

7. THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

Cheryl is feeling this incredible fatigue. Perhaps burning the candle at both ends is finally catching up to her. She also believes the contest is putting this inordinate pressure on her. She is having a drink with Trish.

“I don’t think that I would have broken up with Robert if it hasn’t have been for this contest. It made me shine this light on my life. And when I thought that things weren’t perfect, I made a rash decision.”

“Robert was never right for you.”

“That’s not the point, Trish. I really didn’t expect that much of him before. We had fun together. But when I started to think of him as a potential husband, I said no way.”

“The contest just sped up the inevitable. There was going to be a point in your relationship where you’d expect it to go to the next level.”

“That point was hardly now. I’m not ready to get married. I don’t even want to get married.”

Trish reminds her, “You’re free now. You’re young. Enjoy life.”

Cheryl questions whether Trish even follows her own advice. Things are sometimes to easy at the Anchor. A woman can just get caught up in the tides. There’s always that dreaded morning after.

Cheryl asks, “Don’t you want to get off the roller coaster?”

“I’m like you, Cheryl. I’m not ready to settle down. I’ve tried. I’m not like Diane. I don’t have that confidence about myself. I don’t think that I could be with as many guys. It freaks me opening up.”

“I guess that’s why we drink.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it makes us all the life of the party.”

Trish can really come alive at the Anchor. This is a Tuesday. Things are very quiet. But she’s not above the chase when the moment strikes her.

“Cheryl, I’m a lot like you. I’ve always wanted to settle down. I just pick the wrong guys. Or they have a way of picking me.”

“That’s the lament of a single girl.”

Trish offers a warning, “Not just a single girl. It’s a terrible thing when you wake up one day married to one of the perfect guys who’s out to ruin your life.”

Cheryl admits, “That seems brutal.”

“Cheryl, you know what I’m talking about. That’s why this contest doesn’t really change things. We still make mistakes. And we have to live with them.”

“Or we break up with them and come to the Anchor to console ourselves.”

Trish wonders, “Is that how you’re feeling now?”

“Not really. I hardly miss Robert. The break up was the right thing to do. I went out with Brian for so long that I was afraid to be alone. Robert was just there.”

Trish suggests, “But it never was the same thing.”

“No, it wasn’t. Robert was never a steady thing. We’d go out for a while and then we wouldn’t see each other for months. He was just someone who was there so I wouldn’t feel

completely alone.”

“That doesn’t sound all that happy.”

Cheryl doesn’t want Trish feeling sorry for her.

“We had fun. I’m not saying that. I just knew all along that I wanted more.”

Then Trish wonders, “So you shouldn’t feel bad about how things turned out.”

“I guess maybe you’re right. I’m just not ready to start searching for a husband now.”

Trish advises her, “No one said that you have to.”

Both of them take a moment to look around the empty bar.

Cheryl shares her fear, “It’s just that it’s got me thinking. I don’t think I want to end up alone.”

Trish challenges her, “That’s never a reason to just settle. You know we all have.”

“I’m not settling. But no guy is going to be completely perfect.”

Maybe a Tuesday evening is the perfect time to think about all this. It’s not as if someone is going to disturb their conversation. It’s not that kind of night.

Trish asks Cheryl, “I’m going to get another beer. Do you want one?”

“No, just get me a coke. I still have to drive back.”

Cheryl thinks about all the times that she made it home toasted. It was like driving blind. But she still made it. She thanks her stars.

Trish comes back with the drinks. “What have you been thinking about?”

“How much I really want to start looking for another guy.”

“You don’t have to look. Just live your life. Let happen what happens.”

She wonders if she can really take Trish’s advice. She doesn’t feel as if she needs a man to be who she wants to be. She just doesn’t want to feel that her prospects are nil.

Trish looks her in the eyes, “You really are afraid.”

“That’s not it.”

Cheryl decides that she needs a new look to go along with her recent independence. She hasn’t treated herself to a session at the hairdresser in a while. After her talk with Trish, she needs all the pampering that she can get.

Her hairdresser used to work for a shop in Alpharetta. But Dante has just moved inside the city to Buckhead. So Cheryl takes the afternoon off and heads from her Dunwoody office along GA 400 to Dante’s new location.

