

Michelle's Stern Professor

by

Dinah McLeod

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Prologue

Josh

Though I had a pretty good idea of what to expect, I was trying to keep an open mind as I sat across from Amanda. We'd been dating for the last three months and while it hadn't been an instant love-connection, I did enjoy spending time with her. Somehow, looking at the indifferent mask she wore wasn't reassuring.

"It's just not working out," she blurted out, her cheeks pinking slightly after the words were out of her mouth.

"I see. Would this happen to have anything to do with the spanking I gave you last night?"

"Josh!" she hissed, glancing around wildly to make sure no one had heard. "What the hell?"

My lips tightened together. I didn't approve of cursing, something she knew already, but if she were breaking up with me, I no longer had the right to say anything.

"It's not that. It's...it's just...I don't know. Things don't seem quite right, you know? It's not that."

Sure it wasn't. That's what it always was; just once, I'd like to date a girl who had the courage to admit it. Better yet would be to date a girl who appreciated a firm hand, but it didn't look like such a girl existed. At least, not in Pike County.

She reached for her purse, digging around until she found her wallet. "I'm sorry to give you bad news and run, but I'm going to be late for work."

It was a white lie, another thing I wouldn't have tolerated. She didn't have to be to work for another half hour and we both knew it, but I let it slide without comment. "Please, it's on me."

Amanda hesitated, her hand in mid-air. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Thanks, Josh. And...I hope we can still be friends."

Despite my irritation—why did they all say that, knowing they never had any intention of so much as saying hello?—I gave her a smile. "Sure. See you around. And I hope you find what you're looking for."

If I couldn't, at least someone should, I thought as I threw a twenty down on the table and stood to leave. I had to face facts: I had a good life. A great life, actually. I had my own place, a job I loved and lived in a great community where everyone knew everybody. The only thing I didn't have was a woman I could love, who would love me for exactly who I was. But no one could have everything and I was just going to have to learn to live with it.

Easier said than done, I thought to myself as I walked out the door.

Chapter 1

Michelle

Only bodily force or divine intervention could have convinced me to go back home. The only one there was my father, whom I hadn't seen in six years despite the mere three hour drive separating us. While I certainly wasn't relishing the thought of seeing him again, I had little choice. I didn't have a place to live or a job and the meager amount I'd managed to sock away in savings was nearly gone. At the moment, I had seventeen dollars to my name and the only way I could keep it was if I ignored my growling stomach for the last hour of the drive.

"Let's hope he's got food in the fridge, for a change," I muttered to myself, flicking ash out of my open window. It was probably the worst day for a long drive. It was the hottest day of summer and my AC was broken. Sweat had been beading on my brow practically from the moment I'd climbed into the car. My shirt was sticking to me in a way that was distinctly uncomfortable, but I tried my best to ignore it as I puffed on my clove cigarette.

Last one, I promised myself as I finished and tossed it out the window. It was a promise I knew I wouldn't keep, but it made me feel better to make it. I wasn't a smoker, not really. It was more of an outlet for stress and well, if things had been continuously stressful for the last eighteen months, that wasn't my fault, was it?

It had started with pain in my throat and difficulty swallowing. After a visit to my family doctor, who'd run a series of tests, I'd been given the diagnosis of thyroid cancer. I'd never wanted my mother more in my life—I'd been shocked and scared and every other emotion in-between. The doctor told me that we'd caught it early and the surgery that followed seemed to have cured me, but it was always in the back of my mind that that prognosis could change at any time.

The only thing that had made the awful ordeal even slightly bearable had been my boyfriend, Ben. We'd been together for six years and during the long, horrible ordeal of chemotherapy, he'd been my rock, driving me to every appointment and holding my hand through the worst parts; I wouldn't have been able to get through it if not for him. I had been

terrified out of my mind, even though I tried not to show it, and he was the only thing that had made getting out of bed in the mornings worth it. And on the days I just couldn't make it, he'd stayed under the covers with me, making me laugh, holding me tight, as though he would never let go. Which was why it had been such a shock when, only days after receiving a clean bill of health, he'd told me he wanted to call things off.

