

## CHAPTER TWO

### RESOLUTION DISSOLUTION

Georgie pushed through the richly carved oak door of the restaurant. The flamboyant "G," etched in twinkling ruby stained-glass on the front panel, seemed to personally usher her inside. Though she knew the "G" signified "Guildenstern's," she never forgot the first time her five-year-old eyes saw the capital letter, thrilled in the belief that the initial had been put there just for her benefit. And though she later learned that the world had no intention of revolving solely around her, her five-year-old self still secretly claimed the letter for her own.

She stopped by the empty hostess stand, looking around for Teresa. Though both her cousin and the hostess were elsewhere, from the smell of the restaurant's famous cheese-topped onion soup fondue, the cooks were hard at work. She sniffed the air like an anxious bloodhound.

The five o'clock hour was too early for the crowds to start flocking to this well-established steak house turned yuppie watering hole, located within spitting distance of the movie studios in the San Fernando Valley. In fact, the only signs of life were a few oldster couples, scattered two by two in the wood-paneled dining room on the left, gumming their early-bird meals in silent rhythm. *Now there's a goal, Georgie—find a guy so someday you, too, can slurp some soup with a septuagenarian.*

Peeling off her heavy black wool coat that she would wear no more than three, maybe four times during a Southern California winter, she was surprised to see an

unusually light strand of her own hair in her peripheral vision. *Oh that's right—I keep forgetting—I just changed my 'do.*

"George!"

She heard a familiar bellow and looked off to the right, past the entrance foyer, to the informal, club-like dining room that shared space with the expansive main bar. Her cousin sat at a cozy two-top in the back near the sand-colored, brick fireplace, hands waving as if she were signaling planes down onto the tarmac.

Georgie moved toward her cousin, but a male southern accent caught her ear.

"How dee do, chile; love that hairstyle."

Good old Rhymin' Simon, the Actor by Day, Bartender by Night, saluted her from behind the bar. Too tan for winter, he was the quasi-celebrity of Guildenstern's, known for his terrible, sing-song rhymes. But God bless him and his dyed yellow mane, ultra-white teeth and oh golly, a vodka martini that could make a grown girl weep.

She nodded her head in greeting, knowing her stylishly-cut, long, thick mane bounced along in tandem. Which worked in perfect accompaniment to the movement of her well-shaped hips, rhythmically swaying to some secret, internal metronome. An ex-lover once told her that the motion was so pronounced, he could almost hear it.

Teresa stood, arms open. "George, my gorgeous George!"

Georgie exchanged bear hugs with her cousin. "Tee! Happy 'Broken Resolutions,' cousin."

Teresa held her at arms' length. "You look great! You dressed up in a red satin

blouse for me? And your hair," she said, maternally stroking a renegade curl, "I love it a little lighter."

"You don't look so bad yourself."

"Stop. It's horrible. I'm gaining weight as we speak."

Georgie hugged her again, inhaling the floral, sophisticated scent of Teresa's Chanel No. 5. It was no longer Chanel No. 5 to Georgie. It was simply Tee. "Not to worry. Weight gain is just another one of life's crushing disappointments that we can happily add to the list."

At the end of each and every January since Georgie developed breasts, she and her cousin met for dinner to review their ruined New Year's resolutions. It had become a gleeful contest: the one who piled up the most broken resolutions won. The loser had to pick up the tab.

Teresa settled back down into her chair. "I may have overindulged on the fudge, but I can't wait to hear how you've outshone me," she said, running one tastefully-jeweled hand through her black, chin-length pageboy. The deep ebony of her hair worked in perfect complement to her olive skin. She had a strong jaw, a wide face and a mouth that even she had to admit was bigger than Georgie's.

Unless she chose to hike or refinish furniture, Teresa opted for a well-tailored, timeless wardrobe. This evening was no exception. Teresa had dressed in a hunter green wool pantsuit with a soft ivory crepe blouse.

The older and wiser of the two by eleven years, half-Italian, Teresa's large, dark

eyes never missed a trick. "Your list of broken resolutions, please?"

