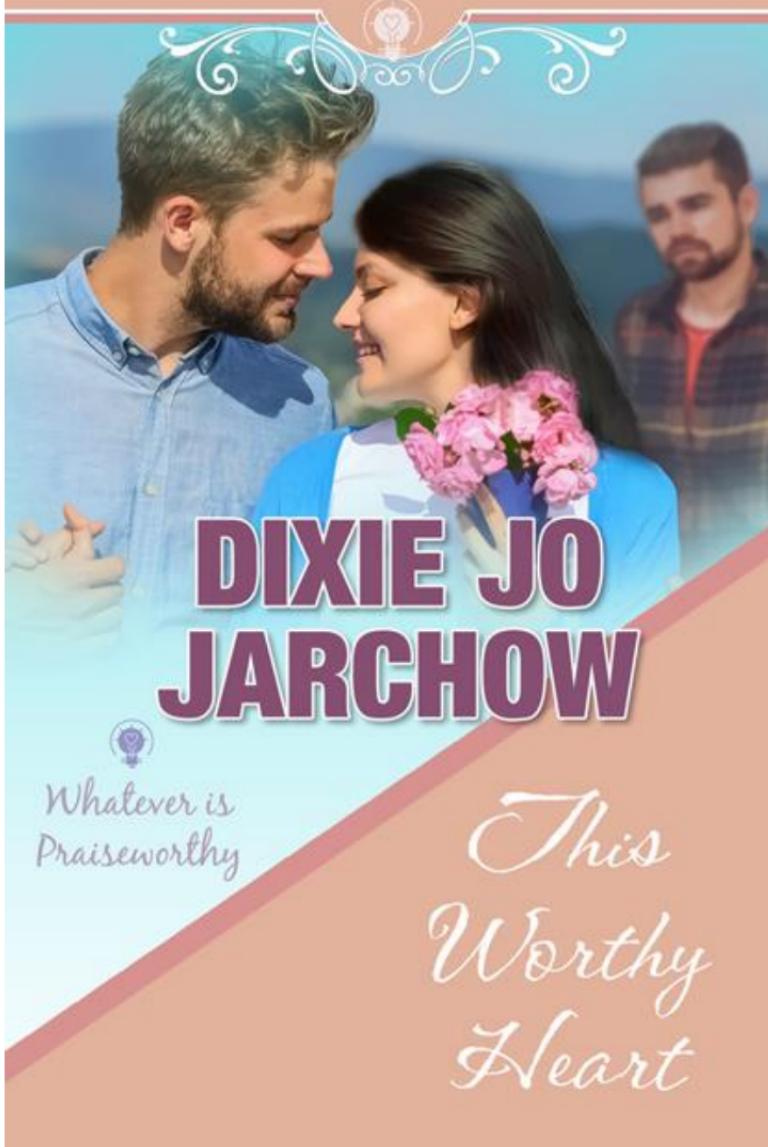


Ponder This...



This Worthy Heart

Dixie Jo Jarchow

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Dedication

To the M&Ms, may they always be in love!

Titles in the Ponder This Series

Lucy in Love by Kimberly M. Miller

Charlotte's Dilemma by Susan Karsten

Buttonholed by Anita Klumpers

A Field of Forget-me-nots by Rachel A. James

To Complicate Matters by Linda Widrick

This Worthy Heart by Dixie Jo Jarchow

A Perfect Fit by Christine Schimpf

Everything about Us by Lisa J. Lickel

1

A rhythmic pounding filled Celestina's ears, and frigid sweat sprang from every pore. Her eyes shot open as her teeth clenched so the air stuck in her throat. One hand groped for her heart to reassure its beat was still strong and regular, if a tad fast. Was that a good thing or terrifying? The pounding continued, and Cele flexed her left hand into a fist. The breath she'd been holding whooshed out.

A small stroke earlier this year moved through her perfect life the way a sizzling piece of bacon moves through a thick layer of mayo, two delicious foods she'd never savor again.

Cele sat on the side of the bed where she'd cried for the last 12 hours. Jason, the future Mr. Celestina Morgan, found out about her medical condition from her long-time tennis coach, Russ. She would never forgive Russ for ruining her life. Jason took two steps away from her, as if he might catch it, and fled.

"Everyone around you needs to understand what happened, kiddo. The people around you need to realize the warning signs of a stroke if this happens again," Russ said.

