11. WHIRLWIND GIRL

No one ever expected Diane to collect Sara's prize. She would be the least likely to settle down. It was all the more unusual when a long weekend of partying results in wedding vows. By the time that the girls hear about it, Diane is already a Mrs. Who is the guy?

Even if she is married, she can hardly maintain this farce for long. An annulment seems like the next logical step. But Diane has her own take on it all, "If I'm married, I'll give it a try." Her nonchalance makes it sound as if she has just inherited a stray puppy rather than just acquired a husband and all the requisite burdens of marriage.

"Girls, it's not as if I'm being sent to prison. Chris is really fun," she protests. Although her tone sounds like a girl waiting to jump again on an amusement park ride.

It's going to be a changed Anchor without Diane gallivanting around night after night.

"It's like smoking. One day I just swore off it, and that was it. I'm tired of chasing boys."

Chris seems rather naive to Diane's past. He could hardly play the high rollers game that she has been so used to. Rather unsuspecting of her wiles, he will be lucky if he lasts a couple of rounds. Bur for the moment, she is committed. That is all that it takes.

Diane seems to have been inspired by Stevie's example. The Hawaii wedding never materialized. Even though the ceremony seemed like something of an afterthought, it still held a sentimental place with all the girls. It ended up being a rather small service with just family and a few close friends. Stevie didn't want to go away too long so they took a few days in Bermuda.

It was only a couple of weeks later that Diane took the precipitate plunge. It had all the drama of a dive from a cliff into the sea. After such antics, Trish feels the added pressure to tie the knot with Gregg. She doesn't want to feel left out.

"Just make sure that you don't get married for all the wrong reasons." Cheryl offers Trish advice on a desolate Monday evening. The Anchor is mourning as the girls are starting to abandon their outpost for friendlier climes.

"It doesn't make any difference what the right reasons are, Cheryl. It's what keeps you married."

"Exactly. You not even sure if you can remain faithful to Gregg."

"Look at Stevie. She is loyal to Josh."

Cheryl still bites her tongue. She doesn't want to reveal Josh's mistakes to the girls. They'll only read it as jealousy on Cheryl's part. Cheryl comments, "You have to decide what is right for you."

"I want to get married."

Cheryl is a little incredulous about Trish's intent. But she lets her friend try to work out what is the best for her.

Trish is pretending that this is the last night for her. She holds up her gin and tonic.

"I'm toasting Gregg and me. May we last until the end of time."

"If that is what you want."

Trish wants to reassure herself, "Cheryl, I need something to help me settle down." "But you can't let the game go. You're living for it all the time."

"Marriage will do trick. Look at Diane."

Cheryl pauses, "I still don't know what Diane is up to. This is too much for all of us."

Amy is a budding Anchor girl. In her tight jeans, flip flops she exudes casual chic. She is wearing her hair up. Amy is studying at Georgia State. She works weekends. She comes in with two guys Burt and Armstrong. Cheryl can't tell who she's with. Both guys touch her on the shoulder when she talks to them. But Armstrong seems the most possessive.

Armstrong is a preppy-punk. His hair is a little spiky. He has on a Rolling Stones t-shirt and faded jeans. Burt is a little more reserved in his style, shorts and a polo shirt.

From the moment that Burt shows at the table, Trish's radar is on. If he's the catch of the evening, he's going to have no doubt who's the fairest of them all. She almost sticks her head in the air to assert her position.

Amy doesn't want to relinquish either guy to her older rivals even if she is only protecting the honor of her friends. Amy tries to get everyone interested in college drinking games. But Cheryl and Trish convince the guys that they're in adult territory now. They accede to the veterans.

Cheryl feels like she is only along for the ride. She does the simple math. Three girls, two guys, some girl is going to get left out. Cheryl would assume that Trish isn't playing. But even with an impending marriage, her reputation is more at stake. She has to win at all costs.

What makes it all so strange is how well Burt is getting along with Cheryl. He is studying finance. He loves to hear about Cheryl's work. He asks her really pointed questions. Cheryl talks on about market fluctuation. He is fascinated to hear about how an actual firm deals with investment issues. He is staring in her eyes all the while.

Cheryl wonders, "I hope that I'm not boring you."

