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C H A P T E R

Kate Nelson glanced at the kitchen clock while unloading the dishwasher, chewing the inside of her cheek. In less than eight hours, she would be naked in bed with her husband. It was the afternoon of their twenty-fourth wedding anniversary and she had that all-too-common feeling in her neck and back muscles. The tendons were already tensing in dismay, and her mind was jumping into hyperspace thinking of ways to avoid the unavoidable. That morning she'd persuaded her husband to settle for body massages after their fancy dinner rather than intercourse. He'd agreed, but she was sure he wasn't happy about it.

"Hi, Mom, I'm home," Nicole announced, bouncing through the door in her black and gold cheerleading outfit.

"Why so early?"

"Gotta find my letter jacket and get over to the stadium for game practice. It's so chilly. I hate standing around shivering between touchdowns."

Her youngest daughter, a senior at Burnsville High School in suburban Minneapolis, rushed by Kate, kissing her on the cheek. Nicole ran back

through the kitchen carrying her jacket. “Almost forgot, Mom ... Happy Anniversary. Tell Daddy I wished him the same.” She made straight for the door. “Hope you guys have a nice dinner out tonight.”

“Thanks, Sweetie. Are you still planning to sleep over at Megan’s tonight?”

“Yep.” A car horn beeped outside. “And don’t worry—there won’t be any drinking at the party after the game.”

“I sure hope not. Love you.”

“Love you too. Bye!” Nicole zoomed out the door.

The house grew quiet again.

Kate rubbed her sore neck. *It’s a good thing I started those new fitness classes.* She picked up the day’s mail and sorted through it. Her eye caught sight of an opened package on Dean’s desk. She knew it was none of her business, but curious, she slid a book out of the wrapping paper and glanced at the title: ***Things Guys Think About Besides Sex.***

She carefully opened it. “Oh, my!” She flipped through the hundred or more pages—every page blank.

“Men! So it *is* the only thing on their minds.” Unamused, she opened the inside cover and noticed an inscription:

*Hey Deano,
Ha! Thought this would tickle your funny bone.
Your bud, Hal*

She slid the book back into the wrapping paper so Dean wouldn’t know it had been moved. She wondered why her husband’s best friend would send him a gag gift like that. It was time to hurry off to her fitness class in St. Paul before tonight’s fancy dinner for two ... and being naked with her beloved husband.



Larissa Beaumont drove her Saturn to the tree-lined campus of MediMax Technologies and parked in the visitors’ lot. She walked toward the main entrance of the company’s glass office building, determined to get her son’s part-time job back. Today’s rescue mission

involved fighting another of her son's battles, and Larissa knew full well that Cody should be standing up for himself, but he'd ignored her. She wished that somebody would've stood up for *her* and fought *her* battles when she was an orphan in the foster system.

Cody needs to be here and do his own dirty work. Like I had to.

The bright autumn colors of the trees surrounding the building lifted her mood. She practiced the mental discipline of seeing the positive side of life whenever negative thoughts harassed her. September's dropping temperatures signaled cooler nights for sleeping and fueled her optimism, as did the delights of the season like leisurely walks in the woods.

Larissa reached the main entrance and checked her lipstick in the glass doors—not too heavy, just right. She boldly grabbed the door handle and entered the building.

A well-dressed man in his thirties walking out the door looked her over. Even though her jacket masked her shapely figure, she could tell he saw through to the curves beneath. Her tight jeans did nothing to hide her slender legs. Regardless, she'd learned long ago to view this "male appreciation" from strangers with a comical eye rather than an annoying affront.

At the information desk she asked the attendant to point her in the direction of Human Resources. Propelled by her mission, Larissa headed down the hallway to introduce herself to the HR director. She marched to the department's lobby and approached the receptionist's desk. An empty chair greeted her.

Larissa spotted a nameplate beside an executive's polished mahogany door: **Dean Nelson, Director of Human Resources**. The partly opened door teased her to peek inside. Behind a traditional desk sat a nice-looking man in his fifties, writing with a fountain pen. His full head of sandy blond hair framed his rimless glasses, and a well-trimmed moustache augmented his Nordic face.

