

***Once More With Feeling* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Chapter One

Sometime during the restless eternity of Thursday night, Elisabeth Whitfield dreamed that Owen, her husband of twenty-five years, was having an affair. She woke up Friday morning, as she had every morning for the past month, afraid it wasn't a dream at all. As Friday afternoon waned she completed preparations for the dinner party that might give her the proof she needed.

Elisabeth's parties were always elegant, tasteful, and ultimately forgettable, too much like their hostess to be truly memorable. She had learned to give a party from her mother Katherine Brookshire Vanderhoff, who had insisted that God and the American flag came in a poor third and fourth behind an eternally pleasant expression and a flair with canapés. She had learned to choose wines and menus, caterers and florists. She had learned how to set a congenial atmosphere.

But she had never learned to like any of it.

This afternoon Elisabeth was enjoying the fine art of hostessing even less than usual. Weeks before, when she had seen the party only as a chance to socialize with old friends, she had rashly decided to hire younger, fashionable, and totally unfamiliar staff. Now, with her enthusiasm at an historically low ebb, she was paying the price.

The new caterer, a sleek young redhead in Ralph Lauren khaki, had furtively examined every visible room of the Whitfield residence as she and her assistant marched in and out carrying platters and equipment. Elisabeth's own kitchen had not yielded the proper number of copper bowls and marble pastry slabs. She had carefully evaluated the neoclassical furniture, Owen's prized collection of Barbizon landscapes, the octagonal skylights and the white granite floor of the entrance hall.

"You have an absolutely spectacular home," the caterer pronounced at last, when Elisabeth's kitchen no longer looked as if it belonged to her.

Elisabeth acknowledged the compliment with the smile she had learned from her mother. "It's kind of you to say so."

"I've catered parties all over the Gold Coast, and I've never seen anything quite like this. Everything's . . . perfect." The young woman dragged out the last word like a feline with an exceptional vocabulary.

"My husband is the architect."

"I know."

Elisabeth suspected that the caterer also knew what clients Owen had designed for, the international competitions he had won, and his income to the nearest hundred thousand. She obviously had her sights set on more than the kitchens of Long Island.

The florist was new, as well. The old man who had faithfully provided Elisabeth with pastel tulips in the spring and pastel chrysanthemums in the fall had died quietly at Christmas, knee deep in pink and white poinsettias. Rick With-No-Last Name, his ponytailed and fashionable replacement, was a different breed entirely.

Elisabeth found the young man in the first floor powder room, assembling an arrangement of leafless twigs and excrement-hued cinnamon fern in three upturned rolls of toilet paper. As she watched he stood back to observe what he'd done, then leaned forward and artistically

unwound a foot of one of the rolls and draped it over the edge of the counter.

It was good toilet paper. Elisabeth had to give him that much. A squeezable roll of ecological white. He turned and grinned infectiously. "Sm. . .oking!"

Blinded by white teeth and shining expectations, she lowered her eyes and found an arrangement of brightly colored bowl brushes in a stainless steel urinal on the floor beside the commode. The brushes were interspersed with long stems of bottlebrush buckeye.

"I can't wait to see what you'll do in the dining room." She added a gentle, vaguely regretful warning. "Just remember, there are going to be some terribly staid old fogies here tonight. And there are only so many Nassau County paramedics on call at any given moment."

He laughed conspiratorally. "I thought an aquatic theme since you're serving fish . . ."

She pictured mermaids impaled on skewers and belly-up dolphins with arugula and radicchio in what passed for their navels. "Remember the first arrangement you did as a very young man. That's what I want."

"Can't do it. I didn't bring my skulls today."

Elisabeth could see that this conversation, like too many aspects of her life, had spun out of control. Rick had quickly guessed the truth about the woman who had hired him. She was the eternal peacemaker, a doormat who would always back down rather than cause a fight. She was so nauseatingly gracious, so intrinsically diplomatic, that one time or another every charity on Long Island had asked her to oversee a fund-raiser.

