

A photograph of a woman from the waist down, wearing a white t-shirt and a long white skirt. She is standing in front of a large, dark wood paneled door. Her feet are positioned on the floor in front of her, showing a pair of gold-colored high-heeled sandals.

never the bride

a novel

cheryl mckay
& rene gutteridge

Praise for
Never the Bride

“Hope, humor, and happiness—to me, those are the attributes of good a book. *Never the Bride* is more than that—it’s terrific!”

—LOUISE DUART, comedic impressionist, TV host,
and author of *Couples Who Pray*

“*Never the Bride* is a love story with a kick! Not just funny, this book is rollicking, with a heroine who can change her own tires, guide her own free-spirited sister, and keep an outlook on life that caused more than one fit of giggles. This is the kind of book I want to read again, simply because it is so rich with meaning and so intelligently written; I want to make sure I’ve caught every nuance.”

—HANNAH ALEXANDER, author of *A Killing Frost*
and the Hideaway series

“*Never the Bride* is a powerful and thought-provoking story with just the right touch of humor. At times I laughed out loud, and at other times I wiped away my tears. *Never the Bride* is a treasure of a novel and a must-read!”

—CARRIE TURANSKY, author of *Along Came Love*
and *Kiss the Bride*

“Engrossing as they are entertaining, the authors hit it out of the park with this delightful romantic romp, striking at the heart of a woman’s deepest desire: to be known and loved for herself. Side-splittingly funny and devastatingly raw in turns. Having devoured McKay’s inspired screenplay first, followed by this fabulously faithful novel, I can hardly wait for the movie!”

—SUSAN ROHRER, producer, writer, and director

“*Never the Bride* teaches us all powerful lessons about God’s plan, control, and the peace that comes with surrender.”

—JIM STOVALL, author of *The Ultimate Gift*

“Delightful, delightful, delightful is *Never the Bride*. Rene Gutteridge knows how to take a plot and give it an unexpected, soul-searching, humorous wow of a twist.”

—LYN COTE, author of *The Desires of Her Heart*

“*Never the Bride* is a delightful book. Jessie is a wise-cracking, sarcastic gal I’d love to take to lunch. This book had me in stitches as I laughed with Jessie, in tears as I felt her pain and desperation. If you’re looking for a book that’s more than a romance, this is the book. This novel will speak to the heart of every woman who’s ever sought the perfect man, by pointing her to the perfect romance.”

—CARA C. PUTMAN, author of *Canteen Dreams*
and *Sandhill Dreams*

“*Never the Bride* is a pure delight! It’s fun, refreshing, and witty, yet also profoundly insightful about God and His amazing love for us. I’ll be recommending this one to my family and friends!”

—MARLO SCHALESKY, author of *If Tomorrow Never Comes*
and *Beyond the Night*

“For all those wannabe brides out there, *Never the Bride* is a refreshing look at how quickly we can sell ourselves short, while reminding us, in a witty and yet profound way, that there is a wannabe Groom who has always been there. Every belly laugh and every tear inspired by this book will hopefully cause each wannabe bride to realize she already is one.”

—DENISE HILDRETH, author of the Savannah series
and *Flies on the Butter*

“I devoured every single page. *Never the Bride* is the best romantic comedy written in years! A page turner from page one.”

—VICTORYA ROGERS, love coach, host of ManToKeep.com,
and author of *Finding a Man Worth Keeping*

“*Never the Bride* is a ticklish tale of one slightly neurotic woman’s quest to find Mr. Right that leads to an unexpected encounter. Delightfully memorable, wonderfully thought provoking!”

—TAMARA LEIGH, award-winning author of *Splitting Harriet*
and *Leaving Carolina*

never
the
bride

By Rene Gutteridge

Boo

Boo Who

Boo Hiss

Boo Humbug

Scoop

Snitch

Skid

My Life as a Doormat

By Cheryl McKay

Never the Bride (screenplay)

The Ultimate Gift film (screenplay)

Gigi: God's Little Princess DVD (screenplay)

Wild & Wacky, Totally True Bible Stories series (cowritten with

Frank Peretti)

Books by Cheryl McKay and Rene Gutteridge

The Ultimate Gift film novelization

never
the
bride



a novel

cheryl mckay &
rene gutteridge



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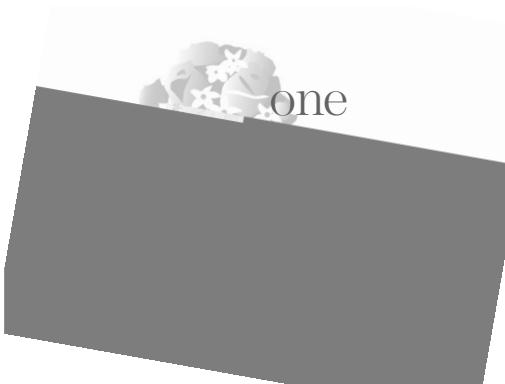
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*For those who fear the
surrender of their
purple pens*



V

You don't know me yet, so there is no reason you should care that I'm stuck on a highway with a blowout. But maybe we can relate to each other. Maybe you can understand that when I say, "Everything goes my way," I'm being sarcastic. Not that I'm usually dependent on such a primitive form of communication. I'm actually not very cynical at all. I'm more of a glass-half-full-of-vitamin-infused-water person. Sometimes I even believe that if I dream something, or at least journal it, it will happen. But today, at eight forty-five in the morning, as the sun bakes me like a cod against the blacktop of the Pacific Coast Highway, I'm feeling a bit sarcastic.

