

What Doesn't Kill You

Chapter 1

...all you can do is mop up the aftermath, dump it in a giant personal hazmat container and move on.

I shoulda known better. But I guess life would be boring if we had all the answers. How about half the answers? Maybe that would have kept my butt out of the gigantic sling it ended up in.

Who am I kidding? No, it wouldn't. Anyway, until the day after my daughter's wedding -- and all that champagne -- I really thought I had a handle on my life. Then it broke off.

But if you can't drink champagne at your daughter's wedding, when can you? Amber's wedding -- it's been two years and it still seems impossible she could be married. My little girl looked so beautiful I had to pinch myself to keep from boohooing. That day she and J.J. -- Baby Son-in-Law I call him, because he still has a face like his fourth-grade picture -- made a whole bunch of promises to love, honor and put up with each other's mess. Then she wasn't my little girl anymore. She was J.J.'s wife. My own vows didn't hit me that hard.

In the limo after the ceremony I popped the cork on one of those cute little champagne splits to calm my nerves. Not that I was nervous like test-taking nervous, but your only daughter's wedding does fall into the major life-change category -- those events that give us gray hair and stress us out, like moving, losing your job, grinning and bearing it while dealing with your ex-husband and his wannabe diva girlfriend for three whole days without slapping either one of them. Besides, I knew the bubbly would help me smile through all the picture taking even though my feet sizzled like raw meat on a hot grill, thanks to those very cute, very high shoes Amber talked me into because they looked so sassy with my lilac dupioni silk suit. And I looked damn good, thank you very much. Better than J.J.'s mother in that tired blue ruffled muumuu, and let's not even discuss that woman Amber's father paraded around. I mean, who wears a miniskirt and thigh boots to a wedding? Don't take my word. Check out the video. I looked great -- way too young to be the mother of the bride. Except for that corsage.

I hate corsages. They're for old ladies who wear mink stoles and musty dusting powder. That will not be me. Ever. The last thing I needed was a big, sloppy orchid planted over my double Ds. Why do you think I wear this minimizer harness? But Amber just about had an ing-bing at the florist's -- you know, one of those fits like she used to pitch when she was two and she didn't approve of my day-care wardrobe selection. Ever try explaining to a two-year-old that the pink flowered pants are in the dirty clothes and she should be thankful she has something clean to wear, since Mommy has been featuring the same tired black skirt every other day for two weeks and scraping together enough quarters to hit the Laundromat by the weekend because the check for the used-car-dealer jingle Daddy wrote is still "in the mail"? And that she needs to get her skinny behind dressed, since Mommy is ready to scream because she doesn't want to be late for work again? You can't. So somehow I'd manage to tease, trick or threaten her into her clothes and I'd wash out the pink pants that night by hand, which pretty much guaranteed the next day she wanted to wear her jeans with the stars embroidered on the back pockets. We sure came a long way from those days.

So I wore the corsage, because Amber has always had first-class taste, thanks in no small part to good home training, because I love her more than anybody in the world, and because arguing with my daughter can be like convincing a pit bull to let go of your leg -- which isn't a bad quality. Early on I made sure she learned how to stick up for herself. Besides, it was her wedding. OK, their wedding.

It's just that I wasn't ready for anybody's wedding. Oh, I was used to the two of them hanging around the house, from the time they were in high school, and all through college, listening to the stereo, watching TV, playing games on the computer. By the time they were in tenth grade, he'd dropped the "Mrs. Hodges," and since he had sense enough to know not to call me Thomasina, he invented his own name for me. "Yo, Mama Tee, what's for dinner?" He'd ask this while taking inventory in my refrigerator, just as big and bold. "Did you ask your mother?" I'd say, but by then he'd be setting the table -- placemats, silverware, napkin folded just so. He was always sweet, and I figured he'd be around until Amber chewed him up and was ready for the next flavor. Shows you what I know. Either he is the right flavor, or she hasn't chewed the sweet out of him yet.

