

Chapter 1

“Seen Parrish?” Jack Cooper asked Blake, Head Trainer at the Bethesda Health Club. Blake was neat as a pin, dressed in sky blue spandex that fit his toned body like a glove. Cooper had speculated that it was a management decision to make the uniform so tight, designed to keep Blake’s clients self-conscious and aware of what they needed to work on.

Cooper and Parrish had done their treadmill routine and weight sets next to each other for five months before Parrish even acknowledged Cooper’s presence. Before that, there was not a smile, nor a hint of recognition, even though they began and ended their routines at precisely the same time. They followed each other on the treadmill and weight machines, obeying Blake’s instructions to the letter. At all times Parrish had been silent, avoiding eye contact, totally focused on himself.

Parrish and Cooper did talk separately to Blake, who kept a watchful eye on their workouts, occasionally correcting their mistakes. Cooper, who resented Blake’s arrogant surety, nevertheless considered him a competent trainer.

In an earlier incarnation, Cooper might have attributed Parrish’s lack of acknowledgment to rudeness or snobbery. Maybe the man was also, like himself, one of the walking wounded, too pissed off to be polite, or simply indifferent

to the blandishments of human contact.

As time went on, Cooper made an effort to put all speculation about Parrish out of his mind, thinking of him as an inanimate object, like the exercise machines. Still, Parrish's daily presence made it impossible to completely eliminate the man out of Cooper's mind or his field of vision.

They had actually met once or twice before they both had joined the club. Parrish was a freelance layout artist who did occasional work for the advertising agency, Merrill and Anthony, where Cooper had been chief copywriter before it folded.

Economic shifting due to the lousy economy and changing business mores had bitten deep into the agency business in Washington, D.C., especially in the field of real estate. Merrill and Anthony primarily advertised for apartments and houses, and when the economy went into a tailspin, the agency tanked and eventually folded, leaving Cooper beached. He spent months looking for work, but the lack of enthusiasm on his part was as overt and unattractive to prospective employers as the stink of cheap perfume. He was rarely afforded a second interview.

Then came a downhill slide in his personal life, which finally pushed him into a state of suspension. His then-wife Margo confessed that she had been involved in an affair with her boss, a lobbyist for oil and gas. She announced that she was leaving Cooper. Soon after, the boss dumped his own wife and married Margo. By now Cooper should have been philosophical about the split. He wasn't. His anger still lingered.

Cooper had invested a great deal of his hopes, dreams, and aspirations in his marriage. He found Margo while freelancing for a magazine she worked for at the time. Meeting her was, he had believed, the greatest stroke of luck he had ever encountered. Their attraction went beyond the initial intense sexual encounters, continuing on to a deep spirituality. They were married within six months, and were happy for seven years.

Their sex life was so prolific that he could not imagine Margo needing anything beyond what he was providing. He had romanticized their relationship into a profound euphoria, blinding him to any possible betrayals. "Made in Heaven" was frequently his description of their marriage. When the crash did come, the incomprehension of it sent him free-falling.

Margo had been quite clever; nothing had roused suspicion or given her away. Not a word, not a gesture, not the slightest hint. She was even sexually responsive, literally up to the very moment when she confessed that she was in love with another man.

Her confession seemed to be timed deliberately, with a cruel irony meant to inflict a mortal wound. They had just made frenetic love and the two were in the soporific post-coital state.

"You are lovely in bed, Jack," she had told him, "but I'm afraid that this is the last time we can indulge. I'm in love with another man and wish to remain faithful to him."

It was that simple, a quick stab and twist. She offered no tears, no remorse, no guilt nor display of conscience about

her baffling commitment to romantic ethics. She lay on her back, looking at the ceiling, naked as the day she was born. Her large breasts, nipples still erect, were like two solid mounds watching over the valley of her breastbone. She offered his spent cock a farewell pat as she rose from their bed, never to occupy it again.

What she had said registered in his consciousness, but Cooper was still too love-struck to react with any semblance of logic. He felt a sensation of bleeding from an open wound, sapping his energy. He was rendered helpless, beyond anger, in a place where his self-esteem had completely disintegrated.

Perhaps if there had been the tiniest ripple of foreshadowing, had he not been caught off-guard, he might have prepared for it. But he had been a fool blinded by lust, self-delusion, and downright stupidity. He had lacked insight, sensitivity, and awareness—so instead of feeling victimized, he blamed himself. It was his own *fucking fault* for lending himself to such a seduction.

To protect his sanity, he forced himself to adopt an attitude of resigned inevitability. He drifted through the motions like a sleepwalker moving through a pitch-black night. In lieu of burning down their small Silver Spring house and all its contents—something he truly wanted to do—he priced the whole thing for a quick sale and sold it in three days, lock, stock, and barrel, down to the pillowcases and washcloths. He split the equity of thirty thousand dollars down the middle with Margo.

