

CHAPTER ONE

Philip handed her a four-inch nail. Barefoot, Sarah stood on a step-stool she'd taken from the bureau chief's office, a bad book in hand. A very, very bad book.

She hesitated. "The thing is, I don't want the nail to show."

"Nail everything but the cover, then we'll glue it closed. That way no one will see the nail."

Sarah turned to her husband. "You're brilliant." She turned back and set the nail into the title page, hammering it into all the dreck that followed, affixing the soft pages to a wide flat wood column opposite her desk. She held out her palm for another nail, so she could anchor the bottom of the book. Then she asked for the glue.

When Sarah took this job two years ago, her predecessor had pointed to a stack of books and said, "Most days it's great -- but at a certain point, you're gonna want to nail the worst of 'em to the wall." Sarah had reached that point.

Philip liked the idea of nailing the very bad book to the wall, but hadn't thought it would be part of his evening out. He'd been away from home for more than two weeks and wanted

nothing more than to have a good meal alone with his wife. He didn't want to be in her office; he didn't want to be in any office.

Philip held out his hand, helping her down from the step stool. Sarah stood back and admired her handiwork.

"Let's go," Philip said.

"Hang on," Sarah said, slipping on her slinky sling backs and handing him a ten-page printout. "Would you look at this speech? Not really a speech, more like a talk. For 'Women of the Ivies', they meet quarterly. They asked me to speak. Julie, too. I think Alex is on the panel." She tapped her fingers on the desk. "I'm feeling unworthy."

Philip stopped reading. "You've been writing your entire professional life. You won the poetry prize in college. Your stories went Page One..." He noticed a white dog hair on his sleeve, which he flicked into the garbage can. "That series: it changed the way people look at the city."

Sarah saw the "PARTY" file on her desk and wondered if he'd peeked into it while she'd been nailing "Gillian's Knot" to the wall. She nudged the file under a stack of assignment sheets and school forms.

"Remember that year?" he asked, still reading.

"Now I write three paragraphs an issue."

"For the world's best-read magazine," Philip noted.

"Three paragraphs," Sarah repeated. "It takes me fifteen minutes to write a review. It's not even writing, it's more like a fox trot across the keyboard."

Philip laughed lightly at the image and set down the printout, scanning the last page as he pulled on his jacket. "You barely mention the professor."

Sarah stood by the wall of windows in her office. It was night now, the city's lights pricking the black sky. She looked over to the Tribune's gnarled buttresses, the blue beacon of the Britannica building, the river curling inland like a lazy snake. She slipped on her thin leather jacket and wondered out loud if she'd ever grow tired of this view.

"The professor," Philip repeated.

Sarah turned away from the windows. "It's an audience of women. They'll think I slept with him."

"People go to these things to find out how someone got from there to here. The story about the professor is magical, and now it's come full circle."

Sarah shook her head and smiled knowingly. "People go to these things to find out if you've met J-Lo."

He held the door open for her. "Let's go."

#

Their table wasn't ready, which didn't matter. They sat at a table in the bar and admired the curvy interior.

"This is a perfect place to celebrate."

"Keith and Cindy designed this one, too," Philip said strongly, over the noise.

"Really? It looks different than the last place. More

feminine." Sarah motioned for him to sit beside her. "I can't hear you."

Philip had been in New York reviewing plans and running numbers with a developer, then on to Paris to receive an honor even though no one involved was French. He -- or she -- had called every night, and during the day sometimes, but it was a long time, far too long a time, to be apart. Sarah looked at him, then kissed him lightly. "Unbelievable," she said. "The achievement of a lifetime, and you're not even 40."

Philip shook his head. "I don't know. Frank Lloyd Wright designed a building that high and it ended up a poster."

A barely clad waitress in combat boots leaned over the table to take their drink order.

"I used to have breasts like that," Sarah said, after she'd left.

Philip slipped his arm onto her shoulders, bringing her closer to him. "Are you sure you want to eat? You look really great in that dress."

The waitress returned and set down their drinks. "Your table is ready."

#

Philip held Sarah's hand as they threaded through the bar crowd, Philip leading the way. A man with thick white hair stopped him.

"Philip Hamner? Mile High Man?" The man pumped Philip's

hand and turned to his wife. "Remember the model we saw at the MCA show?" he said to his wife. "The see-through skyscraper? This is the man, my dear."

Philip smiled and brought Sarah to his side. "My wife, Sarah Anders."

The man took Sarah's hand in both of his. "A genius, your husband. An architect and a builder. It's rare."

Sarah smiled, agreeing. She had no idea who she was talking to.

"And how do you spend your days?" the man asked Sarah.

"Raising his children."

"Wonderful!" the man cried. "No better calling."

Philip looked at Sarah oddly, then pressed on through the crowd. "Nice to see you, Fred."

#

Sarah slid into the booth. Philip sat down opposite her and picked up the menu.

"This place is beautiful! Those huge windows onto the street. And the tall grass to divide the tables. They're talented, those two."

Philip turned to the wine list. "Raising the kids?"

Sarah sipped her water. "That's what he wanted to hear."

"How do you know that?"

"He was delighted!"

"People love to hear about your work."

"Our table was ready."

"Nothing to be embarrassed about, Sarah. You're at the top of your game."

Sarah snorted, splatting water on the table.

"When I describe your job to people," Philip began, "that you sit back, with a dazzling view of the city, and read books and cherry pick culture -- you know what they say? They say, 'Sweet'."

Sarah picked up her menu. Every single thing sounded good. How often did that happen? She set the menu down again, and leaned towards him mischievously. "Anything that sounds too good to be true usually isn't."

#

They slid into Yellow Cab 2374 and headed home. "I can't remember the last time I had a perfect meal," Sarah offered.

Philip lay his head on her shoulder and smiled, sated. He slid his hand under her dress, and fingered the lace of her bra. Soon he was circling her nipple and kissing her, sliding her down onto the cab's wide seat. Philip grinned as he eyed the customer complaint sign: "If you're not completely satisfied by this cab ride, please call..." He kissed her, just shy of sloppy. "Too bad we don't live farther."

"Just far enough," Sarah pointed out as the cab swung off Clark Street, away from the club noise and bright lights, onto their dark, still Lincoln Park side street. "I don't want to get

pregnant again."

Philip sat up, instantly sobered, and reached for his wallet. "This is good right here," he said to the cabbie.

