

CHANCE

by
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CHAPTER ONE

When I was ten, a fortune-teller read my palm. Actually, it was my Aunt Shirley. She went through a clairvoyant phase before she became an evangelical Christian. Nowadays, she attributes her crystal ball predictions to Satan, probably because most of them came true. For example, my parents got a divorce when I was thirteen, just like Aunt Shirley said. A year later my father, who was certainly enslaved by the devil during his male menopause, married a former Miss California. They kept her sash, crown, and stilettos enshrined in a revolving glass showcase in their living room.

The divorce was how Mom and I ended up living with my grandparents in a small Northern California town called Eureka. There, in the hills, Mom sold real estate to San Francisco executives who wanted to live an alternative lifestyle, while I spent each summer vacation chasing girls who would not have me.

Eventually, when I was twenty, Dad came to his senses and divorced the beauty queen and he and Mom got back together after going to Hawaii on a tantric retreat. The divorce settlement left the beauty queen in possession of our house and Dad poor, but Mom didn't care. She was a big success by then, thanks to her copious real estate development deals in Silicon Valley. These days my parents run a meditation and enrichment center in Sausalito called Beyond Limits, which, according to my best friend, Suzie Weissmuller, is what happens to your credit card when you go there.

As well as predicting family crises, my Aunt Shirley told me I was destined to encounter true love amidst depravity and loud music. I spent years hanging out at dances and clubs hoping for the Big Moment, and

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to tell you the truth, I had just gotten to thinking it would never happen when I found myself sinking Buds with Suzie in the Lexington one September evening and—gasp! There she was.

Short dark hair. 501s. Black turtleneck. Leather jacket. She owned the room the moment she set foot in the door. Everyone stared. She seemed oblivious.

“Wow,” I choked. “Check it out.”

Suzie glanced up from her drink. “Where?”

The divine stranger sauntered to the bar like she had a patent on the satisfaction gene. One tiny thick gold earring clung to her left earlobe. I imagined she smelled of salt air and gasoline, fresh from cruising the city in a hot convertible.

“Omigod, she’s looking at us.” I was ready to take a dive off the Golden Gate Bridge if she offered to watch.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Suzie said and waved at the goddess.

I nearly ate my beer glass. “You know her?”

She was coming toward us, one thumb tucked in her hip pocket. I had never seen anything so sexy. I prayed she was not another one of Suzie’s exes.

Suzie got up and planted a kiss right on the stranger’s mouth. I could feel the room receding as if everyone and everything in it had been swallowed by fog. A pair of arresting midnight blue eyes found mine. I stood up. My chair overbalanced and hit the floor.

“Chance...” Suzie said, “meet Eric.”

Eric? I nearly whimpered. *No.* It could not be true.

“Chance was kind of hoping you were a girl,” Suzie explained.

“So was my mother.” The voice was bedroom pitched.

I picked up my chair and sat down again, all set to weep into my beer. “Do you make a habit of drinking in lesbian bars?” I asked the sex-goddess impersonator.

He rolled a cigarette, then offered his tobacco and papers around. “I’m on the run from fag hags,” he said. “They’re too scared to come in here with Pagan on the door.”

I glanced across a sea of jostling bodies to the six-foot muscle machine carding young things at the door. Pagan was the lesbian Terminator, only minus the humor. I’d heard she once turned down security on Monica Lewinsky because it could damage her reputation. Pagan’s, that was.

Suzie constructed a cigarette like a joint, compressing each end to secure the contents. “Thank God lesbians never have to deal with the fag hag trip,” she said. “I mean, can you imagine a bunch of giggling straight men hanging off your every word and wanting to watch you try on clothes at the mall?”

Eric smirked. “I think about that all the time.”

For a moment I wondered if I’d been conned. He couldn’t be a boy. Those smoky blue-black eyes surely belonged to the woman of my dreams. He caught me looking and glanced down at my newspaper. I covered the personals with my hand but it was too late.

“Scored recently?” he inquired.

The red circles I’d made in the *Girl Wants Girl* columns stuck out like warts on a supermodel’s butt. I forced casual laughter. “I never get ’round to writing anyway.”

Suzie fingered an ad. “This one sounds interesting. ‘Independent mature lesbian seeks cute energetic young woman to spoil.’”

