

DANCING WITH THE  
ENEMY



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## PROLOGUE



*NINE YEARS AGO*

*Somebody shoot me now.* Lisa fumbled blindly for her pager on the small table by the bed she lay on as it went off for the thousandth time it seemed. Weary did not begin to describe how she felt. She finally grabbed the pager and shut off the annoying beeping. She rubbed her eyes. Her 24-hour shift in the emergency room at Boston General Hospital had finally ended half an hour ago. She had come to the on-call resident's room to catch a brief nap before driving home. Her eyes stung as she peered at the message displayed on the tiny screen. She had to blink a few times before she could make out the summons to the office of her residency program director. She groaned and got up. She stuffed her blue scrub top into her pants, slipped into her long white coat and clogs, and walked toward the elevator that would take her from the basement where the residents' rooms were to the beautiful and modern fifth floor administrative offices.



"Come in, Lisa, take a seat."

Lisa plopped into the chair across from Dr. Lehman, the emergency medicine residency program director. She heard him begin to speak but it was hard to make out his words through the fog of fatigue and the headache that had begun with her sixteenth hour of work. She wondered how he might react if she put her swollen feet up on his handsome executive desk. She giggled internally at the thought.

"I know you're at the end of your shift so I won't keep you." Dr. Lehman leaned his forearms on his desk and interlocked his fingers. He wore a burgundy bowtie and light blue shirt under his pristine long white coat which had his name embroidered above the left breast pocket. Lisa thought this was unnecessary; everyone knew who Dr. Lehman was. As a professor of medicine at Harvard and a researcher, he had pioneered a revolutionary treatment protocol for multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis and was frequently invited to share his expertise at hospitals all over the world. He looked at Lisa through kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"As you know, halfway through the third year of residency is when we select a resident to stay on an extra year as chief resident." He paused. "We'd like you to be next year's chief resident."

A myriad of thoughts went through Lisa's mind but she was too tired to move her facial muscles to express or voice them.

Dr. Lehman continued. "The program faculty, myself included, selected you because you've demonstrated exceptional clinical and leadership skills. As chief, you would work closely with the faculty as well as the residents to help us accomplish our program goals. This invariably leads to a

faculty appointment after you graduate and is the start of a prestigious academic career."

Still Lisa remained silent.

"Again, I apologize for having this discussion when you're finishing your shift but I'll be away all week presenting in South Africa and I wanted to give you the news so you can think about it, discuss it with family, and let me know your answer next week."

Lisa finally found her voice. "Thank you Dr. Lehman, I'm honored."

"You deserve it. It was a unanimous decision among the faculty members." He stood. "I won't keep you any longer. You go home and rest and let me know your decision next week." He showed her out.

Twenty minutes later, Lisa was home and in bed again, fully dressed. After a six-hour nap and some food, she began to feel human again. She went back to her conversation with Dr. Lehman. These shifts could be so brutal. Did she really want to sign up for another year of this? The answer was an unwavering *yes*. She'd spent four years in college, four years in medical school, two and a half years thus far in residency. What was one more year to set herself up for a brilliant academic career? Wait till she told her parents. They would be over the moon. Brian, though... She looked at the clock. He'd be home from work in about twenty minutes. She went to the small laundry room in the apartment she'd shared with her boyfriend for the past year and began folding clothes just to have something to do to keep her nerves steady until he got home.

A few minutes later, she heard the front door lock turn and came out to meet her boyfriend.

"Hi, hon." Brian kissed her. "How was your day?"

"Exhausting. Come in and sit down. I've got news."

Brian took off his jacket and threw it in on a chair then

sat on the couch next to her. They'd been dating since her final year of medical school. They met during her rotation at a mental health hospital where he was doing his training as a psychology student. She was immediately drawn to the handsome black man who displayed all the confidence she lacked in the intimidating environment that was the Harvard world. He helped her through her incredibly difficult first year of residency and had stood by her since, crazy work hours and all. She knew he was planning to ask her to marry him and she looked forward to saying yes. She also knew he was ready for her to be done with residency and wasn't sure how he would take the news that she wanted to extend it. She gathered her courage and spoke.

"Dr. Lehman offered me the position of chief resident."

Brian was silent for a moment. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't give him an answer. He told me to take a week to think about it."

"What is there to think about? We've been waiting for you to finish residency and get a job with better pay and more reasonable hours so we can move into a bigger apartment and begin to think about starting a family."

"About that." Lisa took a deep breath. "When I didn't get my period last month, I assumed it was because I was stressed from working so much and then I forgot all about it until yesterday morning. I felt sick and threw up."

"Oh God! Are you...?"

"I'm pregnant."

"Oh my God, Lisa, that's amazing!" Brian hugged her and pulled her into his lap. "It's sooner than we had talked about but that's fine. In five months you'll be finished with residency. Then you can get a job with better hours, take maternity leave and get back to work without missing a beat."

Lisa moved off his lap. "I want to be chief resident."

Brian's smile quickly turned into a scowl. "Why?"

"Because it's an incredible opportunity. It says a lot that they've offered me the position. This will open doors for me for the rest of my career."

"Isn't it enough that you're a doctor? Black girl from Akron, Ohio; your teachers couldn't have predicted it. But look at what you've accomplished. You'll make a good income and we'll live a good life. Why do you want more titles? Do you enjoy the crazy hours and the stress?"

"You know why I want this, Brian. It's important to me to be successful professionally. To prove to myself and to others that I'm smart enough...good enough. To show my parents that I appreciate what they sacrificed to get me a good education."

"Isn't it enough that you went to Harvard Medical School?"

"No, it isn't. Half the time people think I got in because of affirmative action. The other half, *I* think that's why I got in. I live in fear of people discovering that I'm an impostor, that I'm not smart enough to be here and taking my medical degree away from me. This opportunity for chief is my validation. Confirmation that I *am* good enough."

Brian took her by the shoulders. "When is it going to end, Lisa? When is this pursuit for greatness going to end so we can start living our lives?"

"It doesn't have to end. Being the best doctor I can be doesn't mean I can't have a fulfilling life with the man I love."

"Yes, it does. At least not a life with me."

A rock settled in Lisa's stomach. "What are you saying, Brian?"

"I'm tired of seeing my girlfriend, whom I live with, every other day. When I do see you, you're too tired to do anything. You're going to have to choose, Lisa. Me or being chief resident."

"Brian!"

"Me or being chief."

"What about the baby?"

"Me or being chief."

Lisa began to cry. After a few moments, Brian said, "I guess you've made your choice." He grabbed his coat and walked out, slamming the door. Lisa dropped to the floor and sobbed great big heaving sobs. She didn't know how long she lay there. Her pain was so great it seemed to split her abdomen in two. And still she cried. She finally quieted, utterly spent. Empty. Broken.