#

Philip turned the key and opened the door, pulling a puddied Sarah in behind him. He closed the door and kissed her again, pressing her against the door. "Kids asleep?"

"Where's Rimbaud?" Sarah said, looking beyond him. "He better not have gotten loose."

Philip cocked his head, listening. "And Helga?"

"Her name is Sabine, and I told her not to wait up."

"Great," he said, pulling her up the stairs, whispering and kissing her. "Because I happen to know you cannot get pregnant in this house. I designed it that way."

"Let me check on the kids. It's kind of cool out," she whispered, "and we don't have the heat on."

"I'll build a fire."

"Yell -- don't yell -- but let me know if you find the dog. I don't want to go out looking for him."

Me either, Philip thought to himself. In the dark, he climbed the floating staircase, rising, not falling, pretending he had not just fallen to last in line upon walking in his own front door. Rising, not falling: rising, he repeated to himself as his foot hit something soft but solid stuck in the airy space where the riser would be. He leaned over to pick up the toy or jacket

or pillow and found that he had found...the dog, sleeping. Philip leaned over to pet him; his tailed thumped once on the tread.

#

Sarah paced their light-filled kitchen, worrying about her talk. Julie had called earlier to let her know the location had changed, to a larger room within the hotel, because more than 200 people had bought tickets. Sarah couldn't imagine so many people wanting to hear from women who write for a living, especially on a weekend day so warm and clear.

"Don't they have families?" wondered Sarah aloud. She set down her coffee. It was only making her more nervous.

"They're bringing their families," Philip teased. He was packing a snack for the car ride home from Plano, when he was sure his son would be hungry and he wouldn't, would not, no no no, stop at Demon Dogs, even if the place was tucked ingeniously under the Fullerton "el" stop and they would pass it coming and going. No, they would not be stopping because of the small but definite roll of fat hanging over Philip's belt whenever he sat down, which had been noticeable indeed over the course of the long flight back from Paris.

"Let's go," he called to 11-year-old Whit, his eldest son, whose passion for architecture this morning was fueled by his other choice to fill the day: going to the aquarium with the babysitter, his younger brother and baby sister. He'd much rather be with his dad, who might nix Demon Dogs, but instead might stop

on the way home at Tower Records, where they could both load up on new cd's, blank cd's, movies they could rent but would end up buying and, best of all, the new issue of Mad magazine that his mother would not buy him.

"Soy nuts?" Whit asked, checking out the snack bag. "Kind of lame."

Philip turned from packing. Sarah looked like she was in early labor, walking in circles, shaking her head, mumbling half-finished sentences, seeming unaware of them until Rimbaud lumbered into the kitchen. He barked, fell at her feet, and issued a wet fart.

"Hello, Rimbaud!" Sarah said suddenly, leaning over and scrubbing his fur affectionately. Licking, scratching, shedding, farting -- none of it bothered Sarah.

Rimbaud bolted to the back windows, where he barked and left a long streak of slobber. Philip turned, bottling the urge to clean. "Ready?" he asked Whit, who nodded yes but jerked his head in the direction of his mother, who had her fingertips pressed into her forehead.

"Do you want us to come?" Philip asked.

"To the talk?"

"You don't look so good," Philip said, taking her hands in his.

"I don't want to go, Dad. I want to go with you."

"It helps to have a friendly face in the crowd. You should have seen me in New York: the laser was bouncing all over the room."

"I thought Laura was there."

"She was...distracted," Philip said, the only way he could think to describe his sister these days. "I couldn't get her attention."

Sarah let her finger run along the top of Philip's hand. She turned to look at Whit, awaiting their decision.

"Okay, no. Thanks. You two go," Sarah said. "It's the last weekend that house is open to the public, right? Before it falls back into private hands?"

"Or gets torn down."

Philip shot Whit a look.

"It can happen! I'm reading a book about Richard Nickel. He was awesome."

"It ends badly," Sarah said, handing him a fleece. "Bring this. It gets cold out in the country."

Philip pulled on his jacket, kissed her, and looked at her steadily. "Look: Anna's going to this. Anna who works for me? She went to Brown, she mentioned she was going, she recognized your name on the flyer. She's great when I give a presentation. She's very encouraging, she nods along, gives me the 'volume' sign. Find her, and you'll be fine."

"Long curly black hair?" Sarah asked.

"Sometimes it's flat."

They headed out, and Sarah stood at the front door to see them off. "Wish me luck," she called after them. Philip lowered the car window. "Find Anna."

#

Sarah stood in line at the hotel ballroom, waiting to get her name tag and program. She saw Julie across the room talking to Alex and someone she didn't know. Sarah moved to a shorter line, but then realized she was stuck behind a foursome who had more people than tickets. One of the four turned to Sarah.

"We came all the way from Iowa this morning for this. I didn't go to an Ivy League school but my sister here went to Cornell. I think I got a better education."

Sarah stepped around them to an opening at the table and found herself finally meeting Lydia Warner, whom she'd spoken with on the telephone many times. Lydia squeezed Sarah's hand, and slid her a pre-made name tag and a program. "Don't be nervous, Sarah, you'll be great. We raised more than \$10,000! We're not sure what to do with the money. We'll talk. Don't be nervous!"

Lydia let Sarah loose and turned to the next person in line. Sarah peeled off the backing on her name tag, stuck it on her blouse, then found her name on the program. The sixth of eight speakers.

Julie came up beside her. "Let's hear it for Yale. I speak last."

"Then I should be second."

"Yes, right, but I was in charge of seating. I jostled things so we could sit together."

"Thanks." Julie was Sarah's closest friend and colleague, but Sarah couldn't get used to the Britishisms Julie picked up

working overseas. Julie had left Chicago with a flat "a" and returned ten years later with the diction of a ponce. Last was lost, charge became choj. Sarah looked beyond Julie so she wouldn't say what always came to mind: Oh, come on: stop that. "Can you believe all these people?"

"Certainly, but no one's begging."

"They will be," Sarah said.

Julie smiled wisely. "Tell me, what's Philip about today? More photos?"

"I think that's over." Sarah scanned the crowd, trying to find Anna. Sarah hadn't been to Philip's office in a while. Not too tall, effortless curves. A wide smile and black black curly hair. Except when it was flat.

