

SKIPPER'S REVENGE

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For my father, John Michael Teahan, who always believed.

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P R O L O G U E

My quest to become the perfect girl began when I was nine years old. My father, John Sheehan, PhD, had been granted a sabbatical to document the history and legends of New England seaboard towns. This opportunity and modest stipend transported our family of five to Martha's Vineyard for the summer. The breezy ocean climate, rows of boutique shops, and preppy passersby were a drastic change for my brother, sister, and me, since our typical dog days were spent swinging from tree vines near our creek-side home in West Virginia.

On our second day in the Bay State's picturesque cottage town, we stopped at Larsen's Market to pick up some groceries. I was curiously peering into the lobster tank when I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a girl pointing at me. She was about my age and dressed in a bright white terrycloth Izod ensemble. I was wearing my brother Wally's hand-me-downs: Evel Knievel pants stylishly coupled with a Mean Joe Greene Steelers tee. A college professor's salary did not provide the luxury of a new, trendy wardrobe each season. Make that *any* season. As the youngest of three, I wore the most hand-me-downs out of all of us.

An hour later, I saw the girl again when we stopped for ice cream. She muttered something to the woman standing behind her, who was busy perusing the list of flavors at the counter. Her mother covered the girl's finger, pushed her arm down to her side, and whispered, "Taylor, it's rude to stare. Leave the boy alone; he's obviously poor." I looked at my reflection in the glass case enclosing the tubs of ice cream. I could not deny that my hair was just a shade longer than my brother's (after all, we shared the same stylist—Mrs. Weitzman, our seventy-year-old neighbor). As for my clothes ... well, they *were* my brother's.

My mother, Mags, suddenly appeared in front of the woman and ordered two cones: one for my sister and one for my brother who she directed, "was to share with Paige."

"But I want a cone," I pleaded to deaf ears. Intent on maximizing my father's stipend, my mother then changed the order to two sherbet cones, because the 2-for-1 Sherbet Special sign had suddenly come to her attention.

Behind me, I heard Izod say to her mother, "I'm glad we're not poor."

While Wally and I were sharing our sherbet outside, Izod's mother appeared in front of me, holding a large dipped chocolate cone. She directed her comment to my mother, who was reviewing the receipt: "They gave me an extra by mistake, and I thought your little man here might want it." Mrs. Izod thrust the cone into my hand. My mother didn't even bother to correct the woman's erroneous assumption regarding my gender.

"Oh, that's very kind," my mother exclaimed. "Thank you."

Little Miss Izod joined her mother and, I assume, thought our poverty had never afforded me such a special treat before.

"It's ice cream," she informed me slowly.

They watched me, apparently waiting for a celebratory dance of joy upon receiving this charitable gift. My mother nodded to me. "What do you say, Paige?"

"Thank you," I muttered.

My courtesy appeared to satisfy them, although I believe they were expecting more of a response. The Izods then crossed Main Street. Before they were out of earshot, I yelled after them, "I have a pink canopy bed at home!"

This declaration wasn't even true. I slept on what had been one half of a set of bunk beds that my father had separated with a saw. The Izods both turned to look in the direction of my rambling then quickly returned to their stroll. I plopped down on the bench beside my mother, causing a crack in the hard, chocolate coating of the ice cream.

"She thought I was a boy," I said discouraged. "I don't want this." I promptly offered the ice cream to my brother, who happily traded his sherbet.

My father sat across from me. "Martha's Vineyard has seventy-five thousand residents during the summer, but only ten thousand in winter," he said, taking a bite of ice cream from my mother's cone.

Ignoring my father's statistic, my mother replied to my complaint, "Oh, don't be silly. She was wearing dark sunglasses."

It was possible that Mother Izod's Foster Grant sunglasses had interfered with her ability to distinguish a girl from a boy, but as I wiped the orange sherbet drip-

ping down Mean Joe Greene's forehead, I knew it wasn't likely. I didn't mind the comments about my apparent poverty, but having my gender questioned really set me off. True, I wasn't necessarily into frills and lace. I had only worn dresses and Goody barrettes for school pictures, and I preferred climbing trees to playing dress-up. I had spent many years being a tomboy. However, these preferences did not negate the fact that I was definitely and undeniably a girl—and happy to be one.

That day outside Larsen's, I vowed to overhaul my image and embrace my femininity. I would grow out my pageboy haircut, pierce my ears, and—most importantly—explore the world of the girliest girl ever created. I would learn what having XX chromosomes was all about from the ideal woman: Barbie.

Upon returning home to Fairville, West Virginia, I requested a Barbie doll. Mags simply replied, "No." When I pressed her, she responded, "If you want to play with a doll, play with a baby doll." She thought Barbies were too bodacious for little girls. She wasn't a hard core feminist; she merely thought it obscene for a young girl to play with a doll whose breasts made up fifty percent of her body mass. My older sister, Vicki, advised me, "Don't bother. She won't get you one. I've tried."

I explained to my mother that girls my age were too old for baby dolls. I needed a doll that I could dress up and style. This prompted my mother's suggestion of Mr. Potato Head.

"He even has a monocle," she pointed out, "All those disguises ... he can completely change his look. What fun! I don't know why you would want a Barbie."

I despised this common practice of my mother. When Mags wanted me to select something different, she would become overly enthusiastic about the item. Her objective was so transparent.

