



KRISTAN HIGGINS

"Higgins's romance is perfect
entertainment for a girl's night in."
—*Booklist on Too Good To Be True*

*the
next
best
thing*



**Praise for the novels of award-winning author
KRISTAN HIGGINS**

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

“Cheeky, cute, and satisfying, Higgins’ romance is perfect entertainment for a girl’s night in.”

—*Booklist*

“Kristan Higgins proves that she is emerging as one of the most creative and honest voices in contemporary romance.”

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FOOLS RUSH IN

“Higgins is a talented writer [who] will make you want to search high and low for anything that she has written.”

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Dear Reader,

The Next Best Thing is Lucy and Ethan's story. It's about second chances. After the death of her husband shattered her heart, Lucy is positive that she doesn't want to fall in love again.... She'd rather find some safe, slightly boring guy who'd be more of a companion than the new love of her life. But Ethan, her faithful neighbor, is determined to bust out of the role of "friend with privileges" and get Lucy to see him as a lot more.

As with all of my books, I hope you'll have a lot of laughs and shed a few satisfying tears, as well. There's something new this time...a cat! Fat Mikey is a nod to my own regal pet, Cinnamon. As for Fat Mikey's name, I "borrowed" it from my neighbors down the street. I hope you'll bond with the curmudgeonly kitty.

Growing up, I was blessed with a large Hungarian family centered around babies, laughter and food—especially desserts—so it was great fun to set this story in a bakery. There's a lot of good food described in this book...I'll post a few recipes on my Web site if you're interested. And while the Black Widows in the story are fictional, they were inspired by my own three great-aunts, Anne, Mimi, Marguerite, and my grandmother, Helen, whose nickname was Bunny. Our family tradition of baking is firmly embraced by my lovely and loving aunts—Rita, whose cakes are the stuff of legend; Hilary, who makes the best apple pie this side of the Mississippi; and Teresa, who doesn't bake but was smart enough to marry a man who does, and does so incredibly well.

Let me know how you enjoyed the book! It's always such a pleasure to hear from readers.

All the best,

Kristan
www.kristanhiggins.com

KRISTAN HIGGINS

the next best thing



This book is dedicated—finally!—
to my patient, funny, generous and lovely mother,
Noël Kristan Higgins. Thank you, Mom,
for everything. I love you so.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Maria Carvainis, my dear friend and agent—humble and profound. Thanks for all you do for me.

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Thanks to my oldest and very dear friend, Catherine Arendt, and her family, who advised me on the vocabulary of Rhode Island. Stuffies, bubbla, no sir! The coffee milk's on me next time.

Mark Rosenberg, Marc Gadoury and Kate Corridan of the Apple Barrel at Lyman Orchards in Middlefield, Connecticut, are responsible for the best baked goods in New England. Thanks to them for letting me watch, ask questions and generally get in the way as they baked the morning bread and goodies for the lucky patrons of Lyman's.

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Last on this list but first in my heart, thanks to the three loves of my life—my wonderful husband and the two best kids in the world.

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU HAVE A WHISKER.”

Though I hear the loudly whispered comment, it doesn't quite register, as I am rapt with adoration, staring at the wonder that is my hour-old niece. Her face still glows red from the effort of being born, her dark blue eyes are as wide and calm as a tortoise's. I probably shouldn't tell my sister that her baby reminds me of a reptile. Well. The baby is astonishingly beautiful. Miraculous.

“She's amazing,” I murmur. Corinne beams, then shifts the baby the slightest bit away from me. “Can I hold her, Cory?” My two aunts mutter darkly—only Mom has held the baby so far, and clearly, I'm breaking rank.

My sister hesitates. “Um...well...”

“Let her, Cory,” Chris encourages, and my sister reluctantly hands over the little bundle.

She's warm and precious, and my eyes fill with tears. “Hi there,” I whisper. “I'm your auntie.” I can't believe how much I love this baby...she's fifty-five minutes old, and I'm ready to throw myself in front of a bus for her, should the need arise.

“Pssst. Lucy.” It's Iris's voice again. “Lucy. You have a whisker.” My seventy-six-year-old aunt taps her upper lip. “Right there. Plus, you're holding her wrong. Give her to me.”

