

Dirty Cookbook

By Jason Clampet

From Chapter One
The One

My closest friends, Ted, Lou and Smitty think she's the perfect woman. If I left them alone with her for any length of time I'm certain I'd come back to find her either cast into bronze or cloned. Every Monday night the four of us meet at Lou's apartment and the subject of Jane occupies at least a half hour of our debate about food and women, our two favorite subjects.

Jane's the only woman the four of us know – and,

not to brag, but we know more of Chicago's finest than your average sampling of men – who takes equal pleasure in a good cut of beef as a nice roll in the sack.

If I wasn't with her, I'm certain at least two of the guys would propose to her. Actually, I should say that I'm seeing Jane. Dating implies a level of commitment and reliance that neither one of us wants or will readily cop to. For us, seeing each other means this: Once a week she comes over to my place. I make her dinner. She loves it. Then we screw like mad; her Jane, me kinda like Tarzan. She's also my accountant. She's good at that too. It's fun, but it's not dating.

I've got nothing against marriage, it's just that I know Jane is only good up to a point. That sounds much worse than it actually is. I've always been able to decide



quickly whether I like something and how much: a building, a pair of shoes, a woman. I knew immediately that I liked Jane but that both she and I would tire of each other eventually. In the meantime, though, there was no reason we couldn't really enjoy each other for as long as it lasted. No, I haven't discussed this with her, but I'm sure it's implicitly understood. This isn't a concept that makes much sense to many people. Smitty and Ted think it's judgmental. Lou, the lawyer, thinks the same thing, but for him that's high praise.

It's 8am and Jane is still in my bed. This is the longest she's stuck around and I think that it has more to do with general exhaustion than a nesting instinct. The last few weeks have been physically intense but otherwise hollow. I think she's got her own sense that I'm not the one. Still, it is nice to be making coffee for two instead of one. I'm taking my first sip when she comes into the kitchen.

"Morning Paul."

"Sleep well?"

"Mmm," she says before taking a sip of coffee. "I think the wine helped with that."

"Need a ride this morning?"

"I don't have any client commitments until noon. I'm going to go home, clean my cuts and bruises and put ice on my head." She gives me a little playful hip check.

"I don't have the luxury of R&R. They're filming at the worksite again and I have to keep my crew from killing the cameramen. I should have been there ten minutes ago."

"Then I'll take a cab," Jane says. "Same time next week?"

"I'm counting the minutes already. And taking my vitamins."

"Good boy," she says before slapping my ass, grabbing her coat from the stand in the hallway and disappearing out the door. I stand there at the counter and flex to test

the soreness in my bones. I feel like I spent the night sparring with Leon Spinks. As I add up my injuries, I go over last night's menu, followed by the damage to my kitchen and my dishes and my soul:

Risotto with sliced roast duck

- 1 roast duck, cooking Peking style and sliced in 1/4" pieces
- 4 oz Plugras butter
- 1 lb Arborio rice
- ¼ bottle Valle de Loire *vin blanc*
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 2 cups shiitake mushrooms
- 3 green onions
- A few dashes of saffron and something I'm not yet sure I can trust you with

The damage (in order of destruction)

- 2 bottles Il Paradiso di Frassina Do
- 1 wine glass halfway through bottle #1
- 1 ceramic serving bowl. Note: replace with wooden version
- Zipper, size 34/32 Levi jeans
- 2 more wine glasses – during the table clearing.
- 1 bone china pasta bowl. Why don't I just use paper when Jane's over?
- Punch bowl. Not sure what that was doing on the table
- White button-down Paul Smith shirt. Now with 1100% more red wine.
- 1 tablecloth. I told her it was too delicate for a girl with a healthy appetite to swing from
- Dining room chair – will wood glue work?

The other cost: Me and my weary bones and me are late to the job. We're only onto day four, but divisions within the crew have emerged between those who are here to work, and those that showed up on day two with haircuts and designer work-wear after they learned we were filming an episode of *Tops to Bottoms*. The cameramen don't help, either. They keep sneaking up on us as we're about to bring a sledgehammer against a wall or pry a fixture from the floor.

