

JULIETTE AND THE MONDAY MANDATES

Becky Doughty

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

JULIETTE stared wide-eyed into the rear-view mirror at the red and blue lights flashing behind her. Her palms began to sweat as her heart rate sky-rocketed, and it took her several minutes to pull her little PT Cruiser out of the dinner-hour traffic.

She waited, both hands gripping the steering wheel, as the officer approached her window. Finding it still closed, he tapped on it, and she jumped, letting out a tiny squeal. "Sorry!" she called through the glass, turning the car back on so she could operate the power windows. She worked the knobs, accidentally sending the backseat window up and down twice before she finally managed to get hers open. "Sorry," she repeated, peering up at the very tall officer whose eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses.

"Please turn off your engine, ma'am." His voice was firm, and Juliette scrambled to comply.

"Sorry," she muttered a third time, afraid now to look up at him. She toyed with the keys in her lap, sensing his eyes boring into the top of her head. She was sure she'd smell burning hair at any moment.

"May I see your license and registration, please?"

After wrestling with the latch on the glove compartment, she withdrew the paperwork for her car, then reached into the back seat to grab her purse from off the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him take a step back and put a hand on his holster.

The thought that she might be pulling out a weapon struck her as funny, and she had to bite her lip to keep from giggling. Her hands trembled, making it difficult to slide her license from its plastic casing in her wallet.

"Is everything all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, Officer." The late afternoon sun setting in the sky behind him made her squint. She couldn't tell if he was looking at her or not, but she caught a glimpse of her warped reflection in his sunglasses. "I'm just really nervous, I guess."

"Why are you so nervous?"

"I—I don't know," she stuttered as she handed over her license. "I've never been pulled over before, and I'm trying not to freak out."

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"Oh. Good. Thanks." She grimaced. It sounded as though she'd been afraid of just that. "I mean, I know you're not going to hurt me. At least I think I do. I meant thanks for trying to reassure me. I can't help it, though; I get nervous easily." She should just close her mouth. She wasn't making things better by talking.

"Do you know how fast you were driving?"

"Um, I think so." She wrapped her damp fingers around the steering wheel again. "Actually, I'm not sure."

"Ten miles over the speed limit." His voice remained calm, patient, rattling her even more. "Do you know what the speed limit is here?"

"Um, I think so," she said again, a hot flush creeping up her chest and neck. "Actually, I—I'm not exactly sure about that either." Her voice cracked into a whisper.

The officer cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I'm a little concerned. You don't seem to know some pretty important pieces of information that someone who gets behind the wheel of a car should know." His patronizing tone irritated her. "The speed limit here is 35 miles per hour. You were driving 45." He paused, just long enough to make her squirm, before continuing. "Were you in a hurry to get somewhere?"

"No, not really." She shook her head and forgot about keeping her mouth shut. "I was just hungry, and I wasn't paying attention to how fast I was driving."

The officer chuckled, and Juliette's stomach flip-flopped uncomfortably. "You were speeding because you were hungry? That's a first." Her grip on the steering wheel tightened; he was mocking her.

Jerk, she thought to herself. "Well, it's the truth." She tried to glare at him, but the sun made it difficult, and she had to turn away again.

He leaned down to look around the inside of the car while she fumed in her seat. As if satisfied there was nothing suspicious about her, he straightened again, tore off a page from his ticket pad, and handed it to her along with her license.

"Look, Ms. Gustafson. Believe it or not, I appreciate your honesty. But being distracted is a dangerous way to drive, much more so than driving too fast because you *choose* to ignore the speed limit. Did you know that most accidents happen when a driver is distracted? Let this be a wake-up call for you. It's why we give tickets; not necessarily to punish drivers for bad behavior, but to encourage them to drive better." He pointed at the pink form she was holding. "Just follow the instructions on the ticket, okay?"

She couldn't believe it. He was actually *lecturing* her! First he mocked her, then he lectured her. No longer nervous, she was offended. She nodded, her lips clamped shut, afraid of what she might say if she let any words slip out.

He patted the roof of her car. "Drive safely now, Ms. Gustafson."

"Thank you, Officer," she managed to squeeze out, her upbringing forcing her to be polite. "Not for the ticket, of course. Or the lecture." Why, oh why couldn't she just stop talking? "I mean, thank you for wishing me safe driving. Thank you for saying 'Drive safely now.'" Her voice trailed off. She stuck her keys in the ignition, turned on the car, and rolled up the window without looking at him again. "Imbecile," she muttered, not sure if she was referring to him or herself.

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A TICKET. Her first ever. She didn't know whether to cry or celebrate. And today, of all days.

Today marked six months of life without Mike.

Juliette tucked her feet up underneath her as she nestled into the corner of her overstuffed beige couch. This was *her* spot. It had always been her spot, and at this rate, it probably always would be. She maneuvered the TV tray over her knees until it was positioned just the way she liked it.

"Another wonderful meal with me, myself, and I. I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want, however I want, wherever I want. No one can tell me otherwise, and I *like* it this way." She raised her plastic fork in a defiant salute, then stabbed it into the middle of The Green Dragon food on her tray. She spun the utensil until it was loaded with noodles and shoved the whole bundle into her mouth. She couldn't close her lips around the bite, but she didn't care; she just chewed with her mouth open.