“Oh, gee, I don't know about that,” Corinne protests, but Iris deftly takes the baby from me. My arms feel lonely without the sweet weight of my niece. “Whisker,” Iris says, jerking her chin at me.

Almost against my will, my finger goes to my upper lip...gah! Something thick and almost sharp, like a piece of barbed wire, is embedded in my skin. A whisker! Iris is right. I have a whisker.

My tiny aunt Rose sidles up to me. “Let's take a look here,” she says in her little-girl voice, studying my lip. Then, before I know it, she seizes the offending hair and yanks.

“Youch! Rose! That hurt!” I press a finger against the now smarting hair follicle.

“Don't worry, honey, I got it. You must be coming into the Change.” She gives me a conspiratorial smile, then holds my whisker up to the light.

“I'm thirty years old, Rose,” I protest weakly. “And come on, stop looking at it.” I brush the whisker from her fingers. The whisker was a fluke. I'm not menopausal. I can't be. Could I? Granted, I'm feeling a bit...mature today, given that my younger sister has had a baby before I did...

Rose scrutinizes my face for another hair. “It can happen. Your second cousin Ilona was thirty-five. I don't think you're too young. A mustache is usually the first sign.”

“Electrolysis,” my mother recommends as she tucks the blankets around Corinne’s feet. “Grinelda does it. I’ll have her look at you next time she comes in for a reading.”

“Your psychic also does electrolysis?” Christopher asks.

“She’s a medium. And yes, Grinelda is a very talented woman,” Iris says, smiling down at Emma.

“Don’t I get a turn to hold that child? I seem to remember I’m also her great-aunt,” Rose peeps. “And personally, I bleach. Once I shaved, and three days later, I looked like Uncle Zoltan after a bender.” She accepts my niece from Iris and her wrinkled, sweet face morphs into a smile.

“Oh, shaving. Never shave, Lucy,” Iris says. “You get stubbly.”

“Um...okay,” I say, shooting a glance at my sister. Surely this is not normal conversation in a labor and delivery room. “So how are you feeling now, Corinne?”

“I’m wonderful,” she says. “Can I please hold my daughter again?”

“I just got her!” Rose protests.

“Hand her over,” Christopher orders. With a martyred sigh, Rose obeys.

My sister gazes down at the baby, then looks up at her husband. “Do you think we should put some Purell on her?” she asks, her brow wrinkling in worry.

“Nah,” Chris answers. “You girls scrubbed in, right?”

“Absolutely. Don’t want Emma to catch the polio,” Iris says, not a trace of sarcasm in her voice. I suppress a smile.

“Chris, honey, how are *you* feeling, sweetie?” Corinne asks her husband.

“A lot better than you, honey. I didn’t just give birth, after all.”

Corinne waves away his protest. “Lucy, he was so wonderful. Really. You should’ve seen him! So calm, so helpful. He was amazing.”

“I didn’t do a thing, Lucy,” my brother-in-law assures me. He reaches out to touch the baby’s cheek. “Your sister...she’s incredible.” The new parents gaze at each other with sappy adoration, and I feel the familiar, wistful lump in my throat.

Jimmy and I might’ve looked at each other like that.

“Hello! I’m Tania, your lactation coach!” A booming voice makes us all jump. “Well, well! Quite a turnout, I see! Do you want an audience, Mother?”

“Corinne, we’ll go,” I say, though it’s quite possible that my mother and aunts would like to stay and offer a running commentary. “We’ll see you later. I’m so proud of you.” I kiss my sister, touch the baby’s cheek once more and try not to notice as Corinne wipes her baby’s face. “Bye, Emma,” I whisper, my eyes filling yet again. “I love you, honey.” My niece. I have a niece! Visions of tea parties and jump rope fill my head.

My sister smiles at me. “See you later, Lucy. Love you.” She risks a pat to my arm with one hand, already instinctively adept at handling the baby.

“Let’s take a look at those nipples,” Tania the lactation coach barks. “Husband, take the baby, won’t you? I need to see your wife’s breasts.”

Like a well-trained border collie, I herd Mom, Rose and Iris out of the room. In the hallway, I notice something. My mother, aunts and I all seem to be wearing black today. My step falters. Mom is clad in a chic black wraparound sweater, something that wouldn’t look out of place on Audrey Hepburn; Iris wears a shapeless black turtleneck and Rose a black cardigan over a white shirt. My T-shirt of the day happens to be black—I get up at 4:00 a.m. and don’t spend a lot of time on clothing choices...

this one just happened to be on the top of the pile.

