

Stealing Her Breath

By

Misty Malone

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Chapter One

Penny Anderson pulled up in front of her new apartment building and put her car in park. She didn't feel good and was tired, so she sat back in her seat and took a few minutes to rest and let her mind wander. She looked up at the apartment building she was moving into. She'd been lucky to find this apartment. It was a nice complex, and apartments here didn't come up for rent often. On top of that, they only had a dozen that were furnished, and this was one of them, which was perfect for her.

She'd just graduated from a very influential college, but unlike the majority of the students there, she wasn't rich. She'd attended on a full scholarship, and had a part-time job to pay for her living expenses, such as shampoo and a few necessary clothing items. She'd never felt like she fit in at college, always feeling like she didn't belong there. She only knew one or two others who had a job, and while she felt more comfortable around them, they didn't have much time to spend together. Much like her, they always seemed to be either working or studying.

The people she spent more time around were her roommates and others who lived in the same dorm. They were all right, she guessed, but were always trying to get her to party more than she felt she could take time for. She had to keep her grades up to keep her scholarship, but many of them didn't seem to care much about grades. As long as they all passed, their parents were happy and kept paying the bills.

They all claimed to be best friends, though, and pledged to be there for each other whenever one of them needed anything. That pledge meant something to her, so she'd helped several of them when they'd asked for help. When she was feeling under the weather and asked for help moving her things across town to her new apartment after they graduated, they all assured her absolutely they'd be there to help. They'd all pack their cars full and have her settled into her new apartment in one trip, easy. Shawn, the guy she'd dated a few times lately, assured her he'd definitely be there. She was grateful for the help, and anxious to start her new life.

Today, though, moving day, no one showed, not even Shawn. What was worse, only two of them even bothered to call her and give a lame excuse for not being able to help. Shawn said since she didn't feel up to going out last night, he went out with some of his friends and they got drunk. He had a hangover this morning and didn't feel up to helping her move. He promised to come see her in a day or two, though, once she was moved in and settled. She told him not to bother, and hung up on him.

Since no one else showed up, she loaded her little car with as many boxes as she could fit in, and headed across town. On the way there she thought about her so-called friends, including Shawn. They had all seemed pretty shallow to her, so the fact that none of them showed up to help really didn't bother her as much as she thought it would, not even Shawn. Instead, she found herself looking forward to starting a new life, with a new job, and the opportunity to meet some people who could become true friends.

Her parents had never been married, and, in fact, she'd never known her dad. He left before she was six months old, and she'd never heard a word from him. She honestly didn't know if he was still alive or not. Her mother did her best to raise her herself, and Penny loved her and was close to her. They never had much money, but that didn't matter to Penny. Unfortunately,

her mother became ill when Penny was a junior in high school. Her mother didn't have any insurance, so she didn't go to the doctor until it got too bad. She went to the emergency room and they admitted her, but she died later that night.

Penny lived with her grandmother after that. When she was offered the full scholarship at a good school she jumped at it. Although she never went to a doctor much growing up and really didn't care much for them, seeing her mother die because of not having the money to go to one sooner made Penny resolve to never be in that situation. She never wanted to make a ton of money and be like the shallow people she went to school with, but she was determined she would make enough money to be able to afford a comfortable home and anything she needed, including insurance. Graduating from a prestigious college would go a long way toward making that happen.

While she was resting, she took a moment to reflect back on the last two weeks. A lot had happened in that short time period. She'd applied for more than three dozen jobs over the past three months, but hadn't heard back yet from any of them, other than a few that said they don't hire new graduates, but wished her the best of luck. Then two weeks ago she got a call. A well-known local accounting firm invited her in for an interview. She thought it went well, but couldn't tell for sure. A week later she got the call, offering her the job. Two days after that she graduated magna cum laude.

Finding a furnished apartment in such a nice area, close to the job she'd just landed was a stroke of luck, for sure. What wasn't a stroke of luck was how she felt. She had what she thought was a cold, but apparently was more like the flu. Her stomach wasn't really upset, but she had no appetite, and her throat was sore. The worst part of it was she had absolutely no energy. Unfortunately, that didn't really matter. She'd spent the few days after graduation in a motel, waiting for this apartment to become available. Now that it was, she had to get everything out of her motel room to avoid paying for another night.

