

## CHAPTER ONE

I'm in the dining room, counting place settings, when the doorbell rings.

A happy, charming, ladylike clang, it's a sound only an old house could make, which mine is. I inherited it from my grandmother.

"That's probably Amy and Mike," I call to Kate, who's sitting in the kitchen. I put down the handful of silverware I was distributing and go to answer the door.

I love having people over. My house is a brownstone that I never could have afforded on my own, and while it's not the most extravagant home on the street or the best kept, there is something about it that makes people stop at the bottom of its terra-cotta steps, their mouths open in lustful, longing *ohhhhs*. Ivy creeps up the brick facade, nasturtium spills from the window boxes, stained-glass panels glimmer above the wide oak double doors.

To any passing stranger, it looks just like home.

I turn the brass doorknob and swing open the heavy door.

"Hell-lo-o!" I sing in three syllables, the way that I'm apt to do when greeting houseguests. Amy is my other closest friend. I hold my arms out for a hug and say hello to her husband as I wrap my arms around her. "It's so good to see you. Kate's already here."

As we walk back into the kitchen, I glimpse Kate sitting on one of the barstools at the center island, picking a piece of Roquefort off of the cheese plate I put together an hour ago. She hears us

coming—Amy’s voice is always two notches louder than it needs to be, and bubbly and eager, like when she was a cheerleader in high school—but instead of turning her head to acknowledge us and say hello, Kate waits, daintily licking a crumb from her finger. This is not unusual. My best friend is a bit of a princess. She’s accustomed to having people come to her.

Amy walks beside me, telling me how Emma, her three-year-old, is going through a phase where she insists on dressing herself. “I’ve decided to just give in and let her do it,” she says. “Today she went to school in purple tights, a Minnie Mouse nightgown, and the patent leather Mary Janes that I bought for her to wear with her Christmas dress.” There’s no quiet, small-talk easing in with Amy. Conversations with her are of the dive-right-in variety. When Kate and I first met Amy thirteen years ago, in the six feet of hallway that separated the door of our first postcollege apartment from hers, our eyes slid toward each other, silently asking, *Is she for real?* Unbelievably, she is. In all of the years that I’ve known Amy, I can’t remember a single instance when she was surly, moody, or rude. It can get on your nerves. But I suppose that when I crave surly, moody, or rude, I have Kate, who’s told me on more than one occasion that she and her husband secretly refer to Amy as “the golden retriever.”

When we get to the kitchen, Amy stops midsentence, her face lighting up as if she’s just stumbled into her own surprise party. “Kaaate!” she squeals. “No Brendan tonight?”

“Working,” Kate says, smoothing her wool trousers with her hands as she stands to greet them. “Where else would he be?” She hugs Amy hello and halfheartedly holds up a palm to wave to her husband.

Mike nods back. While Kate and Amy get along fine—they are nothing alike but friends nonetheless, with me as the link between them—Kate and Mike are barely civil, meeting each other somewhere on the continuum between total indifference and outright

contempt. “Why did Amy marry him?” Kate often says when his name comes up. After evenings like this one, when she actually has to share breathing space with him, she can be downright evil. On the phone the next day, she’ll denigrate where he’s from. (*What is it? Buffalo? Allentown? Some other horrendous place like that?*) It’s actually Rochester, New York. Or she’ll criticize his career. (*A family doctor? So he asks old people about their bowel movements and takes snot-faced toddlers’ temperatures?*) I don’t think that Kate has a right to be as cruel as she can be, but it’s true that Mike’s become kind of a drag. Whenever he’s around, he sulks like he has some thrilling other life that he’s missing out on, as if he might be out clubbing with Brazilian supermodels or chasing down Russian spies if only he didn’t have to spend time with his wife and her friends. I don’t particularly look forward to his company in the way that I used to, and to be honest, I’ve wondered how Amy puts up with it, though I’d never say anything to her. I mean, how do you tell one of your closest girlfriends—particularly one who tends to bounce through her days as if life’s one big Broadway musical—that her husband’s kind of a dud?

