

THE
Lonely
HEARTS CLUB

by

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2008

CHAPTER ONE

Congratulations, Liz, you're pregnant."

Liz Ramsey clutched the edge of the examination table, causing the ridiculous paper gown to pull open. Exposed, she felt vulnerable and somehow a little bit out of control. She was never out of control, not in the courtroom or the bedroom or anywhere else. Except, of course, right at that moment she felt as if she might cry or laugh hysterically, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. So much for her iron-clad control.

"Liz?" Dr. Marta Thompson asked, a frown replacing her pleased grin. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Liz said quickly, fashioning a smile that from years of practice she knew would appear genuine. When you spend your days in front of a jury needing to convey emotions you sometimes do not feel, you become adept at adjusting your facial expressions to almost any circumstance. And right now, she was in one of those free fall situations where the only thing she could do was put on a show of confidence and hope it was believable. "Of course. I'm...just surprised."

"It's not unusual for it to happen this way," Marta said reassuringly. "I know we tell everyone that it may take two or three tries, but a goodly proportion of our mothers get pregnant right away." Her smile returned and she clasped Liz's arm. "You just got lucky, honey."

"Lucky," Liz echoed, her own smile still firmly in place. "Yes, I really did, didn't I?"



Fifteen minutes later, armored in her power suit and heels, and once more in charge of her life, Liz barreled down the stairwell in the Silverstein Pavilion, too keyed up to wait for an elevator. What she needed was to find her anger. Anger was a very fulfilling emotion, and

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she had relied on it frequently in the last two months to shut out her hurt and confusion. She hit the door on the first floor stairwell at a dead run, executed a sharp right turn as soon as she stepped into the lobby, and smacked into a brick wall. At least, for the first few seconds it *felt* like a brick wall—until she heard a muffled oath, and the impediment to her forward motion gave way. Stumbling, Liz skidded to a halt and stared, stupidly, she feared, at the woman lying on the floor in front of her.

“Oh hell, I’m sorry,” Liz exclaimed, kneeling beside the prone figure. A glimpse of institutional green beneath the unbuttoned white lab coat spelled hospital employee. A quick glance to the left breast pocket revealed a plastic name tag. Reilly Danvers, MD. A fast survey of the face registered a shock of unruly dark hair tumbling over slightly unfocused gray eyes, and a wide, generous mouth open in stunned surprise. Liz held out her hand. “Dr. Danvers, please forgive me. Are you hurt?”

“Do I know you?” Reilly muttered, unable to decide whether to be pissed or to laugh. She hadn’t been dumped on her ass by a woman, or anyone else for that matter, since she’d stopped competitive sparring three years earlier. After her eyeballs stopped ricocheting around in their sockets and she was able to focus on the figure leaning over her, she decided that being pissed might not be the smart road to take. The woman who had knocked her flat was beautiful. Wavy, shoulder-length coppery-brown hair. The milky complexion of a classic redhead accompanied by deep green eyes. At the moment, those eyes were so sharply focused on Reilly’s face, so penetrating, that for an instant she thought the woman was reading her mind. Considering that her thoughts were about to veer in directions they hadn’t taken in a very *very* long time, that might be a bad idea. Realizing she was staring at a perfect stranger while sprawled on the floor, Reilly took the outstretched hand and pulled herself to a sitting position. Tentatively, she touched the back of her head and smothered a wince when her fingertips landed on a lump the size of a walnut.

“You’re hurt, aren’t you?”

“No,” Reilly said quickly, automatically. “I’m okay. Just surprised.”

“That seems to be the order of the day,” Liz muttered. “Listen, we’re creating a hazard in the middle of the hall. Let me help you up.”

Before she could protest, Reilly felt long, cool fingers thread through hers, and she followed the gentle tug until she was standing

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upright. Hands still linked, they both shifted toward the wall, out of the steady stream of hospital personnel and visitors crowding toward the elevators.

“Let me see your head,” Liz said, dropping Reilly’s hand, but not before registering the natural, almost familiar way Reilly’s fingers had closed around hers.