On the surface, it was all very civilized, low-key, void of

emotion. He hoped he did a good job of hiding his pain. It was only when he had slammed the trunk of her car on her suitcases that he finally unleashed his anger.

“Goddamned bitch!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. But she had already closed the car door and gunned the accelerator. He still didn’t know whether she had heard him or not. He imagined she had been smiling with relief.

As with all debilitating events, the timing couldn’t have been worse. Cooper’s mother had died just two weeks before, and he had been running between Washington D.C. and upstate New York trying to settle what turned out to be a meager estate. In a one-month period he had been stripped of his mother, his job, and his wife. Not to mention his self-esteem, confidence and psychological well-being. He was buried under an avalanche of failure.

Thankfully, there weren’t any children to contest. Margo had been too focused on her career to be tied down by motherhood, and had avoided any possibility of pregnancy during the seven years of their marriage. In hindsight, this could have been an indication that her sojourn with him had been temporary. Cooper had yearned for a large family—around five kids—but this had gone the way of all his other unrealized hopes and dreams.

During the period when he had looked for a job, he would come home to a small apartment he rented on a month-to-month basis, and reflect on the shoddy condition of his life. He supposed that, all things considered, such a phase was natural. Wasn’t he entitled to his self-pity? Even grieving was supposed to be temporary. Wasn’t life full of peaks and

valleys? This would pass. Wouldn't it?

So far, it hadn't.

Once he had been full of vigorous optimism. He had believed that the future held great promise. Growing up, his mother had been his support system. His father had died when Cooper was three, and she took the reins of parenthood with valiant dispatch and devotion. Cooper was her pride and joy, and she offered him unconditional encouragement, wisdom, and love. Perhaps that is why he had expected the same from Margo. *Fat chance.*

"You'll succeed at anything you try, Jack. I just know it," his mother often told him.

She worked for a furniture store in town as a bookkeeper and was devoted to her son and her job, in that order. The dedication to her job was an act of self-defense: it kept her mind occupied. Her dedication to her son was an act of faith and loyalty to her dead husband, Cooper's father. It was also an excuse for her not to date or remarry. She showed absolutely no interest in men.

"I'm a one woman army," she would often tell Cooper when he was growing up. He had rebuked her for not dating or at least finding another life outside of her job and him; that, too, may have colored his expectation of loyalty from Margo and magnified the blow of her betrayal.

"I'm totally satisfied, Jack," his mother would tell him. She was not a demonstrative woman and if she had any second thoughts about her life she kept it to herself.

He talked to her at least three times a week, even when he had moved to Washington D.C. She was always witty

and interested in his life, but not overbearing or possessive. Stoic about her own well-being, she rarely gave him any cause for concern. Her sudden death, coinciding with Margo's betrayal, was like a penny-filled sock to his psychological solar plexus. Cooper had loved his mother deeply and worried about her. Margo, at least in the early years of their marriage, seemed to resent this attachment, and would often remark that he communicated with her far too often.

"Why can't you make the break?" Margo would ask. She had had a less than satisfying relationship with her own parents whom they seldom saw, although Margo would call them on Christmas.

"Break from what?" Cooper would respond sincerely.

"From being a mama's boy."

"There were only the two of us," he reminded her, hoping that it might disarm her antagonism. It didn't, and continued to remain a flashpoint between them, a subject to be avoided.

The fact was that his mother sensed Margo's attitude and rarely visited them in Washington D.C. From time to time, he was able to get to New York on business, and would travel upstate to visit. The subject of Margo was rarely brought up, as if there was a pact between them to not talk about her.

"Are you happy, son?" she would ask as she searched his face to determine the fidelity of his response.

"Yes, mother. I am."

She would inspect him for a long moment, then offer a smile of approval and contentment.

“For me,” she would respond after a long moment, “that’s all that matters.” She would smile and he would be reassured of her total devotion.

In the later years, although their relationship was close, their communication became more formal. They seemed to talk around things, satisfied with generalities, leaving intimate subjects unarticulated.

His relationship with Margo was similar. For both of them action seemed more relevant than words. Cooper was often guarded, unable to share his deepest thoughts with anyone. He frequently suspected that this distancing was a conditioned learned response from his mother. Nevertheless, Cooper allowed himself to assume that Margo understood what was inside of him, that she had insight regardless. But his experience with her had taught him that having insight was not a universal talent. He did not have it, unable to detect Margo’s oncoming deception. She had been enclosed within herself too, locked into her own thoughts and motives, and he was unable to access her private enclave.

For weeks after his mother had died and Margo had left, he told himself that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel, that the block of ice in which he was frozen would begin to melt, that he would snap out of this state of suspended animation. He felt nothing. This condition had become increasingly troubling, although the very fact that he felt troubled was a contradiction to his feeling nothing. In a way, this comforted him.