The room darkened as she lay on the rug she and Brian had bought together. Eventually she stood up and went to the bathroom. She splashed cold water on her face and stared in the mirror, desolate. She patted her face dry and turned to walk out of the bathroom, suddenly noticing the bloody footprints leading to the bathroom. She looked down at her pants, and for the first time in her life, fainted at the sight of blood.



## CHAPTER 1



### *PRESENT DAY*

"Look, Michael, it's Doctor MacStuffins."

Lisa paused as she walked into the exam room, where three-year-old Michael Barnes waited with his mom to see her. It wasn't the first time a parent had compared Lisa to the little black girl who played doctor to her stuffed animals on a popular kids TV show. She closed the door and schooled her features into effortless impassivity.

"Good morning, I'm Dr. Johnson."

Rebecca, Michael's mom, explained that he had had a cough since last night. She hadn't slept well either.

"I need you to make this cough go away," Rebecca said. "I have too many important things to do this weekend to have another night like last night. Can you give him a shot?"

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Lisa murmured as she approached Michael where he sat on the exam table. She bent at the waist so she was at eye level with him.

"Hello, pumpkin," she said softly with a big smile. "I hear

you're not feeling well. I'm going to take a look at you so we can see how to make you all better, okay?" Michael stared at her with big wary eyes and didn't respond, but Lisa was grateful he wasn't trying to hide behind his mother. Yet.

She took the otoscope off its perch on the wall by the exam table and attached an ear speculum to it.

"Do you see my light?" she asked Michael as she shone the light on her hand followed by his. "See, it doesn't hurt. Now, I'm just going to look at your eyes... and in your nose... Oh no! I see BOOGERS!" At this, Michael burst out laughing. Lisa took the opportunity to peek in his throat.

"Next we'll look in your ears," Lisa continued. "Which one shall we look in first?" Michael indicated his right ear and after Lisa looked, willingly offered the left.

"Okay," Lisa said to Michael. "What's next?"

He pointed to his chest.

"That's right!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to listen to your heart next."

When the exam was over, Lisa draped her stethoscope around her neck and gave Michael a high five.

"You did so good, Michael! You know what treat I have for boys who are as good as you were?"

"Lollipop!" shouted Michael.

"Better. I have a treasure chest!"

Michael gasped and Lisa laughed.

"I have all kinds of toys and stickers and other surprises in the treasure chest, and you get to pick something."

Michael scrambled off the exam table and grabbed his mom's hand.

"Come on, Mommy, let's go." Michael tried to pull Rebecca towards the door.

"We're almost done, Michael," Rebecca said. "Let me just talk to Dr. MacStuffins for a minute."

"It's Dr. Johnson." Lisa was no longer amused.

"Whatever. What are you going to do for Michael?"

Lisa took a deep breath. "Michael has a viral infection. He needs to drink lots of fluids. If you have a humidifier, use it. Cough suppressants are not recommended at his age."

"When will he be better?"

"These viral respiratory infections generally take about a week to run their course."

"That's too long. I have a busy weekend coming up. Did you not hear me?"

"I did hear you, but there's unfortunately not much we can do against viruses."

"He needs antibiotics," Rebecca persisted.

"He doesn't. Antibiotics right now would just expose him unnecessarily to their side effects, which can be very serious, and offer him no benefit."

"I need to sleep tonight."

Lisa couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Michael needs his sleep too. But illness is never fun or convenient."

"Go get another doctor!" Rebecca pointed to the door.

"I beg your pardon!" Lisa was incensed. "I am the most senior doctor on duty, so you are free to go elsewhere if you'd like another opinion." Lisa walked to the door and grabbed the handle.

"Where did you go to medical school?" Rebecca asked. "Did you even go in this country?"

Lisa knew she shouldn't dignify this insulting question with an answer but she couldn't stop herself.

"I went to Harvard."

"Whatever. I don't think so."

Lisa walked out, all thoughts of a treat from the treasure chest forgotten.



"She did not!" Dr. Jennifer Taylor exclaimed.

"She totally did." Lisa tried to remain indignant as she related to her friend and colleague the encounter with Michael and his mom, but it was hard to. Jennifer was one of the bright spots in her work life. She saw the funny side of everything that happened in their emergency room. They were huddled by a computer in the central work area surrounded by ten exam rooms with sliding glass doors and two open trauma bays. Half the rooms and both trauma bays were empty but no one ever used the s- word: calling it a *slow* day, for fear of displeasing the gods of medicine and unleashing mayhem onto their emergency room. For now, a nurse could be seen drawing blood from a patient in one of the rooms. Another patient—a child by the sound of it—was getting an injection and not very happy about it. Lisa and Jennifer tuned out the familiar sounds.

"For a split second, I wanted to grab her by her pretty blond hair and throw her against the wall." Lisa said.

"Oh my goodness! Such aggressive thoughts from the sweetest person I know."

"People make me mad sometimes."

"If you had done that, Lisa, she would definitely have scored you very low on the patient satisfaction survey, and then where would your chances at becoming chief of emergency medicine be?"

Lisa sighed. "To be perfectly honest, sometimes I'm not sure it's worth what I have to go through. Having to just sit there and listen to people stereotype you and question your competence as a physician without being able to give them a piece of your mind is not an easy pill to swallow. I'm not just my skin color, you know."

"I certainly know that, hon," Jennifer said. "You're gorgeous, you have flawless skin and I'd kill for your curls. The fact that you went to Harvard is just overkill."

"Don't forget about my skills. I'm pretty awesome at sewing flesh. The bigger the wound the better. I can also get a catheter into a man's bladder in under 30 seconds."

"With all your skills, it's a wonder you're still single."

"Who has time to date? This chief position isn't just going to crawl into my lap."

Jennifer stepped closer and placed a hand on her friend's shoulder. "I'm worried about you." She stopped Lisa with a hand up before she could speak. "You work too many hours. No one can sustain that pace. I've no doubt you will be appointed chief when the hospital board meets, but I'm worried about what the race to that appointment is doing to you. Life is more than just work, you know."

"Relationships are distracting. Once I'm chief, I'll pull back a bit at work and maybe be ready to settle."

"Everyone needs —"

"We'd better get back to work," Lisa interrupted with a pointed glance towards all the charts that had piled up in their rack.



Fridays were one of the busiest days in the emergency room. With its location in the heart of downtown Boston, Boston General Hospital handled patients ranging from the homeless who drank themselves into a stupor and scored a couple of sheltered nights in a hospital bed complete with meals, to the soccer moms, like Rebecca, with premium insurance plans but who wouldn't wait a day or two to see their primary care providers because they were "too busy to be sick." Lisa and Jennifer worked efficiently, occasionally discussing complex cases with each other or providing an extra set of eyes on X-rays. But frequently, as they passed

each other, they stopped for a minute to exchange funny tidbits about the patients they were seeing.

"Hey, look at the name on this chart I just picked up," Lisa said in the vicinity of her nurse Kate, who was recording on the computer an immunization she had just administered and Jennifer, who was completing a chart note.

Kate came over to look at the chart then burst out laughing. "Dave Schmuck?"