A woman tugged on her sleeve. "You are! She is!" Sarah was pulled into a thicket of smart looking women. Julie waved a slow farewell, then turned her back and headed for the dais.

"Is it art or is it craft?" "Should I give myself six months or a year?" "Have you met J-Lo?"

Sarah struggled to listen to all the questions at once, and felt tempted to say, "One at a time," like she did to her children. Instead she nodded along with them -- some were answering each other's questions -- and found herself admiring one woman's pin, a marcasite antique. Sarah glanced longingly at the dais, which was filling. But she couldn't get past the women, who waited to hear what they wanted to hear. There was no getting around it, or them. "I met her at the MTV awards and I will tell you this," Sarah said quietly. "Jennifer Lopez is the most

beautiful woman alive."

#

On the highway, Philip lowered his window again to let fly the third dog hair he'd picked from his sleeve. Were they flying back in?

Whit stuck his head between the two front seats. "Why don't you like the dog?"

"Put your seat belt back on."

"I'll be really sad if everyone ignores me when I'm old."

"You won't have an opportunity to get old if you don't put on your seat belt."

Whit slumped back and buckled himself in while Philip justified his mixed feelings. "Dogs are not gifts. Glenda should not have given us a dog, even if he was a puppy then." Philip sighed and spotted another hair, this time on the passenger seat. They were definitely blowing back in, or re-circulating in the car's air vents, because now he had another, on his jeans.

"Is Glenda your mother?"

"How can you know the difference between a quoin and a cantilever and not know whose mother Glenda is? Besides..."

Whit thought his father might be dissing him, but finished his story. "Cal and I were running around and Rimbaud was sort of chasing us and he crashed into E.'s shopping cart and slipped and fell and slid into that steel column in the dining room. Glenda was there and said, 'That floor will be the death of us.'"

Philip nearly missed the Plano exit, and turned sharply off the highway. "Why was E.'s shopping cart in the dining room?"

"She likes to play there."

"That's why there's a playroom."

"Dad, get...a...clue," Whit said emphatically. "That floor is the best for sock sliding."

Philip waited at a red light and got lost in the thought of his home's terrazzo floors -- the expense, the trouble, the dust and noise of their installation, the incredible low-luster gleam, the seemingly seamless seams. He loved those floors, and typically indicated them in plans even though clients typically took them out. But not in his house: in his house the floors stayed, and they were bare and clean and smooth and perfect for sock sliding. The car behind them honked: the light was green.

Philip smiled as he hit the gas. Now he could count on his children to defend his choice when Glenda complained.

#

On the dais, Sarah sat down for a moment beside Alex, a former colleague who was now editor of one of the city's few publishing houses. Alex leaned over to speak privately. "I'm feeling outclassed. The writer from Penn won the Edgar three times already."

"That's nothing," Sarah said. "The chick from Princeton won the Pulitzer last year for reporting in the North Sea. Under water."

Alex shook her head. "I want to inflate my bio."

Sarah looked out into the milling crowd for Anna. She saw women with black curly hair, and women with flat black hair, but none were Anna.

"What does that mean, 'a prize-winning poet'?" The thick woman beside her peered at Sarah over her reading glasses.

"Dartmouth?"

The woman reached for her nameplate, and, annoyed, switched it for another. "Harvard," she said, exhaling through her nose, which flared impressively, reminding Sarah of a certain gorilla at Lincoln Park Zoo. "Radcliffe, but it's not really there anymore." She tapped the program, waiting for an answer.

"It means I wrote poems and won a cash prize."

"Excellent!" she smiled, and extended her hand. "Do you still write?"

"Poetry?"

"Is there anything else?"

Alex pulled Sarah away. "She's here."

Sarah looked out into the ever growing audience. She gave up trying to find Anna and her hair and did a crowd estimate: she divided a portion of the audience, counted the people within that portion, then multiplied that by the number of portions...could that be right? "I've been misled," Sarah complained.

"She's here, in this room! Do you see her? She's kind of...round...ten or twelve rows back, Prada bag."

Sarah looked out into a sea of Prada bags. Also Kate Spade, Fendi, Fendi, Fendi, Vuitton and a Burberry knock off. She

couldn't figure out who Alex was talking about.

"Francesca Hadley! The best agent in the country. Maybe the world. Everything she touches turns to gold." Alex pressed her business card into Sarah's hand. "If I don't get this to her, do it for me."

#

A note was passed to Sarah; she opened it, read it and looked down to the woman who had sent it: "You should review poetry in your magazine." Sarah scribbled a reply, "Not likely," and sent the note back down the line, only for it to boomerang. "Chicken or egg? People don't read what isn't reviewed."

Sarah kept the note open in front of her and listened to Alex's close and the mystery writer's open, trying to breathe deeply to calm herself because now she was one person closer. She turned to Julie, who narrowed her eyes and smiled wickedly at Sarah's discomfort. Looking at Julie made Sarah wonder why she hadn't gone to Yale, so she could go last today. But Julie had gone to Yale, and there was only one writer representing each school, so only one of them would be here now and it would be Julie, editor of international news, who had the better job. The world might not think that, but Sarah was sure: there was nothing like working in a big-city newsroom.

The poet's question sat on top of Sarah's printout. "Let's talk," Sarah wrote. She slid the note back, gathered her printed-out pages and stood up.

#

Sarah looked out at the audience and visibly gulped. There were so many women. Men, too, and children, a galaxy of hopeful faces waiting to hear what they wanted to hear: that they, too, could have a glamorous high-paying job in journalism, given the right balance of art and craft, six months to a year, J-Lo pleased to meet you. She looked to Alex, who didn't look back, then to Julie, who rolled her eyes and flashed the "L" for loser signal. Finally Sarah caught the eye of the poet, who mouthed this: "Get going. I've got my car in a two-hour space."

Sarah laughed and relaxed. She called out "Hang on a sec," to the crowd and looked again at her printed-out notes, which did not contain the answer Philip said, and she knew, people were looking for: how she'd gotten from there to here. Surprise me, delight me. Bring me orange juice and onion-skin paper. Come early to class. Wear something diaphanous. She put down her notes.

#

"How'd it go?" Philip asked, noticing right away that Sarah looked completely wiped out, a little annoyed, but also very, very happy. Like she'd looked after she'd given birth to each of their children.

"Anna wasn't there."

"She e-mailed me that she couldn't go after all, some family thing. Sold her ticket for a hundred bucks."

