

# BECAUSE of YOU

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Mitchell



**Because of You**  
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*To My Family.  
I am the luckiest girl.  
I love you.*

*To Kim V.  
Thanks for teaching me  
what a real friend is.  
By the way, could you do me a favor?*

*This book is for Jackie Joudo in Oz,  
aka: Noel.*

*My first editor and one pushy chic,  
your enthusiasm inspires me.*

*XOXO*

*You are the best—*

*No, you are!*

*No, you are!*

*No, you are!*





## Chapter One

“**A** spine-tingling thriller. Another fine specimen of what we have come to expect from Melody Pittoff, best-selling horror novelist.”

Meghan Laine smoothed the wrinkled newspaper that was nearly transparent with wetness. Little chunks of Iowa snow had scattered the countertop when she shook it out, and were melting into tiny pools all around. Folding it again, she took a better look at the weekly syndicated book review.

*“That this rugged work, written from a first person male perspective, could actually be from the pen of a woman, only adds to the intrigue of this novel. There is incredible “ballsiness” that proves masculinity cannot be judged by the writer’s gender.”*

A few blond hairs had worked their way out of her braid, softly framing her face, tickling her eyelashes. She blinked and hastily shoved the hairs out of her cobalt eyes.

“Ballsiness. How charming.”

Gibson Porter was a man who would likely never write a book himself, yet, felt qualified to direct the masses as to where to best invest their seven bucks for a paperback or twenty-five for a hardbound. And the masses paid loyal attention.

Unimpressed with the business of books and reviews, Boo, her tan Labrador, sighed from his place in the corner. Meg smiled at him before her eyes roved down the kitchen countertop to her laptop computer. It was her own novel in the works, one in an unpublished series of dozens, untouched so far this morning.

Meg stretched, arching her back as she yawned. Her rumpled plaid

pajama pants were warm and cozy, topped off with a navy sweatshirt and a pair of oversized socks that actually belonged to her fiancée. The bulkiness guarded her feet from the icy hardwood floor, as December in Jasper Falls was maybe all of eight degrees above zero. Still, that was better than winter in her hometown, Lacross, Wisconsin, where winter daytime temperatures would peak at ten below on the worst days. But she was used to it, having lived there all her life. It was the only thing she'd known before becoming engaged to Marcus St. John, which called for a move to Iowa.

Meg knew that she and the farm boy couldn't be more different. But he adored her, and she appreciated his intended sweetness, despite his sometimes unconventional way of showing it. Finding a moral, single, self-supporting man in this day and age was a luxury that some never knew. In her young thirties, Meg felt fortunate to have him.

He was barely tolerant of her passion for writing, however, citing far more useful ways that she could spend her days. There were rooms to fill with St. John babies, after all, a project that she was admittedly less enthusiastic about than he. But theirs was a comfortable relationship. She considered it a work in progress.

A blast of northern air pummeled the room as the door swung open, ramming the doorstop with a loud *twang!* Meg turned to see Marcus' solid frame nearly filling the doorway. Even he was battling with the wind gusts this bitter day.

She looked next at the snow that had invited itself in, all over the place.

"Oops." Marcus offered her his trademark little-boy grin, fumbling with his stocking cap. He pulled it off altogether, revealing a mess of dark hair that he shook like a wet dog, flipping little chunks of ice about.

Meg heaved a small sigh of annoyance, but gave him an indulgent smile, watching as Marcus brushed off his coveralls with his wool gloves.

It only took him a few long strides to get to the other side of the cozy kitchen. He smiled at her over rosy cheeks as he poured steaming coffee into his thermos and screwed the lid back on.

"Look at my floor, *you.*" She pretended to smack him with the tea towel, and sidled over, wrapping herself in as close a hug as she could manage over his tan Carharts. The coveralls were cold from having spent so much time in the barn, and little chilly blasts of breath emitted through

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his apologetic laughter. Meg planted a kiss on his cool cheek.

“Creative juices flowing?” The welcome warmth of the oven filled the room, and he gazed over the paper stacks that lined the countertop as they always did whenever she was working. Clumsily, he tousled her hair, causing a few more tendrils to droop into her eyes. She drew back and smirked at her computer, still sitting there, lonely. He nodded. “Having a little writer’s block?”

“Yeah, all the publishers are blocking me from writing. It’s depressing. I just read a review for the new Melanie Pittoff thriller and it was disgusting.” She wriggled out of his hold, flailing her arms hopelessly. “Absolutely gushing—*she’s the best*, blah blah . . .” Meg was all over it now. “I read her last book, and I can’t say it’s any better than anything I’ve turned out so far only to have it rejected.”

