



Josée Renard

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By

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Chapter One

“No. Absolutely not. I’ll even do the spring fashion layout, and you know how much I hate models. Anything. Just not this story.” Jamie’s perfectly balanced blood pressure spiked. If she could see her heart, she knew it’d be black and blue from pounding against her rib cage. “Please, Frank, don’t make me do it.”

Her editor laughed, his bald head catching the sun and blinding Jamie for a crucial moment. When she blinked the glare from her eyes, her name was already printed in black on the storyboard for the March issue, and *nothing* changed the board. Not ever. Her name and her assignment would morph from black to green to red as the deadline loomed, but Frank never took anything off the board.

“Jamie, you’re the right person for this story. Everyone’s heard you complain about healthy food and you just admitted you hate models. But the one thing you complain about more than anything else is exercise. You’ve written columns about it, you blog about it at least once a month, and no one’s ever seen you walk more than across the street. You get more parking tickets than anyone else in the city. I know that because the police commissioner told me, so you obviously don’t do much walking. Well, exercise is big news, and you’re going to explore a part of it for us.”

“But, but...” No other words managed to escape Jamie’s mouth.

Frank chuckled again. “But me no buts. It’s your story. Find a personal trainer and spend the next six months getting fit.” His face

brightened. "I mean, just look at you. If you can do it, anyone can."

Jamie imagined the *before* pictures, because there was no way to write the story without them. Frank was big on visuals. Okay, so she might be a tiny bit overweight, but men liked that, didn't they? And where in hell was *she* going to find a personal trainer? She couldn't bear the thought of going to a gym. And any personal trainer she did find would drive her crazy.

She bowed to the inevitable and nodded her head in defeat.

After the aggravating meeting with Frank, Jamie's living room couch beckoned but she resisted. If she went home now, she knew exactly what would happen. She'd cuddle up with her favorite things: hours of mindless television, microwave popcorn, a pizza, and a glass or two of red wine.

Instead, journalist to the core, Jamie set about finding a personal trainer. She Googled "personal trainers, Vancouver" and ended up with a list of three hundred and twenty-seven entries. No surprise, but impossible to weed through. She tried "associations, personal trainers" but nothing came up.

And right there was a possible hook for her story. Trainers obviously weren't regulated and that meant there were sure to be some bad apples. She highlighted that idea in her notes.

In the end, she made the phone call she'd been avoiding. "Hey, Cheerio. What's up? Got a minute?"

Didn't matter if Jamie was looking for food or wine or travel or scandal, her best friend Cheerio knew, or knew how to find, every single thing in the city. Cheerio was the most connected person in town.

"Yeah, but only one. I have a meeting and can't be late. It's important and I don't want to make a bad impression."

"I need to find a..." Jamie hesitated.

"A what? A man? Yes, you do need to find a man and I've got just the one for you."

Jamie jumped in before Cheerio launched into the names of men she just couldn't wait to set up with Jamie. Every phone call with Cheerio was a further chapter in her ongoing rant about Jamie's non-existent love

life. This time she stopped Cheerio's rant with something even more interesting and less likely than a man.

"A personal trainer." Jamie waited for the response she knew would come.

Cheerio's roar of laughter hurt, even though Jamie was holding the phone at arm's length.

"A personal trainer? You? You're kidding, aren't you? Jamie McNeill, exercise? I don't think so."

"It's for a story that Frank's insisting I write. I tried to get out of it, but he won't let me. He's convinced I'm the perfect person to investigate *exercise*."

"You have to interview a personal trainer?"

"I wish that were all. I have to find one, make sure she's photogenic and can talk like a real person, and then..."

"And then what?"

"Go to the gym. Work out. Get fit. Write about it." Jamie's voice dropped away and then returned, a little more quietly and a lot more desperately. "For six months."

"Oh, Jamie, I'm so sorry."

And Jamie knew Cheerio meant what she said. She'd been there when Jamie had met, fallen head over heels in love with, and been dumped by the biggest jock in town, and it wasn't because she hadn't been thin or fit enough. He'd dumped her *after* she'd spent six months training for the Hawaiian Ironman.

"Don't worry, I'm going to find a woman, an older, smarter woman. Maybe one who works with seniors." Jamie knew the readers of City Magazine as well as anyone, and they would likely *not* appreciate that slant. But she'd find a way to write the story in a way that they would.

"Frank's okay with that?"

Jamie heard Frank's voice in her head. *Make it sizzle*. "No, of course he's not. But it's the only way I can do this story. Just give me a name." Cheerio knew everyone in the city, from musicians to moguls to jocks.

"You want the best trainer in town, you're going to have to work

with a man.”

“I can't. You know I can't.”

“Of course you can. You can because you *have* to. Frank won't go for anything less than hot, hot, hot. And this guy's red-hot. His name's Michael Whitfield and he works out of Cambie Athletic Club. Everyone talks about him. He's the best, he's our age and drop-dead gorgeous, plus he never does interviews or gets photographed for the club scene pages. *Everyone* wants to know about Michael Whitfield.”

Jamie wriggled and resisted and whined, but Cheerio remained adamant, refusing to give her another name, and Jamie couldn't bear the thought of asking someone else. In the end, she gave up and took down Whitfield's coordinates—because of course Cheerio had them.

That afternoon, Jamie procrastinated, having carefully closed up her notebook so that the phone number and address of her soon-to-be archnemesis were hidden from view.

