

Prologue

As Jane hid under the “Win a Free Pan” display table at her local grocery store, she realized she had hit rock bottom. A heroin addict stealing from his parents? Theresa May’s Brexit deal? Those rock bottoms had nothing on hers. Moments ago, clad in a dirty white tank and oversized gray sweats, she had been picking up frozen pizzas and copious bottles of wine as a fully adult 35-year-old is wont to do. Passing by all of the Stepford families that populated the Los Angeles grocery store, she scoffed all of the perfect 10s in their couture yoga pants with their perfect angel twins, likely named Ethan and Elijah or something similar.

And then she saw him. Her fucking ex-boyfriend Jason who had broken up with her a mere six months before. The nerve of him to be out in public when she looked so un-hot! So she did what any modern-day soldier of love would’ve done and hit the trenches.

At least she’d gotten away with it. He hadn’t seen her dive for cover. She began to exhale a sigh of relief. But then he spoke.

“Jane? I clearly saw you crawl under that table.”

God damnit, she had been sighted by the enemy!

Thinking quickly, she retorted, “No I didn’t.” Hmm. Not an A+, but it was the best she had.

“Jane, can you come out of there?”

Reluctantly, she crawled out of her foxhole.

“Hi,” she managed.

“Is that it? You dove under a table to avoid saying ‘Hi’?”

Obviously. Who would want to be seen like this?

“Jane, are you ok?”

“Hell yeah. I’m killing it.” She was categorically *not* killing it. Save for work, she had barely left her apartment in months.

“Ok. Well, I’ll leave you alone. I just need to pick up a few groceries. It was good to see you.”

As he walked away Jane slumped back under the table, contemplating her next move. She knew one thing. She had to make a move. Any move. She had nowhere to go but up.

A week later, Jane sat at a table in KC’s Bar anxiously twirling her low-quality cabernet. As she awaited her crew-of-two, she was again pinged by thoughts of her grandmother’s birthday party the night before. God, what the fuck was that all about? How the hell was she supposed to follow through on such a bizarre request. Did her grandma realize just how difficult this was going to be?

A familiar voice pulled her out of her head. Christine, dark hair falling messily out of a French twist, smoothed her blazer over her sides and slid into a chair. Jane was thankful her brother-in-law Paul had agreed to watch the kids so Christine could have a rare girls’ night out. Jane knew Chris needed the break more than even she realized. Last night, she had just seemed distant. Very unlike the driven career woman she was, but Jane would get to the bottom of it. Before she had time to dive in, however, the bar door swung open and in walked her best friend. Effortlessly cool, Elle slid off her perfectly tattered leather jacket and grabbed a whiskey from the bar before joining her friends.

“Yo. Sorry I’m late. Traffic was a bitch today,” Elle offered, sliding into the booth. She worked across town at the LGBTQ teen crisis center and kept late hours. She looked off too, even more than Jane would expect after sitting through a long commute. What was happening to Jane’s group? Knowing better than to jump right in, she allowed banalities to ensue as the three caught up on life. With specifics not yet given, Jane would summarize the tone from all three as “everything sucks.”

Not yet ready to dive deep into the undercurrent she was sensing, she turned to Christine. “By the way, what was up with Grandma last night?”

“The painting? She loved that thing.”

“What painting?” Elle asked, trying to catch up.

Jane sipped her vino and said nothing.

“She asked Jane to find that painting from college she gave to Ridgeley.” And there was Christine with the assist.

“What?” sputtered Elle. She and Jane hadn’t met until years after college, but she was well aware of the tale.

“She wants me to find fucking Ridgeley,” Jane said, staring at her friend blankly.

“She wants you to find the *painting*,” Chris corrected.

“Same thing.” Her grandmother’s eightieth birthday was meant to be nothing more than a relaxing event with old people and cake. But after dessert Jane’s father asked Grandma Jeannie if she had any wishes for her upcoming year. Grandma J once again joked that her biggest wish was for her heart to keep pumping and the family offered supportive laughter, as though they hadn’t seen it coming from miles away. Then, her tone turned serious. Zoning in on Jane, she made a request that caused Jane to jump up from her seat: find the painting.

“But like, why?” Jane had shot back.

“That painting meant a lot to me. It actually meant a lot to your grandfather too. We talked about it quite a bit over the years. I’d like to have it.”

