

MARGOT EARLY



THE THINGS
WE DO
FOR LOVE

Cherish

Margot Early

The Things We Do For Love

Аннотация

The man Mary Anne Drew wants is marrying someone else! So to win him back, she buys a love potion. Mary Anne's not convinced spells and potions work, but still, she has to do something. Too bad the wrong man—aka Graham Corbett—drinks it. Then strange things begin to happen.... Graham has never shown any interest in Mary Anne. In fact, their arguments are legendary. But now Graham is acting anything but hostile! Could the potion really work? Or was Mary Anne looking for love in the wrong place all along?

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“Another drink for you, groom-to-be?”

Distracted, Jonathan glanced at her. “Oh. Thank you, Mary Anne. When you come back—”

But she was already walking away, leaving the crowd behind.

This was the moment. She carried Jonathan’s glass and her own to the refreshment table. It was unattended, and she carefully found the cabernet and poured another glass, then, with the uncapped vial of potion against her palm, let it run into his glass with the wine.

She poured herself some merlot and took a sip to steady her nerves.

“Ah, thank you, Mary Anne.”

A masculine hand took the second glass from her hand.

Mary Anne did not release it. “No, that’s for—” She gripped the glass tightly.

Appalled, she felt the stem break, the foot come off in her hand.

Graham Corbett looked in astonishment from the piece she held to the one he held. Then in a mock salute, he lifted his part of the glass to his lips and drank deeply.

Dear Reader,

One of life’s most frustrating realities, which most people

learn at an early age, is that not all love is returned in equal measure. Most of us learn young that we can fall madly in love with someone who doesn't know we're alive. The girl falls in love with the high school football player, but he likes her best friend... and so on.

In the realm of legends, fairy tales and Harry Potter, one of the solutions to this problem has been the love potion. Of course, it's in no way a foolproof answer. Though all is fair in love and war, we want to be loved without having to resort to witchcraft. And as to enchanted drafts, the wrong people sometimes drink them.

I hope you enjoy reading of love potions in a contemporary context and meeting Mary Anne Drew and Graham Corbett, who can both at least comfort themselves with the thought that love potions don't work anyway.

Wishing you happiness and all good things always.

Sincerely,

Margot Early

The Things We Do for Love

Margot Early



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margot Early has written stories since she was twelve years old. She has published more than twenty books with Harlequin Books; her work has been translated into nine languages and sold in sixteen countries. Ms. Early lives high in Colorado's San Juan Mountains with two German shepherds and several other pets, including snakes and tarantulas. She enjoys the outdoors, dance and spinning dog hair.

A man who believed me to be a witch once asked me,
quite gravely, if I'd put a spell on him.

I thought it a remarkable question and told him,

"Not on you."

This book is for him.

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CHAPTER ONE

Logan, West Virginia

MARY ANNE DREW was at her desk at The Logan Standard and the Miner when Cameron brought the news. Cameron, who was Mary Anne's first cousin and best friend, grabbed a chair and straddled it, facing Mary Anne. "They're engaged."

Mary Anne did not ask who. She said, "No," in a way that was sort of like a prayer.

Her face showing that she knew she was causing pain, Cameron said, "Yes. Angie and her friends were drinking martinis at the Face last night and Rhonda waited on them, and she told me that's the news. She doesn't have a ring yet, though."

It couldn't be true. Mary Anne smothered her feelings in a cascade of repetitions of this thought.

She'd been in love with Jonathan Hale for four years, ever since he'd arrived in Logan from Cincinnati to manage the public radio station, WLGN. She'd never experienced anything like it. At first, she'd thought nothing of the tall dark-haired man with his wire-rimmed glasses and matter-of-fact manner. Yes, she'd been impressed with the time he'd spent working overseas as a correspondent for Reuters. She knew he'd seen dreadful things in war zones, things he didn't discuss. Then, one day when she'd come in to record an essay, he'd sat listening and watching her with brooding intensity. Afterward, he'd said, "That was good

work, Mary Anne. I'm going to try to get it out to as many other stations as I can."

She'd looked into his blue eyes and she had felt something that was almost like an arrow through the heart. She'd never understood where that image of Eros had come from until that moment; she'd been nailed by the arrows of Aphrodite's son. The sheer force of the experience convinced her that Jonathan Hale was meant to be hers.

She believed it still.

Cameron asked, "Are you okay?"

"Sure."

No, she wasn't okay! She was dying. How could she go through the next five minutes, let alone the rest of her life, knowing that Jonathan Hale planned to wed that tacky and tiny thing, Angie Workman, who was manager of the Blooming Rose, the closest thing Logan had to a boutique. To bolster the notion that this news meant nothing to her, she said, "Aren't you working?"

Cameron was director of the Logan County Women's Resource Center, located next door to the newspaper office.

"Coffee break. A client's mother came in and told her marriage is for life and she's ashamed that her own daughter should seek a divorce from the fine man who broke three bones in her face last week. She wound up by calling yours truly and our legal-aid attorney godless man-haters. I'm cooling off." Cameron switched back to Mary Anne's concerns. "I have a last-chance idea. Just for fun. Not that it will work. But it would be fun to

find out if it could work.”

Mary Anne studied her cousin. Like Mary Anne, Cameron was blond—or somewhat blond. They had the same light brown hair, which became lighter in the sun. But there the resemblance ended.

Cameron, to Mary Anne’s envy, was small. In fact, genes had granted her the kind of body that was currently in vogue—boyishly small hips and a pair of tatas that made men stare. She was a natural athlete who never drove if she could walk, run or ride a bike to get where she needed to go. Her idea of a good time on weekends was leading Women of Strength events for the women from the resource center’s shelter. She had a black belt in tae kwon do and was an experienced caver. Mary Anne, on the other hand, knew that her own rear end would benefit from less time in chairs and in the driver’s seat of her car.

Cameron was five foot five. Mary Anne was five foot ten. And Mary Anne lived for haute couture—after all, before settling in Logan she had worked for two different women’s magazines in New York and could swear that everything in *The Devil Wears Prada* was true. Cameron’s clothes came from thrift shops. Mary Anne indulged in highlights, and Cameron wouldn’t dream of it. Mary Anne was an editor and reporter for *The Logan Standard* and the *Miner*; Cameron had the aforementioned challenging job of safeguarding the welfare of women and children.

Being that Cameron had a set of requirements for any man with whom she might be involved, Mary Anne was touched

by her cousin's interest in helping her secure Jonathan Hale's affection and desire. Jonathan nearly met Cameron's prerequisite for a man ready for marriage. Though he was employed and wasn't an alcoholic, Mary Anne doubted he'd ever had therapy, something Cameron insisted all males required. Cameron herself also wanted a man who didn't need to reproduce, who was willing to adopt. "There are plenty of children in the world," Cameron would say. "Children who need good homes."

The truth, Mary Anne knew, was that Cameron had watched her own sister go through an agonizing labor, which concluded with a cesarean section. She had told Mary Anne, "Never. I will never..."

Mary Anne liked the idea of having children. No, she wanted children. This fact had given her dreams about Jonathan an extra edge of desperation. "What's the last-ditch idea?" she asked Cameron.

Cameron's brown eyes gleamed, looking almost black. "A love potion."

This suggestion was soooo Cameron. You would think, Mary Anne often reflected, that a woman who heard heinous stories of domestic abuse, rape and what-have-you every day, would have surgically removed every last romantic cell in her body. Cameron claimed that this was the case. It just wasn't. And whenever Cameron did become romantic, it was things like this...

The fortune teller at the state fair, who'd told Cameron she would marry a dark-haired brown-eyed man; the astrologer who

said Cameron would become united with her soul mate through “unconventional means.” Chain letters with the message, “You will meet the love of your life within five days of sending this to five people. Do not break the chain!” And, no, Mary Anne was not exempt from Cameron’s bizarre schemes.

She forced skepticism to the forefront as she confronted her cousin. “Supposing that such a thing worked—which it won’t. How are you proposing to obtain it?”

“Paul’s mom,” Cameron said simply. “The hippie midwife...?”

Paul was what Cameron had instead of a boyfriend—well, she also had a dog, Mary Anne knew. Paul Cureux was a childhood friend who was totally allergic to the idea of commitment—though Mary Anne had pointed out that he did have dark hair and brown eyes. Since Cameron was hypercritical of nearly every man she met, she and Paul had made some sort of agreement to give other people the impression that they were a couple. Then Cameron wouldn’t have to deal with being pursued by men who’d never had therapy—Paul hadn’t, either—and Paul wouldn’t have to elude women who wanted to marry him and have his children. It was an arrangement Mary Anne had never understood, especially since Paul—who usually had weekend gigs playing guitar and singing folk music that must have made every woman who heard him know she was alive—seemed to enjoy making women fall in love with him. Mary Anne had once asked her cousin, “Do you have a thing for him?”

“I have a thing for no man,” Cameron had replied. “Except the god.”

