

Cassidy Lane

Maria Murnane

Logo TK

Chapter One



“WHERE ARE YOU? I’m dying here.”

Cassidy sat down on the bed, cell phone pressed to one ear, and pulled her knees up against her chest. “Do I have to go? I’m sort of having second thoughts.”

“Stop it. If you don’t get down here, and *soon*, I’m going to murder you. I’m talking cold-blooded murder. Probably a stabbing.”

Cassidy couldn’t help but smile. “Were you this demanding in high school? I don’t remember this side of you from when you were attaching shoulder pads to your bra straps. Do you still have those?”

Patti let out a little gasp. “We must never speak of those again, do you hear me? Now stop stalling. You promised I wouldn’t have to go to this reunion without you.”

“I’m still in my bathrobe.”

“So, get dressed.”

“My hair’s still wet.”

“So dry it.”

“I have a weird little scrape on my nose.”

“So cover it up.”

“I don’t have anything to wear.”

“You’re lying. I was with you when you bought your dress at Bloomingdale’s a couple of months ago, remember? You were in town for the Fourth of July weekend. We had lunch at Pluto’s afterward, and you took approximately nine hours deciding between a grilled chicken sandwich and a salad with grilled chicken. I almost shot you.”

Cassidy balled her free hand into a fist. “Damn your encyclopedic memory. How many people are there?”

“There are about fifteen of us so far, plus some slippery guy named Trent who no one remembers. I think he might be in the witness protection program.”

“Only fifteen? Why did you get there so early?”

“I didn’t get here early. I got here on time.”

“I will never understand your obsession with punctuality.”

“I will never understand your obsession with marshmallows. Now stop stalling and get down here.”

Cassidy sighed, and the truth came out with her breath. “What if everyone is married with kids, Patti? I don’t want to be the only single person there.”

“Stop it. I bet lots of people from our class are single.”

“You’re not.”

“So? I’m just one person. Besides, anyone can find a husband and pop out a few kids. You’ve been off writing books, which, believe me, is *way* more exciting than wiping butts. I bet someone here will ask you for an autograph before the night is over.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Want to bet? Connie Thatcher already asked me if you were coming.”

Cassidy winced. “Oh no, not filterless Connie Thatcher.”

“Yes, the one and only, and for better or for worse, she hasn’t

changed a lick. She even has the same unfortunate hairstyle. I’ll bet *she’ll* ask for your John Hancock.”

“She always said the most mortifying things. Remember that time in driver’s ed, when she asked me in front of the *entire class* if I could lend her one of the tampons she’d spotted poking out of my backpack?”

“Oh my God, I was so embarrassed for you when she did that.”

“You were embarrassed *for* me? Try *being* me in that situation.”

“Well, she’s here in all her awkward inappropriateness, so be prepared. Jimmy Hanson’s here too, although I imagine he goes by *Jim* now that we’re pushing forty. Didn’t you ask him to a Sadie Hawkins dance and he said no?”

Cassidy leaned her head against the headboard. “You’re hardly making a strong case for my attendance tonight. Is anyone there *not* related to one of my humiliating high-school incidents?”

“Get down here and find out for yourself. You flew all the way across the country to come to this, and I’m not letting you bail on me now.”

Cassidy ran her fingers through her damp hair and glanced out of the bedroom door down the hall, where she saw the soft glow of the flat-screen TV reflected in the glass French doors leading to the den. “It’s sort of fun being at my parents’ house. I feel like I’m seventeen again, even though I’m in the guest room now. Maybe I’ll just skip the reunion and hang out here with Mom and Dad. All we’re missing is my brother and actual videos on MTV, and it would be like the last twenty years never happened.”

“Have I been stuttering? Get your butt down here or your life will end tonight.”

Cassidy swung her legs onto the hardwood floor. “OK, OK, I’m coming. And for the record, I don’t think we would have been friends in high school if you were this mean then.”

“I’m not mean, I’m assertive. You’re the writer. You really should know your adjectives.”

“Believe me, I’m thinking of some adjectives right now. You’d better have a glass of wine waiting for me when I get there.”

