

# THE CHOICE

by Nicholas Sparks

## Prologue

*February 2007*

Stories are as unique as the people who tell them, and the best stories are those in which the ending is a surprise. At least, that's what Travis Parker recalled his dad telling him when he was a child. Travis remembered the way his dad would sit on the bed beside him, his mouth curling into a smile as Travis begged for a story.

"What kind of story do you want?" his dad would ask.

"The best one ever," Travis would answer.

Usually, his dad would sit quietly for a few moments, and then his eyes would light up. He'd put his arm around Travis and in a pitch-perfect voice would launch into a story that often kept Travis awake long after his dad had turned out the lights. There was always adventure and danger and excitement and journeys that took place in and around the small coastal town of Beaufort, North Carolina, the place Travis Parker grew up in and still called home. Strangely, most of them included bears. Grizzly bears, brown bears, Kodiak bears . . . his dad wasn't a stickler for reality when it came to a bear's natural habitat. He focused on hair-raising chase scenes through the sandy lowlands, giving Travis nightmares about crazed polar bears on Shackleford Banks until he was well into middle school. Yet no matter how frightened the stories had made him, he would inevitably ask, "What happened next?"

To Travis, those days seemed like the innocent vestiges of another era. He was forty-three now, and as he parked his car in the parking lot of Carteret General Hospital, where his wife had worked for the past ten years, he thought again about the words he'd always said to his father.

After stepping out of the car, he reached for the flowers he'd brought. The last time he and his wife had spoken, they'd had an argument, and more than anything he wanted to take back his words and make amends. He was under no illusions that the flowers would make things better between them, but he wasn't sure what else to do. It went without saying that he felt guilty about what had happened, but married friends had assured him that guilt was the cornerstone of any good marriage. It meant that a conscience was at work, values were held in high esteem, and reasons to feel guilty were best avoided whenever possible. His friends sometimes admitted their failures in this particular area, and Travis figured that the same could be said about any couple he'd ever met. He supposed his friends had said it to make him feel better, to reassure him that no one was perfect, that he shouldn't be so hard on himself. "Everyone makes mistakes," they'd said, and though he'd nodded as if he believed them, he knew they would never understand what he was going through. They couldn't. After all, their wives were still sleeping beside them every night; none of them had ever been separated for three months, none of them wondered whether their marriage would ever return to what it once had been.

As he crossed the parking lot, he thought about both of his daughters, his job, his wife. At the moment, none of them gave him much comfort. He felt as though he were failing in practically every area of his life. Lately, happiness seemed as distant and unattainable to him as space travel. He hadn't always felt this way. There had been a long period of time during which he remembered being very happy. But things change. People change. Change was one of the inevitable laws of nature, exacting its toll on people's lives. Mistakes are made, regrets form, and all that was left were repercussions that made something as simple as rising from the bed seem almost laborious.

Shaking his head, he approached the door of the hospital, picturing himself as the child he had been, listening to his father's stories. His own life had been the best story ever, he mused, the kind of story that should have ended on a happy note. As he reached for the door, he felt the familiar rush of memory and regret.

Only later, after he let the memories overtake him once again, would he allow himself to wonder what would happen next.

## One

*May 1996*

"Tell me again why I agreed to help you with this." Matt, red-faced and grunting, continued to push the spa toward the recently cut square at the far edge of the deck. His feet slipped, and he could feel sweat pouring from his forehead into the corners of his eyes, making them sting. It was hot, way too hot for early May. Too damn hot for this, that's for sure. Even Travis's dog, Moby, was hiding in the shade and panting, his tongue hanging out.

Travis Parker, who was pushing the massive box alongside him, managed to shrug. "Because you thought it would be fun," he said. He lowered his shoulder and shoved; the spa—which must have weighed four hundred pounds—moved another couple of inches. At this rate, the spa should be in place, oh . . . sometime next week.

"This is ridiculous," Matt said, heaving his weight into the box, thinking that what they really needed was a team of mules. His back was killing him. For a moment, he visualized his ears blowing off the sides of his head from the strain, shooting in both directions like the bottle rockets he and Travis used to launch as kids.

"You've already said that."

"And it isn't fun," Matt grunted.

"You said that, too."

"And it isn't going to be easy to install."

"Sure it is," Travis said. He stood and pointed to the lettering on the box.

"See? It says right here, 'Easy to Install.'" From his spot beneath the shady tree, Moby—a purebred boxer—barked as if in agreement, and Travis smiled, looking way too pleased with himself.

Matt scowled, trying to catch his breath. He hated that look. Well, not always. Most of the time he enjoyed his friend's boundless enthusiasm. But not today. Definitely not today.

Matt reached for the bandanna in his rear pocket. It was soaked with sweat, which had of course done wonders for the seat of his pants. He wiped his face and wrung the bandanna with a quick twist. Sweat dribbled from it like a leaky faucet onto the top of his shoe. He stared at it almost hypnotically, before feeling it soak through the light mesh fabric, giving his toes a nice, slimy feel. Oh, that was just dandy, wasn't it?

