

Libby
Sternberg
EDGAR FINALIST

RECOVERING DAD

A Bianca Balducci Mystery



Copyright 2008 by Libby Sternberg
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, people, or institutions is purely coincidental.

Published by Bancroft Press (“Books that enlighten”)
P.O. Box 65360, Baltimore, MD 21209
800-637-7377
410-764-1967 (fax)
www.bancroftpress.com

ISBN 978-1-890862-58-9 • 1-890862-58-4 (cl.)
ISBN 978-1-890862-63-3 • 1-890862-63-0 (pb.)
LCCN 2008937784 (cl.) • 2008937783 (pb.)

Cover and interior design by Tamira Ci Thayne, www.tsgcrescent.com, 814.941.7447
Author photo by Beltrami Studio, Rutland, VT



To Joseph Casimir and David Stephen



CHAPTER ONE

I THINK I CAN I think I can I think I can.

Deep breath, head high, shoulders squared. I tell myself I am worthy, I am not a geek, I am not uncool, I am not undeserving, no matter how low these people try to make me feel. I am Bianca Balducci, daughter of Balduccis, a clan of mall warriors who never let a discouraging word or squinty-eyed salesperson dim their mall-marauding pleasures. I feel the shopping mojo coursing through my veins. I can do this.

I walk over the threshold . . . and prepare to enter the Realm of Deliberately Demoralizing Cooldom—Abercrombie & Fitch.

You check your self-esteem at the door of an Abercrombie & Fitch store. I'm convinced they're designed to make you feel so far behind the fashion curve, you'll get down on your knees and beg forgiveness for not buying their clothes sooner.

"C'mon, Bianca," my best friend Kerrie says. "There's a sale."

Kerrie can afford stuff without a sale. I, on the other hand, have constructed an entire wardrobe from the discount-rack offerings of a few dozen different stores, some of whose names I'll take to my grave.

The background music is ramped up to earache level, making the faux wood floor shake with every throb of the bass. A music video plays on a large-screen TV near the changing rooms. A

perfectly moussed sales “associate” greets us and, in a voice that indicates she’ll evaluate us for hipness before deciding if we really deserve attention, asks if we need any help. Kerrie smiles and says no, heading not for the sales rack but for the new spring corduroy jackets at the front.

Front of the store stuff is always pricey. I head for the back, where odd-sized, odd-colored, odd-everything clothes go to die. Sometimes a refugee from the Cool Clothes Kingdom finds its way here by mistake and I’m able to rescue it before it’s whisked into oblivion, eventually to be abandoned on a peg-board rack in a dollar store in New Jersey.

“Hey, what do you think of this?” Kerrie rushes over and twirls around in a soft pink cord jacket that fits her like the designer used a mold of her body to create the pattern. Of course. Kerrie is beautiful. Beautiful skin, great bod, great hair. I’m just good-looking with a so-so figure and brownish chin-length hair that I wear brushed back—except when it falls in my face. And if you’re *just* good-looking, having a beautiful friend is a bad break. It turns “good-looking” into “isn’t she the one with that hot friend?”

“Looks great!” I say.

This shopping trip is supposed to be a cheer-me-up expedition. Kerrie suggested it and even arranged transportation. That is, she got her dad’s big honking SUV for the afternoon so we could leave our downtown Baltimore homes and head for the shopping mecca just north of the city, paying our respects at the four-level temple of consumerism known as Towson Town Center.

Kerrie knows I’m in a blue mood this week. I took my SATs last week, and I’m convinced I’ve earned myself the lowest score ever. In fact, I’ve already imagined the headlines—“Academic Phenomenon: Student Fails to Score Minimum 200 on SAT.” (You get 200 points, I’m told, just for filling out your name.)

Oh, I did the Princeton Review course. I took the practice tests.

