

THE
ROMANCE
DIET

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THE ROMANCE DIET

BODY IMAGE AND THE WARS
WE WAGE ON OURSELVES



DESTINY ALLISON



SANTA FE

Other Books by Destiny Allison

Non-fiction:

Shaping Destiny

Fiction:

Pipe Dreams

Bitter Root

*To the Solace Crisis Treatment Center,
women everywhere,
and my amazing Steve.*

Preface

In August of 2013, I confronted a crisis. The work I did had stripped all the cartilage from two vertebrae in my back, forcing me to give up my career. I had suspected the injury was severe, but only faced it when denial threatened my marriage. A visit to the doctor confirmed my suspicions and revealed a more significant threat.

To address it, my husband and I shed a combined 120 pounds over the course of a year. I became a poster child for good cholesterol and we reinvented ourselves. The process strengthened our marriage and put age-old demons to bed, but it was a slow, long road fraught with joys and perils neither of us would have guessed.

Initially, I was terrified to tell our story. How could I reveal to the world my personal hell, my deepest shame? Eventually, I felt I didn't have a choice. We need to talk about the small things that eat at us, speak honestly about our feelings and experiences, and learn to abandon the cultural conventions that imprison our souls.

My story is not uncommon. In sharing it, I hope readers are inspired. It is my great wish that it will help women and the men who love them find peace with themselves.



If what I'd lost had only been a career, it would have been okay. But how do you give up everything that defines you, everything you are? I had been a steel sculptor, wresting success through muscle and sheer force of will. My art garnered respect and admiration. It made me somebody, made me strong. Then, one day while loading small sculptures into the back of our Prius, my world came suddenly to an end. The pain in my back began as a sharp twinge and grew like an August mushroom. Four hours later, I couldn't walk upright. Four more and moving at all made me scream.

Unlike previous flare ups, this one didn't end. At night, I cried out in my sleep. Hunched over and moaning, I hobbled through pain-fogged days. Whiskey became a cherished companion as I tried to blot out the pain. For a year I limped along giving the galleries minimum inventory and avoiding commissions when I could. The air in my studio grew stale from lack of use. Long sheets of steel rusted in their storage racks. My financial reserves dwindled.

When my husband Steve left for work, I stayed home and tried to write. If I could switch from one medium to another—weld words to build mass and shape and volume on paper—I could recreate myself from the ashes of what I had been. I pushed myself hard and grew. It sounds spiritual and might even have been, but the outward manifestation was simpler. I got fat.

I couldn't understand it. I ate the same as I always did. We exercised sometimes and took long hikes when we could. It didn't matter. In two

years, I gained forty-four pounds. My 5'6" 140 pound frame slowly changed from lithe and athletic to sluggish and plump. The abomination of my flesh repulsed me, but didn't make sense.

One day, Steve forgot to kiss me goodbye. I came out of the bathroom to find him gone. This forced me to confront how heavy his burden had become. Though sculpting had been my primary focus, I co-owned a shopping center with him. The pain in my back and the depression it caused had forced me to abandon my responsibilities, leaving Steve to manage the enormous project alone. Now, he looked gray all the time. At night when I asked about his day, he said, "Fine." But it wasn't fine. His bright blue eyes no longer laughed. His smile, though genuine, seemed weary. He often fell asleep on the couch or in the low lamplight of my office while listening to whatever I had written that day. We seldom made love. When we did it was a surface thing, the sliding of bodies urgent and quickly over. Oh, the love was there. Just not the energy.

On quiet mornings alone in the house and struggling to learn a new craft, I told myself it wasn't my fault. In the evenings over dinner, *he* told me it wasn't my fault.

"Life happens," he said, then reached for my hand, played with my wedding band, and murmured his love. Duty done, he turned his attention to whatever happened to be on the plate in front of him—a large steak slathered with mayonnaise, another chicken thigh dripping fat.

He always asked what I wanted for dinner.

I always said the same thing. "I don't care." And I didn't.

After our children had grown and gone, I seldom cooked. I'd done enough of it to last a lifetime. When my back went out, I quit completely. Steve would stop at the store on his way home, grab what he liked, and cook for me. He enjoyed it and I had other things on my mind.

The morning he forgot to kiss me, I decided to quit hiding and get the pain in my back diagnosed. A week later, sitting in my doctor's office while he authorized the MRI scan that would confirm what I already knew, I demanded a thyroid test. My weight gain had to stem from something, right?