"As I recall, you said Joe and Laird would be here to help us with your 'little project' and that Megan and Allison would cook some burgers and we'd have beer, and that—oh yeah, installing this thing should only take a couple of hours at the most."

"They're coming," Travis said.

"You said that four hours ago."

"They must be running a little late."

"Maybe you never called them at all."

"Of course I called them. And they're bringing the kids, too. I promise."

"When?"

"Soon."

"*Uh-huh*," Matt answered. He stuffed the bandanna back in his pocket. "And by the way—assuming they don't arrive soon, just how on earth do you think the two of us will be able to lower this thing into place?"

Travis dismissed the problem with a wave as he turned toward the box again. "We'll figure it out. Just think how well we've done so far. We're almost halfway there."

Matt scowled again. It was Saturday—Saturday! His day of recreation and relaxation, his chance to escape from the grindstone, the break he *earned* after five days at the bank, the kind of day he *needed*. He was a loan officer, for God's sake! He was supposed to push paper, not hot tubs! He could have been watching the Braves play the Dodgers! He could have been golfing! He could have gone to the beach! He could have slept in with Liz before heading to her parents' house like they did almost every Saturday, instead of waking at the crack of dawn and performing manual labor for eight straight hours beneath a scalding southern sun . . .

He paused. Who was he kidding? Had he not been here, he would have definitely spent the day with Liz's parents, which was, in all honesty, the main reason he'd agreed to Travis's request in the first place. But that wasn't the point. The point was, he didn't need this. He really didn't.

"I don't need this," he said. "I really don't."

Travis didn't seem to hear him. His hands were already on the box, and he was getting into position. "You ready?"

Matt lowered his shoulder, feeling bitter. His legs were shaking. Shaking! He already knew he'd be in serious, double-dose-of- Advil pain in the morning. Unlike Travis, he didn't make it into the gym four days a week or play racquetball or go running or go scuba diving in Aruba or surfing in Bali or skiing in Vail or anything else the guy did. "This isn't fun, you know?"

Travis winked. "You said that already, remember?"

“Wow!” Joe commented, lifting an eyebrow as he walked the perimeter of the hot tub. By then, the sun was beginning its descent, streams of gold reflecting off the bay. In the distance, a heron broke from the trees and gracefully skimmed the surface, dispersing the light. Joe and Megan, along with Laird and Allison, had arrived a few minutes before with kids in tow, and Travis was showing them around. “This looks great! You two did all of this today?”

Travis nodded, holding his beer. “It wasn’t so bad,” he said. “I think Matt even enjoyed it.”

Joe glanced at Matt, who lay flattened in a lawn chair off to the side of the deck, a cold rag over his head. Even his belly—Matt had always been on the pudgy side—seemed to sag.

“I can see that.”

“Was it heavy?”

“Like an Egyptian sarcophagus!” Matt croaked. “One of those gold ones that only cranes can move!”

Joe laughed. “Can the kids get in?”

“Not yet. I just filled it, and the water will take a little while to heat up. The sun will help, though.”

“The sun will heat it within minutes!” Matt moaned. “Within seconds!”

Joe grinned. Laird and the three of them had gone to school together since kindergarten.

“Tough day, Matt?”

Matt removed the rag and scowled at Joe. “You have no idea. And thanks for showing up on time.”

“Travis said to be here at five. If I had known you needed help, I would have come earlier.”

Matt slowly shifted his gaze to Travis. He really hated his friend sometimes.

How’s Tina doing?” Travis said, changing the subject. “Is Megan getting any sleep?”

Megan was chatting with Allison at the table on the far end of the deck, and Joe glanced briefly in her direction. “Some. Tina’s cough is gone and she’s been able to sleep through the night again, but sometimes I just think that Megan isn’t wired to sleep. At least, not since she became a mom. She gets up even if Tina hasn’t made a peep. It’s like the quiet wakes her up.”

“She’s a good mom,” Travis said. “She always has been.”

Joe turned to Matt. “Where’s Liz?” he asked.

“She should be here any minute,” Matt answered, his voice floating up as if from the dead. “She spent the day with her parents.”

“Lovely,” Joe commented.

“Be nice. They’re good people.”

“I seem to recall you saying that if you had to sit through one more of your father-in-law’s stories about his prostate cancer or listen to your mother-in-law fret about Henry getting fired again—even though it wasn’t his fault—you were going to stick your head in the oven.”

Matt struggled to sit up. “I never said that!”

“Yes, you did.” Joe winked as Matt’s wife, Liz, rounded the corner of the house with Ben toddling just in front of her. “But don’t worry. I won’t say a word.” Matt’s eyes darted nervously from Liz to Joe and back again, checking to see if she’d heard.

“Hey, y’all!” Liz called out with a friendly wave, leading little Ben by the hand. She made a beeline for Megan and Allison. Ben broke away and toddled toward the other kids in the yard.

Joe saw Matt sigh in relief. He grinned and lowered his voice.

“So . . . Matt’s in-laws. Is that how you coned him into coming here?”

“I might have mentioned it,” Travis smirked.

Joe laughed.

