

AFTER HAPPILY EVER AFTER



I zipped my jacket up to the top of my neck, which still didn't keep the frigid air from whipping through my body. The sun hadn't come out in two weeks, and I was beginning to wonder if we'd ever see it again. As I cursed myself for parking so far away from the bank, a handsome man wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap was walking toward me. His face was lit up by a smile. A smile so warm that it looked as if it rested on his face even if no one was around. As he got closer, the sun suddenly peeked out from behind a cloud. Was the universe trying to tell me something? Could this be the man for me? Would this be the day that something exciting finally happened? My heart began to race, and I saw my brand-new life in front of me. This man and I would spend all our time together, laughing, antique shopping, and having amazing sex. It would've all been perfect. . . .

If I were not already married.

CHAPTER 1



At 5:55, I rolled out of bed and caught my reflection in the mirror above my dresser. That mirror was my enemy. It pointed out all the new wrinkles that had been born on my face while I slept. I was not taking to the idea of aging gracefully . . . gracefully.

The room was lit only by the glow of the clock. Jim was happily snoring and was no closer to waking up than our basset hound, Theo. I had five minutes before I had to get Gia up for school. She was going to be just as happy to hear my voice as I had been to hear my mother's when I was a teenager. My feet jumped as they touched the cold, hard wood. Where the heck did I put my slippers? I walked through the dark room, feeling my way along the furniture. I made it past the footboard on the bed, and just when I thought I was safe, I stubbed my toe on the dresser. Damn those slippers! I bet they were laughing at me.

"Gia, it's time to get up," I called through the pain. I didn't feel bad yelling when Jim was still asleep; he could sleep through anything. Hopefully no one would ever break into the house and try to stab me in our bed.

After a moment, teenage mumbling echoed down the hall as sleep escaped her seventeen-year-old body. I shed my pajamas and wondered how the heck thirteen-year-old me had morphed into the body of a forty-five-year-old woman. Like most women, I'd resigned myself to the fact that it was out of my control. Or was it? If I started going to the gym again, I could tone up my floppy belly, my sagging underarms, and my ass that was creasing below my thighs. As I got in the shower, I decided to either give it a great deal of thought or push it out of my mind. I stood under the warm spray, letting it soothe and care for me. I would happily stay here forever.

"Mom," Gia called as she charged into the bathroom as if she'd been left out of something. Forever was not living up to its reputation. I turned off the water, grabbed my robe off the floor, and wrapped my wet hair in a terry-cloth turban. Her five-foot, six-inch lanky frame dwarfed my five-foot-two compact self.

"What's the weather like today?" She was wearing a silk shirt that barely hid the fact that she hadn't put pants on.

"We live in Connecticut and it's winter. What do you think the weather's like?" I asked.

"It's winter right now, but at some point, it'll be spring."

"You'll get a warning. Spring doesn't really 'spring.'"

"Mom, you're so funny."

"You need to finish getting dressed. The last time I checked, your school required pants," I said. She rolled her eyes. Eyes I would've killed for. She had lush lashes that curled upward, except for a few in the corner that curled down. At my age, my lashes were either falling out or turning gray. Long eyelashes were wasted on the young.

When she ran off, I threw on a pair of mom jeans and a white hoodie and pulled my wet hair into a pink ponytail holder. Someday I'd find the motivation to update my wardrobe. Before making

Gia breakfast, I tried to wake Jim up. Not because I needed him for anything, but because it bugged me that he could sleep through all the commotion. I coughed loudly, but he didn't move. I faked a belly laugh; still nothing. I gave up and went downstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, I was sitting across from Gia, enjoying a cup of coffee while she scarfed down a bagel with cream cheese. She pushed a paper across the table, not noticing the dab of cream cheese on its corner.

"Can you sign this so I can get out of third period and go see my college counselor?"

"If I don't sign, would you have to skip college and live with me forever?" The phone started ringing, but I ignored it.

"Not going to happen. I just hope I get into UCLA. I want to go to California, where it doesn't snow and there's sunshine twenty-four hours a day."

"If you really believe that, I don't have to worry that you'll actually get in."

"That sounds like something Dad would say."

"You were blessed with parents with a great sense of humor."

"I meant it's annoying that you both make the same bad jokes." She wiped the cream cheese off the paper and then licked it off her fingers. The phone rang again, but after two rings the person hung up. "Can you just sign this?" Gia asked, handing me a pen.

