

Mona's Second Chance

By

Dinah McLeod

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Chapter 1

“OK, honey, slow down,” I told my friend Sara as I flicked the windshield wipers on. “What did Ethan say? OK, then—” I had to pause, because I could hardly make out what she was saying through her sobs.

“He s-said...he-he’s mad at me,” she wailed, and I quickly pulled the phone away from my ear to turn down the volume.

“Sara, you need to calm down. I want to help you, but I have to be able to understand you, OK? Take a deep breath, and start over.”

I could hear her inhale deeply on the other line. “OK,” she said, sounding a tad bit calmer. “I did talk to E-Ethan.” Her voice wobbled when she said his name. I waited for the waterworks to start again, but she surprised me by pulling it together. “He said he’s...d-disappointed, and that we’ll talk about it when he gets home,” she sniffled, and I felt a rush of sympathy for my friend.

“So, talk. Talking is good. You’ll work it out.”

“Mona!” she moaned, clearly frustrated. “Talk is what he says when he means he’s going to...to...well, you know.”

I shook my head, silently laughing at her. After all this time, she still couldn’t bring herself to say it. “Going to what?” I asked innocently. “Are you sure he doesn’t want to talk? How do you know?”

“Mona!” she hissed in a whisper. “He means...you know...the...DD thing.”

“OK, OK,” I relented, taking pity. “Yes, I know what you’re talking about, Sara. But you want to know what I think?”

“Sure,” she replied, a bit peevishly, probably because she realized I’d been teasing her.

“I think that a big part of how things go for you tonight—whether Ethan decides to tan your butt, that is—is how you behave when he gets home. Be sweet, OK? Listen to everything he says, and don’t argue with him,” I instructed. “‘Yes, sir’ him a lot, he’ll like that.”

“OK,” she agreed, still sniffing. “Hey, how did you get so good at this, anyway?”

I laughed at her dubious tone. “I guess it’s a little ironic, huh? But it’s simple, really. I just think of whatever I would do in your shoes, and as the resident expert in how to end a marriage, I tell you to do the opposite.”

“That’s great, Mona,” she said, her voice flat. It made me chuckle.

“Call me later and tell me how it turns out?”

She dutifully agreed, and I hung up the phone. I said a little prayer for her, and then turned my attention back to the roads. It was really coming down now. I hoped Colby didn’t change his mind about coming to my rescue. Not that I would blame him if he had. I had put that man through a lot, to put it mildly. Frankly, it amazed me that he even accepted my phone calls.

As the windshield wipers flung another layer of water from my windshield, I thought I saw headlights in the distance. I sat up straighter and peered closer in the rearview mirror—sure

enough, Colby's beat up blue truck was pulling in behind me. My stomach fluttered when I saw him come out of the truck with a toolbox in his hand.

Pulling my hood up over my curly hair, I opened my own car door and stepped out to greet him.

"Hey," I called out, trying to sound casual.

"Mona, have you lost your mind? Get back in your car where it's warm!" he snapped at me.

"I was just sayi—"

"Now."

I glared at him, but he glared right back, and well, I was getting wet, so I turned around and got back into my car. He was as stubborn as ever. Not that I really expected any change of heart there. It had been about a year since our divorce was finalized, and not a single day went by that I didn't think about Colby—although, I couldn't deny that in the beginning, the thoughts were less than gracious. As more and more time went by, my emotions cooled until all I was left with was sadness.

In many ways, Colby had been my best friend, the person had been there for most of my worst moments, and loved me anyway. That was hard to lose. He was still the first one I thought to call when anything went wrong. Hence why he was outside, getting pelted by the pouring rain as he searched under the hood of my car for God knows what.

Each time I saw him he brought so many memories along with him. Sad ones, and angry ones, and some happy ones mixed in, too. When we were married I used to lie to myself, I tried to convince him and me both that nothing was wrong. 'Every couple fights,' I used to tell him, sometimes yelling it at the top of my voice right before he slammed the bedroom door. When it got to the point where we were mad at each other more than we were happy together, even I couldn't deny that we were having problems.

If I could have turned back time, maybe I would have done things differently. But of course, I didn't have a time machine, and I couldn't bank on one being invented in my lifetime. I had to move on. Logically, I knew that, but every time I saw him I had to remind myself one more time.

The door opened, and I looked up in surprise. Colby sat down in the passenger seat, dripping wet, and shut the door. My first thought was that he was getting my leather seats wet—I had to bite my lip pretty hard to keep from commenting, something I definitely would have done when we were married. The second was that, even sopping wet, he looked incredibly hot.

At first glance, Colby wouldn't strike anyone as being a particularly handsome man. He certainly didn't fit in the normal category as your typical heart-throb—he was a bit rugged, a little rough around the edges. He had strong features: a prominent forehead, a strong jaw, and full, kissable lips. His ears may be considered a little large, his nose a bit on the wide side. But the first thing most people noticed about him is his facial hair.