"Broccoli is so good, isn't it? I just love it. It's like eating little trees!"

My luck changed the first week of school, when I befriended the new girl, Marcy Roberts. She was wearing a yellow dress with a white butterfly collar, and knee socks with ruffles around the top. She had cornflower blue eyes and white-blond hair tied up in two pigtails, each punctuated with a pink bow. Mags had bought me a new corduroy jumper for school, and even though it featured spiffy ladybug buttons, it paled in comparison to Marcy's attire. I knew with certainty that this was the type of girl who owned a Barbie.

My prediction was confirmed during lunch, when she extracted her toasted PB&J sandwich from a pink, metal lunch box featuring the bejeweled head of my new inspiration. We quickly became friends. Truthfully, proximity was the foundation of our relationship. She had moved into a house just two blocks away

from me, on Harrison Street—and, of course, she knew no one else. Because she was an only child, her parents seemed happy to host an additional child at their home, and Mags was equally happy to have one less child at hers.

More importantly, Marcy had Barbies galore. Unbeknownst to my mother, I was not having tea parties at Marcy's, as I had implied. I had gone underground for my Barbie fixes.

Technically I should say that I was aboveground. Marcy's garage was detached from her house, and on top of it was a finished room. It was like having a luxury tree house, since the rules of the main house did not apply. Furniture was expendable, the noise restrictions were lifted, and cleaning up after a day's play was not required. Beanbag chairs in vibrant colors were in every corner, and in the middle of the room sat a giant blue velvet recliner for two. Most importantly, though: lining every inch of the walls was Barbie paraphernalia—Dream Houses, cars, clothes, furniture, shoes, lunch boxes, hair accessories. It was as if Mattel had exploded right in the middle of Marcy's playroom.

For the next three years, Marcy and I were inseparable. Almost every day of our summers, we would meet at the halfway point between our houses and return to the room above the garage to play. Marcy owned every Barbie one could imagine: Malibu Barbie, Nurse Barbie, Glamour Barbie, Roller Skating Barbie, Tennis Barbie, and the *crème de la crème*, Disco Barbie. In the seventies, there was no upwardly mobile Barbie—or, God forbid, a proportionately correct one. The only jobs Marcy's Barbies had were looking beautiful and trying to decide whether to wear the electric blue hot pants or the sequined evening gown to go driving.

Despite an excess of Barbie dolls, Marcy had a rule that no two could be played with at the same time. This meant that I, as her guest, had to be one of two supporting characters: Barbie's adoring companion Ken or her little sister, Skipper. Since the family's Scottish Terrier had chewed Ken's right leg to an indistinguishable mess, there was really only one choice. Over three summers, I played Skipper, except for a few days one July when Marcy suddenly became fixated on Cowgirl Barbie. During that time, I assumed the role of Montana, the horse.

Mattel introduced Skipper in the mid-sixties as Barbie's kid sister. She was cute, but in comparison with Barbie ... well, there was no comparison. It was obvious which girl Ken would select to take a spin in his dream car or saddle up for a horseback ride. Back when I played her, Skipper was supposed to be about fourteen years old, and her slightly concave chest and lack of curves indicated that she was a late bloomer. Her clothes left a lot to be desired; while Barbie's clothes

looked as if Bob Mackie was her personal designer, Skipper's wardrobe appeared as if she had won a shopping spree at Goodwill. Marcy did not put much of her allowance toward Skipper's wardrobe. In fact, Skipper had only two choices: day-wear that consisted of gaucho pants and a flowered T-shirt, and an evening ensemble that consisted of a yellow cotton nightgown with an airbrushed image of the moon wearing a nightcap.

By the second summer, I had stopped asking if I could play Barbie. I resigned myself to my continuing role as Skipper and truly embraced the identity. Barbie was the center of the Mattelian universe; the lesser characters orbited around her like second-rate moons. Her life revolved around her possessions, stunning good looks, and fashionable attire. Skipper had no empire and was forced to distinguish herself in other ways. And unlike Barbie, Skipper was often faced with challenges. In the years between 1980 and 1983 Barbie experienced only one bad day. Marcy used a curling iron on Fitness Barbie's synthetic hair, matting it together and burning a huge hole in her plastic head. It was a dark day, but Fitness Barbie was quickly replaced with one that boasted "more accessories, including two neon-colored leotards."

Skipper's life was one bad day after the next. Because she had no furnishings or incidentals, she became very resourceful and would retrofit, rehab, and ultimately, create a stockpile of accoutrements. Skipper drove a Tonka truck stolen from my brother Wally's collection. Her wardrobe was supplemented by my father's blue cotton wristband, which could be worn as a skirt, but also doubled as a tube dress when secured by masking tape. In addition, Skipper sported some ill-fitting hats from my discarded Strawberry Shortcake dolls.

One day I offered to make a pair of paperclip earrings for Parisian Barbie, similar to a pair that I had fashioned for Skipper. Marcy quickly refused my offer, stating, "She has her own earrings."

"But these are kind of fun and silly."

Marcy replied simply, "Barbie doesn't want to be silly."

