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Opening Extract from...

Do Opposites Attract

Written by Kathryn Freeman

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Do Opposites Attract?

Kathryn Freeman

Extract


Choc
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Chapter One

The ballroom was dazzling. The jazz band played, diamonds glittered. Waiters strutted round with silver platters filled with canapés and the finest champagne. Wealthy men in their handmade tuxedos danced with glamorous ladies in eye-wateringly expensive silk dresses. It resembled a scene from the nineteenth century, when girls in their finery would set out to snare a rich husband. Two centuries later it looked like very little had changed – bar a reduction in simpering and an escalation in blatant flirtation.

Brianna was so bored, she wanted to scream. She didn't want to spend yet another Saturday night in the company of these pampered, idle rich. Not with men who seemed increasingly dull, or with women who cared about nothing but spending money and looking good. Her greatest fear was that she was fast becoming one of them.

Across the sea of black tuxedos and vibrant designer dresses, Brianna caught sight of Melanie. She smiled as their eyes locked. Melanie had been her best friend from school; was her best friend now. She too had more money than she knew what to do with. With an understanding borne of years of friendship, they simultaneously moved towards the exit.

'When are you going to dance with me, Brianna?'

Her escape temporarily halted, Brianna turned to find Henry Doherty following her. He was attractive, if you liked men with bland, even features. Brianna didn't.

'Maybe later,' she replied, giving him a cool smile. 'And maybe never,' she muttered under her breath, gliding quickly through the hotel and into the welcome fresh air of the London evening.

'I see you're much in demand again.' Melanie had followed her out and was looking furtively up and down the street to check nobody was watching them. With a nod of satisfaction she delved into her satin evening bag and proceeded to light two cigarettes.

Brianna didn't smoke. Neither did Melanie. At least not when they were sober. In fact, Brianna hated it with a passion and refused to go out with any man who smoked. But every now and again, when she'd had too much to drink, or was feeling low, a cigarette was just what she needed. Tonight it was a combination of both.

Taking a deep drag she rested against the cool wall of the hotel. 'I didn't see you standing around like a wallflower either,' she remarked as the nicotine slowly seeped into her veins, relaxing her.

'One of the privileges of being your friend is that I seem to acquire the men you reject.' Melanie grinned and rested against the wall next to her. 'Of course the downside of that is they always know they're getting second best.'

Brianna emitted a very unladylike snort. 'What a load of bull. Look at you with your shiny blonde hair and baby blue eyes. You could never be second best.'

Melanie shook her head, though she was still smiling. 'And look at you, Brianna Worthington. I might be the cool blonde, but it's the sexy brunette the men are desperate to meet.'

Brianna took another drag from her cigarette. 'Bollocks. It's my trust fund they're chasing, not me.' As the sole, fourth generation heir to the Worthington family business, being fabulously wealthy was something she'd grown up with. 'Still, who cares? Far easier to be the one being chased than the one doing the chasing.'

'Speaking of your trust fund, how is life in the family emporium? Found a job you actually enjoy yet?'

Brianna snorted again, a sound totally at odds with her appearance. 'Sure. Running a chain of shops is exactly how I see my life unfolding.'

'Good heavens, only you could call the illustrious Worthington department stores a chain of shops. If your father heard you, he'd disown you.'

‘Sometimes I think that might be a good thing,’ Brianna admitted quietly.

Melanie shot her a look of disbelief. ‘You’re kidding me. Then you’d really have to work for a living.’

‘So? You don’t think I’ve got the stamina to do a nine to five, five day week?’

‘Stamina, yes, boredom threshold, no. You’d be tearing your hair out after a fortnight.’

‘Only if I chose the wrong job.’

‘And what, pray, would be the right job?’

The conversation was becoming way too serious for a Saturday night. ‘Okay, you win. I can’t imagine anything I’d want to do seven hours a day, five days a week.’ She shuddered. Taking a final puff of her cigarette, she crushed the stub under her five inch silver Jimmy Choo’s. ‘Come on, my friend. Let’s go back and party.’

