

THE EX

IF YOU
THOUGHT
SHE WAS
GONE...

THINK
AGAIN

FREIDA McFADDEN



The Ex

a novel by

FREIDA MCFADDEN

The Ex

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To Libby and Melanie (as always)

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Prologue: The Ex

When my live-in boyfriend of many, many (many) years told me he was taking me out to dinner to discuss “something important,” there was only one thought running through my head:

It’s about damn time.

Of all our friends, Joel and I had been together the longest. I don’t want to say how long—it’s embarrassing. Let’s just say that I danced at the weddings of friends who had been together half as long as we had. And then a few months earlier, my sister got married. My *baby sister* got married before I did. In India, they have a rule that the eldest sister must be married off before any of the younger siblings may, and I think it’s about time they bring that rule to the western hemisphere. Because otherwise, you end up sitting alone at your little sister’s wedding while elderly aunts pat you on the hand and assure you that it will be “your turn next” until you end up hiding in a stall in the ladies room, stuffing wedding cake into your mouth.

Joel missed that wedding because he pulled the short straw and ended up with an ER shift that day. Or that’s what he told me. After the fact, I have to wonder.

But tonight, all was forgiven as I walked into the crowded bar and grill where Joel and I were meeting for dinner, since he was coming straight from the hospital. The tables were packed so tightly into the small space that I had to twist my hips to navigate across the room. Smoking had been banned in this establishment for many years, but I still detected a whiff of cigarettes, clinging to the wood of the tables and chairs, ground into the sticky floor.

This was, in fact, the very same bar and grill where we had our first official date together all those years back—if that wasn’t a sign he was about to pop the question, what was? I had barely enough time to change clothes after work, and I’d made the most of it. I splurged on the Ultimate Little Black Dress last month, and I’d been dying for an occasion to wear it. I spent nearly an hour with my curling iron, trying to get my hair maximally silky and shiny. I loved the look on Joel’s face when he saw me in a sexy outfit—the way his mouth dropped open slightly, and a smile spread across his face.

My first clue that something was amiss was that Joel was wearing his green scrubs. Not that Joel wearing scrubs was anything out of the ordinary. He worked as an Emergency Room physician at a local hospital, and he admitted he’d live in scrubs if it were socially acceptable. I did our laundry every Sunday, and there was usually a full load of nothing but scrubs. He wore them whenever I didn’t nag him to put on real clothes. I mean, jeans and a T-shirt would have been fine. I wasn’t picky.

So it wasn’t a *surprise* to see him wearing scrubs. Yet I figured if he were going to propose, wouldn’t he want to wear something nicer? Also, it made me feel ridiculously overdressed in my Ultimate Little Black Dress when he was wearing freaking scrubs.

A waitress started talking to Joel as I approached the table. She was all of twenty-two with curvy hips and blond hair, and before I got to my seat, her hand was on his shoulder. Joel in regular clothes got second looks, with his penetrating blue eyes, shy smile, and lean but muscular build. But in scrubs, he was irresistible to women.

“Hey.” He lifted those blue eyes when he saw me. He looked tired, but that was also nothing new. “You’re here.”

The waitress reluctantly pulled her hand off my boyfriend’s shoulders. I was unsurprised by her reaction to me because I got it all the time. The eyes traveling up and down my body as she appraised her competition. But at last, she left us alone.

“How was your shift?” I asked as I settled into the chair across from him.

His face brightened the way it always did whenever the subject of his work came up. Joel loved his work more than anyone I knew. Even when we first met, back when he was a first-year medical student, he knew he wanted to be an ER doc. He lived for his work. It was the most important thing in his life.

How things have changed since then. Now that he has *her*.

“I diagnosed a dural venous sinus thrombosis,” he said. “Two days ago, they let this girl walk out with just some Fioricet for her headache. I caught it though.”

“So...” I grinned at him. “You saved her life.”

“Well.” He lowered his eyes. One thing about Joel was that he never oversold himself. “Maybe. I’m sure someone would have figured it out eventually. And then I passed her on to neurology, so if anyone is going to save her life, it’s them.”

“Of course you did,” I insisted. Because while my boyfriend was always reluctant to tout his own achievements, I had no trouble doing it. I would tell anyone who would listen about the Great Dr. Joel Broder. I wasn’t bragging—I believed everything I said. I was so proud of everything he had achieved during the time we were together. In my eyes, there was nobody better than him. No better doctor. No better man.