Skipper and I, however, continued to live outside the box. When a raft for the pool was needed, a rubber coaster that I had found beside the velvet recliner was used. Shortly thereafter, I discovered a similar plastic circle in the top drawer of my mother's dresser, along with some KY jelly and an instruction booklet titled *How to Use Your Diaphragm*. We had learned about the diaphragm earlier in my fifth-grade year during a Science Corner report on what caused hiccups. I could not understand why Mags needed instructions on how to use her diaphragm. The report claimed it was an involuntary muscle that could not be controlled. I

assumed my mother had a secret hiccup condition and wondered why the rubber coaster was hidden beneath all her silky nightclothes.

Two weeks before the start of fifth grade, Marcy and I took Barbie and Skipper to her backyard, where Mr. Roberts filled up a small, inflatable swimming pool. Marcy dressed Barbie in a striking pink and green dotted bikini. Skipper wore a bathing suit I had crafted from some medical gauze. Barbie was sunning herself on her Barbie raft, and Skipper was trying her best to soak up the rays while staying afloat on the *SS Diaphragm*, until Mr. Roberts saw it and took it away. Before we were called in for dinner, without any solicitation, Marcy said, "Maybe for a change, I'll be Skipper, and you can be Barbie tomorrow." I was stunned, shocked, thrilled, and anxious.

I relished staying over for dinner at Marcy's, since they often served tater tots and Swanson TV dinners. As I peeled off the tinfoil from my Salisbury steak, Mrs. Roberts inquired about Barbie's activities that day. I eagerly recounted our day poolside.

"But Skipper didn't have a raft," I volunteered, "so she had to use the rubber coaster. But it doesn't float too well."

Mr. Roberts looked up at me from his dinner, then at his wife. She didn't seem to notice his concern.

"Oh, well, I hope Skipper didn't get too wet," Mrs. Roberts replied. "Sounds like we're going to have to buy another raft for Skipper." Mrs. Roberts poked at her apple-crumble dessert and smiled at me.

"It's OK. The rubber coaster works fine for Skipper," Marcy said. "But Daddy took it away, 'cause he said it was dirty."

Concerned that her mother would think we took something that we weren't supposed to, Marcy added, "Paige found it on the floor by the blue recliner, and it was kind of slimy."

Mrs. Roberts looked puzzled, until I cleared things up by saying, "I have a clean one at home. My mom's got one in her underwear drawer for her diaphragm muscle."

Mrs. Roberts put her fork down and dropped her head in her hands. A look of complete disgust crossed her face. She pushed herself away from the table, cried, "Cheating bastard!" and stormed out of the kitchen.

She reappeared moments later, looking crazed and waving yet another rubber coaster in our faces.

"Marcy, is this what you found in the playroom?" she questioned. Marcy looked at me. We didn't know what was happening, but we knew it wasn't good.

“Is this what you found?” Mrs. Roberts demanded. “Apparently, Daddy uses your playroom too,” she cried. Figuring the cat had Marcy’s tongue, I answered, “No, no, that’s not it. The one we found was pink.”

A sobbing Mrs. Roberts ushered me out of the house and onto my banana-seat bike. I was never invited back to Marcy’s to play. I never got my chance to be Barbie. My fate as a Skipper was forever sealed.

C H A P T E R 1

Mattel's Barbie has never been a bridesmaid. This fact swirled in my head as I taped posters advertising the Washington D.C. Bridesmaid Ball between the elevators on each floor of the office. The poster featured the silhouette of a woman holding a rather ill-shaped dress in front of her on its hanger. The tagline read, "And you never thought you'd wear it again." The Bridesmaid Ball urged women to dig to the depths of their closets to extract their one or many once-worn bridesmaid dresses. For the price of the \$150 ticket, you could, as the tagline predicted, defy the notion that there would never be another occasion to wear the turquoise taffeta gown from cousin Edie's 1993 wedding.

According to statistics, 2.5 Barbie dolls are purchased every second worldwide, resulting in two billion dollars in sales annually. For over thirty years, little girls and big girls alike have viewed her as the ideal woman. Perhaps the reason much of the world sees her as ideal is the fact that she has never been a bridesmaid—never forced to wear an overpriced puffy-sleeved satin creation, never made to eat phallus-shaped confections at the bachelorette party, and never paired with a groomsman who could have been mistaken as the ring bearer. After all, never having to do these things would be ... ideal.

However, I knew the world's obsession with Barbie went beyond her never-a-bridesmaid status. I had studied her and the women she represented since my childhood, realizing I was not one of them. Over the years, I had developed a theory that most women could be slotted into one of two categories: Barbie or Skipper. There were distinct differences between the two. "Barbies" come readily stocked with beauty and accessories galore. They, like their namesake, appear to

drift through life unaware and unconcerned with anything outside of their Matelien universe.

“Skippers” are the younger sisters, impatient to grow up from their awkward adolescence and fill the high-heeled shoes of their glamorous sibling. Their identities are not well-defined, and as such, they are eternally stuck in the process of becoming.

It is kind of like being born into significant wealth. Technically, you never have to learn to do anything or to be anyone. Being rich becomes your primary and sometimes sole identity. This one trait can be maximized and manipulated. People will react time and time again to it, reinforcing the adage, “money talks.”

Being a Barbie is similar. You don't necessarily need to be anything more. There are exceptions to this theory, but my observations had shown this to be more the rule than the exception. Skippers are neither rich nor beautiful, and thus were destined to form their own identities—and of course serve as bridesmaids in a fair share of weddings. I, for example, had eight bridesmaid credits, including two as maid of honor. It was crystal clear to which category I belonged.