“Read between *those* lines,” I said, scornful. I was not looking for a sugar mama.

“Or this one.” Suzie wasn’t letting up. “‘She broke my heart and took my cat, but I still have my pride...’”

“It’s a country song.” Eric improvised a few bars.

He could sing in tune. My misery was complete. The women around us stared. I wasn’t the only lonely heart he’d fooled.

“He’s not transgender, is he?” I whispered into Suzie’s ear.

“Ask him,” she said.

I was too embarrassed. “Got any sisters?” I inquired hopefully.

Eric shook his head. “I wish.”

On principle I did not want to like him, but there was something disarming about Eric, a wry self-mockery that made freezing him out difficult. Any negative I tried to see in him seemed a petty consequence of my disappointment, or worse—some deep-seated insecurity.

Suzie was scanning the talent. “Look. Over there in the plaid mini, kissing the biker. She’s cute.”

“If you want a spare tongue,” Eric said.

I shrugged. “She’s not my type. Too young.”

“Is it just sex you’re after?” Eric asked.

“No. She wants the works,” Suzie responded on my behalf. “Flowers, courtship...”

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“Friendship is what’s really important to me,” I said. It sounded like the lie that it was. The affirmations weren’t working.

“What happened to that babe with the dog?” Suzie asked.

Last month’s disaster. “We weren’t even doing anything, but it kept staring and growling...”

“Don’t you hate that?” Eric said.

“I once had this lover who had a rat.” Suzie launched into one of her show-stopper anecdotes. “She was a firefighter.”

“Please,” I groaned. “Not the rat story.”

Such was my life. Twenty-six. Single. Going nowhere. By now you are probably thinking: *what’s wrong with her?* I used to wonder if it was the gap in my front teeth. We’re not talking about the Grand Canyon or anything. People with worse teeth formed happy relationships. But by the time I met Eric on that fateful day, I had taken to staring at myself in the mirror, wondering how would I look with a shaved head. Style was my problem. It’s okay to be ordinary, so long as you have style. Unfortunately, I did not.

I liked to wear jeans and a T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out. On some people it’s a hot look. On me, not so much. My arms are too long for my height, which is five foot eight. In a tank top, I look like an insect. Then there’s my hair. Light nondescript brown. Dead straight, with a tuft that won’t sit flat where I injured my head as a kid. Hairdressers obsess over that tuft. To them it’s as scary as a drive-by shooting or last year’s shoes.

There was a time when I tried to dye my troubles away. Being platinum blonde made my pond green eyes seem less muddy and certainly helped me get past bouncers and attract women. I got to dance with babes who normally looked right through me. But sooner or later the music stops and you have to converse or make out. Both take a certain amount of panache. Therein lies another of my problems.

Some people are sexy. It’s like they have a *Yes!* beacon beaming from their forehead. I am not one of those people. I think my beacon says *Inhibited*. Back then, it would have been *Desperate*. I had enough problems making successful foreplay conversation, let alone capitalizing on the rare occasions when I made first base with a hottie. To make matters worse, my seduction technique malfunctioned completely over the most trivial things. For example, I would lose focus over crappy tattoos, bulimia, meth labs in the kitchen, and a blithe ignorance of

major news matters but an in-depth knowledge of reality television.

If I ever managed to keep a girlfriend for more than a month, it was because she had decided to put up with me and I went along with her decision out of gratitude and hormones. I think we can all agree that in the absence of the ideal woman, having sex with *someone* is better than masturbating alone in your cold bed.

After that disillusioning evening in the bar with Eric, I bought a book called *101 Ways To Improve Your Social Life*. “Become a good listener,” it said. “Ask questions that begin ‘What do you think of...’” There was a whole chapter devoted to first dates.

I was comforted to know that I was not alone; it was clear from the first few pages that there were other losers out there. But by Chapter Three I realized my problem was much worse than one of limited social repartee. I was a prisoner of romantic delusion. I was marking time, waiting for that special someone to come along, just as Aunt Shirley had predicted. I could imagine my drab life transformed by passion and purpose, myself snugly adrift in coupledness. The trouble was, intelligent fascinating women were not exactly lining up to rescue dull little nobodies like me. If I wanted a tomorrow that included a real relationship, I would have to improve myself.