Meg paused in her ranting, looking bewildered. She sighed, as she stood in the middle of the floor in her pajamas, her arms folded. When her eyes met his again, her voice was entirely serious.

“Am I making too much of this? Do I like my stuff because it’s *mine* or am I crazy?”

“You are crazy,” he said, chuckling. Marcus stroked the back of her hair with his damp glove. He found her dramatic performances charming. “But that’s besides the point, now. You already know that I think your stuff is good.”

Meg shrugged her shoulders and mouthed *good?* Marcus shuffled past her, back to the door. He shook out his stocking cap before putting it back on, adding crystalline flakes to the nearly melted pool he’d created earlier. He looked at her through squinted eyes and shook his head.

“But you know I don’t get all that publishing business in the first place. I know this much though. I took a look at that last book of hers too, and I’ll tell you what I think.” Marcus paused, looking right, then left, as if to be sure that no one else would hear. His voice was a whisper. “I’m thinkin’ she’s a man.”

“Marcus, *you* are crazy.” Meg said, laughing. She playfully kissed his nose, standing on her tiptoes to reach him.

“Hey, you never can be too certain these days. I have a cousin who lives in the big city who picked up a woman from a bar one night. Turned out that she had a little secret hiding under those control tops.” He wig-

gled his eyebrows, nodding vigorously.

Meg rolled her eyes. She went back to the neat stacks of paper.

“You do *not* have a cousin that lives in a big city, and they don’t have bars there anyway—they have *clubs*.” She shot him a playful grin. “In any case, this book’s not going to sell itself. I better get back to it.”

Marcus plunged his hand back into his glove, his tone becoming more serious. “You know, Meg, I wish you were half as committed to having a family with me as you are to frittering away your time on that computer all day.”

It was started.

What Meg called independence, Marcus called stubbornness. Refusing to marry a man who was absolutely head over heels for her for the simple reason that there was no book yet.

And she would airily defend herself, waving her hands with her usual wide-eyed expression and soft, reassuring smile that told him not to take it personally.

“Marcus,” She prepared her typical defense.

“There’s that look again,” Marcus said, narrowing his eyes.

“What look?”

“The one that says *really honey, it’s not you*.” He rubbed his forehead. “I was okay with that in the beginning, but it’s getting harder and harder to buy.”

“Honey, it’s *not* you. You know how important this book is to me.” Her eyes softened. “These things take time.”

“You know how important having a big family is to me and those things take time. You can’t just decide one day that *that’s* the day and squeeze out four or five healthy tots for an instant family.”

The same conversation was played out at least every few days. His thirty-six year-old patience was wearing thin, this she knew. But she couldn’t quit now, not when she felt so close.

She went to him, encircling his waist with her smallish arms, and kissed him.

“Give it just a little more time,” she whispered.

“Well, that’s fine, Meg, but too much more time and you’ll be ordering a specimen for fertilization off that computer too, because *this* old body will be bedridden, watching Lawrence Welk reruns and imbibing a

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steady diet of Geritol.” The distraught look on his face said that he was trying to be understanding. Her lips formed a thin, consoling smile while he continued: “Besides, I thought you were going to get yourself an agent—I mean that’s what them publishers keep tellin’ you.”

“Inside the confines of a rejection letter, what else are they going to say? You *stink*, hang it up?”

“They’re writers, Meg, I think they’d say it better than *that*.” Marcus grinned at her as he pulled his muffler tighter around his neck and turned to go.

“I should just face facts. I’m destined to be the Queen of Rejection, perched high upon an ever mounting throne of returned post and *sorry-but* letters.”

“So long as you remain the Queen of My Heart, I don’t reckon I care much what else you do.” Marcus winked at her, grinning sheepishly. Meg softened some.

“I know, honey. You know, I should probably beg for my job back at the Gazette and just call *that* my writing career.” She rubbed her forehead with the backside of her hand. Her eyes turned dreamy before going on. “I just had this notion that it would be so nice to see *Meghan Laine* on the cover of some thick, wonderful novel.”

“The only thing I can think that would be nicer would be to see Mrs. Marcus St. John on one.”

“Soon, soon.” Her defense was weakening.

“Come on Meg.”

“If the rejection count hits two hundred I’ll give in.” She turned toward her work again and pretended to busy herself, restacking papers randomly.

Meg, I’d like to toss a football around with my kids without relying on the use of a cane.”

“Please, Marcus, you know how I feel.” Her tone said she was done talking about it.