I hand Amy a glass of wine and ask Mike what he’d like to drink. “Oh, wait!” Amy says, pulling a small box of Crabtree & Evelyn soaps out of her bag and handing it to me. “I saw this the other day at the mall and thought you’d like it.”

“Oh, Amy, you don’t have to do this,” I say, rolling my eyes and pulling her in for a hug. “Really, after all these years, aren’t we way beyond hostess gifts?”

“Seriously, Amy,” Kate says, twirling the stem of her wineglass between her thumb and forefinger, making the base skitter against the butcher-block countertop. “You’re making me look bad.”

I smirk at her over Amy’s shoulder.

“Please, Kate,” Amy says. “You’ve never had a bad-looking day in your life.”

“I told her that she didn’t need to bring anything, but she never

listens,” Mike barks from the corner of the kitchen. The sound of his voice is surprising and sharp. When we all turn to him, he shrugs his shoulders and glances around, shuffling in his leather bomber jacket and Redskins cap. Kate will say something about the jacket later—I can tell by the way that she raises her eyebrows at me. I turn away before Amy notices and open the refrigerator door, loading up my arms with salad greens, a jar of Dijon mustard, and the butter dish.

Amy clears her throat and starts to tell a story about something they heard on the radio on the way over—something about a pop singer’s affair and surprise pregnancy. While I’m washing lettuce at the sink and listening to her talk, I glance at Kate, who’s taking several healthy sips of her wine. My boyfriend’s coworker and his girlfriend are joining our usual group for dinner tonight, and I hope Kate will behave herself.

“What are we having? It smells so good,” Amy says as she walks to the stove. She picks up the wooden spoon next to the enamel pot to stir its contents.

“Beef bourguignon. Julia Child’s recipe,” I say. It had been the kind of pissed-off February weather that makes it perfectly clear that winter is nowhere near over. Plus, if I was going to feed seven people after working in my bakery all day, I needed something unfussy. “I’ve made this a million times. Mom used to make it for dinner parties when I was a kid. I’d stand on a chair next to the stove—in my *Dukes of Hazzard* nightgown, of course—and she’d taste a bit with her wooden spoon and then hold it out for me to try. ‘Needs more pepper,’ I’d say, feeling very important.”

Amy laughs. “That’s *so* cute. I can just see you, Waverly. The budding chef!”

I wink at her. “Well...” I turn back to my salad and listen to Amy ask Kate whether she ever watched *The Dukes* and whether she preferred Bo or Luke. What I neglected to mention about tonight’s dinner is that I *also* chose to make beef bourguignon because stew

meat is so cheap—and cheap is becoming increasingly important these days. To be honest, I should be serving ketchup sandwiches.

It seems like twice a week, I'll hear some analyst on NPR say that there are signs that the economy is finally picking up, but I have to say, this small-business owner isn't feeling an iota of those vibes. Maggie's, my bakery, sits smack in the middle of Maple Hill, Virginia. Less than ten miles from D.C., my hometown has a nearly perfect mix of urban and suburban living, with brownstones like mine surrounding the center of town, your typical family neighborhoods farther south, and supertony old farmhouse-style homes out toward what used to be the country but is now crazy D.C. sprawl. Because it's so close to the city, Maple Hill has always attracted transplants transferring here for government jobs, and before the economy tanked, houses were snatched up practically the minute a "For Sale" sign went up. That's not so much the case anymore—there are three foreclosures on my block alone—and over the past year or so, my business has started to suffer right along with everything else.