She did not mean Paul Cureux. Mary Anne did not think the man to whom Cameron referred was even remotely divine—and neither did she think his psychological house was in the immaculate order Cameron believed it to be. Now, she said, “Paul’s mother makes love potions?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember? The radio station did that interview with her.”

Mary Anne didn’t remember. She said, “No,” but she didn’t mean that she didn’t remember. She only meant that she wasn’t ready to try anything so silly.

Cameron shrugged. “Your choice. I don’t see being single as problematic, but you do. And you’ve liked this guy for years, though he’d probably make you miserable.”

Mary Anne resented the last comment. She knew Cameron found Jonathan Hale far less appealing than she did, but she hated Cameron’s insistence that there was a worm in the apple.

Mary Anne simply shook her head. “I have work to do.”

Cameron stood up, shaking back her two long braids. “Back to the mines. If you do stop by the radio station, give my regards to the deity.”

“I don’t speak to that man if I can help it.”

When Cameron was gone, Mary Anne sat down in her cubicle and tried to read her piece on the Harvest Tea. She needed to edit it and complete the society page by ten tonight. Her title at

the paper was associate editor, and in practice it meant she did a bit of everything. She edited sections on society and the arts, and she covered news and features as they arose.

Barbara Rollins, President of the St. Luke's Catholic Church Altar Society, provided a light sponge cake...

The Harvest Tea just could not compete with the calamity of Jonathan Hale's engagement. Though Jonathan always treated Mary Anne respectfully, he didn't seem to notice her as a woman. Which might be appropriate in someone else's boyfriend. Which he was.

Maybe Cameron was right. Maybe it was worth trying one last insane thing before it was too late. The love potion wouldn't work. Mary Anne did remember the interview with Clare Cureux, though Cameron was wrong about the focus. Jonathan Hale's focus had been rural health-care providers. Mary Anne, herself, had heard him give a firm negative to the questions of Graham Corbett, Logan's insufferable radio talk-show host, who believed he'd single-handedly put Logan County, West Virginia, on the map. Jonathan had said, "She did not mention the love potions, and I didn't ask."

A love potion was a ridiculous idea. But Mary Anne wondered if she could find a pretext for dropping in at the radio station. Are they really engaged? Maybe the rumor was false. She thought for a minute, then rose from her desk, pulling on her gray wool blazer and slinging her leather handbag over a shoulder. Hurrying past the office of the editor in chief, she gave him a wave, glad

he was on the phone and couldn't ask where the hell she thought she was going. No need to fabricate a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

She hurried down the stairs of the brick building and outside. Fall was in the air, the smell of dried leaves, a brisk wind, no more sweltering summer days that made her hair limp. She stepped to the curb, looked both ways and waited for a pickup truck to pass before running across Main Street in front of an approaching stream of cars. She passed the soda fountain and hurried into the historic brick structure next door, the Embassy Building, which housed WLGN.

Don't let it be true, she thought again. Maybe Cameron had the wrong information about Jonathan and Angie.

As she reached the radio station's glass door, a man swung it open to hold it for her.

Mary Anne felt a rush of distaste, which she hoped showed on her face.

The man who had opened it stood six feet tall and wore his gold-streaked brown hair on the long side, so that it curled around his collar, waving back from his forehead. Frequently, people mistook him for the actor John Corbett, but Graham Corbett was not even related. Dr. Graham Corbett. Doctor as in Ph.D., not M.D. Though she knew he did see clients two days a week for counseling, Mary Anne still found Graham Corbett's use of Doctor before his name to be just one more affectation. No doubt if he ever learned that Cameron referred to him as a deity, he'd

build a temple in his own honor.

“Ah,” he said, “the woman with an ass made for radio.”

Mary Anne paused to give him a smile of sweet acidity. “And I thought you were the ass made for radio.”

“My angel,” he said, “how is the life of the has-been beauty editor and hard-biting reporter of local fashion shows?”

“I can’t wait till someone writes the unauthorized biography,” she said, “of you.” It lacked the power of her previous comeback, and she knew better than to respond to Graham Corbett at all. She should have remembered that his show was on this afternoon and that he always arrived a half hour early, punctual as a Rolex. Without waiting for his reaction, she stepped past him and into the station. Through the glass window of the recording studio, she could see Jonathan Hale interviewing a coal miner who had black lung disease and silicosis. Mary Anne had heard Jonathan talking about the feature only the day before. He was the station manager, but Logan was a small place, even if it was the county seat, and Mary Anne couldn’t imagine Jonathan ever completely abandoning reporting.

His eyes flickered at her briefly through the glass as she passed, and she responded with a little nod, then went to the computer terminal where she knew the archives were stored. Not because she needed anything from the archives but because that way she could pretend to have a reason for her appearance.

“To what do we owe this visit?”

Good grief, Graham the Sham had followed her! She said,

“Isn’t there some other person whose day you’d rather ruin?”

“Absolutely not. I have some news for the society editor of The Logan Standard and the Miner. East of the Rockies magazine has named me one of the country’s most eligible bachelors, and People has chosen me one of their fifty most beautiful people.”

“They’ll need a two-page spread just for your fat head. Please go away.” Without glancing at him, she sat down at the terminal to see if there was anything online about the history of the Logan County Harvest Tea. There wouldn’t be, but that did not matter.

Graham Corbett crouched beside her to stage-whisper, “They’re engaged.”

Somebody’s half-finished latte sat in a paper cup beside the terminal like an accident waiting to happen. “Oops!” She knocked it off the desk, but he sprang back in time—catching the cup.

She did glance at him then.

He winked, gave her the grin that Cameron called “so appealing” and finally left her, tossing the coffee cup in a trash can on his way.

Mary Anne did not watch him go. Instead, she reflected that if he knew anything about her, he wouldn’t have tried to impress her with his mention as a most eligible bachelor, never mind People—if that was what he’d been doing. She detested celebrity, thought that even journalists only remained dignified if they kept out of its limelight. Nobody became famous and retained

his dignity. Graham Corbett, as far as she was concerned, was no exception. He was, however, becoming famous, his voice as familiar to many people as Garrison Keillor's, and his following stronger than Dr. Laura's. He'd been interviewed on several major television network talk shows already.

She looked toward the recording booth, seeing Jonathan's compassionate expression as he interviewed the coal miner. Being a journalist was different. Jonathan wasn't a celebrity and never would be, even if he someday won a Pulitzer. He was interested in other people, in things outside himself.

She had no idea what Cameron saw in Graham Corbett. But, as for Jonathan... Oh, hell, a love potion couldn't possibly work. But it might be kind of fun to try. She pushed away from the computer console, met Jonathan's eyes for one brief electric moment through the glass of the recording booth and as she left the studio reached in her purse for her cell phone to call Cameron.

BACK AT THE WOMEN'S resource center, Cameron resumed dealing with the details of her work. Calling a plumber to fix pipes in the safe house. Phrasing an ad for the newspaper inviting volunteers to train for the helpline. Checking in with the woman who was presently covering the helpline.

Cameron did her turn on the helpline, too. She knew she was reasonably good at counseling women in trouble, getting them to take advantage of the center's resources. But every time a

woman finally made the decision to leave a partner, Cameron felt so much empathy it was as if she, herself, had endured the ordeals. The husband who disassembled the car to prevent his wife from using it to flee. The cop boyfriend who sat with his service revolver, threatening suicide, in front of the single mother and her three-year-old. Then, there were the calls from men. Threats against her, every employee of the women's resource center, the ex-spouses and ex-girlfriends, the runaway wife, the volunteer.

Graham Corbett, Cameron reflected again, would be the perfect man for her. He was kind on his show, and he gave damned good advice. No way could Cameron imagine him turning into a controlling, possessive type. And he was smart.

Cameron suspected that Graham had the hots for Mary Anne. She'd felt the currents running between them. She even wondered if Mary Anne felt it, too, but was in denial, too fixated on Jonathan. Besides, Mary Anne's father was an actor and musician, an attractive celebrity whose exploits had been covered in international tabloids, a big deal. Mary Anne detested this, and she was never going to go for a man who lived and worked in the public eye.

The love potion had been a fun idea. But a deep part of Cameron badly wanted Mary Anne to succeed with Jonathan, for the simple reason that she herself wanted the chance to date and get to know Graham Corbett—who clearly preferred her cousin. She should forget the radio star.

Her cell phone rang and she looked at the screen.

Mary Anne.

Cameron smiled and answered, wondering if she was going to learn that her cousin was willing to try a love potion after all.

“WHAT ARE YOU KEEPING those for?” obstetrician David Cureux asked his ex-wife. He had followed Clare into her basement to discover an entire bookcase stocked with foam meat trays. Those were not the only things stored in the basement. There were old magazines, including every copy of Midwifery Today ever printed, a stash of gift boxes that took up twenty-four cubic feet of space, the infamous box of rubber bands, another of twisty ties. The woman never threw anything away, but for the life of him David had no idea what she planned to do with those meat trays.

