

Healing Hurts

by

Stella Moore

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Chapter 1

Leaning back against the bar, Eric Calloway took a long, slow pull of his beer as he looked around the restaurant. He was supposed to be meeting his buddy, Paul, for a double date. He snorted loudly, earning him a reproachful look from the woman two seats down at the bar. By way of apology, he tipped his beer bottle towards her and grinned.

A blind double date. What had he been thinking? *You were thinking that it's been too long since you had a woman over your knees*, he reminded himself. Having friends that shared his interests sometimes came in handy. Paul, or rather Paul's sweet, bubbly wife Elisa, had been picking at him for months to meet her friend, Penelope.

Glancing back towards the front door, he spotted Paul holding the door open for a gaggle of older ladies. He couldn't quite hide his smirk as the women smiled flirtatiously and giggled as they walked by. He could practically hear them cooing over him. "Oh, what a sweet young man. His mama raised him right." If they only knew.

Directly behind the gaggle was Elisa, doing her own exaggerated impression of the ladies who had so shamelessly fawned over her husband. Paul leaned down and whispered something in her ear that caused her to blush a pretty shade of pink as she shook her head vehemently. From across the room, he saw her mouth form the words "No, sir." Something that he didn't quite recognize as jealousy twisted in his gut.

Then she walked in and even the remnants of jealousy quickly fled. Tall, possibly as tall as his own six feet with the heels she strode in on, she was a knockout. Dark brown hair with hints of red and gold woven throughout bounced in wild curls around her face. And oh man, what a face it was. If he was the type of man to use phrases like porcelain skin, that was exactly how he'd describe her. When she turned her head and pinned him with wide, expressive eyes, he couldn't make out their color but he could see the challenge in them. Pushing away from the bar, he kept his gaze locked on hers as he made his way over to them. Much to his surprise and delight, the haughty challenge never wavered and she didn't look away.

"Hello, gorgeous." Amusement joined the challenge in her eyes—he could see that they were a sea glass green now that he was up close and personal—and her mouth tilted up in a slow smile of feminine appreciation.

Before she could answer, Elisa practically squealed with excitement. "Eric! You're here!" She threw her arms around him and squeezed. Pulling away, she grinned up at him. "I see you've met Penelope. Penny, Eric. Eric, Penny."

"Nice to meet you, Penny." When she slid her hand into his offered one, he felt himself stiffen at the softness of her skin. Surprise flitted over her features when he lifted her hand and pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles in lieu of the more formal handshake she'd obviously been expecting. "It must be my lucky night," he quipped with a wink.

She rolled those clear green eyes and it was all he could do to not pull her across his knees right there in the little waiting area of the restaurant. Instead, they turned to follow the hostess, and he contented himself with the vision of her high, round backside encased in snug denim. Thank you, Elisa.

Penelope Frost studied her date for the evening from across the table as he chatted with Paul and Elisa. She had begged, wheedled, and tried to bribe her way out of the evening, but Elisa was having none of it. Her tiny bestie had laid on a guilt trip that would have made any Catholic

mother proud and in the end, Penny had agreed. If nothing else, she could have one night of fun before returning to her self-imposed hiatus from dominant, and domineering, men.

“So, Penny, what do you do for a living?”

Eric turned slightly and pinned her with those deep brown eyes again. Who knew brown eyes could be so incredibly sexy? But then, there was little about her date that wasn't. He stood an inch or so taller than her in the four inch heels she was currently torturing herself with, and being eye to eye with him was definitely not a hardship. He was more filled out than Paul, who had a lean, runner's body. She could picture Eric on the cover of a calendar full of half-naked firemen or running down opponents on the football field. His nose was slightly crooked, making her wonder if he'd broken it at some point, but the slight flaw only increased his appeal.

Before she could answer his question, Elisa chimed in. “Penny is the world's best photographer. Seriously, she's incredible. I wanted her to do our wedding but...” she trailed off, shooting Penny an apologetic glance. Penny groaned inwardly and prayed Eric wouldn't voice the confusion written on his face.

“Best in the world might be stretching things. Certainly the best in a hundred-mile radius,” she joked, hoping to distract from the awkward moment.

“What's your favorite thing to photograph?” Eric asked, his genuine interest in her work chipping away at her resistance towards the evening and towards him.

“Newborns. They're so tiny and they basically just sleep through the whole thing. And I get some great shots when they end up peeing all over the person holding them,” she added with a grin.

Eric looked surprised for a moment and then let out a deep belly laugh. “You'll have to show me some of those one day. I bet they're incredible.”

“Well, let's see how this date goes and then we can talk about showing you my etchings,” she replied with a wink, eliciting yet another deep laugh. “Elisa tells me you own your own business?”

“That I do. I own a few small sporting goods stores, and I also have a few people who work for me giving private coaching lessons.”

Oh God. Not a jock. She prayed for strength. “Oh wow, that's really impressive. What sports do you coach?”

“I have a few people on staff for football, one each for baseball and softball and another for golf. We're looking to branch out into tennis and lacrosse soon, but I haven't found anyone I trust for those positions as of yet.”

“I have a niece who plays softball. She's pretty good. You should give me your business card to pass on to my brother.”

“Of course.” Eric smiled at her, the simple gesture causing butterflies to dance in her stomach.

Oh boy.

Eric struggled to concentrate on the conversation at the table throughout the evening. Penelope was watching him with a look in her eye that had him ready to take her right there on the table. Elisa had told him that she was perfect for him, and he was finding it hard to disagree at the moment. While he wanted someone he could turn over his knee whenever he wanted, he also loved a woman who stood up to him and looked him in the eye. So far, he was getting all of that with the brunette bombshell sitting across from him.

So what was the catch?