"I'm sure it wasn't that interesting, although Julie did a thorough job describing the indignities of foreign reporting: there was a lot of squirming." Sarah smiled and Philip relaxed. He'd felt a little selfish setting off for Plano.

"What's in the bag?" Philip peered hopefully into it -- a sturdy Barney's bag -- then instantly deflated. More books. Like the dog hairs, they kept coming in and attaching, if not to him, to his home.

"They looked so hopeful," Sarah explained. "I said no when the bag was full, but one author followed me out to the cab and pushed this one through the crack in the window: "Gifted Kids Need Gifted Parents". How was the house?"

"Still standing," Whit offered from the couch, where he was unwrapping the Tower Records loot.

Sarah eyed the pile, and spotted the Mad magazine she hadn't let him buy the other day, though now she couldn't remember why. "That's some gift shop they have out there. You pick up Mies' greatest hits?" Sarah laughed at her own joke.

"He explained how the cantilevered slabs work to a German couple," Philip said. "In German."

Whit shrugged. "I've been talking with Sabine. I remember it when I have someone to talk to. So Dad let me pick out anything I wanted at Tower." He unwrapped another CD.

Philip brought Sarah close to him. He was happy to be home. "We had a good day. A really good day."

"I told them all about the professor."

Philip stepped back, truly surprised. "You haven't even told me all about the professor."

"They clapped. Stood and clapped."

"Who's the professor," Whit asked flatly. He was really more interested in the liner notes to his new CD.

"I even told them about 'diaphanous' and that I had to look up the word in the dictionary."

Philip slowly peeled the name tag from her blouse. "Well done, Sarah Anders." He leaned over and kissed her, thinking thinking thinking...two nights in a row? If the day continued like this, everyone happy and pleased and productive and prize winning and multilingual, why not? They should have sex every night if nights rolled over into days such as this.

"I'll get some wood for the fire," Philip said.

The front door opened with a bang. "Mom, mom, mom," Cal ran up the stairs and into the room. "Would you take me to the toy store? I couldn't buy anything at the aquarium because E. threw up all over Sabine right outside the big tank, where the diver is in there feeding the fish and everyone wants to see? And in the cab, too. I couldn't buy anything because Sabine was covered in puke!" He hopped up and down in front of Sarah. "Would you take me to the store so I can buy something? I didn't get to buy anything, I only saw the fish. I like the electric eel. Would you take me?"

Philip headed to the door to help Sabine.

"Would you Mom?"

"Is she okay?" Sarah called after him.

"Hot," he said, climbing the stairs, Sabine following. "I'll wash her. Bring up some Tylenol."

"Ibuprofen is better for fevers," Sabine advised, pushing away her tears. She shook her head. "I have to go."

"Sure," Sarah said. "What a mess. I'll get dinner ready."

"No, I have to go home. I can't stay."

Sabine's words stilled Sarah: she couldn't lose another babysitter. "You had a rough day," Sarah said sympathetically, turning back to Sabine. "Why don't you get cleaned up and call it a day. We'll have dinner, and start over tomorrow."

"Elizabeth is not like any child I took care of in Germany."

"She's only two," Sarah said softly. "The children you cared for were older."

Sabine shook her head, correcting Sarah. "The same age. I have to go."

Sarah watched Sabine head down the stairs, her shoulder covered in a paste of yellow and green chunks. "That's what babies do, they throw up!" Sarah called after her. She could hear bath water running upstairs, and Philip's soothing voice comforting their baby.

"Would you take me to the toy store?" Cal asked again. "Whit got to go to Tower."

"Sure," Sarah said. "Remind me."

#

"I'll call Glenda," Philip said, as they were finishing up their take-out dinner of ribs and chicken and beans and corn bread which he knew he shouldn't eat but couldn't help not and Sarah was describing the week of work and meetings and school functions and the Race for Cancer run that faced her -- all without a babysitter. Philip had failed to dissuade Sabine from leaving, finally calling her a cab and helping her move from her room to the front door a very heavy suitcase. Philip joked about it containing a dead body, a colloquialism Sabine misunderstood, which caused her to start crying all over again.

"Yip pee!" Cal interrupted. "Glenda makes the best cookies!"

"Glenda makes cookies," Whit agreed. "She also makes us do our homework before dinner, clean the playroom and floss. Do I have to take out the garbage if she asks?"

"Yes," Sarah and Philip said together.

"You think her fever is down?" Sarah asked Philip.

"I'll check," he said, and excused himself.

Sarah turned to Whit, but Whit turned first to Cal. "We can watch anything we want!" They slid from their chairs and raced each other downstairs to the big t.v., which without E. around, they had full control. Sarah didn't even mind that they hadn't carried their plates from the table. They were the only two carefree people in the house. She let them be that way while they could: Glenda was on her way.

CHAPTER TWO

Later than usual on a Monday morning, Binny strode into Sarah's office and folded her long arms one on top of the other. She surveyed the view -- slightly less grand than her own -- and the wall of books, radaring in on the one book now affixed to the column. "What's that doing on the wall?"

Binny was younger, thinner, wealthier and more powerful than Sarah: Binny was the Chicago Bureau Chief, a job that required Binny and her bloated staff to be available for movie-set interviews, after-Oprah drop-bys and Bonnie Hunt, who stopped in a lot. Also for rewriting stories about local athletes who'd stepped onto the national stage because of talent, girth or outrageous behavior. Ditto musicians. And comedians. Also businessmen who'd chucked it all to teach and heart-wrenching stories of ordinary people maimed or killed by colliding "el" trains or falling ice daggers.

Binny had never worked anywhere else.

Sarah took note of Binny's Hermes scarf, today mostly pale pink and wrapped neatly at her neck.

"Lunch?" Binny asked, turning to leave without an answer.

Sarah followed her to the door and nearly tripped over a new stack of unopened books. "What lunch?"

"For Jessica, it's her birthday, Capital Grille."

"Jessica the new receptionist?"

"Don't get corporate on me, Sarah. You and I are the only ones who make any money around here. A girl's got to eat."

"Right," Sarah said, surveying the city of book packages at her feet. "It's just...look at what I have to get through today." She wouldn't mention the rest of her life chomping at her day, because she knew that the fullness of her life irked Binny, who was younger, thinner, wealthier, more powerful...and never married.

