

preview

Look Into Your Heart

A Novel

North of Boston Series

Jacquelyn Johnson

ONE

Emily

One week earlier

My stomach clenches, acid rising. I only have time to collapse in my desk chair and grab the waste basket before I throw up. In the women's room I rinse my mouth, then splash cold water over my face. I have just two minutes to figure out what I'm going to say to the team. My colleagues and friends.

In the conference room everyone's talking at once. I start towards the front of the room. But then, a man – middle aged, white shirt, designer suit – strides in, followed by eight people, all in blue security guard uniforms. The blues stand at the back of the room, glaring like we're all guilty of something. The suit goes up to the front. Orders me to sit.

We've never seen him before. He introduces himself as Head of Development, whatever that is. I wonder why it isn't Peter Ryerson, the publisher of Fairfax Media Group and our boss, here to tell us what's going on.

Rather than answer our questions, the suit – I've missed his name – tells us costs are up for paper and transportation, as if a roomful of journalists wouldn't already know this. "In this era of economic uncertainty," he continues, "We must prioritize our biggest opportunities and make sure we have the proper cost structure to pursue them."

It's all about them. Not about the people who work for them. Fairfax declared a profit of \$78.8 million last year, or so it said in the puff piece about the company in our own magazine, *New England Business Review*. Most earnings probably came

from the other divisions – the radio stations, online betting and gambling and genealogy portals the company also owns. Still, a chunk of those earnings came from the magazines.

“... for deep audience engagement, we were forced to make difficult decisions,” the man is saying now. Does he expect us to feel sorry for him?

“This means losing valued colleagues, something we deeply regret.”

But not too deeply, because our employment is terminated as of right now. There will be no severance as we are all either part-time or contract employees. Then he reads out the email that we each received minutes ago.

Effective immediately, your position with Fairfax Group is terminated. You are asked to proceed now to the conference room.

Following our meeting, you will have 15 minutes to gather your personal possessions and leave the building in an orderly fashion. As required by law, you will be paid for your work up to the end of normal office hours today.

You are reminded of the conditions of your contract and NDA. Do not talk to the media. Anyone taking materials belonging to Fairfax Group will be prosecuted to the full extent of state and federal laws.

The suit refuses to answer questions and strides from the room. Then we’re herded back to our cubicles by the blue force, all still as flat-faced as border guards. One of them watches as I empty out my desk – hand cream, lipstick, extra pair of tights, tampons, Tylenol, the gold pen Lucas gave me one birthday that ran out of ink long ago but I keep for good luck. It all goes in my backpack with my spare shoes, favorite sweater because it’s always chilly here in winter, lunch bag, thermos, and umbrella.

The guard tries to grab my laptop, but “It’s mine,” I bark at her, exactly as harshly as I intended. She lets go and steps back, her face empty of any expression. Just doing her job.

People are gathered, waiting for the elevator, some talking, some crying, confusion and pain rolling off them, filling the room like a bad smell. Someone says, “Meet up at Finnegan’s everyone!” It’s our usual spot for afters on a Friday. I’m not in the mood. I feel dizzy; like I might be sick again. I just want – need – to be alone. Even if only for a few moments. I take the stairs, pausing on the landing when my phone pings. A text from Leandra. *You OK?*

I wonder how she’s heard already. True answer, no, not OK. Answer I send her, *2 soon 2 tell.*

This is wedding week for my best friend. One week and one day from today. I’m going to do every single thing I can not to spoil one minute of it. This means absolutely not being the crying-on-her-shoulder bridesmaid.

Come over. I’m at Dad’s. Stay over tonight. We’ll do girl’s night.

Tempting as it is, I can’t accept.

Have calls to make. People upset, I thumb in.

OK. Call me after. Soon as, she replies.

I turn off my phone, knowing there’s going to be a flood of messages I can’t ignore. Leandra is very well connected. She might have known about Fairfax giving us all the boot even before we did. More likely the company sent out a news release earlier today, timed to hit the business press around the same time we opened that email.