Burt makes every effort to flatter her. "Not at all. It's not often that I get so close to such a lovely woman. And you seem to know so much"

He seems like such a boy. Perhaps this is what she loved in Robert and Brian. They were so perceptive. Early on they used to have such great conversations. But when work took over, that was the end of that.

Cheryl is a little afraid that her friends are making a mockery of marriage. Just finding anyone who can show up at the ceremony. It is pathetic. Here she is talking to a great kid. What does it mean? Is he just a stand in waiting to get the right script.

She wants to probe him more, see what it is that really drives him.

"I think it's dangerous to the psyche to get too caught up in work. I play jazz piano. I've tried to do some painting. I love to read.

"What do you read? Mystery novels."

Burt tells her. "No. The serious stuff. The classics. James, Hawthorne. New fiction." Cheryl admits, "I love to read. You need to recommend some new stuff to me. How about movies?"

"I love independent films. Noah Baumbach. People stories."

She feels like she has found a match. He's not some clown just off of the husband farm. He's a real guy.

Trish's feathers are a little ruffled. She's not going to go down without a fight. How is she going to get back in the running?

"Shots for everyone."

Cheryl says, "I'm passing."

Trish knows that she'll leave Cheryl on the sidelines when the serious drinking starts. Burt tries to beg off.

"I'm going to play some tennis tomorrow."

Amy coaxes him into it, "Burt, you love to burn the candle at both ends. You're in for this round."

He jumps in to play. Cheryl watches as Trish comes into her own. She's not sure what it is. But she turns on the charm. From that natural appeal, she takes it to a higher level. Guys know what it's all about. The heat. She totally radiates. Amy is a natural herself. But she is playing a professional.

By the times that things are hopping even Armstrong has his eyes on her too. Somehow they get in some contest where she has to kiss both guys after downing a shot. First, Burt licks the sweet liquor of her lips. Then Armstrong does his own open-mouthed technique. Cheryl and Amy give each other a look from the sidelines.

Amy turns to Cheryl, "I don't even know these guys." Trish is giggling. Armstrong and Burt are putty in her hand. She knows it is dealer's choice.

As the night regresses, Trish starts to play her cards. She's gone for about a half an hour making out with Armstrong. When she comes back, there are all the tell-tale signs. She straightens out her hair and reapplies some lipstick.

Burt is jealous. He can smell sex. For his breeding, he is just like all the other dogs. And he is circling his prey and barking. He thinks about the great time that he has had with Cheryl. But he can't help himself. He wants to favor the more serious side of his character. But Trish's legs are wrapped around his. He can sense a sure thing. Much to his dismay, he can't have it both ways.

As Trish scoops up Burt and ushers him out of the door, Armstrong is hot on their tails. "Take me too. I need a ride and Burt lives near me."

Trish loves the suggestion that she has both guys for herself. She drops off Armstrong in spite of his regret. She gives him a big kiss. Just a little taste.. She then takes Burt back to his place for some advanced tutoring. Armstrong is still living off of her kisses.

Amy and Cheryl are left to console each other. Cheryl apologizes for Trish, "She's just been more out of control as her wedding approaches. She pretends that she's getting it out of her system. I'm just afraid that the system is taking her over."

"I feel bad for you. Burt seemed to really like you. He's not usually like that."

"Did you ever go out with him?"

Amy replies, "We thought about it. We're just too different. He's more serious than I am." She holds up her hand as if to soften her comment. "I'm not saying anything bad about you."

"That's cool."

"No, really. He needs a girl like you. I'm just afraid that after Trish it's all going to seem like a letdown."

"I would have said the same thing myself. Everyone wants to hold Trish. But Trish can't even hold herself."

"Life is a puzzle. I at least thought that Armstrong would want to hang out."

"It's better to leave them both to the night. There are other fish."

"But they all seem to have deep hooks in their gills."

When she hangs around Amy, Cheryl feels none of this inordinate pressure to find a mate. It's not just Sara's contest. Her friends have played so recklessly at their future. Here is Cheryl just trying to advance her career. Her search seems all the more personal.

Cheryl is surprised that she isn't more on edge. Her Southern upbringing keeps reminding her that something is missing. And her roots run so deep. She can hear the echoes of her grandmother's words. On that view, time is running out. But Cheryl won't give in.

Amy gets a Sprite for herself and Cheryl.

