



THE DIVORCE CLUB  
JAYDE SCOTT



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ISBN: 978-1-4581-3524-7  
Smashwords edition  
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This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the characters and persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

**Other titles by Jayde Scott:**

**A Job From Hell**  
**Beelzebub Girl**

To F., Silver and Tabby

## **Acknowledgements**

This book wouldn't exist without my partner's encouragement. Thank you so much for your undying faith in me and my abilities, even when a writer's royalties can barely cover the monthly electricity bill. I couldn't have come up with yet another book without you.

My gratitude goes out to my critique partner, Christine, and her keen eye for detail. Thanks for pouring your soul into my work and for being so enthusiastic about everything I write.

A huge thank you to my editors and beta readers. You know who you are.

To my fabulous readers: thank you so much for your support.

# Chapter 1

I'm thirty-four, the mother of a thirteen-year-old and divorced. But don't feel sorry for me because it was my own choice. You see, when the sonofabitch slash husband slash Greg decided to drop the mistress, I politely declined—and sold his priceless golf collection on the Internet in the process. I had a hard time—getting rid of him, that is—and I wouldn't wish the same begging and tears of guilt upon anyone else. That's why I'm standing in front of 21 Terrace Street on a rainy November day, waiting for the estate agent to finally make his grand entrance. Today in a fortnight I plan to open my personal revenge act on the male population and hopefully make a few bucks in the process because my daughter needs orthodontic braces and her beloved father decided to go undercover literally minutes after being told about the costs involved. Maybe one day I'll find him on the back of a milk carton.

A Ford pulls up and I crane my neck to get a better view. A guy, mid-thirty, tall but gangly, steps out. We make eye contact and he smiles.

"Sarah Beaver? I'm Ben Foster."

I cringe at hearing my previous, married name. Must have quoted it in a moment of fake domestic nostalgia induced by my unconscious.

"Actually, it's Sarah Davis." I hold out my hand and he grabs it in a sweaty grip. "I just got divorced."

"I'm sorry." Ben points around the corner. I follow a step behind.

"Don't be."

"There was no way you could work it out?"

I sigh. "At first I thought about it—until I found lipstick on his boxer shorts. Then it was war and I forwarded all his mail to Alaska."

"You play dirty." Ben laughs. "Have you ever made a purchase this big before?"

"Only a major league football team." I regard him from the corner of my eye, waiting to see whether he gets the joke.

Something crosses his hollow features; his brown eyes sparkle for a moment, but it's not with amusement. "Shall we get started?"

"Sure." When I step aside, letting him take the lead, I swear he checks out my cleavage. He must believe the myth that all divorcees are rich and desperate for a shag because they haven't done it in years, what with the hubby cheating with the assistant and all.

He unlocks the door and puts a hesitant palm on my shoulder. "Come on in. There's lots of natural light, for a city."

I walk past quickly, brushing off his hand, then peer around. The hall's tiny with a trail of plaster peeling from the walls. Two massive arc windows tower above me. I'm definitely sold on lightening. This alone will save me a small fortune on electric bills. The musty smell reminds me of cheese though. I can only hope it's not mildew and someone just forgot to put on clean socks this morning.

"It really brings out the highlights in your blonde hair," Ben continues.

I smile, sweetly. What next? Will he tell me rays of sunshine are bouncing off my hazel eyes? He needs to get his mind on what I came here for—real estate, so I can

finally start my revenge act. I walk past, staring up at the ceiling, which seems to be in good shape. A little sweat, hard work and a coat of paint, and this place will sparkle like a jewel.

Ben points at the bathroom. "Now, that's extra spacious. You'll never find a restroom this big in such a small house with lots of shelf space for perfume or makeup. Do you see how large the mirror is? The lighting above is fantastic for putting on blush or powder. Why don't you try it out? You know, to get a feel for it."

I'll give him something to feel when I kick his butt into next week. Do I look like a powder chic? I'm a serious businesswoman. "But I'm so smitten with the floral wallpaper and the deep scratches on the floor. I'm also captivated by the giant hook on the bathroom door."

He doesn't seem to hear a word as he keeps going like a robot. "Yes! This house is perfect for you. You definitely need to get one of those soft, padded toilet seats."

