

CHAPTER SEVEN: RAY EATS HUMBLE PIE

“What do you see in these people? There’s nothing permanent in their lives. They don’t have real jobs. They don’t have families. They don’t even have plans for the future.”

Ray looked downcast, “They’re my friends.”

“They’re your friends because they make you feel better than they are because there’s nothing going on in your life.”

He wasn’t sure how to answer her. She was no longer holding back.

“I thought that you loved me.”

“I still do. That’s why I can’t stand what you’re doing with your life.”

“I’ve got a job.”

“You’re calling me up asking for work every few weeks.”

“I enjoy freelancing.”

“Is that what you call it? It’s begging from where I come from.”

He did his best to win her over to his way of life. But she was going to hear none of it. Nevertheless, she thought at least she’d play along.

When she met him for dinner prior to the show, she had nothing but complaints.

“You ought to see that bathroom. I don’t know what was on the seat.”

He could imagine her stooped over cleaning it herself.

She continued, “I should have brought my rubber gloves.”

He tried to keep from laughing.

“I don’t even want to know what the guys’ looks like.”

He hoped that she didn’t ask.

At dinner, she spent the whole time berating the waiter.

“People should be embarrassed to act like that,” she reminded him.

He could imagine her walking the waiter into the back and scolding him.

“I’ve worked in restaurants. If I did half the things that he did. I wouldn’t have lasted a day.”

She twisted her mouth in a snarl.

He wanted her to calm down. He just let her rant.

“Are you going to eat?”

She made an S motion with her fork over the food.

“I’m afraid to put it in my mouth.”

“Just put some ketchup on it, and hold your nose.”

“Why are you such a jerk about it all?”

“I’m trying to help.”

“Check the place out on the internet before we go out again.”

He felt sheepish, “I’ve been here loads of time.”

Meg waved her arm around the room, “How many piercings does that girl have over there? She looks like a mongrel. I bet it’s a health risk to let people like that inside a place where they serve food.”

He held his hand up as if to ward off her criticisms. It hardly stopped. Each time the waiter passed by, she sneered at him.

“Anything more that I can get you, Mam.”

“I’d tell you to get some manners for yourself. But I’m not sure where you’d find them around here.”

She kept wiping her hands off with the napkin even though they never came near the food.

“Look at this knife!” she held up a knife.

“What about it?” Ray asked.

“It looks as if someone used it before me.”

“I don’t see it.”

He felt as if he was never going to get out of there. He did his best to enjoy his burger.

“I have no idea why you quit that job at the brokerage house.”

“The market was in a lull. It wasn’t right.”

“What are you doing now? People’s taxes? You claim that you’re a financial planner. You can’t even do your own finances. You’re going to lose your apartment.”

“I’ll be okay. I have some money saved.”

“Saved for what. We were going to buy a house.”

“We still will. I just need some time.”

“Didn’t someone at the firm suggest that you partied too much?”

“I had a breakdown one morning. And he flipped out on me in front of everyone. Those people weren’t right”

“You say that about everybody. I’d shudder to think what you tell your friends about me. That I’m one uptight bitch.”

“I’m not like that.”

“I’ve heard that mouth of yours. Weren’t you supposed to enter the MBA program. Did you even take the GMAT’s.”

“Yeah. It was a bad morning for me.”

“Meaning you were hung over.”

“I didn’t say that. I don’t even know why you want to be with me.”

Things got even tenser when she got to the venue.

“People around here have no fashion sense.”

“You usually don’t come that dressed up to a place like this.”

“You’re in a jacket.”

“And I have a casual shirt on.”

“I thought that you were going to look nice. I look great.”

“You look stupendous.”

She took the complement in stride.

“Buy me a drink.”

“Right, honey.”

When the band started to play, she began to fidget. It looked as if something serious was wrong.

“Are you OK, dear?”

“This is really loud.”

“We could step back a little.”

“Can’t they turn it down.”

“It’s live. There’s a real drummer.”

In the midst of the show, she kept heading back to the bar for shelter. Ray tried to keep up, but he eventually just gave up. He realized that the bartender was flirting with her, but he didn’t want to add to the mix up.

“Why the hell did you take me to that place?”

“I love the band. I’ve played the CD for you.”

“It’s not the same thing. All this noise at once. I couldn’t even pick out a melody.”

He wasn’t getting anywhere with her. She simply wanted to head back to the suburbs. He wanted to tell her that she hadn’t even given him a chance. But from her point of view, she had made an effort. That was the most that he could expect. Things were starting to make sense in his life. He was making his own way for once. And she just sent him for a loop.

