

Not Single
ENOUGH

by
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CHAPTER ONE

“What’s up with the himbo?” Giselle demanded. “I thought we were going to have drinks and dessert, just us.”

“I happen to think a beautiful man is the least I owe myself,” her mother said smugly.

“How much are you paying him?”

“No one asks a successful *man* if he’s picking up the tab for his companion.” Nashleigh Whittaker sniffed. “You know something? You think you’re a feminist, but you’re not. You sound exactly like my mother.”

“I’m flattered.” Giselle drained her third martini.

Nashleigh wasn’t through. “I’m not even going to mention your clothes. They make their own sad statement. Low self-esteem. Inhibitions. Downward mobility. Fear of male attention.”

Giselle could not even summon a protest. She’d been waiting all evening for “Fabio” to go play in traffic, and now that he’d finally taken the hint and left them alone, she figured she had about ten minutes to spill her guts. Her mother was paying good money for testosterone on tap; she wasn’t going to let the new arm candy out of her sight for long.

“Bobbi and I broke up,” Giselle blurted.

“Bobbi...” Nashleigh lingered over the name as if trying to place it.

Giselle gave her a look. “Don’t play that game with me.”

Nashleigh yawned. “What happened?”

GRACE LENNOX

“She was seeing someone else. Anyway, I lost my job.” This provoked a puzzled stare, and Giselle converted the whole sordid saga into sound bites any middle-aged anorexic could follow. “It’s Bobbi’s company. The guy she’s seeing works there. She gave him the promotion I was supposed to have. That’s how I found out about the affair.”

“Ah.” Nashleigh absorbed this information with the gravity it deserved. She reapplied her coppery lipstick, fixed her hair, and crammed her nipples back beneath her tiger-print shelf bra. Once she was satisfied that she looked nothing like a fifty-five-year-old mother of one, she said, “My own motto, as you know, is don’t get mad, get even. Resigning was the wrong move. You should have stayed there so you could sabotage her business.”

“I didn’t resign.” Giselle wanted to channel the sangfroid her mother always displayed when someone stabbed her in the back, but there was no hiding the forlorn note in her voice. If she could hear it, so could the woman she was trying to fool, and Nashleigh Whittaker had no time for sissies.

“Well.” Nashleigh’s eyes wandered as she covertly scoured the surroundings. She was pretending to listen, but her concentration was clearly elsewhere.

Giselle straightened up. “I told her she looked old and her pussy smelled bad. And then she sacked me.”

“You actually said that?” Nashleigh’s exquisite dental work glowed at her from across the table. “You really *are* my daughter. I’m proud of you, pudding.”

“These are your commiserations on my breakup?”

“Let’s face it,” Nashleigh drawled, “the woman was bad news and the job was a dead end.”

“It paid the rent.” Giselle regretted her comment immediately, so predictable were the consequences.

“Is that why you wanted to see me?” Nashleigh reached for her handbag with an air of relief, like finally she was in her comfort zone and understood what was expected of her. “You need money?”

Not Single Enough

“No!” Weren’t people supposed to scuttle to their loved ones for comfort after a trauma? How many times had Giselle mixed a pitcher of extra-dirty martinis for her mother when the latest marriage got ugly? “I don’t want your money. I want...”

Giselle’s throat closed. Fabio was back. Trailing after him, a waiter balanced a bottle and glasses on a silver platter piled high with red rose petals. In the center lay a parchment roll tied with a red satin ribbon. The waiter lowered the platter to the table and then poured champagne. He waved at someone and the band switched from jazz to a saxophone-heavy version of “Kiss from a Rose.” Fabio hit the deck in front of Nashleigh and produced a black velvet ring box.

Gagging, Giselle plucked at the busy waiter’s sleeve and slipped him a twenty. “Another martini, please.” Champagne was not going to do it; she needed an anesthetic. She knew she should have left the moment her mother mentioned cash.

Future husband number four had the parchment roll in his hands and was reading bad poetry from it, still on his knees. Giselle wanted to climb onto the table and yell “Help!” Nashleigh was acting like she had no idea the declaration was coming and had not already arranged the preup. Giselle swigged some champagne before they could get as far as the toasts, then quickly topped up the glass so no one would notice her premature guzzling.

