

*The Garden of Small Beginnings: Chapter 1*

Prologue.

It's been over three years since my husband died, yet in many ways he's more useful than ever. True, he's not around to take out the trash, but he's great to bitch at while I'm doing it myself, and he's generally excellent company, invisibility notwithstanding. And as someone to blame he's unparalleled, because he isn't there to contradict me, on account of being cremated. I talk to him a lot, though our conversations have devolved from metaphysical explorations of the meaning of death to generic married conversations about what to have for dinner, and who's on the hook for the lost tax returns.

When he died in a car accident, fifty feet from our front door, I seriously considered killing myself too. Not because my heart was broken, though that was true, but because my mind was completely boggled by the

logistical challenges of living without him. However, it's just as well I didn't because he would have been waiting for me in heaven and man, would he have been pissed. He'd have made eternity feel like forever, I can promise you that.

I was driving along, letting my brain spiral aimlessly, when my phone rang. It was my sister, Rachel.

"Hey Lil, are you on your way to get the kids?" Just the sound of her voice made me smile.

"I am. Your knowledge of my daily schedule is embarrassing for both of us." I flicked on the indicator, slowed a little for the light, and made a turn. All with the phone illegally wedged under my ear. Sometimes I astound even myself.

"Can you pick something up for me on your way back?"

"Am I coming to your house?" Maybe I'd forgotten, it wasn't impossible.

“Well, you might have been, how do I know? Anyway, I haven’t seen the kids for a couple of days, and you know how they pine.”

I laughed. “I can honestly say they haven’t mentioned you once.”

She laughed back at me. “You know, one day you’ll accept they love me more than you, and your denial of it isn’t helping any of us move forward.”

I pulled into the carpool line, doing the silent eyebrow raise and smile of greeting through the windshield at the teacher on duty. “Look, I’ll admit they’re fond of you. What is it you need, anyway? Something fundamental like milk, or something more typical, like lubricant and a duraflame?”

Suddenly a small palm smacked the window, making me jump and leaving a smear. Its owner, Annabel, peered in and narrowed her eyes. Her younger sister Clare stood behind her, gazing spacily around. Behind both of them the teacher smiled tightly, telegraphing long-suffering patience with an undercurrent of threat if I didn’t get my ass in gear. I hurriedly hit

the door open button. I'd hate for her to drag out the death ray on my account.

My sister was answering me. "I need a pound of bacon, some parmesan cheese, spaghetti, eggs, a loaf of bread and a bottle of red wine. And butter, of course."

"I'll call you back," I straightened my head, dropping the phone on the floor. "Do you need help or can you get her in, Bel?"

"I got it."

Annabel was only 7 but had the gravitas of a 40-year old career diplomat. She'd been born that way, calmly mastering breastfeeding, crawling, eating solids, and whatever else I threw at her. She regarded the world resignedly, as if we were exactly as we'd been described in the brochure: A little underwhelming, but what can you do? She buckled Clare in, struggling with the straps.

"Too tight?"

Clare shook her head.

“Too loose?”

Clare shook her head, her large brown eyes fastened trustingly on her older sister. Annabel nodded at her, turning to climb into her own seat, fastening her own harness with the self assurance of a test pilot on his fiftieth run, rather than someone with no front teeth and a Dora barrette in her hair.

“Good to go,” she informed me.

“Clare?” I wanted to make sure the little one hadn’t lost the power of speech since breakfast. Presumably I’d have gotten a call from the teacher, but with all these budget cuts...

“Good to go, cheerio.” Ok, smallest planet heard from.

I scabbled around on the floor for my phone and called Rachel back. I put it on speaker this time and yelled at it as it lay in my lap. After all, now I had the kids in the car. Safety first, people. Rachel picked up before it even rang on my end. She’s a very busy woman.

I watched for a gap in the traffic as I yelled at the phone. “Hey, why didn’t you say bring me the fixings for pasta carbonara? And why can’t you stop on your way home?”

“Because I like to give you little riddles to solve, little challenges that keep you on your toes. Otherwise your brain will atrophy, and then who will help the kids with their homework?”

“Are you cooking for us, too?”

“I certainly can. I’d be happy to. Why are you shouting at me?”

“I’m not shouting at you, the bluetooth’s broken. But I’m glad you’re making dinner.” I took a left.

“Are we going to the store?” asked Annabel. I knew she found the store irritating, but was balancing that against the possibility of sudden candy.

I nodded.

“One other thing,” added my sister. “You’ll have to tell me how to make it.”

“And then are we going to Aunty Rachel’s?” asked Clare.

I nodded and then shook my head. My sister was doing her Jedi mind trick ‘these aren’t the droids you’re looking for’ thing. “Wait, Rach, let me ask you this: If I’m buying the groceries and making the dinner, why aren’t you coming to my house?”

