

*Apart at
the Seams*

MARIE BOSTWICK

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To Brad, who makes me happy.

Prologue

Gayla Oliver

Have you ever thrown a pity party? It's easy and requires no advance planning whatsoever. For pity parties, spur of the moment is the norm. Start with a life crisis, a betrayal, a major disappointment, or a smattering of all three, add a carton of cigarettes, two boxes of Kleenex, and a bottle of whatever alcohol you have on hand (scotch works well and, as an added benefit, will clear your sinuses), and you're good to go. No need to call a caterer or send out invitations; pity parties generally have a guest list of one. And if conditions are right, they can last for days. Or even weeks.

Mine did.

Because the thing is, even though Brian wrote that . . . What was it he wrote? I'll have to go back and look at the exact wording. Ah, yes. Here it is.

Gayla, I'm sure it will come as no surprise when I tell you I am unhappy in our marriage. It's obvious that you are as well and have been for some time.

But I *was* surprised. Shocked! Gobsmacked! As Brian would say. And no matter what he said, I *was* happy with our marriage, or happy enough. But not *unhappy*—definitely not.

* * *

I am forty-five years old. Brian is forty-seven. We have been married for twenty-six years. In that time, I've seen a lot of my friends get married and divorced, sometimes more than once. Lanie is on her third husband. These things happen.

When they do, and word gets out, and the gossip mill starts churning, somebody always says, "Well, she *must* have known. Down deep, she had to have at least *suspected*. I mean, really. They've been growing apart. Anyone with eyes in their head could see what was going on."

Sometimes the person who says it has been me.

Maybe it's true, at least some of the time. But now I think this is one of those statements we toss out, not because we necessarily believe it but because we *need* to believe it. Why? Because if those women, those *other* women, knew deep down what was happening and chose to look the other way, then it means that the fault was at least partially their own. And that means that the rest of us are safe.

Maybe some women do know. I wasn't one of them. Until I stumbled across that memo, the possibility that Brian and I would not stay married for the rest of our lives never crossed my mind.

Brian wrote the memo last July. And as of May, when I found it, he hadn't sent it. Obviously, I wasn't supposed to know about it. But I did know. And now that I did, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. How could this be happening?

Brian and I are the solid couple, the ones who've made it. The people who other people point to when looking for proof that marriages really *can* last if you stick with it.

Okay. Sure. Things aren't as exciting as they were early on, but what did he expect? We couldn't spend the rest of our lives just floating around Italy on a barge. Yes, in the early days we had been content living on love and ramen noodles, but that was before we had kids and jobs and a mortgage. Two mortgages, thanks to him! And now, out of the blue, after all we've been through together, after the years and the work and the beating of the odds, he says he's unhappy and wants to divorce?

And the thing that really shocks me is that he assumes his announcement will come as no surprise. But I never saw it coming. Until two weeks ago, on a Friday in May that was as cold as February, I thought he was happy. I thought we both were.

1

Gayla

A cold, sleety rain was falling that day. Everyone in Manhattan, including me, was trying to flag down a cab. I stepped off the curb and into the street as far as was possible without getting run over. After five minutes of frantic waving, a black SUV sped past, spattering me with muddy water. Not an auspicious beginning to the day.

I decided to walk, which made me late for the dentist and every other appointment I'd scheduled that morning. Skipping lunch helped make up some of the lost time but did nothing to improve my spirits. As I was heading back to the apartment for my two o'clock phone conference, I decided to take a detour down West Twenty-fifth Street so I could walk past The City Quilter, thinking that might cheer me up.

If you want to buy silk, organza, or charmeuse, you can find yards upon yards of it in shops that cater to the wholesale design and garment trade. But plain old fabric, the kind people use to make quilts, is hard to find in Manhattan. I don't know of another shop in the city that sells only cotton fabric, let alone caters exclusively to quilters.

Now, let me say this up front: I don't sew. I can barely even thread a needle. But if I'm anywhere near West Twenty-fifth, I always find an excuse to walk past this shop. I just love looking

through the window at all that gorgeous fabric—florals, checks, plaids, polka dots, abstracts, geometrics, and pastoral prints with landscapes, animals, and birds, as well as edgy urban designs of cityscapes, taxicabs, even maps of the subway. It always makes me wish that I'd spent a little more of my youth bolstering my creative side. Assuming I have one, which seems doubtful.

