FOR GROWN-L ANovel FBANDE

BEDTIME STORIES FOR GROWN-UP GIRLS

A NOVEL BY E.B. LANDE



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Cast of Characters:

LILLIAN COOPERSMITH

Marc CooperSmith – Lillian's husband
David, Jonny, Adam – their sons.
Samuel Cooper – Lillian's father
Sir Geoffrey Kuper – Lillian's grandfather
Lady Alice Kuper – Lillian's grandmother
Isabelle Chanteclair – Sir Geoffrey's second wife

CYDNEY MALLONE

Kevin Mallone – Cydney's father
Bianca Chanteclair Mallone – Cydney's mother
Carmen, Mel (Camelia), Risa (Clarisa) – Cydney's sisters
Pauline Chanteclair – Cydney's grandmother

ROBERT BRETTON

Claire Bretton – Robert's mother

Marjorie Wallace Bretton – Robert's wife

Herbert Wallace – Marjorie's father

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Alice in Wonderland

"So Scheherazade began." Anonymous, *The Arabian Nights*

Prologue

LILLIAN HAD NOT EXPECTED the day to go this badly. Mistake #I was attending the funeral of her old nemesis Marjorie Bretton in the middle of nowhere out in the Berkshires. How likely was it that her former business partner, Cydney Mallone, would show up? Very. She hadn't seen Cydney in fifteen years (for very good reasons) and within an hour she was reminded of every single one of them.

Mistake #2 was driving Cydney to the cemetery to mingle with the crowd of mourners, chief among them the bereaved widower, Robert Bretton, Republican senator for Massachusetts. For years Lillian had been dragged into the triangle of Robert and Cydney and the hateful Marjorie, and God damn it—here she was again.

Mistake #3 was agreeing to Robert's invitation to return with the mourners to his country house without writing down the precise directions because she assumed that Cydney knew the way. But, as the skies darkened and it started to snow and she took one wrong turn after another, it became clear that what Cydney did and did not know would dictate the rest of the day and maybe even the rest of Lillian's life.

And mistake #4 was the fucking moose.

Sunday, Nov. 5, 2006, 11:30 PM.

"Who ARE YOU?" Cydney raised the gun. "Where's Lillian? What did you do with her?"

Lillian looked around to be sure she wasn't dreaming. "Cydney, it's me."

"You're lying." Cydney's eyes had gone dead cold.

"This is no time to joke; they're almost here." Lillian knew that she had to stay calm; rescue was on the way.

"What did you do with her?" Cydney's voice rose to an unfamiliar pitch.

Lillian put her hands up in surrender like in the movies. "Cydney! This is me. *Obviously*."

"Prove it."

"I've been telling you stories about us for hours!" Lillian was close to tears but forced herself to think through the symptoms of Lewy Body Dementia that she could remember – paranoia, delusions, hallucinations, Imposter Syndrome. *Imposter Syndrome?* She wore a coin around her neck with the names and birthdates of her three sons. Cydney had been with her in 1987 when she went to Lenny the jeweler to have it made. She pulled it out. "Remember this?"

Cydney peered at it. "Take it off so I can see it better."

Lillian did, numb.

"Yeah, it looks like it. But you stole it from her," Cydney pronounced, dropping the coin.

"Wow. Cydney, listen up! This is me. I remember what you were wearing when I met you twenty-five years ago. Who else would know that?"

"Yeah? Prove it. What was I wearing?"

"Pink. Pink leather. And a polka-dot ribbon in your hair," Lillian answered confidently.

Prologue

Cydney thought about this. "Probably. But so what? You could've seen a picture."

Lillian clasped her head in her hands. *Think!* "What about...Bud and Storm and the other one...Lutz! And the bloody beef. Remember? I just told you that story. *Or.*..what about T.Rex Toys and Marvin and...the breast pump?"

"Impressive," said Cydney, staring at her hard. "They did a good job training you. They have a secret headquarters, huh?"

"Who? T.Rex Toys? You know their headquarters—that dump in New Jersey!"

"Everyone knows that. Who are you, really?" Cydney lowered her voice but kept the gun raised. "Tell me the truth. I won't tell him."

"Who?" Lillian had no idea where this was going.

"Robert. He's the head of the CIA. Uh-oh. I shouldn't have said that." Cydney inhaled deeply and shook her head. "Uh-oh. Too dangerous."

Oh my God. Lillian could hear the chain saws getting closer. Hurry up hurry up!

"Ok-ok. How about this?" Lillian swallowed hard and tried a new tactic. "You know how much I hate being stuck in a car with windows that will not open. You know that better than anyone! I was terrified that I would fly off a bridge and not be able to get out of the car because I couldn't open the windows! Remember? The Tobin Bridge? Cyd, please—I just went over this with you."

"Interesting. I do remember. That's how Celeste died."

"Celeste! That's right! See, your memory is fine. So do I pass?" – maybe if I make it sound like a joke?

"Not yet. You haven't proved anything that they couldn't have trained you with."

"I know!" Lillian had an inch-long scar on her shoulder from falling off the stage when she was a dancer on the ship. Cydney had suggested turning it into a tattoo, saying that she had always wanted to be a tattoo artist and maybe Lillian could be her guinea pig...

"Here," said Lillian, struggling out of her coat sleeve and pulling her sweater down over her shoulder. "The scar, remember?"

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Cydney put her face very close to Lillian's shoulder, dark eyebrows knit together. She stared for a long time. "Excellent reconstruction," she pronounced, very serious. "But where are the track marks?" She examined the length of Lillian's arm.

"What track marks?"

"The drugs they pumped you with so you could pull this off," Cydney said, dropping Lillian's arm. "Now it all makes sense: They sent you to the funeral, you picked me up, got us lost, they released the moose—just like them to sacrifice a helpless animal—and now I'm a sitting duck. Robert will come to get us and put me away. I'm sure he has his orders. Yeah, that's it. Not so crazy, huh? Screw those doctors at Mass General—I figured it out."