In retrospect, his sex life with Margo had been the cen-

terpiece of their relationship. They had done it in telephone booths, taxis, in public bathroom stalls, in other strange and odd places. Sometimes they had been observed, but that had not mattered. They both recognized that sex was an important component of their relationship, if not the most important.

Before Margo, such sensual expression for him was mostly fantasy. He had misinterpreted this physical relationship as an outward manifestation of some greater connection, investing it with far more meaning than it merited.

His mistake was not realizing that frequency and variety was an essential necessity of her sexuality. When sex with him had grown repetitive and stale, she moved on to a replacement. Her sense of possession and exclusivity was not the same as his. It made him feel that he was little more than an object to her, fresh meat.

Margo's betrayal incapacitated his libido. It had completely disappeared, despite valiant attempts to revive it. He frequented porn websites, but no matter the category, it left him indifferent and cold. After awhile, Cooper got it into his head that Margo's sexual absence and the brutality with which she had betrayed him had seriously, perhaps fatally, undermined his desire for sex. His libido had been permanently crippled. She had sucked away the essence of him, and then unceremoniously trashed the container.

In desperation, he called a phone sex hotline once. Back then, he still had a credit card, which he used to pay for it.

"Hi there," a cheery woman said. It seemed a pleasant beginning and he was not sorry he called.

"Hi."

"Tell me what you look like. I want to know who I'm dealing with," she purred.

"Six foot, black hair, brown eyes, about a hundred and eighty pounds."

"I can just see you now. Want to know what I look like?"

"Sure."

"Five six, great tits, flat stomach, great ass, tight pussy. Blonde, blue eyes. People say I'm a knockout. Can you picture me?"

"Yeah," he lied. "I got the picture."

He detected the synthetic nature of what she was saying, but he did not allow himself to analyze it further. It felt nice to hear her warm, enticing voice. He pushed away the thought that he was paying for this, although he realized that the longer they talked, the more it cost. His credit card was already close to being maxed out.

"So, what do you do, baby?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You know, for a job."

"Oh.... Advertising. I'm in advertising."

"Wow. You make people buy all the things they think they need. So charismatic."

"I've been laid off. The agency folded."

"Bummer," the woman said, her voice still cheerful. "You sound like you're a smart boy. You won't be out of work long."

"It's been three months. Nothing on the horizon."

"Hell, what's three months?"

"My wife left me just about the time I got laid off. She was screwing another guy." He became conscious of his sudden change of tone. He felt a sudden urge to scream obscenities, so he did. "Lousy fucking cunt!"

"Plenty of pussy in the world," the woman said. He was pleased that she had followed along.

"You said it."

"You must be horny as hell."

"Maybe," he tentatively said. Actually, he felt nothing, not a twinge of desire.

"Talking to you is turning me on," the woman said.

"I lost my mother at the same time."

He felt the whole tone of the conversation change.

"Boy, it sure dumped on you," she said. Her remark seemed almost sincere. What he was saying was certainly outside the realm of her job description, and was definitely not covered in the training she had received, probably from some greedy greaseball.

Cooper felt ashamed. "This is a lousy idea," he blurted.

"Don't hang up," the woman said quickly. He suspected that she was fearful of losing her longevity commission. He envisioned a bank of middle-aged women, desperate people talking to desperate people.

"I'm not...," he started. "I just feel..."

"Lonely and embarrassed that you have to talk to strangers."

"Now there's a canned idea."

"Don't worry about it. Just say what you feel. That's why you called. You wanted to talk to someone." There was a

brief pause. "You do something to me," the woman said.

"I turn you on, right?"

"You've got one sexy voice. Gets my panties wet."

"Really?" It was the only response he could think of.

"You mind if I play with myself while we talk?" she whispered.

"No."

"You can do better than that," she said, her breathing picking up. "Let's hear it."

"Hear what?"

"My panties are so wet. Can I push them aside?"

"Sure."

His throat felt constricted and he could not think of anything to say.

"God, this feels good. I'm taking off my shirt. That okay?"

"Yeah," he grunted, not aroused.

"I'm touching my big tits. I'm lifting one to my mouth so I can suck my nipple."

He wanted to hang up, but he could not summon the will.

"You hard?" the woman said. "I need to know if you're hard."

"Yes," he lied.

"Can I get down on my knees and suck it? I want to roll my tongue around its head, kiss your balls. I love to kiss balls." Another pause. "You still there?"

"Yeah," he grunted again.

"Whip it out baby," the woman said, her gasping breath getting louder. "Show me that big cock."

He hesitated.

“Would you like to lick my clit, baby?”

Cooper felt a sob begin somewhere deep inside of him. It finally erupted.

“Come on, baby,” the woman said.

He slammed down the receiver. He was panicked. He hated himself.

SAMPLE

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