

FOR BETTER OR CURSE

Alexis Jacobs

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To my parents, siblings and friends, for their inspiration through the story-telling process;
and to my luv, Scott, for his creative gifts and support.

CHAPTER ONE

There will be times in your life when fate will have you by the short and curlies, and at those times there won't be much you can do about it. A wise woman might keep herself still until fate lets go, but not Manda Love. Not when her wedding was at stake. She couldn't just sit back and let fate treat her like rubbish for the umpteenth time.

After all, she wasn't like her cousin, Andrew. Nothing ever worked out well for him, and he had come to believe that nothing ever would. Aunt Beryl said she had always known it would happen. When Andrew was an infant, she had warned his father many times not to hand a baby to anyone backwards, or it would have no future. You were supposed to turn the baby around to face the other person, and then pass it forward. Every Jamaican knew that. But his father wouldn't listen, and now Andrew was thirty-something and running around London with no job, no woman, no children and no future. Aunt Beryl swore his father had cursed Andrew's fate with all that backwards-baby-passing.

Until the day before her wedding, Manda had believed Andrew's problems were more self-inflicted than anything else. But by the time she fell into bed that night, she wasn't so certain.

All day long it had been one problem after another. A mysterious yellow stain had even appeared on her wedding gown out of nowhere. Now the cleaners had rang to say the gown probably wouldn't be ready until the next morning. *And where was Daniel?* "Sherrie, I'm about to have a bloody fit," Manda had shouted into the phone to her best friend after that call.

Sherrie, bless her bleeding heart, had left her husband at home in Plumsted and hauled her pregnant belly all the way to the southwest end of London, determined to calm Manda's nerves. She had brought along a book, *Meditations for the Muddled Mind*. Manda had never tried meditation, but she decided to give it a go.

Now here it was, half past eight. Sherrie had the living room all séance-like, from the burning incense stick filling the air with the scent of patchouli, to the three white candles sitting on the coffee table and the Enya music drifting through the room. Sherrie sat on the couch, legs stretched out before her, one hand resting on her large belly. The candlelight threw a ghostly shadow-puppet of her head on one of the large boxes that lined the walls. The room had been stripped naked of the books, pictures, and decorations that had once breathed life into it. Those things were now packed away in the cardboard boxes that Manda and her fiancé, Daniel, had hauled from local grocers, and the boxes were now stacked around the room with labels announcing their contents. Medical Books. Dinner Plates. Photo Albums. Antique Collectibles – Handle With Care!

Manda tried to sit still on her cushion and prepare herself as Sherrie flipped through the pages of her book.

"Where the hell is that blasted page?" Sherrie said, in a thick Jamaican patois. Sherrie, with her bony English nose, fair complexion and straight blond hair, came from a family of white Jamaicans who had relocated to England decades ago. She herself had never been to the island, yet sometimes she sounded like she had just stepped off Air Jamaica.

“Ah, here it is. Yes. You’re standing on the bank of a river,” Sherrie read in a slow, soft voice. “All of your fearful, anxious thoughts flow from your mind one-by-one and drift into the water, where they are carried away by the river’s currents.”

Alright then, Manda thought. I see Daniel drifting by, looking sick as a dog...too sick to return my call or get married tomorrow...and there goes my wedding dress with its ugly yellow stain...and there’s Mum, drifting downstream, looking sad and lonely as usual...and there goes my car...if it stalls again tomorrow I’ll be late for the wedding...and I see Aunt Beryl, glutton dressed as glam in a red mini dress that shows off her knickers when she bends over...oh, and there goes Dad, looking like a right wanker in that tight powder-blue tux he wore at his own wedding. And he’s got his girlfriend with him. Ugh! And there goes Sierra...no, she’s not there! She’s not coming again, isn’t that what her message said? What kind of sister is she? Ah, sod it. This isn’t working. Now I have to start all over.

Manda took a deep breath. This time, she made a valiant effort to toss those anxious thoughts into the river, one-by-one, and keep them there. After a while, she found herself beginning to relax and felt the tension easing from her neck and shoulders. For a while it was going quite well and she might have slipped into a well-needed sleep, if the telephone hadn’t rang just then and made her jump.

“Damn it,” Sherrie cursed. She reached over to the side table and grabbed the phone. “Hullo? Yes, she is.” She held the phone out to Manda. “It’s your horrible sister.”

Manda scrambled up from the cushion and snatched the phone. “Sierra, I’ve been trying to reach you the entire day. What happened? Why didn’t you get on the plane?”