All proceeds of the Bridesmaid Ball went to whatever charity the annual committee had chosen to sponsor that year. The committee, made up of socialites and local business leaders had been accused in the *Washington Post* of being “trendy” with their annual sponsorship. The newspaper cited several cases to illustrate that point, including the year a portion of the proceeds were donated to cover the cost of a hip replacement for ZoZo, the German Shepherd. ZoZo had been the primary search-and-rescue dog used at the Pentagon after the 9/11 attack. Afterward he became a bit of a celebrity. When news hit that ZoZo was scheduled to be euthanized, because his owner could not afford the \$17,000 operation, the Bridesmaid Ball committee came to his rescue. The *Post* wrote a story headlined “Search and Rescue Dog Saved by Satin.” A firestorm of criticism followed. In response to the bad publicity, this year's committee selected a tried-and-true cause: the environment, specifically the donation of two hundred trees for Arbor Day. Naturally, my firm, Houston, Haffner, and O'Donnell—or, as many called it, H2O—was asked to be one of the corporate sponsors.

With over five hundred attorneys and two hundred paralegals, H2O was the largest environmental-law firm in the country, if not the world. Many historic environmental bills had been developed and approved through the assistance of H2O. Its biggest success to date was the emissions bill mandating the testing of car emissions in forty-seven states.

Although H2O was an environmental law firm, its employees were a far cry from the earthy, crunchy types one expected to work there. Most preferred

Brooks Brothers to Birkenstocks, and I personally was appalled that they did not recycle.

Had Mattel allowed Skipper to be more than Barbie's little sister and given her a career, she would have been well-suited for my job at H2O. As their employee relations specialist, I worked behind the scenes—advising and counseling employees, resolving conflicts, and reinforcing corporate policies such as diversity and Equal Opportunity. It wasn't always easy, but I enjoyed my work. While the Barbies of this world were all about material comfort, the Skippers liked to cushion people's emotions. Quite frankly, we enjoyed making things better. And in making them better, we found great satisfaction and realized our roles in the angst-ridden world.

Mr. Houston, the founding partner of the firm, had asked that I be the community service liaison for the firm, managing anything and everything related to charity work. Hence I was volunteered to coordinate H2O activities for the Bridesmaid Ball. I didn't mind the task since the costly ticket price had dissuaded me from attending the ball in the years past. In appreciation of all my service coordination time, Mr. Houston instructed me to expense the cost of my ticket.

I was taping up the last two copies of the posters when Owen Holden stepped off the twelfth-floor elevator. I ignored him and focused my attention on smoothing the edge of a piece of tape that had rumbled.

"Bridesmaid Ball," he said, reading from the sheet as he peered over my shoulder.

"Wow. You *can* read," I replied sarcastically.

He scoffed, "Are the partners going?"

"I think they have to. We're the corporate sponsor this year," I responded without turning around.

"Need some help with that tape?" he inquired in a condescending tone.

I turned on my heels. "No, thanks. I got it."

He returned to reading the poster. "Saturday, the nineteenth. RSVP to Paige Sheehan."

"Again with the reading. Impressive."

"Consider this my RSVP," he replied.

"Will you be bringing a guest?" I asked.

"Will you?" he responded.

"Not that it's your business, but yes, I'm bringing my boyfriend."

"Great. I look forward to meeting him." He walked toward the glass doors that led to the twelfth-floor offices. I called after him. "I need to know if you're bringing a guest or not, because I'm in charge of tables."

He swung the glass door open gallantly and hung from the handle, reminiscent of Gene Kelly swinging from the lamppost in *Singing in the Rain*. "Yes, I'll bring a guest."

Owen was the firm's poster boy. Women loved him because he was charming and beautiful, and men loved him because he was charming and beautiful. He had been the star quarterback at UCLA and had played professionally for his native team, the Cowboys, for three winning seasons; until he was sacked so hard his helmet came flying off. He sustained a concussion and fractured his collarbone, nose, and tailbone. This blow occurred just as he threw an eighty-seven-yard touchdown pass that won the NFC Championship. For ten painstaking minutes, the world watched as doctors and paramedics rushed to the field. Owen Holden lay there, motionless. The Dallas fans refrained from celebration and sat in silence. The medics carefully moved his limp body to a stretcher, and the wide receiver that scored the touchdown placed the football on the side of the cart as paramedics strapped him down. The stadium was deathly silent. Then, suddenly, Owen Holden's right arm raised the ball into the air. He kept it raised as they wheeled him off the field. The stadium roared. The image was plastered on every newspaper, sports magazine, and news program in the country.

Outside his hospital room, women held signs that read, O- Yes and Give Me the Big O. At the press conference after his release from the hospital, Golden Holden announced that he would not return to football because of his injuries, and that he planned to enter the field of law, following in his father's footsteps. For the next two years, his image was everywhere. He had done both television and print ads for a variety of products and secured a deal with Ziploc. Every time I turned on the television, Owen Holden was there saying, "I'm not a big fan of the sack, but that all changed when I found Ziploc's snack sack."

