

EXCERPT FROM:
WHAT'S NOT SAID

Chapter 1
To Om or Not to Om

Kassie prided herself on being a control freak—not the *my-way-or-the-highway* kind of bitch, rather the *do-the-right-things-right* stickler for details. After all, being a perfectionist flowed through her DNA.

Suffice it to say, Kassie didn't alphabetize her spice rack as her mother did. But once upon a time as she prepared to leave for her freshman year in college, she counted the number of cotton balls she used in a week and then calculated a semester's worth. When she ran out two weeks before finals, she'd discovered her plan had one flaw—her roommate. Lesson learned. She hot-footed it to the nearest drug store and gifted her roomie a package to call her own.

Kassie would freely admit she also had a well-developed time management gene. The best part of her day was when she planned the next. When the Franklin Covey store closed in Boston, she took it personally, swearing she'd never shop at that damn mall again. Oh sure, she could order her supplies online, but the thrill of touching the freshly printed planners and sniffing the plush leather binders was stolen from her. How would she ever survive? A quick visit to the Kate Spade store took care of that near disaster.

So imagine what was going on inside her highly compartmentalized mind when the day hadn't started quite the way she'd intended. She rationalized time was on her side. The hands on the oversized round clock hanging prominently on the hospital's waiting room wall read four-seventeen. Was it early morning? Middle of the night? Didn't matter.

Either way, like her cotton ball miscalculation, this trip to the ER was a minor speed bump. Her plan had arms and legs. The day's agenda was as simple as one, two, three—get to the Red Sox game at Fenway, celebrate afterward, tell her husband she'd filed for divorce. Piece of cake. All she needed to do was get Mike out of the hospital and back home so she could jumpstart the rest of her life.

Leaving nothing to chance, four years ago with the help of her lawyer, Kassie drafted longhand on a single sheet of yellow lined paper what she'd say to Mike and hid it in her black Kate Spade wallet along with a list of baby names on frayed blue and pink Post-it-notes. She practiced a million times—role-played with her best friend Annie, recorded it on her iPhone, and recited it solo in front of her bathroom mirror. By now, she knew the simple words by heart. She was ready. Now it was up to him.

Granted, the calendar on the wall behind the nurses' station in the ER lobby said it was Good Friday. *Screw that*. Come hell or high water, it would be Cassandra O'Callaghan's Independence Day. It just had to be. She'd put it off long enough. Maybe there'd be no parades, no fireworks on the river, no Boston Pops at the Hatch Shell, but there'd be a declaration of freedom...her freedom.

For more years than she was willing to admit, Kassie tried to convince herself that telling

her husband she wanted a divorce shouldn't be so distressing. After all, she was a mature woman, a successful marketing executive in her own right. Throughout her career, she'd handled many thorny interactions—money-grubbing ad agencies, arrogant creative directors, egotistical copywriters. To her credit, she'd confronted every business challenge thrown at her and triumphed, most of the time anyway.

Kassie's professional, confident persona was merely that—a mask she'd perfected throughout three decades of climbing the corporate ladder with its discrimination and bosses who relished the bar, both drinking at it and moving it. This was contrary to her personal life where she avoided conflict, especially when it came to Michael Ricci. Ever since he was her Italian professor in college, she approached him with deference, expecting him to grade her every performance. And grade her he did, as a student, a lover, a wife.

"Sometimes I think you leave your brain at the office," was a Mike-ism Kassie heard way too often.

Would that be his reaction to her news? Would he take her seriously? Did couples who were married three decades, *a.k.a. forever*, get divorced or did they just suck it up and choose to live together separately?

Had he been unfaithful? Sometimes she'd wished he had been. At least that would mean Mike was passionate about something, if not her.

Would he be surprised? Or maybe he'd be relieved. It was no secret their relationship began deteriorating a few years after they married, after the miscarriage. Kassie spent much of the first half of their marriage trying to save it, and most of the second half trying to escape it.

Several years ago, well at least over the last four to be sure, she'd start each year with one goal: get the hell out. And then something unpredictable, either work or family related, derailed her, making her put off what she knew deep in her heart and soul she had to do.

"Coward," Annie had said over and over and over.

"No, just waiting for the opportunity. When it knocks, I'll be ready. You'll see." Kassie would say, wagging her finger.

To stay motivated, she established annual mini bargains. If she filed for divorce, she'd buy a new car, or a diamond ring, or take a cruise around the world. Yet, even her mind games hadn't worked.

