

The Little French Bridal Shop



'Utterly charming...
wonderfully infused
with heart and whimsy.'

A delight?
Joshilyn Jackson,
bestselling author of
Never Have I Ever

Jennifer Dupee

*The
Little French
Bridal Shop*

Jennifer Dupee



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In memory of my mother, Kathe Hill Dupree

PART I

FALL

CHAPTER ONE



The house, a stately brick Colonial, stood at the peak of a grassy hill, the slope of its great rolling lawn dotted with graceful elms and sycamores, on the easterly side of the tiny seaside town of Kent Crossing, on the North Shore of Massachusetts. Perched on high as it was, overlooking the beach on one side and the quiet and compact Main Street on the other, it gave the impression of omniscience, as though it were guarding something. *No wonder*, Larisa thought. She hadn't told anyone yet, but she'd come to prepare the house for sale. She'd taken the train up from Boston that day, Saturday, arriving early afternoon and walking with purpose through the center of town—Main Street being the only street that really constituted “downtown”—past Duffy's Hardware, Antonio's Italian Bakery, and Sunshine Cleaners on the left; St. John's Episcopal, Shea's Tavern, and the Little French Bridal Shop

on the right, leading on to the two-pump service station, just before the rise in the road that led to Elmhurst. Clutching the key the estate lawyer had sent her by FedEx, she had lingered for a moment in front of the trussed-up window of the bridal shop, taking in the puffed-up skirt and ivory satin corset of the showpiece dress, a mannequin's hand splayed out to the side, her head tilted slightly up and back in a pose of effortless elegance.

"I'm never getting married," Larisa had declared before continuing on her way, suitcase in hand. She said this frankly, without bitterness. Despite the looming pressure of turning forty the following summer, marriage was not on her mind. She hadn't had the burning desire, as some women had, she knew, to walk triumphantly down that aisle, tie that proverbial knot, fuse herself to another until death did her part. But given the fallout from her recent fight with Brent—the things she had said, those unforgivable things—her status as single *did* suddenly feel much more final. And now, as she approached the house, the rise and fall of its great lawn mimicking the undulating ocean beyond, she felt a tinge of sadness, a longing for things to be in alignment. But then, she reasoned, she always felt an attack of nostalgia when she came home—not to the actual childhood home she had shared with her parents—but to this, her hometown, and to the house owned, until now, by Aunt Ursula.

She gripped the key more tightly as she stepped slowly up the sweeping drive, aware of the house peering down. The great elm for which the house was named arched up around her, its boughs gray brown and sleek, like the curve of a woman's neck turning to look. Larisa could hear the roar and hiss of the ocean, which lay beyond the lawn to the back and

left side of the house. She smelled the salty air and was reminded of her father walking the craggy bluff overlooking the sea, its edges bordered with beach roses, their round buds and splayed leaves like royal crowns, the air around them in spring and summer always infused with that strong, sweet smell.

“Rosa Rugosa,” he’d sing, referring to the Latin name of the shrubs, “there’s no Rosa Rugosa here. Who’s she?”

Larisa, as a small child, would giggle and skip ahead, plucking a flower, sucking in its delicious fragrance. But it wasn’t spring now, and though she could smell the ocean and could feel its mist on her cheeks, she couldn’t smell the beach roses; they weren’t in bloom. Instead the air smelled musty, of wet leaves tinged with the smoky ash of chimney fires. Sniffing and surveying the landscape, Larisa felt vaguely pleased, as she often did in the fall, that her auburn hair blended so nicely with the autumn leaves, their burnt orange and golden hues contrasting sharply with the clear crisp blue of the sky. Still, the air was just a little too cool, cooler than was comfortable, causing her to hunch her shoulders beneath her camel-colored wool coat.

