

Prologue

It's not me. It's you.

Julie held the postcard and read it for the hundredth time. On the front was a picture of a pig with wings and a caption that read: "Cincinnati. Home of the Flying Pig Marathon." On the back, written with a red marker were the words: *Cincinnati rocks! Cheers, Ronny.*

This was the fourth postcard she'd received in the two weeks since Ronny had left her. He'd stood in the middle of her bedroom, cheerfully stuffing all of his band clothes into a couple of army duffel bags. She replayed the whole Day of Being Dumped once again, as she did every time she looked at another of his cheap postcards.

There he stood at the foot of her bed, and there were his army green bags, and there went his clothes. His clothing resembled the costumes of hair-band rockers in the late '80s complete with mesh t-shirts and too-tight jeans. "Look, Jules. I've got to be honest here," Ronny said in his thick English accent, thicker perhaps because he was from Detroit and not England. "It's not me. It's you. You're too dependable."

"Dependable?" Julie asked. "That's a bad thing?"

"Well, yes, actually. If I'm going to be a rock star, I can't bloody well have a girlfriend. I've got to keep open. Be a sex symbol. I've got to be more like Bono."

"Bono's married."

"Yes. Okay."

"He's actually super responsible."

"But he didn't start out that way, did he? I mean, he's a rock star. Purebred. Like me. What I need is some spontaneous string-free romping. You stay home and watch the

Food Network and Star Trek. It's like you're sleep walking through life or something. I want to tear life apart and suck the marrow from it, you know? And I would too if I weren't a vegetarian."

Julie couldn't believe this was happening. She'd been dumped before, too many times to count, but they always tried to spare her feelings. True to form, Ronny spared nothing. "I mean, what's the last really crazy thing you've done? Besides take up with the likes of me?" Ronny paused here and Julie realized he was waiting for an answer. She tried to think but she couldn't come up with anything. Three years ago she'd taken Ronny home with her after his set. It was, truly, the last, first and only spontaneous thing she'd ever done.

"Look," he continued as he rifled through the closet and pulled out his studded leather jacket and slipped it on. "It's a terrific opportunity. We're touring all of the Midwest including Cincinnati. Can you believe it? Cincinnati! We've even got groupies following us."

"Meg and Marla?" Julie asked. She hadn't meant to say anything, she was too numb for that, but the words sort of slipped from her mouth.

"Yes. Meg and Marla."

"They're not really groupies," Julie said softly. "They're your band members' wives. And they're in their fifties."

"What bloody difference does it make?" Ronny's voice was high-pitched and tight. "I'm leaving, Jules, and that's all there is to it. Maybe when I'm back, if I'm back, we can try again."

"You mean after you get rich and famous?"

“Yeah. Exactly.”

Ronny stepped up to her, pulled her in close to him, and kissed her; because she didn't know what else to do, she kissed him back. “Later, Jules,” he said, and then left.

Now, just two weeks later, Julie's apartment was empty of all traces of him, except for her four postcards from the Midwest with notes like “I'm living the vida loca” and “Flint is wilder than I ever dreamed.” And what was she doing? Flipping through her pictures of him, eating cold Indian takeout, and crying. She'd really thought that Ronny was The One, or at least tried to convince herself of it. And just when she'd thought she'd gotten over him, she'd get another stupid postcard in the mail reminding her that he was on the road, and she was still stuck in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

She blew her nose into a tissue and tossed it on top of the pile at the foot of her bed. “It's not me,” he'd said. “It's you.” End of story.

Or was it?

Julie grabbed her cell phone and speed dialed her best friend, Eve. Dependable, huh? Living her life as if she were asleep? Julie Mills was about to change that.

Chapter 1

He's left me for tight pants and Cincinnati.

Eve opened the back screen door to Bud's Bar and barreled through, bringing the cool, crisp smell of leaves with her. Otis Redding was blaring on the jukebox, and Buddy Henderson stood behind the bar counting bottles.

"What?" Eve called. "No applause?" She struck a pose. Bud looked up from the glasses he was cleaning, wiped his hands on his watermelon belly, and gave a slow clap clap clap. With his graying beard, round glasses, and smiling face, he looked a bit like Santa Claus...if Santa Claus wore his hair in a ponytail, greased his handlebar mustache and wore a leather jacket.

"You're looking good, old man," Eve said. She leaned over the bar and gave a quick peck to his beard-speckled chin.

Bud sighed. "I tell you, Eve, it's a real struggle for a looker like me to stay single."

"Please. You're still single because you haven't let anyone know you're on the market."

"Ah," Bud said, shaking his head. "I've been on and off the market so many times, I'm just plain tired out. I'll give it one more try, though, when you're ready." He winked at her. "You know who we need to get back on the market?" Bud asked.