“We’ll need these things when it all falls apart,” she said.

It, David knew from long and turbulent experience with this woman, was civilization as they knew it. She’d raised two children, who now spoke with a sort of hushed horror of growing up amidst the ominous predictions of a woman they still believed to be a seer, even though they’d finally learned to tune out her prognostications of global disaster.

“I guess you could put them together with duct tape and build yourself a house,” he reflected of the meat trays. “Or a coliseum.”

“Never mind that. Let’s move these upstairs.”

These were more than twenty boxes too heavy for the sixty-eight-year-old woman to carry up the cellar steps by herself. They contained telephone directories for the years 1968 to 2005. Not just phone directories that had belonged to Clare, but most of the discarded phone directories for the state of West Virginia—or so David suspected.

“I have to get this done,” Clare said, referring to the delivery of the boxes to recycling, which her ex-husband had promised to do with his pickup truck. Clare was reluctant to part with them, but she’d realized that every issue of Birth Journal could no longer be kept upstairs. So those magazines were coming downstairs and the phone books would have to leave. “We need to hurry. Someone’s coming about a love potion.”

A person who knew Clare less well would draw one of the following conclusions: One, she’d made a previous appointment with someone who wanted a love potion. Or two, she’d received a phone message or written message asking her to be home at a particular time to greet a customer interested in a love potion.

David, however, understood that Clare simply “knew” someone was going to come by. Enough people approached her about love potions that it wouldn’t be a huge coincidence for her to receive an unannounced visitor requesting one. If such a person arrived in the next few minutes, David would chalk it up to the popularity of his ex-wife’s brand of snake oil. Their lives had been full of these instances of Clare supposedly “knowing” things were going to happen. Like the time she’d made them pack

up from fishing because Bridget had broken her arm. “Bridget’s been hurt. We have to go home,” she’d said.

He’d found these announcements aggravating, because she always expected him to act on them. And coincidence had made her nearly always right.

If it wasn’t coincidence, there was a scientific explanation of which he was unaware. Whenever he told her that, Clare said matter-of-factly, “Of course, there is.” Clare’s point of view was that she had “the sight,” but that there was a scientific explanation for this gift.

Nonetheless, David’s physician’s mind did not stretch to encompass love potions that worked. The love potions were snake oil, and they appeared to “work” because people who were so determinedly in love that they would try such things could often get their way anyhow. And then there was the placebo effect, with all its variations, including the power of positive thinking. The strength of human belief could account for the supposed “success” of the love potions.

David hefted a box of phone books. On the off chance that a victim was on her way—usually it was women who went in for love potions—he preferred not to meet the person. Or be seen anywhere around Clare at the time. His city council seat was up for election again, and the council was having credibility problems as it was; damned if he’d let association with a dispenser of love draughts scupper his chances. He told his ex-wife, “You might think of me.”

"I do," she said, misunderstanding. "You need the exercise."

"LET'S TAKE ANOTHER CALL now. We've got Julie on the line. Hi, Julie."

Mary Anne had switched on the radio as she started her car to drive herself and Cameron to Clare Cureux's house in Myrtle Hollow and obtain a love potion. Hearing the detested voice of her least favorite person, she reached out to turn the radio off again.

"Don't touch that dial," Cameron said, batting her hand away.

"Hi, Graham." It was a shy-sounding, young-sounding female voice. "It's about my fiancé."

"You're engaged. Great! That lucky guy."

"The hypocrite," said Mary Anne. "I don't think he's ever asked out the same woman twice."

"He's waiting for the real thing," Cameron insisted, undoubtedly partly in jest.

"Thanks," the radio caller said, sounding so sweet that Mary Anne herself listened attentively for her problem, the problem the young woman expected to resolve by listening to Life—with Dr. Graham Corbett, which Mary Anne thought of as Get a Life. "Well, we've been engaged six months and we're planning to be married at Christmas, and I totally love my fiancé, but he does this little thing that kind of bugs me. He says these things. I know he thinks he's being funny, but he really hurts my feelings. Like I'm a little overweight but I'm not superfat, and I was showing

him a wedding dress in a Brides magazine, and he asked if it comes in plus sizes.”

“Creep,” Cameron hissed.

“That’s not very nice,” Graham remarked, sounding compassionate.

From the man who says I have an ass that’s made for radio, Mary Anne reflected. You sorry piece of work.

“And I’m an English teacher, but I really want to write short stories, and I sent some in, trying to get published, and he says, ‘Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.’”

“Have you told him how these comments make you feel?”

“Yes. He says I’m oversensitive.”

Graham made a thoughtful sound. “Julie, I want you to do something for me. I want you to think about how you feel when he says these things. Then, I’d like you to close your eyes...Got them closed?”

It was the intimate older-brother tone that listeners seemed to love. Knowing how little relation it bore to the real Graham Corbett, Mary Anne found it pretty hard to take.

“Yes,” said the girl who was engaged to a jerk.

Beside Mary Anne, Cameron had her eyes closed.

“Just imagine spending the rest of your life with someone who says things that make you feel that way.”

The poor girl made a slightly distraught sound. Cameron echoed it.

Mary Anne said, “I can’t believe you buy in to his act.”

“Shh!”

“Now, let’s try a different experiment,” Graham said. “Imagine how you would feel with someone who loves you so much that he wouldn’t dream of saying anything that could hurt your feelings. This is going to be a self-confident guy, so he doesn’t need to make himself feel strong by making you feel rotten. He’s going to say things like, ‘I can just imagine you in that dress. You will look so beautiful. But you’re always beautiful to me. I love you so much. I cannot wait till you’re my wife.’”

Mary Anne was not sentimental, but she had to admit that Graham was on the money with this one, and he certainly had a gift for conveying such sentiments in a way that sucked in the female audience.

Beside her, Cameron sighed.

“It’s all lies, Cam. That’s not what he’s really like. Trust me.”

“Shh! This is therapeutic for me. It keeps me from being a godless man-hater.”

“Yeah,” Julie said softly. “Okay. I see.”

“Julie, you don’t seem oversensitive to me, but this clown does seem under sensitive. He has some growing up to do, and I’d make sure he does it before you get to the altar.”

“Amen,” Mary Anne said. “Or else you’ll end up with someone who says you’ve got an ass made for radio.”

“Who said that?” Cameron asked, eyes suddenly wide and vigilant, turning in her seat.

Mary Anne’s cell phone rang. Knowing that up in Myrtle

Hollow she might not have reception, she pulled over near the historic Henlawson Bridge and answered.

“Mary Anne Drew.”

“Hi, Mary Anne, this is Jonathan.”

“Jonathan.” Why was he calling? She wouldn’t be recording her next essay until the following Tuesday. This was Thursday.

“Hey, Angie and I are engaged, and we’re having a little party upstairs at the station Saturday night. I wanted to make sure you’re there. Angie wants to meet you.”

His words jolted her. Thinking she might throw up from the emotional impact of hearing him say he was engaged, Mary Anne managed to answer, “Thanks, Jonathan. I’ll be there.”

“Great. See you then.”

She shut the phone, closing her eyes and trying to imagine Jonathan Hale telling her that she was always beautiful to him.

Cameron lifted her eyebrows.

Mary Anne repeated what he said.

“A party?” Cameron echoed. “People drink things at parties.”

Mary Anne followed her thought and her mischievous tone to its obvious conclusion. Grimly she put the car in gear, heading for her last hope, for the thing that couldn’t possibly work.

Myrtle Hollow

THE HOUSE WAS in fact a cabin. When Mary Anne parked her RAV4 outside, a bearded white-haired man was loading heavy cardboard boxes into a pickup truck. He glanced at the women in the vehicle and she saw a flash of turquoise-blue eyes.

"That's Paul's dad," Cameron said. "He used to be an obstetrician. He lives in your neighborhood."

"David Cureux," Mary Anne replied, thinking with annoyance of the man she knew to be David Cureux's next-door neighbor—Graham Corbett. "City councilman, possibly implicated in the misuse of city funds."

"He absolutely wasn't," Cameron said. "Anyhow, he and Clare are divorced, but they're still good friends. Well—at least he's always helping her with projects. Paul," she pronounced, "has mother issues. He needs therapy."

"Of course, he does," Mary Anne retorted. "His mother brews love potions in her spare time."

The woman who came out onto the porch wore her still dark but white-threaded hair in a long braid. The years had etched a map of grooves on her olive-toned skin. The dark eyes seemed only briefly interested in Mary Anne and turned fiercely on the white-haired man, as though supervising him at his task. She wore a flannel shirt and blue jeans, and her feet were bare.

Cameron said, "She never wears shoes unless she's forced to go somewhere they're required. Paul finds that mortifying, too. Myself, I like her."

"Does she know we're coming?"

"Possibly, but I didn't call her to ask, if that's what you mean."

Uneasily, Mary Anne touched the driver's door handle as Cameron got out of the passenger seat. What in hell am I doing?