“Tick, tick, tick—”

“Go to work.” It came out in the form of an order as she pointed toward the door. The subject was changed. Unsatisfied with her answer, he left, his hands raised in surrender.

Meg slumped over her laptop.

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The water-wrinkled newspaper seemed to mock her as it lay there. She tossed it into the garbage.

*Get an agent.*

“This is crazy,” she muttered.

*Ballsy.*

She mulled over the review. *Who was Gibson Porter to say what was ballsy anyway?*

Her eyes roved over a pile of freshly-returned manuscripts still in their envelopes. She grabbed one and tore it open.

*“Dear Author, I don’t care what your name is. Thank you for thinking of our company for your manuscript, now think of someone else. Unfortunately at this time, it doesn’t fit our publishing needs—we hate it, take it away. Good luck with your future endeavors, take it away very quickly—in fact if you plan to send us anything else, please enclose express postage for the most expedient return possible.”*

Meg added it to the box where the others were: The rejection collection. Her eyes fixed upon three hundred pages of her most recently returned labor.

*I’m thinkin’ she’s a man.*

Suddenly, she grabbed a fresh manila mailer and shoved the same story into it. Meg flipped through her schedule of publishing companies.

“Hm, let’s see. Oswell House. I haven’t received a rejection letter from them for a few weeks.”

Addressing the mailer in thick black marker, she revised her cover letter a bit and snatched the freshly printed sheet from the Epson.

*Sincerely, Mr. Marcus St. John.*

Smiling, Meg plunked the letter into the envelope along with the recycled story, and sealed it shut.



## Chapter Two

Nick Carter heaved his briefcase upon the desktop in his office. The thing seemed to be growing heavier as the day wore on. Carter spent his morning bouncing back and forth between a star client's office and his own. Being a human Ping-Pong ball was nothing new, he was accommodating to the busy writers he represented, and if they couldn't get to the mountain, well, then, the mountain would go to them.

He hastily loosened his tie and popped the button of his collar. Once again, the day had gotten warmer than the leggy weather forecaster had predicted on the locals the night before.

A partner in his own literary agency, Bankson, Laughton and Carter, Nick Carter was worn out from a week of shuffling a manuscript between a writer and the editor handling the piece, who, apparently, had no like ideas about the direction of the work whatsoever. He was about to miss a major deadline, which meant no bonus for him, and possibly putting off publication until next season.

He sighed dejectedly and slumped into his leather chair.

An electrifying buzzing sound jolted him abruptly, and he slammed his finger onto the return call button to answer it.

"Yes?"

"Boss?"

He rubbed his throbbing temple, squeezing his eyes shut. It was Jan, his secretary.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Kelsey is here to speak with you."

Nick opened one eye suddenly and arched an eyebrow. Without disturbing his slump, he slid the rollers of his chair closer to his desk, scan-

ning his oversized calendar. “Kelsey, Kelsey.” He didn’t find it and hit the button again. “Mr. Kelsey doesn’t have an appointment this morning.”

“I am *aware* of that.” Jan’s voice hinted her impatience, something he was familiar with, and he knew that he’d best handle it before she lost her temper completely.

“Send him in, then.”

Before he could finish the sentence, the man was standing before his desk, the office door closing behind him. Nick cupped his hands around his mouth and called to his secretary sarcastically. “Thanks!”

The agent offered his client half a forced smile and stood from his place there, extending a handshake.

“How are you, Lou?”

Lou Kelsey bypassed the handshake and approached his agent’s desk, intensity burning in his eyes.

“I’m not well, but thanks for your concern.” The man’s voice trailed off and Nick nodded, attempting to emulate concern, but was cut off before he could verbally respond. “I have Wheaton House on me like a rash on my ass. How am I supposed to work with that diversion?”

“Well, you *are* five months over deadline—” Nick began, but was cut off a second time.

“It’s not a wonder!” Lou exclaimed loudly. The middle-aged man’s balding head reddened with anger, his brow furrowing in white creases. “Who can work with all that hounding going on! And now they’re telling me that they’re going to start penalizing me for being late by deducting from my residuals!”

Nick Carter stared at the man, mild amusement flickering in his eyes. He wondered if America knew that one of its best loved authors was a sniveling, greedy whiner. He smiled.

“Lou, did you or did you not sign an agreement that stated that your book would be completed before summer?” Nick waited but Lou only stared at him. “And, is it, or is it not, December? And did you, indeed, accept a fat advance from the company in keeping with this agreement?”

“That’s not the point,” Lou started in again, angrily.

