

Memory Lane

The taxi driver took off down Seventh Avenue as if he'd just mainlined a pound of crystal meth. This guy was on a kamikaze mission, reckless even by New York standards where taxi drivers charge down the streets with no regard for their passengers' lives.

"Slow down, sir, please!" I yelled through the opening in the glass partition as I contemplated ditching this driver at the next corner.

He slammed on his brakes. "Okay, lady! I'll slow it down a little. Yeah." But when the light turned green, he began weaving between cars and playing chicken to blow past the giant city buses. We brushed a bike messenger who retaliated with a fisted punch on the trunk. I again waffled about getting out, but it was that bustling time of early rush hour just before the taxi shift change, when I wouldn't be able to get another, so I stayed put and latched my seat belt. Besides, my kids were waiting for me at home, and I was already half an hour late leaving the office.

I sat strapped in the ratty backseat, tossed back and forth down the length of Manhattan's Seventh Avenue like a Ping-Pong ball.

This car is going to crash.

The lethal night of the plane accident came back to me in waves, starting with the instinctual pangs telling me not to step up from the tarmac onto the slippery, rickety staircase of the little six-seater. *This plane is not made for all this stormy snow*, I had said to myself that night. And I was right.

So much of my life had gone according to plan since then, much of it mapped out in a two-decades'-long fit to fix wrongs—the most evil happening on the eve of my sixteenth birthday that winter night, eighteen years and four months ago.

MY FATHER HAD been planning the trip all year. He had told Mom it was his chance to spend a few days one-on-one with his only child, teaching me the secrets of ice fishing at his favorite spot on Diamond Lake up north. He'd been talking about this as long as I could remember, and, finally, a week before my sixteenth birthday, Mom said I was old enough to go.

Dad had handed in his boarding pass outside, and he came onto the small commuter plane in Montreal, dusting snow off his beard and shoulders once he managed to jam his huge frame into the seat. I knew Dad saw the fear in my face and tried his best to reassure me. All I could think about was how small and fragile that plane seemed against the howling winds outside. Deep down that voice was telling me this was a bad idea, but I kept my mouth shut at first. I didn't want to look like a frightened little girl.

Dad smelled of metal and cold air, a scent that further unsettled me because it was so far from his usual salty warmth. I rubbed his arm to chase away the odor and he smiled down at me.

On the plane, I thought danger was nearby but I didn't want to scare anybody. Others have certainly had that same feeling before they board a plane with severe weather forecast in the flight path, wondering if they should resist getting on because this could be the one that goes down. A moment's hesitation before they step over that little gap and feel the rush of cold outside air between the boarding ramp and the aircraft front galley. *Is my mind playing tricks or do I somehow know this plane is going down? Am I having some kind of psychic experience? Am I going to be on the local news as the one person who survived only because I didn't get on at the last minute?*

The whole body stiffens on the ramp for a moment to stall and consider the possibility.

But then, *No. That's ridiculous. Screw it. I'm getting on. Statistics say it was more dangerous to drive to the airport than to get on this plane.*

At least most often it goes like that. I guess you don't need to be clairvoyant to know that during a blizzard, when a lumberjack pilot in a plaid shirt working for a low-budget commuter airline in Canada's outback says, "It's just a little snow," you get out of the twin-engine Cessna and run for your life.

MY PLAN SINCE then *has* been to run for my life. Run away from a boyfriend who kept traveling too far, run into a marriage that I thought would work. Rush to have kids to cement the

union. Rush home to them today. This plan means I've tried to solve everything quickly before all hell descended on me again. Trauma is like that. It smashes into your life out of the blue and just lingers, dripping like a broken egg.

The kamikaze taxi lurched me back into the New York present, and the frayed seat belt snapped into place, jerking me hard. "Please slow down, sir," I yelled again at the driver. "That light was clearly turning red, and you were never going to make it, so you don't need to speed up just to slam the brakes."

"Okay, lady. Thanks for the driving tip. All I need at the end of my shift." This time he took off two full seconds before the light even turned green. I clenched my teeth and again started to feel that old tingle I'd felt in my bones as the pilot had swung the plane out of the boarding area some eighteen years earlier.

THE ENGINES HAD revved up as he made a ninety-degree tight turn at the end of the snowy runway. I gripped my armrests, imagining how my funeral would be. Matching father-daughter coffins. That's what it would look like. I blinked hard against the image.