“You know I will. Unless you want a Bartles and Jaymes wine cooler; Exotic Berry flavor, perhaps? That *was* your signature drink in high school, at least the handful of times I remember you actually drinking back then.”

“Only if you have on your signature pair of purple acid-wash GUESS[®] overalls when you hand it to me. See you soon.”

Cassidy hung up the phone and stood up, then cinched her robe around her waist and walked into the guest bathroom. She studied her reflection in the mirror as she ran a comb through her ~~damp~~ . Dark and a bit wavy, it never seemed to grow more than an inch or two past her shoulders. She leaned in close to examine her fair skin and gently touched the scrape on her nose with her index finger, then traced the faint lines around the corners of her green eyes. The lines crinkled into tiny ridges when she smiled now, and sometimes even when she didn’t.

A rush of insecurity hit her with a force that startled her.

And surprised her.

Do I really have crow’s-feet?

Does that mean I’m old?

Do I look old?

Do I look as insecure as I feel?

Why am I so insecure?

Have I done enough with my life?

Will the popular girls still make me feel like they know something I don’t?

More importantly, why do I still care?

She stared at the mirror for a few moments, then closed her eyes and did her best to push the negative thoughts from her

mind. She dried her hair and put on some makeup, then returned to the bedroom and opened the closet. Inside hung the burgundy dress she’d bought to wear tonight. With a fitted waist and cap sleeves, it was simple and classy and grown-up—she’d never been able to stand busy patterns of any kind on her clothes. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head in thought. Patti had assured her the style and color looked flattering on her five-six frame, but now Cassidy wasn’t so sure.

She turned to one side and studied her profile.

Do I look hippy?

Is my belly poofing out?

She’d stayed pretty slender and fit all these years, but even so, this was one of those times she wished she had the superhuman figure of a supermodel.

She faced the mirror straight on and nibbled on her thumbnail.

Is it cute enough?

Does it make me look stiff?

Will anyone care?

Almost without realizing what she was doing, she suddenly held out a hand as if greeting an old classmate, then forced a smile and spoke in a loud voice she barely recognized. “It’s great to see you! Can you believe it’s been twenty years?”

Cassidy blinked. Where had *that* impromptu rehearsal come from? She had to laugh. She was clearly overthinking this, and she hadn’t even left the house yet.

“Angel, are you OK?” A female voice called from the den.

Cassidy hollered back. “I’m fine, Mom. Just talking myself into going to this thing.”

“It’ll be easier once you have some wine in you. Trust me.”

Cassidy chuckled. “Thanks, Mom. You’re always a fountain of practical advice.”

She gazed back at her reflection. The nervous figure in the mirror looked nothing like the happy, confident, independent woman Cassidy was used to greeting every morning.

She frowned at herself.

Just yesterday you were fine. Yesterday!

Cassidy Lane had five published novels under her belt, one of which had recently become a ~~best-seller~~. After years of struggle, she finally had a steadily growing fan base that allowed her to write full-time. She lived in Manhattan, traveled—within reason—where and when she felt like it, got paid to basically make up stories, and rarely had to wake up early if she didn't want to. It had been a lot of work to get here, but she was now quietly living a life most people could only dream about.

The woman facing her now, however, still felt like the smart girl no one had asked to the prom.



“Cassidy Lane, how nice to see you! We missed you at the last reunion.” A short, plump woman seated at the registration table checked Cassidy's name off the list and held up a crisp white name tag.

Cassidy smiled and pushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. “I can't remember where I was for that one, but Patti Bramble told me it was fun.”

The woman winked at her. “You were probably off on some book tour.”

Cassidy smiled again, this time a bit awkwardly, as she pinned on the name tag and hoped it wasn't too obvious that she had absolutely no idea who this woman was. The registration table was outside the restaurant, and she peeked through the windows to see if she recognized anyone. Thank God Patti was already here.

The woman tapped the shoulder of the man sitting next to her. “Honey, Cassidy's that author I told you about, remember?”

He nodded. “Ah, yes, the famous New York writer. Crystal said you were coming tonight. It's a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand. “I'm Stanley Bryant.”