Amy affirms, "It's not a total waste. I've made a new friend."

Cheryl smiles back at Amy. She realizes how important good friends are. Before State, Amy studied at Chattahoochee High School. She know a lot of people from those days. But she only hangs out with a few. She's been working at the Anchor for about a year.

It's strange for Cheryl to think about the changing of the guard. But that is what is surely happening. None of the new girls really hang out the way that the original Anchor girls did. Maybe they need a casting call.

"I love coming here, Cheryl. Even when I'm not working, it a place to get away. Everyone looks out for you.

Cheryl is thinking about Trish.

"Yeah, generally we do."

"You haven't been doing this too long," wonders Amy.

"No, it's just gets easy to expect a little more from this place than it can give. Everyone who comes here a lot have their roles pretty well determined. They act the same night after night. And when this becomes your social life, you keep expecting Mr. Wonderful to walk through that door. And he never does."

Amy adds, "I think everyone likes to pretend for a few hours."

"I know that's what we do." Amy feels as if she is in class learning from a seasoned professional. She is taking mental notes.

"Is this that different from college?"

Cheryl tells her, "A lot of people here have already started their careers. But there's still someone missing. A partner. A concerned friend. So we come her expecting to find that. It's not that easy.

"What are you talking about? You're one of the most beautiful girls in here. That's what the nickname *Anchor Girls* is all about. You girls are legends."

Cheryl confesses, "But we can't play forever. This is just a resting place along the way to a more serious phase in our lives. The rest of my friends are taking that step. I'm still lost in the night."

"You're not lost at all. You're the shining star. We set out compasses according to you."

Cheryl is cautious, "That makes me afraid that the whole universe is just plunging into chaos."

Amy smiles.

When Cheryl gets home, she feels a little more secure about things. For a while, Diane's rash move had put her in a panic. Now she is putting it back in perspective. Her friends

concerns are seeming less and less her own. They are still her friends. Only they have different goals. She can't live their lives for them.

She's really glad that she's met Amy tonight. She's been living her whole life orbiting around three other people. Suddenly her possibilities no longer seem limited. It's funny how Trish acted towards their new acquaintance. She couldn't adapt to another female presence. She became petty and rivalrous. This is hardly a forward step.

Trish's wedding with Gregg is less and less a positive outcome for Trish. Cheryl can't let it bother her. Tomorrow she's going to meet Diane's new husband. That will be another change. She wonders what he will be like.

Diane decides to change the setting for their introduction to Ron. She has them meet them at a secluded place in Buckhead. She feels that the Anchor will be sort of inappropriate. Stevie decides to come along, but she leaves Josh at home. Cheryl breathes a sigh of relief. He hasn't stopped his lewd comments after all this time. Who knows what else he is up to?

Trish comes alone. Even though it's less than a week to her wedding, she doesn't want to bring Gregg along. She's also reeling from her escapades with Burt.

Ron is a lawyer. He does intellectual property law, trademarks and copyrights. He is rather a meek guy with glasses. Diane is the most amazing thing that has ever happened to him. She sees him as her savior. It's a chance to put aside her wicked ways.

Trish teases her away from Ron, "Cheryl and I have been trying to figure out what's the worst thing that you've ever been caught doing at the Anchor."

"I'm not the same girl anymore."

She is even dressed more conservatively. A simple blue dress and black pumps. She still has all the guys staring at her. She's doing her best to ignore them. Trish is still envious of all the attention. Diane notices that. She is a little ticked off at Trish. "Trish, you have to let it go. I'm married now."

Trish ups the ante. She's rather clumsy, but she flirts with Ron. He is so oblivious to it all that he imagines that it is simply her gregarious self.

When Trish can't get a rise from Ron, she looks around the rest of the bar.

Cheryl tells her, "You're notorious."

"It's all in jest, Cheryl!"

"Is that what you say when you kiss them?"

"What are you angry about? I would have had Burt sooner or later. I was just protecting you from making another mistake."

"You are a bitch." Cheryl feels like pushing her.

Diane intervenes, "I brought you both here to spend some time with my new husband, not to fight over some guy."

"I'm sorry," says Trish.

Cheryl doesn't believe her. She doesn't know how to handle it. She is fuming. But she shuts her mouth.