Dad seemed oblivious to my fears. "You don't actually sit outside and fish all day. You can leave the lines in and then go check them," Dad went on. "You're gonna love it, Allie Lamb. No trout tastes like this anywhere in the world. This lake is crystal clear in the winter; beneath five feet of ice those damn fish still manage to . . ."

"Dad," I rasped. "The snow, it's just . . ."

He held my hand and kissed my forehead. "It's okay, honey.

A dozen guys I know have flown to this paradise in weather like this. All good.”

The plane made a high-pitched whine as we sped down the runway into a cloudy, billowy, late-afternoon haze. The takeoff was absolutely normal, save a few little bumps when we made the initial ascent, and I let out a small breath. Dad patted my thigh. “You see, honey. It’s all fine. We’ll be above the clouds soon and see the sun.” Our craft coasted up toward the sky.

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW of the taxi, I could see we were now speeding west across Forty-Second Street, past a seedy commercial section of town, heading toward the flashing lights of Times Square and standstill traffic. I said through the glass, “You might want to loop over to Ninth . . .”

The guy slammed on the brakes and turned around. “Look, lady, I’m gonna get you there.” Two blocks later, we were parked in traffic. I did the math: it would take me about twenty minutes to walk, but if this traffic jam broke after five minutes, then it would only take fifteen more to reach home. Same difference. Same exploding anxiety over something with the same result that I couldn’t change. I sat back against the seat again, frustrated and sweaty, my hands clammy from the plane ride down memory lane.

“YOU’RE NEVER GOING to forget the first time the fish bite, it’s so exciting out there, the nature so delicate,” Dad yelled over the whirl of the propellers, still gaining altitude. He cradled me in the crook of his elbow and kissed the top of my head.

My dad couldn't contain his excitement about introducing me to his greatest joy, and I couldn't spoil everything for him, so intoxicating was his commitment to seek that thrill with his own daughter. I wanted to warn the pilot that I *felt* we were in serious trouble, but I kept silent. I *felt* we shouldn't even take off in this weather. Maybe I was too young to protest, to be taken seriously. And I loved my dad too much to drag him through my worries. Downers were anathema to everything he stood for.

But there was that unmistakable ice on the wing. I'd seen something on TV about ice buildup that doomed a big plane, and I wasn't sure if it was the same thing. Or was it just beads of water pooled out there that would slide off somehow? Or was my mind conjuring up troubles? It sure looked like little bubbles of ice were popping up. Maybe the lights on the wing were just reflecting off beads of water. But would there be water at this altitude and at this temperature? I had reminded myself the takeoff was absolutely normal. Surely my mind was playing tricks.

It was getting dark and the lights on the wings were flashing intermittently so I couldn't tell how bad the storm was. The snow socked us in with zero visibility. We did not see one ray of that sun Dad had promised me.

"Dad. It's, like, pouring snow. Are you sure . . ."

"Allie. Don't worry, we are doing just fine."

Ten minutes passed, and the plane dipped into a mini wind pocket and then jerked up again. It felt like we just dropped fifteen feet, hit something hard, and bounced right back up. The metal on the wings rattled. I gasped.

“Hey, pull those belts extra-tight back there; it’s getting pretty damn windy,” the pilot yelled to us. “We’re beginning our descent, but it’s gonna be bumpy.”

The wings now alternated up and down like a seesaw with our passenger capsule in the middle. Dad tried to get my mind off things. “What about the summer? I don’t want you selling T-shirts at that ratty shop downtown. Scooping ice cream just off my dock will be easier to get to and . . .”

He paused and looked out the window; the last bump was so big he had to rest his arm on his head for protection. “Now I know teenagers veer toward doing whatever their friends are doing downtown, but . . .” Dad’s chatter went on, with him talking faster and faster, while the teeny cabin shook so much his words came out all jumpy.

I think he might have been scared too and wanted to distract us both. He kept looking out the window, pausing, then talking again quickly. “I sure don’t want you in cars of any teenagers, so I’d have to drive you, and that won’t work for my early morning work schedule . . .” I don’t know what was really going on for him. God, the number of times I’ve wondered. How I wish to have been able to ask him. I’ll never know if he *knew* what I *felt* at that point.