My doctor didn't think the test necessary. I pleaded, cajoled, and finally insisted. I desperately wanted a pill, an excuse, a way to be me again. Finally,

he acquiesced and did a full blood panel. When next I met with him, he informed me that my thyroid was fine, but my cholesterol count was 436; more than twice what is considered dangerous and stroke was an imminent threat.

That night, dejected because no pill could magically change my life, I told Steve about the results. Yes, my back is shot and I'll never sculpt again. No, I don't have a thyroid problem. Oh, and by the way, my cholesterol is out of control.

He paled when I told him the number and, as always, reached for my hand. "I'm sorry about sculpting. I really am. But, honey, this cholesterol thing is important. I need you to last."

"Uh huh."

"No. Really. I need you for decades and decades." He patted his belly; that big, pregnant round preceding him wherever he went like a flag bearer precedes a king. "If yours is that bad, mine must be too," he said. "I'll do it with you. We'll do it together."

Do what? I thought. Give me back my life? My identity? But I nodded and offered a weak smile because Steve's weight bothered me more than my own. I regularly pictured the arrival of an ambulance, then paramedics hooking up the wires that would try, without success, to start his beautiful heart again.

At six feet, 245 pounds, Steve was like a big teddy bear. Though I loved it when he wrapped his arms around me, he crushed me when he laid that weight across my body. Sometimes, I felt suffocated and wished he would hurry so I could breathe. Then, of course, guilt consumed me when he asked what was wrong. How could I tell him? Criticizing or nagging him about his weight seemed not only inappropriate, but ugly. I wouldn't be that wife.

I loved this man, belly and all, and he loved me. Should I choose to dye my thin, honey-colored hair purple, cut its average length to something short and spikey, hide my brown eyes with gothic make-up, and gauge my ears, he would support me completely. If he wanted to eat an entire quart of ice cream while watching a movie, he had that right. I didn't look askance when he bought an empty shopping center at the height of the financial crisis. He didn't raise an eyebrow when I told him of my plan to stay home and write.

We worked side by side building that center into something amazing. He read, critiqued, and helped edit my books at night. How could I tell him what or how to eat?

I adored him for suggesting we lose weight together, but couldn't fathom the possibility. Neither of us believed in dieting. He loved food. I hated gyms. Besides, where would we find the time?

Daunted, I let the subject lapse and finished my stew.



I t turns out there are 209 calories in a cup of beef stew (depending on the ingredients), but I didn't know that then. That night, I ate two bowls and two slices of bread. Steve had three. When finished, we took our wine to the couch and streamed a movie. He fell asleep halfway through. I watched until it ended, nudged him awake, and we trundled off to bed.

I woke to the smell of frying bacon. Steve stood at the kitchen counter dicing potatoes. As I sipped my tea, he fried my eggs and served them to me with a mound of buttery home fries and three slices of bacon.

I've never been a big breakfast person, but it was Steve's favorite meal. He woke hours before me and loved to have it cooking when I staggered into the kitchen, eyes squinting against the onslaught of daylight. This morning, the sight of all that food repulsed me. I wasn't hungry yet, but not wanting to disappoint him, I broke the yolks and choked down a bite. The smell turned my stomach. Overnight, food had become the enemy.

"Maybe we could try splitting meals," I said. "Not dieting or anything, just portion control."

Looking up from the stove, his lopsided smile spoke courage I didn't have. "Couldn't hurt," he replied.

After serving himself, he joined me at the table—a thick slab of teak long enough to seat eight, bring our many children together, or spread the mail over and leave it for weeks. He shoved the mail aside to make room for his plate.

“I was thinking about it and I can’t remember the last time I had a physical. I bet my cholesterol is worse than yours. Honey, let’s get healthy. Let’s make it happen,” he said.

I nodded and pushed my food away.

“Done already?” he asked.

“It’s good. Sorry, just not very hungry this morning.”

Hand mid-air, omelet quivering on the tines, he fixed those warm blue eyes on me. “Everything okay?”

I looked at my hands. Gnarled with scars and swollen with weight, they mapped my life. “I wanted it to be thyroid,” I said.

He set the fork down and reached for me. “I’m glad it’s not.”

“Why?” I asked, though I knew what he would say. Steve didn’t trust meds. He had known too many people who had lost themselves in a seemingly never-ending cocktail of symptom-averting drugs, which altered personalities and destroyed lives.