"Wow. About the only person who could come up with something that paranoid is me!" Lillian said, starting to laugh, a hysterical edge to her voice. *Wrong*. She stopped immediately at the look on Cydney's face.

"Funny, huh?" Cydney said, her voice dropping, her grip on the gun tightening. "What did they do with the real Lillian? Did Robert buy her off? If he told her she'd get the jewelry back, forget it. It's history."

12 hours earlier.

Sunday, Nov. 5, 2006. Late Morning.

LILLIAN HATED THE WEEK AFTER the clocks were turned back. The light leaked out of the afternoon by the time the school buses finished their routes, just when there should have been enough light to contemplate the last of the autumn foliage. But, really, who wants to contemplate falling leaves? The whole thing reminded her of a lid on a slowly closing coffin, bit by bit, year after year.

But here she was at Marjorie Bretton's funeral, so coffin imagery wasn't inappropriate. Except that Marjorie's coffin was firmly closed and not about to open any time soon. Lillian thought what she always thought at funerals: Who is really in that box and are they really dead? She could see Robert Bretton standing next to the casket up at the front of the church, the Republican Senator from Massachusetts—in the middle of...what... his fourth term? Strange that Marjorie should be buried out here in the Berkshires, far from the hilltop family estate in Lawrell, a gentrified old mill town north of Boston. But there were many things that Lillian did

not know about Marjorie Bretton, although there was a time when she would have paid good money to find out.

The church was crowded, as you would expect when the wealthy socialite wife of a US Senator dies suddenly in the company of a much younger martial arts instructor at an exclusive retreat, but maybe Lillian was just being her usual cynical self. Maybe the church was crowded because the people of Massachusetts genuinely liked their up-from-hisbootstraps, gee-whiz Senator Bobbie B., and were sorry—and a little bit curious—that his gorgeous meal ticket was dramatically dead.

Lillian hadn't seen Bobbie up close since...well, probably since the last time she had seen her former business partner, Cydney Mallone, maybe fifteen years ago, and that was reason enough for the detour en route back to Boston after visiting her son, Jonathan, at Cornell. It was a short hop off the Mass Pike to drop by the Lenox Church of the Holy Cross, and Marc, her husband, told her to take her time and spend the rest of the day in the Berkshires.

"Don't rush back. What's the point? Besides, maybe you'll run into Cydney," Marc had said over the phone as she was getting ready to leave Cornell. Lillian hadn't seen the Boston papers and Marc took great pleasure in reciting some of the little known details about Marjorie's demise:

"Foul play is not ruled out. Marjorie Taylord Bretton was fifty-eight years old..."

"No way. That bitch had to be older than that." Lillian felt compelled to respond out loud to news reports whether in print or on TV.

Marc ignored her and continued, "... and had been married to Senator Robert Bretton, her childhood sweetheart, since 1968, when he assumed control of Taylord Mills and turned it into the most successful textile venture on the East Coast."

"Childhood sweetheart, huh?" Lillian said. "Gee, it's nice to have your own PR staff. Cydney will go nuts when she reads this. So will her mother, if she's still alive." Lillian had a sudden pang that she didn't know if Bianca was alive or dead. But surely Cydney would have called if Bianca had finally—as she threatened to do for many years—let her heart give out.

"Hey, listen to this," Marc continued. "Her personal fortune is estimated at over twenty million in stock alone...Wow! Twenty million dollars? No wonder he stayed married to her... from the sale of Taylord Mills to General Electric two years ago. She died unexpectedly of a freak accident while surveying the construction site of her exclusive Berkshires resort, La Brettonia, which is scheduled to open next spring."

"What was the accident?" Lillian asked.

"Doesn't say. Just while walking unsupervised on the construction site. Although it does mention the presence of one of her partners, a personal trainer. There's a picture; he can't be more than in his thirties. Very buff. Looks gay to me."

"Marc, everyone under two hundred pounds looks gay to you. Walking unsupervised? What does that mean? She tripped? A beam fell on her head? She screwed every guy on the construction site and died of exhaustion...what?"

Lillian could hear Marc stifle a sigh, or maybe a yawn. "Hey, it's water under the bridge, doll. None of us is remembered in her will, that's for sure. Lil, go check it out—maybe Cydney will be there; it's about time the two of you got together."

"Yeah, but I don't know, Marc. Would that be a good thing or not?"

It was all so long ago—Cydney, Robert, Marjorie, the Baby Grand Company—but in some ways Lillian felt as though she were still recovering. Even though the company had long since been successfully sold and she was able to pay off her substantial debts; even though Robert was safely in Washington and not hiding out in the back room of her factory; even though Marjorie was apparently dead; and even though Cydney was a stage designer of some renown—you just never knew when the past might sneak up your spine and grab you by the back of the neck.

Even so, Lillian decided to bend her rule about funerals—she hated them—and go. Besides, maybe—just maybe—the coffin would be open and Marjorie would be all decked out in the Art Nouveau necklace.

Fat chance, thought Lillian. Wherever that necklace is, it won't be going in the ground.

LILLIAN SAT IN THE BACK of the Church of the Holy Cross and waited until the service began. The front pews were jammed with mourners standing in line to pass the casket—not open, she noticed—and offer their condolences to Senator Bretton. White lilies were piled on the coffin and banked in front of the altar, which was ablaze with white and gold candles. Looks like a wedding, Lillian thought, yawning. Very dramatic...totally Marjorie's style. There was a steady murmur of hushed voices and a shuffle of feet down the center aisle, but Lillian did not recognize anyone in the pews around her.

From a distance, Bobbie Bretton was as handsome as ever, black hair almost silver, dark skin still tanned and tight, although dark glasses covered his heart-throb blue eyes. He looked slightly stooped and had put on some weight, but the trademark Italian silk suit still fit impeccably and he still moved like a cat. He stood next to the coffin for over twenty minutes, accepting the condolences of perfect strangers with a disarming, slightly crooked smile, as Lillian watched, incognito she hoped, from a distance of several rows. His quiet equanimity was infectious; Lillian found herself thinking that despite what must have been a marriage from hell, Marjorie was, after all, his partner. Maybe Cydney should have bowed out of the picture long ago and left their marriage alone.