“What are you guys saying?” Matt called out suspiciously.

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

Later, with the sun down and the food eaten, Moby curled up at Travis’s feet. As he listened to the sound of the kids splashing away in the spa, Travis felt a wave of satisfaction wash over him. This was his favorite kind of evening, whiled away to the sound of shared laughter and familiar banter. One minute Allison was talking to Joe; the next minute she was chatting with Liz and then Laird or Matt; and so on for everyone seated around the outdoor table. No pretences, no attempts to impress, no one trying to show anyone up. His life, he sometimes thought, resembled a beer commercial, and for the most part, he was content simply to ride the current of good feeling.

Every now and then, one of the wives would get up to check on the kids. Laird, Joe, and Matt, on the other hand, reserved their child-rearing duties at times like these to periodically raising their voices in hopes of calming down the kids or preventing them from teasing or accidentally hurting one another. Sure, one of the kids would throw a tantrum now and then, but most problems were solved with a quick kiss on a scraped knee or a hug that was as tender to watch from a distance as it must have been for the kid to receive.

Travis looked around the table, pleased that his childhood friends not only had become good husbands and fathers, but were still a part of his life. It didn’t always turn out that way. At thirty-two, he knew that life was sometimes a gamble, and he’d survived more than his share of accidents and falls, some of which should have inflicted far more serious bodily injury than they had. But it wasn’t just that. Life was unpredictable. Others he’d known growing up had already died in car accidents, been married and divorced, found themselves addicted to drugs or booze, or simply moved away from this tiny town, their faces already blurring in his memory. What were the odds that the four of them—who’d known one another since kindergarten—would find themselves in their early thirties still spending weekends together? Pretty small, he thought. But somehow, after hanging together through all the adolescent acne and girl troubles and pressure from their parents, then heading off to four different colleges with differing career goals, they had each, one by one, moved back here to Beaufort. They were more like family than friends, right down to coded expressions and shared experiences that no outsiders could ever fully understand.

And miraculously, the wives got along, too. They’d come from different backgrounds and different parts of the state, but marriage, motherhood, and the endless gossip of small-town America were more than enough to keep them chatting regularly on the phone and bonding like long-lost sisters. Laird had been the first to marry—he and Allison had tied the knot the summer after they graduated from Wake Forest; Joe and Megan walked the aisle a year later, after falling in love during their senior year at North Carolina. Matt, who’d gone to Duke, met Liz here in Beaufort,

and they were married a year after that. Travis had been the best man in all three weddings.

Some things had changed in the past few years, of course, largely because of the new additions to the families. Laird wasn't always available to go mountain biking, Joe couldn't join Travis on the spur of the moment to go skiing in Colorado as he used to, and Matt had all but given up trying to keep up with him on most things. But that was okay. They were all still available enough, and among the three of them—and with enough planning—he was still able to make the most of his weekends.

Lost in thought, Travis hadn't realized that the conversation had lapsed.

“Did I miss something?”

“I asked if you'd talked to Monica lately,” Megan said, her tone letting Travis know he was in trouble. All six of them, he thought, took a bit too much interest in his love life. The trouble with married people was that they seemed to believe that everyone they knew should get married. Every woman Travis dated was thus subjected to subtle, though unyielding, evaluation, especially by Megan. She was usually the ringleader at moments like these, always trying to figure out what made Travis tick when it came to women. And Travis, of course, loved nothing more than to push her buttons in return.

“Not recently,” he said.

“Why not? She's nice.”

She's also more than a little neurotic, Travis thought. But that was beside the point.

“She broke up with me, remember?”

“So? It doesn't mean she doesn't want you to call.”

“I thought that's exactly what it meant.”

Megan, along with Allison and Liz, stared at him as if he were just plain dense. The guys, as usual, seemed to be enjoying this. It was a regular feature of their evenings.

“But you were fighting, right?”

“So?”

“Did you ever think she might have simply broken up with you because she was angry?”

“I was angry, too.”

“Why?”

“She wanted me to see a therapist.”

“And let me guess—you said you didn't need to see one.”

“The day I need to see a therapist is the day you see me hike up my skirt and crochet some mittens.”

Joe and Laird laughed, but Megan's eyebrows shot up. Megan, they all knew, watched Oprah nearly every day. “You don't think men need therapy?”

“I know I don't.”

“But generally speaking?”

“Since I'm not a general, I really couldn't say.”

Megan leaned back in her chair. “I think Monica might be on to something. If you ask me, I think you have commitment issues.”

“Then I'll make sure not to ask you.”

Megan leaned forward. “What's the longest you've ever dated someone? Two months? Four months?”

Travis pondered the question. “I dated Olivia for almost a year.”

"I don't think she's talking about high school," Laird cracked.

Occasionally, his friends enjoyed throwing him under the bus, so to speak.

"Thanks, Laird," Travis said.

"What are friends for?"

"You're changing the subject," Megan reminded him.

Travis drummed his fingers on his leg. "I guess I'd have to say . . . I can't remember."

"In other words, not long enough to remember?"