Crystal! That was her name. Cassidy remembered her now, a cheerleader. She'd been Crystal Hightower back in high school. *Wow, she looks really different.* Cassidy shook Stanley's hand and smiled politely. “It's nice to meet you too. And while I'm flattered by the description, I'm hardly famous. Believe me.”

Crystal waved a hand dismissively. “Nonsense, you're famous to *me*. I've read all your novels. I just love a good romance.” She turned to Stanley. “Isn't that true, babe? Don't I just love her books?”

He held up his hands. “It's true. She's a big fan. You must be living quite the life out there in the Big Apple.”

Cassidy felt her cheeks flush. *If you only knew.* Everyone assumed the life of a published author was all glitz and glamour, especially when they found out she lived in New York City. Maybe other writers lived opulently, but she certainly didn't, and even if that were her style, she would never have been able to afford such a life in Manhattan. The truth was that while she did attend some high-profile events and got dressed up for a photo shoot now and then, those occasions were few and far between. She spent most of her days in her apartment, quietly working alone at her desk, usually dressed in jeans, sometimes even in sweatpants or pajamas.

Actually, who was she kidding? Mostly in sweatpants or pajamas.

Tonight was the most dressed up she'd been in months.

She adjusted the strap of her purse over her shoulder and decided to change the subject back to the reason she was there. “I know everyone must say this, but it's hard to believe it's been

twenty years since we graduated. It almost feels like just yesterday, don't you think?" She hoped her mom was right in predicting that conversation with her former classmates would flow more easily once she got some wine in her to soothe her nerves. Otherwise it was clearly going to be a long night.

Crystal's eyes got big. "I know! I was just talking to Stanley about that. Call me biased, but I think we all look exactly the same, just as fabulous as we did in high school."

Cassidy pictured how much thinner Crystal had been back then. A lot thinner. Like fifty pounds thinner. She opted for another change of subject, fearing the look on her face would give away what was really going through her head. "I'm guessing I'm the last one to arrive. Did a lot of people come? Looks pretty crowded." She pointed through the windows.

"Oh yes, it's a full house in there. Go on inside and mingle," Crystal said.

"You two aren't spending the evening out here, are you? It's pretty chilly tonight." One thing that hadn't changed from their high-school days in Northern California was the cool—sometimes downright cold—evenings, even in the height of summer.

"Oh gosh, no. We're just waiting for a couple more stragglers to show up. We'll be closing up shop and joining y'all soon, I'm sure. Go on in and have fun." Crystal shooed her away.

"OK, thanks, Crystal. It was nice meeting you, Stanley." Cassidy hesitated for a moment, then took a step toward the entrance before pausing again.

Don't be so nervous.

It will be fine.

She took a deep breath and pushed open the door. As she walked inside, she immediately felt as if every eye in the room was staring at her, though in reality the place was so loud and packed it was unlikely anyone had even noticed her arrival. She scanned

the crowd for Patti and quickly spotted her at a bar to the right. Thank God Patti was tall. Suddenly nervous in the company of so many strangers she used to see every day, Cassidy wanted to break into a trot but refrained. Instead she avoided making eye contact with anyone and walked quickly toward her friend.

She was halfway across the room when a woman to her right backed up unexpectedly. She knocked an elbow into Cassidy's stomach as she did so, spilling some of her drink onto Cassidy's dress.

The woman turned and looked at Cassidy. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, her words a bit slurred.

Cassidy recognized her as Eliza Wood, one of the most popular girls in school back in the day, if not *the* most popular. Though they'd once had a class together, they had never actually spoken to each other. For four years straight, half the boys in school had chased the beautiful Eliza Wood. With her expensive clothes and perfectly applied makeup, each long eyelash expertly curled, her lustrous auburn locks cascading down her back, and a stream of would-be suitors constantly at her side, she was the epitome of the Popular Girl. Every day she appeared on campus looking as if she'd jumped right out of the pages of *Seventeen* magazine, and Cassidy had quietly envied her from afar, wishing she could be like that, wishing that just one boy would pay attention to her like that . . . just one. Eliza hadn't been much of a student or even particularly nice, but none of the guys seemed to mind. And tonight, her slinky green dress clinging to every curve, a full twenty years later, she looked as stunning as ever, despite clearly being a bit drunk. Or maybe a lot drunk.

