

SARAH PEKKANEN

ALL IS BRIGHT

A SHORT STORY



Also by Sarah Pekkanen

The Opposite of Me

Skipping a Beat

All Is Bright


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All Is Bright

I was rounding the corner of a grocery store when my cart almost collided with one coming the other way.

“Sorry!” called a voice from my past.

I froze, gripping the cold metal handle, as Griffin’s mother’s sweet, crisp voice conjured a series of memories that swept through my mind like flashcards: her giving me a lime-flavored lollipop and bandaging my skinned knee after I tripped on a rock during a game of tag in her backyard. The expression on her face—pure disappointment; so much more potent than anger—when she caught Grif and me sharing a Marlboro Light, purloined from his aunt’s purse, at the age of fifteen. The tears she didn’t try to hide the night of my senior prom as she snapped photos of her son and me, our dark straight hair, blue eyes, and the bright red of my dress and his cummerbund all forming a pleasing match.

“Elise! What are you doing back in town?” Janice cried now as she hurried over in her parka and puffy down boots—a far more sensible ensemble for the Chicago winter than the Levi’s and brown leather boots I’d pulled on before my flight in from San Francisco. “Your dad and Clarissa are in . . . India, is it? Or could it be Iceland? They send postcards, but it’s hard to keep track! Does Griffin know you’re here?”

Another Janice memory: Her questions tumbled over one another like socks in a spinning dryer. But the habit had always soothed me. Janice’s chatter wasn’t demanding; you could pick which questions you wanted to answer, and she’d skip ahead to new ones without backtracking over the ones you ignored.

“Indonesia,” I said into her auburn-tinted hair, because her arms were wrapped around me. Janice always hugged like she meant it. “They’re in Jakarta right now. I came home because I didn’t want Nana to be alone on Christmas.”

“Of course. How is your grandma? Your dad said her arthritis hasn’t worsened much, thank goodness. But you’re staying alone in that big old house?” Janice asked. Her eyes widened. “Unless you brought someone with you . . .”

“Oh, no way,” I blurted. “I’m not seeing anyone.” That had come out wrong. “I mean, not that it’s *bad* to be dating already—I’m happy Grif is. Truly.”

Smooth, my inner critic threw into the conversation.

“Did you just get in today? The house must be so chilly. And nothing in the fridge, of course, after all these weeks . . . If I’d known, I would have dropped off some milk and bread. But that’s what you’re taking care of right now, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “I took the red eye in, ran into the house and blasted the heat, and headed straight back out for coffee and groceries. We were delayed on the runway for three hours and I sat next to a guy with a bad head cold. I’ve never been happier to walk off a plane in my life.”

“Poor thing.” Janice reached out and rubbed circles on my back. I swallowed against the lump filling my throat. Janice was small and thin, with quick birdlike gestures, yet she managed to be all soft edges. How could I have imagined she’d hate me? I thought as her brown eyes smiled up at me.

I hadn’t talked to Janice in more than eight months—since the night I sat next to Griffin in his bottle-green Jeep as we drove away from a sushi restaurant, tears staining both of our cheeks. Seeing Janice again made my heart constrict with the realization of how much I’d missed her. Not Grif—*her*. That encompassed the reasons why Grif had broken up with me, and why I hadn’t been able to end things with him long ago. The truth was, I was more afraid of losing his mom than of losing him.

Griffin and I had dated on and off since our sophomore year of high school—taking a long break during college, and another, longer one when we were twenty-five. After we got back together for the final time, he moved to Los Angeles for a new sales job and I went along, hoping things might finally work out for us. But over a carafe of cold sake at a restaurant in Huntington Beach, a week after my thirtieth birthday, he asked if I wanted to get married. He wasn’t proposing, just revisiting a discussion we’d had before. I’d always told him I needed more time.

“You’re never going to be ready, are you?” he’d said. “Will it ever be the right time, Elise?” I’d looked down at the napkin twisting in my hands, thinking about the chemistry lab we’d once taken together. We’d spent the whole semester putting two different elements together and waiting for reactions—a fantastic explosion, a fizzle, or something in between. Grif was funny, handsome, and smart, and yet I never saw sparks or felt a burst of heat with him—I was always stuck somewhere in between.

Two weeks later, I left L.A. for San Francisco, hoping distance would help both of us heal. I’d sent Janice a note a month later, and she’d written me back, both of us being careful and polite. Too polite. I hadn’t known how she

really felt until now.

“You know, we’re on our own this year, too,” Janice was saying. “Jake came home for Thanksgiving”—Jake was their older son, who’d gotten married to his boyfriend a few years earlier—“but they flew out to be with Dave’s parents for Hanukkah. They rotate their visits every other year. And Griffin went to Minnesota to meet Ilsa’s family. It’s funny how empty the house seems. We’ve gotten used to it, for the most part, but during the holidays . . .”

Grif went to meet Ilsa’s family? For Christmas?

I felt a pang in the middle of my rib cage. Grif and I spoke or e-mailed every month or so—we were still trying to navigate our way back to the friendship that predated our romance—but I hadn’t realized his new relationship was so serious.

“I brought something for you and Stephen,” I said when I realized the silence had stretched out a beat too long. “I was going to drop it off tomorrow on my way to see Nana.”

She hesitated, then smiled. “Why don’t you come over tonight for dinner?”

“Are you sure?” My voice was so eager it embarrassed me. Janice’s house was never unwelcoming, but oh, at Christmastime . . . She made homemade gingerbread whoopie pies, layered with whipped cream and caramel, and spiced cider bubbled on the stove. The hearth was lined with stockings for two cats and a shaggy old dog along with the rest of the family. And every year since I’d turned seven or eight and began spending almost as much time at Griffin’s house as my own, there was a gift labeled with my name under the tree. Neighbors popped by with jugs of eggnog or plates of iced sugar cookies, and everyone gathered around the upright piano as Stephen played and he and Janice sang carols—a tradition that had deeply humiliated Grif as a teen. When he entered his twenties, he joined in the singing, and so did I.

It was the way I imagined—dreamed—my house might have been, if my mom hadn’t succumbed to leukemia when I was six. Don’t get me wrong; my father is a very good man. He came to all of my track meets, cooked simple dinners, helped me with my English essays. But he seemed so much more comfortable reading the sports page than talking; sometimes I felt sorry for him as he stuttered through explanations of menstrual cycles and the importance of birth control. Dad had never remarried, but for the past decade he’d had a live-in girlfriend named Clarissa. When he’d retired a few months ago, they’d taken off for their long-planned around-the-world trip.

“We could cancel the trip and come see you instead,” he’d offered after Griffin broke up with me. “I know this is, ah, a . . . tough time for you. If you think the holidays might be too hard . . .”

I knew how much he’d been looking forward to the trip. His deposits were probably nonrefundable, too. Making that offer was perhaps the single kindest thing he’d ever done for me.

“Absolutely not,” I’d insisted. “I’m so busy with work now anyways.” That part was true; my graphic design business was, luckily, quite portable, and business had only increased as I’d picked up more clients in California.

“And don’t worry about Nana,” I’d said before Dad could bring it up. “I’ll come home and check on her at Christmas.”

But visiting Nana in her assisted living home wasn’t the only reason why I’d returned, I realized now. I’d been yearning to see Janice again. To feel her forgiveness.

