



Tiny Glass Umbrellas in January

A Collection of Novelettes

Stephanie Van Orman

Tiny Glass Umbrellas in January
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TINY WISHES

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CUT LIKE GLASS

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Tiny Glass Umbrellas
in January

A Collection of Romantic Novelettes by

STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

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Tiny Wishes

A novelette by Stephanie Van Orman



Tiny Wishes

ONE

"Listen," she said, turning around to face him. "I don't like having a male roommate. I think you will agree that getting shackled up with a woman you don't know isn't your idea of a good time."

Raif did not agree with her. He had had twelve roommates over the past five years and the clean, sensible, beautiful woman in front of him had nothing in common with any of them. He was not at all opposed to having her as a roommate. Her name was Wyntessa, which was not at all normal. Most of the time he heard her called Wyn, sometimes Wynny, though the two ys rubbed him the wrong way. In any case, she was spectacularly pretty with gray eyes, twisted cedar hair, and a kitchen that had no dirty dishes in the sink. He kept involuntarily glancing in the kitchen. She had fresh-cut flowers in a vase and a scented candle burning in the center of the dining room table.

Wyn kept talking like Raif had agreed that the situation was bleak. "It's unfair to you and it's unfair to me."

She was referring to what happened to her roommate and his roommate. Two women had moved into apartment number 201 on the first of September (that had been Wyn and Muriel). Two men had moved into apartment 202 on the first of September (that had been Raif and Trevor). By the twenty-first of September, woman number two, Muriel, and man number two, Trevor, had fallen deeply in love. They decided they wanted to move in together and since the ladies' apartment had two bedrooms and the fellers' apartment had one, they came to a simple solution where no one had to be overly inconvenienced and Trevor and Muriel could start playing house immediately. All they had to do was trade Raif for Muriel and all would be well.

Except all was not well as Raif was staring down a very angry Wyn, who did not want to room with a man.

Raif started talking slowly and quietly so he wouldn't scare her or turn her fury toward him. "I'm very clean," he began. "I'm not loud, and I don't have parties. I may stay out late, but you don't have to keep tabs on me. I'll be sensitive and not hang out in the common rooms if you have company."

Wyn pouted beautifully. "*You* are not the problem. Though us rooming together is obviously what we have to do, I will find you a new place to live and get new roommates for both of us. If all goes well, you won't have to live here longer than a week."

"If you don't want me here, I can find my own place. I don't need your help," Raif argued.

"No. I know Trev was a pretty good roommate. I mean, if he was trash, Muriel wouldn't be at Ikea buying lamp shades with him, now would she? I can't make you so desperate for a new place to live that you move in with just anyone. We have to find someone of quality. And I'll help, at least."

Raif nodded. He motioned that he wished to move past her to the bedroom behind her. She swished a hand in assent and let him enter Muriel's freshly emptied room.

He looked around the bare room and noticed where the power outlets were, what kind of

light bulb was in the overhead light fixture, and how many holes there were in the drywall. He opened the closet door and looked inside.

Wyn leaned against the door frame, her arms crossed protectively, and trembled slightly.

"I'm harmless, I assure you," Raif said as he closed the closet door. "Nothing funny is going to happen, and hey, maybe having me around will be fun."

"What could be fun?"

"Oh, I don't know. Say you're on a date and end up not liking the guy. At the front door, you tell him off, but he's not listening. You open the door and he ducks under your arm, only to run into me watching TV. You come in and ask me what I'm doing here when we broke up all those months ago. I say I couldn't stop thinking about you. You appear to gush. Boyo leaves, annoyed and humiliated. You and I smack a high five."

Wyn cupped both hands under her face. "That's quite the imagination you have. Never once in my life has a man 'ducked under my arm' or done something I've asked him not to do."

Raif scanned the beautiful, yet severe, line of her lips. She had to be telling the truth. As alluring as she was, she was also completely terrifying, and yeah, he bet none of her dates disobeyed her if they wanted a second date. Over her shoulder, he could see the clean sink. For more than one reason, all of her dates would want a second one.

He sighed. "I'll find a way to be useful to you. I'm handy and well organized. I'm good at carrying very full laundry baskets, and grocery bags."

"Please stop," she groaned. "I need some alone time." She rounded the corner and vanished into her bedroom.

While she was having her 'alone time' Raif brought over his things. Trevor helped him move his bed frame, mattress, computer desk, and drawers full of his clothes. Normally, they would have talked, and they did, right up until the moment they entered Wyn's apartment. Raif put a finger to his lips and Trevor nodded. Upsetting Wyntessa by making a racket would not help anything.

After everything was arranged in Raif's room, he came out to find Wyn sitting at the kitchen table. She was cutting strips of colored paper, scribbling on them, and then rolling them around a pencil. When the paper was tightly rolled, she tied the tiny scroll with a string and pulled out the pencil.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked, pulling up a chair. "Want my help?"

"No!" she said, covering up her work with her hands, and grasping at an unbroken sheet of paper.

"Okay. I won't intrude, but we need to talk about how we're going to split some things."

"Like what?" she barked.

"The fridge."

She frowned and looked downcast.

"You don't even want to share a fridge with me?" he asked patiently.

It obviously took considerable effort for her to say her next words. "I suppose we could just split it down the middle."

"Wait," Raif said. "Why does this seem like a brand new idea to you? You're what? Twenty-one? This can't be your first time having a roommate."

"Of course, it's not. I just usually did all the shopping and all the cooking and my roommate would clean up after."

“So, Muriel is the one who cleaned the sink?” Raif asked with bated breath.

“No. I cleaned the sink.”

He let out a sigh of relief.

“She's been out dating Trevor every night since we got here. I have been cooking for myself and cleaning my own sink. I kind of got used to doing everything myself. I suppose I see why we need to come to a temporary arrangement about splitting things.”

“Halving the fridge is fine with me.”

“And you'll wash the dishes you dirty?” Wyn asked suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“And you'll pay half the utility bills?”

“Naturally.”

She picked up her pencil with an air of finality. “Then I guess there's nothing else for us to talk about.”

Raif got up and started for his bedroom when suddenly Wyn said, “Before you go, will you pull that jar down from the cupboard for me?”

Tall as he was, he didn't question her, and obediently looked above the cupboard. “There are a lot of jars up here. Which one do you want?”

“The biggest one,” she said casually.

“The biggest one it is,” he mouthed as he easily hefted it and sat it down on the table next to her.

“Thanks,” she said, though it seemed like it somehow hurt her to say it.

“It was the least I could do,” he said because it actually was the least he could do.

Tiny Wishes

TWO

In the morning, Raif got up as the sun was rising. He had a shower and made his way to the kitchen. He was only planning on getting a drink of water, as he didn't own anything more than condiments in the fridge. He planned to get a bite in one of the food courts between classes and go grocery shopping after school. He was about to leave when he saw a little meal set out on the table covered by adorable glass domes. His initial response was that the meal had nothing to do with him, but he was curious. Did Wyn always set out her breakfast the night before? However, on closer examination, the breakfast was for him. There was an envelope on the table in front of the dome covering a cinnamon bun. He opened the envelope. It was filled with confetti and a crisp piece of stationary.

Dear Raif,

I'm only calling you 'dear' because that is how a proper letter ought to begin. You get confetti because none of this is your fault.

I need to explain why I don't want you to live with me. I have an older brother. When he was in college he moved in with a girl, thinking that it wouldn't be different than having any other roommate. He was wrong. He ended up marrying her. However, they are all wrong for each other. They have nothing in common and being in the same room as them is a punishment for all involved. They yell, disagree, fight, refuse to talk to each other and the time spent with them is nightmarish.

Proximity is not love.

I don't want to repeat their mistake, but since we have both been landed in this situation, we have to make the most of it.

I have thought of a system to help avoid us relying on each other emotionally, or even becoming friends. We will cooperate, which is all I want. If you want to talk to me in person, you will need to take a paper out of this jar and do what it says. If you can't do the task, you can email me. I want to pretend we're miles away from each other under different stars.

*Sincerely,
Wyn*

P.S. I'm giving you my email address.

P.P.S. Enjoy breakfast. Welcome home.

Raif folded up the paper and thought about the contents of it for twenty seconds before he stuffed the bun in his mouth, left the rest of the food on the table (there was cut melon and a carton of apple juice), and departed.

On his way to school, he thought about what Wyn wrote. She said she was afraid to fall in love with him and it wasn't personal? Horsefeathers! It was personal. It couldn't be anything but personal.

When he was younger, girls falling for him was an almost daily occurrence. The frequency had ebbed as he'd aged, partly because he had less interest in chasing random girls and partly because he kept his flirting at such a low level, it didn't arouse expectations.

He kicked upturns in the pavement as he walked. He wished he'd brought her note along with him so he could read it again and find hints to the truth. She didn't want to talk to him. What had he done to make her not want to talk to him? He'd done something. Sometime in the past, he'd done something to anger her. If only he could figure out what.

In class, he couldn't focus on the lecture. Raif gazed out the window, thinking about what he looked like and wondering if Wyn found him attractive. He was ordinary with an average build, average face, average money, average all over, except for maybe one thing. He had a good nose. He'd been told repeatedly by girls that the cartilage in his nose was where it was at. Dark hair, hazel eyes, and excellent nose cartilage. But that couldn't be enough to win over Wyntessa.

He always thought his ability to win over girls came from his charm. He was a man who wasn't afraid to say whatever needed to be said, do whatever needed to be done to get a girl to like him, and when he was a teenager, it had been easy to give the girls what they wanted.

He'd given his attention to every girl who wanted it. Needless to say, he had had exactly as many flirtationships blow up in his face as he deserved, but he was certain he hadn't done or said anything out of line when dealing with Wyn. He had been perfect. He had been better than perfect.

Grown women were another matter. Grown women wanted to be mysterious. They wanted physical proof that there was some cosmic connection between them. So, they didn't say what they wanted. They wanted him to guess, figure it out, have the same goals, and want the same things.

Once he had been on a date where she wanted him to choose a dessert for her. If he chose the thing she wanted, he'd get a second date. If he chose wrong, he could never take her out again.

He chose wrong... but not because he meant to. There had been eight items on the menu, thus only a 12.5% chance of success. It was a shame too because she had beautiful legs.

Without a doubt, he knew he could get along with Wyn. She was a superior sort of woman. Fighting typical female stereotypes, he felt that Wyn had played no games in her letter. She'd been honest about her feelings and been ladylike enough not to insult him to his face by explaining how much she objected to him personally. She didn't want to shack up with a player, end up in bed with him, and regret it for the rest of her life.

If that was all it was, everything would be fine. He just needed a little time to prove to her that he deserved that clean sink.

He hadn't had a chance to read any of the little scrolls she'd put in the jar, but he felt that didn't matter. If she wanted space, he'd give her space. What mattered most was the clean sink.

Most of the apartments Raif had lived in didn't have dishwashers. Whoever lived there had to do the dishes. The thing was, Raif had *never* had a roommate who did the dishes. Raif would wash his dishes, but he did not have a generous enough spirit to do the dishes for other grown men. Every night, the dishes would stack up. They would smell and after a certain point, no one

wanted to wash them, and there was a stinky eye-sore in the middle of the apartment while everyone wasted their money eating out rather than becoming real adults.

He felt he couldn't let this opportunity slide. He had seven more months of his program and when he graduated, his job would pay the whole rent. Then no more roommates forever. If only he could convince Wyn to let him stay that long.

Tiny Wishes

THREE

Wyn was a liar. She had written thirteen and a half versions of the letter she gave Raif and the one she presented to him was the most palatable, but it was still a lie. The part about her brother was true enough, so the whole thing was coated in enough truth to stop anyone from guessing what the lie contained in the letter could be.

The lie was that it wasn't personal. Actually, her discomfort had everything to do with Raif. The thing was, when they moved into the same building on September first, mere steps from each other, it wasn't the first time she'd met him. She had met him exactly three times before that.

The thing was, Wyn was beautiful like an anime girl, except better. Tactless young men were always telling her that she looked like Sailor Moon, except not Sailor Moon herself because she was a brunette and Sailor Moon was blonde. It was a little hilarious because once the guy started scrambling for the other sailor scouts, he would look at Wyn's reaction and realize he had failed epically. One guy even put up his hands in surrender, shook his head, and wandered off.

What all this added up to was that Wyn had huge eyes, an expressive mouth, and terrifying manners that were so superior she had never once been dumped by a boyfriend or stood up by a date.

That's where Raif entered, oblivious of having entered the scene at all. She first saw Raif in that classic way people see each other for the first time... across a crowded room. There was a blue spotlight on him as he weaved his way through the club and even though another man had been paying her a compliment, she didn't hear him. She only saw the man who looked better than an elf out of Middle Earth crossing the room. His face was very pointed with three points all in a line: one for his widow's peak, one for his nose, and the last for his chin.

Wyn told herself she was not in love, because to be in love with a person you knew nothing about was completely stupid.

When she was introduced to him later that night, he looked through her. It wasn't that he was looking at another girl behind her, he wasn't. If she was beautiful like an anime girl, he saw something else about her... something boring.

At first, she didn't take it personally that he'd shown such little interest in her. Maybe he wasn't interested in women, but the occasional glance across the room showed that he liked women.

Maybe he was already in a relationship. Yet, that didn't seem quite right either as he noticed various women throughout the night. Wyn watched him let his fingers rest on the waist of one woman. He kissed the hand of another, though it might have been a joke as they both laughed. He twirled another girl before taking her out to dance. For them, he was all smiles and interest.

For her, there had been nothing.

She felt her charms desert her like dry leaves swirling in the breeze, probably the way anime girls felt when their admirers left them for real girls.

When the night was over, Wyn found the meeting disconcerting. In the past, even if a man was not particularly interested in her, he was at least polite to her. It would have been easy to chalk Raif up as a rude man, but that wasn't true either. He hadn't been rude. He'd been uninterested. It probably wouldn't have mattered if she hadn't been so attracted to *him*. It was a surprising disappointment.

She thought she wouldn't see him again.

However, she was mistaken. At last year's Christmas party, she was the date of a student in Raif's faculty (agriculture and forestry). She didn't expect to see Raif there, though she was aware it was a possibility.

