

SUCH
A
Pretty Face

by
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CHAPTER ONE

The moment she went down on me, I should have known that she was telling me good-bye. Spontaneity is not Brenda's strong suit, but for the last few weeks she's been acting like she can't keep her hands off me.

"Why am I complaining? I'm complaining because I was wearing baby blue sweats, a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, and Marvin the Martian slippers. I'm complaining because I was bent over a box with my big ass in the air when she slammed into the house. I'm complaining because she dropped her bag on the floor, and without so much as a, 'hey, hon, I'm home,' rolled me over and set about making it impossible for me to think, let alone worry about where all of her energy came from. Then, to top it all off, two minutes into the sex, the phone rang and she left me on the floor to answer it.

"She comes back twenty minutes later and tells me she's just accepted an assignment in the Fiji Islands to photograph fourteen swimsuit models for a new sports magazine. Oh, and she knew about the possibility of this assignment for at least a week before she decided to accept it."

I stopped speaking because my sales assistant, Matthew "Goody" Good, who was sitting on the edge of my desk, was now staring at me like I was a piece of three-layer, double chocolate cake.

"Mia, wait. Go back to the part where she was going down on you."

"Goody, is that all you heard me say?"

"I was listening. You were just getting into some good sex when fourteen skinny bitches interrupted your fun."

I nodded; he had been listening.

“So when’s she leaving?” His voice held that tone that I hated; you know, the one that makes you want to cry.

“I take her—” I was interrupted by a commotion so loud that it made my ears itch and the walls of my office quake. From past experience, I knew that anything I said would be impossible for Goody to hear, so I stood up and walked to the window.

The whole office had been warned that when construction began, it would be loud. I would have liked to complain; “loud” didn’t quite cover the ear-splitting, nerve-shattering, teeth-gnashing cacophony of sound coming from the room right next door. I would have liked to, but I couldn’t because the construction was for my new, larger office space, so I kept my mouth shut.

Instead of just one window, I would have a wall of them to gaze out of once my new space was complete. I watched the ant-sized people milling below before my eye was drawn to Goody’s reflection. He was studying his fingernails, his foot tapping in unison with the hammering that had begun after the drill quieted. Goody and I had been mistaken for brother and sister on more than one occasion. Our similar heritage meant we both had dark eyes and dark skin, but that’s where the resemblance ended, in my opinion.

Goody was an exceptionally handsome guy. Everything about his slim but athletic frame, thick dark hair, olive skin, and sharp brown eyes screamed sexy. At least, that’s what he wrote in his Yahoo Personals ad.

“I take her to the airport Sunday,” I said during a lull in the noise.

“Sunday? As in, the day after tomorrow?”

That was my reaction too. “Yeah, *this* Sunday.”

“And she’s just now telling you? How long is she gonna be gone?” Goody was still looking at his nails, but his forehead was creased by a scowl. I would give him five seconds before he found a flaw and started in with the emery board he always kept in his front pocket.

I turned around and said, “Five months,” just as he stood up and stuck his hand in his pocket. If he found the board, he didn’t pull it out. Instead he stared at me, his perfectly chapsticked lips parted.

“What?”

“Five months. She’s going to be in the fucking Fiji Islands, with a bushel of swimsuit models, for five goddamn months.” I’m pretty sure I wailed the last few words.

“Damn. That’s nearly half a year.” Goody sat back down in his chair, the emery board temporarily forgotten. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Hell no, I’m not okay with it. We just moved into that house. In another two months we might have all the boxes unpacked.” I slumped back into my own chair. “We hardly see each other *now*, but—”

“At least you know where she sleeps at night, right?”

“Right.”

Goody, as usual, had gotten right to the point. I was already worried about the stability of our relationship. The truth of the matter was, I had been for well over a year. So the thought of being apart from her for so long made me want to find a dark corner and curl up with something buttery, sugary, and warm.

“I got to be honest with you, *chica*...”

“You think there’s more to it?” I was careful not to let the fear creep into my voice, but I could tell by the look in Goody’s eyes that my face gave me away.

“Yeah, I do. And so do you. That’s why you called me in here, isn’t it? You want me to confirm that you’re not overreacting?”

“No, I called you in here to tell me I *am* overreacting.”

“Have you tried talking to her? Maybe ask her not to go?”

I shook my head. I had tried many times over the last few days to talk to her, but how could I when I was afraid of where the conversation might lead?