No better person to spend the rest of my life with.

I still believe that. In spite of everything that happened next.

“There are lots of people I don’t save,” he said.

Without him saying the words, I know what he’s referring to. One month ago, a man dropped dead in his ER. A young man—about our age, give or take a year. He came in complaining of vague chest pain that had been triaged as “likely heartburn.” Joel hadn’t even seen him yet when a “Code Blue” was called. Joel rushed to the room but wasn’t able to save him. *Cardiac arrest*, he said.

Joel took it really hard. He went into our bedroom, lay down on the bed, and stared up at the ceiling without speaking for several hours. I couldn’t get him to eat dinner, even though I made his favorite: spaghetti with homemade marinara sauce and meatballs. It takes me nearly two hours to get that recipe perfect, but it’s Joel’s favorite. *How do you get the meatballs to taste so good?* (The secret ingredient is buttermilk—a tip from my Italian grandma. I never told him that though.)

I woke up at two in the morning that night, and he wasn’t in bed or even in our apartment. When I frantically called him on his cell, he said he was “taking a walk.” He didn’t return until sunrise—I know because I sat up waiting. It took days for him to start acting normally again. And it was clearly still in the back of his mind at all times.

I didn’t entirely understand it. He’d seen dozens of people die during his career in medicine. Maybe even hundreds. Why did this one death shake him so badly?

“He was a doctor too,” Joel said to me now. “Did I tell you that? He worked as a hospitalist downtown. One of our ER docs went to med school with him.”

“Oh,” I said, because I wasn’t sure what else to say. I didn’t want to talk about death. Not now. It was the least romantic thing I could think of.

He took a swig from his copper-colored drink. I didn’t know what it was, but it wasn’t his usual wine or beer. It looked and smelled like... bourbon. I’d never seen him drink hard liquor before. Well, that wasn’t true. But not since he graduated from medical school.

It was my second clue something was amiss. Yet I ignored it and plowed forward anyway.

“So,” I said cheerfully, “you said you wanted to talk to me about something? Something

important?”

When I relive that night in my memory, it's at this point that I start to cringe.

“Yeah.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. His eyes were avoiding mine. I looked at the pocket of his scrub top, trying to make out the outline of a ring box. “So here's the thing...”

Will you marry me?

“I...” He coughed into his hand and took another swig from his drink. “I've been thinking a lot lately, you know? After that guy...”

“It wasn't your fault, Joel.”

“I know, but that's not the point.” He rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hands. “I just... I can't stop thinking about him. He was... I mean, it's not like he was a walking coronary. He was healthy. Young... like me. A *doctor*, like me. And he just... dropped dead. No warning. Just...” He snapped his fingers. “Like that.”

This didn't feel like a marriage proposal. If it was, it was a really, really bad one.

“Well,” I said, trying to turn this around. “That sort of thing makes you want to... you know, reevaluate your life. Move forward. Right?”

Buy a house. Have babies. Grow old together. Sit on a porch in matching rocking chairs, holding hands.

Joel's eyes lit up. “That's exactly what I'm talking about.”

“Wonderful!” I reached out across the table for Joel's hand, but he pulled it away before I could reach him. “I'm glad we're on the same page.”

“I think it's for the best.” He picked up his drink and swished the copper liquid around. “You and I—we're not good together. Not anymore. And it's better to move on, rather than—”

“*What?*” My heart skipped in my chest. “Not good together? What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about...” He blinked a few times. “Isn't that what you meant? That we should... go our separate ways? Move on?”

“Not move on!” I practically spit out the words. People had started to turn and stare at us. “I said ‘move *forward*.’ Like... get married.”

And this is the part where the memory *really* makes me cringe.

Joel's mouth fell open. “*Get married?*”

“Well, why not?” My heart was slamming in my chest. I wondered if Joel would feel bad if he made me drop dead. “We've been together *forever*. We live together. We're great together. And... I love you.”

This was the part where he was supposed to tell me he loved me too. I sat there, waiting for him to say it. But he didn't. He just sank down in his seat, staring at his drink.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “It's just... our relationship isn't working for me anymore.”

Not *working* for him? What the hell did that mean? I still can't figure it out. I felt like an employee he'd decided to let go because I'd outlived my usefulness. Or maybe I was too old.

When I later saw the next girl he dated, the latter became a real possibility. And I do mean “girl.”