"You're kidding me, right?" I'd gasped, staring at him with my mouth agape.

"Come on, Shel. Is this the kind of thing you think I'd kid about?"

"Please be kidding," I murmured, reaching behind me to grasp the coffee table. I needed something to hold onto. It was the way he looked at me, with eyes full of regret that convinced me.

Neither of us said anything for a long time, then, "I know this seems like an asshole thing to do, especially right now, but—"

"No kidding?" I'd snapped, feeling my anger stir to life. How could he do this to me? To *us*? And not that I wanted to play the cancer card, but what the hell?

"I'm sorry, Michelle. I really am."

"Just tell me why," I'd demanded, my fists clenched into balls at my sides. It was much easier to get angry rather than face the pain that was threatening to swallow me up and spit me back out when it had crushed the very last bit of my spirit. "Is there someone else? Is that it? I know I've been a little distant lately, but it's not like I haven't had a good reason!"

"You always have a good reason, Shel. That's the problem."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

But he hadn't answered. He'd given me that insufferably patient look of his and let me rail at him, which I'd done with gusto at the top of my lungs. He let me call him every name in the book; I even got away with slapping him across the face, which I regretted even before I felt the sting in my palm. Still, the one thing I hadn't gotten was answers and I hadn't felt any better for throwing the tantrum.

Six years down the drain. I felt a familiar ache in my chest that came with thinking of him.

My fingers itched and I reached for the half-empty pack of cigarettes, only to draw away a second later when I realized what I was doing. Hadn't Ben already done enough damage? I wasn't going to let him be the catalyst to developing a full-on addiction.

Six weeks after Ben dumped me, while I was still walking around in a depressed stupor, I'd found out that the credit union I worked for was merging with another larger bank and that I was out of a job. I'd gotten three weeks' notice, and while I'd socked away every penny I'd earned during that time, it could only last so long. Even with living on Ramen noodles and cutting off the cable, it was gone before I knew it. It wasn't like I hadn't looked for a job—I'd looked. Hell, I'd begged and badgered, all to no avail. There just wasn't much to be had at the moment. I'd even tried my hand at serving and would still be doing it if it had paid the bills. Anything would be preferable to where I was now.

Anything was better than going to live with my dad. I didn't really believe in Divine Intervention—or God, for that matter—but it sure felt like my version of Hell come to Earth. To say that we had a rocky relationship would be putting it mildly. The truth was, we hardly had any relationship at all and that was the way I preferred to keep it.

Damn, I wanted a cigarette. I pressed my lips together and resisted the urge. Just thinking about him had a debilitating effect on me, which was why I tried to do it as little as possible. Oh, sure, I hadn't always hated him; once upon a time, we'd all been one big, happy family, but like most fairy tales, it was doomed to end.

I must have been in middle school when he lost his job—his third in six months—and had begun spending most of his time at the horse track. My dad was fascinated by the law of averages and taking high-stake chances. It wasn't until many years later, when I was paying my own bills, that I came to understand how hard it had to have been for my mother supporting our family and his habit. She raised me and my sister pretty much by herself, while my dad squandered every dime she didn't manage to hide from him.

She had never let on how difficult things really were. Money had to be tight with only one steady income, but we never went without. Nor did she ever badmouth my dad to either one of us, which was just further proof of her patience and generosity.

Perhaps it's because she never said anything that their divorce came as such a shock. I knew kids whose parents were divorced, of course, but I'd never expected to be one of them. Unaware of the sacrifices she had made, I'd reacted very badly when she gave us the news. My father was nowhere to be seen and I'd lashed out, hurt and angry, effectively shooting the messenger. I was still pained by the memory.

My dad had always been the "fun" one, always ready to take off on an adventure at a moment's notice. Some days, he signed us out of school early and as long as we promised not to tell Mom, he'd stuff us full of cotton candy and all the Ferris Wheel rides we could handle. Ordinary days became something special when he was around. He'd take us hunting in the "jungle" and we'd see our backyard with brand-new eyes. Or we'd play games of hide and seek, darting in-between the hanging clotheslines, unable to hide our giggles.