"Where is Julie anyway?"

Bud grabbed a beer, cracked it open, and handed it to her. "Where do you think?" He nodded towards the kitchen. "Can't you smell it?"

Eve took a deep breath. The bar (which usually smelled of stale beer and smoke) smelled warm, buttery and yummy. “Good God, she’s making bread?”

“She’s been here since last call last night...on her day off no less. And it gets worse. She’s got something in there with little pine trees and garlic.”

“Rosemary,” Eve said. “This *is* serious. All right if I check it out?”

“Be my guest. But be careful. She was working with chocolate earlier.”

Eve crossed behind the bar and walked through the swinging doors into the kitchen. When Bud opened the bar, he’d made an attempt at offering food, but over the years the menu had shrunk to whatever could be prepared in the deep fryer or microwave. Consequently, he only used one small corner of the kitchen. When Julie came in, he let her have the run of the rest of the place. During slow times in the bar, Julie would prepare warm meals with garlic and wine sauces for her and Bud to munch on. If someone happened to be in the bar, she’d feed them something too.

Eve’s stomach growled. The only thing she knew how to cook was takeout. She tried not to think about eating because she knew that if Julie were cooking up a storm then she was still upset over the breakup. She hoped this time Ronny was gone for good so that Julie could move on. “Julie?” Eve called. “You here, sweets?”

Eve couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The tiny kitchen was stacked with dishes of food: flourless chocolate cake, a steaming casserole of leeks and butternut squash, and a colorful salad with flowers and berries. Julie was slicing a loaf of French bread into thick chunks. “We’re having a little snack,” she said.

“More like a feast. Are you okay?”

Julie didn't look up from the bread. She buttered one side and began layering the bread with red peppers, kalamata olives, and goat cheese. "Am I okay? No," she said.

"Put the goat cheese down and come here, Jules." Eve extended her arms; Julie turned around and gave her a hug.

"I hate him, Eve. I'm serious. And I can't stop going over the whole breakup, and what he said to me. He said *he* wasn't the problem, I was. *I'm* the problem. Can you believe it? So he's living the life of a rocker with 'string free romping'. Worst of all...do you know where he's touring?" Julie didn't wait for Eve to respond. "The Midwest! Dead-end bars. He's left me for tight pants and Cincinnati."

"Shhhh," Eve said. "It's okay. You're going to be fine."

"Look at this!" Julie handed Eve the most recent postcard. "Cincinnati rocks, cheers, Ronny. That's all it says. No 'Wish you were here' or 'I'm thinking of you.' No. He just wants to rub it in that he's off living this amazing life and I'm still stuck."

"I'd hardly say a tour of the Midwest in dead-end bars is an amazing life."

"Oh, it doesn't matter! *He* thinks it's amazing. *He* thinks it's a great adventure. *He's* having the time of his life! And look at me! I actually look forward to getting another postcard! He was right. He said I was dependable. Old! He said..." Julie pulled away from Eve, and turned to a sandwich the size of a skateboard. "I want to show Ronny that I can suck the marrow with the best of them." She grabbed a butcher's knife, and walloped the sandwich, splitting it cleanly in two. "Okay?"

"Okay," Eve said. "But no need to get violent."

“I’d like to get violent with Ronny and I have a pretty good idea how.” Julie slid the sandwiches onto a hot griddle, placed a pan on top of them, and turned to Eve. “I call them Poor Man Paninis,” she said and smiled sweetly.

Eve laughed to herself. No matter how sad Julie was, if she was cooking food, she could always pull herself out of it. “It sounds divine,” she said. “Let’s eat, and you can tell me what you want to do to Ronny.”

“I don’t want to *do* anything to Ronny ever again. What I want is to do something to myself. And I will too.” Julie grabbed two plates, loaded them with French fries and coleslaw, and turned back to the sandwiches. “We’re gonna need some energy for this.”

Eve nodded. “Then I’ll grab this bread here. And this roast. And that cake. And you grab a bottle of wine because I don’t have any hands left to grab with.”

Chapter 2

Funny how even your heart could lie to you.

There was no way Dan was going to figure out the Rubik's Cube with his brother yelling at him from the bathroom to grab him a beer while he was 'thinking', so he put it on his coffee table for a later time, although when that later time would be was anyone's guess. Since his brother had moved in with him, it seemed Dan never had time for himself. He never had the time to relax and drink a glass of wine while listening to Miles Davis. He never had time to watch an episode of Star Trek without interruption. Never had time to watch the Food Network and eat a sandwich without Kevin saying "What's up bro? Gimme some of that." No. All of Dan's previous indulgences had been set aside to make room for Kevin's workout bench, bad 1980's posters of women on cars, and his beer stein collection.