Cassidy dug around inside her purse for something to use to blot her dress and found a small pack of tissues. "It's OK, I'm fine." Fortunately her dress was dark, and the liquid was clear. It could have been much worse.

Eliza pointed at her. “Did we have English together?”

Cassidy nodded, secretly thrilled at the recognition. “Junior year.”

Eliza squinted. “You were sort of dorky, right?”

Before Cassidy could respond, Eliza spotted someone else and drifted away with nary a wave, leaving Cassidy standing there alone, holding a wet tissue against her chest. Her cheeks and neck suddenly felt warm. Had anyone heard that? She hoped not. She sighed and, keeping her eyes glued to the floor, made her way across the crowded room toward Patti.

“*Finally*,” Patti said as Cassidy approached. “I was about to call the police.”

Cassidy nodded. “I know, I’m sorry. I was moving in quicksand getting ready tonight. Fear and inertia teamed up to get the better of me.”

Patti picked up a full glass of red wine and handed it to her. “Don’t sweat it. Kevin and I have been having fun catching up. Remember Kevin Tyson?” She gave Cassidy a subtle can-you-believe-it look as she gestured toward the tall man standing next to her.

“Yes, of course. How are you, Kevin?” Cassidy tried to mask the shock she felt upon laying eyes on him. Back in the day, Kevin Tyson had been the captain of the Palo Alto High School baseball team, tall and ruggedly good-looking, with an athletic build and a thick head of wavy dark hair, the kind of guy who could probably go camping in the woods for a week and be even more handsome on the way home. Nearly every girl Cassidy knew—including herself and Patti—had secretly been in love with him at one point or another. He still had a nice face, but now he wore glasses and was balding, and he appeared noticeably soft despite his tall frame.

He shrugged. “I’m hanging in. I was just telling Patti about

my arthritic knees. Very painful.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” *Arthritis? Already?* Cassidy buried her face in her wineglass and tried not to stare at his bulging midsection. First Crystal, now Kevin? Only five minutes into the reunion and she was already getting a bit depressed. At least Eliza still looked gorgeous, though she was still sort of mean. Why were the bitches always so pretty?

He frowned. “It’s not fun. Makes it hard to work in my greenhouse. I was also telling Patti about that.”

“Kevin’s really into horticulture,” Patti said.

“Is that so?” Cassidy tried her best to sound interested but wasn’t sure how successful she was. *The guy’s not even forty and he’s talking about arthritis and gardening?* In a repeat of her encounter with Crystal, she smiled and hoped he couldn’t read her mind. She already felt mean enough. This reunion was clearly bringing out not only her insecurities but also her most judgmental side, and she willed both to make a quick retreat.

“Yep,” he said with a resigned sigh. “Definitely hard with the arthritis, though.”

“I can imagine,” Patti said.

“That’s too bad.” Cassidy glanced at Patti, whose eyes sent an urgent *we’ve got to escape!*

“It was nice seeing you again, Kevin, but I just spotted Krista Nelson.” Patti smiled politely and pointed across the room. “We’re going to make our way over there to say hi. Good luck with your knees. And your plants.”

Before Kevin could even reply, Patti grabbed Cassidy’s arm and pulled her into the crowd. When they were a safe distance away, she spoke under her breath. “Holy sweet mother of Jesus. I like Kevin, I really do, but I was going to light myself on fire if I had to talk to him for one minute longer.”

Cassidy stole a peek back at the bar. “What happened to him?”

I had such a crush on him at Paly. I remember him as being much more fun than that, not to mention way cuter.”

“Apparently he grew up and became boring. I know it’s mean to say, but I think I almost fell asleep for the last part of that conversation.” She tapped the side of her head, pretending to wake herself up.

Cassidy pressed a palm against her forehead. “How did he get so old and depressing? Are we that old and depressing?”

Patti squeezed her arm. “Stop it. We’re not old *or* depressing. We are youthful and lively. Or so I choose to believe. My children might tell you otherwise.”

