

Readers Guide
Inside

Divine Appointments



*"...a heartwarming story that reminds us
of what really matters."*

—Beth Hoffman, bestselling author of
Saving CeeCee Honeycutt

CHARLENE ANN
BAUMBICH

AUTHOR OF THE DEAREST DOROTHY SERIES

*Divine
Appointments*

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A NOVEL

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DIVINE APPOINTMENTS

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To Bridget Ann and Colleen Ann

*May encouragement rise to meet you,
May friends be a-side.
May the moon light your spirit,
The rainbows curl softly in your smiles.*

*May paisley be the colors you play with,
May intimacy be easy and right,
May pure be the love you desire,
May grace be the gift you receive.*

*Until we hug again,
May God hold you in his heart.*

*I love you,
Grannie B*

*Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.
For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.*

JEREMIAH 17:7–8

Part One



One

Attempting to release the stifling heat from her body, Josie threw back the covers and heaved a sigh. Stuck in her languid, sweltering, hot-flashing body, she rolled out of bed, shucked off her damp pajamas, and dragged herself down the hall. Within a few moments, she stood in her kitchen, eyes closed, head stuck in her freezer.

Who would believe that at 2 a.m. on a below-freezing February morning in Chicago, I'd be standing here like this? Up until a minute ago, certainly not her. Hoping she was trapped in a nightmare, she willed herself to open her eyes. *Wake up!* But instead of pulling out of a deep slumber, she looked straight into the swirling curls of mist flowing over a low-cal frozen dinner four inches from her lips.

While waving freezer air toward her sweaty armpits, she surveyed the items before her. Healthy everything. *See, I am sane. So what has led me to such a preposterous moment?* But she knew. Same as always, her course of action was set as a result of last night's Internet research.

Research: her instinctive course of action against the unknown.

In an attempt to find something—anything—short of hormone-replacement therapy to help her through what she hoped was a brief perimenopausal stage, she'd clicked from one medical and holistic site to the next. One set of survey results reported that some women stuck their heads in the freezer for relief. Her initial reaction upon reading that finding had been, *Not in a million years.* But when this tsunami of a hot flash rolled into her forty-seven-year-old body, the idea rose to the forefront, and desperation led her straight to the kitchen. Much to her

surprise, the bizarre procedure seemed to help. Or had the flash simply begun to subside already?

Always analyzing, Josie. Give it a rest. Who cares why? You feel better, and that's the goal, she thought, her eyes landing on a small container of frozen yogurt tucked behind a bag of broccoli. But as she reached for it, a chill quaked her body. She closed the freezer door, crossed her arms over her bare chest, and quickly padded back toward her bedroom. Once the hot flash retreated, the reality of the cool temperature in her condo set in.

Even though she had no need to pinch pennies, she still tried to look after her dollars. The first thing she did when she moved into a new dwelling—an annual event—was swap out the thermostat for the latest and best energy-efficient model. During the winter, she programmed it to sixty-five during weekdays, then up to sixty-eight in the early evenings after she got home from work, and down to sixty-two at night. Summers, well... When the flashes began last July, she often found herself lowering the temperature a notch no matter what she'd programmed.

In the faint red glow of her bedside clock, she opened her dresser drawer and withdrew a powder blue cotton pajama set with three-quarter-length sleeves. Counting the set of pajamas still on the floor, and in keeping with her lifelong motto to simplify, it was one of four identical sets, all pastel blue, all worn year round. Shivering, she scooped the soiled pj's off the floor and scurried to the master bathroom. She turned on the light, ran warm water on a washcloth, and wiped her face and neck and then behind her ears. She gulped a glass of water, slipped on the clean pajamas, and smeared a dab of night cream over her cheeks, then laid the damp items over the top of the hamper to dry. "No sense risking mildew," she heard her Grandmother Nancy say.

Grandmother Nancy had dealt with bountiful piles of laundry produced by seven children. "It doesn't take long for damp things to sprout

moldy wings,” she used to say in a singsongy voice. Josie smiled at the memory of one of her many sayings.

Once back in bed, she drew the flannel sheets up to her nose. “Freezer to flannel? Come on, body!” she chided, tired, yet now wide awake. Although occasional daytime hot flashes were annoying and embarrassing, the sleep deprivation these rampant night sweats caused was wearing her out. The last time she looked at the clock, it said 3:15 a.m.

Next thing she knew, her alarm was ringing. Five-thirty. Time to get up and work out.