Six months ago, Kevin had given him a story about the housing bust. He financed mortgages and when no one bought houses, he made no money. Now he was faced with the horrendous prospect of moving back in with their parents, and Dan had mentioned that, of course, he could stay with him until he got back on his feet. Kevin was more than on his feet now, but he was still living in Dan's spare room and taking over his whole house like a slow creeping virus. In fact, Kevin was bringing home new DVDs, exercise equipment, had just installed a computer desk and home office in the spare room, and bought a new bed. On top of everything, Kevin didn't even offer to pay rent.

Still, God, it was better than living alone.

Dan sighed and thought about Kim again. He still carried her picture in his wallet, the one of the two of them on the beach at Lake Michigan. His family's cottage. They

stood by a bonfire with the sun setting in glorious colors behind them. Dan had his arm draped over her blade-like shoulders. In the picture you could see he was losing a little of his red hair, and had a bit of a sunburn, and even a bit of a belly. Kim looked gorgeous. Hair pulled tight and perfect in a slick ponytail, dressed entirely in some kind of brown, like the color of sand. He had the picture memorized. He didn't need to look at it. Still, sometimes, when he was alone, he pulled it out of his wallet, smoothed out his creases and remembered. In the picture, you could tell he was happy. You could also tell that Kim's smile was as breakable as glass. He'd never noticed that, never thought he was in love with her and she felt nothing. Funny how even your heart could lie to you.

“Dude! Get your ass off the couch and bring me a beer. The exercise will do you good.”

Dan sighed again, shook his head, and went to get his brother a beer.

Chapter 3

*I've always wanted to be a hermaphrodite.
Then I could have sex with myself.*

Julie unfolded the piece of paper in front of her, smoothed out the creases and passed it to Eve. They were seated in their favorite booth near the back of the bar, huddled over the table. "I wrote it really fast. It needs work," Julie explained.

"Seems kinda long," Eve said as she reached for her reading glasses from her purse.

"Yeah, well, there's no real word limit online. Glory of technology, I guess. Be honest, Eve. Should I really do this?"

"You said you wanted to do something crazy. Though, I have to admit, online dating doesn't sound all that wild to me, although it *was* wild like in 1994. Now everyone does it. I was sort of thinking you were going to do something wild and drastic like a sex change or something."

"Yes," Julie agreed. "I've always wanted to be a hermaphrodite. Then I could have sex with myself. You want some more cake?"

"Of course. So with this ad you want, what? True love?"

Julie shook her head. "Maybe I want dating practice or something. I want to experiment with being crazy. I guess at the heart of it, maybe I just want to get over Ronny, or back at Ronny, or something, and I want to do it as quickly as possible. I can't take any more of his postcards. I want to have postcards of my own! I thought...I don't know. It's stupid." She reached for the paper and crinkled it in her palm.

“Give me that!” Eve said. “It isn’t stupid at all. What I meant was that when you said you wanted to do something spontaneous I thought you were going to go on a trip to Europe or have a radical make-over. But online dating is good. It’s a start. Give me your ad. And the cake.” She read:

Young Treasure Seeks Seaman on Love’s Sea

When I was young, I collected broken pottery shards that had washed up on the beach. Each one, I knew, was from a shipwreck. In my palm, a tiny piece of white plate became the last dinner of a couple in love. A brown half of a beer stein with edges smoothed by sand and time became a sailor’s last drink just as the swell of the lake surged and took him over. These collected pieces of plates and bowls from the last moments in people’s lives proved to me that all things end: childhood, careers, and yes, even love. I am resigned to this reality. Still, I am looking to date. Casually. If you are interested, here I wait, at the bottom of the sea, for you to find me and uncover me.

Eve wound a finger in a lock of her honey hair. “Okay, *Young Treasure Seeks Seaman on Love’s Sea*. That’s catchy.”

Julie couldn’t tell if Eve was emotionally affected by the impact of her personal ad, or if she had something stuck in her teeth. “Is it all right?” Julie asked again. “Oh, you hate it, don’t you? I sound boring, don’t I? Oh, forget it!” Julie took a huge bite of her sandwich. Her eyes were burning with tears.

“I don’t hate it. Not at all. It’s just...a little sad. It sort of makes it sound like your life is a shipwreck.”

“Exactly!” said Julie emphatically. “A complete and utter shipwreck.”

“Let me read it again,” Eve said. Julie watched her intently, looking for any reaction from her, good or bad.