My father grabbed my hand. The plane seemed to fall twenty feet and then lunge forward.

The pilot yelled. “We’re descending fast. Hold on!” Dad’s eyes grew large. He then knew what I knew. For a millisecond, part of me felt relief that my fears were justified, but then seeing him anxious did anything but quell them.

“Hold on, honey!!!” he screamed at me.

I’d never seen fear in his eyes before. Ever. I screamed. I think everyone did, but I’m not sure. Seconds later, metal crunched everywhere around me.

I remember every jolt of force throwing me forward as we bumped along the icy grass. They say I must have blacked out for a while after the crash, but I know I remember it. Blood sloshed around my mouth. I smelled the burned fibers of the synthetic royal blue seat fabric.

After we slowed to a deceiving, gentle stop: total silence.

“Dad!” I screamed. “Dad!”

Wind whistled through the cracks in the metal, and snow started whirling into the now shattered front windshield. It was way too calm inside. And next I knew, maybe three full minutes later, the skidding sound of vehicles outside the craft penetrated the eeriness inside. A man in a yellow suit with reflective silver stripes started coaxing me through the wreckage, the gusts of snowfall obscuring the beam of his flashlight. I couldn’t see my father or the pilot. I knew they were hurt. I didn’t hear them and they weren’t taking care of me, the child, in the wreckage. And I had the sudden sense they were dead.

Once they pried open the window, the men asked if we could move. I was curled upside down and waited for my father to answer.

“Dad?”

That was the worst moment of all: the silence after I asked again. I would have actually been relieved to hear him screaming in pain at that point.

Freezing wind was now howling through the front window and the sides of the open plane. The men asked again if we could move, if anyone heard them. I finally said out loud, "I'm okay."

"Good. That's good. Can you try to get through this window?"

"I don't know if anyone else is okay."

"C'mon, sweetie, we'll get them; you just get yourself through the window. Undo your seat belt if you can. There's room for you to get out from under the seat. Crawl through right here." The top of my hand was cut badly and my bones felt rattled, but, as far as I could tell, nothing was broken. The red light of the ambulance siren reflected off the snow and metal, blinding me every time it whipped around like a lighthouse beam. I did not want to leave that plane.

I shook my head. "I gotta get my father. I gotta get my dad!"

"We're going to get him for you. We have to get you out first; you are next to the exit." He grabbed my upper arm with one hand and supported my lower arm with the other. "Can you get out this way?" I thought that metal had somehow gotten lodged in my mouth. My tongue felt jagged, shattered teeth on the right side. I remember worrying the edges were going to cut my tongue.

"Where's my dad! Where's my dad!" I screamed, the taste of iron from the blood in my mouth now thick and soupy. My head filled with pounding wrath.

How dare Dad let us take off.

And how dare he let two other people from back home get on the plane with us.

“HEY, LADY, YOU gonna pay or what? What are you doin’ so quietly back there, knitting an entire sweater? I don’t got all day. We’re here already,” the taxi driver said, knocking on the partition to stir me out of my trance. In a flash, I was back in the taxi, shaking with a rage I hadn’t felt in years.

How dare he die on me so young.

I had to wipe my trembling hand on my jeans before I could open my wallet and pay for the sickening ride.

Homefront

When I walked through my front door, I had to push every memory from that taxi ride out of my head. Lucy, in particular, would need me to focus on the excitement she'd had wearing the caterpillar costume made out of foam and pipe cleaners we'd worked on for days. Even after dinner, Lucy wouldn't let me take off her green face paint from the caterpillar role until her daddy got to see her.

"Wade. You have to make a big deal about Lucy's face." I whispered. My husband arrived home about half an hour after I had that night, work forcing him to miss Lucy's kindergarten staging of *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Where's my superstar?" Wade said to Lucy on cue, as he rushed into our bedroom with a bouquet of purple tulips he had picked up at the corner market for her. "I hate that I had to be at boring meetings at the magazine all day and miss your show!"

Lucy jumped up onto the bed to see him at eye level. "Daddy! I didn't forget anything this time."

He hugged her hard and then held her at arm's length. "You have a little something green on your face," he said in a mock serious way that made Lucy first furrow her brow and then break into a giant smile once she got the joke. Wade released her, and she snuggled back up beside me as he pulled off his work shirt and tie in one big motion, throwing both into the corner hamper.