Jane reminded her that she didn’t have the painting anymore. It had, in fact, gone to her mortal enemy.

Clearing her throat, stalling to find words Jane would hear, Grandma exhaled. “Your Grandpa once told me that looking at that painting was the first time he got to see the whole you. I agreed. Christine is outgoing and friendly; she shows herself to the world daily. You, however, do not. Your Grandpa loved you two girls more than anything, and I do too. I want to see you, and I haven’t for quite some time. I’d really like for you to find that painting and give it to me. Please.” Sensing some hesitation in Jane, Grandma drove the final nail into the coffin. “Jane, I know it’s a big ask, but I’m eighty. I don’t have many wishes left. Please don’t make me waste any.”

And that was it. Jane was completely fucked. Granted, she had been in a bit of a rut for past, say, few years. She could see the merit in embarking on a Reese Witherspoon-in-the-movie-Wild-like journey to find herself again. But finding Ridgeley? Ew.

“So now I’ve got to figure out how the hell to dig up a woman I’ve tried hard to forget for almost fifteen years.

I can’t believe Grandma is doing this to me. Why didn’t she just ask me to paint a new one? It’d be easier.” Actually, that might’ve been worse. Jane hadn’t painted in years.

“Well I can’t believe I’m 37 and so single,” Elle said, raising her glass to the group. “And dude. I only hang out with you guys. Shit, I need more friends.” Jane knew that, despite her wry outburst, this was a sensitive subject for Elle. Open to both men and women, Elle had been hinting lately that she’d been thinking about settling down, but seemed unwilling to date. Jane suspected a mild case of baby-fever.

“Do you ever hear from Lilly?” Chris asked.

Elle tensed up. “I don’t want to talk about me anymore,” she said, downing the rest of her whiskey. She looked at Chris. “So Jane can’t believe your grandma is an evil genius, I can’t believe I’m so, so single...” She raised one perfect brow and Christine grabbed the proverbial mic.

"I can't believe I'm not sexy anymore. I need to start working out. Also, my marriage is stagnant and empty and I'm possibly not in love with my husband who might be cheating on me. I win."

"Whoa, wait what?" Jane asked. "When did this happen?"

"Paul and I are bored of each other. He's been working late lately. And early. All of the time. And his newest client is this hot new divorcée and I just feel it." Christine fiddled with her glass. "Something's going on. I think."

Jane and Elle exchanged a glance; Paul wasn't the type to cheat. But regardless, Chris was clearly unhappy.

Jane's eyes flashed and she stood up with zest. "Fuck it, you guys. Let's not take this shit lying down! Let's do something about it."

"Like what?" Elle asked.

"Well," Jane started, "Elle, you could start dating." Elle stared back blankly. "I know you've got plenty of experience with hook-up apps but if you want a serious relationship, you have to take matters into your own hands. You have to date differently. And by 'date' I mean actual relationships, not one-night stands."

"Shit," Elle grumbled.

"Because this is L.A. most people are gonna be lame," Jane added empathetically. "They'll, like, eat kale and talk about self-care. Oh, and they'll for sure reference 'The Universe.' I know that drives you crazy. But you need to try anyway. There's got to be at least a few normal people in this city. Download an app or something. And *not* a hook-up app, an actual dating app. And don't sleep with them until at least three dates in. Talk to them first." Elle rolled her eyes, but the gesture did nothing to hide her consideration of the idea. "And date women. I think you connect better with them than men." Jane knew Elle might not be ready for that one, but she had to throw that out there. "I don't know why you feel you need more friends because face it,

we're the shit, but if the date doesn't work out on a romantic level at least you'll be going out and meeting people. Win-fucking-win."

Jane turned her attention to her sister. "And you. If you're bored in your marriage, do something about it. Spice it up. Make yourself feel sexy. You don't need to work out, but if you think it'll make you feel better then go join a gym. With the money you two make, that shouldn't be hard." She ignored Christine shifting uncomfortably. "Do whatever you have to do to re-invest in the relationship. Take a romantic cruise for two. Go on nightly walks on the beach. Sign up for ballroom dance lessons or some cheesy shit. I don't know. I'm probably talking out of my ass," Jane took another sip of alcoholic goodness. "Also, he's not cheating on you!" she practically yelled. "Anyone with eyes can see that."

