

Chapter 1



When you first start out, you're going to ask people what they're looking for. This is a big mistake. Huge. They want the impossible. Every woman wants a Cary Grant with a thick wallet who doesn't mind if she's a few pounds overweight. Every man wants a floozy he can take home to Mom. See? Asking their opinions only leads to headaches you could die from. Take it from me, I've been doing this a lot of years. Nobody knows what they want. You have to size a person up and tell them what they want. It might take convincing, but you'll widen their horizons, and they'll thank you for it. Eventually. Remember, love can come from anywhere, usually where you least expect it. Tell them not to be afraid, even if it hits them on the head and hurts a lot at first. With enough time, any schlimazel can turn into a Cary Grant or a presentable floozy.

**Lesson 22,
Matchmaking Advice from Your Grandma Zelda**

THE MORNING I found out about Randy Terns' murder, I was happily oblivious. I was too busy to care, trying to make heads or tails of my grandma's match-making business. Nobody actually mentioned the word "murder" that morning. I sort of stumbled onto the idea later on.

That Thursday I sat in my grandma's makeshift office in the attic of her sprawling Victorian house, buried

under mounds of yellowed index cards and black-and-white Polaroid pictures. It was all part of Zelda's Matchmaking Services, a business I now co-owned at my grandma's insistence as her only living relative and what she called "a natural matchmaker if ever I saw one."

"Gladie Burger," she had told me over the phone three months before, urging me to move in with her, "you come from a long line of Burger women. Burger women are matchmaker women."

I was a Burger woman, but I had strong doubts about the matchmaker part. Besides, I couldn't decipher the business. It was stuck in the dark ages with no computer, let alone Internet connection. Grandma fluctuated between staging workshops, running group meetings, hosting walk-ins, and just knowing when someone needed to be fixed up. "It's an intuitive thing," she explained.

I pushed aside a stack of cards, stirring up a black cloud of dust. I had been a matchmaker in training for three months, and I was no closer to matching any couples. To be truthful, I hadn't even tried. I wiped my dusty hands on my sweatpants and stared at the giant mound on her desk. "Grandma, I'm not a matchmaker," I said to her stapler. "I've never even had a successful relationship. I wouldn't know one if I saw one."

I had a sudden desire for fudge. I gave my stomach a squish and tugged at my elastic waistband. My grandmother was a notorious junk food addict, and I had slipped into her bad habits since I moved in with her. Hard to believe I was the same person who not even four months ago was a cashier in a trendy health food store in Los Angeles, the second-to-last job I had had in a more than ten-year string of jobs—which was probably why Grandma had twisted my arm to move to Cannes, California.

I decided against fudge and picked up an index card.

It read: *George Jackson, thirty-five years old.* Next to the note, in Grandma's handwriting, was scribbled *Not a day less than forty-three; breath like someone died in his mouth.* Halitosis George was looking for a stewardess, someone who looked like Jackie Kennedy and had a fondness for Studebakers. Whoa, Grandma kept some pretty old records. I needed to throw out 95 percent of the cards, but I didn't know which 5 percent to keep.

Putting down the card, I stared out the window, my favorite activity these days. What had I gotten myself into? I had no skills as a matchmaker. I was more of a temp agency kind of gal. Something where I wasn't in charge of other people's lives. My three-week stint as a wine cork inspector was more my speed.

A man and his German shepherd ran down the street. I checked my watch: 12:10 P.M. Right on time. I could always count on the habits of the neighbors. There was a regular stream of devoted dog walkers, joggers, and cyclists that passed the house on a daily basis. Not much changed here. The small mountain town was low on surprises. I tried to convince myself that was a good thing. Stability was good. Commitment was good.

With sudden resolve, I took George Jackson's card and threw it in the wastebasket. "Bye, George. I hope you found love and an Altoid."

I tried another card. *Sarah Johns. Nineteen years old.* She had gotten first prize at the county fair for her blueberry pie, and she was looking for an honest man who didn't drink too much. My grandma had seen something more in her. *Poor thing. Art school better than man,* she had written in the margins.