Motivation wasn't the issue. There were other barriers to exit. She and Mike weren't getting any younger. Both were middle aged, though he had ten years on her. They'd spent more than half of their lives putting up with each other's quirks. Change wasn't in their vocabulary.

Yet Kassie believed Mike deserved to find someone he'd smile at when he woke up in the morning, as she had. And, frankly, she'd grown tired of being scolded by Annie and of delaying the inevitable.

So, when the new year began with Annie chastising her again, Kassie posted a "Just do it" note on her computer monitor at work. And she made a list of what it would take. At the top: courage and a long holiday weekend. Courage, because if she trusted anyone's opinion of her, it was Annie's. And a long weekend, like Easter, because she reasoned if she announced the

divorce on a Friday, Mike would have the weekend to process and cool down before the next workweek began. And she'd have the weekend to celebrate—step two on her agenda. Ooh la la.

Earlier that week with D-Day approaching, an endless *you-can-do-this* message looped through her mind. Kassie felt as if her blood cells could breakthrough her skin and explode like Mentos in a bottle of Coke. The person she was about to confront wasn't some impersonal business associate. This was Mike, someone she once loved. Someone she'd expected would be the father of her children. She had to do something to keep her emotions in check the night before the big reveal or she might chicken out *again*.

Annie suggested a distraction might do the trick. "Take Mike out to dinner or a movie. Keep busy. The night will fly by. You'll see," Annie said.

Though a good idea, Kassie was skeptical. There was one problem. Thursday night had always been "Must-See TV" in the Ricci-O'Callaghan household. It was the night when America's sitcoms and dramas soared—the likes of *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Grey's Anatomy*. Mike never did much else on Thursday nights other than watch TV, no matter the current lineup.

"Shoot me. I'm a homebody," he'd grumble.

Mike had his rituals, as most people do. Kassie accommodated his more often than not. On her way home from the office on Thursday nights, Kassie would buck traffic, struggle to find a parking space, and pick up a pizza for Mike from Boston's North End.

"If you can't get good pizza there, you can't get it anywhere," he'd say. Another Mike-ism.

It didn't matter Kassie had to go out of her way to get his favorite pie or that she rarely ate pizza. Early on in their relationship, Kassie slipped into the habit of putting Mike's needs first. She wasn't proud of subordinating hers. In her way of thinking, habits created within a marriage—whether good or bad—became normalized and accepted. Over time, rationalizing her subservience toward Mike became Kassie's survival mechanism, as did her having a life outside her home.

Take Mike's pizza routine. Though Kassie would remind him his doctor had cautioned him not to eat pizza, Mike would eat it anyway. He always had it with pepperoni and mushrooms, just as he always ate Cheerios for breakfast. He'd wash down his pizza—not the Cheerios—with a beer or two, plunk his dishes in the sink for Kassie to wash, and then head for his favorite Barcalounger in the family room for an evening of comedy and drama. If this kept Mike happy and allowed Kassie some pseudo-freedom, that was fine with her.

So imagine her surprise when Mike said, "Let's do it," when she suggested they go out for dinner on a Thursday of all days. When he added, "Oh, date night. We haven't done that in a while," she had to admit his reaction was not what she expected. It'd been eons since they'd been there, done that. Nevertheless, she was delighted to check "plan Thursday night" off her list.

Other than feasting on lobster, dinner that evening at *Naked Fish* proved uneventful. Not much meaningful dialogue transpired between them anymore. Their conversations these days were often one-sided. Life with Mike was all about Mike, every day, all day—unlike the early years when Mike started his marketing consulting business, and Kassie's own marketing career

looked promising. They had so much in common then, it seemed. Within a few short years, they'd become a power couple in Boston's advertising and marketing world.

Life was one big turn-on. Their dinner table repartee then was full of excitement, problem-solving, and luscious gossip about who was screwing who at the office, figuratively and literally. Sex often was their dessert served at the table, on the floor, against a door. Ah, those were the days.

Nowadays, Kassie would start, "How was your day?"

"Okay, how was yours?"

Then she might say something like, "We met with Sam today. You remember the asshole who—"

Only to have Mike interrupt with something like, "We just signed Eagle Bank today. They wanted to do TV ads, but we recommended they start with radio. Walk before flying..." He'd pause, expecting her to laugh.

