GIRL GONE WILD

RITA CIRESI

CHAPTER ONE

I fell out of love with the wrong man—and tumbled wildly in love with another—on a sunny September afternoon in the light-drenched atrium of the Chicago Hyatt Regency. The hotel was home to two national conferences that day. Since I wasn't wearing my nametag, for all anyone knew I could have been a member of the Feline and Canine Critical Care Society. I could have been heading to one of the sessions posted on the lobby's neon welcome board: "When Your Human Clients Act Like Animals" or "Medicating the Pregnant and Lactating Bitch."

But I wasn't lurking in the hotel atrium to bone up on errant animal behavior. I had taken the train into the windy city to see how the featured speaker at the 2007 Poetry Fest—United States Poet Laureate Anthony Alborn—would handle his turn in the spotlight. Yet I didn't want Tony Alborn to catch sight of me. So I hid like a Mafia hit-woman behind an enormous potted palm tree, scanning the crowd, determined to wait until the very last moment to descend the steep escalator and slip into the back door of the Grand Ballroom, where Tony was due to deliver the opening address.

The title of Tony's talk was "Poetry in the Digital Age." This from the man so technologically behind-the-times that he still

- typed his manuscripts on a porcupine-sized Underwood
- refused to carry a cellphone
- jogged with a Walkman

Tony Alborn was so frustrated by all things digital that he once had begged *me* to enter his end-of-the-semester grades into the university computer system. When I half-jokingly asked if I could change my own final

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grade from an A to an A-plus, he had taken my head between his hands and made me an offer I easily could have refused.

But did not.

Confession: Tony Alborn was my former teacher and former lover. I was *so* totally over him—which was to say, I now Googled him only once a week instead of once an hour. Every sneak-peek on the Internet yielded more than half a million hits: Tony's latest publications, latest grants, latest appearances at colleges and libraries and conferences. Under Google Images, I found the standard black-and-white author photo of Tony looking soulfully into the distance. Pictures of Tony with his arm around fellow poets he once had described to me as "blurb sluts" and "lit-biz lounge lizards." Jpg. after jpg. of Tony doing what poets did best: making love to the microphone as he recited his own verse.

Anthony Alborn was a brilliant writer—I admit that much—but he hadn't always been a Poet with a capital P. When I first came under his spell as his graduate student and research assistant, Tony had been a respected, but relatively obscure poet-professor at the University of Florida. He had seemed resigned to spending the rest of his days in Gainesville, a town so backwater it didn't even have jet service. Tony had lived in a four-room bungalow. Driven a beat-up Honda Accord. Worn faded jeans and Tevas to class. He had professed great admiration for what my Italian mother called my "mouth" and sometimes even had egged me on to "give him some lip."

But then came that life-changing call from the Library of Congress—and overnight, *his* became the only voice worthy to be heard. Suddenly Tony was wearing a black Calvin Klein T-shirt underneath a tweed jacket, and jetting first-class to every major city in the United States to declaim his verse. He no longer seemed enamored of my admittedly loud laugh and tendency to talk back. What he once had called my "irrepressible Mediterranean *joie de vivre*" he now dismissed as "rowdy bridge-and-tunnel behavior."

Let the biographers note that I grew up on the steep hills of Waterbury, Connecticut as opposed to true Tony-Soprano-Land. Let them also note that I responded to Anthony Alborn's anti-Italian-ismo with typical guinea hotheadedness—which is to say, I marched into his grimy bungalow bathroom and flushed his newly-filled prescription of Viagra down the toilet.

During the final hour of our stormy relationship, I had peppered Anthony Alborn with all sorts of immature insults (example: "You don't deserve to be poet laureate! Your mother's a *Canadian*!"). Tony had merely

leaned against his kitchen counter, smoking a Kool, as if lowering himself to participate in such an unseemly display might muss the laurel leaves crowned upon his balding head. Finally he pulled back his jacket cuff and consulted his new Omega watch—his way of telling me that the fireworks should have ended half an hour ago.

I didn't regret falling in love with Anthony Alborn. But I did regret having stormed out of his bungalow without pointing out this irony: he had bought a four-thousand-dollar Swiss timepiece with the royalties from a book titled *Songs for the Common Man*. Yes, *Common Man* had sold so "robustly" (Tony's immodest description) that Tony had ceased to be a commoner. Some called him an icon; others a poetry rock-star. Still smarting from rejection, I preferred to think of Anthony Alborn as a hog in mud, rolling in the fact that after years of being ignored by both the reading public and the literati, he suddenly had become a household name (or at least featured in last Sunday's *Parade* magazine, which was about as household as any poet could hope to get).

