

LOVE JUNKIE

A MEMOIR

Rachel Resnick

BLOOMSBURY

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CHAPTER ONE
Problems with Rachel

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On Observation Drive, the narrow street where I have lived for eight years, I back the cherry red metallic pickup truck down the steep driveway toward my home, navigate past a startled raccoon, which drops a discarded can of refried beans it's pried from the garbage. Just then Jim Morrison starts singing "The End." I sing along the way I never do in front of anyone. There's always a Doors song on a radio station somewhere on the dial in Los Angeles. After it's over I cut the engine, listen to the ticking, pause before gaining the comfort of my tiny one-bedroom hideaway. My sanctuary. Since I took a little break from dating men a year ago, I've grown to relish the solitude and the peace.

I always feel lucky when I get home.

But as soon as I set foot in the door, I know something's wrong. Ajax, the homicidal scarlet macaw I rescued four years before, is uncharacteristically quiet.

"Ajax, you okay?"

Ajax stalks the fancy stainless steel “animal environment” that serves as his cage, ruffles up his neck feathers, glares. His pupils are flaring, like he’s pissed. That’s not something you like to see in your scarlet macaw. He has the power to snap your finger in two, or bite through phone cords, which he likes to do for fun when he’s out of the cage.

I walk into my bedroom. At first I can’t locate the source of my unease. The bookcases are fine, the yellow tulips are still neatly arranged in a vase on the desk. There is the dashboard Hula Man from Hawaii, my desk mascot, next to the miniature Ganesh. On the wall, the painting by the Sandman, the Alabama outsider artist, and next to it the framed black-and-white snapshot of my mother, who died when I was fourteen, looking eternally young and bright-eyed in her high school photo. Nothing’s out of place.

Then I notice the darkened computer. Inside are years of e-mails—including the thousands I exchanged with Spencer, my most recent boyfriend and quasi-fiancé, over the ten months we were together—along with all the stories I’ve written, my second novel, the new novel, all the teaching exchanges, everything. The computer’s green eye is not blinking. The computer, from which I generate my very living, is dead.

For a moment, I stop breathing. Blink. This can’t be happening.

“Ajax,” I call out softly, disoriented. I hear him stretch his wings in response.

Then my brain starts racing. Maybe there was a power outage. Those things happen in the canyon. I drop to my

knees, edge close. Startled, I pull back my hand from the carpet where the hard drive sits. It's completely soaked.

Was there a sudden rainstorm? Canyon weather can be unpredictable. I move my hands closer to the wall, check for drips from the window. Nothing. Maybe something leaked from my landlord's home upstairs? It's happened before. No sign of that either. Besides, the computer hard drive sits under a sturdy desk fashioned from a door set on two filing cabinets. The only water anywhere is concentrated in a thick wet pool right beneath the hard drive. It makes no sense.

Then I see a bead of water leak from the interior of the drive, squeeze through the disk portal, and drip slowly down the plastic.

The computer was a gift from Spencer.

And tonight is the night before Valentine's Day.

And it hits me suddenly: Spencer did this. Drowning my computer is the perfect fuck-you Valentine. I cup my hand over my mouth, muzzle the horror. It might as well be blood leaking from the hard drive. Water poured directly into a computer instantly short-circuits the whole system, erasing all data.

Let me translate what this means to me at this moment in my life.

After decades of chasing love and ignoring the reality of my own life, I am worn to a nub. My nerves are raw. My body and heart ache. My bank account is empty—wait, that's not quite right. It's actually overdrawn. On top of which, I owe Spencer money. Everything is so fragile and tenuous that this violation could send me over the edge. The memory of this period fills me with shame, because I created the calamitous circumstances.

I can't afford any physical accidents or technical mishaps.
Nor can I afford to lose the data the computer holds. What it means to me.

Let me try to explain.

The computer is a living extension of my brain, an expression of my soul, a museum of my fragmented life. It is how I connect with my friends, how I process my thoughts, where I stash memories, where I recount dreams and stories, in a matrix of files. It's also the only place where an overdue decent-paying magazine article exists, not to mention the nearly finished book manuscript I was planning to sell.

To attack it is to attack me. To destroy it is to destroy me.

I know this sounds extreme. Unfortunately, at this point in my life, it's the truth.

My gaze jerks to the window. The blinds are bunched up, like someone took them in the palm of their hand and crushed them. I can feel my heart pounding, beating against the cage of ribs. On the carpet, boot marks. A man's size. The bird remains unusually silent. Normally he's laughing his avian head off, or saying repeatedly, "Hello! Hello?" in various tones, to which I parry with a call and response that somehow I never get tired of doing. Maybe it's shame that holds his black piston of a tongue, shame because he failed to protect his domain. Because clearly, judging from the crumpled blinds and the boot marks, someone has come through the window.

I run to the cage, panicking. Spencer always hated Ajax.

"It's okay, Ajax, it's okay. I love you. Are you okay? Did he try to poison you? Do you need to go to the vet? Tell me, handsome."

Ajax's feathers smooth out. He cocks his head, studying me. He seems fine now. But is he in danger? Spencer could come back. Next time . . . unless—a nerve-prickling thought comes to me. Unless he's still here.