I tossed the card, letting it float onto George. Matchmaking was no easy task. It wasn't all speed dating and online chat rooms. Lives were on the line. One false move and futures could be ruined.

The house across the street caught my attention. It

had seen better days. A bunch of shingles were missing, leaving a big hole in the roof. I watched as the mailman stopped at the mailbox. He would arrive at Grandma's in twelve minutes. I could set my watch by him.

Across the street, the front door opened. An elderly woman stepped out and picked up her mail. She glanced at the letters and then stood staring at her front yard. Something was not quite right about the picture. I didn't have time to dwell on it, though. I had promised Grandma I would pick up lunch for us in town.

I grabbed my keys and hopped down the stairs. Outside, it was a typical Cannes, California, August day: blue sky, sunshine, and warm. Normally it didn't turn cool until October, or so I was told. My experience with the town was limited to summers visiting my grandmother when I was growing up.

"Yoo-hoo! Gladie!" Grandma's high-pitched cry cut through the country quiet. She stood in the front yard, hovering over the gardener as he cut roses. The front yard was about half an acre of lawn and meticulously groomed plants, flowers, and trees. It was her pride and joy, and Grandma supervised the gardening with an obsession usually reserved for Johnny Depp or chocolate. I doubted she had ever picked up a spade in her life. "Yoo-hoo! Gladie!" she repeated, flapping her arm in the air, her crisp red Chanel knockoff suit bulging at the seams and the glittering array of diamonds on her fingers, wrists, and neck blinding me in the afternoon sun.

"I'm right here, Grandma." I jiggled the car keys to remind her of my lunch run.

"Jose, leave a few white ones for good luck and be careful with the shears," she told the gardener. "You don't want to lop off a finger." Jose shot her a panicked look and crossed himself.

Grandma walked as quickly as she could across the large lawn to the driveway. She had a grin plastered

across her face and, no doubt, some juicy bit of news bursting to pop out of her mouth. Her smile dimmed only slightly when she got a good look at my state. I pulled up my baggy sweatpants. As usual, she was immaculately coiffed and made up, whereas my brown hair was standing up in all directions in a frantic frizz, and my eyelashes hadn't seen mascara in months. I didn't see much reason to dress up because I rarely left the attic, but standing next to Grandma, I was a little self-conscious about my attire. As a rule, her clothes were nicely tailored. I listened to the soft *swish-swish* of her pantyhose-covered thighs rubbing together as she approached. I wondered vaguely if the friction of her nylon stockings could cause them to burst into flames. I took a cowardly step backward, just in case.

"I'm so glad I caught you before you left," she said, a little out of breath from either her run or the excitement over the piece of gossip she was about to blurt out. While Grandma never left her property, she somehow knew everything going on in town.

"I didn't get much done," I said. "I can't figure out what to keep and what to toss. Should I throw out everything older than ten years?"

"Fine. Fine. Listen. Randy Terns is dead. They found him yesterday morning, deader than a doornail."

I racked my brain. Who was Randy Terns? Was he the new secretary of state? Really, I had to read a newspaper once in a while. What kind of responsible citizen was I?

"That's terrible," I muttered, a noncommittal edge to my voice in case Randy Terns was a war criminal or something.

"Yes, yes. Terrible. Terrible." Grandma waved her hands as if everything was terrible. The sky, the trees, my car—all terrible. She grabbed my arm in a viselike grip and pulled herself close to make sure that I heard

every word. “I’m on Betty like white on rice to sell that old run-down excuse for a house. I’d love to get in some people who will fix it up. Look at me! I’m drooling over the thought of waking up, going out to get the paper, and not having to see that dreadful lawn across from my prize-winning roses.” She made air quotes with her fingers when she said “lawn.”

She turned to face the house across the street. “I bet you will be thrilled not to have to stare at that falling-down roof every day!”

Falling-down roof. My brain kicked into gear, and I recalled the woman standing by her mailbox. Randy and Betty Terns were the neighbors across the street. I’d never had much interaction with them. And now Randy was dead. Found yesterday morning, deader than a doornail.

