

A Pinch of Ooh La La

Intro

Whenever I was at my lowest about what happened between Avery and me, I'd conjure a list of other women who, like me, had been publicly humiliated by a man. My list was usually made up of a handful of women who'd married politicians—a particular breed of woman who'd inevitably stand by her man while he looked into the TV camera and apologized for lying to his constituents, and, oh, by the way, *I'm sorry, honey, for cheating on you with the hot young intern*, or the twenty-year-old house aide, the thousand-dollar call girl, or whomever. The only difference between women like this and myself is that they at least received some form of apology. Avery had disappeared on me altogether.

When it comes to love, there's nothing worse than public betrayal. I was thirty-three when my heart was drop-kicked and sent flying through the air. Months later, when one of my stepmothers suggested I *"get back out there and start dating again,"* I looked at her as if she'd asked me to pour hot oil over my body and roll in dirt. *You want me to date? After what I've been through? Are you insane?*

Three years later, though, and you wouldn't have known I was that same sad sack of a woman who didn't want to do much more than sleep on her couch. Thanks to hard work and determination, I became the living, breathing embodiment of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive." A mere three years later and I'd opened my own bakery and bought a home. I had arrived. I was woman—hear me roar! I needed a man like a bicycle needed a fish! Or however that feminist saying went.

There was just one teensy-weensy problem. Years of living alone, and as chaste as Mother Teresa, and I was beginning to wish for—actually started to crave—the attention of those hairy non-emotive

creatures that often left the toilet seat up. What do you call 'em? Men. Yeah. That's it.

My heart, bruised and beat-up, began holding sit-ins with lit candles and music playing in the background to the tune of John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance." *All we are saying, my heart sang, is give men a chance.*

But a part of me was scared of men. One particular man. Not that any of this is about him, Avery, but he turned out to be a catalyst, if you will, the goad, the hot prod that convinced me I needed to make changes in my life. I saw his face in the *New York Times* and felt all my I-am-woman bravado diminish. My best friend, Bendrix, had a point, after all. My vagina was aging and my eggs were shriveling and I needed to move boldly from behind the wall I'd created, my comfy, safe wall of work, work, work, and cable on Sunday night.

By now, though, I suppose I should start from the beginning. *Enough with the preamble, my stepmom Bailey would say. If you're gonna tell it, tell it.*

To that end, imagine the interior of a bakery with wood floors and a menu written on a large blackboard in chalky pastels, high ceilings dotted with low-hanging silver retro lamps (which cost the owner a fortune), an exposed brick wall behind the counter, and, near the entrance, a mahogany bar where the regulars like to sit. The smell of freshly baked croissants hangs in the air, and the sound of bass, piano, and drums pipes through the stereo system.

Actually, since I'm the daughter of a jazz musician, I'd like to start things off like my dad might, right before playing a gig with my uncles: his fingers poised above the keys of his piano, and just under his breath, a quiet *A one . . . a two . . .*

Pick Yourself Up

Brad Mehldau’s song “Intro” blared through the stereo system the morning I finally decided to make a few changes in my life. His drummer, Jorge Rossy, moved into a six-four beat that forced the trio to amp their groove. It was seven a.m. and my bakery, Scratch, was empty except for a handful of early-morning regulars. While Dad had a more soulful sound and was an honest-to-goodness jazz legend, Brad was a technical powerhouse and one of the best of his generation, and his take on “Intro” and Nick Drake’s “River Man” were just two of my favorites.

Jazz—not that *smooth* jazz Muzak crap that literally made me want to puke anytime I heard it, but rather *authentic* jazz—was almost always playing at my bakery. Some days we tossed in singers like Otis Redding or Sam Cooke, Etta James or Frank Sinatra—singers who, as Daddy would say, *saaang*, but more times than not, patrons stepped inside Scratch and heard Louis Armstrong’s trumpet over the hiss of the espresso machine, or Bill Evans playing a melodic solo just when they needed to hear Evans most.