She stepped closer. . . .



Dean Nelson searched for loving words to write in the anniversary card to his wife. He felt the pressure of time running short. "To my one true love forever," he considered writing, but mentally scratched it out. *How I wish I could say that and mean it.*

On Dean's desk sat a framed portrait of the Nelson family—Kate arm-in-arm with him, their smiling daughters Lindsay and Nicole, and their yellow lab, Jester. Dean felt a surge of fatherly pride for his daughters. Kate's amiable smile and her curly auburn hair reminded him of their earlier years when excitement in their marriage had ruled the day, rather than the blah sensation he felt nowadays.

Next to the family portrait sat a large gift box wrapped with red ribbons. He'd purchased the anniversary gift for Kate earlier that day with some trepidation. It was a finely-crafted reproduction of Rodin's sculpture *Eternal Springtime* about fifteen inches tall. The two naked lovers kissed in a passionate embrace. He knew the gift was a calculated risk.

He tapped his pen, hunting for the right words. Decades ago they'd shared such an adventurous spirit; could he honestly write words reflecting the same now? His schedule demanded that he leave the office and run errands, then pick his wife up for their dinner downtown.

Dean heard a knock on his door. A woman's face appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Nelson?" Her attractive smile sent a shock wave through him. "I couldn't find someone to direct me, so I hope I'm not intruding."

"That's all right." He found himself stammering a bit, "May I help you?"

"I understand you're the HR director who has reviewed my son's drug test results."

He sat back. "And you must be ... ?"

Stepping in, she stretched out her hand to shake. "Cody Beaumont's mother, Larissa Beaumont. Until last week he was your part-time hire in the warehouse. His random drug test came back positive for marijuana."

It took Dean a moment to refocus. Touching her hand triggered warm energy within him. He shrugged off the peculiar feeling and snapped back into business mode. "Cody Beaumont? Yes, I do recall. But could we discuss this at some other time?"

She forced an unhappy smile.

"I see." Dean reached for a stack of file folders and pulled one out. "First, I'll need to check that he's signed a release." He opened the file. "Okay, here it is. Yes, we're authorized to share information and discuss his case. Before we go any further, however, I'm sorry, but I'll have to see some form of picture ID."

She opened her purse and handed him her driver's license.

He examined it closely: Age, 38. Height, 5' 9". Weight, 136 lbs. Eyes, green.

"My hope, sir, is that you'll be able to convince his manager to rehire him."

"Highly unlikely, but how about if we take a look at the facts? A lot depends on what his manager wrote in his file. Right now I really don't have the time though—" Dean saw her face fall. "Tell you what," he added, "give me a minute to study this. Have a seat."

That's when it hit him. The smooth way she settled into the chair and her poised posture accentuated her penetrating eyes, which reflected an inner attractiveness that matched her stunning outer features.

Pausing for a heartbeat, he cleared his throat and looked up. "Cody's test results are right here. I see he turned eighteen in June."

"Yes, the week after graduating from high school. The first thing he wanted was a job."

Dean scanned the multi-drug test report until he came to the signature at the bottom. "Unfortunately, Mr. Gomez, his warehouse manager, has already signed off on his termination. Sorry."

"Cody said as much. But he needs a second chance, Mr. Nelson. My son ... he ... he's just started community college, and his job here is important. It will keep him motivated to study and help him pay tuition and buy books, besides giving him the discipline he needs. Can you please ask his manager to reconsider?" Her eyes flickered with a plea for hope.

Dean paused. "Why didn't Cody come in today and speak for himself?"

She grimaced. "You've got me on that one. He's still young and hasn't learned to fight his own battles. But you're right; he should be here. Not me."

Dean noted her flustered tone then scanned the report again. Cody's THC level, the psychotropic ingredient in *cannabis sativa*, showed an increase since his hiring date weeks earlier. "Generally, a trace amount wouldn't prevent a college-aged student applying for a part-time warehouse job from being hired. The problem is it's gone up since then."

"What if Cody was retested?"

