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**Opening Extract from...**

# Love Me Back

Written by Merritt Tierce

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# Love Me Back



Merritt Tierce



CORSAIR

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# Put Your Back into It

I met all four of them at an off-site catering event for the opening of their new Minimally Invasive Spine, Back, and Neck Group. The one I liked, Cornelius, was the only one I didn't sleep with, and the only one who asked me out. Trained at Yale so why was he asking out a waitress? I don't know. Two of the other three were sleazy and the handsomest was arrogant. One so sleazy I fled, though usually I had the stomach for it. Cornelius wore Tommy Bahama hibiscus-print silk shirts, and was more than twice my age, but who knows. Someone told him I was smart and gave him my number. We were to visit the Gordon Parks exhibit at the DMA on a Sunday afternoon. Gordon Parks was my idea and I knew it scored with him—maybe made him think of how I could be an accident, a good one lodged in the mire, just waiting to be sprung.

But late Saturday night I met my dealer in the parking lot of the Kroger on Cedar Springs and bought four twenties. At ten a.m. I hadn't come down even after smoking a joint and

taking five sleeping pills. In the mirror I had no iris, I was all hole, falling in. I didn't answer when he called.

He'd asked me out the week before. It felt like a job interview but I went along. Would I be like Jordan? She was a young blond waitress liberated by one of her customers. Hedge fund. After they married they dined at The Restaurant often, before Stars or Mavs games. I'd never want to go back if I'd been her, I'd have felt afraid I might have dreamed it.

I didn't think that scenario likely, but still I would have answered if I'd been sober. When I recovered I left a message he didn't respond to. He'd given me one suspicious halfhearted bored chance and I turned out to be a flake. I never saw him in The Restaurant again. I can't believe he had that much pride.

The three others: I mentioned one so sleazy. Maybe in the end he wasn't as bad as the other two. I say that because he was uglier, and an ugly man may learn to compensate for his face with some kindness. Perhaps his entire career was compensation for his ugliness—a path to money that could pay women to ignore the way he looked. Pale pink, fat, he reminded me of a hairless mole we'd seen at the zoo. There is no point in asking what the attraction was—that's the wrong question. Clearly what has gone on in the world of my past can answer only other questions. Like why does a man want to pretend a woman likes him? What does anyone get from pretending? I did the ugly one first. Went to a bar in his neighborhood, drank some whiskey with him.

I ask my memory, Why did I take each next step? There was a hateful man who once said I am a step skipper but no,

each step was taken. That one, then that one, then another, each *voluntary*. Whatever is in me that makes decisions is now full of an accretion of plaque, the chalky consequence of, paradoxically, so many hollow moments.

After the bar, his townhouse. One of those ubiquitous places that is nice and expensive but not special in any way. Three stories. On the first I took off my heels. On the second we reclined on a black leather couch and watched a giant television. He lay behind me and pushed his erection against me. I stared into no-space and regretted my life. On the third floor we got into his bed and he was so happy. He had done it. Gotten me there. Into the house, up the three stories, onto the bed. I couldn't not let him have it. I lay down next to him and turned my back to him and heard the drawer of the nightstand open. He hurried with the condom as if I might vanish. I let him penetrate me. No, I thought. No no no. I whispered it each time he pushed.

No.

No.

No. Hold on I have to pee, I said. I grabbed my purse from the dresser on the way into his bathroom. Marble floor, high ceiling, two steel sinks set into a long black countertop. The coke looked sweet piled on the black counter and I could see my reflection above it. I looked worried. Don't worry, I said to myself, We're leaving.

I turned on both sinks. Surgeons don't do coke, they drink. I shaped two lines with my debit card and snorted them with a piece of a straw I kept in my purse. I licked the edge of the debit card. I licked the counter. I peed, and checked my nose in the mirror. I imagined her sitting on the

counter, her short legs hanging off, swinging. I went back into the bedroom and said, I'm sorry, I have to go, I'm not well. I was shaking and I felt beautiful. I thought how beautiful it was that I had only one garment to put back on, my black cocktail dress there on the floor. I pulled it over my head. I don't wear underwear. See you, I said. He didn't try to stop me.

The other two go together. After work, after I'd served them their steaks at The Restaurant, I met them at a nightclub where we drank and danced. They'd come by cab but I had my car so when we left I drove. A tiny car, and they were both tall, they barely fit. The black one was at least six-five. The white one six-three maybe. The car spiraled around the parking garage of the apartment complex where the white one lived. Up and up and up to the top floor. I could tell they felt ridiculous in my car and it seemed like forever before I could park it. The black one was gorgeous and so composed. You knew he would get whatever he wanted in life. I stood between them and they undressed me. Isn't she pretty? the white one said. I loved that. How old is she? the black one asked. She's twenty-one, bro, it's cool, said the white one. I sucked on the white one while the black one fucked me. He came and then he lay down on the floor to sleep, he was too long for the white one's bed. I hated staying the night because it was always different in the morning. So when they were both passed out I left, back down the parking garage ramps. Down and down and down.