Her motivational speech was enthusiastic, though Jane realized she might be going a little overboard. What was in these drinks?

"And me. I'm sick of sitting on my ass, wishing things would come to me. They're not going to come to me. Fuck it. I'll go get the painting and take my fucking life back from the bitch who stole it in the first place!" Jane was full blown shouting with excitement. "WHOOO!" She looked at Elle and Chris. Why weren't they cheering?

"I mean, she didn't really..." Christine started.

"Yeah, no one can take your life..." Elle continued.

Jane stopped them. "Oh, shut the fuck up and cheers!"

With that they clinked glasses, committing to taking their lives back in whatever way they could.

Once they figured out how.

CHAPTER ONE

After a long day of passionless work, Jane sat on her couch pondering her first move toward finding the painting. She had succumbed to the fact that she'd have to find her college nemesis; now she needed to figure out how to do it. The hard part was she didn't know the woman's last name. Ridgeley was one of those people that went by one name only, as though she were Cher.

She was so *not* Cher.

Jane was also relatively sure Ridgeley was a made-up first name, because really, who named their kid *Ridgeley*? Thus, Jane really didn't know the woman's first or last name. Great.

She grabbed a notebook, ready to outline a plan, and wrote "Finding Ridgeley" across the top of the first page. Step one was obvious. "Google," she murmured as she wrote. She'd Google the crap out of her. After all, even if Ridgeley was a fake name, she might still be using it for her art.

If a simple internet search didn't pan out, she'd move on to step two. "Facebook." Granted, any Facebook pictures would likely come up in a Google search but it was still worth a shot. Also, even if she couldn't find Ridgeley directly, with Facebook she'd find mutual friends who were sure to know where she was.

Step three. Hmm. If all else failed, go to UCLA and beg the registrar to look her up? Jane crossed that off the list. It probably wouldn't pan out. What would she even say? "Can you look up someone named Ridgeley whose name probably isn't Ridgeley?"

It didn't matter. In this day and age, it was extremely unlikely that finding her would take more than steps one and two.

Proud of herself for making the list, Jane poured herself a glass of celebratory wine and continued on.

She grabbed her laptop and opened her browser. With bated breath, she typed in the word Ridgeley.

The search results were not what she was hoping for. Almost all of them were for Andrew Ridgeley, the other guy from *Wham!* Other than that, she saw a few random apartment complexes with Ridgeley in the name and that was it. Not deterred, she added the word “art” to the search. More Andrew Ridgeley hits. She tried “artist.” Andrew from *Wham!* again.

Well then.

This might be a while.

She went down as deep of a dive as she could, adding various search words to the name but nothing popped up.

With an audible sigh Jane switched gears: Facebook time. Damn, Andrew Ridgeley again. She began to search through friends’ friend lists. Of course, it didn’t help that Jane really hadn’t stayed in touch with many people from college. A few acquaintances had tried to friend her at one point but she rejected them because she didn’t know them well. No need to clog her newsfeed with pictures of food and memes about living, loving, and laughing! Unfortunately, now she couldn’t even remember their names, which made it pretty hard to search for them.

But there *was* one name she remembered well. She had never looked for him before, not even an innocent little internet stalking. Bile rose in her stomach, and she inhaled deeply in attempts to settle it, or at least force it back down. Into the search bar she typed D-A-V-E S-P-E-N-C-E-R. Should she hit enter? Could she stand to see what he’d been up to all these years? Did she really want to know?

Fuck it. She hit enter.

Four or five Dave Spencers filled her screen and as she glanced down the column, there he was. With the same curly hair, a few of them graying, with a few more distinguishing wrinkles staring right back at her, but it was the same Dave. Dave the Heat, she had called him. *Do you know Dave?* Mark Zuckerberg asked her tauntingly through text right under the photo. She wished there were an “it’s complicated” button for that one.

Dave looked so happy. In his profile picture he had a knit beanie on his slightly overgrown curly hair, a skater t-shirt, and an adorable little blonde girl on his shoulders.

“Holy shit, Dave has a daughter!” She was filled with competing emotions: amusement that he’d settled down; anger thinking back to college and how he’d hurt her; sorrow that she’d missed something so important. With the realization that her best friend from a lifetime ago still existed, Jane felt a piece of herself return. She pushed aside the lingering sadness as she admitted she could have collected it at any point she’d wanted.

