

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.

Chapter Two

With considerable embarrassment and deep apology to women everywhere, I must confess that these were the precise words that popped into my head as I followed Nina toward Starbucks: *I'd like to get me some of that.*

In truth those words didn't just pop into my head. I actually spoke them aloud. In my defense, I usually spoke nonstop to Casey. It didn't matter if we were in the car, at home, or hiking in the woods. She was my best friend and probably the only true confidant I've ever had. I was especially talkative whenever a comely young woman was nearby. At those times I wasn't just talkative, I was comically theatric with gushing tones of love and enthusiastic nuzzling of Casey's head, ears, and shoulders. Nothing convinces a girl more that a guy is worth dating than unabashed public displays of affection between man and dog. I've got my own theory about why this is. Pretty much every woman over the age of twelve knows in both her heart and her mind that men are basically dogs. Yet the image of a guy goofing around with an actual dog somehow snaps the female brain to attention and sparks the hope that maybe this guy is different. Maybe this is the one guy who's truly been domesticated. At the very least, this man-on-dog love fest triggers a brief suspension of disbelief on the part of the female and is accompanied by the prayerful

fantasy that the guy's doggie character is more poodle than pit bull. I guess the point is that my buddy Casey helped get me laid far more often than booze, bongs, or bullshit.

None of this is anything I'm proud of, but it is indeed who I am or—I sincerely hope—who I *was*. The weird thing is that, in my head, I wasn't sexist at all. I fancied myself an ardent feminist. I believed in my heart that women could achieve anything a man could. I never joked about or dismissed women's intellectual abilities, emotional strength, or political acumen. I respected women as equals. I looked forward to voting for America's first female president; and I was certain that even the Catholic Church would recognize the error of its ways and allow women to be ordained.

I also desperately wanted to find a soul mate and get married. And desperately is indeed the operative word. I possess a longstanding tendency to fall in love at first sight. I know the difference between lust and love, between fucking and lovemaking, and between physical attraction and a soul-deep connection; but I also make the leap from one level to the next too often and far too quickly. I'd like to say it's my tragic flaw, but the honest truth is that it's simply one of many.

What I have begun to understand, however, is that my respect for and admiration of the female mindset does not preclude an equally intense appreciation of the female form. The two ideas can coexist. They are not—nor should they be—mutually exclusive. They're two sides of the same coin. Heads you win; tails you win.

So when I suggested I'd like to get some of that, I was referring to Nina's physical charms, but I also meant I'd like to learn more about the cerebral and

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emotional facets of her character.

A lot of people probably wouldn't believe or understand that, but Nina did. And even today, after all that's happened, that is the only thing that matters.

Chapter Three

“Adam, huh?” she said.

Nina had grabbed us a cushy spot on a leather couch that faced onto Mass. Ave. I ordered the drinks and delivered her chai latte. We tapped our cups together in a mock toast. Her eyes crinkled as she spoke.

This was my first opportunity to give Nina the full once-over. Discreetly of course. She had removed the Red Sox sweatshirt and revealed a simple white T-shirt tight enough to highlight her curves yet loose enough to leave much to the imagination. And my imagination could runneth over with the best of them. Nina’s eyes were framed by dark eyebrows so thick they invited comparison to the young Brook Shields. Her lips were plump and pouty. Her T-shirt was tucked into black jeans, which were themselves tucked into a pair of classic Frye roper boots. So upon closer inspection, Nina was indeed a woman I’d want to get to know better.

“That’s me,” I said. “Adam Donatello.”

“You related?”

“I get that a lot.” I shook my head. “But I seriously doubt I’m related to Donatello. I don’t have an artistic bone in my body.”

“I meant Adam Ant,” she said.

I leaned forward and squinted to get a closer look

at Nina's face. Unlike most people, I was actually a fan of non sequiturs. I liked the way they disrupted the natural flow of conversation and introduced tangents that were often more interesting and insightful than the original subject matter. Nonetheless, a non sequitur in the wrong hands could indicate a serious mental disorder or a narcissistic streak that would gleefully bowl over anyone or anything in its way. I uncrossed my legs and tensed my calf muscles in case this girl was indeed a psycho freak and I had to run for my life.

"Adam Ant?" I repeated.

"Exactly! The name thing is probably just a coincidence, though you really should ask your parents about that. But, I'm telling you, you look just like him. You could be twins separated by a few decades."

I shrugged. "Is that good or bad? I sort of know the name, but I can't really place him."

"You kidding me? He was like a genius punk rocker. English. Voted the sexiest man in America by his MTV groupies. Effeminate in a masculine way. Like Bowie but with less drama. Probably the best way to describe him is that if Johnny Depp and Freddy Mercury had a love child it would look just like Adam Ant. And just like you."

"I'll have to take your word for it," I said. "And I have to admit I've been called far worse than effeminate in a masculine way. I'll check him out on iTunes."

Nina shook her head. "If you promise to be nice, I might invite you to my place and play some of his stuff for you. If you don't like him, you can go on your merry way. No harm no foul. And if you do like him, maybe I'll let you kiss me."

I didn't know how to reply so I didn't. I was usually the one trying to move things forward—often at a pace that was so quick it could be perceived as borderline creepy. Nina seemed to have her own boy-girl protocol and I was content to see how it all played out.

