

32 / BUSY IS THE BASIC FEEL

—Let me see, says Paul, taking the thermometer out of Scott's mouth. —Yeah—you're at about 99, 100.

Scott, swaddled in the comforter, whimpers.

—Poor sweetheart, says Paul. He runs his fingers through Scott's hair. —Listen, he says, after a minute. —I'm going to go into the other room, let you get some rest. Do you need anything? Orange juice? Do you want me to heat you up some soup?

—Water, Scott mumbles.

—OK, Paul says. He sits there on the edge of Scott's bed for a moment longer, fretting, and then he goes into the kitchen and fills a tall glass from the water pitcher with the roses painted on it.

—Here, he says, returning. —Sit up a second. He raises the glass to Scott's lips.

Once he's gotten Scott's head back down onto the pillow, he says —OK, I'm going to let you sleep now. I'm going to leave the water right here. If you need anything just call me; I'll be right in the other room.

—Not far, says Scott.

—No, Paul says. —Not far. OK?

—OK, says Scott.

Paul kisses Scott on the forehead, then goes into the front room, takes off his shoes, sits on the couch and brings his briefcase up into his lap. He pops it open and spends a while working inside it, getting assorted pieces of paperwork into their proper files, getting the old receipts and empty Tic Tac boxes out of the case and into the garbage. Once he's done with that he stretches out on the couch, trying to let the tension drain out of his neck, and he looks at the calendar on his PDA, clicking at different dates, trying to get a sense of what the month looks like. *Busy* is the basic feel of it.

Except here he is with an evening that's suddenly all freed up. He'd brought over a bottle of wine and the ingredients for a nice dinner, planning to have the usual sort of Friday evening with Scott: cooking, some chatting, the two of them working together on a crossword puzzle for an hour or so, then eventually ending up in bed. But with Scott out for the evening the whole plan is off; there doesn't even seem to be much point in making the dinner with Scott's appetite all shot. He thinks about maybe watching something on TV, except ever since he and Marvin got their TiVo he's grown accustomed to being able to turn the TV on and be presented with a menu of things he actually wants to watch; regular TV, with its relative lack of options, has begun to strike him as crude.

At around this time, it strikes him that he could call Lydia—it's been a couple of months since he's last talked to her. He considers this for a minute and then picks up the phone and dials.

—Hey, she answers, happiness in her voice—she knows it's him from the Caller ID.

—Hey, sugar, he says. —How are you?

—I'm good, she says. —I can't talk for too long, though—I'm on my way to meet a boy.

—Really? Paul says. —How exciting.

—It *is* exciting, she says. —This guy's very sweet; I think you would like him.

—Give me the details, says Paul.

—Hm, Lydia says. —Let's see. His name is Nate—this'll be the second time we've gone out—last week we met up at Filter.

—Have you guys kissed? asks Paul.

—No, Lydia says, —we didn't really have the opportunity. But we had a nice conversation, and he showed me some drawings he did—he does these like sketches of people he sees on the subway? They're really cool—oh wait, hang on—

Paul hears her giving some directions to what sounds like a cab driver.

—So, yeah, anyway, he didn't kiss me, but, you know, he called, and he seemed eager to get together again, so, I don't know, maybe tonight. But I don't want to rush it with this guy—I think I'm learning my lesson about that—

—So—tonight—what are you guys doing? Paul asks.

—Going to the movies—Lydia says. —We're going to go see this *Very Long Engagement* thing? With the chick from *Amelie* in it?

—Oh yeah, says Paul. —I was interested in seeing that; let me know how it is.

—Yeah, OK, Lydia says. —Wait—left here at the light—yeah—so, I don't know, how are you? It feels like *forever* since we talked—how's Scott?

—He's sick, Paul says. —He's got that flu that's been going around—

—But you guys are still—

—Oh yeah, says Paul. —Totally.

—That's great, says Lydia.

—It feels pretty great, says Paul. —You should come out some night and see us again.

—I'd like that, Lydia says. —Hang on a sec—yeah, just up here is fine—here you go—OK, look, Paul, I'm at the theatre now, I should probably get going—but we should talk again soon. Are you around tomorrow?

—Only until five, Paul says, —then I have to go in to PITS. But you can try me in the afternoon. Call me on my cell cause I might still be here nursing Scott—?

—OK, Lydia says. —I'll call you tomorrow.

—OK, Paul says. —Bye.

—Bye, hon.

He hangs up, holds the phone in his hand for a minute as though testing its weight. Then he gets up, goes into the kitchen, and looks in the refrigerator for something to eat.