"Delicious!" She exclaimed when she could speak again. "It's you that I love, Mr. Yu. Only you." She pointed the remote at the television and pressed play. A terribly-acted romance-novel-come-to-life started up again where she'd left it to go pick up her take-out. The heroine was overly-made up and vacuous. The male lead looked like he'd been shellacked from head to toe, not a hair or muscle out of place. Even his jeans were pressed. She actually *wanted* the woman to leave him. The storyline was not making her cry, nor giving her anything else to relate to, and it was sucking all the joy out of her favorite food.

Just as she was debating whether or not she could stand another second of the sappy dialogue, her phone rang.

At first, she tried to ignore it. Then she thought it might be Mike and contemplated throwing the thing out the window. She let it ring instead, and the call eventually went to voice-mail, beeping rudely at her. Sighing dramatically, she turned up the movie, preferring to see it through to the bitter end than to be stuck with her thoughts of Mike.

A few minutes later, the phone rang again. "Are you serious?" She pushed the TV tray away and scrambled for the purse she'd dropped on the floor at the end of the couch. It was Renata. "What do you want," she muttered under her breath, while she considered whether or not she could handle talking to her sister right now.

Either she was calling to make sure Juliette wasn't drowning herself in the bathtub, or she was calling to try to coerce her into going on another family outing to Pizza Haven or the local dog park. "I don't even *have* a dog! Or a family, for that matter. Or a man." She sighed and brought the phone to her ear.

"Hi, Ren." She knew she sounded miserable, but she didn't care. Regardless of how she answered the phone, Renata believed Juliette was seriously depressed, and if she sounded otherwise, her sister reminded her that she didn't have to fake it with her.

"How are you, sweetie?"

"Why do you call me sweetie?" Juliette voiced the first question that popped into her head, belligerence tattering the edges of her words. She softened her tone just a little. "In fact, you call all of us that."

"Do I?" Renata asked. "It must be because I think you're all so sweet. And actually, I don't call Phoebe that. She'd rip my head off and drop-kick it into outer space."

"Hm. Did you two have another run-in?" Juliette smirked at her own ridiculous question. Renata and Phoebe never had anything *but* run-ins.

As though reading her thoughts, Renata replied, "We don't have run-ins. We just think differently. But I didn't call you to talk about Phoebe. I called to find out how you're doing."

"I'm fine." Juliette opted for cryptic. She'd forgotten to turn down the movie and was having a hard time focusing on what Renata was saying.

"You're fine? Really? What is that noise? Do you have company?"

"I'm fine. Really. The noise is a movie. No, I don't have company. Any other questions?" She rolled her eyes as the two main characters on screen started moving toward each other across a parking lot in slow motion.

"You're starting to sound like Phoebe." Juliette could hear the disdain in Renata's voice and it made her bristle.

"That's not such a bad thing," Juliette said, defending their younger sister.

"Oh relax. I don't mean it's bad. I just mean you don't sound like you, because you're acting like her." She sighed. "Again, I didn't call to talk about Phoebe."

"What did you call about, Ren?" Juliette couldn't decide which was worse; this conversation or her movie.

"We had a G-FOURce yesterday."

All ears now, she grabbed the remote and paused the lovers mid-lunge. "What? Why didn't anyone call me? I didn't know." She didn't remember scheduling a meeting with her sisters.

"Wait." A terrible thought occurred to her. "Renata, why didn't I know there was a G-FOURce yesterday?"

"Because we needed to meet without you. We're having a follow-up tomorrow, though, and you need to be there for that one."

"What's going on? I don't like the sound of this. In fact, I'm not sure I really want to be there." Juliette's mind was spinning. They'd met without her. That meant they'd met to talk about her. "This is another one of your interventions, isn't it?"

Renata didn't deny it. "We're worried about you, sweetie."

"Stop calling me that! I'm not your sweetie, Renata. I'm not your child, and I'm not some empty-headed twit who needs to be called placating names." Juliette pressed her forehead into the palm of her free hand and closed her eyes, immediately ashamed of her uncharacteristic outburst. "Look, I don't need an intervention, okay? Yes, I'm sad. Yes, I'm even slightly depressed. When I think about Mike, I get hot and sweaty, but not in a good way. I get sad, and then angry, and then wonder what's so wrong with me that he couldn't love me like I loved him."

"Wouldn't," Renata interjected. "Love is a decision, Juliette. That's why John and I are still married after all these years."

Ah yes. Mr. and Mrs. Perfect. “Regardless, my reactions are normal. I’m not on the verge of suicide, and I’m not going to go be a hermit on some isolated mountaintop. I just need a little time to lick my wounds and heal up a bit.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. “Ren? Are you still there?”

“Tomorrow. Five o’clock. Your place. That way you can’t ditch us. Come straight home from work, Juliette. Don’t dawdle.” The phone went dead in her hand.

“Yes, Mother,” Juliette muttered. She glared down the sofa to her spot at the other end where her food waited patiently, trying not to congeal. Her plastic fork had been knocked to the floor in her scramble for the phone and was nowhere to be seen. She didn’t really care; she wasn’t so hungry anymore.

“I need a dog,” she said. “One that will love me unconditionally. And eat my cold left-overs.”

CHAPTER TWO

“I DON’T think she’s here.” Gia perched on the concrete planter box while Renata rapped her knuckles on the front door.

“She’s here. She wouldn’t dare ditch us.” She knocked on the door again, a little harder this time. “And of course, Phoebe’s late as usual.”

“Actually, we’re both here,” Phoebe drawled as she and Juliette came up the walk behind them. “I, darling Ren, got here *early*.”