“I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want you to change. You have no idea what those pills would do to you and neither do I,” he said.

I took a breath. “So, split meals?”

He nodded, chewing.

I gestured to his plate. “This stuff is loaded with cholesterol, you know.”

He arched an eyebrow and grinned. “Everything in moderation, right?”

I grabbed his hand and brought it to my lips. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“Why, yes. Yes, I do,” he answered. Then his eyes grew serious. “That’s why we both need to last.”

We began at lunch. He closed his business for an hour and I met him at a local restaurant. There were few people in the cavernous dining room. Salvadorian needlepoint paintings and carved wood pineapples graced long walls in Latin colors—mango, pomegranate, and lime. A screen behind the bar flickered with silenced Mexican novellas. We took our favorite booth and ordered a dish we both enjoyed. Sunlight made a rectangle on the table that folded up and over Steve’s bright green, too small t-shirt.

He had jumped from an extra large to a double X, but refused to buy

clothes in that size. Instead, he wore what he had and let his belly show. I had never understood that about him. Some mornings he didn't even glance in the mirror. At first, I had believed his nonchalance a mask. An entrepreneur, and the smartest businessman I've ever met, he had been wildly successful when we started dating. I thought he dressed down so as not to intimidate his customers or business associates, but Steve truly didn't care what people thought—then or now—and, not surprisingly, they loved him for it. The man was chaos incarnate, but what a beautiful chaos it was; part mad scientist, part goofy kid, a ton of heart, and a cool, calm center.

For me, it was different. Though tough as nails on the outside, inside I quivered like the egg on his fork that morning. The artist in me waited always for the next rejection while the woman in me understood her role all too well. Make your man happy. Keep a clean house. Be graceful, demur, and charming. I failed at most of these things, often grotesquely, and my lack reinforced a constant self-doubt. I wanted what Steve had.

When our meal arrived, he divided it neatly in half and carefully—oh, so carefully—arranged my portion on an extra plate. The stuffed Poblano chili and black beans smelled of far away places, of a rich culture simmering in exotic heat. Cumin and garlic blended with cilantro, fresh feta, and grilled vegetables under a cream sauce thick and sweet. We took small bites, chewed them slowly to make them last, and focused on our conversation to distract ourselves from the missing volume of food.

As we talked over that first shared plate, I tried to remember the last time we had discussed so much. Usually, our interactions were sound bites between phone calls and interruptions. Broken sentences punctuated the shared rolling of our eyes as yet something else took priority over our personal lives. At home, we talked over our days and planned our next business moves, sharing the small stories of success that fueled our mutual drive. Seldom, however, did we make time for more intimate exchanges. That first lunch opened a door and we found we hungered for each other's company more than we hungered for the food. At the end of the meal, we were satisfied.



Soon after we began sharing our meals, I realized if I didn't also do something about Steve's stress and my depression, the efforts we made on behalf of our health would fail. I couldn't keep hiding in the fictitious worlds I created. Though I loved the work, it didn't pay.

One late afternoon in early August, I called Steve at work. "What time are you coming home?" I asked.

"Not sure. What's up?"

"I need to talk to you about something."

Through the phone, I heard Steve suck in his breath. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just need to talk to you. Do you have to stay late?"

"No. I'll even try to leave a little early."

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"No. It's fine. I'll see you soon."

I set the phone down and stared out the window. Weeds intertwined with lavender stems in my neglected garden. A stinkbug meandered across a flagstone step. Like the aspen leaves on our sole surviving tree, I felt limp and colorless.

Identity is a difficult thing. Mine had been deeply tied to financial independence, physical strength, and accolades. My work had been internationally collected. Destiny Allison steel sculptures graced mansions, boulevards, luxury hotels, and law offices from New Mexico to Hong Kong. Simultaneously, I had an acute marketing mind and sharp business acumen.

I had been named Business Woman of the Year in 2011. Now, without an income and unable to trust my body, my insecurities reared. Was I still sexy? Did Steve resent my lack of a paycheck? Did he see me the way I saw myself—fat, weak, and useless? I put myself down in every conceivable way and that had to stop.

Earlier that day, I'd taken the first step by making an appointment with an audiologist. A virus in my twenties had damaged my hearing, but because I worked in solitude it hadn't really mattered. When necessary, I read lips. Most of the time, I bluffed and doing so kept the world at a safe distance. The thought of hearing again terrified me, but if I were to come out of hiding and rebuild my life, I had to risk it.