Jane clicked on the *About* section. Studied at UCLA, which she already knew. And everything else was marked *Ask Me*. Ugh, Dave.

She clicked on the *Friends* section. Damn it Dave! He had a famous person’s level of friends, meaning every time a bot or an unknown bored person in Cambodia friend requested him, he’d said yes. This boded well for the odds of his accepting her friend request, but it made the task of scrolling through his friends to find the elusive Ridgeley much more difficult. Smiling wryly to herself that it couldn’t be that easy, Jane typed in Ridgeley’s name.

It wasn’t that easy.

Jane sighed. Keeping loose ties with other people from college would have been pretty clutch right now. Oh, well. She would pillage Dave’s friend list until she got tired, then she’d woman up and message him.

Scrolling through, she did recognize a couple of people she had forgotten. Matt McKinley? Oh yeah, Dave had been friends with him freshman year. What ever happened to him? Jane clicked on his picture. Married with kids. She went back to Dave’s page. Shea D’Angelo? She’d lived in Dave’s dorm freshman year. What happened to her? *Click*. Married with kids. Ugh. Back to Dave. Fill Damien. Oh my God, Phil *still* spelled his name “Fill”? He had been Dave’s roommate freshman year. *Click*. Married with kids.

This was starting to become a pattern.

Having had enough, Jane scrolled through the rest of Dave's friends list, which was a commitment in and of itself. When Jane finally reached the end, she let out a sigh of relief. None of them was Ridgeley. Fuck. But thank God. But fuck. Not knowing what to do next, she poured herself a hefty glass of red wine and brought her laptop to the couch. "Fuck it," she said as she hit *Request Friend*. With that, she shut her laptop and began watching bullshit TV.

At least she'd taken the first step. Hell yeah.

Elle sat in her apartment feeling lost and not knowing where to begin. She had always considered herself to be quite sexually liberated. She never cared about the standard slut-shaming that went on in college, or the so called "walk of shame" back to her dorm after a night of fun decisions. Her mother had raised her to think for herself and not worry about the judgements of others, so Elle had banged her way through college as much or as little as she felt like, and graduated with plenty of sexual experience under her belt.

Elle also had never had a strong preference for males or females. She enjoyed both for different reasons. Men were a way to have her needs met, but they weren't people to settle down with. In her experience, men lacked emotional intelligence. Whenever she'd want to talk something through men would just want to fix it. Also, they had a very predictable 'can we have a threesome' type response when they found out she was bisexual. Ugh.

Women, on the other hand, not only knew how to work a girl sexually, but they also understood the need for intimacy and emotional connection. A good woman was a best friend, lover and therapist all rolled into one. Yes, Elle usually had better luck with women. At least, until Lilly.

But it still hurt to think about her, so Elle shoved the memories aside.

In order to stop the one-night stands she needed to look for something different. But what? And how? Besides not using hook-up apps, she had no idea how to go about pursuing a relationship.

Lilly had always talked about a book called *The Knowledge*. It was a best-selling self-help book. She'd bought Elle a copy and, after enough pressure from her, Elle had read it, hoping to find something to like about it.

It was utter bullshit.

First of all, it talked about The Universe non-stop: "Be careful of negative thoughts you put out into The Universe. You never know what it will manifest." That kind of hippie, new-age crap. Second, it clearly meant to spread the obvious message that if you focus on what you want, you're more likely to get it. It also offered the misguided yet trite implication that deep-down people knew what they wanted, and that getting what they want would make them happy. Bullshit.

Putting the negativity aside, Elle remembered the book did have one good idea and that was to write out a list of goals and meditate on them. Though she'd skip the meditation part, Elle reasoned that if she created a list of what she wanted in a partner, she could rule people out who didn't meet her needs. Something practical like this might serve her better than following her gut feelings. After all, clearly her gut sucked when it came to dating. She took out a pen and wrote: *Is fun. Wants a relationship.*

There. That wasn't so bad. It's not like Elle was asking for a lot in a partner, after all. Reading over her list, she realized something major was missing. *Wants kids*. Yeah, that was an important one. She was thirty-seven. And her clock was ticking.

Taking a sip of wine, she glanced at her copy of *The Knowledge* and added a final bullet point: *Doesn't talk about The Universe.*

With that, she put the list on the table and downloaded her first dating app.