Tony's official (and redundant) title was Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. "As opposed to the Poet Laureate Consultant in *Fiction*," I told my friend LeeLee at the bar last night. "Or the Poet Laureate Consultant in *My Ego Is Bigger Than Your Grandfather's Cadillac*."

LeeLee nudged my arm. "I suggest you stop drinking that beer, Christina."

I lifted my mug and downed the rest of my Heineken. "Okay, I've stopped now."

"And I also suggest," LeeLee said, "that you get over this Tony-thing."

"I am *totally* over Tony's thing."

"Then why have you come into the city to hear him talk?"

"I already told you," I said. "My headmaster wants me to hire him to speak at Worth School—"

"You will NOT hire Tony Alborn to speak at your school."

"—and because I want to test if Tony still has a hold over me."

LeeLee looked down at the foam curdles in my beer mug. "If you have to put yourself to the test," she said, "you've already flunked it."

* * *

So give me a well-deserved F for hiding behind that monstrous palm tree in the Hyatt, watching the superstars of American poetry ooze and schmooze

their way toward the escalator. There passed a Pulitzer Prize winner. A gaggle of Yale Younger Poets. A wildly-popular performance poet known simply as "Octoroon" when she wasn't known as "The Voice of Katrina." Against a pillar stood—or should I say, *posed*—the lovely April March. Her program bio listed her as the recipient of a MacArthur genius grant for her "broken-sonnet cycle that explored the intertextuality of gender and Italian architecture." I knew her as the poetess who flicked back her honey-colored hair, thrust forward her luscious breasts, and breathily prefaced each sonnet with "This . . . is another poem . . . about my. . . . body." Standing over April March—or should I say, leering so deep into her cleavage he might never return to Earth again—was Carlos Jorge Manuel Riviera, winner of the newly-established Post-Columbus Award for his ground-breaking immigration epic, *¡Soy norteamericano, yo tambien!* Carlos had used the proceeds of his award to purchase a McMansion in some gringo gated-golf-course community in southern Arizona, leading Tony to sourly comment, "The only *mexicanos* Carlos talks to are the ones who clean his pool and nanny his kids."

I myself was an aspiring novelist, so it was all too easy for me to gaze out on the crowd and conclude that the world of poetry was populated by many an emperor who wore no clothes. Yet this wasn't the complete picture. Circling around the prima donna April Marches, the fraudulent Carlos-es, and the dubious Octoroons were many writers whose work moved me to laughter and tears. I peered through the fronds at their plain, honest faces and unfashionable clothes that belied that their last book of poems had sold all of 134 copies. If I hadn't had enough of playing the literary groupie with Tony, I might have tapped one on the shoulder and whispered, "If only I could write *half* as well as you, I could die happy."

The crowd began to thin. Just when I thought it safe to come out, I heard footsteps to my left and whirled around. But that threw off my balance—already precarious since my feet were clad in a pair of pointy-toed black leather boots I had purchased at Macy's just that morning. My soles slipped on the marble floor and I pitched backwards, butt first, into the palm tree pot. White gravel scattered everywhere.

A thick square hand—the kind that might look just as comfortable curled around a hammer as a fountain pen—reached into the foliage. I grasped it. The guy who pulled me up was around my age, mid-twenties, with hazelnut eyes and sandy brown hair several shades warmer than my espresso-colored

curls. In his left hand he held an open cell phone—the twin of my Razr, only his was silver, and mine an unabashedly girlie hot pink.

Up until then I hadn't believed in love at first sight. But as this heart-stoppingly-handsome guy apologized—profusely—and helped me right myself on the floor, I felt as if I had spotted a jacket on a department-store mannequin and known it would fit me perfectly without even having to try it on.

I took a second look at him and blurted out the world's worst pick-up line: "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't think so."

"You look so familiar. Well, you must have a twin—"

He blinked.

"—or else we met in another life. Which would explain why I can't remember your name."

He extended his hand once again. "Chris."

"Christina."

Handshakes—as I had learned during my recent job search—had a language all their own. Chris's felt warm and again familiar, as if we already had a history of lazing back and forth together, hand in hand, on a creaky porch swing.

I gestured to the foliage. "So what brings you to this part of the jungle?"

"I was texting—" As if to prove it, his phone vibrated. "—and obviously not watching where I was going, but I really stepped back here to make a call. You?"

I patted my oversized tote bag. "I was about to call someone too."

My Someone was fictional. But his? A guy this good-looking and so nice probably had a girlfriend. Damn: a *harem*. On speed-dial, no less.

My heart—so recently broken—didn't feel ready to get broke again. "I should let you make your call," I said.

"The call can wait."

"What about your text?"

"*Totally* wait—since it's from my parents."

"What do they want?"

"Lately? Grandchildren."

I laughed. "So are you going to deliver?"

