
Suddenly Home

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN

Tess felt bloated and jumpy, unbelievably PM-essy, when she spotted her brother in the waiting throng at the United terminal. To make matters worse, Will's other half was nowhere in sight. She hadn't expected a welcoming party as such, but she'd counted on Jamie being there to keep things civil, since she knew from experience that Will didn't nag as much when Jamie was around.

Her brother stepped forward with a sleepy, lop-sided grin, hugged her clumsily and reached for her carry-on. He looked tanner than the last time, maybe a little greyer, annoyingly content. 'How was your flight?'

'Not bad.' Already expecting the worst, she fixed her eyes on the distance and strode toward the moving walkway. 'The flight attendant slipped me his phone number.'

Will looked amazed. 'Really?'

She nodded.

'A straight flight attendant?'

She shot him a nasty glance. 'Yes, a straight flight attendant. Where's Jamie? He said he was coming with you.'

'He's at Nordstrom's.'

'Shopping?' She couldn't help but sound cranky about this.

Will shook his head, apparently amused by her reaction. 'They fired a clerk with HIV. There's a big demonstration this morning and . . . You know Jamie.'

She felt a tiny pinprick of anxiety. Outside of the call arranging

this visit she hadn't talked to Jamie for at least a month. 'He's OK, isn't he?'

'Fine.' Will looked believably nonchalant. 'His T-cells are way up.'

'Great.'

He glanced at her sideways, narrowing his eyes. 'So, what's going on?'

No way, she thought. Not until we're home and Jamie's with us and you've had *at least* a couple of joints. 'Hey,' she said, feigning jovial indignation, 'Do I require an invitation?'

'No. But this is awful sudden.'

'Well, I do things suddenly.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Look,' she told him, 'I'm going right back to Charleston.'

'Stop. Why are you so edgy?'

'I'm not edgy. You're just in one of your picky moods.' She led the way on to the moving walkway. They cruised past big Lucite boxes, like upright coffins, each displaying a different piece of California 'chair art'. A chair made of Coke bottles, a chair made of cow bones, a Styrofoam chair . . .

'So,' said Will, 'how's the shithead?'

How like him to take the offensive. 'His name is Alec, Will.'

'You called him that first.'

'Once,' she said. 'After a fight. You're the one who made it official.'

'Why didn't you bring him along?'

She studied his face for traces of snideness and decided the question was in earnest. Maybe, she thought, Will and Alec would learn to like each other if they spent some time together. 'He's been on business in Philadelphia. I'm meeting him tomorrow, though. In Maui.'

Her brother's face clouded over. 'So this is just a stopover.'

She rolled her eyes. 'We'll have a whole day. I thought we could go to the beach or something, have a nice long talk. In person, for a change.'

'About what?'

'Does it have to be *about* something?'

'No, but . . .'

'God, the men in this city! Look at the arms on that guy.'

This was a cheap diversionary tactic, but it worked. Her brother's gaze swerved and locked on the beauty in question: an off-duty marine, she guessed, with ivory biceps and a shrimp-coloured T-shirt that said SHIT HAPPENS.

'Big deal,' said Will.

'Well, excuse me, Mr Married Man.'

He looked at the marine again. 'He has a tattoo, for God's sake!'

'Really? Is it misspelt? I love it when they're misspelt.'

She hooked her arm through his as they headed toward baggage claim. He was wearing one of his favourite shirts tonight, a pale blue baggy-sleeved thing which he probably thought made him look like Lord Byron. Trini Lopez was more like it.

Gazing up at him, she counted the grey hairs in his moustache, and noticed with affection that his jaw stored fat in the same place as hers.

Will and Jamie's house on Twenty-first Street was not quite the way she'd remembered it. There were two or three new parchment-shaded lamps and they'd put up barn siding – or something meant to look like it – on one wall of the living-room. Over the past decade or so she had watched Will's taste shimmy from rustic to deco to high tech to rustic again.

When they arrived, Jamie was perched on a stepladder in the living-room, wielding a paintbrush. 'Well,' she said, 'home from the wars, huh?'

'Hi, Tess! God, you guys missed something! Three hundred of us took over the escalator at Nordstrom's – this incredible spiral thing that goes on for ever. It was like Tiananmen Square meets Busby Berkeley!'

Will chuckled.

