

Confessions
of a
Frog Kisser

Chapter 1: Sam's Birthday Treat

“What’s the problem, Sam? Too many candles to blow out?” My sister Josie thoroughly enjoyed teasing me about my age. Never mind she had me beat by two years. She was right, though. There were way too many candles on this cake.

“Come on. We’re waiting. Make a wish,” said my best friend, Kate. She’d been eyeing the cake with barely repressed desire throughout dinner.

A wish. What did I want for my thirty-seventh birthday? Well, not to be thirty-seven for starters. I was freaked out about officially being in my late thirties. Life was passing me by and I had no clue how to make it slow down. I simply wasn’t ready to be in my late thirties.

But I couldn’t have that, so what else did I want? The top three wishes were to be twenty-five pounds thinner, working in a new job, and having regular sex with a fabulous boyfriend. That last item seemed completely unattainable, especially as long as I was living in suburbia. Argh! Nothing in my life was quite the way I wanted it to be.

While I waffled about what I wanted, the candles burned down, leaving pink wax blobs on the caramel coconut frosting.

“I can’t believe you didn’t blow out the candles. What were you wishing for?” Josie said, her face caught between amusement and bewilderment at my hesitation.

“I was trying to decide whether I wanted to get laid or get skinny this year. Does this mean I won’t get either?” I asked. Josie rolled her eyes, brushed the stray lock of hair off my forehead, and handed me a knife to cut the cake.

“You don’t need to lose weight, Sam. You look great the way you are,” said Liz, Josie’s college roommate. We started hanging out recently because we found we had two things in common: we both loved Josie and we were both single. Her compliment was completely sincere and sweet, but not at all true.

I cut the cake and gave everyone a huge slice. I’d worry about the weight wish later. Kate smuggled a homemade German Chocolate cake into the Temporary Inn, and I was not about to forego eating a slice. The Temporary

Inn was the most happening spot in Lake Anne Plaza, the historic heart of Reston, Virginia. At least it was as historic as anything built in the sixties could be. The only reason the manager let Kate bring a contraband cake in was because we were Friday night regulars. Lake Anne doesn't get any random foot traffic, so the manager liked to keep the regulars happy.

We dug in to the cake with gusto, despite the fact we'd each had three slices of pizza and two tons of beer. There's always room for chocolate. Conversation turned to Liz's new relationship with Brian, a stockbroker at Finchley Barnes, whom she'd met through our friend Iona's ex-husband Forrest. They met at Forrest's going away party. He decided to move to Miami the moment the divorce was final. Iona went to prove she was mature enough to be friends with her ex. Or to make sure he was really leaving the state.

Brian was trouble with a capital T, so naturally Liz fell instantly in love. I thought he was cute enough to justify a fling, but he was kind of arrogant and, frankly, I just didn't trust anyone that smooth. Iona couldn't stand him. That, coupled with the fact he was her philandering ex-husband's friend, should have kept Liz away, but it didn't. Iona generally kept her mouth shut when the topic was Brian. Liz made it hard when she insisted on fantasizing about a wedding that we all knew would never happen.

I, however, fully participated in the Brian talk. Brian and his friends were fun and the selfish and bored parts of me didn't care if he was a bit of a jerk and bad for Liz in the long run. Through Brian and his friends, I suddenly had a social group, something I hadn't had since I moved back home from Boston. Brian liked to go out, so Liz was going out and she usually invited me. She said it was because I was fun, but I think it was really because she wanted someone to talk to when Brian ignored her, which he did often. This, naturally, was my observation, not hers.

"I want a small wedding at one of those plantations in Loudoun County, with a string quartet playing as we walk down the aisle," Liz said dreamily. From day one of the relationship she'd had marriage fantasies starring Brian. They'd only dated for about a month, so marriage fantasies seemed premature to me, but she was really not happy about being single at forty.

Josie bit her lip and took a sudden interest in some graffiti etched on the table, in an effort not to say something snotty. Josie had heard different variations of Liz's fantasy many times over the last twenty years. The fantasies never became reality. Iona had gone to the bathroom when the wedding talk started, something I noticed she did whenever the subject came up. She either had a small bladder or didn't want to hear it.

"So, when are you going to find a nice guy and settle down, Sam?" asked Katrina, Josie and Liz's other college roommate. She asked me that every

time I saw her and it bugged me every time. Josie invited her to my party to get her out of the house before she had a nervous breakdown. Josie shot me a *please humor the post partum woman* look. Katrina had one-year-old triplets.

“As soon as I come across a nice one, who is neither married nor gay,” I joked. “Well, actually just as long as he’s not married.”

Everyone laughed. Humor was a good way to divert attention from topics I’d rather not discuss, such as my relationship status. I was single, had been single, and will likely always be single. About fifty percent of the time, I didn’t consider that a problem. The real problem was that everybody else on the planet considered it a problem.

Sure, it’d be nice to have a boyfriend, but I’d always been ambivalent about marriage. Whenever I shared that with my friends, they assured me it was because I hadn’t met the right guy yet. They reminded me I had to kiss a lot of frogs before I’d find my prince. I often wondered how many frogs were enough—ten, one hundred, one thousand? At this stage of the game, I was closer to a thousand than a hundred.

