

ALL THE RIGHT
MISTAKES

A NOVEL



LAURA JAMISON



SHE WRITES PRESS

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*For every mom who has ever felt
she is doing it the wrong way*

PROLOGUE



12:15 PM, Sept. 1

Elizabeth: *DEFCON 5*

Carmen: Um, you know that DEFCON 5 is like the good one? Peace breaking out everywhere? Also, glad to see you figured out texting. Welcome to the 21st century.

Elizabeth: FINE, Carmen. DEFCON 1.

Carmen: OK, I'll bite. Did William finally go behind your back and repaint the living room the wrong gray?

Elizabeth: I'm just going to leave this here.

<https://www.FLASHbooks.com/The-Four-BIG-Mistakes-of-Women-Who-Will-Never-Lead-or-Win/download>

The Four BIG Mistakes of Women Who Will Never Lead or Win
Hardback/FLASHReader - September 1

by Heather Hall, COO, FLASH.com and CEO, The Hall Family

This sure-to-be runaway hit is a must-have for all women looking to get ahead in a man's world. FLASH executive Heather Hall has been there, done that—and so have her closest friends. Drawing on all their collective experience, she reveals a distinctive set of mistakes women make that ultimately sabotage their careers—and their lives.

Don't be another mistake—purchase Heather's book in a FLASH! This book can be purchased with the Official Book Circle Conversation Guide.

Carmen: I don't have time to read Heather's crap. I'm busy actually being a mom instead of writing about how fabulous I am in the workplace. I mean, whatever. Good for her.

Sara: Hey! Some of us have to work, Carmen. Be nice.

Carmen: OK, you know I don't mean you and Elizabeth. That's different. I'm sorry, but you can't be a superstar executive, wife, mom, and an author on top of it. I'm not buying it.

Sara: Carmen, I'm sure she has lots of help. We should try not to be so judgmental. It's great that one of us is so successful.

Carmen: I don't accept your definition of success.

Sara: 🙄

Martha: While you guys were busy bickering, I clicked the link and started reading—not good.

Elizabeth: Right?! Sara, what's the emoji for "Holy shit, I can't believe I defended this bitch all these years?"

Carmen: Did Elizabeth Smith just say the "b" word? You have my full attention, and I'm finding the book right now.

MARCH

A decorative flourish consisting of a thin, elegant line that starts from the bottom of the letter 'A', curves to the left, then sweeps across the bottom of the word, and ends with a small, tight spiral on the right side.

HEATHER



From: Heather Hall <heather.hall@flash.com>

Sent: Mon. 3/2 5:17 a.m.

To: Elizabeth Smith <esmith@gmail.com>

Subject: Girls' Weekend

So I got your message about doing our annual girls' weekend in June. I'd love to do it, but this year I have to pass. I can't tell you all the details, but I have a project in the works that may completely transform my career. I know that sounds melodramatic (even for me), but this project is really special. It should be ready in September if everything goes to plan.

I feel really bad that I can't get away this year. Would you let me treat you, Carmen, Martha, and Sara to a week at my Carmel cottage? You know what, I'm not letting you guys say no. The tickets are on their way.

Love and kisses,

Heather

P.S. Any news on the baby front? I have my fingers crossed for you. I know that this will be the year you get everything you want! No one deserves it more than you.

ELIZABETH



Elizabeth's fingers hovered over her keyboard as she considered whether to reply to Heather's message. She was really disappointed that Heather was backing out of their girls' weekend. Heather was one of her oldest friends, and Elizabeth had spent the whole winter looking forward to their getaway with their other three college friends, Carmen, Martha, and Sara.

She would e-mail Heather later. She needed to get her head in the game today. The Old Man and Joe had invited her to lunch, and she suspected something was in the works. It felt like it was one of those days, a day when something happened that changed the arc of things. Elizabeth's world as a big firm attorney was characterized by long stretches of tedious, hard work punctuated by the rare day that brought a big win (or loss). A new client. A big deal. A breakup. A promotion.

Elizabeth had taken the time this morning to pick out her most flattering suit, straighten her fine, brown hair that she kept cut in a sharp bob, and apply a little more than her normal five-minute makeup. She hated that how she looked was an integral part of her success, but that's the ways things were, and she didn't see it changing anytime soon. She felt she was doing well enough in that department, though. The baby weight was nearly all off after months of coffee for breakfast, a salad for lunch, and the promise of a half bottle of wine on Friday if she kept it together during the week.

Elizabeth pushed back from her desk and headed for the elevator. Walking down the hall, she mentally prepared for the conversation that was to come. As she closed in on the elevator bank, Kenny strode out of his office and sidled up next to her.