It's February but hotter than normal, which means a long, hot California summer is ahead—the kind that seems to bring out the beauty in blondes and the sweat glands in brunettes. I am a brunette. Not at all troubled by it. I don't even have my hair highlighted. I own

my brunetteness and always have, even when Sun-In was all the rage. And it can't be overstated that chlorine doesn't turn my medium chestnut hair green. Actually, it's the copper, not the chlorine, that turns hair green—but that's a useless trivia fact I try to save for speed dating.

I'm squatting next to my flat tire, examining the small rip. Holding my hair back and off my neck with one hand, I stand and look up and down the road, hoping to appear mildly distressed. Inside, I'll admit it, I'm feeling moderately hysterical. My boss flips out when I'm late. It wouldn't matter if my appendix burst, he doesn't want to hear excuses. I wish he were the kind of guy who would just turn red in the face and yell, like Clark Kent's newspaper boss. But no. He likes to lecture as if he's an intellectual, except he's weird and redundant and cliché, so it's painful and boring.

A few cars zoom by, and I suddenly realize this could be my moment. Part of me says not to be ridiculous, because this kind of thing happens only on shows with a ZIP code or county name in the title. But still, you can't help wondering, hoping, that maybe this is the moment when your life will change. When you meet your soul mate.

Like I said, I enjoy my glass/life half full.

Even as an optimist, I see no harm in being a little aggressive to achieve my goals. So with my free hand, I do a little wave, throw a little smile, and attempt to lock eyes with people going fifty miles an hour.

And then I see him. He's in a red convertible, the top down, the black sunglasses shiny and tight against his tan skin. He's wearing pink silk the way only a man with a good, measured amount of confidence can. At least that's the way I see it from where I'm standing.

As he gets closer, his head turns and he notices me. I do a little wave, flirtatious with a slight hint of unintentional taxi hailing. I decide to smile widely, because he is going fast and I might look blurry. He smiles back. My hand falls to my side. I step back, lean against my car, and try to make my conservative business suit seem flattering. There's nothing I can do about my upper lip sweating except hope my sweat-proof department-store makeup is holding up its end of the bargain better than my blowout-proof tire did.

He seems to be slowing down.

Live in the moment, I instruct myself. Don't think about what I should say or what I could say. Just let it roll, Jessie, let it roll. Don't overthink it.

This thought repeats itself when the convertible zooms by. I think he actually accelerated.

So.

My makeup is failing, along with whatever charm I thought I had. I just can't imagine what kind of guy wouldn't stop and help a woman. Maybe I'd have more hits if I were elderly.

I do what I have to do. What I know *how* to do. I change my own stupid tire. Yes, I can, and have been able to since I was eighteen. I can also change my own oil but don't because then I appear capable of taking care of myself. And I'm really not. Practically, yes, I can take care of myself. I make decent money. I drive myself home from root canals. I open cans without a can opener. I'm able to survive for three days in the forest without food or water, and I never lost sleep over Y2K.

But I'm talking about something different. I'm talking about being taken care of in an emotional way. Maybe it's a genetic problem. I

don't know. Somehow I became a hopeless romantic. A friend tried the exorcism equivalent of purging me of this demon when she made me watch *The War of the Roses* two times in a row, all under the guise of a girls' night, complete with popcorn and fuzzy slippers.

That didn't cure me.

I want to be married. I hate being alone.

I lift the blown-out tire and throw it in my trunk, slamming it closed. My skin looks like condensation off a plastic cup. I can't believe nobody has stopped. Not even a creepy guy. I stand there trying to breathe, trying to get ahold of my anger. I'm going to be late, I'm going to be sweaty, and I'm on the side of a highway alone.

"You need some help?"

I whirl around because I realize that I've just been hoping that even a creepy guy would stop, and since my world works in a way that only my negative thoughts seem to come to pass, you can see why the glass-half-full is so important.

The morning sun blinds me, and all I see is a silhouette. The voice is deep, kind of mature.

"Well, I *did* need some help," I say, fully aware that acting cute is not going to undo the sweat rings that have actually burst through three layers of fabric, so I don't bother. I dramatically gesture to my car and try a smile. "But as you can see, I don't now."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. But thank you very much," I say, *for stopping after I'm completely finished*. I trudge back to my car and start the air conditioner. Glancing back in my rearview mirror, I study the silhouette. He sort of has the same shape as the guy in my dream last night. My night-

mare. It was actually a dream after my nightmare, where you feel awake but you're not. It wasn't the nocturnal version of *Chainsaw Massacre*, but it did involve taffeta.

He doesn't wave. He doesn't move. He just stands there, exactly like the guy in my dream. It's very *déjà vu*-like and I lock my doors. I put my blinker on, pull onto the highway, and leave him behind, driving below the speed limit on my flimsy spare tire all the way to work.

I work at Coston Real Estate. We're squeezed between a wireless store and a Pizza Hut. We stand out a little because of our two huge dark wood doors, ten feet tall and adorned with silver handles.