Dad taught us that we should listen to every genre of music out there and shun nothing, but I always returned to jazz. Coltrane. Bird. Billie. Ella’s version of . . . *anything*. Jazz was pretty much all I listened to. Even the menu at Scratch paid homage. There was the Chet Baker cupcake, made with Madagascar vanilla; the Sarah Vaughan, a bittersweet chocolate truffle tart; and the Miles Davis, a dark-chocolate cupcake with chocolate chips, topped with chocolate icing. Other items on the menu included the doughnut of the day, old-time favorites such as cobblers and sweet potato pie, and seasonal items

like plum tarts and strawberry shortcake.

I hummed along to Mehldau as I helped Beth, second-in-command pastry chef, roll out the last of the sourdough loaves for the lunch crowd. Bendrix was there by then, drinking espresso at his favorite booth in the back and reading the paper on his tablet. He'd been on twenty-four-hour call at the hospital and, as was his habit, had stopped by for coffee before going home.

After making a cappuccino for myself, I took out two *pains aux raisins* and joined him. He continued reading while I began returning e-mails on my laptop. After a moment, I heard him mention something about the People's Republic of China and mumbled a noncommittal reply. I wasn't in the mood for world events so early in the morning but didn't want to flat-out ignore him either.

"Not China, silly," I heard him say. "*Va-gina.*"

I looked up from my laptop, knowing I'd missed something. *What is going on with the Chinese and their vaginas?*

Bendrix shook his head ever so slightly and continued to peruse his tablet. "I was at the hospital and trying to remember the last time you went on a date. I went as far back as the eighteenth century."

I played along. "Ah, right, that dreaded Count Vladimir. Hated that guy."

"It's been too long, Abbey. If you don't have sex soon, that vagina of yours is going to forget what it's there for. If you don't have sex soon, that vagina of yours is going to dry up and wither away."

"Thanks for thinking of my—*vagina*," I whispered, "while you were at the hospital, supposedly saving lives."

"Call it multitasking. It's been close to three years."

"Almost four, but who's counting?" I made a show of glancing around the bakery before going back to my e-mails. "Unlike you, I'm not good at multitasking. I've been busy creating a business. Besides, my"—I whispered—"vagina is perfectly fine."

"Your vagina is as dry as the Sahara. Your vagina is so dry it crunches. Your vagina is so—"

"Okay, okay. I get the point. What's with you this morning? Why are we talking about my *you*

know what? It's too early. Go back to your paper or whatever you're doing. I don't need sex right now, okay? I'm in my celibate phase. Besides, whatever is going on with my . . . private body parts is none of your business."

"*Private body parts?* You sound like you're five years old. It's a *vagina* and you have one for a reason."

I shushed him, thinking of my customers trying to enjoy their muffins, not that anyone was nearby. I also wouldn't dare say the word *muffin* aloud. I knew Bendrix would run with it: *You need someone enjoying your muffin. Your muffin needs attention.* And whatever else he'd say.

He swung his tablet around and I stared at a series of cupids fluttering alongside four couples who kissed and smiled. *LoveMatch.com* floated at the top of the screen in a swirly font.

I shifted my gaze from the dating site and looked at him directly. "Uh . . . you need to go home and get some sleep; you're obviously delirious."

"It's time you got out there again. Your dream of Prince Charming walking in here and sweeping you off those clogs you're wearing isn't gonna happen."

"And neither is online dating."

"'Meet your perfect match,'" he read. "'Find love by browsing our top singles, all at your convenience.'"

"It's not going to happen, Bendrix."

"It's time, Abbey."

"Is not."

"It is."

Thankfully, Noel, one of my baristas, walked over to tell me my eight o'clock appointment would be late. A definite hipster, Noel had good looks and a superior talent for chitchat and remembering names, all essential to our early success. He had the required tattoos and his hair was perfectly coiffed to look messily neat. His interruption gave Bendrix and me a momentary break from sounding like

children.

I didn't understand why Bendrix was being so pushy, frankly. There was a time, years ago, when he'd tried to convince me to start dating again, but those conversations had petered out once I became fully committed to opening Scratch. Besides, he was one to talk. If I feared getting hurt again, so did he, and he was as shut down as I was.