When Wyn got ready for the party that night, she simply knew she looked better than she had ever looked before. The roommate of the season was a hairdresser in training who did her hair up in the most exquisite winter braid, so there was a photo session before she left for the party. It proved what Wyn thought, she would never look better again in her entire lifetime. Not in her graduation pictures and not on her wedding day. She was at her peak.

When she ran into Raif at the party, not only did he not remember meeting her the first time, he also did not appear to think anything about the way she looked. She had blinded every man she'd met that night, but Raif didn't look at her twice. She wouldn't have minded his lack of admiration if he'd had a date that night, but he didn't. He moved from circle to circle, seemingly chasing no one except a good time, dancing with this girl and flirting with that girl. If he was playing the field, if he was flirting with all the girls... then why not her too?

The last encounter had been in the university library. It was like a scene out of a terrible rom-com. She'd been browsing and saw him on the other side of the bookshelf, looking at her over top of the books. He was tall, so he had to bend down to accomplish it. Then, like she wasn't even there, he leaned forward and tugged a book loose on her side that had been shelved with the spine inwards. He could see the title from his perspective.

He hadn't been making eyes at her through the books after all!

It was the third blow-by.

When she met him moving into the same apartment building, Wyn wore no warpaint, wore black sweatpants with cat hair and dog hair clinging to them (the sad aftermath of staying with her sister the week before), and her hair tied into a messy bun that could have rightly been described as a dirty bun.

They bumped into each other and he had no idea who she was again! Regardless, he offered to help her carry in the things that were too heavy for her. So, this man who was not gorgeous, but somehow much better than gorgeous, because of his incredibly striking looks, his complete inability to fall for the superficial, and the kindness to help anyone, even on his moving day, had not found it in his heart to date her, flirt with her or even make small talk with her.

He must not like anything about her! Not her looks or her quick wit or even her incredible availability since she was one door down the hall. Not even one thing!

And now, through some incredibly backward twist of fate, he hadn't stayed down the hall from her but moved into her very apartment.

Wyn felt sick to her stomach. If they lived together, shared warm drinks in the middle of the night, watched TV together, bumped into each other in their towels or housecoats, and saw each other when they were least prepared to face the world, she would fall in love with him. Maybe, through some warped scheme of the universe, he would fall in love with her too, but

not because he would have under any other circumstance.

Well, Wyn did not want to be moved around like invisible forces controlled her life. Raif never would have fallen in love with her if they had carried on the way they were. It had already been incredibly serendipitous that he had moved into the apartment next to her. It was unbelievable that things had progressed as far as they had.

At least, she'd thought of the jar. That way he didn't have to talk to her if he didn't want to. Nothing quite like a well-placed hoop for him to jump through to see exactly how he felt. In this case, a hundred hoops. With the help of the internet, it was easy to come up with a hundred dumb tasks to keep him at arm's length. Some of them were entirely too difficult, too demanding, and there was no rule that said she couldn't refill the jar with more requests any time she wanted.

Unconsciously, she put her nose higher up in the air and didn't think about the thing she feared most—the idea she kept locked deep inside her. What if he shared those warm drinks with her, helped her clean the windows, went grocery shopping with her, and did all the things she'd done with her other roommates and, at the end of it, was still not in love with her? What if he didn't even like her? What if she was still unappealing to him?

Anime girls weren't anything after the show was over.

Tiny Wishes

FOUR

Raif had been busy that day. Classes had been more demanding than he'd expected, and afterward, he had to go grocery shopping.

At seven-thirty that evening, he sat at the kitchen table in Wyn's apartment eating an oversized sandwich he bought at the deli. Wyn was watching TV in her room. He could hear the laugh track through the door.

He wasn't lonely. Actually, he was delighted. So far, her arrangement suited him just fine.

He got out his phone and composed an email to her where he thanked her for the bun, apologized for not putting away the plate of sliced fruit, which was no longer on the table, and told her he would be more than happy to go along with her plan. He emphasized that he wanted to be a good roommate and would stay out of her way as much as possible. He sent the email and felt like a saint.

With nothing to do, but finish his sandwich, he glanced at the jar that remained on the table. Curiosity bit him. He opened the jar and pulled out one of the scrolls.

It was on blue paper and when he unrolled it, there was a blue flower print on the inside. He was impressed she had used two-sided paper on the project. Then he read the request.

Bring me a glass of ice water that is filled with ice first and water second.

He looked around the room like it had to be a joke. Adult women did not ask for glasses of water. They asked for nothing and got ticked off when they got it. A woman asking for something directly was unheard of and very curious.

All he had to do to get Wyn to talk to him was get her a glass of water? Well, he didn't know if he had anything to say to her, but here was a woman saying exactly what she wanted and he would be damned if he wasn't going to give it to her.

He put down his sandwich, went to the freezer, and popped it open. There were ice cube trays, but they were empty. In that case, a glass of ice water was a little trickier to procure than he'd originally thought. He filled the trays, but they wouldn't be ready for hours, and he needed ice now.

Raif put on his shoes and left the apartment. He tapped on Trevor's door, but no one answered.

The nearest grocery store was ten blocks away and he'd already been there that night. The closest convenience store was two blocks away, but expensive.

He was about to give up when he thought of the request the girl made. It was small. Under normal circumstances, it would have been nothing.

He cringed. He'd already seen the note. He couldn't ignore it.

He smacked his back pocket to make sure his wallet was still there and then hoofed it to the convenience store to buy ice.

By the time he made it back, his sandwich had melted, meaning the green peppers and dressing had oozed out, but he didn't even look at it. Instead, he went to the cupboard, examined all of Wyn's cups until he found the one he considered to be the prettiest, and pulled

it out. He filled it with ice, then water, added a detail, and took it to her room.

He lightly tapped on the door.

Wyn heard his knock and answered it.

He handed her the water with the note skewered like a cocktail umbrella on top.

“Thank you,” she said, a little dumbfounded. Somewhere in her mind, she thought that he wouldn’t follow the instructions on any of her notes. She took a sip. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Nothing,” he said with a dazzling smile before he returned to the kitchen.

She followed him, vexed and disappointed. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

He put the leftover ice in the freezer, sat back down at the table, and tried to salvage the remains of his sandwich by rolling it back up in the wax paper it had been sold to him in.

“Why did you pick a wish out if you didn’t want to talk to me?” she persisted.

“Because I wanted to know what kind of requests they were, and then it seemed unkind to ignore your request on the first day we’re living together. I told you, I want to be a good roommate. Finding another roommate strikes me as exhausting and stupid. It’s a really bad time of year to find someone new to live with. You’ll give me a chance, won’t you?”

She looked at him for a moment, clearly as uncomfortable as she’d been the day before with no improvement. “Let’s take turns buying toilet paper,” she said, not answering his question directly, but skirting it. “Obviously, I’m going first. It’s your job to notice when we need our next pack and to buy it.”

He nodded.

She went back to her room.

Tiny Wishes

FIVE

The next day Raif tried not to look at the jar. The jar was not important. He had no reason to talk to Wyn. He ought to leave her alone. The sink was still clean and he was still happy.

Yet, when he sat down to a dinner of bacon and eggs, with no one around, he got curious again.

He opened the lid and pulled out the next request. This one was on green paper and unlike the scrolls, it was folded up into a tiny fortune teller. He opened it and read it.

Vacuum the inside of the couch. Muriel was supposed to do it before she left and she neglected her responsibility. The vacuum is in the linen closet.

He turned the paper around in his hand and pondered the meaning of the note. She was not requiring him to do it. She was leaving it as an option. It wasn't even much of a request. It was ordinary roommate stuff!

He had been stupid not to see it before. With the jar, she had provided him a way to prove that he was a good roommate. Doing everything she wanted in one week would be the kill shot he needed to make her want him to stay.

He looked at the jar and patted its lid affectionately.

It was inefficient for him to pick a paper out and then do what it directed. He needed to know what all the papers said so he could do as many as possible before the end of the week.

He finished his dinner, washed his dishes, and took the jar into his bedroom.

Tiny Wishes

SIX

Wyn had been out the night Raif had his epiphany at the kitchen table. She spent the evening telling her sister about how unfair all of it was and how mad she was at Muriel for not being able to date Trevor quietly. Instead, she had to move in with him.

Wyn's sister, Tanya, had laughed and said, "Come on! That isn't going to last. She and Trevor are going to have all the fun you can have being grown-ups 'living together' in less than two months. She'll be back living with you before the end of the term. Don't throw Mr. Middle Earth out. He's going to need to move back in with Trevor in a few weeks. From what you said, he is neither a slob nor a leech. That's rare. Why don't you marry him?"

Wyn groaned.

Tanya waved it away. She believed strongly in Wyn's charms and did not see that any man her sister set her sights on should be able to resist her. Lots of men craved what Wyn had to offer. It wasn't the typical hair-flipping, lollipop-licking, bubblegum-popping fun a lot of guys went for in college. It was grown up. It was homemade soup on a cold night. It was a well-organized apartment. It was a clean car and perfectly applied lipstick. Any man feeling homesick might just cry real tears when Wyn set the table with a roast beef dinner.

"Cook for him. He'll be putty in your hands," Tanya advised.

Wyn defensively stuck her nose in the air a second time. She had actually already cooked for him. She'd made the cinnamon bun she laid out for him the morning before. He'd thanked her for it, but she was unsure if he knew she'd made it (and the other five in the freezer) herself.

"He hasn't done anything to deserve my cooking," she said snottily, unwilling to mention the bun.

"Whatever. From what you said, Muriel was an okay roommate. Just wait for her to get Trevor out of her system. Six weeks tops."

Wyn shrugged and thought about what her sister said as she went home. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that she wasn't going to have to wait six weeks. Muriel and Trevor would tire of each other sooner. During the time that Wyn had lived away from home, she'd seen dozens of relationships surge to existence only to crash into nothing only a few days later.

By morning, she'd decided to let Raif stay until the end of the term. There was always a little reshuffling of roommates at the change of term and so it would be the perfect time to adjust their living arrangements. That was... if Muriel and Trevor had not broken up by then.

Besides, she was starting to suspect that Raif was actually kind of boring.

There.

She's said it.

He was boring.

It felt good to say it. On the way back to her apartment after her classes finished, she said it over and over.

"Raif is boring. He's boring. Super boring!" She was bouncing on the sidewalk like a little girl,

trying to miss the cracks and not caring who heard her.

But someone did hear her and shouted at her from an apartment above. "If you're talking about Raif Laurant, he's not boring. He's hot like cinnamon hearts on Valentine's."

Wyn looked up only to see a head retreat over a balcony rail.

Repenting, she started walking like an adult.

She *had* been talking about Raif Laurant.

When she got home, she saw him emerge from his bedroom while she took off her shoes.

He was holding a package. It was a box-like present with a separate lid and a bow.

She looked at it and then looked at him. "Is that for me?"

He nodded and said casually, "But it's not for keeps. It's only for the afternoon. I borrowed them from a friend."

She set down her bag. "And you bothered to wrap them, whatever they are?"

Raif grinned. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

She moved to take the box from him.

"I'll hold it. Open the lid."

By this point, Wyn was not impressed or interested. She did not want a present or anything. After talking with her sister and now looking at the man in front of her, she felt that she had behaved childishly saying anything about her brother and her fears. She shouldn't have made the jar, told him that she didn't want to fall in love with him, or even asked him to move out. The more she thought about it, the more she felt sure that Tanya was correct and Muriel would move back very soon.

"Why don't you just tell me what you want to talk to me about?" Wyn said dryly, as she looked around for the jar.

It wasn't on the table.

She turned back to Raif, who hadn't answered her. He was making a visible effort to keep the box steady. She hadn't started tapping her toe yet, but she was about to start.

"I don't have anything I need to talk to you about," he confessed sheepishly. "Can you open the lid already? I'm trying to give you something."

"Is it that heavy?" she asked, stepping forward.

"It's not heavy at all."

The lid popped up.

Wyn yelped in surprise. "Something's alive in there?"

"Don't ruin everything," Raif said calmly, as he moved the package to one hand and opened the lid for her.

There were two white furry things inside. At first, Wyn thought they might be bunnies, but as she got closer, she saw they were kittens. She thought back to the jar. On one of the pieces of paper, she had asked him to get her a cat or a dog to play with for an afternoon. She had thought it was one of the most outlandish requests that she'd put in the jar and he had done it for her on the second day?

She dropped her pretensions and scooped up one of the fur babies. "Aw," she mouthed as she cradled it next to her heart. "How did you do this?"

"My cousin fosters kittens to keep them out of the shelter to stop them from getting sick. I asked her if I could borrow a few of her houseguests for the afternoon. This one is called Tommy and that one is Mark One. These boys will be put up for adoption next week. When they get

adopted, they'll get new names."

Wyn felt a little sick. "So, you did this for me? Why?"

"Because your note asked me to."

"And why are you doing nice things for me when you don't need to talk to me?"

Raif had been surprised at how much his gesture moved her. In his experience, women were generally happy with the things he did for them, but they weren't moved to tears. Wyn looked like she might start crying.

Suddenly, he was struck with the stark difference between polite acceptance and genuinely making someone happy. Had he ever made anyone happy before? He thought he had, but when he saw Wyn's face, he began to wonder.

"Uh..." he hesitated. "I know you're not pleased with this situation... with me being here, but I... like you."

Wyn's eyes, which had been brimming with unshed tears, abruptly dried. She didn't believe that for an instant. "You like me?" she repeated, incredulity in her tone.

Raif couldn't help but glance at the sink. Without thinking, he told her the truth. "I'm not a slob."

"I've noticed," she agreed calmly.

"I've never had a roommate who kept a clean apartment before."

The sound that came out of Wyn's mouth was halfway between a raspberry and a snort.

"You don't believe me?" he challenged.

"No, I believe you." She took the kitten and sat down on the couch. "I've never dated a man who didn't keep his apartment a secret from me until at least the fifth date. Even then, he didn't want to show it to me."

"Was it a deal-breaker for you that they didn't know how to clean an apartment?" he asked, sitting in an armchair.