I'm someone who's prone to worry too much as it is—whenever Larry, my boyfriend, gets on a plane to visit his family back home in Minnesota, my latent Catholicism kicks right in and I start muttering Hail Marys—but this problem with my business is a whole other animal. Larry, Kate, and Amy know that I've suffered a little—who hasn't? But I haven't been *totally* honest about just how dire things are, particularly with Larry, who lives with me and shares my household bills. He doesn't know that I barely keep up on the payments for the home equity loan I used to fund my business. Or about the twenty-seven thousand dollars in credit card debt. Or the late rent payments on the bakery.

"Hey, Mike?" I turn toward him. He's examining the collage of junk on my fridge as if the appointment reminder from my dermatologist and a postcard picture of three women in old-fashioned swimsuits actually interest him. "Larry should be down any minute. Are you sure I can't get you a beer? Take your coat?"

"I'm fine," he says, shaking his head and shoving his hands in his pockets. I watch him wander off into the living room and breathe a secret sigh of relief. Finally, it's just the three of us.

"So, Kate!" Amy says, relieving the room of its five seconds of silence. "I haven't seen you in, what, two weeks? How's the campaign going?"

"You know, luncheon, meeting, luncheon, fund-raiser. Blah, blah, blah."

"Oh, Kate, you don't really mean that! It's all *so* exciting," Amy gushes, clasping her hands to her chest with the wistful enthusiasm of a Disney princess. "Just think, by this time next year, you could be living in the governor's mansion!"

"Yes, I know. Fantastic," Kate says evenly, motioning for Amy to bring her the wine bottle from the counter. "I can't wait to move to Richmond and spend my days watching hordes of fat tourists in new sneakers waddle by my front door. It will be heavenly."

"Oh, Kate, come on," I say, chopping the thyme I've gathered into a neat pile on the cutting board. Lately it seems like whenever anyone asks Kate about Brendan's run for governor, her response is just as it is tonight, sarcastic and unimpressed, like a teenager talking about some lame school dance. Her obvious bitterness belies the fact that even though the election is still nine months away, all of the newspapers are already running dreamy articles about Brendan's likely win and their impending Camelot-like reign over the state of Virginia.

You can't blame them, I think, glancing at Kate, who's fiddling with the gumball-sized diamond stud in her earlobe as she listens to Amy reminisce about the first time that she went on the White House tour after she moved to D.C. from North Carolina. Kate has

a way of captivating people. I noticed it the minute we met, on our first day of ninth grade at Madeira, the private girls' school we both attended.

Kate had waltzed into our American history class a full twenty minutes late, her only explanation a simple nod of her head toward our prim, bespectacled teacher, an Alex P. Keaton type who talked with a lisp. It was the kind of gesture that a royal might give to her underlings while striding the halls of her palace, and it somehow, inexplicably, worked. She then flopped into the desk in front of mine, turned around in her seat, and offered her hand. It was manicured, I noticed. Even my mom didn't get manicures. "Hi, I'm Kate," she said, not even pretending to whisper, as if we were sitting on a park bench instead of in a classroom where a lesson was under way.

Kate is beautiful—the kind of beautiful that you don't know really exists until you see an old Grace Kelly film or visit Italy for the first time. I soon discovered that she also had a big mouth and a family name that let her get away with things. In short, she was everything we are supposed to want, especially as fourteen-year-olds. William Townsend, her father, had helmed the family business—a multinational shipping corporation—for decades. Her mother, Evelyn, was the daughter of a legendary Supreme Court justice revered by just about every right-leaning politician in Washington. The other girls at school envied Kate as much as they despised her, mimicking the way that she braided her hair and tied her mother's Hermès scarves onto a strap of the leather satchel she used for a book bag, all the while whispering about what a bitch she was. Men—our teachers, her father's colleagues, our classmates' fathers, passersby on the street—looked at Kate in such an unabashedly lustful way that it reminded me of those scenes in cartoons where the object of desire turns into a steak before the predator's googly, hungry eyes. My mom once said, as she watched Kate bound out of our house in a tennis skirt that just barely covered her ass, that

she would grow up to be the kind of woman whom other women didn't want around their husbands.