Anyway, in the fall after they had both graduated and found their first jobs, I was up early one Saturday, getting ready to go get my hair done, and the doorbell rang. Amber came flying downstairs, wearing the white blouse, tweed skirt and black leather Minnie Mouse pumps she'd put on when she was trying to look sophisticated. I knew something was brewing, since it was only a little later than the time she usually got home from Friday night. Before I could say anything, she yanked open the door and J.J. strolled in wearing a navy blue suit. A suit? On a Saturday morning? It made me dizzy. J.J. kissed her, handed me a box of still-warm doughnuts and a bouquet of red and white carnations wrapped in that shiny green tissue paper. That's when my knees went to Jell-O and I almost missed the seat of my chair as I sat down. The two of them plopped on my sofa, all bright-eyed and shiny-faced.

"What's wrong?" I said, which I know is not what you're supposed to say when somebody gives you flowers and doughnuts, but it's all I could think of. The next thing I knew, he was down on one knee, holding a black velvet box. "Oh no," is what came out of my mouth, which wasn't exactly what I meant, but really, it was. I dropped the flowers all over the floor. J.J. swiped at a tear on his cheek after he slid the twinkling half-carat diamond on Amber's finger. "Look at it, Mama!" Her hand was shaking when she showed it to me. Then she finally remembered to say, "Yes." And I ate six doughnuts -- I don't know what flavors -- then went to the hairdresser, because what else was there for me to do?

Later, when Amber and I were alone and I could speak in complete sentences, I sat next to her and took her hand. At first she thought I wanted to examine the ring, but I covered it with my other hand. "You two are so young to get married. You just graduated from college. Your whole life is ahead of you." I must have read that in *The Fools' Guide to Motherhood*, because those words never came out of my mother's mouth.

"Not as young as you and Daddy," she informed me and snatched back her hand.

So I pointed out the obvious. "You see how well that worked out." But the "case closed" look had come over her, like when she just had to have the Chinese symbol for luck tattooed on her left thigh for her eighteenth birthday. I said, "To my knowledge no one in our family is Chinese," and she informed me she was eighteen, she could vote, so she could decide what to do with her body. I said, "We used to be able to drink at eighteen too. There's a reason they changed it." Ultimately I let it go. Her left thigh was her business, and I guess getting married would have to be too. After all, J.J. had an education and a job. He had a good head on his shoulders and to the best of my knowledge, he wasn't a drug addict or a serial killer -- these days you never know -- so the rest was on her. One of the great jokes of life is that by the time you're old enough to recognize how little you know, all you can do is mop up the aftermath, dump it in a giant personal hazmat container and move on.

Next thing I knew, I was up to my eyelids in bridal magazines and sample menus. I had no idea there were so many banquet halls and bridal shops within a fifty-mile radius of home. Or that there would be so many decisions to make -- calligraphied envelopes for the invitations or Mom's lovely penmanship? Edible, potable or savable favors? Tall, see-through or short, see-over centerpieces? Hotel choice for out-of-town guests? Rehearsal dinner, breakfast the day after or both? Or that it could possibly cost that much to get married. But it sure was fun, and it turned out just like Amber and I planned -- picture perfect. I mean, J.J.'s parents are lovely people, but their idea of decoration was crepe-paper streamers and balloons, and my daughter's wedding was not going to be that kind of affair. Besides, his father had gotten transferred to Dallas a few years back, so it's not like they could keep up with all the details. I acquired some shiny new platinum plastic, with a limit high enough to pay for a very nice car, in order to sponsor the occasion. It would be the only bill in my long history of bill paying that would make me smile every month when I wrote the check. Isn't that why I went to work every day? So I could afford the nicer things in life? Anyway, whatever it cost to make my baby so happy, I was willing to spend it. Except it made me remember how happy her father and I looked that Friday we ran off to city hall, all hope and expectation.

I had shed my usual stonewashed Jordache for a green silk dress with bat-wing sleeves and shoulder pads the size of throw pillows and pulled my hair into a Jheri-curl ponytail with a big black clip-on bow. He had hair back then, long as mine, and it was cut in an Afro shag that bobbed when he played keyboard. Folks used to say he looked halfway like O.J., back when that was cute. He had rolled up the sleeves on his rented tuxedo and wore the ruffled shirt open so you could see his gold chains and the curly hair on his chest. Mercifully, there are no pictures, but we had it all figured out. He was the music man -- the next Stevie Wonder. And I would be right by his side -- his fan, his muse, his manager. We were gonna light everybody's fire. It made sense to me at the time. Love can make you a first-class fool.