I even subjected myself to the humiliation of having my brother Tony offer me advice. Tony's advice, oddly enough, is strangely akin to Tony's scorn. That is, it's filled with phrases like, "You'll fail for sure, you blockhead, if you . . ."

Kerrie, because she is an obsessive-compulsive overachiever, took the SATs months ago and did really well. Right after she finished, she said she felt the same way about them as she did about the PSATs, which immediately prompted an onslaught of mail from Ivy League schools and their wannabe sister colleges. My PSATs, on the other hand, elicited a weak stream of brochures and flyers from places like "The Little College of the Elms." My mother says I'm just not a good test-taker.

In fact, she's twisting my gut into bowties when I think of the SATs. Mom went to college at night, finishing her degree about ten years after I was born. That's because my father died when I was a baby—a cop, killed in the line of duty. My mom had to find a job after that. Her degree could never be her top priority.

It's a big deal in our family that all three Balducci kids go to college. My older sister Connie got her degree in criminal justice, and my brother Tony is finishing his in economics at University of Maryland Baltimore County, commuting every day so he doesn't have to pay for housing.

Me, I'm just a junior in high school—I'm not quite sure what college I want to go to yet, or even what I want to study. I like English and Writing and History. I think liberal arts is eventually the way to go, and I'll settle on a major once safely ensconced behind ivy-covered walls. If I think about these things too much, I'll jinx the first part of my dream—that is, getting into college in the first place. One step at a time.

Hey—I find a pair of jeans. Nice hip-hugger cut. Nice washed-out look. But here's the best part—very cool belt. Some satiny tie thing in a retro orange and yellow pattern. Hmm . . . the belt alone

is worth the price. I hook the jeans over my arm for a try-on just as the sales associate sashays by, throwing me an over-the-shoulder glance. Uh-oh. Maybe she won't let me buy these. Maybe she'll say I don't deserve them.

"Find anything?" Kerrie appears beside me, pink jacket over one hand and several pieces of jewelry in the other. Before I can answer, she holds up a pair of feathery blue earrings and asks, "What do you think of these?"

"Nice. Wonder how many birds went into those?"

Her eyes widen and she scrunches her mouth to one side, her fashion sense now running smack into her must-protect-all-creatures-great-and-small sense. She nods and takes them back to the rack.

We spend another quarter hour grazing at the various in-store displays, oohing-and-aahing over foxy dresses we'd love to own but would rarely wear, sleek pants with little details that will scream sophistication, and skirts and tops we have little daily use for because we both attend a private parochial school which requires uniforms. (Once I graduate, I'll never wear blue plaid again.)

We pay for our purchases—or Kerrie does anyway. It turns out the pants are too loose around the waist for skinny-minny-me, so I've got nada while Kerrie whips out her parents' credit card and buys the cord jacket, some beaded earrings, and a scarf. The sales associate, deeming her worthy, doesn't snarl while ringing up the stuff. She only glowers.

I'm getting a headache from the music so I tell Kerrie I'll meet her outside the store.

"Hey, no," she says in a panic. "Wait here with me. Please?"

I look at the disdainful sales associate and then at Kerrie. Okay, I'll wait. Even Kerrie needs a little moral support in here. That's reassuring.

But once she crams her receipt in her bag and we head toward

the doorway, I see it's more than that—Kerrie's eyes dart between her watch and the window, as if she's expecting Johnny Depp, half-sure he won't really show.

"C'mon," I say to her as her neck cranes about for whatever she's looking for. "I'm hungry. Let's head to the food co—"

It's not Johnny Depp at the exit at all, but my own personal stand-in—Doug! My sort-of boyfriend Doug! Doug, who won my heart my sophomore fall and broke it that next spring when he and his family moved to Virginia, where he's now an early-admit freshman at the University of Richmond. The very Doug I want as my date to this year's Junior/Senior Ball.

"Hey there, Bianc," he says in that lazy, drawling way of his. And in a flash, I'm folded into his arms, feeling as safe and happy as an out-of-season clam.