

*Marrying*  
MAJOR  
BENNETT



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A NOVEL

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# DEDICATION



To my husband. I can't wait to meet you.



# CHAPTER ONE



“MEN ARE SCUM and don’t deserve to live!”

The peaceful 10 x 12 dorm room disappeared as Brittney stormed in and collapsed onto the lower bunk. Along the way, she had managed to drop her bag and coat on the floor and was now lying on her side, perched on an elbow waiting for a response.

Erin knew she was being watched but took her time finishing the paragraph she was reading. She had no one to blame but herself. As a Residence Advisor, she had to be approachable. Her door was always open, except when schoolwork was on the agenda. During those times she would leave it open just a crack.

Some people could study with music or the television in the background; Erin wasn’t one of them. In order to have complete concentration, she needed absolute silence. In a dorm of fifty girls it was nearly impossible. Still, she managed to keep her grades up.

Using a receipt as a bookmark, she rocked back in her chair, her knees against the desk, and looked at the very perturbed Brittney.

“So why are men scum?”

As if she’d been uncorked, Brittney unleashed the story of how the guy she had liked all semester was just now beginning to flirt with her. Erin listened, as she always did, but wondered if Britt’s exasperation was really justifiable.

“Isn’t this what you’ve wanted all along?”

“Well, yeah. But why now? There are two weeks left. He lives in Chicago!” Looking utterly crushed, she went on to give the exact mileage from Illinois to her home in Pittsburgh. Erin dropped all four chair legs to the floor and stood.

“Where are you going?” Brittney quickly sat up on the bed, coming just shy of smacking her head on the top bunk. “Aren’t you going to tell me what to do?”

“I am. In times like this,” Erin took on a mock professional tone, “there seems to be only one solution.” She grabbed her keys off the dresser and dangled them in front of her. Brittney’s eyes lit up as she came toward the jingling keys.

“Mall run?”

“Mall run,” Erin confirmed as she reached for her wallet and proceeded to bang on enough doors to get a carload of other college girls desperate to get off campus.



Twenty-two-year-old Erin Townshend wasn’t the prettiest girl in the group, but with her dark hair and rich brown eyes she had no problem turning heads. The group of six young women roamed in and out of the mall stores, none of them having the money for a big purchase. For the time being, school was forgotten and replaced with laughter and good company.

After some time they briefly parted so that each could seek out her own snack. Erin needed no prodding. Her legs took her to a gourmet coffee shop tucked in the corner of the food court. She ordered her favorite, a frozen coffee and chocolate blend, and explored the shop with its sights and amazing smells. The grinding of her coffee drowned out the bustle of the mall, so much so that she didn’t hear anyone come up beside her. First she saw his boots. The black leather had enough gloss that she could probably use it to check her makeup. His pants were creased down the front and bloused neatly at the top of his boots. Each shoulder boasted a patch, and he wore an insignia at his collar.

When her eyes finally reached his face, she was taken aback to find him looking right at her.

“Hi,” he greeted like they were old friends.

“Hi.” Erin bit her lip. His blue eyes and quarter-inch sandy hair were a perfect combination. She watched him reach for a bag of coffee. He brought it to his nose and inhaled deeply before holding it out to her.

“Midnight Brew. My favorite. Have you ever tried it?”

Erin looked questioningly at the man before her. His clothes may have been camouflaged, but he made no attempt to hide the look in his eyes. Did he really find her attractive, or was he just as desperate as the other twenty thousand Army guys stationed outside of town?

“Number five,” a woman called as she set a drink on the counter.

“That’ll be mine,” Erin said with too much excitement. She made her way to the counter, picked up her coffee, and made for the door without making eye contact with the soldier. Walking briskly to the center of the food court, she found the girls waiting.

“All set?” she asked, feeling in charge once again.

“Who’s the hunky G.I. Joe?” one of them asked, looking over Erin’s shoulder at the uniformed man who was rejoining his own group of friends.

“I have no idea.” Erin took the lead, and soon the other girls were following her through the busy mall. Being hit on was something she wasn’t used to and didn’t particularly like. Determining to forget about it, she picked up the pace, but not before turning to take one last look at the handsome soldier.



