

The Rebound Girl



Tamara Morgan

The Rebound Girl
Getting Physical, Book 1

Tamara Morgan

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[About The Author](#)

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Chapter One

“Is this seat taken?”

Whitney Vidra looked up from her phone and stifled a sigh. The man approaching her in the poorly lit bar didn't have a popped collar or the scent of Axe Body Spray wafting around him, which counted as a few points in his favor, but that didn't mean she wanted his company.

Yes, she was dressed to the hilt in her favorite red dress. And yes, her hair looked fantastic, if she did say so herself. But it had taken all of five seconds to recognize this place for what it was—a backwater attempt at trend, and a fairly poor one at that, what with the middle-aged DJ encouraging them all to start grooving and the cheap black paint blistering on the walls. Her friend Kendra might be content to swap spit with one of the locals out on the parquet dance floor, but Whitney would rather reserve her saliva for digesting the stale bowl of pretzels on the bar.

“I'm not saving that particular stool for anyone, if that's what you're asking,” she said, striving for a politely distant tone.

Taking it for an invitation, the man sat, holding up two fingers to the bartender—either a secret code or a macho attempt to order her a drink without asking first. She hated when guys didn't ask.

“Your friend's a really good dancer. You don't dance?”

Whitney switched off her phone and tucked it carefully in her purse before turning to face her accoster. Now that she was seeing the man head-on, she could tell she was going to have to take it a little easy on him. He wasn't bad looking—in fact, the hesitant smile and tousled sandy hair signaled nerd chic at its best, and there was a slight depression in his cheek that she thought might transform into a full-blown dimple if he tried. But the guy wore a corduroy jacket with elbow patches and drank something pink with little bits of fruit floating on the top.

He was obviously clueless.

“If you’re asking *can* I dance, the answer is yes.” Whitney took care not to provide any encouragement. “But I’m choosing not to at this particular moment.”

She cast a glance over the dance floor, nodding when Kendra sent up a cheerful wave. Her best friend and business partner had insisted they go out tonight, an official commemoration of their first night as Pleasant Park residents. But although Kendra felt the permanence of their signatures on their new office building as a good thing, Whitney had never been nearer to breaking out in hives. There was so much finality in a ten-year lease.

“I’m a terrible dancer,” the man offered.

“Imagine that,” Whitney said dryly, taking in his crisp khakis at a glance. In her experience, men who ironed their pants and men with great moves—on the dance floor or off it—were mutually exclusive entities. “Next you’ll be telling me you’re a regular Don Juan.”

“I like to do my part for womankind.” He deflected her sarcasm with some of his own. “Your friend said you might want some company.”

Aha. Things were beginning to make sense. “Let me guess—you’re friends with the guy she’s currently grinding against, aren’t you?”

“He’s my brother,” the man corrected her, “not my friend. Well—I guess he’s my friend too, since we’re obviously out together tonight. But you know what I mean.”

Seriously? Whitney had known coming in that her new life would take a little getting used to. That was kind of the whole point. Take one part upscale Pennsylvania borough, add three parts big-city beauty professionals. She, Kendra and their third partner John were practically their own bad joke: *a chubby plastic surgeon, an overeducated esthetician and a hirsute massage therapist walk into a bar...*

The move had been a long time coming, of course, and she didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. It was just that she’d

somehow failed to realize that setting up their medical spa in an upstate outpost meant *living* in an upstate outpost—complete with an agonizingly slow nightlife and guys like awkwardly conversational elbow patches over there.

She lifted her finger to stop him from going any further. “Save yourself the trouble. I am not now, nor have I ever been, the DUFF. So thank you, random stranger, for your oddly endearing company, but you’re off the hook for the night.”

The man’s brow wrinkled, and something like a frown crossed his face. The dimple potential disappeared with it. “Matt. My name is Matt.”

Despite herself, Whitney softened. “It was lovely meeting you, Matt.” She stopped short of offering him her hand and swiveled on her stool, effectively ending the conversation.

Which was why it was so surprising when his finger tapped lightly on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry—I don’t think I did that right. I’m still kind of new at this.” His voice was soft but firm, and he stuck out his hand, holding it steady until she had no choice but to take it. “Hello, there. My name is Matt. I somehow got wrangled into coming out with my brother tonight.”

“And how is that my problem?” The words came out a lot crueller than she intended, but she bit back the urge to apologize. Men these days sometimes had to be pried off a girl’s leg with a crowbar.

“It’s not,” he said pleasantly, not the least bit put off. “You look nice, so I’m offering to buy you a drink. And if you don’t mind my asking, what in the world is a DUFF?”

The bartender chose that moment to drop two shots of amber liquid in front of them, followed shortly by a pair of limes and a salt shaker. Whitney stared at the drinks for a moment before looking up.

“You’re moving on to tequila now? Really? Would you like me to sprawl out here on the bar so we can just skip to

body shots?”

He shrugged and reached for the salt shaker. “I’m beginning to think you’re making fun of me.”

“I’m beginning to think you’ve been transplanted here from another universe—one that’s stuck about twenty years ago.” Whitney watched as he licked the salt from his wrist, just inches above the band of his outdated wristwatch, and kicked back his shot. He did it all with a kind of understated grace, as if he knew how ridiculous he appeared and simply didn’t care.

“Do you want yours?”

Whitney shook her head as he drank the next shot straight. He made a face, wincing and flashing his teeth, but the expression was gone in a moment, replaced once again by a strangely kind smile.

“Don’t underestimate finger foods?” he asked, tilting his head at her.

Say what, now? Whitney blinked. “Um...I guess I like an amuse bouche as much as the next girl.”

“Deranged undernourished fighting fish?”

“I think you’re the deranged one.”

“Am I getting close? How about...” He paused and looked thoughtful. “Dangerously unhealthy French fries?”

Realization forced her to sit up a little straighter, and Whitney studied her partner with renewed interest. He was playing a DUFF guessing game. It was almost as cute as his dimples, which were coming out in full force now. He was like some sort of saintly, attractive man-child, dropped here for her amusement.

“Designated ugly fat friend,” Whitney offered, taking pity on him. “But you were close.”

She nodded toward the dance floor, where Kendra had somehow gotten her leg hooked around the brother’s knees and was doing some strange whipping thing with her head.

When Kendra had said she wanted to go out to celebrate their new venture, she'd obviously meant *celebrate*.

A hand, warm and soft, found its way on top of hers. "Hey. That's not true. I think you're lovely."

Whitney laughed, only stopping when she brought her pint of Guinness to her lips and took a long pull. "Thanks. I happen to think so too."

"Then why did you—?"

"Look," Whitney said, setting down her glass, "you won't be the first man to assume that because I prefer sitting alone at the bar over grinding to dubstep that I'm somehow faulty. But I am not the consolation prize in a bar mating game."

Matt frowned. "That sounds awful."

"It *is* awful, which is why I don't play. I don't care what Kendra told you or promised you or begged you to do. I don't need you to babysit me. Good night."

"Do you mind if I sit here anyway?"

Geez, he was persistent. Most guys were only too happy to be handed such an easy out. It wasn't that she couldn't pick men up at a bar—it was hardly rocket science—but never, in her thirty-three years of existence, had she ever accepted DUFF droppings. Contrary to what most men thought when they first saw her, the thirty extra pounds she carried mostly in her hips didn't make her a victim of low self-esteem or discounted standards. She liked that weight right where it sat—and she would have been the first to advocate going under the knife if she felt otherwise.

"I guess I can't stop you from sitting wherever you want," she said slowly.

He released an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you. I don't know why I let Lincoln drag me out tonight—this place isn't really my style. To be honest, the women here kind of scare me."

“No kidding? You? With your tequila shots and fancy lime wedges?”

“You’re making fun of me again.”

She snickered. She really was.

Her phone vibrated, and she pulled it out to find an email from her mother coming in. Since there seemed every chance that her new friend Matt would try and read over her shoulder if she opened the message inside, she nodded a polite dismissal and made for the door.

The air felt clean as she slipped outside—a nice departure from the dank miasma she was used to back in Philadelphia. One thing she hadn’t been expecting about this place was just how breathable it was. Country air did great things for her complexion.

She scrolled through the screen, hesitating for only a second when she saw the subject line. *You’ll never guess who I ran into today...* It was just like the woman to be purposefully coy, and Whitney had half a mind to simply ignore her. Unfortunately, if she didn’t respond right away, her mom would email again, then text, then call. The Vidra women were nothing if not persistent.

But as soon as the email opened, Whitney groaned and snapped the phone shut. Not content with simply spelling out his name, her mother had included an oversized jpeg with the header that had been all over the industry publications last month. Dr. Jared Fine Resigns from Charity Post, Returns to PA. Like she cared. Let him take up residence in state for the rest of his life, brandishing his golden scalpel and transforming the lives of the underprivileged. She was on to bigger and better things.

Well, maybe not bigger. The fellowship at Temple University she’d turned down had been pretty big. And not everyone in the medical community shared her belief that the term *better* applied to her chosen focus on boob jobs and liposuction in place of more sedate medical care. But this was her life, her rules.

“Thanks but no thanks, Mother.” Whitney pressed delete without bothering to read the rest of the email. Her parents had never understood why she was so willing to turn her back on the man she’d loved enough to follow to the ends of the earth, the plastic surgeon god who’d fathered her own career aspirations. But then again, they hadn’t caught him with his pants around his ankles, plowing an anesthesiologist in a third world country.

Make the World Smile, he’d said. We’ll fix cleft palates, change children’s lives for the better, he’d said.

Call her cynical, but that seemed like a poor substitute for fidelity.

Her first instinct was to rush inside and pour her heart out to Kendra, but she hated to interrupt her friend in the middle of what was obviously a conquest for a fitting one-night stand. John was probably meticulously packing the rest of his things in anticipation of the train ride up tomorrow morning, and there was no way in hell she planned on calling her mother.

Which left...what? A man in the bar wearing elbow patches, friendly and clueless?

She put her phone away. *He is awfully cute.*

As she suspected, Matt was sitting right where she’d left him. His gaze was concentrated on Kendra and her dance partner—Lincoln, he’d called his brother—but the dim light made it difficult to tell if he was envious, outraged or merely...spectating. She suspected the latter.

“You came back,” he said pleasantly as she took her former seat. Her beer sat, seemingly untouched, but even though Matt didn’t look like the sort of man who carried spare flunitrazepam in his pocket, Whitney had spent too many years as a single woman to play fast and loose with her beverages. She pushed the drink away.

“Was it good news?” he asked.

“Was what good news?”

He nodded at her purse. “The phone?”

“Oh.” She paused for a moment. He’d been paying attention—it seemed the oddly earnest elbow patches were more than just a fashion choice. “It was from my mother.”

“So...that’s a no, then.” He signaled once again for the bartender.

She laughed and relaxed, letting him make his next macho move. Crowbars and legs aside, she did kind of appreciate the reminder that she was worth pursuing.

“I don’t suppose I can buy you that drink now?”

“Sure. But make it a beer, please. Newcastle.”

A smile quirked at the corner of his mouth as he placed the order with the bartender. Whitney was just about to ask him what it meant when a pair of hot, sweaty arms latched around her back. She might have been scared, if not for all the scratchy sequins pressing through the fabric of her dress, the tangy scent of girl sweat and citrus perfume wafting up. She didn’t have to look to know that the arms around her were the dainty, perfect limbs of her best friend, who’d donned an electric pink bobbed wig for the evening, a perfect complement to her party girl aesthetic and molten gold skin tone.

“Whit-ney,” Kendra’s singsong voice called. “I’d love for you to meet Lincoln.”

That was fast. Whitney swiveled on her stool to confront Kendra’s dance partner. Kendra’s remark was the code phrase for their schtick, their safety net. Whenever either one of them found a partner for the evening, he had to first answer a few pertinent questions before the cab was called. It was a routine they’d developed in college and perfected over the years.

“Hello, Lincoln,” she said, sizing him up. He was exactly what she expected from a guy Kendra dragged home—but not at all the kind of guy she imagined her new friend Matt of the elbow patches being related to. Although their hair shone the same tawny color under the lights and they shared a slightly bulbous nasal tip she could fix in under one hour flat,

Lincoln was clearly cut from a different cloth. He wore a shiny button-up shirt, jeans that were tastefully faded along the fronts of his thighs and shoes that probably cost more than hers did. None of that would have been particularly noticeable if not for the bright synthetic tan that set it all off.

Classy. But then, Kendra was a born-and-bred city girl riding the wave of their recent success. Classy wasn't a requirement—or, apparently, a consideration.

Whitney cocked her head and narrowed her eyes, waiting until Lincoln gave her his full attention before asking, “When was the last time you were tested for STDs?”

Matt spit out a huge mouthful of whatever he was drinking.

Lincoln, the poor sap, looked back and forth between her and Kendra, color leaching from his orangey face. “Um...I dunno? A few years ago?”

“Hmm. That's not a good sign. You carry condoms?”

His eyes, a rare icy blue Kendra always fell for, widened. “Yes, ma'am.”

“And you always use them? Never get that urge to tell a woman how much better it feels all natural?”

“Um, no? Of course not.”

“Good for you. Now—have you ever been hit with pepper spray?”

His head swiveled some more. “Is that a real question? Listen, I'm not sure...”

Whitney held up a finger. “Did you know that a person can't join the Secret Service unless he's been shot before? It's an official job requirement. They want to make sure that everyone tasked with serving the president of the United States knows what it's like to take a bullet, and is prepared to do it again.”

“I don't get it. Is she going to shoot me when we're done?” Lincoln shifted a little until he was at Matt's side, as if he was in search of some kind of protection. Not that Matt

would have done him any good at that moment. He was hunched over the bar, his shoulders and head shaking with laughter.

“Just answer the question.”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” Lincoln said slowly. “Our dad had some bear spray when we were kids, and Matt dared me to use it. I had the nozzle pointed wrong—it hurt like a bitch and I couldn’t see for days. But I still don’t understand the question.”

“Kendra always carries spray. So do I. And believe me when I tell you that neither one of us is afraid to use it to, ah, protect the president. Do you get where I’m going with this?”

She had no idea how much alcohol Lincoln had consumed during his Saturday night quest for companionship, but if the puzzled look on his face offered anything to go by, it was quite a lot.

“You’re saying her vagina is the president?”

Beside her, Matt let out what could only be termed a guffaw.

Whitney reached out and clapped a hand on Lincoln’s back, sweaty through the synthetic material. “You’ve got the idea now, big boy. Now, just let me have a quick peek at your ID and you two kids are all set.”

Bewildered, Lincoln reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. Kendra cooed something comforting into his ear, her eyes dancing at Whitney. No matter how many times they did this, it never failed to amuse.

When he finally handed over his driver’s license, Whitney jotted the details down on a cocktail napkin. Name, address, ID number. It was amazing how well that simple step worked. A person had to show proof of documentation to buy alcohol, vote or even take a flight, but few people bothered verifying the identity of the person they dragged home to swap bodily fluids with.

“Okay, Lincoln Fuller of West Cirque Lane. You’ve been cleared for the evening, but you should know I’m not

throwing this napkin away until she's back home safe and sound. No funny business, got it?"

Kendra leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "Thanks, Whit. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Have a good night." Whitney waggled her eyebrows. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I'm not sure that's possible. You'll be all right getting home? Is there anyone you, ah, want to introduce me to before I go?" Kendra looked pointedly over at Matt, who had finally regained his composure.

"Please don't," he interrupted with a laugh, holding one of his hands up. Quite big hands, actually. Funny she hadn't noticed that before. "My intentions are completely honorable."

Well, that settled that, then. She'd have to content herself with a friendly chat over a couple of beers—which, come to think of it, didn't seem like that bad of a plan. This guy was growing on her.

Kendra and Lincoln used the opportunity to walk-stumble out the door, where a cab already waited, their hands shoved into places that were probably sweatier than the rest of them.

Ah, young lust. It warmed her to the core.

Before the padded door swung to a close behind them, Matt spoke up. "So...now that we've been abandoned, do you want to get out of here?"

"Hey, now." Whitney shook her head. "Did you just miss that whole part about checking IDs? We aren't kidding about that."

"I'm sure you're not, and I respect you both for it. But I'm not inviting you to my crappy one-bedroom apartment or an unmarked van out back. I meant coffee. It's almost two in the morning—we might reasonably squeeze in some pancakes."

She pretended to think for a moment. “And bacon? Can there be bacon?”

Matt placed a reverent hand over his chest. “There can always be bacon.”

Whitney sighed contentedly and drank the rest of her beer in one gulp. There was something about a man who made jokes about pork products that got her right in the heart.

Matt grabbed Whitney’s coat and helped her into it, an action so ingrained into him he didn’t realize he was doing it until one of her perfectly arched eyebrows rose.

“Why, thank you, Galahad,” she teased. “I had no idea the country was such a chivalrous place.”

“Sorry.” He covered his faux pas by putting way more money on the bar than he needed to. That was one of the first things Lincoln had warned him about—that he had to be a lot less gentleman and a lot more barbarian if he wanted to blend in with the rest of the bar crowd. “It’s a force of habit.”

“It’s a good habit,” Whitney assured him.

He took her at her word. It was amazing how everything about this woman carried such candid self-assurance. All he could see about Whitney, from the way she held herself to the way she put Lincoln, the world’s most confident man, in his place, spoke of the same thing. Her rich, dark brown hair hung in tumbled waves around her shoulders. Her eyes, a piercing shade of gray that seemed to see everything, were made up with sixties-style makeup that would have looked ridiculous on anyone else.

He was going to be in big trouble if this was what the dating world had to offer these days. Lincoln told him that women were more assertive than they’d been the last time he’d dipped his hand in the cookie jar, but Matt had assumed his brother was exaggerating in this, as in most things.

Not anymore. Not if Whitney was anything to go by. Strange as it seemed, Lincoln might actually know a thing or two about this stuff.

“So, your ex-girlfriend do the training? Current girlfriend, maybe?”

Matt pushed open the door and followed her through it. “Ex-wife, actually.”

Now that he stood next to Whitney, Matt felt woefully underdressed. Her heels made her almost as tall as he was, and the red dress she wore wrapped like a series of tight bands around her body, stopping just above the knee. But no matter how restrictive the material might look, it was hardly enough to keep her ample curves in check. The whole effect was a grand departure from the loose linens that most of the women in their town favored. Or the soft, floaty, floral things Laura always wore.

City girls. He’d forgotten how different city girls were. How much...more they were. The last time he’d dressed up for anything had been when he was the best man in a friend’s wedding, and even then, they’d gone with chinos and button-down shirts appropriate for a Hawaiian destination ceremony.

“Oho! You have a sordid past lurking inside there, don’t you?” She shook her head. “It’s always the quiet ones.”

He grinned, glad she seemed so accepting. He’d been half afraid women would hear that he was divorced at twenty-nine and immediately run for the hills. “That depends on your definition of sordid. It was what they call an amicable split, and we even divided all our books without arguing about it.”

“No fiery blowups or horse heads in the bed?”

He shook his head. “No passion of any kind. That was the problem.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he paused. “Oh, crap. Was that oversharing?”

She laughed again, a sound that started out deep and throaty but moved higher as it increased. It was a sound that made him want to make her laugh even more, just to see how far her range went.

“Yes, it was.” She linked arms with him. “But I’m under the distinct impression you don’t get out much.”

The diner Matt had in mind was located about a block from the bar—in Pleasant Park, everything in the main section of the downtown borough area could be found within walking distance. As they approached the building, which was little more than a converted train car, he realized he'd underestimated the local nightlife. Two o'clock in the morning normally found him in his plaid flannel pajama pants and deep in the reaches of sleep.

Apparently, he was the only one.

It wasn't that he was completely unhip or clueless—he had a surprisingly large working knowledge of Justin Bieber and vampires that sparkled. But Whitney was right. He didn't get out much. If he was going to move past sitting alone in his apartment above a cheese shop, eating cereal out of the box and smelling of Jarlsberg, he was going to have to learn.

“So,” she said once they were seated in a corner booth that squeaked every time one of them shifted. “Your brother is orange.”

Matt choked on his glass of water. “It's not that bad.”

She shook her head, her hair bouncing around her shoulders. “He was glowing underneath the disco ball of the dance floor. I think that's why Kendra liked him. She couldn't help herself—she was a moth, drawn to a beacon of light.”

“To be fair, the color isn't totally his fault—the tan was a gift for his birthday.” Matt gave in to the profound urge to chuckle. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed so much in one evening. “It was from our sister, Hilly. No one thwarts Hilly. She and her husband own Paradise Tan and Espresso over on Fourth.”

Whitney wrinkled her nose. “Spray tans and coffee at the same place?”

“A warm glow inside and out.”

“Please tell me that is not their actual slogan.”

“My sister wrote it herself—and if you think you could cow her into being ashamed of fake tans, you're wrong. She's impervious to insult. She's impervious to everything.”

Whitney nodded as though that made perfect sense. “I can see how that might run in the family.”

He grinned. She was making fun of him again. Even though he might not know a thing about the current dating pool or why so many men thought being a jerk to women was the key to it all, he did spend an inordinate amount of time with six-year-olds. Girls always teased the boys they liked.

“Strange color notwithstanding, he’s a good guy, you know,” Matt said. “He won’t hurt your friend.”

“I know he won’t. That’s why I let him take her home.”

A waitress, tired and harassed-looking, came by to take their order. They’d just decided to split the lumberjack special, which boasted no fewer than ten plate-sized pancakes, when a wadded up napkin went sailing through the air and bounced off the back of the waitress’s head. She didn’t turn—just picked up the offending item and shoved it in the deep pocket of her apron.

“Teenagers,” she said, shrugging. “They want more coffee. I’ve been slipping them decaf for the past hour.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Whitney asked the moment the waitress turned away.

Matt hadn’t been aware that he was looking at her with anything other than frank admiration, but he took the bait anyway. “I’m half afraid you’re going to go over there and yell at those kids for being mean to the waitress.”

“Would that be so awful?”

“No,” he said truthfully. “But I get the feeling you say exactly what’s on your mind no matter what.”

“And I get the feeling you’re trying to soften me up.” She leaned over the table. “Don’t bother. You’ve already promised me salty pork products and refused the ID interrogation. It’s all downhill from here.”

Matt could hardly believe his good luck.

It was officially eight months since he and Laura signed the divorce papers, and most of that time had been

spent hiding in his apartment, avoiding women and Lincoln's single-minded insistence that Matt needed to put himself out there again.

He'd finally caved, and the first woman he'd gathered up the nerve to approach turned out to be this one. Easy to talk to, funny, pretty in a straightforward, no-nonsense way he wasn't used to. And best of all, she'd already made it abundantly clear she had no intention—or expectation—of sleeping with him. She was like training wheels.

Awesome, bacon-loving training wheels.

“So...what brings you to Pleasant Park?” Matt asked conversationally, blissfully bereft of pressure. “You're clearly not from around here.”

“Work stuff,” she said, toying with a straw wrapper. Her eyes met his squarely, full of challenge and promise.

“Is your work top secret? I'd offer to tell you what I do for a living, but you'll laugh.”

“Oh, I already know what you do. You're an English professor. The elbow patches and Oxford shirt give it away.”

Matt looked down at his attire. Sure, Lincoln had said a button-down shirt and jacket would put him on the firm path to celibacy, but Matt refused to take fashion advice from a man who owned two-hundred-dollar jeans. “Should I have left a few of the buttons undone? Lincoln said chest hair is passé.”

Whitney grinned widely, and Matt couldn't help his elated feeling of pride. See? He was funny. He could still do this.

“And I'm not an English professor,” he added. “But good try.”

“Lecturer?”

“Getting warmer.”

“Oh, crap—you're a poet, aren't you?”

He braced himself. “Actually, I teach kindergarten.”

The silence that followed lasted for exactly five seconds before Whitney burst into laughter. It was the kind of laughter that shook her whole body, and, predictably, she held none of it back.

Matt was used to getting strange reactions. People—especially female people—couldn't help but find something to talk about in his chosen profession. Most of them thought it was sweet. Some thought it was creepy. Trust this woman to find it downright hilarious.

“That is so adorable it almost hurts my teeth,” Whitney said once she finally regained her composure. *A kindergarten teacher?* Did a more nauseatingly endearing profession exist anywhere in the world? “So you, like, sing songs all day? And clap and play games and stuff?”

Rather than take offense to her reply, as she expected, Matt laughed, his same soft chortle that never seemed to contain any malice. Whitney found it strangely addicting.

“There's a little more to it than that. But yes, I've been known to sing.”

“I swear to God, if you tell me you karaoke on the weekends, I'm walking out the door,” Whitney warned.

Divorced, chivalrous, kid-loving, kind...it was like someone had taken a poll of all the non-threatening, asexual characteristics a man could possibly exhibit and rolled them up into a tidy package. Somehow, it worked for him—and the feelings being aroused in Whitney's breast were anything but asexual.

“Singing in front of six-year-olds and singing in public are two different things.” Matt smiled, deepening his cherubic dimples. “And to be honest, I'm not very good at either one.”

Whitney was not the sort of woman who paid any attention to her ovaries or what was expected of them as she strode confidently into her mid-thirties, but she could have sworn they swelled in autonomic response to that smile.

The waitress came by then, her hands laden with plates of towering stacks of pancakes that glistened with butter and

late-night calories. With the promise that she'd be by with more coffee in a few minutes, she left them to divide their bounty however they saw fit.

Sharing a plate of food with someone you just met was supposed to be an awkward experience. In the thick of a relationship, cutting up pancakes and fighting over the last piece of toast had a comfortable feeling to it, a dance of breakfast food and camaraderie perfected over time. She almost liked the first time better. Hesitancy, fumbling, mumbled apologies—there was no better way to get to know a man than to see how he handled them all.

But Matt just smiled charmingly at her and doled out her pancakes as if she was six. God, he was cute. *Too cute.* What was she doing here at this diner, with this man, in the middle of the night? She hadn't come all the way out to quaint, bucolic Pennsylvania to woo the local catch—and a divorced schoolteacher to boot. Clichés were for young women, for dewy-eyed nursing students who thought it was the height of romantic fantasy to follow their boyfriends into the wilds to save the downtrodden and medically bereft.

“You gave me all the bacon,” she pointed out, accepting her plate. “You shouldn't have done that.”

“If it's going to make you frown at me like that, you don't have to eat it.”

“I'm not frowning at you.” She grabbed one of the pieces of bacon and took a huge bite. Crispy, just the way she liked it. “I'm frowning at the situation.”

He paused in the motion of bringing his fork to his mouth. “And how, exactly, is this a *situation*? Where I come from, we call it breakfast.”

“And where is it you come from? Stepford?”

“There you are again, making fun of me when I least expect it. You have a gift.” Although his words were mild, Matt followed up by narrowing his eyes and watching the group of teenagers in the back get noisily out of their booth and make their way out the door.

Whitney thought for a moment that she had succeeded in scaring Matt away, that her admittedly faulty tendency to speak her mind had finally proved too much for his mild-mannered adorableness and he was going to escape with the crowd.

Disappointment twinged somewhere in her nether regions. But then he held up a finger and tossed his napkin on the table, a total gentleman when he added, “Would you excuse me for a second?”

Matt hated to walk away just when the teasing was coming out of Whitney’s mouth again, but he remembered all too well his own misspent youth. Well, *misspent* was a bit of a strong word. The worst thing he’d ever done was hit a car in the parking lot with a grocery cart and not leave a note for the giant ding it left in the door. But he *had* spent considerable time in diners like this one, taking up valuable restaurant real estate and leaving handfuls of pennies in return.

The restrooms were located near the back, so he headed that way, passing the table covered in empty creamer cartons and sugar packets, making it look as though a war had taken place. He stole a quick peek at the check—all of ten dollars for five cups of coffee, and not nearly enough tip for a timestamp that went back three and a half hours. He pulled a twenty out of his wallet and dropped it to the table, hurrying past so the waitress wouldn’t see.

When he slid back into the booth, ready to tackle his plate, Whitney reached out a hand. “Give me your wallet.”

“Is this a holdup?” he joked.

She kept her hand in place. “Back there at the bar, did you really not know what a DUFF was?”

He crossed his heart. “I swear. I would never do that to anyone. I thought you looked nice.”

“The wallet, please.”

He handed it over, watching as she pulled out his ID and scribbled his name and address on a napkin. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what she was doing, and a part of him—

a rather important part—perked up with sudden interest. He'd been alone for over half a year now, lonely for a lot longer than that.

But by the time Whitney got to his address, he put a hand over hers. "I don't think that's necessary."

Her eyebrow rose. "We're not going anywhere without it."

"I thought we were just having pancakes."

Her eyebrow went even higher, if such a thing were possible. "Listen, Matt. You're cute. And you're sweet. I saw what you did over there for the waitress—and it was either the most clever move a guy has ever made on me, or it was the most charming act of kindness I've seen in a long time. Either way, you win. That's why I'm going to make this as easy as possible for you. Would you or would you not like to accompany me to my house to have mindless, attachment-free sex until the sun comes up?"

Matt blinked. Okay, so Lincoln was right. Women were a hell of a lot more forward than he remembered. And it wasn't that he didn't find this woman attractive—he *did*—but... Whitney released an irritated noise and leaned over the table, actually grabbing him by the shirt collar and forcing him to meet her halfway.

Whatever her plan was in that moment, it worked. Damn, did it work.

Her lips were just as hedonistic as their bright red lipstick promised—the right combination of soft and pliable, pressed against his with a forcefulness that seemed fitting, given what he knew of her personality. She wasn't shy with the tongue, either, flicking lightly into his mouth with the syrupy sweetness of pancakes, heedless to the other people trying to enjoy their wee-hours-of-the-morning breakfast.

He let himself fall into it, into *her*; and deepened the kiss almost against his will. That slow, sensual graze of her tongue against his, the soft moan that rose from her throat and tumbled into his—that was where the stirrings of lust became

a pounding, forceful reality. This was the kiss of a woman who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to ask for it. This was the kiss of a woman who would probably never end a marriage because of a lack of passion.

It was also the first kiss that Matt had shared with anyone other than his ex-wife in over five years.

Which made things difficult.

Whitney pulled away and licked her lips, her eyes narrowed and glittering, her meaning clear. "Well?"

Matt leaned back, dazed and slightly bewildered and no longer capable of pretending that his mild interest hadn't erupted into something much more...substantial. This was not how this whole dating pool thing was supposed to happen. He wanted to ease into it, dip his toes in and all that. Not plunge headfirst... Well, not plunge. Period.

"I haven't been with anyone since my wife," he blurted out. He paused and then let loose a laugh. He couldn't help it—this whole situation was beyond absurd. "And I believe I might be oversharing again."

She paused in the middle of putting the napkin with his ID information securely in her purse. "You can't possibly be serious."

"It's not *that* weird."

"It's a little bit weird. How long have you been divorced?"

Matt crossed his arms and firmed his resolution. This whole get-back-on-his-horse, clamber-aboard-the-wagon, jump-in-the-sack thing was too much. He might be woefully behind the times when it came to dating, but he refused to believe that casual sex was the cure for a failed three-year marriage. "Eight months."

She let out a small huff. "And didn't you say there wasn't any passion before that?"

"I've really got to stop saying everything that pops into my head."

“Don’t you dare. I adore it.” She dropped a bill on the table and rose to her feet, reaching for Matt’s hand and pulling him up behind her. The space between them, infinitesimal as it was, felt thick with promise. “What you need more than anything right now is a rebound girl.”

“I do?” Then, “What’s a rebound girl?”

She smiled brightly. “I am. Here’s how it works. I don’t want you to buy me a ring. I don’t want to bear your children. I don’t even want to be your girlfriend. All I want is you and me and as much sex as we can possibly squeeze into the four hours before dawn.”

Matt’s mouth went dry. “That’s a real thing?”

“Oh, Matt. Poor, sweet Matt. You have no idea. You’re obviously one of those men built for monogamy and the kind of love that lasts until you’re wrinkly and don’t remember where you put your teeth—which of course means that you’re completely wrong for the bar scene and for women like me.”

“Then why would I go home with you?” The rational part of him warned him to cool off and back away. The still mildly tequilaed part of him, the rigid stirring in his groin—they had plenty to say on the subject.

“Because,” she said with painstaking calm, “you can’t start a long-term relationship until you rebound, and believe me when I say I’m exactly the kind of girl you want in the interim. I’m an exceptionally good lover. And commitment makes me itchy.”

“I think you’re making this up.”

“I think you’re overanalyzing.”

“Am I?” His head whirled.

“Besides.” She smiled coyly and wound her fingers through his. “I’m feeling generous.”

“Are you trying to say this is like charity?”

She laughed. “Only if you’re really bad at it.”

“I’m not bad at it,” he said, more gruffly than he intended. But he stepped away, putting some much-needed distance between them. He wasn’t that guy, the carefree one-night stand, no matter how much his body might disagree. And it disagreed—rather strongly. With a deep breath that did little to redirect the flow of his blood, he said, “And while I’m flattered that you would offer, I think this is where I call it a night.”

The look Whitney cast him was full of all those things that indicated a woman scorned. Her lips downturned in a frown, and her eyes narrowed with icy disdain. “You’re saying *no*?”

“It’s more like I’m saying I’d like to see you again. During the daytime, maybe.”

“What makes you think I’m interested in seeing you again?”

He shrugged, trying not to show how much those words stung. He’d heard it wasn’t uncommon—the city girls hitting the small-time local clubs in hopes of a brief, illicit fling in which follow-up dates and awkward morning conversations need not apply. But Matt was kind of looking forward to the awkward morning conversations, those heady first days of intimacy.

Whitney was right. He was built for monogamy and toothless love.

“It was just a hunch.” He extended his hand in an offer of friendship. “I’m sorry I can’t be what you wanted. Do you think you can get home all right?”

She eyed his hand warily. “I’m a grown woman. I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“I can call you a cab.”

This time, the corners of her mouth lifted in a wry, twisted smile, and she gave his hand a firm, decided shake. “Thanks, Galahad, but I’ll manage to find my way. I always do.”

Without another word on the subject, she grabbed her things and made for the door, leaving an almost visible trail of regret and temptation behind her.

“Lincoln isn’t going to believe this.” He barely believed it himself. Plopping back down to the vinyl seat, he grabbed a piece of bacon—cold and greasy—from Whitney’s plate and ate it.

And he’d thought he hadn’t understood women before.

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Chapter Two

“John!” Whitney launched herself at her friend of more than fifteen years, unable to stop her exuberance from showing. Even though she built up quite a bit of momentum, what with her body mass and the acceleration of excitement that propelled her across the parking lot, he caught her easily. “I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

He held her for a moment, smelling of laundry soap and mint, before placing his hands on either shoulder and forcing her to take a step back. With a crinkle in his eyes, he took her in, indulging himself for a full minute before nodding with satisfaction.

At over six feet tall and with a robust, bearded physique perfected over time and a love of pastries, John was a comfort to be around. He was slightly older than her—not that he would ever admit to it—and his role as snugly paternal figure was more than complete.

“You look well,” he said in his clipped voice. He might look like a behemoth, but he spoke like the polished boarding-school baby he really was. “However, our office does not. I’ve seen prisons more welcoming than this. I thought they were supposed to start this week?”

Whitney turned to survey the exterior of their soon-to-be medical spa and rejuvenation clinic, New Leaf. In the chill of March, with nothing but dead grass and gray skies to set it off, it did look rather like a concrete block beloved by criminals and avoided by upstanding citizens of the world.

“Why do you think it came so cheap?” Linking arms with her friend, she added, “It’s not so bad inside—it’s older than dirt and they say we’re going to have to gut the plumbing, but just think of it in terms of potential. Sweet, beautiful, money-making potential. And we can plant chrysanthemums or something for the outside. People love flowers.”

“Only the elderly love chrysanthemums.”

“That’s half our target demographic right there.” Whitney pulled out her key ring—with all the keys to the office and her new condo, she felt like a jingling janitor—and unlocked the door. “Welcome to your new home.”

She gave him a minute to adjust. The former dental office, located just outside the center of town, stood a testament to 1980s architecture everywhere. Not for them the quaint, historic brick that dated to the country’s earliest settlement period or the turn-of-the-century Victorians that lined up like gingerbread houses along the north of the borough. No. They got dated carpeting and vertical blinds.

So maybe the office wasn’t exactly the way they’d pictured it, but leasing this heap of rubble was a heck of a lot cheaper than building their facility from scratch, and had the added bonus of making them saviors to the community. The building was an eyesore, a scab. They were going to transform it into beauty, all upscale and sleek.

That was the whole point, actually. Pleasant Park was chock-full of people flush with disposable income and desperate for all things upscale and sleek, unwavering in their desire to be urban but surrounded by the bucolic Pennsylvania countryside that was anything but.

“Well, it *is* roomy,” John eventually said, nodding once to confirm his approval. “You’re sure they said three months?”

Whitney hoisted herself up on one of the laminate counters, feeling inordinately pleased with herself for navigating the tricky maneuver in her tight pencil skirt and dangerously high-heeled boots.

“I’ve seen the plans myself. I believe I’m sitting in the surgery suite right now.”

“How charming,” John murmured. “I can practically see the love handles melting away.”

“I don’t have love handles!” Whitney protested, sitting up straighter. “I’m a strictly junk-in-the-trunk miss. Now you, on the other hand...”

“I’m not going anywhere near you and your scalpel of fury, so don’t even try.” John laughed, *his* love handles jiggling delightfully in the process. “Besides, for someone who advocates artificial beauty so much, I don’t see a whole lot of discreet scars on your body.”

“I’ve had at least half a dozen moles removed, and you know as well as I do this isn’t my real nose. And I thought about getting a breast enlargement to balance my upper and lower halves.” Whitney stuck her arms straight out in front of her, her B cups smooshing together in the process. “But those babies would get in the way of my technique something fierce. Can you imagine stitching sutures with a couple of double Ds in the way? It’d be like you trying to perform a Shiatsu with a couple of cantaloupes taped to your chest. Alas, I’m destined for average beauty and ninja surgical skills. We all have sacrifices to make.”

John leveled her with one of his signature looks—bushy eyebrow raised in an exact emulation of a young Sean Connery. “I have not now, or ever, accused you of being average. I wouldn’t dare.”

Before she could plant the kiss on his lips he so clearly deserved, the front door swung open with a crash. Kendra, bedraggled in the sparkly shirt from the night before, her heels in one hand and eye makeup smudged halfway down her tiny, heart-shaped face, took one look at John and let out a squeal. Like Whitney, she launched herself into their friend’s arms, though she became almost engulfed by the breadth of them.

Whitney laughed as they said their hellos. Kendra effused an aura of stale perfume, stale beer and fresh coffee—the unmistakable scent of the Walk of Shame—and John was doing his fastidious best not to notice.

“I texted you to let you know that you didn’t need to come in today.” Whitney nodded toward her purse. “Did your little orange friend turn out to be not much in the way of a good host?”

Kendra stuck out her tongue, flashing the silver piercing in the center. It wasn’t the only piercing she had—but

with the exception of a tiny diamond stud in her nose, it was the only other one visible to the public. “Judge not, Whitney dear. You’re looking none too pure of heart yourself this morning.”

“When have I ever been pure of anything?”

Kendra laughed, and even though she’d probably just rolled out of bed and stumbled here by foot, Whitney felt a surge of pride and admiration for her friend. There weren’t a whole lot of judgment-free women out there in the world who looked and acted as fabulous as Kendra. Indian by birth, educated at Brown and possessed of a wicked skill at threading a pair of eyebrows into submission, Kendra was the main reason they were actually going through with opening the spa. Her MBA lent them all authenticity, and her esthetician training rounded out an already impressive line of services.

“Did you at least have a good night?” Whitney asked.

“It was...interesting,” Kendra hedged.

“Oooh, interesting.” John leaned on one elbow, propped on the counter near Whitney. “I like the sound of that.”

“Let me guess,” Whitney said, pretending to be thoughtful. “He also spray-tanned his dick, didn’t he?”

John let out a crack of laughter and even Kendra gave in to a soft snort. “A lady never tells.”

“Well—what is it, then?” Whitney prodded when Kendra didn’t offer more. Her friend had never been very good at hiding her worries. Stress always made her quiet.

Kendra shook her head, her chin-length hair—now bereft of the pink wig—swishing around her with razor-like precision. “It’s just that I passed four people I recognized on the walk over here this morning. Three frowned at me.”

“Screw it. Let them frown.” If there was one thing Whitney hated more than critical townspeople, it was critical townspeople who dared to judge her friend. “You’re fantastic.”

Kendra tapped a finger on her lips in a gesture of thoughtfulness. “Don’t think I don’t know that. I just wonder if we overestimated...”

“What, sweetie?” John raised one of his bushy eyebrows. “I officially terminated employment at the sports clinic as of yesterday—there’s no backing out now.”

“We’re not backing out of anything.” Whitney was no quitter. She’d make this business work if she had to run through the town center with her scalpel in hand, threatening the masses. “This is our dream, remember? Everything we ever wanted? The reason we’ve slaved away for years? Any of this ringing a bell? I have fond memories of us sitting in the student lounge writing out a business plan on the cafeteria napkins—I think my parents might even still have a few of them. My mom will probably make us a scrapbook.”

John’s look was just enigmatic enough to cause her pulse to leap. “How could any of us forget? Jared was just finishing medical school, you started taking all your nursing prerequisites...”

Whitney jumped off the counter and pretended to take a profound interest in counting the dead fly carcasses on the huge window overlooking the parking lot. There was no way to avoid the subject—not when Jared had been such an integral part of their group. The Four Musketeers, they’d called themselves, all of them playing second fiddle to Jared’s inborn God complex, herself included. She’d wanted to be his goddamn nurse, for crying out loud. His helpmeet.

She was no man’s helpmeet.

And even though she knew John and Kendra were on her side, it still sometimes felt like they blamed her for Jared’s absence in their medical spa dream-come-true.

He’s the one who cheated, she wanted to scream. He’s the one who ruined the fantasy. The one who ruined me.

If there was one thing Whitney had learned from her life experiences, it was that she didn’t need Jared Fine to make her life complete. She didn’t need anyone for that. Yes, they

were a few years behind schedule, what with Whitney's determination to return to school and become a surgeon herself. And yes, a fourth partner would have considerably reduced the amount of loans they'd had to take out to make this happen.

But they'd persevered. They'd made it. And they'd done it all without him.

She turned, a fake smile plastered to her face so tight it burned. "I, for one, am having no doubts whatsoever. I love this town."

"I take it that means your evening with Matt went well?" Kendra accepted Whitney's change of subject without batting a false eyelash.

"There's a Matt already?" John asked. He, too, was a master at reading Whitney's not-so-subtle cues. "You girls certainly have been busy."

"Who? That guy at the bar last night?" Whitney pretended to think about it. "Nah. I was a perfectly good girl last night."

Under normal circumstances, she wasn't a very good liar—she had far too much directness to be able to pull duplicity off with any real measure of success. But in the full light of day, it was easy to pretend that she had *not* attempted to corrupt a kindergarten teacher, and that she had *not*, much to her dismay, failed in said attempt.

And he'd been such a good kisser too. Surprised, and then...not surprised. Not surprised had been quite the experience.

She decided to change the subject. "I came home alone and at a perfectly respectable hour. Are you going to see what's-his-orange-face again?"

Kendra pursed her lips. "Probably not. But I mean it, Whitney—I think we may have underestimated just how conservative this place is."

Whitney shuddered. *Conservative* was one of her least favorite words. Sweater sets and respectable investment

portfolios were other things that made her itch, right up there with commitment. “What are you saying?”

“Just that we might need to tread a little lighter. We’ll be fine—I’m probably overreacting. These people might be a little bit more old-fashioned than we’d like, but they have money. They know other people with money. And they have an inborn need to compete with the Joneses. Let’s focus on fitting in with that.”

“I’m not wearing pastels,” Whitney warned. “Or pearls.”

John grinned. “Maybe we could start small. Drink less, perhaps?”

Kendra shook off the last of her doldrums and began to walk through the front office, pointing out the future waxing room and massage facilities to John.

Whitney adjusted her skirt and followed her friends through the empty corridor with its boring white walls and cheap gray carpet, thinking of the grave look on Matt’s face when he’d offered her a handshake in place of more intimate relations. *Hmm*. Maybe drinking less was a good idea. They could at least adhere to a strict intoxication-on-the-weekends-only rule.

“The time to ingratiate ourselves here is now, while we have a little time on our hands,” Kendra said, nodding firmly. Then she winced and held a hand to her head. “Or maybe tomorrow, once I’ve had a nap.”

John put an arm around Kendra’s shoulder and steered her in the direction of the front door. “I’m going to take this one home and pump her full of fluids and aspirin. You okay to hand off the keys when the contractors get here?”

Whitney nodded. “I’ll even fight the urge to flirt outrageously with the cute ones. See how respectable I’m becoming already?”

“Don’t listen to her.” Kendra allowed John to lead her away. “She’s got her sights set on the local schoolteacher. She’ll be the ruin of us all.”

“I do not have my sights on him!” Whitney called back, making her voice purposefully loud. “I barely even remember his name.”

Lies. Every last one of them.

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Chapter Three

Matt loved his job.

All jokes and stereotypes about male kindergarten teachers aside, he liked going home at the end of the day knowing he'd accomplished something good, that lives were being changed for the better because of his small place in them. He'd never been one to pursue grand ambitions, and he liked to think he'd once been happy.

Work, wife, home. A simple lineup—but then, he'd never professed to be anything but a simple man.

Unfortunately, with one of the key ingredients missing, Matt had moved well beyond simple into dismal territory. It was a fact he felt keenly, never more so than on days like today, when no fewer than three kids had meltdowns before lunch and all he wanted was to go home to a friendly face.

So much for transforming into the free-wheeling bachelor Lincoln wanted him to be. So much for meeting incredible women in bars and taking advantage of what they had to offer.

As the bell rang, signaling freedom, Matt stepped out of the two-story brick schoolhouse, a historic building with ample charm and not nearly enough electrical outlets, with his line of students in tow. Half of them vibrated with pent-up energy, while the other half appeared ready for an afternoon nap. *A nap sounds about right.*

Visions of his couch and the deep reaches of sleep beckoned warmly. Or rather, they began to beckon warmly. All thoughts of sleep fled the second he caught a bright flash of color the same shade of a traffic cone standing in the schoolyard.

The color itself wasn't unusual. The woman attached to it, however, *was*—bold, daring, leaning against a tree and presumably waiting for him.

He did his best to ignore Whitney's concentrated stare as he handed the children off, one by one, to parents and

babysitters. What on earth was she doing here? And how had she found him?

She has your ID information, dummy. She could probably steal his identity if she wanted to. Run a background check. Stalk him to the ends of the earth.

He'd never been stalked before.

Matt's pulse picked up, clearly enjoying the idea, but he tamped the sensation down. She'd probably left something behind at the diner, or maybe her friend failed to show up yesterday morning and she wanted to exact payment in Lincoln's blood. Nothing big. Nothing at all like what his overactive and apparently workplace-inappropriate imagination had in mind.

Two of the more persistent moms lingered long after everyone else cleared away, and he had to force himself to greet them with a semblance of calm, to avoid Whitney's oppressive gaze. As much as he might want to run screaming into the school right now, taking a much-needed time out in the corner, he had to man up and face these women.

All three of them.

The two parents he knew as Tara and Nadine were both single moms, both taking care of robust boys who routinely pushed their boundaries using physical force against the smallest kids. They weren't bad—they just needed a strong male presence.

The boys. Not the moms.

"I was hoping to set up a time to talk to you about Tommy's reading." Nadine tugged her squirming son to stay by her side. She had red hair that passed in a tumble of curls to her mid-back and always dressed in a sweater with a deep v-neck, no matter what the weather. "I'm so happy with what you're doing—I just want to take it to the next level, you know?"

The sound of a deep, feminine chortle filled the air.

"Of course," Matt said, doing his best to ignore Whitney. He wished he knew what she wanted. He wished he

knew whether the curve of those lips carried mockery or something else...something that coiled down toward his groin and gave an insistent tug. “Why don’t I send Tommy home with a book list that you two can work on together?”

Before Nadine could say anything more, Tara pushed her way forward, a plate of something warm and cinnamony in her hand. Even though she often brought baked goods with her, she looked as though she never ate any. She and her son Giovanni dressed almost exclusively in athletic gear, she in those tight black pants women liked to exercise in and he in matching tracksuits, one color for each day of the week.

She pressed a plate of cookies in his hand and beamed. “Right out of the oven. Oatmeal pecan—it’s my great-granny’s recipe.”

Matt held the plate a little farther out from his body. He was deathly allergic to pecans. “Thank you.” She seemed to expect something else, so he paused for a moment before adding, “Did, ah, you guys get the notice about the field trip next week? I think we’re still short a few chaperones, so if you’re free...”

“Oh, I’m free. Absolutely. Count me in.” The words were shot rapid-fire. As her clothes indicated, Tara was very energetic.

“I’d love to help too, but my job as a legal secretary keeps me so busy during the day, you know?” Nadine’s job as a legal secretary had been mentioned so many times throughout the course of the school year Matt sometimes heard it in his sleep. “We didn’t all divorce a big-shot director with alimony to spare. But I can volunteer in the evenings. Any time.”

Matt smiled and nodded, awkwardly holding the cookies so far out a bird could have swooped down and taken every last one. He appreciated that Tara and Nadine took an active interest in their kids, but he hadn’t yet learned how to straddle the line between professionally friendly and not interested.

He fought a sigh. This sort of thing had never happened before the divorce.

Whitney, of course, seemed to take all of this in at a glance, sensing his distress—not that she appeared to have any plans to save him. As though she'd come by merely to spectate, she continued resting against the tree, managing to look amused and relaxed at the same time.

Don't just stand there—help me, he mouthed, being careful not to draw the attention of the two women, who had squared off to discuss the comparative merits of being a working mom versus a stay-at-home one. Nadine and her legal secretary background were currently in the lead.

He thought for a minute that maybe Whitney misunderstood or was willfully ignoring him, but with a slow, satisfied smile, she pushed off from the tree and sauntered over as if she owned the place. That had to be a thing of hers—that sense of entitlement. It seemed somehow ingrained.

“Hello, ladies,” she said coolly. A quick appraisal determined that she wasn't wearing anything low cut or revealing, being dressed in skintight jeans and a bright orange top, but she still seemed to swell larger than life, taking over all the air and space.

Or maybe that was just him.

“I don't believe we've met. I'm Whitney.” She extended her arm, confident and strong, holding it there until the women had no choice but to take it. “I'm so sorry to have to whisk your child's teacher away like this, but I'm having a bikini wax in an hour and Matt always holds my hand during the appointment.”

She did not just—

Whitney clasped his hand and beamed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “And then we always take that baby out for a test drive.”

She did.

But even as Matt's face burned and he heard echoes of the adage to watch out for cures that were worse than the

disease, he felt a smile form on his lips. Maybe he would have adopted a more subtle approach, but there was no denying Whitney's version got results. He had a feeling she always got results.

"Oh, my stars, I had no idea." Nadine cocked her head and stared at Matt. "You have got to be the sweetest man on the face of the planet."

"Thank you," he managed, striving to keep a straight face. "I try."

"You are so lucky," Tara added, her words directed warmly at Whitney. "I couldn't even get Gio's daddy to come to the ultrasounds."

"I know." Whitney wrapped an arm around Matt's waist and squeezed him. "And you wouldn't believe how great he is with those hands."

Both women looked down at his hands with interest. As far as he could tell, they were just hands, chapped from excessive washing but otherwise unremarkable.

"He gives great foot rub," she added. "Honestly, though, I'm just so grateful to have him in my life. And I know he just loves those kids of yours. It takes a special kind of man to step up for this kind of job. He's society's hero, if you ask me. A real pillar of the community."

Tara and Nadine nodded, beaming at him.

"I couldn't agree more." Tara grabbed the plate from Matt and foisted it into Whitney's hands. "You enjoy those cookies, both of you."

"Thank you. We will." Whitney smiled, taking over the conversation with ease, her lips rolling over the word *we* in a way that made Matt's insides grow taut with expectation. "And I'll make sure this gorgeous man of mine brings the plate back when we're done."

They stood chatting for a few more moments before the moms took their leave, crises averted, now on perfectly amiable terms with one another.

Matt took a moment to squat to the boys' level, careful to look them both in the eye. "Remember what I said about your homework tonight. What is it we're working on, again?"

Giovanni scowled. "I'm s'posed to say *please* and *thank you*, 'specially to my mom."

He ignored the outburst of feminine "awwws" at Giovanni's recitation. It wasn't doing these kids any favors for them to think being polite was anything other than what they owed every fellow human being. "And I think you'll do great at it. What else? James?"

"Look for shapes and write 'em in our journals. My Wii is a white square. I already know that one."

"You might try looking outside too. There are some really good shapes in nature." He stood and brushed off his knees. "I'll see you guys tomorrow, okay?"

He refused to make eye contact with Whitney as Tara and Nadine dragged their sons away, fearful that any sort of acknowledgement of what had just happened would have him rolling on the ground in tears of laughter.

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't acutely aware of her watching him. He defied anyone to ignore that kind of intensity—they might as well try to turn off the sun. But then she picked up one of the cookies and began nibbling, so he jumped away.

"Pecan allergy," he explained when one of her eyebrows rose. "One crumb will send me to the hospital."

"Then why didn't you tell Tara that?"

It was a good question. And the answer—that strong, forceful women scared the crap out of him—didn't seem like a confession he should make if he planned on getting out of this situation alive. "I was being polite."

"You'd risk anaphylactic shock for the sake of being nice?"

"I've risked a lot worse."

"Good thing I'm a doctor," she added.