The year prior, the love of his life, one Anthony Wilson, had confessed to making out with another man at a party. Bendrix was so upset after hearing Anthony's confession, he broke up with him. Mind you, these two had been dating for more than two years by that point and were planning on buying a house together. I, for one, stood on the side of common sense and told Bendrix that he should give Anthony a second chance. At least hear him out, I'd said. It was a kiss, after all, not a full-blown affair, or anything close; and Anthony had confessed, which was a clear indication that the kiss was a cry for help. But Bendrix, stubborn and prideful, wanted nothing more to do with Anthony. I was so upset after their breakup, you would've thought I'd been dumped. I never knew anyone who was a better fit for Bendrix, who could make him do that rare thing he so disdained—smile—as often as Anthony could. They were good together. Then again, if Bendrix knew me better than anyone, I knew him just as well, and my guess was that after two years with Anthony, he'd been falling hard, and loving a person so deeply scared him, and that kiss had given him a way out. Bendrix waved away my take on the situation, calling it psychobabble, and after the split he rarely wanted to talk about Anthony, or, God help him, discuss his feelings. When it came to love, I was the Cowardly Lion and Bendrix, the Tin Man. If I dealt with the Avery debacle by baking, Bendrix dealt with his heartbreak by working longer hours at the hospital, volunteering at a free clinic in East Oakland, and watching esoteric foreign films from the sixties.

Anthony's name worked like kryptonite against Bendrix's cool exterior, and he had a way of recoiling whenever he heard it. Even so, I thought if he kept bugging me about dating I was going to pull out the name and throw it at him.

He waited for Noel to leave the table before starting up again. “You have to think about egg production.”

“You have to think about leaving me alone. You’re getting on my nerves.”

“I’m concerned. From what I learned in medical school, eggs get old, and when they do, they don’t lay as well, making it harder to create the necessary zygote that eventually leads to diaper changes and midnight feedings.”

It wasn’t fair that he mentioned kids, but he had a point and he knew it. Forty loomed: a six-foot-high billboard lit up on a dark highway and drawing closer and closer and closer. What’s more, if my heart was holding sit-ins and quietly requesting that I find romance, my uterus was holding protests with a megaphone and placards: *What do we want? Sperm! When do we want it? Now!*

I looked at him from across the table. “Why are you putting all of this in my face? Why are you being a jerk?”

He leaned in, his voice low. “If you want a family as much as I know you do, now is the time to start trying. The older you get, the higher the risks of ectopic pregnancy, high blood pressure, diabetes—”

“You’ve made your point.”

He reached over and took my hand. “I worry about you.”

“I know. Stop it. It’s annoying.”

I wasn’t a believer in reincarnation, but if past lives existed, I had to believe that Bendrix and I had lived together through several. I imagined us bumbling along through one lifetime after another as brother and sister, husband and wife, mother and son—we’d experienced it all together, only to reach this point now, best friends. We had met the first day of our freshman year of high school. When I saw him in the cafeteria in his oversized T-shirt with a picture of the Cure, it was love at first sight. His Afro had been straightened to within a short breath of its life, dyed lime green, and styled so that several oiled strands fell perfectly over his left eye. His pants were held together in spots by safety pins. I was in my

black phase—black jumper, black stockings, black shoes, and my own hair was shaped like a block of cotton candy. Frankenstein’s bride had nothing on me.

He read Baudelaire and ate an elaborate sandwich on a toasted baguette with various kinds of sprouts and vegetables sticking out. He didn’t look up from his book until I made a show of clearing my throat and opening my Plath. When he saw what I was reading he smiled. “Child, I cannot believe we have another four years of this shit. I feel like *Oliver Twist* trapped in that damn orphanage.”

“More like *Carrie*,” I rejoined.

“Yes,” he said, widening his eyes. “Pig’s blood and all. Bendrix Henderson.”

“Abbey Lincoln Ross.”