We'd gone to school for years together, ever since we were kids—he didn't have quite so much facial hair back then. When I'd met him my first thought had been that he was cute, for an eleven year old, but we weren't part of the same social circle so that was as far as it went. We got closer before I went off to college, and we talked on the phone a few times before I stopped being homesick. After that, whenever he'd cross my mind I would push the thought away,

assuming he'd found someone else by now. Hell, he might not even live in our hometown anymore, for all I knew.

That all changed the day I accidentally bumped into him at a farmers market. I'd been home for almost three months by then, and was out doing some shopping for my mom. My arms were full of the most beautiful apples I'd ever seen, and I cursed loudly when I dropped several after slamming into a 6'1, solid hulk of man.

When he turned around to see what all the fuss was about, at first all I could make out was hair. He was wearing a baseball cap that pushed his bangs toward his eyes. He had grown a full beard, and although it was trimmed neatly, it took up a good bit of his face.

"Everything OK?" he'd asked drily.

"Fine, everything's fine," I'd huffed, still flustered, as I knelt to the ground to pick up my apples, inspecting them one by one to make sure they weren't bruised.

"Can I help you with that?"

"It's more helpful than watching me do it, I suppose," I'd snapped.

He had a hearty, booming laugh. Once he'd started, even I couldn't help but smile. "You have a mouth on you, huh?" he had asked, still chuckling as he knelt to help me.

"Most women have mouths. I would guess what you're actually referring to is how I choose to use mine."

This made him laugh even louder, and when I looked up I caught my breath. His eyes were the most beautiful ones I'd ever seen. Sea-foam green, with so much laughter and light... they were breathtaking to behold. When I'd become aware of those magnificent eyes, his whole face changed before me. He'd morphed into my Prince Charming in that one instant.

His face scrunched as he looked back at me. He was looking so closely that I was beginning to wonder if I was sweating off my makeup, or if he had something against redheads. Just when I was starting to feel embarrassed, his eyes lit in recognition.

"Mona?"

I had been caught off guard, not only by the fact that an apparent stranger knew my name, but also by the way he'd said it—sounding awed and overwhelmed by his good fortune. It was also clear that the once confidant stranger had a sudden case of nerves. It was all I could do to hide my smile.

"Do you know me?" I laughed before he could answer. "I'm sorry, that one's obvious. What I meant was, do I know you?"

"You probably won't remember, but..." He'd whipped off his baseball cap, revealing shaggy, dark hair. I had peered closer, thinking I saw something familiar in his face.

"Colby?" I'd asked, my voice sounding as disbelieving as his had moments before, minus the awe.

He had grinned sheepishly at me. "Hey, so you do remember."

"Oh, well," I tried to shrug it off, feeling embarrassed. Having red hair was something of a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, as long as you paired it with clear skin it typically made you insta-popular with guys. On the other, you couldn't hide a blush to save your life. "I'm good with faces."

He nodded solemnly, and it suddenly occurred to me that I had potentially ruined any chance I might have had with him by being snippety earlier. But as it would happen, Colby liked

confidant, funny women. He liked apples, too. I'd had him over that very night for an apple pie, which happened to be my specialty. After he'd taken that first bite, he had closed his eyes and groaned. From that moment, I knew that he was mine for the taking.

After we'd finished our dessert, I hand washed our plates and cups. Colby sat at the bar and watched me, which I thought was odd, but even more so that I enjoyed it. I was finding that I liked having him near.

"Mona..."

"Hmm?" I had asked, rinsing the soap suds off the forks.

"There was this time...in fifth grade. I gave you a note. Do you remember?"

I turned to him with a small, quizzical smile. "A note? I don't know. What did it say?"

He shrugged. "I can't remember. It's not important."

I had gone back to washing dishes, and he'd sat there for the first of many talks that would take place in my kitchen.

"Mona," Colby called out, bringing me back to the present. "What the hell have you done to your car?"

"What? What do you mean what have I done to it? I've driven it, what do you think?"

"I can do without your smart remarks tonight," he shot back. "Now, I want you to crank up the car. I want to hear what kind of noise it's making."

I started to tell him that it was making exactly the kind of noise that I'd said it was when I had talked to him on the phone. In the end, I shrugged and fished my keys out of my purse to put them in the ignition. I turned the key, and winced at the weird, chocking whine that my car sputtered out.

"Damn it, Mona!" he groaned, and I instantly knew that he'd solved the problem, Sherlock that he was. At least when it came to cars.

"What? What is it?"

"You're out of gas!"

"What? Really?" I looked down at the fuel gauge, and sure enough, the arrow was hovering well below the E. "Oh." The word came out as an embarrassed whisper.