“You are?” That didn’t seem right. A doctor was upright and professional and...staid. Whitney, this city girl with a strangely overpowering pull on him, was not.

She smirked. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me. At least not yet. Which is why I think I’ll let you thank me over a cup of coffee.”

“Coffee?” That sounded suspiciously like what he’d offered the other night...and what she’d turned down flat, claiming a disinterest in daytime activities. “What’s the catch?”

Her grin grew and she took a few predatory steps forward. “No catch. Can’t a girl take a man out for a hot beverage of the bean variety? Can’t two consenting adults share a plate of something delicious and pecan-free?”

The way her voice dropped over the word *consenting* spiked straight to his groin. His powers of resistance were only so strong. He *was* human, after all.

She laughed, a rough, low sound that didn’t help matters any. “That’s what I thought. Meet me at Java Rocket in half an hour?”

He hesitated, not because he wasn’t interested, but because he *was*. It had been so long since he’d felt that surge—anticipation and curiosity and the stirrings of lust all at the same time—and he was almost afraid he’d forgotten how it was supposed to work. Women. Coffee. Dating.

Sex.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” Whitney picked up one of the cookies and waved it in his face.

“Is this how you get dates?” he couldn’t help asking, even though they both knew he was well on his way to capitulation. Who was he kidding? He was already there. He wanted coffee with this woman in ways that had to be illegal in at least ten states. “Threatening a man with bodily harm?”

“Oh, honey.” Whitney laughed and tossed her hair. She took his assent as a matter of course and turned toward the parking lot. “No one said anything about this being a date.”

“How did you do that back there, anyway?” Matt balanced two cups of coffee and a huge wedge of chocolate cake as he approached their table.

Chocolate and table service. Matt might be a bit quieter than the guys she usually went after but, damn, did he know how to woo a girl.

“How did you turn Nadine and Tara around like that without their knowing?”

“Easy.” She grabbed a fork. “I was nice.”

He shook his head and studied her intently. After what felt like a full minute he said, “No. That wasn’t it.”

“I beg your pardon?” Whitney was used to men looking at her—she wasn’t without her faults, obviously, but her bright colors and tight pants weren’t exactly subtle cues, the human equivalent of a bright red baboon ass wagging under the trees. While she definitely read interest in Matt’s sharp blue eyes, it was tempered with something else. Disdain, almost. As though she wasn’t quite up to his usual standards.

Damn if that look didn’t make her want to prove him wrong. It was the only reason she could give for being so persistent in her pursuit of him, coming to his place of work and accosting complete strangers on the playground. She wasn’t normally the one doing all the work.

He wasn’t fazed. In that same thoughtful vein, he added, “That wasn’t being nice. Kindness is something that comes from within. It’s spontaneous, unconscious. You were extracting something from those women—getting them to do what you wanted.”

“That is so not true. I was getting them to do what *you* wanted. I saw that pained look. You were a trapped man.”

“I think I might still be.” He grinned, flashing that damn dimple and looking more appealing than her cake—and that was saying a lot. “What were you doing at the school?”

“Trapping you,” Whitney admitted. She arched her brow suggestively, but he kept chewing, kept watching,

making her realize she had virtually no discernible effect on him.

“So you’re really a doctor?”

“A plastic surgeon. You know that old dental office just off Main Street? It’s mine—well, mine in conjunction with Kendra and another friend of ours. We’re opening a medical spa. Botox, boobs, brows—the whole package.”

“You mean...you live here? In Pleasant Park?”

There was a reluctant note in his voice that made her feel every inch the naughty seductress she was attempting to be. “Yes. I live here. Why? Afraid I’m going to ruin your reputation?”

He took a long sip of coffee, giving nothing away.

“Can I get you anything for that? Maybe a stool for getting down off your high horse?”

Matt offered a slight grin over the rim of his cup—just enough of a quirk of the lips to do strange things to her equilibrium. He was cute *and* self-deprecating, which was turning out to be a bizarre and effective aphrodisiac.

“I’m sorry. That was rude. I just assumed you and your friend were visiting.”

“Slumming it in the boonies?”

“Something like that,” he admitted. “I’m sure you guys will love it here. It’s a very friendly place.”

Whitney placed a hand on his. “That’s what I’m hoping.”

He looked at her hand warily, and Whitney’s pulse picked up. She’d never met a man so attracted to and repulsed by her at the same time.

“So.” She leaned over the table. “Tell me about you.”

“There’s not much to say. I live in Pleasant Park. I teach kindergarten.”

“You have a brother who, unlike you, enjoys the bar scene.” She ticked off her fingers. “You’re divorced. You’re abnormally polite. You think women are scary.”

“Not scary.” His eyes met hers. For all his bashfulness, his stare was very direct.

“What, then? Why are you looking at me as though I might eat you?”

“I move a little slower than most guys, that’s all,” he said carefully. “I don’t see what the big hurry is.”

She licked her lips. “Don’t you?”

Matt pushed back from the table with a polite nod. “I’ve got to get back to school—I didn’t get a chance to set up for tomorrow. Thanks for coffee and everything.”

She watched him for a suspended moment before rising to her feet. “Lots of crayons to organize and paper shapes to cut out?”

“Something like that,” he said, but added nothing more. He’d resorted to being cool and polite—almost exactly the way he’d been with those overeager women at the school. It was as good a sign as any that she was being rejected. Again.

As she reached around to the back of her chair, Matt stepped forward, once again grabbing her coat and helping her into it. The brush of his fingers against her neck stalled them both in their tracks, and Whitney knew a sudden urge to arch into his hand. But he pulled away before she completed the thought, stepping so far back someone could have wedged a grocery cart between them.

Whitney let out a low whistle. “Your ex-wife really did a number on you, didn’t she?”

Matt jerked his head in the direction of the door. “It’s complicated.”

“Is she off limits, the ex-wife?” Whitney asked, taking pity on him and allowing him to lead her out. As expected, Matt opened the café door for her, and even made a move as if

to follow her to her car—protecting her against the savages of Pleasant Park in the daytime. “Are you still at that stage where you’d rather stab your eyes out with a fork than talk about her? I remember that stage well. I used to have a very fond daydream of a fork and a totally different organ to puncture.”

“It’s fine.” Matt shoved his hands deep in his pockets. “In fact, if you want the whole story, all you have to do is ask anyone walking down the street. It’s kind of hard to keep a personal life personal around here.”

“I’d rather you tell me.”

He paused before shuffling forward again. “The short version? She cheated.”

Oh. *Oh.*

Whitney stopped him. It was just a quick hand to his arm, but enough to show she was listening. “That sucks, Matt. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Actually, I did. I wasn’t able to give her the emotional support she needed, so she looked for it somewhere else. It happens.” As soon as the words moved past his lips, he stopped and laughed. “I don’t know what it is about you. I really can’t keep my mouth shut, can I?”

There was nothing even remotely funny about a cheating wife—infidelity was the one thing Whitney refused to play off as a joke—but she still laughed. Matt looked so sheepish, his hands in his pockets, hair tousled, breath coming out in short puffs in the cold air. Oversharing definitely became him. And she wanted to hear more about this bitch of an ex-wife—preferably over dinner or wine or partial nudity.

“You don’t spend a whole lot of time with members of the opposite sex, do you?” Whitney asked warmly, tucking her arm in his.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Let’s just say it’s been a long time since anyone has been able to catch me so far off guard.” And off her game. “But you? You surprise me. You’ve been surprising me for almost a full forty-eight hours now.”

“Is that a good thing?” Matt’s look of discomfort grew until it was all she could do not to kiss him and squeeze him until the adorable exploded all over them both.

“It’s good.” Emboldened by the deepening of his dimple, she stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against his cheek. Warm and scratchy—just the way a man ought to be. “You have no idea how much.”

Matt was never more grateful for a telephone call than he was in that moment, what with Whitney and her lips and his ever-weakening resolve toward her. The only dark spot was that Lincoln had somehow gotten to his phone and managed to change the ringtone for Laura’s number to Rhianna’s “Unfaithful.” Very subtle.

With a quick look of apology to Whitney, who was struggling not to laugh, he pulled his cell out of his pocket. “Hello?”

“Hey, Matt. It’s me.”

Me. A word that meant so much and yet so little. “I know. What’s up?”

He heard her sharp intake of breath over the phone and realized he’d spoken much more harshly than he intended. He was usually pretty good at this part—the inevitable conversations and lingering issues of two lives torn apart—but he felt oddly hesitant to talk right now. It probably had something to do with standing next to a woman who didn’t carry years’ worth of his history on her shoulders, who actually laughed at his jokes for a change.

“Was there a problem with the check?” he continued, more moderate this time. Laura didn’t demand much in the way of alimony—and how could she, given his profession—but they’d settled it between them that he’d cover the house payment on their little two-bedroom cottage for the first year. Enough time for her to get back on her feet, and enough time for him to pay down on the guilt he felt at the way things had ended.

His sister Hilly and Lincoln considered it the height of outrage that he gave her anything at all, considering the circumstances of their breakup, but it wasn't for them to judge. Hilly had been happily married to the same man for a decade and Lincoln...*well*. Matt looked at Whitney and smiled. Lincoln was orange.

"Oh, no. Nothing's wrong," Laura rushed to assure him, her tone breathy and light. "I was just wondering if you planned on stopping by this week."

He ran a quick mental check over the to-do list he kept tacked above his desk at school and came up empty. "Was there something I forgot? Is the water heater acting up again?"

"It's been fine ever since you replaced the coils. It's just that you usually check in on Sundays to see how things are getting along with the house. You missed yesterday."

"I did?" *Oh, yeah*. He had. A beer, sangria, two shots of tequila and the Whitney whirlwind had conspired to make his Sunday morning something of a blur. He distinctly remembered a headache and a lingering sense of regret that had more to do with turning Whitney down than the unprecedented amount of alcohol he'd consumed.

"It's not like you to break habit, that's all," Laura said. He could hear the smile in her voice. That was one of the things that had first drawn him to her. She'd never been the kind of woman who did things to excess, but when she was pleased, her normally placid exterior broke a little, letting him in. Of course, her tendency to underplay emotion had also made it that much more difficult to tell when she began to be unhappy.

Or when that unhappiness led straight to another man's arms.

"You're dependable old Matt," she added.

The certainty with which Laura spoke sent a jolt of awareness through him. Was he that easy to label? He hadn't even realized he'd fallen into such an ironclad routine of checking in on her. Taking care of the ordinary household

things that had always been his domain had started as a way to retain a connection to his old life. A few months later, it had become a courtesy.

Lately, it had become a chore.

Is that her? Whitney mouthed, catching sight of his frown.

Matt nodded once, regretting his honesty the moment Whitney lit up, unwarranted glee casting the deceptively gentle features of her face into a kind of radiance. “Give me the phone,” she hissed, reaching for it.

He remembered the way she’d so neatly handled the women at the school and shook his head. Laura would find nothing charming in Whitney’s depilatory habits—no matter how much she might deserve to hear them.

Whitney, obviously not one to give up easily, dived toward him with her arm outstretched. “I’m serious. I’ve got one or two things to say to her.”

“Um, I’m sorry, but—” He stepped aside just as Whitney got a hand on his phone. He didn’t let go, but he also wasn’t willing to hit Whitney—a restriction she apparently didn’t share. With a quick, playful jab to his stomach, he was forced to give up the fight. To do anything else would be to confess just how ticklish he was, and nothing seemed more catastrophic than admitting *that* particular weakness to *this* particular woman.

Something about his sudden shift backward threw Whitney off balance and the phone clattered to the ground, the screen shattering in the final way that belonged solely to inordinately expensive electronics.

“Well, shit.” Whitney’s words said it all.

He looked at the piece for a moment before giving in to laughter—long, hearty laughter like he hadn’t enjoyed in a long time. “I think you broke it.”

Whitney laughed with him. “That wasn’t my goal, I promise. I just wanted to say hello, introduce myself to the woman. I’ll buy you a new phone.”

“Don’t bother. It was about five years out of date as it was.” Matt cast a sidelong look at her. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever hung up on Laura before.”

“Is that her name? How ordinary.” She paused for a moment. “You aren’t going to let the whole hanging-up-on-her thing eat away at your noble soul, are you?”

“No.” He shook his head resolutely. “She called me dependable. And old.”

Whitney gave a mock shudder. “That unfeeling bitch.”

Matt didn’t correct her. While he wouldn’t choose quite so strong a term to describe Laura, he felt strangely unsettled at her certainty in his reliability. When had he become such a pushover? When had he decided that dependability was the only quality worth having?

“Are you just going to leave the broken pieces there?” Whitney asked, making no move to scoop them up.

“I don’t think I’ve ever littered before either.”

Whitney’s eyes flashed. “I like where you’re going with this. Tell me, Matt Fuller, what else haven’t you ever done?”

“I’ve never met a woman like you,” he said honestly. He doubted most people had ever enjoyed an experience like this.

“Well, what do you intend to do now that you’ve met me?” she asked, not making any overt moves toward him. She stood almost motionless, as if waiting for his response before determining how to proceed.

He knew how he wanted to proceed—and it had nothing to do with being dependable. Or reliable. Or safe. He didn’t want to be the guy who checked in on his cheating ex-wife every week because he couldn’t let go of the feeling that he’d somehow wronged her by not putting up more of a fight.

He also didn’t want to fight. At least, not for Laura.

“Matt?” Whitney prodded. “Are you okay?”

He swallowed and met Whitney's eyes. The dark, turbulent passion he saw there gave him enough courage to say the words they both needed to hear.

"I'm more than okay." A feeling of warmth spread through him. There would be no more focusing on all the things he didn't want. Right now, with this woman, he was going to focus on all the things he *did* want. Starting with her. "In fact, I think I'd very much like to rebound."

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Chapter Four

Matt wasn't sure what to do with his hands.

The possibilities seemed endless. He might start by running them through Whitney's long curls, which always seemed to be one strong wind away from being tangled up in knots. From there, he could cup the back of her neck, holding her firm as he brought her mouth to his. Wrap one hand around her waist, which was deliciously tiny in comparison to the generous flare of her hips. Pull her so close that if she wanted to keep laughing—and who was he kidding, she was always laughing—she'd have to draw the breath from between his own two lips to do it.

He bit back a groan and shoved his hands behind his back instead. All in good time. He might be at her condo for what pretty much amounted to a sex visit, but that didn't mean they couldn't at least talk first.

Whitney's home was situated in one of those townhouse blocks that was all granite and hardwood and had a three-foot patch of yard out back. She claimed to have only recently moved in, but the space greeted visitors with a strong, lived-in feeling. No cookie-cutter condo this, what with a hairbrush and curling iron in the fruit bowl and a dazzling array of wine and margarita glasses littering every horizontal surface. The wall opposite the front door had been painted a bright red, and above her television hung a painting of a very enthusiastic nude.

He liked it here—or he would, as long as he could figure out what to do with his freaking hands.

“So let me get this straight,” Whitney said as she sat across from Matt on an overstuffed leather couch. “Your dad was a cop, your grandfather was a cop, your uncles are cops and your brother is a cop?”

“Yep,” he said, playing along. “Technically, my great-grandfather was on the force too, but only in a voluntary capacity. After he retired from military service.”

“So you’re the first male in your family to break tradition in, what, a hundred years? And your chosen profession is...kindergarten?”

He spread his hands in a gesture of futility, glad to finally have something to do with them. “I’ve always been a rebel.”

“I can clearly see that,” she said wryly. “Is this some kind of inborn passion for reforming the world’s youth or something?”

“You could call it that.” Matt leaned back in his armchair—also done up in dark, rich leather—and allowed himself to relax. For eight months now, he’d avoided situations like this, situations in which he might be expected to flirt and be charming, make eye contact and say all the right things. Yet here he was, doing those things—*successfully*—and he wasn’t even trying.

“It’s always the quiet ones.” Whitney’s mouth lifted at one corner. “Seriously, though. What made you want to teach small children?”

There wasn’t any malice in her question, but Matt was strangely reluctant to go into details—mostly because it wasn’t a huge deal. When junior year of college had rolled around and he’d needed to formally decide on a major, early childhood education had seemed like a good fit. He liked kids more than he liked most adults, and there was something so undemanding and, well, playful, about that age group. Five- and six-year-olds accepted the world and the people who inhabited it at face value. And all they asked in return was circle time and a few snacks.

“Kids are fun,” he hedged. “Why did you become a plastic surgeon?”

“The money.”

Matt was betrayed into a laugh. “I should have known you’d refuse to be serious.”

“Oh, I’m serious.” Whitney flipped her hair, the tangles tumbling over one shoulder so that a single curl licked

at her breast. He could have sworn she did it just to torment him. “I’m opening a clinic where women with six-figure incomes can come to get a body wrap, a waxing and a butt lift all in one day. You think I’m spurred by motives of altruism?”

“Come on.” He couldn’t believe anyone became a doctor for the money. There were a lot easier ways to make a fortune—many of which didn’t require a decade of education first. “No deep-seated urge to bring people joy? Or to make the world a better place, one scar removal at a time?”

Whitney’s eyes fell curiously flat. “Nope. Not in the slightest.”

“There has to be more to it than that,” Matt said, refusing to let the subject drop. This was the first time he’d seen her be anything but one hundred percent carefree—and he’d be lying if he didn’t admit that this glimmer of something real intrigued him more than a hundred casual sexual innuendoes.

“I know within five minutes what a person’s biggest weakness is. Does that count?”

“That sounds very doctor-like, actually. You’re like a medical superhero,” he joked.

But the look Whitney gave him was not one of a woman joking along with him. It was more like she was talking down to a very obtuse, very young student. “Not medical weaknesses, Matt. Their personal ones. I get a lot more out of my patients when I know where their insecurities lie.”

“That sounds awful.”

“Is it? The reason your brother Lincoln is orange and dresses like he’s from the Jersey Shore is because he’s jealous of you. You’re taller, better looking and have more strength of character. It eats away at him inside—he’d be a good candidate for bodywork. Something like calf implants or even laser hair removal. Those women at the school today? The first one, Nadine, has already had work done on her breasts, and it was very well done—it probably didn’t come cheap, and in my

experience, work like that rarely comes alone. The other one, the one in the yoga gear? Her body shape is the result of hardcore exercise, but that wasn't her original nose. A hundred bucks says both of them got surgery before the divorce but after it was clear the marriage was failing."

Matt blinked. The things she was saying—they were cruel words, harsh words. But she was being neither cruel nor harsh. Whitney was matter-of-fact and decisive...and proud.

"You do that to everyone? Find their flaws and profit from them?"

She met his gaze directly. "If there's one thing you should know about me, Matt, it's that I rarely tell anyone what they don't already know." She waited a moment before adding, "Aren't you going to ask me what I'd change about you?"

"No. I would never do anything like plastic surgery."

Her smile was slow and lazy and wide, mesmerizing him. "I know you wouldn't. And you don't need any work done."

"Because I'm perfect?" he couldn't help asking.

"Nice try." She laughed. "Because imperfection suits you."

Matt got up and stood in front of Whitney's giant HDTV—a relic that many a gentleman caller found himself drawn to the moment he stepped through the door. She was pretty sure most of them used the time to measure their own technology against hers. Penis envy. She'd expected better from Matt.

"It was a gift from my parents," Whitney explained. "When I completed my residency."

He turned, a puzzled look sweeping across his brow. "Really? Your parents gave you that?"

"I think it was a commentary on my lack of a love life," Whitney admitted. Actually, her mom's exact words had been, "It was either a television or a cat, dear. Something

needs to keep you company at night.” And her parents knew how she felt about cats.

Matt took a huge step back. “Okay. That’s officially one of the weirdest things I’ve ever heard.”

“That I have parents who love and care about me?” It wasn’t *that* strange—even in this day and age. Even at *her* day and age.

“Well...I meant having parents who buy you erotic paintings. But I guess that makes sense, now that I think about it.”

Whitney burst into laughter. Did Matt honestly think her vices ran that deep? “Oh, God. You mean my Gwyneth Hogan.”

“Is that the, uh, model’s name?”

“The artist,” she corrected him. It was almost too easy. She let out a gurgle as she added, “And I can safely assure you my parents had no hand in the purchase of that painting, though my mother does find Hogan’s work compelling.”

Matt colored, his face suffusing with a charming pink hue as his dimples deepened. “You were talking about the TV, weren’t you?”

“Just how depraved do you think I am?” she teased.

He didn’t answer—at least not verbally. He didn’t have to. The words that came out of this man’s mouth and what she read in his expression were two completely different things. Maybe it was the mild-mannered, buttoned-up schoolteacher thing he had going on, but he reacted to every sway of her hips, every sexual promise that rolled off her tongue, like a man witnessing his last meal being cooked before his eyes.

So when his mouth fell open a fraction and his body became unnaturally still, he might as well have whipped out his erection and started stroking it right there. He wanted her—depravity and all.

In fact, if she was right about Matt—and she rather suspected she was—he *especially* wanted the depravity.

“Is this where I’m supposed to be impressed by the size of your toys?” he asked, trying to cover his mistake with an attempt at being coy.

Two could play that game. “That depends. Is it working?”

“A little bit. If you’ve got a really nice set of golf clubs hiding in your closet, I think I’m going to have to leave.”

Golf. Ugh. That had to be the least sexy sport on the face of the planet. “Don’t even mention that word to me. I don’t approve of any activity that requires a four-hour time commitment. Well, most activities. There is one that I enjoy for much longer than that.”

“It’s Frisbee, isn’t it?” he joked.

“No, Matt. It most certainly is not.”

There he was again, mentally stroking his erection, his throat working up and down as he took in her full meaning. How could he make her feel so naughty with just one look?

“So.” When he finally spoke, his voice came out a hoarse strain. “How does this work?”

She knew what he meant, but *dammit*. She was going to make him say it. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger and pretended to look thoughtful. “And by *this*, you mean...?”

“The rebound.” He took a breath so slow and so long he seemed to be preparing to submerge for hours. God, she hoped that was what he had planned. “Seeing as you volunteered yourself for the role, is it polite for me to wait for you to start bounding, or do I just jump in?”

She kept her face grave, but it was a struggle. “You’re the one who said you weren’t bad at this. I’m waiting for my proof.”

“Oh.” He smiled. It was one of those crooked smiles they always talked about in books, the kind that started at one low corner of his mouth and spread upward, lighting his face and eyes. “Well. In that case...”

She waited, curious to see what he would do. There was no doubt in her mind that Matt could kiss—the one they shared in the diner had been more than enough evidence for her that he was possessed of a deft tongue and knew what to do with it. And in terms of sexual acrobatics, she wasn't the most demanding of lovers. As long as he showed up at full attention, she could work with what she got.

A thrill ran up her spine. She'd show him just how well she could work with it. This man had no idea what he was in for.

Apparently, neither did she.

Matt crossed the room before she could blink, and all she could think in the first few whirlwind seconds of his mouth capturing hers was that she'd been duped. This man, so curiously shy, had no intention of taking things slow. He had no intention of remaining buttoned up. With the kind of deep, insistent kiss that went straight to her toes, Matt proved that full attention was just the start of what he had to offer.

“How am I doing so far?” he asked, pulling away when it became clear both of them were going to need to eventually breathe. “I have the feeling I'm going to like this rebounding thing.”

“You tricked me.” She licked her lips slowly, her body throbbing with desire as his eyes followed every flick. “I thought I was going to get to teach you a lesson or two, Mr. Fuller.”

“Am I supposed to call you by your last name too?” he asked, curling one hand against her hair. His other hand was busy behind her back. Somewhere along the way, he'd slipped it under her shirt and was trailing a slow, careful pattern along the length of her spine. “I'm not sure I know it.”

She let out a low laugh. “Last names aren't required. And if you move your hand just a few inches lower, you can call me anything you want.”

He pulled her roughly to him, and even though they both wore jeans, there was no mistaking the desire that swelled

between them. A low purr escaped her throat. If there was any sensation better than that of a man growing hard against her, she had yet to discover it.

And bless his heart, he did move his hand lower, cupping the generous curves of her ass with a kind of fierce possession that made her whimper with longing. But she couldn't whimper long, because he kissed her again, rendering everything but the hot, insistent demands of his mouth a blur.

Even though there was no question of what would eventually happen—the two of them, naked, his incredible tongue in all her dark, secret places—Matt took his time. She could feel just how much he wanted her, knew that the deep, shuddering breath he pulled when she grazed her hand over the hard line of his erection was just the start of his desire, but still he kissed. Everywhere. Jaw, neck, the slight dip in her throat, but mostly her lips.

When Whitney was pretty sure she couldn't take the slow, easy pace of his seduction anymore, she pulled away and nodded toward the bedroom. “Are you ready to show me what else you can do?”

He examined her carefully, his expression difficult to read. Without touching any part of her, he leaned in and brushed his lips against hers, so light and soft it might have been a figment of her imagination. She leaned in, straining to increase the intensity of the kiss, but he held back.

“What?” she asked, growing irritated—though with herself or him, she wasn't quite sure. “I've already let you into my home, and I'm ready to lead you straight to my bed. What else are you trying to get from me?”

His eyes searched hers, leaving her feeling strangely lost in her own skin. “What else are you willing to give?”

“Nothing.” That wasn't strictly true. The longer he made her wait, the more certain she was that she'd do just about anything to get him between her legs. “And everything,” she amended.

“That sounds like a great place to start.”

She ignored the thick, emotional promise in that statement. “Well? Are you going to take my clothes off, or am I going to have to do it myself?”

Matt licked his lips, his gaze not straying from her face. “You,” he said, the word so quiet it was almost a whisper. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he was reverent. A girl could get used to that. “You do it. Please.”

“Good answer.” *Great* answer.

She took her time with the task. It had taken quite a bit of practice in front of a mirror to learn how to shed one’s shirt to maximum effect, but she’d been nothing if not a diligent student in her youth. Lifting the fabric inch by inch, she showcased what she knew was one of her best features—a soft stomach and waspish waist, rendered all the more appealing by the ample bulk that started at her hips. A study in contrast, she’d once been told.

Her shirt flung wildly to the side, she moved on to the swell of each breast where they lifted out of the black lace of her inordinately expensive push-up bra, her fingers slow and methodical. A slight shrug of each shoulder caused her bra straps to slip down her arms, just a hint of nipple appearing where the fabric began to fall.

Matt’s gaze roamed over her, more intimate than a caress—and if she was being honest, more erotic than one too. There was something about his rigid control, the way he could force himself to stand there and do no more than watch, that made the empty ache between her legs throb even harder.

She could feel the slick moisture of her desire build even more as she reached for the button of her jeans. Honestly, if Matt so much as reached out and tweaked a nipple between his fingers, she’d probably come on the spot. And she wasn’t even half naked yet.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Matt announced, stopping her before she got the fabric of her jeans past her hips.

Thank God. “Is that a question or a statement?”

“*May* I kiss you now?”

“If you’re going to be polite about it, absolutely not.” She pouted. “These lips are reserved for men who take no prisoners.”

“Good thing I wasn’t talking about those lips.”

Matt’s words caught her by so much surprise she barely registered it as he approached her and pushed her into the couch with a soft *whomp*. The scent of the newly purchased, buttery leather filled her senses as Matt grabbed each thigh and pulled her to the edge of the cushion.

She was reduced to a bundle of incoherencies. Legs apart. Devoid of breath. Holy shit excited.

And then he fell to his knees before her.

Whitney didn’t often find herself at a loss for anything—thoughts, words, actions. But as Matt leaned in and kissed each of her breasts softly before murmuring, “I think I’ll take care of the pants. You take too long,” she found that she could open her mouth and let out a squeak, but no other sound would come.

His movements were careful and methodical as he unclasped her jeans and tugged them low on her hips, though his mouth found something to do in the meantime. He bit the outside of her bra, grasping onto her nipple through the lined lace. It would have seemed odd if not for feeling so damn wonderful, the sharp edge of his teeth dulled by the fabric but still latching on with a sharp intensity that shot a spike between her legs.

She put both hands on the back of his head, encouraging him to latch harder. But he pulled away and looked up.

“Is this okay?”

She laughed, finally able to find her voice. “I’m going to have to go with a definitive yes. Anything I can do to help?”

He buried his face between her breasts, playfully motorboating. “Nah, I’m good,” he said, his voice muffled.

Whitney laughed again, a sound that quickly gave way to a gasp when he yanked her jeans the rest of the way down, her underwear going along with it. It was a shame, too, since they were one of her best pairs, all black and girly and wearable only two or three times before the lace started to shred. But when Matt's head dipped down to kiss the inside of her thigh, she decided she didn't really care whether or not he took the time to appreciate her lingerie. All she wanted was for him to keep appreciating her skin. Oh, yes. Just. Like. That.

In her experience, oral sex was only good if both parties were enthusiastic about it—a rare aligning of the stars that didn't happen often enough for her tastes. It was easy to tell when a man was going down out of a sense of duty, or if it was a begrudging journey, taken solely to ensure a reciprocated visit.

But Matt—he was enthusiastic. Real interest ignited in his eyes as he took in the sight of her naked and spread open before him, and she found herself gripping his hair harder as he moved between her legs. She shifted so that she was even closer to the edge of the seat and arched into him, allowing herself to enjoy the sensation of his tongue lapping greedily at her, the expertise with which he moved between sucking and licking, her clit never once lost in the mix.

Her grip on his hair had to be borderline sadism by the time she came—she'd long lost feeling in anything but her lady parts—but it was impossible to unlatch her fingers as she jerked against him, sensation taking over reason as the orgasm rocked through her.

“Now that was a kiss worth waiting for,” she murmured, falling back against the couch with her eyes closed. She knew she ought to adopt a more decorous pose as she offered her congratulations, but *damn*—she needed a minute.

She didn't get one, though, as Matt pulled away and dropped a light kiss on the inside of each thigh before all the stars had completely cleared from her vision.

“Slow down there, Galahad,” she murmured, struggling to sit up. “As soon as I recover from this ladylike

swoon, I plan on showing you my appreciation for that incredible feat.”

His laughter was a warm breath on her leg. “You don’t have to.”

She sat up, her lethargy dissolved in a moment of wounded pride. She might be the kind of girl who slept with a guy she barely knew, but at least she had the common human decency to give as good as she got.

“Oh, I do. I really do.” Her words weren’t as forceful as she’d hoped, but since most of her was still quivering with a gelatin-like satisfaction, it would have to be enough. “Besides—it doesn’t count as a rebound otherwise.”

He rubbed a hand on the back of his neck and grinned up at her. “I didn’t know there were going to be so many rules.”

“If you want there to be rules, Matt, I can make rules. And I can enforce them.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he conceded, nodding solemnly. “You’re very intimidating.”

“You aren’t intimidated.”

“Not right now, I’m not. I’m far too pleased with myself.”

He looked at her, the cheeky bastard. “I said that was incredible. Not perfect.”

“Oh? Do you want to give me some pointers?” He licked his lips, taking slow satisfaction in the taste of her that lingered there. “Should I try again?”

As much as she wanted to say yes, to lie there for the next few hours while he kissed whatever the hell he wanted, Whitney was determined to do this right. “Sit down, Matt. And take off your pants.”

Matt still wore his jeans, though they were unbuttoned at the fly and it was obvious they were straining to be removed. The clear outline of his cock bulged with all kinds of

promise, extending much lower down the right leg of his pants than she would have first guessed.

All of that. All for me.

When he didn't move right away, she grabbed for his waistband and shoved her hand down, not stopping until she reached the hard length of him. Thick and strong. A little bit curved. And *hot*. She squeezed. "Sit down. Now."

That time, he sat.

She took her time divesting him of his clothing, enjoying the thick trail of hair leading from the flat plane of his abdomen to where his fly spread open. This was the best part of a man's body, though few of them realized it. Forget clearly defined six packs or skin rendered smooth through laser hair removal treatments or even the sinewy arms that could carry a lady to safety. Give her a happy trail any day, rough and coarse and leading to...she groaned. To such deliciously robust equipment.

Matt was a big boy.

She got to her knees as he lifted his hips, allowing his jeans to pool at his feet. "If, at any time, you feel I need pointers," she said, licking her lips in anticipation, "you be sure and let me know."

He moaned as she took him inside her. His cock was smooth and firm against her tongue, and she had to work her jaw open to fit him all in. She brought one of her hands down to wrap around the base of his dick—the part she couldn't reach with her mouth—the other coming up to gently cup his balls, working and squeezing and even giving a little tug now and then.

"Jesus, Whitney." He jerked as she wrapped her tongue in circles around his shaft. "I don't think pointers will be necessary."

She liked to think that was true—and the noises generated in his throat seemed to indicate that all was going well. So well, in fact, that she didn't have a chance to do much more than swirl her tongue around the large, round head of his

cock a few times, delving deeply into the slit, before the hot, steady pulse of his release filled her mouth.

It wasn't a record for Whitney, but it was certainly up there in the ranks. Like most women, she liked stamina good and well when a man was inside her—but she didn't need oral sex to last forever. Blow jobs weren't exactly a race, but there was something supremely self-satisfying about being able to reduce a man to nothing but sound and sensation in under five minutes flat.

Matt lay in an exact imitation of her repose before, and Whitney had to laugh, imagining how he felt. She crawled up on the couch next to him so that they were side-by-side, not touching, but not feeling awkward about it either.

“So,” she finally said, once both their breathing resumed a normal pace. “That was fun.”

Without getting up from his seat, Matt pulled up his jeans. “I'm not going to argue with that. Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me.” Whitney adjusted her bra straps and reached for her own clothes. “I was the one seducing you, remember?”

“I mean it.” Matt's movements halted. “I was dreading this.”

“Sex?” she asked, laughing softly. “That's got to be the first time a man has ever admitted that out loud.”

He turned to face her, looking adorable and ruffled. That was Whitney's undoing, because he took her pause and appreciation for something they weren't, kissing her lightly on the forehead and lingering there with a sweetness that ached somewhere in the center of her chest. Their eyes met, and Whitney found she couldn't move away from him.

“I meant thanks for making it so easy to, ah, get back on the horse. I don't know that I could have done it with anyone else.”

“No problem, Galahad.” Forcing herself to smile and point, she added, “But don't think that was about anything

more than me finding you to be one hot piece of man meat. This was still not a date.”

A flash of hurt crossed his face—so fast she might have imagined it—before a crooked smile settled on his lips. “If that’s the case, I’m curious to know how far you go on an actual date.”

Taken aback by the unexpectedness of his reply, Whitney tossed her head back and laughed. “Oh, Matt. You have no idea. Bathroom’s through the back if you want to clean up. I’ll make us some toast.”

“You want toast?”

“What I want is Kung Pao chicken and spicy noodles and a beer the size of your head,” Whitney amended. “But whole wheat bread and a toaster oven is what I have. Don’t complain.”

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Chapter Five

“I told you. Women are different now.”

Matt eyed his brother doubtfully. “You act like it’s been fifty years since I’ve even talked to a female member of our species. If you count all the time I spent dating and married to Laura, we’re talking five years, tops. There’s no way they changed that much. Some flowers don’t even bloom that often.”

Lincoln pointed his fork and waved it, a cherry tomato dropping seeds all over the table. “If you’re going to start comparing female anatomy to flowers, you’re only proving my point.”

Matt scowled at his dinner. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

The brothers sat at Pizzaro’s, a local Italian bistro—a cozy, romantic restaurant filled with red checkered tablecloths and private label wine. Almost all the tables seated two and the lights were so dim the menus had to be read with a flashlight. He and Lincoln had a standing weekly date here.

Yes, sharing a candlelit dinner with his brother every Tuesday night might not be the height of his romantic fantasies, but single people deserved to eat at their favorite restaurants too. Yet another hard truth no one bothered mentioning in the *So Your Wife Cheated on You* handbook.

“You boys want me to uncork that wine?” their server asked, materializing from out of the darkness. The fact that the waitstaff dressed all in black made it that much harder to see them coming. “And how’s that salad with the nonfat dressing on the side treating you, Lincoln?”

Now it was Matt’s turn to laugh. The haughtiness of the tall, slender brunette filling the breadbasket could only mean one thing—Lincoln had slept with her enough times that she’d become aware of the strict diet that kept him lean and in shape. Protein and vegetables. Workouts twice a day. And,

when he thought no one was watching, baby oil to the abs so they glistened in the sun.

“It’s delicious, thanks.” Lincoln speared a mushroom. “And no wine for me. I’m on duty at eight.”

Matt snorted. “I don’t think the Rotary Club bake sale qualifies as official police duty.”

“People look to me for leadership. You have no idea how hard it is being a public servant.”

The waitress—Melinda, her nametag pronounced—let out a laugh. “I’ll be back around with some water. I am so slipping the hostess a twenty tonight. You’re going in someone else’s section next week.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Lincoln announced, shaking his head at Melinda as she folded back into the shadows. “A few years ago, she would have been begging for a chance to serve the great Officer Fuller his dinner. But ever since the borough’s been taken over by commuters, it’s like the girls here won’t look at anyone without a six-figure income and Venetian plaster walls.”

“Don’t you think that might have more to do with the fact that you’ve slept with and discarded at least half of the Pleasant Park female population?” Matt asked.

Separated as they were by just eleven slightly scandalous months, he and Lincoln had always been closer than most of the other siblings they knew. They’d shared a grade, clothes—most of the time—Christmas presents too. But ever since his brother had hit a robust thirteen and Matt straggled into an awkward twelve, Matt had a hard time finding much sympathy for him in the dating arena. The way he treated women, like disposable playthings, wasn’t exactly progressive.

“That shows what you know.” Lincoln pushed his salad plate away and grabbed the parmesan and red pepper flake shakers, setting them up in the newly cleared space. He gestured at them. “Take Kendra, for example.”

“Is she the cheese or the pepper flakes?”

“She’s the pepper flakes. Hot.” Lincoln didn’t miss a beat. “We had fun. We danced, we talked, we fu—”

Matt held up a hand. “I really don’t need to hear the details.”

Lincoln rolled his eyes and brought the two shakers together in a crude approximation of condiment sex. “We fucked, Matt. It’s okay to say that word now that you’re free of Laura. Anyway, the point is that I’m not a complete jerk. I got her phone number, texted her the next day and all that.”

“Wait—are you supposed to be the parmesan cheese?”

“You’re damn right I am. We complemented each other, Kendra and I. But the next morning, when I told her I had to get to the station for work, it was like a wall came crashing down.” Lincoln put his napkin between the shakers and nudged the pepper flakes closer to the bottle of wine. “She used me. It was all fun and games until she found out what I did for a living. She doesn’t want the cheese, no matter how delicious I might be. She wants to take up with the wine. Wine is who she’ll marry and have babies with.”

“I thought you hated babies. And marriage.”

“I do.” Lincoln dropped the napkin, letting it blanket his strange scene. “But *she* doesn’t know that. She never texted back. I could be at home, sobbing into my Hot Pocket and wanking into a dirty sock, and she’d never have any idea.”

Matt dropped his own fork. That was an image that didn’t set well with his pasta carbonara. “You picked her up in a bar and slept with her on two hours’ acquaintance. What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Irony dripped from Lincoln’s voice. “You picked Whitney up in a bar and slept with her on two days’ acquaintance—and now you’re asking me for advice about what to do next. Well, this is my advice. It was a one-night stand, and about damn time too. Don’t call. Don’t write. Don’t ask her dad for her hand in marriage or some dumb shit like that. If she’s looking for a long-term relationship—and I seriously doubt she is—it’s not with some

pathetic backwoods teacher like you. Accept the situation as divine intervention and move on.”

Damn. It wasn't often that Lincoln made sense—let alone the kind of sense that rang with actual truth.

“I think I'm going to call her anyway.”

Lincoln dropped his head to the table, the hollow thump of skull on wood loud enough to halt the background chatter and scraping of forks on plates. “What were her exact words when you left?”

Matt refused to say them out loud—especially for Lincoln's edification. *Next time I'm determined to feel that beautiful cock of yours inside me*, she'd said. She'd been smiling at the time, but the door had been closing slowly but firmly in his face before he'd barely had time to swallow his toast.

Next time? *Next time?* Did that mean they were firmly on the path to an actual relationship? Or would she just show up at his work again, smiling at him with that mouth—gorgeous, bright and firmly implanted in his memory as the best orifice on the face of the planet—over the heads of innocent children? *Jesus.* He still wasn't sure what her parting words had been calculated to do, other than to have him hard and straining before he even got to his car.

Which was exactly what had happened.

“She said she wants to see me again,” he managed.

“But she clearly stated it wasn't a date? Like before you even went out?”

“Well...yes.”

“Fuck buddy,” Lincoln said firmly. “She intends to ride you until there's nothing left for her to ride. Lucky bastard. I practically gave her to you the other night.”

Across the room, the dark outline of a guy in a suit dropped to one knee in the unmistakable plunge of a man in love. All eyes turned in the direction of the couple, unashamed to witness a spectacle meant to be public in the best possible

way. In fact, the entire restaurant seemed to suspend itself, all eating and talking and kitchen activity stalled for the brief minute it took for the man to stammer the most important question he'd ever ask in his life.

It was too far away to make out any of the details, but the woman's cry and the way she leaped out of her seat to launch herself at the man was all the confirmation Matt needed. Applause broke out all around them, and even Lincoln got caught up in the moment, holding up his glass of ice water in a mock toast.

"Another one bites the dust," Lincoln quoted solemnly, clearly not intending a joke. With a sidelong look at Matt—the same sidelong look he'd been getting for eight months now—Lincoln shook his head. "That's one situation I'm really glad you got out of. I know you don't like to hear it, but Laura was a stone cold bitch."

"She wasn't," he insisted, but he didn't put much elbow grease into the protest. No amount of explaining could get his family to realize that he didn't hate his ex-wife, that he didn't hate the institution of marriage, that he didn't spend his nights secretly punching holes in his walls in anger.

"Are you going to call her?"

"Who? Laura?"

Lincoln let out an irritated huff. "No, dumbshit. The one who's actually willing to suck your dick more than once a year on your birthday."

I've got to stop telling Lincoln things.

"Why don't you get to your bake sale already, Officer Fuller," Matt said, emphasizing his brother's title and ignoring the question of Whitney and what, exactly, the next move was supposed to be. He'd figure this out on his own. And who knew? He might actually enjoy himself in the process. "I'll get the check this time. Go mingle with the townspeople and eat lots of cupcakes and donuts."

"You know how I feel about that donut crap." Lincoln rose from his seat, his finger pointed in a warning as he

gathered his things. “Stereotypes hurt, Matt. And I never joke about carbs.”

Matt was worried—and not just because Laura’s sink was clogged with yet another wad of debris that looked like an entire roll of paper towels.

He sprang to his feet and tried the water, happy to find that it ran straight through.

No. The real cause for his worry was that Lincoln had been right. It had been a week since Whitney had popped his post-divorce cherry, as his brother had so charmingly put it, and against his better judgment, Matt had called once and texted twice—not being pushy, of course, just letting her know that he was thinking of her and would like to meet up again for coffee or dinner.

Radio silence. He’d gotten nary a word in reply, and the natural conclusion—that he’d taken part in a one-night stand—was the only logical one. Which was fine. A little insulting, maybe, but in the grand scheme of crimes against him, not seeing Whitney again wasn’t the worst rejection he’d ever suffered. Not by a long shot.

So why couldn’t he stop thinking about her?

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Matt whirled to find Laura leaning against the counter, looking calm and relaxed in slacks and a button-up shirt, her hair a soft cascade around her shoulders. She’d never looked like that when they were together—she’d always been in a rush, bearing the harried look of a woman with hundreds of things to do, even though he had no real idea how she filled her days.

To be fair, he’d never really asked.

“You know you can only put food scraps in the garbage disposal, right?”

She chuckled softly. “That’s really what you were thinking right now? With that frown?”

He shrugged. He hadn't realized he was being so transparent. "I can leave you the number of a couple of good plumbers if it acts up again. And put paper products in the garbage next time."

"Sure." She hesitated, poised as if to speak. Matt could tell she wanted him to press her to find out what was going on, but he refused to ask questions, to engage her in any way.

"You're good to me," she continued. "Too good."

"It's just a sink, Laura."

"I know it is." Then, the words a tumbled rush, "We're still friends, aren't we?"

"Of course we are." *Friend* was a bit too strong of a word for the giant chasm of *nothing* he felt whenever Laura walked into the room, but he had to say something. And the truth seemed unnecessarily cruel. "Anything else you need before I go?"

She shook her head, and Matt knew what was coming next. It was always the same three words, an *I'm so sorry* that seemed to slough right off wherever it landed.

"I've got to run," he said quickly, not allowing her to get the words in this time. The apology would lead, as it always did, to a cup of coffee, a friendly chat about work, the same banalities that had become commonplace for the pair of them in this post-divorce life they'd created. But he was tired of trying to make her feel better about her sins, of trying to make himself feel better about his lack of interest in them.

He wanted something more.

He wanted to see Whitney again.

Tucking the toolbox carefully under the sink, Matt nodded and ducked his head and pretty much avoided making any eye contact with Laura. Cheap tricks, all of them, but they worked.

It wasn't until he was in his car and several miles away that he realized he wasn't headed in the direction of home—rather, he was pulling near the old dental office just off Main

Street, where a pile of wood and a few work trucks indicated a transformation was taking place.

Huh. Apparently, he wanted to see Whitney a lot more than he realized.

And apparently, he intended to do something about it this time.

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Chapter Six

“I have the paperwork right here,” Kendra repeated. “The blueprints have been cleared, and all renovations are in keeping with the local building code.”

Whitney had to hand it to her friend for remaining so calm. In another lifetime, Kendra could have been a diplomat—she had an incredible way of placating people without losing any ground. The skill came from her sweet face and tiny stature, underneath which existed a deceptively iron-clad negotiating ability. Whitney’s starting salary was a testament to that.

Now she, on the other hand, had the unfortunate tendency to overreact to situations—which was naturally followed by mountains of regret and apologies. Despite being familiar bedfellows of hers, neither one was her favorite thing.

“Breathe, Whit,” John murmured in low, soothing tones. “I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding.”

“How is there even such a thing as a beautification petition?”

It sounded made up. And the man presenting the petition to them ran a bicycle shop across the street, of all eyesores. Three dozen bikes lined up outside every morning, each one boasting a handwritten price tag. What was that contributing to the local ambiance?

“You know what would make this place look better?” she persisted. “About fifteen pounds off his midsection and a neck lift to take care of that wattle.”

“Quiet down, Whitney. He’ll hear you.” Despite his firm words, John’s whole body shook with laughter as he pulled her away from the parking lot. “Maybe we better sit this one out.”

“But did you hear the way he was trying to intimidate her? City ordinances, long-standing community service...like we don’t already know all that. What is it he thinks we’re going to do? Put up giant neon lipo signs?”

John clucked sympathetically. “If anyone can put our new friend in his place, it’s Kendra. Leave her to it. There’s a reason we put her in charge.”

“And how could he possibly have five hundred signatures already? How can that many people protest an office they haven’t even *seen* yet?”

“Kendra will take care of it with her vocabulary and fancy politics,” he soothed.

“You mean my four-letter words won’t do the trick?” She released a begrudging laugh. It was hard to understand how anyone opened a business without the support of their best friends. Slicing people open was one thing. Cooperating with them was another. “Fine. I’ll be good. But if you try to pacify me with your Papa Bear voice one more time, I’m going to put *you* in need of a beautification petition.”

He didn’t even blink at the empty threat and turned his attention to the road, where an understated Ford Focus had just pulled up. “That a friend of yours?”

“Who?” Whitney turned, squinting into the sun. “Oh. Crap. That’s Matt.”

“Matt? The schoolteacher?” John leaned over her for a better look and let out a low whistle. “I can see what Kendra was talking about.”

“Why?” Whitney grew instantly suspicious. Her friends weren’t the most complimentary of people when it came to the men she chose to share her bed. They almost always ended up giving them nicknames based on their most prominent body part. The Mustache. Shoulder Boy. And for one particularly bad decision during residency, Moobs. “What’s wrong with him?”

“So far?” John shook his head. “Not a damn thing. Though I do question his taste in shoes.”

She elbowed him. “Be nice, okay? It’s not his shoes I admire.”

“The Tongue?”

She beamed. “Talented beyond your wildest dreams, but not big enough to warrant a nickname.”

John nodded like that made perfect sense. “Soft Hands?”

“Nuh-uh.” She shook her head. “His hands weren’t at all soft when they—”

“Stop right there. I have it. We’ll call him Dimples.”

Her inner girl squealed. She’d forgotten about the dimples.

“Matt?” she asked, playing it cool as he sauntered up. His gait was slow and relaxed, part of the lackadaisical confidence that came so naturally to him. “How nice to see you again. Are you feeling a craving for some toast?”

“You could say that,” he replied, unfazed by her goad. “I see you’re still making fun of me.”

She couldn’t help herself. “It’s just so easy.” And he took it so well.

He nodded politely to John, introducing himself with an underlining of suspicion. Whitney recognized the motion for what it was—a delicious, toe-tingling jealousy—and wrapped her arm around John’s waist. Or as far around it as she could get. “John and I go way back. He’s our massage therapist. You wouldn’t believe what he can do with a bottle of oil and his thumbs.”

Matt looked back and forth between them, his mouth growing firm. “I’m sorry—am I interrupting something? I can go.”

Tempted though she might have been to push harder, to see how Matt might react, John interceded. “Well, you’re too young for me, or I’d do my best to lure you away. It’s nice to meet you and I hate to be rude, but I think I’m going to go help Kendra. It looks like she’s at least got a copy of the petition now. No, Whitney, don’t you dare ruin what little progress she’s made.” He turned to Matt with a grimace. “Please do us both a favor and get her out of here before she says something we’re all going to regret.”

Without another word, John tipped an imaginary top hat and sauntered away.

“This is a bad time.” Matt’s hands were shoved deep in his pockets, and an apology darkened his brow.

Whitney hadn’t intended to see Matt again. Yes, she’d picked up the phone at least twenty times in the past five days, his number halfway dialed before she thought the better of it and tossed the phone away. Yes, the thought of his cock had spurred no fewer than three hot showers made hotter by virtue of her detachable massaging shower head. But Matt was young and cute and schoolteacher-y and clearly looking for something long-term.

In short, he was the exact opposite of her. Calling him would have just been cruel.

Yet faced with his elbow patches and the full lips that haunted her dreams, she found him impossible to resist.

“You drive the most pathetically sensible car I’ve ever seen,” she said by way of capitulation. “I bet it gets great gas mileage.”

Matt’s frown melted away, his eyes lighting with laughter. “We can’t all be rich surgeons. How come you never called?”

Cut to the chase, why didn’t he? “I told you—it wasn’t a date.”

“So I can’t even talk to you now? If I see you downtown, should I pretend you’re not there, or move to the other sidewalk? We could share custody of Main Street.”

Whitney’s lips twitched, and Matt was pleased she found humor in the situation. It would have been very easy for his sudden appearance to be taken as creepy or overbearing or, even worse, *sad*. But he was none of those things. He was just a guy who saw something he wanted.

Whitney. He wanted Whitney.

“And what if I need a waxing?” he persisted. “I’ve heard manscaping is very hot right now.”

Her lips opened and a full laugh escaped. “Okay. You win. I should have called. But don’t you dare touch a hair on that delicious body of yours. A hairy chest gets me hot like you wouldn’t believe.”

He let out a falsely longing sigh. “Me too.”

The next move was a mystery to Matt. He’d done the unthinkable and stopped by Whitney’s place of work when it was clear she didn’t want to talk to him—and somehow managed to make it seem cool in the process. Asking her out on a real date would invariably lead to another shutdown, but he could hardly suggest they retire to his car to make out.

“You want to go make out in your car?”

He blinked, unsure if the words had actually been spoken or if he’d somehow willed them into being. “Um... what?”

She cocked her head, studying the blue vehicle he’d had since he first started teaching. “It’s compact but workable, I think. I’ve never done it in a Focus before.”

“You’re serious?”

Whitney snaked a hand into his pants pocket, her palm warm where it pressed into his hip, fingers insistent as they plunged deeper. Matt was just about to protest in the shared names of public decency and self-preservation when she whipped her hand out, his keys dangling from her grip. “Are there any good parking spots around here?”

She *was* serious.

And even though Matt knew he should be strong, resist the urge, insist on dinner first...who was he kidding? He grabbed the keys.

“I’ll drive.”

“What do you mean, no sex?” Whitney pulled away, breathing heavily, her head hitting the roof of the passenger side seat. “I have condoms in my purse. Extra large. I bought them just for you.”

Matt placed his hands on both sides of her hips, stilling her movements where she straddled his lap. With her skirt hiked up to her waist and Matt's cock in her hand, he was one or two quick maneuvers away from being inside her.

She arched. And she wanted him inside her. The deep, empty aching gave an anticipatory clench. She wanted it so much she was damn near ready to beg for it.

"I don't mean no sex," he corrected her, swallowing as she slowly stroked his cock, her grip tight against the hard length of him. "I mean no intercourse."

Her movements stilled. "Excuse me? Did you just use the word *intercourse* while your dick is in my hand and I'm so wet I could ride you for hours? Don't you think we've passed the bounds of propriety at this point?"

His laugh was soft, almost painful. "It's just that *riding a man* is the sort of thing I've always considered kind of a big deal. You know—to be shared between two people who actually date."

Whitney scooted back even more. The windows had fogged up so much it was impossible to see out, but the car was nestled in a dark, secluded wood—the kind of dark, secluded wood her father had always told her to avoid with young men she didn't know very well. Here she was, flouting paternal advice, pretty much ready to bend backward over the seat if it meant she could feel even the tip of Matt's cock pressed against her, and she *still* couldn't get fucked.

"You're serious about this? You're punishing me because I won't go on a date with you?"

He brushed the hair from her face, his hand gently cupping her cheek. When his thumb drifted close enough, she swirled her tongue around it, pulling the digit in her mouth and sucking. That would teach him.

