
Prologue

Meg closed her eyes and smiled as Matt's arms enfolded her from behind.

He began to nuzzle her neck. "You look gorgeous tonight. Yes, you heard me. And don't look at me with those big blue eyes as if you don't believe me. That short black dress goes perfect with your dark hair. I've a good mind to ditch the reunion and take you to bed." His hand slid up under her dress, and she danced away from him.

"Matt, I can't. We'll be late. There won't be another class reunion for ten years."

"Five minutes."

She turned back toward him and raised up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Perhaps we could wait until we get home and make it five hours?"

He sighed, wrapping one arm about her waist and holding her to him. "Then you shouldn't look so tempting. All right, princess. You get your way. *This* time." His hand reached around her, cupping a cheek firmly and squeezing. Meg squealed.

Tilting her face upward, she gave him a chaste kiss.

His arms tightened. "Think I'll let you get away with that, do you?"

She grinned as he moved one hand to the back of her neck and brought her closer. The other caressed her, drifting down to her bottom. What began as feather-light kisses covering her neck and then her face, turned to ones of possession that stirred her to her very soul. He invaded powerfully with his tongue, and hers danced with his, inviting.

She moaned. "You're convincing. Five minutes."

"Oh no, young lady. This is just a taste. I've changed my mind. I'll take my five hours, beginning the minute I get you back home. Be warned."

A giggle escaped, and his hard hand popped her bottom.

"Ouch! You're incorrigible," she whispered.

"And you're a tease. What time is this thing tonight over?"

She looked up into the handsome face above her. His combination of dark hair and stunning brown eyes sent shivers through her every time she looked at him, even after two years of marriage. Matt was so good to her, and she appreciated his willingness to accompany her to the ten-year reunion more than she could express. She shouldn't have been this nervous. Remembering his question, she gulped. "Midnight, but people will probably begin to leave about ten-thirty. I think I'll be ready to go by then."

Matt looked down at her with a warning glance. "Ten-thirty it is, then. Enjoy your friends, princess, because that's all the time you'll get. You don't have to stay with me every minute, but I do insist on a dance or two. And," he gave her a wink, "I'll be there if you need me. Don't let anyone make you feel intimidated. You'll be the most dazzling girl there. Just one more thing."

Meg looked up. She knew what was coming.

"I still think you should wear your glasses. I know, you think you look better in your contacts, but you lose them way too easily.

The Blue Lion

And that dress is too short for you to be down on your hands and knees searching through the carpet for a lens."

"But I already have them in. I could put the glasses in my purse just in case." Her voice had a bargaining ring to it, and he frowned.

"All right. Have it your way. Let's go."

Meg moved quickly down the stairs ahead of him and grabbed her purse.

She didn't even think of it again until they were halfway to the country club. Her glasses had remained on the vanity, at home.

Chapter 1

The arrival...

Meg stood in the doorway, leaning toward her husband for support. The class of 2009, consisting of around four hundred people, was milling about in the country club, and she gulped. She hated entering a room full of people with a passion.

But as if sensing her hesitation, Matt leaned down into her ear. "Oh no, you don't."

She scowled. "What?"

"You're not backing out. You've been talking about this thing for months. You're going, whether you want to or not. Trust me; it'll be fine once you see someone you know."

She tilted her head upward. "How do you know? Have you ever been to one?"

He grinned. "Nope. Not in your lifetime or mine, either. I see a table with two chairs open. Stick with me, kid. I won't let them eat you."

"Wonderful," she breathed, letting him lead her inside.

He sent an encouraging smile her way, guiding her between the tables.

"Meg! Dr. Hart. Over here!" A voice caught her attention, and she tugged on Matt's arm. Across the room, a friendly, familiar voice called, "Sit with us."

It was Nikki Stone, her boss's wife and co-worker and classmate from high school. Relieved, Meg looked up into Matt's handsome face and grinned.

"Told you," he teased, his mouth turning up on one side. "Now, just don't lose your contacts, and you'll be fine."

Meg's grin turned to a frown. The truth was her vision was extremely poor without correction. Matt was right. It was much easier to find a pair of glasses than a lost contact lens.

"We saved seats for you." Nikki patted the seat next to her as Scott rose to shake hands with Matt. He nodded to her.

"So, Meg dragged you along after all. Good enough for you. I shouldn't have to be the only one suffering through this." He laughed, adding, "They owe us, buddy. I even took off an hour early to get ready for this shindig."

Matt chuckled. "I know. I ended up seeing your patients."

Scott's brows rose. "Ah. Sorry."

"No worries. I'll return the favor before long."

A grimace crossed Scott's face. "I was afraid of that. I'm glad you're here. We may not see much of our gals this evening."

Nikki smiled at Meg. "You look stunning. I'm so glad you decided to wear your hair down after all."