The room swung. Faces blurred like they were flowing across the glassy surface of a lake. The zebra-striped wallpaper swirled into spirals of black and white, punctuated with Art Deco silver and crystal. Giselle was tempted to rest her head on the red tablecloth and wait for the dizziness to pass. Her next martini arrived in the nick of time. She gulped it down as Fabio stuck his tongue in her mother’s mouth, sealing their engagement with an exchange of fluids. The ring was on her mother’s finger. It looked a lot like the last one. Same diamond, Giselle thought, new setting.

Nashleigh and Fabio clinked their glasses, and people peered around the high wooden booths to beam and join the toast. There

GRACE LENNOX

was clapping. Giselle resisted the urge to denounce this déjà vu moment for what it was, merely the latest installment in the soap opera that was her mother's life. Born to poverty and ignorance. Raped at fourteen by her stepdaddy. Grandma Caldwell sentenced to life for killing the no-good sonofabitch. The state of Florida had no time for husband-killers, given the man shortage.

After Grandma was incarcerated in Broward Correctional Institution, Nashleigh and her two brothers went to live with an aunt who could not afford college for any of them. To help out, Nashleigh took a job in a gym while she was still in high school. She married the owner, a cheating asshole who made her have two abortions so she would not lose her figure and have to take time off work. The experience taught her a guiding principle she liked to share with Giselle: *only marry a man worth divorcing*.

Giselle supposed the rules were different now that her mother was rich and didn't have to marry ugly older men for their money. Fabio was a handsome, poor paramedic who also did geriatric massage and shiatsu. They'd met on a cruise ship. Giselle knew she had to say something about their big announcement. Her lips felt as numb as they did after major dental work.

"Congratulations, both of you," she croaked.

Nashleigh gave a gracious nod. "I'm sorry if the timing was off. Obviously, we didn't know about your situation." She fondled Fabio's neck beneath the black mane of his hair, informing him, "My daughter's lesbian affair has ended, and she is also unemployed."

Fabio's bedroom eyes swept Giselle with molten emotion. From his chiseled lips came the sympathy she had yearned to hear from her mother. "I'm sorry. It hurts, no?—

when the love is crushed. I see it in you. The heart pines to be whole once more."

Giselle wasn't sure if it was the Italian accent, the European sentiments, or the alcohol flooding her system. Tears spilled down her cheeks. At this, Fabio stood and discarded his jacket.

"A beautiful woman in tears? This cannot be endured."

Not Single Enough

Ignoring a startled grunt from Nashleigh, he hauled Giselle to her feet. "Come. Your mother says dance is your gift. Show me."

Her mumbled protests fell on deaf ears. Fabio said something to a waiter, who pulled back a couple of empty tables and cleared a small dance area. Fabio sauntered out into the center, tore open a few buttons so his white shirt gapped across his bronzed-god chest, and blew a kiss at Nashleigh. Management switched the session-break music to the Lila Downs version of "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps," and Giselle found herself enticed into a slow rumba.

The dance progressed with the usual teasing body language and sensual hip rolls. Somehow she managed to stay upright. Sliding within Fabio's arms at the appropriate intervals, she made a fool of herself by sharing drunken confidences.

"I don't know what to do. My life is a mess. I have no one."

They shadow rolled, and as Fabio guided her into a Cuban walk, he said, "You are young. These troubles, they will pass. I have three bothers in Verona, all handsome."

"I'm gay."

"Yes. That, too, it will pass. Do not worry." Fabio slip pivoted and they danced in sweetheart wrap. "You are modest. *Vergine*, no? You must choose your first lover carefully. Finesse. Experience. No clumsy boy."

Giselle decided to forgo the technical discussion about what made a woman a virgin. "Are you only with my mother for her money," she digressed. "Tell me honestly."

Affront evicted the requisite brooding lust from Fabio's dance face. "You insult me, but that is not your intention. You Americans. You do not understand the love of a younger man for a mature woman."

"You *love* Mom?"

"It is my honor to do so. Your mother, she is the sun and I am the shadow."

Giselle had heard all she could stomach. She felt seasick.

GRACE LENNOX

People applauded as she and Fabio executed a flawless set of shadow turns, then ended their dance in a clinch.

She said, "You're good."

He said, "You have technique, but you do not know passion. When you do, you will dance with your whole body."

"Good to know." Giselle mustered all her dignity for the walk back to their table.

Fabio bent over her mother, parted her burnished mahogany waves, and whispered something in her ear. Giselle could only imagine.

Nashleigh's frosty smile became benevolent. "See what you're missing out on, pudding?"

"Yes," Giselle said. And that was the truth.