On the other end of the phone, she heard Sierra sigh. “Manda, I’m sorry, I just couldn’t do it. When I got to the airport, I didn’t feel so bad. But when I was heading for the flight, I thought about everything, and I had to turn back. I’m just not ready to face them again.”

“Them? They’re your parents, Sierra. And this is my wedding. You have to be there.”

“Manda, I just can’t.”

“You can’t? Why not? How can you do this to me?” Manda breathed hard into the phone.

“It has nothing to do with you.”

“Yes, it does. It’s my wedding you’re missing.”

“I said I’m sorry. I tried, Manda, I did.”

“Sierra, I don’t understand. What happened between you and Mum? And what did Dad do to you?”

There was silence on Sierra’s end.

“Sierra?”

“Never mind about that, it’s not important right now. All that’s important is-.”

“Not important? For God’s sake, you’re ready to miss my wedding. Sierra, I’m your sister. Don’t treat me like this.”

“Manda, don’t get yourself all upset. Just go to bed and get some sleep, alright? Listen, why don’t you and Daniel come to New York for Christmas? I’d still love to meet him.”

“We’re not coming anywhere.”

“Hang up on the cow,” Sherrie said, pulling at Manda’s t-shirt.

“Shhh. Sierra, you listen. If you don’t come to my wedding, you’ll regret it.”

“Manda, I can’t. I have to go. Nik is waiting for me.”

“Well, let him wait. Don’t you dare-.”

“Sorry, Manda, I’ll call you tomorrow. Forgive me, okay?” And Sierra was gone. Just like that.

“She hung up,” Manda said, staring at the phone in her hand.

“Cheeky wretch,” Sherrie said.

“She said she can’t come to my wedding. Then she said her boyfriend was waiting, and hung up.”

“Hmpfh!” Sherrie shook her head. “I can’t believe she’d do that to you. Selfish cow. What excuse did she give?”

“She just said she wasn’t ready to face our parents again.” Sierra had moved to New York two years earlier after a terrible fight with their mother, and now she no longer spoke to either parent. Manda and Sierra had stayed close, but she still hadn’t told Manda what the quarrel had been about.

“That’s a bloody weak excuse,” Sherrie said, sitting up as straight as she could.

Manda wondered if Nik had anything to do with Sierra’s change of heart. Had he encouraged her not to come? According to Sierra, he was very protective of her. “I’m knackered,” she said, as a wave of fatigue flowed through her, threatening to knock her down. “I just want to go to bed, though I’d be lucky if I fall asleep tonight.”

“Of course you’re knackered. If I were you, I would never speak to Sierra again. This is exactly why I’m glad I don’t have sisters. They’re horrible.”

As Aunt Beryl liked to say, “Those who can’t dance say the music is no good.” Sherrie was an only child. She had no trouble dismissing siblings she never had. But as angry as she was at Sierra, Manda couldn’t imagine cutting Sierra off. Nobody knew Sierra like she did. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about other people, it was just that Sierra had always responded to trouble in the exact same way. *Pay No Mind*. And if that didn’t work, she would resort to her other response. *Run*.

“Your sister’s dry and heartless,” Sherrie said now. “That’s what your parents get for naming her after a desert.” She had only met Sierra a couple times before she left England, and she hadn’t liked her.

Manda looked at the candles, still flickering on the coffee table. She had enough on her mind, without having to worry about Sierra too. For one thing, she hadn’t heard from Daniel since the night before, and when she last spoke to him, he hadn’t sounded like himself. “Well, that’s it for the meditation,” she said. All of the tension that had momentarily left her body had dug their steel fingers into her neck and shoulders again.

“Oh, everything will be fine.” Sherrie gave her a pitiful smile. “Do you remember all the chaos the night before my wedding? I was ready to drink my weight in rum, and let’s not forget the hysterical blindness. But you single-handedly kept me from touching even one drink. Manda, you’re the most stable person I know.”

Manda smiled back at her friend. That night had been truly ugly, but Sherrie had come a long way and Manda admired her for it. She used to have a gift for attracting the worst sorts of men. Adulterers. Abusers. Liars and the like. Then Sherrie had finally met and married a wonderful bloke, and now they had a baby on the way. If it wasn’t for her example, Manda might never have believed a person’s luck in love could change. She might never have given Daniel a chance. Now in less than twenty-four hours, the two of them would be honeymooning on the island of Mykonos, splashing around in the Mediterranean Sea, and Manda could still hardly believe her own luck.