I turn to face him, taking in the dark circles around his eyes and that glint that signals his brain's counting the money as we speak. "Ben, let me assure you I couldn't care less about the bathroom design. If you don't want to flush this deal down the toilet, I suggest you quit talking *fluff*. I don't care if my bum gets a soft landing when I use the restroom. I'm more interested in your inspections dealing with cockroaches, electrical wiring, plumbing, and heating." I pause for effect. "Give me the facts. When was it built? Is the roof in good shape? How much does it cost to heat?"

He clears his throat and adjusts his tie, regarding me. "1983. The roof's seen better days, but if anything happens the insurance company will cover the costs. Heating shouldn't be that bad given how much natural light you get. There's a second room that you could use for storage." He opens another door and I scan the scratched but still shiny, wooden floor. Storage, my butt. The space's so tiny, I could barely fit a vacuum cleaner in here.

We move to the largest room and Ben resumes his infomercial, but I've switched off as I peer out the bay window to the overgrown backyard. I've always wanted one of those instead of Greg's meticulous lawn and trimmed hedges. They were just as boring as he was in our fifteen years of marriage.

"I could get the landlord to clean that up for you." Ben clears his throat. He seems almost apologetic as he points at the rusty windowpanes, and I feel sorry for him. "I know it's not up to scratch, but it's a nice area and the price is—" He hesitates. "You said you wanted something *affordable*."

I hate that word. It's almost as bad as saying you're a divorced female *and* nearing forty. "No, don't you dare change the garden." I smile and whisper, "Why mess with perfection?"

"You'll take it?" He looks stunned, as though he doesn't believe his luck.

I nod, wondering whether I'm making a mistake here. Just as I'm considering whether to tell him I'll sleep over it, my phone beeps and I read the text message:

*Don't you bail out on me!!! Xoxo*

Mel must be psychic. Or she has a listening device planted in the second-hand *Louis Vuitton* handbag she gave me for my last birthday.

I smile, only then noticing Ben's still awaiting my confirmation. "When shall we sign the papers?" I ask.

"Right now?" He pulls out a bunch of documents and presses them into my hands, saliva almost dripping down his chin. I force myself to read through the tiny print that I usually tend to skip and sign the dotted line. Then I pull out an envelope filled with banknotes. Ben sucks on his fingertips before he starts counting. I turn away, disgusted.

Eventually, he smiles and dangles three sets of keys from his fingers. "Congratulations on your new business. What's it called?"

My insides turn hot and cold as I peer at him from under mascaraed lashes. "The Divorce Club."

## Chapter 2

I'm supervising the delivery guy who's just arrived with a huge stack of print paper and other office stuff, an intern from a local newspaper who's supposed to be interviewing me but has no idea what she's doing, and my chattering daughter who's talking to her first boyfriend. I should be focusing on the interview because the success of my business depends on the publicity I receive, but I can't help tune in to Sam's gushing over the boy.

A finger taps on my shoulder and I turn around. Mel's standing behind me, her straight, glossy, golden hair bouncing against her skinny shoulders, her pearly whites on full display as she says, "Who's Sam talking to? She's fidgeting like a bird caught in the rain."

"Her boyfriend." I cock an eyebrow.

Mel's jaw drops in a most unflattering way. Her forehead remains smooth. I suspect she had yet another Botox session without telling me because she knows I worry about all the poison she's injecting into her skin. "Is she even old enough to have one? In my days we gals could call ourselves lucky if we were allowed to speak to boys before the age of eighteen."

I laugh. "You don't look like you were born in the Middle Ages." The delivery guy tosses another stack of papers on the floor and I shout, "Hey, why did you even bother to climb up the stairs when you could've thrown in the parcels through the window?"

I'm not usually such a sour puss, but my last nickel went out on a stapler and several flowerpots from the local bargain store. I can't afford to print out my correspondence and invoices on smudged paper.

Mel elbows me in the ribs and hisses, "What did I tell you about bitching and journalists, darling?"

All right, I forgot. I smile and offer the delivery guy a coffee, but it's too late. Smelling the possible success coming from rummaging through other people's garbage cans, the intern girl starts scribbling.

"We can't do that. Mum would go ballistic," Sam says. What would make me ballistic? I turn sharply, narrowing my eyes as I try to catch what my daughter's talking about, but she just giggles and walks away.

"How are you going to keep that from Greg?" Mel asks.

I roll my eyes. "Luckily, I won't have to because he's gone incognito. He owes me child support for the last three months."