There was a pause.

“Oh, that’s a much better idea. Thanks! I’ll see you later on.” She started to hang up.

Stop,” I interrupted. “If you’re coming over, you can pick up the groceries. I’ve got the kids, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Ok.” She hung up.

I looked at Clare in the rear view mirror. “No, honey, Aunty Rachel is coming to our place.”

Both kids looked happy to hear it. They really did like her better than me. And why not? She could turn a request for a favor into an invitation to dinner and make you feel good about it.

One.

I'm an illustrator, which sounds romantic, as if I spend my days under a spreading tree, dapple-splashed with sunshine, a watercolor tablet steady on my knee. Actually, I spend my days slumped in an office chair, destroying my posture and working on a computer. There is sunshine, of course, this being Southern California.

I love doing traditional illustration, the pencil and paint stuff, and I wish I had more time to do it, but when I left college the job I found was illustrating school text books. I took the job expecting it to be a good starting place, but it turned out to be a great big comfy chair of a job, with a good salary, benefits, free coffee and all the second grade text books I could ever want. 82% of American school children use Poplar Press products, and have done so for nearly a century. I love it. I learn all kinds of interesting stuff, and I draw and create things kids look at and,

presumably, doodle little hats and moustaches on. Once Annabel brought home one of my text books – ‘Kids in History’, Fourth Edition -- and I saw that dozens of kids had used it, each of them adding new details to my historical figures I never would have imagined. Who knew Martin Van Buren was so well hung?

There are four of us in the creative department, plus a full-time writer, three fact-checkers and a general assistant who’s been there forever and who actually runs the whole place. She looked up as I walked through the door that morning, and pursed her lips.

“Checking sent back your whale penis, Lilian.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Rose, how long have you been waiting to say that?”

She didn't flicker. “I got in at 7, so a couple of hours I guess.”

I kept walking. “Tell them they'll have their penis back in the morning.”

She coughed. “I already told them they could have it back later.”

I stopped and turned, “Why did you do that?”

She was looking at the magazine she’d hidden beneath her desk.

“Because then I could say ‘we’ll have your penis back at the end of the day, but it will be hard’.”

“I can see how that would be difficult to pass up.”

She shrugged. "In the maelstrom of tedium that is my day, I grab what rays of sunshine I can."

My office mate Sasha looked up as I walked in. “Hey, did Rose tell you about the penis?”

“Yes, she did. Did you still need me to help you with your biology book?”

“The development of the chicken egg? It can wait.”

“Ok, thanks.”

Sasha shrugged. “The chicken should probably come first anyway...”

Let me be clear: The creative department of Poplar Press is not usually a comedy mecca. Often it is very dull, especially if we’re updating a

chemistry text, or something. But it does have its moments, and there is the coffee.

I sat down, opened up the whale penis file, and stared at it. It's not a whole file of whale penises (penii?), it's just one relatively small illustration in a veterinary medicine textbook, and I'd been a little suspicious of why it was even included. Yes, it was important to be thorough, but how many vets were going to need to operate on a whale penis? Its not like the last time you took your parakeet to the vet you couldn't get into the waiting room on account of the impotent whale sitting nervously on several hard chairs. Or a young whale couple, holding hands, and looking enviously at the baby animals in cardboard boxes all around them, occasionally shooting each other supportive glances and clearing their throats. I checked my email: the fact checkers had sent it back simply because one of the labels was misspelled. How did they even catch that? I picked up the phone and punched in a number.

“Fact Checking, Al here.”

“Al, it’s Lili.”

“Hey Lili, sorry about your penis.”

I shifted in my chair. “Jesus, what is it with everyone this morning? You’re all beside yourselves about the penis.”

“As it were.”

“So here’s my question, Al. Are you sure there’s a mistake? My input from the editor agrees with what I have, so what do you have there, an encyclopedia of penises? PenisCheck 2000™?”

I could hear him grinning. “I cannot divulge the sources of the fact checking department, you know that. I’d have to kill you, and then we’d lose our best illustrator.”

I turned to Sasha. “Your boyfriend just said I’m the best illustrator.” We could both hear Al yelping. Sasha shrugged without turning around.

“Tell him now I’ve seen Moby’s gear I’ve lost all interest in him anyway.”

“Al, she’s leaving you for a cetacean.”

“Again? That whore. No, but seriously, our guy at the aquarium caught the typo, and we checked with the editor and his original content was wrong. No big deal, just checking the facts. We see a fact, we check it. It's our job.”

“Oh, well, ok then. I didn't know you had a tame whale guy on call.”

“Again, I cannot reveal my sources but how else do you think two scruffy guys with liberal arts degrees proof all this stuff, if not for a fat, fat rolodex of smart people with very narrow fields of focus?”

