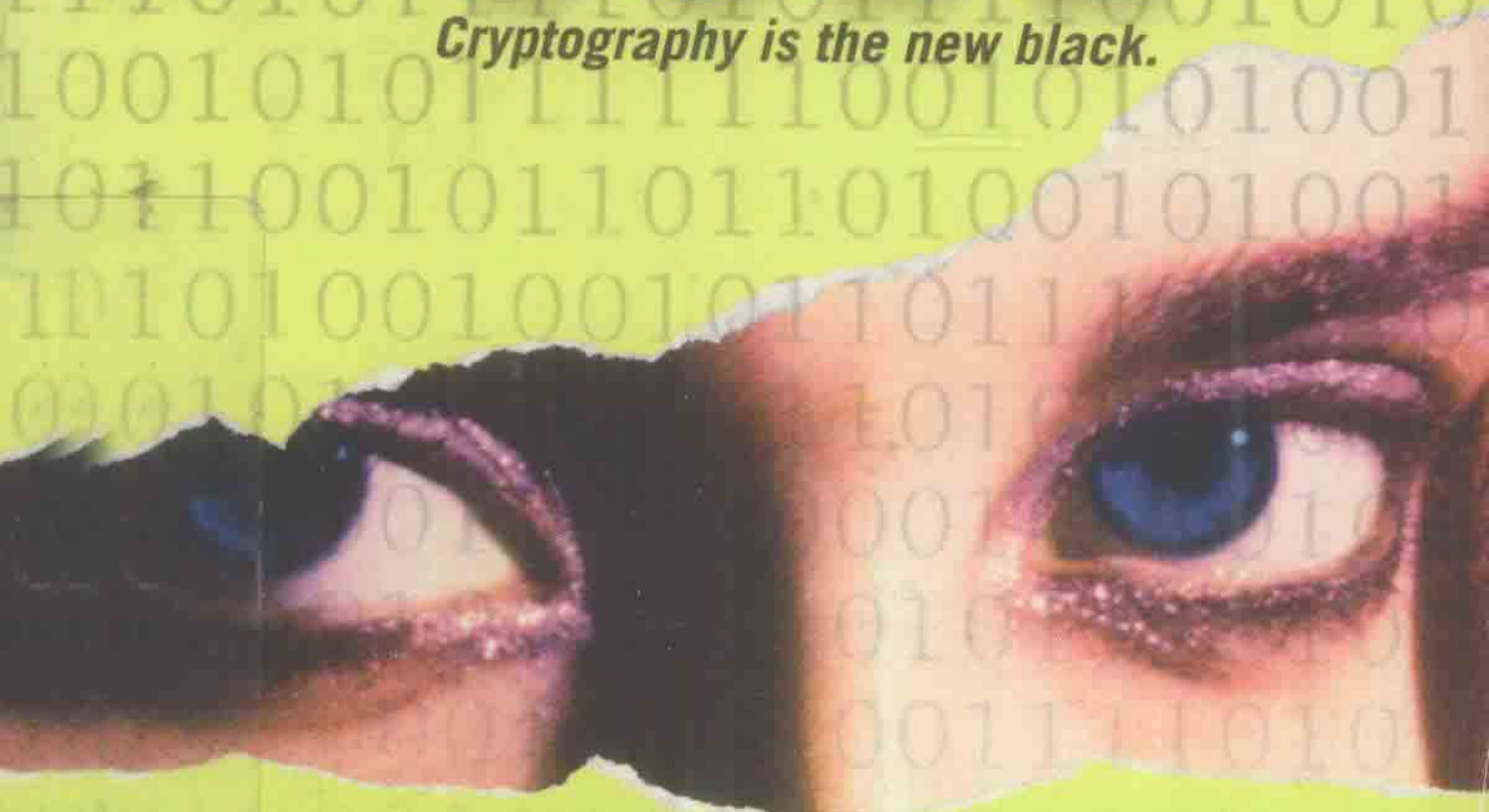


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# Chapter 1

This was not my day.

First of all, it was drizzling. Which would have been just fine if I'd been curled up on my couch watching *Sex and the City* or *Desperate Housewives* reruns. Or buying shoes on eBay. Or even working on my thesis.

But I wasn't doing any of those things. Instead, I was being yanked down East 86th Street by six furballs eager to reach the dog run at Carl Shurz park. So far, both Poopsie (aptly named) and Precious (definitely *not* aptly named) had left little steaming presents on the sidewalk for me to retrieve with the plastic grocery bags I'd shoved into my raincoat pocket before leaving the Kirkguard Towers.

