

*Every now and then, people who
need to, find each other again—
magic meeting grace.*

KB

That Crazy Little Thing

A NOVEL

by

KATE BRACY



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Wake Up

I'm not a morning person. Neurologically speaking, you may as well talk to the toaster if you want a lively companion before ten a.m. I admit that I wake up slowly about pretty much everything, love included. This might be the blueprint for my life, a preview of the larger picture. I'll start out kind of clueless and vague—unconscious almost—and gradually recognize what's important, becoming more competent as time goes on.

A year ago, I would have denied that romantic love was anything more than good marketing. I certainly would have scoffed at anyone who carried a torch for more than a decade, never knowing that she (or he) was beloved. I would have happily told you that daughters break your heart as thoroughly as ex-boyfriends, and I would have suggested that best friends are your surest bet for any kind of happy ending.

But some surprises sweep through like Dorothy's tornado, turning everything around in a topsy-turvy gale, and set it back on the ground facing a whole new direction. That's how it happened one fall. Four short months that left me a shaken girl.

What I understand about "Love" now is that maybe it lives in places you've never visited before. That sometimes it comes wearing a spikey hairdo and black boots or a crooked tie and a business suit. Sometimes you find it riding in a truck on a winter day, and sometimes love sits straight up in a hospital bed and

makes you laugh so hard you wet your pants. Again. And maybe that having the chance to love someone through a dark moment is all the proof you need to become a believer.

You go chugging through your days, thinking things are one way or maybe even not thinking at all. Then something happens that makes you do a fancy little double take on your life and suddenly you're signing up for meditation lessons and making a trousseau quilt for your daughter even if she hates you. Something really sad makes you reach into that duffel bag of a heart of yours and start feeling for a piece of joy that you can bring out and look at. Wouldn't matter what it was, just something to make it worth watching the clock tick by.

Joy, to put it mildly, was not on my radar. You might even say that it found me. And here *I* am, smiling at odd moments—happy in a way I don't understand. Rolling my eyes at my daughter Jessie instead of trying to find a murder weapon. Humming under my breath, almost forgetting that there were times when I felt as though Mercury would be in permanent retrograde in my astrological chart.

Here's the thing. I had to come face-to-face with death to decide to walk arm-in-arm with life. I came here kicking and screaming, only to find it's exactly where I want to be. It reminds me of the Sesame Street story I used to read to Jessie when she was tiny about *The Monster at the End of This Book*. Grover narrates and is terrified because he has heard that there is a monster at the end of the book. He tries to get the reader to stop turning pages, lest they face the dreaded monster. Finally, when all efforts to stop the page-turning have failed, he is forced to face... himself! Whew! No biggie. Just furry, lovable old Grover, after all. And that's where I am now, marveling at that crazy little thing called "Love" that was waiting at the end of the book all along.

We'll start on that fall day when the leaves rustled under my window. It was just another day. It was before I learned that

my friend Donna was holding secrets. Before sitting in a chemo center reminded me that life is quick, and that today is your best shot at every kind of love, so keep your eyes open.

Wake up.

Chapter 1
NOVEMBER, 2018

“I will be out in the car!” I yelled up the stairs. “Jessie? I’ll be out in the car!”

“My car!” she yelled back down to me.

“Yes, *your* car! But on the title, it’s *my* car! That’s how we afford insurance!”

I was tired of yelling up the stairs. Tired of arguing about whose car it was and whose life it was and who did or did not ask to be born. And the fact that her dad gave her the car and an iPhone and permission to hate me just made me feel that much worse about all of it.

I walked out onto the porch and breathed in the November day. Ordinarily, I would have walked to work on a day like this—the sun, the clear air. But I’d promised Donna I would take her to a doctor’s appointment, and my car was busy having its stolen catalytic converter replaced. Just my luck to be vandalized the very week I needed to be available to a friend, but so be it. Jessie knew there would be times when I would need to borrow the car—*her* car. It was part of our deal.

I got in and started the engine. The familiar Volkswagen putter reassured me. It was pointless to start the heater before the engine was good and warm, so I put the radio on while I waited. The thumping, pounding drone of some rap artist assaulted my eardrums when I hit the power button. I turned it off immediately.



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It wasn't worth the argument with Jessie, if she ever made it out there, to change the station to something I could stand.