Renata had the decency to look abashed, but there would be no apology coming any time soon. Besides, it was a rare day indeed when Phoebe was on time, no less early.

Juliette hugged Renata and Gia, and unlocked her front door. “We walked down to the market on the corner. Mona says ‘hi.’” Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“You didn’t have to do that. I brought chocolate chip rice cakes.” Renata held aloft a bag and Juliette rolled her eyes at her sister’s version of indulgence.

“Thanks, but since I’m being forced to host this event, I get to decide what refreshments we’re having. In fact, you two should thank Phoebe. She talked me out of serving canned liverwurst and Vienna sausages. After you all held a G-FOURce without me, I wasn’t feeling very gracious toward any of you.” She stood back to usher them in. “Besides, I have a feeling I’ll need a little comfort food when this is all over. Come in, my traitorous siblings, and make yourselves at home.”

“Do you really have some Vienna sausages?” Gia asked as she passed by. “I love those things.”

“Please don’t admit that in public, *mon cochon*,” Phoebe teased, tugging on one of Gia’s corkscrew curls.

“I’ll go get the java,” Juliette closed the door behind them. “I started it before we left; again, thanks to Phoebe’s powers of persuasion.”

They settled into their regular spots around the coffee table; Renata in the brown leather recliner, Gia on the floor, leaning up against the front of the television cabinet,

and Phoebe on one end of the couch, leaving Juliette's end empty. They all knew better than to sit there.

Juliette returned with her tray of coffee fixings, and they gathered around, preparing their drinks, and oohing over the box of pastries from Mona's Market. Along with an assortment of cookies, there was a chocolate éclair for Gia, a pumpkin spice scone for Phoebe, a slice of glazed lemon cake for Renata, and an enormous cinnamon roll for Juliette.

"What happened to your triple chocolate brownie?" Gia asked, noticing the change in Juliette's selection.

"It occurred to me I never really liked the triple chocolate brownie as much as Mike did. I've always wanted one of these ridiculously sticky, drippy, gooey things, but he was a dentist and didn't approve." She closed her eyes in ecstasy as she bit into the roll. "Oh, you guys. This is divine. I might just die a happy woman." With her forefinger, she swiped a dollop of creamy icing off the top of her roll and stuck it in her mouth. "Who needs a man when I can have Mona's sticky buns?"

"Juliette, you little hussy!" Phoebe smirked.

"Phoebe!" Renata reprimanded.

Gia grinned from behind her éclair.

"Mona," Juliette sighed rapturously. "I love you. You and Mr. Yu."

"Speaking of love." Renata effectively put an end to the frivolity. "It's time to officially start our meeting. Gia?"

Before she came along, they'd called themselves G-Force3, a name their grandfather gave them. "When you girls get your minds set on something, there's not a thing in this world that can stop you," he declared. "You're like a living, breathing G-force!" When Gia was initiated in at eight years old, they officially changed the name of their sister club to G-FOURce.

As the youngest member, it was Gia's job to begin the pledge. "Welcome Empress Juliette, Empress Renata, and Empress Phoebe." She pressed her hands together in a prayer-like manner and nodded her head to each sister accordingly.

"Welcome, Empress Georgia." The other three spoke just as somberly, nodding back at her.

They clasped hands, then, forming a circle, and began the G-FOURce pledge, a time-honored tradition that had somehow survived adolescence into adulthood.

*Let the words of our mouths
Be necessary, kind, and true.
Let the secrets we share
Be kept safe amongst us few.
Let the decisions that we make
Be brave, noble, and wise
Oogie-boogie-doggy-loogie
Wiggly-jiggly-fries!
G-FOURce unite!*

They didn't collapse into giggles the way they used to, but none of them was quite grown up enough to give it up. The pledge was like an unbroken cord weaving through their lives, binding them together.

Renata took a deep breath. "Juliette, this is an intervention."

"I *knew* it! No. This G-FOURce is *over*." Juliette stood up and tried to take Renata's plate.

"Stop it!" Renata refused to relinquish her half-eaten lemon cake, and a brief tug-of-war ensued.

Phoebe started whooping, her fist in the air, "Cat fight! Cat fight!"

Gia's eyes darted from one sister to another, a mixture of delight and horror on her face.

Then Juliette let go and stepped back. Cake and crumbs went flying up into the air, and Renata shrieked as it all came back down, showering her with sticky lemon dessert. Phoebe cheered, and Gia ducked behind a cushion she held up in front of her.

"You ... you *brat!*" Renata sputtered, frantically brushing crumbs from her clothes, fingering them out of her hair. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"What is wrong with me? What is wrong with you? With all of you?" Juliette retorted, gathering things onto the coffee tray. "Go home, Empresses. G-FOURce is *not* united today."

"Jules, come on." Phoebe pleaded, quickly stifling her laughter.

"And you, Gia? Are you actually here by your own free will?" Juliette turned a scathing look on the youngest Gustafson sister. Gia stayed behind her cushion.

"Jules, not cool. She's here for the same reason we all are; because we care about you. Sit down, Big Sister. You too, Ren." Phoebe fixed her gaze on a scowling Renata.

"I don't *want* to sit down if I'm going to be attacked again."

"Oh, please. I didn't attack you," Juliette scoffed. "I a-caked you." She laughed, silently at first, then her whole body began to shake until she had to put down the tray lest she drop it. She clutched her stomach as she stared helplessly at Renata, and the more indignant her sister became, the harder she laughed. In a huff, Renata began to gather her things.

