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One of Those Days by Zathyn Priest
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***Dedication:** For Mychael, who never stopped encouraging me to write short fiction, despite my whining! I love you.*

Author Bio



Zathyn Priest is an Australian m/m fiction writer and author of three novels, *The Curtis Reincarnation*, *The Slayer's Apprentice*, and *Liquid Glass*. All titles available in electronic format from Torquere Press. He also works as a manuscript appraiser and volunteers as a mentor for writing groups. Zathyn is happily partnered with fellow author, Mychael Black.

Please visit www.zathynpriest.com for novels available in paperback and information on new releases, works in progress, and contact details.

One of Those Days

By
Zathyn Priest

It was never going to be an ordinary day. The alarm decided to wake me an hour earlier than it was supposed to, at five rather than six. My dog ate the last of my cereal. The cat, which has spent three years happily peering through the fish tank glass, decided that morning was the occasion to quit procrastinating and jump *into* the tank instead. The only clean socks in my drawer were odd, despite the fact I'm positive they matched when I put them away. I locked my keys inside my house, leading to having to wake my dear but decidedly disgruntled neighbor for the spare set. Then, just when I thought nothing else could go wrong, the car had a flat tire.

Luckily I'm one of those types who needs to plan everything. This includes rising in the morning an hour earlier than necessary on the off chance something -- or several things -- go wrong. I've always been this way. Pedantic my mother calls me. Anally retentive my father calls me. Either way, pedantic or retentive, at least I'm prepared. Being taken by surprise doesn't sit well with me.

So finally I made it to the clinic, after being caught behind an elderly man driving a Volvo who obviously thought the brake was the accelerator. He was also wearing a hat. You know what they say about drivers who wear hats and drive Volvos. Beware!

When I walked into the clinic I noticed Janet working the reception desk instead of Carmel. This is a perfectly fine arrangement for three weeks out of a month. It's that other week that leaves me, and most times the patients as well, walking on eggshells. She wasn't supposed to be working this particular day, but Carmel phoned her early to say she had the flu and Janet begrudgingly took her shift. I knew the instant I walked in that it was 'the other week.'

"It's a beautiful morning!" I said, smiling in a way that alleged my contentment with the world, even though, for the most part, it irritates me.

"Ya think?" Light gray eyes cut through me like a laser. "Have you noticed Carmel's not here?"

"Yes." From five-foot-eight to five-foot-five in a nanosecond. I shrank defensively under the woman's furious gaze. "I have. But..." *Smile sweetly, Alex, and pretend you haven't noticed the horns growing out her head.* "... it's always a pleasure to work with you."

"Men." She snorted. I swore I saw smoke swirling out her nostrils. "You're all the same."

In my infinite wisdom I've learned to never argue with a PMSing woman. It usually always ends in tears. Generally mine. Janet started humming. When she hums I know it means I should avoid eye contact, conversation, weak jokes I presume may cheer her up, and, if at all possible, refrain from breathing the same air as her.

She shoved a patient file toward me. “He’s late.” She stomped her foot. Kind of like a raging bull eying a red cape. “Men!”

“He’s only two minutes la...” *Shut up, Alex, smile and nod.* “You’re right. It’s completely unforgivable.”

Tucking the file under my arm, eager to free myself from Janet’s hormonal wrath, I wandered into the treatment room. I have three sisters, and I survived my mother’s early menopause, but no woman scares me as much as Janet does during that ‘one week.’ It’s the humming. The humming is terrifying. A swarm of bees many decibels louder, heading directly for me with stingers drawn like swords, could not petrify me more.

I removed my jacket, took a white coat from the hook behind the door, and slipped it on. Embroidered on the pocket it says Bell’s Chiropractics. Beneath that it has my Christian name and surname. This is my father’s clinic and the name on his coat reads Tony Bell. The name on my coat reads Alexander Bell. I’ve never forgiven my parents for that. Alexander Bell. What were they thinking?

After making sure the treatment table hadn’t collected dust overnight, I walked to the bench and set the file down. It was then I saw the name glaring at me in red ink. Richard Saunders. My stomach instantly tied itself into a billion knots. I looked at his date of birth and hoped he was any age other than twenty-six. No matter how many times I did the calculations in my head, it always came back with twenty-six.

The buzzer hadn’t sounded yet to alert a patient arrival. Everything else vanished from my mind and I ran from the treatment room, down the hall, skidding on the linoleum floor where I crashed into the reception desk. This was one day I fervently wished I’d never woken up to.

“Janet.” I pointed frantically at the phone. “Call this patient and reschedule the appointment.”

“Are your fingers broken?”

Panic led me directly into stupidity and I retaliated with, “*You’re* the receptionist!”

Bad move. Her lips puckered as if she sucked an ultra sour lemon. I could almost see those satanic hormones pulsing through the throbbing jugular veins in her neck. Her face turned a dreadful shade of burgundy.

“Fine!” I snapped, as though it were the greatest one-liner comeback of all time. “Forget I asked.”

The door buzzer sounded. I froze. Memories of school flooded back to me. Ric Saunders, the captain of the football team, the guy all the girls drooled over, the one who made my life a misery for years. Who stole my lunch, ripped up my homework, wrote ‘Alex is a fat fag’ on my locker, and who flushed my head down the toilet more

than once. He taunted me, threatened to beat me up, and was almost as scary as Janet's PMS.

"Hi. Sorry I'm a bit late."

I recognized the voice immediately. Any hope of mistaken identity evaporated.

"I've got an appointment for nine. Richard Saunders."

"A *bit* late?" Janet snarled. "Eight minutes late is almost ten minutes late. Ten minutes late is not a *bit*."

Go Janet! Let him have it. Set free the hormonal rage!

"I tried to call. Phone battery was dead." Ric sounded exactly the same as he did in school and it made my skin crawl. "My mother's in hospital. I came straight from the ER. Food poisoning."

"Oh, I see." From meltdown to temperate, Janet calmed. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Don't be sorry! I tried to will my thoughts to penetrate directly into Janet's mind. The woman gave birth to him for God's sake. She deserves to be punished!