"What can I say? I've yet to meet any woman who could measure up to any of you."

Despite the growing darkness, he could tell she was pleased by his words. He'd learned long ago that flattery was his best defense at moments like these, especially since it was usually sincere. Megan, Liz, and Allison were terrific. All heart and loyalty and generous common sense.

"Well, just so you know, I like her," she said.

"Yeah, but you like everyone I date."

"No, I don't. I didn't like Leslie."

None of the wives had liked Leslie. Matt, Laird, and Joe, on the other hand, hadn't minded her company at all, especially when she wore her bikini. She was definitely a beauty, and while she wasn't the type he'd ever marry, they'd had a lot of fun while it lasted.

"I'm just saying that I think you should give her a call," she persisted.

"I'll think about it," he said, knowing he wouldn't. He rose from the table, angling for an escape. "Anyone need another beer?"

Joe and Laird lifted their bottles in unison; the others shook their heads. Travis started for the cooler before hesitating near the sliding glass door of his house. He darted inside and changed the CD, listening to the strains of new music filtering out over the yard as he brought the beers back to the table. By then, Megan, Allison, and Liz were already chatting about Gwen, the woman who did their hair. Gwen always had good stories, many of which concerned the illicit predilections of the town's citizens.

Travis nursed his beer silently, looking out over the water.

"What are you thinking about?" Laird asked.

"It's not important."

"What is it?"

Travis turned toward him. "Did you ever notice how some colors are used for people's names but others aren't?"

"What are you talking about?"

"White and Black. Like Mr. White, the guy who owns the tire store. And Mr. Black, our third-grade teacher. Or even Mr. Green from the game Clue. But you never hear of someone named Mr. Orange or Mr. Yellow. It's like some colors make good names, but other colors just sound stupid. You know what I mean?"

"I can't say I've ever thought about it."

"Me neither. Not until just a minute ago, I mean. But it's kind of strange, isn't it?"

"Sure," Laird finally agreed.

Both men were quiet for a moment. "I told you it wasn't important."

"Yes, you did."

"Was I right?"

"Yep."

When little Josie had her second temper tantrum in a fifteen-minute span—it was a little before nine—Allison scooped her into her arms and gave Laird *the look*, the one that said it was time to go so they could get the kids in bed. Laird didn't bother arguing, and when he stood up from the table, Megan glanced at Joe, Liz nodded at Matt, and Travis knew the evening was at an end. Parents might believe themselves to be the bosses, but in the end it was the kids who made the rules.

He supposed he could have tried to talk one of his friends into staying, and might even have gotten one to agree, but he had long since grown accustomed to the fact that his friends lived their lives by a different schedule from his. Besides, he had a sneaking suspicion that Stephanie, his younger sister, might swing by later. She was coming in from Chapel Hill, where she was working toward a master's degree in biochemistry. Though she would stay at their parents' place, she was usually wired after the drive and in the mood to talk, and their parents would already be in bed. Megan, Joe, and Liz rose and started to clean up the table, but Travis waved them off.

"I'll get it in a while. No big deal."

A few minutes later, two SUVs and a minivan were being loaded with children. Travis stood on the front porch and waved as they pulled out of the driveway.

When they were gone, Travis wandered back to the stereo, sorted through the CDs again, and chose *Tattoo You* by the Rolling Stones, then cranked up the volume. He pulled at another beer on his way back to his chair, threw his feet up on the table, and leaned back. Moby sat beside him.

"Just you and me for a while," he said. "What time do you think Stephanie will be rolling in?"

Moby turned away. Unless Travis said the words *walk* or *ball* or *go for a ride* or *come get a bone*, Moby wasn't much interested in anything he had to say.

"Do you think I should call her to see if she's on her way yet?"

Moby continued to stare.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. She'll get here when she gets here."

He sat drinking his beer and stared out over the water. Behind him, Moby whined. "You want to go get your ball?" he finally said.

Moby stood so quickly, he almost knocked over the chair.

It was the music, she thought, that proved to be the clincher in what had already been one of the most miserable weeks of her life. Loud music. Okay, nine o'clock on a Saturday night wasn't so bad, especially since he obviously had company, and ten o'clock wasn't all that unreasonable, either. But eleven o'clock? When he was alone and playing fetch with his dog?

From her back deck, she could see him just sitting there in the same shorts he'd worn all day, feet on the table, tossing the ball and staring at the river. What on earth could he be thinking?

Maybe she shouldn't be so hard on him; she should simply ignore him. It was his house, right? King of the castle and all that. He could do what he wanted. But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that he had neighbors, including her, and she had a castle, too, and neighbors were supposed to be considerate. And truth be told, he'd crossed the line. Not just because of the music. In all honesty, she liked the music he was listening to and usually didn't really care how loud or how long he

played it. The problem was with his dog, Nobby, or whatever he called him. More specifically, what his dog had done to her dog.

Molly, she was certain, was pregnant.