By an ironic and unfortunate twist of fate, my mother, Iris and Rose bear the maiden name Black, translated from Fekete when my grandfather immigrated from Hungary. By an even more ironic and unfortunate twist of fate, all three were widowed before the age of fifty, so it's only natural that they're called the Black Widows. And on this happiest of days, somehow we're all wearing black. It dawns on me that today I, also widowed young, am more like a Black Widow than like my radiant sister. That today I found my first whisker and was advised on facial hair management.

That I'm a long way off from having a baby of my own, a thought that's been on my mind more and more recently. It's been five years since Jimmy died, after all. Five and a half. Five years, four months, two weeks and three days, to be precise.

These thoughts override the chatter of my aunts and mother as we drive over the short bridge to Mackerly, back to the bakery where the four of us work.

"We're going to the cemetery," Mom announces as they pile out of the car, first Iris, then Rose, then my mother. "I have to tell your father about the baby."

"Okay," I say, forcing a smile. "See you in a while, then."

"You sure you don't want to come?" Rose asks. All three of them tilt their heads looking at me.

"Oh, gosh, I don't think so."

"You know she's got a thing about that," Mom says patiently. "Let's go. See you later, hon."

"Yup. Have fun." They will, I know. I watch as they walk down the street toward the cemetery where their husbands—and mine—are buried.

The sun shines, the birds sing, my niece is healthy. It's a happy, happy day, whisker or no whisker. Widowed or not. "A happy day," I say aloud, heading inside.

The warm, timeless smell of Bunny's Hungarian Bakery wraps around me like a security blanket, sugar and yeast and steam, and I inhale deeply. Jorge is cleaning up in back. He looks up as I come in. "She's gorgeous," I say. He nods, smiles, then goes back to scraping dough from the counters.

Jorge doesn't speak. He's worked at Bunny's for years. Somewhere between fifty and seventy, bald, with beautiful light brown skin and a tattoo on his arm depicting Jesus' agony on the cross, Jorge helps with cleanup and bread delivery, as Bunny's supplies bread—*my* bread, the best bread in the state—to several Rhode Island restaurants.

"I'll deliver to Gianni's tonight, Jorge," I say as he starts loading up the bread. He nods, heads for the back door and stands for a second, his way of saying goodbye. "Have a great afternoon," I say. He smiles, flashing his gold tooth, then leaves.

The freezer hums, the malfunctioning fluorescent light over the work area buzzes, the cooling ovens tick. Otherwise, there's just the sound of my own breathing.

Bunny's has been in my family for fifty-seven years. Founded by my grandmother just after my grandfather died at the age of forty-eight, it has been run by women ever since. Men don't tend to fare that well in my family, as you might have noticed. After my own father died when I was eight, Mom started working at Bunny's, too, alongside Iris and Rose. And after Jimmy's car accident, I came on board as well.

I love the bakery, and the bread I create is proof of a beneficent God, but it's fair to say that if circumstances were different, I wouldn't work here. Bread, while deeply

rewarding, is not my true passion. I was trained to be a pastry chef at the great Johnson & Wales Culinary Institute in Providence, just about a half hour from Mackerly, a tiny island south of Newport. Upon graduation, I snagged a job at one of the posher hotels in the area. But after Jimmy died, I couldn't keep it up. The pressure, the noise, the hours...the people. And so I joined the Black Widows at Bunny's. Unfortunately for me, the division of labor had been decided years ago—Rose on cakes and cookies, Iris on danishes and doughnuts, Mom on management. That left bread.

Bread-baking is a Zenlike art, not fully grasped by much of the world, and an art that I've come to love. I arrive at four-thirty each day to mix the dough, measure it out, let it rise and get it in the oven, head home for a nap around ten, then return in the afternoon to bake the loaves we supply to the restaurants. Most days, I'm home by four. It's a schedule suited to the erratic sleep patterns that came home to roost when my husband died.

