

THREE CUPS

CHAPTER ONE

Wands

Beginnings. Communication. Passion. Fire.
Action. Movement. Sense of self. Energy.
Interactions. Awakening.

Sophia eyed the deck. "So, this is them."

A deck of tarot cards rested squarely in the middle of the kitchen table

Jilly nodded. "Yup. That's them."

The two friends stared at the cards. A kitchen light hung low over the tabletop, casting off such a focused beam the deck appeared to be glowing.

Yanking three wine glasses from the kitchen cabinet, Kate called over to Jilly. "And you've done it before, right?"

"Well, my sister's done it for me," Jilly answered. "And my church had a workshop day on it. Alternative Methods of Accessing Your Spirituality."

Kate joined them at the table and shot Jilly a look. "Could your church possibly get more New Age?"

"You should come," Jilly replied.

"God's everywhere, right?" Kate asked.

"Absolutely," Jilly stated.

"So if I don't go to church, he'll still track me down," she said, a wicked look in her eye.

"Yeah," Sophia muttered. "But it might take him a few minutes."

"Good!" Kate said. "Then he'll miss me hanging out with the crazy women who want me to read tarot cards with them. I mean, we all know this is completely ridiculous, right? I just want to be sure we know that. We aren't going to figure out our destiny sitting around a kitchen table, reading a few tarot cards. This can't possibly, really work."

"Come on, Kate, don't you want to see your future?" Sophia said.

"Future, my ass. It's today that keeps causing me trouble," Kate said. "I mean, listen to the girls down there. God knows what kind of plot they're hatching."

Sophia grinned. "I never thought I'd see the day. Kate...scared."

"Scared?" Kate cracked. "Terrified. I'd rather face a dozen ace attorneys than a couple of eight-year-old girls scheming in a basement playroom. Sophia, thank god you didn't bring Jackie. At least we got 'em outnumbered."

Jilly pushed her bangs back and straightened up. "Okay, listen. Each card represents an emotion of concept or, well, theme that can happen in your life. Jung says--"

Both Sophia and Kate groaned loudly at the mention of Jung.

"This isn't a psychology, therapist thing?" Sophia asked. "Like that test...rickshaw?"

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Rorschach,” Jilly corrected her.

Kate barked a laugh. “I like rickshaw.”

Unfazed, Jilly continued. “Jung says that there are universal themes, archetypes present in every culture, in everyone’s consciousness. The tarot reveals-” Kate interrupted with a snort but Jilly plowed on, shooting Kate a wicked glare. “The tarot reveals, Miss Piggy, the themes currently at play in the questioner’s...the person asking...you know...their life.”

Jilly and Kate embarked on a rousing, good-natured argument about the importance of critical thought over emotion as Sophia poked at the cards. Slightly larger than traditional playing cards and decorated with a pattern of stars of varying shapes scattered on a deep blue background, the crisp, white border framing the outer edge seemed to be holding the stars within a pre-ordained boundary.

Kate was expertly uncorking a bottle of pinot noir in the brightly lit kitchen. Outside dense clouds hanging low in the afternoon sky warned of an impending spring storm.

Kate had intentionally decorated her entire house to be a perfect reflection of her public persona. The up-to-date, almost state-of-the-art kitchen the three friends were gathered in opened into the family room, all shiny black, gray and silver accents, with the television discreetly tucked into a large cabinet. Modern, long lined furniture of excellent quality was precisely arranged throughout the Midwest suburban house.

The kitchen table was the only thing that didn’t seem to fit. Fashioned out of rough-hewn wood that had been retrieved and restored from an old barn or farmhouse, it stood like a relic from an earlier time, almost a museum piece, in the center of the kitchen. Jilly had commented that it looked like “Laura Ingalls Wilder does Mies Van De Rohe.”

Penetrating the wall of windows, the growing darkness seemed to creep across the marble countertop, making the wine that Kate began to pour appear almost black in the crystal goblets. Then, saying, “Sorry about this, Soph, but I’m out of Sprite,” she pulled a juice box out of the refrigerator, poked a hole in the top and squeezed the apple juice into the last goblet. She passed out the glasses and they all leaned towards each other, clinking rims.

“To Play Doh and Happy Meals,” they said.

The warm, jammy wine pricked Kate’s senses. She was touched with the familiar sensation, an easy awareness of the slightly overheated air on her skin as the fragrance of the wine mingling with a faint whiff of Desitin, the rich, smooth flavor of the wine tingling lightly against her throat as she swallowed.

Kate looked at her two closest friends. She was well aware that the contrast between the three of them couldn’t be more pronounced.

Sophia, eight months pregnant and belly bulging in front of her small boned, petite frame looked, as Kate recently commented, “Like a knocked up Irish elf.” Her red hair, soft and fine, floated around her face and shoulders like a cape. A few haphazard freckles were scattered across her nose and her eyes, clean green untouched by any shade of gray or hint of blue, observed the world with caution. The top row of her teeth was misaligned, crowded into her mouth as though the teeth were elbowing each other for more space. Her hands were the only part of her body that didn’t seem to fit the package. While everything else about Sophia was petite and almost fragile, her hands possessed long expressive fingers, nearly elegant in their proportion. When she laid them on her stomach, which was now so swollen it jutted out shelf-like, they spanned close to the

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

entire girth. Her manner was measured and when she spoke it was as though she was carefully pre-choosing each word. With Kate's strong features, sleek hair and long muscular body, Sophia still occasionally made her feel like a cross between a female impersonator and a linebacker.

Thankfully, Jilly provided Kate's ego a lovely counterpoint. Jilly, who seemed to live in a semi-permanent state of disarray, always made Kate feel pulled together and stylish by comparison. Jilly's uniform of choice was jeans and sweatshirts. Her brown hair was pulled back, sometimes successfully, in a ponytail that flopped around her head like it was desperately trying to break free. Her bangs, half curly, half straight, danced across her wide forehead like a poorly rehearsed Rockettes kick line. But the eyes that stared out from under the disheveled hair were steady and clear. Kate knew that not much got by those eyes.

"So, come on. Let's get this show on the road." Kate grabbed a card and held it up. "Okay, what's this theme? It's a picture of a guy...actually a knight, charging ahead with a sword in his hand."

Jilly began furiously leafing through a book and settled on a page. "Here it is...okay. 'The Knight of Swords represents a young, smart person charging forth with adamant opinions even though he or she-'" She paused and pointedly looked at Kate, repeating, "'Or she doesn't really know what they are talking about.'"

She handed the opened book to Kate. "I swear that's exactly what it says," Jilly said, eyes wide. She then glanced at Sophia and they both began to snicker.

Kate smiled at both of them. "Have you both always been this bitchy?"

Jilly and Sophia looked at each other and, after a brief moment of feigned deep thought, they nodded furiously. Kate, rolling her eyes, said, "I thought so. Just checking."

"Ever since that first, auspicious day at Tiny Tots Park," Jilly said.

"How many lives are forever altered by the dinosaur sandbox, I wonder?" Kate said as the three women simultaneously lifted their glasses to take another sip.

As they drank, the wind suddenly stilled and a loud silence hammered against their ears.

Watching Kate sip, a critical arch to her dark eyebrow, Jilly thought, Kate's just so damn...big city attorney; wine snob sophisticate entrenched in the boring old suburbs. And all that great black, curly hair. Why she insists on blow-drying it into submission I'll never understand. She's intimidating in jeans and a sweater. When she's in full armor of suit and heels, she must strike doubt and fear into the hearts of every judge and lawyer she comes across. No wonder she can bill so much. Yet here she is, hanging out with me. I like that Kate the sophisticate likes frumpy, old easy-going me. Is that somehow unchristian? Jilly wondered. Is that vanity? And Sophia too. Boy, look at her, ready to pop out a baby. She's huge, irritable and still looks like a serene, modern Madonna. Sophia the Madonna and Kate the Tough Broad. Yup, it is vanity. I like being part of this little crowd. They have absolutely no problem understanding that not every Christian is a right-wing fundamentalist. That I can love Christ and still be liberal, still try tarot cards or eat organic foods or just...be open to life. They make me feel sophisticated and serene by association.

Yup, I am vain. Shoot, gotta work on that.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Shrieks erupted from the basement; the freezer spat out a rattle and in the distance a crack of lightning caused the three women to jump. Kate choked on her wine as Sophia and Jilly broke into giggles.

“Oh my god. That lightening strike almost made me pee my pants,” Sophia gasped.

Coughing and sputtered, Kate remarked, “Eight months pregnant, breathing makes you pee your pants,” as she wiped wine from her chin.

“True,” Sophia nodded as Kate strode to the basement door, yanked it open and yelled down the stairs, “You girls are getting way too wild. What’s all the yelling for?”

The shrieks stopped mid-breath. A “nothing, Mom,” floated sweetly up the steps.

“Good,” Kate shot back. “Then stop yelling!” She slammed the door shut.

The yelling resumed.

“Ah. The sweet sound of chaos that’s not directly in front of me,” Kate commented, settling back in at the table.

“It’s not chaos, Kate,” Jilly said. “It’s a very organized ritual. The infamous playdate. So let’s get started. Who wants to go first?”

Feet were heard pounding up the basement stairs; the door flew open and Jilly’s daughter, Haley, appeared. A nine year old, with a disheveled ponytail and brown eyes identical to her mother’s, she was wearing a bejeweled tiara, purple boa and carried a wand.

“Hey honey,” Jilly said. Haley ignored her mother with the arrogance of a child that knows she is well loved and went to Kate.

“I was sent up for juice boxes,” Haley said.

“Oh, so Queen Bridget sent you to do her bidding,” Kate said.

Haley reared her head up even higher. “Hey, check out the crown! I’m queen of my land, she’s queen of hers and the couch is the moat.”

“Excellent arrangement. But you ever hear of Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth?” Kate asked, gesturing Haley over to the refrigerator.

“Are they on MTV?” Haley asked and then spied Sophia. “Where’s Jackie?” she demanded with a regal authority befitting her crown.

Apologetically Sophia replied, “My sister’s. Sorry.”

Haley sighed “Okay,” clearly exasperated at the madness of it all, and made her way to the refrigerator and reached in it. Without looking, she grabbed two juice boxes and headed back downstairs, boa trailing behind her.

Jilly grabbed the basement door that was flying shut. “Say thank you!” she yelled to the descending Haley.

A nonchalant “thank you” made its way up the stairs.

“And remember, we’re picking up your baby brother from Grandma’s before we go home,” Jilly added and muttered, “That kid,” as she shut the door.

“Oh, she’s great, Jilly,” Sophia said. “Smart, funny and kind. Like her mommy.”

“Nope. Like her daddy. He’s the patient, kind, funny one,” Jilly said. “I feel like I’m yelling constantly. I mean, constantly. I’m the Queen of Darkness and Punishment. ‘No, Haley. No, you can’t. No, stop that. No, don’t go there. No, no, no.’ Jim is great. He’s the King of Nice. I’m just the boring, ever-present, arm of might.”

Sophia picked up the pink wand Haley had left behind and fiddled with it, shaking it to make the glitter in the long handle dance.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Well, Jilly,” Sophia began, her words measured. “Have you ever considered that since he’s always on his crusades for his corporate stuff, he can afford to be nice? The King of Nice, he makes you his enforcer by...um...what’s the word...something with an ‘a’?” Sophia tapped the wand on the table, searching for the phrase.

Kate offered, “Abdicating his throne?”

“No. No. He doesn’t abdicate,” Jilly protested. “He’s the king of the castle.”

“Just an absent king. You’re the one that’s gotta face the serfs and collect the fucking taxes,” said Kate. Turning to Sophia, she continued. “And how’s your royal pain in the ass...I mean, how’s the king of your castle? Excited about the prospects of a male heir? God, men get so weird about the name thing. Not only do they expect us to change our last name but then they get completely tangled up with the ‘passing on my name and my line nonsense.’ Like the world is waiting with bated breath, hoping and praying that the fruit of their loins will insure the continued existence of their realm, which extends from Expressway Exit 128 to the Target parking lot. What do they think? That their royal bloodline of the house of Court of Queens’ Way subdivision in the county of...what? What?” Kate stopped cold.

Sophia and Jilly had broken into poorly suppressed laughter.

“Preparing for a closing statement this week, Kate?” Jilly asked, eyes dancing.

“Yes. Why?” Kate demanded. Still shaking with laughter, Jilly shook her head innocently.

Kate turned her glare on Sophia.

Sophia, biting her lip, eventually said, “Well, Kate, you kind of get in this...mood when you’re doing a trial. And, well...you sort of...well, you start making speeches.”

“No, I don’t!” Kate protested.

“Yeah, you do,” Sophia said. “But good ones! Really. Remember, that trial around January? During that one, you kept ranting about the mayor and that park district thing. Getting fresh wood chips in the playground. It was great. You did a seven-minute speech one time. Seven minutes. On wood chips.”

Jilly, nodding gleefully, chimed in. “We timed you!”

Kate cast a cool eye over her friends. “It’s called a closing argument. An opening statement and closing argument. Not a closing statement.”

Their insincere apologies rang out.

“Oh my god! So sorry.”

“Of course! A closing ARGUMENT!”

“How could we forget?”

“Jilly, you fool, it’s called an opening statement!”

Kate smiled at her friends with a broad, crooked grin that was rarely seen on her composed face, its slight tilt giving her face an unexpectedly goofy, almost silly expression. The warmth of being teased by those who have paid attention enough to be able to do it really well spread into her bones.

“Too late. You both clearly lost your senses years ago,” said Kate. “So let’s do this. This absurd tarot thing. Who’s first? You go, Jilly.”

Jilly shook her head. “Oh no. You go.”

Sophia began looking at the pictures on the cards, her long fingers fanning them across the table. She held one up for Jilly and Kate to see. “This is pretty. I like this one. Doesn’t he look happy and...carefree?”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Kate peered at the card. “Soph, it’s an obviously delusional man, probably a client of Jilly’s, jumping off a cliff.”

“No, it’s not! He’s not-” Sophia said, looking at the card in alarm.

Kate patted her hand. “Yeah, he is.”

“Oh my god,” Sophia said. “You’re right. Poor guy.”

Jilly scanned one of the tarot books and said, “It’s the Fool. The card is the Fool...and, Kate, my clients don’t jump off cliffs, thank you very much.”

Oddly worried, Sophia examined the card. “Is anyone at the bottom of the picture? No. Wow. Who’s going to catch him, you think?”

“Maybe he’s got a parachute in that dandy little knapsack of his?” Kate offered. “Or perhaps he’s into extreme sports?”

“Maybe he’s got a friend that’s going to catch him,” Sophia finally said, fingers gently working the card back into the deck.

“God will catch him,” Jilly stated firmly.

Kate looked at Jilly. “You put a lot of stock in this God guy, you know, Jilly? I’ve always heard he moves in mysterious ways. You’ve gotta introduce me sometime.”

Jilly threw her arms up in the air and posed, one of the tarot books in hand. “You’re looking at his mysterious way, baby.”

“Maybe he’ll just land on his feet,” Sophia said hopefully.

Sophia watched as Kate and Jilly initiated their verbal joust, Kate, the skeptic and Jilly, the believer.

Oh boy, they’re getting into the God versus science routine, Sophia thought. I love this. They are so different but...so...not different. A passion for compassion. Pretty soon, Kate will do her ‘eye for an eye’ riff and Jilly will start making her deal. The ‘try one, just one, church service and I’ll give you three nights of babysitting’ deal. They’re so...alive. Smart and alive and don’t take any crap from anybody. Wish I was like that. So full of me that no one could rattle my foundation. Jilly has her faith. Kate has her brain. What do I have?

As Jilly and Kate continued their verbal joust, Sophia fiddled with the cards, gathering them back into a neat stack and then pushing against it. She watched them slide onto the rough, dark surface of the table. The clean white edges of the new deck came to rest in a sloping hill against the table, separating as they came in contact with the pitted wood. The cards shimmered under the glow of the overhead light.

If I picked one up, what would it tell me? Sophia thought. The small baby in her belly suddenly executed a turbulent roll. A wave of sensation passed down from the top of her bulging stomach, around towards her ribs and came to a stop where hip meets groin. Kate’s voice broke into her thoughts as the thought danced across Sophia’s mind that, somehow, she was being nudged into action.

“You are the Monte Hall of Christianity! What would Jesus think?”

“Three nights,” Jilly said. “That’s almost nine hours of watching Bridget for one measly little hour Sunday morning. It just centers you. Gives you an hour of peace and community. Prayer is just a fancy word for-”

“Meditation. I know,” Kate groaned. “And I hate meditation. Hate it. If I want to reflect on inner truth, give me a martini and a sunset. Now, come on, Sophia, shuffle. Jilly’s getting her cult face on again. Oh, you are shuffling. Good.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia smiled at Kate as she gestured for Jilly to open a book. “Come on, Jilly, you promised answers. Get moving.”

Slowly turning pages, eyes on the book, Jilly stalled. In that moment, she summoned the voice inside her chest, the words around her heart that she saved only for prayer.

Please God, send Sophia the strength and guidance she needs. She is so full of heart and she makes me feel...always okay. Like you do. Like a good prayer. A true friend is like a good prayer. I am lost how to help her. Her marriage...her husband...she’s in trouble. But I know in my bones, through you, the answer will come. Please help my friend. Show her the clear path. I am so scared for her. Please help my friend. Please help my friend.

“Hey,” Kate said. “Read, Jilly.”

“Sorry,” Jilly muttered and began to read aloud as the cards whirled in Sophia’s hands. “Okay, guys, listen... ‘Can be a compass to guide you along the map of your inner landscape. Like a true and honest friend, the tarot can act as a signpost pointing you to the path of your destiny, but it is only a guide, a tool. You have to make the journey yourself.’”

“Sorta like that Jesus guy you keep talking about?” Kate cracked.

“Exactly like that Jesus guy,” Jilly replied. “My goodness, someone’s been paying attention.”

“But what do I do?” said Sophia. “I need to know what to do.” She polished off the final drops of her apple juice with gusto worthy of the finest chardonnay.

“We still all know this is ridiculous, right?” Kate said, squeezing the contents of another juice box into Sophia’s glass.

Sophia said, “I have an eight-year-old, a second mortgage, I’m so pregnant it isn’t even funny, my husband hates his job and I’ve lost my identity somewhere between the minivan and the mall. That’s ridiculous.”

Jilly looked up from the book. “When you’re done shuffling you’ll then turn over five cards, one by one, and lay them down, face up, on the table.”

“Come on, tarot!” Kate began cheering. “Give us a good one. Come on; lay those cards out, Soph. You need a good lay, right?”

Sophia splayed her hands across her bulging belly, stretched to its’ utmost limit. “Are you kidding? Getting laid got me into this mess anyway.”

Kate merely grinned as she settled back down in her chair, sticking her long legs under the table. Vigilant after a lifelong history of inadvertently kicking people when she sat or stretched her legs, Kate usually performed this move with caution, automatically glancing underneath tables to spy the lay of the land. But with Sophia and Jilly, parameters of seating were long established. She could, and did, move with the comfortable ease of familiarity. She and her legs were free.

“My father would die if he saw me doing this,” Kate said. “Three generations of attorneys and scientists and I’m playing tarot cards with the neighborhood coven.”

Sophia closed her eyes as she shuffled. “Shhh. A coven takes thirteen.”

Kate looked at Sophia. “It really scares me that you know that.”

Sophia, eyes still shut, smiled.

Jilly leaned in. “Kate, suspend that lawyer’s empirical mind, let God guide you and open up to the flow-”

“Chaos,” Kate muttered loudly.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Whatever,” Jilly continued. “You’ll be great at this. You’ve always been good at seeing the big picture. That’s why you’re such a wonderful lawyer.”

Kate groaned in mock exasperation. “Oh, don’t do that warm, fuzzy therapist number on me!”

“Did it work?” Jilly asked.

“Absolutely. No one else is nice to me. Come on, Sophia. My aura’s mutating and my charkas are jamming up.”

Sophia slapped the shuffled deck down on the table and Jilly gestured for her to turn over the first card. “Good, Soph. Okay. The first card will be, um, you. It represents you.”

Here we go, thought Jilly.

Sophia turned over the first card.

“Okay. Your first card is the Empress. You are the Empress,” Jilly said.

“But she’s upside-down. Should I turn it right-side up?” Sophia said as she tilted her head to look at the card, reaching over to straighten it.

“No!” Jilly said. “If it came up that way, you have to leave it like that. You are the Empress, but reversed.”

The image of a calm, serene woman gazed out from the card. In the background a thick forest made up of lush, green trees, appeared to dance in a gentle breeze. In the foreground resided the Empress. Planted solidly on what could only be described as a historical version of a Barcolounger, she wore a long, flowing robe that draped over her generous figure and puddled at her feet. Vibrant colors saturated the picture; a glaring yellow sky seemed to flood the card with sunshine, and pillows of red, black and gold cushioning the woman’s body.

Jilly said, “Reversed. It’s called reversed. When the Empress is reversed...hold on...let me find the page.”

Sophia reached across the table and dragged the card over to her so she could see it better. A crown of stars appeared to hover above the woman’s head and a golden scepter was raised high in one hand.

Sophia replaced the card, saying, “It looks like she’s all tangled up in her robes from this angle. From the upside down angle.”

Jilly looked up from the book. “The book says when this card is reversed it represents the dark side of motherhood.”

Kate barked out a loud laugh. “Well, hell, I could have told you that. Shit, Soph, you’re eight months pregnant.”

Sophia nodded and merely said, “Keep reading.”

Jilly continued. “Okay. Um... ‘Being burnt-out. Overgiving. Lacking in empathy or losing your perspective, especially regarding one’s home or emotions. Can indicate codependency.’” She stopped reading. After a moment, Jilly looked up at Sophia.

“Um...that’s what the book says.”

Why can’t she just say “drunk”? Kate thought. I suppose “co-dependant” is better. More user-friendly maybe. Anything to get her to leave the pathetic asshole. God knows, Soph must know what I think by now. Maybe this was the point of the whole thing? This tarot card thing. Jilly getting Sophia to dump him. Have the cards tell her to do it! That’s it. Good, Jilly, good. Brilliant in fact.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia was just nodding and staring at her hands. She spun her wedding ring around, wiggled it and finally said, "I hate it when my fingers swell up. I'm always afraid they're going to have to cut my ring off."

The basement door suddenly flew open and Kate's daughter Bridget charged into the room. She jumped up on the arm of Kate's chair and leaned into her, balancing her long thin legs off the floor as she talked.

"Mom! Mom! Haley wants to sleep over tonight. Can she? Please?" Balancing her weight on the arm of the chair, Bridget's legs waved like awkward toothpicks caught in a tornado.

"Honey, you're going to break the chair," Kate said, pushing Bridget's black curly hair out of her face. Bridget ignored her and looked to Jilly, legs still flailing.

"Bridget, I'm sorry," Jilly said. "But we have to go soon. Haley's daddy is coming home soon and I still have to get Jim Jr. from his Grandmother's, but you could do a sleepover sometime soon. How about this next weekend? If it's okay with your--"

"Mom?" Bridget implored, dropping off the arm of the chair and flinging herself to her knees in front of Kate.

"I'd have to check with your dad. It's his weekend. Maybe we could work something out.

"Jackie too?" she asked.

"Yes," Kate said without even checking with Sophia, knowing any excuse to be childfree for a night was a blessing. "But don't count on it," Kate finished.

Bridget groaned dramatically and rolled her eyes. "Fine. Whatever. Can we go outside at least?"

"Now?" Kate cried. "It's pouring rain. No!"

Bridget looked to the heavens, silently imploring for someone to understand her. She sighed deeply, gathered herself, thrust her hip out and achieved barely-tolerant calm. "But Mother, I want to see how everything responds to weather changes. The environment and everything...I mean, it's spring. Nature and stuff. Plants, bugs and animals." She included Sophia and Jilly in her realm of explanation. "We're studying the environment in school. I've gotten three excellents and a superb."

Jilly and Sophia heaped Bridget with the required and expected praise and congratulations as Kate slapped two bananas into her daughter's hand. "Here, go."

Standing face-to-face with her mother, Bridget, her dark curly hair shooting out in all possible directions and long limbs in constant movement, appeared to be a physical manifestation of Kate's active, analytical mind and quick wit. In contrast, Kate, dark hair smooth, body still but always a little tense, stood as a monument to mind over matter.

Their eyes met.

Bridget declared "Bananas?" voice dripping with scorn.

"Yes. Go. We're conjuring here. Go read each other's palms or something." Kate, ignoring Bridget's exasperated sigh, poured herself and Jilly another splash of wine.

"Can I take more juice boxes?" Bridget negotiated.

"Yes," Kate responded, waiting.

Bridget took the plunge. "Cookies?"

"No. Now, go," Kate said without pause, turning back to the table as Bridget removed two juice boxes from the refrigerator and, surreptitiously, grabbed a large bag of Oreos.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“We’ll be done soon,” Kate added as Bridget, arms full, smoothly glided out and down the basement steps, a faint “Okay” drifting up behind her.

After the latch on the basement door softly clicked, Kate, grinning, looked up at her friends. “How’s that for Empress reversed? Did I not just completely ignore the Oreos heist?”

“Well done, my passionate friend,” Jilly acknowledged.

“She’s turning out great, Kate,” said Sophia.

Kate merely groaned. “Just try keeping her inside to study everyday. Every excuse in the book. The book she won’t open. Don’t get me started. Okay, what’s the next one?”

“The next card is my...my current situation, right?” Sophia said.

“Right,” said Jilly.

Sophia carefully turned over the next card.

“It’s the Five of Swords,” Jilly said.

The dark storm clouds on the card mirrored the bleak, gray sky outside the kitchen window. The scene was a battlefield, post-conflict. Of the five figures on the card, four were turned away. It was unclear whether they were simply departing the field of battle or grieving the fight’s loss. Their swords lay abandoned on the ground. The sole remaining person, young, ill clad for the weather and being buffeted by a harsh wind, stood alone, clutching the last remaining swords.

Kate began flipping through another tarot books and settled on a page. “Got it.”

“Well?” said Sophia.

“Oh. Alright...um...” Kate began to read. ““Five of Swords is giving up. Departing from a situation that you can have no impact on. Accepting defeat. Loss. Resigning yourself to the inevitable. Surrender. Walking away. Seeing a defeat for what it truly is.””

A dark but lovely coincidence. Couldn’t have put it better myself, Kate thought as she closed the book with a snap, saying aloud, “Oh well, isn’t that depressing.”

“Actually, not so much,” Sophia said. “We both, recently, I mean Edward and me-”

Kate and Jilly sat, watching her.

Sophia nodded. “We both have just sort of walked away,” she said. Staring at the card, Sophia noticed that the glow emanating from the light over the table appeared to be growing even more brilliant in contrast to the dark sky outside the kitchen window. “It’s right. The card, the storm, everything. What’s next, Jilly?”

“Obstacle.”

Sophia turned over the next card. “Okay. My obstacle card is...um...it’s King of Cups and he’s upside...I mean, reversed.”

“What are the cups?” Kate asked. “They represent something, right?”

“Emotion. Love. Artistic mastery. Fluid emotion,” said Jilly.

“And, so far, the first three out of five of mine are reversed,” said Sophia. “I mean, the picture’s...upside down. What does that mean again?”

Jilly said, “It is sort of...I’m still figuring it all out...but I think it’s sort of the meaning of the card but on it’s head. Distorted. Not the opposite but more...a perversion of the true meaning.”

Kate looked at Sophia’s cards. “Kind of like the card’s having a bad hair day?”

Without hesitation, they all leaned back in their chairs and simultaneously, in observance of long-standing ritual, fluffed their hair and then resumed their positions.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“God, I hate my hair,” Jilly said as she pushed her bangs out of her eyes. “Kate, why the heck do you blow dry yours when you have those amazing curls—“

“Oh, please. Don’t start,” Kate moaned.

“It’s a crime. A follicle crime,” finished Jilly.

“That sweatshirt is a crime,” Kate shot back.

“You’re both right,” Sophia said. “Kate, you have great hair. And Jilly, that sweatshirt is totally rank and disgusting. Now, read my card!”

“Hey. Jim got me this sweatshirt,” Jilly protested.

“Bullshit,” Kate countered. “You got that thing in the Wal-Mart men’s department, like the rest of your clothes.”

“It was on sale.”

Sophia raised her hand. “Helloooo. Me! My card! Geez.”

“Sorry,” said Jilly. “Sorry. Okay...um.... obstacle. Got it...” She located the proper place on the page. ““The King of Cups is mastery of one’s emotions and craft, usually a craft in the arts. While exposed to or even possessing of great depth of emotion or love, the King of Cups remains balanced, open and loving. Passionate, he loves himself and others from a place of clarity, forgiving weakness and flaws in self and those that he loves. Possessing high self esteem, yet not selfish, he is the moral heart of his kingdom.””

“But my king is reversed,” Sophia said.

Jilly nodded.

Sophia continued. “So, from what you’ve said, it’s all those qualities, but turned on their ear. The bad side of passion. Not open. Selfish or weak.”

“Or maybe just unforgiving?” suggested Jilly. “Unforgiving of everyone around him.”

“So, does this mean I’m unforgiving?” Sophia said.

Jilly looked at her steadily. “I think that maybe there’s someone around you that...has these qualities and they are your obstacle.”

Fiddling with her wine glass and looking down, Kate said, “So, Soph, who do you think this could be?”

Sophia stared at the card. “Edward’s boss, maybe. It’s been hell at work. They were supposed to get this contract and they didn’t and so he said...well, you know.”

Kate and Jilly glanced at each other as Jilly said, “Yeah, I guess it could be him. Edward’s boss. Maybe.”

Kate nodded. “Sure. Maybe. I gotta admit, Jilly, these are interesting. I mean, the pictures on them,” she said, reaching over to pick up the card, then quickly pulling her hand back. “Hey, Jilly, I can touch the card, right? It’s not going to shock me or anything? No lightning bolt from the sky going to get me? Wrath of God won’t send me to hell?”

“Do you talk to judges like this?” Jilly asked.

“Absolutely,” replied Kate, picking up the card. “Well, Soph, the good news is he’s pretty good looking. And he’s a king, so he obviously has a job. His throne looks solid and he’s got a groovy scepter in one hand and a cup in another.” Kate peered more closely at the card. “But he’s floating on some pretty rough seas. If he’s not careful that cup’s going to...” Kate stopped and then took a long swig from her glass. “Thought maybe I should empty my cup after seeing his...cup,” was all Kate said as she placed her now-empty wine glass down.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia looked at the card one more time and merely said, "Maybe it's not his boss." She grabbed Haley's wand and began tapping it against the table. "So, what's the next one?"

"Best course of action," Jilly replied. She and Kate watched Sophia for a minute. "Um...Soph, turn the next card over," Jilly finally said.

"Oh! Sorry." Sophia reached over to the deck.

Seeing the card, Kate commented dryly, "Well, at least you get to sit down."

Sophia just looked at Jilly. "So?"

"Wait. It's the guy sitting down, holding onto the big coin, right? Okay, okay, here it is," Jilly arrived at the page and settled back in her chair. "Four of Pentacles--"

"Okay, wait." Kate said. "What the hell are pentacles? I mean, I know what they are, you evil witches you, but they represent something, don't they?"

Jilly sat up, eager to teach. "Yes. There are four suits, just like a regular deck of cards. Like I said, cups are emotion, love. Pentacles are earthly things. Physical. Practical." She turned to the beginning of the tarot book as she spoke, scanned it for a moment and then continued. "Yeah. I'm right. Pentacles are sort of the 'stuff' of the everyday...you know...your car, your job, money, paying the rent--"

"Paying your mortgage," Sophia suggested.

"Exactly," Jilly said. "Swords are intellect, the mind. The unvarnished truth."

"What's the last suit?" Kate demanded. "There should be one more."

Sophia playfully began smacking Kate on the head with the pink wand, making the glitter encased in the long handle dance. "Wands," Sophia said with a grin.

"Hey! Watch it, young lady," Kate cried.

The neon pink, jewel encrusted top of the scepter got tangled in Kate's sleek bob as she tried to grab it from Sophia's hand. Kate successfully snatched it away and then tried to untangle it from the crown of her head, exclaiming in mock rage, "Hey, what's the big idea?"

"Sorry," said Sophia, leaning in to help her untangle. "You were just looking way too perfect."

"That's it, by the way, Kate," Jilly said. "Wands are big ideas. See, Kate, I knew you would be good at this. Wands are the burst of a magnificent, life transforming idea. The seeds of change sprouting out of the earth so that they can be realized. A passion recognized."

Kate, hair now liberated from the wands' clutches, retorted, "I'll recognize your passion," and slid the wand back into the middle of the table, but not before smacking Sophia a couple of times on the head with it, a punishment Sophia accepted with smiling serenity. The wand, rolling to a bumpy stop near the cards, almost knocked the last card off the edge of the table. Both Jilly and Sophia splayed their hands across the cards to protect them, Sophia yelping, "Hey! I'm still figuring out my future. Keep an eye on your passion."

"Keep an eye on yours," countered Kate.

"Alright girls, let's settle down," said Jilly. "Soph needs us. Where were we? Best course of action, right? Okay, and you got...um--"

"Four of Pentacles. That guy sitting down, holding onto his money," Sophia said.

"Are you sure he's not grabbing his passion?" Kate commented.

"Cute, Kate," remarked Sophia, motioning for Jilly to start reading.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Here we go,” Jilly said. “All right...found the page...Four of Pentacles. ‘Hanging on to what you have. Playing it safe. Don’t make any radical changes. It is time to fortify your position but with the awareness that no material object can ever protect you from the unpredictable nature of life.’”

The three women sat in silence for a moment. The rain lashing against the window, Sophia’s slender fingers enveloped the baby brewing in her belly as she commented, “So, I guess this means I should probably balance the checkbook.”

“Lock your car,” suggested Kate.

“Stock up the fridge,” Jilly added.

“Hide more money from Ed.” Startled her own words, Sophia continued. “I mean...sometimes...I’ve learned that it’s good to have some extra money set aside for...in case...you know.” She looked down at her belly, in either embarrassment or a reflexive act of protection. Probably both.

Kate and Jilly merely nodded, saying “Good” in unison. Sophia peeked up at her friends, allowing a small smile to poke out from behind her red hair, silently acknowledging their knowledge of the state of her marriage as the rain continued its steady, relentless deluge outside.

“So, what’s next?” Sophia said as she revealed her final card. “Outcome, right?”

“It’s the Tower,” said Kate.

“The Tower,” Jilly echoed, already intently reading.

I wonder if I was in this much trouble, if I would see it? Jilly thought, eyes scanning the page, words and images floating up to her. Yikes. Destruction. Radical change. God sending down a lightning bolt of events to facilitate insight. Boy, did a therapist write this thing? Breaking out of a psychic prison. God, let Sophia see this. See her truth. See the path she needs to walk. But would I? If Jim was an alcoholic, would I see it? Of course I would! And he doesn’t really drink. Food, yes. But alcohol? To him, alcohol’s merely that wet stuff between bites. I wonder if he started that gym pass thing at the hotel chain?

“Reversed,” Kate added, breaking into Jilly’s thoughts with a “wake up, girl” expression in her eyes.

“Sorry,” said Jilly. “Yeah, it’s reversed.”

Sophia, having already located the description in her book, silently read the passage and looked up. “Buried anger,” she said. “Reversed, my outcome is anger...buried.” Sophia continued, flatly reading aloud, “Ignoring the flash of revelation. Avoiding the explosive, life altering insight. Dodging the truth. Now may not be the time to change your life. Change is coming but it may be appropriate to wait.”

“Sophia-“ began Jilly.

“So I will!” Sophia stopped her with a smile. “I’ll wait.” She then gathered the deck together and plopped it down in front of Kate.

“Your turn.”

* * *

“So, will I see Daddy at all before I go to bed?” Jackie looked up from her pancakes.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

The rain pounded the house with a steady beat that was somehow both comforting and unsettling.

Sophia, Jilly and Haley had all left Kate's at the same time, huddling underneath Jilly's umbrella as Jilly deposited Sophia at her car. Driving through the rain to Noelle's apartment, the storm felt like quite the appropriate metaphor as images of tangled Empresses, buried towers and lost battles bounced around in Sophia's head.

After driving across town, collecting Jackie (and noting that Noelle's hair had changed color again. To Sophia it looked like bright aqua although Noelle called it "Urban Velvet"), they had finally gotten home.

Edward, of course, wasn't there. Message on the machine. Late meeting.

Sophia flipped the next pancake in the skillet and watched the circumference bubble and puff. Pancakes had become the defacto meal standard whenever Edward wasn't coming home for dinner. The routine had become so established that whenever Jackie saw the syrup bottle on the table, she no longer even asked.

Sophia kept her eyes on the pancake, watching the moist batter rise. She was waiting for that telltale moment. If she flipped the pancake too soon, the edges would be cooked but the center would be too gooey. Wait too long and the pancake would be tough and leathery. Once you got that pancake into the frying pan, timing was everything.

Her mother had started this. This pancakes-for-dinner routine. Calling from the bar or some party or wherever she landed, she would tell Sophia, "Um...I dunno. Maybe you could make pancakes for you and Noelle maybe. There's always that box batter stuff. Make that." At least there was always that. Pancakes. The kitchen would have nothing. No peanut butter. No cheese. No bread. But somehow, her mother would always make sure there were pancake fixin's.

"Mom!" Jackie barked. "Did you hear me?"