It was hard to imagine a more unlikely long-term affair than Robert and Cydney's. Robert was the calmest man she had ever met and Cydney was a force of nature. 'Portrait of the Artist as a Gathering Tornado' as Lillian used to describe Cydney in the years when they had somehow managed to run a business together. To be fair, Marjorie was no shy and retiring character herself. Maybe calm guys need hellions to keep their blood pressure up. Who knows? Lillian scanned the crowd for the second time for Cydney, and although she hadn't set eyes on her in years, how could she not recognize someone who had once been closer to her than her own husband?

The line at the front of the church was beginning to thin out, as people took their seats. The priest, dressed in white, tiptoed around the altar and the sacristy, preparing the accounterments of the funeral mass.

Purple light and haze streamed in from the stained glass windows arched around the alcove behind the altar. Lillian settled down in the hard wood pew, wrapping the lining of her raincoat around her legs, and realized that she hadn't stepped foot in a church in years. Did she miss it?

While Jewish, Lillian was raised (or as she often said—benignly neglected) by her eccentric grandparents in the very Catholic province of Quebec, while her own parents were busy divorcing and remarrying each other. By the time she was ten, and her parents finally collected her and settled down in the boring world of Vermont, she was attached to her grandmother's devout French-Canadian maid, Isabelle, and furious that she hadn't been able to receive first holy communion along with the rest of her class at the convent school she was attending. No amount of dedicated Bat Mitzvah preparation could completely extinguish the Catholic infusion of her childhood.

Her former business partner, the missing Cydney Mallone, lapsed French-Canadian and Irish Catholic to the bone, refused to allow the occasional hapless nun who wandered into their former factory in an old East Cambridge brewery to leave religious literature behind, although it would have taken some amount of misguided missionary zeal to enter the rundown artists complex in the first place. Lillian couldn't help it; her heart leapt at the sight of nuns in full habit. It must have been some weird holdover from childhood, and she would gladly accept the offered literature, dropping everything to ask about the Holy Blood of Lost Lambs and the mysteries of stigmata, while forgetting all about payroll and eighteen-wheelers rolling up to the loading dock.

But, Lillian reasoned, this was about the only time she ever slacked off. And how could you compare that to the chaos of Cydney, who could go out to buy a cup of coffee, find herself in the middle of a bank robbery, chase down the culprit in high heels and deliver him to the police. When she showed up half an hour late for a business meeting, instead of using a lame excuse like, "sorry, I forgot my wallet," or "the car wouldn't start"—she would just tell the truth. The truth—though unbelievable—often

involved the police, a narrow brush with cheerful death, or a rare animal that had escaped from the zoo and was now residing in her living room. It turned out to be a great way to charm men—which Lillian did not need—but a nonstarter if you wanted them to invest in your business, which she did.

Lillian's reverie was broken by Robert Bretton standing down from the side of the coffin and seating himself in the front pew.

The priest put on his glasses, cleared his throat and began: "Dear friends. We have come on this sad day to commit to eternal rest our dear sister, Marjorie Miranda Taylord Wallace Bretton, whose life has been taken from us so tragically..."

"Miranda, huh?" said a throaty voice behind Lillian. "Sounds like a goddamn law firm if you ask me."

"Hey, Cyd," said Lillian without looking around. "I knew you wouldn't miss this for the world."

25 Years earlier. 1981. Spring.

LILIAN SAT BY THE EDGE of the chipped claw-footed tub in her partially renovated bathroom, with 16-month-old Jonny in the bath and three-year-old David jumping up and down, demanding to join him, a trail of Cheerios in his wake. Just eight years earlier she was touring the world as a dancer on a cruise line while Marc volunteered with the Peace Corps. She was going to be an actress; he was going to save the world. Now they had between them—in addition to two fine sons sixteen months apart—a law degree, a business degree, an old Victorian house in the Boston suburb of Newton that had asbestos in the basement, bats in the attic and a leaking roof; two mortgages, two car loans, two IRAs, no furniture, and fine lines in their recently smooth brows. Plus, Lillian's phobias were getting worse; she could barely cross a bridge, much less be on open water, without a panic attack.

MARC APPEARED IN THE BATHROOM doorway wearing his tennis whites and holding two cups of coffee, one of which he gave to Lillian, who was deep in thought. What was she waiting for? It was time to get back to Cydney and get their business off the ground. She made a snap decision.

"I'm going to Cydney's loft today and stealing a shopping cart. It's early, the stores won't open 'til noon, and I'll find a broken cart and haul it into the station wagon. Want to help?"

"As an officer of the court? If you get caught, don't call me." He looked at her. "Are you ok?"

"I'm looking forward to it actually. It's time I broke some rules."

"By the way," he added, "we have no money to start a business, in case you hadn't noticed. I'm not sure we have enough money to pay next month's daycare bill."

"We'll see. There's always Alice's jewelry. She promised it to me." Lillian's grandmother—Lady Alice Kuper, wife of a British baronet who had immigrated to Canada after WWI and founded the country's largest department store, *Chez Kuper*—had left her a rare matching set of Art Nouveau necklace, earrings, and bracelet composed of jeweled hummingbirds that had graced the cover of Vanity Fair in 1933. As a child, Lillian had spent hours in her grandparents' large, echoing house in Montreal, transfixed as Lady Alice demonstrated the tiny moving wings of the ruby-throated birds that hovered above flower petals encrusted in tiny pearls. It was as close to a living fairy tale as she could get. Before Lady Alice had died the previous winter, she reminded Lillian that the hummingbirds were hers, pressing the key to the bank vault into her hand.

"I ADMIRE YOUR OPTIMISM, DOLL," said Marc. "You must get it from your grandmother. Along with the jewelry, I hope."

"I can't do much about the jewelry while Sir Geoffrey is still alive." Lillian pulled Jonny out of the tub and wrapped him in a towel. Everyone referred to Lillian's grandfather as Sir Geoffrey—even his own children.

"Still on a yacht in the Bahamas?"

