

BEFORE.

IT'S NOT THAT I don't love the men I sleep with. I just don't love them after we get out of bed, or off the couch, the rug, or wherever we've satisfied ourselves. I like men. I appreciate them. But I don't need to love one on a permanent basis. This doesn't mean I'm promiscuous or dishonest in my relationships. I'm always clear at the start of an affair about what the future holds and so far I haven't had any complaints.

If you've had your heart broken as badly as I have—the kind of broken that takes years to heal but never quite does; the kind that ever after leaves an abrasion to ooze fresh blood if you're stupid enough to even glance at it—well then, you understand where I'm coming from, and why I'm content to leave love out of the relationship equation. After my last disastrous love affair five years ago, I slammed the door with the valentine pinned on it and nailed it closed for good. I haven't regretted it, not even once.

I'm content. Or rather, I *was* content until C. made his entrance.

The all too delectable C. notwithstanding, I need to state that I don't see the fountain of youth in every young person who walks by, which isn't true of a number of middle-aged men of my acquaintance who have divorced their first wives for women young enough to be their daughters. As a woman of a certain age—meaning I'm over forty—I'm contemptuous of the belief that rejuvenation can be found be-tween the legs of someone who barely sidles past the jailbait threshold.

If this opinion seems harsh, my friends will tell you I can be swift to judge. And, this time, that old reprobate, Zeus, lover of irony, mortal

women, and practical jokes, couldn't resist the challenge my opinion contained.

Of course I don't believe that any deity, from among the pantheon I might choose—including Yahweh, God of my people—is meddling in my life; but it's a more comforting conceit than to accept full culpability for my own mistakes.

Whatever you choose to believe about meddlesome gods or fate, my ironic little lesson arrived on an otherwise unremarkable February afternoon, cloaked in the form of a lanky twenty-three-year-old man-child.

Two men later, I'm still reeling.