"I don't know, honey," said Sophia, flipping the pancake over, observing with satisfaction the nicely browned top of the pancake rising evenly. "He said 'late.' You want another one?"

Slumped, shoveling pancakes in her mouth, Jackie nodded. Eight years old, she had her father's dark curly hair and dark brows but she had Sophia's eyes. And her teeth.

"You've got the orthodontist Saturday, remember?" Sophia reminded Jacqueline. "He's got to tighten."

Jackie grimaced and nodded again as she stuffed another bite of pancake into her mouth, muttering, "Stupid dentist. I hate the dentist."

Sophia ran her tongue over her crooked teeth. She would still press her tongue against the one tooth that always jutted into the roof of her mouth, crowded and shoved aside by the rest of her teeth. She never succeeded in budging it but she still tried. Noelle was the only one who could make her feel better about her teeth. Thumbs on the front of her two buck teeth, Noelle would say, "Look, poor man's braces," as she tried to push front teeth back into line. They would joke that between the two of them, they had almost one good set of teeth. When they got older and Noelle began dating, Sophia would "lend" Noelle her teeth, saying, "Hell, Noelle, take 'em. I'm not using them."

And now Jackie was bitching about her braces.

Sophia slapped the last pancake onto Jackie's plate, snapping, "Yes, you are going to the orthodontist on Saturday, I don't know when your dad's going to be home and this is the last pancake. Eat, then brush, then get to bed."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Jackie said.

Now I’m feeling guilty, Sophia thought. Damn. I can’t win. Is this that Empress reversed thing those cards were talking about? This guilty mother, short-temper thing? Make amends. Have a nice conversation. I didn’t have nice conversations with my mother over the dinner table but Jackie can. That is, if I can stop snapping at her.

“So, how was Aunt Noelle’s? Did you have fun?”

“Yeah. She made me do my homework like you told her to. She let me try on her fake wig, hairpiece fall thing. The pink one. Then we watched a Knight’s Tale. It was awesome.”

See, this is nice, Sophia told herself. A nice dinner table conversation with my daughter. So her father isn’t here all the time? So what. Lots of kids have fathers that work late. So he comes home late sometimes and has a couple of drinks. He doesn’t drive drunk. He loves her. He’s a good, kind guy. I need to just be patient. No, that’s not the right word. Tolerant? No. Accepting. Acceptance isn’t denial. I’m just too judgmental because Mom was an alcoholic.

“Oh, I need that field trip money by tomorrow,” said Jackie. “Mrs. Green said. Were Haley and Bridget there? Can I go over next time?” Jackie speared a piece of pancake and mopped up as much syrup as she could manage.

“Yeah, of course,” Sophia said, rising. She grabbed her purse and fished around for her wallet as her stomach sank. Field trip money.

Money.

The image of that Empress card flashed across her mind again, enveloped in robes. Encased, blanketed. But the card was upside down. Just like she was upside down. Floundering with the cost of it all. Braces, impending hospital bills, mortgage, car payments, a pregnancy that kept her from...what? Working? Leaving? Where would she go anyway? The weight of it all blanketed her like she had been immersed in a pool, clothed in velvet and she was now drowning. What was she going to do?

“Mom!” Jackie said. “It’s only five dollars.”

Sophia looked in the wallet in her hand. There was a single, a five and a twenty. She was going to go to the market tomorrow. Get something into the house for a nice Saturday night dinner with all three of them. It might be the last dinner before the baby came. Maybe get a steak for her and Edward.

She handed the five to Jackie.

“Thanks, Mom.”

What did Jilly say? “The Five of Pentacles. Hang on to what you have. Playing it safe. Don’t make any radical changes. It is time to fortify your position.”

Sophia smoothly removed the twenty and folded into a tiny square. She let it rest in the palm of her hand for a moment before she slipped into the narrow pocket behind her library card.

Screw Saturday night steaks.

Sophia suddenly inhaled, almost a gasp.

“The baby against your ribs again?” Jackie asked as she dumped her plate in the sink. Lying, Sophia nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

“No!” Kate objected.

Jilly nodded. “Yes. Shuffle.”

Groaning, Kate pulled the pile of cards toward her and fumbled with them, attempting to get them into a neat stack. “Do I do exactly what Soph did?”

“Just shuffle and get centered and calm,” Jilly said, leaning back in her chair and taking a deep breath. “Find the God place within.”

Kate looked at her friend. “Hey, does this God character know you’re talking about him?”

“I certainly hope so. As a matter of fact, I know so,” said Jilly. “So, my cynical friend, what do you want to know?”

“Well, I’m obviously the Knight of...Pens...?”

“Swords,” Jilly interjected.

“I know, I know. I was just riffing. Pen mightier than the...you know-”

“We got it, genius,” remarked Sophia, rising. “Although, while some of us didn’t graduate college when we were nineteen, we did go to college. Albeit, in my case, art school, but still-” She interrupted herself as she staggered to the bathroom. “I hate this. Three ounces of liquid and I have to pee.”

She made her way into the hallway powder room and shut the door, having to negotiate it around the girth of her stomach. As the door latched, Kate said, “I hate that.”

“What? Soph?” Jilly said, glancing at the bathroom door

“No. No. Not her. Not Soph. The nineteen thing. The genius thing. I hate it.”

“Why?” asked Jilly.

Kate hesitated. She knew that people, the blessed normal, the favored average, found her complaint odd and even mean-spirited. Similar to rich movie stars complaining about their fame or beautiful women bemoaning being too adored, her thorn, her odd inheritance, rarely elicited sympathy. “Oh, the label. Genius. It just makes me sound...it makes others treat you-”

“Like you’re smart?” said Jilly. “And that’s a problem?”

“No. Like you’re a smart freak. Emphasize freak. It’s a rather odd sort of...fame. Silly. I wish I had waited.”

“Why didn’t you?” Jilly said, brown eyes patient, waiting.

Why didn’t I? Kate thought. Why did I never ask myself that? She realized, of all the questions her mind sought out, “like a hog rooting out truffles,” as her mother used to say, this was the one that had never occurred to her. Why didn’t I wait? she asked herself.

Sophia opened the door and waddled back before Kate could answer. “What did I miss?” she asked.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Nothing,” said Kate. “Nothing. Alright, I’ll do a work question.”

Jilly, mind clearly still on Kate’s question, accepted her cue and turned away, readjusting her wayward ponytail. Sophia settled back in her chair, a slight groan puffing out from her lips as Kate began to shuffle. A rhythmic whirl could be heard as the cards snapped against each other, first settling into a neat stack under Kate’s command, then arching back up, then settling down again. She crisply tapped the edge of the deck against the table after each series, deftly cut them, then repeated the sequence.

“Who are you? Minnesota Fats?” Jilly said.

Kate just closed her eyes in feigned rapture as she continued, saying, “How many frog ears and tongue of eel should I put in the crock pot? I always forget during a full moon.”

Sophia gestured to the wand still lying on the table. “Whack her with the wand,” she ordered Jilly.

Jilly whacked her with the wand.

Kate opened her eyes and blew Sophia a kiss.

Sophia blew one back and asked, “Why work? I mean, why a work question? I thought you had the perfect set-up? Great money. Decent hours, considering you’re a...um...what do you call yourself again? ‘A soulless private practice attorney only in it for the bucks’.”

“You forgot ‘amoral.’ A soulless, amoral private practice attorney only in it for the bucks. The money and hours are...perfectly suited for my life,” said Kate.

“So?” Jilly demanded.

“So...do I have to do the five card thing Sophia did? Is that, like, the best...oh, shit-“ Kate stopped herself.

Confused, Jilly answered, “What? No, you can do any question you want.”

Kate shook her head. “No, my grammar. The ‘shit’ I just said was for the ‘like’ I just said.”

Sophia and Jilly stared at Kate.

Kate went on, fumbling. “Well, it’s...I don’t use the word ‘like’...like that. It’s unclear. An imperfect usage.”

Sophia and Jilly, now amused, continued to stare at Kate.

Silence reigned.

Kate finally cried, “Okay! Yes! I’m anal. It’s just one of my things. It’s sort of how I was...raised. Trained. My dad would say... ‘Language is a tool. Don’t let your blade get dull. Like, you know and um are all words, phrases, that muddy the contextual waters of...um...’ Shit!” Kate threw her hands up. “Oh, just shut up. Both of you.”

Jilly spoke. “Yes, you can, like, well, do any number of cards or, like, questions you, like, want to, like, okay?”

Kate said, “I can’t believe you counsel the troubled,” casting a cold attorney’s style gaze in Jilly’s direction. Jilly grabbed the pink wand and, using it as a cigar, leaned back into her chair and, doing her best Sigmund Freud imitation, replied, “Actually, I prefer to trouble the counselor, Counselor.”

“Oh, be quiet, you...Jesus freak. I’m going to do a card for me, that best course of action thing and-”

Sophia bobbed her head. “That’s a good one. The best course one.”

“I like that too,” Jilly said. “I tried one yesterday and it really helped. It’s nice knowing what actually to do. Next reading, I want to-”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Kate broke into their chatter. “And outcome. Focus back to me, please!”

Sophia did a regal half bow, as regal as she could with her belly jammed against the table. “Excuse the serf’s interruption, Queen Kate.”

Kate gestured elegantly with her hand. “Permitted. I’m just going to do three.”

Quickly turning over three cards, she recited “the first will be me, then that best course of action one and the last is the outcome...if I believed in this silliness, that is.” Cards on the table, she leaned back in her chair with apparent disinterest but perused the cards below half closed lids, a courtroom tactic she had mastered long ago.

“Six of Pentacles...those are pentacles, right?” asked Sophia, glancing at Jilly. Already thumbing through the book, Jilly nodded, adding, “Or you can call them coins. Kate, you also got...um...the Emperor and the Ace of Wands.”

Sophia, muttering, “Pentacles, pentacles. The earthly stuff. Money, food, job...got it,” settled on a page.

Kate, wine glass in hand and feet propped up on a chair, declared with an elaborate sprawl of her arms, “Go. Go, girls. Tell me my life. I await judgment, ready to retire to the Tower, guillotine standing, its razor sharp blade gleaming in the sunlight of courtyard, mocking my every move. Knowing that I am the true heir to the throne, my supporters gather in secret, planning-“

“To order pizza. Perhaps Pizza Hut. Perhaps Dominos,” Jilly continued for her. “But knowing Dominos only serves the rabble to the south, the land of that angry hoard challenging our fair queen-“

“Look at this hair. I’ve never been fair,” Kate interjected as Jilly barreled on.

“It is decided! Pizza Hut it is. A secret meeting is planned, with-“

“Enough already!” Sophia yelled. “You two! Come on. Shut up, Jilly, you’re just encouraging her. And you’re dodging, Kate. Alright, Six of Pentacles and it’s upside down.”

Kate held up a finger. “That would be reversed. It’s called reversed.”

Sophia threatened, “I’m gonna reverse you in a second. Come on.”

“Okay. Okay. Read. Please. I’m sorry,” Kate apologized. “I won’t make fun anymore. I promise. Really, go. Read.”

Sophia looked at Kate steadily; soft eyes hard. “Promise?”

Kate, slightly taken aback, nodded. “Promise,” she replied.

The storm had reached a steady lull. Rain drilled rhythmically against the house as the flat, gray sky clung close to the ground. Inside, the chrome and glass light fixture, hung low over the table, illuminated the three friends faces, casting them into a clear, almost stark definition. It was if the bones of their faces could be perceived under the steady light pounding down on their skin. Eyes were bigger, complexions more luminous.

The disheveled bangs scattered across Jilly’s forehead appeared to have been painted there by a most attentive old school artist. Her brown eyes, too dark to penetrate in normal light, revealed tiny chards the color of caramel and, unexpectedly, in just one eye, a few scattered flecks the color of soft, green moss.

Sophia’s hair had taken on an otherworldly quality. It was wildly, impossibly, red. Dozens of shades and variations rested comfortably side by side, each strand seeming unique unto itself.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Kate's lips, unbeknownst to her, appeared almost fragile, framed by her pale skin. For once still, their soft wrinkles were etched like the crisp, defined ridges of two delicate hills, caught with the precision found in an Ansel Adams photograph.

The wand, pink, garish, covered with glitter half worn off or picked off by young fingers, lay glowing in the middle of the table.

Kate's dodging, Sophia thought. She wants this but she doesn't want to look like she wants it. The joking thing. If we think she's so uninterested that she can just joke around, then she knows she won't appear eager. So, work. Work is big for her. The big city attorney. But she wants to do a question about work. And for Kate, work is identity. So, it's really a question about identity. Okay, Kate. What's missing? What's the missing piece you would never admit to?

Jilly said, "Okay, Kate, got it," as she impatiently tried to cram some hair back into her ponytail with one hand as she held the book in the other. Finally giving up, she rested the book open on the table and, holding the pages down with her chin, adjusted the ponytail with both hands. Then, ponytail not much better for all the attention, she began to read. "Six of Pentacles, reversed. 'The quality of holding back. Feeling as though what you're giving is inadequate or unappreciated. Stinginess. What you're getting isn't enough.'"

Sophia pointed to the card. "Look. It's got the scales of justice on it!"

"But they're really, really tiny," Kate observed.

Jilly kept reading. "'A misuse of talent. An unbalanced, unequitable situation in which you have the upper hand but still find unsatisfying.'"

The rain throbbed against the windows as Kate looked at the card and then looked back up at Jilly and Sophia. Stretching, she finally said, "It should be inequitable, not unequitable. Don't these people have editors? Or spell check, at least?"

"Kate," Sophia threatened.

"Okay. Okay! I don't know. Considering what I bill per hour, this seems a little unlikely. Between that and child support from Teddy, the house-", she gestured to the room, "I'm sitting pretty."

Jilly and Sophia sat, watching her.

Kate looked at them. "So?"

"So, what?" responded Jilly.

"So, what am I supposed to do, according to these flimsy pieces of plastic sitting on the table?" said Kate, smoothing her dark bob.

Sophia and Jilly smile.

"Oh, so you want to go on?" Jilly asked.

"Yes, smart ass. I want to go on," replied Kate.

Jilly began to read. "Best course of action. The Emperor."

"So, the Emperor is my best course of action. What does that mean, pray tell?"

Jilly fingered the card. "Well, it's first and foremost...now don't yell at me, but Jung would say that this is the archetype of the father...and I told you not to yell!"

Sophia patted her hand. "We're not yelling, Jilly, we're groaning. Kate, hand me that book." Taking the book, Sophia murmuring out of the side of her mouth to Kate, "I know, I know, but at least she's not bringing up Engel and those personality test things."

"Hey, I heard that!" Jilly objected.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia ignored her and began to read. “Okay, my book says it’s more about moving to create, through your actions, a better world. Um...it says, ‘Taking your belief system and talents and building an empire. Committing to a cause that comes from a value system that is bedrock. Solid. A cause that may have been passed down from one generation to the next.’ Does this ring a bell?” Sophia looked up from the page, eyes on Kate.

Kate picked up the wand and fiddling with it, slowly banging it against the table. “Well, maybe-”

Jilly interrupted her. “Oh my god...” A look of growing alarm was spreading across her face. Kate saw panic in her eyes.

“What? What?!” Kate said with a nervous glance towards Sophia.

Wordlessly, Jilly pointed to Kate’s head. Sophia looked Kate’s head, then back to Jilly. “What is it, Jilly? What? I don’t see anything,” Sophia said, baffled as Kate.

Jilly looked at Kate and very slowly said, “Kate, now don’t move and don’t be scared but I think I see...a curl. OH MY GOD, it’s a CURL!!!! Hit the decks!! Get the cyanide capsules!!! AUUGGHHHH!” Jilly threw herself back in her chair, hand to her mouth, trying to muffle her scream.

Sophia began to laugh, hard, as Kate, rigid in her chair, attempted to remain stone-faced. Kate then grabbed the bottle of wine.

“You are now cut off, young lady.” Kate strode to the kitchen with bottle in hand as Sophia and Jilly continued to laugh, Jilly’s head was now down on the table and Sophia was trying to cross her legs so the pee didn’t squeeze out from the shaking. Between gasps, Jilly squeaked, “That would be ‘Jung’ lady to you.”

This remark sent them off again. Kate, standing regaling in the kitchen, could long longer resist the contagion. Checking her hair in the reflection of the microwave, she started to laugh. “You both are such...brats.”

Sophia said, “Um...Kate, you missed one follicle right there.”

Kate picked up the wand. “As Emperor, I impose eleven sleepless nights and four grocery store tantrums on you both,” she said, flicking the wand at them both. “Verbal hair abuse is against international law and I won’t stand for it. So, stop enjoying yourself at my expense and tell me my last card. My outcome, please.”

Still giggling, Sophia and Jilly turned their attention back to the cards.

“This really is amazing, Jilly. Thanks for doing this. It’s like a free therapy session,” said Sophia.

“Come on, Jilly. Outcome. Outcome. Me. Hello. Me.” Kate impatiently gestured to the card.

Sophia picked up Kate’s final card. “These are all so pretty. I mean, look at this card. What is it again...the Ace of Wands? Wow? It’s almost surreal,” she said, handing it to Kate.

The card contained a perfectly clear day, a sky as white as the border which surrounded it. A strong, muscular hand, perhaps male, perhaps female, stuck out of a single storm cloud hovering above the earth, creating an odd juxtaposition of images, part body, part tempest. The hand grasped a large branch. Pointing upwards to the heavens, the wand was perfectly perpendicular to the earth far below it. Small leaves branched off the wand and a few others were floating unattached around it. It was unclear whether the new growth was being held, suspended in the air by an unseen force, or falling to the earth. An imposing but comfortably solid castle rose atop a mountain far in the distance.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“So pretty. The design, I mean,” commented Sophia.

“Some people design their own decks,” Jilly said.

“Really? They’re so evocative.”

Jilly continued. “My sister, Sarah, she says they’ll bring up memories as well as resonate with images about the future. She says any flash is really God talking. God saying, ‘Hey kiddo, this is it. Wake up and get to work.’”

“God actually says ‘kiddo’?” Kate said.

“Well, Jilly’s God obviously does,” said Sophia. “Okay, Jilly so wands are-“

Kate exploded. “Me! Hey, me here! Let’s get this over with. My outcome is petering away as you two yammer! Now, read to me about this ace thingy...you...you...bad, evil influences, you!”

“So sorry to inconvenience you o’ disbelieving one,” Jilly said. “Now, Kate, you realize that these are just pieces of plastic covered cardboard sitting on a table, right?”

Kate grabbed Haley’s pink glitter wand again and raised it high above her head. “I see my future and in it I seem to be ostracizing two lovely young women from my life but only after I beat them bloody with my Barbie Fantasy Playtime Princess wand.”

Sophia and Jilly exchanged a solemn look. “She’s getting feisty,” Jilly observed.

“A good sign,” Sophia replied.

Grabbing the wine bottle, Jilly said, “Oh, so Kate wants to go on. Very interesting. Well, we’ll just have to see about that.” She very, very slowly sat back down, taking care to make sure the bottle didn’t leave a ring on the table, her ponytail still existed, that both she and Kate had enough wine and that her bra straps were straightened. She then carefully and, again, very slowly, picked up the tarot book.

“You are such a brat,” Kate muttered.

“Hum, let me see. Ace of Wands. It was the Ace of Wands, right, Katharine?”

Kate, glowering, said, “Why yes, Jillian, it was the Ace of Wands.”

Jilly nodded and, after another bra strap check, began.

“Your outcome. ‘The birth of a passionate idea. Going back to the seeds of inspiration. Being fired up about a new project or career. A spiritual awakening concerning the debate about the career you were meant to have as opposed to the job you do have. Beginning to articulate your life choice. Grabbing your vision. Planting the seed for change, even transformation.’”

Kate asked, “What’s the castle...or, maybe it’s a house, it’s far in the background, what’s that supposed to represent?”

Jilly scanned the book and looked up, shrugging as Sophia picked up the card.

“Maybe it’s a house from your past?” Sophia offered. “Something that someone you knew built and you want to return to?”

“Or build one for yourself?” Jilly volunteered.

“So,” Sophia said, “what’s your passionate idea?”

Kate shook her head so vigorously she almost dislodged her curls from their bondage. “Actually, I’ve been feeling pretty passionless lately, so I really have no frickin’ idea,” she said, unconsciously checking her hair. Then sweeping the cards up and jamming them back into the middle of the deck, she gathered the entire deck to her chest and turned to face Jilly.

Sophia followed suit, turning in her chair to face her friend, her eyes boring into Jilly’s.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Kate said, “Well Jilly, looks like-”
“It’s your turn,” Sophia finished.

* * *

“Mom, wow, look!” Bridget’s face was pressed against the window.

Bridget was sprawled across the window seat that lay across the bottom of the front bay window. Haley, Jilly and Sophia had all just pulled away and Kate was in the kitchen cleaning up. Wine glasses clustered in her hand, she looked over at Bridget, her long, pale body extended the length of the cushion and her face peered out the lowest pane. She appeared to be staring at the ground.

Still in the kitchen, Kate called, “Bridge, what in god’s name are you looking at?”

Bridget’s face popped up. “Come here, Mom! Look. Flowers! Well, not yet, they’re just coming in but...they’re coming in. Those little blue ones I helped Grandma plant last year. They’re working!”

Wine glasses still in hand, Kate crossed across the living room to Bridget.

“Wow, it sure is coming down,” she said, looking at the sky.

“No, Mom, look down. There. See?” Bridget twisted her body so she could instruct her mother and stay in position. Kate obliged and looked over Bridget’s shoulder.

Thru the watery glass, she could barely make out a few tiny green sprouts, barely the size of the point of a pencil. “Cool, huh?” Bridget said.

Kate wanted to say, they are little tiny green plants in the pouring rain. They come up every year. My mother would drag me out to see them (Mom also had this obsession with all things green that require dirt and air...an obsession that she has succeeded in passing on to my one and only child) and now my daughter is dragging me over to see them, and all I see is wet dirt and something that’s going to be lovely and sweet in about six weeks.

But I am not going to become my mother, Kate thought. I am not going to dismiss an interest that I don’t understand. She would always tell me, “Get outside for awhile. Your homework’s done. Go run around with the other kids. Get some fresh air!” And it was always right at the best part of some book. Always right before the end. But, I, Kate, shall not do this to Bridget. If she’s excited, I’m excited. Maybe she’ll become a scientist. Environmental expert and activist. Travel the world, lecturing, winning prizes. Always speaking of her mother, who always supported her.

“Yup, I see them, Bridge,” said Kate. “They’re so tiny and...green. Wow, it’s great, Bridge.”

“Can I go outside? See if anything else is coming up?”

“What? No! It’s pouring out.”

“Mom, come on! Please!”

“Bridget, no. That’s silly. You’ll get wet.”

And then Bridget looked at her. Bridget’s eyes were Kate’s father’s eyes. Dad. Jedidiah Davidson. Public Defender. Social activist. Teacher. Writer. Dad. The smartest man, ever. He could see through pretty much anybody’s bullshit. Bridget had the same steady, level look. The look that cut through all the nonsense.

“So, Mom, I get wet,” said Bridget. “It’s not like we live in the jungle. I’ll get wet and then come in and get dry.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“No. Stay inside. Read a book. I saw that one they’re having you read for Book Days. It’s really good. Why don’t you read while I make dinner and then we can talk about it afterwards...what? Why are you making that face? I like to hear your take on things. You’re very smart, Bridget.”

By now Bridget had rolled off the window seat and was now lying face down on the carpet. “No, Mom, no! Not the book report conversation. Please. I’m begging you. I’m a good daughter.” By now she had grabbed Kate’s ankles and was attempting to shake them.

“Oh stop! Fine. We’ll talk about wet dirt and weeds. Happy?” Kate broke free as Bridget rolled on to her back and popped up, following Kate into the kitchen.

“Oh, Mom, I need that field trip money.”

“Wallet,” said Kate, placing the glasses in the sink and gesturing to her purse. She added, “What’s the field trip again?”

“We’re going to some museum and meeting these old people.”

“What?”

“You know,” Bridget shrugged. “They lived through the history of whatever we’re gonna be seeing. They’re going, like, to bring it to life for us or something. Well, that’s what Mrs. Schlitt said. I dunno. I need five dollars.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good. Stay with the group.” Kate slid a frozen pizza into the oven. “Yes, that’s a good field trip. Community service integrated with education. And you get to meet people. Cool people.”

“Old people. But there’s supposed to be a neat cafeteria.”

“Grandma’s old,” Kate countered.

Kate was so grateful for the close relationship Bridget had with her mother that she was able to ignore the twinge of jealousy that always seemed to thread its way in around the corner of her mind whenever she thought about it.

“But Grandma’s cool,” Bridget said.

“Exactly!”

Bridget rolled her eyes. “Oh, mom, don’t go all lawyer on me,” she said as she reached for Kate’s purse.

Field trips. Community. Service. Dad. He did so much and what am I doing? Kate watched Bridget dig through her wallet. I probably make more in two years than he made in twenty. But am I going to have eleven hundred people at my funeral? Young people. Old people. Community leaders. Ex-cons. Teachers. Judges. It was as though a king had died.

King. Emperor. That card. Best course of action, Jilly said. A kingdom. An empire. Committing to a cause that comes from a value system that is bedrock. A cause that may have been passed down from one generation to another. What did my dad build? What am I building? Who would I have at my funeral? Rich CEOs and some friends. People from the firm. A few judges, maybe. Maybe I should volunteer for this field trip? Nope. Can’t. I’ve got court.

She watched Bridget up-end her wallet and pour change and bills into her hands. Kate began to snap at her to be careful but she stopped herself.

This is that card. That stupid tarot card. The Six of Pentacles. The money falling into Bridget’s hand is that same image. It meant...what? It was reversed and it meant...that

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

we have enough but that it doesn't feel like enough? Yes. That what I'm getting, or giving, isn't enough. But I've got money. A great job.

Bridget took a ten. "Is it okay if I take extra? Sometimes, Jackie...I mean...um...I may want to get an extra big lunch at the cafeteria. To share, you know."

That's my dad. This is my dad in Bridget.

After he got sick. When he was home. During the chemo. After the surgeries. He would make my lunch. He always would make me a huge lunch but it wasn't just for me. He'd say, "There's always that kid. That kid who's got a little bit less, all the time. It won't be noticeable, but they're there. Share, Katie girl. Groan about me making you way too much food. Complain. Not too much, but a little. Hunger doesn't have to happen and neither does shame."

He was right, of course. Mary. Andy. Juanita. Good, smart kids. They had become friends. What ever happened to them? I miss that feeling.

The feeling. That feeling of having an impact, right now.

"Mom, your face looks funny." Bridget was watching her.

Kate crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

"Better," said Bridget, turning her eyes outside.

She's looking for more new plants, Kate thought. New plants. Beginnings. Ace of Wands. That was my outcome. A new beginning. What do I want to start? Shit, Kate, you are contemplating the meaning of your life and destiny based on some stupid tarot cards. Damn you, Jilly. Count on you to turn an afternoon of fun into a New Age psychological tour-de-force.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

“What time is it?” Jilly craned her neck in an attempt to see the clock on the stove.

Kate blocked the view with her hand. “Oh, no, no, no, young lady. You started this. We both did it. It’s your turn.”

Sophia nodded in agreement. “She’s right, Jilly. It’s pouring rain. Getting Jim Jr. will only take you five minutes and Jim’s plane will be late and he’s going to be caught in traffic from the airport for another hour after he gets off. It’s destiny.”

Jilly said, “I just like to be at the house when he gets there.”

“Can’t miss the love of your life’s foot touching local soil?” Kate said.

“Jealous,” Jilly countered as she began to shuffle.

Kate bobbed her head. “Absolutely.”

“Where was he this time?” Sophia asked.

“Quebec...no...California,” said Jilly. “No, wait, I was wrong. It’s Quebec.”

Turning over three cards, she added, “I’m doing what you did, Kate. The three card one. Those same questions.”

“First on is...Seven of Cups...Seven of Cups....cups, right?” Kate said as she settled on a page. “Got it.”

Nose in her book, Sophia said, “Me too.”

“Well, somebody go,” Jilly demanded. “The clock is ticking.”

“Okay, I’ll go,” said Sophia, leaning over and tapping the card. “This is you, right now, right? Right. Okay. The Seven of Cups. Well, obviously, you’ve got somebody looking at a whole bunch of cups with different; kind of really cool stuff, in each one. And the cups are all on a cloud in the sky. One cup has jewels and fortune in it, one has a castle, one has...wow...a snake...and that one...a person standing in the cup, covered with a blanket and, well, that person is glowing. Like a mystery thing. A mysterious outcome.” Sophia, grinning and proud at her interpretation, looked up at her friend.

But Jilly was frowning, shaking her head. “Mysterious outcome?” she protested. “No, Soph, it’s probably something else. That cup probably means...” She fumbled for her thought, finally stopping mid-breath.

While Jilly struggled, Sophia stopped merely watching Jilly and let her artist’s eye take over. She began observing Jilly, seeing her as an object, studying her with the clinical, distant perspective of the creative mind. Framed against the dark sky as the sharp kitchen light struck her face, Jilly the friend became nameless. She was now The Model. Model as still life. Pieces of the picture, a few faint freckles, the stains on her faded

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

sweatshirt, and an aura of escaping hair, not quite curly, not quite straight, appeared juxtaposed, not cubist but still fragments, illuminating by the low hanging light, silhouette reflected in the large kitchen window behind her. Sophia felt a tiny jolt, not quite a memory, but a flashcard, a footnote of a familiar image. As she sought it out, mentally digging for the root, her eyes fell on the card.

The person looking at the all cups was Jilly but so was the shrouded figure standing in one of the cups. That person was Jilly too, Sophia realized. The person in the image is staring at an array of choices, a cloud full of cups just as Jilly is sitting before a table full of wine glasses, covered with tarot cards, reflecting on the choices for her future, and one of those will be a new, uncloaked Jilly. Something is coming.

But this experience is different, Sophia thought. I'm used to seeing the picture in my mind, the painting in front of me that uncloaks. That process I know. But now, this card, this experience feels like that, the painting that reveals itself to me. Jilly and the card, the images are the same. What is happening? What do I do with this? Oh boy, she's staring at me. What am I seeing? What do I say? Is this just me, the now or the future? Am I really seeing something?

"Well?" said Jilly.

"Sorry," Sophia said. "Sorry. Um...it's like maybe you're dreaming about all the great stuff that you're going to have. And while you think you've thought of every outcome you also need to see that other stuff might happen too."

Kate interjected, "Hey, you're not reading from the book. What does your book say?"

"I'm trying to interpret the image first, Miss Literal-Genius, thank you very much," replied Sophia, her calm demeanor belying her inner dialogue.

Kate raised her hands in surrender. "Yikes. Sorry. Sorry. Really. Go on."

Every so often, Sophia still intimidates the hell out of me, Kate realized, watching her friend gaze at the card. How does she do it? After forty-five minutes, she can already just dive in, just trust herself, and start exploring. I research for six months before I go see a fucking movie. Right away, she got what these cards are really about. Themes. Images. The story of...something. And she does it without fanfare. No drama. Just pure heart. She's like a butterfly to my rhinoceros. God, I feel huge. Huge, long and dark.

Sophia looked up at Kate and stuck her tongue out at her.

She thinks I'm such an idiot, Sophia thought, watching Kate smile at her. See, she's humoring me. And she's right. I am an idiot. Like I have special powers or something! I mean, come on, I didn't even go to a real college.

Sophia picked up one of the books. "Hum...well...the book says... 'Dreaming about the future. Fantasizing about all the desired possibilities. Wanting to choose.'" She looked at Jilly. "See how his hand is outstretched towards the cups? The guy's reaching, he wants to grab one? Well, he wants to make a decision. He wants to make a dream become reality."

Kate asked, "And this is Jilly, correct? This card represents Jilly?"

Jilly smiled, bobbing her head so hard her ponytail flopped. "This makes sense. It does. I mean it's sort of...really...incredible. Jim and I, well, we've been talking about his job. All the travel. Well, you know, it's over. Well, going to be over in a couple of weeks. He got the big promotion...which he actually accepted, thank you, God. He got another promotion, that one last year, you remember, but he didn't want to leave his new

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

clients hanging. He had just spent three years developing that South American market, after all. But this one he took.”

Watching Jilly chattering about the conversations she and Jim had, Kate thought, Christian guys get away with murder. It makes me nuts. He’s got her so fucking fooled. Gets everything his way, gets to prance around the world and come home to a nice hot meal, hot wife, everybody “ohhing” and “ahhing” over how fabulous he is, what a great husband, what a terrific Christian for showing up at church once a fucking month and signing a huge check twice a year. He knows she won’t make a peep because she’s a good Christian, a good wife and a great mother. Her list. Her happiness list. He uses it like a carrot in front of a donkey. What a jerk. He’s never going to stop. Why should he?

As the last few drops of wine gather in a pool at the base of her glass, she turned her attention back to the conversation. Sophia, rubbing her belly, was commenting, “He is gone an awful lot. I don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s hard,” Jilly acknowledged. “Church helps. You guys help. God helps a ton! I pray every day. Every hour. Anyway, we both agreed that for the future, retirement, college, maybe a summer place, it was worth it. Even though he missed a lot. And I missed him. And the kids. Well, Haley but soon Jim Jr. too. But it was worth it. It was.” Jilly ran her finger along the hard straight edge of the card, repeating, “It was. It was worth it. And he loves it, to be honest. The people. The travel. The different places. The food even. He told me about this one place, in China, he ate snake. They skin the snake right in front of your table then take it back to the kitchen and cook it for you.”

She tapped one of her fingers against the snake writhing out of one of the cups on the card. “It’s amazing. He just loves the adventure. You should see the look in his eye when he comes home. And it’s good for us too. For us. The kids. The money. For college. Retirement. Maybe a summer place one day. It is. It’s worth it. To have a plan. That’s why these tarot cards are so interesting. You get to see what’s coming,” Jilly said.

“Okay. Then what’s the next one?” Sophia tried to bounce eagerly in her chair but only succeeded in shaking the table with her stomach, almost knocking over her glass. “Oops. Sorry!” Sophia tried to grab the teetering glass.

Jilly beat her to it and, after saving the table from a certain soaking, said, “Read it the next one. My best course of action, right? What is it? The Queen of Cups?”

Sophia said, “Oh, look at her! She’s so pretty and...oh sorry, Kate! See, look, I’m reading! Gonna read from the book now. Heaven forbid I-”

Kate interrupted her with a wiggle of her finger. “Oh, don’t start...Miss...um...Not-Literal-But-Spiritual-Warm-Fuzzy-Type-Person.”

“Well, somebody go!” Jilly demanded, glancing at the clock, “I’ve got to go soon.”

Kate started. “Okay. Queen of Cups. ‘The emotional ruler and creative director of her universe. Centered and spiritual, she revels in the joy of creation.’”

“Joy of creation,” said Jilly. “Got it. Nice. Go on.”

Sophia piped up. “It says here to live fully in the moment, enjoy the fruits of what your energies and vision have created today. Don’t look past the love that is in your hands.”

Jilly pushed the wand away as she plopped her purse on the table. “I’ve got so much to do. It got so late, so fast. Why didn’t you tell me what time it was? Read the last one. The outcome. That guy. The...um...the Hermit.”

Pointedly closing her tarot book, Kate shot a look to Sophia and picked up the card. “Well, let me see. The Hermit. I see an old man standing on a dark, gray cliff. It’s night.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

He's got a lantern. And...he's alone. Well, he is a hermit after all. Kind of implied. But, I digress. He's old, wise, I assume--"

Sophia smiled at Kate. "That felt pretty good, didn't it? Just diving in...letting your psychic eye open--"

"Please! My psychic eye?"

Sophia winked at Kate and said, "Alright, maybe your psychic eye needs a little mascara. Okay...now I'll do the reading part...the book says...hum...a leader. 'A spiritual, insightful person. Guiding himself and those he leads confidently into the future. Some one who has walked the path of experience and is now forging ahead, leading those behind him, but he proceeds alone.'" Sophia looked up at Jilly, volunteering, "It sounds like you."

Jilly shook her head. "But this is my outcome, right?"

Kate nodded. "Yup."

"It's just that, I'm not alone," said Jilly. "I mean, it's not like I'm raising them alone, like my mom did. I've got Jim. And he's going to be around more, after he...What? What, Kate? You've got that lawyer look."

"No, I don't," Kate protested.

"Yes, you do. But don't argue with me. This playdate is now officially over. Back to life."

Jilly scooped up her cards and thrust them back into the deck.

* * *

The noise was deafening.

Rain pounding the house.

Thunder booming at extremely regular intervals.

Jimmy crying in his highchair.

TV blaring.

Haley dancing by the front window, chanting, "Come on, come on, come on, Daddy. Come on, come on, come on, Daddy. Come on, come on, come on, Daddy..."

Jilly snapped at her, "Honey, stop it! He'll be here. They landed, he'll be here. Come on. You're making my head pound. And turn off the TV. If you're not going to watch it, turn it off."

Jilly was going through the motions of the Mom-Make-Dinner Dance. Check the water for the spaghetti. Throw some Cheerios on Jimmy's high chair tray. Stir sauce. Organic All Natural Tomato and Garlic. Free Range ground turkey. I wonder if anyone will notice it's not ground beef? Grab remote and hit mute. Finish emptying dishwasher. Wipe off counters. Toss placemats across counter to table. Yell at Haley to spread them out and get the napkins.