"Yeah. No one can reach him. My father keeps trying. They need to settle Alice's estate because she left a ton of debts," Lillian said, letting the water out of the tub. "But that jewelry is going to help me get this business started, I have no doubt."

LILLIAN COOPERSMITH MET CYDNEY MALLONE a few weeks earlier when Lillian took an afternoon off work at BYO Advertising and followed the directions to East Cambridge that she had scribbled on the back of her lunch napkin. The area where Cydney lived spread out beyond the rusting span of elevated MBTA tracks and access ramps to McGrath Highway into a low flat grid of abandoned industrial buildings seeking new life. Old textile mills, shoe manufacturing plants, factories, warehouses lining the north side of the Charles River just before it joins the Mystic and heads into Boston Harbor, were turning into urban shopping malls, brick and butcher-block restaurants, hi-tech start-ups, New Age Galleries and funky design firms. Rents quadrupled and suburbanites bought. Longtime residents—Portuguese, Italian and French-Canadian—moved out and on the periphery new ethnics moved in—Vietnamese, Cambodian—wearing coats too thin in winter and letting their tiny children play soccer in the middle of the street.

But three or four blocks in from the river the scenery hadn't changed in generations. Row houses, some brick, some wood, intermingled with small factories, tool supply shops and plumbing equipment warehouses—their windows plastered with aging campaign slogans for city councilors long since departed. Somewhere in this less gentrified maze of squat buildings, Lillian was looking for what had once been The Old Steamboat Brewery that took up half a city block and was surrounded by a moat—or at least a very large ditch.

Lillian carried her trench coat over her briefcase, which held her high heels, as she trudged up and down Archibald Street in her cracked Etonic running shoes and sweat socks. Because she was tall and somewhat lanky, she could get away with wearing a business suit and sneakers, and because she was always rushing—to pick up or drop off two toddlers

on her way to and from work, the day care center, the supermarket and home—the four points on the compass of her ever-shrinking life—she didn't care how she looked. In fact, she was still nursing Jonny, who was sixteen months old and not yet walking—what was wrong with that kid?— and had never lost the ten pounds she had gained from her first pregnancy with David, who, unlike his younger brother, never stopped running. Lillian put down her briefcase and examined the hieroglyphics on the crumpled napkin.

"Follow 2nd Street off Archibald to Bridge," she read out loud. "Ok, there is no Bridge Street here, so what is she talking about? Maybe it's a real bridge?" Facing her was a short chunk of street that spanned what could have been a large gutter or a small moat. It led into an arched gateway and beyond that into a courtyard. Embedded in a recently sandblasted limestone arch, a greened copper plate bore the proud curlicued numbers '1880' entwined with leaves and vines, and under it, 'Old Steamboat'.

Eureka, she muttered, stuffing the napkin in her jacket pocket. This was about the only bridge that Lillian was able to cross these days, having become—she hated to admit—increasingly phobic about being over or on open bodies of water. The part of her brain that didn't threaten to explode as she approached a bridge told her that this was nuts for someone who had spent a year and a half working on a cruise ship as part of a dance company. But that was the part of her brain that spent each anxiety attack hunkered down and under cover. She crossed the street and peered into a waterless trench about six feet deep that was littered with junk food wrappers. No water. She was safe.

Inside the courtyard, which must have been built for horse-drawn carts, Lillian scanned the doorways fitted into the old brick and granite cornices for signs of Cydney Mallone. She found her on a dumpster spray-painted, *Touch this and you're dead, Mallone.* Hard to tell if this was a warning to Cydney or from Cydney, and Lillian was not sure that she wanted to find out.

The dumpster was stuffed to bursting with pieces of fabric, arms of sweaters, rolls of zippers-rusted and dripping-hanging out from under

the top lid, which was held down with chains wrapped around it like a birthday bow. Lillian dug out the napkin and squinted at it away from the sun.

'Ok,' Lillian said out loud, 'next to the dumpster behind the banner...' She picked up a limp piece of pink nylon which, when stretched out, read *Cydney Mallone Cut & Sew*. Someone had inserted an 'n' between the 'u' and the 't' and crossed out 'Sew' altogether. *Cydney Mallone Cu-n-t*. She let the banner fall back, lifeless, over a discarded wood stove next to a door that she assumed was Cydney's.

'Do I want to go on,' Lillian asked herself, 'or have I seen enough?' She looked at her watch. It was 3:00. She had to pick Jonny up at 4:30 and David had an ear infection check-up at 5:00, which meant not getting home until after 6:00. Another late dinner with cranky kids. Marc would be home early tonight for the first time all week. Early for him was being home for the slapshot chaos of dinner—chaos that he could not understand now that she was only working part-time. Lillian, who had been Director of Market Research at BYO Advertising, was phasing herself out of advertising so she could start a juvenile products company, tentatively called Baby Grand, intending to make a pile of money selling fun and creative infant products to Woodstock yuppies and never having to work for anyone but herself ever again.

According to Mickey Klein, personal secretary to BYO's President, Lillian needed the right fabric and textile designer to help her create the baby product that Lillian kept yapping about when she should have been paying more attention to her clients' market share. And Mickey knew just the one: a woman named Cydney Mallone, who had recently come up with the brilliant trade show display for Purity Enterprises, one of BYO's largest clients.

Purity was introducing a new laxative at a food and drug convention and needed an eye-catching show stopper. Apparently Cydney produced a series of larger-than-life constipated worms in neon colors with bulging eyes and bulging humps, giving them a dromedary effect. The eyes

rolled by means of some hidden mechanism and an internal tape deck pumped out strategic groans.

"Sounds gross," Lillian told Mickey. "How come I didn't know anything about this?"

"You were out on maternity leave," Mickey said. "It was a sensation. The only thing we couldn't figure out was why the worms were not allowed to come into contact with water. Turns out she had stuffed them with dried kidney beans. One accidentally got wet and boy, constipation was not a problem, I can tell you. That thing blew to Kingdom Come."

"Sounds like a ringing endorsement, Mick. Thanks."