“Cheryl, I want to do a little color work. Just darken your shade a little. And add some soft highlights. It will make you look great.”

She is excited about the change. He has the colorist do the initial changes by following his instructions. Then he works to give a little more shape to her hair. The new cut is more clearly redefined.

“We’re cutting away the excess baggage. It’s the new you.”

She hopes that it is that simple.

She sits in the chair waiting for the color to take. She is looking through a magazine. She wonders what kind of private lives these models have. One day they are doing something wild with asparagus. Or they’re finishing a new table for den. The next week, it’s off on a shopping excursion in Thailand. She wishes that she can do it all.

She’s feeling that two-month breakup lull. She still hasn’t found someone new. And

she's getting a little afraid. She is more than a little nostalgic about Robert. She imagines the little trips. The delightful moments between them. She conveniently forgets about nights and days waiting for him to call.

Cheryl realizes that her lull is also coinciding with the same experience on his part. He has actually called her a few times. But she is doing her best to ignore his appeals. Sure, she feels a twinge of desire. And he is working her feelings of loneliness. But she can't give in to him. Not even a little bit. So even though she has serious doubts about being apart, she has to maintain a united front.

Cheryl has been proud of herself. She's shown him no signs of weakness although on her own, she has been a bundle of nerves. It would be so easy to break down. His door is open for her. But that would destroy everything that she is.

After getting her hair done, she goes out for a snack. She can see how good her hair looks when she sees herself in the mirror of the restaurant. One of the patrons is staring at her. She loves the attention, but turns away.

She sips her tea and thinks about how far she has come. Robert has actually been a serious impediment to her further development. He constantly made her think that she was lacking for something. The more that she put her life in order, the less that it seemed to matter.

Cheryl has never thought of herself as a lady-in-waiting. She has her own life. On the other hand, she valued having Robert around. It gave her the sense that she never had to give in to the all the confusion of night life. Even if she was attracted to some guy at the Anchor, she could let it all go and get in her car and just drive away. She could shut the door on all the excitement and chaos.

Now Cheryl hopes that she has the will to maintain herself. She finishes her lemon cake and tea. It would be a great time to buy a new dress. It's beautiful late summer weather. She has been taking care of herself all season. This would be the perfect reward that she has been promising herself.

There's a clothing boutique just across from the sweet shop. She crosses the street and looks in the window. Few of the dresses have that quality that appeals to her. Too many flowers. Too much going on. But she is resolved.

The clerk suggests that she has something that might be to Cheryl's taste.

"I've got something that you really will love."

She finds a dress in light mauve with dainty honeysuckles. The cut is very flattering with a slight shape to the waste and spaghetti straps. It is more to her taste. She tries it on.

"Wow! This is great," remarks Cheryl. It shows off her tan. But it is also very lively; nothing could be better to express her mood.

"I really think it's fantastic."

The clerk complements her. "It really does look appealing on you. The dress becomes you."

She is overjoyed that she's found something so great.

When Cheryl gets home, she is still on the high from the day. A great hair style and the perfect dress have put a wondrous mood. She had a full meal at lunch so she makes herself something light for dinner.

She hates eating alone. But she can't afford to go out every night. She 's not afraid of

her solitude. She could call the girls up now. However, she needs some down time before she heads off to the Anchor.

“Are we always going to be like this?” asks Trish. “We just stare at the door waiting for the next cute guy to come in.”

Cheryl meets Trish at 9. Diane and Stevie are showing up later.

“I’m not looking at the door.”

Trish asks, “What are you doing, Cheryl? Checking them out in the bar mirror?”

“Hardly. I’m not worried about it.”

Trish probes her, “When was the last time that you were with a guy?”

“That’s not a fair question. I just think that it’s better right now not to hop into something. You’ve got to be honest with me on this.”

Cheryl retreats, “I’m not sure that I want to think of it like that.”

“Really? We’ve got needs.”

Cheryl has her own take on it all, “Need one is a little sanity. I’m not going to snap at the first guy that I see.”

Trish is lecturing her, “I’m not talking about snapping. You just have to get back in the game.”

“Trish, we’ve worked here. We know how so many of these guys work. That’s just not for me. A roll in the sack isn’t going to do it for me. I’d rather be alone if that’s what it takes to be me.”

Trish asks. “What about the contest?”