He groaned. "I mean it, Whitney. You're an incredible woman, and I'd like nothing more than to take things to the next level with you, but only if you're willing to go with me. I'll happily—gladly, diligently, many times over—give you all

the satisfaction you want this way. But I'm not a toy. I have feelings. And this is where they draw the line."

"So you will do anything for the rebound, but you won't do that," she said flatly, conjuring Meatloaf.

He laughed softly. "We can stop if you want."

Whitney studied him, searching for a crack in that immovable façade. A confident woman even when she wasn't on top of a man, holding his most vital bits, she had no resources for this kind of flat refusal—especially from a guy like Matt.

Because he meant it. He was seriously going to deny her the best part of him out of a misplaced sense of chivalry... and she had no choice but to comply. That grim, apologetic expression was the look of a man who meant what he said and intended to enforce it, even if it meant turning that car around and taking her straight home.

A thrill ran through her. He would, too.

"Okay, you win." Hesitant to let him see how profoundly his strength of resolve affected her, she resumed her attention to his cock, her movements a little faster, a lot harder. "But if you get to make a last-minute stipulation like that, I think I should get one too."

He sank further, and Whitney dropped with him. Even with the seat all the way pushed back, space was limited. She used the sudden shift to tug her skirt higher, slipping her free hand between her legs. The slick heat of her own desire greeted her, but it wasn't that which made her turn suddenly warm with liquid satisfaction. No—that honor belonged to the look on Matt's face as he realized she meant to get them both off. Like he was seeing his first Christmas and she was all wrapped up in a shiny red bow.

She moaned, getting into it, losing herself momentarily in the double sensation of her hands working them both.

"Wait—what's your stipulation?" Matt managed, never once tearing his gaze from her fingers working her clit.

“Oh, God. I can’t stop. You’re going to have to give me a minute first.”

She switched hands, her own moisture acting as a lubricant as she finished jerking Matt off. The sound of him calling her name, begging her not to stop, was all it took to push her over the edge, and they came together, bodies jerking and making the kind of glorious mess that signaled complete and utter release.

Minutes later, slumped in the opposite seat, doing her best to clean up with a school-sized pack of tissues in Matt’s glove compartment, she finally rolled her head to the side to address him.

“I’m ready to make my demands now.”

He groaned. “After that? I honestly don’t think I can.”

With a shout of laughter, she tossed him the tissues. “Don’t worry. You can give those boys a much-deserved rest. But if we’re going to do this—if we’re going to make sure you’ve rebounded so hard your feet won’t have time to touch the ground—you have to promise not to get attached.”

He outlined her lips with the tip of one finger, and that gentle touch did more to sway her than the entire past hour they’d spent fooling around. He was so *sweet*. She wasn’t used to guys being sweet.

“Too late. I’m already attached.”

She grabbed his finger and held it aloft. “I mean it, Matt. Let’s just have fun, okay? Take it one day at a time?”

He made the motion of an X on his chest. “No intercourse, no dates, lots of fun. I accept the challenge. Should we shake on it?”

She sighed, knowing full well she was going to regret taking his extended hand. But she did, and there was no mistaking the jolt of electricity that passed between their palms. *Just imagine what it must feel like to have that man’s cock inside you.* Dammit. She was getting attached too.

“You’re not going to make this easy, are you?” she asked.

But then, what man ever did?

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Chapter Seven

Kendra burst through the door of Whitney's townhouse, her arms full of canvas bags that sprouted bushy weeds from the top. Even though she had her own place across the street, Kendra was a social creature by nature. She liked dinner parties and girls' nights out and sleepovers of the male variety. Since they would be working together all day long, Whitney insisted on separate residences—she loved Kendra, but there was only so much effusive socializing a person could take in one day.

Of course, that didn't stop her friend from regularly stopping by, filling her fridge with bizarre, too-green food and stealing her favorite tights in payment.

“Say what they will about beautification permits, I love this town. Did you know that they open the farmer's market year-round? I just bought twelve varieties of winter squash.”

Whitney wrinkled her nose. “There are that many types of squash? Please tell me you bought them all for decoration.”

Her friend laughed and dropped all the bags on the kitchen island, bulbous vegetables in every color of orange and yellow spilling out. “They're certified organic and delicious. You haven't lived until you've tried my butternut soup.”

“Kendra, you know I love you, but vegetables are what food eats.” She turned back to her magazine, *Plastic Surgery Practice*, and resumed her perusal of pictures of the latest fractional laser system. “And I dare you to find anything in this town that isn't organic. I'm pretty sure all the clothes in that little shop on the corner of Main—you know, the one that had that incredible pair of vegan boots—are made of hemp. That stuff makes me break out in hives. It's like we wandered into some strange episode of the Twilight Zone where everyone feeds off the earth.”

“You said you liked this place.”

“I know I did. I just don't like bugs in my food.”

Forget the problems with the local business bureau, which seemed to take offense that they hadn't been consulted about the new clinic opening up. Forget conservative borough morals, which seemed to be so deeply ingrained the people here somehow forgot they were all the result of good, old-fashioned fornication.

Those were blips, problems to be overcome with a little charm and a few well-placed donations. What Whitney hadn't planned for was the lifestyle, eco-friendly and pulsating with quaint charm. Kendra and John might love the chance to mingle with the salt of the earth, but Whitney preferred noise and giant bloody steaks and even the occasional drive-by shooting. She wanted her pesticides back. Give her chemicals or give her death.

"You know, John and I have been talking. It's important that we all become part of the community if we intend to be accepted." Kendra waved a phallic-shaped gourd at her. "You should join a team or something."

"I *am* getting to know the people," Whitney shot back. Okay, so it was only one person, but she'd definitely done her part to make herself memorable. In fact, she was rather hoping to do it again. Matt Fuller definitely...rose to a challenge.

"I don't mean sleeping with Teacher Hottie to while away the time. I'm all for having a little fun, but I think you should join the Ladies Golf Club. Those women are our target market—you have to try and be one of them."

Whitney shuddered. "I would much rather build my image by cavorting with the local educator, if it's all the same to you. You know golf and I have...issues."

"I volunteered to work at the food co-op and John just signed on to chair the Alternative Health Initiative at the hospital. You can't just sit around on your ass all day eating bonbons. You have to help us build a positive image, and we both think you should start by befriending some of the more powerful women here."

"We both? So what—you and John make all the decisions now?"

“Since all your decisions thus far have been made with your libido?” Kendra paused, her impeccable brows drawing together. Flash and bang was her normal style, so when her smile dropped and some of the energy waned, Whitney knew it was time to listen. “Yes. John and I are calling this shot. Don’t let this flirtation get you derailed.”

Whitney nodded firmly. Kendra was right. Career and life decisions that revolved around a man—even one as nonthreatening as Matt—were not acceptable. Whitney had already done that once, and it had provided enough angst to fuel a thousand teenage melodramas.

“Okay, I’ll golf,” Whitney said lightly. Kendra was right, and she wasn’t in the mood to spend the next few hours falling into a pit of memories, especially one where Jared’s visage loomed large. Better to go along with it and move on. “But I am not wearing those stupid checkered pants. A girl has to draw the line somewhere.”

To any rational person, the fact that it was March meant the golf clubs ought to be put away for at least a few more months. Whitney was all for being dedicated to a sport—it was one small step from being dedicated to a career—but she was also very respectful of the change of seasons. Spring meant she got to wear her cute rubber ducky galoshes. Summer meant weekends at the beach. Fall was knee-high boot time. And winter? That was just another word for spiked coffee, warm fireplaces and long days spent in bed.

So as she approached the local golf store, located in one of the strip malls along the outskirts of town and wedged next to a fondue restaurant, she expected it to be a little deserted.

Desertion didn’t reciprocate her feelings. Apparently everyone within a twenty-mile radius was forgoing the more rational choice—melted cheese in a pot—and opting to buy new clubs for use at the borough’s indoor driving range, a huge, balloon-like building that always emanated an ominous pounding noise as countless balls thwacked their way through the air.

“I am hobnobbing with the locals,” Whitney announced to her reflection in the rearview mirror. Affirmations had always seemed like a tool for the weak, but she was beginning to see the purpose. Someone had to talk her into this stuff—and there was no one in the car but her. “I will be charming and inoffensive. And humble.”

Humble was one Kendra was constantly reminding her to work on.

She pulled a pair of woolen mittens over her hands and got out of the car, shivering as she locked the door. The country was decidedly colder than the city. All those warm bodies and car emissions had a tendency to warm a place up—yet another thing to miss.

You must suffer to be successful. And even with the cold and golf, her life now was a hell of a lot better than it had been a decade ago. Sure, it had been warm and balmy in Huehuetenango, the rugged northwestern region of Guatemala where she’d been stationed with Jared in their Make the World Smile days, but tropical rain wasn’t the key to life’s secrets. And selflessness didn’t always equal joy.

She’d been surrounded by some of the most incredible surgeons, anesthetists and nurses the world would ever know—a parade of young, talented, passionate people. Well, and her. She’d had the young part down pat, but as a second-year nursing student, talent was a negligible quality. And the passion was largely misdirected, as it turned out.

It was hard sometimes not to miss the girl who’d opened herself up to so much—good, bad, pain, love. All those things normal people seemed to thrive on.

She looked around her surroundings now, the exact opposite of the staggering village where howler monkeys (cute but nasty) far outnumbered the humans. Rows of golf paraphernalia—overpriced sticks of metal and the ubiquitous white puckered balls and shoes that were kind of cute, in that fifties retro way—lined the walls, with price tags that ought to make them all ashamed of themselves. People would willingly pay tens of thousands of dollars for a cart to take them over a

few hundred yards of green, while kids all over the world walked miles every day just to get water.

Stop it. As she always did, Whitney silenced that niggling little voice, the conscience she could never quite seem to shake. She'd given up that life for a reason, and it wasn't just that the man who opened her eyes to it all turned out to be a cheating scumbag. The girl she used to be might have had stars in her eyes and plans to change the world, but the woman she was today had so much more. Confidence, a medical degree, great friends.

Those things counted too.

Smiling brightly, she pushed her way to the checkout counter and prepared to dazzle the teenage boy working there with her ineptitude. *See, Kendra? I can be humble.*

"Hello there," she said, smiling brightly. "I'm new in town and I've decided to take up golf. I need a man to help me find everything it takes to get started. Would you like to be my man?"

The boy blinked a few times, his Adam's apple—always so prominent at that age—working overtime.

"Wh-what do you need?" the boy asked, clearly terrified.

Whitney winked. "Oh, I need it all."

"I thought you said you hated golf." That soft voice sent a shiver down her spine, and Whitney could feel a shift in the air as Matt slid next to her at the counter. It seemed the golf store was the place to be on a Saturday afternoon, the height of hip borough activity.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said.

He leaned on one elbow and watched her, his eyes glinting with amusement. "I thought you said that the skinny poles and tiny balls were far too lacking for a woman of your vast experience."

She'd said no such thing. If she didn't know better, she'd say *he* was making fun of *her* for a change. A few

moments of delicious havoc being wreaked on her lady parts, and now he thought he had all the power. God, she loved this town.

“And what would you know about tiny balls?” she asked archly. Turning to the kid at the counter, she shrugged. “Looks like I found my man. Rain check?”

“Sure,” he managed, his voice an odd combination of baritone and high-pitched squeaking. He looked more relieved than anything else as she took Matt’s arm.

“I’m going native.” She pointed Matt in the direction of the golf outfits. Clothes first. The pesky clubs came later. “The people here golf, therefore I do too. I hear you’re good at teaching, Mr. Fuller. Want to be my private tutor?”

Matt pursed his lips, pretending to think it over even as his gaze lingered on all her roundest parts. Whitney was much too well-versed in the art of man to be deceived. There was no way he would turn her down. Not when the question he was clearly dying to ask—when do we get to have sex-but-not-sex again—hung, unasked but already decided upon, in the air.

“I’d teach you, but I think you’re overestimating my abilities,” he admitted. “I’m lucky if I get out a dozen times a year. The only reason I took it up in the first place is because Laura’s family golfs.”

That stopped her a little. Maybe they weren’t exactly spilling all their life secrets yet, but it was clear this man had serious closure issues.

“So...you’re not allowed to like a sport for its own merit? You only do things if your ex-wife left them for you in the divorce settlement?”

A warning flash in his eyes stopped her before she pursued the subject any further. Despite the brevity of their interludes, she was coming to know this man quite well—particularly that sticky point at which he wouldn’t be pushed another inch.

So she wouldn’t push. At least not right away. No matter how much her more moderate self might warn her to

back off, Whitney wasn't one to let a wound take care of itself. She picked and prodded and yanked the tissue into new positions to make it better. It was her calling. And if she was going to help this man successfully rebound, getting to the bottom of his marital issues definitely landed on her to-do list.

“Don't forget—I'm a poor schoolteacher,” he added, though his jovial tone sounded forced. “I can barely afford green fees. Besides, you're going the wrong direction. The clubs are back there.”

“I don't want clubs yet. If I'm doing this, I'm doing it right.” She stopped, looking Matt firmly in the eye. “If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that once I make up my mind about what I want, I cover all the angles until it's mine.”

“Noted. And if there's one thing you should know about me, it's that once I make up my mind about what I *don't* want, I stand by my resolutions.”

“Good.” Since the conversation was clearly leading nowhere—at least nowhere she wanted to go—Whitney let the matter drop and strode to the racks of clothes, all of them nauseatingly pastel and khaki-colored, and started rifling through. “Now, if I'm going to be a golfer, I need to look the part. Find me the pinkest pair of pants they have in here.”

“Pink?”

“The brighter the better,” Whitney added. She *wanted* to stand out—especially if she was going to have to work this hard to fit in.

Even though Matt would never say he loved the act of shopping with women, he was very good at playing a supportive role. He was used to waiting patiently while Laura tried things on, offering a benign opinion when asked to choose between shirt A or blouse B, both of which seemed to match every other item in her closet. Even Hilly said he was a prince among men when it came to squiring his lady through the boutiques on Main Street—and Hilly didn't bestow compliments lightly.

Of course, that was before he'd ever tried to shop with Whitney.

“Don't just stand there gawking at me.” She stood outside the changing room door, an enormous pile of clothes in her hand. “My zippers aren't going to unfasten themselves. Why don't you come into the changing room with me and help? I promise to make it worth your while.”

His breathed through his nose. There was no mistaking her tone of voice—nor was there any mistaking his reaction to it. He wanted to unfasten her zippers, all right.

“I think my while is going to have to wait,” he returned, careful to keep his distance. “There are a lot of people here. Families—some of them whose kids I work with every day. You're just going to have to keep it in your pants until we're done.”

“Aren't you going to want to see how the outfit looks?” She jiggled a tiny neon pink tank top at him. It looked barely big enough to cover her nipples, especially if she was wearing another one of those lacy, gravity-defying contraptions she called a bra.

“Why don't we just close our eyes and imagine it instead? Or maybe I could just hold your purse.”

“That's why they invented hooks in the dressing room.” Whitney spoke to him in the kind of slow, patient tone he normally reserved for his most difficult students. “And holding a lady's purse is something a man in a relationship does. You know what a man on the rebound does?”

He didn't answer her purposefully leading question. Golfwear was supposed to be about athletics—about sweat and toil. Okay, maybe not toil, since the courses in Pleasant Park wouldn't let you on without a caddy and a cart for every four people. But Whitney was treating the sport like it existed solely to provide her a chance to have her own private fashion show. And by private, she meant the two of them, wedged inside one of the tiny changing rooms as she squeezed in and out of her clothes.

God, that sounded amazing.

“Try it on and then come out and show me,” he said. There was already far too much squeezing going on for a public place. “I promise to ooh and aah in all the right places.”

Her eyes sparkled with a meaning that his body took the liberty of interpreting for him. “Oh, there will be happy noises, I promise.”

Matt drew closer. He knew he should stay firm, put his foot down, otherwise put a stop to the juvenile antics that were part of Whitney’s general fervor for life. But this was supposed to be fun, right? Wasn’t that the only rule?

“You’re not scared, are you?” she taunted.

“Of you? No.” Of the alluring power she held over him? Maybe a little.

He kept drawing nearer to her, their faces so close it probably looked like a kiss to anyone paying attention. It felt like a kiss, too, all the intimacy of bodies close and mouths closer, her breath warm and caressing.

“Not even a little?” she teased. “With all these big, bad people watching you, knowing exactly what you want to do to me right now?”

Yes, people were watching him. And yes, he wanted to do things to Whitney without a second thought for proprieties. Those fears—things that might have mattered a lifetime ago—had no power to stop the blood from roaring a furious course to his groin, robbing him of sensation as it moved past all his other organ systems to the one demanding the most attention.

She smiled. Matt was too close to see it, but he could feel it, the amusement that curled her lips into a one-sided grin. “In fact, I’d say there’s no way in hell you could get it up in a public place like this. Not you. Not the town schoolteacher. You’re just man enough to want me...not man enough to do anything about it.”

The blood came faster now. Hotter, too, if such a thing was possible, and the sensation of her body against his was the antithesis of all rational thought. Yet he remained unmoved.

“Nothing you say is going to change my mind. *This* man on the rebound is going to hold your purse. I’m wise to your tricks.”

“Oh, Matt. You haven’t even begun to see my tricks. You set the boundaries, remember?” With a waggle of her eyebrows, she ducked into the changing room with all her clothes in tow.

Matt technically wasn’t holding anything of Whitney’s as she thumped around in the changing room. Not her purse, not her hand, not anything that might be mistaken for two people in a relationship. But as he examined a print on the wall of a golf landscape somewhere in Scotland, desolate and cold, he realized she was right. Standing outside a changing room wasn’t the hallmark of a man on the rebound. He was supposed to be throwing caution aside. He was supposed to be having fun.

In this instance, fun was a half-naked woman with a voracious appetite for sex. And it was literally waiting for him behind door number one.

With a ferocity that seemed to come from some deep, dark place that had remained dormant for too long, Matt marched to the dressing room door and knocked. “I’m coming in.”

Whitney pulled the door open a crack and peeked out. “Why, Mr. Fuller,” she crooned, her voice low. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“My heart is not the organ I wish to discuss right now.” Slipping in, he shut the door as discreetly as he could behind them.

The dressing room was small. Tiny. Barely big enough for one person to turn around in, let alone two of them, all hands and mouths and a furious desire to mesh them together. Whitney did her best to make room by backing up against one side of the dressing room, her hands flat against the flimsy particleboard walls, her legs spread. She had yet to do anything more than remove her shirt, and was dressed to kill in nothing but her bra, a form-fitting black skirt and boots that

went almost all the way up to her knees. In his excitement to enjoy the skintight cut of the material across her ass, he flung a pair of hideous flamingo-covered pants to the floor.

Whitney's eyes opened wide. "Are you going to dress me?" she asked, her voice dripping with sex and faux innocence. "Or is undressing more what you had in mind?"

"I think you know exactly what I want to do." Matt grabbed both her hands in one of his and held them behind her back, using his leg to force hers wider. "And clothes are the last thing I'm worried about right now."

He kissed her then, but without any tenderness or meaning beyond the need of the moment. She moaned into him, enjoying the show of dominance. He enjoyed it too, a lot more than he expected, which was part of the appeal. He'd always been a slow starter, the last to hit his growth spurt as a teenager, the last of his friends to brush his hand across a girl's breast, the last to lose his virginity, which didn't happen until college. The only milestone he'd been the first to hit was marriage, and they could all see how well that turned out.

So the fact that he could pin Whitney against the wall, forcing her body to move and mold under his, their mouths playing at a game that was half pain and half pleasure, teeth and lips fully interchangeable where they crashed—it was exhilarating. Exhilarating and hot and, given that her bra slipped low and her breasts swelled against his chest, going much further than he'd intended.

"I take it back," she whispered, arching her back so that her body rocked against his. "You're not scared at all."

"No." He ran his lips along her jawline. "But you better be. Because you're going to pay for those remarks."

"Tough words, Galahad."

His fingers slid up the length of her thigh, just underneath the hem of her skirt where it brushed against the boot. It was a small expanse of skin by any real standards, but that only added to the appeal of it, especially when she hitched

her leg up on the small bench seat along the back of the dressing room.

As his hand moved up, Whitney let out a low moan. He captured the sound quickly with his mouth, continuing his path up her thigh until he reached his destination. As always, she was ready for him, her lace panties slick with moisture. He slid a finger inside her, feeling a shudder of excitement hit him in the groin as her body tightened around him. Firm and hot, yet always ready for more—her responses were the biggest surprise in all this. She loved his touch, craved it even, begging for more, harder, faster.

She made him feel like a god.

Leaning down to capture one of her escaped nipples in his mouth, he slipped another finger inside. She bucked against his hand, and this time, the moan that escaped wasn't low. *Crap*. He'd left her mouth free.

He tried to kiss her into silence, but it was too late. Someone outside the door must have heard because there was an awful knock at the door, sharp and concise.

Matt jumped back. Since he was the primary object keeping Whitney aloft, she stumbled to the ground, bringing the mirror down with her. Matt had just enough blood left in his brain to be able to catch one of them, and he went for the mirror, saving them both from getting showered in shards of glass. He half expected Whitney to rail at him for letting her fall, but she just rolled onto her knees, face to face with one of the hardest erections he'd had in his life, and started laughing.

The knock sounded again, this time followed by an even sharper and more concise voice. "Hello? Can I ask you to step out, please?"

There was a decidedly schoolmarm undertone to the woman's voice—something all teachers perfected over time, Matt included. But instead of striking fear into Whitney's heart, she only laughed louder, struggling to get up and shrug back into her shirt. Matt helped her up and tried to stifle his own amusement, but she wasn't making it any easier.

“Uh-oh, Mr. Fuller. We’re in for it now,” she whispered between gulps of air. “I bet I’m going to have to buy at least four pairs of those flamingo pants.”

Matt drew a deep breath and willed his body to cool. Fortunately, chagrin acted as a fairly good anti-aphrodisiac, and he was able to pull the door open with his best composed, upstanding citizen-of-the-world look. He might have gotten away with it, too, if the woman standing on the other side of the door had been anyone but Natalie Horn.

Natalie Horn, whose family not only owned the entire chain of Great Golf stores, but who also headed up every local charitable and political organization in town. Natalie Horn, whose tall, wiry frame and freckled features had been an everyday part of his life with Laura, seeing as how the two were best friends.

“Matt! What are you doing?” she called, surprise softening her face just a little—though not enough to make him feel any better about what was to come. “Is this woman attacking you?”

Definitely not better. The moment those catastrophic words crossed Natalie’s lips, Whitney lost any and all of her ability to act like a mature adult. Giggling with mirth, her shirt hanging open, red-faced and not the least bit ashamed of any of the above, Whitney wasn’t exactly the kind of woman who made saving face even a remote possibility.

“Yes, Matt. Tell us,” Whitney managed. “What *were* you doing in there?”

If he’d been wearing a tie, he would have used this moment to straighten it, along with his stance and a firm mouth. As it was, all he had was a T-shirt that had moved up to show a sliver of his stomach and the sinking feeling that Whitney’s teeth had broken the skin along his neck, and he might actually be bleeding all over himself.

“Natalie,” he said, resisting the urge to swipe at his neck to check for damages. “How nice to see you again.”

He'd always liked Natalie, even if she was difficult to get to know. She'd been the maid of honor at their wedding, and he'd come home from work on more than one occasion to find her and Laura chatting in the portico. Although there was a good chance she'd been sitting in that portico, sipping white wine and smiling at him with the full knowledge that Laura was sleeping with another man, he didn't harbor the woman any ill will.

It was clear the feeling was not reciprocated.

"I'm sorry, but were you...fornicating in my changing room?" she asked. At least her voice was low. It seemed they were drawing quite a crowd.

Whitney let out a snorting sound, and Matt kicked his leg backward, catching the shin of her boot. She let out a howl that was more laughter than pain.

"I'm really sorry, Natalie. My, uh, friend needed some help with her clothes."

This was what came of putting pleasure before propriety. It would take all of an hour for this story to spread around town—and he knew exactly what the topic would be during the next teachers' meeting.

Natalie refused to look at Whitney, directing all her attention to the space about one foot above Matt's head. "I can see that. I hope she plans on paying for those."

Whitney held a pair of flamingo-covered pants up triumphantly. "I'll take four pairs. One in every color. You have no idea how good these pants make me feel. Or, I guess, uh, maybe you do?"

Natalie's lips came together tightly, and Whitney leaned in to examine the purse of them, as if performing a medical examination.

It took him a second to realize that was exactly what she was doing.

"You know, my colleague Kendra has a cream that will do wonders for those perioral wrinkles—or, if you're looking for a quicker boost, I do fillers that leave practically no

marks.” She fumbled around in her purse, pulling out a pair of worn nylons and a handful of tampons before finally coming across a business card.

Natalie didn’t take it. She turned on her heel and marched toward the checkout line and, with one imperious wave of her hand, indicated they were to follow.

“Really?” Matt ushered Whitney toward the front of the store. She paused only to grab three other pairs of those god-awful flamingo pants in alternating colors of blue, green and yellow. “You thought now would be a good time to plug your business?”

“What?” she said with faux innocence, her dark eyes wide and flashing. “I was trying to distract her.” Then, more seriously, “Does everyone in town know who you are?”

“If they have kids under the age of twelve, yes.”

She paused before making her way to the checkout stand, where Natalie was whispering something in fierce undertones to the scared teenage clerk.

“Ma’am, I will thank you to take your business elsewhere next time,” Natalie said, looking up at Whitney with a death glare. “And Matt, I have to say that I’m really disappointed in you. This isn’t the sort of thing we expect from a man like you. Are you retaliating for what Laura did? Is that what this is about? I know you’re still hurting, and I know forgiveness is hard—”

Whitney interrupted her by slapping a credit card down on the counter. Her whole body straightened, taut with anticipation—and not the good kind. If Matt didn’t know any better, he’d say she was angry.

“Lady, if you’d been the one Matt recently had pinned up against the side of your changing room, you’d know damn well that Laura is the last thing on his mind.”

Matt laid a restraining hand on Whitney’s arm. She *was* angry. He could feel it in the tension coming off her skin and the clawlike grip she had on her purse. The anger itself

wasn't too surprising—this was clearly a woman whose blood ran hot—but the fact that the anger existed for his benefit was.

She was defending his honor.

And he kind of liked it.

“Whitney, it's fine,” he said, his voice low.

She whirled to face him. “It is *not* fine. How dare this woman stand there and defend a cheater? Okay, so maybe we weren't behaving like saints back there, but at least we're not lying about who we are and how we feel.”

“Whitney.” He waited until some of the anger ebbed away, until her eyes softened just enough that he knew she understood. This one was his call. His ex-wife. His pain. She nodded once.

“Natalie, thank you for your assessment of my condition, but my friend here is right. This has nothing to do with Laura.” Except that wasn't entirely true. As long as Whitney remained nothing more than his rebound girl, every one of their interactions was a direct retaliation against the life he'd once had.

Natalie scowled and pushed Whitney's credit card across the counter, making sure their fingers didn't touch. “She's still not welcome in here again.”

Matt grabbed Whitney's elbow and steered her in the direction of the door. Fortunately, they moved fast enough that only a handful of hangers-on by the door caught the stream of lilting, almost sweet obscenities she uttered every step of the way.

Well, and him. He heard each one—and agreed with at least half.

Chapter Eight

“So...that happened,” Whitney explained, wincing as she took a huge gulp of red wine. One thing about Pleasant Park—there were wineries and vineyards in abundance, and most of what they produced was really good. Cheap too. Who knew they were hiding all the best wine out in the country?

“You’re banned from the golf store?”

“The whole chain of them, actually. I’ve been blacklisted so hard I might as well put a scarlet letter on my chest and call it done with.”

Kendra sighed and buried her emotions in an equally oversized glass of cabernet. “This isn’t going to be good for business. You need damage control.”

“What did Dimples say?” John asked. “I can’t imagine that sober smile takes kindly to tarnishing its schoolteacher reputation.”

Whitney frowned into her wineglass. There was no easy way to answer that question.

Naturally, Matt admitted a shared culpability. “*I was kind of an active participant in there, if you didn’t notice,*” he’d said wryly as he walked her to her car. “*No need to apologize to me.*”

And he hadn’t said a word about her outburst against that horrible, uptight Natalie woman. Which seemed about right, actually. One of the things she was coming to appreciate about Matt was that he didn’t try to tell other people what to do. He had his own moral code and adhered to it with an almost frustrating level of diligence, but he didn’t force it on anyone else.

But she still couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d somehow let him down. Herself down. Kendra and John and New Leaf down. Slashing and burning bridges—that had always been her style. Why waste energy placating people she cared about less than fingernail clippings? She could always build new bridges. She could always find an alternate route.

Pleasant Park, though...it was different. There were only so many paths to take here, and encountering the same people day in and day out meant she had to take a good, hard look at the consequences of her admittedly impetuous actions. And to be honest, she didn't always like what she saw.

What had she gotten herself into, moving here? What had she gotten herself into, taking up with a guy like Matt?

"Dimples is too much of a gentleman to say anything," she finally replied, purposefully haughty to stave off any further discussion. "He kind of thinks I'm amazing."

"Well, we're all happy that you're settling in with your new boyfriend, but I think you should find something more productive to do tomorrow. You're bored, that's the problem." Kendra looked at her pointedly.

"He's not my boyfriend." Whitney ignored the rest of her friend's statement. "I'm helping him move on with his sexual journey. That's all. You know, like Beatrice and Dante. Except you replace the seven levels of hell with sexytimes."

John snorted and held up his glass in a toast. "Here's to replacing hell with sexytimes."

"You're both older than twelve, so please act like it," Kendra snapped. "I mean it, Whitney. Find something to do other than Matt. You could, you know, volunteer at the hospital or something."

Whitney's jaw clenched. Next to the word *boyfriend*, she hated *volunteer* the most, recoiling against it with the force of a thousand black holes. And Kendra knew how she felt about both.

"I've already worked out the operating room situation with them. I just have to coordinate with their physician liaison whenever I want to schedule a complex procedure or overnight recovery there, but otherwise we're all clear—there's no need to go all Mother Theresa on them in order to grease the works."

"No one would ever accuse you of *going Mother Theresa*," John said.

Whitney flipped him off. “I’m good at what I do, Kendra. Incredible, actually. I don’t need to prove myself by kissing babies and making nice with the community. So we can drop it now, okay?” She grabbed her glass and stomped to the kitchen, not stopping until she reached the sink. She poured the rest of her wine out, watching the dark red liquid swirl down the drain.

She knew she was overreacting, but she couldn’t help it. Besides her parents, Kendra and John knew better than anyone just how much she didn’t want to start up all the charity work again. As far as she was concerned, she’d done her time—and then some.

For the past twelve years, she’d busted her ass, getting the grades, landing the residency, passing the boards. All she wanted right now was to spend a little time looking out for Number One. And since Number One wanted to kick her heels for a few months, dallying with a nice, cute guy and making no commitments further than a cup of coffee tomorrow, who was she to stop her?

“Stop sulking!” John called, snapping his fingers. “We’re not saying you have to change, Whitney. We’re saying you should probably work a little bit harder on your Plays Well With Others badge. That’s all.”

Whitney slapped on a smile, determined not to let gloomy self-reflections derail her. In the battle of introspection versus Whitney Vidra, she would always put her money on the latter.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “And I’m going to start by letting you pick which Lifetime movie we’re going to watch.”

She took a seat next to John on the overstuffed leather couch. Kendra sat at their feet, her gaze locked on some complex problem neither Whitney nor John could see.

Whitney snuggled closer to John, instantly feeling better. He was big and warm and comfortable, and it didn’t take long before she even felt conciliatory toward Kendra. These were her friends. She had hot sex, great professional success and people who loved her.

What more could a girl possibly want?

Matt rarely got sick.

He laid most of the credit for it on Hilly's capable shoulders. At almost a full decade older than her brothers, she'd been primarily responsible for raising them when their mother had passed away in a car accident at the unfairly young age of forty-two. Matt remembered his mother as a soft, gentle woman who always smelled of sunshine and used cookies to bribe them away from dangerous activities like climbing to the roof and daring each other to jump off.

He and Lincoln took after her in a lot of ways, both smaller of stature than they cared to admit and with a distaste of arguments and disorderly scenes. Lincoln, Matt knew, tried to hide it behind his overloud bachelor lifestyle and the gun his job required him to carry. But other than a few rebellious years in which he dyed his hair black and—only once, he swore—wore eyeliner, Matt was content to simply be himself.

Hilly, on the other hand, took after their father, an unapologetically brazen bear of a man who never spoke but barked. Commands, questions, queries about the weather—she didn't distinguish. In her mind, all communication required complete attention and decibel levels that would endanger anyone subjected to them for longer than a few minutes at a time.

And since Hilly didn't believe in getting sick, he and Lincoln didn't get sick. She yelled the germs away.

But not today. Today, his head felt as though it was seconds away from ripping into two, his entire body aching in sympathy with it. He knew, in a vague, swimming-through-water type of way, that he needed to call in sick to work. As this feat sucked away the last of his will to live, he dropped to the couch, which still carried the thrift store smell of unwashed hair and unidentifiable meat products, and reconciled himself to inevitable death.

The pounding on the door came later. Hours, minutes, days...Matt had no real idea of anything except that the apartment was dark and his face pressed so hard down into the

threads of his couch he probably had a permanent tic-tac-toe grain on his cheek.

“Mahamanama,” he called, his mouth unable to form any distinguishable syllables. He swung his legs over the side of the couch and promptly tucked his head between his knees, the world dangerously close to tipping on its side.

In the blur of semi-consciousness that took over, Matt recalled a moment, when he and Laura had first been married, that he'd gotten food poisoning from a questionable lamb curry. Even though Laura was squeamish about bodily fluid, she'd been by his side with some sort of vitamin-infused remedy and her cool, efficient hands.

He couldn't help but feel that if she were here right now, Laura would have gotten rid of the person at the door. She would have force fed him chicken soup until he felt better.

This wasn't the first time he missed Laura. But it was the first time he realized just how alone he was since he left.

Before he could wallow any more than he already was, the pounding at the door picked up. A glass of stale, tepid water on his coffee table helped alleviate the worst of the nausea, and he'd even gotten so far as to put both feet on the floor and stand when his phone started ringing.

The phone was easily cast aside, but the pounding monster clearly wasn't going away any time soon. He shuffled to the front door, which was, thankfully, very close—one-bedroom apartments did have their advantages from time to time. He unlatched the lock but didn't have to pull. The door moved all by itself.

Okay. Not by itself. There was a force on the other side much stronger than wood or air or him.

“I cannot believe you stood me up, you asshole.”

“Come on in,” Matt croaked, gesturing for Whitney to cross over the threshold. She looked chipper and bright, her hair pulled into a ponytail and a wool coat covering a tiny dress the color of a Smurf.

Tennis dress. That was a tennis dress, and she carried a racket under one arm. In his stupor, he'd somehow forgotten he promised to take her to the country club he had a lingering membership to, courtesy of Laura's family. After the golf store fiasco, Whitney had made him swear to teach her how to play tennis and how to host a tea party—two activities she somehow equated with both him and the ladies-who-lunch crowd in Pleasant Park. He'd been so excited at the prospect of seeing her again, on what was almost a real date, the insulting portion of that comparison hadn't sunk in until later.

“Oh, shit. You look awful.”

He nodded and kept moving, force propelling him to the couch and allowing him to collapse onto it.

“Are you dying or something?” Whitney followed him inside and stood over the couch, her arms crossed.

“It's possible,” Matt mumbled. “You're the doctor.”

“I only ask because that is the sole acceptable excuse for not picking up a phone and calling. Or even texting, for crying out loud. Your fingers look fine.” As if to reinforce her point, she picked up his hand—and then immediately dropped it, moving to place her palm on his cheek instead. “Well, you're hot, I'll give you that.”

“Thanks. I work out a little.”

She laughed. “I see your sense of humor survived. Seriously, though. That wasn't very nice of you. I thought that of all the things wrong with you, not being polite wasn't one of them.”

“The only thing wrong with me is the flu,” he groaned, sinking farther into the couch. Whitney plopped down near his feet, lifting the appendages and tossing them to the floor to make room for herself. “And it wasn't my fault I missed the tennis, er, non-date,” he added. “I only just now woke up.”

“Yeah, well.” Whitney reached for his remote control. “You're lucky I'm not an insecure person—in fact, I have a strong suspicion you're totally into me. I brought a note. You can check yes or no.”

“You’re funny,” he muttered. The room was beginning to grow a little fuzzy. “So when I stood you up, you decided to stop by my house to aggravate me? That’s the whole plan? By the way...while you’re here, do you think you could get me a fresh glass of water?”

“What am I, your servant?” Whitney clicked on the television, scanning through until she found a Lifetime movie. “Oh, I love this one. The hero travels through time to save his wife’s parents from dying in a horrible car accident, but he makes a mistake and ends up killing his wife before they have a chance to meet. Makes me cry every time.”

Matt blinked and tried to sit up some more but the room spun. “I’m surprised you can cry.”

“Only when the movie is really over the top. I’m a sucker for melodrama.” She looked over and smiled. There was something warm and comforting in that smile. “Relax, Galahad. I’ll grab you a juice and some acetaminophen during the commercial break. You’re not near death yet.”

“How do you know?” he asked miserably.

“Because you’re cracking jokes and kicking me with those freakishly large feet of yours.” She paused, listening for a moment. “And your breathing sounds good.”

“That’s your professional diagnosis?” He settled a little more comfortably on the couch. This wasn’t the kind of sick-time pampering he was used to, but he couldn’t deny that there was no fault to find with the company. And there was something about the brusque, no-nonsense way Whitney treated him that seemed right.

Like her. It feels like her.

“Shh. This is a good part. He messes up the time-travel machine knobs and ends up in the middle of the French Revolution.”

Matt closed his eyes. “I’m sorry I couldn’t play tennis with you. I was looking forward to it.”

Whitney picked up his feet, which he was having a hard time keeping still, and dumped them in her lap. The

warmth of her seeped into his bones, stilling some of the restlessness and making him feel at home for the first time in his god-awful apartment.

“You can make it up to me when you feel better,” she assured him, running her hands firmly over the soles of his feet, her thumbs strong and dexterous where they landed. He should have known she’d be an excellent foot rubber based on the way just a few capable strokes of those hands could reduce him to nothing but about eight inches of nerve endings. “Don’t worry, Matt. I’m not going anywhere. You still have a lot of recovery to do.”

He relaxed and let her hands go to work. Recovery seemed like a golden future beckoning on his horizon—especially since he had the suspicion she was talking about a heck of a lot more than the flu.

Men were huge babies.

It was something every woman knew, but Whitney had daily proof of this fact, brought to her in the shape of men who whined and complained through every stage of plastic surgery.

She could extract the exact same amount of fat from the asses of both a woman and a man using the same techniques, and the only one who would complain about the bruising and pain afterward would be the man. Women accepted that pain and beauty were inexorably linked. Men, on the other hand, threatened to sue her for malpractice.

Unfortunately, if there was one thing she’d learned on the job, it was that telling men how useless they were rarely got the desired effect. It was better to pander, to soothe and coo and be the benevolent angel they sought.

That was why she stopped by all that week, bringing Gatorade and trashy magazines, which Matt pretended he hated but she knew he secretly adored. He knew an awful lot about Justin Bieber for a man nearing thirty.

“I thought you were supposed to be working,” Matt protested on the third day. He’d only stayed home from work because she’d prescribed one more day of rest—which had

nothing at all to do with how enjoyable hanging out in his apartment had become and everything to do with the aforementioned truth about men and their inborn wimpiness.

Yeah, right.

“I swear it’s like you never go to work,” he added.

“I’m a plastic surgeon, Matt.” Whitney breezed in the door with an armful of flowers, which she proceeded to artfully arrange in a big blue plastic tumbler—the closest thing to a vase Matt owned. “Even if our facility was ready to open, I only intend to work nine to five with a generous hour for lunch. I bet you have to put in more time at the day job than I do.”

“That’s awful.”

“It’s genius, that’s what it is. Look around you, Matt. You’re not exactly living the grand lifestyle.”

She finished putting the last daisy in place and surveyed the rest of his apartment. It was exactly what one pictured when imagining a man striking out on his own after an unhappy relationship had sucked away the largest portion of his twenties. It had none of the cold, clinical charm of a typical bachelor pad, and none of the comforts of a home. She was going to have to buy him a new couch too. She was pretty sure this one wanted to break underneath her weight.

“How are your germs doing?” she asked, coming up behind him and snaking two arms around his waist. God, she loved the lean strength of him. It was all flat abs and hard lines for as far as the fingers could explore. Which she promptly set hers out to do. “I’m not so sure I can take much more of this incubation period stuff. Hmm...well, hello there. I guess you might not be able to take much more of it either.”

He let out a sound that was half laugh, half shudder. “I’m pretty sure you could bring a man back from the dead with that move. What are you—?” His cock, stiffening against the flat of her palm, gave a satisfying twitch before she let go.

“I’m just making sure all the parts still work,” she whispered, nipping the side of his neck. “I think we should

feed you. Get your strength up. Then I'm going to find ways to assemble your parts you've never imagined."

"That is both the most intriguing and the most disturbing sexual proposition I've ever received," he murmured.

Whitney released a crack of laughter. "I'm happy to hear it. Now sit. I brought sandwiches."

"Oh, good. I'm starving."

Matt grabbed the to-go bag she'd laid down next to her purse and started rifling through it. Unlike most men she knew, who would grab the best-looking part and settle in, he went to his cupboards and pulled down plates, also taking the time to set out silverware and napkins. Just a small gesture, and one she was pretty sure he didn't even know he was making.

But she noticed, and she appreciated it. She was also put on her guard. It would be very easy to get used to a man who was helpful in the kitchen.

"Am I all clear to return to work tomorrow?" Matt asked, taking a huge bite of his pickle. He was cavalier about it, as if he knew that having a large phallus between his lips was actually a turn-on. And it was. He was the exception to the rule, the one man who could probably walk into a movie theater, order the largest pickle they had, and not cause fits of hilarity behind the popcorn machine.

Dammit. Now she was the one getting aroused.

"I hate leaving the kids for this long," he added. "They prefer stability."

"They prefer recess and cookies," Whitney returned. It wasn't that she didn't like kids—she'd done one or two ear pinnings a month during her residency—but it was hard to imagine a life where their presence was the end all and be all of her earning potential. "Take another bite of that pickle, would you? Slower this time."

Laughter lit his eyes as he processed her request. "You mean, like this?" Without losing eye contact, he began running

his tongue around the width of the condiment in an exaggeration of a blow job—and a rather poor one at that, if you asked her. Far too delicate.

“No, no. Don’t be so shy with the poor thing,” she commanded. “You’re supposed to wrap your lips around it like you’re starving. Like you couldn’t bear it if you missed out on a single delicious inch.”

He lowered his hand, eyes wide. “Is that your trick?”

“It’s not a trick, Matt. When I take your cock in my mouth, it’s my intention to enjoy as much of that hard, throbbing beast as I possibly can. I don’t want to miss a single delicious inch.”

Matt’s throat worked up and down, and the pickle fell to the table. If it was possible to fuck someone with just a gaze, he was doing it right now. With that kind of fierce, blue power, he could have had her stripped and panting between blinks.

Which was why, when a loud knock at the door sounded a few seconds later, it took them both a moment to process the interruption.

“Are you expecting company?” she asked, the first to speak, though her voice came out a little hoarse. “It’s a good thing you dropped that pickle. Things were about to get very inappropriate in here.”

He frowned. “I don’t think so. What time is it?” The insistent rat-tat-tat filled the apartment again. “Excuse me just a second.”

Whitney didn’t want to appear too interested, so she focused on her food. The deli by her condo baked rye bread that was so good it made her want to do illicit things with whole grains. If the past ten minutes in Matt’s company had been any indication, she was going to need the energy. And possibly some illicit whole grains.

Matt checked the peephole. “Oh, crap.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Laura.”

“The evil ex?” Whitney tried not to let her surprise show, but she did a poor job of it. The woman called *and* she showed up at Matt’s apartment unannounced? That took some kind of nerve. “You could pretend we’re not here. By all accounts you should be at work anyway.”

He sighed and rubbed a hand along the back of his neck. “I might have, if you hadn’t just said that loud enough for the neighbors to hear.”

“Right. Sorry.” Except she wasn’t—not really. She felt a powerful urge to see this unfaithful creature for herself, to judge and stone. “You can’t let her stand there forever, you know.”

With a deep breath and a nod, Matt pulled open the door.

“Hey, Laura,” he said kindly, though Whitney noticed he didn’t move out of the doorway enough to let the woman in. Or, she realized, to let her catch a glimpse. “What are you doing here?”

“I called the school, but they said you were sick.” The woman’s voice was soft and light, almost sing-song, like it came from a princess in a Disney cartoon—the kind who only spoke in rhymes. “I brought soup.”

Soup. That was such a joke. Give Whitney a case full of vitamin C and some Tamiflu any day. Who did this woman think she was, barging in here with her home remedies and old wives’ tales?

“Um...thanks.” Matt didn’t move to take it.

“I just remember how you used to get. You know, when your tummy hurt.”

Oh, geez. What was next, a boo-boo bear and a thermometer up the ass? Unable to take another second of waiting in the wings, Whitney gave up the pretense of eating. She came up behind Matt, flanking him as she eyed the infamous cheat. “Come in, come in. We were just having lunch. You’re welcome to join us.”

As she suspected, Laura was one of those wispy, ethereal women who avoided the sun and shopped in the children's department. She was short, coming only up to about Matt's shoulder, which meant she came up to Whitney's shoulder, as well, since she matched his height when she wore heels. Laura had thin blond hair and no breasts to speak of, and, for some unfathomable reason, had chosen to wear a floaty top over jeggings. *Jeggings*. Honestly.

"Aren't you just lovely," Whitney cooed. She nudged Matt out of the way with her hip. He stood there, watching the pair of them interact.

It was such a... Matt thing to do, to quietly watch, to let the women speak for themselves. Not the approach Whitney would have taken, that was for sure. There was a rule—one she adhered to both in her life and in the world of plastic surgery. One must always be happy and gorgeous in the face of a broken relationship, regardless of how one felt. Even if it took a boob job and ten rounds of laser tattoo removal to get there.

They should put that on a plaque and slap it up in her office.

"I've heard so much about you, but none of it has done you justice." She extended a hand. "I'm Whitney."

Laura took her hand limply, and there was a clamminess to it that made Whitney feel a thousand times better. Wet hands were not attractive, no matter how tiny and pert one's ass appeared in jeggings.

Laura looked around uncertainly. "I'm sorry—am I interrupting something?"

Matt spoke up. "I should probably make the formal introductions. Whitney, this is Laura, my ex-wife. And Laura, this is Whitney, my—"

Whitney placed a territorial hand on his ass and gave it a liberal squeeze. "His sexual partner," she offered.

Matt let out a strangled laugh—the sound he always made when Whitney did inappropriate things and he secretly

loved it.

Okay, so maybe the truth would have been better coming from him, but it wouldn't kill Laura to know that there were plenty of other fish in Matt's sea—*willing* fish. Fish that were practically begging for it.

She motioned warmly and made proper welcoming noises. Laura, her eyes wide and her color mounting, had no choice but to enter.

In that moment, Whitney almost felt sorry for her. *Almost*. She hadn't gotten the whole story out of Matt yet, but based on his standard of living, it seemed a reasonable assumption that Laura had gotten the house and the car and any sort of household gear that hadn't come from a frat house.

Considering which one of them was the cheating hosebeast, that hardly seemed fair.

"I should have called first," Laura mumbled.

"Nonsense." Whitney ushered Laura to a chair and dropped half of her sandwich on a plate, avocado and mayonnaise oozing out the sides. "I have to get back to my office in a few minutes, so you two can have all the time you need. I'm a surgeon, you know. A plastic surgeon—we're setting up a new practice in town. I'm quite good. In fact, I make an extraordinary amount of money."

Behind her, Matt covered his laugh with a cough. Laura blinked up at her. "Do you?"

"I know what you're thinking. You want to know what it is I'd change about you." She tilted her head and pretended to survey the woman, even though she'd made her assessment in the first few seconds. "You know, I wouldn't change a thing. You have lovely proportions."

"I do?" Laura colored rosily. "I don't think anyone has ever said that to me before."

"Well, it's true. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise. Now, me? I'm all ass and no tits."

Matt chortled again.

“But I find it suits me just fine. And Matt here doesn’t seem to mind.”

Before Laura could say anything more, Whitney spun and planted a kiss on Matt’s mouth. A wet one, with lots of tongue and a few little mewls thrown in for good effect, germs be damned. If there was one thing she was good at, it was putting on a show.

But it was a mistake, that kiss.

Matt stopped before the kiss got *really* good, the abruptness of his hands on her shoulders as he pushed her back almost painful. A slight shake of his head and an anxious furrow in his brow could only mean one thing: Matt was worried about his ex-wife’s feelings.

Whitney had to stop and breathe, her fingers rising to her lips almost of their own accord. They felt tingly and hot, and all she could think of was how much she wanted him to kiss her in her other hot, tingly places. Of how badly she wished he’d toss his nobility aside and give her a proper deep dicking.

But she was the last thing on his mind. As was always the case when she found herself a new fling, she was the odd woman out—the one who had no real claim on a man’s time or his heart.

“You know what?” she said brightly, her smile tight. “I think I’ll leave you two alone for a spell.”

“No, Whitney—you don’t need to go,” Matt protested, but it was a move taken in half-measures, at best.

“I’d love to stay, but they’re installing the entryway tiles today,” Whitney lied. In actual fact, renovations on the office had all but stopped while the bank reassessed their business plan. There was some strange loophole Kendra pretended didn’t exist and refused to talk about, which meant that hanging out in Matt’s cheese-smelling apartment had been the highlight of her week. “You two have a nice chat, and you can call me later. Okay?”

“That’s probably best,” Matt agreed. Damn him.

She leaned in and pecked him on the cheek, dropping her voice to a low whisper. “You better call me, young man, or I will make it my personal mission to punish you. Is that understood?”

She'd been aiming for jocular, but the worried crinkle around Matt's eyes indicated that she fell short of her mark. Never one to outstay her welcome, Whitney offered another cheerful smile to Laura, grabbed her purse and made for the door.

It looked like round one went to the jeggings.

And she'd given the damn woman her lunch.

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Chapter Nine

“What do you mean, you have to go rake leaves?” Whitney rolled out of bed and got to wobbly feet, which were still covered in her favorite striped fuzzy socks. Most of her clothes were still on, actually, which was a new coital habit for her. Normally she reveled in nudity and all its pleasures.

She'd been determined to pump Matt for information about Laura before they resumed their rebound agreement, but the second he'd walked through the door of her condo, holding an offering of orange dreamsicle cupcakes from the local bakery, she'd been unable to keep her hands out of his pants long enough to fully undress.

“Don't be mad.” Matt leaned against her headboard, totally relaxed and at ease with one arm behind his head. Although she'd managed to remove his shirt, his jeans were still there, unbuttoned and unzipped where they slung low on his hips. “I only came here to thank you for taking care of me while I was sick and to explain that Laura stopped by last week to talk about some lingering insurance issues. Then you jumped me.”

“You jumped back. But I still don't understand about the leaves. You live in an apartment. That's why people live in apartments. Because they hate yard work and decent standards of living.”

Matt dropped his arm and swung his feet from the bed, busying himself with his fly. “Well...it's not for me.”

Whitney froze in the act of buttoning her shirt. Lingering insurance issues, huh? She didn't buy that for a second. Unless she was very much mistaken, that sweet ex-wife of Matt's was the worst kind of manipulator, using that damsel-in-distress routine on a man who obviously considered himself some sort of savior.

“Please tell me it's for a nice old lady who has no muscle mass and eats pot pies alone in her kitchen every night.”

“It’s not.”

“A science experiment then? Are you going to give your kids an insider’s look at the decay of nature?”

Matt hesitated before answering Whitney again. It didn’t take a psychologist to know she wasn’t going to care for his response. It would have been easy to lie and pretend he was helping Lincoln or the fictional nice old lady, but Matt was a big believer in honesty—especially with a woman he’d had his fingers inside no more than ten minutes ago.

“Matt…”

“She needs my help—it’s a big yard, and she didn’t get to all the leaves in the fall. And technically, the house is still in my name.” He paused, searching Whitney for some kind of clue as to her feelings. Other than the fact that she was adjusting her clothes rather fiercely, there wasn’t much to see. Still, he had to try. “I don’t want you to think it’s anything more. I would never do that. You’re the only woman I—”

She growled. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you still have the hots for your ex-wife. In fact, I wish you did. It would be one thing if you showed up there, rake in hand, totally commando underneath your coveralls.”

Matt frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You know—I’m here to mow your lawn and clean the gutters and all that. Bow-chicka-wow-wow. I fully approve of using your ex-wife for revenge sex.” She paused a beat. “But you and I both know that’s not what this is about.”

“How would you know what this is about?”

Whitney turned to face him. This time, there was no mistaking her sentiment. Her hair floated in a disheveled mess around her shoulders, and her clothes were slightly skewed—but none of that had the same effect as the contortion of her lips, which twisted in a sneer. “You might refuse to open your eyes to the truth, but I see you so much more clearly than you realize. You absolutely cannot go over to a woman’s house to do yard work with no ulterior motive, especially if she’s the woman who broke your heart and then tied all the pieces to her

Laura Ashley belt to drag with her wherever she goes. You can't go crawling back to a cheating wife to do her bidding without looking like a pansy. That's what you look like right now. And let me tell you—it's not attractive."