"I wouldn't say it ended the relationship. I would say that it took the magic out of the romance. It was like I had only been seeing what I wanted to see about the guy until I saw the mess he lived in. Once I saw that, his other flaws were a lot more obvious. Have your dates considered it a deal breaker even though it wasn't your mess?"

"I could always take a woman into my room if I was comfortable doing that. My room isn't a sinkhole, but it's never been inspiring. I keep my room like it's an army bunker. It's not my home. I've been very much aware that every place I've lived while going to school is temporary. I'm not putting down roots, I'm going to class."

Wyn nodded. "I guess I can understand why you'd feel like that. I mean... I don't feel like that."

"I know," he said, with a breath full of understanding.

But Wyn had rarely felt understood by a man and immediately resented it. "How could you know something like that about me?"

"Just by looking around. You've lived here for a month and you've already decorated. There are beautiful, well-chosen pictures and accessories everywhere. They don't belong to Muriel or she would have taken them with her to cover the bare walls of the apartment down the hall. Trevor and I didn't toss elegant throw pillows on our couch. I bought our couch off Craig's List and it is an absolute piece of garbage. The only upswing for it was that it was clean enough that I felt like I could sit on it without contracting a disease. I said Trev could have it."

“Aren’t you going to need it?”

“No.”

“Why not? This situation living with me can’t last.”

Raif looked at her. She was holding her breath, waiting for him to agree with her, but he wasn’t going to. He was thinking that he hadn’t been fast enough on the uptake. He thought he had taken every opportunity to win her over. She’d like having him as a roommate and he’d have a nice time living with her for as long as it could last.

He had been dead wrong.

He shouldn’t have been aiming for roommate status. He should have been trying for something more.

“Why don’t you want to fall in love with me?” he suddenly asked.

She averted her eyes and dove for her lie. “It’s not personal.”

He didn’t contradict her. “Maybe I’d like it if it was personal,” he said, keeping his voice and eyes steady. “I like you. I would not have moved in here if I didn’t, no matter what Trevor said.”

She smirked. “You don’t know me.”

“Not intimately, of course, but I know you.”

She didn’t drop the smirk from her face. “When? When did you meet me?”

“I met you at a high school grad party in Colhurst. I was in grade eleven and I was escorting Kimberly Maxwell. You were in grade ten and you were escorting Brad Williams.”

Wyn almost choked as the memory flooded her. She had forgotten all about that.

Tiny Wishes

SEVEN

Wyn had been sitting by the bonfire. Kids were drinking. Her date, Brad, was very drunk, and he was lying in the back of a pickup truck on a mattress explaining to an equally drunk boy that high school was rigged.

She hadn't known anything about grad parties, and all of her classmates had been so jealous of her because she had been asked to go as a date. She had been excited too. She had fussed over her dress, her shoes, her makeup, and her hair. She'd driven herself nuts making sure that she was the prettiest date there.

It hadn't mattered.

She had only had a month to prepare. Some of the girls who were graduating had been making plans for their outfits their whole lives. In the end, Wyn looked good, but she wasn't shattering any records.

She also didn't know Brad very well. He was from a different town and no one at the party knew her. Not even the chaperones knew her. That meant they didn't know she was under eighteen, couldn't drink, and shouldn't even be there. She hadn't been prepared for the night to be so sour. It turned out, she didn't like Brad and she was tired of listening to him talk. Seeking escape, she sat down near the fire because it was warm there and she was away from Brad. She wanted to leave, but she wasn't quite prepared to admit to her parents or her friends that she was extremely bored, and it was only midnight. On grad night, no one expected her to come home at all.

That was when a guy came up to her. He had dark hair, hazel eyes, and a pointed face.

"I brought you a stump," he said, thumping it down next to her. Then he extended his hand to her and helped her off the grass.

"Thanks," she said, sitting down on it.

He came back a minute later with a stump of his own. Sitting down on it, he asked her, "Where's your date?"

"Over there." She gestured vaguely in Brad's direction.

"Yeah..." the boy said, rolling the word around in his mouth. "He's not your date."

"Why not?"

"Because, it's past midnight... just barely."

"I'm pretty sure dates don't expire like parking passes," Wyn said stiffly.

"No. They do," he said, with a smile. "My date is making out with our host's older brother. Your date has about 20 minutes before he passes out cold. It's his first night drinking, huh? He doesn't realize he's overdoing it because he's drinking like they do on TV. And I'm glad."

"You're glad?"

His eyes gleamed with fun. "Because I've been watching you all night. You're not from around here, are you?"

"No. I live in Wellspring."

"Thought so. Let me ask you a question. What's your idea of the perfect date?"

“Location or person?”

“The location is here. The person is me. What would you like to do? Are you a prankster? Do you want to play a joke on the graduates?”

“No!”

“Do you like kissing? I could kiss you all night.” The way he said it made it seem like he was not serious, but a second look said he might be. His eyes sparkled with amusement and mischief.

She was more tempted than she ought to have been by his invitation. Instead of kissing him, she said, “That’s not without its appeal, but wouldn’t you only be doing that to get revenge on your wayward date?”

“No. She brought me to grad for the pictures. She wanted to have an impressive-looking guy by her side and, though I don’t see it myself, she said I fit the bill. Let it never be said that I didn’t help a girl when she asked me.”

Wyn cocked her head. She had an idea. “Do you have a car?”

He nodded.

“And you’re sober?”

“Dead sober. I’m only seventeen.”

“Can you drive me home?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

“And you won’t feel bad about deserting your girl?”

He stood up. “Not at all. She planned to sleep here tonight and she’s already disappeared with what’s-his-name. Don’t worry about it. I’ll drive back here after I’ve dropped you off.”

Wyn stood up too. “Just let me tell Brad that I’m leaving.”

“Yup. Go tell him.”

When Wyn got in the car, she realized she was getting into a vehicle with a stranger. She hadn’t asked him his name. She had even considered making out with him and she didn’t know his name, but as she sat down, she felt like a fool and like she couldn’t. Instead, she asked him to tell her about himself.

He started the car. “I like to date.”

“So you’re a heartbreaker?”

“Not at all. I’m friendly... and though it is true that I have been called a player, I don’t do it because I’m trying to hurt them or get another notch on my belt. I do it because I’m friendly and I like to date. I like to start a date by telling them that, so they don’t think that the attention I’m giving them signifies anything special.”

Wyn smiled. “I like how you worked that in, phrasing it like a conversation you had once with another girl and it doesn’t have anything to do with me. Very clever.”

“Wasn’t it?”

Wyn leaned back comfortably in her seat. “How many girls have you dated?”

“How many Fridays and Saturdays are there in a year?” he quipped.

“A hundred and four.”

“Well, probably triple that and then cut it into quarters. I don’t take a different girl out every time.”

“Your math is dizzying.”

“How many guys have you dated?”

Wyn didn't want to reply. She hadn't dated that much. That had been part of the reason she had been so excited to go out with Brad. "Let's put it this way, I've never gone out with a guy I wanted to kiss at the beginning of the date... until tonight."

He smiled and turned on the radio. "Did my offer to drive you home mean that much to you?"

"Yes," she said in the darkness.

"It's understandable. They were loud and gross."

In the darkness of the car, they talked. The drive was over an hour and they used the time well. She told him about herself and he listened like he cared. When they pulled up in front of her house, he turned off the car and got out.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He came around and opened her door. "I'm walking you to your door."

She stepped out and stood in front of him. "You don't need to be that gallant."

"Never tell a man you don't want him to treat you well," he said, suddenly taking her hand and rubbing it with his warm one. "I really enjoyed driving you home. The party will be a different kind of madhouse at three o'clock in the morning than it was at midnight. Wouldn't it be nice if I lived down the street and I could just stay here? In the morning, we could meet up, and I could take you on one of the dates I plan. I'll bet you look beautiful when you play tennis."

She kissed him.

She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, pulled his mouth on top of hers, and kissed him.

She told herself she was going to do that when he stopped the car. She had completely forgotten that he still hadn't told her his name and she hadn't asked. She didn't know where he lived or get his phone number. She knew nothing. She was kissing a stranger on the street.

The spell was broken when he kissed her back.

She realized instantly that she was dealing with a boy who had done an incredible amount of kissing and he knew far better what to do than she did. Why hadn't she picked that up from his conversation? His hands were in the right places and she had never had that happen to her before.

Suddenly, she felt twelve years old and hopelessly outclassed. Her mouth froze and he got the cue that she was finished.

He let go of her and shot her a smile. He gripped her hand tighter and pulled her gently to her front door. He touched her shoulders and gently kissed her forehead. "You are something special. Come find me when you're ready." He got out a pen and wrote his phone number on her hand. Then he let her go and went back to his car.

Inside, she was more tired than the one-thirty on the clock suggested she should be and she went straight to sleep.

When she woke up, she smiled and looked at the pen mark he'd made on her hand. To her surprise, it wasn't his phone number. He'd written the words, "I could have kissed you all night."

Tiny Wishes

EIGHT

“Why didn’t you say you knew me when we met at the club?” Wyn demanded, glaring at Raif across her living room.

“Look, I don’t hunt women down. I gave you an invitation. I told you to come find me. If you wanted to, you could have. When I didn’t hear from you when we were teenagers, I assumed I’d freaked you out with my kiss. It wouldn’t have been the first time. I was a bit hurt, but I really don’t hunt women down. I’ve never even kissed a woman first because I want it to be a hundred percent clear that she wants me.”

Wyn was losing her patience and the kitten she was holding was clawing at her. She put it down. “You could have said something at the club.”

“I thought you recognized me. Didn’t you?”

“No. I thought it was the first time I’d met you. Good grief. Five years have passed. Do you know how much you have changed in five years? I only saw you in the dark at that grad party and then it was dark again in the club and at the Christmas party. I probably didn’t get a good look at you until we moved in here together.”

Raif huffed. “Well, I guess that explains it. I thought you were giving me the cold shoulder and you had no idea who I was.”

“I also thought you were writing your phone number on my hand that night. It turned out to be no such thing. I was really disappointed, but I thought it was just one of those tricks players play. You had your fun with me and then you were finished.”

“Wyn... we kissed once. How could I possibly have had enough fun with you to be finished with you? Even if I was a complete creep, I’d want more than just that one kiss. You really could have found me if you’d wanted to.”

“I didn’t know your name,” she countered.

He laughed. “That’s never been an obstacle for me. I can always find out someone’s name. After I dropped you off, I went back to the party. Brad had less to drink than I’d supposed and he was looking for you. I told him I’d taken you home. He was relieved and I asked him to tell me more about you. I got your phone number from him, but I already had your name and address.”

“You sound like a stalker,” Wyn remarked sourly.

“Girls expect that kind of attention. Perhaps you’re just annoyed I didn’t call?”

She was. She was really annoyed he didn’t call.

“Wyn?” he asked seriously. “Did you want me to call you?”

For a second, she couldn’t move. Frozen, she couldn’t lie and shake her head, or tell the truth and nod. She just stared angrily into a corner of the room.

“I get it. You like me, but you’re unhappy I’m a player. That was what bothered you that night when I kissed you. It was too smooth, too experienced, and it felt too good for you to handle.”

He was right, but Wyn did not like that he understood and said it so clearly, even before she understood it herself. She was too stunned to answer.

He bobbed his head like he heard a beat she couldn’t hear. “Bingo, huh?”

She managed a nod.

Raif cleared his throat and continued. "I'm not sure if you're interested, but I haven't had a date in over a year."

Wyn gawked at him. "That can't be true."

"It is," he said pleasantly. "I like flirting, and playing around, but the women I'm attracted to don't enjoy that aspect of me. You are not the first woman to feel annoyed that I like women so much and enjoy dating a variety of them."

"If you like it so much, then why aren't you dating?" she asked in a raspy voice.

His eyes traveled the room like he wasn't sure if he wanted to answer her. "I'm graduating this spring."

"What does that mean?"

"I have a job set up that starts on May first."

"And?"

"It's in a territorial park, outside Yellowknife."

Wyn gasped. She had never even met anyone who had visited Yellowknife, let alone someone who would move that far north voluntarily.

"It's a good job," he continued, "with interesting work, excellent salary, and good benefits. It's what I want to do and the people there are willing to hold it for me. Nowadays when I tell women that's where I'm headed, it kills the romance. I'm super appealing until I tell her I'm going to live in a place that experiences twenty-four hours of darkness. Then she smiles and I might as well have told her I was chosen as part of the first Mars colony. My honesty is killing my dating prospects."

"You're not worried about not being able to find someone to date when you get up there?" Wyn asked.

"Are you kidding? I'll be fresh meat. It'll be great..." his voice petered out. "Okay, I'm a little worried, but I can't ask a woman to move up there or to have a long-distance relationship with me when I'm there. I'm better off seeing who already lives there and is cool with it."

Wyn nodded, the wheels in her head turning at a frantic rate. "I think this might work out better than I thought it would," she admitted.

"You'll let me stay here until grad?"

"I don't think it will come to that. My sister says Muriel and Trevor will get bored, fight, and they'll want to switch back before the end of term."

Raif nodded. "That's a very real scenario."

Wyn picked up the soft kitten for the second time, her mood improving. "We'll wait."

Tiny Wishes

NINE

Wyn was feeling better about living with Raif by the second. He would not be bringing his dates by. She hadn't wanted to admit it before, but that had been one of the things that bothered her about rooming with a man she had a crush on. What if she had to play nice with his real love interest? What if she ran into her in the morning? The thought of it made her sick.

By Friday, it was clear that Raif had no prospects, exactly like he said. One thing especially convinced her. She saw him in the hall in the Cousins Building at the University and approached. A young woman was standing in front of him all a-blush and the pitter-patter of her heart on display.

"What year are you?" she asked in time for Wyn to hear.

"I'm a fourth year," he replied.

Wyn watched his stock rise in the reflection of the girl's eyes. She was thinking he'd graduate, get a job, and have money before she did.

"Hey, Wyn," he said, drawing her closer toward them with his eyes. "This is my roommate," he told the girl.

She hesitated. "Uh... you live with a girl?"

"I live with the best girl. Do you know how clean she keeps her sink?"

"Sorry," the girl muttered, backing away. "I thought you were single."

Raif let her back away and didn't call her back.