Later, I drafted the rough outline of a business plan. Now it lay sprawled across the dining room table, along with wadded up pieces of paper, gum wrappers, and a half-full glass of water. I surveyed the plan dispassionately. With a little bit of capital, the store I envisioned had a good chance of success. I just had to get Steve to agree to it.

He arrived home in record time. The car door shut with a slam and our front door flew open. "Destiny?" he bellowed.

I came around the corner and almost crashed into him. "Hey. How was your day?"

"Fine. What's up?" he said.

His whole body seemed to quiver, though he stood perfectly still. I rose on tiptoes to kiss him, then led him into the big, open room that served as kitchen, dining, and living rooms. Above the table, a spider web dangled from the pitched, wood paneled ceiling. Seeing it, I winced. The house was a mess again.

"Here," I said, thrusting a sheaf of paper at him. "Read this."

"What is it? What do you need to talk about?"

"Steve, I want to open a business."

His body relaxed. "I knew it! At first, I thought we were in trouble or that I'd done something majorly wrong, but then I—"

"No. We're fine. It's just that I need to do *something*."

"What about your books? Your writing?"

I sighed and slumped in my chair. "I love it, but it's going to take years

to build the platform I need to make any money. We don't have that time right now."

His nod chastened me. My choices had worn on him.

"The book's almost done. It won't take but a day or so to finish the final draft. After that, I'm going to put the writing on hold. And I really think I've got a business idea that'll work."

"Okay. Let's hear it. What's your plan?"

"I want to open a general store at the center...one built just for this community. It'll be boutique, but not high end, and I'll carry a little bit of almost everything."

"Like what?"

I picked up my plan and thumbed through it. Finding the page I sought, I read him the list. "Clothes, office supplies, toys, and hiking gear, for starters. I haven't fleshed it all the way out yet. Maybe books. Maybe even coffee. You know, the idea is to provide all the things we're missing in this market or at the center. Then, if someone wants to open a full store and sell any one of my segments, I'll get rid of it and add the next thing. It's different, but it's resilient. It'll be a shopping experience, fun and profitable, I think. Plus, I'll be there to take some of your workload. You need help. I need an income. The center needs revitalizing. If we can come up with the capital, I can make this work."

Steve beamed.

My intention to open a shop staved my depression and, for the first time in a long time, hope hovered in the air between us. My plan reinvigorated our relationship, stimulated our minds, and got us working together again.

We spent the next eight weeks in a frenzy—remodeling a space, shopping for inventory, doing the paperwork involved in creating a new business—all the while eating less and talking more. The weight came off in fits and starts. Some days, we actually gained a pound or two. Then, almost as if our bodies had held onto the fat for as long as possible, we dropped three. Up and down the scale went, much like my emotions. But in two months we'd each lost over ten pounds.

I want to stress this. *We lost more than ten pounds doing nothing more than sharing meals.*

We still enjoyed our wine or whiskey at night and the occasional

dessert. Bread and pasta, beef and bacon remained a part of our diet. We experienced no sense of loss, no great hunger, no longing for food. Instead, we felt fuller. The time we spent together over our meals began to change the shape of our lives.

That change first manifested in the purchase of a teardrop camper and a commitment to play. Our lives revolved around work and our conversations had been limited to business for far too long. We needed more adventure and fun. So, just before I opened my store, we drove to Pensacola, Florida to pick up the camper.

I-40 in October. Tall grass dancing in the wind; trains black and red and rusty against the horizon; chain motels smelling of floral disinfectant and vacuum cleaner dust; clouds casting shadows; billboards selling Jesus; and truckers texting one-handed, eyes on anything but the road.

We held hands until our fingers cramped and let silence soothe us. When the mood took us, our conversations traipsed through politics, love, family, and fears. The drive allowed us to be tourists in our own lives, to see ourselves anew.

At a gas station in Arkansas, I bumped into a woman coming out of the restroom. We both blurted “sorry” at the same time. The long, purple bruise lining her jaw and tear-smudged cheeks made me stop.

I touched her shoulder.

She winced.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Her eyes darted away from me as she mumbled, “Mind your own business, bitch.”

Back in the car, fury competed with hopelessness as I told Steve what I had witnessed. “I don’t get it. Why so much violence against women?” We had been talking about the Steubenville rape case and the sentencing of four men in India who had raped a woman to death on a bus.

Steve sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Don’t these people have daughters and mothers?”