'Really,' said Jamie, 'it was amazing. A whole store full of us chanting, "We're here, we're queer, and we're not going shopping."'

She laughed and held out her arms. 'Can I please have a hug?'

Jamie scooted down the stepladder and embraced her, his fingers climbing her spine until they found the knots at the base of her neck. 'Hey,' he said. 'Tough flight, huh?'

Will said: 'The flight attendant had major hots for her.'

'A straight flight attendant?'

Will shook his head at Jamie. 'Don't.'

Jamie released her. 'I'll give you a good shoulder rub. Soon as I clean up.'

She peered up at the ladder and noticed for the first time that the ceiling above their heads looked dangerously damaged. 'What were you doing up there?'

'Just painting.'

'Shouldn't you fix that huge crack first?'

Jamie seemed proud as a new parent. 'I painted that huge crack.'

'C'mon.'

He shrugged. 'We didn't get any good ones during the earthquake, so we're painting our own. How long can you stay?'

'Till tomorrow.'

Jamie looked crushed. 'Stay till Valentine's Day, at least. It's our second anniversary.'

'She has to be in Maui,' Will announced sullenly. 'For some reason.'

She ignored him, keeping her eyes on Jamie. 'You met on Valentine's Day? You never told me that!'

Jamie smiled sheepishly.

Will said: 'He was passing out condoms at the ACT-UP booth on Twenty-fourth Street.'

'How romantic.'

'Well . . .' Her brother looked affronted again. 'The condoms were heart-shaped.'

She had one hell of a time picturing this.

'The *wrappers* were heart-shaped,' Jamie explained.

'Thank you,' she said.

Jamie laughed with her, and something about the tilt of his

head, the tenor of his laughter, reminded her exactly of Will. He was five years younger than her brother – thinner, blonder and already balder – but on the phone she found it increasingly harder to tell them apart. They claimed not to notice this, of course, pretending to be horrified by what it suggested, but any fool could see what had happened.

Will fixed iced tea, which the three of them sipped on the deck. The air was warm and lemony with a neighbour's verbena, and half-a-dozen seagulls were making languid loops above the little valley. For Tess the scene felt oddly like a homecoming.

'How's the travel agency?' asked Jamie.

'Fine.'

'And Alec?'

Will shot his lover a look.

'He's great,' she said, determined to get on with it. 'He sent you both his best.'

Will grunted, but Jamie ignored him, remaining pleasant. 'Are you guys still . . . together?'

'Oh, yeah. Three or four nights a week.' She smiled at him, grateful for his interest. 'He's still got his own place, but he's not in it much.'

'Awright,' said Jamie.

'Of course,' she added wryly. 'Daddy says I'm a slut.'

'Why?'

'Oh . . . you know, because we aren't married. And Barton and all.'

'Fuck him,' said Will. 'Barton is fifteen years old.'

'Thank you. I know.'

'It isn't any of Daddy's goddamned business whether you're married or not.'

'We live in the same town, Will. I can't just close the door like that. He's Barton's grandfather. He isn't gonna be around much longer.'

'Fuck that. He's been saying that for ever. He was saying that

before Mama died.' He fumed silently for a moment. 'When did he call you a slut?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'When, Tess?'

'At Barton's confirmation.'

'At church?'

'No.' She smiled at that. 'Afterwards at the party. It was more like a brunch, really.'

'Great. He called you a slut at brunch. Was the shithead there? What did he even . . . ?'

'Will . . .' Jamie was pissed now. 'Stop interrogating her.'

She gave him an appreciative glance before continuing. 'Everybody was full of wine and making these dumb toasts. Daddy didn't mean it. It's just that he likes Alec so much.'

'Figures,' muttered Will.

'He's right, actually. Not about the slut part, but . . . I've been dodging the issue way too long.'

'What issue?'

She shrugged. 'We're getting married.'

The silence seemed interminable. It was Jamie who broke it, reddening noticeably. 'Well . . . that's great, Tess. Congratulations.'

'When?' asked Will.

'Tomorrow. Well . . . day after tomorrow, really.'

'In Maui?' asked Jamie.

'Aloha.'

Will wrote in the air with his finger. 'Mr and Mrs Alec T. Shithead.'

Jamie frowned. 'Will . . .'

'Believe me,' she said, 'I've thought about this long and hard.'

Her brother threw up his hands. 'Fine. Great. Terrific. What do you need us for?'