I knew back then, and still know today, that our friendship is an improbable one. I had been able to attend Madeira only because of a financial aid package. My dad was a midlevel photographer for UPI, my mom worked in an insurance office, and though we were in Maple Hill, we lived in the kind of dim ranch-house neighborhood where everyone's front yards are blanketed with dead leaves year-round. Even if I had come from a family like Kate's, or like those of the politicians' daughters we went to school with, I just didn't look like the kind of girl she would cozy up to. I had my Polish grandmother's thickish build; I draped myself in loads of the burnout jewelry that my mother had collected while following bands with my father when they were dating; I couldn't—still can't—bother to deal with the mess of curls springing from my head like live wires. While Kate starred on the equestrian and tennis teams, I spent most of my time after school watching reruns of *What's Happening?* and reading the dirty sections of my mom's Judith Krantz novels while I waited for someone to come home from work.

Still, the two of us somehow clicked. There had been moments over the course of our teenaged friendship when I wondered about the very thing that I was certain the other girls around us said: Maybe Kate befriended me because I was such an underdog and posed no threat to her queen bee status. But as the years went by, those suspicions faded and our relationship deepened. If there was anything that initially drew Kate to me, it was that I was too clueless to care about who she was or where she came from. I know now, as you come to understand your close friends' insecurities without ever speaking them aloud, that Kate loves me because being with me means that she doesn't have to perform.





We both ventured north for college—me to Bowdoin and Kate to Brown, a school so liberal that it was obvious she'd chosen it simply to spite her parents, who'd expected her to attend Yale like everyone else in her family. We met Amy when we were twenty-two, on the day that we moved into our first D.C. apartment. Housed in a dirty brick building in Adams Morgan, it was about what you would expect for a couple of recent college graduates—a dim hallway that smelled like cat food and takeout, a sticky galley kitchen, jewel box-sized bedrooms. I'd found it while Kate was in Spain for the summer, and the only person who was more horrified by it than Kate was Evelyn, her mother, who offered to cover my portion of the rent to put us up somewhere else. As much as Kate hated the place, there were few things she treasured more than defying her mother, so she agreed to slum it with me if I'd at least let her decorate, something I was more than happy to do.

Kate and I were in 4B. Amy lived across the hall with a roommate in 4A. Kate's then boyfriend (if you could you call him a boyfriend when she'd just met him four days earlier) had gathered a group of buddies to help us haul our stuff into the six hundred square feet we'd call home for the next four years. They were a rowdy group of fraternity brothers from Vanderbilt, all wearing worn baseball caps and embroidered ribbon belts. After moving day, we'd never see most of them again. Kate's beau was an aide for Trent Lott, who was about to become the Senate majority leader, and he spent most of his time at work. But even at twenty-two, Kate wasn't the kind of woman who waited around until somebody had time for her, so she dropped him within a couple of weeks for a bookstore owner who chatted her up at a cocktail party in the Hirshhorn Museum's sculpture garden.

We went out for beers with the guys after all of our stuff was loaded in, and on our way back to our apartment we encountered Amy in the hallway. Kate was fiddling with our new keys. "Hey, y'all." Amy smiled, approaching us. "I'm sorry to bother you, but

my air-conditioning just broke and I can't seem to find the number for the super."

We invited her in and offered her a beer, which she initially refused, until we both opened our own, and Kate began to interrogate her—I knew that she was sizing Amy up to determine if she was worth getting to know. We learned that Amy had come to the city to work as a guidance counselor at a new charter school in south-east D.C., an area once deemed "the murder capital of the world." The administration had set her up with a roommate, another new teacher, but her boyfriend lived in the Maryland suburbs so she was almost never around. Amy was nervous about essentially living alone. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was her hometown and the only place she'd ever lived. She'd spent the last four years in a sorority house at UNC, less than a two-mile drive from the house she grew up in.