She didn't. She'd let him ramble, inserting her travel plans into the conversation whenever he shut up and took a mouthful. He'd never remember she told him when and where she was going, but she knew she had. Her conscience was clear, at least somewhat.

A similar scenario repeated itself that night at dinner, without the sex. She reminded him she would be flying to Washington, D.C., over the weekend to pitch a new assignment to Georgetown University on Monday. When they returned home after dinner, Mike retired to his chair and the TV, and Kassie bolted to their bedroom, which they still shared... *imagine that*...presumably to pack.

Kassie had her rituals, too, most aimed at slowing the inescapable aging process. Despite the butterflies fluttering from her stomach to her chest, or because of them, she stuck to her nighttime routine, detailed on green Post-it-notes with red tulips on her side of the double-wide bathroom mirror.

"You're not in college anymore. Take those notes down before I do," Mike said on more than one occasion. She loved them. Maybe because he hated them.

Although she knew the list by heart, she read it aloud. "Brush teeth, floss, remove make-up, moisturize all over, stretch, meditate."

She tried to relax on her mauve meditation pillow and changed up her usual practice, chanting instead the short and sweet words she and her lawyer drafted. With deep cleansing breaths, she began.

"Om. Mike, there's something we need to talk about.

"Om. We've been working on us for a very long time." *Not true, I've been working, he's been skating.*

"Om. I don't mean to hurt you, Mike, but I've filed for divorce.

"Om. It's not you...it's me." *Am I really going to say that?*

"Om. You'll be served papers next Tuesday. Where do you want to receive them?

"Om. Better here than at the office, eh?"

She bowed her head and raised a prayer to sweet Jesus and her mother to give her the

courage and strength to survive the next twenty-four hours.

With that, Kassie popped a Tylenol PM for good measure, climbed into the California king waterbed she wished they'd replaced years ago, and with steamy visions of where she'd be sleeping the next night, sunk into a toasty, soothing sleep. For a while, anyway.

In a drug-induced fog, Kassie opened one eye. The bedroom was dark, except for a smidgen of light outlining the bathroom door at the opposite end of the bedroom. That was odd. She rolled over and searched for Baby Ben. She knocked over a soy candle and the familiar aroma of green apples floated in the air. Thankfully it wasn't lit.

Fumbling around, she found the clock. Without her glasses, Kassie pulled the clock right up to her face. Ten after two give or take. She never could remember if the clock was ten or twenty minutes fast. Kassie started setting her clock ahead five years ago as a New Year's resolution. She always tried to tackle one more thing before leaving the house, so she figured finagling with the clock would break a bad habit. Not so much. Instead, her brain recalculated the time, and she'd end up either late or right on schedule. It wasn't the problem solver she'd hoped it would be, but it entertained her. It may have even replaced a few of the brain cells the wine she drank had killed.

A quick swing of her arm and sweep of her leg across the bed confirmed Mike was elsewhere. With a grunt, Kassie threw back the heirloom quilt that once belonged to her mother and lifted herself out of the waterbed. She flipped on the lamp she and Mike had made from seashells they'd collected on the beaches of Cape Cod, sat on the wooden bed frame, and tried to figure out what was happening. In her mind's ear, she could hear Mike scold her for sitting on the edge of the bed.

What are you trying to do? Break the bed? Flood the whole house?

But then she heard moaning and got a whiff of an unmistakable odor wafting from the bathroom. A line etched between her brow. No doubt about it. Mike was puking.

The lobster?

She ambled toward the bathroom, giving her arms a good wake-up shake. "Gee whiz, Mike you must've pulled the short straw tonight. My lobster was de-licious!"

Kassie opened the bathroom door. She stood speechless.

Chapter 2

KassieCare

You've got to be kidding. Not again. Kassie's hands covered her ears.

Sitting in the emergency room lobby at Boston Clinic in the middle of the night, she heard the sirens first in the distance, and then right on top of her as ambulances arrived. She never got used to their shrillness or their meaning. Somebody was in deep trouble.

It was déjà vu all over again. Her memories of Boston Clinic were vivid and heavy-hearted. She'd never forget the day she was there long ago when she'd miscarried, and the many nights and days more recently as Patricia O'Callaghan, her mother, had fought and succumbed to

lung cancer. Her death a year ago left Kassie parentless. *Adults need parents, too, don't they?*

Kassie guessed her mom wouldn't be happy she'd decided to go ahead with the divorce. She'd stayed with Mike mostly to appease her mom, who almost always defended him when Kassie broached the subject of divorce with her.

