

Chapter 2: Life List

I'd gone from truly happy, to feigning excitement, to avoiding Josh and Libby all together. It wasn't difficult with all of the sorting and packing that needed to be done. There was little they could actually take across the pond with them; considering a lifetime's worth of possessions. The essentials had to be reduced to two suitcases and a carry on. This fact had been especially traumatic for Libby.

I had my own problems. I was cramming my own motherhood into a trunk. A demon with whom I'd fought tooth and nail in the beginning. She was a terrorizing bitch of reality that had stared me in the face with blood shot eyes and snarled hair. She had widened my hips; filled my breasts until they sagged and painted white streaks in my hair whilst I'd been sleeping. When that wasn't enough, the bitch had given me something more important than work, success, money or status. In the beginning, I hated her. I wanted the life of my working girlfriends; drinks after work, shopping on Saturdays, sleeping in until noon on Sundays. The bitch of motherhood had stripped me of the title of exciting and left me dull. I'd gone from full length leather coat to frumpy cardigan sweater.

It was the kids, with their fantastic way of looking at the world that had converted me. In the years of fairy wings, cowboy boots, stories read under the apple tree, looking for dragons by flashlight, building exploding volcanoes, first love, first kiss, driving lessons and weekend movie marathons, I'd grown into motherhood. I'd gotten used to lukewarm food, little sleep and always having someone to take care of. When I thought about it, I'd gotten good at Motherhood. She had slowly gone from demon to domestic diva with each passing year. Now my fun, working girlfriends wanted what I had; someone to love unconditionally. And now, just as I'd gotten the hang of it, Motherhood left. I'd been right about one thing all those years ago. She was a bitch.

I told myself I was being ridiculous. Motherhood wasn't leaving with the kids. They'd still need me. The bitch was smoothing out her diva hair in the mirror before me. "Yes". She grinned back at me from the mirror.

"Yes what?" I asked

"Yes" she hissed like a snake. *"They are leaving. They don't need you anymore. I'm taking them with me and there's nothing you can do about it."*

I stared back at her, wide eyed, incredulous. "You can't do this to me! They're mine. It's my life! You think you can just waltz in here twenty years ago and turn my life upside down and then rip them out of my life just as quickly? Let me tell you something, you bitch, you've got another thing coming!"

"Yes, I do....and I will." She stared back at me; eyes glowing red; beautiful and fierce. She was me; or at least what she'd taken from me. She grinned pompously and with a snap, was gone. I stared into the mirror at the stranger looking back at me. She looked at scared as I felt.

I sighed. "Now what are we going to do with you?"

It had been Gabe's idea to give the kids a proper send off. A party. While his intentions were good, seeing the kids off on a positive note, I knew his alternate reason was to give me some way to work through my bad mood. I'd regretted closing the studio for the summer since the night the kids had announced they were leaving. I needed something to get my mind off of the emptiness I felt every time I bumped into a suitcase. I needed to work! A party was the closest thing Gabe could conceive of and I took it without complaint.

The weeks had flowed quickly as lists ran through my head day and night. The morning of the party finally arrived and I was busy in the kitchen. Chopping had always been my first line of defense against stress or depression. Something about slicing, mincing and my favorite, julienne cuts with a chef's knife that had proven therapeutic. Deidra knocked at the front door and let herself in. I called "In here!" from the kitchen and kept mincing; rocking the razor sharp knife through the pile of herbs and garlic. I poured the mound into a bowl and examined my work.

"Uggh, on all the days..." I mumbled angrily under my breath. Second line of defense stepped forward in the shredding of my own internal anxiety. Time for the shears.

"I stopped by the coffee shop and thought you might like an espresso" Deidre dangled a tall paper cup with a brown thermal ring round its middle midair. She walked over and set it next to my bowl to see what I was working on. She watched me as I took small pieces of previously chopped parsley from the bowl and cut them into paper fine flecks with my kitchen scissors. Like lightning, she snatched the paper cup away from the cutting board. "Then again, I think coffee might be the last thing you need. How long have you been at this?"

"Check the fridge" I barked.

With a wicked gleam in her eye, she followed my chef like instructions and pulled open the side by side, stainless steel doors. "Holy shit!" Inside the refrigerator were platters of poached salmon with dill mayonnaise, petite galettes, mini cheese cakes with chocolate ganache, tapas, vegetables with egg dip, sausage rolls, and mini quiches. My current project was French potato salad with shallots, garlic and apparently, evil parsley.

"I know, I know" I groaned. "I need a bigger fridge".

"Are you kidding me? You need a sedative! What the hell is wrong with you?" she put her right hand on her hip and slammed the refrigerator door with her other hand. That was what I loved about Deidre. She could take a person out of their whacked version of reality with her intense stare and her direct opinion. It was as if in the kindest, most humane way, she had permission to beat the hell out a person with a sack of bricks. When she and I had these moments, I had to admit that when she was through, I was the better person for it.