“That’s just it. Why do we just have value as daughters and mothers? I mean, it’s okay to beat your wife or rape a woman as long as you don’t put her in either of the sacred categories? That’s just wrong. Why don’t we have value by ourselves?”

I raged against the injustice, against my own buried memories of the girl I had been at nineteen. Alone and far from home, I had trusted a man I met in a bar and he violated me. I seldom thought about that night, had put it behind me, but in moments like these, my rage fueled the internal demons that taunted and shamed me. Their voices were a white noise at the edge of my consciousness as familiar as a mother's nagging criticism, and often as inconsequential, until someone or something awakened their full fury. Now, gazing out the bug-stained windows at a landscape shockingly green, the demons hurled noxious taunts and I cringed against them. Eventually, as I held Steve's hand and listened to the hum of his voice, they quieted. In our beat up, gray Blazer, with Steve at the wheel and adventure ahead, I was safe.

We moved farther south into the land of buttered grits, fried catfish, and Waffle Houses. Our discipline relaxed. For Steve, who loves food, the challenge proved almost insurmountable. I heard the refrain, "We're not dieting, right?" too often for my comfort. As he slipped, I slipped, and by the time we arrived in Florida my appetite for fresh oysters and hushpuppies matched his. Guilt crawled across my belly and between my sweat-sticky thighs. The demons woke, their voices a hailstorm of spittle in my mind.

At the beach, I refused to go into the water. Squeezed into my too small bathing suit, I huddled in a cover-up and watched him splash in the waves. When he staggered through the surf and onto the sand, dripping and covered in gooseflesh, he opened his arms to the sky, shook the water from his hair, and grinned. Then he moved to me and I rose to meet him. He grabbed me—the chill of him making me squeal—and kissed me deeply. His mouth tasted of salt and wind and joy. My demons cringed, his love for me a crucifix against them.

The little camper had beach scene stickers, white-walled tires, and bright red hubs. Black Silver Shadow fenders graced its sleek body, their luscious curves reminiscent of big bands and swing dancing. With wood paneling, a queen-sized bed, and a kitchen galley we had to stand outside to use, the tiny teardrop charmed.

In the evenings, we lit candles inside our pop-up tent and savored sultry air, red wine, and Norah Jones singing softly through portable speakers. We divided our days between travel and play, blazing through Alabama and

Mississippi to get to New Orleans—Dixieland on a river boat, the wide river silky in the fading light, the lights of the city jewel-like against an azure sky. On Bourbon Street, every other business seemed to be a strip club. Hawkers sold Jell-O shots, ball caps, and colored beads from every doorway. Jazz standards blared from open-air patios and tourists staggered drunkenly along the sidewalks sipping fruit flavored drinks from tall, plastic cups. Sewage, alcohol, and car exhaust hung in the heavy air while neon signs flashed stenciled breasts and the words “Girls, Girls, Girls.” Revolted, we combed the city for a less carnivalistic Jazz scene, found a hole in the wall, and lost ourselves in the passionate music of a trio still willing to give it their all. Faces contorted and dripping with sweat, they made love to their instruments as if we weren’t there and, like voyeurs, we reveled in the performance.

Oh, and the food. Crawdad bisque and shrimp Creole, gumbo so spicy it burned our eyes. Cold beer and hot sauce. Chocolate cream pie. As we walked laughing and talking, guilt retreated to a quiet corner in my mind and I reveled in the juicy swish of my too thick thighs.

For ten days, we suspended time. The camper gave us a new found freedom to travel wherever we liked. In Marfa, Texas we chatted with a vendor at the local farmers market and discovered the disdain the locals felt for the rich, New York art collectors who had commandeered their town. At a restaurant on the San Antonio river walk, we watched a duck battle a fish for crumbs, took bad selfies and laughed as we discarded them, fanned our faces with the back of our hands, and finally found shade under a restaurant awning. Over a shared steak and bottle of wine, Steve let his whole self shine. Like a cat getting her belly scratched, I purred at his undivided attention.

On our drives, we drank in wide skies and open landscapes, the expanse calming our busy minds. At a rustic campground in central New Mexico, the clear, calm water of a bottomless lake beckoned. This time, emboldened by romance and adventure, I didn’t think twice.

Cool, still water caressed my body, easing cramped joints and stiff limbs. I closed my eyes, shut out the sound of children splashing near the artificial beach, and imagined myself adrift in soft wind and open sky.