We don’t even get the weekend to process this before we’re going to be required to explain, to friends, family, media,

everyone, just what's going on at *TASTE of Boston* and our sister publications.

As if I or any of us can possibly do that. We haven't got a clue, either.

Finnegan's is heaving. There's a rowdy gang of women sitting in our regular big booth at the back. We're able to nab a couple of high tops, though all the stools are taken. A colleague – former colleague – hands me a glass of house white I don't want. It tastes raw.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry any more about if it's going to be us next," Katie says glumly. Her mascara is smudged, I notice. She suddenly looks years older than the 27 I know she is. I probably look worse. I'm nervy and jittery, with a headache coming on.

All around us people are laughing and joking, relieved to reach the end of another work week. We're the glum ones, standing, drinking, shell shocked, gut-punched. Not saying much.

I pull out my phone, check that I have contact info for everyone. Notice that 38 messages have come in. Some junk. Some media people. Others I can't put off answering.

"Well, I'll be going," I say. There are limp hugs all round. Promises to keep in touch. Meet up again, soon. Some tears. I head for the door and the long walk home. Hoping the fresh air will help somehow. Wishing I'd asked for ginger ale, rather than the wine I wasted. My stomach flips and another wave of nausea washes over me, like the tide coming in and I'm the shoreline being eroded.

I have no memory of that walk home, but then, I'm holding my key card, I'm into our building and up the stairs, too impatient to wait for the elevator. Kick off my shoes at the door. Into my room, dump stuff, flop on the bed.

Pull the pillow over my head.

I don't know how much later it is when I hear someone pounding on the door. I stumble through our dark apartment remembering all my roommates are away this weekend or on a late shift. I figure it must be one of the neighbors since I didn't buzz anybody up.

It's Leandra. She ducks around me, pulling me into a hug. "I'm so sorry," she says, as if someone close to me has died. And I guess, for all of us who tried to keep *TASTE* and our other magazines alive, it has.

I don't say anything.

"OK," she says. "There's a cab waiting. You're coming over for tonight, at least." I follow her to my bedroom, where she's tossing clean underwear, socks, my slippers and a couple of tees into my backpack. "Here, go rinse out your coffee thermos. I'll pack. You just need to grab your handbag and laptop. And your phone!"

I don't feel strong enough to resist. She does everything. I just stand there, useless. She steers me out the door, down the stairs, into the car.

Leandra has her own totally gorgeous house north of Boston in New Hampshire. When she's in town, she stays at her fiancé's or her dad's red brick Victorian in Beacon Hill. It's not where she grew up. Her dad bought it after her mother died. That was coming up to three years ago. Lavender Hill was the house Lea's mother had famously remodeled and decorated when they'd bought it, back when Lea was 5. *Architectural Digest*, *Boston Globe* and even *The New York Times* had featured it, launching Evette Turner's career as decorator to Boston's wealthiest couples.

Lavender Hill was even larger and more luxurious than Lea's dad's current house, with indoor and outdoor pools as well as its own beach. Lea is and always has been, as have her parents, among the one per centers, yet never, ever have I known her to

have any of that entitled attitude towards the merely middle-class, like me.

She's one of those people you meet and think, oh she's quite pleasant, isn't she? Not beautiful in the usual sense, not glamorous in any way ... and yet. Spend half an hour with her and you'll be convinced she's the most attractive person you've ever met.

In school she had legions of friends. Now, she's still got everyone she's ever met plus a network that's legendary. She knows everyone. Way more people than I do. She has this knack, no, it's better than that, it's a gift, for making people *want* to know her. *Eager* to do whatever will please her. She's just about impossible to say "No" to. I keep wondering how she does it. Despite being a close observer, I'll probably never work that out. But what a useful gift to have, if you're a consultant and marketer, as she is. Or, I guess, as a life skill, no matter what or who you are.

I delete the messages I can. Some others just get a short reply: "Sorry, not able to respond now. Will get back to you on Monday." All of those go in a separate file for a group broadcast answer.