Meanwhile, Haley danced and bounced at the window as Jimmy picked up Cheerios and, one by one, dropped them off the edge of the stained white plastic highchair tray.

Jilly's mind continued its evening gyrations.

Monday appointment with Freda. I wonder if she confronted her mother? At least they're talking again. Remember, church bazaar organizing meeting Thursday. Is that his car? Nope. Call Kathy. Talk to pastor about a fundraiser for the Youth Group. Maybe a bake sale? Nice, old fashioned. Nope. All the moms would just buy bakery stuff, put it on

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

a dinner plate and send it in. Maybe a dance marathon thing? Is that his car? No. Sign up for a shift at the shelter. Sign Haley up for those dance classes at the studio. Remember the 20% off coupon. Maybe Bridget and Jackie would want to do it too. No. Not Jackie. Sophia doesn't have the money. Maybe if I gave her the coupon? Damn that Edward. I hope the reading worked for Soph. Both their readings were perfect. Perfect. Kate is like some Emperor. So strong. Maybe she'll start applying that power to making a difference instead of making a buck. Sophia...well, I'm not a fan of divorce but, in her instance, I think God would have no problem. Right, God? She's suffered enough. Edward's been missing in action for far too long. God, please help her, give her strength. How she's put up with it...

"He's home! He's home!" Haley screamed.

Jim. Home.

Jilly finished her Mommy-Make-Dinner Dance with a flourish, tossing the Handi-Wipe across the room to land in the sink, fluffing her hair and opening the door leading to the garage.

A gust of cold wet wild spring air blew in as the garage door rattled up and Jim's car eased into the garage. The moment it stopped, Haley was past her mother like a shot, yelling, "Hey, Daddy! Hey! Can I help carry your stuff? I get to take Spanish this year. It's a special thing after school. Mom wants me to take stupid ballet. Can I do Spanish instead?"

Jim's head popped up out of the car and he and Haley negotiated retrieving bags, laptop and briefcase in a familiar routine.

"How was that strange foreign country you were in?" Jilly asked as Jim entered, Haley right behind him.

Generous stomach, rounded shoulders, squat but with broad shoulders, Jim had the rumpled look of every businessman just off a plane. Thinning hair cropped close, skin pale, Jilly thought (and not for the first time), he looks like every middle management suit you pass on the street. Until he smiled. Haley called it his "Jim Carey smile." That smile was a gift from God. That smile breathed humanity, sincerity and heart into every person it fell upon.

"Strange and foreign without you three. Hey, hey, little man!" Jim said, advancing on Jimmy, who was now screaming with joy. Ignoring the sodden Cheerios clinging to Jimmy's undershirt, Jim lifted him out of his highchair and brought him to his chest for a warm embrace. Over his shoulder, he asked Haley, who was leaning against his hip, "You torturing this little guy?"

"Every hour, on the hour," said Haley, tickling Jimmy's foot.

Jim grunted with approval and then roared, "What's missing? My WIFE! Woman, come 'ere!"

Amidst whoops and hollers, Jilly joined the embrace.

The scents of Cheerios, baby skin, airline peanuts and spaghetti sauce mingled and combined with the rough wool fabric of Jim's suit against her cheek. The sensation of Haley between their bodies, Jimmy squirming on their shoulders and the visceral power of Jim's free arm against the small of her back all married, seeming to create a single being out of the four bodies leaning together.

Family, Jilly thought. My family. Bless this house, Jesus. Thank you, God. I have so much. My cup runneth over. Cup. Cups. Many cups. That reading. They said it was what

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

I was dreaming of. The future. But they were wrong. It's right now. How many cups was it? Six? Seven? Seven of Cups.

Jim released her after a swift smack on the ass and, still holding Jimmy, he said, "Oh my gosh! Who's getting bigger?"

"Me, me!" Jimmy yelped.

Haley said, "You are, Daddy," poking a finger into his stomach.

"Hey, young lady! Be careful or I'll...um..." Jim hesitated elaborately.

Haley picked up her cue. "Or you'll what?" she said as Jimmy cried, "Me too!"

"I'll have to give you a present!"

The whoops began again. Jim dug in his bag as Jilly turned back to the dinner preparations. First night back was always so easy. Heck, everything about Jim was easy (aside from the travel and that would soon be a thing of the past) He liked spaghetti first night back. Took the kids to the grocery store Saturday, always an event of great joy and involved negotiation ("Are you crazy? No broccoli for you and Jimmy! I insist on chocolate cupcakes and brownies) Church on Sunday. Naps and board games Sunday afternoon. Tortillas for dinner.

They really were the perfect couple, Jilly thought, stirring the pasta. The system, the plan, they both were completely on board with it. Yes, Jim had to travel a lot, but he loved it and it allowed them money for the important things. That Christian summer camp for Haley. The summer place they wanted. Maybe they'll start looking later this spring, after he's settled into the new position. The mortgage was almost paid off on the house. College funds were in good shape. So was the pension and savings. Her client load was only during school hours. Yup, it was all working. She set the timer and shot Jim a look.

"Okay, Haley, tell Mommy when the timer goes off," said Jim and they both headed upstairs. The kids settled down, toys in hand (Haley with a globe made out of wood and Jimmy, a toy wallet with plastic Canadian money) This was the routine. The Daddy-Coming-Home routine.

"Okay, my queen," Jim said as Jilly settled on the bed, legs extended. He swung the suitcase up with a grunt, flipped it open with a practiced hand and began making a pile. "This suit has died an honorable death. This tie, I think the spot on it's cream cheese. I found this amazing kosher deli in Quebec, on this side street. Unbelievable lox. I took Philippe. He's lived there his whole life. Never knew about it. Both these shirts need to be cleaned."

"Okay. I'll take them tomorrow. Did you talk to Carl about when the new position goes into effect?"

"This is just a tiny bit of hot sauce by the button."

"Got it. This shirt is pretty much shot anyway."

"Put it in that pile with the suit. The collar's not comfortable anyway. Too small. Oh heck, I'll admit it. My neck's getting too big." He quickly stripped off his suit.

"Well, Jim, the main office has a gym right on the fortieth floor. That's just two floors down. You can start working out on your lunch hour maybe. Donna said they even have a personal trainer come in twice a week. The money you bring in, they should supply you with your own trainer. Bob Greene or that Ty-Bo guy."

Standing in the center of the bedroom, he puffed his chest up and sucked in his stomach. "Hey, woman! Look at me. I could kick Bob Greene's ass!" Then, grabbing

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

some sweatpants and a t-shirt, pulling them on he said, “Well, it’s Friday. So, how are the girls? Sophia doing okay?”

“Okay, I guess. I’m so lucky to be married to you.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Jim said, rolling backwards onto the bed.

“Just think,” she said, rubbing his belly. “A few more weeks, maybe a month or two, and this will be very night.”

They heard a “Mom! The timer!” from downstairs.

“Saved by the bell,” grunted Jim, heaving himself up and offering his hand to Jilly.

“Come on, my queen. Let us descend to our subjects awaiting our wisdom.”

Something’s up. The thought hit Jilly. It surfaced like a small lantern’s flame being turned up. The light grew from a flicker to a steady glow. What an interesting image, Jilly realized. Lantern. Where did I get this? The Bible? No.

That card! Jilly thought, making her way down the stairs behind Jim. The Hermit. He was holding a lantern. That’s where I got it.

Already seated, Jim, Haley, and Jimmy, his highchair pulled up to the table, were making faces and pretending to speak French. Jimmy’s “Oh la la,” came out as “Poo caca.” This led to much merriment as Jilly ladled out the spaghetti and assembled plates, still thinking.

Her mother used to say, “Enjoy today, Jilly. Tomorrow is promised to no one. Quit running after the horizon and enjoy the landscape at your feet.” Jilly always hated that condescending attitude. Like Mom knew what tomorrow was going to bring. Tomorrow brought her this. This life!

So there, Mom.

Unfortunately, Jilly, well-trained therapist that she was, knew that whenever she started railing at her mother in her mind...it was something else.

No. It was Jim. That look in his eye. What was it? He evaded the promotion question! Bingo. That was it.

“So, honey,” Jilly started, handing Jim his plate of spaghetti.

“No, Jilly, it’s excusez moi, monsieur!”

Jim, Haley and Jimmy all dissolved into giggles.

“Parlez vous avec Carl, mon ami?” she asked with a smile and an extremely bad accent.

Haley and Jimmy giggled and Jilly added, “Blow on Jimmy’s spaghetti, Haley,” but she didn’t turn away from Jim.

She waited.

Jim, mouth full, nodded.

She waited.

He shrugged.

She waited.

Finally he said, “Carl. Yup. Well, honey, I told him that I need to wrap up the new Asian clients. It’s a whole new market and I’m the lynch pin. They’re very traditional and they’ve been dealing with me. Spaghetti’s great, honey. Fabulous. Pass that yummy garlic bread. Doesn’t your mommy make the best garlic bread in the whole world?”

“So?” Jilly said. He wasn’t getting off the hook that easily.

“So, nothing. It’s just going to be a few more months. Honey, I got this entire deal off the ground. Just a few more months. Then it’s corner office, me home every night,

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

working out every day. I'll be so buff, you'll think you're married to Brad Pitt. Anyway, you've got such a system here; it would be a crime to mess it up. I've got the best life in the world!"

And with that, there was a loud crack of lightening; a crash of thunder and the lights went out.

* * *

Jilly and Sophia struggled into their coats as Kate's kitchen's lights seemed to be growing brighter in contrast to the darkening skies and increasing rain. Jilly yanked open Kate's basement door and yelled, "Haley, time to go. We've gotta get Jimmy from Grandma's and I wanna beat the worst of this storm. Come on." She turned to Sophia. "Next week at your place. It's your turn, right?"

The shift change had begun.

Looking around for her scarves, Sophia nodded. "Yes. My place. I'm going to bake that bread. Jilly, bring these again, okay?"

Kate was up, gathering items as they all made a final sweep around the kitchen, clearing the table, grabbing purses and gloves, putting on shoes and digging for car keys.

Jilly yanked open the basement door again and bellowed, "Haley, come on! Move it! We've got to get your brother."

Silence, groans and an exasperated "I'm coming!" shot back up the stairs.

Haley began slowly trudging up the stairs, Jilly urging her along. "Come on, honey. We need to get home."

Haley appeared, a smudge of glitter on her cheek and her hair clumsily braided and stuck into a high ponytail. She put her hand to her hair, a dreamy look in her eyes. "Oh, I forgot my barrettes."

This discovery caused her to smile. Still occupying the land of intrigues, plots, escapes and slightly blurred and intentionally unresolved romance, she was atop a wild, young steed, galloping across a flowering field, knee-long, auburn hair sailing behind as she courageously saved her exotic kingdom (in France. Maybe Russia) from certain ruin as throngs of adults cheered her every brave and confident move. She stood at the top of the stairs, the cheering mob below her as she received the appropriate adoration.

Jilly's voice intruded. "Well then, why don't you go back down and get the barrettes?" Muscles rigid, Jilly was smiling a small, hard smile at her daughter.

Haley stood there, and then looked over to Kate. "Bridget was wondering if we could-?"

Jilly exploded. "NOW! Move it!"

Haley, now her every muscle rigid, turned back to her mother. "You know, Grandma says you should appreciate me and not rush me through my childhood. Every moment is precious, you know." And, with a flip of her ponytail, she disappeared back downstairs in search of the wayward barrettes.

Jilly collapsed down into a chair. Kate and Sophia followed suit.

Sophia uttered, "Oh. Wow! She's good," trying unsuccessfully to hide the admiration in her voice.

Kate concurred. "The big guns. The Mom card. And very well played, might I say. Impressive. She should consider a career in law."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Head in her hands, Jilly groaned. “Oh my god...that rotten, stinking kid can push my buttons almost as hard as my mother can.”

“Is that possible?” Sophia asked.

“Oh, yes,” Jilly said.

“She is good.” Kate nodded sympathetically. She grabbed the deck of tarot cards and began rifling through it. “Where was that Empress card again?...got it!” She held up the card.

The card in Kate’s hand seemed to float in the bright, warm kitchen light. The image of the Empress as she sat, easy and relaxed on her throne of cushions, peered out calmly at the three friends, eyes steady and forgiving. Surrounded by the lush trees and the harvest in full bloom, the crisp white border of the card protected her from the world like a fence around a garden.

Kate, with a glint in her eye, slowly turned the card upside-down. “Welcome to the dark side of motherhood, my friends.”

“Think we’re going to become our mothers?” Sophia asked softly.

“No,” Kate stated.

“Never,” agreed Jilly.

Sophia placed her hand over Kate’s hand, which was grasping the tarot deck. “Promise? I’m counting on you guys.”

Jilly put her hand on top of both of theirs. “We, knights of Kate’s round...well, rectangular table, make a solemn oath. Protect, defend and save each other from the dreaded destiny. We shall never become our mothers.”

“Our children shall live in a kingdom free of judgment-” Kate said.

“Yammering advice-” added Jilly.

“Fear. Free of fear and...aleness. Is that a word?” asked Sophia.

Kate, Jilly and Sophia all look at each other.

“Yup, Sophia. It’s a word,” said Kate.

Hands clasped, glasses on the table, Empress card shining in the light, neither Jilly nor Sophia heard the storm continuing to pound the house. But Kate did.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pentacles

Earth. Home. Food. Security. Money. Work.
Inheritance. Tradition. The senses. Healing. Nurturing.
The magic of the ordinary. Practical wisdom.

The screen door slapped shut with a whack and, alone in her kitchen, Sophia turned back to the long counter. Hair swept up in an awkward ponytail worthy of Jilly, she continued on her task of cutting up the last of the orange. White sun streamed in the tall windows as she sliced the orange meat into small pieces, the sticky juice clinging to her fingers. A colorful mix of grapes, bananas and strawberries was already towering in a white enamel bowl resting next to the cutting board. She attempted to topple the leaning pyramid every time she tossed in more oranges.

She was so tired she felt beyond sleep. Laying down the cutting knife and resting just the palms of her hands against the counters' edge so she wouldn't make the counter sticky, she wiggled her back and stretched her legs out, one at a time, the gyrations producing small yet satisfying cracks in one hip and that spot just between her shoulder blades that always went if she worked it just right. Edgy, strained energy washed over her body, much like too much caffeine mixed with a good argument. Hey, it's not so hard, she thought. If I keep moving, it's not so hard. And I feel...awake. No, alert. Just really, really...alert.

A stray breeze passed over her body from one of the few small vintage fans that were strategically placed around the large room, rattling at high speed, providing a modicum of relief from the wet, heavy late afternoon air.

Every window was opened to its widest possible point. Some just cracked, others gaping, the bottom sash crammed against middle sash so hard the layers of old paint were wedged tightly together. A gnarled old branch from a tree propped up one window, a large children's edition of Camelot propped up another.

A cardboard box rested on the floor and a few paintings had been carefully placed inside, its exterior decorated with a detailed rendering of a castle with towers, turrets and a drawbridge. The breeze from the fans floated over the profusion of artwork, both child and adult, covering the high, vivid green walls of the kitchen, adding a faint rattle of paper to the quiet Sunday air.

Old houses sound different than new ones, Sophia thought. The sound is solid. Like being inside of a cave instead of a tent. I love the sound. I love this house. Nope. I need to think, "I loved this house."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

The quiet was broken by Jilly's arrival, entering through the opened back door, having to give the screen door a good, hard, snapping yank to open it. Hefting a grocery bag and a frayed straw purse, which had fallen off her shoulder and was dragging perilously close to the floor, she was yelling over her shoulder. "Haley, you and Jackie watch Jimmy!" She dumped the grocery bag on the floor and plopped her purse on the table with a thud. "Am I first?"

"Kate's coming," Sophia said. "She had to make a stop. Sarah with you?"

"Lazy bum wanted to sleep in. It's so great having her stay. Like a slumber party with built in babysitting for the week," said Jilly, standing right next to a fan and attempting to wipe her forehead with her shirttail.

"Sit down," said Sophia. "Turn on that fan by the table. Isn't it great? The fan? I got it at a garage sale for fifty cents. I think it's from the thirties."

Settling in at the kitchen table, a chrome and enamel relic from the 1950's, Jilly thought, I could never do this. How does she do it? Sophia can take junk and can make it look like a million bucks. Look at that bowl even. She can take this cracked old wooden bowl that most people would throw out, put it in the center of her kitchen table, fill it with stuff and she makes it all look like art. Like those magazine spreads. *Vintage Elegance. Personal Style Revealed. Eclectic Country Comes Home*. If I had this arrangement in my kitchen, it would look like I was cracking up. She just makes it look...cool. Her husband's a drunk, out of work, she's got two small children, no family, parents or grandparents or cousins to help except that one weird sister and her house looks like Creativity Central. I should do more art with the kids. Painting. Maybe some crafts.

"How do you do it?" Jilly asked.

"What?" Sophia replied, beginning to stir the fruit salad.

"Make everything look like art?"

"Oh, stop it." Sophia waved her away. "It's called being broke your entire life. So, your sister. Sarah. She's good?"

"She's great. It's just nice to have company. An adult in the morning, you know?"

"Sisters are saviors. And how was church?" Sophia asked, turning the salad over, the juices from the fruits making the small segments glisten like wet jewels.

"Amazing. We have this amazing new pastor."

"So you like her?"

Jilly nodded vigorously. "She's...she just...crystallizes the homily in a way that you understand it so you can integrate it into your life. She's...amazing."

"See! And you thought you were going to hate her."

Glancing out the window and surveying the activities in the backyard, which obviously met her satisfaction, Jilly replied, "I know. I know! I mean, the old pastor was fine, but I think you get so comfortable with the known so-"

"No matter what the change is-" Sophia interjected.

"You fear it!" finished Jilly.

Sophia sitting, said, "There's a homily for you," pushing out another chair and resting her feet on it.

Spotting the picture filled box resting on the floor, Jilly asked, "Rotating the collection?"

Sophia shrugged. "Sort of...yeah."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Where’s Sam?” Jilly continued, shoving her sweaty bangs off her brow, adding, “God, I’ve gotta get a haircut.”

Sophia said, “Sleeping. The golden ninety minutes of my day,” and yawning, stretched back in her chair so far she strained the wood, searching in vain for another back crack.

Jilly chuckled. “Oh god, the dreaded nighttime feedings. Is he beginning to sleep through the night yet?”

“He’s had to,” Sophia said, her eyes falling on the wooden bowl. Besides the three red apples, car keys, a rock, a small rag doll wound with brightly colored glass beads, a salt shaker, a small bottle of hand lotion and an empty baby’s bottle, she also spied a stack of bills, two of them red, resting in its center. Rising, she smoothly slipped the envelopes out of the bowl and, after sliding them under a notebook on the counter; grabbed the fruit salad and some spoons.

Jilly reached over behind her to grab her grocery bag on the floor. “The salad looks great. I brought some cheese and crackers too. And you mentioned you were low on coffee...and I grabbed a coffee cake that I bought by mistake.” She awkwardly swung the bag up to the table, almost losing her balance in the process. Sophia grabbed the bag and placed safely it on the counter, protesting, “You didn’t have to. It’s my turn.”

“I know. I just grabbed some stuff that was just lying around the house, mocking me. I feel so fat. Fat and hot and sweaty and fat. Get this food out of my kitchen and away from me.”

Groceries lining the counter, Sophia again said, “But it’s my turn,” and began folding the bag up.

She spied a supermarket receipt crumpled at the bottom of the bag.

She’s lying, Sophia realized. She bought this food. She left the house early, she had a list, she went to the grocery store and bought food to give to me. She even had the story ready. Congratulations Sophia, you’re the neighborhood pity child again.

A wave of weariness broke against her body. Am I ever going to be the one who feeds everybody else, she wondered. Am I ever going to be...the neighbors that people send their kids to? Am I ever going to be the one with...the stuff? The money? The food? A home? A real one? I’m so sick of digging to survive. I even had to dig through three old purses to get enough change for Popsicles for the kids. I hate this.

She retrieved the receipt and glancing at the items listed, confirmed her suspicion and wordlessly tossed it in the garbage.

“Please. It was all just lying around my kitchen,” said Jilly.

The screen door opened with a loud crack. Kate was there. Hair obscured almost completely by a cotton bandana, with a few curly tendrils peaking out, she too was lugging a grocery bag. She dumped the bag in the center of the table and, without a nod of acknowledgment, strode back to the door.

“Bridget, help Jackie and Haley watch the Jim Jr.!” she yelled. “And, Bridget, put lotion on. Now! I mean it...I don’t care, it’s still summer...you can get a sunburn in August just as easily as in June, you know!...you know, we could go home right now!...Fine...Thank you.” Kate turned, brow low, eyes dark. “I’m ready to ship her off to my mother’s for the next few decades,” she declared as she dropped into a chair. Gesturing to the grocery bag and saying to Sophia, “I had a taste for an orange,” she continued. “I mean, she’s outside constantly. Constantly. I can’t get her to come in.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia unpacked the grocery bag, piling apples, oranges, bananas, kiwis, four pounds of frozen ground beef and peanut butter and two loaves of bread on the red enamel tabletop, merely saying, "You guys. It was my turn."

"Excellent. Then just hang on to that stuff. I overbought this week and the ground beef, well, this gal at the office said I should try vegetarian...something about my colon...now, you're interrupting my tale of woe," said Kate, glaring at Sophia.

"Sorry. Sorry!"

"I continue, before I was so rudely interrupted-" Kate went on with her story as Sophia pulled out another supermarket receipt, this time out of Kate's grocery bag, and crumpled it up in her hand.

"You would have thought it was the end of the world, school starting," Kate grumbled, violently cramming an escapee curl back into bondage.

Sophia asked, "So, friends and neighbors, what do you want to drink? I don't have a big choice but water, milk, a Coke-"

Jilly and Kate responded in unison. "Water."

"You sure? I've got coke, Kate," said Sophia.

Kate pulled a tarot deck out of her purse. "Nope. Caffeine is the devil's elixir. Can we do me first?" she asked, already beginning to shuffle.

"You want to go first?" Jilly said. "Okay, we could do a family question. A card representing Bridget, a card representing you. Then, we-"

"I got it!" Kate blurted out.

"What? You already did a reading on Bridget?" said Jilly.

"No. No! The job. I got the job. I got the job!"

"You did? That's great!" said Sophia.

"You got the job? Oh! The job! That job! Fantastic," Jilly said, adding a "Thank god!"

Kate acknowledged, "I know, I haven't been fun to be around," her crooked grin appearing. "But I will be now. It's great. I'm great. All of it...great! Not a non-great thing in the pot today," she declared, gleefully spinning the wooden bowl in the table's center around so hard it wobbled.

Setting down three tall glasses of ice water, condensation already making them slippery, Sophia asked, "When do you start?"

"A week," Kate said. "Then I'm off to save the children and old people."

"Off?" asked Sophia.

"Well, downtown still, but to get to the new building adds another thirty minutes but I think I've worked most of the kinks out." She picked up her glass. "Hey, guys, come on!"

Jilly raised her glass and Sophia grabbed hers. "Play Doh and Happy Meals," they said, touching cups. The friends all took a long sip; grinning at each other over the wet, cool rims. Jilly wiggled, pulling her sweaty thighs from the vinyl seat cushion with a grimace. A loud ripping sound followed. Sophia and Kate immediately dissolve into guffaws. "Oh, stop it!" Jilly groaned attempting to sound insulted.

"Careful. Don't move again, Jilly. We don't want to wake the baby," Sophia cautioned her.

Jilly said, "You are so obnoxious," and turned to the still giggling Kate. "So, anyway, the job. It's for real then. Tell us."

"Yeah. What's the office called again?" Sophia asked.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly jumped in before Kate could answer. “The Public Guardian. They advocate for the young and elderly that are destitute or need legal counsel. Some of my clients have-”

“I’m just so happy I got the fucking job! Anyway, yes, the Public Guardian’s office,” Kate said, reclaiming focus and leaning back in her seat. She stopped, mid-stretch, shooting a quick glance at Sophia, and then slowly sat back up. “I mean, I think that there are always jobs for lawyers willing to take a huge cut in pay. Even in a rough economy like this.”

Shit, shit, shit, Kate thought. My big mouth. Edward. Drunk, unemployed Edward. Here I am, bragging about my new job. I wasn’t going to. I’m pathetic-

Sophia nodded. “I know. It’s great, Kate. Really...oh, I forgot bowls.”

As Sophia went to the cabinet, Kate dropped her head to her hands behind Sophia’s back, wordlessly berating herself. Jilly silently motioned for her not to worry with a wave of her hand. Observed their antics in the glass covered cabinet door, a ripple of warm shame flushed Sophia’s sternum and crept up towards her throat. She leaned towards a fan trying to dispel it as she opened the cabinet and grabbed some bowls.

They were both sitting upright, smiling, when Sophia returned.

Kate, grabbing the fruit salad and serving herself, looked at Sophia. “So, do you want to go first? Do a spread on Ed? The whole job thing?”

Sophia shook her head. “Absolutely not. Shuffle. And tell us more.”

Kate hesitated and then began to shuffle. “Well, you know, I didn’t think I was going to get it, after that second interview-” she began.

“With Cold, Cutting Carol Carson?” Jilly asked.

Kate nodded with a roll of her eyes. “Wow, is that woman tough. My only reservation is her,” she said as pushed the wooden bowl to the end of the table, making room to lay the cards out.

Jilly added, “And dealing with some pretty tough, complicated casework. I mean, child advocacy can be rough. Often you start off thinking that-”

“I know, but the clients I’m not worried about. Please. I’ve dealt with both criminal and civil at the firm. Trust me. I can handle the kiddies and the seniors,” said Kate, stopping Jilly with a confident wave of her hand.

“Well, then sounds like you’ve got it all figured out,” Jilly muttered as Kate smoothly lay down five cards.

They all leaned in and looked at the cards, Sophia craning her neck to get a better view. “Okay, Kate, you did...what?” Sophia asked.

Kate pointed to each card, reciting what they represented in the spread. “Me, then current situation. Obstacle. Best course of action. Outcome.”

Jilly grabbed a tarot book off a pile off books teetering on the kitchen counter as Sophia recited, “Page of Swords, Six of Wands, Queen of Swords-”

Kate interrupted her with a shout. “Ha! I know who that is. I knew Cold, Cutting Carol would show up-”

Sophia smiled and kept going. “Hanged Man. And the Eight of Pentacles, reversed.”

Jilly looked up from her book. “It’s reversed?”

Sophia and Kate both looked at the card and nodded. “Yup. Why?” Kate asked.

Jilly said, “...um...no reason, really. I’m still just figuring out the meaning of the reversals.”

“They are hard,” agreed Sophia.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Well, the first few are easy, so come on,” Kate urged. “The Page of Wands is me. A passionate student. Me. Starting this job. So, that’s obvious...the next card is-”

“A beginner,” added Jilly. “The Page of Wands also means a beginner.”

Kate shook her head. “No, I think more studious and eager to start than...naïve. Not a beginner. I mean, litigating, I know. I’m a master at that.”

Jilly paused and shrugged. “Okay.”

Kate turned to face Sophia. “Next.”

Sophia began looking through her book. “Current situation...um...Six of Wands...got it,” she said, settling on a page and reciting, “Triumphant. Victor. Victory. Success.”

“Obvious again,” Kate stated and, with a glance towards Jilly, reached over to the next card. “Next one.”

But Jilly leaned over and grabbed the Six of Wands card off the table and scanned it. “Maybe more on the path to achievement but not there yet. He’s on a horse after all. Still riding. Not arrived. And look, he’s sort of ignoring the people behind him.”

Sophia took the card back from Jilly, saying, “But see, Kate,” holding up the card to show her, “It looks like he’s in a parade. A good place. Happy.”

Jilly suggested, “Maybe parading his victory?”

Kate slapped her hands down on the table and, hot, sweaty and boiling, turned to face Jilly.

The moist, still air did little to dampen the silence that had suddenly fallen.

That pompous, arrogant, superior bitch, Kate thought. Parading my victory. Like she doesn’t parade her perfect, loving, rich, FAT husband? And she’s such a hip, streetwise therapist ‘cuz she listens to a few suburban housewives tales of woe? Had a few rich kid clients smoking some pot and tanking in school? Come on! She’s been on me for weeks about this thing. How hard it’s going to be. Like she knows!

Kate opened her mouth to launch but Sophia sprang up. “God, the kids! Kate, could you check on the kids? And, Jilly, run upstairs and peak into Sam’s room. I thought I heard something over the monitor but I want...to...um...make room for the other readings and...more ice water. God, is it hot!”

With some relief, Sophia’s orders were obeyed. Jilly headed down the long hallway towards the stairs and could be heard thumping up them. Kate waited until Jilly was well upstairs before she said anything. “Can you believe her?” Kate hissed. “She makes me nuts when she does that! That ‘been-there-done-that-I-know-better-than-you’ shit.”

Sophia shrugged, merely heaving the big bowl off the table onto the cluttered counter as Kate stalked across to the window overlooking the backyard. “They’re fine,” she growled. “Sitting under a tree, Jim Jr.’s drinking from a water pistol and the girls are talking.” Kate returned to her seat but only after she repositioned the fan that had been facing Jilly to point towards her chair.

Jilly returned. “He’s out. Breathing. Cute. Not sweating. God, nice to be five months old,” she said.

Sophia, confident that everyone had regained their composure, picked up a book. “Okay, ladies. Obstacle.”

Kate stopped her. “Don’t bother,” she said. “It’s Carol Carson. It’s Carol Carson. She’s my obstacle. I know it.” Kate picked up the card and yelled at it. “You are a cold woman, Carol. Cold and...um...” she pulled the card back to take a look at it, “...cloudy.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“How?” asked Sophia. “I mean, what did she say? You’re a brilliant lawyer.”

“Oh she just kept talking about the heavy caseload, the complex legal issues. Sometimes the clients are troubled, sometimes mentally ill. Working with kids, with neglect. Some are violent. She said it’s not easy work. But I know that. She looked at me like I was this newbie.” Kate affected a disdainful, pompous tone. “‘Kate, working with violent, troubled or abused children...well, it may change the way you look at the world.’ The thing is, I want to change! I want to make a difference. To be different. So it’s not an obstacle at all.”

“What’s obstacle mean, Mom?”

Bridget was standing on back stoop, bright sunlight streaming in around her. Leaning against the doorframe, flowers woven into her hair and denim shorts covered with dirt, she casually worked the screen door open with her foot and wandered over to the refrigerator.

“Jackie said there were Popsicles?” Bridget continued, making her demand sound like a polite enough question to evade rebuke. Sophia rose, replying “sure” as she opened the freezer. Cold fog floated out from the unit and cascaded down the front of the refrigerator. Bridget and Sophia leaned into it, smiling.

Kate watched her daughter as Bridget took a handful of Popsicles from Sophia and turned back to her mother. “Obstacle?” Bridget asked again, hip jutted out to the side, Popsicles dangling in her hand.

“Something that makes what you want to do, harder to do,” said Kate.

“So, it’s a bad thing?” Bridget asked, swinging the Popsicles back and forth by their white paper wrappers.

“Not always,” Jilly said. “Sometimes, what makes something harder for you to do is what eventually makes you better at doing it.”

Bridget considered this for a moment. “Like grape vines?”

All three mothers gaped at her, struggling to make the connection.

Bridget sighed. “Oh geez, grape vines...France...wine...you know! The better, no, well, the rockier and rougher the soil, the better the wine is. Grandma told me, you know, after she got back from that trip. The plant has to work harder to be more fruitful, and well, to, like-”

“Honey, don’t use ‘like’,” Kate said.

Bridget cast her a level look. “I meant, it helps it to...like...survive, it helps to have things tough sometimes. Right? That’s what I meant. That’s an obstacle?”

The three women nodded slowly.

“Okay.”

And with a shrug, she was gone, screen door banging behind her. Chuckling at Bridget’s departure, Sophia leaned back in her chair in an attempt to catch the breeze that occasionally meandered in the back door. “She’s right, Kate. This woman hired you so she can’t be all that bad,” she said, opening up the book and beginning to read. “‘A tough, honest person, probably female, articulate, doesn’t suffer fools gladly, gifted at seeing the big picture.’” Sophia interrupted herself to point to the card. “See, how her head is actually above the clouds. She’s looking above all the things that cloud the issue.” Sophia resumed reading. “‘Lacking in sentimentality or artifice.’ She sounds like you, Kate.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly added, “Or who you will be after being in the child advocacy trenches for a few years. Kate, I gotta tell you, I don’t mean to act superior, but as a friend I have to tell you that you have no idea what you’re getting into-”

Kate abruptly unwound her scarf and as the curls spring out from her head, she turned to Jilly with a look that many a judge and opposing counsel was familiar. “You are coming close to raining on my triumphant parade, young lady! I know exactly what I am doing, thank you very much,” Kate said, voice deep, smooth and a little too articulate.

“Just reading the cards,” Jilly retorted.

Sophia said, “Come on, guys. Break it up...best course. Best course,” her best “mommy” voice forcing the issue back down to simmering as she pointed to the next card in the reading. “Kate, this is your best course. Come on. Read.”

She handed both women a tarot book and leaned back to turn a fan up to a higher setting. “Read!” she ordered, taking no prisoners this time. Kate and Jilly quickly started searching their books.

Kate said, “Okay...um...I got the Hanged Man I in my best course position. He’s...is he reversed?”

“No,” Jilly said and looking to Sophia, added, “Should I go now?”

Sophia nodded regally, granting permission. Jilly began.

““Looking at things in a completely new way’...see how he’s hanging upside down but completely happy about it?...um...‘Turning your life upside-down.’”

Kate snorted. “Done!”

Reading from her book, Sophia took over. ““Allowing yourself to feel pain and discomfort as you seek out a new world perspective. Looking at your hang-ups and assumptions and challenging them.””

““Allowing yourself to look different in order to learn,”” Jilly read. ““Allowing yourself to be different.””

Jilly and Sophia looked at Kate. She threw up her hands. “I can do that...I am doing that. Alright, outcome.”

“Eight of Pentacles,” Jilly muttered, again rifling through her book.

Having already found the description and read it, Sophia hesitated, saying, “But it’s reversed. Right?”

“Yeah. Eight of Pentacles, reversed,” Kate said, “Come on. Outcome.”

Sophia hesitated again; cast a glance at Jilly, who had her head down, reading intently.

This is good, Jilly was thinking. No, not good. God forgive me, I am such a bitch. But since she won’t listen to me, maybe she’ll listen to the darn card. I’m glad this card is reversed. I don’t care. I am glad. And it isn’t me being bitchy even though she thinks I’m being bitchy. Kate...thinking somebody else is a bitch. A red-letter day. She needs to hear this. I’ll let Sophia read. I just won’t say anything.

Sophia began slowly. “Well...it’s a work card. See how the guy is sitting at a workbench, producing all those nice...um...pentacles, and he’s really into his work. I mean, it’s going well. But, remember this is a pentacle, job, work thing. Not a wand, passion, career thing.”

Kate nodded, her shiny, dark curls bobbing, and said, “Okay. Good. Got it. Keep going,” as Sophia pulled the back of her shirt away from her body, flapping it in a vain attempt to cool off.

Come on, Soph, thought Jilly. Quit stalling. Don’t wimp out now. Read the reversal.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“So, it’s, well...reversed, it’s-” She began reading directly from the book. “Mediocrity. The method of work that has been successful in the past is now no longer effective. Not knowing how to proceed. Using the incorrect procedure. Mistakes and errors.” She peered up at Kate, with a small shrug, adding, “Maybe it just means that you’re going to be learning some new things at this office?”

Kate looked at Jilly.

Jilly looked at Kate.

Kate groaned and, grabbing her sweaty scarf and expertly wrapped it back around her head to recapture the majority of her curls, she gestured for Jilly to speak. “You’re dying to go, Jilly. So, spit it out.”

Jilly took a deep breath. Time to walk the walk of a Christian, Jilly thought. I want to just let it rip. But don’t. Be the Christ. It’s easy being a Christian when everyone is behaving, when everybody’s getting along. That’s cake. This...when a friend is making you nuts for weeks. Arrogant, know-it-all, cocky, superior...okay, Jilly, this is a test. Be what you preach. Be what you believe.

Jilly spoke. Gently.

“Prepare yourself, Kate. It may not come completely naturally...at first. That’s all. The work. But just at first. You are so smart. You’ll get it. You’ll be brilliant. But, maybe, not right away. It may be a difficult transition. You aren’t going to rule the roost right away. You’ve led the charge for a long time at your firm but this is a whole new battle you’ll be fighting. And new battlefield.”

Kate threw her head back. “Well, I know that! I’m not naïve, Jilly, whatever you might think.”

How do I do this? Jilly thought. What do I say to make her see?

Jilly continued. “But, Kate, I’ve been a therapist and a social worker for a long time. This field can be brutal. Really tough stuff.”

Kate stood so abruptly that her chair skittered across the floor behind her; she turned towards a fan, lifting her shirt so the cool air billows up her body. “Please, don’t talk down to me, Jilly!”

Jilly closed her eyes. Geez Kate, you can be such a bitch. I was being nice. If you want somebody to talk down to you, look in the frickin’ mirror! Okay, Jilly, keep going.

“I’m not talking down to you. But, god, Kate, you’ve got to realize-”

Sophia interrupted them both. “I think...I THINK she just means that it may be a slightly difficult adjustment. Right, Jilly? But we both know how much you wanted this. Right, Jilly? How hard you’ve worked...Right, Jilly?”

