

John Drake sank into his chair, unwrapped a big slice of cake, and shoved the pointy end into his open mouth. As his teeth sank into the soft cake, warm cinnamon melted on his tongue, a hint of clove tickled the roof of his mouth, and the fluffy icing tasted like it had been scooped out of a sweet cloud.

*So damn good.*

Rex Graves stepped into the office and rolled his eyes. “Are you eating dessert for lunch?”

“You bet.” He swallowed and wiped his mouth. “This is carrot cake. It has walnuts and raisins, just like a salad.”

“Salad, my ass. You’re about to eat two thousand calories of sugar and fat.”

“I need these calories, because I hate November. I’ll tell you why.” John lowered the slice of cake to a napkin and raised his forefinger. “First of all, this lousy weather kills every blade of grass in Pocono Grove. My yard is no longer green. It’s beige.”

“You’re weird.” Rex flopped into one of the chairs next to the desk.

John raised two fingers. “Second of all, baseball season is over. That’s a big reason why this month sucks.”

“Try watching some football.”

“Football is fine, but it’s not as good as baseball.” He raised three fingers. “Here’s the final reason why I hate this time of year. There’s too much pie all over the place. Squishy pumpkin. Soggy apple. And quince pie. What the hell is a quince?”

“It’s a fruit.” Rex shrugged. “Tastes like pear.”

“Well, I hate pie. Cake is what I want, every day and twice on Sunday.”

“You eat sugar by the truckful, yet you look like a hairy version of Superman. How do you not weigh three thousand pounds?” Rex shook his head and snorted. “You must’ve made a deal with the Devil. He gets your soul and you get unlimited cake.”

That was a little too close to the truth. A few years ago, he’d made a deal that had turned into a complete nightmare. He knew how it felt to sell his soul.

John took another bite of cake to fill the emptiness. Didn’t work. “If you stopped by to critique my diet, come back another time. I’ve got work to do.”

“I’ve been working, too. That’s why I’m here.” Rex gripped the arm of the chair and leaned forward. “You were right about your brother.”

“Damn. I hate being right. Being right always meant trouble.” He’d caught a whiff of this trouble a week ago when he ran into his brother’s friend at the gym. That guy was miffed at David for not showing up for a tennis match, which was strange. David *never* walked away from the chance to play tennis. He got off on firing wicked serves across the net. A mortal injury was the only thing that would keep his brother off the court.

John inhaled slowly and then exhaled through his nose, but the deep breath failed to calm the bad feeling churning in his gut. He had a hunch something was wrong. And like any good gambler, he always trusted his instincts. That’s why he’d asked Rex to check things out. Not only was the

big guy a good friend, he was also a terrific private investigator. Nothing got past Rex.

“What’d you learn about my brother?” John asked.

“He’s not acting like himself. Over the past two weeks, he hasn’t played tennis, he hasn’t stopped by the bookstore, and he hasn’t showed up at the diner because he’s got something better to do.” Rex broke into a sly grin. “Your brother has been spending time with three women. And yeah, I said three. Not one. Not two. *Three* of them.”

“Huh. I didn’t see that one coming. David’s work schedule barely gives him the time to date one woman, much less three.”

“Mm-hm.” Rex stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Speaking of women, have you heard from Natalie?”

“Yeah. She found a job in New York. Found a boyfriend, too. Apparently, he knows how to make her happy and I don’t. She finally spoke to me a month ago and broke up.” During that uncomfortable phone call, she’d called him an aloof neat freak who was incapable of affection. She also said she hated his beard, which stung more than he cared to admit. “According to Natalie, I’d rather do my taxes than talk about my feelings.”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t talk about. Are you ever going to tell me why you haven’t spoken to your brother for the past four years?”

“Sorry, Rex. That topic is off limits.” He reached for the baseball that sat next to his computer and gripped the ball in one hand. “The new women in David’s life—who are they?”

“I knew you’d want to know more, so I took some pictures.” Rex opened his briefcase and tossed a photo on the desk. “Here’s your brother

walking out of the hospital after his shift. See the woman smiling at him? That's Kate Baldwin. Apparently, she's a nurse who works in the operating room. Whenever David performs a knee replacement, Kate is by his side. Sometimes, they hang out together after work."