That's when a very strange thing happened. A casino chip with Five Thousand Dollars written on it fell out of his shirt pocket. I wouldn't necessarily have noticed had Wade not dove for the chip like a linebacker. I didn't let on that I'd seen it or the more alarming amount; instead I made a mental note of his unusually athletic attempt to hide it. Something inside made my heart break for no concrete reason except that it felt suspicious.

Once he got up off the floor and surreptitiously stuffed the chip into his khaki pants, I looked at my husband like I didn't even know him. He grabbed Lucy and carried her back to her room sack-of-potatoes style.

I stood in the doorway of the bedroom in our cramped New York apartment mulling over that chip. We didn't have five thousand dollars to throw around or to keep in our pants' pockets. Wade was the editor of a flashy newsmagazine, but that didn't mean we had a comfortable amount of savings. New York is like that. Everyone here except the Wall Street, one-percenter crowd is living on a financial edge where close to nothing is left over. My PR firm salary combined with his editor salary didn't pay for much beyond a small apartment and two private-school tuitions. Five thousand dollars really mattered to our bottom line.

And Wade wasn't a gambler. He didn't hide things from me. We were opposites, but we came together at a safe place in the middle where I harbored a notion that trust was key. When I first met Wade, he had six people glued onto him like a snake charmer and still had enough juice to lure me across a room and into his comforting spell. And despite the distraction of a persistent flame from my past, and to be honest, partially because of that flame, I leaped into a frenetic New York City life with Wade, covering my eyes and holding my breath.

I heard Lucy screaming from the bedroom, "Daddy, air lift!" I entered and saw Wade hoisting her skyward, missing the light fixture by mere inches.

"Wade. Please! You're going to hurt her on the light! And make sure you give Blake some attention before bedtime; he's upset over . . ."

"Who gets every joy of the earth?" he asked as he threw Lucy up again, giving me the eye.

"Lucy!" she shrieked, falling back into his strong hands.

"And who was the best caterpillar in the show?"

"Daddy, there's only ONE caterpillar!"

"And what girl does Daddy love best in the world?"

"Lucy!" They collapsed onto the bed, and Wade tickled her until she yelled out for him to stop, happy tears streaming down her face. Wade cradled her in his arms for a few more moments, singing a little song he had made up when she was a baby, then turned to me and held my face in his hands, dispelling any residual wifely annoyance over the casino chip I preferred to ask him about later.

“Allie, I know all you do to make the kids happy—making her costume so intensely the night before and keeping all your work pressures out of the kids’ lives—and I love you for it.” He kissed my nose. “And don’t worry about Blake; I know you’re worrying about him too. I see that concern in your face.”

“Yes, I’m worried about him. They don’t include him in so many of the little things his group does all day. All because of one kid who loves the power to exclude. I want so badly to call Jeremy’s mom again and—”

“You cannot do that again. No way. She is going to tell the kid exactly what you said on the call even though she promises to handle it discreetly. And that’ll just make Jeremy ostracize Blake more, and then you get busted for interfering. Fourth grade is rough, but he’s got to learn to handle his friendships on his own.”

“Wade, I know you are right, but his circle is edging him out again, and I don’t know how a nine-year-old is supposed to figure that out. They went to get snacks at the vending machine again at recess and told him he couldn’t come.”

“Well, I’m going to help him man up a little, and then he’ll work this out for himself.”

Another thing I loved about Wade: he knew exactly what our kids needed when they were down. What woman doesn’t love a man for that? But that casino chip would pop up again and, in time, signal a transgression no wife could ignore.

Power Jaunt

The next morning, I rushed to see my boss for fifteen minutes before a client meeting at New York's famed Tudor Room. It didn't help my mood that I was meeting him at a restaurant that operated more like a private club for high-octane achievers than a pleasant place for lunch. Absolutely nothing in my makeup or past experiences prepared me to hold my own in the ring with the wealthy gladiators who lunched there regularly; I just happened to be employed by one of them. I walked into the restaurant lobby with a confident stride, wondering if the people watching my entrance pegged me as an imposter.