Even Ric's moron best mate, Greg Willis, who had a neck the size of his head and a brain the size of a pea, would've been a better deal than Ric. Greg egged Ric on at every opportunity, but he never had the smarts to think up bully tactic plans on his own. He tried once to embarrass me with 'AB is gay' scrawled across the classroom chalkboard. Greg failed to remember our homeroom teacher's name was Aaron Benson. It landed him in detention for a week.

There we were, all gathered around the reception desk, and at this stage I hadn't dared look left. I'm not sure what I was waiting for. Perhaps divine intervention or that relieving moment when you wake up and realize it's all been a twisted nightmare.

"Are you going to take Mr. Saunders through to the treatment room, Dr..."

Speaking far louder than was necessary, I cut Janet off before she could say Dr Bell. "Yes!" I slammed the file to my chest, covering the embroidered pocket. "As soon as you've completed the patient interview," I said while winking my right eye repetitively.

Janet folded her arms over her chest, nostrils flaring. "Since when do *I* do patient interviews?"

"Since today." My winking quickened. "New procedure."

"Fix your eye." She ripped a tissue from its box and shoved it into my hand. "I know nothing about..."

“Forget it.” What was the point of arguing? “I’ll do it.” I span on my heel, jerking my head at Ric without looking at him. “Follow me.”

Once inside the treatment room I placed the file on the bench, took off my white coat before he read my name, and sat down on my swivel stool, keeping my back to Ric at all times. I heard him shuffling around the room and figured he didn’t know whether to lie down on the table or stand around aimlessly.

From my pocket I took a pen, clicking it with my thumb furiously like I do when I’m angry or nervous. “Do you prefer to be called Richard or Dick?”

“Ric.”

“Dick? I’ll make a note of that on your file.” I spoke aloud as I wrote. “Patient prefers to be called Dick.”

“No, *Ric*.”

“Have you ever been to a chiropractor before, Dick?” When I heard him sigh in exasperation, I couldn’t help smiling.

“I’ve been to a physiotherapist. Never a chiropractor.”

A lot has changed since I went to high school, my appearance especially. As a teenager I was very overweight, had pimples, braces on my teeth, had horribly unflattering glasses, and when wearing the dark red school uniform, I looked more like a raspberry. It didn’t seem as though Ric realized who I was. Why would the coolest guy in school remember the name of the fat, ugly kid he tormented? Even I can barely see the resemblance of my teenage self in comparison to how I look now.

“I see.” Should I put my theory into action or keep my face from view? Curiosity burned. I wanted to see if the asshole remembered me. “They’re two very different forms of treatment, Dick.” I swiveled my chair around and looked at him for the first time. “Expect to hear a whole lot of bones crunching and cracking.”

He stared at me wordlessly. For a moment he seemed scared until his blue eyes wandered over my face and resulted in unnerving me instead. “Thanks for the warning.”

It shitted me off to see that he hadn’t lost any of his good looks in the past eight years. In fact, the bastard looked even better.

“Do you want me to take my shirt off?”

“No!” God, it was bad enough I had to touch him at all, let alone touching his naked skin. “Leave your shirt on, Dick, but take off your jacket.” I got off my chair, approached the treatment table, put my foot on the pedal, and lowered it. “Then sit on the side of the table and look straight ahead.”

“Okay.” My abrupt bedside manner obviously had him thinking twice about putting his skeletal system into my hands. “Where should I put my jacket?”

Shove it up your ass! “Give it to me.” He handed it over and I tossed it into the corner of the room.

“I could’ve done that myself.” He sniggered.

“Sit down, look straight ahead.” It annoyed me more that he laughed when it was meant to piss him off. “What made you decide to see a chiropractor?” Standard patient question, I certainly wasn’t making friendly chitchat.

“I’ve been getting migraines for a few years. Bad ones.” He sat down. The way he continued to study my face started to rattle me. “My GP’s given me pills, but nothing works. I constantly have a headache even if it’s not a full-blown migraine.”

“Had your eyes tested?”

“Yeah. My vision’s fine. They’ve done brain scans, too.”

“Did they find anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I jotted notes into his file, starting to feel a sense of power over my high school nemesis. “Do you get neck pain?”

“Yeah, quite often actually. You look really young to be a chiropractor.”

Ah ha! The man was starting to get ultra nervous. I do look younger than twenty-six. In fact, there are regular occasions I still get asked for my ID. “I assure you I’m qualified, Dick. Graduated three days ago.” A lie because I graduated two years ago. “You’re my first patient.”

“You’ve never done this before?”

“Of course I have.” I’ve never seen sweat form on someone’s brow so quickly. “On mannequins. But the principle is the same.”

“Maybe I should make an appointment for another day.”

“Sure, you can do that.” I smiled stiffly, gesturing toward the door. “You’ll still be charged for this appointment, though, practice policy.” I didn’t want to lay a finger on him before. Now I wanted to make him squirm. “Seeing as I haven’t actually treated you, you won’t be able to claim the cost through medical insurance. Which means, you’ll be looking at a couple of hundred dollars at least.”

“You *sure* you know what you’re doing?”

“Pretty sure.” I nodded and pointed to a poster on the wall. “If I get confused, I’ll just look at that and it tells me what bone is connected where.” Putting the file down, I walked behind him. “Okie dokie, let’s give this a shot, shall we? Look straight ahead.”

“Anywhere in particular?” His voice strained.

As much as it pained me to touch him, I still had a job to do and a reputation to uphold. “Eyes level and look straight ahead.” I placed my hand under his chin to align his head properly. I didn’t really want to injure him permanently and lose my license. “I’m not going to do anything yet. I’ll warn you first. Relax your chin into my hand, sit up straight but don’t tense.” A patient must be relaxed and I waited until I felt his chin settle into my palm. I then placed my other hand at the back of his head. “So how long did you say you’ve been having...”

In one swift, fast movement I twisted his head to the right. A fraction more and I could’ve broken his neck. Oh, what a pleasant thought. The cracking of his vertebra sounded awesome!

“Jesus Christ!” Both his hands gripped the side of the table.