“How about five o’clock?” Janice was saying.

“I’d love it.” My voice trembled and I blinked, hard.

She started to walk away, turned back, and said, “Honey? It is *so good* to see you.”

* * *

Six hours later, I turned the corner and walked down Grif’s street, smiling as I remembered what had happened after senior prom. We were both exhausted from dancing and hitting after-parties and finishing it all off with pancakes at a twenty-four-hour diner with a group of friends. When he’d finally pulled up in front of my house at four a.m., his red bow tie was dangling around his neck and my shoes were on the floor of his parent’s station wagon.

“My feet are killing me,” I’d groaned, reaching for the two-inch heels that had rubbed blisters on my toes.

“Oh, yeah?” Grif had said, raising an eyebrow. “Feel like you can’t walk another step?”

He’d gunned the motor and pulled up over the curb while I shrieked. He drove clear across my front yard before finally braking with his fender almost touching the steps leading to my front porch. I’d laughed for a good five minutes before I finally unbuckled my seat belt and kissed him good-bye.

Now I raised my hand to ring his old doorbell, just as I had hundreds of times before. “Come in, it’s open,” Janice’s muffled voice called from

somewhere inside.

The hinges of the front door still complained as it swung open, and everything else in the house was exactly the same, too, down to the hanging ferns and soft-looking furniture and rich maroon paint on the walls. The dark wood banister was wrapped with greenery, and a sprig of mistletoe hung from the ceiling between the living and dining rooms.

“Hey, Scout,” I said, rubbing behind the ears of the ancient golden retriever who’d ambled over to greet me. His snout was almost pure white and his eyes were rheumy, but his tail wagged as eagerly as ever.

“Elise? Welcome!” Griffin’s father, Stephen, rounded the corner from the kitchen, a mug of cider in his hand. He looked exactly like Grif would in another thirty years—tall and fit, with classic features.

“Thank you so much for having me,” I said. *Way too formal*, I chided myself. I thrust the gifts I’d bought in San Francisco—a handcrafted teapot with a box of peppermint tea for Janice, and a box set of Miles Davis CDs for Stephen—toward him.

“Thanks. Happy you could make it,” he said easily, tucking the gifts under his arm. He leaned forward and kissed my cheek. “We’ve got a buffet set up in the kitchen. Neighbors are going to be wandering in and out all night. Come on and get the best stuff before they gobble it up.”

I exhaled and felt warmth flood through my body. It was as if I’d been here just yesterday.

* * *

I was working my way through a second sinfully delicious whoopie pie when the telephone rang.

“Griffin!” I heard Janice cry a moment later.

I brushed my hands against my pants to remove the crumbs and stood up. I wanted to say hi to Grif, too. To let him know I was thinking of him. Missing him, even.

“Yes, Dad’s right here,” she was saying. “Come on, honey, Griffin wants to talk to both of us at once.” Stephen bent over and Janice held the phone receiver midway between their ears. They were silent for a long moment, then erupted into cheers.

“Oh my gosh!” Janice squealed.

“Congratulations, son!” Stephen chimed in.

I knew—before Janice called out the news to the assembled neighbors; and even before that, during the pause when the phone had dangled between their expectant faces—exactly what had happened.

“Griffin just got engaged!”

I instinctively took a step backward, then a few more, until I’d moved out of the living room and into the hallway. I slipped into the guest bathroom and stood there with the lights off.

A moment later I heard Stephen’s voice, louder than ever. They’d come into the hallway to continue the conversation privately, I realized.

They don’t know I’m in here.

Their words seemed to float into the bathroom, crowding around me. I could almost reach out and touch the sharp, bright sentences.

“I can’t believe it’s only been five months since you met,” Stephen was saying. “Of course your mother and I dated for seven months before we got engaged. When you know, you know.”

Grif had known about me, too. Or maybe he only thought he had.

“Oh, let me talk to her!” Janice cried. “Welcome to the family, sweetheart! Two weeks? Stephen, Ilsa just said they’re coming for a visit in two weeks so we can meet each other! And Griffin might try to get transferred back here!”

She laughed in response to something Ilsa had said. “Don’t you dare call us Mr. and Mrs. Henderson ever again! We’re Stephen and Janice . . . or you could call us Mom and Dad.”

Those were the words that made me fold my arms across my stomach and bend over, even though it wouldn’t bother me if Ilsa started calling Griffin’s father “Dad.”

I had a father.

* * *

“I wish you didn’t have to leave so soon,” Janice said a half hour later.

“I should get going.” My voice was unnaturally high, and I tried to dial it down a few notches. “I have to get up early. Nana will be waiting.”

“Of course,” Janice said. Her mouth opened, then shut. It was the first time I’d ever seen her at a loss for words. She walked me to the front door, and even though the hallway was only eight or so feet long, it seemed to take forever.

“Drive safely tomorrow, okay?” Janice said as she opened the door. The

sky was black and a gust of frigid air hit my face like a slap.

“Oh, sure,” I said.

She hesitated, despite the cold streaming into the house. “How long are you staying in town?”

“I’m flying back on the twenty-sixth,” I said lightly. “I’ll probably head out by noon.”

I could see in her eyes that she wanted to invite me over again before I left. But what if Ilsa didn’t like the idea of Grif’s old girlfriend hanging around? What if *Griffin* didn’t? It was right that Janice hadn’t mentioned to Grif that I was standing five feet away when he announced his engagement. I had no place in that moment. Not in their family, anymore, either, other than as a casual acquaintance.

“Please take care of yourself, honey,” Janice finally said.

My throat was closing up again, this time for the opposite reason than it had yesterday when I’d seen Janice in the parking lot, but I managed to chirp, “Will do!”

She hugged me again, then shut the door.

I began to walk around the block toward home, my head bent low and my hands tucked into the pockets of my red coat. I thought about how the engagement must have unfolded: Griffin would’ve asked Ilsa’s father for her hand, since he was traditional that way. That must have been why they’d gone to her family’s house for the holidays. I pictured Grif inviting Ilsa to go for a walk in the snow, under the stars. They were holding hands, laughing as they stomped their feet to keep warm. Then Grif was reaching into his pocket and dropping down on one knee and looking into her eyes as snowflakes fell on his dark hair. Because it was Minnesota in the winter, Ilsa was wearing gloves. She was pulling them off to put on the ring, and Grif’s knee was getting cold and damp. Later they’d probably laugh about that; it would become part of the story they’d tell again and again, a sweet pivot point in the history Grif and Ilsa were building together.

Grif would be a kind husband, a devoted father. Maybe they’d have three or four kids, and Ilsa’s heart would still leap in her chest when she looked up and saw him enter a room. The way mine should have, but never did, no matter how hard I wished for it to.

Did Ilsa know how lucky she was? Soon she and Janice would start forming their own relationship, through the giddy planning of the wedding. Janice’s white gown was preserved in a box in the basement, waiting for a

new bride in the family; she'd offer it to Ilsa to wear. If Grif didn't get transferred back right away, they'd probably settle into regular phone chats. They'd almost certainly move closer together when grandchildren came along.