She paused on the stoop. It felt so odd to be arriving for the first time without her great-aunt to greet her. Larisa had been back for the gathering after the funeral, of course, but the atmosphere had been different then. At age ninety-six, Aunt Ursula had lived a very full life. She’d gone quietly in her sleep, hadn’t endured months of pain and suffering, hadn’t broken her hip or contracted pneumonia. And so the mood had been respectful but not quite as somber as it might have been. There was a full turnout—the butcher, the baker, and yes, the candlestick maker—and everyone had stories to tell, either about Aunt Ursula or about not much at all. Larisa,

perched on the arm of the couch, next to her parents, had found it hard not to laugh at how predictably provincial it all seemed. *This town is full of people making shit chat*, Aunt Ursula would say. You mean chitchat, the family would correct her. No, she meant idle *shit chat*. The funeral reception had been nothing but: commentary on the weather, the newly paved roads, the traffic light that had finally been put in at Four Corners. And even some actual *shit chat* about the new septic system going in under the library, the original pipes from 1910 having been infiltrated by a full system of tree roots from the neighboring maple. So much *shit chat*, they didn't know how not to be full of it anymore. It went on for hours—the new cement subfloor being poured at the police station, the skylights cut into the roof of city hall, the new fire hydrants installed up and down Main Street, the family of squirrels that had to be ousted from the barn attached to the historical society, what a ruckus they had made, squirrels being so family-oriented.

It went on like this all afternoon and into early evening until it became almost Zen-like for Larisa. Closing her eyes and leaning into the couch, she felt herself falling into a *shit chat* trance, settling into the hum around her, absorbing the buzz without really hearing the words. Then, finally, the clock in the front hall struck five and people collected their casserole dishes and apple pie plates and took the cue to head home to dinner. And after the crowd had thinned out, after the leftovers—cookies, cut vegetables, tea sandwiches—had been sealed up under plastic wrap, that was when she had gotten the ring: a square-cut sapphire encircled by diamonds, handed to her unceremoniously by her father, knowing Aunt Ursula, his father's younger sister, had been anything but sentimental about the family jewels.

“She would have wanted you to have it,” he said.

“Would she?” Larisa gave him a half grin, eyebrows raised.

He had shrugged. “Well, who else would we give it to?”

Then he padded back down the hallway to the study, where he continued sorting through Ursula’s papers.

Now, as she slotted the key into the lock, pushed open the heavy oak door, and passed over the threshold into the foyer, the place seemed very still. Too still, even for Aunt Ursula’s liking. Larisa would know, for she had visited almost every week from the time she had turned ten, when she was old enough not to be a nuisance, and until she turned seventeen and headed off to college. This house, once so familiar to her and now mostly just nostalgic, had a feeling about it that she couldn’t find anywhere else, reminding her a bit of the industrial age, a bit of the board game Clue. Not quite as ornate, not quite as British, but with the same formal layout: a grand winding staircase leading to the second floor, a large living room to the left with a camel-back sofa and an upright piano, a stately dining room to the right. There were skylarks in the front-hall wallpaper, a bathroom under the stairs, an old-fashioned ice grinder mounted on the wall of the prep kitchen, a stack of metal blueberry buckets Larisa had once used on berry-gathering trips as a child with her babysitter and the other neighborhood kids. A butler’s pantry, a laundry chute, a formal library with a rolling ladder on a metal track. There was even a conservatory, like in the game, a great glassed-in greenhouse sort of thing where, usually, sat Aunt Ursula herself—her hair pinned up, her eyes the color of French lentils—eating quiche or lemon yogurt, blanched asparagus or deviled eggs, the things that nobody ever ate anymore. There were bells wired into the walls for the maids,

and even though Larisa knew those bells didn't work anymore, she liked to push them just to see if anyone would come running. Nobody ever did.

She moved up the stairs now, her eyes meeting those of her ancestors displayed in framed photos hung on the wall that followed the staircase up. A young man in a frilled shirt and knickers, a pert smile teasing the corners of his lips. A group of three girls, sisters, mounted on tall horses, arranged by height. There were some newer photos mixed with the old—an overhead shot taken from the rooftop at a family reunion; a shot of Larisa herself, her arms around Aunt Ursula. Then came one of Larisa's favorites: a sepia photograph in an oval frame, featuring a small girl in a white dress with long puffed sleeves, her hands folded neatly on her lap, a quiet expression on her tiny face, an enormous bow in her cascading hair. Larisa imagined it—the hair—to be red, like her own. Her eyes flitted back to the three girls on horses, their adult faces already beginning to emerge. She paused, thinking. Hers had been a family of strong women. Women who spoke in formal niceties and euphemisms but still always managed to get what they wanted. When Aunt Ursula called to say it was a shame she hadn't seen Larisa in several weeks, that meant Larisa was to come over immediately to pay her respects. When Grandmother Lydia, who had died much younger than her older sister-in-law, commented that Cousin Edward certainly had a healthy appetite at dinner, that meant he was overindulging. Was she a strong woman as well? Larisa didn't know. But exploring the house, running her finger along the brass bedposts, flicking the curtain tassels, palming the glass paperweights, she knew one thing: she could pretend to be strong even if she wasn't.

