

## "Petite"

The most infuriating woman I had ever met handed me the keys to her car, kissed me, and walked out my front door.

Every bone in my body said to follow her. Not just to stop her from leaving, but because I lived in a residential neighborhood. She wasn't likely to catch a taxi on my block at four in the morning. Smart money would be on me driving her to the airport. But I stayed where I was, looking at the keys in my palm.

Joanne Walker had never voluntarily handed those keys over to somebody else in her life, and she'd just given them to me.

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*Five years earlier*

"Michael. Michael Morrison. It's good to meet you." I'd repeated the same words, the same solid handshake, dozens of times already. Seattle weather was cooperating, pouring sunshine down on a Fourth of July picnic, and it looked like everybody from the Seattle Police Department's North Precinct who wasn't on duty that day had turned up. The man introducing me around, Captain Anthony--Tony--Nichols, was pleased. It was a good opportunity to meet my new team in less formal circumstances than the department building, he said. It would warm them up to me.

I didn't want them warmed up, I'd told him. I wanted them to do their jobs.

He'd looked at me, and though he hadn't said it, I'd heard it anyway: *You're young, Mike. Trust me on this.*

I was young, and that was why I wanted formality. Thirty-three was damned young to be taking over as precinct captain. I had the credentials--youth correctional

programs in high school, college completed in four years, volunteer services for the department in my free time, top of my academy class, made detective by twenty-five, lieutenant by twenty-eight. Every officer in Seattle knew the only thing I'd ever wanted to be was a cop, and they respected the effort I'd put into it.

My hair had also gone silver by my thirtieth birthday. I wasn't kidding myself: if it hadn't, I'd still be a lieutenant instead of preparing to take over the North Precinct when Tony Nichols retired at the end of the month.

But I was young, which was also why I listened to Nichols. Why I trusted him. He'd been a cop longer than I'd been alive, and he'd been a captain since before I reached double digits. If all I wanted was to be a cop, then I'd be a fool not to learn from men like Nichols. So I was at the picnic in shirtsleeves and slacks, as informal as I would let myself get, even surrounded by men and women in shorts, tank-tops, t-shirts and skirts. Plenty of them were in uniform, too: men--mostly men--coming or going from their shift, but mostly they were casually dressed, and I was a little too formal.

That suited me just fine.

We worked our way through the picnic--this is Bruce, bad hamstring injury sideline him to desk work, that's Ray, real fireplug of a guy, Jenn works Missing Persons, over here is Sandy, yes, he knows his hair is red, not blond--and I'd relaxed enough to accept, if not drink, the bottle of beer someone offered when I first saw her.

She was sitting on the hood of a purple car that had been rolled illegally far onto the grass. A dozen or more big men sat around the vehicle's front end, passing beer and whiskey bottles back and forth, frequently via the woman on the hood. One bottle tipped as it was passed over, and the guy who'd spilled wiped the splash off the car's paint job without thinking about it, like making sure the Mona Lisa didn't get stained. I knew nothing about cars, but the paint job had to be Mona Lisa quality: the purple glowed with an internal shimmer, like someone had layered starlight into it. Its shadows were black and in sunlight the purple looked deep enough to dip your hand into. The only reason I was certain you couldn't really was because she *was* sitting on it, not sinking in like it half-seemed she should be.

She was as startling as the car. Even from the distance she looked as tall as I was, just under six feet. Her black hair was cropped boyishly short. Aviator sunglasses rested on a beaky nose above a full mouth, and her shoulders were broad and square. She had muscular arms bared by a white tank-top. Not the slender long muscles women got from careful gym regimes, but bulk, real strength, like she did heavy work for a living. Her legs were muscular too, and her bare feet dangled over the car's grill. She made me think of pin-up models, except strong and lean instead of bombshell curves.

"Thought you liked petite redheads."

"What?" I looked away from the woman.

Nichols hid a grin, poorly. "Thought you liked petite redheads. Curvy ones. Seems to be what you date."

Heat built around my collar. "She caught my eye, that's all. Who is she?"

"Joanne Walker. One of our mechanics."

I hated that I said it: "She's a *mechanic*?" She looked like a mechanic's girlfriend. She looked like the luckiest mechanic in Seattle's girlfriend, but like a girlfriend.

"Mm. She rebuilt that car she's sitting on. Calls it Petite."

"Her car has a *name*?" Worse than having a name, it was emblazoned on the license plate, suddenly visible as someone leaned over to get another beer.

"A lot of people name their cars, Mike. Anyway, she put herself through college on scholarships and working at Chelsea's Garage over in the University District," Nelson went on. "I'd seen her a few times. Recognized her when she came in to apply for the Motor Pool job last fall."