PART ONE

~ C. ~
~~~~~

## CHAPTER I

---

**C. IS STANDING** in front of the liquor cabinet in his family's great-room kitchen, his back to me. The last time I saw him, about three years ago, a bronze-colored braid hung past his shoulder blades. There was something delightfully anachronistic about that long braid. I'm caught by its absence, as well as by how curly his hair is cut to collar length. Braid or no, C. is a sight to see, broad shouldered and slim in a way that rarely lasts past a man's early thirties.

This last observation is academic, since I'm more than twenty years C.'s senior. The eldest of my friends' three sons, C. spent the last few years ski bumming out West, as well as in Europe and Australia. He did not go off to college at the usual age because he had no idea what he wanted to study. The problem was, he had too many interests rather than too few.

Earlier this evening, when I bumped into his mom, Mel, at the grocery store, she told me he's finally decided what to pursue and has been home since fall, applying to colleges. For now, he is working at Stratton Mountain, less than an hour from home. C. became a certified ski instructor at the amazingly young age of sixteen. Mel says the ski school there was happy to have him back.

C. turns and exclaims, "Hi, Mom. Hey—Liz!"

Crossing the room, he relieves us of the grocery bags we're holding. He deposits them on the kitchen island and helps me out of my coat. C. and his brothers have always been well mannered in a way that most of the young men my daughter brings home are not. I find the Randall boys all slightly unnatural though thoroughly charming.

Transferring my coat and his mother's to the pegs beside the door, C. says, "Nice surprise. It's been too long." His blue eyes twinkle.

I smile. "Agreed! So, when your mom invited me for dinner, I couldn't refuse. It's great to see you."

"Back at you." He rubs his hands together. "What can I get you?" He tilts his head toward his glass on the counter. "The Aberlour is good."

I wrinkle my nose. "Scotch is your drink, not mine."

In the past, the glass of Scotch he often poured for himself before dinner jangled me. His parents share a European view of youth and alcoholic beverages, so 4:30 p.m. on a Friday afternoon was, and continues to be, happy hour for everyone in this household. Since none of the boys has ever showed signs of abusing the custom, I try not to judge it. But, that old-knee jerk reaction I used to experience when C. was younger twitches through me. I need to adjust that; he is a young man now, no longer a boy.

Returning to the liquor cabinet, C. contemplates the contents. "There's a nice selection of reds." He pulls a bottle from the wine rack and pivots to display it. "How about this?"

"Tell me why it's the one for me." I expect a short dissertation in the language of a wine aficionado will commence.

He doesn't disappoint. "The 2005 Yering Station has a floral fragrance and deep fruity notes. Plum and cherry mostly," he adds, his hand fisted around the bottle. "It's spicy, with a vanilla and oak finish."

I shake my head. I'm amused by his polished recitation, another trait that sets him apart from my daughter's friends. Diana turned nineteen in October.

"Sold," I say. His mom has begun organizing appetizers on the kitchen island. She orders a glass as well.

"Where are your brothers?" I ask as C. lifts down a couple of wine-glasses.

"Harry is at a friend's house. Drew is upstairs in front of his computer. You know how he is. He'll show for dinner."

The Larkins are casual friends although I've known them for years. C. is three years older than Drew, and five years older than Harry, the baby of the family. Mel and I met at our library's book sale, bonding over the fiction table.

Finding ourselves next to each other in the checkout line, we decided to continue our conversation over lunch. These days we get together only a few times a year—life seems too busy for more—but we always pick up where we left off.

"So what have you been up to?" C. asks as he uncorks the bottle.

I think about how to answer, then decide to do a top-level skim. "I'm shooting a wedding at the Manchester Village Inn in a couple of weeks. They've remodeled since the last event I shot there, so this afternoon, I took a look at the public spaces for possible lighting issues." I'm unable to keep a new weariness out of my tone.

"That bad? You sound like I do when it's my turn to mow the grass."

I laugh. "I think I'm suffering from a bit of wedding fatigue."

"Too much giddiness makes me uneasy, too."

I grin but answer seriously, "I would rather take pictures of the great outdoors, but it doesn't pay the piper."

"I'm surprised you don't like portraiture, since you're so good at it."

"You've seen my work?" I ask, pleased he enjoys what I do.

"Like, on your website?" C. says, as if I'm a little slow.

"Of course. Well, thank you. I enjoy shooting people if not quite as much as landscapes. Like your mom, I'm always curious about what motivates us humans. Curiosity makes her a good doctor and me a good people photographer. It's just . . ."