Working her way back downstairs, scanning the wall again, she paused for a moment to take in a photo of her parents, fingers entwined, emerging from the church on their wedding day, gazing deeply, lovingly, at each other as they still often did. Her father was dressed in a full morning suit with a top hat, her mother in a classic long-sleeved gown, clutching a modest bouquet in her free hand.

Larisa swallowed. *I want my mother*, she thought, and then inwardly chastised herself for the childish yearning. Her parents felt so distant, and not just in proximity, her mother having battled dementia now for several years, her father the sole caretaker with limited support from their retirement community in New Hampshire. Larisa knew she was partly to blame for the distance. She didn't visit as much as she ought; she didn't offer the support she should. But she didn't want to admit it was happening. She couldn't stand to see her mother deteriorate and fumble for words. Her mother, who had always been so caring, so capable. Larisa felt a surge of anger that she—Larisa—had no one left to care for her but herself. Then she felt immediate guilt. Thank goodness her father was so patient, so kind. Larisa could never live up to the level of care he provided. She didn't have to, did she? She was the child, not the spouse.

She left the photos behind and headed down the stairs to the dining room. She smiled, as she always did, at the wallpaper: a heavy navy blue imprinted with a repeating pattern of tan and white pheasants glancing over their shoulders, apprehensive. The pheasants looked so silly, startled out of their forward momentum, that she couldn't help but laugh. But her smile shrunk when she turned the corner and spotted a large strip of the paper peeling away from the wall above the

fireplace, dangling like the tongue on a cartoon dog. “Crap,” she whispered to herself. If her mother had been more with it, it was the sort of project they might have tackled together, a mother-daughter do-it-yourself special. Fixing up the house and taking occupancy. But no, it was too big to manage. Best to just make the repairs and sell the place. So, after balancing on a chair and trying, to no avail, to press the paper back into place, she gathered her things, headed outside, and tramped back down the hill toward Duffy’s Hardware, where she hoped to find some wallpaper glue.

She’d almost made it there when, partway through Main Street, her gaze alighted once again on the mannequin in the window of the bridal shop. She stopped and peered in. The model’s hand, she noticed now, had been painted with a pale pink French manicure and she had a faux diamond adorning her delicately raised ring finger. Larisa snickered, yet something took hold of her, a mischievous and imposturous side of herself that had recently been surfacing, to her surprise and delight. Wouldn’t it be fun, just for a laugh, she thought, to take a peek at those dresses? To pretend for a moment that she was that mannequin or even her own mother, pre-illness, skipping down the steps of the church? How did one feel, she wondered, wearing such a dress? She suspected she’d feel ridiculous, pompous, and over-plumed, like a peacock. But no one would have to know she wasn’t serious. Would she dare? She sucked in a breath and smiled to herself. Yes, she would.

And so this was how Larisa found herself with her hand on the doorknob deciding, to her own amusement, that perhaps she *would* go in and try on some dresses, just for the heck of it, why not, what else did she have to do? The wallpaper

could wait. And so she stepped in, a little bell tinkling as she pushed open the door, and before she knew it, she stood directly in front of Mrs. Muldoon, her eighth-grade English teacher, who, with clipboard and pen in hand, seemed to be taking inventory. Larisa stood frozen, acutely aware that *now* was the time for escape. But then Mrs. Muldoon took down her glasses, letting them drop on a chain against her bosom. Looking a little perturbed or maybe just befuddled, she lifted her gaze to her customer.

“I’m sorry,” stammered Larisa. “You weren’t expecting me. I guess I’m supposed to have an appointment for this kind of thing.” Though it was dim in her mind, Larisa must have heard at some point that Mrs. Muldoon had retired from teaching to open up a bridal shop, and so she wasn’t quite as surprised as she might have been when Mrs. Muldoon’s eyes lit up in recognition and she jettisoned the clipboard to smother Larisa in an all-encompassing hug.