“I told you that it made me break up with a guy. But it has no effect on me wanting to get with another. I like my independence.”

Trish informs Cheryl, “You don’t have to give that up.”

Cheryl is more reflective, “I just don’t want to end up on the other side of heartache. I’ve had enough with short cuts.”

“You have to watch that you don’t give in to your own imagination. We do that when we’re alone. It’s the Cinderella complex. You hope that you’re going to meet the perfect man. And you measure every guy against your ideal prince. You just have to jump in the water.”

Cheryl doesn’t want to go along, “If jumping in means taking some guy home for the night, that’s not what I’m about.”

“I’m not telling you to drown yourself. But you have to get your feet wet if you want to swim.”

She wonders if this is what she got all dolled up for. She feels like an attendee at her own funeral.

Diane shows up, “Cheryl, your hair looks great.”

Trish concurs, “I told her that when I saw her earlier.”

Diane adds, “I predict a man in your future.”

“I don’t think that includes tonight.”

The few men who are already there can’t take their eyes off the table. And Cheryl is really attracting them tonight.

By the time Stevie makes it in, the bar is full of people. She has to squeeze through the crowd just to make it to the table.

Stevie makes an excuse for being so late, “Josh wanted to go out. I agreed to go over there. He got all angry when I wouldn’t stay.”

Diane offers her ten cents worth, “He wanted a little loving.”

Stevie is not so agreeable, “I know what he wants. I’m not sure that I want to be with him permanently.”

Trish wonders, “It’s not like you’re interested in any other guys.”

Stevie answers, “I’m not sure that we’re right for each other.”

Cheryl has been in the bathroom.

“Cheryl, that dress is super. Your hair! Your hair! You’re a knockout.” Cheryl’s new look distracts Stevie from her own problems.

“Thanks, Stevie.”

“I hope that you’re not thinking about Robert anymore.”

Cheryl responds, “I wasn’t until you mentioned his name.”

“Sorry,” says Stevie sheepishly.

As the night wears on, Cheryl notices that Stevie is drinking more than usual. She is sympathetic. She can tell how Josh has her locked in a holding pattern. How can Stevie ever bring herself down? Later it is clear, that Stevie won’t be able to make it home on her own. Trish and Diane are off on assorted adventures.

“I’ll give you a ride. You can come back for your car tomorrow.”

Stevie is stumbling and slurring her words, “I’ll be OK.”

“No, you won’t. I’m taking you home.”

She drives Stevie back to her place. She helps her get ready for bed. She is almost passing out. Stevie has always done as much for the other girls. It’s unusual to see her like this.

Cheryl notices a pattern in Stevie that she’s seen in herself. Instead of the needed attention from her man, Stevie is substituting getting trashed. The Anchor is all about that temptation. Even now, Cheryl feels that she could give in to the same kind of attitude. For the time being, it always makes her seem more desirable.

The next morning Cheryl stares at herself in the mirror. She can almost sense the toll that she saw in Stevie’s face last night. She really doesn’t feel that drained from the night before. But that feeling is definitely affecting her. There have been other mornings where she still felt the buzz from the night before. Days that seemed to be stalked by a dark cloud. Today she remembers those moments. With her new hair, she needs to enhance her new outlook on life.

It’s still early for a Saturday. There are only a few takers at the gym. Cheryl works the stair machine. Her confidence flows through her veins. This reminds her of who she is. She can’t give in.

She knows how nice it would be to have a great guy sleeping next to her when she would wake up in the morning. She’s felt that before. With Robert. With Brian. She’s hated to live the lie. To have that temporary reassurance is not enough.

Cheryl pushes her body. She can feel that natural unity inside of herself. She feels great.

In the shower, her muscles ache. But it is a good feeling. She lets the water run over her, and it brings her to life.

At 1, she calls Stevie.

“I still feel bad. It’s not like Josh and I really had a fight. I just needed to go out.”

Cheryl offers, "Do you want to go get some lunch. Then we'll go get your car."

"I'm not sure that I can eat anything. But come get me."

Cheryl has a great appetite from her workout. She orders a salad with tuna steak strips. Stevie has coffee and a sweet roll. She has dark patches under her eyes.

"I'm going to do the pool. And then a long nap. Do you want to come?"