It was so much easier for him to play the life of the party, any party. When he had to focus for her, he felt like he was someone else. It would be better not even trying. A leopard can’t change its spots.

He did everything that he could to restrain himself. His natural inclination would have been to keep drinking until he was completely numb. Then anything that she said would have just sailed over him. Instead, he took it all to heart. This made him want to drink even more.

He called me up a couple of nights later.

“I have to do what I can to get her out of my system.”

“Isn’t that why you quit the job.”

“I have to do more than that.”

I warned him, “I really don’t want to watch you get drunk.”

“Come keep me company.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant. If I was going to meet him for a drink, I wanted to make sure that it was a place that he wouldn’t make a spectacle of himself. We ended up at a bar further up Roswell Road. It was fairly deserted for a Thursday night.

“I think that she got a kick out of embarrassing me.”

“You can’t take it all personally. She was totally a fish out of water. She was floundering from the get go.”

“I don’t even want her to come out with me anymore.”

“You’re breaking up with her.”

“I’m not sure if we ever were together.”

“But you had hopes.”

“We made plans if that’s what you want to call it.”

“Plans for dinner?”

“Plans for our life. We were going to buy a house. When I got that job, she had spent my money for five years down the line. I couldn’t take the pressure.”

I recollected, “Sometimes that we were out, you acted as if you weren’t together with her.”

“I needed to be myself.”

“By drinking a storm and embarrassing yourself in front of other women.”

“I can’t help it if girls love me.”

I wanted to draw a clearer picture for him.

“You did most of the loving.”

“Let’s just say that the girls were willing to play along.”

“You never told them a thing.”

“You were on the honor code as well.”

I didn’t want to take the blame, “I had nothing to do with your mischief.”

“You gave me a needed alibi now and then.”

“I never told Meg anything that wasn’t true.”

“You’re such a boy scout. I didn’t hear you object when I introduced you to girls.”

“I was single.”

“So am I.”

“You are now.”

“Technically!”

“So she still thinks it’s all on.”

“It’s still a lot of talk. Nothing signed. Nothing set in stone.”

He was doing his best to put his best face on what had happened.

He added, “I can’t change her to like what I like.”

“I don’t think that it’s about that. You’ve always used that as excuse to go wild.”

“Are you afraid that I’m going to do that tonight? There’s no one in here to impress.”

I felt as if I had kept him in probation: “I’ll take the handcuffs off if that’s what you need.”

“I need you to be yourself. Let’s live a little.”

He knew how a couple of drinks would only make him more restless.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“I can’t tell you how to arrange your life. You just can’t expect her to change.”

He had too much invested in his plans with her to let it all go out the window. That made him want to drink more. But the calm of the evening was mellowing things out for the moment.

“I didn’t tell you that I discussed your novel with her.”

“What did she say?”

“She mocked it. Told me that it sounded like one of my perverse fantasies.”

“That sounds like a complement coming from her.”

“Maybe she has a point. I’ve always thought that there was something a little too macho about your fantasies.”

“I’m just trying to characterize your appetites in the most correct way.”

“You’re not writing about me, are you?”

“A little here and there.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“We’re friends.”

“You told me that it was cool to write about Rebecca.”

“I know that I told you that. But now I think that you’re wrong. What’s a woman going to think when she reads your prose.”

“That I’m telling it like it is. Not how some uptight guy wants her to think things are.

It's not like I'm talking about everything that you do. I'm just using the general idea."

"But none of your characters really care about people. They just think about getting high and partying. Nothing is permanent. People hook up. But no one stays together."

"This is her talking?" I asked.

"I'm telling you what I see. You've shown me this stuff. We talk about it all the time. No one wants to read about two guy who spend all their time trying to pick up women."

"Maybe timid guys do."

"That's who you're writing for."

"Not at all."

"You're trying to explain yourself to me."

"My characters are a lot closer to your psyche than you're willing to admit. All of a sudden you're a regular Mr. Clean."

"I just don't want you spending all your time working on this thing and then producing something that's unreadable."

"It's real and it's honest."

"So are talk shows. But they bring out the worst in people."

"I'm trying to entertain. It's not very entertaining reading about a bunch of people going straight. I need a little action to get things going."

"But your characters are all voyeurs. They don't know how to engage in a serious conversation with women."

"Help me out. Tell me what to say. I've got a pen and some paper. I'll do whatever you say."