“Not for a local like Larisa Pearl!” she crooned. “Honey, how *are* you? I’d heard you might be back, but my word, look at you. Larisa Pearl on *my* front stoop. Don’t just stand there—come in!”

Larisa took a step forward so that she stood in the center of the room. The shop was small and square with a display case toward the back and dresses hanging all around the perimeter, some long and sleek, others puffed and gauzy, most of them some tone of creamy off-white. One corner featured a small collection of mother-of-the-bride and bridesmaid dresses—maroons, salmons, teals—while the other displayed an assortment of veils—lacy, piped, patterned.

“Well, I’m not really *back*.” Larisa struggled to release herself from Mrs. Muldoon’s hug.

“Timmy O’Leary saw you coming off the train this afternoon—he and I both get coffee after lunch at Antonio’s—and somehow, don’t ask me how, I knew you’d be by. I had a full-on premonition.” Mrs. Muldoon stepped back and stood grinning at Larisa, hands on hips. “I just *knew* you’d come visit me at the shop.”

Larisa nodded, trying to look noncommittal, not sure whether to blow her cover so soon.

“The gowns, are they actually French?” she asked, glancing around.

Mrs. Muldoon waved her hand in the air as if swatting a fly. “Oh, no, no, that’s just a gimmick to get people in the front door.”

They stood there for a moment, facing each other, while Larisa took it all in, her gaze starting at one corner of the shop and working around to the other.

“So many,” said Larisa, not knowing what else to say.

Mrs. Muldoon flattened her palms in front of her and pumped them up and down as though halting a moving vehicle. “Now don’t panic. It can be overwhelming. But don’t worry, I can *absolutely* find something perfect for your special day. I have a knack for finding the right dress.”

“No, no—” Larisa started again, but Mrs. Muldoon cut her off.

“Larisa Pearl is getting married!” she chanted, hopping in place on her medium-heeled pumps. “*Larisa Pearl* is getting married.”

“Well, no, actually, I’m really just taking a peek at the dresses,” Larisa tried to correct her, but Mrs. Muldoon wasn’t listening.

“Did you bring a slip? A strapless bra?” Larisa stared, con-

templating how to get herself out of the situation, as Mrs. Muldoon waved her hand around in the air again. “No worries, I have extra.” And before Larisa could protest, Mrs. Muldoon had ushered her around the display case, down a small hallway, and into an oversize dressing room, pressing the loaned lingerie and a terry-cloth robe into her arms.

“Just put these on and I’ll bring in some dresses. Do you have any clippings of what you might like?”

Larisa shook her head.

“That’s OK. I’ll bring an assortment.”

And before she knew it, she was going through with this charade, stepping out of her boots and wool skirt and into the lacy undergarments. There was something, thought Larisa as she stood there nearly naked, about being in your underwear—or someone else’s underwear, really—in front of a relative stranger, that gave one a false sense of intimacy. So she stood there in the borrowed bra and slip and let herself be carried away by Mrs. Muldoon’s enthusiasm. What harm, she thought, could really come of it?

“I’ve always imagined planning my perfect wedding,” Larisa said, “but I didn’t think I’d find a dress shop so close to home.” This wasn’t true, of course. Larisa had never dreamed about planning any wedding, and certainly not a fairy-tale one; she’d barely given it much thought at all. Why was she doing this? She couldn’t explain and yet she couldn’t stop. She felt vaguely aware that she was avoiding the conflict, as she often did, but that wasn’t her only hesitation. She liked the release she got, the escape. It felt incredibly liberating, really, to play this impersonation of herself.

“Well, you were so smart to wait, honey.” Mrs. Muldoon’s voice carried over the wall to the dressing room. Larisa could

hear her sliding hangers and gathering the dresses from the racks. “My Sally, God love her, she’s happy with her five kids—two of them teenagers!—but she’s forty pounds overweight and working part-time as a travel agent. That’s what happens when you get married too young.”