My plans for today have us tearing down a load-bearing wall dividing the dining room and living area. I stayed late yesterday with my foreman Malcolm to shore up the

temporary supports and, from the sound emanating from the open door; I can tell that he and the crew have already started. I walk up the steps and into the center of a room alive with the sound of sledgehammers meeting plaster and waves of dust undulating off the collapsing piles. I should have an aversion to this. Demolition is about destroying another architect's vision and the destruction of every lingering memory in the space. But there's something in the feverish activity that's the perfect corollary to the measured and plodding nature of architecture.

At the center of the scene is a figure enveloped in a haze of dust and sunbeams who hovers above the activity like an angel; a creature more beautiful than any that's ever descended on a construction site. And it's not Malcolm. Whoever she is, she's taken charge of the scene with such an uncanny grace and grip on power that even the pretty-boys who just want to be on TV are busy hauling red wheelbarrows full of debris out of the room. With one hand she directs the construction crew, with the other she encourages the cameramen to get closer (but not too close). Their movement is in such perfect harmony that I stand back and watch, hoping I can commit her every move to memory in case she up and flutters back to heaven or the modeling agency or wherever she came from.

Malcolm approaches me from behind, snapping me out of my daydream.

"Something else, right?" he says.

"Who is she, Malcolm?" I ask.

"She's Victoria, AKA Blake's brain. His creative director. She showed up before the crew today with homemade cupcakes and a vat of coffee."

Just then, one of the pretty boys grunted past us with wall studs to recycle and a smile on his face.

“Oooh, she’s gotta be a witch,” Malcolm says.

From Chapter Two

The Ex

“I’m ending it with Jane.”

The guys look toward where I’m standing near the door from their habitual perches on the couches and chairs that Lou precisely positioned around the center of his loft space. I go over to his fridge, reach in and pull out a beer. While I’m taking a drag from it, the trio pipes up like a Greek chorus made up entirely of thirteen year-old boys:

Smitty: “She finally realized there were more numbers than sixty-nine?”

Lou: “What’d you do? Tell her you only love her for her spreadsheet skills?”

Ted: “I always knew you were gay.”

Smitty again: “Did the dish breaking streak finally claim the ‘special’ vase. You know, the one you made yourself during that way too little mocked hippie phase of yours?”

And back to Lou: “Someone say ‘gay’ yet? OK, then it must be your penis. She’s finally gotten sick of rounding it up to a whole number.”

The laughter continues for a while and I take the opportunity to sit down and put my feet up on one of the coffee tables.

“Everybody done? Ted, it’s your turn, isn’t it?” I say.

“No, I think we covered all the bases. Except your haircut. And your cooking,” he says.

“My problem,” I say over the continuing chuckles, “Is that I don’t know how to break up with somebody who, A. Isn’t technically my girlfriend, and B. Is an excellent accountant. The best I’ve ever had.”

Lou launches into his wise counsel voice, the one he uses with clients, children, and the three of us. “The real question, as I see it,” Lou says, “Is why on earth would you break up with this woman? The sex is, by your admission, phenomenal. The commitment is negligible. Either you’re lying about her accounting skills or there’s another problem altogether.”

The other two nod in agreement. Ted leans in and speaks in a hushed tone like he’s about to impart the solution to all of my problems. “Is it one of those ‘guy’ problems? There are all sorts of medication available to men just like you.”

“It’s worse than that,” I confess. “I think I met The One. With a capital ‘T’ and ‘O,’ quotes around it ... maybe even all caps, bold and italics. It’s that serious.”

A hush falls over the group. The type that’s usually broken by a belch or passing wind. Instead my words sit there with the strange odor of the latter but an altogether more unfamiliar and unwelcome effect.

Smitty clears the air. “How long have you been seeing her? How come we’ve never met her?”

“Today,” I say. “I met her today. And we’re not really seeing each other yet. I’m going to ask her out tomorrow.”

The sound of three grown men groaning in unison breaks the hushed atmosphere. I would have groaned, too, to be honest. I’m in a sorry state. She hasn’t even said “yes” to dinner, let alone to a life of commitment to me. She wasn’t wearing a ring at work – I

looked for that during lunch – but for all I knew she could be the kind of person who values workplace safety over outward signs of marital fidelity.

Smitty's the first one to respond. "I'm sorry," he says. "I walked by a construction site on my way over here and the jackhammers must have screwed with my hearing. It sounded like you said you met her today. And since I know you're not insane I figure it must be my hearing," He looks around the room for confirmation.