Enough. Matt got to his feet and forced his arms into the sleeves of his crumpled shirt. He didn't even care that it was inside out. "So what you're saying is that it would be attractive if I planned to take advantage of a woman who asked for my help? It would be attractive if I tried to sleep with one woman when I'm seeing another?" He shook his head. "Whitney, you are some kind of messed up."

"You want messed up, go look in a mirror. If you think Laura is operating one hundred percent ulterior-motive-free, then you're a lot dumber than those elbow patches make you look."

"Fine," Matt said, quieter this time. "I won't go."

"Damn right you won't." Whitney's volume, conversely, stayed well inside yelling range. "I say fuck her. She can rake her own damn leaves for a change."

Matt wasn't done. "I won't go," he repeated, "but you have to give me a reason not to. Let's go to a movie this afternoon, and I'll make reservations at Pizzaro's for tonight."

She paused, her lips parted in the middle of her surprise. "You don't mean a real date, do you?"

That was exactly what he meant. "Is that a problem?"

"I thought I already made this clear. We aren't dating. This is about you and me and sex. That's all. I'm helping you get over your ex-wife, remember? You obviously need all the help you can get."

Pride had never been something Matt was accused of displaying to excess. He'd never understood the point in getting all worked up over a falsely inflated sense of self-worth, especially when it came to relationships, when giving was the much more effective approach over taking. But there was no denying that pride still existed inside him, one of those emotions it was impossible to quash entirely. In fact, it was

making its presence loud and clear right now, telling him to walk away from this room—a jumble of clothes and shoes and gauzy, draped things over the lamps—and return to the nice, normal life he'd led just a short time ago.

It hadn't been bad, that normal life. A little lonely, maybe, but at least he hadn't been hanging out in a strange, highly sexualized limbo where it was difficult to tell which way to go for air.

“So...that's a no then,” Matt said flatly. “On the date thing?”

Whitney's mouth softened and she lifted a hand to Matt's cheek. Quick and featherlight, it was the kind of embrace that could easily mean nothing. However, the image of Whitney sitting with him all night while he had the flu, of her stopping by to take his temperature and ply him with fluids was still fresh in his memory.

So that touch could also mean a lot more.

Ever the optimist, Matt steeled himself. Whitney Vidra—plastic surgeon, city girl, woman with a will of iron—might think that sex came with no strings, but there was more here than just a tangle of limbs. He was sure of it.

“All you have to do is say the word,” he added.

For a second, he thought she was going to cave. But she shook her head, and by the time she stopped moving, a frown seemed permanently etched into place.

“Matt, I like you. I like you a lot more than I should, and I'm not going to lie—my resolve is weakening. Two hours ago, I might have even agreed to go on a real date with you.” She paused and blew out a long breath. “But if you think for one second I'm going to allow myself to be wooed by a guy who doesn't realize he's lugging massive baggage around with his ex-wife shoved inside, you sadly underestimate my self-esteem. What she did was more than just wrong—breaking that promise, that *trust*, is one of the worst things a human being can do to another. How can you possibly be friends with a woman like that?”

“I’m going over to the house to help Laura with yard work. Not because we’re friends or because I’m still holding a torch, but because what I feel is the exact opposite.” He wished he could make Whitney understand. He wished he could make *anyone* understand. All the rules said he was supposed to feel rage, betrayal, loathing—those things that reduced a man to a rubble and left him with nothing to build on.

But the only thing he felt was antipathy. Relief. And the absolute, agonizing certainty that Laura was aware of both.

“I’m sorry, Whitney. But this is what I have to do.”

She frowned and, for a moment, Matt imagined throwing all concerns of Laura to the side and whisking Whitney back to bed. Forget his commitments and responsibilities, forget work and life and focus one hundred percent on *play*.

But that wasn’t him. He stuck to his promises, no matter how softly temptation beckoned. “Will I see you later?” he asked.

“You better,” she said. “I’m not about to abandon you now. Go. Rake. Be your bad Galahad self. And if you need a field to plow afterwards, you know where to find me.”

“I’m taking it upon myself to find you a serious relationship,” Whitney announced.

She, Matt and John sat in the bright window seat of the train diner, eating crepes the size of small countries. Hers oozed with cinnamon and apples and a rich ricotta cheese filling. The guys had both opted for a savory one with bacon and sausage and every other part of a pig that tasted good over coffee. She moved her utensil between all three plates, sampling whatever she wanted. Neither one of them dared stop her—she’d already stabbed Matt once with her fork, and she wasn’t afraid to do it again.

“Um, me or Matt?” John held up his coffee cup, as if to shield her with it.

“It would take me all of five minutes to pair you off,” Whitney said, ignoring John’s intense look of fear. One time, dammit. One time in college she’d set him up with the guy who lived in the apartment above hers. From the sounds of it, he’d been a very acrobatic lover. John should have been grateful for the introduction. “If you weren’t gay, you have no idea how many of my friends would happily snatch you up.”

“Don’t use the word *snatch*. Don’t even joke about such things.” John gave a fake shudder. As Whitney suspected, John had immediately agreed when she’d suggested brunch. He thought the idea of Whitney spending all her time with an uptight teacher was too hilarious to miss.

Matt pretended to look affronted. “Are you saying John is more desirable than I am? How many minutes will it take to pair me off?”

“Oh, it would take at least a month to do it right.” Whitney squelched against the vinyl seat as she sat back, studying Matt. He obviously thought she was kidding about this whole thing—but she’d never been more serious in her life. The last thing she wanted was for him to end up gardening for his cheating ex-wife for the rest of his life. “I’d want to make sure she was worthy first. A catch like you? You aren’t allowed to settle.”

This time, he caught her full meaning. “I think I’m the best judge of who I want,” Matt said in that quiet, firm way he had—that quiet, firm way that made her want to rip all his clothes off right then and there.

Since public acts of indecency were strictly forbidden until further notice, Whitney focused all her attention on her mimosa, taking a healthy sip that drained half the glass. She would not return Matt’s glance. She would not acknowledge the statement in any way. In fact, she would do exactly what she’d just announced. Matt needed a serious girlfriend.

And that serious girlfriend needed to not be her.

“Then make me a list.” She shoved her napkin across the table. “All the characteristics you’re looking for in a woman. I’ll find her.”

“I don’t need help getting dates.” Matt shoved the napkin back, a challenge in the firm set of his jaw.

“I don’t think matchmaking is in your future, Whitney,” John agreed. “Maybe you should stick to your natural talents. Blood and gore.”

“If I wanted your opinion, I’d have given it to you. Matt is broken and in pain. He needs me.”

“Who said I’m broken?”

Whitney dropped her fork, allowing it to clatter to her plate noisily. “You haven’t once mentioned your gardening adventure with Laura. In my experience, reticence equals pain.”

“Maybe,” John said calmly, stabbing his fork into her last slice of apple, “it means you should mind your own damn business for once.”

“Unacceptable,” Whitney said, and she meant it. “You know as well as I do that the most catastrophic thing for the recently lovelorn is to be thrown in constant contact with their ex.”

For the first time that morning, John looked serious. He cocked his head slowly, taking in both Matt and Whitney through narrowed eyes. “Is *that* what this is about?”

“What?” Matt instantly picked up on the thread. His soft, trusting eyes turned her way. “What does he mean?”

“Ignore him.” Whitney tossed her hair. She didn’t want to talk about Jared. Not now. Not with Matt acting as though he could see right through her. “Nine times out of ten, John is talking out of his ass. That’s not all he does up there, by the way. Don’t trust it.”

John choked on his water.

“What I’m talking about is Laura,” Whitney continued. “I’m serious. That woman needs to be taught a lesson. She can’t keep treating you like her personal assistant.”

“You don’t know her,” Matt said quietly. John coughed something up from deep in his lung and muttered about

needing to use the restroom.

“If this is the part where you tell me you’re going to start trying to fix things with her, I’m out of here,” Whitney said coldly as soon as John rounded the corner and disappeared from view. “You’re better than that.”

“I didn’t say anything about reconciliation. If you really want to know, she needed me to come over to both rake leaves *and* talk about health insurance. When we were married, she was always on my policy. She doesn’t have any now.”

Whitney raised a brow. “She couldn’t call?”

Matt refused to look away. “It’s not an easy thing, you know, the breaking up of a marriage. It’s a lot more than packing up a box of CDs and crashing on a friend’s couch for a few weeks. What was the longest relationship you ever had?”

“Irrelevant.”

“Are you going to say that what we have is irrelevant too?”

Whitney lost her appetite—something that didn’t happen very often in her world. She pushed her plate away. “Look, Matt. I’m doing you a favor here.”

“Is that what you’d call it? Because it feels like something else to me.”

“I mean it—just give me a chance to find you someone better.”

“What if I don’t want someone better?” he asked, and Whitney no longer had any idea who the *better* referred to in this context. Better than his ex? Or better than her?

“Fine. You want to do it this way?” She sat up, her hands spread wide. There would be no holding back now. “Almost two years. That was my longest relationship.”

Matt might not be an expert, but he knew enough about women to recognize that now would be a good time to back

off. Whitney clearly didn't want to talk about this, and he was already treading on unstable ground with her.

But he could no more stop the question from forming on his lips than he could pretend his feelings for Whitney didn't exist. "He's the one who cheated on you?"

She nodded once. "Isn't it cliché? I'm a psychoanalyst's wet dream."

"What happened?"

"You're really not going to let this drop?"

Matt shook his head resolutely.

"The short answer? We met through John. We dated in college. I caught him sleeping with another woman. It's not terribly interesting."

He waited.

"Please stop looking at me like that. The details aren't important. Maybe it wouldn't have affected me so much if I hadn't dropped out of nursing school to follow him to the middle-of-nowhere Guatemala, but I did. It's impossible to pretend the betrayal wasn't made considerably worse by that fact. I gave up my life. I gave up my dreams. I hated every minute of it."

"Guatemala?"

"Make the World Smile." She flashed a big, false smile by way of punctuation. "He's a plastic surgeon—*the* plastic surgeon, a way better one than I'll ever be. He wanted to spend a few years repairing cleft palates before settling into a medspa practice with me and Kendra and John, and he thought the only way our relationship would work was for me to follow him to the ends of the earth. Where he then decided he liked Nancy the anesthesiologist better."

"That's terrible," Matt said, and he meant it, even though it was hard for him to imagine anyone not wanting Whitney. Especially a Whitney who willingly gave up so much for a chance at love. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault.” She offered a one-shouldered shrug, and her loose red blouse slipped off. The round, naked curve of her shoulder sagged, saying all the things she tried so hard to keep back. With Whitney, her body spoke a language all its own—and Matt was rapidly becoming her most diligent student.

“At least I have Jared to thank for me becoming a surgeon myself.” She sat up, adjusting her shirt so that the gorgeous, sloped, vulnerable shoulder disappeared. “I would have never pushed myself this far if I hadn’t felt like I needed to prove something—to him, to myself, to Kendra and John. But you know what the worst part was?”

Matt shook his head wordlessly.

Whitney grabbed his hand and placed her palm against his, their fingers twining. She held them there, suspended and steady, until he looked up and met her gaze. “The worst part was that I couldn’t *leave*. Transport services only came every few months, so I had to sit there in that tiny camp, rolling bandages, watching them together. Not a day went by when I didn’t feel the urge to stab him in the face with a tracheal tube, but I was just a student volunteer. There was nothing I could do.”

She squeezed his hand and dropped it, but her eyes remained locked on his. “The only thing that allowed me to keep my sanity was a German microbiologist. Claus.” She smiled. “I owe quite a bit to Claus and his gratifyingly audible lovemaking. By the time the supply helicopter came in to carry me away, the whole damn village knew exactly how he liked it.”

Jealousy, hot and unwarranted, twinged for a second before Matt realized the moral of this particular story.

“He was your rebound.”

“We still send Christmas cards to one another—he’s married to this hugely tall model with gorgeous hair and has the most adorable two boys you’ve ever seen. And while we’ll always be friends, not for one second did either of us delude ourselves into thinking we had a future together.”

Matt opened his mouth to protest, but John chose that moment to plunk unceremoniously back into his seat, politely pretending not to notice how furtively Matt and Whitney pulled away from one another.

“So.” John settled his napkin into his lap. “Are we having a second round of mimosas or what?”

“Yes,” Whitney said brightly. “I was just thinking that what Matt and I need is another drink. Several of them, actually.”

Matt, normally not one to drown his sorrows, couldn't help but agree.

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Chapter Ten

Hilly and her husband Donald owned a farm. It had been a point of pride with his sister for years, as though possessing a plot of land once toiled over by Quakers somehow made her a better person, even though the only thing they grew on their ten acres of pristine Pennsylvania countryside were weeds.

Matt parked his car in the huge area in front of the farmhouse, which carefully straddled the line between historic and decrepit. Built in the eighteenth century, the house could very well travel back in time and fit in. Few updates other than plumbing and electricity had been added over the years, and the rooms boasted the low-ceilinged, cramped feeling common in all the old homes in this part of the state.

Not that he could judge, what with his current cheese-shop accommodations. And Hilly's two sons, Trenton and Dylan, seemed to like the house. They said it was a lot like living in a fort full of hidden nooks and crannies, including a staircase cupboard so small no grownup could come crawling in after them.

Matt enjoyed a few minutes of quiet contemplation before entering the house. Tonight was their monthly family dinner, presided over by Hilly, whose rambunctious family seemed to take up all the space around them. It reminded Matt a little of his own childhood, when he and Lincoln did their best to break every bone in their bodies and every valuable in the house.

The rumble of gravel kicking up came along not too much later. Even from a distance, Matt could tell his brother's car was flashy and too fast, showering the top layer of unpaved road over the porch and the empty potted plants and the piles of tires that sat, haphazard and toppled, all over the front yard.

Chances were the car, with the rounded yellow molding denoting speed and low self-esteem, wasn't even Lincoln's. His salary as low-level cop, though more than what Matt enjoyed as a low-level teacher, wasn't nearly enough to

support him in the manner to which he was accustomed. Every time Matt saw his brother, he was driving something new, and he held the cars of spurious origin just long enough to sell them at a profit.

Lincoln always had some sort of trading deal going on Craigslist and, from the looks of the dark brown bob in the seat next to him, he'd also managed to get a date to accompany him to the family dinner. He had a way of getting results. It just defied Matt's capabilities of reason to figure out how.

"Matt!" Lincoln called amiably, sliding over the hood of his car to pull open the passenger side door. Matt recognized the woman who emerged—it was Lincoln's supposed one-night stand, the friend and business partner of Whitney's with the flawless eyebrows.

"Hey, Lincoln. Kendra, right?" He extended a hand. "It's good to see you again."

"Is it weird that I'm here? It's weird that I'm here." She looked around, taking in the disrepair and fields of rippling weeds with a near-grimace. Like Whitney, she oozed city polish, dressed in a skirt and wobbly-looking shoes, her hair shiny in ways that didn't seem natural.

Hilly was going to eat the poor girl alive—if there was one thing she hated more than women who wore dresses, it was women who wore dresses and actually looked good in them. She'd been married in a beige pantsuit, Hillary Clinton style.

"No, not at all," Matt said warmly, even though it *was* kind of weird. He hadn't even known Lincoln was seeing Kendra like this, let alone enough to foist their family on her. "I didn't know we were bringing dates. Should I call Whitney to see if she wants to come?"

Kendra laughed. "Oh, you're cute when you're funny. Whitney doesn't do families."

He should have assumed as much. Parents implied longevity, and after their chat at brunch the other day, he knew

better than to give her even a whiff of that.

Lincoln draped a casual arm around Kendra's shoulder and pointed out various areas of non-interest to her as he led her into the house. An empty silo leaning so far it almost touched the ground. A chicken coop containing one scrawny bird that pecked at anyone who dared come within a few feet.

Kendra nodded politely in all the right places, and the look Lincoln cast at Matt over his shoulder was one of triumph—calculated to put him in place. Matt doubted his brother even cared that much about Kendra in romantic terms. He just couldn't stand coming in second.

He allowed them to enter the house first, mostly out of respect so that Kendra didn't have an audience when she met the insanity that was the Fuller family. In his experience, his sister didn't make anyone look good, what with the constant bombardment of inappropriate questions voiced at top decibel levels.

“Uncle Matt!” A blur of mud tackled him from the side, and Matt lifted the grungy, red-haired seven-year-old into the air with a roar. As he came crashing back down to the ground, the boy added, “Do you want to see my tadpoles? Trent and me caught them at the pond yesterday. Three of them are dead—those are my three, Trent says—but they still float. If I poke them it's almost like they're swimming.”

Matt looked at his nephew's wide grin, missing two of the most important front teeth, and nodded solemnly. “I love tadpoles. Especially dead ones.”

“Cool!” Dylan, younger than his brother by three years, reminded Matt an awful lot of himself at that age. “I wanted to show Uncle Lincoln but he said he sees enough dead things during the day.”

“Uncle Lincoln is probably grouchy because he hasn't had anything to eat yet today. Low blood sugar does that to him.”

Dylan nodded as though that made perfect sense. “He told Trent he'll take him out to shoot cans later. How come I

can't shoot cans, Uncle Matt? Amn't I big enough?"

"Aren't you big enough," he gently corrected him, "and no." He didn't have the heart to tell the poor kid that it wasn't his age, but rather his clumsiness, that prevented him from participating in Lincoln's plan to show off in front of his lady friend. "Besides—if you were out shooting, then we couldn't go see how many more tadpoles we can catch. You know what's a really good trick? Putting them in your mom's glass of water when she isn't looking. Did I ever tell you about the one time Uncle Lincoln and I tricked her into eating a peanut-butter-and-firefly sandwich...?"

"I'm just saying that maybe you wouldn't feel quite so depressed all the time if you upped your intake of Vitamin D, that's all. One or two tans a week would do wonders for your mood, Matt—not to mention your pallor."

"Yet the answer is still a resounding no." Matt looked around for a means of escape. Hilly had outdone herself in terms of cuisine for the evening, piling their plates with a shepherd's pie made of what looked and tasted like bloodshot roadkill, so food offered no recourse. Lincoln was all too happy to leave him right where he was in the hot seat, and even Kendra was no help. She'd claimed vegetarianism as a means for avoiding the food and merely sat, drinking boxed wine and stifling laughter, while Matt flailed for some kind of foothold. "I appreciate the concern, but I am not becoming a walking advertisement for your business. Lincoln has more than got it covered."

Beside him, Kendra let out an inelegant chortle.

"Did you see the new car Lincoln drove up in?" Donald asked, attempting to engage his wife in a discussion of something—*anything*—else. "He promised I could take it for a spin later."

"So." Kendra turned to face him, a smile playing on her lips as Lincoln vehemently denied his brother-in-law's claim. "You're clearly the sane one in this family."

Matt had to laugh. He was beginning to get an idea of why she and Whitney were such good friends. His personal

struggles seemed to be an endless source of amusement for them both.

“I’m the white sheep, I’m afraid. I don’t tan, I don’t steal cars and I don’t teach children how to arm themselves against empty sodas. We’re big believers in owning one’s faults, and they feel I’m sorely lacking in vices.”

“Is that why your sister looked at me like I had two heads when I said I don’t eat meat?” Kendra asked.

Matt nodded. Hilly had heard the word “vegetarian” and gone into a state of denial. Kendra had the biggest portion of them all slopped onto her plate, as if Hilly somehow hoped to woo her to the other side with her military-style cooking. “She grows on you after about fifteen years or so. Aren’t you so glad you came?”

She shrugged and played with her fork. “Your brother’s nice. Persistent too—but I’d be lying if I said I came for him. I wanted to talk to you, actually.”

“Me?”

Hilly scooted her chair closer and cocked an ear their direction, though her attention never wavered from refilling Trent’s glass of milk. At least she was making an effort to be subtle.

“Yep.” Kendra spoke loud enough for Hilly to overhear. “I want to know about your intentions.”

He sputtered on his cheap, acidic wine. “You want to what?”

Kendra didn’t blink. “Whitney’s told you about our plans, right? The spa?”

“Yeah, it’s come up a few times,” he said wryly. He and Whitney might be nothing more than sex buddies, but it would take some kind of jerk not to be aware of what was going on in her life. “I think it’s great what you guys are doing. I can’t imagine the kind of work that goes in to opening up a medical facility of that caliber.”

“She’s an amazing surgeon.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He didn’t. A person of Whitney’s monumental confidence rarely had the chops to back it up but, so far, nothing about her failed to deliver.

“Then I probably don’t need to tell you what it takes to reach her level of skill.” She didn’t wait for Matt to agree with her. “Four years of undergraduate studies. Three of medical school. Internships, residency, the whole package. Women booked her for boob jobs six months in advance. She did mine, you know.”

Matt couldn’t help his gaze from traveling to Kendra’s chest. Now that she mentioned it, she was rather well-endowed, given her small stature. “They’re...lovely?”

She laughed out loud, clearly amused at his uneasiness in checking out her rack. “You know how this works. The night we met, you saw for yourself how Whitney and I protect each other—and I’m not just talking about at the bars. You’re a nice guy, and I know you don’t mean any harm, but you have to understand that as much as she might seem like this outgoing, good-time party girl, there are layers to Whitney you haven’t even begun to touch.”

He knew that. Of course he knew that—the fact that she refused to let him all the way in was something he was rapidly growing accustomed to. But even though Whitney loudly proclaimed her intention to take two steps back every time Matt got too close, her actions spoke differently.

And so did his heart.

“What exactly are you saying?” he asked.

Kendra took her time responding, and in the momentary lull, Matt realized the sounds of conversation and the scrape of dinner being hidden in the napkins had stilled. Everyone was listening.

“In the esthetician trade, the first thing they teach us is about our limits—did you know that?”

Matt shook his head wordlessly.

“It’s day one. No matter how much we might want to or how far technology has come, it’s impossible to completely

erase a scar. A plastic surgeon like Whitney can cut into it, I can apply all the topical creams in the world, and we can even improve every other aspect of that person's physical appearance in an attempt to divert attention. But remnants of the scar tissue will always be there."

Matt wasn't sure how he was supposed to respond—especially since they had quite a captive audience. He doubted Lincoln or Donald had any idea what Kendra was really talking about, but Hilly had grown abnormally still.

"I've always wondered about that," Hilly boomed. "I have got the biggest, ugliest scar down to my you-know-what—they had to slice Dylan out of me when he was born. Ten pounds, that kid carried on him, and I swear half of it was in his head." She cast a fond look at her youngest son, whose face bore the resignation of having heard this story countless times over the dinner table. "Still is. In your professional opinion, what do you think would work best for me? Like you said—cut it, cream it or maybe get one of those vajazzle thingies so Don won't notice anymore when he's making the weekly trip downstairs?"

Across the table, Lincoln let out a strangled sound and clapped his hands over his ears. Donald grew so red he matched the tablecloth, and Trent asked in the same overloud voice of his maternal parent, "What's a vajazzle? Matt, do you know what a vajazzle is?"

But the damage—or the repair, depending on your perspective—had already been done. Kendra quietly resumed not eating her dinner and Matt no longer felt compelled to answer her. And as Hilly looked around her with a wide-eyed look, asking, "What? What'd I say?" Matt used the moment to mouth his thanks.

Hilly was a good sister. She might be able to beat him in arm wrestling and try to poison him every month with these family dinners, but if she were an affectionate sort of woman, he'd slap her with a big, hearty kiss right about now.

"You can't fix her, you know."

Matt eyed Hilly warily. He'd forgotten that his generous feelings toward his sister rarely lasted more than an hour at a time. The second he thought they were finally about to agree on something, she pulled rank and started ordering everyone around.

"I never said I was going to," he protested.

Hilly plopped her coffee cup down, spilling the almost opaque, too-milky liquid all over the coffee table, which was little more than several shellacked pieces of firewood glued together to form a horizontal surface. In their pre-tanning-salon entrepreneurial days, Hilly and Donald once decided to make and sell driftwood furniture out of their barn, take advantage of the rural antiquing crowd. Unfortunately, a shortage of driftwood in landlocked Pennsylvania meant they'd turned to their winter firewood pile for parts. Hilly thought no one would notice the difference. They noticed.

A tabby cat with the size and stripes to rival a tiger jumped onto the table and started lapping the milk. It was only a matter of time before her other seven cats—another barn project—came to share the bounty, so Hilly abandoned her after-dinner beverage altogether.

"You always think you can fix them," she said, settling back into her overstuffed chair, upholstered in the swirled brown and orange velour of the seventies. "That's your thing. You're drawn to broken women."

"I am not," he said irritably, focusing on his mug.

"Case One, Jenny Hefflemeyer." Hilly refused to back down. She never backed down from anything. Put her against a drunk biker or an irate camel—he knew who would come out on top. Armed with Jenny Hefflemeyer, and the odds were stacked even more in her favor.

"Don't be mean. You said you wanted to talk about Trenton's grades."

"Trenton's reading skills aren't the ones fornicating in public," she said, her tone magnanimous. Matt retreated once again into the welcoming bosom of his coffee. This town's

gossip would be the death of him. “You remember Jenny, don’t you?”

Of course he remembered her. She was the first girl he ever kissed—a sweet, shy neighbor who’d been having a hard time fighting off a fifth-grade bully. “Sure. What about her?”

“Don’t you remember how you took it upon yourself to make her popular? That poor girl just wanted to be left alone with her books and her weird doll collection.”

He sat up straighter. “What are you talking about? She was bullied. I see it all the time in schools today. It’s not a joke.”

“Oh, the other kids teased her, I know. Don’t forget—I’m the one who drove you to and from school every day.”

He wouldn’t forget. Not only because he knew how much he owed his older sister, but because she mentioned it at least five times a month. Subtlety had never been her strong suit.

“But she never noticed any of it. Seriously—you could have placed that girl on top of a polar bear and she would have blinked and given it a little pat. I don’t know why you ever took it into your head to make her class president, but she hated every minute of it. You know her family transferred her to the charter school because of you.”

“I don’t know what version of history you’ve got on playback, but that is not what happened.” He remembered it well—Jenny was one of the main reasons he’d gone into teaching in the first place. She always ate lunch alone, spent recess sitting on a swing, rocking back and forth and singing under her breath. To everyone else, she’d always been the weird kid. To Matt, she’d just seemed lonely.

So he’d befriended her. Sat on the swing next to her at recess, ate lunch next to her in the cafeteria. She’d never been overwhelmingly excited to see him, but she’d just needed a little warming up, that was all. The class president thing had been a fluke—he’d thought it would help her make a few more

friends. And it would have, if she hadn't gotten moved to a new school. All she'd needed was someone to believe in her.

"I was her friend," he insisted.

"No." Hilly reached out to pet a black cat that wound in and around her feet. "You tormented that poor child right out of town with your...your..."

"Kindness, Hilly. It's called kindness."

"Is it?"

He didn't care for her ironic tone. "So, what? You're saying I'm going to cause Whitney to cry in an assembly when she wins class president? Is that it? Because I'm warning you, she strikes me as the type of woman who might have had her tear ducts surgically removed on a whim."

"I'm saying you suffer from chronic white knight syndrome. You're always looking for a woman to save. Shy Jenny. Unfaithful Laura. And now this Whitney woman, who, if town rumor has anything to say about it, is a train wreck just waiting to happen."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never tried saving Laura."

"Are you sure? Isn't that what you're still trying to do?"

Always, it came back to this. Always, his family and friends refused to leave him in peace to deal with things on his own terms. He jumped to his feet, scattering the cats.

"It was nice seeing you, sis, and I appreciate the meal, but I think you've said enough for one night." And she had—more than enough. But as his blood warmed up, Matt realized he'd barely scratched the surface of what weighed on his mind. Maybe Hilly had earned the right to speak out against Laura...but he'd be damned if he'd let her say a word against Whitney. "And what is that supposed to mean, Whitney is a train wreck waiting to happen? You don't even know her."

"I've heard enough."

“From who? Natalie Horn? A bunch of stubborn shop owners who refuse to adapt to change? I’ll tell you all you need to know about Dr. Whitney Vidra. She speaks her mind and doesn’t let the borough’s single-mindedness dictate her actions. I, for one, think that’s something we should all aspire to.”

“Matt?” Lincoln called. “What are you talking about?”

Naturally. No outburst of Matt’s would be complete without an audience. And opinions from each member thereof.

“Whitney. And me. I’m talking about me. No matter what you think, what any of you think—” this time he turned to include Kendra in his pronouncement, “—I’m more than aware of the repercussions my actions have on the women in my life.” Acutely so. Painfully so. “If you’ll all excuse me, I’m leaving.”

Hilly’s mouth firmed, but she knew better than to try and stop him. He didn’t offer more than a tight nod to Kendra and Lincoln, who sat arguing with Donald over a Scrabble board, all three of them misspelling *catharsis*. On second thought...he reached down and traded an *e* for an *i*.

“Tell Trent and Dylan I said goodbye,” he added, and walked out the front door.

The cold night air that washed over him did little to soothe his anger, the austere moonlight only enhancing his feeling of isolation among the people who were supposed to matter to him most.

Yes, he’d done a lot of things wrong with Laura—there was no doubt of that in his mind. He hadn’t tried hard enough to hold on to her, he hadn’t forced her to communicate when they started sharing more silences than they had conversations.

But he’d never tried to save her. If anything, he’d pushed her to find her own happiness, never making demands or forcing her to do anything she didn’t want to. Early on in their marriage, he’d been offered a principalship in New Jersey—something he’d always wanted—but she’d hated the thought of being away from Pleasant Park and her family. He’d gone

along with her wishes, happy to thrive at Hamilton Elementary and come home every night to their two-bedroom cottage on the outskirts of the borough.

After all, that was what a marriage was supposed to be, right? A partnership? A place where both people shared a vested interest in the future?

He slid into his car and pulled the handle roughly, narrowly missing slamming his fingers in the door. Gripping the wheel, he willed some of his anger to ebb away and was surprised to find that his knuckles had grown white.

Anger. This was anger.

The strange thing was, he had no idea where he intended the emotion to land. Hilly, Laura, Kendra...even Whitney danced through his mind, fueling a sudden urge to grab Lincoln's gun and start shooting cans.

As he started the car and pulled across the gravelly drive instead, satisfactorily kicking up rocks that pinged against Lincoln's car, he realized that the person he was angriest at most was himself.

Because the reality was that he didn't think he needed to save Whitney.

But, oh, how he wished she'd ask him to try.

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Chapter Eleven

“So then we thought maybe Kendra had printed the address or the date wrong or something.” Whitney’s hands moved rapidly as she talked. It made sense that she would be a hand talker, what with being a plastic surgeon and all, but Matt wished she’d sit still for a minute instead of pacing the tiny, slightly creaking floor of his apartment. “But it was all correct. We sat there for like three hours this morning, assuming someone would eventually show up to apply, but the only living thing that stopped by was a three-legged dog. We might have to try to find candidates from Philadelphia and pay them to relocate or something, which is only going to set us back further.”

“It could just be a fluke.”

“I don’t believe in flukes,” she retorted. “In this economy, how can there be no one in the area who needs a job? Do you want to quit teaching and come be my medical assistant?”

“No offense, but I can’t think of anything worse than taking orders from you all day long.”

As if a flip switched, Whitney’s mood instantly shifted. Gone were the fast movements, the faster talking—in fact, it was as if time slowed down, and her eyelids dropped as she slinked across the living room carpet toward where he stood in his linoleum-paneled kitchen. “Is that a fact? And what if I ordered you to sit your tight little ass down in that chair?”

Matt felt himself growing hard. One look from this woman—that was all it took. It wasn’t that he was a stickler for flowers and foreplay and all that, but it would have been nice to think he had *some* willpower.

Technically, this was the only reason she’d come over to his apartment today. Not flowers. Not foreplay. His only real responsibility here was to enjoy himself. The conversation about her work, the sharing of her troubles, that was just a bonus.

Her eyes glittered a warning.

“I’d sit,” he said, resigned. And he did.

“Oh, I like this,” she cooed, moving closer.

“But then I’d tell you to sit here with me.” He beckoned. Whitney’s eyes lit and she swung her legs—clad, as usual, in the tight, sexy-secretary skirts that shaped her body into a gift to the world—up over his legs. Sidesaddle. She was planning on riding him sidesaddle.

He claimed her lips for a kiss, taking his time in a slow, sensual play of their warring tongues. Whitney had a tendency to be a frantic—though generous—lover. She knew exactly how to grind her ass against his erection, forcing him to grip her hips and calm the incredible sensation that jerked him even through layers of fabric. If she wanted him to kiss her deeper, to plunge into her mouth without remorse and leave them both panting for air, she’d bite his lower lip, spurring him to action. And if she decided he wasn’t getting his hand up her skirt fast enough, she’d start making the journey on her own.

“Hey,” he said, when all those actions came into play at once. “You might have ordered me into this chair, but I’m not leaving until I’ve taken a little time to enjoy it. Sit still.”

She grinned and did the exact opposite, her squirms sending jolts of pleasure through his center.

“I mean it,” he growled. He began kissing a trail along her neck. Past the gentle slope of collarbone. Into the deep vee of her shirt, where the round peaks of her breasts rose from a scrap of wispy lace. He tasted one of those breasts, enjoying the soft swell of flesh against his tongue. “I intend to spend at least ten minutes doing nothing but this. You have the most amazing body. Let me savor it. Let me savor *you*.”

Pushing the lip of her bra out of the way, he took one of her nipples into his mouth. Hard and yearning, just like him. He suckled deeply, loving the way the skin puckered and rolled under his tongue.

As she gasped for air, he moved higher, kissing her jaw, her throat, all of it waves of rippling silk under the

cinnamon-scented tumbles of hair that blanketed them both. Breathing deep, he nuzzled a path from her neck, enjoying the line of her shoulder unbroken by anything but his touch.

Whitney arched her back and ground into his lap. “Oh, God. I *can't*.” Forceful hands on his shoulders pushed him out of the warm, blissful haven of her skin. Her eyes, for once, had lost their glaze of lust, replaced by something much more serious. “You have no idea how it aches. I can't stand the buildup, knowing I don't get to have you inside of me, knowing your absolutely perfect cock isn't going to rip me in two. When you kiss me like that, it's all I can think about. You. Filling me.”

A sudden blaze of fury intensified his rising lust. Filling her was all he could think about too—sweet kisses a different kind of agony. She wasn't the only one suffering here.

“That's not fair. You know that option is off the table if this thing between us is going to remain nothing more than a fling.”

“Exactly.” Her voice was strained. “Which is why you can't take your time and...and...*worship* me like that. Get me off, Matt, make me scream. That's all I'm asking. That's all I'm here for.”

As you command. Fueled by the pulse of anger in his blood and the desperation in her voice, he stood. As she was still halfway on his lap at the time, she stood with him, her legs unsteady at the suddenness of it all. He used her lack of balance to bend her over the kitchen table, one hand nudging her legs apart, the other holding her neck to keep her in place.

If she wanted nothing more than skin and sensation, that was precisely what he'd give her.

“*Yes.* Like that.” She moaned and spread her legs, her back arched so that her ass rose in the air. He hiked her skirt around her waist, barely taking time to register the sight of her panties, tiny and damp, peeking enticingly up at him from between her legs.

Skin and sensation. Nothing more.

One finger slid in. Then two, tight and hot. Three, deeper still, and he kept her pinned to the table as she rode his hand to a shuddering, moaning halt.

The encounter was rough and crude, harsh in ways he didn't know he was capable of. When he pulled away, Matt felt oddly shaken. Normally, he'd take a moment to drop a kiss near her ear, maybe offer a self-congratulatory joke. But today, he felt only that he'd somehow let them both down.

And he had, because he couldn't give her everything she wanted. Everything she *deserved*. He was powerless in this relationship—something he'd never felt with Laura, even after she threw them away.

When Whitney turned to face him, she shared none of his remorse. With an almost malicious glint in her eyes, she licked her lips and zeroed in on his crotch, making it clear she had every intention of returning the favor. Even though Matt's entire body throbbed with yearning, he crossed his arms and shook his head. He refused to accept her version of affection right now. Not like this.

Since work conversations seemed to be the only other intimacy he was allowed, he fixated on that.

“Don't get all noble on me, Galahad,” she warned. “I can see quite clearly that there is some unfulfilled need saying hello over there.”

“I had a thought.”

She finished adjusting her clothes. “Does it involve me on my knees?”

“I don't know,” he said irritably. “Do you listen better from down there?”

Whitney laughed, missing a valuable opportunity to ask him the source of his troubles. Probably because she already knew and refused to care.

“Do you want to hear it or not?” he asked.

“Okay, I’ll bite. *And* I’ll listen.” Whitney inclined her head. “What is this all-important thought?”

He waited a moment before speaking, willing his body to cool off and focus on her flop of a hiring fair. It wasn’t what he—or his body—wanted from her right now, but at least this was a concrete problem he might actually be able to solve. “Honestly? I think the reason you aren’t getting a whole lot of job applicants is because of your business model.”

“Wow. You really know how to make a girl feel all warm and fuzzy in her post-orgasm glow, don’t you?” Then, more suspiciously, “Why? What do you think is wrong with our business model?”

There had been talk in the teacher’s lounge lately—well, talk until he’d shown up—about the intrusive nature of a plastic surgery practice in a place where holistic health centers and family-owned businesses had long been the borough staple. Not to mention the intrusive nature of the practice’s founding members.

“You might be going at it a little aggressively, that’s all.”

The corners of Whitney’s mouth fell and her brows came together in the center of her forehead. “Define aggressive.”

“Well, that,” he said. “Don’t eat me, Whitney. You asked. Between the billboard you guys put up at the train station and the public, uh, argument between you and Natalie, you aren’t exactly winning anyone over the old-fashioned way. We like our change slow and subtle here in Pleasant Park. And you, my friend, are neither of those things.”

If he’d thought the joke would help lighten some of the heavy atmosphere in the room, he was sadly mistaken. Whitney leaned on the counter and began drumming her fingernails. “So, what? We have to make house calls with our weathered black bags and travel via horse-drawn carriage? Is that how we’ll get accepted? I’ve been around town long enough. Almost every woman here has had some kind of work done, and call me cynical, but five times out of ten it’s because

they caught their husbands checking out a younger model. Kendra, John and I didn't just pick Pleasant Park on a whim. This place is the Holy Grail for people like us."

"I don't doubt it." Matt paused. In a quieter voice, he added, "And while no one is going to deny that marriage vows aren't as consecrated here as one might hope, most of the cheating is done behind closed doors. We like to keep our faults and weaknesses close to home. Not plastered on a billboard every commuter has to look at twice a day."

Before Whitney could respond, Matt's cell phone rang, vibrating its way across the counter.

"If that's Laura, so help me, I'm going to throw that thing out the window. I don't care who it hits."

It was, of course. Laura seemed to have an impeccable sense of timing these days. "It'll only take a second." Then, more to himself than Whitney, "If I don't answer, she'll just keep calling."

"She doesn't deserve you," Whitney muttered, but she waved at the phone, giving in.

Matt regarded the still-ringing phone with distaste. Lately, Laura's calls had become more regular and less important. He wasn't stupid. He knew it was a direct reaction to his too-public relationship with Whitney, but that only made it *harder* to stop picking up. It was cruel to rub Laura's face in his newfound happiness. He wouldn't wish that on anyone.

With a quick nod to Whitney, he moved to the relative privacy of his bedroom to take the call.

"Laura?" he asked, his voice low. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to you." Her soft voice cracked.

"Okay. Fine. I have a few minutes." Probably five. That was about Whitney's limit, before she'd start banging on the door and demanding her turn to chat. "Shoot."

"Can you come over?" she asked quietly. "It's kind of a long conversation."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. The last time he'd gone over there, on the fateful yard work errand, it had taken hours before he felt comfortable leaving her there alone. Even after he'd answered her questions about the insurance, she'd seemed so sad and listless, so concerned about every detail in the house. She didn't function well alone.

"It's not a good time right now—how about we do lunch this weekend or something?"

"Oh. Is your girlfriend over?"

Girlfriend. That might be the word he'd choose to define Whitney's presence in his life, but she'd probably end the life of anyone who said it out loud. "Sort of," he said, uncomfortable with perpetrating the lie any more than he had to.

"You don't have to pretend she isn't there," Laura said. "I'm happy you're moving on. Really. And she seems...nice."

He bit back a laugh. *Nice* didn't even begin to cover Whitney's many charms. "Thanks. Look—if it's not a matter of life and death, can we just do this later?"

A choked sob came through the phone. "But it is, Matt. Death, I mean. Or it could be. I'm sick."

Whitney heard a heavy thud from the bedroom and smiled, hoping it was the sound of Matt getting angry. She had never seen a man so blasé about being cuckolded as that one, and it would have been refreshing for a change to see him stomp and kick and possibly punch a wall.

Yes. Matt punching a wall would be hot—especially if he got that look in his normally kind eyes, the one where he knew he'd just lost control and didn't give two damns about it. Or when he wore that expression of concentration so intense, a lock of his hair fell right in the center of his forehead and he couldn't be bothered to brush it away.

But the thump wasn't followed by any sexy sounds. It wasn't followed by any sounds at all. In Whitney's experience, several thumps indicated a healthy rage. One thump usually

meant—*crap*. He was already on edge today. She hoped he hadn't passed out in there.

“Matt?” she called, trying not to let her concern show. “Are you still alive?”

He didn't answer. Alarmed, Whitney tossed the cereal box she'd been reading aside and pulled open the bedroom door. A more polite woman might have knocked, but that wasn't a virtue she'd ever bothered much with.

Matt sat slumped against the far wall of his bedroom, which was as sadly underfurnished as the rest of the apartment, though still oddly neat and color coordinated. His phone was in his hand but not on, and he stared blankly at the opposite wall, where a damp, moldy patch had colored the white wall an antique sort of brown.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, forcing herself to lean casually against the doorframe. No need to overreact. All his limbs were still in place. “Does the duchess need you to open a can of pickles for her?”

When he looked up, it was as though a light somewhere had gone off. It was a look she knew well and avoided wherever possible. One couldn't work in a hospital for any length of time and not know when a person reached their breaking point, when everything fell apart and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

She hated that part of medical care—just one more reason she'd committed to a lifetime of boob jobs for the overprivileged.

“She's dying.”

“Bullshit.” Whitney stormed into the room and dropped to Matt's bed, glaring at him slumped there, until he finally looked up. Inertia scared her more than anything else—she'd do almost anything to wipe that expression from his face. “This is another one of her ploys to get you back. I don't believe her.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said dully. “She's not trying to get me back. She's scared.”

“Or she sees that you’re finally moving on with your life and can’t stand it.”

Rage finally reared its ugly head. “I’m not having this conversation with you right now, Whitney, so you can stop. I know you never cared for her, but I refuse to believe even you could be so heartless right now.”

Whitney knew she was being cruel. She *felt* cruel. But she didn’t know how else to make Matt see that his quiet, stubborn strength had to give sometime.

“So, what? You’re just accepting this at face value? You don’t think she might be exaggerating things a little?”

“Laura doesn’t exaggerate. She withholds. She underplays everything until it’s out of control.”

“Is that what she did with that William guy? Fucking another man while you were married—that was underplaying her emotions? Jesus Christ. When are you going to wake up and realize she’s using you? That she’s always used you?”

Matt’s glance was sharp. “Who told you his name?”

“You’re not the only one who knows a thing or two about borough life.” Whitney could hardly believe her ears. Of all the things she’d just said, that was what he wanted to talk about? “It doesn’t take a cop like your brother to figure things out around here. The pharmacist over at the drugstore told me. Said he was some real estate developer passing through who breezed in, swept up your woman and breezed right out again. The people of Pleasant Park might like to hide their own flaws, but they’re more than happy to gossip about others’.”

“He was a real estate agent, not a developer.”

“He was an asshole, that’s what he was. And Laura isn’t any better.”

“Why do you even care?” Matt was on his feet within seconds, looming so close he could have kissed her. None of that soft, melty-insides kissing, either. The hard, punishing kind. The kind that would have her once again bent over the table, taking in the virile edge of his wrath. “You’ve made it more than clear that you’re only here for a good time—why

does it bother you so much that I have actual human emotions? That I care? We can't all turn our hearts on and off like they're on a switchboard. We can't all be you."

"Don't you dare." Whitney jabbed a finger in his chest. "You don't know anything about my heart."

"Of course I don't," he said, his voice low and steely. "You won't let me. Talking about those things—sharing those things—would be something people capable of a normal, healthy relationship would do."

"I'm capable of normal and healthy."

"No, you're not. You're too scared to even try."

"Fuck you." She tried to pull away, but Matt gripped her arms with a strength she didn't know he had. Looking pointedly at her arm, she expected him to release her, but he refused to budge. Goose bumps broke out along her skin.

"She says they're testing her for cancer," he said. Whitney's goosebumpy feeling only intensified. "They're still doing tests, but her mom died of it when she was only thirty-six, and they've always suspected it ran in her family."

"Oh." Whitney stopped pulling away. This, at least, was a language she could speak. "What kind?"

"Ovarian. That was what her mom died of, anyway. And Laura always had problems...you know, down there."

"Down there? You can't even say the words without blushing. You mean with her reproductive organs?"

"You don't get to be mad at me." Matt dropped her arm, but the pressure of his fingers—manic, desperate fingers—lingered like a bruise. "Since the day we've met, I've let you treat me like your sex toy, let you tell me what I'm supposed to be feeling about my ex-wife. And that's fine. I was happy to play along. But right now, you don't get to judge or command or even make a comment."

"And you don't get to cry."

"I wasn't going to. But I would like to be alone, if that's not too much to ask."

“This is something I might actually be able to help with,” she said hurriedly, not missing his clouded, murderous look. A shaky feeling flooded her stomach, spreading its reach into her limbs, wobbling through her arms.

And she’d always had such steady hands.

“I have friends—I know people back in the city...”

“I think you should go.”

“Matt. I’m sorry.” Never one to apologize easily, the words felt heavy on her tongue. They also felt like her last chance to repair something perilously close to shattering. “That was a horrible thing to say about Laura, and it was wrong of me to bring it up. I’m aware I don’t always put your feelings ahead of mine, but you know how I react when it comes to infidelity. I’m doing my best here.”

He didn’t hear her. “I’ll call you later.”

She didn’t move or speak.

“Please, Whitney. Go.”

With that simple, firm request, she had no choice but to comply. More powerful than anger, more painful than a fist—Matt was able to reduce her to a few inches tall with just one word.

And that was something no man had been able to do in years.

Chapter Twelve

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Normally the joke, heard so many times in her lifetime she'd long since stopped keeping track, was worthy of an eye roll or two—but Whitney was impervious to raillery today, a not-uncommon occurrence when one's not-a-boyfriend had yet to call.

It wasn't that she needed the reassurance about where she stood with Matt—the arrangement was clear. No rules, no ties, no pressure.

She was just worried about him.

And she wished she knew what Laura was angling to get out of the recent cancer bombshell. If Whitney found herself facing a life-threatening diagnosis, she'd be on the phone with a travel agent to book her the most fabulous Caribbean getaway money could buy for her and her nearest and dearest, not...she shivered. *Ugh*. Not calling Jared for a chat.

“When do we not have problems?” Whitney asked lightly, ignoring her warring feelings and focusing on Kendra's grim face instead. They were like gloom and gloomier. “I think that should be our new name. The Spa of Disappointment.”

The pair of them sat in what would soon be their front office, enjoying the sights and sound of construction going on all around them. Despite Matt's ominous warning that the town would never accept them, things were looking quite nice on the inside—and for once, she wasn't talking about the construction workers.

Kendra had her eye on one of said construction workers, a strapping young man who looked as though he had recently entered the legal age of drinking. Even though the thermometer barely registered fifty degrees outside, he never wore a shirt while he was working. In most men, it would have looked like conceit. Who was she kidding—it looked like

conceit on this guy too. And even she had to admit conceit looked good.

They ogled from a discreet distance, pretending to take a profound interest in paint swatches. Or that had been the plan, anyway, when they picked up a few salads from the deli and headed over.

Kendra toyed with her lettuce, not really eating so much as rearranging the pieces. “It has to do with the little personnel issue we encountered last week.”

“I told you not to worry about that,” Whitney said breezily. “Let’s just focus on getting this place finished. We’ll hire from out of town if we have to once it gets closer to opening. Candidates from the city are going to have more medical experience, anyway.”

“That’s not the whole problem.”

Whitney paused to watch the shirtless laborer walk by, his gloved hands bearing a huge load of two-by-fours. Now that she thought about it, he was a little too chiseled for her. Men who had necks the same size as their heads freaked her out. Give her a stealthily strong, hairy chest any day of the week. Or now. Now was good too.

God, she missed Matt. Why didn’t he call?

“Hello?” Kendra snapped. “Earth to Whitney. Are you even hearing me?”

Whitney shook herself off—as well as the lingering image of Matt, stripped to the waist and lowering her onto the bed. “Sorry. It’s because you’re making me eat salad. I can’t concentrate without red meat.”

“Yeah, like that’s the kind of meat flashing through your filthy mind right now.”

“You’re one to talk,” Whitney returned, looking pointedly over at the barely legal Adonis. “So what’s the big problem? Are building costs running over? They always do...I thought we had that accounted for.”

“It’s bigger than that. People not showing up to our job fair was just the beginning. The real problem is that the loan officer we thought was on our side to make this all happen? He pulled out.”

Normally Whitney wouldn’t let such an opportune “that’s what she said” moment go unchallenged, but once again, jokes were the furthest thing from her mind. *What is happening to me?*

“What do you mean he’s out? How can a bank just cancel a loan?”

The money issue required to pull New Leaf off successfully was one they’d revisited time and time again. In addition to the three of them saving every penny they’d earned over the course of the past five years, Whitney had taken a painfully generous loan from her parents. Financing covered the rest, but they’d have to go into debt by so many zeroes it made her head woozy to even look at the paperwork. That bank loan was, unfortunately, the biggest piece of the whole money puzzle.

You have to spend money to make money, her father’s voice said, loud and clear and proud of her.

We have a lifetime to build riches together, said another male voice, this one accompanied by a wash of emotion that filled her vision with red. *It’s just two years. It’ll be good for us.*

“Are you ready for this?” Kendra’s words cut through the haze of Whitney’s thoughts, forcing her back to the present. “You should probably be sitting down.”

Whitney double checked, confused. “I *am* sitting down.”

“It seems that when we signed the paperwork,” Kendra began, her voice ominously quiet, “we failed to take into account the bank’s morality clause.”

“I’m sorry—did you just use the term *morality clause*?”

“I’m not sure how we missed it.” Kendra frowned. “But in choosing to approach a local bank for funding as a way to build community appeal, we failed to notice that our loan could be revoked within ninety days should we fail to meet a standard level of moral restraint.”

“You lie. That is not a real thing.” Whitney looked around for John, assuming he’d pop out from behind one of the piles of drywall, camera in hand. “Is this your way of telling me to tone it down?”

“It’s not you—it’s all of us.” She met Whitney’s eye. “Well, it’s mostly you. But the fact of the matter is, they’re simply looking for ways to close us down at this point. Your relationship with Matt, mine with Lincoln. And Brett. And that guy who does those tree stump sculptures out by the old sawmill.”

“Ew. Really?”

“You know I have a thing for lumberjacks.” Kendra shrugged. “Anyway, only John remains a paragon among us, but it’s only a matter of time before they find something objectionable about his behavior too. It was bound to happen one way or another.”

“This place is seriously so repressed its business owners aren’t allowed to be sexual beings? That can’t possibly be true.”

“Well...there’s something else.”

Whitney didn’t like Kendra’s tone. Having been friends far too long for women of a certain age to mention, Kendra had a scary amount of insight into Whitney’s inner workings. If she was holding something back, it could only mean she was trying to protect Whitney.

And they both knew the only thing she needed protecting from was herself.

“Spill it.” Whitney pushed her salad away. Not even the buttery croutons seemed palatable now. A few more weeks of this and she’d be withering away.

“The guy who owns the bank is someone you know. I get the feeling the reason he’s pushing this morality clause is personal.”

No way. That sort of thing didn’t happen in real life. “I swear to God, if you tell me Matt is secretly a bazillionaire holding all the strings to our financial future, I’m going to kick out our new separator wall.”

Kendra laughed and shook her head. “It’s not Matt. And you might not know him face to face—just circumstantially. Walter Horn? Ring any bells?”

Whitney mentally rifled through her little black book of the past few years for lovers scorned, but nothing seemed to connect the dots. One of her crowning triumphs in life was that she always left her lovers a little better than when she met them—happier, more confident, sated. It was a gift. “Nothing comes to mind. *Should* I know him?”

“I guess that depends on how much time you’ve been spending at the golf store lately.”

“That’s not funny. You know I was banned. That Natalie woman—” *Natalie Horn.* That was why the name sounded so familiar. “Please tell me this Walter guy is some sort of third cousin eight times removed.”

Kendra shook her head sadly. “Married eight years. Two kids. Huge house, luxury cars, the whole bit. You messed that one up big time, Whit. Between the two of us, this project is doomed.”

Whitney’s heart sank. Not because getting their funding stopped put a kink in their plans—this fight was by no means over—but because no matter how kindly Kendra might pretend her sordid affair with a chainsaw artist was the cause of their problems, this was Whitney’s doing.

Antagonize people. Overreact. Repeat.

“What if I go issue a formal apology?” she asked, the words tasting of regret. And salad. Neither one was very delicious. “I might need you to promise to funnel wine and happiness down my throat later, but I’ll do it.”

“I think it’s too late for that,” Kendra admitted. “This whole thing is snowballing way out of our control.”

“I don’t understand how we could have so grossly misjudged this town.” In all their earlier visits, the people had seemed friendly and receptive, if slightly snobbish. She refused to believe that a group of individuals this concerned about appearances had no need for a medical spa. “They need us. They want us. They just refuse to admit it.”