“Hey, lucky,” he said with a smile. “Nice break on the office. I thought they would give it to me, but I’m happy with my spot. And I’m sure it makes them look good to have a woman in the corner office. I don’t mean that as an insult at all. You understand.”

“No offense taken,” Elizabeth replied, doing her best to mask her mild annoyance. She had developed an incredibly thick skin over the years, and it took way more than a comment like that to insult her. Getting the Old Man’s corner office was no guarantee that she would be getting the Old Man’s work or responsibility. It was just an office, after all.

Elizabeth added, “Sorry, I actually don’t have time to chat. I’m late to lunch with the Old Man and Joe.”

“Oh, didn’t he tell you? I’m tagging along. I wonder if they’ve decided to pick a new cochair.”

Hmm, thought Elizabeth. She had expected that the lunch would be an opportunity for the Old Man to dispense some of his famous “wisdom” on his way out, but it was equally plausible that with his departure they might decide to elevate someone to cochair the corporate transactions team with Joe. *But surely they would be speaking to us privately on something that important*, thought Elizabeth. If Kenny was coming along, it must be something else. And she doubted Kenny was in the running, a guy five years her junior, no matter how good everyone thought he was.

“I think it’s just a friendly lunch, Kenny,” replied Elizabeth calmly. “I wouldn’t make too much of it.” As they walked together toward the elevators, Elizabeth decided that she actually felt a little bad for Kenny. If they were really promoting someone, it was going to be her, and Kenny would be disappointed. Elizabeth supposed Kenny had a shot, but, in her heart, she felt certain she had the leg up, and not just because she had more experience. She was also confident that she was the better attorney. Kenny was good, too, but a lot of the big successes Kenny was known for were a result of Elizabeth’s leading the team. He wasn’t a

particularly bad guy; in fact, he could be a lot of fun to work with, but he had a knack for hogging the credit. Elizabeth figured everyone knew who the real brains of the operation was, so she never drew any attention to it. Firm life was hard enough without making unnecessary enemies.

A few minutes later, they both pulled into the valet at Harbor House. The Old Man and Joe were waiting in the lobby.

The Old Man kind of still had it, Elizabeth had to admit. His six-foot-four frame was leaning over the hostess stand, and he was doing that thing where he made you feel like you were the only person in the room. That hostess was a goner. She was laughing at whatever he was whispering in her ear and tilting her head just so.

Poor Joe, on the other hand, would never get the time of day from that type of woman. A bull in a china shop, a good half foot shorter and half foot wider than the Old Man, and with less than half of what the Old Man had up top.

“Hey, it’s my dream team!” the Old Man boomed as he shook Kenny’s hand and turned to envelop Elizabeth in a hug. “I know you are going to miss me—don’t try to hide it. Especially you, Elizabeth honey. My right-hand gal!”

Elizabeth wanted to be annoyed, but she felt a rush of pleasure at the compliment, hating herself a little bit for her response. *Give me a gold star and I’m all yours*, she thought.

The hostess led them to a round table right at the water’s edge. A waitress scurried over, and the Old Man ordered a steak (rare, the only way it should be eaten, he said with authority). *Really, steak at a seafood restaurant?* thought Elizabeth, but she kept her mouth shut and nodded pleasantly as she ordered her usual salad.

“Your wife must be delighted to have more time with you at home these days,” began Elizabeth politely.

“Are you kidding me?” The Old Man laughed. “A third wife doesn’t want to spend time with you. She wants to spend time with your money.”

Joe and Kenny laughed uproariously as if it was the funniest thing they had heard all month. Elizabeth managed an awkward smile at the old, tired line whose time had come and gone.

“In any case,” the Old Man continued, “this lunch isn’t about me. It’s about the future of our group. Joe and I have some news we would like to share with you.”

Elizabeth stiffened involuntarily. *Crap, maybe Kenny was right. Here it comes*, she thought.

“This is how we see it,” Joe interjected, cutting off the Old Man. “You both are great. And you would both make a great cochair with me.”

Right, Elizabeth thought. *But I am the clear choice.*

“Look,” Joe continued, “we want a modern, fresh take on things, so we are looking hard at the both of you. You both would get it done.”

Well, I certainly would, thought Elizabeth. *Kenny, not so much.*

“Here’s what we are thinking,” Joe went on. “Elizabeth, you are working on Project Greysteel for Grey Corp. There probably isn’t a more important client for the firm.”

“And they will need a new partner to take care of them,” said the Old Man.

Elizabeth was surprised to hear this. Again, she knew the Old Man would be passing that relationship on to someone else. But she thought she had it in the bag. Since when was Kenny in the picture? Greysteel was her deal. Not her client yet, but definitely her deal.

Joe continued, “Elizabeth, I know you are running the merger, but we need Kenny to be brought in now too. I want you two to run it together. Share all key information with him, and run important strategic thinking by him. You guys have always been such a great team. We need to be sure we are covered, okay? Make sense? And we need to know how the client views you both before we make any big decisions.”