'I don't know. I thought your blessing might be nice.'

Will sighed histrionically. 'This isn't *Lourdes*, Tess.'

'Tess . . .' Jamie proceeded carefully, measuring his words. 'Do you think you might be . . .?'

'She's obviously made up her mind.'

'You're right,' she said quietly, looking at her brother. 'I have.'

'Fine,' he said, picking up his drink again. 'Go for it.'

She showered off the grime of her flight while Will and Jamie packed a picnic lunch in the kitchen. She could hear their voices dimly through the wall and for a moment tormented herself with what they must be saying. When she returned, though, they were chipper and smiling, absorbed – or pretending to be, at least – in Jamie's bogus earthquake crack.

At Will's suggestion they drove out to Land's End in the VW. They parked in a dust-choked lot above Seal Rocks and, toting their lunches, set off on foot through the gnarled cypresses. A sudden shiver of *déjà vu* made her realize why Will had chosen this spot. He was trying to tweak her memory, to make her nostalgic for the halcyon days of her bachelorhood.

'I know what you're up to,' she told him.

'What?' asked Jamie.

'He brought me here years ago,' she explained. 'After I signed my divorce papers. I was as free as I'd ever been. And I was so . . . intense.'

Will smirked at her. 'More like in heat.'

She smiled at him. 'We came here after the Gay Games. You'd just won a gold medal in something terribly butch.'

'Badminton,' he said.

Jamie hooted.

'We met this guy out here with a pigtail and the cutest butt and Will swore to me he was gay.'

'Was he?'

'Now wait a minute . . .' Will instantly went on the defensive. 'The guy was from LA. It threw me off.'

She and Jamie both got a kick out of this. 'Right,' said Jamie.

'She was shameless,' muttered Will.

Tess remembered every detail of it except the man's name: his baby-blue briefs, his Vangelis tapes, the rust-stained ceiling of his

geodesic dome. 'He was so . . . flexible,' she murmured. 'He was an importer.'

'He was a coke dealer,' said Will. 'She disappeared for three whole days. You think I rated so much as a phone call?'

She batted her eyes demurely. 'I was busy.'

As usual, the guys loved this.

They left the noonday twilight of the cypress trees and hiked along a broad, sandy ledge above the sea. The path was hyphenated here and there with makeshift footbridges, and she could see for some distance, watch the picnickers as they made their way back and forth from the parking lot. They were all in pairs, she realized, every last one of them.

'Damn,' said Will. 'I forgot the blanket.'

'Forget about it.'

'We have to have the blanket, Tess. The ground is murder up there.'

'Him and his blanket,' said Jamie.

'You should've seen him when he was three,' she said.

'He had a blanket then?'

'With a *name* no less.'

'Tess!' snapped Will.

She smirked at him and turned back to Jamie. 'Flipper.'

'*Flipper?*' Jamie was enjoying this as much as she was.

'Daddy wouldn't let him have a dolphin.'

Will had had enough. 'I'm getting the blanket,' he said. 'You'll be glad when you have it.'

They found a bench and sat down, awaiting Will's return. 'Do you think I'm making a mistake?' she asked.

Jamie hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. 'That's not for me to say.'

For a moment she pictured Alec in Maui, checking into some amorphous highrise, some soul-deadening place with a Benihana in the lobby and a volcano that goes off on the hour. He'd insisted on booking this one himself, on surprising her, which had seemed

romantic as hell at the time, the closest a travel agent could come to being carried over the threshold. Now she wasn't so sure. For all she knew, she was about to be married by a Don Ho impersonator. Alec would think that was funny.

She raked her wind-tangled hair with her fingers. 'He's not such a bad guy, you know. He's always been there for me. And he's pretty nice in the sack.'

Jamie smiled. 'Nothing wrong with that.'

'He's not the world's best conversationalist, but I can always call you.'

He gave her a look of disarming intimacy. 'You'd better.'

Embarrassed, she peered out at the flickering, blue flame of the sea, roughly in the direction of Maui. After a long silence she said: 'I'm scared, Jamie.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I'm thirty-three and time is running out.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'Tell me about it.'

She realized her blunder instantly. 'Oh, shit. I'm sorry.'

'Hey . . .' He waved it off.

'You look wonderful, by the way.' She hoped this didn't sound forced or patronizing, because he did look wonderful.