Another flash card came unbidden into my mind: this time a memory from when I was a freshman in high school. Grif and I were best friends—he hadn't yet leaned over on the school bus on our way back from a track meet to kiss me—and I was home from school, burning up with a fever. I was a teenager, certainly old enough to find a bottle of Motrin, a cool washcloth, and the television's remote control. And yet on the second day I found myself staring out my bedroom window, my eyes traveling in a straight line down our backyard, over the wooden picket fence, through Griffin's family's backyard and up to his ranch-style house. A few minutes later, a knock on our front door had startled me.

"I'm making chicken soup," Janice had said, a sunflower-patterned apron tied around her waist. "I can never remember—feed a cold and starve a fever? Or is it the other way around? Anyway, your dad said you were sick and chicken soup is good for everything. Want to come have lunch with me?"

My face was already flushed, but I turned a deeper red, wondering if Janice had seen my silhouette in the window. "Oh, no, I'm fine," I'd said.

"Are you sure? There's plenty. Besides, I'm going to start putting photos into albums—you know how I've got them all stacked up on that shelf and they look so messy—and I'd love some company for a bit."

Somehow I was tying my sneakers and putting on a sweater and heading around the block with Janice. I'd eaten a big bowl of her garlicky soup, and then the Motrin had kicked in, bringing with it a wave of exhaustion. My head dropped down to my chin.

"Why don't you lie down?" Janet had said. "No, just leave your bowl right there. I'll take care of it." *Thank you for taking care of me, too*, I'd thought, feeling inexplicably like crying. She'd led me to the couch and I fell asleep almost instantly. When I woke up three hours later, my fever had broken and a yellow knitted blanket was tucked around me.

"You had such a good sleep," Janice had said softly, looking up from her book in the armchair opposite the couch. "Ready for some tea and toast?" I'd nodded eagerly, worried I was taking too much from her, but unable to stop. Janice had walked over to stroke my forehead, then looked down at the blanket. "It's a family heirloom," she'd said. "My grandma made it when she

was a young woman, and my mother gave it to me when I went away to college. I always feel better when I curl up with it and think of all the love stored in it. It's the most special thing I own."

"Thank you," I'd said, reaching out with a finger to touch the satin-trimmed edge of the blanket.

"Two peppermint teas, coming up," Janice had said, and I'd hopped out of bed to help her.

It was why I'd spent three weekends searching through San Francisco shops for the prettiest teapot and the finest peppermint tea I could find for Janice's Christmas present. I wanted her to know I would never forget that day.

* * *

The Windham Assisted Living Facility looked like a gracious Victorian mansion, except instead of being surrounded by sprawling green lawns, it was situated next to a strip mall featuring a pizza place, a bank, a pharmacy, a grocery store, and a beauty shop. All of life's essentials, lined up neatly in a row. Ninety minutes after I'd left my dad's house, I pulled into the visitors' parking lot and unsnapped my seat belt, stretching out my arms and rolling my neck in circles.

Nana had moved here from Florida seven years ago, after Grandpa died of Alzheimer's disease. Usually people live eight or ten years after that diagnosis; Grandpa had held on for seventeen. My father had invited Nana to move in with him, but she'd refused, not wanting to burden him. Dad had borne so much tragedy, I thought. His father and wife were diagnosed with horrible diseases within a year of each other, and he was an only child, so there was no one to share the grief. I felt a surge of gratitude that he was in Jakarta, gearing up to travel to the beaches of Thailand. He deserved happiness.

I stepped out of the Volvo and popped the trunk, reaching inside for the bags of gifts. I felt guilty that I couldn't visit Nana as often as I used to, and I knew I was trying to compensate by lavishing her with a electronic reader stocked with a dozen downloaded books, lavender bath oils, Godiva chocolates, and a plush velour robe and matching slippers in a leopard-skin print—Nana definitely wasn't a cabbage-rose pattern kind of woman.

Partly because of Nana, I'd been toying with the idea of moving back

home, even though I'd loved everything about San Francisco from the moment I'd stepped into the city, loved the coffee shops and wine-tasting bars, loved the tang of the ocean that swirled around my little apartment on days when it was warm enough to throw open my windows and work on my computer with my new rescue cat, Oreo, lazily winding her way around my ankles.

But now I knew I couldn't move back to Chicago, at least not anytime soon.

I found Nana in her room, reading a large-print edition of *Gone With the Wind* in an armchair by the window.

"Hey, hot stuff," I called from the doorway.

"Go away. David Beckham's on his way here and he's got a big jealous streak," she said without looking up from the page.

I burst into laughter and ran toward her as she stood up—less steadily than she had the last time I'd seen her. I folded her in my arms and breathed in the sweet smell of Chanel No. 5.

"Beanpole, don't tell me you've gotten even *taller*?" Nana exclaimed, pulling back to look up at me.

"Hey! I think you must've shrunk," I protested. "Old people do, you know."

She swatted my rear and hugged me again.

"I was worried you'd miss dinner," she said. "They have festive red and green Jell-O cubes, you know. You don't see that every day."

"Sorry, the roads were slick. It took an extra half hour to get here."

"As long as you're safe." She finally let go and smiled up at me, her eyes almost disappearing into crinkles. "I missed you, sweetheart."

It seemed like I'd done nothing these past two days but tear up. I turned away and wiped my eyes with my index fingers before Nana could see. "Are we late for dinner?" I asked. "I want to meet your friends."

"Nah, it's not for another hour. Plus I like to make an entrance," she said.

When she'd first arrived here, Nana was depressed—plain worn out from caring for her husband and saddened by the arthritis that left her once-nimble fingers bent and gnarled. Then she began to make friends. Now she had a group of women—the Seven Widows of Windham, they called themselves -- and not one of them had the slightest bit of interest in water aerobics or taking macramé classes.

"So you're in a gang?" I'd asked when she told me.

“Yup. Those Crups better look out,” she’d said. “We like to play poker and drink bourbon. We’re thinking about taking up playing pool so we can hustle people.”

“Crups?” I’d asked. “Do you mean Crips?”

“We could take ’em both,” she’d said, and I’d smiled. It was as though Nana’s spirit, buried beneath the pain of losing her husband long before his actual death, was finally fighting its way to the surface again.

I was grateful to the widows for that, but it wasn’t the only reason why I wanted to see them tonight. Usually we brought Nana to our house for visits or took her out to dinner, so although I’d waved to one or two of them in passing, I hadn’t spent any real time with them. I wanted to make sure Nana was taken care of, now that I was gone so much.

After I flopped on Nana’s bed and we chatted for a while, we freshened up for dinner and headed for the elevator. I was doing okay, I thought as I watched the numbers on the elevator panel drop from four to one. I could get through tonight with Nana to buoy me, and tomorrow I’d leave for the airport early. When I was back in my new apartment, with no reminders of Grif or his family, it would be easier.

Then, as we approached a circular table in the dining room where Nana’s friends awaited, she uttered two simple, impossibly complicated words: “How’s Griffin?”

I burst into tears. Not the discreet, slowly-rolling-down-the-cheeks kind either.

“Whoa Nellie!” shouted a voice to my left. “Better get her into a chair.”

I felt gentle arms around me, easing me into a seat; hands patted my cheeks with napkins.

“Usually they don’t cry until after they see the food,” someone cracked.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I grabbed a napkin and blew my nose. “I just. . .”

“Say you were cutting onions,” a widow with pure white hair suggested. “Or thinking about Sylvester Stallone’s acting.”