She definitely got it. She would do all the hard work per

usual, and Kenny would get the credit. Kenny, the man who had signed her welcome back card after having George as follows: “Hope you had an awesome vacation!”

“Of course,” replied Elizabeth tightly. “I don’t think you gentlemen have anything to worry about in terms of coverage, but I agree we should always function as a team for our clients, and we will continue to do that.”

“And I’m sure it will be helpful to have me around when you have that kid stuff, Elizabeth,” interjected Kenny.

Not cool, Kenny, thought Elizabeth with a little flair of anger. *No, it’s fine*, she told herself. *And it’s not a secret that I’m a mom. Anyway, Joe and the Old Man are smarter than to fall for that shit.*

The food arrived, and Elizabeth was thankful for the interruption. Joe began complaining to the waitress because his tomato looked “just fucking unacceptable.” The Old Man and Kenny started talking about a different deal. Elizabeth ate her salad and prayed that the lunch would conclude quickly.

Elizabeth knew she would swallow her pride and do things on their terms. It’s how she had always done it and why she was still hanging in there at the firm. And there were worse people to be tethered to than Kenny. If he got it, he got it. But that wasn’t going to happen. She was better.

She had to relax. She should put some time into planning the weekend with the girls.

Heather really shouldn’t have cancelled, thought Elizabeth. Sure, Heather operated at a whole different level now than her four old friends, but she should be careful. She was getting so famous now that the four of them might be the only women who would still treat her like a normal person. To them, she would always be a small-town girl from Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, one of a group of five former residents of the left hall of the second floor of the Choates dormitory.

The five of them—Heather, Elizabeth, Carmen, Martha, and Sara—had been a unit since that first day of college more than

twenty years ago. The next years brought new cities, jobs, marriage, and children, all of which conspired to push them apart. Somehow, they managed to remain good friends despite the fact that their lives had unfolded very differently. To be fair, some of them were closer than others. Carmen and Martha had always had an especially close bond. But they continued over the years to find time to be all together as a group.

After more than two decades of friendship, they probably knew each other better than their own spouses knew them, and certainly better than their own children knew them. Women's lives are funny like that. It becomes so easy to forget that girl you were at eighteen. The girl who was ready to set the world on fire, without a glimmer of the compromise and disappointment that was to come. If you are lucky enough to have just one friend to remind you of that girl, you might manage to hold on to a piece of her.

Elizabeth didn't want to forget that part of herself, so she worked hard to stay in touch with her four old friends. Those old friendships felt even more important to her now because she had chosen a profession—law—that seemed to be unique in its ability to wear down a person's confidence and passion. And today was no exception.

In any case, this was the year all the girls were turning forty, and Elizabeth had hoped they could do something extra special to commemorate the occasion—but not a repeat of the Vegas debacle when they had turned thirty (Carmen's idea, of course). It had taken her a week to recover from that particular event. No, they should come up with something more dignified for this milestone.

Maybe she could get Carmen to help. But she knew Carmen would probably come up with an excuse as to why she didn't have time. She had a lot of excuses to choose from. She ran her Gold Coast neighborhood association, entertained frequently for her husband Mark's colleagues and clients, had been the PTA presi-

dent from the second her daughter had started formal schooling, and was now managing the renovation of her and Mark's new vacation home in Lake Geneva. Carmen had the firm belief that she was at least as busy as the other four of them. Elizabeth was dubious (really, unless you had worked in a big job like Elizabeth's, you had no idea how demanding they were), but Carmen was her friend, so she tried to be respectful on the point.

No, whatever her argument, this year's planner had to be Carmen. Elizabeth and Sara were always buried at work, and Martha was days away from giving birth. So it had to be Carmen.

As she finished her salad, Elizabeth's thoughts turned back to Heather's e-mail. It was typical that just as Elizabeth was about to get ahead a step, Heather was "transforming" her career. That's how it always had gone in their friendship. One small step for Elizabeth, one leap forward for Heather.

She would have to ask Heather what she was up to when they saw each other next. Or, more likely, when they e-mailed each other next, since Heather didn't seem to have time for old friends anymore.

Elizabeth wished that she and Heather had stayed as close as Carmen and Martha over the years. But she and Heather both had grueling jobs. She told herself it was just different. And some days she believed that.

CARMEN



Carmen was finally meeting Martha for lunch. Martha had been in Milwaukee just a few months since Robert had moved them and their two boys from Boston so that he could spend the year at Children's Hospital for his newest cancer study. Carmen was delighted that Martha was only an hour drive away now. It had taken all of her patience to wait a few months for this visit to give Martha a chance to settle in.