She was an attractive brunette. "Are they dating?"

"He treats her like a friend, but she's definitely into him." Rex produced another photo of David. In this one, he was walking with a tall blonde. "Your brother has been spending a lot of time with this girl. Vanessa Hayworth is her name."

"I see." And he didn't like what he saw. The last time he dealt with a Hayworth, everything fell apart.

"Vanessa went to high school with you and David." Rex cocked his head to one side. "You know her, don't you?"

"Everyone knows her. She was the head cheerleader and sang in every school musical. Has she moved back to Pocono Grove?"

"No, but she lives twenty minutes from here. Your brother took her out to dinner a few times this week." Rex tossed another photo on the desk. "David also spends a lot of time with this woman. She is Kate's sister."

*Good Lord.*

The baseball dropped out of John's hand and bounced on the desk. He shoved the ball out of the way and grabbed the picture.

If his brother had any sense, he'd spend every second with this woman. Her smile was bright and wide, formed by a pair of lips that looked soft and sweet. She had long, dark hair and remarkable eyes. Those brown eyes sparkled with warmth despite the obvious fact she was cold. She was

bundled up in a plain wool coat that covered her from neck to knee, yet she was the hottest thing John had ever seen.

She stood next to his brother in front of a cafe. They must've met for coffee because both of them carried a cup of whatever they'd ordered. It was obvious she was amused by something David had said. Her head was tilted back as though she loved to laugh and did it often.

One look at her smile was all it took. His heart shot into his neck like a lit firecracker. He could barely breathe past the sizzling knot in his throat. A hot flush zipped up the back of his neck and flamed into his hair. Perspiration prickled behind his ears.

Her picture trembled. God, his hands were shaking. That never happened. *Shit.*

He placed the photo on the desk. "What's her name?"

"Shay Baldwin. From what I understand, she teaches music at Pocono Grove High. She also plays the piano at Buckley's Tavern every Friday night."

The tavern wasn't far from here. She'd be there, tonight. He could go there after work, just for the hell of it.

"Your brother has a very active social life." Rex gestured to the pictures. "Three women in one week. I'm impressed."

"Don't be. David's not a player. He dates one woman at a time. This isn't like him."

Or was it?

Truth was, he didn't know what the hell was going on. And he couldn't call his brother, not even to say hello. They'd stopped speaking after Dad died.

Rex's jovial grin faded. "You're frowning. What's up?"

"I don't know, which is part of the problem." John scratched the thick crop of whiskers along his jaw and thought for a minute. "Something strange happened last week. I got a phone call from the attorney who handled my father's estate. Some woman contacted the law office because she wanted to know who inherited everything."

"What woman?"

"Good question. She left a message, but the receptionist can't remember the name of the caller. I'd like to know who it was." He'd worked hard to bury the past. If someone was asking questions about his father's estate, they might dig up some dangerous secrets.

Even though Dad had died four years ago, he was still causing problems.

Some things never changed.

John took a closer look at the pictures and wondered if one of these women had called the lawyer's office. "I'd like to know more about Kate, Vanessa, and Shay. Would you run a background check on them?"

"Sure, but I'm in the middle of a big project I need to finish. I can run background checks in a few weeks. Does that work for you?"

"Fine." While he waited for that information, he'd launch his own investigation. A search for these women on social media would be a good place to start.

He thanked Rex for stopping by and got back to work. Took hours to get through the pile of paperwork on his desk. When he finally left the office, it was almost seven o'clock. Rather than head to his empty house, he drove to Buckley's Tavern. It had been a long time since he'd been there, mostly because he spent most of his time at the office, at the gym, or at the batting cages.

Felt nice to be in the tavern. It had a mellow vibe and smelled like good food. He grabbed a seat at the bar and looked around, but didn't see anyone he recognized.

"What can I get for you?" asked the bartender.

"I'll take a beer. Whatever you have on tap is fine."

The bartender poured a brew and set it on the bar. "Want anything to eat? Tonight's special is a cheddar burger with fries."

"Yeah, I'll take the special." He took a sip of the fizzy beer. It went down smoothly and left a hint of caramel in the back of his throat. Not bad at all. Damn good, in fact.

He watched a waitress walk out of the kitchen. A few seconds later, another waitress appeared, carrying a tray of food.