I push open one of the doors and walk in. Mine is the front desk. It's tall, almost Berlin Wall-like. People have to peer over it to see me, and I look very small on the other side. When I'm sitting, I can barely see over the top of it.

I walk toward the break room, past nine square cubicles, all tan and otherwise colorless. Even the carpet is tan. On my left are the real offices with walls.

Nicole, inside her cubicle, sees me. "What happened to you?"

We've been good friends ever since I started working here, ten years ago. She's African American, two years younger than I am. She has that kind of expression I wish I could wear. Her eyebrows slant upward toward each other, like a bridge that's opening to let a boat through. It's part *You're weird* and part *I'm worried*. She has sass and I love it. She's working her way up to senior agent and is one of Mr. Coston's favorites, but I don't hold that against her.

I don't answer because I'm busy staring at her new eight-by-ten

framed family picture. It's very Picture People: white background, casual body language, all four wearing identical polos and jeans. I love that kind of husband, who will wear matching clothes with his family. They're so adorable.

"Jessie, seriously girl, you okay? You've got black smeared across your forehead."

I tear my eyes away from the photo. "Blowout on the highway."

The eyebrow bridge is lowered, and she chuckles. "Honey, you look like you changed your own tire."

I put my forehead against the edge of her cube wall. "I did."

"Oh. Wow. I wish I knew how to change a tire."

"No, you don't. Trust me."

She reaches under her desk and pulls out a neatly wrapped gift. "For you."

I smile. I love gifts. I drop my things and tear it open even though I already know what it is. "Nicole, it's beautiful!" It's a leather-bound journal with gold embossed lettering and heavy lined paper inside. "What's the occasion?"

"It's February. I know how much this month... Well, it tends to be a long month for you, that's all." She points to the spine of it. "It sort of reminds me of the one I brought you back from Italy four years ago. Remember?"

"Yes, it does."

"So, my friend, happy February. May this month bring you—"

"Love." From my bag, I pull out a folder and slap it on her desk.

"What is this?" She says it like a mom who has just been handed a disappointing report card.

“Just look.”

Carefully, like something might jump out and insult her, she opens the folder. She picks up three glossy photos of several potential loves of my life.

“They’re hot, aren’t they?” I ask.

“Too hot,” she says.

“There’s no such thing as too hot.”

“Suspiciously too hot, like an airbrush might be involved.”

I grab the photos from her and turn them around for her to see. With my finger, I underline each of their names: CuteBootsieBoo, SuaveOneYouWant, OneOfAKindMan.

“Jessie CuteBootsieBoo. Mmm. Doesn’t have a good ring to it.”

“It’s their *instant message* names, Nicole.”

“Yes. And that makes it better?”

I sigh. “You have got to get into the twenty-first century, you know. This is the best way to meet a guy.”

“You can tell a lot about a man by what he names himself.” She looks up at me and shakes her head. “Seriously. You set up a date with one of these and they’ll show up with a beer gut, a walker, or a rap sheet.”

“None of them rap.”

Nicole stands, grabs my arm with one hand and my stuff with the other, and whisks me to my desk. She nearly pushes me into my chair and drops everything in front of me.

“Chill out,” I say as she walks away. “This service guarantees background checks. But if you happen to end up needing a restraining order, they’ll pay for it.”

Nicole gasps and whirls around.

“I’m kidding.” But I have her attention now. I lean back in my chair, looking at the ceiling as my hands feel the leather on my new journal. “This’ll be the year, Nicole.”

“You say that every year. Especially in February, which is why I got you the—”

I snap forward. “But I’ve never taken control like this before. Three online match sites, one dating service. They find what you want or your money back.”

Nicole walks back toward me and leans over the counter. “I didn’t realize QVC sold dates. If you order in the next ten minutes, do you get two for the price of one, plus an eight-piece Tupperware set?” She reaches for my chocolate bowl.

I scowl at her but lift the bowl up so she can reach it. “What do you know about it? You got married right out of college.”

“Don’t remind me.” She carefully unwraps her candy and takes a mini-bite.

“You never even had to try.” I grab a piece of dark chocolate out of my candy bowl and get the whole thing in my mouth before she takes another bite of hers.

Nicole shrugs and leans against the counter. “Sometimes you just gotta leave these things up to fate.” She goes back to nibbling on her chocolate.

I swirl my hands in the air. “Fate, God, the universe. They’ve all been asleep on the job of setting up a love story for me.” I stand up. “No. I am going to make this happen myself.”

Nicole doesn’t look up from her candy. “Do you even know what

it means to be married? To be chained to another person for the rest of your life? To pick up socks and wash underwear and care for a grown man like he's just popped out of infancy? Huh?"

I glare at her even though she's got eyes only for her candy. "It's got to be better than being alone. Or being a bridesmaid eleven times."

She bites her lip and finally glances at me. "But you know how...you kind of need everything to be a certain way."

I nudge my stapler so it isn't perfectly perpendicular to my sticky notes, just to show her I'm able to handle disorder. I try not to stare at it because now it's really bugging me. "Are you saying I'm a control freak?"

"With OCD tendencies. You can't expect everything to be exactly how you want it if you want to live through a marriage."

I stand and start walking slowly toward the bathroom. "I know what 'compromise' means."