Carmen and Martha were more than just friends; they were each other's person. In so many ways they were opposites, cold, uptight Martha and fiery Carmen, but the chemistry had worked from the start. For more than twenty years, they shared the puts and takes of their lives, sometimes in person, but more often in daily calls or texts. Strung together, they were a diary of the mundane, hilarious, disappointing, and occasionally even sublime business of marriage and motherhood. And now, after Martha's big move, they could talk in person whenever they wanted to. It was a game changer for their friendship, and the timing felt perfect to Carmen, especially since she had just become an empty nester when her only daughter, Avery, went off to college last September.

Well, it would be perfect timing unless Martha messed it all up. In the last year or so, Martha had been making noises about wanting to go back to work after her baby was born. Carmen had already decided that she wasn't going to let that happen—and this lunch was an intervention.

Carmen knew she had to be subtle. Best not to launch into the importance of being home straight away. Carmen suspected that Martha secretly sided with Heather, Elizabeth, and Sara,

who thought that working was an essential part of staying whole and happy. To Carmen, staying at home was a job in and of itself. And it certainly wasn't a mistake, as Heather had said to Martha at that disaster of a dinner in Chicago several years ago (what a pretentious bitch Heather had been that night). And then there was what happened to Martha after Jack was born and she was trying to work and juggle everything all alone. If Carmen had not intervened then, things would be very different indeed. Carmen hoped she would not have to bring that part up.

Carmen had found a cozy table in the corner and sat waiting for Martha, twirling her wild brown curls that framed a still unlined heart-shaped face. After a few minutes, she saw her old friend waddling in. Carmen couldn't help but giggle. Martha's five-foot-nine frame was skinny absolutely all over save for what looked like a pumpkin hiding under her tunic. That poor girl.

As she carefully lowered herself into the chair, Martha glared at Carmen and said, "Yeah, yeah, go ahead and laugh. Enjoy!"

"Hey, at least your perfect blond ponytail still looks great," Carmen teased. "So how's the rental?"

Exhaling loudly and twisting around looking for a comfortable position that didn't exist, Martha said, "You know, it's actually pretty nice. The houses here are so much bigger for the money than in Boston. Five bedrooms, Sub-Zero fridge, lake view, the works, all for under seven figures. Robert is excited about the school. It's called the University School. I wanted to try public school. Some of the northern suburban school districts like Shorewood and Whitefish Bay are supposed to be really good. That's what Elizabeth says anyway. But Robert thinks we're better off in the bigger house farther north where there are lower taxes so we can afford a private school. I didn't want to fight about it, since the boys are so young. Who knows how long we'll be here anyway."

"Martha, you wouldn't know the first thing about a public

education.” Carmen laughed. A little more seriously, she asked, “Are things going better for the boys at school?”

“They seem okay, I guess. I found out that Bobby’s first-grade class had three other new kids this year, so that’s not too bad. I think the school gets a lot of executive types who are coming and going. But he told me that some of the kids are mean. So, you know, it’s a process. The kids in Jack’s 4K still don’t seem to know where the bathroom is, so he’s good,” Martha joked, but then, her mood changing, she crossed her hands on the table and sighed. “I know it’s hard to move schools for Bobby, but I mean, what was I supposed to do? Have the baby by myself in Boston in March in one of those polar vortex snowstorms? I’m not sure Robert really thought about how hard it would be on us to move. You know, the snow here might actually be worse than Boston, which I didn’t think was possible. How do you even put a baby in a car seat in the snow nine months pregnant?”

Martha shifted again in search of the elusive comfortable position. “Robert tries to help, but he has this knack for being physically present but mentally disengaged when he’s with the family. I shouldn’t complain about him, but sometimes I get so tired, Carmen.”

Carmen reached across the table and squeezed Martha’s hand. “Hey, you’re allowed to complain. You are raising two little kids going on three, and with Robert’s schedule, you’re basically doing it as a single mom in a city where you know like two people. It’s impossible and you’re doing great. And think how lucky you are. I would have killed for another kid or three.”

Martha squeezed Carmen’s hand back, and a quiet moment passed between them.

Trying not to let the sadness creep up, Carmen said, “And how’s my good friend Evelyn?”

Smiling again, Martha said, “Oh, Carmen, you should hear my mom talk to her friends. Even with all their fancy educations, I don’t think any of them could locate Wisconsin on a map

if they tried. Robert told her that the position at Children's might only be for a year, so she's calling it his 'ex-pat' assignment. I mean, really, like Wisconsin's another country."

Carmen grinned, remembering the first day she met Evelyn.

It was move-in day at Dartmouth. Her dorm was called the Choates. She had no idea how to pronounce it, and she wasn't going to try until she heard it come out of someone else's mouth. She was a long way from Texas, and she was determined not to make rookie mistakes.