As they walked through the crowd, Cassidy scanned the faces around them, a blend of familiar and unfamiliar, together creating a literal memory lane. Some faces looked fresh and vibrant, others faded and weary, and she wondered how much of the difference was due to genetics and how much to life itself.

Marriage.

Kids.

Homeownership.

Divorce.

Arthritic knees.

She hadn’t experienced any of those things yet, but she imagined that collectively they could add a lot of city miles to one’s appearance. She furrowed her brow in thought. A twentieth high-school reunion? Maybe that could spark an idea for her next book. She was a tad more than halfway through a novel right now, but she’d been dragging her proverbial feet a bit, and her editor was pressuring her to finish it.

They were en route to Krista when Patti whispered under her breath. “Abort! Abort!”

Cassidy turned her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Curses, too late,” Patti whispered.

“Hello again,” a male voice said.

A tall, skinny man wearing a sport coat and an equally skinny tie approached them. His blond hair was pulled into a ponytail.

Cassidy had no idea who he was.

“Hi again, *Trent*.” Patti turned to Cassidy. “Do you remember Cassidy Lane?”

Trent gave Cassidy a quick once-over, then squinted at Patti. “I can’t say that I do, but I *would* love some weed. Do you got any?”

Patti held her free palm up. “Sorry, Trent, fresh out.”

He looked at Cassidy. “You got any, Cathy?”

“Cassidy,” Patti said.

“Yep.” He turned and wandered away. “See ya.”

“What was *that*?” Cassidy whispered to Patti when he was out of earshot.

“I told you, witness protection,” Patti whispered back. “My money’s on informant for some huge drug bust.”

“Ladies!” Krista suddenly emerged from the crowd and gave them each a hug, standing on her tiptoes to do so. “How are you? You both look amazing! You always did, though. Two of the cutest girls in school.”

Patti waved a hand in front of her. “Stop it. We look our age and you damn well know it. You, on the other hand, still don’t have a line on your face. What’s your secret?”

Krista patted her tiny cheeks. “What can I say? Black don’t crack.”

Cassidy laughed and glanced around the room. “Did Andre come too?” Krista and Andre had been together since ninth grade and had been voted cutest couple their senior year. They’d gone to different colleges but dated long-distance all four years and married shortly after graduation. Now they had three adorable daughters, all spitting images of their mother. If Krista weren’t so darned nice, Cassidy would probably be jealous of how her life

had worked out. But it was simply impossible not to like her.

Krista pointed toward the far corner of the bar. “He’s getting me a drink.” She lowered her voice and leaned closer to them. “Did you hear about Eliza Wood?”

Cassidy and Patti both shook their heads.

“Apparently her husband left her . . . for their twenty-five-year-old nanny.”

“No!” Patti covered her mouth with her hand.

“Yes,” Krista said. “Some young hottie from Sweden. Huge scandal.”

“Hotter than Eliza?” Patti raised an eyebrow.

“I think *younger* is the operative word,” Krista said.

Cassidy frowned. “I can’t believe we’re old enough to be having this conversation.”

Krista shrugged. “Forty is just around the corner. We might as well face it.”

Cassidy tapped her chest. “Eliza ran into me when I first got here, as in *literally* ran into me. She spilled her drink all over my new dress.”

Krista lowered her voice. “She’s schnoekered off her firm little butt and is in oversharing mode. Sounds like it was a pretty messy divorce, although my sources tell me her drinking like a fish had as much to do with the split as the hottie nanny.”

“This is truly like being in high school again,” Cassidy said. “You still have the best gossip.”

Krista snapped her fingers. “It’s a gift, what can I say?” She leaned toward them again. “Speaking of gossip, have you seen Kim Harvey yet?”

Cassidy and Patti again shook their heads.

“She looks *a . . . ma . . . zing*. Lost a hundred pounds.”

“Wow, that’s incredible!” Patti said. “I can’t even lose five

pounds without them immediately reappearing somewhere else on my body.”

Cassidy glanced in the direction of Kevin Tyson and lowered her voice. “I prefer more uplifting reunion stories. Not to sound like a teenager, but finding out that people are getting divorced and going downhill physically is bumming me out.”