“It might be that an error occurred with the urinalysis. It’s happened before.” Dean knew false positives were possible, as they were with all drug tests. “I’ll put in a call to Mr. Gomez. How’s that? No promises.”

“Great! Anything you suggest would be wonderful.”

Amazed by her sheer persistence, he couldn’t help checking her out again, comparing her to Kate. About ten years older, Kate matched this woman feature for feature. But his skin got prickly when he admitted to himself how Kate had let her sense of style and zest for life slip over the years.

“Your son didn’t give us your phone number, Ms. Beaumont. I’ll need that information and an email address. When would be a good time to reach you?”

“Just about any time between ten and four.” She dug into her purse and handed him a business card. “Here’s my work number and email.” Her eyes met his. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

He glanced at the card: *Fitness & Flowers by Larissa*. The logo in pen and ink showed a curvy woman reaching elegantly toward the sky. “Assuming I get an okay from Mr. Gomez, Cody will have to provide another urine sample first thing Monday morning.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t see anything here in the file about his father. Has he been notified?”

She looked away. “Cody’s father has been absent from his life since his birth.”

Dean adjusted his glasses. “Well, I hope Cody realizes what a lucky kid he is to have a mom who’s willing to stick her neck out for him.”

Larissa’s shoulders arched upward. “I want to be honest with you. I love him dearly, Mr. Nelson, but he’s been a party boy, and I don’t know when he’ll start getting serious about his future.” She clenched her jaw. “I just want him to fulfill his potential, that’s all. It’s buried right now.” She looked Dean in the eye then gazed down at the report. “Everything hangs on the new lab results, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, and whether or not Mr. Gomez gives his okay. Also, Cody has to show up like he’s supposed to for a retest and demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility on the job.”

“Can we talk by phone as soon as the results come in?”

“It usually takes a day or so. Once Mr. Gomez and I discuss it, I’ll be in touch.”

She stood up to leave, reaching out her hand. Her caramel blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders. “Thank you for your help. And pardon me for taking so much of your time. You’ve been more than kind. I’ll wait to hear from you.”

“Like I said, no promises.”

“I understand.”

He noted her beautiful smile.

“Goodbye, Mr. Nelson. It’s been a pleasure.”

He watched her turn and walk out the door. Dean sensed her frustration. He glanced again at the framed portrait of his family on the desk. How he wished Kate’s smile of fifteen years ago would be the same today. Noticing the time, he wished he felt more excited about picking her up for dinner. He loved her for so many reasons—her friendliness and readiness to encourage the best in everyone distinguished her—but he wondered when the last time was he’d had an intense, mouth-to-mouth, tongue-wrestling kiss with Kate.

The blah feeling overwhelmed him again. He glimpsed the svelte woman reaching for the sky on Ms. Beaumont’s business card, whiffing the intriguing scent of her perfume and aching for something he couldn’t quite name.

C H A P T E R

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Larissa banished her anxiety as she walked to her parked car. The sky seemed sunnier, and the warm autumn day cheered her. She appreciated the uplifting change. *More positive thoughts. Keep 'em coming. Thank you, Mr. Nelson.*

A new skip in her step accompanied the lingering impression of Mr. Nelson. He had grinned slightly when she'd handed him her business card. To his credit, he appeared open-minded and compassionate, and he was definitely handsome. She liked his hazel eyes and regretted that he was a married man, evident by the family portrait on his desk.

Fifteen minutes later, after driving across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis, she parked in the alley behind her fitness studio on Grand Avenue in St. Paul's commercial shopping district. Unlocking the shop's back door made her self-esteem soar. *My very own business!* She'd rented the former dance studio a year before and worked her butt off to build a paying clientele, currently sixteen regulars and counting. She loved teaching aerobic exercises and yoga, including fast-paced Zumba, to upbeat classical or blaring hip-hop music as a healthy way to help her clients tone up their sedentary bodies and de-stress their tense emotions.

For this afternoon's 4:30 fitness class, she chose Vivaldi's *Gloria* for warming up.

