



Across
the pond



CHERI CRYSTAL

Chapter 1

Autumn to Winter 2008

IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH TO excite me, not like I was ridiculously easy to please, but happiness came from within. I was animated because I loved surprises, especially when I was the one behind them. My bliss had me dirty dancing with a wooden spoon one minute, hip-hopping and flailing around a spatula the next, and twirling a potato masher to a disco beat, until I was burning calories like a well-oiled furnace. It was a good thing too, because I was cooking up a special dinner to commemorate our thirteenth anniversary. Thirteen! Our lucky number, but still hard to believe it had been that long since Faith and I had first met at a *Mostly Mozart* orchestra concert at Lincoln Center. Her tastes in music had done a complete turnaround from the classical she had preferred back then. These days she was a fanatic for anything Latin American, and the spicier the salsa, the better. While I enjoyed everything from country to glam rock, she sure did adore the Latin beat, and it was growing on me too.

She'd be home soon. I had great plans of spending quality time with her. And yes, I had high hopes to spend most of

that quality time with her in bed. Both our jobs seriously cut into our cuddle time. Faith saved struggling restaurants from bankruptcy, and I helped motivate employees toward healthier lifestyle choices in order to cut absenteeism and increase productivity. Tonight, I planned to make up for all the time we'd had to spend apart recently.

I'd taken time off today to mark the occasion and even treated myself to a decadent spa treatment—from a brand-new hairdo, mani, pedi and facial to a full leg and Brazilian bikini wax. It wasn't every day I went to great pains, literally, to look my best, being more of the rustic type in tune with what Mother Nature gave me. But the results had been miraculous: As soon as the tortuous tingles of pulling hairs out by the roots had subsided, I sparkled all over.

The table was pure elegance: I set it with our best china and stemware, placed matches alongside the decorative candles, and chilled the champagne in an ice bucket. A whole sustainable salmon was slow-roasting in the oven. Already I could detect a hint of delicate seasonings in the air. By the time it was done, the skin would be crispy, the pink meat beneath moist and succulent, and the buttery orange glaze would be fragrant and delicious. And Faith, my love, would be in culinary heaven.

As soon as I heard tires crunching and kicking up gravel, the buzz I'd had all day grew stronger. I knew how much my girl loved being catered to and just how high her standards were when it came to the taste and presentation of food. And pleasing her was one of my greatest joys. Diverting my attention away from the pile of freshly scrubbed and peeled vegetables, I placed my paring knife on the cutting board,

moved the curtain aside with my clean knuckle, and glanced out the window. Our remodeled driveway, not yet tarmacked, wrapped around the side of the house where it led to the back garden. We could throw a huge party and invite a house-load of guests with room to spare if we were so inclined. But Faith was not a fan of parties, and I was mostly glad to have just two cars out there. Hers and mine—side by side.

Sure enough, Faith was home. My heart beat faster. Before she powered the windows up, I received an earful of Ricky Martin's "Livin' la Vida Loca." Both music and engine quit in sync as Faith cut the ignition of her brand-new red Toyota Camry. She strode toward the front of the house, uniform grey pebbles parting like the Red Sea as she went. The convenient side door was bolted shut until we were ready to build a staircase that was safe to navigate. Faith was chief-in-charge of home repairs and had promised months ago she'd get around to it, but she hadn't as of yet.

No matter how many times we sprayed the lock with WD-40, she'd no-doubt struggle with the key. If I nagged her to fix something or call someone in, we'd only argue, so I always let it go, and would again today. There were more important things on my mind: the sooner she stepped inside, the quicker we could get the party started, and the happier I'd be.

My first inclination whenever Faith arrived home was to run into her arms. But after she'd put in a sixty-hour week plus a grueling commute from anywhere in the Tri-State Area to Eastern Long Island during the Friday evening rush hour, I knew better than to invade her space the second she crossed the threshold. Although I got grouchy waiting, I considered allowing her to chill and greet me on her own

terms a small sacrifice to pay. I'd finish up in the kitchen, and she'd walk in to find me all smiles.

With my heart rate mounting in direct proportion to my anticipation, I wiped my hands on the full-length apron I wore to protect my dress. It made me glance down at my clothing choice, and I realized I wasn't too upset to wear the dress again, after a shopping trip had failed to turn up a better alternative. I hoped Faith would be pleased at me choosing her favorite, a sheer number in deep plum with outlines of butterflies, buds, and leaves in cream; she'd bought it for me while on one of her business trips. It had a built-in, flesh-colored slip, hinting at the allusion of being bare but with a modicum of modesty. Only, on this special occasion, I had nothing on underneath. Without undergarments, this totally nice dress turned naughty. Maybe it was the feel of silk over freshly waxed skin, but I felt so sexy, mere walking threatened to bring me to the brink of orgasm.

I'd have come where I stood if not for a tactic that usually worked to quell unwanted passions best saved for later: I tried forcing my mind to imagine myself at the gym in a spinning class, the most unsexy thing I could think of. However, even that couldn't stop me from reliving old memories of Faith ripping this dress off and having her way with me in all sorts of kinky delights on the kitchen floor. I kept fast-forwarding to having all of her in bed tonight.

Speaking of Faith...it seemed to take ages for her to appear. The time it took her to place her shoulder bag and keys on the console table in the entryway, set her briefcase beside the hall closet, and drape her coat over the high-backed chair in the living room was often enough for her to unwind before entering the kitchen ready for a welcome embrace. Not crowding her earned me tons of sweet rewards.

It was a routine that ultimately suited us both. However, this was not an ordinary night for typical routines; it was our anniversary. Only, Faith hadn't mentioned a word about it all week, despite several of my not-so-subtle hints.

If I scrubbed the carrots any harder, they would be pared without a peeler.

I basted the fish again, mostly to have something to do with my restless hands, and then resumed stirring the cheese sauce on top of the stove. With assorted vegetables in a rainbow of colors all lined up, I reached over to the windowsill and switched tracks from dance to romance. Faith might tease me about altering the words to every sappy tune I'd ever heard, but I didn't care. Soon the first floor of our house was filled with the sounds of love songs, nothing but love songs, with me the lead vocalist—singing at the top of my lungs and jazzing up lyrics to my heart's content.

