

Still Counting

She had reasons to tiptoe toward marriage;
he gave her reasons to run.



Phil Fragasso

Chapter One

The first time I saw her it was raining.
I was crying. She was laughing.

Actually I heard her before I saw her. I was leaning against the Jeep clutching Casey's leash and collar. My joyous and beautiful chocolate Lab had come down with cancer of the spleen at the age of seven. She suffered stoically for three months until I realized that keeping her alive any longer was solely for my benefit and not hers. Twenty minutes earlier I had held Casey's right front paw as Dr. Renee Martin shaved and cleaned a small patch of skin on her left leg. I lay on the floor beside Casey and stroked her velvety smooth ears. Casey's ears were legendary. Over the years I had come across countless young children who were nervous or frightened around dogs. Casey was a sure-fire cure for their fear. I would have her sit quietly as I held out one of her ears for the child to touch. I demonstrated how to fondle it between thumb and forefinger as though appraising the quality of a fine fabric. I don't know if dogs have a G-spot, but this was truly the epicenter of pure ecstasy for Casey. Her eyes glazed over, and her tongue peeked out ever so slightly from the front of her closed mouth. She would emit whisper-quiet murmurs and push her head tightly against whatever hand was doing the stroking, determined to extract every ounce of pleasure from the moment. I used to call it aural sex.

This time, however, this final time, I don't think she felt anything but sadness and pain. We locked eyes as we often did, but there was no look of excitement on Casey's part about an impending walk, a ride in the car, or one of my mom's homemade dog biscuits. All I could see through my own tearful eyes was a look of resignation. It was time. Casey knew it and I knew it.

"Are you ready, Adam?" asked Renee.

I looked up at her, the only vet Casey or I had ever known, and nodded.

Renee knelt on the floor and offered Casey a treat shaped like a squirrel, but my usually ravenous companion had stopped eating the night before and refused this treat as well.

"You're doing the right thing," said Renee.

I placed my hand on Casey's head when Renee injected the fatal solution. Within seconds Casey's pain faded away, and mine forever heightened.

Since then I'd been standing in the rain not wanting to return to the apartment I shared with Casey but not knowing where else to go.

"You do what you want, but I wouldn't go out with him in five-and-a-half million years."

Those were the first words I heard Nina speak.

Then she laughed. It was a throaty cackle that pulsed with palpable joy, amplified with some well-practiced theatrical flair.

I glanced toward the voice.

"Have fun, Mom," she said. "I love you."

She slipped the phone into her jeans pocket and noticed me. Her face beamed with a broad smile and sparkling eyes that seemed in perpetual motion. She threw her arms in the air. "Beautiful night, huh?"

I wanted to nod but could do nothing but shake my head back and forth.

“You okay?” she asked.

I stared at her without responding, and she moved toward me with the fluid, effortless motion of an Olympic figure skater. The Red Sox sweatshirt she was wearing was soaking through, and her jet-black hair, long and tangled, was matted against her face. Except for pushing a few stray hairs from her eyes, she seemed oblivious to the weather. I hoped the rain would hide my tears, but I was wrong.

“There’s no crying in baseball,” she said.

I forced a smile. The line had been delivered with the same kind of droll self-consciousness that Tom Hanks had used in *A League of Their Own*.

“I’m fine. But thanks for asking.”

Nina extended her hand and introduced herself as Nina Morales.

“I work for Renee,” she said. “Dr. Martin.”

“I’m Adam.”

As we shook hands I saw Nina glance at Casey’s leash and collar, and then she studied my eyes.

“Was the chocolate Lab yours?” she asked.

“Casey,” I said. “She was only seven. Still acted like a puppy.”

“Cancer’s a bitch,” said Nina. “I saw Renee’s chart when we moved her to the morgue. She was a beautiful dog.”

I nodded and sucked in a bellyful of air.

“She was the best,” I said. “She was pretty much the most important thing in my life.”

Nina leaned forward and put a hand on my chest, right above my heart. “That is not good,” she said. “I’m

a dog person myself, but if your dog is the best thing about your life, then you better rethink whatever the hell you're doing."

I tried to laugh but snorted instead. "I've heard that before. Maybe this time I should listen."

"Maybe you should. And maybe I'm the one you should listen to."

I paused before responding and let my eyes wander over the face of this perfect stranger who had come out of nowhere at a time when I had nowhere to go and no one to go with. "Can I buy you a coffee?" I asked.

"No, but you can treat me to a chai latte."

"Deal," I said.

"The Starbucks in Central Square?" she asked.

"Perfect."

I opened the Wrangler's door and asked if she wanted to ride with me.

"No thanks. That wouldn't be proper. I don't even know your last name."

"Donatello," I said. "Adam Donatello."

We shook hands again, and I watched Nina walk to her car and climb in. For a brief moment, I forgot I'd just lost my best friend and the most loyal of companions. I had the crazy thought that maybe Casey's soul had somehow taken hold of Nina's persona and would guide me through the heartbreak of her passing. I wasn't a particularly religious person who believed in some higher power who pulled strings and directed the day-to-day happenings on Earth, but I did believe that some seemingly random events often happened for a reason—a reason that only became clear much later. I wondered if meeting Nina would prove to be one of those momentous life events that I would

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never forget. Or if I was falling victim to my all-too-frequent foible of reading too much into too little too soon.

I waited for Nina to start her car and turn on her headlights, and then I followed her to Starbucks.