She had first met Daniel at Tesco’s on a busy Saturday afternoon nine months earlier. Manda had just queued up to pay for her groceries when she heard people shouting for a doctor. She followed the commotion and found a man lying flat on his stomach beside an overturned

cart, with frozen pizza packages scattered around him. Manda had bent down and checked his pulse, and put her hand on his feverish forehead. He was so hot, she half-expected to see steam curling off him. She had rang for the paramedics and tended to him until it came, and even felt compelled to accompany him to the hospital. She had never imagined that anything much would come of it.

As for Daniel, he believed he and Manda had been chosen to be each other's mates before time began. He had asked for a wife who would be loving and caring, a wife who would be the perfect helper. He was a minister after all, and finding a wife was a very spiritual matter. Then, against his better judgment he had crawled out of bed with the flu and drove himself to Tesco's one afternoon, determined to pick up his weekly supply of packaged man-meals. And next moment he was looking up into the face of a pretty nurse who had come to his rescue. He told Manda the moment he had opened his eyes and seen her, he had started to fall in love. To him, that ambulance ride had been their first date.

The telephone rang again and Manda snatched it up, thinking it was Sierra calling her back. But it was Daniel's voice on the other end.

"Daniel, oh, thank God," Manda said, clutching her chest. "I was so worried about you. How're you feeling?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

Something in his voice chilled her. "Daniel, is everything alright? Where are you?"

"I'm in my car. Manda, I... I'm on the way to your flat."

"My flat? But-."

"I'll be there soon," Daniel said, cutting her off.

"Well then... alright." She put down the phone and looked at Sherrie. "It's Daniel. He says he's coming round."

"Why? What does he want?" Sherrie gasped.

"I don't know?"

"But he can't come here. It's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding."

"Well, obviously it must be important, or he wouldn't be coming, would he?"

"What could be that important that he can't say it over the phone? In some African countries, a girl doesn't even get to meet her husband until the wedding."

Manda rolled her eyes. Sherrie was a dry-land tourist. She had never stepped foot out of England, yet she was always talking about life in other countries like she had experienced them first-hand.

"Anyway, I'm glad he's coming," Manda added. It felt like she had been waiting years for his call. "I'm concerned about him. He doesn't sound well."

"Don't worry about Daniel," Sherrie said. "He's probably so nervous, the poor bloke's given himself an ulcer."

Manda saw Daniel's face in her mind, and felt love well up. Daniel, with his neat and tidy habits, and his penchant for using tissue to remove crisps from a bag so he wouldn't get his fingers greasy. He was so different from all the other men she had dated. In the first place, he was the only man she had ever met who wasn't afraid to be vulnerable. He had never seemed to be aware of the usual games men and women played with each other – whether or not to wait a few days to make that precious first call, pretending he wasn't eagerly waiting by the phone for her to call him back. His sheer passion and openness about his feelings for her had intimidated her at first, but Manda had quickly learned to relish it.

And the thing Manda loved most about Daniel was that he was a true Family Man. Some of her ex-boyfriends had accused her of being too wrapped up in her family, but Daniel was all about family. She got the feeling that he was one of those men who mated for life - unlike her father, who had walked away from her mother three years earlier. Their divorce had been devastating. Daniel didn't seem like the kind of man who could ever abandon his wife, and Manda loved him for it.

Manda looked down at the old blue t-shirt and baggy trousers she had put on for the meditation. She didn't want Daniel to see her looking so awful. She left Sherrie in the living room and hurried off to the bedroom, where she pulled back on a pair of jeans and a decent blouse. She rushed into the toilet to fix her hair.

"Blimey," she said, looking at herself in the medicine cabinet mirror. Her hair was a mess. She picked up the hand mirror that hung on the bathroom door and lined it up with the bigger one so she could see the back of her hair. It looked thicker than ever. Cousin Anthony, Aunt Beryl's hairstylist son, would be coming early in the morning to do Manda's makeup and hair. That would be the only real challenge. Her hair was big, thick and curly—the kind of hair that broke the teeth out of plastic combs and tore the bristles out of brushes. Her hair was a source of envy for the women in her family, and a nightmare for anyone who had ever had the task of washing, combing, braiding or twisting it. And now tomorrow, poor Anthony would have the daunting task of magically transforming that hair into something worthy of a bride.

Manda was so busy studying her hair, it took her a moment to notice that another face had appeared in the glass, just behind her own. A dark, drooping face framed by a mass of matted gray dreadlocks. When she noticed the face, she let out a yelp. She spun around and found herself face-to-face with a thin old woman, dressed in a long blue frock.

