

Sifting Through Mud

A novel by

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Chapter 14

Initially, I thought it was a good idea—actually, a great idea—back when it was rolling around in my head. But now as I’m sitting in the middle of a vicious silence, with all of us desperately seeking something to rest our eyes on, besides each other, the thought comes barreling to the forefront of my mind that maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all.

Instead of spending the day cleaning, grocery shopping, and cooking a fabulous dinner, I probably should’ve volunteered at the Senior Center, surrounded myself with grey-haired old ladies, and chucked the whole notion of having the “big reveal” at my house. Stupidly, I decided to have the “Andrew paternity pow-wow dinner” in my dining room, with all my good china, and a lovely braised-beef tenderloin with all the fixin’s.

Treesie has just informed us there is no child. She'd lost the baby six months into her pregnancy and she'd never planned to tell Andrew about it—not even if the baby had survived. This, of course, doesn't sit well with Andrew.

“You selfish witch!” he says. Except he doesn't say *witch*. It's the b-word that rhymes with witch.

Instantly I flinch. My eyes grow wide in their sockets. In shock, I look at him in horrid disbelief. Andrew rarely, if ever, uses profanity. And especially not in such a malicious tone. Furthermore, across the table, Treesie is having the same reaction as I am, except our expressions go unnoticed by Andrew as he continues to rant.

“I would've had a child somewhere on this earth and not even have known about it?” The palms of Andrew's hands slam down hard on the table, rattling my good china, and sending a few roasted red potatoes from their serving platter to the tabletop. “Why would you keep my child from me?”

“Because I wasn't interested in you.” Treesie yells back, whips up from her chair, and starts flailing her arms around like a wild woman. Her body is leaning over the table and perched towards Andrew. Clearly she's pissed at Andrew's name calling. “And neither did I want some kind of forced, obligatory relationship with you.” Her eyes fire daggers across the table to match the angry blaze in Andrew's eyes. “I was going to keep my baby...”

“Our baby!” Andrew spat out.

Treesie presses her lips tightly against her teeth, which forces the blood to leave and form two angry, white lines. “THE baby,” she retaliates and slams one hand down on the table.

Good lord, why are they killing my table and rattling all my good china. And what's with me that I'm thinking about china at this time.

“I was going to keep “THE” baby and start a new life for myself,” Treesie continues, seemingly egged on by the intensity of the room. “It was too much drama here. Too many friendships/relationships being ruined, so I left.” She pauses, dart her eyes at me, then back at Andrew. “Everyone made me out to be the whore, the bitch. No one ever once stopped to hear what I had to say, to see what I was feeling, or even noticed that maybe I was going through a crisis. And at that time, it didn’t matter if I never saw you...,” She looks at me again, her eyes slicing my soul. “...or you,” Her eyes then slice Andrew. “or anyone else in this damned town, ever again.” She swallows hard.

Andrew jerks up from his chair, paces back and forth at the end of the table, then leans one hand against the wall, the other hand pressed hard against his hip. He stares violently at the china on the table.

He is obviously pissed.

Treesie takes her seat.

And that’s when the vicious silence falls over the room.

Two weeks ago—the day after Darnell’s infamous game night—Andrew and I called Treesie expecting to confront her about his child. However, there was no answer from her phone, so I left a message for her to call me. In the meantime, Andrew thought it would be better to confront Treesie in person and decided he’d fly out to South Carolina to see her. He then rattled out something about frequent flyer miles.

I hadn’t heard what he’d said about frequent flyer miles because I was too focused on the part where he asked me to come with him to South Carolina. This was not a good idea. My being there would only complicate things, so I refused. Yet he pleaded with me. Said he’d be

more comfortable if I were there, since he hadn't seen Treesie in years upon years. Eventually, I agreed to go. And later that afternoon, before Andrew flew back home to Colorado, we went over our plan of action.

Coincidentally, Treesie made it easier for us when she returned my call and said she'd be in Chicago on business in two weeks. So I invited her to my house for dinner and purposely left out the fact that Andrew would be joining us.