"It's up to you, KO, to do everything you can to save your marriage," her mother would say.

"I've tried. But you can be lonely even if you live with someone. Believe me, I know."

"But he's not an alcoholic. Doesn't beat you. Doesn't fool around. He puts a roof over your head and food on the table. And he *let* you have your own career. What else is there?"

"More. I want more. Someday I'll show you what more means."

Her mother didn't live to see what *more* meant to Kassie, but someday had arrived. Despite her well-thought-out game plan, she anticipated telling Mike she'd filed for divorce much the same way she approached going to the dentist—dreading it ahead of time, but breathing a sigh of relief when it was over.

Little did Kassie know going to the dentist would be like a walk in the park when that Good Friday was history. Things started to spiral from bad to are-you-kidding-me bad when Mike insisted she take him to the hospital. Collapsed on the bathroom floor, he looked pitiful. The color drained from his face. Crying. In all the years she'd known him, she'd never seen him tear up. Not for funerals, weddings, movies, nothin', never. There were times she doubted he even had tear ducts.

"I tried to pee," he'd said. "But the room swirled. I lost everything. I found the john, right?"

"Not to worry. I'll take care of it."

Kassie grabbed an oversized towel and draped it around his shoulders, making him look like a heavyweight boxer between rounds. She mopped up the curdled stinking mess, succeeded in not gagging, and sat on the cold white tile beside him.

"I need to go to the hospital." Mike rested his head on her shoulder.

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

She rubbed the back of his shirt which he'd soaked through and suggested if he tried to sleep, he could go to the doctor in the morning. Who wants to go to the ER in the middle of the night?

"Kassie, get me to the hospital. Now."

Something was terribly wrong, something beyond bad shellfish.

"You look like hell. Can you make it to the car, or should I call an ambulance?" Kassie was relieved when he chose to drive. No reason to wake the neighborhood.

Though almost a foot shorter than Mike, Kassie had muscles enough to hike him to his feet. At just over six feet and two-hundred pounds, Mike loomed larger than he was, especially when Kassie stood by his side. They would never pass as the perfect Hollywood-looking couple, though their romance was as volatile. But it didn't matter to them. The difference in their size,

they'd agreed, was one of the things that attracted each to the other in the first place.

She curled her arm under his armpit. "Heave ho. Let's get you up."

As he stood, she saw the tears up close streaming down Mike's unshaven, handsome face. Her heart throbbed over what could have been. Her eyes blinked, stifling her own waterworks.

Mike shuffled into the bedroom, still with the towel around his slumped shoulders, and perched himself onto the wooden bed frame and scowled. "Don't say a word."

She swallowed so hard her left ear popped.

"Let's get you dressed." Kassie wiped his face with a warm wet washcloth. "Better?"

"I'll need your help. Get me clean underwear."

What? Kassie had never been in his bureau. Mike had proclaimed it off limits to her. When they were first dating—not quite cohabiting—in Columbia, Missouri, he taught her to fold his clothes to his specifications, and then he'd put them away. She respected his privacy then. He was her college professor, and she'd do just about anything for him, especially when it involved his boxer shorts. Once they married, the laundry routine continued. She never gave it much thought as it was one less chore she'd have to do around the house.

"Second drawer."

"Good thing we dumped all those old, decrepit undershirts and shorts!" Kassie tried to lighten the mood. Mike didn't laugh, or maybe he wasn't listening, which was more likely the case.

Mike dressed with a little grunt here, and a big grunt there. Or maybe it was a little fart here, a big fart there. You never could tell with Mike. Whatever noises Mike emitted woke Topher, Kassie's yellow tabby, who had curled up on her side of the bed. Topher yawned, stretched, and swiped his white paw over his sleepy eyes as cats do. *What are those humans doing at this strange hour?*

"I think I'll try to pee again." Mike headed back to the bathroom.

Kassie fussed around the room, mumbling to Topher about neither of them having a good night's sleep. Not the best day to be sleep deprived. After a few minutes, she checked on Mike. He stood there with a pained grimace on his face.

"No luck?"

"No luck."

"Mike, your feet! They're swollen big time. Oh my God! Can you wiggle your toes?"

Mike looked down and tried. "No, not really. Salt from dinner, ya think?"