“Did that hurt?”

“Umm...no.”

What a pity. “Now for the other side.”

He folded into laughter. “You said you were gonna warn me!”

“If I’d warned you, you wouldn’t have been relaxed.” *Stop laughing, meathead. You’re supposed to be freaking out.* “Look straight ahead.” I placed my hands into position.

“I know what’s gonna happen, how can I relax?”

“Hang on a moment.” I’m used to distracting nervous patients. It goes with the territory. “Don’t go anywhere, Dick. I’ll be back...” His chin felt heavier in my hand. “...in...” His body relaxed. “...a...”

I whipped his head to the left. *Crunch!* It was even louder the second time. Unfortunately, so was Ric’s laughter.

“You’ve definitely done this before.” Circling his head, he peered over his shoulder at me. “You had me going there for a while.”

Stop laughing! Fear me, you Neanderthal! “Misalignment of the spine, especially in the neck region, is a common cause for migraines.” The last thing I wanted to do was give him the impression I cared what he had to say. “Lie down on your stomach.”

Not that it mattered to me if he'd been in pain for years, but the guy's spine was like a buckled railway line. Years of playing football had wreaked havoc. No wonder he'd been floored with migraines. I manipulated his back and shoulders, filling the treatment room with cracking and crunching. After about ten minutes he completely relaxed, which told me he had absolute faith in me as a practitioner and in what I was doing. Needless to say, that infuriated me. Yes, I love the fact I have a great reputation, but I wanted him to suffer as much as he'd made me suffer in school.

"Done." I stepped away from the table. "You can get up now, Dick."

When Ric sat up and hung his legs over the side of the table, his gaze locked with mine as I handed over his jacket I'd fetched from the floor. "My headache's gone." I swore I saw his hands trembling. "Three years of pills and nothing worked. Half an hour with you and my headache's gone."

"We're not the quacks some people say we are." Why did he have to stare at me so appreciatively? It almost made him look like he possessed a soul. "You'll need follow-up appointments."

Snatching his file off the bench, I jerked my head for him to follow me to reception.

"Janet, Dick needs a weekly appointment for six weeks. Book him in to see Dr Tony, please." I didn't want to say Dad's last name on the off chance Ric hadn't made the Bell Chiropractics connection.

"I don't want to see another doctor. I want to see you."

He gripped my arm like I was his only saving grace. It repulsed me. "I'm fully booked for the next two months."

"No, you're not." Janet shoved the appointment book under my nose, ignoring my pleading wink for her take the bloody hint this time and stop assuming I'd developed a facial tic. "See?" She shook her head at me, rolled her eyes, and picked up a pencil. "I'll make your appointments with Alex, Mr. Saunders."

Oh God...I saw it written all over Ric's face. That moment of enlightenment when he put two and two together, staring at me without a word while he mentally remembered me as a raspberry-like teenager and tried to match it up with the adult he saw standing beside him now. My stomach flipped and churned. I'm sure my skin turned ashen. I wanted to throw up.

When Ric managed to pick his jaw up off the floor, he pointed his index finger at me. "Alexander Bell? *You're* Alex Bell!"

I know I cringed, a reflex from back then coming back to haunt me now. He'd have *seen* how scared I was and I felt like I was right back in school, cornered, cowering as he and his meathead mates threatened to smash my skull into the wall. Eight years later and being pinned under those blue eyes still filled me with dread. Ric hadn't ever hit me, but he and his friends pushed me around. He made me feel worthless the entire time I endured high school.

I bolted from the waiting room to the safety of closed doors.

Thankfully fortune finally smiled on me when the next appointment cancelled. It gave me forty-five minutes to try and pull myself together. There'd been times I'd fantasized about running into Ric somewhere, dreamed about being in a situation where I could avenge the years of bullying. When you spend most of your life being the fat, ugly kid who's teased mercilessly, you pray one day you'll wake up looking gorgeous. Pray you won't have to get your clothes custom made to fit the way your parents needed to get your uniform specially made. You want the acne gone, the braces gone, the glasses gone, and you want to one day walk down the street knowing you're turning heads for all the *right* reasons.

When Janet stomped into the tearoom, cursing under her breath about cheap pens the clinic expects her to use, I quickly turned my face away.

"None of them write." She dumped four pens in front of me. "How am I supposed to work when I can't find a decent pen in this whole God forsaken place?"

"I don't know."

"And you don't care either, do you?"

"At the moment," it was then I started crying, "I don't care."

I expected to be bombarded with furious demon wrath for daring to answer her back.

"Alex! Sweetheart!" The next thing I knew she had me in a bear hug, squishing my face into her chest. "Darling, what's the matter? Why are you crying?"

At that particular time I wasn't sure if I was crying due to unresolved teenage issues or because I had my face closer to a pair of breasts than I ever wanted. She squeezed me so tight the fabric of her shirt went into my mouth each time I tried to breathe. Janet wasn't the mothering type, even during the three weeks when PMS didn't possess her. This was another side to her hormonal swing that was, quite frankly, almost as scary.

"Tell me what's wrong?" She started rocking me back and forth, hand raking over my head and messing up my stylish hair. "Do you want me to call your mother?"

No, don't call Mum! Even if I wanted to reply, I couldn't, my face still pushed into her ample bosom as I shook my head. Or *tried* to shake my head.

"You know..."

Oh God, now *she* was crying. Could this day get any worse?

“...sometimes everything gets a bit too much in life and we just have to let it all out.” Several short, gasped breaths followed before she continued. “Cry, baby boy.”

Baby boy? What the...?

“Cry and I’ll hold you. This is a safe space. *You’re* in a safe space.” Now she was kissing me on the forehead. “Outside, the world is unforgiving, cruel, ruthless, and fucked up, but *here*, you’re safe.”

My shoulders started shaking, my entire body shook. She smothered my face into her chest again, trying desperately to comfort hysterical giggling she’d misread as... well... just plain hysterical!

A few minutes later I managed to stem the giggling enough to quiet down and prise her away from me. “I’m okay now. Are you okay?”

“I will be.” She held my face in both hands. “I love you, Alex.”