The silence is so loud, I can't take it anymore. And to see Andrew fully riled up like this—when he's typically an easy going guy—only means this situation has touched a nerve, so I end the silence.

“Okay, Treesie,” I say softly, “Tell us now. What kind of crisis were you in that caused you to do the things you did?”

She says nothing. I become annoyed.

“See. Right there,” I say, stabbing the air with my finger. “What you're doing right now is what you did over twenty years ago.” I throw my hands up in disbelief. “You said nothing then like you're doing now. I asked you several times back then, how could you do such a thing, and consistently your answer was silence.” I pause for a second, see if she responds. When she doesn't, I shrug and say, “So don't you sit there and say no one ever stopped to hear what you had to say. I did stop to hear, but you said nothing, and right here, right now is your opportunity to say something.”

Treesie drops her head, mumbles, “I couldn't.”

I cock my head to hear her better. “What?”

“I couldn't tell you then,” she says louder.

I study her face. “Why not, Treesie, why couldn’t you?” A range of emotions seem to travel across her eyebrows, her forehead, her face.

She looks over at Andrew. His arms are now folded across his chest, his back leaning against the wall. She looks back at me, spread her arms wide as if she’s about to explain, but instead they fall clumsily onto the table in heavy thumps.

“Why not, Treesie? What’s the problem?” I continue to prod. “If you weren’t the whore that we...that I...thought you were, then here’s your chance to prove me wrong.”

“It’s not that simple,” she says and picks up her fork, moves food around her plate.

“Why not?” I say even louder, more direct.

“Because, Bella,” she says into her plate as if unable to look at me or not wanting to.

Andrew interjects. “Because, what?” He says and releases an irritated sigh. “Just say what you have to say, Treesie.” His patience wearing thin.

Treesie whips her head up from her plate, stares me straight in the eyes and challenges me. “Because of you, Bella. I was in love with you,” she shouts.

My head snaps backwards from the impact of her words, and from the corner of my eye, I see Andrew’s body jerk from the wall. Shock seemed to reverberate throughout his limbs.

“What!” Andrew yells.

Of course, my mouth forms no words, I just sit there with my jaw dropped.

Treesie’s eyes stumble over Andrew before landing on me. “I tried to ruin your relationships with Andrew and Craig.” She wrings her hands together nervously. “I didn’t want you to be with them. So I tried to sabotage it. I wanted you to see that men couldn’t be trusted. That given the chance, they’d hump anything moving.”

“Oh...my...god,” Andrew says, in slow, exact syllables. “Are you serious? I mean...” he shakes his head in disbelief. “are you...is this a joke?”

I form the word “wow,” with my lips but no sound comes out.

“I had no idea you felt that way, Treesie,” I finally say and meet her eyes.

Andrew walks over to sit in the chair next to me, leans forward on the table, props up on his elbows, and looks back and forth from me to Treesie.

I shift in my seat. “You do realize I’m not gay don’t you?” I say directly into Treesie’s eyes. “And I never was.”

“I know that,” she replies and rubs her hands over her eyes, as if trying to rub away the past two minutes of this conversation.

“Listen,” she begins, “my life at that time was complicated. I was struggling with a lot of conflicting emotions, trying to get a grip on who I was. I was attracted to both men and women, or at least I tricked myself into believing I was attracted to men.” She pushes her plate aside, leans in closer. “When you and I met in college, Bella, we clicked instantly and our friendship flourished.” She looks briefly at Andrew, then back. “I dated guys, you dated guys and we both compared notes. But all along, I would’ve rather spent my time with you than the guys I dated, and eventually those feelings got stronger. The more and more I tried to deny or suppress them the stronger they got. I no longer wanted to hear about your boyfriends. I started to become jealous of them.”

Oh my god. Do I want to hear all this? Should I stop her? I get the picture. I don’t need the details. I mean, I love Treesie. Always have. Even through the anger, the hatred, the distance, I still loved her, but never in that way. This puts a whole new perspective on our friendship. A perspective I’m not sure how to handle.

“Look, Treesie.” I stop her. “This, like every other bomb you’ve dropped on me, is hard to swallow. I mean, what am I suppose to say? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do right now.”