“You’re no fun at all,” Sarah announced as she walked beside Erin. Both women had finished with classes for the day. Erin still had to stop at the Registrar’s office, but walking Sarah to the library wasn’t out of her way.

“Why do you say that?”

Sarah rolled her eyes. Although a few years younger than her RA, she wasn’t afraid to tell it like it was.

“No one says you have to settle down and have babies with the first guy you meet.” They had been discussing the incident from the night before at the mall. “Do what I do; enjoy the view for a while, and when he asks you out, go for it. Let him pay for everything and order the most expensive thing on the menu. If later he gets frisky, play hard to get. I usually keep this up for about three weeks and then dump him.”

It was all so matter-of-fact that Erin laughed.

“And what happens, heaven forbid, if you end up liking him?”

“Well, then I just don’t play hard to get.”

Erin was glad they were at the library. She didn’t know how much more cynical humor she could take. The girls parted ways, and Erin continued on to the top story of the main building. After switching some classes around to make the spring semester a little less stressful, she decided to take the elevator back to the first floor.

With the first-floor button pushed, she waited for the doors to close, only to have a suit-clad man slide in at the last moment. Erin stepped back a little further, smiling briefly in his direction. When the doors closed the tall man turned to her.

“Are you faculty?”

His question caught her off guard, but then she couldn’t blame him for his assumption. She was well dressed and leaving the top floor where most of the faculty offices were located. But how old did she really look?

“No. I’m a student.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He suddenly looked quite young. “I’m kind of nervous. As of a minute ago I’m officially the newest chemistry professor.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Maybe I’ll have you in one of my classes.”

“I doubt it. I’m majoring in Primary Education.”

“Well, I’ll still see you around campus. Make sure you say hi to me. It’ll make me feel like I know someone.”

Erin smiled and shifted the heavy book bag on her shoulder, all the while trying to decide how old he really was. His suit and short beard screamed professor, but his demeanor was unfinished. The doors opened before she could narrow down an age. Once across the threshold, he turned to her.

“Don’t forget to say hi. I’m Andy Strader, by the way.”

Erin shifted the burden of books once again and shook his extended hand.

“I’m Erin.”

“Do you have a last name, Erin?”

“Yes, I do,” she answered, reclaiming her hand. Smiling, she bid him goodbye, and disappeared around the corner before Andy could gain too much information.



The day Erin dreaded every semester was suddenly upon her. Cars upon cars were lined up outside each dormitory. Eager parents had come to snatch their children away for Christmas break. Erin had already driven some girls to the airport, but there was something about seeing the families here on campus that really hit her. Just like all the other years, she wouldn’t be returning home for Christmas. She would spend the day with her dorm parents and their family, hoping to take the edge off.

Work was her main objective over break. Long days at the bookstore would leave her too exhausted to notice the silence of the dormitory.

Jenna, one of the sweetest girls on campus, knocked on Erin’s door.

“Erin, my dad just called, and they’re stuck in construction. Want to go get something at the café?”

“I’d better not,” Erin said, as she vacated her desk. “I need to go help lug suitcases down the stairs.”

“At least you’re not lugging them up the stairs.”

“True. That can wait until everyone comes back in the spring. I always seem to have an appointment at that time.” Her mischievous tone matched her face. Jenna knew it wasn’t true. Erin Townshend was the hardest-working girl she’d ever known.

The rest of the day seemed to fly by, and by dinnertime the dorm was deserted. Erin had tried reading, but the silence was too much for her. She fell asleep early, thinking that the spring semester couldn’t come soon enough.



It was one of Erin's favorite ways to kill time. She would roam the shelves of the mall bookstore, find a cover that looked promising, open the book to a random spot, and read a page or two. Of course, this did nothing in revealing the plot or synopsis, but most times the little sneak peek was just enough to let her know if she'd like the rest of the book.

The particular book she held today had captured her attention. She was five pages deep into a suspenseful scene when she suddenly had the feeling she was being watched. Peeling her eyes away from the action, she found Andy Strader leaning against a shelf only feet from her. His arms were crossed at his chest and he was shaking his head.