That sounded rather familiar, actually. The citizens of Pleasant Park. A certain young, nubile kindergarten teacher she couldn’t seem to get out of her mind.

“We’ll find a way around it.” Kendra took Whitney’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’ve got some ideas in the works. Just keep your head down and play nice for a while, okay?”

Whitney squeezed back. “I can do one better.”

She ignored Kendra’s look of anxiety and started plotting. No way was she going to sit back and let life happen to her. Whitney might not be the paragon of femininity that this town seemed to idealize, but she wasn’t without her strengths.

Foremost among which was her refusal to give anything up without a fight.

Matt lined his kids up in the hallway, watching tiredly as they swung lunchboxes and chattered their way into the cafeteria. This had to be the longest week of his life. Between Laura’s diagnosis and the argument with Whitney, he was running perilously near his empty gauge.

But that didn’t stop him from noticing a morose face at the end of the line.

“Cecily, no one is going to make you eat the fish sticks if you don’t want to.” He offered an encouraging smile to the little girl bringing up the rear. Since the first day of class, colorful beads had clacked at the end of her multiple braids, and he’d developed an extraordinary ability to interpret the sounds. Those were near-tears ticks. “Here. I’ll go in with you

and tell Ms. Patterson you want the gluten-free option today. I hear it's yummy. Chicken and stars.”

Click, swash. Happy nodding.

He took Cecily's hand and followed the class into the lunchroom. Technically, teachers got lunch off to recover and refuel. Between the cafeteria workers and the playground attendants, most teachers were able to sneak in a full forty-five minutes to themselves.

More often than not, though, Matt ended up sitting with the kids at the miniature fake wood-grain tables. Six hours a day wasn't enough time to connect with all twenty-four students, and it was amazing how much he could learn over Lunchables and juice boxes.

Cecily, for example, recently lost a grandmother and was struggling to understand the monumental finality of death—it wasn't just the mushy, tasteless fish sticks making her cry. As Matt had been a similar age when his own mother had passed, he knew just how much that extra kindness mattered, how much the little things became everything.

He murmured a warning to Ms. Patterson—a somewhat grouchy lunch volunteer whose arms were so short in proportion to her bulk the older kids had nicknamed her T-Rex—about the need to tread lightly. In the middle of his entreaty, Matt glanced up toward the entrance of the cafeteria. He wasn't sure what compelled him to do it, unless it was the flash of color, so out of place in the drab beige school and his own muted state of mind. Or maybe it was just that he could sense her. When Whitney approached—even from a hallway halfway across a building—he felt it. A change in the atmosphere, a tightening in his stomach. She moved the very air around her, and his body was calibrated to detect each shift.

She turned the opposite direction, though, toward the front desk. The tightening in his stomach took a turn for the worse. He'd been half afraid he wouldn't ever see her again. Seeing her and having her walk away from him was worse. Especially since her motivations were unclear.

“I don’t want to eat that.” Cecily gripped his hand tighter.

“No, no. You’ll like it.” He squeezed back. “I promise.”

“It smells funny.”

“What if I got some too?” He looked at the plate, broiled chicken and some unpronounceable gluten-free grain that could maybe, possibly, barely be mistaken for star shapes. It did smell funny. “We could eat it together. Maybe we can even convince Ms. Patterson to throw in an extra brownie.”

“The brownies aren’t gluten-free.”

“Work with me here, Lisa,” he said. “This is a brownie emergency.”

It was also a Whitney emergency, but she’d disappeared into the maze of administrative offices. And no matter how much he might want to talk to her right now, his first loyalty was to helping Cecily tackle gluten-free stars. And Ms. Patterson’s chocolate-disapproving ways.

He managed to wrest an extra brownie out of the woman and sat down to eat with Cecily. For the next fifteen minutes, he refused to imagine Whitney waiting for him in his classroom without a shirt on, or the conversation she might be having with his coworkers about his sexual preferences.

And he did a pretty admirable job at it, if he did say so himself. He even got Cecily to laugh.

With the kids safely out to recess, Matt moved quickly through the halls. It wasn’t that he felt worried, exactly. Whitney was a competent human being who, despite outward appearances, would never do anything to cause him harm.

But unpredictability was her calling card, her trump. A large basis of his attraction hinged on her refusal to accept things at face value, in her ability to mold the world around her until she was comfortable with the fit. He gulped. That was a large basis of his fear too.

“I understand that Mrs. Horn runs the PTA, and I respect that you feel the need to support her in this.” Whitney’s voice, as usual, carried down several doors. “But I think you’re missing out on an important opportunity here.”

An odd mixture of relief and anxiety thrummed in Matt’s heart. Relief that the conversation had nothing to do with him. Anxiety that it contained anything else.

“I looked over your list of speakers. You’ve got an incredible array of professions covered, including the medical ones, but you can’t deny they’re strongly skewed toward the male persuasion. Where are the role models for girls who want to be more than medical receptionists or dental hygienists? Why is every non-secretarial professional on here a man?”

Matt stopped, pausing just outside the principal’s doorway. That sounded an awful lot like the argument he’d made at the last staff meeting about next month’s Career Day assembly. Every year, they marched a parade of successful men and the women who supported them across the stage. And every year, he had to spend the next two days explaining to the female students in his class why that parade should in no way limit their future aspirations.

“Yes, I’m new in town, but you can call my references, check my credentials. I graduated at the top of my class and received my board certification last year. From a professional standpoint, my qualifications are impeccable.”

He couldn’t hear what Mr. Gregoire said in return, but Matt had the feeling it wasn’t what Whitney wanted to hear. Or what *he* wanted to hear. The kids would love Whitney. Colorful, bright, scarily accomplished, strong and unwilling to let anyone tell her no. She was exactly the kind of woman little girls could—and should—look up to.

With a soft rap of his knuckles, he announced his presence at the door.

The principal’s office was spacious but windowless, which always gave him the sensation he was entering some kind of prison. Harry Gregoire himself didn’t help matters any. A balding, humorless man, he’d had his eye on a

superintendent position for years. He saw his current job as a stepping stone rather than a place of honor, and his office reflected it. No color, no artwork, no indication that kids were welcome there. There was just his tiny, reflective head and his oversized desk, which was designed to intimidate even full-grown adults who happened to find themselves seated on the other side.

Whitney had elected to stand.

God, he adored that woman.

“She’s right, you know,” he said by way of greeting. “A female surgeon is exactly what our Career Day needs. We’ve had the same tired lineup of Pleasant Park residents for years, always giving the same speeches, always opening the same doors for our kids. Isn’t it time we let them see what else is out there? Expand their horizons beyond town limits?”

“Mr. Fuller.” Harry’s slightly nasally voice twinged, clearly displeased. “I believe Miss Vidra here is a friend of yours? Surely you are aware of the things being said—”

“Dr. Vidra,” he interrupted, correcting him. He caught Whitney’s gaze. Expecting her to be full of the usual light and laughter, he was surprised to find her mouth firmed in a line, her eyes sparking with wrath. *She’s barely holding on here.*

He hardly blamed her. Harry was not an easy man to get along with under the best of circumstances. When he was being a condescending, misogynistic prick, all bets were off.

“And yes,” Matt continued. “I know a little something about the current popular opinion on the subject of New Leaf.”

“New Leaf?”

“The medical spa she’s opening. You know, as a board-certified plastic surgeon and female business owner? Two things you have to admit we’re sorely lacking on that list in her hands.”

Whitney’s insides twisted into a strange and new contortion as she watched Matt come to her rescue. He leaned over the desk, his hands gripping the surface, staring down the bespectacled little rat on the other side. Even though Matt

wore the haggard look of a man who hadn't slept—or shaved—in at least forty-eight hours, it was obvious he meant business.

“Come on, Harry. You know as well as I do that Natalie can't interfere with the school's academic program, no matter how much noise she makes. This has nothing to do with the PTA or fundraising or appeasing parent tempers. It's about the kids.”

A staring contest commenced. Whitney, not normally one to stay silent while a pair of obstinate men debated the outcome of her life for her, found herself curious to see how things would unfold.

Considering how she and Matt had left things the other day, angry and underpinned with the devastation of Laura's diagnosis, she'd half expected him to be on the principal's narrow-minded, belittling side. But he'd marched right in and taken over, embracing Whitney's fight as if it were his own, finding the good in it.

Not once did it occur to him that Whitney needed to repair her reputation with the community and had simply found an efficient way to do it. Nobility—it was so ingrained into his own character he didn't realize how unique an attribute it was. He saw it in everything and in everyone. Even her.

How easy it would be to fall in love with a guy like that. And how dangerous.

She saw the possibility of a future with this man, and it scared the crap out of her. No matter how hard she would try to hide her true nature, no matter how much she might bend over backward to fit his ideal, he'd eventually find out that there was nothing noble about her. And then she'd be right back where she started.

Stranded in a strange town. Brokenhearted. Alone.

“You'll vouch for her, Mr. Fuller?” The principal's voice broke Whitney's thoughts.

“I’ll vouch for myself,” she said firmly and extended a hand. Matt’s heroism would be well-rewarded, she’d see to that herself, but she refused to let him bear the burden of responsibility for her actions. “I’m good at what I do, Harry, and my medical spa isn’t going anywhere. Your school will be lucky to have me.”

“I have to talk it over with my staff first,” he warned, his nod effectively ending the conversation. “We don’t much care for change here at Hamilton Elementary.”

“It’s the Pleasant Park curse.” Matt placed a hand on the small of her back and led her toward the hallway. She shivered when his pinky finger slipped under the waistband of her skirt in a tiny yet defiant gesture of possession. *Mine*. “If there’s one thing we fear more than change, it’s a beautiful woman like you carrying it in. Take it easy on us, Whitney. We’re trying.”

She turned to face him, aware that they were talking about much more than a kids’ school assembly and a town that refused to evolve. Dimples, ruffled hair, boyish grin—even with the taut, tired expression underlying it all, he was still capable of making her heart go pitter-patter like she was twenty again.

She pushed a lock of hair out of his face. “I’m not asking you to change, Matt. I’m just asking to be accepted for who I am.”

“And who are you, Whitney Vidra?”

Good question. “I’m the rebound girl. I’m the selfish plastic surgeon who plans to use a little kids’ assembly to boost her fledgling business. I’m the crazy lady who yells at men when their ex-wives have been diagnosed with cancer.” And most important, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t be more.”

The school bell rang, signaling the end of lunch and a stampede of boots and coats making their way indoors. As if carried on a rising tide, she and Matt were pulled apart.

And that was okay. For the first time in days, Whitney felt like she and Matt were in, if not a good place again, at

least somewhere familiar.

Also? Kendra was going to freak when she found out Whitney had just scored a seat in an elementary school career fair.

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Chapter Thirteen

Whitney's parents visited her every year like clockwork, their trip aligning, not coincidentally, with her birthday. She'd once told them it was the worst present they could possibly give her, that any other time out of the year would have been better, that she'd even take time off from her regularly scheduled activities if they would leave her alone to celebrate in peace.

Whitney loved her birthday. She also loved her parents. She just didn't love them at the same time.

"But it's technically my birth day too," her mother always protested, ignoring Whitney's pleas and blazing forward with whatever plans she'd already laid out. "I'm the one who did all the work. Thirty-six hours of back labor, Whitney. You should be buying *me* presents."

Nothing Whitney did or said could stop them. Never mind that she'd rather go dancing and eat a whole cake and spend way too much money on new shoes. Never mind that she had no desire to entertain them in the middle of the personal and professional quarantine area her life had recently become. The parental units were currently making plans to visit Pleasant Park.

God help them all.

"Well, if you're planning my surprise party, you can go ahead and cancel," she said glumly to John, who had come over to watch the Lifetime marathon on her DVR. "Mom and Dad couldn't be talked out of visiting again this year."

"Poor baby." John dropped a giant bowl of cheesy popcorn onto Whitney's lap. It was warm and smelled of processed food heaven—Kendra would have had a fit. "I happen to love your parents. Do you remember the year they took us all to Medieval Times and your dad was so drunk he volunteered to joust that huge knight?"

"That wasn't because he was drunk," Whitney pointed out with a sigh. "My parents are weird, and I don't know why

they refuse to get a hotel. I think they do it on purpose to spite me.”

“I think they do it on purpose because they love you.” John shoved his hand deep in the popcorn bowl until he reached the half-popped kernels. He had the disgusting habit of sucking off all the flavor and then spitting them out. “Also because the only way they ever learn anything about your life is by going through all your stuff while you’re at work.”

“They don’t do that.” Whitney grabbed the remote and selected their first show, part one of a series in which a woman with amnesia first gave birth to a demon and then, a few years later, to an angel. “I put all my kinky sex stuff right where they can find it. There is nothing like a vibrator in the crisper drawer to keep your parents from snooping in the really good cupboards.”

“You’re sick, you know that?” John spit out a popcorn kernel into a napkin and laughed. But as the movie came on, he sobered a little. “Are you going to introduce them to Dimples?”

“Shh,” Whitney hissed, watching the screaming blonde woman give birth from the back of a taxi. “You’re ruining the dramatic opening.”

“My humblest apologies,” he murmured. “I just wonder how it is you’re going to manage to hide a man like that in a town like this.”

Whitney ignored him. It wasn’t a question worth asking, let alone answering. Besides—there was no way Matt would fit inside the crisper drawer.

Her parents’ visit was slated to begin in T minus three days. As it had been a week since Whitney had last seen Matt at his school and even longer since she’d seen him without his clothes on, she sensed an urgent need to pay him a visit.

Not because she wanted sex. Because she wanted to make sure he was okay.

If her parents were going to be present for two weeks—two weeks in which she refused to introduce them to Matt in

fear of getting their hopes up—she needed to do this now, to call and face her demons. Face his demons too.

Oncology wasn't her field, but she'd done a rotation during her residency. All it took was one or two days on the floor to realize how much that disease tore apart families and people. Even if the patient was a cheating ex-wife with codependency issues.

Especially if the patient was a cheating ex-wife with codependency issues.

She swung by his apartment on a Saturday afternoon. Fearful that a phone call would put him on his guard or that he might turn her down flat if given any advance warning of her arrival, she was making this a sneak attack. She'd even slipped into a pair of jeans and a beige sweater before leaving the house. Beige was her safe color, asexual and bland.

“Holy crap,” Whitney said when he pulled open the door. Tired and morose, Matt had never looked so beaten down. A stubbly growth covered his jaw and chin, a worn black T-shirt stretched tight across his frame. “You, uh, look like you could use a nap.”

It wasn't her most glib response, but it was all she could come up with on short notice. She held up a six pack. “Or beer. I brought beer.”

Matt gestured for her to come in, his expression neutral. “I'm sorry I haven't called. I should have called.”

“No. You shouldn't have.” Whitney swept into the kitchen and put the beer in the fridge. Unlike his normal leafy greens and carefully lined up Tupperware, his shelves held a mess of takeout cartons and a lone withered orange. Things were worse than she realized. Peeking over her shoulder, she added, “You don't call unless you want to. Remember? No rules?”

His face screwed up for a moment before straightening back out, almost as though he was trying hard to remember their past conversations, as though she'd fallen so far off his

radar he no longer remembered her last name. “Thanks for thinking of me—with the beer and all.”

“Of course.” She handed him one. “Have you eaten?”

“No, but I’m not really hungry. Unless you are...?”

She thought of his fridge’s contents. “Nah. Not right now.”

An awkward silence fell, oppressive in how strange it felt. This was the first time she didn’t feel easy and perfect being in Matt’s presence. Damn that Laura. Damn her for getting cancer and making it Matt’s problem.

Maybe that made her a terrible human being, but it was a role she’d gladly play if she could just get Matt to smile.

“Okay. You have ten minutes,” she announced, pointing her beer at him.

His brow knit. “I do?”

“Yes.” She threw herself onto one of the kitchen chairs. “I want you to talk to me about Laura for ten minutes—whatever you’re feeling and whatever is happening. And then she’s gone for the rest of the day.”

Matt blew out a long breath and studied Whitney, lounging at his table as though she’d dropped over for a chat about the latest Eagles game. He’d known, when she appeared unannounced at his door, that he wasn’t going to get off easy today. No more sitting and staring at the wall, wondering what he was supposed to do. No more waiting for the phone to ring, to see if Laura had any more information about her diagnosis.

“I’m sorry about before,” he said. “For yelling at you.”

“I said talk about Laura, not apologize.” Whitney’s gaze was unwavering—her presence solid and warm. How was it that this woman was able to carry so much energy and joy with her wherever she went? It fizzled and crackled around her and made him think, for a small space of time, that he could be happy again. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Now spill.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather not.”

“Not an option. I want to hear all the gory details. Have you talked to anyone else?”

He let out a soft snort. It wasn't exactly the sort of topic one foisted on coworkers or a set of six-year-olds, and the last thing he wanted was Lincoln's or Hilly's advice on the subject.

“Oh, no, you don't.” Whitney marched over to the microwave and set the timer for ten minutes before leaning on one elbow on the counter. She trained her eyes on him, unblinking and, to all outward appearances, interested and sympathetic. “Start talking.”

As always, he did as she commanded—not because he had to, but because he wanted to. It was an important difference, one he couldn't always put into words but felt just the same. Making this woman happy was as ingrained into him as breathing.

“She had an appointment on Tuesday, and she wanted me to go.”

“Tell me you didn't say yes. Doesn't she have any family or friends in town?”

“Is you asking questions part of my ten minutes?” he asked. “Because that doesn't seem fair.”

She made the motion of a zipper over her lips and gestured for him to continue.

“Her family does live here, but you have to understand that they're pretty conservative people. When our marriage ended the way it did...”

“You mean when she cheated on you...”

He shot her a warning look. It was hard to explain this town to people who didn't grow up here. Pleasant Park was anything but pleasant if the locals chose not to accept you. Judgment and contempt came with the territory.

Then again, maybe she knew more about that than most...

“When she cheated on me,” he said, gaining momentum even as the words tripped over his tongue, “there was a pretty big public outcry. Most of the people here have had kids in my class, and since my sister and brother are their own kind of fixtures, we’re pretty well liked. It was really hard for her—for her whole family—for a few months. They’d go into the diner and wait for an hour for their food. Teenagers egged their house. Small stuff, but the kind of stuff that weighs on you after a while—especially since it wasn’t any of the town’s goddamn business.”

Whitney nodded. “That’s for sure.”

“Anyway, the point is that most of her friends started dropping off not too long after we separated. I don’t doubt her sister would have gone with her to the doctor, but not without making a big deal out of it. So yes, I went, and sat in the waiting room. And don’t you dare look at me like that. You just have to accept that no matter how much she hurt me, Laura was—and is—very much a part of my life. I’m not going to let a woman I once pledged my life to visit a cancer specialist alone. No one deserves that. Not even my worst enemy.”

He paused, waiting for her to insert a snide remark or comment on his nobility. But she just nodded, real warmth in her eyes.

“So that’s pretty much it. She still doesn’t have any conclusive results, but I think they did one of those biopsy things.”

Whitney opened her mouth and then promptly shut it again. It was probably killing her not to insert an opinion after every word.

“I don’t know what else to say,” he continued. “There’s lots of medical terminology I’m sure you already know. Laura is scared and freaked out and I’m not sure what my role is supposed to be yet. I told her it’s probably best to go into the city—they have specialists there and she can stay with an aunt—but she didn’t really talk much. She mostly cried.” His voice

cracked. “Which seems fair, given the situation. She’s only twenty-six.”

Silence blanketed them both—not awkward or comforting, just present, like oxygen. There was a lot more he could say, but the depressing realization that it would come out more as a jumbled mixture of sounds rather than actual words was too strong to ignore. He liked Whitney—more, he knew, than she liked him—and he refused to break down in front of her over this.

A few more minutes were left on the timer, but he didn’t make a move to fill the silence, and she, bound by her word, did the same. It was odd. They weren’t touching at all, but he felt closer to her in that moment than during any of their sexual entanglements.

Of course, the second it went off again, Whitney bounced into action. “So, I brought a few movies, but it’s a nice day out, so that seems like a really depressing way to spend the afternoon. Which is why I also brought a kite.”

The randomness of that statement forced a laugh out of Matt. “Is it even windy enough outside for a kite?”

“I don’t know. Do I look like the type of woman who kites?”

“Then why did you buy it?”

“It’s pretty.” She said it with certainty, as though that were the answer to everything. Kite purchases. Relationships. World peace. “Can’t you just make it work by running fast?”

Matt had a suspicion Whitney was secretly some kind of master kite flyer and was testing him. They’d get outside only to find that she had one of those thousand dollar contraptions with dual handles, and she’d soundly whip his ass, laughing at him all the while.

It sounded wonderful.

“We can head to Blue Lake,” he suggested. “I think the winds are pretty decent on the shoreline, and there’s a cabin up there that used to belong to my grandparents.”

“Oooh,” Whitney squealed. “Waterfront real estate. Why, Matt Fuller, you never told me you’re a man of property.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. It’s not that kind of waterfront. Oh, and Whitney?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For letting me talk. For being here.”

“Of course.” Whitney turned sharply away. “Let’s get going. Daylight’s burning.”

Whitney had a small arsenal of outdoor equipment in the trunk of her car, which was strange, given how incredibly non-outdoorsy she claimed to be. In addition to a kite, there were coats and blankets and a picnic basket that she vehemently ordered Matt not to open, for fear of releasing the scents and spores of a long-gone day at the park. There was even a cricket bat, though she was hard-pressed to explain its presence among so much random gear.

“If you think this is bad, you should see my closets” was all she’d say as they piled inside and she revved the engine, taking off at a good twenty miles per hour over the speed limit.

Matt was slowly getting used to her way of driving, though he might have preferred to put the top up, considering it was a crisp spring day with a thermometer firmly topped out at fifty-five degrees. As he watched Whitney out of the corner of his eye, her hair whipping playfully in the wind, he decided maybe he would bear the cold. He wanted to cement the sight of her, youthful and flushed, in his memory to store for the hard days ahead.

Life with Whitney was ass-hugging jeans and laughter. It was stolen kisses and rushed orgasms. It was yelling and arguing and a constant battle of wills.

Life with Whitney was exhilarating.

“Take this exit and turn right.” Matt pointed toward a rustic one-lane road that disappeared into a dead overgrowth. One nice thing about having a frozen face and wind tearing up

his eyes was that it wasn't necessary to attempt conversation. He felt more at peace than he had in days. "I really hope your car can make it. The road is awfully rough."

Whitney turned to him and winked. "Oh, Matt. My car and I were made for hard riding."

Matt groaned. "I set myself up for that one, didn't I?"

Whitney just laughed before hitting the gas pedal with a vengeance. A normal person would have slowed down to take the backwoods hairpin turns with a little more caution. Or at least to reduce the kickup of dust. But she was oblivious to death or danger or dirt, and Matt settled in to the inevitability of misery.

Compared to how he'd felt earlier in the week, dropping Laura off at their empty house, refusing her entreaty to come inside and keep her company, this freezing, dirty misery was a wonderful feeling.

Whitney stepped on the gas again. Although she was trying to be discreet about it, she was keeping a close watch over Matt's face, which alternated between irritation and sadness. Sadness meant she needed to speed up, because he was starting to think again. Irritation meant she was doing her job well.

She might not have a ton of experience being the supportive girlfriend type, but she wasn't Matt's self-appointed rebound girl for nothing. When faced with a distasteful situation that had no easy answer, the only thing to do was think about something else. *Anything* else. And since even she knew whipping off her shirt and putting on a personalized burlesque show might be a touch gauche right now, she'd settled for a kite and a drive. It was the best she'd been able to come up with on short notice.

As she turned the last corner into what looked like a solid wall of trees, Matt indicated that they'd finally arrived at their destination. She parked under a huge evergreen tree and waited for Matt to come around and open her door. He always let out a little huff if she tried to do it herself—and, truth be told, she was getting kind of spoiled. Those little gallant

gestures of his—opening the door for her, hanging on her every word when she spoke, the way he always made sure she came first before taking his own pleasure—they added up to something substantial.

“Welcome to Chez Fuller,” he said, taking her hand and helping her out of the car. “The family legacy, hunting lodge, fishing shack—call it what you want. My grandfather built it with his own two hands.”

Whitney took in the sight of the so-called legacy with a laugh. Matt’s grandfather had obviously not been one of those men who could craft an entire city from a pile of leaves and a matchstick. The log cabin looked solid enough—it had walls and a ceiling—but the front door creaked on ominous hinges and there wasn’t a single wooden beam overhead that wasn’t sagging and crowded with wispy cobwebs.

“It’s just the one front room and an upstairs attic. Hilly, Lincoln and I used to all fit up there if we didn’t breathe too much, but the last time I was here a family of eagles had taken up residence in the rafters.”

“Your family must be big on outdoor adventure, huh?”

“What can I say?” Matt spread his arms. “We’re a classy people. Now grab that kite. I want to take it for a spin.”

Whitney obliged, even though there was no way that thing was going to get any air. She’d bought it at a Chinese grocery store the next town over, which had incredible to-go lunches but otherwise contained products that were a mystery to her. She didn’t eat any fruits or vegetables she couldn’t recognize, so assuming she could do anything with a fuzzy melon other than mock it relentlessly was ridiculous. But they’d had a shipment of decorative kites out one day, and she’d picked up a long-tailed dragon painted a vibrant red and sporting fangs bigger than its feet. She thought it would look nice against the bright blue sky of summer.

The dull, overcast spring weather would work too. She had a man to cheer up, after all.

Matt pulled the kite out of its brown paper wrapping with a grimace and shook his head at what he called the poorly designed aerodynamics of it. She should have figured he'd be far too practical a man to simply enjoy the shiny-pretty.

"Just give it one try," Whitney wheedled. "I saw a fireplace inside the cabin and the kitchen cupboard—singular, by the way—had a giant jar of Ovaltine in it. I'll make hot chocolate for us when we're done."

"That stuff is older than I am. We'll die."

"Then we go out with a flourish. Spoilsport."

The distance from the house to the lake was short. The temperature plunged with each step closer to the shoreline, and when they finally broke through, the wind whipped up off the water a good ten degrees cooler than the forest air.

Whitney's face stung cold and chapped, her lips dry. But still she smiled and broke into a laugh when she reached the edge of the lake. The sandy shore was littered with debris and branches, the water a murky brown of slime and grabby tendrils of lakeweed. Definitely a little rustic for her taste, but watching Matt struggle to untangle the kite, freezing his ass off in a thin jacket, filled her with a sense of comfortable happiness she refused to define.

"So, how did you say this was supposed to work? I run fast?"

"*Can* you run fast?" she asked, tilting her head sideways. Matt had the lean build of a runner, firm in all the right places, his ass a muscular and delicious handhold. But she'd always taken him for a long-distance sort of guy—endurance over fancy acrobatics—rather than a sprinter. Long-distance guys always made the best lovers.

"I'm fast enough," he said gruffly. "Faster than you."

"If I'm your measure of athletic prowess, then you've got problems," Whitney said with a laugh. She found a fairly dry spot on a fallen log and sat. Only a little moisture seeped up through her jeans, and it was hopefully too cold for bugs.

Matt proved surprisingly adept at flying a kite—the result, she was sure, of hours of playing card games with children and watching patterns of cloud animals march through the sky. He'd gotten the string unwound and was testing the kite by tossing it into the breeze when he turned to her.

“Why are we doing this again?”

“I like to watch you work with your hands. It's sexy.”

He stopped, staring at her with the fixed intensity he always got when she dared to talk dirty to him. A mixture of suspicion and rampant sexual interest, that look curled through her belly with a slow, steady burn.

“What? You have the most dexterous fingers of any man I've ever met. When you do that thing—that one where you pin me down, spread me wide open and massage my clit with your thumb—I always think what a shame it is you never thought about becoming a surgeon.”

“You use that time to think about my choice of careers? That's one of my best moves.”

Her own sudden burst of laughter caught her off guard. “It's a very brief thought, I promise. Want to know what else I think about?”

“No. I want to get this over with.” He jiggled the kite. “It's cold, Whitney, and this contraption is a piece of crap.”

“How's this, Galahad?” She uncrossed her legs and watched him struggle with the flimsy material. She'd promised herself she wouldn't make today about sex, but *damn*. With that dimple peeping out and the slow, careful way he licked his lips, it was a wonder she'd waited this long. “Every second you keep that kite in the air is a second I will spend with my mouth wrapped around your cock. We can pretend we're in a *real* cabin, all cozy and warm and rolling around on a bearskin rug.”

He paused, head tilted. “I've always thought bearskin rugs were a little creepy. Especially if they keep the head on.”

“Afraid of a little bite?” she asked, her voice low.

Matt's dimple deepened, and it was all Whitney could do not to launch herself across the beach and take him right then and there. He was being coy on purpose.

Men didn't normally do that—at least not with her. They took what she offered and reveled in it, like dogs and their favorite rubber chew toys—always a little fearful that if they let down their guard, she might take away their privileges.

Not Matt. She had a feeling she was the dog and he was the treat. He had the power here—he set the pace of an arrangement that was verging fearfully into courtship territory. Today was clear proof of that, and even though danger flashed a warning red right in front of her, she was powerless to stop it.

She could feel the danger as he sat on the log next to her and worked at the knots of the string, slowly and leisurely, a man who didn't have a care in the world. She leaned in and kissed him just below his ear, a spot she knew was sensitive and normally had him growling and throwing her to the bed.

“It's not going to work,” he said pleasantly, though she noticed his hands stilled as her teeth nipped his lobe. “I've been issued a challenge, and I intend to meet it. Did you bring a stopwatch?”

“I can count.” She moved a little lower, her lips against his neck. He smelled of the outdoors and Irish Spring—by all accounts the most basic of scents a man could possess. But as he did in the case of all things commonplace, Matt made them his own. Comfortable and tantalizing and somehow the best smell in the entire world.

“There! I got it.” Matt sprang to his feet, ignoring her.

“You tell me when to start.” She slipped her hands into her armpits. The day grew colder as the sun dipped farther into the trees. There better be firewood inside the cabin. Gathering sticks would take up valuable sex time.

“No counting super slow.” He lifted the kite. “Okay. Go.”

With a quick flick of his wrist, the kite was out of his hand and into the air. For a moment, Whitney was sure it was going to take a nosedive right for the water, but he pulled at the last second, and it rippled against the wind, shooting straight up to the top of the tree line.

She began counting out loud, purposefully inserting “Mississippi” between each beat. He ignored her, unwinding the string so that the kite moved higher into the sky. There were a few moments when she thought the kite might snag on a tree, forever lost to the chipmunks and evergreens, but he always seemed to pull up at exactly the right moment.

At six hundred and five seconds, she stopped counting and called out, “Okay. Now you’re showing off.”

He turned, grinning. “No. *This* is showing off.” Wrapping the handle of the kite deftly around the branch of a tree a few times, he effectively made the kite a permanent fixture in the sky. “Do you want to keep counting?”

“You cheat!” Whitney squealed as he came up behind her, wrapping his hands just under her breasts and burrowing his face in the crook of her neck. He inhaled deeply, seemingly content for the moment to smell her hair.

She’d always wanted that—a man who smelled her hair. It was a simple gesture but an intimate one, one that signified a subconscious need that was out of his control. But when he remained there, embracing her, not pulling her toward the cabin where she could make good on the kite’s promise, she stiffened.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice muffled.

“It’s cold. Let’s go inside. You can build me that fire.”

He remained in place a moment longer before grabbing her hand and leading her back on the path. His hand was strong and sure; her legs wobbled.

They almost gave way entirely when he leaned in close and whispered into her ear, “With what I have planned, a fire is the last thing we’ll need to stay warm.”

Whitney always made good on her debts.

She sent faithful student loan payments on her massive medical school debt every month. She repaid people who helped her move with generous purchases of pizza and beer. And when she lost a bet, she paid in full.

“But I never concede to cheaters,” she explained from their twined position on the dirty cabin floor. “Not even cute ones.”

“You’re just a sore loser,” Matt teased. He spoke directly to her breasts, taking his time kissing each one. The slow, lazy circles of his tongue were agony. She wanted him to suck, pinch, play. Instead, he gazed worshipfully at where the mounds of flesh swelled before his eyes, his breath warm as he lightly flicked a tongue over the protrusion of her nipple.

“Less talking. More sucking.” She arched into him and fisted his hair, forcing his mouth closer. When he finally clasped her nipple lightly between his teeth and suckled, she let out a cry that probably frightened all the wildlife within a mile radius. An explosion of pleasure swept through her, throbbing as it forced its way to her achingly empty core.

Always, it came to this. Always, she felt the void of Matt much more painfully than she thought possible.

With her hand still gripping his hair, she yanked him back. “You know what? No. I don’t owe you a single lick.”

His dazed expression sharpened. “Of course you don’t. I was just kidding with the kite back there. We can stop.”

Oh, sweet Jesus. This man could not be any more adorable if he was wrapped in bacon. “Oh, we’re not stopping until I’ve had at least three orgasms. But after your little stunt outside, I think I’m placing a strict fellatio embargo on today’s activities.”

“Mmm,” he agreed, his lids heavy as he appraised her. “I think I can handle that.” He licked his lips and allowed his gaze to travel southward, not stopping until he reached the juncture of her jeans-clad thighs. Moisture steeped her panties as his meaning became clear. He’d do it too. Dive between her legs and not come up until she could no longer think.

“You’ll be handling it all right.” She rolled and rose to unsteady knees. So far, the only clothes they’d managed to lose were her shirt and bra, which suited her current purposes just fine. She needed the denim barrier below if she intended to remain firm. “Across the room. Five paces.”

His lips quirked in a question, but he did as she commanded, counting them off like a dueler of old. When he got to the end, he swiveled on one foot and made a gesture toward a fake gun. “Okay. What now?”

“Take it out.”

His eyes flared for a moment, desire lighting his face. “You’re serious?”

“Unbutton. Unzip. Oh, and take off your shirt nice and slow first.”

Matt must have realized her delicious, wicked intentions, because a smile worked slow and satisfied across his face. Without another word, he began at the top button of his shirt, taking his time with each one.

There was something about Matt that made him a natural stripper. A big part of it was his lazy confidence, which didn’t balk at behaving a little ridiculously from time to time. But that wasn’t all. Maybe it was the rough forest of hair extending into his jeans, promising so much more. Perhaps it was that he knew how much she loved every second.

Most likely it was just that he knew what awaited at the bottom of that treasure trove of a body of his. How could he not? Thick and strong, his erection had such a powerful effect on her she could barely breathe at the sight of it. And she wasn’t attached to the damn thing. Walking around with that cock every day of the year must be some kind of torture.

“What now?” he asked, his voice hoarse. With his chest exposed and his jeans open at the fly, he wasn’t technically naked, but it *was* pretty cold in here. And his erection sprang from his nest of dark hair with so much glorious promise the rest of the room fell away.

“I want you to take your dick in hand and stroke it. Tell me how it feels.”

She half expected him to be shy about being so vocal, but Matt was a creature of contradictions. He didn't swear in public, he didn't like talking about sex in a casual setting and he had a delightfully small vocabulary when it came to her vagina. But as he wrapped his fist around his cock and began an agonizingly slow motion up and down the length of it, he showed no restraint.

“It feels incredible,” he said, his voice gravelly. “Hot. Hard. Heavy.”

Whitney felt herself squirming under his concentrated stare. “Yes. It's definitely all those things.” It was the most beautiful cock she'd ever seen, all thick and veiny and strong. “Faster. I don't want you to hold anything back.”

He groaned and pumped harder, never once losing eye contact with her. A lock of hair fell into his face as he concentrated on the task, and his body jerked with each movement.

“Tell me what you're thinking,” Whitney commanded. “Tell me what you want.”

“I'm thinking of you. Naked. Sitting on my face.”

The unexpectedly blunt reply caught Whitney by surprise in the best possible way. She had to remind herself to breathe. “What else?” she asked, her voice almost a croak.

“I'm remembering how you taste, sweet and hot. Delicious.” His hand moved faster, driving against his erection with intense focus. “I'm thinking about how smooth your legs are when I force them open, how you get so wet I can barely stop myself from licking every inch of your thighs.”

“Don't stop.”

“Your breasts. God...” he groaned. “The perfect weight in my hands—I dream of them sometimes, of the way they swell when you breathe heavily, like they can't get free fast enough. And when you moan like that, I swear your nipples get darker and tighter, begging for my touch.”

Unable to prevent herself, mesmerized by his words, constricted with need, Whitney flew across the room.

He caught her, mid-flying-tackle, providing a cushion when they both fell. And even though the breath flew from their lungs, neither one of them cared enough to stop the crashing of their mouths in a passionate, searing kiss. Whitney couldn't open her mouth wide enough, her tongue couldn't get deep enough. She wanted to devour him.

Reaching down, she grabbed the brawny heft of him and finished the job he'd started. It didn't take much—just a few pumps—and he was groaning into her mouth, spilling hot and sticky over her hand.

She waited just long enough for him to catch his breath before reaching for her jeans and practically ripping them off her body.

“I want what you said. All of it. Right now.”

He took her face in both hands, his eyes kindling fire at her. “Nothing on this earth would make me happier.”

She sighed and gave in to the heady rush of Matt's hands forcing her legs apart. He moved both of them closer to the wall, allowing Whitney to brace herself with both hands as he lowered her to his mouth.

He kissed deeply, almost hungrily, as if drawing the blood from her whole body and forcing it down to meet his lips. Before Matt, she'd had no idea that a man could kiss a woman as passionately at her entrance as he could her mouth. But he did. His tongue delved in, sweeping along the inner folds of her labia, enjoying every taste. He nibbled and nipped at her clit, applying the perfect amount of pressure when she cried and ground harder against him.

And best of all, he never loosened his possessive grip on her thighs. He pulled her away and brought her closer on his own terms, refusing to let her simply take her pleasure. Instead, he gave it.

She cried out and slapped her hand on the wall as she came. The resounding sting in her forearm did nothing to still

the crash of sensation that moved through her. In fact, she slapped the wall again and laid her head against the splintery wood, groaning as he continued providing pressure to the sensitive nub, her body jerking with a few more final twinges of pleasure.

When he pulled away, he left her cold and empty in the glorious space where his head had just been. But not for long.

“Well,” Matt said happily. “That makes one.”

Oh, God—had she really commanded three of those?

His fingers traced a slow and careful pattern up along her lower belly, reigniting the fire that hadn't gone completely out. She groaned again and sank farther to the ground.

Yes. Yes, she believed she had.

There was a stitch that ran about two inches along the length of Matt's side, and he was pretty sure he was going to need Whitney to check his toes for frostbite later, but he didn't dare move. She'd fallen asleep, exhausted, in his arms, nestled up against him in an unprecedented moment of intimacy even though the blankets they'd spread out over the floor smelled of death, and a frightening rustling in the vicinity of his head signaled that a nest in the nature of the rodent family was located nearby.

Also, Whitney was a blanket hog.

Of course she was—he could have guessed that weeks ago. She was exactly the type of woman who would sleep horizontally and snore and otherwise make sleep inconvenient.

He didn't care.

He ran a hand gently along the curve of her bottom, which was bare and pressed up against him, stirring his groin despite several hours' worth of backwoods cavorting that left his whole body numb. He loved the sight of her naked, the feel of her naked. Soft, responsive, a seemingly endless bounty of curves and nooks to explore. Even now, as he ran a hand over the softness of her belly, she murmured and purred, shifting against him.

How easy it would be to get used to this. Or to slip even further into the incredible gift she offered him by moving their sexual relationship to the next level.

Naturally, he'd thought about it—all the time, he thought about it. Maybe he'd take it slow, kissing her entire body from head to toe, savoring all his favorite parts before finally entering her. Possibly he'd push harder. Probably he'd push faster. He'd be unable to control himself as he took his pleasure in the hard, frantic thrusts his body demanded. Over the table, on the bed, up against the shower wall. The seemingly endless loop in his head was nothing if not inventive.

He groaned. Either the noise or the fact that he'd grown rock hard against her signaled the end to her brief nap. As sleep ebbed away, her body stiffened against his.

Wisely, Matt kept quiet and didn't move his hand. A man didn't work in his profession without learning a little patience. Letting him talk about Laura had been an act of kindness, bringing him here for a change of scene even more so. Whitney might like to drive home the temporary nature of their relationship whenever she could, but she was warming to the idea of more. She had to be. He wasn't sure he could bear it otherwise.

Whitney pretended to be asleep for a few more minutes, unnaturally still and tense. When she finally turned, it was with a forced stretch and a yawn, her smile tight.

He leaned in and kissed her nose. "My toes are freezing."

It was the right thing to say because she laughed and relaxed a little, though she pulled away enough that his body felt the loss of her heat and softness. "Get one of those single moms to knit you some socks—I'm not contributing to anything that covers you. I like you much better in the nude."

Whitney was nothing if not predictable—that was a classic Step One. Put him in his place. Matt was a sex toy, an object of lust and welcome to encourage the attentions of others as long as it didn't interfere with their arrangement.

“By the way, we’re going to have to cool it a little this week.”

Step Two. Set more boundaries.

“That’s fine,” Matt said congenially, rolling over and stretching his limbs. His toes were cold but not discolored. Still, he pulled on his boxers and jeans, comfortably half-dressed while he searched for his socks and shirt. “Give me a call when you’re free.”

“I mean it, Matt. Don’t stop by or anything. My parents are visiting, and I don’t want to have to explain...” Her voice trailed off and she waved her hand between the two of them. The movement brought to mind just how cold it was, and she shivered, all of her body covered in a ripple of goose bumps, which didn’t fail to take hold of her nipples, pointed skyward and tempting.

He turned away. That was Step Three, and it was the one that hurt the most. Drive home her refusal to capitulate with whatever force was necessary. The more brutal, the better.

“Got it. The parents are in town. No clandestine meetings. No lovers hidden under the bed. I’ll cease to exist.” As soon as he said the words, he regretted them. They smacked of little-boy-irritation.

“Hey—if you don’t like the arrangement, we can stop right now.” She’d pulled on her shirt and underwear, but even in a state of half undress, she was formidable. She meant every word.

It would be the easy solution, that was for sure, to let her go and move on. He would miss the sex—good God, there wasn’t a hot-blooded man on earth who wouldn’t miss that sex—but more importantly, he would miss her.

Longing for a woman wasn’t new to Matt. A guy didn’t grow up an awkward, straight-A student without feeling the lack of female admiration in his life. That sort of thing—of him trying too hard to please, always falling short of the goal—had been a staple of almost all his relationships to date.

Even with Laura, she'd fallen out of love with him before he'd fallen out of love with her. He'd always done more wanting, more waiting, more everything.

Whitney had sensed that at the outset—wasn't that what she said? That he needed a rebound girl in order to learn how to differentiate sex and a relationship?

He obviously sucked at that.

"It's not a problem, Whitney," he said, forcing himself to continue looking bland and uninterested. She didn't seem convinced, but there wasn't a whole lot she could do about it unless they dumped all their thoughts and emotions onto the floor and pulled them apart, examining for clues.

Like that was going to happen.

So they got dressed. They cleaned up the dirty cabin and piled into the car, the top thankfully up and secure as night settled around them.

As Whitney cranked up the radio and stepped on the gas, Matt could just make out the red kite in the distance, still flapping proudly in the wind, full of sexual promise.

He hoped it would be there when they came back.

Who was he kidding? He hoped they came back, period.

Chapter Fourteen

“You don’t have a serious boyfriend, you don’t cook and you obviously haven’t cleaned this place since you moved in.” Whitney’s mother clipped around her condo, her heels echoing off the hardwood with an ominous sound made possible by borrowing her daughter’s favorite shoes. She spun on one of the tall black heels. “What do you do with all your free time?”

Her dad, who had found the remote control and lodged a permanent place in the corner of her couch, looked up from under bushy gray eyebrows. His face was craggy and weathered in ways that worked like a balm on Whitney’s psyche. “She works, dear. Doctors are very busy and important.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” Whitney leaned over and kissed his cheek, which was scratchy and papery and just the way she remembered. “You see? I’m far too successful to bother with the mundane details of life.”

Her mother’s brow arched—well, as much as it could arch, anyway. Her mom loved free Botox as much as the next plastic surgeon’s mother. “Oh, sweetie. If you consider a man a mundane detail, you’re doing it wrong.”

Her dad guffawed. “Or she’s doing *him* wrong.”

Behind her, her parents high-fived.

Oh, dear Lord. She couldn’t take thirteen more days of this. Having sexually liberated parents wasn’t the awesome party it appeared on the outside. By day three, her dad would be comfortable enough in the new setting to default to his standard wander-around-the-house-near-nude form, and her mother would take to filling her fridge with strange French cheeses and her underwear drawer with strange French undergarments.

“It just so happens I *am* kind of seeing someone,” she said defensively, the words slipping out before she remembered the long-term ramifications of such a confession.

Her mother kissed her forehead. “John doesn’t count, dear. You’ve tried passing him off as a boyfriend, what is it, three times now? We might live in the suburbs, but we’re not stupid. We know all about the gays.”

“It’s not John—and I never tried passing him off as anything.” Really, there’d just been that one time, and John had deliberately sabotaged her by bringing a date. The nerve.

“Well then, Peanut.” Her dad patted the seat next to him. “Why don’t you tell us all about him? Is he coming over later? Do your mother and I need to find something to entertain ourselves for a while?” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Whitney sat and sank into her father’s arms, which were open and waiting. For all her grumbling, there was something timeless about her parents being near, as if she was once again a little girl and all it took to put the world back on its axis was a hug and a comforting ear. Her eyes watered, and she let herself bask in the scent of him, cloves and antiseptic soap.

Funny. She hadn’t even known she was upset.

“I’ll make coffee,” her mother announced, taking the pair of them in at a glance. “You two look like you could use a little chat.”

Unfortunately, her mother was as adept in the kitchen as Whitney, and she rattled around for a few seconds before heaving a sigh. “I don’t understand why this thing has so many buttons. Whatever happened to hot water and a can? Why don’t I make a coffee run instead?”

“There’s a café called Java Rocket around the corner,” Whitney called from the comfort of her father’s chest. “I’d love a cappuccino.”

“Make it two,” her father said. “And a muffin.”

“Mmm. Good idea.” Whitney nestled further. “Or some scones.”

“Of course, my loves,” her mother returned, her voice dry. “Keep ordering. I’ll carry it all down the street on my

head.”

The moment the clack of Whitney’s Louboutin heels—which she was pretty much guaranteed never to get back now—could be heard careening down the front steps, her dad pulled away and chucked her chin, forcing her eyes up. “Okay, Peanut. Spill. Who’s the jerk and how soon should I make a call to your cousin Vito?”

Whitney sniffled and laughed, and a strange choking sound escaped from the base of her throat. “It’s not fair to invoke poor Vito every time you want to make an idle threat. He can’t help that Aunt Paulina gave him that awful name.”

The laugh and redirect didn’t work. Now that his wife was out of the way, her dad would do what it took to get to the bottom of this—and Whitney knew there was no escape.

“I mean it, Whitney. What’s up?”

Most of the time, it was wonderful being Daddy’s Little Girl. She and her father had always been close, always been pitted against her mother on every issue of importance. By virtue of the family democracy in which they carried the lead, the two of them had made the decision where to go on vacation each year—almost always somewhere tropical and expensive—whether or not her dad should take the job in another city, what to eat for dinner each night.

Her dad had also been the only one to defend her when she quit Make the World Smile, the one who picked her up from the airport when all of her belongings were shoved into a pair of dirty duffel bags and she was being detained by airport security because she’d forgotten her passport when she hightailed it out of Guatemala.

It wasn’t that her mom wouldn’t have done any of those things, of course. But Daddy was always there first, and he always made things better. And he was much easier to talk to when her mom’s overbearing concern wasn’t in the room with them. She had a tendency to overdramatize things a little.

Okay. A lot. It was a family trait.

“Nothing is up.” Whitney shifted out of his grasp. “It’s not a big deal.”

“How long have you been dating?”

“Well...we’ve been *seeing* each other about two months.” Technically, it was the truth. “And he’s nice—really nice. He teaches kindergarten.”

Her dad laughed out loud. “You’re funny, Peanut. Who is he really?”

“I can’t date a teacher?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

“I’m serious. He’s a teacher and he wears sweater vests and he drives a really awful car. One that’s so out of date you can’t even buy parts for it anymore.”

“I had one of those once,” he said, nodding. “A Yugo. What a clunker, always breaking down in the strangest places. I’m pretty sure you were conceived in the back seat, now that I think of it. Your mother and I were on our way home from this party, and she had on these tight little shorts—”

“Omigod, Dad. Stop.” Whitney slapped her hands over her ears. “I do not want to hear this.”

“What? Your mother has always had such a nice round figure. We were more forgiving of that back then.”

“It works just fine now too,” Whitney said defensively. She and her mother were built the same way, though she happened to think she dressed herself better. Her mom liked capri pants and embroidered blouses. No amount of persuasion would get her to realize that high-waisted pencil skirts were much more flattering to their signature generous hips. “But that is so not the point. Daddy, can we please make a promise not to talk about boys while you guys are here? Let’s just have it be us for a few weeks. No boyfriends. No ghosts.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said, though the words were so drawn out it was clear he didn’t mean them. “But I don’t see what harm meeting the guy could do. We’ll be good. I promise.”

Her father's definition of *good* could mean acting like the decorous lawyer and housewife they really were, or sneaking off in the middle of dinner to have a quickie in the bathroom stall. With her parents, it could go either way.

"I'm not ready."

"Not ready for what?" Her mother blasted open the front door and directed a petite woman, who Whitney immediately recognized as one of the baristas at the café, to the kitchen. "Right in there, sweetie. That was so nice of you. You tell your boss to give you a raise, okay? Oh, and wait right there. Marshall? Marshall, surely you have something nice to give this young lady."

Her dad reached into his pocket and extracted his wallet, fat and frayed at the edges. "Give this to your mother. And say nothing about the situation with your young man. You know how she gets."

As he stressed the final sentence with awful clarity and deliberateness, her mother and the barista both caught every word.

"Oh, don't say you broke up with Matt?" the barista asked, looking innocent despite her numerous tattoos and the long blue-black hair she wore cut in a killer Bettie Page style. "You guys are so cute together. And he's such a sweetheart—he always buys an extra coffee for that old man who sits in the corner with his journals."

"Does he now?" Her mother reached into the wallet and extracted a twenty, pressing it firmly into the woman's hand. The barista looked at it, wide-eyed, and tried to give it back.

"No, no," her mother urged. "You earned it. Tell me more about this Matt character."

"Well..." The barista shifted from foot to foot. She'd caught a glimpse of Whitney's intense look of warning. The question was, where did her loyalties lie—with the woman pushing a twenty into her hand, or the woman who regularly left tips in her Free Tibet and My Credit Card Debt jar? "I

don't know much else, actually. But he's nice. There just aren't that many nice ones out there anymore, you know? The kind with no ulterior motive at all."

The answer must have satisfied her mother, because she nodded and released her hand—and the money. She walked the woman to the door and waved happily, her fingers trilling a cheerful farewell.

"This is your fault, Dad," Whitney muttered as her mother turned her eyes, glittering and determined, on her little family. Whitney grabbed one of the to-go coffee cups and buried her face in the little plastic lid, but it was a ridiculous attempt at a barrier. Her mother wouldn't stop until Matt's entire list of virtues was unfurled at her feet. Her father, she knew, wouldn't stop until he had the same thing in the form of all his vices.

"You know, this puts me in mind of something I've been meaning to ask you," her mother began, her tone not unlike that of a parent about to disclose the truth about Santa Claus. "Your father said you guys might be having some financial difficulties with the spa."

Whitney was confused. "What does this have to do with Matt?"

"We talked about it, and there's simply no way for us to lend you any more money, sweetie. Not even for partial ownership. We need to be liquid right now. We've taken up cruises."

The disclosure didn't come as a complete surprise. She and Kendra and John had begun filling out applications at a few larger banks, but it had seemed prudent to cover all the other possible bases first. "It's okay, Mom. I understand. But I still don't see where Matt comes in. He's a divorced schoolteacher with about twenty dollars in his savings account. And I would never ask him anyway."

"No one said you ought to, dear." Whitney's mother shook her head and began passing out the baked goods. "But I wanted to let you know that I've been talking to a few

interested parties. I might be able to get a potential investor to head down to take a look at the facilities later this week.”

“Really?” Whitney wrapped her arms around her mom’s waist. “That would be so wonderful. You didn’t have to.”

“You can repay me by telling me all about this young man of yours.” She kissed Whitney gently on the forehead. “Tell me—does he golf?”

Golf. *Ugh.*

She’d almost rather they start talking about their sex life again.

“It’s not a big deal, Matt. Just lunch.”

Matt hid a smile, though he didn’t know why he bothered. He was, for the moment, alone in his apartment. When he’d answered the phone, the last thing he’d expected was Whitney’s voice, resigned and dry. It was only two days into her hiatus of shame. She was breaking already.

And begging.

“Well, now,” Matt drawled, propping his legs up on his coffee table, littered with books on coping with ovarian cancer. The ladies at the library had almost burst into sobs when he’d lugged every book they had on the subject to the checkout counter. “How your tune has changed. I thought I was forbidden from participating in the time-honored parent parade?”

“Don’t be mean. It was wrong of me to shut you off like that, and I’m sorry. I realize now that there is simply no way to pretend you don’t exist. My parents know me too well, and you...” Her voice grew quiet.

“And I?” he prompted, his pulse leaping. *Say it, Whitney. Say I matter. Say I’m more than a temporary fix.*

She paused. “It’s a small town, Matt. Word gets around.”

