

## CHAPTER ONE

Gail Bishop eased open the door and let the newness wash over her. She had been in the suite only once before, when she and Ann had set it up last week, every last piece of furniture in place. There was in fact very little that was actually new. New paint, and the air still smelled of it. New, colorful posters lined the walls. A new telephone, new stapler, new office supplies. Almost everything else was used or came with the space. The desks, file cabinets, office partitions, they had purchased them on the used market. They all came from among the many poor businesses that had been going out of business

during these trying times. The computers they had bought off eBay and craigslist. Even in the diagnostic meeting room, which they set off with a closed door for privacy, their nasometer, the children's picture books they used there, and the other specialized diagnostic equipment, almost all of it they managed to find pre-owned.

But it was all new to Gail, and it felt new. That's what she had told Ann, but Ann didn't seem to understand.

She had only started a business once before, and it both excited and sickened her at the time. Excited her, because she knew she was doing something that mattered, that she was going to make a difference in the lives of untold hundreds of children. Sickened her, because she knew she could fail. But this time, this time she felt different. She had done it all before. She had sought, and she had found. Despite the fact that her future did not hold the uncertainty that normally comes with starting a new business, it still felt new, and exciting. Because there was still the seeking, even though she knew where to look. And in the seeking, that's where her passion was, and that's what released the best she had to offer the world.

When she had told Ann this, the sweet, sensitive blonde smiled from vacancy, that "I know what you're saying is a profound revelation to you, but I just don't get it" expression. This made Ann such a good SLP, her unmitigated kindness and infinite patience, also made her a novice businesswoman. Gail didn't care. Ann was her business partner and friend, and she

would soon get it.

That was new, too. Gail had never had a business partner before.

Gail's stomach welled up with energy.

"You going in? Or you just gonna stand there and admire the place?"

Gail recognized Ann's voice from behind her. She turned and beamed at her new business partner.

"You look happy," Ann said, smiling back politely.

Ann just didn't get it. She and Gail were like black and white, literally as well as figuratively. Gail's curly, raven hair was always poufing out in the wrong direction; Ann's straight, blonde hair seemed to flow like water down over her shoulders. Gail had to stay inside out of the sun because of her ghost-like complexion, or else she'd fry up like a strip of bacon; Ann always looked tanned. Gail looked out from behind brown eyes, and her eyebrows, though well-defined, almost looked like a man's; meanwhile, Ann's blue eyes stuck out, the most dazzling feature on her flawless face, because of the arch of her pale brows. Gail always watched calories, because they always turned her thighs into lamb shanks; Ann's super-model figure never wavered, no matter how much or what she ate. Gail barreled her way through school through single-mindedness and hard work, and as a result she never dated, and she ran her business the same way; in school, Ann had always had a thing going with some boy, which worked for her, because she almost

never studied, and after she graduated with honors and passed her certification on the first try, she married a simple but tall-and-sexy man, worked for a couple years, then had kids and dropped out. Now she was looking to get started again.

Despite their differences, the two women had become fast friends from the moment they met in a graduate course on voice disorders. Gail didn't understand why or how it had happened. They had said "Hello" one day, began chatting, started spending time together. And no matter how much distance came between them, physical or emotional, they remained fast friends.

So when Gail's business in Worcester started to bore her, and she began looking for a change, she turned operations over to Clarice, her friend and manager there, and she moved back East, to team up with Ann in a new venture.

"I love this!" Gail gushed. "It's like-- Like you're finally free."

Ann nodded politely.

"Like nothing can hold you back. You know what I mean?"

"I know," Ann said. "You said that before." She was smiling, half with joy, Gail was sure, but half from how silly Gail must have seemed to her. Gail knew, because she had been there before.

Ann continued. "You looked lonely for a long time, every time I saw you. It's good to see you this way again, like the Gail I remember from back in college. It's the first time you've seemed happy since you moved back."

Gail could have gotten any man she wanted, with her fair skin; long, curly, black hair; perfectly proportioned figure. Even though she had an overly arched nose and a fear of extra weight going to her thighs, she could have had any man she wanted. But she simply didn't want a man.

"You should go out more," Ann said. "Go out and meet new people--"

Gail interrupted. "I don't think we'll have time for much going out, Ann. There's too much work to do."

Ann sighed. "Yeah, I get that. But just one night, after work. I mean, we're not going to be working all the time, are we?"

"Pretty much," Gail said, "at first."

"You can't spare time for just one date? Come on. Bob has a friend who'd love to meet you."

Suddenly, it struck Gail what was going on. A blind date. She shook her head. "Ann," she said. "I don't go on blind dates. You know I don't go on blind dates. I've never gone on blind dates."