Larissa looked and, right on time, her clients began streaming through the door: Claire, a rather undernourished 45-something divorcee whose sorrow had deepened her insecurity; Jasmine, an African-American fashion model and wannabe actress who worked hard to keep in shape; Conrad, an accomplished dancer who loved the feminine companionship during workouts; Annabelle, an overweight healthcare executive whose goal of shedding thirty pounds meant walk-the-talk weight loss; and her newest client, Kate, a fiftyish lady from the suburbs who needed major loosening up. Larissa felt like a mother hen to this interesting bunch.

As the group was assembling, Larissa hollered, "Okay, everybody. Three minutes before we start. Let's warm up."

Larissa noted Kate's warm-up routine, particularly how she rubbed her neck and shoulders repeatedly. Kate muttered to Larissa, "I sure need your flexibility stretches and exercises today."

"You're making progress, Kate, but try relaxing more and not being so hard on yourself. Let your shoulders and neck get loose." Kate looked in shape, but muscle tension inhibited her body in other areas as well.

She recalled how Kate had seen a flyer for Fitness & Flowers at a local shop four weeks earlier and had signed up for workouts that day. "My shoulders are killing me," Kate had told her, "so getting rid of these neck aches would be super. Can you help?" Larissa had noted how she carried her weight well and was neither over- nor underweight, yet her posture slumped in contrast to her overall appealing figure and caring personality.

"I'm sure you'll benefit from our individualized classes," Larissa told Kate that day. "We also have a free women's empowerment support group on Fridays and weekends."

Annabelle paused during her leg stretches and spoke up, "I hope you're planning for us to do some Zumba, Larissa."

"Yeah," echoed Jasmine. "I could use some cardio."

"You're so flexible already, I'm jealous," said Claire.

Kate added, "If Zumba is your secret, Larissa, then I'm all for it. Your midriff and thighs are to die for."

They all laughed.

The back door swung open and Cody stepped in, surprising Larissa. “Hey, Mom. Sorry to interrupt. I got tied up on campus.”

Larissa looked at her son, a handsome, tall, and charismatic young man full of mischief in a grown man’s body. “Cody, I’m just starting class. Make it quick, real quick.”

“I know I should’ve emptied the trash in the dumpster yesterday and cleaned out the flower cooler like you asked, but I’m here now. Any more chores on your list?”

“I hope there’s homework on *your* list. Oh, and by the way, will you get busy and clean out your animal hospital? The scat from your injured rabbit is stinking up the place.”

“No prob. I thought today would be a good time to release the little bugger anyway.”

The crate for Cody’s makeshift shelter for injured animals sat by the back door to the alley, as far away from clients as possible. He’d cared for traumatized rabbits, cats, turtles, birds, and dogs ever since he was nine years old, when his pet hamster had injured its paw.

She turned to her students and declared, “All right, everybody ... opening positions.” Larissa began her instructions, stretching and twisting in her workout leotard, demonstrating poses and guiding her clients to Vivaldi’s music.

After the 45-minute workout, Larissa was wiping her brow with a towel when she noticed Kate and Claire hugging by the front door. Claire looked at Kate, sporting a brighter smile than Larissa had ever seen. It gave her pleasure to see that. Claire waved goodbye, and Larissa approached Kate.

“Feeling more limber, Kate?”

“Much better, yes. Now, if these muscles would only stay this way.”

“They’re releasing endorphins right now. Repetitions and more repetitions will teach them to behave.”

“Bless you, Larissa. My neck is beginning to feel looser, and that’s a huge plus.”

“By the way, it was great seeing you connecting with Claire just now. You’re very kind with people, Kate.”

“It’s the least I could do. She’s going through so much with her ex right now.”

“Yes, Claire needs a friendly ear these days. It does my heart good to see relationships like that forming. You have a very gentle way about you.”

“It shows?” Kate asked.

“It shows. And glows.”

They laughed.

Kate smiled. “Time to go. See you next week.” Glancing at the clock, she panicked. “Oh no! Gotta run! It’s our anniversary, and my husband is picking me up for dinner. Bye!”

“How wonderful. Congratulations to you both.”

Kate waved and rushed out the front door.

Outside Fitness & Flowers, Kate hurried to her late-model Lexus SUV. The crisp outdoor air cooled her sweaty brow. She looked back and noticed Larissa waving through the window, smiling.