But none of that mattered on Amber's wedding day. It was the most perfect October day I ever hope to see. We had made it through corsets, crinolines, upsweeps and the first big crisis of the day when they sent the white stretch limo instead of the white superstretch SUV I paid for. Amber got on the phone, turned into the Bride of Frankenstein, and thirty minutes later we had the right car.

By the time we arrived, the church was full. The bridesmaids arranged themselves in their six degrees of purple gowns. Dad, looking very dapper in his first-ever purchased tuxedo, was about to walk Mom, elegant in amethyst, to their seats when she reached up, patted my cheek and said, "You know, Tootsie, you're getting old." That's what I love about my mother. She captures those sentiments you won't find on a Hallmark card. After that, I gave Amber a kiss and a final fluff, trying hard not to look like I was losing my last friend, which is kind of how it felt. Anyway, I snapped out of it when she took her father's arm, because that made me mad. Why should he get to give away somebody I raised? But she wanted it that way, so before I got madder, I let the best man, Baby Son-in-Law's cousin Ron, escort me down the aisle. I squeezed his arm so tight I probably stopped the poor man's circulation, but he winked and smiled and whispered, "It'll be fine." And for some reason, I believed him. So I vaguely remember grinning as we marched in, but really I couldn't feel my face, or my feet touch the floor, because I couldn't figure out how twenty-one years had gone by, and my child -- the one I grunted and pushed to deliver without the benefit of drugs so I remember every blasted, blessed moment -- could possibly, legally, be getting married.

At the reception, people from the job just didn't know what to say. I couldn't wait for them to spread the word on Monday -- tell the others how together Tee was. You know, some people think we don't have anything or know the proper way things are done. I wanted them to see that Thomasina Hodges was -- and always would be -- a class act, especially that snake in suede loafers. He sent regrets, but his assistant showed up and fell all over herself telling me how fabulous the wedding was. So I smiled, said my "thank yous" graciously, had another sip of champagne and watched as she took one more California roll from the passing tray. After that, Julie, who had been the receptionist on executive row, and the only other brown face, came up and said, "I don't know how you can look so calm." I told her sometimes the commercials get it right. Never let 'em see you sweat. We clinked our glasses on that, hugged and I buzzed off, ready for my next post receiving-line meet and greet.

My best buds from the neighborhood -- Diane, Marie, Cecily and Joyce -- our kids had been in school together -- nodded their collective approval and congratulated me on throwing a stellar wedding. We called ourselves the "Live Five" and we toasted to my good taste. Twice.

Then I had to get through the first dance, and the song Amber's father wrote especially for her. All that ooohing and aaahing about how sweet it was just pissed me off because he always did know how to upstage me. I pay for the whole soiree, but he gets over with a song. OK, he offered to chip in on the wedding. I just couldn't bring myself to accept. I mean, he wasn't a deadbeat dad -- just a deadbeat husband. I never had to hunt him down or get the states of California and New York involved in making him cough up child support. Sure, in the beginning he almost never saw her -- LA was way more than a chunk of change away, and his monthly contributions barely kept Amber in juice boxes and sneakers, but it came regular as the IRT, which is to say sometimes it was late, but it always arrived eventually. After he finally started making some money as a musician, he'd take Amber with him during the summers when he toured -- Budapest, Sydney, Johannesburg...And even though food on the table and new school clothes every fall doesn't leave quite the same impression as your very own frequent-flyer miles, a visit to the cockpit, getting pinned with your very own wings (which my darling child wore every day for six months) or seeing a kangaroo in its native habitat -- at least the man was present in her life. But tattoo and all, Amber had been a great kid -- not a nickel's worth of trouble -- as long as I don't count her adoration of her father. So her wedding -- exactly the way she always dreamed about -- I wanted to give her those memories. All by myself.