Andrews grabs my hand, manages out a half smile in an attempt to comfort me.

“I don’t need you to say or do anything,” Treesie says. “I just need you to understand all the elements involved before you cast me aside as some heartless whore.”

“Well it certainly puts a new spin on things.” I admit. “An unexpected spin, to say the least.”

Andrew chimes in. His anger now subdued by this new revelation. “Man, Treesie, I’m so sorry for what I called you earlier. That was inconsiderate of me and inappropriate altogether.”

Treesie stares at him, her eyes unwavering.

“And I also should’ve listened to you back then. You were trying to tell me, that night...” he shrugs a shoulder “...about your struggles, about being gay, but I just thought you were drunk and joking.”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t sure myself, so I’m sure it came across in a joking manner.” Treesie says with a dry, half-smile. Her adamant stance towards Andrew softens. She then looks at me, as if hoping I’d say something.

I don’t. Instead I look down at the wayward potatoes still lying on the tabletop.

Andrew adds, “But even though your being gay may explain some things, it doesn’t explain it all. And it doesn’t excuse the fact you kept the pregnancy from me. A child. My child.”

“I know. It doesn’t. And as I said, I was really mixed up.” She leans in, reaches her hand out and let it slide across the table. “But that’s no excuse. There is no excuse for keeping a man from his child and I am deeply sorry for not telling you.” She shakes her head, her eyes appear

sorrowful as they stare directly into Andrew's. "I am, Andrew, I'm truly sorry for the choices I made twenty years ago. And once I lost the baby, I especially didn't see any point in telling you. Any connection we would've had together was gone." She draws in a deep breath, releases it.

From across the table, Andrew places his hand on top of Treesie's. "Thank you for that. I appreciate your apology." He squeezes her hand. "And again, I'm sorry for my outburst."

"Me, too," she says to Andrew and then looks at me. "Are you okay?"

I shrug, fake a smile. Actually it's a genuine smile, my face just feels fake doing it.

"Listen, Bella," Treesie says. "I knew you weren't gay, and I knew we could never be together that way. Which is the other reason I left town. There was nothing left here for me. I needed to move on with my life."

"There was nothing left, because you ruined it all," I say, hoping not to sound harsh. I didn't want the room to erupt in anger again. I wanted us all to talk without anger. "While you were trying to sabotage my relationships, you also sabotaged our friendship. You had to have known that would happen."

"Subconsciously, I guess I did, but I thought our friendship was strong enough to withstand it. That you'd be angry at first, but eventually get over it and we'd be friends again—more than friends. But I didn't do it to hurt you. I did it to have you." She pauses to take a deep breath.

Andrew shifts in his seat, fumbles with a napkin, then excuses himself from the table, mumbling something about getting more rolls from the kitchen.

Treesie continues.

"Bella, I wasn't thinking straight, my rationale for things was off. I was grabbing at straws and hoping for the best. That's why I did what I did. I'd hoped everything would work itself

out.” She lifted a hand to smooth her hair. “I guess I didn’t have it all figured out in my head. Actually, I really didn’t have anything figured out in my head. I was just wingin’ it.”

I lean back in my chair. “Treesie, I hear what you’re saying. I get it. It’s just that...it’s just so much to take in right now. I mean, you can’t begin to know how severely wounding your betrayal was...is. I mean it’s not something that’s going to just mend overnight, or over one dinner.” The doorbell rings and I hear Andrew going to answer it. “It will take some time for it all to sink in, I just need time to process it.”

“Of course you do. I understand,” Treesie says. “Is there anything I can do to help, to make it easier for you?”

I shrug, fold my arms across my chest. “We’ll just have to work through it...see what happens.”

“That’s sounds fair enough. It’s a start.”

I look at her inquisitively, search her body language. “Is there anything else, Treesie? Are there any more bombs waiting to explode? Have you told me all there is?”

But before she could answer, I look up to see my friend Lenora—whom I’d met at Haven Lake Spa—standing in my dining room next to Andrew. My mouth drops open in shock. Lenora’s does, too.