Wyn had to stifle a snort. "Even if you are leaving in seven months, you probably still could have had a date with her tonight, if you'd wanted."

He flopped his head toward her. "I told you. I don't want to get into anything. I'll just disappoint her. I'm dead sick of disappointing girls like her."

"So what are you going to do tonight?" Wyn asked as they started walking down the hall.

"I don't know. I guess it's a little early to start internet dating women who already live in Yellowknife." His head drooped a little as he clutched the straps of his backpack.

"You look like you're not even looking forward to that," Wyn observed with a little laugh.

"I sort of stretched the truth when I said that it was near Yellowknife," he admitted slowly.

"It's not?"

"No. It's not. It's at Aulavik National Park on Banks Island way above Yellowknife. The likelihood I'll be able to get a woman from Yellowknife to want to go that much further north is really iffy."

Wyn got out her phone and looked up where Banks Island was. She'd never even heard of it. When she saw how much further it was, her heart nearly stopped. "Why do you want to go there again?"

"Because I want to live my life. I don't know how long I'll work that job, but I am not going to prioritize dating. I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to date, meet women, whatever, but working in a place like that is not an opportunity that comes along every day."

Wyn grabbed the elbow of his shirt. "Are you bored with dating?"

“There’s more to life than just getting a woman to like me, and I’m more than just a player. I’m done with that.”

“So you grew up?” she asked hesitantly.

He glanced at her. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“Seriously, what are you doing tonight?” she repeated.

“Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because I’m going to make you dinner.”

Tiny Wishes

TEN

Wyn arrived home and immediately began preparing dinner. She told Raif it would be served at seven so she didn't have much time.

She didn't know why exactly, but it seemed like everything he said was made of gold since their conversation with the kittens.

She hummed to herself as she cooked and told herself that he deserved to have a little fuss made over him. He'd brought her kittens, vacuumed the couch, and for the first time in her adult life, someone else had put ice in the freezer. He'd also given up his player ways, however temporarily, because he wanted something more. She was inspired.

She was also a very good cook, so the meal went off without a hitch. Except that it was five minutes to seven and Raif was not back yet.

Tapping her toe and looking around, she wondered if there was anything else she needed to do. The appetizers were warm in the oven. The salad was chilling in the fridge. There was no dessert that night, but she had fizzy drinks getting a quick cool-down in the freezer. Dinner was in the warming drawer and the table was set.

Suddenly, she thought of the jar. It wasn't in the kitchen anymore. Doubtless, Raif had taken it into his room. An impish thought occurred to her. If he wasn't home, maybe she could snatch it back from him. He no longer needed to jump through hoops to talk to her, so she felt a little silly with him having it. Some of the requests in the jar were pretty embarrassing.

He wasn't home, so she quietly slipped into his room and kept her ear open for his key in the front door.

The first thing she noticed was that his bed wasn't made. There was a blob of bedding in the middle of the mattress. She looked around for the jar, but it wasn't on his nightstand, his desk, or his dresser. She looked inside his closet and didn't see it. Then she crouched on the floor to see under the bed.

It was there.

Before she could reach for it, Raif popped out from under the covers. "What are you doing?"

Wyn grabbed at her heart and jumped to her feet. "Nothing. Dinner's ready. Hungry?"

Raif knew it was a quick evasion. He also knew exactly what she had come in for. She was looking for the jar and it was under his bed, but she didn't really want the jar. She wanted the notes that had been inside, and they weren't there anymore.

"Yeah, I'm hungry," he said, moving the blanket aside. He had been enjoying the aroma of her cooking for the last half an hour.

He followed her back to the kitchen and saw the table she'd set. Raif hesitated. He had had girls cook for him before and they had tried to make it special. There had been candles lit on the table and proper place settings, and the flavor of romance had been in the air. With the other girls, the food had been dressed-up take-out or her best attempt at cooking. He always felt obligated to eat those best attempts and he tried to see other things about her that were pleasing. It usually wasn't too hard if her neckline plunged at all.

However, the table Wyn set was not organized to romance him. There were flowers on the table, but they were the same ones that had been there the day he moved in even if they were holding up beautifully. Instead, the table was set in a practical, beautiful way, without even the slightest trace of seduction to it.

“Do you need any help?” he asked, tentatively.

“Nah,” she said, fetching the appetizers from the oven. She served wings with a side of salad.

“This is dinner?”

“No. These are the first and second courses. I just serve them at the same time because I think they complement each other. There’s less walking back and forth for me, fewer dishes... it’s just a better way to present the meal as far as I’m concerned. We’re having chicken mozzarella pasta with sundried tomatoes.”

She set his plate down and he smelled perfectly cooked food, saw a perfectly prepared plate, and looked across at Wyn. She wasn’t wearing a dress and her neckline did not plunge. She wore a white shirt with buttons up the front, and most of those buttons were done up. It was the sort of thing your server wore at the restaurant, not the sort of thing your date wore.

He suddenly realized he may never have had an interaction with a woman that wasn’t doused in pretense. For a moment, he felt small and like the world might not be his oyster.

“When was the first time you were in love?” he suddenly asked, curious if her experiences had been similar to his.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not convinced I’ve ever been in love. I’ve had little crushes, been curious about men, been kissed all night.. since you made that sound so appealing... I must have chosen the wrong guy for it though because it wasn’t very much fun. I don’t know. I’ve never been in a relationship where I was willing to let my whole world get turned upside down, which is why I’m so annoyed with Muriel. Couldn’t she have kept it together until the end of the term?”

Raif signaled that he agreed that it was strange she and Trevor hadn’t been able to wait, though it didn’t annoy him.

Wyn took a drink from her glass. “What about you? Ever had your heart knocked out of the park?”

“A couple of times. I wouldn’t exactly call what I felt love, but more like the seeds of love... if I wanted to plant them.”

“And how did planting them go?”

Raif hesitated. “I didn’t do it.”

“No?”

He shook his head. He was thinking of the time he drove Wyn home after grad. When he held her hand in his, he was going to write his phone number and then he reined himself in and wrote the other line instead. “The first time,” he said slowly. “I thought of doing it and then I didn’t. It wasn’t that I was scared. It was that I thought I would feel differently later. I had to stick to the system I’d made for myself. I couldn’t go off track.”

“Are you sure you weren’t scared?”

The way her face looked, if they had been in candlelight, Raif would have been completely undone, but as it was, there was a fluorescent light above them that offered no romance. Instead, what he saw was not seduction, it was sympathy.

Players never got sympathy.

And she was right. He was scared, but he put his feelings away and picked up one of the wings she'd cooked. It was perfection.

"Did you buy these somewhere and then just heat them up here?"

"You want to know my secrets?" she asked as she licked her fingers.

"Do you not tell how you make things?"

She giggled. "I guess I don't care. I bought some seasoning at the grocery store, so I didn't blend the spices myself, so I guess I'm not hardcore."

"If you seasoned them yourself, you are hardcore compared to the ladies who usually cook for me."

Conversation ebbed as they finished their appetizers and she brought out the pasta bake she'd put together.

When Raif tasted it, he knew he was going to be a mess. He was not used to defending against sincerity and wholesome food.

"You're not telling me much about your love life," he ventured. "What was your last boyfriend like?"

"I don't like to talk about it. I broke up with him and he was pretty upset. The thing that was the most disappointing about it was that there was nothing wrong with him, I just didn't want to go any further down the path of life, or love, with him. I want a different kind of man."

"What do you want?"

"An adult."

Raif wrinkled his nose. It seemed like an incredibly low bar. "He wasn't?"

"He was very reliant on his parents, which I didn't like. They gave him so much money, I knew that if I continued to be with him, eventually marrying him, I'd have to do everything the way his parents wanted because they held the purse strings. I don't want to do what people expect of me. I want to do my own thing. I also like to read advice columns and parents who pay for everything are worse than parents who pay for nothing."

"What are your parents like?"

"Oh... they're gone. It's just me and my two siblings."

Raif looked down. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mean my parents are dead. I mean they're living abroad in Singapore. Dad's doing business and mom goes with him. Regardless, they don't have much say in what I do or where I go. I claimed my adulthood ages ago, so I couldn't approve of Winston and the sappy way he went to his parents when he had problems."

"Do you approve of me taking that crazy job on Banks Island?" Raif asked with a satisfied smile.

"Of course I approve," she replied heartily.

"Would you go somewhere like that? I mean, if you were offered a job like mine with good pay, a cabin, and the lot?"

She looked down. "I'd have to think about it. The darkness and the temperatures there are really something to consider, but would I go somewhere crazy to exert my independence? Yes."

Raif smiled. "I have to thank you. I haven't eaten that well in... I don't remember."

Wyn started gathering up the dishes.

He put out a hand to stop her. "Don't do that. I'll do them."

She gawked at him. "You'll do the dishes?"

He didn't want to make much of his offer. "Yeah. You told me that that was how it worked with your other roommates. You cook and they do the dishes. I'll do them... but not yet."

"Why 'not yet'?"

"Because I have a surprise for you."

"What?"

"Come on," he said, easing the dishes out of her hands and leading her into the living room.

Wyn was very aware that he was touching her hands. Friends did not lead her into rooms by her hands like they had to guide her because they were afraid she'd run.

"What are we doing?"

"All the things you wanted," he replied.

She looked around. "What do you mean 'all the things'? I put one hundred things in that jar. It was very kind of you to do any of them."

"Yeah... I did some more."

Wyn allowed Raif to lead her to the couch. She sat down and stayed put while he retrieved something from his bedroom. When he came back, he had a scrapbook with him, which he laid out on the floor.

Inside were all the papers she'd written her wishes on. They'd been organized according to category and glued down. Wyn was astounded. She had enough stamina to crazily write down each of those wishes, but she didn't think anyone else would have the stamina to think about them, categorize them, glue them down, and make an action plan. She suddenly remembered that he had offered to help her with them that first night and she thought he was just being friendly, but what if he was the type of guy who made action plans the way she did? Her blood started humming.

Raif began talking. "The first category is housekeeping. Naturally, you'd want a clean roommate. Sweep and mop the kitchen floor? Done. Scrub the toilet inside and out? Done. Dust the lighting fixture in the living room? Done."

Wyn's eyes raced upwards. Had he really taken apart the light and washed the inside of it?

He kept listing the cleaning items. Wyn didn't know it, but there were eighteen of them and he had finished them all.

In her stomach, she felt fluttering.

"Then we move on to things you asked me to buy. Rubber gloves? Tea lights? Matches? Lysol wipes? Wet Swiffer cloths?" He went on to list twenty-four things she'd asked him to buy for the sake of keeping their apartment clean. He'd purchased all of them and arranged them on an empty shelf in the linen closet.

Wyn felt a little bad hearing the list. Had she asked for so much? "What's the next section?" she asked shyly.

"The next section lists repairs and improvements you want me to make around the apartment. There are six."

She remembered. She wanted mountings put in the walls for pictures and she wanted two shelves hung.

"We can do that tonight if you want. I have a toolkit in my room."

Wyn was flustered. "I don't know if tonight's a good night for that. It's enough to know that you're willing to help me with that sort of stuff."

"I am," he said confidently. "Let's move onto the next section."

“What’s this one?”

“It’s all ridiculous stuff no one would do. There are thirteen items, basically intended to humiliate me. It starts off with me wearing a clown nose--”

Wyn interrupted by putting her hands up. “You don’t have to do any of that stuff. I was being very immature when I wrote that. You certainly do not have to wear a clown nose.”

He pulled one out of his pocket and put it on his face. “Very little embarrasses me. I already owned one.”

Wyn’s blood had been thrumming, her stomach flipping, but when he put the clown nose on his outrageously pointed nose, it all came out of her mouth. She laughed. “You already had that?”

“I have more than one,” he said, splitting open a second one and putting it on her face.

She leaned into it.

Looking back at the book, he continued. “I’m also supposed to wear suspenders with no shirt?”

“Don’t do that!” she spazzed.

“I own a clown nose, but I don’t own suspenders,” he confessed. “Do you have a pair?”

Wyn looked at the floor and tried to make her face blank. She did have suspenders. She shook her head no, but it wasn’t his first rodeo and in the next second, he was on his feet, moving toward her room.

“They’re in your closet?”

They were. They were in her belt box, but she couldn’t let him take them. What had she been thinking when she asked for that? She didn’t believe he’d do any of the stuff she’d put on the papers, let alone study them and catalog them. She thought he’d read a few and move out.

She hurled herself ahead of him and threw herself between him and the door.

He smiled at her, still wearing the clown nose.

She smiled back at him, with her hand on the doorknob.

He didn’t ask her to get out of his way. Instead, his hand came out on the opposite side of the doorknob and he grabbed her ribs. She convulsed to the tickle so completely that she let go of the knob and he side-stepped her.

He had found her belt box before she had recovered enough to follow him. “How did you find that?” she gaped, staring at him as he selected the suspenders that were most likely to fit him.

“Your room is so well organized. I don’t know how you expect to hide anything,” he said pleasantly as he adjusted the straps to their maximum length.

“I should not have asked you to do that!” she bit.

“This isn’t different from cleaning the toilet,” he said, attaching the back strap to his pants. “We’re roommates. We’re supposed to have fun together.”

She dropped her smile. “Maybe you shouldn’t do it because it was a joke of mine, because I didn’t think there was any way in hell you’d take your shirt off for me.”

He clipped the front of the suspenders to his pants but left them hanging around his hips. “It’s too late to stop it now,” he laughed. “The jar has spoken!”

He whipped off his shirt and pulled the suspenders over his shoulders. He turned to look at himself in her full-length mirror. “Looks pretty good. If I went to a cowboy club like this...”

Wyn was covering her face, hoping to cover her embarrassment.

“Don’t be like that. I’m giving you what you asked for,” he said warmly, putting his arm

around her shoulder.

Her hands were still over her face, but his laughter quieted.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said softly, his lips almost touching her ear and another set of suspenders brushing her arm. “If you put these on, I’ll toss the rest of the requests on that page.”

That sounded quite appealing to Wyn, who remembered some of the other requests she’d made. She’d asked him to dress in drag and post a love letter to a sandwich on social media. There were more and she couldn’t let him do them!

She took the suspenders he offered. “I won’t go topless.”