I pause, not understanding what has me so dissatisfied with my work these days. Specializing in weddings and portraiture has paid well enough for me to own my own home and support my daughter. These substantial benefits, however, don't change the fact my work has become less satisfying.

Perhaps, having forsworn love for myself, all those starry-eyed

couples and oaths of eternal love and obedience are wearing on me. I just don't know, and until I can articulate the problem for myself, I'm not going public with it.

"How about what you've been up to?" I ask. "I want to hear about your skiing adventures. And what's happening with your applications. Any early acceptances?"

"I haven't decided where I want to go, so I didn't apply for early acceptance."

All three Larkin boys have been home schooled because Mel and Hal believe they provide a better education than the local school system offers. Both parents took a step back in their careers to make that commitment. Mel works at a clinic, and while Hal is tenured, his track to get there was a little longer than it should have been for a man of his accomplishments.

C.'s parents were fine with his decision not to apply to college immediately after finishing his high school requirements. He hung around at home for a year taking a couple of online courses. Then, he decided to do some ski instructing and parlayed it into a travel adventure. His parents supported that choice, too.

I'm not sure I could have been so relaxed had it been Diana. Particularly if it ended up, as it did with C., that her year all over the map would become two years and then three.

No matter Mel and Hal's display of solidarity with C., they must be relieved he is home and headed for college this fall.

I wonder how it will be for him to be so much older and possibly more mature than his classmates. Age differences are more pronounced when one is young. C. has always been shy, although he is outgoing at home. His introvert tendencies seem at odds with his looks. In public, he manages to appear sophisticated and polished, but his sangfroid is manufactured. I've always thought his real-time knowledge of human experience is thin. At least it was thin before he began his travels. His interactions with his ski students and off hours at the resorts where

he worked—Steamboat Springs, Colorado; Courchevel, France; and Perisher, in Australia—have probably increased his comfort among strangers. I hope so, because if not, college is going to be a lonely landing.

“No favorite school?” I say. “I’m surprised. Remind me where you applied.”

“Columbia, Princeton, Dartmouth, and Brown.”

“What a pantheon. Is Dartmouth your safe school?” I ask facetiously.

“Ashburton is his safe school,” his mother interjects. “Because Ham is tenured, tuition is free and we have no reason to believe he wouldn’t be accepted.”

“Nice perk,” I say as C. hands me my Shiraz.

He brings his mother her glass as well, circles the counter, and, his ultra-cool yet self-conscious manner still evident, slides onto the stool next to me. He takes a sip of his scotch.

“I hear behavioral science is taking you off the slopes,” I say.

He nods. “Doesn’t the idea that what we do is as much about brain chemicals as conditioning intrigue you? I love the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde overtones.”

“The subject is indeed fascinating. Too bad the knowledge of how to alter those chemicals is as yet largely a mystery. There are a lot of medications but they don’t work for everyone. I’d love to fix a bad mood with the right mix of chemicals—chemicals more natural than pills, like a shot of spinach with a side dose of extra trace minerals.” I don’t add that I suspect the solution to whatever ails me is more complicated than the Popeye fix.

As I take a sip of the wine, which proves as good as advertised, C. tilts his head, observing quizzically, “Your eyes are very green tonight.”

My glance flashes to his. Is he flirting with me? I shift my glance to his mother. She raises her eyebrows, her expression amused, seemingly comfortable with her twenty-three-year-old son flirting with her forty-five-year-old friend.

But is he flirting? If he is, his three years on the road didn’t move



him past novice abilities, or he is going about the process so carefully that it is hard to assess. Yet, there is something unmistakably appraising in his gaze, something more man than boy. I decide our age disparity makes it okay to notice what he may be up to, but less okay to feel the flutter of arousal accompanying that notice.

No matter what my insides are doing, I'm a safe target for his practice, since nothing can come of it. I decide to be flattered and leave it at that.

Affecting aplomb, I reply, "Hazel eyes tend toward green or brown depending on the colors around them." I've always appreciated my light eyes and complexion, which friends say are striking with my dark hair. The rest of my family has brown eyes. I theorize that a marauding Cossack inserted the green eye color into the Silver family's Jewish gene pool a couple of centuries ago in the old country. "The green of my scarf is making my eyes look greener tonight."

He nods, apparently satisfied with this answer.

Mel looks up from arranging cheese on a board. "I meant to compliment you on that scarf."