“Joel, I love you,” I said again. “Please. Don't do this. You're my whole life.” My eyes filled with tears. “Please.”

If there's one thing I wish I could take back about that day, it would be to eliminate the begging. I'd never considered myself a weak woman. Begging a man not to leave me—I still feel the sting of humiliation from that one. But my words were true. Joel was my life. I loved him more than I'd ever imagined loving a man. It was fairy tale love. And fairy tales always have happy endings.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, unable to meet my eyes. “You... you can have the apartment.”

“I can’t afford the rent on my own,” I said. I loved my job and I was very good at it, but my salary was piddling compared with his.

“I’ll help you pay it then,” he offered. “Until you can find another place.”

He was so nice about it. That’s the thing about Joel—he’s a good guy. Always so kind and considerate and *good*. He had two months off after he graduated from medical school, and instead of using that time to have some fun like his buddies, he decided to fly to Senegal to volunteer at a medical clinic. I went with him and volunteered to help out doing what I could. We got our shots together—the yellow fever one made me particularly ill—and stocked up on malaria pills, and we spent six weeks living in a hut together. The room we shared was only slightly bigger than our walk-in closet, and the one tiny fan in the corner of the room did nothing to dissipate the stifling heat. After a week, I was covered head-to-toe in mosquito bites. But somehow, it was the happiest six weeks of my life.

“What if we went to Senegal again?” I suggested, clinging to the memory of when we used to be happy together. “We could volunteer again. Couldn’t we?”

He shook his head. “That... it wouldn’t...”

I was running out of ideas. I felt like I could convince him not to go if only I could come up with the right words.

“Please don’t do this,” I whispered. “Please.”

More begging. Ugh. I promise I’m not usually so pathetic.

I studied Joel’s face, with his pale eyelashes, thick brown hair, and the flush creeping up his neck. “Is there someone else?” I asked.

“No,” he said quickly. “There’s no one else.”

The subtext was obvious: *Not yet*. There would be someone else someday. Another woman. One he’d someday deem worthy of marriage, the house in the suburbs, the kids, the matching rocking chairs—everything I wasn’t good enough for. Because he and I didn’t *work*.

“Don’t do this to me,” I said, the volume of my voice rising above the din of the restaurant. Joel hated making a scene. He would do anything to avoid it. I was making him very uncomfortable now, although it was his own damn fault for doing this in a restaurant. Maybe he thought if he did it at home, I’d rip the whole place apart. I had no idea that as we were having this conversation, his buddy Pete was hauling his belongings out of the apartment so they wouldn’t be there when I got back.

Joel glanced around. Half the people in the restaurant had their eyes on us now. He looked really uncomfortable. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

“I’m sorry,” he said for the third time. And then he stood up, tossed a few bills on the table, and sprinted out of the restaurant.

I was stunned. Fifteen minutes earlier, I had been planning a life with the man I loved. And now? Now it was all down the toilet.

They say there’s a thin line between love and hate. In those few seconds between when Joel stood up and when the door to the restaurant slammed behind him, my love for Joel Broder started to morph into hatred. It didn’t all happen that day, but with time, I grew to hate him. I hated that I wasn’t good enough for the life he imagined for himself. I hated the pity in his eyes when he offered to pay the rent on our apartment because he knew I couldn’t afford it. I came to despise the new girl he would meet who would someday take my place at the altar when he was finally ready to settle down. Much more than I ever hated Joel, I came to hate this nameless, faceless woman.

I wanted to get back at him for what he did to me.

And *her*.

That was my intention from the beginning. When Joel dumped me that night, he took away my entire life—my home, my friends, my dignity. I could never get any of that back. All I wanted was to even the score.

I never meant to kill anyone.

I swear.

Chapter 1: The New Girl

There are three businesses that nobody in their right minds would want to own in the twenty-first century:

- 1) A travel agency
- 2) A video store
- 3) A bookstore

Cassie Donovan has been booking trips online for her entire adult life, and she only vaguely remembers what it was like to walk into a store and borrow a DVD to watch on her family's DVD player. She doesn't even *own* a DVD player anymore.

Yet here she is, shelving her latest acquisition of slightly worn books at the used bookstore she inherited from her grandparents: Grandma Bea and Grandpa Marv. She was only twenty-two when she took over the store—just out of college. Nobody else in the Donovan clan had any interest in taking the reins of a used bookstore that was struggling in the setting of a growing online and electronic book sales market. But Cassie always had a passion for print and couldn't let Bookland close its doors.