She read it again, coughed, set the paper aside, and quickly downed her glass of water. “Julie...Look,” Eve continued. “I love you. To pieces, and anything I can do to help get Ronny out of your system, I’ll do. But you say here *Young Treasure Seeks Seaman*. It sort of looks like you misspelled ‘semen’, like this is a personal ad for semen.”

Julie gasped. “Eek! No. No no no. I was trying to be poetic.”

“It is poetic, but maybe you should just say sailor instead.”

“Okay. I can do that. Anything else?”

Eve hesitated. “Can’t you cheer it up a bit?”

“Cheer it up? Why?”

“Julie, you sound like you don’t believe in love. You’re posting an ad to *find* love and you’re saying here, quite effectively, that you’re obsessed with things ending and dying. Do you really think that all of life is a shipwreck?”

Julie felt a rush of tears forming. She was so emotional lately, and talking about love did nothing to help her. “Not all of life, just mine.”

“You’re smart. You’ve got talent. A wicked sense of humor, and, need I say, killer knockers. Your life is not a shipwreck. And I’m sorry to be such a hard-ass with you, but ever since Ronny took off you’ve been swimming in your own misery, and you’re better than that. Now write this down. We’re going to write you a personal ad that really works. That sings. An ad that will bring the man of your dreams to your feet.”

“Fine.” Julie said as she reached down and picked up her personal ad. She liked what she’d written. She didn’t think it was *that* depressing.

Eve leaned in. “Now take this down...”

Bud interrupted from the bar. “How about...Hot Mama Seeks Love Slave And Marriage. That would reel me in.”

Chapter 4

She laughed. She cried. She was drunk.

That night, Julie logged onto *CoupleMe.com* and began typing in her personal ad. She considered it again. What exactly did she want? Posting for a mate was sort of like ordering a pizza. Did she want another vegetarian, or something with a little meat.

Meat, she thought. This time I want meat.

She typed. Took a sip of wine. Thought: *Mmmmm. Merlot is yummy.* Took another sip of wine.

What was she supposed to say? The truth? *I'm lonely. I'm in love with my ex-boyfriend. I'm totally dependable and predictable, which means...I'm boring.* You could feel those tings, but you couldn't write them. She sipped her wine.

She looked at the picture of Ronny she still kept by her computer. It was her favorite shot of him on the night they met nearly five years ago. He was playing piano for his band, The Two Wets. He stood in a spotlight, face tilted up, his face pinched. It was a familiar expression to Julie since it was the same pose he struck when he had an orgasm, except without the spotlight.

Julie toasted the picture and gulped. Usually, she'd stop at one glass, because wine tended to make her loopy, but tonight was a special night. She was in search of loopy. She poured another glass, stuck her tongue out at Ronny, and slammed his smug orgasm-face on the table. She couldn't look at him any more especially since *she* hadn't had an orgasm-face in months.

If she were being honest, and drinking an entire bottle of wine led her to be pretty honest, Julie admitted that she felt like that miscellaneous sock at the bottom of the

laundry basket, the one that you keep washing in hopes that its second half would eventually show up. “Thass me,” she slurred to the computer screen. “I’m a sock. A hole filled socky-sock-sock.”

Julie tried to pick up her cell phone and call Eve but she was having trouble seeing the buttons clearly. No need. She could post this ad on her own. She didn’t need Eve to hold her hand with everything. She would post this ad!

She grabbed her “Semen” personal ad and began typing. Maybe she would change her ad. Cheer it up a bit, like Eve said.

She made a small change. Good. Then she thought: *I’ll just erase the pottery shards and tweak it. Just tweak it a teeny, tiny bit. Tweak, tweak!*

She wrote so quickly she barely knew what she was typing. Her words flew from her in a torrent. She laughed. She cried. She was drunk. She hit “submit”, and then slunk back in her chair for a very quick nap.

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Five hours after Julie posted her ad, she awoke still sitting at her computer. There was a paperclip stuck to her forehead and a swollen mailbox brightly signifying mail. *Oh my God*, she muttered. She picked the paperclip off her forehead and slowly dragged the cursor over the screen.

114 messages.

Then Julie saw what she had done. “Young Treasure Seeks Seaman on Love’s Sea” became, with the help of her computer’s thesaurus and a fourth glass of merlot: “Easy Lady Requests Guy with Two Socks.”

Chapter 5

Easy Lady Requests Guy with Two Socks

It was nearly three in the morning and Eve sat at her laptop in her kitchen wrapped in her favorite pink silk robe. She'd given up on trying to get to sleep, and decided to check and see if Julie really did post that ad. She hadn't gotten any emails or calls yet so she figured Julie probably hadn't done it. Eve reached for her home-made cappuccino and took a deep sip. Of course, she thought, drinking four cups of cappuccino a day since she got her new coffee maker probably didn't help in the sleep department.