Nick rose and quickly strode over to the door of his office. He opened it, examining the plaque with his name on it. “One more thing, does this say Nick Carter, counselor and baby-sitter?”

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Lou had never been addressed by his agent in such a manner, and only looked at him blankly, suspicious that the man was about to crack. Nick smiled as he continued.

“No. No it doesn’t. It says Nick Carter, *Literary Agent*. And, Mr. Kelsey, if we were to make such a plaque for you, it would say Lou Kelsey, *Writer*.” He pointed toward the door. “Go, write.”

“See here, Carter—”

“Hep! Ho!” Carter held his hands like a shield, halting the man, as if the very voice of Lou Kelsey might harm his precious ears. He squinted his eyes shut and smiled, restating the order, quiet but firm: “Go. *Write*.”

The gentleman stormed out of his office, past the pointing arm that directed him to do so, and the door slammed shut. Nick Carter shook his head as he went back to his chair, plopping into it.

“I think that went well. Who says I can’t communicate?” He was referring to his girlfriend who had allowed him only two hours of sleep the night before, insisting that *that* was the night they would hash out every single facet of their lives. He yawned as he leaned back comfortably, and stretched his legs onto his desktop, crossing them at his ankles.

“That’s what you get when you live with a shrink.” He closed his eyes, mocking her in a quiet voice now that he was in the privacy of his office. “*Nick* doesn’t know how to communicate. *Nick* can’t express himself. *Nick* likes to sleep on the couch.”

The buzzer sounded a second time, jarring him out of his rambling. Opening only one eye, he uncrossed his legs, using one foot to scoot the intercom across the desk and into the garbage.



## Chapter Three

Noel O'Dell dug through a pile of rubber bands in the top drawer of her desk in her office at the *Jasper Falls Gazette*. With the telephone wedged between her ear and her shoulder, she listened carelessly to the person on the other end, her chestnut shoulder-length hair lopping across her forehead and into her round face as she extracted the widest band she could find. Unable to get a word in edgewise, she rolled her eyes and nodded, as if the speaker could actually see her doing so.

Pulling the rubber band tightly around the L of her hand, she aimed toward the oversized picture of an old woman hanging on the far wall.

*Snap—Smack!*

She smiled triumphantly at the perfect hit, raising her arms to an imaginary cheering crowd. Meg Laine entered her office and sat down.

“Uh-huh, Yes.” Noel clicked her fingers and thumb together in a jabbering motion that said the person on the line had entirely too much to say. Meg smiled at her best friend’s impatient antics as Noel rolled her eyes for the millionth time.

“You know—I’m swamped, absolutely swamped. Sounds good. We’ll do.” Noel’s voice squeaked sarcastically as she added: “Buh-bye.”

She slammed the receiver down and glared at Meg.

“What the hell do you want?”

Meg watched Noel assume a pseudo yoga stance. She began to hum.

“Stressful day?” Meg asked sympathetically.

“I’m going to meditate it all away now, hold on.”

“Mother O’Dell?”

At this, Noel briefly opened her eyes and closed them tightly again, humming louder.

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“I swear t’ Gawd, Meggie, the woman’s gonna drive me to an early grave.” Noel’s accent, left over from her earlier life in New York, rang through her words thickly as she rubbed her temple, finding her focus. “I’m sorry—let’s start over. How are you?”

Meg sighed loudly.

“I’m not published.” She started. She took the jar of holiday ribbon candy from the desk and twisted the top off. Selecting a red and green mixed piece, she popped it into her mouth. “I’ve been figuring. Do you know that at closest count, I have spent *nine hundred fifty-eight dollars* on postage, copying, and paper—only to be rejected over and over and over . . .”

She rolled her hand in the air as she recounted.

“Not to mention the countless hours that I have *wasted*—”

“Invested,” Noel corrected.

Meg made a face and spit the bitter candy out of her mouth, looking around for someplace to put it. Her friend promptly offered up a tissue and discarded it for her.

“Invested, *wasted*. What’s the difference?” Meg shook her head. “I’m thinking of giving it up. Take *all* that money I save and go on a little vacation or something. That’s what smokers do with the money they save when they quit their habit.”

Noel’s mannerisms were curt and predominantly emotionless, the husky New York girl that she was. She narrowed her dark eyes, speaking to her best friend in a no-nonsense tone.

“Last time I knew, writing wasn’t hazardous to your health.”

“Hazardous to my *heart*.”

It was worse than Noel had suspected. Meg continued, her dramatic voice softening. “I had just hoped my life would be doing so much more at this stage in the game—that one of these books would be a reality. What happened? I’m a good Catholic girl. I go to church semi-regularly. I give to the poor and hold doors open for little old ladies.”