"The bastard," Mel hisses. "You should try voodoo."

The doorbell rings, startling me. I nod my head toward intern girl. "Can you take over?"

"Sure." Mel shrugs, flashes her PR diva grin and strolls toward the girl like a spider enclosing a fly trapped in a net. For a woman dressed in a tight pencil skirt, she moves with surprising speed and agility. I've no doubt Mel will have a fabulous time.

I open the door and let in a petite redhead, plump in all the right places. For a moment, I can't peel my eyes off her generous cleavage, wondering how much she paid for it. I'm even tempted to ask for the doc's number, but then I remember Sam

needs orthodontic braces more than I need a pair of double Ds. What's she doing here? What man would actually divorce breasts like hers?

"Is this the Divorce Club?" the redhead whispers conspiratorially as though she's talking about buying an illegal joint in the semi-lit backroom of a shady bar.

"Welcome and thanks for coming." Straightening my back, I nod and point at a sofa still covered in plastic foil. "We'll be opening in half an hour. Please take a seat."

I remove the plastic wrapping and start stacking my office supplies in a cheap cupboard. By nine a.m. the reception area looks quite nice. The floor's no longer obstructed by boxes, my desk's free of any clutter and the light shining through the windows casts a golden glow on the obviously fake flowerpots.

As I mentally brace myself for the speech that Mel prepared for me, the doorbell rings again and more women I don't know flood in. The room's starting to fill up. I flick through my papers, but don't look up because my heart's pumping hard in my chest. Doubt starts to nag at the back of my mind. God, what was I thinking? I was a housewife. Cooking and cleaning defined my identity for the last twelve years. Consequently, I know nothing about running a business, or mixing with the clientele, or even about getting people to sign up as clientele.

Mel appears behind me and squeezes my elbow whispering, "You'll kick butt. I know you can do it."

No idea why she has this immense trust in me when I feel like my knees have just turned to jelly and my tongue's stuck to the back of my throat. From the corner of my eye I notice Sam giving me the thumbs up and I realize I have two options. Either I suck it up and just do it, or I pack my things, close shop and give Greg the self-satisfaction that I can't earn a living without him.

Taking a deep breath, I step in the middle of the room and raise a cheap champagne glass. "Ladies, thank you so much for being here today." My voice starts shaky, threatening to break any moment, but I continue, "I'm Sarah, thirty-four, and divorced with a wonderful daughter. During my long divorce from my two-timing ex-husband, I often debated whether to take him back because I must've done something to deserve his straying. I often wished I could rely on someone to guide me through those moments when I felt worthless."

Mel starts clapping and the others join in. I smile at the sympathetic faces and hold up a hand. "The Divorce Club's here to offer women moral support through their divorces. But our little group is much more than that."

I grab a stack of colorful brochures Mel designed a while back and hand them out as I speak, now fully confident as I gaze at the interested faces. "One membership option includes the full benefits package: weekly meetings, one-on-one counseling, advice on how to deal with single life, filing for child support, learning to let out your anger and rebuilding self esteem, polishing your social skills and a 24/7 hotline. We'll help you get a job and create a personalized battle plan uniquely designed to suit your needs. If you're moving, we'll help you pack and unload. If he's the one moving, we'll help you throw his belongings out the window."

Laughter fills the room. I smile.

"If you have difficulties getting the hubby to sign the papers, we'll come up with a strategy to get the leech out of your life." I raise my brows meaningfully. "And if you sign up today you'll get the full benefit package at half the membership price."

Once again, thank you so much for coming. Mel and I will be happy to answer your questions."

"What do you mean by arrangements? You're not talking about hiring *thugs*, are you?" the redhead asks.

I laugh and the others join in, but I can sense the sudden uneasiness. "Of course not. We're not a gang. What I meant was transforming you into something he no longer wants. We'll use psychology, undercover work and female intuition."

Several heads bob and ahs and ohs echo through the room. Mel takes over as I walk to my desk with a few women following behind, some still clutching their brochures, others waiting for an admissions form. The redhead hands me her credit card while the intern girl is taking out her camera to shoot photos. My heart flutters in my chest and I can barely breathe, so I smile because my first client has just signed up.

## Chapter 3

The room's full of excited, chirping soon-to-be divorcees. I'm having heart palpitations again, but not because of my nerves. The Divorce Club opened a week ago and boasts a staggering four members. At a hundred bucks each, I'm thrilled to say I can at least pay this month's grocery shopping—or Sam's phone bill, whichever comes first.