"Your hearing's fine, Smit," I say. "It's me that's messed up." I proceed to tell them about the demo scene this morning and our lunch together and the falling ceiling that disrupted my date asking. They took it all in OK, I guess, but lightening didn't strike them like it struck me and I began to wonder whether I was rushing into things all half-cocked.

Then Ted spoke. "That happened to me once. A few years ago I was at a benefit for something or other on Navy Pier. Typical stuff: bad catered food, long lines at the bar and abysmal bands playing worse music. I began talking to this woman while I was waiting on line for a drink and we just clicked – like cosmic clicking kind of thing. By the time we got to the front of the line I knew that we were perfectly matched. I'd never felt like that before. Not since junior high, of course."

"So what happened," I ask, wide-eyed, hopeful and completely stupid.

"I went back to her place, got her naked, and was about to completely get into it when an army of cats walked across the bed. I stopped and said to her 'If I wanted extra pussy in this bed I would have had you call a friend.'"

I should have seen it coming. When the laughter subsides again, Lou spoke up. "Stick with Jane, Paul. You've got a good thing with her."

“I don’t have anything but sex and help at work,” I say, waving my hands about. The three of them look at me, their faces saying a big “and” in unison. “You know what?” I say. “Forget about it. You’re probably right. Order the pizza, let’s watch some shows. It’s Monday night.”

“Good,” Lou says. “Come back to us when she’s given you her phone number.” They move on to other subjects: Smitty’s latest rejection on the steps of the Art Institute; Lou’s latest client, the disgraced former CFO of an energy trading firm; and Ted’s new evening weather girl. I settle into the armchair for what seems like the longest Monday night ever. I’m to blame, of course. The pizza is better than usual, and the DVD I brought, of Gordon Ramsey toning down the vocabulary to pitch us his idea of a Sunday brunch, is one of his best.

Then Lou begins his favorite part of the evening, the market report, and I have to admit that his enthusiasm alone cheers me up for a minute or two. Like a school don, Lou balances a pair of bifocals on his nose, opens the cookbook and begins to read.

“Ted, I believe you had a date on Thursday with a Kate Jordan. You were going to do the flank steak with a chimchuri sauce, a tomato salad and an Argentinean Syrah. What were the results?”

“We should retire it,” Ted says.

Lou looks up from the book.

“Yeah, throw it out. I think it’s gone stale.”

“What are you talking about?” Smitty says. “It’s a classic.”

“Well classics have to be put out of their misery now and then.” Ted says. ““Like *Cats*.”

“Since when did you develop an admiration for the works of Andrew Lloyd Weber?” I ask, hoping to distract from my problems.

Lou clicks the binder open and removes the plastic sleeve that holds the recipe. He peruses it like a piece of evidence and then begins reading. “It says here that this has been tried a total of 27 times and resulted in very, very good things 26 of those. You’ve even written a note here that says “unbeatable with old John Barry records in the background. Did you break your LP, perhaps?”

“Three times,” Ted says. “Three times in a row it failed.”

We all pause. Three times is serious. I don’t think any of us have ever admitted we failed three times in a row with a recipe. Oh, we’ve failed all right, but admitted it? No way. Smitty is the first one to break the silence.

“Well, uh, Ted. Did it fail. Or, um, did you?”

An even longer silence ensues. It’s pregnant – ironic, yes, considering Ted’s situation – with the unspoken understanding that this may just be the beginning of what we all knew could happen one of these days. If Ted, the top toque, man about town, leader of the pack, is failing down there, what does that mean for us? Who’s next?

“I’m going to move it to the ‘out of season’ section for now. How about that?” Lou says looking at Ted.

“Yeah. It’s probably the herbs. Hard to get good fresh basil these days, you know?” None of us point out that Ted has his own little herb garden that was, as of last week, bursting with so much green that he brought a bad of spillover last Monday night.

“OK. That’s settled,” Lou says. “Smitty, what’s going on with the creatures of the sea?”

Smitty stumbles a bit, still struck by Ted's admission, before leaping into it. "My man says that the next two weeks are great for South Pacific catches – marlin, tombo ahi and kona crab. He also says we should be prepared for a ton of farm-raised scallops flooding the market. He can get me some of the real stuff, but I need to let him know at least two days in advance so he can skim some off of Charlie's order."