She was a woman on whom a man could easily cheat, assured that she would be too dignified to call the matter to his attention.

She swept methodically through the rest of the house to consult with the cleaning crew, examine the linens and reprimand Owen's bookend golden retrievers, who lolled on a Savonnerie carpet and refused to move as much as a tail for Georgina, the gray-haired matron in a fifties housedress who was attempting to vacuum around them.

Today Elisabeth found no comfort in familiar rituals. She probably needed hormones. She definitely needed a drink.

Instead, upstairs in the master suite bath she fished aspirin from a plastic vial and swallowed it without water. In the mirror with a museum-quality gilded frame, she saw an ash-blond, forty-something woman with a serene expression and pale blue eyes that were as untroubled as the May sky.

Behind the eyes was a fishwife clawing her way to freedom.

She washed her hands and automatically massaged lotion over them. At thirty she had been able to pretend that she would age gracefully. She had dieted and exercised, and the flat plane of her abdomen had fueled the lie. But now, at forty-eight, the truth was always in view. Hands with prominent veins, hips that had blossomed to their full genetic potential, feet in shoes that were designed primarily for comfort.

The telephone rang, but she ignored it. It would be Owen's secretary Marsha, checking to see if Elisabeth needed any last-minute assistance before the party. If there were errands, Owen wouldn't do them himself, of course. His staff was motivated to help by personal loyalty and generous salaries. Owen would smile his warmest smile and extend his hands in a little-boy-lost gesture. They would respond with whatever was needed. *Scottish salmon from Fraser Morris? Consider it done, Mr. Whitfield. Three bottles of Chateau Haut-Brion? I'll make the calls.*

Owen could design and oversee every detail of the construction of award-winning houses or entire developments, but he could not locate a case of Bordeaux if he were standing in a Paris wine cellar. Everyone understood that.

She had understood it once upon a time.

Elisabeth had one blessed hour before she had to reassemble the worst of the florist's masterpieces, an hour before she had to give last-minute instructions to the caterer. She forced everything out of her mind: the fact that she was growing older with nothing substantial to show for it, the fact that she was married to a man who looked at her and didn't see her anymore, the fact that she was giving an intimate dinner party for her closest friends and was no longer looking forward to being with any of them.

The fact that one of her guests might well be sleeping with her husband. She did what she had been doing for more than a year to forget the shackles that bound her to her outwardly enviable life.

She turned on the television.

On her bed, snuggled against Irish lace pillows, she watched a familiar crystal globe materialize on the screen. Once she had counted the globe's facets by taping the opening of the show, then pausing frame by frame as the globe turned full circle. There were twenty-four, each with a different scene reflected on its surface. She knew each image, although the effect was meant to be subliminal. A soaring eagle, the convertible that had carried Jack and Jackie Kennedy on their final ride together, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb, Hopi kachina dancers, Bill and Hillary.

That scene dissolved into the next. A gavel fell against a polished wood surface, once, twice, three times. And before the sound could die away, a man began to speak.

"What you are about to hear is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Elisabeth mouthed the words in sync with the announcer. As the final truth was uttered, a woman appeared on the screen.

"Hello. This is *The Whole Truth*, and I'm Gypsy Dugan."

Before she had married Owen, in the days when she was still young and filled with confidence and spirit, Elisabeth had worked in television news, too. She had briefly tasted the joys that Gypsy probably took for granted, and she had relished them.

She didn't know when Gypsy Dugan had become her alterego. She didn't know when the sexy news anchor had begun to represent all the things that were missing in her own life. She did know that no one suspected her fascination with the woman or the show, and that she intended to keep it that way.

She was Elisabeth Whitfield, scion of a family as old as the thirteen colonies, wife of the revered Owen Whitfield, mother of a grown, beloved son. She appeared to have everything, but she was only just discovering how little she had settled for.