"You need a story that comes from the heart. One that isn't all based on sex."

"You're reading in your own qualms into my story."

"What about Rebecca? You see a bar girl in short shorts, and you're acting as if it's the second coming."

I needed to rein in him. He was getting high on his own venom, "You're the one who's only emphasizing the physical aspect. I told it like I saw."

"But you never even talked to her. You didn't give her a chance to tell her side of the story."

"That is all that I did. I did it when I told you about it. And I did it when I wrote about it. If you want to see it in your way, so be it."

"But she goes to the bar looking to hook up."

"That is already part of her reality. That's not the story that I tell. She strives to be independent from all these guys that she meets."

He was getting a little riled up, "That's not what you said to me."

"Be honest with yourself. You're with a girl who has no spunk. So you seek it elsewhere. If she had half the guts as Rebecca, I'd have a real story. But she hides in dreams of marriage and family. She has no passion. And she can't see past her blinders to know what it really is to love."

"Rebecca loves someone?"

"How the hell should I know? But at least, she puts up a real fight. She doesn't come downtown and then squeal to get taken back to the suburbs."

He was right if I was hitting a little hard. But he had coming out swinging so he needed to take a dose of his own medicine.

“You’re just being too defensive about your book. You need to take a little criticism. There are loads of people in America who don’t live like this. They don’t want to pick up a novel about drugs and wild sex.”

“That’s not my story. Find the movie in the theater that is so morally upstanding, and I’ll have a model to copy.”

“Is that all that it takes?” he asked.

“Don’t be silly. This is art. Some of it is boring. Some of it is titillating. But it’s all real. Chaotic stories about people who are looking for something more. So they’re susceptible to a host of temptations. That’s why it’s a novel. It’s not a prayer book.”

“But none of the characters have a philanthropic bone in their body.”

“That doesn’t mean that they’re uncaring. Besides, philanthropy is for the rich people who you left at Fidelity. Most people are struggling to find an identity. That is the story that I’m telling.”

“None of this is contrived like you see in those sensitive Hollywood film. So my characters seem a little conniving. Or they’re looking for an edge. That’s how things are. If Meg wants to write a novel, more power to her. But leave the writers to the words.”

He still wasn’t convinced, “No one wants to buy your stuff. You have to change our focus.”

“To what? Happy couples like you and Meg.”

“You could start off with the disagreements between us. Then you could find a way that we could work it all out.”

“How? If that’s why we’re here, I’ll do everything that I can to help you. Until a little while ago, a fight between you would get you claiming that everything was off. Then you’d spend all night trying to pick up one of your b-girls. No wonder you see Rebecca in such a terrible light.”

“I liked all that talk about her cosmic urges. But it’s all fake. Just a cute way to reconcile the fact that she won’t give you the time of day.”

I corrected him, “That’s not my question. I want to know why she doesn’t give herself the time of day. She could change the course of the universe, and she chooses instead to waste her time hustling guys in a pool hall.”

“That is pretty presumptuous of you.”

“No more so than Meg is about you. Or you are about some girl that you meet in a bar. You’ll go off about how one of those girls has plans to become a fashion designer. Or how another one is taking guitar and voice lessons. It’s all a cheap excuse so that you can hook up with her again. And when she’s served her usefulness, you start telling me that the girl has no direction.”

“I love women. All kinds of women.”

“So quit making excuses why you and Meg can’t get along.”

“I do what I can.”

Was there any point to pursue this further with him. I was only wearing down the confidence that he had built up. He just needed to realize that Meg offered nothing for him.

“This isn’t the time to break up with her.”

“Hasn’t she made it obvious to you. You go back to a normal nine to five or she will find someone new.”

“She didn’t say that.”

“She couldn’t have made herself any clearer. Do you really enjoy the fights. If you do, call her up and tell her what we’ve been saying.”

“I need another drink.”

“I need to go. I’ve had enough for one night. I do have to write.”

“You need to live.”

“Not tonight.”

“I don’t want to drink alone.”

“You don’t need to drink at all. Go home. Think about this!”

I could tell that he was teetering on the edge. If he couldn’t play his old game, he was going slink back to Meg and beg her forgiveness. Meg had known nothing about the old Ray. One word about those days, and she would have been reaching for the butcher knife. But he had used her stability as his anchor as he ventured deep into his private hell. The self-loathing rolled over him until the only hope was to gamble his fate again and again.

