



*Perfect*

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# CHAPTER I

I peered over a box of Special K at my husband and smiled because today I was going to run away with another man. The back of the cereal box was emblazoned with a doleful woman being pampered by four men. “Win a Cosmopolitan makeover.” I crunched the healthy flakes thinking about my plans to change my safe life. Today is the start of a new me. I reached for my husband’s Cocoa Krispies and sprinkled the sugar-laden morsels onto the top of the reliable whole wheat. That was me. Healthy. Doing the right thing. Drowning in a well of good intentions. My husband’s eyebrows rose—a nearly imperceptible gesture, but I caught it before he refocused on

the *Wall Street Journal*. I slid the sweet over my tongue and chewed my revenge, crushing every calorie and refusing to feel an ounce of guilt. I was done with that. At least for now. Down with fiber. Up with chocolate and other sins.

I was the daughter of a Christian minister. That alone was enough to keep me from divorcing Henry. Every denomination has its top ten list of evils. Of course divorce wasn't as high on the list as homosexuality, but it certainly made the top three. So I had never given it serious thought. Murder, I'd contemplated. Divorce, never. I was a good Christian.

Until today.

I was sure the church would be quick to raise their eyebrows in judgment. I'd been doing it myself, and it had stopped me from acting out my dream a thousand times. But I'd been riding a dizzying pendulum from comfort to desolation for months, and I'd decided to escape.

I was married. But I was alone.

I'd sat in church. But I felt abandoned by the faithful.

I was anxious over my plan. But terrified of the inertia that had anchored my life in sameness. Sameness could be good if your skin reflected your heart. For me, I'd lived a lie, and knew I'd die if I kept smiling in front of my pain.

Henry reached for a knife and dissected an English muffin. It threatened to split unevenly, but he paused and teased the rebellious bread into even halves. Exacting work, performed with flawless dexterity. He was a surgeon, a dreadfully good one, and I was part of his perfect world.

"What time's your flight?"

I'd told him three times. "Eleven." He still thought I was going to a business convention. *I am*, I told myself. *I'm in the business of rescuing my life.*

"I should go with you."

My gut tightened, but I remained outwardly cool. With all the smiling I'd done in church, I should get an Olympic medal for divorcing my face from my feelings. "You have a paper to write?"

He sulked. "Funny."

The last time I had taken Henry to a convention relating to my work, he had spent a week locked in a hotel suite ordering room service and writing a paper on outcome predictors in patients with multi-system organ failure or some such folly of life-and-death importance.

We lived on a wooded knoll just north of Charlottesville, he the prodigious surgeon, and I his adoring wife. Our house and yard were *Southern Living*-perfect. We vacationed in Europe, dined at the Boarshead Inn, and worshiped at First Baptist. Of course, I'd known for years that Henry only worshiped himself, but he didn't seem sick of the hypocrisy of spending an hour in the Lord's house marveling at his own greatness. Well, I for one was ill of pushing under the surface the reality that boiled beneath the calm.

We drove his and hers Mercedes, both sedans, even though I had wanted the convertible. We had a diversified investment portfolio, season tickets to see the Virginia Cavaliers play football, regular seats at the Washington Opera, and sex three times a week, all managed with surgical efficiency. I had heard Henry brag that he'd removed a gallbladder from a patient in nineteen minutes once. "Skin to skin in under twenty minutes," he beamed, in the surgical lingo for time from opening the skin to closing the skin.

*That's fifteen minutes longer than he spent with me last night*, I thought. *Skin to skin in less than four minutes.*

I'd spent my professional life reading subtle clues, the whys and hows of motor vehicle accidents. Skid marks, velocities, folded fenders. These were the things that whispered their secrets to me. It linked me to Henry in a weird sort of way. I figured out what happened at crash scenes. He took over from there and did the neat life-saving stuff. That was Henry. Captivated by the inner workings

of anatomy and physiology, but blind to the cause-and-effect of the road we'd traveled together.

This month Henry and I would have been married for six years, happily for six months. Once I stopped worshipping him, he seemed content to purchase my affections. It worked for a while. But it was going to end today.

I'd clawed to a position of respect as an accident reconstructionist. As a consultant, I was valued by law enforcement and insurance companies alike. As a professional witness, I was feared. But my hard-earned identity ended when I left my occupation bubble. Everywhere else, I was defined by the men who loved me. I was the pastor's daughter. Dr. Henry Stratford's wife.

