

A PENGUIN SPECIAL

# Ace Jones

MAD FAT ADVENTURES  
IN THERAPY



*New York Times* Bestselling Author  
of *Down and Out in Bugtussle*

STEPHANIE MCAFEE



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# **ACE JONES**

Mad Fat Adventures in Therapy

Stephanie McAfee

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON



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# 1

“All rise!”

I stand up, knees shaking and nerves shot to hell. The Honorable Benjamin Wren comes in and takes his place behind the giant wooden desk or podium or bench or whatever it’s called. Without looking up, he instructs us all to be seated. I sit down on top of my purse and, in trying to discreetly pull it out from under my rump, I drop my file folder and watch in horror as my Very Important and Embarrassing Papers fan out on the floor. The Honorable Benjamin Wren calls someone’s name. Thank God it’s not mine. I scramble to get the papers back together. Arrest report, statement of probable cause, court-appointment information sheet. Judge Wren calls another name and then another. Everyone who’s been called so far has an attorney. *Great.*

I glance at the jury box where three men are seated. They’re all wearing orange. One has his hands cuffed behind him and a fancy array of neck tattoos. *Wonderful.*

“Graciela Jones,” the judge says. When I stand up, I feel like I might pass out. Heart thumping and cheeks burning, I put one foot in front of the other until I’m standing at the double-wide podium where I saw everyone before me go.

“Do you have counsel, Ms. Jones?”

“No, sir.” My mind spins visions of the worst, horrid thoughts of what my life will be like behind bars. I can’t stop thinking about *The Shawshank Redemption*. Ninety days. That’s what one of my Very Important and Embarrassing Papers indicated was the maximum penalty should I be found guilty of my alleged crimes against civilization.

“You’re representing yourself?” The Honorable Benjamin Wren raises an eyebrow at me. Someone could weave an afghan rug with the hair above his eyeballs.

“I guess I am, your honor.” I knew better than to punch that lady in face. I knew better than that. Walmart has video cameras everywhere, which means there’s no way I’m getting out of this. I’m going to jail. I’ll have to join one of those gangs for protection.

“You *guess* you are representing yourself?” His tone is not friendly. I nod. I’m going to jail. I know I am. “Hmmp,” he says. I hear sniggering and glance over to see the fellows in orange laughing at me. At *me!* They have BUGTUSSLE COUNTY DOC stamped across their shirts, but they are laughing at me. I catch the eye of the fellow with the neck tattoos and give him my dirtiest dirty look. He winks at me and I want to vomit. I look back at the judge, who is shuffling papers. He scans the courtroom, no doubt looking for my accuser. I want to turn around and scan the crowd, but I’m afraid to move. I didn’t see her before court was called into session. I got here an hour early this morning hoping that when she showed up, I could hide behind something, get her attention, and then smack my fist against the palm of my hand and point to her. That was my only plan today. Run the bitch off. That was it. Well, that and picking up a forty ounce bottle of cheap beer on the way over. I wanted a Corona, but a girl scraping change from the glove box, cup holder, and ashtray has only so many options.

“Patricia Desmond,” the judge says. He’s looking around. The bailiff is looking around. The court reporter is looking around. Even the guys in the jury box are craning their necks. *Assholes.*

I should've just followed Patricia Desmond to her house and socked her in the nose there, but from the looks of her, she probably has a meth lab in her garage that's guarded by rabid pit bulls who would've surely eaten me alive. Maybe it's better that I punched her at Walmart, where it's safe. I got a round of applause when security escorted me out of the store, and some other folks booed the police who arrested me just before I got to my car, which told me that my fellow shoppers were as tired of listening to that old hag run her mouth as I was. You could hear her all over the store. Kids and little old women shouldn't have to listen to crap like that. And neither should I. Nobody needs to hear a bunch of idiotic foul language in a place where we're all trying to save money and live better. She deserved to be punched in the face. I should be here to receive a ribbon of commendation for shutting her up because that was an act of community service in and of itself.

Patricia Desmond does not come forward. Maybe her meth lab exploded and she's busy with that. "Patricia Desmond," the judge says again. He looks at the court reporter. "Let the record show that the plaintiff failed to appear." The Honorable Benjamin Wren turns his attention and his eyebrow to me. He frowns and says, "Case dismissed."

"Oh thank you, Jesus," I mumble and pick up my folder. When I walk past my brothers in orange I throw up a victory sign and whisper, "Peace out, homies." Outside the courtroom, I toss my folder full of Very Important and Embarrassing Papers into the first trash can I see. I can't wait to start forgetting this ever happened. I drive home where my super chiweenie, Buster Loo, is waiting for me in the kitchen.

"Not guilty!" I tell Buster Loo, who sits up on his rump and waves his paws. "I knew you'd be proud!" I settle into my sofa, thankful the "incident" is over, and pick up the phone to call Pier Six Pizza. Buster Loo brings me his favorite little-dog toy and we celebrate with a few rounds of Victory Fetch. Now all I have to worry about is how to pay Lilly Lane back for posting my bail.

. . .

The phone rings and it's my friend Chloe. "J.J. wants to know how it went today."

"Case dismissed," I tell her.

"I'm so sorry we were out of town when that happened," Chloe says. "I'm sure J.J. could've done something." Chloe and Sheriff J. J. Jackson had gone to Gatlinburg for a long weekend in January and while they were away, I found myself locked up in the Lee County Jail. By the time they got back, the paperwork was already in the system and there was nothing J.J. could do to help me. But that was fine. I didn't mind. I wasn't even going to tell Chloe about it, but Lilly's boyfriend, Deputy Dax Dorsett, told J.J. as soon as he got to work that next Tuesday. Then J.J. went home and said something to Chloe and she called me all freaked out. I told her not to worry about it, that I got myself into it and I could get myself out of it. Or so I thought. As it turns out, I was an idiot because when I made that dreaded "first appearance" and they issued me another Very Important and Embarrassing Paper, this one with an actual court date on it, I became quite concerned. Then I happened across a little paragraph that stated the maximum penalty for my crime was ninety days in jail. That got me a helluva lot more worried. But it was too late because it was happening, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. At that moment, I realized that I needed a lawyer worse than I ever have, but the only lawyer I know is Mason McKenzie, my ex-fiancé. And I couldn't exactly call him, now, could I? Okay, honestly, I did think about calling him but in the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Which is fine because it's all over now and I'm ready to stop talking about it but my friend Chloe obviously isn't.

“All’s well that ends well, my friend,” I tell her. I hope no one told Mason about my legal predicament, but I’m sure they did. Small-town gossip spreads like herpes in a whorehouse, and the fact that Mason lives four hundred miles away in Pelican Cove, Florida, means absolutely nothing. Someone called him. I know they did. Probably his stupid-ass mama who I heard was positively thrilled about our breakup. *Bitch*.