Ron is hardly here. He doesn't grasp any of the give and take among the three. Diane just appears defanged.

"I wonder if Diane's going to lose her powers if she stays like this."

"Trish, why are you so mean?"

"Be honest, Cheryl. It's not the same Diane."

"The same Diane was down a path of destruction." She wants to add, "You can't recognize because you're on the same path yourself." She doesn't say anything more.

Trish stares at Diane as she comes back to the table. Trish does see something is wrong. But she can't tell Diane. Neither she nor Cheryl can say a thing.

Later that evening Trish and Cheryl go to the Anchor for a quick post-mortem.

"He is so boring."

"Trish, he is nice."

"I don't want to lose to a guy like that. She must have given him money."

Cheryl adds, "I think that it's the other way around. There's no way that she would be with him for any other reason."

She is meddling. Cheryl promised herself last night that she wouldn't do this kind of thing. But Ron is worse than terrible."

"I don't even know how they have sex," jokes Trish. "I bet that they both just lie there.' Cheryl smiles. Fortunately there are no real prospects in the Anchor.

Trish states, "Maybe we should have stayed in Buckhead."

"We still would have had to drive back."

"Not if I met a cute guy down there."

Cheryl asks, "Trish, why are you getting married?"

"To win the contest."

"Stevie and Diane are already married."

"Diane is not going to stay married to that guy."

"What are you going to do to stop them? Sleep with Ron. No, wait. Pretend that I didn't say that."

Trish asserts, "This body will do what it has to."

"What about Stevie? She has Josh."

"Josh is catting around," claims Trish. "He comes on to me every time that he sees me." Cheryl refuses to say anything about her own bad experiences with Josh.

"Would you sleep with Josh to win the contest?" Cheryl presses her.

"I hate Josh. And I really don't care about the stupid contest."

"You said ... "

Trish interrupts her, "I don't know why I'm really marrying Gregg. I want to settle down. Even though I know that I can't. I need something to slow me down."

"Marriage never makes you do something that you don't want to do. You have to want to stop."

Trish is despondent, "That's the problem. I'm enjoying myself too much."

"That was a cheap shot with Burt."

"Cheryl, honey, be honest. He's just a cat hound. There was no other way to prove it to you."

Cheryl is irritated, "You needed to let me prove it on my own. I didn't need you playing the part of the cat."

"I wanted him. In some dirty way, I wanted what I couldn't have. Both those guys."

Cheryl feels uncomfortable, "Don't you have regrets?"

Trish answers, "I do. But I also have regrets that I don't do this more often."

With regret, Cheryl asks, "Was he tender?"

"He was a guy. Any other questions about him?"

They look at each other and laugh.

"You really saw him naked?"

They laugh some more.

"I did more than that!"

"Boxers or briefs."

"I never noticed anything like that. Of course, the lights were off."

Cheryl is reluctant, "I wanted my turn. Now he's off limits. You knew that. That's why it's no fair."

The next night that they are out Trish asks Cheryl to look around. "Imagine that you are Diane. You need one man to marry you in a fit of passion. What guy that is here in the Anchor would you sacrifice your freedom for?"

"Trish, I don't have much freedom to sacrifice." Cheryl mulls over her drink.

Trish makes the challenge. "Do the Diane thing. You need to win the contest before we

do."

Cheryl wonders, "I still can't figure out how Diane really got him to marry her."

"Look at her. She can have anything that she wants."

Cheryl admits, "That doesn't say a lot for him."

Trish shrugs, "Face it, Cheryl. Happiness is a simple thing for most people." "Diane isn't simple."

Trish remarks, "She's simpler than either of us."

"I've seen her acting up not long ago."

"But she also told me about that time that you had to rescue her. That was terrible." Cheryl thinks about that night when the *Whirlwind Girl* went around almost too many

times. She can bend only so many times before she breaks.

"Cheryl, you haven't answered my question. What guy are you going to pick?"

She points randomly at some guy. Trish goes over to him and leads him to the table.

"My friend pointed you out. She wants to marry you tomorrow morning."

Cheryl is embarrassed. She is blushing,. "I'm sorry!"

"Is this how you meet guys?" asks the unsuspecting guest.

"You don't have take it so bad!" maintains Cheryl.

"It's just that I don't know you from Adam."

