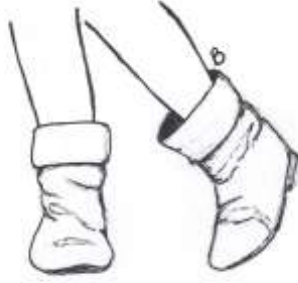


One



From a Blurry Distance

A sprinkle of dust encircles my head, and a cough escapes my lips. My hand flips past countless discarded treasures as layers of stale perfume seep inside my nostrils. I stare at the aging fabric and begin to seriously question my method.

“I know you’re hiding in here ... somewhere,” I whisper as my eyes shift from an outdated suit to an almost-adorable sundress. I haven’t found anything worth my efforts, yet I’ve combed through almost every rack.

“I’m out of here.” As soon as the words enter my mind, my feet blaze a trail between assembled outfits on display and full-length mirrors echoing my escape. No sooner do I reach the exit when I hear someone clear her throat.

“Thanks for stopping by,” a voice slithers past a stack of folded T-shirts and creeps inside my ears. I steal a look to my left, and the clerk offers me a better-luck-next-time smile.

My hand freezes on the door, and I remind myself that Paige MacKenzie is not a quitter. I can’t give up, not until I’ve searched every inch of this place. These shirts, skirts, dresses, and accessories — no matter their state of shabby chic — have personalities of their own, and each one clamors for my attention. A prize is in here, lurking among tossed-on-the-beach-one-too-many-times canvas bags and coffee-stained blouses.

I can feel it.

With that, my hunt shifts gears. Only a moment passes before an entire row of cardigans hangs in a disheveled mess. To my surprise and delight, a cashmere sweater practically leaps into my arms. I hold it in a deep embrace, caressing its velvety sleeves. Except its color is too dull against my pale complexion, and right now, that’s the last thing I need.

A glint in the mirror catches my attention, and I casually glance over my shoulder. A golden mannequin stands there with attitude, wearing the cutest pair of jeans I've ever seen. I rush over and, somewhat rudely, strip the plastic goddess. With bated breath, I peek at the size ... yes! I hug my new jeans and continue my expedition.

Like a puppet on a string, I'm pulled toward artfully displayed shoes. Smooth and supple leather beckons me. Wait a minute ... could it be? I catch my breath and place my hand over my chest. My weary feet float past ratty sandals and scuffed pumps. I grab the fold-over ankle boots and ever so carefully slide my foot inside the tan-colored suede. I push a little farther, and my toes graze the tip. The fit is just right! Other than a few signs of wear on the soles, they're in practically perfect condition. And they'll look fabulous with my new/vintage jeans.

Victory is mine.



Without warning, a familiar sound drifts from the backseat of my minivan, and from a blurry distance, my daughter's voice finds me.

"I am not a baby," Elle exclaims, appearing as if she's going to snap, and just like that, my most recent shopping daydream is over.

"Are too," Liam grumbles through clenched teeth.

"Am not!"

My rearview mirror reflects the reddened faces of my children. I'm about to jump in and referee, but then something strange happens. I hesitate. Do I really want to be in the middle of this heated argument? Isn't it better to allow my children to use this exchange of dialogue as a learning experience in the art of debate? Another minute passes as I deal with my own internal struggle.

In the end, I surrender a sigh and ask the dreaded question, "What's going on back there?"

"Liam said I was too old to wear a purple pony on my T-shirt. He said the other kids would think I was a baby." Elle tugs at the sparkly graphic on her shirt.

"Liam, that little pony's all the rage on the kindergarten playground," I say.

"The girls in my class wear shirts with guitars and cool stuff on them," he replies.

“Well, you’re also three years older than Elle. If she’s happy with her clothes, then that’s all that matters.” A big-toothy grin takes over my face as I await his response.

“I was only trying to help.” Liam rolls his eyes before looking out the window.

Elle relaxes into her seat. A smile spreads across her sweet, heart-shaped face, and I realize I must’ve said something right. I take another moment to stare at her reflection. Since the day she was born, Elle has resembled my husband: golden-blond hair, bright-blue eyes, and a smile to brighten my day. Today, she looks a little different. Is it possible she’s beginning to resemble me? After all, her hair *is* looking a bit darker.

Sunshine Elementary School appears ahead, and I cringe — time to be herded like cattle. A person adorned in an orange vest motions for the cars, minivans, and SUVs to merge into the right-turn lane. I stop at my assigned spot, and my children leap from the backseat.

