

TO LOVE OR NOT TO LOVE
EXCERPT

Miranda was unable to sneak out of the house without her mother noticing her subtly applied makeup. Cressida was still sleeping at six forty-five when she left.

“Say hello to Mr. Gorgeous for me,” Susan called after her.

Miranda cringed and headed out to pick up Lucky and Blackie. She brought both Romeo and Juliet with her. Leaving a little earlier, she’d be sure not to miss Penn. She hoped he would be waiting for her. Of course, a commitment-phobe like Penn was perfect for her messed up life...perfect guy to break her heart. “Be reckless” Susan had said, so Miranda had worn her sexiest tank top in raspberry with low-slung, hip-hugging shorts, hoping to see him again.

She hit the park and picked up her pace, realizing she needed to be near the 72nd Street entrance around seven thirty. The canines jogged alongside. Even Juliet loved to run, but the pugs lagged behind Lucky and the Boston Terrier. She slowed down to catch her breath before “accidentally” running into him. Sure enough, when she came around the huge boulder at 74th Street, there he was, jogging slowly. *Maybe waiting for me to catch up?*

“Hey, Penn!” she yelled then waved when he turned around. He gave her a huge smile and ran back to join her.

“Would you like to take Lucky today?” she offered.

He nodded, taking the leash from her and pulling the tennis ball out of his pocket. He pitched it about twenty-five feet ahead and let go of the dog. The retriever ran like a shot, picked up the ball, and trotted back to Penn, dropping the toy at his feet.

“He likes you,” she observed.

“He likes anyone who’ll throw a ball for him,” Penn countered, tossing it again. “Breakfast today?” he asked her, his gaze roving over her slender form with appreciation.

“Okay.”

“Let’s take your route through The Ramble,” he suggested. They turned the animals around and headed back to 77th Street. This time, they went up the hill and turned right.

“This way...” Miranda said, taking his hand. Trying to prolong their time together, Miranda took Penn on an indirect route through the elaborate maze of paths. The walkway became so narrow in some sections that they had to walk single file. The pooches fanned out into a line behind them. As they came upon the stone arch, Juliet barked at Blackie, who went for her, but she dodged him.

“Blackie, no!” Miranda ordered. The Boston paid no attention, the game was on. Juliet bobbed this way and weaved that way with Blackie in pursuit. As they circled Miranda, they wound the leashes around her legs. Then, Lucky bolted for a squirrel and pulled Miranda’s legs out from under her. She toppled over into Penn, trapping him against the arch.

He closed his arms around her to keep her from falling then pulled her nearer. The small dogs, panting hard, plopped down on the cool stone path to rest.

Feeling Penn’s breath on her cheek, Miranda stared as his lips came closer to hers. The quiet and seclusion of The Ramble encouraged his bold move. His mouth claimed hers, gently at first, brushing over hers, testing her response. When a little moan escaped her, he angled his head to deepen the kiss, running one hand through her hair. Miranda opened her lips as he drew her even closer and slid his tongue along hers. She tasted of mint mixed with coffee. *Delicious.*

Heat was building in her body.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest while one hand rested on his shoulder and the other anchored around his neck. He continued to kiss her slowly, sensuously, his fingers cradling her head, his tongue gliding over her lips then back into her mouth. She was melting against him, defenseless against the growing hunger he created.

Pressing against her abdomen was his reaction to their impromptu make-out session. His swelling shaft ramped up her desire, making her damp.

She wanted more, but was afraid. *He's a stranger. What are you doing?* The small voice of reason in her head pulled her back from total surrender. A tug on the leash when Lucky changed position woke her up completely. She looked into gray eyes glowing with the fire of passion.

Still leaning on him, she attempted to push off from his chest to right herself. Penn gripped her biceps and hoisted her to her feet. She smiled at him. He kissed her nose then rearranged the jacket tied around his hips to hide his erection. Miranda unwound the tangle of leashes from her legs. She readjusted her clothing, smoothing out her wrinkled top, and redirected her gaze to the dogs, sitting lazily on the path, calmly waiting for her to resume their journey.

She brushed her shorts with a nervous motion and cleared her throat. He moved away, his cheeks coloring when she stared at his crotch. She averted her eyes, sorted out the leads, and continued forward, expecting Penn to follow.

Wandering through The Ramble as the only two people there was romantic. Hiding places created by bushes, shrubs, and vines called to lovers who wanted to give in to their desires *al fresco*. Miranda had never noticed these spots before. *Inspired by Penn?* She took a deep breath and stopped. The only sound was the call of a chickadee to his mate.

"I'm hungry," she said, avoiding his gaze to hide her own lust. *For more than food, but that will have to wait.*