"No wait," Juliette gasped, grabbing at her sister's arm. "I'm sorry, Rennie. Seriously. I don't know why that's so funny." She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, wiping her eyes. "A-caked. It isn't funny at all, really. I don't even know why I'm laughing."

Renata stood, indecision making her appear vulnerable, and Gia spoke up. "Please, Ren, don't go."

Finally, she turned around, and picking up the bigger chunks of cake, she brushed the rest into the palm of her hand. "If we don't vacuum this up, it'll be ground into the carpet."

Still going into intermittent silent paroxysms, Juliette opened the coat closet in the tiny foyer, and pulled out the lightweight machine she used almost every night before bed. She ran it over the carpet all around the chair, then using the hose, she vacuumed

the crumbs off the cushions. When she was finished, she held it up to Renata, a question in her laughing eyes.

"No!" Renata stepped back, swatting at the offending nozzle. But she was trying not to smile.

When everyone was settled again, Renata began once more. "Jules." The nickname sounded awkward coming from her. "We think it's time for you to wash your hands of Mike. So we've come up with a plan."

Juliette rolled her eyes.

"You're not going to like it."

Juliette sighed heavily.

"In fact, you're going to try to get out of it, but you should know that we've thought of everything."

Juliette moaned and pulled her knees up to her chest.

"You look like a pill-bug," Gia observed.

"Maybe an armadillo," Phoebe quipped, and they both laughed.

"Girls," Renata reined them in again. "Here's the deal. We have a list of eligible men—"

"What?" Juliette interrupted, her voice rising to a near shriek. "Just kill me now!"

"Juliette, listen to me. We are not going to stand by and let you wither away over Mike. Just because he was too blind to see how wonderful you are, doesn't mean every other man is, too." Juliette glared at her, but she continued, her chin thrust forward. "So we've made up a list of eligible men, and you're going to out with each one of them until you get out of this slump."

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. What is this? High school? No, junior high!" Juliette held a cushion to her face in an attempt to block them out.

"We aren't expecting you to fall in love with any of them. We just want you to go out and enjoy yourself. Have fun."

Juliette didn't speak. She sat with her pillow over her face for so long that Gia finally whispered, "Did she fall asleep?"

"Juliette, sweetie?"

"Is suffocation that easy?" Phoebe poked Juliette's thigh with her toe.

"I'm alive, unfortunately, and awake. I'm just hoping that if I stay behind this pillow long enough, you three will disappear, and all this will turn out to have been a nightmare." Juliette lowered the cushion a few inches. "Shoot. You're still here." She wished she was somewhere else; anywhere but here.

No, she wished her sisters were anywhere but here. This was *her* spot.

What made them think she'd even consider this ludicrous plan? She didn't feel like dating, and she really didn't feel like forgetting about Mike. At least, she didn't want to forget about being angry with him. She wasn't quite ready to stop feeling sorry for herself, either.

"This is an intervention, Juliette, not a choice," Renata continued. "We'll give you a few days to get used to the idea, but unless you can come up with a really, really good

reason not to participate, the first guy will be here a week from Monday to pick you up."

"That's ten whole days, Jules. You can be ready!" Gia was full of encouragement, her copper curls bobbing around her face as she nodded.

Renata held up a paper on which were several names and phone numbers. "Here's the list. We were going to call it The Monday Man-Dates, but we decided that was too cheesy."

"Too cheesy? Ha! I think it's perfect. This is cheese at its finest! And stinkiest," Juliette snorted, grabbing for the paper in Renata's hand. "Let me see that."

Renata jerked it out of her reach. "Oh, no, you don't. This is for our eyes only. We only tell them that we're setting them up with you on a blind date. We only tell you their first names. But you have the benefit of knowing that every guy on the list is a personal friend to one of us. Or to John. They're all close to your age; give or take a few years." Then she added as an afterthought, "I'm coming to pick you up next Saturday to take you clothes shopping."

"I have plenty of clothes."

"How would anyone know that? You wear the same thing every day. Black pants, faded top." Renata pointed at Juliette's pale green shirt.

"I do not," she declared, slightly affronted.

"Hey. Be nice."

"I *am* being nice, Phoebe. She needs to hear the truth, and at least I love her enough to give it to her."

"I'm sitting right here, you know." Juliette had to break it up before any more cake got thrown. "And I like my wardrobe. If I'm stuck going out on a few dates to get you three off my back, fine. But I'm going as me. In my own clothes. My own style." She liked her neutral colors. She thought they made her look soft, ladylike, and steady. She wasn't artistic like Phoebe, or funky like Gia. And she wasn't anything like Renata in her tailored shirts and cropped linen pants. She was just Juliette. Black and white, no surprises, no drama. Steady. Neutral.

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DURING the course of the following week, she tried on several different outfits from her closet, until she secretly admitted her sisters were right. Her wardrobe wasn't neutral, it was boring. By Sunday night, she'd finally settled on her favorite pair of black pants, with a long, lightweight sweater. Trying it on, she eyed herself in the mirror. The buttery beige knit didn't add any pizzazz to her appearance, but she wasn't shooting for pizzazz.

Then Mike showed up on her doorstep.

He brought tiger lilies.

Red tiger lilies. Her favorite flowers in the whole world.

He remembered.

But she couldn't afford to forget so easily.

CHAPTER THREE

"MIKE." She greeted him flatly, not wanting him to suspect just how flustered his appearance made her.

"Julie." He smiled, his straight white teeth irritating her, while his satin voice soothed her. "It's good to see you again." He paused meaningfully, his lids lowering. "Really good."

