



A one-night stand,  
my unplanned  
pregnancy, and  
loving the best  
mistake I ever made

Accidentally  
on  
Purpose



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Accidentally On Purpose  
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PART I

*Then*

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Trojan on the Floor*

I STOOD IN A BACKYARD hung with streamers, trying to talk myself into a good mood while I waited for my hamburger to cook. This was my friend Dave's fortieth birthday party. I ought to be cheerful. There were balloons, for God's sake, and a homemade cake, and I was surrounded by plenty of people I loved and others I liked and others I imagined I'd like if I knew them. But while it wasn't even my fortieth birthday—not for ten months anyway—I felt each and every one of Dave's years. I was almost middle-aged. Ancient. The damp, foggy wind that is the specialty of a San Francisco summer whipped through my hair, and I could have sworn it whispered *Spinster* in my ear.

The passage of time was evident on all our faces and bodies. There was the former playboy novelist, grown thick around the middle; his boyish good looks were finally going to seed. He looked happy, though, chasing his young son around the backyard. An old flame of mine, the one we thought would never settle down, stood with his arm wrapped protectively around his vastly pregnant wife. My friend Kir joked about her crow's-feet, yet her oldest daughter stood nearly level with her shoulder, green-eyed and beautiful. Milestones seemed far less traumatic when you were bringing new life to the party.

The hamburgers were still raw in the middle. The cute orthopedic surgeon my friends had promised would be there had been

called into surgery and wouldn't be coming. I went inside to the bathroom and stared into the mirror. My hair was frizzy and the gray was showing, although, sadly, not in a glamorous Emmylou Harris kind of way. I felt so left behind. I was the same person I'd been for the last fifteen years. I could be counted on to be fun, wry, and sarcastic. But I was also chronically lonely, sick of myself, sick of my sad stories, and even sick of my funny stories. I contemplated going home to soak in my sorrows. I'd put Kieslowski's *Blue* in the DVD player and break out my bottle of Irish whiskey. The cats would comfort me. The wind whistled up through the cracked bathroom window to add a fresh taunt: *Cliché*, it hissed.

I decided to go to Liza's house instead. She'd recently separated from her husband, Hugh, and he had their two young sons for the weekend. Liza and her brother John would cheer me up. I'd known them for more than half my life. As college students, we'd worked together at a funky old summer resort in Maine, the kind of family-style place that liked to hire waitresses and busboys from liberal arts schools with names the guests recognized. Twenty years later, there wasn't much we didn't know about one another.

We made pasta and discussed our various romantic plights. John thoughtfully stroked his goatee and nodded sympathetically. He was single, but Liza and I assumed it was only a matter of time for him. He sold wine, bought French soap, baked bread, and was *nice*. He was a catch. Not for me—he was practically my surrogate brother—but for someone, someone lucky.

I found myself prowling the house after dinner. I wanted to wash away the gloom of birthdays and the absent orthopedic surgeon. Usually it was easy to persuade Liza to set out on an evening's adventure. Up until the last few years, she had been fairly demure. Always elegant, but hidden away in baggy jeans. All that changed when she and Hugh moved to San Francisco. Her jeans got lower and tighter as her spirits grew higher and the marital bonds looser. Now that she and Hugh were apart, John had moved into their flat to keep Liza company.

“Just one beer,” Liza had said finally, shrugging into a suede coat.

When we got to Finnegan’s Wake, she flatly refused to advance past the first empty barstools. She was wearing a kerchief over her impeccably maintained blond highlights. She looked as though she’d rather be scrubbing the tub than going out for a pint.

“I’m Hagrid,” she kept saying. Her older son was deep into Harry Potter. “I don’t want to be seen.”

So John and I perched at the end of the bar with her. The walls were brown and there was a pool table, and that was about the extent of the decor, the perfect blank slate for an evening. If we didn’t run into someone we already knew at Finnegan’s, we could usually count on making some new friends. A doughy middle-aged guy on the adjacent barstool had instantly perked up at the sight of us. But between Liza’s charwoman headgear and John’s barely suppressed yawns, I doubted it would be a late night.

I looked out the window. A guy in a baseball cap smoking a cigarette caught my eye. Cute, I thought. Really cute. Young, though. Maybe thirty-five, probably younger.

The cute guy flicked his cigarette to the ground and walked into the bar. He sat down beside us, taking a coaster off the top of a half-drunk beer. He knew the doughy guy, who had been attempting to engage Liza in conversation from the moment she sat down. This often happened when we were out. When it came to men, it was almost as if Liza emitted one of those whistles that only dogs can hear.