As she and her parents walked into her new room, they had been greeted by three people who collectively looked well, pastel, for lack of a better word. The dad had been wearing pink pants, and the mom had been wearing a cotton shift dress with an unappealing floral motif that wasn't doing her emaciated frame any favors. Carmen did like the mom's canvas tote, though. It screamed, *I belong here*, Carmen had thought. Behind her parents, a pale, rail-thin girl with stick-straight long, blond hair (kind of the color of a wheat field, Carmen had thought) sat on one of the two twin beds in the room surrounded by her matching monogrammed luggage (the same canvas as the mom's tote, of course). She looked kind of miserable, Carmen remembered thinking.

"Hello, dear," the mom had said. "You must be Martha's roommate! How exciting that she gets to learn about your culture!"

Great, Carmen had thought. *Here we go again*. To her credit, the girl reddened a bit and opened her mouth to object, but before she could get a word out, Carmen's father had lunged forward and boomed, "I guess you mean Texas culture! Hey, we're all Americans, right?" Pink pants flinched at the volume and took a quick step back.

"Oh, of course," the mom had stammered while she looked back and forth in confusion at Carmen's very white father and very not-white mother. Not knowing what to do, she shook hands with Carmen's father while taking in his cowboy boots.

Carmen had immediately known that quietly blending in would not be in the cards that day. She remembered thinking it was going to be a long four years as she watched her parents pull away.

But she had been wrong. It had turned out to be an amazing four years. She and Martha might have been from different worlds, but they were the same where it counted. After a few months they were as thick as thieves, and Martha was her official tour guide for all things East Coast. They also got friendly with the girls across the hall—Heather and Elizabeth—both girls from the Midwest. A fifth girl who lived on their floor, Sara, a third midwesterner, quickly joined their band, a victim of a bad roommate match.

After those four years, Carmen had forgotten what it felt like to be an outsider. She was just Carmen.

A waitress came over for their drink orders, and Martha asked for a triple espresso.

“Good God, you never change. That much caffeine all at once is really not good for you or the baby,” said Carmen, feeling a little alarm bell go off in her mind. “She’ll have a water too,” she instructed the waitress.

“So,” said Carmen carefully, “what have you decided about work? I know that you had planned to go back when Jack started 4K, but with the baby, don’t you think it makes sense to give it a few more years? I mean, what’s the rush?”

Be gentle, Carmen reminded herself. But she knew she had to remind Martha of how hard the mom job really was. Especially as the kids got older. Martha’s oldest, Bobby, was only in first grade, and the job didn’t get any easier. Of all of Martha’s friends, Carmen was the only one that had been a full-time stay-at-home mom all these years. Even if she hadn’t ever had an outside job, as her mom friends used to say, Carmen had worked her ass off since graduating from Dartmouth almost twenty years ago. Playground monitor. PTA president. Manager of her

daughter's sometimes grueling dance schedule. Head of the local Gold Coast community association (and chair of the beautification and historical preservation subcommittee). It really irritated her over the years when Heather, Sara, or Elizabeth insinuated that she must have all the time in the world. They had no idea how much work volunteering and full-on mothering with no help really was. And even though Carmen sometimes longed for the exciting job she had missed out on, she would remind herself that the working moms she knew at Avery's school always seemed exhausted, and though they might show up for the occasional field trip or concert, they were never fully part of things.

In any case, this was her chance to convince Martha to make the right decision, not just for the sake of her kids, but also for the sake of her health and sanity. And maybe if Martha didn't go back to work, Carmen could see more of her, which would make life a little less lonely. But Martha had been programmed from birth by her uptight Boston clan to be a world-beater, and Carmen knew she was going to have to dig in if she wanted to win the argument.

Carmen continued, "So, I was thinking that we should make some summer plans, you and me. Lake Geneva is gorgeous in the summer, and I'd love to have you come down for a while. The house won't be totally finished, but close enough. It would be like glamping."

"Maybe," said Martha slowly, avoiding Carmen's gaze. "I'm actually planning to get a summer nanny so I can get back to work. If I can get something going, I could keep her in the fall or maybe just put the baby in day care. Anyway, I don't know how things are going to go."

Carmen couldn't hold it in any longer. "Look, you know what I think. I know your parents, and certainly Heather, and probably Elizabeth and Sara, too, think continuing staying home is a mistake for you," replied Carmen as calmly as she could. "Don't forget that Heather and Elizabeth have huge amounts of

help at home. We all know Phil is doing all the dirty work. Or at least he has to coordinate the army of people they have raising their kids and keeping their house in order. And don't forget that Elizabeth has William. You and I don't have a William. And Sara, well, I think that's really good evidence for my argument right there. I'm worried one of these days she is going to drive her Odyssey right over a cliff because she's so stressed and distracted."