And before we can connect the dots, Treesie leaps up to greet Lenora with a hug. “Finally, you made it,” Treesie says. “You’re just in time for dessert.”

Chapter 15

It took me a while before I put two and two together. Even as Lenora and Treesie are standing right in front of me, I still don't make the connection. I'm so taken aback by the sight of Lenora, so thrilled and excited by her presence, that as soon as Treesie unlatches her arms from Lenora, I fly over to do the same. Except I'm screaming, "Oh my gosh! Lenora? What're you doing here?" and squeezing her hard against me. I don't even notice the strange expression on Treesie's face, or the way she steps aside while I greet Lenora like a long lost love.

Lenora squeals to Treesie but is clinging to me, "Sweetie, when you said you wanted me to meet an old friend of yours for dinner, I didn't know it'd be Bella."

Treesie nods and gives a half-lit smile.

And it's way after the first-sight thrill ebbs, after the glee-filled screeching and screaming is over, after our widened eyes lessen and our overly animated words become less animated, that I realize, Lenora Draper is gay. Lenora Draper is the woman Treesie has had a seven-year relationship. Lenora Draper is Treesie's better half, spousal equivalent, life partner, or whatever it's called nowadays. I can never keep up with the gay/lesbian lingo.

Once this revelation hits me, my body springs backward about a foot and I stumble over Andrew. Then I raise my hand and fan a finger at them both.

“Oh. My. God.” I say in slow motion, my finger pointing from one to the other. “You two are a couple!”

It never occurred to me Treesie would invite someone to my house for dinner without asking me, or that the someone would be my friend Lenora—her lover.

“Duhhh, Sherlock, how'd you figure that one out?” retorts Lenora with a feisty grin and her usual spunky, straight-to-the-point demeanor. “Are you doing math in your head again? Putting two and two together?” She laughs her infamous deep-throated, quirky laugh and the whole room joins in, even the walls laugh, that's how contagious the sound of it is.

Except I was wrong, one person wasn't laughing but expressing a curious grin. “So you two know each other?” Treesie says, trying to appear indifferent.

Lenora gives me a roll of her eyes as if to say “Oh, lordy, here we go,” before she turns to Treesie. The roll of her eye was so slight and so brief, you could've missed it if you blinked.

“Yes, babe, I told you about her,” Lenora says to Treesie with an overly sunny smile. “She's the friend I met at Haven Lake. The one I told you was a blast to hang with.” Lenora reaches out to rub Treesie's arm, as if to say, “Don't worry, we're just friends.”

Treesie smiles, and I know it's a forced smile because it's hollow and thin. And I've seen it a million times before. “Yeah, you told me about a friend you met, but you never said a name or mentioned she was a ‘blast.’”

I sense the mild tension in Treesie's words so I step in to lighten the load. “Well, of course, I'm a blast to be around,” I say lightheartedly and grab Andrew's arm. “Lenora, I take it you've met Andrew already at the door.” She nods and Andrew reaches to shake her hand.

“It's good to meet you,” Andrew says. “I've heard good things about you.”

“Andrew and I are dating...well, more than dating. He's the one I told you about at the spa.”

A light bulb goes off in Lenora's eyes. She takes off her glasses. “Oh wow, so this is the guy...” Lenora takes a closer look at Andrew “...the one who has a child with your best friend.”

I pan around the room at the flabbergasted expressions, including my own, for this was the last thing we expected her to say.

But then she adds, “Who's the best friend?”

Nope, this is the last thing we expected her to say. But that's the beauty of Lenora and also the curse—she wastes no time getting to the meat of things.

No one speaks for what seems like decades, but is virtually only a split second. Except within that second, Lenora sees our expressions, does some math of her own, and quickly give us her verdict.

“You?” She looks at Treesie, then surveys the rest of us before returning back to Treesie. “But that's impossible. How could you have a child with him?”

“Had. Had a child. I lost it during pregnancy years ago, way before you and I met, Nora.” Treesie explains softly.

“Hmmp,” Lenora snorts. “I've been with you seven years and I've never known that. How come?”