"Why are you here?" *Be strong, Jules.*

He hesitated briefly, but it was enough to let on that he'd been expecting a slightly warmer reception. He held out the bouquet. "These are for you. Your favorites." When she tentatively reached for them, he didn't let go. Instead, he covered her hands with his own so they held the flowers between them.

She flinched at his touch and tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip, pulling her toward him. "Don't I get a thank you kiss?" As he bent forward, she turned her face away in an attempt to evade his mouth. His lips brushed her cheek instead.

She jerked back at the rasp of his jaw against her skin. "Stop it, Mike." She hoped her voice sounded stronger than she felt.

He stood so close, that even over the heady fragrance of the lilies, she could smell the familiar Mike smell she had loved for so long. Against her will, she felt herself softening the tiniest bit, just around the edges. He must have felt it, too. He cocked his head.

"I knew you'd be home tonight, missing me as much as I was missing you." She wrenched out of his grasp and took a step backwards, flowers now clutched tightly to her, trying to restore the boundaries between them. He looked her up and down and smiled indulgently. "No wild weekend plans for you, are there, my sensible Julie? Let me in."

He *knew* she'd be home tonight? His Julie? *His?* And how many times had she told him not to call her Julie? There were so many things wrong with what he'd just said. She felt her stomach knot, and her voice quivered. "You can't come in."

"Come on, Julie-baby." He tugged on a strand of her hair that had fallen forward over her shoulder. "I've forgiven you. Can't you do the same for me?"

She scowled at him over the top of the lilies. "You've forgiven me for what, exactly?" Suddenly the deep scarlet petals looked sinister to her; beautiful, but speckled with deceit.

"For walking out on me." He stroked her cheek, but she flinched, and he dropped his hand. "You hurt me, Julie. It's taken me a long time to recover from your little temper tantrum."

A Valentine's Day he'd been too busy to celebrate with her.

Had he come to her with flowers and kisses a few months ago, she might have been swayed. She might have apologized for causing him so much pain. She inwardly

cringed knowing she might even have been grateful for his offer to forgive her. But now he was too late. Her heart, though bruised by his nearness, was no longer willing to make excuses for him.

A million thoughts raced through her head in that moment; all the times she'd put aside her own plans to accommodate his, all the times he'd canceled last minute and left her alone. All the times he didn't tell her she was important, worth it, *loved*. She wanted to rage at him, to pour over his head all the poison he'd used to douse the fire that had once burned in her heart for him.

But she didn't.

"Excuse me, Mike. I'm kind of busy right now." She started to close her door, but he thrust his arm out to block it.

"You're busy? What plans do you have, Julie? In your pajamas?" He pushed on the door, but she wedged her foot against it from the other side. He lowered his voice.

"Stop pouting. It's not cute. Let me in."

"I'm not pouting, Mike." Her voice no longer trembled. "I really am busy. Go home."

"You're lying, and we both know it. Now let me in." He pushed a little harder, and Juliette saw something shift in his eyes. He was angry. Very angry. A chill went up her spine.

"Go home, Mike." She said it more forcefully.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby-doll." His voice became menacing. "Do you have any idea how much I had to pay for red tiger lilies in September?"

"You need to leave right now!" She shoved the crimson flowers in his face, making him stumble backward. From the edge of her vision, she noticed her neighbor watching them from her own front porch. Mrs. Cork's little dog ran out to the lawn, barked a few times, then sauntered across into Juliette's yard, where it turned around three times and squatted. She slammed the door on Mike, his scarlet flowers, her scowling neighbor, and the defecating dog.

For once, she was thankful for Mrs. Cork's nosiness. She knew Mike wouldn't try anything now that he had an audience. She ripped off the beige top, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it away. Even *he* thought her wardrobe was boring.

"Tiger lilies are still in season, you creep. I hope that florist took you to the cleaners!"

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JULIETTE stared at the mirror, trying to see herself the way any man other than Mike would. She thought of all the things he used to love about her, from her long, black hair, her gray eyes, and slender neck, to her slightly turned out feet.

"I look like a duck," she muttered. The woman who gazed back at her stood just under 5'6" and weighed just over her ideal weight. Mike always liked the extra pounds; maybe she should lose them to spite him. No, losing weight might make it look like she was pining away for him. Besides, she really didn't think it would be right to abandon

Mr. Yu or Mona, and she knew they'd be the first to go if she was going to drop a few pounds.

She'd gone on a whirlwind shopping spree over her lunch break, and the long, empire-waist dress she wore looked good on her, she admitted to herself. The raspberry tones brought color to her pale cheeks, and the drape of the fabric made her feel feminine. She peered down at her toes sticking out below the ruffled hem, and smiled at the iridescent turquoise she'd painted them earlier this evening. Be bold, she told herself. Be daring. Do something stupid. Like actually going out with the first guy on The Monday Man-Date list.

"I'm a chubby, pink, bold, and stupid duck," she declared. She flapped her way into the kitchen where she stubbed a turquoise toe on a chair as she passed her table.

"Ouch! This is not a good sign." She sank into the offending chair and massaged her throbbing appendage. She wondered again what had gotten into her. This was not like her at all. She liked things organized, sensible, planned out. She didn't do well with change. She was not quick on her feet, and she inevitably made a fool of herself when put on the spot. She certainly wasn't bold. Or daring. And she didn't do stupid, if she could help it.