"Suit yourself, but I got her name from The New England Opera Company where she designs sets and props. She's hot stuff; I think she's the one you want."

So Lillian called Cydney and tried to explain over the phone what she had in mind. But Cydney sounded like she was half asleep—her voice husky, almost moldy. She appeared to be stifling a yawn when she said, "Yeaahh, sure I've done consumer stuff, lots of it. Come see my portfolio, it's hard to explain."

But Lillian kept right on trying to explain about a seat that should fit into the top part of a shopping cart to hold an infant, and then convert to an upright seat for a toddler. "Believe it or not, there is nothing like it on the market," she added at the end of her speech.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe the things I believe, so take down the directions and come anytime. I'm always here. I live here, I work here, I have a studio and a factory with little dwarfs sewing away; they even cook for me, so I'm always here, ok?" She hung up before Lillian could respond.

LILLIAN BENT DOWN TO TIE a shoelace that threatened to actually touch the muck surrounding the dumpster, when the door behind her swung open, almost knocking her down.

"Hey! Watch it!" she yelled to a girl in tight jeans carrying a load of pillows in a clear plastic sack over her shoulder, a sack that hung almost to the ground and threatened to engulf her. She kept right on walking,

which Lillian noticed she managed in remarkably high heels-sling-backs actually, the kind of shiny purple pumps that come with Barbie Dolls-straight to the dumpster marked for death to or by Cydney Mallone.

As she dropped the bag and spun around, Lillian saw that this was no girl, but a petite woman, probably her own age-maybe younger-with hair unleashed by the removal of the bag that shook itself out in waist length waves. She started working on the locks in the chain around the dumpster, with something that looked like a pick, bracing her glass-slippered foot against its rusted side.

"Sorry," she called out to Lillian, not looking up, "but that door is unpredictable."

The lock came loose and the chains clanked to the pavement. She stood on an orange crate next to the dumpster and threw the lid back as though it was made of cardboard and not steel. Lillian had tendonitis in both wrists from lifting her kids and could barely hold a milk carton.

"I'm Cydney," she continued, "you must be Lillian. Don't tell anyone I'm dumping this stuff. People are so fussy around here, you wouldn't believe it." She grabbed hold of the bottom of the sack, shook out the contents of ripped pillows whose insides looked like milkweed pods gone to seed, gave the lid a tug, and watched it fall back down with a crash that shook the dumpster and the fillings in Lillian's teeth.

Over the phone Cydney had a throaty voice that suggested a large woman, backed up by her industrial address adjacent to several auto body shops, which Lillian could now see through a gateway leading into a second courtyard. She would not have been surprised if Cydney had weighed two hundred pounds and been part of a motorcycle gang. Instead, she probably weighed half that, and stood several inches shorter than herself, even in the purple pumps.

"Is there some place we can go and talk?" Lillian suggested, because she was here on business, after all.

"Of course," said Cydney briskly, aging ten years, and striding with surprisingly large steps over to the door next to the pink banner. "Hope you don't mind dogs," she called out over her shoulder as she took out an enormous ring of keys. Lillian was just about to ask what kind of dog when the door flung open and out raced a husky larger than Cydney, who leapt up to embrace her with its paws on her shoulders.

"He's pretty gentle if he knows you," Cydney said, grabbing the dog by the collar as it lunged at Lillian. "Down, Boris, down, boy; that's a good boy." Cydney looked back at Lillian, who was cowering in the doorway, "Don't worry, he won't hurt you. Not used to dogs, huh? Around here a girl needs some protection. That's why I have a wolf. Well, actually part-wolf."

"A wolf? You're kidding...is that even, I don't know...legal?" Lillian was beginning to think that maybe Cydney was the girl that people needed protection from, but just then they entered the inner courtyard that was the decaying heart of the old brewery, and Lillian forgot all about the wolf.

"Oh, wow!" Lillian breathed, looking up at the domed skylight in leaded glass panes, several of them blanked out and boarded up, giving it the look of a jack-'o-lantern. Rising up from the center of the concrete floor was a twisted tarantula of a rusted brass tank with tubes and arms stretching out from the top like flexed biceps. Around it wound an inside staircase in black wrought iron, which climbed, open and clattering, up the four inside levels, each of which looked down from its elliptical position, atrium fashion, into the brass tubing below.

"Don't get carried away," said Cydney. "Ever live in a cylinder? It's like living in a nuclear power plant." Boris the wolf, who had gone from furious to friendly in moments, chose Lillian's upward-looking position to dive-bomb her crotch, despite a skirt and slip—articles of clothing with which the dog was evidently unfamiliar. Lillian let out a shriek and was about to hit him on the head when Cydney grabbed her arm.

"Whoa, there! Are you crazy? This is a cross between a husky and a wolf. If we are going to work together, you had better be nice to him."

Lillian stared at her. Work together? Who said anything about working together? No way was she working with someone who looked better taking out the garbage than she could after a day of beauty treatments. (Whatever *that* was—one of those \$150 gift items she always saw at silent

auctions.) And secondly, no way would she work with someone whose favorite color was pink.

Lillian hated pink; it was a color she could never wear, and here was Cydney draped in it from head to toe. Her jeans were custom dyed, because no denim of that shade existed, as was the jacket, a soft leather that could have come out of Liberace's closet. Even the ribbon in her mass of dark curls—*Were they natural? Who could perm all that hair?*—was a pink and white check, although somewhat ratty at the ends, Lillian noted with satisfaction. An artist—she was sick of them—and a natural beauty, with olive skin and aquiline nose. Somehow this annoyed her deeply.

"How long does it take you to wash your hair?" Lillian wondered aloud, taking herself by surprise. Her own blonde hair was short and straight as a stick, cut in a wedge up from her neck. Suddenly she felt like a shorn sheep and shivered. Whenever she contemplated growing it back to its adolescent Alice-in-Wonderland glory, the prospect of different lengths and hair getting in her mouth stopped the thought cold. And she had looked this way since, well, since she had become a professional real life grown-up. She couldn't even remember when she had first cut it off—probably on the ship. But then she had been dancing every night, or was always in rehearsal, and she had better things to do than wash her hair.