I find that I'm feeling for another whisker. If there was one, after all, there might be others. Nope. I seem to be smooth, but I check the mirror in the bathroom just in case. No more whiskers, thank God. I look normal enough...strawberry-blond hair pulled into a ponytail, light brown eyes—whiskey eyes, Jimmy used to call them—a few freckles. It's a friendly face. I think I'd make someone a very cute mom.

I've always wanted a family, a few kids. Despite one errant whisker, most of the evidence still indicates that I'm still young. Or not. What if Aunt Rose is right, and menopause is lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce? One whisker today—a few months from now, I may need to start shaving. My voice may change. I'll dry up like a loaf of bread left to rise too long in a warm oven; that which was once light and full of promise, left alone too long, now a hard, tasteless lump. That whisker was a warning. Crikey! A whisker!

I risk a quick squeeze to my breasts. Phew. The girls seem to be in good shape, no drooping or sagging yet. I'm still young. Fairly ripe. But yes, perhaps my shelf life isn't as long as I like to pretend it is. Dang whisker.

Jimmy would want me to move on, to be happy. Of course he would. "What do you think, Jimmy?" I say out loud, my voice echoing off the industrial-size Hobart mixer, the walk-in oven. "I think it's time for me to start dating. Okay with you, honey?"

I wait for an answer. Since his death, there have been signs. At least I think so. In the first year or so after his death, dimes would turn up in odd places, for example. Sometimes I'd catch a whiff of his smell—garlic, red wine and rosemary...he was head chef at Gianni's, the restaurant owned by his parents. Once in a while, I dream about him. But today, on the issue of my love life, there's nothing.

The back door opens, and my aunts and mom come in. "The cemetery was beautiful!" Iris announces. "Beautiful! Although if I catch those mowers cutting it so close to my Pete's grave, I will strangle them with my bare hands."

"I know it. I told the committee the same thing," Rose cheeps. "Last year, they mowed right over the geraniums I planted for Larry. I thought I'd cry!"

"You did cry," Iris reminds her.

Mom comes over to me in a cloud of Chanel No. 5. "That baby sure is beautiful, isn't she?" she says, smiling.

I grin up at her. "She sure is. Congratulations, Grammy."

“Mmm. Grammy. I like the sound of that,” she says smugly.

Iris nods in agreement—she’s already a grandmother, courtesy of the two kids her son, Neddy, and his ex-wife produced. Rose, meanwhile, pouts.

It’s not fair,” she says. “You’re so much younger, Daisy. I should’ve been a grandmother first.” Rose and Iris are well into their seventies; my mother is sixty-five, and Rose’s only son has failed to reproduce (which is probably a good thing, given Stevie’s propensity for stupid acts).

“Oh, Stevie will get some girl pregnant, don’t worry,” my mom says mildly. “I wonder, though, if he manages to find someone who’d marry him, if she’d die young, too.” Then, aware perhaps that this is a sensitive subject, the Black Widows turn as one to look at me.

You see, in my generation, the Black Widow curse has only struck me (so far). My sister lives in constant fear that Chris will die young, but so far, so good. Iris’s daughter, Anne, is gay, and for some reason, the Black Widows are confident that Laura, Anne’s partner of fifteen years, will be spared due to sexual orientation. Neddy’s ex-wife is also deemed safe. Both Ned and Stevie are healthy, though Stevie’s on the dim side (he once ate poison ivy on a dare. When he was twenty-two). The biological men in our family are spared...it’s just the husbands who seem to meet an early death. My grandfather, my great-uncles, my own dad, my aunts’ husbands...all died young.

Also, no Black Widow has ever remarried. The late husbands became saints, the wives became proud widows. The idea of finding another man is traditionally scoffed at, as in, “Bah! What do I need a man for? I already had my Larry/Pete/Robbie. He was the Love of My Life.”

Back before I was a widow, I thought that maybe the Black Widows almost *liked* being alone. That they were independent women, proud of how they’d coped. Maybe their disdain of remarrying was more a statement about their own security, independence, power, even. When I became a widow myself, I understood. It’s fairly impossible to imagine falling in love again when your husband’s life ends decades before you expect it.

The back door opens again. “Friday night happy hour has arrived!” calls a familiar voice.

“Ethan!” the Black Widows chorus, flattered and feigning surprise over his arrival.

“I hear from my sources that it’s a girl,” he says. “Congratulations, ladies.”