"Thanks. My mother sent it for Hanukkah. She has a good eye."

I like to think I inherited her artistic eye, although I'm relieved that some of her less stellar traits have passed me by.

"Are my eyes bluer when I wear blue?" C. asks.

A zing of sexual awareness travels through me as his eyes meet mine. This is a new game for him, one I would expect more from Harry, a born lady's man if there ever was one. Coming from C. it's a surprise. Boys his age can be painfully self-conscious or obnoxiously vain. Either way, they spend plenty of time in front of the mirror. C. should know how his clothing enhances his beauty, so I don't think I'm imagining that he is flirting.

Amused, I say, "I suspect so, but I don't think I've ever seen you in blue, so I can't offer a definitive answer." I look away, checking on his mother's response to our banter. "Mel, care to weigh in?"

“All my sons should wear more blue and less black.”

“Ha!” C. exclaims, smoothing a hand down his flat stomach and the black T-shirt he is wearing. The shirt says, “There are two kinds of people in the world: those who can extrapolate from incomplete data.”

I laugh, but worry that for all his sophistication, accomplishments, and amusing T-shirts, C. remains ignorant of the life experiences I would expect him to have acquired at the cusp of adulthood. Has he lived through the fights and heartbreak that provide lessons in how to navigate emotional pain without crumbling? Has he ever found himself in a situation that scared him shitless—the sort that would boost his confidence because he had to make a fast and dangerous choice and lived to tell the tale? Perhaps on the ski slope, but I’m betting not in a relationship.

Before he went off on his travels, because he was home schooled, C. had few interactions with teachers or classmates to learn how to negotiate social conflicts. Because his family is well off, he never had to take a dead-end summer job of the type we all grumble about when recalling them later—the ones that teach us how much abuse we are willing to take to fill our wallets. Has teaching at one ritzy resort after another qualified him in the dead-end job category? The young man I knew needed tempering. College should fill in the blanks, as long as C. doesn’t hold himself apart through age or shyness—or both.

He takes a sip of his Scotch. “Seen any good movies?”

“I’ve been pretty holed up this winter. How about you?”

“Not yet, but I have hope. There’s a retrospective of French films at Cinerama this weekend. Any interest? I teach until 3:00, so I could make one of the evening shows.”

This is where our conversations often started before C. left home. The two of us share a love of foreign films. We always discussed the latest releases when I visited, occasionally seeing one together. No one else in the household is willing to brave subtitles.

“Anything you particularly want to see?”

“*The Piano Teacher*. I missed it when it came out.”

He missed it because he was seven years old when it premiered.

“Good actors, as I remember. Isn’t Isabelle Huppert in it?”

C. beams. “I can always count on you among these heathens.”

I shake my head in amusement.

“I’ll check the movie times and e-mail you, okay?” He clicks his tumbler against the rim of my wineglass where it rests on the counter, and finishes off his Scotch.



*The Piano Teacher* is about an aging and sexually repressed music teacher who has an affair with her much younger male student. Needless to say, it doesn’t end well, with the teacher developing a terrible fixation on the student. As C. and I walk out of the theater after the screening, we decide the torturous, two-hour film about perverted love could not have been conceived by anyone who wasn’t French.

“Who else could find romance in anything so ugly?” I ask.

C. narrows his eyes, contemplating. “Not the English. Though they are experts at evoking silent longing. They have also perfected a certain kind of passive yet aggressive viciousness.”

We wonder how the film’s plot might evolve if it were a German production, agreeing that in the Spanish version everyone will die in absurd ways but only in the last two minutes of the film. We conclude this might be better than the physical and psychological maiming that ends the movie we saw.

“The self-cutting was really, really horrifying,” I say. “Even though that isn’t how the teacher self-destructs at the end.”

“But it illustrated her self-loathing so well, don’t you think?” C. uses his fingertips to push a stray lock of hair off his forehead. “It was an excellent way to emphasize how emotionally numb she was, since cutting herself there had to be so much more agonizing than cutting anywhere else.”

I wince, understanding why men react so strongly to any suggestion

of harm to the penis. This conversation is getting a little uncomfortable for me. I am discussing passion and jealousy, rape and genital self-mutilation, with a man young enough to be my son. But, if the subject tips C. the slightest bit sideways on his lofty perch, I can't see it. He is sailing glibly along, so far inside his head that this is simply another exercise of his intellectual dexterity.