"There are something like two hundred people coming to that hall this afternoon and you're worried about the fucking parsley?" she continued.

"My grandmother is coming" I hedged.

“So?” there was her stare again; right through me.

“So she’ll complain of the parsley isn’t fine enough, or if it has stems.”

“Then give her a drink before dinner and to hell with it.” Deidre started pacing around my small, farmhouse kitchen. “A sane person would have hired the hall caterers and spent the day getting their hair done.”

“Lots of people cater their own parties. Besides, I want this to be a really great bon voyage. I can’t leave that up to caterers.” I felt like I was actually gaining some ground. “You know what they say, if you want something done right, you need to do it yourself.” I smiled, triumphant.

“Who’s *they*?”

“Wise and knowledgeable women of history?” my resolve was slipping.

“Two people say that kind of crap when their children are leaving for another country....control freaks and Martha Stewart” she took the scissors out of my hand.

Defeated, I sighed. “Isn’t that a redundant statement?” I asked with a little more venom that was required.

“I’m trying to make a point.”

“Mission accomplished”.

“Look, I’ve been in your shoes. There’s only one positive choice you can make as a modern and intelligent woman.”

“Make a pitcher of Bloody Mary’s and cry once their plane takes off?” The joke was flat but I was trying to keep it together.

“Make a life list. I did a few years ago and it really inspires me to do positive things when life smacks me in the face with the reality that my life is more and more my own.”

“What the hell do I put on a life list?”

“You know, things you’ve always wanted to do, places you have to see before you die, things you want to learn. It can be anything. Be creative. Isn’t there something you’ve always wanted to do, something you said to yourself, when the kids grow up I want to do blank? Or as soon as their grown I’m packing up and going to blank?”

I ran the possibilities through my mind; grappling with the idea that this was no longer an ending for me but a beginning of something new. “Creative....like what? Make out with a woman, drop acid, die of dehydration at a rave party?”

“Easy, now. I said creative, not suicidal.”

“Right” I sat to think again. I looked at Deirdre, sipping her coffee like it was fine red wine. She was the most interesting person I knew. If I needed an ass kicking, I was happy she was the one to deliver it. “What’s #23 on your life list?”

She laughed out loud and pulled out her cell phone.

“You keep it in your cell phone? Wow, just in case that opportunity to hop a flight to Zanzibar presents itself?” I teased. “Check” I moved my hand diagonally as if to check off an oversized task.

She rolled her eyes at me. “I wrote it on my computer like a ‘normal’ person and sent it to my phone. It’s good to remind myself that opportunities are a daily possibility.” She scrolled through her list, each adventure rolling down the queue with a high pitched beep. “Here it is #23.” She smiled her fantastic wicked smile. “You should make this your #1 and join me.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask” I winced.

“#23. Get into a bar fight.” The two of us burst out laughing. As soon as she left to get ready for the party, I took out a piece of paper and a pen.

‘Life List’ I wrote at the top of the page.

‘#1’ I continued. I stared at the closed doors that lead to my music studio. I considered going in and dusting it leaving this list and its mental exercise for another day. But something kept me in my chair. The roll of the pen on the paper had lifted the heavy sadness I’d felt all morning. I’d have to thank Deidre when we were getting stitches or casts from that bar fight. She was on to something here. I stared back at the dark studio just beyond the wood frame and glass French doors. I pushed the pen to the number one spot and continued. ‘Find a different job’. I stared at the words. I chewed on the end of the pen absentmindedly. I crossed out the word job and replaced it with “career” but that seemed strange too.

Spirit, my German Sheppard whined at my knee. In all of the chaos, she cried for the routine of her morning walk, the simplest of requests. Josh came bounding down the stairs and Spirit wagged her tail in the hopes of getting his attention.

“Who’s the best puppy?” he said in a smoochy, baby voice. He rubbed her ears and under her chin. As her put the dog in a playful headlock, he glanced at my piece of paper. “Students to reschedule?”

“No. Just making a list of things to finish” I put the paper and pen in a book on the table. “You about all packed?”

“Yup” Josh answered with his face buried in the dog’s fur near her ear. Spirit pushed her head against him as they continued to play.

“Did you leave out...”

“Something nice to wear for tonight?” he finished my sentence. “Already in the works, Mom.” He released the dog and she jumped to turn and tackle him again. Her head hitting him straight in the stomach. He coughed and laughed. “I might even shower and shave...just for you.” He made the last statement staring at the dog but I knew the jab was meant for me.

“Never let it be said I stood in the way of progress” I said as I went through the studio to the front door, grabbing Spirit’s leash as I opened it. “You shower. We’ll walk.”

“There’s plenty of time. I’ll go with you. Never know if that Doberman and her jogger will cross your path again. Lawn skiing doesn’t suit you” he smiled and his brown eyes met mine. He was trying to cheer me up.

“The neighbors thought it was great. Allen, next door said he never saw a dog drag a woman who could leap over his rose bushes like that.”