“Why not? Begging her not to leave is the first thing I would have done.” Goody was smiling, but the pain and embarrassment in that smile had nothing to do with my situation.

“Does begging work?” The question was, I hoped, a deterrent—an opportunity for Goody to segue into his own problems instead of mine. The sad thing is, even if I were able to force myself to grovel I knew it wouldn’t do any good. Brenda had made up her mind to leave even before she told me she was.

“Didn’t work with Emil,” Goody said, with forced nonchalance. “He left me two days after he proposed. He had the most gorgeous blond hair.”

I frowned, struggling to differentiate Emil from the other half dozen boyfriends Goody had fallen in lust with over the last two years.

“He was a librarian? Remember?”

“Oh yeah, Emil.” I barely kept myself from adding, “How could

I forget *him*?” Emil, the long-haired librarian, would always stand out in my mind for all the wrong reasons. I knew within two seconds of meeting the guy that he was a player, a bisexual one. The first time I had caught him staring at my chest I figured it was envy. When he invited me to dinner *sans* Goody I could no longer turn a blind eye. Goody claimed he was just trying to earn my approval, but the truth was in the ogling. I had learned to recognize that creepy feeling of being used as some guy’s sexual fantasy at far too young an age. “You swore off men after him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but then I met Paul about nine days later. He was a waste of time, great in bed though.” He paused. “Why are we talking about me? What are you going to do?”

“It’s her career. I can’t ask her to give up an opportunity like that.” Based on the exasperated look on Goody’s face, he didn’t agree. “So let’s say I tell her I don’t want her to go and she goes anyway?”

Realization followed by sympathy crossed Goody’s face. “You’re scared it’s already too late, aren’t you?” I shrugged my answer, but he went on as if I had agreed. “Then you have to find a way to start over.”

“Goody, Brenda isn’t just some chick I met online or picked up in a bar. She’s my wife. I don’t give a shit—” I cut myself off because I could see that he was taking what I said personally. I reached for his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by that.”

“I know,” he said, but when he didn’t take my hand, I dropped it back in my lap.

See, that was Goody’s problem. He wore his heart on his sleeve, and every pretty boy in Portland had used that sleeve to wipe their asses—twice. *He* was a sucker for a pretty face; I wasn’t. I was in a committed relationship, the “until death do us part” kind of relationship, and five months in the Fiji Islands with swimsuit models just didn’t fit into that picture.

The wall behind my bookshelf shuddered as someone methodically hammered away with apparent disregard for anyone working within a two-mile radius.

“Damn it, I’m done dealing with this bullshit.” I pushed my chair back and stood up. As I walked around my desk I knocked my hip on a sharp corner and hissed in pain.

Goody winced in sympathy. “Ouch, I hate when that happens.”

I rubbed at the sore spot and kept walking. For once I was grateful

for the extra padding on my hips, but the pain wasn't going away easily and it stoked my annoyance into full-blown pissed-off mode. It took me two angry seconds to stalk next door and yell, "Hey, I'm trying to get some work done over there!"

The hammering had stopped almost as soon as I walked in, so the words came out far louder than I'd intended. A muscular blond woman wearing goggles, blue jeans, and a white T-shirt turned to face me. "Sorry?" She straightened to her full height and pulled a piece of yellow foam from her ear.

I allowed myself a moment to take her in. Boots, long legs, slender hips, a small waist. She had obviously found that one elusive pair of jeans that fit its owner like a second skin. She wore no belt, and her white T-shirt had managed to avoid being spattered with plaster. The floor surrounding her hadn't fared as well. I forced myself to meet her eyes. They were just blue, nothing special, so why was I having such a hard time looking away? "Uh, no...no, I'm sorry. I was just..."

"Was I being too loud?" Her "I" sounded like "ah."

"No, you're fine." I heard Goody come up behind me. "I mean, if you don't mind holding off on the power tools for a few minutes, we'll be heading out to lunch soon."

She gave me a small, closed-lipped smile, but said nothing. It was the kind of gesture I had seen the folks in the cage give *other* brokers. I, on the other hand, got everything from affectionate teasing to Christmas ornaments and invites to parties and housewarmings. It mattered to me that this woman hadn't gotten the memo that I was one of the "cool ones."

She had started to look uncomfortable before I realized that I had been staring much longer than appropriate. Heat crept up around my ears as I fumbled for something useful to say. "I should probably... uh..."

"Mia, we should get back to that account we were discussing," Goody said quietly from behind me.

