

# CHAPTER 1

I wish I could be as happy as others seem to be.

[ x ] TRUE [ ] FALSE

The party was roughly divided into the same-sex groups of a grade school dance, both sides seeming to enjoy the break from their significant others.

The women, most of whom seemed to be named Carol, laughed explosively, touching one another's forearms in agreement or emphasis as they sucked down wine coolers and long, skinny cigarettes, while men with mustaches cradled koozie-swaddled Miller Lites and rushed punchlines to dirty jokes under clouds of cigar smoke.

Francine stood alone in the kitchen, digging her thumbnail into the wood of the door jamb as she studied the residents of Hawthorn Woods. There was a time when she could have guessed professions, habits, personalities. But not anymore. She could see only a party of question marks, mingling on the cement patio under the glow of porch lights.

Yellow dust gathered on the linoleum floor below as splinters of wood chipped at her nail polish, revealing details only visible once they'd been separated from the whole.

Like the way Ben used to roll her toothpaste tube.

He had always used mint toothpaste, only touching Francine's cinnamon flavor when it was almost out, crimping the ends so the last of the paste was ready to go. Now Francine had to roll the empty tube herself, but she could never get the crimp quite right. One detail in a thousand, and such a stupid one to miss, but that's what stuck.

“Ow!” She jerked her hand back and flapped it in pain. A splinter had lodged deep under her thumbnail. She bit at the spot, watching as a head of strawberry blond hair wove its way through the crowd.

“There you are!” Ellie said, yanking open the screen door. “C’mon, you need to meet more of the neighbors.”

“Ellie, I’d really rather—”

But Francine’s sister had already pulled her out into the dizzying carousel of suburbia.

She took it all in as best she could, smiling and shaking hands while trying to look happy. The marathon of introductions was doing a number on her already exhausted psyche, especially since she was without her once-keen ability to read people.

Her ex-husband had taken a lot: a good chunk of her thirties, her faith in one half of the human species, and her favorite Whitney Houston cassette. Worst of all, though, was the theft of her confidence. How could anyone pretend to have good sense after marrying a man who’d turned out to be...what Ben had turned out to be?

“Ellie, I need a break,” Francine said after meeting yet another Carol and her mustachioed husband.

“Ooh wait, just one more. Laura Jean!” Ellie towed Francine toward a short, blond woman whose waist-length ponytail swung as she spun to face them. Hair was always the first thing Francine noticed about someone; the curse of the stylist, she supposed.

“Best friend, meet big sister,” Ellie announced. “Laura Jean, Francine. Francine, Laura Jean.”

*Please let there be at least one genuine person here*, Francine prayed. Every woman she’d met that night had taken great trouble to appear welcoming, but never quite managed to transcend constipated pleasantries.

“You make us sound like a couple of Muppets when you say our names together,” Laura Jean said to Ellie. Her voice had a faint twang, not a Southern

accent so much as Diet Southern. “Francine. So very nice to finally meet you, even in seventy-percent humidity.”

The woman’s perfectly put-together look was a touch intimidating, but her words seemed sincere, her smile warm. Francine decided to risk being herself.

“Really wish I’d remembered how tropical Illinois is in the summer.” She wiped a strand of sweaty brown hair from the sun-bolded freckles on her cheeks. “I’m starting to smell like a locker room.”

“Oh boy, I’m right there with you.” Laura Jean made a show of sniffing her own armpits. “I’m getting notes of eighth-grade boys, post-gym class, pre-deodorant.”

The exchange sparked a smile from both of them, and Francine wondered if they’d decided to be friends at the same moment.

Still in auto-introduction mode, Ellie tugged on Francine’s elbow. “Okay, we should keep meeting people. Ooh, you still have to say hi to the coupon club ladies and you gotta meet the Chief, of course—”

“Ellie, I just remembered.” Laura Jean bumped her palm against her forehead. “Pete said to tell you the ice is running low in the beer tub.”

Ellie’s eyes went wide at the scandalous thought of warm beverages, and she ran for the garage. “I’m on it. Keep her company!”

Laura Jean plucked two bottles from the beer tub—already overflowing with ice—and handed one to Francine with a wink. “Looked like you could use an Ellie break. I adore your sister, but *mercy*, she is a treadmill jammed on High.”

“Thanks. And thanks for not dying of surprise that we’re related. That’s the normal response from people, usually after they gush over how pretty she is.”

“Oh, please. My older sisters had legs for days and nobody ever let little ol’ me forget it. You and Ellie look plenty related to me.”

Francine shrugged. “She took the aggressively-petite approach, which has its advantages. But I suspect the day you become a size zero is the day somebody makes off with your sense of humor at gunpoint. Though that may just be my rationale for finishing a pizza by myself.”