My boss, Murray Hillsinger, a toadlike man, had already positioned his large bottom smack in the middle of a coveted corner banquette, twisting his jowls left and right to survey the scene from his primo lily pad. He was very proud to have his square corner banquette (even though it wasn't as prestigious as the center round tables—those went to higher rollers with huger

titles, companies, and net worths). I took a deep breath and walked over, smoothing my hair as I did so, trying to exude professional acumen, the only attribute I could for sure hold on to.

“Allie, come here. Glad you came before my lunch partner shows up.” He patted the leather next to him. “You’re going to do fine, kid.”

Like so many guys named Murray, it seems, he grew up poor on the backstreets—in this case, Long Island City, Queens. His nose was crooked from one too many fistfights, and his large forehead was now crowned with an unfortunate shoe-polish comb-over. The expensive loafers he sported were not designed for feet that caused the leather to crack in a fault line next to his big fat pinkie toe.

I moved my way around the seat on Murray’s right. “Relax. It’s going to go fine,” he told me as he chomped on a large cauliflower cluster drenched in green dip and roughed up the back of my hair like I was his kid sister. I *was* a kid when I started this job a decade ago in my early twenties, and neither he, nor I, to my dismay, ever got past that initial dynamic.

Georges—the famous-in-his-own-right maître d’ of the Tudor Room—rushed to the table, an invisible cloud of his cologne preceding him. Georges ladled more dip into the ramekin dish as he asked, “Would you rather I pour the sauce on your tie directly, or should I allow you to stain it yourself?”

The very French Georges knew that the powerful always favor those employees willing to show jocular insubordination. I watched as he moved off into the room, slipping from table to table making clever, and often hilarious, asides to the assembled

men and women who pretty much ran every major hedge fund, real estate empire, and media conglomerate in Manhattan.

Murray sat at the helm of the biggest public relations firm in New York, Hillsinger Consulting, hell-bent on saving the reputations of most of the people in this very room, many of them guilty as charged for causing the recurring economic downturns that trickled down and crippled the rest of us. The Tudor Room was a new hotspot for these powerful warriors who dined in packs, many having migrated from the more clubby Four Seasons Grill Room. The new place was part lunch spot and part womblike secret society where they all felt cozy in their amniotic bubble—this protective coating thickening ever since they had been targeted by America for causing the biggest economic downfall since the Great Depression.

“Order something, Allie!” Murray barked, always solicitous in his own special way.

“Thanks, no food, my meeting is soon,” I said. “Besides, I’m too on edge.”

“About what? You’re tough. That’s why you got the big job,” Murray said, trying to prop me up for my meeting in fifteen minutes at the Tudor Room bar to placate the unreasonable newswoman Delsie Arceneaux. If I didn’t always have the keen sense that Murray believed in me, and if I hadn’t always witnessed him doing the mensch-y thing, like promoting all the smartest women in the office, I would have quit doing crazy things for him long ago.

Sitting at the bar, Delsie Arceneaux glanced over and winked at Murray through her signature large tortoiseshell glasses as she

barked into her phone before our meeting started. She was the impetuous, African American news anchor of the “all Delsie all the time” cable news network, most famous for draping her fortysomething, voluptuous body over an army tank while she interviewed the commander of the U.S. forces in Kabul. The perennial glasses had been Murray’s idea to disguise her beauty queen looks and highlight her legitimate cerebral side.

“No,” I replied. “You got the big job. I service your requests and put your crazy notions on paper.” Today’s particular request was to placate a news anchor, known for alienating her staff by second-guessing their every decision and action. “Does she even know we are also representing the people who are asking her to speak . . .”

“Order some broth, Allie.” Conflict of interest was a concept that Murray Hillsinger found utterly tiresome. “Calm the fuck down. Nothing wrong with us booking our own clients for our other clients and taking a little cut on both sides.” He pushed the tan parchment paper menu too close to my face and pointed at the appetizers.

Georges came over to hover and pour two thousand more calories of dill cream into the dip ramekin.

“I don’t want any soup, Murray.”

“Give her the soup, Georges. She works too damn hard and deserves a little pleasure once in a while. You know the good one I mean. The light one, the brothy one. With those duck balls.”

“Foie gras wontons, sir.” Georges wrote the request down with his dainty fingers wrapped around the tip of a miniature gold pen.

“Really, Murray?” I pleaded. “Thirty-eight dollars for consommé I don’t even want?”