I turned and gave him a grateful smile. "I'll be right there." With a quick parting glance at her, I said, "I'm sorry for interrupting you."

"I'll try to be quieter," she said, the closed-lip smile looking a little less forced.

I walked away thinking I should have said something smart and sassy, maybe left an opening for further conversation. I was back in my office staring owl-eyed at Goody when I realized that I should be grateful

I'd made it back without tripping over my own feet. "I had nightmares all last night about supermodels, and now there's one building my new office. Where the hell did she come from, anyway?"

"I don't know, but did you hear that accent? Did you see those arms?" Goody was back to studying his nails.

"Yeah, I heard it. I was thinking Texas."

"She's gorgeous," Goody said. "I wonder how she got that scar."

"What scar?"

"You didn't see the scar on her cheek? Hell, the way you were staring, I thought you knew her. Maybe had a tryst or something in the past."

"I've never seen her before in my life. And I wasn't staring that hard." Goody raised his eyebrow and winced. "I hope she didn't think I was being rude."

"Nah, I doubt she noticed."

I tugged the lapels of my suit jacket together and wondered if they had been gaping apart when I talked to her. "What were we talking about before?"

"Brenda moving to Fiji."

"She isn't moving. She's working there for a while."

Goody shrugged. "Might as well be moving."

I hated that he was right. I hated the fact that my clients trusted me with a little over two hundred million dollars in assets, yet I was afraid to tell my partner that I didn't want her to leave me for five months. I hated that she didn't appear concerned about being away from me. And worst of all, I hated feeling like my life was teetering on the point of a pin and one false move could easily send it toppling into the unknown.

I sighed and stood up. "You up for an early lunch? I could use a panini and fries with an ice-cream chaser."



Sunday morning came faster than Brenda did after our good-bye sex. You would think good-bye sex would be the best ever, right? The thing is, the good-bye sex that morning was really no different than a lot of the sex Brenda and I had been having over the last few weeks, fast and vaguely unsatisfying.

I was still lying in bed trying to figure out what was bothering

me besides the obvious, when Brenda got up, murmured something about a shower, and walked into the bathroom. I watched each languid step with detached admiration. Although she had purchased all of the exercise equipment currently gathering dust in our basement, she was genetically blessed with a slender yet feminine physique. Because I worried about hurting her, I always made sure that she ended up on top when we had sex.

My mind slipped to the construction worker and the lean muscular arms flexing beneath her T-shirt. I wouldn't have to worry about hurting her at all. I felt an immediate tightening between my legs.

Nice, Mia. I pulled the blankets up to my chin. Brenda was leaving and I was lying here thinking about a stranger. I should have been worrying about the fact that my partner was going to be on a tropical island working closely with supermodels for five months. *Maybe I'll put all that exercise equipment in the basement to good use. Who knows, she could come back to a slim and trim Mia.* I turned over, wondering if I should go pick up bagels or just cook something for breakfast.

The pipes squealed, groaned, and finally released a gush of water. The house stopped protesting and the sound of running water lulled me into a half-sleep until a soft whine and a thumping noise wrenched me back to wakefulness.

I leaned over and lifted the bed skirt. "Pepito, what are you doing down there?"

I knew exactly what he was doing. Listening to the bed squeak while plotting revenge on my best high heels. Brenda had been given the Chihuahua mix six months ago, and since then, the dog and I had come to a kind of mutual understanding.

We hated each other.

I glanced at the clock. Ten past ten, which meant that we had just enough time to have breakfast and drive to the airport. The water stopped and the house moaned again. I was used to Brenda's short showers, but this one had to be a record. *She's in a rush to get to her models.* I dragged myself out of bed, quickly reached for my robe, and covered myself with it just as Brenda entered the room, naked except for the towel draped over her short, graying hair.

"God, the water pressure sucks," she said, for the umpteenth time since we had moved into the house.

"I'll try to get someone in to see about fixing it while you're gone." Of course I wouldn't. Things like water pressure just didn't concern

me. My father was fond of saying that Brenda was the perfect woman for me. She had practical sense. The implication being that I had none.

Brenda shrugged and disappeared into the closet. She had been acting odd since Friday night. One moment she couldn't keep her hands off me, the next she couldn't string two words together. I went into the bathroom and was about to shut the door behind me when I heard her muffled voice from inside the closet.

"I'm going to put some eggs on. You want something?"

"Yeah, I'll just have a croissant and some coffee."