“Of course not, but I do hope you have something embarrassing enough to match this challenge and satisfy me that I’m not the only one being humiliated for someone else’s amusement. A red bra? A spotted bikini top. Surprise me.”

He closed the door behind him and left her alone to change.

Only then did Wyn take her other hand away from her face. Why had she asked for something so outrageous? What had she been thinking? And what right did he have to look so good with no shirt on? No wonder he wasn’t embarrassed. In two minutes, she’d be in her living room with her male roommate wearing a clown nose, a bra, and suspenders? She thought she’d die.

Whatever.

He wouldn’t have done any of this if she hadn’t suggested it herself. Ultimately, she was getting what she deserved.

She found a horizontally striped tube top and put it on under the suspenders.

When she hesitantly came out of the bedroom, he was reclining on the couch with his phone in his hand.

Click!

He’d taken a picture of her.

“Hey!” she protested. “I didn’t take a picture of you.”

“You can take a picture of me if you want to,” he offered, getting up and posing for her.

She took her phone out and took shot after shot of him until he got bored.

“Let’s take a selfie,” he said, getting behind her and pointing his camera at them both. Her face was very red with his bare chest pressed up against her back, his breath in her ear, and the wide smile on his face.

And it was at that very moment that there was a knock on the door.

“Get a shirt on!” Wyn hissed when she heard it.

“No. Half the fun of dressing like this is getting caught,” he said, dragging her to the door with him.

He opened it and Muriel was on the other side with tears streaming down her face. “Can I come in?” she mouthed timidly.

Raif and Wyn took their clown noses off in unison and stepped aside to make room for her.

Tiny Wishes

ELEVEN

Raif and Wyn were dressed in normal clothes as they listened to Muriel tell the story of how she and Trevor broke up. Wyn was surprised that Trevor had not been cheating. Raif was surprised that Trevor had been so careless.

He'd hit her.

When Raif heard the story, he knew it was an accident. Trevor was an amateur boxer and he often punched the air. It was just that when Raif had been his roommate, Raif hadn't been trying to cuddle with him, which was what Muriel had been doing. Trevor hit her so hard she had a forming bruise on one side of her face from where he hit her, and another angry bruise on the other side of her face from where her head bounced off the fridge.

Now she was crying, claiming she had a concussion and asking if she could sleep on Wyn's couch that night.

Raif was listening to her sobs and complaints when his eyes met Wyn's. Without saying it, he knew exactly what she wanted. He got up and casually went over to Trevor's to see what the damage was.

He stopped in the hallway, putting his hand on the fabric of his shirt over his heart. He had never had that moment before, where his connection with a woman was strong enough that she could tell him what to do with a glance. Maybe it wasn't anything.

He kept walking.

Tiny Wishes

TWELVE

Wyn listened to Muriel, called Healthlink on her behalf, and then took her to the hospital. It was a concussion. A little before midnight, the doctor decided to keep Muriel at the hospital for observation and sent Wyn home.

When she came through the apartment door, she expected to find it black with Raif in bed. To her astonishment, a few lights were on in the living room. He had been watching TV. When he heard her he turned it off and rose to greet her.

“How’s Muriel?”

“Trevor really knocked the stuffing out of her.”

“He knows. He’s a mess and he couldn’t be more sorry. Do you think she’ll forgive him?” Raif asked gravely.

The corners of Wyn’s mouth pointed downwards. “Yes, but I think they’re finished living together. She wants me to move you out before she gets out of the hospital tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to go back to living with Trevor,” Raif said.

“Scared he’ll hit you?”

Raif scoffed. “No. It’s simple. I would rather live with you.”

She glanced at the table. The dishes were done.

“I’d like to live with you too,” she said. From the way she said it, Raif knew her meaning was as friendly as it could be.

It bothered him immensely that she only wanted to be friends. Maybe they weren’t meant to be together. He’d thought it himself enough times, but he was through thinking that way. Suddenly, he decided to put it all out there.

“No,” he said, covering the distance between them. “You want to know why I got bored with dating? Because it was boring and pointless. I hated dating women I didn’t love.”

Wyn looked at him disbelievingly. “Are you saying you love me?”

“I’m saying I *could* love you, which is more than I can say for any of them. If I move back to Trevor’s like you want, will you date me?”

She looked at him. “Even with you moving to the far frozen north at the end of the school year?”

“Yes,” he replied sternly.

It was her turn to be a player and she answered in sugary tones, “What if I feel the same way all the other girls feel? Like dating a man who’s on his way to the North Pole is a mistake?”

Raif swallowed and the blood drained from his face, but Raif was the kind of man who would do or say anything to get what he wanted. He grabbed her hands. “This is a perfect opportunity to try us out. Why couldn’t we have a trial just like Trevor and Muriel? Let me keep living here. We could tell Trevor and Muriel that they started this mess and now they have to finish it, and we could go on here...”

“...until you have to go?” Wyn finished for him in quiet tones.

His shoulders drooped. He couldn’t ask anyone to go to Banks Island with him. “It’s a huge

opportunity for me.”

“I know,” she said. The expression on her face and the tone of her voice saying she felt sorry but she was rejecting him the same way she’d sent her last boyfriend packing. Everything wasn’t perfect, so he had to go.

His head hung limp. “Anything I can say that will make you change your mind?”

“Come on, Raif, you don’t have to look like someone just took your arm off. I want us to be friends.”

For a second, his glare could have cut her in half. Then suddenly, he blinked, straightened, and put out his hand in an apparent offer to shake hers.

He looked so dangerous at that moment that she kept her hand to herself.

“You don’t want to be friends with me,” he said crossly. “You don’t even want to shake hands with me!”

“No. I do,” she said, putting out her hand.

Raif frowned. “Why don’t you try telling me the truth? What’s your big objection to me?”

She gritted her teeth, then blurted, “I’m scared! If I fall in love with you, it will change everything. I’m not ready for *everything* to be different!”

“Going on a couple of dates with me will probably not change *everything*.”

“I... I... am not...” she stuttered between awkward pauses.

At a glance, he saw something he’d never seen before. He was insightful that way. What he felt for her, what she felt back for him, it was just too much that was too right too suddenly. What they felt for each other was everything. She wasn’t wrong about them being friends. They were friends, and everything beyond, lovers and soul mates. And if he was right, even though it happened suddenly, it couldn’t be undone suddenly.

“Okay,” he relented. “Let’s stop there. I get it. Come here.”

His tone had softened so completely that she felt comfortable taking those few steps forward. He bent and selected a pen from beside the scrapbook. He took her hand in his and said, “Come find me when you’re ready,” exactly the same way he had said it all those years ago. Then he wrote his phone number on her palm and whispered in her ear, “I could have kissed you for the rest of my life.”

Tiny Wishes

THIRTEEN

It was snowing. Wyn looked out the window at the snowflakes. It was the first snowfall of the year and Wyn felt lonely.

Raif had moved out. He was back down the hall with Trevor, and not a day went by that Wyn didn't think about how that day could have gone if he hadn't had to go. She didn't call him. She didn't know what to say. If she thought it had been annoying to have him ignore her before they moved in together, it was far worse to have him notice her after he had moved out.

His hazel eyes fixed on her and his gaze took all of her in. Sometimes his eyes were so inviting, she accidentally took a few steps toward him. Sometimes, he looked so lonely, she wanted to sit next to him. His desire to have her near him was all over him, like nothing else about him mattered anymore.

She resisted him completely.

Muriel came into the apartment. "Wyntessa, are you here?"

"Yep."

She handed her a parcel.

"Where did this come from?" Wyn asked.

"It's from Raif. He stopped me in the hall and insisted that I give it to you."

Wyn tore the brown paper. It was a pair of white mittens with a note attached that read, 'For the first snowfall. And number five under the list I named 'Acts that Prove I'm not a Selfish Jerk.'

Wyn chuckled. He was still making her tiny wishes come true.

She slid the soft knitting over her fingers.

He'd get bored. He found her boring once, she was sure he'd find her boring again. He might even start dating again.

That was what she thought until the next item arrived. It was earmuffs and though she didn't want to admit it, she loved them and wore them every day. He sent her hand-warmers, slippers, and socks. He sent her packets of hot chocolate and apple cider.

The next time she saw him looking at her across the library, she couldn't ignore him any longer. She stumbled over to him, and the couch he sat on. Without any word escaping her lips, she sat next to him, dropping herself into the crook of his arm. That first time, she cried a little. He tightened his arm around her and said nothing. He just held her and felt what she was feeling with her.

She stayed until an alarm on her phone rang. Having someplace she had to be, she rose from the sofa. Raif helped her stand. He hugged her, she hugged him, and without a word, she wandered away.

She wanted to thank him, for thinking of her, for still trying to fulfill his promise to her, for loving her from a distance, and for giving her space to think.

If he knew everything, just by looking at her, then he certainly knew she wanted him to stop sending her presents. They made her want him... badly.

Wishes continued to come true.

One time, she went to the library, intending to pay her library fees only to find that they had been paid by a very attractive young man. The librarian gushed. She'd never witnessed such a romantic act in all her years.

Neither had Wyn.

Paying her library dues had not been an item she had listed in the jar.

Truthfully, he had barely scratched the surface of the food she'd asked him to bring her and over the weeks, he brought her giant cookies, muffins, strawberry shortcake, and a dozen other treats. He must have been making a study of it because each item was better than the last.

It climaxed at Christmas when he decorated her balcony with Christmas decorations so wonderful, Wyn thought her heart would burst.

She couldn't ignore him any longer or try to pretend that what happened between them wasn't special.

From that point onwards, if she caught him looking at her, she no longer tried to hide or run away.

If he was on a couch, she'd drop next to him and rest her head on his shoulder. He'd put his arm around her and place a kiss on the top of her head. If he was standing in line somewhere, she'd come up beside him and put her hand in his.

But she didn't talk to him. She couldn't talk to him when she didn't know the answer. He knew and didn't press her. He continued giving her gifts, sometimes he wrote her letters he pushed under her door. They were full-on love letters, but they never asked for anything, just breathed his love for her.

One time, a few of Raif's friends were there for their ritual. They saw each other. Wyn shuffled over. Without saying hello, he caught her and held her with an air of tragedy surrounding them.

"What is happening?" Raif's friend, Jonathan asked their other friend, Andy.

"They're in love, but he's moving to the north end of the Northwest Territories at the end of April. They don't want to get too attached, so they don't date and they don't talk. They just look at each other all hungry and then cuddle for a bit."

"That doesn't seem healthy," Jonathan observed.

"It might not be," Andy replied. "But I've never been in a relationship that's lasted as long as theirs."

"She should just go with him."

Andy snorted. "Would you go with him?"

"Heck no, but I am not that chick, who is looking at him all dewy-eyed and biting his shirt. Like she's going to notice twenty-four hours of sunlight or midnight."

Wyn heard Jonathan talking. Yes, she was biting the shoulder seam of Raif's shirt, but that level of intimacy felt so normal by Valentine's Day that she didn't realize it was a symptom.

She slowly gathered up her things and left. She went home to Muriel, who was dating Trevor again, although not living with him. She opened her laptop and decided it was time to embrace something different.

Tiny Wishes

FOURTEEN

On the day before Raif was set to leave for Banks Island, he saw Wyn across a crowded room. If she came over to him, he was going to kiss her. He was going to kiss her right up until the moment when he had to leave. His bags were all packed. Every arrangement had been made. He had nothing he had to do, except pull her into his arms and give her all the love he had.

Except, she wasn't looking his way. She was hurrying down a hallway.

Later, she was running to a car.

He raced home.

He knocked on Wyn's apartment door.

Muriel answered.

Hot and sweaty, he demanded, "Where's Wyn?"

Muriel looked confused. "She moved out. Didn't she tell you? All her stuff is gone. I don't know if you remember, but like none of the furniture was mine. This place is a wasteland." She stepped aside to show Raif the empty apartment.

"Where did she go?"

"Seriously? Didn't she tell you? You two have been ridiculous, mooning over each other for months. What happened in those few days when the two of you were alone? From my perspective, it looks like you created a secret cult with blood oaths to ensure your silence. You two are so weird! Why didn't you just move in together, or date? Surely, you guys could have dated!"

"I don't even have her phone number," Raif admitted sadly. "Please, tell me where she's gone."

Muriel put a hand to her head like she had a concussion all over again. "Look. I'm sure she had a reason for not telling you. I'm not spilling the beans. Goodbye, Raif. Travel safely tomorrow."

"Wait!"

She closed the door on him.

Raif stood there, panicking, feeling each beat of his heart like it would break. He should never have taken that job. He should have written to the people at the park and told them that he couldn't take the job because he needed to be with Wyn and she couldn't come with him.

He wanted to do it now, but it was too late. He had to go. At least, he had to work a few months. During that time, he would find Wyn on social media, find a job near her and go to her whether she wanted him or not.

Tiny Wishes

FIFTEEN

On the plane the next day, Raif got out a notebook and made a plan. He knew how to make plans. He scribbled down all kinds of crazy ideas for how to stay in touch with Wyn. Ideas for videos to make and send her. Ideas for cards to send her in the mail. If anyone knew how to do a long-distance relationship... it wasn't Raif, but that didn't matter. He'd figure out how to win her over from a distance.

His plane landed in Yellowknife, where he had to get on his connecting flight. He was being met by a private plane that was to take him on to his final destination.

The Yellowknife airport was not like the Edmonton airport and when he saw its shrunken size, he realized that the one on Banks Island was going to be even smaller.

In front of him, there weren't many gates, and he wandered down the one hallway, thinking about Wyntessa and wishing that he had done something different that would have made her want to be with him. Why hadn't he thought of anything more than what he'd done?

He took a seat on a bench under a window. Suddenly, he had the feeling that someone was watching him.

Slowly, his eyes met the eyes of a woman standing across the hall. Her gray eyes arrested him. How many times had he stared at her until she saw him? During those times, he drew her to him with nothing more than his expression. Now she was doing the same thing to him, lifting him out of his gloom and pulling him toward her.

He ditched the bench, his bags, and everything else and ran to her. Without waiting for her to say one word to him, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. All his deft experience kissing vanished. The only thing that was left was how much he needed her and only her.