“You make a good point, Al.” I hung up, fixed the word, and re-sent the document to Rose. In the cover note I wrote she could stick the penis in fact checking's inbox, which I knew she would appreciate.

My phone rang. Rose. “Upstairs wants to see you.”

I frowned. “Am I getting fired?”

She clicked her tongue. “No clue. Why don't you gather your balls in your right hand and go upstairs and find out for yourself?” Rumor has it Rose was the mistress of the first Mr. Poplar, and installed in the 'art

department', as it was originally called, to hide her from his wife. Seeing as that would make her around 80, and she is not that, I doubt it, but clearly she has embarrassing info on somebody, otherwise they would have fired her long ago. She has people skills like lions have gazelle skills. I sighed, and headed upstairs to face Roberta King, my general manager.

Roberta King was probably around my age, but we had as much in common as a roller skate and a racing car. (This isn't the best analogy for either of us, but was something my dad always said and it springs to mind. He died last year but I am keeping him alive by stealing his best material.) Roberta and I had met maybe half a dozen times, at work activities that sought to build community through trust falls and other excruciating experiences, and all I could remember about her was that she had looked as uncomfortable as I had felt.

I was wearing my "working mother at work" ensemble, consisting of a long skirt over boots (with two different socks underneath, but the skirt covered this), a long sleeved t shirt that I had slept in, and a v necked and

somewhat stretched sweater from Target. Roberta was wearing a suit. She smelled of flowers. I smelled of waffles.

However, she was smiling at me as if we were old friends, which of course meant I was about to get fired.

“Hi, Roberta, Rose said you wanted to see me?”

“Yeah, hi, Lili, come on in. Take a seat.” She pushed her chair back from her desk and crossed her legs, indicating that this was a casual, girl-to-girl type of thing. I sat at an angle, like you do, and crossed my legs too.

“How are the kids?” Ooh, a personal question.

“They’re good, thanks. You know...” Shit, I had trailed off. Why was this difficult? I was a woman, she was a woman, we both worked in publishing, ovulated, perspired, ate ice cream and felt guilty about it, read People at the check out, wondered what people thought of us, we should be able to be relaxed.

“Two little girls, right?”

I nodded.

“And one dead husband?” Ok, she didn’t say that, I just added it in my head. People often ask, when they don’t know you, ‘oh, and where’s your husband’, or, ‘and what does your husband do’, and it’s very hard not to reply, ‘in heaven, hopefully’ or ‘oh, he mostly just rots’. But anyway, she didn’t mention him, which means she remembered he was dead and was being polite and thoughtful. Bitch.

“So, Lili. As you know, things are a little tight in publishing right now. Education budgets are getting cut all over the country, and that's having a direct impact on our business, of course. Poplar's trying to stay ahead by branching out a bit.”

I laughed. She paused, frowning a little. I blushed. “Sorry... I thought you were making a pun... Poplar... branch... “ I swear a tumbleweed blew through the office, bouncing over a ridge in the carpet.

Roberta cleared her throat. “Fortunately, an opportunity has presented itself. The Bloem Company is one of the largest seed and flower corporations in the world.” I nodded. Even I had heard of them, and I

don't know a daisy from a doorknob. "They produced a series of flower guides and they're going to add a series on vegetables. They've asked us to publish them, because the small press who released the flower guides has gone out of business."

I nodded, and put on my intelligent listening face, adding a little between-the-eyebrows frown for extra focus. I was actually just waiting to hear my name, like a dog.

"We'd like you to illustrate them."

I nodded again, but she had stopped talking.

"Well, that will be... fun." I was puzzled. What was the fuss about? Why was she pulling me into her office to tell me about a job? Normally we get briefed on new projects downstairs in a short meeting and then they arrive via email.

Roberta started up again. "It's a very big job."

"Well, there are lots of vegetables in the world."

“Yes. And the Bloem people want to cover all of them. There will be several volumes, plus an addendum.”

“I love an addendum.”

“And we want you to do it by hand, not computer. Watercolors, pen and ink, charcoal, whatever you like. Bloem wants to create something artistic and lasting. While at the same time capitalizing on the rebirth of interest in slow food, organic gardening, and the back to the land movement.” She was nervous about something, I could hear it in her voice. She suddenly looked at me and blurted out, "I'm afraid I did something terrible. Truly, truly terrible."

I was surprised, because I hadn't thought she was that kind of girl, but I got ready to be shocked.

"I said you'd take a gardening class." She cleared her throat. "A vegetable gardening class."

"I'm sorry?" I frowned, "Did you say a gardening class?"