Charlie is Charlie Trotter, one of the city's big swinging culinary dicks. Smitty's man deals seafood to him and a dozen other high-end restaurants in town. Because of Smitty's guy we get big-eye tuna Fed-Exed from Tokyo's Tsukiji market, not thawed-out seconds from Whole Foods.

"Excellent," Lou says. "Paul. The shiitake and duck risotto, same as usual?"

This is Jane's dish. It's become so trustworthy that we use it like a control group. I'd replace the shiitake with another type of mushroom and see how she reacted, or poach the duck rather than roast it. Based on these alterations and her physical responses we were able to gauge a number of factors that helped us better prepare other dishes. "Last night I doubled the parsley and Jane kept going on about 'Something's different. It's better than usual' and then we did it on the living room floor." I don't bother going into the laundry list of ruined laundry, shattered dishes and plates, potential world records and the violation of a few state decency laws.

"So more parsley is what the man's saying."

"Yeah Lou," I say. "She noticed that something was different, but she gobbled it up and told me it was better than usual."

"Good, good," he says while jotting a note down in the cookbook.

At this point in the evening we typically moved on to what we were doing later in the week: namely who we were seeing, what we were cooking. To avoid more jokes

about my dream girl who was as of now not even an afterthought, I beg off claiming a stomach ache and leave for home.



I'm proud of my home. It's a basic two-bedroom floor-though that I gutted and remodeled myself. It took a couple of years, but not because I was quibbling over paint colors, I was rescuing parts and supplies from conversion projects I was working on throughout the city. I like to think of it as a mini-museum of Chicago architectural history. My front door came from an old mansion on Astor Street (the owners replaced it with a reinforced steel version), the floors from an old Polish social club on the west side of town, the crown molding from a 1920s hotel conversion in Sandburg Village. Even the kitchen is used, but its history is more instructive than illustrious. I bought most of it at auction from a flash-in-the-pan restaurant that specialized in vertical food. My back porch is just plain old wood, but almost priceless: on game day you can hear the Cubs match, another 90 degrees to the east and I'd be sitting on a goldmine.

I grab a tumbler from the open cabinet, pour in two fingers worth of Laphroaig, flick a few drops of water in the glass and walk to the stereo. In need of serenading from a like-minded guy who makes mistakes with girl music, I pick a Lloyd Cole album and listen to him sing about a girl who's "inappropriate/but then she's much more fun" who has "cheekbones like geometry/eyes like sin/sexually enlightened by/Cosmopolitan" and think immediately of Jane. Lou, Smitty and Ted are right: I have a very good thing going. Courting Jane only took two dates, and then I slid into the relationship without any fanfare or official discussion about what we had. It's what I've always wanted – what every man wants: I live my life, with my stuff and my friends, and she lives hers, with all the female trappings – shoes that match outfits, throw pillows, Coldplay – that I can't

stand. Then we've got a standing date for great food and wonderful sex once a week. That's more than most marriages can boast.

I make up my mind to keep seeing Jane and to take my chances with Victoria tomorrow; maybe up my love life with Jane at the start of the week and Victoria at the end. Great idea, really great, Paul. And with a feeling of complete relaxation and satisfaction, I drift off to sleep in my favorite club chair.



Malcolm has the site under control this morning and I head over to Wicker Park to do a walk-through with a new client who's remodeling his recently purchased condo. I went through it with him before he made an offer and gave him a rough idea of what we could do with it, but this will be the first time I show him anything on paper. Jane's office is only two blocks away so, feeling sorted and chipper and (most of all) ahead of schedule, I decide to swing by and bring her a cup of coffee.

I pull up next to the row of shops and small office storefronts on Milwaukee that Jane's firm is mixed in with and I find a parking spot behind a white Saab. Inside this Eurotrash motoring abomination, two heads are merged into one as what probably began as a morning goodbye kiss turned into a genuine Big Red moment. They're not teenagers, so they're obviously in love (you can't have a lusty kiss before dropping someone off at work). I immediately waver on last night's resolution to keep the field open. Maybe this is what I want; the passionate goodbye every morning instead of the cab rides and "see you next week" or "I'll call you later" that defines my current relationship.