"You never go on any dates," Ann said. "And I know you. You can make time to take a night off."

"I don't need a guy in my life right now," Gail said.

"This isn't about a relationship. It's about having fun once in a while, so you don't implode."

"Well, I don't need any fun, either."

"He's a nice guy."

"Not interested," Gail sang, walking toward her desk.

Ann followed. "His name's Eddie. He's a nice guy, easy-going, fun to be with, and he won't try any funny stuff, I guarantee it."

"How do you know?" Gail asked, facing her friend across the desk.

"Well," Ann reconsidered, "not unless you want him to."

"This is ridiculous!" Gail was reaching the end of her patience. She sat and turned her attention to some papers on the desk. She didn't care which papers, as long as they served as a distraction from Ann's hassling.

"Okay, so he likes to date," Ann said, "a lot. But he's a respectable guy, and he won't take advantage of you. Not unless you want to, anyhow."

Gail leered at her.

"Sweetie," Ann said, "you have to loosen up a little!"

Gail returned to her fake paperwork.

Ann sat in Gail's guest chair. "I'm going to keep badgering you," she said, grinning, "until you give in. So you might as well agree right now and save us both a lot of annoyance."

"Why do you do this to me?" Gail said. "You did it in college--"

"I never did it while you were married," Ann corrected her.

"I don't want to talk about that," Gail said. "Anyhow, you've done it every time I've visited since then."

"It's in my nature, and you're my friend, and I'm tired of seeing you lonely all the time."

"You want me to have sex with a stranger."

"I just want you to meet someone new, who's fun to be with. And he is. The rest is up to you."

Gail said nothing.

"I promise," Ann added.

Still silence.

"Please?" Ann put on a pouty expression.

Gail took a deep breath and sighed it out. "Okay. Just one date. But then will you leave me alone and let me work?"

"Yes!" Now Ann was in her element, beaming from ear to ear.

"But," Gail added, "I won't promise to have fun."

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I married George Edward Chase when I was very young, only 22 years old. I divorced him when I was even younger. We were only married for 3 years, just a little longer than it took for me to get my master's degree, my certification, and my first real job.

By the time I got my Bachelor's in Psychology, my college fund had all but run out. My parents were in no position to help fund my master's, since Dad had just gotten laid off. Besides, my younger brother Graham was just about ready to enter college himself, and any extra money would probably go to him. My folks had done their part, and the rest had to be up to me.

So getting married seemed like a good idea at the time. That way George and I could pool our resources. George had a full-time job, assistant GM at a McDonald's. Yeah, I know. It sounds like a joke. But it paid the bills and the rent, and he could put me through school. I had met him at BU as an undergrad, but George had dropped out several years earlier, because, he said, he needed to find himself. So we thought that after he put me through school, after he figured out what he wanted to do with his life, I could then help him develop his profession.

But by that time, it was clear we had both made a huge mistake. We had grown apart, and we didn't have the same goals anymore. I had been offered an exciting entry-level position at a speech-therapy clinic in Worcester. George, however, wanted to move to Hull so he could live on the beach. George loved the beach. That's how he was, a free spirit, like the water, washing over the sand as it wills, then going out to sea--and who knows where it goes. At first, I thought it was silly. But I saw that he was serious, and there was no way I was going to commute from Hull to Worcester every day.

This was just the last in a long line of situations that drew us farther and farther apart. We never could have made it together. We were two incompatible people in two incompatible places, and a marriage of convenience is no real marriage at all.

"We should never have gotten married," I told him. "I knew

I wanted to work on my career. We both knew."

In retrospect, it sounds silly to me, to break up a marriage over an hour-and-a-half on the Interstate. But at the time, divorce seemed the only way to resolve the conflict, the distance that had seeped into our marriage.

"We should never have gotten married," I repeated.

When I said it, I remember, he stared at me with sad, soulful eyes the color of sand, and I finally understood. Every time I had told him I had to work or study, instead of spending time with him, hanging out with his friends, socializing, or whatever else he wanted me to do... Every time my schooling had gotten in the way, he had stared at me with those same, empty eyes. And I only realized at the end of the road that far from being empty, they were full of meaning, because they had been the signposts indicating the road we were on.

I intoned the magic words, "I want a divorce."

He never told me that I made him sad, and I didn't ask. He didn't say anything. We didn't fight. By then, we didn't fight anymore.

He nodded silently. But his eyes spoke volumes.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

I've always done whatever I had to, whatever needed to be done. I've always stuck with it, followed the road to the very end. I've always searched until I found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, no matter what challenges I've faced along the way.

But somehow, it never seems to get any easier.