"Give me a minute to negotiate." Throwing her coat over an adjacent chair, Georgie attempted to lower herself into the plush burgundy leather seat, holding on to the wide arms decorated in stud detail for support. But she had to arrange herself carefully, the short, snug, black suede skirt restricting her every move.

"Tight?" asked Teresa, a small smile playing around her mouth. "Do I need to call a nurse to help get you down?"

"No, I'm good. I can still blink and if necessary, breathe. But if anything happens to me, promise you'll call a fireman instead?"

Leaning back in her club chair, Teresa took an appreciative look around the room. "I think this place may even be older than me."

"We've discussed this before." Suppressing a giggle, Georgie said, "Dirt is older than you. That's it."

"You have no respect."

Georgie joined Tee in her assessment of the restaurant. With its clubby, amber-lit richness of dark woods and oxblood red leather upholstery, Guildenstern's harkened back to an earlier time, of whispered secrets in deep, cushiony banquettes, of adulterous grabs under large, white linen-covered tables, the smell of juicy steaks and buttery garlic bread, and the famous onion soup fondue, it's thick jack cheese actually bubbling...

"May I take your order?"

*Heaven help me, I've got to start eating again. I'm fixating on that damn onion*

*soup.*

A waitress had appeared, order pad in hand. She was an ode to perky: perky blond curls, perky posture, even perkier tits. Shifting her weight, she chirped, "Do you need more time?"

*I remember 'perky.' But as I recall, we had a falling-out in my mid-to-late twenties, and 'perky's' never been heard from since.*

Teresa said, "Bloody Mary for me, extra Tabasco, and a Stolý vodka martini on the rocks for my hot date."

"With a twist and two olives, please."

Drinks served, Georgie made the first toast. "To Broken Resolutions, of course. And to you, Tee, an abhorrently shining example of a happily married woman." They clinked glasses.

"Right back at'cha. To George, a shocking example of a nice girl gone wrong."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," she said, taking a moment to savor her first drink in a month, the commingling sensations of heat and ice trickling down her throat, jump-starting her insides upon contact. The immediate buzz surprised her.

"George, don't look now, but that red blouse of yours seems to be arousing the bulls at the bar."

"Not interested. But I'm noticing some pawing of the ground on your behalf."

Teresa snorted, pulling a pack of gum from her oversized designer purse. She popped a fresh stick into her dark-red lipsticked mouth.

"So how does that Trident work with a Bloody Mary chaser?" teased Georgie.

"It's an acquired taste. Better than nicotine, thank you. May I remind you that in all my years of making resolutions, gum instead of cigarettes is my only success story. So don't pooh-pooh."

*There's my Tee, classy as all get-out, yet snapping her gum like a cheap gun moll. A snap that's always artfully timed for perfect emphasis.*

Teresa took a healthy swig of her Bloody Mary. "So," she said, putting her highball glass down with a flourish, "resolutions notwithstanding, I take it you're still dating the entire single male population of the United States and all of its subsidiaries?"

*Give me the snap, Tee, you know I'm waiting for the snap.*

Teresa snapped. Georgie beamed.

"Try not to swallow your gum, Ms. Know-It-All, but I've been abstaining. I believe I'm going to retire my Pasta Theory of Men."

"It's about time."

Georgie ignored her. "The Pasta Theory of Men," she waved her arms grandly in the air, "postulates that if one throws enough males up against the subject female, namely me, some Mr. Somebody will eventually stick."

"It bombed."

"Wrong. It needed more time. To quote the mathematician I once met for a coffee date, 'It's all about the Law of Large Numbers.'"

Teresa shook her head, the light bouncing off her expensive diamond stud

earrings. "I came out on a winter night for this?"

"In layman's terms: The more times you do it, the more times you'll succeed."

Georgie looked at Teresa's scowling face. "Now, Tee, I'm not going to do it. I was just mentioning..."

Like a well-timed vaudeville routine, Teresa started in. "Like I always said—you're cheap."

"I'm sporty."

"You're a slut."