Molly, her beautiful, sweet, purebred collie of prize-winning lineage—the first thing she'd bought herself after finishing her physician assistant rotations at the Eastern Virginia School of Medicine and the kind of dog she'd always wanted—had noticeably gained weight during the last couple of weeks. Even more alarming, she noticed that Molly's nipples seemed to be growing. She could feel them now whenever Molly rolled over to have her tummy scratched. And she was moving more slowly, too. Add it up, and Molly was definitely on her way to birthing a litter of puppies that no one on earth was ever going to want. A boxer and a collie? Unconsciously she squinched up her face as she tried to imagine how the puppies would look before finally forcing the thought away.

It had to be that man's dog. When Molly was in heat, that dog had practically staked out her house like a private detective, and he was the only dog she'd seen wandering around the neighborhood in weeks. But would her neighbor even consider fencing his yard? Or keeping the dog inside? Or setting up a dog run? No. His motto seemed to be "My dog shall be free!" It didn't surprise her. He seemed to live his own life by the same irresponsible motto. On her way to work, she saw him running, and when she got back, he was out biking or kayaking or in-line skating or shooting baskets in his front drive with a group of neighborhood kids. A month ago, he'd put his boat in the water, and now he was wakeboarding as well. As if the man weren't active enough already. God forbid the man should work a minute of overtime, and she knew that he didn't work at all on Fridays. And what kind of job let you head off every day wearing jeans and T-shirts? She had no idea, but she suspected—with a grim sort of satisfaction—that it more than likely required an apron and name tag.

Okay, maybe she wasn't being entirely fair. He was probably a nice guy. His friends—who appeared normal enough and had kids to boot—seemed to enjoy his company and were over there all the time. She realized she'd even seen a couple of them at the office before, when their kids had come in with the sniffles or an ear infection. But what about Molly? Molly was sitting near the back door, her tail thumping, and Gabby felt anxious at the thought of the future. Molly would be okay, but what about the puppies? What was going to happen to them? What if no one wanted them? She couldn't imagine taking them to the pound or the SPCA or whatever it was they called it here, to be put to sleep. She couldn't do that. She wouldn't do that. She wasn't going to have them murdered.

But what, then, was she going to do with the puppies?

It was all his fault, and he was just sitting there on his deck with his feet propped up, acting as if he didn't have a care in the world.

This wasn't what she'd dreamed about when she'd first seen the house earlier this year. Even though it wasn't in Morehead City, where her boyfriend, Kevin, lived, it was just minutes across the bridge. It was small and almost half a century old and a definite fixer-upper by Beaufort standards, but the view along the creek was spectacular, the yard was big enough for Molly to run, and best of all, she could afford it. Just barely, what with all the loans she'd taken out for PA school, but loan officers were pretty understanding when it came to making loans to people like her. Professional, educated people.

Not like Mr. My Dog Shall Be Free and I Don't Work Fridays.

She drew a deep breath, reminding herself again that the man might be a nice guy. He always waved to her whenever he saw her pulling in from work, and she

vaguely remembered that he'd dropped off a basket of cheese and wine to welcome her to the neighborhood when she'd moved in a couple of months back. She hadn't been home, but he'd left it on the porch, and she'd promised herself that she'd send a thank-you note, one that she never quite got around to writing.

Her face squinched unconsciously again. So much for moral superiority. Okay, she wasn't perfect, either, but this wasn't about a forgotten thank-you note. This was about Molly and that man's wandering dog and unwanted puppies, and now was as good a time as any for them to discuss the situation. He was obviously awake.

She stepped off the back deck and started toward the tall row of hedges that separated his house from hers. Part of her wished Kevin were with her, but that wasn't going to happen. Not after their spat this morning, which started after she'd casually mentioned that her cousin was getting married. Kevin, buried in the sports section of the newspaper, hadn't said a word in response, preferring to act as if he hadn't heard her. Anything about marriage made the man get as quiet as a stone, especially lately. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised—they'd been dating almost four years (a year less than her cousin, she was tempted to point out), and if she'd learned one thing about him, it was that if Kevin found a topic uncomfortable, then more than likely he wouldn't say anything at all.

But Kevin wasn't the problem. Nor was the fact that lately she felt as though her life weren't quite what she'd imagined it would be. And it wasn't the terrible week at the office, either, one in which she'd been puked on three—*three!*—times on Friday alone, which was an all-time office record, at least according to the nurses, who didn't bother to hide their smirks and repeated the story with glee. Nor was she angry about Adrian Melton, the married doctor at her office who liked to touch her whenever they spoke, his hand lingering just a bit too long for comfort. And she surely wasn't angry at the fact that through it all, she hadn't once stood up for herself.

Nosiree, this had to do with Mr. Party being a responsible neighbor, one who was going to own up to the fact that he had as much of a duty to find a solution to their problem as she did. And while she was letting him know that, maybe she'd mention that it was a little late for him to be blaring his music (even if she did like it), just to let him know she was serious.

As Gabby marched through the grass, the dew moistened the tips of her toes through her sandals and the moonlight reflected on the lawn like silver trails. Trying to figure out exactly where to begin, she barely noticed. Courtesy dictated that she head first to the front door and knock, but with the music roaring, she doubted he'd even be able to hear it. Besides, she wanted to get this over with while she was still worked up and willing to confront him head-on.