"Oh," he repeated, in a tone of voice that was less than kind. "I swear, I don't know what to do about you. I skipped a date to help you out, and for what?"

"Oh," I said again, my heart sinking. I guess that meant he was still with what's-her-name. I didn't remember her name, but I remembered that she was a size two. What a bitch.

"You're too old to be making stupid mistakes like this, Mona. I swear, if you were my daughter you'd be over my knee right now!" he scolded. "And you will be if you ever waste my time like this again!"

I rolled my eyes at him. Sure, a thrill went through me at the thought of close contact with him, even if it happened to take the form of a spanking. Even so, I knew an idle threat when I heard one.

"Try me and see, little girl," he warned, as though I'd spoken my thoughts aloud. "Next time, I won't warn you, I will carry through. You can count on it."

"I'm sorry, sir," I replied meekly, shocking us both the minute the words left my lips. Where had they even come from? It must have been the right thing to say, though, because Colby looked mollified.

“Fine. I’m going to go get you some gas. And Mona? If this ever happens again, don’t call me.”

I inhaled sharply. Boy, those words stung. He didn’t seem to notice—that, or he didn’t care. He let himself out and was walking back to his truck before I could even form a reply.

“Do you want another?” the waitress asked as she removed my vodka and cranberry.

“Yes, please,” I agreed.

“No more for me,” Sara said, and I grinned at her. She had been on a one drink limit ever since her run-in with the law. Whether that had been her idea or Ethan’s I didn’t know. I tried to be a good friend and not ask for more details than she was willing to volunteer.

I watched the waitress walk away, and keeping my eyes averted, I made my announcement. “I ran into my ex.”

“Really? Where at?”

“Um...Bell Road. It was on the side of the road, actually,” I replied, aiming for nonchalance.

“Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well...” I risked glancing back at her to see that she was focusing on me with intense interest. “I called him when my car stalled.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. He was pretty mad when he found out that I just ran out of gas. He said he’d canceled a date to be there.” I watched her closely, trying to see what she thought of all this, but her face was an unreadable mask.

“Oh,” she said again.

“He even said—” I glanced around cautiously, making sure no one was loitering nearby. When I was satisfied that no one was listening to our conversation, I lowered my voice and continued in a whisper, “—that if I ever did it again, wasted his time like that, that he would spank me.”

“Oh,” Sara replied, with hardly any more emotion in her voice than before.

“What?” I hissed at her. “Out with it already!”

“Nothing! Geez, Mona.”

I knew her well enough to know when she was lying. There was no denying that she had a pretty good poker face, but it was hard to miss the way she was sitting on her hands, forcing them to stay still to hide her emotions. Strike one. She wasn’t making eye contact, either. Oh, sure, she’d like me to think she was, but she was looking at my eyebrows, not my eyes. Strike two. I didn’t even need a strike three, that’s how sure I was.

“Sara,” I said sweetly, smiling at her, “we’ve been coming here every Thursday for months now. You don’t know this about me, but I’m pretty good at reading people. And you, my friend, are not being honest with me.”

“How can you know that?” she asked, trying to maintain wide-eyed innocence.

“Let’s just say that deception is not your gift.”

“I’ll keep working on it,” Sara replied, matching my smile. “OK, do you really want to know what I think?”

“Would I have brought it up if I didn’t? Spill, girl!”

She dismissed my logic with a shrug. “Ok then, here it is. One: He’s still the first person you think to call in a crisis. Two: He canceled a date for you. That’s pretty big, Mona. And lastly, three: I think the whole comment about spanking you, well, I think it shows that he still cares about you.”

I snorted a laugh. “I doubt that. Maybe I’m just not telling it right. If you could have heard him—”

“It doesn’t matter! If he didn’t care about you, he’d storm off, he wouldn’t answer your calls, but he wouldn’t suggest taking the time to... ah....”

“Yes, I get it,” I snapped, sounding harsher than I’d intended.

Sara seemed unfazed by my sudden blaze of temper. “You know what you could do, to test my little theory?” she asked, with a sly smile that could only mean trouble.

“What is that?” I asked, with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“You should make something up, call him again and—”

“Whoa!” I held my hands out. “Hold it right there. That is definitely not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

So help me God, she actually sounded like she couldn’t imagine what was wrong with her fail-proof plan. “Why? Because I don’t want to know if he would...you know.”

She nodded, looking too smug for my liking. “Yeah? There isn’t there even the tiniest bit of you that wonders what it’d be like?”

“No, thank you.”

“If you’re sure. But spanking or no spanking, it’s obvious that Colby still cares about you.” She sounded so convinced that I wished I could borrow some of that conviction for myself, because I could definitely use it.