She pulls a dog-eared paperback out of the box. *Rebecca* by Daphne DuMaurier—one of her favorites. Yet the classics never sell. She'll be lucky to get a dollar for this one. A dollar isn't enough to keep a business going.

"What's going on back there, Cassie?"

The voice of Cassie's friend and business partner Zoe Malloy floats out from the front of the store. Zoe was Cassie's college roommate, and when Bookland fell into Cassie's hands, she decided to offer a share in the business to Zoe in order to get her help. Cassie's accounting degree helps her in balancing the books (or trying), but it's Zoe who knows about sales. It's a fact that when Zoe is at the front of the store, they sell more books than they do when Cassie is there. Maybe it's Zoe's glowing personality. Maybe it's her sales technique or her degree in Communication. Whatever it is, Zoe is a better saleswoman than Cassie will ever be.

"Are you done yet?" Zoe yells. Bookland is tiny, yet you can somehow get lost inside it. Everywhere you turn, there are shelves filled with books—Grandma Bea managed to stuff a ridiculous number of bookcases in this small space, and sometimes Cassie worries they'll all go tumbling down like dominos. "Cassie?"

"Just another minute!" Cassie calls back as she shoves the last of the books on a shelf.

Cassie wipes her hands on her skinny blue jeans as she walks back to the front desk where Zoe is sitting on one of the stools she set up in front of the cash register. Stools are not very comfortable, but the old chairs literally fell apart six months ago, and she found these two stools on the street in front of a brownstone downtown. Zoe helped her drag them to the store.

Cassie hates to admit it, but Bookland is in a bit of financial trouble. She hasn't managed to drag it out of the hole it was in when Grandma Bea died. But she will.

One way or another.

Zoe's got a paperback cracked open in front of her. Zoe loves to read as much as Cassie does, but she likes the newer stuff. Her current cover features a picture of a woman with a drop of blood dripping from a fang jutting from her lips. Vampire novels are not Cassie's thing, but Zoe devours them—and they sell much better than the classics. Zoe looks the part too, from her jet black hair cut in a bob around her face, dark red lipstick, powder-white skin, and black nails. Zoe is gorgeous and only slightly frightening.

Zoe insists they'd sell more books if Cassie would let her do her makeup, but she's resisted so far. All Cassie ever wears is a layer of lipstick if she remembers—and sometimes she doesn't even remember that much. Today is one of those days she didn't remember.

It's not just the makeup though. Zoe is simply friendlier than Cassie. Zoe knows how to chat up a customer like nobody's business—everyone is her friend. She's even befriended the homeless woman who occupies the empty gap between the book store and the drug store next to them. Apparently, her name is Maureen.

"HD," Zoe murmurs. "Three o'clock."

Sadly, Cassie knows exactly what this cryptic code means. HD stands for "Hot Doctor." Bookland happens to be located a mere block away from a large teaching hospital and tends to get its fair share of young physicians and medical students, looking for various medical textbooks. Unfortunately, Bookland doesn't carry medical textbooks. So while Zoe enjoys this eye candy, Cassie mostly finds it frustrating.

Still, she follows Zoe's directions and looks in the direction of three o'clock, and... well, this guy is definitely an HD if there ever was one. The green scrubs give away the doctor bit. And the hot bit... yeah, that one isn't up for debate. Thick, dark hair slightly tousled from the wind, eyes the color of the ocean, and a pretty nice build under those scrubs.

"Dibs," Zoe says. Even though she's got a boyfriend.

"Fine."

Zoe taps her shiny black fingernails. She has the longest fingernails Cassie had ever seen, although she claims they're mostly for self-defense. New York is a dangerous city. She says the fingernails save her a bundle on mace. "You can have him if you really want him."

"I don't want him."

"Why not? He's gorgeous. And no ring."

"I don't know." Cassie glances at the guy in scrubs, who is flipping through a dog-eared copy of a graphic novel. "He's too old."

"He's too *old*?" Zoe's dark red lips form an O. "How is he too old? He's mid-thirties, at the latest."

Cassie turned twenty-six a couple of months ago. "Right. He's like ten years older than me."

"Are you kidding me? That's perfect. Men mature later than women, so you have to date men ten years older."

Cassie's not sure she agrees. She can hardly manage men her own age, much less than older men.