"It was my story to tell," Cele retorted.

"Sooner is better. You dropped like a stone on the tennis court. By the time I got to you, you'd popped back up. You're

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lucky I recognized the signs, and that it was a big deal, or you might be dead."

"Thank you, but Jason isn't comfortable around sick people."

"You aren't sick. You need to keep taking your aspirin, and if another episode happens, get to the hospital pronto."

"Another Transient Ischemic Attack, you mean, not my boyfriend running off."

"Yeah, TIA sounds better."

Jason had sent a text later. "We need to take a break from each other. I'll call you." Her heart squeezed tight, but not from a random clot blocking an artery.

Cele needed to regroup and be a functioning human being again. The pounding continued, but the sounds weren't generated from inside her chest. Cool relief flooded her. Her heart slowed with each step to the door.

No twenty-five-year-old should be forced to worry that an artery was seizing. It was so unfair. Not that anyone ever expected a stroke. The pounding continued and she checked the clock. It was seven a.m. Saturday morning.

She was ready to exact painful vengeance on whoever was intent on denting the door of her efficiency apartment. Good luck. That door was solid 1936 oak construction, old growth that nothing short of a chainsaw could budge.

"Who is it?" Cele asked. The vintage apartment didn't sport modern conveniences such as peep holes.

"Andy from work. Celestina Morgan, let me in, it's urgent."

The use of her full name and the wavering in his voice gave her pause. Andy, her boss, dressed with

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style and coordinated his shoes to his outfits. Cele opened the door.

"What do you want?"

Andy paused mid-knock and frowned, "Is that what you sleep in?" He shook his head with its tight sand colored afro. His white chinos sported a perfect crease, and his blue pinstriped shirt was spotless. "We need to talk. I can help you."

Cele glared to cover the heat crawling up her cheeks.

Andy stumbled on, "I need a big favor. I've got a primo gig on a cruise ship for four days. It's a lot of money, and I'm hoping they'll hire me on."

"So, go." Cele wondered if the stubble on her legs was visible from where he stood. She meant to shave today before she went to the tennis club for her appointment.

"Here's where the problem lies and you save my life. Mrs. King asked me to watch her puppy. She couldn't take him on the plane. Here's his crate, food, and stuff."

Cele noticed a moment too late a fabric bag slung over each shoulder. Andy sloughed them off onto the floor. She didn't want to betray the smallest amount of interest.

"No." She reached to the floor and picked up the bags. She heaved them out the door, grimacing as a high-pitched squeak came from one.

"Please. I need this. You work here two weeks and already you get a week of vacation. I deserve a chance at happiness. I'll do anything."

That stopped Cele for a micro second. His obvious sense of style could improve her wardrobe and apartment. But on the other hand, she didn't plan to

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stay here long. Jason was a big part of that. She'd planned on marrying him until Russ ruined her life.

It was true she'd only worked there two weeks. The whole company took a paid vacation while it underwent an audit. When she thought of putting her stupid life back together, what mattered was Jason. A puppy didn't fit into her grand plan to win him back. Jason hated animals of any kind.

Andy put on a serious surge when the door slid towards him. Cele's athletic strength won the day. She caught one brief shot of his angry face before the latch clicked.

"No, dog." Cele yelled through the crack between the door and jamb.

2

Cele breathed a sigh of relief and surveyed with dismay her hard-won aloneness. What a pig she'd become in the space of a few weeks since she moved here from the corn town of Peoria. Clothes thrown everywhere, magazines piled here and there, dropped where she'd last read them.

Celestina admitted to being a magazine junky. The piles had offended Jason's "house beautiful" vision. At his apartment, every surface was planned and every counter swept clean of debris. It looked great, she admitted, but she couldn't change her ways to conform to Jason's request that she read books instead. And he had a book list for her too.

Sometimes, she sneaked magazines and devoured them over lunch at work. Some women sneaked chocolate. Cele smirked; she did too.

She vowed to clean up her act. Magazine piles were first to go. She picked up a stack and walked them to the garbage can. She pulled one back out and paged through it.

Jason hated disorder, so she'd agreed to work on it. She picked up some of the dirty clothes. She wasn't the neatest person by any means. Was there any need to be neat if he wasn't there to disapprove? He'd never

spent much time in her tiny apartment. What was the harm? She pulled the magazines back out of the can and put them in a neat pile.