Nothing had proven as effective to loosen her rigid muscles as Larissa’s classes. The investment of time and energy to limber up was paying off. Watching Larissa lead exercises, following her fluid movements, responding to the way she quietly corrected mistakes with gentle pointers, all boosted Kate’s motivation to improve herself.

As Kate got in her SUV, she noticed Claire leaning against her car, staring at the pavement. Kate frowned. “Claire, are you okay?”

“Oh hi, Kate. Yeah, I guess,” Claire said. “I’m so sick of the divorce games my ex is playing. It’s really getting to me. He just hung up on me.”

Kate detected the toll on Claire’s nerves as she walked closer. “Would it be all right if I prayed for you?”

“That’s very kind,” Claire answered, as Kate approached. “But please don’t think you have to. Oh, never mind. That would mean so much, unless you’re in a big hurry.”

“Sshhhh.” Kate put her hand on Claire’s shoulder, sensing a sibling-like connection. Kate closed her eyes, fully aware of the urgency to meet her husband, and prayed softly, “Heavenly Father, lift my friend Claire out of her pit and touch her heart with Your love. Comfort her as only You can. Amen.”

Claire blinked as Kate opened her eyes. “You actually prayed out loud!”

“Yes,” Kate replied. A current of warm energy passed between them.

“Will you be all right now, Claire?”

“Of course. Please go. And ... thank you.”

Kate smiled, dashed to her car, turned the ignition key, and drove away to get ready for her dinner out.

Two hours later, Dean took Kate’s arm as they walked into La Belle Vie restaurant. The elegant ambience impressed Kate, but she couldn’t help thinking about her never-ending list of to-do’s: answering text messages from her older daughter Lindsay in Iowa about college dorm life, counseling her younger daughter Nicole about the snarky fights she was having on Facebook with classmates, and keeping up with a bulging list of appointments and reminders. Dean had apologized for picking her up late. In all truth, she’d been running late herself, so Kate was grateful.

Always a gentleman, Dean held her chair as she sat down. The waiter handed them menus. She looked across the table at her husband. He placed a large gift box with red ribbons on the table next to the smaller gift and card she’d brought for him. “Dean, do you think we’ll be having a romantic dinner like this in another twenty-four years?”

He looked far off and squinted. “Let’s see, right now you’re forty-nine and I’m fifty, so you’ll be seventy-three and I’ll be seventy-four.” Peering at a distant horizon as if he were a ship’s captain, he said, “I trust we will navigate whatever choppy waters are ahead and prevail.”

She smiled. “Okay, I think you get what I’m saying, Skip.” She kicked his leg under the table. She often called him Skip, a nickname he’d had since childhood. “I like the idea of us being together no matter what age we are.”

“Yes, Katie,” he said, using her favorite nickname. “Till death do us part.”

She glanced at the menu. “I think I’m seafood hungry tonight. The pan-seared scallops look very tempting.”

“And for me the top sirloin looks scrumptious.”

They ordered calamari for an appetizer. She asked for a whisky manhattan on the rocks, and he ordered a fancy lemonade with a twist. Dean leaned over and kissed her hand. For a few heartbeats, Kate basked

in the good fortune of having a husband who loved her and who also loved the Lord. "I'm just praising the Lord for you," she whispered. "How could I ever be so blessed?"

"God's the glue, isn't He? The center of everything we are."

She nodded and handed his anniversary card to him. It had a yin/yang pattern of two hearts entwined with the bold words on the cover *When Two Hearts Beat as One*. He read it aloud, "To Dean, my one and only. We live as one, we love as one. In Christ's love always, Katie."

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand, and kissed it again. Reaching for her gift, he opened the box she'd wrapped in bright aquamarine paper with pearl-colored ribbon. He took out a theatre brochure and peered inside it. "Hey, season tickets to the Guthrie. Way to go!"

She smiled. "We get to pick four plays for the current season. Look inside and see which ones you like." Dean read off the titles, and they talked through their choices.