If our mother minded finding exploded volcanoes on the floor or play-dough stuck and hardened behind couch cushions, she never said. She let me be wholly infatuated with the man I believed my father to be. He truly *was* a superhero in my eyes and he could do no wrong. She must have known that, when she'd told me. She must have known that I would attack her and defend him. Yet, she'd never said one word to make me feel guilty and as time passed, I had come to see the truth for myself.

I could still remember exactly how he'd looked the day he'd moved out. I'd been eleven at the time, watching from the doorstep as he lugged a battered suitcase to the car. He'd looked so forlorn and lost and I'd looked to my mother, silently begging her to change her mind, glaring when she hadn't. Only when I saw the memory with the eyes of an adult did I recall the way her lip had trembled and the sheen of tears glistening in her light green eyes.

Mom had done her best to keep things as normal as possible and eventually I just couldn't stay angry at her. Especially when my dad skipped out on most of the weekends we were supposed to spend with him. In the beginning, he'd been full of excuses, apologies and promises, but before the divorce had even been final for a year, he'd stopped calling—he just didn't show up.

The last time I'd seen my dad had been at my mother's funeral. She'd only been forty-nine when she'd had the heart attack that had claimed her life. She was much too young to die and I couldn't help but blame my dad. If he'd done what he was supposed to do by providing for our family—even if that had meant just paying his child support once in a while—Mom wouldn't have had to work so hard. Maybe it would have been enough to keep her with us.

There was no way to know for sure, but that didn't mean I didn't hold him responsible. I hadn't even spoken to him at the funeral; I'd pretended that he didn't exist—because, after all, he'd more or less ceased to exist years ago as far as I was concerned. Every week until she'd died, Mom had encouraged me to forgive him, but I wasn't interested.

Just the thought of seeing him again filled me with dread. I wouldn't be doing it at all if my options weren't limited—and that was pretending that I had any other option. If I had, I wouldn't have been pulling into his driveway, looking at the ramshackle one-story that was in desperate need of a new coat of paint, knowing that I would now call it home.

I stayed in the car for a few more moments, looking at the house and trying to harness my emotions that were running rampant. *I'm a grown woman*, I reminded myself. *Damn near thirty years old. He can't do anything to me—he can't hurt me anymore.* Yet, in spite of the pep talk, I remained unconvinced. Just knowing I would see him, knowing I had to rely on him for anything, made me feel like that little girl who went to the window on Saturday morning, looking out at all the cars passing by and desperately praying that one would pull into the driveway.

Just when I was mustering up the courage to get out of the car, the door to the house swung open. A middle-aged, graying man stepped out on the porch, looking back at me solemnly, his hands jammed into his jean pockets. His jeans were fraying and tattered, his wife beater dingy and stained. With a sigh, I pulled the key out of the ignition and stepped out of the car. I slammed the door with a bit more force than necessary and crossed my arms in front of me, refusing to be the one to make the first move. Didn't he owe me that much?

"Hey there, Shelly," he called out, walking toward me in slow, ambling steps.

"It's *Michelle*. I know you haven't been around much, but I didn't think you would have forgotten my name."

He took the barb gracefully, which just made me all the more determined to draw blood the next time. "Do you need help with your bags?"

I rolled my eyes and scoffed, but popped the trunk. He didn't say a word as he collected my things—one large suitcase and a duffle bag—and walked into the house. I stared after him, wondering if I could make my feet move if I wanted them to. From the moment I'd seen him, my feet had felt heavy, as though they were glued to the pavement.

"You comin'?" Dad asked, poking his head out the door.

No, I thought, but my feet did not seem to hear. When I stepped inside, I was surprised to see that the house was relatively tidy. At least the living room was, anyway. I looked around warily, surprised that his furniture, while dinged and nicked, was polished clean. The couch was ugly, but looked comfortable.

"I've got the guest bedroom all fixed up real nice for you."

An unladylike snort was all the reply I could manage.

"What? You don't believe me?"

"Do I believe you've been eagerly anticipating my visit, putting out fresh linens and a mint on my pillow? No."