But wouldn't you know it? After his serenade, Dear Old Dad presented the happy couple with a big fat check toward the down payment on a house -- guess he must've sold a couple of songs -- finally. That brought the room to its feet. Terrific. OK. I guess it wasn't like we hated each other. But it didn't take long after we parted ways for the reasons we got together in the first place to seem like they had been written in the sand. I guess we both loved each other once upon a time -- that was a whole 'nuther happily ever after. The only thing we still had in common was that we both loved Amber, so we agreed to be civilized about our daughter and not to bad-mouth each other in front of her, and after I made it clear that as far as I was concerned it was not then, nor would it ever be, OK for him to have put his dreams first and his family somewhere farther down on his list, he gave up trying to convince me we could be friends. So the good thing about him singing was that I didn't have to dance with him, because I don't know if I could have managed to glide across the floor, like when we used to do the Hustle --

-- so I sucked down another glass of champagne, kept my mother-of-the-bride smile firmly in place and watched from the sidelines. And even though I thought I was doing a pretty good job, my bad attitude must have been showing just a little, because both my mother and Julie came over to ask if I was OK -- I assured them I was.

The maître d' kept my glass full. Frankly, he was supposed to. As much money as I laid out -- including the coconut shrimp and mini lamb chops during the cocktail hour, beef Wellington and sea bass for dinner and

the Viennese table with the chocolate fountain -- he should have been at the door of my complimentary suite with a rose and a mimosa the next morning. But now we're back to shoulda, and that woulda killed me for sure.

Anyway, my problems started the next day when I woke up, and shoulda, coulda and woulda did not stop the train wreck in my head, or keep the elephant from tap dancing across my aching body. I mean, I'd probably had more to drink in one night than I had consumed in the last decade. My mouth felt like I'd been sucking vintage sewer water and I wanted to call room service or 911 for an Advil and orange juice IV because I could not remember where the bathroom was or imagine dragging myself to it and trying to find the pill bottle in my toiletry bag. That would have meant I had to open my eyes. I had tried that already. The little bit of light sneaking through the drapes made me want to vomit.

Then he coughed. And my heart about exploded out of my chest because I didn't know he was there. Or who he was.

I jumped up so fast my brains banged against the inside of my skull, and as I caught sight of those high heels, my suit and new purple lace bra and panties in a heap on the floor, I came to the horrifying realization that my lumpy brown body was bare-butt naked. So I snatched the spongy beige blanket off the king-sized bed, uncovering a king-sized man, and I suddenly realized HE was J.J.'s cousin Ron, the best man. And I thought, *Oh my Lord, what else don't I remember?*

"I didn't expect to hear from you before noon." He rolled up on his elbow and didn't seem the slightest bit surprised to be where he was. Or to be skin-side up.

Then he smiled that killer smile, the one I had been avoiding since he showed up at the wedding rehearsal and J.J. introduced him and I thought, *That's cousin Ron? The one who was like a second father to J.J.?* Second fathers are not supposed to have bulging biceps or voices like hot buttered rum on a cold day. At the ceremony he kissed my cheek before depositing me at my designated pew. I sat there, doing my best to look motherly and not think about how good he smelled and how good those lips felt on my cheek.

Ron was pretty popular with the ladies at the reception too -- I saw more than one of the bridesmaids giggle at something he said, then bat her eyelashes as he obligingly twirled them around the dance floor. I swear I even saw my mother grin at him when he stopped by their table to chat -- not that I was paying attention or anything. And when the time came, he gave such a beautiful toast about how he'd watched Amber and J.J. learn to love each other, from puppy love to grown-up love. How attending the wedding meant we would all be there to help them love each other for many years to come. And he was right. I had seen it, in my own living room. I glanced over at Mama and Daddy, who had finally left Brooklyn and moved to a retirement condo in Maryland. They had been so worried when Amber and I set out on our own, but I showed them I could take care of her and I could throw this wedding without anybody's help, thank you very much. Mom said I was crazy -- "It's a wedding, not a coronation" -- but they sat there just beaming. That filled me up too. I had a little speech planned, except there really wasn't anything left to say and I had no voice to say it with. So I clinked my glass, toasted to their future and washed down the disappointments of my past. Because suddenly, in the midst of a sit-down dinner for 220 people, I felt totally alone. I mean, I had my daughter to love, J.J. too, and my family, but who did I have, for me -- personally?

Could I say I loved Gerald?