Disappointment hit him like a blow to the stomach, leaving him shaky and breathless. “So what happened?” he

asked, resigned.

“Maybe I just want you to meet my parents.”

“Or?”

“Maybe I decided you were right and I was wrong.”

Sure. He tried again. “Or?”

“Or maybe I let it slip that I was seeing someone and they won’t leave me alone.” She sighed into the phone, and Matt couldn’t tell if it was because she was being forced to ask for his help, or if she was afraid he might say something to her parents that he wasn’t supposed to. “They might even think we’re more serious than we really are.”

“Whitney...”

“I didn’t use the word *dating*, I swear. But there’s a teensy tiny possibility it got implied.”

Unbelievable. She refused to admit to herself they could be more than a rebound, refused to admit to Matt that she cared. But her parents? They got the full, idyllic bliss of nondisclosure.

“So I’m supposed to what, exactly?”

“Come to lunch. Smile. Be charming. That’s all.”

“What if they ask me about my intentions?”

“They won’t. They aren’t those kinds of parents.” She paused. “Please? I know it’s not fair of me to ask, but they’re driving me crazy. You’re my only hope. I need you.”

No joke—those words were almost guaranteed to make a man feel good. And this particular man? Hilly was right. Matt loved nothing more than being asked to come to the rescue.

“I’m good at moms and dads,” he offered. “If you’re worried, I mean. They love me.”

“I’m sure they do. You’re every mother’s dream come true.”

But not Whitney's. The words weren't said, but they lingered there just the same. He suddenly felt very tired, and very old, and very fed up with maneuvering his life around what women seemed to need or want for the moment. What about him? How much longer was he supposed to give before he finally broke?

Soon. He had a feeling it was soon.

"So you'll do it?" she prodded.

"Of course I will." Before he made the mistake of adding something sentimentally horrifying like *I'll do anything you want*, his call waiting beeped.

Laura.

His heart thumped with a dullness he'd come to associate with the phone number he once called his own. "I've got another call, so I need to run. But I'm looking forward to meeting your parents, and I promise to be on my best behavior."

"That's what I'm afraid of." She rattled off the lunch details until the call waiting beeped again. Then, quietly and with an undertone of steel, "It's her, isn't it, on the other line?"

He didn't know what to say. Whitney would never be the president of the Laura Fuller Fan Club. He wasn't feeling all too keen on his own membership these days, but there didn't seem to be much else he could do.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Whitney." Avoiding the subject—that always worked. A deep male voice boomed through the other end of the phone, and Matt heard Whitney call something back about the need for pants and sanitation standards for her leather couches. "Tell your parents I can't wait to meet them."

It was true. Knowing that Whitney had parental expectations and a normal life outside Pleasant Park filled him with hope.

He was sorely in need of that hope, he realized as he pressed the call waiting button and braced himself to face Laura's tears.

There was a shortage of that stuff going around lately.

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Chapter Fifteen

“That girl at the coffee shop was right. You’re an absolute sweetheart.”

The woman came at him at a clicking pace, not stopping until he was firmly ensconced in a pair of warm, fleshy arms. It was easy to tell this was Whitney’s mother—she had so much overflowing energy and heat, it wrapped around her like an aura. She had the same dark hair and sparkling eyes, too, and the only lines on her face were the ones people were supposed to have. Laugh lines and smile lines. Two seconds into this meeting and Matt could already tell this was a family that laughed and smiled often.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Vidra,” Matt said politely once he was released from her stronghold. He nodded to the man at her side, tall and hairy and with an arm wrapped protectively around Whitney’s waist. “You must be Mr. Vidra.”

“Please, call us Marshall and Pearl.” He took Matt’s proffered hand and gave it a hearty shake. “I can’t tell you how glad we are to meet you—sweetheart or not.”

The only one who didn’t seem excited to see him was Whitney, who shifted uncomfortably under Matt’s frank stare. He was waiting for her to do the introductions, but she seemed at a loss for words.

“I’m Matt,” he said, looking at her pointedly. “Whitney’s...” He wasn’t sure what else to say. What were they? And more importantly, what were they under the scrutinizing stare of two people who obviously mattered to her?

Pearl waved him off. “You don’t have to worry about offending us. We’re used to the arrangements you kids make today—all the fun and none of the hassle. What do they call them? Fuck buddies?”

Matt’s shoulders shook. That wasn’t exactly how he would have put it—particularly to individuals of the parental

variety. But Pearl just beamed at him.

“Good God, Mom. Just call him my boyfriend. I’m begging you.” Jolted from her stupor at her mother’s outrageous words, Whitney strode forward and kissed him softly on the lips. “My parents are horrid,” she said, loud enough for them to hear. “I should have warned you. You will never meet two more inappropriate people on the planet.”

“Don’t be ungrateful.” Marshall took his wife’s arm and led her inside the door of the restaurant they’d chosen—a French-style bistro that overlooked the Riverwalk. “I know plenty of kids whose parents never even gave them The Talk. And you know what happened to them?” He didn’t wait for a response, booming right ahead even though the entire restaurant could hear. “Pregnant. Every last one. Half of them didn’t even know they were having sex at the time. You work with kids, Matt—you tell me. How can they not know?”

“Don’t answer him,” Whitney warned, though her hand seemed to relax a little in his, swinging almost playfully at her side. Louder, she added, “Daddy, he works with six-year-olds. I don’t think it’s relevant.”

“Your cousin Jessica was one of them,” he continued, not paying the least heed to anyone. “Fifteen, I think she was, and didn’t even know she was pregnant until the baby’s head was hanging out. We all thought it was a hemorrhoid.”

“So, Matt,” Pearl interrupted brightly. The waitress had led them to a booth in the back—far away from anyone else. The poor woman’s face bloomed with color, and it was clear she was trying very hard not to laugh. “Tell us about you. Whitney refuses to say anything. She’s afraid we’ll get the wrong impression.”

Underneath the table, Whitney squeezed Matt’s thigh. It was half warning, half playful and doing strange things to his concentration.

“The basic stats? I’m twenty-nine and teach kindergarten. I’ve got two siblings—one of each gender—and two nephews I adore.”

“No kids of your own?” Pearl asked.

Beside him, Whitney sucked in a sharp breath. “We are not starting the baby talk, Mother. I forbid it.”

“I wasn’t asking about *your* reproductive history, dearest heart. I’m well aware how decrepit your eggs are getting these days. I was asking about Matt’s. Not his eggs, of course. The other bits. His swimmers.”

“No, ma’am. No kids. I was married, though.”

“Whitney mentioned something about that. Do you want children some day?”

“Don’t answer the question, Matt. Plead the fifth. Otherwise you’ll only encourage her.”

All this domestic talk was clearly killing Whitney—and he’d have been lying if he said he didn’t love every minute of it. She could be felled after all. With normal, inquisitive, loving parents. Who knew?

“I suppose that will depend on my partner’s views on the subject,” he replied. “I’ve always felt that bringing another human being into the world was something two people should agree upon ahead of time.”

Pearl nodded, accepting the statement for what it was. Whitney did not. Sucking in a sharp breath, she narrowed her eyes and examined him. “But you’re a teacher. And an uncle. You love kids.”

“Sure—I love *other* people’s kids.” He couldn’t help but smile at her disbelief. “I’m not saying I’d be against having some of my own someday, but I could be just as happy without. There’s no right or wrong way to have a relationship, Whitney. Family is what you make it.”

Her hand left his leg abruptly—and didn’t return.

Lunch continued on in the same manner for a few hours, beginning with a bottle of wine and dwindling into glasses of scotch that Whitney’s dad ordered despite it being three o’clock in the afternoon.

Her family's tendency toward social alcoholism and inappropriateness in public wasn't something Whitney willingly foisted on just anyone, and by all accounts, Matt was passing with flying colors. He laughed at the worst of her father's jokes and asked her mother all the right questions about her scrapbooking hobby, which betrayed a frightful tendency toward middle-aged stodginess. He was charming and intelligent and funny, and by the time they were finally ready to leave the restaurant, she was pretty sure her dad was going to propose marriage for her.

"I told you I was good at parents," Matt said smugly as her parents went to get the car. "I represent stability. They can't help but love me."

"My parents would love a horse if I told them it had a chance of someday providing them with grandchildren." She realized how horrifying that sounded and laughed. "They're easily pleased, that's all. They just want me to be happy."

He turned, his grin wiped off and replaced with something that filled her heart with equal parts joy and doom. "And *are* you happy?"

She feigned a lightheartedness she was far from feeling. "Are you asking in a general sense, or are you fishing for compliments?"

"Forget it."

"Do you want us to give you a ride home?" Whitney asked. There was a distance of a few feet between them, but she didn't make a move to fill it, even though it seemed like what he wanted. She'd fill it with inanities instead. "Did you walk?"

"Nah. I drove."

"You drove the entire half mile to a restaurant?" she joked. "I thought accessibility was the whole point of living in that cheese curdled apartment of doom."

He didn't laugh or smile or do anything that might have indicated he didn't hate her right now. She'd known the

parents thing was too much. Now he had ideas. About her and her family and where he fit in the grand scheme of it all.

“Actually, that’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“That sounds like an ominously important conversation. Can it wait?”

“No.” He frowned. “I don’t think it can. I drove because I’m stopping by Laura’s this afternoon.”

Whitney’s first reaction was to scream—not any particular sentiment or statement, but just in general, the kind of sound that would bring men running to her aid and frighten banshees away. She was so freaking tired of hearing that woman’s name coming out of Matt’s mouth. She was also painfully aware of what kind of a person that made her. Bad. It made her the bad kind.

Tightly, and with more control than she thought possible, she said, “Oh?”

“As of yesterday, she’s formally turned down medical care. I’m hoping I can change her mind.”

“What?” Whitney’s senses whirled into a red-hot pool of anger. Of all the ridiculous, wheedling, self-serving... “Why the hell would she do something so stupid?”

He spread his hands helplessly. “I can’t figure it out. She’s so tired all the time, barely eats anything, complains of stomach pains. She came home from the doctor yesterday and announced her intention not to return.”

“Is she terminal?”

“She wouldn’t say.”

“Well, what stage is she in? She has to know that there are experimental treatments...with chemo she might be looking at a few more great years.” Whitney dug in her purse. “I can put her in touch with a great specialist—”

Matt stilled her with a hand on her arm. “Thank you, but I don’t think your help is something she particularly wants.”

Whitney wasn't about to give up so easily. She shifted on her feet, which were growing strangely numb. "Well, give me the name of her doctor, at least. I can find out if she's seeing someone who knows what he's talking about or if this guy is a complete quack. What did you say her other symptoms are?"

"I don't really know." He rubbed his eyes, looking suddenly exhausted. She hadn't realized what a chore it must have been to get through lunch with a smile and his easy charm. But he'd done it. *He did it for me.*

"It seems a lot like the regular flu to me, honestly," Matt added. "Sore throat, chills."

Whitney stopped, a darkness flooding her. "Are you sure that's not what it is?"

"That's ridiculous. Why would the doctor even suggest cancer if it was something as simple as the flu?"

"Are you sure she's not lying? Matt—*are you absolutely sure* this isn't just another ploy to keep you close?" The question slipped out before she could stop it, but there it was.

Matt's lips compressed into a firm line and his body tensed. It wasn't hard to read the signs of anger—as a plastic surgeon, she'd made it a goal to read body language, since the body was her canvas. But if she expected some kind of outburst of emotion, it didn't come. As always, Matt preserved every ounce of his passion for the bedroom, leaving nothing but quiet, stoic acceptance in every other part of his life.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just ask me that, Whitney. Look—I know this is unfair of me. I know it's asking a lot for you to accept Laura in my life, especially if it means you have to explain her to your parents."

"This has *nothing* to do with my parents." And everything to do with a woman Whitney loathed in so many ways there was no medieval torture too terrible for her.

"I understand if you don't want to see me anymore—"

Whitney's hand shot up. Her parents pulled up at the curb, but they took one look at her and discreetly pulled away. "Oh, our arrangement stands. There's no way in hell I'm abandoning you to that woman's wiles now."

"They're not wiles, Whitney. She's afraid to be alone right now."

"So hire her a nurse."

"I will, if it comes to that. But what about all the other stuff? Buying groceries and paying bills and..."

"Holding her hair in the middle of the night? Boiling her tea and kissing her tummy and making it all feel better?"

"Yeah," he said quietly, his gaze direct. "If that's what she needs."

Silence fell over them, and neither one seemed willing to say more. But then he added, in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I'd do it for you."

"I'd never ask." And she wouldn't. Not as her lover, and not as her friend. And definitely not if she threw away three years of marriage with a man like this one.

Her parents pulled around again, slower this time, clearly interested in the conversation taking place on the sidewalk.

"I need to go or my parents are likely to weigh in on this situation."

"There's not really much to weigh in on," he said firmly. "My decision is made. You've said it yourself a hundred times, Whitney—you and I aren't together. Not in any way that matters. You're here for fun, a rebound. Why should you care if I throw away my life on a woman who's not you?"

"I don't care if you throw your life away on a thousand other women," she flung back, furious at him for putting her in this position. It wasn't a matter of their relationship, whatever that meant these days. It was a matter of friendship. And friends didn't let friends make the worst decisions of their life

without at least trying to fight back. “But I do care if you throw your life away on that one.”

Her parents honked.

“You should go,” Matt said wearily. “Tell your parents I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Whitney leaned in and kissed his cheek, being sure to hold on to his hand so he couldn’t pull away. “We’re not done here. You’ll be hearing from me.”

He was betrayed into a startled laugh. “That sounds an awful lot like a threat.”

“It is.”

It was also a promise.

Whitney hid in the office for the rest of the week.

Under normal circumstances, heading to the office as a way of avoiding life was a big part of why she’d chosen to get into medicine in the first place. There was no better career path for someone who liked a justified reason to bury herself in work than the altruistic and demanding role of doctor.

Okay, so plastic surgery wasn’t *exactly* altruistic. And technically, the office smelled of paint thinner and contained no actual people in it—clients or otherwise. But someone had to oversee the coffeemaker, and she was pretty sure she’d left her parents in the middle of a morning quickie.

Focusing on the first—and safe—half of that thought, Whitney fiddled with the espresso machine that sat in their welcome lounge, not to be confused with the relaxation room or the recovery spa. The shiny gold apparatus was a piece of genius on Kendra’s part, a way to encourage the construction workers to move faster and with a little better humor. It was also going to be part of their luxury service—along with the cooler full of wine in the salon, there would be plenty to keep the ladies happy during Botox parties or a weekly waxing.

You know, if they decide not to boycott the entire facility. They were all still working on that part.

The espresso machine was designed for easy use, requiring only the push of a button to get the beans ground and working. The smell of the freshly brewed coffee warred with the paint, but was still effective in wiping away the worst of Whitney's exhaustion and irritability. She wasn't even going to bother with milk this time. She needed caffeine, straight and dark.

"I hope you're planning on making me one of those."

Even though the morning sun had yet to rise and her back was turned, she felt no fear at the sound of that deep voice. Instead, she felt a rising displeasure coil around her insides, tightening there until it was so tight she might snap.

"Smells incredible."

These last words were said so close to her neck, they might have just as easily been taken to imply the scent of her shampoo or her skin or anything close and personal and completely inappropriate.

She spun. The displeasure disappeared only to be replaced by the heart-pounding sensation of fury.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The man chuckled, the sound just as deep and sexy as the voice. "Nice to see you too, Whitney. I see you haven't lost your ability to say exactly what's on your mind."

She took a few steps back, needing distance. With her kick-ass boots, which boasted four-inch wedge heels, she had to look down to meet the man's gaze. The gaze was as she remembered, dark and piercing, a possible element of mocking to them that she'd never been able to completely confirm or deny.

Jared Fine. Risen from the underworld, crafted from pure masculinity, savior to children all over the world.

God, how she hated him.

"I'm sorry," she said, covering the hitch in her voice by turning to grab her little white cup of espresso. "I wasn't aware

you had to be handled with kid gloves now. Should I try again?"

He continued staring at her, his arms crossed over a chest built more like a barrel than a body part. She'd take that as a yes.

"Why, can it really be you?" she simpered, batting her eyelashes. "Dr. Fine? *The* Dr. Fine? Catch me while I swoon! Watch my bosom heave! Deliver me from evil!"

"Cute," he said drily. "I think I prefer the honest, angry you."

"Good." She swallowed the espresso in one burning gulp and squared off to face her foe. She would not notice how good the years had been to him. She would not notice his perfectly aging crop of hair, salt-and-pepper at the temples. She would not notice the twining muscles of his powerful forearms or the deep lines in his swarthy face. Built like a bulldog, pugnacious from head to toe, it was so like a man—so like *him*—to get better with age. "Let me reiterate. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I know I'm early, but I wasn't sure how passable the roads were here."

"It's upstate Pennsylvania, not the wilds of the Yukon," she said, scowling. "And what do you mean early? Early for what? Your forcible removal?"

A puzzled look lowered his already low brow for just a moment before he gave way to full-hearted laughter. Whitney waited, impatiently tapping her foot, until he was done. That had always been the problem with Jared. He got so caught up in his reactions to his own thoughts and how they contributed to his own amusement that he forgot there might be other people in the world.

Well, that and the fact that he stuck his dick inside another woman after Whitney gave up her livelihood for him. She didn't care to quibble over the details.

"You really don't know what I'm doing here?" he finally asked, drinking in her frown as if it were ambrosia.

“Pearl didn’t tell you?”

The room, which was generous even by upscale medical spa standards, suddenly felt very confining. Jared was taking up the oxygen, heavy mouth-breathing it all in and out on a constant loop.

What was it her mother had said the day she arrived? She’d set up a meeting with a potential investor?

Oh, Mom. As far as maternal figures went, hers had to be one of the most blithely meddlesome on the planet—and if you asked her, the sun rose and set on Dr. Jared Fine’s wide shoulders. Even though she was firmly arranged on Whitney’s side in terms of the breakup, there was still a warm place in Pearl’s heart for the God of Guatemala.

And if her mother was thinking of a *deus ex machina* solution for their current predicament, Jared was the first place she’d look. He might have spent the better part of his adulthood practically working for free, but there was no lending institution in the world that would dare turn down a man as adored by the public as this one.

In fact, he was perfect.

Her stomach turned. That type of thinking had no place inside her head. It had no place anywhere within a ten-thousand-mile radius of her.

“Aren’t you supposed to be off saving the people of Beirut or something? What appeal can Pleasant Park possibly hold for a third-world rock star like you?”

“Rock star, huh?” He smirked. “I had no idea you were still holding a torch.”

“I’m not,” she managed, her teeth gritted so hard she could hear her dentist yelling from across the state. “But you’ve definitely got the ego for stardom. You always did.”

He tapped her forehead. “That’s your problem. You think that just because you haven’t moved forward in twelve years, no one else has either. Maybe it’s time for me to think about settling down. Maybe I heard that my best friends were

opening the clinic we'd always planned together. Maybe my feelings were hurt."

False. He didn't have feelings. "I don't need you. I've moved on. What do you think all this is?"

"Actually, we might need him." Kendra's voice broke through some of the heavy tension in the room. "I hope you don't mind—your mom told me you'd be here."

"Kendra!" Jared cried, turning. And just like that, Whitney was once again left to fend for herself. "You look incredible."

Jared and Kendra spent a few minutes sharing one of those nauseating reunion moments, both of them exclaiming over how well-preserved they'd remained over the years. It was true, of course, but that didn't mean it had to be shared in deafening tones and with heaps of exclamation points thrown in. "I would ask if you've fallen into the hands of a master plastic surgeon, but I wouldn't dare insult you that way. You don't need any work. You never did."

"Of course she does, asshole." Whitney finished brewing another cup of coffee. At least it gave her something to do. "She's not impervious to gravity. You just can't tell she's had anything done because I'm the one who did it. I'm good."

"Not good enough, or I wouldn't be here."

The tiny white porcelain cup rattled in its saucer as she struggled to gain control. He was goading her on purpose. That was kind of Jared's thing.

"Don't be mean." Kendra angled herself between the two of them. Like her mother, Kendra would profess up and down that Whitney was her favorite, but that didn't mean she hadn't loved Jared once upon a time. They all had. "Let's go to the conference room. I think we need to talk."

She ushered them down the hall and into the half-finished room, which would soon boast an oversized round table where they could talk over their procedures and woo the hard-to-convince clients. For now, it was a cavernously empty

space with white walls and a thin layer of underflooring. Kendra, in comfortable-looking yoga pants, settled cross-legged onto the ground, gesturing for them to join her. Jared also had jeans on, paired with an Oxford shirt opened to the douchebag button located about halfway down his chest. He got down easily, extending his legs and leaning against the far wall. They stared at her.

Whitney had on a short black skirt over dark gray tights and slouchy boots. It was not an outfit for the floor. Unless one counted nudity, she never dressed for the floor. “I’ll stand.”

“Suit yourself,” Kendra said, but there was a note of hesitancy to her voice. Good. Whitney appreciated that her friend was pulling out all the stops to make this thing work, but that didn’t mean it was okay to side with her nemesis.

“Wait a minute—shouldn’t we wait for John before we start stirring up all these old, rancid memories? Does he know my mother has asked the prodigal son to return?”

If anyone would be on her side, it was John. John knew what it felt like to transform your life for a man only to have it squashed in your face at full speed. He didn’t talk about it much, but his Jared had been a closeted politician, his Guatemala a series of seedy hotels.

“I just got off the phone with him,” Kendra said. “He told us to get started. He should be here soon.”

As the alternative was to sit and make chitchat until his arrival, Whitney capitulated. “Let’s hear it, then. And this better be good.”

Kendra took a deep breath. “You know I’ve been running the numbers and looking at our options, and it’s not what we want to see. The chamber of commerce has denied our request to join the local business registry and our business license application is stalled in some kind of jumble of red tape. Even if that new bank loan goes through, we only have enough money to open the facility and operate for about two months.”

“That’s good.” It *was* good. “Don’t forget my career day thing at the elementary school coming up. That’s free positive PR.” And, oddly enough, she found herself looking forward to it. Kids and Matt under one roof. According to history, the very thought should reduce her to breathing into a paper bag and dropping her head between her knees.

Kendra frowned and feigned intense interest in her fingernails, which were free of polish but otherwise flawless. “The principal called, Whit. They’re going to pass. The official word is that they’ll only accept established professionals who have been in town a year or more. Next time, maybe?”

She swallowed woodenly. No tears in front of Jared. Not even a twinge of disappointment. Even after Matt stood up for her, she was no closer to being accepted here than when she started. “Sure. Next year.”

“And the real problem we’re facing right now isn’t necessarily the startup costs—it’s the day-to-day. Until our appointment book is filled and people show an interest, we don’t have a feasible long-term plan. More than money, Whitney, we need to improve our image. Without community backing, all we can do is pack it up and call it over.”

“Fine. If the school is a no-go, I’ll pick up shifts at the hospital,” Whitney said. “I can ask to be put on rotation. What I earn can go straight into the spa.”

John appeared in the doorway, leaning casually on the frame. Massive arms crossed over his chest in defensive mode, and his normally beaming face settled into a frown. “I meant to talk to you about that, Whitney. They’re retracting their offer to let you schedule operations there.”

Whitney’s chest tightened, and it became increasingly difficult to draw a full breath. That was it. Those were all her irons—and it seemed the fire had gone out.

As she looked from face to face, all she saw was the somber confirmation she was an utter, miserable, useless failure. Even Jared looked sympathetic.

“All this because I refused to kowtow to one uptight soccer mom?” Whitney knew better than anyone that one small mistake could lead to far-flung consequences, a butterfly effect rippling through her life. Why hadn’t she seen just how devastating this could be?

“What exactly did you do to her?” Jared asked.

“It’s not important.” Let her feel her guilt and shame in private. Share it with Kendra and John, even. Anything but parade it for Jared to enjoy.

“It *is* important,” Kendra corrected. “But it’s also only part of the problem. Jared, could you give us a second?”

Nodding once, he hopped up off the ground. He looked like he wanted to say something or offer a hand, but Whitney turned her back, her eyes pricking. Anything he had to say meant zero. Less than zero. A black hole of zeroes.

“I’m sorry,” Kendra said. “Your mom only just told me. I had no idea she even still talked to Jared. I got here as soon as I could.”

“I can’t believe you’re on board with this idea.” She brushed at the hot, angry tears forming in her eyes, refusing to let them fall. “You’re supposed to be my *friend*.”

Kendra winced. “I *am* your friend, Whit—you know that. But I’m also your business partner, and there’s a reason you and John put me in charge. You knew you weren’t always going to like my decisions, but you asked me to make them. So I am.”

“That was before I knew your decisions included bringing Jared back into my life.”

“I’ve been talking to area businesses, and you know what I’ve found?” Kendra asked, ignoring her. “Every single one of them has some sort of cause they’re allied with. Animal shelters, foster care, medical research. The people of Pleasant Park might be uptight and judgmental, but they care about giving back. And they want their local companies to care too.”

“So we’ll adopt a three-legged dog.”

“We don’t need a three-legged dog.” John moved to her side and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder. “Not when we have a world-renowned philanthropist offering to become our fourth partner.”

John’s other hand snaked around Whitney’s waist, holding her up. She might want to kill the man right now, but she would forever be grateful for him not allowing her to sink to the floor.

“It was always our plan to do this together, the four of us,” Kendra added quietly. “You know that. And with Jared by our side...”

Kendra didn’t have to finish that statement. Everyone in the building knew Jared Fine’s worth—no one more so than the man in question. Money, credentials, experience...not a single one of those things mattered. Not when it was his goddamn heart of gold that really cinched the deal.

Who—investor, patient or otherwise—could resist a man who’d dedicated almost half his life to providing free surgeries to the world’s poor and downtrodden? The number of pediatric cleft palates he’d repaired in his lifetime qualified him for sainthood, and that didn’t even count the number of years he’d spent in war-torn countries like Afghanistan helping save the lives of innocent victims of landmines and car bombs.

His list of awards and accomplishments made her nauseous. Which, of course, also made her the official worst person on the face of the planet. Who wanted to take away the chance for underprivileged children to eat and smile? Who wished double amputees a botched surgery with scars twisting their bodies?

Dr. Jared Fine brought out the very worst in her. Of all the things she disliked about him, that one scared her the most.

“I can’t do it. I’m sorry, you guys. I know this would be an easy solution, but there has got to be another way. More time. More money.” She paused. “I *am* a surgeon. I could probably find a good home for our kidneys.”

“May I?” Jared asked gently, returning to the room. Whitney immediately stiffened, but since neither John nor Kendra made a move to oust him, she was forced to stand there and remain calm. That was what life would be with him around. The whole world would embrace him with open arms and keep moving, leaving Whitney standing furious and alone.

“I know it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you guys. Too long.” Jared smiled, and for one painful moment, Whitney was wrested back over a decade, to a time when that smile meant everything to her. His coarse features, unattractive by modern standards, meant that he almost always looked like he was scowling, that smile a break of sun in a world of clouds. “And I know how much time and work you must have put into this project already. It’s presumptuous of me to ask to be brought in as a fourth partner after I’ve done almost nothing to help with the groundwork. But this was *us*, remember? We used to stay up until dawn every weekend planning our future, drinking coffee and subsisting entirely on nachos. We had so many dreams, so much passion. Those were the best months of my life.”

Kendra smiled mistily, watching Jared with rapt eyes. Even John seemed a little smitten, nodding in time to Jared’s words. They were giving in.

And then Jared landed the clincher. Turning to Whitney, he added, “I can’t believe you guys were going to make it all happen without letting me know. After everything we’ve been through, I think I at least deserved a phone call.”

Whitney couldn’t stay to hear another word. It was all too easy to imagine what it would feel like to be the odd man out, how hurt she’d have been if Jared, John and Kendra opened a spa without her. It would break her heart—almost as much as losing the man she loved in a Central American outpost.

Without waiting for any of them to try and stop her, Whitney stalked out of the room. Hatred of Jared, dripping into her veins as if through an IV, had been her nourishment for years.

She wasn't sure she could live without it anymore.

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Chapter Sixteen

“That was not okay, Mom.”

Whitney stood opposite her parent in her bedroom, where her mother had been searching through her shoes for a lower pair of heels. Apparently, the Louboutins hurt her arches.

“You have about forty pairs of shoes in here, and all of them look exactly the same. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“I’m not talking about you pilfering my shoes.”

Her dad poked his head in the room, most likely beckoned by the sound of Whitney’s teeth grinding together, and took in the situation at a glance. “I told her it was a bad idea, but you know how your mother gets. Tunnel vision. I hope you gave Jared our love.”

“I’m sorry—what with the being blindsided by my parents and best friends and all, being polite must have slipped my mind.” Not since her teenage days had Whitney leveled such a perfect tone of sarcasm at her parents. Wisely, her father ducked his head back out.

“Oh.” Her mom slipped on a pair of silver-spangled sling-back kitten heels and nodded her approval. “I thought he wasn’t coming by until next week. He looks well, doesn’t he? That hard, on-the-go lifestyle suits him.”

Whitney fell to her bed in an exhausted heap. She didn’t have the strength for this. She’d be turning thirty-four in just a few short days, stood within arm’s reach of her professional goals, and her parents still possessed the power to reduce her to a wreckage of overwrought emotions.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice muffled by her pillow. “He looked really good.”

The end of the bed sank with her mother’s weight. “Don’t you think it’s time you forgave him and moved on with your life?”

Whitney turned over, still clutching her pillow to her chest, gazing on her mother with wary eyes. “That’s the exact same thing he said to me today—about me not moving on. Frankly, I don’t get it. In what respect does my life look like I’ve been at a standstill? Why can’t anyone see how far I’ve come?”

Pearl paused thoughtfully, taking the question at face value. That had always been one of her most irritating attributes. No matter how cruelly or peevishly a question was hurled at her, she took her time answering, as if they were having a rational conversation instead of a one-sided sullen fit.

“If you’d have asked me that question one week ago, I would have had an easy answer.” She pulled Whitney into a hug, the pillow wedged between them. “I know you’re a beautiful, single, independent woman who doesn’t need a man to feel complete, and your father and I are proud of you for it.”

“But?” Whitney braced herself. No matter how many degrees lined her walls or how much money she earned, it always came down to this.

Her mother squeezed. “We just want you to be happy. And all those men, those short relationships that meant nothing...I don’t know, Whitney. They never seemed to make you happy. We always thought that maybe you hadn’t yet faced the lingering Jared feelings. Closure is a good thing.”

“So you don’t want me to get back together with him? This isn’t some archaic matchmaking move?”

Her mother’s laughter rang out over Whitney’s head, and she dropped a kiss on her hairline. She could almost feel the lipstick imprint being left behind. It was comforting, that relic of her childhood. “It might have started out that way. But now that I’ve met Matt, well, I can see that I was wrong. He’s fantastic, and I can tell by the way he looks at you that he’s a man deeply in love. What does Jared matter, now that you have him?”

Whitney smiled blandly and proclaimed to have a headache—not her most creative excuse in the world, but the lack of blood in her face probably helped add a hint of

authenticity. She needed to be alone with her pillow right now, wallowing and acknowledging that her mother was, as always, right.

Because Jared didn't matter, as long as she had Matt.

Too bad she didn't have Matt—not really. He was over at his ex-wife's house, a place she'd driven him by her continually pushy behavior. A place a small part of him would always reside, that sweet and unyielding part that made her long to rage at the world.

Yes, some might call his forgiveness an admirable trait. And yes, a large portion of the blame for their troubles could be laid at her feet. She'd been the one to set the rules, to constantly hold him at arm's length, to ensure he didn't get attached.

Are you sure those rules were laid out so he didn't get attached?

She punched the pillow a few times before tossing it across the room, watching it smash satisfactorily against a pile of books that cascaded to the floor.

She hated drudging up the past. She hated when her friends were right. She hated this town.

But most of all, right now, alone and with no one else to blame, she hated herself.

“What are you wearing right now?”

Matt looked down at his lap, the phone nestled in the nook of his neck. “Um...khakis? And that blue button-up shirt you like. Though you will be happy to know I left the elbow patches at home today.”

Whitney made the sound of a buzzer. “That answer is so wrong it doesn't even land you in the qualifying round. Haven't you ever done this before? You should either be bare-assed naked and at half-mast or in an erotic state of undress. Do you want to hear what I'm wearing?”

Matt turned abruptly around. Even though he knew the two women in the living room couldn't hear his phone

conversation, he was pretty sure they'd notice the sudden flush of color in his face. "Under normal circumstances I'd give you an enthusiastic yes, but..."

"I'm wearing white lace panties and a tank top. Nothing too fancy, but this top is so tiny my breasts are straining at the fabric. You can totally see the outline of my nipples, all dark and firm, just like you said. Now I'm touching one of those nipples. Gently, around and around in a tight, twisty knot. Oh, it's too much. I'm slipping my hand inside my shirt..."

"Jesus, Whitney!" Matt shot out of his seat. Both Laura and Natalie looked up from their places on the couch, both of them frowning at the sound of Whitney's name. Cupping one hand over the mouthpiece, he hissed, "I'm kind of busy right now."

"Mmm. I'm busy too." She let out a moan. "My other hand is moving lower, just inside the lip of my panties. Do you like that word, Matt? Panties? Paaaannties. I do—oh, just like that."

Matt gave up all pretense of trying to get off the phone unaffected. It didn't take much in the way of imagination to picture Whitney sprawled out on her bed the exact way she described. She'd be rosy, flushed, her fingers exploring without a care for proprieties.

There was no need to lie about his clothes anymore. He'd skipped half-mast and gone straight into hard-on erection mode.

"I'm, ah, just going to take this outside," he called into the living room, not waiting for a response. Stumbling out the back door, he didn't stop until he reached the far side of the yard at Laura's cottage. There, at least, a large elm tree hid him from the view of most of the neighborhood. He pressed the phone back to his ear. "Whitney, are you still there?"

"Mmm, yes. I'm still here. I wish you were too. Want to know why? Do you want to know what I'd be doing to you at this exact second if you were?"

Matt swallowed. He did. He really, really did. “I don’t think—”

“Oh, you’re so right. Thinking would be strictly forbidden. All you’re aware of is how hard your dick feels right now, how much you want me to take it in my mouth. And I’m about to. Oh, how I want to taste the length of your cock, so big, so full, all for me. In fact, I’m on my knees in front of you, and my lips are parted and wet—just like my pussy.”

“Whitney, you have to stop.” Normally a man who prided himself on a little control in this arena, Matt was seconds away from becoming the creepy guy who whips it out and masturbates in public. “I’m begging you. This *really* isn’t a good time.”

“What?” she said innocently. “Aren’t you stroking yourself right now? Isn’t the weight of your big, glorious cock in your hand, pumping for me?”

“Actually, I’m crouched behind a tree, trying my best to keep my hands as far away from my pants as possible. The neighbor over the fence is pointing her hose at me.”

Whitney laughed, and he could hear the shift in her voice. From sexy to matter-of-fact in five seconds flat. “You’re no fun. Point your hose back.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to help your situation any.”

Whitney groaned. “Not you too. I am so tired of hearing about how my dirty, slutty ways are getting in the way of Pleasant Park’s code of ethics.”

“Under normal circumstances, I fully approve of your dirty, slutty ways,” Matt said gently. She wasn’t going to like this next part. “But I’m at Laura’s right now.”

The silence on the other end of the phone was heavy with recriminations.

“The good news is, I’m not alone,” he offered, striving to be cheerful. It was a little bit easier now that he wasn’t fighting a painfully mounting arousal.

“Oh?” she asked flatly. “How comforting.”

“That’s because you haven’t heard who’s over. It’s a friend of yours.”

Whitney’s sharp intake of breath was so strong he almost felt it. “What can he possibly want with Laura?”

“Him? You mean John?” Matt shook his head, even though he knew she couldn’t see him. “No, it’s Natalie Horn. Remember her? The dressing room incident? The PTA? She had quite a bit to say on the subject of your new medical spa.”

“I don’t want to talk about Natalie Horn or her stupid moral high ground. The dressing room incident, however...”

“Don’t you dare start. I’m just now able to stand up again.”

“I miss you.”

He paused. Those three words, uttered softly and without pretense, meant more to him than all the dirty talk in the world. “I miss you too, Whitney.”

She sighed into the phone. “So what’s my favorite banker’s wife doing there with you? Does she make it her personal mission to intrude on the lives of everyone who’s down on their luck?”

Matt glanced at the house to see Natalie staring at him through the kitchen window. He lifted a hand and waved, but it didn’t get her to do anything more than purse her lips. “Actually, she’s coming to stay with Laura for a bit. As much as you might hate her, she’s as outraged at Laura’s obstinate refusal to seek medical attention as I am.”

“My hero.”

“This isn’t forever, Whitney. I promise.” He waited for her to say something more, to ask about Laura’s health or discuss anything other than the current state of her nipples. It never came. “Rain check on the phone sex?”

“You know I’m good for it,” she said. But even though there was a smile in her voice, Matt didn’t share it.

Laura wanted him to feel more than he actually did. Whitney wanted him to feel less. But he wasn't made for either kind of deception.

With a heavy sigh and a heavier heart, he made his way back into the house.

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Chapter Seventeen

As Whitney saw it, she was a woman of limited options. Her birthday dinner wasn't until that weekend, a grand bash that was to consist of her parents, as many friends as she could convince to make the drive up, and at least fifty bottles of wine—and she somehow had to get through the week, spiraling-depression-free, until that happened. The most appealing of her options, to call Matt and have him drag her out of the sulks with his dimples and bad taste in menswear, was one she refused to consider for the time being.

He was probably off gallivanting with Natalie and Laura, the twinset terrors, anyway.

That left groveling at Jared's feet, begging him to solve all her problems or...what? Oh, yeah. Fixing the damn problems herself.

Which was why she ended up at the local golf dome, sneaking in through the emergency exit while she struggled to conceal a five-iron in her pants.

This fight wasn't over. She could still play nice with the locals, show her softer side. Not every crisis in the world needed Dr. Fine to come dashing to the rescue.

The golf dome sat like a pustule on the outskirts of town. Big, white and bulbous, the dome had to be one of the worst beautification petition transgressors in the world. Yet, if the state of the parking lot was anything to go by, beloved by the community.

Once inside, Whitney sidled up to the tee on the farthest end of the dome. She swiped a few of the balls from the bucket belonging to the guy next to her and lined up. With a little ass wiggle and her arms primed to hit a homerun, she swung.

Miss.

She screwed up her nose and tried again. Slowing things down this time, she was able to actually make contact

with the ball, though it skittered off at the wrong angle and almost took out an advertisement on the nearest wall.

Doctors golfed all the time, but she'd be damned if she could figure out why. This stupid sport had none of the precision, none of the finesse of a well-done periareolar incision. She was pretty much hacking away here.

“Well, this is a sight I never thought I'd see,” drawled the last man Whitney wanted as a witness to her failure. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you're wearing golf shoes.”

“That's because I *am* wearing golf shoes.” Whitney spoke with a composure she was far from feeling. She was also wearing sedate, flamingo-free clothes. Khaki slacks she'd pilfered from her mother and one of her less colorful shirts completed what had to be the most boring outfit she'd ever worn, but her goal, for once, was not to antagonize.

She turned to face Jared, also dressed in casual golf wear and looking as uncomfortable as she felt. His powerful build was made for military-style fatigues and field scrubs, which, of course, had always magnified her own ass about twelve times.

“What a strange world we live in these days.” His smile said he was laughing, but no real sound came out. “Back when we were dating, you couldn't tell the difference between a putter and a driver.”

“The women of Pleasant Park golf. Therefore, so do I. It's no different than you putting on a suit and showing your suitcase full of slides to a committee. It's called networking.”

“Oh?” Leaning against the separator wall between tees, he pointed toward a group of women clad in similar attire as Whitney. “You going to join those ladies over there? Talk manicures and slip gin in your afternoon tea? 'Cause that woman in blue is giving you a major case of the stink eye.”

Whitney ignored him. It wasn't Natalie—just one of her cronies. If the Ice Queen herself had been here, she'd have already been escorted far, far away. “What are you doing here anyway? Are you stalking me or something?”

“Yes.”

Disarming her with the truth. That was new. “I don’t know why you think you can show up after all this time and pretend like we’re best friends on our way to the jungle to save the world. Maybe Kendra and John think you’re the answer to our problems, but I don’t.”

“I know I messed up, Whitney. Believe me, I know.” His words were so soft she almost had to lean in to hear them. But she didn’t lean—at least not in. When his voice dropped like that, so low it was almost a rumble, it meant danger loomed on the horizon. She knew and her body—the stupid, thoughtless thing—knew it too. She straightened and gripped her club tighter, wielding it like a weapon.

“What is it you want from me, Jared? Do you need me to fill your bucket with warm fuzzies? Because you’re knocking at the wrong lady’s door for that. My warm and fuzzy for you ran out a long time ago.”

“Ah, Whitney. You are, as always, a class act.” A mocking smile lifted one corner of his mouth. “Why don’t you let me start making it up to you? Fifty bucks says I can walk over there and book your first nose job.”

“Oh, please. Even your arrogance has its limits. You couldn’t possibly.” She scanned the group of women carefully just in case. There was one woman, a petite blonde with a recessive chin, who could probably benefit from a hump rhinoplasty to even out her features. Her friend, drinking from a water bottle, was in desperate need of a cervicoplasty to get rid of her double chin. It wasn’t that they were unattractive—it was simply that there was always some sort of recommendation to make, some flaw every person saw in the mirror. The smallest mole had a way of making an otherwise gorgeous woman feel like a hag.

“Is that silence the sound of you picking up the gauntlet?” Jared teased, his hand cupped around one of his ears as he tilted his head close. “Or are you afraid?”

“I’m not afraid,” Whitney muttered, returning her attention to the tee. “I just don’t want you ruining our business

even more than it already is. In fact, it would be better for all of us if you'd hop back on a plane and resume your charitable actions."

Aware that Jared was watching, she took care placing her feet. By the time the club came down, chipping just at the edge of the ball so it veered off in yet another left angle, she was sure he must have taken the hint and sauntered off again.

But his laughter rose to greet her ears, followed almost immediately by the tinkling of three female voices appreciating his sense of humor.

She ignored them and returned to her golf clubs. It probably wasn't the best way to go about making friends, but she wasn't about to head over there and ride on Jared's coattails.

She'd made that mistake once. Never again.

Surprisingly, the balls flew much straighter and much harder as her sense of irritation grew. Maybe these golf people were on to something. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to—

Her club stopped in midair. Her first reaction was completely immersed in an *Oh shit* moment, thinking that someone had stepped in the way. But then her club dropped and she saw that Jared had stilled it with his hand.

"Are you insane?" She turned. "I may not have been playing the sport for very long, but even I know you don't come up behind someone midswing."

"Dr. Vidra, I'd like for you to meet Lila Tucket."

At the invocation of her title, Whitney immediately dropped into professional mode. It was an involuntary response, the result of years of jumping whenever the attending doctor made so much as a peep.

"Oh, how lovely to meet you," she said, stretching her lips into a smile and extending a hand. "If you walk away from this conversation with anything, please let it be my solemn vow that my medical skills far surpass my golfing ones."

Jared coughed heavily.

Lila offered her a tight smile, looking as though the only thing less pleasant than their meeting would be a coffee enema.

“I believe you’re a friend of Natalie’s, right?” Whitney persisted. “Maybe you can tell me why my ball keeps shooting off to the left. Is it a stance thing?”

Lila ignored her. “We weren’t aware that your practice participates in charity.”

“Oh.” Whitney’s club clomped to the green plastic grass. “Well...you know.” What was it Kendra had said? All the businesses here were charity-minded? “I hate when businesses go on and on about their nonprofit contributions, as if that somehow replaces solid customer service. When we perform a service, we do it for us.”

There. That should do the trick.

“Dr. Fine here—” Lila said his name as though it were a sigh, “—was just telling us about his work with the orphans in Borneo. The Ladies Golf Club has been putting on an annual luncheon for Borneo for the past five years—we had no idea you had such an incredible team of doctors at your back.”

That was close, but it wasn’t a nose job. Jared promised her a nose job.

Whitney smiled. “It’s always been our goal to match the quality of organizations and people here in Pleasant Park,” she said, parroting Kendra’s mission statement. “But thank you for noticing. We hope to become a positive influence in the community.”

Ugh. The schmooze tasted like hydrogen peroxide on her tongue.

Lila nodded, eating it up. “Maybe I could set up a tour of your facilities later this week. Strictly between us, of course.”

Her heart took a strange tumble in a war of excitement and irritation. Jared had just booked her first surgery. In a matter of five minutes. At the golf club.

Jared grabbed the club from Whitney's hand and gave it a tentative swing. "Work can wait, don't you think, ladies? Next bucket of balls, warm and fuzzy, is on me."

Lila actually cracked a smile and squeezed Whitney's arm before taking her place at one of the tees. The other two women followed suit, all of them perfect in the way they positioned their bodies. A quick slice went straight and true, sailing through the air in a perfect arc somewhere near the 200-yard mark.

Whitney sighed and lined up with them. This was a game she wasn't sure she'd ever like playing.

And she wasn't talking about the golf.

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Chapter Eighteen

“It was nice of Whitney to include us.” Lincoln took the hairpin turn at a leisurely forty-five mile per hour pace. He drove a bright orange Dodge Challenger this time—yet another of his turnaround investments. Matt was pretty sure he’d read an article last week about a car just like this taking part in a drug bust over in New Jersey. “I didn’t even know they rented out the McCullough barn for parties.”

“Me either.” Matt tipped his cowboy hat. “But you have to admit—it’s the perfect place for a hoedown-themed birthday bash. I haven’t been to a costume party since...”

“Ever?” Lincoln’s laughter got lost in the rev of the engine. “Face it, Matt. You’ve never exactly been the adventurous type. Your flannel looks fetching, by the way.”

Matt looked down. He hadn’t had much in the way of cowboy clothes in his closet, so he’d settled for borrowing a workshirt and boots from Donald. At least the jeans were his—a faded pair he distinctly remembered wearing the first day of college. “The shirt is a little snug,” he admitted, tugging at the collar. Although Hilly was built like a linebacker, her husband stood five foot six, if measured generously, and had the daintiest wrists. He and Lincoln had once tried to figure out the dynamics of a sexual relationship between the two.

But only once. He shuddered.

“I rolled up the sleeves so you can’t tell they’re so short,” Matt said. “Don’t cowboys wear tight things?”

“Of course they do,” Lincoln said, clearly patronizing him. “Helps with the aerodynamics of roping a bull.”

Since his brother had opted for pointy white alligator shoes and red denim, Matt decided to take Lincoln’s insults with a generous helping of salt.

They pulled into the drive leading up to the McCullough barn, a towering two-story structure reputed to have once been the seat of the biggest moonshine distillery in the state. It was set back from the house by a good three miles,

secluded enough that you had to be looking for it to find it, which made it ideal for running booze.

Tonight, though, it had been transformed. The faded wood-grain doors had been pulled open and lined with pots of colorful flowers, and in the fading twilight Matt could make out dozens of strings of twinkling lights illuminating the interior. Cars lined an impromptu parking lot along one side, and people milled about, most of them with glasses in their hands.

“You came!” Pearl Vidra wrapped her arms around Matt and hauled him from the car. Although it was rare for him to feel the pangs of missing his mother—Hilly had admirably stepped up to take on the role—the scent of this woman’s floral perfume and the tight squeeze of her arms awakened something sad in him. As if sensing it, Pearl pulled away and pinched his chin. “I insist you call me Mom. We can’t tell you how happy we are Whitney has found a...friend like you.”

Lincoln snorted at the invocation of the word *friend* but composed himself enough to take Pearl’s hand. “You must be Whitney’s sister,” he said, bowing theatrically low. “She never mentioned she had such a gorgeous family.”

Pearl rolled her eyes at Matt but let Lincoln continue his ministrations. “I’m as impervious as the next middle-aged has-been to flattery,” she said, by way of apology. Allowing Lincoln to take her arm and lead her into the barn, she nodded over her shoulder. “You’ll find Whitney inside. She’s holding court at the birthday girl table.”

“Holding court?”

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, her voice and tone so similar to Whitney’s it made him smile. This was one family where it was pretty obvious the apple didn’t clear the first set of branches. “I hope you brought one heck of a nice gift. My daughter has never, in all her thirty-four years of existence, failed to turn her birthday into a celebration of all things Whitney. She’ll be the one with the crown over her cowboy hat. Expect to grovel.”

Matt laughed and wandered into the barn in search of the woman in question.

There were a lot more people there than he expected, given Whitney's lack of reception in the town thus far, but closer inspection revealed mostly faces he didn't recognize. He nodded and tipped his cowboy hat to a few, taking in their crisp western shirts and creaky boots, and realized most of them were from the city. *Whitney's real friends*. Her professional ones—the ones who wore suits and saved lives and did otherwise important things with their time.

He shifted uncomfortably. The faded red flannel he wore suddenly seemed too authentic, making him a small-town hick amongst royalty.

“I hope you brought Whitney a good present.” Kendra sidled up next to him and offered a perfunctory kiss on his cheek. Like the rest of the guests in the twinkling barn, she wore a middle-class version of cowgirl chic, her short denim skirt matched by a pair of pink cowboy boots, her midriff bare under a blue-and-white checkered top that tied at her waist. When she turned, Matt caught sight of twin piercings in the dimples of her lower back. He hadn't even known you could pierce those.

He returned her greeting with a smile. “Why does everyone keep saying that? Is there some kind of present-giving contest I don't know about?”

“Only if by contest you mean your worthiness as a human being and as a man,” Kendra said. “Whitney takes birthdays pretty seriously. I bought her a pony. I hope you can top that.”

He cast a look around, searching the dark, hay-filled corners for signs of life. “An actual pony? Why am I only hearing about this birthday obsession now?”

Kendra reached up and patted his cheek. “I'm sure whatever you got her is fine. But tread lightly, Matt. She's had a bit of a rough week.”

Left with that enigmatic threat and visions of a palomino out back, Matt tucked his gift to Whitney in his back waistband. He'd had to specially order it online, but the present wasn't *pony* good.

Besides—how was he supposed to know what was appropriate to give one's rebound girl? A book was too little, jewelry too much, edible underwear too predictable. And what he *really* wanted to give her—the formal title of girlfriend—was something he knew all too well she wouldn't accept.

As he had been forewarned, Whitney stood near the back of the barn, surrounded by a group of about seven or eight people, all of them laughing at a shared joke. Of the bunch, only John was familiar. Matt hung back a little, watching her interact with her people.

Like Kendra, Whitney's version of country fashion included the least functional attire in the world. Tiny denim shorts that cupped and lifted her ass, a tight electric-blue tank top layered with twin bandoliers that strapped diagonally over her chest, black cowboy boots that just hit the middle of her perfectly shaped calves—she was much more fantasy outlaw than rustic farmhand.

Matt leaned on the nearest beam and let himself enjoy the simple act of admiration. Her face lit up and her hands moved quickly as she chatted, oblivious to the way her infectious joy impacted everyone in her immediate circle.

And while he could have stayed there all night, perfectly happy to be part of her captive audience, John spotted him and nudged Whitney with his hip. Their eyes met across the musty, straw-scented distance, and her smile dimmed—but not in any kind of way that signaled sadness. On the contrary, the difference was one of gentle transformation. Gone were the trappings of delight, replaced in an instant with the reality of it.

Surrounded by people she adored and who adored her right back, on what was obviously her favorite day of the year, dressed to seduce every man in sight—that smile told him one thing. She was his.

And God help him, even though he knew it was the last thing she wanted, Matt loved her.

Whitney wagged her fingers in Matt's direction, but he didn't move from his spot near the back of the barn. In any other man, she would have assumed it was timidity keeping him at bay, but not Matt. In order to feel awkward or shy, he'd also have to be the kind of person who compared himself to others—he'd have to have arrogance or false pride.

Matt had neither of those. She'd known that since the first night they met, when he approached her in the bar with his quiet, calm earnestness. It was still there—and she still found herself undeniably attracted to it.

“Who is that guy staring at you?” Her friend Liz, a matronly psychiatrist who worked in a nearby county, made a pointing-but-not-pointing motion in Matt's direction. “I think he might be the most delicious thing I've ever seen.”

“Tight pants suit him,” Whitney murmured, agreeing. He looked like a real cowboy, all faded and comfortable, the perfect fit. As if he knew her weakness for rough men in rolled-up sleeves, he crossed his arms and nodded once. “That's Matt. He's a local.”

“I thought you said the locals hate you.” Jerry, a graduate-level sociology student and one of Kendra's many ex-lovers at the party, raised a brow. It was obvious he'd had Kendra recently thread them—men simply didn't have eyebrows like that on their own. “You're supposed to be our own baby pariah.”

Whitney's smile gentled. “Well, all the locals but that one.”

Without another word of explanation, she moved to Matt's side, working her bandoliers with a thumb hooked on either side. She looked sexy as hell and knew it—but if she'd had any doubts, they would have been erased as she caught the gleam in Matt's eyes, the slight part in his lips where his breath came hotter and heavier.

“Howdy, pardner,” she drawled, loosening her stance and shaking her chest so the fake bullets rattled. “Save me a dance for later?”

“Am I allowed to kiss you hello?”

Whitney paused. Was it her imagination, or was there a hitch in his voice as he asked that? “The merest peck,” she offered flippantly. “We wouldn’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

“Oh, no,” he murmured softly, his eyes never leaving hers. There was an intensity to them that rooted Whitney to the spot, cementing her in his presence. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Gently, and with a carefulness almost agonizing in its precision, he took her hand in his. He brought the appendage to his lips and, true to her request, gave it the merest of pecks. Lips fluttered over her skin so softly she might have imagined it, yet the mark they left behind went deep enough to flood her entire body with tingling sensation.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Galahad. You win.”