Nicole follows. "Then why do you get mad when I have to check with my husband before we go out? That's what marriage is. You can't even poop without someone else knowing."

I glance at her to see if she's serious. She is. Part of me wants to tell her about my dream last night. I always tell her about my dreams. But she's really pooping on my parade today. We get to her desk and she sits down. I walk on.

I have these dreams. I'm talking nocturnal, not journal. Yeah, I dream in my journal. I admit it. I've written in one since I was fourteen, when I found a strange delight every time I drew a heart with a boy's name attached in squiggly letters.

But back to my nightmare. It started with me in a wedding dress.

That's not the nightmare. That part was actually cool because I was in a dress I designed in my journal when I was twenty-two.

The march was playing. I love the “Bridal March.” Nothing can replace it. I cringe every time I hear a country song or bagpipes or something. My wedding, it’s got to be traditional.

I was making my way down the aisle, rhythmically elegant, one foot in front of the other. My shoulders were thrown back, my chin lifted, and my bouquet held right at my waist. I once saw a bride carry her bouquet all the way down the aisle holding it at her chest. I shudder just talking about it.

The train fluttered behind me, like it’s weightless or maybe there’s an ocean breeze not too far away. It was long, bright white, and caused people to nod their approval.

I smiled.

Then the “Bridal March” stopped, halting like a scratched record. I looked up to find another bride in my place, wearing *my* dress, standing next to *my* guy. I couldn’t see what he looked like; he was facing the pastor. But the bride, she looked back at me with menacing eyes, overdone with teal eye shadow and fake lashes.

I screamed. I couldn’t help it. I closed my eyes and screamed again. When I opened them, I could hardly believe what I was looking at. A church full of people, looking at *her*. And what was I doing? Standing next to her in a bridesmaid dress.

Gasping, I looked down. Hot pink! With dyed-to-match shoes! I glanced next to me and covered my mouth. It was me again, standing next to me, in green. Dyed footwear.

And there I was again, standing next to my lime self, this time in

canary yellow. On and on it goes. I counted ten of me before I woke up, gasping for air, clutching myself to make sure I was wearing cotton pajamas.

“Thank God,” I said, but as I looked up, I saw a man in my room. He was backlit against my window, like the moon was shining in on him, but I don’t think the moon was out. A scream started forming in my throat, but I recognized that he was not in a stance that indicated he was going to stab me to death. There was no knife. Nothing but an easy, casual lean against my windowsill. Truly, no less scary.

The scream arrived as I clamored for my lamp. I yanked the string three or four times before it turned on, but when it did, the man was gone.

I realize I am standing in the middle of the hallway near Nicole’s desk. She is gabbing on the phone but looking at me funny. I go to the coat closet next to the bathroom. I always, always keep a spare change of clothes at work, just in case I have to do something like change my tire. Or someone else’s. It’s happened. I take out my least favorite suit, which is why I keep it here. It’s lilac with a boxy neckline that makes me feel like I should be a nanny. I head toward the bathroom.

“Stone, get me the ad copy for the new Hope Ranch listings.”

This is my boss, Mr. Coston, dragging me back to reality. He pops his head out the door as I pass by but yells at me like I’m down the hall. I don’t think he even remembers my first name.

“Already on your desk, sir,” I say.

He’s in his sixties, with a loud but raspy voice and shiny silver hair that tops a permanent look of disappointment. “What happened to you?”

"Blown tire." I hold up my suit. "I was just going to change."

"Fine. Then get me a latte. Lighten up on the sugar, will you?"

"Right," I mumble as he disappears. "Lighten up on life, will you?"

I'm the office equivalent of a bat boy. I'm the coffee girl. It's this one thing that sort of drives me crazy about my job. I do a lot of important things, but when I have to run get coffee, I feel like I'm falling down the rungs of the occupational ladder. It makes me wonder. If I had a job I could get passionate about, would I be so desperate for a husband? I could drown myself in work rather than my dreams.

Well, either way, I'm drowning, and that's never good.

After I change and decide I really, really dislike the color lilac, I grab my purse and head for the neighborhood Starbucks. It's five blocks away and I like that. It gives me time to walk and think on such things as to why Mr. Coston has been married for thirty-four years, the exact number of years I haven't been married. He doesn't mention his wife much and doesn't even have a picture of her in his office. He doesn't wear a wedding band, and when he does take a vacation, it's with his buddies to golf resorts.

It just seems like the world could better balance itself out, that's all.

I'm nearly to Starbucks. People are leaving with their white and green cups of bliss. The putrid smell of coffee will soon replace the putrid smell of old rainwater evaporating underneath the sun. I'm not a coffee fan. I'm high strung. The feeling everyone wants by drinking coffee I have naturally, just like my chestnut hair.

I'm about to open the door, and then I see him, in all his glory.



h

He's sitting at one of the outside tables in front of Starbucks, busily texting. I pull out my phone and pause. I know exactly whom he's texting. My phone vibrates almost instantly.

PLAY HOOKY.

Before I go on, I have to explain Blake to you. It's complicated, but stick with me.

Blake is my best friend. We've known each other since we were kids. I grew up to be smart, sensible, and brunette. He grew up to be smart, sensible, and hot. We've been through a lot together, but I never could shake the attraction to him that I've felt since we were sixteen.