I wish I shared his ease. I suspect he sees us as contemporaries, or perhaps colleagues. For my part, I treat him like any other adult in my circle, though the awareness that I am more than twenty-two years his senior never leaves me.

It is a relief when we return to reenvisioning the movie country by country. Our plot twists are entertainingly absurd, especially when we attempt alterations for the American movie-going public.

There has been a hiatus in movie nights of almost four years, but holding to tradition, we're having dinner at my house tonight.



When we walk through the kitchen door, my five-year-old standard poodle, Obie, short for Oberon, offers C. an ecstatic greeting. After much circling, tail swishing, and leaning into C. for pats, Obie trots off to fetch a toy. I start a salad, standing at the soapstone sink.

"C., can you open that bottle of wine on the counter?" I purchased the Cabernet knowing it is one of his favorites.

He works at uncorking the wine, pausing to throw Obie's toy. We continue discussing the film, comparing it to others we have seen, as I wash lettuce and begin chopping vegetables.

"Obie," C. says sternly, glancing down at the shaggy black dog as he hands me my glass, "this is the last throw." He tosses the toy clear through the kitchen and dining room almost to the front entry. Obie gallops after it.

For all of our *New Yorker*-like critiquing of the movie, I feel self-conscious about its sexually violent subject matter. Thinking aloud, I say, "I hope it wasn't uncomfortable for you to watch that movie with

me.” Only after the words are out do I realize this isn’t a conversation I want to have. It will probably add an awkwardness to the evening that C. doesn’t seem to feel at present.

But, with his usual cool, he says he hopes people looked at us and wondered whether we were—he rolls his hand in a conjuring wave—“You know . . .”

“That we were together?” I ask, filling in the blank while leaving a tiny bit of room for interpretation. I’m wondering if I’m opening a can of worms. I also wonder if I’ll be able to corral any that wiggle out.

C. nods, going a little pink.

His blush is adorable. I have it on good authority that being seduced by an older woman is a standard fantasy for a guy his age, so the concept doesn’t surprise me. What does surprise me is that his fantasy might be about me. Between the color he’s taken on and that nod, I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’m reading his interest correctly. I’m also ninety-nine percent sure I should leave what he’s instigating, or what I *think* he’s instigating, right where it is.

I don’t.

“You would like that?” My tone is light, my glance quick. I haven’t yet drunk enough wine to excuse this latest utterance. There’s a good chance I’ve knocked the aforementioned lid off that can of worms with an explosive little pop.

He nods. Our eyes meet for a second. We both look away. Blood pounds in my temples. Searching for something to fill the space between us, I grab the container of imported olives from the counter. Once they’re in a bowl, I let myself glance at C.

He is staring into his glass.

I’ve developed a few rules about who I’ll sleep with. I’m not talking about protecting myself from communicable diseases, unless you consider love a disease—which I do. So, I limit my bed partners to men with a flaw or two—or three. This is the first rule to keep my heart safe: A man must have fatal flaws. Perhaps he has an inability to settle into a

career, or he's unreliable, or holds political opinions I can't abide. Such characteristics would make me think twice about long-term commitment and emotional entanglement, but for a few rolls in the hay? No problem.

My heart is not in any danger from C. The sticking point is his age, and knowing his family a little too well. Then again, he is past the age of consent. A one-time tutoring exercise might benefit him. If he isn't a virgin, he is young enough that his enthusiasm likely trumps his technique.

I sip my wine, not tasting it. I should tell C. he's sweet and I'm flattered and then return to fixing the salad. A repressive voice inside my head, which I refer to as the Victorian, gives an emphatic thumbs-down to the rest of what I'm contemplating. The Victorian is my internalized mother. She shares with the corporeal version a rigidly nineteenth-century code of honor. It overrides her Jewish-mother tendencies—not that she has all that many.

Shooing my inner mother away, I do a quick calculation involving probable outcomes if I were to take C. to bed. In our twenties, we think we know what we want. In reality we don't have the life experience to accurately anticipate where our actions might lead. We are often shocked by the result of those actions. As the true adult in this kitchen, the one capable of weighing the odds of this ending in disaster, it's up to me to decide what happens next.

By the time I put my glass down, the pause between C.'s revelation and my response has become a little too long. I close the distance between us. "C.," I say, "do you have a girlfriend?"