Larisa nodded. She remembered Sally, who had been in her year at school. They’d been friends, of sorts, sharing some of the same classes and occasionally sitting together at lunch.

Mrs. Muldoon poked her head into the dressing room and deposited some dresses onto a tufted ottoman that was pushed against the wall. She prodded Larisa into standing on a small footstool that faced the mirror. “But you, look at *your* figure. Just like when you were homecoming queen.”

Larisa felt more than a little unsettled that Mrs. Muldoon remembered her days as homecoming queen at KC High. She had forgotten how insular things could be in a small town, everything stuck in time. She had been embarrassed about the homecoming queen thing, hadn’t seen it coming at all. She had been popular, she supposed, but not the type to attend sporting events or run for class office, organize dances and car washes and field day. More academic than most kids and quieter, too.

But before she could react, Mrs. Muldoon presented her with the first dress and gestured for her to step in. It had a textured top and faux feather skirt that fluffed out around her ankles, all of it tinted a light peach. Looking at herself, Larisa was reminded of an ostrich puppet she’d seen years ago at an amusement park, a man with a leather cap manipulating the strings so that the ostrich bounced along the sidewalk, its head bobbling from side to side, a ridiculous pink grin sewed across its felted face.

Mrs. Muldoon weighed in quickly. “Don’t think so, do you? A little too much Zsa Zsa and not enough Gabor, if you know what I mean.”

Larisa didn’t quite know what she meant, but she agreed the dress was not right.

The next one was revealed—a sparkly Cinderella skirt with sweetheart neckline and spaghetti straps. Mrs. Muldoon helped Larisa step into it and zipped up the back. She tugged on the straps and pulled at the bodice until it was adjusted the way that she liked. When Larisa turned to face herself in the mirror, she didn’t think it was too bad—perhaps a bit young and certainly too prima ballerina, but then that was the look. Mrs. Muldoon had her own assessment.

“Oh, hello—Glinda the Good Witch, anyone? I wouldn’t let you do *that* to yourself. Speaking of which . . . honey, it’s been so long. What *have* you been doing with yourself? Something wildly successful, I’m sure.” She deposited herself on the ottoman, among the dresses, chin on fist, elbow on knee, and waited for Larisa to undress.

“Sotheby’s,” Larisa answered tentatively. She had actually recently been fired from Sotheby’s, but it hadn’t quite sunk in yet. “House Sales and Private Collections.”

Mrs. Muldoon nodded and gathered the discarded dress in her arms. “Such a jet-setter.”

Larisa’s five years at Sotheby’s had *not* involved much jet-setting. She’d been to London once for the annual meeting, but that was about it. Still, she wasn’t against giving the impression of a thriving and dynamic career.

Mrs. Muldoon sprung up from the ottoman and started to sing again. “Larisa Pearl is getting married, married, married. Oh, honey, I’m just so happy for you.”

Larisa smiled stiffly from her pedestaled position and once again considered setting things straight. But how, now that she'd gone this far? And anyway, Mrs. Muldoon seemed to be enjoying herself. Why ruin the woman's fun? She descended from her perch and allowed herself to be unzipped.

The next set of gowns were stiff and creamy, like meringue—an off-white number with sculpted curves in the skirt, reminding Larisa of an almond macaroon, and another with folds like ribbon candy, a third with a fishtail skirt. Mrs. Muldoon fussed with each one before dismissing them, all the while asking questions and often providing her own answers about Larisa's big day.

"And where will you have it? Oh, of course! At the house." Mrs. Muldoon clasped her hands in front of her chin, her eyes sparkling. "Elmhurst. I heard she'd left it to you, the poor dear."

"Well, no, to my parents, actually, but—"

Mrs. Muldoon gasped. "Oh, how *are* your parents? June and Ward Cleaver. That's how I always thought of Clark and Kittie. So happily married."

An image flashed through Larisa's mind from the last time she'd visited her parents—a dirty sponge floating in a half-cleaned toilet because her mother's mind had wandered mid-task. Her father, as usual, had stepped in to deal with it when Larisa had hesitated. God, she'd been a terrible daughter. How hard was it to remove a dirty sponge from the toilet?