"I'm an optimist."

"George!"

"Teeee! You don't understand. This is the new me. Haven't you noticed? I haven't checked out the men over at the bar even once."

"Talk to me in another month."

"You could give me a little credit, you know." Georgie busied herself looking for the olive-laden cocktail spear. "Damn it, the waitress forgot my second olive." But it wasn't the olive that bothered Georgie.

Teresa took hold of her cousin's hand. "Oh, baby, I'm just teasing you." Squeezing it gently, she added, "Don't you know that I love you, no matter what?"

Georgie bit her lip, nodding. *Jeez, I'm acting like a child. What am I carrying on about?* It was probably just the post-New Year's slump, another painful marker that well into her thirties, she was still coming up empty. *But that's yesterday's news; today's*

*different.*

Tee continued. "I know it's not easy out there. I thank God that Lou rescued me when he did."

Georgie smiled. She never could get over her cousin's luck when it came to men. Teresa had a few lighthearted relationships, married her soul mate at twenty-three, followed by two effortless pregnancies. Her healthy, happy sons were both doing well in college, and she and her husband Lou still seemed blissful after over twenty years of wedlock.

"Tee, you realize you've been married as long as I've been dating? Now that's what I call optimism on two fronts."

They clinked glasses again.

"So! Since you're wearing a skirt the size of a teabag, I assume there's been no eating whatsoever?"

"Not much. A stalk of celery when I get crazy. But maybe I'm going too far—this morning when I walked by a newly-pruned rose cane, I almost mistook it for a salted pretzel rod. We were both in danger." She patted her soft stomach. "Look, it still jiggles, but I think there's less of it."

Georgie tried not to flaunt, but she felt proud of herself. For the first three-and-one-half weeks in January, she had stayed in, eaten right, and went back to the gym with the renewed fervor of, well, everyone who goes back to the gym in January. She organized her office at the law firm, replacing her old family pictures displayed on her

credenza with new ones. She called her difficult mother twice, and acted kind once.

Teresa gave a mock sigh. "I'm disappointed in you. Obviously, I win the contest this year. The only thing I've exercised is my brain while I've been weighing my options about a gym. And while I weigh, the aggravation makes me eat more. So the more I weigh...the more I weigh. But I'm walking Zeke everyday, so even if I get chubby, Zeke will stay sleek."

*Zeke and sleek. Rhymin' Simon the Bartender would have a field day. "God forbid you should have a fat Doberman."*

"We'd be run out of our Encino home faster than I could down another cheesecake."

"Did you make it to midnight mass like you promised?"

"Yes. Did you light the Menorah for Hanukkah?"

Georgie hesitated. "Sort of. I lit four of the eight candles, which fully meets the prescribed requirement for my religion. You know, half-Jewish, half-assed."

"You're a pisser."

"I'm conflicted."

"See an internist." Snapping her gum, she stood up, saying, "On that note, I'm going to the ladies' room."

"Fine, leave me here with a room full of men and an empty stomach. " *I wonder, does that make me feel twice as empty? Stop it, Georgie. Go have a chat with Simon before it gets too packed at the bar.*

Though the happy hour crowd was growing, she squeezed into a vacant space between a nervous giggler and a blowsy redhead.

Waiting for Simon to acknowledge her, she basked in the comfort of her familiarity with the vast U-shaped bar. Its low-lit, gold antiqued mirror bounced back the names and jeweled colors of this season's trendiest liquors, fighting for space on the illuminated shelves with spice-infused vodkas, time-honored scotches, bourbons and gins.