I took a bite of my *pain aux raisins* and Bendrix sipped his espresso while staring at me. In the momentary silence that followed, I felt a sense of anxiety coming from him that I hadn’t noticed before. I could feel my heart quickening because I just knew that something was up. Something was wrong.

“What happened?”

He stared down at his tablet longer than necessary. Waffling, I believed it was called.

“*Bendrix.*”

He sighed and swiped, then pushed his tablet in front of me. I picked it up and stared directly into Avery Brooks’s caramel peepers and shockingly white teeth. Avery stared back at me from the photo as if no time had passed at all. I read the headline—AVERY BROOKS MAKING QUIET COMEBACK IN AMSTERDAM—then let my gaze wander back down to the photo. He stood in front of a large abstract painting flanked by potted plants and an oversized red chair; a staircase peeked out from behind. Sunlight shone through the windowpanes to his left, and at his feet there was a small stuffed rabbit, a kid’s toy. His home, presumably, in Amsterdam.

“I guess Mexico didn’t work out,” I heard Bendrix say.

I remained quiet, until—“How long have you known?”

“I found out a few hours ago while I was at the hospital.”

I skimmed the text long enough to catch familiar phrases like *impassioned artist*, *fraud*, *Oscar-nominated documentary*, and the more unfamiliar *phoenix rises*, *sales doubling*, and *second life*. I clicked to the next page and saw Avery with his arm around a ruddy, freckled girl whose blond pigtailed flipped upward as though pulled by strings. She wore clogs and lederhosen.

I exaggerate, but only slightly. She was in her twenties and pretty in a pale, freckled, Scandinavian way.

“They have a son,” Bendrix said.

“That explains the pink rabbit. Good for them. Pippi Longstocking and Basquiat’s love child.” I pushed the tablet toward him and covered my eyes with my fingers as if I’d been reading for hours.

“What else?”

“Apparently he’s working on a series of paintings.”

“*Original* this time?”

“So he says. He’s been selling. The price for his work is up. They love him in Europe. His show hasn’t opened and most of the work has already sold.”

Bendrix gave me the necessary time to pout before speaking. “He’s putting his life back together—all of his life, not just work. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Abbey. I love what you’ve done with Scratch as much as you do, but you need to get on with living.”

“But you don’t understand. I need time. Yes, you were there, but you don’t know what it’s like to be humiliated in movie theaters and on Blu-ray and DVD and live streaming.”

I always fell back on my humiliation when I was pushed too hard. And why shouldn’t I? Who else could say they had discovered their fiancé was cheating while watching a documentary about his life? Show of hands? *Anyone? Anyone at all?*

Avery B: His Rise and Fall was a Sundance Audience Award winner and went on to be nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary. I mean, how does something like that happen?!

“That movie was years ago, Abbey.”

“Feels like yesterday.” I glanced around the bakery. By now the tables were filling up and a line was snaking to the screen door in the front. My bakery was a success, but the article made me feel like a complete failure. He had a baby—a son. During all those years with Avery, I had dreamed of starting a family with him. Avery was making a comeback and had a kid and a girlfriend, while I was spending my life making cupcakes. Where was my child? Where was my family?

“You of all people know how much that man hurt me,” I said.

“I also know that you’re letting your fear take over. I also know you’re so afraid, you’ve stopped trying.” He looked up from his tablet. “What are you going to do? Spend the rest of your life hanging out with your best friend?”

“Yes?” I said weakly.

“Abbey, you’re not getting younger. Life is short. There are no guarantees. You’re the star of your own show.” He was on a roll now and enjoying himself. “The driver of your own car. Only *you* can make it happen.”

I rolled my eyes.

Thankfully, Noel called over that one of my suppliers was on the line, saving me from breaking out into tears on the spot. My life sucked!

I told Noel I’d take the call in my office and rose from the table. “Thanks for the morning pep talk and news about my ex. I feel much better about life. You are a fine friend, Dr. Henderson. Thanks. Heading home yet? You must be exhausted.”

He eyed me from over his espresso cup before holding up his tablet with a grin, and the online dating site flashed before my eyes.

Jerk.