Jason was right in theory; things did work better with order. Cele picked up the rest of her meager wardrobe. Her clothing needs were minimal in college, t-shirts, jeans, and tennis outfits. Since getting a job in the city, she was accumulating a wardrobe, but more to avoid doing laundry frequently.

A pounding at the door snapped her head around, and she wound up to give Andy another, firmer refusal. She was certain he'd only chosen her because she was a new employee, and that would make it hard for her to say "no."

She pulled the door open, forgetting the chain was still on, and it whipped back closed again.

The latch defeated her eager hands. When she remembered her unshaved legs, she scooted into her sweats. Maybe the stains weren't that noticeable. At least it was an improvement over the bristles. She'd meant to shave this morning. It was on the list.

She whipped her short dark hair forward and back to give it more volume, waited for the dizziness to pass, and plastered a smile on her face before opening the door.

"Jason! This is a surprise." She expected her heartbeat to increase and imagined her pale blue eyes dilating with desire. None of those things happened. Instead, the bristles on her legs caught on her sweats, making her legs itch. Her teeth sported a filmy grit from being so rudely awakened. Quite the fetching princess waiting for rescue.

"Yeah, sorry I didn't call ahead. It was a spur of the moment thing. Oh, here's the dog. Your boss

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recognized me and handed it off on his way downstairs." He set the expensive-looking dog carrier on the floor and sloughed the other bag off his shoulder.

"Grrrrr." Cele clenched her fists. "He tricked you, Jason. I told him I wouldn't watch the animal. You don't like animals."

He frowned. "Look, I'm only here for my other phone charger." The case wobbled from side to side. Was the thing was trying to escape. They both watched as a trickle of yellow fluid ran out of the seam near the bottom.

"Ew!" Cele waited for Jason to spring into action and save the day.

"You should take it outside and clean this up. I'm late for a meeting." He glanced at his watch on cue. "I'll walk you down," he offered.

Trapped. She picked up the dripping contraption and slid her feet into shoes. The tiny thing inside slid from side to side as she grabbed her keys. Jason waited in the hall, glued to his phone.

A tiny whimper caused her to keep it level. It was crying, poor baby. Cele put one foot on the first step.

A second whimper stopped her. While she peeked into the tiny mesh window, something rammed into her from behind, catapulting her off balance and into the air. One glance back up the stairs as she fell showed Jason. He raised his head as she tumbled. He hadn't see her pause while talking on his phone.

With one hand on the crate and one arm free to grab onto the railing, she flailed, missing a handhold. Her momentum propelled her into the glass entry door, which saved her from sprawling onto the sidewalk.

Cele cried out when her ankle cracked under her and the sound resonated through her body. Pain flowed over her in waves. At least she'd kept the bag with the crying dog from taking a hit.

She took a moment to breathe and assess the damage. Her shoulder throbbed and Cele cringed. The pain was coming. The ankle hurt so much that nausea rose in her throat. This was serious. Daggers of pain stabbed her ankle. The crying changed timbre, and she realized that the whimpering was coming from her instead of the dog.

Puppy! Cele kept the beast alive. The crate sat on her chest in a wet soft mess. The door to her apartment building opened behind her, taking her headrest so that her head bounced once on the hard sidewalk outside her apartment. A man gazed at her. His distorted face gave away his identity: Ugly Dave.

Everyone called him that, even to his face. He hadn't spoken in her presence in the time she'd lived there. She wondered if he could. He showed her the apartment and provided a sheet with the rent and amenities. Ugly Dave lived somewhere in the building and performed basic maintenance. His face was lopsided as if he'd been a stroke victim. One side drooped, and he labored when he breathed.

Wetness slid across her face and her breath caught when she thought it might be blood. Cele tasted it and realized it was urine, baby dog urine leaked from the container onto her face. Today got better and better. And baby dog was at the door of the crate staring through the tiny window. The itty-bitty nub of a tail wagged a couple of times. His or her day wasn't going well either.

Was everyone in the world staring at her? Another

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face joined Ugly Dave, a male face.

"Are you OK?" The new guy was upside down too, but his concern made tears well up and slide out of her eyes. Cele sobbed and the wetness leaked into her hair mixing with the pee.