When he pulled off, she said, "Don't go deserting all your dignity at once."

"Who needs dignity? What are you doing here?"

"I applied for a job working at Aulavik National Park. I'll be a tour guide for the summer. Do you approve?"

"Yes. Yes. I approve. What made you decide to come?"

She looked down and admitted hesitantly. "I was never going to get over you. I'm ready for everything to be different, and I've come to find you."

He kissed her and kissed her again. He kissed her right up until a voice boomed above them, "Raif Laurant and Wynessa Marks? Please report to the information desk."

"We're missing our flight," Wyn said breathlessly as they pulled apart.

"It wouldn't matter if we did," he said, the sound of ecstasy in his words. "All my wishes have already come true."

THE END

CUT LIKE GLASS

A Novelette



STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

Cut Like Glass

ONE

“I’m sorry, Sir. She won’t get out of the car,” the driver explained hoarsely.

It had been a long day with the wedding and all the guests that needed to be carted to and fro.

The wedding had been at Bart’s house because it was ideal. He lived in a mansion just off the Malahat north of Victoria. There was nothing quite like swearing your vows with a vast mountain range and the ocean as your backdrop. Bart had bought the place with the idea of using it for such occasions and his cousin’s wedding was the first time it was being used for such a purpose. He was delighted.

Bart did not pay for the majority of the wedding, but the one thing he did pay for was the transportation of his more skittish relatives. Any of the wedding guests who were nervous about driving up his mountain were conveyed to the wedding in two limousines. The grandmothers and great-aunts were like colorful butterflies, already in a good mood when they arrived, all smiles and joy.

Those skittish guests left shortly after the departure of the bride and groom and, by late evening, the only guests left at the house were Bart’s closest family members. They were still having a party and Morris, Bart’s brother, was having an adult-brand tantrum.

His girlfriend, Kelsey, refused to come to the wedding with him. She said it was bad luck for their relationship because Kelsey shouldn’t have to see another bride before Morris proposed to her. However, now that the bride and groom had left, it seemed she was perfectly happy to come to the after-party.

Bart understood that his driver, Klein, was tired, and he would have sent Morris to take care of his own girlfriend, except Morris had had too much to drink and it was a wedding. Special occasions made Bart unusually attentive. He was always possessed by this gritty need to make everything go perfectly. That was why Bart paid the extra fee to send Klein to pick up Morris’ girlfriend in Victoria.

When Klein returned, Bart saw him pull up the driveway and wanted to thank him personally before sending him home for the night.

With a light step, Bart went down the steps while Klein was coming up them.

“Where’s Kelsey?” Bart asked.

“I don’t know what happened,” Klein’s harried voice said. “I think I picked up the wrong girl.”

“What? How is that possible?” Bart asked. He had worked with Klein on many occasions and the idea that the driver had made a mistake struck Bart as impossible. “Let’s go through it carefully. What happened first?”

Klein took a couple of deep breaths before answering. “I showed up at the restaurant. There were two women outside who were alone and waiting for rides. I spoke to the first one. She wouldn’t give me her name or tell me anything about herself. She thought I was hitting on her and would not listen to me when I tried to explain to her that I was a driver who had come to pick her up if her name was Kelsey. She hit me with her purse and went back into the

restaurant. The other woman had been sitting on a stoop holding her head. I thought she said yes when I asked her if her name was Kelsey. When I leaned in to get her to say it a second time, she passed out cold before she could answer me. On the drive up, I tried to talk to her a few more times, but she didn't answer me until we were coming up the drive. Then I called her Kelsey and she muttered something negative. What if I picked up the wrong girl?"

"What did the first woman look like?"

"She was a blonde who hadn't dyed her hair blonde recently. Big black roots. She was wearing a leopard print dress with black lace, and she had a bright pink purse," Klein answered in a sadly triumphant tone, proud to have remembered so much and unhappy that he had made a mistake.

Bart stuck his tongue out and bit it before saying, "That was probably Kelsey." He approached the back of the limo and looked inside. His eyebrows shot in the air. "Hello," he called, leaning one hand on the top of the car.

The woman didn't move. Her eyes were closed and she didn't acknowledge that he had spoken to her. She had honey-blond hair, dark red lips, and a fan of dark brown lashes that flattered the shape of her cheek. She wore a black and white dress that had panels of different colored fabric rather than a print that was both black and white. Her heels were white with pointed toes and a strap across her ankle. Her hands in her lap were manicured with a clear sheen and she wore a delicate row of diamonds around her wrist.

"Hello," he tried again as he put his head right in the car. He wanted her to hear him, but he did not want to shout at her.

She didn't answer.

On closer inspection, Bart stopped dead. "She's not drunk. She has a head injury. Did you see this lump on her forehead when you picked her up?"

Bart got out of the way and let Klein have a look at her.

The driver pulled his head out of the limo. "That wasn't there when I picked her up."

"Well, regardless, this woman has far too much class to date Morris. Look at her dress length. Her hem is asymmetrical, but the shortest of it goes past her knees. Notice how her face doesn't look like it's been painted to look like a billboard. She doesn't need attention. She's understated and lovely all over."

"Oh, I see," Klein said with a chuckle. "I picked up the wrong girl because I forgot that I was going to pick up Morris' date and not yours."

Bart chuckled. "If you can pick up women of this quality for me, why have I been meeting women on my own?"

Something about their conversation stirred her and the woman in the back of the limo fluttered her eyelashes. She opened her eyes slowly to show Bart and Klein the beauty of her dark green gaze. Blinking, she looked around to get her bearings.

"Good. You're awake." Bart squatted beside her to put him at her eye level. "How are you feeling?"

Bart was very conscious of how attractive he was. His looks helped him when he worked with clients, when he worked with assistants, when he traveled on his own, and when he went on dates. All of that added up to a conscientious effort to look trustworthy in a classic kind of way. It meant that he never let himself fall for trends and instead opted to look like the kind of man you could trust with your life savings.

He had dark brown hair, parted on the side with a wave in it. He also shaved every morning to help him look clean-cut because his hairstyle didn't quite produce that effect on its own. He had been dressed for the wedding, so he was wearing a gray suit with a white silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

"Where am I?" she asked softly.

"My name is Bart Camphor. You're at my place outside Victoria. What's your name?"

"Maisie Whitlock," she answered through gritted teeth. The pain in her head was clearly overwhelming her.

"Glad to meet you," he said pleasantly before turning back to Klien. "Would you mind running to my kitchen to put together an ice pack for her?"

"There should be ice in the limo," Klein said, working on the other side of the vehicle to put something together for her.

Bart turned back to Maisie. "We owe you an apology. Our limo driver, Klien, went to retrieve my brother's girlfriend from The Silver Swan and picked you up by accident. To make up for it, he's more than happy to take you anywhere you want to go."

Maisie didn't answer him but numbly touched her body almost like she was frisking herself. She looked up at his face and he watched her assess him. Was she talking to someone she could trust or did she detect a touch of oiliness?

"We didn't do anything to you if that's what you're wondering," he explained kindly. "Your purse is next to you and we didn't even open it to find out your name or address."

Maisie nodded. "I live in downtown Victoria. If you could drive me back, I'd appreciate it."

"Do you remember how you got hurt?" Bart asked.

"Yes. An angry woman threw a tumbler at her date. He dodged and I took it in the temple. It really hurts," she said, before blacking out again and falling fainting into the headrest.

"She is gorgeous," Bart breathed so far under his breath that he hoped Klien didn't hear him. He stood up and said, "I'm not the least bit surprised that you picked her up instead of Kelsey. Women try to be this beautiful and fail constantly."

"You don't seem angry," Klein, commented.

"I can't care overly what happens to each and every one of Morris' dates. He moves from woman to woman at a pace that makes everyone dizzy. Today it's Kelsey, tomorrow it's Angelica, and the day after that it's Louisa. It's bizarre that Kelsey thinks he'll marry her."

"Should I take Maisie home or take her to a hospital?" Klein asked hesitantly.

"I guess it depends on how hurt she is versus how much she's had to drink. A tumbler to the temple isn't nothing." Bart took out his phone, turned on the flashlight, and looked at her injury.

The light in her face bothered her and she moaned.

"Hospital," Bart deduced.

Klien handed him the makeshift ice pack, which was just ice in a ziplock bag.

Bart wrapped it in his white silk handkerchief and pronounced, "I'll come with you."

He settled next to Maisie in the black limo, while Klien got the engine running. He pressed the ice pack against her temple. Using his free hand, Bart pulled Maisie's wallet out of her purse. Flipping it open, he found her driver's license and her address. After confirming the spelling of her name, he found her on Instagram and looked at her posts.

She was twenty-seven, enjoyed baking, and home decorating. It appeared she had a fiance.

Taking a second look at Maisie's hands, he spotted the engagement ring he had missed on his first inspection. Bart found a picture of her fiance on her feed. He looked like the personification of a rat to Bart, who enjoyed mentally comparing people to animals in order to remember them more perfectly.

Glancing down at Maisie, he tried to figure out what animal he could compare her to. He found himself at a loss as he looked down at her. She was entirely too perfect to be anything like an animal. Peering at her contemplatively, he wondered if she would be the first person he'd ever met who reminded him more of a thing than a person. Was she like glass? Like a glass ornament hanging from a Christmas tree? Like the tall goblet that sat next to the tumbler in the crystal cabinet? Like a wine decanter meant to look like a woman with lips and a swell of hips?

Bart glanced at himself in the dark glass of the window next to him. Not free of his own speculative habits, he was an animal, like everyone else he knew. Naturally, he was a wolf. The lone variety. It was cheesy and terrible, but it was the only animal he could think of that didn't feel like an insult to be compared to since usually he used the animal comparison to look down on people.

He knew he had to have a conversation with Maisie in order to categorize her. She might be a rare bird or an exotic fish. His mind hung on the idea of a fish bowl with rainbow water splashing. Still, she was not an animal.

Wouldn't it be awful if he spoke to her and all the wonderful things that were dancing through his mind like sparkling sugar plums on a dark Christmas night turned out to be a mistake? He had met plenty of women who were lovely on the surface only for him to discover that was all they had... a pleasant surface. There was nothing of much interest under their skin. If they were fish bowls, they were empty.

"Don't disappoint me, Maisie," he said softly as the limo slowed to take the curves in the road.

"I'm not the one who disappointed you," she suddenly mumbled. "You are the one who disappointed me."

Taken by surprise, Bart replied to her. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," she hummed.

"Nothing? If I didn't do anything, then why are you disappointed in me?"

A sneer appeared on her lips. "You say that like omission, neglect, and passivity are not a problem. Or at least they aren't *your* problem. Well, mister, they aren't going to be *my* problem anymore."

He chuckled. Who did she think she was talking to? "What should I have done instead?" he asked, playing along.

"It's too late for that," she said, waving a hand limply.

"I won't apologize for something I didn't do," he said, attempting to hide his amusement. After all, she might open her eyes at any moment and realize she was not speaking to the person she thought she was.

"I'm happy to be rid of you," she said with a slight slur, like she was falling back asleep.

"You hurt your head. I'm not sure you should be allowed to fall back asleep." He snapped his fingers in front of her face three times and her eyes snapped open. "There you go."

Her eyes were glassy as she looked around her. "Who are you again?"

"Bart Camphor."

"Right." She touched the sore spot on her head.

“Who were you dumping tonight?” Bart surmised. “Your boss or your boyfriend?” In his mind, neglect was unforgivable. How could she have left the restaurant on her own? There was no way a woman like her would have been left alone unless she had left angry and the man she had been with was leaving her alone to cool off. If the guy was the fiance Bart had seen online, he’d be back.

“Neither. He was... yuck... I can’t even say it.”

“Your fiance?” Bart supplied.

Maisie swallowed. “How did you know that?”

“If you want my advice, and I know you do, you should return his diamonds.” Bart picked up her hand and turned her ring around her finger to hide the shine of the rocks.

“Why? He doesn’t deserve to get them back.”

“For quite a few reasons. If you keep them, it would be like keeping a part of him... like you wanted to keep his money or a reminder of the glint in his eyes... maybe it would even be like keeping a piece of his heart.” Seductive talk of this variety was always on the tip of Bart’s tongue. It seemed innocent, but it never was.

Maisie made a face. “Hearing you say that makes me want to open the window and deposit it outside.”

“Does it? What did he do? You were talking about it a moment ago, but perhaps you didn’t realize who you were talking to?”

“I don’t remember saying anything,” she admitted. “Where are we going?”

“The hospital. That bump on your head is quite impressive. It may need to be drained.”

“Gross,” she muttered, gingerly touching the bump.

“Is there someone I can call to let them know what’s happened? A sister? A friend?”

“Um... I don’t really have anyone like that. I just moved. My fiance... I actually broke up with him three weeks ago, but met him tonight to go over any unfinished business. I should have given him his ring back, but his conversation was so annoying, I didn’t think of it. All my friends live up-island. I’m sure if you take me to the hospital and they give me the green light, I can get myself home afterward.”

Bart was nodding like he agreed with her completely, like he would do anything she asked. In reality, he was planning on ignoring her suggestion. He wanted to talk with her and, so far, he was as impressed with her conversation as he had been with her appearance. She didn’t swear at him, threaten to sue him, cry about how much pain she was in, or fall madly in love with him on the spot. That last one was something that happened so frequently, the cliché was killing him. A woman like her did not appear in front of him every day, or ever.

He was not about to let her out of his sight even if he had a party cooking at his house without him. He could definitely escort a fine woman like Maisie to the emergency room.

Cut Like Glass

TWO

Bart watched Maisie in her hospital bed in the emergency room from the edge of the privacy curtain. He was allowed inside, but he refused to sit down. How could he sit with that antsy woman sitting straight up in the hospital bed?

Under the harsh lights of the emergency waiting room, Maisie had woken up in a big way. She wouldn't even pull a blanket over her knees. Instead, she clicked her tongue and rubbed her fingers together with her left hand in a motion that was almost a snap. The doctor on hand had decided that she needed an x-ray of her head to see if she'd broken any bones in her temple. If she hadn't, he would release her immediately. She had already been taken for the x-ray and now she and Bart were waiting for the doctor to return with the results.