She sipped her chai and looked around the room. “There are fewer assholes here than most Starbucks.”

I took a quick glance around the room and shrugged. It looked to me like the usual assortment of Cambridgians replete with self-conscious undergrads, millennial professionals, aging hippies, autistic-spectrum bohemians, and a sprinkling of the genuinely homeless. Nina seemed to be waiting for a more explicit sign of agreement, so I nodded and smiled.

“You know what I mean?” asked Nina. “Maybe because it's late and the regulars have gone home to sip their decaf Keurigs, work out on their Concept2 rowers, and watch PBS while scanning porn on their iPads.”

This chick wasn't just the queen of non sequiturs, she was the queen of non sequitur stereotypes.

“Sounds like you've given this a lot of thought,” I said.

“I give everything a lot of thought. Thought—and I mean real thought, not the vapid musings of cable television and political hacks—is the one thing that separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. And if that sounds a little self-congratulatory, I'm okay with it.”

“Do I detect a certain bitterness?” I asked. “Perhaps a fiendishly misanthropic streak?”

One of the best things about being an English teacher is that I have a world-class vocabulary. The

average college-educated American can recognize and understand about twenty thousand words. In all humility, my personal vocabulary approaches that of the great Bard himself, some thirty thousand words. The fascinating thing, however, is that whether you're talking about a genius like Shakespeare or a hack like yours truly, ninety-eight percent of what we speak and write is limited to a measly four thousand words. So why do we waste time learning tens of thousands of additional words that may or may not ever be used in normal discourse? Because of moments just like this. Words create stories, and stories are the building blocks of love, friendship, and trust. So the additional twenty-six thousand rarely used words that occupy my cerebellum roar to the surface, demanding to be voiced, whenever confronted with a woman who might be able to satisfy both my physical and cerebral needs. And there was no restraining me with the raven-haired beauty in front of me. So I continued.

“Am I indeed being graced with the presence of a comely curmudgeon? A cynical soul of sardonic sassiness? A jaded jewel?”

Nina sipped her chai, carefully placed the cup on the table between us, and patted her lips dry with slow and deliberate precision. “And might I be in the presumed presence of an alliterative asshole, a punctilious prick, a swaggering simpleton, or all of the above?”

“Well played,” I said. “Perhaps I misjudged you. Maybe you're simply a spunky savant.”

“Spoken like a true equivocating egotistical egalitarian,” she said.

“Is there even such a thing?” I asked.

“There is now.”

She had me at hello, but “equivocating egotistical egalitarian” sealed the deal. I was smitten. “Casey would have liked you.”

Nina leaned toward me and placed her hand on my forearm. She squeezed once and patted twice. “That’s very sweet.”

“She liked women,” I said. “I was pretty much the only guy she cared for.”

“That’s odd for a Lab. They usually love everyone.”

“She was a rescue,” I said. “I got her when she was about six months old. The shelter said she had been abused and was in pretty tough shape when they found her. I never allowed myself to even imagine what might have happened to her.”

“That’s why I fuckin’ hate people. I don’t know how anyone could hurt a dog or any animal for that matter.”

“Is that why you work for Dr. Martin?”

“Partly, I guess,” she said. “And partly because I’m not really qualified to do much else.”

“What do you want to do?”

“That’s the other part,” she said. “I’m not sure what I want to do. I’d always planned to go to art school, but my parents wouldn’t pay because my dad thought it was a total waste of time and money. And the sad truth is that I’m not good enough to get a scholarship. So sometimes I take classes at Emerson or the Art Institute, but mostly I just work on my own stuff. Eventually I’ll figure it all out. Maybe. Probably.”

“What kind of art do you do?”

Nina pursed her lips and arched her eyebrows high,

fully exposing her large, sea-glass blue eyes. She cocked her head from side to side, almost touching an ear to each shoulder. She stood and took my hand. “I guess you could say I’m a potter who does sculpture. Or maybe I’m a sculptor who does pottery. It’s kind of hard to explain, but I can show you if you’re really interested.”

I knew that Starbucks often displayed work by local artists, so I checked out the walls to see if anything resembled a combination of pottery and sculpture. I turned back to Nina. “Whereabouts?”

“At my apartment. It’s really close. Between here and Harvard Square.”

Holy shit. I’d hit the mother lode. A beautiful woman who could go head-to-head with me on verbal slings and arrows. Who’d spent a whole thirty minutes with me and still liked me enough to hang out some more. And who had invited me back to her place. *Holy shit.*

“Sounds great,” I said. “Want me to follow you again?”

Nina shook her head. “Not if you show me your driver’s license.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. A girl’s gotta be safe. There are a lot of freaks out there.”

I couldn’t argue the point, so I handed over my license. She examined it with the intense scrutiny of a TSA security guard. Then she took a picture of it with her iPhone and typed in a brief message. I heard a “bing” indicating that a message had been sent and delivered.

“Do you have a friend who’s gonna run my

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information through the FBI database?”

“Perhaps. But the pertinent fact is that now that I know your name and address, I think it’s safe if we go together, but I’m driving. Just in case you are a serial-killing pervert, I can hit the ejection seat button and you’ll be gone.”

I assumed she was kidding.