“I’m fine,” Reilly protested. “Believe me, I’m a doctor.”

“And of course, that means you’re never wrong,” Liz commented dryly.

“Not a fan, huh?”

“I’m a lawyer.”

“Ouch.”

Liz shook her head. “Sorry. I am a fan, actually. Well, at least most of the time. Turn around.”

Deciding that acquiescing was easier than arguing, Reilly pivoted. “How did you know my name?”

“Name tag. Stand still.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Reilly muttered.

“Try Liz. Liz Ramsey.” Liz gently parted Reilly’s short, thick hair. “Well, I don’t see any blood.”

“Told you.”

“But,” Liz went on as if Reilly hadn’t spoken, “you’re getting an impressive hematoma.”

“You sound like a doctor, not an attorney,” Reilly said over her shoulder.

“Malpractice attorney.”

“Double ouch.”

“For the defense, so I expect you’re safe. The hospital retains my firm, in fact.”

Reilly angled around until they were facing one another again. “Glad to hear it, and I hope I never need your services.”

“Me, too. How much does that hurt? Honestly.”

“Nothing a few aspirin won’t cure.”

Liz rummaged through her Hermes shoulder bag. “Damn, I usually have some.”

“No matter. I’ll get some at the gift shop.”

“You’re kidding. Can’t you just ask someone in the pharmacy? Or a nurse?”

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Reilly started to shake her head, then abruptly stopped when the throbbing escalated. “Not anymore. Everything is unit dose and accounted for.”

“Then at least let me buy them for you. The gift shop’s on this floor, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but—”

Liz sighed. “Do we really have to debate this? It’s an aspirin, not a date.”

The instant the words left her mouth, Liz regretted them. She was practically flirting with a woman she didn’t even know. Not only did she never flirt, the furthest thing from her mind and the last thing she needed in her life was a new woman.

Reilly grinned. “At least let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

Liz made a show of checking her watch, mentally backpedaling. “I’ve got another appointment—”

“And I need to be in the OR in forty minutes. We’ll make it a quick coffee. What do you say?”

Thinking ahead to her bi-weekly lunch date with her two best friends, Liz knew exactly what their first question was going to be, and suddenly, she didn’t want to answer it. That told her just how badly she’d been thrown by the news herself. Avoidance wasn’t her style. No matter what the disappointment, no matter how much something hurt, no matter how hard the situation appeared to be, she threw herself at it, into it, until she beat back the pain and won, somehow. Except lately that strategy hadn’t been working so well. She checked Reilly Danvers’s calm gray eyes, felt her quiet assessment, and wondered if her own bewilderment and uncertainty showed in her face. She doubted it.

“Twenty minutes. I could use a cup of...” *You’re pregnant.* “Tea.” Liz suppressed a groan. “Decaffeinated tea.”

“Somehow,” Reilly said, cupping Liz’s elbow for a second to direct her toward an adjoining hallway, “I didn’t figure you for the tea type.”

“Yes, well, looks can be deceiving.”



“Do you think we should call her?” Candace Lory asked the petite brunette seated across from her at the corner booth at Smokey Joe’s,

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a restaurant bar on the fringes of the Penn campus that had been their hangout since their student days. She sipped her martini, appreciating one of the many perks of working for herself. She didn't have to worry about having a drink at lunchtime, or taking an extra long midday break if after the business was done she wanted to review the "details" with a client who happened to catch her eye. Thank God, commodities trading wasn't like so many professions. She could sleep with a client now and then without destroying her reputation, if she was careful. A little risky, maybe, but if there was no risk, where was the fun? For some reason, sex made her think of Liz, and she asked again, "Bren, should we call her?"

"She'll be here," Brenda Beal said. "She's never missed a lunch date with us in—how many years has it been now? Seven—almost eight years?" She groaned. "God, I feel old."

"Thirty isn't old."