Okay. Maybe waiting nearly ten years for Mike Wilson to make up his mind about her might fall under the "stupid" category, but she'd been fooled by him. She'd believed the years were gifts of time; time for them to plan and prepare, to sort everything out so they could step into their future with all the details taken care of in advance. She glanced through the arched opening to the living room where she could see a row of 3-ring binders, color-coded and labeled, lined up on the bottom shelf of her bookcase. She rolled her eyes. *My well-planned life.*

One binder held all their wedding and honeymoon plans, another, their home plans. There was a binder filled with travel plans for future vacations, and the newest one was labeled *Wilsonettes*. In it, she collected pictures of babies from magazines, catalogs, and online, as if she had choices when it came to how their offspring would turn out. She squirmed at the thought of Mike paging through it, but knew there was no way he'd ever seen it. Even though they'd only split up six months ago, his unexpected appearance last night was the first time he'd been to her place in over a year.

She always went to him.

She stood and shoved the chair back into place under her rectangular dining table. "He called, I went running." She clenched and unclenched her fists at her sides, her skin prickling with humiliation. "What is wrong with me? I'm such an idiot. I'm a chubby, pink, bold, stupid, *idiot* duck!" She charged into the living room, grabbed her purse off the floor, and dug down to the bottom where she knew there was a small clutch of make-up. Years ago, she used to wear lipstick, but Mike told her once that he didn't like kissing her when she wore it. She never knew whether it was because he didn't like the way it felt, or if he was afraid he'd end up with it on his lips instead. She just stopped wearing it. For him.

"It took me a long time to get used to going naked-lipped, and you still didn't kiss me often enough," she railed. "Or long enough. Or sweetly enough." Her voice trailed off.

"Enough! Put on your lips, Jules, and let's see what tonight has in store." She pulled the cap off the Burnished Plum, a slightly shimmery, somewhat dated color that she loved. It made her eyes look smoky, and it made her *feel* dressed up. It was amazing what a little lipstick and toenail polish could do for a girl.

There was a knock at the door, and Juliette froze. Her doorbell didn't work and she'd hung a pretty lantern in front of it to keep people from using it, but tonight, the rap of knuckles on wood sounded rather ominous. She stared at her face in the mirror over the entry table, her eyes large and overly-bright, her skin translucent in the glow of the chandelier overhead. *You can do this, Jules, you can. Bold and stupid, bold and stupid.*

"No, bold and daring!" She pressed her lips together gently and smoothed her hair away from her flushed cheeks.

Her phone rang from somewhere in her purse, startling her. At a loss, she didn't know which to answer first, and she dug the phone out just as she pulled open the front door.

The man on her stoop wore khaki pants and a white shirt, his hair combed neatly back from his forehead and temples. He had gentle eyes, a wide smile, and an air of confidence in his stance that made Juliette automatically step back and open her door wider. She caught herself before inviting him in, realizing her immediate sense of comfort was due to his uncanny likeness to Mike.

What was Renata thinking?

She glanced down at the phone in her hand. Speak of the devil. Renata. She shoved it back into her bag. She'd deal with her sister later.

"I'm Paul Rudyard. As in Rudyard Kipling."

"I'm Juliette. Um, as in ... Juliet Capulet." She could think of no other renown Juliettes on the spot. "But spelled differently." She stuck out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

The man shook her hand, then offered her the bouquet of mixed wildflowers he'd brought. "And these are for you."

"Thank you. They're beautiful." He let his fingertips drift over the back of her hand as she took them. She couldn't help but think of Mike's last visit and tensed, prepared for flight.

"Juliette. What a lovely name. Very romantic. Maybe I should change my name to Romeo." He chuckled, and Juliette smiled politely, taking a step back. This was all so awkward. She was having a hard time remembering why she had agreed to the ManDates at all.

"Oh. Well. I think Paul suits you," she said, trying desperately to steer the conversation away from romantic notions. "Besides, if we were *that* Romeo and Juliet, this night would be ending very badly for both of us."

There was an awkward silence that lasted way too long, and the uncomprehending look on Paul's face compelled her to explain. "You know, we'd have to kill each other. I

mean ourselves. We'd both have to commit suicide. But first I'd have to take a poison that made it look like I was dead, and then you'd kill yourself rather than living without me, and then I'd come around and find you dead, and then I'd have to kill myself for making you kill yourself. Not a good first date."

In her head, Gia chirped, "Cricket. Cricket."

"You haven't read Shakespeare," she stated.

"Oh. Yes. Shakespeare. Of course." Paul nodded, then he smiled, recovering his composure. "Your sister did tell me you were a little depressed." He winked and his smile broadened. "But I have a much better plan for this evening than a double suicide."

"She told you what?" Juliette stiffened. Renata really *was* the devil.

"It's all right." He reached over and patted her shoulder. "She thought I should know that you were feeling a little down, that's all." His placating tone was beginning to make her skin crawl. "Well, I'm here to change the way you feel. I'm going to take you out, and wine and dine you until you can feel nothing but happy."

Juliette reached for the handle of the door, and Paul mistook her intentions. "Are you all ready to come outside and play?"

"Oh dear," she murmured, looking down at her toes poking their little blue tips out at her. "Oh dear," she repeated, shaking her head. *Bold and daring, Jules. He's already got the stupid thing down.*

"What is it?" Paul asked, hunkering down a little in order to see her face. Finally, she looked up at him.

"I can't, Paul. I can't go out and ... and *play*. I'm sorry if you were misled about me. I'm afraid you and I have very different expectations about this evening."

