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4:00 PM

The doorbell rang. The opening measures of “Libiamo ne’ lieti calici” sprang forth. Elizabeth Worthington did not believe in random notes.

“What’s that?” Brian asked.

“What’s what?” Amanda replied. It hadn’t occurred to her that not all doorbells chime little ditties from *La Traviata*.

“That sound. What is that?”

“Ohhhhh,” Amanda cried. “That’s Verdi, silly. You haven’t heard of him?”

Amanda knew full well that Brian hadn’t heard of Verdi. Or Puccini. Or Porcini for that matter. But what did she care? He was kind and true and cute with a capital *k*. She threw her arms around him and gave him a little tickle in the secret place she had discovered early on in

their relationship—the one that, without fail, propelled her serious beau into fits of girlish giggles. Though let it be made perfectly clear, as Amanda had to all her sorority sisters: Brian Grace was no girlie-man.

“Amanda, don’t. They’ll hear,” Brian pleaded.

But Amanda was having much too much fun. She rang the bell again and again and again while maintaining the assault on Brian’s giggle-spot.

Inside the Worthington home a CD was skipping, or so Eddie thought. Why else would the same twelve notes play over and over again? He had just reached a critical juncture in the meal preparation—such an incessant irritant could not be endured.

“Libby?” he cried, in a delicious accent that included a dash of Europe and a hint of Africa. “Libby, are you there?” There was no answer.

“Libby!?”

Eddie dropped the venison he was seasoning to hunt down the derelict disk. As he hurled his long, lean frame down the hallway, it suddenly struck him—if Libby hadn’t put the CD in the stereo, then who did? His annoyance turned into alarm. He made a quick U-turn back to the kitchen, surveyed his options, and picked up a Wüsthof classic six-inch boning knife. Home-invading opera lovers were a rarity in the tony North Shore enclave of Mooresdale, but Eddie figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

He entered the living room slowly, not so much out of fear, but to give his eyes time to adjust. Before him lay a sprawling sea of white—sofas, armchairs, rugs, credenzas, artwork, picture frames, marble floor: all white, whiter, and whitest.

In fact, the only thing not white in the room was Eddie. And the knife.

Eddie peered around the room. To his delight, there was no burglar in sight, unless, of course, he or she was camouflaged as a swan. He then opened the media cabinet. To his consternation, there was no CD in sight either. The stereo was off.

The chiming continued like acoustical Chinese water torture. Amanda had forgotten her house key back at school, so she had no choice but to ring. And ring. And ring.

“Screw it,” Eddie muttered. “I’m a chef, not a D.J.” He headed back toward the kitchen in search of his iPod. Fully cranked, his trusty Nano would drown out the infernal noise.

Suddenly the ringing stopped, only to be replaced by hysterical shrieks of laughter emanating from just beyond the front entryway. The doorbell had eluded Eddie, but this sound he could not mistake. Amanda Worthington, sole progeny of Charles and Elizabeth Worthington, was home.

The chiming resumed.

“Alright man, alright. I’m coming, I’m coming,” Eddie cried. He once again changed course, this time toward the front door. “God help me. I have to do everything in this place,” he grumbled, as he placed the knife down on the credenza.

Amanda needed Brian to make a good first impression on her parents, but at the moment he was doubled over in search of a regular heartbeat. “Bri, stand up,” Amanda pleaded. She tried in vain to yank him upright. “Please, stand up!”

It was too late. The door opened. But, neither her mother nor her father peered back at her. “Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie!” Amanda shrieked in joyous relief. Had there indeed been a burglar,

Eddie thought, surely that would have been the last straw. The blood-curdling squeal of an ebullient eighteen-year-old was sure to scare off any would-be intruder.

Amanda gave Eddie an enormous bear hug. “Hello there, little one,” he said, warmly returning the embrace. Voice pitch aside, he was actually quite fond of Amanda.

Not one to linger, Amanda bounded into the living room, anxious to see the new decor. Her mother had mentioned that she was going with mono-achromatic this time. Amanda assumed that was the name of the decorator.

She surveyed the room, desperately seeking some sign of color. An accent pillow, perhaps, or even a magazine. The vase on the mantelpiece gave her hope, but to her dismay, even the calla lilies, delivered fresh weekly, were, by definition, lily white.

“Oh my God, Eddie. It’s like ... it’s like seventeen shades of white.”

“Eighteen. I counted.”

Amanda looked around again. “It’s kinda scary. I mean, like, what if you spill something?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure she ordered two of everything just in case. Take extra care with the couch, though. That just arrived this week.”

Eddie looked back at the entryway. Brian was shifting back and forth, looking as lost as a burger without its bun. “Amanda, what about your guest back there? He looks a little lonely.”

Amanda turned around and motioned Brian to join them. “What are you doing?” she said, laughing. “Come in, come in.”

Brian entered with two suitcases. Eddie noticed that the bags were quite a bit larger than one might expect for an overnight visit.