"What?" Erin asked, as she hesitantly closed the book, wishing she'd marked the page.

"I'm disappointed."

She frowned in question. "About what?"

"You didn't say hi."

Remembering his comment from the elevator, Erin smiled. "Hi."

"Ah, now I feel better—not nearly as insecure." He flashed a smile and pushed away from the shelf. "I thought all the kids were gone for break."

"Not this kid." Her tone emphasized her resentment of the word. "What about you? School's out. Aren't you supposed to go on vacation or something?"

"I wish. I'm still unpacking. You wouldn't believe the amount of junk. I swear the movers threw in some extra boxes. Although I can't seem to find my TV, so maybe they traded me."

Erin smiled as he related how painfully boring his apartment was, and then a silence fell between them. Erin figured he had said hello and would be on his way.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee, Erin?"

"I can't." Nervously clutching the novel in front of her, she hoped he couldn't see her surprise at his offer.

"Why not?" He nodded toward the book. "Is Romeo about to kiss Juliet?"

"No," she answered with a laugh. "I'm working."

"Working?"

"Yes. I work here."

Andy wasn't put off. "Well, can I buy you a cup of coffee when you're done working?"

She shook her head, about to refuse, when she remembered just how miserable her evenings had been since the girls had gone. And besides, it was coffee—free coffee.

"I'm done here at eight."

"Good. I'll meet you outside."

Hours later, true to his word, Andy sat relaxed on a small bench outside the bookstore. Instead of one of the finer coffee shops downtown, Andy led the way to one of the mall's restaurants. Once they were seated at the bar, he grabbed a handful of peanuts and turned to the pretty college student next to him.

"What are you having?" the bartender asked.

"Two coffees," Andy ordered, ignoring the man's questioning look.

Erin suddenly felt very self-conscious. Why was she even here? She didn't know this man. All of the news stories of young women being attacked or killed were filling up her mind quickly.

"Relax." Andy sliced through her thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I just feel a little out of place."

"I thought about getting coffee somewhere else, but I didn't want to make you drive across town, and I wouldn't expect you to ride with me. I could be an ax murderer." His comment jerked her head around. "Don't worry. I haven't killed too many people." He popped another handful of peanuts in his mouth.

"Are you always this sarcastic?"

"Only when I'm nervous or meeting new people. In this case it's both." Their coffee arrived then. "Ah, this will take the edge off."

Erin couldn't help but laugh. His wit put her at ease. For several moments they enjoyed the hot coffee in silence until she noticed the looks they were getting from the bartender.

"Is he mad because we didn't order drinks?"

Andy looked up and shrugged. "If he is then it's his problem. Some of these other people are eating not drinking. He's probably jealous because I'm with the prettiest girl here."

"I don't think you're allowed to say that."

"Why not? It's true."

“There must be something in the school rulebook about giving compliments to students.”

“There may be, but you said it yourself—you’re not my student.”

“Are you really that bored, Mr. Strader, that you have nothing better to do with your time?”

“Yes, but I think it’s safe to say that we’re both bored. I also have to admit that I find you very attractive.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“It was a compliment. Don’t you ever get compliments?”

She didn’t answer.

“Is it that I’m a professor that makes you uncomfortable?”

“No. In fact, I keep forgetting that you’re faculty. I’m just not a people person. Well, that’s actually not entirely true. I’m not good in social situations, with men especially. I’m always overanalyzing and trying to read their motives.”

“Listen. To save you the time, these are my motives: you seem like a nice girl, and I have a full month before I start teaching. I’m not looking for anything—just someone to hang out with.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“As long as it’s not about the Periodic Table.”

“Do you really believe in platonic relationships?”

“I do. But I also believe that fate has a way of intervening with our lives.”

Both turned their attention to their coffee. Erin was wishing she’d said nothing at all. It was just coffee after all. Sarah’s words came back to her. *No one said you have to settle down and have babies with the first guy you meet.*

“Maybe we should start over.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I’ve never had a conversation quite like this.” Andy extended his hand. “I’m Andy Strader.”