"That's part of the long-range plan—"

I copped a quick glance at his left hand: pleasingly bare.

"—but right now I have other priorities. Like—" He looked down at his

phone. "—letting the parental unit know why I'm not answering my landline. Goddammit. Excuse me, please, while I reassure my mother and father I'm not lying in a pool of blood in a back alley."

I watched his thumbs—broad, with flat nails that seemed to smile at me from upside down—as he sent them a quick message on his cell.

"Sorry," he said. "My parents usually aren't this interested in my whereabouts."

"And the difference today is?"

His face turned red. "My dad's having a colonoscopy."

"Oh."

"And my mom is flipping out about him being put to sleep. I've just been sent what she's convinced are his final words of advice."

Chris held up his phone. Since I once had written a collage poem using famous last words—*Either that wallpaper goes, or I do. Get my swan costume ready. Friends applaud, the comedy is finished*—I knew a good exit line when I heard one. Chris's father obviously had a good sense of humor, because he had written: *Skip turning 50.*

Chris flipped his Razr shut. "Are you here for a conference?"

"Yes, but I can't stand wearing nametags."

"Me neither. So: the poets or the dogs-n-cats?"

"The poets."

"Then I'm glad I've got you here." He slipped his cell into his jacket pocket and took out a memo pad and pencil. "I'm writing an article for the *Trib* on the state of poetry today—you know, who reads it, who writes it. Maybe you'd like to answer a few questions."

"You probably don't want to talk to me," I said.

"Why not?"

"I'm nobody."

"You're also—obviously—a fan of Emily Dickinson."

"Emily wouldn't be caught dead at this bloated ego-fest." I paused. "Did you just write that down?"

"Yes, don't worry, I got it. Word for word."

I stuck my tongue between my teeth and stopped just short of biting it.

"So what brings *you* to the ego-fest?" Chris asked.

"I'm here to hire some writers for a conference I'm planning."

He kept scribbling on his pad. "So you're not a writer yourself?"

I scrunched up my nose. Part of me wanted to reply: *Of course I'm a*

writer! And a damn good one, too. . . I hope, I pray, I dare to dream, I long to think! But that would lead to the inevitable questions: *What have you written? Where have you published? Would I have heard of you?* To which I would have to answer: *nothing, nowhere, you've never heard of me. . . yet.*

"I write," I admitted. "But not enough, these days."

"What holds you back?"

"I teach."

"College?"

"High school."

"My dad used to teach high school. So I know how it eats you alive."

A buzzer went off in the atrium. Chris looked at his watch, then over his shoulder at the thinning crowd. "Are you going downstairs to hear the keynote address?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"You don't like Anthony Alborn's work?"

"Just the opposite, I admire it very much. But I've been roped into trying to get him to speak at my conference."

"Good luck getting anywhere near him. I'm scheduled to interview him after his talk—"

My stomach turned queasy. Not that Tony ever would mention me to a reporter.

"—and I can tell you, trying to nab him is a real bitch. He doesn't have a cell phone. Doesn't use e-mail—or at least he claims he doesn't—and he isn't registered with a speakers' bureau."

"So how'd you pin him down?"

"I had to go through his personal handler."

Since I could just imagine this "handler"—some mediocre boy-poet eager to brownnose his way to the top—I made a *ffffft* sound that resembled, too closely, a fart.

"My feelings exactly," Chris said. "Especially since she—"

She?

"—said Alborn would agree to the interview only if he could check the quotes before it went into print. Ordinarily I would just blow the guy off. But I can't write an article about poetry without a comment from the poet laureate. And I figure considering his position, he probably isn't going to say anything controversial."

"Like calling this conference an ego-fest?"

Chris looked down at his memo pad. "That would be *bloated* ego-fest."

"God," I said, "I have such a big mouth."

"Every reporter's dream subject." Chris smiled. "I'll walk downstairs with you."

"Great." Then I hesitated. "But I have to sit at the back of the room because I need to duck out early."

"I have to sit up front because his assistant is holding me a seat. But listen. . . after I'm done with Alborn. . . . maybe later this afternoon . . . I'd love to get more of your take on this whole conference. For my article, of course."

I had a funny feeling—a *hopeful* feeling—that Chris didn't give a damn what I thought about the art form that Wordsworth had called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Beyond that: I knew I had to "get my name out there" if I ever wanted to get anywhere in the Lit Biz, and to have my name mentioned on the same page of the *Chicago Tribune* with the name of Anthony Alborn was too good a chance to pass up.

"Maybe when the sessions are over," I said, "say around five, we could meet back here in the lobby?"

"Sounds good," he said. "Let me give you my number, in case you get hung up somewhere."