Grabbing Melanie by the arm, the pair of them strode confidently back into the hotel, oblivious to the envious glances of other women and the frankly lustful gazes of the men. They both lived in a world where they were used to being pursued and adored.

On entering the glittering ballroom once more, Brianna paused. There was Henry again, his eyes scanning the room. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she guessed he was looking for her. Bugger. She liked him well enough, and had certainly *known* him long enough because their mothers were great friends, but it didn’t mean she wanted to spend the rest of the evening with him. Especially as he seemed to be angling to move their relationship on from friendship to something more. It simply wasn’t going to happen. He might be good-looking, but romantically, Henry left her cold. What was it about rich men that made them dull? Maybe they didn’t feel the need to try. Or maybe their lives were so empty it left them with nothing interesting to say.

‘Henry’s on the prowl for you,’ Melanie whispered, nodding her head in the man’s direction.

‘Which is why I’m about to make a run for it.’

Her friend chuckled. ‘Coward.’

‘I prefer to think I’m being kind.’

‘Abandoning me is kind?’

‘Not giving Henry grounds for false hope is kind. Abandoning you is a necessary step, but one I know a best friend will forgive.’

Not allowing Melanie a chance to reply, Brianna darted out of Henry’s line of vision, offering her friend a silent apology when his gaze fell in her direction. Feeling every inch the coward she’d been accused of being, Brianna sneaked round the outside of the room and headed for her mother’s table.

Dull and rich. The words haunted her as she walked. They applied just as easily to women, too, and were exactly what she feared was happening to her. It was all very well being rich and pretty, but really, what did she actually *do*? What was her purpose? If she wasn’t careful, she was going to end up being a bland, rich lady. One of those who lunched, played tennis and waited for their equally boring partners to come home.

It was a sobering thought, sobering enough to dim the champagne high she’d been slowly cultivating all evening. Time to head to the refuge of her mother.

Approaching her table, she found her deep in conversation with Henry’s mother, Abigail.

‘I’m sure it won’t be long before Henry and Brianna get together,’ she overheard her mother saying. ‘They make such a lovely couple. And I wouldn’t have to worry about my in-laws coming for tea.’ The two ladies chuckled.

Anger fizzed up Brianna’s spine and her first instinct was to pull the two women apart and announce that hell would need to freeze over before she’d ever contemplate marrying Henry. But mid-stride, she halted. She was twenty-six years old. Old enough to have learnt to curb her temper. Well, almost. So instead of rushing in

with both feet, Brianna hung back, accepted a drink from a passing waiter and let her anger cool.

All her life she'd done as her parents had asked, sometimes going against her own wishes. She'd trooped off to ballet lessons when she'd rather have been learning to salsa. She'd struggled with the classical piano, although she'd wanted to rock the electric guitar. She'd even spent endless hours perfecting her topspin forehand, whilst enviously watching the girls from the local school play football. But marrying Henry was a step far too far. How could her mother think that someone like him was right for her? For marriage, she needed love. And for love she needed someone far more exciting than Henry.

Abigail started to make a move and Brianna took her opportunity and sidled onto the now vacant chair next to her mother. 'Mum,' she greeted her, landing a kiss on both her cheeks. 'What have you and Abigail been plotting?'

Her mother had the grace to blush. 'Plotting? Don't be ridiculous. We were just having a chat.'

Brianna narrowed her eyes. 'You were discussing me, Mum. Apparently I'm going to marry Henry. Which, I have to confess, is news to me.'

She'd expected embarrassment, but a broad smile lit up her mother's face. 'Well, what do you think? Wouldn't he make an ideal husband?'

'Ideal how, exactly?' She was trying to curb her tongue, she really was.

'Isn't that rather obvious, darling?'

'Not to me.'