"Eve," says Cheryl. "We're women. If you don't know us from Adam, that's you're problem."

He is getting angry, "You dragged me over here."

Trish has the perfect answer for him, "You've never been here before. This is find a husband night. And the women get to choose. Maybe you should go back to your cowboy bar because you don't belong here."

As he walks away they start to laugh..

"He sure doesn't know what was in store for him."

"Trish, you are so mean!"

"Look at him, Cheryl. He can barely stand up. He'd be the perfect candidate."

"I already went through that sort of thing before." Cheryl scans the other men in the bar. "Are we going to do this some more?"

"I've got the perfect guy for you.."

"Robert!"

Trish tries to answer Cheryl, "No, someone else."

Cheryl points. "No it's Robert over there. He's here with some girl. He never liked to come here. And now he's come here with another girl. She looks all of 18."

"Just his type. She's all over him."

Cheryl turns her head and tries not to look. "I just don't want him coming over here."

Cheryl scrambles for the first free guy that she might talk to. There's no one. She's feeling really alone and desperate.

She whispers to herself, "Someone rescue me, please."

She turns to see a guy standing right in front of her. "I heard that and came right over here."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Michael. I'm your angel."

Cheryl credits him, "Great line, Michael. Have you ever used it before?"

"Only once with my first wife."

"I guess that she married you. So you expect me to marry you."

"No. Just a lucky guess. But I might be up for it." He is a little older. A little weathered.

Cheryl doesn't say anything. He keeps talking, "Let me get you a drink."

"A rye and ginger. Something new.

"Do they even have rye here?"

Cheryl informs him, "I used to work here, and yes they do."

"Wonderful. I'll have one too."

The DJ plays some Sinatra. Its hardly the lively night fare. But it fits the present mood. Everyone needs to chill a little.

Somehow she ends up back at his place. He lives by the river.

He tells her, "I'm not really used to bringing girls back to my place."

"I'm not really used to going back to guy's places. Just remember. Nothing is going to happen."

Michael jokes, "Not at least until we get married."

Cheryl looks at the art books on his coffee table. He also has some great paintings on the wall.

"I used to paint. I was part of an art community. Now all the artists that I knew are successful. I got all their stuff when they were young."

He has a taste for the abstract.

"Let me get you some cognac."

It is a gentle night. He guides her through the dark moments. She leaves just as she came in. Untouched. She has met her angel. She has been spun around. She welcomes her new life. At home, she cherishes the time with Michael. It shows her that there is something more in her life than the great chase. She takes a long shower and gets ready for bed. Tomorrow is Saturday. Another crazy night. The summit of the weekend.

As Cheryl settles in for the night, she thinks more about Diane. Is that all that it takes to escape? One mythical kiss and the spell is finally broken. She rubs her fingers together and ruffles her nose to try to bring the magic alive.

Saturday morning she goes for a grueling run. It is still cool in the morning, but there is a bit a heat in the air. Today she feels that the angel is trying to outpace her in her run. She pushes extra hard so the he cannot catch her. She skips a breath and catches up on the other side. This gasp is such a rush. She kicks ahead. Her mythical opponent tries to catch up. He cannot. She burns to victory. She is covered in sweat.

When she takes her shower, she lets all the fatigue run out of her. Afterwards, she lies on her bed for a while. She goes out for a light breakfast.

The café is full of families and couples from the night before. Cheryl doesn't let her solitude frighten her. She embraces it.

The rest of the day she wonders about her encounter with Michael. In another life, he might have been the one. But for Cheryl, the whirlwind is just a game. Diane has given in. But Cheryl is never going to be that impulsive. At least, she hopes that she won't be.

Amy is working when Cheryl shows up at the Anchor.

Amy relates, "I saw Burt the other night. He asked about you."

"A lot of good that does now."

"You could give him another chance."

Cheryl can hardly let down her guard at this point. "To do what? Find another girl to go home with."

"I don't think it was all him. Trish had it in for you."

"There's always going to be someone who has an agenda. I just want a guy who won't give in."

Amy gets her thinking about Trish. She doesn't want to take it personally. All the girls do that sort of thing here. She can hardly imagine that Trish is about to be married. The juggernaut will hardly slow down once the vows have been exchanged. This is not even Diane. Trish is going to keep the fangs on. She's seen the result of Stevie's blindness. She will hardly do the same for herself. She just naturally assumes Gregg's own ignorance. Again that makes her more powerful.