I gave a snort-laugh.

“Ah, now she’s coming around. Get her some water,” another widow suggested.

“Water? That’s ridiculous. Get her a gin and tonic.”

“Who’s got the gin?”

A purse appeared, a liver-spotted hand ducked inside it, and a moment later a silver flask emerged and was pressed upon me. “You’ll have to make

do without the tonic.”

I took a sip. It burned going down, in a good way.

“You know what?” I said, looking around the table. “That was exactly what I needed. Thank you. Can we start over?”

“Elise, meet the Seven Widows of Windham,” Nana said.

“Six, unless you’re introducing yourself to your own granddaughter,” pointed out one of the women, who was wearing a homemade pin that said, “I’m a Jew. Don’t serve me that blasted Jell-O.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. I took in a shuddering breath and tried to smile. “I was just feeling sort of emotional. My old boyfriend got engaged last night.”

“Oooooooh,” one of the women said. “Say no more. Actually, please do say more.”

“My daughter’s over there with her husband,” another women whispered. “I have to go sit with them in a minute, and they’re as dull as paste. I’d so much rather be here, in the middle of the action.”

A woman in a blue wrap dress nodded. “My kids are in Cleveland. Said it was too hard to get here for the holiday.”

“My son’s coming in January,” said another. “He invited me to visit him, but his kids have the flu again. ”

“Again? Those kids get the flu every month. Of course, with six of them, they’ve probably just been passing around the same disease all these years.”

“Can all you biddies stop jabbering and let Elise talk?” the tallest woman of the group spoke up. “So . . .” she prompted me. “Your boyfriend broke your heart?”

I shook my head. “I broke his. He wanted to marry me.”

“Were you in love with someone else?” Seven pairs of bright eyes were fixed on me; it was hard to tell who had asked the question.

“There isn’t anything you can say that would shock us,” someone—I think it was the woman in a blue dress—said when I hesitated. “Between us, we’ve got three divorces, one face-lift and possible other unconfirmed work, two adulterous affairs—of course they were long ago, but one was interracial, which adds an extra bit of spice—a gambling addiction—”

“It’s an enjoyable habit, not an *addiction*,” the woman to her left shouted.

“—and heaven knows what else,” the woman in blue concluded.

So I took a deep breath, and then I started my story with the sweet, surprising kiss on the school bus coming home from that track meet. Over

slices of turkey and mashed potatoes and broccoli and secret sips of gin from the flask circling the table, I described our reconciliations and final breakup.

“So you did love him,” a widow named Betty said.

I nodded. “Just not enough. Or maybe not in the right way.”

“You were right to let him go,” she said. Her eyes grew distant. “I married a guy I cared for. And two years later, I met the love of my life.”

“What happened?” I whispered.

“I stayed married to the first guy. The second guy married one of my friends. And I never stopped wondering, ‘What if?’”

I squeezed her hand.

“San Francisco? That’s where you’re living now?” Thelma, the tallest widow, appraised me through narrowed eyes over the rim of her coffee cup. “I’ve got a great-nephew who lives in Seattle.”

“It is in another state, you know,” Nana pointed out.

Thelma batted away the objection. “Oh, they’re all having sex over the Internet now anyways. What I was going to say is, my nephew travels all the time for work. He goes to San Francisco regularly.”

“Is this the guy who sent you the video showing how to do Beyoncé’s moves?” someone asked.

Thelma nodded. “‘All the Single Ladies.’ We practiced it last week, but we didn’t let Betty do the pelvic thrusts on account of her osteoporosis.”

“They were just jealous of my moves,” Betty said.

With each laugh, each sip of gin, each touch, I began to feel better.

* * *

Nana and I stayed in her room until almost ten o’clock, sitting next to each other on her bed, talking and sharing the box of Godiva I’d brought. Neither of us wanted to say good-bye.

“You know, I don’t think you truly regret breaking up with Griffin,” Nana said. “Hold on, is that the dark caramel you’re taking? Put it back, young lady, or I’m going to press the emergency button next to my bed.”

“I already licked it,” I said.

“Liar,” Nana said. “You take the milk chocolate caramel. Anyway, I was going to say that you don’t begrudge Griffin happiness, do you?”

I nodded. “I *wanted* him to find someone else, partly because then I wouldn’t feel so guilty, but mostly because he deserves to. So why am I

conflicted about it? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing." She smoothed my hair back from my face with her right hand, which wasn't as crippled as her left one. "Things would have changed anyways, you know. Sounds like they already were changing. You're happy in San Francisco, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I miss it here, though. I miss you and Dad." *And I miss Janice.*

Nana's hand came to rest on mine. "But we're still in each other's hearts. Even if we don't see each other as much. Even through changes."

"Always," I said.

"What do you think about the great-nephew in Seattle?" Nana asked.

"I kind of like the idea of a guy who sends a group of eighty-five-year-old women Beyoncé's dance moves," I admitted.

"Whoever he is, wherever he lives, you're going to find him," she said. Her voice was as gentle as a whisper. I knew I had to go soon, because she was getting tired, but it seemed important for her to tell me this one last thing: "But you won't forget the ones you leave behind. You'll always love them, too. I think that's all most of us really want. To feel like we matter. To know we're loved."

* * *

I drove home extra slowly, wary of black ice and other motorists who might be full of hot spiced rum, and it was almost midnight when I pulled into Dad's driveway. I checked the car to make sure I'd removed every bit of trash before I got out, since he wouldn't be back home for two more months. Tomorrow morning I'd clean out the refrigerator, sweep the floors, and turn down the heat before heading out to catch my flight. I'd take a final look at Griffin's house through my bedroom window, then shut the door.

Something was on our front porch.

As I came closer I saw it was a box, maybe a foot and a half long and equally as wide, wrapped in red paper and tied with a big silver bow. I brought it inside and turned on a lamp in the living room, and then, before I even took off my gloves and coat, slowly untied the bow and peeled back the paper.

I opened the lid of the box and saw a burst of yellow, the shine of a strip of satin trim.

I heard her words again, as clearly as if Janice was standing next to me:*I always feel better when I curl up with it and think about all the love stored in it. It's the most special thing I own.*

I lifted the blanket out of the box and held it against my heart; then I closed my eyes.

The story continues with a twist: Now it's told from Ilsa's point of view in *Love, Accidentally*, the new eShort Story by Sarah Pekkanen, available now for download from your online retailer.

Read on for a first look at Sarah Pekkanen's dazzling new novel

Skipping a Beat

Coming in February 2011 from Washington Square Press

When my husband, Michael, died for the first time, I was walking across a freshly waxed marble floor in three-inch Stuart Weitzman heels, balancing a tray of cupcakes in my shaking hands.

Shaking because I'd overdosed on sugar—someone had to heroically step up and taste-test the cupcakes, after all—and not because I was worried about slipping and dropping the tray, even though these weren't your run-of-the-mill Betty Crockers. These were molten chocolate and cayenne-pepper masterpieces, and each one was topped with a name scripted in edible gold leaf.

Decadent cupcakes as place cards for the round tables encircling the ballroom—it was the kind of touch that kept me in brisk business as a party planner. Tonight, we'd raise half a million for the Washington, D.C., Opera Company. Maybe more, if the waiters kept topping off those wine and champagne glasses like I'd instructed them.