I unzipped my purse. My best friend LeeLee had nicknamed this floppy brown leather bag—which was the size and shape of a kangaroo pouch without the baby roo inside—"The Danger-oo," since every time I reached in to fetch an item, something embarrassing fell out. This time it was not a tampon nor a condom, but a slender silver tube marked *BADgal Brown Mascara* that fell to the floor. I quickly bent down—probably giving Chris an eyeful of the lace thong poking through my jean gap—and scooped the BADgal back up. This only caused item number 2—a hot pink tube marked DuWop Lip Venom—to roll out.

Chris fetched the Venom and handed it to me. "What else do you have buried in there?"

"You don't want to know." I dug past the hard clamshell of my birth-control pills, grabbed my pink Razr, and typed in Chris's number. His area code was not 312—like LeeLee's—but 773, which put him somewhere outside the Chicago city limits.

"We have the same phone," he said.

"Yours is more *masculine*." Then as my face undoubtedly turned as pink

as my phone, I stupidly snapped my Razr shut without offering my own number.

Chris rode behind me down the two sets of escalators. When we reached the ballroom, he said, "I hope you don't mind me telling you this . . ."

"Fire away," I said.

"But you have gravel all over your . . . um. . . ."

"Butt?"

He nodded.

I swatted the back of my jeans. A shower of white pebbles fell to the purple-and-gold carpet, along with some clotted material that looked suspiciously like peat moss. No. Strike that. More like the fecal matter of a goat.

"In my next life," I told Chris, "I plan on coming back with an ounce more elegance."

"Elegance is overrated." He smiled again. "See you in the lobby at five."

"Wait. *Where* in the lobby?"

"How about at that plant again?"

I looked down at the dirt and pebbles on the carpet. "Or what's left of it."

Chris disappeared into the Grand Ballroom, which was packed with poets who had come to revel in Anthony Alborn's words (or at least to find out why he earned more than $10,000 an appearance while they still were reading for free at open mikes). A huge hunk of a man in faded Wranglers and a turquoise bolo tie bumped into me. "Pardon me, ma'am," he said, in almost a parody of a western accent. I recognized him as one of the Midnight Cowboys—authentic cattle rustlers who branded steers by day and penned verse at night. To my right stood Chazz MaHazz, spokesperson for the Gutter Poets, who had been quoted in the latest issue of *Poets and Writers*: "Poetry is everywhere. It's in your heart. It's in your soul. It's in your bellybutton—unless you got an outie, man." Sprinkled among these bohemian specimens—like clownfish out of water—were The Red Hat Poets, a national network of 50-plus women in purple blouses and poppy-blossom berets whose unofficial motto was, "We like our poetry to rhyme and make sense."

I edged past the people seated in the back row. After I settled into my chair, I started fretting. Why hadn't I given Chris my number? And what if I had entered his number wrong and he had to call off our meeting? I would have no way of getting in touch with him, or he with me. Our story then would turn into one of those sappy *Lifetime* movies in which a handsome young man and a lithe young woman met on a train, exchanged phone num-

bers and exited at the station only to lose the slips of paper in a fateful wind. The disappointment! The regret! The road not taken! Fast forward forty years: they remeet on the very same train route and conveniently discover they both are widowed, leaving them free to enjoy one weekend of bliss together before he . . . or she . . . or both tragically drop dead.

As my mother had pointed out many times, I had an imagination that took off like a sled on an icy hill. If I "lost" Chris, I could Google him just as easily as I Googled Anthony Alborn. I could find his phone number and address and even hover above his apartment building and gaze down on him from that ultimate big-brother-eye-in-the-sky, Google Earth.

Provided I knew his last name. Which—alas—I did not.

I could have kicked myself for not asking. But then he hadn't asked for mine. The uncertainty of who he really was did all the more to intrigue me. Chris could be heir to a meatpacking fortune or son of a diplomat. His ethnicity was anyone's guess. I leaned toward something Eastern European, because his shoulders were just the way I liked them, broad and Balkan.

As for me, I practically had MADE IN POMPEII engraved upon my face. No one looking at my thick-as-thieves brown curls and doll-like chocolate eyes and kiss-me lips would ever guess I was anything other than Italian, especially since I wore the official lanyard of Camp Catholic: a 24-karat-gold crucifix my mother had draped around my neck when I made my Confirmation, making me swear never to take it off until I got married. Countless mothers of Mommy's generation thought that these *articoli religiosi* functioned as chastity belts—little realizing how the sight of a cross dangling between a woman's sweaty breasts only further stoked the desires of former altar boys such as Tony Alborn.