"Can you imagine how miserable life was for him in school?" Lisa asked.

"Hey, that's a perfectly good German name," said Jennifer, whose parents emigrated from Germany before she was born. "My Auntie Suzy's second husband is named Christofer Schmuck."

"Well, this is America, and if your name is schmuck, kids will make fun of you." Lisa said.

"I saw a woman the other day whose first name was Kittycat," Kate said. "I kid you not," she added in response to Lisa and Jennifer's incredulous looks. "The kicker though, was her last name." She paused. "Porn."

"No way!" Jennifer said even as she laughed. "Even if her parents had been high on something when they named her, she would have changed her name the minute she turned 18. No one goes around answering to Kittycat Porn."

"I've seen some interesting names in the years I've been here," Lisa said.

Kate wandered off to check on a patient as Lisa and Jennifer continued to crack each other up over some incredible but real patient names they'd encountered.

"Tessa Topless"

"Janice Tits"

"Crystal Ball"

"Harry Dick"

Lisa laughed so hard she had to wipe tears from her eyes.

She and Jennifer had hit it off immediately when Jennifer came to work at Boston General Hospital six years ago. They couldn't be more different though. Lisa watched as Jennifer walked away to speak with a consulting neurologist. She carried herself with the unconscious confidence that came from never having to question her place in the world. Jennifer was born in Chicago, an only child to two wealthy physician parents who emigrated from Germany. A product of private schools, expensive tutors and horse riding camps in Vienna, Jennifer was the most confident yet down to earth person Lisa knew.

Lisa, on the other hand, was born in Akron, Ohio. During her sophomore year of high school, her father moved her, her mother and her older brother Steve to Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, to take on a teaching job at the prestigious Wellesley School for the Gifted. Lisa's cafe au lait skin and tight black curls never bothered her in Akron. But at Wellesley, she was often the only black girl in class. The teachers were fair and no one bullied her, but whenever she was picked last for a team or her raised hand in class was ignored, she often wondered if it had anything to do with her skin color. Even after getting accepted to Harvard Medical School on a full scholarship, she still worried that one day she would be discovered to be the impostor that she often felt like and her achievements, job, and lifestyle would be ripped away from her.



The day passed by in a blur of fingers slammed in car doors, stomach bugs, wounds needing to be stitched, head injuries, ingrown toenails, heat exhaustion, chest pain, appendicitis, allergic reactions, rashes that had been present for months and definitely didn't belong in the emergency room, ear

infections, assaults, and even a hangnail. The nurse manager on the floor yelled at that last patient for wasting everyone's time and made him leave. Lisa handled all her patients with ease and confidence. To the casual observer, she was in her element: greeting all her patients with a smile, listening intently, addressing their concerns with compassion, and distilling her expert knowledge of their condition into words they could understand.

Around 4 p.m., Lisa went to the break room for a cup of coffee. Kate was giving a report to the evening shift nurse, Lindsey, on the remaining patients before going home. Lindsey had moved to Boston eighteen months ago from Waco, Texas, after her husband received a promotion at his IT firm.

"Kate," Lindsey said in her Texas drawl, "Kevin and I just got back from Atlantis and you've just got to go. Well, you've got to get a boyfriend first because Atlantis is much more fun as a couple. My husband and I flew to Texas so we could leave little Dylan with my parents and then we went on to Atlantis from there. It was so much fun! The pools. Oh my God, I got to swim with the dolphins!" she finished with a squeal.

"That's really great, Lindsey. I'm glad you had a good time," Kate said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She turned to Lisa. "Do you need anything else before I leave, Dr. Johnson?"

"No, thanks, Kate," Lisa answered with a smile. "Have a good evening. Thanks for your help today."

Kate gathered her notes and walked out of the break room. The room was drab and also used for overflow storage. It didn't invite relaxation, which was likely the objective. The ER nurse manager didn't want employees lingering during their break. *Patients aren't going to see themselves*, she was fond of saying. The coffee maker was an old single-cup



model that brewed 12 ounces of coffee regardless of the brew size chosen. *I'll definitely make some changes once I'm chief*, Lisa thought. She took her freshly brewed cup and sat at the table. Lindsey hadn't been at work in 10 days and yet she didn't acknowledge Lisa or offer a greeting. Lisa sighed internally.

"Hi Lindsey. It sounds like you had a nice vacation."

"Uh huh." Lindsey offered a forced smile, gathered her papers and left the room.

Lisa sat at the table with her coffee and looked at her watch. Eight hours down, four more to go. It was going to be a long four hours working with Lindsey on the floor. She wasn't sure when or where things went wrong but it was obvious that Lindsey did not like her. When Lindsey first started working at BGH, she'd mistaken Lisa for a nurse when she first met her. Even though Lisa was nice about correcting her, Lindsey never seemed to get over her initial impression or get comfortable seeing Lisa as the attending physician. She ignored Lisa's written orders for patient care in the nurse rack and did any and everything else first. She also undermined what Lisa said in front of patients. Thus far, she hasn't said or done anything really egregious but Lisa had been close to writing up a complaint many times. She sat for a few minutes sipping her coffee, trying to summon enough energy to finish the rest of her shift.

"Hello, gorgeous!"

Lisa looked up to see Dr. Alex Walker, a general surgeon she'd met when she first started at BGH eight years ago, walk into the break room.

"Kate said you were in here."

Lisa smiled at the other bright spot in her work life. Alex was handsome and knew it. Dark, clean cut, 6'2", with a smile charming enough to make the most ardent feminist lose her panties as well as her bra, Alex was once recruited off a

Boston subway car to model for a jeans company. He considered it briefly but he'd already had his eyes set on becoming a surgeon. Lisa would have dismissed him as shallow if she hadn't quickly come to realize that behind the boy-next-door-meets-GQ-cover-model looks was one of the smartest people she knew. Which was why she'd called him for a consultation.

"Hey, Alex."

"So, what do you have for me today? I've been doing post-operative rounds with the new interns and I need something to get the blood flowing to my brain again after some of their ridiculous questions. July is such a painful month in a teaching hospital."

"Well, I think you'll love this case."

"Tell me." Alex pulled out a chair and sat backwards in it.

"I thought about calling Dr. Morgan but I wanted to give you first dibs on this case since you and I go way back."

"Sounds interesting."

"I tried to address it myself, but I couldn't. I thought to myself, who can I call who is ingenious enough to solve this problem where I failed?"

Alex leaned forward. "What is it?"

"Plus, I think there might be a publication out of this case because I've never encountered anything like it before."

"Tell me!" Alex practically yelled.

"Someone stuck a giant zucchini up his ass. I need you to get it out."

Alex looked at Lisa with a priceless look of mingled fascination and horror. "You know you should have called my resident," he said as he playfully chucked her on the shoulder. "You're lucky I have a soft spot for you."