"Oh. I see." He nodded sagely. Then he shook his head. "No, I don't see. That's why I'm here. To change your expectations." Paul's confidence didn't seem to waver at all.

Juliette took a deep breath and blew it out slowly before she replied, setting the blossoms in her hand fluttering their petals encouragingly. She chose her words carefully, but kept them firm. "Paul, I was under the impression this was a blind date, not therapy. I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think this is such a good idea after all. I'm sorry. I'm—I'm going to say good night now." She stepped back and began to push the door closed.

"No, wait!" Paul put a hand up to block it, just like Mike had done, and Juliette felt panic swirl in her belly. The look on Paul's face, however, was not angry, just a bit desperate. "Don't do this, Juliette. I promised your sister I'd—"

"You shouldn't be making promises about me to my sister." She said it so quietly she wasn't sure if he'd heard. Then very gently, she closed the door in his face.

She still held the flowers clutched in one hand, and she was trembling as she waited, listening. She could hear nothing from outside, so she worked up the courage to look through the peep hole. Paul still stood on the stoop, facing the door, as though trying to figure out what had just happened. As she watched, he finally turned, shoved his hands in his pockets, and began to whistle as he walked away, his pants stretched

oddly over his backside. She wrinkled her nose in distaste; she'd seen Mike do the same thing a hundred thousand times.

"Juliette!" A muffled, faint voice made her spin around, her heart pounding.

"Who...who's there?"

CHAPTER FOUR

"HEY! PICK up the phone!"

Juliette unearthed the device from the black hole of her purse. She stared down at the screen. Eight minutes and counting. The whole traumatic exchange had lasted less than ten minutes. And Renata had heard the whole thing. "Hi, Ren."

"I can't believe you sent him away!"

"Well, I can't believe you sent him here in the first place!"

"Oh, Juliette! Why couldn't you be polite?"

Juliette stomped her foot, her sandal smacking the entryway tiles. "I *was* polite, Renata. I was so polite that it took him several minutes to realize I'd closed the door in his face. But you," she waved a hand in the air in frustration. "You told him I was depressed? Thanks! I wish you'd warned me. I could have been better prepared. I still have my black sackcloth and shroud, you know!" She was shouting into the phone. "That was insensitive and manipulative, Ren. I don't think I really like you right now." She covered her face with the hand she'd been waving around above her head.

Renata was silent a moment before answering. "Well, I don't like you right now, either. You're not acting like yourself these days, Juliette, and it makes it difficult for me to know how to handle you." Renata's tone warned her that her feelings were hurt, but then, so were Juliette's.

"I don't want you to *handle* me. What I really want is for you to leave me alone! But since clearly that isn't possible, I'd at least appreciate a little respect on your part. I do not need some man showing up on my doorstep offering to help me find my happy place again. Just because you think you can control your little world, Renata Gustafson, doesn't mean you have the authority—or the insight—to control mine, okay?"

"Dixon."

"What?"

"My name is Renata Dixon, Juliette." Renata's voice was tight, and Juliette fleetingly considered warning her about triggering her TMJ. Nope. Grind away, little sister. Grind those teeth down to nubbins.

"Are you serious? Really? After everything I just said, that's the only thing you heard?" Juliette held the phone out in front of her, and shook it as though the other end was connected to her sister's head. She put it back to her ear and said, "I love you, Renata Dixon," she punched out her sister's married name across the line. "But you make me want to do very bad things to you, so I'm hanging up on you now. Good night."

What was it about Renata that could make her behave so irrationally? No one else made her feel so out of control and childish, not even Mike. She kicked off her sandals and sent them skittering across the floor, resisting the urge to pick them up and return them to the empty spot on her organized shoe shelf. She stepped over them with purposeful indifference on her way to the kitchen, where she tossed the bouquet on the table. Her toe still hurt from kicking the chair, and stamping her foot on the hard tile hadn't helped it feel any better. And her hair was starting to bug her.

"Who am I kidding?" she muttered, as she headed to the bathroom. She wasn't the kind of girl who wore fluttery dresses and left her hair streaming down her back. She dug out a clamp from her accessories drawer and clipped her hair up in a knot at the back of her head. All she needed now was a pair of black pants and a tee-shirt—or better yet, an old pair of jammies—in order to feel that everything was as it should be.

She looked down at her pretty pink dress and swished the skirt around her legs a few times. She wished the night had turned out differently with Paul Rudyard. He had a nice name. He had a nice face, a nice smile. But he was just too ... well, too nice. Nice wasn't all it was cut out to be. Mike had been nice once, too.

"Until I got tired of being his little door mat," she fumed. "Then he got tired of being nice." She changed from her dress into her favorite flannel finery, and headed back to the kitchen to dig around in her refrigerator for something to fill her empty stomach.

She was feeling better until her phone rang. She dug it out of the couch cushions where she'd tossed it after hanging up on Renata.

Phoebe. Juliette couldn't imagine Renata calling Phoebe on purpose, but she supposed it was possible tonight. They were in cahoots on this whole ridiculous intervention, after all.

"Hey, Phoebe." Juliette tried to sound casual.

"Hey, Jules." Phoebe sounded just as casual. "*Comment allez-vous?*"

"I'm fine, thank you. And how are you, little sister?"

"I'm fine, too. Whatcha up to?"

"Actually, I'm getting ready for a big night in. I'm in my jammies, and I've put the kettle on for hot chocolate. Now all I have to do is figure out something to eat and find a good movie to watch. Wanna join me? You bring dessert."