"That's not fair, Carmen," scolded Martha. "Sara is a really good mom. You can figure out both parents working. People do it all the time."

"Maybe, but four kids and both parents working is actually just too much. You remember when Sara moved from New York to my neck of the woods and she blew off every invitation from me to do stuff, right? I mean, I get that she's busy, but there's busy and then there's no-life busy. C'mon, Martha. I know you. Is the Sara life really the life you want? Just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you should, you know."

Carmen was on a roll. "Please just enjoy that baby. It will be your last one. Seriously, what's a few more years? It's not like you need the money or anything. And we'll have fun—I promise. It will be just like the good old days."

"I've been home over three years now. It's already been too long. And besides, when my boys are in school in the fall, we'll have time to do stuff. Doctors get time off, you know," countered Martha.

"Listen, you put your baby in day care, you'll have hand, foot, and mouth disease within the month," Carmen teased, taking a different tack and hoping Martha would relent.

But Martha wasn't having it. "Carmen, you know I love being home with the boys. But I miss medicine so much. I worked so hard for it, and I really thought that I could do both. I don't think it's fair that I have to bear the burden of making sure the children Robert and I created are getting everything they need.

Really, we are both doctors and both parents. Why is this my burden alone?" Martha's eyes welled up a little, and she looked away in embarrassment.

"I know," said Carmen softly, "I really do get it. I never asked Mark to lift a finger, but my situation was always different. Look, if working is what you want, you should do it. I love you and will support you no matter what, you know that. But Robert is not going to be a different guy. So I would quit being disappointed on that score. You have to do what's right for you and what's right for the family. Don't you think just focusing on the mom job will give you the most happiness in the long run? I see those exhausted working moms all the time, and they look miserable."

"I guess," said Martha slowly, "but there's nothing like doing a job you were trained to do and doing it well."

"Martha, don't forget what happened the last time," Carmen reminded her gently. Carmen remembered getting the text from Martha and rushing to Boston to take care of her boys while Martha locked herself away in her bedroom and slept. Robert had been in Europe on another one of his work trips. "Anxiety," the doctor had said. "Your friend just needs some time to rest." Martha had sworn Carmen to secrecy and decided not even to tell Robert. And it had stayed their secret since.

"Carmen, I'm better now, and I can handle it this time. And I don't want to talk about it again. You promised we wouldn't talk about it," said Martha quietly as she stared down at her hands, which she was kneading in her lap.

After a pause, Martha continued, "Anyway, I have a call scheduled for Friday with an old med school classmate who might be able to get me a position at a local clinic he runs. I owe it to myself to look into it. Carmen, do you ever think about how weird it is that we started out so ambitious and driven in college, and now here we are not working? I don't know, I feel like if women like us can't get this figured out, then nobody can, you know what I mean? We started out with every advantage. Especially me."

Carmen didn't know what to say to that, so she decided to say nothing for the time being. She was clearly losing the battle. And Martha was going down that old, bad road again. This would not be the last conversation they would have, vowed Carmen.

After a prolonged silence, Martha made an attempt to change the subject. "So what's the plan for our girls' weekend?"

"Well, Heather has already bailed," said Carmen dramatically, trying to put her concern to the side and rolling her eyes for good measure. "No surprise there. She's working on some secret project."

"You know, I'm not sure I care that she's not coming," said Martha matter-of-factly. "Ever since she was so judgy at that dinner after Jack was born, well, let's just say I've had trouble enjoying her company."

"This is what I've been saying for years," agreed Carmen.

"But Elizabeth and Heather are kind of a package deal, aren't they?" Martha sighed.

"And Heather does pony up the free stuff. Do you remember when she sent us all those e-readers preloaded with hundreds of books? Not bad," Carmen conceded. "So we should consider that."

The waitress returned with their drinks.

"Is Mark excited for the new house in Lake Geneva?" asked Martha.

"You know, he said he would get up from the city more, but he's so busy," said Carmen.

"Hmmm. Well, I hope he appreciates all the effort you are going to," said Martha with suspicion.

"I'm sure he does," responded Carmen brightly. "But, well, it's hard sometimes—"

Suddenly, Martha interjected, "Oh God, I have to go to the bathroom, again! When will this be over?"

Carmen laughed and watched her friend negotiate her way to the bathroom at the back of the café. Carmen had been about to admit that things with Mark weren't so great. It was the one

area that she never wanted to discuss with Martha, though, because she just couldn't face the truth herself, and talking to Martha about it would make it real.

And if she and Mark could just get pregnant it could be different. No, it *would* be different. He would stop making excuses for why he couldn't get up to Lake Geneva from the city. And if there was something there, well, it couldn't compete with what she could give him—loyalty, family, a shared history.