I hate death. I’m scared it’s contagious. At funerals, I feel my arteries start to harden. Medical shows on TV send me into neurotic fits. McDreamy or McSteamy, it doesn’t matter—I only see my slow, agonizing death from a terrible disease. Like Ebola or flesh-eating bacteria. Or a drug-resistant superbug yeast infection. If I found out that poor Randy Terns died of a heart attack, it would only take five minutes or so for my chest pains to start.

“Betty said she would think about it,” Grandma said with disgust. “Said she has a funeral to organize and a houseful of kids. Kids. Huh. The youngest is thirty-seven. Three of them still live at home. It’s time to push those birdies out of the nest, I say.”

She harrumphed loudly and kicked the cobblestoned driveway with her left Jimmy Choo. Gold-tipped. Very fancy.

“Five children. Why do people take things to extremes?” she continued. “Anyway, they come and go like they own the place, moving in and out whenever

they want. They're holding on for dear life. A bunch of losers, the lot of them. I didn't make an index card for any of them." She looked at me expectantly, and I nodded vigorously in agreement, even though the most I saw of the "bunch of losers" these days were some faceless figures going to and from various cars.

Grandma patted a stray hair in place on her head and continued. "'Betty,' I told her, 'you could buy yourself a condo on the beach for cash and have enough left over to last your whole life if you sell now.' But she didn't have time for me. You know, Gladie, that house is one of the biggest on this street. And it's got a pool."

Grandma let out a big why-are-people-so-stupid sigh. Then she slapped her forehead. "I almost forgot! I have news about the house next to ours, too."

Geez. I really didn't want to hear that another neighbor had died. I would need therapy.

"Don't look at me like that, Gladie. It's good news. Jean the real estate lady told me there's been a bite on the house next door." She nodded to the house on my left. "A big bite. A whale bite. A . . . a . . . what's bigger than a whale? Whatever it is, it's one of those bites. Anyway, I can't talk about it yet. Might jinx it. Won't you be happy to have that house filled?"

I was only dimly aware that the house next door was empty and for sale, but my real estate ignorance would be sacrilegious to Grandma. The town was her business, and it was supposed to be mine now, too. A couple of speed-walkers made their way past us, distracting us from talk of houses and death.

"Daisy Scroggins," Grandma called out, flapping her arm at one of the speed-walkers. "You are the sweetest thing. How could I resist homemade chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven?"

The speed-walker, who I assumed was Daisy, stumbled in surprise. "How did you know I baked—" she

started, but stopped herself midsentence. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes with a plateful, Zelda. It's the least I could do."

Grandma leaned into me. "Her daughter's wedding is next month," she whispered. "That was a tricky one, but in the end I convinced her to go for the plumber with one leg. She's never been happier, of course."

I had a familiar feeling of dread. Grandma's shoes were hard ones to fill. When the moment came, would I know to fix up someone with a one-legged plumber?

Jose let out a bloodcurdling scream. He jumped up from the rosebushes, clutching his hand. It grew redder by the second and started to drip.

"What did I tell you?" Grandma shook her head and clucked her tongue at him.

"I cut off my finger," he yelled, his eyes wide with terror.

"No, you didn't," Grandma insisted. "It's just a scratch. Good thing I told you to be careful. Let's go in, and I'll wash it." Jose followed Grandma into the house, holding out his hand in front of him as if it was a snake. I took that as my cue to hop in my car.

I drove a block before I realized I didn't know whether to go to Burger Boy or Chik'n Lik'n. I could have gone to Bernie's Rib Shack, my grandmother's favorite, but it was in a strip mall next to Weight Wonders, and I didn't want to face any dieters while getting an order of baby backs. I decided on Burger Boy because it was the closest and had the quickest drive-through.

My grandma's house was one of the oldest in town and located right in the center of the historic district on Cannes Boulevard near Main Street. The houses were a mishmash, most built in the haste of newfound money during the gold rush in the nineteenth century. The gold had run out pretty quickly, but people stayed on to enjoy the mountain views. The town had never grown

to much of anything, topping out at around four thousand people.