I've never ventured through the door of The City Quilter. What would be the point? But that day I spotted this fabulous red paisley in the back left corner of the display. It was the exact color of the sweater Brian bought in Italy right after we were married. He wore it until it was threadbare. I was thinking about going inside to get a closer look when my phone rang.

Lanie was calling. She didn't wait for me to say hello or offer a greeting herself, just started talking, assuming I'd be interested in whatever she had to say, which is usually true.

"You will not *believe* this, Gayla. I'm at the consignment shop, and I've found the most *stunning* vintage mink coat. Stunning! Princess cut, *enormous* collar, perfect condition, with stripes of—wait for it—lunarine and platinum—"

"Lunarine and platinum?"

"Lunarine and platinum," she said again, as if repeating the words were the same as defining them. "Brown and white. The coat has a vertical pattern of brown and white mink pelts. Exquisite! And they're *only* asking seventeen hundred—a bargain. It's too small for me, but you must have it! You *must!*"

Lanie has adopted a pattern of speech, not entirely uncommon among New Yorkers, that places emphasis on certain words, transforming them into selling points. It's the vocabulary and cadence of a woman who knows how to close the deal, which is exactly what Lanie is and why she's made such a success in real estate. But today, I wasn't buying.

"Lanie, where would I ever wear a mink coat?"

"To the opera, the ballet. The A&P. Anywhere you want. It's New York!"

"I don't think so. I couldn't stand the idea of animals dying just so I can go to the A&P looking stunning."

"They died back in the seventies, so what do you care? It's *vin-*

tage! Oh, never mind,” she said after a moment, realizing she was getting nowhere.

That’s another reason Lanie is so successful: When her arguments fail to convince, she lets go and moves on. Sometimes.

“Where are you?”

“Standing outside a fabric store. What if I made Brian a quilt for his birthday?”

“Oh, please,” she groaned. I could almost hear her eyes rolling.

“What? Brian’s birthday is just a couple of months off. Don’t you think he might like something I made myself?”

Lanie groaned again.

“No. I do not think your husband would like a quilt for his birthday. No man wants a *quilt* for his birthday.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve been married three times. I am an expert on men. And I’m telling you, no middle-aged man wants a *quilt* for his birthday. What a man in his late forties wants is a sports car, or tickets to a playoff game, or lingerie—basically the same things he wanted in his late twenties or his late teens—the three ‘Ss’: speed, sports, and sex. Emphasis on the third ‘S.’ Men aren’t complicated, Gayla. They don’t change that much.”

“No?” I said with a smile, still holding the phone to my ear as I gazed at a blue, white, and gray quilt that hung on a wall near the checkout counter, wondering how long it took to make something like that. “Then why have you been married three times?”

“Because women *do* change. At least I did. And because of that third ‘S.’ And because men are all the same.”

“Not all men,” I said.

“Not all,” she conceded. “You got the last good one. Brian is too sweet to cheat. Or maybe he’s just too British. Adultery is so impolite, don’t you think?”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed absently. “Utterly *déclassé*.”

“And beneath the dignity of a viscount.”

“Except Brian’s not a viscount,” I corrected. “Second sons don’t count, remember? Especially second sons who run off and marry Americans.”

“He’s still an aristocrat,” Lanie replied. “I think my fourth husband should be an earl.”

I frowned. “Fourth husband? Is there trouble in paradise?”

Lanie has always had a thick skin, and as the years have passed it’s only gotten thicker. Sometimes I can’t tell if she’s teasing or if she’s serious. Sometimes I’m not sure she can either.

“No, Roger’s a doll. But it pays to be prepared. And anyway, I think I’d make a terrific Countess of Something or Other. Or even better, *Dowager* Countess—like Maggie Smith in *Downton Abbey*. So old and opinionated and rich that nobody can dare tell me off.”

“But aren’t you all that now?”

“You are hilarious,” Lanie replied flatly. “Anyway, tell Brian to keep an eye out for an old earl with a bad cough. After all, he owes me. If I hadn’t convinced you to take that semester abroad, the two of you might never have met.”