I could have had any number of Brian’s old high-school friends, if I wanted to. I had a plethora of ultra-conservative, workaholics heading toward premature heart attacks to choose from. At least, they all seemed to like me. I could do the workaholic, heart attack about to happen thing. But ultra-conservative? No. I just couldn’t go down that road.

I won’t lie. Part of me welcomed their attention. I hadn’t dated much since my mother died three years before. I just couldn’t muster up the enthusiasm for it. Instead, I ate chocolate. As a result of that, it had been a long time since anyone even looked at me. I was so out of dating practice, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to flirt if someone good did come along. I saw these guys as a good way to get back into my flirt groove before testing it on real prospects.

“It’s time for presents,” Iona said, having returned from the bathroom once she thought the wedding discussion would be safely done. She flashed her wide, dimpled smile and flipped her luxurious red hair. A waiter was at our table in seconds to offer us more drinks. Not our waiter, of course. Hanging out with Iona was hard on my ego. The philandering Forrest was an absolute idiot.

As I opened the last package of Filigree bubble bath, the lights dimmed, signaling the shift from family-friendly burger joint to smoky bar where suburban singles who can’t be bothered to drive the twenty miles into Washington, D.C. gathered. Josie and Katrina, being married women, chose to leave. Iona, Liz, Kate, and I chose to stay.

Four chicks out for a wild Friday night in the ‘burbs. Wahoo.

Liz ordered herself another beer and one for Brian, to be ready for him when he showed up. Iona kicked me under the table. Liz's subservience to Brian really irked Iona, but she was smart enough not to say anything to Liz's face. Iona's divorce had made her fiercely determined not to let any man walk all over her or any of her friends, ever again. But, she knew a lost cause when she saw one, and Liz was very content to be Brian's doormat.

"So, how's the marathon training going? Are you ready?" Kate asked. This would be the fifth year in a row Liz ran the Marine Corps Marathon. Not many people can say they've done that.

"Um... I'm not going to run this year. I haven't had time to train, I've been so busy with Brian." Liz involuntarily looked toward the door, her brow furrowing in irritation when he still wasn't there. Iona abruptly pushed herself away from the table and headed toward the rear of the bar and the bathrooms. Liz was about to ask what her problem was, but Brian chose that moment to arrive. Liz's face lit up, a warm glow suffusing her pale cheeks. I said hi to Brian and his merry gang as they pulled up another table and sat, then turned my attention to the stage. It was open mic night, meaning every amateur guitarist in the Reston and Herndon area would serenade us. Most of it was awful, but some of the people were good.

"Yummy," Kate drawled in her Mississippi Delta accent. She usually toned that accent down, unless we were talking about men or she was describing her grandmother's fried chicken and greens. Kate rarely said yummy, especially in her Mississippi voice.

Her declaration brought me back to the moment, and I was surprised to find myself in the dark, smoky bar. I'd been pretending to listen to the music, but I was actually obsessing about my life and where it was going. Here I was, sitting in a bar, in the suburbs, on my thirty-seventh birthday. Not my childhood dream of living in a fabulous penthouse apartment in New York City, going to the Opera, and dating James Bond.

Of course, my actual life has never matched my fantasy life. The fantasy life is much more exciting.

It's not that my thirties, thus far, had been boring—anything but. They just weren't what I thought they'd be. I moved to Boston after college, and happily spent my twenties seeing all the cool bands, eating at trendy bistros, and generally having a ball.

Somehow, I had morphed into an unhip suburbanite. I owned a townhouse, with a yard I had to maintain. I had two cats, which I actually got before I turned thirty, but somehow it didn't seem to be symbolic of impending insanity then. I stupidly changed careers, from magazine publishing to management consulting. I had a lot of responsibility, made a pretty good living, and recently started eating antacids for breakfast.

I only just recently came out of the grief-induced depression resulting from my mother's death. Three years was a long time to not feel like doing anything.

Really, the only thing that hadn't changed since I turned thirty was my relationship status. I was single then and I was single now. Nice to know at least one thing in my life was consistent and predictable.

I shook off the deep thoughts and turned to see what had inspired Kate's yummy declaration.

Yummy, indeed.

Actually, he transcended yummy. At about six feet tall, with a lanky build, he had dark brown hair, deep brown eyes, pouty lips, and clef in his chin. He wore jeans, a black T-shirt, and a brown suede jacket. He glided between the tables with the kind of easy grace that looked comfortable in any situation, greeting the people he knew along the way. I noticed these included all of Brian's friends.

He looked like the kind of man put on this earth specifically to cause me nothing but heartache and pain. I was instantly smitten.

"Very Yummy. Happy Birthday to me. What's he doing here?" I murmured.

Nobody that obviously cool ever hung out in Reston, even at the Temporary Inn. I thought there may be a town ordinance against it. If the cool people had to hang out in the suburbs, they went to Arlington or Bethesda. Period. No exceptions to the rule. So what was he doing here?