“Ace, I’m concerned about you,” Chloe says.

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “That lady knows she got what she deserved and that’s probably why she didn’t show up today. She got up this morning and said, ‘Come to think of it, I needed that,’ and then decided to spend the day assembling a new meth lab in her bedroom.” Chloe thinks that’s a little bit funny. “You worry too much, Chloe.”

“I can’t help it, Ace,” she says, back to serious-as-usual. “What if that woman had shown up? What if you had been sentenced to serve jail time?”

“She didn’t and I didn’t, so can we please move on?”

“But what if she had? What would you have done?”

“I guess I would’ve gone to jail.” I look down at Buster Loo, who puts his snout between his paws and whimpers. If I’d gone to jail, I wouldn’t have seen my dog for three months. I don’t want Chloe to know how bad this bothers me, so I change the subject and then start trying to get off the phone.

“Okay, well, you seem to be in a rush so I’ll let you go, but would you be interested in meeting Lilly and me for coffee in the morning?”

“Before y’all go to school?”

“Yes.”

“Let me get this straight,” I say. “Lilly is going to be up early enough to meet us for coffee before she goes to school?”

“She has recently become somewhat of an early riser,” Chloe says, and I wonder if she’s lying. “I think it has something to do with Dax sleeping over.” Or maybe she’s telling the truth.

“Well, if she can make it, surely I can,” I say. Maybe I have enough change lying around the house to cover a cup of coffee. Or I could use my emergency five-dollar bill.

When I get to the Morning Perk on Friday morning, Lilly is already there.

“This is unbelievable,” I tell her. “Here you are at six fifteen a.m.”

“I get up early a couple days a week and go to the gym with Dax.”

“Before school?”

“Yep, he gets up at four a.m. every morning.”

“That’s amazing,” I say. “What do you do at the gym?” To my knowledge, Lilly Lane has never owned a pair of shoes designed for athletic use.

“Sit in the sauna mostly,” she says. “Sometimes the hot tub. It’s very relaxing. And I’ve started yoga class that I absolutely love.”

“I can see you doing yoga,” I tell her.

Chloe arrives and seems a bit too chipper for this time of the morning. We go to the counter where they both place elaborate drink orders and fork over six or seven bucks each. I order a small cup of coffee and worry that I’m embarrassing them because I don’t use the coffee shop’s stupid little term for small. And my small coffee, for which I’m issued a cup to fill up myself, costs nearly three bucks. *Fantastic*. I ignore the tip jar and decide that today is not the day to ask the weird snobby lady behind the cash register what exactly she’s done to constitute a cash bonus. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for tipping. I waited on tables all through high school and college and worked my butt off every time I clocked in, and my hourly wage was half of the legal minimum. I certainly didn’t stand behind a computerized screen smirking at people and making change for a five. Hell, the checkout clerks at Walmart, most of whom are extra nice and super friendly, have to scan and bag hundreds of items a day and then deal with coupons, government checks, handwritten checks, people like me who never can remember to press the “No” button on the cash-back option, and then sometimes they still have to make change, but you don’t see a tip jar next to their register, do you? The sulky cashier acts like it hurts her fingers to get my change out of her register, and then I have to reach for it because she obviously can’t unbend her arm. Then she starts staring at her tip jar. I drop the money into my purse, pick up my empty cup, and turn around. She doesn’t say “thank you” or tell me to have a nice day. Jeez. If I were the richest woman east of the Mississippi, I wouldn’t tip someone who acts like they’re doing me a favor by doing a job for which they get paid a full wage. I want to punch her right in the face. I really do. But I cannot punch her in the face, so I head for the coffee urns where I take my time making a selection. I hear Chloe’s name called and then Lilly’s and we return to our table and they start talking about school. I smile and try to be conversational while simultaneously ignoring the fact that I’m broke and unemployed.

“Thank goodness January is finally over,” Lilly says. “It seems like payday was a hundred years ago.” I’d tell her she was being dramatic, but I used to feel the same way.

“Tell me about it,” Chloe says and I just sit there. They both have savings accounts that could float them through a thousand rainy days. Especially Chloe, who comes from “old money” in Jackson. I take a sip of coffee. And then another. The coffee tastes like shit. I wish I would’ve just stayed in



bed.

“What about that storm system that’s all over the news?” Chloe asks. “Do y’all think it’ll be as bad as they’re forecasting?” I look at Chloe and then at Lilly. We’re discussing the weather now? Something is wrong here. Chloe continues, “Everyone seems to be gearing up for a big winter storm. She looks at me. “Do you have everything you need?”

“I have a twelve pack of Corona and a freezer full of frozen pizza,” I lie. “I’m all set.” Am I a charity case now? If so, then I wish someone would’ve bought me a caramel macchiato.

“I hope it snows like hell,” Lilly says. “I could use a few days off work.” Chloe shakes her head. She never needs a day off work. They look at me and I can see they expect me to participate in this parlay.

“The nine weeks after Christmas break was always the worst,” I say and, again, I’m striving to be conversational. “Even back in high school, it seemed to drag on forever.” Call me Bruce Springsteen, because I’m reverting to the glory days.

“But we always had spring break,” Lilly says. “Good times.”

“Good times,” I say. Bruce was right. The glory days will pass your ass by like you’re sitting still. I look at my coffee. It’s so hot in this place that I feel like I might suffocate to death. I’ve got to get out of here.

“I saw on the Weather Channel that Jim Cantore is coming to Memphis,” Chloe says. While I’m somewhat concerned that we’re still discussing the weather, Chloe has had a crush on Jim Cantore since college.

“Maybe we should drive up there and stalk him!” Lilly says.

“We could borrow Ethan Allen’s truck in case the snow gets deep,” I say. Chloe laughs and waves off that idea. She’s not much of a stalker, unlike Lilly and myself, who are seasoned professionals. “I could use some fun like that in my life,” I say and then immediately regret it because they get quiet and give me that “we feel so sorry for you but we can’t tell you how sorry we feel for you because you’re our friend and we don’t want you to know that we think you’re a loser” look.

“I have a gift for you, Ace,” Chloe says.

“For what?” I ask. “It’s not my birthday.” These two are definitely up to something. I look at Lilly, who looks at her skinny vanilla latte with a double shot of espresso. Chloe picks up her purse and pulls out an envelope.

“It’s a gift certificate,” she says. I get excited, thinking that maybe they’ve chipped in and bought me a pedicure or a massage. Or both! I’m embarrassed by how excited I am, but when I open the envelope, I see that my assumption was incorrect.

“Who is Rosemary Tallis?” Chloe is smiling, Lilly has yet to look up.

“My therapist,” Chloe whispers. “She’s great. You’ll love her.”