I didn't hate him. It's hard to hate someone who won't fight back. I'd tried endlessly to get him to hear me. And not with subtlety. I bared my soul, then my fangs. He walked away, silently slinking back to the hospital and the operating arena where he was king and lord. Henry J. Stratford, Jr., M.D., Ph.D., F.A.C.S., F.R.C.S. So many letters that they had to use two lines on his office door at the University of Virginia.

I was young. A trophy wife. Blonde from a bottle only because he wanted me blonde. I'd been arm candy at so many cocktail parties where I'd listened to the boys of surgery that I thought I could fake my way into the club. Just name an organ and attach *-ectomy* or *-otomy* to the end, rant about long room turnover times, reference Billroth, Halstead, or DeBakey every fifteen minutes, and complain about low reimbursements and Medicaid.

I'd spent the last five years smiling when potbellied men talked about blood, pus, feces, urine, or worse — as if secretions and their quantity should interest anyone but the ones who charted them for fun and profit. If Henry was the prototype, I thought, surgeons should be quarantined from the public, unleashed only to yield the blade to heal, and then herded back to their own boorish brood.

The sweet brown milk in the bottom of my cereal bowl called for more. I shook out the last of the Cocoa Krispies and avoided my husband's eyes.

"Back on Sunday night?"

I smiled again and turned my cheek to accept his goodbye kiss. Functional. To the point. Predictable as the way he double-checked his fly before leaving the house. "I've told you six times, Henry."

He looked past me at his briefcase. On to the next subject. The next patient. The next case. "I'm giving Grand Rounds this morning."

"Mmm." I gave him the dutiful answer he deserved. It was all the encouragement he needed to continue while I stared at the last floating piece of puffed rice. I chased it around the bowl with singular determination. It bobbed and weaved before I gave up and lifted the bowl to my lips. It's the new me. Down with etiquette. Up with savoring immediate pleasures like milk saturated with syrupy chocolate.

"Our data shows that prehospital IV resuscitation of the penetrating trauma patient actually worsens outcomes over the—" He stopped midsentence and watched as I backhanded the milk about to drip from my chin.

I smiled demurely, set down the bowl and intertwined my fingers on the table. I tilted my head to let him know he had my undivided attention and loyalty. It was a body-language lie, further evidence of the heart-face disconnect game I played.

He arrested the drop of his chin and, with a slight shake of his head to show his shock at my behavior, continued, "—the scoop-and-run approach where the paramedics avoid the time delays of field resuscitation."

"Mmmmmmm." This answer was intentionally longer than the first to show my growing interest in the bull that issued from his pontifications.

He paused on our tiled foyer and studied himself in the full-length mirror. Our friends thought it was for me to check my designer dresses. That's a gas. Spend one morning with Henry and you'll see why we have a mirror there. It was seven feet high and framed in oak, gold-leafed and antiqued with little dents. Stress-patterned to look old. Appearances can be deceiving. The hall table was behind him with a bouquet of fresh-cut daffodils offset so that they would appear to his right when he admired his reflection.

He touched the edge of his graying temple. The hair was just above his ears and full enough to make me jealous. Check. He traced the outline of his tie next. Silk. Designer insignia. Tied double Windsor without a dimple. Check. He patted the front of his Italian suit. Check. He pivoted just enough to see that his pants weren't riding up on his socks. Check. Zipper. Check. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with fragrance from the daffodils. With his chest thrust forward he was preened and ready to face his adoring public. Almost. Zipper again. Compulsive check number two.

"Call once you're in Denver. You can leave a message with Grace if I'm in the theatre."

I suppressed a desire to roll my eyes. He had called the operating rooms the theatre and even spelled it in the Queen's English ever since his days as a trauma fellow in London. It fit him. The problem was, he was near the pinnacle of surgical perfection and he knew it. I caught myself smiling again, because this morning I'd decided I was going to allow myself to think the curse words that would make my pastor father blush. "Of course."

Denver, hah. I was going to be sunning on white Caribbean sand. I was not going to visit my nursing-home-bound mother for a week. I was not raising money for the medical auxiliary to replace the monitors in the ICU. I was going to seduce the choir director from my father's church, drink frozen mango daiquiris, and make love for longer than three minutes.

I stood and interposed myself between my husband and his adoring reflection. "Kiss me goodbye."

He paused. I was interrupting his routine. He leaned his head to the side to check his part.

“You’re perfect,” I whispered. “Now kiss me goodbye.”

