



# FERN MICHAELS

*Bestselling Author of SEASONS OF HER LIFE*

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## DESPERATE MEASURES

*A Novel*

*DESPERATE  
MEASURES*

*Fern  
Michaels*

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# PROLOGUE

This was the best day of his life.

He thought about other days in his life, bad days, terrible days, and then the days that were not so bad, that were bearable, livable.

Maddie Stern said she would marry him. He thought it would never happen, just the way he had thought his uncle would never find him. But it had happened. He would have someone forever and ever. Someone who would love him unconditionally, someone to share with, to grow old with, to parent with. Someone named Maddie Stern.

If it were possible to walk on air, Pete Sorenson would have been three feet off the ground as he walked down the jetway to board the shuttle for Boston's Logan Airport. His very tallness hinted that his shadow would be forthcoming. His dark eyes, heavy brow-line, and sinful double row of eyelashes were in stark contrast to his sandy hair.

He was antsy, wired up. Once, he'd had sixteen cups of coffee and a few colas in a six-hour span, and felt the way he was feeling now. And of course he felt guilty. That was it, guilt. Guilt was terrible, it made you do weird things, made you lie and con-



coct elaborate cover-ups. Not that he was doing something he shouldn't be doing. *Oh yeah*, a voice inside him needled, *then how come you waited till Maddie left for her buying trip to make this jaunt to Boston to see Annie?* Because, he responded to his inner self, I wanted to spend as much time as possible with Maddie. Now that she's away, I won't be cheating on her. *Terrible word, Sorenson, cheating.* Maddie doesn't understand about my friendship with Annie, he continued with his defense. Once she gets to know Annie, she'll feel differently.

He buckled in, listening with half an ear to the stewardess drone on about lifesaving measures, a brief spread open on his lap. He should be paying attention to everything, but his mind wandered to how surprised Annie would be when he popped in unannounced to sweep her away to dinner. Annie was going to be so happy for him.

He'd wanted to tell her weeks ago, when Maddie accepted his proposal, but he wanted to hug her acceptance to him, and so waited to share it until he felt the time was right. Annie would understand. Annie was perfect. A more than perfect friend, the best goddamn friend in the whole, entire world; a more than perfect lawyer; a perfect person in every sense of the word. She had morals, ethics, and the uncanny ability of always having the right answers to all his problems. She always had just the right words, the right expression on her face. Annie was goddamn, fucking perfect, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Somehow, somehow, he had to make Maddie see how important Annie was in his life.

Pete leaned back in his seat and let his memories take over. He forgot about the brief in his lap, forgot about Maddie, his uncle, everything but Annie Gabriel. When he sensed commotion around him, he opened his eyes and unbuckled his seat belt.

Boston.

Annie.

Outside the terminal, Pete hailed a cab. Twenty minutes later he was poking his head into Annie's office. "Hey, lady, I find my-

self in need of a dinner companion. Whataya say, just you and me," he said, leering.

"Pete!" Annie was off her chair and in his arms a moment later. "God, it's good to see you. What are you doing here? Oh, who cares what you're doing here? I'm so glad to see you. Yes to dinner. You're lookin' good," she said, laughing.

Pete eyed her: slim, curly hair, clear complexion, and the oh-so-perfect business suit she favored. Maddie's hair was always in wild disarray and she favored loose-flowing clothing. She called her wardrobe funky and trendy. She always wore three-inch-long earrings that clanked and jangled. Annie, he noticed, wore little pearl drops. "And you," he replied, "look good enough to eat. Dennis must be doing something right," he added, referring to Annie's man of the hour and his old law school roommate.

Annie grinned. "Or something."

"Can you leave now? I want us to have a couple of drinks before dinner. I've got a lot to tell you. Would you mind terribly if we excluded Dennis? I want you to myself this evening."

"No problem. Dennis has night court. Give me a few minutes. There's fresh coffee. Your favorite," she said, beaming.

"Vanilla hazelnut with a dash of cinnamon."

"There's some real cream in the fridge. You know where the kitchen is. Don't you dare eat any of those cookies or doughnuts that are on the table."

"Wouldn't think of it," Pete said, then marched into the kitchen, where he eyed the doughnuts warily. They weren't really doughnuts, they were the holes from doughnuts. He crunched down four.

Pete looked around the kitchen. It was hard to believe Annie had worked for this firm seven years, starting the day after they graduated law school. What was even more remarkable was they'd maintained their friendship, visiting each other once a month, calling once a week and dropping each other funny cards in the mail. Once in a while, if one or the other was out of town or tied up with a bone-crunching case, they missed the monthly

meeting, but then they always managed to squeeze in an extra visit. They had that rare kind of friendship that neither party wanted to give up or let fade away.