He distracted himself by picturing himself as a ladies’ man. But no woman knew the dark creature that was lurking behind the pressed white shirts. They were all willing to play his little devil for the night. It wasn’t about psychology lessons; it was passion pure and simple. And he did everything that he could to forget about Meg and her restrictive plans for the both of him. No wonder he was so defensive about his life with her. He hated it, but he didn’t want me to remind him of his point of view.

He could race his BMW down Piedmont just to know that he was alive. Even if he had passed his time among the living dead, this was his animator. So any foul was nullified. If he had a girl next to him, then success became its own reward. He had walked away from this kind of luxury for a vague promise. At this point, Meg was no longer part of his life.

He knew the vague emptiness that he was facing. And he still didn’t have the confidence to live according to his dream. Each point that he felt that independent streak, he rushed back to Meg’s side. He knew what it would be like if raised the honest questions with her.

“I don’t want to talk about it. You’re giving me a stomach ache.”

He felt as if he was dumping all his problems on poor Meg.

“You tell me all these things just to get me upset. I can’t even sleep. I’m a wreck at work the next day.”

He didn’t want to break down before her eyes. So he held his tongue. After a couple of days, she would make his life miserable. He wasn’t going to get a job at a firm again. And she hated his prospects. He had little choice but to return to his apartment. For the time being, he couldn’t use her contacts.

“Why did you leave like that?”

“I told you that I didn’t want to move in together. Sometimes I need to get away.”

“I need you tonight.”

“I’m supposed to go out with Ray.”

We had plans. They were flexible, but I could imagine him cancelling at the last moment.

“Meg needs me.”

“How long have you been out of there. A couple of days. Haven’t you learned? Besides tonight is Tuesday.”

“Buddy, you’re going to have to manage without me.”

That I would have to do. If Meg was calling him back, he was ready to run.

“When are you going to realize?”

“I feel as if I’m on the verge.”

“I’ll keep you informed.”

I felt as if I needed his help. But I wasn’t sure how good he would be on a night like this. I ventured out on my own.

What could I really do to encourage Ray. Meg was smothering him. He had quit the job. That seemed like a positive first step. And he had cut back on the drinking. But he was living like a hermit. He was playing according to her rules. I could hear her crack the whip. Where was his soul.

Even though he had avoided me, I was in the midst of something too great not to share. I stepped outside and gave him a call.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the bar. Rebecca is here. Get down here.”

“I can’t. I’m staying in with Meg and watching a movie. She has some work for me in the morning.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

“I’m in for the night.”

“But you know how we said that she was a regular.”

“But she wasn’t there last Tuesday.”

“But she is here tonight. It’s like she’s here all the time.”

He wanted to give me credit for my theory, “I guess that you’re right. I only wish that I could be there. You have to say something to her.”

“What can I say? You told me not to talk about the book.”

“You can’t give her a complex. Then she’d work you to get something out of you.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Maybe money. She might want to pose for the cover of the novel.”

“She could use a break like that.”

“I told you not to get caught up in the story. You can write whatever you want. But you can’t share what you write. People feel as if you’re prying into their private lives. You don’t want to do that.”

“But it would add an element to the story.”

“It would turn it into reality TV. You know what’s wrong with that. People start performing for the camera. They exaggerate their worst habits.”

“That might make it more entertaining. No one wants to read a book about people talking to each other in bars.”

He warned me, “You’d be giving this false characterization of her. It would get people wondering who she was going to go home with next.”

“I’m not proposing to follow her around with a camera. I just want to know if she’s ever

thought about this kind of thing.”

Ray made his point: “Of course not. You said it yourself over and over again. She is who she is.”

“But maybe she needs the inspiration to change.”

“Then get to know her as a real person. Otherwise, move on!”

“I’m not sure if I can do that.”

“You’ve tried to advise me. Now, I am giving you good advice.”

“I told you not to go back to Meg.”

“I’m just over here for the night. You told me to quit living my life in bars.”

“I think that was something Meg said about the novel.”

I wanted to go back in the bar to watch Rebecca. But I had already said enough to Ray. We had both stumbled on the one constant in her life. Even if she spent a night or two at home, we could hope to eventually find her here on a Tuesday.

What was I doing with my knowledge? In many ways, this was much more rudimentary than our understanding about her pool playing. But it also meant that we had limited means to apply our knowledge. It could help to inspire my writing. But it wasn’t as if she could really change her habits. Ray had shown how difficult it was to affect one’s behavior. You could observe the behavior of the stars, but our faults remained deep inside of ourselves.

He had left me to continue the adventure alone. The compact that held us together was dissolving.