"Fine." I took the pen she held out to me and signed. "You can't fault me for loving you so much that I don't want you to leave."

"Do you love me enough to let me stay home from school tomorrow?"

"Nope, that's where my love draws the line."

She took the pen back from me and stuffed it in her backpack; then she looked up at the clock on the microwave. "I gotta go." She let me kiss her goodbye, and I followed her to the front door.

I watched as she walked across what would be our grass if it weren't completely covered in fresh snow. Her heavy backpack weighed her down, causing her to stride awkwardly. As she crossed onto the sidewalk, she dropped her lunch and, in one fell swoop, picked it up. I yearned for the little girl who always turned back, wanting to see me wave one last time, but this young woman didn't give me a second thought.

When I quit my job seventeen and a half years ago to stay home and raise her, I told myself publishing would have to wait. I was sure I'd go back to my editing job when Gia entered kindergarten, but she was such an anxious kid that I needed to be here when she got home from school. And now seventeen years had flown by, and in a short time she'd be gone, and I was going to be alone.

I closed the front door because my fingers were getting numb, but I continued to watch her out the window. When she got to our corner, she walked toward a boy who was leaning against a black Honda Civic that was parked at the curb. I assumed it was her new boyfriend, Jason, although she still hadn't let me meet him. His dirty blond hair was shaved on the sides and slicked up and over with gel. The style teenage boys wore so they could avoid getting haircuts very often. I didn't know why he had to drive her when we lived only three blocks from school. Well, I did know, but I didn't want to think about it. I opened the door to get a better look at him, when he began tapping on his horn. I'd hoped a daughter of mine wouldn't put up with that kind of behavior, but she smiled at him and got in the car. I could tell he was the same kind of boy I used to go for in high school. The kind that was full of himself. The kind that always broke my heart.

I went back upstairs, and as usual Gia hadn't bothered to close her bedroom door. Her room was its usual mess, her wicker

hamper lying in the corner on its side. Half her clothes were hanging from the rim, the other half scattered on the floor surrounding it. Was it really that difficult to put dirty clothes in a hamper? When she was four, we used to play a game together to keep her room neat. Barney the dinosaur has not been given enough credit for all the good he did in my house.

The next thing I knew, I was singing, “Clean up, clean up, everybody everywhere, clean up, clean up, everybody do your share.” After I finished my solo, I realized I’d picked up all her laundry and was now carrying it downstairs. I’d read the books, I’d heard the experts. I knew I should’ve left it and had her do it herself, but those experts weren’t coming to my house and listening to her whine that she had no clean clothes.

I was halfway down the stairs, when Jim called out from the kitchen, “Maggie, have you seen my keys?” I stayed put, hoping he’d find them, although I knew he wouldn’t. This was a dance we’d been doing for the past nineteen years. The keys were probably on the kitchen counter under the huge pile of *Psychology Today* magazines. The magazines he never had time to read. The magazines I kept quietly throwing out when he wasn’t looking. I heard him tossing things around, and I knew in his haste he was dumping stuff everywhere. I had to find his keys before the hurricane moved from the kitchen to the living room.

When I walked into the kitchen, Jim looked at me hopefully, as if I’d been sent from the Promised Land to help him. “I can’t find my keys, and I have a client coming in early,” he said, pushing his bangs off his forehead. I sighed as he started looking in the appliances. Did he really think they’d be in the toaster oven? I glanced at the hook near our back door that we’d put in for this exact purpose, but his keys weren’t there. I moved the pile of magazines and handed him his keys. “Thanks,” he said, relieved.

“Do you want some coffee before you lose the coffee pot too?” I asked.

“It’s not nice to make fun of an old guy,” he said.

I handed him a cup of coffee and a bagel. He tucked a napkin into the top of his red-striped polo like a bib so he wouldn’t get cream cheese on it. Jim’s hair had almost no gray in it, which pissed me off. Although today I saw a few white hairs peeking through the stubble on his face, which gave me a little satisfaction.

“I forgot to tell you I can’t go to the Marksons’ party next Saturday,” he said. “I made an appointment with a new client.”

“On a Saturday evening?”

“It was the only time he could come in. You can go to the party though.”