An hour later, Giselle stumbled out of the Lenox Lounge, thankful to surrender her senses to the Harlem night. Familiar fragrances soothed her. Coffee. Traffic. Urine. Maple syrup. Fried chicken. She even thought she could smell hot peanuts. But that was a scent of the past, a memory that rose up from the pavements and clung to the buildings. Like so many ghosts of Harlem, it still haunted the neighborhood.

She had declined a ride home. She couldn't watch her mother and Fabio fawn on each other anymore. Besides, she only had a few blocks to walk after crossing Lenox Avenue, and these days W. 125th was an upscale shopping precinct, light years from the scary stroll it had once been. Normally Giselle would have felt self-conscious about her noisy sobs as she wandered along under the pulsing street lamps, but she wasn't the only inebriated pedestrian having a pity party. A man on the corner opposite the Lenox Lounge was yelling about how his old lady stole their kids. He had an audience of homeless people and yuppies. The yuppies paid him to move on.

As he drifted in her direction, Giselle ducked down a side

Not Single Enough

street to give him time to pass by. Like any other dark, narrow, deserted alleyway, her refuge looked menacing. It didn't matter that Bill Clinton's office was just down the road and Harlem was trendy now. She opened her purse and found the mini-Taser her mother had given her a few months back. Tucked next to it was tonight's parting gift, a check for ten thousand dollars. Giselle wasn't going to bank it. She kept Nashleigh's checks in a shoe box under the bed. Nashleigh knew she wasn't cashing them, but she never said anything. She'd done her bit. No one could ever accuse her of neglecting her only child.

Giselle wondered why people needed the approval of their parents so much, even as adults. And even when the parent in question was just another flawed human being who sometimes behaved badly. Giselle could not remember a time in the twenty-eight years of her life when Nashleigh had taken a break from man-worship just to be a mom. What had she expected tonight—a complete personality change? Nashleigh, suddenly awash with maternal feeling, clutches her daughter to her augmented bosom? Life was not a Hallmark TV movie. Her mother's self-absorption was nothing new. They both knew Giselle came second and always would. Hence the shoe box. Nashleigh thought writing a check proved she had a conscience.

Giselle stopped pacing and stared down at the filthy pavement, angry with herself and trying to comprehend the depth of her disappointment. A handsome, moderately intelligent foreigner was in love with her mother. What depths did she reveal that were invisible to Giselle? What tenderness did Nashleigh reserve for him that she withheld from her own flesh and blood?

Glass smashed somewhere and Giselle looked around. The drunk who'd lost his kids lurched into view, clutching his stomach. He hovered briefly at the entrance to the alley, then staggered to the nearest building and leaned against the wall, vomiting noisily. Giselle sidled backward into a shadowed doorway near a dumpster. As she waited for the man to stumble away, she peered over her shoulder, guarding her own back. All she needed now

GRACE LENNOX

was to get mugged, a fitting end to a perfect day.

Behind her, the alleyway was empty. No footsteps. The only sound apart from traffic noise was a faint, irregular mewling. It could have been a cat stuck behind a door. It seemed close. Giselle tried the door she was propped against. The handle didn't budge and the distress seemed to be coming from a different place. She left her spot and took a couple of paces back toward the main road, but the thin cries made her uneasy. She turned around and stared at the dumpster. People did ugly things. Kittens in trash bags. Animals hurt and discarded to avoid a vet bill. She couldn't walk away.

The dumpster was too high for her to see into. A few empty crates stood nearby. She dragged one over and climbed onto it. The sound was coming from a mound of putrid restaurant garbage. She fished around in her purse and found the pepper spray that doubled as a flashlight. Pushing aside cabbage leaves and broken-down cardboard boxes, she trained the beam on the source of the distress.

A tiny balled hand waved at her. A ghostly miniature face floated in a sea of shredded lettuce. Giselle felt a hot choking tide rise from her gut. She clung to the dumpster and threw up. Then she climbed over the side. Weeping with horror, shaking uncontrollably, she delved in and lifted the newborn from the shame of its mistreatment. The placenta was still attached. She wrapped both of them in her coat and stood there, up to her thighs in filth, trying to assemble a plan. The hospital. The police.

Suddenly, incredibly, a lightning bolt of clarity laid waste to her confusion and she was as calm as she had ever been in her life. A miracle had happened. A higher power had reached out to her. She was chosen. Filled with fierce wonder, she held the baby to her and stared up at the heavens.

"Thank you," she said.