And then Shay walked into the room.

God, seeing her for real was even better than drooling at her picture. Dark slacks skimmed her long legs and a silky blouse left no question she had a beautiful body. She was slender with just the right amount of curves. Her dark hair was pinned up, revealing the graceful length of her neck. She wore no jewelry except for a simple pair of pearl stud earrings. Her face was downright stunning, and there was a cheerful warmth about her that

stole his breath. He literally had to remind himself to suck in some air as he watched her.

A soft smile bloomed on her mouth as she stopped to speak to an older couple who sat at a table. Even though John couldn't hear the conversation, it was obvious she treated the man and woman in a kind, friendly way.

“That couple is celebrating their fortieth anniversary,” the bartender told him. “They’re asking our pianist to play their wedding song.”

He glanced at Shay's empty hands. “Where's her sheet music?”

“She doesn't use any. All you have to do is mention a song, and she can play it.”

“That's incredible.” As he watched her walk away, his heart rammed against his ribs and his throat went painfully dry. She had a great ass, great legs, and great everything.

She sat at the upright piano tucked in the far corner of the room. The instrument hadn't been polished in years and had countless scrapes and scuffs, but the instant she touched the keyboard, a beautiful melody filled the air.

*Good God.* She was amazing.

“Burger and fries for you.” A waiter put a plate of food in front of John.

He ate the juicy burger while Shay played Broadway tunes, soft rock ballads, country songs, and even a popular hit by the Rolling Stones. She offered something for everyone and seemed perfectly content to provide



the background music while the crowd ate and laughed. She didn't seem to need any attention or applause at all.

After he finished eating, he grabbed his phone and searched for her on social media. He found her on Facebook, but she didn't post very often. Looked like she'd share a picture of a garden or a sunset every once in a while. Her photographs were terrific. She definitely had an eye for that sort of thing.

He tucked the phone back into his pocket and watched her play the piano. For the first time in weeks, he relaxed. He could've stayed all night, as long as he was in the same room with her.

As the last note faded away, he paid for his meal and left a generous tip. He stepped away from the bar and collided into someone.

It was Shay. God, he'd almost made her fall. "Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No, no. I'm fine." She waved a hand as if it was no big deal. "Friday nights are always crazy busy. I always end up bumping into someone when I'm here. Anyway, have a good weekend."

And then she smiled.

*Jesus.* All of that warmth, pointed right at him. It was too much and not enough. His face stung as if he'd just caught a line drive with his chin. His heart flipped and landed in his stomach as he watched her walk away.

He should go, too. But he wanted more music. More warmth. More Shay.

But she was spending time with his brother. She could be the woman who'd called the lawyer's office to ask about Dad's estate. If she was digging for answers, she'd cause a lot of trouble.

If he pursued this woman, it could be the biggest gamble of his life...or the best idea he'd ever had.

*See what happens next in [The Perfect Flaw](#).*



Shay Baldwin lives next to the Worst Neighbor Ever. He threatens and harasses her all the time. She's desperate to move out of her apartment and buy a house, but she can't afford the down payment. She decides to sell sexy photographs as a side hustle, but it's a risky plan. High school music teachers aren't supposed to sell pictures of themselves barely dressed in lingerie, but she'll do whatever it takes to escape her tormentor.

John Drake can't escape the past. A long time ago, he gambled to get by. Everyone believes his gambling destroyed the family business, which isn't the truth. John can't reveal what really happened, and he hasn't spoken to his brother in years. That needs to change, because his brother is about to marry a fortune-hunter from John's ugly past. She's looking for a missing heirloom that's worth millions. The only way to stop her is to partner with Shay, his brother's best friend. With her, John might finally earn his brother's trust.

When John offers to help Shay move out of her apartment if she'll work with him to protect his brother, she's tempted to accept the deal. She's beginning to believe John is a good man—but believing the best of everyone is her deepest flaw. It's not smart to trust a gambler who has too many secrets. He's asking her to torpedo her best friend's engagement, and he might up the ante if he discovers the pictures Shay has tried so hard to hide.

This partnership is the biggest gamble of their lives. If they bet on each other, they might fall hard...or fall in love.

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# Hidden Flaws

Prequel to The Perfect Flaw

by Lynn Kellan

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