“We can’t keep on with these adolescent games.”

“You come in the city for a couple of drinks. What’s wrong with that.”

“I feel tempted by the game. I don’t want to go backwards.”

“So how are you moving forwards. You’re an artist like me. Hang out again.”

“How am I an artist? I’m a financial adviser. At least, you have your writing.”

“You’re a great listener. You add a little magic to the story. If it wasn’t for you, I would have dropped the Rebecca thing long ago.”

“But what is that? An aimless girl playing pool in a bar.”

“She has a personality. That’s more than can be said for other people.”

He felt hurt, “Who are you talking about? Meg? Me?”

“She doesn’t even let you come out to see a show anymore. You’re stuck in the suburbs.”

“I like the calm. It keeps me away from the alcohol.”

“You’re not entering a cloister. You’re a young man. Live a little before you settle down.”

“I’m afraid of losing her.”

“Admit it. She’s not really a part of your life. She hardly realizes the change that you’ve made. When she does, she’s going to chase you out.”

“I can get another good job. I’ve had offers.”

“You shouldn’t backtrack. It’s not like you.”

He seemed like a broken man. It made no sense. He was still a baby. What would it take to get him back?

“If I couldn’t get you out for Rebecca, what is it going to take.”

“I took your advice. I left Meg’s. I’m back at my apartment.”

“Are you still together?”

“I don’t know. She started going off about one of friends who called. I felt that I had no privacy with her. She wouldn’t let me be myself.”

“Do you want to come out for a drink.”

“I need to hang around here and figure things out. Whenever we used to fight, I’d just use it an excuse to go wild. I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“You have turned over a new leaf.”

“I have no idea what I have or haven’t done. I only know that I need to be by myself for a while.”

“No going out?”

“I didn’t say that. Give me a few days.”

He had found his sense of liberation. He had wasted too much time worrying if he could turn Meg’s ear. But she wasn’t willing to budge one iota. I only hoped that his loneliness wouldn’t convince him to run back to her.

“I think that I need to do some traveling.”

“You just quit your job. Is freelancing really paying that well.”

“I still have some savings. My parents are going to help out. I need to know that there’s something more in the world.”

I wanted to go along. I felt that my adventure was tied up with his.

“I’d love to go too. But I know how you need to do this on your own.”

“I feel strange ducking out like this. I just feel that I’m getting in the way of what you need to do.”

“So I’m right about Rebecca.”

“I don’t know. It’s not my place to say. You’ll figure it out.”

“Do you still think that it’s wrong to approach her?”

“You have to go back there. And if the moment seems right, say something. Just remember that the image that you have in your head has nothing to do with how she really is.”

“I’m not just basing it on how she looks. It’s like watching any athlete. They have to think about their form. So it’s not just me reading in to her situation. I want to know what makes her tick.”

“Do you really care that much about pool?”

“Not at all.”

“But she does. And even if her grace resembles ballet, it’s not the same thing. She’s not even a choreographer who plans out the movement of the dancers. . And you expect her to be a mathematician. She just does what feels natural.”

“So there is no point that she gets a clearer image of herself.”

“She feels it. But she doesn’t snap a psychic shot of herself that reveals her soul.”

“I feel that there is an artist in there that is waiting to come out.”

“Reconcile yourself to the reality that she may never give you the access that you want. That is why she plays pool the way that she does. She is willing to show a part of herself. But then she shuts the observer down. She is telling her audience that is why she is a winner. She hides her true face from the crowd.”

“That doesn’t mean that with utmost care I can’t figure it out.”

“Even if you do, it’s not necessarily something that she is willing to talk about.”

I knew that I wouldn’t be able to force Rebecca. Why did I need the words when she was satisfied with the feeling.

“In some ways, she has already crossed the threshold to the other side.”

“Granted, she feels inspired. It gives her a rush. But you can’t say that it’s more than that.”

“For her, it’s as good as sex!”

“Even if it’s better for her, it’s not the same thing.”

“How is that?”

“Sex is about consent. You can study every inch of her body, but she may never say yes to you.”

“So what is the difference?”

He underline his point, “You have to have something that she wants.”

“But a good part of that is mental. If I can just get her to play my game.”

Ray recalled, “That sounds like something that I would have said. Are you after a relationship with her?”

“I just want to know what it all means.”

“Nothing. She like to reduce it to a game. Same thing in her life. She’s a competitor. If you can’t play, you’re nothing.”

“I just have to get her on the same playing field.”

“Good luck. Meg never budged an inch!”