From a very early age, I could be counted on to burst into song on cue. Often I wasn't even aware I was humming until I was ordered to stop. Like my dad, I simply loved music. Did my mother have a premonition when she named me Janalyn Melody Jacobs? Or did I enjoy singing as a result of my middle name? But I liked to think I sang on-key, even if I could never remember the lyrics. I used to assume a line in "God Bless America" went "...from the night with the light from a bulb." I've since learned the error of my ways, but I continued to sing it my way just to make a point. After being ostracized by one's critical fourth grade peers for being different, I'd learned early that some battles weren't worth fighting. Let them make fun. If worse came to worst I could always just beat them up. I never did use my fists, but the thought I could went a long way to getting me through those awkward teens.

Back then I enjoyed creating silly medleys, not caring if they made sense or not, and now I couldn't be bothered to memorize actual lyrics. With my back to the door, I tore three varieties of lettuce leaves, slicing cucumbers, zucchini, celery stalks, radishes, scallions, tomato wedges, and four colors of peppers and tossed them all into a salad. Dried cranberries, caramelized pecans and crumbled feta cheese went on top for an extra zing. I was singing a borrowed tune from the song du jour rattling around in my head, singing, "hey you sexy thing, dah, duh, dah, duh, get down and dirty and let's have a fling, dah duh, dah, dah—" when Faith tapped my shoulder, startling me half to death, sending me nearly to the moon.

"A *fling*? Faith grasped her chest as if fatally wounded in the old country and western film style.

I turned to face her, blushing at first before putting on a deadpan expression. "If that's your interpretation of taking your last breath, then you mustn't quit your day job."

Unable to keep a straight face for long, I burst into laughter. She was much better at bluffing than me. It was a nuisance being unable to hide my emotions. It was no surprise she was great at poker, often beating the pants off me—literally.

"So, what about this fling you're having in our kitchen?" Faith said with an overly pronounced pout.

"*Fling* rhymes with *thing*. Need I say more *darling*, dah, duh, dah, duh?"

She rolled her eyes before I threw my arms around her neck, unable to stand another second without a proper greeting.

After thirteen years, my heart rate still sped up whenever she walked into a room, and heaven help my libido if she merely glanced my way; I was a goner then. I placed tiny kisses all over

her face, lingering at her lips, only stopping to say what was in my heart: “Who needs a fling when I have you?”

Faith chuckled and ran the fingers of her free hand through my hair. “Hello, beautiful. Oh my, somebody changed her hairstyle.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Do you like it?”

“I love it, and I love you too.”

I shivered with delight whenever she paid extra attention to my appearance. She was my aphrodisiac. I was so absorbed in her presence; it took a while to notice that she was artfully keeping her other hand behind her back. With an overactive inquisitive nature, I stood on tiptoes to peer over her shoulder at what lay in wait for me to discover, but she blocked my view.

“No fair!” All I could detect over the pungent aroma of exotic spices that clung to her hair and clothing was a definite scent of fruit salad—a melon and strawberry patch and a pineapple grove smothered in chocolate. She radiated with obvious delight, a mischievous twinkle in her gray eyes.

“What did you bring me? Please let me see.” I went to grab for it but was thwarted again. Faith was an expert at suspense. Possibly another of her appealing qualities, but I wasn’t telling her that.

“Now may I please see my present?”

“May I have another kiss first?”

“For you, there’s an unlimited supply.” I placed my lips on hers and was deeply rewarded with the grand welcome to which I was accustomed.

I returned the favor and ran my fingers through her hair, gingerly massaging her scalp with my fingertips, while she closed her eyes, as if allowing her tense neck muscles to fully relax, one fiber at a time, until I was practically supporting

her head and she was putty in my hands. I marveled at the potpourri of sights, scents and sounds that made up the whole of my girl. Faith was a conglomeration in many ways: outspoken yet reserved; tough as nails but a total mush; super-smart but not conceited. And while she came across as somewhat prudish to the outside world, she was sexy as hell in the bedroom. The many sides of Faith intrigued me to no end because I got to appreciate the real her.

I could have lingered this way for the remainder of the evening but my bionic nose just wouldn't let me forget: "Show me my present already, or I shall have to tickle you without mercy," I said.

With a flourish and a great big smile, Faith whipped out a tremendous fresh fruit bouquet from behind her back. I gasped at how the colorful arrangement of fresh fruit: cantaloupe, honeydew, strawberries, pineapple-shaped flowers—some naked and others cloaked in chocolate—formed an incredible bouquet. A rectangle slice of dark chocolate, held up by a plastic stand, had pink-icing letters inside a big red heart drawn on it—*F and J Forever*.

"Happy anniversary, Janalyn."

I held the bouquet to my nose and inhaled the sweetness. "This will be the perfect dessert, after the main dessert we're having in bed." I winked.

"Perfect. Did you by any chance make salmon?"

"A whole salmon."

"Oh, yum." Another thing I admired about Faith: while she didn't abstain from all indulgences, she mostly preferred healthy eating, like I did.

Faith and I were on the same page about proper nutrition. It made it easy to choose foods wisely and only occasionally

indulge in less nutritious options, particularly wine and chocolate—we loved wine and chocolate. But Faith was more obsessive about fitness, especially as she was required to taste fattening foods at the restaurants she was helping. She suffered more guilt after partaking in empty calories than I did. I was more likely to forgive my indiscretions, figuring life was for enjoying, not depriving. But we both felt so much better when we didn't pig out. Staying fit enhanced sex. That was our incentive, and Faith helped keep me on track.

I was just about to place the floral arrangement at the center of the table when I noticed a small gold box. It was imbedded between chocolate-covered grapes and held by a wooden stick with a pineapple daisy on top. Totally stunned, I simply beamed that not only had Faith not forgotten our anniversary but she had bought me a real gift.

"What's this?" I lifted the box, glancing at her for approval like a little girl awaiting permission to open a birthday present, and then ripped open the shiny giftwrap; the tiny bow and paper didn't stand a chance. I lifted the black velvet lid, my hand literally shaking, to find an exquisite solitaire diamond necklace that took my breath away.