Could I have this with Jane? No, she's not that kind of girl and, besides, there's nothing wrong with the way things are. Victoria? I can pretend all I want up until she says yes or no to a date. Then, maybe.



I open the car door and take out my coffee from the cup holders. I slam the door shut with my butt and step to the sidewalk as one half of the Wicker Park Make-Out Duo Champs 2007 emerges from the Saab of love. Our eyes lock and a flash of panic washes across hers. Shock across mine.

“Jane?” I say as the Saab pulls away leaving the two of us to sort out the surprise.

She quickly regains her composure and points to the coffee in my left hand. “Is that for me?” She asks. “You’ve never brought me coffee before.”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought that I’d...” I trail off and look at the coffees in my hand, then back up at her. “I never pegged you for someone who made out with guys who drove Saabs.”

“I’m so sorry about that. What did you see?”

“Enough to be certain that he’s not your brother. Or maybe he is. Either way we have a situation.”

She scrunches her eyebrows like she’s attempting a tough equation. “How exactly do you figure that?”

“Well, obviously you’ve got some explaining to do.”

“What kind?”

“Him,” I say and point in the direction of the vanished Saab. “And us.”

“The ‘us’ that we’ve got doesn’t give you permission to inquire into that,” she says, pointing in the same direction. “You have me on Sunday nights, or Wednesdays if we’re busy, but still hungry. The rest of the time you live your life and I live mine.”

This is ludicrous. What is this woman saying? We’re a couple. “I don’t approve,” I say.

“You don’t approve?” She looks at me like I just grew another head on my shoulders. “You know what, I don’t have time for this. Especially if I still have to get my own coffee. You and I have an excellent, sexually fulfilling arrangement. You cook, I get aroused, and we have great sex, end of story. We don’t have a relationship. You can’t make claims on me. I don’t on you. But if you’re going to start coming here looking all puppy dog and bark at rivals, I see that you can’t handle it.”

She takes the coffee from my hand and I begin to protest, “Yeah, but...”

“OK, Paul, you know what, we’re off this Sunday and the Sunday next and the one after that. And you know what? I hate doing your books, too. Try finding another woman who does both.

With that she turns away and walks into her office. Five minutes later I’m still standing there and the coffee’s growing cold in my hand as I try to figure out if I just got dumped; if someone who wasn’t my girlfriend just broke up with me. I was still mulling this over when I finally got back into the drivers’ seat. Then the worst part hit me:

I need a new accountant.

From Chapter Three

Mother's Day

I don't do dinner parties with Lou, Smitty and Ted. They're not our thing. Maybe it's one of those weird hetero-guy landmines where we secretly worry that we'll end up sleeping with one another if we cook a great meal. Once a year, though, on Mother's Day, we head to one of our mothers' places and the four of us cook the four of them a Sunday brunch. We've found that it's the most painless way to make up for a year of not returning their phone calls in a timely manner and never sending those thank you notes after Christmas and our birthdays.

This time we're holding it at Smitty's mom Anita's place. His parents spend their weekends at their cabin along Lake Michigan. Anita insists on calling it "the cabin," but it's more posh than 99% of the houses in the city and, since I'm an architect and this field is my specialty, I can pretty much guarantee that 10,000 square feet of living space bumps a building out of the cabin category by about 9,000 square feet.

Anita's reluctantly agreed to come into the city a day early, but Smitty warns me just as soon as he hops into my truck that the mood is not good.

"Get ready for Anita the Beast today. She's looking to get mileage out of the terrible sacrifice she made for our little meal. I give her ten seconds within our walking in the door to mention that my dad will go hungry up in the cabin today."

"As if. When was the last time your mother stepped in a kitchen for a reason other than grabbing a bottle?"

"I think she roasted an infant after reading a magazine article that said eating a child made your skin look fifteen years younger."

“Does she still have your maid steal pints from the blood bank?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t even warm those up anymore. Just drinks them down with a straw or has the maid make a smoothie if she’s in a festive mood.”

“What about her afternoon snack?”

“Nope. She doesn’t even put the olive in her martini anymore. She’s afraid it might splash and get a little vodka on her Balenciaga.”

“Your poor father.”

“My poor father. You know, we’re the only two people to have used that adjective in reference to my old man in more than half a century.”