A faint crease lined her mother's brow, her one and only sign of annoyance. She didn't do big scenes. Didn't shout or rant, which drove Brianna mad, as she did both, frequently. 'Your father and I both think Henry would make the perfect husband for you. We've known his family for years, he's independently wealthy, and has charming manners.'

‘And that’s all it takes? Money, a pedigree and a few basic manners? Mum, we’re talking about my life here, my future,’ Brianna snapped, exasperated. So much for curbing her tongue. ‘There’s no way I’m going to let you and Dad determine who I’m going to marry. God knows you’ve chosen everything else in my life, but not this. Never this.’ She pushed her chair back and stood up. ‘What about love, Mum? Am I not allowed to marry for love?’

‘Of course you are, my darling.’ Instantly her mother was by her side, an arm draped around her shoulders, hugging her tight. ‘Love is the most important thing. But you can learn to love the right person,’ she added quietly, ‘rather than someone who might be unsuitable. Who might want you for your money.’

‘Don’t you trust me enough to find that person by myself?’ Brianna replied sadly.

‘Oh shush, of course we do. I was just trying to help, that’s all. Give you a push in what I thought was the right direction.’ Gently she pulled Brianna back down onto the chair. ‘What is it, my love? Your father and I are worried about you. You don’t look happy any more; you haven’t done for a while. That’s why we started talking about Henry. We thought maybe you were ready to settle down, but not sure who to settle down with.’

Brianna sighed and leant back against the chair. ‘Oh, Mum, I’m far from ready to settle down, and especially not with Henry.’ She toyed with the stem of her wine glass. ‘I feel restless. I’m halfway through my twenties and I still don’t know what I’m doing with my life. I don’t just want to get married and have babies. In time, yes, but not now. I want to do something useful, something worthwhile. Not become yet another spoilt rich kid.’

‘I thought you were going to work with your father?’ her mother prompted cautiously. ‘Make use of that business degree you worked so hard for.’

Brianna let out a deep chuckle, releasing the last of the tension between them. ‘Very tactful, but you know as well as I do that I haven’t exactly excelled in that direction so far.’

‘I know that buying and finance weren’t your forte,’ her mother replied generously. ‘But I thought you enjoyed the marketing section?’

Brianna thought back to her time in the Worthington family business, affectionately known as the big W due to its single letter logo. Yes she’d enjoyed looking at ways to improve the branding and promotion of the company, but it hadn’t lit any fires in her. Running a chain of shops – sorry high end department stores – simply wasn’t what she wanted to spend the best part of her life doing. ‘It was fun,’ she replied slowly, ‘but I’d soon grow bored of it.’

Her mother squeezed her arm. ‘Brianna, you’re beautiful, smart and determined. You’ll find your path in life, my dear.’ She considered her daughter for a moment. ‘You know I think you should talk to Margaret. She’s here this evening. You’ve met her before, I think?’

Brianna nodded, recalling being introduced to a feisty, grey-haired lady at the last charity ball her mother had coerced her into attending. ‘Yes, she runs the charity tonight is in aid of, doesn’t she? She’s one scary lady.’

Her mother laughed. ‘She’s not so scary, at least not when you get to know her. Mind you, she has to have a certain amount of pluck to be able to do her job. I was wondering if maybe spending some time working with a charity, a cause you feel is worthwhile, might help you determine your direction. Margaret heads up Medic SOS, a charity I’m rather proud to be the patron of.’

Brianna looked guiltily at her mother. ‘I haven’t really paid much attention to your charity work, have I? I should have done. What do they do?’

‘Well, Margaret can tell you more, but in a nutshell they provide immediate medical help to any place in the world struck by a natural disaster of some sort. I came to know about them when they saved the life of my friend, Tilly. Do you remember how she was caught up in the tsunami disaster in

Thailand? The local medical services were hopelessly overburdened, but she was lucky enough to be taken to a Medic SOS tent when she started to have trouble breathing. It turned out that she'd fractured a rib, which then punctured her lung cavity. The team operated on her there and then, and literally saved her life.' At that moment, her mother glanced up and waved. 'Look, here comes the lady herself. I'll ask her to have a chat with you.'