"I'm touched beyond belief." Tears leaked out from the corners of my eyes and my voice registered at barely a murmur. "I had no idea."

The timer went off, breaking the spell, but not spoiling the moment. With an oven-gloved hand and dishtowel, I removed the piping hot cast-iron roaster. My whole salmon appeared as if swimming in a sea of fragrant juices amongst tiny bubbles. Steam quickly heated my cheeks, which were already pink with pleasure. I placed the scalding dish on

top of the stove while Faith closed the clasp of the necklace. Without checking the salmon for doneness, I scurried to the bathroom mirror to see how I looked. Faith eventually came up and stood behind me as I fingered the jewel that reminded me of an engagement ring, only better.

“Selecting the diamond was easy, but I wasn’t sure what length chain would be best. This fits you perfectly.”

“Oh Faith, I love you so much. This is the nicest surprise ever. It’s exquisite. Thank you.” After words failed to express my true emotions, I stopped rambling and planted tons of kisses onto her, painting her lips and face with my love instead.

“Happy anniversary, beautiful.” Faith managed a murmur during the rare moment when her mouth was free. “You’re smothering me.”

“Sorry.”

“No, I like it, but we should probably eat before dinner gets cold.” She led me by the hand back to the kitchen, where I lit the candles and she popped opened the champagne. “To us,” we toasted.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Janalyn. I rate this meal five out of five stars. But now I’m pleasantly stuffed. I can’t eat another bite.” Faith pushed her chair away from the table and stood. “I think I’ll take my shower now unless you need me to help clean up.”

“The dishes can wait. I’d rather help with your shower.” I smiled brightly.

Again, Faith led the way, and I was eager to follow. In the bathroom, I stripped her clothes off first. Cool air, in contrast to my warm, wet kisses, constricted her nipples

to fine points. Mine tightened in response. It seemed she could hardly contain her desire; nor could I. With haste, she removed my dress, gasping at discovering I had nothing on underneath.

“Oh my, my.” Her eyes darkened. Both of us vibrating with unmistakable need, we stepped into the shower, now hot and steamy. I soaped up her slick body, rinsing her off using the handheld showerhead, and when we were done, we towel-dried each other off. My body ached for me to get Faith into bed as quickly as possible.

“God, Janalyn. Had I known you were naked under that dress all during dinner, I’d have skipped the food.”

Her words were music to my ears. I loved being a tease for her, especially when she responded like this.

“Don’t move a muscle.” She leaped out of bed, naked.

“Where are you going?” I asked

“Downstairs. Stay put.”

“Don’t take all day.”

Faith reappeared with her incredible edible bouquet. “Time for dessert!”

She fed me chocolate-covered fruit in bed in exchange for having sex in every position imaginable.

At one point, we got out of bed, so that she could fuck me with a strap-on that delivered both anal and vaginal pleasure simultaneously, and I had to stand on tiptoes for prolonged periods of time in order to climax; I swore my thigh muscles were close to snapping. Had I remained in that position another second, I surely would have needed emergency services. When my orgasm exploded, I came so hard that Faith caught me just before I fell in a fine puddle of contented flesh and bone.

Blissful hours passed before we fell asleep in each other's arms, totally sated and exhausted. It was an anniversary to remember.

* * *

Saturday morning, I woke refreshed, yet stiff. I stretched awakened muscles I hadn't even known existed. After the crazy, heat of passion positions in which we had found ourselves last night, it's a wonder I could move at all. Our bodies were entwined, our flesh sticky with the enticing aroma of post-sex afterglow. Faith was one minute in dreamy slumber and the next sleepily nibbling on my earlobe, her heated breath tickling me. It was like being on a slow simmer, after so many hours of scalding hot carnal pursuits.

I could luxuriate in the contours of her body for hours and never tire of tasting every inch of her. Her nibbling led to her kissing her way down my neck until I wanted more, much more. I was ready to be taken, to be ravished by her, but our tender moment was rudely interrupted when her cell phone rang at the highest volume.

I have a love-hate relationship with cell phones—one minute wondering how I ever lived without one and the next wanting to flush it down the toilet. There was nothing worse than an annoying ringtone that didn't stop.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" I asked, wincing as I stretched.

She glanced at the screen and swiped *decline*.

"Who would call this early on a Saturday morning?" My bare breasts brushed hers as I reached for the phone, but she moved it out of my reach, so I sat up instead, with my back against the headboard. "Let me speak to them."

“It’s work.”

“So why didn’t you just pick up?” Feeling a sudden chill, I pulled the sheet so it lay just below my chin and rested my cheek on my knees to face her.

“I wanted to discuss it with you before I made a decision.”

“What decision?” Why was she waffling? “What do they want?” The tone of my voice rose despite my best efforts to remain calm.

“I know it’s our anniversary, but—”

“Oh no, but what?” I pouted.

“But Longhorn Bill’s Grill has been slapped with a hefty fine, with a deadline to clean up or pack it in. They want me to fly to Dallas tonight. Oh, Janalyn, I’m so sorry. I won’t go if you don’t want me to, but the promotion is within reach, and if I don’t jump on this, they’ll give it to someone else. And well, we all know who would just gloat in my face.”

“I know, I know.” I swallowed my disappointment. “You go, and when you get back, we’ll continue right where we left off. Call them back.” I got out of bed and headed to the shower.

I heard Faith say, “I’ll catch the next flight and meet you there...” before I closed the door behind me. A hot shower or a cold shower? Either way, I was doomed. A cold shower to quell the longings in my loins, or a hot shower to steam away the loneliness that settled in my gut? And Faith hadn’t even left yet.

* * *

That night, Faith rang and gushed about my delicious dinner and our intense coupling. I couldn’t stop thanking her for the diamond necklace and telling her how much I missed her.

“How’s it going over there, though?” I asked. She was a restaurant whisperer. She managed to save more establishments from going under than all the men on her team. I was so damn proud of her and didn’t blame her for wanting to shine in a field where women were just being recognized as knowing a thing or two.