“Erin Townshend.”

“Are you hungry?”

Erin had been so nervous that she hadn’t noticed the gnawing in her stomach. “I’m starving.”

“Well then, let’s make this bartender earn his tip.”

They went on to enjoy a simple meal of burgers and fries, but the conversation was amusing and never forced. Later, when Erin climbed the stairs to her room, she knew she'd fall instantly asleep. Andy's humor had been just what she needed, and for the first time since the girls left, she felt hopeful. Maybe break wasn't going to be as bleak as she'd thought.



Andy's idea of hanging out was shopping for his apartment. Having had lunch with him twice, Erin now felt comfortable enough to ride in his car without fearing for her life. Today they had already been to two home interior stores and were now pulling into the parking lot of another. Andy had rented with another bachelor at his previous dwelling, so he was in need of some small appliances and furnishings.

"Ready for round three?" Andy was almost out of the car before noticing Erin's uninterested face. "I know it's not your thing, but I could really use your help. I'll take you out for an extravagant lunch to make up for boring you to death."

"That had better be some lunch." Erin tried to look more disgruntled than she actually felt. He was right about it not being her thing, but he seemed to make everything fun. When they were together, she forgot that he was on the college staff. To her, he was just someone she could laugh with or at. With each of their encounters, she was becoming more and more comfortable with him.

They browsed the store, successful in finding a floor lamp that Erin declared "modern but tasteful." The biggest hurdle was fitting it in the car. Andy pushed, shoved, rearranged, and persuaded the lamp until all four doors were closed with both individuals safely inside. The lamp's base was flush against the left rear seat and extended over Erin's left shoulder, allowing Andy to laugh at her expense.

He redeemed himself by choosing a nice Italian restaurant, the perfect intermission in their shopping day. The atmosphere inside was warm as the weary bargain hunters slid into a booth. Although they'd only been at it for a few hours, Erin was convinced that, if given a pillow, she could fall asleep on the spot. She told Andy as much.

“Please, don’t,” he begged, equally as tired. “Then I’d have to carry you to the car.”

“I saw the way you treated that poor lamp. You’re not laying a hand on me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I wouldn’t want my lamp to get jealous, me having another woman and all.”

“So the lamp’s a woman? Funny, I thought it quite masculine.”

“I like my women rough around the edges.”

The banter went on until their food arrived, and the famished couple dived in. Neither one spoke for quite some time. Andy’s plate was almost cleared when he questioned Erin.

“Why didn’t you go home for break?”

“Money.”

“You wanted to stay here and work?”

“Yes, but also I just don’t have the spare change to fly home.”

“Where’s home?”

“California.”

“And your parents ...”

“They’re lawyers.”

Her answers were a bit icy, and Andy didn’t know how much to probe.

“They can’t afford to chip in for a ticket?”

“They could afford a ticket and probably have enough left to buy the plane.”

“I know I’m being nosy, but why don’t they help you out?”

“Yes, you are being nosy, but I don’t care. My folks have their own firm. It’s become very large and very successful. They are proud to be a family business. My five siblings work there as lawyers or assistants. My grandpa Townshend was a lawyer, as were my two uncles.

She took a bite out of her garlic bread almost violently and then washed it down with her drink.

“So what happened?”

“I didn’t want to be a lawyer. I wanted to teach school. My parents tried to talk me out of it up until the day I left. You would have thought I was joining a gang.”

“They’ve never welcomed you back?” Andy found it rather unbelievable.

“I might be welcomed back—they just won’t help me get there.”

“I’m not a fighting man, Erin, but if your dad was here right now I think I’d take a swing at him. I can’t imagine anyone treating you that way.”

“It’s all right. I feel like I’m stronger because of it, and I’ve learned to make it on my own.”

“Thanks for telling me. I feel like I just got another piece of the puzzle.”

“Puzzle?”

“You know—what makes you the woman you are today.”

“First I’m a kid, and now I’m a woman. I think you are the puzzled one.”

Andy just shrugged and suggested they order dessert.

“Anything to put off going back to shopping,” was Erin’s response.