"Julia!"

I carefully set down the tray, then spun around to see the fretful face of the assistant florist who'd called my name.

"The caterer wants to lower our centerpieces," he wailed, agony practically oozing from his pores. I didn't blame him. His boss, the head florist—a gruff little woman with more than a hint of a mustache—secretly scared me, too.

"No one touches the flowers," I said, trying to sound as tough as Clint Eastwood would, should he ever become ensconced in a brawl over the proper length of calla lilies.

My cell phone rang and I reached for it, absently glancing at the caller ID. It was my husband, Michael. He'd texted me earlier to announce he was going on a business trip and would miss the birthday dinner my best friend was throwing for me later in the month. If Michael had a long-term mistress, it might be easier to compete, but his company gyrated and beckoned in his mind more enticingly than any strategically oiled Victoria's Secret model. I'd long ago resigned myself to the fact that work had replaced me as Michael's true love. I ignored the call and dropped the phone back into my pocket.

Later, of course, I'd realize it wasn't Michael phoning but his personal assistant, Kate. By then my husband had stood up from the head of the table in his company's boardroom, opened his mouth to speak, and crashed to the carpeted floor. All in the same amount of time it took me to walk across a ballroom floor just a few miles away.

The assistant florist raced off and was instantly replaced by a white-haired, grandfatherly looking security guard from the Little Jewelry Box. “Miss?” he said politely.

I silently thanked my oxygen facials and caramel highlights for his decision not to call me ma’am. I was about to turn thirty-five, which meant I wouldn’t be able to hide from the liver-spotted hands of ma’am-dom forever, but I’d valiantly dodge their bony grasp for as long as possible.

“Where would you like these?” the guard asked, indicating the dozen or so rectangular boxes he was carrying on a tray draped in black velvet. The boxes were wrapped in a shade of silver that exactly matched the gun nestled against his ample hip.

“On the display table just inside the front door, please,” I instructed him. “People need to see them as soon as they walk in.” People would bid tens of thousands of dollars to win a surprise bauble, if only to show everyone else that they could. The guard was probably a retired policeman, trying to earn money to supplement his pension, and I knew he’d been ordered to keep those boxes in his sight all night long.

“Can I get you anything? Maybe some coffee?” I offered.

“Better not,” he said with a wry smile. The poor guy probably wasn’t drinking anything because the jewelry store wouldn’t even let him take a bathroom break. I made a mental note to pack up a few dinners for him to bring home.

My BlackBerry vibrated just as I began placing the cupcakes around the head table and mentally debating the sticky problem of the video game guru who looked and acted like a thirteen-year-old overdue for his next dose of Ritalin. I’d sandwich him between a female U.S. senator and a co-owner of the Washington Blazes professional basketball team, I decided. They were both tall; they could talk over the techie’s head.

At that moment, a dozen executives were leaping up from their leather chairs to cluster around Michael’s limp body. They were all shouting at each other to call 911—this crowd was used to giving orders, not taking them—and demanding that someone perform CPR.

As I stood in the middle of the ballroom, smoothing out a crease on a white linen napkin and inhaling the sweet scent of lilies, the worst news I could possibly imagine was being delivered by a baby-faced representative from the D.C. Opera Company.

“Melanie has a sore throat,” he announced somberly. I sank into a chair

with a sigh and wiggled my tired feet out of my shoes. Perfect. Melanie was the star soprano who was scheduled to sing a selection from *Orfeo ed Euridice* tonight. If those overflowing wineglasses didn't get checkbooks whipped out of pockets, Melanie's soaring, lyrical voice definitely would. I desperately needed Melanie tonight.

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"In a room at the Mayflower Hotel," the opera rep said.

"Oh, crap! Who booked her a room?"

"Um . . . me," he said. "Is that a prob—"

"Get her a suite," I interrupted. "The biggest one they have."

"Why?" he asked, his snub nose wrinkling in confusion. "How will that help her get better?"

"What was your name again?" I asked.

"Patrick Riley." Figures; put a four-leaf clover in his lapel and he could've been the poster boy for *Welcome to Ireland!*

"And Patrick, how long have you been working for the opera company?" I asked gently.

"Three weeks," he admitted.

"Just trust me on this." Melanie required drama the way the rest of us needed water. If I hydrated her with a big scene now, Melanie might miraculously rally and forgo a big scene tonight.

"Send over a warm-mist humidifier," I continued as Patrick whipped out a notebook and scribbled away, diligent as a cub reporter chasing his big break. "No, two! Get her lozenges, chamomile tea with honey, whatever you can think of. Buy out CVS. If Melanie wants a lymphatic massage, have the hotel concierge arrange it immediately. Here—" I pulled out my BlackBerry and scrolled down to the name of my private doctor. "Call Dr. Rushman. If he can't make it over there, have him send someone who can."

Dr. Rushman would make it, I was sure. He'd drop whatever he was doing if he knew I needed him. He was the personal physician for the Washington Blazes basketball team.

My husband, Michael, was another one of the team's co-owners.

"Got it," Patrick said. He glanced down at my feet, turned bright red, and scampered away. Must've been my toe cleavage; it tends to have that effect on men.

I finished placing the final cupcake before checking my messages. By the time I read the frantic e-mails from Kate, who was trying to find out if

Michael had any recently diagnosed illnesses like epilepsy or diabetes that we'd been keeping secret, it was already over.

While Armani-clad executives clustered around my husband, Bob the mailroom guy took one look at the scene and sped down the hallway, white envelopes scattering like confetti behind him. He sprinted to the receptionist's desk and found the portable defibrillator my husband's company had purchased just six months earlier. Then he raced back, ripped open Michael's shirt, put his ear to Michael's chest to confirm that my husband's heart had stopped beating, and applied the sticky patches to Michael's chest. "Analyzing . . . ," said the machine's electronic voice. "Shock advisable."

The Italian opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* is a love story. In it, Euridice dies and her grieving husband travels to the Underworld to try to bring her back to life. Melanie the soprano was scheduled to sing the heartbreaking aria that comes as Euridice is suspended between the twin worlds of Death and Life.

Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me that Euridice's aria was playing in my head as Bob the mailroom guy bent over my husband's body, shocking Michael's heart until it finally began beating again. Because sometimes it seems to me as if all of the big moments in my life can be traced back to the gorgeous, timeworn stories of opera.

Four minutes and eight seconds. That's how long my husband, Michael Dunhill, was dead.

Four minutes and eight seconds. That's how long it took for my husband to become a complete stranger to me.

Read an excerpt from Sarah Pekkanen's *The Opposite of Me*.

One

AS I PULLED OPEN the heavy glass door of Richards, Dunne & Krantz and walked down the long hallway toward the executive offices, I noticed a light was on up ahead.

Lights were never on this early. I quickened my step.

The light was on in *my* office, I realized as I drew closer. I'd gone home around 4:00 A.M. to snatch a catnap and a shower, but I'd locked my office door. I'd checked it twice. Now someone was in there.

I broke into a run, my mind spinning in panic: Had I left my storyboard out in plain view? Could someone be sabotaging the advertising campaign I'd spent weeks agonizing over, the campaign my entire future hinged on?

I burst into my office just as the intruder reached for something on my desk.