She didn't need to worry about finding friends. Kate and I quickly discovered that Amy was an easy third for our group, and we started to live in the way that twenty-two-year-old girls live in a big city—meeting for happy hour, watching television on each other's sofas, discussing potential boyfriends, sharing each other's clothing, nursing our hangovers together.

In those early years, Kate and Amy were close. Not close in a confide-in-each-other kind of way but close in the sense that they spent time together when I wasn't around. One rainy Saturday night when I couldn't be convinced to go out—I never had the social stamina that they did and prized quiet nights alone in the apartment's kitchen—the two of them came home shortly before midnight, wobbling and desperate to tell me about the palm reader they'd been to see in Georgetown. We were twenty-four.

"You won't believe it! You won't believe it, Waverly!" Amy slurred, kneeling on the floor in front of the couch and gripping my legs with her clammy hands. "She said that I'm going to get engaged this year. *This year!*"

“It’s true.” Kate nodded emphatically. “I heard it from the other side of the curtain.”

“She said that he’d be somebody I never would have dreamt for myself—a foreigner, she said. Right, Kate? That’s the word she used, right?”

Kate was standing by the open refrigerator, digging a fork into my leftover container of lo mein. She’d already swiped two of the madeleine cookies from the cooling rack on the counter. I’d baked them while watching a VHS of *Annie Hall*.

“She said we’d have six babies,” Amy said dreamily, letting her head fall into my lap.

“That’s great, Ame,” I said, patting her on the head. “And what about you, Kate?”

“Well,” Kate said, flopping onto the other side of the couch and pushing my legs out of the way with her foot. “She said that I would also meet somebody this year—somebody well-known.” She shrugged. “So what else is new? My mother has been telling me exactly what my future will hold—or *should* hold—for as long as I can remember. I’ve never listened to her, so why would I listen to some freak ‘fortune-teller’ on M Street?”

Back then, Kate was working at the *Washington Post* as a travel reporter. Her mother, naturally, viewed Kate’s career as the kind of appropriate hobby that would keep her busy—and keep her meeting appropriate people—until her husband came along. Then she could retire, start lunching on the charity circuit, and get busy having kids. Kate had other plans. She’d always said that if there was one thing she was going to make sure of in her life, it was that she would not grow up to be her mother. She wanted a life where the conversation involved more than one-upping and name-dropping, and since our teens, she’d daydreamt aloud about being the kind of person with a thick, tattered, heavily stamped passport. Budapest on Tuesday, Santiago on Wednesday. An apartment in New York, a flat in Paris. There would be men, of course (there always were

with Kate) but she didn't fantasize about a husband, per se, not in the white-picket-fence sense that Amy did. And kids? Kate was ambivalent about the idea of children, I'm sure because she was such an afterthought to her own parents. She grew up in a home where children were something you did because you were supposed to, like joining Congressional Country Club or naming your springer spaniel after one of the founding fathers.

But when Brendan swooped into her life four years ago, everything changed. Suddenly, the round-the-world fantasies I'd heard her talk about for years were just little whims; "old daydreams," she'd say wistfully. After years of resisting a certain kind of life, she just settled into it like she was giving up. Brendan was raised in Charlottesville, prep-school and Harvard educated, and a moderate conservative. It was as if her parents had ordered him out of the Neiman Marcus catalog for her for Christmas.

When she told me that she was falling for him and thought she might marry him, and then proceeded to do just that barely a year after they'd been introduced, I wish that I could say that I was surprised, but I wasn't. I hate to sound like this, because I'm not the kind of person who believes you're supposed to settle down by a certain age, but I think that Kate heard the clock ticking. I'd been with Larry for six years. Amy had been married so long it was hard to remember her as single. Kate still had a trail of admirers that could circle a city block—and in my opinion, she always will—but I don't think she felt the same way. Brendan might not have been the man of her dreams, but marrying him gave her security at a time when I think she was starting to feel a little lonesome. And if I had to make a guess, the loneliness she'd experienced as a child was exactly what she'd always been running from in the first place.