“Lilly,” I say, and she finally looks at me. “What is this?”

“We’re worried about you, Ace.” She looks like she’s about to cry. *Of course*. In addition to being a seasoned professional stalker, Lilly is also a seasoned professional squaller. I look back at Chloe, who has the phoniest smile I’ve ever seen plastered across her pretty face. Chloe has on a dark gray pantsuit with a lavender button-up shirt. Lilly is wearing black leggings with knee boots and a cream-colored sweater with a multi-colored scarf. I’m wearing sweat pants and a hoodie that’s three years old. I didn’t bother to put on makeup. I want to ask them why they chose the Morning Perk to give me a freakin’ gift certificate for a freakin’ therapist, but deep down inside, I know. They knew I wouldn’t make a scene about it here.

“Uh, thank you, I guess.” I slip the envelope into my purse.

“I made you an appointment for Monday,” Chloe says. She’s happy now because the gift certificate is in my purse.

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“Thank you,” I say again. And so this is what an intervention looks like. Nice. Maybe I’ll go lie in the street and hope a dump truck comes through.

“The gift certificate is good for as many sessions as you need or want,” Chloe says, and Lilly is looking at her cup again.

“Okay,” I say, getting up. “Thank you both so much, but I better run.” They look at me like I’m crazy, and their expressions have new meaning to me now. I hug them both and grab my jacket. We all know I have nowhere to be. I pick up my half empty cup of designer coffee and drop it in the trash on the way out the door. Squinting against the cold, I walk to my car, which is parked between Lilly’s BMW and Chloe’s Lexus. “I love my Maxima,” I mumble to myself as I get in and start the engine. “It’s a great car. And I love my jogging pants.”

“Buster Loo!” I call when I get home. “You wanna go for a walk?” It’s kind of windy out, so I bundle him up in his thickest doggie jacket. I wrap a scarf around my face and look at my dog, who is prancing around in his fancy winter coat. When we get outside, he doesn’t miss a beat. I make it all of two blocks before I have to stop and tell Buster Loo that we have to go home. “It’s too cold, little man.” I say. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” He stands there, snout pointed toward the park, and doesn’t budge. “Buster Loo, maybe the sun will come out tomorrow. C’mon, now.” He doesn’t turn around. I tug on the leash and he stiffens up. He stares down the road as if life cannot go on as planned unless we finish our walk. I reach down to pick him up, and he promptly starts running in circles, wrapping the leash around my ankles. I have to unsnap it and when he realizes he’s free, he takes off at top speed toward the park. Luckily, his fluffy jacket puts a damper on his haste. “Buster Loo!” I say as loud as I can without shouting. I don’t need the whole neighborhood involved in this. “Stop!” He doesn’t look back. He’s headed for the walking trail. I have to jog to catch up. “Buster Loo!” I say again and then use my devil voice, “Stop right now.” He stops and looks back at me with those chiweenie eyes of shame. “I’m sorry, Buster Loo.” I say as I scoop him up and snap the leash back to his collar. “It’s just too cold out here.” My nose is running now. He starts wiggling so I put him down and he trots back home as if nothing happened. As soon as we walk in the door, he runs to the kitchen, sits up on his rump, and starts waving his paws. Buster Loo thinks he’s earned a treat. So I give him one. God love him. At least my dog isn’t worried about me going off the deep end. He loves me just the way I am. We snuggle up on the sofa and sleep until well after lunch.

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Monday morning, the weather folks are all in a tizzy. To hear them tell it, this winter storm could bury us all! It's going to dump snow across the southeast like none of us have ever seen before! But that's what they always say, and either they're always lying or they're always wrong, because northeast Mississippi has seen all of two big snowfalls and one serious ice storm in the past thirty years. Yet the promise of snow never fails to keep us glued to our televisions in hopeful expectation, while the threat of ice tends to cause widespread panic. And here I sit, coffee in hand, watching the weather and thinking a good snowstorm would provide a nice break in the monotony of things.

The sky is dark gray when I pull out of my driveway and head downtown. I take a right off Main Street onto Willow Lane where several historic homes have been converted into offices. It's a charming area, especially in the summertime when the big oak trees form a leafy green canopy over the street. But today, the bare branches look like skeleton arms reaching out to one another through a foggy haze.

I drive down the street until I see the one I'm looking for, then make a U-turn and park by the curb. The house is pale green with dark green shutters, and the porch is skirted by glorious evergreen shrubs. There are two giant square columns, six extremely tall windows, and a second-floor balcony jutting out over the double front doors. The wooden sign next to the sidewalk indicates that there is a dance studio, an accountant, some kind of consulting firm, and a licensed professional counselor. Two offices are vacant and available for rent. I walk up the cobblestone steps and admire the wavy glass of the large wooden doors. I wonder how they've survived all these years without a single crack.

The door creaks when I push it open and a gust of cool air comes into the foyer with me. I count six doors, four downstairs and two up. It's remarkably quiet inside the house. I tiptoe up the steps and look for door number six. I find it to my right and see a small sign that reads, "Rosemary Tallis, L.P.C." I don't know if I should knock or just walk in. I put one hand on the knob, then gently tap on the door with the other.

"It's open."

I turn the knob and walk inside. A girl that looks about twenty is sitting behind a block of something that appears to function as a desk. Instead of a nameplate, there is an ornamental picture frame holding a card that reads *Aurelia*. The letters are thin and wispy, like the girl herself. I don't see a computer anywhere. Aurelia picks up a pencil, the kind that has to be sharpened, and scribbles something on what I'm almost sure is recycled paper. There are three candles on the corner of the desk-thing, and all three are burning.

"You must be Graciela Jones," she says. "Rosemary will be right out." Her voice is warm and sweet with a hint of an accent. She tells me I can have a seat if I like. I turn and see four squares covered in a pea green fabric that resembles the texture of a potato sack. They look like multi-functional pieces that could either be used as individual footstools or arranged in front of a sectional in place of a coffee table. I ease down on the green thing closest to the door, and my ass hangs off either side. While I worry about crushing it, a horrible scene plays out in my mind where I tumble

back against the wall and that giant wooden anvil looking thing falls on my head and kills me graveyard dead. Even though it's relatively cool in the waiting area, I start to sweat. I stand up and walk to the closest window.

"Do you think it's going to snow?" I ask Aurelia.

"I hope so," she says. She's using the eraser end of her pencil now.

"This house is so quiet," I say.

"Yes," she replies. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"It is." If I could get my mind as calm and peaceful as this lovely old house, I'd be in good shape. I'm glad I came here today. Maybe I need to start buying pencils. Wooden pencils with which to write on recycled paper. I could erase things so easily. Why can't my house be this quiet?