I drove south out of the historic district toward Orchard Road, where just beyond, hundreds of acres of apple and pear trees stood as a beacon to all those who came up the mountain for the town's famous pies.

Burger Boy was at the corner of Elm and Park, a few blocks before the orchard and across the street from Cannes Center Park. The park had been established about 150 years before in a wise attempt by the town's founders to preserve and protect the natural beauty of this little corner of Southern California paradise. It was a huge expanse of rolling hills, sagebrush, and eucalyptus trees. It used to have a lovely gazebo in the center with park benches all around, where they held weekly concerts and regular picnics. Then, in the late fifties, a few bored and prudish housewives caught some couples kissing on the park benches, and they lobbied to have the benches removed. It was decreed that the park should be used for brisk exercise and that lounging on benches and in the gazebo would only lead to trouble and moral decay. The gazebo fell into disrepair. Gone were the kissing couples, and with them went the concerts and picnics. Today, brisk exercise was relegated to the historic district and the little park on Main Street. Cannes Center Park welcomed mostly skateboarders and teenagers searching for a little excitement in the bucolic small town.

Across the street from the park, Burger Boy had location, location, location and a killer dollar menu. It was a gold mine, a favorite of locals who did not particularly enjoy pie or tea.

An explosion rocked my car, jolting it forward a few feet before it slowed to normal. "Whoa, Nelly," I said, patting the dashboard. "No more car farts. I need you a while longer." I called them car farts. My mechanic

called them a cataclysmic end to the catalytic converter. He had grumbled something to me about being one car fart away from total destruction and probable death, but I couldn't afford to fix it. Besides, it ran fine as far as I was concerned. It was a 1995 silver Cutlass Supreme, and I had gotten it for free when I worked at a used car lot for one month. I loved it, even though it had more rust than silver paint, and the interior was ripped, with foam poking out in tufts.

I rolled into the parking lot past a group of skateboarders hanging out in front, their skateboards leaning up against their legs as they packed away burgers, fries, and shakes. I followed the drive-through sign, winding through the parking lot toward the talking Burger Boy. I opened my window, and the smell of french fries hit me like nectar to the gods. Really, happiness was truly easy to acquire if you're honest with yourself. Maybe I could start eating right tomorrow.

Burger Boy's mouth was open in a big smile, and I yelled in its direction. "I would like two Burger Boy Big Burgers. No pickles. Extra cheese, please. Two large fries, and a Diet Coke."

There was a long silence, so I tried again. "I would like two Burger Boy Big Burgers, please!"

"Dude!" a voice shouted back at me.

"Yes, I would like two Burger Boy—"

"Dude! It doesn't work!"

I leaned out the car window and tried to look into Burger Boy's mouth. The voice sounded much clearer than usual, but I still didn't understand what it was saying.

"Hey, dude. Like, the drive-through doesn't work, man." A skateboarder rolled up to my car, a shake still in one hand.

"Didn't you hear me? I've been yelling at you for, like, forever."

His shorts hung down well past his knees, and he wore a T-shirt that announced the price of beer bongs. “Dude, I just thought of something,” he went on. “If I didn’t say anything, you would still be talking to the Burger Boy. So trippin’.” He thought this was riotously funny and got so caught up in his own giggles that he didn’t hear me when I said thank you and backed out of the drive-through lane.

I was disappointed about the drive-through, but I still had to get lunch. I was careful to lock up my car before I walked to the front door, passing the four skateboarders deep in conversation. Their attention was drawn to the sky.

“Dude, like, I think it’s an eagle, man.”

“No way, dude. It’s an owl.”

“I don’t know, man. It’s pretty big.”

“Dude, it’s been up there, like, you know, forever.”

“Oh, man. It’s been up there since last week at least. Maybe it thinks it’s a tree or something.”

“Cool.”