Where did...? Manda opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue had turned to stone. The eyes were what struck Manda the most, what would haunt her dreams for a long time afterwards. Eyes blackened with such bitterness, it filled Manda with a fear that took her breath away. Her heart froze in her chest. She couldn't move. A million years seemed to pass in seconds. Finally, she closed her own eyes, trying to shut out the face. When she opened them again, the old woman was gone. The mirror slipped from Manda's hand and fell to the floor. It hit the ground with a crack, sending glass shards shooting across the tiles.

"Is everything alright?" she heard Sherrie call out from beyond the door.

Manda turned back to the medicine cabinet mirror, then spun around in the bathroom. *Nothing there.* Her heart thumped back to life, beating so loud, she could feel the pulsing in her eardrums. She felt dizzy, and had to quickly sit down on the side of the bathtub.

"Manda, did you hear me?" Sherrie called out again.

"Yes...I...I just broke a mirror." *What on earth was that? A duppy?* But there were no such things as ghosts. "This is no time to lose your bloody mind," she whispered to herself. "Daniel is on his way. It's just stress, that's all. Stress."

Manda bent over and picked up the mirror's frame and a few pieces of the shattered glass, her hand shaking. At the other end of the flat, the door buzzer sounded.

"Daniel's here," Sherrie shouted.

Manda dropped the frame and broken glass into the rubbish bin. She opened the door and stumbled quickly out of the toilet.

"Sherrie, where's Manda?" She heard Daniel ask from the living room.

"She just broke a mirror," Sherrie answered. "She's in the loo cleaning up seven years of bad luck."

Both Daniel and Sherrie looked up as Manda entered the room. Sherrie had turned the floor lamp back on, and the living room had lost its mystery and shadows.

“What’s the matter with your face?” Sherrie asked, staring hard at her. “You look like you’ve seen a duppy.”

“A duppy?” Manda let out a hysterical laugh and grabbed a fistful of her hair. But now it was Daniel’s appearance that was frightening her. The first unusual thing she noticed about him was that his blue shirt was crushed, and a prickly-looking stubble had sprouted on his face. If a nuclear missile had been cruising towards London, while everyone would have been busy scrambling for a hiding place, Daniel would have stopped for a shave.

He stepped forward now, carrying several hangers with the nurses’ uniforms that he had washed and ironed for her. She didn’t have a washer or dryer, and Daniel often took her clothes over to his flat to launder them himself.

“Your finger’s bleeding,” Daniel said, a squeamish look on his face.

Manda looked down and saw a bright red drop of blood slip off the tip of one finger and spatter on the floor. “The glass,” she said. “I must’ve cut myself.” She popped the finger into her mouth, tasting the metallic tang of her own blood.

“Manda, I have to talk to you about something. It’s quite serious,” Daniel said, glancing across the room to where Sherrie sat watching them.

“I can take a hint,” Sherrie said, struggling back to her feet. She came over and took the uniforms from Daniel. “I’ll be in the bedroom.”

When they heard the bedroom door close, Daniel cleared his throat and looked at the wall. “You know how sometimes you make decisions about something, serious decisions, and then odd things come about that aren’t even feasible to your mind and you’re left having to do something...something you could never have imagined?”

“Yeah...?” She pulled her finger from her mouth. What was he rambling on about? And what had she really seen in the bathroom?

“Right, then. Well, I have something to tell you, and...and I don’t know how to say it, exactly.” He glanced at her.

Manda peered at his face. His eyes were redder and more watery than usual. “Daniel, have you been crying?” she asked, reaching for him. She felt another chill course through her.

Daniel stepped back from her. “I can’t do this,” he said.

“You can’t do what?”

His arms slumped by his side. “I can’t marry you. There, I’ve said it.”

At first, Manda just stared at him curiously, as if he had addressed her in a foreign tongue.

“You can’t marry me,” she said finally, trying to figure out the meaning of the words.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” Daniel said. “I can’t even explain it.”

“You can’t explain it. You don’t know what’s happening to you.”

“Exactly. Three days ago, everything was fine, but then the next morning when I woke up – I don’t know, things changed somehow.”

“Everything was fine, but-.”

“Manda, please stop repeating everything I say. This is hard enough as it is.”

“I’m just trying to understand.”

He slapped a hand to his forehead in exasperation.

“Daniel, what happened? Did I do something?” She felt the first real stirrings of panic rising in her.

“No, no, you didn’t do anything. That’s just it. I don’t know what’s happening.”

“All right, calm down.” She stepped before him and rubbed his tight shoulders. “Let’s go over to the couch and sit down and have a talk. We can figure this out together.” Yes. That was it. They just had to have a reasonable talk, figure it all out.

