

THE ART OF FORGETTING

One

There is only one way to boost your metabolism: exercise. I realize this in the middle of editing an article about how cayenne pepper, cinnamon extract, and massive amounts of coffee might, just *might*, trick your body into burning more calories (but probably not). I'm contemplating how to nicely tell my boss that the story is a load of unprintable crap when the phone rings.

Sigh. I hate the phone. Then again, I'm hating this story, so I pick up.

"Is this Marissa Rogers, the world-renowned weight-loss expert?"

"Hey, Jules," I say, relieved it's my best friend and not a publicist pitching me the latest fat-melting wonder drug. "You won't believe this drivel I'm working on."

"Let me guess: a recipe for vegan cardboard cookies?"

"That sounds like something you'd actually eat." I laugh, referring to Julia's endless quest to maintain her whippet-thin figure. "You're close, though. One more try."

“Um . . . one hundred forty-two ways to lose the last five pounds.”

“Very close, but no dice,” I tell her. “Metabolism makeovers.”

Julia snorts. “I cannot believe you’re doing that story *again*.”

“I know. We’ve only covered it half a dozen times this year,” I say, and it’s not entirely untrue. *Svelte*, like many health magazines, essentially runs the same ten articles over and over, each one tweaked ever so slightly so it doesn’t sound identical to the last. Metabolism stories, I have decided, hover near the top of our most-repeated topics: above colonics (explosive but effective) but below celebrity get-skinny secrets (diet and exercise, which is Hollywood parlance for Adderall and anorexia).

An e-mail alert pops up in the right corner of my computer screen. As soon as I click it closed, another appears, and then another. “Listen, I have to run if I’m going to get out the door in time for tonight,” I tell Julia. “We’re still on, right?”

“Definitely,” she says. “That’s actually why I’m calling. I can’t wait to see you. But any chance you can do six thirty? I’m running the tiniest bit behind.” Then she adds in her sweetest voice, “I just have to pick up a little something.”

“No presents!” I scold her. “Tonight is my treat to you. You’re the one who got promoted, remember?” I say, referring to her recent bump to senior publicist for the New York City Ballet.

“This isn’t a present, nut job.”

“Julia.”

“*Marissa*,” she mocks me. I can practically feel her smiling on the other side of the phone. “See you there. Don’t be late!”

Two hours and half a glass of cabernet later, I’m sitting by a window at the restaurant and trying not to be irritated, although it’s nearly seven and Julia is nowhere to be seen. If I were waiting for

anyone else, I would have left fifteen minutes ago; having been raised by a mother who's perpetually behind schedule, I have no tolerance for tardiness. But in this instance, I have only myself to blame, because I know full well that the chances of Julia showing up when she says she will are on par with polar bears floating down the Hudson River.

I take another sip of my wine and poke at the chunk of cheese the waiter gave me to sample (not realizing that at nine grams of fat per minuscule serving, it isn't going anywhere near my mouth). Outside the window, Gramercy is buzzing with life. I love this area, with its low-hanging magnolia trees and crumbling brownstones. There's still a little daylight left, and like so many Septembers in New York, it is warm enough that people are still strolling about in shorts and sandals.

In the distance, I spot a familiar brunette striding down Irving Place and I'm struck with a fleeting pang of envy; unlike Julia, I will never be the woman who gets up-and-down looks from fellow pedestrians. It's not that she's the Victoria's Secret type—in a city full of models that would hardly be noteworthy. But her heart-shaped face and wide gray eyes are striking, and she carries herself with a confidence that invites staring. When we're out, people often stop her to ask her where she's from. Each time, she deadpans a new answer—*Honduras. Ukraine. Syria*—in her best Midwestern accent, then doubles over in laughter.

As Julia comes into focus, I see that she's holding an enormous bouquet of white peonies, undoubtedly for me. Out of season, the flowers must have cost a fortune, but it's unlikely she even asked about the price before passing her credit card to the florist. I once told her I felt guilty that she always seemed to be bringing me some small token. "My love language is gift giving; yours is quality time," she informed me matter-of-factly, and so I eventually stopped protesting when

she showed up with a bag of coffee she picked up in San Juan, a blown-glass ornament she found at a sidewalk sale, or like today, flowers.

Julia makes her way down the street in record time, no doubt aware that I've been waiting. She reaches the corner, and seeing me through the window across the street, gives me an enormous smile. I lift my wineglass to wave at her and she waves back, then does a little skip toward me and steps into the street.

Before I even put my glass back on the table, a cab hits her.

The accident unfolds so quickly that I am barely able to process the streak of yellow metal that slams into Julia, tossing her off its hood and onto the pavement.

I don't scream. In fact, I do nothing until I realize my pants are wet; I've spilled wine all over them. I leap up and run out the door, pushing my way through the small crowd that has gathered. Everyone is talking at once, and I overhear one frightening snippet of conversation after another: "Definitely bloody," "Skull fracture," "Natasha Richardson," *Dead.*

Trying to shake off the shock I'm feeling, I steel myself for a gruesome scenario. When I finally reach Julia, though, she's not only conscious, but actually trying to push herself into a sitting position. Her hair is hanging in her face and her right knee, poking out from ripped tights, is bleeding. Otherwise, she looks no more flustered than if she'd just tripped.

She looks up at me, then glances wistfully at the white petals strewn around her. "Your flowers."

"Julia! Are you okay?" My mouth is dry, and there is a metallic taste on my tongue. "Don't worry about the flowers. Let's get you out of the street."

An older woman with a heavy New York accent wags her finger at Julia. "Young lady, you hit your head, and *good*. You'd best get yourself to a hospital."

"I called 911," the cabdriver says to no one in particular. The rims of his eyes are red, and I realize he has been crying.

"No hospital," Julia says, slowly rising to her feet. "I'm fine." She points at the cabbie weakly. "You could have killed me."

I obviously look worried, because Julia says, "I'm okay. Just wobbly."

"Of course. Why don't you go sit down?" I snatch her leather clutch off the street. "I'll get the driver's info for you."

"Thanks," she tells me, and allows a banker type, who is obviously smitten, to walk her over to a bench in front of the restaurant.

"That woman was right, hon. You need to get checked out," I call back, digging through my purse for a pen and paper—not an easy feat, as I can't stop shaking. I'm having a hard time processing the fact that my best friend was just nearly flattened by oncoming traffic. "You don't want to find out you fractured something when you show up to dance practice tomorrow."

The crowd quickly thins out, and I wait at the curb for the cabdriver to get his registration and insurance card. After triple-checking the info I scribbled down, I turn back to the restaurant.

Immediately, I know something is wrong. Julia is hunched over on the bench, her hands cupped around her ears. "I have a headache," she says. She sways slightly as she attempts to look up at me, and I spot a small trickle of blood under her right nostril. Then she groans. "I might be sick."

In spite of myself, I cringe—I can't stand the sight or smell of vomit. But instead of throwing up, Julia slumps over on the bench before the banker can grab her.

"Ambulance coming?" she manages to mumble.

Then she passes out.