“She’ll have the consommé.” Murray looked at the maître d’ and then back at me. “You got some time before your meeting. It’ll settle you down. Gimme the lobster salad before my guest arrives as a little preappetizer. Double order.” Georges nodded and left the table.

“Why are the most famous people also the most neurotic about public speaking gigs? She looks into a camera and speaks to four million viewers and she can’t give a speech to two hundred people?”

He patted my hand. “All the news anchors do this. The camera is her guardian and her barrier. Without it, the live audience terrifies her. Just go handle her nerves for me. And have some soup.”

Next to me, a glamorous newspaper publisher in a sunny yellow Oscar de la Renta spring dress and matching bolero sweater raised her index finger in the air at Georges and mouthed *Charge it to my account* as she sashayed toward the door.

I leaned toward Murray, whispering, “I don’t need the soup because I don’t like to throw money away like all your friends in here.”

“It’s not about the money in this room. It’s about what you’ve accomplished.” He stole my nose with his finger like I was five years old. “M-E-R-I-T-O-C-R-A-C-Y, kid. ’Tis the beauty of this room. Money gives you power in here, but only if it’s ‘fuck you’ money you earned. There’s no one with Daddy’s inherited cash in here. Self-made or get the hell out.” Murray’s voice was

thick, more truck driver yelling at someone to get out of the way than genius spinmeister. As Murray turned his head to wave with feigned friendliness to a rival, two little curls of hair behind his ears bounced out from the hair gel meant to smooth them down, making the flat part of his comb-over seem that much more incongruous.

I looked at my watch. Five more minutes before my meeting. Across the room, I saw Delsie throw the long end of her spring, lime-green cashmere scarf around her neck and behind her shoulder. “What about Delsie with her four-point-five-million-dollar annual salary you worked so hard to leak?” I asked. “It’s not about the money in here?”

“That broad’s got raw star power and black and white viewer appeal no one can touch. Delsie took over that cable network and got the ratings they’d coveted for years. No one can say she didn’t do that on her own.”

“On her own? Really? You believe everything you peddle, Murray? Delsie secretly pays us to doctor her appearances and often her scripts. Did you forget you have me fixing her lame copy at all hours?”

He smiled at me. “Even a fuckin’ genius like me can’t spin something out of nothing. Everyone in here has to deliver the goods.”

I didn’t try to argue. I knew he was right on some level: Manhattan did harvest a huge crop of people who came to this city from small towns across the land and rose to become the lead players in their fields of art, fashion, publishing, or banking.

Most of those tried and tested winners were in this very room.

The consommé arrived, and I know Murray made me order it just to prove his point: that a foie gras wonton floating in a small bowl of duck broth could actually command a \$38 price tag. I tried the broth first. It went down smoky, gamey, with a big hint of honey. Even though it was a clear soup, it was so rich that just two sips made me thirsty. Like their patrons, the chefs had also overachieved to create something outstanding: they must have roasted three hundred duck carcasses to produce the heft of this broth.

I smiled. “You’re right. I mean, it’s not worth thirty-eight dollars of my money for a small cup of soup, but if you can afford it, I guess, yes, it’s very special.”

Murray splashed his big spoon in my broth, spilled a little on the table, and slurped up some for himself. “No. It is worth that money!” He was almost yelling at me. “It’s supply and demand and the effort to . . .”

There were supersized personalities back home in Squanto, Massachusetts, for sure—many of them in fact. My own father had led the pack. He had had no money to speak of, but I remember so much about how he behaved around the house: he always had his fellow fishermen over after they’d all chartered their boats out or had come in from a day on the sea. Everyone would bring burger patties or beer and they’d sit around pontificating just as loudly and confidently as the men and women in this restaurant. My father was one of the loudest and most charming ones—boisterous and Metertic—but he didn’t think

everyone had to agree with his every opinion just because he walked into a room.

“And don’t forget to tell Delsie I want her covering the Fulton Film Festival I’ve worked so fuckin’ hard to put on the map. Art films. Science. Action. Whatever. Fuck Sundance!” Murray picked up an entire lobster claw from his salad with his fingers, put it on half a roll, and mashed both into his mouth. “Mark my words, Allie, maybe you’ll never have big money or pick up the check. But you’re going to be respected ’cause you did something great. You saved people. You invented people. Your PR helped them reach their greatest potential.”