She'd made it this far, but now here she sat, with her first load of things to move in, and no energy. She needed a plan. She'd discovered that she could make it through about anything, as long as she had a plan, and could see the light at the end of the tunnel. She thought a few minutes while she rested, and came up with a plan. She had to push herself to get this done, but she told herself that after getting everything from her car into the apartment, she would find the box containing her bed linens, which she made sure to bring in the first load. She would make the bed, then go get another load of her things. After unloading her car that time, she would reward herself with a quick nap before getting the rest of her things here.

With that resolve, she got out of the car and pushed on. She reached into the back seat to grab a box, when she heard a deep voice behind her. "Would you like some help unloading some of this? I'm going that way anyway."

Penny didn't feel good at all, and had been thinking about that louse, Shawn, on the way over here, which put all men in a bad light at the moment. She assumed her position at the moment, with her head in the car and her butt sticking out, had something to do with whatever the white knight who was offering to come to her rescue had in mind. "I'm quite capable of doing it myself, thank you very much," she snapped.

The man said something about letting him know if she changed her mind, but she wasn't listening. She felt guilty as soon as the words left her mouth. She knew her illness played a part in her snapping like that, but she still felt bad. That wasn't like her, and that man certainly didn't deserve her wrath. She stood to apologize, but the man was gone. She couldn't blame him, but she still felt bad. She reached back in and grabbed a box and headed for the front door.

Later that night, much later, she made it back with the last of her belongings. She hadn't eaten anything all day, and although she wasn't hungry, she knew she needed to eat to get her strength back. She had gone through a drive through on her way back with her last load, to pick up a meal. Once she got her car unloaded, she got her food. She ate a couple bites and gave up. She put it in her fridge.

She got her phone and saw that she'd mixed several texts. Scrolling through them, they were from Shawn and her other supposed friends. They all hoped she got moved okay and suggested when she got settled in to let them know and they'd break the apartment in with a party. She couldn't believe how self-serving and immature these people were. Their messages made her even more anxious to start a new life. Right now, though, she was going to bed. Surely she'd feel better in the morning. She drifted off to sleep with that thought.

Unfortunately, however, her dreams didn't come true, and in the morning she felt no better than she had when she went to bed. It was Thursday, and she was supposed to start her new job on Monday. As much as she hated dealing with doctors, even she had to admit her chances of feeling like starting a new job in less than a week without seeing a doctor were pretty slim. She found the phone book she'd been given the day before when she moved in, and set about looking for the nearest doctor who would see her yet today.

Finding a doctor that was taking new patients turned out to be way more difficult than she'd anticipated, but she finally found one, and it was even close to her apartment. It was with a Dr. Jarvis. She was assured he was a good doctor, but relatively new to this area, which is why he was taking new patients. She laid down to rest a little bit before she had to take a shower and go. She dreamed of being in an exam room at a doctor's office, when an overweight man that should have retired years ago walked into the room, introducing himself as Dr. Jarvis.

She woke up, not feeling any more rested than when she fell asleep. She took a shower, telling herself it didn't matter how old this doctor was, he would still be able to give her some antibiotics so she could start feeling better. She got dressed and left, anxious to get some medicine and get back home.

"You said it should open in the front?" Penny gave the disgustingly perky nurse what she hoped was an innocent, pleasant-looking smile, as she started to unbutton her blouse.

"Yes, and you can leave your bra on. Then have a seat on the examining table. Dr. Jarvis will be in in a few minutes."

"Okay, thank you." Penny watched the nurse leave, then casually slid the examination gown into the wastebasket and sat in the chair. She hated going to a doctor, or being sick enough to have to. But there was absolutely no way she was going to put one of their designer gowns on that opened in the front so some old crotchety geezer could get his jollies for the day.

