

PROLOGUE

November — December 1988

“Honey, if you have any questions, you can ask me.”

Adam Winter cringed at the suggestion. “Mom,” he implored, avoiding eye contact at all costs. “Not now. I know. About girls...and stuff.”

“It’s natural to be curious. Your dad and I, we’ve never talked to you about this.”

“Okay, well...I should probably get in. I think they might start reading the Torah soon.”

Escaping the nails-on-a-blackboard almost-sex talk was not as hard as he imagined it would be — just a slam of the car door and a wave goodbye. Luckily, Adam was 31 days away from total liberation. Thirty days and twelve hours to be exact. That’s when he was scheduled to take his driver’s test at the DMV. After that, freedom.

Passing his driver’s test would be final hurdle in his effort to be pardoned from life as a dork. The commutation of his sentence had been painless. Within the past few weeks, Adam had said goodbye to coke-bottled glasses, a highway of braces, and an Alfalfa haircut. Thanks in large part to contacts and a salon haircut, Adam had stepped from the world of high school nobodies into high school high society. And his musical talent and sharp-witted humor really blossomed after the recent communiqué by the popular girls that Adam was cute. He’d

survived dorkdom after all. The clumsiness that had plagued Adam melted away, revealing an excellent athlete. He was a shoo-in to be a starter on the varsity baseball team in the spring. During the winter, he was busy as Professor Harold Hill in the school's production of *The Music Man*. Life in his hometown of Minneapolis was falling into place.

Savoring his post-pubescent renaissance, Adam strode into the reception hall of his synagogue. The filtered sunshine through the stained glass windows created bizarre shadowing on the 200 Jewish teenagers from all over the Midwest. The synagogue and the parents called it conclave where, according to the brochure, "Jewish teens gather to experience Judaism together." But really it was a smorgasbord of well-intentioned events all unwittingly designed to foster the attendees' already-raging hormones. Adam's parents were happy because he was hanging out with other Jewish kids for the weekend. Adam was even happier — he was guaranteed to score points with his parents while at the same time throwing himself a cheap yet effective coming-out party.

Adam enthusiastically glad-handed his fellow teens like a politician running for office. Megan Russell was responsible for it all. The day that she gave Adam his first and only hand-job after study hall two weeks earlier gave Adam the confidence to command a room. His first real sexual encounter had gone smoothly. For a rookie, Adam was pleased with his performance. He had joined an elite club of guys whose penises had actually been touched by a female. That beat a letter jacket any day.

He hadn't been in the reception hall for more than five minutes before he met Zoë Rosenberg, a bubbly redhead with mischievous emerald eyes, peach-colored skin, and an enchanting Canadian accent. Through the crowd, Zoë and Adam simultaneously caught each other's elongated stares. They clicked instantly. They went from hello to lightly interlocking their hands in less than an hour. Adam had never felt so drawn to anyone before. Although he couldn't explain it, he wasn't about

to complain. All he knew was that he was determined to spend every minute of the weekend with Zoë.

What made the conclave the ultimate situation for attendees like Adam and Zoë was that the out-of-towners stayed in the homes of those who lived in Minneapolis. With a little maneuvering on the final night, Adam was able to get Zoë transferred to his house. Although Adam never had the opportunity to use it for anything other than watching television, his basement was a potential lair for intimate exploration. A large L-shaped couch sat across the back wall of the windowless wood-paneled basement. A big-screen TV provided just enough light. Although Adam's parents objected to three teenage boys and three teenage girls all sleeping together in one room, there was really no other choice; his sister wasn't about to give up her room. Besides, his parents couldn't put up much of a fight. After all, it was their idea for Adam to attend in the first place.

Then the intercom crackled. "Adam, can you come up here a minute?" At least his father didn't embarrass him in front of every one. "We don't want any heavy petting going on downstairs," Burt Winter warned.

Everyone played their parts — a parent parenting and a kid lying his ass off: "No one's into that kind of stuff," Adam said assuredly. "Some of these kids even keep Kosher."

After the lights first went out in the basement, there was talking, joking, and laughing. The barbs that the guys flung back and forth were really just nervous reactions to being called into duty. Adam had some experience, but the other two had no idea how to kiss — let alone what to do with their hands. Soon the razzing subsided and was replaced by the sounds of groping and grinding.

Adam and Zoë were in their own world, oblivious to everyone else. They both felt each other's heart pounding as they lay pressed together on the couch. It was much different than it had been with Megan Russell. Being with Megan was all about the act. Being with Zoë was special, not some quick high school grope. Zoë's soft skin was so inviting that Adam had to kiss it.

As he flipped her hair out of the way and began to kiss her neck, the sweet smell of her Apple Pectin shampoo engulfed him. Adam couldn't stop at her neck. He had never kissed a girl's breasts before, but it was all he could think about as his fingers ran across her nipples. Like the food taster for a paranoid dictator, he cautiously licked one nipple and then the other.

"Is this okay for you?" Adam asked nervously.

"Yeah," she purred, guiding his mouth back up to hers, where it was met with an intense kiss. "You know, I wouldn't just let anyone do this."

"Good," Adam whispered, as his lips started working down Zoë's neck.

Zoë arched her back and moaned as quietly as she could in a room full of other teens.

Adam was mesmerized. All he wanted to do was hold her even tighter. He was already in uncharted territory, but breasts were one thing, and it was clear that Zoë was giving him the green light to proceed further. Even if he had actually taken his parents up on the offer to "have a sex talk," nothing that could have prepared him for the situation of sheer terror and absolute euphoria in which he found himself. Thankfully the basement was pitch black, so Zoë couldn't see the fear etched on Adam's face. With a deep breath, he repositioned himself on the narrow couch and slipped his right hand inside Zoë's panties. Given the way she purred, he knew he was at least in the ballpark. After about ten minutes, Zoë reciprocated with a hand job. It felt much better than Megan Russell's attempt. His breathing was labored and intense. By the time Zoë and Adam finished, everyone else was sleeping. They remained awake for another hour or so, kissing, touching, and talking, hoping that the morning would never come.