“I think they’re willing to work within my plan, starting with getting rid of the head chef.” Enthusiasm filled her voice. “That was the hardest part too, as the chef is Bill’s—the owner’s—brother-in-law, and Bill’s wife owns half the business. With this and a few other major changes, I believe they have a strong chance of staying viable. What a mess, though. Thank you for understanding.” Faith sounded upbeat and completely in her element. This pleased me.

“I’ll be waiting for you, so please hurry home and stay safe.”

She blew me kisses, and I saved them all. I spent Sunday morning fixing the toilet, planning to surprise Faith with my plumbing prowess. Then I went for a mid-morning run. After my second shower that morning, I was high on endorphins and texted my trusted friend and colleague Debs, on the off chance she was free for a matinee and dinner, nothing fancy, She was, and so we made a plan.

While I lived on Long Island, my best friend, Deborah Foster-Baker, a.k.a. Debs, resided in Manhattan. We often hung out near Roosevelt Field Mall as a suitable midpoint location with lots of options for activities. Driving to meet her took about thirty to forty minutes by car, depending on the Northern State or Long Island Expressway traffic. Her train ride from Penn to Westbury or Carle Place was around the same.

I had wanted to see *The Dark Knight* with Christian Bale and Heath Ledger for some time. Debs was a real pal, not only meeting at the spur of the moment, but agreeing to the movie of my choice. Whenever Faith refused to see another superhero or sci-fi flick, Debs was my best bet for companionship. Even when our entertainment tastes didn't match, Debs was open to experiencing every genre imaginable. If I wanted to see a movie on the big screen before it went to DVD or cable TV and Faith had no intentions of enduring something she didn't find intellectually gratifying, then she had no objections about me going with a friend. Besides, with Faith often traveling to further locales and wherever demand for her services were required, I think she felt relieved whenever I had plans, perhaps because she felt it absolved her from being away from home so much.

With time to spare, I left the house for the Westbury train station to pick up Debs. As it turned out, I got there a few minutes ahead of time, so I bought us some Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

Debs arrived at the rendezvous point nearest the ticket office of the station just as I pulled up. Her medium-length layered hair, a deep brown with golden highlights and delicate bangs, had long, finger-like locks that pointed to the notable contours of her cheekbones. The way the hairstyle was so freshly coiffed, it nicely framed her oval face.

"Hi there!" I said, as she breezed into my car with a smile. Think Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* meets *Sex in the City*, and Debs came to mind: athletic, beautiful, savvy, and on any given day, probably hornier than even me. Shocking, but true. She was also a fashion maven, dressing corporate perfect at work and super-sexy at play. She knew what to

wear for any occasion and looked hot in everything. She loved shopping at Roosevelt Field.

“This is a nice surprise. You saved me from doing laundry in the dregs of my apartment building.” When Debs spoke, she had your undivided attention, because you couldn’t look anywhere else but into her dark brown eyes or at her red lips.

“Whew, wouldn’t want to waste time off doing mundane chores.” I handed her the bag. “Here, I bought you a coffee if you want one.”

“Bless you. I didn’t have time to drink anything before boarding, but this is just perfect. Thanks.”

She took a sip of the brew, light, without sugar and no longer scalding, and replaced the lid. “What happened to your romantic weekend? Faith off on business again?”

“Yes, you guessed it. The anniversary dinner was exceptional, though.” I didn’t share the details, but I opened my jacket and showed her the diamond instead.

“Oh, wow! This is incredible. *Somebody* put out a lot to deserve it.”

“Shut up.”

Debs giggled. I pulled away from the curb, and when I didn’t elaborate, Debs kindly let the subject drop. Debs and I were close, but that didn’t include sharing intimate details about our sex lives. At least I preferred to keep some things private, Debs not so much; but that was her prerogative.

We both loved the film: all two hours and fifty-some-odd minutes of it went by in a flash, and we decided to finish off the night sharing a meal at TGI Friday’s.

“No mentioning work, okay?” I said as we walked into the restaurant. It was already crowded, but the wait for a table was tolerable, so we put our name down on the list.

“I’ll do you one better. The first one to say anything work-related buys. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said, although it was not an easy task after we’d spent years working together within the same department. We had even followed each other up the corporate ladder, where we grew along with an ever-expanding company. Not talking shop was like having a brand-new puppy and not bragging about him or her to anyone who’d listen.

Working together in a business we both believed in went a long way to keeping our dedication and job satisfaction fairly high. It wasn’t as if there were never any grievances at all, but as far as jobs went, Scott Spencer Enterprises was more than decent: to motivate us toward healthy lifestyle choices, we received company-subsidized gym memberships, and once we got holiday food vouchers for a thirty-day supply of fresh fruits, salads, and vegetables from a local Korean market. Faith and I saved a fortune that month on our shopping bill.

Debs and I each ordered salad with chargrilled chicken breasts—dressing on the side, minus cheese, bacon and croutons—as our main entrées. We knew the bar-restaurant chain specialized in affordable food and huge portions, a reason it was always busy and, for us, a reason to avoid eating there. But it was near the movie theater, and we had opted for convenience. Still, when our orders arrived, we gaped at the enormity of the portion size.

“This could very well feed a small nation,” I quipped.

Debs nodded. They got the order wrong. She started picking out the fattening stuff, but soon gave up.

I tried to catch the waitress’s attention, but she was too busy to stop. My stomach was already growling after

watching the almost three-hour epic movie without so much as a kernel of popcorn.

“Oh, go for it,” Debs said. “You raised your metabolism running this morning, didn’t you?”

“That’s not the point. How hard is it to get our orders right?”

“At least the dressing is on the side.” Debs popped a chunk of chicken into her mouth. “Yummy, but this doesn’t taste low fat to me.”

“Me neither,” I said. “They probably pump the chicken breasts full of saturated fat and salt to make it grill up nicely. It tastes good, but it’s not as healthy as it could be.”

“Let’s not harp and just enjoy,” she said, but I couldn’t let it go.