He had graduated from Stanford Law School and worked at the H2O office in San Francisco before transferring to D.C. It had been five years since his celebrity had peaked, but people at the firm still treated him as if he were some type of superhero. I knew better. My contact with Owen overall had been limited to three experiences. First, I had conducted his employee orientation, during which he rudely snickered throughout. Second, he had been selected by one of the partners to submit questions for a workplace satisfaction survey I was developing, and one of them was, "Do you like green eggs and ham?" I had skimmed the questions before submitting them to Mr. Houston, but had failed to strike Owen's contribution. After his review, Mr. Houston emailed me to say that he didn't appreciate my hubris.

My only other experience with Owen was in the building parking lot. While I was getting into my car, I dropped my keys. My door was positioned over a drainage grate, and the keys slipped down into the abyss. I was on my hands and knees peering into the black hole when Owen burst through the glass doors into the parking lot. I waved at him and yelled, "Owen? Owen? Sorry to bother you, but I need a little help." He didn't even look at me and made a beeline for his car, saying, "I don't have the time right now. You'll have to find someone else."

In addition, having access to his personnel file provided me with information that indicated the golden boy's shine was more than a bit tarnished.

C H A P T E R 2



My boyfriend, Ken, and I had been dating for a little over two years. I met him while going to night school at Georgetown to obtain my master's degree in organizational development. As soon as he spoke his first name, my heart sank since I believed the Skipper Syndrome that plagued me would never allow for any relationship between us. At the time, I was in a dead-end job at the American Medical School Alliance (AMSA), a nonprofit organization that monitored medical-school applications. My primary job was to investigate fraudulent applications, which was a somewhat heart wrenching task. There were students who had written their own referral letters, altered their transcripts, and even cheated on their MCAT, all in the hope of becoming a doctor.

My favorite case was that of a twenty-one-year-old from Idaho who attempted to fake the seal on a counterfeit transcript. Unless embossed with the school's seal, AMSA did not deem transcripts official. A counselor at Camp Walahatha, this aspiring doctor tried to pass off the camp's seal as that of Case Western's. The beaver head within the design alerted the AMSA processor to the scheme, and after further investigation, the applicant was forced to withdraw from all the medical schools to which he had applied.

Other wannabe doctors tried to strengthen their applications by enrolling in offshore medical programs, such as the ever-popular Doc Zobie's Medical Academy in the Bahamas. Their transcripts featured a picture of who I assumed was Doc Zobie wearing a straw surgical hat and holding a syringe in the air. He was missing several teeth and had what looked like a walleye. Needless to say, this additional documentation did not improve anyone's chances.

During my time at AMSA, I was also responsible for maintaining the DAF—the Disillusioned Applicant Folder. About once a month, we would receive an application from a mentally ill individual. Most of the applications were from the same woman, who claimed she should be admitted to medical school, as she had discovered a cure for cancer. She outlined her cure and provided illustrations. The treatment involved covering the patient’s head with dental floss that had been soaked in Pepsi-Cola. The patient was then to sit under a salon-style hair dryer, preferably at Vidal Sassoon. The DAF consisted of over a thousand applications and was maintained for security reasons. On days when I felt particularly Skipper-like, I would rifle through the file to remind myself that at least I was better off than someone who believed that radioactive laser beams were emitted from Vidal Sassoon styling tools.

I had noticed Ken my first semester at Georgetown and thought he was an undergrad student, because of his youthful appearance. He was, as my father would say, “easy on the eyes,” sporting a head of brown, curly hair, dimples, and small, round, wire glasses that hid the longest lashes I had ever seen on a man. When he waltzed into class, the female population in the room swooned and sized up one another knowingly. He did not look like a professor. My father looked like a professor—somewhat Einsteinesque, with crazy eyebrows, uncut nails, pen stains on his ten-year-old corduroy pants, and blazers with suede elbow pads. Professor Kenneth Marxen looked like a Chippendale’s dancer. According to the contact information provided on the syllabus, he worked for Norton, Totton, and Dinnhaupt in downtown D.C. I knew the name of the law firm well. It was the largest criminal-defense firm in town and represented politicians, celebrities, and big white-collar criminals. Most recently the firm had represented a senator who had been accused of soliciting a male prostitute dressed as a dominatrix.

On the second night of class, Professor Marxen walked into the classroom with a boom box and pressed Play. The voice of Barry White rang out.

*Been makin' love for hours
And, baby, with you goin' strong
Girl, this night is ours
And, ooh, I swear I feel it comin' on, yeah
Oh, I know when we get through
Girl, I won't be able to move
I don't know just what you got
I just don't want you to stop
Givin' me, all of me*

All the women in the class leaned forward, including me, and waited. I think most of us were expecting him to throw his glasses into the air, ditch the professor act he had going, and launch into a gyrating strip routine. Much to our disappointment, this did not occur. Instead he pressed Stop and asked the class, "Does this offend you?" He walked around the podium and sat casually at the edge of the desk with his hands clasped loosely together. "Do the lyrics bother you? If a colleague of the opposite sex played this type of music in his office, would it bother you?"

A girl in the front row answered, "Does he look like you?" Professor Marxen laughed. A few others clapped. He continued.

"In 1988, Nancy Whitman filed a lawsuit against her employer, Fakelmann Glass. She had repeatedly informed her manager that her co-worker's music made her feel uncomfortable. The music was that of Mr. Barry White, the sexy walrus of love." He motioned to the boom box. "The employee accused cited his employee handbook, which stated that listening to personal tapes was acceptable. Was the plaintiff being sexually harassed?" He searched the room, making eye contact, and his eyes landed upon me. "What are your thoughts, Ms.... uh ..." He looked at his roster.