When it came her turn to open his gift, she removed the card from the envelope marked KATIE and eyed the playful illustration. In a sailboat with a billowing heart-shaped sail, two lovers rode together, navigating arm-in-arm on the wide open seas. Inside she read the printed greeting, "Let's expand our horizons and live our marriage to the fullest." In his own words: *Dearest Katie, I truly hope and believe the best adventure is still ahead. To be closer to you is my deepest wish and desire. With all my love, Dean*

She reached across the table and intertwined her fingers with his, squeezing them tightly. "How special." His message thrilled her. She looked in his eyes and was surprised to see something—sadness? loneliness?—darken his gaze. *What could it be?* she wondered.

Dean handed her the large box with red ribbons. As she pulled back the paper, two naked lovers kissing passionately greeted her. Taken aback, she almost dropped the ceramic sculpture. Blushing, she stuffed it back in the box.

"What's wrong?"

"I ... I don't think it's ... it's quite what I expected."

"It's Rodin's *Eternal Springtime*, a famous piece of art. It visualizes what

I wrote in your card, “To be closer to you is my deepest wish and desire.”

Kate knew it was a gorgeous sculpture full of expressive yearning, but the lovers’ embrace was unmistakably erotic. “Of course it’s famous. I took art appreciation, you know. It’s an excellent replica. I’m sure it will look nice wherever we find a place for it.”

Dean looked hurt. She could almost hear him thinking, *Excellent replica?* “I was thinking,” he said softly, “of our bedroom.”

Now she was outright embarrassed. She could not imagine it anywhere except covered up in a closet. Her mind went blank with confusion. From feeling quietly elated, she now felt her head buzzing. A niggling reminder jabbed at her; she had put off calling the gas company to schedule the annual pre-winter tune-up for their furnace. *I need to stop procrastinating about simple chores.*

“Are you okay?” Dean asked.

“Yes, of course. Sorry.” Her mind had gone blank. Empty. *Could it be the onset of menopause?* Her friend Ginny had insisted the start of menopause should no longer be thought of as “the change.” Instead, for today’s woman, it was a fresh opportunity to begin a second adulthood with benefits to explore and freedoms to enjoy.

“Are you off in La-la-land?” he asked.

“Never mind,” she said, snapping back to the present. “I think I’ll have the scallops.”

When the waiter returned with their drinks and the calamari, they ordered their entrees. As the busboy refilled their water glasses, the activity allowed her to collect her wits. She decided to bring up Lindsay and her boyfriend Brandon to distract Dean from talking about the Rodin sculpture. “Lindsay texted today that Brandon’s folks have been fighting again.”

“What about this time?”

“His mother’s alcoholic. He and Lindsay visited their family farm last weekend. His mom was acting up again, saying hurtful things about Brandon’s dad.”

“Treatment would help them both. Her to get sober, him to cope better.”

Dean had worked as a professional addictions counselor for twelve years prior to switching to corporate HR and was himself a recovering

alcoholic. Kate felt proud of him. Dean's successful sobriety the past fourteen years had calmed him, and his regular attendance at AA meetings inspired others who suffered from alcoholism or abusing drugs to stay clean.

"How's your lemonade?" Kate asked.

"Just right."

She wondered at times how he'd done it, denying himself the pleasures of alcohol. Thank goodness he seldom made a stink about her own drinking, like right now when she was thinking of ordering a second manhattan. What she honestly wanted was a double manhattan.

While eating, their conversation centered on parental and household concerns, like a new fence for the backyard. Kate splurged a bit and ordered two glasses of pinot noir with dinner. "It's so nice to have open-ended time together, Skip, like right now. I could sit here till midnight holding hands with you."

He winced slightly. "I hope by midnight we're doing more than that. Can't wait to get home and start our massages." He lifted his glass of lemonade. "Like my card said, Katie ... 'the best adventure is still ahead.' To us."

They clinked glasses.

After they finished a delicious tiramisu, the nagging thought running through Kate's mind was, *What should I do about the sculpture?* She hoped it wasn't a not-so-subtle hint from Dean. Not tonight. What else, though, could two naked lovers mean?

Maybe the ghastly thing would find its way to the closet after all.