

Pick Up the Pieces

Flo Fitzpatrick

“pick up the Pieces” Four words, written in embossed lettering on a cream-colored card slipped inside a pricey thick envelope, arrive at the door of singer Bebe Becerra’s New Jersey apartment, throwing her into an emotional mix of confusion and annoyance. Bebe soon realizes Pieces refers to the rock band she sang with the year she attended Southwestern University in Texas. A band that split up after its lead soprano, Marigold Blume, vanished during a gig at a sorority dance ten years earlier. When Bebe learns the sorority wants Pieces to come home and sing for their reunion dance, she fears returning will shatter the walls she’s built for the last ten years to keep her from contacting her first love, drummer Nic Jericho. She never imagines she could lose her life.

© 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission in writing from the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Georgetown, Texas
May, Ten Years Ago

Chapter 1

As fights go, I suppose ours hadn't measured up to reality TV star standards, yet I was still shaking and choking back tears fifteen minutes later. At least I'd stood up to Marigold even though she'd ignored everything I said in response to her beyond-off-the-wall comments. She'd just chain-smoked her damned cigarettes while calmly declaring she was calling off her wedding to Cam and getting ready to "make a run through half the male population in Georgetown, Texas," starting with the guys in the band—including Nic. When I'd claimed her actions were a total betrayal of Cam, she'd shrugged. Worse, when I'd flatly stated Nic and I were happy together, even if I might not be the most experienced person in terms of romance, she'd taunted me by maintaining I was a mere child who had no understanding of the real world or real relationships.

I'd kept my temper. Instead of giving in to my first impulse, which was to slap her silly, I'd begged her to explain why she'd spent the last month growing progressively crazier by the day. She'd responded with the air of a tabloid journalist revealing the biggest story of a career, stating, "It's all in the music, Bebe. *All* in the music."

I'd stomped back to our dressing room inside the Palace Theatre ballroom only to discover I'd become schizophrenic. Marigold's outrageous comments had me so confused and angry there was a part of me that wished she would disappear. Go smoke dozens of packs of cigarettes, scatter her ever-present pumpkin and sesame seeds, *and* her wild oats, and then head for the nearest Mexican border and not come back. The falsely optimistic side of me continued to hope she and I could make up before we had to spend the next ninety minutes singing harmonies with each other.

Marigold didn't come sauntering into the dressing room. Once I finally felt ready to face the world—or at least a bunch of partying college kids, I headed back toward the ballroom. I ran smack into Nic, who was balancing a huge bottle of water in one hand, and a paper plate filled with cookies in the other.

He set his burdens down, grabbed my hand in his, and then pulled me behind a large column near the bandstand for a small amount of privacy. Then he proceeded to kiss me until my ears started ringing. Finally, he released me and casually stated, "Hi, gorgeous. Where ya been? You took off two seconds after break. I missed you. Was hoping for some backstage time with my girl away from the crowds."

I couldn't tell him about the fight or the words Marigold had spoken, which now echoed inside my head. *Mind if I take a sample of Nic? Mind if I already have? After all, Miss Barely Past Jailbait, even if you two set a date, you'll never get past his dad, who is not your biggest fan.* Whether she'd meant to deliberately hurt me or believed she was doing me a favor by saving me from a worse situation didn't matter. Her words, along with the unasked question as to why Marigold had been spotted (by me) leaving Nic's apartment two nights, or rather two very early mornings ago, were colliding in an effort to keep me silent. Now I looked at Nic and I saw the

shadow of his father, the esteemed and highly critical Judge Adrian Jericho, standing behind him labeling me as trash.

“*Not the time, Bebe,*” I told myself. “*Be brave and talk to Nic about his dad, but not now.*”

I said, “Well, obviously we weren’t looking in the right places, were we? Actually, Marigold and I went outside for a minute or two, and then she started smoking so, uh, I came back in and hid out in the dressing room. I just didn’t feel like chatting with anyone and I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

“Ah. Well, I did much the same thing when I didn’t see you standing next to any tables—then I happily discovered comfy couches in the dressing rooms.” He flashed his impish, ever-devastating smile at me. “I would have preferred cuddling with you on one of them, but since I couldn’t find you, I was a bum and managed to sneak in a ten minute nap. So, Hon, you ready for the next set?”

“I guess.”

Nic picked up the water and empty plate before escorting me to the steps leading to the stage. He lightly kissed my lips again before we made the short ascent. He was acting as though everything was fine and he was still the faithful boyfriend. Marigold must have been lying. There was no way he’d gone back to her. They’d broken up more than three years ago before I ever met either of them. Or was I trying too hard to convince myself because I loved Nic and couldn’t bear to lose him?

Cam grabbed me as soon as we took our places on stage. “Bebe, do you know anything about this new song Marigold wants to do? Like—oh—maybe the bloody name of the thing? I have a vague recollection of Marigold telling me but I’m too pissed at her wanting to do it to remember. She’s said zippo about it.”