I remember the exact day he went from irritating to irresistible. We were at a birthday party. Our birthdays are nine days apart, and his mother was always kind to include me since my mom had a hard time organizing events, or even dinner, for that matter. Blake never minded. We shared many friends.

Anyway, it was the smallest thing. One second he was Blake. And the next, when he offered to pour my drink for me, he became more. My heart skipped a beat and for a second I thought maybe something was wrong. I stared at the fizz swelling over the top of the plastic cup, dribbling down the side. His finger caught it, swiped it. He took a napkin and cleaned the rest. He looked at me and said, “Sorry about that.”

It’s no *Casablanca* moment, but that’s when it happened, when everything changed.

I’ve never spoken a word to him or anyone else about it, because there is a certain feeling of safety knowing that he is my best friend and that we’re close for no other reason except we like each other.

It’s just that he’s also hot.

But trust me, I’m not going to do anything crazy like declare my love for him. I’ve seen *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, and it doesn’t end well for the chick friend.

Anyway, this is a usual routine for us. He texts PLAY HOOKY, and I meet him down at the Starbucks under the guise of getting my boss coffee. Since my boss is a Starbucks junkie, this has worked out well.

I snap my phone closed and decide to play a little trick on him. He’s busy watching women walk by, so I sneak up behind him and in a deep, sexy voice purr, “Hey, baby, wanna share a latte?”

Blake sits up and whips around, his eyes wide. He sees me and cracks up laughing. I slide into the other seat at the table. “That was fast!”

“I was on my way here. Coston needed a latte, pronto.”

I observe Blake for a moment. He always seems out of place at Starbucks. He works construction, houses mostly, and his clothes often

have a fine layer of sawdust on them. He's rugged and muscular, with caramel wavy hair that complements his tanned skin. I like the fact that he always has a sunglasses line and that he refuses to wear anything but Ray-Bans.

For my birthday one year he bought me a pair, since I'd given him a hard time for years, declaring Target's were just as good. Turns out I was wrong. Ray-Bans rock. I still have the pair that he gave me. They're locked in my safe-deposit box because I couldn't live with myself if I lost a pair of two-hundred-dollar sunglasses.

He props his sunglasses on top of his head and grins, and by "grins" I mean melts my heart. "I've got something to show you!" He takes my hand and guides me through a small crowd. We are walking the opposite direction of my work, toward a two-block stretch of quaint shops.

He drops my hand and starts talking with his hands, which I notice immediately because usually he has them stuffed deep into his painter jeans. "She called the company this morning, asked for our help designing the inside of her shop. It's right up here."

I eye him suspiciously. "You build homes..."

"I know, but I think she just called, maybe because it's my dad's company, but—"

"Who?"

He stops and gestures toward a storefront. It's obviously unoccupied, but inside a couple of people are milling around. One in particular is catching Blake's eye. And mine. The plain glass window is busy with reflections of the street, but through all that I can see her. She's practically glowing among the dust and clutter of an unfinished

room. And bending over. Let's just say she's...taut. All of her. Head to toe. Even her neck looks in shape.

I fold my arms. "You're gonna stop building homes to make, what is it, shelves or something?"

Blake smiles. "For Veronica Steele, yes."

I take a deep breath. I had never actually seen her in person until now. I'd seen a picture of her...okay, pictures. Lots of them. This woman, whose name sounds like she stepped straight out of Harlequin, USA, was Blake Lightner's college obsession.

We stand there for a moment, Blake observing Veronica and me observing Blake. He's got this weird expression on his face. It's part thirteen-year-old with an *SI* swimsuit issue and part dumbfounded, *Why didn't she choose me?* That part I can relate to.

Still, it irritates me. "What? And you need my approval? What do you see in her?"

We both look. We both know. Legs like a giraffe. Hair like a wild pony. Curves like a coastal highway.

"What's not to like?"

"She's just very giraffey. I mean, sure, her neck is long, her legs are long, but don't you think she's a little out of proportion? She's got short arms, or maybe a long waist, but either way, she's very giraffey." I know. I sound stupid. I get this way when Blake gets this way.

"I was thinking more along the lines of gazelle." He's staring like we're five-year-olds at the zoo and the zebras are mating.

"Well, good luck finding a vet for the two of you." I sigh a little. I'm being hard on him and I know it. The truth is, he's always loved Veronica. I'm about to apologize for my snarkiness when his attention is diverted by another woman walking by. It's just for a second, but I

see it. “I’m not sure they can cure you of the bad case of shallow-it-is you’re suffering from.”

Blake’s gaze slides sideways. “I am not one of those guys.”

“I hate to shatter your perfectly solid opinion of yourself, but people who hold on to old flames and refuse to let go are pathetic.”

My words are harsh. Not as harsh as I want them to be. But Blake’s sensitive, which is why I like him and why I hold back. And yes, that’s holding back. Especially when I offer a small smile. I stand there for a moment, drowning in my own subtext.

Veronica is bent over again. We’re both staring.

“Well,” he says, and I can’t tell at all if he’s being serious or not, “is it curable?”

“This girl’s gotta get back to work. Enjoy the show.” I walk toward Starbucks, checking my watch. The line is long, but that is a good thing today. I need some time to cool off. I feel foolish. And hopeless.