Maisie seemed surprised when Bart said he wanted to stay to make sure she was alright. After all, he did his best to make himself useful. That meant he was behaving like an errand boy who fetched her a can of pop and refreshed her ice pack.

From her place in the bed, her gaze was all over him, observing his hands in his pockets and how he kept trying to lean against a wall, but since there wasn't one, he had a few near misses with the curtain separating her from the patient in the next bed. He hoped he wasn't having one of those moments where there was a huge gap between what he thought he looked like and what he actually looked like. He thought he looked too good to be true, but maybe he actually looked like a creep who was only helping her because he was afraid she'd press charges.

With the most unmistakable head-wave, she motioned for Bart to take the chair next to her bed.

Bart was happy to oblige and immediately took the chair, leaning toward her so he could hear her without her having to shout in the middle of the night in the emergency room of a hospital.

"Can you take me through what happened outside the restaurant again?" she asked quietly, though her eyes showed a sharpness that hadn't been there before.

He was pleased to have something to talk about and took her through it with his best air of casual efficiency. It worked on most women... Well, it worked on most people.

When he was finished, she lay back on her pillows. "I have to thank you for staying. Obviously, it was not your fault that I got pegged in the head while walking through the bar. You weren't even the one to pick me up on accident. You've been wonderful, but would you mind stepping out while I talk to the doctor?" Here, she blushed artfully.

The blush was so perfect that Bart agreed to what was expected of him without a sideways glance. However, the doctor hadn't arrived yet, so they sat in silence.

Finally, Maisie broke it. "Tell me about yourself, Bart. I'm bored."

"I'm a banker. I work all over the world, but this is my home base. What do you do?"

"Nothing. I'm looking for a job."

"You're very well dressed for someone who's unemployed," he said playfully, looking down and appraisingly at her clothes. "What did you do before you dumped your boy?"

“Oh, I was an assistant at a veterinary clinic, but I decided to stop doing that when I moved here. I don’t really want to work with animals anymore.”

That caught Bart’s attention. He had just been thinking about animals and their human counterparts.

“Why?” he asked curiously.

“I... lost my stomach for it,” she said, sounding as traumatized as any war vet.

That struck him as very interesting. He compared people to animals for his amusement while she held animals when they died. No wonder she wasn’t an animal when he looked at her. She was somewhere beyond that.

He left it alone and pressed for different details. “Do you have any idea what you want to do instead?”

“I want to work close to my house. I’ve been applying for jobs within walking distance. I have a couple of interviews on Monday. Do you think my head will look okay by then? I’d hate to go with a big ugly bruise on my forehead.”

“Let’s hope so,” he said brightly.

At that moment, the doctor came in and Bart ducked out as promised. As he walked the empty hospital halls, he thought about the cute way Maisie acted. He was so charmed that he forgot all about what the doctor was likely to report.

Half an hour later, Maisie met him at the front door.

“I’m fine,” she said with a bright smile. “No broken bones in my head, which is always a good sign. Why do you have a limo?”

“I don’t usually. This weekend was my cousin’s wedding and I hired a few to haul around my masses of relatives. Although I do hire the same company and get the same driver whenever I have to escort more than three people around, so I know Klein pretty well. We have done a few very long rides together.”

“Am I keeping you from a wedding party?” Maisie asked in alarm.

“No,” he lied, before telling the truth. “The wedding was this afternoon. I just kept the limo on hand until the end of the day.”

“But...” Maisie sputtered in alarm. “Whatever consequences there were going to be for the driver for picking up the wrong girl, they could never have been pinned on you. None of this is your problem.”

Bart chuckled softly. “Who said it was?” He implied that he wanted to be there, giving her a look that the trouble he took for her was well worth it.

She gave him a cautionary glance in reply.

The limo pulled up to the curb just as they emerged from the hospital and Bart helped Maisie inside. After he joined her, she gave Klein her address and they started rolling out of the U-shaped driveway.

When they arrived at her house, Bart thought something must be wrong. They must be in the wrong place. He double-checked the numbers and the street name before he got out of the back of the limo and helped Maisie to her feet.

“This is where you live?”

“Yes,” she said with a placid smile.

The house she had directed him to was one of those odd houses that was between two large buildings. It had once been on a street with lots of houses, but those other houses had been

bought as a parcel and torn down to make room for bigger buildings. Her house was the only one left on the block.

A high wooden fence surrounded it. Maisie stood in front of the gate and fiddled with her phone. It was well past one in the morning, but she was oddly giddy. "Would you like to see my garden?" she offered with a smile.

Bart nodded. He would have gone with her into a port-a-potty if she had asked him to with that smile on her face.

She pressed a button on her phone and Bart saw lights turn on through the slats in the fence.

Inside, he was surrounded by the most charming space. What she showed him was everything a lady's garden should be. The grass was green and springy. There were stepping stones arranged like checks on a chess board. She had a topiary in the shape of a knight like it had just stepped off the board. Tiny fairy lights lit the climbing plants on the fence whereas strings of patio lights dangled from the pagoda. Roses bloomed everywhere and bleeding hearts fell.

He was immediately enchanted.

"Shall I send away my driver?" Bart asked, approaching her swing. It was covered in pillows and large enough for him to lounge on. "I'll just sleep here."

Maisie's face fell. "I think I just wanted to show it to *someone* because I haven't lived here long enough to make friends. I don't think I wanted to show you *specifically*, so please don't read anything into it."

At that moment, Bart's brain caught on fire. What was she saying? It sounded like she was saying something that meant that she didn't see him as a potential lover. He suffered from a moment of indecision where he wasn't sure if he should stalk over to her like the hungry wolf he was, or if he should sprawl himself out on her swing, and simply refuse to leave.

At that moment, she opened the gate for him and said pleasantly, "It's late. Thank you so much for taking me to the hospital, taking care of me there, and bringing me home. You've been lovely, but I need to go inside."

Bart might have protested. He might have whined and complained about being thrown out so quickly, but the angle at which Maisie was standing changed his mind. A light shone directly on the bump on her head. Whatever he thought about her, him, and the night with fairy lights, she wasn't well. He needed to be sensitive.

"Of course," he said, coming toward her with an easy gait. "May I have your number, so I can text you tomorrow to make sure you're still alright?"

Maisie nodded and gave him her number.

He sent her a sample text and after seeing her receive it he wished her a good night and slipped out the gate. He waved as she closed it behind her and disappeared from view.

Instead of sitting in the back of the limo, Bart got in the front with Klein. "Okay, take me home and then you're finished for the evening."

"You mean for the middle of the night?" Klein replied brazenly. "I should be pissed at you for having me work so many extra hours, but I'm so thankful you smoothed that over. She's not even mad that I accidentally picked her up from the restaurant, is she?"

"No, I don't think she's mad. I think she needed help and we were there to help her. Besides, I'm completely enamored with her. Did you see her? Of course, you saw her. She's perfect."

Klein took his hand away from the steering wheel to rest his elbow by the window and cover his mouth with his hand. Was he attempting to disguise a chuckle?

“What?” Bart asked.

“Nothing. I’ve just seen you with a few other women who you thought were perfect. I mean, I don’t mind it when you fall into the two-week love cycle. I get a bit of business and it’s nicer to work for you because you’re not rowdy and neither are the women you like. It’s just a little sad to see them all mascara-stained and miserable the last time I drive them.”

“It’s not *my* fault that happens,” Bart asserted. “I tried to be in love with them and it didn’t work. Sometimes I even wonder what the heck love is and why I can never find it. I like them. I find them loveable. I get to know them. They get to know me and it turns out that everything was an act. I was acting so I could get the girl and they were acting in a way they hoped would please me. It’s a big pointless display of ego clashing against ego. She wants to be desirable so badly that she can’t say what she really thinks and my ego will be crushed if she won’t let me win her over.”

“You’re just as bad as your brother. If you know that’s the cycle, why don’t you break it?” Klein injected.

“How?”

“Don’t play the game in the same way. Why don’t you just tell her what you want from her up front without the act? Just say what you want.”

Bart rolled his eyes. “That would never work. You have to dance carefully if you want to get a decent woman.”

“The goal isn’t to win this particular woman. The goal is to cut through the lies and just tell her the truth. If she likes the truth, she’ll like you.”

Bart scoffed and didn’t answer. He was thinking about his lone wolf status and how he liked semi-solitude more than he wanted to be paired up with any of the women he knew. They were like models. They had to be shown off.

Who did he have to show them off to?

His family? His brother? Who would try to take any woman he thought was attractive. His sister? Who had children of her own and only liked cackling over his choices.

The dating carousel was best when he didn’t have to make a decision to get off and the ride didn’t have to stop.

Cut Like Glass

THREE

Bart texted Maisie exactly four times and, through his delicate texting, he managed to get invited to her house for tea.

Maisie had two outdoor areas attached to her house that overlooked her garden. The first was her front porch. A great winding staircase led up to it. She had plants there. The second was a tiny balcony with a table and two chairs that broke off from the dining room. That was where she served him tea from an adorable little tea set. The tea itself was an orange-flavored herbal tea that Bart found flavorless and bland, but the cookies she served with it were delicious and made the occasion truly noteworthy in his mind. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been somewhere so delightfully feminine. His whole house was a man cave that just kept going the further in you went.

"Maisie, I want to ask you on a date," he said, unsure if he was doing what Klien recommended or the exact opposite.

She glanced at him and then at everything but him. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. I mean, you're amazing. From what I know about you right now, you're amazing. The problem is..."

"That you just broke up with your fiance?" Bart finished for her.

"I guess that's the simple way to put it. It doesn't feel that simple. I feel angry. I feel misused. I feel... done," she finished with an air of finality like she had thumped a gavel down in front of her.

Bart was very much aware that even though he had been invited over for tea, it was not a meeting that met the requirements of a date in his mind. The texts that he had written implied that he wanted to pop by to see if her bruise had gone down and to make sure she really was fine. He was meeting her in person to express his romantic interest in her. It all felt very formal to him, which he liked because those formal rules made it very clear what he could and couldn't do.

"Can I ask, did he cheat on you?" he asked in a voice almost intended to mimic a therapist.

Maisie huffed. "Not to my knowledge, though at this point, I really don't think I would get worked up if I found out he had. I got bored. Very bored."

She pouted her bottom lip and Bart thought the shape of her lips was a perfect cupid's bow. He should not be thinking about how attractive she was, but the problem was that she was far more attractive to him than she had been. It was a Sunday. It had been a week since their last encounter and she was dressed in a white print dress. The most subtle of jewelry hung from her throat and the engagement ring was gone from her finger.

"What was so boring about him?" Bart questioned, getting very interested.

"Oh... everything was just about him and what would make him happy. I wasn't even married to him and I got bored with making him happy."

"What would make *you* happy?"

"Nothing," she hedged.

He sat back. "I don't believe you. You must want something."

“Fine. I do,” she relented. “I want to live in this house. It belonged to my aunt and she left it to me in her will. I love being here. I’ve made a lot of changes to the garden since I got here. The inside of the house is charming. It’s full of crafts and paintings and little touches that remind me of my childhood. I used to come here for Christmas when I was little and I lived here in my late teens. The best thing is that my aunt was not a pack rat. Only the best things are here. I love it. I never want to leave.”

Bart looked over the building and the garden. It was charming in the light of day as well. He could certainly understand the allure, but if she was so charmed by what she had at home, what could he offer her?

“What about you?” she asked. “What do you want?”

“I want to take you into your bedroom and kiss you until nightfall,” he answered with a steady tone and meaningful eye contact.

She made a sound that was almost a honk as she gaped at him in surprise. “That’s brave of you to admit. You must know I’ll refuse.”

“I don’t know that,” he replied. “I’m not expecting anything this minute, though I would like it. I’m just trying to stir you up. You might be able to feel something beyond boredom with a different man.”

She ran her hand under her nose as if to scratch it and a long line of red blood coated three-quarters of her index finger.

“You’re bleeding,” he observed, tugging a napkin free from the stand and wiping her hand.

She got a second one and blotted at her nose. “I’m sorry. How embarrassing! You’re not turned off by blood, are you?” She gave a dark little chuckle through the paper napkin.

He grimaced his answer as if to say it would take more than a bloody nose to get rid of him.

She swallowed. “Sorry... I’m just trying to think back to the days when I was dating before I was supposed to get married.” She turned away and treated her bloody nose. When she was sure she had stopped the bleeding, she turned back to him.

Examining his face like she had never seen him before, she stopped and sized him up.

Bart knew what he looked like. He had good lines that made up his body, particularly through his collarbone and side. More than anything, he knew he was better looking than the fiance she had dumped. He felt like a star.

Too bad for him, she still looked bored. She took a sip of her tea and coldly asked, “So, would I see you tomorrow if I let you throw me down on my bedspread?”

“I would never leave,” he replied with an easy confidence. Every motion of hers, every move, every word was getting him more and more excited. She wasn’t going to be easy, which made his interest peak.

Unfortunately for him, he didn’t know that he had actually replied the worst way he could have. The question had been a trap. There hadn’t been a right way to answer it, but the way he had chosen to answer it had obviously rubbed Maisie particularly wrong.

He expected her to offer him a scathing reply, except that her nose started bleeding again, dripping in a line down her lips to her chin in one second flat.

“This isn’t a good day for this,” she said, dabbing at her nose again. “Please allow me to speak for myself. I am not interested in a one-night stand. If that’s your regular entertainment...”

“It’s not,” he insisted.

"If something like that is your regular amusement," she continued like he hadn't spoken, "then please, do not contact me again. I'm not interested in being anyone's entertainment. I thought I had already explained to you that I left my last relationship because I hadn't enjoyed satisfying someone else's desires continuously. I certainly do not exist to satisfy yours."

"Relax," he interjected with a casual shrug. "All romantic relationships eventually lead to sex. You are an adult, after all. It's perfectly fine if you don't want to begin that way."

"You mentioned a date? You want to begin that way?"

"Yes, but I also wanted to let you know the nature of my interest in you. I do not want to be mistaken as a friend."

"That's too bad. I'd like to have a friend," she said, holding the tissue to her nose. "Sorry. I can't get the blood to stop." She removed herself from her seat and hurried to the bathroom where Bart could hear her blow her nose violently.