Damn, those hormones are freaky, powerful things. “I love you, too.” Well hell, I had to say something, didn’t I? I couldn’t leave the poor woman hanging while she peered at me like a wayward puppy.

“You’re a good boy. Sweet, kind, gentle, and *good*.”

“I guess we’d better wash our faces before the next patient arrives.” It was a great excuse to stand and back away before those boobs suffocated me again.

Being the gentleman I am, I waited patiently outside the bathroom while Janet fixed her makeup. The phone rang and I cursed having to step into the role of receptionist. Janet and Carmel have an appointment system. The problem is, neither Dad nor myself understand what that system is. You can rest assured we’ll make an error and double book someone.

“Bell’s Chiropractics, Dr Alex Bell speaking.” I used my best butch phone voice.

“Alex, it’s Ric Saun...”

I slammed the phone down. Why the hell was he calling? Why did he have to call during the few minutes Janet fixed her mascara?

“I hope you didn’t make an appointment, Alex.” Janet walked behind the reception desk. “Did you?”

“No.” Leaning back onto the desk, I buried my face in my hands. “Of all the chiropractic clinics in all the cities in all the world, he had to walk into...” *Hang on*. I frowned and dropped my hands. *Isn’t that from Casablanca?* My eyes widened. “Janet, the guy from Casablanca, wasn’t he called Rick?”

“My favorite movie,” she gushed. “I especially love the part where Rick is...”

"I hate Ric! Hate him!" I'd picked up a pencil in preparation to make the caller an appointment. I snapped it in half and threw it across the waiting room. "Everyone thought he was gorgeous, but he's a fuck-knuckle. Son of a bitch ruined my life."

Janet edged away, lifting an eyebrow. "It's just a movie, dear."

"I *wish* it was, then I could get it all out of my head and not have to think about Ric anymore."

The next patient walked in and Janet reached for my hand. "Try and think about another movie, darling, one that doesn't upset you so much."

My turn to use the bathroom. I strode away, saying over my shoulder, "If Ric calls and asks for me, tell him I've gone home. There's no way I'm talking to him!"

"Sure." The poor woman, she looked completely dumbfounded, probably thinking I'd had a mental breakdown. "Though I doubt he will call. Bogart's been dead a while."

At twelve-thirty I offered to buy Janet's lunch and left the clinic to walk to a small café across the road. They sold the best chicken salad sandwiches in the world, in my humble opinion, and the best coffee. Because it had been such a shit-awful day, I splashed out and bought two slices of chocolate mud cake as well. Generally I'm strict with my diet. The last thing I want to do is pile on all the weight I lost. Once in a while, though, it didn't hurt to spoil myself.

Balancing coffee and lunch bags, I waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the road. I couldn't wait to get back to the tearoom and stuff my face with calories, eat away my angst.

"Hey! Alex!"

Coffee hit the ground, splashing over the car park bitumen. Lunch bags followed, sending chocolate cake splattering into the brown liquid and one chicken salad sandwich split open out of its wrapper. I startled so violently I staggered backwards. When I saw Ric break into a jog, heading straight for me, I took off. At least I tried to. My foot slipped on a slice of tomato, sending me straight onto my ass and into the mucky mess.

Ric loomed over me and a hand shot out from his side. I scrambled to my feet, humiliated and panicked. Being the planner I am, there were spare clothes in my car. At least I didn't have to finish the day tending to patients with coffee, cake, and sandwich plastered over the seat of my pants. That was the last thing on my mind at the time. I ran from the car park into the clinic.

Rather than admit to Janet that the reason I had no lunch was because Ric scared the living shit out of me, I told her I'd slipped and dropped everything on the way back from the café. It wasn't a complete lie. I'd lost my appetite anyway and turned down

Janet's offer to buy me lunch instead. When she left the clinic to buy her own lunch, I locked the door and stood in the waiting room, peering through a gap in the curtains to make sure Ric wasn't lurking.

I'm twenty-six years old, I have a great job, I'm paying off a mortgage on a lovely home, I drive a BMW, and I have good friends. I guess you don't realize, until something like this happens, just how much being bullied at school haunts you well into adulthood. Whoever invented the saying, '*sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me*,' obviously never endured being verbally taunted. When Janet arrived back from the café, and after I'd changed into clean pants, I stood staring at myself in the mirror and saw the raspberry looking back at me.

Work took my mind off Ric for a while. I tended patients, did some paperwork, and even managed to smile when Janet refused to stop fussing over me. Perhaps the way to deal with her PMS in the future is to burst into tears. It apparently did the trick that day.

I walked a patient out to reception. There, on the desk in a vase, a large bunch of long stemmed red roses sat proudly.

Janet handed me a small sealed envelope. "Thought hubby finally found a romantic streak." She snorted. "No such luck. They're for you."

Roses for me? I don't have a boyfriend. As far as I know, I also don't have secret admirers. Except for Tanya, a girl who works in the café. It wasn't Valentine's Day. It wasn't my birthday. Who'd send me an expensive bunch of red roses? My patient stood beside me, just as eager as Janet to satisfy curiosity.

I opened the card and read, 'I'm sorry. Ric.'

"Who are they from?" Leaning closer, trying to see the writing, Janet grinned.

What the hell is going on today? I tossed the card into the bin. "You keep the flowers, Janet. I don't want them."

My head reeled. Why would Ric, captain of the football team, the guy who dated every pretty girl in school, fag hater, dickhead extraordinaire, send me roses? Straight guys don't send other guys roses, even if they did cause them to drop their lunch in the car park. Plus, they weren't cheap roses. They weren't bought from a gas station or supermarket. Surely Ric wasn't... no, totally impossible. An arrow couldn't have been straighter than Richard Saunders.

I wanted this day over and done with. Wanted to go to bed and wake up tomorrow with everything back to normal. This is *me*, Alexander Bell, the one who hates surprises, needs everything to be organized, planned, scheduled, and predictable. By the time my last patient left, I felt drained and exhausted. At least it was Friday.