“I hate it when I order the healthiest option on the menu and get the exact opposite,” I said, but couldn’t stop myself from stuffing forkfuls of chicken loaded with bacon and cheddar into my mouth.

While the servers seemed to have been abducted by aliens, the bar staff had plenty of time to talk us into specialty drinks.

“Let’s order strawberry daiquiris and really go to hell with ourselves,” Debs said.

“You’re a very bad influence. I’m driving, so I’ll have a taste of your daiquiri, and we can share dessert.”

We were much too absorbed in talking about the movie to pick out the bacon and cheese. Debs’s drink was to die for, and we shared the Brownie Obsession.

After we’d done all but lick the plate, I put down my spoon and groaned. “I ate way too much.”

“Me too. We’ll be better tomorrow.” Debs had a quick look at her cell phone. “Oh well, it’s been real. Let’s get the check.”

“I guess we split it, since no mention of work was made.”

“Imagine that! Where is our waitress anyhow? I need to head home.”

“You can crash in our spare room if you want.”

“I’m wide awake now. Hopefully, the train will lull me into sleep mode by the time I get back to my apartment. Besides, I don’t have any work clothes with me, and the thought of leaving extra early in the morning to grab something just doesn’t appeal. But thanks anyway.”

I dropped her at the Westbury train station and waited the fifteen minutes for the next train to arrive. We said our goodbyes.

Catching up with Debs was always fun, especially on days off. It took the edge off missing Faith.

Chapter 2

MONDAY MORNING ROLLED AROUND BEFORE I was ready to relinquish my dream: Faith and I were basking on a white sandy beach, sipping mai tais while warm salt water tickled our toes. A warning signal blared in the distance. Serenity vanished before we could react. No raft, we were totally unprepared. But we had each other to cling to.

Just as a huge wave was about to land on our heads, the sound of the alarm clock catapulted me into reality. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over my head. With a pounding heart, I hit the clock radio button, hoping I pressed *off* and not *snooze*. As a backup, I had set both my clock and phone alarms. But waking up to music didn't work. If anything, songs or mindless chatter between DJs lulled me back to la-la land. Faith was a much better wake-up call.

Having a low tolerance for toxic substances of any kind, even sugar, I was still feeling sick. I really could have done without TGI Fridays. Even sharing a Brownie Obsession, with enough fat and calories for a whole day, had pushed me way over my limit. I had such trouble sleeping afterwards, made harder because I didn't relish sleeping alone. With

a wicked sugar hangover, it was no surprise that the first hour at work on a hectic Monday morning was going to be a total waste, spent removing the cobwebs from my brain and detoxing from eating too much.

By the time I arrived at work, Debs was at her desk, and the office was all abuzz with activity.

“You’re early. Show off,” I told her.

“Move to Manhattan,” she replied.

“And pay through the nose? That’s not going to happen.”

I grabbed a fistful of memos. Some things at Scott Spencer Enterprises had remained antiquated, like still receiving memos on top of e-mails. “What have we got?”

“You’ll see.”

The stack of stuff in my hand and on my desk was daunting. Most of our clients were large firms who could well afford to seek out-of-network consulting services and therefore felt they had the right to exacting standards that kept us busy. Scott Spencer Enterprises had a reputation of putting cost-effective programs in place without bankrupting companies before those companies could reap the benefits of improved employee morale and performance. If people were happy and healthy, they were often more productive. It helped to have personal incentives, reward systems and peer support.

I had just turned on my desktop when a dozen pings signaled alerts. Gearing up to get started, the stupid hard drive needed to be rebooted to install updates. This called for multiple caffeine infusions—the Folgers instant at breakfast wasn’t cutting it. Why couldn’t Mondays start off restful and calm, to ease us back gently into the work week? No, there had to be meetings, memos, computer glitches, and

unanticipated extra work piled on—all marked *urgent*. One such message provided a sign-up sheet asking for volunteers to test out a pilot program for motivating staff to move more while still maintaining optimal work performance in sedentary jobs; as if ‘voluntary’ was in Scott Spencer’s son Marcus’s vocabulary—which it wasn’t.

Naturally, Debs and I were the first names on the list. She made sure of it. Debs worked so hard, but being competent was second nature for her. That’s why she volunteered to go the extra mile, so she wouldn’t be idle for even a second, and because she was too nosy not to have a finger in every pot, including after-work events. She was always reaching for the stars, an avid overachiever—goal-oriented, perfectionist, yet completely laid back about her achievements; but heaven help anyone she cared about if they didn’t tag along.

My cellphone beeped. It was a text from Faith. I immediately cheered up, reading what she wrote:

How’s the sexiest woman alive this morning Xx?

Pining for the object of her fondest desires. You? XXX

Me too. Looking forward to unlimited repeats of the other night’s performance.

My thumbs raced through the motions of creating what I hoped looked like us eating each other out.

As usual, work got in the way of real life. The galleys of my handouts arrived ready for the final proofread before they went to print. Seconds later, a box of bound booklets I’d completed the week before landed on my desk with a

thud. I had enough to keep me busy for a week, but only two days to do it.

Oops. Gotta run. Have a great day, darling. Love you.

XXX Love you too. Miss you. XXX

I silenced my cell phone and forced myself to ignore kinky images so I could accomplish something constructive that also paid the bills. I finally got back into the groove, losing all track of time and space. After both handouts met my standards, I switched gears completely and dove into a tedious amount of statistical data to analyze—a task that was as much fun as a bout of stomach flu. I couldn't remember how I became the go-to girl for restoring order to records that were a total mess, as if I were the only one who could organize it sensibly. It took hours arranging years of statistics that should have been collected and entered onto the database regularly. I experimented with several approaches to organizing the random facts and figures—chronological, subject, quantity, and success versus failure—all in an attempt to figure out which model would most usefully visualize the improvements I needed to present in my five-year projections. Focusing on the computer screen too long made my eyeballs burn, but I was completely absorbed.

When the gentle tapping of Debs's knuckle on my desk made me jump, I was glad it was her, but I still blurted out, "Geez, Debs, use a sledgehammer, why don'tcha."

"Someone is grouchy."