She sat up straighter in the presence of the cute guy. He had an infectious smile and wide, sexy eyes. Within minutes Liza had got him to lift off his green A’s cap, revealing short, dark blond hair and a receding hairline. I could tell she was doing age calculations in her head based on the hairline. I was doing them too. She asked his name. It was Matt.

“Now, how old are you, Mr. Matt?” she asked. “Because we’re quite old.”

She was the only woman I knew who consistently lied upward about her age. Since she looked younger than she was to begin with, this usually produced expressions of astonishment and then a cheering round of compliments.

"I'm twenty-nine," Matt said. She winced, and I looked away. Twenty-nine was unacceptable. My last serious boyfriend had been five years younger than I, and that experience had produced no desire to dip into the youthful dating pool again.

But there we were, sitting next to each other at the bar, so we continued talking. The movie of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* was on the bar television right behind us, and it launched us onto the topic of Peter Matthiessen. Matt didn't want to even glance at the screen because he planned to read Matthiessen next. In the ensuing discussion of literature, I thought, *Certainly this guy can't be a cretin*. At some point during this conversation, we looked into each other's eyes, and suddenly in my mind there was a *maybe*.

What I always loved about the hookup in the less complicated days—the days before the wretched biological clock intervened—was the sharp sense of recognition you had when you met a man's eyes and realized that not only were you going to sleep together, but he'd be the next person who would really matter to you. You just knew it. In recent years, that feeling had become less trustworthy. For whatever reason—his baggage, your baggage—it just wasn't as simple as it used to be. So even though I felt that electric surge when I met Matt's eyes, I decided to let it go.

Yet even a hint of that feeling is sometimes enough, because it makes you remember hope. By that I don't mean generic, theoretical hope, the kind that makes you tell yourself, "I'm a good and kind person; of course I'll find someone someday"; I mean active, palpable hope—the kind that resonates in your gut and makes you realize how pale theoretical hope looks in comparison. The first kind of hope is the fuel that gets you out of the house on a Friday night; the second is the kind that replenishes a depleted tank.

Liza went out to smoke a cigarette and left us there together. John was gamely talking to the doughy guy.

“Do you want to go out sometime?” Matt asked me. I smiled ruefully and told him I was too old for him.

“Why?” he asked.

I didn't really have an answer. I could have told him about that last younger man, the one who actually *sucked his thumb*, but I refrained. Matt wasn't even in his thirties yet. A boy toy, not someone I could really date. Liza came back to the bar before we'd resolved the matter. John had already slipped away, too tired to stay any longer. Soon it was closing time, and Liza asked Matt if he wanted to come back to her house with us.

We opened a bottle of port, smoked some pot, and watched Liza get drunker. Eventually she collapsed on the couch next to Matt, nestling her head against his shoulder. He had his arm around her, and I watched his fingers move on her upper arm. I turned away, figuring that the spark I'd seen in his eyes wasn't meant exclusively for me. I pushed aside the disappointment. But when Liza announced her intention to fall asleep in his armpit, he seemed alarmed and told her she should go to bed.

Together we helped her weave her way up the stairs, and then we went back to the couch. A minute later, he was kissing me. Two minutes later, he was on top of me, grinding his hips against mine. Three minutes later, I realized all of this would be better naked.

“I'm coming home with you,” I said.

Matt's apartment was less than two blocks away from Liza's, so there wasn't much time to contemplate the wisdom of what I was about to do. However, he did give me pause as we stepped onto Cole Street together. He wanted me to know that his apartment wasn't much to look at.

“I've got to get a new place,” he said.

Just as long as there's a *bed*, I thought. Hell, I'd be fine with an easy chair.

“But not until I get a J-O-B,” he added.

My slightly stupefied brain cells put the letters together. My first thought was *Why is he spelling job?* The second was *Good God, why doesn't he have one?* The third was that I still wanted it to be ador-

able Matt who saved me from my unwanted celibacy. The last guy I'd considered sleeping with was forty-six and a fixture on Nerve.com's online dating service. He owned a home in the city that he was fixing up and also a lake house somewhere up near Mt. Shasta. He was what my mother would have called "a good catch." He most certainly had a job. He also had a big wide ass. I had taken one look at it in his pants and dreaded seeing it on its way to my bathroom, nude.

Running my hands over Matt's later in the night, I felt many things, none of them dread. Maybe just a little sadness during my internal debate about the wisdom of all this: "I should probably stop sleeping with beautiful young guys," the sensible me told myself. "But I *like* sleeping with beautiful young guys," I said back. "Yes, but it's not the path to settling down," Sensible Mary said. "Look, this could be the last beautiful guy who wants to sleep with you," I told her. "So just stifle yourself."