Krista laughed. “I hate to break it to you, but while not all of us will end up divorced, we’re *all* going downhill—sooner or later. That said, if you want to talk about those who have managed to avoid that slope so far, have you seen Brandon Forrester?”

Cassidy shook her head.

“Well, girl, have a good long look when you get a chance. I don’t know where he was hiding in high school, but that man is *fine*. Babe with a capital *B*.”

Cassidy laughed. “Krista! You’re a married woman—to a man in this room, I might add.”

“So? No one said I can’t look.” She touched Patti’s arm. “You look, right? I know you do.”

Patti nodded. “I promised to be faithful, but I didn’t promise to go blind. Roy’s on board with that.”

Krista looked at Cassidy. “There you go.”

Patti scanned the crowd. “I didn’t see Brandon come in. Is he here with his wife? I think she and I might have done a tequila shot together at the last reunion. It’s all kind of a blur.”

Krista put her hands on her waist and slowly shook her head. “*Di . . . vorced*.”

“Was there a nanny involved?” Cassidy asked.

Patti covered her eyes with her free hand. “Please tell me there wasn’t. That would make me afraid to hire one, even though I’d love to escape from my kids when they shift into their bratty mode, which is basically all the time these days.”

"I don't know the details of what went down, but I don't think it was anything scandalous," Krista said.

Cassidy glanced around the room. "I never really knew Brandon at Paly. Do they have kids?"

Krista nodded. "Twin boys."

Patti took a sip of her drink. "I'm sad to hear that. He was such a nice guy. For some reason we always had math together." She looked at Krista. "He and I and your husband too. What was up with that? We were like the Three Mathketeers."

Cassidy pretended to wince. "Did you learn that joke from your kids?"

Krista gave Cassidy a suggestive smile. "So, my dear . . . Brandon Forrester is divorced *and* looking yummy. I just thought you might find that information interesting."

Cassidy shielded her face with her hand. "Please, don't go there."

Patti pushed her shoulder. "Why not? Weren't you just complaining about being single?"

"I was, but I wasn't looking to find a boyfriend *tonight*. I live in New York, remember? That's a long way from California."

Krista held up a palm. "So? Andre and I live in Seattle, and yet here we are. Have you ever heard of this thing called an airplane?"

Cassidy smirked. "Very funny. But I didn't come here for a round table on the state of my dating life. Can we please talk about something else?"

"Well, hello there, *Brandon*," Patti said over Cassidy's shoulder.

Cassidy felt her face flush and hoped Patti was joking. She slowly turned around and saw Brandon approaching them, followed by Andre.

She hadn't been joking.

And Krista hadn't been exaggerating.

He was gorgeous.

Wow.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with salt-and-pepper hair and piercing gray eyes. Had he been such an Adonis in high school? She reached into the deepest corners of her memory but came up with nothing. Had they ever had a class together? She didn't think so. From what she could recall, they'd never even met, at least officially. *Funny how high school is like that*, she thought. *Everyone knows who everyone else is, yet so many of us go the entire four years without ever speaking a word to one another.*

"Hi, Krista. Hi, Patti, Cassidy." He made eye contact with each woman as he spoke her name. "It's nice to see you all."

"Hi, Brandon," Cassidy eked out the words, suddenly shy. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Patti and Krista watching her reaction and trying not to laugh.

Andre handed Krista her drink, then turned to face the others. "Well, if it isn't the one and only Patti Bramble, looking as beautiful as ever," he said to Patti.

Patti did a little curtsy. "It's Patti Baker now, but thank you, my friend."

"And the lovely Cassidy Lane. I'm surprised you made it, what with being a famous author and all."

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "Give me a break, Andre. I bet you couldn't even name one of my books."

"I know they're chick books. Does that count?"

Krista elbowed him. "No."

Brandon cleared his throat. "I'm not technically a chick, but I've read them."

Cassidy looked at him, truly surprised. "You've read my books?"

Patti eyed him with suspicion more than surprise. “You enjoy women’s fiction, do you now? Or are you just saying that because Cassidy’s rocking that dress?”

