

Excerpt from *Ready and Willing* by Cara McKenna

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"Well, your paperwork is fantastic. When are you available to have sex?"

The man opposite me smiles nervously. Our table is positioned beside the café's front window, and the silvery winter sunlight bounces off the brushed aluminum and lights up his eyes. They're pretty and complex, greenish gray with a bit of yellow. He spins his coffee cup around on its saucer, considering his schedule.

"I guess that's up to you," he says. "When are you...you know."

"Ovulating?"

He nods.

I study those eyes again. There's an intriguing dark ring around his irises. Shit, I'm not supposed to be noticing things like this. On paper he was a tidy inventory of genetic factors, and it'd be simplest if I could keep thinking about him that way. Then again, if I really wanted this to be simple, I'd have just gone to a sperm bank. I give myself a mental shake, pull my hair back, and twist it into a messy bun with the elastic from my wrist, as though this might magically imbue me with an aura of professionalism.

"Next week," I say. "And since you're being so open-minded about all this, I feel like I should let you in on something. In the interest of full disclosure."

He -- Noah Aubrey is his name, I may as well mention -- offers me a warm, kind smile. "You already showed me a letter from your gyno. What else is there to tell?"

"Well, have you ever heard that thing about executioners --"

Noah's laugh cuts me off. "Oh wow, I can't wait to see where this is going."

I wave a hand to dispel his worries. "No, no. It might be an urban legend, but I heard once that when someone's being put to death by lethal injection, they administer it using a button. Like you push a button and it opens some valve, and the condemned gets poison through their IV or whatever."

He laughs. "Okay, now you're just scaring me, Abby."

"But there's two buttons and two guys who push them, except only one really releases the...death serum. So neither man has to spend his life knowing for sure that he killed someone."

"You're telling me there's another guy."

I nod.

Noah nods as well, slow, not seeming too bothered by the news. "Okay. Better than you telling me there's death serum involved. Oh wait -- unless you're about to announce we'll be pushing our 'buttons' at the same time."

I swat him with my folded-up copy of his medical history. Noah is easy to swat. It's easy to forget we're meeting to discuss fluid procurement and not for a first date. He feels very familiar. Not as if we've met before, but as though he's made up of pieces of a dozen friends I've known for years. Like a car I've driven a hundred times, just in a different color than I'm used to.

"Nothing that scandalous," I say. "So, that's okay with you?"

He shrugs. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I dunno. Can you tell I've never done this before? I don't really know how the politics go." I study his face...kind and intelligent. I'd like an intelligent-looking baby who'll wind up with a fine, straight nose and black eyebrows like this man's. That easy smile. And tall doesn't hurt.

My fingers fuss with his paperwork, squaring up the corners with the edge of the tabletop, giving me something to stare at so I don't disturb Noah with all my scrutiny. "I have to ask...what did you think when you first saw the ad?" I'd placed it in the Boston Globe classifieds, not trusting my womb to craigslist.

"My colleague found it, actually," he says. "At first, to be honest, I thought it was nuts."

"I'm guessing it's the money that piqued your interest?"

"No, not really." Noah makes a thoughtful face, fascinating eyes darting, taking in whatever's going on out in the street beyond my shoulder. "I've always tried to take interesting opportunities when they come to me. New experiences. This one was a lot scarier than spelunking, though, I have to tell you."

"Did I mention we have to spend the night in a haunted mansion first?"

Noah laughs, and it gives him a dimple. I wish I were in a position to develop a crush on him...but this conception arrangement is supposed to be no strings attached, and romantic feelings surely qualify as a string. A particularly tangled one, no doubt.

He leans back as though he's given himself permission to finally relax in my twisted company. "So I have to ask why not a sperm bank?"

I shrug and take a sip of my coffee. "It never sat right with me, just picking a man out of a catalog. I wanted to meet you. You and the other guys I got in touch with. I wanted to make sure... I don't know." I twirl my hands around, searching for the right wording. "That your souls seem right, I guess. Sorry, that sounds sort of oovy-groovy."

"No, that makes sense."

"And it seems kind of fair that you'd meet me. In case you cared what kind of sperm-wrangling she-devil is planning on possibly having your child. If you care."

"I care," Noah says, nodding. He's so good-looking I want suck on his fingers. Which is weird, because that thought has never occurred to me before with anyone, under any other circumstance. This man is saddling me with unforeseen fetishes.