"Have we been up all night?" Zoë wondered.

"I think you dozed off for a few minutes. You were snoring a little bit. It was pretty cute."

"Adam, have you ever been love?"

"I don't know. What does it feel like?"

“This, I think.”

The next morning came too quickly. Neither Zoë nor Adam was ready to be separated, but her youth group was boarding their bus back to Winnipeg. Zoë cried as she boarded the bus. Adam pulled her toward him one last time and kissed her passionately.

“Will you call me the minute you get home?”

“As soon as I walk in the door. I’ll miss you...a lot.”

While he watched Zoë’s bus pull away, he felt a longing he couldn’t quite grasp. What he didn’t know was the long drought he would suffer until he felt that way again.

Jen Savin wasn’t looking forward to her family’s annual Christmas vacation to Miami. Jen, her parents, and two younger brothers always went to Florida on Christmas Eve morning and stayed through New Year’s Day. The thought of donning a bathing suit was terrifying. Jen was disgusted with how she looked, even though rationally she knew she had potential. She had just turned 15. But the combination of her incredible intelligence and shyness actually made her feel like Carrie at the prom. High school was certainly not the time of her life. She couldn’t even get people to call her Jennifer or even Jen. She was just Jenny, the buck-toothed girl with pigtails who only got Valentine’s Day cards because kids were forced to give one to everyone in the class.. She was worse than unpopular — Jen wasn’t even noticed enough to be labeled unpopular. With each academic award received, any hope she had of getting a date seemed to become even more remote. Her parents never realized her anguish because she hid it so well. They figured that as long as Jen was getting straight A’s, she must be happy and well adjusted. Jen could never blow her parents’ dream of draining their savings to send their happy daughter to an Ivy League college by confessing to them how sad she was. Pleasing her

parents was her duty, or so she thought.

Unlike other teenage girls, Jen buried herself in books — mostly ones about influential American political figures. Her father Gerald, an undersecretary with the U.S. State Department, had passed his thirst for politics to her. It was one of the few things she genuinely enjoyed, and it wasn't just to please her parents. She wanted more, though, and dreamed of the day when a boy would want to kiss her. But every time she looked in the mirror, she couldn't imagine when it would happen. *Teen Beat* had tons of articles about how smart, shy, sexually inexperienced girls should approach a guy. But even the wisdom of *Teen Beat* couldn't help Jen.

As her brothers played football on the beach, Jen sat on a chaise lounge reading a biography on President Johnson. A large t-shirt covered the bathing suit she was afraid to reveal. She was taken aback when the girl next to her invaded her space and just started gabbing.

"I bet that book attracts all the cute boys," the strange redhead teased. "Come on, let's really try to meet some guys. You're on vacation, right?"

Within minutes, Zoë had Jen giggling, as she pointed out the bulges in the boys' bathing suits, especially the foreigners in the teeny Speedos. Zoë and Jen traded family vacation war stories. They both agreed that being locked in a room with your siblings and forced to wear a bathing suit in front of your family for a week was not their idea of a vacation.

When Zoë suggested they find some real boys, Jen became timid. She told Zoë that she had only been kissed once before — playing "two minutes in the closet" at someone's party in the sixth grade.

"Guys are morons, Jen. There's no need to be afraid of them," Zoë expertly advised. "The problem with most girls is that they spend all their time trying to get some guy to notice them. The key is to make them come to you."

A few nights later, Zoë and Jen met two 17-year-old guys at the hotel's game room. Within minutes, Zoë had the two base-

ball-capped hormone-ragers eating out of her hand. Zoë gently worked Jen into the fold. After standing around the Pac Man machine for about an hour, one of the guys, Kurt, suggested that the four adjourn to the beach. Jen didn't think that was such a good idea, but before she could voice any objection, Zoë, Kurt, and Jake were headed outside. For once, Jen threw caution to the wind and followed.

Kurt and Jake thought that being with girls on a hotel beach at night meant guaranteed action. Kurt was really into Jen, but Zoë had to practically force Jen to sit alone with him. Zoë kept a watchful eye on Jen, even as she and Jake moved further down the beach.

About a half hour later, Jen emerged from the darkness, grabbed Zoë's hand, and raced up the wooden steps to the hotel's well-lit pool area.

"He called me sexy," Jen beamed. "Do you think it's bad that I let him feel my boobs?"

"That's how it usually works, sweetie."

"It was only over my shirt, anyway."

CHAPTER 1

November 2004

“Is there any spinach dip left in the bread bowl?” Tracie Watson called out to no one in particular. Hearing no response, she came from the kitchen to check the buffet of assorted fattening foods and desserts mounted on top of the dining room table. Her silky brown hair glistened under the track lighting as it swept across her back. Satisfied that the bread bowl was sufficiently full, Tracie made a quick sweep of the room with the captivating green eyes that had made her the most lusted-after girl at Wayzata High School ten years earlier. She picked up a chicken wing, carefully removing the skin before nibbling on it — one of many ritualistic inconveniences she endured in order to maintain her sleek, waif-like body.

Unlike Tracie, most of her guests were clueless as to the fat content of chicken skin and had all but given up trying to save their physiques. They were in a nebulous state of stagnation, between 27 and 32 — waiting for something to happen. The problem was that none of them would be able to recognize the “something” if it were right in front of them. Most were married, engaged, or in serious relationships. The need to look good had been replaced by other concerns: mortgages, retirement plans, job security, and kids. Some had chosen such an existence, while others had had it thrust upon them.

Tracie had been married to Tony since two weeks after her

twentieth birthday. And while her figure was still pristine, she had let herself go in other ways. There were so many things she'd wanted to do with her life — study in Venice, work in advertising in New York City, get her master's degree. All of her dreams were collecting dust.