His toned softened. "Let me take you dancing this weekend. I know how much you love dancing and you look like you could use some release." Alex had asked Lisa out a few

times in the years they'd known each other but she'd said no every single time. She knew she was too busy and wanted to accomplish too much professionally to get involved with anyone. Her painful breakup with Brian had taught her that. Although seeing Alex look at her with obvious appreciation was somewhat tempting. Too bad they worked together.

"I get plenty of release, thank you," she said.

"Who with?"

"I already have plans to go dancing with Whitney." Lisa and her best friend Whitney went dancing at least twice a month.

"A man's gotta try, right?" Alex said with a wry smile.

"I love you for trying. Does great things for my ego. Now get going. You've got a zucchini to retrieve."



Four hours later, Lisa knocked against the open door to the chief of staff's office. "You wanted to see me, Dr. Kelly?"

"Come in and shut the door."

Lisa stood just inside the closed door and waited. Dr. Richard Kelly's office was spacious and bright thanks to a large south-facing window. The desk at which he sat reading a document intently held several tall stacks of papers and charts. There were the requisite family photos on his desk and framed diplomas on the wall. Against one wall stood a large bookcase full of medical texts. Lisa wondered how many of them were still in print. Dr. Kelly looked up and nodded gruffly for her to take a seat across the desk and continued writing. A minute or two later, he sighed, leaned back in his chair and muttered, "I am getting too old for this." He rubbed his face hard with both hands and then sat upright with an energy that belied his words.

"So, Dr. Johnson," he started, "brilliant case presentation

last week at grand rounds. That patient with back pain has you to thank for your prompt diagnosis when faced with an obscure presentation, and for saving him from permanent disability."

"The staff did a great job that day from the minute he walked in." Lisa liked to give credit where it was due.

Not one to dwell on pleasantries, Richard moved on to the reason he had asked Lisa to come to his office.

"I wanted to review your quality metrics for the quarter," he began. Lisa groaned internally.

"Your patient satisfaction scores for the month of April averaged 4.77 out of 5," said Richard, "a drop from the previous month's 4.86." Lisa kept silent. "Have you anything to say to that?"

"You know how that works, Dr. Kelly. So much of how a patient grades us is out of control."

"I need you to work on what's in your control. Do you smile when you walk into the room, shake the patient's hand, sit down, ask them if they have any more questions at the end of the visit?"

Lisa's face remained impassive while a riot of emotions surged through her. "I've been doing this a long time, Dr. Kelly. I know how to talk to patients."

"Then you need to keep your score above 4.85 or there'll be no bonus at the end of the quarter."

Lisa nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Dr. Kelly shuffled his papers and pulled one out. "There was one comment from a patient I wanted to share with you. The patient wrote:

*Dr. Johnson was very nice when she treated my mother for pneumonia last week but I thought her hair was wild and too curly. I suggest she straighten and tame it to look like the professional I assume she is.*

"What the...?" Lisa was dumbfounded.

"As you know, Dr. Johnson, we value diversity here at Boston General. We have a number of blacks throughout the organization. However, you are a physician and patients expect a certain look, a professional look from their doctor."

"Are you saying my hair in its natural state is unprofessional?"

"I'm just sharing a patient's comments. Maybe pull it back or something. Put it in a bun."

"Let me talk to human resources and look over BGH's dress code and see if it lists specific acceptable hairstyles for employees. While I'm at it, I'll review the anti-discrimination policy."

Dr. Kelly looked long and hard at Lisa.

"As you know, we've had a vacancy in the position of chief of emergency medicine since Dr. Price had a heart attack and had to step down. The hospital board has been discussing whether or not to recruit for the position from within or begin a national search. Your name came up, as did Dr. Ethan Mulberry's. The board meets in a month and will make a decision then. There are eight board members. In the event of a tie, I will cast the deciding vote."

Lisa felt a mix of emotions as she left Dr. Kelly's office. She was inordinately pleased at this recognition of her hard work, but the threat was thinly veiled. If she wanted to be chief of emergency medicine, she needed to stay on Dr. Kelly's good side and work her ass off to show that she deserved the position.



Even though she was already exhausted when she got home later that night, Lisa poured herself a large glass of wine and sat in her favorite plush armchair. Home for the last several

years had been a sixth floor condominium in the Back Bay. She'd chosen to live in the area because of all the great restaurants that offered takeout, lifesavers given her limited cooking skills. On her days off, she enjoyed walking down Newbury Street with its exclusive fashion boutiques, or heading towards the Public Gardens.

She took a sip of wine and frowned. It wasn't the finest stuff. She hadn't had the chance to go to her usual wine store and had instead grabbed a bottle from the convenience store adjacent to the hospital. After a few minutes and a second glass, she began to let go of her workday. She picked up her phone to call her best friend. Lisa and Whitney had met ten years ago when Lisa answered Whitney's ad for a roommate. Lisa was still in medical school and Whitney in design school. The two women had hit it off immediately and been best friends since. They spoke on the phone almost every day, even if some days Lisa only had enough energy for a five-minute chat.

"Hi, hon," Whitney said when she picked up.

"Work was a bear today," Lisa said without preliminaries.

"It's always a bear."

"I know, but I'm particularly wiped today." She took a sip of wine and exhaled, beginning to feel the day's tension recede. Talking to her best friend was her favorite part of the day.

"And how are you, Whit?"

"I got a new client today!"

"That's great! What's the project?"

As Whitney talked about her newest home design project, Lisa couldn't help but admire her friend's courage and entrepreneurial spirit. Whitney grew up an only child in Roxbury, a low-income black neighborhood of Boston. Her mother raised her by herself after Whitney's father left when Whitney was two years old. Whitney's mom worked as many

shifts as she could at the grocery store to make ends meet. She was grateful to have a child as self-sufficient and responsible as Whitney, but she also bemoaned her misfortune at having such a strong-willed daughter.

Once Whitney decided she wanted to become an interior designer, there was no changing her mind. Her mom often prayed that she would come to her senses and get a "real" job. But her arguments were coming less and less frequently as she witnessed Whitney land client after client shortly after graduating from design school and starting her own design firm. She was outgoing and confident. There was no denying that she was a free spirit and would not have lasted at a desk job with set hours for longer than a week.

Aside from their modest upbringings, Whitney and Lisa couldn't have been more different. Where Whitney was extroverted, Lisa was introverted. Whitney preferred to start each day with no preset agenda, Lisa created a weekly schedule every Sunday morning. Whitney was bold and adventurous, while Lisa was the voice of reason, making sure Whitney didn't get them into too much trouble. Whitney was the yin to Lisa's yang and they were closer than Siamese twins.

"Can you come shopping with me on Sunday?" Whitney's question brought Lisa back to the conversation. "I'd like to start looking at some fabric choices for my new client and you have a great eye for color."