"You'll need to wear your flip-flops. I'll go find them. Don't go anywhere." Kassie threw her hands in the air.

She left him to finish dressing and ran downstairs. She dug through the hall coat closet and found an old pair of cheap black flip-flops from last summer. A stack of five Red Sox hats caught her eye. Sorting through them, she grabbed her favorite red one. A gift from a friend. She closed her eyes, breathed in its lingering scent, and smiled. *It won't be long.*

She ran upstairs, tossed the hat on the bed, missing Topher's head by a hair. "How you

doin'? You ready?"

"I am, but you may want to wear something else."

Kassie glanced down at her short black silk nightgown. *Oh crap, can't go like this.*

Topher had moved from the bed to the honey-colored chaise lounge, resting his head on the lap of the dark tan teddy bear with a pink and blue plaid bow Mike had given her when she was pregnant years before. It had survived even if the baby and their marriage hadn't. The chaise lounge was once upon a time Kassie's favorite chair, especially when losing herself in a murder mystery. After she'd adopted Topher, saving him from almost certain death, he in turn adopted the chaise. She nudged him and swiped her jeans and the black turtleneck she'd thrown there after dinner. Cat hair be damned.

"Do you need help getting downstairs?"

"No, I don't think so. Don't forget your phone."

Kassie unplugged it. Though fully charged, she took the charger anyway and headed downstairs to her office. She grabbed her wallet from her purse and threw everything in her black leather briefcase.

Almost on autopilot and without checking "Topher's care" list she'd posted on the inside of the pantry, Kassie went into the eat-in kitchen and filled Topher's food and water bowls. They should be back home in time to give him his meds.

She filled a water bottle for herself and shouted to Mike, who had begun his measured descent.

"How about a bottle of water for the road? Might that help?"

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not. How do you expect to pee if you don't have enough fluids in you? Less soda and more H2O might do you some good."

"Whatever. Which car we taking?"

"Mine. Does it matter?"

"Sure. If I'm gonna puke again, I don't want to be in my car!" He laughed alone. Not quite a Mike-ism, but typical Mike, a side of him Kassie came to ignore with practice.

She tossed her briefcase into the backseat and helped him into the car.

"Planning to drop me at the hospital and then go to the office?"

"No, but I might as well work on my Georgetown presentation while I'm waiting for you to be examined. Remember I'm heading down there this weekend?"

Kassie bit her lower lip at the lie and backed the midnight blue Mercedes out of the oversized two-car garage. She checked the gas gauge. Half full? Half empty? Didn't matter. She had plenty to get them to the hospital. The trip from Newton to Boston on I-90 should be quick at that hour.

"Where's your transponder?" Mike said in between heavy breaths.

"Right here on the visor. Hang in there, Mike." She touched his arm with assurance. "Not much traffic at this hour."

And she was right. Kassie wheeled the Mercedes into a familiar parking spot in front of

the ER as if it was reserved for her. She leaned toward the steering wheel and kissed it. “Good girl,” she whispered. At least the car could be called that.

Chapter 3

Lady In Waiting

Kassie peered into the ER lobby that was lit up as bright as a highway construction site at night trying to anticipate how long they’d have to wait. If only she were clairvoyant like her mom swore she was. Though she never claimed to have ESP, Kassie thought it wicked cool her mom had bestowed that superpower on her when she was growing up.

As a child, there were the times when the phone would ring, and Kassie would announce who was calling before her mom answered it. Or they’d be at a restaurant, and she’d predict a waiter would drop a stack of plates, and then before she could count to ten, *crash*.

“What do you think’s gonna happen?” her mom would ask ahead of an upcoming family or sporting event. “Will Aunt Emma bring her dreadful pasta to the picnic? Who’s gonna win, Yankees or Red Sox? What’s the score going to be?”

“I don’t know what will happen. It doesn’t work that way. I just watch and listen to what people say and do, and then sometimes something inside me stirs. I’m an observer of life, and just lucky in my guesses, I guess.”