My first step was to get rid of my television.

Suzie was shocked. “But you almost had a breakdown when *Queer As Folk* ended. How will you live without *The L Word*? Oh, my God...what about *The Daily Show*?”

“If I spend any more time staring at the box, green slime will grow on my teeth,” I declared. “It’s now or never. I have to get a life.”

Suzie gave me a strange look. “It’s up to you, but I think you’re taking this too far.” I knew she wanted to say more, but she held back.

“You’re probably right, but the fact is, whatever I’ve been doing, it’s not working. I have to do something different before it’s too late. Do you understand?”

“Babe, you’re only twenty-six.”

“I’ll be twenty-seven in a few weeks. There are women my age with four kids.”

“Yeah, and look at them.” Suzie paused over this scary thought. “Oh fuck, are you telling me you want to have babies or something?”

“Get real. All I’m saying is most people are settling down by now. I feel like a freak.”

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Suzie stabbed her chest with a finger. “I haven’t settled down.”

“That’s because you prefer fucking around.”

She didn’t deny it. Instead she adopted her most sensible voice. “They say you can try too hard. Just relax and get on with your life. Sooner or later the right woman will come along.”

“I don’t buy that.” I’d given this plenty of thought and had made up my mind. “I don’t believe passive wins the day. I’m sick of school. I’m sick of the bookstore. It’s time I got serious.”

“What are you going to do—go to Europe or something?”

“No. I’m going to change myself and meet new people.” I carried my TV to her car. We were taking it down the road to the Community Thrift Store on Valencia.

“But there’s nothing wrong with you just the way you are,” Suzie said.

I ran a quick mental count of the girlfriends who’d dumped me in the past several years. “Fifteen women can’t be wrong.”

“Oh, please. Like anyone dates for more than three months at our age.”

“Almost everyone we know is in a long-term relationship,” I reminded her.

“Whatever.”

Suzie bitched about this herself—the diminishing supply of attractive, available women. Suddenly, all the best ones were wearing someone’s ring and talking about bathroom renovations instead of their favorite band. I knew our mutual friends wondered why Suzie and I didn’t hook up, and maybe I was an idiot for wanting to keep our friendship the way it was. Suzie was all things lovely, from her short dyed copper hair that she wore in two little pigtails on top of her head, to her sparkling blue eyes, which she made ocean bright with cerulean contacts, to her milky skin and tight skirts and the little fluffy sweaters she wore most of the year ’round.

She was shorter than me and worked out so she wouldn’t look like a waif. On top of her fetching appearance, she was loyal, funny, and a woman of the world, even though she was only a year older than me. I could have picked worse girlfriends by far, and generally did.

“You still coming over on the weekend?” she asked.

“Sure.” One of our married-to-the-woman-of-her-dreams pals from college was having a baby shower. While we were wasted one

evening, we'd rashly offered to do the catering.

Suzie closed the hatch on my TV, and as I waved good-bye to living vicariously through lame plot lines and ludicrously thin actresses, she got into the car and hung her head out the window. "Don't do anything rash," she said, as if I would know how.

I smiled and waved good-bye but didn't answer. I needed to do something rash; I was falling asleep at the wheel of my life.



I remember the afternoon we cooked for that baby shower as if it was yesterday. Suzie shared half a Victorian with two other women. We were in the courtyard drinking iced tea after we got done making artichoke dip, falafel, and vegetarian mini-pizzas. Suzie's roommates, Ashleigh and Karla, were trying to repair Karla's favorite vibrator, which had ended up in someone's Jacuzzi. I didn't ask.

Karla said, "Are you really quitting your job, Chance?"

"I wrote my resignation this morning."

Suzie looked horrified.

"Don't worry. I found something else." I fished in my pockets for my new business cards. The design was pink and cut in a poodle silhouette. I handed some around.

"'Canine Follies,'" Suzie read aloud, mortification frozen on her face. "'Dog Grooming With Attitude. Your Canine Care Consultant is Chantelle Delaney.'"

"*Chantelle*?" Karla and Ashleigh echoed.

"Mrs. Van Wynterhaven—that's my new boss—says my full name sounds classier. She doesn't like Chance."