"Graciela?" I turn to see Rosemary Tallis, who has appeared like a vision on the opposite side of Aurelia's block desk-thing. Rosemary is wearing a long-sleeved shirt embellished with fabric flowers. Her skirt is long and flowing, like her hair. I smile and nod. "Please come on back." Aurelia gives me a little wave and I follow Rosemary down a short hallway.

There are lit candles all over Rosemary's office, and the curtains on the windows appear to be made from the same gauzy fabric as her shirt. The walls are a soft shade of yellow, and there is a collage of empty frames between the windows. She motions to the plush sofa. I lie down and look up at the ornate ceiling tiles. I could sleep here for days.

After some small talk, Rosemary asks, "Is this your first visit to a therapist?"

"No," I sigh. "When I was younger, I saw a lady for about a year." *Oh please let's not rehash my childhood.*

"Do you feel the issues you saw her about were resolved?"

"I do," I say. "Fully."

"Okay," she says. She crosses her legs and picks up a manila folder. She flips it open and starts to write. I can't help but notice that she too is using a wooden pencil with an eraser. I want to ask what she's writing. Actually, I'd like to see it. "So what brings you here today?" she asks. I wonder if I should tell her about the gift certificate, but I have a feeling she already knows. Aurelia made no mention of fees or payment. She didn't even ask to see my ID. When I don't respond, Rosemary says "Do you mind if I call you Ace?"

"Not at all," I say. I wonder how much about me she already knows from Chloe.

"What's on your mind today, Ace?"

I don't even know where to start. I stare at the ceiling tiles, waiting for her to say something else but she doesn't. "I'm not very happy right now," I say finally.

"Go on," she says.

"I'm teetering on miserable." That's the understatement of the year. I'm drowning in the misery tank. "And every day it gets a little worse." I look at her and she nods. We stare at each other for a minute. Oh, what the hell? I might as well tell her the whole story. Chloe is probably paying good money for this and it might actually make me feel better. God knows I'm tired of feeling bad all the time. "I'm not one to think life should be all cotton candy and lollipops, but I just can't seem to see the brighter side of things anymore. I made some bad decisions—well, not bad, necessarily. I mean, nothing that I had to go to jail for. Okay, I've been to jail, but it wasn't a bad decision and I almost went to jail last week, but the lady I punched in the face didn't show up for court so they let me go." Wow. I'm horrible at this. "That's not really as bad as it sounds." Or maybe it is.

"You punched someone in the face?" Rosemary is writing again.

"Uh, yeah."

“Why?” She crosses her legs in the opposite direction. Rosemary is a very pretty woman.

“~~She was acting a fool in Walmart and I couldn’t listen to it. I wasn’t even finished shopping but~~ I went to get in the checkout line because I knew I had to get out of there because I just couldn’t listen to her anymore. Then she got in line behind me and I tried to ignore her, I really did, but she kept pushing her buggy up closer and closer to me and I just, I don’t know. She was giving me this look and you’ve got to understand that this was not a classy person and while I’m certainly not the classiest woman myself, I do have a full set of healthy white teeth.” I smile. She smiles.

“So . . .”

“So the lady checking me out was taking her time and there was that lady behind me talking on her cell phone and she was loud and she was cussing and she kept giving me the evil eye.”

“The evil eye?”

“Yes. The evil eye.” I give her the evil eye. She looks like she wants to laugh, but she doesn’t.

“What was the cashier doing?”

“Taking her sweet time,” I say again. “It was like she couldn’t hear the idiot lady at all. She was just in her own little world scanning my stuff and sticking it into a bag.”

“Were there other people around?”

“Sure, but everyone was trying to keep their distance, you know. And there I was with her right behind me in the checkout line.”

“Was she getting louder because she was getting closer to you?”

I think about that for a moment. “Maybe,” I say.

“So you punched her?” I appreciate the lack of judgment in Rosemary’s tone when she asks me this.

“Yes, I did. When she pushed her cart up next to me that last time, instead of stepping out of the way again, I stepped around that buggy, looked her right in the eye, drew back my fist and knocked the ever-lovin’ shit out of her. She fell down. But then she jumped up like a cat and started cussing me like a dog and before I even knew what I was doing, I’d punched her a second time. She stayed down that time. And she finally shut up.”

“What did the cashier do?”

“She said, ‘That’ll be sixty-three dollars and forty-three cents.’”

Rosemary’s eyes tell me that she thinks that’s funny but, again, she doesn’t crack a smile. “So what happened then?”

“Well, that stupid lady got up and ran over to the customer service counter and started yelling for someone to call 911. Her nose was bleeding, so she was able to make a huge scene.”

“Why didn’t she just call from her cell phone?”

“Well, she dropped it when I hit her and it busted.” I breathe a sigh of relief. I haven’t told anyone the whole story. Just bits and pieces. It feels good to get it all out.

“Do you plan to cover the expense for her phone?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay, so you were arrested, but you didn’t go to jail?”

“Well, yes, I did get locked up, but my friend Lilly posted my bail so I didn’t have to stay long. And then my court date was last week, and Patricia, that was her name I found out later, didn’t show up, so here I am.”

“Is this the only time you’ve ever been arrested?”

“Uh, no.” I’m starting to feel like a real criminal. “There was one other time.”

“What happened then?”

“We were stalking a friend’s husband who is now her ex-husband, and we were at a strip club in Memphis and we’d decided to go incognito so we went to this costume shop and ended up wearing dresses designed for men, but they looked really good on us, they really did.” Stoic Rosemary finally smiles. “I’m sure you heard all about that from Chloe. It was her ex-husband.”

“Chloe?”

“Yes. Chloe Stacks. She’s a regular here, isn’t she?”

“You know, the privacy laws these days are so sticky.”

“Right, sorry. Well, we both know she comes here. I mean, she told me she was and she’s the one who gave me that gift certificate or whatever you want to call it and I know she had to tell you about this because that whole incident was why she started coming here in the first place.”

“Getting back to you, Ace.”

“Right. Getting back to me.”

“Why aren’t you happy?”

Oh boy. “Well, I made a decision that I thought was right for me, but then it wasn’t and now I’ve wrecked my whole life. Well, not wrecked.”

“It’s okay to say that.”

“Okay, it’s wrecked. My life is wrecked bigger than shit. I showed my ass and quit my job and moved out of my house. Chloe rented it for a while after her divorce but then she just bought a new house so I was able to move right back in when I moved back to Bugtussle.” She raises her eyebrows at me. “So at least I have a home.”

“That’s a good thing,” she says and makes another note in my folder. “Tell me what else is good in your life.”

“I have great friends and a fabulous dog.”

“Those are very good things,” she says. “A home, friends, a loving pet.” I want to tell her that Buster Loo is so much more than a pet, but I don’t. She continues, “So let’s talk about what you want to change in your life and why.”