I took out my cell and went to CONTACTS to memorize, the old-fashioned way, Chris's number. My Razr was both a curse and blessing. For a long time I had carried only a pay-as-you-go Virgin Mobile, partly because of the cost, but mostly because I'd been under the influence of Tony, who considered the cell phone a "blight upon civilization." But after I'd been lucky enough to get a teaching job at Victoria Worth School for Girls—a tony boarding school on Chicago's north shore—I had visited the T-Mobile kiosk in the Northbrook Mall and indulged in an upgrade that gave me games, wallpapers, camera, and the option to download ringtones for my frequent callers.

When I returned to campus from the mall, I faced two choices: I could

play with my new techno-toy or I could grade sixty student poems that were variations on

Roses are red
Violets are blue
I'm fifteen years old
And cuter than you

or

I am
the excruciating
wound
You are
the razor
blade that slices
into my excruciating
wound
giving me excruciating
pain

which would tempt me to write these grades at the top:

"B"ware of lapsing into doggerel verse

and

I recommend you "C" the school psychologist.

I liked teaching. No, I loved teaching—all the way up to that moment when I had to confront my students' well-meaning but awkward attempts at creating high art. Thus I let their poems fester on my desk while I spent the next four hours hooked up to the Internet, listening to all the ringtones I could download. At first I had explored only the dignified classical selections. But Beethoven and Brahms soon gave way to the Italian-American crooners I associated with my songbird mother, who routinely stood up at wedding receptions to belt out tunes best left to Connie Francis and Anna Maria Alberghetti. Connie and Anna Maria then moved over for the even

cheesier Tony Bennett and Perry Como. I knew I was a goner when I clicked on the tab labeled SOUND EFFECTS. I hesitated over EXCITED DOG BARKS and GUINEA PIG SQUEALS. Played POLICE SIREN and CHURCH BELLS over and over. Then I switched back and forth between those listed in tandem:

ASIAN ELEPHANT	AFRICAN ELEPHANT
LITTLE BURP	BIG BURP
DRY FART	JUICY FART

So much to choose from! And so little time! Especially if I wanted to avoid grading those student poems altogether. So I downloaded a few ringtones for free and then racked up an impressive bill for the ones priced at $2.99 a pop.

Now after committing Chris's phone number to memory, I programmed his incoming calls to play the opening of Sinatra's "You're Nobody Until Somebody Loves You." Slightly premature, I know. But Chris seemed so eminently eligible. And certainly much more age appropriate than Tony.

I hit save. Just as I was about to turn off my phone, my leg got jostled by a couple of graduate students—easily identified by their heavy backpacks—trying to get to the last two available seats. I dropped my Razr into the Danger-oo and stood to let them pass.

In the front row of the ballroom, I picked out Tony—or rather, the back of Tony's head. I was delighted to note that his bald spot, which last year had been the size of a silver-dollar pancake, had grown to the size of a yarmulke. Sitting two chairs down from him was Chris.

I almost sat down again. But then something—or should I say *someone*—made me crane my neck for a better view. A tall svelte girl with bobbed platinum hair and a chest that could only be described as a "rack" lowered herself into the empty seat between Tony and Chris. As Tony leaned over and whispered something in her ear, I felt my stomach flop. Who was this blond Glamazon? Tony's latest grad-student pickup? His media escort? The very debutante I had told him to go *fongool* once he refilled his Viagra prescription? His "personal handler"?

What did it matter? Jealousy brewed in the dark depths of my moody, melancholic, needs-to-C-a-psychiatrist soul. My bile ran so dark and deep that it pooled on a memory that, to me, exemplified the contradictory nature of this complicated thing called love: the time Tony had tried to explain

to our poetry workshop something called *chiastic structure*, using as an example an elegiac couplet written by Catullus to his mistress Lesbia.

I had been the only student in class who had studied Latin. But I knew there was another reason why Tony—intently staring at the gold cross around my neck, which his fingers had yet to touch—had commanded me, "Read this aloud to us, Miss Galliano."

I had looked down at the faded blue mimeograph (yes, mimeograph! indicating Tony probably had used this same handout since his first year of teaching!) and read:

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

"Translate," Tony said.

I hesitated. "*I hate and I love. Why do I do this? I don't know. But I feel it and . . . it crucifies me.*"

"Would you use that expression? In a modern translation?"

I put my finger on the blue *excrucior*. "No, I would say something like, *I am torn in two*."

"That'll do," Tony said.

I had forgotten everything Tony had told us about chiastic pattern. But now, staring at Tony canoodling with his personal handler, I understood all too well what Catullus meant. *Odi et amo. Amo et odi.* My conflicting emotions made me feel like an egg rolling from side to side in a pan of boiling water, my shell splintering from the force.

I plopped back down in my folding chair and looked at the gal-grad student next to me, who clutched a battered copy of *Songs for the Common Man.*

"I take it you're a fan of Alborn," I said.

She sighed. "He's a *legend*."

"So was Elvis," I pointed out. "And he died on the toilet."