"That's another thing we need to talk about," Binny began. "Your hours."

"I start at eight."

"If a tree falls in a forest, and no one's there..."

"You want me to punch a time card? Binny. Binny, Binny, Binny...we're journalists." Sarah couldn't believe she had just let Binny into that hallowed club. "Whatever the hours -- that's how I was raised. Whatever it took."

"It doesn't look good to the rest of the staff."

"They should look to me as their future! I work where I want on what I want. And I get paid a lot."

Sarah waited for Binny to change the subject, something she did whenever Sarah was obviously right. She just wondered which subject -- men, marriage, money, handbags -- Binny would land on this time.

"I'll send Esme in to help you with these piles. But I'm billing her to you. You have to talk to New York about this!" Binny ran a finger lovingly along a line of miniature classics -- Dickens in 2-point type -- then headed out.

#

Esme sat cross-legged on Sarah's floor unzipping brown cardboard book boxes. "'Martial Arts for Marrieds'?" she called out, and from her desk Sarah said, "Pitch."

"If I find one I like can I review it?" Esme asked.

Sarah shifted her gaze from her computer screen and peered at Esme, who was 22, overeducated, underpaid, and polite enough not to mention that opening boxes was not in her job description.

"This is a place you..." Sarah said, turning back to her computer and scrolling through her e-mails, one of which -- from her photographer friend Marco -- made her laugh out loud. She looked up and saw that Esme was waiting for the rest of her sentence. "It's not a place to start."

"Okay," Esme said, opening another box. "Wow," she said earnestly, holding up a book. "'Figs, Fountains, Fontina: A Memoir'."

"Will it never end?" Sarah said rhetorically. "Okay," she

said, reading out loud from the professor's daily e-mail. "Look for packages from Bantam, Dutton, Little Brown and Anchor. They'll have books we have to review."

"You don't choose?"

"Of course I choose."

"Then why don't you review something like this?" Esme asked, holding up a new translation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses", put out by a university press.

"They don't buy ads -- but you didn't hear me say that," Sarah said, watching the bloom come off Esme's cheeks. The door opened, and Sarah turned in her chair to find Philip walking in. He leaned over and kissed her lightly.

"Hi, hi. That's Esme on the floor, she's helping me."

Philip walked around Sarah's desk and extended his hand to Esme, who met his eye and shook his hand steadily while thinking of all the friends, and her mother, whom she'd have to call immediately to say you will not believe who just walked into this office, and when they first guessed Britney Spears and then when she added "wearing Hugo Boss" guessed David Schwimmer she would say no, no, no, think "living master" -- a term that would blow them out of their failed dot.com Aeron chairs and provide proof that she'd made the right career decision to work in here at a Bureau instead of out there at a suburban daily.

"What brings you around?" Sarah asked, but sat back and smiled at Philip, not caring why. It was good to have him home, and back at his office across town, in town -- not out of town across the ocean in an inconvenient time zone. He was here, in

her office, looking out over a small but significant university building he had designed.

"Meeting over at the Aon Center. I'm early." Philip sat at the edge of her desk, admiring the hammering they'd done over the weekend. "Can I borrow that?"

"Sorry," Sarah said. "That one's out of circulation."

He leaned over and eyed the bottom shelf, Sarah's line of living masters: Richard Ford, Richard Price, Richard Russo. Sarah kept them there because "no return" Binny -- the worst kind of borrower -- was unlikely to squat for a book. He pulled a Paddy Doyle from its place on the bottom shelf, and leafed through it. "We still on for lunch at the Arts Club?"

Sarah wilted. "It's the David Adler lecture, right? I was so looking forward to that." She turned to Esme. "All those exquisite manors on the North Shore: David Adler. There's a new book out on him." Sarah doubted she'd review it: too narrow, too smart. But Adler's clients had been rich, very very rich, so maybe. But most of them were also dead, so probably not.

"I'm bringing Jorge, from the Barcelona project? I just hired him. You'll like him."

Esme tried to stifle a sigh -- a private conversation overheard! Her mother didn't follow architecture, but she did subscribe to Time and that man had lain face up on her leatherette sofa for at least a week. Esme opened another book package and held up "Vestment Interests", which brought a line of knit brows from Sarah and Philip.

"I should go." Philip picked up Sarah's hand and fingered

her wedding rings, not going anywhere. Sarah's telephone rang; she reached for it with her free hand.

"It is," she said into the receiver.

"See you at lunch," he said softly, raising her hand to his lips, leaving Sarah with a kiss and Esme with the realization that she'd not yet ever been loved.

Esme shook that nasty thought from her pretty head and turned back to her work. She held up "Nocturne", which Sarah wasn't sure of: she pointed to the "keep" pile. There were new books by Joyce Carol Oates, Sara Paretsky, Jim Harrison and James Patterson that she needed to find in those stacks.

"She did?" Sarah asked her caller, an unnamed assistant to Francesca Hadley. Sarah lapped up the flattery: Francesca loved Sarah's talk at the writer's panel, was there more? Something in print? Could she expand?

Binny barged in. "Are you through?" Esme looked up and shook her head. Binny retreated, but not before turning to Sarah and tapping her thin wristwatch. "Lunch. Be there."

"Thursday," Sarah said, then hung up the telephone and inked Francesca Hadley into her calendar.

Esme held up another book. "Another Mallory mystery," Sarah said with a sigh. "That woman is a machine."

"It's by a man."

"He's a woman, when he's not writing Mallory. When he's writing the 'Hot Red' or 'Cool Blue' series, he's a man. British. Although she's really South African."

Esme looked confused.

"Just leave that one on my desk."

#

Sarah passed Esme, sitting at her desk outside Binny's office, talking on the telephone and looking guilty. Esme covered the mouth piece. "Your husband. Wow. I mean, it's so obvious."

"He's just home from a long trip. He's usually more reserved," Sarah said, stepping into Binny's office, determined to put an end to the lunch thing. "I just got a call from Francesca Hadley's office."

"The agent? Chairs the Boo Ball. We profiled her, but it never ran. New York said it lacked drama."

"Okay." Sarah looked at her watch pointedly. "I can't do Capital Grille for the new girl." Sarah didn't work for Binny, but her office was within Binny's bureau. Most days this worked in Sarah's favor.

"Francesca Hadley? I told you, she's been done. She's in our files."