"This hair is a major pain in the ass, let me tell you," Cydney was saying, "and I am far too vain to cut it off. But if I had straight thick hair like yours, with all those blonde colors, I'd blunt cut mine in a minute. It'd make me look taller, I bet. Wouldn't have to walk around in these heels all day long."

Lillian had almost forgotten that Cydney was short. At 5'10", Lillian towered over her and suddenly felt like an awkward giraffe next to delicate Bambi. She jammed her hands in her peanut butter-stained pockets—she just noticed—and stared down at her scuffed sneakers. She hadn't done her nails in months; it was all she could do to remember to shave her legs, and here was Cydney, who worked with her hands (apparently) and managed to have unchipped, one-inch long pale pink nails.

"Yeah, how do you manage to walk in those things?" asked Lillian. "I have mine in my briefcase, but they look like orthopedic shoes next to those."

Cydney broke into a smile, showing off dimples and very white teeth. Her eyes were an intense shade of sea blue rimmed by thick black lashes that Lillian couldn't have managed with several layers of mascara. "Aren't these shoes a riot? I got them at the toy store for my niece who's eleven. But I have small feet and I just started wearing them and voilà! I figure I'll get her something else. You know, I've been thinking about what you said over the phone," she added, grabbing the dog's collar and motioning for Lillian to follow, "about the baby thing. I've got it. A cantaloupe cut in half. It's perfect."

"Excuse me?"

"Really, I think it will work," Cydney said, her voice suddenly rising as Boris started to run frantically in place at the sight of a dark-haired man in an expensive suit who was just coming down the stairs. He did not look as though he either lived or worked in the building. In fact, he looked like one of Marc's law partners. Boris wagged his tail furiously and leaped up on his hind legs.

"Down, Boris!" both he and Cydney said at the same time. The wolf pawed the air and the man backed away.

"Who says wolves don't shed?" he said from the landing, brushing real or imagined fur from his jacket. "Uh...excuse me, Cyd, but it's getting late and I'm on my way. The material looks good though, better than the last run. I'll talk to you in a couple of days about the next delivery." And he pivoted to go back up the stairs, retreating quickly along an upper corridor.

Lillian was sure that she had seen him somewhere before—mid-thirties, sharp dresser, tanned—moved like a boxer—big creased smile, but she couldn't remember where. She started to say, 'Haven't I met him somewh...' when Cydney grabbed her arm in an amazingly strong grip and started walking in the opposite direction.

Now Lillian really wanted to know who he was. "Is he a client of yours? I'm sure I've seen him before."

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Cydney shrugged. "A supplier. One of the only surviving textile mills left in the area, up in Lawrell, where we both grew up. He owns the mill and I own a dumpster. That's the way it goes, huh?"

"What kind of textile business?" Lillian asked. *Had she met him at a party?*

"Nothing sexy," she answered, sounding vague. "Government contracts, defense department stuff, lots of camouflage fabric, much to my chagrin. If I hate the color, watch out. I'm giving you fair warning."

Warning taken, Lillian said to herself, thinking that he must be a local politician and she would have to look him up. "So where were we?" asked Lillian, checking her watch and noting with alarm that she had to be at the day care center in twenty-five minutes. "Something about a melon—sorry, that went right over my head. It's to hold a baby in a shopping cart, you know. Do you have kids by the way?"

"No, it's all I can do to manage my animals and my employees, but I know what you're looking for—I'll do a prototype. Tonight. You don't believe me, do you?"

"Well," she said diplomatically, "I don't believe anything until I see it. Look, I hate to spoil this," she added, "but I gotta go. I have to pick up my kids." Lillian had worked with lots of designers over the years; they were mostly unreliable and full of excuses. Maybe she should end this now. "You know, this has been real interesting but I don't think a melon is going to quite make it. So... uh...thanks, but probably not."

"Look, come back on the weekend," Cydney said, suddenly all business. "And bring a doll, a large doll, or better yet, bring a baby. I'll mock something up and show you how I think it will work. Really."

Lillian sighed. Maybe Cydney was her last chance. She couldn't keep toying with an idea in the back of her mind forever when she knew it was something that could get her out of the corporate rat race and into her own business. "Sure, ok, I guess. I mean it would be nice to see your studio."

"Great. Oh, and bring a shopping cart. We'll put it on the lift."

"Where will I get a shopping cart?"

"Where everybody else does...steal it. I'd do it but you know the city; the carts are disgusting. We've met before, you know," Cydney said casually, popping a large stick of gum into her mouth.

"We have? Where?" No way, thought Lillian. I would remember anyone who looked like this.

"Long time ago, at the Candy Shack-Combat Zone." And Cydney turned abruptly and walked away. "See ya this weekend; don't forget the cart."

Lillian shook her head. Hardly. The Combat Zone was local vernacular for the strip joints that had spread out along Washington Street in downtown Boston. She hadn't been there since college. And besides, people were always telling her that she looked like someone they knew.

LILLIAN COULD HEAR MARC RUMMAGING in the hall closet for his tennis gear. He hadn't said anything to her about the BYO party the night before. He was pretty good about that, although she wasn't sure that was the kind of support she needed. Maybe she should see a different therapist. It was hard to live in a city on the ocean and on a major river and freak out every time you had to cross a bridge or go near the water.

The previous night, BYO had hosted a party for select clients on a boat in Boston Harbor; a good sized boat—maybe eighty feet—with four or five staterooms and a crew of six. For weeks Lillian pretended that this was not going to happen. All the senior BYO staff were excited about it; after all, it was a real luxury to be treated to a dinner cruise with live music on a private boat, but every time Lillian thought about it her scalp started to crawl and her stomach churned. She spent all day Friday debating whether it was better to take valium before she got on the ship or drink after she was on board, or both. Some of each, or a lot of one? Secretly, she hoped that one of the kids would get sick and she would have to stay home; but she had used that excuse a number of times already. Or that the weather would turn awful, bringing early hurricanes and gale force winds, but it was predicted to be a balmy evening with a spectacular sunset.