“I can’t sit,” Daniel said, pushing her hands away. “My car...I left it running.”

“Daniel, you what? This isn’t a bank robbery. We have to talk about this.”

“No, there’s nothing to talk about, Manda. I’ve made up my mind and that’s really all I have to say. Sorry.”

Manda shook her head. It didn’t make sense. This wasn’t like him. Daniel was usually the most sensible, reliable bloke a woman could meet.

“What...what about Greece? The tickets, hotel...” The smell of patchouli from the burning incense stick suddenly made her nauseous.

“Don’t bother yourself about it, I’ll take care of everything. It’s my fault after all.” Daniel sighed, and his eyes filled up with tears.

“Did you...did you stop loving me?” It ached her head and heart, just to ask it.

“No, I never have and I never will,” Daniel said, his voice firm.

He *meant* it. She could see it in his eyes, brimming up from the deep well of pain and confusion that she had never seen there before.

“Manda, I don’t know what’s happening to me,” he said. “I can’t seem to help myself.” Daniel dropped his head in defeat.

“But what about the flat?” she said suddenly, looking over at a stack of boxes piled against one wall.

“Oh, hell. I hope you’ll forgive me.” Daniel was crying now, the tears painting dark blue streaks down the front of his light blue shirt.

The flat had once belonged to Sierra, and Manda had taken it over after Sierra’s sudden departure. She had already told the landlord she would be moving out at the end of the month, and then had felt free to add what a horrible landlord she thought he was. He never fixed anything. At the time, she had walked away feeling relieved to have finally gotten that off her chest, but now bile rose up and almost choked her. A new person was already scheduled to move in.

“Daniel, I’ll be homeless,” she said, her voice a screech.

He took a deep breath. “No, you won’t, Manda. You can move in with your mother or...or perhaps your auntie?” he said, his voice quiet.

“What?” That was like asking her why she didn’t just check into Bedlam or a whorehouse. This was all wrong. Daniel couldn’t leave her. Their lives were knitted together too tightly, like conjoined twins who shared the same heart and lungs. They shared almost everything, even an Ebay account, for cripes sake. Two lives couldn’t just be easily separated. Panic raged through her now.

Deep breath, she told herself. That’s it. The wedding is tomorrow, and Daniel is just nervous. We’re both out of our minds tonight.

“Cold feet.”

“What?” Daniel said. “Manda, I’ve gotta go.”

“It’s just cold feet. That’s not unusual, Daniel. Ha, that’s all it is. Nothing to worry about, really.” She felt a drop of relief.

“No, Manda, it’s not cold feet.”

On the little table beside the couch was her book, Down the Aisle with a Smile: A Couple's Guide to a Blissful Wedding, the one she had read cover-to-cover. She picked it up now. She flipped to the chapter called "Warm Heart, Cold Feet".

"Listen, Daniel," she said, coming back to him. "It says here that it's natural to get cold feet before the wedding." She skimmed down to a paragraph. "You may be faced with the gravity of the commitment you are about to make, and it is at once daunting and exciting. In this state, you should never panic. Instead, this is-."

"Manda, stop it." Daniel grabbed at the book, but she held it away from him.

"This is the time for you to utilize the opportunity to-."

"Stop it," Daniel said. "It's not about that. The answer isn't in some book."

"Where is the answer, then?"

Daniel let out a sarcastic laugh. "You always need answers, don't you? Well, life doesn't always come with bloody answers, eh, does it?"

It also said in the next paragraph that when one partner got cold feet, the other partner should try to be patient and understanding. Well, sod it. Manda had been patient and understanding when her first boyfriend had dumped her at her sixteenth birthday party. And it had only gotten worse. Now at thirty-three, she had so much practice in being patient and understanding, Mother Theresa would've been proud of her. But breaking up with someone on the eve of your wedding, well that took the biscuit. That was just plain evil.

"You bleeding coward," Manda said. "You bastard." She swung the wedding guide at Daniel. It caught the side of his face and sent him staggering sideways into the floor lamp. He grabbed at it for balance, but both he and the lamp went crashing to the floor in a symphony of thuds and tinkles. The light went out and the room fell into darkness.

Manda heard him groan from the floor. She bent down and reached for him, and her finger connected with something slimy and soft.

"Ow, my eye," he said.

"Daniel, I'm sorry, I..." She tried to take his arm to help him up. She wasn't sure what to say to him.

"No, leave me. I'm fine." He started to struggle to his feet, pulling himself away from her grasp.