“See ya.” Liam offers a half-baked wave behind his back as he struts toward a group of friends.

“Okay, my little man. See you later. I love you and will give you big hugs later,” I say in a hush and only to myself.

“Bye, Mommy.” Elle’s delicate arms wrap around my neck and her tiny lips press against my cheek. Before I can even respond, she hops from the car and rushes toward her class.

Kiddos delivered to school unharmed: first mission accomplished. Next, pick up a few groceries ... sigh.



“What to cook for dinner?” I agonize on my drive home from the supermarket.

Even after purchasing a cart overflowing with food, I’m still not sure what to throw together. If I’m being honest, I dread coming up with meal ideas, especially when I know in my heart that my feeble attempt in the kitchen will most likely fail in a major way. Over the years, my family has endured countless subpar meals, and I suspect our lack of dinner guests is due to the fact that dinners at the MacKenzie household are typically served burnt, dry, tasteless, or all of the above.

My cellphone rings, and my heart races in anticipation, but I already know it will be one of three people: my husband, little sis, or Mom. I squish the phone against my head, while fumbling through one of my bags.

“Good morning,” I say, and a few cookie crumbs tumble from my mouth.

“Hello there,” Hailey chimes. “What’s happening?”

I laugh a little in response. “Let’s see ... drive kids to and from school, grocery shop, clean the house ... and I’m guessing, help my sister plan her wedding.”

“Sounds fun, especially the last part,” she says, and suddenly there’s an awkward silence. A few more seconds pass before she adds, “So, I liked the article you sent on art-inspired centerpieces.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Which do you like the best? Which do you want to use?” I ask.

“I like them all, but I can’t choose. Why don’t you pick one?”

“Hailey, I can’t plan your entire wedding. You need to make some of the decisions. You’re the bride, remember? And you really should start acting like it. The wedding’s only two months away. Speaking of which, have you sent the invitations?”

“Not yet. I’ve been so busy with Julian. I mean my designs for him. He’s opening an amazing new restaurant downtown. It’s a very exciting project,” Hailey says, and I can barely hear her fingernails tap rhythmically against her phone. “You know, I have an idea. Why don’t you and I work together on the invitations?”

“Tonight?”

“No, silly, I already have plans. How about tomorrow night?”

“You bring the wine.”

“Don’t I always?”

“No.”

“Sure, I do,” she says, but I know she’s grinning sheepishly on the other end. “Listen, I have to go. Talk soon.”

I don’t bother to respond, knowing she’s already long gone. My phone slips into the back pocket of my vintage-but-new-to-me jeans, and I take a moment to stare adoringly at my boots. A smile consumes my face as I image having someplace fun to wear them: soaring across the skies to a foreign land or a concert in the park. Oh, well. These groceries won’t unload themselves ... but wouldn’t that be nice?

Canvas bags are strewn across every inch of counter space, and I begin the arduous task of sorting through their contents. Strange. Where did this shrimp come from? I never buy shrimp. I shrug my shoulders and throw them into the freezer. I come across another strange item: paprika. Did I end up with someone else's cart? I search and find something I do recognize, frozen mini pancakes. Now those I recognize. I reach for the paprika and stare. What sort of dish would call for paprika? Hmm ... I'm going to be creative and make the most incredible dinner my family has ever tried. I had better get started now, in case my efforts explode all over my kitchen.

I rummage through another bag and discover an onion at the bottom. Off to a good start. I mean, onions taste good in everything, don't they? A minute later, I'm wiping tears from my cheeks while scraping diced onion from my cutting board. The small squares tumble into a large pot, and melted butter engulfs them, creating a pleasant sizzling sound. I wander toward my prep area, both arms overflowing with exotic spices. Something explodes under my boot. I groan as a second small burst of liquid breaks free of its skin and squishes across the floor. I glance down and recoil at the veritable army of purple grapes that now covers my wooden floor.

"Nice!" I lean against the counter and inspect the damage to my boots. Wine-colored goo's dripping from my heel. I swipe a paper towel over the messy substance and scour it clean. My finger grazes the boot's surface, and I'm immediately reminded of how awesome my newest purchase is. Thank goodness the juice didn't ruin the top.

I'm finally beginning to relax when my suede boots start to shimmer. Wait one minute. They're not supposed to shimmer. And why do my hands look like they're made from glazed porcelain? I scan my kitchen. Everything's sparkling: the stove, the sink, even my wooden cabinets. What's going on here?