Jilly leaned in and, to Kate’s back, said, “I just think you-”

Sophia interrupted her again, this time her green eyes flinty. “You’ve worked so hard. Right, Jilly? Remember how hard Kate’s worked. It may be a scary change for her. That’s all. Right, Jilly? It might be a little scary.”

Jilly turned to Sophia, ready to make her point to her. She saw the look in Sophia’s eyes. She’s telling me to shut up, Jilly realized. She’s telling me...Kate’s scared. And she’s right. Thank you, God. Thank you for Sophia. She’s got it. She’s in the Christ place, not me. Listen to Soph. Okay. Okay. Deep breathe.

Jilly said to Kate’s back. “Um...right. Soph’s right.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Flapping her shirttail, Kate returned to the table. “The schedule may need some tweaking at first. I know that. The commute. And I am taking a pay cut but working longer hours.”

Sophia nodded. “Exactly. That’s probably it. Maybe it just means you shouldn’t work too hard. Right?...right, Jilly?”

“Right,” Jilly echoed. “Right...you’ll be great, Kate.”

Kate grinned. “You’re acting as though I take these flimsy-”

Sophia and Jilly, speaking in unison, joined in. “Pieces of plastic covered cardboard sitting on a table-”

“Seriously!” Kate finished with a flourish.

“Sorry,” Jilly said to Kate. “My mistake.”

Kate dipped her fingers in her water and flicked some drops in Jilly’s direction. “You are a mistake!” she remarked as Jilly feigned ducking.

“Hey, check on the kids, bossy!” Jilly ordered.

Kate retorted, “You check on the kids, bitch!”

“Girls, girls, girls...” Sophia said, shaking her head as she rose and peeked out the window. “Jackie’s working on her Popsicle and Haley and Bridget seem to be building a sand castle condo for Jimmy.”

“Who’s bossing who?” Jilly asked.

“Hard to tell. Always a draw with those two,” Sophia said, returning to her seat, muttering under her breath, “They take after their mothers.”

A realization dawned on Jilly, but Kate had beaten her to it and was already striding towards the opened window.

“Make sure he doesn’t-” Jilly began but Kate was already yelling out the window.

“Bridget, Haley, don’t let him eat the sand!”

* * *

Kate pointed the cart towards the meat aisle.

“Mom,” Bridget moaned. She was hanging off the front of the cart, balancing her feet on the bottom, arms extended towards Kate, clutching the sides of the cart, stomach pressed against the metal basket.

“Bridget, get off! You’re too heavy and we’re late for Sophia’s already,” Kate barked, straining as she swung the cart around a corner.

“We’re not late. Can’t we get Popsicles? They don’t ever have much stuff there.”

“They don’t have much stuff because Jackie’s dad is out of work but don’t say anything about bringing treats because people feel bad about being...about not having a lot of stuff. Like food and nice clothes. You know, that sort of thing. We are very lucky, you know that? Now get off!”

Bridget gracelessly stumbled off the cart and leaned into Kate, half-skipping alongside of her. “Then why are you taking them all this stuff? Won’t that make them feel bad?”

“No, because I have a cover story,” Kate said, grabbing the biggest package of frozen meat she could find. Shivering, her hair under her bandana already felt wet with perspiration, the humid air combined with the cold emanating from the coolers hit the back of her neck like a heavy, unpleasant ice pack.

“What’s a cover story?” Bridget asked.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Um...sort of a...nice lie.”

Bridget merely looked at Kate.

Kate was still working on her cover story.

Why can't everything be great for everybody, all at the same time, Kate thought as she swung into the produce section, neatly steering around two seniors, an obviously botoxed and medicated trophy wife and a stock boy. Maybe I'll just say Bridget's dad was going out of town unexpectedly because of something and he gave me all this stuff from his fridge. No, bad cover story. They both know ex-hubby Teddy the Schmoover never eats at home unless there's a natural disaster or rift in the fabric of the universe.

She grabbed a bag of apples, some oranges and a large cluster of bananas.

“Jackie doesn't like bananas too much,” Bridget offered.

Kate said, “They're for the baby. I can't exactly come in with jars of baby food.”

“Why not?” Bridget asked, still trying to figure out the cover story plan. “The cover story doesn't cover baby food?”

“Sort of,” Kate muttered.

I just want to celebrate this new job, Kate thought, heading towards the bakery shop. I did it. I got it. I'm the new attorney at the Public Guardian's Office. Miss Jilly-Good Christian-I-Know-All-About-The Disadvantaged will just have to zip her lip from now on because now I'm walking the walk too. And not only am I walking away from the six-figure salary but I did it the New Age enlightened, self-actualized way. That should make Miss Let's-All-Get-Centered happy. I also took that measly little Ace of Wands, watered it with my credentials, fed it with desire and I constructed a new future. I will be of service. I will change the world, my little corner of it, one neglected child and senior at a time. Those judges and lawyers aren't gonna know what hit 'em. I will be an Emperor among lawyers. Arrogant, know-it-all, cocky, superior Jilly can take her warnings of “You might not get it,” and “It might be hard, you know, since you're not used to advocacy work,” and she can stick it. I will win difficult cases just like I won this job, surmounting the obstacle of Cold, Cutting Carol Carson. I am completely confident. I am strong. There is not a fiber of doubt, not a thread, not a fragment of worry about whether this was the right thing to do. I will live up to my father's heritage of service, perhaps even surpassing it. Jilly is completely wrong. This will be the most natural transition. I was meant to do this...and things one is meant to do, well, they come easily. Nope, I'm not worried one teeny tiny little bit.

“Mom, come on!” Bridget said.

“What?”

“Why are you just standing there with a loaf of bread? Just put it in the cart and let's go,” said Bridget, adding, “Oh and Mom?”

“What?”

“The cover story?”

“Don't worry,” Kate said with bold a conviction that fooled many a judge and opposing counsel (but not Bridget) “I'm working on it,” she promised as she wheeled for the checkout lane.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’ve got a hunch about this reading,” said Jilly as she shuffled the cards, letting them rifle evenly through her hands.

“What? Why? More water, anybody?” Sophia asked.

Kate and Jilly shook their heads as Jilly continued. “Things are just...good. That’s all.”

Sophia said, “Jim starts the new position Monday, right?”

“Hallelujah. That’s what you religious, holy-roller types say, right?” Kate said.

“Actually, we usually say ‘bite me’, but hallelujah will work to,” Jilly retorted as she leaned over behind Kate and repositioned the fan to blow back in her direction.

“Children, children,” Sophia sighed. “Come on, break it up. So, no more travel?”

“No more travel. No more planes. No more O’Hare. No more no Jim,” Jilly sang as she placed the shuffled deck down on the table. “It just feels good. To see the plan to completion. It was all part of the plan. The Jilly and Jim future, life plan. We get a leg up on retirement, college, savings. Now, I finally get more Jim.” She quickly and confidently turned over five cards, laying them down in a row.

The rattle of the fans and the children’s voices in the distance to filled the room as they took in the revealed cards. Sophia was the first to speak. “Wow,” she said softly as Kate leaned back in her chair. Arching for a bit of breeze, eyes steady on Jilly, Kate said, “So, looks like you’re having a little trouble in paradise too.”

The Nine of Cups rested in the first position. A plump and happy man, surrounded by a half circle of cups resting on a table behind him, he was the image of a person convinced they have all their cups in a row and are more than ready to start drinking.

The Moon was the second card, having found its place into the current situation position. Howling dogs at water’s edge, a twisted path and an obscured destination were illuminated by the full moon, which, since the card was reversed, appeared to be waning.

Third, the obstacle, was the Star. A beautiful, relaxed woman, pouring a seemingly endless supply of water into clear pools, had a large pointed golden star hovering in the sky above her. But, since this card was also reversed, it looked as if the woman, unsuspecting, was going to be pulled downward into one of the star’s points that was aimed directly at her back like a knife. The water flowing from her pitchers appeared to be disturbing the calm pools, not adding to them.

In the place of best course of action, the image of a robed and seated man filled the face of the Hierophant card. A pope’s crown on his head, concrete pillars on either side, keys at his feet and two people standing in front of him awaiting his call, he stared straight out from the card and into Sophia’s kitchen. He was surrounded, protected, by the building in which he sat and the people around him, ready to leap to his bidding.

The outcome of this chain of events rested with the King of Pentacles. He was hanging suspended, reversed, in the final position of the line of cards. Planted in his throne, a

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

pentacle in one hand and a scepter in the other, he seemed to be awaiting an arrival of some sort. Clusters of grapes dripped from his opulent cape and his castle loomed behind him, far in the distance, yet he sat on a throne that was placed, planted, within a stone wall. Vines growing up from the earth were either rooting him to the earth or trapping him to the ground. A crown rested heavy on his head. It was difficult to tell whether his eyes were shut, looking within, or merely cast downward observing the pentacle in his hand. Either way, they were unavailable for interpretation. Since the card was reversed, the pentacle that his hand was resting atop of seemed to be acting as a heavy ball, weighing the king's hand down, almost crushing his fingers with its weight. A blood red scarf was wrapped around his neck. Cloaked, hands full, he was surrounded.

A faint ripple was again felt in Sophia's chest, but this one seemed to be creeping towards the pit of her stomach. She noted that this time, the feeling wasn't shame.

The fans rattled back and forth another rotation before anyone spoke again.

They all suddenly, simultaneously, reached for the stack of tarot books, knocking them across the table in their urgency.

"Geez. Sorry," said Jilly, handing one book to Kate and one to Sophia.

"Yikes. Kate, I almost got your water. Sorry. Sorry," said Sophia, taking the book from Jilly and looking at the first card. She began. "Well, you, the Nine of Cups. That's good! Really good. I mean, terrific. Good. Well, it's-"

Jilly was already nodding. "Contentment. Remember, Soph, you got it last month?"

"But mine was reversed," Sophia added as she began reading from the book.

"Satiating. Contentment. Celebration. Ease. Confident. Having drunk one's fill. Happy."

Jilly turned to Kate and waited. "Maybe overly confident?" Kate suggested.

"Yeah, okay," Sophia said quickly, pointing to the next card. "Current situation. Um...The Moon. The Moon, reversed."

Kate began to read, voice calm. "Reversed. Primal forces out of control. The dark side of nature. Fighting the flow of the universe. Chaos hidden under the surface but generating riptides and powerful currents hidden to the naked eye."

Jilly thought for a moment and shook her head. "I'm just not getting any impressions. I usual do...but...nothing. You guys, anything?" She pushed her bangs back with a firm hand and watched her friends. They both shook their heads.

"Let's move on then," Sophia suggested. "Obstacle."

Jilly grimaced. "Okay. The Star, reversed. Um...a blockage, maybe?"

"Good things not flowing?" Sophia added.

"But they are! Good things are flowing!" Jilly protested as she pushed away from the table. Wandered over to the window and peering out, she turned back and glared at the cards.

Kate picked up the Star. "Maybe they are. For you," she said.

I could really tear her apart, thought Kate. I mean, look at this reading. And she earned a good ripping after that "parading your victory" crack. But, she's worried. And this reading, this heat. Why did it get hotter in here all of a sudden? And Sophia, she's got that pale, green-gray thing going around her eyes. Man, she looks tired. But she got that same look when she gave me that reading about the firm and that case settling. And she was...the reading was right...it was crazy.

"Meaning?" demanded Jilly.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What?” Kate looked at Jilly.

“What?” Jilly barked. “Come on. Good things are flowing but just for me?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” Kate said. “God, it’s hot. Well, maybe, perhaps Jim will be less of a star after he stops traveling. A less visible, spotlighted position. Does he want this new job? Did he go after it?” Trying to ignore the large, heavy drop of sweat slowly working its way down her back, Kate kept her face smooth and expression clear as she looked at Jilly.

Jilly flopped back down in her seat and yelped, “But we both wanted it!” She looked at Kate and Sophia and conceded. “Okay, well...maybe, I did and he agreed. It’s the plan. He agreed on the plan! God wants this for our family. I feel it.” Jilly grabbed the bowl of fruit off the counter, plopped it in her lap and began nervously picking grapes out of the salad, popping them into her mouth.

God’s plan, she thought. He’s been guiding me towards this. I’ve felt it. I know it.

Jilly gestured to the card. “It doesn’t make sense. Doesn’t the Star mean health and healing anyway?”

Sophia nodded. “Yeah. Upright. Reversed, as your obstacle, maybe someone not healing? Not being healthy?”

Jilly furiously munched on the dark purple grapes, thought for a moment and finally said, “Oh heck, let’s just move on. Best course. The Hierophant.”

“Church,” Sophia said.

Jilly protested. “Church? What? But I thought it was teacher?”

“Me too,” said Kate.

Sophia was staring, not at the cards and not at her friends, but towards an inner point, the place where a thought becomes an idea. “It can be that,” Sophia said. “But, I was just thinking...how happy you were with church this morning. It just sprang into my head. I don’t know why.” Sophia rose, walked to the kitchen sink and, still thinking, began filling a small pitcher with water.

Skimming a book, Kate agreed. “Yeah. You’re right. It’s systems. Organizations. School, traditions, church. I forgot the church part. Being supported by the societal order around you. Rituals.”

Kate fiddled with the remaining stack of tarot cards as Sophia refilled everyone’s water glasses. Lost in thought, the three friends took their glasses and automatically clink rims.

“Play Doh. Happy Meals,” they mutter and continued thinking.

“Rituals, rituals. I don’t know. Jim’s company?” Sophia offered.

Jilly’s ponytail bobbed vigorously as she nodded, slight relief in her voice. “That’s good! The company. But, looking at the outcome, is it silly to be worried?”

Kate leaned over and looked into Jilly’s eyes. “Please! They’re cardboard! CARDBOARD, woman! We’d get as much insight if we built a house of cards instead of trying to read something into these silly pictures. My god, you two. This is just a fun way to spend an afternoon. You really need my voice of reason, you know. I should bill you by the hour!”

Sophia reached into the large wooden bowl and fished out a quarter. “Here you go, counselor. But you owe me change back.”

“Cute,” Kate replied. “You know, statistically, if you murder a redhead, you have a sixty-two percent higher probability of getting off.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Bullshit,” Sophia shot back.

Kate grinned. “Yup. Bullshit. But good bullshit. I love making up social statistics. But you two are the only ones that ever call me on them.”

“Well, we don’t fear you,” said Jilly. “Curse you sometimes. But never fear you.”

“You want to go on?” Sophia asked. Jilly grimaced, yanked her ponytail tighter and nodded.

“Do it. Outcome,” Jilly said, tapping her finger on the pentacle in the king’s hand. “What’s the reversal on the King of Pentacles?”

Kate handed her opened book to Sophia and gestured for her to read.

Thanks a lot, Kate, Sophia thought. She knows something’s coming. Empirical Kate, the voice of science and reason, is nervous about this reading. Jim. Something about Jim. An affair? No. Fired, maybe? Or maybe it’s Jilly. She’s really the king of the castle at home. Is Jilly sick? What is it? Why can’t I get a handle on this? Okay, read. Just do it.

““Being disconnected from your source of strength,”” read Sophia. ““Dropping or letting go of important responsibilities through lack of discipline or strength. A strong, grounded person who’s lost their way. Abandoning your responsibilities. A life plan gone...um...awry.”” Sophia finished and looked up at Jilly. “Well, he is gone from you and the kids a lot.”

Jilly protested. “But that’s ending!”

“It could be that he’s used to the excitement of travel and making the deal and that he’s going to miss it,” offered Kate.

Sophia chimed in, “Yes! It will just be a change for him. For you both.”

Jilly biting her lip, struggled. “Maybe, I’ll get him involved in coaching, helping Haley’s soccer team, church, of course. This new pastor. She’s great-”

“Yes!” Sophia said. “Church. The Hierophant.”

Jilly continued, thinking aloud. “Maybe a men’s thing? Basketball or something like that?”

Kate, nibbling her salad, commented, “He may want to join a gym before he starts basketball.”

Jilly smiled. “Hey! I love his gut. Kept the travel whores away.”

“Far away,” Kate said into her bowl.

Abruptly Jilly swept up the cards, her fingertips grasping at them, trying to pick them up and away from the old enamel. She handed them to Sophia in a haphazard pile, the corners of the cards poking into her sticky palms.

“Your turn.”

* * *

“God’s plan.”

Jilly allowed her back to settle against the wood pew. She had been waiting all week for this moment.

Sarah back at the house, Jim coming home, tarot reading this afternoon and church right now. I got here, Jilly thought. I made it.

The end-of-summer flurry had begun. List of To-Dos on the corkboard, Jilly had marked off each accomplishment with a giddy twinge of satisfaction.

School supplies shopping. Done.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Doctor check-ups and medical forms completed. Done
School clothes shopping. Done.
Food for the Meet-and-Greet with the new pastor. Done.
PTA meeting. Done.
Clients/sessions. Done.
Spanish and ballet sign-up. Done.
Grocery shopping. Done.
Youth Group meeting at shelter. Done.
Make up guest room. Done.
Get Sarah from the airport. Done.
Order rug for Jim's new office. Done.
Schedule company personal trainer for Jim consult. Done.

Now, finally, she had arrived. She was exactly where she wanted to be. Kids in Sunday school. Jim flying home from his last international business trip. Sarah at her house, sleeping in after wonderful night of late night talking (Jilly reminded herself to pray for forgiveness for all the Mom-bashing they had done). After this, a quick swing by the market and then off to Sophia's place for an afternoon with the Moms and tarot card reading. But the best part of all was that she was in church right now.

Jilly loved church. Ever since she was a girl she had loved it. Years ago, Sarah had put her finger on it, stating firmly, "It's like all the best parts of you, Jilly. Church is all the stuff you're really good at. Friends, philosophical questions, lots of things to organize, built in naps...excuse me, I mean, 'Let us pray' moments, people to help, a great roomy building to hang out in and a guy who's always there for you. That cute Jesus guy. Strong, steady, reliable God. Take your pick. Plus, you get to boss people around. In a really loving, actualized Jilly way."

She was right. Thank you God for Sarah.

Thank you God, for this wonderful day.

The sun hit the apex of the arching stained glass window, casting down a rippled blue shadow, encasing her body in an aqua cape of shimmering light. She felt relaxed and happy, surrounded by the half circle of rows of pews behind her.

Jilly lifted her eyes to the pulpit. Oddly enough, the woman standing there had been her biggest anxiety all week.

After the retirement of Minister Henderson (and enduring a number of visiting preachers) the church finally hired a minister from Oregon. Lillian Fieldstone. Jilly missed her one "audition" sermon. At first Jilly couldn't remember why had she missed it. She never missed Sundays. Then it came to her...stomach flu. Both kids. April.

So her new spiritual guide was a completely unknown commodity and, as much as Jilly trusted the church board, the landscaping in the meditation garden alone was enough to make a person, if not worried, at the very least cautious about their judgment.

She needn't have worried.

Pastor Fieldstone was wonderful. Silver gray hair flying everywhere, direct, funny, clearly easy in her own skin, she wore the robes of the church like a shepherd, not a judge. Her homily was about leaving Oregon, her known place, to come here, the unknown. She lit on the desire for order, safety, community, faith, adventure and continuity but the most of lovely of all; she created a vibration of trust amidst the congregation. She freely acknowledged she had assumed to understand what God's plan was for her. She said that

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

even Jesus made the mistake, assuming he had been forsaken. Claiming concrete knowledge of God's plan was folly. Educated guesses were just grand. But knowing, for certain? Six months ago, she knew she would forever be in her house on the Pacific. But now Oregon was merely dust on her shoes and richness in her heart. She was here, now, for a reason. God's reason. God's plan.

And they were all going to discover the particulars together.

Jilly could hardly wait.

CHAPTER SIX

“I want to do mine differently,” said Sophia, carefully and methodically straightening the stack, eyes and hands intent on ordering the chaos of cardboard Jilly had bestowed upon her.

“Excellent,” Kate shouted. “We’ll build a house of cards. Perfect. Finally, you two start listening to me!”

The mood from Jilly’s reading broken, the friends gladly busied themselves reaching for salad and flapping their damp shirts out from their bodies. Salad bowl in hand, Jilly stood and looked out of window. Saying, “Go for it,” over her shoulder to Sophia, Jilly bellowed out the window, “Yes, that’s fine, drink out of the hose but turn it off when...is Jimmy okay? Give him some too...okay, okay, I’m going away.” Jilly looked over Kate’s shoulder. “What are we doing? House of cards?”

“Feels like it, but no,” Sophia said as she shuffled. “No, I just want to lay down one, read it, then move on to the next one. I focus too much on the outcome. I need to just look at...each one. One step at a time.”

Head lowered, Sophia held the deck to her chest for a moment, waiting for the unease deep in her chest to quiet. She took a breath, then another. Finally realizing it wasn’t going to budge, she went ahead and turned over her first card.

Observing the card cluttered with pentacles, Kate stated, “Ten of Pentacles, reversed.”

On the rectangular picture, a family was gathered under a grand archway that appeared to be placed in the center of a courtyard. The mother and father talked while their child played at their feet, happily chasing a dog around her parents’ knees. A grandfather sat, a gentle patriarch watching the family, while above his regal head a crest could be seen attached to the archway. The crest’s emblem was a castle. The family was clearly home.

The card was reversed.

Kate began. “Okay. Upright, I mean, not reversed, it’s family, tradition, money, gain, family history.”

Sophia asked, “And reversed?”

Jilly, looking over Kate’s shoulder, offered, “The ending of a family tradition? Maybe family history rejected.”

“Unorthodox. Defying tradition,” said Kate. “The unexpected action.”

“Are you making some changes?” asked Jilly. “Doing anything differently?”

“Maybe it represents Edward’s job...thing,” Kate offered quietly. “Being out of work. Laid off.”

Sophia, still looking at the cards, said, “Fired. He was fired.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

A flushed wave of sensation passed over Sophia's body. God, it feels good to be honest. It's as though it's a habit I never learned. Like I'm learning how to breathe. I should have been breathing all along but I just began. Thirty-four years old and I'm just starting to breath. Why did I wait so long? So long, not breathing. And it's easy. But terrifying. Taking this weird air into my body, trusting that it won't kill me. Being honest. It feels deadly. But it's not. It's like air.

Sophia turned her next card over.

"Current situation. The World. Reversed."

"The World," Kate said. "Here, I found it."

Sophia said, "You don't have to read from the book. I know what the World, reversed, is. See the woman on the card?" Sophia pointed. "The long, purple scarf wrapped around her? See how she looks like she's dancing in the middle of a wind whirl? Well, that's how I feel."

"Your world's upside-down?" Kate asked.

Sophia nodded.

"Why?" asked Kate. "Money? Mortgage and no-job for Ed?"

Sophia just turned over another card. "Obstacle," she said. When it was revealed, Jilly reached for a book but Sophia stopped her, saying, "Jilly, it's the Five of Pentacles. You know what it means. We know what it means. Put down the damn book, look at my card and talk."

Jilly said, "But I'm not good at...I need the book."

"I just need for you to talk to me," pleaded Sophia. "Just talk to me."

Jilly began, hesitantly at first. "Well...um...A long standing, long endured worry. A burden carried so long it has become a habit. See how there are two cold and injured people staggering in the snowstorm? The woman's feet are bare but she's still trudging along, up to her ankles in a snowdrift. The other one is hurt...crutches, wounded. They are obviously a pair. A damaged team. Above them is a glowing stained glass window with golden pentacles hanging above them. It's a church window but they...can't get inside. Or won't. Haven, safety, security, financial security, is close but they don't see it. Their heads are just focused on the path in front of them. The man on the crutches seems to be just focused on this own pain. His own misery. It is...lack. Lack of money. Lack of security. Lack of a safe haven. But the worst part about it is that they are used to it. They don't expect anything to change."

Sophia nodded. "And this is my obstacle. My comfort with...um--"

"Lack," Kate finished for her.

"So, Sophia, we know that the money thing is rough, with Edward out of work. Has he been drinking...alot?" Kate asked.

Sophia just cocked her head, slightly turning it to one side and flipped the next card over, saying, "Best course of action. What I am supposed to do...and it's...drum roll, please...The Knight of Wands. The knight in shining armor."

Jilly groaned. "This does not mean that you are supposed to save Ed! He needs to help himself. You cannot--"

Sophia stopped her mid-breath. "I know this isn't about Edward. It's about me. I'm supposed to...I have to save myself. My best course of action is to rescue me. Me and the kids. I'm saving my kids from...my life. They cannot have this outcome. My outcome. My life, the life that I had. This has to stop." She turned over her last card. Her outcome.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“The Fool,” Kate said.

Sophia said, “Go on, Kate. But no book. Just read the card.”

“Don’t you think that’s putting a little too much faith in me?” Kate commented.

“It’s not possible for me to have too much faith in you, Kate,” Sophia said. “Stop stalling and go.”

Kate’s skin already pink from the heat, took on a deeper, warmer tone. She thrust out her jaw and took a long look at the card. “The beginning. We know that. It’s the first card of the entire deck. The highest, most powerful card because it is the freest. He has reached the mountain top and is jumping off the cliff-”

“Into a dark abyss?” Sophia murmured.

Kate paused and then continued. “Maybe he’s beginning a journey? Oh god, I’m not good at this trusting myself bullshit...shit...okay, it’s doing what you must do even if the world, others, parents, spouses, think you are being a fool. Trusting yourself. Freeing yourself. The sun is shining, his knapsack filled with his skills and treasures in one hand, flower in full bloom held in the other.”

A loud laugh popped out of Sophia, flowering into a full-blown belly laugh. “Oh my god, my life is so incredibly, wildly, screwed up!”

Jilly and Kate watched her. Sweaty, flushed, eyes hollow and tired, Sophia let the hysterical release of laughter overtake her small body. The heat, tension and anxiety in the room cracked and broke. Jilly and Kate began to laugh. Sophia, limp, woozy and unexpectedly happy, picked up the rest of the deck and, with a dramatic sweep of her arms, began trying to build a house of cards in the center of the table.

“You were right, Kate,” Sophia sputtered, giving up almost immediately on the project. “It’s all a house of cards!”

* * *

“How soon can you have the house on the market, Sonia?”

I hate this woman, Sophia silently railed, a faint, fake smile plastered in her face. She is a slick, ambitious bitch and I need her. Of course she could only come Sunday afternoon. Just get her in and out before Kate and Jilly and the kids get here. Shit, god knows what my tarot reading will say about all of this, Sophia thought as she shifted her eyes to the orange, grapes, few old strawberries and beginning-to-brown bananas resting on the counter in front of her. At least I’ve got something to feed them. And don’t forget the Coke in the fridge for Kate.

A bead of sweat ran down behind Sophia’s ear.

“Um...Sonia? How soon?” Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch asked.

“It’s Sophia,” she said. “And right away. I want to sell right away. I have to. How soon is soon?”

“I could have buyers here tomorrow.” Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch looked around. Sophia got a faint whiff of hairspray emanating from Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch’s smooth blond coif.

“But, there is work for you to do,” Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch continued. “So I can show it well. So it looks, well, more presentable. Saleable. Don’t get me wrong. It’s a fabulous house. FABULOUS. It’s going to be snatched up. But, Sonia...sorry...Sophie, you’re going to have to clean up the clutter. The artwork all has to come down. I’ll show

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

it right away but if it doesn't move, you may have to paint. Often, putting in some time and money can reap you tremendous rewards down the line." Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch's smooth even features (expertly made-up with make-up "For a Hot Summer Day,") blandly took Sophia in.

"I don't have time. I don't have money. That's why I'm selling," Sophia said.

"Okay. Well, then, box the clutter."

"It'll be ready by... Tuesday? Is that okay. Will that work?" Sophia asked, beginning to cut up the banana. Screw her schedule. I've got stuff to do too.

"Tuesday's good. I can do Tuesday. Call me. I'll have appointments. Are you around for showings or do you work?"

"Things are... in flux. I'm waitressing so my hours are... strange-"

I've kicked my husband out. I'm a single mother. I guess I'm a single mother. Do I have to tell her this?

"Well, don't worry, Sophie. Leave a key in doorknob thing so I can let myself in whenever. Just, whenever you leave the house, assume I may be coming by with a client so have the house ready."

"I'm ready. I mean the house will be ready."

This is crazy, Sophia thought. I'm a fool. So he's out of work? Big deal. So what? Lots of men are unemployed. I'm taking my children's father from them. I'm turning their world upside down. Making chaos. People will think I'm crazy, breaking up the family. He's only drunk here at home. At night. And on weekends.

"Good," Realtor-Tiffany-the-Bitch said. "It's a fabulous house. The dark green paint... well... we may have to... oh, well... we'll see! I can sell anything. I just moved the ranch the next block over."

"You moved a ranch. Goodness, you are strong," said Sophia.

"...and that Victorian, two blocks down... that was my sale too-"

She is Satan.

"Fabulous," Sophia said.

* * *

"I told you!" Kate said, trying to balance two cards together. "A house of cards is the only way to go with these damn things! Stupid, fucking tarot. Are we crazy, or what? So, talk, Sophia! TALK! What is up with you?"

The phone rang and Sophia went to answer it as Jilly shouted, "You not getting off that easy, Sophia girl! Kate's right. We want answers!"

Emitting gasps of laughter, Sophia staggered over to the phone, dented and worn from years of use, a long, twisted cord dangling from the unit dating it to be at least thirty years old. Shivering with giggles and exhaustion, she took a deep gasp and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello... Hey Sarah, heard you were in town. Why didn't you come over? We're having a great... what? Yeah, yeah, she's here. Hold on."

Sophia handed the phone across the counter to Jilly, twining the cord to its limit around the large wooden bowl from the kitchen table. Still chuckling, Jilly leaning up against the counter, picking up the rag doll from the bowl and fiddling with it as she spoke.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Hey Sarah, we’re having a blast. I told you to...what? Say that again...stop...wait...what? What?”

* * *

Nothingness. Aloneness. It is a word. God. Where is God? Jim...Jim. Nothingness. What am I feeling? Why is that water rolling down my back? Why did someone pour water on me? Oh, it’s my sweat. God, it is hot. Why am I sitting on the floor? There’s a sticky part under my hand. Sophia should mop. It’s probably apple juice. I need to mop.

My nose and mouth. They feel...cramped. How can a nose cramp? What is that? I don’t want that. I have a glass of water on the table. I should pick up that rag doll. Why can’t I move? I can’t move my hand to pick up the doll. That doll...shouldn’t be on the floor. She should be in that bowl.

Why is Kate talking to Sarah? Something about Jim. Jim is supposed to be landing. Jim.

Jim. Gone. Jim. Something about Jim. Somebody died. How can somebody die on a plane?

Jim. Heart. What did she say about his heart? Something about his heart. On the plane. Was he in Amsterdam or Paris? The itinerary is on the corkboard. Tell Kate. Tell Kate to tell Sarah it’s on the corkboard. The corkboard. The plans are on the corkboard.

The plans.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cups

Love. Emotion. Relationships. Art.
Friendship. Flowing. The subconscious.
Psychic abilities. Dreams. Nightmares.

Jilly stared out kitchen window, methodically wiping the already clean counter. A few soggy, limp leaves were flattened against the window screen.

A plastic play set could just be made out sitting in the middle of the backyard, a pile of twigs and leaves gathered at the base of the faded green slide.

A lone bucket, partially filled with sand, lay on its side at the foot of the yellow ladder.

A forgotten baseball bat had rolled under the bushes.

Jilly straightened, glancing at the clock. She snapped the curtains shut, tossed the Handi-Wipe into the sink and walked into the family room.

The family room and kitchen were perfectly decorated in an American country theme. Blue and white checked upholstered chairs sat on either side of a blue couch, all facing the television sitting inside an oak armoire. Handmade wreaths and framed family photos dotted the walls. Green, blue and pink floral coordinated drapes and valances graced the large windows overlooking the darkened backyard. A large oak table and tall ladder back chairs with green and white plaid seat cushions sat in the center of the two rooms, anchoring the kitchen and the family room together.

Aside from the kitchen table and counters, a fine, almost undetectable layer of dust coated everything

For a moment, Jilly stood in the family room, looking at the toys scattered in a seemingly, to the untrained eye, random chaos although her mother's mind could easily decipher the evidence of specific games played by the placement of the carnage.

The remnants of a children's impromptu tea party resting on the end table revealed proof of "Princess/Cowgirl/Ballerina Goes To France For Dinner and a Ball."

The trail of Matchbox cars that wound their way along the brick hearth of the fireplace was the game of "Car Dealership in Space" that had been interrupted by dinner.

She bent down, with a groan that would have been audible if she had cared to give it voice, and began throwing toys into a gaping cedar chest already loaded with games, dolls and books. Stooping to fish out a pink plastic toy teacup jammed under a chair and unable to reach it, she lay down on her stomach and awkwardly fumbled until she grasped it and yanked it out. The teacup was fashioned to create the impression that when upright, it was full of liquid, but turn it upside down and it appeared to empty.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

On her hands and knees, Jilly stared at the teacup, turning it up and down, watching the bubbly, pink liquid disappear, reappear and disappear again. She rolled onto her back, cup still in hand. A long, dusty strand of a cobweb dangling from the ceiling caught her eye. It drifted and danced in an unfelt breeze. Jilly watched the cobweb dance, still turning the cup slowing in her hand.

A car could be heard pulling up.

Jilly didn't move from the floor.

A car door slammed.

Jilly kept watching the cobweb and playing with the cup.

A quiet knock was heard at the front door.

I could just lie here and she might go away, Jilly thought. But she won't. She'll keep knocking. Or just wait. Then Kate will come. Sophia will say, "It was tonight, right?" Kate will say, "Of course it was tonight! You didn't knock loud enough. She didn't hear." Sophia will say, "But I didn't want to wake the kids." So then Kate will say, "Why the hell won't she get the damn bell fixed?" Then Kate will knock. Then they'll talk some more. "Why isn't she answering the door? What if something's wrong? What if she fell? Or is sick? What if she's been abducted? What if they all have been abducted!" Kate will make it a drama. Of course, Kate will make it a drama. Kate will find a way in. She'll call the cops or break open a window. No, probably go around to the back and scream up to Haley and wake her and then she'll be up too, and down here, she'll let them in. Then she'll be awake and they'll both be in. "Why didn't you let us in? What's wrong? What's wrong? Tell us! Now, Jilly. Now. Tell us. Tell us. Tell us."

With a grunt, this time audible, Jilly, cup still in hand, went to the front door and flipped the latch.

Sophia strode in. "Oh, good. Hi! I was afraid I wasn't knocking loud enough but I didn't want to wake the kids. Oh my god, it's getting cold!" she said, heading straight for the kitchen. A large leather purse was slung over her shoulder and she was carrying three large cups of coffee in a cardboard travel holder and a brown paper bag with "Creativity Café and Coffees" printed on its side. In one easy movement, Sophia slid the coffee and bag onto the table and swung her purse onto one of the checked chairs, her coat following her purse with a light toss. Her cheeks, bright pink from the cold, made her eyes glitter like emerald crystals. She threw herself into a chair with a happy groan.

"Oh my god! I'm bushed! Bushed! It was crazy tonight. The cold brought out everybody. Everybody. You would think it would make people burrow down into their caves but no; everyone and their brother came in tonight. The café was rocking. Oh, I have to call Enrique before I leave tonight and warn him about the kitchen. We blew through some of the morning prep stuff. And I had to swing by the bank before I got here. Oh, it's decafe by the way," she said, gesturing to the coffees sitting on the table. "And the last of the desserts. A really bad bran muffin, two brownies and I saved a couple of the lemon squares."

Pulling out a few plates, Jilly said, "You didn't have to. I have--"

Sophia waved her away. "Please! We would have just pitched them anyway. I only send the leftover stuff to the shelter if we have enough. Thanks for setting that up by the way. Is Kate...?"

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly nodded. “Soon. She got tied up with some case again...don’t be offended but I’m going to pass on the coffee,” she said, unceremoniously dumped the desserts out of the paper bag onto a large plate.

Sophia said, “You’re thinking screwdriver, aren’t you?”

Jilly nodded, conceding, “Yeah.”

“Excellent! I’m so sick of this stuff I could puke. But make mine a weak one.” Sophia stretched her legs out under the table and reached over to pick at one of the lemon squares.

A silence settled.

“How long have you been managing the café? Jilly asked. “It’s been awhile now, hasn’t it?”

“Oh, boy, it’s probably been, wow, well over a year! Since almost, probably the end of last summer, right after Jim...um...right after...um, when, after we sold the house,” Sophia said.

“Kids with your sister?” asked Jilly, turning away and pulling out the vodka and orange juice.

Sophia, glancing at Jilly’s back, arranged the desserts on the plate in a more pleasing pattern as she said, “the new girl called in and quit so I had to redo the entire schedule...the one I had just finished. Thank god Ramon just bought a new car to impress his girlfriend. I love hard workers desperate for cash. The lemon bars are fantastic, by the way.”

Drinks in hand, Jilly returned and handed one to Sophia. Sophia automatically grabbed a coaster and slid it under her glass, and then took a small sip. “So, how be you?” she asked Jilly as she poked the ice cubes down with her index finger, swirling the orange concoction around.

Taking a big, long sip and shrugging, Jilly said, “Fine. Fine. The same. You know. Fine.” Jilly picked up the plastic teacup she had placed on the table and turned it upside down, tapping it on the tabletop to make every last drop of the thick pink liquid disappear.

Sophia nodded. “Good.”

“Nothing to report. Nothing new.”