Brian returned to the table. I guess he'd been in the bathroom. The yummy one headed over to our table, too. Be still my heart. I stopped breathing.

"Hey, Sean, glad you could make it," Brian said, extending his hand.

The yummy one had a name. Well, of course he did. Surely people didn't shout, *hey yummy one* after him. Sean. What a great name.

"Hey, Brian." They performed an elaborate handshake. I realized later it probably included the transfer of drugs. "I can only stay a while. I'm meeting some friends in Arlington later."

Arlington. That's where he belonged.

Brian introduced Sean. With tremendous strength, I pulled my tongue back in my mouth. Drooling on the cute boy was not the best way to win his heart. I felt slightly nauseated and I was aware of the red coloring my cheeks. I could barely look at Sean. I hadn't felt this kind of attraction to anyone in years. I was very thankful that, in honor of my birthday, I made some sort of attempt to look good. Not like the previous week when I was wearing my old overalls and a stinky white T-shirt. For my birthday, I donned khakis and a black cashmere turtleneck. Black was one of my best colors—it made my eyes

look electric blue. I even brushed my hair so it fell in silky waves around my face.

I was the last to be introduced. Sean took my hand, looked me in the eye and smiled, and then sat down next to me. I thought I would faint. He was gorgeous. I didn't even mind when he lit up a cigarette.

I'm a big fan of positive affirmations and reciting mantras in times of stress. My mantra for this situation was, "you're not going to faint, you're not going to faint." I think mantras are supposed to be more positive, but I never perform well under pressure.

I was reciting my mantra, and trying to breathe, and therefore didn't catch what he said. So I smiled instead.

"How long have you known Brian?" That's what he said.

"Oh, only a few months. We've been hanging out a lot, though, since he and Liz started dating."

"He's dating someone? I didn't know that."

That's what he said. But the look on his face said, "So why did we hook up with those hot chicks last night, then?" This was potentially bad news for Liz. Therefore, I wouldn't say anything to her about it.

"What about you? How do you know Brian?" I asked.

"We were neighbors, growing up. I was a few years behind him in school, but we always hung out before I moved away for law school...." Crap. He wasn't local. "I just moved back and am getting back into the scene here." Hooray. He was local.

"Is it someone's birthday?" He nodded toward the nearly devoured cake.

"Yes. Mine, actually," I beamed.

"Well, happy birthday, Sam. Let me buy you a drink."

I didn't actually want another drink, but guys never offered to buy me drinks. What a sweetheart.

Once I got over my desire to faint in his presence, I was actually quite cool. All that practice flirting with Brian's friends paid off. Sean was easy to talk to. Only occasionally did I have to ask him to repeat himself—I found myself getting lost in the way those lips moved while he talked.

We had the kind of conversation where the guy is totally engaged and interested in everything you're saying. I was fascinating and beautiful and smart. I could see it in his eyes. Occasionally I pulled myself out of my trance to see Kate or Iona smirking at me. Since I met both of them after Mom died, neither had ever seen me in love before.

I learned Sean moved out west for law school, but dropped out before he graduated and had since been working as an electrician. He was hoping to start a business. He was also a song writer, but hadn't recorded anything. Be

still my heart. Around midnight, Sean gave me a chaste little birthday kiss. He told me I was beautiful. He said he hoped to see me again. And then he left.

“Well, he was sure cute. And he liked you,” Kate said the second Sean passed through the door on his way out. Oh joy. I wasn’t just imagining it.

“Very yummy,” Iona agreed. She raised one of her impeccably manicured eyebrows: “Did he get your number? Are you going to go out?”

“Oh. Well, no. He didn’t get my number. But he said he hoped to see me again.”

Iona and Kate sighed. I turned to Liz, whose blue eyes were dancing with almost as much excitement as my own.

“That’s great,” she said. “I’m sure Brian will know where he’s going to be.” A co-conspirator. Excellent.

“You know, if I was the type of girl who believed in love at first sight and mystical signs and stuff like that, I would think meeting Sean on my birthday was fate.” Iona’s lips twitched and I felt a ribbing coming on. “I don’t believe in that sort of thing, of course, but I think meeting such a great guy tonight is a very promising start to the year.”

Which I needed, because honestly I was still totally freaked out about officially being in my late thirties.

I looked for Brian, but he had, of course, disappeared again. So had our hoochy waitress. That meant I’d have to wait for both the scoop on Sean and a glass of water. I busied myself, committing every word of my conversation with Sean and every line on his scrumptious face to memory. I wanted to be able to recount this evening for our children.

Fifteen minutes later, Brian returned, smelling slightly of pot. I noticed the hoochy waitress return a moment later, eyes glassy. I hoped Liz didn’t notice; she wouldn’t like the notion of her boyfriend slinking off with a hot, young thing to get high.

“You and Sean sure were hitting it off,” Brian said, punching my arm for emphasis, perhaps a little harder than he meant to. I blushed. “You know we’re all going to the Pub tomorrow night...you should come too.”

No duh. I would be there.