"David," said the gray-haired woman, "why don't you see if

the library can use some of them?”

“The library has no use for thirty-year-old phone books. You could have used them for kindling.”

Clare seemed to think this over.

He hurried to get behind the wheel, as if afraid she was going to ask him to unload the cardboard boxes he'd just loaded into the truck bed. He shut the door and drove off.

The maker of love potions scowled.

“Waste,” she said to Cameron. “People are going to regret all the things they throw out when it all falls apart.”

Cameron said, “Hi, Clare. This is Mary Anne Drew. We’ve come to ask you about—”

“A love potion,” Clare answered. “Let’s go inside.”

Cameron cast Mary Anne a sidelong look, inviting her to be impressed by the woman’s powers. Mary Anne wished she was back at the newspaper office, accepting defeat with dignity.

The walls of the cabin’s kitchen were lined with shelves full of canning jars containing leaves, roots and other unidentifiable things. Clare asked, “Would either of you like a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” Mary Anne was a little bit uneasy about accepting a cup of tea from someone who brewed love potions. Whatever this woman made, would it be safe to give Jonathan? What if it poisoned him?

“Thank you,” Cameron said. “Do you have nettles?”

“Yes.” Clare gave her an approving nod. Mary Anne wondered again why Cameron didn’t simply marry Paul, who was

handsome, intelligent and employed—a keeper and interpreter at the state park zoo by day and a musician by night. Except that Cameron didn't especially want to be married, and she had said Paul definitely didn't want to be and she didn't like him that way anyhow. But Cameron seemed so at home in this atmosphere.

In contrast, Mary Anne felt out-of-place, felt exactly what she was. A woman who liked highlights and pedicures and bikini waxes and shopping and New York, who wouldn't reject the idea of Botox or tooth bleaching, who could lie around watching entire seasons of *Sex and the City* on DVD over and over again.

They sat at a beautiful handmade wooden table on mismatched chairs.

Mary Anne said, "Cameron, this is unnecessary."

Cameron gave her a fierce look.

"Good," said Clare.

Mary Anne blinked. Wasn't this woman peddling snake oil? But she seemed to be encouraging Mary Anne not to buy a love potion.

"Mary Anne," Cameron said, "I think they work."

"They work," Clare agreed. "But usually not in the way people intend."

Despite herself, Mary Anne found her curiosity piqued. But surely Cameron didn't believe—

"What do you mean?" Mary Anne asked Clare.

The woman's gaze was penetrating—a basilisk stare.

"I tell people everything. I give them their instructions

for activating the potions. They follow the instructions. Then, unexpected things happen. For instance, you are thinking of giving a love potion to a man who has a girlfriend.”

“Actually, they’re engaged.” The journalist side of Mary Anne was scrupulously truthful. “How did you know that?”

Clare ignored the question. “Yes, well, if he drinks my potion and falls in love with you, things may get messy with the other woman. You need to look into your heart and make sure that this is what you really want, because the person who drinks the potion will fall in love with you with a force you’ll be unable to stop or countermand.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem,” Mary Anne reflected. “For me, I mean.”

Clare gave her an almost disapproving look. “It’s better to let nature take its course, you know. You think you know what you want, but it’s very important you understand that the experience may be different from what you’re expecting.”

Mary Anne was quite sure that all the ways Jonathan Hale could fall in love with her would be wonderful. She shrugged. The love potion couldn’t work, so what was the big deal? “I’ll take my chances.”

That look again, the expression of a woman who was warning against disaster and knew that the person she warned was deaf to the message. Clare donned reading glasses and opened a spiral notebook, making a notation with a short stub of pencil. She was a thin, reedy woman, not at all bent by age. Drawing a resolute

breath, she turned a page in the notebook.

“You’ll do it?” Mary Anne said.

“Of course.”

The teakettle whistled. Soon a concoction that smelled like grass clippings sat in front of Cameron. “Nettles,” Cameron said. “They make your hair grow.”

Mary Anne envisioned her cousin with Rapunzel-like tresses—which wasn’t too far from what Cameron actually had already.

While Clare worked, mixing various ingredients into a clear liquid, straining, tapping, the journalist in Mary Anne came alive. What went into a love potion? The only ingredient she could identify was a piece of chocolate. Seeing her looking, Clare said, “Green and Black’s Organic Extra Dark. Here, have a piece.”

Mary Anne took it warily and ate the piece. She had to admit, it was extraordinary chocolate. “It won’t hurt him, will it?” she asked. “The love potion?”

Cameron put her head in her hands and shook it.

Clare simply looked at her. “Write this down,” she instructed. “Just take a piece of paper out of that notebook. A blank piece, please.”

Mary Anne did as directed, picking up the stub of pencil.

“This is what you need to do to activate the potion,” Clare said, working with the clear liquid as she spoke. “You must perform three acts of love, each for a person you dislike, someone you can safely say you don’t particularly love. It can be one, two or three people. Break it down anyway you like. Just make sure

it's someone you quite detest, someone you think is a terrible person."

Graham Corbett leaped to mind.

"You must give one of these people a treasured possession of yours. You must speak to a disliked individual with kindness. And finally you must perform a secret good deed for that type of person."

"It can all be the same person?"

"You have someone in mind?" Clare said with no inflection whatsoever. "People usually do."

"Quite," Mary Anne said, finishing copying the directions. She read them back to Clare.

"Yes. Well, that's it." Clare turned from the sink, twisting the cap on a half-ounce vial of clear liquid. She handed it to Mary Anne. "Slip it into something he'll drink. He shouldn't notice any difference in the taste."

"Don't you need a piece of my hair or something?" Mary Anne asked, deciding not to repeat the question about the potion hurting Jonathan.

The look the midwife gave her was withering. "No, I don't," was all she said. Then, seeing Mary Anne's still doubtful expression, she seemed to take pity and explained, "Your essence is there. Believe me."

Mary Anne tore out the piece of paper. "What do I owe you?" If this was expensive, she was going to kill Cameron.

"Twenty-five dollars."

Cheaper than highlights. Mary Anne readily produced the cash.

Clare stared hard into her eyes and said, “Finally, the most important thing.”

“What?”

“Make sure the right person drinks it.”

Cameron and Mary Anne both laughed. Mary Anne said, “Won’t be a problem.”

CHAPTER TWO

A TREASURED POSSESSION, a kind word, a secret good deed. Graham Corbett was the obvious recipient of all these things. “A terrible person,” Mary Anne murmured with satisfaction as she steered the car out of Myrtle Hollow.

She had forty-eight hours in which to accomplish these tasks. Then, she could slip the potion into a drink for Jonathan at his engagement party. And watch her happiness unfold.

Except that love potions did not work, could not work.

Beside her, Cameron said, “I’ll come back to Nanna’s with you, then walk home.”

A good three miles, but nothing for Cameron.

“I can drop you,” Mary Anne said.

“No, I want some books.”

Aside from a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published in 1969, nearly all the books at their grandmother’s house, where Mary Anne also lived, were romance novels. No pirates, nothing sexy. Also, nothing published since the early 1950s—Mary Anne suspected that sexy romances had been written before then, but Nanna owned none of them. In Nanna’s books, the heroines were constitutionally upbeat virgins who never smoked, drank or kissed on dates, not only because it might be bad for them but also because it might set a bad example for their peers. American heroes and heroines were fiercely patriotic and always punctual.

No one ever even mentioned sex. The only historicals Nanna owned had been written by Barbara Cartland—Nanna didn't even particularly care for Jane Austen. Mary Anne believed that this was because Lydia Bennet had lived in sin with wicked Wickham before Darcy had bribed Wickham to marry the ruined creature. Cameron countered that it was because Fitzwilliam Darcy stirred Nanna's own repressed sexual nature. *Pride and Prejudice* was, Cameron maintained, an inherently sexy book.

Both cousins, however, shared an enjoyment of Nanna's selection of extremely unlikely romances. Cameron claimed that in her own case it was historical research into the evils of the repressed society from which all her clients' problems sprang, the seeds planted generations earlier. Mary Anne just enjoyed the stories' improbable plots. "I just finished *Stars in Your Eyes*," she recommended.

Cameron frowned. "Which one is that?"

"The girl is driving to Mexico to take care of her brother's daughter, when she gets a flat tire. A seedy character directs her to a mechanic at the nearest bar, where a total stranger greets her as though they're eloping together. While he's embracing her, he whispers, 'I'm Drex. Danger.'"

"And the heroine falls right into the act with him," Cameron said, remembering. "Then, the corrupt Mexican military dude forces them at gunpoint to marry, with the seedy guy presiding as J.P.," she filled in excitedly. "Then, the hero persuades her to keep up the pretense of the marriage—"

“Without ever consummating it—”

“For patriotic reasons involving espionage. Yes, I want that one,” Cameron decided. “Do you think Nanna has made us strange? I mean, she made your mother and my mother strange.”