She moved the cursor over the screen and typed in the web address. She didn't even have to search for Julie's ad as it had been chosen as the member spotlight, and was featured on the first page of the website.

There was Julie: sweet, withdrawn Julie, for the entire world to see in a red negligee sprawled on her couch holding up a nearly-empty bottle of wine and what Eve recognized as a very drunken expression on her face. To others, Julie's smoky eyes and slight smile might be misinterpreted as a come-hither-now stare. And it looked like there was a paperclip stuck to her forehead. Laughter rose within Eve as she read the ad:

Easy Lady Requests Guy with Two Socks

**Look, I'm here you're there and if you wanna
know the truth I'm tired of this being alone stuff
I don't wanna be a lonely sock and it's not like
I'm looking for marriage exactly but you know
what? I'm talented and smart and fairly attractive
and have killer knockers so why not come knockin
you write me and if not then forget you I've got
plenty of things to meet and people to do.**

Eve laughed again. This was good. Too, too good. This was exactly the sort of thing that made her love Julie: she had an astounding knack for complicating her life.

Chapter 6

Changes to your ad will be reviewed!

Julie read her ad again.

She could not believe it.

Did she write that? No. She didn't. Wait. Maybe she... She remembered her epiphany about socks and men. She remembered drinking a glass or two of wine to gain the courage to push the submit button. And now she was vaguely seeing herself setting up her digital camera and trying to figure out how to get the blasted thing to work on automatic.

Julie looked down and saw that she was wearing a red negligee that she'd bought on sale at Victoria's Secret a year ago. Eve told her that if she felt sexy on the inside she'd emanate sexiness on the outside, so Julie bought the lingerie. She'd worn it once, for an hour or so, and waited to emanate sexiness, but the feeling she emanated was closer to itchiness as the lace chafed the inside of her thighs. And now look at her, sitting at her computer drinking wine and wearing a red teddy. She might as well be posed on the couch looking like a...

Wait! She *had* written that ad! She had posed on the couch with the camera on automatic. Her thighs were chafing.

Frantically Julie signed into her account and scrawled a new ad to replace the hideous fiasco of Easy Lady Requests Guy with Two Socks. Since she was now sober, or relatively so, Julie thought she could write something better, something that would capture who she was really looking for.

She was looking for someone to make Ronny jealous. That was all.

And so she wrote an ad that said the truth:

**Hi there. I'm a nice, sweet down-to-earth girl
looking for someone to get to know over time.
I like reading and writing and cooking and
going for long walks on the beach. I appreciate
fine wine, fine food, and fine conversation.
In five years I want to own a house and start on a family.**

God. Was Ronny right about her? Was she boring? Predictable? Was this the ad of a woman who sucked the marrow from life? Julie shrugged. Maybe it wasn't exciting, but it was the truth...except for the part about going for long walks on the beach. She liked to read at the beach, but not walk. And she should have mentioned that she was obsessed with cooking, and not a good cook. And she should have put in there a little bit about her affection for the world of Star Trek...from the polyester 1960's series to the dark Deep Space Nine. In Star Trek, at least, there was a code people lived by. And no one was a rock star.

She hit the submit button. A message popped up onscreen that, if it had a voice, would no doubt have that perky cheerleader type voice she so hated:

**Thank you so much! Changes to your ad will be reviewed!
If accepted, your changes will appear in 3-5 business days.
Happy hunting!**

3 to 5 days? Three to five *business* days! Julie quickly did the calculations: it was Friday night. That meant her ad would remain as is until...Monday. Until next week!

An instant message chimed on her screen. It was Eve.

LadyEve: Nice ad. How many responses you get?

Julie1976: I hate my life.

LadyEve: Must be a lot.

Julie1976: My life is a shipwreck.

LadyEve: It's hysterical. My favorite part is the bit about your knockers.

Julie1976: What if someone I know sees this? How can I go to work with Bud knowing what I look like nearly naked and drunk off my ass? What if I'm walking down the street and some guy gives me a sock and asks me for a quickie? I never should have listened to you....I hate....

At that point, Julie's cell phone rang. She answered by completing her previous thought:

"I hate my life and right now I really hate you for getting me into this." She could hear Eve laugh on the other line.

"I did not get you into this. It's all you, sweets. In fact, I warned you not to drink and operate heavy machinery."

"I thought that meant don't drink and drive."

"It also means don't drink and email. Ever. So. What's the damage? How many emails did you get?"

Julie moved her cursor over to her mailbox. In spite of herself, her heart did a quick skip. "One hundred seventy-eight."

"Holy shit, woman! You're a movie star!"