There were times, though, Kassie shocked herself because the sensations that bubbled up from somewhere deep in her gut were vivid, intense, and foreboding. She couldn’t ignore them. Like the day the principal walked into her third grade class. She sensed he’d call her name even before he did. And when she saw her mother waiting in the principal’s office, she knew her father had died. Why else would her mother show up at school on Friday the thirteenth? *Freaky!*

Still, Kassie refused to totally buy into her mother’s ESP theory. Rather, she attributed these strange occurrences to a finely tuned intuition fueled in part by reading the Stephen King books lining her bookshelves. As an adult traveling around the country, she’d often track down fortune tellers for a palm or tarot card reading. Over time, their prognostications scared Kassie shitless because of their similarity whether it was a psychic in San Francisco, Scottsdale, or Seattle. Didn’t matter.

Starting in her twenties when each foreshadowed some version of “A younger man will come into your life and turn your world upside down,” she interpreted it to mean she’d have a son someday. But when their single-focused prophesy continued unfulfilled into her forties, she halted the useless psychic research into her future. Enough of that insanity. Instead she’d take her chances on her own magical powers to guide her destiny, be it good or bad.

If her mother was right, how did Kassie not foresee this trip to the ER? She inhaled deeply to conjure up whatever inner force she possessed. Squinting her eyes to get a better view, she concluded the ER looked alive but not crazy busy. She took it as an optimistic sign they’d get in and out fast.

“I’ll get a wheelchair.”

“Don’t bother. I can walk.”

No sooner had she jumped out of the car to open the door for Mike when a tall good-looking black man in blue scrubs approached their car.

“What have we got here?”

“It’s my back, doctor.”

“I’m Tommy Thompson. A nurse. Not a doctor. Let me grab a wheelchair.”

Kassie leaned into the car, clenched her teeth, and whispered, “Your back? Since when?”

“He’s not a doctor. Damn it. I’ll wait to talk to a doctor.” Mike stared straight.

“Why because he’s black? Or because he’s a male nurse? Can’t you stifle it for once in your life?”

Mike held onto the car door for leverage and settled his rear into the wheelchair.

“It’s not too hectic tonight, so I’ll take...oh, I’m sorry, sir, what is your name?”

“Mike. Mr. Mike Ricci.”

“Okay, Mr. Mike, I’ll take you right into an examining room. And Mrs. Ricci, please go to the main desk. The staff there will take your husband’s information and get him checked in.”

Relieved to get away from Mike even for a few minutes, she walked through the sliding glass doors chuckling. Tommy Thompson gave as good as he got. *How do you like them apples, Mike?*

She fumbled through her briefcase to retrieve their insurance information and filled out and signed the paperwork. She noticed the Wi-Fi password on a poster and logged on. No messages yet. The redeye from San Francisco wasn’t due for another three hours. Enough time to have Mike examined and back home, she hoped.

“Could you tell me where Mike Ricci is? My husband?” She almost choked. Her words tasted as bitter as a mouthful of kale.

“Just have a seat, Mrs. Ricci. We’ll let you know when you can see him. The waiting room’s over there. Is that your car outside? You’ll need to move it to the garage.”

Gulp. She’d recently attended an international travel safety course sponsored by her company where she learned in graphic detail how bad people in this world operated. Parking in a dark, poorly lit garage in the middle of the night especially alone was something to be avoided at all cost. She knew if she were going to divorce Mike and be on her own, she’d have to overcome fears like these, no matter if they were rational or not. She took a deep breath and obeyed the admitting nurse who had the power to make her time there miserable if she was so inclined.

“Excuse me. Would it be possible, I mean, may I leave my case with you, here, while I move my car? Please? I’ll just take my keys.” Kassie waved her carabiner.

When she returned unharmed, she strode down the hall to the all-too-familiar waiting room. She’d been there before when her mother was ill. She studied the room, assessing her seating options. Something had changed. Wood-framed couches and chairs with complimentary cloth cushions of royal blue and forest green stripes replaced the metal and black vinyl chairs. Hand sanitizer stations stood guard on both sides of the entryway, as well as in the middle and

far corners of the room. Germs better beware.

Taking the not-so-subtle hint, Kassie availed herself of the cold gooey gel and chose a seat in the far corner facing the doorway so she'd see when someone came to get her.

But no one came, at least not within the fifteen minutes Kassie allocated as waiting time. She heard sirens approaching, reminding her of her mother's lengthy decline and demise.

"Mom, if you're watching, you better have my back today," she prayed.

Her stomach gurgled in response. *Tea, I need tea. What are my choices?* There were no Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts on site. The 24-hour coffee shop was in another building. She didn't want to be too far away in case Mike was ready to leave.