"Sure, that'll be fun. Are we still going dancing tomorrow night?" One thing Lisa and Whitney both loved was dancing, but for different reasons. Dancing was another expression of Whitney's free spirit, but it was Lisa's therapy. On the dance floor, she was no longer a physician or even African American. She was colorless. She didn't think about her job stresses, nor did she have to wear pants or knee-length skirts, or swallow her tongue when patients were rude and

demanding. She didn't think about the fact that her father was dying of cancer. When she was dancing, she was simply a woman, one with the music, free of worry, responsibility, and self doubt.

"Absolutely, girlfriend, I've already got my dress. Speaking of dancing, maybe you'll meet someone at Sophia's," Whitney said. "It's been way too long since you broke up with Brian. It's time to get back in the saddle."

"You know I don't want to meet anyone at the club. I just go to dance. Most of the guys there are just looking for a good time. Not exactly the place to meet someone to bring home to my parents. Plus, you know I'm focused on my career right now."

"I know. You're focused on your career and a serious relationship isn't compatible with professional success," Whitney recited tonelessly. "I've heard that a few times. Humor me for a second though. What kind of man would it take to get you to start dating seriously again?"

Lisa made herself more comfortable in her chair. They'd had this conversation numerous times.

"Assuming I were open to dating, which I'm not, at least not until I've secured the chief position, then first of all, he'd have to have a job."

"Of course."

"A good job. Someone with at least a college education. I want someone I can have lively intellectual debates with."

"Uh huh." Whitney listened.

"I want a man who won't be intimidated by the fact that I'm a doctor and I went to Harvard. A man who won't be expecting me to go to work and then come home and cook and clean while he watches sports on TV and calls out for me to bring him a beer."

"He'd be a fool to expect you to cook because, honey, you know you can't cook."



"That's why takeout is the greatest invention of the century. Most days I'm too tired after work to even think about preparing anything."

"Okay, now for the most important part. What do you want him to look like?"

Lisa thought for a moment. "The truth is, I've never been too concerned about what my man would look like. It's more about how he makes me feel. The sound of his voice—I'm a sucker for a deep voice—, a sincere smile, a playful nature, a kind heart, and an affectionate spirit."

"Girl, let me know when you find a guy like that so that I can clone him."

"Hair I can run my fingers through." Lisa continued then shook herself. "I don't know where that came from."

"Unless your man has relaxed hair or dreads—and I'll disown you if you date someone with relaxed hair—you won't be running your hands through his hair."

"He doesn't have to be black."

Whitney was silent for a moment. "How do you think your parents would feel about that?"

"Right now there is no man so it's a moot point. Chances are I'll meet a nice professional black man, have little black babies, and my parents will be over the moon. But not tomorrow. Tomorrow we're going to dance and I'm going to forget about this hellish week I've had."

"What are you going to wear?"

## CHAPTER 2



SAM WATCHED AS HIS EX-WIFE VIVIAN BREEZED INTO THE restaurant they'd agreed to meet at for lunch. He stood as she approached the table.

"You're late."

"It's nice to see you too, Sam." Above medium height with a glorious mane of expertly layered and coiffed brown hair cascading past her shoulders, Vivian Marino was a stunning woman. She drew appreciative glances from half of the other diners and envious ones from the other half. She leaned in to kiss Sam on the cheek and immediately enveloped him in the bewitching scent of her outrageously expensive perfume. He hadn't stood a chance when he met her eight years ago. He pulled away and sat back down. Vivian remained standing. After a beat, Sam stood again and pulled out her chair.

"Still a diva, I see," he said.

"Still don't know how to treat a lady, I see," she mocked. "You're lucky you're as handsome as the devil."

After Vivian sat, Sam returned to his seat. "I have a meeting with a client in half an hour."

"Darling," she tutted, "I did suggest we meet for dinner

instead of lunch. That way we'd have all the time in the world to visit. It's been a while." She leaned forward and laid her perfectly manicured hand on top of Sam's where it rested on the table. He pulled his hand back.

"It hasn't been long enough. What do you want?"

Vivian pouted. "My, aren't we grumpy. Let's order lunch. Maybe food will wipe that sour look off your pretty face." She looked up and caught the eye of the waiter, who'd already been staring at her. A knowing smile and coquettish tilt of her head sent him rushing to their table. He took Vivian's order and left. A minute later he returned, having realized he'd forgotten to take Sam's order. Sam didn't blame him. Vivian was a maestro in the art of flirting and seduction. No one she turned her attention to stood a chance. He hadn't. His cousin Antonio hadn't either.

Sam declined to order. "I'll just have a glass of water."

"You're not going to eat anything?" Vivian asked.

"Somehow I lose my appetite whenever I'm around you."

"Ouch. We've been divorced over a year now. I thought you would have gotten over it by now."

"Oh, I'm over it. Took me no time at all to get over my cheating wife, my good-for-nothing cousin and the sight of you two doing disgusting things in our bed."

"We did wilder things, you and I, don't you remember?"

"Spare me the walk down memory lane." Sam looked at his watch again. "I have to leave in fifteen minutes. What did you want to talk about?"

"How's work? Still ruining doctors' lives?"

Sam got up to leave.

"Sit down," Vivian said. "I'm here to talk about Maddy." The flirtatious smile disappeared and Vivian became serious. A chill traveled down Sam's spine. Maddy was the reason he hadn't turned into a complete mess when his marriage to his college sweetheart fell apart. His then four-

year-old angel had held her daddy one day as he wept, and told him she would learn to cook and wash his clothes so that he wouldn't miss Mommy so much. After contentious divorce proceedings, Vivian had agreed to let Sam have Maddy the majority of the time in exchange for significant financial concessions. She had moved an hour away from Boston immediately after they'd divorced to join a new law firm and was on the fast track to becoming partner. She'd been too busy to be saddled with raising a four-year-old child.

"What about Maddy?"

"I'm moving to New York. I want her to come and live with me."

"Over my dead body."

"That can be arranged."

"Don't you dare threaten me. Do you think because we're Italian, my scumbag of a cousin has ties to the mafia? Get real."

"What's real is that I'm not going to be able to see my daughter every other weekend if I'm in New York."

"What's changed, Vivian? A year ago you wanted nothing to do with raising your own daughter. You gave me practically full custody. All you cared about was your stupid law career and screwing my cousin. So why now? Maddy is finally settled in her new routine and we're happy. Why would you do this?"

"I'm getting married."

"*To Antonio?*"

"Oh, please," Vivian responded with disdain. "Your cousin was a good lay, and it was fun while it lasted, but I need a man who is going to achieve big things and run a legal empire. I'm getting married to one of the junior partners in my firm. He recently won the biggest case of the year in the city and I'm sure he'll make full partner before the end of the

year. We've started looking for nannies and I'm ready to have Maddy with me."

"She's happy with me."

"She needs a stable two-parent home with responsible adults. She doesn't need to be exposed to your parade of whores."