On the screen Gypsy Dugan shook back her short dark hair. There was nothing warm or sympathetic about her smile. It was as erotic as an X-rated film and every bit as cynical. She was Scarlett O'Hara with a mission. No matter how maudlin the subject matter, how shocking the feature story of the day, her dimples flirted dangerously with her ripe, full lips. She was every man's fantasy and every woman's nightmare. She was Gypsy Dugan.

And she was a living reminder that Elisabeth Whitfield might have been somebody, too, if she had just tried harder.

Gypsy waited for the final signal, then she leaned back in her chair and half listened to the familiar bustle that characterized the end of another taping. An assistant came to unhook her mike, someone else gathered the props on the semicircular desk. No one tried to start a conversation, although she hardly noticed. Her gaze was riveted on the man standing just

outside the studio lights. If she'd been anyone else, she might have licked her lips in anticipation. Instead she allowed one corner of her mouth to turn up. Just the tiniest bit.

He waited until the path was clear, then he moved toward her, a twentieth century pirate in a Davide Cenci suit. Charles Casey, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and perpetually in need of a closer shave. He was *The Whole Truth's* star reporter and the hottest lover Gypsy had taken in a decade.

"You could have manufactured a tear or two for the lead-in to the Williston story," he said when he was towering over her. "I mined the pathos in that one for all it was worth. Even Gypsy Dugan should squeeze out a tear for the death of a homeless mother and her two little angels."

Gypsy examined her nails, a supremely cliched but nonetheless effective signal--besides, she wasn't at all happy with her latest manicure. "We've got Nan for the teary segments. She could cry buckets at the grand opening of a shopping mall."

"But that wasn't Nan's segment."

"No one wants to see me cry, Casey. You know that's not why they watch the show." She glanced up. "Did you come here to critique my work? Or did you have something better in mind?"

"Like?"

"An early dinner."

"Where?"

She tapped her disappointing nails. "Aureole," she said at last, choosing a place where he would have to mortgage his soul for a last-minute dinner reservation. She studied him from under her lashes. "If you have the clout to get us a table. But then I have to be back here to go over tomorrow's script. I'm not at all happy with the new writers Desmond hired."

Something blacker than sin glistened in his eyes. "You're sure you don't have time to come to my place instead? We could send out for something."

"I am absolutely sure." She stood up slowly. A strict Catholic upbringing provided the inspiration for this particular exhibition. As a young teen she had learned to rise from her chair one inch at a time, so slowly that the nuns at St. Mary's had grown impatient and passed over the fact that her skirt was rolled at the waist and just a foot short of paradise.

Those years of practice served her well now. Casey's weight shifted to his heels and his gaze shifted, too. There wasn't a man anywhere who could resist Gypsy Dugan's legs. She ignored the fashion mavens--just as she had ignored the nuns--and wore her hems where she wanted them: smack dab in the middle of her thigh.

Casey's gaze drifted downwards as slowly as she unfurled. From his pained expression she knew that he disliked this particular performance, but he was helpless not to become a one-man audience. "What about after you've finished here?" he asked.

"It will be very, very late." She placed her index finger against his lips. "Too late. But don't let that stifle your creativity."

He didn't kiss her finger, he sucked it into his mouth and nipped it with his sharp pirate's teeth. Then he blended back into the shadows.

Gypsy's dressing room was her sanctuary. The temperature was exactly seventy-two degrees year round, and there was always fruit juice and mineral water waiting on ice. Tito Callahan, the media mogul for whom *The Whole Truth* was just one juicy tidbit in a banquet of television and newspaper holdings, had commissioned his personal decorator to redo the dressing room as a surprise bonus after the negotiations on her last contract. The walls were aubergine

satin, and the Persian rug was fine enough to adorn a sultan's harem.