“And we’d probably still be living in a teeny-weeny one-bedroom walk-up. And Maggie would have had to elope. Who besides you could have gotten us into the Central Park Boathouse for the reception? And with only three months’ notice?”

“What can I say?” Lanie said with a sigh, as if honesty would not allow her to deny it. “When you’re in the fairy godmother business . . . So how is our little princess? Still in love with her prince?”

“Madly.”

“Well, she’d have to be to follow him to North Carolina. I still can’t understand why they didn’t move to New York.”

“Because Jason’s dad offered him a good job and because Manhattan is too expensive for a young couple starting out.”

“Expensive,” Lanie countered, “but not *too* expensive. You and Brian managed. Nate managed when he lived here.”

“Yes, but my darling son doesn’t care where he lives, as long as it has Wi-Fi. He’s too busy studying to care. You should see the picture he sent of his apartment in Edinburgh; it’s one step up from a garret. Reminds me of our first apartment. Brian and I were even younger and more starry-eyed than Maggie and Jason when we got married. We thought we could live on love and ramen noodles.”

“I remember,” Lanie said. “You were nauseatingly precious as newlyweds. Thank heaven you got over *that*.”

I glanced at my watch. “Listen, my lovely, aside from trying to get me to buy dead animal skins—”

“*Vintage* dead animal skins.”

“Vintage dead animal skins . . . was there any reason you called?”

“Just to tell you about the coat and to make sure we’re still on for tonight.”

“Of course we are. Have I ever missed our Friday night drink?”

“Just checking. I’ll see you later, then. Kiss-kiss. And Gayla? *Promise* me you will *not* make Brian a quilt for his birthday.”

I sighed. Lanie could be such a nag sometimes.

“It was just a whim. I wasn’t serious.”

“Good.”

She rang off as abruptly as she’d rung up, but that was just Lanie’s way; I was used to it.

I stuffed the phone into my bag and started walking east, but after about ten steps, I turned around, pressed the buzzer on the door to The City Quilter, waited for the answering buzz that signaled the release of the lock, and went inside. The girl at the counter was a lot younger and hipper than I figured somebody working in a quilt shop would be.

“This is a beautiful red,” she said as she plunked the bolt onto the counter. “Just came in. How many yards do you want?”

“Umm . . . two?”

She unrolled the fabric from the bolt and sliced through it with something that looked like a huge pizza cutter. “What are you planning to make with it?”

“No idea,” I admitted as I handed over my credit card. “I just . . . I just wanted it.”

She nodded as she folded the fabric and slipped it into a white plastic bag. “We get a lot of that,” she said.

Feeling inexplicably pleased after purchasing two yards of red fabric I had no use for, I continued on my way, jogging the last five blocks and getting home just in time for my phone appointment with Sandy Tolland. Things were looking up.

Sandy hadn’t set an agenda when she texted that morning, ask-

ing if we could talk, but she didn't have to. I already knew what we'd be discussing.

I am an educational consultant, a kind of college admissions counselor for hire. I went into private practice almost six years ago, after years working as a guidance counselor in public schools.

Every kid I work with is an individual, but the parents are pretty similar. Maybe one in twenty approaches the process with an open mind, but most arrive with a very set agenda. Some have their hearts set on the Ivy League. Others have decided up front that their child should pursue one particular program of study in one particular field and that one particular college is the only place to do it. Still others are focused on the school that they and the members of their clan have attended since the founding of the republic.

Families come to me because they want their child to get into the "best" school. My job is to help them find and gain entrance to the *right* school, the one that lines up with the student's interests, personality, learning style, abilities, and goals. Kids latch on to the idea pretty quickly, but some of the parents, like Sandy, can take longer. You have to let them talk it out. But that's all right; I'm a good listener. I'm also good at stealth typing, another useful skill to have in my line of work.

In case you're not aware, stealth typing is the ability to hold a telephone conversation while simultaneously shopping online, answering e-mail, or editing a personal essay so quietly that the speaker on the other end of the line has no idea what the listener is doing or that they don't have her complete attention.

I am a virtuoso stealth typist. And I should be; I get a lot of practice.

I shifted the phone to a more comfortable spot on my shoulder and opened the browser on my computer.