At Christine's house, things were actually quiet. Cameron and Lucy were finally in bed and Paul was, of course, still at work. She turned on the television and tortured herself with self-comparisons to the actresses on screen. Why did she feel so frumpy lately? Granted, she wasn't her 20-year-old self anymore, but would she feel this way if Paul were spending more time at home? He had a stressful job as a divorce attorney, but his recent time away sure coincided nicely with taking on Angela as a client.

With the TV on as background noise, she also began to scroll through social media. A post by a much younger and extremely attractive co-worker of hers made her smile. Frankie, a young realtor new to her office, had booked a new listing. Good for him! Looking at the picture of him giving a goofy thumbs up, she immediately felt humiliated. Here was a good-looking pup, new to the job and with a zest for life. By comparison she was a wrinkled old dog with excess weight along with other baggage.

What had become of her? Was this how she planned to live her life, giving up on herself and her happiness? Chris shook her head. Her husband's whereabouts may be out of her control but there was one thing she could do to make herself feel better. A few clicks on her phone, and small damage to her credit card later, she downloaded an app and joined her first gym.

Christine tossed and turned in bed that night until Paul crawled in at around eleven.

"Where have you been?" a sleepy Chris asked her potentially cheating husband.

"Work. I told you, things are really crazy right now."

Paul did work hard to provide for his family. Which Chris appreciated, truly. But as Paul settled into bed Chris caught a faint whiff of perfume. "Were you with Angela?" she couldn't help but ask.

Paul sighed, "Yes. Working. She insists on going over every little detail of their assets."

Was that the truth? Or did that sneaky little tart just come up with reasons to get Paul alone? And was he receptive to it? Christine just wasn't sure, but she didn't feel like getting into it this late. So instead of the confrontation she wanted, she rolled over, stuffed down her tears, and tried to get the sleep she needed.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Jane peeled herself out of bed. She considered checking Facebook to see if Dave had accepted her friend request but she was too nervous. She'd allow 48 hours from the time she sent it before she checked again. That way she could go to work, spend a reasonable amount of time freaking out, and then settle in on the couch for either excitement or disappointment.

Jane ploughed her way through her work day at Hudson Solutions, the market research firm where she'd been employed for the last ten years. She serially avoided contact with most co-workers except Todd, the snobby receptionist. He'd make snide remarks about her clothes being inappropriate for a professional environment, and she'd tell him he was the full body version of resting bitch face.

It was their thing.

Toward the end of her day, bored with the content of emails and BuzzFeed, she allowed her mind to wander back in time to the days of college, art, and Dave the Heat, whose very presence knocked the wind out of her and kept her begging for more.

Dave was a college girl's wet dream. He was a poet who played guitar, and his emotions ran so deep he would at times cry at the sight of a beautiful sunset. 35-year-old Jane would laugh him right out of an open-mic night, but 18-year-old Jane fell head over heels in love with him. He "got her" in a way others didn't. He was an English major with a passion for creative writing. He loved chai tea and Kerouac, because of course he did. Dave was the kind of guy one assumed smoked weed, but he didn't because he "didn't want his well of emotions covered by anything impure." Oh, Dave.

The day they met was like something out of one of his poorly-written stories. Jane noticed him first, all that curly hair hidden under a backwards grandpa hat. His starry eyes full of heat, staring at her intently. His swaggering walk, proclaiming his confidence. And the first word this God uttered to her? “Hey.”

“H-hey,” Jane stuttered back.

“You’re the art chick. I dig your style.”

At that, 18-year-old Jane climaxed. (Mentally; come on, it was never that easy.)

And so their friendship began. They’d go to art shows and coffee houses and discuss the deeper things in life, things like if she saw something blue, was it the same blue to him? Jane turned him on to hippie-rock and he introduced her to underground punk.

There were deeper feelings there under the surface but it was complicated. Ok, it wasn’t complicated: Dave had a girlfriend. A pre-law girlfriend in Chicago.

Still, their friendship—platonic on his side, infatuated on hers—continued.