"I'll call 911." Jason's bearded face hovered over her for a moment and disappeared.

"Wait, come back," Cele struggled to sit. She needed him. She watched through the glass door as he disappeared.

Ugly Dave put his huge hands around the carrier and tried to remove the thing from her chest. Cele struggled to hang onto it.

"Don't take my dog." She didn't even want the thing, but as she'd hurt herself protecting it, she was darned if she'd give it up to a gargoyle.

"Let go. Let's help you up." The second person's voice soothed her into allowing Ugly Dave take the carrier.

Her core strength was awesome from years on the tennis court, but she couldn't get past the pain in her ankle and shoulder to sit up. As he grabbed her under her damaged shoulder to lift her to her feet, she passed out.

3

Celestina floated weightless for the space of a breath. A bone jarring landing caused her to cry out in searing pain. Cele dragged her eyes open and watched a man in an ambulance moving around her, adjusting straps that kept her ankle and bruised shoulder still. They hit another pothole and her body barely left the stretcher. She closed her mouth against a moan. Years of sports gave her a barricade against pain. *Suck it up, buttercup.*

Where was Jason, her rock? Her eyes darted, trying not to move her head to search for him. He followed in his Mercedes, she reasoned. The man who helped her was easy to locate. He sat on the side across from the ambulance guy. He put one warm, comforting hand on hers and his brow furrowed. She hoped Ugly Dave wasn't having little dog for dinner. Let Andy explain that to their boss.

The kindly stranger turned her wrist over.

"Hey, she's got a medical bracelet. Stroke."

"Thanks, buddy," the paramedic said, calling it in.

The drive was short, and more tears leaked out of her eyes when the driver jerked to a stop at the ER entrance. Cele breathed out counting to three, hoping the blessed painkillers were that much closer. The

thought kept her going.

The man was right at home in the ambulance and Cele lost track of him as they wheeled her to a cubicle in the waiting room.

There were mounds of paperwork. The welcoming woman filling things out for her was not so welcoming when she found out Cele's bare bones insurance policy. As an up and coming soon to be discovered artist, only basic coverage was affordable.

After that ordeal, she was wheeled into a curtained examination room. After an eternity of suffering and listening to the noises beyond the curtain, a whistling black guy came and pushed her to the X-ray line. Yes, there was a line. Where in Chicago isn't there a line? Coffee shop? Line. Ice cream stand? Line. Treadmill in the exercise room? Well, OK, maybe there wasn't a line everywhere, but there was a line everywhere Cele wanted to be.

Coffee and ice cream were not to appear on her menu while they watched for signs of more TIAs. They were sneaky little things and could be a blank spot in the day or a full blown cardiac event. A TIA differed from a true stroke in that no lasting damage was done. A stroke meant damage. Cele hoped the worst was past. She planned to win Jason back and move forward with her perfect life.

One week to go, and she was failing in spectacular fashion.

Cele held up her fist and shook it at the fluorescent lights.

"Whoa, thanks," the orderly took her wrist and read the medical warnings on her bracelet. He checked her chart and left again.

The parade moved in a way that reminded her of

dying worms on hot sidewalks after a rain. Jason was no doubt frantic in the waiting room. She imagined him following the ambulance in the sleek gray Mercedes, canceling meetings as he drove. It was his fault she was in this place.

The line moved in jerks and starts while Cele stared upwards and envisioned a world where Jason realized how much he needed her and swooped in to rescue her. She edited out tripping on the apartment stairs when he bumped into her. A quick engagement followed by a lavish wedding, culminating with a move into his sky-high loft above the city. He would take care of everything.

His building sported a plush elevator, and a doorman to fetch groceries or take laundry out, for a fifty dollar bill. The view was a picture postcard of the city. On a clear day, the river peeked from behind the buildings. Cele could sit and draw while she healed. Pottery, her true gift was out. Jason didn't approve of the mess.

Pain jumped through her leg as they transferred her to the X-ray table. The massive machine moved across her prone body, peering inside, and Cele relaxed. Painkillers were getting closer. Any time now.

She waited back behind her curtain for a doctor. A short balding man with skin the color of dark chocolate came in, followed by a tall, thin Caucasian woman in scrubs.

"You sprained your ankle, but it's a grade one," he said and she breathed a sigh of relief. A sprain could be grade one, minor up to grade three with a total tear and surgery. Thank goodness hers was minor. Tennis was only six to eight weeks away.