"Cya, Janet." Those roses glared at me from the reception desk. I tried to pretend they weren't there as I prepared to leave. "Thanks for putting up with me earlier."

“It’s not shameful for a man to show his emotions.”

No, no, don’t cry, Janet, don’t cry...oooh...too late. Here we go again.

“Come here, darling.” Moving away from the desk, tears in her eyes, she wrapped her arms around me, squeezing the breath out of my lungs. “If more men weren’t scared to show their emotions, they wouldn’t be such bastards.”

“I’ll close up the clinic.” I eased away from her. “You have an early minute.”
“Are you sure?”

“Yup. Take the flowers with you.”

“No, they’re your flowers.” She kissed me on the cheek. “Why are all gay men understanding and compassionate?”

“Pfft.” I arched an eyebrow at her. “They’re not, trust me. It’s a myth.”

“A straight man wouldn’t understand cramps, mood swings, backaches, headaches, not to mention the price of tampons keep...”

Way too much information and I shoved her handbag into her arms. “You go home. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Once I’d gotten rid of Janet and tidied up the reception desk, I locked up the clinic and headed for my car. A hot bath sounded good. Hot bath and a tub of ice cream. Or cake. I never did get to eat my chocolate cake. Perhaps I’d stop somewhere on the way home and pick up enough cake to sit and stuff my face for an hour.

“Alex?”

Oh fuck, not again! Jumping six feet into the air, I stumbled into my car door, setting off the alarm. My high school nemesis had turned into a crazed stalker. “I’ll call the police!” I shouted, struggling to silence my screaming car. “Leave me alone!”

“I only want to talk to you.” My threat to call in the law had little effect and he soon stood directly in front of me. “Did you get the roses?”

“I’m getting in my car.” *At least, I would get into my car if my hand would stop shaking enough for me to put the key in the door.* “If you follow me, I swear to God, I’ll call the police!”

“I’m not here to hurt you, Alex.” My keys fell from my hand and Ric picked them up off the ground, stepping closer to me. “Can I talk to you?”

“Give me my keys.” Why did my voice have to quaver so much?

He placed the keys into my hand. “I just want to say...”

“What? Say *what*?” All my pent-up teenage angst bubbled over. “You said every mean thing to me in school you could think of. What else is there to say?”

I didn’t think it was possible for Ric Saunders to show any form of remorse. Even in the dusky evening, I could see it in his expression. I heard it in the way he ran his fingers through dark blond hair and sighed heavily.

“What I said to you, how I treated you, it was cruel and if I could go back and change it, I would.” Broad shoulders lifted and lowered in a shrug, his eyes searched mine. “But I can’t.”

I scoffed. “What’s the deal with roses? Why did you send roses?”

“To try and tell you how sorry I am.” Not only did he look extremely awkward, he also appeared flustered and nervous. “It was never *you*, Alex. I didn’t hate *you*.”

“You sure as shit did a good impression!”

“I hated myself and I took it out on you.” He spoke almost in a whisper. It was eerie. “Everyone thought you were gay, but no one knew I was.”

A bolt of lightning through the top of my head couldn’t have shocked me more.

“Flexing my muscles, picking on you, I did it so no one would ever guess I liked guys as well.” Shaking his head, he ran his hand over his jaw and peered up at a crescent moon. “I’m a youth counselor now.” He lowered his face, locking eyes with me again. “Mainly I work with kids who are going through exactly what I put you through. Today, seeing how you reacted to me after all these years, it makes me sick with shame.”

Who is this person? What has he done with meathead Ric Saunders?

“Then I go and make you drop your lunch, fall over, and run off.”

“It wasn’t *all* my lunch,” I mumbled. I didn’t want him to think I still ate two servings of everything. “It was Janet’s lunch, too.”

“Any chance I can make that up to you with dinner?”

Is Ric Saunders asking me on a date? Rather than reply, I simply stood deathly motionless, staring into blue eyes that widened as they waited for an answer. First roses and now a dinner invitation.

“Please? ”

“When?” *God! What was I saying? Don’t agree to a date with him, Alex, you moron!*

“How ‘bout now?” A smile crept through his guilt. “There’s a nice Italian place not far from here. We could walk there.”

“Okay.” *You did! You fucking idiot, you agreed to dinner with Ric Saunders!*

“Whatever I order, you’re paying for, Dick.”

Ric nudged me in the arm with his elbow. “The only reason I’m letting you get away with that is ‘cause you invented my favorite toy.”

We started walking away from my car, side by side. “I never invented vibrators.”

“Telephone!” The palm of Ric’s hand settled onto my lower back and he laughed as he spoke. “By the way, are you ever scared you might break someone’s neck when you do that chiropractor head twisting thing?”

“No. But I wanted to break yours.”

“Don’t blame you in the slightest.”

Leopards don’t change their spots. Not that I believed. Yet here I was, sitting at a cozy table for two in a nice restaurant, with the guy who’d made my life a misery for so long. Surreal moments followed as I listened to him speak and studied the face I used to despise. Part of me wanted to keep hating him. It was easier to do that than to consider forgiving his past behavior. But the more he talked, the more he listened, the more I realized he had indeed changed. Ric showed passion for his work, a true desire to help kids whose lives were less than easy. Many times throughout dinner he repeated apologies, and each time he said he was sorry for what he’d done to me, I saw real regret.

“What make you decide to be a chiropractor?” Ric asked, head in hand, watching me intently. “Was it ‘cause of your Dad? Following in his footsteps?”

“Initially, yeah.” With my fork I stabbed at dessert, reluctant to eat too much in front of him. “He wanted a protégé, someone to take over the business. I love it now, though. It’s good to be able to help people.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Ric’s hand brushed against mine. “That’s why I love my job. Some of the kids I see, they’re broken and they have no self-esteem left. Sometimes family stuff, sometimes school bullying, and sometimes it’s a combination of both. I love the fact I can make a difference in their lives.”

“You sure made a difference in mine.” It was a catty, snide remark and Ric winced. Changing the subject, I moved my plate away. “I can’t eat any more of this.” He picked up the wine bottle and I placed my hand over the glass. “I have to drive home. Anyway, if I drink more than two glasses of wine, I’m anybody’s.”