"They're fine," answered Larisa, bluffing. "Busy as ever. Hiking in the Himalayas." She hoped Mrs. Muldoon didn't notice her hesitation, the telltale to her lie. She'd talked with very few people about her mother's illness, and she didn't feel like letting the whole town in on it just yet.

Luckily, Mrs. Muldoon went on without pause. “Always so active, those two, it’s amazing!”

Until relatively recently, Clark and Kittie had still lived nearby in the modest center-entrance Colonial in which Larisa had grown up. Larisa’s father, a public interest lawyer specializing in nonprofits, was well-known among the community. Larisa had memories of him sitting with local families, seeing them at church. A pat on the knee, a shake of the hand. *How’re you holding up now, Charlie? Come by for a cup of coffee. You know Kittie—she always has a loaf of banana bread or some such thing coming out of the oven.* Several years earlier, they’d sold their house and moved to a retirement community in southern New Hampshire. The move had been planned for years, the community chosen long ago for its golf course and indoor pool and proximity to the lake house where they had sometimes summered. But not long after the move, Kittie, who had always been so organized, had begun to falter, her short-term memory failing first. She left the house to water the plants and forgot the meat loaf in the oven. She paid some bills twice and didn’t pay others at all. She couldn’t remember the place she’d left off on her knitting and so they would find her wringing the yarn over and over in her hands, trying to locate an entry point. No, Kittie couldn’t manage in a house the way she once had. With her condition ever worsening, there had been talk of relocating them to Elmhurst. Larisa hadn’t told her father yet, but she was against this. The house was huge, much too much for them to manage. No. Elmhurst needed a little fixing up and then they could sell it. People would be shocked, she knew, but really, they had no other choice.

Mrs. Muldoon had taken a break from the dresses and had entered into full-on inquisition mode.

“When will it be? Have you set the date?” Her eyes had grown wide, almost manic in anticipation. And Larisa, seeing Mrs. Muldoon so caught up in the moment, had been compelled to answer tentatively, “June?” which caused Mrs. Muldoon to clap her hands together and nod vigorously. “Nothing more perfect than a June wedding. Next June, of course? That only gives you”—she counted on her fingers—“October, November, December . . . eight months or so to plan.” She rested her hand on Larisa’s arm. “But don’t worry, it’s enough.”

Then she suddenly clutched Larisa’s hand—she must have spotted Aunt Ursula’s ring—and began pulling on her finger to get a better look.

“Oh,” she gushed, her eyes gleaming, “oh, he has *fabulous* taste.”

Larisa felt like she really ought to explain that this was Aunt Ursula’s ring, not something Brent had picked out, but Mrs. Muldoon, her focus unwavering, had begun to home in.

“Tell me about him. No, wait, let me guess. Tall, dark, easy on the eyes?”

Larisa nodded.

“Well, he’d have to be to land someone like you.”

Brent hadn’t exactly landed Larisa. She’d met him by chance two years earlier when she’d come up one day for a visit to Elmhurst. Aunt Ursula had just settled down for her late-afternoon nap when Larisa, standing by the upper hallway window, spotted Brent swinging on ropes through the old elm. Larisa knew Aunt Ursula hired an arborist every year to tend to the trees, but she had never seen one at work before. She watched, undetected, for over an hour as he hoisted himself into the treetops and positioned himself to

delicately remove dead limbs and decaying bark. She'd been so fascinated by his work, both the idea of it—the removal of lifeless branches to make room for new growth—and the precision and care it involved. She stood transfixed as he maneuvered around in his harness, pulling saws and drills up on a rope, wiring some branches together and allowing others to fall to the ground. He wasn't tall or dark. Instead he was much stockier than most of the men she had dated, but he did have a rugged handsomeness about him, his shaggy blond hair curling boyishly at the ends. She watched him pack up at the end of the day and just when he was headed toward his truck to leave, she noticed a forgotten tool lying hidden in the grass. She hurried down the stairs and out the front door to retrieve it.

"Wait," she called after him. "You forgot this . . . this . . . What *is* this?" She held up the tool, which looked something like a ripsaw, only smaller and curved. The initials B. U. D. had been branded into the wooden handle.

The tree man swiveled and came back up the driveway. "Oh, thanks. It's a pruning saw." He took it from her and slid it into a sheath on his tool belt.

"I'm Larisa," she told him. "Are you Bud?"