Creating illusions had never actually been my plan. My plan had been to write novels or long magazine essays, not use my MFA creative writing degree to craft press releases that got people out of trouble or made them appear to be something they weren’t.

“Take that guy over there for starters,” Murray yelled as he glanced over to the podium at the entryway of the restaurant where Wade stood to have lunch with a potential interview subject. My husband came to the Tudor Room as a way to network with important people he needed to put in the magazine or to entertain potential advertisers. He was able to play in the power brokers’ sandbox by charging every lunch to his parent company.

“Maybe,” I allowed. Across the room, Wade smacked Georges’s shoulder while whispering some delicious bit of gossip into his ear. I adored my husband’s ability to get everyone on his side, but his arrival also made me feel even more out

of place here, like everyone but me had a code and language and sense of humor I could never quite grasp.

When I first met Wade, I was instantly drawn to the symmetrical, thick, blondish-gray waves in his hair that neatly rolled down the back of his head, ending about a quarter inch below his collar. As I watched him walk up the movie aisle that first night, he flashed his smile back at me, having noticed me a few seats down. I felt my stomach churn because the long hair reminded me of brawny guys on the Squanto fishing docks I'd grown up with. When he joined a group of rapt partygoers to grab a drink beside the bar in the lobby, I instantly felt left out. That's the effect he had on a room: his circle was the one to be in—and most of us were on the outside looking in.

Murray beckoned for Wade to come over. "Well, for one thing, your husband's the only prick cocky enough to walk in here in jeans, and not even Georges stops him."

My husband did have an uncanny ability to skirt the rules without acknowledging them in the first place. A brass plaque on the coat check downstairs clearly read: *Jacket required. Please refrain from wearing blue jeans at the Tudor Room.* Wade had on very blue jeans, a white Oxford cloth shirt, a beat-up leather blazer, and black sneakers. He was a bit of a rebel in his industry by always going after people in print he seemed to be cozying up with on the social front. "Always bite the hand that feeds you" was his professional motto.

Wade glad-handed his way toward us as Murray watched him. "M-E-R-I-T-O-C-R-A-C-Y, baby, I'm telling you. Your husband isn't known for having much cash on hand, but he's a

member of this crowd no doubt. That magazine he runs is still a juggernaut, despite the fact that it's a fuckload thinner than it used to be. Maybe his parent company is deep in the red right now and he's always going to be low on personal funds because what the fuck does an editor make? Peanuts in this city." Murray slammed the table so hard that the cauliflower popped out of the basket. "But he's got primitive power—he turned *Meter* magazine around from a piece of dilapidated dusty old shit into the absolute number one must-read for everyone in this room. *The ultimate media macher.*" I didn't remind Murray that my husband, ten years my senior, did all that twenty years ago—before YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and online anything. People who still worked on real glossy paper in 2013 had far more uncertain futures than anyone in the room, even if Wade did everything he could to dispel that. "And he had the sense to marry you!" Then Murray added, "*And if he ever doesn't treat you right, I swear I'll kill him.*"

Wade walked up to our corner, kissed me behind my ear, whispering, "You look *hot*," and slapped Murray's back. I didn't feel hot and I doubt he meant that. He said it because he always did want me to do well and didn't like to see me stressed. I quickly sipped my last fourteen dollars of broth, eager to get out of the booth and over to the bar before Wade and Murray got into their exclusionary boys' club banter.

"Thanks for the soup, Murray. I'll see you tonight, Wade," I said to them, as I stood and smoothed my knee-length black skirt. "Wish me luck making an insanelly insecure woman feel satisfied."

“Knock her dead,” Murray answered.

Wade raised an eyebrow at my tight skirt and looked at me tenderly. “You look gorgeous. You always knock ‘em out.”

I whispered to him, “Thanks, honey. But I don’t. You’re blind.”

“You do.” He brushed my cheek. “And I’m going to go to my grave making you believe that.”

I crossed the room to go meet Delsie at the red-paneled bar wondering why both my boss and my husband were being so awfully nice to me. It was only when I had a clearer view of that bar that I noticed at first a spectacular pair of bare legs belonging to a beautiful young woman. Her snakeskin sandals wrapped around her ankles, mimicking the reptile that had been gouged to make them. She was sitting alone and scarfing down the famous Tudor Room line-caught tuna tartare served in a martini glass before her, when Georges whispered something *amusant* into her ear. She tossed her shimmering blond curls over her tight belted white jacket, where they flowed down into a V-shaped back and brushed against the top of a very round bottom.