* * *

PoetryFest began with tedious welcomes, tiresome reminders about room and schedule changes, and announcements that such-and-such a poet could not appear due to unforeseen circumstances (i.e., *he got hauled in for drunk driving AGAIN*). Then came the inevitable windy introduction of the main

speaker, which culminated in "It gives me great pleasure to present to you Poet Laureate of the United States, Anthony Alborn!"

Thunderous applause.

Tony bounded up the stage steps and took the podium. My whole body immediately felt flooded with heat. I associated Tony with muggy Floridian nights, when we had sat on his sagging front porch, drinking tall-necked Coronas with a twist of lime, watching the fireflies switch on and off, until we went back inside and soaked his sheets with sweat. I also associated him with the emotion most dear to every poet's heart: love. I really had been head-over-heels for him once, or at least so attracted to him that the physical pull had become equivalent to the sentiment. Plus—beyond a couple of awkward undergraduate gropes at my alma mater of Albertus Magnus College—Tony was the first and only man I had ever slept with. So how could I not feel possessive of him, at least until someone else came along to take his place?

It was easy to see why I and the Glamazon and girl-groupies all across America continued to be drawn to him. Tony Alborn was indeed a handsome man. Despite being old enough to grace the cover of *AARP Magazine*—and a smoker—Tony was tall and fit and rangy as a track star. His graying hair held just the right touch of silver. Plus success had turned him into a good dresser. His dark brown jacket fit his shoulders just right—thanks, I was sure, to some skilled Italian tailor.

Tony leaned into the microphone. "Good afternoon and thank you for coming." He smiled. Gone were the days of reading his poems aloud to three people in a skanky bar or a crowded bookstore, where customers wandered over and interrupted his most moving lines by asking, "Dude, where's the toilet?"

I slumped down in my seat, even though I knew that if Tony happened to spot me in this sea of established and wannabe writers, he might not even recognize me. After I had broken off with him (okay, truth: after *he* had dumped me), I'd done what women since the beginning of time had done when they wanted to shed the burden of a man: bobbed my hair and dropped ten pounds. Like Tony, I too had changed my style of dress. Gone were my Gainesville grad-school togs: the jean shorts, the spaghetti-strapped camis, the red rubber flip-flops. Now I wore clothes worthy of my new job teaching impressionable young women at a Gold Coast private school: those sleek pointy-toed boots, skinny Seven jeans, and a thin Ungaro sweater that hugged my chest just right. Granted, I had charged the boots to my maxed-

out VISA and bought the jeans and the sweater for all of $12.50 at the Lake Forest Thrift Shop—but nobody had to know that.

After rustling his papers, Tony began to speak. As was to be expected, he assailed the Amazon-ification of America. The death of the independent bookstore. The evils of the Internet. To listen to Tony, you would have thought that for each point that Microsoft and Apple stock rose, another acre of poetic Rome ignited into flame.

I held back a yawn. I'd heard all this fol-de-rol before. But five minutes into his talk, Tony took an unexpected turn. He claimed he had been converted to the wonders of technology. Not surprisingly, it had taken someone "a wee bit younger" to pull him into the digital age and convince him that his new task as poet laureate was to blaze a trail into the worldwide web. He paused to soak in the sight of the Glamazon sitting in the front row. She, in turn, gazed up at him adoringly.

I felt my molars grind together. I had such a fierce competitive streak that I only just recently had trained myself not to fling my racket down on the lawn and holler "Cheater!" when my niece beat me at badminton. I knew it was childish and pathetic, but I couldn't stand *not* being Numero Uno at whatever I did. And I couldn't stand that this willowy bitch with her silicone tits had replaced me!

But even worse than my knowledge that I had been so easily replaced in Tony Alborn's book of love, was the queasy feeling that the newly computer-literate Tony now might stumble upon my worst indiscretion—already gone viral—as he surfed the Internet.

* * *

Last night after we had left the bar and gone back to her sublet in Marina City, I had confessed to LeeLee, "My worst fear is that I'll never make a name for myself as a writer."

"I hate to tell you this, Christina," LeeLee said. "But I think you already *have*."

"How so?"

"You're on YouTube."

"YouTube!" I repeated.

"Singing."

"Singing!"

"In that karaoke bar we all went to right before we left Gainesville."

I gasped, remembering that hot August night when LeeLee and I and the rest of the graduating MFA students had stumbled into that downtown karaoke bar, eager to have one last hurrah before we each went our separate ways. Happy Hour lasted from five to seven, and two-for-one margaritas were a deal none of us could resist. After the first round, we all had gotten drunk enough to write and perform parodies of popular songs. I had chosen Billy Joel's "The Entertainer," with what now looked to be disastrous consequences.