Pete closed his eyes as he sipped his coffee. He tried to imagine Annie's response to his news. Would she squeal and say, "You sly devil"? Or would she look at him with those wide eyes of hers and say, "Still waters run deep"? On the other hand, she was capable of slapping him on his back so hard he'd move forward a foot. He was prepared to tell her that when he and Maddie got around to having children, he was going to name his first daughter after her. Annie would get all misty-eyed and choke up, and he'd preen and beam his pleasure. Maddie would agree, he was sure of it.

"I'm ready, Mr. Sorenson," Annie said, entering the room with a Chanel bag over her shoulder, his last year's Christmas present to her. "You ate those doughnuts after you promised not to."

"I did not," Pete lied.

"Then how come you have sugar all over your lips?"

"Well, Miss Smartass, I was smelling them. I guess I got too close," Pete managed to say with a straight face.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace dark and intimate. Someplace where there's soft music and good food and liquor. Someplace where the bill is so high we have to wash dishes."

"God, what are we celebrating? Did you win a lottery or something?"

"Better," Pete said smartly.

"What could be better than winning a lottery?" Annie asked.

"Something."

"Wait a minute, I have to get my briefcase. I can't seem to walk straight unless I'm carrying it." She left the kitchen, returning with a stuffed, battered case. It looked like his own.

"I've missed you, Annie," Pete said, throwing his arm around her shoulders as they left the office. "Why don't you quit this firm and come to New York?"

"Because, as you know, this firm gave me my first job," she replied. "I owe them. Also, I like it here, and there's a good chance I might make partner next year. And on top of that, it's too expensive to live in New York. I'd just be turning in one set of problems for another. Are you staying over or taking the last shuttle?"

"Gotta get back tonight. I have to plead a motion at eight tomorrow morning. Let's go to Bonderos."

He hailed a cab, opened the door for Annie, admired her legs. He hardly ever got to see Maddie's legs, with the long, flowing skirts she wore.

"Bonderos is good," Annie said, settling herself comfortably. "It's awfully expensive, though."

"Annie, stop putting a price on everything. You're worth it. If this town had something better than Bonderos, I'd take you there. Nothing is too good for you. I mean that, Annie. However, there is nothing to compare to *your* lasagna. No restaurant anywhere can make anything half as good. You should sell your recipe."

"Why do I have this feeling you're buttering me up for something?"

"You have a suspicious nature?" Pete guffawed. "I'm here to share. With you, because you are my best friend. My buddy, my pal, my compadre."

Annie had been trying to get a grip on Pete's ebullient mood. Perhaps, she thought, he was overworked. "You've been working around the clock, Pete," she said. "Why don't you take some time off?"

"Can't. I have a handle on everything except the traveling. I'm sick of it."

"You're making money, aren't you? Dennis said—and this is a direct quote—'Pete's making it hand over fist and he's got to be a millionaire several times over.' How does he know that, Pete, and is it true?" Annie asked.

"Well, most of it's true," Pete said defensively. What the hell

right did Dennis have discussing his business with Annie? "Listen, I bust my ass for the consortium I work for. Don't let Dennis try and convince you it falls off a tree in my backyard. If I'd known you were interested in my finances, I would have mentioned them to you. It's not a secret, for God's sake. I have a job, I do it well, I think, and I make some big bucks. I bank it, and that's the fucking end of it."

"Testy aren't we?"

"I resent Dennis's comments," Pete said sourly. "I bust my ass out there."

Annie fell silent, in deference to Pete's abrupt change of mood. It wasn't until they were seated in the restaurant that she spoke again. She said, "I know you work hard, Pete, and already you have a reputation that can't be beat. They say you're the best acquisitions lawyer in the country. And I'll drink to that as soon as we get waited on."

"Are you putting me on, or is that really what they're saying?" Pete asked, pleased in spite of himself.

The wine steward approached the table, wine list in hand. Pete waved it away. "Dom Pérignon, 1956. One bottle now, one on ice. When the first one is gone, bring the second one."

"Yes, *sir*," the steward said, backing away.

"What *are* we celebrating?" Annie demanded as she calculated the cost of the wine and dinners.

Pete grinned. "Don't tell me I finally impressed you. I thought that was an impossible feat."

Annie grimaced. "No, you aren't impressing me. I think it's terrible that you spend so much money like this, I don't care how much money you have. There's always tomorrow and a rainy day. You, better than anyone, should know things can go from wonderful to downright bad overnight."

"I like your worry and concern. For so long no one cared if I lived or died. That's a bit dramatic, but you know what I mean. I care about you the same way. That's why I can't understand why you won't take a loan from me to help with your student loans. Interest-free, Annie. For God's sake, think of the

money you'd save. I know it isn't easy for you. I just want to help. Why won't you let me?"

"Because."

They'd had this argument so many times, he'd lost count. "Because" was the only answer he was going to get.