Zoe narrows her eyes. "When's the last time you've been on a date, Cassie?"

Cassie quickly makes herself busy organizing the bookmarks on the counter. Zoe made them and they bring in a little bit of revenue to supplement what they earn on books. Zoe is really talented—she could have been an artist if she wanted. "I'm not sure."

"So... what? You're not interested in men anymore?"

"I'm just... busy."

That is the truth. It is taking every ounce of Cassie's energy and time to keep Bookland from closing its doors. She has been posting flyers all around the neighborhood, negotiating cheap advertising, and keeping the store open as many hours as she can stomach. She doesn't have time for dating. Not now. Maybe someday.

It doesn't help that all of the dates she's been on in the last several years have been a disappointment. And her last relationship was so unsatisfying, she couldn't wait to be single again.

Cassie fully expects Zoe to keep hassling her about her social life. But instead, Zoe sucks in a breath and nudges her hard. “Here comes HD. Look pretty.”

Sure enough, the guy in scrubs is approaching the desk. Now that Cassie sees him close up, it’s clear he’s every bit the Hot Doctor. His blue eyes are so vivid and sexy that her resolve to keep out of the dating market wavers slightly. But only slightly.

Usually, a guy like that would make a beeline for Zoe, but instead, he approaches Cassie. He looks her in the eyes and offers an endearingly crooked grin. “Hi,” he says.

She had irrationally hoped that when he spoke to her, he would have awful coffee breath or rotted yellow teeth or *something* that would make him less appealing, but no. He’s got perfect, white teeth and smells like a combination of aftershave and the outdoors.

Zoe nudges her again. “Hi,” Cassie says.

She waits for him to say the words every other guy in scrubs says when they come into Bookland. *Can you help me find [fill in name of medical text]?*

But he doesn’t say that. A crease forms between his eyebrows and he says, “I’m looking for a copy of *Wuthering Heights*.”

If Cassie had been drinking a beverage, she would have spit it out dramatically. This extremely attractive man in green scrubs wants a copy of the greatest love story of all time? “*Wuthering Heights*?”

He nods. “Is that something you have?”

“Of course.” And now her heart is racing in her chest. Not because this will be her first sale of the afternoon, but because a man who loves that book could be worth opening up her social calendar for. “Follow me, please.”

She steps out from behind the desk, and he diligently follows her to the back of the store. She leads him to the four narrow shelves marked “Classics.” The books are coated in a fine layer of dust because nobody ever peruses this section, aside from the occasional teenager on a school assignment. The “Classics” sign is in Grandpa Marv’s handwriting—Bea never took down any of the signs her late husband wrote, even as the writing became faded. And now that both of them are gone, Cassie won’t touch them, even though the paper is starting to disintegrate.

Cassie plucks one of their two copies from the shelf and blows dust off it as surreptitiously as she can. “Would you prefer hardcover or paperback?”

He chews on his lip. “Uh... which one is in better condition?”

“They’re both in excellent condition,” Cassie says, trying not to sound indignant.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to offend you.” That crooked smile again. “See, the book isn’t for me. It’s for my mother. It’s her birthday.”

“You’re buying your mother a *used* book for her birthday?”

He ducks down his head. “It’s not what you think. My mother... she likes books to have a story. Like, she wants to imagine who owned it before and what journey it’s been on and...”

She smiles. “That sounds like my grandmother.”

Grandma Bea used to say things like that all the time. Every time she got a new shipment of books, she would lift each volume, bring it to her nose, and inhale. She said different book brands had different smells—for example, Penguin books smell like vanilla. But then the journey the books would take would give it another unique odor on top of that. *Cigarettes*, she would say. Or maybe *Chanel*. She would come up with stories about who owned certain books. Cassie loved listening to those stories as much as she liked reading the books.

Cassie replaces the paperback and plucks the hardcover volume off the shelf. The pages are so worn that they’ve turned yellow. “This book was given to us by a middle-aged woman,” she

tells him. “She read it every day in the park while waiting for her married lover to appear. They stole one hour together every day, but he couldn’t leave his wife because she was ill and he was afraid the shock might kill her. He kept telling the woman it would just be a little longer, then they could be together. So the woman met him every day like that for one year... five years... twenty years, until...”

He raises his eyebrows. “Until?”

She smiles. “I don’t know. I just made it all up. What do you think happens?”

“I think they find a way to be together. A happy ending.”

“But what about the wife? Doesn’t she deserve a happy ending?”