Mary Anne had little interest in this topic. Her parents lived in Florida and she lived in West Virginia. Another continent might be preferable, but you couldn’t have everything. “Do you think the love potion will work?” she asked. “No, I’m stupid. There’s no way it can.”

“Paul says they do work. He says it’s scary.”

“For someone terrified of commitment, I’m sure it is.”

“It’s like this, Mary Anne. I work in a job that encourages me to believe romance is silly, marriages don’t last and happily ever after is a mundane matter of avoiding men who beat you. But your parents are still married and so are mine.”

“Would you be in my mother’s marriage?” Mary Anne asked.

“No. Nor my own mother’s. I’m just trying to say...” Cameron sighed. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say. Except that even if the love potion doesn’t work, you shouldn’t stop believing you can have an excellent future with someone.”

“That’s the most depressing thing I ever heard.” It was depressing because she wasn’t in love with a random someone. She wanted Jonathan Hale. “So can you, by the way. Have an excellent future with someone.”

“It doesn’t matter for me. I want to adopt children. I’m not a marriage-or-nothing-else kind of person.”

“And I am?”

Cameron said what Mary Anne knew on some level to be true.
“Yes.”

Mary Anne tried to think of a treasured possession she was willing to sacrifice toward the goal of achieving her heart's desire. What were her most treasured possessions? She treasured the quilt Nanna had made for her and given her when she graduated from Columbia. No way would that find its way to Graham Corbett's bedroom—a place she pondered only briefly as an imagined horror of dirty underwear and stinky men's running shoes. What else did she treasure?

Cameron said, “So you're going to bestow all these things on Graham Corbett?”

“Yes. I detest him.”

“I'm not sure that's the message you'll convey.”

Mary Anne heard a slight strain in Cameron's voice.
She really likes him.

A brainstorm occurred to her. “How's this? For the really nice thing I'm going to do for him?”

Cameron said nothing, just waited.

“I'll set him up with you!”

Cameron muttered something entirely uncharacteristic. “I don't think I'm his type.”

“But don't you want to go out with him?”

“I want him to want to go out with me,” Cameron corrected.

“He's truly a jerk, dear cousin. You have no idea. He says the

most offensive things to me.”

“I’ve heard some of them,” Cameron replied, sounding more dejected. “It’s called flirting, Mary Anne.”

“Oh, no, it’s not!” Mary Anne replied. “But if you’re game, I can do a thing for him that is far better than he deserves, and set him up with wonderful you.”

Cameron shrugged, as if she already knew that Graham would refuse. “Sure.”

THE VALUED POSSESSION that Mary Anne decided to sacrifice was Flossy. It was ridiculous for a thirty-two-year-old to be so attached to a stuffed white rabbit with plastic fangs. She’d received it as a twenty-first birthday present from her college boyfriend, and she’d learned afterward that it had been made because of something to do with Monty Python. Her boyfriend had loved Monty Python, but she’d never watched the shows and thought they were stupid. Nonetheless, she’d absolutely fallen in love with Flossy, who her boyfriend had always called “the fluffy little bunny rabbit.”

It was going to have to be Flossy. Mary Anne would give it to Graham anonymously. He probably liked Monty Python. She could part with a stuffed animal in the cause of securing the love of Jonathan Hale.

The kind word would be easy. She’d choke down the bile that would inevitably rise to her throat and tell Graham Corbett that his advice to the woman with the mean fiancé had been good.

Then she'd set him up with Cameron. What did her cousin see in the man?

GRAHAM CORBETT stopped by the radio station at nine the next morning. His plans for the day included working on his book, the first self-help book he'd ever set out to write. He already had a contract with a major publisher; because of the nationwide broadcasts of his radio show, not to mention a few appearances on national television talk shows, his name recognition—and face recognition—had helped to sell this first project, *Life—and Love*—with Graham Corbett.

He had noticed the irony, given that his own love life was thin on the ground. He knew all the reasons that was the case. Briony's death had left him shaken. Not the grief—he had experienced the grief, lived through it. No, it was the way he'd come unraveled, the destruction he'd allowed his emotions to wreak on his life. After a thing like that... Well, he was uneasy about truly binding himself to a woman again.

Uncharacteristically, Mary Anne Drew was at the station when he arrived. He gathered, from her interaction with Jonathan Hale, that she'd just recorded one of her essays. The essays were great. They painted Appalachian life in familiar colors and seemed to always strike an emotional chord. The woman could write and she had a good radio voice, a distinctive alto.

But what did she see in Jonathan Hale? As he stopped near his In basket, Graham could almost feel the longing in Mary

Anne...for Hale. She was desperate, no doubt because of the engagement.

Well, whatever.

He stared at his In tray. In it sat a white plush rabbit with vinyl fangs. It was the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog from Monty Python and the Holy Grail, but it wasn't his. He picked it up bemusedly and addressed Mary Anne and Hale, the only other people at the station. "Whose is this? It was in my In tray."

"Then, it must be yours," Hale replied. "Perhaps you have a secret admirer." He chimed in then with a near-perfect imitation of the appropriate section of the movie. Mary Anne laughed, and even her laughter, Graham noticed, seemed desperate.

Graham held the rabbit toward Mary Anne. "Do you know anything about this?"

Her face flushed, but it was probably because Hale had just put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Great essay."

Mary Anne shook her head at Graham.

Graham shrugged and tucked the rabbit under his arm as he collected the other things in his tray. Better not pay too much attention to Mary Anne. She didn't like him, and it bothered him that she had gotten under his skin a bit. Being attached to a woman was something he didn't need. Occasional dates, sure. But the rest...

What had happened after Briony's death still made him ashamed. Drunkenness, failure to appear at appointments or for studio engagements, random couplings with virtual strangers, a

sort of unconscious yet full-power course of life destruction. One morning, he had actually awoken naked and hungover on the university athletic field with a broken ankle, like a character from a Tennessee Williams play. And why this descent into debauchery? Because he'd loved her so much? Even after half a year in a grief group and hours of counseling he wasn't sure. He thought it was the shock of death itself. That someone could be there—then gone. His father had passed away a year after Briony, but that had touched him less. His father's life had been a celebration, and it hadn't shocked Graham when an eighty-year-old man slowly dying of asthma had stopped breathing and then become free. Briony's death had been a different situation. A young woman, vibrantly, almost indecently healthy, an athlete, her life so alive...Then, gone.

And so he'd had to live to the extent of life, had to live so as to constantly court death.

In any case, now his life was ordered as he liked it, and he wanted to hold on to those things that were most precious—his work, his close relationships, his commitment to all that mattered to him.

Jonathan Hale headed for his office, the only actual office at the station—a small room with a view of Stratton Street. Mary Anne said, "Um, Graham. I wanted to talk to you."

He lifted his eyebrows. Mary Anne never voluntarily spoke to him. And maybe that was part of what needled him about her. Not to mention the sheer waste of her infatuation with Hale.

He stepped toward her. For all his teasing of her, Graham had to admit that Mary Anne Drew was an extraordinarily good-looking woman. She was tall, strong like an Amazon, with straight Florida surfer-girl hair. She could easily have been a model on the basis of her face. Lush dark eyebrows and eyelashes, green eyes, defined cheekbones and chin, generous mouth, a few freckles on that skin that always looked honey-colored. Yeah, he gave her a hard time about her butt, yet it was only because he knew that was the part of her body she disliked the most. He liked it. You could see her glutes, and she wasn't all skin and bone, like her scrawny cousin.

"I wanted to compliment you on your show yesterday," Mary Anne said.

He lifted an eyebrow.

Her cheeks took on color as he watched.

"Your advice to that girl was so good. It's the kind of thing a lot of women need to hear."

"Thanks," said Graham. This was unprecedented. And a little strange.

"And I wanted to do you a—or ask you for—"

She stumbled around incoherently.

Graham said, "What do you want?"

"I wanted to offer to set you up with Cameron."

"Your cousin," he clarified.

"Yes. She's really nice and she directs the women's resource center, which I'm sure you know. She's had some counseling

training, and I thought the two of you might get along.”

Graham scratched his head. This was all so strange. “You think I can’t get a date?” he asked.

“No.” She actually stamped her foot. A small stamp of frustration, but a stamp nonetheless. “I just thought you’d like each other. I thought you could go to Jonathan’s party together.”

Things were getting more and more weird. “Did she put you up to this?”

“Of course not. Cameron’s not like that. She doesn’t need male attention. She gets plenty of that without help. But she does think you’re nice, and I thought the two of you might hit it off.”

He squinted. “Cameron... What’s her last name?”

“McAllister. Our mothers are sisters. Cameron is really great. I know you’d like her.”

Strangely, Mary Anne seemed every bit as desperate in her quest to unite him and her cousin as she was to earn Hale’s approval. Graham decided to forgo the “whys.” Did he want to go out with Cameron McAllister?

