Finishing Touches

by Deanna Kizis



About the Book

Jesse Holtz and her two best friends, Cecile and Bryn, are practically attached at the hip. Their 10-year friendship?begun in college and still super glue-strong?is maintained by ritualized weekly get-togethers and daily cell phone catch-ups. Until Cecile, the Golden Girl of the trio, dies from injuries sustained in a head-on car crash.

In **Finishing Touches** Deanna Kizis follows up her brilliantly comic debut novel, *How To Meet Cute Boys*, with a part bittersweet, part acid funny tale of the intricacies of friendship, grief and getting a life while getting over a tragic event.

Jesse?s not even halfway there. Cecile was everything Jesse wanted to be?a charmer who was bright, beguiling, and movie-star beautiful. Just being able to bask in Cecile?s reflected glory made up for everything Jesse felt she lacked. At least Jesse still has Bryn?s treasured friendship?but even Bryn?s backing comes up short in light of Jesse?s grief, and her discontent with her job at one of L.A?s interior design studios.

Now, nine months after Cecile?s death, Jesse is still in mourning, and in spite of Bryn?s bugging her about dating, she?s not in the mood. Her only solace is in spending time with Zach, Cecile?s still-grieving husband. Zach is a respected food critic, but doesn?t relish sitting alone in a restaurant he?s supposed to review, so Jesse has become his willing dinner companion.

Inevitably, their friendship turns into passion, but it also cools the close ties between Bryn and Jesse. Bryn feels that Jesse has betrayed Cecile?s memory and distances herself from Jesse. Hurt, but savoring Zach?s attention, Jesse guiltily allows the romance to flourish. As time passes, she feels that she?s recovering from Cecile?s death, but Zach?s pain is becoming more intense. In spite of her misgivings, she agrees to spend Thanksgiving weekend with Zach and his family?a disastrous few days that fuels her doubts about a relationship that?s become more co-dependent than caring. Yet, at his urging, she moves in with Zach, only to find that he is still living with Cecile?s belongings. He hasn?t begun to heal, and Jesse realizes neither has she. It?s not easy but Jesse begins to understand the connections between home

and hearth, familiarity and grief, and that life, like any good interior, can always use a little rearranging.

Discussion Guide

1. Until Cecile?s tragic death, she, Jesse and Bryn had been best friends since college. Do you still have friends who have remained as important to you as they were during your school years? How do you think these three very different young women have managed to retain their deep feelings for each other after so many years?

2. To Jesse, both Cecile and Bryn possess qualities that she not only admires, but feels she sorely lacks. Is Jesse?s lack of self-esteem something you can relate to? Have you ever wondered why somebody you idolize for his or her brains or beauty could find you endearing?

3. Jesse hates her job and her boss who takes credit for Jesse?s ideas, but she never confronts her boss with her duplicity. Why do you think Jesse is so reluctant to confront her? What would you do in a similar situation?

4. Jesse and Zach are drawn to each other because of their mutual grief. Does it surprise you that they become romantically involved? Has this ever happened to people you know?

5. Bryn feels that Jesse has betrayed Cecile?s memory by becoming Zach?s new girlfriend. Why do you think she blames Jesse and not Zach? Would you react the way Bryn does in a similar situation?

6. In the past, Jesse had always accepted Bryn?s directives as if they had come from on high. But now, even though she?s hurt by Bryn?s coldness, she continues her relationship with Zach. Do you see this as the beginning of Jesse?s independence?

7. Jesse?s brother, Henry, is gay and has a loving relationship with his partner. What part do they play in Jesse?s life? Is their wedding ceremony a defining moment for her?

8. Even though Jesse begins to admit that she has mixed feelings for Zach, she still moves in with him. Have you ever continued a relationship with somebody, even though you have doubts about its staying power? Do you think that women are more apt to deny their negative feelings than men are?

9. Jesse?s mother is anything but a good role model. Do you think that that Jesse has idealized Cecile?s and Bryn?s parents because she has missed having normal, happily married parents of her own?

10. Cecile had wanted Jesse to design the interior of the home that she and Zach had bought. But when Jesse and Zach become involved and she begins rearranging the furniture, Zach becomes extremely upset. Why did he find Jesse?s suggestions unacceptable? Should Jesse have waited a little longer before deciding to redo the house in her image?

11. Jesse and Zach?s Thanksgiving visit to his parents? home ends disastrously for Jesse, when Zach?s younger sister gets drunk and screams invectives at Jesse. Did Jesse handle the situation well? what might she have don differently to avoid that terrible scene?

12. What has happened in Jesse?s life that has enabled her to see that Zach, in spite of his oft- stated love for her, is still

in a state of unbearable grief? Do you see an emerging strength in her ability to end the affair?

13. Jesse does a lot of growing up after Cecile?s death. What do you see as her greatest achievements?

14. Jesse?s new love, Wyatt, is the best thing that?s ever happened to Jesse, but the first time she meets him she can?t help but notice that he?s a bit flabby around the middle. In time she grows to love his soft belly, along with everything else about him. Do you know women who would be turned off by a soft belly or do you think that most women don?t even notice these so-called imperfections?

Author Bio

Deanna Kizis, The former West Coast editor of *Elle*, is an L.A. insider whose familiarity with the city enables her to write about them with a mixture of love and a pointed wit. In addition to her current novel and **How To Meet Cute Boys** , her work has appeared in *Harper?s Bazaar*, *Details*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Variety*, among numerous others.

Critical Praise

"...[a] candid and sensitive exploration of love, friendship, guilt, and human complexity."

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