There's another thing, too. As much as Kate talked about wanting to flee her pedigree, it was hard for me to imagine that you'd give up that kind of privilege if it was what you'd known your whole life. When she stopped working six months into their mar-

riage for the sake of Brendan's career? Okay, I found it a little ironic that she was stepping directly into the supportive wifely role that her mother had expected for her, but, again, it wasn't *that* surprising. As much as Kate hated her parents for basically overlooking the fact that she existed, she was quite comfortable with her station in life, and it probably felt natural to just make the easy choices and do what she'd always known. Plus, the thing with Kate—and it's actually something I admire, maybe even envy—is that she's so headstrong and sovereign in the way that she marches through every decision that you just don't question her, even if she is your best friend.

## CHAPTER TWO

Larry's heavy footsteps pound the stairs behind the kitchen, shaking my collection of bud vases on the windowsill over the sink. *At last*, I think, peeking out of the kitchen door to check on Mike, who's sitting on the couch in the living room and thumbing halfheartedly through a coffee table book of *Rolling Stone* covers. Larry can keep Mike occupied.

"Hello! Hello!" Larry says, entering the kitchen. After ten years together and countless evenings like this, I still can't convince the man to put on a nice shirt for dinner. He's fresh from the shower—I can smell his Right Guard across the room—and his thick, wavy, wet hair has left a damp half-moon along the collar of his long-sleeved T-shirt.

"Lare, could you put on some shoes at least?" I say, pointing my knife at his bare feet. My boyfriend is one of those people who looks like where he's from. Just throw a flannel shirt on the guy and he could be an easy stand-in for the Brawny paper towel man. He moved here from Minnesota specifically to work at the Smithsonian and is now a curator at the National Museum of American History, where he oversees a massive collection of old campaign memorabilia and political artifacts. A lifelong history buff, he gets excited about an old World War Two poster in the way that I get wound up over buttercream.

"Baby, it's family here." He laughs, putting his beer bottle on the

kitchen counter so that he can wrap Amy in a bear hug, his heavy arms folding around her shoulders and neck.

Larry is one of those rare people whom everybody seems to like. He tells ridiculous tales about growing up in Minnesota—ice-fishing mishaps, barroom brawls that led to best friendships—and when he does, he draws a crowd. Once, one night in Old Town, he got the whole bar singing “Skol Vikings,” the Minnesota Vikings fight song, and this was during football season, in a roomful of rabid, beer-breathed Redskins fans. In short, everyone loves being around him, myself included . . . most of the time. The fact that I haven’t shared my money problems with him (which, let’s face it, since he’s my roommate, are his problems, too) is wearing on me and, by extension, us. I’ve never kept secrets from him before, and I feel so guilty that I actually find myself looking for ways to avoid him. He’s noticed, though neither of us has said anything about it. I tell myself that it’s temporary, a rut, and that we’ll push through it just like we have before, but deep down I know that’s not true.

Larry lets go of Amy, ruffling her hair as he walks away as if she’s his kid sister, and then he hugs Kate, calling her “Katie” even though she always asks him not to. Larry and Kate are just like siblings—outwardly mocking and secretly adoring of each other. When he finally makes his way to me, I’m stirring the pot on the stove. He wraps his arm around me and bends deeply to kiss me in the crook of my neck. He’s six-two—big, but not NBA big—and strong in the best way, like he could haul a load of firewood if he needed to, but not like someone who pounds protein shakes at the gym. I am average—not the smallest girl in town but not the biggest either—and when Larry holds me, it’s with every bit of him.

“What’s the over/under on Dr. Feelgood cracking a smile tonight?” Larry whispers in my ear. He’s talking about Mike, who’s

now gazing sleepily out my front window. I gently shove him off with my elbow.