Dave would take her on “discovery walks” every day. They’d wind around campus, looking for over-looked surprises like a piece of gum on a sidewalk in the perfect shape of a diamond, a park bench broken symmetrically down the middle, or a trail of dog footprints that seemed to simply vanish into the beauty of the winter. Jane would invite Dave to the art building where he’d watch her paint, listening to *Diamonds and Rust* by Joan Baez and various Fleetwood Mac songs on repeat. Jane could get lost in her painting for hours. She used it as a vehicle to show her true self to the world, and more importantly, to discover herself. Dave watching her paint was a huge boost to her confidence. But even as he raised her sense of worth something else gnawed at it: a fellow art student named Ridgeley. The ethereal, wistful blonde quickly became Jane’s arch nemesis. When it boiled down to it, Jane couldn’t come up with a good reason to hate her except for one, and it was a big one.

Ridgeley was a better artist than Jane. By a lot.

Ridgeley's paintings were *full* of personal voice and an effortlessness that made Jane green with envy. Less technical than Jane's, they were infused with feelings Jane hadn't experienced, or maybe ones she hadn't dared to access. Ridgeley could condense a moment in time into a few brush strokes so accurately the viewer felt a part of the painting. For this, everyone praised Ridgeley's talent.

And Jane wanted to claw her face off.

She'd often offset her simmering rage with doses of Dave. He was addictive. She had to be near him. But he had a girlfriend that they rarely talked about.

So they continued as they were, Dave blissfully unaware of Jane's romantic feelings.

Jane started drinking chai tea on a daily basis. Dave started wearing glints of silver, like a chain or an earring. They were becoming one, enmeshing themselves so deeply in each other's lives that an invitation extended to one was an implied invite to the other. Jane started to study creative writing while Dave enrolled in a drawing class, one that unfortunately had Ridgeley as the Teacher's Assistant. Ew.

Jane was imploding under the weight of sheer love for Dave. She'd often go running to help dissipate the energy. She found herself short of breath when he'd walk in the room. She'd wake with a jump in the night from the sexual heat of her dreams. But Dave had a girlfriend.

A full six months into their friendship, Jane dipped back in, testing the girlfriend waters.

"So, when is Mandy coming to visit?"

"Oh. Mandy and I broke up," Dave mentioned casually.

Jane froze. Oh my God, this was her chance. She sat on the edge of her chair, the weight of the moment propping her up so she didn't tip over. She was pulled by competing urges. Should she pounce on him or console him?

"When did that happen?" Nice and casual. Not bad, Jane.

"Just last week. I told her I was developing feelings for someone else. She didn't love that."

Holy shit. "Oh? Um. Ok. Who?"

Here it was. It was coming. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

"You're not going to like this."

Oh, she'd definitely like this. "Is it m—" Jane began to ask.

"It's Ridgeley."

NOOOOO! The name uttered from Dave's mouth hit Jane like a ton of bricks.

"Jane, you don't even know her. I really think you'd like her."

Dave knew. He *knew* Jane was anti-Ridgeley. Granted, he may not have known exactly how much, as Jane generally didn't taint her conversations with The Heat by infusing their talks with wretched Ridgeley. But he knew. And she had really thought this was going to be Dave's moment to make a move on *her*.

"What the fuck, Dave?!"

"Whoa. Dude."

"Fucking Ridgeley! How did this not come up until now?"

"I don't know. You and I don't talk about stuff like this. Plus, I know you're jealous of her."

Oh, holy hell. It was on now. “Jealous of her? Why would I be jealous? Because she has everything that I want?” Ok, perhaps jealous was an accurate term. Dave had to subconsciously know Jane was in to him, had to have known that she felt an umbilical connection to his very soul. He was not getting away with this. “Seriously fuckhead, do you not know why we ‘don’t talk about stuff like this’? Do you not know that I’m into you? Like so, so into you!”

Dave’s face went blank. “You are? Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Because you had a fucking girlfriend.” Tears began to fight their way through the last layer of Jane’s wall.

“Oh.”

Yeah. Oh. He really hadn’t known.

But the damage was done. Jane was shaken by the bitterness of Dave’s betrayal. The puncture wound had already started to bleed out, and the blood tasted of Ridgeley. And of course Ridgeley was into Dave too. Who wouldn’t be? As Dave and Ridgeley began to knit together, Jane unraveled. The injustice killed her. Ridgeley had taken every art accolade Jane could have hoped to receive. She took the praise of professors and peers. All of that Jane hated, but she could deal with it. But this? Ridgeley had taken from Jane the very thing she could not lose. And Dave had willingly walked toward her.