Second of all, immediately after depositing steaming package number two in a cheerfully labeled Keep Our City Clean! trash can, I ran smack into my ex, Todd. Or rather, little Daisy, Mrs. Oppenmeir's Lhasa apso, ran smack into Todd. I managed to skirt gingerly to the right, avoiding him but hopelessly tangling him in six leashes.

"For God's sake, Melanie," he said. "What the hell are you doing?"

Now, see, that's one of the reasons Todd and I broke up. I mean, how hard is it to remember that I prefer "Mel" and hate "Melanie"? And, frankly, it was perfectly obvious what I was doing. I really didn't need to be reminded. "I'm maxing out my credit for Manolos, Todd." I shook the handful of leashes at him. "What the hell does it look like I'm doing?"

"What happened to the job with Josh?" Unperturbed by my annoyance, he looked up at me from a bent-over position, talking even as he struggled to loosen the ever-tightening leash-noose. Part of me was tempted to plant the heel of my left Prada sneaker on his gluteus maximus and give a little shove. But that would have upset the dogs, so I managed to stifle the urge.

"It didn't work out," I said stiffly. Right after we'd broken up, I'd become a victim of university budget cuts and had lost my *not-so-lucrative-but-still-handy-for-rent* job as a teaching assistant. In what I'm sure Todd had considered a supreme act of chivalry by the male exiting stage left in my life, he'd arranged for me to get a flex-time receptionist job at a *tiny little public relations firm* on Madison Avenue. What Todd had neglected to mention was that his friend Josh was a prick who, when he hadn't been talking about my tits, had filled in the conversational blanks with comments about my ass. The man clearly wasn't acquainted with Title VII, and I didn't intend to be the one who introduced him.

"You could have called and told me," Todd said, picking Daisy up and lifting her over a *crisscross* of nylon leashes. He shot me a look that could have been recri-

nation or a request for assistance. Not sure, I just stood there and shrugged.

Once I'd discovered Josh's more endearing qualities, I wasn't about to call Todd. For one, we'd been quite broken up by then (if we hadn't been, introducing me to Josh would have been grounds, that's for sure). For another, I like to fight my own battles. So I'd called Josh a chauvinistic, Neanderthal prick, and then I'd quit. (Unfortunately, the name-calling was all in my head, but it had made me feel better.) Then I'd fallen back on my old standby of answering ads posted in the student newsletter or on the bulletin board in the grad student lounge.

I've used this method to earn extra cash on and off since my first day on the NYU campus as a wide-eyed and innocent freshman from Texas. The results have never been fabulous, but the experience has certainly been varied. In addition to the wonderful world of pet care, I've also worked as a short-order cook, a Circle Line ticket agent, and a cocktail waitress at a restaurant with food so horrible it went out of business a mere five days after it opened. To mention just a few.

Todd always looked askance at my revolving-door job situation, but so far I haven't minded (well, the dog thing *is* a bit much). With an undergraduate degree in math and a master's (soon!) in history, I figure I'm going to be spending the rest of my life behind a podium trying to get teenagers to listen to me upon threat of failing their midterms. Either that, or I'm going to be perpetually in academia, taking the degree train to Ph.D.-ville and then settling down to an assistant professorship while I try to think of something brilliant to publish so that I can snag tenure.

With all that to look forward to, is it any wonder I like



a little variety in my life? Or at least that's what I told myself when I slogged outside this morning, ready, able, but not entirely willing to escort a group of little poop machines on their morning constitutional.

The sad truth is that I flat-out need the money. I'll do (almost) anything to make the rent on the tiny one bedroom I share with my roommate, Jennifer. Each month, I barely squeak by. Yet somehow, I have enough left over for shoes, cocktails, Starbucks, and food. (Yes, in that order.) Tuition, thankfully, is covered by scholarships and grants.

Beside me, Todd finally managed to extricate himself from the web of leashes, and the dogs were straining, their collars pulling tight around their little necks as they whined for the park. All except Gomer, who looked poised to produce another package. I winced. That's it for me. No more dog-walking. Even the adorable pair of hot pink Jimmy Choo wedge sandals I saw online at [designerexposure.com](http://designerexposure.com) aren't worth the indignity. Not until they're marked down by at least 20 percent, anyway.

"Well," I said brightly, tugging on Gomer's leash in the hopes of distracting him. "You probably have somewhere you have to be."

"I took the day off," he said. "I've got nowhere to be."