"Yeah. And that's up from only a hundred and fourteen like fifteen minutes ago!"

Julie couldn't help but smile. She'd never had so much attention in her life. True, it was a completely misleading ad and she probably wouldn't want to talk to the kind of person who would respond to it, but...*still*. Nearly two hundred men found her interesting.

Titillating. Over the course of one night, Julie had transformed herself into a vixen. She sort of liked becoming someone she wasn't, especially since no one online was exactly who they said they were anyway. It reminded her of her college days when she and Eve were in the Dracula Musical together. She'd been really good in that, she remembered. Eve had played Mina and Julie had been a remarkably believable maid.

“You're smiling aren't you?” Eve asked. “I can tell you're sitting there feeling all happy. I told you you'd get a response! See! Who needs Ronny?”

Eve was right. Since she'd posted her ad, Julie hadn't thought once of Ronny or his orgasm face or how miserable she was without him. In fact, she hadn't thought of Ronny at all. “Come over,” Julie said. “I need you to help weed through these. This could be fun. We'll see how many whackos are out there.”

Chapter 7

He's a nut-ball.

Eve ran into her room, and let her silk robe pool at her feet. She was naked and stretched her arms above her head. Her breasts rose as she arched her back. She could relate to a cat: stretching felt *good*. There was a strip of blue light pouring through the space in her curtains, and it fell on her in a band, emphasizing her taut stomach and the curve of her hips. “You look hot,” a low voice muttered to her from her bed. Eve had nearly forgotten he was there. Well, not *nearly* forgotten, she *had* forgotten. Clearly, he hadn’t been that memorable.

“You’re going to have to motor there, Chad. I’ve got an emergency.” She reached for the blankets and pulled them off him. He was still naked too, and though no moonlight poured over his firm torso, she could see him well enough. “On second thought...” she said and straddled him. “Just take care of me here for a few minutes and then you can go.”

“Just a few minutes?” he asked. He lifted his hips, raising her up a bit.

“Well, that all depends on you. Be quiet now,” she said, “I’ve got to concentrate.”

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Julie re-read her ad that would rival any Las Vegas ‘masseur’ and looked at the clock. Nearly an hour had passed since she’d phoned Eve to come over and review the messages, and she was starting to worry. It only took two or three minutes to get from Eve’s downtown condo to Julie’s apartment in Heritage Hill. She lived at the top of the hill in a converted Victorian house. There were six apartments and each one was

completely different from the rest. Hers still had tile from the 40's, a stove from the 50's, and orange carpet in the living room from god knew when. She'd decorated the apartment with cheap furniture from garage sales and antique stores. Nothing matched, and she loved it.

Even though Eve lived just at the bottom of the hill, it could sometimes take her an hour or so to drive the distance. "Why do you insist on driving?" Julie had once asked her. "Just walk up the fricking hill."

"Me? Walk?" Eve asked. "I am a Michigander. We. Do not. Walk."

Now, there was nothing for Julie to do but to sit in her warm apartment surrounded by her vintage 1950's posters from Good Housekeeping to obsess and reminisce, in that order.

First, she reminded herself that there was nothing wrong with her. She was cute, attractive and sometimes sexy. Even though she was all of these things, she didn't always see it. Mostly she saw someone who was not terrible-looking but could be great looking if she could just lose five more pounds. She never did lose those last five pounds though. She was too attached to them.

If pressed, Julie would admit that she liked her curvy body and that she looked killer in a push-up bra. She liked her body. She *was* sexy. Womanly. Even when she'd pass a newsstand and see the anemic faces of models looking at her, it didn't bother her. They all looked so hungry to her. Hungry for cake. So she'd go home, whip up a cake from scratch, and indulge. At night, when she'd curl up with her dog-eared copy of Anais Nin, she'd feel sexy all over again.

So feeling sexy and her self-esteem weren't exactly the root of her problems with men. In fact, Julie had experienced a fairly active love life. It seemed that boys (and then as she grew older, men) found curvy women appealing. Julie had dated a string of interesting characters, the trouble was, none of them had held her interest. That was Julie's real problem. She could walk around all day feeling sexy, but no one really brought that side of her to the surface. That is, until she met Ronny.

That's when her real trouble began.

She gave Ronny her heart. She might as well have wrapped it up in a box for him and handed it to him all gooey with emotion. She loved him fiercely, so fiercely she ignored his ever-growing need for beer and Nights with the Band.

Even Julie's Grandmother knew Ronny was no good for her, and she reminded Julie of this every time they had lunch together. Julie made it a point to have lunch with her Grandma Mills every few weeks, especially since her parents recently "relocated" to Albuquerque. Julie remembered when she first introduced Ronny to her grandma. They were eating lunch on Grandma's porch and she pointed to Ronny. "There's something *wrong* with him," she said. Julie looked at Ronny and noticed a fleck of mustard on his chin.