“Because that part of my life had died—Bella, Andrew, the baby—and I didn't want to resurrect it.” She moves closer to Lenora, touches her arm. “You were my new beginning and that's what I wanted it to be—new. Out with the old, in with the new.” She chuckles nervously.

“Good lord, this night just keeps getting better and better,” I mumble on the way back to my seat. Andrew follows.

“Well, I'll be darned, Treesie,” Andrew says jokingly in an attempt to lighten the mood. “Looks like you've kept a lot of people in the dark about a lot of things, Miss Missy.” But his attempt falls flat. The mood doesn't lighten.

“Yeah, and I guess tonight is when the darkness shall come to light, huh?” Treesie replies and takes her seat, too.

Lenora is the only one left standing, looking around the table at us like we're all a weird cast of characters. “So is that what this is...,” she says, motioning to the table, her gaze landing on me and Andrew. “...a witch hunt? Did you bring Treesie here tonight to stone her to death and hang her from the rafters?”

“Not at all, Lenora,” I explain. “We brought her here for the truth. To put an end to all the drama.”

Lenora instantly gets protective. “You sure?” she says curtly, “Because now that I've had a closer look, it looks to me the two of you are here to gang up on her.” Lenora's eyes grow darker, more threatening.

My face twists with disbelief because I did not see that coming. In a matter of seconds, Lenora changed from being my sweet, spunky friend, to a ferocious, defensive linebacker ready to dismantle me.

I match her tone and raise it a notch. “Are you threatening me in my own house, Lenora?”

“Are you threatening Treesie in your own house, Bella?” she shoots back, throwing my words back in my face.

Andrew jumps to my defense. “Okay, okay, everybody just calm down.” He throws out his hands in a settle down motion. “Nobody's threatening anyone. And nobody's here to kill, maim...,” his eyes dart heatedly at Lenora, “... or witch hunt. So just settle down.”

I blow out a sigh, allow my chest to deflate.

Treesie pulls out the chair beside her and motions for Lenora to sit down.

I prop my elbows on the table, clasp my hands together against my chin, and watch Lenora take a seat.

“We are all adults,” Andrew continues. “so how 'bout we act like it, before we say something we'll regret.” He looks around the table at each of us. “Now sometimes the truth hurts as we all know, but it's how we choose to handle it is what makes the difference.”

Andrew is right. Lenora and I had become great friends so why are we sitting here acting like enemies? When Lenora called me last week to tell me she'd be in the Chicago area, I became giddy as a Lark. Although it was bad timing because both Treesie and Andrew would be in town, too, but I'd work around it somehow in order to spend time with her.

Since my Friday night dinner debacle couldn't be cancelled, I told her we'd do something on Saturday, which was fine with her because she, too, had Friday night plans. Little did we know our separate Friday plans wouldn't be so separate after all.

After a few moments of quiet, Lenora speaks up.

“He's right, Bella, I'm sorry for attacking you,” she says with a warm smile. “Remember I told you, I do a lot of barking, but I don't bite.” She attempts a laugh.

I smile as I recall her saying those same words the first day we met on the front porch of the Haven Lake Resort Spa. “Me too. I’m sorry, too, Lenora,” I say and reach for her hand as she reaches for mine in a squeeze of forgiveness.

Lenora then looks at Treesie, “I understand why you didn’t tell me about all of this, but that doesn’t excuse you. We still have some talking to do.” She leans over and brushes against Treesie’s shoulder “But later. We don’t have to talk about it now.”

Treesie mouths the words, “thank you” and smiles.

I leap from my chair. “Who wants dessert?” I say and take a tally of the table. Everyone is in agreement and saying stuff like, “bring it on,” and “thought you’d never ask,” and finally, “I hope there’s enough to go around 'cause I may devour it.”

As I move into the kitchen, I hear them behind me stumbling to make small talk and repair the damaged atmosphere. I hear Lenora ask Andrew a series of questions about how he and I met, with Treesie blurting in with tidbits of information she was privy too regarding our relationship. Then Andrew is rehashing some of the stories I’d told him about me and Lenora at Haven Lake Spa, and laughter fills the room from those stories. Lenora, of course, unleashes her trademark laugh, which I fell in love with the first time I heard it, and I know Andrew is getting a kick out of it, too, because who wouldn’t.