A finger of worry snaked up my back as I squinted at him. "Did you come here looking for me?" A stupid question, really, since what are the odds I'd just happened to bump into him? I'm a math geek. Trust me. The odds aren't good.

At least he had the good grace to look sheepish. "I called your apartment. Jennifer said you might be here, and since I wanted to talk to you . . ." He trailed off,

flashing that endearing little smile that always got me in trouble.

I fisted my hands around the leashes and mentally dug in my heels. *No, no, no.* I did *not* want to date Todd Davidson again. But more than that, I didn't want him to broach the subject. If he asked me out, I knew I'd say yes. It's stupid, but it's my nature. Ask me to discuss Euclidean domains or couture shoes, and I'm all over it. But put me in a room with a man, and my fortitude dissolves. Sad, but so very true.

He rummaged in his shopping bag and brought out a brightly wrapped shoe box topped with a big pink bow. "I saw these and thought of you." He passed me the box, and I took it, exchanging my leashes for my present as my heart raced. "Go ahead," he said. "Open it."

I didn't. Opening it would be like tempting fate, sealing a pact in blood. Silently telling him that this was okay and that there was still a chance things could be good between us.

"Come on, Mel. It's a present, not a time bomb."

I could never resist him when he remembered to call me Mel. For that matter, I never could resist a pair of shoes. . . .

I used the tip of my forefinger to ease the lid off the box until I could peek inside. I saw just a hint of red, and then. . . . OHMYGOD!

"Givenchy?" I kept a tight hold on the box as I flung my arms around him. "You bought me a pair of Givenchy pumps?" I lust after all shoes (and handbags for that matter), but in my mind, Givenchy represents the pinnacle of fashion. Givenchy *is* couture. After all, back in the day, Hubert de Givenchy designed practically all of

Audrey Hepburn's clothes and costumes. If that's not the most amazing endorsement, I don't know what is.

Audrey may have had breakfast at Tiffany's, but I have breakfast, lunch and dinner at Givenchy. I'll happily go out of my way to pass by 63rd and Madison, just so I can get one more look at the window display. Someday, I'm going to walk into that store and actually buy something. Until that happy day, though, I'm going to have to settle for acquiring my prizes through eBay and various online designer outlets. And, it seems, gifts from my ex.

"Put them on."

"Are you nuts? It's drizzling."

He leaned in closer, then popped an umbrella open over our heads. How suave. "At least take a closer look. See if you like them."

He didn't have to ask me twice. I slipped my hand inside the box and stroked the smooth red leather that would, soon, cup my foot. *Heaven*. (And probably a little pathetic, but we all have our weaknesses. Mine, like my mother before me, is shoes.)

"How are they?" he asked. From the way the corner of his mouth twitched, I think he knew the answer.

My mouth itched to say *orgasmic*, but I bit back the urge. Fabulous shoes or not, Todd was still my ex . . . and I'm pretty sure that's all I wanted him to be.

"Fabulous," I said instead. "They're really great. Thank you. This is really sweet."

"You're not going to go all Emily Post on me and say you can't accept them?"

"Are you nuts?" I clutched the box tightly against my chest. "Of course I'm accepting them."

He laughed. "That's my Mel." Only, of course, I wasn't his Mel any longer. He cleared his throat. "So, um, I thought maybe we could go out later. Get a drink or something."

*Aha!* The other shoe drops.

How pathetic did he think I was that I'd go with him just because he'd brought me a pair of shoes? I opened my mouth to tell him off, then heard myself say, "My parents are in town for their anniversary weekend. They're doing the whole Broadway thing, and I'm supposed to meet them for dinner before the show." Hardly the resounding no I'd been aiming for. But it was true. They'd been in town for almost a full twenty-four hours, and so far our schedules just hadn't collided. Or, more accurately, my mother hadn't managed to carve out a slot for me before this evening. Since I was dying to see my dad, I really didn't want to bag.

"How about now, then? It's still early," he said in his best I'm-a-lawyer-and-argue-for-a-living voice. "Plenty of time for a martini with me and dinner with them."

I knew I should just nip this in the bud and tell him we weren't having drinks, parents or no parents. Instead, I let him down gently. "I have to finish with the dogs, and then Jennifer and I are going shopping. Besides, it's too early for drinks."

"Coffee, then. Jennifer will understand."

Actually, no, she wouldn't. Being my best friend, Jennifer would strap me to the refrigerator if I told her I was about to go out with Todd, the man who'd been the subject of so many late-night bitch sessions. At least I thought she would. I could be wrong about that. She had told the man where to find me, after all.