"They fire Todd and leave me with his shit to clean up. You'd be grouchy too."

“Poor baby. But we’re talking Christmas, which is sooner than you think, so priorities, my dear friend; this is important. We’re having the holiday party at the VFW Hall this year.”

I pounded my keyboard. “This stupid program is getting on my nerves—it keeps freezing up at the worst possible moment.”

“You’re not listening.”

I glanced up at her, briefly. “FYI, Miss Party Pants, I *was* paying close attention.”

“Close attention, hrmpff. Well, Miss Attentive, what did I say, and, more importantly, what do you think?”

I closed the program with a huff and pushed my chair as far away from the cluttered desk as it would go, which was not very far at all. Even a tiny distance between me and my work for a much-needed break was better than fighting with a finicky computer that screamed, *we need a newer model here, ASAP*.

The muscles around my mouth slackened, and a tiny hint of a smile started.

“I think that following up last year’s five-star Christmas party at that fancy-schmancy Continental restaurant—which ended up being fun and festive beyond everyone’s expectations—with a Christmas party at the VFW is, well, cheesy,” I said.

“Well, Janalyn Jacobs, why don’t you tell us how you really feel?”

“I’m just being a realist.”

“But you don’t have to be so negative, and you are allowed to breathe, even during tirades. What you need is more coffee to lift your spirits.”

She held out her hand. I spun my chair around and passed her my mug as she breezed by. We took turns supporting each other's caffeine habit.

Without missing a beat, Debs walked the few steps across the office to the communal pantry that housed the various amenities of a studio apartment kitchen, including a small gas stove for members of staff who preferred to prepare their lunches at the office rather than go out to eat. I caught a whiff of freshly brewed coffee, could tell it was strong, and got an instant buzz before even taking the first sip.

Debs handed me my mug and warmed both her hands on hers. "Oh God, don't look now, but the administrative assistant's secretary, what's her name, is at it again."

I moved everything to one side so we could have our coffee break together. She then wheeled her chair to my side of the partition.

"What's she done now?"

"Can't you smell it? She's obviously vying for a promotion," Debs said.

I sniffed the air, and sure enough, I could detect cookie dough baking, namely three scrumptious varieties. "Yum, if I had to guess, she's making chocolate chip, white chocolate macadamia nut and peanut butter cookies. Do I win?"

"Ding, ding, ding. Right you are. How do you correctly identify three varieties of cookies?"

"It's a talent." I sat up taller. "And I have a bionic nose, inherited from my mother, who could tell who ate what from her kitchen just from sniffing our breaths." I laughed. "There never was any getting away with swiping some goodies when she wasn't looking. Besides all that, I saw a bag of macadamia nuts on her desk the other day, and I could identify chocolate chip and peanut butter in a snap."

Debs swatted my arm. “That’s cheating. I’d say...” She wiggled my mouse to get the time from the desktop, “...in about seven minutes, thirty one seconds, I will go over there and confiscate some for us.”

“Swell idea. Only, it’s Monday, we ate like pigs last night, and I’m trying to be good.”

“Oh pooh, forget diets. Faith has you so tightly strung when it comes to food, if you ask me. Besides, you’re already perfect. Look at you: there’s not an ounce of unwanted fat or flesh anywhere.”

“Dark clothes can be deceiving.”

“Nonsense. I’ve seen you naked, and I know exactly what I’m talking about. You have an amazing body, a flat stomach, tits that don’t sag, and perfectly sculpted legs most women would give up their most prized possessions for. You have no idea how many wet dreams have dried up when the guys I know find out you’re a lesbian. You have no freaking idea what a heartbreaker you are!”

If Debs wasn’t as straight as an unwinding road, her compliment would make me blush from here to kingdom come, but alas, changing in the locker room at the YMCA after heavy aerobics followed by swimming laps for an hour hardly counted as seeing each other naked in a sexual way. It was a good thing I didn’t get to ponder her comment for too long, for although my face was growing hot, Debs was already on to other subjects.

“I hear she prepares the dough at home. From scratch! I have no clue where she finds the time to work, bake and put on enough makeup for a show on Broadway. She’s in before we are, and have you ever seen her leave on time? What gives?”

Relieved to steer the conversation away from my so-called finer attributes, I played the gossip game instead, although it wasn't my favorite pastime. My feelings for Debs, who by the way was a total babe, were deep-seated and totally platonic, since I had Faith. To a fault, I was faithful. The pun made me laugh.

Back to contemplating the secretary with the obvious implants in both her breasts and butt. "I think Amber's either a gold digger or she has the hots for Mr. Nerdly." The image of Miss Playboy Centerfold and her boss as a couple got us both laughing. Syd was the biggest nerd in NYC, hands down. He brought new meaning to socially inept—emotionally befuddled yet mentally brilliant—an all-around geek who never ceased to find new ways to torment us all. If he wasn't such a slave driver, we could really appreciate his smarts.

It wasn't long before the office smelled as mouthwatering as a bakery. I had no idea how Faith resisted when she worked around kitchens all day long, sometimes seven days a week. I tried to channel her fortitude, but it took heroic strength to suppress the delightful salivary response to such heavenly aroma.

"For a company that promotes health and well-being, how the heck does anyone get away with tempting each other with tasty empty-calorie treats? That's what I want to know," I said.

"Beats me. But we can afford it."

"Says who? Usually there are enough chocolates, cakes, cookies and pastries around here to pad the waistlines and hips of every already bulging body. Never mind that most of us are trying to watch our weight and promote positive

lifestyle habits.” I patted my belly to check that it wasn’t going completely to pot. “It’s our company mission to make healthy choices; but that’s near impossible around here.”

“Okay, Miss Preacher, you can step down from your soapbox now. You’re singing to the choir. I agree with you. We have to set a fine example, no matter how hard that may be. Move more, eat less—that’s our motto. Oh, and my all-time favorite, have tons and tons of calorie-burning sex,” Debs said.

I laughed. “I really don’t think senior Spencer, or even junior, have sex in the recipe for weight loss success.”

“Probably not. Come with me to the gym after work so we can eat these cookies and get away with it.”