How had it come to this? We used to look forward to the ride to school. She would tell me what was coming up in the day, and I would tell her what we'd be having for dinner that night and we'd talk about all sorts of minutiae that provided the glue for the mother/daughter bond. Lately, it was more like the mother/daughter bomb. I never knew when she would go off, and often enough I couldn't figure out for the life of me what I'd done that lit the fuse.

After about five or six minutes, she came clumping down the steps. She opened the door and plopped into the seat beside me. "Drive slow. I have to do my makeup." She pulled a black zippered pouch out of her black leather backpack and tipped the passenger sun visor down to use the mirror. I glanced over at her. Her hair was the latest iteration of... I never knew what to call it. Neogoth? Retropunk? GenZAddams? Shaved on one side, cornrowed on the other, with a three-inch teased mohawk down the middle. Fluorescent orange. At least the mohawk divider was not the original eight inches it was when she first had it dyed. It had been so hard and straight in the air that she'd had to tip her head sideways to sit in the car and drive. It was still the color of a construction worker's vest, but at least there was less of it.

She was wearing a short black pleated skirt, black leggings, a black T-shirt with metal spikes around the crew neck and ankle-high lace-up boots. Outlining her lower lashes with black pencil, she eye-rolled, "What are you *waiting* for?" Her tone was the one you might use with someone who had just vomited on your favorite chair.

"Well, I thought maybe I should wait until you weren't in danger of poking your eye out if we hit a pothole."

"Nah. I'm good. Go ahead, or I'll be late."

It struck me as ironic that someone who looked like an extra

in a slasher movie would be worried about getting to school before the second bell. I pulled out carefully, keeping one eye on the liner pencil.

“What time will you be home?” she wanted to know, examining her work in the small square mirror over her head.

“I’m not sure. Donna’s appointment is for mid-afternoon, but sometimes they run late.”

“Well, it will probably be after dark, right?”

She had a provisional license that mandated driving only in daylight. Dusk came early in November.

“Sorry, Jess. I didn’t plan this. I promised Donna.”

“What kind of doctor’s appointment is it? I mean, she doesn’t usually ask you to hold her hand.”

“I’m not sure about that, either. For some reason, she didn’t want to go alone.”

I knew that Jessie adored Donna. Maybe she was worried. How could you tell under all that eyeliner? She used to be such a tender-hearted kid.

I pulled up at Remington High School and turned to Jessie. “Have a good day, Sweetie.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” She dragged her backpack across the seat after herself and slammed the door, “Tell Donna I say ‘Hey.’”

“Okay.”

I followed the spikes of her bright orange hair until she disappeared into a mass of kids heading for the double doors. I was tempted to put the top down on the little cabriolet, but I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to get it back up, so I drove the three miles to work with the windows open. I like the smell of autumn.

I got to work about forty-five minutes earlier than usual. I put the coffee on in the Mr. Coffee perched on the built-in carved oak sideboard. This building had been constructed as the grand administration building for the New York State Hospital for the Insane. That was back in the 1890s, and the towering sandstone

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structures were still impressive. The high ceilings and extravagant woodwork, especially in this building, were beautifully preserved pieces of craftsmanship that you didn't see anymore. Most of the hospital buildings had been sold to the New York State Department of Correctional Services, so just outside my window there were four medium-security buildings and one unit for special offenders that houses several varieties of sexual criminals. My neighbors.

But there were also several units still offering psychiatric services, and the hospital was renamed the North Country Psychiatric Center—NCPC for short. Dr. Eisenhart, my boss, had been there a dozen years, and I'd been his confidential secretary for ten of those. He was an easy boss, and we had a comfortable arrangement. He counted on me to do my work and I counted on him to keep letting me.

I took this job after he caught his previous secretary upstairs in the old boarded-up staff's quarters, making a little time with one of the patients from the alcohol rehab unit. She was an easy act to follow. I had been out of the job market for ten years and suddenly needed to support myself. I'd let my teaching certificate lapse. Somehow between helping Dean start his plumbing business and birthing Jessie, keeping that certificate dropped in priority. So when Dean announced that he was leaving me for Mary Ann Tibbideaux, I was so shell-shocked I applied for the first thing that came along.

Dr. E. was memorably polite in that interview considering I probably looked as desperate as I was. I explained that I had a B.A. in English education, but that my circumstances demanded that I take a job right away. He asked me if I could type and whether I was good with time management. I told him I had helped Dean set up the business and that I had managed all the day-to-day details. He said he needed someone he could rely on, and if I was sure that I wasn't going to leave for a teaching job in a couple of months, he'd like to check my references.