Laura Jean gave a wry grin. “In any case, you’re on vacation now, so you can eat as much of whatever you damn well please.”

“Yeah. This is kind of a vacation, I guess.” Francine wondered how chummy she should get in the first thirty seconds. They stood in silence for a moment, watching barefoot children chase each other around the patio’s ring of citronella candles. “Did Ellie mention why I’m here?”

“Well.” Laura Jean studied her beer bottle. “Since this feels like a feet-first-into-the-deep-end kind of friendship to me, I won’t feign ignorance. She did say you were having a hard time.”

Francine nodded. “That’s polite-speak for a runaway train headed for a bottomless pit. Also the train is on fire or something.”

They both laughed. Francine took a swallow of her beer and pinched at the faded daisy sundress sticking to her skin.

“My husband and I got divorced two years ago. The paperwork was easy enough to sign, it’s just the moving-on part that’s been tricky. Not one of my strengths, I guess.”

“Oh please, when the grocery store stopped selling my favorite ice cream flavor, I wrote a letter to the CEO. ‘Where’s my rum raisin?’” Laura Jean gaveled the air with her fist.

Francine laughed as Laura Jean continued the ice cream story, but her attention had caught on a middle-aged couple across the patio.

A barrel-chested man, his pomade-drenched hair combed into immaculate lines of gold, was quietly arguing with a waif of a woman with a black pixie cut. Their body language was a unique brand of tenseness Francine expertly recognized as marital discord. Apparently she could still read people if it was both obvious and marriage-related. Less obvious, however, was the meaning behind the occasional glances Pixie Cut seemed to be sending in Francine’s direction. Something about them seemed...hostile.

Francine brought her attention back to the conversation at hand as Laura Jean wrapped up the ice cream epic. “‘Read my lips,’ I told ’em. ‘No. New. Flavors.’ In the end, they politely told me to get over it. Not the same thing, I know.”

“Hey, ice cream or divorce, problems are problems.”

“You sound pretty put together to me,” Laura Jean said. “Maybe you’re being hard on yourself.”

“I can fake put-together when I’m meeting people. I just...are you sure you want to hear all this?”

“Absolutely! Feet first, deep end, remember? Let’s have it.”

“I guess I still haven’t figured out a way to sort through everything that happened. Most of ‘our’ friends sorta turned out to be ‘his,’ so there really hasn’t been anyone to talk to. Not like I’d have the time, either. I’ve been working double shifts at the hair salon to pay for an apartment that’s somehow both shitty *and* expensive.”

“Hmm.” Laura Jean tapped her beer bottle against her lips.

“I don’t feel like myself,” Francine said, with a sigh. “That’s why I came here. Ellie and I grew up in a place like this. I’m hoping a bit of relaxing nostalgia can help fix whatever’s broken. Two weeks of shady trees and friendly neighbors to help get my mind right. People seem nice enough so far.”

“Oh, everyone’s plenty nice, and half of them might even mean it.”

“And the other half?” Francine’s eyes flashed back to Pixie Cut, who was definitely staring at her over the rim of her red cocktail.

Laura Jean smirked. “The other half might be a little nervous at seeing a total babe dropped into a sea of bored husbands.”

“No, no, no. I’m no homewrecker. And thanks for calling me a total babe, but I don’t think you can legally use the term for someone fast approaching forty.”

“Hey! I’m *in* my forties, so watch it. And you’re a certifiable catch. Got a sort of...Phoebe Cates-all-grown-up thing going on, and it is working. I am worried about this change-your-life-in-two-weeks business, though. I’ve been trying to cut down on that rum raisin for a decade and counting. Why the harsh deadline?”

“It was hard enough getting just two weeks off from work. Plus, I don’t want to be the older sister crashing with the happy younger couple. It’s embarrassing. July fifth, Pete and Ellie are back from their trip, and I’m back to San Francisco.”

Laura Jean frowned, but breathed out resolutely. “Very well. I agree to your terms. My sympathetic ear and unparalleled matchmaking services are at your disposal. We’re gonna put what’s-his-name—”

“Ben.”

“—soon to be what’s-his-name once more, squarely in the rearview mirror where he belongs. I take payment in coffee and gossip. And rum raisin ice cream if you can find it. Summer 1989 is going to be the summer of Francine, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Unless it’s the butt of some dashing summer fling, of course.”

Francine smiled. “Thanks, Laura Jean.”

“Good. In the meantime, I’m gonna go check on my darling husband, wherever he is. Will you be all right on your own a sec?”

“I’ll try to stay out of trouble.”

Laura Jean squeezed her shoulder, then disappeared into the slow churn of polo shirts and perms.