“Forget it. I’ll skip it.” I got myself a bagel and sat down to have breakfast with him when his cell phone rang. His ringtone was “Ride of the Valkyries” from his favorite scene in *Apocalypse Now*. I hoped he wouldn’t answer and we could have breakfast together, but that wasn’t the case.

“Hello. . . .” He listened a moment. “Okay, try to calm down. Just tell me what’s going on. . . . I know you think she’s stalking you, but she’s your mother, she’s eighty-five, and she’s in a wheelchair. You’ll be safe until our appointment at nine.” He hung up.

“What’re you up to today?” He asked this as if I might be hiding some secret, exciting life and today might be a new adventure. Part of me wanted to say I was going to Vegas to lose all our money and start a prostitution ring, but I figured he’d just ask me to pick up his favorite cookies on my way home.

“I’m going to Brooklawn this morning.” How could he not remember that I go visit my dad at his assisted living facility every Tuesday?

“Oh yeah, sorry. I’ve been a little distracted.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s work stuff.” He put his dish on the sink and left his mug on the table, as if he’d forgotten we had a dishwasher.

“I know, but it makes me feel bad when you shut me out. For a while now it’s seemed like your mind is somewhere else, and I keep bringing it up, but nothing changes.”

“I know, you’re right. I’ll try harder, I promise.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering if this time he’d hear what I was saying.

Jim picked up his briefcase and went to the hall closet to get his coat. As he put on his gloves, I said, “Gia’s not going to be home tonight. Do you want to try that new gastropub?”

“I don’t know. I might be too tired.” He walked toward the door and put his hand on the knob.

“Has Gia mentioned her new boyfriend to you? I don’t think I like him,” I said, putting his mug to my lips and drinking the last drop of his coffee. Jim’s shoulders drooped as he realized his great escape was going to be held up.

“Can we talk about this later?”

“Why can’t we talk about it now?”

“I don’t want to get stressed out.”

“I’m stressed. I thought we could share it.”

“You know I don’t like dealing with this kind of stuff before I go to work.”

As a psychologist, Jim listened to his patients and helped them solve their problems, yet I was often left to deal with ours by myself. He’d come home to a place where our problems had been magically fixed.

He kissed me on the lips lightly, so lightly I felt a brush of air and the slight hint of toast on his breath. He opened the door to the garage and called over his shoulder, “Love you.”

“Love you? Where’s the *I*?” I said.

“Okay. Love, *I*.” He was delighted by his comeback.

“Get out of here, before *I* kill you,” I said.

I found myself twirling my wedding ring around and around; it had been on my finger for so many years. Sometimes it was hard to remember my life before marriage, when the biggest decision I had to make in the morning was whether to have a café Americano or an iced green tea before picking out a cute outfit and heading to my job as a senior editor at Shier and Boggs publishing. My best friend, Ellen, still worked there and got to have deep conversations with interesting people, and I got to scrub melted Rocky Road ice cream off my counters.

I raised the shades in my kitchen. The morning light danced in the room as it reflected off the snow. I had lived in Shelton, Connecticut, my whole life. When I was a kid, there were about twenty-seven thousand people, and now there were more like forty-one thousand. Our town had gone from mom-and-pop shops to Targets, Staples, and Starbucks, although we still had a few quaint cafés and a lake where everyone fed the ducks. We also had one independent bookstore, Wordsmiths, which had been here since I was a kid. When Gia was four, I took her there to hear a man in a Sammy the Whale costume read stories. She was so scared of the guy—and all whales for that matter—that when her grandmother gave her a toy stuffed whale, she freaked out. Needless to say, she’s never been to SeaWorld.

Shelton was only forty minutes from a big city, yet our house backed up to the woods, so when I looked out my back door, it often felt as if I was alone in nature. It was a feeling of peace yet also loneliness. As though the woods went on forever. I marveled at how the tall, barren trees covered in snow would bend down ever so slightly. And the ground free of footprints, except for the occasional raccoon that had run across the fresh powder to dump over the garbage can and spread wrappers from the chocolate that I denied eating. How I longed to leave my own footprints

in the snowy woods. They were so inviting. Sometimes I thought about walking out my back door through the leafless trees. I would disappear for a while. Not forever, but at least a month. I wondered how long it would be before Jim or Gia noticed I was gone. Would it be today? Tomorrow? The next day? Would they notice when they got hungry and I wasn't there to get them dinner? Would they miss me?