Without thinking, I look for a weapon. Pick up a kitchen knife. Listen for movement. I force myself to check behind each door, in each hiding place, but the apartment is small, only two rooms and a bathroom—three, if you count the tiny walk-in dressing area. The kitchen morphs into a living space; the bedroom also serves as the office and library. Actually, there are books and bookcases in every room, even the bathroom. There's really nowhere to hide, unless you're a book or a squirrel.

He's not here.

Still shaking, I pick up the phone.

“Stasia, call me back. I know it's late. I'm sorry to call so late. I hope I didn't wake you and the kids. But it's an emergency. Spencer broke into my house and wrecked my computer. You've got to call me back.”

Anastasia and I have been friends since right after college, when we were both living in Rome. For years we were hellions together, plowing through men, running around town—until she got married and had two kids. Now I barely see her. She's busy, lives on the other side of town, but we still talk every day. She's family.

Then I call Samantha, my friend who lives up the road in Topanga Canyon in a trailer, the Cowgirl Palace. More family. The women who never let you down. Sam picks up right away. I don't even remember what I say.

“You want me to come over? Spend the night?” she says.
“What a fucking psycho.”

Her words comfort me, though there’s a dull nagging thought—who’s psycho? I picked him. I kept him. I kept him even after he began debasing me, just as I picked and kept a lifetime of other men who seduced and then debased. So if he’s psycho, aren’t I psycho too?

There’s no way to dress this up either and make myself look good in the process.

This is a story about my years of compulsive sex, romantic obsession, the endless demeaning e-mails I wrote, the addictive relationships I pursued—convinced each man was, in fact, the love of my life—and the time and effort wasted. It’s also a story about how I finally decided to break the cycle, and how I slipped, and how I tried to find my way again.

What does it cost when someone asks you to marry them—three times—and backs out—three times? A dollar? A year’s rent? A trip around the world? What does it cost when that same man chips away at your self-esteem, with lists of criticisms? And you stick it out because you think this might be your last chance to have it all—a husband, a child of your own—before it’s too late? Does that add up to ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a quarter million in damages?

I owe Spencer money a thousand dollars. Maybe he thinks demolishing the computer is a kind of justice. I remember he once punctured all four tires of a man’s car after the man parked in his spot too many times. If he only knew I had the check to pay him back, in full, right here on the desk ready to send. With money borrowed from my brother.

What kind of sick cosmic joke is this? Isn't humor all about timing? I can't help but smile, however grimly. My humor has always saved me, or at least softened the blows. Maybe I was meant to face the wreckage of my past, the consequences of my choices and stubborn clinging. Maybe God thinks I need to be slapped upside the head to truly wake up.

I'm a freelance writer, always struggling month to month to pay basic bills, juggling credit to cover the gaps. I'm doing the best I can. I tried to pay Spencer back whenever I got a chance, even in tiny payments, but recently I'd struggled just to pay the landlord. I remember how Spencer thought that I was a successful writer at first, that I owned a house, had assets and investments, and how disappointed he was when he found out that wasn't the case.

It started like a fairy tale.

When Spencer and I first met at Moonshadows in Malibu, after flirting on Nerve.com for one day, we couldn't stop talking. There in the outdoor Blue Lounge, we drank vodka tonics and smoked Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes while the gulls and the hours floated by on the moon-dappled ocean below.

"Let's play the Freakout Game," he said. "What if I told you I'd been waiting to meet you my whole life?"

After three days, he e-mailed me a coupon that read

Rachel Miranda Resnick,

I would rather die than add one more ounce of heartache and pain and disappointment to your life.

Spencer Wozniak

Date

“Print it out,” he said. If I had, maybe this story would be different. But I doubt it.

In the beginning, Spencer was perfection. Though he looked menacing with his wide-set blue eyes, shaved head, and steroidal physique, he was the biggest teddy bear: an amateur chef who cooked me gourmet meals every night and invented desserts like Rachel’s Kiss (strawberries dipped in Frangelico fudge on amaretto-infused vanilla ice cream) and dishes like Ceviche Confetti (sea scallops marinated in roasted tomatillos, papaya, lime juice, and Serrano chiles on a bed of radicchio); who gave me my own fancy Italian cappuccino maker and brought me perfect cappuccinos in bed with fresh-cut mango; who flew me out to meet his Polish immigrant parents in Phoenix the first month; and who made love to me multiple times a day, always making sure I was satisfied, and whose gloriously uncircumsised cock with its hooded charms and textured driving power inspired worship.

Here was this guy striking enough to have scored bit parts in a few cult indie films and a scattering of thuggish music videos; a seasoned street fighter who earned a semiotics degree at Reed College, and wrote the Reed newspaper’s weekly sex advice column in the guise of a woman; who loved my writing and told me so; who showered compliments; who said he wanted me; who promised that we would travel the world, make a family—and who always had a good bottle of champagne in the fridge.

Who could blame me for staying when he first pointed out a tiny flaw in me? After all, I am well aware of being deeply flawed.