Without even saying hello, Delsie started in with this: “I can’t do a speech for Murray one more time at another one of his charity ventures. I know I agreed, but now I want to back out. He wants me to whore myself out for every goddamn cause he’s attached to.”

“Whoring yourself out?” I asked.

“Yes.” She was now extrapissy because no one was allowed to challenge her opinions either—a charming trait apparently shared by every patron in the room. “Whoring out. That’s what I said and, funny as it may seem to you, that’s what I meant.”

I breathed in a slow breath. “Delsie. Let’s just review why you agreed to do the speech, because ‘whoring out’ has the connotation of maybe you’re being used or maybe this wasn’t your choice. You hired us for more visibility, so we got you the keynote speaker at the Fulton Film Festival media lunch, which is a very prestigious affair. Yes, it raises money for journalism schools but . . .”

She looked at me sternly, as though she was considering whether to call Murray over to reprimand me.

I went on, giving her a pitch I’d given so many times. “You’re getting paid a large speaker’s fee as a professional to MC the event, Delsie. And it’s an important celebration that will only bring you recognition in a media spotlight I know you care about. You will be impressive, don’t worry about that.”

She backed down a tad. “Who’s coming? Anyone important?”

“Who isn’t coming?” I responded. “Anyone important who cares about the future of this city. The Fulton Film Festival brings a bunch of first-class films here over the next month, so you are boosting New York’s culture and getting a lot of good press while doing so.” I may have successfully delivered the gist of this very pitch, but I was not anywhere close to present during it. My mind and eyes were drawn to the young woman down the bar. She was looking right at us—something in her eyes made me shudder.

Her bare legs glistened like the golden curtains that draped the front windows, filtering the harsh noonday light now bursting through the storm clouds. The soaring height of the glass walls made it feel like we were on top of the world, looking out over all Manhattan, even though we were street level. This

young woman took a long, slow sip of her iced tea, no hint that she was secretly uncovering the madness that would detonate around all of us in due time.

I glanced over at Wade, who gave me an encouraging little wave, the kind he gave Lucy when she went blank last fall on her three Carrot Number One lines for the *Vegetable Play*.

I pressed ahead, bolstered by all the times I had to push powerful clients onto a stage. “I’m not sure there’s a downside, unless you don’t like hanging out with movie stars.” I then stared into Delsie’s needy eyes. “You need more culture in your portfolio if you’re going to crack Manhattan, be somebody in this room. I assure you this is good old-fashioned PR for a nice Carolina woman like you.”

I couldn’t help but remain half in, half out of my pitch as my gaze locked once again on the man-eater down the mahogany bar. She looked like she was maybe twenty-eight, but I figured she was really a poised twenty-five-year-old. I stealthily neaten up my blouse and the belt around my waist. My outfit was much like hers—a pencil skirt, no stockings, high sandal heels, and a white blouse—but the sex appeal differential was enormous. My five-foot-four-inch height didn’t exactly make for sexy, lanky legs. I did have nice, thick dark hair that fell a little below my shoulders and a passable pretty thirty-five-year-old face, but more because of my unusual blue eyes and dark hair combination than actual head-turning beauty.

The woman down the bar then bit her thick, tomato-red lips and walked over to us with great purpose.

She interrupted. “Excuse me for overhearing. I’d just like to

say that Allie Crawford is known to have more innate PR business sense than anyone in this room.” She brushed her body ever so slightly against Delsie’s shoulder, whispering, “*Including her boss, Murray Hillsinger*. If you’re interested in doing something high profile, then I’d follow her advice and do whatever she wants.”

“Um, thank you . . .” This was all I could get out as she strode back to her barstool perch. At this point, I didn’t even know her name or have any idea why she wanted to help me.

Georges came over to address the beauty once again, her brown eyes sparkling back at him. He whispered something into her ear. At first, I assumed he might be having a little fling with her, but then I sensed that they were going over something. Out of his left blazer pocket, he took a casino chip and placed it discreetly in her purse. I saw a tiny piece of the chip, the top of a section with “Five” written on it, as in Five Thousand Dollars.

Also, as in the same goddamn chip that fell out of my husband’s shirt pocket the evening before.