Let's Face the Music and Dance

A quote from *New Yorker* art critic Charles Rappaport: “Avery Brooks’s artwork speaks on a level outside the realm of abstraction and encapsulates the vitality of the mean streets where he grew up and the irony of his generation. Even at his young age, his work stands with that of the great artists he once studied.”

I was twenty-eight when I met Avery and working at *Contemporary Art Now* as a staff writer. I’d been following his career since grad school and lucked out when I was assigned to interview him at his opening at Kerr Gallery in San Francisco.

I’d recently earned my master’s degree in art history, my thesis on Kyrah Hegl, an artist who worked with mixed media before her suicide in the early 1980s. I was never an artist myself and not nearly as talented as my musically and artistically inclined siblings, but Bendrix and I had earned a name for ourselves back in high school as graffiti artists. We were serious enough that we were getting commissioned gigs by the time we were seniors. (Oh, how I was tempted at times to tell people that the one and only Dr. Bendrix Henderson was once known as Benz to the graffiti world.)

Bendrix had felt even more trapped in high school than I had and was always coming up with oddball ideas: “Let’s go to a hockey game!” “Hockey? Who goes to hockey? We live in Oakland.” Or, “Let’s go see Pearl Jam!” “They’re in town? Where are they playing?” “Oregon! We could take the train!”

He’d been going through some of my art books one night (I was obsessed with graffiti art back then, especially that of Barry McGee and Shepard Fairey), and he looked up from one of the books and suggested that we find an abandoned building and make graffiti art just as easily as you might say, *We*

should take a walk. I was hardly paying attention because I was struggling through my algebra homework. Bendrix had been whisked off to gifted and Advanced Placement classes two weeks into freshman year and was already taking trig, but math remained my nemesis. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you listening?”

I tried the formula I was working on for the millionth time. $X \text{ minus } Y$. . . “Yeah. Graffiti. God, I hate algebra. Who cares about Y? I hate Y. I hate Z. I hate all these stupid formulas. And why are we using letters with math?”

At this point Bendrix sighed and climbed down from my bed and grabbed my book. “Here, child.” He took my pencil and began marking up my page like Zorro signing his signature with masked flair. “There.”

I stared at the answer.

“Now will you pay attention?”

Neither Bendrix nor I could really draw per se, so we made abstract portraits of our favorite artists instead. Van Gogh riding a skateboard. Paul Klee bungee jumping. Or we’d spray-paint a poem or haiku.

Daddy was big on three rules: Be honest, be yourself, and stay out of jail. So when I told him I wanted to try my hand at graffiti art, he made me promise to make my mark only on abandoned buildings and freight trains—as if we knew where to find a freight train. Our odd creations caught on, and at the height of our “fame” an indie rock band took a picture of one of our designs and used it on the cover of their CD. Later, the owner of a skateboard shop in Alameda asked us to come out and paint the side of his building. Thanks to those early years in high school, I hadn’t merely *studied* art like my colleagues in grad school; I’d also created it. I’d learned in some small way what it was like to feel a creative spark, to experience the aliveness and elation that come from creativity.

All this is to say, while I wasn’t model gorgeous like the women Avery usually dated, I was able to meet him in a place other women couldn’t—that place where we could spend hours on end at MOMA

gazing at a piece of art or sitting at a café discussing favorite artists and evaluating their work. I also introduced him to artists he'd never heard of, mostly female, who were ignored in academe and the art world. I knew a bit more about art criticism and history than he did, only because he was mostly self-taught. He once told me he thought one of the sexiest things about me was my love and knowledge of art. He proposed a year after we met while we were traveling together in Italy.

Like Pollock and his alcoholism, Frida and that pole (!), van Gogh and that ear (!), Avery also came with the prerequisite Artist's Story, his involving a drug-addicted mother and a series of foster parents. It also didn't hurt that he was *fine*, as my stepmother Bailey noted more than once. Years of climbing the art world's ladder led to a two-page spread in *Vanity Fair* that catapulted him into the national spotlight. Even readers not interested in art stopped short when they saw Avery standing next to one of his drawings, barefoot and wearing a clean white T-shirt and jeans. Oh, those light-brown eyes and that caramel-like skin; those muscles, and that grin starting at the corner of his mouth. Ladies on Park Avenue sitting in gold-plated chairs turned the page of *Vanity Fair*, saw Avery Brooks, and sucked in a breath of air.

