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Final Bouquet

I stare down at the silver mules. The toeless pantyhose bites the tender spot between my big and little toes. *Ouch* is an understatement. I try not to bite my lip. Brick-red lipstick on pearly-whites don't mix. I wince and look up. The doorman is admiring the view. He's not bad. I smile back. *Fat chance.*

A sleek black SUV sneaks up behind me through the reflection of the revolving hotel door. I beat the valet to the car and tap against the tinted window. It rolls down. "Get in, babe." Jean smiles in greeting and reflexively tucks a loose strand of long jet-black hair behind her ear. I slide into the passenger side, nearly crushing a bouquet of fresh flowers. Long white satin ribbons keep them from falling apart.

"Dear *GOD!!!*" My jaw drops. I'm not superstitious, but I can't help blurting, "An omen!"

"I know, I know!" Jean whines. "She chucked it a million miles. It landed right there! I was talking to this hot guy. He shoved it at me. What was I supposed to do?"

"From one commitment-phobe to another, you're now officially marked-for-life," I smirk. Jean and I are sworn swingers. It's been a little over two years since we drank to that pact. We're beyond institutional parameters, but it's *the* bridal bouquet. It's obscene the way the lilies are thrust amidst the crush of rose petals --- a huge head of deep cardinal sin accentuated by several sprigs of promised purity. That's just messed up that Jean caught it. Not part of the plan. *Unforgivable.*

"You'll be sorry for saying that," Jean threatens. I don't know the last time she's frowned or showed concern. Wrinkles are a huge "no-no" with her. She glances over, dramatic sloe eyes swallowing me whole, growling: "Be careful what you wish for." She's right. I keep silent. This whole bouquet bit's nothing, really.

"God Carmen," she glances over, cocks her head and gives me an approving nod. "You taught naughty how to be nice. Lucy Liu scoot on over!" Jean's meticulous and merciless when it comes to being sassy: comments like that one cement her ties to some of the trendier "up-and-comers in the biz." Her needy Hollywood clients worship her for it.

"Where are we going?" I'm stingy with compliments, so I savor hers. I smooth down the silver sheath and flick imaginary bits of lint off the slinky silver cardigan Jean sent me to "break-in." She's picked out my outfits since we played "store" back in the third grade. Some habits aren't meant for breaking.

"Typical Chinese grub." Reality sets in. The scenario isn't getting better. "Twelve courses. Nothing new."

"Ugh. Are they seating you with all the single slackers?"

"Nah. They know better than to waste my time."

Jean looks hot. Nothing new since she defines "sexy" with all that's subtle. Her creamy linen slacks with killer heels make her all legs. A simple black tank flirts more with wandering eyes than the plunging necklines we'll be exposed to at the reception. Jean's great eye-candy, and she knows it.

We gab about different escape routes we'll take if things get unbearable, and arrive at Great Seafood House. Jean's convinced I'm meant to crash this reception with her. Death by boredom is the worst faux pas to commit. I can't argue with that.

"Hey, who got married?"

"Tiffany and Winston."

"Do I know them?" I immediately regret asking. The names set off my internal security system.

"Um, yeah. Don't you love this song?" Jean turns up the radio. Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl" blasts our eardrums. She pulls her hair over her shoulder, a makeshift veil. I know for

a fact she can't stand the song. Christie Brinkley is not one of her favorite people.

Then it *smacks me*: Tiffany Wong.

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!

Tiff was the last of Jean's single relatives. The rest are amateur matchmakers. Jean's the last to go, and can't face them alone. Yeah. That's what friends are for. Leading each other to slaughter.

"I don't believe you!" I bristle. If there's one thing I hate about wedding receptions, it's the nosy relatives. The pushy ones, who always have "someone perfect" in mind, kill me. I begin fingering the pearls against my earlobes. Amazing: how tiny grains of sand, causing pain, can form into twin globes of perfection. Symbols of faith: suffering creates perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character, hope. Weird, how it keeps me going.

"Ready?" Jean interrupts my frigid silence. She gives me one last once-over, managing to eek out a weak: "You look just absolutely faaaaaab!" Her gaze shifts from my nervous fiddling with the cardigan buttons to the mob of relatives waving madly as we pull into the parking space. My heart sinks. I recognize at least half-a-dozen Wong clansmen among the impending stampede. Jean sinks back, sighs and closes her eyes. We share this moment. She unlocks the car doors. They're whipped open from both sides. The onslaught begins.

"Jeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanie, dearie! Everyone's asking for you!!!"

"Heard you caught the bouquet. You're neeee-eeeeext!"

"Did you see the rock???? My *gaaaaaaaawd!!!* I knew love came in all shapes and sizes. Just never thought I'd live to see something so HUGE!"

Jean looks at me. Helpless. I look back. Accusing. We're both defiant and defeated. I've done enough improvisation exercises from my high school thespian days to scope out and cater to my audience. Nothing prepares me for this, though. We head toward the "Gates of Hell." I've sworn off school reunions, blind dates, owning a cat, eating Cherry Garcia on an empty stomach and listening to my co-worker rant and rave over the last dog she swapped spit with. Why

didn't I slap on wedding receptions to my list of things NOT to do?

I spot a high countertop over by the coat room and figure it'll buy me a couple bucks worth of peace hanging with the attendant. I stall, allowing the gushing crowd of wedding martyrs move forward without me. Smirking, I wonder aloud where I can find the little girl's room and whip around only to find myself *body-blocked*. Too smug, too soon. I catch my breathe and a whiff of something only two women I know share: crushed Jasmine and Lychee mixed with "something sassy." Jean's not around. My heart drops.

Auntie Kai-Kai. So much for that escape route.

Jean's mother is drop-dead and dressed in a sharp midnight indigo tailored suit. No doubt, it's another of her daughter's creations. Her commanding presence is deafening. Still in shock, my eyes try to make out what the shapes her lips are making sound like. Beaming, her forehead's smooth and her eyes aren't crinkling at the edges. She's been *Botoxed*. Not a good sign. Didn't Jean tell her mom how dangerous it was injecting poison into her forehead?

"Carmen, you were able to come!" Auntie Kai-Kai latches onto my arm. "Sweetie, Jeanie said she'd make sure you'd be here."

"Really?" That's news to me. Last I knew I was crashing the joint. Where are the restrooms? *Where's Jean?* It's been a while since my last panic attack.

"How's your mom?" She scrutinizes my every expression. Nothing escapes this woman. "And that handsome father of yours? She keeping him out of trouble?" I manage a weak smile. *Incredible*. She still asks about my dad after all these years. It's a miracle that Jean and I are so tight since our mothers choose to speak to each other only on holidays and special occasions. Mama and Kai-Kai were rivals for my dad's attention way back in the day. Kai-Kai was the wild Miss Chinatown. As of last year, Mama got promoted as Chinatown's head librarian.

"Your Auntie Mei-Mei knows the doctor at your table," Kai-Kai jabbars on. She cups her mouth with her free hand and whispers loudly. "She begged Uncle Liu to invite him. Just divorced. Wife made more, so he gets alimony. Not bad, if you know what I mean." Jean's mom titters. No wrinkles. Two slanted slits signify she's laughing. *Incredible*.

"Auntie Kai-Kai," I pat her shoulder gently with my free arm. There's still hope I heard wrong. "Jean just asked me to hang tonight with her for a bit. I really wasn't invited."

"Nonsense," she gushes. "No need to be shy. Jean said you'd be in town. It's fine."

"But, I don't know the bride or groom that well." Tiffany still smarts from the last wedding we were both invited to. It's been three and a half years. Her date asked me to dance, and forgot to take her home. It was priceless. Forgiveness isn't cheap.

"You're family," Kai-Kai dismisses my discomfort, continues with her mission statement. "Your parents would approve. Like Randall, he's a surgeon. Not plastic. Heart. His wife was that pretty film star Jeannie met on her last trip to Hong Kong. She left him for a British producer."

I'm going to kill Jean! I've had nightmares about this. Never dreamed Jean had a little Judas in her. I swear off these functions and plan elaborate escapes in my sleep. Jean's mother has a death grip on my arm. It's losing circulation, and not the only part of me that's numb.

I muster a lop-sided smile, frantically scanning the place. Jean's evaporated. Girl's got meticulous timing. A waiter walks by with an empty silver tray. No open bar in sight. Dry wedding. *DAMMIT!* I remember Tiffany's a fanatical church girl. No chance in hell of drowning my sorrows tonight.