His brow furrowed as he stared at me. His expression was wounded, and I hated myself for the pang of guilt I felt. *He'd* never felt guilty for anything he'd done, so why should I? "Your sister is comin' by to see you real soon. Says she hasn't seen you in a few years."

"Oh, did you think it was just you?" I asked with a cynical smile.

"Listen, Shelly, I'm not drinking anymore. I'm sober, go to the meetin's and everything." Likely story. I rolled my eyes before reminding him once more, "It's Michelle."

"You used to like it when I called you Shelly."

"When I was, like, five. You weren't there much past that though, so I can see how you'd forget." It was exactly the truth, but I wasn't in a truthful mood.

"Why don't I show you your room? You look tired."

I was far from tired: I was tense and wary, but it seemed as good an excuse to get away from him as any, so I nodded my agreement. We walked a short way down the hall and I noted the dings and scratches in the wall. I was curious, but not enough so to ask and risk another conversation.

"Here she is," he said as we stopped in front of a closed door. He had his hands jammed in his pockets again, looking nervous as he teetered on the balls of his feet.

"Thanks," I replied tersely. I opened the door and let myself in, closing it behind me before he could follow. Hopefully he could take a hint.

I set my luggage down and surveyed the room. It was larger than I'd expected and not at all bad. The floors were wood, and though scuffed, I could see that they had been waxed recently. There was a large bay window framed by white, billowy curtains with a charming reading seat. Seeing that my dad had stacked some books on it, I wandered over to take a closer look. Upon further inspection, I couldn't help but snort a laugh. He'd put out the *Little House on the Prairie* and *Nancy Drew* books I'd read as a kid. He *did* realize that I was a grown woman now—or had that fact escaped him?

Leaving the books, I continued my exploring. The bed was a full, but it would be plenty big enough for me. The comforter on the bed was clearly made for a queen-size bed, so it dragged a bit. It looked oddly familiar, too, though I couldn't place it.

I had just checked out the adjoining bathroom—it was filthy and would require a good scrub-down with some bleach, but at least it had hot water—and was about to open the closet when I heard knuckles rap against the bedroom door. I sighed heavily and rolled my eyes, not even caring that I was acting all of sixteen years old. "Yes?" I asked expectantly when I threw the door open.

"You settling in okay?" His eyes shifted around the room and I knew he was waiting for me to say something, but I'd be damned before I showed him any kind of gratitude. I didn't owe him anything, not after how he'd abandoned me.

"Yep."

"You hungry? I made us some dinner. I bet you didn't know your old man could cook."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he hadn't been my *old man* in a long time, but I let it slide and settled for, "I don't know that dumping a box of crap into water counts as *cooking*."

"It does in some countries," he replied, unperturbed. "And lucky us, this is one them."

I rolled my eyes again, but followed him into the kitchen. Despite my protests, my nose couldn't help but notice that it didn't smell half-bad and my traitorous stomach growled, giving me away. I slumped down in a chair and let him bring me a plate. It looked like hamburger helper, with a side of peas and a dinner roll. Despite my desire to remain aloof, I pretty much tore into the food. I was starving, having been too broke for much more than a candy bar on the way here.

"How is it?" he asked as he sat across from me.

I mumbled noncommittally, but even I couldn't deny that it was pretty tasty. Dammit.

For a little while, he watched me scarf down my plate, but I didn't care. "Want some more?" he asked after I set down my fork. I nodded and handed the plate to him and he took it, returning with a second helping as big as the first. This time, he didn't seem content to merely watch me eat and cleared his throat. "So, how's life been treating you? Catch me up."

I snorted another laugh, my fork stilling in mid-air. "Pick a year."

He gave me a small, sad smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Tell you what, why don't you pick."

Sighing, I set my fork down. This could be a lengthy conversation. "Well, let me see. This has pretty much been the worst year of my life so far. I lost my boyfriend, my job," I ticked them off on my fingers, "my apartment..." *And I have to move in here with you*, I added silently.

He gave me a nod, as though he could hear what I wasn't saying. "And then there's the cancer, of course."

