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Chapter 1

Bill

So there I was, away from Annie, my aggravating wife—my aggravating ex-wife. I was the one who asked for a divorce, trumped her, for I knew she was working her way up to asking for one. I beat her to it. I got the upper hand. I was still angry that I had to dismantle my study where I spent so many peaceful hours, pack up all my books and move them. I had to move out of my home, which was a quick commute to the hospital, into an apartment downtown. My habits were disrupted and all because of what? That I preferred flowers arranged by a florist? That I questioned her utterly incomprehensible desire to write fiction? I soothed myself by thinking of ways to take revenge so she would realize what she threw away and would be sorry for it. I would let her know that no matter how much she begged and groveled, I would never come back, and I would never forgive her. Those who say revenge isn't sweet are wrong. Yes it is.

I was a good husband, earned a good living, paid for schooling for the kids, and would have paid for her schooling if she had taken my advice and gotten a masters of fine arts (MFA). She never appreciated me, never valued all I gave up for her. I never complained when she no longer brought any money into the household, when she retired, for God's sake. And retired from what? A little job that was not nearly a career, but still, the extra money helped in those tuition-heavy years, years when I wondered if I was worth more dead than alive because the insurance would pay the tuition bills.

At least she never wanted any help in the gardening. She did take care of that all by herself. Even if I had volunteered, she would have rejected my offer, as she rejected so much I offered her: everything I offered except money and status.

What exactly did Hans offer her that I didn't? He was a failure, his marriage a mess, his children dreadful, his career dependent upon his wife's family. And then he became an artist, of all the ridiculous things. Though he wasn't bad, but it was way too late for him. He messed up his life completely, and still Annie wanted him. Why? I must not think about it too much or my blood pressure will sky rocket. Women! For God's sake, why prefer him to me? But still, there are plenty of women out there who will appreciate me and not criticize me incessantly.

At first it was a relief living alone. Coming home after a long day, I would no longer be confronted with requests for small jobs around the house when my response if not spoken would be, "I worked hard all day, was in surgery for hours, and now you want me to do what?" angry that not only did I bring in all the money but that relentless demands on me at work were also relentless demands on me at home. No privacy, no rest. Just demands.

I hadn't lived alone since I was a resident, and that was not an experience in living alone so much as it was an expanded dorm room. Medical school, internship, residency, fellowship; not exactly living alone but living in a small apartment that served as a receptacle for my medical books, some clothes, and a typewriter. Condoms in the nightstand drawer, a six-pack of beer rests pristine in the refrigerator: all the essentials to my existence.

Now I have money and maybe a little bit of time to myself. I could find a willing woman who didn't find emotional storms necessary. Maybe she would like to go sailing with me, as well as go out to the obligatory dinner and movie or play or something

cultural; Annie without the prickles.

Boy, did I find out how good I had had it. Cranky independent women, outspoken about what pleased them in bed and out: Annie's prickles were like pussy willows compared to some I went out with.

"Is that all?" one of them said, looking at me, disgruntled.

"Do you think I have the stamina of a twenty-year-old?"

"If you don't have the stamina, take the pill. You're a doctor; you can prescribe."

"You don't feel you have to make an effort but just lie there and be serviced because you are so wonderful? Now you are telling me how to practice medicine as well as how to make love."

"You don't make love, you fuck. Make a little effort, why don't you? Try to get it in your head that it is a turn-off to have you groan, 'Annie' in intimate moments."

We glared at each other and retreated to opposite corners of the bed. Deflated, I got up, outrage accompanying me to the shower, and with what dignity I still possessed. I left. Could it be that my technique could use some updating? But I didn't like her and didn't want to lick her and hear her fake moans. It was boring and obvious. She just wanted an orgasm handed to her, so to speak, and didn't wish to enjoy it with me.

Then there is the question of food. I just need a dessert plate with a protein, a vegetable, some fruit for supper. If I go out to eat, I am confronted with piles of heavily sauced foods. If I stay in, I open the refrigerator door and there is wilted lettuce, shriveled pieces of fruit, some green-covered cheese. I don't have the hang, yet, of living alone.