"Sheehan," I said.

He repeated the name. "Sheehan, sorry. It'll take me awhile to get all the names." I swatted my hand in the air to let him know it wasn't a problem.

"It depends on how you define sexual harassment."

"Well, thank you for the segue," he said, then read from a book. "The law defines it as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment."

It was precisely when he looked up from the book with his dimples working overtime and said, "Whew, say all that three times fast," that my crush officially began.

On one occasion, during a class discussion on the definition of a hostile environment, he had held my gaze for what I thought was a moment too long. Aside from this exchange, he was extremely professional and never showed the slightest interest toward anyone—until the last night of class. I was purchasing one of my favorite vending-machine dinners for the trip home, a Payday bar. Unfortunately, it got stuck in the machine. I thought tapping delicately on the Plexiglas would free it from its imprisonment between some Fritos and M&Ms. After a

few taps, I resorted to banging frantically on the glass, and then to using my shoulder as a battering ram. In the midst of flinging my body into the machine, as would a hockey player going in for an aggressive check, I saw Professor Marxen out of the corner of my eye.

“I’ve never had a Payday, but perhaps I should. They must be delicious. Personally, I wouldn’t go to such lengths unless it was for Reese’s Cups.”

I stopped and rubbed my shoulder. The professor began jingling some change in his hand, separating the coins between his fingers as if he were mining for gold. He sifted out two quarters and a dime, placed them in his other hand, and returned the rest of the change to his pants pocket.

“I didn’t eat lunch today, so I’m a little crazy,” I lied. The truth was that I was a woman, and there was a candy bar with my name on it. He moved past me.

“You’re going about this all wrong. Money over muscle.” He took the change in his hand, slipped it into the machine, and pressed B9. Tumbling down came another Payday bar, knocking mine to the metal receiving bin.

“Double your pleasure,” he commented, touching my hand slightly as he delivered the two bars.

“Here, let me at least give you your money back,” I said, digging into my purse.

“No need,” he said, smiling. “Happy to help a damsel in distress.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “I guess I’ll see you around next semester.”

“I hope so.” He grinned.

Ten days later, my final paper came in the mail. Professor Marxen had asked the entire class to self-address manila envelopes, so he could mail out our graded papers. A single note from a yellow legal pad was attached with a paperclip.

Paige,

Delightful read. You have shown a true interest and understanding of the subject. I may know of a job opportunity for you. Please call my office if you’re interested.

The word “please” was underlined three times. I consulted my sister, Vicki, who advised me *not* to call. I had learned over time *not* to follow Vicki’s advice. The first such lesson had occurred on my tenth birthday—when, at the wise age of fifteen, she told me that my new banana-seat bike could indeed fit through the

hula hoop Wally was holding above the bike ramp he had built. I made the jump, and my bike stopped at the hula-hoop ... but I kept going and received thirty-two stitches: ten on my head and twelve on my knee. My respect for Vicki's opinion was forever changed. Thus, if Vicki advised not to call, that would indicate that I should call, which I did the next evening while at her apartment, which was located only a block from my condo. Vicki and I discussed living together when I first moved to the city. However, when she informed me that no televisions, cell phones, or microwave ovens would be permitted in *her* home, living by myself sounded like a good option.

Sitting on Vicki's couch the next day, I dialed the number. I had expected Ken's office to be closed. I wanted to leave a message on voice mail, but his secretary answered.

"Norton, Totton, and Dinnhaupt. Kenneth Marxen's office."

"Hi, may I speak with Kenneth, please?"

"He's in a deposition right now. Is this Katherine?" she asked sweetly.

"Uh, no," I replied. "I'll just call back later."

"Would you like me to transfer you to his voice mail?" she chirped.

"Yes, please." I mouthed the words "voice mail" to Vicki. She gave the thumbs-up. Now I could hit the ball directly into his court, and there would not be any question whose move it was next.

"Ma'am," his secretary said, "you'll hear a click and then the beep. It takes a second."

I whispered to Vicki, "His secretary asked me if this was Katherine. It's probably his wife ... or even worse, his mistress ... the bastard. He's probably got a whore in every court." I snickered at my own play on words and returned my ear to the phone. I heard an automated message: "If you'd like to review your message, press 1. If you'd like to send your message, press 3. If you would like to hear your options again, press star."

"Shit!" I exclaimed. "It just recorded that message."

"What message?" Vicki asked.

"My conversation with you. Hold on. Dammit." I flipped the phone around and pressed 1. I listened again for the prompts, but there was silence. I pressed it again.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm trying to listen to this message, but I don't hear anything. It says to press 1 to rerecord. I keep pressing 1, but I'm not getting anything."

"Oh, yeah. My 1 doesn't work," Vicki announced casually.

"*What?*" I shot back.

“The number 1, it doesn’t work. I’ve been meaning to get another phone, but then the guinea pig got ear mites and the vet bill was \$160. Plus, it’s a money saver, because I can’t call anyone long distance, and I also can’t call Pizza Hut, because their number is 534-1111.”

“What should I do?”