"Sandy, I told you from day one that Yale wasn't a realistic option for Emily, not with her SAT scores and a B-plus average. St. Michael's is a good match for her. She'll do well there, and she'll be happy."

"Karen Wittenauer's daughter got accepted to Smith." She sniffed. "Why couldn't Emily do well and be happy *there*?"

Keeping my fingers flat to prevent my nails from clicking against

the keys, I typed the name of my favorite travel site into the address bar of my laptop and hit enter.

“No gymnastics,” I said. “And no boys.”

Sandy didn’t argue. She knew that a school with no boys was a no-go for Emily.

“What about Brown? I heard it’s an easier admission than some of the Ivies. Ray and Camilla Rossman’s son, Chas, got in, and he’s not nearly as . . .”

While Sandy listed all the august institutions of higher learning that the children of her friends had been accepted to, I closed a pop-up ad for time-shares in Florida and fought back the urge to sigh. Oh, the weight of parental expectations. Sandy would have gotten on great with my mother.

While Sandy talked through a list of second-tier but decidedly name-brand colleges on the Eastern Seaboard, I delivered short, to-the-point responses as to why each of these places was wrong for Emily, pinned new pictures to my Pinterest boards, and tidied my workspace. I’m a big believer in the value of multitasking.

I reached up to the wall over my desk and straightened a photo of Brian and me on our honeymoon in Italy, standing in the bow of the barge with his arm over my shoulders and my head resting against his chest. We’re holding glasses of Barolo and peering at the camera with satisfied, slightly sleepy smiles. We’d just come up from below, where, about an hour before, assuming I’m doing the math right, we had conceived Maggie and Nate.

We were so young. And good-looking. Brian especially. I still miss his long hair. And Italy. We should go back there someday.

Scanning through a couple of my favorite blogs, I found a photo of an old-world-looking kitchen with stone walls occupied by a woman in a chef’s apron and two handsome, fortyish-looking couples who were eating bruschetta and toasting each other with big glasses of white wine and pinned it to my “Traveling Light” Pinterest board, still semilistening as Sandy Tolland wondered what she was supposed to tell her friends whose children *did* get into the Ivies when they said they’d never heard of St. Michael’s.

“Tell them it’s a little gem of a school in the Midwest with a gorgeous campus modeled on Magdalen College in Oxford, small

classes, a first-rate undergraduate psychology department, and a fabulous study-abroad program, and that the gymnastics coach is very excited about Emily. Tell them that you and Mark considered a number of colleges, including many in the East, but came to the conclusion that St. Michael's was the best fit for Emily. Tell them that you decided that your daughter's happiness was more important than being able to brag about getting her into the Ivy League."

"Yeah," Sandy replied in a scoffing tone. "Because they're really going to believe *that*."

Sandy laughed, and I did, too, but I knew that at least part of her was dead serious.

I liked Sandy. I liked most of the parents I work with, but sometimes . . . well, you just have to wonder. Considering all the problems that teenagers can have and all the trouble they can get into, why isn't it enough for Sandy to have a bright, pleasant, athletic, above-average daughter? Why are so few of my clients content with that? And when did getting a child into the "best" college get to be a competition among the parents?

When? At about the time people like me figured out people like Sandy would pay good money to anyone who could help their children receive fat envelopes from the small list of prestigious schools that will impress their friends and validate them as parents. I went into this line of work because I wanted to help kids and their families keep their priorities straight, to avoid making the same kinds of mistakes I made, but it's gotten all turned around. Somehow I've become part of the problem.

"What about Skidmore?" Sandy asked. "Do you think she'll clear the wait list?"

"Why would you want her to? We always meant Skidmore as a backup option, remember? It's a perfectly good school, but not as good a match for Emily's personality or interests. And they don't have a gymnastics team."

"I know, but at least people have *heard* of it."

I closed my eyes and quietly pounded my head on the padded headrest of my desk chair. The only thing you can do with clients like Sandy is let them talk it out. She'd come around. But I hoped she wouldn't take too long. I had to meet Lanie at the Monkey Bar

at four forty-five and pick Brian up from JFK at seven-thirty. Wait. Was I supposed to pick him up at seven-thirty? Or was it seven? I pulled a Post-it out of the dispenser and scribbled myself a reminder to call Emily at the corporate travel agency and confirm Brian's arrival time. Then I closed Pinterest and opened the word-processing program, thinking I might as well edit a couple of essays while Sandy talked.