The man laughed and fingered the letters on the saw. "No, Brent, actually. Brent Dempsey. Those are just my initials. My father stamped them there for me. He was the only one who did call me Bud, ever since I was a little kid."

He began to tear up and he wiped a sleeve across his eyes.

"Forgive me," he said, taking a deep inhale and letting it go. "My father is no longer with us, but he taught me everything I know about trees. Some days it still hits me."

“Of course,” said Larisa. She hadn’t seen many men express their emotions so openly, and it touched her. “I’m so sorry. How did you lose him?”

“Heart attack, when I was nineteen. It’s been over fifteen years already, but sometimes I still cry like a baby.”

“Oh, that’s tough,” answered Larisa. She thought of her mother, the disease beginning to take hold. “You must miss him.”

Brent nodded. “People say a sudden death like a heart attack is better than watching a loved one suffer, but I wish I had gotten the chance to say goodbye.”

Here Larisa swallowed. She’d have the chance to say goodbye, but she’d also have to witness some suffering. She wasn’t sure how well she’d handle it.

“Hey,” she said. “You wouldn’t want to grab a cup of coffee, would you?”

Brent shot her a shy smile and glanced at his watch. “How about dinner instead? I’ll go clean myself up and come back in about an hour?”

They went to dinner, where he talked more about losing his father. He had hoped to go to college—the first in his family—but his father’s death forced him to get a job to support his mother and two younger brothers. With his mother so distraught, he’d practically raised his brothers, he’d said. He’d wept openly when he talked about it—the void his father had left, the strain it put on him to grow up quickly. Great heaving sobs shook his entire body as he spoke, and it struck Larisa that Brent was the first man who had let himself be truly vulnerable in front of her. He understood, she felt, something about what she was going through, and it all grew from there.

Before she knew it, they'd been together for almost two years, living in a two-bedroom apartment in Somerville.

At first it was great. Brent was attentive and caring; he liked to surprise her with breakfast in bed or a fistful of flowers when she arrived home from work. She loved how down-to-earth he was. He almost never wore anything dressier than a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt, and he wasn't obsessed with achievement the way many of her grad school friends were. He smoked a little weed, which she didn't love, but it wasn't the worst vice as far as vices went. And he adored her at a time when she felt a yearning for affection.

"It was fate," he'd say, "meeting you that day. Like my father was watching from above. If I hadn't left that saw behind, I never would have met you. Somehow we were just meant to be together."

At times it had seemed liked fate, just what Larisa needed to help her navigate her mother's burgeoning illness. But after a while she felt trapped by his words. What if they *weren't* meant to be together? And what did that even mean? *Were* some people actually meant to be together? Brent was sweet, sensitive, and she'd grown fond of him, sure, but if pressed, she'd have admitted that her heart wasn't fully in it. He was almost too fawning, giving his affection so freely that she felt she hadn't earned it. She felt stifled, unseen. She wasn't sure he really knew her at all; he'd just fallen in love with some idea of her. And his continual insistence on fate began to grate on her. He began talking about buying a ring, settling down; she hedged and asked for time to think about it. After that, just his general presence caused her to feel guilty and then resentful so that she found herself

perpetually agitated—unsettled—around him, the way one might feel when wearing a piece of clothing that fit a little too snugly. And so, their recent fight and subsequent breakup had been a culmination of an entire year of discord. Small bouts of bickering had slowly grown more frequent until it seemed like every encounter ended with a quarrel. They'd both been working long hours and they hadn't slept together in months, though she couldn't be sure which had started happening first. Were they working so hard that they had no energy left for intimacy or were they working too hard on purpose, to avoid getting close, afraid of confronting the gulf between them? Larisa suspected the latter. She knew she should end it, and yet she wasn't sure how. She couldn't bear to break his heart.