He was selective in choosing dates. He sometimes had trouble getting rid of women after he’d taken them out a few times. One or two had even taken to dropping by the radio station, finding excuses to walk past his house—which wasn’t even in town but out in Middleburg, near Mary Anne’s grandmother’s house. It made him uneasy. He was a public figure. Like it or not, his voice and his radio show, his appearances on television and more, had made him a public figure.

"I really don't know her, Mary Anne," he said. Then, added impulsively, "I have an idea. Why don't I take you to Jonathan's party?"

Mary Anne appeared to be considering some serious dilemma in her mind. He could hear the wheels turning and wished he could read her thoughts.

"I—I'd rather you took Cameron," she said.

"And I'd rather take you. Besides—" he lowered his voice, unable to resist—"think of the effect it will have on Hale, seeing us together. For all you know, he might decide you are more of a prize than little Angie." Graham didn't believe this. Hale had no interest in Mary Anne Drew, except as a source of food for his massive ego. Graham simply had to tease Mary Anne, whose face grew distinctly red at his words.

She expected him to rise to the bait and spit back at him.

Instead, she said, "Oh, I just don't know," in a way that suggested global warming or world peace might hang on the answer to her inner conflict. She said, again almost desperately, "I'm trying to do something nice for you!"

"So go out with me."

"I don't like you!" she replied. "Cameron does. Why don't you go out with her?"

Her behavior was incomprehensible. Graham pushed aside the little sting of that "I don't like you!" He said, "Well, you tried. But to be perfectly honest, it reminds me of the Christmas when I wanted a red ten-speed Bianchi bike and found a five-speed

Schwinn under the tree.”

She made a startled little noise that might have been the word Oh, and looked crestfallen.

He said, “I’ll tell you what. You bring Cameron to the party, and we’ll see what happens. I’ve never really talked with her. All I know is she broke Carl Moosegow’s wrist.”

“He grabbed her in a bar!” Mary Anne exclaimed. “And not on the arm, either. She’s studied martial arts. It was a case of ‘no mind,’ like Bruce Lee used to talk about. She just reacted as she’d been trained to do.”

“I’ll be careful where my hands stray,” said Graham, who had counseled female clients on maintaining boundaries—and dealing with men who did not observe them. “By the way, are you trained in martial arts?”

Without a word, she spun away, grabbed her purse and left the office.

Graham grinned as he watched her go...and exchanged a look with the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog, who grinned right back.

HE HADN’T LET HER do something nice for him, and Mary Anne was unsure whether “It’s the thought that counts” applied to good deeds required to activate love potions. A simple solution would have been to agree to go to the party with him, but Mary Anne didn’t like him, so how could that have been doing him a good deed? She couldn’t have gone with him, though. Because of Cameron. Cameron liked him, and Mary Anne didn’t want to

hurt Cameron.

Objecting to the idea of putting more effort into the love potion project, yet unwilling to simply abandon it, she took a gift certificate for Pizza Hut pizza that she'd won at the high school's kickoff carnival and slipped it into Graham's In tray. After that, the only thing to do was mildly discourage Cameron's interest in Graham, play down any possibility that Graham actually liked Mary Anne herself and prepare to slip Jonathan Hale a love potion.

"DO I LOOK OKAY?" she asked Cameron on the night of the engagement party. "Do these jeans make my butt look big?"

"You have an excellent butt," Cameron replied matter-of-factly. Blessed with a figure that Mary Anne, for one, believed was the answer to every man's fantasies, Cameron had absolutely no interest in discussing Mary Anne's figure flaws. "And your clothes are cool. You look like a model."

Low-rise flare jeans, baby T-shirt and her favorite hat. She also wore her favorite moss-green wrap sweater coat.

In her handbag was the precious vial she'd bought from Clare Cureux.

Tonight was the night.

Taking her turn in front of the mirror, Cameron babbled, "Jonathan asked Paul to play for the party but I told Paul he couldn't, because if he's there I have to pretend we're together."

It was a situation Mary Anne still couldn't get her head around,

but all she said was, “And so he turned down the gig?”

“Oh, sure. That’s not usually part of our agreement, but he knows how badly I want to go out with Graham.” After a moment, she said, “Besides, he knew he could get a different gig tonight. He just told Jonathan he was booked, and then he got a gig—so he was.” She changed the subject. “Do I look okay?”

Mary Anne scrutinized her cousin. Cameron was dressed up, for her. She wore a low-backed brown dress and clunky platform shoes. She looked sexy and great and had probably spent a total of six dollars on the ensemble. “You’re an eleven,” Mary Anne told her, blowing her a kiss. “He’s lucky you’re coming, but you’ll get to see for yourself what he’s really like.”

Cameron gave a mischievous grin that showed her chipped front tooth, an anomaly in her otherwise perfect bite. “Graham Corbett, here I come!”

Mary Anne decided that if Graham tried to flirt with her tonight instead of her cousin, she would pour a drink on him.

THE PARTY TOOK PLACE in the Embassy Ballroom, which occupied the entire floor above the radio station in the Embassy Building. Mary Anne had learned that the landlord was letting the engaged couple use it as a gift to Jonathan Hale, a tribute for his work for WLGN.

Before they headed upstairs, Mary Anne said, “Want to use the ladies’ room?”

“Sure.”

Mary Anne opened the radio station's glass door. The recording booth was occupied by two indie kids prerecording a music program. She gave them a wave as she and Cameron headed past the rows of desks and computers to the restrooms.

"There's Flossy!"

"Yes." Mary Anne didn't even steal a glance at the desk Graham claimed as his at the station—or the white rabbit sitting on top of it. "Let's not talk about it." Cameron, of course, was privy to the steps Mary Anne had taken to activate the love potion. Well, except all the details of her failure to set him up with Cameron. She'd confessed to her cousin only that the Pizza Hut gift certificate had been "simpler."

Cameron remarked, "If you didn't hate him so much, I'd think you liked him." She wasn't talking about Flossy, now.

"Ha-ha," said Mary Anne, without interest or humor as she marched into the ladies' room.

Angie Workman stood alone before the sinks, leaning forward on tiptoe in her stiletto heels to apply red lipstick to her wide mouth. "Oh, hi. It's Mary Anne, right?"

Besides being impossibly tiny, with a figure to die for, Angie had wonderful hair. It was very thick, very curly and platinum-blond...true blond. In contrast, her eyebrows and eyelashes were so dark they looked fake. Regrettably, she held her hair back with barrettes in a style that showed zero imagination. Her dress was a synthetic blend, white with autumn leaves, and her stilettos were also white. A part of Mary Anne, which she

acknowledged as mean-spirited and extremely jealous, thought, Hello, it's October! You don't wear white shoes in October.

If Angie knew nothing about fashion, the fact had obviously made no impact on Jonathan Hale. With a lurch of her heart, Mary Anne saw the diamond on Angie's delicate left hand.

Mary Anne held out her own hand. "Yes, and you're Angie. It's nice to meet you. This is Cameron McAllister."

"I so admire your radio essays," Angie told Mary Anne with obvious sincerity. "I wish I could write something like the things you say. I listen to you every week. My favorite one was the one about the Civil War cemetery—about the brothers who fought on different sides of the conflict."

"Thank you." Mary Anne's emotions were mixed. She felt proud and happy because of Angie's words. And yet she planned to steal Angie's fiancé. She could tell that Angie was obviously a nice person, one of those deeply genteel people that the West Virginia mountains sometimes produced. A twinge of shame ran through Mary Anne, and she remembered Clare Cureux's warnings. How would Jonathan's falling in love with Mary Anne impact Angie? What if being jilted was the kind of thing Angie couldn't get over?

Now Angie turned to Cameron. "And everyone says such good things about your work at the women's center. My friend Rhonda says you're an angel to those women."

All delivered in a West Virginia twang that seemed the pinnacle of charm.

Cameron smiled politely. As Jonathan's fiancée excused herself to return to the party, Cameron glanced at Mary Anne. "I know," Mary Anne said. "She's sweet and adorable." Cameron said, "Maybe. But I'm not an angel."

JONATHAN WAS DRINKING a Frog's Leap cabernet. Mary Anne discovered this in a brief moment of conversation with him as she sipped her own merlot. She managed to tell him how nice she thought Angie was and ask what he thought of her idea for next week's essay—October celebrations—all while watching the level of wine in his wineglass and praying for a moment of opportunity.

Jonathan, however, was engaged in a distracted conversation with one of the female disc jockeys who was also the friend and future bridesmaid of Angie Workman. Her name was Elinor Sweet.

Jonathan said, "What color dress you wear is between you and Angie. I couldn't care less."

"But you could intervene. I mean, orange? Me, in orange?"

Elinor had honey-toned skin, which would probably look great in anything.

Jonathan looked over at Graham and said, "Graham, please explain to Elinor why it would be a mistake for me to try to choose the color of the bridesmaids' dresses."

Mary Anne watched Graham Corbett and Cameron join the group.