"Can I get painkillers?" she asked, guilt nagging

her after wheeling by a man with his bloody hand in a wrapping.

The woman smiled at her. "Not yet. The doctor has to cast it." She laid out three plastic tubular cages, red, yellow and blue. He measured around the ankle. The ankle wasn't displaced. It appeared normal except for the swelling. The bruises would come later.

"OK, let's get you set up and out of here." The doctor scanned the laptop and nodded. He took the robin's egg blue plastic thing with Velcro wraps and snapped it around her foot. He moved his head around, checking the fit.

"Nancy, perfect as always," he smiled at the older woman in the animal print scrubs. "I should let you run things. Nice to meet you," he smiled to Cele as he left without introducing himself.

"I do run things," the nurse told Cele. "I let him think he does. Here's your care sheet. Keep off it. Keep it elevated. Ice helps. And,"—she pulled something long out of a lower cabinet—"here are your crutches. Return for a checkup in six weeks." She pulled back the sheet and left.

An orderly came, the same man who pushed the gurney to X-ray and brought a wheelchair. He helped Cele slide off the table. Her butt landed in the chair, jarring her ankle and shoulder. She clutched the crutches and instructions across her lap. Cele vowed to think of it as an adventure. Attitude was everything.

He wheeled her into the waiting room. Several pairs of expectant eyes glanced at her, but only one showed recognition. The rest returned to their magazines or cell phones. But the eyes that met hers didn't belong to her beloved, Jason.

Instead, they belonged to the guy from the

sidewalk. His height exceeded hers by at least four inches, making him six feet three inches. He dressed like a working man. Jason wore either formal or semi-formal. She bet his closet didn't sport a flannel shirt, jeans and scuffed work boots.

This man's face was clean shaven, which Cele favored and his blue eyes were piercing and intelligent, filled with scorn or was it pity? His face was ascetic: planes and angles with cheekbones jutting out.

"Hey." she remembered. "Don't I get any painkillers?" Cele moved her neck around to ask the orderly.

"No, not covered on your insurance. Take something over the counter for the worst of it." He locked the chair while she struggled out. The other man took her instructions while she figured out how to manage the crutches.

"Thanks," Cele muttered.

The orderly spun and wheeled away in one fluid motion, leaving Cele balanced on three legs. Six weeks of this? She'd be lucky if she didn't break her other ankle. Where was Jason?

Cele frowned. "My boyfriend was here." Her mind balked at the image of Jason leaving her here to the tender violations of the emergency room.

The man scanned the room, probably hoping to dump her as soon as possible. Couples and families sat together in the square waiting room. No single, bearded, well-dressed razor slim guys in evidence.

"He knocked me down the steps. I was sure he followed me here." Nagging doubt picked at her. She longed to whip out her cell and call him to rescue her, but if he was in a meeting, he wouldn't answer. Plus,

her cell phone was at home. Was he parking the car? She'd been in there for an hour, long enough to park any car anywhere, even Chi town. Cele's heart sank in her chest. Not a TIA, disappointment.

She gazed towards the glass double doors, but no Jason hurried to her from the rows of parked cars. No valet parking at the hospital and parking the Mercedes could take time.

"I guess not. Can you take me home?" The whine of a young girl came out her mouth instead of the poised urban sophisticate she imagined herself to be. Jason's loft with the elevator for her recuperation crossed off her list. She'd be facing the flight of steps that caused this anguish.

"We can take the bus. I don't own a car." He dug in his pocket for something and pulled out a well-used, laminated pass. "Ellie, can you tell the bus we need a stop here, please?"

First name basis? "Do you spend a lot of time here?"

"Yeah, unfortunately," he replied and headed through the doors with a whoosh. She swung the crutches forward, balancing on her good foot and leaned into it. It wasn't so terrible. By the time she got the twenty feet to the stop, tears gathered in her eyes and she kept her head down, eyes on the sidewalk. Her shoulder screamed in agony at the extra pressure.

She was grace itself on the tennis court. How could she be such a klutz on crutches? The chill wind tore at her sweats and the night seemed unfriendly.

A bus roared up, belching fumes and stopped in front of them. The man stepped up and through, showing his pass. Cele navigated the three stairs to the driver.