"Watch yourself, Vivian. I'm a single man, thanks to you, and I date occasionally. When I do, Maddy stays with my parents, whom she loves and who saw her through the mess you left behind. Don't rock the boat. You get her for a month during the summer. We can make that six weeks if you want." He could see she wasn't budging. He tried a different tactic. "How badly do you want to be partner at your firm? Are you prepared to do what it takes? Do you really think now is the best time to begin raising a child whose routine you have no clue about?"

He could see Vivian mulling over what he said.

"Perhaps I need to think more about this. But make no mistake. If I decide I want Maddy, I will have her."

Sam got up abruptly, hands fisted at his sides. He walked around the table and leaned close to Vivian, one hand on the table and the other on the back of her chair, effectively caging her in. When he spoke, his voice was low and deadly calm.

"If you pursue this, you will regret it. You have my word."



Sam was still seething from his encounter with Vivian as he left the law offices of Bruno and Ferrari later that afternoon. Heavily recruited by legal genius Francesco Bruno even before graduating from Harvard Law School, Samuel Ferrari's brilliant mind and razor-sharp legal arguments had quickly put him on the fast track to partnership. Unfortu-

nately the long hours he put in had allowed Vivian's affair with Antonio to go undetected for months. In his generous moments he blamed himself, not Vivian, for the demise of his marriage. Perhaps if he'd been around more, given more priority to his home life, his wife might not have sought attention from someone else. In his less generous moments, he called her many unflattering names. After all, he had worked as hard as he did for Vivian. She had a taste for expensive things and she'd made it very clear how important it was to her to have a successful husband with an income approaching seven figures.

Sam got into his Mercedes SUV and pulled out of the parking garage into the Friday evening financial district traffic. Thirty minutes later he arrived at his parents' house in the North End, having made a quick stop at one of the dozens of small Italian grocery stores in the neighborhood to pick up some wine and antipasto. He walked up the steps of his parents' cheerful colonial home, with its white columns and shutters against ocean blue siding. A toy stroller with a doll in it stood by the front door. He smiled, rang the doorbell, and walked in.

"Daddy!" Maddison ran and leaped into Sam's arms a split second after he'd safely deposited the wine bottles and grocery bag.

"Hello, pumpkin," Sam laughed as he kissed his daughter. "I missed you today. Did you have fun with Nonna and Nonno?"

"We always have fun," Maddy responded. "Today Grandma showed me how to make cannoli. We'll have them for dessert. And then Grandpa and I planted some flowers in the backyard." Maddy wriggled and Sam set her down. "Come see," she said, tugging his arm.

"In just a moment, sweetheart. Let me say hi to everyone."

Sam grabbed the wine and food with Maddy still holding

on to his free hand and walked into the kitchen. His dad Giovanni and brother Marco sat at the table while his mom Natalia stood over a pot of something that smelled divine.

"Ciao, Mamma." He kissed her cheek

"Hello, darling."

"Papa. Marco." Sam greeted his father and brother with kisses as well. He laid out the antipasto on the table. Maddy took a seat and resumed coloring her book of dragons and princesses, flowers forgotten.

"What's for dinner, Mamma?" Sam asked.

Natalia grabbed a small spoon and had a taste of the creamy dish in the pot. She made a satisfied sound and turned the heat off under the pot. She turned towards Sam. "We're having a caprese salad to start, with tomatoes and basil from Marco's greenhouse. I dressed it with that fifteen-year aged balsamic vinegar your uncle Vinny gave us. Then we'll have saltimbocca alla romana with mushroom and asparagus risotto. For dessert, the cannolis Maddy and I made."

"Saltimbocca, wow Mom." Natalia rarely made this Italian delicacy because it took all day to prepare. She wrapped veal in prosciutto and sage, marinated it for hours in olive oil and then cooked it in dry white wine and butter. The results were well worth the time and designed to impress. "What's the occasion?"

Natalia turned back towards the stove. "No occasion. I'm just glad to have my boys over for dinner."

"We were just here Tuesday night, Ma," Marco said.

Before Natalia could say anything else, the doorbell rang. Sam caught the knowing look his parents exchanged. "What's going on, Ma? Is someone joining us for dinner?"

"Just my friend's daughter, Rossana. Can you get the door, please?"

Sam groaned and stood up. It had been three weeks since

Natalia had last played matchmaker and Sam had hoped that his lack of interest would force her to give up. Apparently not.

"You might want to wipe that scowl off your face before you open the door," Marco said. "Your future bride might be waiting on the other side." Sam grabbed a kitchen towel, balled it and threw it at Marco, who ducked, laughing.

With a sigh, Sam walked to the foyer and opened the front door. The visitor, who had been admiring the potted flowers on the front porch, turned around.

"Hi," she said, extending her hand. "I'm Rossana." Sam did a quick appraisal. Rossana appeared to be in her early twenties. *Too young*, he thought. She wore a white strapless dress. The gold highlights in her shoulder length hair set off her deep, flawless tan. Somehow Sam doubted that her tan was the kind you got for free. Sam shook her hand and stepped back to let her in.

To his surprise, Sam found himself enjoying dinner and Rossana's company. She was too young for him but she reminded him of how fun it could be to spend time in the company of an attractive woman.

Two hours later, he walked her to her car.

"I had a great time this evening," Rossana said.

"Mom's a great hostess. She went all out with dinner tonight."

Rossana placed a hand on Sam's arm. "I enjoyed meeting *you*. I'd love to get together again. Perhaps just the two of us." She gave his bicep squeeze and a rub before pulling her hand away.

"I'll give you a call," Sam said, noncommittal.

Rossana leaned forward and kissed Sam on the cheek. He opened her door and she slid in. She pulled away with a wave. When Sam turned back towards the house, three faces



quickly retreated from the window. One, the smallest, remained and grinned.



"Lovely girl, that Rossana," Natalia offered. She was putting the leftovers away in glass containers while Marco and Sam rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher. Giovanni and Maddy sat at the kitchen table watching a soccer match on the small TV mounted on the adjacent wall. Their two favorite teams, Juventus and Milan, were playing each other.

"Rossana seemed really nice," Marco added.

Sam stayed silent and continued rinsing and handing dishes to Marco.

"Daddy, can I have another cannoli?" Maddy asked.

"You've already had two. That's enough."

"Grandma, can I have another?"

"You heard your dad."

"Grandpa —?"

"Just watch the game, *cara*. I bet you Juventus wins this time."

"No way. Milan is way better. My team is going to beat your team."

"Bet you a cannoli they don't."

"But Daddy said I couldn't have one."

"I'm betting because I know my team is going to win."

"Nuh-uh."

"Uh-huh."

"Your best player is on the bench with a hurt ankle," Maddy persisted.

"Our next 11 best players will get the job done."

"Grandpa," Maddy sighed. "You're like one hundred years old and Daddy says old age is clouding your mind."

Giovanni looked up at Sam, who was trying to hide his smile behind the plate he held. Marco coughed and Natalia outright laughed. Giovanni deliberately turned his back to them. "Your dad has a new girlfriend," he said and took a sip of wine.

"Papa! Don't put such ideas into my daughter's head."