I've made myself a nice, little list so I can remember every member:

The Redhead aka Simone Schuster: Simone's a consultant with a major insurance company and a huge paycheck. She has the guts to dig in other people's dirt to find pretexts so the company doesn't pay out, but she can't tell her hubby that she wants a divorce because she doesn't fancy him anymore. Go figure.

Shannon, a skinny thirty-something American with glossy raven hair and a toothpaste smile to die for. Apparently her parents never liked the hubby, but she loves her new house in London—and her visa needs to be renewed soon. I can see a conflict of interest there and why she'd choose to stay with a two-timing moron for the sake of not losing out the money she's invested in her mortgage.

Then there's Lucy, a fifty-year-old Glaswegian, quite chubby, with an infectious smile but a lack of a haircut. After thirty years of marriage, her husband's decided he'd rather have someone half his age—and preferably male. She keeps patting the corners of her eyes with a tissue, and I start to see that providing a 24/7 hotline might not have been my brightest idea.

Finally, there's Mindy, the youngest in the group. She's a friend of Mel's and not here to divorce her husband. As a personal assistant to a banker's wife, she's researching ways to prove the husband's preference for strippers so her employer can snatch the guy's millions in the process. I make it clear right from the beginning that we don't provide that kind of trap when she assures me we won't need to. Who would've thought my new job would be so diverse?

"Ladies, may I have your attention, please?" Mel, dressed in yet another pencil skirt ensemble with six-inch heels that make my feet ache just from watching, clinks her dessertspoon against my cheap *Poundland* champagne glass. I cringe, waiting for disaster to unfold, but surprisingly the glass remains intact. I make a mental note to ask her to get a whistle or something. Mel continues, "I'm thrilled to announce next week's timetable."

I get the hint and start handing out black cardboard sleeves embellished with a tiny diamante butterfly, courtesy of Sam's nail art case, which would make any nail artist green with envy. Papers shuffle and I hear first giggles and exclamations of delight. A first rush of accomplishment washes over me. It might not be the vital job of a heart surgeon, but I'm saving lives too. Sort of.

"You sure you want me to do this?" Shannon flicks her black hair back and points at bullet point number two on her list.

For a moment I feel tempted to ask whether she has a better idea, but then I remind myself I'm supposed to be the professional one here, hence, no snapping, bitching, moaning or otherwise expressing my own self-consciousness in the way I interact with my clients.

So I smile and grab her hand as I say, "Shannon, dear, trust me when I say once you're done with him, the idiot will wish he'd never messed with you in the first place."

Shannon nods enthusiastically, blue eyes sparkling. "Yes, you're right. Sorry I got weak there for a moment. Won't happen again."

I pat her hand and turn away, hoping I'm doing the right thing by reverting to such a cheap trick to get Shannon's visa and a one-way ticket to a cheap hotel for her straying soon-to-be-ex.

"I'm off," Mel whispers in my ear, "you know, big launch party tonight. I can't miss it."

"All right, thanks for stopping by," I say, feeling guilty for wishing Mel would've forgotten. After all, Sony et al. make gazillions a year already. One PR manager not showing up shouldn't make a difference to their bank account, but it could decide over whether I meet the mortgage payment this month.

Mel smiles, hesitation written on her unnaturally smooth face, courtesy to lots of money spent in beauty parlors.

"Off you go. Chop, chop, and don't forget to get loads of samples." I wave her out the door with an enthusiasm I don't feel.

"Love you," she mouths and then disappears.

I heave a big sigh and turn to face the room. My clients are still reading their papers, chattering as they compare their to-do lists.

"Shall we get started, everyone?" The room falls silent and four pairs of eyes peer up at me. I wipe my damp hands on my oversized pencil skirt and sit on my chair in the circle. "Today we'll be working on Lesson One in our wonderful six-month program to get you where you want to be in life. I want you all to start thinking of yourselves as individuals rather than as part of someone else. To be able to do so, you'll have to work on your *individuality* and build *self-confidence*." I speak the words slowly as though they're Chinese. For a woman in the process of breaking free from the ego-killing bond of marriage I might as well be speaking a different language.

"You want us to get all dolled up to land a guy, eh?" Lucy chuckles. "Well, fancy that. I'm in."