If I was honest about it I had to admit that I probably didn’t even cross his mind—until I called him to come put gas in my car, that is. And if that was the case, how could I blame him? It was easy for Sara to hear part of the story and think she knew what was going on, because she didn’t know all our history together. Truthfully, most of it didn’t bear retelling.

“How was it?” she asked, taking another sip of her mojito. “Being with him, I mean.”

Just thinking about him being in the car, right next to me, close enough to reach out and touch made my body heat up in excitement. I could just picture it, the way his hair had been slightly damp and sticking to his forehead. The way his eyes flashed when he realized I’d run out of gas. How he clenched his jaw when he promised I’d end up over his knee the next time...

When I replayed those words over in my head, my breath caught in my throat. Any woman, hearing those words from the man she loved would be rendered speechless. Unfortunately, I was not ‘any’ woman. It didn’t seem to matter what Colby said, just being near him brought out the smartass in me. I wish I had my new drink.

“It was good,” I said, striving for a light, casual tone.

“Good,” Sara echoed, with a gleam in her eye, and I could tell she heard all the things I wasn’t saying. “Why did you two break up, anyway?”

“Oh, God,” I groaned. “Sara, I’m going to need another drink for this.”

She immediately signaled the waitress and I groaned again. I had hoped she would take that as a hint to let it go, but no, she ordered another vodka cranberry for me and a Diet Coke for

herself. We sat in silence as we waited for the drinks to arrive. I started fiddling with a napkin, tearing it into strips just to keep my hands busy as I tried to find the words to explain my failed marriage. It was a tall order for sure.

“Colby and I were just so different.” I paused to take a sip of my new drink, and was gratified to feel the warmth the vodka brought as it traveled throughout my body. “He was all cowboys and rodeos, and I’m not.”

Sara scrunched her brow in confusion. “So he lives on a farm or something?”

“Not exactly.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “He’s a mechanic. I’m not explaining this very well. He’s kind of country, and old-fashioned, you know? He likes the idea of the little woman at home and while I may be a little woman,” I gestured to my 5’2” frame, “I don’t do the whole homemaker thing. I need to have a job to go to every day, and my own money.” I shrugged, unsure what else to say.

“You couldn’t work it out?” she asked, leaning toward me.

“It wasn’t just that. We just didn’t—we don’t work. We had different ideas about what it meant to be married, and we both wanted different things out of life. You know how you and I get together after work every Thursday? I couldn’t do that when I was married to Colby. He blew up anytime I wanted to hang out with anyone other than him.”

“But didn’t you love him?”

The question was so simple, but it made me want to throw my hands up in frustration. What did love have to do with it, anyway? Wasn’t she listening? “Some people just aren’t meant to be together,” I said at last, my voice heavy with regret.

“Maybe that’s true. But you still love him, don’t you, Mona?”

“We fought all the time. He never cared about the things that were important to me. He never took me out on dates, we just sat at home all the time...” I trailed off helplessly, because all the excuses sounded so trivial now that I heard them spoken aloud. When we’d listed our grounds for divorce, we had checked ‘incompatibility’. The truth was, there were too many reasons to list, but none of them felt like the reason we were ending our life together.

The entire time we were married I’d felt like he was more in love with his job than he was with me. It was one thing to love what you do—and really, who loves working on other people’s cars?—and it was another to leave your wife alone cooling her heels long after you’re supposed to be home. Which was exactly what had happened to me at least three times a week.

Then there were the weekends which he would spend either hunting or fishing. He would come home puffed up like a conquering hero, bearing prizes of dead animals, which he expected me to cook. It wasn’t that I couldn’t cook, but I couldn’t eat anything when I’d had to remove its head first. Those beady little eyes had always left me feeling so guilty. Several times in our three years of marriage I considered becoming a vegan. Some of the animals he’d brought me would have made even Gordon Ramsay a little squeamish.

He didn’t like me going out with friends too often, either. He liked to know that I was at home anxiously awaiting his return, although I never knew exactly when that would be. It all seemed so sexist and controlling to me at the time. I always felt like he didn’t want me to work so that he could control how the money was spent, that he didn’t want me to have any friends so that I would have to depend on him for everything. Looking back, I could see that wasn’t true.

We had joint accounts, and he never kept tabs on what I'd bought. He never minded having people over, either, or me having friends.

"It's pointless to talk about," I told Sara firmly. "We're divorced, and we have been for awhile, so why speculate?"

"Because you're both older and wiser now. You know what you really want, Mona. Maybe—"

"No. It won't happen, Sara. Let's just drop it, OK?"

"OK. If you're sure that's what you really want."

I didn't blame her for sounding hesitant. I probably would have too if our situations were reversed. I knew she just wanted me to be happy, and believe me, I wanted that for myself. But the truth was, no matter how faint I felt when I saw him smile, or how much I longed to be close to him, that part of my life was over. We'd had our chance, and we had blown it. There was no point daydreaming about something that would never happen.