"She's hard to miss."

Nichols nodded. "She's half Cherokee. I wanted her to join the force, but the idea scared her."

I lifted an eyebrow at him. "She's six feet tall. How can anything scare her?"

Nichols laughed. "She's a kid, Mike. About twenty-three. She doesn't know a damned thing about herself, and she's not ready to stick her head out past what she's

familiar with, not yet. She's smart and she's great with cars, and right now that's all she's ready for. I talked her into going to the Academy before she started in the Motor Pool, just in case it woke her up to her own potential."

Twenty-three. Ten years younger than me. Too young, even if she wasn't an employee. I shook my head without knowing I'd done it and saw it reflected in Nichols' eyes. Not just his eyes, but in his expression, too, like he was seeing something I wasn't sure I wanted him to. "Did it? Not if she's one of the mechanics."

"She graduated in the top third of her class. Too proud to do worse, I think, and too cautious to do better. Except in the defensive driving course. They said she was the best driver they'd ever had come through the school. She was a good shot, too, not afraid of guns. But she wanted the Motor Pool when she came back, and I thought it wasn't time to push her. Not yet. So she's down in the garage for now. I'd wondered at first if she'd get along, the only woman down there, but..."

He gestured, encompassing the ring of men littered around the purple car. Walker sat above them like their queen, laughing and passing alcohol back and forth. She leaned over and stole somebody's burger for a bite, then handed it back, and he didn't complain. "Not a problem," I said dryly.

"I think she's their mascot, if you can put mascots on a pedestal. That's most of the Motor Pool over there. You want me to introduce you?"

"Maybe later."

Nichols failed a second time to hide his grin. "Right. Well. I think I'll go grab some of Elise--that's Bruce's wife--some of her potato salad. If they ever invite you to dinner, say yes. Elise is one of the best cooks I'd ever met."

"Will do." I watched Nichols retreat--because that's what he was doing, and without a hint of subtlety--then went back to studying Joanne Walker.

Smart money was on walking away, or waiting for Nichols to come back and put a badge and a formal introduction between us. The woman--the *girl*--was an employee, and I wasn't going to start my captain's career with a score like that against me. I hadn't come this far this fast by making stupid mistakes.

But for some reason I had to see which of us was taller. I was halfway to the gathering at the purple car before I realized it, and then Walker noticed me and it was too late to find another destination.

She slid off the car's hood and stepped over one of the men surrounding it. Long legs and Daisy-May shorts: the man she'd stepped over grinned until he couldn't anymore, and one of the others hit his shoulder in a combination of envy and praise. Walker ignored them and came up to me, stopping a few feet away. I was taller, but only just, and she was barefoot, which put her at the disadvantage.

It didn't seem to bother her. She tipped her aviator shades down, revealing hazel eyes that tended toward green. She looked me over from head to toe and back again, then gave me a slow smile. "Hi. I'm Joanne Walker. Joanie."

The hand she offered me to shake had a beer in it. I tapped my own beer bottle against hers and then took my first drink of the day, because she drank and it seemed the natural, polite, and social-class-appropriate response. "Mike Morrison," I said when we'd both drunk. "Pleasure to meet you."

"You too. You're new, or your car never breaks down. Which is it?"

"New."

"Thought so. Come on, have a drink." She turned away and sauntered back to her crew, stepping over someone else as she approached the car. With me a step behind her, the man didn't have time to appreciate it, which gave me a faint smug satisfaction I had no right to. "Guys, this is Mike. Mike, this is everybody. Nick, he runs Motor Pool, that's Dave, this is Benny, that's Jake--" She ran through another eight or ten names, ending with, "And yes, there will be a quiz."

"Nick, Dave, Benny--" I repeated them all back to her, earning a round of applause from the mechanics and laughing approval from Joanie Walker. She even swept a hand over the purple car's hood in invitation, and one of the mechanics wolf-whistled while another two looked put-out.

Protocol would be dissembling, but I was already past the end of the rope. I sat on the car's hood, shoe heels braced on the bumper, and Joanne scooted forward to sit next

to me and *tsk*. "You always this formal, Mike? Shirt sleeves and leather shoes in the middle of July? You obviously haven't been drinking enough. There'll be another quiz," she added, mock-severely, "once you've had enough to loosen up that collar.

"I'll pass," I promised her.

She arched an eyebrow. "The quiz, or on loosening up?"

"You decide."

Her grin came again, slow and long and amused before she took a pull on her beer that emptied the bottle. One of her crew chortled and Joanne threw the bottle at him, not hard. He caught it and offered an un-credible apologetic look. She slid a glance at me, winked, then shrugged innocently at the guy on the ground.