Over the next ten minutes Brianna listened attentively while Margaret described the work of Medic SOS. The more she listened to the older lady's rather gruff tone, the more Brianna started to feel a spark of interest. Maybe her mother was right. Perhaps it was time she considered a new direction, something far removed from traditional business. Goodness knows it hadn't exactly captivated her so far.

'We've got a team out in South America at the moment,' Margaret was saying. 'They've been there for two days now, dealing with the aftermath of a destructive tornado. If you're interested you could fly out and see for yourself the work they do.'

'Really?' Nobody was more surprised than Brianna when the word shot out of her mouth.

Or when Margaret actually cracked an answering smile. 'Yes, really. Just contact the office on Monday and we'll sort everything out for you. Mitch McBride is the lead doctor down there. He's our most experienced medic. You couldn't ask for a better person to demonstrate the practical side of what we do. I'm sure he'll be happy to show you around.'

When Brianna drifted away from the ball later that evening, her head wasn't full of dancing or champagne. Instead she was trying to imagine what a poor area in South America might look like after a tornado, and whether she could possibly be of any help in putting things straight. For the first time in a long while she felt a zip of excitement.

Chapter Two

If Mitch had overheard Margaret telling the young socialite how happy he'd be to show her around, he'd have possibly burst into uncontrollable laughter. But that would have been after he'd thumped his fist against something hard and uttered several filthy swear words. Showing a visitor around the crude camp that so many were now calling home was the bloody last thing he had time for. He was far too busy trying to administer medical help under a leaking tent and without half of his much needed supplies. They were apparently still making their way across the flood stricken muddy tracks that passed for roads. And still it rained.

'Mitch, they're bringing in another crowd.'

Midway through examining the arm of a five year old boy for fractures, Mitch glanced up to see Tessa, his senior nurse, point towards a bedraggled group of varying ages shuffling into what was laughingly called the waiting room. In reality it was a smaller tent adjoined to the larger treatment tent.

'Thanks, Tessa.' Mitch smiled briefly at the head nurse before focussing all his attention back on the child. 'It looks like you've broken your arm, buddy.' He spoke softly in Spanish to the little boy with the large brown eyes. 'But we'll put a cast on it and soon have you as good as new.' He ruffled the boy's hair. 'Have you got any family here with you?' The boy simply shook his head, the fat tears that trailed down his cheeks telling the story far more eloquently than any words. 'Did you get separated?' Mitch continued gently, holding the boy's hand.

The boy nodded and Mitch sighed. Sometimes he hated his job. 'Don't worry. You stay here with us. We'll look after you until we can find your family. Okay?'

He walked the boy over to Tessa. 'Can you sort this brave lad out with a cast and a sling?'

Tessa smiled. ‘I’m sure that can be arranged.’ She glanced in the direction of an adjoining tent. ‘Have you checked on the main ward recently? We’re filling up fast.’

Mitch ducked his head through the entrance and went to see for himself. The main ward was a preposterously grand name for what was simply yet another tent, this time filled with rows of temporary beds, most, as Tessa had implied, already occupied. With a heavy heart he ducked back to the treatment tent.

‘Poor sods,’ he muttered to Tessa. ‘And to think they’re the lucky ones.’ At least they’d managed to escape from what was left of the remote villages that had once been their homes. All too many hadn’t.

‘We do what we can. If we weren’t here, even they wouldn’t be lucky.’

She was right. In fact *we do what we can* was a mantra he’d repeated to the team often enough. But not for the first time he wondered how much longer he could continue to work amongst such obvious suffering.