“Patti!” Cassidy felt her cheeks flush.

Brandon chuckled. “I guess I do enjoy women’s fiction. I’ll read anything, though. I’ve always got a stack of books on my nightstand.”

The thought of Brandon Forrester reading *her* novels in *his* bed flustered Cassidy even more, and she quickly buried her face in her wineglass so he wouldn’t notice. She glanced at Krista, who winked and gave her a triumphant I-told-you-so look.

“Hey, there’s Angela Green,” Patti announced. “Let’s go say hi.” She interlocked her arm with Krista’s, then turned to Brandon and Cassidy. “Brandon, it was nice seeing you. Cassidy, we’ll catch up with you later.” They quickly disappeared into the crowd. Andre wandered off too, leaving Brandon and Cassidy alone.

Cassidy nibbled on her thumbnail and tried to think of something interesting to say to keep him from moving on as well. She cleared her throat. “So, do you still live around here? I’m in New York now.”

“Yep, not too far from the house I grew up in, actually. My boys just started kindergarten at Walter Hays this year.” He looked around the restaurant. “It’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that they go to school there now, especially when I think that I met a lot of the people in this room when *I* was at Walter Hays.”

“It’s horrifying, isn’t it? We’re getting so old.”

He smiled. “I don’t know if I’d go *that* far, but I agree it’s been a while since we were kids.”

“No really, Brandon, it’s *horrifying*. We’re closer to fifty than

we are to twenty, do you realize that? That means we’re closer to wearing dentures than to wearing braces.”

“Wow, you’re right. Maybe *horrifying* is the appropriate word choice.”

“Oh believe me, it is. I’m quite particular about my adjectives.” She sipped her wine.

He laughed. “Were you this funny in high school?”

She shrugged. “Ask the librarian. That’s where I spent most of high school.”

He gestured to his beer. “Sometimes I wish I’d done more of *that* and less of *this*.”

She gestured to her glass. “Sometimes I wish I’d done more of *this* and less of *that*. I probably would have had a lot more fun.”

“Life in New York must be fun, especially as a writer. Sounds exciting. How many martinis do you average when you ‘do lunch’ with your editor?” He made an air quote with his free hand.

She answered with a straight face. “At least three, but never more than four.”

He laughed again. “You’re quick. I like that. I like that dress **too**, Patti was right.”

The compliment surprised her, and her self-assuredness immediately disappeared. She visualized herself in her New York apartment, alone at her laptop, no makeup on, her hair pulled up into a messy bun, and felt decidedly *unexciting*.

But he didn’t have to know that.

She swallowed.

If you only knew what my life was really like.

She decided to change the topic of the conversation, hoping to recapture her wit along the way. “Enough about me. What about you? What did you grow up to be?”

“I’m an attorney. I run a small firm downtown.”

“What kind of law?”

“If I told you in detail, you’d fall asleep standing up. But in ten words or less: **We** specialize in patent disputes for technology companies. I bought the practice from my dad when he retired and moved to Carmel a couple of years ago.” He took a sip from his glass, and she found herself wondering what kind of beer he was drinking. Why was she wondering that? Or was it his lips she was interested in?

Mmm.

She blinked and tried to stay focused on the conversation. “Do you like being a lawyer?”

“I do. I guess I enjoy arguing with people.”

“I’m terrible at arguing. If they made running from conflict an Olympic sport, I might win the gold.” There it was! *Wit, welcome back.*

Brandon chuckled, but before he could say anything, Cassidy felt a tug on her arm.

“Cassidy Lane! How are you?”

She turned and saw Connie Thatcher standing here.

The ever-inappropriate Connie Thatcher.

Oh no.

Cassidy forced a smile. “Hi, Connie.” *Please don’t embarrass me. Not now. Not in front of Brandon Forrester.*

“Hi, Cassidy! It’s great to see you. Are you going to write a book about our reunion? Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Cassidy tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Maybe. I never know where an idea will come from.”