She turned her hand so that it gripped his, and, using the momentum of catching him off guard, pulled him close. She wanted none of that chaste, knightly kissing, so she met him with her lips parted and ready. Their hats knocked off, but neither one of them seemed to care. His gorgeous mouth, so hot and willing, robbed her of all her breath in a matter of seconds, and she found herself hitching a leg against him in order to keep standing, wrapping her arms around the soft flannel that rippled over his lean musculature.

“Jesus, Whitney,” he groaned against her mouth, his tongue pausing only momentarily before it plunged back in, sweeping languid circles despite the urgency that swept through her. “This is *not* a peck.”

A catcall sounded in the distance, warning her that she was overstepping a boundary—hers or Matt’s or the crowd’s, she didn’t know. But this was her birthday party, dammit, and she wanted to kiss her lover without fear of retribution. Without pulling away, she lifted a hand and flipped whoever it

was the bird. Then, deepening the kiss, she snaked that hand around Matt's back and continued on a dedicated journey to the tight fit of his jeans around his ass.

Crackle.

She pulled away. "Is that what I think it is?"

"That depends..." Matt paused. "What do you think it is?"

"You brought me a present, didn't you?" She jumped up and down, clapping her hands and giggling. "And it's in your pants!"

"You act like you haven't been given a present before." He shook his head and reached around, pulling out a smallish package, a bit longer than her hand but so thin it might have been a padded envelope. The paper was covered in cheerful birthday lassos. "Kendra already told me about the pony."

Whitney giggled again. She knew it was ridiculous for a woman of her advanced years to put so much stock in one day out of the year—ordinary but for the celebration of her birth—but for as long as she could remember, her parents had made this day magical. Even when she'd been halfway across the world, they'd sent her a care package full of instant gourmet hot chocolate mix and well wishes and even a bulk-sized box of lacy underwear, since her mother was sure every woman needed something pretty downstairs, even if she toiled under the tropical sky.

Even though children of her own had never been something Whitney particularly wished for, the one concession she'd allowed herself was the unspoken promise that if they existed, their birthdays would be epic. Everyone deserved epic.

"I don't think she told you what The Pony really is, or you'd be blushing so hard there would be no blood left for your other parts." She looked purposefully at his groin, which bulged with promise and a definite lean to the right. A girl had to love tight cowboy pants.

He licked his lips, eyes wide. “And what, may I ask, is the pony?”

She laughed. Matt was so adorable when he was flustered. “Let’s just say it’s long and hard and something all girls love to ride.” Dropping her voice, she leaned in and plucked the present from his hand. “If you’re very good, I might be willing to show you later.”

“I’m not even going to ask what your parents got you.” Then, realizing what she held in her hands, he quickly added, “It’s just a little thing. Silly, really.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

She examined the package carefully, taking her time, noting the weight and texture—more to annoy him than anything else. It looked an awful lot like an envelope stuffed with something, like maybe a mixed tape. Oh, God. She hoped it wasn’t a mixed tape.

Matt leaned back against the wall, watching as she tore in. At first, she was confused—it *was* an envelope, but a plastic one in black and white. It wasn’t until she lifted the fold and pulled out what was inside that she realized what he’d gotten her.

It was a golfing glove...but not just any golfing glove. Bright pink leather, hand-stitching along the seams and, best of all, an embroidered flamingo located dead center. She looked up at Matt and back at the glove, feeling oddly wobbly where she stood. “Where did you find it? I *know* you didn’t buy this from Natalie.”

He shifted on his feet. “Oh, this novelty company online. It’s no big deal.”

“Matt.” She got up on tiptoed feet and kissed his cheek—a peck this time. She didn’t feel capable of more. “This is really sweet. Thank you.”

He opened his mouth to say something but seemed to think the better of it.

“What?” she asked, instantly suspicious. “Come on. Out with it.”

“I was just wondering if my gift made you feel good.”

Good? Reeling, yes. Breathless, sure. Touched by the quiet thoughtfulness of it, absolutely. But good?

“You know, good enough to show me the pony later.”

The comment hit her from the side, and Whitney was so surprised she staggered. And laughed. The sound of it was so loud several people around them stopped talking to see what had happened—who had gone so far off her rocker she brought birds down from the rafters. By the time she got her composure back, her eyes were moist, and she’d never been more certain that despite the mess of her life, this might possibly be the best birthday ever.

And she knew exactly why.

Lean, charming, dimpled. Quiet. Strong. The exact opposite of everything she’d ever thought she found attractive in a man.

“Matt—for that comment alone, you get a private Pony showing that will have you coming so much harder in those tight little pants than you ever dreamed possible.” She smacked him on the ass and walked away, tossing back over her shoulder. “Come find me when the party’s over.”

Matt couldn’t say for sure exactly when he became aware of the other man’s presence.

Stocky, in his late thirties and the only one not wearing a cowboy hat, there wasn’t much else about him that stood out—at least not as far as Matt could tell. There were lots of people here he didn’t know. What difference did one more make?

“Did you see that guy over there in the cargo pants?” Lincoln took a seat next to Matt at one of the long tables near the food and dropped his head in his hands. “Ugh. I hate douchebags like that.”

Matt nodded once. Apparently he wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the guy.

“Do you know him?” Matt handed his red plastic cup to his brother, thinking he’d set it down. Lincoln had to go on duty tomorrow before the sun came up, and had already declared his intention to forgo the birthday cake and all its empty buttercream calories. “Whoa—that’s beer, Lincoln. I thought you were watching your fluids.”

“Maybe I want a night off for once, okay? Back off.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Kendra, does it? Look, Lincoln—you told me right from the start that city girls had a tendency to do this.”

Lincoln gulped back the rest of the cup’s contents and pointed it at him. “Not everything in life is about that mushy romance crap. Maybe you’re happy designing your life around the crook of a woman’s finger, but some of us have *real* problems.”

Matt steeled his jaw, taking his brother’s low blow without complaint. There had been rumblings that Lincoln was facing suspension from the force yet again, something that arose every couple of years and made them all miserable by extension. “I don’t design my life around women, Lincoln. I treat them like actual human beings. There’s a difference.”

Lincoln grabbed another red plastic cup from a woman walking close by. “Is there? Is that why you’re letting that guy move in on your girlfriend without so much as a murmur?”

“First of all, she’s technically not my girlfriend.” Matt glanced over at the man and did his best to fight a rising wave of panic. “And he seems nice. He’s probably a doctor friend.”

“They’re all fucking doctors.” Lincoln gestured widely. “Even that dude over there with the dreads down to his knees. Who ever heard of a doctor with dreads?”

“You’re absolutely right, Lincoln. How stupid of me. No man who makes style decisions you object to has a right to attend medical school. You should arrest him.”

Lincoln slumped farther in his seat. “Gimme my keys. I’m going home.”

“I think maybe you should go get some air first.” No way was Matt letting his brother behind the wheel of that speed trap in his current condition. “Give me a few minutes to let Whitney know where I’m going, and I’ll drive you.”

“I don’t need you to drive me. Besides—I think I’m about to become the least of your worries. Look.”

Matt’s first thought was that Laura had somehow followed him here, and he sat up straighter, unconsciously correcting his posture. But that was ridiculous. Even though she’d been clingy as of late, she wasn’t obsessive. And she barely had the energy to leave the house anymore.

When he finally looked over, his gaze didn’t land on that of his ex-wife, looking uncertain in her surroundings. It landed on Whitney...and the mystery doctor. Dancing.

No. Not dancing.

The way the pair of them moved across the barn floor—faces close, lips moving, bodies swaying—wasn’t the embrace of two friends meeting for the first time in months. If he didn’t know better, Matt would say that Whitney had the other man’s neck in a chokehold.

“I, uh, think I might need to intervene.” Matt got to his feet and moved quickly. One thing he was sure of about Whitney—she wouldn’t forgive him for letting her murder someone on her birthday.

As he drew closer, hesitation settled in. Although Whitney’s face was unquestionably clouded with rage and homicidal thoughts, the man didn’t seem to feel the oncoming storm. The words *party crasher*, *arrogant* and *asshole* streamed rapidly out of Whitney’s mouth, and all he did was swoop her into a dip and flash a dazzlingly white smile.

Matt’s stomach churned acid. Who was this guy? And why, if Whitney so clearly disliked him, was she putting up with his arms winding tighter around her waist? Before he knew what he was about, his feet carried him all the way across the barn floor, his steps long and sure.

“Mind if I cut in?” he asked, barely recognizing the James Bond voice that slipped past his lips. “I believe you promised me a dance.”

Whitney and the man stopped spinning, but their hands stayed in place as the music twanged on. It would have been an opportune moment for introductions or for an exchange of pleasantries as Whitney changed dance partners, but Matt felt a sudden urge to prove a point.

What that point might be he had no real clear idea—but it had its roots in an overwhelming urge to have Whitney in his arms and as far away from the blindingly white smile of the arrogant asshole party crasher as possible.

Without waiting for either one of them to do the polite thing, Matt grabbed Whitney’s hand and twirled her away from the man’s grasp. He slid his fingers along the curve of her waist and pulled her close, glad when he heard a hitch in her breath.

“That was rather debonair of you,” she said, watching him closely. “Care to share what’s got you so riled up?”

“Not really.” The music slowed into a ballad about teenage love, and Matt adjusted his step to match. Every eye in the place was on them, but he didn’t dare loosen his grip. “Can’t I dance with my non-girlfriend on her birthday if I feel like it?”

“I had no idea you were so light on your feet,” she said, ignoring his question. “Have you been having fun?”

They’d reached one edge of the eight-by-eight patch of flooring that served as the dance floor, so Matt spun Whitney to begin a path back across. Unfortunately, that put him squarely in view of the mysterious doctor, who stood somewhat apart from the others, watching Whitney with a look of keen interest.

“I’ve enjoyed being here for you,” he said honestly. Honesty was necessary, as he meant to counteract it with a slight deception. It wasn’t his fault—he wanted to know who the hell that guy thought he was. “I believe I got around to

meeting just about all your friends. There are only one or two newcomers I missed.”

“Oh? Any ladies catch your eye? I should introduce you to Gertrude.”

Matt’s grip on her waist tightened, and he hooked his thumb on one of the wide straps of her bandolier. He ran his fingers up to where the leather passed over her nipple, allowing his touch to linger on the hardened peak. Juvenile it might have been, but he relished the reassurance of her body’s response to him. “That’s not funny. You know there’s only one woman I want.” Then, before she could do more than open her mouth to protest, he went for it. “Who was that you were dancing with?”

“Who?” Whitney avoided his gaze. The obvious fact that she was hiding something only made the fire in Matt’s stomach burn higher. He remained silent until she was forced to speak, their dancing all but stopped in the middle of the floor. “Oh, you must mean my old friend from med school days. He just arrived in town this week.”

Perfect. Lincoln was right—they were all doctors. “For your party?”

“Possibly longer.” Then, lower, as if to herself, “Hopefully not.”

They turned again, this time bringing Whitney within clear view of the mystery medical man. Her body tensed, and a full twenty seconds passed before she was able to shake herself off.

Matt wished there was some way he could see what sort of an exchange had passed between the two, but the music switched to a faster song—one of those thump and grind ones Lincoln favored when wooing a woman. Something inside Whitney switched, too, and she drew closer.

“Oh, I love this song,” she said, her hips coming to rest against his. The beat picked up, drums and electric guitar pounding, and Whitney’s dance moves picked up with it.

Before Matt could do more than wonder at the sudden change, Whitney twirled so that they stood front-to-back, her entire body flush with his. The press of her ass—so tightly packed in those tiny jean shorts—as it wiggled against his groin proved too much for Matt’s restraint, and he placed his hands on her hips to still the grinding movements. He still had to walk away from the dance floor on just two legs, regardless of how wonderful it felt to bury his head in the curve of her neck and lose himself in the moment of sound and sensation and *her*.

“What do you say we get out of here?” Matt said, his voice low as his lips brushed against her ear. “I saw this great pile of hay out back.”

“Tempting.” Whitney turned back around and pulled his face down to hers. Her lips barely grazing his, she breathed against them, “But right now I need you to kiss me, Matt, please. Kiss me like you mean it.”

He didn’t need much more of an invitation than that. Without hesitation, he pressed his mouth against hers—softer than the music and his straining erection called for, but the exact way he’d wanted to kiss her since the day they met. Slow. Deep. Sharing breath and fusing souls. The rest of the room fell away and they stopped dancing. All that remained were his hands cupping the sides of her face, holding her tenderly while his kiss said all the things she wouldn’t let him say with words.

Like he meant it.

Matt was the first to pull away, dazed, robbed of all memory of where they stood and who made up the audience around them.

Whitney’s lips remained parted, her cheeks flush with color. It was too dark to read her eyes, but her body language—heavy breathing, her whole body unnaturally still—was clear. She brought her fingers to her lips slowly, as if testing to make sure they were still there, and the only thing that prevented Matt from capturing them again was the crash of a

table overturning and Lincoln's voice, loud and insistent, that he was perfectly capable of seeing himself home.

"I can't believe this," he muttered, tearing his gaze away. "Whitney, I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to take him home."

All of Whitney's guests were watching the spectacle of Lincoln attempting to right the table by himself and sliding in the Jell-O salad. All except one. The mystery doctor stood rooted to the spot, watching Whitney.

No. Watching Matt.

The man nodded once, tipping his head in a way that suggested conciliation or capitulation or even...recognition. But recognition of what?

He didn't have time to wonder. Kendra appeared at his elbow, asking if he wanted any help getting his brother out to the car, but Matt shook his head firmly and forced himself to leave the mystery alone for now.

"I can handle Lincoln." Maybe nothing else in his life made much sense, but the inevitability of Lincoln screwing up was almost a comfort. "Just get him outside. I'll do the rest."

He faced Whitney, intending to apologize for such an abrupt end to an unforgettable kiss, but she had already recovered her senses, and he could practically see the shift in her eyes as she regained control. "Go rescue your brother, Galahad. The people of Pleasant Park are counting on you."

"You're not mad?" Matt was furious. Lincoln was going to owe him big time for this.

"Of course not. You're the nice guy, the dependable brother. I wouldn't expect anything less." She brushed the hair from his face and rubbed her thumb along his jawline—an intimate gesture rendered void when her gaze shifted somewhere over Matt's left shoulder. He knew, without needing to look, who she was staring at. "Thanks for coming. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Matt felt a burning urge to glance back as he exited the barn, to see if Whitney went to talk to the mystery doctor.

But he didn't.

For one, Lincoln was retching all over the lanterns lining the path.

For another, he knew, with a roiling certainty in his gut, that the answer was one he wouldn't like.

"Thirty-four looks good on you."

Whitney froze in the midst of tossing a stack of plastic cups into the garbage bin. Determined not to let Jared goad her, she tossed her hair and kept cleaning. "Was there ever any doubt? The Vidra women are a well-preserved breed. You should know—you spend enough time with my mother."

Jared's hand fell on her shoulder, forcing her to turn and face him. "Don't take it out on her. I made her invite me to your party. We need to talk, and you won't return my calls. I didn't have many other options."

She dumped a stack of plates in the bag. Kendra and John were also supposed to be cleaning up, but they had conveniently disappeared into the night, leaving her alone in a stale, sweat-scented barn with the last man on earth she wanted to see on her birthday.

She wanted Matt. She wanted him in ways she didn't know existed.

That kiss—that kiss had changed everything. That kiss was what women dreamed of and fought for and carried with them to the grave. That kiss brought life to parts of her untouched by the most inventive sexual positions. That kiss made her believe, for the first time in what felt like forever, that love might be worth the risk.

"You have until I finish clearing off this table," she offered, feeling suddenly generous. If Jared brought out the worst in her, Matt brought out the best. "Go."

"Who was that guy you were dancing with earlier?"

She twisted her head to peer at Jared. As always, his grim smile was difficult to read. "Really? This is your big

grovel moment and you're wasting it talking about my boyfriend?"

Boyfriend. The word just slipped out, hovering in the air like a cloud—and now that it was there, she kind of liked it. Matt Fuller, her boyfriend. The local kindergarten teacher, her boyfriend. Her boyfriend, who kissed like a god and worshiped like a mortal.

"I think he's relevant, don't you?"

"I think he's incredible, and I also think he's none of your business." She moved faster, sweeping up piles of napkins with her whole arm. Matt's benevolent influence over her only went so far.

Jared squatted to retrieve a few fallen beer bottles. "But he's proof that you win. Isn't that what you want to hear? You win."

"I win?" Red-hot anger filled her, twisting her insides and making her ill. Earlier in the evening, Matt had rescued her from having to confront this man, saving her from herself before she even knew she needed it. But he wasn't here now, and she was on her own. "What the hell does that mean? A nice, handsome guy happens to like me for me. So, what? Is that so out of the ordinary? Is that such a stretch of the imagination I need a trophy to commemorate it?"

"Dammit!" Jared smacked an empty beer bottle on the table with a loud crash. "Can't you see? You have *everything*. Our friends. Our private practice. My career. Family. Security. Love. All those things we set out to build together—it's all yours. And there's not a single scrap left over for me."

"And whose fault is that?" Her heart swelled against the cage of her ribs, her body not nearly big enough to contain her emotions. "You could have had all of it. That whole life you're imagining I stole from you was yours for the taking. Remember? But you didn't want it—at least not as much as you wanted to feel a shiny new vagina wrapped around your dick."

There was no mistaking the expression on his face this time. Fury twisted the saturnine features, and his hands balled into fists at his sides. Jared wasn't a violent man—at least, he hadn't been back when she'd known him—but she could see that he was reaching the edge of his endurance.

Sighing, she added, "I'm sorry you feel left out of our plans. With all your fancy world travel and media popularity, how were we supposed to know you even cared about this kind of thing anymore?"

"You could have asked. After you ran away from Guatemala—away from *me*—you could have answered one letter, taken one call. You could have let me know you were okay."

Shock robbed her of breath and of the ability to come up with an appropriate reply. How could she tell this man that despite what he saw on the outside, she wasn't okay? Family and a medical degree and friends were great recovery tools, but they weren't a promise that she wouldn't get hurt again. They weren't a guarantee she'd be able to give Matt the love he so clearly deserved.

That was what Jared had really taken away from her in Guatemala.

"I'm okay," she said flatly. "Sorry it took so long for me to get back to you."

Predictably, her words only enraged Jared further. With a flourish, he cleaned up the last of the table, ending their conversation and leaving her feeling worse than ever before.

"Happy fucking birthday, Whitney," he growled, and stormed loudly out the barn door.

Happy fucking birthday, indeed.

Chapter Nineteen

Matt came to see her parents off, brandishing a bag of freshly baked bagels for the road and promises to look them up on Facebook when he got home. It was a cute, boyfriend-like thing to do, and her mom practically salivated when he pecked her on the cheek and promised to look after Whitney.

Her heart swelled with admiration for a man so wholly committed to wooing her parents that he'd remember to feed them. Who was she kidding? She swelled for him, period. But he had yet to look her squarely in the eye.

Something was wrong.

They stood side by side as her parents rounded the corner, waving, cheerful on all fronts. The moment the license plate was out of their line of vision, Matt jumped away and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "Well, that's done. We don't have to pretend anymore."

"Oh, poor thing, did your halo get a little tarnished these past few weeks?" Whitney strove to lighten the mood. Where was her cheerful Matt? Where was the man who made her feel better no matter what kind of gloom and doom lurked ominously near?

He squinted as he turned to face her, the morning sun casting a glow that was rather heavenly on his face, making him appear much younger than his already younger-than-her years. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this."

Her heart stopped. "Then don't do it," she replied, her words coming fast and automatic.

Illusions weren't something Whitney harbored willingly, and she recognized his tone for what it was—the end of a relationship that had been stamped with an expiration date since day one. She'd pushed too hard to keep him away. He was finally tired of pushing back.

The thought of losing Matt just when she was beginning to see how wrong she'd been, scratched at Whitney's throat, aching and raw. She wasn't ready to pull the

plug. Not now. Not yet. Something hot and sharp prickled in her sinuses.

“I mean it, Matt. Don’t say something you’ll regret—don’t give life to words you’re unsure of. Once you put them out there, you can’t take them back again.”

“I know that.” His face screwed up as if in pain. “Don’t you think I know that?”

Yes. She also knew he was much too noble to continue having sex with her once he made up his mind to move on. Dammit, he wasn’t ready—not when Laura still had her claws underneath his skin. Not when Whitney wasn’t sure she could exist in a world without him.

“Why don’t we go inside?” she said. Inside, where it was safe and she could lock the doors and make him listen.

Is this what it was like for Jared? Screaming with a thousand things to say, scared to death it was too late to say them?

Matt nodded once and followed her into her condo, his head ducked in a gesture of surrender. Unsure what else to do, she poured them both a glass of iced tea with actual mint floating in it. Maybe she could disarm him with domesticity.

It didn’t take. He ran his finger along the outer edge of the glass where condensation beaded, not drinking, not talking, not looking at her.

He was miserable. Galahad to the very end, unable to say the words that would rip her heart, still beating, from her chest. Well, she could at least give him this.

“Should I make this easy on you?” she asked softly, the words bitter on her tongue. “Hey, Whitney. It’s been fun while it lasted, but I think maybe it’s time you and I went our separate ways. I hereby declare myself successfully rebounded, and shall go on to enrich the lives of understated, quiet women the world over.”

She expected him to be grateful, to at least give her a few points for laying it out there, but when he looked up, the color had leached from his face and his eyes were stricken.

“It’s that guy from last night, isn’t it? The one you were dancing with?”

Whitney blinked, her eyes moist. “What are you talking about? What does Jared have to do with anything?”

Matt never knew how profoundly one word could affect a person. He’d long been a proponent of the sticks-and-stones motto, a staple when your primary demographic required rhymes and singsongs to understand complex social problems.

But that word, that name, worked more powerfully on him than a hundred sticks, a thousand stones.

“That was Jared? The one you used to date? The one who...”

“Acted like a certified asshole and cheated on me?” Whitney’s laugh was rough and shaky, and she brushed quickly at her eyes. “The one and only. He crashed my birthday party.”

Matt’s head spun. “I don’t understand. I thought he lived halfway across the world.”

Whitney took a long sip from her iced tea, staring at the empty region a few feet above Matt’s head. “He did.”

“Did?” *Past tense.*

“Did, does—I don’t know.” Whitney sighed. “He says he’s here to help with the spa. Kendra and John want to make him our fourth partner.”

“Oh.” There didn’t seem much more to say. The love of Whitney’s life—the one man who’d had the power to touch her heart, who’d wasted the incredible opportunity afforded by her love—was here in Pleasant Park. A doctor. Rich. Powerful. By all accounts, a saint among men.

Matt had never felt so sick in his life, but more than the overwhelming urge to run and hide from this conversation, he wanted to hit something. A sweltering surge of anger encroached just on the edges of his vision, making it difficult to distinguish dark from light.

“Is that why you were arguing with him last night? Is he moving here?”

“What is this really about?” Whitney dropped her glass and stepped forward, warily, almost as if approaching a dangerous animal. *She is*. Matt had never before teetered so close to the abyss. “Matt, what was it you wanted to say to me? What was it you promised you wouldn’t do?”

“I wasn’t going to ask about him.” *I wasn’t going to care.*

“Is that all?” She let out a shaky laugh. “I thought—”

But what she thought remained a mystery, because she shook herself and stopped in the middle of her forward movement. “Oh, my God. You know what this means, don’t you? You’re jealous. You’re jealous of my ex-boyfriend.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Matt firmed his stance. He’d never been jealous of anyone in his life. He felt the occasional pang of regret when friends got married, sometimes wished he’d made more attempts to further his career. And it was impossible not to regret Laura’s infidelity. But jealousy? No way. This felt mostly like he’d been plucked from the earth and tossed too near the sun, like he was still falling.

“Is it?” A small smile, tentative and unsure, crossed her face. “My ex-boyfriend slithers into town and you’re suddenly a new man, all territorial and angry. What would you call it?”

“You still have feelings for him,” he said, changing the subject.

“That is the one thing I can safely say I do not have.”

“I was watching you last night. You might not be aware of it, but there were feelings.”

Whitney stood up straighter and jabbed a finger his direction. Whatever lethargy she’d been feeling before was suddenly yanked out of the room, replaced by the brimstone and brilliance of the woman he loved. “Don’t you dare transfer your dysfunctional relationship over to me. You’re the one who hangs around your ex-wife’s house, buying her aspirin

and refusing to sever the ties. Not me. I'm happy to report that what I feel for Jared is bitter and cold."

Matt waited for her to continue.

"Don't look at me like that. You should trade that skepticism for a pen and paper to take notes. When Jared cheated on me, I would have given anything to be able to leave him in my dust, but I couldn't. I had to watch, wait, fester—exactly what you've been doing for the past year."

A surge of emotion filled Matt's chest, constricting his breathing with how forcefully it hit. Since when was taking care of someone in need considered *festering*? "So what does it mean inviting him to become your business partner twelve years later? Is there an expiration date on this sort of thing? Am I only allowed to help Laura a dozen years from now?"

Whitney frowned. "I didn't invite him. He just showed up."

"I don't see the difference."

Neither did Whitney. If anyone had asked her, the last thing she wanted out of this life was to ever look at Jared's smug, conceited face again. She'd seen that face every day of medical school and residency, in all her peers begging her for a good word to try and get close to the great Dr. Fine and his feats of benevolence. *Fuck benevolence*, she'd told them. *Build a nice private practice and buy a sports car instead.*

Yet here Jared was—and seemingly to stay. Maybe it was Matt's sudden burst of jealousy, the reversal of roles that placed her directly in her ex-lover's path, but she felt suddenly magnanimous. Screw it. Jared could help them open the spa. He could help them open a thousand spas.

Just so long as she had Matt by her side.

"I think we should start dating," she announced.

"Very funny." Matt didn't look like he found it very amusing. "Didn't you just break up with me?"

"Not on purpose. I thought you were going to break up with me first—I was trying to save you the agony." When he

didn't exhibit any of the joy one might hope for in just such a situation, she added, "I'm sorry?"

"I thought sex with no strings attached means never having to say you're sorry."

A soft chortle escaped her lips. He was teasing her—now, of all times. Ah, how far things had come since the day they'd first met. She lowered her voice and dropped her eyelids seductively. "Think about it—you, me, buying pottery together. Isn't this what you've wanted since the beginning?"

Matt's movements stilled and he took a full minute to examine her closely. She tried not to squirm or make a face, but it was hard. Here she was, laying her heart out on the line, and he was judging, watching, tapping into his uncanny ability to unsettle her without saying a word.

"Define what you mean by dating."

She released a slow breath. "Since when have you become such a cynic?"

"I'm a realist. What's the catch?"

"No catch. I think we should go public, make it official. We'll hold hands in the park, eat romantic dinners for two, make out in the back of taxis on the way home. You'd like making out in the back of taxis, wouldn't you?"

"What's the catch?" he repeated, his tone surprisingly firm. "Why all this now? Is it because you're really ready to take our relationship to the next level, or is it because you want to prove to your ex-boyfriend that you've moved on?"

Damn him. Damn Matt and his nobility. Damn Matt and his never-ending pursuit of all things good and honest.

"The timing isn't great, I'll admit," Whitney said. And there was no way to be one hundred percent sure Jared's involvement didn't have a role in spurring her on. "But I mean this from the absolute bottom, softest part of my heart. I want you. All the time. Day and night. With every fiber of my being. Please let me be more than your rebound girl."

He narrowed his eyes. "Answer my question first."

Impatience took the place of tenderer emotions. “Nothing is black and white. Sometimes there are lovely shades of gray thrown in. I like the gray area. It’s where the good sex is.”

“Can you be serious for one second?” He gripped his hair with both hands, his glance pained. “If you really want to be my girlfriend, I need to know where it’s coming from. I need to know you aren’t going to turn around and change your mind in a few days.”

She reached for him, but he backed away as if her touch could burn. *It could.*

“I’m not you, Whitney. I can’t turn that part of me on and off like it’s a switch.”

Matt wanted to believe her. He wanted to believe her so much it was a physical pain, lodged in his chest, rendering him unable to breathe.

No matter how long she kept looking at him like that, how many times she promised today’s conversation had nothing to do with Jared, he kept coming back to two realizations. The first was that Whitney was clearly willing to go to incredible lengths to avoid her ex. The second was that no woman took such careful pains to avoid a man unless she either hated him or loved him beyond her own strength.

Matt suspected the latter. And it was killing him.

“You’ve seen all my tricks.” Her voice grew soft, pleading. “I’ve shown you my whole playbook. The sex part is all I’m good at—it’s all I know. For the past few months, I’ve used that to help you, to get you to realize that life exists beyond your ex-wife and the rules you’re determined to live by. Now it’s my turn for help. Show me how the rest of this relationship stuff works. Teach me how to care for you without losing a part of my soul.”

“I can’t.”

Whitney turned away, tears forming in her oversized brown eyes. He reached up and wiped them away, cupping her face and forcing her to look at him.

“Such a thing doesn’t exist,” he explained softly, “because in order to do this the right way, we both have to put our souls on the line. The only thing I can safely promise you is that I will give everything I have to make sure it’s safe while in my keeping.”

“Oh, Matt.”

He didn’t let go yet. “If we do this, I want you to understand—we do it my way.”

“And by *this*, you mean...?”

“All of it. Everything. I want to rent bad movies and eat good takeout together. I want to cuddle after sex. I want to be able to tell you how I feel whenever I feel like it.”

Her mouth parted, lower lip trembling as he made his demands.

“I want to take my time exploring every inch of your body. And I want to kiss you like I mean it every time.”

So he did. Unable to keep himself apart from her for another second, he captured her mouth with his. Falling into her was so easy. Her breath was a whisper, her tongue a gift, her lips a promise. Matt held her close, his hands entwined in her hair, unable to pull away. He could remain holding her in his arms forever.

But she eventually pulled back, gasping. Her skin flushed pink and tempting. “I think I can get used to that one. Any other rules of yours I should know about?”

He couldn’t help but smile. Always business, his woman. “Just one. I’m even going to make you meet my sister.”

Laughter lit her face, and Matt realized it was his favorite sight in the world, seeing her glow just for him. “Why, Matt Fuller—I think that’s the least sexy thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Does that turn you off?” he asked, kissing her along her neck, taking his time with the delicate curves where her

pulse beat hot and strong. “Should I tell you about how Hilly likes to trim her husband’s nose hairs for him?”

She angled her head, giving him better access to the soft, sloping skin of her shoulders. All this unexplored territory. *His territory.*

“I’m practically thrumming with anticipation.”

“Or maybe we can talk about rashes,” he murmured. “Those are sexy. Once, when I was a kid, we went swimming in a pond over by the quarry and got swimmer’s itch. We had big, scabby sores all over. Oozing pustules.”

“You forget that I’m a doctor,” Whitney said with a low chuckle, playing along. She grabbed his belt loop and pulled their bodies closer together. “Parasites get me really hot.”

“Is that so?” He lifted her shirt roughly over her head. Her bra, a soft, worn, white cotton thing, had to be the least lingerie-like item in her closet. He loved it. He loved the comfortable ordinariness of it, the fact that she wasn’t out to impress him for once. He moved lower, kissing the swell of each breast.

“Tapeworm.” He left the bra in place and fixated on the soft curve of her belly. “Scabies.” Moving lower, his tongue dipped into her belly button. “Lice.” He was down to the band of her skirt now, a man with nowhere left to go. He peeked up and grinned. “Um...botfly?”

Whitney let out a low moan. “This is my kind of dirty talk. Don’t stop.”

“I think you might have to pick up from here,” he said, giving up the fight. He straightened and brought his head close to hers, brushing her lips so softly it could barely be registered as a kiss. “I’m running out of organisms to name.”

“You’re doing fantastic,” she whispered.

Both of them stopped, a cavern of things still to say. It was one thing to turn lovemaking into playtime—that was something Whitney did incredibly well. Joking, laughter, fun.

But those kinds of words were easy. It was the not-so-funny ones that seemed to stick on Matt's tongue.

"I feel too much," he confessed, his eyes searching hers. Difficult as it was, the conversation had to happen. "I always have. For life, for you, for what it will mean to make love to you the way you deserve—long and slow and giving myself to you one hundred percent."

Whitney's eyes flared with surprise. If he didn't know better, he'd think she hadn't remembered that part of the deal.

"Don't ask me to be your boyfriend unless you mean it, Whitney. Don't ask me because you want to prove a point or because it's what you think I want to hear. Don't ask me because you fear my encroaching ex-wife. Ask me because you can't imagine spending tomorrow without me."

Her hands wound around his neck, pulling him close. He thought she was going to kiss him, but instead of bringing their lips together, her mouth moved to the side, grazing his earlobe.

Bodies taut with anticipation, so much tension in the air it sealed them into their embrace, she whispered, "I can't imagine spending tomorrow without you, Matt. Or any of the tomorrows after that."

His heart roared, the rest of him not too far behind. Taking her firmly by the hand, he pulled her toward the back of the condo. There was no joke on her lips, no laughter in her eyes when they reached her bedroom, messy and unkempt and quite possibly his favorite place on earth.

He laid her gently on the bed and held himself suspended above her.

Matt intended to take his time. Even though Whitney was all urgency, her hands everywhere at once—in his hair, at his shirt buttons, tugging at his fly—he stilled her with a kiss, deep and determined.

"I've been looking forward to this for two and a half very long months. You're going to have to be patient." He traced a finger down her sternum, past her stomach, not

stopping until he reached her waistband. Carefully, he pulled the fabric down over her hips and past her legs, taking the time to kiss her calves, sleek and smooth, on the way back up.

That was when he noticed she wore sweet, white cotton panties to match the bra—yet another pleasant surprise. He hadn't even known she owned such practical underthings.

He traced his finger over every stitch of the fabric, where it curved over her thighs and dipped between her legs, showing his appreciation as a caress.

“I don't think I can be patient.” Whitney undulated against the bed, arching her back so that her whole body strained toward him. “You have no idea how much I want you right now.”

He nudged her legs apart with his knee and slipped a hand farther between them. Hot and wet before he even got past the fabric. “I have an inkling,” he said, tugging the panties down.

Matt knew Whitney's body intimately—much more than he thought possible for a woman he had yet to have actual sex with. She loved it when he thrust his fingers inside her and kissed her deeply at the same time. A long, hard suck at her nipple had her hips jerking from the bed almost as though her body parts were attached by taut, electrified wire. Her favorite was when he gripped her ass and held it firm while he buried his face between her legs.

In return, she knew that a wet fingertip pressed firmly to the head of his erection reduced him to a monosyllabic beast, and that he could only take her hands cupping his balls for about sixty seconds before they grew too sensitive and she needed to move on.

But there was so much still to explore—and he wasn't the only one looking to stake a claim. Whitney sat up and whisked her bra up with a flick of her fingers, motioning for him to take her place on the bed.

He sat, but only after she reached down and slowly unzipped his jeans, her fingers lingering over the task. He

shrugged out of his shirt as she splayed a hand over the flat of his abdomen and ran her fingers through the smattering of hair there.

“I feel like I could write a poem about your abs.” Whitney sighed. “A happy ode to a happy trail.”

He chuckled. “Don’t let me stop you. But odes tend to be really long. You’re better off with a haiku.” He turned her so that she stood facing away from him, his head level with where her back sloped into her glorious rounded bottom. Pressing a series of soft kisses to the curve of her spine, he basked in the feeling of so much softness within his reach. *Mine. All mine.*

She purred and arched against him. “I’m a doctor. I don’t do haiku.”

“Kiss falling softly.” He pressed a deep, warm kiss to each dimple of her back.

“The world spins until it stops.” He whirled her around so that she faced him.

“And I stop with it.” He stopped.

Whitney sat astride him, her sex brushing against his erection but not taking it in. She lifted his face in her hands and kissed him softly. Her hair blanketed them both, smelling sweet and spicy at the same time. He breathed deep, looking forward to the time when he could wake up next to the splay of that hair on his pillow.

“No one has ever written me a poem before,” she teased.

“Someday, Whitney. I will write you the whole damn ode.”

Gripping her ass in his hands, he finally guided her onto his cock. It had been his intention to take her slowly, to savor the overwhelming rightness of her body wrapped around his, but as she opened her legs to take him in, moaning with each movement bringing them closer together, he found himself powerless to stop. Himself or her. *Especially her.*

“Please don’t hold back.” She thrust her hips against his, finalizing the fit, proving that the complete fusing of two bodies was a shared effort. “You feel amazing. You are amazing.”

He gripped her ass, lifting her up and bringing her down, feeling the fit of her all over again. Amazing didn’t even begin to cover it.

“I meant to woo you with kisses and sweet nothings,” he said, his voice coming out raspy as he strained to slow down. All the blood pumping through him commanded that he move rougher, faster, harder. And Whitney, rocking against him, her body a perfect blur of sensation, wasn’t helping matters any.

“And I mean for you to lose control.” She ground her hips against him, drawing him deeper, and the last of his resolve fled. “Let it go, Matt. Take what you want and worry about the sweet nothings later.”

“You. I want you.” He captured her mouth in a kiss, pumping against her with an untamed intensity he didn’t know he possessed. And she pushed right back against him, hips and tongue, her teeth clamping down on his lower lip.

As their bodies continued to move as one, Matt realized just how right they’d been to wait for this. He was inside Whitney, yes, but this was so much more than a physical penetration. Whitney’s body was pure, hot silk as it moved over his, and no man could ever tire of her passion—but it was more than that. She’d finally let him in.

Him, an ordinary man with nothing special to say or offer. *Him*, a quiet nobody who could only offer her his heart in return.

He slowed his pace, an agonizing feat of restraint, but it seemed important to kiss her one last time before she came. Without leaving the embracing depth of her body, he brought his lips to hers, a soft promise that was the only thing he had to give. Before he could do more than sweep his tongue gently against hers, she bucked her hips and cried out in release.

The tight compressions of her body around his erection brought his own orgasm to a roaring head, and she collapsed against him just as he was sure he'd never be able to breathe again.

But breath came, as it always did.

So, too, did their heartbeats resume a normal pattern against one another. Still, neither of them moved beyond the physical demands of bodies that intended to continue living. Hopefully for a very long time.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be able to walk again," Whitney finally said, lifting herself off and falling to the bed.

"See how much fun it is being my girlfriend?" he asked, falling next to her. His hand trailed a lazy pattern over her stomach before settling, firmly entwined in her own. He rolled his head to the side. "Don't you wish we'd done this weeks ago?"

"I can't believe you're trying to bribe me into loving you with sexual favors."

Matt jerked back, her words taking him by surprise. He'd long since fallen in love with her—he'd been doing that since the day they first met—but he hardly expected to hear the words come out of her mouth without being forcefully pried.

"Loving me? Is that what you're doing?"

She smiled and pulled him tight. It wasn't an answer, but Matt realized that words didn't mean anything as long as their momentum was moving in the right direction. As she nestled firmly in the crook of his arm, burying her face in his neck, he decided her direction was perfect.

She was moving toward him. And he was waiting to catch her when she finally arrived.

Chapter Twenty

The spa opened with an impressive fanfare, given their inauspicious beginning.

For a while there, Whitney had been beset with visions of an empty waiting room, of hundreds of pounds of paraffin wax sitting in untouched bricks that would someday comprise all their worldly goods. In every one of these visions, John and Kendra smiled and nodded and reassured her that it wasn't her fault.

Even though they knew it was.

“Well, it's not the line out the door we were hoping for, but I scheduled two facials and a Brazilian this morning.” Kendra nodded like that was all it would take to begin them on their path to riches. “How's your appointment book look, John?”

“Unlike the two of you, I've been helping old ladies all over town cross the street, extolling the virtues of massage for circulation and joints. I've got three patients coming in for evaluations today. And a hot stone therapy at three.” He turned, continuing the chain around the table. “Whitney?”

“I don't want to talk about it.” Whitney studied the plate in front of her with renewed interest, rolling a melon ball in circles. She'd hung the sign outside offering free Botox to ten lucky winners. What more did they want from her?

“Morning staff meetings to share our client lists were your idea, Whit,” Kendra pointed out, her voice gentle but firm. “How bad can it possibly be? I thought you were finally getting a little interest.”

“May I?” Jared didn't wait for a reply. He grabbed the delicate green fruit in front of her and popped it in his mouth. “I'm happy to report that Dr. Vidra and I are booked solid. For the entire week.”

If smug had a smell, Jared would be reeking of it right now. And Kendra and John would be bottling it up to sell out front.

“Solid is a bit of an exaggeration, don’t you think?” she scoffed. “Most of our appointments are for consultations only—which are free.”

Jared leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers. It was a gesture she remembered well—arrogant and sophisticated and probably the reason three quarters of the female population were willing to drop trousers the moment he drew near. “Are you telling me you don’t have enough confidence in your own abilities to turn at least half of those consults into appointments?” He tsked gently. “You disappoint me.”

Whitney knew she was being baited, but as was usually the case with this man, she wasn’t strong enough to resist the challenge. “Oh, I can close the deal. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“Okay, so that’s good,” Kendra said brightly, shutting the manila folder in front of her. “Why don’t we—”

“Unless you want me to take them all.” Jared ignored Kendra and locked eyes with Whitney. “I bet I can close every last one.”

Ugh. The only way he could be any cockier was if he carried a big stick between his legs and pulled it out to play croquet. “Let’s just see how the day goes, shall we?” she asked, striving for calm. She pushed back from the table, but Jared’s hand, warm and insistent on her shoulder, stopped her from getting very far.

“What happened to the Whitney Vidra I used to know?” he asked, searching her. “She wasn’t scared of anything.”

“Funny how a person changes over time.” That was the understatement of the decade. “The Jared Fine I used to know would have never groveled his way home to beg for his old life back. Yet here we are.”

She heard Kendra and John suck in sharp breaths in the background.

Crap. She’d done it again, opened her mouth and let the anger out before she even realized it was there. Of course

there was going to be workplace tension and friction and all those other physics lessons that accompanied a once-crushed heart, but she'd agreed to this, which meant she needed to put her big-girl pants on for once.

She could always ask Matt to rip them off with his teeth later.

"I'm sorry." She turned to face Jared, thoughts of Matt taking away the last ebb of irritation. "That was way out of line. I've become so accustomed to using your face as a dartboard I sometimes forget there's a real person in there."

"At the risk of another rake down, I have to say you really *have* changed." Jared looked like he wanted to put a hand on her forehead and check for signs of disease. "I don't think I've ever heard you willingly apologize before."

"You better get used to it," Whitney said wryly. "That won't be the last time I yell at you without provocation. In fact, if you don't stop smirking in the next sixty seconds, I'll do it again."

Jared surveyed the three of them, his smirk transforming into a genuine smile. "I've really missed you guys."

Kendra snorted. "You miss Whitney overreacting and me ordering people around? You must have had a harder time of it out there playing God than we thought."

Jared's smile disappeared. "You have no idea."

Damn. Now not only did she feel guilty, but she felt pity for the poor jerk. The mighty must have fallen when her back was turned.

"You know what, Jared?" Whitney stuck out her hand in a gesture of conciliation, though she was careful to keep an entire arm's length distance between them. "You're on for that wager. Fifty bucks says I book more appointments than you today."

"Make it dinner and you're on."

“Nice try, but I think you’re forgetting one small thing.” Whitney dropped her hand. “My boyfriend.”

If she’d been afraid that the word would stick in her throat the first time she said it out loud for real, she was happy to report that no such fears existed now. Matt was her boyfriend. He wasn’t exactly a boy, but he was definitely her friend...a *very* good friend. The sooner Jared accepted that, the better it would be for all of them. She shot him a triumphant look.

But Jared deflected it with a laugh. “I’m not asking you to sleep with me, Whitney. It’s a meal between colleagues. Two people and forks and maybe that conversation we’re way overdue for. You are allowed to eat with other people, aren’t you?”

Did he seriously just ask her that? “Of course I am.”

Yes, she and Matt had made things official. And yes, she was still very new at this being a good girlfriend stuff. But the one thing Matt promised her was that she didn’t have to change for him. The old Whitney wouldn’t have hesitated to rise to the challenge, to accept Jared’s taunt and show him who called the shots.

A gnawing doubt nipped at the edges of her stomach. The old Whitney was also someone who thought about herself first and thought about herself often. *Did you forget the part where Matt came inside you—shared a part of himself he doesn’t give to just anyone?*

“So we’re on, Dr. Vidra? Loser buys dinner? And works the first volunteer hospital shift?”

She was painfully aware of Kendra and John staring at her, waiting to see what she’d say. It felt like a kind of test, two warriors circling to see who came out on top.

She stuck out her hand, happy to find it didn’t waver as Jared gave it a hefty shake. “I accept.”

If there was one good thing about having a liberal-minded boyfriend who respected women and forgave his ex-wife for adultery, it was this.

Matt wouldn't care about one tiny dinner with Jared.

Even if she did.

“Why do I smell delicious food?”

Matt heard the rattle of Whitney's keys as they hit the counter. The sound was followed almost instantly by a pair of arms winding around his waist, the softness of Whitney's body as she pressed against him.

“More important,” she murmured into his neck. “Why do I smell delicious food in my very own kitchen? Are you making me dinner?”

Matt held up a glass of red wine and felt it being plucked from his hand. A pause long enough for her to drink filled the air, and her soft moan of appreciation came soon after. “You have no idea how much I needed that.” She dropped a wet kiss on his neck and seated herself at one of the island stools. “If you tell me you cleaned too, I'm making you quit your job to become my barefoot housewife.”

Matt grabbed the wine bottle and poured a liberal amount into the pasta sauce he was stirring. “It's a compelling offer, but there is no way I'm tackling the hoarder's nightmare that is your living room.”

“You can't blame a girl for trying.”

“I don't blame the girl for anything.” He held up the bottle in a toast. “Happy first day of medical spa ownership, Whitney. I want to hear all about it over dinner. You have no idea how hard it was for me not to call you about twenty times today to see how it was going. I've never been a stalker before. It's exhausting.”

Whitney's smile dimmed, and she buried her face in her wineglass. Matt knew it was going to be a stretch—setting this scene for her to come home to—but this was supposed to be what she wanted. The relationship, the domesticity...*him*.

Well, this was what it looked like on the inside. This was who he was.

“Don’t look so sad.” He waved a spoon at her. “I only called and hung up twice. I thought I showed admirable restraint.”

All he got in return for his attempt at a joke was a small half smile and a request to refill her empty glass.

“It smells absolutely wonderful,” she said. “And I can’t tell you how much it means that you would go to such lengths to make my first official day at work special.”

He stirred harder, splashing marinara sauce along the tiled backsplash. “But?”

She came up behind him again, this time pressing a deep kiss just below his earlobe. “But I made dinner arrangements already. Work stuff.”

Matt relaxed a little. She wasn’t freaking out about the insipidity of an evening spent at home—she simply had plans.

“Invite Kendra and John over.” He turned to accept her kiss and got caught in the dizzying distraction of her lips for a full minute before he realized he was dripping sauce from the spoon onto her hair. “I made more than enough for everyone, and I can make myself scarce if you guys need to talk. I should be getting ready for conferences next week anyway.”

“You’d do that? You’d drop your whole fancy seduction routine just so I can get some work done?”

“You think this is a fancy seduction routine?” And here he’d thought it was dinner. Curious, he added, “Is it working?”

She let out a soft snuff of laughter, her breath warm against his neck. “Like you wouldn’t believe. Nothing gets me hotter than a man in a frilly apron making me pasta.”

“Mmm,” he murmured. “There’s garlic bread too. I expect quivering loins for that.”

Whitney placed her hands on Matt’s shoulders and spun him, bringing them face to face. He had a smudge of something that looked like flour on one cheek, and he was, in fact, wearing a frilly pink-checked apron that looked to be about two sizes too small. In a word, he was gorgeous—and he

was planning on feeding her. And, if she wasn't mistaken, that one-dimpled grin indicated they might go ahead and skip dessert.

Coming home to a man was something she could definitely get used to.

"I wish it were that simple." She dropped her hands and backed away, trying not to notice the way his smile faltered. "Jared already made reservations."

"Jared is going." Neither question nor statement, it lingered somewhere in an uncomfortable place in between.

Lying would be such an easy way out of this—an easy way to spare feelings Whitney had no desire to harm. She knew, without a doubt, that Matt was the last man on earth who would check up on her, ask nosy questions afterwards, send his brother in to spy—any of those tricks that might catch her in the act. But if she was supposed to be doing this whole grown-up relationship thing, she'd do it right.

"Just Jared," she amended. "I sort of lost a bet at work today—just barely, mind you—and he wants to talk. This seems like as good a time as any."

"No."

She took a step back, recoiling against the sharpness of his tone. Matt *never* spoke to her like that. He never spoke to anyone like that. "I beg your pardon?"

Matt tossed the spoon into the pan and walked away from the oven, gripping his hands on the edge of the kitchen counter. He didn't look up as he repeated, "No."

"No, as in...you think it's going to rain so I better stay in tonight?"

"No, as in you aren't going to dinner alone with that man."

"I don't recall asking your permission." Her hackles were definitely up now—hackles and something else, something that felt a lot like what John might be inclined to call a lady boner. She wanted nothing more than to rip that

apron off Matt and ride him until he knew who was in charge here.

Good God, what kind of a woman had she turned into? How could the sight of two white knuckles holding onto the counter for dear life, of a man so angry he wouldn't even look at her, be such a turn-on? Wasn't that how all her favorite Lifetime movies started?

"I see the way that man stares at you, Whitney. It's not the look of a guy who wants to chitchat about old times while he dines on steak. Not unless you're the steak." Matt finally looked up, and she could tell he was barely holding on to his self-control. "I accept that he's your colleague and you need him for your business. I'm happy to be nice to him when we meet. But I don't trust that man, and I don't want you going out with him."

Whitney laughed. Granted, it wasn't the most appropriate reaction to the conversation, what with Matt on the edge of some sort of personal crisis and the smell of burning bread filling the air, but she couldn't help it. Matt was forbidding her from seeing her ex. Matt, of all the men in the world.

"I'm glad this is so funny to you," Matt said coldly.

"Please tell me you see the big, fat irony sitting in the middle of this kitchen. You're telling me to stay away from my cheating ex-boyfriend? You, who probably stopped by Laura's house this afternoon with some tea and a big hug? You don't see me getting up in arms every time you break bread with that woman. In fact, I'd say I've been the most understanding girlfriend on the face of the planet."

"That is a totally different situation."

She didn't say a word—she didn't have to. Matt realized how unfair he sounded just a few seconds later, and the daggers coming out of his eyes wavered. "Fine. Do you want me to stop seeing Laura?" he asked.

"No. Yes. I mean—" She sighed. *See what this messy relationship stuff did?* Already things were growing

complicated. She should have just jumped him when she had the chance. “I’m sorry that you went through all this trouble to make a meal I won’t be here to eat. I should have called or texted to let you know my plans. Can we try this again tomorrow?”

One lopsided half shrug was all she got in return. She marched up and planted a soft kiss on Matt’s mouth. He didn’t return the gesture, but she could feel his body responding. “There is no man I dislike more on this planet than Jared Fine. The number one entry on my personal bucket list is to see him die a thousand fiery deaths.”

“What’s the number two entry?” Matt asked, his forehead pressed against hers, resignation in his slumped shoulders.

“To go back in time and watch him die a thousand fiery deaths *before* he derailed my entire life.”

She got a soft chuckle that time. “I’m sorry.” Matt pulled away. “I don’t know what got into me tonight. Of course you should go to your dinner.”

“It’s okay. This is what normal people feel for their cheating exes. Hatred. Anger. Pulsating revulsion.”

“I didn’t even know revulsion could pulsate.”

“Believe me—with this bastard? It can do just about anything.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“The whole village came out to see us off, which was the most incredible part.” Jared rubbed his hand along his jaw, where the predictable five o’clock shadow made him appear grizzled and raw. “They spent weeks trying to keep us out by whatever means they had at their disposal, but once they saw how we were able to reattach that boy’s ear, it was like those decades of bad feelings toward Americans just disappeared.” He paused. “I’m boring you, aren’t I?”

Whitney didn’t bother suppressing her yawn. Bored, uninterested, mind-numbingly indifferent—it was all the same. “I’m not one of your sentimental med students, hanging on your every word. I’ve heard the stories. I was there for a good half dozen of them, remember?”

Her sarcasm didn’t appear to bother him. Leaning in, he placed his hand on hers. “You can’t tell me you didn’t feel anything when you were out in the field. You forget that I was there when you stepped off the airplane—remember that tiny little one-engine passenger plane, the one we thought would never make it? You were sentimental. I remember. The first to get up every morning, the last to go to bed.”

She remembered—all of it, the memories as clear as if they were moving pictures before her eyes. “God, that plane was something, wasn’t it? To this day, I’d swear the wing was held on with duct tape and sheer force of will.”

“You weren’t scared then.”

She snatched her hand back. “I’m still not. Don’t make the mistake of confusing apathy with fear.”

“I know I made a mistake—believe me, I know.” Jared’s eyes glittered at her over the table. He’d chosen the most romantic restaurant in the whole borough, a small Italian bistro with smells that, though tempting, didn’t rival the ones she’d left at home alone with Matt. “I really hurt you, didn’t I?”

“And don’t make the mistake of confusing my dislike of you now with deep-seated emotional pain. I resent your intrusion in my business life. That’s all.” Her gaze sought a place to land—anywhere but his face.

“Then why did you agree to let me on the team?”

What other choice did she have? From the moment Jared swooped into town, all their troubles seemed to simply fade away. The bank loan came through. Their client list began to grow. People stopped sticking protest signs in front of their building. She’d even gotten a call from the principal at Matt’s school asking her to fill in on a last-minute opening for Career Day.