Next Treesie is asking Andrew what he does for a living, and when he tells her, she asks if he’s encountered any real “looney tunes” who are hard to deal with in his psychiatric practice. Laughter breaks out again when he responds with, “Not often, but there’s a spot open for you, Treesie, if you’d like.” And I know the facial expression Treesie gives him, just before she erupts into laughter. Most of Treesie’s expressions are ingrained in my memory.

I fill up bowls with peach cobbler—warm from the oven—top them with cinnamon peach ice cream, and dollops of whipped cream. And as I'm licking some renegade cream from my finger I think back to my time at Haven Lake and how I can't recall Lenora ever revealing anything about herself that would've led me to believe she's gay. Come to think about it, she hardly ever talked about herself at all.

Most of our conversations were about other people or about my issues. If topics ever teetered around her, she'd be very vague with her information or change the subject altogether. How did I not pick up on that? Why was she not open about her gayness? Do I look like a gay basher? Like someone who wouldn't have been accepting of her. The thought of this becomes irritating.

"I'm not a gay basher," I announce as I reenter the dining room and thump down the huge tray of desserts. The bowls create a rhythmic sound as they collide into each other.

"No one ever said you were," offers Treesie while grabbing a bowl. "Mmmm, these look so good," she says, licking her finger from an accidental brush against the whipped cream.

The rest of them follow suit. Making ooh and ah noises as they reach for the bowls.

"Then how come you never told me?" This particular question is directed straight between the eyes of Lenora Draper and I stand there, waiting for her answer. Yet her answer doesn't come immediately, due to the spoonful of cobbler she's already stuffed in her mouth. So I wait.

Lenora looks up at me, swallows the remnants in her mouth, and licks her spoon. "Um, because it never came up." She gives me a "what's the big deal" look and takes another spoonful of cobbler.

“Okay. I'll give you that,” I say and grab the last bowl from the tray. “because I know people don't walk around with 'I'm gay' signs hanging on them.” I move over to my seat. “but we've talked since then, why haven't you mentioned it then?”

Lenora puts down her spoon, looks over at Andrew then at me. “Okay, Ms. Liberal,” she says in her spunky trademark tone, “everyone is not so open-minded about those things, so I like to know who I'm dealing with before I reveal my life story to people I meet. Is that okay, Ms. Power-to-the-People?” She looks at Treesie, who's grinning into her bowl of cobbler. “Good gosh, I would've told you eventually, we've only been friends...what... just shy of a month. Gimme a frickin' break.”

“Well almost a month is plenty of time.” I throw up my hands in surrender. “But I'll respect your need to tell me in your own timeframe.”

“Well that's mighty kind of you ma'am,” she chides with a sarcastic flair.

Andrew clears his throat, trying to hold back his laugh, which is pointless because it seeps out anyway and causes the whole table to explode. This, of course, is good ole' Lenora Draper's style—to place people in a fit of laughter. But the amazing part is she does it unintentionally.

After the laughter dies down, Lenora says, “If it makes you feel any better, Bella, I was going to tell you this weekend, when I introduced you to Treesie. But obviously you two need no introductions.”

“Obviously,” Andrew says lifting his eyebrows in a “duhh” expression.

I pat his arm to support his observation and allow my smile to roam around the table.

Eventually, after dessert, we all end up in the family room having civilized conversation amongst the sofa and oversized chairs. It is during this conversation I learn Lenora has only just arrived in town this evening even though Treesie has been here all week on business. Lenora's

flight caused her to miss the dinner portion of the evening, which was probably for the best, considering things got off to a rocky start.

I also learned the reason Lenora never knew Treesie and I had been best friends in the past was because Treesie never spoke of me until recently and even then she referred to me as her old friend from Naperville, which explains a lot.

By evening's end we are all getting along so well, you'd never have known only hours earlier we were all about to slit each other's throats.