Francine bit at the tiny splinter under her thumbnail as she gravitated toward the party’s makeshift bar: a card table hung with glittery letters that read, “Bon Voyage!”

An elderly man examining the bar’s spread of liquor bottles would’ve made a picture-perfect dictionary entry for “grandparent”: tortoiseshell spectacles, handsome blue blazer, and gray hair the papery texture of a hornet’s nest.

“Hi,” Francine said.

“How do you do?” he returned, with a distinct accent.

She pointed at him. “German?”

“I am Swiss. It is a common confusion.” He smiled. “My name is Roland Gerber. You are Ellie’s sister, yes?”

“Yes. Francine.”

Roland Gerber sized her up. “A fine, strong woman. I can see this plainly. Superior to that which you left behind, there is no doubt.”

Francine blushed and shook her head. “I probably I should’ve just saved Ellie some time and worn a neon ‘divorcée’ sign above my head.”

“Your sister asked us all to be especially considerate. Perhaps I wasn’t meant to disclose this. I’m normally a discreet confidant, but drinking causes me to act out of character.” He held up a half-empty bottle of apple schnapps as the culprit. “In any case, welcome to Hawthorn Woods, Francine. You belong already.”

“Thank you. Nice to meet you, Mr. Gerber.”

She bummed a cigarette from a nearby Carol and stood alone among the candles at the patio’s edge, watching fireflies bob weightlessly above the lawn. After a dry spell of quality meetings all night, she was feeling better, having gone two for two with a sincere Southern belle and a flattering Swiss expat. Maybe her luck was finally turning.

The orange tip of another cigarette joined hers in the fireflies’ galaxy of yellow.

The man sat in a lawn chair, watching the party closely as he smoked. Wonderfully messy spills of jet-black hair stopped just below his ears, where began one of the worst outfits Francine had ever seen. A cheap tweed jacket covered a pink dress shirt and a pencil-and-paper-patterned tie, the whole ensemble anchored with brown corduroys the man was probably regretting in the night’s heat. He was younger than the rest of the husbands, and without the gold stripe of a wedding band, maybe not a husband at all. His eyes were focused intently on the patio, like he was looking for someone in particular.

“Hey, everybody!” Ellie’s husband Pete stepped onto the back stoop, hands cupped around his salt-and-pepper mustache. “It’s getting kinda late, so I just wanted to say a few things real quick.”

After a few good-natured jeers, the party quieted down.

“First, thanks for welcoming Francine, who will be keeping an eye on the homestead in our absence.”

Embarrassingly marooned on the outskirts of the party, Francine gave a faux bow to the crowd’s applause.

“Total babe!” Laura Jean shouted.

Pete held out a hand for Ellie to join him on the stoop. “Four years ago, when Ellie and I got married, we couldn’t afford a honeymoon. Yes, we took a weekend

up in that mecca of romance called Wisconsin, but Ellie's always wanted to go to Paris, and I've always wanted to take her."

*Awws* from the crowd.

"As excited as we are," Ellie said, "travel is nothing without a good home to come back to. I'm sure by the end of the first day, we'll be homesick for this special place and the special people in it."

She put her arm around Pete's waist, he put his around her shoulders. Treasured friends, gathered before them, a beautiful little house behind, a delayed honeymoon on the horizon.

A deep sting found Francine's heart. *This* was what she'd wanted with Ben. A place to call home with someone she could count on. The inertia of a mature relationship unassailed by lies. A future that looked brighter than the past...

But she didn't have any of that.

What she had was a rare, two-week opportunity to turn her life around. Fresh air and rosy memories to bounce her out of a rut that was starting to feel alarmingly familiar. Catharsis through nostalgia. Looking back to move forward. Whatever she called it, it *had* to work.

Because if it didn't, if she couldn't fix what was broken, Francine knew exactly what would happen. She'd slink back to San Francisco and find someone safe, someone she'd love out of pure will because waiting for the right person was too risky. She'd settle, and wilt, and in quiet but important ways, die, living the rest of her days as someone she didn't recognize.

A shiver of activity pulled her attention from the domestic bliss on the stoop to the center of the patio where Pixie Cut was threading the narrow gaps of the motionless party. A flicker of light came from the star pendant necklace on the woman's chest as it repeatedly caught and lost the porch light. Maybe what Francine had initially read as hostility in the woman's face was just frustration at her husband, in which case she and Francine would have plenty to talk about.

Francine wiped a sweaty hand on her equally sweaty sundress as she prepared to meet the umpteenth neighbor of the night.

"Cheers, Hawthorn Woods!" Ellie and Pete said, in unison.

They raised their glasses in a toast as Pixie Cut reached the edge of the patio and threw her entire cocktail into Francine's face.