“Maybe you should try out for the Olympics”.

“Maybe you should hold the leash so I don’t break something before tonight.” I handed Josh the leash and the three of us made our way through the front arbor where the last of the Clematis were in bloom.

“Great...I moaned as I looked down the road”.

“What are they fixing now?” Josh wondered sarcastically. “Michigan, the home of two seasons, winter and construction.”

“Probably fixing the pot holes before the school buses return to their routes.” I sighed. “Looks like we’ll have to walk on part of Allan’s lawn to avoid the mess.”

“Nah. We’ll just cross to the other side of the street, right girl?” Josh tossed the dog on the top of the head.

“This is a main road. I’d prefer we didn’t teach her to cross. What if she gets out one day without me?”

“Relax. You don’t give Spirit enough credit. She’s smarter than you think.” Cars swerved around the construction and its workers. We three waited until it was clear and then made our way across to the other side of the road, through the scraggly patch of brown and dusty green lawn along the shoulder and then on to the sidewalk. “See? No problem.”

“Guess I need to have a little more faith” I shrugged. “Speaking of which, are you all set with the BBC and the internship? After all, you didn’t fly out for an interview or anything.”

He laughed his easy chuckle and his shoulders moved as he shook his head. “Sure I did. Have an interview I mean. Remember the webcam that came built into my computer? Do you think I’d honestly go to another country without an interview?”

“Sorry” I nodded my head. “I don’t give you enough credit sometimes”. I smiled and he laughed a little. I could see he was hurt but it wouldn’t last. I tried to quickly change the subject. “How long of a walk are you planning?”

Josh’s face went blank. He shrugged “I don’t know. Are we timing this?”

“No. It’s just weird that you brought along a jacket. Thought you were planning to walk until sunset or something.” I nudged him with my elbow. “Not planning on ditching a bon voyage bash, are you?”

He raised one eyes brow skeptically. “Bash? Is that what we’re calling it these days?” he smiled.

“Ok, ok I should have gone into advertising. Can we bump up the elegance factor and call it a soiree? Maybe I’ll try a new career in marketing?”

“But you have the studio; you love teaching.”

“ I taught because it was good for you and Lib’s schedules. I could work when I could, be available for you when you needed. I love it, the kids are great. But I’m thinking of making a change. So you think I have what it takes to create the next buzz word?”

Josh put his finger to his top lip as if in deep thought. “A buzz word defines an entire product or event. A soiree would imply a suit jacket.” He looked at me with wide, pain filled eyes. “ Dear God, I hope I already packed it deep in my suitcase.” He looked down at Spirit. “Careful or she’ll be tying bows and bells on to your collar for the ‘bash’ effect.” Spirit whined in defiance and pulled ahead as far as the leash would allow.

“You loved being dressed up when you were a kid” I teased. “Bow ties and cowboy boots.”

“I was three and had no idea the scars my mother was leaving on my impressionable young mind. I mean, come on, bow ties?”

I grabbed the denim jacket from his hands.

“Hey” he protested. “That’s my practice jacket! You know it rains more days than not in the UK. I have to get into the habit of carrying a jacket with me.”

I refused to release my grip as he made a swipe for it. “What, no umbrella? “

He stopped mid stride. Spirit felt the jerk on her collar and looked back to see what was causing the hold up. “Surely, you’re kidding. Have you ever seen anyone under the age of 80 carrying an umbrella on the streets of London the way you are describing it.”

I blushed. “Guess I’ll be taking that farewell gift back to the store”.

“God Mom! Are you serious?” he yelled incredulously.

I could hear him but something distracted me. It was the white Mercedes swerving around the construction. A woman whose silhouette revealed a short bob hair cut, giant sunglasses and her hand raised near her face. She was talking on her cell phone.

She swerved again to avoid the raised man hole that stuck up from the chipped away asphalt. She cursed again and this time, hit the gas in protest. One of the workers yelled back and her gaze went from the road ahead of her to her rear view mirror.

Spirit started to whine again. The whine turned into a bark as the car came barreling towards us. My instinct was to grab Josh and run but my logical mind kept insisting that surely this woman would see us. She would swerve before she collided right into us. She never looked forward. All the while, her rage feeding her rant. One hand on the steering wheel, one hand on her cell phone, both eyes focused on the rear view mirror and her foot securely set on the gas pedal.

There is an interesting ability that evolution has given humans. Somehow, in the face of mortal danger, we have the ability to see our environment in a slowed time. The brain processes and reacts telling the body to stretch out the arms, to send adrenaline to the hips, the thighs, the calves and the arches in one's feet. The heart beats faster, slamming the adrenaline through the bloodstream. And we humans react, lead by instinct to flee or to fight and protect. What evolution added through the years was the instinct of every mother, from black bear to human; no matter how large the oncoming death. In a split second of reality, she forms an impossible shield all the while giving calculating direction, "Run!"