"You don't know the first thing about dogs," Suzie pointed out.

"They're going to train me. That's part of the deal. I go out with another groomer and assist. Then I work for a month under supervision and..." I became conscious of my companions exchanging those nervous, darting looks that happen when no one wants to say what has to be said.

Suzie touched my hand in one of her big-sister gestures. "Have you talked to Dr. Birnbaum?"

"Hell, no." What had I achieved in two years of therapy? Complete inertia, that's what. "I'm in control here. I don't need my therapist's

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permission to get a new job.”

“Dog grooming...” Karla twiddled with the vibrator and it burst abruptly into life. Over the mechanical hum, she continued, “Aren’t you kind of overqualified?”

Karla’s people were from Connecticut. She tried not to be a snob but it was in her DNA.

I said breezily, “As far as Mrs. Van Wynterhaven is concerned, an MA is a liability. She says college educated people have forgotten how to do an honest day’s work.”

Karla, who took her own permanent student status seriously, said, “Only someone who hasn’t had to write a PhD thesis could say something so ridiculous. Sounds like envy to me.”

“Whatever.” I had a feeling Kristina Van Wynterhaven had never suffered a moment’s pang over missing out on sorority gossip and B-grade lectures while she traveled the world as a personal assistant and dog groomer for the über-rich.

A picture of a foreign princess wearing a tiara, her hand resting on the head of a disdainful dog, hung in the foyer of the Canine Follies office. Underneath it, a caption read something like: *My personal friend and patron, a benefactor of animal welfare charities, H.R.H. Crown Princess Sofia of Castille, photographed with her beloved Borzoi, Grand-Ch. Valshebnik Baron Draco, “Drak.”*

Mrs. Van Wynterhaven had worked for this woman years ago in St. Tropez and still received birthday and Christmas gifts from her. She displayed these in a mock Louis XIV cabinet in her office.

“I think poodle grooming is a fine idea,” Ashleigh pronounced, serenely Southern. “And a good business too, I’m sure.”

I thanked her and gave Suzie a pointed look. I had expected more support from my best friend.

“I know some people with dogs,” she managed weakly.

I gave her a bunch of my poodle-shaped cards. “Tell them we do all breeds.”

“Hey, Chance. Are you still seeing that dolphin trainer?” Karla asked. “Yvette...was that her name?”

“No, it’s Evelyn,” I said. “We broke up ages ago.”

“You wouldn’t have her number, would you? We’re trying to fix my cousin up with someone bi.”

This perked Suzie up. “Oh my God. Are you talking about the cousin with the Harley and the pierced tongue? Is she queer? I had no

idea.”

“Calm down,” Karla said. “We’re talking about the CPA with the bi wife. They’re looking for an extra.”

“She plays and he watches?” Suzie grimaced. “That’s disappointing.”

“Sounds like something Evelyn might be into,” I muttered. She’d always kept a covert eye on the TV and picked up her cell phone while we were fucking. In the end it got me down and I dumped her before she had time to dump me.

“Can you think of anyone else?” Karla banged the vibrator lightly against her calf. It had died again.

I hadn’t dated any other bisexuals, at least not that I knew of. Which meant anything was possible, since I had no idea what went on in the heads of my girlfriends. “If I think of anyone, I’ll let you know,” I said and stood up. “I need to get going.”

Suzie walked me out as far as the gate. “Be careful,” she advised, fixing the black velvet ties in her radiant pigtails. “Don’t look them in the eye. They think it’s aggression.”

“Don’t worry,” I said with a nonchalance I was far from feeling. “They’re mostly show dogs.”

“Genetically speaking, they’re wolves in poodle’s clothing.”

“Sounds like one of my mom’s universal truths.”

Suzie giggled. “Sounds like most of my exes.”

“We should start a club for women who can’t do commitment,” I remarked.

Suzie studied me gravely. “I don’t think that’s us. I mean, you and I have been best friends for ten years. What’s that if it isn’t commitment?”

She had a point. We weren’t incapable, we were just unlucky. I slipped my arm around her waist. “Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe other women can’t compete.”

“You know what?” Suzie said, “That’s too fucking bad.” And we kissed and hugged like we always did, our love uncomplicated by sex.