He laughs. He has a nice laugh that shows off a row of white teeth. “This is too much philosophy for two in the afternoon.” He folds his arms across his chest, and she notices what are some very nice biceps protruding from his scrub top. “By the way, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“What is HD?”

Cassie’s mouth drops open. He heard Zoe talking before. Wonderful. “HD?” she says weakly.

“I heard your coworker say it.” His eyes twinkle. “When I was walking over to you. She said, ‘Here comes HD.’”

She is going to *kill* Zoe. “Um, well... we weren’t talking about you or anything. It stands for... high... definition.”

“High definition what?”

“Television.” Cassie tries to shrug, but only one shoulder gets in on the action. “I was thinking about buying a high definition television. So.”

“Right, of course.” He nods. “I got a high-def TV a few years ago. It’s great. The picture is so clear.”

Great, now he’s giving her advice about high-definition televisions. As if she could afford that. She’s lucky they haven’t shut off her electricity. But anything is better than admitting they were ogling him from across the store.

“So,” he says, “how much is the book?”

Cassie flips over the hardcover in her hands and reveals the price on the back. Twenty dollars, which seems a bit steep for a used book—no wonder it’s never been sold. Grandma Bea must have priced it. She was very protective of her copies of *Wuthering Heights*, especially after Grandpa Marv died.

She starts to tell him ten dollars, but before she can, he says, “Okay, I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful. I’ll go ring it up.”

“Thanks...” He hesitates, one eyebrow raised.

“Cassie,” she finishes for him.

“Cassie,” he repeats. He sticks a thumb at his chest. “Joel.”

She nods, not sure why they’re bothering to exchange names. He will purchase this book and she’ll never see him again. It’s not like he’s any great lover of literature who will be returning for many future purchases.

Cassie rings up the book, trying not to think about the fact that this is the first time she’s opened the cash register this afternoon. How long can she keep this going?

Joel pulls a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet and holds it out to her. His thumb brushes slightly against her fingers as she takes it from him, and a tingle goes through her hand. A forgotten sensation, but not at all unwelcome. Maybe Zoe is right. Maybe she needs to reenter

the dating world again.

“I like these bookmarks,” Joel announces, breaking into her thoughts.

She perks up, wondering if she might score another sale. Or at least keep this appealing man here just a little while longer. “They’re handmade.”

He raises his eyebrows. “*You* made them? They’re incredible. You’re really talented.”

“I didn’t,” she admits regretfully. “Zoe made them.”

Zoe lifts her eyes from her vampire novel. She looks between the two of them, shakes her head, and then sighs loudly. “Hot Doctor,” she announces.

Cassie whips her head around to look at her coworker. Joel’s eyes have widened.

“That’s what HD stands for,” Zoe clarifies as she lays her book flat on the table. “Hot Doctor. We saw you standing there and agreed you were a hot doctor, so... well, I think it’s self-explanatory at this point.” She taps on the desk with her long fingernail. “Aw, and now Hot Doctor is blushing.”

Cassie had been averting her own eyes, but it turns out Zoe is right. Joel hasn’t turned red as a beet the way Cassie does when she’s embarrassed (as she surely is now), but his ears have flushed pink and he’s rubbing at the back of his neck.

“You’re *both* blushing!” Zoe claps her hands together like Christmas has come early. “That is so cute.” She focuses her gaze on Joel. “You should ask her out, HD. She’ll definitely say yes.”

If Zoe weren’t her business partner, Cassie would fire her.

“Uh...” He coughs. “Cassie, do you... I mean, would you be okay with me calling you sometime?”

“Wow.” Zoe clasps her chest. “For a hot doctor, you are *not* smooth. Just ask her on a date. She’s free every night of the week.”

For the love of God...

He tugs at the V-neck of his scrubs. “What do you say, Cassie? Are you free on Friday night?”

“Yes,” she admits. As well as Saturday, Sunday, Monday...

A smile lights up his face. A guy that cute shouldn’t have been so nervous about asking out a random girl. It makes Cassie wonder if he’s been in the clutches of a long-term relationship and has only recently escaped, so his skills are rusty. She tries to put that thought out of her head.

“That’s great,” he says. “Can I pick you up here?”

She nods, finding that a smile is twitching at her own lips.