Hollywood came next. Larsen, a documentary filmmaker, asked if he could make a movie about Avery's creative process and life. Avery and I were three years into our relationship and had already formed an impenetrable bubble around us against the ever-mounting requests for his time and attention. Larsen seemed trustworthy, though, and the opportunity of a rising documentarian filming Avery's life was too good to pass up. We said yes, and the camera crew began following Avery around.

Sometime during the filming of *Avery B*, it was discovered that Avery had forged his last series of paintings off a former assistant. Admittedly, he was already heading into territory where artists begin to copy old ideas. Think Factory Warhol and those tired stills, or late Keith Bosworth and those dreaded cartoons. When his assistant took him to court, he eventually admitted that he'd copied "a few ideas." He was sentenced to pay damages and sued on all fronts by people who'd bought paintings from his last series of work and by other patrons and gallery owners who feared they'd been scammed. He put the loft in San Francisco on the market, as well as his New York City studio. Everything had to go. Larsen

changed the title of his documentary from *Avery B: His Rise and Genius* to *Avery B: His Rise and Fall*.

I watched movers come in and take everything from our loft. I watched Avery try to work his smile on his manager, curator, patrons, and press as he did his best to explain his way out of the shithole of lies into which he'd dug himself. I'd had to defend myself as well. *Did you know about the forgery, Ms. Ross?* No, I hadn't. I hadn't known a thing. I could have added that there'd been a time when Avery had told me everything and asked my opinion on whatever project he was working on, but that had ended months before—as had the sex and most of his attention.

So, yes, I was as surprised as anyone. I mean, forgery? Cheating is no surprise in places like Wall Street or the government, but in the art world—where creativity, *your* creativity, your insight, is your absolute treasure—to forge, to cheat another artist . . . it was unthinkable. Naturally his crime was the talk among critics, reviewers, and other artists. Charlie Rose dedicated a segment to the scandal, and when the movie premiered, Larsen was invited to speak about his movie and Avery on *Fresh Air*.

About a week after the scandal broke, I told Avery off and moved in with Bendrix for a while. Avery knocked on the door a few days later and asked if we could talk. He told me he was going to Mexico because he needed time to think. The documentary was showing at Sundance that month and he didn't want to have to “deal” when it opened. When I said I'd think about going to Mexico with him, he told me not to bother because he was going alone. That's when I knew we were finished and tugged off my engagement ring. He refused to take it back, though. He loved me, he said, and he was “deeply sorry.” I deserved the ring and should keep it. He told me he'd be in touch, and then he turned and walked away.

Since I had tickets to the festival, I went with Bendrix to see *Avery B*. We pointed out actors and directors and acted like kids. We sat in the back of the theater during the showing, and I gripped his hand, humiliated every time I appeared on camera; my nose alone looked six feet tall. All in all, though, I had to say, it was an excellent documentary, just as much about the creative process and the importance of art as a story about Avery's life. I started to relax and enjoy myself. Until the nymphs appeared: one blond, one brunette, both thin boned and wide-eyed and full lipped.

The brunette, Charlotte, looked like she belonged in a silent picture, a modern-day Mary Pickford

with her coiled hair and pencil-thin eyebrows that exaggerated her perfectly oval face. She stared directly into the camera as Larsen asked when her affair with Avery began. “Like, maybe, like, a year after he and Abbey got engaged. I know this is supposed to make me the bad guy in all of this, but I believe when there’s true love between two people, no one can come between them. I mean, like, if I could so easily come between those two, it wasn’t love.”

Larsen (offscreen): So what happened?

Charlotte (shrugging): We’re both Scorpios, so it was crazy! We were all, like, *so* hot for each other; then things played out. It’s like those—what do you call ’em?—those meteors in the sky. We burnt out. He didn’t want to hurt Abbey either, so we stopped. I know he must seem like a player or whatever, but he’s just very passionate.