I looked up. Sure enough, an owl was perched on top of a telephone pole. I don’t normally notice wildlife, don’t know much about it, but two years before, I had had a job typing up a doctoral thesis on the endangered Madagascar red owl, and now I was staring up at one on a telephone pole at Burger Boy.

“Check it out. An eagle is up there,” one of the skateboarders said, pointing it out to me.

“Actually, it’s an owl,” I explained.

“Oh, dude. She so burned you. I told you it was an owl.” This came from the beer bong skateboarder, who I figured had held on to a few more brain cells than his friends.

“It’s an owl from Madagascar,” I informed them.

“Cool.”

“It’s not supposed to be here,” I said. “It’s highly en-

dangered, and it's nocturnal. I don't understand what it's doing here."

They looked at me with empty stares. I had the strongest urge to knock on their foreheads to see if anyone was home.

Two things were certain: the four great geniuses were not about to help the endangered owl, and if I didn't help it, I would be responsible for driving the Madagascar red owl that much closer to extinction.

I sighed and dialed information on my cellphone. A minute later I was on the line with animal control, which proceeded to pass me to seven different offices around the state before I got to wildlife management. They said they couldn't get someone out here due to budget cuts and would I be so kind as to shoo it off or get it down.

"Get it down?" I asked.

"Yes. If it's too weak, just go up, grab it, carry it down, and take it over to animal control. We'll handle the rest."

"What if it has rabies or something?"

"Ma'am, birds don't get rabies. Just throw a shoe up there or something. It will fly away. It probably is enjoying the view."

The wildlife person hung up, and I stood there a moment, looking at my phone. Our tax dollars at work. Sheesh.

"We have to shoo it down," I told the skateboarders.

"What? With our shoes, man?"

"You know, shoo. Like, shoo fly," I said. "But in this case, with our shoes. Throw your shoes up there to shoo it away. We have to make sure it's okay."

The beer bong guy was the first to take off his shoes, and the rest followed. I guessed he was kind of their leader. They threw their shoes up at the owl in unison, and I shielded myself from the onslaught of laceless,

skull-embossed sneakers as they made their way back down to the ground. I looked up, and sure enough, the owl was still there. He hadn't even blinked, which made me think he was in distress of some kind. Possibly more distress than what I was feeling at being stuck with a bunch of pothead skateboarders having to save an endangered species because my government wouldn't fund its budget properly.

"Okay. Well, that didn't work," I said. "So one of you is going to have to go up there and get it down."

The guy who had thought the owl was an eagle looked at the telephone pole and whistled. "I don't know, dude. Can't you get electrocuted or something touching one of those poles?"

"No, no. This is a telephone pole. There's no danger with a telephone pole," I said. I was almost sure there was no danger with a telephone pole.

"I'm not much into climbing, man," said the beer bong guy. And that seemed to clinch it for all of them. Without saying goodbye, they put on their shoes and rolled off into the park.

I waited a moment to see if some nice passerby would pass by, and then I kicked off my flip-flops, grabbed the pole, and started climbing. I got about halfway up before I got stuck on a metal doohickey and started screaming.

I was surprised and impressed that it only took about seven minutes for the police to come. Cannes was a very small town, and I didn't know it had so many police. Two squad cars and an unmarked car with a flashing light on its roof drove into the parking lot. I was amazed I had garnered so much attention.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" one of the policemen yelled up at me.

"I was trying to get the owl," I shouted down with as much dignity as I could muster.

“Get down immediately!”

“I can’t. I’m stuck on the metal doohickey.”

I was stuck. Stuck, and nothing was going to get me to move. I was sure any little movement would precipitate my plunge to earth. I sat on the metal ladder rungs, my legs wrapped around the pole in a death grip. My pants leg was punctured all the way through by the metal thing, my fear of heights had suddenly kicked in, and I was sweating so much that a nice slippery coat covered my body from head to toes.

I looked down at the policemen, who were deep in conversation. Four were in uniform, but one was dressed in plainclothes, an expensive suit.

A couple of minutes later I heard a siren and saw a giant hook and ladder fire truck come my way. Presto chango, they had a ladder against the pole, and a big fireman was climbing up to me.