That leaves two types of emails: one deserving a reply immediately, much as I'm not feeling up to it. The other I'd rather ignore, but Lea insists I don't.

"I know it's hard," she says, "but we have to do this."

We. I know she's right. When all I want to do is sink to the floor and howl. It's so embarrassing. Humiliating. But so tempting.

Lea creates a group list with names hidden and calls it *TASTE* Contributors. They're the people who write articles, or take photos, for *TASTE of Boston*. Or did. People I enjoy working

with. Enjoyed. Trusted to do a good job. Kept giving assignments to.

“So tell me the general gist of what you want to say to them. I’ll write it and get it sent.”

I dictate something about *So sorry to have to tell you that ... it’s been an honor to work with you ... I’ve valued your creativity and professionalism ... know how much your work has been appreciated by our readers ... hope that, at some point in the future, we may be able to work together again ...*

But, interrupting us, is a ping – a text. From the publisher. Our boss. Ex-boss. Nowhere to be seen at the office today during the slash and burn. From him there’s just one word: *Sorry.*

Sorry? I text back. *People were in shock. Devastated. Where were you?*

Had no choice, he replies. *Had to be done. Expect you’ll all be fine.*

I start to key in a reply. Lea stops me. “Leave it,” she says. “Whatever you want to say to him can wait.”

I sigh. She’s the person who’s more likely to be thinking straight at the moment so she’s probably right. Much as I’d like to seriously rough him up with some poison dart words.

We go back to the message to the freelancers. I tell them as much as I know, which isn’t much at all. For anything beyond what I know, I ask them to contact Fairfax Group directly. I give them the publisher’s contact details.

As a freelancer myself, I know what they’re waiting to hear. Is someone else taking over the magazine? (I don’t know). Will the work they’ve done that hasn’t been published yet ever appear in print? (I don’t know). What about the work they’ve already submitted to me? (You still own the rights to it.) Will

they be paid for that work? (I don't know) When? I don't know that, either.

It sounds pathetic, how little I know. The team that put *TASTE of Boston* together was downsized out the door today by uniformed guards.

Kicked to the curb. Not even tossed in the re-cycle bin of candidates for jobs in other company divisions.

Leandra writes the freelancer group email for me. Refills our glasses. Calls for take-out. Tells me to turn off my phone, just as I'm pulling it out.

"No social posting," she says. "No public venting. Nothing about the miserable way they've treated you, which they have. I know it's tempting, but it could come back to bite you." How, I wonder, my mind muzzy. And why should I care? Let them get the scorn on social they deserve.

"For possibly some kind of severance package. Most employment contracts say something about non-defamation. Bad-mouthing their brand," she says. "Also, if you interview for jobs in the future, employers look at your social before hiring. They don't like anger. Or revenge. They want to see resilience."

Not revenge. Even in my current state, which is totally gutted, I see the sense in what she's saying. I turn off my phone and hand it to her.

As we're eating, freelancer responses flood in. Their messages range from *WTF?* to *What's wrong with your phone?* Some beg for details. I've told them all I know. Leandra taps in a message saying that. Reminding them, call Fairfax Group for these answers. As they're closed until Monday, I expect that leaves them with a tough weekend ahead.

Next, Lea says, we need a message to the media. So far, they're mostly local, like *Boston Globe* and a few of the radio and TV

stations. Lea and I talk about it. She writes a press release for me, reading it out before posting for wide broadcast. It's upbeat. Totally unlike how I feel, but that's not the point, Leandra says.

Though my years as writer, then Editor of TASTE of Boston magazine have come to an end, let me say how grateful I am to Fairfax Group to have been given this exciting and career-changing opportunity. I and my former colleagues as well as all our freelance contributors have loved being able to present all the best of Boston lifestyle, culture, entertainment, food, wine and spirits through the pages of TASTE of Boston.

Thank you to all the wonderful readers and advertisers who have supported our team at TASTE of Boston for helping to make it the lively and entertaining voice of all that is vibrant about the beautiful city and region we call home.