To further boost her morning cardio workout and burn off the few M&M's she'd nabbed from the small art deco bowl near her key hook, Josie walked down her building's five flights of stairs. Anxious to gulp a blast of fresh air, she stepped out onto the sidewalk while tossing a “Good morning, Howard,” over her shoulder to the doorman. She sucked in her breath. The wind blustered, causing her to pull her scarf a little tighter around her neck.

When she'd contracted for the job in Chicago, she told the Realtor that proximity to her labor was primary. This move's goal: as often as possible, leave the car behind. Despite the cold, she felt a renewed surge of gratefulness for that freedom. The last two years, both her Houston and Raleigh locations had kept her sitting in traffic too many hours a day. She needed exercise and more scenery than the exhaust pipe of the car in front of her. She set a brisk pace down the sidewalk, only slowing after she skidded on a small patch of ice and nearly lost her footing.

When Josie was growing up, her mother constantly asked her why she moved so quickly. “Where's the fire? Walk like a lady, Josie.” She'd heard it a thousand times. But in all ways, Josie was a mover. She almost always walked a different route to work. Residing just under a mile from

her current job, she'd explored nearly every city block between it and her condo—within the boundaries of reason and safety—by foot. But today after chugging only two blocks, and even though she'd pulled her scarf up twice, the tip of her nose was nearly numb. In these freezing conditions, she decided walking didn't make sense, not with "L" stops only a short distance from both ends of her journey.

Before her virgin ride last summer, Josie had made sure to memorize and follow the "L" safety instructions posted on the Internet. She learned where to locate both radio and call buttons in the cars and on the platforms and programmed emergency numbers into her cell phone. She stayed alert, toted her handbag and briefcase cross-body style, and kept her transit card handy so she didn't have to rummage for it.

Immediately after swiping her card, she tucked it back into the slot in her handbag she reserved solely for that purpose. She zipped the bag closed and settled comfortably into her seat. Riding the "L" was second nature now. Relaxing, really. *So simple*, she thought, as she leaned back and recalled her first "L" adventure. She'd studied the maps and made sense of the different color-coded lines, and she possessed a steel-trap memory. During that first ride, her every move was calculated to make it appear as if she'd been riding the elevated system for years.

A big man stood just a few feet from Josie—the type of guy that might inspire caution in "L" riders. Although she couldn't see his face, he reminded her of one of the people she'd encountered at a previous job.

In Atlanta, Josie had been in charge of notifying the employees being laid off, not a task regularly included in her consulting work. The first employee to receive her dismissal notice was Roger Elmquist, a physically daunting bruiser of a man.

"Roger," Josie said the day she let him go, "I need to see you in my office, please."

“Yes, ma’am.” He was always polite. Large in stature but quiet in voice. Good at his job, but his position was being eliminated. Bottom line. End of story.

Once she closed the door and asked him to take a seat, she got right to the point. “Roger, I’m sure you are aware that your company is streamlining operations. Sometimes through no fault of an employee—and such is the case with you—a position with a company becomes obsolete. I’ve called you in here to let you know that unfortunately, this is your last day on the job.”

Roger looked at her as if he did not understand English. Josie had heard rumors of his penchant for karaoke, but she couldn’t picture the man in front of her at the mike.

“Human Resources has arranged for you to receive job counseling. I’m sure they’ll help you find just the right match for your skill set.” She stood and held out her hand. “Good luck, sir.”

Roger remained seated, eyebrows knit together. He stared at her outstretched palm.

“Roger?”

He blinked, then looked up at her.

“Roger, they’re waiting for you in HR. You’re a good worker, and management here is giving you a great recommendation. I’m sure you’ll land on your feet.”

After a very long pause, Roger stood. He appeared shorter, smaller, his shoulders slumped. Without saying a word, he left.

The next day, Roger’s itsy-bitsy wife stormed into the building, wanting to see Josie. Josie could hear her yelling clear through the glass in the reception area.

“What do you mean I *can’t* see her? She *crushed* my Roger! He can’t even lift his head off the pillow this morning. What kind of a monster—what kind of a company—doesn’t give notice, or warning, and just

upends a man like that? Do any of you even care that six years ago he tried to take his own life, he was so despairing? Of *course* not! All you know is your own power and greed!”

When she threatened to storm the place if Josie did not have the common decency to look her in the face and explain exactly why her Roger was treated that way, Josie started toward her office door. *Some people*, she thought, *need a strong word about simmering down.*

“Is that her?” the woman yelled, noticing Josie through the door. “I swear, if my Roger slides back into depression, I am going to hold you personally accountable!”