I forced thoughts of Nic and Marigold together out of my head. It was harder to push away the image of how nice this break would have been in Nic’s arms back in the dressing room. I blinked and tried to answer Cam’s question. “Uh, yes and no. I haven’t seen Marigold’s lyrics and I didn’t write the music for it. She did tell me it’s going to shake loose something beyond dangerous and it’s not a typical *Pieces* song. What the hell she meant is anyone’s guess since we all know both danger and typical mean something totally different to Marigold Blume than to normal society.” I paused. “Wait. I thought she was going to let you take a peek at the music during intermission?”

“Nope. She headed outside with you and that’s the last I saw of her.”

“Okay. Hang on a sec. There should be a copy in my bag somewhere. She stuck it inside about two seconds before we started our first set tonight but I never got the chance to take a look. Let me grab my bag while we wait for the great diva soprano. “I glanced at my watch. “Dang, but she’s incredibly late.”

Cam frowned. “Why couldn’t she have just shown it to me today while we were recording?”

I stared at him. “Seriously? Cameron Felsen, you and Marigold were on a snipe hunt from the first second we walked into the studio. If she’d said *anything* about a new song you would have strangled her. She barely talked to *me* about it. Didn’t even want me to provide a melody and I’m supposed to be her collaborator. I’m clueless.”

“Great. Crap. So, would you mind getting the copy she gave you? As of—oh—yesterday?”

I looked around for my carryall bag. I could have sworn I’d left it behind Dusty’s piano. It wasn’t there. I plopped down on my hands and knees to check in back of Nic’s drums and all the amplifiers. No bag.

“Oh, fabulous. This night just keeps getting better and better. Now my bag’s missing.” I sighed. “Sorry, Cam. Guess we’ll all be treated to her bizarre creativity when our lead singer opts to join us. Hey, you can always pull rank and tell her a new song is a ‘no’ tonight.”

Our keyboardist, Dusty Sears, impatiently tapped the top of the electric piano. “Speaking of missing, where *is* she? We’re already seven minutes late. Our audience is growing restless down there.”

He was right. Couples in dance position were waiting to writhe to *Pieces*’ renditions of hits from the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties.

I took a long look around the ballroom but didn’t spot Marigold anywhere. She was pushing it. Her fiery temper and bad attitude, not just tonight but this whole last month, telling Cam she was singing a new song whether he approved or not, and now late for the second set. This was unusual behavior, even for our temperamental soprano. Marigold might not be above springing a new piece of music on the band at an inappropriate moment but she was never late for rehearsal or performance. My stress level shot up about ten notches. Something was very wrong.

I tried not to show any concern. “I’ll bet she’s still outside, chain-smoking. Trying to figure out how to make up for how nasty she’s been to everyone. Shoot, she’s probably afraid of retribution. Which is smart, since I’d say there’s at least four people on this stage ready to ‘retribute.’” I quietly added, “The only thing is, she’s never this late.”

Cam exhaled. “*Dammit!* I’ve had it with her. Who does she think she is leaving us in the middle of a gig?”

Dusty left his keyboards and joined us downstage. “Maybe she just lost track of time? We can’t assume she’s walked out on us. That’s not like Marigold at all.”

Nic slid out from behind his drums. “Hang on, guys. She could be hurt. Or sick. I say we organize a search.”

We divided up the various locations where we thought she might be either hiding or too ill to walk back from. Then Cam waved at the crowd on the dance floor. “Sorry, folks, but we seem to be having some difficulty locating one fifth of the band. Back in a few. We’ll stay late to make up for the time.”

I didn't wait for the coeds' reactions to Cam's announcement. I raced toward the exit of this old theatre turned nightclub, and then opened the door to the parking lot. Lots of cars, a few couples making out, but no Marigold.

My earlier sense of unease grew stronger as I walked the length of the lot. There was no one in sight, yet I could swear someone was watching me. I considered, then quickly dismissed, any notion of heading toward Southwestern campus past the old cemetery and the Blue Hole Park and lagoon. I didn't honestly believe Marigold would have gone out for a stroll by herself under a starless sky. And I couldn't imagine her trying to break into the science lab or the new gym and hide even if she was afraid the whole band was thoroughly enraged with her bad behavior. Marigold had a song she was determined to sing, and if I knew her only the devil himself could keep her from performing.

The Blue Hole Park was only about a mile past the lot. Dark and devoid of life tonight apart from plants and creepy water creatures. Marigold would have had no reason to go traipsing through trees or a creek at midnight and there was no way in hell I was heading down there by myself.

I turned back around and walked through the parking lot again.

Something crunched underneath my feet. I leaned down and picked up the remains of a handful of pumpkin seeds lying beside four cigarette butts. The mix was not the most threatening sight I'd ever seen, yet a cold totally opposite the temperature of this May night in Texas enveloped my entire body.

My wish had come true.

Marigold had vanished.