"Say that in three years when you get there," Bren complained good-naturedly, although she doubted Candace would ever fret about her age. Candace was one of those women who looked as good in jeans with no make-up as she did in haute couture. Even when Candace had arrived on campus that first day as a freshman, she'd stood out from the others in the dorm where Bren was the RA. She might have been fresh off a farm in Lancaster County, but she hadn't looked like the stereotypical farmer's daughter. Blond and blue-eyed, true, but there the resemblance ended. At five-ten, she was willowy and model-pretty, with an air of subtle sensuality even at eighteen that had heads turning. Candace's wide-eyed innocence had disappeared in the last nine years, somewhere between girlfriends number two and twenty. Now she looked the part of her high-powered, fast-paced job—a job that suited perfectly her wild, risk-loving nature. Her raw silk blouse was cut low enough to entice while still remaining within the bounds of professional good taste. When she was working, Bren noticed, Candace wore her long ash-blond hair pulled back and clipped at the nape of her neck, giving her an almost austere appearance. She probably thought that made her clients more comfortable handing over big bucks to her, as she bought and sold and rode the margins. She was probably right.

"Liz is only five minutes late," Bren pointed out reasonably, falling into her role as the voice of calm just as she had back when Candace was still a student and bemoaning the latest crisis in her life.

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“She’s always on time,” Candace fretted. “One of us should have gone with her.”

“She didn’t want us to. You know how private she is.”

“I ought to,” Candace replied, her smooth features tightening. “I went out with her for almost a year and didn’t have a clue why she wanted me, and then...didn’t.”

Since Bren was far from an expert on relationships, never having had one, she refrained from suggesting that the reason Liz broke up with Candace might have been because Liz had found her making out with a soccer player at a party one night. Since Bren tried not to take sides where her friends were concerned, and since Liz and Candace had weathered that particular storm years ago, she just repeated, “Let’s give her a few more minutes. Then if she doesn’t show, we’ll go find her and drag her butt over here.”

Candace smiled wanly. “Okay. I’m just...you know, worried.”

“I know,” Bren said softly. “Me too.”



“Why orthopedic surgery?” Liz munched a stale peanut butter cookie and washed it down with a revolting sip of tepid floral-flavored tea. God, was *this* what she had to look forward to for the next seven months? She pushed the thought away and concentrated on the woman sitting across from her. Dr. Reilly Danvers was what Candace so frequently referred to as melt-in-your-mouth-hot. With her nice tight body, slightly husky voice, and kiss-till-you-drop mouth, the surgeon was an attractive package. Six years ago, Liz thought, she might have been tempted, even though Reilly was very different than the usual urbane objects of her desire. She had a casual, almost unconcerned air—as if she never worried about others’ opinions of her—and Liz found the attitude refreshing. And at one point in time, she would have found Reilly Danvers downright sexy. But now, she was just grateful for the company and, she admitted, the diversion.

“I picked ortho because I was a jock.” Reilly swallowed two aspirins with a sip of coffee. “And I wanted to work with other jocks, at least that’s what I thought when I started my training. I ended up doing ortho trauma, instead.”

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“So what seduced you away from sports medicine?”

“I like never knowing what’s coming through the door next,” Reilly replied, chipping the edge off her Styrofoam cup as she thought about the question. There were other reasons, ones she didn’t want to talk about. Emergency surgeries kept her busy, kept her mind occupied and her body tired. When she fell into bed after hours of relentless tension, she closed her eyes and rarely dreamed. When she got up the next morning or rolled out in the middle of the night to handle some crisis, she had no time to reflect on the empty space beside her and her emptier life.

“Ah,” Liz said teasingly. “An adrenaline junkie?”

Reilly nodded, not offended. That was the simple answer, and partially true. “Maybe. I get a charge out of being in the hot seat, I guess. Thinking on my feet, knowing that there’s no time to do anything except follow your instincts.”

“You enjoy the challenge.”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Reilly said. “Don’t you, doing what you do? Duking it out in court?”