The trouble was, having done a seven-year stint as an army doctor, he’d found it hard to settle into mainstream hospital work. Partly because treating patients who were there through their own fault – too much alcohol, too much food, too little exercise – had bugged the hell out of him, but mostly because he’d missed the thrill of life on the edge. Of never quite knowing what was going to happen next. It was while he’d been slowly going out of his mind with boredom that he’d attended a lunchtime lecture on Medic SOS. The rest, as they say, was history. Three years on and he was now the Chief Medical Officer in charge of an established core of doctors and nurses he could call on as the circumstances dictated.

But much as he loved it, the job was beginning to take its toll. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d let his hair down. Done something frivolous, just for the hell of it. Being surrounded by human tragedy on a regular basis was turning him into a tougher,

more serious-minded man than he'd ever intended to be. At some point he needed to have a break, take some time to relax and just enjoy life again.

With a deep sigh he walked back to the treatment room. There he was greeted with rows of traumatised faces, all waiting to be helped. These poor sods had lost their homes, probably somebody they loved, and damn near their own lives. His own life was positively privileged in comparison. *Stop moaning, Mitch. Your holiday can wait.*

It was late by the time the queue of waiting survivors had all been attended to. Some had been bandaged up and sent to the temporary camp to search for missing loved ones and find a place to sleep. Others were settled into the ward, too injured to be moved.

Having completed his final round and checked that each patient under their care was stable, he turned to Tessa. 'Time for a quick team meeting, I think. Can you rally the troops?'

While Tessa disappeared off, Mitch pushed together a few chairs at the back of the treatment tent and waited for his small unit to arrive. To the outside world they probably appeared an odd bunch, but they were united in their desire to provide help to those who needed it most, usually with little concern for their own personal comfort or safety. When discussing their jobs with friends in the bar back home, the life of a medical charity worker probably sounded exciting. Reality was a much bleaker picture. A tough hide was needed to withstand the unrelenting misery of the situations they were thrown into, and the crude conditions they were expected to work and live in. Many who joined in a haze of enthusiasm and desire to do good didn't last more than one trip. The team on this tour though were a seasoned group, part of his core team. He felt a rare surge of emotion, even affection, towards them as they slowly straggled in towards him.

'Come on you ugly bunch. I've got places to go, people to see.'

His statement was met with the chorus of derisory sniggers he'd expected.

'Even if you said that back at the office, we'd laugh in disbelief. The only places you go are work and bed.'

'Thanks, Tessa,' he remarked dryly as his head nurse took the seat next to him. He knew, because he'd seen her CV, she was in her early forties, but she had a face and body that could have passed for a decade younger. She'd joined Medic SOS following a divorce, determined to start her new single life in a very different environment than her married one.

'She should know. She's tried to entice you out often enough.' That was from Toby, another nurse who came as a pair with his wife, Jane. They'd joined after finding out they weren't able to have children.

Mitch grunted at Toby's remark, uncomfortably aware of the truth behind it. When he turned to see Tessa blushing next to him, red enough he could almost feel her heat, his discomfort increased a hundred fold. She was his right hand woman. Someone he trusted, admired and enjoyed working next to. Period. He prayed that was all she felt, too. Not only did he not think of her like that, but women and work didn't mix. Frankly women and him didn't mix that well, either. He'd had his fair share of affairs – probably more than his share – but for reasons he couldn't fathom, women often tried to shift things from casual and easy to permanent and complicated. Something he had no interest in.

'Thanks, but my personal life isn't on today's agenda,' he told the group gruffly just as Stuart and Roger joined them. Stuart was the other doctor in the team, not long out of medical school. Young and single, what he lacked in experience he made up for in enthusiasm. Roger was a huge, burly, no-nonsense individual who made a surprisingly gentle and caring nurse. He was married, but his wife seemed to tolerate his frequent stints abroad. Some speculated that was what made their marriage

work.

'So will it be on a future agenda then, boss?' Dan, the last one in the team, grinned as he plonked himself on the remaining chair. Single and in his mid-twenties, he was handsome and he knew it; a total ladies' man. Officially he was in charge of logistics. Unofficially he was also the unit's entertainment co-ordinator, which usually meant locating the nearest available bar. A place they could unwind and, for a few hours at least, block out the misery they'd witnessed during the day.