"Dear, you'll be fine. You're seated with the Chows. They brought along their FIRST born." Kai-Kai never forgave me for ditching Jean's cousin, Randall, at the altar. That was almost two summers ago. What she doesn't know is he knocked up the neighborhood dog-walker twelve days before our "I dos." Jean found out from a mutual client and snitched right after the rehearsal dinner, the night of our swinger pact.

"Too bad it's a girl," Auntie Kai-Kai looks into my eyes. "They'll have to try for a boy next year. Best to not wait too long." Instinctively, I rest my free arm over my ovaries. They're not stale, I want to scream.

We're at the table now. Jean's mom dumps me for Uncle Liu. I rub my arm to get blood circulating. Everyone's chatting it up. Small talk drains me and Jean's still missing. She's my best friend. When it comes to confrontation, she's a

coward. This isn't an isolated incident. But this is low. Jean knows better than to drag me here. What possessed her to con me into this? I pretend to look interested and flip through the reception program. The second page lists the guests at this table. Randall and his dog-walking wife are printed on top. Could this get any worse? Everyone's coupled off except for a Dr. Gene Seto and myself. Great. He shares the name of my soon-to-be-ex-best-friend.

Someone's staring at me. It's the dog-walker. She's got big fat lips and they look bruised. Did Randall give her those? She's got that irritating glow of a new mom. Whatever. She's still dumpy from the recent pregnancy. Randall is not there. Yet. She lumbers over. I cringe.

"Hiya, I'm June!"

"I know." I don't owe anybody favors. No need to make her feel comfortable. I'm not. She's super-perky, unnerved. How annoying. I want to bolt.

"Randall's got the baby," she continues yapping. "He's putting Alicia to sleep." *Good God!* How *sick* is this guy? Carmen's my middle name. Alicia is my mother's name. I'm named after her. The shock hits me square in the stomach. I'm spiraling. A wave of nausea hits. God tried preparing me from day one. He must've been speaking in code through Old Mother Goose. I just wasn't smart enough to crack it. You know how it goes: Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall.

My vision blurs. Defeat on the horizon. Not a good thing. I still haven't mastered the art of applying mascara. Jean would be horrified. But she's not here. I reach in my purse for a quick touch-up. Instead I pull out a crumpled e-mail from Mama, a surprise message I stashed there after scanning it this morning. I still don't know how to soak it all in. It strikes a chord I'm not familiar with:

Honey.

You haven't called or written to me yet. I'm a little worried about this. How's everything at work? Your personal life? Have you gone out with anyone new? You need a strong, loving and caring man. Someone that you feel safe to be with. You need a person that is knowledgeable enough to satisfy your hunger for new findings. He doesn't have to be rich or handsome, but rich in understanding, compassion, honest and trustworthy. Beware of married men. Very few single

Love you.

Mama.

"There you are!" Jean's voice breaks through my doom and gloom. I shove the letter back into my purse and switch to fury. She feigns ignorance. "Hey, Ma told me she'd set you up here." Jean glances at June and diplomatically asks about the baby. I'm going to puke. I start to stand up. She jerks me back down and hisses: "Turn around. I swear you'll forgive me. He's five-ten, got great posture and in his mid-forties."

I turn and see red. Roly-poly Auntie Mei-Mei's clad in a deep cardinal chi-pao for her daughter's wedding. She's so soft, sweet. I picture her munching on bamboo stalks --- her cuddly, panda-like demeanor. The deceptive steely determination "with-a-smile" runs deep in the Wong family. Mei-Mei's chattering excitedly to a tall, slender man with salt-and-pepper hair. He's not in a suit like the other men. He's got a broken-in creamy linen shirt rolled up at the sleeves over dark khakis. His brown braided loafers peek from underneath. That's what I could make out from his back. I picture curling waves and toes.

"Auntie Mei-Mei!" Jean starts waving. "Over here!" She's getting way too excited over this. It's crazy and out of character. Mei-Mei looks over at us, her face crinkles in recognition. She ushers the stranger over to where we're sitting. The man turns around. My chest tightens.