I turned to Bendrix, my mouth agape. Even in the darkened theater I could see that his eyes were as big and wide as mine.

“Do you know her?” he whispered.

“Of course not! I’ve never seen her before in my life!”

Someone from behind shushed us.

The blonde appeared next. Already she looked like she had more of a brain than the first bimbo. She wore glasses; her long braid was an accessory that draped over one shoulder. Her name appeared at the bottom of the screen: Josie.

Larsen: When did your relationship with Avery start?

Josie: We met at a party. He said he wanted to draw my hands. I know that sounds corny, but that’s exactly what he did. He was very respectful and drew my hands all night while we talked. I’m an artist myself. I design jewelry.

Close-up shot: Josie fingering her necklace, made of what looks like icicles held dangling from a thin silver chain.

Larsen: And how did the relationship end?

Josie: Well, to be honest, it hasn't. I'm not proud of how we started, but we're very much in love.

Avery Brooks is the love of my life.

Larsen: You know he's engaged.

Josie: Abbey is more like his business partner at this point. What Avery had for Abbey died a long time ago. He loves her more like a sister.

Cut to: Josie and Avery strolling through Golden Gate Park. He picks Josie up and throws her over one shoulder like a sack of flour, then twirls her around. Cue cheesy-sounding classical music.

Cut to: **Larsen** (offscreen): Do you ever worry about infidelity?

Cut to: **Me** (smiling into the camera—*like a gullible idiot!*): Oh, no. Never. Avery and I have our ups and downs like any couple, but I know Avery is as faithful to me as I am to him. Besides, I wouldn't know where he'd get the time to sneak around behind my back. His art and his career are all consuming.

The word *idiot* flashes on and off at the bottom the screen.

Okay, it didn't, but it may as well have.

"Let's get out of here," Bendrix said.

"No, I need to see this."

"You'll have to fight me off, then. There's no way I'm letting you torture yourself."

He grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the theater.

I considered suing Larsen but let the idea go since it was Avery who'd hurt me. Or was I to blame?

How had I missed not one but two women? And when exactly had his love for me "died"?

I was devastated. Hurt enough that I wanted nothing more to do with men—in particular artists and musicians and anyone in the performing arts industry. And Scorpios.

In the meantime, however, I still had Bendrix to deal with and that dreaded article in the *New York Times*, dredging up old memories. After Noel mentioned I had a call, I went to my office and spoke about fruit

with my apple supplier. When I hung up, I remained in my chair and took in the pictures of my nieces and nephews covering my desk. My brother Theo was the first in the family to have a child, and I'd fallen instantly in love with my nephew and wanted to be the best aunt ever. As our family grew (and grew), I couldn't keep up with all the recitals and baseball games, but I always sent a gift every birthday and over the holidays, and I attended their school plays and activities whenever I could.

Yes, Daddy had babies by women he never married, but he made sure to remain in all his children's lives. He hated the words *step* and *half* and wanted us to treat one another as brothers and sisters. Period. As the oldest female, I'd learned to potty train, diaper, and entertain toddlers and babies as well as a professional nanny. I was a kid who liked to please, and I never grew tired of all the snot and dribble and phlegm that came with looking after my younger siblings. My long way of saying, I always knew I wanted to be a mother. I always knew it was something I wanted to do.

So yes (*okay, okay, okay!*), Bendrix was right about my fear, and the clock inside my uterus ticked and tocked all the louder as I stared at the pictures on my desk.

With a heavy sigh, I walked back to the front of the bakery, feeling envious of Avery and alone and lonely. A rain cloud formed above my head as I walked past Beth, rolling out piecrust; when I stepped into the bakery itself, the storm cloud burst and dumped pellets of hard rain. I donned a black scarf and continued to drag myself around tables as thunder boomed and lightning flashed. I was woman—watch me mope.

Bendrix was working on a second cup of espresso by then. He didn't bother looking up from what he was reading, even after I stood in front of him and thanked him for ruining my day with his news.