'My personal life will never be an agenda item. Not as long as I'm still breathing,' Mitch muttered darkly, and they all laughed.

'Sure thing, boss. You're our man of mystery. You're single, like to run and swim and enjoy an occasional beer. It's all we need to know.' Dan grinned again, flashing a set of even white teeth. 'Speaking of which, I've located the nearest watering hole. Any chance of you joining us tonight?'

Mitch shook his head, surprising nobody. They always asked, but he rarely came. Thrust together under circumstances that made for real, lifelong friendships, Mitch remained a man alone. It wasn't that he was unfriendly. Just that he didn't allow anyone to get close to him.

'Right, down to the real agenda,' Mitch announced abruptly, determinedly steering the topic of conversation back to work. 'Dan has managed to track down the rest of our supplies and they should be with us tomorrow evening. In the meantime, the stuff we have has been borrowed from the hospital in the next town. Use it wisely.'

His grim expression said all it needed to. They weren't to waste it on patients who weren't going to make it.

'On a lighter note, we have a visitor, Brianna Worthington, joining us tomorrow for a week. As she's the patron's daughter, I guess that means we'll have to be on our best behaviour.' His wry grin caused his eyes to crinkle and the hearts of the women to flutter. 'Without the money, we don't exist.'

‘Better put me in charge of looking after her then,’ Dan interrupted cockily.

Mitch chuckled and his harsh features temporarily relaxed. ‘I can’t think of a man more suited for the job. I was going to say she’ll be in safe hands, but frankly with you, I’m not so sure.’

‘She might prefer the quieter, more sensitive type,’ Stuart interjected, a determined glint in his eye. ‘I think I should be responsible for showing her around.’

Mitch shook his head. ‘Come on, guys. The woman hasn’t even arrived yet and already she’s causing trouble. She might be fat and ugly for all you know.’

‘Yeah, but she’s going to be loaded,’ Dan replied sheepishly. ‘That would sure make up for any disappointment in the looks department.’

Rolling his eyes heavenwards, Mitch sighed. ‘Well someone has to pick her up from the airport tomorrow. Maybe you boys should flip a coin. Meanwhile go and make merry, but for God’s sake behave yourselves. Roger and I will hold the fort.’

Mitch watched them bustle out of the tent, their minds already on a well-deserved night off. Sometimes he wished he could be like that. It must be great to drink, relax and share experiences, but he hadn’t been made that way. He couldn’t do small talk. He couldn’t share confidences. Heck, he couldn’t even relax properly in the company of others, even those he knew well. All of which meant there were very few people in his life he had ever been close to. He had a couple of friends from the army but they were now married and he felt like such a spare part when they all hooked up, it seemed easier not to bother. Besides, he was happy with his own company. Frankly he preferred it to the effort of making conversation with others.

‘Sleep or ward duty?’ he asked Roger, who shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘Okay, toss you for it.’

‘Heads.’

Mitch flipped the coin, took a quick look and then thrust it

back into his pocket. ‘Unlucky. You’re on duty.’

‘Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t see that.’

‘Calling me a liar?’

Roger chuckled – a sound quite incongruous with his big, brawny looks. ‘Sly and sneaky, yeah, but a liar? Nah. Heads it is. Enjoy your kip.’

While Roger went to take his turn on ward duty, Mitch made his weary way back to his tent. Luxurious it wasn’t. A camp bed, an oil lantern and a table and chair that doubled up as a desk when he needed to catch up with his paperwork. Something he’d fully intended to do when he’d called tails on a coin that had turned up heads. But the moment he spied the bed, exhaustion crept up on him and instead of sitting at the makeshift desk, he lay down. In this job he’d learnt to sleep whenever he got the opportunity.

To be continued…

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