He snatched a pebble off the ground and hurled it down the slope. 'Ever thought about moving?'

'Moving?'

'Sure.'

'Here, you mean?'

'Why not?'

'For starters,' she replied, 'I have this weird thing for straight guys.'

'We have straight guys,' he said, twinkling. 'Especially weird ones.'

She gave him a rueful nod. 'I've noticed.'

Jamie's eyes widened excitedly. 'We could get arrested together. And gang up on Will.'

'Right.' This was much more of a proposal than she had ever

received from Alec. For a moment, she was sure she felt herself blushing.

'He's just like your father,' Jamie added. 'Every bit as pig-headed.'

'Noticed that, huh?' She threw him a quick sideways glance. 'Don't tell me the honeymoon's over?'

He chuckled. 'Let's just say the marriage has begun.'

'Oh, dear.'

'No. We're fine, really.'

She brushed back her hair again and returned her gaze to the water. 'Sure looks that way,' she said.

Another phalanx of couples was plodding toward them up the hill. The ones in the lead were white-haired and ruddy-cheeked, puffed up like a pair of shore birds in purple-quilted polyester.

'These people,' she said.

'What about them?'

'Two-by-two all over the place. You'd think they were headed for the goddamn ark.'

He shrugged. 'Lots of them are just friends.'

No, she thought. They've all got that look. She couldn't quite pin it down, but *lived-with* was how she thought of it. Will and Jamie had it, too, of course.

Jamie slid his arm across her shoulder and gave her a gentle shake, apparently reading her mind.

She mustered a lame smile. 'It's stupid to be jealous, isn't it?'

'Jealous?' Jamie's brow furrowed. 'Of who?'

She abandoned her confession on the spot, uttering a laboured sigh. 'I don't know . . . these people . . . everybody.'

The white-haired couple came to a full stop in front of their bench. The woman was beaming moronically. 'Hello,' she crooned. Tess just wanted them to go away, to leave her the fuck alone.

'Hi,' said Jamie.

'You look so sweet.'

'Excuse me?'

'The two of you,' explained the woman. 'You make such a lovely sight up here.'

Jamie's lip flickered, but otherwise he didn't betray a thing. 'Thanks.'

'I'm psychic, you know.'

'Really?'

'She is,' said the old man.

'I noticed your aura all the way up here. There's just one, you know. The two of you have one aura.'

Tess cast a quick, sardonic glance at Jamie. 'Were people here still doing this shit?'

'That's nice,' said Jamie.

'You'll have a long life together.'

Jamie gave her a guileless smile. 'Even better,' he said. 'How long?'

'Jamie . . .' Tess realized what he was up to and it made her hideously uncomfortable.

'Now I've embarrassed her,' the old woman said.

'Not really,' said Tess.

'I just thought, maybe you could give me a rough figure.' High on his own private joke, Jamie was milking it for all it was worth.

'Oh,' said the old woman. 'Four or five decades, at least.'

'Hey. Awright.'

'Jamie . . .' Tess rose, brushing off the seat of her jeans. 'We've gotta meet Will, remember?'

He gave her a smile of surrender, abandoning the game. 'Poor thing,' he said, when they were finally out of earshot. 'Not exactly batting a thousand, is she?'

Her depression escalated as the afternoon wore on. By the time they had trekked back to the house, wind-burned and empty-hampered, she was determined to get on with it. Showering again, she changed into clean sweats, then phoned the airline and changed her ticket to a night flight.

Will was a total jerk about it, pacing the room sullenly while she

shook the wrinkles out of the green silk cocktail dress she had bought for the ceremony. Beyond the window several long, white fingers of fog had begun to creep across the breast of Twin Peaks.

'Stay for the night at least,' he whined. 'Jamie's out renting a movie and everything.'

'I can't,' she replied as evenly as possible.

He looked at her for a long time, as if weighing his words, as if composing a whole sermon, in fact. 'You know,' he said, 'I spent years looking for somebody and it didn't happen until I *stopped* looking. You've gotta let go a little, Tess.'

She grunted. 'Meaning what? Move here and hang out with the boys?'

'No.' He sounded stung. 'I mean . . . learn to be content in your solitude.'

This was more than she could take. 'Will, that is the biggest load of California crap! You were never content in your solitude. Not once.'