Sarah looked beyond Binny to the Blue Cross building, which changed colors depending on the kind of day it was, and the time of day. How could Binny keep her back to such...drama?

"We don't need anything new on Francesca Hadley," Binny repeated. "Although I heard she'd gained weight at the Oraguay Spa. Her family owns that. Did you know that? They also own an entire town in Utah. For skiing. I'm rich, but I think that's dramatic."

"You really have to wonder about New York."

Binny nodded wisely, swiveled in her chair, then stopped and tapped her long nails on her uncluttered desk. "I'll forgive you Esme this morning. But I need you at lunch."

Sarah flipped through her mind the David Adler houses -- she had seen some of them with Philip when they'd started dating, and Adler's home and studio in Libertyville, white against the green fields, and with a turret. She checked her watch and realized that the time she'd set aside to interview a new babysitter and order groceries had shrunk to 10 minutes. "Why?"

Binny slid a slick cookbook across her desk. "He's the chef there. And I want to meet him."

"We don't review cookbooks."

"I know that, and you know that. But Chef Ernie doesn't know that and I want to get to know him." Binny paused. "I'll give you Esme every day until you're caught up."

Sarah saw the oasis of civility that was the Arts Club dry up in front of her eyes. She opened the cookbook to a photo of grilled skate. "You think they're serving this today?"

"Let's find out," Binny said confidently.

#

Julie dropped the cigarette she'd bummed, and ground it out with the heel of her running shoe.

"Binny didn't even come back to work," Sarah explained as they looped down to the path that crossed in front of Navy Pier.

"He unwrapped her Hermes in front of her whole staff?"

"She sent the rest of them back early, but made me stay and talk publishing with Chef Ernie."

"The man can cook." Mon...

"He's got amazing hands, like hams," Sarah said. "By the time I left he was ready to bring Binny to the back and fillet her over a butcher block."

Julie went ahead of Sarah once they reached, and had to negotiate, the crisscross of paths that led to the beach, filled with bikers, runners, rollerbladers, babies in strollers, babies in backpacks, cops on horseback, cops on bicycles, cops in cars, office workers walking three abreast and a bicycle built for four, with five. They ran single file, around a clot of tourists, until they made it to the wide concrete path that began at Ohio Street beach and hugged the shore heading north.

"Say, an agent rung today," Julie said, when they were running side by side again. "Francesca Hadley. Wants me to write a book about traveling in the East with children. You know, 'Samerkand avec des Enfants'. Worldly, sophisticated."

"Hadley, or her assistant?" Sarah said, struggling for air and regretting the question.

"Hadley, why? We had a...chat. She's rather loud."

Sarah sank on that bit of information, but tried to keep the pace. Slower than a smoker! Then again, she reasoned, Julie hadn't just had the best of Chef Ernie. Sarah laughed out loud: hopefully Binny had.

They rounded a wide curve in the path and headed towards Oak

Street beach, closed for the season but still populated by people with dogs, people with kites, people with kids running up and down the winter dunes, laughing and falling and rolling. The lake was coated gold, from the setting sun...gold. Sarah had lived here for 15 years but was still struck by the lake's beauty. She turned and ran backwards, to watch the sun set but also caught the passing parade: a juggler on rollerblades, a rollerblader drafting off a line of bikers, a biker pulling his barking dog in a baby cart, lovers with their hands linked, lovers on their last walk, lovers licking a single ice cream cone.

"We should train for the marathon."

Sarah turned. "Last year someone died, just short of the finish line. He was 22 and in great shape."

"Yes, right, but he'd never had a baby."

They slowed their pace by the chess pavilion, another human bottleneck. "I don't know about that."

"I feel as though I need a new challenge," Julie explained. "I've had my children, I've circled the world, I like my new husband, I'm good at my work. What next?"

"I don't want to run a marathon, but I know what you mean. I don't want to get left behind."

#

Glenda opened the door for her. "Elizabeth Jane is fine, no fever, just a little sleepy. I let her have a second nap. Do you mind?"

"That's fine," Sarah said, between breaths, sitting down hard on the steps. She'd sprinted the last two blocks, as always, but was cramping on her sides. Rimbaud, usually first at the door, bounded to Sarah, wagging his tail so his whole body wriggled. He barked once, then fell flat on to her, settling in on top of her running shoes.

"We went to the zoo, fed the ducks, checked on Buster, had lunch at John's -- my friend Mary wanted to see her and Elizabeth Jane was very well behaved except for the crayon she threw at the waitress but otherwise she ate everything on her plate and could not have been more adorable. When we came home I got the plumber over here to fix that handle in Whit's shower and the heating man to check the furnaces before it gets cold."

Sarah leaned over and pet Rimbaud.

"There's a simple minestrone on the cook top and a bottle of French chardonnay -- I like the French better, don't you? -- in the refrigerator. I think it's important to have a drink before Parents' Night. The children are fed and bathed although Whit tells me he showers in the morning. The boys are upstairs doing their homework together."

"Thank you." What else could she say? Glenda was a force of nature that produced only good, like a cleansing spring rain. "You're sure you don't mind staying?"

"Mind? I'm delighted! I worry about Buster of course but these children, oh, I just can't get enough of them. But could you talk to Philip about the floor? My feet are freezing."

"Do you want to borrow some socks?"

"Then I slip. It's dangerous for someone my age. I'd hate to break a hip. Otherwise, I'm perfectly happy, deliriously so. Even with the cold floors and lack of curios. I know that's Philip, I've seen your office, so it must be my fault. Something I didn't do, or overdid. Have you spoken to Laura?"

"About the party?" Sarah pulled her feet out from under Rimbaud, whose tail was still sliding happily back and forth across the floor. She left her running shoes under the dog, then leaned over and peeled off her sweaty socks.

"About anything."

Sarah studied the callous on her foot and tried to figure out how to answer. "Not lately."

"Oh, I don't believe you, sweetie. I just don't. No one wants to bring me bad news. Or worse news. Her life is a mess and she won't let me help her! That's a feeling I'm not familiar with."

Philip walked in and set down his briefcase. He kissed his mother on the forehead and hugged Sarah to him even though she was sticky with sweat. He was happy to be home, again: he smelled good things from the kitchen and peaceful sounds concerning the square root of nine coming from his boys upstairs. He saw the baby monitor in his mother's hand and could hear the faint breaths of his sleeping daughter. "How's E.?"