Cameron said, "I'm sure Angie would want to know how you feel about wearing orange, Elinor. If it were my wedding, I would want to know."

Mary Anne met Cameron's eyes briefly and knew her cousin was dying to add, And you wouldn't be in it.

Graham said, "I think etiquette dictates that the bride's wishes carry the day."

"But who wants a wedding color that will look bad on bridesmaids?" Mary Anne asked. "Tell Angie how you feel, Elinor. Though I'm sure anything would look great on you."

"But the question is," Jonathan said, "if I should step in. Obviously, I shouldn't."

"Obviously," Graham echoed.

Mary Anne wanted to scream that obviously the bride should choose colors and clothes that would look good on her friends, and whoever heard of bridesmaids dressed in orange? She asked Graham, "What makes you the expert on weddings?"

"He's the WLGN relationship expert," Jonathan said.

Mary Anne rolled her eyes. "A man."

"What's wrong with men?" Graham asked.

"It's just a bit one-sided. That's all."

Jonathan's eyes lit up, as if what she'd said had struck home with him. "That gives me an idea..." He glanced at his nearly empty glass.

Mary Anne was vigilant.

As he took the last sip, she drained half of her own glass in

one long gulp and lifted Jonathan's glass airily from his hand. "Another for you, groom-to-be?"

Distracted, he glanced at her. "Oh. Thank you, Mary Anne. When you come back—"

But she was already walking away, leaving the crowd behind.

This was the moment. She carried both glasses to the refreshment table, which was unattended. She found the cabernet and carefully poured another glass, holding the uncapped vial of potion against her palm, and letting it run into his glass with the wine.

It couldn't work, but what the hell?

Frowning slightly, she spotted Angie again. Far from spending every moment on her fiancé's arm, Angie was speaking intently to Max Harold, the Embassy Building's custodian. Max used to work in the mines and could talk for hours. Mary Anne had to admit the old man was interesting, but clearly Angie was a good listener.

There was, Mary Anne told herself, nothing wrong with what she planned to do. All was fair in love and war.

She poured herself another glass of merlot and took a sip to steady her nerves.

"Ah, thank you, Mary Anne."

A masculine hand took Jonathan's glass from her hand.

Mary Anne did not release it. "No, that's for—" She could not let the glass go.

Appalled, she felt the stem break, the base coming off in her

hand.

Graham Corbett looked in astonishment from the piece she held to the glass he held.

She reached for his part of the glass just as he lifted it to his lips and drank deeply.

Mary Anne could not breathe. Her mouth was open, she was half-panting, her hand still reaching, reaching...

"Excellent," Graham said and gazed at her thoughtfully.

She wanted to swear.

But she couldn't even breathe. Everything was swimming. Her head was swimming. And the glass was empty.

CHAPTER THREE

MARY ANNE STUMBLED into Graham, and he caught her. She smelled earthy, sexy and natural. He studied the scattering of freckles across her nose, the paintbrush lashes, the full lips.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Mary Anne sank onto a folding chair near the table. “Yes. Yes.”

“What happened?” Jonathan Hale joined them, gazing in concern at her.

Graham saw that earlier expression of horror wisp over her face again.

Mary Anne pushed herself out of the chair. “Nothing happened. I’m fine. Just a bit light-headed.”

“You’re a skinny thing,” Jonathan told her. “If you haven’t eaten, let’s get something in you.”

Graham felt irrational annoyance. “She’s not fading away.”

Her part of the glass had rolled away on the floor, and Jonathan picked it up. Graham handed the other part to him and focused on Mary Anne. She was a strong, healthy woman, vibrant as a Thoroughbred horse. This one was no fading lily or shrinking violet or whatever it was that was supposed to be prized in Southern women, and he didn’t believe she was light-headed, either. Probably just upset about Hale and Miss Workman. He looked at Jonathan, who was handing her a bottle of water.

“Thanks,” she said, taking it gratefully, uncapping it and then simply gazing at the bottle, looking shattered.

Jonathan put a hand on her back, and she gave him a look that seemed to say, What in the hell are you doing touching me?

In fact, Mary Anne was now wondering if she’d actually seen Graham Corbett drink the glass of wine she’d spiked with love potion. And if she had seen that, as she was sure she had, why was Jonathan Hale suddenly noticing her existence? She whispered, “I need to...I need to go home.”

“You can’t drive,” Jonathan said. “Just sit down, and let’s get you something to eat. You’ve been manhandled.”

“What?” Graham said in disbelief.

“You were fighting with her over my glass of wine,” Jonathan replied.

“Didn’t know it was yours, but I did not manhandle Mary Anne.”

Jonathan ignored Graham. “I’ll get myself another,” he told Mary Anne gently. “Thanks for trying.”

“Ah, Cameron.” Graham turned to Mary Anne’s cousin and dropped some keys into her hand. “My car’s just outside in the bank parking lot. Why don’t you take it and meet us at Mary Anne’s house? Can you drive a shift? I’ll drive Mary Anne in her car.”

“Maybe we should hear what Mary Anne wants,” Jonathan said, staring intently at Graham.

And they all, Graham and Jonathan and Cameron, looked at

Mary Anne, as if to discover what she wanted.

She had no answer, except that Graham was paying attention to her in front of Cameron, who couldn't help seeing the direction of the wind. And Jonathan was finally noticing her—but he was engaged! Everything was messed up and she wished she'd never gotten involved with the love potion that Graham Corbett had drunk.

She stared at the bottle of water and lifted it to her mouth, drinking deeply. Drinking in a clear, bright thought.

Love potions don't work anyhow.

MARY ANNE MADE her excuses—to Jonathan and his fiancée and to Cameron, who had secured the promise of a ride home from Graham—and was back at her grandmother's house before ten, just as Nanna's housekeeper and attendant, Lucille, was about to turn out Jacqueline Billingham's bedroom light. Putting the debacle with the love-potion-that-wouldn't-work-anyway behind her, Mary Anne hurried upstairs to kiss her grandmother good-night.

Nanna still sat up against a three-cornered pillow, wearing a nightgown made of some delicate cotton that reminded Mary Anne of the woman's soft skin, grown thinner with age yet always seeming smooth and young. As usual, her grandmother smelled good, the scent of her night cream reminding her of roses. An Emilie Loring novel, marked with a lace bookmark, sat on the bedside table next to Nanna's water glass and rosary beads. Mary

Anne kissed her, and Nanna, her white hair loose for the night, asked, "Did you have a good time, dear?"

"Yes," Mary Anne lied blithely.

"And did Cameron come back with you?"

"No," Mary Anne said. "She has a ride home with someone else." Mary Anne steered the conversation carefully away from mentioning any possibility of Cameron being, in any sense, with a man. Rationally, she knew this was unnecessary. However, some genetic reflex compelled her to participate in the family conspiracy of pretending the world was like one of Nanna's romance novels. Even if sometimes it seemed to her that the pretense was subsuming her own reality.

Mary Anne had been a rebellious teenager, a Florida surfer girl. Every summer, her mother had sent her north to Logan, where Mary Anne, rather than succumbing to her grandmother's influence, had spent every free moment with Cameron and the sort of boys their mothers hated, doing every forbidden thing one could arrange and usually escaping detection.

After that, Mary Anne had gone away to university in New York City, but she'd still returned to Logan each summer. Gradually, she had ceased to be a hellion, had entered therapy to help her accept everything she hated about her family and had become a decent contract bridge player, who could prepare a nice-looking dish for a church potluck and who sent thank-you notes on time.

It was now five years since Mary Anne had come to live

with Nanna. The drawback was that Mary Anne could not bring a man to her grandmother's house for the night or allow her grandmother to know that she would spend the night at a man's house. Her grandmother did not want the world to be the kind of place where men and women who were not married to each other had sexual intercourse. So Mary Anne was due an Oscar for lifetime achievement, for pretending she would never consider sleeping with a man outside of marriage. The most difficult part of the pretense was that Mary Anne simply couldn't lie to her grandmother.

So for five years she hadn't spent the night with a man.

She'd had rare, brief sexual encounters with men at their homes and then said she needed to get home, citing newspaper deadlines. Because the world could not wait for her feature on the Logan Garden Tour.

Cameron had once asked her, "What's Nanna going to do if you ever want to move in with someone? A man, I mean."

"There's no one I want to move in with," Mary Anne had replied. "Anyhow, the same applies to you."

"No, it doesn't. Nanna knows I've lived with men."

This was true. Nanna had simply said, "Oh, my," and, "Darling, could you find this color of embroidery floss in my bag? My eyes are having trouble picking it out."

Mary Anne wasn't sure what she thought would happen if she let Nanna down by doing what Cameron had done with so little consequence. Nonetheless, she couldn't bring herself to

disillusion the older woman.

Well, it wasn't going to be a problem anytime soon, Mary Anne reflected later that night as she curled up in her four-poster missing Flossy.

The wrong person had drunk the love-potion-that-would-not-work.