I asked him if he had ever faced a classroom full of eighth graders. He shook his head. I said if he had, he'd understand why doing office work might look pretty good to me. I also said that I wanted a job that wasn't going away, and that offered benefits because I was about to be a single mom with a six-year-old who was going to need braces someday.

He called me the next morning and offered me the position. I heaved a sigh of relief and told him he wouldn't be sorry. As far as I could tell, he hadn't been. In fact, I think we both felt pretty lucky about the whole situation. I worked for a guy who encouraged me to go to Jessie's band concerts, and he had an assistant who fended off reporters and lawyers on the phone and told him when his tie was crooked, which it usually was.

I settled in that morning to filter through Dr. E.'s mail. I'm the first stop on everything that comes through the office. The doc is a sweet man, but predictable in most ways, and monitoring his correspondence is not what I'd call 'scintillating.' Now and then a request from a local television station to do an interview is about as electrifying as it gets.

I flag anything that looks like it needs attention, and he looks at those first. I read, I flag, I file. That's pretty much it. He appreciates the triage, but we mostly don't talk about the content. I know what he wants to see, and he trusts me to sift through the three hundred or so messages that he gets every day. He goes home at night and finishes looking at all the unflagged messages. Because of privacy laws and the confidential nature of his work, his account is programmed to delete everything in "Trash" when he signs out. Besides, we are government workers and email can be requested as public information. The rule is, "If you don't want to see it as a headline on *The Remington Record* website, don't write it in email." At any rate, every morning when I come in, his inbox is empty and ready for the day's new three hundred.

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“I like big *butts* and I cannot *lie!*” Buddy bounded in, a new laptop under one arm, imaginary microphone in the other hand. He startled me, and I spilled coffee onto my desk.

Buddy does not come quietly into the office like your typical IT manager. No, Buddy makes an entrance. Not that he really has to try. At six feet five and about two-hundred and thirty pounds, you couldn’t miss him if he *tiptoed* in. Which he never does.

“Jeeze, Buddy,” I said, “Not so loud this early. Let a girl wake up.”

“Right. If that Maxwell House gets into your keyboard, I’m the one who’ll have to fix it.” He smiled.

It’s hard to stay mad at Buddy. Before he went to school for his computer science degree, he was a maintenance foreman in the building. I’ve known him forever—his sister is Donna, whose doctor’s appointment had me driving my daughter’s bright green convertible. My mom used to do their family’s ironing, and we lived about four blocks from each other growing up. He’s the sort of guy who thinks life is one big improv, and it would probably be a lot of fun to ride around in his shirt pocket for a day if I were the size of a mouse. Which I’m not.

“Where’s the big E today?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s in Chicago interviewing that woman who chloroformed her three kids and shipped them to her ex via UPS.”

Yeah, I read about that. Thank God Lori never went that nuts. The worst she ever did was mail me a used condom when she started dating again. I tucked it back into her child support check when I mailed it out that month. We never mentioned it either way.”

“Blech!” I said, “Isn’t that against the law or something? Mailing body fluids across state lines?”

“Who knows? I thought about sending her a muddy thong to show her that she wasn’t the only one having fun, but I wanted to see the kids again, so I let it go.”

“Muddy?” I asked, and then thought better of it. “Never mind. What’s with the laptop?”

“Finally, the doc gets a new one. I told him if he didn’t get one pretty soon, I’d be rummaging for parts at antique stores. He finally heard that, and it came in today. Can I set it up in his office?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.” I turned back to my own computer screen. “Be sure you set up the new one to be just the same as his old one because he’ll come to me for help and you know *that’s* not good.”

“Right. Blind leading the blind,” he said, disappearing into Dr. Eisenhart’s office.

I opened the doc’s inbox, scanned for requests to be an expert witness, and flagged those first. Dr. Eisenhart specializes in the psychiatric treatment of women who kill, or try to kill, their children. The press calls him “Dr. Medea” after the Greek goddess who killed her sons rather than let her husband have them. It’s a grisly little sub-specialty if you ask me. But he’s fascinated by it and does a lot of testifying.

After requests for testimony, I opened those asking for media interviews, and then any personnel issues for the hospital. I clicked on one with “CNN Interview” as the subject line. I was expecting someone either inviting him to appear, or commenting on his appearance last night regarding the chloroform mom.

The email itself was innocent. The sender was “Sanders, Evelyn” and it said:

Edward!