"Oh! Ronny, you've got something on your chin," she said.

"Wha's tha?" he replied, laying the English accent on thick.

"Your chin," Julie said.

"Oh, right-o then," Ronny said as he wiped the mustard away.

Grandma Mills leaned over and said, "I didn't mean *that*, Julie. I meant there's something wrong with him *there*. In his head. He's a nut-ball."

Grandma Mills had always been overprotective of Julie, especially because her parents weren't protective at all, but this time, Julie didn't believe her. Later, of course, Ronny proved that there was indeed something wrong with him, namely his penchant for The Two Wets groupies and his tendency to stand Julie up. And then, of course, he left her.

Clearly, Julie was cursed. It seemed that she would never get over Ronny because every time she tried, something worse happened that made her look at Ronny with renewed hope. Ronny wasn't so bad. Sure, he was thirty-four years old and in a band. He had no permanent employment. He pretended that he was from England. He slept around. But he had good hair and he kissed her with passion. He kissed her all over with passion and that wasn't such an easy thing to find.

She had to come to terms with it: finally and forever, Ronny was gone.

Before she could surrender to another bout of crying while looking from her picture of Ronny to her internet ad, her door buzzed. "Dahling..." Eve droned in her fake hoity-toity voice. "It's me. I'm here to go shopping...shopping for men." Julie tried not to laugh at the ladies-who-lunch voice, but laughed anyway and buzzed Eve up.

Julie ran into her bedroom, threw on her lemon colored velour bathrobe over the red teddy, squeezed her feet into her bumblebee slippers and checked her face in the mirror. On a scale of one to five, five being high, her appearance was a negative two. Perfect for internet dating.

Chapter 8

She looked like a bumblebee in heat.

Julie opened the door and Eve gasped—really gasped. “Oh my God,” Eve said. “You look like a bumblebee in heat!” And then she laughed. She couldn’t even enter the door she was laughing so hard.

“Oh, really,” Julie said. “I don’t look *that* bad.” She tugged her bathrobe closed.

“What are you wearing underneath that? What’s *that*?” Eve flicked at a piece of red lace and tried to get Julie to open her robe.

“What? Nothing!”

“That’s the red teddy you got at Victoria’s Secret, isn’t it? Let me see!”

Julie looked both ways to see if any of her neighbors were stumbling in from the bar. No signs. She quickly opened her bathrobe, gave Eve a flash, and then tucked the bathrobe firmly closed.

“Not one word. Not one word, Eve Geary!” Julie grabbed Eve by the shoulders and pulled her in. Julie knew she must look awful, but it was four o’clock in the morning so who cared, and yet, Eve, Eve looked perfect. Absolutely perfect. Her blonde hair was perfectly in place. It swung just below her shoulders and it was streaks of honey and wheat and sunshine and all the wonderful colors one could purchase for a small fortune at the nearest Aveda salon.

“I’ve brought bubbly!” Eve purred and handed Julie a six pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.

“This is bubbly?”

“It’s as bubbly as you’re going to get at this hour. Only place open is Quick Stop. I almost bought some beef jerky too just to, I don’t know, live on the edge or something.”

They didn’t waste any more time.

Eve followed Julie into the living room and popped open the beers. They both sat at the computer and Julie typed in her password. “You’re not going to believe this, but I’m majorly popular!”

And there it was.

A mailbox filled with potential soul mates looking for their lost hooker-sock. Julie couldn’t help but sigh. With *that* ad and *that* photo the chances there was even one email from a nice guy were still pretty slim.

“Let’s get cracking!” Eve said, and for emphasis cracked her knuckles.

“That’s really gross,” Julie replied as she opened the first message.

“What can I say? You bring out my inner thirteen-year-old boy.”

With that they clicked beers and began reading.

hi lady you look really hot why don’t we get nakey?

“Oh my God, Jules! This guy wants to get nakey with you. He wants to get utterly *nakey!!*”

“No way. I don’t even get nakey with myself.” Julie shook her head, pressed delete and went on to the next one.

**Dear EASY LADY
My name is Sam. I am single now. I am good**

**relationship material its just that my wife died.
Suddenly.
My son is the light of my life. He needs a mother.
You seem like a nice, mothery type.
I like the red thing.
Please call me.
Sam**

“This is just too good. This is better than HBO.” Eve was laughing so hard she was holding her side. It was either because the emails were so awful or because the Pabst beer was particularly heady.