Up ahead, she spotted an opening in the hedges and headed toward it. It was probably the same one that Nobby snuck through to take advantage of poor, sweet Molly. Her heart squeezed again, and this time she tried to hold on to the feeling. This was important. Very important.

Focused as she was on her mission, she didn't notice the tennis ball come flying toward her just as she emerged from the opening. She did, however, distantly register the sound of the dog galloping toward her—but only distantly—a second before she was bowled over and hit the ground.

As she lay on her back, Gabby noted dully that there were way too many stars in a too bright, out-of-focus sky. For a moment, she wondered why she couldn't draw breath,

then quickly became more concerned with the pain that was coursing through her. All she could do was lie on the grass and blink with every throb.

From somewhere far away, she heard a jumble of sounds, and the world slowly started coming back into focus. She tried to concentrate and realized that it wasn't a jumble; she was hearing voices. Or, rather, a single voice. It seemed to be asking if she was okay.

At the same time, she gradually became conscious of a succession of warm, smelly, and rhythmic breezes on her cheek. She blinked once more, turned her head slightly, and was confronted with an enormous, furry, square head towering over her. Nobby, she concluded fuzzily.

"Ahhhh . . .," she whimpered, trying to sit up. As she moved, the dog licked her face.

"Moby! Down!" the voice said, sounding closer. "Are you okay? Maybe you shouldn't try to get up yet!"

"I'm okay," she said, finally raising herself into a seated position. She took a couple of deep breaths, still feeling dizzy. Wow, she thought, that really hurt. In the darkness, she sensed someone squatting beside her, though she could barely make out his features.

"I'm really sorry," the voice said.

"What happened?"

"Moby accidentally knocked you down. He was going after a ball."

"Who's Moby?"

"My dog."

"Then who's Nobby?"

"What?"

She brought a hand to her temple. "Never mind."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," she said, still dizzy but feeling the pain subside to a low throb. As she began to rise, she felt her neighbor place his hand on her arm, helping her up. She was reminded of the toddlers she saw at the office who struggled to stay balanced and remain upright. When she finally had her feet under her, she felt him release her arm.

"Some welcome, huh?" he asked.

His voice still sounded far away, but she knew it wasn't, and when she faced him, she found herself focusing up at someone at least six inches taller than her own five feet seven. She wasn't used to that, and as she tilted her head upward, she noticed his angled cheekbones and clean skin. His brown hair was wavy, curling naturally at the ends, and his teeth gleamed white. Up close, he was goodlooking—okay, really good-looking—but she suspected that he knew it as well. Lost in thought, she opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again, realizing she'd forgotten the question.

"I mean, here you are, coming over to visit, and you get slammed by my dog," he went on. "Like I said, I'm really sorry. Usually he pays a bit more attention. Say hey, Moby."

The dog was sitting on his haunches, acting pleased as punch, and with that, she suddenly remembered the purpose of her visit. Beside her, Moby raised a paw in greeting. It was cute—and he *was* cute for a boxer—but she wasn't about to fall for it. This was the mutt who'd not only tackled her, but ruined Molly as well. He probably should have been named Mugger. Or better yet, Pervert.

"You sure you're okay?"

The way he asked made her realize that this wasn't the sort of confrontation she'd wanted, and she tried to summon the feeling she'd had on her way over.

"I'm fine," she said, her tone sharp.

For an awkward moment, they eyed each other without speaking.

Finally he motioned over his shoulder with his thumb. "Would you like to sit on the deck? I'm just listening to some music."

"Why do you think I want to sit on the deck?" she snapped, feeling more in control.

He hesitated. "Because you were coming over?"

Oh yeah, she thought. That.

"I mean, I suppose we could stand here by the hedges if you'd rather," he continued.

She held up her hands to stop him, impatient to get this over with. "I came over here because I wanted to talk to you . . ."

She broke off when he slapped at his arm. "Me, too," he said before she could get started again. "I've been meaning to drop by to officially welcome you to the neighborhood. Did you get my basket?"

She heard a buzzing near her ear and waved at it. "Yes. Thank you for that," she said, slightly distracted. "But what I wanted to talk about . . ."

She trailed off when she realized he wasn't paying attention. Instead, he was fanning the air between them. "You sure you don't want to head to the deck?" he pressed. "The mosquitoes are vicious around the bushes here."

"What I was trying to say was—"

"There's one on your earlobe," he said, pointing.

Her right hand shot up instinctively.

"The other one."

She swatted at it and saw a smear of blood on her fingers as she pulled her hand back. Gross, she thought.

"There's another right by your cheek."

She waved again at the growing swarm. "What's going on?"

"Like I said, it's the bushes. They breed in the water, and it's always moist in the shade. . . ."

"Fine," she relented. "We can talk on the deck."

A moment later they were in the clear, moving quickly. "I hate mosquitoes, which is why I've got some citronella candles going on the table. That's usually enough to keep them away. They get much worse later in the summer." He left just enough space between them so they wouldn't accidentally bump. "I don't think we've formally met, by the way. I'm Travis Parker."