He scowled at her. 'I lived alone for five years before I met Jamie.'

'And you were totally desperate. You were dating devil worshippers!'

She saw him stiffen noticeably. 'If you mean Eduardo, he was a white witch. There is a very big difference.'

She laid out the dress in her suit bag, smoothed the front again and pulled down the zipper. 'All I know is how much you wanted someone. And when Jamie moved in, I sent you champagne and flowers. Why can't you wish me well now that I've . . .?'

'Because the guy is pond scum, OK? Don't you think I know how Alec treats you? Your last five phone calls have been nothing but crying jags.'

This was a rank exaggeration, but she did her damndest to stay calm. 'I call you when I'm blue, Will. It's not always that way. Alec and I have some rough spots from time to time, but . . .'

'*Rough spots?* You went to a marriage counsellor with him when he was still married to somebody else.'

She reprimanded herself, one more time, for ever having told

him about that. 'Look . . . all right . . . I know he's not perfect, but . . .'

'You sound just like Mama. Is that what you want? A lifetime of making excuses?'

She groaned. 'I want to be married, Will. That doesn't make me a doormat.'

'I understand that.'

'Then why won't you say it's OK?'

The look he gave her was infuriating. 'Because I'm not going to be one more man giving you permission.'

She glared at him in glacial silence for a moment, then slapped the bag shut and began snapping the straps. 'Don't flatter yourself.'

'You're not going to marry him anyway,' he said. 'You wouldn't have come here if you were. Why can't you just deal with it? Why does it have to be a man's decision? Why can't it be *you* for once? I haven't got time for this petty shit.'

She dragged the suit bag off the bed. 'Right,' she said. 'I'll remember that. My life is petty.'

'I didn't mean that.'

Suddenly enraged, she flung the suit bag into the hallway. '*Then, what the fuck did you mean?*'

Will regarded the fallen luggage for a moment, then sighed. 'I meant . . .' He shrugged and turned away from her, gazing out the window. The fog had begun to spill into the valley, tumbling past the Monopoly-board houses, blurring their lights and softening their edges. 'Last week,' he said at last, 'I went out and bought myself a suit just for funerals.'

She sank to the edge of the bed, filled with dread and drained of all energy. It wasn't until she saw her brother's tears that she began to come apart. 'Will, please . . .'

'You keep acting like Jamie and I have some sort of . . . happily-ever-after.' He swiped at his eyes. 'All we have is right now.'

'I didn't . . .'

'That's all anybody's got, Tess. The future doesn't count for shit.'

She picked at a loose thread on the comforter.

'You can't *plan* for happiness ever. You've got to figure out what makes you happy now.'

Her faint, bloodless response seemed to come from somewhere else. 'What if nothing does?'

He sat down next to her on the bed. 'Something will, sweetie.'

When she began to cry, he laid his hand gently on the back of her neck. She curled into his chest, feeling eight years old again, spilling big, ridiculous tears down the front of that ridiculous shirt.

Jamie came loping into the room with a plastic bag. 'Hi guys . . . oh . . . sorry.'

'No problem,' she said, yanking a Kleenex from the bedside table. 'Come on in.' She dabbed at her eyes, blew her nose noisily, cast a quick glance at Will. 'Whatcha got?' she asked Jamie.

'Lethal Weapon One.'

'Ugh.'

'I know,' said Jamie, 'but we can always put it on hold and look at Mel Gibson's butt.'

She laughed extravagantly, aglow with relief, giddy from the sudden, miraculous lifting of a terrible weight. 'What's for dinner? Shall I make my lasagna?'

Jamie looked confused. 'Will said you were leaving.'

'He was wrong,' she said.

Will just shrugged at his lover. 'I was wrong.'

After dinner, while Will and Jamie changed into their nightshirts, she skulked off to the bedroom, where she flopped on the bed, kicked off her shoes and phoned the number in Maui Alec had given her. Predictably enough, it turned out to be the Hyatt Regency, another atrium from hell with fiberglass waterfalls and resident flamingos.

There was no answer when they rang his room. She envisaged him down by one of the pools, ordering a Scorpion, hustling the cocktail waitress, bragging to anyone who'd listen about the major

deal he'd just closed in Philadelphia. She left a message for him to call her in San Francisco as soon as possible, almost certain he'd know what that meant. For the first time in weeks she felt a little sorry for him.

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