I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you talking to Anderson Cooper last night on CNN! You did a lovely job with the interview, and you haven’t aged a day. I hope all is well in your world.

Best Always (if you even remember who I am.)

Evelyn

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Because he had accessed his mail through webmail, Dr. E.'s response was still in his "Sent" folder. Usually, I don't read his responses, but something made me curious about Evelyn, so I opened his response.

Dear lady!

I jumped six feet out of my chair when I saw your name in my inbox. I trust you are doing well. Of course, I remember you—I remember vividly our days of working together back in St. Paul. Are you still at the hospital?

If it's not too much of an imposition, I wonder if I could have your office number. I would love to call and see how you are faring.

Kind Regards,

Ed

Six feet out of his chair? Hmm. Now it might have been just nothing, but when you are a man's secretary for several years, you have a sense about him. It is a tiny marriage, in a way, and you can tell when he is upset, or delighted, or excited. Dr. Eisenhart was always professional, and politely formal in a sort of "old world" way. He opened the door for me when we arrived at the same time; he touched his hat when he left at the end of the day. But I had never seen him jump six feet out of his chair for anyone.

Even when the nurses or managers flirted with him, he seemed to be completely unaware. In fact, when the nursing director started making him fudge and knitting socks for him, I was the one who had to tell him that she was making a play. He immediately called her into his office. I'm not sure what he said behind that door, but she was crying when she left, and there were no more sock deliveries.

My own love life could only be called pathetic, so when

it looked like someone else's might be perking up, it got my attention. Truthfully, I never really thought of Dr. E. as *having* a love life, fudge and homemade socks notwithstanding. He always reminded me more of Lou Grant than Cary Grant, so not exactly a babe magnet. I will say that having met his wife I can safely say that no jury would convict the man for looking around a little.

Just as I was mulling over Evelyn Sanders's email, Buddy popped his head out of the office.

"Okay, I've migrated all his files into the new laptop. Do you want me to set up his mailbox, or can you do that?"

"Buddy, you know I'm hopeless about the setup thing," I said. "I wish you'd do it."

"No problem." He ducked back into the office.

As I listened to the soft clicking as Buddy finished with the setup, I considered Dr. E and his request for Evelyn's number. My sixth, seventh, and eighth senses told me that something was up. I was of several minds about it. One mind said, "None of your business kid. Dr. E. has a life outside this office, and it's not yours." Another mind said, "You've known the man for a decade. You would love to see him happy and with someone besides that patronizing horror he calls a wife. It had to have been some sort of karmic mistake." Yet another mind said, "Look. Your own husband took off with a chesty blonde and left you with a kid to raise. You have no business rooting for a man to take up with an old work friend." That same mind added, "On the other hand, we don't really know that's what this is, do we?"

"No, we don't," I said out loud.

"We don't what?" Buddy, packing up his gear, turned around and looked at me from Dr. E.'s desk.

"Remember last year when Dr. E. had that stalker? The guy who kept sending threatening emails?"

"Yeah..." He put on his NY Giants cap and stood in front of my desk.

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“We had to save those emails as evidence, and you made a rule to put them all in a special folder, didn’t you?”

“Is he back? I thought they threw the book at him.”

“No, they did. But I thought I might start putting some of Dr. E.’s emails into folders, especially if it looks like we might need them in the future. We don’t want to lose them, and he deletes everything from his inbox and trash when he signs off.”

“Oh. Right. I can send you a link that explains how to do that. Is that enough?”

“Yes.”

He put down his two bags, one containing the doctor’s old laptop, and one with his equipment. “I’ll do it now.” He pulled his phone from his back pocket, dabbed at it with his big index finger. And then looked up, “There you go. Let me know if you need any help with it.”

I heard the ‘ping’ of his email coming into my inbox. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“Naw. Part of the job. But I wouldn’t mind you setting me up with Tina LeClair over in accounting.”

“Tina?” I thought of the petite brunette in the business office. She was ten years his junior. I couldn’t really picture them together. Then again, who was I to say? “Yes, I guess I can see if she is interested. We go to lunch together on Tuesdays.”

“I want her to know I speak accounting fluently. Tell her I just got a raise, and I think she has great assets. And her debits ain’t too bad either.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Great. Let me know after you talk to her, so I can find an excuse to go update her software.”

“I’ll keep you posted.”

“Appreciate it, Mel.” He tilted his head and smiled at me.”

“What?” I looked down to see if I had spilled something down the front, and patted my hair, in case it was sticking out straight from the earlier wind.