Manda heard Sherrie's footsteps coming down the hall, and her loud gasp when she reached the living room and turned on the overhead light.

"What's happening?" Sherrie asked. "Manda, did he hit you?"

Daniel put his hand over his sore eye. He stumbled towards the door.

"Daniel!" Manda scrambled up after him.

He wouldn't even look at her. He opened the front door and stepped into the building's hallway.

"Manda, please. What's happening? Talk to me." Sherrie tugged at her arm.

"Let me go." She tried to pry away her friend's hand.

"Lord, gal. Just talk to me."

"No, Sherrie. I have to go after him." She wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know." Manda grabbed her purse off the chair by the door and ran after Daniel. She had to stop him. What else was she supposed to do?

Outside, the night wind cooled her damp skin. Her car was parked in the little lot behind the building. As she was heading for it, she heard Sherrie shouting out her name. She turned to see her friend standing in the building's front door, waving the phone.

"Manda, it's the cleaners. They say you can pick up your dress in the morning."

"Aaahh." Manda screamed so loud, a cat hurled itself from a windowsill where it was lounging, and scampered away. She turned back around and hurried towards her car. As she reached the parking lot, she saw Daniel's blue Toyota speed by on the road.

"Daniel, stop," she screamed after him, but if he heard her, he didn't look back.

Manda hopped into her own car. Less than a minute later, she had turned onto the road after him. She could see Daniel's car at the light, several cars ahead of hers. She thought he was headed back home, but when he got to the intersection he turned left onto Southampton Row and sped towards the center of London. Where was he going? She followed his turn. He must have known she was there, because he swiftly changed lanes and sped up. Manda swerved out of the lane and cut in front of another car. The driver honked his horn. Ahead of her, Daniel raced through the light. Manda sailed through it after him just as it turned red. He wasn't getting away that easily.

Daniel, please. She tried to reason with him in her head, like she planned to do when she caught up with him. *You can't do this to us. I love you, and I know you love me. You're just afraid, that's all. I'm afraid too. Please, Daniel, listen to me. We need each other. We've shared so much.* Daniel was the best thing that had ever happened to her. If she lost him, she would never again meet another man like him. She would end up like one of those lonely middle-aged women who had no husbands to hold their hands when they came into hospital.

"Please, Daniel. Don't do this to me," Manda cried out, as she followed him through a left turn and down a street lined with tall hedges. Before she had gone another hundred yards, she felt her car slowing to a crawl, like a tired beast. She pulled onto the side of the road just before it stalled completely.

"No," Manda yelled. "You can't do this now. Please." She turned the key over and over, trying to force life into the car, but the car was dead. She glanced up the road and saw Daniel's car disappear around a corner. She slumped back in her seat and let the tears come. Everyone was abandoning her. First Sierra, and now Daniel. She wished her sister were right there beside her. If Sierra had come back for the wedding, she would have been there when Daniel came over. She might have been able to talk some sense into him, turn him around with her charm.

"Sierra, I need you," Manda whispered. "I need you. Why aren't you here?" She saw Sierra's face before her. The traffic lights blurred into red smears across the dark sky.

Manda wiped her eyes. She drew in deep, jagged breaths. She could hear Sherrie's soothing voice in her head, coaxing her to relax. *That's it. Deeper now.* Her heart rate slowed down as she talked quietly to herself. *Deeper. That's it.*

And then a calmness came over her, just like it had in the living room when she was meditating. But this time she must have fallen all the way through the slim crack between waking and sleeping, because Manda forgot she was behind the wheel of her car, on a rain-washed London road. She forgot about Daniel and the woman in the toilet, and everything that had happened only minutes earlier. It was as if she had left the present moment and slipped into an entirely different one. She found herself staring right into her sister's face as if they stood only inches apart. So close that Manda could see the tiny scar on Sierra's forehead where a stone had once caught her, and the silky white scarf around her hair with colorful butterflies all over it. Sierra's eyes were wide, and a tear ran down her cheek. They were on a cliff-side. Behind them,

the sky was a canvas of thick white clouds with just a few small patches of blue. But then Sierra was falling backwards into this sky, a look of horror on her face. Manda reached out to grab her, but she was gone.

“Sierra,” Manda shouted, bolting upright. She was still looking at the sky, but this time it was the dark, cloudy sky that belonged to the London night beyond her windshield. Someone knocked on her window, making her jump. Manda looked up to see a grim old face peering at her through the glass. Her ears started to ring, and she felt her mind melting into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

By some particularly sick-minded cosmic practical joke, Manda's surname was "Love". Yet if there was any part of her life that was a right mess, a dark-comedy for the gods, it was her love life.