“Go! Go get him a beer,” I whisper. When I turn, I catch Amy watching me. At first, I fear that she heard Larry joke about Mike, but she’s looking at me in the funniest, most longing way. She grins sheepishly and then claps her hands together and says, “So! What can I do to help? You can’t just let me stand here and watch you work.”

My dining room is too small for seven people. Kate lingers in the doorway between it and the kitchen and I know that she’s waiting to choose a seat because she doesn’t want to be near Mike, who seems to have at least loosened up enough to talk hockey with Larry and his coworker Kyle.

I squeeze past Amy’s chair, holding the pot of stew over her head as I pass, and everyone nudges into their seats. “It smells incredible,” she says, shifting dishes on the table to make room for the pot. Five years ago, after much prodding from Kate, Amy, and Larry, I quit my job as a high school English teacher to open Maggie’s, which is named after my childhood dog. I know, the world has enough bakeries, coffee shops, and bars named after dogs. Yes, there’s a black and white picture of her on the wall by the cash register. I won’t apologize for it. She was a fantastic dog.

“So, a toast,” Larry says, raising his glass when I finally sit down, easing in between Amy and Kate. “To Waverly, the hostess with the—”

“Oh God, Larry, stop before they are too nauseous to have an appetite,” I interrupt. “Cheers, everyone.” I raise my glass. “Let’s eat.”

“So,” Kate says after everyone’s plate has been filled, pointing her fork toward Kyle’s new girlfriend, Rebecca. She’s a petite woman with Gilda Radner hair who’s a professor at American. “What is it that you teach?”



“Women’s Studies.” Her voice is surprisingly throaty, particularly for a woman with a figure skater’s frame.

I glance around the table to make sure everyone has what they need and see Mike make a face. Kate knocks my foot with hers under the table. She’s noticed, too.

“Interesting!” Amy says, nodding her head emphatically while she finishes chewing. “So, give me an example of one of your classes,” she says after she’s swallowed.

“Well, I also work out of the English department, so right now I’m teaching a course on women’s autobiography. We read Carolyn Heilbrun, Annie Dillard, Maxine Hong Kingston. Do you know them?”

“No, I’m sorry.” Amy laughs self-deprecatingly. “Since I had my daughter, I’m lucky if I read a book a year.”

Mike shakes his head.

“What?” Amy says teasingly.

Mike rolls his eyes, and it’s not in an amused way. He looks genuinely peeved.

“Do you have something you’d like to say, Mike?” Kate says.

*Shit, here we go.* The fact that she’s getting a little drunk doesn’t bode well for the rest of us.

“Mike just knows how little I read,” Amy says, laughing to lighten the mood. It’s obvious that she’s trying to placate him. “I mean, to be honest, my sister gave me a *People* magazine subscription for my birthday and I can’t even finish one issue before another one arrives in the mail.”

Mike puts his fork down and shakes his head at Amy. “No, Amy.” He laughs sarcastically. “Believe it or not, I actually wasn’t reacting to you. I just don’t understand the point of a ‘Women’s Studies’ department.” He makes little quotation marks with his fingers as he says it. “I mean, if equality’s the issue, shouldn’t there then be a ‘Men’s Studies’ department, too?”

“Oh, Mike,” Kate says. “That’s the same flimsy argument that

my barely postpubescent classmates at Brown used fifteen years ago.”

“Come on,” Mike says, sputtering sauce. “You think Brendan, the Republican superhero, is into ‘Women’s Studies?’” He makes the little quotation marks again despite the fork in his hand, which is close enough to Larry’s face that he has to jerk his head to avoid getting hit by a forkful of beef. Here goes my relaxing Friday night dinner party. I see the way that Mike is glaring at Kate, feel the way that Kate has sat up in her chair—almost as if it’s in case she needs to pounce across the table at him—and I suddenly remember a movie scene I once saw of a dinner party gone bad where the ominous sound of an escalating roller coaster was piped in over the actors’ voices—boom, click, boom, click, boom, click. It’s exactly what I’m feeling in my chest.