"Matt insisted." Meg returned a smile. "And you look adorable."

"Blah," Nikki threw back. "But I don't care. I'm just me."

It was true. Nikki looked like she was still sixteen, with curly blonde hair and dark eyes that danced and twinkled when she talked. She also worked in her husband's office and was a delight for Meg to work with.

"Meg! Nikki!" A voice called. "Over here! The gang wants to see you."

Meg looked up, waving to the woman across the room. But as she rose, Matt crooked a finger at her.

"Ten-thirty. Don't forget. And I want a dance with you." His voice was both a warning and an encouragement.

"I'll be right back, I promise."

Nikki had risen and was waving, but as they crossed the room, she leaned toward Meg. "Who's that?"

Meg smiled. "Heather Hall. Remember her?"

"That's *Heather*?"

"Yes. She's changed a little."

Nikki shook her head. "She's changed a *lot*."

Heather met them both with a hug.

She's gorgeous, Meg thought to herself. Heather's hair was the same as it had been in high school, soft, with color ranging from a light red to a dark blonde. She'd seemed extremely shy and rather awkward in school, but now she appeared full of composure and confidence. Her eyes were bright and her smile was friendly. That, Meg thought, really was new.

"We're so glad you're here." Heather went around the circle graciously. "Let me see if I get this right. You remember Amber, whose last name is Nelson now, Mellie—"

"Jenkins," added Melanie, laughing.

"Thank you." Heather was grinning. "Hannah Ross, Andrea... Woods?" She paused.

"Of course."

"And I'm now Heather Hicks."

"You did better than I could have, Heather, to remember them." Meg smiled, pointing to herself and then Nikki. "Meg Hart, and Nikki Stone."

"Well, I cheated a bit. I've been looking at our program. There was only one Andrea, two Melanies, and one Hannah.

But there were six Ambers, believe it or not. And thanks for making it easier by telling me yours. Has anyone seen Chelsea?"

They all shook their heads.

"It's a shame she isn't here," Amber replied. "That would have made our group complete."

"You mean the *smashing seven*?"

The comment came from Andrea, the former leader. *How rude*, thought Meg, *that Andrea would still insist on using that name, even though everyone knew Heather made the eighth. Andrea had never accepted her.*

Heather, however, managed to completely ignore the comment, and Meg was glad. She was also glad Heather had introduced them by their current names.

She'd been so worried about looking her best. Heather and Mellie were utterly breathtaking. Mellie was picture-perfect, with her long dark hair and brilliant big blue eyes and slim figure. Amber, she would have known anywhere. In high school, everyone called her "pretty little Amber with the strawberry curls", and she hadn't changed. Hannah, a frequent patient of Dr. Stone's, was the only one she had seen since graduation. Although she was very pretty, she looked pale and thin, unhealthily so. She'd been plagued with type one diabetes since she was twelve and now had an insulin pump. Hannah's glance at her begged her not to mention her illness. But of course, she wouldn't.

Andrea, on the other hand, she wished she could forget. Andrea stood five' ten" and still looked as full of herself as she had in high school. She'd added four-inch heels to her outfit this evening and had her hair piled high on top of her head, adding even more to her height. Meg, at five' seven" somehow felt like an ant stared down by a praying mantis. Well, *that* was the same.

"*You* haven't changed," was Andrea's first comment. It sounded catty.

The Blue Lion

Meg forced a smile, pretending not to notice. "Thank you. Neither have you."

A chuckle erupted from somewhere in the group, hidden behind a cough, which brought a slight scowl to Andrea's face.

Melanie was the next to speak. "And you look beautiful tonight, Meg. Where did you manage to find that dress? I need one just like it. Nikki, you're cute as ever. It's so good to see you."

"Thanks, Mellie," Nikki murmured as Meg returned the compliment.

"A mutual admiration society," Heather added, laughing. "I have but one thing to ask. It's been so long since I've seen you all, I'd love for us to meet for a luncheon a week from tomorrow so we can catch up on each other's lives. At the Blue Lion?"

"Where?" Hannah asked.

"Downtown, past the Rodger's Theatre. It's new. Pierce and I own it, but I run it. He's too busy being Coroner. I have a full-time chef, plus a pastry chef who makes desserts to die for."

"I've heard of it." Amber, with her strawberry-blonde hair and stunning green eyes, gave her a wide smile. "Of course, I'd love to come." She patted her tummy. "Oh well, what's twenty more pounds?"

Heather smiled back. "We have a line of sugar free desserts, too, and I swear, I can't tell the difference. Please come? It's on the house."

Hannah and Melanie agreed. Andrea nodded, finally.

"Good." Heather gave everyone a gentle smile. "Eleven?"

When they had all agreed, she glanced at Meg. "We can catch up there. It was so good to see you all. I have to go and join Pierce before he forgets who I am. Later!"