To begin with, her father's family hadn't always had the last name, "Love". The family name used to be "Graves". The story went that when her paternal great-grandfather Latimer Graves was a young man, he used to be plagued with a mysterious illness. Lattie had traveled to every corner of Jamaica, visiting every kind of doctor he could think of, in an effort to find a cure. The doctors had never seen anything like it, a disease that defied definition and resisted all treatments. Finally, when regular doctors couldn't help him, Lattie went to see an Obeah woman. She told Lattie something that cut him to the heart. She said the only way he could cure himself was to change his last name. If he didn't do it, he would soon die. Lattie was mortified. He had always been proud to be a Graves. The name carried much importance in his part of Jamaica.

According to family history, Mortimer Graves, a former slave, had given his master so much grief that the master had two choices: kill him or free him. The master chose the latter, being a man who had inherited slaves, but opposed slavery in principle, and also being a man who was known to rule with a cotton fist. Mortimer made his way to Pebble Beach where he built himself a house, married an Arawak Indian woman and had seven sons. Mortimer's sons had then given him so much grief that he had two choices: kill them or free them. He also chose the latter, and his sons had gone out to spread their seeds and their name to nearby towns. The Graves men were known to be a rebellious, headstrong and enterprising lot. They were good with money, and owned nearly half the land from Pebble Beach to Linstead. People respected the name. How could Lattie give it up? But as the Obeah woman said, his choices were clear. Either live without the name, or die with it.

And so Lattie decided to change his name. He wanted one that would carry its own power, and bring him and his progeny good fortune. He thought about the one thing that had always been missing in his life. Love. His parents hadn't been very loving. He had a wife, but as it turned out she loved other men more than she loved him. Three of his children had been conceived while he was traveling around Jamaica looking for doctors.

Lattie went home and wrote the name "Graves" on a piece of wood, as the Obeah woman had instructed. He built a fire in the yard, gathered his family around him, and had the youngest child throw the piece of wood into the fire. Lattie's mysterious illnesses disappeared, and he went on to live to ninety-seven. The name Graves had been burnt out of his bloodline forever, and in its ashes, Love blossomed.

But not for everybody. Skip forward three generations and here was Manda, slumped down in the seat of a London bus headed for Lewisham, wondering what exactly had gone wrong in her love-life this time. She had always been extremely unlucky when it came to men. Even her mother had finally given up and sold the sixty-piece Wedgewood dinnerware she had always planned to give Manda on her wedding day. It wasn't that Manda had never been loved. It was just that men usually dumped her just when they seemed to be falling in love with her. One day

she might get flowers and a tender love note, then the next she might get a Dear Jane telephone call or an email with some baffling explanation, and that was the end of it. The pattern never changed – that is, until Daniel came along. His proposal had been so unexpected, every one of Manda's dead ancestors, including Latimer, must have sat up in their graves and bumped their heads. But now Daniel was gone, just like the others before him.

Manda had come to conclude that falling in love was like being afflicted with Alice in Wonderland Syndrome. This rare affliction caused its sufferers to temporarily see people and things in a distorted way – usually bigger or smaller than they actually were. It was all in their heads, of course. With Daniel, she had tried her best to remain as objective as possible, and see him for exactly what he was. But the Daniel who had abandoned her recently, wasn't the Daniel she thought she knew. How had she been so blind again?

She had spent the first few days after Daniel's departure curled up in bed like a dead caterpillar, drowning in grief. She couldn't bring herself to leave the house, let alone change out of her nightgown. Even the sunlight spilling through the window was an insult to her grief, and she had gone around the flat and drawn all the curtains closed. Her mother, Myrna, had taken on the terrible job of breaking the news to everyone that the wedding was off. Sherrie had wanted to stay with her for a while, but Manda had insisted she go home. She didn't want to share her pain with anyone. Myrna stopped by and tried to pry her out of bed with a huge container of curry chicken and rice, Manda's favorite dish. She wouldn't leave until Manda had eaten a chicken leg and a little of the rice.

Manda kept her phone in bed with her, and from time-to-time she would call Daniel and leave him yet another message. She had also spoken to his distraught mother, his brother who was supposed to be his best man, and two of his sisters. No one knew where he was, or why he had left. It was as much a puzzle for his family as it was for Manda. That was the worst part of it – not knowing what had led him to abandon her in the first place. Even Daniel didn't seem to understand his own behavior. But in spite of the amount of times she had lost at love, she wasn't prepared for this kind of grief. The all-consuming, body-racking, stomach-cramping kind that made it hard to draw in simple breathes.