"On the road to good health," Glenda said. "Tell me about your day, dear. It's hard to keep up with your accomplishments."

"I'll shower," Sarah called out, heading upstairs. "How was the Adler?"

"We missed you."

Philip prepared his mother her drink, and poured one for himself. He was happy to be home, truly happy, and didn't mind at all sipping a cold cocktail while telling his mother the exact same things he'd told her last night on the telephone when he'd called and raised the white flag. Really and truly happy, no matter what she would say about the floor. Because when Glenda was around, his house was as it should be: quiet and clean with a decided order to things, such as cocktails at six and a satisfying meal at seven. He was not criticizing Sarah, who liked those things, too. It was just that neither of them could pull it off. That Glenda had and did flooded him with happiness. Either that or the Stoli was kicking in.

"You look happy."

"I am, Mother."

What Philip was not happy about was the evening that stretched before him. Parents' Night at his sons' school, where he wouldn't even get to sit beside Sarah -- she'd be in another classroom -- but would be sitting at a too-short desk feeling like a miniature version of himself while trying to make sense out of the new new math. Subtracting a stacked equation left to right...it made his head spin.

"Daria Bright crossed your bridge in Spain," Glenda began. "She said it was scary. But beautiful, she did say it was very beautiful. She didn't know why it was scary. Why is it?"

"It moves with the wind. So it won't collapse."

"That sounds scary."

"It spans a fiord that has wall drawings that date to the 11th century. It's designed to be..." he hated to say this, "...transparent."

"I liked the model of it, very elegant. But I don't think I'd want to walk across it."

"It's thrilling. Sarah loved it."

Glenda raised her glass and lowered her voice. "I worry about Sarah. She's getting too thin."

"She runs most days."

"Exactly. Serious runners stop menstruating."

Philip freshened their drinks. "I think she'd welcome that."

"Oh stop that! Elizabeth Jane needs a sister!"

Sarah stepped down the floating staircase, dressed in a soft black suit. "No she doesn't."

"Thank you," Philip said, and raised his glass to her. "Can I get you a drink?"

Sarah surveyed the scene before her, Noel Coward on fast-forward. "A glass of wine," she said. "And then we should go."

#

They headed up their street as evening turned to night, passing the children's playground Philip redesigned, gratis. He admired the arched footbridge set between two towers, just like the bridges that cross the Chicago River. Nothing fleeting about that design! Philip said to himself.

"Cal wants me to go to his classroom," Sarah said. "He said

he wrote me a special note. He said if it's you it's okay because he wrote another note for you and you could bring me mine. But he seemed to think it was very important that I find mine in his desk."

"Doesn't matter," Philip said, and it didn't. In his experience, the short desks were endemic throughout the school. Philip laced his hand in hers, then leaned over and kissed her.

"Did something happen in Paris?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You're very affectionate these days."

"I'm not always?"

They reached the corner and Sarah raised her hand and hailed a cab. "In cabs, of course. And that closet in your mother's house. I don't think we were married then..."

"I'm happy to be home." He held the door open for her, and slid into the cab behind her. "I missed everyone." He looked fondly at her and slid his arm around her shoulder. "I missed you."

"I thought you'd be caught up in all the hoopla: the award and the interviews, the wining and dining."

"There was a lot of that."

"You sounded very happy when you called from the Ritz."

"I want to take you there. Even the phone receivers are soft."

Sarah leaned forward, towards the driver. "On the other side is good." They stepped out of the cab onto Clark Street and headed towards the school.

"Julie says her husbands would get really affectionate with her when they were having affairs."

Philip pushed the school door open. "I'm not one of Julie's husbands."

"Of course not," Sarah said, leading him up the stairs. "It's just that your sister said she and Brian had the best sex of their recent life before he left. Oh, this is Cal's room. I'll see you later."

Sarah turned into Grade 2 and waved goodbye to Philip without looking back.

#

Sarah bumped into Cal's desk the moment she walked into the room. She -- and by extension, he -- could not have been farther from the teacher. Cal was a very good student, so Sarah wondered if it mattered where he sat, and then, if she were to blame.

She sat down at Cal's desk, trying to drive that thought from her mind and slide into the small space between the chair and desk. She did, then introduced herself to the man beside her, whose heavy-lidded eyes made him look like a toad. He shook her hand limply, but didn't mention his name. She glanced at his name tag: William Krass.

Right. It was all coming back to her, Cal complaining about having to sit next to Carrie Krass, who belittled his spelling achievements and summer vacations. Which made Sarah feel badly -- not because they'd only gone as far as Michigan -- but because she

had called the teacher the first day of school to ask that Cal not be seated next to Georgie, who had a potty mouth, samplings of which Cal liked to bring home.

Sarah lifted Cal's desk top and found the note he'd left for her. Also, a purple plastic pencil box, a math workbook, a spelling dictionary and a worn Sammy Sosa baseball card he used for reading. She lowered the lid when the teacher began talking: about goals, gum chewing, talking out of turn, kindness and civility, the rain forest, lost and found and...

The door behind Sarah opened, letting in voices from the hall and a stout woman in a mocha-brown knit suit. The woman surveyed the room, then squatted beside Sarah, whistling sharply. "Krass!" she hissed. Without even turning to look, Mr. Krass waved the woman away, causing the woman -- Mrs. Krass? -- to slide first her Prada bag and then her sizable body on to, then across, Cal's desk so that she could get at both Mr. Krass and his Palm Pilot, which sat unguarded on little Carrie's little desk.

Mrs. Krass's fat ass stood in front of Sarah like a midsize mountain range. And even though these two people were very, very close to her, Sarah could only make out the words, "Little Dix, Tanzania, and Bedford -- for Thanksgiving!"

Sarah, still taking in the fact and size of the woman's ass rising from her son's desk, realized that her name was being called, repeatedly.

Sarah stood, so she could see beyond Mrs. Krass.

"There you are!" Cal's teacher was perky even at this hour. "You'll be our first Writer in Residence. Tomorrow at ten? Cal

volunteered you. Because you're a professional."

"Tomorrow at ten?" Sarah said doubtfully, as though casting doubt could excuse her.

"We'll see you then!"

