



Courting Disaster
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Summer's not a good time for the plumbing business. You'd think, all that beer and greasy nachos at the ballpark, something's bound to get clogged; or with the new construction, someone's got to be laying pipe. Thing is, what people don't realize about plumbing, it's an inside job. So the condos going up in Bushwick needed showers and 'his-and-hers' vanities before another wave of trust fund brats move down into the city from Harvard or Yale? Sure, I'd get to them, just as soon as all the concrete set and the caulk dried in the windows. Summer was my time. No rush. Nowhere much else to be, unless you counted Mrs. Deluca's tub job, and that could wait.

Tuesday the 17th, noon. Early lunch, and I planned on staying long. I was up to the usual: sitting in my pick-up with the window open, triple-chili cheese dog in one hand and cherry soda in the other, paper riding shotgun with the eighth and twelfth races circled for my weekly twenty dollars at the track. Sometimes a couple of the guys from my old contracting job met me down here, but since I started flying solo a few years back, most of them ate on the run. Me, I'm my own man, take my time.

Mouthful of jalapenos and sesame bun, just about to wash it down, when her voice practically threw me up against the windshield and cracked my skull.

"Started howling when I got to New Jersey."

Choking, I grabbed my drink and ripped out the straw. Ice chunks dribbled down my chin as I coughed, looking around to find out who she was. Before I could pick her out of the crowd standing ten feet away at the counter, another killer blow.

"Didn't stop 'til I got home to New York."

When I was a kid, my uncle Arnold kept bees out on an acre and a half in New Jersey. You wouldn't recognize the place now, it's all McMansions and Volvos, but back then there was space enough for a quiet man who still lived with his mother to set up a few hives. I spent three weeks there every summer until I was twelve. Learned a lot about bees. Uncle Arnold always used to say he could tell how the queen was by the noise. Said the strongest queens always had the quietest hives, just a low, balanced hum telling the world who was in charge.

There were about fifteen people at the hotdog stand that Tuesday: mostly guys like me on their breaks, but with five or six drive-bys.. People on their way to somewhere else—tourists with hungry kids who saw the twenty-foot hotdog from the highway, or new interns coming off double shift at the hospital. When that voice fluttered a second time, the crowd's chatter stopped, replaced by soft talk that sounded like the buzz of obedient bees.

There she was. Craning around the glare on the glass, I squinted into the sun and found the source of my confusion. At least five-ten, hair the color of wild strawberries that are almost ripe. Skin pale as sugar. She had her back turned, but I knew from how she stood that her mouth would be a slashed, straight line, and that her eyes would be dancing with fire. Still talking into her cell, the voice revved up a notch, cracking at the top. "Should've seen him, looked right through me like I was a ghost. All that way for nothing."

Every word she uttered was another question in my head. He, who? How far had she gone, and how long had it taken her to return?

And the luckiest person alive was on the other end of that phone.

A truck roared by, drowning out the next twelve seconds. The agony of missing her words stretched like old underwear. When the engine rumbled around the corner, I grabbed a handful of wipes and scrubbed at the stubble on my face. Still watching as she nodded to herself, and the river of hair fell from her back across her left shoulder. "I know. No flowers, no cake. No cake, no disaster. No disaster, no Jack."

Checked my face in the rear-view. Double-check. Couldn't remember the last time I even saw my reflection. Not looking too hot there, buddy. My blue work shirt was soaked down the front from where I spilled the ice, and I was overdue for a haircut by at least three months. Six years past forty and I still had a zit on my chin.

I shook off the dread and gripped the steering wheel. Pray she likes the shaggy dog look. Let's do this. I tore the keys from the ignition, kicked the door open with my steel caps, and took a first close-up as I tossed my trash. She hadn't finished on the phone, but she'd paid for her

lunch turned to find an empty seat at one of the picnic tables. Hungry eyes traced every move, but no one said anything as she onto the end of a bench swarming with gossipy secretaries.

My own stare filled in the blanks, like a rookie cop taking notes: square jaw, pine-green irises. She hung up without saying good-bye and stashed the phone in her paperback-sized red purse. A sleeveless purple tee was visible under her sheer white blouse, and she chewed her thumbnail. From fifteen feet away I could see she wasn't wearing a ring.