How can I, Jessica Stone, compare to *that*? Leggy. Blonde. Owns a business. Steele will win over Stone any day of the week.

I sigh loudly—too loudly—and the woman in front of me turns, offering a sympathetic smile. “This line is barely crawling.”

I stand on my tiptoes to see what’s going on. Short on baristas? Nope.

“It’s that she’s blonde,” I tell the woman in front of me, who is a carrot top—curly and afro-like.

She peeks around the line to look. “Yep. The men always feel like they need to chat up a blonde.”

I didn’t know redheads felt the same way. Huh.

“What is it about blondes?” I ask her.

She fluffs her curls. “No idea. I hate her. Look.”

I stare at the young barista, who really doesn't seem to be doing anything out of the ordinary. She's taking orders, smiling at customers, counting change. But somehow when she does it, it seems sexy.

I am fully aware that I am discriminating by hair color. And I'm also fully aware of how shallow that makes me.

The redhead finally gets to the front and begins ordering. I chew a nail, wondering if I should text Blake, just to make sure things are okay. But then I notice a man. He's standing in the corner, near the wall of coffee mugs, noticing me. The second thing I notice is that when I notice him, he doesn't stop noticing me. He doesn't look away. He locks eyes with me, and I look away first. He's cute! Slightly rugged but not above a button-down cotton shirt. A nice, gentle smile. Compelling eyes.

"Ma'am?" By the tone, I realize the barista has probably been trying to get my attention.

"Oh, uh, sorry." I shuffle forward. "Grande latte, skim, extra foam."

"For?"

"Jessie."

I hand over the money and glance back at the guy. He's still staring at me. He looks familiar, but I don't know where I've seen him. It's not his face. It's...the way he's standing.

"Ma'am?"

"Oh, sorry," I say as the blonde dumps the change into my hand. I scoot out of the way and stand near the bar where the coffee comes out. The red-haired woman is standing nearby. "Hey," I say to her, "is it just me or is the guy over by the mugs staring at me?"

She nonchalantly glances over. "The motorcycle dude?"

I see the motorcycle dude. Scary and not at all looking like a latte guy. "No, the other guy, standing by the mugs."

“Um...”

“He seems kind of intense. I mean, to just blatantly stare, you know?”

She doesn’t say anything. Now *she’s* staring at me. I’ve got two people staring at me.

Thankfully my drink comes up. I grab two sugars and tear them open. I pour. I stir.

I wonder if he’s still watching me. And then I realize that I had been so distracted by his intensity, I forgot to be cute. I look back up, this time with a cool smile on my face, but he’s gone. I peer out the window. Maybe he’s waiting outside. But no. He’s gone. Probably the lilac suit.

I rip open two more packets and pour furiously. Stir so hard coffee drips. I grab four napkins and scrub the counter. Two more packets and I don’t bother stirring this time. I secure the lid and walk outside.

Yes, sometimes I ruin his coffee simply because I’m in a bad mood. But the man should count his blessings. I could add something much worse than sugar.

I make it back quickly because when I’m mad I walk fast. I deliver the latte to Mr. Coston, who is busy on the phone explaining to someone that just because a person died in a house doesn’t mean it’s haunted.

Back at my desk, I gaze at the shiny silver banner that hangs across the wall behind me. It’s been there for two weeks. It looks tacky against the marble lettering of Coston Real Estate. It reads, HAPPY TENTH ANNIVERSARY! The exclamation point bothers me. I’m certain that the banner was meant for a married couple. If not, then the exclamation

point is unnecessary because maybe someone isn't excited about being at the same dead-end job for ten years.

I can't complain too much. They did bring me literally pounds of my favorite candy. I open my desk drawer and plunge my hand into a bag of dark chocolate M&M's. You wouldn't know it by looking at the situation, but I'm a bit of a risk taker. I'm allergic to chocolate. Not in an airway-closed-off kind of way, but I do swell. Sometimes my lips get puffy, and I won't lie, it's a good look for me. Other times I'm not so lucky, and an eyelid will droop or something. Dark chocolate and chocolate in liquid form give me the least trouble. But when I do indulge, I have to make sure I'm not due for a date or a presentation or something, because I never know exactly what's going to swell.

Since I'm stuffing my face with chocolate, why not continue down what Nicole would call a self-destructive path? I log on to Matches.com. The opening page has one match being lit by the other's charm. It's kind of cute, except the song is corny, so I turn down the sound. I log in and punch in my password, Dark Cocoa. My screen name appears: WELCOME_LEGALLY_BROWN.

The front doors of the office open. I quickly minimize the page and smile as my co-worker Christa enters. She peeks over the counter.
“Hey, Jessie.”

“Hi, Christa. How are you?” *And your perky, beautiful self?*

“Good. I can't wait for after work. You'll be there, right?”

I pause. I had no intention of going to her bridal shower in the break room. I was going to cut out early to avoid it. But the bright smile that must've won the guy—now fiancé—over starts to fade and she seems a little hurt. “Of course,” I say. “Wouldn't miss it.”

She claps her hands. “Yay! All right, see you then!”

She bounces down the hall, and all she’s missing is a team to cheer for. I pull up my Matches.com page again.