The phone rang again, and I knew I couldn't keep ignoring it. "Hi, Mom," I said.

"How did you know it was me?"

"We've talked about this. Your number comes up on my caller ID." I wanted to say no one else would call repeatedly this early in the morning. How many weekends did she wake up my whole house?

"Why didn't you answer the other two times I called?"

"I was busy getting Gia out the door."

Mom was like the Energizer Bunny, up early and always moving. She never needed to diet; her hyperactivity kept her in shape. She was a young seventy-five-year-old, and only the creases in her hands revealed her age. "I wanted to tell you I bought the cutest dress yesterday," she said.

"That's nice." I began tossing moldy strawberries from the fridge into the trash.

"And I wore it to lunch with Cayla and Jill."

"Great."

"They loved it. Said I looked ten years younger."

As I moved on to the expired yogurt, she began describing the new restaurant they had gone to. I moved from *oohing* and *ahing* into *uh-huh* mode. Mom went on to tell me about every dish she and her friends tried and how the chef came to their table and told them he had just gotten out of the hospital after a gallbladder attack. When she started talking about the waiter's

sister, I closed the fridge and told her I had to go, I had a lot to do. She said she understood and didn't want to keep me.

As my finger was about to hit the End Call button, she asked, "When was the last time you talked to your brother?"

"I don't know."

"You should talk to him more. You're family."

"I really don't want to discuss this."

"Fine, but someday it'll just be the two of you. So, how's my granddaughter?" she asked.

"She has a boyfriend."

"How nice."

"I'm not sure this guy has the best manners."

"I remember the boy you went out with in high school. Talk about rude. There was that one boy who'd come over to pick you up, and he'd never even say hello to us. What was his name?" I shook my head, even though I knew exactly who she meant. She laughed. "When you were young you were a terrible judge of character." I wanted to drop the phone down the garbage disposal, but instead I took a swig of hot coffee directly from the pot, hoping it would burn my mouth so badly I couldn't blurt out the twenty curse words I was thinking. "Your father kept saying you were a smart girl and you'd be fine. Thank God you found Jim when you did. He really straightened you out."

"I really have to go, Mom."

"Are you sure? We're having such a nice chat."

I had never been so sure of anything. "Dad's expecting me. Bye."

After I'd hung up, the sound of the ticking clock on the mantel became so loud it was all I could hear, that and my mother's voice in my head. Over the years, I'd tried to ignore it, or pretend it didn't affect me, but it did. Even at my age the things she said made me question my judgment, so I tried to avoid her.

I got in my car and turned the volume on the radio up full blast to drown out the noise in my head. After ten minutes and a handful of judgmental stares, I arrived at Brooklawn. With its celadon siding, white columns of ledger stone, and circular driveway, it looked more like a quaint hotel than an assisted living facility. An American flag and a Connecticut state flag blew in unison. Even though I'd been coming here at least once a week for the last nine months, every time I walked through the doors, a feeling of melancholy washed over me. I wanted to go back fifteen years to when my dad was a vibrant and active prosecutor with no health issues. I signed in and then made my way through old people with walkers trying to mow me down. I saw Julia, my favorite nurse, walking toward me. Even though she was in her midthirties and had a thick blue streak in her hair, I wished she were my mother. She'd comforted me when I cried the first time I saw my dad alone in his room, and she'd stood up for me when one of the doctors caught me sneaking our dog, Theo, in to see him.

I waited while Julia stopped to help an elderly woman who had her shirt on backward. She had the woman raise her arms over her head as she turned the shirt around, being very careful to keep it pulled down so the woman could maintain her dignity. As the woman walked away, Julia waved me over.

"Hi, Maggie. I know you're here to see your dad, but can I ask a favor?"

"Of course," I said.

"Mrs. Cryer needs someone to listen to her news report. Could you drop in on her?"

"No problem," I said. I had become familiar with many of the residents. Mrs. Cryer was ninety-six and convinced she was Walter Cronkite. She liked to report the news every morning . . . the news from 1962.