“Just hang up,” Vicki said. “If you have to press a button to send it, it probably won’t register. Just hang up.” Ignoring my tried-and-true rule of not following Vicki’s advice, I pressed End.

Thirty minutes later the phone rang while I gently held her guinea pig, Mr. Fatboy, so Vicki could administer his ear ointment. Vicki answered.

“Yes, this is Ms. Sheehan. Oh, wait, hold on. I believe you want my sister.” She grimaced and made the type of sleesh sound that one makes when hydrogen peroxide makes contact with an open wound.

“I think it’s him.”

“*What?*”

“It’s him. It’s him,” she whispered, pushing the phone into my hands.

I took the phone, exhaled, and brought it to my ear. “Hello?”

“This is Ken Marxen,” he began. “I apologize; I got this number from my secretary’s caller ID. I recognized your voice and just wanted to let you know that I’m not married, nor do I have a mistress. I, by definition, am not a bastard, as my mother and father were in fact married when I was born ... and most important, I do not have a whore in every court.”

“I am so sorry,” I replied. I searched for something to say, but there was nothing. Ken came to my rescue again.

“I did find your message entertaining,” he laughed. “I was hoping you would call.”

“You were?” I sat down on Vicki’s couch, where Mr. Fatboy sat eating a mound of romaine lettuce, his reward for being a good patient.

“Yes, I was. How about dinner sometime?”

“Dinner?” I asked, as if it were a novel concept.

“You do eat dinner, don’t you? Or would it be better if I offered to take you out for a Payday bar?”

“No, I eat dinner.” Mr. Fatboy squealed beside me, vocalizing the emotion I felt inside.

“Great,” he said. “How’s Saturday?”

“Is this about the job?” I asked.

“What if it’s not about the job?”

“W-Well, uh ...” I stammered. “That’s fine?” My answer sounded as if it were a question.

Ken and I went to dinner that Saturday, and then the weekend after, and so on and so on. It wasn’t about the job, although through Ken’s connections, I was offered my position at H2O.

For the first year of our relationship, I dated in disbelief and constant angst. He embodied what the Ken doll represented—handsome and magnetic and certainly deserving of a Barbie ... someone like Marcy Roberts. Her parents had gotten divorced the summer before we started high school, the same summer I discovered the truth about the rubber coaster. I had put all the pieces together, as in a game of Clue. Mr. Roberts, in the playroom, with the diaphragm. When I fully understood what had occurred that fateful day at Marcy’s home, I wondered if she somehow blamed me for her parents’ divorce.

The years leading up to high school had been good to Marcy. She had grown up to be a living Barbie, standing over five feet seven with long, blonde hair that cascaded beautifully down her back. She had lips that glistened and could not be imitated, no matter how much Bonnie Bell Watermelon lip gloss I applied. There seemed to be many girls like Marcy in high school. In hindsight, I attribute this reality to the fact that my town in West Virginia boasted seven cosmetology schools. Beauty was a priority obtained through extreme discipline, a blessed gene pool, and an attitude. Three requirements ... of which I had none.

I had blossomed after college and in the years since, but I was no great beauty. I recognized that I had assets and appreciated them. My hair was a shade of auburn that no box of hair color could reproduce. Women stopped me often to inquire about what product I used, but it was God-given. My breasts were small, but proportionate to my small, slender body. I had close-set eyes, but straight teeth and a full mouth, which my father said smiled even when I slept. A family of freckles dotted the bridge of my nose—as well as a lone freckle, which positioned itself underneath my left eye. I didn’t necessarily resemble the Skipper of my youth but felt a great kinship with her, and had since my childhood. I had been referred to as cute, but was no match for a Barbie.

Following the anniversary of our first date, I overcame the feeling that I was unworthy of Ken. He needed a Skipper—low maintenance, accommodating, and unselfish. Dating me was simple and uncomplicated ... or so I thought.

C H A P T E R 3

“How’s the crouton holding up?” my father questioned me on the phone that weekend, as I attempted to make sense of the H2O table arrangements.

“The what?”

“Is it comfortable? Dr. Samuels from economics has one in his office and uses it as both a couch and a bed when his wife throws him out.”

“You mean the futon, Dad. It’s fine.”

“Futon. Yes. Leave it to the Japanese. You know, they also created Worcestershire sauce.”

“Can I talk to Mom?” I asked. “I need to ask her an etiquette question.” I loved my father dearly, but he was an odd man. Many described him as eccentric, but I believed that was because calling him eccentric was far more polite than calling him odd. I liked to describe him as your typical absentminded professor, but that was also polite. Vicki would later describe him as “not of this world,” which is the most accurate description. He was a true scholar and did not care much for anything except filling his head with facts and figures and words. They would spout from his mouth at any time for no particular reason.

I first noticed this habit when I was about five. “Jefferson’s house in Monticello took seven years to build. The brick used was actually made of mud, not clay,” he announced one day as Wally and I watched cartoons. What was so interesting about this tendency was that he wouldn’t be talking to you, necessarily. He often was talking to no one. Thoughts would simply bubble in his head, and the froth boiled over. If you did have a conversation with him, it would present itself in bits and pieces and could transcend time. I once talked to him on a Tuesday afternoon about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. That conversa-

tion had ended with his account of the many world records the bridge had broken when it was built in 1883. On the following afternoon, I came home from school to find him sitting at the kitchen table, grading papers.