Ugh. NO MATCHES blinks like a hazard light. Why did they have to make it blink? Blinking is for excitement and road hazards.

Maybe it’s a subtle message that I’m on the wrong road.

It’s noon and I tell Nicole I’ll have to skip our planned lunch because I have to go get something for Christa. Nicole says it’s fine because she wants to decorate the room a little more. How a break room can look any better with streamers is beyond me, but I let it go. I don’t want to become that bitter person who stands people up at their bridal showers because I’m insanely jealous.

I find an open meter in the Paseo Nuevo district, parallel park like a moron, and walk a few blocks to get to the gift shop that is my home away from home.

I notice an awful lot of men shopping today. These are the cool ones, who are shopping a few days before Valentine’s to get the exact right gift. They’re thinking ahead, not running out and grabbing something in a hurry. Their women, whoever they are, are lucky.

I open the door to Malia’s Gifts & Flowers. A robot Cupid, playing *Love Is in the Air*, pretends to shoot an arrow. I never liked Cupid. Thought he was a little creepy with his diaper and fat rolls.

I notice Malia behind the counter, sacking up some grand gift for a guy. She hands him change and wishes him luck. Malia is beautiful for her age. She’s sixty-two and looks like she’s forty, except she’s all gray.

She has a youthful playfulness about her. She spots me and waves enthusiastically. I wave back, then block the door so the guy with the balloons, stuffed pink bear, and card can't get out.

He gives me a curious look.

I can smell his cologne. "Hi." I smile.

"Hi. Excuse me."

"Not so fast." I look carefully over his purchases and notice he had picked out a card that had made me snort out loud when I read it last week. Funny, but not so romantic. "Love the balloons. The pink bear is cute. But trust me, you'll want to write something personal in the card."

He looks down at it, a slight panic crossing his face. "I went with humor. Maybe I shouldn't have. I'm... I better go back... this is..."

I place a steady hand on his shoulder. "Listen, the card is fine. It doesn't matter what's in there. Just write something personal. You don't have to write an essay, just two or three lines that make her feel like you have thought this through." I let go of his shoulder and step aside.

He nods, gazing up at the balloons. "Maybe the balloons were a mistake."

"How long have you been dating?"

"Not long. Three months."

"Then it's perfect. It's too soon for jewelry, but this still says, 'I'm crazy about you.'"

"Thank you," he says, relieved.

"You're welcome." Malia is coming toward me, so I step toward her and embrace her with a hug.

"How are you?" she asks. "I didn't see you this weekend."

"Fine. The shop looks great! Love the Valentine's decorations."

“Yeah? I kind of think I went overboard.”

“No,” I say, gazing at the hundreds of hearts hanging from the ceiling. “It’s the season for going overboard. For most people, anyway.”

She pinches my cheek and begins walking toward the counter. “What brings you by?” She looks me up and down as I walk with her. “You eating enough, girl?”

“More than my share of my favorite food group.”

Malia arranges a pile of fake roses as she talks. “How many times do I have to tell you? Chocolate is not a food group.”

I grin and adjust the heart-shaped notepads. “Hey, I’ve got to get my antioxidants somehow.”

Malia looks up at me, worried. “Well, are you at least carrying Benadryl?”

I smile. She’s such a mom. “Yes, I’ve got my emergency supply here.”

“Let me go microwave some organic spinach for you.” She starts moving toward the back room. “I’ll season it; it’ll give you energy.”

“And stick in my teeth.” I grab her arm, and she stops, though it’s obvious she’s disappointed. “It’ll be awkward,” I say, “because I won’t know I have green slime on my teeth and nobody will tell me. I’ll get home, see it, die of embarrassment—and then I’ll have to eat more chocolate. So I better pass.”

She shoots me a mild look.

I begin to browse. “I need a bridal shower gift.”

A customer approaches the counter, and I let Malia take care of him.

I wander the displays, looking for anything that doesn’t scream Valentine’s Day. I pick up a cloth doll with a mop of blond hair. “The bride’s young enough that she might actually enjoy this,” I holler as I hold the doll high enough for her to see.

I hear her laugh. She finishes with the customer and joins me.

“Did you know,” I say, fingering the yarn, “that your son has quite the thing for blondes?”

Malia nods. “No curing a man of that.” She reaches for a display and hands me a shiny silver heart-shaped frame. “She’ll love this. One can never have too many frames.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll wrap it up nicely for you.”

“You’re a sweetheart.”

She takes my arm as we head for the register. “You know, speaking of, I could introduce you to the guy who owns Fine Computer Techs. They do my Web site. He’s single.”

“Unless *fine* means something other than ‘talented computer geeks,’ I think I’ll pass. Have we not committed to memory the last disaster you set me up with?”

“I swear I had no idea he would ask you for one of your kidneys.”

Malia’s eyes grow wide at the memory.

I pull out my credit card and hand it to Malia. “Maybe I have commitment issues, because although his great-uncle Ned sounded completely fascinating, I wasn’t ready to part with an organ.”

Malia laughs. “I’m serious, though. This computer guy, he’s a cutie. He’d be just right for you.”

“I need more depth, Malia. He speaks binary, and I need more than just zeros and ones in my life.”

She hands me my card and receipt. “He’s fully HTML.” She winks and begins looking for wrapping.