Roberta blushed. "I was on the phone with the woman from Bloem, and she mentioned that one of the Bloem family sons was teaching a class on vegetable gardening, here in Los Angeles, and I said you'd take it."

"The class?"

"Yes."

"On vegetable gardening?"

"Yes." She spoke more slowly, as apparently I wasn't getting it. "I said you'd take a class on vegetable gardening." She said it the way someone else might have said "and you'll be slowly dipped in battery acid, toes first".

"I don't mind taking a gardening class, it sounds like fun." I paused, "Unless it's a three year commitment and requires a lot of heavy lifting?"

She shook her head quickly. "It's Saturday mornings for six weeks, we would of course be compensating you for your time." I half-shrugged, and she leapt on it. "And giving you extra vacation days."

I would have done it for nothing, but there was no need to tell her that. "Sounds fair."

She shuddered. “I would have taken the course myself, but I simply couldn't.”

I altered my opinion of her, subtly. “Why?”

“I hate worms.” She visibly shivered, and may even have gone pale, it was hard to tell under her perfect make-up. “I had a bad experience as a child. I can't even stand too close to soil, you know, just in case.”

I had to bite my lip not to ask for details. What qualifies as a bad worm experience? I imagined her running along, tiny and cute in coordinated Baby Gap, tripping, falling, her little braids twisting in slow motion as she hits the ground, skidding, coming face to face with a worm... that pulled out a gun and shot her? That bit her on the nose? I mean, honestly, they don't even have mouths. But you can't say that kind of thing to people, you can't mock their fears openly. But I made a note to do it later, in private.

She still looked worried. “So will you do it?”

I shrugged. “Of course, happy to. I’m sure it will inspire my illustrations.” I didn't add that I could always get up close and personal with a carrot in the produce department, but she seemed to think this class would help the project, and who was I to argue?

She relaxed, visibly, and stood up. Her clothes fell perfectly, not a wrinkle. Maybe she had some little guy under the desk, steaming her as she sat. Mine kind of stuck where they were, as if someone had wadded them into a ball and thrown them at me.

“Excellent. The class starts this Saturday. You can bring your kids.” I said thanks, and she said thanks, and we both shook hands and said thanks again, and then she added something.

“We’re very worried about the future of Poplar. But I know you’ll make a good impression, do wonderful work, and save the company.”

“No pressure then,” I tried to soften my sarcasm with a small smile.

Her first genuine smile since I’d entered her office appeared. “I know you’re up to the task.”

I tottered out and headed back downstairs.

I went to the tiny kitchen and poured an enormous coffee. My mug said World's Greatest Dad, which I supposed was applicable, although I picked it because it was the size of a bucket. Rose had put a sign above the coffee maker: "If you take the last of the coffee, put on a new pot. Or I will make your life... challenging." She meant it too. Sasha forgot once and Rose connected all her outward bound calls to the CEO's office, which meant five times in a row the guy picked up the phone and there was Sasha. Eventually the CEO suggested she not forget to put on more coffee next time.

Back at my desk, I called my sister.

“Can you babysit the kids every Saturday morning for the next 6 weeks?”

There was a pause. Then she said, “Yes, if you don’t mind dropping them at my house and running the risk that naked people might be there. Or trained animals.”

I laughed. “Come on, your private life isn’t that exciting.”

“That’s what you think. Note the use of the word private.”

“So that’s a no then?”

“Do I have to commit to the full series? Can’t I do it as needed?”

“This is as needed. Work has asked me to do a gardening class and it’s every Saturday for the next month and a half. I’m illustrating a book on vegetables, and they think it will help if I learn how to grow them.”

“They might be right.”

“I doubt it. I did a great job on Monasteries of 14th Century Europe and I’m not a monk, nor French, nor dead for 500 years.”

“Good point. Can’t you take them with you?”

“I could, but I thought they’d rather hang with you.”

“How about I come to the class too, and help you with the kids there.”

I actually took the phone away from my ear and looked at it.

“Are you ok? Gardening? Really?”

She sighed. “I’m feeling oppressed by my job today. I have spent the last two hours on the phone yelling at people I will never meet, but who hold the fate of my company in their slippery hands. A very important item has been lost in transit, which I am having a hard time with.”

“Wow, you really are pissed, you just ended a sentence with a preposition.”

“Eat me.”

“What was it?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. A priceless thousand year old statue of a horse.”

“Well, maybe it’s just in the wrong box or something.”

“It’s life-sized. And on its back is a naked woman holding aloft the headless body of an eagle. But apart from those minor distinguishing features, it’s easily missed.”

“OK.” I paused. “I have no response to that at all. Good luck with your missing horse.” We hung up. Honestly, our conversations were getting more and more like an old married couple every day. Apart from the headless eagle part, although I always say you never really know what goes on in someone else’s marriage.