Lost in thought, she didn't notice the arm reaching around her waist to grab a hunk of cheese. "Excuse me," a rich, baritone voice said, blasting Tracie back to the party.

With a mouth full of cheese, the medium-built stranger with neatly trimmed, slicked jet black hair, and a weekend's worth of stubble on his face, smiled and choked out, "I'm Adam Winter."

"Hi, I'm Tracie Watson," she said, extending her hand forward, grabbing Adam's just as he finished wiping it on a cocktail napkin. "Are you a friend of Tony's from work?"

"Who's Tony?"

"My husband."

"Oh, the guy whose birthday it is. Actually, I'm here with my buddy, Rob. I think he works with your husband."

"How did you know that it was Tony's birthday?" Tracie asked.

"If it weren't for all of those critical thinking skills I learned in law school, I would have never deduced from the numerous 'Happy 30th' banners draped around this place that it was someone's birthday," Adam smirked.

"You don't look like a lawyer."

"Thanks."

"All the lawyers in this neighborhood wear khakis and Polo shirts when they try to look casual and hip," Tracie looked Adam over. "You're over-the-edge hip in this suburb."

"I guess it doesn't take much to be hip around here."

Tracie laughed. "What's cute, nice guy like you doing at a party like this?" she asked.

"I came for the spinach dip. And Rob sort of sold this party a bit differently." Adam said.

"What do you mean?"

"I was given the impression that there would be a little more

partying and some single women.”

“Well, this is the suburbs. This is what we do.”

“Is this really what happens? Am I destined for a life of sedate parties with mounds of artichoke dip?” Adam joked good-naturedly.

“You’re funny,” Tracie laughed. “Would you like a drink? I have beer, vodka, scotch, and...”

“How about a vodka and whatever kind of mix you have?”

“You got it,” she said, before returning to the kitchen.

Adam continued to pick at the bread bowl, the homemade quesadillas, and the thawed, chewy shrimp attractively placed on the table. Busily fixing a plate for himself, he hoped he didn’t look as stupid and out of place as he felt. There wasn’t anyone to talk to. Rob was busy talking about work with his work friends, leaving Adam to fend for himself.

“Here you go,” Tracie said, handing Adam the mixed drink. “I hope you like cranberry juice...Excuse me,” Tracie said as her husband summoned her.

Rob finally checked in with Adam, draping his arm around him. “Sorry about this, but you know...it’s that work thing. I swear we’ll be out of here in a half hour.”

“That’s great, but your best friend has been left alone at a couples-only birthday party.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to come here by myself. I’ll make it up to you,” Rob promised. “After we leave, I’ll buy the drinks all night.”

“That’s the least you’re going to do. Look around, Rob. Look at these fucking people. Can they really be so content in this mundane bullshit?” Adam whispered.

“I think it’s good to see this. Someday you’ll be sitting at some party like this, talking about your new mini-van and little Joey’s tee-ball game.”

“The sad thing is that I sort of hope I am. But, Jesus, I’m a girlfriend, an engagement, a wedding, and a dog away from even thinking about kids, and —”

“Say, do you know this chick who’s about to descend on us?”

Rob interrupted, nodding his head toward the charging female with the fake tan and teased mocha hair.

Before Adam could answer, the tacky woman was in his face. “Adam!” she squealed nostalgically.

He swallowed hard. “Hi, how are you? It’s been a long time,” Adam grimaced, but as sincerely as possible.

Rob couldn’t resist capitalizing on Adam’s painful encounter. “Hi, I’m Rob Burton,” he said, getting close enough to be overwhelmed by the woman’s cheaply sweet perfume.

“I’m Megan Russell. I’ve known Adam since sophomore year in high school,” she said to Rob without ever taking her eyes off Adam. “You remember, don’t you?”

“Sure. It was...uh...um...”

“Student council. Remember what we did behind the auditorium?”

“Oh yeah, I remember,” Adam said with a stiff grin.

“I’m sure surprised, but happy to see you here,” she gushed.

“Me, too,” he choked out.

“I’ll let you guys catch up. I’m going to get another drink,” Rob said snidely, leaving Adam to fend off lonely, desperate Megan.

“Just a sec, I’m coming,” Adam called out in vain. But Megan had trapped him.

“You look great,” she purred. “What do you do these days?”

“I’m a lawyer. And you?”

“I sell copiers.”

“Great. Great,” he sighed, thinking of an excuse to get away. “So, what’s your connection here?”

“My girlfriend works with these people.” Close enough to notice Megan’s sunken, glassy brown eyes and the dark circles under them, he attempted to back away. But she reached out and clutched his arm. “You’re not leaving yet, are you?” she asked with an annoying, animated frown.

“I have to get Rob because we’re meeting some friends downtown soon. But, wow, it was really nice seeing you again,” Adam said politely, as he made a beeline toward the portion of

the white Formica kitchen counter masquerading as the bar.

Rob could hardly control his glee. “I never thought I’d actually ever meet the infamous Megan ‘scratch-the-shaft’ Russell. That was awesome! Are you going to meet her later for a little nightcap?” Rob sneered with delight.

“Fuck you, Rob. By the way, have you noticed that I’m the only one here drinking?”

“Obviously, you don’t go to too many of these parties. Rule number one: Everyone will think you’re an alcoholic if you have a beer. Rule number two: If you must have a drink, by all means don’t get fucked up. These people have outgrown the notion that having a few drinks is okay.”

“Like I care what anyone here thinks,” Adam said defiantly.

“It’s not what they think of you that matters, it’s how they can damage your reputation. You have a few beers and next thing you know, you’ll hear that you have a drinking problem.”

“Here’s the \$64,000 question, Rob — why the hell are we here?”

“Well, you’re here because these types of parties are too depressing to attend alone. I’m here because Tony and I work together and even though we have nothing in common, we’re required to fake it. That’s corporate America.”

“Oh my, here comes the birthday cake,” Adam sighed, as Tracie dutifully paraded the cake into the living room.