Of course, I did. In my way. He was the one and only man in my life, and we'd sure been together long enough. Well, not exactly together. You can't exactly be together with a man who has a wife and three kids -- they're not even kids anymore. Yeah, I know that sounds bad, but I didn't think of it like that. We never talked about Annie; in fact, the only thing I knew about her was her name. I heard about his children growing up. He heard about Amber. The time flew by. We shared some pretty significant moments along the way. I guess you could say we reached an understanding. We could be together on my birthday, unless there was a recital or a ball game, but not his. Major holidays were out, but that left a whole lot of evenings, the occasional Saturday, whenever our calendars coincided. I wasn't staying home waiting by the telephone. He didn't have to lie to me. I didn't have stray socks on my floor, fuzz in my sink, toilet seats left up, anybody telling me what I could and couldn't do with my money and my time or expectations that would never be fulfilled.

Amber and I had also reached a kind of understanding about me and Gerald. Back when she was thirteen, she came home early from a sleepover -- flew up the stairs, barged into my room to tell me all about the party and found him there. No, she didn't catch us doing anything, but it sure wasn't what she expected from dear old Mom. After that, they'd run into each other from time to time -- until the day Amber and I saw Gerald in the mall with his family. I tried to act like I didn't see him and dragged Amber into a sporting-goods store, praying she didn't see him either. But before I could even pretend I was seriously interested in

the teepee of aluminum baseball bats, she was in my face. "Wasn't that your friend? Who was that with him?" It was a game of Twenty Questions I'd rather not have played. Especially since Amber was not buying my answers. Anyway, our discussion progressed into a screaming match in the car that I, not so proudly, ended with "because I'm grown and as long as you live in my house and I pay your bills, what I say goes."

Gerald was not at the wedding.

But Ron was, and now he was pointing in my direction, if you get my drift. And he had to go.

"You have to go," I said. It came out somewhere between a shriek and a question. Then I got this flash that my hair must be smushed to the side of my head, so I kind of ran my fingers through it, casually, and wrapped the blanket around me like a super-sized tortilla.

"Don't cover up." He patted the bed. "Come on and relax. We can order in some breakfast, take a shower. And later I'll help you get those presents into your car."

I saw the tower of packages and had this vague memory of the bridal party cavalcade carrying them to the suite. Ron came last -- carrying a silver-wrapped box that felt like his and hers barbells. I think the others were gone. I hope the others were gone. I prayed the others were gone. I remembered looking at all those beautiful boxes and starting to cry, because the day had been overwhelming -- the whole week, really. Ron surrounded me in a hug and I remembered that it felt so good. And then I was standing in the middle of the floor, in my tortilla, crying again, which made it worse, because I do not cry. I'd rather shoot staples under my fingernails than snivel and whine. But there I was, sniveling like a champ, and I couldn't stop. "Please don't tell anybody." I was begging. "I'm so embarrassed." It was pathetic. I was pathetic. A spectacle. I was just grateful there was no mirror where I could see myself.

He hopped into his tuxedo pants and brought me some tissues. "No need to be embarrassed."

That made me snort. "Oh, of course not," I said. "The mother of the bride traditionally sleeps with the best man."

Which made him laugh. Me too, for a moment. I wiped my face and tried to get my head together.

"We're all single adults here." Ron folded me in his arms again. Those arms -- against that strong chest, which, I realized to my horror, now smelled more like my perfume than his aftershave. How much had I rubbed up against him? Couldn't the floor just open up and swallow me? But I wasn't getting off that easy. He kissed my eyelids and said, "Last night was great. And once you get to know me, you'll realize I would never disrespect you in any way."

Get to know him? Was he crazy? And what exactly had made last night so great? Other than the obvious? I yanked myself out of his arms, kind of like a fly coming to its buzzing senses just before the Venus flytrap clamps shut. The fact that I slept with a man I had known for all of two days was already too much for me to process. Now he thought I was ready to exchange vital statistics? I hadn't found myself in bed with anybody but Gerald in twelve years, and I can count on one hand with fingers left over the times we woke up together. And when was the last time he told me it was great? On top of that, I didn't even know how old Ron was -- somewhere north of J.J., but definitely south of me. And he was J.J.'s cousin and godfather. End of story. It was going to be hard enough trying to pretend this never happened when we both showed up at christenings, Thanksgiving dinners and other family get togethers.

I guess Ron read the near-hysteria on my face because then he said, "Would you be more comfortable if I left?"

I babbled something that ended in yes, then headed for the bathroom, dragging my blanket behind me, because at that moment the suite felt very small and I did not want to see whether he was annoyed or relieved.