I shake my head. "No, it's not about finding a man but finding contentment within yourselves. Getting a guy in the process is just a bonus."

"So you're teaching us to start thinking like a lad, you know, being *liberal* and all," Lucy says.

I cringe inwardly, sensing that I'm wasting my time with explanations here. The poor woman was married to a man who turned out to like men. How could I blame her for wanting to get laid to feel wanted again?

"I think Sarah means we need to find our self-worth again after we let some guy treat us like crap," Mindy says.

I stare at her, open-mouthed. For someone who's not even married Mindy knows a lot. She might just prove a natural when it comes to understanding the laws of attraction and why marriages are actually doomed to fail. "Well done, Mindy. That's exactly my point. In the coming weeks we will be talking about ways to achieve just that, but for now we'll start with a little blaming—and not ourselves, for a change."

I stand and hand out blank sheets of paper and pencils, then sit again. "While

I'm grabbing us all some coffee, you girls can jot down your husbands' flaws and actions that you think contributed to the breakup of your marriage. And no cheating because this is supposed to be an enlightening experience for everyone."

As soon as I'm in the kitchen, I lean against the yellow wall and take a moment to smell my armpits and apply some more deodorant, then pop a chocolate praline—the *Tesco's Value* kind—into my mouth. A degree in psychology may have endowed me with knowledge about the human psyche, but it didn't turn me into a public speaker. A week ago, I was literally shaking at the thought of people staring at me, so I'm making progress here. Who knows, maybe by the end of the six months I'll have miraculously transformed into a conversation goddess that can enthrall a venue with a charming smile and small talk about the fairness of the new taxation system. But to actually know that I'd have to buy *The Times*. Spending unnecessary money on a newspaper doesn't rank high on my shopping list at the moment.

Five minutes later and carrying a serving tray with five lukewarm mugs and some more value chocolates, I return to my clients. Shannon starts sipping, leaving sticky layers of glittery pink lip-gloss on the mug, while Lucy turns bright red, avoiding my gaze. Blaming isn't as easy as it seems.

"Who's confident enough to start?" I fix my eyes on Simone, but it's Mindy who raises her hand. I point at her. "Please, feel free to speak whenever you want, Mindy."

Mindy clears her throat and reads from her notes. "During my five-year marriage to Patrick—"

"Wait," I interrupt. "I thought your employer sent you here."

Mindy nods. "Yes, but she wants me to pretend I'm she so the research feels authentic."

That's one messed up employer. She can't even be married without the personal assistant joining in. I smile. "Oh, I see. Sounds plausible. Please continue."

"Well, Patrick's never given me an orgasm. Whenever I complained he said there must be something wrong with the way I'm built."

"Oh, my god, that's awful. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you." I peer around the room, waiting for the others to join in, but there's complete silence.

Eventually, Lucy laughs and pats Mindy's knee. "You held onto that hope for five years? I gave up after six months when I realized the guy had no intention to ever venture south, if you know what I mean."

I gasp, unbelieving. "So you just did the deed without expecting anything in return?"

"What was I supposed to do? He brought home the bacon." Lucy looks at me defensively and the others nod.

"I had mind-numbing orgasms—with the help of my Rampant Rabbit," Shannon says.

Heat's slowly crawling up my neck. "Shall we get back to the topic at hand?" I ask, trying to change the subject. "So, Patrick didn't care about your personal needs. What else about him did you find damaging to your relationship?"

"He never tried to get along with my mother. He always made me feel stupid because he had a postgraduate degree and I didn't." I open my mouth to speak when Mindy holds up a hand as she continues, "And he favors strippers because I'm

apparently not attractive enough—even after getting a boob job and Botox."

The others gasp. Lucy places a hand on her large bosom and exclaims, "No!"

Mindy shrugs. "I even got extensions and a bikini wax."

Ouch. I hope Mindy's boss didn't actually force her to do that for *research purposes*. Smiling sympathetically, I hold out the tray to Mindy. She grabs a praline and starts nibbling, mouthing, "I didn't. The boss did. My hair's real."

Huh? I peer at her, confused who got what now.

"Actually, I tried the bikini waxing at home." Simone cringes. "So I sealed my private parts with hot wax. The pain was excruciating. I ended up walking like a penguin for a week."

"No woman should be forced to go through that torture," Lucy says. "In my time, au natural was all the rage. I had lads queuing outside to get a look at my bush."