Today, after taking care of the thousand and one details that signaled the official end of her working day, Gypsy closed the door behind her and went straight to her dressing table. The clothes she wore were on loan to the show from a Madison Avenue boutique, and she stripped them off and left them exactly where they landed. She considered changing into a black dress that she kept for such moments, a sleek, form-fitting tube with crisscross straps that left little to the imagination. But Casey thought entirely too much of himself, and she didn't want him to believe she was dressing up to please him. Instead she slipped into her street clothes, unfastening two of the buttons on her red silk blouse and replaced the simple pearl studs in her earlobes with a spray of faux rubies that would have glared like searchlights on camera.

She had thrown a towel over her shoulders and was creaming her face when someone knocked. The sound was too hesitant to be Casey's, but it was familiar, all the same. "It's not locked." She attacked the cream with a wad of tissues.

The door opened a crack. "Are you decent?"

"I'm never decent."

Desmond Weber, the show's executive producer, closed the door behind him and stood with his back against it. He was a man in his mid-fifties with the sturdy build of a linebacker carried incongruously on a jockey's short legs. His wiry gray hair was clipped and contoured with poodle precision; his nose was a classic pug and his eyes were as soulful as a cocker spaniel's. Gypsy glanced at him, then turned back to the mirror. "I'm a work in progress here, so you don't have to blockade the door. I'm not going to run."

Desmond moved farther into the room. "I thought the taping went well."

"You know what? It would have gone better if you'd given me some stories with meat on them. Cripes, Desmond, how many more segments are we going to do on that poor homeless woman from North Carolina? Don't you think digging up her date for the senior prom was a bit much? She's dead. Does anyone care whether she got roses or carnations that night?"

"Yeah. Our audience cares."

"Then they're bigger assholes than I thought."

"Hey, aren't we in a charming mood?"

"*We* certainly are not." She stroked concealer under her eyes. These days it had become her first line of defense. She might not be sleeping worth a damn anymore, but she wasn't going to tell the world.

"Have you noticed that everyone's tiptoeing around like you're an unclaimed suitcase ticking sixty beats to the minute?"

"They're just doing their jobs quietly, the way they're supposed to."

"You're never jumpy. And suddenly, you're jumpy as hell. Everybody's noticed. Everybody's worried."

"Everybody's wondering how they can use it to scramble up the old career ladder!"

"Come on, Gyps. Not everyone's as motivated by misfortune as you are."

She was silent, because he was right. She knew she had a gold-plated reputation for ruthlessness, although everyone agreed it was never personal. Gypsy wasn't unkind. She was simply obsessed with herself.

"Is it your . . . security problem?" Desmond asked.

She abandoned the concealer for custom-blended foundation. "At least you didn't say my *imaginary* security problem."

"Come on. I know you think it's real."

"Why yes, now that you mention it. Nearly spilling one's guts on a Fifth Avenue sidewalk can give a person those kind of fantasies."

"Look, I know it was hard, traumatic even, to watch somebody you knew and respected drop dead right beside you--"

"Yeah. Particularly when you think that the gunman who killed him was taking aim at you, too." Gypsy glanced at Desmond again. "And don't tell me that none of the witnesses believe anyone besides Mark was the target. I've read the police report myself. I know what it says. But I was standing right beside him."

"Look, we're taking your fears seriously. If there's any chance that the man who shot Mark wants to take you out as well, then we have to protect you. You're being watched twenty-four hours a day."

"Right. And the only thing I can be sure of is that next time, if *I'm* the victim, I'll go to my glory with an audience."

"We've hired the best men out there."

"And not a one of them could have kept Mark from getting shot." Usually Gypsy saved her reminiscences of that moment for the middle of the night when her Xanax wore off, but now the whole scene flashed through her mind.

Mark Santini had been hired the previous fall as *The Whole Truth's* newest director. A promising young man with energy and ideas to spare, he had taken Gypsy to lunch several weeks before Christmas to discuss a new concept for the show, and they had chosen a restaurant some blocks from the studio. The day was unseasonably warm, and afterwards Mark suggested that they walk along Fifth Avenue to see the holiday windows. Half a block from St. Patrick's Cathedral a man stepped out in front of them and blasted a hole through Mark's cashmere overcoat. Gypsy watched in horror as Mark slumped to the ground. Then the man lifted the gun in her direction.