Jane began cooling herself off from The Heat. It was the only way she could tolerate moving forward. She traded in her chai for black coffee. She dropped out of creative writing, telling the teacher that she had to go to rehab (you know, college logic). In a way, she *was* in rehab; she was suffering serious withdrawals from her favorite drug.

She turned to painting as her only solace. Finally, her art reflected real emotion. She didn’t want to see her own pain on the page, but she couldn’t help it. Her body could no longer fit the depth of her longing for Dave, nor could it withstand the razor-sharp stab of his lack of passion for her. Thankfully, her art was there to soothe her. Painting carried her through the aching

hours in the middle of the night, which her poor young heart didn't understand only time could relieve.

To add to the pain, "Ridgeley" was a name Jane continued to hear in her classes. A glimmer of hope finally came at the end of sophomore year when Jane found out her final exam in Painting 302 would include a competition across classes. Jane knew her work had taken on new depth. She knew it told stories that her previous self couldn't bear to have shown. This was it. She could finally beat Ridgeley.

Jane spent days and nights thinking about what she'd paint, starting pieces and scrapping them, going back to the canvas again and again. How could she best vomit her feelings onto the page, and how much bile was she willing to show the world?

In the end, she decided to go for broke. The best way to move past something was to stare it in the face, embrace it, then let it go. She poured her soul into the painting, the smell of the acrylics cushioning her mind. She started with hues of blue and silver, and slashed in harsh tones of red and black. She used actual dirt to muddy the look and show the weight of what she carried. When she finally finished, she looked at her piece. Pain on the page.

Her eyes welled up. It was fucking perfect.

When competition day arrived, Jane did a quick walkthrough of the show space. She caught glimpses of the other works, but she didn't take much time to review.

Until she got to Ridgeley's. It was a whirl of crystallized pastels, with white glitter as the overarching color. Ethereal and beautiful, as always. But for the first time in a long time Jane was hopeful. Her own work was better. It was guttural and raw. The true point of art was to incite feeling after all, and Jane's work did that more than Ridgeley's.

She was going to win.

Jane allowed herself to enjoy the event. Her family and friends were there, after all. She clung to her grandparents until the judging commenced. With the confidence of an NBA first draft-pick, she stood proudly, waiting for the news.

The judges said some general pleasantries about the level of talent shown in the competition before they finally got down to it. Here was her moment. Chills ran up her back as she braced herself for glory. "Second runner up, goes to...Tyler Franson." She took a breath knowing she was one step closer. "This was a close competition folks. There's lots of talent on display here. But without further ado, your first runner up is...Jane Baker, and the winner of the competition is Ridgeley."

No! It couldn't be!

Each "good job, Jane" she heard put another pin prick in her. She struggled to keep it together. Then all of the sudden, she heard a voice that made her want to scream. "Hi Jane."

Fucking Ridgeley.

Jane turned and stared pure venom at the girl in front of her. "Jane, I know you're not a big fan of mine." Good. At least she got that. "I just wanted to say, honestly, your piece is amazing. You really should have won."

Fuck this. "Don't patronize me, Ridgeley."

Ridgeley looked surprised. "No, I'm not. I mean it. Your painting is better than mine. I honestly think the judges assumed I'd win and it muddied their judgment. Yours is better. It actually brought tears to my eyes."

Jane felt pure poison in her veins. "Yeah, well, you can have it."

Ridgeley looked taken aback. "Really? Jane, I would love that."

“It’s yours.” With that, Jane walked away. She wanted to crawl out of her skin but she’d settle for crawling into her bed and burying herself under the darkness of her blankets.

“Thanks,” she heard Ridgeley call after her. What the fuck? Even Ridgeley knew she should have won and yet, it didn’t matter. With that bitch around, she just could not win.

And if she couldn’t even beat out a rival at the collegiate level, she didn’t stand a fucking chance in the world of professional art.

Before the start of the next semester, Jane changed majors, despite her advisor’s horror she’d switched at the start of junior year. Sure, Jane felt like a coward for doing it but cowardice was more tolerable than pain. And something safe like Marketing would ensure she wasn’t continually exposed to the pain of realizing she was a failure.

Life moved on. But maybe Jane hadn’t.

Brrring. The ringing phone brought her back to the present. It was Todd so she sent it to voicemail.

Snapping herself back into work mode, she shook off her past and managed to stay on task until the end of the day.