Cheryl begs off, "I still have to do laundry. Are you going to stay in tonight?"

"Heavens no! I have to do something to get rid of this headache."

They both laugh. By the time the night rolls around, Friday is a dim memory.

Diane screams, "Shots for all of us."

"Rusty nails," is Trish's request. They are all ready to sail.

Diane notices, "Stevie seems in better spirits tonight."

"She's not even thinking about him tonight."

"That's all for the best, Cheryl," comments Trish.

It has been a long night. Cheryl is sitting in a nightgown at her make up table. She takes down her silver necklace that is hanging from the mirror. There is a pendant of a sea gull with a small ruby fixed where the eye is. She runs her finger along the chain. She hesitates to wear it again. The necklace was a gift from Robert. It reminds her of the time together. She prefers to leave it hung up rather than bringing it down from its place. That is another time.

She puts it back in its place and looks at it. She wants to try it on. But she can sense its curse. It would only send her back to another time. She has escaped those memories. She closes her eyes. She feels that she won't make it to the bed. She has flashes of those moments together. Good times and bad times. She wants to hold her breath until something new can greet her in the morning. She lies on her bedspread with her hands upon her chest. She cannot return to her innocent bliss. She knows too much to go back.

The necklace is a sparkle at the end of the room. It is too far too touch. Something is seriously out of her reach. She holds on to the bedspread and tries to avoid passing out.

When she wakes the next morning, she has the bedcovers wrapped around her. She feels such a sense of ease. She feels protected. She doesn't need Robert. Just her comfortable bed.

She takes a deep breath and greets the morning. When she stands up from the bed, she feels confident. She has a long shower and lets the water wash away what remains of the nighttime haze.

After her morning coffee, she is ready for work. She catches herself. It's Sunday morning. The days have been playing tricks on her.

She decides to do some early grocery shopping. She's scouted out the deals for the week in the paper. As she glides through the aisles of the grocery store, she wishes that finding a man was as easy as squeezing a cantaloupe for ripeness. She smiles as she watches some guy struggling at the melon counter. It's not his day.

At the deli counter she asks the clerk to slice some cheese for sandwiches. She's also scouted out some crusty bread. It's from a local company in Atlanta. And she's picked up some grapes and strawberries.

"Are you eating alone?"

She looks to face her questioner. He is smiling.

"Do I know you?"

He replies, “No, not at all. But I have seen you at the Anchor. I’ve always wanted to say something. You’ve got a new hair do.”

“Yes, I have.”

“It looks great. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“I guess that’s a complement.”

He seems a little embarrassed, “I’m Nick.”

She takes a good look at him. Is he her overripe melon?

“I’m Cheryl.”

“Yeah, I know. Everyone talks about you at the Anchor.”

“Gossips?”

“No, more like a celebrity.”

She blushes, “I feel honored. I could pose for a picture.”

He jokes, “I’ve got my camera in the car.”

“Maybe next time.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you at the Anchor.”

As he heads off, she wonders if she was too abrupt. He wanted something more. He was extra friendly. She just find him too eager.

She wonders if she is getting too difficult. She’s never going to be with someone else if she keep acting like this. Oh well.

It’s the weekend, and the girls enter conference mode. Stevie is starting to get a lot more serious about Josh. The girls have to decide if they want to intervene.

Diane notes, “She hasn’t been too happy around here lately.”

Trish reasons, “She may be right. We’re all in for a change. How long can we keep acting like college kids?”

Diane won’t give in, “I’m not acting. This is how I am.”

Cheryl has been listening. She’s dying to say something, “But if Josh is the wrong guy then she shouldn’t be with him.”

“You’re being too much of a mom. If she likes him, what more do you want?”

“Good character!”

Diane smiles. She’s seen all those great characters around the hospital. “For my money, I have to go along with Trish.”

“We wait and she’ll get married to the guy.”

Diane has her own idea, “I know what it is. You don’t want her to win the bar. Especially after you dumped Robert.”

Cheryl takes a sip of her vodka tonic, “That’s not it at all. I just don’t want her making a mess. That’s why I broke up with Robert.”

Trish points out, “And you’ve been miserable since then.”

Cheryl feels like they are ganging up on her. “I made the right move. It’s just hard accepting it all.”