“Good Catholic girls don’t live with their boyfriends, and skipping church ever is a Cardinal sin.” Her friend bit off another section of the candy as she spoke in her monotone voice. “I think it goes deeper than that, Meg.”

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“Deeper than what?”

“Than the book.”

“It’s the book.”

“It’s not the book.”

“You think it’s *me*?”

“I think it’s you and whatshisname.”

“His name,” Meg straightened her posture and smoothed her hair, speaking with forced confidence. “His name is *Marcus*.”

If you were happy with your life, you wouldn’t have a need to weave these tales of yours—to write yourself into the kind of life you *really* want.”

“You think that’s what I’m doing?” Meg’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Of course it’s what you’re doing.”

“Then you don’t believe my writing’s worthy of publication?”

“Of *course* it is—I published it every week myself! For the love of the gawds.” Noel rolled her eyes and leaned forward onto her desk, looking into Meg’s eyes. “You *will* get published someday, Meg, I don’t doubt that for a second. I’m just saying, it wouldn’t bother you so darned much if you had a little side dish of happiness to fall back on. Instead you keep holding out for this all-encompassing book that you think is going to come along and save you—*rescuing* you away from whatshisname.”

“I certainly do not,” Meg defended.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Do.”

“Don’t.” Meg rose from her place in her chair and looked out the glass window at the offices around them. “I’m thinking of coming back to the Gazette.”

“Why would you wanna do a dumb thing like that?” Noel’s voice raised an octave. “If this wasn’t Mother O’Dell’s stupid paper, I would have been out of this editorial gig ages ago. Just because I’m destined to spend my life correcting stories about bean prices and Farmer Bo’s butter cow at the state fair, doesn’t mean I think it’s the greatest.”

“So why do you do it? For love?” It was Meg’s turn to laugh, recall-

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ing the ever-stormy relationship between Noel and her husband, Everett. “Is *that* the kind of thing you think I’m missing?”

That’s just what you’re headed for sister.” Noel waved a finger at her. “You’ll marry *whatshisname*—”

“Marcus.”

“You’ll start popping out kids like kittens and start slacking off the writing—saving it for naptime or bedtime or in between microwaving bowls of spaghettios. Or those little disgusting things that kids like. Those gushy little things that my Jeremy is always eating—”

“Ravioli.”

“That’s it—except it’ll be in the shape of dinosaurs and space cowboys. The next thing you know there’s soccer and 4-H and then, before you know it, you’re drivin’ a mini van and you’re super mom and *that’s* your job.” Noel paused to sip her coffee. “Don’t go there, Meg. Don’t give up. Personal happiness, Meg. It’s not easy to achieve.”

“Personal happiness?” Meg sat back down, shaking her head. “You make it sound like a chore rather than what it is.”

“What do you think it *is*, Meg? Like in the movies?”

Meg shrugged sheepishly, looking away.

“Yes, you do.” Noel helped her out. “I’ve read your stuff. I know that you think that all lovers just naturally come together—that fate puts people in the right place at the right time, and everyone always lives happily ever after on some wonderful, exotic beach or something.”

“Well, I don’t think too many housewives want to read a book for escape that resolves itself in the dead of winter in Iowa, microwaving bowls of dinosaur-shaped raviolis for her seven kids.” Meg rubbed her eyes. “That’s why it’s called *romance*.”

“Romance *shomance*—there is no such thing as everything coming together out of nowhere just like that.” Noel snapped her fingers to get her friend’s attention. “You need to face the real issues here. You need more excitement than this little newspaper, town—or even what *whatshisname* can give you. You need a life, Meg.”

“I have a life.”

“As your editor, I’m ordering a rewrite.”

“Rewrite my life?” Meg looked at her as if she’d gone insane.

“Well, except for the part that says I’m your best friend.” Noel smiled.

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“As if it could be that simple.”

“As for your job, you can’t have it back. I will not let you compromise your integrity by having this little corn-shuckin’ press on your resume.” She stood abruptly and motioned for her friend to do the same. Raising her hand in a salute position she shouted her command: “Go! Write!”

“Yes ma’am.” She marched out of the office but poked her head back in suddenly. “You having lunch with Mother O’Dell?”

“Please! And listen about the pros and cons of fried versus baked, vinegar versus ranch, and plain versus *I’ll have everything on it?* I’m never *that* desperate for a lunch partner.”

“Brugle’s Bagels at noon then.”

“Deal.”