By the time Martha came back from the bathroom, talk of Mark was forgotten, and the girls filled the rest of their lunch talking about house stuff, both of them happy to avoid deeper conversation.

MARTHA



A few days had passed since Martha met Carmen for lunch, but the conversation had stuck with her. As she sat in the stiff, narrow, and unyielding chair outside the office of the head of the lower school where Bobby and Jack were enrolled, waiting for her appointment, she considered whether Carmen was right.

Martha really did enjoy being able to be there for so many things she would have otherwise missed. It was the small things at the strangest times. And mostly in the car, it seemed. Maybe on the way to school when they wanted just one more hug before starting their day. Or, even more likely, on the way back when they forgot she was there and spilled their secrets to each other with no apparent filter.

But being a doctor was more than just getting up and going to a job. It was being the person who solved the puzzle and helped set someone else's life back on the right course. It was time for her to get back that part of who she was. And this time she would do things differently. She wouldn't let it all fall apart again.

As she decided that she would move ahead with her call tomorrow with her old classmate, she heard the office assistant call her name.

"Mrs. West, the dean will see you now."

Martha rose from the chair and walked into the dean's office, quickly locating the widest available seat.

"Please sit down and make yourself comfortable, assuming, of course, that remains a possibility for you at this stage," the dean said wryly.

Martha smiled and said, "Not really, but I'll give it a chance."

“When are you expecting the new arrival?” the dean asked pleasantly.

“Any day now,” replied Martha with a tired smile.

“Excellent. Well, I won’t beat around the bush given your condition. I’m sure a rest would do you good. I called you and your husband in to discuss a serious matter.”

“Yes, I’m sorry Robert was unable to make it. His work at the hospital makes it very difficult for him to get away,” Martha interjected apologetically, annoyed that she was yet again in the position to have to make excuses for him.

“Well, if we don’t make some progress, I will want him to participate in future discussions. It’s important in our community that both parents are part of the process.”

“Of course,” replied Martha, wondering what could be such an enormous problem at the first-grade level that it required both Robert and her to attend a future meeting.

“I assume the issue is in the first-grade classroom,” prompted Martha, wanting to get this over with and find a place to get ice cream. She was hungry and tired.

“Actually, this is a more global concern,” replied the dean in a serious tone. “Our staff have observed some ongoing issues with both the boys. In the case of Bobby, we have witnessed a number of instances of aggression toward the other children. There was one instance in which he pulled the hair of another classmate and two reports of shouting on the playground. These sorts of behaviors are not the kind that are acceptable in our community. While they haven’t risen to the level that would require immediate action, we wanted to inform you of our findings so that you can be part of the solution moving forward.”

“I’m sure that a part of that is the stress of the move,” said Martha, vowing to read Bobby the riot act when she got home. “Robert and I will address it, of course. You mentioned that there are issues with both boys?”

“Yes, with Jack, the staff informs me that he has had a num-

ber of accidents requiring the staff to be pulled away from learning activities to assist him. As you know, our policy is that all 4K community members must be fully toilet trained. I appreciate that accidents happen, but more than a few accidents indicate a failure to be fully trained. And, as you know, the accidents are, shall we say, often so catastrophic that we can't simply clean him up here at school, necessitating an immediate parent pickup."

Martha felt her cheeks go hot with embarrassment. "Yes, I know Jack has had some issues in that department. I think the change has been hard on him as well."

"Agreed. And we will give you every opportunity to adjust more fully. It's only been nine weeks after all. But I must advise that with the arrival of a new baby, we often find this can create additional difficulties. I have an excellent consultant if you are interested." The dean began rummaging around in her desk. "She's available to speak with you tomorrow if you are available."

"Actually, I have an interview tomorrow," Martha blurted out.

"Yes, I imagine you are still looking for all sorts of help. You know, we produce a list of recommended service providers for a wide variety of needs, from household help to doctors, tutors, and coaches. I'll ask Glenda to e-mail it to you," said the dean.

"No, actually, I am interviewing to get a job as a doctor in a local clinic run by an old classmate."

The dean looked confused.

"But won't you be taking care of the new baby for some time?" she asked.

"Maybe for a few weeks, but I'd really like to get back to work. I'm a doctor," said Martha lamely.

"Is there a financial consideration? We can certainly talk with your family about our financial aid options."

"No, no, we don't need the money," Martha replied, with growing embarrassment at this entire exchange. "I miss being a doctor, and I'm excited to return to the profession."

"I see," said the dean, although it was clear that she didn't

see. "I do hope you take into consideration the needs of your boys and the issues we covered as you make your decisions. Perhaps you could delay that degree of change until things are settled." Rising from her chair, she continued, "Well, that's enough of that. Good day. My door is always open."

Having properly shamed Martha, the dean motioned her out.