#

Philip stood at the school's entrance waiting for Sarah, accepting the compliments and congratulations of near strangers, vaguely familiar fellow parents, and Andy Wagner, whom he'd known since he was five. They shook hands warmly, happy to see each other anyway but also because it confirmed each other's expensive decision to stay in the city after they'd had children even though they both knew first hand that excellent (and free!) education could be had for their children in the North Shore suburb where they had grown up. "They're studying micro-climates in senior kindergarten. Five year olds: I love that." Andy beamed. "Hey, how was Paris? Quite an honor, old man." Andy picked a white dog hair from Philip's jacket.

"Thanks, fabulous," Philip said, looking beyond his friend for Sarah. The moment he saw her, he excused himself and headed straight for her.

"I am not one of Julie's husbands and I am not my shitty brother-in-law."

"Look at what Cal left me: 'Mom, Would you take me to the toy store to buy -- spelled b-y -- something? Love, Cal. P.S. Do you like my desk? It closes this year.'"

"Sarah, you can't drop bombs and hide behind our kids."

She handed him Cal's note as they walked away from school.

"Julie is my best friend and your sister Laura, well, I don't know what happened, we used to be close....The thing is, they're my friends, my points of reference." She lowered her voice and leaned closer to him. "And you seem different since you came home from Paris."

"I am different: I won the Pritzker Prize, I'm being courted by the top firms in the world and the elders of Amsterdam are after me to design a floating city hall. I'm so thrilled with what I've achieved I could bust a gut." He stopped, and turned to Sarah but saw Dirk Fellows approaching. He needed to speak to Dirk but not now. "What's not different is me for you. You're it: you're the beginning and the end."

Sarah caught her breath, and covered her mouth.

"You need new friends."

Sarah thought a moment, dropped her hand from her mouth and broke into a slow, wide grin. "You are a genius."

"Thanks," Philip said, taking her hand so that they'd cross Clark Street without Dirk and his wife. Block 37 had been a nightmare, but worse was being mentioned in the same breath as his brother-in-law.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" Sarah asked as they passed a trattoria so full that people waiting spilled out onto North Avenue. "I know Glenda made something but I don't feel like going home yet."

Philip didn't answer, because he wasn't sure what he wanted

to do. They stood at the wide intersection of North and Wells, waiting for the light to change. When he was a teenager coming into the city for the day with Andy and the rest of his friends this corner had been the best place to buy a baggie of serviceable pot. Down the block had been three -- three! -- different head shops, where they'd buy rolling papers, admire the hand-carved bongos they could never bring home, bum some matches and head east to the beach, where they'd lie in the sand and get very, very stoned.

A movie-location poster blew across the street and wrapped itself against Philip's pant leg, then blew away just as quickly. Sarah pointed up Wells Street to a Mexican restaurant. "How about there? The Wagners go all the time."

"Fine."

They crossed the intersection and stepped inside the restaurant, loud and crowded with long tables of people nearly twenty years younger than Philip. They didn't make him feel old, though, he thought, as he followed the stick-thin hostess to a small booth in the back. They made him feel glad to be finishing out his thirties sitting only with his smart, beautiful, talented wife -- who was still those things even though he was mad at her. Sarah and Philip sat, each looking at the lengthy menus.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that before."

"Me either. Let's -- ugh -- my -- How could you?" He leaned very close. "I love you."

It sounded more like a threat than an endearment.

"You just don't seem like yourself since you came back from

Paris."

Philip sat back and stared at the menu. "Sometime I'll tell you about it but not now."

"So something did happen."

Philip put down the menu. "Not now." The waiter came by and Philip ordered: designer margaritas, masa boats filled with shredded chicken and chips with a sampling of sauces. He turned his attention back to Sarah and her long hair falling in front of her eyes. He tapped his fingers on the table and looked at her puzzling over an entree, pushing the hair back from her face, away from her eyes. Unlike the other night, not everything on this menu looked good. She set down her menu and looked up.

"You know, fifth grade was just right," Philip began. "I finally fit in their desks. They're studying medieval history this year. And Whit's teacher is a docent on the architecture river cruise. He thinks my work is -- get this -- 'cogent'."

"Who doesn't?"

Philip sipped from his drink, which had arrived with the appetizers, and added "loyal" to the list of Sarah's attributes. "I said: not now."

"Did you ask about dating?"

"In fifth grade?"

"I heard it's a problem. Second grade..." Sarah shook her head and moved a masa boat onto her plate. "Krass: can you believe people have that name and then act that way?"

#

On the walk home, Philip let his arm rest easily around Sarah's waist. The dinner out had been a good idea, the third margarita an even better one, despite his back-on-terra-firma-plan to lose, not gain, weight.

"I was thinking we'd cook this weekend since we don't have a babysitter."

Philip nodded. With the weather so clear and the night ending on so pleasant a note, he'd agree to anything, even Julie and her new husband.

"I was thinking we'd invite Julie and her new husband, Alex and her only husband, the Wagners. Lila, or maybe Esme, from my office. And how about Anna, from your office?"

"I think she has a new boyfriend."

"Who else? It's a big table."

"Marty, of course."

"He came by a lot while you were gone."

"Nice of him; I know he's busy with that anthology."

"I guess...he gets grabby when he drinks too much."

Philip wanted to say "don't we all?" but thought better of it.

"I know, don't we all?" Sarah continued. "Marty has no boundaries."

Philip snorted dismissively -- Marty? -- and steered Sarah into a doorway, kissing her, pressing his fingers into the small of her back, holding her close. They were outside the vestibule of his first apartment, a loft carved from an old warehouse on

Wells Street.

"This was a fun place."

"More once you showed up."

"You didn't have girls staying all weekend before then?"

Philip nodded half and half and nudged her back to the sidewalk, towards home. "You were the only one who wanted to do what I did Saturday morning."

"Stay in bed?"

"Exactly," Philip said, remembering that, but also oysters at Burhop's when it had a standup bar, the Art Institute before its exhibits ended in a place to shop, shopping on Clark Street when it was the only place to shop. Oldenburg's bar, the Inland Steel building, Calder's "Flamingo". Philip would take her to the Loop to show her a building and Sarah would point out something he hadn't noticed, or take him inside a building he'd only studied from the outside, where she'd have heard or read about its green-glass mosaics or a neglected Henry Moore. Who wouldn't want to be with a girl who liked what you liked and then showed you more? Who wouldn't want to be married to that girl? To be married to her still?

"So, do we invite Anna or not?"

"I'll find out tomorrow."