“Don’t worry, miss. I’ll help you,” he said.

“I was trying to get the owl for the wildlife management department. They have budget cuts,” I told him.

“Happens all the time, miss. Come on. I got you.”

He put his arms around me and gave a little tug, and the ripping sound from my sweatpants could be heard across state lines. I pulled back, trying to minimize the tear, and my elastic waistband gave way as I fell upside down, my pants pulled down to my knees, my pink Victoria’s Secret special three-for-fifteen-dollars boy’s-cut underpants out for everyone to see.

I heard snickering from the group below, which now included not just the police and the firemen but the entire staff of Burger Boy. In a moment of lunacy, I waved to them.

The fireman carried me over his shoulder down the ladder. Once on firm ground, I pulled up my pants.

“You have to get the owl. It’s distressed and endan-

gered,” I told the fireman. He nodded and went back up to retrieve the bird.

The policeman in the suit approached me. He was tall. His thick, wavy dark brown hair was perfectly cut and combed, his chin was shaved down to the last whisker, and despite a manly Gerard Butler kind of face, he looked like he was not averse to using moisturizer and the occasional clay mask. He had largish dark blue eyes and thick eyebrows. He arched one of those eyebrows as if he had a question.

“Yes?” I prompted.

“Cinderella?” he asked, his mouth forming a smile, revealing white teeth.

“Excuse me?”

“I was thinking you must be Cinderella.” He held up my flip-flops. “I found these. They’re yours, right?”

I put my hand out, and he placed the flip-flops in it. “I guess that makes me Prince Charming,” he said.

Ew. Who did he think he was? I had just had a near-death experience.

He stood with his hands on his hips. His suit jacket was pulled back a bit, and I could see his badge and gun.

“I was trying to save the owl. It wasn’t my idea. Wildlife management told me to do it,” I said.

He smiled and cocked his head to the side. “I don’t usually come out for these kinds of things, but I heard the call come out about a woman up a telephone pole and had to see for myself. I’m not complaining, though, and neither is anybody else. Sergeant Brody over there says you have the finest rear end he’s ever seen.”

“Well, I’m sorry I wasn’t up there longer to give everyone a better view.”

“Don’t worry about it. They all took photos with their cellphones,” he said.

A deep heat crawled up my face, and my ears burned.

He studied me a second. “Hey, don’t feel bad,” he said, a smirk growing on his perfectly shaved face. “The town has cut back our overtime allowance, so the men have been pretty down. You just made everyone’s day. I heard one guy say he hasn’t felt this alive in twenty years.”

One of the firemen approached us with the owl in his hands. “I got your owl,” he said. He tapped it, making a hollow sound. “Plastic. It was put up there to scare away the pigeons so they wouldn’t crap all over Burger Boy. I took it down so we don’t have to go through this again. Although”—he winked at me—“I wouldn’t mind the experience.”

“But it looked so real,” I moaned.

Prince Charming took the owl from the fireman. “Here,” he said, presenting it to me. “You should have it.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” I walked to my car and opened the door with a loud creak. Prince Charming was on my heels. He threw the owl behind me onto the backseat.

“Think of it as a souvenir.”

I felt I needed to explain myself to him, and I hated myself for it. “I was just trying to be proactive.”

“You were being a Good Samaritan,” he said.

“I’m not like this normally.”

He gave me another annoying little smirk. “I’m thinking there isn’t much normally in your normally.”

I gave him a sufficiently snotty look back and started the car. “I don’t think you’re Prince Charming at all,” I said.

He smiled from ear to ear. “Nice car.”

The Cutlass chose that moment to let rip its biggest car fart ever. I tried to retain my dignity, although I was guessing it was a little late for that. Besides, how dare he make fun of my only means of transportation? I was



about to send back a zinger when he patted the roof and turned on his heel. “Bye, Pinkie,” he called, waving as he walked.

I took a long, healing breath. The day had been a big lesson for me. I would never wear elastic-waist pants again.