Connie poked her shoulder. “I always wonder what parts of your books are from your real life, especially if there’s a racy scene.” She grinned at Brandon. “Anytime it gets a little hot and heavy, I’m like, *Did Cassidy do this? Go, Cassidy!*” She held up her hand for a high five, clearly proud of her profound insights.

Cassidy winced and lightly tapped Connie’s palm to oblige her, then glanced over at Brandon. He had an amused look on his face but let the comment pass. Instead he pointed toward the back of the room.

“I think I’m going to say hi to a couple of guys I used to play tennis with back in the day. I’ll let you two catch up. Cassidy, it was really nice chatting with you, and congratulations on the success of your books. Have a safe trip back to New York. Connie, take care.”

“It was nice chatting with you too, Brandon.” He was really leaving? She wondered if the disappointment she felt was stamped all across **face**.

As he blended into the crowd, Connie squeezed Cassidy’s arm again. “So tell me, can you totally see the top of my Spanx through my dress?”



“Oh my God, these are even better than I remember them. *De . . . li . . . cious.*” Krista spooned out a big lump of chocolate milk shake and downed it. “Want a taste, doll?” She scooped out another spoonful from the silver canister in front of her and held it up to Andre, who sat next to her, across from Cassidy and Patti. The four of them were tucked into a red vinyl booth at the Creamery, a Palo Alto institution.

Patti looked around. “This place has barely changed since high school. Remember how we used to come here after dances?”

Cassidy snapped her neck toward Patti. “Oh my God! Remember when you dressed up like Madonna for every dance sophomore year?”

Patti squeezed her eyes shut. “We must never speak of that again. Do you hear me?”

Cassidy looked at her. “You already said that about the shoulder pads.”

Patti shrugged. “I have three children. I’m used to repeating myself.”

Andre picked up a curly fry. “I remember your Madonna phase. It was rad.”

Cassidy squinted at him. “Did you just say *rad*?”

“I did, man. *We are* at a high-school reunion, after all. And Patti’s Madonna phase was most excellent.”

Krista scooped another spoonful of milk shake from the canister. “I don’t know whether it’s this conversation or this restaurant, but I feel like we’re in a time warp.”

Cassidy nodded. “No kidding. It’s like at any moment someone’s going to throw on a Walkman and start moonwalking, right here at the Creamery.”

Patti closed her eyes and began to sway. “I’m hearing the mix-tape in that Walkman right now. It definitely has the **Backstreet Boys** on it.”

“You want some?” Krista held out a spoonful of milk shake to Patti, who shook her head, then slid down the booth a bit and groaned.

“No thanks. After that burger I just inhaled, I think I have an indigestion situation going on here.”

Cassidy smiled and lightly patted Patti’s stomach. “So, what’s the verdict on tonight? What did you all think?”

Krista shrugged. “Overall, I think people looked pretty good.”

Cassidy nodded. “I agree. With a few notable exceptions, of course.”

“Some of the ladies have let themselves go, that’s for sure,” Andre said. “Did you see Crystal Hightower? Ouch. Eliza Wood still looked smoking, though.”

Cassidy leaned across the booth and poked his shoulder. “Hey now, some of the gentlemen weren’t looking so hot either. I’m still trying to erase the image of present-day Kevin Tyson from my brain. Yikes.”

Patti sat back up and put her arm around Cassidy. “Brandon Forrester sure looked good.”

“Hell *yes*, he did.” Krista pointed her spoon at Cassidy. “Girl, you need to get on that.”

Cassidy cocked her head to one side. “I need to get *on that*? I can’t believe you just said that.”

Andre rolled his eyes. “Krista has two drinks and starts talking like Queen Latifah.”

“Now Queen Latifah is *rad*,” Krista said with a nod.

Cassidy took a sip of her milk shake. “Anyhow, while I agree that Brandon Forrester could probably stop traffic, he is definitely *not* interested in me. He didn’t even say good-bye before he left. Plus he has two kids and lives three thousand miles away from **me.**”

Krista shrugged. “He’s still a babe.”

Just then a dark figure appeared at the end of their booth, and they all looked up.

Trent.

He was holding what appeared to be a joint.

“Any of you know where Eliza Wood went?” he asked with a squint.