When the steward returned, Pete tasted the wine, nodded his approval. He was going to tell her the minute they made their toast. The exact moment she swallowed the wine.

"What are we drinking to?" Annie said, holding the fragile wineglass aloft.

Here it was. The moment when he shared his news with his best friend. The best friend who was going to smile from ear to ear, whose eyes would sparkle.

"We are drinking, Annie, to my engagement and my wedding."

He didn't see any of the things he expected to see. Didn't hear the words; at least right away. He watched as Annie drained her glass. He watched her swallow and make a face. Her eyes were watering.

"This wine isn't worth the money you're going to be paying for it. I'm happy for you, Pete. I didn't know you were seeing anyone seriously. When's the wedding?" She held her glass out for a refill.

"Sometime in August."

"August is a nice time of year for a wedding. I'll be away in August," she said flatly.

"Well, you'll just have to change your plans, Annie." Pete grumbled, not at all liking the direction the conversation was taking. "I can't get married if you aren't there."

"I can't, Pete. My parents are buying into a retirement community in Florida and I have to go with them, help them move, handle the closing on their present house and the one they're buying. Everything's been arranged. I can't disappoint my parents."

"Even for me? Jesus, I didn't mean that to sound so selfish-sounding. Then I'll change the date to September."

"September is no good either. I scheduled appointments in

San Francisco for some job openings. I don't think I'll take them if they're offered, but I do want to get some feel for what's out there in case I don't make partner early next year. You'll send me pictures, and I'll send a smashing gift."

"I don't want a smashing gift. I want you at my wedding."

"I'm sorry, Pete."

Pete enunciated each word carefully. "Do you realize this is the first time in over twelve years that you haven't come through for me? Jesus Christ!"

"I'm sorry, Pete."

"No you're not!" Pete said belligerently. "Is this one of those woman things men aren't supposed to be able to figure out? Like Maddie not understanding our friendship. I think Maddie is jealous of you. I told her she has nothing to worry about. Was that the right thing to say, Annie?"

"Since you already said it, I guess it doesn't matter. What does it mean?" she said, looking everywhere but at Pete.

"Mean?"

"Does it mean I shouldn't call you anymore? You know, once you get married? I guess these monthly visits will have to stop too, huh?"

He was missing something here. "You can always call me at the office. You do that a lot anyway. We'll still get together as often as we can. You bring Dennis and I'll bring Maddie," Pete said happily as he envisioned the four of them as lifelong friends.

"It won't be the same," Annie muttered.

"No, I guess it won't. It could be better, though." He didn't believe his own words for a minute.

"I'll always send you a Christmas card. I'll address it to Mr. and Mrs. Pete Sorenson," Annie said flatly.

"Annie, you're angry with me. I can see it in your face and hear it in your voice. What's wrong here? I was happy for you when you said you were seeing Dennis. I'm the first to admit I'm pretty dense when it comes to women, so maybe you need to explain to me what your attitude is all about."

"I think," Annie said, choosing her words carefully, "that you should have told me about Maddie. I thought we didn't have any secrets, yet you chose not to tell me. I suppose my feelings are hurt. You told me about Barney. Those things were important to you, and we shared. Did you tell Maddie about Barney?"

"I wanted to tell you, but I wanted to keep it to myself for just a little while, you know, keep it close to my chest. I was so afraid something would go wrong and I'd feel like a fool. When I couldn't stand it a minute longer I hopped up here. I'm really sorry, Annie. Now I feel like shit."

"And well you should. I'm not sharing anything with you anymore, Pete Sorenson," Annie said childishly. She finished the last of the champagne in her glass. "Well?" she said challengingly. "Did you tell her?"

Pete winced. How well he remembered Maddie's reaction to Barney. She'd trilled with laughter and said, "Tell me you didn't believe that kid. Tell me, Pete, that you weren't that naive. Are you serious or are you putting me on when you say you believed right up until your sixteenth birthday that kid would actually come for you? That's just too funny for words." She'd laughed and laughed until he wanted to blubber the way he had the day Barney made the promise. Instead he'd picked up his coat and left. He hadn't called her for three days, and maybe he never would have spoken to her again, but she called him and apologized. He hated the tickle of amusement in her apology, but in the end, because he loved her, he let it pass.

"Well?" Annie said a second time. "Did you tell Maddie about Barney?"

"She thought it was silly of me. Why are we talking about Barney?"

"You poor fool," Annie said. A moment later she was off the chair and out of the restaurant. By the time Pete slapped some bills on the table and made his way outside, Annie's cab was two blocks away.

Pete waited outside her small apartment all night, but she



didn't return. He called Dennis's apartment, but there was no answer there either.

With nothing else to do, he hailed a cab and told the driver to take him all the way to New York. When he settled back for the long ride ahead of him, he felt as if someone had drained half the blood from his body.