"Show me the damage," I said.

LeeLee brought up YouTube on her laptop. I stared at the site motto—BROADCAST YOURSELF—as she typed into the search bar. And as my mother would say, *Eccolà*. The opening screen showed me, the usually mild-mannered Christina Galliano, holding a stubby microphone that looked like something from a Fisher-Price plastic playset. My eyes looked wild, as if I had snorted five lines of coke instead of having downed four margaritas.

The screen was titled *DRUNKEN GIRL MAKES FUN OF POET LAUREATE.*

I gasped again. "Who had a video-camera that night?"

"That Asian girl with the new iPhone—what's her name, the one who got pissed because Tony gave you the only A-plus in workshop?"

"Tony didn't give me an A-plus."

"But you told me he gave you the highest grade possible," LeeLee said.

I bit my lip. LeeLee had been my roommate and best friend all through grad school. Yet I couldn't bring myself to confess to her that I had given the highest grade possible to *myself*—after I had performed a certain sex act on Tony, of course.

Even now I still cringed to remember how I had graduated from Tony's research assistant to Tony's lover. Tony—fumbling around on his office computer—first had been unable to log onto the university grading system, and then had even more trouble locating the screen to enter his final grades.

"You do it for me, Christina," he said.

I sat down at his computer. Then I looked down at his gradesheet and noted that everyone in our poetry writing workshop—from me, who had worked so tirelessly to be the workshop star, all the way down to the most hopeless writer, Suki Hashimoto—had been given As. The uniformity of these grades galled me. To think that I had slaved over multiple drafts of

every poem, while Suki probably had scribbled her first and only draft on bar napkins!

"Why aren't there any Bs here?" I asked Tony.

"Because I can't stand listening to students whining."

"But you're a teacher," I said. "You're supposed to uphold standards."

"I've been teaching for almost thirty years, Christina. I give up."

I stared at my well-deserved A. Then I stared at Suki's. I did not want to make waves. And yet I felt my inner-Galliano rising. It wasn't fair! I had busted my butt to be the Somebody who rose above the pack!

"Can I change my grade to an A plus?" I asked Tony.

And it was then that he had turned my head away from the computer screen toward his bulging fly and murmured, "I'll give you . . . if you give me . . ." Thank God there had been no camera present at *that* scene—or else every guy in Waterbury who cruised the Internet for salacious material would tell my mother, "I thought you said your daughter went back to school to become a writer, not a porn star."

Now the YouTube logo sat on LeeLee's computer screen, taunting me. "Play it," I weakly commanded her.

LeeLee hit the forward button and I saw my shit-faced self spring into action on the stage. I stuck out my less-than-voluptuous breasts—in a T-shirt that appropriately read *YOU LOOK LIKE I'VE BEEN DRINKING*—then stared cross-eyed at the microphone and the rumpled piece of paper I held in my hand. The wild synthesizer opening of "The Entertainer" began to play, and I started to sing. Or rather, bray like a drunken donkey. Bad enough was the off-key way I sung. Worse still was *what* I was singing:

I am the poet laureate
And I know just where I stand
My books are not remaindered
At Daedalus or the Strand
Today I am the hottie
In the world of poetry
But if I go flat
My wallet won't get fat
I'll get put in the back
On the discount rack
With Robert Hass and Robert Penn Warren!

I am the poet laureate
The idol of our day
I make a whopping 10K
When I go on the stage
Today I am your troubadour
Mesmerizing with my verse
But I know the biz
It's short as a whiz
After a while
And a thousand miles
My reputation goes—

I had written additional verses. But I did not have the chance to "entertain" anyone with my off-kilter meter and bad rhymes because when I reached the word *kaput*, my face suddenly went white as tuna fish. As the music merrily kept playing, I staggered to the side of the stage and fertilized a potted palm tree with my margarita-laced vomit. The video caught every ragged retch of my retching. Never mind a sizeable inch of my butt crack.

Then the video went dead.

I stared at the YouTube screen. I was so speechless I could not even say, "I'm speechless."

LeeLee laughed. "That was some performance, Christina."

"You can say that again."

LeeLee did not repeat the praise. But she did replay the opening of the tape, which showed me strutting up and down the stage like some female Mick Jagger—or worse, my own mother, who at every wedding reception overindulged in drinks festooned with paper umbrellas, then took to the microphone to serenade the troops with her cheerfully drunken version of the Neapolitan *canzone*, "*C'e La Luna Mezz'o Mare*."

LeeLee pointed to the screen. "Your bra strap is showing."

"That's the least of my worries."

"And it looks like you lost one of your earrings."

"Turn that off," I said, "before I have to look one more time at my butt crack!"

LeeLee paused the video. "Hey, you've gotten a lot more hits since just this morning."