“Oh Lord,” I say. “See, the thing about me is that I really enjoy helping other people solve their problems but I’d very much prefer to carry on like I don’t have any. Ever since college, I’ve just kind of lived this safe little comfortable life, but I always felt like something was missing. Like I could do more and be happier somehow, but I was scared to make any changes. Then out of the blue one day, my big opportunity came and I packed up and moved to Florida to live my dream life with my fiancé. What’s really sad is that I honestly thought it was my time to shine, you know, my time to really live life and be happy, but it wasn’t. Not a damn thing down there turned out anything like it was supposed to and now I’m back up here and I’m heartbroken and I’m depressed and I want my old job back and don’t know if or how that can be done and this is why I help other people fix their problems because it always seems to turn out fine for them, but this chance I took with my life—wow. I fucked that up big time and now it’s just a wreck.”

“Okay,” she says, and she’s writing again. “Now let’s define ‘wreck.’”

“Wreck. Let’s see . . . I have no job. I’m down to single digits in my savings account. I wear jogging pants every day. I take entirely too many naps. And I’ve gotten to where I don’t even want to leave my house anymore.” There, I said it.

“You mentioned the job first, so can we talk about that?”

“Well, naturally, another teacher had to be hired to fill the vacancy when I left, and the school board would probably rather see me tarred and feathered than to offer me another teaching position at Bugtussle High School.”

“Why not apply in another district?” she asks, and I lie there and stare at those beautiful ceiling tiles. The answer is simply because I don’t want to, but I don’t tell her that. We sit in silence for a moment and then she continues, “Okay, let me ask you this: Would having your old job back solve all of your problems?”

I don’t answer right away and I’m ready to start squalling for real and I don’t even know why. After several minutes pass, I say, “Having that job would solve a lot of my problems.”

“The immediate ones, I suppose,” she says. “A job would put money in your bank account, require you to wear something other than jogging pants, and get you out of the house, but would it solve *all* of your problems? Would you be completely happy if you had your old job back?”

I don’t want to go where this conversation is about to take me, but I guess that’s why I’m here so I try to be honest. “No,” I say.

“And why is that?”

“Because I would still miss Mason.” There it is.

“Tell me about Mason.” Here we go.

“Mason is my ex-fiancé,” I say. I give her the short version of our pitiful “he loves me he loves me not” love story which ends with me saying, “And then he proposed and I moved to Florida and—” I stop talking because I can’t continue without breaking out in a Lilly Lane–style sobbing fit.

“Sometimes we imagine people, places, and things to be something that, in reality, they are not. For example, we might build up expectations for a hotel or a vacation destination that, when we arrive, doesn’t measure up to the vision we created in our mind, but we’re invested emotionally and otherwise so that creates a crisis because we don’t feel what we think we should feel.” I nod to indicate that I understand. “Are you mad at Mason?”

“Of course not,” I say and I’m barely hanging on. I stare at the ceiling and Rosemary doesn’t speak so I go ahead and say what I know I have to: “Mason McKenzie is a wonderful person and I love him very much and will love him until the day that I die.” That does it. I start squalling and can’t stop. Rosemary hands me a box of tissues. After a few minutes, I calm down enough to tell her the whole story about what happened in Florida and why I couldn’t stay.

“It’s okay,” she says. “Your heart will mend and your soul will find peace.”

“When?” I ask her. “I’m ready to start on that right now.”

“It takes time, and you don’t want to rush it. The healing process, however long it may be, can greatly enrich your life.” I want to call bullshit on that, but I don’t. Rosemary continues, “You might not believe this, Ace, but you’re in a wonderful place right now. This is a new beginning for you.” She’s right. I don’t believe that at all, and, actually, I despise new beginnings. I just want to get over it, dammit! And I want to get over it right now! Rosemary is still talking. “It’s good you went to Florida because that experience provided you with a deeper understanding of who you are and what you want from life.” What I want is for someone to tell me why things couldn’t have worked out differently for me down there. What I want is for someone to explain how I could’ve been so wrong for so long about how and with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life. What I want more than anything is for someone to tell me how in the hell I could’ve been so incredibly foolish as to buy into the idea that a fairy tale life existed for someone like me. As my mind spins, I come to the dreadful realization that the person I’m most mad at is me. “Ace?” Rosemary says and I snap back to reality. Cold, harsh reality.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I’m seething inside. How could I have been so stupid? I look at Rosemary who looks deeply concerned. “Could you please repeat that last part?” I ask, and she starts comparing my life to a blank canvas and then starts talking about me being an artist and I feel like I’m going to

throw up.

“It’s time to get to work on your next masterpiece,” she says. It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes because I do not believe that I’m capable of accomplishing the endeavor she’s suggesting. Poor Rosemary. What did she ever do to deserve having someone like me come in here and lie on her couch? She needs people with fixable problems. Like Chloe. “Have you ever considered Vipassana meditation?” she asks.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s an ancient Indian meditation technique during which we strive to see ourselves clearly and as we really are.” I’m seeing myself pretty clearly right now, but probably not in the way she’s talking about. “It’s a practice I highly recommend.”

“Okay,” I say.

“What we have to realize is that true happiness doesn’t come from our manipulation of the external world but from the cultivation of wisdom in our minds. Through meditation, we gain a deep understanding of who we are. From there we can start to recognize the mental impurities that cause pain and distress, and then our mindfulness of that can eventually ease our suffering.” I’m not sure I follow, but I nod like I know exactly what she’s talking about. “We have to purify our minds in order to find peace.” She slides down onto the floor like a snake. “Join me,” she says. I get down there with her and lean back against the couch. I sit like she’s sitting. “Close your eyes and breathe,” she says. “Just breathe.” She takes a few deep breaths and I do the same. We sit there for a minute, and then she tells me to pay attention to how I feel but the only thing I feel is dizzy from all that deep breathing. “Now focus on what comes to mind, and see if it pertains to the present, the past, or the future. Don’t try to control your thoughts; just let them flow freely through your mind.” The only thought flowing freely through my mind is in the form of a question: *What the hell am I doing on the floor?*

I don’t know how many minutes pass, but something starts buzzing somewhere and she tells me I did a good job. Of what, I’m not sure. I get back on the sofa.

“I think your journey is off to a great start, Ace,” she says quietly. “You opened up today and released a lot of pain. I want you to try and meditate a few times a day if you can.” She walks over to a piece of furniture that looks like an antique sideboard. She picks up a few booklets and gives them to me. “This is some basic information on the practice of Vipassana. There are some Web sites listed here, but I recommend checking out books at the library because that’s a much more reliable source of information.”

“Thank you,” I say. I stand up when she opens the door.