Well, there you go, thought Martha. Women who think men are the problem really are missing the boat because no one is less kind to women than other women, regardless of the circumstances. We truly can't win. And shame is the weapon of choice. The dean would have never told Robert not to go to work.

It made her remember again that day she had been so angry with Heather, the moment that she had never fully forgiven, if she was being honest.

It had happened right after Jack was born. Heather had started her family and had just been recruited to her big executive job at FLASH. Elizabeth had made partner at her law firm, but she hadn't started trying for a baby yet. Sara was on baby number three and was working at her in-house lawyer job. And Carmen was home with Avery, probably busier than any of them with her various school and community commitments.

That year they had decided to meet for their annual girls' weekend in Chicago, where Carmen and Sara were living.

Martha was excited to tell her friends about her choice to stay home full-time. She didn't tell them the whole story, of course. Only Carmen knew about all of it. But she thought they would be happy for her, and, selfishly, she was trying to be okay with her decision, and their approval would have gone a long way toward that cause.

Heather had insisted that they go to the Four Seasons and that she pay. They all objected. The stress of keeping up with the Joneses was making everyone feel relatively poor, and they expected Heather was no exception . . . until she told them what her pay package was going to be at FLASH. When they

heard the eye-popping sum, they couldn't say yes fast enough.

Heather had booked them into the biggest suite in the place. For her money, Martha would have stayed in the room the whole weekend, luxuriating in the enormous white-and-gray marble tub, but Heather had insisted that they all get dressed up to celebrate her and Elizabeth's promotions. They went to dinner at one of those great Chicago restaurants where an individual cut of steak was enough to feed the whole table.

Martha still had a picture of the five of them at that dinner in a moving box somewhere. Everyone looked so happy and full of life in the picture, with their glasses raised in a toast.

The dinner went as it always did. They told stories about the old days—skating on Occum Pond, building the ice sculpture on the Green, dancing around the bonfire at Homecoming. The conversation would inevitably turn to gossip about mutual acquaintances. Everything had been going swimmingly until Martha shared her news.

Sara had said flatly, "Good for you—parenthood is exhausting, and you can always go back."

Elizabeth hadn't crossed the motherhood bridge yet, but she apparently felt compelled to point out that when the women at her firm left, they never, ever returned. "But if that's what you want, Martha, good for you," she had said.

"Do I have to be the asshole here?" Heather had exclaimed with exaggerated exasperation. "Martha, you are making a big mistake. Huge. If you leave now, you'll never go back. You worked so hard to become a doctor. You went to Harvard, for Christ's sake. And you're great at what you do. What are you thinking? Just hire more help!"

Carmen had immediately interjected, "Heather, it's extraordinary that you think you know what's best for everyone when you barely have time to hear about what's really going on in all of our lives," but she stopped short when Martha shot her a look that said, *Shut it, Carmen.*

The girls moved on to happier topics, but Martha couldn't shake off Heather's comments, and she did her best to hide her hurt. Carmen was right—Heather didn't know all the facts, but she knew enough to wound. Martha intended to enjoy staying home regardless of all the reasons for being there, but she did feel some shame that she couldn't do it all on her own, at least not right then.

On the way back to the hotel, Carmen took her arm and whispered, "Heather's a bitch. You are going to love being home with your baby. And don't forget, this is what you need to do right now. It's not a knock on you. No one can do it all alone. Not even Martha Adams. And of course you can go back when you're ready. Elizabeth doesn't know anything about the medical field. You're good."

Martha didn't look forward to talking to Heather much after that weekend. It was ironic. She should have had more in common with Heather after Bobby was born—she was in the motherhood club now! But she felt more distant from her than ever. It was so easy to stop talking every week. Then every month. And then one day they weren't talking much at all. Martha didn't avoid her per se, but she didn't seek her out either. They were together on their girls' weekends a few times in the intervening years, but Heather didn't ever seem to perceive the rift she had created in their relationship. Martha never pushed the issue because Heather had always been Elizabeth's closest friend and Martha didn't want to hurt Elizabeth, who didn't have many other friends outside their group. Besides, Elizabeth was a genuinely good person and didn't deserve it.

Things change, Martha thought as she walked out of the school and climbed behind the wheel of her car to drive back home. Dartmouth felt like a lifetime ago.

At the end of the day, it didn't matter what the dean or Heather or anyone thought. She couldn't go back to work if the boys were in trouble.

It was all very disappointing but somehow felt inevitable at the same time. It would be too much, again.

Of their entire group, Sara was the only one who had managed to figure out how to work and mother with another working spouse, although Sara didn't feel like a good data point. She seemed to relish living on the edge of disaster. Martha didn't want to live like that.

But Sara did. She wanted it all. And then she wanted to double it.