Without hesitating, he pushed his full glass toward me. “Drink up.”

I pushed the wine glass back across the table. “Figure of speech, not fact.”

“Damn.” He smirked, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. “Thought my luck was about to change.”

This was all terribly bizarre. To be on a date with Ric Saunders and have him flirting with me was almost more than my mind could conceive. My anger hadn’t subsided completely, just waylaid.

For some reason it was then I remembered something I felt sure would prove Ric was a liar. “Hang on a second. Why are you here with me if your mother’s in the ER?”

“They discharged her as soon as I went back to the hospital.” From his wallet he took his credit card and set it onto a small tray. “She ate bad oysters. It wasn’t as serious as she made it out to be.” He chuckled. “Mum’s always been a hypochondriac. Dad’s looking after her now. I doubt she’ll let him cook her dinner ever again, though.”

That was plausible. Seeing as Ric had made the move to pay the bill, I gathered our date had come to an end. He probably knew he wasn’t going to get laid.

“Do you...”

I raised my eyebrows.

“...want to follow me back to my place?”

My brows rose even higher. “Wow. Smooth, Ric.”

He blushed. Ric Saunders actually blushed! “For coffee, I meant.”

“I have coffee at home.” *Jeez, how easy does he suppose I am?*

“Let me rephrase.” Another charming smile flashed in my direction. “I don’t want to say goodnight to you yet, I hoped we could spend a bit more time together tonight.”

Yeah right! You wanna get laid! “Then I’d feel more comfortable on my own territory. You can follow me back to my house.” *Oh my God, Alex, what are you thinking?*

All the way I home I kept peering into the rear vision mirror, waiting for Ric to have a swift change of heart and to see the headlights of his car disappear from sight. Butterflies flew around in my belly. I felt torn. I hated Richard Saunders, but I really liked the guy I had dinner with. It defied the odds, yet Ric was nice company, intelligent and funny. But there were moments when he looked at me that I felt like a kid again, fearing what he’d do next. You know... leopards and all that.

Once we arrived at my house, he followed me into the kitchen, standing close to me while I prepared coffee. Talking freely, seemingly unaware of my nervousness. Before that day, I’d never seen Ric as handsome, not in the way all the starry-eyed girls at school saw him. Now, as he stood in my kitchen, his good looks began to

fluster me. Tall, blond, blue eyes, ripped body, there really wasn't anything you could fault about the man's appearance. He was hot. Very, very hot.

I picked up the coffee mugs, turned to say something I thought would be witty, tripped over one of my dog's squeaky toys, dropped the coffee, fell forward onto my knees... Could it get any worse? Oh yes! Face straight into Ric's crotch.

"Shit! Are you okay?"

"Yeah." *No. Mortified. And I don't think I'm imagining the semi-erection my face slammed into.*

One strong, muscled arm circled around my waist, helping me to my feet.

"I'm fine. Really." *Damn, and I thought you used to stuff padding down there.* "How embarrassing." *Where do I look? Anywhere but in his eyes.* "I'll make more coffee and clean up. You can go sit down if you want." Another pair of pants was soaked through.

"How about you get changed, I'll clean up and make coffee." His arm tightened around my waist. "Sure you're not hurt? That's twice you've fallen over."

"Been one of those days." *Don't be so understanding. It's making you sexier.* "Umm..." I raked fingers through my hair, dithering in humiliation. "Okay, I'll be right back." I took a step forward and pain shot through my left knee.

In spite of my best efforts to pretend I wasn't in agony, Ric didn't believe it. Going straight into football player mode -- 'cause knee injuries are common in those meathead sports -- he crouched down to examine the damage. "You hit the floor pretty hard, but I think you've probably just bruised it. Come on." He placed my arm around his neck and straightened. "Lean on me."

Soon Ric had me safely deposited onto the sofa and returned from my bedroom with a pair of track pants he'd found in my wardrobe. "Take your jeans off and let me take a closer look."

"At what exactly?"

"Your knee." He sniggered. "If anything else happens to fall into my line of vision, I'll try not to stare. Much."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't mention the word fall." What was the point of being prudish? I'd had my face in the man's crotch for God's sake. I peeled my jeans off, immediately thankful I'd worn decent underwear that day. "Oh no, it looks like it's swelling up."

It hurt my feelings that Ric thought my injury was funny enough to burst into reels of laughter. "You have no idea how much!" He said, covering his eyes with his palm.

This had nothing to do with my knee. I lowered my eyes to the front of his jeans and saw exactly what he referred to. One thing I envy women over is the fact they don't have to put up with genitalia announcing arousal at unwelcome times. My penis reacted on instinct -- absolutely no consultation with my brain -- standing to attention inside boxer briefs that did nothing to hide the fact I'd cracked a boner.

Ric uncovered his eyes. "You too, huh?"

Snatching a cushion to quickly cover my lap, I held it in place firmly, trying to picture Janet naked and hoping my cock would deflate ASAP. "Can you get me a bag of ice out of the freezer, please?" I snapped.

"That's a bit drastic, isn't it?"

"For my knee!"

From the coffee table, Ric moved to sit next to me. Expensive aftershave wafted under my nose. I squirmed when warm fingers traced down my thigh and his hand cupped over my knee. "You have nice legs."

Oh God... what do I do?

"Long, lean, shapely legs."

"Back off, Romeo!" I shoved his hand away. "I'm not one of your fucking cheerleader girlies!"

"If you were I wouldn't be here!"

"Why *are* you here, Ric?" Even though my knee begged for mercy, I pushed out of the sofa to get away from his wandering hands. "Dinner and roses... It doesn't make up for everything, you know?"

"I know."