Smitty and I pull up to a warehouse in Avondale and I park the truck. Smit hops across the sidewalk and bands on a rusted steel garage door.

“It’s Smythson,” he says loudly. With that, we hear the clank of a chain and shortly the door begins to rise. As it does, the clash of air temperatures produces a cloud that makes it seem the garage is exhaling on a January Chicago day. Smitty turns to me.

“I love this place.”

Inside this graffiti’d garage is a temple to seafood. Men in gill, scale and blood covered smocks stand at stainless steel workstations, their knives prepping fish to order for restaurants and high-end grocers throughout the city. Slick tuna, salmon and yellowfin are piled atop sparkling beds of ice. Despite the butchery taking place here, the room is alive with reflections and the crisp air of the first day of winter.

Lucas, a barrel-chested man with a voice to match has three salmon lying across one of the larger workstations. He doesn’t say a thing; just watches Smitty inspect the fish.

“You’ve outdone yourself this time, Luke,” he says.

“Straight out of the North Atlantic and onto your plate. What one you want?”

“Lefty over there. I like the look in his eye.”

“You’re the boss.”

With that, Lucas slides one hand under the fish, slips in the business section of the *Tribune* and wraps the salmon up tight with twine. Smitty reaches into his wallet and pulls a \$50 bill. Lucas looks at him like he’s hurt.

“Oh, you’d prefer this?” Smitty asks while pulling a manila envelope from underneath his pea coat. Lucas smiles like a kid at an ice cream counter.

“Did she do it? You got them?”

“I’ll pull them out nice and slow for you, Smitty says. “Don’t get your fishy paws all over these prints.”

Smitty pulls out three glossy pictures. The first is the well-bosomed host of a cable sports show (no, not John Madden). Her thong is more of a slingshot than an under garment and tiny portions of her breasts are obscured by two well-positioned old-school fuzzy mics. The second glossy is of a Spanish-language soap star who’s currently dating a forward on the Bulls (she used to date Ted until her dislike of solid food turned us against her otherwise nice package). The photographer convinced her to don a trimmed down version of her man’s jersey and pose with a tricked out ¼ pound hot dog. Funny since she’s an anorexic. The last image is a classic, one made better by a personalized signature I know that even Smitty had to work for: Janet Jackson’s hands-on-boobs *Rolling Stone* cover; with the twist of a personal message: “To Lucas: Take care of those precious hands!”

“Damn, Smyth. This is insane. How the hell.”

“Just remember me next time you get something good that somebody else wants.”

“Shit yeah. Grant Achatz will just have to feed his crazy-ass customers Mrs. Paul’s Fish Sticks for the next year. Like they’d know the difference anyway.”



The Smythsons live on the 26th floor of the southern tower at 860-880 Lake Shore, Mies van der Rohe’s modernist landmark. The view from their apartment takes in the lake, the downtown skyline, the Field Museum and, since they crashed a UFO into it, Soldier Field, too. The ground floor of the complex leaves me cold, but the view from the top leaves me feeling like a super hero.

“Remember the great cheeks incident of ’83?” Smitty says as he hands me an iced tea in the living room.

“Not as well as I recall the great penis panic of later that afternoon. Your mom may be a,” I look around and then lower my voice, “a vampire,” I continue. “But she definitely told the building manager what he could do with his and the neighbors’ complaints.”

“Mom’s always been funnier after her 5pm ‘medicine.’”

A knock on the door breaks up our gentle reminiscence of youthful afternoons spent sticking our private parts on plate-glass windows. Smitty answers it and finds Lou and his mother Joyce, followed by Ted and his mom Mai. Both guys have their arms filled with grocery sacks, one of which overflows with fresh green herbs.

“Where is the lovely Anita?” Ted says in the singsong voice he reserves to charm mothers. Anita adores Ted, not just because he’s always flirted with her but also because he’s the right mix of success and fame for her.

“Hello, Ted, hello, ladies,” Anita comes into the entryway dressed in a kimono-like wrap and slippers covered in sequins. She’s holding what I think is the third mimosa

of the morning. “Oh, hello, Louis,” she says. Lou, despite all his charm never merits much more than this underwhelmed greeting followed by, if Anita’s in good spirits, “And how is the firm?”

She’s not interested in that today, though.