"Hey, I'm just trying to help. Just doing my part to wake you up."

He swiped and turned his tablet toward me. I stared at a picture of Avery and the Danish Pippi Longstocking holding their son.

"Wow, you really are a jerk."

He snickered.

Noel came over. "Your eight thirty is here." He jutted his chin toward a couple near the front of the

bakery, holding hands and grinning at each other.

“Thanks, Noel. Will you tell Beth to bring out the cakes?”

“Sure thing.”

I said to Bendrix, “I wouldn’t mind if you were gone by the time I’m finished.”

“Love you, too.”

For obvious reasons I had to let go of my foul mood before talking weddings and wedding cakes with the couple I was meeting with. By chance, Rosemary Clooney sang “Pick Yourself Up” on the stereo. I listened for a few bars while willing the rain cloud over my head to go away.

The couple, twentysomething Google employees, pointed at the taster cakes Beth was setting out.

My bakery was popular, but my reputation and expertise lay in so-called wedding cake artistry. The couple I was about to meet had discovered me after seeing one of my cakes at their coworkers’ wedding. Their coworkers Adhitya and Minu were more artsy than techie and had wanted an eye-popping cake with a contemporary design. They’d been to Scratch a few times, and after trying several bakeries in the Silicon Valley, they thought they’d see if I could come up with anything. I knew that having the opportunity to make a wedding cake for a pair of Google techies could be a boon if I played it right, and thanks to my background in art I felt ready for the challenge.

My first Google cake, as Bendrix and I called it, was an abstract creation based on Henry Lair’s *Flamingo*. I knew Minu would be wearing a red-and-gold sari, so I’d covered the cake in a deep red fondant that matched her dress. On the top tier I created gold leaves and abstract shapes that also harkened back to Lair’s work. The cake was a success and generated enough buzz that my name was taking hold not only throughout the Internet behemoth but in other tech giants in Silicon Valley as well.

Hence the Google couple sitting across from me. “So, are you ready to discuss your wedding cake?” I could only hope that my smile and overly bright tone hid my sense of hopelessness: *My vagina is drying up! I’m the wedding cake designer who’s never had a wedding of her own!*

“We’re very excited!” said the future bride. She kissed the future groom in a burst of youthful

happiness and Google money and optimism. “We’re so in love!” she exclaimed.

“We just had sex in the car!” said the future groom.

“We have sex four times a week!”

“And we make a shitload of money!”

“In exactly one year we’re going to start making a baby!” admitted the future bride.

The future groom to me: “If you want a baby, I suggest you start soon. You look *old!*”

“Yes,” agreed the future bride with added concern, “you look *very old!*”

They turned to each other and burst into laughter: “*We’re so rich!*”

Actually, I’m not sure what they said. Their mouths moved, but I was somewhere else. Rosemary Clooney droned on while I stared into one of the mini-cakes I’d made, a delicate yellow cake, iced in lemon rolled fondant, as if I was gazing into my future. I saw myself making wedding cakes until I was old and gray; Avery, meanwhile, would be surrounded by his grandchildren and latest girlfriend.

I mentioned something to the couple about the first cake but my head remained elsewhere. Bendrix was right. I’d given up. I’d given up on finding love because I was afraid of getting hurt. The future bride took a bite of the cake. “Oh my gosh, honey, this is delicious!”

I thanked her while thinking that they were a concrete reminder that love was possible, and even though we failed at it at least fifty percent of the time, it was worth the effort, right? Yes! Yes, it was!

I stood abruptly. “I’m so sorry, but would you give me one second, please?” I was already backing away. “I’ll be right back. Forgot something.”

I marched over to Bendrix. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Do what?”

“Online dating! I’ll give it a try.”

“Good, because I’ve already created your profile.”

“*You what?*”

He clicked a few times and turned his tablet. I stared at a picture he’d taken of me last year at my sister’s birthday party. At the top of the picture I saw my profile name.

“Abbey Lincoln Ross, say hello to JazzyGirlinOakland.”