"I promised her," I said. That was more or less the truth. When we'd first moved in together, Jenn and I had promised that we would never ditch plans with each other just because some guy asked us out. There were a variety of exceptions to this rule—the guy resembled Johnny Depp, the guy *was* Johnny Depp, the guy had an employee discount at Bergdorf's—but Todd didn't fall within any exception.

"You're certain? What about another time?"

I opened my mouth, hoping some clever excuse would leap to mind. Nothing. In lieu of cleverness, I just waved the leashes and said I had to get on with it before the dogs mutinied.

"I'll come with you."

"Oh. Well, okay. Sure." I figured it was only polite. The guy had bought me *shoes*, after all. Besides, I was standing there in the drizzle with drenched dogs and not feeling altogether attractive. Maybe Todd was the best I could do. Maybe no one else in my whole life would go out of his way to buy me shoes.

More likely, I'm a wimp. And Todd knows how to push my buttons.

We started walking toward the park and, when we were about halfway there, he reached out, his pinkie brushing against my thumb. "I've missed you, Mel."

Oh, *man*. I should have melted at that. His tone was sincere, his expression penitent. Gifts. Soft words. The man really, truly wanted me back. And I was flattered as hell and even a little bit humbled.

What I wasn't, was interested. Which made for a rather awkward moment. The moment stretched out, finally

bursting when we reached the dog run and I set the dogs free. Thank God.

I cleared my throat. "Listen, Todd—"

He held up a hand. "Just a drink. If you can't do tonight, then tomorrow." He flashed the same smile that had gotten me into his bed about fifteen months ago. "Come on, Mel. No pressure. Just alcohol."

"With us, there's no such thing as just alcohol," I said.

His grin reflected all the nights that proved my point, and I felt my resolve waver. My phone rang, and I snatched it open, grateful for the interruption. My mom. "Hi, Mom. I was just talking to a friend about meeting you guys tonight."

"Well, I hope it won't inconvenience you if we take a rain check for tomorrow." A statement, not a question, with no room for argument on my part.

"Oh." I licked my lips. "I was really hoping to see Daddy. And you."

She didn't even bother to muffle her sigh of exasperation. "For goodness' sake, Melanie. Whose vacation is this? It turns out that one of your father's old classmates lives on Long Island, and he's going to join us for dinner before the theater. Surely you wouldn't want us to miss the chance to get reacquainted with an old friend?"

*Ever think about getting reacquainted with your only daughter?*

I wanted to say it. I really, really wanted to say it.

Instead, I said, "Sure, Mom." I plastered on a bright smile. Shrinks everywhere said that if you smiled even though you were depressed or angry, your mood would

shift to match your expression. I waited a beat, testing that theory. Nope. No change.

“Good.”

“So, um, what time tomorrow?”

“Good Lord, child, I don’t know. We’ll call you after we get up. Really, I don’t know how you ever became so regimental.”

“Me neither,” I said, picturing the rows and rows of calendars in our Houston house, each entry color coded to correspond with some society function my mom had going on at any particular moment.

“Well, that’s that, then. We love you, sweetie.”

Since I hadn’t thrown a fit and messed up her plans, suddenly I was golden again. “Love you, too, Mom.”

And the truth was, I did.

But she still drove me absolutely fucking nuts.

Todd reached out and took my hand. “*My* invitation still stands.”

Bless the man. He’d soothed me through many a parental rough spot during the time we’d been together, so I was quite sure he’d comprehended the entire conversation even though he’d only heard my half.

“Thanks,” I said.

“So you’ll come?” His grin broadened, both devilish and inviting, and suddenly the reasons we’d gotten together were much more prominent in my mind than the reasons we’d broken up. I was weakening, and I knew it. I grabbed hold of the metal fencing that marked the dog run.

“I just don’t think—”

“Melanie Lynn Prescott?”

Saved by a stranger. I whirled around to face the voice

behind me, then gasped and took a step backward. Todd's hand closed on my shoulder, and I didn't shrug it off.

Books always describe men as dark and dangerous, and now I know what that means. The man standing in front of me was positively gorgeous in a way that made me want to touch him and run from him, all at the same time. Total eye candy, with coal black hair and a movie star jawline.

I almost moaned—okay, maybe I *did* moan—but I stifled the sound quickly enough. Swallowed it, actually, and then was even more grateful for Todd's hand on my shoulder. There was something about the stranger's eyes. They seemed cruel and hollow and, without any reason at all, they scared me to death.

"You *are* Miss Prescott?" he said.