My mother Elizabeth follows before I close the door. She’s carrying what looks to be a sheet cake. I give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Mom, what’s with the cake?”

“I wanted to make sure no one went hungry. Plus, I found the recipe in a brochure for a new sugar substitute and thought it would be good for Joyce’s borderline diabetes. I also used egg beaters so it’s extra healthy.”

I bite my tongue and usher her into the living room where she begins a round of hellos and kisses with the other moms. The rest of us move into the kitchen and begin cooking.



With the exception of an occasional BBQ, this is the only time we ever cook together and it’s always a negotiation. Ego-driven and politically scheming, it makes a UN general council discussion about Israel’s legitimacy look like a coin toss. It’s a problem for a number of reasons: Each of us usually cooks alone, We’re in an unfamiliar kitchen, and, even though we won’t admit it, We’re all trying to impress our mothers. On top of that, nobody wants to prep and no one wants to clean up.

To avoid the Mexican standoff featuring Wusthof knives that almost brought last year’s brunch to a fatal conclusion, Lou and Smitty collaborated on a task list and taped off work areas in the kitchen and hung name plates above each one. I think it’s a pretty good solution until I look up and, by process of elimination, realize which one is mine.

PUSSYWHIPPED.

“Five dates,” I say and begin to fastidiously chop onions. “That’s all. Nice and easy. And I haven’t even cooked for her yet.” I don’t tell them I’m worried that if I cook for her and everything goes to plan I’ll end up with the same old, same old kind of girlfriend.

“He broke up with Jane,” Ted says. “Dumped the perfect woman for a shot in the dark. Now his books are fucked but he isn’t.”

So maybe I didn’t tell them the truth about Jane. I’m not a monument to justice.

“If she’s really the woman of your dreams, why have you only seen her five times?” Lou asks.

“She was ‘hurt,’” Smitty says in the middle of hand-whipping a bowl of mascarpone, lemon and pine nuts “So she wants to take it slow.”

“Paul, Paul, Paul,” Lou says. “This has to either pick up or stop. At least put another woman into the rotation so you don’t get all needy on us. Are you crying?”

“Whoever put me on onion duty is an ass,” I say. “Are we even cooking anything with onions today?”

All three of them laugh.

“Any one of you would kill to pull a girl like Victoria,” I say through the tears. “She’s only going slow because the last few guys she dated were complete dogs. Like Ted.”

“I’m sorry for all the damage me and my kind have wreaked on your little angel with a tool belt. And I’m sorry just talking about her brings tears to your eyes ...”

“Onions. It’s the onions.”

“... but you’re letting her get too close. You’re forgetting that the reason we meet every week, the reason Lou pours his heart and soul into the Dirty Cookbook is so that we can all taste as many dishes of woman we can during this great movable feast we call life. You like a good steak? Fine: eat it once a week. Don’t eat it every day or it will make you fat and eventually clot your arteries and kill you. Like marriage. Victoria may very well have that power. So eat some roughage – I know a nice woman for you – find a new side dish, just don’t stick with the same diet forever “

“You have a breakthrough over there or is it still the onions?” Smitty says.

“If you met her you’d see what I’m talking about. But for her sake and mine too, I’m going to keep you away from one another for as long as humanly possible.

“About that,” Smitty says.

“About what?”

“Her not meeting us.”

“Forget it. Drop it,” I say.

“It’s a little late.”

“Late for what?”

“To drop it.”

“?”

“She’ll be here in an hour.”

“!”

Lou steps forward. “You were getting too moony-eyed. We haven’t seen you so stupid for someone since that month you spent waiting for every Alitalia flight at O’Hare. So we decided we had to either chop off the infection before it spread or learn to live with the disease.”

“You invited her here? Today? Why?”

“Look on the bright side, Paulie: If she sees you doing your momma’s boy act and if she survives us, Joyce, Anita and Mai then you’ve got something and we’ll let you two hop down the bunny trail of love. If she doesn’t dig it, she splits and we get you back. Cool?”

“No. How’d you get her number?”

“I looked at your cell when you were in the shitter at Lou’s last week. Is that her picture attached to the profile? Pretty cute,” Smitty says.

“Jesus.”

“Word to the wise,” Ted says. “You may want to stop crying before she shows up.”