I took a long shower by the red glow of the heat lamp, letting the water rush over me, even my hair. I'd figure out what to do with my wet naps later. Clearly, I had stepped over some invisible boundary and needed to wash myself back to the other side of the line, where I belonged. I closed my eyes, let the water stream over my head, my neck, my shoulders, my back. I tried to let my mind go blank, but scenes from the day before popped in and out of my head like a slide show -- Amber and J.J. scouring each other's faces in wedding cake, me floating down the aisle on Ron's arm, the Olympian prowess of the single women leaping and diving for the bouquet, the speech Amber made before she and J.J. left for their bridal suite at another hotel. She thanked me for being her mom, every day. Not just on special occasions, but during bad dreams, scraped knees, report cards -- good and bad -- acne breakouts and tattoos. She said she hoped one day she could be as good a mother to her children. Well, remembering that only prompted more

waterworks. Somehow tears feel different from shower water, and the hot drops traced down my face, but enough was enough. I blew my nose in my washcloth and felt around for the soap.

When I got down to my feet there was a tender spot on my baby toe and I knew it was a blister from all that dancing. The Hustle, the Electric Slide, the Booty Call -- ironic, huh? I hadn't grooved like that in years. My dad even took me for a turn around the floor, calling himself waltzing. And I danced with Ron, at least I remembered that part. Now, I would never have agreed to a slow dance, but it was one of those sneaky ones where the band starts off with some boogie music, then slides into a slow jam before you have a chance to make a graceful exit. Next thing I knew, I was cheek to cheek, smelling that good cologne. It didn't hurt that I caught my ex's eye. That made me snuggle a little closer, and you can see where that got me. You know as well as I do there's no fool like an old fool.

Then the lightning hit me right between the eyes and I dropped the soap. What did I drum into Amber's head whenever we talked about sex? Not the "sperm and egg, isn't it a miracle?" talk when she was young. But later, when boys' names started creeping into her conversation and one of her little girlfriends turned up pregnant. Yes, I did everything short of beg and bribe her to wait until she got older, which led to lots of eye rolling, heavy sighing and bolting from the car, which is where I usually arranged these intimate tête-à-têtes so she couldn't escape. I also told her that if ever, whenever -- I could barely say the words, but I made myself clear. She had to promise me to use a condom. "I don't care where he tells you it hasn't been or how much he says he loves you -- no latex, no sex." That wasn't just for Amber. Even after all these years, Gerald had to live with that rule too. But I had no idea exactly what we did last night, much less what we used, which only compounded my complete mortification.

I didn't even dry off. I snatched the terrycloth robe from behind the door, kicked the blanket out of my way and charged out of the bathroom. How in the world was I going to ask him if he had put a sock on it?

But Ron was gone. Damn. Just like he said he'd be.

I yanked open the drapes, turned on the lights and got on my hands and knees. Crawling around on the carpet like an insane crab, I found an earring back, somebody's long dried-up contact lens and a three of clubs, but not that little square wrapper. The panic was rising as I tore the sheets off the bed, but still nothing and I couldn't tell if I was shower wet or if I'd worked up a sweat. I wanted to scream, but the last thing I needed was hotel management showing up at the door. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was just looking for a used rubber. Do you think you could help me?" There is no tip big enough for that. So I sat on the bed for a second to collect what was left of my wits. That's when I saw his business card on the night stand. Ron owned an auto body shop. I don't know what I thought he did, but it wasn't that. He didn't look or act like any mechanic I'd ever seen. Anyway, he had written his cell number on the back, so I could have called him to ask, as casually as I could, if either of us had had the good sense to make at least one smart decision that night, but I was sure he already thought Amber's mother was crazy. A conversation about whether he'd used a raincoat was more humiliation than I could handle. So I took one last sweep of the suite -- felt under sofa cushions, moved the coffee table. I was digging around in the trash can with the hotel ballpoint and bingo! Securely wrapped in layers of tissue was the evidence I needed. Hallelujah!

Then I was completely through. I called for a pot of coffee and started throwing clothes, lilac suit and all, in my bag because I had to go home. And there was not one doubt in my stressed-out, hungover mind that none of this foolishness would have happened if I hadn't lost my job the week before the wedding.

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