I'm actually asking whether he's a virgin. I'm unwilling to probe the subject directly. I expect most young men his age have rid themselves of their virginity, but C.'s path to adulthood hasn't been typical.

His eyes meet mine. I think he is too intelligent to miss what I'm really asking. But, he is also young enough not to perceive the nuance in the question. I brush a knuckle over his cheek. He sighs, breaking eye

contact. His hand rises to trace the same path mine took. He mumbles, “Not at the moment.”

“So you’ve had—” I’m about to say, *So you’ve had sex*. I don’t finish, deciding it’s better not to be so explicit.

“Yeah,” he says. “Of course.”

“Ah.” I nod as if in understanding. In truth, I don’t know whether he’s telling me he’s had sex or only that he’s had a girlfriend. I recall seeing a couple of young women his age hovering at his last piano recital. Maybe one of them is his not-at-the-moment girlfriend. He must have had opportunities to fool around during his travels. Youth is full of opportunities if you can get out of your own way to notice them, and après-ski bars are reliable pickup spots.

Since he isn’t elaborating on that less than enlightening “Of course,” I’m no more in the know about his sexual experience than I was before. Worse, I’ve no doubt embarrassed him as I have myself. Yet, I can’t help stirring the pot . . .

Leaning slowly toward him, I set my hand lightly on his shoulder and gently trail it higher until I’m cupping the back of his neck. I let my palm rest there, giving him the chance to pull away.

This is where before and after divide. I’ve calculated the odds and I’ve decided they favor me. Our glances hold. C. doesn’t look away, step back, or suggest the Red Sox look promising this year. I kiss him softly, a mere brush of my lips against his. He stands very still, a tall blue-eyed statue in my kitchen.

I let my hand slide down his chest as I step away. “You know this can’t be real,” I say. “I mean, it’s a fantasy with no future.”

He says nothing, then murmurs, “But it might have a *right now*.” Color blooms in his cheeks at his own brazenness.

I raise my brows. “Okay.”

His eyes widen for a second and then he raises his glass, intent on draining it.

“I think you’re smart enough to understand the rules here, but I’ll

give them to you anyway,” I say, watching his glass empty. “You will not tell anyone. Most definitely, you will not utter a word to your brothers. *Ever*. Our secret. Got it? The same for me.”

My only confidante, my best friend, Arielle, wouldn’t approve, so I won’t be recounting this little adventure to her. I’ve reached the age where I accept that total honesty isn’t always the best policy. Nor do I feel the compulsive urge of my younger self to confess every little transgression on my conscience. If I’m going to do something this iffy, I must be willing to pay the price, and that includes keeping my own counsel.

I wait for confirmation from C. He puts his glass on the counter and nods.

“Another understanding we need to share—this will happen only once.”

C. nods again. “Secrets are interesting.” His mouth twists, part smirk, part smile.

An *interesting* remark, though one I don’t choose to examine at the moment. Instead I warn, “If you tell anyone and it gets back to me, I’ll say it is a lie even if you flatter me by telling it.”

“I’m not a child,” he says, as if this isn’t evident.

As much as he hoped for a yes, getting one seems to have surprised him. As for me, it’s probably a stupendous conceit to believe I have something to teach him. Although there must have been any number of ski bunnies and the Internet is a richly pornographic world for anyone of legal age, I nevertheless tell myself I’m doing him a favor—the next girl he takes to bed will have a more enjoyable experience than if I’d dismissed his idea and kept making the salad.

“Come on, then.” Taking his hand, I lead him through the house to the stairs.

While we climb, I question my sanity. I have watched C. grow from a child into a lovely young man. *What am I doing?* I’m not corrupting a minor—as if this detail makes taking him to bed more acceptable.



Busy worrying about the right and wrong of what is about to happen, I don't realize C. has made a thorough study of my backside until I hit the upstairs hall and twist to check on him. Two steps below me, his focus takes a second to rise to my face. I raise my eyebrows. He raises his. We laugh as I lead him cross the hall to the bedroom.

I have coveted C. for a long time. He is beautiful—a chrysalis in mid-metamorphosis from tender youth to the man he will become. I realize it is a cliché to compare him to a butterfly, but it is the best I can do; recently emerged from the cocoon of childhood, he remains vulnerable to what the world has in store for him. I can't entirely comprehend the protectiveness I feel for him, or the lust.

This thought should be a flashing red light. Unfortunately, my brain has already thrown the switch and my body is blind to anything but what I want, and I want C.

He comes to stand next to me in the shadowy bedroom, the street-light outside the window providing the only lighting. In front of us, my high-backed antique bed seems to take up far more space than it did when I made it this morning.