"Lindsey! You scared me half out of my wits!" my assistant, Donna, scolded as she paused in the act of putting a steaming container of coffee on my desk.

"God, I'm sorry," I said, mentally smacking myself. If I ever ended up computer dating—which, truth be told, it was probably going to come down to one of these days—I'd have to check the ever-popular "paranoid freak" box when I listed my personality traits. I'd better buy a barricade to hold back the bachelors of New York.

"I didn't expect anyone else in this early," I told Donna as my breathing slowed to normal. Note to self: Must remember to join a gym if a twenty-yard dash leaves me winded. Best not to think about how often I'll actually *use* the gym if I've been reminding myself to join one for the past two years.

"It's a big day," Donna said, handing me the coffee.

"You're amazing." I closed my gritty eyes as I took a sip and felt the liquid miracle flood my veins. "I really needed this. I didn't get much sleep."

"You didn't eat breakfast either, did you?" Donna asked, hands on her hips. She stood there, all of five feet tall, looking like a rosy-cheeked, doily-knitting grandma. One who wouldn't hesitate to get up off her rocking chair

and reach for her sawed-off shotgun if someone crossed her.

"I'll have a big lunch," I hedged, avoiding Donna's eyes.

Even after five years, I still hadn't gotten used to having an assistant, let alone one who was three decades older than me but earned a third of my salary. Donna and I both knew she wore the pants in our relationship, but the secret to our happiness was that we pretended otherwise. Kind of like my parents—Mom always deferred to Dad's authority, after she mercilessly browbeat him into taking her point of view.

"I'm going to check in with the caterers now," Donna said. "Should I hold your calls this morning?"

"Please," I said. "Unless it's an emergency. Or Walt from Creative—he's freaking out about the font size on the dummy ad and I need to calm him down. Or Matt. I want to do another run-through with him this morning. And let's see, who else, who else . . . Oh, anyone from Gloss Cosmetics, of course.

"Oh, God, they're going to be here in"—I looked at my watch and the breath froze in my lungs—"two hours."

"Hold on just a minute, missy," Donna ordered in a voice that could only be described as trouser-wearing. She bustled to her desk and returned with a blueberry muffin in a little paper bag and two Advil.

"I knew you wouldn't eat, so I got extra. And you're getting a headache again, aren't you?" she asked.

"It's not so bad," I lied, holding out my hand for the Advil and hoping Donna wouldn't notice I'd bitten off all my fingernails. Again.

When Donna finally shut my door, I sank into my big leather chair and took another long, grateful sip of coffee. The early-morning sunlight streamed in through the windows behind me, glinting off the golden Clio Award on my desk. I ran a finger over it for luck, just like I did on every presentation day.

Then I stroked it a second time. Because this wasn't an ordinary presentation day. So much more was riding on today than winning another multimillion-dollar account. If I nailed my pitch and added Gloss Cosmetics to our roster of clients . . . I squeezed my eyes shut. I couldn't finish the thought; I didn't want to jinx myself.

I leapt up and walked across the room to look at my pictures of my babies, another one of my superstitious rituals on big days. One of my walls was covered with simple but expensive black frames, each showcasing a different

magazine ad: a dad in a red apron barbecuing hot dogs; a preppy couple sinking their bare toes into their new carpet; a young executive reclining in her first-class airline seat. *Blissfully* reclining.

I smiled, remembering that campaign. It had taken me two weeks and three focus groups to decide on the word *blissful* instead of *peaceful*. Yet my whole campaign was almost torpedoed at the last minute because the model I'd chosen had the exact same hairstyle as the airline owner's ex-wife, who'd convinced him that true love didn't require a prenup. If I hadn't spotted a five-dollar tub of hair gel in the makeup artist's case and begged the client for thirty more seconds, our agency would've lost a \$2 million account on account of a chin-length bob. Clients were notoriously fickle, and the rule of thumb was, the richer the client, the crazier.

The one I was meeting today owned half of Manhattan.

I grabbed the mock-up of the magazine ad my creative team had put together for Gloss and scanned it for the millionth time, searching for nonexistent flaws. I'd spent three solid weeks agonizing over every detail of this campaign, which I'd get maybe ten minutes to present in our conference room in—I looked at my watch and my heart skipped a beat.

Unlike other ad shops, it was the culture of my agency to blur the division between the creative work and the business side of our accounts. If you wanted to succeed at Richards, Dunne & Krantz, you had to be able to do both. Of course, that also meant all the responsibility for this presentation was mine alone.

The worst part, the part that gnawed at my stomach and jolted me awake at 3:00 A.M. on nights when I managed to fall asleep, was that all my work, all those marathon stale-pizza weekend sessions and midnight conference calls, might be for nothing. If the owner of Gloss rejected my ads—if something as simple as the perfume I was wearing or a splashy adjective in my copy rubbed him the wrong way—hundreds of thousands of dollars in commission for our agency would slip through my fingers like smoke. Once a Japanese tycoon who owned a chain of luxury hotels sat through a brilliant, two-months-in-the-making campaign presentation our agency's president had personally overseen—I'm talking about the kind of creative vision that would've won awards, the kinds of commercials everyone would've buzzed about—and dismissed it with a grunt, which his assistant cheerfully translated as "He doesn't like blue." That was it; no chance to tweak the color of the ad

copy, just a group of stunned advertising execs with the now-useless skill of saying, “*Konnichi-wa!*” being herded like sheep to the exit.

I gulped another Advil from the secret stash inside my desk drawer, the one Donna didn’t know about, and massaged the knot in my neck with one hand while I stared at the mock-up ad my team had created for Gloss.

After Gloss Cosmetics had approached our agency last month, hinting that they might jump from their current agency, our agency’s president—a forty-two-year-old marketing genius named Mason, who always wore red Converse sneakers, even with his tuxedo—called our top five creative teams into his office.

“Gloss wants to kick some Cover Girl ass,” Mason had said, swigging from a bottle of Lipton iced tea (they were a client) and tapping his Bic pen (ditto) against the top of his oak conference table. Mason was so loyal to our clients that he once walked out of a four-star restaurant because the chef wouldn’t substitute Kraft ranch for champagne-truffle dressing.

“Gloss’s strategy is accessible glamour,” Mason had continued. “Forget the Park Avenue princesses; we’re going after schoolteachers and factory girls and receptionists.” His eyes had roved around the table so he could impale each of us with his stare, and I swear he hadn’t blinked for close to two minutes. Mason reminded me of an alien, with his bald, lightbulb-shaped head and hooded eyes, and when he went into his blinkless trances I was convinced he was downloading data from his mother ship. My assistant, Donna, was certain he just needed a little more vitamin C; she kept badgering him to go after the Minute Maid account.

“What was the recall score of Gloss’s last commercial?” someone at the other end of the table had asked. It was Slutty Cheryl, boobs spilling out of her tight white shirt as she stretched to reach a Lipton from the stack in the middle of the conference table.

“Can I get that for you?” Matt, our assistant art director, had offered in a voice that sounded innocent if you didn’t know him well.

Matt was my best friend at the office. My only real friend, actually; this place made a sadists’ convention seem cozy and nurturing.