“Okay. Good. The kids?”

“Fine. They’re fine. We’re all...um...” Jilly’s voice ran out of steam.

“Fine?” Sophia suggested.

“Yeah. Kate should be here soon. She got tied up on a case,” Jilly said.

“Okay,” said Sophia. “Well...how’s your case load? Any new, really crazy clients?”

Jilly shook her head. “Nope. They’re all about the same. Work is...I don’t know-”

“Fine?”

Jilly nodded, saying, “Yeah. I guess. Fine. Everything’s fine.”

Sophia looked at Jilly. Finally, after another silence settled and grew, Sophia tossed out a “...so I gathered.”

A brief knock on the front door was heard, followed by Kate flying in. “Sorry. Sorry! Late. I know. Putting out a work fire,” she said as she threw her purse and coat on top of Sophia’s, yanked a chair out and planted herself in it.

“Unbelievable day,” Kate cried. “Unbelievable! My entire Sunday shot on this one case. The thought of you two and this was the only thing that kept me going!” she said,

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

grinning and kicking her shoes off under the table. “What’s everybody...?” She spied the drinks. “Screwdrivers. Excellent. Oh, are those the new lemon squares? The good ones?” she added, rising to mix herself a drink.

“Yup,” Sophia said.

“This new baker you’ve got is amazing. An artist. Is he cute? You should let him knead your dough, if you know what I mean. If he’s half as good at lovin’ as he is at cooking-” Katesaid, throwing a few ice cubes into a glass.

Sophia smiled a cat’s smile. “Yeah, he is kinda cute. Anyway, I had to save these before they sold out. He’s got a following now.”

“Completely understandable. I mean, they are really amazing. I actually dreamt about them last week,” said Kate, settling back in her chair, drink in hand. Sophia slid her a coaster across the table.

Jilly sighed. “Oh, geez, don’t worry about the fucking coasters.”

Stunned, Kate and Sophia gaped at her, Kate saying, “I’m not sure whether I’m more shocked at the ‘fucking’ or the wild disregard for your tabletop.”

Jilly said, “I do get to swear too occasionally, you know,” grabbing the vodka bottle off the counter behind her. “The right isn’t just reserved for lawyers and rock stars,” she finished, adding another shot of vodka to her drink.

“Does that make me the rock star?” Sophia asked.

Kate leaned back and said, “Well, hell, go for it. Fucking go for it, goddamn it! Shit, girl. It feels good. And she’s drinking too! Oh my god. Does your minister know about this reckless behavior? Has that God guy been informed?”

“Yeah, Jilly,” Sophia said. “I swear one of the kids at the café could score you a joint or two. Want his number?”

“It’s just a drink and a swear word. I think I’m allowed too,” Jilly muttered as she set her glass down and, unable to resist, grabbed a coaster and slid it under her glass. Sophia and Kate raised their glasses to toast, both looking to Jilly. They held their glasses aloft, waiting.

“Jilly!” Kate finally said. Jilly looked up, muttered, “Oh” and lifted her glass to join the others.

“Play Doh and Happy Meals.”

They toasted. And then drank.

And all Jilly could think was, Please, just go home. Go home. I don’t want to do this.

Kate jumped up and grabbed her purse, which was really the size of a small suitcase. “Wait until you see this-” she said, grinning as she dug, mumbling to herself, “It’s so...oh god, I forgot, I have to drop that off at Cindy’s desk...oh, there’s that lipstick...is that?...got ‘em!”, Kate triumphantly pulled out a small, brown paper bag. “I got these great new decks,” she said, unwrapping two tarot decks from the bag and passing them out. “There’s this completely insane wiccan, pagan, mystic, mishmash head shop one of my client’s mother works at. You should see the decks they have. I got both of these. Check out the one Soph’s got. A Star Trek motif. Hysterical. You wouldn’t believe the stuff they have. And the funniest part...the mother now trusts me utterly because we talked tarot for twenty minutes and she had a customer read my aura. Oh, it’s official, by the way. I’m a pure spirit.”

Sophia held up a card. “Is that Kirk?”

“Of course! Kirk has to be on the Lovers card!” Kate said.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Sophia slid the card across to Jilly, saying, “Check out the hair on the chick. Very sixties. Looks like a pyramid...or a waffle cone.”

Jilly, who had laid her deck on the table, smiled at the card but didn't take it. “Is this client the same mother, I think you called her an ungrateful, rude bitch...who chucked the pen across the room at you?” asked Jilly.

“Please. That was months ago.” Kate rolled her eyes and checked her hair, smoothing the back, adding, “And that client...she's back in rehab...I think...yes, she should probably be out soon.”

“So, you want to use the Star Trek one?” Sophia asked. “Spock makes one groovy Emperor!”

“Absolutely not!” Kate said, recoiling in mock horror. “For our readings, I'm a purist. Jilly, pull out the official mommy-reading deck.”

Jilly grabbed a deck and a few dog-eared tarot books from a cabinet, placing everything in the center of the table amidst the cocktails, toy teacup and coffee cups as Kate continued. “Who's first?”

Sophia said, “Jilly should go first, then you, then me.”

Jilly shrugged, “I don't have a question. Kate, you go.”

Kate decided. “Okay. Sophia, then me, then Jilly.”

“God, it's been forever since we've done this,” Sophia said as she shuffled. “Gotten together even.”

“Work has been unbelievable. I'm constantly up to my ass in alligators,” said Kate, taking a long swig of her drink.

“You don't seem too upset about it,” Jilly commented.

Kate, still standing, retorted, “Well, I just kicked an alligator's ass in court this week,” breaking out her goofy grin and adding a hip wiggle.

“Feel good? Kicking an alligator's ass?” Sophia asked.

“Fabulous! I was born to be an alligator-ass-kicker! Carol and three other attorneys sat in to watch.”

“Okay. Kate,” Sophia said, straightening her shoulders and taking a deep breath. “Come on, sit. Good. Okay, I'm just going to do a card for me, current situation, best course of action and outcome.”

Jilly corrected her. “And obstacle.”

Sophia shook her head calmly. “Nope,” she said, turning over the first card and smiling as it revealed its face. “Temperance,” she said, pushing away her half finished cocktail and taking a small exploratory sip of coffee.

“This is such a nice card. I don't think I remember you ever getting this,” Kate commented.

Sophia said, “Never have...until tonight. It is nice.”

Kate grabbed the card and leaned back in her chair. “Okay, I'm going to try this ala Sophia. Just open my psychic eye and try to remember every fucking thing I can from the book. Well...Sophia, I see a beautiful, serene woman; I wonder who that could represent? Someone at the café perhaps?”

Sophia, perusing the deserts calmly, smiled and said, “Bitch.”

Kate said, “Oh no, she's not a bitch. Looks like an angel. The aura around her hair, well coifed might I add, is strong. She has some kickin' red wings ready to help her fly off wherever she wants to go but she seems to want to stay planted right where she is,

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

floating almost, one foot on solid ground, one foot dipped in clear, clean water. Angel Face is wearing a very comfortable looking white dress...almost a mumu. Kind of like a Chico's dress. I'm thinking it's that nice squishy material that packs so well."

Sophia interjected, "'Cuz, god knows, they had Lycra blends when these cards were designed hundreds of years ago."

"Hey, you all started this divination, future looking bull," Kate shot back. "They could very well have done a reading and SAW THE FUTURE of manmade fibers taking off! Anyway, we digress. Back to you. She's pouring water back and forth between two golden cups in her hands...like, OH MY GOD, Sophia, you are doing right now, this is so fucking spiritual, I'm freaking out!"

While sipping her coffee, Sophia had picked up the pink teacup and begun fiddling with it. "Man, you are wound up tonight!" Sophia said. "But you are right, o' weird one. I feel good. Strange, isn't it? Anyway, I know this card. It's making a magical life out of what you've got."

"Yup, being a centered person...not that I would know," Kate continued. "Balanced and tempered, you mix everything, good and bad, in your life into a fabulous concoction of...yummy, rich, sweet, delectable...um...lemon squares. OH MY GOD, you've taken lemons and made, not lemonade, but lemon squares...I'm freaking out again! Jilly, you go."

Jilly sat, a book opened in her hands.

"Jilly, you don't need the book," Sophia said.

Kate nodded in agreement. "You are so beyond the book."

Jilly began to read. "'Being moderate and wise in the consumption and creation of all that is around you. While the sun rising in the background represents a new day dawning, Temperance is equally content with what is right in front of her. Her contentment with today is transforming her world for tomorrow.'"

"Things are going...pretty well," Sophia conceded. "And now, current situation." She turned over the next card and then straightened abruptly. "Oh my god! I finally did it!" she cried.

"What?" Jilly leaned in to look at the card.

Also puzzled, Kate said "Did what?"

Sophia pointed to the card. "I got into the church! Don't you see? It's the Three of Pentacles!"

Both Jilly and Kate shook their heads.

"Oh god, you two! Remember the Five of Pentacles? The two people, struggling, always outside in the snow and cold, worrying about money, never inside the warm church with the nice stained-glass window?" Sophia said. "How I kept getting that damn card over and over again? Look. I got inside. The Three of Pentacles. Okay, see? The three people, okay, they're building a church...that one, the one higher up, standing on the bench and building the church, he's the boss. And I'm the boss at the café. And the other two guys, holding the plans, the blueprints, they're helping, helping with the vision, the plan...but look...it's a church. They're inside a church. And not worried. They're working. It's working. They're building their own church. Screw that other church. We'll build our own. I love this. I love this card." Arms raised above her head, Sophia did a little dance of joy, sort of a cross between a jig and a single person "wave."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly looked up from her book. “You’re right. It’s teamwork. People working together to reach a common, mutually agreed upon goal.”

Sophia pointed to Kate. “You got this one awhile ago. What was it about?”

“Wasn’t it Cold and Cutting Carol Carson?” Jilly said.

Kate nodded, commenting, “Actually, I might rename her Cool and Calm Carol Carson.”

Jilly looked at her. “I thought...?”

“I know, I know,” said Kate, conceding with a wave of her hand. “I thought she was the devil. So, occasionally, sometimes, when the stars are misaligned, I may make a slightly wrong judgment about another...occasionally.” Turning to Sophia she added, “This could be you and the kids too. Not just work.”

Sophia grinned, nodding. “Oh yes. It is. It’s all of it. The system seems to be working. Good. This is good. It’s right. Okay, next card. Best course of action.”

She turned the card. The Three of Swords appeared.

Both Kate and Sophia stopped themselves from automatically glancing at Jilly. After a moment, Jilly spoke. “Well, finally, someone else gets this damn card.”

Perhaps the most straightforward card in the entire deck, a large red heart sat in the center of the gray, cloudy card. Rain streaked down in the background. Three swords were plunged directly into the middle of the heart. No people populated the image. No animals, no earth. Just a damaged, pierced heart and gray, dark unrelenting rain.

“But it’s reversed this time,” Kate said quietly. “I know it looks upright facing you, Jilly, but...since Sophia is opposite you, it’s-”

“I know. I get it. It’s good for you, Soph,” Jilly said. “Reversed. That’s the only way you want to get this card. Trust me.” Jilly grabbed the tarot book and barely looking at it, opened it to the appropriate page and began to read. “Reversed, you are allowing the swords to fall out of your heart and permitting healing to begin. Letting go of a past pain. Healing a broken heart. Forgiveness.”

Eyes narrowed, Kate peered at Sophia suspiciously. “Are you dating somebody?”

Sophia laughed. “Hardly! I’m not even divorced.”

“Yet,” Jilly added quickly.

Sophia turned over her last card, over Kate’s protests of “Hey, we didn’t even do this one!” as the phone began to ring.

Jilly rose, saying, “Who’s calling this late?” and adding, “Kate, let her alone,” she picked up the receiver. “Hello...who?! Oh...yes...fine, yes, she’s here...”

Receiver in hand, Jilly looked at Sophia, thinking, you stupid bitch. You stupid idiot. What the...FUCK are you thinking?! You stupid, fucking, stupid, stupid woman.

But aloud, she merely said, “It’s for you. It’s Edward.”

Sophia pried the receiver from Jilly’s clenched hand.

“Hi,” she said. “Try under the green chair or sometimes he puts his cars in the tent thingy...not a problem...a little while...me too...thanks...bye.” Sophia fumbled with the phone, finally finding the correct button to push to end the call, and handed it back to Jilly. Jilly took it but didn’t move, just stared at Sophia for a long moment; her long bangs hanging limp in her eyes. “Ed?” Jilly finally said.

Sophia returned her gaze. “Ed.”

“What’s going on?” Kate asked.

“Well, we’ve been spending some time...together,” Sophia said carefully.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly slammed the phone back in its cradle so hard it made Kate and Sophia jump. “Are you nuts? This is so...Soph, this is extremely unhealthy. As your friend, as a therapist even, I have to tell you that this is typically...codependent and just plain-”

Kate held up her hand, trying to stop Jilly. “Hold on. Wait, Jilly. Sit. Sit. Soph, talk. Jilly, eat a lemon square.”

Jilly yanked her chair back and threw herself into it, muttering, “Fine.”

Sophia picked at the crumbs off the desert plate and looked at her friends. “Well...um...he’s been sober for...well, since a week after I threw him out. So, well over a year...anyway, so I-”

Jilly interjected, voice low, flat and harsh. “You had to sell your home because he was so drunk he got fired from his job. You had to move to an apartment-”

“Wait-” Sophia said.

But Jilly barreled on. “Completely rearrange your life, your children’s’ lives, work like a dog, he just has to get sober and you-”

“Jilly, wait!” Kate commanded in her best courtroom voice. “Go on,” she ordered Sophia.

Sophia stared into her coffee for a moment and then looked at her friends. “He’s the lemon square guy,” she said.

Kate and Jilly looked at the plate of lemon squares and then back at Sophia. Courtroom voice gone, Kate sputtered, “What?”

Sophia bobbed her head and shrugged, body language sheepish but voice not. “He’s the lemon square guy.”

Kate leaned back, clasping her hands together behind her head. “Interesting. Quite the interesting tidbit of new evidence. Okay, Edward is the lemon square guy. He’s the new baker. And you’re not kidding. This is...interesting. Good. Wow. All right. Spill.”

Sophia arranged her coffee cup, cocktail and the pink toy teacup all in a row in front of her as she gathered her thoughts. She finally said, “Remember, we met, Edward and I met while I was in art school and waitressing? He was in the food supply business. The rep for that food company...anyway...he just did that...he hated it...but...he loves food. Making it. Pastry. Bread. Baking. He just never thought it would be allowed, as a job. For a man. His parents would never...well, they never really...”

Sophia stopped, pushed her hair back and took a small sip of her coffee. No one said a word. After a moment, she continued. “When we split...I mean, he had been unemployed for awhile anyway. And, well, he got a job at a bakery,” she finished, eyes calculating her news’ impact.

Jilly pulled the rubber band out of her ponytail with a yank and impatiently re-gathered her hair together as she rolled her eyes. “Terrific. So he makes a fabulous lemon square. Makes me want to do him,” she said, snapping her ponytail back in place and taking another long sip of her drink.

“Jilly, shut up...go on, Soph,” said Kate.

“I didn’t want to tell you until...it’s just been happening,” Sophia said. “It’s not even physical. Yet. We were trying to work out the divorce. The details. We couldn’t...well...I had to start on nights because that other manager left, remember? Well, he works mornings. Early. And the kids. He was sober, the kids got to see him, I didn’t have to pay for all that daycare and after school stuff. And he didn’t have a place to live.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“He’s living there? Jesus! Sophia!” said Jilly, slamming her hands down so hard the cups rattled.

Kate looked levelly at Jilly. “It makes sense. It does.”

“Then your standards have gotten a lot lower, Kate.” Jilly turned to Sophia. “And you, Sophia. I can’t believe-”

“Look at her cards, Jilly. The outcome,” Kate said, halting Jilly’s next outburst mid-breath.

The Lovers card was in the final position, at the end of the line of cards. Two people, a woman and a man stood on a green field. Naked, relaxed, eyes opened, they were surrounded by a landscape rich with trees and blue skies. A shining sun beamed down on them and, hovering high in the sky, was a woman, almost a goddess, floating above them, arms opened in blessing or benediction. Eyes closed, face rapturous, she bore a striking resemblance to the angel on the Temperance card, including red wings, which were now outstretched to their fullest extension and her costume, now a rich, passionate purple.

“Well, it doesn’t necessarily mean...the Lovers card can be...it can be more about healthy balance than sex,” Jilly said, pouring herself another drink. Throwing a few more ice cubes into the glass, she splashed some of the cocktail onto the counter in the process. Tossed the Handi-Wipe on top of the spill to soak it up and, leaving it there, she retook her seat as Kate said, “And I think that’s what Sophia has been trying to tell us.”

“Well, Sophia, I think you’re making a mistake. A big, fat, huge mistake,” Jilly said, jamming a coaster underneath her glass.

“Gosh, I sort of figured that out, Jilly,” Sophia replied quietly.

“People don’t change, Soph.”

“Yes, they do. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but, yes, people do change.”

“Well, I think you’re being very, very foolish,” Jilly said. “Mark my words. It’s a big mistake,” and with a sweep of her hand, she scooped Sophia’s cards into a pile and haphazardly slapped them back on top of the rest of the desk. Striding to the sink and grabbing a sponge, she returned to the table and began to vigorously wipe it down, sweeping the remaining crumbs from the lemon squares into her hand. Sophia and Kate had to quickly lift their coffee and cocktails to avoid the broad, swift strokes of her hand. Jilly then took the plate of deserts, napkins and paper towels and dumped everything on the counter behind her.

“Wow. All evidence of the dreaded lemon squares obliterated,” Kate remarked as Jilly sat herself back down.

“Along with any sign of my reading,” added Sophia with a glance to Jilly. “So, I guess it’s your turn, Kate.”

* * *

I’m awake, Jacqueline thought. Cool.

She took an exploratory sniff. No breakfast yet. Good. Maybe she could talk Dad into french toast. She listened and didn’t hear her mom up either, making coffee or anything. Mom would probably sleep in, since she got home late last night anyway. Not from work, but from hanging out with Bridget and Haley’s moms. What do they talk about anyway, she wondered.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jacqueline kept her eyes closed and wiggled her body as silently as possible, back down into her blankets. She didn't want to wake up Sammy.

She and Sammy shared a room. It should have been awful but actually it was pretty much okay. Sammy's crib was pushed into the corner (he was really too big for it. Mom even left the side down since he could climb over the top anyway) and, since she was ten years old and had to share with a two-year-old, Mom let her leave her stuff all around the apartment. It was pretty cool. Jacqueline had a desk, an actual grown-up's desk, pushed against the living room window. Mom had turned the dining room...well...dining area...into a library/art studio/project space. It was stuffed with bookcases, baskets of toys and the kitchen table from the old house as a project table.

Jacqueline loved the apartment. It was filled with fun and noise and food. Well, at first, it had sucked. It had been cramped and weird and Dad was gone. But then it got better. It got better really, really fast. Mom had gotten all the stuff to look really good and cool. Aunt Noelle came by a lot to help after school and on days she couldn't come, Jacqueline got to go to after-school Champions with Bridget.

Then Dad started coming back. And he never wore a suit anymore, which totally rocked. He wore these white t-shirts and pants all the time, which always smelled good, and he laughed and took her and Sammy cool places like the Farmers Market and this farm that grew plants and flowers that you could eat and a chocolate factory once. He even started showing up at weird times, like picking her up from school when she had an orthodontist's appointment or coming by instead of Aunt Noelle on Mom's late shift nights.

Mom and Dad were completely getting back together. Jacqueline was sure of it. They both were real careful to point out how he slept on the sofa because he wanted to be around for her and Sammy, and how he worked days and Mom worked nights and...whatever. It was a whole bunch of adult-weird-babble explaining why he was there, instead of just saying they were trying to get back together without screwing stuff up again.

Today was Monday, which was cool. His day off from the bakery. Lucky Sammy. He got to spend the whole day with Dad while she had to go to stupid school. But when she got home there would be bunches of cool stuff to eat and lately Mom had been trying to get Monday nights off.

Jacqueline rolled over and stretched, pushing her head back up towards the pillow. She opened her eyes and peered over to Sammy.

Sammy was gone.

His nighttime diaper was there. So was his t-shirt. Great. There was a naked two-year-old running around the apartment.

Bugsy was gone too. Bugsy was Sammy's lovey stuffed animal. A totally rank and disgusting stuffed animal...actually, stuffed insect because it was an ant. Of course Sammy couldn't have a cute teddy bear as a favorite toy. So he was running around naked with a black ant hanging from his mouth (he liked to chew on the ant's legs. Disgusting)

Sammy was probably cuddling with Dad.

Jacqueline got up and went looking. It was beginning to get light. The apartment looked quiet. Jacqueline knew it was impossible for something to "look" quiet, but it did. Everything looked sort of blue and gray and soft.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

The living room was empty. Weird. Dad's sleeping bag wasn't even out.

No Sammy. No Dad.

She heard giggling. Making her way through the apartment, she opened her mom's bedroom door.

Mom and Dad were in bed with Sammy burrowed between them. Buggy was on Dad's head and Mom was laughing.

When Jacqueline said, "Hey," Edward cried, "Hide! She'll never see us," and flipped the blanket over their heads. Jacqueline took a running start, jumped up into the bed and hurled her body onto Dad's, ripping the blanket off. "You guys are so busted!" she cried, body horizontally splayed across the three of them.

"She found us," Sophia yelled. "Sammy, she found us!" She began tickling them both, Sammy and her. Sammy's little boy naked body wiggled and twisted with joy and Edward said, "Sammy! What are you doing here, NAKED? Are you crazy?" Sammy's laughter rose as he screamed, "Not naked, not naked," and dove back under the blanket.

Sophia kept tickling Jacqueline. Jacqueline knew her mother wouldn't stop unless she said the magic words. But she didn't want to say them just yet. It felt too good, wiggling and squiggling against her parents and brother.

"Mom, stop!" Jacqueline moaned.

"Nope! You gotta say 'em," Sophia said.

"Daddy, help!"

Edward laughed, Sammy now encased in his arms. "Sorry, Jackie. You're on your own with this one. The magic words are a royal decree. No one gets off the hook."

Jacqueline waited a minute, enjoying the sweet, excruciating ripples of tickle sensation. She finally cried, "Okay! Okay! I surrender!"

Her fingers poised above Jacqueline's body, Sophia said, "I'm waiting."

Giggling, Jacqueline said the magic words.

"Mother, you are the Empress of this world!"

They smiled at each other. At that moment, the morning sun must have broken across the horizon because a beam of soft, early morning light struck both Jacqueline and Sophia. The sun warming their skin, they lay together, the weight of Jacqueline's body on Sophia and the strength of Sophia's arms around Jacqueline combined with the rumpled sheets, the sun and the murmured giggles coming from Sammy to create a sweet mix of heat, comfort and blissfully limp energy.

The nodded to each other and then, as one, turned towards Edward and Sammy and, fingers wiggling, descended upon them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate took a pull on her screwdriver and took the deck from Sophia.

Kate shifted in her chair, silently berating Jilly's decorating sensibility. Stupid ladder-back chairs. American Colonial is possibly the most uncomfortable choice possible for a tall, modern person she fumed.

"Me, obstacle and best course of action," stated Kate, scooting her butt down in a vain attempt to ease her back. .

"And outcome," Jilly reminded her.

Kate shook her head, saying with a shrug, "No. No outcome. "

Sophia began to laugh. "Oh my god, you are getting so actualized. I bet you've been reading the Oprah magazine too."

"Please. I only stoop so low," Kate responded as she began to shuffle.

With a flourish, Sophia helped herself to another lemon square from the plate on the counter. Taking a huge bite, scattering crumbs across the table in the process, she declared, "Um, um, um...these are fantastic. I could eat them all day," with a big, pointed smile in Jilly's direction.

Jilly merely brushed the crumbs away and said to Kate, "Well, what's the point if you don't do outcome, if you don't see what's coming?"

Kate raised her eyebrows and turned over a card. "Me."

"Ten of Wands. Feeling overburdened, of course," said Sophia, slapping lemon square crumbs off her fingers.

"Ha! Being overburdened," Kate cried. "I have this flood of cases, they just keep appearing on my desk. It never ends. This constant need. It's always there, weighing on me. "What if I fail? What happens to this child if I fail, if I miss something, if I don't do enough, if I don't do the right thing? See this guy, this guy on the card, head down, just hefting all those wands on his shoulders? That's how I feel, every day. Every fucking day."

Kate leaned into the table, her broad, shoulders hunched up around her ears. "These kids. All these kids. These bad things happening to them. Their lives are not what they should be. The people around them...so many just don't get it. Parents that don't understand how to parent...how to love. Oh maybe they just don't know how to love the kid they have."

Kate glowered at the card for a moment and looked up to Jilly, conceding, "Jilly, you were right. It is brutal. This area of the law. I had no idea. But I know I can do this well. I see the issues, the people, everything is laying right before me and I feel like I've almost got the answer to...shit, I don't even know what the question is! But, I'm close to something. Really close. And then there's that new guy. You know. Alan. Him. The

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

caseload. And then getting all of Bridget's activities in. And dealing with my mother. Thank god I've got you guys. Every time she accuses me of not having a life...excuse me...not having HER life, I can point to you two."

"How's the guy?" Sophia asked.

"Things are fine with Alan. I just need to get better at juggling all of it," Kate said with too-firm a nod.

"Are you sure this is the right job for you?" asked Jilly.

"Yes! Yes." The words were out of Kate's mouth before Jilly finished her sentence. "Yes, I am. I'm completely, absolutely certain that this is what I'm meant to be doing. It's just hard to do it all. I need to figure out that component. How to...put the pieces of the puzzle together in the right way. So everything fits perfectly."

"But the cases aren't ever going to stop, right?" Sophia said. "There's never an end in sight. So are you, maybe, sort of, losing the forest for the trees? Does that make sense? Like see, on the card. The guy his hefting around what looks like a whole bunch of wands that look like baby trees. He's too wrapped up in the work that he's not-"

"Oh my god," Kate said. "That's exactly what Carol said. Well, not exactly but...anyway...she said, 'Just keep looking at the big picture, Kate.'" Kate gazed hard at her friend and looked back at the card. "All right...this is hard. Let's do obstacle."

She turned over the next card. Sophia leaned in eagerly as Jilly rose to mix herself another drink, calling from the kitchen, "What is it?"

"King of Cups, upright," Sophia answered and continued, taking in the image on the card. "Okay. Mastery. Emotional and artistic mastery. A person that has everything under control. Wisdom of the profound, complex emotional nature of man."

Returning with drink in hand, Jilly protested, "But that doesn't make any sense. How is that an obstacle? How can mastery be getting in your way?"

"This is strange," Kate nodded. "How can authority...wisdom be an obstacle?"

"Maybe this card isn't just you?" Sophia offered. "Maybe it's somebody else too? Could it be somebody else? Is it a judge you know? One that you're in front of with a case?"

Kate smoothed her hair as she stared at the man in the card, regally sitting, cup in hand.

"Maybe it is me and somebody else. And, perhaps, it's a concept too," Kate said.

"How can a King be a concept? It's gotta be a person" Jilly argued, full cocktail tipping somewhat precariously in her hand.

"It's about them." Kate suddenly straightened in her chair.

"Who?" Sophia asked.

Kate stared ahead for a long moment. Then she smiled. A big, crooked smile. Leaning back in her chair, her face transformed from sharp, angular lawyer into clown.

How does Kate do that? Sophia thought. Go from being the scariest, most intense person in the tri-state area to looking like the tallest Muppet since Big Bird? Tonight, really, Jilly's the scary one. Kate's just...happy. That's it. Kate is happy! Confused, struggling, exhausted, challenged, she's happy. She just hasn't figured it out yet. But that's it. She has to dump Alan, of course, but that'll come. Yup, Kate's happy. All right! One down, one to go.

"I think I just got something." Eyes wide, Kate's face opened up as her long arms reached before her, her hands appearing to hold the air in front of her. "Carol's been

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

saying for a long time, always... 'It's about them, people! It's not about us!' And I think I finally got it. It's about my clients. My job. I think... god, I've gotten so mad at them sometimes. At the stupidity, the ingratitude, the weakness. I think I'm coming to grips with the fact that I'm not... their mommy or their daddy." She tapped the King of Cups resting before her. "And I'm not my daddy. I'm their lawyer. Their life and their pain aren't about my life and my pain. And I'm not perfect. I'm smart as hell, and I'm compassionate, but my job is to see the big picture and do the best that I can. The best thing for everyone involved. It's not about perfect. And, it's not about me being the perfect lawyer."

Kate touched the card, her finger tracing the turbulent water beneath the king's throne. "Maybe even my dad wasn't a perfect lawyer. It feels like he was but he probably wasn't. Because there's no perfect when it comes to people. There is no single, right solution. So I need to stop killing myself looking for the right answer, perfect solution and just work for the best thing possible. There is no race to finish, no time to beat, no puzzle to put together. There's no answer. There's just no... finished." Kate shook her head, unknowingly releasing a few curls that sprang up to frame her face like tiny black curled ribbons.

"Oh my god, Kate. Does this mean... you're not perfect?" Sophia said. "Jilly, what does this mean to the world as we know it? Kate isn't perfect! I can't believe I hang out with you, you flawed, imperfect creature, you! I only hang out with perfect people, you know."

Kate looked levelly at her. "Does that include that employee with the two tattoos on their face?"

"Phillip or Jenna?" Sophia replied.

"Do the next... what's the next one?" Jilly said. "Outcome... yeah... do the outcome now."

"No, it's best course of action. I told you, I'm not doing outcome," Kate said as she flipped over her last card.

"Justice. Wow. Wow!" Sophia grabbed the card and waved it. "You got Justice. Perfect!"

"No!" Kate shouted. "NOT perfect!"

"Which is perfect?" Sophia answered. "See, it even has the scales of justice on it. Jilly, come on, come on, what do you think?"

Jilly took a deep breath and shrugged. "Maybe balance? I remember that. Balance and, of course, well, justice, fairness with... people... everybody. Being fair. I think... wasn't there a thing about... um... you know, all the events coming to a place of... things being... right? Oh, yeah, you don't do 'right'. No perfect anymore. Only best. I don't know." She shrugged again, adding, "I still think you should do outcome."

Kate gathered her cards up with a sweep of her hand, stuck them in the deck and slapped the deck down in front of Jilly and said, "Here. You do outcome."

* * *

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

It was clearly a robin. Cardinals had that deeper sound. Yup, it's a robin, maybe two, Bridget thought. So they found the bird feeder finally. Shouldn't take long now for a whole bunch of birds to start showing up. I just gotta keep an eye on the squirrels. Grandma's right about them.

The sun was just beginning to come up. It was probably about 6:00 am. Maybe earlier. It was staying darker later. Or was it getting lighter later? Whatever.

Bridget loved the early morning. Fall, winter, spring, whenever, it was always cool. She had the corner bedroom so her bed could be wedged right next to the southern window and face the eastern window too. It was grand. The dawn penetrating her room was one of her favorite things. Bridget sat up in bed, leaning toward the sunrise.

The window was closed, of course. Mom had come in sometime during the night and closed it, so now the room was all stuffy.

When will she get that I like fresh air, Bridget fumed as she kicked off her blankets and went over to the window, yanking it back open. Cool fall air hit her hips as the crisp, woody fragrance of leaves, dirt and fall filled the room.

Bridget saw the faint outlines of two rabbits along the back yard fence. She also saw light spilling onto the lawn from the kitchen window.

Mom was downstairs already? She should be just getting into the shower.

Very odd.

Bridget made her way downstairs. She knew her mother. No case up in court meant she slept until 6:10, then showered, and then everything else.

Very, very odd.

Bridget found her mother at the kitchen table. Papers lay before her, which was typical. Coffee cup, typical. Laptop on, extremely typical.

But she looked absolutely wild. "Mom, are you okay?" Bridget asked.

"Hey, Bridge. You're up. I'm great. Why?"

"Mom. Your hair!"

Kate's hair was everywhere. This was very, very, VERY not typical. The curls, over the years so careful pulled and tended, had been released. They boinged out from her head at every possible trajectory, little black noodles of released coils.

"Mom, your hair is like...not straight. Are you okay?"

Kate laughed. Taking a swig of coffee, she said, "Yeah, Bridget, I'm fine. I just got tired of trying to be perfect. There are some things I just can't control. Oh well." Kate shrugged, ruffled her hair with her hands and then shook her head for good measure.

Bridget wasn't sure if she liked this turn of events. She had always thought her mom's obsession with her hair was profoundly stupid (she was sure the woman must go through six straightening irons a year) yet her letting go of it so easily was kind of...unsettling.

"Sit down." Kate gestured to a chair. Bridget sat and Kate slid a lemon square over to her. "I saw Sophia and Jilly last night. I saved this for you. Please appreciate the effort I displayed in NOT devouring it before you came down."

The joy of a Creativity Café lemon square, even a little stale, did much to alleviate the weirdness of the past few minutes. "So what are you working on?" Bridget mumbled, sugar and crust crumbs spraying out from her mouth.

Kate smiled. Her goofy, really happy smile.

She NEVER smiled that smile over work stuff! "Mom!" Bridget demanded. "What is going on?"

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What do you mean?”

“It just that you’re all weird this morning.” This was a profoundly irritating way to start the week.

“I’m sorry, Bridge. I just figured out a work thing. I’d been struggling with this case and I figured out that…” Kate smiled that smile again. “I figured out that it’s okay not to have everything completely and perfectly figured out and fixed for everybody. So, I’m sort of, you know, like, going back over all my cases, you know, the ones pending, just look for the best possible answer. Plus, I think I may keep my hair this way, which is going to probably buy me an extra half hour every morning from now on.”

Oh. Well, that sounded okay, Bridget thought.

The curls suited her. They made her look sort of like Grandma. Grandma’s hair was all gray and usually stuck under a gardening hat but it was curly like Mom’s. And her’s. They all had the same hair. Okay. Well, I guess this is all okay.

At that moment the sunrise crested over the horizon. A warm beam of light came to rest on Bridget’s face. Turning towards it, Bridget grinned at the sensory information that it was going to be a clear day.

Maybe I could talk Mom into letting me go to Grandma’s after school, Bridget thought. I could help her put in those bulbs.

Kate watched her daughter smile at the new day and suddenly the blood rushed to her head, causing the roots of hair on Kate’s scalp to ripple.

Bridget seemed to be emanating light and warmth and, on her young, open face; Kate saw her father’s smile. For a moment, it was if her dad was in the room with them, embracing Bridget, somehow telling Kate, through her daughter, to stop and smile at the new day.

So Kate reached across the table and pressed her fingertips into the remaining lemon square crumbs. Licking the sweet and tart crumbs, she turned towards the sun.

It wasn’t a perfect moment. But it was close.

CHAPTER NINE

Jilly moved all the cups on the table to make room to shuffle, almost dropping the coffees so Sophia took over, sliding them aside to the far end of the table.

Just get this stupid thing over with; Jilly thought as she began to shuffle, complaining, “These cards are a little stiff.”

“I think you’re a little stiff, my friend,” remarked Kate.

“That lemon square isn’t agreeing with me.”

“Along with the five shots of vodka?” Sophia suggested.

Jilly put down the deck with a grunt. “This is stupid. I don’t have a question anyway.”

Kate demanded, “Well, then how about an answer? What the hell’s going on with you tonight?”

Jilly thrust her body back in her chair. “I just don’t want to do this right now.”

“Really, Jilly, what’s up with you?” Sophia asked.

“Nothing. I’m fine. I’m a little pissed at you though.”

Startled, Sophia stared at Jilly. “At me!?”

“Yes, at you. Oh god, I really don’t want to talk about this. Let’s just call it a night,” Jilly said.

“No. What do you mean, you’re pissed at me?” Sophia insisted.

Head jutting forward, Jilly just shook her head.

“Don’t shake your head at me. Tell me!”

Jilly exhaled so hard her cheeks flapped, hesitated, and shook her head again. Just let it go, Sophia, she thought to herself.

But Sophia didn’t. “Tell me!”

Don’t tell her, Jilly thought. It would be stupid. Let her sit in her own mess.

“Tell me, Jilly,” Sophia demanded. “Why the hell are you pissed at me? What exactly have I done to piss you off?”

Don’t tell, Jilly thought. Don’t tell.

Sophia persisted. “What? What is it?”

So Jilly let the vodka take over. She turned on Sophia and launched. “You just...god, Soph, you just have no idea, you don’t know what it’s like to stand by and watch somebody screw up their life.”

Sophia stunned, stammered, “Well, actually, yes, I do, Jilly.”

Jilly barreled on, barely hearing her response. “Well, you’re screwing up your life and it’s bothering me. I’m your friend and it’s bothering me. That prick of a husband

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

completely abandons you, leaves you stranded, with two young kids to raise all by yourself, you have to rebuild...everything...you're tired all the time--"

"We're all tired all the time," Kate interjected as Sophia strode to the kitchen and tossed the remainder of her screwdriver down the drain.

Jilly had now worked up a head of steam and the words were spilling out of her.

"Your life is totally screwed because of his selfishness and you decide to just take him back. Just like that. 'Oops, world, he made a little mess but, don't worry, I'll clean it up. I'll fix everything' He doesn't have to do a goddamn thing. It is so fucking, so...codependent. He's playing you for a fool. I can't believe what...this is so...foolish. You are being such an idiot!"