When I said wistfully to a woman I was dating that I would really like a home-cooked meal, I got "the look." The person sometimes smiled and ignored me, and more often I got a statement "I don't cook." One of them, who went from being a bed partner for a short time (we didn't have anything in common when naked) to a nonsexual buddy, said to me, "Bill, the ladies who are dating know the symptoms of a man who wants a woman to take care of them: a wistful request for a cooked meal, a rueful look at a disordered apartment, the spaniel look that you need looking after. It doesn't work. Bill, you are not in the market for a wife; what you want is a housekeeper. The ladies know this and have been taking care of themselves for a long time and no longer can pretend patience for what you want. They are out for a good time (sex) and some companionship. Nothing more. They do not want to get into the same habits you acquired when married. They don't care."

She went on. "You could also brush up on your sexual techniques. You are still making love to your ex-wife, and that is not a turn-on for a woman."

I had no idea that I was in a rut sexually. I set out to enlarge my repertoire, read some books, listened to the women, and watched as they responded or didn't. I changed my ways to increase the likelihood of an exciting response, which would make it much more interesting for me. Of course in surgical techniques the patient does not respond while on the operating table, but still, techniques are techniques and can be learned.

I do have a housekeeper to keep things straight and do my laundry. Dry-cleaning comes to the doorman, and I pick it up on the way in. There is too much resemblance to the way I lived as a young doctor. Definitely not fun. Sitting alone at night reading my journals is more my style.

I had always thought Annie was oblivious to the realities of life, but when Hans faded, she saw very clearly what was happening to him. He had already changed his will

to leave his artwork to Annie, for he knew that his daughters hated it and him and her. Annie and Hans spent that last year married. When they married, I realized our marriage was over. No going back. But still, I knew what was going on.

At our age, all are braced for what will happen, but braced or not, we are never reconciled or less than shocked when it does. As Hans lost weight, so did Annie. As the two of them looked frailer and frailer, my desire for revenge faded. I bumped into them at a play. Thank God I was not alone but with an attractive woman.

When Annie looked at Hans with tender sorrow in her eyes, my anger began to melt. For I knew what they were facing, and what the painful and inexorable end would be. I could not hold onto the anger. I tried, but I just couldn't. Hans looked down at her, and I could see he knew what was coming and that he didn't want to leave her. Fate, an aberrant cell loosed on the body that he thought he owned.

"Bill, how nice to see you. Are you enjoying the play?"

I had introduced my companion of that evening. "Yes, I am. Good to see you, Annie."

I was enjoying the play up until that time but not the next act. I took my miffed companion home and excused myself, saying that I had surgery scheduled early the next morning. I smiled with all the charm I could muster and patted her hand, but still she was miffed. A lie. I no longer wanted to be with her.

The desire for revenge, which had been so hot, cooled, never to heat up again.

As Hans faded from life, I found myself worried for Annie. She was getting too thin. After all those years of reminding her that thin was better than her softness, that thin was much healthier, I was alarmed at how thin she had become. Her hands were restless, her hair silver, her clothes hung on her decreased body; she didn't notice they were baggy. When she was with me, she was fastidious about her clothes, color, fit; she made me proud to be with her. She looks neglected. She has neglected herself. That is the most worrying of all. I remember how she and her lady friends took care of Katherine when her Geoff was dying. I made excuses to send Annie e-mails, usually something about the children. I told myself that we were making it easier on them, but really I wanted to stay in touch with her. Wanted to look out for her, protect her. Wanted to touch her.

That thought surprised me. Touch her bottom, her back. I thought I was outraged at her betrayal of me. Of always fighting about her garden, her writing, about the way she didn't seem to cherish me. Those wild emotions of how could she treat me this way, seemed to be quieting down. Maybe it's all the women who I date who educated me, knocked some sense in me. Who do not treat me as the center of the universe. Maybe it's my getting older. I know I am.

I am too old to move my practice to another hospital. The administrators know that, and so they apply the screws to me. I still have enough private patients who come to me so that the powers that be have to be careful. But I am a declining asset in their view. They want the new surgical techniques, the high-profit patients, the young surgeons at the peak of their earning power. Not me, not me anymore. It has been said to my face.