“I can reach it,” Cheryl had said bravely, tossing back her long chestnut hair and straining away as Matt shot me a wink. You’d think that after a few hundred meetings she’d have figured out an easier way to wet her whistle, but there she was, week after week, doing her best imitation of a Hooters girl angling for a tip. By the purest of coincidences, she always got thirsty right

when she asked a question, so all eyes were on her.

“Cover Girl’s last commercial, the one with Queen Latifah, hit a thirty recall, and Gloss’s latest scored a twelve,” Mason had said without consulting any notes. He had a photographic memory, which was one reason why our clients put up with the sneakers.

I could see why Gloss was testing the waters at other agencies. Twelve wasn’t good.

The recall score is one of the most effective tools in advertising’s arsenal. It basically tells what percentage of people who watched your commercial actually remembered it. Cheryl, who’s a creative director like me, once oversaw a dog food commercial that scored a forty-one. She ordered dozens of balloons emblazoned with “Forty-One” and blanketed the office with them. Subtlety, like loose-fitting turtlenecks, isn’t in her repertoire. And I swear I’m not just saying that because I’ve never scored higher than a forty (but just for the record, I’ve hit that number three times. It’s an agency record).

“I want five creative teams on this,” Mason had said. “Have the campaigns ready for me three weeks from today. The best two will present to Gloss.”

As everyone stood up to leave, Mason had walked over to me while Cheryl took her time gathering her things and pretended not to eavesdrop.

“I need this account,” he’d said, his pale blue eyes latching onto mine.

“Is the budget that big?” I’d asked.

“No, they’re cheap fucks,” he’d said cheerfully. “Name the last three clients we signed.”

“Home health care plans, orthopedic mattresses, and adult protection pads,” I’d rattled off.

“Diapers,” he’d corrected. “Ugly trend. We’re becoming the incontinent old farts’ agency. We need the eighteen to thirty-five demographic. Get me this account, Lindsey.” His voice had dropped, and Cheryl had stopped shuffling papers. She and I had both leaned in closer to Mason.

“I don’t have to tell you what it would do for you,” Mason had said. “Think about the timing. We’re presenting to Gloss right around the time of the vote. You bring in this one on top of everything else you’ve done . . .” His voice had trailed off.

I knew what Mason was implying. It wasn’t a secret that our agency was about to decide on a new VP creative director. The VP title meant a salary hike and all the sweet side dishes that went along with it: a six-figure bonus,

a fat 401(k) plan, and car service to the airport. It meant I'd be able to buy my sunny little one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side, which was about to go co-op. It meant first-class flights and obscene expense accounts.

It meant success, the only thing that had really ever mattered to me.

"I'm on it," I'd said, scurrying out of the office and diving into the world of Gloss Cosmetics.

Now I was surfacing for the first time in three weeks.

I gulped more coffee and finished scanning my ad. Something as simple as a typo could mean professional death for me, but our ad was clean. This ad was my 3:00 A.M. baby, born from the unholy alliance of too much caffeine, an entire bag of potato chips (but eaten in small handfuls, with the bag primly sealed up and put back in my pantry between handfuls), and my old reliable bedmate insomnia. Gloss wanted to steal a chunk of Cover Girl's market, but they didn't want to pay for celebrity models like Halle Berry and Keri Russell. I was giving them the best of both worlds.

Mason loved it; now I just needed to perfect my pitch to the owner and CEO of Gloss. I glanced at my watch again. Ninety-six minutes until their limo was due to pull up in front of our building. I'd be downstairs in seventy-six, waiting to greet them.

I pressed the intercom button. "Donna? Have the caterers arrived yet?"

"Don't you think I would've told you if they hadn't?" she snapped. She hates it when I second-guess her. "They bought red Concord grapes, though."

"Shit!" I leapt up so quickly I knocked my coffee to the floor. I grabbed a handful of napkins from my top drawer and swabbed it up. "I'll run out to the deli right now—"

"Relax," Donna said. "I already did. Green seedless grapes are in our freezer. They'll be ready in plenty of time."

Red grapes instead of green. It's the simple things that can annihilate a career.

"Thank you," I breathed as my heart slowed its violent thudding. I reached for one more Advil and promised myself with all the sincerity of a street junkie that it would be my last hit. At least until lunchtime.

I couldn't be too prepared. Cheryl and I had won the two chances to present our Gloss campaigns, and she was a wild card. Many of her campaigns were uninspired, but when she nailed it, she was spectacular. I was dying to sneak a peek at her storyboard, but I knew she was guarding it like a hostage. As I was mine.

Cheryl was thirty-three, four years older than me, and she worked hard. But I worked harder. I lived, breathed, and slept my job. Seriously; if I weren't so chastened by Donna's disapproving huffs when she noticed the imprint of my head on my couch cushion, I'd barely have any reason to go home at night. Even though I'd lived in New York for seven years—ever since Richards, Dunne & Krantz came recruiting at my grad school at Northwestern and made me an offer—I'd only made one real friend in the city: Matt. My job didn't leave time for anyone or anything else.

"Lindsey?" Donna's head poked into my office. "It's your mom on the phone. She said she's at the hospital."

I snatched up the phone. Could something have happened to Dad? I knew retiring from the federal government wouldn't be good for him; he'd immediately begun waging a vicious gardening war with our next-door neighbor, Mr. Simpson. When I was home for Thanksgiving—two years ago; last year I'd missed the holiday because I had to throw together a last-minute campaign for a resort in Saint Lucia that was suffering a reservations lull—I'd had to physically stop Dad from climbing a ladder and sawing off all the branches of Simpson's trees at the exact point where they crossed over our property line.

"Oh, honey, you'll never believe it." Mom sighed deeply. "I bought a subscription to *O* magazine last month, remember?"

"Ye-es," I lied, wondering how this story could possibly end in a mad rush to the hospital to reattach Dad's forearm.

"So I bought the November issue and filled out the subscription card that comes inside," Mom said, settling in for a cozy chat. "You know those little cards that are always falling out of magazines and making a mess on the floor? I don't know why they have to put so many of them in. I guess they think if you see enough of them you'll just go ahead and subscribe to the magazine."

She paused thoughtfully. "But that's exactly what I did, though, so who am I to cast stones?"

"Mom." I cradled the phone between my shoulder and ear and massaged my temples. "Is everything okay?"

Mom sighed. "I just got my first issue of *O* magazine today, and it's the November issue! Which, of course, I've already read." Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper: "And so has your father, but you didn't hear it from me. That means I get only eleven issues and I've paid for twelve."

“Lindsey?” It was Donna again. “Matt’s here. Should I send him in?”

“Please,” I said, covering the mouthpiece.

Mom was still talking. “. . . almost like they’re trying to trick you because they say ‘Save fourteen dollars off the cover price’ but if you end up with two of the same issue and you paid for them both, you’re really only saving ten forty-five with tax—Dad sat right down with a paper and pencil and did the math—and—”

“Mom,” I cut in. “Are you at the hospital?”

“Yes,” Mom said.

Pause.

“Um, Mom?” I said. “*Why* are you at the hospital?”

“I’m visiting Mrs. Magruder. Remember, she had a hip replacement? She won’t be able to manage stairs for six weeks. Last time I was here I noticed the waiting room only had copies of *Golf Magazine* and *Highlights* and I thought, No sense in me having two copies of *O* magazine. Maybe someone else can enjoy it. And there’s a recipe for low-fat cheesecake with whipped cream—the secret is applesauce, of all things—”

“Mom, I’ll take care of it.” I cut her off just before the pressure in my head began boiling and shrieking like a teapot. “I’ll call Oprah’s office directly.”