*Why the low light on everything but the pretty bottles? Who's selling what to whom? Sure, the restaurant owners have to profit, along with all the industries involved in manufacturing, hauling and hawking the booze. But what about the sale of us, the customers? Keep the light low, so that our aging, sagging skin isn't obvious? So that the lines around her mouth are barely visible? So that the beer gut hanging over his belt is hardly noticeable? So that we can still believe we're beautiful, both to the strangers we're trying to impress, and ourselves?*

*Bars: a legal, adult Disneyland. Have a drink. Have five. Make a friend. And if we can drive home without wrapping our car around a tree, congratulations, we might even get a sleepover.*

*So what if he's a moron? So what if she's too loud? Lips, tongue, skin, the touch of another body—it's tangible. It's a connection, a literal plugging in. If nothing else, at least we're being made aware of our own bodies that haven't moved except from the car to the office to the lunchroom to the Xerox machine and then back around again. Maybe*

*we even get reacquainted with our deadened sense of touch. No fuzzy words of affection, their intent always slightly unclear, are necessary at all. Let's just focus on the plugging; God bless the plugging. Maybe aside from killing us with too much alcohol, too many STD's and too little sleep, maybe these bars, these overheated, underlit caverns of possibility, also keep us alive.*

Georgie took a quick peek at the nervous giggler and the blowsy redhead partially blocked by all those pretty bottles reflected in the mirror. *After all, not all of us are lucky enough to find, and sustain, the real deal. No matter how focused our New Year's resolutions may be.*

"Hey, pretty dear, a belated Happy New Year," said Simon. "Am I growing dim, or have you not been in?" As he rhymed, he flipped a chilled martini glass from one hand to the other, pouring a liberal amount of Stolichnaya vodka into a shaker of fresh ice. He executed his trademark wave of the vermouth bottle over the mix, stirred with a grand flourish, and strained the vodka into the glass. Twisting a lemon rind peel, he ran it lightly over the rim before throwing it in. Aside from his technique, his speed was truly impressive.

"I've been laying low this past month, refraining from all things sinful."

"But surely you can't resist a little drink like this. To the lady in the red blouse; this one is on the house."

"Why thank you, sir. And if I may remind you—"

"Two olives along with that twist? Honey, I may forget your appellation, but

never your libation." Holding the drink in front of him, he bowed from the waist with a great flourish, his corn-colored hair flopping forward.

She took the glass. No need to insult Simon by telling him she already had another drink at her table. Employing his favorite toast, she said, "Up yours."

"Up yours, doll." He clinked back with his usual cup of coffee.

"Your absence has been noted..."

She popped the olive into her mouth. *Mmmm, yes, marinated just right. Wait, what did he just say?* "Excuse me?" she said, raising her voice to be heard above the crowd.

He leaned over the bar to talk closer to her ear. "I'd hate to be misquoted, but your absence has been noted, by a man who seems devoted." He straightened up, flashing his best actor smile.

The olive suddenly went down her throat. Hard. She hated surprises. "Did you catch a name?"

"Nope, but I've seen him before. He's usually with a pretty woman. Like you, with a great chassis, but darlin', not as classy."

She gave a perfunctory smile to acknowledge his compliment. "Describe him, please."

"Nice looking, dark wavy hair, brown eyes, looks like he works out, a good dresser. Women seem fascinated by him." Simon ran off to fill a waitress's drink order before he could finish with a rhyme.

*Women seem fascinated by him? Well, I don't fascinate that easy. Who is he? Oh, never mind. He's probably some "sleepover" from long ago. Her mind began spinning out a virtual Rolodex of possible ex-suitors. Stop it, I don't care. Whoever he is, he's not the right guy. Twenty years of dating and one thing I know—I've yet to meet the right one.*

She saw her cousin return to the table. Catching Simon's eye, Georgie mimed her departure. His hands otherwise engaged, he nodded.

In a mock scolding tone, Teresa said, "I leave you alone for two minutes and you're back at the bar? And what's this? You're nursing a second drink?"

"Since you were otherwise engaged, I multi-tasked. Remember? I'm on a mission to find him? Carpe diem, Tee."

Teresa dropped back down into her chair, unwrapping a second stick of gum. "If you're serious, I'd stay away from bars altogether. How about charity events? What is it now, three years since you've had anything romantic that's lasted longer than..."