And there was bliss as well. Although it was not getting any easier to strip off my clothes in front of a man, especially after three weeks of shirking yoga while enjoying a Safeway two-for-one special on salt and vinegar potato chips, Matt made it painless. "You're beautiful," he murmured into my ear, pulling his T-shirt over his head in that peculiar one-handed way boys have. "You're awesome."

Awesome? God, I thought, please don't call me dude.

Then I tossed such concerns to the four winds. I was coming up on a full year without having slept with anyone. After that, celibacy starts to seem less like a misfortune that might end at any moment and more like a habit you can't shake. Yes, the pillows under my picky, thread-count-obsessed head were foam and only half covered with ratty navy blue cases, but I managed to effectively block that out. I knew my head would survive the night and that some other woman, or more likely, a girl, would have to deal with his bad bedding issues. In the meantime, I had his smooth slim body, his tenderness, and his insistent penis, which he kept rubbing against me, even after we'd had sex and I was sleepily, deliciously satisfied. He hadn't come yet and I wasn't sure he would. But I was too tired to ponder the mysteries of the male orgasm.

“Have you ever read *Lonesome Dove*?” I asked, figuring him for a fan. I can tell those guys from a mile away. My list of former lovers was filled with the kind of romantic, smart souls who warmed to Larry McMurtry.

“Twice,” he said, into my neck. “I finished it and reread it right away.”

“Good,” I said. “I was going to tell you I’d give you a poke in the morning, but I had to make sure you’d get the reference first.”

Matt had stacks of books next to his bed, many I’d read, some I’d been meaning to read, some I hadn’t heard of but that looked compelling. He also had a pile of lacrosse sticks in the corner and an array of baseball caps on top of every post of his bed frame. If those were the accoutrements of the boy he still was, the books seemed like the accoutrements of the man he would become.

In the morning, I snuck into the bathroom, feeling chagrined at my situation. I’d been in nicer Porta-Potties, and in the light of day, the rest of Matt’s place was revealed to be more of a boardinghouse than an apartment, with no living room and locks on all the individual bedroom doors. It seemed ridiculous for a grown woman to be there, an embarrassment. But when I got back to his bed, there he was again, whispering that he’d wanted me right away in the bar, making me feel desirable. This time, he came too.

When I picked my scattered clothes up off the floor and joked about making the Walk of Shame back to Liza’s place, he laughed and said, “How is that supposed to make me feel?” I felt a twinge of guilt because, of course, I was using him. If I’d been twenty-nine as well, I wouldn’t have left. We’d have gone out to breakfast and I’d probably have fallen madly in love. I looked at him, sprawled on the bed, naked and relentlessly lovely, and bent down to kiss him good-bye.

At my feet, I noticed the Trojan, still neatly sealed in its wrapper. The night before, I’d asked him if he had a condom and he’d dutifully gone and gotten one. But then he’d gone in and out of hardness, the way that guys do when they’re nervous and shy with you. Or drunk. Putting a condom on a man with an iffy erection is like trying

to catch a butterfly with a torn net; it may simply flutter off and be gone for good. Directness is usually my forte, but I once had a boyfriend who had struggled mightily the first time we slept together. When I mentioned, months later, that I'd debated cracking a joke to relieve the tension that first time, he looked at me and said, "If you had, that would have been the last time you'd ever have seen me." So after telling Matt to fetch the condom, I'd never insisted he put it on, not even in the morning, when shyness and alcohol had clearly ceased to be an issue.

But now that orange wrapper practically pulsated up at me through the dim morning light. Unsafe sex. My good cheer waned as I mentally skimmed over the risks, the soup to nuts of HIV and STDs. My married friends would be appalled. They always want to know if you used a condom, like schoolteachers checking your penmanship. I gave myself a chiding, then decided to be optimistic. He seemed totally straight, fairly innocent, and definitely not an IV drug user.

I never once gave any thought to pregnancy. I was a thirty-nine-year-old woman. What chance did I have of still having an eager, ready egg on the one night in eleven months that I'd had sex?

## CHAPTER 2

# *The Magic Wand*

ABOUT THREE WEEKS LATER, I had dinner plans with my friends April and Laura. I prepared for that night as I had for countless others, striving for casual yet sexy, with a sleeveless top under a suede jacket, and cowboy boots to make me feel tough.

I looked in the mirror. Still reasonably pretty. Not in a beachy way, but in an Irish kind of way, with dark hair, pale skin, green eyes. I am tall enough and long-legged enough to do jeans and boots well, although I have not looked good in a bikini since I was six.