GRAHAM CORBETT LAY on a comfortable, if ugly couch in the master bedroom of his home, his feet on a tile-topped Craftsman encyclopedia table that had been a gift from his mother. The graceful two-story white house, with its wraparound porches and its upper balconies, was too big for one person. Nonetheless, he liked it.

Like Mary Anne Drew, he lived on the exclusive island of old homes known as Middleburg. Reached by a bridge that crossed the river, Middleburg was a charming spot. The hills rose behind his home, sometimes bringing nature closer than he wanted. For instance, there'd been a time last summer when he'd found an eight-foot-long black snake curled up under the swing on his back porch. Graham was not a snake lover and he really didn't give a damn about the inroads they made on the rodent population. He'd headed to the garden shed, intending to grab a shovel and cut off the thing's head, and there he had found a copperhead curled up in his watering can.

He'd gone back to the house and poured himself a whiskey. When he'd returned to the porch, the black snake was gone. He'd

knocked back the glass of whiskey and considered what to do about the copperhead in the watering can. First, he must cover the opening in the top of the can so that the snake would not escape. Then, he needed to kill or dispose of the snake. But how?

He was on his second whiskey when his neighbor David Cureux popped over to invite Graham to join a committee to discuss health plans for city workers. Cureux, a former obstetrician, was a council member and had become a friend.

Graham told David about the copperhead. David went home for his shotgun, came back and killed the copperhead. To Graham's astonishment, however, David first dumped the copperhead out of the watering can—explaining that he didn't want to get holes in the can.

Two other neighbors, attracted by the sound of the shotgun, came over to see what was going on. One told Graham a story about a child carrying baby copperheads in a jar, thinking they were worms, holding his hand over the top of the jar, being bitten repeatedly and then dying from the venom. Subsequently, according to the neighbor, a policeman put the jar of copperheads in the trunk of his car, which then had to be impounded and fumigated to kill the reptiles. David Cureux challenged this story as nonsense, but for weeks Graham dreamed of finding snakes in his automobile, in his bed, in his bathtub, in his basement—virtually everywhere. The woman who recorded the astrology show at the radio station told him that dreams about snakes reflected the evolutionary ability to change,

the urge to survive and how he dealt with the impulses of the most ancient part of his brain.

Jonathan Hale had argued that snakes in dreams were definitely about sex.

The astrologer had retorted, "Isn't that what I said?"

Graham thought the dreams were about the basic terror of sitting down on the porch swing and discovering a black serpent of notoriously aggressive nature coiled beside his feet.

Hale. What had the station manager been doing getting touchy-feely with Mary Anne tonight? Wasn't the man supposed to be celebrating his engagement?

Graham needed to stop thinking about the woman. What was this sudden obsession with her? He'd always found her attractive, yes, and he took great pleasure in baiting her, simply because of her worship of Jonathan Hale and her awe of his experiences in Rwanda and Afghanistan. But Graham wasn't sure he wanted a relationship, and in any case Mary Anne had made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him.

Until the strange business of her trying to set him up with Cameron.

Cameron. Cameron did nothing for Graham. She was pretty, if you liked the type. But he thought she was hard, as well. It was her cousin who interested him.

Strange. She'd annoyed him at their very first meeting five years earlier. The former station manager had introduced him to Mary Anne as "a psychologist who hosts a talk show dealing

with relationship problems.” It hadn’t been as slickly phrased as Jonathan Hale would have put it...and did express it after he replaced the former manager. But essentially it had been accurate.

The new kid on the block, fresh from her New York job covering Milan fashion shows or whatever the hell it was she had done, had said, “No doubt calling up a wealth of life experience. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Graham. I’ve heard your show.”

Innocuous enough.

But what had she meant about life experience? Puzzled, he’d stopped her at the water cooler a few minutes later and asked her what she meant.

Then, she’d dissembled. She’d shrugged and said, “I mean, we all work with what we’ve experienced. That’s all I meant.” And she’d turned away fast. Escaping.

She’d been nasty, and when challenged she’d denied having said anything offensive. Nor was the undercurrent of her words imaginary. Because a week later, she had introduced him to another woman as “the bachelor guru of female satisfaction.”

The bachelor guru.

Which was inaccurate and incomplete.

Graham Corbett was a widower.

THE PHONE AWOKE Mary Anne the next morning. She saw the numbers on her alarm clock—nine-thirty—and snatched the receiver from its cradle. How had she slept so long? “Hello?”

“Mary Anne? It’s Jonathan.”

Her heart pounded. “Oh, hi,” she said, squinting against the autumn’s morning light.

“I just wanted to see how you are this morning. Did you get home okay?”

“Oh. Of course. Thank you. It’s really nice of you to check. I was fine. I am fine,” she corrected.

“Good,” he said. “Good.”

He sounded as nervous as Mary Anne felt.

He said, “There’s something I want to ask you. I ran it by Graham last night, and he was game.”

Dark presentiment hovered.

“I heard what you said about him offering a one-sided view on relationships. So I suggested that you be his guest for a four-week segment on dating. If it works out, we could have you there regularly as a guest.”

Mary Anne blinked. Be on Graham Corbett’s hideous, tacky talk show?

But it was exposure. It was something else for her resumé. She wouldn’t become a celebrity. It wasn’t any different, really, from her radio essays.

But it wasn’t as anonymous as journalism. In journalism there was a dignity lacking in—well...She separated herself mentally from her father’s public and private personas, which were essentially the same. She would never become like him.

“I’m hardly qualified,” she said.

“You’re an attractive woman. You date, right?” Jonathan asked.

You’re an attractive woman. If only it didn’t feel so much as if he was damning her with faint praise. “I date,” she confirmed. Occasionally. Almost never lately, because there was no one she wanted to date.

“You can do it,” Jonathan said. “You’ll give great advice.”

Like how to steal someone’s fiancé with a love potion? The thought of what she’d done the night before was mortifying. In a way, she supposed, it was better that Graham had drunk it. It wasn’t going to work, and this way it was as if she hadn’t actually tried to spike Jonathan’s drink.

Mary Anne said, “I’d like to...think about it.”

“Well, I plan to be at the studio most of the day doing paperwork,” he said. “Come by if you want to talk about it—or just hang out.”

Mary Anne widened her eyes. It was nothing. He was just being a friend. “I...might,” she said.

“Great. I’ll look for you. We’ll go have coffee.”

“I said I might,” she clarified.

“Then, I’ll hope,” he replied.

She hung up the phone, squinting, heart beating hard, playing the conversation through her mind. Come by if you want to talk about it—or just hang out.

Did it mean anything? Was he finally interested in her?

Interested or not, he was engaged to another woman.

And he hadn't called her on the phone to say that relationship was broken because he'd suddenly realized he didn't want to marry Angie Workman. Instead, he'd called her and told her he'd be spending the day at the studio. Sunday, when the studio was usually quiet, the station running prerecorded programs.

No, she was being silly. People popped in and out on Sundays.

What if she made an excuse to go down to the station? Was that what he hoped would happen? She couldn't decide whether that was good or bad.

She called Cameron.

“GRAHAM DRANK the love potion.”

Cameron's heart sank. It wasn't that she believed the love potion would work. All the same, Graham Corbett's drinking it seemed a sign—a sign that he and Mary Anne were going to end up together.

In any case, he was not attracted to Cameron. If he had been, she would have felt it. Lots of men were attracted to her. But last night, when Graham had taken her home, he'd seemed deeply preoccupied.

Cameron lived in an old miner's company house that had been moved from its original location to the foot of Jack Hollow. When she'd climbed out of Graham's car, the dogs came to greet her. Wolfie was feral, a black animal almost certainly part wolf, who'd gradually become tame and was loved by the people of the hollow, and his daughter, Mariah, Cameron's own dog. Cameron

had glanced into the car at Graham but he was simply waiting, engine idling. No hope.

She told Mary Anne, “I don’t think he needed to.”

“Needed to do what?”

“Drink the love potion. I think he’s already seriously smitten with you.”

“Well, I’m not smitten with him. What happened when he took you home?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Mary Anne said, “Well, forget him. Jonathan called.”

Cameron listened to the details, saying, “But he didn’t drink the love potion. Maybe this is what Clare meant—that they don’t always work the way you think.”

“She told me to make sure the right person drinks it.”

Cameron considered, curious. “If I’m up at her place again, I’m going to ask her about other things that have happened with love potions.” Maybe she has something that will help me get over my stupid crush on a man who likes my cousin. “You’re going to do the show with Graham, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I’m thinking about it.”

Cameron remembered something she’d meant to ask the night before. “Hey, can you help me with Women of Strength next weekend?”

“As long as it’s not caving.”

Cameron smiled, remembering that on a previous caving trip Mary Anne, who wasn’t proportioned for the sport, had gotten

stuck in a narrow passage. “It isn’t this time, but we’re doing Big Jim’s Cave at the end of November and I want you to do that with us. You won’t get stuck there.”

“What’s next week’s joy?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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