"You told her I was old."

Sam turned to his daughter. "Maddy, I do not have a new girlfriend."

"You didn't like Rossana? I thought she was nice," Maddy said.

"It takes a long time for adults to get to know each other before they become boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Oh." Losing interest, she turned back to the soccer game.

Sam walked over to his mom. "Mom, I wish you would stop bringing women over for dinner. Especially without letting me know first."

Natalia took his face in her hands. "I just want you to be happy, *mi figlio*. You need a woman."

"I appreciate the concern, Mom, but I don't need any help finding dates."

Natalia took her hands away and wagged a finger. "You're not going to find good women at those dance clubs you go to."

"They're not dance clubs. I take classes at a ballroom dance studio and occasionally enter competitions with my partner."

Natalia lowered her voice. "Maddy needs a mother."

"She has me and you guys and the entire family. She's happy. If it's in the cards for me to get married again, I will, but I'm in no hurry. She and I have finally gotten over the messy divorce and I'm just focused on Maddy right now."

"I know but—"

"Mom, can we drop it please?"

Natalia opened her mouth to respond but a look from

Giovanni silenced her. She put the food containers she had packed in the fridge and took her glass of wine into the living room.

"Mom means well." Marco glanced at his brother.

"I know that, but I wish she wouldn't push."

For a few minutes the brothers worked in silence putting the dishes away. When they were finished, Sam turned and leaned back against the sink, hands in his pockets. "I saw Vivian today."

Marco quickly looked over at the others to make sure they hadn't overheard then stepped closer to Sam. "Why?"

"She sent me a message on Tuesday saying she'd be in town today and could we have lunch."

"For old times' sake?" Marco asked bitterly.

"To talk about Maddy."

"What did she want?"

The words lodged in Sam's throat. He turned around and gripped the sink till his knuckles cracked. "She wants custody of Maddy."

"*What the hell!*" Marco exploded. Giovanni and Maddy looked over in alarm just as Natalia ran back in.

"What's the matter?" she asked, worry written all over her face.

"It's nothing, Mom. Marco saw a huge spider and couldn't control himself," Sam answered.

"Did you get it?" Natalia asked as she took a few steps back.

"I did."

"No, I got it," Marco said. "I think it was a black widow, the biggest I've ever seen, right by Sam's hand. That's why I yelled. I didn't want him to be bitten. It's alright, Ma."

Natalia looked suspiciously at both her sons. "Okay. I'm going to go back to watching my show." Maddy and Giovanni were already back to being engrossed in their

soccer match and occasionally taunting each other with trash talk.

Sam and Marco resumed their conversation. "To tell you the truth," Sam said, "I'm still in shock. She seemed serious."

"That woman wouldn't know what to do with a child if it came with instructions. She turned her back on her own daughter a year ago. Why does she want her now?" Marco asked.

"She's moving to New York and wants to be able to see her. She's getting married and hiring a nanny. Maybe she feels like she's going to be more stable and is ready to give the Mommy thing a try again. Or maybe she simply hates me that much."

"We'll fight this."

"Of course we will. It may not come to it though. She has a weak point and it's that she cares about her career more than she cares about even her daughter. I reminded her that doing what it takes to become junior partner at her firm might be difficult with a young child in tow. That got her thinking."

"What if you get married? Then we can argue the courts leave Maddy with you because you've been her primary caregiver all this time."

Sam looked at Marco as if his two eyes had suddenly merged into one in the middle of his forehead. "Do I look like I want to get married right now?"

"I'm not suggesting you get married right this minute, but—"

"Maddy and I are fine, just the two of us. I'm grateful for the help I get from you, Mom and Dad, but I'm not going to get married just to be able to use that argument in court. Maddy doesn't need any more disruption in her life right now."

"Okay, bro. I hear you. Hopefully this all turns into a non-

issue." He looked over to where Maddy was doing her happy dance because her team had just scored. "Do you want to go watch the match with Dad and Maddy, or Mom's show?"

Sam merely raised one eyebrow. Marco laughed. "Milan vs. Juventus it is."

They sat at the table and Maddy climbed into Sam's lap. "Are you working this weekend?" Marco asked Sam.

"I'll be working from home. I just took on a new client. Someone whose child suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen because the doctor didn't treat his asthma attack properly. I'll be doing research on the case this weekend."

"Can you do me a favor?"

## CHAPTER 3



LISA SMILED AS SHE STIRRED IN BED. SHE FELT THE BRIGHTNESS in her room even before opening her eyes. She stretched, feeling lazy and decadent, and ran her hands over her silk sheets. An indulgence, sure, but a necessary one, she told herself, to keep hair frizz at bay. She smiled as she luxuriated. When was the last time she'd woken up without her alarm jarring her out of sleep? Her alarm! Lisa sat up abruptly, heart pounding. Her alarm didn't go off! How late was she for work? She looked at the digital clock on her nightstand. Whew! It was Saturday and she was off the entire weekend! She fell back on the bed and kicked her feet in glee. She always slept better when she knew she wasn't working the next day.

Tempted as she was to linger in bed, getting two days off in a row was rare and Lisa was determined to make the most of her time off. She jumped out of bed to get ready to go to the farmer's market, a few blocks from her house. First order of business though: coffee. She took her brew out to the balcony and surveyed the view she had paid a premium for. It was a perfect Boston summer day.

Her sixth floor condominium overlooked the Charles River Esplanade. She watched a lone runner make his way along the trail. *I need more days like this*, Lisa thought. Days to just sit and enjoy life without being utterly exhausted. She shook herself. No negative thoughts today. No dwelling on her career. Although she did have to think about the conversation she'd had with Dr. Kelly yesterday. She hadn't brought it up during her phone conversation with Whitney because she didn't know yet what to make of it.

Chief of emergency medicine. Her parents would love it, she knew. Already, they bragged about their daughter going to Harvard and working at a big hospital in Boston. She knew the entire community in the neighborhood where she grew up in Akron was proud of her and happy for her parents. She had become the community doctor. Her parents often called for her advice regarding an ailment someone in the community was suffering from. Just last weekend, her dad had asked her what old Mr. Leroy could do for his hemorrhoids. Lisa shuddered and pushed that thought aside. Being chief of emergency medicine would be validation that she was a great physician. So often she worried that medicine was just too vast to know as much as she wanted to and that one day she would screw up and be exposed for the impostor that she felt she was. But if the hospital board thought highly enough to recommend her for the position, and the journal editors thought her work good enough for publication, and the patients were satisfied with the care she provided, then maybe she *was* a good physician.

After her shower, Lisa got dressed to head to the market. She wore a white t-shirt and khaki shorts, to which she clipped her pager. She was on backup call. She grabbed her sunglasses and large straw shopping bag and headed out the door. She hadn't had the chance to go to the farmer's market in over a month because of her work schedule, and she was

looking forward to the experience. Lisa wasn't much of a cook, as Whitney had reminded her last night, but fruits and vegetables didn't require much preparation. Those she could handle. She only went to the large grocery store to pick up health and beauty items. She preferred the friendly interactions with the farmers and liked the idea of supporting the local economy.