Mindy almost chokes on her chocolate. I pat her back as I ask Lucy, "What do you think your husband did wrong?"

Lucy scoffs. "You mean apart from making me dress up like Arnold Schwarzenegger and groan in a deep voice so he could *perform*?"

I nod, wide-eyed, hoping she's not getting more explicit than that. Frankly, I've never been the inhibited type, but Lucy's starting to push my boundaries.

"Let's see," Lucy continues, "he advertised his new-found sexual preferences on a dating site and expected me to help him sort through the phonies. And when he found a guy he asked me to sleep in a hotel so he could spend the night with the lad. Top that."

Peering at her, I nod some more. "What an awful man. What about you, Simone? Is there anything you'd like to blame your hubby for?"

Simone shakes her head as she stares at a point behind me. "I don't think there is. We both made mistakes."

"But there must be something that makes you boil inside," I insist.

"Nope."

I tap a finger on my chin, thinking. "Let me see that list."

She hesitates, but then hands over the paper. I peer down at the white space. There's nothing there.

"There must be a reason why you want to divorce him," Mindy says.

Simone laughs nervously. "It's not really that big a deal."

I feel like telling her to just spit it out, but contain myself. What's the point in distressing her even more? "It's okay. Maybe another time."

"No, it's not," Lucy says. "We gals have to trust each other. You've got to open up eventually, lassie."

"I don't fancy him anymore," Simone whispers. I lean forward because I'm not sure I heard right. *That's* her big secret? For goodness sake, she wrote it down on the membership form.

"You mean he doesn't take care of himself any more. Have you tried getting him a shower gel for his birthday?" Mindy asks.

Simone shakes her head. "No, it's not that. He's very attractive—just not to me, and I've no clue why."

"At least you're not finding that out after wasting your life on him," Lucy says.

"Did you talk about divorce yet?" I ask.

Simone shakes her head, wide-eyed. "I mentioned I might need some time alone, but he wants to wait things out. Maybe something's wrong with me."

I smile and pat her knee because I know how she feels. "Don't worry about it. I have the perfect plan for you. You'll get him to fall out of love with you."

She frowns. "How?"

"Look at the five points on your individual plan."

She starts searching through the papers in her folder, then reads out loud, "Put on weight and don't shave your legs, or armpits, or any part of your body for that matter. That's gross."

I shrug. "But it'll get the job done. The next points will be more fun."

"Don't wash his clothes and cook rotten meals, preferably ones that give him constant diarrhea. Wear a thong with a mini dress and bend over in front of his friends, preferably after you've gained weight." She laughs. "You can't be serious."

"Okay, you don't have to pile on the pounds if you don't want to," I say. "Just focus on the last two points."

"Treat him like a child and nag, nag, nag." Simone shakes her head. "I can't do that."

"You want him to let you go, don't you?" Mindy says. Simone nods. "Then you'd better follow Sarah's advice and see what happens."

"Exactly," I say. "If he's the one dumping you, you won't hurt his feelings which is something you seem to want to avoid at all costs." My phone beeps on the table, the first hour is up. I clap my hands. "Well done, everyone. I'm so proud of you. Let's meet in two days, same time, same place, and for those of you who have one, don't forget your individual appointments. If anyone needs to cancel or rearrange, give me a call."

My clients stand and start stacking away their papers in oversized bags between makeup bottles, lipstick holders and powder brushes and, in Lucy's case, hundreds of chocolate wrappers. They air-kiss me, then flood out the door while I wave goodbye. I've barely managed to pick up the dirty mugs and carry them back to the kitchen when the bell rings.

Assuming one of the ladies forgot something, I shout, "Come in. It's open."

Heavy footsteps thud through the tiny hall. I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel and turn, almost bumping into a tall guy dressed in a suit, at least six feet, with cropped brown hair and piercing blue eyes. For a moment, I feel like I'm going to faint as hundreds of thoughts race through my mind. What if he's someone's husband and here to hurt me after finding out I'm helping the missus divorce him? Of course, he could be some psycho who's spied a lonely woman in a quiet residential area on a dark, cloudy evening. Why didn't I think of security or at least of locking the door?

"Are you okay?" he asks, groomed brows furrowed. "You look like you're about to have a heart attack."

I press my palm against my racing heart and smile nervously. "Maybe a tiny one."