Jilly, drink in hand, had risen and was now standing in the middle of the family room. Sophia returned from the kitchen and planted herself, hands on hips, between the two rooms. The kitchen table, still cluttered with cups, stood between them.

Kate, motionless, waited.

Sophia looked at Jilly and, in a low voice, returned fire. "First, Jilly, my life is not totally screwed up. My kids are great. I pay my rent. I work hard at a job I'm good at. My kids see their sober, happy father all the time. Ed and I, we both had a huge problem but we worked it out. We fixed it. Both of us, together. I do a ton of work, but so does he. He is doing it, every day, and I adore him. He's here, every day, showing up, working it out, which is a lot more than I can say for your husband!"

Kate glanced up at Sophia. "Soph--"

"NO!" she shot to Kate, and kept staring at Jilly. "The precious, perfect, love of your life was never fucking here! God's gift to parenting, Christianity and husbands was gone, what, ninety percent of the time? One week a month, MAYBE, he was around!"

"He did it for us," retorted Jilly.

"He did it for him," Sophia hurled back. "He loved it. He loved the traveling, the schmoozing, he loved the money, he loved it all. And he couldn't give it up. Not for you. Not for the kids. He wanted it all. Had to have it all. And he let it kill him. Your life is totally screwed because of your husband's selfishness. Not mine. So you tell me who the fool is." Sophia, body shaking, sat down in a chair, grabbed the pink teacup and held onto it tightly, breath coming so quickly she was almost panting. Kate looked at Jilly, who hadn't moved.

"Jilly," Kate said, "it's okay to be angry at Jim for dying. It's normal. It's alright to even hate him for it."

Jilly gasped, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath and exhaled. Her legs folding under her and her whole body seemed to deflate as she sat onto the brick edge of the fireplace. "That's the problem. I don't. I don't hate him," she said. Face pale, eyes blank, she picked up a toy car and gently rolled its wheels with her finger. She rolled the car away from her, toward the other cars snaking along the brick. "I don't even miss him that much," she said watching the bright blue car slow and stop before it reached the rest. "It's just the same...the days are pretty much the same. The schedule, the days...nothing has really changed. Everything is fine. I don't hate him. The problem, the real problem, is me. I've changed."

Kate squatted down next to her, asking, "How?"

Sophia, all anger gone, added, "It's okay. Whatever it is, it's alright."

Jilly shook her head. "No, it's not."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Kate said, gently, “Yes, Jilly, it is-”

Jilly snatched the blue car up and, clutching it in her hand, looked at Kate. “I hate God. Don’t you see? I hate God! I hate him. I hate him so fucking much. I want him to die. I hate him for making this cruel, stupid, empty, violent world full of hungry, selfish, stupid, lost people. It’s dirty and shallow and I hate him. He’s abandoned us. He’s laughing at us!” She hurled the car into the toy box and went over to the table and began clearing it, awkwardly carrying cups and glasses into the kitchen. “There are wars, rape, famine, children without fathers, and he doesn’t care. I can’t pray anymore. I haven’t prayed for months.” The coffee and screwdrivers splattered her as she dumped them in the sink. “And when I do pray all I do is scream at him. But he’s not listening anyway. God doesn’t listen. God doesn’t care. He leaves people, hanging. Literally. He left Jesus alone, abandoned, and he does the same thing to everybody else. I was such an idiot. I was so, so incredibly stupid.”

She grabbed the Handi-Wipe from the counter and squeezed it out into the sink, liquid oozing through her fingers, and tried wiping the vodka, orange juice and coffee off her sweatshirt. “I bought it. I bought it all. That the world could be better. The future, if I just found the right answer, if I asked the right question the right way, I’d find the right answer and I’d get it. Everything would be right and...safe. I’d be safe. The future, me, my kids, the world, we would be saved.”

Sweatshirt now smeared and splattered and the damp Handi-Wipe hanging from her fingertips, she turned towards her friends. “God would...provide. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t provide. He takes. He takes, and then leaves. He threatens us with hell...well, big deal. I’m already there. I’m already fucking there!”

She sat, cloth still in hand. Staring at it, a corner of her mind casually noted the slight scent of stale mold rising from the frayed and torn green weave. She stuck her finger through a small rend in the fabric and tore it wide, easily ripping apart the cloth. She spied the last of Kate’s cocktail still at the corner of the table and she reached over and deposited the remnants of the cloth into the tall glass, pushing them down with her index and middle fingers, watching the faded green pattern mingle with the diluting orange juice and last few lumps of ice cubes. “I don’t miss Jim. I don’t miss my husband. I don’t miss the father of my children. But I miss...the old God. My old God. But he never was and I want to kill him. I hate him and I want to kill him. I want him dead. Like Jim is dead. I want God dead.” With a firm nod, she seized the cocktail and took it to the kitchen, tossing its contents into the sink with a grim flourish and returned to the table.

Her ponytail had come undone and she sat, small, hard smile in her lips, hair tangled, eyes hooded and dark, sweatshirt splattered, smeared and the faint smell of mold left from the Handi-Wipe rising up from it. Her eyes fell on the single, solitary cup remaining on the table; the neon pink plastic was so bright it seemed to be burning as the cup leaned, resting against the tarot deck. Jilly slowly reached over and, with a flick of her finger, sent it flying off the table. Kate and Sophia watched it bounce across the carpet and come to rest under the chair where, unbeknownst to them, it had begun the evening. Kate looked back to Jilly.

“Is that all?” Kate asked.

“What? All?”

Kate nodded. “Is that everything? You hate God. You hate God. You want to kill God. That’s one. Give us the rest. I want to hear all of it.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jilly, a little confused, shook her head firmly. “That’s it. That’s everything.”

“Come on, Jilly, I’ve been an attorney for almost two decades. That is not everything.”

Sophia suggested, cautiously, “Jim, maybe? Do you want to...?”

Jilly shook her head again. “No. Not Jim. I never-”

Kate persisted. “What else? There’s more. Let’s hear it.”

Jilly reluctantly looked over at Kate. “Well...me. This feeling in me. This not feeling in me. Nothing. I feel like nothing. An empty, dry space full of nothing but air. Brittle and stiff and cracked and hollow and full of nothing.”

Kate nodded. “Alright. Have you been thinking of killing yourself?” Her level, unemotional gaze held Jilly’s eyes.

“No...because it feels like God already has.”

Kate nodded again. “So, you’re pissed off at God for murdering you?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds pretty reasonable. Any other crimes we should know about?”

“What?” Jilly said.

“Other crimes! Other offenses. Think, Jilly.”

“Um...he killed my husband?”

“Good,” said Kate. “And you feel already dead, so...he killed you and Jim. Anything else?”

“Left my children fatherless?”

“And motherless,” Kate added.

“Orphans.”

Sophia offered, “He’s a big faker?”

Kate leaned back and looked over to Sophia, her fingers making a temple at her chest. “Elaborate,” Kate instructed.

Struggling with her thought for a moment, Sophia said, “Well, he pretends he is generous, loving, will...um...provide-”

Kate interrupted. “Yes! ‘God will provide.’ Misrepresentation. That’s good. Increases expectations which he has no intention of fulfilling. Abuses his position of authority.”

Jilly sat up straight. “False statements under oath. His oath...um...perjury!”

“Good. Yes. Perjury. Anymore?” Kate said.

Jilly, thinking hard, gathered her hair back into its’ ponytail as she considered.

“Neglect...oh...oh, I got another one! Expects you to pray in exchange for, supposedly, answering prayers. And, if you don’t pray, you’re going to hell.” Fishing in her pocket, she found a rubber band and snapped her ponytail back into place with a satisfied grin.

“Extortion.” Kate turned to Sophia, continuing, “We should start writing these down,” she gestured for Sophia to look in her bag. Sophia jumped up and dug in Kate’s voluminous purse and after a brief, frenzied search, triumphantly produced a notepad. She quickly settled back in her seat and flipped open the notebook.

“Okay, you’re gonna have to go back. I’ve got extortion-” Sophia said as she began to write a list, thinking, I love Kate. Love, love, love her! I sit here, completely useless, no idea what to do, what to say. How do you respond to someone’s grief like this? I was going to just listen. Maybe give her a hug. Suggest some grief support group. Therapy. How lame. But Kate! Putting God on trial. She is brilliant. She’d do anything; she’d piss off God, to help a friend. No wonder she’s such a great lawyer. Maybe that’s why she’s

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

so good. She's so loyal. If she had to, she'd put Mother Theresa on the stand, reduce her to tears, and then call Gandhi out for erroneous statements of fact. And she'd do it without blinking an eye. I don't even have the nerve to ask the checkout girl if she double rang the milk.

"Perjury," said Kate, interrupting her thoughts.

"And murder. Neglect. Misrepresentation. Abuse of power. Did you get false statements?" The list poured out of Jilly as Sophia attempted to keep up.

Sophia looked at Kate. "Is false statements included under misrepresentation?"

"Just write it down and we'll sort it out later," Kate said with a wave of her hand. She looked back to Jilly. "Come on, there's gotta be more."

Jilly burrowed down in her chair and kept thinking, staring intently at the pink teacup wedged under the chair.

The room was silent as the women search their minds for further evidence. Sophia suddenly looked up. "Are we just sticking with Jilly's case?"

Kate snapped her fingers. "We could go federal! There's cause. Excellent, Soph! Well done."

Sophia proudly grinned and, with a flourish, created a new category on her notepad.

Jilly looked up, an idea dawning on her face. "Do we have a case for war crimes? Isn't not doing something if you can, if you have the power to stop something awful from happening but you don't... isn't that a crime?"

"Wouldn't that be more like... global neglect?" Sophia suggested.

They both looked to Kate, faces bright. Kate began to laugh. "We're probably gonna need more paper. He's been a busy guy, this God character," she said, continuing, "Do you think God knows his rights? How would you Miranda God?"

Fingers again templed at her chest, she started to contemplate the legal issues. God would have good lawyers, she thought. Darrow definitely. So, they'd appeal. Make sure that they have issues and groundwork laid. I'd have to make a record. Make sure I brought out..." Kate's mind plunged down the familiar and enjoyable path of legal maneuvering.

"He just looks away," Jilly suddenly said. "He's neglecting his children. We're all supposed to be children of God and what does he do? Nothing. He does nothing. He even left Jesus up there to die, alone. Up there. Jesus, up there. Jim, up on that plane. Me, here. Alone. I'd rather be punished than... abandoned."

"You're not alone, Jilly," Sophia said.

"Yes, I am."

Kate shook her head. "No, you're not."

"Maybe it's just that I'm in this new place," Jilly said. "This new land where's there's no God, no Jim and no me. And there's no map to find my way back."

Sophia reached across the table and pushed the tarot deck until it rested in front of Jilly. "We'll help you," she said.

Kate bobbed her head in agreement. "That's why we're here."

Jilly looked at her two friends. "God sent you?" she said.

"Not exactly comforting, is it?" commented Kate.

Jilly took the deck and began to shuffle. "You'd be surprised," she said, letting the cards rippling through her hands. She placed the shuffled deck on the table and, reaching to turn the first card over, hesitated.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What, Jilly?” Kate asked.

“If you don’t want to do this,” Sophia added, “You don’t have to.”

Jilly merely shook her head. “It’s not that I don’t want to do it...it just feels like...this...us...this silly little ritual feels like the only hope I have.” Taking a jagged breath, she turned over the first card. “Me,” she said.

Of course, Jilly thought, staring at the card.

The beast stared back at her, teeth bared, darkness of the small black square only broken by the flames shooting out of the torch in the clenched fist held high above the monster’s head.

Kate said, flinging her arms out, “Well, that’s it! You are going to hell. At least I’ll have a little company on the flight.”

Sophia reprimanded her, “Kate! Behave!” and, turning to Jilly, she added, “Don’t worry. She’s just jealous it’s reversed. She always gets it upright.”

“But it’s the Devil!” Jilly protested.

Sophia reminded her, “Reversed.”

Kate countered, “Yeah, but it’s still two people in chains, bound to the devil. Looks pretty bleak for us, Jilly. I get the window seat. And no hogging the rotting cesspool of steaming excrement.”

“But it’s reversed! And Kate, I said behave!” Sophia repeated firmly as she turned to Jilly. “She’s just happy someone else got this card for once. Okay, well, obviously, since the card is reversed, it means beginning to cast off the shackles of what has imprisoned you. Facing whatever issue has bedeviled you.”

“It looks...right. It’s so dark and fierce,” Jilly said.

Sophia nodded. “I also remember, it has something to do with using...um...outside stimuli to deal with internal demons. Edward...this card would show up in my Edward position a long time ago...at first.”

Eyes wide, Kate said, “Why, Jilly, have you ever used outside stimuli to deal with inner demons? Oh, could you pass me that vodka bottle off the counter? Oh, forget it. It’s almost empty. How did that happen, I wonder?”

“You are an obnoxious brat,” Jilly muttered to Kate, a true smile beginning to appear at her lips.

“Careful, young lady. This is your seat partner for eternity you’re talking to.”

“But since my devil is reversed, maybe I’m getting off my hell-bound plane. The devil wants me to stay stuck within myself. Maybe I’m trying to...I don’t know-” Jilly floundered.

“Change course?” Sophia suggested.

“Do the next card,” Kate said. “What’s it going to be? The position?”

“Current situation,” Jilly answered. Deep breathe and the card was turned.

Kate and Sophia began to giggle. Jilly, after glaring at them, finally couldn’t resist and has to join in.

“The Tower,” said Sophia.

“Unbelievable!” Kate said. “I’m shocked. The Tower? The Tower?! Why this represents exploding anger. Rage. A bolt of lightening completely changing your life, outlook and worldview. Your world itself being changed. Why, Jilly, this can’t be right!”

A tall, isolated, gray tower rose up into a dark nighttime sky as lightening cut across the black sky and struck the top of the building. The image on the card seemed to be

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

recording the moment of impact and the roof, which was actually a large, golden crown, had been propelled upward, flying off. Flames were erupting from the tower and two people plummeted, helplessly, head first, down towards the ground.

Sophia said, "In some books, they say this card represents the flash of revelation. Seeing the awesome power of God. God is the lightening and our lives, our minds, are the tower that we build to try to protect ourselves."

"Men make plans and God laugh?" Jilly said.

"Something like that," said Sophia with a shrug. "It sort of makes sense, don't you think? Look at the two people that have been thrown out, that are falling to the ground. Maybe, that's you and...Jim. See how one person is looking at the ground, reaching for it? Looking to find a place to land. But the other guy is just falling, just sort of...I don't know...giving up...not changing, maybe?"

"Not changing? Giving up? Are you saying that's me?" Jilly demanded.

Sophia looked at Jilly and with her long fingers enveloping Jilly's wrist, she said, "I'm saying that's Jim."

"But Jim didn't give up!" protested Jilly. "He didn't! He just had a heart attack. He wanted the...he wanted to be home with us. With me. He wanted the promotion. All the travel was wearing all of us down and he..." She stopped talking with a small intake of breath. Sitting rock still, she stared at the card. Eventually, she began to speak again, this time her voice close to inaudible. "I never told you but...Jim was developing type 2 diabetes. And his cholesterol was...the doctor said if he didn't change his diet, the lifestyle, he could have...serious problems. That was one year before...one year before the plane. Before what happened on the plane. And he didn't do anything. He had a year. He didn't...change anything."

She put her face in her hands. "He didn't want to change anything. I pushed it," she confessed, looking up. "He didn't want to stop. He loved the travel. The food. The people. Everything. He didn't want to change one iota, except maybe to get me off his back. He loved coming home and seeing me, seeing the kids, but he loved leaving even more. I saw it. I didn't...I couldn't admit it...but I knew. And the part I have so much trouble with is...did he die because so he wouldn't have to change, did he die because I was asking him too or did he die because he really just didn't want to be with me?"

Kate placed her hands on the table and directed her gaze straight into Jilly. "Jim died, Jilly. He just died. The man is dead because of every fettuccini Alfredo, every martini, every time change, croissant with butter, sleepless night spent exploring this new sushi bar in Tokyo or chasing down that new client in Madrid. He crammed you, the kids, every damn country in the world, every different kind of food, dozen of experiences, hundreds of new people, countless cultures tasted and savored and he was done. DONE. He could have stretched it all out by throttling back, maybe just a little bit even, but did he? Could he, even?"

Jilly unable to answer, looked over to Sophia.

Sophia nodded. "Jilly, Kate's right. And maybe, he was the way he was, always moving, seeking out new experiences, because he himself couldn't be that. He couldn't do...new. He wanted to be able to be different. To be able to grow. But he couldn't so he just kept moving, kept running, kept busy, so he wouldn't have to be at home...with himself."

Her head moving, barely half an inch, Jilly nodded ever so slightly.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Good, Soph,” said Kate. “Okay. You wanna do obstacle, Jilly?”

Jilly turned over her next card. “Queen of Pentacles...which makes no sense at all. This cannot be my obstacle. This is me, doing my job. Taking care of business.”

“Exactly,” Sophia said and gathering her hair into a makeshift ponytail, a pseudo-serene expression plastered on her face, she uttered in a bland monotone, “Oh, I’m fine. Fine. Just fine. Everything’s fine. Fine, fine, fine. Work’s fine. Kids, fine. Everything, fine.”

Kate picked up the drone. “I shouldn’t be mad. I’ve got a good job, insurance money, healthy kids, I’m a therapist, so, god knows, I’m extremely well adjusted. Oh yeah, my husband dropped dead of a heart attack but I’m okay with that. I grieved for the appropriate amount of time, at 2:45, every day, for six months-”

“So, now...I’m fine,” Sophia finished.

“Fine,” Jilly said. “Point taken. You both are extremely obnoxious.”

“But are we right?” asked Kate.

Jilly, ignoring the question, said, “Best course of action,” and turned over the final card.

The Death card rested in the middle of the table.

“Okay, counselors, let’s get to work,” Kate said, straightening her shoulders. “It ‘aint easy. It ‘aint purdy. So let’s just look at the facts. Because, that’s what this card is. The facts, undeniable. Right, Sophia? The skeleton, all artifice stripped away to expose what holds us up. The bones of what we...you...truly are. Jilly...everything has been...everything is...um-”

Death. Shit, Kate thought. Help me here, Soph. I’m good with the fancy stuff. The flourishes. Putting God on trial. Joking about hell. But the rawest of stuff. I’m the brains, not the heart. Nobody explains death by using their brains. Look at Soph! This card doesn’t even freak her out.

Picking up the card and contemplated it, Sophia wondered, why does this card freak everybody out?

“All right, Jilly,” Sophia began. “All that was you feels like it has died. But, you, the essence of you, remains. See, you’re not lying in a grave but riding a horse forward. Armour on; flag in hand, ready for action. In action. You are dying to change. Oh! Oh! Look at that dead guy on the ground beneath you! It’s...he’s a king. Wow. The old rule is dead. The king is dead. Long live the-”

“Queen?” Jilly suggested.

The skeleton rode forward, on the back of a strong, white magnificent horse. Welcoming him with open arms was a small child, grasping flowers and a pope, hands outstretched. Behind the child, a young woman, eyes closed, sat, either in a trance or lost in thought. Far away, miles away in the distance, the sun was rising, just cresting over the horizon.

Sophia continued to gaze at the card, eyes traveling over the images of the minute scene. “So the child there wants the change. See the little kid there? And so does the church guy with the pointy hat on. The sleeping woman, well, she’s a girl really, I don’t know what that means. Maybe she’s waiting to get wakened? The unknown future maybe? Oh, wow! There’s this little tiny ship in the background, going down a river...got it! I got it. You’re on a long journey. This is a really neat card. I’ve told you, once you get

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

past the scary skeleton guy on the horse it's almost...almost exciting." She looked at Jilly as she slid the card across to her.

Jilly said, "So you're saying this is exciting? This is fun? I hate to tell you this, but this doesn't exactly feel 'fun.'" Her eyes were dark holes in her face, mirroring almost exactly the gaping black spaces on the skeleton's face where his eyes used to be. A red plume affixed to the top of the skeleton's helmet could be a medieval ponytail blowing in the wind. Jilly, spying the plume on the helmet, instinctively reached up to adjust her own ponytail.

"Hey! She didn't say fun. Lighten up," said Kate, her gentle voice belying the sharpness of her words.

Sophia added, "I'm not saying fun. I'm not even saying exciting. I'm saying...I don't know..."

Kate retorted quickly, "Yes, you do. You know, Soph. Say it."

"No, I don't."

"God, I hate that!" Kate cried. "When lawyers know the answer--"

Sophia said, "But I'm not a lawyer."

"And don't have the balls to say it," Kate finished. "And, Sophia, yes, you are. Tonight, your job is to see the big picture for Jilly. To protect and advocate for her to the best of your ability, you have to tell her the hard truth. So, be a friend. Do it."

Sophia looked at Jilly, the years shared between them sitting on the table between them. All the phone calls, lunches, fragments of advice casually tossed out, birthday parties, playdates, hugs, jokes, spats, Sunday matinees, last minute babysitting and dozens of forgotten afternoons held them together like a solid slab of long-fixed cement. Jilly nodded her head to Sophia in an incremental gesture, whether acknowledging her concurrence with Kate's opinion or in recognition of the foundation that lay between them, it was unclear. Sophia nodded her head in return and began.

"You've always been looking for answers as long as I've known you. But, from what I can see, the old answers aren't doing you any good. You look like...death warmed over. So, maybe you're supposed to just let yourself be dead. Stop trying to fake to everybody that you're fine. That you're alive, even. Because you're not. The old Jilly is dead. You are a different Jilly already. Maybe just stop and see what questions...or answers...show up."

"You sound like my mother," Jilly said.

"Have five more screwdrivers and a line of coke and you'll sound like mine," Sophia replied.

"So you want me not to think?"

Sophia nodded. "Yeah, sort of."

"I've never done that before," Jilly said.

Kate took the card out of Jilly's hand and held it aloft. "Hence, the Death card...oh, and good job, counselor," said Kate, smiling at Sophia as she handed Death back to Jilly.

Jilly stared at it, the images beginning to swim before her eyes. The king lying dead on the ground, crown knocked off his head, child and pope alive and vibrant, the sun rising in the distance but the skeleton on his tall white horse dominating the foreground, the sleeping girl and sailing ship. Everything began to blur and dance. She finally looked up.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Let’s do outcome,” she stated firmly, but remained motionless, card in hand. After a moment, Sophia reached over to the stack of cards and turned the last card over for her.

Kate and Sophia exchanged a glance as Kate said, “Well, my friend, you got the King of Cups.”

“Reversed,” added Sophia.

For the first time in the evening, Kate reached over to the stack of tarot books on the counter and randomly pulled one out and opened it, quickly finding the appropriate page.

“Mastery of emotion. Reversed, loss of that mastery. A leader feeling the most primal of emotions sweep over him-”

Jilly put her head in her hands and began to weep.

“The emotion and stress of great responsibility casting one into the rough and rocky waters of sorrow, grief and confusion.”

Sophia rose and got a box of Kleenex from the kitchen as Kate reached over and began stroking Jilly’s hair. Sophia, putting the tissues in front of Jilly, squatted down and took her weeping friend into her arms.

Sobs rattled Jilly’s body harder and harder.

Oh God, I can’t stop it, Jilly thought. I can’t stop this feeling. If I don’t stop it I’m going to end. This is it. This is me, ending.

Guttural gasps flew out of her, beyond sobbing. Limbs rigid, her torso jerked with spasmodic, aching grief. She threw her head back and hunched forward, eyes streaming and nose running, and screamed at her friends. “Why doesn’t God help me? Why isn’t he listening? I need...I need...God. Oh, God, this hurts. I need you. I need Jim! I need Jim! Help me, God. Oh God, please help me. I need...you. Jim. Oh, god...Jim...Oh, god, this hurts. This hurts. Help me...God, help me. I miss Jim.”

* * *

Haley awakened with a jerk.

She had been dreaming. Dreaming about running towards a car but she couldn’t get to it because things kept flying out of her backpack. Pencils and books and homework. Everything kept flying out the top and the faster she ran; the wider the zipper opened and the more stuff came out. She would stop and grab the stuff as fast as she could, so her arms got fuller and fuller, and then she tried to keep running with more coming out the top of the backpack and everything slipping out of her arms.

All this while the car got farther and farther away.

She was relieved to wake up. Her mouth was crusty and dry, like she had been panting, and her nightgown was all bunched up around her hips. She wiggled upright, yanking the nightgown back down and sat on her bed for a second, hunched and bleary and still rattled from her dream.

It was dark outside. Her clock glowed 5:49 am. Mom and Jimmy would still be in bed. Jimmy would be asleep but Mom would probably just be lying there.

She turned on her bedside light, almost knocking over the wooden globe she always kept there. Under it sat her book that she finished last night. Oral book report today.

Monday. School today.

Haley thought she heard something but didn’t want to check and see if Mom was up, maybe getting dressed or something. Haley didn’t like going into her parent’s bedroom

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

anyway. It smelled too closed up and sweet, like a lot of fake fabric softener smell and sweat. Mom would just be lying there anyway, her face all puffy. Not from crying. At least, Haley didn't think from crying. More just like...old. Like puffy skin on old people.

She didn't want to think about her mom getting old.

Pop Tarts. She would go downstairs and have one of those Pop Tarts. Actually, they weren't technically Pop Tarts. They were a weird organic, whole grain version with *Natural* and *Vibrant* in the name but if she smeared extra jelly on them they were okay.

Silently, with stealth worthy of a Native American warrior princess, she dressed, went to the bathroom, peed and crept downstairs.

Haley froze.

There was a strange person at the kitchen table. An old woman sat, coffee mug in hand. The mug Daddy brought back from Ireland. Another mug sat on the table. The red one. He brought that one back from Brazil.

The woman looked up and said, "Why, good morning, Haley."

"Huh?" Haley said. It sounded stupid even to her. She cast about for a swift second and then came up with, "Um...where's my mom?"

"Haley, honey, you're up. I didn't realize how late it was." Her mom came around the kitchen counter with the coffee pot. Putting down the pot, she came right over to Haley and gave her a hug. A big one.

It was completely annoying. "Mom! Stop. It's not late. It's like five-thirty. It's really early."

"I'm sorry, Haley." She released Haley and gestured to the old lady. "You know Pastor Fieldstone, Haley. Dig up some manners and say good morning."

Oh, yeah. It was Pastor Fieldstone. She looked different, sitting here. More like a grandmother than a minister. "Haley..." her mom prompted her.

Haley wanted to say, "What the heck is Pastor Fieldstone doing sitting at the kitchen table at five-thirty Monday morning?" but she merely squeaked out a "Sorry. Good morning."

The pastor smiled. "Don't worry about manners, Haley. Heck, I should apologize to you. Nobody likes surprises before breakfast. Speaking of breakfast, got any donuts back there, Jilly? It's been a long night. I'm starving."

"Oh geez, Lily, donuts for breakfast?" Jilly moaned in feigned disgust, "don't you want some eggs?" Jilly went to the pantry.

Behind her back, Pastor Fieldstone winked at Haley and made a face. "Nope," the pastor said smoothly. "A donut or anything sweet would be great."

Pastor Fieldstone sat, calm and still, smiling at Haley.

Haley, still rather uncomfortable in her own kitchen, smiled back.

Jilly returned with the box of "Pop Tarts" (still *Natural* and *Vibrant*), a few oatmeal cookies, banana bread and a lemon square. The sun must have started to come up because Jilly walked right into a beam of sunlight that was now coming in the patio doors. She stopped and stood, Pop Tarts and desert plate in her hands. "The pastor and I were just talking," she said to Haley. "We were talking about your dad. I've been still pretty sad and I needed to talk about him."

Haley looked at her Mom's face. It was puffy and sort of red. Parts of it were white too. She looked awful. Her hair was limp and Haley could smell her sweatshirt from across the table. It smelled sort of like old, yucky orange juice.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

But she sounded great. She sounded normal. Not that forced, strained, “supportive” voice. She sounded like she used to sound. She sounded like Mom again. None of that stupid “therapist” talk like:

“Would you like to talk about your father, Haley honey? Anything you want to tell me? It’s okay to feel sad, you know. Anytime you want to talk, I’m here for you.”

Haley hated The Therapist Voice. Those moments when they were supposed to connect and heal. Please. How pathetic. Plus, Mom never talked about how she felt anyway. It was always just about Haley and Jimmy.

But, right now, she sounded normal. She looked awful and smelled worse and the entire morning was strange. Really strange, uncomfortable and more than a little weird.

But Haley had a feeling it was also really, really good.

CHAPTER TEN

Swords

Ideas. Intellect. Truth. Clarity.
An intellectual tradition. Study.
Analysis. Mental focus. Debate.

The house was silent.

The turn of the century mansion, restored to detailed perfection, sat dark and sleeping on the cold winter's morning. Leaded glass windows, thick plaster walls and high ceilings flowed from one room to the next. All the walls were painted a rich, vivid green.

Outside, the morning sky began, very slowly, to turn from dark gray to purple to red and then to blue. A few sheets of thin clouds hung high in the sky, frozen and motionless. The full moon remained visible yet the stars had disappeared.

A single shaft of hard winter sunlight broke across the horizon, cutting through the darkness. It reached the tall, ice-covered trees lining the side of the house, making the branches glisten like just-washed crystal.

Inside, the house still sat in a thick darkness. What used to be a turn-of-the-century kitchen, butler's pantry and breakfast room had been renovated and expanded into a fully outfitted, professional kitchen, now open to the rest of the first floor. A pair of swinging doors off the back of the kitchen led to an addition containing commercial-grade ovens, dishwashers and more refrigerators. A thin line of light lay at the base of the double doors, but it was too faint to combat the winter's darkness.

The only sound detectable, a soft, steady hum, came from a line of refrigerators tucked under the counters.

A muffled thudding of footsteps pounded down the back stairs, formerly the servants' staircase, and Jacqueline burst into the kitchen. She immediately crossed to the swinging doors and peered under them. Seeing lights on, she grinned and kicked one of the small refrigerators lightly with the edge of her foot. It obediently swung open and, reaching in and grabbing an apple, she hoisted herself up onto a wooden baker's table.

"Hey, Dad," she called out.

A "morning, honey" drifted back.

As she sat, she allowed herself the pleasure of slowly waking up in the dark. She watched the cool sunlight, slender knives of pure shine; progressively touch the each room of the café. Filled with funky, vintage furniture from various eras clustered in small, comfortable groupings, wingback chairs and Naugahyde recliners created small inviting corners for reading or talking. A Victorian sofa flanked by bean bag chairs was

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

the perfect place to peruse one of the many newspapers the café subscribed to and chrome and enamel kitchenette sets from the 50s were scattered about, strategically placed to catch light from the tall windows.

Resting at the back of the house was a spacious sitting room with a small raised platform tucked into its corner. To the right of the platform hung a large blackboard, on it written, "Poetry Slam, Beginners, Mondays. Play Readings, Tuesdays. Beef Your Beef Open Mike (10 Minute Limit PLEASE!), Wednesdays. Poetry Slam, Advanced, Thursdays. Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, Various Artists (see website/newspaper/announcements/staff)"

The light reached the sweeping oak staircase that rose from the spacious front entryway. Beyond it, in Jacqueline's mind's eye, she envisioned the full-fledged art gallery on the second floor, with its clean white walls and well placed ceiling lights which, when on focused onto the display. The current show was a series done in the style of English aristocracy portraiture complete with ornate gilt frames but with celebrities of questionable repute as the subjects.

The morning light finally hit Jacqueline.

Crunching away at her apple, she wore a boldly striped sweater, an obvious relic of the 60's. The large sweater hung to her knees, almost engulfing her frame, and faded pink slippers clad her feet. Petite and wiry, she effortlessly scooted backwards on the table and crossed her legs underneath her. At nineteen, dark eyebrows dominated her small face, making her appear older than her years and her dark, slightly kinky hair was gathered into a messy bun at the nape of her neck. Her skin shone with the smooth radiance of youth, Irish heritage and favorable DNA. While the majority of her features were clearly a combination of both Sophia and Edward, her hands, long and gracefully, were from Sophia alone.

Apple finished, she deftly tossed it across the room, watching it arc and then successfully descending into the large, empty garbage can. "Three points," she declared, pushing herself off the counter and ambling over to the swinging doors, she thrust them open with a push of her hip.

She walked straight into a wall of warm, fragrant aroma. Bread, pies and something sweet and rich could be detected in the layers of scent filling the room.

Edward sat at a marble pastry table. A tall, wiry man, he was flipping through a small stack of cookbooks, two of them in French, one in Italian. His black, curly hair was cropped close, streaks of gray beginning to make themselves known. He was wearing a pair of slightly geeky but oddly flattering reading glasses which slid down his nose a bit when he furiously began to nod. He reached over to his notepad and dashed off a quick idea.

"Yes, the balsamic...and maybe I will put the snow peas in the...oh...remember the garnish..." he muttered as he wrote, a dreamy smile flitting across his face. He distractedly pushed up his glasses with his wrist, a habit developed from years of working with flour-dusted hands.

"Hey, Dad," Jacqueline said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Hey, Princess. You're up early. Good. I've decided. Rack of lamb for your mother. Rack of lamb and those potatoes she loves. The lemon squares-"

"Of course-" Jacqueline interjected with a grin.

"Of course. What am I, crazy?"

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“You? Never! Forget the lemon squares? That would be grounds for divorce, I’d say.”

“Her plane touches ground at 4:42,” Edward said. “I’ll be there-”

“Please be there, Dad. Please. You’re kinda making us all crazy.”

Edward looked up, startled. “Have I? I didn’t think I-”

“Dad, come on. You’re like this every time she goes to a workshop,” Jacqueline said. “All you do is cook and pine for her. Patty at the shelter actually said she had too many pies yesterday. Too many pies. Too much food at a shelter. They’re gonna list King Street Soup Kitchen in Zagat’s if you keep this up.”

Edward nodded, sending his glasses down to the end of his nose again. “It’s the only thing...baking, you know...that makes me feel...right...better...when she’s away. Except you! You help tremendously, Jackie. You and your brother,” he said, enveloping her in a hug. “Call me crazy, but I just have a thing for that old gal. Okay, what do you want for breakfast? Omelet? French Toast? Pancakes? Crepes? Crepes! I got these tremendous raspberries. I’ll make some crepes and perhaps-” He buried his head in the refrigerator, muttering.

“Dad. Dad. No, I had an apple. And I’ve gotta make the coffee...get things started.” She grabbed a rack of clean knives sitting by the dishwasher, glanced at them and added, “Oh, and Dad, we’ve gotta get the dryer serviced again. I’ll call Anthony. The knives are covered with spots.”

From deep in the refrigerator a muffled, “Apple! That’s not enough!” emerged. He continued, head still in the refrigerator. “There they are. Oh. I forgot those. Blueberries-”

Jacqueline made a hasty retreat out of the room, certain in the knowledge that a rich, sumptuous, calorie laden meal lay in wait for her in the very near future. Returning to the kitchen, hauling the knives with her, she shoved the light switch with her shoulder, illuminating the main work area and the large wooden community table in the room just beyond it. Jacqueline slid the rack of knives onto the table and, after tossing a clean towel over to the table for later knife polishing, she calmly went about the business of getting the café up and running. Coffee was started, tables and counters wiped down and sandwich and salad stations restocked.

Squatting down by one of the coolers, checking the cream situation, she heard someone pounding at the back door.

“Excellent,” said Jacqueline, jumping up to open the heavy wooden door situated at the far end of the kitchen. Swiftly unlocking the various deadbolts, she swung open the door, revealing a person whose entire upper torso was obscured by three large flower arrangements being carried in a flat cardboard box.

Muffled by the blooms, a voice demanded, “Hurry! It’s fucking freezing out here!” Although the flower carrier’s line of vision was completely blocked by the arrangements of flowers, winterberries and greenery, she stomped her feet on the mat and confidently made her way into the kitchen and across to the community table. Carefully sliding her horticultural bounty on the table, she revealed herself as she sank her body into a chair with a groan.

“Hey, Bridget,” Jacqueline said. “Coffee?”

“Just hook it up to an I.V. and snake it over here, Brat,” Bridget replied, her head thrown back in mock exhaustion.

Jacqueline said, “Don’t pull that crap on me, Fidget.” Bridget sat back up and began fiddling with the sugar packets on the table as Jacqueline poured two cups of coffee.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Plunking Bridget's cup down in front of her, Jacqueline continued. "Your fingernails are dirty, which means you've been at the greenhouse, which means you've been up for awhile, which means you've had at least one cup of coffee, which means you're fine. And happy, might I add." Bridget had constructed a small tower out of sugar packets as she awaited her coffee and Jacqueline snatched a few off the top and tossed them at her to emphasize her point.

Retrieving the sugar off the floor, Bridget conceded, "Yeah, but not good coffee," whacking the sugar packets loudly against the side of her leg a few times and then doctored her drink. "Pretty nice, eh?" she said, gestured to the flower arrangements. "And, yes, although I've had coffee, it wasn't Sophia coffee. And I need a fresh lemon square or my life will be without purpose. So, Jack, where do you want the flowers?"

Bridget pulled off her hat to reveal a headful of black, springy curls. She ruffled her hands through them to insure that every curl was standing as much on end as possible. Clad in well-worn jeans and work boots, struggling out of her bulky green parka, she revealed an old green doctor's surgical scrub shirt, thankfully covered with dirt instead of bloodstains. At almost six feet, Bridget adopted the slouch that most tall women assume when standing, but she sat up poker straight when seated. Her long arms were in perpetual motion when she spoke, either illuminating her point, fiddling with her hair, arranging sugar packets on the table top into various patterns, or leaning over to adjust a wayward leaf or blossom on one of the arrangements.