"Pardon me," she whispered. "Is there somewhere to get tea around here?" She lifted her index finger and gestured a circle.

The same admitting nurse raised her eyes from the computer screen and peered over her tortoise-shell glasses. "Just vending. Down the hall on the right."

"Oh yes, I forgot. Thanks, any word yet on Mike Ricci, my husband?" Again that word. Again that hint of bitterness in her voice and her mouth. Was she being punished with this constant reminder she was about to take steps that would change the whole husband-wife until death do you part thing? She wondered if ex-husband would roll off her tongue any smoother.

"No, I'm sorry," the nurse replied in full voice. "Not yet. The chief resident is with him now. These things take time, especially at night. If they're running any tests, it could take twice as long to get the results, you know."

Another déjà vu moment. Kassie knew all too well.

Tiptoeing down the empty hallway, she tried to silence the *clickety-clack* of her heels. *Should've worn my Skechers.* She imagined the hospital's infrastructure asleep, regenerating itself as the human body did. God forbid she disturbed or slowed down that process.

Kassie found the small windowless room that housed the vending machines. She crossed her arms and stared at them. Who invented these cretins anyway? Did they replace automats she and her mom visited in New York City when she was little? She'd call them food prisons where only exact change could free boiled ham and processed cheese sandwiches and slices of lemon meringue pies from their jail cells. Or were they another method for the mob to monopolize an industry and make a shitload of money? Maybe a little of both. Didn't matter.

There they were. Three vending machines standing idle side-by-side beckoning her to feed them so they could feed her.

Kassie took the smallest bill she had in her wallet and checked for a change machine. No luck. She stepped back, eye-balling them. Which would take a five and make change? The "Exact change only" light on the candy and coffee machines flashed. Only the one with wimpy-looking sandwiches would take her five. She purchased a turkey and cheese on what she expected was soggy day-old rye bread and scooped up the change she'd need to buy a lukewarm cup of tea. The sandwich found its way into the green trash bin with a loud *kerplunk*, and the tea went down the hatch. On the way back to the waiting area, she swung by the ladies' room.

"I'm cleanin' here," a tiny pretty woman said with a thick accent. Was it Turkish or

Greek or Mexican? If it weren't Italian or Irish, Kassie couldn't place it. Didn't matter.

"You should be at home with your family, in bed, asleep!" Kassie teased.

"You got that right. You, too."

"Can I come in?"

"Sure. But be careful. Floor's a little slippery."

A little slippery? That's all she'd need to do was fall on her ass and land in a bed next to Mike. What would happen to her plans then?

As she left the ladies' room, Kassie gagged as cleaning fluid fumes and hospital antiseptic converged up her nose. Stark reminder of where she was. She ambled back to the waiting room, gelled up again, and glanced at the oversized round clock on the wall. She'd been there for an hour and a half already. No word yet, from anyone.

In the time she'd been away, two couples had arrived. From what she overheard as she passed them, one was a car accident, the other was an overdose. Kassie's chest tightened as she maneuvered her way past the families to the same chair she had previously occupied, claiming it as her own, the same way college students did.

The tea may have settled her stomach, but it did little to help her figure out what was wrong with Mike. Was it the lobster he ate? He'd passed on his usual Dewar's and water, which she thought might be a good sign.

Mike had told her that during his last physical his doctor advised him to slim down, shape up, and stop smoking. Even at his age, Mike should be able to improve his health. Kassie took the doctor's advice seriously, but she was never sure if Mike did. She enrolled in a Weight Watchers cooking class, and once a week for six weeks, she left work early and learned how to poach, smoke, and grill foods that would reduce carbohydrates. While Mike had lost about ten pounds, Kassie benefitted more, losing fifteen. Together with her walking, yoga, and weight training, her fifty-four-year-old body had taken on a leaner, sexier shape, which would not go to waste even if Mike turned a blind eye.

Kassie checked the clock again. Almost five-thirty and still no sign of a doctor or Mike. The other couples had already left. Leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes, she inhaled, imagining the rest of the day, starting with getting Mike out of the hospital as soon as possible. She calculated they'd need to head home by ten at the latest.

The pit stop to the ER was not on her agenda. She wanted to get on with the first day of the rest of her life, starting with the Red Sox game. A couple of months ago Kassie was invited to sit in the company box at Fenway. Under the circumstances, she declined the invitation. Instead she'd called her ticket broker and bought bleacher tickets for two.