That orthopedic surgeon who was supposed to be at Dave's birthday party was someone I'd just met. Since smart, attractive newcomers to my social circle were scarce, my interest had been piqued and I'd made inquiries. But when he hadn't shown up at Dave's, part of me had thought he probably wouldn't have returned the interest anyway. My self-confidence was ebbing. The scarlet A on my chest stood for Available, and at thirty-nine, I'd been wearing it long enough for it to feel like an apology. I had begun to suppose that when men looked at me, they presumed that there was something wrong with me. Why else would I still be alone?

I had been with what seemed like a wide variety of men, and clearly none had been right for me. A couple weren't smart enough. Some weren't ready to settle down. One was gay and still in the closet. Then there were the liars, the cheats. One who lived with someone else but moaned to me about how much more fascinat-

ing I was until he had me completely wrapped around his little finger. Then of course he let go, flinging me a mile into emotional cement.

But as rational as the reasons for these relationship mishaps were on an individual basis, collectively they took on the stench of failure, and the only consistent factor in the equation was *me*. Perhaps I was too bitchy, angry, bitter, controlling? Not needy or clingy anymore, but what about acerbic? I make my living as a movie critic, and maybe whatever it was in my nature that made me want to be a critic was off-putting to men. Ninety percent of my hate mail at work came from the opposite sex. “Bitch,” they’d say. “Why don’t you just keep your opinions to yourself?”

Certainly I’m opinionated and proud of it. But I’m also smart, affectionate, kind. I have a good job. On a mercenary level, I can get you into any movie at least three days before it opens. For free. The only catches are I’ll be taking notes in the dark—and I won’t want to talk about the film on the way home.

I am completely truthful. I have never cheated on anyone, nor would I. While it is true that I have two cats, the universal symbol of spinsterhood, I also love dogs. Dogs love me. I come from a family of six, so I work well in chaos. I am social. I can cook. I can make, and have made, lobster rolls for forty people in an afternoon. With fish chowder on the side. “You are such a catch,” my friend Karen said once, using a tortilla chip to scoop up the ceviche I’d just made for her. “I just don’t understand how you’re single.” Crunch, crunch. Scoop. “It doesn’t make sense.”

There was no point in dwelling on any of that right now. “Just a nice quiet night with the girls,” I told my reflection. I put lipstick on, then wiped most of it off. It was hardly going to be a wild evening. Both April and Laura were still bruised from their last encounters, April with a younger boyfriend who turned out to be a jerk, and Laura with an ex-husband who left her for another woman shortly after Laura gave birth to their first child (a guy who, incidentally, immediately impregnated the other woman).

I felt that familiar female surge of guilt as we dug into a shared plate of fried calamari. I'd worn my loosest jeans that night because I was bloated and premenstrual. *This isn't going to help*, I thought, dipping another one into the aioli. *Blimp.*

Where was my period, anyway? It seemed as though I'd been mentally preparing for it for days. Actually a week. And then some. April and Laura were chatting away. I started in on my second vodka gimlet and realized that I was drinking with less relish than usual. Technically maybe I was, what, a day late? Maybe two? But God, my boobs were so sore. I tried not to be obvious as I pressed the sides of my arms against them. Really sore.

During a lull in the conversation, I put the glass down on the table.

"I'm a little worried that I might be pregnant," I said. "Just a little worried."

April's big blue eyes got bigger. Laura sat back in her chair.

"Who?" April asked. She sounded baffled, understandably. For all she knew, it had been a year since I'd had a boyfriend.

"This young guy," I said. "I met him at Finnegan's Wake."

I gave them the short version, until April, also a journalist, who specializes in health and science stories, started grilling me on when I'd had my last period, precisely what date I'd had sex with Matt, etc. She gave me a deadly serious look.

"I think after dinner we need to go get an EPT," she said. "You can do it at the bar."

We were headed to a bar in the Mission District, a retro place where the waitresses wear vintage dresses and they still let people smoke. I couldn't quite fathom the image of myself squatting over a stick in the tiny bathroom, with some drunken guy pounding on the door.

"If I'm pregnant, I don't want to find out at the Lone Palm," I said. "I'll do one tomorrow morning."

"If you're pregnant, what are you going to do?" Laura asked.

I leaned back in my seat. I felt far away. The noise in the crowded

restaurant receded. The door opened and two couples walked in, bringing a breeze with them that reached all the way to our table, brushing across my cheeks.

“I guess I’ll become a single mother,” I said.

It sounded absurdly blasé yet terrifyingly true.