Very best wishes,

Emily Burke

"They probably won't quote from it, but good to get it out there," Leandra says. "Take some control of the optics. Show that you're strong. Professional. Now we put the same thing on all your social. That's all we have to do right now."

We do that. I sink back on the couch, feeling about as resilient as overcooked pasta. Wishing I could just get stumbling silly drunk and wake up tomorrow to find it never happened. It would be worth the hangover, I think.

Instead, we pull out a box set. *The Crown, Season 4*. Drink a bottle of blush from one of my favorite wineries in The Valley. Open another.

I wake up on Lea's bed, still dressed, a summer duvet tossed over me. I drag myself into her bathroom for a shower, feeling

like an army has marched through my mouth and I haven't washed for a week. Half remembering strange dreams. But it's light out, I notice when I get back to her bedroom, wrapped in the robe she set out for me in her bathroom.

"There you are. How are you feeling?" Lea asks when I get to the kitchen, two floors down from where I was. "Can you face something to eat? Eggs and toast?" She pours me a latte from one of those snazzy machines.

"Better," I say.

She gives me The Look. Caring, with just a flash of disbelief.

"Trying to be."

She smiles.

"Will be."

"I know you will," she says with another hug. "So, what about today? Did you have anything you were going to do this weekend?"

Anything you *have* to do, she means. The opinion piece I've been meaning to do to pitch to *The New York Times*. No pay but tremendous bragging rights. Reading the latest five novel submissions from my publisher client and writing my reports on each of them. Lettering the place cards for her wedding next Saturday. And a few other bridesmaid-ish tasks she doesn't need to know about. Plus the usual food shop and laundry routine. "No, not especially," I say.

"So, OK. The wedding. I get it. But why don't we take a day off? We deserve it."

"Today?"

"Today," she says. "You've been really strong, Em. We've done everything we need to do, for now. Why not give ourselves a

time out? Put all this aside for a day. Let's go play tourist in our town. We hardly ever get to do that!"

So we do.

For all of Saturday. All of Sunday, too. We take in a new exhibition at the Museum of Bad Art. Wander through the aquarium, marveling at its residents. Go to the beach, though it's still too cold to swim. Borrow the neighbor's dog, a friendly Newfie who's a black mass of fur but a total teddy bear and go for a hike. See a show at the Wang. Eat lobster sandwiches at one of the umbrella patios on the harbor. It's the best staycation I ever had, making me wonder why is that? Why did I write so many pieces about having fun in Boston, but I hardly ever did it? Why was I the observer and the writer; so often the dreamer but almost never the do-er? Telling other people how to have a good time. Hardly ever doing it myself unless it was to write about it.

Somehow, I turned play into work. Some trick.

It's a relief to leave my phone turned off.

I don't turn it back on till I get home on Monday. And then slog through and mostly delete messages. Today, there are only two messages I have to send.

The first is to Marit Bain. She's "the best employment lawyer in Boston," Lea says. "A total rottweiler in court. And a good friend." I have no idea how I'll be able to pay for her help. That's if she's able to help me. Lea says "Don't worry about that right now. You just need to see her. Find out what she can do for you."

Right. Yes. OK. Lea's the one who's thinking straight, at least today. Me, less so.

The other message is to my parents. If I could tell them this in person, I would, but they're in Italy. In Umbria, near the border with Tuscany. Turning an old house and stone barn

into a bed-and-breakfast and something my mother is calling a health retreat center.

Saw your news, sweetheart. So sorry. Come over for a visit, Mom writes. Take a break. Give yourself some time to just be. Stay as long as you want. Or, better yet, pitch in. We could really use the help.

Right now, running far, far away looks very enticing. If only I could, I'd be there. Right after Leandra's and Robson's wedding.

But I can't.

Instead, I get my phone, now freshly recharged, and dial their number.

Find **Look Into Your Heart** wherever you
buy your books or visit:

www.CrimsonHillBooks.com