Ethan Mirabelli, my late husband’s younger brother, comes in through the back door, an insulated bag in hand. He kisses each Black Widow, with an extra-long hug and some murmured words for my mother, who beams and pats him on the cheek. Then Ethan glances at me. “Hey, Luce. Congratulations on being an auntie again.”

“Thanks, Ethan,” I answer, smiling. “I guess it’s not quite a cousin for Nicky, but close enough, right?” Nicky is Ethan’s son. Then I wince, realizing I may have just hit a sore spot. Nicky’s cousins would have to have been Jimmy’s kids...Jimmy’s and mine.

“Absolutely,” he answers, letting me off the hook.

“And how is Nicky?” asks Aunt Iris.

“He’s handsome, brilliant and has a way with the ladies. The apple doesn’t fall far

from the tree.” Nicky is four, but everything Ethan says is true. My brother-in-law smiles at me, then unpacks his bag, something he found God knows where—a minibar, complete with martini shaker, small knife, shot glass and a few bottles of alcohol. “I thought French martinis today, girls,” he says, pouring the vodka. “They’re pink, in honor of the baby. I can only hope she’s as gorgeous as the rest of the Black women.”

As expected, the Black Widows coo and giggle in response. Ethan has them wrapped around his little finger.

“Is it too early for drinking?” Rose asks in her sweet voice, glancing at the clock and holding out her glass. Four-thirty. No earlier than any Friday.

“You don’t have to have one,” Ethan says, just as he’s about to pour the martini into her glass.

“Don’t be fresh,” Rose says, swatting his hand. “Fill ’er up.” He grins and obeys. “Ethan,” Rose continues, “what I want to know is, how could you get that nice girl pregnant?”

Ethan lifts an eyebrow in his trademark bad-boy look. “Want to step into the office? I’ll be happy to show you.”

Aunt Rose whoops with mock horror and sincere appreciation. “What I mean is, why didn’t you marry her? That nice Parker?” Like they haven’t heard this a million times.

Ethan winks at me. “I asked, if you remember. She wouldn’t have me. She knew I was secretly in love with the Black Widows and my heart would never be hers.” He turns to me. “Here you go, Lucy.”

“Thanks, Eth,” I say.

Friday afternoon cocktail hour is a tradition here at the bakery. Ethan, who travels throughout the country for his work, comes home to Mackerly each weekend to see his son...and to check on me, I admit. Since Jimmy died, Ethan’s been very loyal. A great friend. But he starts most weekends off by coming to the bakery for happy hour and flirting with my mother and aunts, and they think he pretty much walks on water.

“So how’s the baby?” Ethan asks the Black Widows, then sits back and grins as they regale him with her loveliness.

I take a token sip from my glass, listening and smiling. Though they’ve all been widows most of their lives, the Black Widows are more full of life than most people I know.

Then I glance at my watch and set my drink aside. “I have to make the bread run to Gianni’s, guys. Ethan, want to come?”

“Hell, no,” he answers with great cheer. “Why on earth would I visit my parents when I can drink with these Hungarian beauties instead?”

More tuts, more feigned disapproval at Ethan’s casual dismissal of his parents, more deep appreciation and secret consent from the Black Widows.

“Does being a gigolo pay well?” I ask.

Ethan laughs. “Maybe I’ll see you later, Luce.” We both live in the Boatworks, an old sailboat factory turned condominiums.

I go in the back and load up the bread for Gianni’s delivery. Much of it is still warm. My breathing slows, my movements gentle and efficient with practice as I bag each loaf, setting it in the large bakery box. The scent of fresh bread is what heaven must smell like, comforting and homey. When the box is full, I heft it up, push open

the back door and head outside to the street and bright sunshine.

To my consternation, Starbucks, which is located just around the corner from Bunny's, is full, even at this hour. Bunny's could use some of those customers, I think. For years, I've been urging the Black Widows, each of whom owns thirty percent of the bakery, to shift our emphasis from bakery to café. Of course, that would mean changing, and the Black Widows don't like change. I own ten percent of the bakery, so I could never outvote them. I can't even filibuster.

Around the corner from Starbucks is Gianni's Ristorante Italiano, owned by Gianni and Marie, my in-laws. "Lucy!" they cry in delight as I struggle through the back door.