"I don't bite—" he smiles "—unless it's full moon."

"What can I do for you?" Should I actually be so forthcoming? I remember reading somewhere that rapists take friendliness as some kind of sick invitation.

The guy runs a hand through his hair as though it was longer until recently and

he's still not used to its new length. His blue eyes scan the room, fixing on the floor. "I'm here to sign up."

"You're here to do what?" I ask, unsure whether I've heard right.

"Sign up," he repeats, this time a little louder.

Why would he want to join my club—unless he's some sort of spy and only here to expose me? Then I remember, he *can't* expose me because I'm doing nothing illegal.

"That's not possible." I walk past him to my office slash meeting room and start looking through the papers on my desk, hoping he'll get the hint and leave, but I can see I've no such luck.

"Why not?" He slumps in the chair opposite from mine and puts his elbows on the scratched, wooden surface, his gaze connecting with mine. My heart skips a beat and my palms start to sweat as I search for excuses.

"Because you're a man!"

"What? You're kidding me."

I shake my head. "No, you see, this club's for women only. I don't think my members would feel comfortable with you around." I'm actually talking about myself because he's making my knees all jittery. I've never been the confident type anyway—hence the need to transform myself into a social goddess through this club—but this is beyond ridiculous. I feel as though I'm fourteen again, waiting for the bus, and the school hottie's talking to me for the first time.

"That's a sexist thing to say." He laughs, but the glint in his eyes conveys another message.

"It's my club. I make the rules."

"So you'd rather lose a potential customer than discard your sexist ideas?" He snorts. "What a great way to run a business. You'll go bankrupt in no time."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm not a sexist."

He cocks an eyebrow. "Well, in that case, you'll let me sign up because I've heard you're really good and the only institution offering this kind of treatment in town."

"No, sorry." I shake my head.

"No?" he asks, incredulously.

"No."

Smirking, he stands and leans over the desk. "Listen, I'm not usually such a jerk but you leave me no choice. I need this, okay? My life depends on it. My—" he takes a deep breath as he struggles for words—"my whole existence does because I can't take it any more. I can't sleep or focus on work, meaning I could lose my job soon."

I stare at him, lost for words. Granted, I anticipated my club would make someone feel like that one day, but the guy isn't even a member yet.

"I'm sorry, I can't help you," I whisper, uneasiness creeping over me as he nods.

"I will sue you." He says it so composed I'm not sure I've heard right.

"Pardon me?"

"Sexism is a crime in our politically correct times. You know what'll happen to your reputation once the media get hold of this?" He grins like a child in a candy shop. The first pangs of anger bubble inside me.

"You wouldn't," I hiss.

He smirks. "Oh, I would. Believe me, I would. I'm desperate enough to do it."

I grit my teeth, wishing I could tell him that the word desperate doesn't even do him justice. The phone rings, jerking me out of my thoughts. Still looking at him, I pick up the receiver.

There's music playing in the background—a fast bass beat accompanies one of the Black Eyed Peas' rap. After listening for a second or two, I realize someone's shouting, anxious to be heard through the noise.

"Babe, can you hear me?" Mel's voice seems to be coming from Alaska.

I smile, thankful for the distraction. "How's the party? Got any doggy bags?"

"She brings you food?" the guy asks.

"I meant goody bags," I hiss.

"What?" Mel yells into my ear.

Shouting, I repeat myself as I glare at the guy still sitting opposite from me. Social etiquette doesn't seem to be his strong point because he can't even be bothered to turn away and *pretend* he's not listening.

"It's fab," Mel shouts. "You should see the fit lads in here, and everyone's wearing *Armani*."

The guy snorts. "Who in their right mind defines attractiveness by the suit one's wearing? No wonder once the suit's off, so is the relationship."

"And you're the expert on that field." I roll my eyes like Sam always does.

"Darling, I can smell *Armani* from a mile," Mel says.

My visitor shuffles in his seat, an unnerving smirk planted on his lips. "If she smells the *Armani* it makes one wonder what the guy smells, doesn't it?"

"Not really." I point at the receiver. "Sorry, do you mind? I have an important conversation here."

He holds up his hands in mock awe. "Of course. I wouldn't want to keep you from saving the world." He turns, muttering under his breath, "Or the whales."

I bite my lip, struggling to keep a snarky remark to myself and focus my attention on Mel who's shouting, "Hey, are you still there? I can't hear a darn thing."