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Lillian called Mickey Klein late Saturday afternoon in a panic. Mickey worked closely with Tom Monahan, BYO's wunderkind president, to whom she was personal secretary and administrative assistant. It was assumed but not confirmed that she was assisting him in other matters during the two-and-a-half hour Friday lunch breaks they each routinely took, leaving the office separately and returning five minutes apart, Tom looking flushed and Mickey gazing off into space for the rest of the day.

"Hey, Mick," Lillian said over the phone, feeling it grow slimy in the cold sweat of her palm. "Are you...um...coming tonight?" Lillian knew this was a stupid question because Mickey had spent the past three weeks organizing this event. "I mean, do you think the weather will hold up?"

"Lillian, where are you? Look outside; it's a clear blue sky."

"Yeah, you're right, I guess. I mean, what should I wear? It's a boat. Should I wear rubber soled shoes?"

"Didn't you get my memo? You can wear anything from casual to very fancy. Just don't embarrass Tommy. Listen, I have to do something with my hair; I'll see you tonight." And Mickey hung up.

LILLIAN HAD LEANED HEAVILY ON Marc. She wore dark glasses so no one could see the panic in her eyes. She stayed in the inside cabin, midship, where she could still keep her eye on the horizon, even though the sea was dead calm. She talked intently with Jack Goldfarb about the confidence levels on his new dog food market study, pointing out that all the statistical analysis in the world would not compensate for the reality that dogs hated the food. She watched Mickey trail Tom whenever Tom's eight-months pregnant wife lumbered to her feet and squeezed herself into the bathroom. She counted the minutes, then the hours, and when she knew she had made it through three-quarters of the evening she felt her grip on herself relax. She dropped the tiny balls of paper napkins torn and shredded and kneaded in the palms of her hands into the nearest ashtray and had a drink. She hated herself.

It was time to get control of her life. The phobias had been strangling her since the previous spring when Lillian had returned to work after her

second maternity leave in little more than a year. After five months at home avoiding bridges, she had almost forgotten about her phobia. But not for long.

Three days back in the office and the Transamerica Shipping file landed in her lap.

"They've got a regional office in Chelsea," Tom Monahan said, sitting on the edge of her still clean desk, "and I think you should go see their operation ASAP."

"Chelsea?" Her heart sank. "Come on, Tom, no reputable company has an office in Chelsea."

Chelsea was on the other side of Boston Harbor behind the airport. The most direct route was over the Tobin Bridge, favorite haunt of suicide jumpers, and so heavily circled on her "how to avoid bridges" dashboard map that it looked like the site of a crime scene. It was the fastest way from Boston to Chelsea via Purgatory.

"Chelsea's going to make a comeback. I'm betting on it. Beautiful views. Right on the water. Just get on the Tobin and you'll be there in a jiff..." Tom said, sliding his hip off her desk and signaling that, as far as he was concerned, she was on her way. "Here's their card; let me know how it goes."

Lillian claimed that her car was in the shop on the day of the Chelsea appointment, taking the subway to East Boston, which, because it traveled under and not over water, she could handle, and then a cab from there. The guys at Transamerica thought she was brilliant for avoiding the traffic over the bridge, and she immediately rose several points in their estimation. Not good news; she did not want this client.

It was soon after the Transamerica episode that Lillian found herself food-shopping one evening on her way home. Preoccupied with her anxieties (which she knew were getting out of control) she had baby Jonny in a backpack, and 20-month-old David seated in the front of the cart. Lillian was staring at a fistful of green beans when she turned to see David standing up with one foot on the handlebar, arms spread

wide, ready to jump. She tackled him with a flying leap and half lay there, draped over the cart, her teeth in the shoulder of David's windbreaker, listening to Jonathan's terrified shrieks as he struggled in the backpack. A voice popped into her head as clear as an early bird song on a still morning.

"You're going to get me out of this," it said, just like that. It was a low, quiet voice, certainly not her own, and hovered somewhere behind her left shoulder, so that she took Jonny out of the pack to look around. The voice filled her with a sense of peace and serenity and purpose, which she had not known in some time. She lifted Jonny on her hip and looked into David's clear brown eyes, a golden brown, the color of a lion's mane. She kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Davey, it's ok. Mummy has it all figured out. You're going to get me out of this." She sounded calm and controlled, without her usual edge of panic; so calm that David looked shocked.

Lillian knew that something had to change.

One year later that change was about to take place. En route to Cydney's loft with her kids and the stolen cart on board, Lillian checked her dashboard map. "Let's see," she said out loud, "if we take the Mass Pike we can get off at Allston and take the River Street Bridge. I can do that bridge." Her finger landed on a light blue streak on the map with three stars and an exclamation point. "Yup, that's what we'll do, right guys?"

Cydney met her in the courtyard and directed her to the loading dock that led into the freight elevator. She was delighted to have the cart, which she unloaded from the back of the car with considerably less difficulty than Lillian had getting it in.

"I lift weights," she explained, "or at least I did until three months ago when I fell down the elevator shaft and broke half a dozen ribs. But I'm just about ready to go back to the gym." In fact, she was wearing a weightlifter's wide leather belt. Her waist didn't look much bigger than David's head.

"So these are the kids, huh? How old are you, sweetie?" Cydney asked David, who kept his thumb in his mouth and shook his head. "They look like they're almost the same age, Lillian. How exactly did you do that?"

"I've blocked it out-three years of nonstop pregnancy and nursing."

The corridor on which they walked and half carried the cart to Cydney's studio entrance was open grating and looked down through the next two floors to ground level. Lillian suddenly felt a bridge panic coming on. She tightened her grip on David's hand, and hoisted Jonny up higher on her hip. *Don't look down*, she told herself fiercely, *and you'll be fine*.

Cydney glanced behind her and sensed Lillian's discomfort. "Don't worry," she called out. "You'll get used to it, although it's a bitch in high heels. Ooops, sorry. Gotta watch my language, I guess."