“You have a tendency to be late. Especially when we have a date to be somewhere. Maybe you should make a list each day and calculate the exact time each part requires.”

I furrowed my brow, grabbed the yellow legal pad I used to scribble daily lists of things to do. The day’s page was already chaotic and crowded with tasks, calls, Post-its, exclamation points. Some items were months old, still undone. I reread Spencer’s e-mail. Then I tried to mark each task with an estimated time, each effort a tiny hammer tapping on my skull. The hammers gathered speed. I wasn’t sure whether the times I chose were reasonable, whether I could even do any of the tasks, or why I felt so out of control. All I knew was that as I calculated, numbers seemed to fray at the edges, unravel, then sift senselessly to the floor.

I e-mailed Spencer back in defeat: “I’m trying. I can’t do it. Please help.”

The phone calls, conversations, and e-mails gradually took on an increasingly scolding tone. Things like, “Maybe being so expressive about sex could be construed as bullying,” or, “Why are you so moody?” Or, “You don’t answer questions, you’re squirrely.”

Almost imperceptibly, the exchanges turned harsher:

“Do you ever do ANYTHING in the moment besides complain about the past or recent past?”

I was terrified he was cutting me off. He turned cold. But once I fall, I’m done. As Stasia says about me and men, “You’re like a dog with a bone.” Over the past two decades, she’s seen how I cling way past the point of ugliness.

Meanwhile, I began missing deadlines—for teaching, for writing. I was barely hanging on. I began racking up serious credit card debt.

He continued his harangue: “Every single little thing is an opportunity for more grief and conflict and strife when placed in your over-reactive, over-sensitive hands. You have transformed my once pretty happy and peaceful world, on the whole, into a minefield, with the occasional wonderful, lovely time for variety’s sake. Thanks.”

I was trying desperately to please him, or at worst, argue him out of his harsh criticisms. The word “minefield” sent me spinning off into days of self-examination, soul-searching, beating myself up. Friends grew tired of my ramblings. Their advice to just get out fell on deaf ears.

My first *Los Angeles Times* assignment lay dormant. The editor’s queries unanswered. It appeared every day on my list of things to do, neglected. My book agent couldn’t reach me. My teaching suffered. I lost students. My job was to make sure this relationship worked. At all costs. If it took fifty e-mails of justifications and explanations, late-night drive-overs and I’m-sorry blow jobs, sign me up. Spencer might as well have been heroin. Everything was falling apart.

“You have single-handedly allowed your mood swings and your profound insecurities and your deep depression to tear apart what had been a very lovely young relationship. You saw that. Saw it clearly. But have not taken strong enough measures to lessen the damage you have caused.”

Finally the criticisms bloomed into a meticulously detailed, twenty-page numbered list printed out for my edification.

Granted, he called them our “issues” and attempted to balance these out with “constructive” ways to overcome them—but in truth, they were a series of complaints about my character. Originally he delivered them verbally, presented as problems he had with me that I needed to address or else we couldn’t continue the relationship. Then they appeared in e-mail form. There were so many e-mails, so many criticisms. Sometimes stand-alone, sometimes embedded in niceties. I still remember the folded pages, how I carried them around with me, unable to keep track of my flaws without referring to them. My friends and I began calling them “Problems with Rachel.” We laughed about it, in that black comic kind of way. These brief periods of relief kept me going. I talked about those Problems as a kind of sucker punch to the gut. What I didn’t share with my friends was that they were also a kind of relief. Spencer saw me. Saw me as I truly was—a demon hiding in the guise of a fucked-up woman.

My friends also dared to wonder out loud how I could be such a tough woman, so independent, so powerful, and yet once again succumb to a controlling man? Was I some kind of masochist? If I was, I fed off the fighting just as much. I was always right in there, ready with a rejoinder. I kept the ugliest vision of myself to myself. And continued to curl my eyelashes, dress sexy, gussy up to keep my man.

So Spencer and I had enjoyed maybe a month of pure bliss. We fought for the next nine. Until he broke up with me for good.

Why didn’t I leave?

Because that’s not how it works.

Ever since my first serious boyfriend at age twenty-one, when I finally told someone “I love you” and fell down the romantic rabbit hole, this pattern has emerged and placed a shadowy choke hold on all my subsequent love relationships.

Maybe I suspect I’m dark, and rotten, and unworthy. Possibly I need to be swept up and seduced, obsessed over, then degraded. Built up, then shattered. Why, I do not know. But ever since Spencer, the most devastating relationship I’ve yet been in and the one that constituted “hitting rock bottom,” I’ve taken a temporary vow of celibacy so I can step back and try to figure it out.

What I think so far is this addiction is lethal, rooted in the most primal ground of childhood damage. And once that attachment has set in, shaking it is tantamount to weaning oneself off the most addictive and powerful drugs.

This book is my journey through a lifelong pattern of ruinous relationships with men, a pattern that may have cost me my chance to have a child, or a healthy relationship of any kind. It’s my attempt to understand, and end, a pattern that has been yielding worse and worse choices. Before I can even begin to explore that pattern, though, the real question is, what is wrong with me?