Chapter 2: The Ex

My most recent photograph on Facebook from last night featured yours truly in a short, slinky red dress, with four-inch black heels that, with the right camera angle, made my legs appear endless. I don't want to admit how many shots it took to get the exact right camera angle.

Okay, it was forty-three. Forty-three snapshots of me, taken with my iPhone in the full-length mirror hanging on my bedroom door, to get that perfect shot. Which I then immediately posted on Facebook with the caption: "Ready for a night out on the town!"

Sixty seconds after the post went live, I was stripping off my slinky red dress and my heels, washing off my makeup, and settling in for a marathon of *Top Chef* on my sofa. Alone.

But it paid off. This morning when I woke up, there were twenty-seven "likes" of last night's update and multiple comments. Yes, several of those comments were condescending remarks like, "Good for you, getting out there again!" I wasn't concerned about that. The only thing I cared about was that one of those "likes" was from Joel Broder.

In the five months since our breakup, Joel and I have not remained friends, but we are still Facebook friends. He is able to see my carefully orchestrated photographs and updates that show I'm having the time of my life without him. If he sees enough of these photographs, will he eventually start to feel regretful over what he gave up? And maybe decide he wants me back?

It's pathetic. I know. I need to stop. But until Joel changes his status to "in a relationship," I keep trying. I can't help myself.

So when I walk into Starbucks and see Joel sitting at his usual table in the back, dressed in his usual scrubs, hunched over his Android with the fingers of his left hand wrapped around a Caffe Mocha, I don't turn around and walk right out the door. Fortuitously, I'm dressed in my best pair of acid-washed skinny jeans paired with a top I got from the discount rack at Macy's last week that shows the perfect amount of cleavage. My hair is gleaming from the highlights I put in last week—the salon is far too expensive but worth it. The box just isn't the same.

Okay, it's not *entirely* fortuitous that I'm running into Joel while looking my best. The truth is, about two years ago, Joel got sick of me texting him whether he'd left the hospital yet, so he installed an app on my phone called WhereAmI. This app allowed me to locate him anywhere he goes via GPS with startling accuracy. If he goes into a Starbucks, it can even tell me which one.

I had assumed when Joel broke up with me, he'd have turned off WhereAmI on his own phone. But he hasn't. I can only assume he's forgotten all about it, because I'm still receiving minute-to-minute updates about his whereabouts.

I should delete the app. I definitely should. It's not healthy to be tracking my ex-boyfriend around the city. I'm no psychologist, but I know that much.

I'll delete it. Soon.

As casually as I can, I get on the Starbucks line. I don't look in Joel's direction and pretend I don't even know he exists. When it's my turn, I order my usual: a vanilla latte. Then I take out my phone as I wait for my drink to be made.

Don't look in his direction. Pretend he isn't even here. He will come to you if he wants to talk to you.

"Hey..."

I glance up from my phone, and sure enough, he's gotten up from his seat and he's standing in front of me. And God, he looks so good. *He* didn't engineer this meeting—how does he manage to look so great? I lower my phone and throw my shoulders back, reminding myself he

saw the photo of me dressed to the nines last night and “liked” what he saw. And as his eyes sweep over me briefly, I can tell he likes what he sees yet again.

“Hey!” I flash an easy smile. Easy, breezy. “How are you? It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I’m good.” He rakes a hand through his dark hair. Are those slight purple circles under his blue eyes? Maybe he’s not doing as well as I’d thought. “But you... you look great.”

I check his tone for pity, and there’s none. He means it. “Thanks. I’ve been... pretty busy. You know, work... life...” Television... ice cream... alcohol...

“I can see that...” He manages a crooked smile. “Actually, I’m really glad I ran into you.”

My heart speeds up in my chest. This is the third time we’ve “accidentally” run into each other since the breakup five months ago, but this is the first time he’s been interested in anything more than an awkward hello.

“What’s up?” I say.

“Well, listen...” He shifts between his feet. “I know your situation and all that, but... I really... I can’t...”

“Yes?” *I can’t live without you. I want you back.*

“I can’t afford to keep paying two rents,” he finishes. The second the words are out of his mouth, he drops his eyes. “I know your financial situation, but... between that and my loan payments, I’m digging into my savings. I can’t... I mean, it’s been almost six months.” He takes a deep breath. “This is the last month I can pay. I’m sorry.”

My stomach sinks. He doesn’t want me back. He’s just sick of bankrolling our old apartment.