“That just makes me sad. Look!” Julie said, pointing to the underlined Easy Lady. “Do you think he even read my ad? It looks like he just inserted EASY LADY into a regular email.”

“No, he references your ‘red thing’,” Eve laughed. “Your red thing. That sounds gross.”

“You’re gross.”

“I know. I think you look good in your lingerie.” Eve nudged Julie away from the mouse and clicked on Julie’s ad. Julie’s picture sprang up once again revealing Julie sprawled on the couch as if she were a B movie star posing for a career-jumping spread in Playboy. “See! Now if that isn’t the motherly type, I don’t know what is.”

“Stop it.” Julie took a deep swig from her beer and kept clicking. “This is stupid,” she said. “The only people who’d respond to this ad are going to be creepy and weird. I’m not going to find anyone this way, you realize that, right?”

“You said you wanted to do something spontaneous, and I think your lingerie ad counts. Besides, you could think of this whole experience as a prime opportunity.”

“A prime opportunity to what?”

“An opportunity to break your dating curse, and purge Ronny from your life forever!”

“I thought you said I wasn’t cursed.”

“I lied.” Eve ran her hand through her hair and tucked a shiny blonde piece behind one ear. “Look, Julie, maybe you should just meet one of these guys, go out, and live it up. You could totally pretend you’re this Easy Lady character you’ve created, only without, you know, being easy. You’ve always wanted to be a temptress, so why not pick a harmless guy and give it a shot? For one night. You could consider it an opportunity to really live on the edge for once. You could go on a date and pretend to be anyone. Think of it as practice. Or improv. Or a way to get a free dinner. Maybe it will get all of your bad dating karma out of your system. You have the freedom here to have the worst date ever, and *then* when your real ad goes up, you’ll have a clean slate.”

“Clean?”

“As a whistle.”

“You know,” Julie said, “whistles aren’t really clean. People put their lips all over them.”

Eve ignored her. “I just don’t think you ever get over an ex until you have a date with someone new. It’s a ritual. A way to exorcise Ronny, and Ronny is G-O-N-E. Get him out of your system for good. So, pick one of these weirdoes, a harmless weirdo, and be Easy Lady. Just for a night. Just for dinner. Just for fun. Then when you meet a real nice guy, someone who isn’t Ronny, this nice guy will look all that much better to you. Come on! This will be *fun*.”

Julie shifted in her seat. “This will be complicated.”

“And fun,” Eve insisted.

Julie was nervous. Whenever Eve wanted to have fun, someone ended up drunk or married or both. Julie wasn't convinced. Since she'd spent most of the past twenty-nine hours intoxicated, she was feeling a need to detox on fiber cereal and mint tea and above all avoid things like alcohol and men. Going on a blind date, an internet date, and pretending to be someone else sounded....dangerous.

Julie shifted in her seat.

Eve was right. It also sounded fun. If she chose a busy restaurant, disguised herself...if Eve went with her and she never used her real name...what harm could there be?

“All right.” Eve continued, still pushing. “I'm going to click on this guy's picture and you promise me whoever it is, whatever he looks like, you will *promise* to meet him.” Eve wiggled her eyebrows at Julie. Julie hated it when she did that. She looked like some blond Groucho wanna-be.

Julie shook her head, her brown locks flipping around her face. “No way!” she said. “What kind of deal is that? First off, I posted an ad so that means I've already lived on the edge. In my book, that's enough. If you want me to go out with the next guy we click on then I want something for it.”

“All right then,” Eve said. “You give me no choice. I'm going to make you an offer you cannot refuse. If you go out with whoever this guy is that I'm about to click on, I will give you...” Eve paused dramatically. She was very good at building drama. “One dollar.”

Julie couldn't help but laugh. It seemed whenever she was around Eve she laughed a lot. "You will give me one whole dollar if I go out with the next guy you click on?"

"Yes. In *cash*."

Julie thought for a second. "Okay," she said. "Deal."

Eve pressed the mouse. They waited for the picture to download. Julie's computer was old, and everything took forever to download. It was very suspenseful. The picture slowly started to emerge, revealed line by line. At first all they could see was a line of brown and then... "What *is* that?" Eve pointed to the screen. Julie leaned in to stare. They waited for another line of the picture.

"Is that...No. *No!* That's not what I think it is!" They both leaned in, their noses almost pressing against the screen. Before them, in Technicolor, was a close-up of a man. A man's penis. Just his penis. And some hair.

"Bah!!! Hahahahahah!" Eve couldn't breathe. "Oh. My. God. You're going out with..."

Julie pressed the close and delete buttons. She stood up. "No way. No no no no way on God's good earth am I going out with that..."

"Dick!" They both said together and screamed.