“It was very nice to meet you,” she says. “Thank you for coming in today. You can make another appointment with Aurelia if you like.”

“Thank you,” I say again. “It was nice to meet you, too.” Rosemary closes the door behind me. When I get to the waiting area, Aurelia isn’t at the desk. I slip out, grateful that I don’t have to lie or make up phony excuses about why I don’t want another appointment. When I get to my car, I realize that I still have the gift certificate in my purse. Chloe must’ve just written them a blank check and would like, “Please help my crazy loser friend however long it takes.” I turn the radio on and scan through the channels, but it’s all commercials and weather bulletins. Bugtussle is under a winter storm watch. I pop in a Pink CD and turn up the volume.

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When I get home, I find Buster Loo curled up on the sofa. I turn the heat up, put on some jogging pants, and snuggle up beside him. We nap like kings until late afternoon when I'm aroused from my slumber by the doorbell. I get up and stumble to the back door, where I find Lilly Lane.

"Let me in!" she shouts. "It's freezing out here!" I open the door and she comes inside with two grocery bags. "You busy?" she asks as she hauls her bags up and onto the counter.

"Not especially, no," I say. Buster Loo comes into the kitchen, sniffs Lilly's boots, then hops out the doggie door.

"Dax is working until midnight," she says. "I told him if he needed me, I'd be at your house. I don't want to sit home all by myself in this dismal weather so I thought we could make some soup. Hope that's okay."

"That's perfectly okay," I say. I unload the bags she put on the counter. There's tortilla chips, a loaf of French bread, bananas, shredded cheese, Velveeta, four cans of corn, one can of Rotel, two boxes of crackers, and a package of Oreos. "What kind of soup did you have in mind?" I say, looking at her groceries.

"Oh, I don't know," she says, smiling. "You always tell me to bring tortilla chips or French bread."

"Okay, so I could make chicken enchilada soup to go with the tortilla chips or corn chowder to go with the French bread. Which one would you like?"

"Hmm, that's a tough decision," she says. "What are you in the mood for?"

"I love them both," I say. "What does Dax like?"

"He loves your corn chowder."

"Well, let's make that and you can invite him over for dinner."

"Sounds great!" she says. "You want some Rotel dip?"

"Lilly, I always want some Rotel dip."

I get out my grandmother's cookbook and flip to the soup section while Lilly digs around in my cabinets until she finds a bowl. She works on the dip while I chop red peppers and potatoes.

"You told Chloe all you had over here was Corona and frozen pizza," she says, eyeing the potatoes.

"I was joking," I say. "Y'all know I don't eat frozen pizza." I look at her. "And before you ask, yes. I went to my appointment this morning."

"How did it go?" Lilly asks. She's trying to be nonchalant. Like giving someone a gift certificate for a prearranged mental health appointment is something people do all the time.

"I feel better," I say, because I do. "It was good to air out all of my problems, but I don't think the practice of Vipassana meditation is for me."

"The practice of what?"

"The ancient Indian art of insightful meditation."

"Ace, I'm so sorry," she says.

"No, it's fine," I tell her. "I think it would be great if I could grasp it. The lady was very nice and she gave me some pamphlets. I'm all for a little quiet time and self-analysis every now and then, but I don't think I'll ever reach the level of enlightenment required to comprehend what's going on with that."

"Chloe meditates like a monk," she says. "I tried it, but it's not for me. Chloe says I have a monkey mind."

That cracks me up. "Monkey mind?"

"Yeah, my mind is always jumping around everywhere so I can't focus on my thoughts."

I hold up the bananas. “Is that what these are for?” I ask.

~~“Yeah,” she says laughing. “I knew you’d have monkey mind, too, so I came prepared.”~~

“Lilly, do you and Chloe really think I need counseling?”

“Chloe does,” she says, like a child laying the blame on an imaginary friend.

“You were there when she gave me that gift certificate to see a licensed professional counselor, Lilly.” She looks like she’s about to cry. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “I would just like to know if you really think that’s what I need.”

“You of all people should understand someone going to extreme measures for a friend,” she says. I nod because she has a point. “Since you came home from Florida, you haven’t been the same. I’m shrinking, but I can see that this breakup with Mason was different.”

“So y’all didn’t suggest this because I had to go to court?”

“Well, that did cause some extra concern,” Lilly says. “I was terrified you were going to jail. To stay!”

“Truth be told, so was I.”

“What happened to you in Florida?” Lilly asks. “It’s like you left all happy and free and then you came back with part of yourself missing. It’s not like y’all haven’t split up a hundred times before. Remember when you moved down there for the summer and then y’all broke up again and you moved back home and you were so happy. Well, you weren’t happy, but you were happy to be back. Nothing like this. Ace, what happened?”

“It was all wrong, Lilly,” I tell her. “I was wrong. About everything. I hated being in that art gallery all by myself, and Mason talked about work all the time—I swear he never stopped—and when he wasn’t talking about work, he was at work. Then when I pulled that stunt at the charity ball and he wanted me to apologize, I knew then—”

“Knew what?”

“That it was over. We were over. For good and forever and that there would be no getting back together.” Somehow that seems easier to admit after squalling my eyes out this morning on Rosemary’s sofa. “He’s a great guy, Lilly, you know that. And you know that I love him and I always will. But I finally realized that we’re not meant to be together. I think we both realized that.”

Lilly stands there, shaking her head while she stirs the Rotel dip.

“I just wonder how many opportunities I passed up along the way because in the back of my mind I always thought it would be him. I never gave anyone else a chance because I was always holding on to that glorious hope of a life as Mrs. Mason McKenzie.”

“It just breaks my heart,” she says.

“Yeah, it’s pretty freakin’ sad,” I say. “But what can you do?”

“Hey!” Lilly says, and I can see that she just had a light bulb moment. “I know what you can do. You can come to yoga class with me.”

“I don’t think I would fare any better in a yoga class than I did with the Vipassana meditation.”

“No, it’s not like that at all. It’s fun. Just trust me. We could start in the morning!”

“Lilly, please. Fat girls don’t do yoga.” My trips to the gym haven’t always been pleasant. Okay, I’m lying. My trips to the gym haven’t *ever* been pleasant. Disastrous and humiliating would be much more accurate.

“There are three girls in my class right now who are quite a bit larger than you, sweetheart. The teacher is wonderful, and the class is basically stretching to relaxing music. Nothing complicated. Nothing dangerous. Please go with me! We can go at five in the morning.”

“Five in the morning!”

“I don’t even want to hear it,” she says. “If I can do it, so can you. And I can tell from the way your hair looks that you slept all day today.”

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“Okay,” I say because she’s got me on that one. “Are there any machines involved?”

“Of course not! All you need is a mat and I have an extra one.”