"Nothing has lasted longer than four months since the dawn of time," said Georgie quickly, not wanting to think about her past disasters, but the memories flooded in, right on cue. In her early twenties, she'd had a live-in boyfriend who cheated on her whenever he had the chance. A decade later, her wonderful year with a business entrepreneur ended when his company bottomed out. Now he was off somewhere on some beach making puka shell necklaces for free beer and shelter.

And those were the good guys.

Teresa suddenly jumped. "Wait, there goes my cell phone. I've got it on vibrate."

Unhooking it from her trouser pocket, she added, "You know, given your new oath of celibacy, this 'vibrate' setting might be a happy alternative." With one finger pressed to her free ear to muffle the escalating din from the bar, Teresa spoke into her phone. "Is this my Lou, my shining knight in armor? It's not? All the better. Let's meet at that cheap motel with the pink plastic swans right around the corner..."

Georgie watched her cousin gaily chatting with her husband, feeling an overly-polite, third-person smile form on her lips. *What if he never comes along? What if there's really no one out there to love me? And even worse, what if there's no one out there for me to love?*

"I'll tell her. Bye." Teresa snapped her cell shut, giving a perfunctory "Lou sends his love." But instead of the expected chatter on Lou news, she retrieved her purse and sighed.

"Everything okay?" Georgie asked.

She looked down, twisting her wedding ring. "Oh George, I'm sorry to cut our date short, we haven't even had time to really talk, but my silver-haired caveman is summoning me. He just signed some new clients and wants me to join all of them for dinner."

Georgie understood. Teresa's first loyalty was to her husband, always had been. But it hurt anyway. "This has been happening a lot lately, yes?"

"You forget, Lou owns the hottest C.P.A. firm in town. Or at least, the most honest. It seems everyone wants a piece of him." Teresa signaled the waitress for the bill.

"You used to say that about me," said Georgie, waving her cousin's hand away.

"You know the rules. Contest winners never pay."

"You have to rub it in?"

They both stood up for a farewell hug. "Go. Be the power behind the throne. Love you, Tee."

"Love you, my George. Thanks for understanding. And here's to your guy." She reached for the almost-drained Bloody Mary, raising it in a farewell toast. "From my big mouth to God's ear, may he be around the very next corner."

"Around the corner, yes. But lurking in a corner, with a gun in his hand, no."

"Heaven forbid." Teresa hugged her hard.

Georgie felt a familiar black lump of loneliness well up in her throat and willed herself not to cry. *It'll upset Tee. Just hang on until she leaves.*

She waited for her cousin to exit before she dropped her understanding, "happy-face" mask. *So much for our annual reunion.* She looked over at the crowded bar, attempting to zero in on faces in the low light. Faces looking at her looking at them. *Wait, I'm not supposed to be doing this. No matter, there's the waiter coming with the bill. Hey, that's no waiter...*

"Simon? What's the king of bartenders doing on the floor? Such service!"

"Your tab's been paid. I bring a note, don'tcha know; a middleman, just like Cyrano." He winked, and with a choreographed dance step, he placed a fresh drink in

front of her, along with a folded piece of paper. He clicked his heels, pivoting toward the bar. Yet still managed to whip his head back to her, loudly whispering, "It's that guy I told you about," Simon seemed too excited to rhyme.

Georgie took a sip of the drink, contemplating the paper. *This is nothing, I'm sure. Nothing at all.* She wished she could get her heart to stop racing. *Oh hell, just open it already.*

The note, written in a fluid, masculine scrawl, read: "To such a magnificent woman of high style and beauty, you're obviously in a rarified league of your own. Perhaps, if nothing else, you'll join me in a verbal dance? -Adrian"

Her crotch tingled. *Damn. With all my promises of celibacy, I think I feel a slip coming on. I wonder if it's this hard for other women?*

*Tee may not be this year's winner of the Broken Resolution contest after all.*

Trying to look unaffected, yet hypersensitive to the fact that someone was probably watching her every move, she casually retrieved the cocktail spear from her drink, playing with the olive. A moment later, she looked up to see a man approaching from the bar. Just like Simon said: "dark wavy hair, brown eyes, looks like he works out..."

For the second time that evening, Georgie swallowed her olive whole.