“I don’t have my stuff.”

“We can buy something on the way or stop at my place. You can borrow mine.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said. Debs had a convincing argument for every scenario. Of course I would join her at the gym. How could I not?

I heard the egg timer ring, and without spending another second thinking about waistlines, calories, or anything but sinking my teeth into gooey chewy, chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven, I told Debs with gusto, “Go get ‘em, cowgirl.”

“That’s the spirit!” Debs hurried over, joining the stampede.

“Oh my God, won’t she miss all those?” She had a plate heaping with cookies when she returned to my desk.

“Are you kidding? There’s enough for every department plus leftovers. Dig in.”

With our coworker Patrick, the senior member of the team and self-appointed know-it-all, off for the day, we

continued to chat, taking a longer than usual but much-needed break, as Debs filled our mugs a second time, adding sugar and Cremora Lite to hers and leaving mine black. Give me the real thing or don't give me anything. That was *my* motto, not that I didn't appreciate Debs's idea of having copious amounts of sex for exercise.

"*Anyway*," Debs said, "the VFW Hall was Patrick's idea." She clearly still hadn't gotten over my remarks about her work party proposal. "He says the money we'll save on a less fancy venue can be spent on live entertainment. We'll even have extra cash for good food from a reputable caterer of my choosing." Debs smiled broadly. She so loved being in charge. And it really was her forte.

"No way is he going to let anyone else choose the menu and entertainment."

"It's true. Patrick claims he's a food and wine connoisseur, and it's evident he has the girth to match, so I'll allow him the final say on the food. But the entertainment—"

"Whose idea was it to have us dress up as elves and reindeer last year, so that our secret Santa couldn't tell us apart to hand out the right gift to the right person?"

"You have to admit, we made a pretty mean pack of elves," she said.

I couldn't help but join her snicker. "There's no such thing as tall, mean elves that run in packs. The ones I imagine are all short and sweet."

"You're much too technical. Anyways, Pat isn't in charge of the entertainment—I am." Debs buffed her nails on the lapel of her navy pinstriped suit.

"Do tell how you managed that one." My ears perked up. I suddenly had a good feeling about this.

“I’ve booked the Azteks.”

“No way!” They were probably the hottest local club band around, with Latin beats and plenty of salsa. “They must charge a fortune.”

“They do, but I’m dating the lead singer’s brother, and, well, let’s just say I got us a really good deal.”

“You never cease to amaze me. Wait until I tell Faith; she’ll flip. The Azteks are her latest craze. We can bring a date, right? Faith will love me for bringing her along.”

“Of course you can, but it’ll cost you. We have to keep to a budget. I figure that for the price of a top-notch band and food ordered from Five Star Caterers, nobody will make too much noise about paying for a date when they’re getting their evening for free.”

“You’re a genius, Debs.”

As we did often, we reached to wiggle the mouse out of screen-saver mode, glanced at the desktop and gasped. The long coffee break ended up counting as our lunch hour.

I went back to making sense of Excel and by the end of the day had a working copy of projections to be revised ad nauseam, and Debs decided that she was satisfied with her latest project.

I was almost ready to call it a day when my cell phone made noise, and I picked it up on the first ring, after almost deciding to let it go to voicemail. My face lit up when I heard Faith’s voice.

“Hi, beautiful. How’s my girl?”

“Wonderful, now that I’m speaking to you.”

“Good. I’m running a bit late and won’t be home before eleven at the earliest. I had to catch the later flight. Sorry to miss dinner, but you can have the leftovers if you want.”

“No problem. I might hit the gym, then and have a salad when I get home.” I was still full from too many cookies and buzzed from downing copious amounts of coffee.

“That’s a great idea. Wish I could join you. I could use a good workout, followed by further toning.”

I knew what she meant by toning. We were both in longstanding agreement that sex was great for developing muscles other exercises missed.

“I love you,” I whispered into the mouthpiece. The office staff had thinned considerably, but there were still plenty of peeps who would love nothing better than have something to wag their tongues about.

“Love you too. Have a great workout.”

I knocked on Debs’s cubicle. “Looks like I’m definitely gymming with you tonight. I need a new swimsuit. Can I borrow those extra goggles and towel?”

“Of course; be ready in a sec.”

On the way to the Y, I picked up a Speedo swimsuit, Lycra capris because they were greatly reduced, a package of cushioned sport socks (always handy), and a cheap non-descript T-shirt. When we entered the locker room at the gym, I had an unexpected case of nerves about changing in front of Debs after her earlier comment about seeing me naked. But thoughts of keeping in tip-top shape for Faith soon dispelled any anxiety. Besides, Debs opted for the treadmill, StairMaster and weights, while I headed straight into the pool. The swim did wonders for not missing Faith too much until she got home. Afterward, I bid Debs goodnight.

I was completely stoked that Faith was coming home. It didn’t matter how late—I’d wait up just to kiss her goodnight. The trip from Penn to the Ronkonkoma station

and then our front door happened in a flash when my mind was preoccupied imagining lust-filled reunions. As much as I hated her being away all the time, all these business trips sure did keep the heart growing ever fonder. Faith and I never seemed to get a chance to get sick of each other.

* * *

Faith came home late Monday night, as promised. Actually, she tiptoed in at three a.m., technically Tuesday morning. I barely remembered kissing her in my drowsy state, but I do remember being spooned back to sleep. The next morning, at breakfast, there was no mention of Faith rushing off again soon, and I was content that we could enjoy our evenings together and plan for the upcoming weekend.

The week really flew once the routine was restored. At the office, Debs and I were totally engrossed in work: the test pilot program was in full swing, which meant taking the stairs instead of elevators, walking around the office every hour, standing and stretching at our desks, and engaging in light calisthenics. At first, everyone laughed their heads off when they weren't too busy grumbling about wasting precious time, but soon, the bell would ring throughout the office, and like well-trained dogs, we did as told without a peep. It seemed that the volunteer sheet was just a ploy, because every single person on our floor was involved. In between light exercising, we attended short films and pep talks on proper nutrition and the benefits of even moderate physical activity—all the stuff Debs and I knew by heart, but had to listen to regardless. We were encouraged to leave work at a reasonable time, even if that time was often a few hours after our shifts ended, and to hit the pavement for a

power walk or the gym of our choice at least five out of seven days a week.