Well, Lilly just has all the bases covered. “I guess it’s worth a try.”

“Promise?”

“You promise there are some fat girls in your class?”

“Yes, I promise that there are some lovely plump ladies in my class.”

“Okay, you have a deal. Now pass the cheese dip, please.”

We snack on chips and dip, and I make some spiced tea. When Dax comes over at seven, we have corn chowder and French bread. It’s a pleasant evening, and I’m happy to have such good company. After they leave, I stay up until three a.m. because I slept all day, but I’m good and snoozing by the time Lilly calls at four thirty to make sure I’m up.

When the yoga class begins, I look around and see that all the fat girls must've slept in today. I glare at Lilly, and she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"I swear, they're always here," she whispers. "But I usually come on Wednesdays."

"Can we just leave?"

"No, this class costs fifteen dollars."

"You said it was free!"

"It is to me because I'm a member," she whispers.

"What?!" I cannot believe this.

"It's fifteen freakin' dollars. Don't worry about it."

"Dammit, Lilly!"

"Quiet, please, ladies!" the instructor says. Her voice is smooth and mellow, but does nothing to alleviate my anxiety. She says her name is Olivia. I've never been to a yoga class in my life and the last time I remember stretching was last week when my keys fell down between the seat and the console in my car. There are twenty-six women in the room. I count them twice, and not a single one looks half an ounce overweight. Which is great, I mean, it speaks volumes for the program and whatnot, but my fat ass is way out of place on this little blue mat. I look around at the tanned and toned women and tell myself to remain calm. Because that's the point, right?

I'm thankful when Olivia dims the lights and turns on some soothing music, but she might as well be speaking Greek when she starts in with the instructions. Everyone slinks into position and Lilly whispers, "Just do what I do." I roll my eyes at her and then, thankfully, Olivia explains what our bodies should be doing in a language I can understand. And so I begin.

I twist and turn and grunt and stretch, all the while praying I don't squeeze out a fart and gas every one of these limber bitches to death. I'm having a horrible time, my body is in a world of pain, and I swear I'd walk a thousand miles a day to never have to do this again. Olivia finally gives us a break and I roll onto my back and try to breathe quietly. I hear a commotion and turn to see Olivia getting out the balance balls. I glance at Lilly and shake my head.

"I can't do that," I whisper.

"You're doing fine," she lies. "This is the easy part."

"Quiet, please!" Olivia says. I can't even get mad at her because, as a former classroom teacher, I completely understand how annoying it is when you're trying to do something and a couple of assholes in the back won't shut up. I decide not to open my mouth again because I don't want to be disrespectful, plus I need to be fully focused to get through the second part of this class.

Lilly rolls a balance ball my way and gives me a discreet thumbs up. Olivia says something about spinal rotation, and everyone sits on their ball. I ease down on mine, terrified of what might happen. I manage to get my butt situated without falling over, and I swear that a mountain climber just reaching the summit of Mt. Everest couldn't be more pleased with herself than I am right now. The woman in front of me extends her arms like a bird taking flight. I do the same. I'm a little shaky, but I'm still o

the ball. She starts moving her arms, but I sit still. When I feel steady enough, I start to move my arms and, lo and behold, I stay on the ball! That little victory makes me feel so confident that when everyone reaches out to touch their toes, I reach for my toes, too. My fingertips are almost down to my ankles when my balance ball flies out from under my rump. I look around in a panic and watch it bounce off the noggin of the lady behind me. It knocks her ponytail sideways and I can see that she's not happy, but she flashes a smile and fixes her hair. I whisper an apology, but she puts a finger to her lips, then points to the front of the room. Lilly chases down that bastard of a giant ball and I get some dirty looks from my fellow yogis. I get back on my mat and look straight ahead. That's when I notice the Ass Thong.

The woman directly in front of me is tall and slim with a set of those extra-long teardrop-shaped buttocks. She's wearing a black full-body leotard and some kind of high-waisted contraption that looks more suitable for a porno shoot than a yoga class. The neon green fabric running up from her crotch is disturbingly thin. Thank God for the black bodytard, or that whole scene would be indecent. I look over at Lilly to see her sitting peacefully on her ball with her eyes closed. I look straight ahead and try hard but fail to keep my eyes off the neon green Ass Thong.

The next pose is called the Seated Stork. I have the good sense to sit on my ball and not try any of that crazy shit. No one seems to mind, since they probably feel a little safer with me just sitting still. Next up is squats. I stand up and participate because I think I've got this one. Sure enough, I do ten squats without incident. But when I'm done, my ass and thighs are screaming for me to stop. Olivia instructs us to come down to our knees—gently, slowly—and lean into the ball. I'm more than happy to do that. "Now roll forward," she says, and I squish my boobs flat as I follow her lead. I can't believe people get up this early in the morning to abuse their bodies in such a way as this. "Now press your hands into the ball." I can't do that. I know I can't. I look over at Lilly.

"Just hold onto it," she whispers. "Keep your toes on the floor." I'm going to jackknife this yoga ball. That's what the end result of this will be. I watch as the woman in front of me rolls up to where her hands are on the floor. Those teardrop butt cheeks fan out and I just can't stop staring at that Ass Thong. I make myself look at the floor. I'm not sure what I want to do more: laugh or cry.

"Downward Facing Dog," Olivia says. "Great job, ladies. Very smooth. Now up."

I'm sweating like a whore in church, but I hug that ball like I love it. It starts to slip so I grip it hard, pressing down with my boobs to keep it in place. My toes are really starting to hurt. Lilly glances at me, and I can see now that she understands what a horrible idea this was. "Help," I whisper. "You've got to help me." She shushes me, so I look straight ahead again only to see that Ass Thong has acquired a massive wedgie. I start to tilt forward. I'm about to pile drive my head into the floor, so I arch my back—and when I do, the ball slips again. I tighten my embrace, but that only sends that ball flying from my arms like it was fired from a cannon. My balance ball is airborne while Ass Thong is going back into the Downward Dog. Just before my face hits the floor, it occurs to me that the woman in front of me will never get that neon green fabric out of her asshole. I look up to see that she's fallen into the lady in front of her. Balance balls start flying around all over the place. People are rolling and falling, and all I can do is lay there and watch the chaos unfold. Poor Lilly has an awful look on her face and I know she'll never want to be seen in public with me again. When the dust settles, we find ourselves surrounded by hostile yogis and I'm sure things are about to go down like the rumble in *West Side Story*. I regret that I didn't bring along a pocket knife with which to defend myself. Lilly and I slowly stand up.

"I'm sorry," I say to Ass Thong. I am so embarrassed and feel terrible for humiliating Lilly. "I've never done this before, and I shouldn't be here."