And he smiled.

"He didn't shoot you," Desmond reminded her. As he spoke the door opened behind him, but despite the subject under discussion he didn't even turn to see who it was. Security at the studio was high-tech and impenetrable. There were too many competitors in the lucrative world of investigative news to risk media espionage.

Gypsy's gaze strayed to the man at the door. Her voice changed subtly. Now she sounded bored. "We'll never know why Mark's killer didn't pull the trigger again, will we? Maybe the gun jammed. Maybe he realized he didn't have time to get off another shot. He was gone before anyone could ask for an explanation."

"Or maybe he just didn't have any reason to kill you," Casey said from the doorway. "The cops have a pretty good idea why this guy might have wanted Mark dead, and it doesn't have anything to do with you."

Gypsy knew the prevailing theory. Mark's extended family was rumored to have murky ties to organized crime. His death had all the traits of a Mafia hit, a lesson, perhaps, to some distant uncle or cousin who had gotten out of line.

She shrugged carelessly and uncapped her mascara. As far as she was concerned, the conversation had ended. Desmond was the only person to whom she admitted her worst fears. Casey was another matter.

"No more of this tonight," she said. "I'm sure your watchdogs will keep me safe, Desmond. Besides, when I'm in Casey's hands, I never have anything to worry about except Casey's hands." She redid her lipstick, then reached for a bottle and spritzed her cleavage with a

new fragrance that claimed to contain synthesized human pheromones.

"Try to lighten up a little, will you?" Desmond asked. "Especially on Nan."

She wrinkled her brow in mock sympathy. "Poor little Nannie-poo. Has the wicked Gypsy woman hurt her teensy-weensy feelings again?"

"Just ease up on everybody, Gyps. It'll make my life easier, and in the long run, that's good for you."

She waved Desmond out the door. "Go tell whatever watchdog is lurking in the shadows tonight to take his dinner break. Casey will take over my care and feeding for a while, won't you, Casey?"

"With something like pleasure." Casey waited until the door closed before he crossed the room. Gypsy rose to greet him, but he didn't embrace her until she rested her forearms on his shoulders. The game was hers to call, and she had made certain that Casey realized it from the start.

He was a tall man, but she was a tall woman. It was just as well, since she couldn't imagine gazing up at him with adoring eyes. She liked her lovers nearly nose to nose; she never wore anything lower than three-inch heels.

He lowered his head, and she smelled the spicy essence of Joop. Casey's lips were warm against hers, but the kiss was not all that she had expected. There was nothing rakish or demanding about it. It was almost . . . gentle.

She pulled away and her eyes narrowed. "What's that about?"

He didn't answer for a moment. She could see something like a struggle behind his perpetually cynical expression. "I know you're scared," he said finally.

"Do you?" She stepped back, one perfectly arched eyebrow sailing high above the other. "Well, you're wrong. I'm angry. I just don't like the fact that my daily life's been affected by all of this. But I'm not scared. I've never been scared of anything in my whole life."

"Everybody's scared of something."

"Bullshit." She paused a heartbeat or two to recover. "Gypsy Dugan's not like everybody else. She's in a class all by herself."

"Even Gypsy Dugan's afraid of dying."

"Gypsy Dugan isn't going to die. She's planning to live forever." She said the words, and for the moment they lingered in the air, they were true. She had no intention of meeting her maker. In spite of the fears she had voiced to Desmond, it was simply inconceivable.

"We're all going to die. Even the reigning sexpot of the television tabloids. We'll just have to do everything we can to make sure it happens later rather than sooner."

One corner of her lips turned up provocatively, and she wiped her lipstick off his mouth with her thumb. "Don't worry about me, Casey. I've got an incentive to stay alive. I hear they've reserved a place down below for women like me. If I want heat, I'll wait out eternity on a yacht in the Mediterranean."