“That’s a good sign.” Rob’s eyes followed the cake’s migration toward the center of the living room.

“Why?”

“Because the party will begin to clear out within minutes after the official birthday celebration is concluded. We can leave then with our reputations intact.”

The guests were fixated on Tony’s store-decorated birthday cake. It momentarily diverted their attention, serving as a reprieve from the small talk.

“Who are those two guys standing over there by the kitchen?” one woman whispered to Megan.

“The dreamy, dark-haired one is Adam Winter,” Megan said

affectionately.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“He’d like to be, but he’s playing games. He wants me to chase him.”

“Who’s the shorter guy next to him?”

“That’s his friend, Rob something or other.”

“He’s got a great nose.”

“A little too bony for me,” Megan critiqued.

“Oh, not for me. It’s very stately. I love the way it comes to that little point.”

“Why don’t you go and introduce yourself?” Megan suggested.

“I think my fiancé might be just a little bit upset,” the woman said, flashing a gum-exposing grin and an even bigger engagement ring, proving that Mr. Just-Ok can become Mr. Might-Be-The-One with a large enough diamond.

Adam and Rob felt safe near the drinks. Since no one else was drinking, the makeshift bar served as a welcomed buffer between them and the rest of the party. Leaning against the wall made it easy to see people coming in and out of the kitchen. Throughout the people-watching, Rob continually glanced at his watch. Finally, he announced, “We can go. We’ve done our time.”

“Great,” Adam said, sucking the remaining vodka off the ice cubes in his glass. “I’ll get our coats.”

Adam searched for the room that was being used to stack all the coats. “Wrong room,” whispered a barely audible female voice behind him.

Startled, he turned around to find Tracie practically on top of him. “Sorry I’m whispering, but the baby’s sleeping.”

“That’s okay. Just point me to where I can find the coats. I’ll be quiet, I promise,” Adam said, trying to lighten the mood, which all of the sudden seemed so tense.

“Do you have a card?”

“A business card?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh...ummm...yeah, I guess.”

“Are you sure?” Adam asked, as he stared into Tracie’s eyes.

“I might want to give you a call sometime . . .okay?” Tracie meekly muttered.

“I’ll help you in any way I can,” Adam said.

“I could already tell that about you. Don’t say anything to your friend. Okay?”

“Attorney-client privilege,” Adam whispered reassuringly as he pressed his forefinger against his lips.

Leaving the toasty, cookie-cutter home, Adam blurted out, “God, it’s fucking cold out here!” as the bitter November wind pummeled their faces. “What do you want to do?” he asked, pulling his parka as far over his ears as he could.

“Want to hit some bars?” Rob asked unenthusiastically.

Before Adam could answer, a female voice shrieking his name sliced through the dark, winter night.

“God dammit,” Adam muttered, while Rob quickly scrambled to his car, leaving Adam in the middle of the street, waiting to be attacked.

“Here,” Megan panted, barely able to breathe from the cold.

“Did this fall out of my jacket?” he wondered, staring at a piece of paper.

“No, silly, it’s my phone number. Call me sometime,” she smiled while braving the below-zero temperature without a coat.

“Great...sure,” he said, stuffing the number into one of the pockets in his parka. “You should really go inside. You must be freezing.”

“You’re worth it,” Megan called out, skipping back into the house.

CHAPTER 2

December 2004

As Adam stared down Cyrus Moody and his team of overpriced, stuffed-shirt lawyers, he wondered if any of them would end up doing something crazy on New Year's Eve. He couldn't really picture it. He could only see them at the country club, sipping champagne and telling bad jokes.

One of the only good things about the practice of law was getting paid to tell guys like Cy Moody to fuck themselves. Adam's client, Chuck Sager, had made the mistake of trusting Moody and making him a business partner, which was okay until the day when Moody decided it was time for his ne'er-do-well nephew to get a real job. Moody orchestrated a coup at Sager's company, where Moody was now the controlling shareholder. To add insult to injury, when Moody found out that Sager wouldn't go quietly, he released the hounds — well, about 12 of the 140 lawyers who worked at Moody & Moody. Moody's minions filed a 75-page lawsuit against Chuck Sager, accusing him of fraud and breach of contract.

Adam and Chuck Sager had been summoned to Moody & Moody for a settlement conference, but once Adam walked into the room, he knew it was an ambush. On one side of the mammoth mahogany conference room table sat Cy Moody's army of underlings. Adam and Sager were dwarfed by the dozen attorneys and almost twice as many huge, black three-ring

binders filled with accusations and “evidence.”

When Moody nodded, one of the attorneys began the inquisition. “What’s contained in these binders is indisputable proof that Mr. Sager was engaged in racketeering,” one of Moody’s suck-ups rattled off.

Less than a minute into the diatribe, Adam, who was leaning all the way back in one of the firm’s comfortable conference room chairs, sprung forward and asked, “Are you trying to intimidate us? Racketeering? So a dispute about pushing a guy out of a company he founded is now the same as a mob case? Has this ridiculous tactic actually worked before?”

“There are some serious issues here, Mr. Winter,” asserted another one of the scoundrels-in-training.

“Well, the way I see it, boys, your master down at the end of the table, Mr. Moody, needs 12 of you to do his dirty work. What that tells me is that Mr. Moody’s best weapon in this case is his money and power, which means he has a shit case. Now, you want to act tough? Then let’s put away the neat folders you have, move this table, and get down to some real business.”

Moody was furious. Each of his million age spots seemed ready to explode. “Listen, punk, I’ll bury you!”

“Do you think I give a shit about you or your money? I don’t. It’s about time someone taught you a fucking lesson.”

“This meeting is over!” Moody announced to his minions, who simultaneously stood up and marched out of the room behind him.

Adam yelled down the hallway, “Cy, did they have the rules of ethics around when you started practicing? If they didn’t, don’t worry. I’ll teach ‘em to you as I’m showing ‘em up your ass before this case is over!”