My lips parted, but no sound came out. I blinked rapidly, trying to formulate a response. But I felt so cold and detached all of a sudden that even the anger that I knew was pulsing just underneath the surface couldn't touch me. How could he know about that? Only three people knew; one of them was me, one my ex-boyfriend...*Lucy*. The answer came to me without having to search too hard. Of course she would have told him. Lucy was the peace-maker, the reconciler. She probably thought—misguidedly, of course—that if my dad knew about my cancer, it would motivate him to repair our relationship. Which meant that she'd also thought that, given my diagnosis, I'd let him. The thought made me so angry I thought I'd be sick.

"Now, don't be mad at your sister," Dad said, holding his hands off as though to ward off the lasers that were shooting from my eyes. "She just thought I should know."

I tried to snap back a comment, but my throat had closed up and I found that, for the moment, I was incapable of speech. It was a pity, really, since I had plenty to say on the matter. For starters, why should he have a right to know anything about me? Hadn't he given up that right when he'd left without so much as a backward glance? I certainly thought so, and if Lucy disagreed, well, it wasn't *her* cancer.

"You know what, I almost forgot, I've got a little something for you."

I wasn't fooled. I knew he was just trying to get away from the hot pools of lava in my eyes before he got scalded. I picked up my fork and took another bite of pasta, but the noodles stuck in my throat, tasting about as appetizing as sawdust. I didn't want to cry. I wasn't going to cry, dammit—those days were behind me. I wasn't eleven years old anymore.

When my dad walked back into the kitchen, carrying a simple white gift box, I'd managed to get my tumultuous emotions somewhat under control. He put the box down on the table in front of me, watching me expectantly.

I eyed the box as though it might bite. Maybe that had been his plan all along, maybe he was going after Lucy next. Go ahead and get us kids out of the way so that he could live out the rest of his days doing what he damn well pleased—which was what he'd always done, but at least then he wouldn't have to feel guilty about it. The idea of my father feeling any type of remorse made me smile wryly.

"Go ahead and open it," he urged, misreading my expression.

I shrugged and flipped the top off. To my surprise, there were layers of crinkly pink tissue paper. I gave him a dubious look before shaking something free of the tissue paper. It landed on the table in front of me and it took me a minute to process what I was seeing. It was a small stuffed rabbit holding a strip of pink silk cloth between his worn paws. One ear was bent, and one eye was literally hanging on by a thread. "Where did you find this?"

"At your mother's."

My stomach lurched. He had been in her *house*? How could he, after all he'd put her through? How *dare* he? "When did you..." I held up a hand before he could answer, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves. "Never mind. I'm going to bed."

"Shelly, wait—"

I ignored him and continued toward my bedroom, locking the door behind me. I flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling without seeing. *What* was I doing here? What had I been thinking? That I could somehow make it work, despite the hatred that came pouring off me in waves every time he so much as breathed in my direction? Not likely.

Grabbing my cell out of my pocket, I hastily dialed Lucy's number, not sure whom I was angrier at.

"Hey, Sis," she greeted me after the first ring.

"You were expecting me?" I asked drily. Of course she was. Lucy was always three steps ahead of everyone else.

"I knew I'd hear from you sooner or later. How are things going?"

"Lucy, how could you take him to go through Mom's things? What were you *thinking*?"

"That he loved her too," she answered with quiet dignity that I couldn't dispute.

I wanted to. Oh, God, how I wanted to, but I knew that Lucy would just get emotional being put in the middle. She was only trying to help—I *knew* that, but I wished I cared a little

less about hurting her feelings so I could tell her to mind her own business next time. "And my cancer?" I asked with barely restrained anger. "Why did you feel the need to tell him about that?"

"Because he's your dad, Michelle."

I rolled my eyes and huffed into the phone. "Says who?"

"DNA," she answered in that infallible way she had. "Whether we like it or not, neither of us can change that—*or* the past. All we have control of is the future."

God, my sister was such a pain in the ass sometimes. Why did she have to be so smart and reasonable? Would it *kill* her to just hate along with me? "Okay, okay," I grumbled. "I hear you. But it's not going to work, Lucy. You know that."

"He's trying, Shelly."

Too little, too late, I thought before I deftly changed the subject.