Before Josie even reached for the handle, a security officer appeared. First he tried to reason with the woman, explain that she needed to calm down. She made the mistake of drawing back her arm as if she was going to strike him. He grabbed her wrist and said, “Come with me. It’s time you leave before you get yourself in real trouble here.”

“Any trouble, sir,” she said, speaking through clenched teeth, “has been brought about by this company’s lack of common decency.” At that, the fight seemed to drain out of her, and she began to cry. She cried so hard they nearly had to carry her out. “You’ve sapped the life out of my Roger,” she said, sniffing. “You have no idea how hard he worked to build himself back up as a man after he lost his last job. And now you’ve gone and robbed him of his dignity again.”

Decency. Dignity. The words twirled in Josie’s head as she scanned passengers in her car.

That older woman to her right... *Hmm. Might be on her way to a cleaning job. Or maybe to visit a sick sister in the hospital. Yes, that’s it.* She wore a tired sadness around her eyes. Likely a widow, which gave her something in common with Josie. Although Josie had never married, she understood the responsibilities and nuances of an oldish woman living

alone. What they probably didn't have in common was that Josie liked it that way.

Josie's body jerked slightly to the left. She glanced at the floor as a stream of murky winter-boot water shifted in the opposite direction.

How quickly life ebbs and flows when you're off to the next station.

Her eyes shifted to a stately man wearing a plaid neck scarf. He somewhat resembled Victor. Tall. Lean. Strong jaw. Powerful presence. She studied his shoes, his haircut, his fingernails. This guy was richer than Victor, she thought. Likely a CEO. They briefly made eye contact, which she had not meant to happen, and he nodded at her. She nodded back, then averted her eyes. She was glad when he stood to get off at the next stop. After he departed, she swiveled and watched him walk down the platform. He even moved like Victor. Erect, shoulders squared, chin tucked to chest, military cadence. She leaned back to see around a couple of heads, unable to take her eyes off him, wondering what Victor was up to lately. If one person on this earth moved faster than she did, it was Victor.

She recalled the day she'd finally caught Victor on the phone to ask his opinion about a high-paying corporate job dangling in front of her. She wasn't surprised by his answer.

"Pick something that keeps you in the lifestyle to which you are accustomed: fluid. It's a big, wonderful country we live in, Jo. You're a strong woman. Make sure you can always call your own shots. Why be another corporate clone?"

Who wouldn't heed the voice of such a powerful father? She'd called her father Victor for so long that sometimes it seemed easy to forget he *was* her father, not just Victor Brooks, military lifer, man of convictions with the power to influence.

She watched the stranger until he disappeared when the train took

off again. *Movin' on.* Within forty-eight hours of Victor's call-your-own-shots pep talk, she had begun the process of incorporating and setting up shop as an independent systems analyst and consultant. Two weeks into her well-planned flurry of self-promotion, her sterling résumé and focus on the world of corporate insurance landed her first major client. *Interesting, how the course of a life can take shape during such short encounters, like how a passing stranger can jog such memories.* It seemed so very long ago that she flew to Denver to seal the deal and sign a year's lease on an apartment. One year was how long she estimated that first contracted job would last. In fact, she finished three months ahead of schedule, which gave her the opportunity to take a class and score another software certification.

You've come a long way, baby, she thought as she recalled the worn, uneven floorboards and the banging water pipes in that first apartment, which was the last dwelling place she rented. From that day forward, she bought. With every annual move, she upsized her income as well as the value of her condo or town home. Shrewd research and negotiating skills proved each real estate investment a more luxurious accommodation than the last. She smiled at the satisfying fruits of her diligence.

But as the elevated train car rounded the last bend before her stop, she watched the skyline change and wondered if her next move, due to take place in only four months, might be the end of that grand roll. Not long after she'd signed on here in Chicago, the housing market tanked. It would be interesting to see where she landed next and what kind of hit she'd have to take. Then again, in some areas, housing was selling so far below market value that she still might make out. Seemed lots of folks were already looking for 2009 to end, and they weren't even six weeks in. But wouldn't it be just like her to land on her feet in the midst of an economic downturn? Victor would be proud.