"Oh, yes, me, right." The man's voice was like honey. If it hadn't been for those eyes . . .

"And who are you?" That from Todd, still behind me.

"I have a delivery for you," Mystery Man said, ignoring Todd. He took a step toward me, then held out a manila envelope.

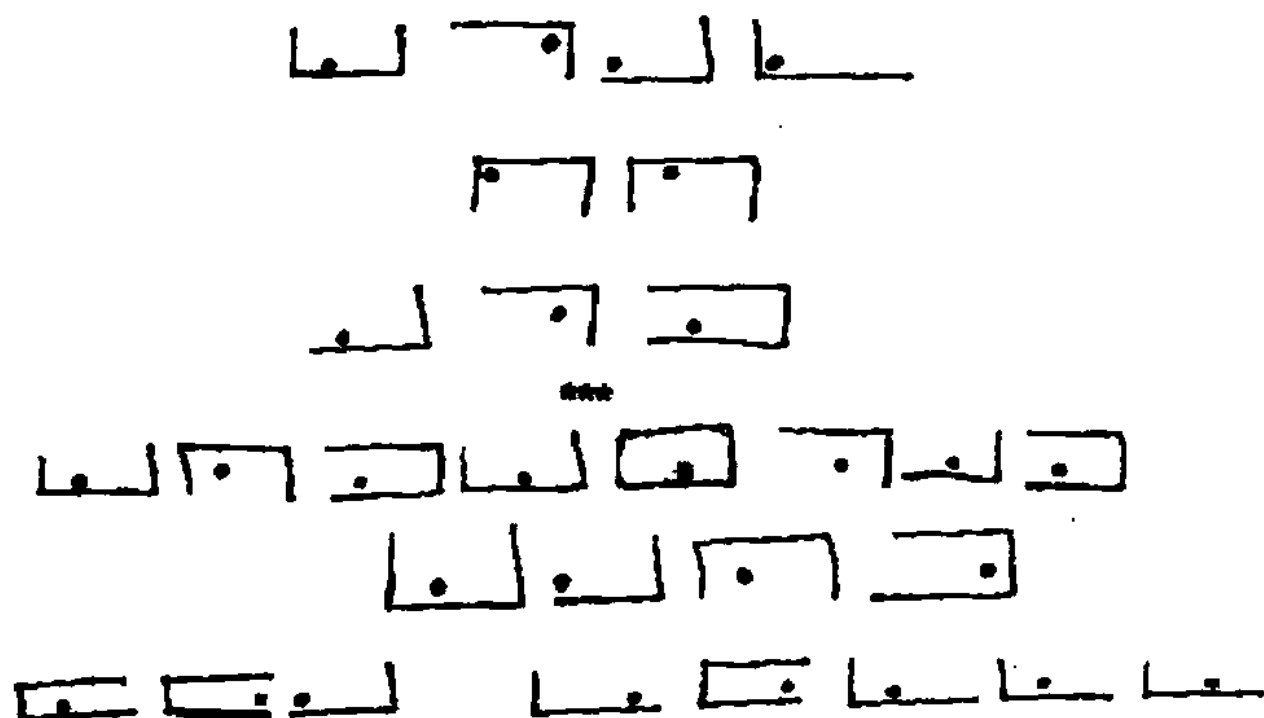
"What is it?" I asked.

He smiled, but the gesture didn't seem to fit his face. "I couldn't say. I'd suggest you open it." He touched a finger to his brow as if tipping an imaginary hat, then turned and walked away, leaving me holding the envelope and feeling more than a little perplexed.

I frowned, my brow crinkling in a manner that really isn't my best look. Too curious to wait until I got back home, I slipped a finger under the flap and ripped the envelope open. Inside was a thick piece of brown paper



that looked like it had been torn from a grocery bag. I pulled it free and immediately saw the markings. *Totally cool.*



Okay, I'm a geek, but I confess I was a little giddy. I had no idea why someone had sent me a coded message, but whoever it was knew me well. My B.S. is in math with a minor in history. That surprises most people. Apparently math majors are supposed to be surgically attached to their calculators and wear plastic pocket protectors. It's an irritating stereotype. Like saying blondes have more fun. I'm a blonde, and believe me, that's one old adage that simply doesn't hold true. (I will say, though, that even when the hair falls short, the math comes in surprisingly handy. Take parties, for example. Whenever the conversation gets slow, I can amaze and astound the other revelers with fractals, Fibonacci numbers and Smullyan's logic games. In those situations, I really am the life of the party.)

Now that I'm working on my master's, I've switched