Diane comforts her, “I can guess how you feel. But it never really works to say something to a friend.”

Trish disagrees, “I feel like you girls are watching my every move.”

Cheryl goes along with Trish, “She’s got a point. If we felt bad about Josh, it would

make her think twice.”

Diane objects, “That’s not fair. You have to give her a chance to work out things on her own. If she loves a guy, we can’t destroy it for her.”

“A lot you know about love, Diane.”

“There you go again, Trish. I know as much as anyone. Certainly as much as you. I’m not the one dogging around the Anchor all the time.”

“Whoa, low blow.”

Cheryl arbitrates. “See what we’re becoming.

“Bitches,” say Diane and Trish in unison. They all laugh.

Cheryl continues, “We just have to take it slow. I guess that I need to keep my mouth shut.”

Diane steps up to get more drinks.

Trish seems pensive, “It’s just so easy to get caught up in things. Once a guy gives me that look, it’s as if he’s erased m mind. I need something to drag me out of this.”

“It’s always another man and more of the same. We all have amnesia.”

Trish calls it, “Boy amnesia.”

“Sounds right.”

“Cheryl, it’s sometimes worse than that. I’ll be with some guy that I don’t know at all. And my hands just have a life of their own. Like a horror movie.”

Cheryl doesn’t get it. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ll just put my hands down his pants. Let him touch me in all kinds of weird ways. And I just come completely apart. There is absolutely nothing that I can do to stop. And even if I go home on my own, I’ll just feel all guilty the next day.”

Cheryl describes it, “It’s a Southern thing.”

“It’s worse than that. I have to get really trashed just to have sex. Otherwise, I’m just uptight.”

Cheryl tries to take her side, “We all get nervous.”

Trish is assertive about her concern, “It’s something else. After a couple of drinks, I just come unglued totally. One little touch. That is all that it takes.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I do worry!”

“Diane does the same thing too.”

“Cheryl, I hate being compared to Diane. But I sometimes see myself when I look at her.”

Cheryl notes, “That’s what I’m saying. We all have those feelings.”

Trish adds something more, “I’ve never seen that in you. We’ve never had to tell some guy to hit the showers after harassing you.”

“I’m less available.”

Trish smiles.

Diane comes back with the drinks.

“What took you so long?” asks Trish.

“I don’t know. I just thought about taking your money and your drinks and heading for home.”

“I see that you took a sip out of all the drinks,” observes Cheryl.

“I did not. I just took a sip out of yours Cheryl.”

Trish is drinking a whiskey and coke. Diane has a cranberry and vodka.

“I don’t think that I’ll be able to stand up if I have another drink,” says Cheryl.

“No problem,” Trish teases her. “I’ll find a guy to carry you out.”

Diane concurs, “I’ll make sure that he has fresh breath.” She makes a weird motion with her fingers.

“What is that about, Diane?” asks Cheryl.

“You know that thing that guys do with their fingers.

“No, I don’t,” says Cheryl.

Trish pretends to know, “Cheryl hasn’t been with a guy in a while.”

“Sorry, Cheryl,” says Diane.

“You girls are the worst.”

Trish turns with her fanny towards Cheryl, “I’ll take my spanking now.”

“Trish, you better save that lily-white ass until some guy goes to work on you tonight.”

“Diane, you are getting more nasty than I am.”

“You’ve just got to save your spankings until last.”

Cheryl wonders what is going on. “This is really not my style, girls.”

Diane pegs it, “You’re a proper Southern girl.”

Trish confesses, “I was pretty proper at the beginning of the night. But now I’m ready for anything. That’s what good drinks will do.”

Diane affirms their need, “We can’t do it on our own. Send in some boys!”

All of a sudden some guy taps Cheryl on the shoulder. “You’re the melon lady.”

She has forgotten all about Nick and the incident in the supermarket.

“Oh, now I remember. So you always pick up girls in the grocery store.”

“More light. I know what I’m getting.”

“So what are you doing here now.”

“I was with some friends from school. They ditched me.”

Cheryl is brutal, “Now you’re here hunting for stray girls to vanquish back at your place.”

“Something like that.”