The train lurched to a stop. Josie stepped out of the car and was

once again reminded why she'd ridden today. The wind howled down the raised "L" platform. She hiked up her briefcase strap and held a gloved hand over her nose. A man frantically ran up the stairs toward her, coat flapping open, as if he'd been sitting at the table and just noticed he was late. *Could be on his way to a shareholders' meeting. Likely runs late every day, a habit his wife finally gave up trying to change.* When they passed each other, she got a whiff of his cologne. Cheap. Too strong. *Maybe he's having an affair, and they woke up late.*

She trudged down the slushy sidewalk, trying to expel the remnants of that guy's fragrance from her sensory memory. It brought to mind a VP in Augusta she'd once invited in for drinks after a dinner date. He'd scrutinized her surroundings over the top of his wineglass.

"A bit stark," he'd said, shifting his eyes to hers. "Don't you think? I bet you'll be happy to settle down one day, finally personalize a place and make it your own. I can't imagine moving every year. What we put up with to make a decent living, right?"

She'd replied with a flat no, and that was the end of him. How she'd made such an error in judgment, she could not imagine.

She entered her work building, pulled her scarf from around her neck, and hopped on the elevator, which had just landed. *Moving on and up has definite advantages,* she thought, even though as a military child, it had at first been difficult to keep moving away from new friendships. But she'd soon realized that all that moving also offered its perks, and she'd quickly learned how to take advantage of them. Endlessly able to start over, she'd reinvent herself, try on new personas. The more moves, the better she became at leaving her old self and longings behind. At one base, she played the shy child, while keeping her nose stuck in a book. At the next, she was the tireless sojourner, off exploring and blazing new trails. "Follow me!" she'd shout. But whatever persona she tried on, she made sure to keep an emotional distance from those brave

enough to attempt to make friends with her. *Funny thing to ruminare on now*, she mused, since at the moment she was pressed against the back wall of the elevator while two more people squished their way inside.

Well, I was who I was, and I am who I am, she thought when she exited the elevator at her floor. She opened her coat and involuntarily shook like a dog trying to expel a spider off its back. She detested cramped elevator rides.

Hopefully, she thought as she removed her boots, swapping them for heels, *the next place is warmer than Chicago*.

Two

Marsha Maggiano clamped down on the little edge of fingernail between her teeth and gave her head a jerk. The nail ripped so low in the quick she winced. She spit the ragged nail slice into her hand and tossed it in the garbage can, then splayed her fingers in front of her and stared at them. Not a normal fingernail left. The fervor of today's mastication might actually tie the record-low shape of her nails right after her divorce last year.

Marsha looked up just in time to see that analyst woman, the one who'd been lurking around for several months, walking toward her, notebook in hand, writing as fast as she could while staring directly at Marsha. How could she last on those heels all day, especially at the pace she kept?

That analyst She-Cat, Marsha thought, had the most uncanny way of catching her with her hands off her keyboard. To her, Ms. Josie Victor Brooks seemed to move like a dangerous robot, a feline robot even, eyes slicing this way and that, just waiting for the weakest links to reveal their vulnerability. Marsha heard it joked about in the lunchroom that Ms. Brooks had eyes not only in the back of her head but in her ears as well. Kind of a creepy thought, really, eyeballs floating around in ear canals. Marsha liked the concept enough that when she first heard it, she immediately withdrew her Moleskine notebook from her handbag and wrote it on the "Character attributes" page.

Marsha glued her eyes to her computer monitor and banged her sore fingertips on her keyboard. Still, her mind reeled off character names. Firing Matrix or possibly—*hmm*—Peeping Perpetrator. Good

one! It struck her as hysterical to imagine that the uptight Josie, who had been hired to come in and “fix” what did not at all seem broken, could actually spy on people through a fog of earwax. But then Marsha always laughed at the most inappropriate times—in church or at a funeral. Or when something was extremely sad. Or when she was scared, like now.

Hmm. Why is she talking to Barb, but still staring at me? Right! Because with that eye in her ear, she’s actually spying on Barb too. A chuckle escaped Marsha’s lips, which she quickly covered with a cough. At least she hoped she had. Either way, she loved it when she cracked herself up.

Barb, the department head, was also a good friend of Marsha’s. They’d met on the job fifteen years before, the day Marsha started at Diamond Mutual. Barb had not only taken Marsha to lunch her first day, but had also taken her under her wing, just as she did with every new employee, showing her the ropes and encouraging her to be patient with herself. Since the day they met, the two of them had always sat near each other.