She was still thinking about that when there was a knock at the door, followed by a deep masculine voice. "Hi, I'm Nick Jarvis. I don't believe we've met, Miss Anderson." She glanced up, expecting a short, fat man in his sixties, at least. Instead she saw a young, tall, muscle-bound, absolutely gorgeous specimen of a man, holding his hand out to her and smiling.

"Hi," she said, shaking his hand. "I'm Penny."

"Nice to meet you, Penny. I'm Nick. What can I help you with today?"

Before he got the full question out Penny started coughing, and coughing, and coughing. It sounded like she was going to cough up a lung, and felt like it, too. She was doubled over, trying to stop coughing, and didn't even notice Nick leave. She was still choking when he came back in with a glass of water and offered it to her. "Take short sips, Penny. That's it. Take a

couple more sips.”

She gradually got control again, and looked up at Nick, embarrassed. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome. Don’t try to talk yet, take another sip or two, and just relax.” She hadn’t noticed before, but he was gently rubbing her back, which felt really good. He continued that, and talked softly to her, encouraging more water, until she was over her coughing fit. “Feeling better?” She nodded, feeling like a fool in front of this incredibly handsome hunk. “Good.” He smiled at her as he continued rubbing her back. “When I ask what I can do for you, most people just tell me what hurts. I didn’t expect you to demonstrate the problem.”

She had to chuckle. She’d never met a doctor with a sense of humor. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t know why you’d be sorry,” he reasoned. “I’m sure this isn’t your favorite way to spend a sunny afternoon. Now, let’s see what we’ve got here.” He looked at her chart in his hand, and casually said, “We need to do something about your fever, about your cough, and about your dislike for doctors.”

He looked up to see her puzzled, but flushed face. “How did you know that?” she asked.

He smiled again. “According to the nurse’s note your temperature is 101.6, I heard your cough, and—”

“No, I mean, how did you know I don’t like doctors?”

He grinned as he answered. “When I saw you sitting in the chair instead of on the table, I wondered, but when I saw the gown in the waste basket, that was a dead give away. Either you don’t like doctors, or you’re not very good at following orders.”

Penny was so embarrassed she looked down at the floor. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

Nick just laughed and brushed it off. “Don’t worry about it. I do need to listen to your lungs, though, and it would be easier for me if you could sit up on the table for that.”

Penny felt like a fool as she stood to get up on the examination table. She was surprised when Nick held her elbow to help her up. “Thank you,” she told him, blushing.

“No problem, and no reason to be embarrassed, Penny. Lots of people don’t like coming to the doctor. Most of them suck it up and follow protocol, put the gown on, but it’s kind of refreshing to see someone who does her own thing.” That comment made Penny feel much better, and she smiled. “Now,” he continued, “let’s see what we’ve got going on in your lungs.”

“Do you need me to put the gown on?”

He laughed as he answered. “No, you’re fine. I am going to have to put my stethoscope inside your shirt, though. You’re not going to attack me or anything, are you?”

Penny could see the smile in his eyes, and couldn’t help being a little mischievous herself. “Well, I guess not this time, since you warned me.” She really liked this doctor. He was unlike any she’d ever met. Maybe coming here wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

“I hate to ask you this,” he said while checking her lungs, “but can you take a deep breath for me, please?” She took a deep breath, and started coughing again. He was immediately there with her water again. “Okay, take another sip or two, and shallow breaths.” As her coughing ended, he apologized. “I’m sorry I had to have you do that. I was afraid that would happen, but I had to hear your lungs.”

“It’s okay.”

He finished his examination, and gave her the bad news. “Penny, you’ve got bronchitis, but I’m concerned about your lungs. There’s some congestion starting. You need to take care of yourself or this could turn into pneumonia very easily. I’ll give you a prescription for antibiotics, and it’s important that you take all of them, and take them twice a day.”

“Okay.”

“We also need to get your fever down. You said you’ve taken Tylenol, but that obviously didn’t break the fever, so I’d like to give you a shot for that, and—”

“No, that’s not necessary. I’ll just take some Motrin or something.”

He watched her nervous fidgeting, and gently held her by her shoulders and spoke quietly. “Don’t like needles, either?”