"Then turn down the salsa."

"It's pop."

"Whatever. About the goody bags—"

"I didn't forget about my best friend," Mel says. "They'll be delivered to your door first thing in the morning."

Cradling the receiver between my shoulder blade and my cheekbone, I clap my hands. "What's inside? I'd love some perfume because Sam's used it all up."

Mel laughs. "I won't tell, but you'll love it."

"How I wish I worked in PR."

"So you can party day and night, and die of an enlarged liver from all the alcohol?" My visitor, completely forgotten to me for a brief moment, snorts. "Now there's a hefty goal."

"Not everyone wants to be a surgeon," I hiss. "What did you say you do?"

He turns to face me, his eyes beaming again. "I'm a business exec."

Now I'm the one letting out a snort. "So you're Robin Hood, except that you rob the poor to give back to the rich. How altruistic."

"Says the one who robs children of their youth so they can make pretty handbags." He points at my second-hand *Louis Vuitton*.

My temper flares up, leaving a boiling feeling in the pit of my stomach. "*Louis Vuitton* don't engage in child labor. Besides, it was a gift."

The guy nods. "Ah, a gift. That certainly makes it more acceptable."

Heat scorches my cheeks. I've no idea why I'm arguing with this man. He's not even that good-looking, but I know I'm lying to myself. He's well-dressed, groomed, probably almost as educated as a NASA astronaut—and makes me all defensive. But, after dealing with Greg for fifteen years, I can certainly deal with Mister Business Exec.

"Can you call me back once you get home?" I ask Mel as I keep my gaze fixed on the guy in front of me.

Mel agrees and I hang up, smiling at my visitor.

"So." He cocks his head.

"So." I imitate his posture. "You'd sue me, wouldn't you?"

"Yep," he says, grinning.

"Okay." I open a drawer and pull out an application form, which I push toward him. "Fill this out, please. It's four hundred a month." I usually charge two, but I feel as though he owes me after all the headache.

"Four hundred?"

I nod, feeling guilty because my superego tells me I'm about to cheat someone out of their hard-earned cash. "That's quite cheap considering the kind of service you'll receive here."

"I thought you charged more." He points at the scratched up chair. "You know, to get new furniture."

"Really?" There's my chance, so I switch off my bad conscience and go with it. "That's because I just offered you the basic package. If you want the 'extras' you'll obviously have to fork out more."

"What's the 'extras'?" He looks up from the application form.

"A 24/7 emergency line and an employee's constant surveillance that you stick with your goals. After all, if you want to change your life, the changes have to come from within yourself."

He seems impressed as he signs the form and hands it back to me. I read his name written in all caps: JAMES BOWERS.

"Everyone calls me Jamie." He points at the form as though reading my thoughts.

"I'm Sarah."

"Do you do home or office visits as well?" he asks.

I nod, suddenly recognizing his enthusiasm. He didn't mean to sound rude; he just wanted to join so badly that he saw no other option but to threaten me. "Any time."

"In that case, it's worth every nickel."

"Five hundred," I say, hoping I'm not pushing my luck. He doesn't even blink as he hands me his credit card and signs the standing order form.

As soon as I've locked all papers inside my drawer he asks, "When do we begin?"

"You just missed our first session, but that's okay. You can jump in on Thursday and I'll give you an hour longer to set up a personal timetable."

Jamie hesitates. "I guess I can stand waiting another forty-eight hours, but it'll be tough."

I gape at him. He must really want to get that divorce. I'm wondering how bad things are at home. "If you need to talk, just call me. We've run out of brochures, but here's my number." I jot it down on a blue sticky note.

"So, if I wake up at three a.m. and feel like hitting a wall or something, I know who to call." His expression is dead serious.

"Yep, that'd be me." I smile, hoping he wouldn't dream of calling me at that unholy hour.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." His lips stretch into a lazy smile and a dimple appears on his right cheek. I avert my gaze quickly before I look like an idiot staring at a stupid dimple.

"Divorce can be a traumatic event in a person's life. Even if you believe your world's crashing down on you, we'll keep you grounded as you progress through the various stages," I say in the hope I might cheer him up a bit. "See you in two days then. We start at five p.m. Don't let the missus bug you."

A frown crosses his forehead as he stands and heads for the door. "I'll find my way out. Goodbye."