Marsha tried not to pay attention as Beastie Babe—*Oooh! Yes!*—sidled up behind her. She was glad she’d thought to quickly switch computer screens. She’d opened a little notebook window to type all the clever character nicknames popping into her creative head, which she’d later transfer to her Moleskine. *Good thing I had that spreadsheet open too!* She clicked on one of the menu items and added a formula to a column. By the time she completed that task, Josie had moved toward the next desk, still burning words into her notebook. Marsha could hardly wait for break time when she and Barb could debrief about her...*encounter of the dragon kind. Oh, man! The muse is with me today!*

Marsha felt a twinge of guilt for thinking and saying such terrible things, applying such a plethora of cruel nicknames to someone she didn’t really know. But the writing was on the wall. Word had spread that when the new system was actualized, almost everyone in her depart-

ment would lose their jobs, thanks to Hatchet Hand. But then, that was the Brooks woman's job, to come in and "upgrade" the system, make Marsha's department more efficient—which meant irrelevant, which meant Marsha would soon be culling help-wanted ads rather than spending her evenings working on the great American horror novel, or sci-fi adventure, or murder mystery, or whatever genre it turned out to be in the end.

Moments after Josie finally left the area, Barb walked over to Marsha's desk. She wore a big smile. "You crack me up, you know that?" Barb said. "I wish you could see yourself in action. It was all I could do to keep from busting out laughing when Our Ms. Brooks came around and I saw your 'I am sooo busy' face." They both giggled.

Lyle Waters, Diamond Mutual's VP of operations, strode in. Several times lately he'd appeared right after Josie left an area. Marsha wondered if he might be checking for fallout.

"Ladies," he said, nodding to each of them, "it's good to hear laughter in this department again. I know with changes in the wind, everyone's been a little uptight. Just last night I heard another tickler on the news about how laughter is a healthy way to combat stress."

"Barb is so good for us, Mr. Waters, for *all* of us," Marsha said, her eyes roaming the department. Just that morning Barb had held a brief meeting to thank everyone for their diligence under pressure.

"Yes, that she is." Lyle nodded. "That's exactly why we've kept her all these years."

"Back to work," Barb said, turning toward her desk. "Enough about me."

"Yes, back to work for me, too," Lyle said. "I was just making a pass through, checking the climate. Good to know at least *one* department is still running on sunshine."

Marsha watched Barb resettle herself at her desk. She'd meant what

she said: she was so grateful for Barb. Glancing down the hall, she noticed Lyle stopping to chat with Frank. Lyle put his hand on Frank's shoulder and nodded, taking in Frank's every word. If Marsha were writing romance, her leading man would be very similar to Mr. Lyle Waters. Kind. Handsome. Thoughtful. He'd have a name like Lance Looker, or maybe Lawrence O'Lovely, or...

Nah. Stick to murder, fantasy, sci-fi or action adventure. You stink at love anyway.



Lyle sat in his office across the desk from Josie. She'd knocked twice and opened the door, expecting them to get right down to business. When she noticed he was on a call, she started to back out, but he wagged his finger toward himself and then pointed at the chair for her to sit. In return, she pointed her finger at her wristwatch and raised her eyebrows. Yes, he had her down for 2 o'clock, so he repeated his finger-wagging gestures. Reluctantly, she closed the door behind her and took a seat.

While he listened to his call, he watched Josie shuffle through a few pages in her notebook. She was obviously annoyed. But he couldn't just hang up on his surprise 1:45 conference call that should have ended by now, not when it was with two members of the board of directors explaining that another member had suddenly resigned over some "unconquerable discord." They didn't say what discord, but the repercussive fallout was evident in their voices. "We've always trusted and supported you, Lyle, and didn't want you to hear about his resignation through the grapevine or in a memo." They said they'd keep him informed, then finally said their good-byes.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said to Josie. He looked at his watch, as did she. It was barely 2:02.

"Yes, well, I don't have long. Busy day." Her voice was curt.

While she started in on her briefing, Lyle quickly jotted down a couple of key words from his conference call that had triggered his intuitive sensibilities. Trust. Support. Two words that in and of themselves were good, but they'd sounded too carefully chosen. He set down his pen and gave Josie his full attention.

She opened her mouth to speculate, as she put it—although most of her speculations were actually calculated conclusions—as to which line of computer code involving the something or other might hold the error causing one of their greater issues.

“Can you break that down? Slower, please,” he said, when he realized she awaited his response. Though still slightly unnerved and distracted by the call, he also could never quite size this woman up. Every work day for eight entire months, he'd studied her. He was a good people reader, but she was a mystery and unlike anyone he'd ever met. Unintentionally and unaware she was doing it, she extracted a dichotomy of emotional responses from him with every encounter.