Julia went back to work. As I walked down the long hall, the smell of cleaning fluid permeating my nostrils. Dad had a private room at the end of the hall, with a hospital bed, a dresser, a well-worn navy club chair, and a side table. On the side table was a Victorian lamp, the one Mom kept bringing over to my house, even though I kept saying I didn't want it. On the dresser were three pictures: one of Mom and Dad on their honeymoon, where Dad's wearing a sombrero and Mom's laughing hysterically; one of Jim and me and Gia in New York City; and one from my childhood of Jerry and me, where Jerry's smirking at the camera. Mom thought she was only going to be able to have one child, so she told anyone who'd listen about her miracle baby boy. Jerry still smirks whenever you take a picture of him; he took that miracle thing too much to heart. Jerry and I were six years apart, and he was stubborn, meticulous, and a loner, which also explained why as an adult he could rarely maintain a relationship with a woman for more than a few months.

I kissed my fingers and touched the mezuzah that Mom had put up on Dad's door. A mezuzah is a Jewish symbol that signifies God's presence. Dad wasn't religious, but he believed in traditions, so every home he'd lived in since he was born had one.

He was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt that said, "Yes, I'm an attorney, but I use my powers for good." His silver hair was combed far enough back to reveal a very high forehead. A forehead I'd been lucky to inherit, which was why I always wore bangs. Dad was sitting in his club chair intently focused on the television. Pat Sajak of *Wheel of Fortune* was calling out letters, and a professorial-looking man was trying desperately to solve the puzzle. "A Blast from the Past," I called out as I came up behind him, kissing him on the cheek.

"Show-off," he said. When I was growing up, Dad and I watched *Wheel of Fortune* together almost every night. Neither

Mom nor Jerry ever tried to join us. I'm not sure if that was their choice or ours.

During the commercials, we'd talk about my classes, which boys I had crushes on, and whether Whitney Houston or Madonna had a better voice. Mom was usually in the back room sewing or reading a book, and Jerry was locked in his room.

"How's my favorite daughter?" he asked.

"I'm your only daughter."

"That you know of."

"Very funny." He was slumped to one side of the chair, so I reached my hands behind his lower back and pulled him up straighter. Or as straight as I could with him being dead weight. Dad had Parkinson's disease, so sitting up straight wasn't easy. He stared straight ahead while I pulled him up and didn't say a word. I wondered if he was embarrassed that he couldn't control his own body well.

"Hey, you want me to sneak you in a chili dog next time I come?" I asked. His face looked a little thinner than the last time I was here.

"Sure, but don't tell your mother. She likes me to eat healthier."

I promised to keep my mouth shut, which was easy because when I talked to my mother, she did most of the talking anyway. I told him that Julia had asked me to go see Mrs. Cryer for a few minutes.

"Mrs. Cryer's loony. In the dining room the other day, she told me the Boston Strangler was on the loose and headed for my room. I told her I'd just hit him with my walker, and she said I'd do more damage with an AK-47." He laughed at his own joke, but the laugh caught in his throat, and he started coughing. I looked around the room for a cup of water, which I found on a side table, and held the straw up to his lips. In the last few months, his shaking had made it harder for him to hold a cup

himself. I hated seeing my strong dad reduced to needing help with such a simple task.

Mom and Dad didn't tell me at first that he'd been diagnosed with Parkinson's, because they knew I'd worry. Then, a year ago, he started falling a lot, and one day when he fell in the kitchen, Mom couldn't get him up by herself. She called Jerry, and Jerry called Jim and me. When we got to their house, they confessed how often Dad had been falling. We got them to agree that they needed help. I wanted them to hire someone to come into the house, but Dad refused. They couldn't afford twenty-four-hour help, and Dad didn't want my mother to be his caretaker. He saw what it had done to his own mother when she took care of his father for the last five years of his life. His mother ended up an angry, bitter woman who resented his father. Dad never wanted that for my mother, so we moved him into Brooklawn, and Mom spent almost every afternoon with him. I never asked her what it was like to sleep alone after all those years.

I kissed Dad on his cheek and told him I'd be back soon, although I didn't get back to him as quickly as I wanted. After listening to Mrs. Cryer go on and on, I was cornered by another woman who needed help getting a knot out of her yarn so she could finish her great-granddaughter's sweater. When I finally got the knot out, she pointed out another one. After twenty minutes of new knots popping up, I figured out that she was tangling them purposely so I would stay and talk to her. Finally, she fell asleep, and I snuck away. The number of forgotten seniors here made my heart ache and scared the hell out of me. Would I be left all alone in a home someday? Would Gia ever come see me? When Dad moved to Brooklawn, I told Jim that if I got to the point of having to go into any type of nursing home, he should leave a large quantity of sleeping pills on the counter and go out for the day. He said if I could get to the counter by

myself, I probably didn't need a nursing home to begin with. I thanked him profusely for feeling my pain and knowing what I needed to hear.