"Hi, Marie, hi, Gianni," I say, stopping to receive my kisses. Paolo, the sous chef and a vague relation from Rome, takes the loaves from me, as Micki, a prep chef, calls out a hello as she chops garlic and parsley. Kelly, a longtime waitress who went to school with me, waves as she talks on the phone.

"How are you? The baby? Everyone healthy, please God?" Marie asks. I'd called them before going to the hospital—we're very close.

"She's so beautiful," I tell them, beaming. "My sister was a champ, too. Seventeen hours."

"Any tearing?" Marie asks, causing Gianni to wince.

"Um, we didn't cover that just yet," I murmur.

"We'll send some food," Gianni says. "A new baby's such a blessing."

For a second, we fall silent. My eyes go to the shrine above the twelve-burner stove. Two candles, the red bandana Jimmy always wore while cooking and a photo of him taken on our wedding day. His broad, genial face grins at me, those amazing eyes sparkling. He favored the northern Italian side of the family...curly, dirty blond hair, eyes like the Mediterranean Sea and a smile that could power a small town. A big man, broad-shouldered and tall with a booming laugh, he made me feel protected and safe and utterly, completely loved.

Dang it. My eyes seem to be filling with tears. Well. The Mirabellis don't mind. Marie strokes my arm, her dark eyes filling, too, and Gianni pats my shoulder with a beefy hand.

"Is Ethan coming home this weekend, do you know?" Marie asks me, wiping her eyes.

I hesitate. "Um, I think so." Knowing their son was down the street with my family would only hurt them.

"That job of his," Gianni mutters. "Foolishness. Ah!" He flaps his hands in disgust while I suppress a grin.

Though Ethan once studied to be a chef at the same school I myself attended, he dropped out just before his senior year to work for a large food corporation. A company most famous for making *Instead*, a hugely popular drink that contains all the nutrition of a well-balanced meal without the inconvenience of actually having to eat. I think my in-laws would've preferred it if Ethan had become a drug dealer or porn star, frankly. After all, his company's mission is basically to discourage sit-down dining, and they own a restaurant.

My eyes go back to Jimmy's picture. Now is not the time to tell the Mirabellis about my decision to get back on the horse. It can wait. Why ruin their weekend?

Because while they wouldn't begrudge me the comfort of husband and children, I know it won't be easy to hear. Besides, I have some housekeeping to take care of first.

Around nine that night, I'm playing a lively game of Scrabble with my computer, seventeen pounds of purring pet on my lap—my cat, Fat Mikey. A knock sounds on the door. "Come on in," I call, knowing who it is.

"Hey, Lucy," Ethan says, opening the door. I rarely bother locking up—the building has a coded security system in the lobby, and Mackerly's crime rate is practically nonexistent.

"Hi, Eth. How's it going?" I tear myself away from the computer...I was just about to play *zenith*, which would totally slay Maven, my archenemy computer foe, but humans come first. Or they should. I play the word discreetly, then close the lid of my computer. Take that, Maven!

"Everything's great." Ethan, who has logged many hours in my apartment over the past five years, makes himself at home by opening the fridge. "Can I have one of these?" he calls.

I swallow. "Sure. I made them for you." Earlier in the evening, I did what I often do—created a fabulous dessert. Inside the fridge are six ramekins of pineapple mango mousse, each one topped with a raspberry glaze. I figured Ethan will eat at least three, and I need to be on his good side.

"You want one?" he calls. I can tell he's already eating.

"No, thanks. They're all yours." I don't eat my own desserts. Haven't in years.

"This is fantastic," he says, coming into the living room.

"Glad you like it," I say, not meeting his eyes.

"Hey, thanks for e-mailing those pictures of Nick," he says, already scraping the ramekin clean.

"Oh, you're welcome. He sure looked cute." Ethan and I grin at each other in a moment of mutual Nick adoration. On Wednesday, the nursery school put on a play about the life cycle of the butterfly. Nicky was a milkweed seed. It's become my habit to photograph Nicky and e-mail pictures to Ethan while he's traveling, since Parker, Nick's mother, never seems to remember her camera.

"Um, listen, Ethan, we need to talk," I say, cringing a little.