Two days after she started, he was convinced she was truly a genius at her job, just as her references had said. But he also suspected she might be a somewhat scary, cold-hearted loser in her personal life, despite her physical beauty. But then, out of nowhere, she'd say something so remarkable that the surprise of it knocked his assumptions completely off kilter. Something like, “I once saw the Grateful Dead in concert.” No way could he picture her as a Deadhead. Or “I like what Obama said about...” when he could have sworn she was a die-hard Republican.

The real scale tipper came the day she happened to be standing next to him when he received a call from his sister and learned that his mother had taken severely ill. Josie divulged that she'd spent a few sessions with a therapist shortly after her mother died.

“Too much guilt and grief to sort it out on my own. It had been so long since I'd been home for a visit, and I assumed her hospitalization

was just another of her bad spells. If your mother is ill,” Josie’d said, her tone of voice a mix of authority, kindness, and guilt, “don’t second-guess. Just go!”

He took her advice, made an airline reservation, and left that evening. Between bouts of fretting about his mom during the flight, he found himself revisiting the moment that Ms. Brooks admitted there was a time in her life when she needed help—that she needed anything from anyone.

Amazing.

As Josie flipped through her notes, Lyle studied her perfectly oval, groomed fingernails. *So feminine*. Slowly, methodically, tenderly, almost, she repeated the technical issue and the cause and response for her summations. But when she shifted gears to read the list of employees she recommended be let go, there wasn’t a hint of softness about her. She peeled further back through her notebook, glanced at her list, and named three more names. She sounded so certain, so unemotional, so *casual*, as if she neither felt a thing she said nor cared about how anyone would fare after a job loss. She could just as easily be reading her grocery list.

“Ashley Storm, Ted Frazier, and Barb DeWitt.”

The last name caught Lyle up short. Barb DeWitt? She’d been with the company for nearly twenty years, nine years longer than he had. She’d been the head of the data entry department for the last seven years, and there were good reasons for that. Barb was one of the most likable people in the whole company. She took charge of her department and settled the hysterical buzz the day it was announced an outside consultant and systems analyst would soon be among them.

Although he was aware before his firm contracted Josie Brooks that Barb’s entire department would likely be the first to go once the new system was fully operational—new equipment installed and all the bugs worked out of the software—Lyle figured those who served in supervi-

sory capacities would still be utilized somewhere. But according to Josie, who continued talking while he reeled from the reality of the depth of the cuts, Barb's skill set would no longer be a compatible match.

Not for the first time, Josie explained to him that it would be more cost-effective to hire a couple of entry level employees already trained in the new systems rather than to invest in "old school, we've always done it this way" attitudes. "Besides, she's likely ready to retire soon anyway." Josie sounded like she herself would never think of doing such a thing.

"You sure we're not opening ourselves to an age discrimination case?" Lyle asked. "The CEO sent me a cautionary e-mail."

"Look," Josie said, closing her notebook. "I get paid to make recommendations and upgrade systems. I don't think about who's young or old or make your final decisions. You can offer selective buyout packages if you're concerned, but I'm sure you already know the financial limitations of that. If it's Barb you're worried about, she would likely be happy to accept a fair offer, especially if you help cover insurance. She seems like a reasonable person. But then that's not my area of expertise or advisement. Those types of decisions are up to Diamond Mutual." She stared at him, impatience skirting her eyes.

"You're right, of course." He would not mention, though it was certainly on his mind, that when, at age sixty-two, his mom lost her job in a corporate "rearrangement," he'd encouraged her to file an age discrimination case.

Lyle studied the deep blue of Josie's eyes and unsuccessfully tried not to check out the swing of her fanny, as his dad used to say about Doris Day, as she headed toward the door.

"Josie," he said, causing her to stop and turn. "For the record, I am grateful for your expertise." He stood and walked toward her. "And thank you for your patience when you arrived today. Just to make things clear," he said, now standing in front of her, "I don't want you to think

I take your time for granted any more than I want you to believe I'm *incapable* of making my own corporate decisions." He flashed her a playful grin, which she did not reciprocate. Did the woman even have a sense of humor? "You are good at what you do, which is why I both ask for and value your opinions." He meant every word.

All she offered in return was a slight nod of her head. Although he reached for the door handle, she beat him to it. Why did he have the distinct feeling she'd rolled her eyes as she closed the door behind her?

"Whew!" was all he could say when she was gone.