She can’t tell what to think of him. He’s just a little too glib. He frightens her. He looks her straight in the eyes. The worst part of it all, he’s making her do all the work for him. Guys like Nick are here with one thing in mind. Harvesting Anchor Girls. She’s commented on it before to her friends. Cheryl is more a prize because she doesn’t go along with this kind of thing.

Cheryl speculates how a guy like Nick can tell if a girl is hot for the game. He’s got to like a bit of a challenge. But the pretense is half the battle. As long as Cheryl is the bewildered melon lady, she’s worth a spin. And he’s already done most of the work in their first meeting. He orders a shot. Cheryl passes. She will need her wits if she is going to come out of this alive. She’s seen Cheryl and Diane in action. Now she’s going to test her wings.

Nick is a graphic designer. He used to work for the Cartoon Network. Now he is in freelance.

“It gives me the chance to go skiing in Utah.”

“This really isn’t ski weather.”

“I go sailing off of Hilton Head.”

He is just so cocky. Cheryl doesn't have much of her drink left to protect her. What if she went back with him to his place. Could she ever turn the tables on someone like this. If she ended up not talking to him, he'd just find another girl. There still wouldn't be much for her troubles. She's never really believed that line *Girls want it too*. It's just more inducement for letting a guy act like a prick. Diane's always tried to come out on top. But here's such a down side to her game. In some ways, she can't stop drinking. Just stop for a week. Trish has admitted as much about herself as well. And she's not as ensconced in the sport.

If it's a game, she wants him to make a move. He needs to say something clever.

“You told me that my hair looked great in the supermarket. Has the cat got you tongue today.”

Nick tells her, “I'm just amazed to see you here.”

“That's all.”

“I'm not what you think. I'm not a pick-up artist.”

“And what's the longest that you've been with one woman. A week. A month.”

“A year.”

Cheryl asks, “And you were completely faithful?”

“I never said that.”

She thinks about what it would mean to walk out that door arm in arm. How far would she go in the parking lot? What would she give up in his car? Would she let him drive her to his place? Cheryl looks around. Cheryl and Diane are nowhere to be seen

Cheryl has been looking for a replacement for Robert, someone that she might marry someday. And here she is heading down the winding road with the wolf. There's no hunter anywhere around to rescue her.

She imagines pushing him off as she closes the door of the Anchor. Her car is in sight. Will he give chase or realize that his time is over.

He snaps her out of her reverie, “Cheryl, what are you thinking about?”

“Marrying you.”

“Really?”

“No, really.”

He doesn't believe her. He doesn't understand that he is failing the test. Cheryl wants to win Sara's contest. He doesn't improve anything.

She flabbergasts him with her proposal, “Do you want to go back to your place and make passionate love?”

He perks up. He says nothing.

“Nick, I'm just not your type. You really need to go back and pick up some more melons.”

“It's not a matter of type. Cheryl, you're really hot. We could have some fun.”

She taunts him, “That kind of line might work in kindergarten. I'm a grown woman.”

He can feel her put down. He slinks away. All of a sudden Diane and Trish magically reappear.

“What have you been doing, Cheryl?”

“Just turning down the perfect candidate for marriage.”

Diane rubs her teeth together and smiles her knockout smile. "I've been doing the same thing. Only twice."

Cheryl wonder what the hell Diane is talking about.

"Was he cute?" asks Trish.

"In a sleazy mangy dog sort of way," says Cheryl. She thanks her stars that nothing happened. She realizes that she's not that desperate. Although she wishes that she was. It would make life so much easier. She has answers for Diane, Trish, and Stevie. But none for herself.

The next day is another Saturday. She could give in to the weekend doldrums and just wait for dusk's announcement of the night life, or she could take a different tact.

Over coffee and a bagel she mulls over her life. She's going to stew in the bath all day. Then she's going to get all perfumed up and take home the first bad boy that she sees,

This isn't college anymore.

She ends up going to the gym and then hanging out at a book store in the afternoon. After a long nap, she almost doesn't make it out. She really enjoys her time alone, her time without any burdens.

Even with all her ambitions, Saturday night has little to offer. She starts to party too early. By 10, she is ready to go. Trish begs her to stay. Her mind is made up. She is already in the parking lot wondering what has happened to the weekend. By the time that she rolls into her apartment, she realizes that she needs more than this. She doesn't know what to do. She promises herself not to call Robert. She has promised herself that all week.