This was going to be a mistake. I had no business trying to flirt with employees, even if--especially if--they didn't know I was the boss. But it had been a while since a woman had caught my eye as quickly as Joanne Walker had, and even knowing nothing could come of it, indulging was a rare satisfied temptation.

I glanced over my shoulder at the long hood of the car we sat on. It was a classic, but that was all I could tell about it. "What is this, anyway? A Corvette? A--" I was only certain of one classic Corvette line, and offered it up: "A Stingray, maybe? 1963?"

Joanne Walker laughed out loud, a bray that sounded delighted, but it faded into jaw-dropped disbelief when she saw I'd meant the question. "Are you serious? Oh my God. You think Petite's a *Corvette*?" She glanced at her crew, most of whom were watching with reserved glee, though the two who'd been irritated by my invitation onto the car's hood were openly grinning already.

Walker, all too clearly egged on by their quiet delight, repeated, "Oh my God," and launched into . "No, Corvettes are curvy, you idiot. I mean, the classic ones are. They came straight out of the fifties, shaped like the women, you know? Hips and boobs, that's what all those curvy wheel wells are, and the Stingrays had a split back window, swear to God they were supposed to look like a woman's butt. Petite's a Mustang, a 1969 Mustang, a muscle car, you moron. Twiggy, not Bettie Page, that's the kind of model she's built on. She's a Boss 305, there were only a few thousand like her made, oh

my God, a Corvette, really? How can you not know this?"

Stiff with embarrassment, I said, "I was never really in to cars," and she choked a laugh. "Dude, apparently not even enough to get laid. Didn't you ever get it on in the back seat of one of these things?"

"How old do you think I *am*?"

Her eyes narrowed in the instant before she blurted, "Oh, God, I don't know, like forty-five?" She didn't think I was anywhere near that old, or she wouldn't have invited me to sit on the Mustang's hood in the first place, but she'd put herself on the spot with her own question, and had to upwardly revise whatever she thought the answer really was. And probably downwardly revise it as well, because I'd asked, and I wondered if she'd mentally come up with an answer anywhere close to the truth.

It still stung, which wasn't any more appropriate than the smugness I'd felt a few minutes ago. "Not quite."

"I guess *not*, if you don't know a '69 Mustang from '63 Stingray. I didn't think that was actually possible for people with Y chromosomes. Ar--oh, hey, Captain."

Nichols walked up, a bowl of potato salad in one hand and a hot dog in the other, and smiled genially around at the Motor Pool crew. "Hi, folks. I see you've met Captain Morrison already. What do you think of him?"

"What do we *think* of him?" Walker crowed, and Nichols, as if oblivious to the tone of her voice, went on pleasantly: "I've been introducing him around. I thought it would be good for the precinct to meet my replacement before his first day of work in August."

Blood drained from Walker's face. She looked at me, white with accusation, which was fair enough: I'd all but introduced myself under false pretenses, and I was just about ashamed enough to look away. Just about, but not quite, and she had just enough pride and anger to drown out her horror. We glared at each other, neither willing to back down, long enough to make not just the Motor crew, but even Captain Nichols, uncomfortable.

Walker finally broke the stalemate with a tight smile and a low harsh voice. "Well. Live long and prosper, Captain Morrison."

She looked pointedly at my seat on her Mustang. I got up, stepped through the crew, and walked away thinking I'd never been told to go fuck myself so politely in my life.

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Somehow she'd found a taxi in my quiet residential neighborhood after all. By the time I followed her, she was gone, the street empty but my driveway filled with not just my Toyota Avalon, but the 1969 Mustang Boss that had been the source of years of contention between myself and Joanne Walker.

The car had had a rough year. Almost as bad as Joanne, and unquestionably worse than my own. An arrow had been shot through the gas tank, an ax dragged through the roof, and then a helicopter had winched the vehicle out of an earthquake fissure that had crumpled the back end. Joanne had spent every spare moment and all her spare cash re-restoring the car, even finally putting in the manual transmission she had always wanted to.

As far as I knew, no one but Joanne had driven the car since she'd found it in a barn a dozen years earlier and started the restoration work on it. I unlocked and opened the driver's side door slowly and sat down. The seat didn't need adjustment--Walker and I had proved to be exactly the same height, in the end. I put the keys in the ignition and my hands on the wheel, feeling the shape of Walker's body in the seat and the soft worn spots in the leather from her hands. Faint scent lingered: mostly Irish Spring soap, but with a hint of oil and grease that would always remind me of Walker.

"It's all right, old girl," I finally whispered to the car. "She'll come back to us as soon as she can."

We sat together, two things that loved her, and I fell asleep a little while before dawn.

*the end*