His face danced to the right, trying to avoid my lipstick. I countered. I wasn’t going to settle for duty. This was no time for a peck on the cheek. I wanted this last embrace to mean something. Down with superficiality and haste. Up with passion. I wanted to live each moment. Mechanical was out. I wanted spontaneity, maybe even a little aggression.

“Wendi,” he whined. “Your lipstick.”

“I’m leaving,” I said. “I want to kiss you goodbye.”

I felt his will eroding. He wouldn’t fight. Henry didn’t do mad. Maybe that was what drove me crazy about him. He couldn’t ascend an emotional mountain peak. With Henry, it was all flat roads. The ice cream was all vanilla in his world.

I pushed up on my tiptoes and puckered for a final memorable Stratford kiss and suddenly remembered our very first time.

I was his patient. I’d heard of his reputation and sought him out after my gallbladder no longer agreed with my desire for cheese pizza. It wasn’t until my last postoperative visit that, looking up at the ceiling of his examination room, I felt guilty for how attracted I was to my physician.

Dr. Stratford stood over me and nodded his approval. “How’s your appetite?”

When he touched me, I felt the heat in my cheeks. I tried to speak, but my voice cracked through the desert in my mouth. “It’s fine. Good, really.”

He leaned closer, inspecting the small scars. “Without a gallbladder, the bile will drip slowly into the bowels all the time, not intermittently like before. Some patients experience a loosening of their stools for a few weeks after surgery, but that’s normal and should go away.”



I had no idea what he was talking about. All I knew was that every time this man touched me so tenderly, I found myself breathless, longing for something more than his clinical exam. He nodded, and I saw the edge of a smile sneak upon his lips. He stood proudly, admiring my abdomen, touching gently and staring with all the attention of a sculptor approving of the curve of his work.

It was to be my last visit. I'd recovered sufficiently to be outside his watchful eye. I gathered the gown across my body, covering the pretty lace unmentionables I'd worn just for him. They were a departure from my normal modest Hanes and a definite venture away from the narrow path of my church life, but I knew that he'd have me strip to the bare essentials. I'd even worn red lipstick, trying on three shades that morning before choosing.

I'd fallen for him hard by then, and he was my savior.

I dressed behind a flimsy curtain while he sat on an examining stool and listed the reasons I might need to contact him. Redness of the wound. Fever. Chills. Increasing pain.

"Dinner," I said, pulling back the curtain.

"Excuse me?"

I giggled. "Reasons to call you." I shrugged as if my heart wasn't beating in my throat. "Dinner sounds like a great reason."

He stood and retreated, but I wasn't turning back. If I walked out of that office without a date, Dr. Stratford would disappear from the room and my life would never see fulfillment. "I—dinner," he stammered.

I pushed forward until our breath mingled, and he looked like at any moment he might call for his nurse, who'd exited after my exam. "Is that a yes?"

He stood speechless.

"Kiss me," I ordered. Where that came from, I'll never know. *Somewhere between my childhood dreams of being an Air Force cadet and the fantasies I'd had about my surgeon for the last four weeks, I thought.*

To my surprise he obeyed, hesitating for a moment because of my lipstick, I'm sure. Our lips met and our future was sealed. After a second or two, he pulled away and gasped. Where my red-lace panties failed, my desperately forward behavior scored. He pulled me forward and kissed me again.

Now, seven years and countless Stratford kisses later, I rose on my tiptoes and puckered for a goodbye. As his face danced right to avoid my lips, I mirrored his movements, a perfect man-to-man defense. I wasn't going to let him get away. "Kiss me."

He complied, and my lips met his. Passion met obligation. Freedom and lipstick versus responsibility and duty. I won. He responded by pushing me against the mirror.

"Easy, tiger," I said, straightening his tie. "You need to give Grand Rounds."

He looked at himself and wiped his lips on a handkerchief. He turned towards the garage, having regained his professional demeanor. He cleared his throat and nodded at me. "Goodbye, Wendi."

"Goodbye, Henry."

I watched him disappear through the doorway into the garage, thinking I'd enjoyed our first embrace more than our last. I reached beneath the waistband of my jeans and snapped the edge of my fancy lace panties. *It's odd*, I thought. *I haven't worn that particular pair since my first kiss with Henry.* But this morning, I had gotten up with a new resolve to live from my heart, and I found them, like so many of my dreams, crumpled and nearly forgotten in the back of my undies drawer. *Imagine that*, I thought. *My entire relationship with this monotonous man has been framed by the same pair of unmentionables.*

I took a deep breath.

I'd said goodbye.

It was time to pack. Out with stuffy business suits. In with things two-piece and revealing.