Jacqueline shrugged. "You know Mom. 'Oh, honey, just put them wherever they'll look beautiful. You have such a great eye.'"

"You do have a great eye."

Jacqueline dismissed the idea with a shake of her head. "Not like hers. Just put them where you did last year. Make sure one gets upstairs. We have the opening tonight."

"Should I put it next to O.J. Simpson as Sir Walter Raleigh or Madonna as Mary, Queen of Scots?" Bridget asked.

Jacqueline asked, "Did you see Rush Limbough as Henry the Eighth?"

"No! Fabulous."

"I saw them cooling, by the way."

"O.J. and Rush?" said Bridget. "Trust me, they'll never be cool."

"The lemon squares," Jacqueline said. "They've gotta cool or else they-"

"I know. I know," Bridget said, waving her hand. "Did we hear from...?"

Jacqueline nodded. "She'll be here soon. She's still on...some other time. Some time zone thing."

"Where was she again? Nairobi?"

Refilling her coffee, Jacqueline said, "Nepal, maybe?" and leaned against the baker's table. She pointed out the window, gesturing for Bridget to turn around.

The women watched in easy silence as the sun sent shafts of light flooding through the frozen trees lining the street. Other smaller, yet still regal, houses could be seen along the wide boulevard. They had also been renovated, converted into boutiques, bookstores, an art supply shop, a lawyer's office and an upscale French restaurant. All the buildings were dark except for the sharp, white, winter sunlight bouncing off their windows.

After watching for a long moment, Bridget, over her shoulder, said quietly, "Yes, I got a postcard. Everybody was Buddhist. Nepal."

"Then it was Nepal. Are they Buddhist in Nepal?"

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

A thumping was heard on the back door and Jacqueline hurried over to get it, her pink slippers scuffing against the wooden floor. She opened the door to reveal a figure, bundled head to toe, a brightly colored knit hat pulled low against the cold.

Jacqueline cried, "Oh my god, Haley...the prodigal daughter returns! Yee ha!"

Jacqueline and Haley embraced, allowing the cold wind to gust in the door around them.

Bridget yelled, feigning rage, "Hey, Brats! Close the door. I got fragile flowers here!"

"Fragile, my ass," said Haley, running over to embrace Bridget. "If they can survive you, they can survive a little sub-zero arctic blast." Haley stepped back from Bridget and her light brown eyes, an inheritance from her father, peered intently at her two friends, taking them in.

Grinning, Jacqueline said, "Yup, you're home."

"Brat," Bridget added quickly.

Haley barked out a loud laugh and bent over, grabbing a well-traveled green backpack that she had dropped on the floor. "Shit. I can't believe it..." she said, swinging it up onto the table and beginning to peel her winter layers off. First came off her Mexican poncho, then a dark blue pea coat, a Irish woolen sweater, a thermal undershirt, to finally settle on a slightly frayed Henley shirt of questionable color, perhaps cream, perhaps gray. Her body, solid and wide, had the strength of a person used to toting a heavy backpack and walking long distances. "I mean, seeing Mom pulls me right back into the vortex of reality," Haley said as she stripped, "...but still! You guys look incredible. This is just like old times. Wait until you see what I brought you from China, Jack...you'll fucking die. And...yes...Bridget, don't even say it. Yes, I got the Japanese seeds, whatever the hell they are. I just grabbed all these packets from this little greenhouse...well...it was a shop, greenhouse place. Very spiritual. I told them all about you. And...oh! And look!" She finally plunked herself down in a chair, fished in one of the many pockets of her cargo pants and pulling out a packet of tea that she tossed to Jacqueline.

Picking it up and examining it, Jacqueline asked, "So, what's the poison this time?"

"I got it in Tibet. It's fucking amazing." Haley pulled off her knit cap, causing her thin, straight brown hair, cut in a short, almost punk style, to cling to her head with the static electricity. A faint line of freckles danced across her nose and her cheeks were bright round balls, which would forever give her the appearance of good-natured enthusiasm.

"I thought you were in Nepal," Bridget said. "You did Tibet two years ago, didn't you?"

"But I was in Nepal already. Tibet's right there. I had to."

Bridget and Jacqueline exchanged a big smile as Bridget began to nod furiously, saying, "Of course! Whenever I'm in Nepal, I swing by Tibet."

"One must!" Jacqueline added her brow furrowed in agreement.

"What would people say if you didn't?" said Bridget.

"There would be talk."

"What would the neighbors think?"

Haley peered at her two friends and, after a feigned three-way glare, stuck her tongue out at them, muttering, "Brats. Both of you."

Grinning, Jacqueline and Bridget nodded and said in unison, "Yes."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Teabag in hand, Jacqueline went about preparing a tea service tray as Haley leaned back, arching her body.

“Anyway, they were amazing, by the way,” Haley said. “Amazing countries. The people. The food. The government...fucking governments...totally corrupt. The West should do something. Something sane.”

“Yup.” Jacqueline nodded.

“Is your dad up? Has he made the...?”

“About twenty minutes. They’ve got to cool.”

Haley nodded. “So, who’s happy?” she asked.

All three women raised their hands.

“Who’s screwed up?” she continued.

All three women raised their hands.

“Whose mother is making them crazy?” All three women raised both hands high in the air, laughing.

Jacqueline returned from the kitchen and, placing a small, ornate, chipped English tea tray in front of Haley, asked, “Do you have to do any tea ritual, sun salute, maybe a Buddhist meditation pose of serenity or can you just drink the tea?”

Haley cast a level eye at her friend. “Cute. Japan was amazing. You should go. Everyone should go to the East. It’s almost a responsibility, in this day of globalization...so you can understand. Embrace a more diverse perspective.”

“Next week,” Jacqueline said. “After the napkin shipment comes in. Oh, and I’ve gotta clean the coolers. They’re very diverse, you know-”

“And there’s that pesky eyebrow plucking to do,” added Bridget.

“Yes! I am getting quite bushy,” said Jacqueline.

“Plus, those silly other little things like, um, go to school-”

“Make money to pay for...what...everything?” Jacqueline finished.

With a shrug, Haley waved them off. “I get it. I get it. I’ve heard all the excuses from you two. Every goddamn one.”

“Come on, Hal, not everybody is you,” Jacqueline said. “I’m just not comfortable getting on a plane with a couple of hundred dollars in my pocket and going off-”

“I know. I know, but-” Haley protested.

“But no ‘but’. It’s you. It’s not me. The café is diverse enough for me right now. Especially now,” Jacqueline finished.

Haley shrugged again. “Okay. Fine. Okay. I just don’t want you to miss anything. I’m your friend and I don’t want you to make a mistake, to miss an important opportunity for growth. You too, Fidget. And, might I add, Miss Bridget, you are amazingly silent during our usual debate. What’s up? How’s botany? Cracked the code of fern DNA yet? Found the missing link between poison ivy and cabbage roses?”

Bridget laid her head down on the table and groaned. Loudly. “Oh my god, I am so screwed. I am completely and utterly screwed.”

Debate forgotten, Haley and Jacqueline sat up, at automatic friendship alert. Through the quick, almost primal sorting of hints and clues including analysis of the past few minutes of conversation juxtaposed with years of shared experiences from childhood to the present, Haley and Jacqueline immediately estimated the approximate magnitude of the issue, although the specifics were still yet to be revealed. They both suspected it must lie somewhere in the emotional territory between death and a bad grade.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What? What is it?” demanded Jacqueline.

Bridget moaned, “I’ve decided to screw up my life,” head still on the table but face popping forward to look up to her friends.

Haley nodded firmly. “Finally. Well done.”

“About time, Miss Perfect,” Jacqueline added. “Now, spill. Specifics. Now. I hate waiting.”

Bridget just groaned again and lay her face back down.

“Come on,” Haley demanded, “proceed with screwing details. Is it literal screwing? Like a guy?”

A muffled “No. No. No,” rose from the table. She elaborately struggled to sit up. “Worse,” she said. “Mom.”

Jacqueline grimaced and muttered an “Oh boy,” as Haley briefly dropped her head to her hands. A sympathetic silence settled around the table.

Finally taking a small breath and looking to the ceiling, Bridget said, voice bleak, “I’ve decided to go to grad school.”

Jacqueline and Haley exchanged a puzzled glance.

“Um...Bridge,” Jacqueline said, “...but I thought...we thought that was always the...weren’t you always going to go to grad school? Why would your mom...I mean, this is what she wants...um...so, what’s the problem?”

Haley nodded in agreement. “This is good. Why is this bad?”

Bridget grabbed a knife from the metal dishwasher rack sitting on the table and began tapping it nervously on the table. “No, no, no. It’s not good. It’s bad. Bad, bad, bad. It’s not botany. I’m not going to be a botanist. I’m not going to be a scientist.”

“Oh. Wow,” said Jacqueline quietly.

“Shit,” Haley said. “Then what? The history of comic books? Pottery? Vegetarian studies?”

“Worse...” Bridget took a deep breath and, exhaling, said, “Landscape architecture. I want to...have my own landscaping business. Design. Design parks. Gardens. Public spaces. Have a greenhouse. All of it. I applied to this one grad school for it. One tiny little application. All the others were for botany, I swear. But, I got in. I got in to the botany ones too, but...I got in. Scholarship. The works. And I said yes. Oh my god, what was I thinking? I said yes.”

“But this is terrific!” Jacqueline shouted. “Oh my god, it’s perfect.”

Haley nodded vigorously in agreement, echoing, “Perfect. A perfect fit,”

“Are you nuts?” moaned Bridget. “Tell me, what do you think Kate the Great is going to say?”

Bridget stuck her chin out and in a clipped, measured tone that was a perfect rendition of Kate at her most disdainful, said, “You’re going to be a gardener, Bridget? Four generations of lawyers and scientists and you want to be a gardener for rich people?” Bridget released her hair and, reaching over and grabbing a knife, feigned stabbing herself in the heart. She then dropped her head back down on the table.

“Maybe she’ll be supportive,” offered Jacqueline, albeit weakly.

Bridget sat up and, again mimicking Kate, said, “Bridget, you’re brilliant. I raised you to be brilliant. Your grandfather, you know, Moses’ long lost brother, Gandhi’s mentor, God’s gift to the poor and indigent, was brilliant, I’m brilliant, so you must also be brilliant. And be of service. That’s what we do. But no, you choose to apply your

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

powerful, important mind to where to plant some fucking tulips!” She replaced her forehead down on the table.

Haley demanded, “Have you even told her?” as she tossed a few sugar packets in the general direction of Bridget’s head.

Bridget pulled herself up, shook her head “No” as she grabbed the packet that had landed in her curls, opened it and added it to her coffee. She stood and, slouching her way to the kitchen muttering, “damn, damn, damn” all the way, she grabbed the coffee pot. As Bridget worked her way around the table, refilling mugs, Jacqueline asked her, “So she thinks that you working every summer for Paul and Francis Garden Designs-”

“And the job at that greenhouse near the campus?” Haley said.

“Were just jobs for cash?” Bridget finished for them. “Summer stuff? Part time things? They weren’t. It’s not part time for me. It’s-”

“Love,” Jacqueline said. “You love it. You’re in love with it. You always have been. You know that. Remember when you planted flower boxes outside the windows of that apartment we lived in for awhile? You were, like, fourteen, and you were planting flower boxes, for god’s sake! In a rental apartment!”

“And you were the only member under ninety of that local gardening club. What was that, the Ladies Rotary or something?” said Haley, trying to hold back a smile and doing a very poor job of it.

Jacqueline started to giggle. “You had your picture in the paper. You and twenty old ladies-”

“And everybody else was holding a rake and they had you holding this teeny-tiny trowel,” snorted Haley. By now, Jacqueline and Haley had begun laughing outright.

“You told Kate it was for extra credit for Girl Scouts-” Jacqueline sputtered.

“And you didn’t even belong to Girl Scouts!” Haley screamed, now laughing so hard that she had to stomp her foot against the floor.

Bridget began to laugh in spite of herself. “Those ladies loved me. They fucking LOVED me! They all would invite me over to meet their sons or their grandsons and we always ended up in their gardens talking about borders and ground covers.”

“They were great,” said Jacqueline. “They understood you.”

“They were great,” Bridget agreed. “One named a gardenia after me. Really.” Bridget’s laughter subsided as she remembered. “They all came to graduation. Brought me a bonsai and an orchid to take to college. I still have the bonsai. The orchid...well...you know orchids.”

Haley muttered darkly, “Orchids. They are bastards. Every orchid I’ve ever met has always hated higher education. Dorm life especially.”

“But Mom never got it,” Bridget said. “Never. It was always ‘Come inside, Bridget, do your homework. I don’t understand you. Why do you have to get so dirty? You’re so smart. Come inside.’” Now quiet, she stared at her rough and calloused hands resting on the table.

Jacqueline asked, “When are you going to tell her?”

“Maybe I should just move to Tibet. Do they have gardens there?” Bridget asked.

Haley nodded.

“That’s it then,” Bridget said, slapping the table. “I’ll travel the world, instead of saving people, I’ll save plants.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Haley protested, “Hey, I don’t save people. I’m not a missionary. I just help out sometimes.”

“Whatever.” Bridget shrugged. “Saving. Helping. Whatever the hell you do, I’ll do that and you both stay here and deal with Judge Kate.”

“That’s it!” cried Jacqueline. “Hire a lawyer to argue your case in front of her. Present the facts. All that stuff.”

“That probably would be the only way,” Bridget said. “But she knows every lawyer in the damn county. And no way I’m getting a change of venue on this one. The Honorable Come-Inside-Kate would never permit it. Oh my god, I am so screwed.” Sitting at the table, hair on end, Bridget’s face animated with revolving expressions of exasperation, laughter, relief and anxiety.

“Oh, stop it!” Jacqueline barked, bringing both Bridget and Haley up short.

“What?” Bridget said.

“I said ‘stop it.’” Jacqueline ordered. “This is a blessing. Look at you. You’re thrilled. You’re happy. Ecstatic. Because you’ve divined your calling. You know. You know what it is. Do you know how lucky you are? To know what you’ve been put on earth to do. What you were made for. This is an amazing gift. Don’t you dare crap out on it! You’re gonna tell Kate the Great and it’s gonna be fine. She’ll freak, yeah, but so what? It doesn’t matter. Because you have to do this. You have to do this plant, earth, garden thing. So, get over yourself, spit it out to the old broad, and get busy.”

The early morning sun was now flooding into the room, sparking Jacqueline’s eyes, currently boring into her friend with the intensity of a power drill.

“Wow, Jack, don’t hold back or anything. Tell her what you really think!” Haley said.

Jacqueline calmly shot a look at Haley, and then refocused on Bridget.

Bridget caved. “You’re right. I will. And I am. Lucky, I mean. I’m just scared. I don’t know why.”

“Because if you tell her, you’ve got to do it,” Jacqueline said. “Do what you love, but also put it out to be examined by Kate’s standards. And yours. Easier just to blame her.”

“God, Jack! You’re scaring me,” Bridget said. “When did you get your degree in psychiatry? Go to med school over the weekend or something?”

“You’re scaring me too!” Haley said. “It’s cool. Very tough-love-insightful-your-God-is-within. Mom would fucking love it.”

“Speaking of your mom,” Jacqueline said with a grin and a cool flip of her hair, “why aren’t you in church, young lady, so she can show you off?”

“Her second service doesn’t start ‘til twelve,” said Haley. “I call it ‘The Hangover Crowd.’”

“She really packs ‘em in,” Bridget commented.

Jacqueline nodded. “She does. She should. She’s wonderful. Absolutely inspiring.”

Haley just looked at her friends. “You try having to look up at your mother three times a week in a pulpit and have her preach to you.”

“Done,” Bridget said with a snort. “That’s it. Can we talk about something else besides our mothers for once? How’s Jimmy?”

Haley groaned and shook her head as though trying to dispel a bad dream. “Ugh! Chasing an MBA, chasing girls, chasing the good, capitalist fantasy. Whatever it is, he’s running after it, full steam ahead. How about Sammy?”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jacqueline grinned and held up her long fingers, wiggling them for emphasis. “Oh, no! It’s Sam now. Sam. Not Sammy. He should be down eventually. Beret, clove cigarettes, black turtleneck and all. All the poetry nights are his idea.”

“But he’s such a sweetie!” Bridget protested. “He somehow manages to make existential dread seem fun. That’s it! I’ll become an existentialist. Philosophical questions. That would make Mom happy.”

“Better than tulips?” Haley asked.

“Oh, most definitely, don’t you think?”

Talking as he entered, Edward, apron on and hands covered with a light dusting of flour, came through the swinging doors. “Jackie, honey, have you seen that whisk? The big one? The one I like for omelets? I can’t seem to find...oh my goodness!” He spied Haley and Bridget. “Oh my, oh my, oh my! The girls. Here comes trouble. The girls are together again. Haley, you’re back!” Haley rose and Edward gave her a warm embrace, leaving flour handprints on the back of her shirt. “Haley, Haley, Haley. Well, well, well. You’re back. How wonderful.” He held her by the shoulders to look at her. “You look wonderful. Wonderful. Jilly must be thrilled. Going to stay put for awhile this time?”

Haley shook her head. “Never!”

Pushing his glasses back up his nose, Edward said, “Well, don’t tell your mother that, at least not for a few days. Bridget, nice to see you. My fellow early riser...”

He stopped suddenly, mid-sentence. Bridget and Haley patiently waited for Edward to chase down the thought, Jacqueline, not so patiently. “Dad! What?” she said, just this side of snapping.

“Oh! Yes. Edible flowers. That’s it.” He looked at Bridget. “Edible flowers. Can you grow them inside? Like...here? Could I grow them on, say, a window sill?”

Bridget rested her chin on her hand, contemplating. “No. Really, you need a greenhouse. For the quantity you want...these are for the café and the wedding cakes, right?”

Edward nodded intently, sending the glasses back down his nose.

“Well, then, no,” Bridget said. “But let me talk to Tony. Maybe he could work something out at the greenhouse.”

“Excellent!” Edward said. “Wonderful! Of course, I’ll have to ask Sophia. She’ll be back soon and I’ll just ask...it’s just not the same around here...would she like that, Jackie? I think she would.”

“Tonight, Dad. She’ll be home tonight.”

Edward looked at his empty hands and realized he came in for something.

“The whisk, Dad. It’s in that container by the sink,” Jacqueline said.

“Oh yes. The whisk.” Edward located the whisk and, grabbing it, headed for the back, muttering, “...she likes the glaze. Oh, I need to chop those...” He stopped abruptly and turned back to Jacqueline. “I did tell you, rack of lamb, right?”

Jacqueline waved him to the backroom with both hands. “Yes! Now, go. Don’t worry about the omelet, just...go bake something, Dad.” He exited; pushing his glasses back up as he went.

They all started to giggle.

“Oh my god, he’s making me crazy. Crazy!” Jacqueline cried.

Gesturing to the café, Bridget asked, “When does the queen of castle return?”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Tonight, thank god! It’s killing me. You have no idea all that she does. I mean, it looks like she just floats through the café, making people feel...happy...relaxed-”

Bridget said, “You do always feel like you’re at a private party here.”

Haley concurred. “Like it’s someone’s home. It’s not like a business.”

“I know!” Jacqueline said, bobbed her head. “But with her gone, I’ve got dozens of grown-up kids coming in looking for their mommy. She should charge these people by the hour. Did you know three couples have named their daughters after her? And we have piles of applications of people who want to work here. To work at a coffee shop. A waiting list, for god’s sake!” Jacqueline grabbed at a few tangled strands of hair that were working their way out of her hair clips. She jammed them back up, causing a few sections to spike up away from her head like dark antennas.

“She’s like the empress of the artsy, caffeine addicted, liberal, new age crowd,” said Haley.

Jacqueline exclaimed, “She could make empress someday. Last month, somebody asked her to run for the county board.”

Bridget and Haley’s jaws dropped. “Politics? Sophia?! Is she doing it?” Haley asked.

“No, thank god,” said Jacqueline. “She’s starting her own line of jewelry. That’s where she is right now. New Mexico at another jewelry selling, designing or something convention-workshop thingy.”

Bridget sighed. “Your mother is so creative and interesting and...relaxed.”

Haley rose and took a necklace with a small pendant hanging from it off a rack by the register. “Is this her work?” she asked, swinging the necklace from her fingers. Jacqueline nodded.

Haley gathered the pendant in her palm and examined it.

A woman’s figure was molded from the polished silver. Delicate but solid, the piece was three dimensionally crafted so that the back of the pendant was not flat but continued the form, the woman’s hair flowing down her back, cascading over her full, tumbling robe. Rather than having a clasp protrude out of the top of the figure’s head to affix it to the silver chain, two smaller clasps were attached, one at either shoulder. The right shoulder’s clasp was the figure’s hand resting gently on her shoulder, appearing to voluntarily grasp the chain. The clasp at the other shoulder was fashioned from the top of scepter resting in her arms. Haley looked up, astonished.

“This is amazing! I had no idea she could...it’s incredible, Jack.”

Jacqueline continued to yank at her hair, randomly reassigning clips to the sagging sections. “I know. Guess what it is.”

Haley looked at the woman resting in her palm. “A self portrait?”

Jacqueline laughed. “Almost. It’s the Empress.”

“You’re kidding! From the...?”

“Yup.”

Haley said, “They still do it?” her face locked in the expression of astonishment.

Bridget groaned, “Are you kidding? I swear, it’s the only religion my mother has!” She broke into her “Kate” impersonation again. “I can’t. I can’t. It’s the first Saturday of the month. I’ve got my reading with the moms. The blood transfusion will have to wait.”

Necklace still in hand, Haley sat back down. She laid the pendant in the middle of the table, arranging the chain around it in an irregular circle. Although small, the woman’s calm, oval face seemed to look out at them, neither smiling nor frowning.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

"I can't believe they still do it," Haley said, staring at the necklace. "I remember, I thought it was so stupid. Looking for answers in a bunch of—"

"Flimsy pieces of plastic coated cardboard," Jacqueline and Bridget recited in unison.

"Shit! That's amazing! I remember that! Them saying that. Oh, god, the memories. Geez. I'd forgotten. So they still do it? I can't believe it."

"Believe it," cracked Bridget grabbing the knife and, with its tip, gently arranged the silver chain into a perfect circle around the pendant.

"By the way, it's not so stupid," remarked Jacqueline, staring at the pendant shining under the light. "Remember Hal, in high school, when your mom didn't want you to go to France, with the school group thing? When you were a junior."

"Vividly. We fought for weeks. Months. Why in god's name she didn't not want me to step on that plane, I will never know."

"The moms...they...the reading...convinced her to let you go," Jacqueline said.

"What?" Haley gasped.

Bridget peered at Jacqueline. "I didn't know that. Did your mom tell you that?"

"Are you kidding? And break the sanctity of the...whatever they have...are you nuts?" Jacqueline took a swig of coffee and continued. "No, I was doing homework in the other room. Or putting off doing homework. Whatever. Anyway, I remember I was trying to figure out a way to stack the deck so the cards would tell her to get me a car for my sixteenth birthday. And I heard. I heard your mom's reading. They told her. The cards or Mom and Kate. Both. They all told her to let you go. She cried too."

Haley stared at Jacqueline. "She cried? She never cries."

"She cried. I remember vividly. I mean, I think that's why I remember it. She said something about not wanting to have another bad thing happen on a plane."

Haley nodded. "She hates planes. I mean, come on, a car is so much more dangerous." Haley looked at Jacqueline. "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"Oh, I think we weren't speaking. Some fight. I can't remember what it was about—"

"Probably politics. I tend to fight about...um...politics, sometimes."

Bridget and Jacqueline smiled, Bridget saying, "No? Really? I never, ever noticed that you ever even paid the tiniest bit of attention to politics, Haley."

"Well, at least I have an opinion!" Haley countered.

"Girls, girls, come on!" Jacqueline interrupted. "It was politics, Hal. Your strident, lecturing, we-must-lay-down-in-the-middle-of-the-street-to-protest-everything phase."

Bridget poked at the pendant with her knife, shoving it into the chain that circled it. "Remember when my mom finally broke up with that prick? Alan? I think it was Alan. Maybe Andy."

"That workaholic guy with the money?" Haley asked.

"I swear, it happened right after a reading night," said Bridget, squinting as she tried to remember. "Because it was Sunday morning and that was the only time he ever had free. Mom told us we wouldn't see him anymore. Then she took us to Grandma's instead of staying home. And she was happy about going to Grandma's for once."

Haley began to shake her head, laughing. "Those women are nuts."

"Bonkers," Bridget agreed, nodding vigorously.

Jacqueline reached over and fiddled with the necklace. "I've been doing it," she said.

"Going bonkers?" Bridget grinned. "Old news, my friend."

Jacqueline fingered the pendant. "No. Tarot, Brat-Face. I've been reading."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“No!” Bridget said. “Really?”

“Really,” said Jacqueline, laying the pendant down on the table.

“How long, o’ silly one?” Haley asked.

Jacqueline shrugged. “Awhile.” She scrunched her legs up in her chair, sticking them under her sweater and rested her chin on her knees, so she looked like a scruffy, messy elf topped by a crown of tangled curls and bedecked in a royal, multi colored robe. She shrugged again.

Bridget and Haley slowly and dramatically turned to look at each other, jaws opened. Bridget groaned, leaned back in her chair and started to giggle but Haley looked back to Jacqueline, an odd light in her eyes. “Show us,” she said, half request, half challenge.

Bridget stopped giggling. “Can we really take that chance?”

“What do you mean?” said Haley, still looking at Jacqueline.

Bridget said, “We’ll become our mothers, for god’s sake!” wagging her finger, emphasizing her point. “Mark my words, this is playing with fire.”

Jacqueline rose and went to a shelf in the kitchen as Bridget continued. “What...where are you going? What are you doing? Jack, are you...oh, no! No!” as Jacqueline very slowly and very deliberately took a stack of old, extremely worn tarot books off the shelf and a deck of cards. “No, no, no!” Bridget made the sign of the cross with her two fingers as Jacqueline retook her seat, a calm, slightly devilish smile plastered on her face.

“I think we should do the Bridget, Kate the Great problem,” Jacqueline said.

Haley nodded, concurring. “Oh, yes! Of course.”

“Oh, no!” Bridget shouted in response.

Jacqueline slid the deck out of the box with a practiced hand, her long fingers fanning the cards out. “Don’t worry, Bridge. We’ll be gentle.”

Haley said, “Gentle, my ass. Speak for yourself, Jacqueline, my friend.” She pointed a finger at Bridget. “Watch out, Brat. You’re gonna get it from me. From me and this tarot deck. You’ve been running from Queen Kate long enough. This will give you the battle plan to storm the castle and regain your throne.”

Jacqueline, eyeing the cards, muttered, “I think that’s ascend to the throne.”

Bridget pushed her back up against the chair as she stretched her long frame, her legs reaching beyond the other side of the table and her arms arcing behind her head, brushing the marble counter. “Oh, no. Then she would have to step down. Mom has never walked away from anything in her life.”

Haley said, “Alright then. You’ve got to overthrow her. Or at least tell her that you need to run your own life. Stop with this bullshit and rule your own land.”

“And landscape it too!” Jacqueline added, sliding the cards across the table. Bridget leaned into the table and hunched over to stare at the deck resting side by side with the Empress necklace.

“Come on, Bridget,” prodded Haley. “What have you got to lose?”

“My sanity?” Bridget responded as she grabbed the knife in front of her and used it to drag the cards the rest of the way towards her. “This is a crazy idea,” she muttered as the necklace got tangled up in the deck, some of the cards slipping out from around the knife’s edge. “See! See, how I’m getting tangled up already?” she cried, gesturing to the wayward cards.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes as she opened one of the tarot books. “God, you are so dramatic. Prince Hal, help the damsel in distress over there.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Haley helped Bridget gather the cards as Jacqueline began to read. “Listen. ‘Can be a compass to guide you along the map of your inner landscape. Like a true and honest friend, the tarot can act like a signpost, pointing you to the path of your destiny but it is only a guide, a tool. You have to make the journey yourself.’ Okay. Neat. So now, shuffle ‘em.”

“This is the silliest thing I’ve ever done,” Bridget muttered as she began to shuffle.

“No, using Play Doh to try to straighten my hair was the silliest thing you’ve ever done,” Jacqueline said.

Haley shook her head. “No, no, no. It was trying to grow corn in her closet.”

“Oh! I got it! Kool-Aid mix in the spaghetti sauce. Remember?”

“Oh, no. Better!...Ice skating down the front steps,” Haley cried. “Do you still have that scar?”

Bridget ordered, “Shut up! Both of you. I can’t believe I spend time with such-”

“Lemon squares,” Edward announced, entering the room with a large plate in his hands. “I’ve decided to make all of you omelets but these will get you warmed up.” He placed the plate of pale yellow desserts on the table.

Each individual square was decorated with a different design created by using a small template and soft white powdered sugar. An art nouveau rose, a moon and stars, a geometric image of two hands clasped and various stylized abstract designs graced the squares spread across the platter. In the middle rested three large rectangular pieces, about card size, one with the initial “B”, the other with an “H” and the third, a “J.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Jacqueline looked up to her father with a smile as an appreciative chorus rang out from Bridget and Haley, which he waved away.

“Oh, don’t do that, girls! You’re all too thin. I expect this plate to be empty when I come back with the omelets,” he said and, with a push of his glasses, he disappeared into the backroom. The three friends simultaneously reached in and grab their desert.

“Incredible. Tastes like childhood, every single time,” Haley said, a grin and a shadow passing over her face.

Acknowledging both smile and shadow, Jacqueline asked, “Is that good or bad?”

Haley thought, her broad, open face closing for a moment. “Complicated?” she finally offered.

Bridget, mouth full, said, “No. I think more...complex, maybe? Bittersweet. Good and bad. That’s why these are so right. Lemon and sugar. Tart and sweet.” She looked at Jacqueline. “But the real question is how the hell do you stay so tiny, living with this every day? It pisses me off,” she growled, brushing some powdered sugar off her chin.

Jacqueline reached over and wiped off some sugar that Bridget missed, saying, “Oh, I’m actually 300 pounds. I just suck it in to piss you off. Now put down the lemon square, pick the cards up and let’s do this. Your future awaits you, you unfair and cranky maiden.”

“How many am I supposed to put out?” Bridget asked.

“Five,” Jacqueline stated. “The basic, starter reading is five cards. But do them one at a time. That’s the way Mom said to start.”

Bridget fluffed her curls with her hands and, groaning loudly, picked up the deck.

“God, this is so silly. But I want to do it, oddly enough. Don’t laugh!”

“We’re not laughing,” Haley said.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“But this is so not me. But I do need an idea. An idea on how to tell Mom. She’s just so damn perfect. Always. Do you know she graduated college when she was nineteen?” Haley and Jacqueline nodded as Bridget continued. “And then she even managed to arrange graduating from law school just three days before her dad died. Top of her class, of course.” She rifled the cards with a loud snap.

Jacqueline looked up. “I didn’t know that.”

“That she was top of her class. Well, of course. She-”

“No, I didn’t know her dad died three days after she graduated. What did he die of?” Jacqueline asked.

Bridget paused, thinking. “I don’t know. Cancer, I think?”

“Was he sick for a long time?” Jacqueline asked.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Well, it’s a good reason.”

“A good reason for what?”

“A good reason to race through life,” Jacqueline said. “Accomplish a lot, real fast. Maybe she wanted to make sure he caught her doing it. Making it. Before he died.”

Bridget nodded slowly, curls bouncing against her cheeks as she thought. “Maybe. Maybe. I never thought of that.” She grabbed the necklace from off the table and yelled at the Empress pendant. “Ugh! Why are your voices so loud in our heads? Why are we so afraid of disappointing you?” She slapped down the charm and abruptly turned over the card from the top of the tarot deck. “Go. Tell me. What is it?” she said, eyes on the ceiling.

Jacqueline and Haley leaned in and look at the card. After a long pause, Bridget yelled, “What? What? What is it? Come on!”

“Congratulations, Bridge. You’re a Fool,” Jacqueline said softly. Bridget brought her eyes down to look at the card.

The Fool, a young person that could be either male or female, was walking towards the edge of a cliff high on a mountaintop, while a small white dog appeared to snap at the Fool’s heels. Head raised in joy, face looking to the sky and arms outstretched in an expression of liberation or surrender, the Fool appeared uncaring as to where the next step could take them. A knapsack was tied to the end of a long stick being held in one hand. The other hand clasped a white flower. The sun on the card shone, seemingly illuminating the colors of the image, which were saturated and rich.

Drumming her fingers against the table, Bridget declared, “The Fool? Does that mean I’m a fool? Great. Perfect. Thanks so much for doing this. Big help.”

Haley said, “But, see, it’s upside-down, facing you,” pointing to the card. “That means something. I know it does. I remember that.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Yeah. Reversed. First off, the Fool is a great card. I mean, a great, fabulous card. The best. It’s the beginning of everything. The first card in the deck.”

Bridget reached over and cautiously fingered the card. “I can touch it, right? It’s not gonna reach out and curse me or anything?”

Jacqueline warned her, “I’ll curse you if you don’t shut up and listen for two seconds.”

“Okay. Okay. Sorry. Go. What do I know? I’m clearly foolish!”

Jacqueline slid a book across the table to Haley and instructed her, “Turn to the front. The Fool is at the beginning.” Haley obediently searched the book and settled on a page.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jacqueline continued. “Now, Hal, remember, it’s reversed so go to the end part of the description and-”

“Got it,” said Haley with a nod.

They both read from their books quietly for a moment. Jacqueline began to chuckle and Haley looked up, an expression of awe on her face.

“This is incredible!” Haley exclaimed.

Jacqueline said, “See! See! I told you! Isn’t it amazing?”

“What?” Bridget demanded, losing all patience.

Haley looked back down at her book and began to read. “‘A person fearful of stepping forward.’ Now, Bridge, this is the reversed meaning, remember. Um... ‘Not trusting in yourself or the universe. Lacking in courage. Ignoring your God given talents and gifts to satisfy the perceived dictates of your society.’” Haley looked up with a grin, adding, “Why that is the stupidest, craziest, silliest thing I’ve ever heard! Jacqueline, you should demand a refund for these cards. You’ve been fucking ripped off! I’m enraged on your behalf.”

“Thank you so much, Brat. I appreciate that,” Jacqueline said and turned to Bridget. “Now Bridget, since these are obviously completely inaccurate, why don’t we just stop right now?”

Bridget, head back, fingers templed at her chest, gazed at her two friends through narrowed eyes. “I hate both of you with every fiber of my being. I shall toss you off that measly little cliff that I’m so clearly headed for the very first chance I get and be happy to do it!” And with that, she reached in and turned over the next card, but not before she stuck her tongue out them. “Okay, what’s this? This next one. Come on, Jack, Hal, I’m beaten. Do it.”

Jacqueline bit into her lemon square and mumbled, spraying powdered sugar, “Alright. This position...oops, sorry about that. Just hand me a napkin...” Jacqueline mopped up the front of the Fool card and continued. “This is your current situation. Kind of the environment, the vibe around you. And you got the Seven of Swords and this is-“

“‘Being sneaky’,” Haley said, reciting from her book. “Sorry, but that’s what it says,” she said with an apologetic shrug. She continued. “‘Not being open with others. Attempting to manipulate the situation to your own ends but not being forthright about what you want. Not understanding, or even attempting to understand, another’s point of view. Winning the battle but losing the war.’”

Bridget said, “Well, that’s...coincidental. Mom surely is not a master at understanding my point of view.”

“Is she sneaky about it?” Haley asked. “About what she wants for you? Or is she generally forthright?”

Bridget thought for a moment and nodded. “Yeah. Okay. She’s always pretty open that way.”

Haley stared at Bridget.

Bridget shook her head, shrugging. “What? What, Hal?”

Haley just mimicked her shrug. “Nothing. Nothing, Bridge. But it sounds to me like somebody in this scenario isn’t being honest...and it’s not Kate the Great.”

Bridget grimaced and then snapped, “Oh...go to hell. What’s my next card thingy?”

“You ready for me to go on?” Jacqueline said. “Don’t you want me to read the Seven from my book? It says-“

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Bridget stopped her. “No! Just...um...do the next one. What is it?”

“Okay,” said Jacqueline. “This position represents the obstacle. Your obstacle. What’s getting in your way or...well...what you’re allowing to get in your way.”

Haley said, “Same fucking difference, in my book.”

“Does it actually say ‘fucking difference’ in the book?” Bridget asked her.

“Wow. You are cute, Bridge. And quick. Oh boy. Maybe I should-”

“Stop it!” Jacqueline interjected. “Let’s keep going.”

Bridget turned over the next card.

Jacqueline said, “Okay...your obstacle is the Queen of Swords. And she’s upright.” She gestured to Haley. “Hal, this one’s near the back of the book. Look at the pictures. All the swords are in one chapter.”

Haley flipped through her book, asking, “Is this one...reversed?”

Bridget pointed to the card. “No. Look. She said upright. It’s this one, see.” She spun the card around for Haley to see. “It’s the woman sitting on a gray throne, a sword in her hand, head above the clouds in the background. The sword is stick straight up in the air and...oh...wow...” She stopped talking and dragged the card back across the table to take a closer look.