Jared was a magic charm, the key they needed to open doors left and right. And as much as she hated to admit it, he wasn’t as terrible a person as she remembered. Still arrogant, yes, and still likely to cause her head to explode at the least provocation, but also...human. If Matt could find a way to coexist in the same town with the person who’d broken his heart, maybe she could too.

“I agreed because I’m not a completely selfish bitch, no matter how much you might like to think I am. I care about Kendra and John and the success of New Leaf, and I’ll do anything—including working next to your sorry ass every day—to make it work. Satisfied?”

“I doubt I’ll ever be that.”

Now it was her turn to be nosy. “What are you really doing here, in this town and at dinner with me? What is it you hope is going to happen?”

A heavy silence settled over the table, and she fought the urge to wipe it away with idle chatter. Unless they wanted to reenact this morning’s drama at work every day for the rest of their professional lives, the truth needed to come out.

“This was my dream too,” he finally said. “It belongs to all of us.”

“Am I supposed to believe you’re giving up your adventuring life of heroism, peace and goodwill for a chance

to do lipo on ladies who lunch?” She shook her head. “I’m not buying it. There’s more to your story.”

He studied her carefully, ignoring his plate of food, not moving until she uncomfortably acknowledged his desire for eye contact. “Almost twelve years, Whitney. One hundred and forty-three months. Four thousand three hundred and forty days. I can even tell you the number of hours, if you’re interested.”

“I know. It’s been a long time.”

“You don’t know. You have no idea. I could easily do another twelve years, and another twelve after that, and none of you would have any idea what it’s like. I’m done.”

“Good for you. If you don’t love the Make the World Smile work, you shouldn’t keep doing it.”

He laid his hands on the table and stretched his fingers flat against the tablecloth—a motion she recognized as the exact opposite of making fists. “I don’t just mean that I’m done with the organization. I mean I’m done atoning for the errors of my youth. Isn’t it time? Haven’t I suffered enough?”

The pasta in her stomach began to feel like a lead weight. She pushed her plate away and tossed her napkin on top to signal that she was rapidly approaching her limit.

“You seriously expect me to believe that you spent the past twelve years risking your life in the field as penance for shacking up with an anesthesiologist? Bullshit.”

“I made a mistake, one I know I can never undo.” His glance was stricken, and it would have taken a much stronger woman than she not to be moved by the entreaty she saw there. “But how much longer do I have to pay the price for our relationship ending? How much longer do I have to bear the responsibility alone?”

“No.” Her tone and voice echoed those of Matt earlier, and she couldn’t help but feel that he’d been right in forbidding her to come here. How much nicer would it be to have Matt’s arms around her right now? Those strong, kind,

gentle arms? They made no demands. They would never hurt her. They'd promised.

"No," she repeated. "You don't get to blame me because you couldn't keep it in your pants. Oh, excuse me—because you couldn't keep it in your military-grade combat slacks."

"Come on. You're a doctor. You know as well as I do that Nancy wasn't the disease. She was a symptom. A symptom I deeply regret, but that doesn't change the fact that we were over long before I slept with her. Or the fact that you knew it just as well as I did." He paused, a silence weighing several tons pulsing between them. Quieter and with infinite control, he added, "I saw the letter you wrote. I read it that same day you found me with Nancy. I'm not proud of that part, and I'll never be able to make it okay, but all I could think about was finding some way to hurt you even a fraction of the amount you hurt me."

Whitney's vision filled with lines of electric white light and her whole body shook with the effort of remaining calm. "What are you talking about? I tore that letter up. I never intended for anyone to see it."

"I saw it, Whitney. I read every last word."

"You know what? Fuck you." She stood, unable to stomach another second of sitting there, pretending to share a meal with this man. "A note I wrote to my parents as a scared, insecure twenty-two-year-old trapped in the middle of nowhere does not make me the guilty party here."

"No, it doesn't," Jared agreed. "I should never have pressed you to come with me to Guatemala in the first place, and it should have been my first priority to make sure you were settling in. And I know Nancy was a mistake. But at any time in those early weeks, you could have told me how you felt. You could have said you were having reservations about the whole thing—about *us*. Instead, I had to read it in that fucking letter. You called me self-absorbed. A self-absorbed hypocrite you barely recognized. Do you really think there was any way we could have ended that relationship on a happy

note after that? Was there anything I could have done or said that would have made it all okay?"

It was a good thing she wasn't holding a fork any longer, or she might have thrown it at his head. How dare he put this on her? How dare he rip open a wound that was only recently beginning to heal?

"You want to know how long you have to keep slaving away in jungles and deserts before I forgive you?" she said. "Twelve more years. No—make it twenty. And no matter how many women you send my way with visions of double Ds in their heads, your sentence remains intact."

He let her leave, clutching her purse with two-fisted ferocity and marching toward the door with such purpose she almost missed the slight, blondish woman sitting at a table near the door. Almost, but not quite. No amount of rage could erase that face from her memory.

"Laura?" She did a double take, twisting to get another look.

"Oh, hey, Whitney." Laura bobbed her head in greeting. "I saw you having dinner earlier but didn't want to interrupt."

What was this place, the broken relationship graveyard? She cast a look over Laura, making a quick note of her appearance. Yes, she looked thinner. And yes, there were bags under the woman's eyes that could hold a bowling ball. But unless she was very much mistaken... She peered closer.

"That's quite a rash you've got spreading up your neck there, Laura."

Laura's hand inadvertently went to her jawline. "Oh, that. It's nothing."

It didn't look like nothing. The red, blotchy dots seemed painful to the touch. "I'm curious—do you also have them on the roof of your mouth?"

Laura's eyes flew open, and she brushed her hair to cover the redness. Nervously, she gestured across the table. "This is Luke."

Luke, a slight, balding man who seemed to ooze insurance salesman out his pores, started to get up, but he took one look at Whitney's face and sat back down.

"Oh, nice. You're on a date." This was called anger transference—it was Psychology 101. Whitney recognized it but didn't give one-tenth of a damn. "How lovely for you. It's okay for *you* to move on with your life, but God forbid Matt try to do anything for himself." She adjusted her posture so that she addressed Luke. "Hello. I'm your date's ex-husband's new girlfriend. Tell me, have you been married before?"

Luke swallowed heavily. "Um...no."

"Serious relationship?"

"A few." He glanced nervously at Laura. "Why?"

"How many years?"

"Almost two."

"Perfect." Whitney pulled up an empty chair and dropped onto it, slamming her purse on the table. Something inside it cracked. Great. Now it matched the rest of her. "After you broke up with this serious two-year love, did you ever go over to her house to hang out?"

"Well, I went once to get my CDs."

"Look, Whitney," Laura interrupted. "I don't think—"

Whitney ignored her, placing both hands on the table and blazing forward. "And when you picked up said CDs, did she ask you to help her paint a room? Solve a complicated work situation? Guilt trip you into paying her credit card bill?"

"Well, Anne wasn't there. She was on vacation at the time."

Luke sure didn't have much in the way of imagination, did he? "But if Anne had been there?" she prodded. "Would she have asked?"

"Anne doesn't have any credit cards. She doesn't believe in incurring debt."

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Whitney gave up. “I hope you two will be very happy together.” She yanked her purse off the table, the contents spilling across the red-checked tablecloth. She shoved it all back in, groaning only a little over the shattered phone case as she stormed out the door. Things were replaceable.

This evening was not.

Matt hated to walk through the front door of his old house without knocking first. He had the key and he knew how to jiggle the handle to get it to open on the first try, and few things had changed since he'd left almost a year and a half ago. The same tidy wreath—with its appropriately seasonal decorations—greeted him from the door. The same muted colors smiled blandly down from the foyer. It even smelled the same, a mixture of simmering potatoes and the pungent vinegar they'd always used in place of chemical cleaners.

It had once been home. But in the past few months, he'd come to realize just how little this place had ever felt like his.

“Laura?” he asked, hesitating in the doorway.

While he'd never begrudge Laura his friendship, he hated being here like this. Sneaking. Lying, if he was being honest. He'd come straight from work, hoping to duck in and immediately back out, Whitney none the wiser.

Cowardly it might be, but when it came to things like negotiating dissolved relationships, Whitney's blinders were pitch black and sewed over her eyes.

“Are you here?” he asked again, louder this time.

“In the living room,” a feeble voice called. “Don't turn on the lights, please. I'm resting.”

Even though his sensible, no-slip loafers made barely a scuffle as they crossed the looped carpet, Matt tiptoed. All the blinds had been drawn tight against the cheerful spring sun, and the entire room thrummed with the heavy kind of stillness that had always made him feel like a stranger in his own house.

“Thank you for coming.” Laura’s voice was weak where she rested on the couch, and Matt couldn’t help a surge of pity from flooding him. Always a slight woman, Laura had lost a good twenty pounds in the past month. Still, she smiled to see him.

His chest clenched. How could two people who once shared so much have come to this? Laura, alone and clearly unwell. Matt, wanting desperately to do something to ease her pain, but no longer able to muster anything in her presence but guilt-stricken indifference.

“Of course.” He forced himself to appear cheerful. “Can I get you something? Water? A cup of tea?”

“No, I’m fine. Sit.” She patted the couch next to her and struggled to sit up, her blanket falling away. Matt let it fall and chose the seat farthest from her, a stiff, overstuffed armchair in a floral pattern he’d always hated.

Laura noticed his distance and smiled sadly. “I saw your girlfriend the other night. Whitney. The doctor.”

“Did you?” Matt felt a surge of irritation at the way Laura’s mouth formed the sounds of Whitney’s name, as if they were discussing an imaginary friend from Matt’s childhood. Whitney was real and incredible and *his*. And he didn’t care to talk about her with Laura.

“At Pizzaro’s. She was there with some guy. So was I.”

Ah, the infamous dinner with the good doctor who broke Whitney’s heart. When she’d come home that night, she’d been smoldering with fury at whatever dirty laundry had needed airing between the two of them. After asking once if she was okay, they’d tacitly decided not to discuss that particular evening—just jumped into bed like they hadn’t felt the touch of another human being for years. It had been desperate, needy sex, the pair of them clinging to one another as if their lifeboat was damn near running out of air.

They hadn’t talked about it since—and he wasn’t eager to break the heavy, lingering silence surrounding the topic with Laura, of all people.

“I hope you had a nice time,” he said blandly.

“I did. His name is Luke, by the way.”

He waited. What was the appropriate response when one’s ex-wife started seeing someone? *What are his intentions? Has he found your ticklish spot yet? Is he handy with a hedge trimmer?*

“I think we’ve done a good job, don’t you?”

Matt glanced around the room, looking for clues.

Laura laughed, the same short, semi-forced chuckle that she’d always had. At least some things couldn’t be eradicated with a grim diagnosis. “I meant with us. Look at how well we’ve handled things. Our one year divorciversary is coming up and we’re doing fine. Both of us dating again. No screaming fits. It’s as though we’ve always been the best of friends.”

“A divorciversary?” Matt relaxed into a smile. “I didn’t know that was something people celebrated.”

“I made it up. Pretty clever, huh?” She didn’t wait for him to acknowledge it. “But that’s sort of why I asked you here today.”

“Because we’re responsible adults?” For some reason, that realization didn’t make him feel particularly proud. No one would accuse Whitney of being a responsible adult. Sure, she had all the trappings, but inside, she was a whirlwind of emotions and sensations and opinions on the world. *An irresponsible adult.* He liked the sound of that.

“Yes. Because what I’m about to ask you is something that only responsible adults—like us—could even contemplate.”

He leaned forward, scooting to the edge of his chair. “Has something happened? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing like that.” She busied herself tucking the blanket more firmly around her. “It’s just...what would you say to moving back in? Only for a little while? Until I’m feeling...you know. Better.”

Matt had moved so far to the edge of the chair he could have been knocked off with a feather or a poke or even a slight breeze. But of course none of those things existed in this house. “Move back in? Here?”

This time, Laura’s smile was sad and a little wan, her already pale features growing more slight. “I know it’s crazy. But I can’t. I just can’t. Take care of things, of this place, of myself. I’m overwhelmed by this house every single day.” Then, more quietly, “I have been since you left. I know that’s my own fault, after what I did to you. I was just strong enough to handle it all before my illness. I’m nowhere near strong enough now.”

Matt gave up the pretense of sitting and moved to the mantle, to where the urn that contained Laura’s mother’s ashes rested, a reminder of just how close to the other side they were. He ran his finger over the stainless-steel surface, the engraving confirming the dates of the woman’s short life. “I’ll hire you a nurse. Live-in help if you need it. A whole fleet of housekeepers.”

“Matt, you can’t afford that.” Forcefully, she added, “Look at me, please.”

He turned, albeit begrudgingly. “What about the new guy? Luke?”

Laura laughed again. When had she become the calm in the middle of all this? “I don’t think one blind date is quite enough for a man to be saddled with all this, do you?”

“But I’m seeing someone,” he protested. Someone, he didn’t have to say, who had offered to throw Laura into the river on more than one occasion. Someone, he didn’t want to say, who made him feel a thousand things more than Laura ever had. “We’re not who we used to be.”

“That’s just it!” Laura sat up straighter. “You’ve moved on with your life, found someone new to love—you’re *happy*. I could never have asked otherwise.”

Happy. That’s what this was. Bumps and speed bumps and meddling exes aside, Whitney made him happy.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can do it.”

“Please. I don’t have anyone else.” Her voice cracked.
“I need you.”

There were those words again.

He closed his eyes, but the oppression in the room lingered, pressing at him from all sides. He should have taken Hilly’s advice and moved to a new city the moment he found out Laura cheated. He should have taken Lincoln’s advice and taken Laura to court so he could sell this goddamn house and wipe away the memories of the two of them once and for all.

He should take Whitney’s advice and tell Laura to go to hell.

A long, slow breath escaped him. It was too late now. The damage was done, the disease already taken hold. “I have to talk to Whitney first.”

“Of course you do,” Laura said, clearly pleased. “Oh, and Matt?”

He forced his shoulders to remain up, but couldn’t yet bring himself to open his eyes. “Yeah?”

“I’d love that cup of tea now.”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Whitney had lied when she said she'd torn up the letter.

Worn with creases and thousands of miles of international travel, yellowed with age, it lay dormant in one of the many boxes of ignored paperwork shoved under her desk at work.

Whitney loved her office, ignored paperwork and all. Unlike the rest of the spa, which was all balmy greens and sound recordings of ocean breezes, this room was one hundred percent hers. She'd hung her Gwentyth Hogan painting above her sleek, glass-top desk. Tasteful photographs of finely shaped breasts, butts and bellies adorned the rest of the brick-red walls. There was no need to tiptoe in here. What you saw was what you got—human perfection at its most evocative.

Her own imperfections huddled under the desk and in the closet and in the filing cabinet Kendra called a hot mess of medical liability.

Except the letter. That she pulled out and crinkled flat in front of her, recognizing the hasty, almost illegible scrawl as that of a young woman nearing the breaking point.

The words Jared had flung at her were all there, verbatim. *He's turned into a self-absorbed hypocrite I barely recognize anymore. A few more he'd skipped over were there too. Afraid he's not the man I fell in love with. Terrible mistake.*

She'd written the letter one rainy afternoon when all their supplies had flooded out and she didn't have a single pair of dry socks left. Of all the horrors of that jungle adventure, she remembered the squelch of her bare feet in sodden hiking boots the most.

A knock sounded at the door. Whitney called a cheerful "Come in" and shoved the letter into the nearest desk drawer.

"Well, it's just like we always imagined it." Jared came through the door, looking at ease in a pair of blue surgical

scrubs. “You and me, shaping middle-class derrieres together. Not many people can bond over 600ccs of adipose tissue.”

Whitney had to smile. She was pleasantly surprised by how much she enjoyed having a second plastic surgeon on staff. It was nice to have someone to talk to about irrigation pumps and aspirators. Kendra’s face when Whitney tried to interest her in the latest research in fat transfer didn’t exactly bear the rapt expression she was going for. “You and I are a rare breed, Dr. Fine, I’ll give us that much.”

“Does that mean you’ve finally come to your senses about me?” Jared shut the door gently behind him.

Apparently, he was coming in. She gestured at the empty chair across from her. “Please, come in. Sit. I’m delighted to have you.”

What a waste of sarcasm. Jared lowered himself into the chair without blinking. “You ran out on me the other night.”

“Did I? That was rude. Who’d have had any idea I’d turn out so poorly?”

“You really aren’t going to make this easy on me, are you?”

There was just enough pain in his voice to give her pause. She’d never hated this man quite as much as she did at this exact moment. Not because of what he’d done to her in the past or because he wanted to stand by her side during surgery every day. Not even because he was bringing up all these old emotions, long buried and suppressed, as all crappy emotions ought to be.

It was because he was *right*. Maybe she’d never sent that letter, and maybe she’d never intended for anyone to see it—but even if he’d never read the cruel, harsh sentences, they would have still existed in her head and in her heart. He must have known they were there, felt them hovering between them, long before that terrible, awful, life-changing day.

She realized now that what Jared was asking of her wasn’t really forgiveness. It was culpability. And that was the

one thing she wasn't sure she was capable of giving him.

"You don't deserve the easy route," she insisted.

"And I haven't taken it. You said it yourself, Whitney—you've moved on with your life. Can't we find a way to work together without all this..."

"Loathing?"

"History." He rose and moved to her side of the desk, an invisible barrier he had no right to cross. Sinking to his knees in front of her, he took her hands, a sincerity to his features she hadn't known he was capable of. "I loved you once, Whitney, and I'm fairly certain—as certain as a man can be—that you loved me too."

Whitney closed her eyes, willing herself as far from the room and this conversation as possible. Of course, reality didn't work that way, and she eventually had to open them again. Jared was still there, and so was she.

"So what if I did?" There was no use pretending anymore. "What does love change except that it makes your betrayal that much worse? Do you have any idea how awful it was for me, watching you and Nancy the anesthesiologist find one another? I didn't even like Guatemala. I never wanted to make the world smile."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because you asked me to!" She got to her feet, but Jared wouldn't let go of her hands. "There was nothing you could have asked me that I would have refused—didn't you know that? I would have given you everything."

"Like you gave it to Claus the very next day?"

She released a bitter laugh, her senses whirling. "I knew how much you hated him. Wasn't that clever of me? He was the perfect rebound. Available, great with his hands, the last man on the planet you'd want me to choose after you."

He shook her hands. "Can't you see that he was proof we were never meant to be? You slept with the first willing body you could find, heedless of what it meant for me or Claus

or the project or even yourself. You thought sex would fix things—you've always thought that. But it's not a substitute for a real relationship."

"You bastard." She pulled away, but instead of taking the moment of separation to compose herself, her fists rose and she beat against Jared's chest, landing blows, making almost no real impact. "I don't think that. *You* made me this way. *You* broke my heart."

He let her keep hitting him, the distance between them closing until he had his arms wrapped around her. "Dammit, Whitney. I'm not asking you to forgive me." His voice cracked. "I'm begging you to. Please let me move on. Please let me begin to forgive myself."

In that moment, Whitney stopped struggling. She couldn't hit anymore. She couldn't even move.

"Oh, Jared," she murmured, going slack against him. She and this man—this almost stranger—had once shared so many hopes and dreams together. How had they managed to go so wrong?

She was struggling to find the words when the door to her office swung open.

"Kendra said you weren't with a patient, so—"

She and Jared jumped apart. Even though there was nothing amorous about their embrace, even though Whitney was sure Matt would approve of her burgeoning compassion for the man she'd been so sure she'd never stop hating, being caught in the act of physical affection had a way of assigning guilt. Flustered, Whitney gave in to an overpowering impulse to adjust her clothes and smooth her hair.

"Whitney?" Matt's voice was small. "What's going on here?"

She offered a shaky laugh and extended a hand. "You're just in time. You won't believe the breakthrough Jared and I were having."

Breakthrough? Is that what they're calling it these days? It looked more to Matt like an embrace—and not one

that invited a third-party viewing. Jared's arms had not just been around Whitney, but holding her aloft, their faces close, eyes shining. It was the kind of embrace he and Whitney only recently mastered, the fusing of emotion and desire into one.

Matt's jaw clenched so tight he could hear his teeth grinding, and he was surprised to find that his hands had formed fists. He kept them balled up tight at his sides, unsure what to do with them. The urge to plant them in Jared's face was overpowering. But Matt was a peaceable man, an understanding man.

Wasn't he?

"What the hell is going on here?" he said, and even though his pulse sped up, he sounded flat and cold to his own ears. "There had better be an exceptionally good reason for all this."

"I told you." Whitney's smile stretched falsely across her face, and Matt could see that her outstretched hand shook. "I think I'm finally beginning to realize how it is that you and Laura can coexist in the same city."

"Oh, you are, are you?" He turned to Jared, his voice dangerously low. There was no way this was happening. Not again. Not with Whitney. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to talk to my *girlfriend* alone right now."

Jared held both hands up and backed away slowly, and it took Matt a moment to realize that the trepidation he saw in his face was directed toward him. "It's not what you think. Whitney and I go way back—"

"I know the story," Matt said through clenched teeth.

"Then you know how it ended." Jared nodded, as if that was all the explanation required. With one last, lingering look at Whitney—a last, lingering look that made Matt's head feel like it was home to a pressurized water heater—he escaped out the side door.

Whitney came forward, as if to embrace Matt, but he stepped aside. He didn't want her to touch him. Like a wound

rubbed raw, the tiniest brush of her fingers against his skin was likely to send him over the edge.

Who was he kidding? He was already flailing into it.

“Matt, come on,” she admonished softly. “This isn’t like you.”

“What isn’t like me?” he demanded. Even though Jared had left the room, Matt could still smell him, still feel him. Like a caged predator, Matt began pacing the room, the walls suddenly too small to contain the breadth of his emotion. “That I’d be upset to walk in here and find you wrapped in another man’s arms? Should I have walked out and given you another minute to yourselves? Let you finish? Jesus Christ, Whitney, I know you’ve always felt I’m too understanding when it comes to this kind of thing, but I’m still a man.”

“I know you are. You’re *my* man.” She tried again to approach him, but Matt angled himself behind a chair. He didn’t trust himself to get any closer.

Whitney’s face fell as she realized a few soft words weren’t going to cut it. “Just sit down for a second. Please.”

“I’m fine standing. I don’t think this will take long.”

Whitney wasn’t sure why, but it seemed imperative that Matt sit down. Maybe it was because he held himself so tense, like he could be off and running out the door in a matter of seconds. He couldn’t be off and running. He needed to hear her.

Didn’t he realize she’d had her breakthrough? She’d done it. She’d finally found a way to forgive.

“I see now why it is you’re so close to Laura,” she offered—feebly, she knew, but she wasn’t sure how else to start this conversation. Jared was right. She’d always thought that sex would fix things. Between the two of them. As a cure for Matt to move on. But so much more powerful than the physical manifestations of love were the emotional ones. “I know I’ve been the biggest advocate for you tossing her to the curb—and I still think she’s one of those women who go to terrible lengths to avoid being alone—but I was wrong.”

“No, I’m the one who was wrong.” Matt thumped the chair on the floor. “I can’t believe I was so stupid to think you actually wanted to be with me. Me! This whole time, I’ve been nothing more than a passing phase, a sexual conquest.”

“No,” she tried.

She failed.

“Don’t patronize me.” Matt swore under his breath, something he almost never did. It scared her almost as much as the white-hot fury she read in his face. “I fucking *love* you, Whitney. I know you think it’s too soon for that, and I know I’m supposed to just bury my feelings until you’re ready for them, but that’s not me. I love you and I don’t care if you know it.”

That was the second time a man had used the L-word in this office in the past hour, and while Jared’s declaration had left her feeling all the nausea of regret, Matt’s words made her feel lighter—happier—than she had in years. *Love*. Such a complex, twisted emotion rendered pure when it came from this man.

“Matt, I lo—” she began.

He cut her off. “It doesn’t matter. I won’t do this again, do you hear me? I refuse to sit by and watch the woman I love throw me away for someone else. You, of all people, should know that. Since the day we first met, you’ve been trying to get me to realize what kind of a horrible human being would cheat on someone they cared about. Well, guess what? I think I’ve got it now.”

Her heart lodged somewhere in the region of her throat. “Matt. No.”

“What was it you said to me once? About what you felt for your cheating ex? Hatred, anger, pulsating revulsion?”

No. Not those. Anything but those.

Whitney’s legs gave way and she fell to her chair. And just as she thought the moment couldn’t get any worse, Matt added, “I came over today to tell you that Laura asked me to move back in with her.”

She shook her head, unable to form the words that would prevent him from making such a catastrophic life decision. The jeggings could not win.

“I’m not asking your opinion, Whitney. I just wanted you to know.”

Before she could do more than let out a strangled cry of protest, Matt turned on his heel and left, slamming the door as he went. Behind her, the Gwyneth Hogan painting fell to the ground and the air filled with the sound of cracking wood as the rack splintered and ripped the canvas in two.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Whitney wasn't an easily intimidated woman.

She'd back herself in a game of pool against an entire motorcycle gang, look Natalie Horn in the eye and tell her exactly what she thought about her so-called morality, fight this town until it finally accepted her and her friends for what they had to offer.

Those things were easy. Second nature. The right of a woman who'd forged a path through this life with a scalpel and a kick-ass pair of boots.

But I don't think I can do this. She'd met her match, and it existed in the shape of approximately two hundred small humans—all of them trying to touch her giant rubber glob of fat. *Not today.* Not when a scalpel and a kick-ass pair of boots wouldn't get her Matt back.

She stood underneath a banner showcasing her face, the New Leaf logo and the name Dr. Vidra in bright white lettering. All across the gymnasium, other banners and businesses highlighted the various careers to be found throughout Pleasant Park. There was a nice old dentist to her right who had apparently been born in one of the historic homes on Main Street and was angling for free medical advice about a skin tag on his lower back. To her left, the baker who made the incredible orange dreamsicle cupcakes kept pushing the tray of samples closer to Whitney's side.

They were nice people, friendly and seemingly happy to have her as part of their Career Day alumni. With the exception of Natalie Horn, who occasionally snuck by on silent ballet flats, there was no evidence that Whitney had been perilously near being branded with a giant red *A* on her chest.

She'd done it. She was in. Maybe it had taken a little more Jared Fine influence than she cared to admit, but the town had finally broken, had finally accepted her for who she was. All the pending approvals slipped through the red tape. All the petitions vanished overnight.

She should have been ecstatic.

She wasn't.

What was the point in winning over an entire town when the one person who really mattered had seared her with a brand so much worse, so much more painful than a little red letter?

He'd gotten all the way to her heart. And it *hurt*.

"Is that real fat?" asked a dark-haired girl missing what looked to be about eight of her teeth. "Can I touch it?"

"I'm sorry. It's not real. Fat is a lot more aqueous when we extract it." Noting the girl's puzzled look, she amended, "Globby and gushy."

The girl poked the model, a twisted, yellow mass, and her eyes lit up. "How do you get it out? Do you cut it off? Like meat?"

Whitney swallowed the lump in her throat and knelt to the girl's level. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard, after all. This girl had a glint in her eye Whitney recognized. Blood lust. Curiosity. These were things she could work with. "That depends on where I'm taking it from. The fat in your bu...I mean, bottom?"

The girl nodded, clasping her hands together eagerly.

"Well, that's called subcutaneous fat. That means it's easier to cut out pieces kind of like meat, though we use sharper knives. But the fat in your tummy?"

The girl touched her stomach.

"It's mostly visceral. That means we can slurp it out with a tiny vacuum."

"That is so cool."

It *was* cool. She straightened and prepared herself to handle the next wave of students heading her way. She'd thought that talking to people would be the real agony—the coming here, the standing in front of a crowd that despised her. But the kids were unconcerned about any of the local politics

surrounding New Leaf. Maybe their parents accepted Whitney only because they had no other choice, but to these tiny creatures, she was an interesting lady doctor who cut off people's moles.

She could be the interesting lady doctor, no problem. She could even be the least-liked member of the New Leaf professional team, which seemed likely for most of the foreseeable future.

What she couldn't be was in the same room with Matt for another minute, unable to do anything while he demolished her with his eyes. It would be one thing if he simply ignored her, erected a stone wall around himself and pretended he didn't care. That she could handle. Hell, she was the queen of handling that.

But every time she looked up, he was watching—not with joy, not with condemnation, not with anything other than a deep, intense longing. All that, all for her, and still it wasn't enough to carry him across the floor. She was too late. As he'd promised the night they first made love, he'd given her his heart to keep safe. And she'd crushed it.

"Do we get a break soon?" she asked Valerie, the cupcake magician.

"They didn't tell you?" Valerie laughed. She had a deep smoker's voice and a sheet of steely gray hair that went to her waist. A tiny waist, which, given her profession, spoke volumes about the woman's restraint. "This is just the first wave—and these are the fun ones. Wait until we get the fifth and sixth graders. The only thing they care about less than talking to adults about jobs is, well, nothing. We're as low as it gets. I'm lucky—I can bribe them with sweets."

Whitney laughed, but it felt brittle, forced. She thought she'd have a chance to at least *talk* to Matt today. Every day, every hour that passed with the huge gaping void between them made her feel exponentially sicker to her stomach.

It was a feeling she'd have to get used to. Even if it killed her, sealed her fate in a glass coffin, she had to stop him from moving back in with the woman who'd taken a

metaphorical machete to their marriage vows. Let her give him that much. Let her *try*.

As she watched him move through the gym, herding his class in a jacket complete with elbow patches and a teddy bear sticker on the lapel, she realized just how much she missed him. And perhaps more important, she missed who she became when he was around—a stronger, happier, better version of herself.

All these years, all those men, and no one had ever told her love was that simple.

A group of the aforementioned sixth graders came barreling up, easily identifiable from both their comparative size and the way they sneered over her table of tools—all of them carefully selected to appeal to the younger crowd.

“What’s this?” one boy asked. Based on the polo player logo on his shirt and the trendy, sideswept hairstyle inexplicably favored by this age group, she’d have bet her share of the practice he was Natalie’s son. The epicanthic folds on his eyelids were also a dead giveaway. “It looks like a chisel from my grandpa’s shed. Gross. What else do you use? A rusty hacksaw?”

“You’re actually pretty close.” She held up the tool and handed it to him. Maybe today’s efforts wouldn’t get her any closer toward filling the gaping, painfully hopeful hole Matt left behind, but she’d be damned if she was going to let herself lose face in front of a bunch of twelve-year-olds. “It’s called an osteotome. When I do a rhinoplasty—that’s a nose job—I shove this up the patient’s nose and bang it with a rubber mallet. Thwack. The bone just chips away.”

“No way!” several of the kids cried at once. Even mini-Horn let out an approving noise.

“You think that’s cool?” Today, she would win over children. Tomorrow, she could tackle Matt. Maybe. If her heart held up. With a deep breath, she held up a small file-like tool and flashed it at them. “Then you should check out my rasp.”

Matt could hear the shouts of the sixth grade class over at Whitney's table. His first instinct—one of alarm—demanded that he rush over there and extricate her from their cruel, preadolescent grasp.

Not my problem. Not my concern.

Whitney had more than proven that she could handle herself in this world. She wore a man down and took what she wanted. And then she moved on.

“Aren't you dating that woman?” Michelle, the music teacher, sidled up and stared across the gym alongside him. Their target, the vibrant Dr. Vidra clad for once in a sensible white lab coat, held up something flashy and silver. “Would you look at that. The kids are just eating her up.”

“She's good at telling people what they want to hear,” was all Matt would say.

It was too much to expect the day to continue on without running into her. He was partly responsible for her being here in the first place, having personally vouched for her with the school board a few weeks ago, even going so far as to ask Natalie to capitulate a little, if only as a favor to him.

Natalie hadn't exactly been happy about it, but even she had to admit that New Leaf was growing on the community. Though resistant at first, the people of Pleasant Park liked the promise of new ideas, of new faces—and of new blood. If nothing else, they recognized the fountain of gossip gushing inside those four walls.

Even though Matt busied himself with his class and tried to keep them interested in the construction company owner and investment banker, he eventually found himself standing across her table.

Underneath the white lab coat, she wore a dark skirt and shiny turquoise blouse—professional clothes, albeit ones in the bright hues she favored. Her hair wound unbound and unruly down her back, huge loopy bracelets jangling on her arm. How a woman could look so coolly medical and mind-bendingly gorgeous at the same time was beyond him.

Also beyond him was what he planned to do about it. His body forgave, but his heart?

He wasn't sure it still existed anymore.

“Hey.” She was the first to speak, the sole syllable breathy and warm.

He nodded once, unable to trust himself with the monumental task of speaking.

“How are you?”

Inanities—that was how she planned to do this. How wonderful it must be to call those up on a whim, to push feelings aside for the sake of polite conversation.

“I'm good, thanks.” He spoke through clenched teeth. “You?”

“Sad. Worried.” Whitney paused, weighing her next words carefully as she studied Matt's angry gaze.

She was already playing with fire; there was no need to incite a blaze. Unfortunately, certain questions had to be asked if she intended to ever sleep at night again. Even if Matt never got past his hang-ups about Jared, she needed him to get past the ones with his ex-wife.

She swallowed a bitter laugh. Look at her—a rebound girl to the very end. She wouldn't move on until she knew he was ready to face the world alone. With a deep breath, she asked the question burning on her lips. “How is Laura?”

“No.” Matt took a huge step backward, recoiling as if slapped. “I'm sorry. I thought I could come over here, have a conversation with you, clear the air. I was wrong. I cannot and will not talk to you about my ex-wife. Not now. Not ever. You lost that right.”

Something inside her snapped. She was guilty of many things and would go on to be guilty of a great many more, but this was one injustice from which she refused to back down.

“When has it ever been my right?” She was talking too loud, creating a scene, but she could no more stop herself from speaking than she could from trying to protect Matt. “Tell me

that, please. As your fling, I wasn't allowed to say anything because we were only temporary and you didn't want me touching your life in any way that mattered. As your girlfriend, I had to be supportive and understanding or come across as a callous, unfeeling...you-know-what." Too many tiny ears, too much adult interest. She lowered her voice. "I would think that now, as a woman who has to suffer all the resentment and blame you couldn't be bothered to muster over your ex-wife, I'd finally get a say."

Matt held up his hand.

With that one small motion, his entire classroom stilled and placed her tools back down on the table, and even made zipper motions across their mouths. Whitney fought the urge to do the same—his stern command was that strong.

"Come on, class. Career Day is over. Say thank you to Dr. Vidra for letting you touch her toys."

Twenty-four small kids obeyed, their voices chiming a friendly thanks before they filed out of the gym. Whitney watched them go, hands on her hips, her foot tapping so furiously she probably wore a hole in the glossy plank boards.

Say what it did about her, but it felt good to have her anger back. Screw pain. Screw longing. Matt might not want to touch her toys anymore—and he might think Laura was none of her business—but this was not how their story was going to end. This was not where she gave up.

After all, she'd made the town of Pleasant Park accept her for who she was. Surely she could do the same for one stubborn, saintly man.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Why am I doing this again?” Jared looked down at the suit and tie Whitney had hand-pressed and grimaced.

“Because it matters to me.” She stood back and viewed her handiwork. Jared looked good in a suit—he always had—but Whitney was happy to note that the sight of him all gussied up did no more to her equilibrium than if he’d been wearing his usual scrubs. This was what it felt like to coexist amicably with a former lover, to work side-by-side and beg favors.

It felt like nothing.

At least, it felt like nothing compared to the gaping hole in her chest that no amount of Valerie’s cupcakes and Lifetime movie marathons could fill.

“Do this one favor, and I’ll wipe the slate clean. We’ll be strangers meeting for the first time. Colleagues. I might even let you assist me on some of the bigger surgeries.”

Jared let out a soft snort. “How generous. Are you sure this isn’t a last-minute attempt to get rid of me for good? Sending me in to pretend someone is my patient so I can look at her confidential files could get my license revoked. You know that.”

“Remember that time you had your dick inside Nancy the anesthesiologist?” she said lightly. “We’ll call this even.”

Jared’s brow lowered as he adjusted his tie. The heavy frown lines etched into his face would never fully disappear, but Whitney liked to think that they were softening a little.

“Fine,” he said. “But this is the last time you get to hold that against me. You promised.”

“She promises.” Kendra wrapped her arms around Whitney’s waist. “Though do you really think you should go through with this plan of yours, Whit? I’m not so sure throwing something of this magnitude in Matt’s face is such a good idea right now.”

Neither was she. The last thing she wanted to give Matt right now was one more barb, an I-told-you-so moment that would probably deflate what was left of his respect for her.

But what other choice was there?

“Would you do it for me?”

“Of course I would,” Kendra automatically replied. There wasn’t a whole lot in this world her friend wouldn’t do for her.

“I would too,” Jared put in. “Even if it meant you’d end up hating me for the next twelve years.”

Whitney nodded. Despite his popular reputation among the general masses, Jared wasn’t perfect, and no amount of law breaking on her behalf would change her opinion on the subject of infidelity. But even Whitney had to admit—if there was one thing this man knew, it was how to exist in a world where relationships were founded on a bizarre mixture of love and hate.

“Then do it.” She checked her cell phone for the time. “We’ll meet outside the office at thirteen hundred hours.”

Both Kendra and Jared whipped their heads to stare at her.

“What? I’m nervous, okay?”

That was the understatement of the decade. Nerves were a pre-surgery shake off, the pitter patter of her heart in the moment before Matt entered her.

These weren’t nerves. It was the earth tilting on its axis, shaking her from the last clinging grasp she had left.

Well, too bad. She hadn’t let go yet.

And if she had anything to say about it, she never would.

Matt was so grateful to finally get Laura to a doctor he didn’t mind that she asked him to wait outside in the car. It had taken the combined efforts of him, Natalie, Laura’s sister and the nosy neighbor across the street, but their collective

nagging had worn her down and convinced her that she couldn't give up without at least hearing all her treatment plan options.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

He put his feet up on the dashboard and settled in for a long wait. No reading material, no papers to look over, no phone calls to make...all he wanted to do was close his eyes and give in to a profound urge to sleep the rest of the day, week, month away. He wasn't particular as long as time passed and eased some of the ache that settled on his soul.

A flash of black leaving the office caught his attention before he got very far with that plan. Matt dropped his feet to the floor, leaning closer to the windshield to get a better look. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that black flash looked an awful lot like the infamous Dr. Fine, dressed to kill.

The car door opened, and Matt had to look down to realize that it was his own manic grip that held the handle firmly. Before he had time to recognize that the constant ache he'd felt for the past few days had been replaced by a boiling hatred, he was halfway across the parking lot.

"What are you doing here?"

Jared turned, his heavy brows raised as he looked up to find Matt looming over him. "One could ask the same thing of you."

The man was coolly distant—so much so Matt wanted to shake him. If anyone had the right to be outraged at the turn of events, it was him. "I don't really think that's any of your business, is it?"

"No, it's not." Jared stuck out his hand, holding it there so long Matt had no choice but to take it. "It's nice to formally meet you. I'm sorry we weren't able to do this under more congenial circumstances. Jared Fine."

"I know who you are," Matt grumbled. Still, courtesy compelled him to respond in kind. "Matt Fuller. Did you happen to see my ex-wife while you were in there?"

Jared's brows knit. "Unless she's an eighty-year-old woman in a muumuu or a chirpy receptionist who looks like she should still be in high school, no. Most of the office is out for lunch."

"She might be back with the doctor."

"The doctor is also out for lunch. Look, Matt—I don't know how to say this without it being really awkward."

In a voice he barely recognized, Matt asked, "Don't you think we might have passed awkward the day I walked in to find you with your arms around my girlfriend?"

Jared backed off, clearly hearing how close Matt was to losing it. And he was close—he seemed to constantly walk the edge these days. "Fair enough. But I think you might want to ask your, uh, Laura about her diagnosis. She's not inside there, and she doesn't have cancer. I think you might be missing a few vital pieces of that puzzle."

The yellow lines of the parking lot blurred in and out of focus. "How would you know anything about it?"

"Because Whitney asked me to check her records."

He dared to say her name out loud. All was fine until that man's lips—once a vital part of Whitney's life—formed the syllables Matt couldn't say out loud. "I have never punched a man in my life, but I have to warn you, I'm dangerously close to changing my views on violence as a means of solving my problems."

"And I've punched more men than you probably care to find out," Jared returned calmly. "So go right ahead."

They stood at a stalemate for a full minute before Matt realized how ridiculous the whole situation was—a thought bolstered by the sight of Laura coming out of the café located around the corner and behind the doctor's office.

"What's she doing getting coffee instead of seeing her doctor?" he wondered out loud, watching as she tossed an empty paper cup in the garbage and checked her phone. He looked at Jared and back at his ex-wife, no answers making themselves clear in the meantime.

“Whitney wanted to tell you herself, but maybe you should go talk to your ex-wife instead. I think you might have a lot to discuss.” He gestured at his watch. “I should go. I have surgery at two. Can we pretend this whole conversation never happened?”

“Nothing would make me happier,” Matt said, but he was already jogging up to Laura and didn’t catch what, if anything, Jared had to say in return.

“What are you doing?” Matt took Laura’s arm as she stepped down from the sidewalk. He led her to a black bistro set on the café patio, making sure she was settled comfortably in her seat before taking the one opposite her. “You promised us you’d talk to a doctor today. This isn’t a joke or some kind of game. This is your life we’re talking about.”

“Oh, you know.” Laura’s eyes filled with tears and she waved her hand. “I, uh, just couldn’t do it.”

“What do you mean, you couldn’t do it?” And why had Whitney asked Jared to check Laura’s records? There was no possible benefit to that, unless...*no*. It was too awful to even contemplate. “What’s going on here?”

Laura’s fingers trembled. They did that a lot lately, but Matt had assumed it was part of the illness. Now, he realized, it might actually be fear.

“Oh, Matt. I’m so sorry.”

“What aren’t you telling me—why are you here eating scones instead of seeing a doctor? And why do you refuse to answer all our questions about your diagnosis?”

“It’s not what you think.”

Had Jared been telling the truth? Oh, God. Had Whitney? “You mean it’s not cancer?”

Her lower lip trembled.

“Laura,” he warned, not fooled for a second.

“It’s mono!” she wailed.

Matt sat, stunned and immobile. A gust of wind picked up around him, lifting the edges of Laura's dress, playing with her hair and painting her in the delicate image that had so long existed inside his memory. But when the wind fell flat, bringing her crashing down with it, Matt felt as though he, too, had been cast upon the ground.

"When you say it's mono, you mean a special kind of cancer, right?" he asked slowly. "That's a new name for it?"

Laura shook her head miserably and began playing with the bracelets around her wrist. "No. I mean it's mono. The kissing disease. I probably got it from William, and it's just now taking hold. The doctor says that between the virus and my stress about us and everything..."

"Us?" Matt shook his head as if to clear it. "Stress about us?" His voice was overloud, he knew, and the couple the next table over were listening with a keen tilt to their heads, but he didn't care. How many books had he read on ovarian cancer in the past month? How many times had he delayed his plans with Whitney to take care of Laura?

How much of my life have I already sacrificed to this woman?

"It was just so hard when you left." Laura's voice cracked, and the eavesdropping couple scooted closer. "Everyone hated me for what I did—my dad, my sister, even my supposed friends had this way of getting quiet whenever I came near. And what with the house and trying to find a job and William dumping me...I don't think I ever realized how much I depended on you for everything."

"Not everything," he said coldly.

Laura burst into tears. The woman the next table over handed her a napkin, which Laura promptly buried her face in. "And then for the first few months, you were so nice about checking in and making sure I was okay. That is, until you started dating that woman."

Matt's heart stopped. "Don't you dare call her *that woman*."

“You know what I mean. You disappeared, you moved on without me.” She sniffled loudly. “And then I began to feel really sick and you started coming around again. The doctors really did suspect cancer at first—that much wasn’t a lie. But when the diagnosis for mono came through, I was afraid you’d start pulling away again. Can you blame me? Can you really be mad at me for holding on to whatever I could of us?”

“Yes.” He got up from his chair, feeling cold all over. “I can.”

“Wha—” Laura’s jaw fell open and she scrambled to get out of her chair.

Matt turned his back on her, trying to gather his thoughts, attempting to moderate his billowing rage into something that wouldn’t make him look like a man transformed into a monster on the street.

And then he gave up.

“I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been.” He kicked the empty chair and squared off to face her. She took a cautionary step back, and Matt didn’t feel an urge to stop her. He felt proud of that. “You cheated on me—how is that in any way not clear? You took another man to your bed—*our bed*—on more than one occasion. And you’re the one who asked *me* for a divorce. Don’t you remember? You couldn’t pretend anymore, that’s what you said. We’d lost our connection and you hated to live a lie. You wouldn’t even try counseling.”

“I was wrong, I know that now.”

“We were both wrong.” He caught sight of the woman at the next table giving him a small fist pump, cheering him on. “You shouldn’t have thrown us away like that without even trying to fight. And I shouldn’t have stuck around as long as I did trying to make you feel better about the choices you made. Whitney was right.”

Laura had been doing nothing but manipulating him for months. And he’d let her.

“You don’t love her. Not like you love me.”

“That’s one thing you have absolutely right.” He was yelling now, channeling all the fury he’d flung so carelessly at Whitney into its proper channel for once. “I love her more than you’ll ever know.”

And if it wasn’t too late, he might have a chance to keep doing just that.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

“What do you mean, you ran into him in the parking lot?”

“Well, in the most accurate sense of the word, he ran into me,” Jared said. “Quite purposefully. He’s very angry, your young man.”

“He’s not *that* young,” Whitney muttered. “And you’re sure it was Epstein-Barr? I was right about her diagnosis?”

“Of course I am. I haven’t been out of the medical world that long.” Jared released a well-worn sigh, a sound Whitney remembered as mounting frustration and a sign he was about to revert to imperious surgeon mode. “Can I be done with your relationship drama now? I really do have that patient at two, and the medical assistant you guys hired is just awful.”

“We had limited options,” Whitney retorted, but the irritable banter felt good. Normal. Friendly, even. “If you don’t like it, you know where the nearest airport is.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Jared started to leave, but he paused, his hand on her office door. “I’m glad you found someone who can stand your awful personality, Whitney. I didn’t think it could be done.”

“Now all you have to do is find someone who can stand your awful face,” she said sweetly, not daring to suggest that she might not actually have Matt at all. “Unless you’d like me to do a little something about that overhanging brow ridge?”

“Don’t you dare start.” With that, Jared closed the door behind him.

It opened seconds later, and she formed another clever retort to throw at him. Fortunately, she called it back at the last second, helped along by the sudden lack of air in the room.

“Matt.”

He stood in the doorway, a picture of the first night they’d met. Ugly jacket, awkward confidence, a hint of

dimples. Was it on purpose? Did he know how the sight of those heinous elbow patches made her heart swell?

It was all she could do not to launch herself across the room at him. “You’re here.”

“Of course I am. I came as soon as I found out.”

She rose from her desk hesitantly, bracing herself on the glass top, leaving an array of sweaty fingerprints behind. “Found out about what?”

“Mono.”

An overwhelming urge to giggle struck her, and Whitney clapped her free hand over her mouth. There was nothing funny about this situation—she’d never been closer to losing the most important thing in her life, and she wasn’t about to ruin her last chance with a poorly timed fit of hilarity.

“What?” Matt stepped forward, concern darkening his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Say it again,” she ordered.

A look of confusion passed over his face, but it didn’t last long. He caught the amusement in Whitney’s voice. “Mononucleosis,” he said, drawing out each syllable.

This time, a full laugh escaped. “Oh, Matt. I’m so sorry you had to find out like that.” And she *was* sorry—about the method. Not that the truth had finally come to light. “It was the rash that gave it away. Can you believe I asked her about her symptoms in public? At a restaurant where dozens of people were gorging on pasta?”

“Yes, I can believe it.” Matt’s eyes twinkled. “When have you ever held anything back?”

That was all the cue she needed. Releasing her grasp on the desk, she threw herself at Matt, never more grateful for anything than when he caught her open-armed.

“Never. I’ve never held back and I’m not going to start now,” she said into his lapel. It felt so good to be pressed in his arms—so right—she didn’t dare look up for fear of what she’d see in his face. “I’m sorry you caught me embracing Jared, but

you have to know that there is nothing between the two of us. Not like that.”

“I believe you,” Matt said into her hair, his arms tightening around her.

She felt brave enough to push harder. “And even though I know you don’t like him, he’s going to be a part of my life now. You can’t fly into a jealous rage every time we have to be alone together.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

She pulled back and stared at him, taking in the chagrin that made him look so much like a man she could spend the rest of her life with. “But you are allowed to tell me how you feel about Jared—and to have a say in how he and I move forward in our lives together. Just like I expect to be able to say things about you and Laura. We’ve got baggage, you and I. Lots of it. The least we can do is help each other carry it.”

The look of chagrin only deepened. “I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you about her. I was so sure I was doing the right thing, taking the high road.”

“I hear the high road is pretty lonely.”

“It is. And I think I lost my permanent membership when I walked in on you and Jared and acted like such a possessive ass. I have no excuse for the way I reacted, other than that it was the exact moment when everything I felt for Laura—all those awful feelings of jealousy and rage and betrayal I refused to let loose—came rushing to the surface. I didn’t know what to do with them, so I just threw them, let them fly, not caring where they landed. I’m sorry you had to play catcher.”

Matt’s eyes shone with emotion, and she let herself bask in it.

“It’s funny,” she replied. “That was almost the exact moment I realized that all the jealousy and rage and betrayal I felt towards Jared was a poor substitute for taking a long, hard look at my own life. I blamed him for my faults, thought that if

he took all the responsibility for our breakup, I'd have a good excuse to never open myself up again."

"And now?"

She reached up and traced the outside of his lips, a soft and intimate gesture that spiked her blood. "Did you really move back in with Laura? I'm half afraid I'm going to get mono if I kiss you."

He let out a soft laugh. "No. And I was never going to. I came to your office that day to tell you about it and see if you had any insight about how to turn her down."

"Oh, that would have been easy."

One of Matt's hands snaked around her waist, the other coming up behind her head, pulling her close. "It would?"

"Mmm-hmm." She smiled. "You would have been forced to tell her that you've already made new living arrangements. With me."

He almost dropped her. "Are you serious?"

"I want you barefoot in my kitchen, Matt Fuller. It's where you belong."

She didn't hear his answer, but she assumed it was a yes. She was far too busy falling into the endless pleasures of his kiss to care either way.

Epilogue

“Your sister is the single most terrifying human being I have ever met.” Whitney hid behind Matt and slipped off her shoes. Without her heels, she could safely hide most of her body behind his broad shoulders and loose-fitting jacket. “Please don’t let her ask me any more medical questions. I’m begging you.”

“Trenton has this tiny recurring rash I meant to ask you about,” Hilly boomed, drawing closer. Matt’s shoulders—her supposed protection—shook with laughter. “He won’t let me check it because it’s on his S-C-R-O-T-U-M. But you’re a doctor. You’re pretty. You’re young. Maybe he’ll let you look at it.”

“Oh, God, Hilly.” Matt gave in to his laughter. “I can promise you that the last thing any boy his age wants is a young, pretty doctor checking his parts for signs of infection. Make him a real appointment with your family practitioner. And please leave my girlfriend alone.”

Hilly muttered something about selfish, hoarding brothers and stomped back into the kitchen, where a cauldron that smelled like a mildewing fish tank bubbled.

“I told you I was going to make you meet my sister,” Matt said triumphantly, whisking Whitney from behind him and encapsulating her in his arms. He kissed her lightly on the nose. “And I told you the experience was right up there with botflies and tapeworms. But it’s too late now. You’re one of us.”

Whitney stiffened.

“What?” Matt’s brow lowered, and he pulled away. “I thought you were excited about this meeting the family stuff. I thought it was what you wanted.”

“It *is* what I want,” she replied. God, he was so easy to rile up. “But I can’t hear the word botfly anymore without getting turned on. You don’t want to know what happens when I look at a picture of a tapeworm.”

His eyes flew open and he scanned his sister's living room, a vintage patchwork of wood paneling, shag carpeting and the most adorable family photos of Matt growing up. "Here? Now?"

She kissed him softly, her lips a promise against his. "Anywhere. Always."

"My sister is never going to forgive us if we miss dinner." His voice low, Matt pulled her closer, their bodies pressed tight. Tapeworms seemed to have quite the positive effect on him too. "She might even refuse to cook for us ever again."

Whitney grinned. "Maybe we'll have to take the whole family out next week to make up for it. I could invite my parents to join us. Who knows? Hilly might have all sorts of complex legal questions she'd like my dad to answer for free."

"And if that doesn't work out, he could always just take a look at Trenton's S-C-R-O-T-U-M."

Whitney threw her head back and laughed. Never, in all her years of casual relationships and forty-eight hour hospital shifts, had she thought happiness would be this easy. It was a sweet, caring man who always remembered to kiss her goodnight. It was a business she loved and her friends by her side. And most important, it was finding acceptance against all odds.

Her life in Pleasant Park might technically be just beginning, and she was pretty sure there were morality battles galore waiting on the road ahead, but Whitney was absolutely certain of one thing.

She was home.

About The Author

Tamara Morgan



Tamara Morgan is an award-winning contemporary romance author. Ninety-nine percent of her information comes from television, movies, books, and all other pop culture activities that limit the

amount of time she has to spend in polite company.

Her long-lived affinity for romance novels survived a B.A. degree in English Literature, after which time she discovered it was much more fun to create stories than analyze the life out of them. She lives with her husband and teen in the Inland Northwest, where the summers are hot, the winters are cold, and coffee is available on every street corner.

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