Andrea waited until she had gone and looked around at the circle. "There won't be much for *her* to catch up on. She wasn't *really* one of us, was she?" Her voice was haughty, and Meg at once felt sorry for Heather.

It was true. No one in the group had accepted Heather in

school, not really. Meg and Nikki were probably the friendliest toward her of all of them.

"Well, I'll be there," she said softly. "It was quite gracious of her to invite us all. I've heard of the Blue Lion. Everyone says the food there is decadent."

"And expensive," Nikki added. "I've been begging Scott to take me there for weeks."

Andrea's gaze settled after a moment on Nikki. It was almost as if the girl was too short to make it onto her radar. "Isn't your husband a doctor? You should be able to afford it."

"And Meg's husband is too," Hanna offered.

Andrea's brows rose. "Really."

"If they have sugar-free items on the menu, I'm in, too," Hannah added. "We aren't likely to be offered that tonight *here*."

"I'll be there too." Amber gave them her loveliest smile. "Good thing I married a dentist. At least he can preserve my teeth, even if he can't drop my weight."

Meg tilted her head. "Amber, you look just right. You were too thin in high school."

Amber's expression was one of supreme gratitude. She mouthed the words "thank you" before turning to leave. "See you all next Saturday."

Andrea watched her go. "It helps to be tall. At least I can gain and it's not noticeable."

If she was fishing for a compliment, she was to be disappointed. When no one responded, a pained expression settled across her face. "Well, see you all Saturday. I guess I'm in as well. Might as well have a free meal and '*catch up*' on the gossip."

The phrase had definitely been directed at Heather. Meg was glad the girl had already left.

Mellie waited until Andrea was gone. "Someone please," she said under her breath, "remind me just *why* we ran around with her in high school? I swear, I couldn't figure it out then, either."

Meg turned to see Matt watching her with an odd expression

on his face and tried to suppress a smile. "I need to get back to my other half. See you all there." She waved goodbye to the remainder of the group and led the way back to Matt. Except for Andrea, the group had been a fun bunch in school. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to meet once more.

"Oh God," Nikki muttered as they moved back toward the table. "Tell me I'm not really invited. *Please.*"

Meg laughed. "Oh, but you are."

Nikki shook her head. "I was afraid of that. I'm not going."

"You have to. If you don't go, I won't. And Heather's willing to go to a lot of trouble for us. What if no one else shows up? She'd be so hurt."

Nikki stared at her a second. "So, throw a guilt trip on me already. I hate you."

A giggle escaped Meg as Matt rose to hold her chair for her.

"Looks like a fun bunch." The hint of cynicism in his voice was unmistakable.

Nikki rolled her eyes heavenward, and Meg shook her head.

"Mm. Not much."

They spent the rest of the evening mostly in the company of Scott and Nikki. Once, however, Meg looked up to see Hannah standing above her.

"I can't stay," she whispered. At Meg's unsure glance, she continued. "Andrea was always so cynical about my diabetes. Thank you for not mentioning my pump."

Meg rose and hugged her. "Oh, Hannah. We would never do that. It's confidential."

"I knew you wouldn't. But thank you, anyway."

Nikki made the familiar motion to indicate her lips were zipped, and Hannah smiled and left. "See you next Saturday. I'm looking forward to talking about someone's life other than mine."

Meg watched her go as Matt glanced down at her. The familiar half-grin landed on his face.

"Proud of you, princess."

She shook her head, just as the MC announced the buffet was ready. Matt rose and guided her toward it.

Nikki and Scott managed to reach the line ahead of them. With the large number of people present, however, it was slow, and Meg raised up on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "Matt? I'm going to run to the restroom."

He nodded. "Go ahead. You'll be back before we reach it. But hurry every chance you get." He gave her a wink.

Meg found she wasn't the only one with the idea. The line in the restroom trailed all the way out past the door, however, and she glanced at the buffet line from around the corner. They might be still here waiting for food at ten-thirty, at this rate.

It seemed an eternity before she was able to finish up and wash her hands. The line had made a good deal of progress, however. As she left the restroom, she turned the corner, looking for Matt. He was almost to the buffet table and met her eyes, motioning her over. Meg started toward him.

She wasn't sure exactly how it happened. Suddenly, she found herself hurtling forward and landed on her face on the floor, the wind knocked out of her. She pushed herself up onto her hands and knees and then remembered what Matt had said earlier about her dress being so short.

"Oh dear. Poor Megan," a snide voice said close by. It sounded like Andrea's voice.

Meg froze, blinking. Her cheeks were hot, and she heard people around her gasping with dismay at her fall and asking if she was all right. She raised her head, trying to look around for Matt, but she couldn't see him.

It suddenly dawned on her. She couldn't see *anything*.