The room abruptly shifts, and coffee in my favorite mug begins to swirl. It doesn't take long before my entire kitchen is spinning out of control. My feet slip and slide across the floor. I slam into my refrigerator and grip the door. Something is terribly wrong. What am I supposed to do? I must focus on my breathing: one, two, three This isn't working!

After a few more rotations, the room stops spinning. My stomach, however, is still churning, and I doubt I'll ever be able to open my eyes again. A minute passes before I can even attempt to wedge apart one eyelid. Where am I? I'm in a kitchen, but not in *my* kitchen. My white cabinets have changed to dark Formica. Beige wallpaper covered with fruit surrounds me. Small, medium, and large cast-iron skillet hang neatly in a row. And is that an avocado-green stove?

Hmm, something smells yummy in here. I wonder what's simmering on that green stove. I inhale the heady steam and pick apart its scrumptious fragrance: sautéed onion along with stewed tomatoes and bell peppers. Odd, this isn't *my* nose; it belongs to someone else.

All right, I must have slipped and hit my head. I'm hallucinating and this is some sort of illusion. Strange — I'm aware of someone else's thoughts and feel the motion of her body. I can hear her boots cross the floor. No, I mean *my* boots.

This has to be a dream.

I search for a reflective surface but can't move a muscle. Suddenly, I realize *she's* looking for a mirror. Hold on ... how do I know this? Long, delicate fingers reach for a cabinet door. It opens, and attached inside is a round mirror. Wow. I'm not me. I mean, this isn't me. *I* don't have strawberry-blond hair, light freckles, and a soft pouty mouth ... and I'm definitely not a teenager.

Delilah's Story, June 1988 *Lewisburg, West Virginia*

"I'm not sure what you're makin', but it smells mighty fine," a male voice says from behind and practically startles me right out of my skin.

"Shep, when're you gonna learn to stop sneaking up on people?" I admonish, turning away from the mirror.

"It's 'Dad' to you — not Shep," my dad says with a smile, and I notice again how his weathered face tells a tale all on its own; his entire life having been spent working hard outdoors, all while raising a daughter on his own. Dirt from the day is still smudged all over his white T-shirt and jeans, his salt-and-pepper hair is matted to his forehead, and beads of sweat still cling to his skin.

"I can't wait to have a bowl of whatever you're cookin'." He peers into the bubbling pot as his nose follows the steam.

"It's called crawfish étouffée. I found it in the gourmet cookbook you gave me. I had trouble finding crawfish, so I used shrimp instead."

“Well, I’m lookin’ forward to tryin’ something new from my little girl. One thing I don’t get: Why is it when everyone else around these parts is makin’ mashed potatoes and gravy, my Delilah comes up with some strange new dish?”

“I suppose I take after the man who raised me — always ready to try something new. In fact, I noticed there’s a recipe in here named for you, shepherd’s pie. I’m assuming that’s why you bought this cookbook for me.”

“Funny, I didn’t realize that was in there,” he says, but I can tell he’s fibbing. “I suppose since it’s in there, you’re gonna have to make it. I expect it’ll be a huge success at your future restaurant.”

“I expect *all* my meals will be a huge success.” The étouffée simmers in the pot as I scoop up a heaping spoonful. It’s a little hot but as tasty as can be. “The shrimp étouffée will be ready in time for your supper.”

“I feel bad eatin’ a meal you’ve put together when you ain’t here enjoying it with me.” His brows knit into a frown as he shoves his hands into his pockets.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll eat a little before I run off to work.”

“That’s right — my little girl has got herself a new job.”

“Not just any old job. I’m an official employee of the Greenbrier Resort.” I pat him on the shoulder. “Now go, get back to work.”

“Yeah, I best be gettin’ off.” He heads toward the door and places his cowboy hat on his head. “Now, I’m serious. When you get to work, I want you to march straight over to your boss and tell him what you’re all about. Why, you’re the best cook south of the Mason-Dixon Line.”

“Thanks, Dad, but the truth is, I’m lucky to have a job.”

“Delilah Jones, what you’ve got there’s a God-given talent. The only person who doesn’t believe in you is you.” His voice is stern, but his eyes twinkle like starlight.

“I’ll talk to my boss about working toward a position in the kitchen. But can I at least start the job before I go blabbing my mouth off to him?”

“Well, alrighly then. I’ll see ya later.” He tips his hat and strides out the door.