“You’re right,” Ass Thong says. “You shouldn’t be here if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“This is not a beginner’s class,” says the first woman Ass Thong knocked down. She’s wearing hot pink hot pants over black leggings.

“No, it’s not, but it is an open class,” Olivia says, stepping into the circle. “Everyone is welcome here.”

“Well, maybe we should start a private class, then,” Hot Pants says.

“Maybe you should,” Lilly says. While I’m relieved to have her stand up for me, I still feel horrible for causing such a commotion.

“Why don’t you bring her back tomorrow so she’ll have some other hefty women to keep her company?” Ass Thong says. I look at Lilly, and she looks at me, and the room is silent except for soft music tinkling from hidden speakers.

“Why don’t you kiss my ass?” Lilly says. That makes me so happy that I want to cry. Now more than ever, I’m so thankful for her. Maybe she *will* be seen in public with me again!

“Okay, that’s enough!” Olivia says, waving her arms. “This class is over. I will not tolerate this kind of dissension.” She looks at Ass Thong and Hot Pants. “Accidents happen, and you two don’t even need to forget the first week y’all were in here.” Ass Thong and Hot Pants back down fast. Olivia looks at Lilly. “I’ll have to ask you not to come back if you use language like that again. And you,” she looks at me and I wish I could just evaporate on the spot. “With all due respect, you might want to visit our beginners class on Friday.” She turns to leave, and everyone starts getting their things to hustle out the door. Ass Thong doesn’t move. Hot Pants stands dutifully by her side.

“I suppose I should apologize,” I say. The foot traffic going out the door slows as a few nosy ladies pretend not to be eavesdropping.

“Yes, I suppose you should,” Ass Thong says with a smirk. Hot Pants smiles, showing off her tiny little shark teeth.

I take a step closer to Ass Thong, lower my voice, and say, “Well, from the bottom of my heart, let me say that I am truly sorry that you look like fucking Borat in that porn star leotard.” I look at Hot Pants. “And you, little sister, ain’t doin’ much better in whatever you call that. I’m no yoga fashionista or anything, but Jeez Lou-eeze, y’all look ridiculous. Good day, now.” Lilly snatches up our mats and we get out of there.

“C’mon,” she says. “Let’s grab our bags and use the locker room upstairs.” When we get up there, we change into swimsuits and get in the hot tub. I apologize to Lilly for embarrassing her.

“Oh, I don’t go to that class anyway, so who cares?” But I can tell that she cares. We make small talk for ten minutes and then she has leave to get ready for school. I still can’t believe she gets up this early. Maybe people can change. On the way home, I pay attention to my thoughts like Rosemary told me to and one keeps coming back over and over: Maybe I can to change, too.

When I get back to the house, I take a long hot shower and then head straight for my bed. When I get up at lunchtime, I’m so stiff I can barely move. Buster Loo, always on high-alert for monsters and such, has a barking fit as I zombie-walk down the hallway.

“I can’t help it, Buster Loo,” I moan. “Mama hurt herself today.” I wobble into the kitchen and scratch around in the cabinet until I find some ibuprofen. I wonder if I should try to stretch, but I’m afraid if I get down I might never ever be able to get back up. I could get some meditating done then, couldn’t I? I pick up my laptop and hobble over to the sofa. Talking to Rosemary made me feel better but I think I need someone a little more mainstream. I search online until I find a therapist in Tupelo who appears to be affiliated with the hospital system. Best of all, Dr. Sidney Carl’s fees are based on a sliding scale according to a person’s income. I pick up my cell phone. There’s one credit card in my

wallet that isn't maxed out yet.

~~“Initial consultation is a hundred and twenty-five dollars,”~~ the girl who answers the phone tells me. She sounds like an automated answering system. Certainly no Aurelia.

“Is that based on a sliding scale?” I ask, because I'm an idiot and don't know these things.

“No, ma'am, the consultation is a flat fee and your rate will not be determined until you speak to Dr. Carl.”

“Okay, then,” I say. Turns out Dr. Carl has an appointment for tomorrow. *Lucky me.*

“There's been several cancelations due to the weather,” she says. For some reason, I think she's lying. I decide not to tell Chloe and Lilly about this appointment. I turn on the television and flip it to the Weather Channel.

“Storm's coming, Buster Loo,” I say, and we snuggle up and doze off.

When I leave the house Wednesday morning, the sky is an ominous shade of gray. Instinctively, I generate a grocery list in my mind which begins with a jug of milk and a loaf of bread. The weather people were rabid to the max this morning, so I'm sure most grocery store shelves are empty by now. I could probably still score a gallon of blue Hawaiian Punch, some sugar free wafers, and maybe a can or two of sardines. On a whim, I call to make sure Dr. Carl's office is open today. "We're here for now," the girl tells me. "But if it starts snowing, we'll be leaving at lunch."

"Well, my appointment is at nine thirty, so that won't affect me, right?" I don't want to drive all the way to Tupelo for nothing.

"I guess not, ma'am. Unless it starts snowing earlier."

"Oh. Okay. Thank you."

"Thank you and have a nice day." She's not smart, but at least she's polite. I wonder if she has a tip jar. If so, I might toss her a few cents.

Thirty minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of what their Web site said was a medical center. Apparently someone had big plans for this property that didn't pan out because a lone structure sits between two vacant lots, both of which are wildly overgrown. I can't help but notice how well the three-story building blends in with the sky. I have to guess where the parking spaces are because the lines are worn off the pavement. There are four other cars in the parking lot. I step over the cracks in the sidewalk, pull open the standard-issue glass office door, and step into a lobby that has wall-to-wall industrial tile.

"Sign in, please," the girl behind the glass says without looking up from her late-model computer. There is no tip jar. Nor is there a single soul in the waiting room. I pick up the pen and scribble my name on the very top line. She snatches the clipboard, highlights my name, and shoves another clipboard out the window. "Fill this out," she says.

It takes me fifteen minutes to fill out the six-page questionnaire which asks the same basic questions a dozen different ways. When I finish, I take the clipboard to the window where I stand for several minutes while my pal behind the glass speed types on her crusty little keyboard. There is a television in the corner of the waiting room, and the volume is turned up to where the sound cannot be ignored. CNN also appears excited about this big weather system moving across the south. They start showing random pictures of blizzard-type conditions from different parts of the county, as if they don't have everyone from Arkansas to Georgia worked up enough already. Finally, the non-jolly receptionist stops typing. She reaches for the clipboard, but I hold on to it. She looks up at me, clearly annoyed, and we make eye contact for the first time since I stepped into the office. She pulls the clipboard from my hand. "Photo ID and insurance card," she barks. I see she's wearing a name tag. Her name is Meg.

"I don't have insurance."

"We don't take checks, credit cards, or debit cards." Meg looks at me, eyes hard, lips pursed. She has better things to do.



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