I stared in horror at the number of people who had watched the video: 1,367.

"Who would waste their time looking at this?" I asked.

"Oh, people watch all sorts of shit on YouTube."

"How'd you find it?"

"Remember Marisa Pearl from workshop, who wrote that poem that compared her own vagina to a prune?"

"A plum."

"Whatever. She e-mailed the link to me."

"Can I sue Suki for posting this?" I asked.

"Can you afford a lawyer?"

I bit my lip again. "What if Tony sees it?"

"You said he never used the Internet."

"What if my mother sees it?"

"You said she didn't even own a microwave."

"But what if the headmaster at my school sees this?" I held my hand against my aching forehead. "God, I could get fired."

"Relax, Christina. Your name isn't anywhere on this video. I honestly wouldn't recognize you but for one thing."

My hand rose up, involuntarily, to the crucifix around my neck. I gave LeeLee a dubious look. Then I did what Gallianos always did after they made fools of themselves—gave off a what-the-hell laugh that could be heard all the way from the abandoned brass factories of Waterbury down to the wharves of Bridgeport.

"Next time," I said, "remind me to *think* before I drink."

* * *

When Tony took a surreptitious glance at his Omega, I knew he had reached that point in his speech where he had nothing left to say (or nothing *prepared* to say). He concluded his talk and basked in the applause. But he did not move away from the podium. Instead, he looked out expectantly at his fans.

"We seem to have a few minutes left," he said. "Would you like to hear some poems?"

More thunderous applause. After the ruckus died down, some people

even called out the titles of his greatest hits, as if Tony were Bruce Springsteen and they wanted to hear him play "Back Streets" or "Born in the U.S.A."

Tony graciously honored requests by reciting from memory "Valediction for the University of Florida Card Catalog," and "Elegy for My Canadian Mother." As he spoke, I was reminded of why I once had admired him so deeply. How deft he was with language. How clever with metaphors. How skilled at consistently delivering a surprise at the end of each poem. No, I hadn't been dumb to love him. In fact, I was almost dumb enough to tumble back in all over again, until he said something that made my stomach lurch.

"I'd like to end with something new," he said. "This sonnet is called 'Love Sucks.'"

My face felt on fire. How dare he—! After I had told him—! No, after I had *threatened* him, that last evening we spent together in his bungalow—! I'd been so furious, so crazed with rage, that I had reached down deep into my genetic pool and channeled my inner *Camorra* by telling him in a gravelly, godfather-like voice: "If you ever, *ever* write a poem about that blowjob I gave you in exchange for the A plus, I swear you won't have a *cazzo* left!"

Now Anthony Alborn stood before me, almost daring me to emasculate him. I felt myself rising in my seat, determined to put a stop to this.

Then my mother did it for me.

As Tony took a deep breath—ready to launch into the first line—my Danger-oo began to vibrate and there rose from deep within its leathery bowels the merry voice of Connie Francis:

C'e la luna mezz'o mare
Mamma mia me maritari

The Grand Ballroom let out a collective groan. Tony Alborn no longer was the center of attention, because the entire audience was staring at *me*. Or at least staring in my general direction, trying to discern which buffoon in the back dared to interrupt the Poet Laureate of the United States with such lowbrow guinea nonsense.

Meanwhile Connie kept singing:

O Mamma, piscia fritta baccala!
O Mamma, piscia fritta baccala!

I sat there, paralyzed. What should I do? Pretend the cell phone belonged to someone else? Or take a more extreme measure: reach into my purse, pull out my nail file, and commit hara-kiri?

Finally both the phone itself—and an emboldened audience member—made the decision for me. "Shut that fucking thing off!" he shouted just as my phone went silent. The Grand Ballroom burst into applause yet again. For me. Or should I say, *against* me. What could I do, but join in the applause and hope that no one knew I had been the *stunod* who had caused such a ruckus?

No one, that is, beyond my immediate seatmates—all of whom glared at me—and Tony himself. Of course I might have imagined it, but I was positive that during my sixty seconds of shame, Tony's eyes had fixed on me. Surely he had seen me lurking there in the back of the ballroom, sliding down into my seat. And surely he knew I was the only person in such a highbrow circle who would program a cell phone to Connie Francis singing about a moon in the middle of the sea, a daughter who asks her mother, "Mamma, what kind of man should I marry?" and the unconventional mother who gave these ribald answers:

> *Marry the butcher! He'll give you the sausage!*
> *Marry the gardener! He'll give you the cucumber!*
> *Marry the writer! He'll always hold the pen in his hands!*

As I looked up at the stage at the glowering face of the United States Poet Laureate, I suddenly was reminded of the thing I liked least about Anthony Alborn, both as a man and a writer.

The guy had zero sense of humor.