Moody was a jerk. He’d probably be out for Adam now, but in that moment Adam felt great unleashing on him.

Sager was in shock. “I’ve never seen anyone stand up to him before,” he said.

“That guy fucked you out of your business. Now I’m going to teach you how to fight back.”

On the drive back to his office, Adam felt himself falling apart. He was in his fifth year of spending every minute of the day dealing with other people's problems and listening to them complain. He had no girlfriend and a social circle that was growing only because some of his friends were getting divorced.

His near-brawl with the 80-year-old Moody only signified to Adam that he was living the wrong kind of existence. What the hell was he doing? Is this what life was going to be like? Spending his prime dealing with rich assholes all fighting over money? Then again, rich assholes like Moody were helping Adam come close to making him a junior partner at Kaplan, Rubens & Squire. Wondering how to find the right existence was a luxury reserved for the five-minute mini-fantasy he lived each time he bought a lottery ticket. That's when he would dream about how his life would be different if he had millions in the bank and was able to pursue something he really loved

Dragging his painfully heavy briefcase into his building, Adam knew he was meant to do something else, but what and how to get there escaped him. As he entered the elevator in the office tower that was home to KR&S, he took a good look at himself in the mirrored paneling. Just another guy in a suit putting in time in some office. Carrying around a briefcase filled with someone else's problems.

His secretary, Felicia, motioned him to her cubicle while she was on the phone. "My psychic is telling me all about you," she whispered as her hand covered the receiver. "She says you're in a state of Saturn Return."

Adam would have asked her what she meant, but Felicia was too engrossed in her conversation with her phone psychic, Tessa McCloud. Adam went to his office and let Felicia do her thing. She was a good secretary, so he overlooked the abundant amount of time she spent consulting with Tessa.

Felicia bounced into Adam's office and flashed her engagement ring. "Tessa said Jerry would come back, and he did. If she says you're in Saturn Return, you should listen to her."

The great thing about Felicia's saga with her on-again, off-

again fiancé, Jerry, was that it always made Adam feel so much better about his personal life. Felicia had met Jerry, a rich young millionaire about a year earlier. But several months after their engagement, he joined a cult, whose leader told Felicia's fiancé that he should call off the marriage and give the money he was going to spend on the wedding to the cult — which is exactly what he did. Through it all, Tessa was there for Felicia at \$1.95 per minute. When Jerry finally snapped out of it and came back to Felicia, she gave all the credit to Tessa.

Now that her own problems were solved, it seemed that Felicia had asked Tessa about Adam. “I know you don't believe in this stuff, but Tessa has you pegged. Do you really hate law that much?” she asked.

“What?”

“She says that's the cause of your Saturn Return.”

“What's my Saturn Return?”

“It's a three-year astrological state that occurs every 28 to 31 years when Saturn returns to its original position in the natal chart. People experiencing a Saturn Return feel lost, stymied, or in such terrible flux that their lives seem out of control,” Felicia said, reading off the notes she took during her conversation with Tessa. “Saturn is associated with some pretty tough stuff — discipline, caution, wisdom gained through hard work, sorrow, loneliness, depression, fear, and inadequacy.”

“So what does this have to do with me?”

“Old world astrologers called Saturn ‘Great Malefic,’ meaning ill-willed. But Tessa calls Saturn the Great Teacher because it helps us come to grips with our deepest fears, and if we face these fears head-on, we emerge from this period of life stronger and more enlightened.”

“Come on, Felicia. How does anyone know whether I'm experiencing this ‘Saturn Return?’” Adam asked skeptically.

“Well, Tessa could read your aura when I described you to her. Tessa says that Saturn's major influence in one's lifetime occurs about every 29 years and lasts for about three years. That puts you in it. She also says that you know where you want to

be, but you don't know how to get there. Is that true?"

"No...no...I'm about to be a junior partner here."

"How about the law? Tessa says you hate it. Is that true? Don't you like it here?"

"Okay...we're done with this ridiculous topic. Please let me get back to work," Adam begged.

"I knew it! Tessa was so right about you," Felicia teased. "See, you are in it. Saturn Return is the end of a major life cycle and the beginning of great re-evaluation, changes and endings. She says that you must use this time to reappraise your life, whether it be in relationships, career, residence, or family."

"Well, great. Did Tessa tell you what kind of New Year's Eve I'd be having? Because if I don't stop listening to you and make some plans, I'm going to be sitting on my ass in the middle of my Saturn Return, with nothing to do except watch Dick Clark and that fucking ball of lights."

"Well, Mr. Naysayer, all I can tell you is that Tessa says you need to relax and learn to expand your perspective and brace yourself for enforced changes, possible endings, and ongoing challenges and crises. Then make way for a time of new opportunities, new realizations, solidification and strengthening of foundations, new beginnings, and maturity."

"Felicia, why is it that you can't remember half the stuff I ask you to do, but you can remember every damn word that woman tells you?"

"Maybe 'cause I pay her by the minute. If you do the same, I promise to remember everything." Felicia marched out of Adam's office, her psychic notes tightly pressed against her chest.

Adam had little time to ponder his astrological fate. There was a Tracie Watson on the phone. Her name was familiar, but Adam was unable to place her.

"Remember me?" Tracie asked.

"Sure, from the...ah...ah," Adam stumbled.

"My husband's birthday party. You said I could call."

"I'm sorry, Tracie. It's been a long day. What can I do for

you?”

“I need help,” she said in a quivering voice. “Tony has hit me a few times recently in front of our son. He’s been verbally abusing me for almost a year. I’m scared.” The turmoil in Tracie’s voice radiated through the phone. “He won’t get counseling and is threatening that if I leave him, I’ll never see Willem again,” she sobbed.

“Just take a deep breath,” Adam said gently. “I’m mostly a corporate lawyer, but I’ve handled a few divorces,” Adam explained. “What can I do to help?”