"Can't have that—you want another dog instead?" George, same guy who's owned this place for twenty-five years, yelled at me from his cash register.

I ignored his offer, dug in my jeans, and threw him a ten. "Make that two extra large Cokes and a bag of Twizzlers."

Thing is, I'm the guy women go to when they need a friend. You ask any one of my ex-wives, they'll tell you that I'm still the best friend they ever had. I don't lie, I don't steal, I make a decent living, and I don't screw around. Some of the guys give me a hard time about the way it goes, too, wondering what I say to women who need something. Seems to me, not much of a trick to it—there's listening, and there's not listening, and in my experience that first way of doing things will never leave you lonely.

At least, not for awhile. At the end of the day, they all got tired of being treated so well. Like Callie O'Brien in the eighth grade, who dumped me for a bruiser named Eddie Pulciano, and then came crying back three years later. First wife. Lasted four years, until Eddie rode up on a Harley and they headed for Texas. Or Terri Cole, whose parents owned every apartment on the block and who used to watch me play first base in the summer league from her window across the park, while her son-of-a-bitch boyfriend gambled away her inheritance and smashed everything in sight.

Including Terri. I kept her safe for almost nine years, but she found her way back to the screams and the bruises. Still calls me to come get her, sometimes three o'clock in the morning. Sleeps on my couch a few days, but I know she's going back. Married Carol Kowalski on my thirty-fifth birthday, at her family's place down at the Shore. Eighteen months later

she left me for the bottle and the county-singing promise of a drifter from Tennessee.

“Keep the change.” Pretending to look around for a spot, I wound the long way through the tables, criss-crossing through the lunch traffic. I slowed down to watch that woman take her first bite.

Some people eat with their elbows. Sure, there are all those fancy-schmancy restaurants with their soup forks and fruit spoons, and everyone’s seen the pinky up like a boner from a china cup. You ever watch, though, those people aren’t eating. They’re performing, sitting in the front row, like a monkey’s ass critic of the movie of the week. They slice and prod and tease their food until it’s bored to death. And they hardly ever swallow. Got no appetite for living. Got no hunger for life.

Nina, though, she ate with her elbows. Watching her out of the corner of my eye, I could see her shoulders tense as she lifted her loaded meatball sub. She’d gone all out: extra cheese, roasted garlic dripping out the sides. A full foot—nothing petite about her, nothing timid. The works. Made my chili dog look like the stuff they feed the old folks at Oakland Mews. Made me feel like an amateur. Never seen a woman eat like that.

Now or a week from never, dope. Not much with the pep talk. The voice inside my head was a wiseass. I told him to shut the hell up, walked over to the table, and sat down across from the sassiest woman I’d ever seen.

“Abrams.”

She looked up with her laser eyes and chewed with her mouth open. A piece of onion smeared across her cheek, but she didn’t reach for a napkin. She took her time, watching me watching her. Without asking, she grabbed the drink I’d brought over and sank her teeth into the straw. When she put down the cup, I could see an outline of apricot lipstick. She popped the lid, dug around for a piece of ice, and swallowed it whole.

“Abrams. Abrams what?” Way she said it, all drawn out like a growl, make my hand shake. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, wiping my fingers clean as I could before I eased them out. All that before it hit me that

she hadn't got it wrong. Name like Abrams, everyone assumes that's my last. Everyone except for her.

"Porter." I pointed to my blue pick-up with the stenciled wave over the sign. "Plumber. That's my truck."

"Nina."

The week before Memorial Day, me and my buddy Dennis head out to Six Flags. He leaves his wife and kids at home, and we get there early enough to be first through the gate. We ride every roller coaster four times straight, eat fried dough and pretzels covered with horseradish, and don't leave until the lights go out. It's an adrenalin-driving, stomach-turning, no-wimps-allowed kind of day. But nothing had ever made me fight for breath the way she curled her tongue around her name.

I stuck out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Nina. Thought you might be thirsty."

She laughed, brushing her icy fingers against my palm before slurping another mouthful of her beverage. "Those guys over there put you up to this? Bet you a beer you couldn't get my number?"