"I wouldn't agree to this if you seemed like some kind of psycho," he says, and I decide never to mention my finger-sucking impulse in case it contradicts his conclusion.

"And also," I say, "I figured since I'm doing this the old-fashioned way..." In a moment of juvenility, I make a little in-out-in-out motion with my fingers. "I thought you'd want to see me, so you'd know if you could pull it off. Without beer goggles. Or with," I add with another shrug.

He smiles and looks at the table, pink flushing his cheeks, so damned cute. There was nothing about cuteness in his medical history. He glances up again. "Don't worry. You're... I think you're very pretty."

"Well, lucky you, I guess." I feel as though we should shake hands or toast. Or kiss. Wait, no, definitely not kiss. I push my cappuccino mug across the table until it clanks against his cup. "How about next Tuesday evening?"

"Yeah, I think that'll work. What time?"

"Whenever you're free. By the way, in case you were worried," I add, "I'm not going to be taking the temperature of my womb or anything and calling you up at four a.m. to come over and service me."

He laughs. "No pagers. Good."

"And you don't need to keep your balls in a hermetically sealed jar or anything. Just try and keep them safe, at least until after next week."

I catch Noah blushing faintly behind his smirk. "I've been doing that for thirty-four years now. I think I can handle it."

"That's all I ask of you. That and a waiver, you know, about relinquishing your rights and not suing me. I'll have it ready for Tuesday."

"I love foreplay," Noah says drily, but his smile is warm.

"Good. Oh, and you probably want to know about the money."

"I was curious."

"Well, here's what I thought up. I'll give you a hundred bucks for every...successful interaction," I say, embracing how stupid this sounds.

"When and if I do get pregnant, I'll be paying you and the other guy each twenty-five hundred."

His handsome eyebrows rise. "Wow, pricey project. I wasn't...I wasn't expecting that much."

"Yeah, well, this kid's going end up costing me way more than that over the course of its life. I'm willing to shell out for the best, genetically speaking. And to be honest, I think I'll like, um...working with you. Both of you. And to be even more frank, if this does take more than just the first try, it's my hope that you won't sleep with anyone else for the time being. You know, because of STDs and just general complicatedness. So I want to make this worth your time."

"Well, I hope I can return the favor," Noah says, his smile turning shy.

I take out my card and scribble my address on the back. I did a background check on him and other man, Rob, and it's a calculated risk, bringing them into my home. No more risky than a date, I suppose. Probably less, since no one's heart is on the line.

I hand the card over. "So, I'll see you Tuesday night. How's six thirty?"

He nods, tucked my card into his wallet. "Sounds perfect. I'll come straight from work."

"Oh." A pang of unforeseen panic tightens my chest.

"What?"

"Do you want... I can make us dinner if you want. Or we could meet up later. Is that too weird? Me making dinner?"

Noah laughs. "I'd love dinner. I'll bring wine, if you drink."

"Yeah, we'll probably need it. Okay, good. I'll make ziti or something. Something not gassy," I add, feeling oddly at home being silly with this man. After all, his threshold for my potential weirdness is already high, given the nature of our meeting. I know the guy's sperm count, for crying out loud.

He stands; I stand. We hesitate a moment before I put out my hand, and we shake, such an innocuous bit of contact considering the deal we're signing off on. His touch matches his smile, warm and easy. When his hand releases mine it heads for his wallet, but I swat him again. I leave a few bills for our drinks and tip and let him hold the door for me. I walk him the half block to his car, an old black hatchback splattered with salty winter mud.

"Thanks again for meeting me," I say. "And all the doctor rigmarole."

"Sure."

"And just so you know, if Tuesday comes around and you decide I'm a psycho after all, don't feel like you need to call or make any excuses. If you don't show, I'll just have plenty of leftovers for dinner on Wednesday."

He smiles, and his teeth are as white as peppermint Chiclets. I want to run my tongue over them, discover what he tastes like. Probably just coffee, same as me.

"Thanks for the escape hatch," he says and unlocks his door.

"Thanks for the sperm," I say, and I laugh at my own ridiculousness.

"Yeah, no pressure." He makes a funny little theatrical stressed-out face and slides into his seat, then gives me a wave as I shut his door for him.

I can't believe this might actually work.