"There was a huge opening ceremony," he said.

"What?"

"For the unveiling ... it was an invitation-only ceremony."

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

"The bridge! The bridge!" he answered, as if my question bordered on the ridiculous. It was as if no time had elapsed; he just picked up the conversation from where it had last ended. Over time, I grew to love, enjoy and expect this idiosyncrasy.

"Hold on, I'll get your mother." My father screamed my mother's name. "Mags! Paige is on the phone."

Several minutes went by. I could hear the television in the background. Dan Rather was talking about the FDA's proposal to regulate herbal supplements. It was a bit like listening to the courtesy music you get when you are put on hold. The only difference was that I was not on hold.

"Dad!" I screamed loudly into the receiver, "Daaaad? Anyone there?"

The volume on the television decreased. "I'm watching the news. I'll help you in a minute," he mumbled.

"Dad? It's Paige," I bellowed. "I'm still on the phone!"

He picked up the receiver. "Hello?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, hello?" I replied.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Hi, yeah, Dad. It's still Paige. Mags never picked up."

"Oh, sorry about that, Paigebug. I'll get her."

I was learning all about the liver damage caused by herbal remedies when Mags finally picked up breathlessly. "Hi, honey. Sorry. I didn't hear your father. I was downstairs folding laundry." Vicki had begun calling our mother by her first name, Margaret, when she was ten. At the time, my parents had thought it was a phase. Wally and I followed suit. The phase had now lasted twenty-five years and I couldn't recall when her children had referred to her as anything but versions of Margaret, including Maggie, Meg, and my personal favorite, Mags.

"I have an etiquette question for Mags Sheehan. I'm in charge of doing the place cards for this company function next weekend. Is it better to write Mrs. Paul Houston ... or Mrs. Sally Houston ... or just Mrs. Houston?"

"Hmmm. That's a tough one, but I think Miss Manners would say that you should use her husband's name ... Mrs. Paul Houston."

“Really?” I asked skeptically. “I don’t think it’s fashionable anymore to go by your husband’s name.”

“Do you want my advice or not?” she replied teasingly.

My mother prided herself on etiquette, formalities, and her fashion sense. But if forced to choose between fashion and practicality, she always chose the latter. I experienced this partiality my senior year in high school. Marcy had unexpectedly invited me back into her house because she needed help deciding which dress she should wear to the homecoming coronation. She, of course, had been voted queen.

Two dresses were splayed on her bed, along with several bags overflowing with new clothes. After pointing to my pick—a black velvet Jessica McClintock—I focused my attention on a pair of jeans that sat atop a department-store shopping bag. When she saw me looking at them, Marcy said, “Yeah, aren’t they rad? My mom got them from a store in Pittsburgh. They’re Jordache.”

“Pretty awesome,” I replied. “Are they expensive?”

Marcy shrugged. Since her parents’ divorce, Marcy never wanted for anything; her parents gave and gave.

“They have zippers at the bottom,” she said smugly, as if she had sewn them there herself.

I was in shock. Zippers at the bottom! At the time, I believed this to be a stroke of fashion genius.

That night I begged and pleaded with Mags to buy me a pair of the zippered Jordache jeans. I knew she had an upcoming business trip to Greensburg, a town located on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. Mags had gotten a job writing advertising copy for a regional carpet company. It was an ideal assignment, because she had long perfected her marketing skills on her children. She had sold us on baths, glasses of milk, flossing, church, and, for many years, Mrs. Weitzman’s haircuts. I had no doubt that Mags would be able to make shag carpet sound like a must-have.

I offered to spend the entire weekend cleaning the garage in exchange for a pair of the jeans. To my surprise, she agreed. That Saturday, I cleaned out eight years’ worth of crap from the garage. I worked from seven in the morning to seven that night. The following Thursday evening, when my mother came home from her business trip, she carried a bag—but from Hartley’s Discount Outlet. At seventeen, I was old enough to know that a discount outlet would not carry designer Jordache zippered jeans. Maybe a discount store, and maybe an outlet store, but not a discount outlet. My mother prefaced the unveiling by saying, “I

know they're not *exactly* Jordache jeans, but those jeans cost \$90, which is insane! I found these at Hartley's, and if you ask me, they are practically identical."

I carefully opened the bag to reveal a pair of Joe-Dash jeans. I went to inspect the zippered, tapered leg but found snaps instead, like those found on a country-western shirt. I looked up at my mother to complain, but she was gleaming.

"Not bad, huh! Sometimes Mom pulls through." She nudged me in the side. I forced a smile and hugged her.

"They're great, Mom. Can't wait to wear them."

Recalling Mags' questionable sense for what was fashionable, I carefully penned *Mrs. Sally Houston, Table 1* onto the silver-trimmed place card.

"Have you heard from Wally?" I asked my mother, moving the freshly inked place card to the completed pile. My brother had entered the Peace Corps a year earlier and had recently committed to another two-year stint teaching in Tanzania.

"We got a letter last week. It sounds just dreadful. He wrote that one of the boys in his class had bugs crawling out of his pants ... some type of worm. Can you imagine?"

Before I could reply, my father picked up one of the phone extensions. "Origami. The Japanese also created origami ... probably why they can get the crouton to fold up so many different ways."

"Futon!" my mother and I corrected him in unison.