“I don’t know. I can’t live with him anymore. Willem is three. He can’t be exposed to this. My son is my life,” Tracie bawled uncontrollably.

“Tracie, I’ll help you,” Adam said in a comforting voice.

“But Tony controls all the money. I can’t get my hands on any of it to pay you,” she said in the most desperate tone Adam had ever heard.

“We’ll worry about the money part later,” Adam reassured her, even though he knew that KR&S would dump a client at the courthouse steps for being a day late on a fee payment. Flipping through his calendar, he said, “Come in tomorrow at four. We’ll figure things out then. Just don’t say anything to him, and don’t worry. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I promise. See you then.” He hung up the phone.

For all the disdain Adam had for the law and the legal system, he didn’t have enough to refuse to help one of the few people he had met who really needed a good lawyer. The trembling voice of a broken, scared woman was something Adam could never turn his back on. Tracie really needed him.

Jen Savin swallowed hard as she picked Mandy Lehman’s shower gift off the front seat of her Taurus. Mandy was the last of Jen’s friends to get married. The era of having a cohort to

accompany her down the messy path of single life was over. Trudging up the slush-laden steps to the monstrous Tudor manor that the Lehmans called home, all Jen could think of was how she was left to do it alone. The final crutch had been swiped almost without warning. Mandy met Tray while fighting with him over the last copy of *Sleepless in Seattle* one Friday night at the video store. Eight months later, Jen was being fitted for a bridesmaid's dress. *What a way to spend a Sunday afternoon*, Jen thought as she entered the house.

Mustering up all the courage she had, she moved from the foyer to the massive living room. With all the chatting going on at the grown-up tea party, no one noticed that she had arrived. The sun-filled parlor was loaded with dried flowers and a gaggle of women in their late twenties and early thirties daintily seated on furniture that had a never-been-used look. It wasn't Jen's crowd. Even though she had known most of the women since Jewish youth group, they weren't close friends. Mandy was the bridge between Jen and the rest of them. Mandy and Jen had been friends long before Mandy's father sold his patent for an automatic teller machine and became filthy rich. Even after Mandy moved to a private school the summer before tenth grade, she and Jen remained close. Remaining friends with Mandy in high school meant putting up with Mandy's new friends. It was tolerable.

Jen's family was middle class — on the higher end, but not quite upper. In high school, while Mandy and her friends gossiped on their own phones, Jen worked 25 hours a week at Baskin Robbins. With her parents' help and a few academic scholarships, Jen was able to go to Yale. None of the shower guests ever had to worry about much. Affluence and pampering prepared them for lives of more affluence and more pampering. Jen had worked excruciatingly hard to level the playing field.

After the shower, none of that would really matter any more. Jen had accepted a job as a political science professor at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, giving up her position

as the legislative director for a powerful U.S. Senator. In two days she'd be living in Minneapolis — alone, but rescued from Bethesda's gossipy Jewish community. Who she dated or didn't date, as was more often the case, wouldn't be discussed anymore. She was about to achieve *persona non-grata* status, and she loved it.

Jen quietly nodded hello to everyone as she took a seat at the end of one of the couches. The gift opening had begun. It was a ritual that could not be disrupted. "Hi, Jen!" Mandy exclaimed between tearing open professionally wrapped boxes. The finely dressed attendees mischievously squealed as Mandy pulled slinky lingerie from a box. The plain white silk shirt and black pants that Jen wore were no match for the designer labels that garnished each garment worn by the others. Their nails glowed like freshly waxed cars. Jen's were well groomed, but otherwise nondescript. The jewelry worn by the others sparkled. Jen wore only a watch and a thin silver bracelet with a small locket attached to it. The locket was a nostalgic reminder of what Jen wanted. On the last day of sixth grade, Brad Swanson gave it to her right before their awkward first kiss during the "two minutes in the closet" fiasco. He was the last guy who had been really crazy about her.

Beneath the stiff-fitting clothes and conservative light brown bob that flipped out at the bottom was a natural beauty. The freckles that once adorned her face had melded together and formed a rich, warm complexion. Her shapely body screamed to be noticed, but because she didn't, no one else did either. Her infectious smile and soothing chocolate brown eyes had yet to be really appreciated and cherished by a man.

After the gift flurry, a small cluster of Mandy's guests huddled around her and admired the ring as she dangled it in front of them. Until her wedding day, it was socially permissible for Mandy to conduct such blatant teasing. Gushing with relief that her struggle to find love was over, Mandy spewed her good fortune on her friends still searching for some. Jen was jealous and she hated herself for it. Mandy deserved to be

happy. She had waited her turn. Patience and dogged persistence had paid off. Finding a husband had been Mandy's part-time job since the first day of her freshman year at Tulane. It had actually worked out much better than her real job as a nursery school teacher. From the dumb luck of being lonely at a video store, Mandy met a rich proctologist who swept her off her feet and had her living in the suburbs and mingling at the country club practically before the video even needed to be returned.

It wasn't that Jen wished she could switch places with Mandy; she didn't. After the hours they had spent trolling through the bars in Adams Morgan searching for their dream men and wondering why love was so elusive, Mandy had stumbled upon a guy who wasn't quite the dream man she had fantasized about, but she fell head-over-heels in love nonetheless. It wasn't fair, but Jen was dealing with it. She did have good things happening in her life; however, she was willing to trade some of them for being part of one of those happy couples she always saw in their sweats, grocery shopping on Sundays. Mandy was now one of them.

Jen filled a small plate with the delicate finger foods and fruit and attempted to make small talk with some of the girls she saw only a few times year. Despite her indifference toward most of Mandy's friends, it was still fun to get together and find out who was doing what, who was engaged or about to be engaged, and who was having kids. Rachel Marcus was still trying to lose the 30 pounds she had gained before her three-year old was born. Amy Kane had just been promoted to a buyer at Saks, and Gail Mandel was three days away from being officially divorced. Talking to Gail always made being single so much better. Gail still had the same bitter disposition, but sported a new nose.