"What happened to Paul?"

"He went home," Juliette quipped, keeping her voice light.

"I see." She didn't say anything else, and Juliette sighed. She didn't want to talk about it, but apparently, it was unavoidable.

"I sent him packing." She dropped onto the couch. "He was awful, like some fatherly version of Mike. I'm serious. He even dressed like him. Couldn't Ren have been a little more creative?" Phoebe chuckled on the other end of the line. "It's not funny!"

"I thought about screening her guys, but then she'd make us do the same with ours, just in case I sent over one of my hot, young models, or Gia tried to hook you up with a pimple-faced teenager."

Juliette moaned at the thought of either one. "I will not go out with someone I might have given birth to, got that? In fact, I don't know that I'm up for any more dates at all."

"Were you serious about me joining you?" Phoebe asked after a moment's pause.

"Of course. Even though I know you're going to try to talk me into going out again. But I was also serious about dessert. I won't let you in if you're not packing sugar."

Juliette and Phoebe sat at either end of the sofa, facing each other, their feet tucked underneath each other's rear ends. They sipped hot chocolate and passed back and forth the bucket of ice cream bon-bons Phoebe brought.

"Am I really so pathetic, Phoebe? I'm telling you, if tonight was as good as it gets, I'm calling this whole thing off. I finally talked myself into being okay with going out for a little fun, and the first one out the chute is Thera-Paul!"

"Well, I can't speak for Gia's guys, but my friend is up next, and he's no Thera-Paul." Phoebe smiled smugly.

"So prep me. And do a better job than Ren did."

Phoebe frowned. "She prepped you? That's against the rules."

Juliette rolled her eyes, her bluff called. "No, she didn't. In fact, she told me nothing. But I think I deserve to know if the guy's a weirdo, don't you?"

"Absolutely! I can tell you that much. My guy's a weirdo." Phoebe popped another bon-bon into her mouth.

"Forget it. I don't want to play anymore."

"He's weird in a good way, though."

"Come on. You gotta give me something." Juliette shoved a bon-bon in each cheek and grinned like a chipmunk.

"No, I don't. That's disgusting."

"Yeth, you do."

"No, I don't."

"Yeth, you do."

"No, I..."

"All right!" Juliette interjected, spitting one of the chocolates into her napkin. "Be like Ren, then." It was the worst insult she could think of at the moment. "And you're right. That was disgusting." She wiped her mouth with a clean napkin.

"So, speaking of Ren, when are you going to make up with her?" Phoebe asked.

"Never."

"Come on, Jules. You know she's trying."

"Trying is right. She's extremely trying. And why are you, of all people, defending her? You two don't even like each other."

"I love Rennie," Phoebe laughed. "She and I aren't as different as she thinks we are. But I can see that better than she can. I know she loves me. She just has a hard time showing it."

"Whatever. You two fight like cats and dogs. You always have."

"It's not real fighting, though." Phoebe swallowed the last of her tea. "I've just made it my job to remind Ren that she's not perfect. I love her too much to let her

convince herself that she is." She set her empty teacup on the coffee table and settled back into her corner of the sofa. "And she loves me enough to do the same for me."

Juliette didn't miss the flicker of pain in her sister's eyes, and she poked her in the thigh with her turquoise toe. "Hey."

"Hey."

"*Je t'aime*, Phoebe Gustafson."

"I love you more."

"Only because there's more of me to love."

"Stop it. You're perfect just the way you are, Jules." Phoebe looked imploringly at her. "You know, I almost feel sorry for Mike, even though he never deserved you." She reached down and squeezed Juliette's ankle. "He let go of the best thing that ever happened to him. You."

Juliette still struggled to imagine her life without the man she'd built it around. What was wrong with her that he didn't want her? Why *did* he let her go?

"But don't you ever let a man take the best of you, Jules. That's no man's right to take. Only yours to give." Something in Phoebe's voice made Juliette stop thinking about Mike.

"Phoebe?" she asked gently. "Did you—did something—someone...?"

Phoebe's vague smile only confirmed her suspicions, and Juliette stretched out a hand to her younger sister, rather shaken by the haunted look usually masked by her beauty. How had she never noticed it before? They laced fingers, the connection tender, and when Phoebe's eyes welled up, hers did too. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Phoebe shook her head and squeezed her hand before letting it go. "Someday, maybe. Not today. Besides, I'm here for you, remember?"

"Oh goodness, Phebes. I'm fine. You know that. But now I'm worried about you." Juliette straightened up and crossed her legs like a pretzel, an elbow on the back of the sofa, resting her head on her palm. "Does this have anything to do with what's between you and Ren?"

Phoebe lifted her shoulders in a dismissive gesture. "What's between us is old history. You said it yourself. We've argued our whole lives. There's always been stuff between us, and if there isn't anything, one of us will make something up just to keep the argument going." She waved a long finger at Juliette. "Which is why you two have to stop fighting. I can't stand the competition."

Juliette studied her sister, a little taken aback by her ability to set aside her pain so effectively; obviously a well-rehearsed habit. Finally, she nodded. "Okay. I won't push. But..."

"Jules. I'm fine. You need to stop worrying about me."

"Like that will ever happen. Worrying is like breathing to me, Phoebe. You know that."

Phoebe held out the nearly empty ice cream carton. "Well, since I can't ask you to stop breathing, have another bon-bon. Then tell me what you're going to wear on your date next Monday."