You'd work at The Restaurant every night and sometimes you'd see the same customers two or three times a week, and then sometimes you wouldn't see them for six months. The

tall white spine surgeon disappeared for a while but then he came in with his family for Christmas and I took care of them. Good to see you, I said. You too, sweetie, how you been? he said. Someone told me—maybe it was the ugly one, unafraid to bash his own kind—that spine surgeons are weak among surgeons, that you can't really fix a back so you go in there and fuck around and bill the shit out of the insurance company and refer the patient to pain management.

The tall white one had a girlfriend or fiancée or something with him at that Christmas dinner. She was on his left and I stood on his right to tell the table about the features, which were presented in the raw and under plastic on a large rectangular ceramic platter I'd placed in the center of the table. I described in detail each cut displayed. At the end I said, This evening's market fish is a Chilean sea bass, panseared, and then I felt him reach between my legs and wrap his forearm around my shin, rub my calf. She couldn't see and neither could anyone else because my back was against a wall. Chef is serving the sea bass over grilled asparagus with a lump crab beurre blanc, I said.

I leaned forward to lift the platter off the table. I could sense another server standing behind me, waiting for it. It weighed twenty pounds so I had to brace myself by stepping forward with one foot and when I did the surgeon slid his hand up the inside of my thigh and put his thumb between my lips. He pressed hard, as if somehow I might not have felt any of it before that. I concentrated on my left hand as it raised the corner of the platter. I placed my right hand under the platter and concentrated on the marbling in the chateaubriand and on where the wineglasses underneath my elbows

were. Oh that looks so heavy! exclaimed the girlfriend. It is, I said. Babe, help her, she said to the surgeon. She's got it, he said, since there was no subtle way he could extract his hand from between my legs just then. I'm fine, ma'am, I said, but if I throw my back out I've got your man's number. People tittered. I lifted the platter straight up and shelved it backward in space, knowing the server behind me would take it from me as soon as it cleared my guests' heads. I didn't turn around as DeMarcus said in my ear Thank you Mama and took the platter.

Let me know if you have any questions about the menu, I said to the table, and we'll be happy to accommodate any special requests. I looked at the older man across from me—probably the surgeon's father, who'd probably pay the check—and smiled.

Unless this one's asking, I said, gesturing at the spine surgeon by tipping the side of my head toward him while I sparkled at the older man. Then I looked down at the spine surgeon and said, I've got a big hot plate of nothing for you, sir.

He withdrew his hand and reached for his beer and they all laughed.

# Part One



# The Olive Garden

I'm a hard worker, I tell the manager. We are sitting in a booth. His name is Rajiv George and he is short and portly and has kind eyes. He laughs often. Great, he says. In a restaurant that's really all you need. We'll teach you everything else.

Does that mean I'm hired? I ask. The Olive Garden is the fourth restaurant to interview me. I filled out applications at thirteen.

I think so, he laughs. Congratulations. Are you sure you don't want a breadstick? He gestures at the basket of fluffy wands between us on the table. They glisten with garlic butter.

No thank you, I say. I ate earlier.

Well, you could use some meat on your bones. He twinkles so I try to twinkle back. Employees can have as much bread and soda as they want, he says.

Okay, I say. When do I start?

Now? he asks. It's only three thirty. You can learn how to make salads and help out tonight. The salad girl called in

sick. Word to the wise, if you're gonna call in, do it as early as possible. Actually—the wise don't call in. Find someone to cover the shift. Right, Kendall? He says this to a tall, stunning man who walks past the booth, then pauses to tie on a black apron with three pockets across the front. His white shirt is unbuttoned and I see a leather necklace with a pewter cross that hangs so it just touches the beginning of his chest fur, visible over the top edge of a wife-beater. His sleeves are rolled up and he has snakes tattooed around both forearms.

Right, boss, he says. Who's this?

He is facing Mr. George, but means me. He pops up his collar and buttons the top button, then takes a blue tie out of one of his apron pockets and ties it with quick aggressive movements. There is a grease spot he is careful to hide within the knot.

This is Marie, says Mr. George. She's new.

No shit, says Kendall. How old is she? Twelve?

Excuse him, says Mr. George. He was in Desert Storm.

I was in fourth grade during Desert Storm but I don't say this. I won a lot of mental math competitions that year including the regional title and I didn't pay attention to the news. But we had to write letters to the soldiers, and the math team coach made us tie yellow ribbons on our competition pencils. Kendall extends his right hand to me while rolling down the sleeve with his left.

Christopher Kendall, he says. Marie, I say, shaking his hand. It is warm and dry and strong. He has a silver Celtic knot ring on his thumb.

You ain't got a last name, Cabbage Patch?

Cut it out, Mr. George says to Christopher. I just hired

her, don't run her off yet. At least not before she fills in for the salad girl tonight.

Young, I say to Christopher. Yes you are, he says. Did you give her the tour? he asks Mr. George.

No, says Mr. George. Are you volunteering? Don't think it gets you out of opening sidework.

Why do you think I want a little helper? says Christopher, and to me, Come on, doll, I'll show you around.

Don't forget what we talked about last night, says Mr. George as we walk away from the booth toward the swing door that leads into the kitchen.