She felt a flicker of uncertainty. She wasn't here to be his buddy, after all, but expectation and manners prevailed, and she answered before she could stop herself.

"I'm Gabby Holland."

"Nice to meet you."

"Yeah," she said. She made a point to cross her arms as she said it, then subconsciously brought a hand to her ribs where a dull ache remained. From there, it traveled to her ear, which was already beginning to itch.

Staring at her profile, Travis could tell that she was angry. Her mouth had a tight, pinched look he'd seen on any number of girlfriends. Somehow he knew the anger was directed at him, though he had no idea why. Aside from being tackled by the dog, that is. But that wasn't quite it, he decided. He remembered the expressions

that his kid sister, Stephanie, was famous for, ones that signalled a slow build-up of resentment over time, and that's how Gabby seemed to be acting now. As if she'd worked herself up to this. But there the similarities with his sister ended. While Stephanie had grown up to become a certifiable beauty, Gabby was attractive in a similar but not quite perfect kind of way. Her blue eyes were a little too wide set, her nose was just a bit too big, and red hair was always hard to pull off, but somehow these imperfections lent an air of vulnerability to her natural good looks, which most men would find arresting.

In the silence, Gabby tried to collect her thoughts. "I was coming over because—"

"Hold on," he said. "Before you begin, why don't you sit down? I'll be right there." He started for the cooler, then rotated in midstride. "Would you like a beer?"

"No, thank you," she said, wishing she could get this over with. Refusing to sit down, she turned with the hope of confronting him as he strode past. But, too quickly, he dropped into his chair, leaned back, and put his feet on the table.

Flustered, Gabby continued to stand. This was not working out as she'd planned.

He popped open his beer and took a short pull. "Aren't you going to sit?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I'd rather remain standing, thank you."

Travis squinted and shaded his eyes with his hands. "But I can barely see you," he said. "The porch lights are shining behind you."

"I came over here to tell you something—"

"Can you move just a few feet to the side?" he asked.

She made an impatient noise and moved a few steps.

"Better?"

"Not yet."

By then, she was almost against the table. She threw up her hands in exasperation.

"Maybe you should just sit," he suggested.

"Fine!" she said. She pulled out a chair and took a seat. He was throwing this whole thing completely out of whack. "I came over because I wanted to talk to you . . .," she began, wondering if she should start with Molly's situation or what it generally meant to be a good neighbor.

He raised his eyebrows. "You've already said that."

"I know!" she said. "I've been trying to tell you, but you haven't let me finish!"

He saw her glare at him just the way his sister used to but still had no idea what she was so wound up about. After a second, she began to speak, a bit hesitantly at first, as if wary that he was going to interrupt her again. He didn't, and she seemed to find her rhythm, the words coming more and more quickly. She talked about how she'd found the house and how excited she'd been, and how owning a home had been her dream for a long time, before the topic wandered to Molly and how Molly's nipples were getting bigger. At first, Travis had no idea who Molly was—which lent that part of the monologue a surreal quality—but as she continued, he gradually realised that Molly was Gabby's collie, which he'd noticed her walking occasionally. After that, she began talking about ugly puppies and murder and, strangely, something about neither "Dr. Hands-on-me" nor vomit having anything to do with the way she was feeling, but in all honesty, it made little sense until she started gesturing at Moby.

That allowed him to put two and two together until it dawned on him that she believed Moby was responsible for Molly getting pregnant.

He wanted to tell her that it wasn't Moby, but she was on such a roll, he thought it best to let her finish before protesting. By that point, her story had veered back on itself. Bits and pieces of her life continued to come tumbling out, little snippets that sounded unrehearsed and unconnected, along with bursts of anger randomly directed his way. It felt as though she went on for a good twenty minutes or so, but Travis knew it couldn't have been that long. Even so, being on the receiving end of a stranger's angry accusations about his failures as a neighbor wasn't exactly easy, nor did he appreciate the way she was talking about Moby. Moby, in his opinion, was just about the most perfect dog in the world.

Sometimes she paused, and in those moments, Travis tried unsuccessfully to respond. But that didn't work, either, because she immediately overrode him. Instead, he listened and—at least in those moments when she wasn't insulting him or his dog—sensed a trace of desperation, even some confusion, as to what was happening in her life. The dog, whether she realized it or not, was only a small part of what was bothering her. He felt a surge of compassion for her and found himself nodding, just to let her know he was paying attention. Every now and then, she asked a question, but before he could respond, she would answer for him. “Aren't neighbors supposed to consider their actions?” Yes, obviously, he started to say, but she beat him to it. “Of course they are!” she cried, and Travis found himself nodding again.

When her tirade finally wound down, she ended up staring at the ground, spent. Although her mouth was set in that same straight line, Travis thought he saw tears, and he wondered whether he should offer to bring her a tissue. They were inside the house—too far away, he realized—but then he remembered the napkins near the grill. He rose quickly, grabbed a few, and brought them to her. He offered her one, and after debating, she took it. She wiped the corner of her eyes. Now that she'd calmed down, he noted she was even prettier than he'd first realized.