Trish almost uses her wedding as an old aristocratic family might. It gives her more power. It helps her cover all her bases. She will not give up the Anchor. She only adds it to her list of treasures. She almost assumes it as her wedding present.

She graces the Anchor as if she is a monarch surveying her castle and its grounds for one last excursions. She takes in every man with their wandering eyes. She burns that impression deep on their brains. This was where Diane once walked and stunned every man in here. At this moment, Trish will admit of no competition.

"I thought that you were going to stay in."

"This is what I'm doing instead of a bachelorette party," Trish tells Cheryl.

"And what do you mean by that?" Cheryl asks.

"Maybe have a few drinks and go home."

"Alone?"

Trish tells Cheryl, "I don't know. Gregg is with his buddies. They went to a strip club" "So that's your excuse."

She gives Cheryl a wide knowing smile, "Something like that."

For the moment Trish struts around the bar. She has adopted an even more aggressive pose in the last little while. Amy is busy so Trish goes over to get a drink. A long wake flows behind her.

When she comes back, Cheryl has the perfect commentary, "Maybe marriage isn't right for you Trish. You need to save yourself for these poor boys at the Anchor."

"I have been getting the strangest looks tonight. What have I done?"

"It's nothing that you've done. They don't know what to make of you. Did you get your hair done? Something is different." Cheryl is inquisitive.

Trish tosses her curls in her usual manner, "I got a trim and some highlights"

"There's more than that."

"They know that I'm hungry for blood. Like a hound."

Cheryl dares her, "Are you going to take them all on?"

Trish holds up her arms, "I'll arm wrestle anyone in here."

She imagines all the comers flocking to the table. When Cheryl goes to the bathroom, she is surprised that Trish has drawn a crowd. Some guy has dared her to dance on the table.

They are playing "Erotic City" by Prince. She is giving them a show.

"How can she do all that on such a small table?" one guy asks.

"Dance lessons when she was a kid," Cheryl replies jokingly.

"I thought that they kept the kids off the tables."

"She forged her mother's signature so she could get away with it" Cheryl notices that she is spitting out omedic dialogue with tonight's wit.

"Do you have all the answers?"

"Tonight, I do. I'm Cheryl."

"I'm Lee. Let me get you a drink."

She holds up her drink. "I just got one."

"Do you two girls work as a team?"

Cheryl admits, "Only tonight. She's getting married next week."

"What about you?" He looks her in the eyes.

"I'm spoken for by an angel."

"Your guy at home."

"No," says Cheryl. "A real angel."

Tonight, Lee is the whirlwind romance. And if Cheryl doesn't take him, Trish just might. But she has so many fans that she can't stop and think about just one.

Nothing that Cheryl could do that night could top what Trish has accomplished. She has clearly staked her claim. All the Anchor is hers for the night. Forever. Her one real rival Diane has something real at home. So Trish has to make to turn the illusion into something real.

Cheryl can hear them talking, "That girl is really hot."

"You don't know the half of it."

And what is the other half. The half that Cheryl hides. She can't let herself go the way that Trish does. She refuses to be haphazard. As the night continues, she starts to plan out her shopping list for the next day. Cheryl really needs a change.

She looks over at Lee. He is now watching Cheryl more intensely. He is hardly alone. Lee again turns to Cheryl. "Is she really getting married?"

"I don't think that's going to stop her in the least."

Cheryl hopes that she is wrong. But she was once the good waitress which means that she has seen it all. She knows all about the whirlwind. She can feel it blowing right now.

Cheryl needs to get out of the breeze. She knows that the twister is coming and that it will engulf everything in its path.

At home, there is no risk. No guy is going to disturb her committed demeanor. She is not going to surrender for a silly prize. The weekend has illuminated things for Cheryl. Even as Trish wowed everyone in the place, the glow has slowly gone out of her performance. Trish will eventually confront her loneliness. She will realize that Gregg can do nothing to save her from herself.

That night Cheryl dreams of her own wedding. She has all her friends and family there. All her lost cousins. At the altar, Cheryl passes on the vows. She can't go through with it. All the best for Trish. All the best for the Whirlwind Girls.