"No. Oh, no," she whispered.

"Princess? What is it?" Matt's voice. He had left the line to come for her. "Contacts?"

"Yes, both of them." Her voice was tremulous.

Strong arms reached down to grasp her elbows and bring her

to her feet and into his arms. His hand on the back of her neck pulled her closer, until her head was tucked under his chin. "Wait here; I'll bring your purse."

"Matt, my glasses aren't in it. I'm sorry, I meant to get them—the lenses must be on the floor somewhere—I need to hunt for them." Her voice was growing more frantic by the second.

"Megan. Stop." he whispered into her ear. "Listen to me. I tucked your container of contacts into your purse on the way. Hear me?" He began guiding her toward the restroom and took her shoulders into his hands. "Wait here. I'll get it." Disappearing for a brief moment, he returned, holding the purse open so he could see what was in it.

"I'm buying you another purse. One where everything doesn't fall to the bottom."

Meg waited patiently as he retrieved them, placing the little plastic holder into her hands. "Here. I'll wait here for you."

By now, the restroom was almost empty, and she made her way to the sink with shaking hands. Staring into the mirror at the fuzzy image reflected back at her, she wanted to cry. It wasn't the first time she'd fallen on her face in front of the crowd of her peers. She'd done it in high school more than once. Her parents hadn't had the money to purchase contacts then, and she'd often been guilty of taking her glasses off for vanity's sake.

Remembering Matt was just outside the door touched her heart. The way he'd hugged her to him after she'd fallen, the way he always looked out for her meant the world to her. He'd probably noticed she'd left her glasses, and that was why he had picked up her extra set of contacts.

He'd looked out for her since the first day she'd met him. At age twenty-four, Meg had come to see him after a viral illness that had hung on too long. She was wearing her glasses then, but when Matt stepped into the room to see her and she saw how handsome he was, she immediately took them off and stuffed them into her purse. He spent a good deal of time with her, and

his comment, "I'd like to see you again in a week," was met with no resistance at all, even though she had to take off work to keep the appointment.

During the following week, she'd been unable to think of anyone but him, and when she went back for her follow-up, she'd deliberately left her glasses in her purse. She'd been embarrassed when she stumbled going into the exam room, hoping no one else noticed.

But Matt had. The first thing he asked was where her glasses were. Her answer of, "I-I don't always wear them," had not convinced him, and he'd taken her outside in the hall for a brief vision test. When he realized how poor her sight was without them, he'd brought her back to the room and demanded she put them back on and wear them. He'd taken her by the shoulders and said, "You look beautiful without them. And you look beautiful *and* intelligent with them. Hasn't anyone ever told you intelligent is sexy?"

She'd never believed him. But the fact that he tried to reassure her was so precious, she'd fallen the rest of the way—and there wasn't far to go—for him then and there.

"Princess? Are you okay in there?"

She jumped. "I'll be out in a minute." Drawn back to the present, she managed to get her left lens in place, and then she could see well enough to get the right. She was thankful he'd brought the little container with the solution in it. Her hands were still shaking when she moved toward the door and met him outside.

He was waiting for her, just as he'd promised. Taking her in his arms for a long hug, he brought her around the other way to the back of the line. It was almost finished, and he handed a plate to her. She managed a smile and a nod when others asked if she was all right. The truth was she was humiliated beyond belief.

"You okay?" Nikki whispered suddenly, from her left.

Meg managed a smile but could only nod. "I'm all right. Just flustered."

"I'm so sorry. Andrea had a smirk on her face. I was about to slap it off, but Scott wouldn't let me."

Meg shook her head, forcing a grin. "I'll speak to him. He should have let you do it."

"Yeah. Someone needs to."

Matt's voice was quiet as he got her into her seat. "How's my girl?"

She swallowed, hard. "Embarrassed. I just want to go home."

Matt put an arm around her and brought her close. "Look around you, sweetheart. Do you see anyone looking at you?"

She raised her eyes and glanced around at the throng of people. He was right. No one was looking at her at all. She shook her head.

"If you really want to go home, I'll take you. But it would be much harder for you to face them at the next reunion." When she didn't answer, he gave her a squeeze. "Tell you what. After I get my dance, I'll take you if you still want to go."

She nodded. It was hard, but she managed. The MC began to lead them through the short program, and the music started. Her husband took her hand and began leading her to the dance floor. Before she knew it, she was in Matt's arms and slow-dancing. He held her closely, possessively, and she leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

A slow smile lit her face as she danced the next two numbers in his arms.

The next one was a faster one, and he leaned down into her ear as it started. "Still want to go home?"

"Yes." When she nodded, he retrieved her wrap and said goodbye to Scott and Nikki. Nikki waved to her, a sympathetic expression on her face.

"Later," she mouthed, putting a hand to her ear. "I'll call you."