She drew a shaky breath. “The question is, what are you going to do?” she finally asked.

He hesitated, trying to draw a bead on what she meant. “About what?”

“The puppies!”

He could hear the anger beginning to percolate again, and he raised his hands in an attempt to calm her.

“Let's start at the beginning. Are you sure she's pregnant?”

“Of course I'm sure! Didn't you hear a word I said?”

“Have you had her checked by a vet?”

“I'm a physician assistant. I spent two and a half years in PA school and another year in rotations. I know when someone's pregnant.”

“With people, I'm sure you do. But with dogs, it's different.”

“How would you know?”

“I've had a lot of experience with dogs. Actually, I—”

Yeah, I'll bet, she thought, cutting him off with a wave. “She's moving slower, her nipples are swollen, and she's been acting strangely. What else could it be?” Honestly, every man she'd ever met believed that having a dog as a kid made him an expert on all things canine.

“What if she has an infection? That would cause swelling. And if the infection is bad enough, she might be in some pain, too, which could explain the way she's acting.”

Gabby opened her mouth to speak, then closed it when she realized that she hadn't thought of that. An infection *could* cause swelling in the nipples—mastitis or something like that—and for a moment, she felt a surge of relief wash through her. As she considered it further, however, reality came crashing back. It wasn't one or two nipples, it was all of them. She twisted the napkin, wishing he would just *listen*.

"She's pregnant, and she's going to have puppies. And you're going to have to help me find homes for them, since I'm not bringing them to the pound."

"I'm sure it wasn't Moby."

"I knew you were going to say that."

"But you should know—"

She shook her head furiously. This was so typical. Pregnancy was always a woman's problem. She stood up from her chair.

"You're going to have to take some responsibility here. And I hope you realize it's not going to be easy to find homes for them."

"But—"

"What on earth was that about?" Stephanie asked.

Gabby had disappeared into the hedge; a few seconds later, he'd seen her enter her home through the sliding glass door. He was still sitting at the table, feeling slightly shell-shocked, when he spotted his sister approaching.

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough," she said. She saw the cooler near the door and pulled out a beer. "For a second there, I thought she was going to punch you. Then I thought she was going to cry. And then she looked like she wanted to punch you again."

"That's about right," he admitted. He rubbed his forehead, still processing the scene.

"Still charming the girlfriends, I see."

"She's not my girlfriend. She's my neighbor."

"Even better." Stephanie took a seat. "How long have you been dating?"

"We're not. Actually, that's the first time I've ever met her."

"Impressive," Stephanie observed. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"What?"

"You know—making someone hate you so quickly. That's a rare gift. Usually you have to know a person better first."

"Very funny."

"I thought so. And Moby . . ." She turned toward the dog and lifted a scolding finger. "You should know better."

Moby wiggled his tail before getting to his feet. He walked toward her, nuzzling Stephanie in her lap. She pushed the top of his head, which only made Moby push back harder.

"Easy there, you old hound dog."

"It's not Moby's fault."

"So you said. Not that she wanted to hear it, of course. What's with her?"

"She was just upset."

"I could tell. It took me a little while before I could figure out what she was talking about. But I must say that it was entertaining."

"Be nice."

"I am nice." Stephanie leaned back, evaluating her brother. "She was kind of cute, don't you think?"

“I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah, sure you didn’t. I’d be willing to bet it was the first thing you noticed. I saw the way you were ogling her.”

“My, my. You’re in quite a mood this evening.”

“I should be. The exam I just finished was a killer.”

“What does that mean? You think you missed a question?”

“No. But I had to really think hard about some of them.”

“Must be nice being you.”

“Oh, it is. I’ve got three more exams next week, too.”

“Poor baby. Life as a perpetual student is so much harder than actually earning a living.”

“Look who’s talking. You were in school longer than me. Which reminds me . . . how do you think Mom and Dad would feel if I told them I wanted to stay in for another couple of years to get my PhD?”

At Gabby’s house, the kitchen light flashed on. Distracted, he took a moment to answer.

“They’d probably be okay with it. You know Mom and Dad.”

“I know. But lately I get the feeling that they want me to meet someone and settle down.”

“Join the club. I’ve had that feeling for years.”

“Yeah, but it’s different for me. I’m a woman. My biological clock is ticking.”

The kitchen light next door flashed off; a few seconds later, another flashed on in the bedroom. He wondered idly whether Gabby was turning in for the night.

“You’ve got to remember that Mom was married at twenty-one,” Stephanie went on. “By twenty-three, she already had you.”

She waited for a response but got nothing. “But then again, look how well you turned out. Maybe I should use that as my argument.”

Her words filtered in slowly, and he furrowed his brow when they finally registered.

“Is that an insult?”

“I tried,” she said with a smirk. “Just checking to see if you’re paying attention to me or whether you’re thinking about your new friend over there.”

“She’s not a friend,” he said. He knew he sounded defensive but he couldn’t help it.

“Not now,” his sister said. “But I get a funny feeling she will be.”