Debs and I had no problem with this. After being chocolated-out by Monday's stash of cookies, we had successfully avoided office goodies altogether, hoping the admin secretary took the hint and stopped baking. But by Thursday, she showed no sign of letting up, and we gave in, sneaking one cookie each, so as not to alert anyone we weren't giving one hundred percent. Besides, neither of us felt we needed to be perfect in order to be healthy. We high-fived to moderation as we nibbled at our indiscretion in the supply room when no one was looking. Only a handful of coworkers fell off the wagon, more than once, and some stayed off. I figured non-compliance into the success rate percentages—it was inevitable.

By the time I left work on Friday, stopped for a session at the gym, and then headed for home, I was floating on air, already planning extra cuddle time with Faith. Debs had finalized the Azteks and left a huge non-refundable deposit, and I had impulsively bought tickets that day for both me and Faith before leaving work, even though I hadn't asked Faith about it yet. I wanted to surprise her with the tickets over dinner one night soon. I could already imagine the excitement on her face when I told her. Sure, it was a bit risky to buy the tickets before asking, but surely, work wouldn't send Faith anywhere over Christmas or New Year's; what restaurant would want someone poking her nose into their set routines during one of the biggest customer spending seasons?

Yes, I was certain it was a done deal. Even if work tried to schedule her, Faith would get out of any obligation to see the Azteks; I was sure of it.

I pulled the Mazda into the driveway beside Faith's Camry, surprised she had beaten me home. I glanced at my watch, verifying that she was an hour earlier than usual and grabbed my briefcase off the floor by the passenger seat. Followed by the seventy-five laps Debs and I had done in forty-nine minutes, seeing Faith home waiting for me for a change had me on endorphin overload.

The gravel under my rubber soles had a nice feel to it. Maybe we shouldn't pave the driveway after all, I thought. I juggled my work stuff along with my new purchases and a Ziploc baggie filled with the leftover cookies Debs insisted I take, because Playboy Bunny had gone rabid, and the result was non-stop baking. At Debs's suggestion, I planned to hide the cookies in the freezer as an emergency stash for when the test pilot ended and Faith was not on the lookout. I prepared myself for a battle of lock and key when the front door swung open the minute I arrived at the top step.

Faith held a briefcase and an overnight bag in each hand. Her handbag was slung across her chest. Every hair was in place. She smelled nice too.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Oh Janalyn, I left you a note. Something happened, and I'm flying into BWI tonight."

"No! Where are you flying to?"

"A new client with an upscale restaurant in Georgetown. I'm not even at liberty to reveal the name of the establishment. This is a huge make-or-break deal; I can't afford to miss this one."

I dreaded another weekend alone. "For how long this time?"

"One or two days, tops; maybe three. I'll call as soon as I know the details."

“But you only just got home Monday, and it’s the weekend.” I looked down at my feet, vacillating between exploding with anger and bursting into tears.

“I know.” At least she had the decency to look positively despondent. “Come here, you.”

I dropped my stuff on the floor by our feet and fell into her arms. She smelled absolutely gorgeous. I could have wept. I mumbled into her neck. “It’s almost Christmas. I thought we’d go shopping, buy new outfits, gifts and—”

“You don’t have to remind me, but you know what it’s like. I’m close to this promotion, so close I can’t blow it.”

“Please, cancel your trip. Don’t go.” Sounding more like a crybaby by the second, I did my best not to whine; it wasn’t working. “Please conference call or e-mail or whatever you can. I’ll give you plenty of space to work from home. *Please.*”

“You know I need to see for myself before I assess the situation. Besides, I can hardly sample their menu online. You know that, Janalyn. I’ll miss my flight.”

“I’ll take you to the airport.”

“I’ve already prepaid the parking at the airport. This way, you won’t have to worry if I get back early or late.”

“Debs booked The Aztecs for the holiday party this year. Please promise you’re not working through Christmas too.”

Faith stopped dead for a split second, the wild look of excitement about the prospects of spending the night dancing to salsa performed by none other than Manhattan’s own, obviously gave her something to contemplate. But as quickly as I caught the fervent excitement of a true fan in her eyes, it was gone: she pursed her lips and shook her head.

“No? Please tell me you can take one night off.” Disappointment solidified into anger. “The party’s two weeks away. Surely you can switch with someone.”

“Janalyn, please. Don’t make this harder than it has to be. You’ll make me late. We’ll discuss it when I get back. Now give me a kiss, and I’m off.”

With nothing more I could say or do to persuade her to forgo this assignment, I simply went back into the house and closed the old oak door without even watching her leave. She was right: the promotion would be great for her and would help us with all the repairs and bills; our costs in this area were indeed formidable. I’d lived in an apartment for so long before buying my first house, I had no idea what a huge undertaking and money pit an old vintage house like this would turn out to be.

I looked around the house we called home. Sometimes I envied Debs and her recently updated digs; all she had to do was freshen up the paint and redecorate. Faith and I had already upgraded the electrical system, repaired the heating several times, and put in a new hot water heater, after we’d realized we couldn’t flush the toilet, run the sink, and take a shower at the same time. In fact, after doing a load of laundry in warm water, forget about running a bath or using hot water at all, because not only did it waste electricity, we also had to wait at least thirty minutes for the water to heat up again. What in the beginning had been a romantic, rustic home had soon turned into something chronically annoying.

Faith was right to work hard. She was always right. Who was I to complain when all she wanted was to make our lives easier? I fingered the anniversary present around my neck and felt a pang of guilt. I loved her so much, it hurt to be apart, but I would be okay. There was plenty for me to concentrate on here. Maybe it was as good a chance as any to catch up on work from home. At least we had the latest

computer equipment at home; Faith's overtime certainly helped on that account.

Suddenly, I couldn't wait for her to arrive wherever she was headed, so I could call and make it up to her.

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ACROSS THE POND

BY CHERI CRYSTAL

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