After arriving home from work, Josie shed her winter wear, recalling flashes of people doing the same thing as she passed by their office windows during her "L" ride this morning. *We come and we go*. She walked to the bedroom, hung up her work clothes and donned one of her three comfy gray sweat suits.

Rummaging through the fridge, she decided she owed it to herself to leisurely prepare a stir-fry concoction using some of her fresh vegetables and a block of tofu. No rice or noodles this time. Just wholesome crunchy goodness, an unusual blend of spices, and maybe a few cashew nuts thrown in for good measure. One by one, she lined up the veggies on the counter and surveyed their beautiful range of colors, then rearranged the lineup in descending color order.

Yes, it was time to unwind. Create. Brighten her world. Ongoing trouble with a code, people in data processing all but laughing in her face, a slight headache that set in the minute she left Lyle's office... *No wonder the employees all adore him*, she thought as she fixed herself a tall glass of water. *What a brown-noser*.

She downed several hefty gulps of water, screwed the lid back on, and set the bottle out of spilling range. After placing two lightweight

chopping mats on the countertop, she went straight to methodical work on an onion. She drained the block of tofu, sliced a stalk of celery on the diagonal, smashed a couple of garlic cloves, then cut a few very thin wedges of Chinese cabbage. Next she snipped a small pile of fresh lemon grass with her kitchen scissors and grabbed a handful of fresh bean sprouts from the fridge. She took out her stove-top wok and set the bottle of peanut oil nearby. After cutting perfect squares of tofu and surveying her mounds, she decided to rummage for at least one more color. "Perfect," she said, when she spied the eggplant.

She was glad she'd made a stop at a nearby market yesterday. As was often the case when she went to the market, she remembered a conversation with her Grandmother Nancy. Shortly after Josie's mother died, Josie made an uncommon spur-of-the-moment trip to visit her grandmother before she accumulated one *more* irreversible regret. Thank goodness she did; shortly afterward, Grandmother Nancy was gone too.

"All your gadding about, Jo-Jo." Grandmother Nancy had pushed a hair behind her grown granddaughter's ear, a hair already perfectly in place. "I understand that you can't help but have a little wanderlust in your blood. After all," she said, smiling, "you are your father's daughter, and he sure didn't stay put the moment he could fly. No sir. That boy was chompin' at the bit to get out of here. But when good homegrown tomatoes come into season, can you even buy one when you're stuck in the middle of those cement cities?"

Josie laughed. "You'd be surprised at the wonderful produce I can buy in the city, and from all over the world! Just last week I made a Thai dinner with some wonderfully fresh and fragrant vegetables and a few spices I bet you've never even heard of. I wish you'd take me up on my offer to fly you out for a short visit. We could spend a whole *day* going from one market to the next. You'd love it. You'd find *twenty* kinds of tomatoes!"

“Early Girls and beefsteaks are enough *kinds* of tomatoes for me. Fresh off the vine, there’s nothing like them. I’m a homebody, Jo-Jo. Besides, who would bring in my mail if I just up and disappeared? Who would be here to baby-sit my wily passel of grandkids and great-grands if I just took off?” Grandmother Nancy said, smiling, her eyes flashing their wonderful twinkle. Her grandmother adored nothing more than just being there—for everyone. Having lived with a husband, seven children, and countless pets, she once said she could never imagine living Josie’s life. “I’d feel like a kite without a tail, sailing a sky way too quiet for me.”

On the other hand, there was Victor. “Why get stuck in the same place for the rest of your life, Jo?” he’d counseled when Josie first began charting a course for her career. “Think about it: what does your grandmother really know of the world?”

Victor loved his mother, but he often talked about her as if she were an old fuddy-duddy. In fact, Josie believed Grandmother Nancy was quite in vogue for her age, at least among her small-town peers. But Josie understood why, after his childhood, which he referred to as “stifled by quaintness,” a phrase he always followed with a dramatic yawn, Victor enlisted in the army. He was the oldest of seven children in a family perpetually scraping the bottom of funds, and the military seemed Victor’s only practical and affordable way out of town. And yet, no matter how much he derided his hometown, he also knew he’d fight for the right of the families within it, so enlistment was not only doable, but a good fit for his inborn sense of independence and scrappiness. A military lifer, he’d witnessed his share of the world and change—and death.

And who, Grandmother Nancy, would get Diamond Mutual running leaner and meaner if I lived like dad, always having to go where someone else told me to go? Or if I lived like you, never leaving town?