My chairman still protects me, but there will come a time when I will not get the preferred operating room space or time, when the best anesthesiologists will not be assigned to my cases, the time when this world where I have spent my life will no longer be welcoming. I fight the same old fights, know how to do it, but do not have the joy in combat that I once did. Hard to think of it, but I am mellowing.

My father's career went down the tubes at a similar point in his life. He was forced out of his profession too. He went down physically at that point. Was his heart broken, or were the signs he was deteriorating already visible to others and they wanted him to leave before he did harm? It scares me to think about it. Perhaps it is happening to me. Perhaps my wits are going, my physical integrity going, and I don't even know it. And who would tell me the truth?

I come back to it. Annie would. Although not just now, she has enough that she can't take on anymore. Annie with all her prickles would understand. I wouldn't have to give her all the background because she already knows it.

I will not show a new woman any vulnerabilities, for they all are equipped with fangs and claws and enjoy using them. Either that or they are shopping for a new husband and want to bring food and succor to earn a marriage ring. I quickly caught on to those, for I am high status, being a doctor and a big earner. But even though living alone is inconvenient, I am unready for another marriage and can't imagine being married to any of these ladies, no matter how they present themselves. I won't be trapped. And as for a younger woman, they want to get married and have their own children, as is appropriate. I have done the bringing up children bit and don't want to do it again. Though to be honest, Annie did most of the work, and a good job she did of it.

I can't remember why I used to get so frustrated with her. Is this part of old age? Or perhaps it was not important then and still isn't. But it led to our splitting up. I don't believe Hans coming back was that important, a fling or an itch she had been wanting to scratch for years and finally got the chance to. A mistake she made, not me. A detour that is not ending well.

He was a good artist, but he didn't have enough time to develop his art. He picked a lousy first wife, probably for money, and had two awful daughters. I think of Annie and how our children turned out; wonderfully, not like his. Hans was not good at making decisions, picking a wife, building a career. Not like me.

Annie will need taking care of when he is gone. I will be there. Perhaps, perhaps we can get back together again. But I had better keep my mouth shut about Hans's deficiencies and how foolish she was to go off with him. Better play this carefully.

Making love to Annie again, it seems right, but perhaps that is merely the memories of habits, and it will stale with time. In the morning, the trees rustling outside our open window, waking up gradually, and then after a visit to the restroom, returning to the warm sheets and rolling over and into her as she sleepily wrapped herself around me. All nerve ends focused on being deep in her warm, wet self, no thought of passion but only of being deep within her, feeling her gripping me, massaging me, giving into pleasure with me. An unexpected quick orgasm shuddered through me, the long pleasure, she nuzzled my shoulder, licked it, and then chortled, deep and happy. I wonder why this was more satisfying than frantic stripping of clothes and coupling. I held her tight and never wanted to let her go. Ever.

I wake from this dream, ready for her, aching for her. Not yet, it is still a dream. Soon, though.

I wonder why Annie is still living in that poky little apartment, that once was her mother's and then that she and Hans lived in during their time together. She has the money to buy a bigger apartment in a more central location. She inherited both from her parents and from Hans, and she has the artwork that was left to her. There was another

apartment in the same building that Hans used as a studio. I wonder whether she sold it or what she has done with it. Claire would know, as would Katherine, but I don't want to ask and betray my interest. Better to proceed cautiously.

She is no harder to court now that she has her own money than she was when she still lived with her parents. Strangely enough, the money doesn't seem to matter. She has her writing and her friends, and one day I suppose her interest in clothes will reignite, maybe when she has put on some weight and looks more like herself.

I look forward to being with Annie at Katherine's party. It will be the first time we have appeared together at a social function, but I bet Annie's friends have heard of our being together around town. I think it is almost time to bring Annie to my apartment that I have set up carefully with a big reading chair in the study. A portrait of Annie made by Hans is the only art piece on the study wall. I will make sure she sees it. Flowers carefully not arranged in a vase on the counter, put there for her to play with. I have my strategy for recapturing her, and then keeping her, so she never gets away from me again. My Annie.