“My husband’s masculinity isn’t threatened by strong women,” Kate says, taking another swig of her wine.

I look over at Amy. Her eyes are pinned to her plate.

I put my hand over Kate’s arm. “I’m sorry,” I say to the table. “How about we, uh, change the subject?” I have the kind of complexion that’s always rosy, like I’ve just come out of the cold, but now I can feel that I’m flushed down to my collarbone.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Rebecca says, unruffled. “I get this reaction from men a lot. It’s not a big deal. Some men just don’t comprehend the usefulness of a women’s studies curriculum in the twenty-first century.”

“Exactly,” Mike says, banging his fist on the table and making the wineglasses shake. The sound makes me jump, and I look across the table at Larry, whose eyebrows have now shot into his hairline. “I mean, what do you think about all of this?” Mike says to Kyle.

“I’m sorry. What’s the question?” Kyle says, looking up from his nearly empty plate. You can tell what his politics are just by looking at him. He’s intellectual looking in a contrived way, wearing

wire-rimmed glasses and a wool turtleneck sweater. He looks like someone who meditates. A tea drinker.

“What do you think of your girlfriend’s job?” Mike says, slow and loud, like an ignorant person speaking to a foreigner.

“Well,” Kyle says, carefully resting his fork on the table and then folding his hands at his chest like a yogi. “I think it’s fascinating. I’ve learned a lot from Rebecca about feminist theory and what it’s like to be a woman in the modern world.”

“Kyle just read *The Feminine Mystique*,” Rebecca says.

“Really?” I say, hoping that I can steer the conversation away from Mike and Kate. “Larry, maybe you should take a cue from your coworker.” Aside from the history journals he reads for work, Larry never reads anything heavier than the sports page, the Sunday comics, and paperback thrillers, but I’m trying to lighten the mood. I smile at him as I hand him my glass—he’s stood to man the re-fills—and hope that he can tell by the way that I’m looking at him that I’d like some help.

Seconds later, I can tell it’s of no use.

“Oh, c’mon!” Mike groans. “Hey, Kate, I guess you can count these folks out of your husband’s constituency. No way they’re voting for Brendan!”

Kate shakes her head toward the ceiling. “*You are so—*,” she starts.

“Well, I think it’s all very interesting,” Amy interjects, finally speaking. I’ve had one eye on her—she’s been swirling her fork in figure eights around her plate. “I read *The Feminine Mystique* in college and I loved it.” She smiles at Rebecca.

“Oh, give me a break, Ame,” Mike says, laughing. “You can barely remember to pick up the dry cleaning, much less whatever you studied in college.” He looks at Rebecca. “My wife’s just trying to impress you,” he says.

Amy takes a deep breath and shakes her head. “Please, don’t mind my husband,” she says. “He has strong opinions.”

“Whatever,” he says, scooping a forkful of food into his mouth.

The room falls silent and Amy looks at me from across the table. “I’m sorry,” she mouths, and I notice the tears in her eyes. The old radiator under the window hisses and cracks. Larry clears his throat. “Who wants seconds?” he says.

I look over again at Amy as Larry and Kyle begin to tell the table about how one of Tony Hawk’s skateboards has joined the museum’s permanent sports collection. She is subtly gnawing on her bottom lip and I can tell as she nods and smiles and listens to Kyle that her mind is entirely somewhere else. Mike’s behavior tonight is nothing I haven’t seen before, but he seems a little more explosive than usual, and he’s *never* acted this way in front of people outside of our small circle.

I know that Amy must be mortified, but I’m having a hard time feeling sympathetic—this is not how I’d planned tonight to go, and there’s no one who’s more humiliated than me. Kate must sense this, because she squeezes my wrist under the table and mutters, “What an asshole,” under her breath. I tap her foot with mine in acknowledgment, then stand up to get dessert out of the kitchen.