When I finally got back to Dad's room, a nurse was helping him steady himself on his walker so he could go to the dining room for lunch. I felt bad that I'd been away for so long, but Dad was happy to see me again and asked me to join him for lunch. He loved showing me off. I told the nurse I'd take over and made sure he was steady on his walker before we began a very slow progress toward the dining room. For every step I took, he shuffled two while I waited.

I spent an hour eating a lunch of baked cod amandine, sweet potatoes, and dry green beans and listening to a medley of the elderly telling me how adorable I was. Nothing lifts your spirits more than feeling as if you're a teenager when you're over forty. I settled Dad back in his room and told him I was going to head out.

"Your mom said you haven't come by the house lately," he said. "I've been busy, but I'll try to get over there."

Dad was always the peacemaker with my mom and me, but he should've been more concerned about his relationship with Jerry. Dad had trouble connecting with him, so he put all his fatherly efforts into me, which didn't help the situation. Mom felt bad, so she had tried to become both mother and father to Jerry.

A half hour later, I was turning down my block when I realized I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to do any more laundry. I didn't want to wash any more dishes. Or walk the dog. Or cook dinner. Since Gia started her senior year, and would be leaving for college soon, I'd been struggling with how I was going to find a new purpose to my life. There were plenty of people who

would've been happy to *not* have to go to a job every day, but right now I wasn't one of them. If I had a job, after she left, I'd have a place where I could still feel important. At forty-five, I was insecure, and I worried whether I'd ever get back into the working world and, at the same time, wondered if I really wanted to. My mixed-up thoughts depressed me. And then I remembered something that made my day even worse. I'd offered to volunteer at Gia's school to set up for Winter Carnival. Oh, yay, I'd get to be with moms who lived to boss people around.

As I turned the car around and headed to her school, I drove past a Krispy Kreme donut shop. If I were going to get through the rest of this day, I needed a sugar fix, and a donut would make me so much happier right now. Besides, I was already late, so what were a few more minutes? Ten minutes later, I walked out with a powdered sugar donut in my mouth and two glazed ones in a bag.

The first thing I saw when I walked into the gym was grown women standing in groups like high school cliques. In the center of the room were the high-powered moms who were doctors and lawyers. They were handing out clipboards to the rest of us peons. When Gia started kindergarten, I'd tried to make small talk with them, but they snubbed me when they found out I didn't "work" for a living. They had no idea how hard I worked, and I resented them and felt inferior at the same time. The thought of spending the afternoon with these women made me so anxious that I was already sweating through my shirt.

My friend Heather was standing in a corner with her head bowed over her phone as if she were doing something very important. She hated these things as much as I did.

"Hey," I said.

"Shh, I've been here ten minutes and they haven't noticed me yet," she said. I don't know how they could have missed her. She had blond spiky hair and was wearing pink cowboy boots.

Amy, a five-foot-ten model-looking pediatrician, approached us. “Can you go help with the decorations?” she said to Heather, who shot me a look. Then she handed me a bunch of clipboards. “And you get to work on the silent auction.” She said this as if I’d won the lottery. As Heather and I went to do our slave labor, Amy returned to her friends to sip coffee.

For the next half hour, I got to decide opening bids on luxury items. There was an aromatherapy session at a spa, which I thought about bidding on until I realized it was for a dog spa, and Theo was not the pampering type. There was also a basket filled with David Spade movies, and a surgical tummy tuck with a belly button reconstruction. Finally, something I could’ve used, but there was no way I was putting my real name down on that one.

I’d volunteered for three hours, but after two, I’d hit my limit. I walked over to where Heather was hanging up streamers. “You want to get out of here?” I whispered.

“They’re not going to just let us leave. We have to come up with a good excuse,” she whispered back.

“I’ll say my mother needs me to take her to the doctor,” I said.

“That’s good. I’ll say my kid’s throwing up in the school bathroom.”

Heather put down the streamers, and we loudly made our excuses to the coffee klatch. No one said anything or even acknowledged we were leaving, which was probably for the best, since when we got into the corridor, I noticed I was still holding three clipboards.