"That's not healthy," was her standard automated response, but the racks of clothing made her sound farther away than she actually was.

"Okay, I'll have a croissant, some coffee, and two cigarettes." The old joke dropped like a stone and I shut the door to the bathroom without hearing any response. I had smoked until about the second week of our relationship, when Brenda let me know, in no uncertain terms, that she had no interest in being with a smoker. So I quit. Brenda liked to say she was responsible for saving me from lung cancer.

I took longer than I should have with my shower, but by the time I got out I had come to a decision. As much as our relationship felt off kilter, I didn't want Brenda to know how upset I was. If being apart for five months didn't bother her, I would try not to let it bother me. She was gone when I came out of the bathroom, so I walked downstairs in my robe. I found her sitting at the kitchen table, slumped forward, staring into her mug.

"I haven't told my parents that you're leaving." I walked over to the cabinet and pulled down a mug for myself. "I figure I'll just tell them when I go over there this afternoon. That way they don't have time to come up with a bunch of questions." I poured my coffee. Brenda was still looking down into her cup.

"Mia, I need to tell you something."

Pepito's claws clicked across the floor as he took his position beneath the table where Brenda, much to my annoyance, would feed him scraps.

"What is it?" I bit into my croissant and sat down across from her.

"I don't think I'm in love with you anymore."

Her words hung in the air between us before reaching in, grabbing my throat, and closing off my esophagus. I swallowed hard. The bread hung for a few moments longer than was comfortable before making

its way down my throat. I had been pushing her since Friday, poking for answers because I had already had a premonition that there would be no “us” in five months.

I searched Brenda’s face. She met my eyes with the candor she always had. I wanted to believe I had misheard. Except that her ring, the one I had bought her when we got married at the Multnomah County Courthouse, was sitting on the table beside her coffee. She twirled it on the table as if it were a penny.

“What are you saying?” My words came out cool, unemotional. I would have been proud of how composed I sounded if I hadn’t been in shock.

“I don’t know what I’m trying to say. It’s...this has been on my mind for a while.” I heard a little whine followed by a sneeze from beneath the table. Brenda stopped spinning the ring long enough to pinch off a piece of her croissant. Her hand disappeared beneath the table. I pictured Pepito taking the bread from her fingers and spearing her with one of his deformed front canines.

“So is that why you took this assignment? Because you don’t...” I was unable to finish the sentence. *Is it possible to just stop loving someone?*

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Last weekend I realized that it was time to do something about it.”

“Last weekend?” I repeated and she looked away from me. I heard the ring spin two more times before it fell flat on the table. Getting married had been Brenda’s idea. She’d said we should take advantage of the loophole that allowed gays to marry in the Multnomah County Courthouse.

I still remember how the light had glinted off the ring when I first put it on her finger. I remember how she smiled at me, her eyes large and bewildered. How the kiss that pronounced us partners for life had been so chaste because we were both shocked by what we had done. The letter revoking our marital status was buried in a dresser drawer, but I still considered myself married. I thought we both did. Thirteen months ago that ring had stood for so much, but now it looked like how I felt. As if someone had leached all of the life out of it.

“Mia, are you listening to me?”

“No. Sorry.”

“I was saying that the trip will do us both good. Give us both some space.”

“I don’t need any space.”

“I think you do. We’ve been together constantly for four years.”

“We live together. You’re my partner. We’re *supposed* to be together constantly.” Tears prickled at the back of my eyes and I stood up, grabbed her plate along with mine, and set them on the counter. I flipped on the water and squeezed my eyes shut. *Please, dear Lord, tell me this isn’t happening.*

“Mia, that can wait.” Brenda had to raise her voice over the rush of water from the faucet. I wiped my eyes, shut off the water, and returned to the kitchen table. Small claws scuttled on tile as Pepito tried to avoid my feet. Normally, he would have growled at being disturbed. This time he didn’t. Even the house was hushed. There were none of the usual groans and moans that accompanied turning off the water.

“Say something,” she said. Frustration was evident in her voice.

“What do you want me to say? I don’t think you should go anywhere before we fix this. If there’s a problem we should be able to work it out. It’s not like you have someone else, right?” Even as the words left my lips, I could see the answer in her eyes. She looked apologetic. Guilty. My heart sank.

“Let’s not start accusing each other, Mia. I’m talking about our relationship. Things haven’t been good.”