But somehow instead of opening my files, I ended up opening Brian's, and when I tried to get out of that folder, the screen froze. I tried hitting escape, but it didn't help. I just got that spinning color wheel, the one that appears when the computer is loading, thinking, or simply mocking you. After a minute, I started hitting random keys quickly and repeatedly, growing more frustrated by the second, not caring where my commands took me as long as it was far from the rainbow rotations of that stupid wheel.

If I'd realized what was going to happen next, I might have thought twice before I started smacking those keys.

The wheel stopped spinning as suddenly as it started, and a series of documents, written by Brian, popped up on the screen in quick succession. The fourth one, the final one, a memo, dated July 2012, was written to me.

Subject: Facing Facts

Gayla, I'm sure it will come as no surprise when I tell you I am unhappy in our marriage. It's obvious that you are as well and have been for some time.

We were so young and married so quickly, without a true appreciation of how much our personalities and expectations of life differed, that perhaps our growing apart was inevitable. In any case, I don't think there is any point in casting aspersions or placing blame, but I think it is time we faced the facts about our marriage and moved on with our lives.

Before you ask: There is no one else. I did have a very brief affair with someone from work—we met only three times over a two-week period—but I was not and am not in love with her and have ended the relationship. I am ashamed to have treated you and the woman in

question so badly. Though I make no excuse for my conduct, I am very sorry for and deeply regret my actions.

However, that episode forced me to take a good long look at my life and myself. I didn't like what I saw. I realized that, as Nate would say, "I don't want to be that guy."

I don't want to be a man who cheats, lies, or feigns affection for you or anyone else. Though I do think that, in the beginning, we were very much in love—at least I was; I won't presume to speak for you—those feelings have obviously faded. This being the case, if our marriage continues on its current course, I don't see how I can keep from becoming "that guy."

The long and short of it is: I am lonely. I want to love someone and be loved in return. For a short time, when we first bought the cottage, I felt there was a chance of us reviving what we used to feel for each other, but it soon became clear that this was wishful thinking on my part. And so, to avoid any further indiscretions, lies, or betrayal, as well as to give ourselves the possibility of finding real love (I'm sure you long for this as much as I do), I think we should admit defeat and consider divorce.

I anticipate that we shall end this amicably; after all, we're both grown-ups and since we're finally out of debt and your business is doing well, this shouldn't cause any serious financial hardship for either of us.

Now that the children are grown and gone—you did a marvelous job raising them, Gayla—it probably makes no sense to delay further. Still, I don't want to cast a pall on the wedding, so I'll wait a few weeks before sending this to you.

Once Maggie and Jason return from their honeymoon and have made the move to Charlotte, you and I can sit down together and figure out what we're going to say to the children and how to proceed from here. We can retain attorneys, if you'd like, but I think going to arbitration would be a less expensive and more direct route.

As I said, we can discuss. Perhaps early September would be a good time?

Divorce? He wanted a divorce?
And he'd written me a *memo* about it?

I scrolled down to the end of the file, thinking that there had to be more to this, that it must be a joke, some kind of macabre man-humor that one of his coworkers had copied off the Internet, or that he was taking up creative writing or was working on a screenplay, or that it was . . . anything but what it appeared to be.

I read the whole thing again.

“Oh my God . . .”

It was real. It *was* exactly what it appeared to be. Brian wanted to divorce me.

Sandy, whose voice had become a white whirl in my ears, finally stopped talking. “Gayla, are you all right?”

“No. I mean . . . yes.” I closed my eyes, trying to steady myself. “I’m just not feeling very well. Could I call you back later?”

“There’s no rush,” she said in an uncharacteristically patient voice. “Tomorrow is fine. Are you sure you’re all right? You don’t sound like yourself. Something you ate?”

“Probably. I’ve got to go. Tell Emily I said hello.”

“I will. And listen, Gayla, about Skidmore—”

I didn’t wait for her to finish. I couldn’t. I hung up the phone, ran down the hall to the bathroom, and threw up.