Penny’s eyes quickly looked up into his. He could tell by the look in her eyes that she felt uneasy, maybe embarrassed, and he tried to calm her with a reassuring smile. It worked, as her shoulders slumped and she looked down. “Not at all.”

When she had looked into Nick’s eyes, he momentarily recognized something in her expression. He looked intently at her, like he was studying her. “I’ve seen you somewhere,” he said, “but I can’t figure out where.”

She looked at him quizzically. “Are you sure? I just moved here yesterday and I haven’t met many people yet.”

“That’s it,” he said, smiling. “You moved into an apartment down the hall from me. I offered to help you unload your car, but you, uh, robustly informed me you were quite capable of doing it yourself.”

She blushed yet again. “That was you?”

“Yeah, that was me. I didn’t see your face then, though, since you never turned around. I saw you again later on that day.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been fighting this cold for a week, but it hasn’t gotten any better. I was tired, and I wasn’t feeling too good yesterday. I’m not usually that rude.”

Nick looked at her with concern. “You were sick a week ago and waited until now to come see about it?” Before she could answer, he nodded, understanding setting in. “Oh, that’s right, you don’t like doctors. I forgot.”

“You must think I’m a real jerk.”

“On the contrary, I find you very interesting, in a challenging sort of way. Your chart says you’re single, and if you’re new in town, are you unattached, or is there a significant other somewhere out there?”

“No significant other anywhere.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. “Would you have dinner with me, once we get you healthy again?”

Nick smiled at the shocked expression on her face. After a few moments, though, he was relieved to see her smile. Unfortunately, just as she was about to answer, she started coughing again. He quickly offered more water, and commenced rubbing her back again.

When her cough ended he made a note on her chart. “We’ll get you some cough syrup today, too.”

She smiled. “Good. The over-the-counter stuff hasn’t done much.”

“I’ll give you something stronger. Now, about your fever—”

“Will Advil work?”

Nick sighed and shook his head in a grim fashion. “Penny, I’d really like to have the nurse give you a shot to bring that fever down, especially if this has been dragging on for a week. This is real close to pneumonia.”

“Please?”

He smiled. “Are you always this stubborn?”

“Occasionally,” she admitted, “if it’s important to me.”

Nick thought a few moments before responding. "I'll make a deal with you."

"What's that?" she asked suspiciously.

"We'll hold off for now, but you go home and take some Advil right away. Then let me stop by and check on you tonight. If your fever's still over 101, you let me give you a shot. Deal?"

"You can do that?"

He looked at her, smiling. "I can what; give shots? Yes, we learned that in med school. I'm actually pretty good at it."

"How do you know; have you ever given yourself a shot?"

He had to chuckle. "No, but seriously, I've been told I'm very gentle. So, do we have a deal?"

She hesitated before saying, "Dr. Jarvis—"

"Nick."

Smiling, she amended it. "Nick, I appreciate what you're doing for me, I do, it's just that—"

"You really don't like shots, do you?"

"I'm scared to death of them."

He reached out and gently picked up one of her hands, rubbing it soothingly. "I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important, Penny. I really don't think you want pneumonia."

"No, I don't." She sighed, and looked at him with a pitiful expression. "Okay, deal. If two Advils may help, will three work better?"

He stopped smiling and turned serious. "No, it won't. The label will say to take one, and if one doesn't work within thirty minutes you can take a second. You can take two when you get home, but no more than two. Understand?"

"Okay, just two. I hope it works."

"Me, too," he told her seriously. "Now, I want you to stop and get these prescriptions filled, then go home, take them and your Advil, and get into bed. I'll stop by later, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you, Doctor—Nick."

"That's better." He smiled, as he opened the door for her.

Penny thought about Nick the rest of the afternoon. She got her medicine and went home, but didn't go to bed. She hated going to bed during the day, but she did what she assumed was just as good. She went to her living room and lay down on her couch. She turned on the television and watched that while she contemplated the cute doctor, and dozed off.

She woke up two hours later, coughing. She went to the kitchen and got some water. She was still coughing, though not as badly, when she heard her doorbell. She opened the door, and doubled over coughing again.