"Sure. Let me grab another one of these. They're incredible." He goes back into the kitchen, and I hear the fridge open again. "Actually I have something to tell you, too." He returns to the living room "But ladies first." Sitting in the easy chair, he smiles at me.

Ethan looks nothing like his brother, which is both a comfort and a sorrow. Unlike Jimmy, Ethan is a bit...well, average. Nice-looking, but kind of unremarkable. Medium brown eyes, somewhat disheveled brown hair, average height, average weight. Kind of a vanilla type of guy. He has a neat little beard, the kind so many baseball players favor—three days of stubble, basically, which gives him an attractive edginess, but he's...well, he's Ethan. He looks a bit like an elf in some ways—not the squeaky North Pole elves, but like a cool elf, a Tolkien elf, mischievous eyebrows and sly grin.

He regards me patiently. I swallow. Swallow again. It's a nervous habit of mine. Fat Mikey jumps into Ethan's lap and head butts him until Ethan obliges the bossy animal by scratching his chin. Ethan rescued him from the pound a few years back,

saying no one would take the ugly beast, and gave him to me. Fat Mikey has never forgotten just who sprung him from prison, and now favors Ethan with a rusty purr.

I clear my throat. “Well, listen. You know, ever since Jimmy died, you’ve been, just...well. Incredible. Such a good friend, Ethan.” It’s true. I don’t have the words to voice my gratitude.

His mouth pulls up on one side. “Well. You’ve been great, too.”

I force a smile. “Right. Um...well, here’s the thing, Ethan. You know that Corinne had a baby, of course. And it got me thinking that, well...” I clear my throat. “Well, I’d like to have a baby, too.” Gah! This isn’t coming out the way I want it to.

His right eyebrow raises. “Really.”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted kids. You know. So, um...” Why am I so nervous? It’s just Ethan. He’ll understand. “So I guess I’m ready to...start dating. I want to get married again. Have a family.”

Ethan leans forward, causing Fat Mikey to jump off his lap. “I see,” he says.

I look at the floor for a second. “Right.” Risking a peek at Ethan, I add, “So we should probably stop sleeping together.”

CHAPTER TWO

ETHAN BLINKS. HIS EXPRESSION doesn't change. "Okay," he says after a beat.

I open my mouth to brook his argument, then realize he hasn't made one. "Okay. Great," I mumble.

Ethan sits back and looks toward the kitchen. "So seeing your new niece really got to you, huh?"

"Yes. I guess so. I mean, I've always wanted...well, you know. Husband, kids, all that. I've been thinking about it lately, and then today—" I opt not to describe my whisker. "I guess it's time."

"So is this theoretical, or do you have someone in mind?" he asks. Fat Mikey lets out a squeaky meow, then lifts his leg and starts licking.

I clear my throat. "It's theoretical. I just...I just figured we should make a clean break of it first, you know? Can't have a friend with privileges if I'm trying to find a husband." A nervous bleat of laughter bursts from my throat.

Ethan starts to say something, then seems to change his mind. "Sure. Most boyfriends wouldn't like to find out that you've got a standing arrangement with someone else." His tone is mild.

"Right," I say after a pause.

"Is that door still sticking?" He nods to the slider, which leads to the tiny balcony.

"Don't worry about it," I mutter. My face feels hot.

"Oh, hell, Luce, don't worry. I'll fix it. You're still my sister-in-law." For a second, he just stares at the glass door.

"Are you mad?" I whisper.

"Nah." He stands up, then comes over to me and drops a kiss on the top of my head. "I will, of course, miss the smokin' sex, but you're probably right. I'll drop in tomorrow to fix the door."

That's it? "Okay. Um, thanks, Ethan."

And with that, he's gone, and I have to say, it feels odd. Empty and quiet.

I'd thought he might have been a little more...well...I don't know what. After all, we've been sleeping together for two years. Granted, he travels all week, and on the weekends when he had Nicky, obviously we didn't do anything, but still. I guess I didn't expect him to be so...blasé.

"What are we complaining about?" I ask myself out loud. "It couldn't have gone any better." Fat Mikey rubs against my ankles as if in agreement, and I reach down to pet his silky fur.

The evening stretches in front of me. I have seven hours until I head for the bakery. A normal person would go to bed, but my schedule is erratic at best. Another thing Ethan and I have in common: the man only sleeps four or five hours a night. I