"I heard your news. Congrats," Gail squealed like she cared. "Maybe there'll be some cute guys up there. It'll be cold, so you better find one quickly."

"Being an associate professor should keep me pretty busy at first."

“What do you teach?”

“Political science.”

“Oh,” Gail responded, hoping not to hear any more.

That was fine with Jen, since she didn’t enjoy discussing it outside an academic setting. Besides, Gail and Jen hadn’t had anything to really talk about since tenth grade, when their interests diverged dramatically. Jen discovered scholarships and academics while Gail discovered that boys pay a lot of attention to girls who put out. So when they did see each other the conversations were always stiff until they reverted back to high school. Thank God for the past — it was resuscitating another friendship.

As far as wedding showers go, Mandy’s was enjoyable. Getting together with the girls was fun for everyone, but Jen derived a little extra pleasure from it. After years of not quite fitting in, she was now the one who everyone admired — bold, intelligent, and free to focus on herself. She didn’t quite see herself the same way, but she knew they all did. Jen wasn’t proud of herself for needing to feel superior in order to face the fact that a wedding shower for her had no chance of taking place before Hillary would be a candidate for president.

Jen still had not even taped the packing boxes. Thinking about the ordeal of moving made her start to panic. Mandy saw Jen preparing to leave. She rushed over and hugged Jen tightly.

“I’m going to see you before you move, right?”

“Of course...God, I’m so nervous about going,” Jen confessed. “The whole thing — new city, new job, new people... scares me. Starting over at 31 — it’s crazy.”

“You’re so wrong. What do you really have going on here? In D.C., you’re just another cute girl working in politics. How many brilliant and sexy political science professors do you think there are in Minneapolis?”

“What if I want this to be my life? I might miss all of this,” Jen said reflectively.

“You’re not going to miss a thing,” Mandy reassured her. “Go and live your life. Find whatever it is you’re looking for —

whether it's a guy, a job, or a passion. My life wouldn't make you happy. I love it, but I'm not you. I'll never be an academic commodity like you. I'll never have schools fighting over me. I'll never consult powerful politicians. That's you. Your brains have put you in a position to blossom into whoever you want to be."

Sometimes Mandy made a lot of sense.

Like just about every other single person he knew, Adam dreaded New Year's Eve — the one holiday that is all about anticipation and new beginnings. The expectations for the night never lived up to their billing. Adam had spent an inordinate number of New Year's Eves with the wrong girl at a romantic restaurant with an expensive bottle of champagne. The result was always the same — mediocre sex and a crushing hangover. Somehow, puking while the girl he wished was someone else tried to mother him always seemed like such a bad omen on New Year's Day.

By the time Rob and Adam arrived at Bellbottoms, Minneapolis's only authentic 70's disco, the place was packed. Sweaty revelers bumped and grinded with each other as Donna Summer, The Emotions, and the Village People vibrated the club. Rob was drinking scotch like it was iced tea. He required excessive amounts of alcohol to unravel from his shell. With the exception of spring break during his junior year of college, Rob had never left a bar with anyone who'd sleep with him. He'd even had trouble getting laid during his marriage. It was one of those marriages where the counseling starts even before the engagement. Yet the guy somehow claimed to be an expert on women. Both Adam and Rob spent the night checking out the scene and trying not to think about how another shitty New Year's was about to come and go. As the clock struck midnight and confetti sprinkled onto the dance floor, those barely old

enough to drink partied and celebrated, not knowing that Saturn Return was lurking.

The new year brought with it scores of resolutions, most of which would die quick but painless deaths before the first snow-fall of the year — with one exception. Adam's parents, Burt and Sandi, were determined to make 2005 the year that Adam found a nice Jewish girl. They were anxious to retire and buy a condo in Boca Raton with extra rooms for their grandchildren. While lying on the couch watching the Rose Bowl, Adam received a call from his mother.

"Hi, honey. Happy New Year."

"Thanks, mom. Can I call you back after the game?"

"Sure...are you seeing anyone special?"

"Mom, I'm trying to watch the game here. Why?"

"Last night we were at a party and I ran into Lois Weiss. We went to high school together. Anyway, Lois has a daughter who just moved back to town. She's 27 and works for an environmental non-profit group. She sounds darling."

"Well, is she cute?"

"According to her, mother she is."

"Mom, don't you think that opinion is just a bit biased?"

Adam heard his dad pick up the phone to continue the ambush. "Come on, Adam. What the hell? Go out with her. You don't want to end up being the oldest dad at the Little League games, do you?"

"Okay, okay, Jesus Christ, you win," Adam surrendered. "Give me her number," he said, scribbling it as quickly as his mother told it to him.

"We'd like to be able to dance the Hora at our own child's wedding before we're both in the nursing home." Burt's final shot.

The first day of the year had slipped away, and Adam had nothing to show for it. And the evening left few options. Adam unraveled the crumpled napkin on which he had written Amy Weiss's phone number. At least he was going through the motions for his parents. He didn't feel like talking to her and

was thrilled when the voicemail clicked on.

Then came the breakdown — the grief-induced booty call. Adam scrolled through his caller ID and found Megan’s number. She had called several times since they had run into each other a few months back. Each time, Adam had a great excuse as to why he was busy. Megan was annoying, but sexy. And, Adam was lonely. Once he slept with her the phone calls, crying and pleading, would begin.

His sexual soul was a tortured one. He only had sex occasionally, but every once in a while there would be a hot streak, making Adam feel like a squirrel, gathering everything he could before the barren winter. Consistently good and spiritually gratifying sex had always alluded him. But it was cold outside; he had been alone in his house all day, and he just wanted some simple female companionship.