Lisa drove a short distance and parked her car. She turned the corner onto St. James Avenue and after three blocks came up to the first stalls. She paused to take in the sights and sounds, as well as enticing smells of the market. All down both sides of the street were rows of stalls covered with white awnings. They housed tables, bins, baskets, and boxes containing all sorts of offerings. There was no particular order as each farmer brought to market whatever he had grown, although there was a general area for produce, the meats were in the back, flowers and breads were adjacent to each other. It was still early, not quite 8:30, but the street was full of Boston's bargain shoppers, the health conscious and the social shoppers.

Lisa took off her sunglasses and parked them on her head while she debated where to start. Closest to her was a stall with bins of mangos, papaya, watermelon, bananas, plums, apples, tomatoes and avocados. That was Pedro's stall. A recent immigrant from Guatemala and former patient, he never charged her the full cost for her purchase. She loved mangos and planned to stop there first. Further down she saw boxes of green beans, red bell peppers, sweet yellow onions, carrots, cucumbers, corn on the cob and much more. Just beyond that stall were the berries: strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries, in addition to other produce. Berry smoothies were easy to make, so Lisa knew she'd go to that stall as well. Toward the end of the road, she saw fresh-cut roses and planned to pick those up last.



For almost an hour she haggled and joked and flirted with the vendors and generally had the best time she had had all week. The farmers were young and old but all passionate about their produce. Eventually she made her way to the berries stall. At first she didn't see anyone manning the store. When she stepped closer, she saw a little girl, about five years old, sitting on an upturned crate and looking at a picture book.

"Hello," Lisa said. "Is your Mommy or Daddy here?"

The little girl looked up. Lisa was struck by the brilliance of her big blue eyes. She had wavy brown hair messily held together with two white ribbons. The little girl smiled excitedly at her customer. "Daddy went to get me hot chocolate. You can buy the berries or vegetables if you want but you have to give me exact money because he has all the money."

Lisa smiled.

"What's your name, pumpkin?"

"I'm Madison, but I prefer Maddy because it rhymes with Daddy and I love my Daddy."

"Well, Maddy," Lisa said, "You must be a very responsible little girl for your daddy to leave you in charge all by yourself. I'll take these two boxes of strawberries and one box of blueberries. Here's \$6." Lisa put the money in Maddy's hand and grabbed the fruit to put in her already full bag.

"You're pretty," Maddy said.

"Yes, she is."

Lisa looked up. She hadn't seen the man approaching to her left, so intent was she on her exchange with the adorable little girl. Lisa couldn't for the life of her think of anything to say. She was grateful her skin tone hid obvious signs of embarrassment, because she was sure he would have seen what effect his voice had on her otherwise. It was a baritone that seemed almost out of place in a man with his slim athletic build. He had to be in his mid-thirties. Aside from

the cup of presumably hot chocolate he held in one hand, his blue eyes made it obvious that he was Maddy's father. But rather than the innocence with which Maddy had looked at Lisa, her father looked at her with appreciation and a hint of interest.

He stepped a little closer and she noticed with envy his long eyelashes and the full eyebrows framing those magnetic eyes. His hair was darker than Maddy's and just as wavy. He ran his free hand through his hair, pushing it off his face. It was a little long, coming down over his ears and brushing his neck. Lisa wondered how it would feel to run her hand through that hair. As if he could sense what she was thinking about, he smiled. Her eyes moved to his lips. Big mistake. They were beautiful lips, she thought. Kissable lips.

"I bought strawberries," Lisa finally said.

"And blueberries," Maddy added.

No one said anything for a moment. Maddy looked from her dad to Lisa. Back to her dad. "Daddy, can I have my hot chocolate?"

"Oh! Yes, here you are, pumpkin."

Lisa startled at his use of the same term of endearment she favored for little ones. She watched as he walked around the stall, scooped Maddy up in his arms and gave her a big kiss on the cheek before handing her the lidded cup of hot chocolate.

"I'm Sam, by the way," he said, extending his hand to Lisa.

"I'm Lisa," she answered as she placed her hand in his. A funny feeling went through her as his hand closed over hers. Inexplicable as it was, she felt a strong sense of connection between him, Maddy and herself. His grip was warm and sure. She started to pull her hand back but he held on a beat longer.

"Can I get you a hot chocolate? Or a coffee?"

She was tempted to say yes just to spend a few more

minutes with this attractive stranger and his daughter, but at the last second, reason prevailed. She'd learned from her dance club outings not to give in to the initial attraction. It meant nothing really. She would likely never see Sam again. Even if she said yes to coffee, she knew she was too busy for a relationship. Eyes on the prize, Lisa reminded herself. Chief first, fun later.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go," she said.

Sam shielded the disappointment in his eyes but not quickly enough. Reluctantly, Lisa waved bye to Maddy and began to walk back towards her car.



"Mamma Mia! Hot doctor in the house!" Whitney whistled as she took in her best friend from head to toe.

Lisa laughed as she enveloped Whitney in a big hug and let her into her apartment. Whitney was dressed for a seriously good time. Sophia's, the salsa club they were going to, was one of the classiest clubs in the city. The cover charge was also one of the highest at \$45, but Whitney and Lisa had never had to pay before, and Lisa had a feeling they wouldn't have to pay tonight either. Whitney was dressed in a gorgeous red satin halter dress with a plunging V neckline. The dress fell to mid-thigh in sexy ruffles because *a salsa dress has to fly*, Whitney was fond of saying. The top had a band just below her breasts that accentuated her slim waist. The show-stoppers of the outfit were the killer stiletto strappy shoes she wore, which showcased her beautiful long legs.

"You are the hot one, Whit." Lisa said. "All the guys are going to fall over themselves trying to dance with you." Lisa looked more closely. "Did you add some highlights to your hair?"

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



It's hard to imagine a Harvard-trained physician penning stories about love and longing, but Dr. Christiana Jones has never been described as 'conventional.' Born in Nigeria, she spent every night pressed dangerously close to a kerosene lamp with a book in her hands, while her family bemoaned the lack of reliable electricity. As an adult, her colleagues would traipse off to yoga classes while Christiana, a.k.a. 'Dr. Doom,' donned her black belt and earned her fight name.

But for all her interests and passions, Christiana's heart inevitably returned to storytelling. To this day, her greatest joy is crafting moving stories with strong heroines that pay tribute to the courage and resilience of women working in medicine. Saving lives day after day might take a heavy toll on their personal lives, but that doesn't stop them from chasing their dreams and following their hearts.

Her first novel, *Dancing with the Enemy* was a #1 Amazon bestseller and was followed by *Loving Dr. Martin* and *Till Medicine Do Us Part*.

Christiana loves to connect with her readers, so feel free to stop by and say hello, or join her mailing list for releases and updates.

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