"No, you don't! You know nothing!" My cat bolted under an armchair, unused to me screaming like a banshee. "You made me feel like garbage, Ric. What? You think I didn't know I was fat? You think the mirror I looked into every morning showed me something different to what everyone else saw? You think I don't still look in the mirror every day and see ugly staring back at me?" *Shut up now, you're getting hysterical.* "You think I didn't go home every day and cry myself to sleep at night because of you?" *Now, Alex, shut up now!* "Did you do that? Huh? Did you have panic attacks thinking about school? Thinking about facing me? Did you ever think you were a raspberry?" *You had to go and mention the raspberry thing, didn't you?*

At that moment Ric could've done anything. Walked out, left me standing in my boxers with a bruised, swollen knee, tears streaming down my face, and got the hell away from the situation.

Instead he stood up, moved toward me, wrapped his arms around me and said, “It doesn’t matter how many times I say I’m sorry, it’ll never be enough.”

I so badly wanted to push him away again. Knee him the crotch -- with my one working knee -- throw him out of my house and make him feel like dirt. When he kissed the top of my head, I crumbled. Probably because it had been such an emotional roller coaster that day, and also because there was still a part of me that really liked the man I’d had dinner with. More than I’d liked anyone for quite some time.

“I didn’t know who you were today, Alex.” He whispered into my ear, arms tightening around me, swaying gently from side to side. “When I saw you, I thought, *Holy shit, he’s hot!* When the receptionist said your name, I recognized your eyes. You always did have the most beautiful brown eyes.”

“No one ever saw them through the coke bottle lens glasses!” I wailed.

“I saw them. I mean, sure, they were magnified twice as big as they should’ve been, but...”

He was right. It managed to make me laugh, remembering just how big my eyes did look through those thick lenses.

“...they were always beautiful.” Releasing me from his arms, Ric held my hand and tilted my chin up with his finger. “Don’t ever look in the mirror and think you’re ugly. You’re gorgeous, Alex. You took my breath away when I saw you today.”

Is he about to kiss me? Did he eat garlic too or was I the only one? ‘Cause if Ric didn’t eat garlic then my breath’s gonna stink and he’ll think... Oh for fuck sake, shut up internal dialogue!

“You’re hot.” Very slowly, he started to lower his head. “You’re sexy.” It tilted. “You’re...”

One of my contact lenses slipped, moving up under my eyelid. Ric quit the pre-kiss flattery, assuming my sudden winking meant full steam ahead. He faltered for a moment, seemed confused, then winked at me before going in for the lip-lock kill.

My hand shot up between our faces, smacking him in the mouth before I slammed my fingers to my eyelid. “Ow, ow!”

“Ow!”

“My lens...its...ow, ow...gone under my eyelid.” Had I not been incapacitated with only one working leg, I’d have run to the bathroom.

Ric held my chin. “Lick my fingers.”

“I’m in pain, Ric. I’m not thinking about licking anything right now!”

Plainly I'd pissed Murphy off at some point early that morning for his Law to scorn me so badly the entire day.

"If my fingers are wet, it'll be easier for me to..." I wasn't terribly appreciative of his laughter. "Forget it, I'll lick them. Move under the light a bit more."

"I would if I could walk!"

His hands gripped my head like a football. "Are these disposable?"

"The lenses, yes, my eyes, no. Be careful!"

While Ric pried open my eye, searching for the AWOL lens, I became acutely aware of the fact I stood in my boxer briefs, a shirt, and a loosened tie. A bit like a scene from a gay porn movie where jock meets straight-laced -- or not so straight in this instance -- medical professional. Ric's finger was in my eye, I was in pain, but I was turned on. I felt like the bad boy doctor having a forbidden liaison with his hot patient.

Oh my God, that's exactly what I'm doing! It is forbidden!

Ric finally retrieved the lens, wiping it on a tissue he'd taken from his pocket. I quickly removed the remaining lens on the off chance it too decided to debilitate me.

"Feel better?"

"No!" I picked his jacket up off the coffee table and thrust it into his arms. "You have to leave. Now! Go now!"

"What? Why?"

"You're my patient, I'm your doctor. I could lose my license for this!"

"I didn't think chiropractors were real doctors."

People have no idea how much that comment pisses me off. I'm a doctor of chiropractics, not a quack who cracks bones for a living because he wasn't smart enough to get into medical school. I studied for five years, vigorously, and I didn't get my job just because I'm the business owner's son.

"You thought wrong!" I started pushing Ric toward the hallway, forgetting about my sore knee. "This is a breach of patient/doctor trust. There are ethics to adhere to. We can't do this."

"Wait, wait, wait." He dug his heels in, refusing to move any further. "We haven't actually done anything, Alex. And didn't you say there was another chiropractor who could see me next time?"

True. I did.

“Which means, if you booked me in to see the other guy, I *was* your patient, but I’m not your patient anymore. Right?”

That was also true. I took a few seconds to think the conundrum through. “You’d still be a patient of the clinic and that’s a bit too close for comfort. Especially seeing as the other chiropractor is my dad.”

“Refer me to another clinic. I trust your judgment. If you say he’s good, then I’ll see him instead.”

“I can do that.” The man didn’t give up easily. It stroked my ego nicely. I made a mental note to ensure the chiropractor I referred Ric to was old, wrinkly, and married to a woman. You know, just in case, covering all my bases. Better still, I’d make sure the new chiropractor *is* an old, wrinkly woman. *Yeah, that’s it, I’ll do that.* “So we both agree at this point that you’re not my patient and I’m not your doctor?”

“Alex, you’re in your underwear. I’ll agree to anything.”

End of career averted. I relaxed. Entertaining the bad boy doctor does his hot patient fantasy again, I wished I had a treatment table in the house. The fact Ric was my high school bully fuelled the fantasy. Bad boy doctor, who turned from an ugly duckling into a swan, does handsome straight football captain who turns gay at the mere sight of his irresistible chiropractor.

Okay, so I didn’t actually turn Ric gay, but I wasn’t going to bother with minor details.

Ric twisted my tie around his fingers, tugging it just enough to tilt me forward. The aftershave he wore...*shiver*...delicious. I felt his other hand settle on my butt and his body press in closer. When I reached up to put on my own sexy moves, by running fingers through his hair, I missed my target.

“You can’t see a damn thing, can you?”

His breath heated dangerously close to my lips. “Blind as a bat,” I murmured.