“Nothing. You’re pretty cute before you’re awake.”

I rolled my eyes and threw a pencil at him, which he caught and handed back to me.

“I see where Jessie gets it.”

“Gets what?”

“Sorry Mel. I got work to do.” As I raised the pencil to throw it again, I heard the “ping” of another email. Evelyn Sanders again. I looked back up and Buddy was already out the door.

I clicked on the new note.

Hello again, Edward.

I wouldn't mind in the least if you wanted to call my office. I'm not in St. Paul anymore. I moved shortly after you left. I live near Seattle these days and am now managing the psychiatric unit in the county jail.

I'll look forward to catching up. And to hearing your voice again. 206-233-9090, extension 4484.

Best.

Evelyn

As I was trying to discern whether “best, Evelyn” had a flirtatious tone, the phone rang. “North Country Psychiatric Center, Dr. Eisenhart’s office.” I said.

“Mel, it’s Donna. Are you still going with me to the doctor?” She sounded uncharacteristically tentative.

“Yes, planning on it. And I’ll apologize ahead of time. I have Jessie’s car. She gave me the third degree about your appointment. She’s not sure you need a nanny, but she says, ‘Hey.’”

“Well, I’m not sure myself why I want you to come, but I have a feeling about this that I can’t seem to shake. Thanks for being a sport.” She sounded almost embarrassed, as if it were too much to ask.

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“No problem. Do you want to stop in when you’re ready, and we’ll leave from here?”

“Sure. I’ll be there about two or so.” Donna worked at the hospital, too, over in the medical unit. It was a short walk from my office.

“Great, see you then.”

I just could not get Evelyn Sanders out of my mind. I was probably imagining romance out of sheer boredom. I hadn’t gone out with anyone since my boyfriend Benjamin, and I didn’t want to think about that. Dean had pretty well convinced me that I was undatable, and when Benjamin dropped me like a fisherman throws back an electric eel, it seemed to prove the point. Maybe I was just too old for dating. Maybe that was only for women twenty years younger and thirty pounds lighter.

In any event, Jessie was enough of a handful to distract me from thoughts of men. No one ever tells you at the prenatal visits that daughters turn into a parenting nightmare somewhere around the age of fourteen. I heard from friends that they don’t emerge as humans again until something like twenty-two or -three. I calculated seven more years of hard mothering ahead of me and guessed that men would just have to wait.

My current wrestling match with Jessie was about the dangers of removing a chunk of one’s tongue to become a member of the piercing community. She was adamant that it was *de rigueur* for any self-respecting emo/grunge/goth/whatever-she-was and I was adamant that it would be over my dead body. She seemed unmoved by the prospect, and I remained unwilling to give my permission. So far, a stalemate.

I turned back to the computer, reading through the email instructions that Buddy had sent. Whatever it was that made these two so polite—and yet so eager—I wanted to know what it was made of. Curiosity burned a large hole in my conscience.

I followed the instructions and set up a folder to receive

all emails to or from Evelyn Sanders. I told myself it was okay because Dr. E. already shared all his email with me as a “delegate,” therefore however I wanted to organize them would be fine. I stared at the folder for a few minutes. I labeled it “Errands.” No need to draw attention...

I proceeded with my sorting. A lawyer wanted Dr. E. to advise him on an insanity plea for a mother of twelve who had left the van full of kids in a Walmart lot and walked home. “I hope she walked home and shot her husband,” I thought. I flagged it to be read.

Then an offer from the North American Psychiatric Association to speak at their winter conference in Honolulu. Hmm. He’d be needing secretarial support for that, I hoped.

About four minutes later, in the new Errands folder appeared Dr. E.’s response. He wasn’t wasting much time out there on the road.

Good woman and former colleague,

Expect a call this evening at 4:00 your time. If I fail to make a connection, I shall persist until I am a certified nuisance. I look forward to hearing your voice as well.

Regards, Ed

Something was definitely up. Or maybe my own dismal life was making me see intrigue where there was just nice, friendly, professional chit-chat. If they were flirting, I couldn’t decide if I was mad at them or cheering for them. Could I be both?

“Mrs. Davis?” a voice hissed at me from the hallway, “Is it safe?” It was Frances, the building housekeeper.

“Yes, Frances. No one here but me and Mr. Coffee.”