I followed her pointing, and a half-dozen of the regulars hooted and waved. George blew kisses and winked, the sly bastard. "Don't even know those morons."

Sandro, an electrician I worked with on the refit at the college, cupped his hands and called over. "Hey, Porter, you ask her out yet? What's taking you so long?"

Snarling, I slumped on the bench put my head down on the table over crossed arms. "Tell me when they're gone. Better yet, tell me when I'm dead."

Nina did me one better. "Let's make it Tuesday at eight-thirty. My place, if I can get unpacked. Number's on the card. Call for directions. You eat fish?"

"Yes." I answered her last question before I could process the rest.

By the time I'd figured out that she wanted to see me, Nina had shot a three-pointer with her sandwich wrapper into the garbage can, slurped the last of the soda, pulled a few Twizzlers from my open pack, and walked away.

I parked my truck a block away to walk off adolescent nerves. With every step, I flicked the fingers of my right hand into the palm of my left, wishing I had a baseball and glove to keep me busy. The brownstone had a knocker, but the door was open. As I tapped it to announce my arrival, Nina jogged down the stairs and greeted me with a full-body hug. Nothing I could do to hide how happy I was to see her. I just prayed she wouldn't look down.

The apartment was covered in boxes. I tried to distract her. "Thought you said you'd been here awhile? Still moving in, or thinking of moving out?"

Nina glanced at me as though that were a trick question. "Come on in."

A guy who looked like Robert Redford's younger brother greeted us in the living room. "Ray." His handshake could have cracked walnuts. I held on, wondering how many of Nina's easy conquests he ate for breakfast.

She rescued me with my name. "This is Abrams. Ray and Ursula were supposed to be in Mamaroneck already, house all signed off and everything."

"Water's off in the new place until tomorrow." He shrugged.

Winking, Nina stroked Ray's arm. "Told 'em both I had a hot date, but can't seem to get them gone." Her mouth was smiling, but something in her eyes looked hurt. "They'll need more room, with a baby on the way."

She shook it off and draped herself over my shoulder, smelling like incense and oranges. "Four of us for dinner. Alright with you?"

My nod collided with the arrival of the other guest. Ursula floated past Ray, raised one eyebrow at Nina, and gripped my upper arms with

surprising strength. “So you’re the one who’s here to steal our Nina’s heart?”

Ursula was short and soft, but the ripples of her brown skin and the warmth of her chiding laugh made her beautiful. Not Nina-goddess-beautiful, but attractive enough to hold my attention. Especially since, pinned to the floor by Ursula’s head-to-toe examination, I had no choice.

Nina saw me eyeing Ursula’s hips and the soft kinks of the other woman’s black hair. Raymond tracked my unexpected desire for the soon-to-be-mother of his child with a swaying cobra’s cool stare. I broke away and followed Nina’s beckoning finger through to the kitchen. She dug in the refrigerator, tossing a lettuce and two cucumbers at me.

“Those guys are the cooks in the house. Mostly their stuff, anyway. Think you can scrounge us up a knife or two from that drawer on the left?”

I handed her one of the two least-blunt rejects. We stood on opposites of the island, chopping in silence, our heads directly below the row of hooks that had probably held the other couple’s now-boxed copper pots. Our rhythm slowed in sync.

A kiss, I thought I was ready for. Nina surprised me again, choosing direct confrontation instead. Her whole body sagged, and she held herself up on the palms of her hands. “Ursula and Ray are a package deal. No one without the other. So don’t even think about it.”

When I reached to steady her, she didn’t react. Her damp eyes met mine with a sigh. “We worked it out, them and me. Four years, thirty toes on my saggy king mattress, until last July.”

I did the math, counting digits. “Then you and they—”

“Until I did something stupid.” She coughed, took a deep breath, and pulled herself up to her full height, which was two inches tall than me in the strapless heels. “Abrams, you know the only trouble with four people in bed?”

The woman of my dreams, heart broken in two many places to count, allowed a single tear to slide down the bridge of her nose. When I stepped around the barrier between us and put my arms around her, she snorted with laughter and held on tight.

She wanted to know she was enough. Standing there in her half-empty kitchen, for the first time in my life, I knew exactly what to say. "Trouble is, too many legs."

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