She did some searches on him, coming up with all sorts of articles about Whitfield and Cambie Athletic Club, but nothing personal, nothing more from him than a few words of gratitude about the interviewer's interest in him and the club. Cheerio was right. He didn't give interviews. That meant that her story, while painful, would at least have some entertainment value, even if it wasn't news.

If Cheerio said he was hot—in the news sense of the word—then he was hot. Which meant her story would be hot. Which meant people would read it, her readership would increase, and maybe, just maybe she'd have enough clout to avoid Frank's next really aggravating idea for her.

She shook her head and tried to focus on what little she had to show for her online research. Michael Whitfield was *the* go-to trainer in Vancouver. Trainer to the stars who were often in town for vacations or film shoots, trainer to the lumber and oil moguls, trainer to the club hoppers and partygoers. And Cheerio was right about his looks. He was the sexiest man she'd ever seen.

She hated to admit it, but he was.

And just the thought of him adjusting her shoulders or her hips on

the mat was enough to get her hot. She wiped the drool off her keyboard and kept looking.

Jamie ignored the articles that mentioned his work with underprivileged kids and the program he'd set up for seniors at the city-owned gyms. She ignored the fact that he worked at these programs for free. She tried desperately to ignore the photographs—she tried *especially* hard to ignore the photographs, though without much success.

Because Michael Whitfield was everything she hated about jocks. Obviously arrogant—never mind his philanthropic bent, because surely his charitable endeavors were only to improve his image—he radiated good health, tofu and bean sprouts. But he was gorgeous. Drop dead gorgeous. Movie star gorgeous. Tall, dark, and handsome gorgeous. With a body to die for.

She clipped a couple of the photos—one in an Armani suit, and one in shorts and nothing else, sweat gleaming on his body. She told herself it was research but no matter how much she tried, she couldn't really convince herself of that.

Jamie flipped through the articles again. Not one contained quotes of any substance from Whitfield. That was weird. No, it was weirder than weird. It was downright peculiar.

For a guy to generate so much ink and none of it in his own words was almost unheard of. J.D. Salinger he wasn't. Maybe there *was* a story in Michael Whitfield, one that wouldn't require serious pain on her part. One that allowed her to avoid the stress of thinking about her last experience with a jock. One that was more substantial than a flavor-of-the-month puff piece.

Jamie looked down at her not-so-perfect body. "I can't do it, not even for a real story," she whispered, resting her head on her computer screen. "I'll just quit my job. There are plenty of magazines looking for experienced writers."

She straightened up and started typing her resignation. She was actually pretty good at this—she typed her resignation once a week on average. Working for Frank wasn't easy, especially if, like Jamie, you wanted to work for the Washington Post or the New York Times and not

fluff like City Magazine.

"It is with great regret I inform you that I will be leaving..." She left the date blank. "I've loved working with you all, but circumstances are such..." Jamie grinned. She seldom made it past the *circumstances are such* phrase. The mere act of typing the ridiculous words forced her to do the job, whatever it was, that she didn't want to do.

Fine. She'd write the story. But since it was 4:00 o'clock on Friday, she would put off phoning Michael Whitfield until Monday morning. She was going home, calling for a pizza, and watching whatever was on television. The more mindless, the better.

* * * * *

Michael Whitfield's Saturdays and Sundays were just regular working days to him. In fact, they were often his busiest days. He tried to take at least one day off a week but he seldom could. Someone had to reschedule an appointment, someone desperately needed to start with a trainer immediately, some actor or model or singer needed to get buff for a video or movie shoot the following week.

Since moving to Vancouver, Michael had worked harder than he could remember. And that was good. He liked working hard. It kept him occupied and out of trouble. It kept him out of the papers.

Because staying out of the media had become his goal in life almost ten years ago.

So he busted his ass and put his money away. Two more months and he'd have enough to buy the Cambie Athletic Club and get back to where he'd been before a scumbag reporter had published a story with no evidence, sent his club into bankruptcy, and ruined his life.

Michael had learned to live with the loss of the club he'd worked so hard to build, learned to live with people in town crossing to the other side of the street when they saw him coming, but he'd never gotten over his aversion—his severe and obsessive aversion—to reporters. He'd spent ten years of his life trying to get back what that reporter had taken from him.

* * * * *

Monday morning arrived too early. Jamie wasn't a morning person at the best of times and because she'd been dreading the call to Michael Whitfield, she hadn't slept well. Dragging herself out of bed was only ever accomplished by the use of two alarm clocks, one across the room on her dresser, the other—an extra large wind-up one—on the bare hardwood floor outside the bedroom door. A lengthy shower and a stop at the coffee shop down the street for a double espresso and a chocolate muffin completed the routine, turning her from a zombie into a relatively normal human being.

But Jamie knew if she stopped at all this morning she'd never finish the journey to the office so she brewed a pot of coffee while she was in the shower. Three cups later, she was on her way to the office where she immediately poured herself a cup of the sludge they called coffee at the magazine.

Her hands trembled as she picked up the receiver of the telephone and checked the phone number at the top of her notepad. And then she started talking to herself.

"It's the coffee, silly. Four cups and eight teaspoons of sugar. No wonder you're shaking."

Jamie resolved to cut back on the caffeine and sugar. That resolution—along with the walk-to-work one, the stop-procrastinating one, and the spend-less-money one—were regulars on her to do list. None of them ever got further than the list.

She checked the number one last time, took a deep breath, and dialed.