Frances, a plump woman somewhere in her late sixties, giggled and lumbered into the reception area. She’s a longtime patient of Dr. Eisenhart’s and had been the housekeeper for the

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administration building for as long as I'd worked there. Frances was always friendly to me and quite the fashionista. That particular day she was dressed in a green kilt with polyester bell bottoms underneath. On top, she had two cardigan sweaters—the pink one on backward and the aqua one on right ways. As she shuffled in, she pulled a piece of rolling luggage with mop and broom handles protruding from the top where the zipper gapped to accommodate them.

Frances was an excellent cleaner, and she knew not only how to bring woodwork to a glistening shine but could also tell you how to get just about any spot out of just about any fabric. Although her outfits were strictly Goodwill material, they were always spotless.

“Whatcha doing?” she asked, taking out a bottle of floor wax from her luggage. She often asked me what I was doing, but my underarms began to prickle and my heart started beating guiltily. Spying on my boss was something I had never done in my life.

“Oh, the usual,” I said, and minimized the folder I had just created.

Dr. Eisenhart came in early in the afternoon.

“How was your trip? I asked. “I saw you on the news last night—you did a great job and your tie was straight.”

“Thank you, Melanie. It's an interesting case. Anything urgent that I need to attend to?”

I thought about certain “errands,” and took a breath. “No sir. Buddy was here and set up your new laptop. He said to text him if you needed anything.”

“Good man, Buddy.”

“Yes. Yes, he is.” He was as trustworthy and reliable as his sister, Donna.

He looked distractedly at his phone. “Did my wife call today?”

What day does she not call? “Yes, yes, she did. I think she left

you a voicemail. Maybe several. She also called me to see what time your flight was coming in.”

He looked at his watch. “Yes, I suppose she’ll want to go to dinner. Then I’ll probably come back to work for a bit.”

It was only two o’clock. “*Eleven o’clock in the morning Seattle time,*” I thought.

Two o’clock! Donna would be here soon. I closed out of my computer, reminding Dr. E. that I had scheduled some personal time that afternoon. Just as I was telling him, Donna appeared at the door.

“Ready for hand-holding duty?” she smiled. With her red hair, and despite her height, she always reminded me of a leprechaun. She was still in her raspberry-colored scrubs, with the coordinated cardigan for the cool weather. I envied her those long legs, and that annoying habit of always looking ten years younger than she (we) were. She hadn’t gained an ounce over the years, and I had gained at least a pound a year since high school. When we are together, I always felt like an Alex Borstein to her Nicole Kidman.

“Yes. Just let me unplug the coffee...”

I trailed off when Mrs. Eisenhart barreled in, practically knocking Donna onto the loveseat.

“Darling!” She shook her index finger at Dr. E. “How many times have I asked you to keep your cell phone on when you are traveling? I’ve been trying to reach you for *hours!*”

Frances, who was just putting the finishing touches on cleaning the windowsills, darted out, leaving the aroma of lemons and furniture oil. I had no idea she could move that fast.

Mrs. E. sniffed and watched Frances disappear down the hallway, then she turned to me “Leaving already, Melanie?”

“Um. I have an appointment, Mrs. Eisenhart.” *She is not your boss. She is not your boss.*

She stared evenly at me, some sort of challenge that I couldn’t identify.

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Dr. E. looked at her, then at me. His eyes apologized.

I made my “I’m considering the source” face, grabbed Donna by the elbow of her wool coat, and whispered “Am-scray, ow-nay.”

As we left, Mrs. E. was following the doctor into his office, closing the door. I heard her hissing, “You are much too lenient with the ‘time off,’ Edward.”

Out in the hall, Donna looked at me, “Pig Latin, Mel? What is this, fifth grade?”

I shrugged, “I know, but I get so nervous when she’s here I don’t know what to say, so I start talking like I did when Jessie was little, and we didn’t want her to understand. No wonder Mrs. E. thinks I’m an idiot. When she’s around I *am* an idiot.”

“I don’t know how he stays married to that Klingon.” Donna led the way down the old stone stairs to the vast foyer.

“She doesn’t really look like a Klingon,” I said, trying to think of what she *did* look like.

“No, she looks like a fit version of Snow White’s stepmother. Maybe Cruella DeVil *mated* with a Klingon, then, and she got her mother’s looks and her father’s emotional intelligence.”

“Sounds about right.” I followed Donna into the parking lot.

“Mmmm, Fall.” I smelled wood fires and the river.

Donna blinked into the sunlight. “Perfect day to be poked and prodded by my favorite GYN.”