Matt stepped into my office, one eyebrow raised. He was wearing a black blazer, which looked good with his curly dark hair. I’d have to tell him black was his color, I thought absently.

“Thank you, honey,” Mom said, sounding the tiniest bit disappointed that she couldn’t milk it a bit longer. “It’s so nice to have a daughter who knows the right people.”

“Tell Stedman we should go fly-fishing again sometime,” Matt stage-whispered as I made a gun out of my thumb and index finger and shot him in the chest.

“By the way, did you hear about Alex?” Mom asked.

I should’ve known it would be impossible for us to end our conversation without a mention of my twin sister. If she compliments me, Mom has to say something nice about Alex. Sometimes I wonder if Alex and I are as competitive as we are because Mom is so scrupulously fair in the way she treats us. Probably, I thought, feeling comforted that I could reliably blame my personal failings on my parents.

I sighed and squinted at my watch: fifty-eight minutes.

“Oprah,” Matt croaked, rolling around on my office floor and clutching his

chest. “Rally your angel network. I’m seeing . . . a . . . white . . . light.”

“The TV station is expanding Alex’s segments!” Mom said. “Now she’ll be on Wednesdays and Fridays instead of just Fridays. Isn’t that wonderful?”

When people learn I have a twin, the first thing they ask is whether we’re identical. Unless, of course, they see Alex and me together, in which case their brows furrow and their eyes squint and you can almost see their brains clog with confusion as they stutter, “Twins? But . . . but . . . you look *nothing* alike.”

Alex and I are about as unidentical as it’s possible to be. I’ve always thought I look like a child’s drawing of a person: straight brown lines for the hair and eyebrows, eyes and nose and mouth and ears generally in the right places and in the right numbers. Nothing special; just something to pin on the refrigerator door before it’s covered by grocery lists and report cards and forgotten. Whereas Alex . . . Well, there’s no other word for it: she’s flat-out gorgeous. Stunning. Breathtaking. Dazzling. Apparently there are a few other words for it after all.

She started modeling in high school after a talent scout approached her at a mall, and though she never made it big in New York because she’s only five foot six, she gets a steady stream of jobs in our hometown of Bethesda, in suburban Washington, D.C. A few years ago, she got a part-time job for the NBC affiliate covering celebrity gossip (or “entertainment,” as she loftily calls it). For three minutes a week—six now that her appearances are being doubled—she’s on camera, bantering with the movie review guys and interviewing stars who are shooting the latest political thriller film in D.C.

I know, I know, I hear you asking what she looks like. Everyone wants to know what she looks like. Alex is a redhead, but not one of those Ronald McDonald—haired ones with freckles that look splattered on by Jackson Pollock. Her long hair is a glossy, dark red, and depending on the light, it has hints of gold and caramel and chocolate. She can never walk a city block without some woman begging her for the name of her colorist. It’s natural, of course. Her skin defies the redhead’s law of pigmentation by tanning smoothly and easily, her almond-shaped eyes are a shade precisely between blue and green, and her nose is straight and unremarkable, the way all good, obedient little noses should be. My father can still fit into the pants he wore in high school; Alex got his metabolism. My mother hails from a long line of sturdy midwestern corn farmers; I got hers. But no bitterness here.

“I’ll call Alex later and congratulate her,” I told Mom.

“Oh, and she booked the photographer for the wedding,” Mom said, winding up for another lengthy tangential chat. Alex’s upcoming wedding could keep our phone lines humming for hours.

“I’ve got to run,” I cut her off. “Big morning. I’m going after a new account and the clients are flying in from Aspen this morning.”

“Aspen?” Mom said. “Are they skiers?”

“The really rich people don’t go to Aspen to ski,” I told her. “They go to hang out with other rich people. My clients have the mansion next door to Tom Cruise’s.”

“Are they movie stars?” Mom squealed. The woman does love her *People* magazine. And so does Dad, though he’d never admit it.

“Even better,” I said. “They’re billionaires.”

I hung up and took a bite of blueberry muffin, but it tasted like dust in my mouth. It wasn’t the muffin’s fault; it was the unpleasant thought tugging at me like an itch. I’d told Mom about my presentation so the message would get back to Alex: *You’re prettier, but don’t ever forget that I’m more successful*. Don’t get me wrong; I love my sister—she can be generous and outspoken and funny—but no one can push my buttons like Alex. Around her, I light up like a skyscraper’s elevator control panel at rush hour. We’re complete opposites, always have been. It’s like our DNA held a meeting in the womb and divvied up the goods: I’ll trade you my sex appeal strands for a double dose of organizational skills, my genes must’ve said. Deal, Alex’s genes answered, and if you’ll just sign this form relinquishing any claim to long legs, you can have my work ethic, too.

If Alex and I weren’t related, we’d have absolutely nothing in common. The thing about Alex is that she doesn’t just grab the spotlight, she wrestles it to the ground and straddles it and pins its hands to the floor so it has no chance of escaping. And it isn’t even her fault; the spotlight *wants* to be dominated by her. The spotlight screams “Uncle!” the second it sees her. People are dazzled by Alex. Men send her so many drinks it’s a wonder she isn’t in AA; women give her quick appraising looks and memorize her outfit, vowing to buy it because if it looks even half as good on them . . . ; even cranky babies stop crying and give her gummy smiles when they see her behind them in the grocery store line.

If Alex weren’t my sister, I probably wouldn’t be nearly so driven. But I learned long ago that it’s easy to get lost and overlooked when someone like Alex is around. In a way, she has made me who I am today.

I pushed away my muffin and glanced over at Matt. He was sprawled on my couch, one leg hooked over the armrest, half-asleep. How he always managed to stay calm amid the chaos and frenzy of our agency was a mystery. I'd have to ask him for his secret. When I had time, which I didn't right now, since I was due downstairs in forty-four minutes. Mason was letting me greet the clients, since I was presenting first, and Cheryl would get to walk them to their car afterward.

"Can we do one more run-through?" I begged.

"We did twelve yesterday," Matt reminded me, yawning. He opened one sleepy-looking brown eye and peered up at me.

"You're right, you're right," I said, lining up the pencils on my desk at a perfect right angle to my stapler. "I don't want to sound overrehearsed."

"Knock it off, OCD girl," Matt said, pulling himself up off the couch and stealing a bite of my muffin. "Mmm. How can you not be eating this?"

"I had a bowl of Advil for breakfast," I told him. "High in fiber."

"You're beyond help," he said. "What time is the party tonight?"

"Seven-thirty," I said. "Is Pam coming?"

Pam was Matt's new girlfriend. I hadn't met her yet, but I was dying to.

"Yep," he said.

Tonight was our office holiday party.

Tonight was also the night the name of the new VP creative director would be announced.

"Nervous?" Matt asked me.

"Of course not," I lied.

"Step away from the Advil," Matt ordered me, slapping my hand as it instinctively went for my desk drawer. "Let's get your storyboards into the conference room. You know you're gonna kick ass, Madam Vice President."

And just like that, the cold knot of anxiety in my stomach loosened the tiniest bit. Like I said, Matt was my only real friend at the office.