“Since when? Since when haven’t they been good? We’ve had sex more in the last few weeks than we’ve had—” I stopped because I had given myself the answer. It had been right there all along and I hadn’t noticed it. Although Brenda’s hours had been crazy over the last few weeks, we had found time to have sex at least three times in the past two weeks. A record for us. How had I missed it? The new clothes, the attention to grooming, the impromptu sex. Brenda had been cheating on me and I hadn’t had a clue.

“Who is it?” I demanded.

Brenda stood up and went to the counter to refill her coffee cup. She took so long to answer that I contemplated repeating my question. Her answer was not unexpected, but it was painful. “I’m not cheating on you.”

“You’re lying to me now?”

She went on as if she hadn’t heard me. “But even if I were, wouldn’t that tell you something? Don’t you always say that if a person cheats it means the relationship wasn’t strong to begin with?”

“That’s not the point. If you’ve been cheating on me, I deserve to know who I’ve been sharing you with.” I hated the bitterness in my voice. I wanted to sound like she did, calm and sure of myself. But I couldn’t because my life was falling down around my ears and I was sitting in my kitchen wearing a terry cloth robe that had seen better days five years ago. I pulled the robe tight across my breasts. “I deserve more than ‘we need our space.’”

Brenda’s mouth tightened. Finally, something more than that absent look of boredom. “I’m sorry you feel like this has come out of nowhere, but I’ve been trying to change things around here for a long time. You don’t want to go out. You don’t like doing any of the things I like to do. We don’t even have the same friends.”

“I didn’t know it meant that much to you. We could have gone out more. I could have called—”

“Who, Mia? There’s no one. Amy and Dominique can barely pull themselves away from playing mommy to play poker. All of our friends have either moved away or moved on with their lives. This is it.” Her voice was bitter, cutting. “Don’t you get it? I want more than just this.” She gestured at our surroundings.

I looked around—at the brightly colored walls, the marble countertops, the Spanish tile that didn’t really fit the kitchen motif—and tried to determine what in it could have made her so unhappy. A cold moist nose tapped at my shin twice.

“I’ve watched you avoid looking at yourself in the mirror for almost a year now,” Brenda said in an impatient tone. “Do you really believe you’re happy? How much weight have you gained this year?”

“What does my weight have to do with anything?”

“Everything. You eat when you’re not happy, and lately you’ve been eating twice what you used to. I asked you to run the marathon with me, but you refused. Hell, if you would just go downstairs once a week it would do you a world of good. You refuse. It’s like you’re scared to get yourself into shape because then...”

“Because then what?” I was shaking my head. “Brenda, where the hell is all of this coming from? You just told me you didn’t know if you were in love with me anymore. You’re going to Fiji for five months in less than an hour. Why are you telling me this now? Why couldn’t this wait until you got back?”

“Because I don’t know if I’m coming back.” The words were

softly spoken but I could hear the pain in them. If she hadn't sounded like she understood what she was doing to me, it might not have hurt so much.

I stood up without looking at her. "I better get dressed."

"I called a cab while you were in the shower. It'll be here soon." I turned her words over in my head. I studied her facial expression, her eyes. I was looking for a crack, some show of weakness or emotion. I found none.

"I'm sorry I have to leave like this," she said. "I'm sorry that I hurt you. I just didn't want to drag this out until I got back, and I didn't want to run the risk of telling you over the phone."

"So this is it, then? It's over?" I don't know why, but a small laugh left my mouth.

Brenda's eyes grew large as if she too had just begun to understand the ramifications of what she was saying. "I don't know that we can end four years in five minutes of conversation, but I thought you had a right to know how I felt."

Anger warmed the chill in the pit of my stomach. "I had a right to know before you cheated on me!"

"I never said I cheated on you, Mia."

"You didn't have to. You forget that I know you. Now you're just trying to make yourself feel better about the fact that you're going to do it a lot more times. You know what's sad? I would have never guessed in a million years that you would be this chicken shit."

Brenda didn't answer me and I followed her out into the hall just as a car honked outside and she turned the knob. "I'll call you, okay?"

"I'm not going to wait for you to come back, Brenda."

She acted like she didn't hear me. "Try to take better care of yourself."

She picked up her three bags and walked out the door, closing it firmly behind her. I pulled my robe tight across my chest and stared at the door waiting for the pain to hit. There was a soft whine from behind me and the sound of tiny claws clicking across hardwood floors.

Pepito sniffed at the front door, looked at me, whimpered, and settled down to wait for Brenda's return.