Much to Adam’s surprise, Megan was home and was willing to drive in below-zero weather to hang out with him. She arrived 45 minutes later and smelled freshly showered. The conversation was the typical babble of two people who haven’t had sex yet but know they are going to that night. Fifteen minutes into playing “Where are they now?” about their high school classmates, Megan pulled out a bottle of strawberry flavored massage oil and said, “Do you like massages?”

Adam loved it, but was starting to feel guilty. “Listen, Megan. I’m really not looking to get involved right now. Don’t get me wrong, you are beautiful and I’d love to have sex with you, but I can’t tell you I’d be interested in anything else — at least not right now. I feel something is about to happen and I didn’t want any misconceptions.”

“Just take off your shirt and lie on your stomach,” Megan ordered.

Adam had said what he needed to say. All his cards were on the table. He took off his shirt and prepared to enjoy the evening. After having sex twice, Megan forced Adam to cuddle with her by sticking to his side and draping an arm around him. Soon she was sleeping. A naked woman who adored Adam was

pressed against him, but all Adam felt was alone. He stroked her hair, pretending he was lying next to the woman he loved.

Where are you? Who are you? Adam thought to himself. *I know this isn't as good as it gets. God, if she's out there, please let me meet her.*

A tear escaped from Adam's left eye. Wondering if real love is out there can hurt as much as losing it once you've found it.

CHAPTER 3

January - February 2005

Adam's 2004 ended with a \$25,000 bonus from KR&S. No matter what anyone said, being unfulfilled and unsatisfied was better with money than it was without it. Thanks to Moody, Adam's 2005 was shaping up well, too. The legal war was escalating. Moody and his expanding squadron of lawyers had never battled an attorney with Adam's dislike for the law and the profession. For Moody, it was like fighting a war at night, on foreign terrain, without night-vision goggles. Adam strategically unloaded bombs, catching Moody off-guard. Both parties had various points of law on their side. What Adam had that Moody didn't was the ability to psychologically outmaneuver his opponent.

Back on the home front, Adam was getting ready for something he had not done in awhile — a second date. He had met Keri Ross, the head television buyer for a large retail chain, through Esther Goldberger, Minneapolis's self-proclaimed Yenta the Matchmaker. Esther was one of the happily married people, whose goal it was to fix up every single person she knew. While her track record with Adam was miserable (0 for 12), her matchmaking resume boasted five marriages, two engagements, a gay partnership, and four children in the past six years.

Adam's first date with Keri was nondescript — dinner, a bottle of wine, forced conversation, and an awkward goodnight

kiss. But the absence of anything too disastrous happening on the first date, coupled with their mutual attraction for each other, was enough to make them want to climb in the ring for round two. Keri was tall and olive-skinned, with a sophisticated Mediterranean look. The second date started out well. After a few margaritas at a new Mexican restaurant, Adam was pleased with the ebb and flow of the conversation. Keri seemed receptive and interested. Then the bottom fell out.

"I got this really weird call last night," Keri announced. "A guy was breathing hard and masturbating. I thought it was you."

Astonished, Adam's jaw fell open as he struggled for something to say. Finally, he said, "You think I was jacking off on the phone with you last night and you're here tonight? How badly do you want an enchilada with unlimited chips and salsa?"

As Adam stood up, Keri asked, "Are you mad?"

"No, I just need to get going. I have three old girlfriends I want to stalk before midnight. That's a lot of jacking off to do in the next two hours," he said sarcastically, as he looked at his watch. "Obviously, you realize this date is over, right?"

"Will you at least give me a ride home?"

"Hey, just because I'm a pervert doesn't mean I'm not a gentleman."

After Adam dropped Keri off, he began to think for the first time that it was all payback for the years of reckless dating. From the time he'd gotten rid of the glasses and braces, getting women was never a problem; the problem was finding ones he liked. He had dated and fooled around a lot. But now he was almost 32, and he had never been in love. To make matters worse, there wasn't one woman he had ever dated whom he regretted losing. It sucked.

Was Adam even capable of being in love? The words of the nurse at Georgetown Law School who gave him his weekly allergy shots now seemed prophetic. During law school, Adam had the blessing and the curse of having the prettiest, most popular, smartest law co-ed, Barbie Bettzman, head-over-heals in love with him. When dignitaries came to visit the school,

Barbie was the one the administration picked to escort them. She was model tall, with smartly cut shoulder length blonde hair, sea blue eyes, and perfect white teeth. During one of Adam's visits to the nurse, she asked him when he planned to get engaged to Barbie. When Adam said that she wasn't "it" for him, the nurse snapped, "Maybe you're not capable of being in love."

Had the nurse nailed it? Adam still clung to the hope that the ability to fall in love was within him.

Well, there was Zoë. No one had ever lived up to her. Maybe he was glamorizing an infatuation into something more than it was, but Adam was waiting for that feeling again. Zoë and Adam spent several summers working together at overnight camp but hadn't seen each other in nearly 10 years. Had they lived in the same city, something might have evolved. But she lived in Canada, and he was in Minnesota, and naturally they drifted apart. Adam had no regrets about Zoë. He believed their paths were meant to intersect at a certain time, and that was that. At 15, no one dared to call it love, but now Adam was convinced that it was. He could still recall in excruciating detail the day they met at the synagogue's youth conference.

Adam hadn't talked to Zoë in almost two years. But on February 16th, Adam was surprised and excited to see that he'd received an email from her. The subject line read, "Hot Chick Seeks Jewish Stud." Adam had never double-clicked anything so fast:

Too forward? I think so, too, but I knew you'd love it. Last time I heard from you, you weren't married or anything, so I figured why not? Soul mates show up at the funniest times, don't they? Another kiss like our first one could be happening again soon.

The Saturn Return was over, before he even really knew he was in it! The woman he'd always wanted had just opened the

door. Typing like a man possessed:

When? Last I heard you were married...Did I miss something?

I wish you could see me smiling. I've been searching for that amazing feeling I had being with you. Haven't even gotten in the ballpark. So...is it safe to assume you're available now?

What's next?