Then as if she wasn't feeling bad enough, Sierra's gift had arrived the day before. Manda couldn't even look at the box, but Myrna had opened it out of curiosity and then tried to hide it among the other boxes in the living room. But Manda had seen the box, and when she peered inside, she clapped her hand over her mouth. There, lying on a bed of blue tissue paper, were two dolls the size of one-year-old children. They weren't just any dolls, but a girl doll that looked remarkably like Manda – long thin body, big floppy hair and all – and a boy one that resembled Daniel. Manda's doll was dressed in a white nurse's uniform with a little white cap sewn onto her hair, and Daniel's wore a black suit and had a little red Bible glued to his hand. Now she knew why Sierra had asked her to email a picture of him the month before, although Sierra had improvised with the Bible.

Sierra, how could you do this to me, she had thought. But Sierra hadn't known what would happen. She must have imagined the two of them opening the box together and having a good laugh when they saw the dolls. Manda picked up Daniel's doll and studied him. He had big brown eyes and big feet, just like his human counterpart. She started to laugh, but the laugh quickly turned to wails as she felt a sudden, crushing love for the real Daniel. She missed him so much. She held up the doll and kissed him all over his cool rubber face. He just stared back at her with his big, sad eyes. She took the doll back to bed with her and held it through the night.

On the fifth day, Manda had finally gotten up and spread her bed. Then she had gone into the bathroom to wash up. Every time she entered that room, she felt as skittish as a frightened cat. She would avoid looking in the mirror, afraid she might see the old woman's face again with its two horrible eyes.

But when Manda did happen to glance at her reflection in the mirror, the only image that made her gasp was her own. Her face was a mess, the skin puffy and dull. And worst of all, there were four prominent gray hairs at the front of her temple – four gray hairs that hadn't been there a few days earlier. Was she aging rapidly? She had heard of extreme stress having that effect on the body. The first thing she did was to take a tweezer from the medicine cabinet and pluck out the hairs. Then she had rang Aunt Beryl, hoping to pay her a visit. Manda wanted to tell her about the strange things she had seen on the eve of her wedding, and ask what she thought about them. Since Manda and Sierra were little girls, they had been running to Aunt Beryl to talk about things they couldn't discuss with their own parents. Nothing phased Aunt Beryl, because what she had to say to them, was usually more shocking than anything they could come up with.

When she got to her aunt's house in Lewisham, Manda had to pound on the door for several minutes before she finally heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The door barely opened before an arm shot out and grabbed her, pulling her into the house. It was Aunt Beryl, wearing a pink dressing gown over a too-tight white bra, and a black girdle that squeezed her belly upwards into a wide lump. She had big fluffy pink slippers on her feet and her hair was braided against her scalp in cornrows. For a fleeting moment, Manda wondered what an Aunt Beryl doll might look like.

"Minchie, why didn't you come round the back?" her aunt asked, slamming the door fast.

"Sorry, I forgot," Manda said. "My mind isn't too clear right now."

Aunt Beryl rarely ever used her own front door. She claimed the ex-wife of the man who had rented her the house had gotten someone to work Obeah on her. The woman had lost the house during the divorce, and she wanted it back. Whenever Aunt Beryl entered the house through the front door, something was sure to catch on fire soon afterwards. She said she had a hole in her favorite bedspread, a blackened kitchen counter, and a burn on her right buttock to prove it.

"Yes, I heard what 'appened to you, so I'll forgive you this time." Aunt Beryl grinned, exposing the gold cap on one of her front teeth. She drew Manda into her damp arms. "See, if I forgive you, then it's myself I'm forgiving then, ain't it?"

"What?" Sometimes Manda had a hard time following Aunt Beryl's logic.

"It's just like if I pinch you, then I'm really pinching myself." She pinched Manda on the arm with two red, talon-like nails.

"Ow, what the-." Manda flinched away from her fingers.

"See? That 'urt me too. What I do to you, I do to me, you understand?"

"Not bloody likely." Manda looked at the two indentations in her skin. She rubbed her arm. "You really shouldn't-," she started to say, but Aunt Beryl's behind was already wriggling its way back up the stairs.

"Come, Minchie, "I don't have a lot of time to spare," Aunt Beryl said, as Manda followed after her. "I've got to meet someone soon."

Minchie was a pet name Aunt Beryl had given her when she was small, and it had somehow stuck. Long before Manda, the name had belonged to a beloved puppy Aunt Beryl once owned that had been trampled by a goat.

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