Then one day, after a particularly difficult visit with her parents—*I hate you*, her mother had declared for seemingly no reason at all—Larisa had arrived home to find the kitchen a mess, Brent's work boots and jacket strewn across the floor, spaghetti sauce dripping down the side of the stove. This wasn't typical of Brent, she knew, but it struck a nerve and somehow unleashed all the emotion and irritation she'd been holding in. She'd gone ballistic. Larisa herself wasn't prepared for the level of rage that had surged through her. Before she could stop herself, she was screaming obscenities and berating him at the top of her lungs. She grabbed the closest thing in reach—one of the white porcelain dishes from the sideboard—and threw it hard against the floor so that the little pieces scattered everywhere. Then she threw another and another and another while Brent just stood there gaping, bewildered. And despite the mess she had created—yes, she saw the irony there—Larisa felt an absolutely incredible release.

This fight was symptomatic of the whole mismatch of their relationship. And it felt so good to break something, so satisfying to see the clean white porcelain strewn all over the muddied linoleum. God, she was just so sick of holding it all together. She would have kept on throwing, too, had she not gathered herself for a moment and counted the remaining dishes to make sure she had enough left for a dinner party of eight. Anyway, suffice to say, it was over with Brent.

But thankfully, Mrs. Muldoon wasn't asking about him anymore. She had produced another set of dresses, which Larisa dutifully slipped on, each rejected in turn by Mrs. Muldoon. Dress after dress, a dozen more at least, until Larisa began feeling like she would probably be there all afternoon. The act of undressing and redressing became a comforting ritual, a way to perpetually reinvent herself. Larisa began to imagine someone new in every dress. Was this the Larisa Pearl she knew and loved? Or this one? Or how about her?

And then, just as Larisa was settling into the rhythm of it, just as she had started to depend on it, they arrived at the last dress.

"Just one dress left," Mrs. Muldoon whispered, shifting her weight from side to side.

Larisa felt a very brief feeling of panic flicker through her. What if it wasn't right? What if she had gone through all the dresses and not one of them was a match? Of course, she hadn't forgotten that she didn't actually need a dress. But still, didn't everyone talk about finding *the* dress? She'd never been the sort of person to care about finding *the* dress. And yet, after all this, how would she feel if she couldn't find one?

Mrs. Muldoon seemed entirely unconcerned. She had

dragged the ottoman over behind Larisa and now stood on it, her mouth full of bobby pins. She began securing Larisa's hair into an elegant twist.

"Sometimes it just helps to have the hair up. It completes the look."

Larisa turned her back to the mirror as Mrs. Muldoon removed the last dress from the protective garment bag and helped Larisa step into it.

"This designer is known for his beading." Mrs. Muldoon pulled the top this way and that, smoothed out the skirt. She assessed the last dress silently with a self-satisfied smile as she gently swiveled Larisa to face herself.

Larisa gasped. The dress had a simple scoop neck constructed of cream-colored lace bordered with tiny gray pearls. This top connected seamlessly to a fitted bodice ornamented with dainty silver-cut beads arranged in small florets in a delicate vining pattern that worked its way down through the waist. The dress hugged her hips and then flared out to a full tulle skirt that swept the floor as she walked, which she had begun to do, Mrs. Muldoon having extended a hand to help her off the footstool. She swiveled and shimmied and spun in front of the mirror, peering over at her smiling reflection. She felt elegant, regal, dignified. Something about it brought things into focus for her. She began to see herself, really see herself in a way she hadn't in a long time. Yes, *this* was the Larisa Pearl she knew and loved. And yet, simultaneously, the Larisa Pearl she dreamed of becoming. No, she hadn't expected it at all, but the dress was perfect.

Mrs. Muldoon came and fastened a light veil to the top of her head and together they exited the dressing room, Mrs. Muldoon holding the train of the dress as Larisa began to

step solemnly around the shop. Mrs. Muldoon started to softly hum and then sing the "Wedding March."

"Here comes the bride, all dressed in white . . ." Da da da da-da, dum deedley dee do do . . ." She fussed with the veil, fanning it out so that it fluttered gently behind as Larisa circled the store. They made their way around like this several times before stepping back into the dressing room and onto the footstool, where Larisa faced herself once again. Her feelings of recognition had only intensified. Standing there, stunned, her eyes met those of Mrs. Muldoon full on for what seemed like the first time all afternoon. She held the gaze, Mrs. Muldoon aglow, Larisa herself buzzing with excitement.

When they could hold the silence no longer, it was Larisa who finally spoke.

"Larisa Pearl is getting married," she whispered, a soft smile spreading slowly across her face.