To be fair, I can’t blame him. Our apartment wasn’t cheap—nothing in Manhattan is—but it’s hard for me to give it up. Everything about it reminds me of Joel, and giving it up would be like admitting we’ll never get back together. That it’s finally over for good.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. He’s looking at his sneakers, which are a shade on the grayscale, with one dark splotch that may or may not be blood. “I didn’t want to yank the rug out from under you, but... well, like I said, it’s been almost six months.”

I swallow a large lump in my throat. Joel has no idea how bad my financial situation really is, although even if he did, he still wouldn’t agree to keep paying indefinitely. “No, of course. It’s understandable. I... I’ve actually found a new place.”

I don’t know how I got to be such a liar. I always considered myself an extremely truthful person.

“Really?” For the first time since I walked in here, a genuine smile lights Joel’s face. “That’s great!”

I nod. “It’s downtown, in the village. Really cute and bohemian.”

“Well, congratulations.” He looks like he’s about to reach out and touch my shoulder, but at the last moment pulls back. “I’ll have to... well, if you have a housewarming party, maybe I’ll...”

I lift my chin. “Yeah, maybe I’ll send out a Facebook invite. You’re welcome to come.”

Fantastic. Now I’m inviting him to a housewarming party for an apartment I don’t have.

“It’s great seeing you,” Joel says, glancing back at his seat with his Caffe Mocha growing cold on the table. “So... uh, I guess... I’ll see you around?”

It takes all my willpower to force a smile onto my lips. “Absolutely. Great seeing you too.”

I watch him hurry back to his seat. I stand there in his wake, taking deep, calming breaths. It’s not over. Just because I’m giving up the apartment, it doesn’t mean I’ve lost. I can still save this.

Chapter 3: The Ex

“Micro-studios are *very* trendy right now, Ms. Mascolo.”

I am standing in the tiniest apartment I’ve ever seen. My real estate broker, Cindy, has now shown me three apartments, each smaller than the last. This one is only seventy square feet. Yes, that’s right. Seven-zero. I need to suck in my breath to fit into the room. There are coffins larger than this apartment.

“And it’s furnished,” Cindy adds, gesturing at the small sofa pushed against the wall, and the tiny desk smashed into a corner. There’s even a mini-fridge on the side of the sofa, doubling as an end table. “You’ll just need a microwave and maybe some sort of hot pot.”

“What about a closet?” I ask around the bile rising in my throat.

Cindy pushes aside a faded yellow curtain and there it is: what may be my new closet. It’s roughly one-sixth the size of my current clothing space. I’ll have to get rid of most of what I own if I move in here.

I glance around again, sure I’ve missed something. “What about sleeping?”

I’m certain Cindy’s going to inform me that sleeping standing up is all the rage right now, but instead, she gestures at a set of stairs leading to a nook just above our heads. No wonder the ceiling is so low.

“You’ve got an upstairs bedroom,” Cindy says, without cracking the smile that I feel such a statement clearly deserves.

I climb the stairs, which is more of a ladder than a staircase. It leads to a tiny nook above the apartment where I can put a mattress. When I’m lying there, I will have about a foot of space between my nose and the ceiling. The coffin metaphor is becoming more and more apt.

“What about a bathroom?” I ask.

“There’s one in the hallway. You’ll share it with four other residents.”

I climb back down the ladder carefully, landing unsteadily on my feet. I don’t want to live here. I really, really don’t want to live here. But my options are horrible. I’m too old to deal with a strange roommate, and even renting out a room in Manhattan is pricy.

I tried Queens. I looked at three apartments there that were at least somewhat larger than this place, but the easiest commute would involve two busses and a subway, totaling three hours of daily commuting time. At least this place is in a good neighborhood—right near Lincoln Center and Central Park.

“You don’t have anything bigger?” I ask hopefully.

Cindy arches an eyebrow. “Ms. Mascolo, this apartment is in the upper limit of your price range.”

“Yes, but—”

“And it will be snatched up by the end of the week. Believe me.”

I run my hand along the top of the mini-fridge. I get a jolt of electricity and yank my hand away.

“Oh, you don’t want to touch that,” Cindy says.

I shut my eyes. This can’t be my life.

“So do you want the place or not?” Cindy glances down at her gold watch. “I’ve got another client in twenty minutes.”

“I…” I look around at the tiny living space. My knees feel like Jell-O. I recognize I’m on the brink of being homeless, but I can’t live here. I’ve been here less than fifteen minutes and I’m