Josie rummaged through the vegetable bin in the fridge one more

time and decided to add a handful of pea pods. As the gas burner sparked to life, flashes of her day's encounter with Lyle shot unbidden to the forefront of her mind. That he was not ready for their meeting and then didn't give her his full attention right away after he hung up was, in her opinion, unprofessional. She poured peanut oil into the pan and let it heat a moment. *His seeming indecision followed by a well-timed compliment and a quirky grin?* The oil sizzled when she tossed in the tofu, which she stirred with aggression. She removed the tofu and stir-fried the rest of the ingredients, adding a few spices along the way. After tasting one of the pea pods for flavor, she decided to grate a little ginger into the mix. Before rinsing the grater, she put her nose to it and inhaled.

Smells better than any man's cologne.

Although it wasn't her best meal—it needed more...something—it was tasty and healthy. She eyeballed the M&M's. *No. Not even a little caffeine this time of day.* She'd read that caffeine exacerbated hot flashes, which, when she did indulge, was another reason to limit herself to only a few at a time. She straightened up the kitchen, then forced herself to put in a load of laundry. She'd have to stay up later than she'd like, but piles of laundry—all things left undone—weighed her down.

That was why this whole job thing was getting to her. She'd never been this far into one job without having locked in the next. She'd spoken on the phone with Donovan, her only sibling, about just this the other night, after he'd asked her where she'd be moving next.

"It's disconcerting, Donovan. For the first time ever, I have this gnawing question about meeting the contracted deadline, enough that it's kept me from pursuing a next place."

"You've put out feelers though, right? I'm sure you've got *something* in the works."

"Only a couple of halfhearted attempts. A few months into this job, before I realized how bad things were going to get, I checked out a couple

of possibilities in Minnesota, but they were too small. Not enough challenge. Since then, every time I experience another setback or surprise at this venue, I have to reign in my aggressive tendencies to think that far ahead again. I know you've always wondered why I go through the hassles of buying and selling every year, but aside from the monetary gains, another upside is that I'm free from the pressure of yearly leases. Can you imagine if I had to deal with *having* to move or signing another year's lease again any time I ran behind or got done early?"

"Wait. Rewind. Did I just hear you say you reigned in your aggressive tendencies? Is this really my sister? We must have a bad connection. You think it's on your end or mine here in Paris?" He laughed.

"Very funny. Seriously, Donovan, you know I don't rely on emotions or gut hunches."

"Yep," he said after another chuckle. "'Until you prove it to me, it doesn't exist.' Do you know how many times you said that to me when we were growing up?"

"Fair enough. And for the most part, I still believe that. But Donovan, I keep sensing something about this current job's circumstances that demands a constant time buffer or reevaluation or... It's making me crazy."

"If anyone can figure it out, you can, sis," Donovan said. "You always do."

Yes, she'd thought after they'd hung up, on herself she could ultimately rely. But still, she was currently struggling into the second week of solving something she initially thought would take a few hours. The project felt close to hopelessly behind. She'd put in many late nights attempting to ward off the possibility that she might have to seek an extension on her contract, something that, until now, simply was not acceptable.

You just need to relax, Josie. She finally let herself sink into the couch,

the remotes to both the television and stereo, which was on, within reach and a small glass of sherry in her hand. *Donovan is right. If there is one thing I do really well, it's figure things out.* To shore up a minor dip in her resolve, she ran through a personal list of affirmations.

- She made companies better. Always.
- She was excellent at her job.
- She made smart real-estate decisions.
- She maintained her living quarters exactly the way she liked them: sparse. Just a few expensive and meaningful objects of art.
- Always on the move, she'd learned to travel light. Aside from her mattress, for two of her relocations, she'd rented furniture, which not only saved money but gave her the opportunity to "try on" new decorating styles.

When the timing is right, you'll figure everything out and be smart enough to trust it.

A few years ago, she'd even sold her mother's heavy, dark dining room furniture—the only reason she'd kept a storage shed—happily unburdening herself of the last of her anchors. "Maybe one day you'll settle down and start a family," her mom had said, just before anyone knew she was dying. "I'd like to think my grandkids will one day sit around their great grandmother's dining room table. At least someone in the family will finally enjoy it!" Madeline, Josie's mother, had inherited the set from her mother, a farm wife in West Virginia. A military wife, Madeline kept it in storage her entire lifetime, hoping that one day they would settle in one place. But it wasn't in her husband's genes to do so. Josie had decided she wasn't going to die with it in storage too.

There was no sense in holding onto dreams that were not hers. You move on and cut your losses.