“I like pitting my mind against my opponent, outmaneuvering them mentally,” Liz replied contemplatively. “I like finding the weak point in the argument and turning it into a weapon.”

Reilly chuckled. “You sound like you enjoy winning.”

“I suppose I do.” Liz wondered at the personal turn in the conversation. She had lunch with her colleagues at the firm several times a week, and she didn’t think in almost eight years she’d ever had more than half a dozen personal conversations. And here she was, having one with a stranger. Maybe that explained her willingness to talk about herself—after today she’d never see Reilly Danvers again, so she didn’t have anything to fear.

“What did I say?” Reilly asked, pushing her cup and the pile of white Styrofoam chips aside.

“What do you mean?”

“You look upset. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No. Sorry. Just a lot on my mind.” Liz schooled her expression to relax. “You asked about my work. In many ways, it’s like an elaborate game of chess. The aspect I enjoy most is uncovering the subtle facts in a case that will make the difference in the verdict.”

“And the truth?” Reilly asked quietly. “Is that part of it, too?”

Liz searched Reilly’s eyes, looking for reproach, but found none. “I like to think so.”



Candace half-stood as Liz slid in opposite her in the booth, next to Bren. “We were about to send out a search party!”

“I’m only fifteen minutes late,” Liz said with a wry smile. Candace was always volatile, but she didn’t usually hover. For the last two months, though, she’d been hovering quite a lot. Most of the time, Liz didn’t mind, but today her nerves were raw. “I had a bit of an accident—well, not really an accident,” she hastened to add when alarm flashed across Candace’s face, “more like an encounter.” She laughed. “I collided with a surgeon and knocked her flat. I only thought it was right to buy her a couple of aspirins by way of an apology.”

“You left us sitting here worrying while you bought some surgeon...” Candace narrowed her eyes. “Was she cute?”

Brenda groaned softly.

“Yes,” Liz said indulgently, recognizing the Candace she knew and loved coming to the surface, “she’s very cute.”

“Still, even if she was hot...was she hot?”

“Yes,” Liz replied, thinking that Reilly Danvers was definitely hot, if you went for the intense, darkly attractive types. Which she didn’t. She had always been drawn to the brightly burning extroverts like Candace and Julia. At the thought of Julia, her heart ached. Even as she struggled to push the sorrow aside, she wondered as she had so frequently over the last eight weeks, if the pain was from missing Julia or just from knowing she had lived six years of a lie.

Brenda, with her usual quiet sensitivity, touched Liz’s arm. “You okay?”

Liz clasped her friend’s hand. “Yes, I’m fine. Thanks.”

Candace, seemingly having forgotten her interest in Reilly Danvers and whether she was a potential bedmate, reached across the table and took Liz’s other hand, joining the three of them in the old familiar circle. “So, honey, what did the doctor say?”

Liz looked from one expectant face to the other. Brenda, who spent her days directing the rare books department in the Temple University

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library and her nights in some sort of scholarly pursuit that Liz had yet to completely understand. At five-foot-four, raven-haired, doe-eyed Brenda had women following her at any kind of gathering, but she rarely dated. And Candace. Candace, who had stolen Liz's heart when Liz should have been old enough to know better, and who had casually, innocently broken it on her way to the next effortless conquest. Her two best friends. One ex-lover. So different, and yet together, forming a whole.

For nine years they'd shared secrets, heartbreaks, the joy of new beginnings and the pain of breaking up. The three had forged something that went beyond friendship and created a family in a far more intimate way than anything Liz shared with most of her blood relatives. Her friends looked at her now, with worry and expectation.

A few minutes earlier, as she had crossed the campus from the University Hospital to the bar where they had hung out in their carefree student days, she had considered what she would say when they asked the inevitable question. What would she tell them, when she herself wasn't certain how she felt about the news? She wanted to give herself time, time to examine a future that was so very different than what she had anticipated just three months before. But now, sitting with her friends, the family she had made, she knew that time would not change her answer.

With a tremulous smile that for once she could not control, Liz said, "You're both going to be aunts."