They stopped at Cydney's door and stepped into another world. Before them unfolded a length of polished bowling alley floor, perhaps a hundred feet long and forty feet wide, bordered with huge glass windows covered with flimsy bamboo shades in irregular shapes and sizes. The windows—some original with small opaque panes, and some recently replaced, startling in their expanse of clarity—faced south. Through the windows the sun streamed onto the high-gloss floor, bouncing off bolts of fabric, bins of patterned remnants, yards unrolled on cutting tables, rows of unused sewing machines, racks of thread and scattered tools. Several muslin curtains hung in a large archway created in the center of the long work area. Beyond them the space curved off into an 'L' with the windows carrying light from the west, looking out toward the clapboard three-deckers of Somerville.

THROUGH THE CURTAINS LILLIAN COULD see an unmade bed and open bureau drawers. On a dressing table stood a heavy silver soup tureen, very ornate, tarnished to a smoky blue. It was filled with daffodils just past their prime, and fat, red tulips spilling petals on the coffee-stained lace tablecloth beneath. Boris, the half-wolf, stood next

to the curtains—Lillian had forgotten about him—looking horrified at the group of cart-bearers and small children approaching. David took off down the slippery floor toward the dog, who—because he was so used to terrifying newcomers—was momentarily confused and stood rooted to the spot, legs tense, ready to spring.

Cydney called out, "Stay, Boris!...good boy...don't move."

Lillian started to run to David but Cydney grabbed her arm. "Don't run. You'll scare him."

David walked right up under the dog's chin and said, "Hi Doggie! Woof!" Boris wagged his tail slowly without committing himself to a clear course of action until David saw a ragged Donald Duck lying on a low lumpy couch and started for it. Cydney must have anticipated this move because, just as David reached for the doll, Cydney grabbed the dog's collar before he could lunge for the duck now in David's hands.

"Uh-uh, David," Cydney said sweetly, crouching down to his level, "the doll and the couch belong to the doggie and you must never touch them because that's the only time Boris ever really gets upset, understand?"

David nodded his head in time to the rhythm of her voice. He didn't seem the least bit disturbed as Cydney took him by the hand and led him through the curtains and into her living space, talking all the while. Lillian followed, weakly, once she was sure her legs, which had been rooted to the spot, could move.

"Now that's the bird cage," Cydney was saying to David as Lillian trailed behind, balancing Jonathan on her hip. "It's a pretty big cage, huh? Probably as big as your closet at home. Actually, it's called an aviary; can you say that? And yup, there's the cat lying on her mat right next to the cage. She's given up on trying to get those birds; they sort of have a live-and-let-live attitude. I figure it's a pretty good example in case I ever get married and...let's see...oh yeah, there's the fish tank—it's a little dirty, which is why you can't see a whole lot of fish. Why is it so dirty? Because I haven't cleaned it, to tell you the truth. You see, a friend of mine asked me to keep it for her when she went away on vacation two years ago, and she never came back, so I kept it. There could be

prehistoric fish in there by now. Actually, she fell in love; that's why she never came back. No, I don't think it's like falling IN something, like a cave or a hole, although maybe it is, let me think about that..."

Cydney rambled on, making David a glass of chocolate milk, as though she were talking to a short person of equal intellectual powers. Lillian could see that David was completely infatuated; gone – hook, line and sinker.

Lillian cleared her throat. "Uh, can I walk past this dog and back to the shopping cart?"

"Oh suuure," Cydney answered, "he's harmless."

Lillian walked back to the studio where the cart was now balanced on three wheels, having lost one in the heave-ho into the lift. Cydney followed and plunked a piece of canvas and foam in the front seat. There it was—the size and shape of a watermelon cut in half, just like Cydney had said—nestled in the cart with silver hooks gleaming at either end.

"See," said Cydney, demonstrating, "the baby lies down like it's a cradle, and then when it gets big enough to sit up, Presto!" She picked it up and flipped it over, folding one panel down and another up. "It's a seat and the hooks wrap around and fasten on the front end and at the back to hold the baby in. Let's try it."

They left the canvas in the seat position and Lillian plunked Jonathan in, forcing his reluctant legs through the seat holes. This was a new one for him. Although less active than his brother, he was used to hauling himself up in the cart to stand at chest level with his mother. Suddenly he was buckled front and back. A look of panic crossed his face, and he reached as far forward as he could to shake the handlebar. He looked from his mother to Cydney with his brows knit and his mouth open, screwing up his face for a howl.

"Hey!" Cydney said. "It works! He can't go anywhere."

"You're right." Lillian was not quite as carried away. "He can't stand up and swan dive, that's for sure," she said, walking around the cart.

"You see?" Cydney said to David. "Because of you and your brother, your mother and I are going to get rich."

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"Well, we're a long way from that, but I do believe we have a product here, and I've seen enough new gizmos cross my desk to know that this could really work." The thought exploded in her head—this really could work.

"See, guys, you're going to get us out of this!" Cydney was saying to David while the two of them danced around Jonathan.

"Out of what?" Lillian asked. Where had she heard that before?

"It'll get you out of a stuffy job and me on the road to financial independence; I can't hang on short-run contracts or the good will of rich men forever."

Jonathan started to clap his hands, resigned to his stuck position. Both kids had fallen in love with Cydney as she danced with one around the other.

"Ha, ha, ha! You're going to get us out of this!" she sang. She helped David climb into the basket of the cart, then turned to Lillian.

"Well, what do you think? I have to thank you: You're going to get me out of this, I can feel it."

Lillian looked at the kids in the shopping cart and was hit by something in Cydney's voice—the same voice that had floated over her shoulder a year ago in the supermarket when David had almost jumped out. The voice that had filled her with some inexplicable hope and calm. That's what it did then; that's what it was doing now.

Cydney smiled at her. "Hey, wake up! Don't blank out on me. Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, I did. Probably a lousy reason to start a business..."

"Good as any, I bet."

"I wouldn't know how to get started; it must cost a fortune..."

"You know what? Enjoy the moment. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

No question about it; Cydney's voice. Lillian had no choice. She grabbed David and scooped him up. It was meant to be.