Fuck your mother, Apu, Christopher says under his breath. Raj is harmless, he says to me. But don't eat the bread or you'll wind up like him and that would be tragic. He gives me a blatant up-and-down as he says tragic.

This is the back station, he says. We are standing in front of a soda machine and a computer screen. He continues, By the bar is the front station. Over in the twenties is the side station. Back station is safest. Ring at the bar and somebody's gonna ask you for change, or when the dingbat hostess leaves the door you'll end up seating. Side station is right between two big-tops so somebody is bound to need something, and there's always a fucking kid throwing crayons on the floor. Parents think you're a prick if you don't stop everything and pick em up for Johnny. Nobody can see you here.

Okay, I say. He takes a clear plastic cup from a stack by the soda machine and plunges it into the ice. Plastic for us, glass for them, he says. Always use the ice scoop. Georgie sees you doing this you'll get yelled at. It's unsanitary. Plus if

you break a glass in the ice we have to burn it. Where is the ice scoop? I ask. Fuck if I know, he says. He fills his cup with Mountain Dew and takes a straw wrapped in paper from a cardboard box on the stainless-steel shelf above the soda machine. He tears the paper about an inch from the top of the straw, throwing away the long part and leaving the short part on like a cap. He stabs the straw into the cup. This is how you serve a soda, he says. Make sure it's full. Fuckers drink it like it's fucking crack. Put a straw in it. Leave the top on the straw so they know you didn't put your nasty paws all over where their mouth goes. Always have extra straws in your apron because some lazy asshole in the section next to you won't give his people straws, and when you walk by they'll ask you for one, and if you don't have one you gotta find dipshit or get it yourself. He takes the paper cap off the straw and flicks it into the trash. The fizzing head on the soda has settled so he tops it off and then takes a big suck. I recommend a straw for your personal consumption as well, he says. Never put your mouth on anything in a restaurant if you can help it. Shit doesn't get clean. Ever.

Okay, I say. Yo, is that all you say? he asks.

No, I say, but I'm here to work. He raises his eyebrows at this and says, Oh! He looks around. She's here to work, he says to another server who walks by with a gray plastic tub of silverware. Great, says the other server, I need help with these rollups.

Sorry, Dave, I called her first, says Christopher. This way, honey.

He takes my elbow and guides me toward the kitchen.

Dave's a faggot, but he's a good guy, he says. I heard that, says Dave.

Outside the kitchen door hangs a broom and dustpan. There's the broom, says Christopher. Somebody breaks a glass use it. Don't pick it up with your hands. Tell one of the busboys you're busy and make them do it.

He kicks open the kitchen door and points up at a circular mirror hanging from the ceiling. Coming out, check that or you'll knock somebody down and then people will think you're stupid. Going in, look through the window. First time you bump a tray out of somebody's hands is not gonna be pleasant for you, or them, and if it's me you're doing all my sidework for a week. Trays, tray jacks, he says, gesturing toward a stack of big brown ovals and wooden stands with black nylon straps. You can carry a tray, right?

I don't know, I say. He gives me his full attention for the first time. Wait, he says. You ever worked in a restaurant before?

No, I say. I fucking knew it, he says, I could tell the second I saw you. He shakes his head slowly, looking around the kitchen. A skinny boy in a white coat is chopping onions. He looks up at us. A tear slides down his nose and he raises his shoulder to rub it off. Don't cry, José, don't cry, says Christopher. José says I'm sorry, Chris, it's just so sad how ugly your mom is, but Christopher doesn't answer because another server comes into the kitchen through the door at the opposite end. Sup Chris, says the new server, then Sup Kelly, Tare-Bear to two women who are standing in a corner talking while they do their makeup. Hey Josh, says Chris-

topher, guess what we got here. Josh is punching in on the time clock by the office. Mr. George sticks his head out and says Don't punch in unless you're working. I'm working, I'm working, says Josh. What do we got, Chris?

A fucking virgin, everybody. Chris grabs my hand and yanks it up into the air like I won a boxing match. This is Marie, and today's her first day in a restaurant. Welcome to hell, baby. He laughs a sadistic laugh. He has beautiful beautiful teeth. I pull my hand down and look toward the office but Mr. George is on the phone, his back to us.

Don't look at him, says Christopher. You gotta make it with us. He don't know shit about how to wait tables.

I nod. I know, I say, I was just looking at the clock.

Uh-huh, says Christopher. There's only two times in a restaurant: before and after. You walk in, you white-knuckle it, try not to fuck up till it's over and then it's over. You made money or you didn't.

God, leave her alone, Chris, says one of the women. Ignore him, she says to me. He's so full of himself it's disgusting.

Christopher walks toward her so I follow him. What's disgusting, Tara, he says softly, is how full of me *you'd* like to be. Fuck off, says Kelly. Tara yells toward the office, Raj, Chris is harassing me again! but then both women start giggling. Don't worry, sweetie, Kelly says. He's all talk. That's not what she said last night, says Christopher. Kelly rolls her eyes. Fine, you win, she says. I would rather fuck myself with an OG bread stick but you can pretend if you want.

Don't believe anything he says, she tells me as she pushes