I smile. I love that she gets my jokes. Blake gets his sense of humor

from her. The thing is, Malia has this track record with me. She's tried to set me up twelve times. Twelve disasters. Maybe because she never tried to set me up with Blake. I don't blame her. I act awfully uninterested to protect my own interests. But still. Can't his own mother see what a great couple we'd make?

Malia sets my gift aside for a moment to help a pregnant woman who has approached. She's wearing a short-sleeved cotton blouse with tiny tulips all over, and some khaki capris. Her shiny, youthfully golden hair is pulled up high into a ponytail. Her stomach is beautifully round, and she's rubbing the bottom of it with one hand, like the baby is already in her arms. I start rubbing my belly just watching her. Except when I do it, I look like I'm expecting chocolate-chip cookies.

"You ready, hon?" Malia asks her.

"Yes."

Malia peers over the counter. "Do you know if you're having a boy or a girl?"

"A boy."

"Oh, do tell us! Have you picked a name?" I see something in Malia's eyes...a longing for a grandchild of her own.

"Jonathan. It took three years for me to get pregnant, so my husband and I consider this little guy to be a gift of God. That's what Jonathan means."

I have to wonder: what name means "in desperate need of a man"?

Mr. Coston is in a particularly bad mood today. He sends me out twice more for coffee. I take my time and this time don't add so much sugar.

The atmosphere is somber for the afternoon. We've all been lectured three or four times. I try to focus, for once, on my work. By five I am exhausted and still have to attend the break room bridal shower. I turn off my computer, straighten my desk, dust, Lysol, squirt my hands, and then head for the break room.

A few people have gathered, and Nicole is trying to secure a streamer that has fallen. I climb on a chair to help her.

"Hey." She smiles. "Can you hand me some tape?"

"Sure." I reach for it and rip off a piece. "Nicole?"

"Yes?"

"Promise me when I get married you'll do something bigger—maybe outside the office or something?"

Nicole glances at me. "Honey, when you get married, we're going to give the Fourth of July a run for its money."

I hand her the end of the streamer. "Christa's nice. Maybe we should've done something more."

"She's a co-worker. We don't hang out on weekends. There's a difference."

"What'd you get her?"

Nicole stands on her toes and manages to re-secure the streamer. "A gift certificate to Pottery Barn. You?"

"A frame and a month's supply of antibacterial gel."

Nicole laughs. "Wow."

"It's practical. She's going to appreciate that after she shakes everyone's hand at the reception."

Nicole glances at me. "You're serious?"

"What? I tied a cute satin bow around it."

We are climbing down just in time to see Christa entering, surrounded by a half-dozen people.

“...and my fiancé tied my ring to the mistletoe and waited for me to notice. It was so adorable.”

“A little unoriginal, don’t you think?” I whisper to Nicole.

“I don’t know. Jerry dropped to one knee, popped open the box, asked, and we ordered chicken wings, so it sounds kind of nice to me.”

“I’m just saying, mistletoe is overdone. Now dropping it down the chimney, that’s creative.”

“Santa’s got the corner on that market.”

I sigh and sit on one of the folding chairs that we’ve put into a circle. Christa is popping her shoulders up and down, just as happy as any human being can be. It’s genuine. And she doesn’t seem to care we’re in a break room.

“I’m just saying,” I whisper again to Nicole as soon as she sits down beside me, “she deserves a more creative proposal than that.”

“Jessie, some people are not creative. They’re okay with things not having to be done over the top.”

“I’m not over the top.”

Nicole puts on her sales smile as she looks up at the arriving guests, but she turns sideways toward me and says quietly, “You dream big.”

I can’t respond for the moment because Nicole welcomes everyone, tells some nice anecdotes about Christa, and then begins the procession of presents. But as soon as I get Nicole’s ear again, I whisper, “I like the personal touch. I like things not to be cookie cutter.” I gesture to Christa as she pulls out a slinky negligee. People are giggling. “I’m simply saying that she’s the type of person who would make her

bridesmaids wear peach dresses with dyed-to-match shoes. When I get married, you're going to thank me for being a little more original."

"Like what? Scratch-and-sniff dresses?"

"Funny. *No.* Like maybe letting everyone wear what they want."

Nicole laughs. Hard. Nobody notices because they're all laughing about the fluffy bunny slippers Christa just unwrapped. "You've got to be kidding me," Nicole whispers. "You're not capable."

"Of what?"

"Letting us choose what we wear."

I smile at Christa "That's not true."

"So you're fine with your sister in a dress cut so low we can see her bellybutton ring and me wearing that off-white skirt I've had since—"

I wave my hands. "Sensibly. That's what I mean. Wear what you want as long as it's sensible."

"Uh-huh. But here's the thing. Your definition of sensible has a lot of parameters."

Just then Christa pulls out the antibacterial gel. "Ohhhh...um...the bow is lovely."

"There's more," I say, pointing to the bag.

She reaches in and pulls out the frame. Now she's gushing again. Good. I'd hate to have stopped all that gushing.

I turn back to Nicole. "You're still coming over Wednesday, right? Jerry's cool with it?"

"Yes, I'm still coming. And I think it's big of you to ask for help."

Christa is now pulling out his and her robes from Mr. Coston. "Oh! Beautiful!"

I sink into my seat.