"Ah, Carmen," Mei-Mei peers up from underneath her soft wrinkled lids. "You came. So good. You look good. Always look so good." Tiffany's mother suffers from early symptoms of Parkinson's. She's very careful about saying what she means. The man nods in agreement. Jean nudges me with her knee. I'm confused. I stand up and hug my aunt. Dr. Seto introduces himself. The dog-walker has since left to find Randall. She returns with him and baby in tow. Jean diverts their attention by cooing over Alicia. The doctor turns to me.

"Mei-Mei tells me you're a food scientist." His eyes are deep cocoa with light toffee flecks reflecting a deeper pool of gentleness. "Haven't met one of you before. What's it you do exactly?" Tongue-tied, I'm clueless. Jean turns around and our seasoned kindred connection kicks in. She interrupts, and begins to gush over what I do for a living. She tells him I took the fortunate detour from culinary school. I don't hear the rest. It's strange. This guy's at least a decade older. My nausea slips away. Butterflies take its place. So do goose bumps. I'm thirteen again. Someone taps my shoulder. The little hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end. I turn to face Randall. I age twenty years. He tries to rest his arm on my shoulder. I grow cold and step back. He looks agitated.

"Funny seeing you here."

"Ditto."

"Didn't know you and Tiff smoothed things over."

"I never needed to," I cringe. Randall nips and tucks for a living. Apparently he's added applying rock salt to absent emotional gashes. "It was all her."

"I see." He glances over at Jean and Dr. Seto. His face blanks, hardens. I know he wants to ask me if I'm there with Dr. Seto. Whatever. Maybe it would've been fun to mess with his mind a year ago, when he messed up my life between boob jobs. I'm over it. He loves a good fight, and I'm not in the mood for one. Randall's got a wrestler's build: his movements are furtive, and he's compact. He's always tried to push and crush me, if not emotionally, physically. The dog-walker comes to retrieve Randall. She walks him back to the opposite end of the table. Randall glowers.

Jean's still keeping Dr. Seto amused with my 4-1-1. His gaze makes me blush. I'm horrified. This guy's going to think I'm such a moron. A groomsman tells Jean the bride needs her to fix an outfit. Jean rolls her eyes.

"Please take care of my friend Carmen." She tosses her hair to one side and gives me a sly look. "She could use some loving." Then she's gone.

"Dr. Seto..." I wince. Enough torture for one day, please!

"Gene." He smiles. I melt. Gene pulls out my chair, inviting me to sit next to him. Randall barks loudly about how bad the service is. The food hasn't arrived. His dog-

walker fusses over him. He resists her petting. We don't notice.

The baby starts howling. Randall shoves back his seat and announces he's going out for a smoke. He stomps out of the restaurant. June looks desperate. She bounces over and, without a word, shoves a screeching Alicia towards me. We stare at one another. It's a dare. This promises to get ugly. The baby's screams rise another three decibels. The noisy restaurant has hushed to take in the scene. My cheeks burn. Helpless, I open my arms. Two strong arms intercede, swooping up Alicia and all is blurred. Gene nods at June. She bounds after Randall. Within seconds Alicia quiets to a hiccup against Gene's creamy linen chest. My head swims. I'm jealous; I want to be her.

"Gene, I'm sorry, but what just happened?" Gene's deep throaty chuckle answers all the questions I don't know to ask.

"It's okay," he winks. "I wanted to be a pediatrician."

"Why didn't you?" I'm amazed by the way he handles Alicia. She's cooing and smiling now.

"It wasn't in the cards for me," he gently kisses Alicia's forehead. "My ex-wife swore off children while I was in med school. I couldn't bring myself to care for other people's kids knowing it wasn't an option for me."

Gene's wistful. I want to reach out, protect and hug. I close my eyes for a second. I picture the three of us. Me. Gene. Our baby. I'm horrified. What the HELL? He senses my discomfort, smiles and reaches for me. He pats and holds my hand. I've never felt so safe. It scares me shitless.

The reception ends, too soon. The food's wonderful. Gene cradles a sleeping Alicia in one arm, fills my plate with the choicest morsels from each dish with the other. I don't taste a thing. He lets me know he savors everything. The Chows return in time for mango pudding and mocha-coconut cake. Alicia's whisked away without a "Thank You."

Jean pops by to check on me. Eyes the abandoned seats and the huge wet spot left on Gene's shirt. She winks, pinches me and murmurs, "Be careful what you wish for." She smiles. I finger forgiveness and friendship against my earlobes.

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