Haley began reading as Bridget stared at the card. “‘A tough, honest person, probably female, articulate, doesn’t suffer fools gladly, and gifted at seeing the big picture. Lacking in sentimentality or artifice. She speaks with clarity and logic but, since she is a queen, is also the possessor of great compassion, although that is not readily apparent. Truth, insight and clear vision are her hallmarks.’” Haley stopped reading, put the book down and looked steadily at Bridget, her brown eyes clear and level. “Now, who the hell could that be?”

Bridget shook her head. “Oh my god. That sounds exactly like...Kate,” Bridget said, flipping to the appropriate page. “Look. Look! It says the Queen of Swords doesn’t suffer fools gladly. And I’m the Fool-”

“Reversed,” Jacqueline interjected.

“So I’m screwed!” Bridget finished with a flourish, pointing the knife dramatically in the air.

Jacqueline said, “Maybe not. Let’s do the next one. It’s best course of action.”

“What’s that?” asked Bridget, suspicion and curiosity fighting for equal time.

“It will tell you what to do,” Jacqueline said.

“Perfect. So there’s a card that can tell me how to give my mother amnesia for the next forty years of her life?”

“Come on, Fidget,” Haley barked. “Grow a backbone and turn over the fucking card.”

Bridget flipped the next card and they all leaned in to look.

“What is that?” demanded Bridget. “It’s a card full of frickin’ sticks. How’s that supposed to help me?”

Haley pointed to one of the arrangements the Bridget brought, towering at the end of the table. “Look. Look at that Asian, modern flower and stick arrangement thingy. It looks just like that!”

“Does not!” Bridget said.

“Does too!”

“Does not!”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Behave-” Jacqueline ordered. “It’s the Eight of Wands. Upright. I mean, not reversed.”

They all simultaneously opened their books as Bridget muttered, searching through the pages, “Well, it’s official. I am crazy.”

Jacqueline watched Bridget, who was now reading intently.

“You ready?” Jacqueline asked.

Bridget grunted, and then began shaking her head, saying, “Wait just a second...um...wow...okay.” She looked up. “Okay. Sorry. Yeah, I’m ready.”

Haley started. “Well my book says that-”

Bridget interrupted her. “Wait. This is weird. But my book says this...um...Eight of Wands card...see all the wands coming down to the ground like arrows? Well, it says that wands are passion and communication. This card represents...” She began reading. “Clear, articulate communication about a plan or project that you are passionate about. You can see in your minds’ eye what you are destined to achieve. This card is about guiding all your communication skills and energies towards harnessing the energies of the world and other people into helping you achieve that destiny.” Bridget raised her head from the book and said, very slowly, “Okay, this is absolutely wild. Extremely unsettling but-”

“Extremely accurate” said Jacqueline. “See? Didn’t I tell you?”

“Bridget, she’s got you. Hell, this damn card’s got you! You just gotta open your mouth,” Haley said, adding, “...and I know you can do that!”

Edward came pushing through the swinging doors, arms laden with plates. “Omelets, girls!” He walked over to the table. “Make some room and I’ll just...oh...the cards. Is that the Seven or Eight of Wands?”

Haley and Bridget gaped up at him as they began moving coffee cups to the side. “You do the tarot cards?” asked Bridget, unable to mask her astonishment.

“Are you kidding?” Edward placed an omelet in front of each woman with a flourish. “It was an issue of survival! I may be occasionally...maybe a little...um...preoccupied with...other things, be careful, the plates are hot...but I’m no idiot. The first Saturday of every month, I held my breath the entire afternoon. I started having Sophia give me readings...figuring the best defense is a strong offense. Haley...you still like those yellow peppers? I put those in with the extra onion, like you always...” He stopped talking and looked at Bridget’s plate. “Oh! I forgot your garnish-” He started to walk out but all three women stopped him.

“Whoa! Wait!”

“Dad...stop.”

“I don’t need a garnish! Come back, come back.”

Edward turned back.

“Dad, so you read the cards too?”

“Oh no,” Edward said. “And your mother doesn’t like to read mine too much. She says it’s like a doctor performing surgery on a relative. She feels she’s too invested in the outcome. No, Jilly usually does. Sometimes Kate. That toast is the sourdough you like so much, Bridget. A new recipe. I like the density a little better. But is it too salty for you? A lot of people do like a more savory bread.”

“Thanks. It looks great,” Bridget said. “But my mom...Kate...how is she...as a tarot reader?”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Edward looked at the three friends, gathered around the table, cups at their elbows, cards in their midst. "Oh god. All of you, sitting here..." He stared at them, his face growing flush.

"What, Dad?" asked Jacqueline. "What is it? Are you okay?"

Edward grinned. "I'm fine. I just...it looks like...all of you sitting here, looking so much like your mothers...it feels like twenty years just disappeared. It just took me back to...the beginning." He reached across the table and spun the Fool right side up and softly tapped it, leaving a faint dusting of powdered sugar on its face. "She...Sophia...helped me do this." He leaned down to kiss Jacqueline on the top of the head and walked back to the kitchen.

Haley stopped him at the swinging doors, saying, "Hey, thanks and everything, but we're not our mothers."

Edward looked back at them and began laughing, a laugh so big and easy that it rippled across the air, bouncing off the walls. "Right. Absolutely! You're not your mothers. Of course! Enjoy the cards, girls." He exited into the kitchen, still laughing.

The three friends all looked at each other, shrugged, and dug into their omelets.

"Oh my fucking god, but he is an incredible cook," declared Haley.

"Does Preacher Jilly know you talk about God like that?" Bridget asked, mouth full.

"It drives her nuts," Haley said, grinning. "Why do you think I do it? What's the last card? We're doing five, right?"

Jacqueline nodded and, stealing a piece of Haley's toast, said, "Outcome. Turn it over, Bridget."

Bridget asked, "Can we do it while we're eating?"

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. "Once I saw Mom do a reading stark naked after getting out of the shower. Yes, you can do it while you're eating."

Bridget sighed, "You had such a great childhood." As she reached over to flip the last card, she continued. "There isn't a card for big, fat disappointment, is there?" She turned over the card.

"Oh my god, it's twins!" Haley declared.

Jacqueline shook her head. "No, No, the Lovers, or maybe the Two of Cups are two people that look like twins, but this card is just one woman--"

"No, that's not what I meant. Look," Haley said, tapping one finger on the Empress necklace lying on the table and the other finger on the card resting next to it. "No, look. The card is the Empress, right?" Haley looked at Bridget, saying, "Your outcome. The Empress." She then grabbed the necklace and slid it across the table, the chain and pendant rattling as it came to rest in front of Bridget. "This is you, Fidget. You are the Empress. Or will be, if you ever open your fucking mouth."

Bridget had already opened her book and, after skimming it for a moment, she let out a low moan. "This is the mother card. I am becoming my mother. You promised I wouldn't and look...look at the outcome!" Bridget tossed the book in the middle of the table in an act of despair and resignation.

Jacqueline grabbed it and opened it. "God, Bridget, you are so dramatic...um...Empress...there it is...okay." Jacqueline read for a moment and looked back at Bridget. "Did you look past the first three words?"

"I didn't have to! Look at them!" Bridget cried.

"Read it, Jack," commanded Haley.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“Okay, yes, the first words are ‘The mother card’” Jacqueline began. “But then it goes on...shut up, Bridget, stop moaning like you’re in labor or something...‘The Empress represents the mother of all things. Like a skilled and loving gardener, she tends the landscape of her life, and the lives of those around her, to produce a rich, fruitful, fertile experience. A loving and emotional content woman, she understands her needs and the needs of others. She is capable of embracing and caring for herself and those around her, understanding frailties and flaws, pruning back discord with a wise hand and nurturing new growth with a profound grasp of the seasons of life. Deeply connected to nature, the earth and the complexity of all organic elements, she has the strength to endure all the tests that life throws her way.’”

Haley leaned over and, spearing a piece of tomato off of Bridget’s plate, suggested, “So, maybe you’re just going to become your own version of your mother.”

Chin thrust forward, Bridget demanded, “What does that mean?”

“Well, face it, Fidget,” Haley shrugged. “Kate the Great is the best possible version of herself, bench, robes, gavel and all. She’s like a towering...goddess in the garden of justice.”

Jacqueline interjected, “Very profound, Haley. You must go to exotic places and think cool thoughts.”

“Thank you, Brat. I do. And I do.” Haley turned back to Bridget. “But, come on, Bridge. Don’t you think, deep down, she wants the same for you?”

“For me to become a goddess of justice?”

“For you to become the best possible version of yourself.”

“So, you’re telling me that if I do this, tell her, she’ll understand?” Bridget implored.

“Yes,” Haley said firmly.

Through the last bite of her omelet, Jacqueline countered, “No. No, she won’t.”

“What!” Bridget cried. “I thought you said that Mom would-”

Jacqueline shrugged. “Oh, she’ll keep loving you and all, but she’ll never get the nature, plant, garden thing. She never has! She never will. But, she’ll accept it ‘cuz it’s what you really want. If you tell her it’s what you really want.”

“So, she’ll keep loving me, flaws and all?”

Swabbing her plate with the last crust of toast, Jacqueline said, “Yup. And maybe you’ll do the same for her.

“Oh my god,” Bridget said. “That is a pathetically weak attempt at insight.”

“You, on the other hand, are just pathetically weak.” Jacqueline grabbed her empty plate and, rising, took the rest and deposited them all in a bus pan under the counter.

“Absolutely. Guilty as charged. I am pathetic,” Bridget admitted and, taking her cards, she shoved them back into the deck and placed the stack down in front of Haley.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Your turn, my traveling friend,” Bridget said to Haley as Jacqueline, standing in the kitchen next to the bus pan, concurred. “Yup.”

Haley stared at the deck for a moment and, stretching back, said, “Oh, I don’t know. I really don’t have a question.”

Coffee came flying out of Bridget’s nose, propelled by the abrupt, uncontrollable spasm that seized her, caused when both she and Jacqueline burst out laughing. As she snatched napkins from the dispenser and clutched them to her face, Bridget gasped, “Bratface! Oh my god, you did that on purpose!” as she and Jacqueline (Jacqueline, still in the kitchen, had her head between her knees and she kept stomping one foot on the floor) continued to roar, both almost crying with uncontrollable, rhythmic guffaws.

“What? What did I do?” Haley demanded, truly perplexed. “Why the hell are you guys laughing so hard? What’s so fucking funny?”

Jacqueline strode over to the table from the kitchen and, in spite of the long sweater hanging to her knees, jumped up onto the center of the table and crawled across it to lean into Haley’s face. “You always, ALWAYS have questions, Hal. Always!” She rolled off the table into her chair, crumbs from the toast and a wayward napkin clinging to her sweater.

“No, I don’t,” Haley protested.

Wiping the tears away from her face, Bridget began reciting. “Why are governments so corrupt? Why does power corrupt people? Why isn’t there better health care for the poor? Food is everywhere so why do we have starving, hungry children? Why isn’t a parliamentary system a viable...thing...for the States? Why do we tolerate multi-national conglomerates?”

Jacqueline nodded, continuing. “Why don’t we decriminalize pot and tax it like cigarettes and liquor? Why do we tax? What’s so bad about socialism? Why doesn’t it work? Capitalism is an economic system, not a governing system, so why is it considered anti-American to hate it?”

Haley ran her fingers through her short hair. “But those aren’t personal questions. I thought this was for purely personal crap. You mean, the tarot could help us change the world?”

“Maybe your world,” Jacqueline suggested, a sly smile dancing across her lips.

“What do you mean?” Haley demanded. “My world is the political, social world, as is yours, if you don’t mind me saying so. Change the world and you’ll change me, trust me.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Bridget interjected, “But what you’re really saying you don’t have a personal question, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I feel okay. The trip was good, as always. Nice to be back, I guess. Always great to see you two. I feel okay.”

“Okay, then I have a question,” Jacqueline said.

Haley slid the deck across to her. “Great. Then you go.”

Jacqueline shook her head. “No, I have a question for you.”

“For me?”

“Yeah. If you don’t have one,” said Jacqueline.

Bridget asked, “Can you do that?”

Jacqueline shrugged, looking at Haley, “Sure. I mean, why not?”

“Great,” said Haley. “Go. I’m dying to hear it.”

“Okay,” Jacqueline said and, taking a deep breath, she looked at her friend. “Whenever you come back from a trip, every time, you are, well, you seem happy, everything was ‘amazing’ and all that, but you also seem, well, a teeny-tiny bit...disappointed. Like you were looking for something but didn’t find it. And that’s my question. Why do you travel so much? What are you looking for? What are you hoping to find?”

The room was now flooded with light. The ceiling lights were now irrelevant, washed out by the winter sun. The table, scattered with cups, knives, plants, plates, napkins and the Empress pendant resting in the midst of the chaos, was a cluttered testimonial to the morning’s activities. Jacqueline and Bridget looked at Haley across the broad, wooden tabletop. The easy trust and pure, clear love between the women was almost palpable as they sat, alert but at rest. Comfortable and safe enough in each other’s presence to forget to edit or censor themselves, Jacqueline and Bridget waited. Haley, running her fingers through her short cropped hair, finally said, “I’m hoping to help. To help and to learn, I think. To become an international citizen. I don’t want to be ignorant.”

Jacqueline said, “I know that part. We’ve heard that,” as Bridget nodded in agreement, silently encouraging Jacqueline to continue. “But...isn’t there something else too?” Jacqueline finished, “Maybe? Another reason?”

Haley began fiddling with the card resting on the top of the deck, aligning so it was perfectly square with the rest. “Maybe...” she said. “I don’t think...um...” Suddenly changing tack, she said, “You know, you guys never ask me about my travels.” She gazed at her friends; eyes slightly squinted against the morning light.

“Because you never tell us anything,” Bridget said, picking at the crusty remnant of a lemon square.

“Yes, I do!”

Bridget shook her head firmly. “No, you don’t. It’s always the same. ‘The people were fucking amazing.’”

Jacqueline chimed in, “‘The West should help more.’”

“‘Our government is crap.’”

“‘Their government is crap.’”

“‘The food was terrific.’”

“‘Corruption kills children.’”

“‘Think globally, act locally.’”

“‘When will humanity get its act together?’”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Haley threw up her hands. “But this is all true. This is telling you about what I see and-”

“No,” said Bridget, reaching over and grabbing her hand. “It’s never about you, Hal. Everything you say, it’s always about...not you.”

Haley looked at Bridget, and then turned her gaze to Jacqueline. “Shit. Alright. So, what’s my question, ‘o silly one?’”

Jacqueline said, “Why do you travel so much?”

“What are you looking for?” Bridget added.

Haley quickly swigged down the last of her tea. “Okay,” she said. “Hell, I’m game. Take that platter, serving wench and fetch me some hearty ale.” She began to shuffle. “You know, I had my palm read once too. In Italy, I think. And my tea leaves a couple of times too.” Her strong hands rapped the cards against the table between each shuffle.

“What did they say?” Bridget asked.

Deck in her hands, Haley ignored the question. “What are those...um...positions again, Jack?” she asked.

Jacqueline, in the kitchen fetching Haley another pot of hot water, called back, “The first card represents you, then current situation, obstacle, best course of action, and then, the last one is your outcome.”

“Best course of action is just the one telling me what to do, right?” Haley said.

Jacqueline returned to the table, pot in hand. “Yeah. What you need to do. The best way you can embrace and resolve the issue you’re facing.”

Haley plopped the deck down on the table. “You’re sounding a little too much like my mother, former therapist, practicing minister to the world and frankly, Jack, it’s scaring me the piss outta me. Okay, let’s do this.” Haley quickly and decisively turned over five cards, all at once.

Jacqueline looked at the cards and let out a loud, piercing scream. “OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! SHIT! NO, NO, NO!”

Haley and Bridget leapt out of their chairs and backed away from the table as Edward came bursting into the room.

Haley sputtered, mouth agape, “What? What the hell? Am I gonna die? What is it, Jack?”

Edward ran over to Jacqueline, saying, “What!?! What’s wrong?” as Haley and Bridget stared at the cards in dread.

Grabbing Haley’s arm to comfort her, Bridget asked, “What did she get, Jacqueline?”

Jacqueline took a deep breath, straightened her bun and looked at her father, who was kneeling at the side of her chair. “Sorry, Dad,” she said. “I had to. Haley said I was sounding like her mother,” and, taking a sip of coffee, she began to delicately nibble a piece of toast, her pinky finger aloft.

Edward said, “Oh, well then she clearly deserved it,” and, casting a wink in Haley and Bridget’s direction, walked back to the kitchen. A faint “...muffins in ten minutes,” came through the swinging doors as he disappeared.

Haley and Bridget retook their seats.

“You are the brightest bitch in the universe,” Bridget stated, bowing her head in homage.

“Well played, my friend,” Haley conceded. “Well played.”

Jacqueline shrugged. “Well, I had too.”

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Haley burst out, “Well of course you did! What was I fucking thinking? Comparing you to one of our mothers! I’m lucky you didn’t throw hot coffee on me and spit upon my cat.”

“You don’t have a cat,” Bridget remarked.

“I’m making a point,” Haley said. “Okay. Profound, deep apology. How many years to forgiveness? Twenty? Thirty?”

“Oh, just give me that lemon square crust.”

“Done.”

Munching on the crust, Jacqueline turned her attention back to the cards. “Alright, Hal. First card. You. You are the Knight of Wands,” she said, tapping the card.

Looking closely at the card, Bridget began to giggle. “These are pretty...well...the coincidence is surprising,” she said.

“What?” Haley demanded. “You don’t know anything about these, Brat! What coincidence?”

“Well, no, but come on, Hal,” said Bridget. “Look at the card. Look at what he’s wearing.”

A young person was astride a strong horse. Clearly a knight, he grasped the reigns in one hand as the horse reared up on its back legs, its momentum poised to hurtle its body forward toward the knight’s chosen destination. The rider’s control over his mount was in some question since the knight’s other hand was occupied, clutching a large wand. The faceplate of his helmet had been pushed back and his eyes were a study of strong resolve and determination. Short, light brown hair peeked out, framing his face. Either a fierce wind or the mere action of keeping control of his mount had sent the knight’s flame colored plume atop the crown of his helmet dancing up toward the sky.

He was wearing a shining armor.

Haley demanded, “What do you mean, ‘look what he’s wearing’?”

“He’s a knight in shining armor, for god’s sake, Haley!” declared Bridget. “Don’t you get it?”

“Get what? No, I don’t get it.” Haley looked to Jacqueline for help.

Jacqueline said, “Here, let me read a little bit,” turning her attention to the dog-eared book in her hands. “Okay...the knight in shining...I mean, the Knight of Wands. Here it is.” She began to read. “A young, passionate person on a task so urgent it almost feels like a quest. Being actively committed to seeking a workable solution for you and for others. Charging forward perhaps using the activity of the journey as a substitute for true insight. The need or motivation for reaching the destination may be unclear. A desire to use one’s abilities to help or rescue others.”

“See!” Bridget said. “That’s you. You want to be the knight in shining armor to the whole world. You want to rescue the damsel in distress. Or the country in distress. Or the children. Especially the children in distress. You want to save the world, for god’s sake. This is completely, totally right on.”

Haley, hands firmly laid on the table, shook her head. “I’m helping, not saving. Trust me. I’m no minister. I’m not into converting anybody-“

Bridget tried to continue. “I didn’t say convert. I said-“

Haley stopped her. “I know. I think that this just means I’m an explorer. I’m involved and working towards a better future. I choose to be part of the solution.”

“That’s another thing you always say,” Jacqueline observed.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What?” Haley asked.

“That quote... ‘Either you’re part of the problem or part of the solution.’ It’s another thing you say after you get back from a trip. Instead of really talking.”

“I have no idea what you guys fucking want from me!” Haley glared at her, vacillating between anger and frustration.

Jacqueline took a small breath and leaned forward, hands coming to rest on the table, almost touching the tops of the cards. As she collected her thoughts Jacqueline’s presence seemed to fill up the big room. The contrast between her pale skin, disheveled hair, brilliant, multi-hued sweater and the vivid green walls of the large room visually gripped Haley and Bridget, allowing the tension to ease. Jacqueline looked up from the cards and her eyes held Haley’s for a moment. She smiled at her friend and said, “Next card.”

Haley said, “Okay...fine. Don’t answer, Miss Brat. Big brat with a cherry on top. Next card.”

Bridget craned her neck around and looked at the next card in Haley’s line-up. “Yikes. A little graphic. It says, ‘The Tower.’ And I think it’s-”

Jacqueline nodded. “Yeah, Lady Bridget. It’s the Tower, reversed.”

Haley grabbed a tarot book from the table and settled on a page. “So this is my obstacle. The book says, ‘Buried anger. Ignoring the flash of revelation. Avoiding the explosive, life altering revelation.’”

Jacqueline shook her head. “No. Wait. That’s wrong. The next card, the one after the Tower, is your obstacle. The Emperor is the obstacle. Not the Tower.”

Bridget commented, “He’s reversed too. The Emperor card is.”

Jacqueline flipped through her tarot book, quickly rifling through the pages. “I don’t remember for sure...but I think the Emperor means-”

Haley protested, “But you guys, I’m not angry at-”

“The Father! That’s it,” Jacqueline said, locating the card’s description in the book. “The Emperor represents the father. So, Hal, your situation is the Tower, buried anger. Your obstacle, the issue, or maybe the cause, is your father. I mean, the Emperor.”

Bridget added, “Reversed. He’s reversed.”

“But I’m not angry with anybody,” Haley said again, now sunk low in her chair. “I’m confused. So, I’m looking for buried anger?”

Jacqueline slowly and quietly murmured, “Not quite.”

She and Bridget watched Haley.

Chin on her chest, Haley muttered, “So, the Emperor is my obstacle?”

Bridget and Jacqueline nodded. Haley continued, “And the Tower is my current situation. Buried anger. Something unrealized.”

Bridget and Jacqueline nodded again. Haley pondered the cards for a minute. “Read the Emperor description,” she finally said to Jacqueline.

Jacqueline complied. “A father figure. The concept of authority, government, organization.”

Bridget piped up. “And what does it mean reversed?”

Jacqueline turned the page. “A missing father. Abandonment. A corrupt system or government. A structure or head of family failing.” Jacqueline finished reading and gently placed the book on the table. She and Bridget looked at their friend, still slumped down in her chair.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

A minute passed as Haley sat, brow furrowed, her broad, solid body planted in the chair. She had a wide mouth, which seemed to occupy her entire chin when she smiled, although, at that moment, it lay in repose, a long, straight line on her lightly freckled skin. Her soft, travel worn clothes were so plain as to direct no attention to themselves, allowing her brash, funny and bold persona to dominate and define the face she presented to the world. Her hiking boots could be heard tapping against the floor as she thought.

She abruptly straightened up in her chair, eyes wide. “Oh my fucking god,” she said, staring at the cards. Jacqueline and Bridget waited, breath held.

Haley looked at her friends and a smile popped out, spreading across her face.

“Well, duh! This is obviously work related,” Haley said. “This last relief organization I was helping out with...they were completely incompetent. I was so angry! The answer, the solution to world hunger, to all this desperate need, is out there. People just need to show up. Be there for each other. That’s what I keep waiting for! That’s what I’m looking for! That’s it. That’s why I always come back disappointed. I keep waiting for the world, for people, to show up and care.”

Jacqueline and Bridget sighed, Bridget running her fingers through her curls and shaking them in a gesture that could be interpreted as frustration.

“Well, that’s one possible take on it,” Jacqueline said.

Bridget asked, “Anything else? Anything else you can think of this might mean? Have you thought that maybe the Emperor card might actually be-“

“Next card,” said Haley, firmly cutting off Bridget before she could reach the end of her sentence. “Let’s get to the next one. It’s that best course of action card, right? I like that. Give me something to do and I’m happy. Now, let’s see. It’s the...Ace of Pentacles. Thank god the names are printed right at the bottom for us newbies.” Haley snatched a book off the table and flipped through it quickly, scanning for the description.

Jacqueline said, “I know this card. I got it last week. Well, Mom did. It represents home. Family. See, you’re looking at the image of the card from the viewpoint of a garden, a backyard, so it’s like you are in your house. And pentacles are earth. The ground that you grow things in. Or the ground that you grew up on.”

Haley started to speak but Bridget interrupted her. “Haley, my book says, ‘Staying put. Issues of home, family, safety, security.’ See that hand in the sky hovering right above the garden? That represents embracing what you have.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Yes! See how the pentacle in the hand looks heavy. Somehow it looks heavy but the hand holding it is glowing. Cool! Wow.”

Haley, eyes narrow, said, “So it’s telling me to hold onto my heavy stuff?”

“Maybe it’s telling you to stay put for a while and-” Bridget began.

Haley interrupted her. “I don’t like this card,” she said. “It looks...it makes me feel unsettled.”

Bridget looked at her friend with astonishment. “How the hell can this make you feel unsettled? It’s a garden, for god’s sake!”

“Well, I’m not a fucking gardener!”

Jacqueline prodded. “So being settled makes you feel unsettled?”

“Yes. No. Ugh. Let’s just move on. Outcome. Let’s finish this,” Haley said with a grunt and a shrug.

“Okay,” Jacqueline said.

“But let’s read some more about this card. I think-” Bridget interjected.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Jacqueline stopped her. “No, let’s move on,” she said, glancing at Haley’s figure, again slumped down in the chair.

Bridget groaned but obeyed. “Okay. The last one is outcome. It’s the Moon. Reversed.”

“A lot of mine are reversed,” Haley muttered, shoving her book across the table to Jacqueline. Jacqueline picked it up as Bridget also opened hers. Silence filled the room up as they found and read the appropriate passage. Haley waited.

Bridget and Jacqueline finished reading.

“Well?” Haley demanded.

“Okay, Hal,” Jacqueline started. “I think, according to this, you might continue to feel...unsettled.”

Haley grunted, “Great. Is this supposed to help me? This isn’t helping.”

“Sorry,” said Jacqueline with a shrug.

“You’re not sorry. I can tell when you’re sorry and you’re not sorry.”

“Sorry,” Jacqueline said again.

Haley looked over to Bridget. “Well?”

Bridget began to read and, unbeknownst to her, her clear, firm voice sounded exactly like her mother’s.

“The Moon. Reversed. ‘Primal fears or unexamined issues emerging from the subconscious. You are currently ignoring the need to understand your deepest motivations. If you stop running and turn to face the emotional terrain over which you race, your inner eye will adjust to the darkness and the truth shall be revealed.’” Bridget put down the book. “So, Hal. What’s your deepest motivation?”

Hal looked up from deep in her chair and with a small smile, sat up and swept the cards up. “To get away from you two!” She dumped her reading, along with the rest of the deck, in front of Jacqueline. “Here you go, Miss Dish-It-Out. Let’s see how you take it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Get me some coffee somebody. I’m switching to decaf,” Jacqueline said as she gathered the cards and began to shuffle.

Haley pulled herself out of her chair; saying, “my turn, I suppose,” and ambled over to the kitchen, boots thudding against the floor.

“When do you open anyway?” asked Haley, grabbing the pot of coffee pot.

“We’ve got another half hour, then employees, then the psychotic, huddled masses of caffeine and sugar addicts shall descend,” said Jacqueline, smoothly flipping over four cards. “Okay, I’m doing me. Then obstacle. Best course. Outcome.”

Bridget, noting Jacqueline’s practiced hand, asked, “How often are you doing this again, Brat?”

Jacqueline looked at her cards, shrugging. “Just sometimes.”

Haley barked a laugh out. “Bullshit! ‘Sometimes.’ You’re addicted. Deep down, you’ve always been a wanna-be therapist. Now you get to do it under guise of these flimsy pieces of-

“Plastic coated cardboard!” they all finished in unison.

Bridget counted the cards Jacqueline had spread out on the table. “Hey, you only have four. We both did five. What’s missing? You forgot one,” she said.

“I skipped my current situation,” Jacqueline said. “I know it. I mean...I have been kinda...doing some readings for myself sometimes. Mom helps too. Anyway, I’m just doing me, obstacle, best course and outcome. Okay, I’m Ten of Pentacles. I know this card.”

“What is it?” Haley asked, having now switched to coffee, dressed it up with large helpings of cream and sugar.

Gesturing to the cup in Haley’s hand, Bridget said, “I thought you gave up coffee?”

“Hell, it’s a tradition,” Haley replied. “And I can’t help but I fall back into the habit whenever I’m around you two. Or Mom. Okay, so what’s this card supposed to mean?”

“That’s what this card means,” Jacqueline said.

“There’s a card that says ‘coffee’?” Haley cracked. “I’m a little skeptical, I must admit.”

“No, no. It means tradition. Family tradition. Also wealth, inheritance, gain, a cornucopia of plenty,” Jacqueline said as Edward came through the swinging doors with a plate in his hands.

“Muffins, girls,” he said, gently laying the plate on the table and headed back to the kitchen, adding as he disappeared, “...wait until you see the turnovers!”

Giggling, Bridget quoted from the book in her hands. “‘A rich and fruitful home life.’” Grinning broadly, she continued. “Why goodness, Jack, what in the world could this card

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

mean? Hand me one of those forty-five muffins off that valuable antique platter, that your adoring, stable father made for you from scratch, would you be so kind?"

Jacqueline rolled her a muffin across the table. "Yeah, I know. But that's sort of the problem. I've gotten so much. Not money but everything. I mean I have enough money, especially since I can live at home while I do school but everything is really...rich. Family, the café, the food, obviously, even Sam is tolerable."

Bridget interrupted her. "Come on! We all adore Sam. He's always been--"

"Great," Jacqueline said. "I know, I know. I just feel good here. Even great. But I also feel, sort of, kind of...finished. Like I need to do something but I don't know what. Classes are good but nothing's knocking my socks off..." She trailed off, staring unseeing, at the card.

Haley said, "Let's move on. Next one is...um--"

"Obstacle," Bridget said. "But how can the Lovers, upright might I add, be an obstacle? This should be a terrific card, right?"

"Is there something we don't know?" Haley asked. "Are you dating anybody?"

Jacqueline shook her head. "Hardly! I'm at class all the time. Or here. Don't get me wrong, I love the café...but...I have no idea. I have no idea what this means."

Bridget picked up the card. "Well, let's look at the thing. We've got two naked people on it. That's a promising start. There's a mountain rising up behind them in the distance. A little phallic but I can live with it. There's a fruit tree behind the babe that also has a snake wrapped around it. Oh, come on. A little too biblical but all right. Behind the guy, a tree with flames for fruit. I hardly think I need to explain that! And last but not least, a winged angel chick floating above the entire proposition, arms and wings spread out like she's conducting the whole...pardon my expression...affair. Oh, and the guy is leering, I mean, looking at the gal but she's just staring up at angel chick in the sky. Oh my god, what does it all mean?" Bridget tossed the card back in the middle of the table as the phone rang.

Edward came flying out of the kitchen, hands covered with oil. "I got it! I got it! It's 8:30! It's Sophia. She calls at 8:30 am, sharp! I got--" He grabbed the phone before the voice mail could kick in. "Hello?...Hi! Hi! Honey, oh honey...fine...God, I miss you so much..." He wandered back into the kitchen, phone in hand.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes as Bridget said, "Hey, I think it's cute. They've always been a great couple."

Haley said, "Okay, back to Jack's problem. So, you're not seeing anybody?" eyeing Jacqueline and then the card.

Jacqueline shook her head. "Nope."

"Why not?" Haley demanded.

"What do you mean, 'why not'?"

"I mean, why not? Why aren't you seeing anybody?" Haley demanded. "You're cute, not too deformed, obnoxious but not at first glance. Smart, creative and you're tiny and, trust me, I know guys prefer that. So, why not?" Haley was now leaning forward and it was Jacqueline's turn to slump down in her chair.

"I don't know," Jacqueline said. "None of the guys at school...or at the café...they all are either stupid jocks, or too serious, or just want to party, or are way too needy. No one feels like...I don't know--"

"Home?" Haley finished for her.

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

“What? What does that mean?” Jacqueline demanded.

“Look around. There’s only one happy couple in the general vicinity together...getting laid even-”

“Please, I’m eating,” protested Jacqueline as she picked at a muffin top. “Can we not talk about my parents’ sex life!”

“Oh, shit, woman!” Haley said. “Ever met a man that dotes on a woman the way that our Eddie here dotes on your Mom?”

Bridget nodded. “She’s got a point.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Jacqueline said. “This is not about my parents. This is about me.”

“Exactly,” said Haley, striking her palm against the table. “You, Miss No-Man-Is-Good-Enough.”

“Maybe I do idealize them, well, their relationship just little bit,” Jacqueline admitted. “Does it make sense? Is that crazy, to idealize something like that?”

“Crazy? Absolutely!” Haley declared. “To idealize somebody or something-”

“Nuts!” Bridget finished, vigorously bobbing her curls in agreement.

“Thanks so much,” Jacqueline said.

Then they all, as if on cue, turned their attention to the next card, Jacqueline declaring, “Best course of action. High Priestess, upright.”

Bridget said, “Man, it’s strange how I sort of feel like I know these pictures. Am I the only one finding that?”

“It is bizarre,” Haley confessed. “I didn’t want to say anything...but that Moon card. I swear I’ve seen that before. Like in a dream or something.”

“Well, we have seen them. All of them,” Jacqueline said. “Probably watching from our mothers’ elbows.”

Haley grunted. “Whatever. Well, the High Priestess, it’s trusting yourself according to this book. ‘Being your own authority.’”

“‘Do not marry at this time,’” Bridget added, reading from her book. “‘Learn to be a single, independent entity. Seek to love and romance your own inner spirit.’”

Haley began waving her book in the air. “Oh, this part is fucking fabulous...wait...” She read, “‘possibly seek guidance and insight from strong, wise, independent women in your life whom you trust deeply.’ Well, who could that be? So, you wanna call Tammy, that awful, chirper cheerleader, prom queen from high school? You know, the one who wanted you to join her...um...what did she say? ‘My group of friends who are so cool. We don’t worry about books and junk like that.’”

Jacqueline shouted, “Ha! Thank you, Hal. I was wondering who the hell I should call. Bridget, toss me the phone.”

“Tough luck, Jack,” Bridget said, “Your dad’s still on it.”

“Oh well,” Jacqueline shrugged, “I’ll just have to call her later,” as Bridget grabbed the coffee pot and refilled all the mugs.

“Oh stop, god,” Haley protested. “I’m gonna float away!”

“Wimp,” Bridget and Jacqueline declared in unison.

“Okay, WIMPS, what’s this last card here?” Haley demanded.

“Three of Cups,” Jacqueline said, gazing at the card. “It’s the Three of Cups,”

Three women stood in a circle. They were in a garden but the ground at their feet was clear, as though they had trodden this particular patch of earth many times before. Each woman was slightly different, a redhead, a blond and a brunette, and they were clad in

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

robes of a various colors, one yellow, one white and one red. Their stance was identical as they faced each other, with right arm raised and left arm extended low behind, assuming a pose that was relaxed and open, but clearly choreographed. Caught mid-action in a dance, a ritual, perhaps a ceremony of celebration, each woman grasped a golden cup in her right hand, raised up high. It was unclear whether they were reaching towards the sky or each other.

Bridget said, "It's outcome, right? Hey, it looks exactly like us!"

"Oh my god, I never noticed before," Jacqueline said. "It does look like us."

"Oh, wait, I was wrong. It doesn't look like us," Bridget protested. "Look. I have much better hair than that."

Haley located the appropriate place in the book and began to read.

"Friendship."

Bridget, having pushed the card back to rest in the center of the table, found the proper page in her book and added, "Union."

"Togetherness," Haley read.

"Trust," said Bridget.

"Healing," Jacqueline said.

"Um...love?" Bridget finished, with an eye on her friends.

Jacqueline sat bolt upright in her chair. "Our mothers!"

Bridget said, shaking her book at her friend, "Okay, now you're flipping out. I told you! We are not become our mothers. At least, I'm not. I'll only become our mothers if I get to be Sophia."

"Oh! I wanna be Jilly! Dibs on Jilly!" Jacqueline yelled, raising her hand high in the air.

Haley said, "So that leaves me with Kate?!"

"Oh, she's not so bad," Bridget said. "And she's dating this guy. He's a poet."

"You're kidding!" said Jacqueline.

"Believe it! A poet," Bridget nodded. "Well, a teacher too. He quotes stuff all the time. But, good quotes, not obnoxious ones. Mom is...well...relaxed with him. It's truly bizarre."

"Are they doing it yet?" asked Haley.

Bridget protested, "Please! Can we not talk about my mother having sex?"

Jacqueline patted Bridget's hand, commenting, "I know exactly how you feel. Way too much imagery there." She pointed to the last card, adding, "I'm just saying that the card looks like us but it also looks a little like them."

Haley said, "Hey, we should join them. We should toast. Start our own little tradition."

"What should the toast be?" Bridget asked.

The three women sat in silence for a moment, contemplating the question. Jacqueline ventured, "Well, what brought us together?"

"The queen bees," said Haley.

"No," Bridget said. "According to Kate the Great, they met in Tiny Tots Park. You remember? That park with the big, green dinosaur?"

"Hell, I kept hanging out with you guys for Ed's lemon squares," Haley remarked. Jacqueline raised her glass. "To Tiny Tots and lemon squares."

THREE CUPS/SERGEL

Haley and Bridget joined her, glasses raised high above the wooden table, arms reaching towards each other.

“To Tiny Tots and lemon squares.”

High above the wooden table, cups in hand, the friends reached towards each other.

THE END