Nick had his hands full, but laid everything down on the table by her door and helped her to the couch. He handed her the glass of water from the table, rubbing her back again. When she had her coughing under control she sat back and said, "Sorry. That's not how I normally invite people into my apartment."

He smiled. "I'm glad to hear that." His smile left, though, as he looked her up and down. "How come you're not in pajamas? I thought I told you to go to bed and rest."

"I did rest. I slept on the couch for a couple hours, until I started coughing again," she explained.

"Well, one out of two's better than nothing. At least you rested." He looked at her with a suspicious twinkle in his eyes. "Why do I get the impression that not only do you not like

doctors, but you're not fond of taking orders from them, either?"

She started to argue, but realized his impression was pretty much right on the money. "Oh, it's not just doctors," she said with a giggle. "I don't like taking orders from anyone."

"I can easily believe that," he said with a wink. "But right now you need to listen to your doctor."

"I may have a little problem with that, but I'll try. You're not like other doctors, so maybe I can listen to what you say."

He laughed and shook a finger at her. "Listening to directions is good, but following those directions is even better. Now, have you checked your fever since you've been home?"

"I don't have a thermometer."

"Why not?"

"I don't like them."

"Much like doctors?" He'd retrieved his medical bag while they were talking, and took out a newfangled thermometer that he simply ran over her forehead. "Was that really that awful?" he asked, as he read the results.

"You're done?"

"That's it. That didn't hurt, did it?"

"No, that wasn't bad. I thought you had to put something under your tongue for like an hour."

"You haven't been to a doctor for some time, have you?" He looked at the thermometer again, and frowned.

"No, I haven't, but I don't like the look on your face," she observed nervously.

"I don't like what I'm seeing on this thermometer, either. Let me check it one more time." He did, and then frowned again as he gave her the bad news. "Penny, the Advil didn't help any. It's 101.8 now, and we really can't let it go. If we don't get this down you're going to end up in the hospital with pneumonia."

"I can't do that," she insisted.

"I understand you'd rather not do that, but—"

"No, I mean I can't do that. I don't have any insurance yet."

"Yet?"

"I came here because I got a job. I start Monday, which is why I went to see you today. I have to be there Monday for sure. My insurance doesn't start until thirty days after I start my job, so I can't go to the hospital now."

He nodded his head in understanding. "Did you have the money for your medicine today?"

"Yes, I got it, and I took it."

"Okay, good. If we're going to keep you out of the hospital and try to have you feeling better by next week, I really do need to give you that shot, Penny. I'm sorry, but there really aren't any other options." He saw her start to panic and quickly tried to assure her. "It won't be all that bad, really. First, though, I have a favor to ask. I'm really dry. Could I get a drink of water?"

"Sure, I'll get you some." Nick watched her get up and slowly go to the kitchen, looking like she was about to have a root canal. He hated to ask her to get up and get him a drink, but he knew if she watched him get her injection ready she'd worry more, so he quickly got it out and ready while she was in the kitchen, and laid it on the table behind him, hopefully out of her sight.

"Here's your water," she said forlornly.

Nick's heart went out to her. "Thank you. Penny, I brought a paper that talks about bronchitis and what will help you get over it. Can you look it over while I get this ready, see if you understand it, and then we'll talk about it afterwards?"

"How long is this going to hurt?" she asked.

He smiled and once again tried to assure her. "This isn't one that will make your arm stiff, so you will have forgotten all about it by the time I leave, I promise."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. Now, let me wipe this antiseptic on your arm, and then you read that while I get this ready, okay?" She nodded, as he wiped her arm. As soon as she started reading the material he quickly got the syringe and gave her the shot before she had any idea what he was doing.

"Ow. What was that?" She looked over and saw the syringe in his hand, and her eyes grew. "Nick?"

"It's all over, Penny. You did great." He smiled at the shock on her face. He put the syringe back in his medical bag and handed her a sucker. "Here you go. I give all my patients a sucker when I'm proud of them." He started rubbing her back gently, trying to calm her. She looked like she was about to have a panic attack.