“Mmm...feel your way around. Like...” His hand wandered to cup my butt cheek, giving a firm squeeze. “...this...and...” Fingers stroked up and down the nape of my neck. “...this.”

Just when I thought I couldn’t stand the anticipation, especially considering the way Ric kneaded my butt in his hand, his mouth found mine. Warm, soft, and he kissed me in a gentle way that indulged the sensation of lips. It was sweet and hot, promising more without any forceful demand. I let my hands find skin beneath his shirt and only then did he open his mouth slightly to invite my tongue inside.

Once I accepted the invitation, it was a flurry of hands trying to feel up every part of each other’s bodies at the same time. We kissed feverishly, teeth clashing every now and then, our tongues practically doing calisthenics in an effort to taste everything as deeply as possible.

Then he was mauling my neck. God, how I love my neck mauled! Every now and then, he moaned, *Alex...Oooh, Alex*, and that succeeded in getting me more worked up. His crotch dug hard into my thigh, his ripped body rubbed against me, and his arms held me in a firm embrace I had no desire to be free of. This wasn't the Ric of years ago. This was a totally different man who made me feel absolutely safe while shifting my arousal into overload.

"Bedroom," I gasped, clamping my hand behind his head. "Now!"

In the heat of passion, Ric even remembered my injured knee. His arms locked under my butt, lifting me off my feet, still working my neck with his lips, carrying me to the bedroom easily as though I weighed nothing. He placed me down on the bed carefully, resting my head on the pillow, immediately indulging my neck again as he hovered over me.

My tie had already been removed and discarded. Ric undid my shirt buttons one by one, trailing down my chest with kisses until he reached the waistband of my boxers. I lifted my hips, allowing him to drag the underwear off.

"Condoms and lube are in the top drawer." I pointed to the bedside table. "In there."

"Not so fast."

His lips brushed over mine, hand closing around my cock, stroking in a slow, steady rhythm. I arched my back, rocking my pelvis into his hand, moaning quietly and feeling every sensation heightened due to being unable to see clearly.

Just because I couldn't see didn't mean I was prepared to leave his clothes on. Ric remained fully dressed while I lay stark naked. My fingers fumbled to find shirt buttons, releasing them quickly each time I happened to locate one. Eventually I managed to complete the job, peeling the shirt over his broad shoulders. Ric quit stroking me, removing his shirt completely and tossing it aside. My hands traveled over his chest, finding erect nipples I then circled my fingertips over. He groaned. A hoarse, low, sexy groan.

I wanted to get his jeans off next, but changed my mind swiftly when Ric's mouth slid down the length of my shaft. "Oh..." I jerked my hips up hard, my hands clutched the sheets. I thought I was going to come right then and there. "...*fuck!*"

His tongue teased me mercilessly in between hard sucking and lips sliding to take me all the way into his mouth and out again. With one hand he circled my stomach, with the other he massaged my balls. Christ, I was in bad boy doctor, hot patient heaven!

"Stop!" I gripped a handful of his hair. "Stop or I'll come!"

He kissed the insides of my thighs, moving upwards over my belly, chest, back to my lips. My body trembled. I heard the bedside drawer slide open, the stuff inside it rattling around, silence, and then the sound of his jeans zipper descending.

With him sitting on the side of the mattress, leaning over, kissing me luxuriantly, I made a move in the general vicinity of his crotch and this time hit my target immediately. Ric groaned into my mouth, his breathing picking up quickly as I stroked him firmly. He returned the favor, slowly, well aware I was pretty close to coming due to the special attention he'd paid me prior. Not to mention the fact I now had his cock in my hand, I knew what it felt like, I knew its size. In my mind, I was already fantasizing about him inside me.

"Umm..." Ric pulled away from the kiss, fingers brushing across my cheek.

"Umm? Umm what?" *Jesus, Ric, don't get cold feet on me now.* "What's the matter?" I held onto his cock, unwilling to let it go, holding his genitals captive.

"Your knee. It's pretty swollen. You probably shouldn't try and bend it."

Bend it, Ric, for God's sake! It'll heal!

"Trying to figure out the best way to do this."

Cylindrical peg into the round hole, it's not that hard. Actually, yes, it was that hard, which is why I didn't want it deflating before he figured out what to do with it. "I'll be fine, don't worry about it."

"Lie on your side, baby. Left side, so you can keep that knee straight."

Baby. Ric called me baby. I smiled.

"I know it's kind of...well..." I could hear in Ric's voice he sounded worried. "...unromantic to take you from behind like this, being our first time and all, but it's the only way that's not going to hurt you."

It was really very sweet. Ric's concern for my feelings and wellbeing added to my newfound respect for him. It also reassured me that this wasn't going to be a one night stand. Ric seemed to have decided I was someone he wanted to see again.

With me on my side, and Ric pressed in against my back, he did his best to make sure he kept himself in a position to coddle me with kisses. Sure, it meant I had to turn my head awkwardly to the side most of the time, but it was worth the slight discomfort. His slicked fingers brushed back and forth over my prostate, and I felt hot and shivery at the same time, pampered by all the care and attention he showed.

His fingers slid out and I reached behind to part my butt cheeks. He guided his prick into me. I gasped, taking in a lungful of air and jamming my ass backward. Ric groaned next, low and husky. His hand found mine and our fingers entwined. His mouth kissed, nibbled, and licked my shoulder. The steady rhythm of his cock thrusting slowly sent me into the heights of ecstasy. Ric made my body react in a way that it never had before, had my heart pounding against my ribs.

I'm no innocent by any means. I've had my share of sex on a first date. It never meant anything other than sex. This was different. This was a real connection. I felt it and I knew Ric felt it too.

No, it never was going to be an ordinary day. What started off as a nightmare turned into a day etched forever into my memory. Ric and I have been together for a year now. Today's our anniversary, which is why I felt the urge to write about the time we re-met and crashed into each other's worlds. We're going to the Italian restaurant we went to that night twelve months ago.

My heart still flutters every time Ric tells me he loves me. His eyes still light up every time I say those words to him. We're a match made in heaven. Even though I originally met my angel in hell.

{THE END}