When she returned, he asked her, "Does that help?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you bleeding because of last week's head injury?"

She shrugged noncommittally and left the air between them empty of words.

"I'm sorry. Was what you said earlier a no for a date?"

She nodded. "I really don't want to date anyone right now."

"I see. You're tired of dating. What part of it is tiring you out? Dressing up? It can't be that. You're dressed up right now."

The sigh that escaped Maisie's lips showed inner exhaustion to the bone. "Expectations! If I go on a date with you, what will you expect? A kiss on the doorstep? An invitation inside? I am absolutely not having sex with you. It is ridiculous and obscene to risk having a child for the fun of casual dating. If you date me for weeks or months... One day you'll just be like, 'Enough games, Maisie. I told you what I came for, now give it to me.' I'd rather you walked out right now."

Any excitement that had been brewing inside Bart abruptly died. A vision of Maisie getting knocked up suddenly entered his mind and he didn't like it one bit. Though he would have died rather than admit it to his driver, Klein, Bart did not sleep with the two-week girls. That was generally the reason they were so upset when Klein drove them home. They had never expected a life-long love affair with Bart. They had expected a one-night-stand or, as icing on the cake, a two-week seduction, ending with a weekend of sex. When Bart admitted he didn't like them well enough to go to bed with them, they were more humiliated than they would have been if he had slept with them on the first night.

He had foolishly thought he could treat Maisie the same way he treated them, which was to say, he often dropped a sexual innuendo of the same caliber on the two-week girls. It heightened the excitement... Until he casually dropped that he had changed his mind on the last day. Maisie wasn't like those girls and he had been a fool to treat her like one.

"Okay. I see I made a grave error in saying that all relationships lead to sex. Obviously, the ones that end don't. It was not meant to put any pressure on you. It's my habit to say things like that around women I like in order to establish myself and stay out of the friend zone. You haven't dated in a while, but I'm sure you remember how the game normally works?"

She took a doubtful sip of tea. "That seems like a harder way of playing than I remember."

May I begin again? Just this once?" he asked tactfully.

Maisie nodded hesitantly.

Cut Like Glass

FOUR

“I’m Bart Camphor. I’m a banker. I work down the street at the Millennium Banking Network. I see you’re new to the area. I’d like to show you around.” He put out a hand as if to shake hers.

She took his hand like it was a snake and held it cautiously.

“How did your job interviews go?” he asked, keeping the conversation neutral.

“I got the job I wanted.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s at a floral shop down the hill called The Buttonhole Bouquet. I’ll work as a florist. I’m really looking forward to working with plants instead of animals and getting the first choice of the best flowers when they come in,” she said slowly like she wasn’t sure if his interest was sincere.

“What do you do exactly?”

“I’m an investment banker, so please don’t lump me in with financial planners. I only handle people who are millionaires several times over. I invest my own money too, so stacking money is my hobby, hence the limo and the house from the other night.”

“I don’t remember the house clearly,” Maisie admitted. Her eyes widened. “I thought I was in front of a hotel.”

He smiled. “What a compliment! Would you like to come out for a visit?”

Maisie looked at him sideways. “Not today. You know, you weren’t kidding when you said your bank was just down the street. I can see a sign advertising it from here.”

Bart got out of his seat and moved behind her to see her line of vision. Being so close to her, he looked down at her and breathed in the fresh scent of her hair. “I really messed up today,” he said from his position, leaning against the balcony railing.

She looked up at him.

“If I retreat for today, can I take you for lunch sometime next week?”

A wicked gleam entered Maisie’s eyes. “If you’re looking for a way to make it up to me, and convince me of your finer points, I have a really good way in mind.”

Bart smiled back. He was a complete sucker for the look she gave him. It was exactly the type of look he always wanted to see on his woman’s face.

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Maisie loaded garbage into the back of Bart’s car. Bart had a car with a clear stun factor. It was an Audi R8, black and glossy and so beautiful from the side, he had almost cried when he bought it. At least, she wasn’t loading black plastic bags. She was loading stuff that had to be taken to the eco-center: old appliances, loose cardboard, and several boxes of glass bottles. So, there was no risk of any of it oozing out onto the interior, which made the whole ordeal a lot more comfortable for Bart.

Apparently, Maisie had moved to Victoria with the intention of giving up her car and she had already sold it to a friend of hers from up island, but that meant she didn't have anyone to do an errand like an eco-run for her.

Bart looked at the state of her shed. She still had more that needed to go and the back of his car was full.

"I have a truck," he suddenly found himself offering. He never drove it into Victoria if he could help it. "I could come by with it on a different day and take the rest of this."

The stars in Maisie's eyes could have lit up a stadium. "I'd love that, but speaking of today... Can I come with you to the eco-center? I want to see how they sort things and what they're willing to take. I also need to find out their fees and pay them. Afterward, we can get a bite to eat down by the waterfront. My treat? You know... if you don't have any other plans."

Bart had never had a date where he went to a garbage dump before or where the woman paid for dinner. Everything was new to him, but he was willing to entertain pretty much anything if it meant staying with her.

The entire experience was different than it would have been with another woman. Maisie changed into jeans and a yellow spotted shirt that buttoned up the front. She tied the tails into a knot at her waist, pulled her hair into a high ponytail, and discarded her mules for Converse All Stars that were old and stained. Bart hadn't been on a date with a woman who dressed like that since high school.

While they drove, instead of playing the music he normally played, Maisie had programmed the directions to the eco-center into his GPS and kept the music off in order for him to hear them more easily. Privately, he lamented the loss of the music. It really set the stage in that it was almost classical, but very definitely synthesized. But what stage was he trying to set? He wasn't taking her to a show or even dinner. He was having his car weighed because the eco-center asked for payment by the kilogram.

As he watched Maisie add her glass bottles to the recycling, he wondered if this was what it was like to be married to a woman. He never ran simple errands with his dates. That was the kind of thing he'd do by himself the weekend after a love affair ended.

Afterward, Maisie directed him to the waterfront where food trucks were set up, and took him for fish and chips. There wasn't an official place for them to sit, so they sat on a set of stone steps in front of the harbor. Boats bobbed and the setting sun lit up the sails like he was looking at the real-life image of a puzzle he'd put together as a child.

"You really helped me today," she said sweetly. "Just like you did last weekend with my bruised head and the trip to the hospital. If you tell me what day you're free to come with your truck, I'll drop everything to fit in your schedule."

He nodded, a little lost for words. If they did exactly the same thing the next week, it would be a better date because he would remember to keep his foot out of his mouth.

The whole date was weird for him. Their elbows brushed as they ate and he counted the calories he'd have to work off at home on the treadmill after he dropped her off.

Normally, he'd have paid for an expensive restaurant. In the perfect restaurant, he'd sit across from his date and he'd have a moment, a realization that he never told anyone. He wasn't attracted to the woman he was with. She was boring him. What she wanted was boring. It was always the same situation even when it was a different woman. Yet he had to do it that

way. He had to play the game or... What? What would happen? He wouldn't be the lone wolf he reassured himself he was?

He glanced at Maisie. She wasn't like the other women. She wasn't interested in his house. Her interest in his car had nothing to do with what it looked like or how fast it could go... unless it was on its way to the eco-center. She wasn't even interested in him. She hadn't even given his shoulders the looks women usually gave him, even when he was working to lift things for her. Something about her didn't make sense. The line she used about only wanting to live in her aunt's house couldn't be the whole truth. What did she really want?

"How's next Saturday?" he asked. "I am free then."

She smiled. "Text me with what time you want to go."

"Anytime."

"Oh, then I'll have you come at three."

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Bart drove home with the music he normally listened to turned off. His house was a mansion on a mountain range outside Victoria. It was a status thing. He could easily afford it, but it honestly was not the easiest place in the world to commute to and from each day.

It was about status.

It was about how his family felt when they drove up and saw the iron gates at the base of the driveway. It was about how the women friends they brought salivated and gasped, "He's single!" Sometimes he brought people from work home to show them a good time and add an unnamed kind of sparkle to life.

It was about cultivating a world that was all about him and the pleasure, prestige, and comfort he brought to everyone he associated with.

He had thought his life was perfect, but he saw at once that Maisie had something he didn't have. Was it possible that he had something she didn't have as well?

When the time was right, he'd invite her home to his house and introduce her to his family. She'd see his wholesome side and immediately warm up to him.

That had to be true because he knew that side of him would not work with his average date. Maybe it would work on Maisie.

Cut Like Glass

FIVE

When Bart showed up to help Maisie empty her shed the next Saturday, he was late. He hadn't meant to be, but his sister, Nina, had shown up the night before insisting that she and her husband needed a night away and asking Bart to watch her two kids.

Bart didn't mind. Neither of her kids were babies, so he fed them pizza and played video games with them. At the exact right time, he suggested they watch a movie. Once he had them both snuggled on the couch under furry blankets, it was only a matter of time before they both fell asleep. He had a room set up with bunk beds for children to sleep in, so he bundled them off to bed like an experienced handler.

The morning had been fine too, but his sister and her husband did not make it back until three o'clock and only after Bart phoned them to complain. Honestly, he hadn't had the idea that he should just go to Victoria to help Maisie with the kids in tow until his sister breezed through the door. Maybe kids would impress Maisie and he knew the kids would like hauling junk. They liked doing anything their uncle suggested. But it was too late.

Nina apologized. "Why didn't you tell me you had a date? I would have been back sooner, but what are you doing at three in the afternoon? Isn't your date normally setting her curls at this time?"

Bart tugged on his plaid shirt, hoping it made him look a touch country. Country people were hospitable, trustworthy, honest, and hardworking. He was a banker and though he worked hard, he felt like his regular business attire made him look cold and the warmth he had to ooze from his demeanor to make up for it would seem fake to a woman like Maisie.

"I'm taking a stack of three old televisions to the eco-center," he answered, pausing to fix his hair in the mirror by the door.

Nina smiled stupidly. "I've never seen you like this. She must hate your guts."

"She doesn't hate me," Bart retorted, using his tone to hint that Maisie liked him a lot.

"There's a size sticker on your chest," she pointed out. "Did you forget to pull it off when you bought the shirt... yesterday?"

Bart found the sticker and yanked it free. "Okay. She doesn't like me very much. But I'm late and I've got to go. I texted her that I'd be late, but I've really got to go now. You can leave the dishes in the sink, but lock the door on your way out."

He left listening to his sister cackle as he made his way to his truck.

When he arrived at Maisie's, she wasn't answering the door. He would have left, but he heard a power tool in the background. Circling the house, he found her sanding the wooden siding of the shed with a power sander. He tapped her on the shoulder. She flicked off the sander and turned around.

"Glad you made it, but we're going to have to hurry if we want to get loaded up before they close," she said. There was already an old television screen sitting in her garden cart.

She slapped him on the back and helped him load up the back of his truck.

"I thought your aunt wasn't a pack rat," he asked, perplexed by all the junk.

“She wasn’t. This is an ordinary yearly purging. When I lived up island, I’d get rid of stuff all the time. What I’ve loaded up is *all* I’ve gotten rid of since she died. Her vacuum wasn’t working well, so I replaced it. All these TVs had to go. It’s not much considering how much crap she could have owned. Some of this stuff is even mine. She had better stuff, so I’m getting rid of my old garbage.”

“Did you inherit her whole house, with everything?”

“Yes. Dishes, clothes, jewelry, beads, drapes, family albums. I got everything she had.”

“You’re not going to keep all of it?” Bart scoffed.

“I am keeping some of it. But you’re right. I can’t keep all of it. It was just that when I got here, I got so excited about replanting the garden that I sort of went bananas. My own clothes are still in boxes in the bedroom.”

“What are you doing out here sanding when you need to empty your aunt’s closet?” Bart asked her.

Maisie didn’t have an answer.

“I’ll tell you what,” Bart said, leaning in. “We’ll take this load to the eco-center, then hit a drive-thru on the way back. We can eat here and when we’re finished, I’ll go through your aunt’s clothes with you.”

She looked at Bart with wide eyes. “You would really do that?”

“I’m a banker. Tedious details are my jam. You clearly don’t need any help outside the house. You’re made of green thumbs, but at the very least, if there are labels inside your aunt’s clothes, I won’t let you throw out anything valuable. If we find anything pricey that doesn’t match you, we can take it to a consignment store and you can at least get a little pocket money.”

Maisie’s nod was loaded with indecision and unease.

Bart understood that throwing out the clothing of someone dear to you was horrid, but she couldn’t let her aunt’s unwearable clothing eat all the available closet space. He’d help her.

They completed the second eco run and ate their burgers and milkshakes on the swing in the front garden. Bart had never done anything like that with a date before, which was now becoming the norm.

“I think this is the last night of summer,” Maisie mused. “Starting tomorrow, I’m going to pack up all these pillows and take them in the house. This has got to be the last night of good weather before the cold sets in.”

“The city might surprise you. It’ll snow here, which is why I own the truck, but the weather won’t get insufferable... until it does. Do you like skiing?” Bart suddenly asked.

“I’ve never gone.”

“You live on an island covered in mountains and you’ve never gone skiing?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

Maisie looked at the ground. “I guess it never came up. It was never a good time to go. I never had an invitation. I never went on my own.”

“I’ll have to take you some time,” he said with a smile.

“I’m a clutz. You’d have more fun with someone else.”

“We wouldn’t have to do black diamonds or anything like that. Looking at the mountains, feeling the cold air on your face, and the fun of being with people you love, that’s what skiing is about. I’d have a good time even if we never left the bunny hill.”

She looked moved, but she attempted to cover it up by clicking her tongue in reply. “If you really feel like that, then maybe we could go sometime.”

After they had finished eating, they went inside. Maisie left Bart in the living room and went into the bedroom. After pulling a huge handful of clothes out of the closet, she came back and heaped them in a pile on the couch, hangers and all.

“You said you know labels, so see if there are any good ones,” she instructed, going back into the bedroom to get more.

Bart didn’t know what he expected from Maisie’s aunt’s clothes. After seeing the old television screens, he had got it into his head that Maisie must have been referring to her great aunt and the woman must have been close to a hundred because her life had declined so far that she only stayed home to watch TV, but when he saw the clothes he was confused.

When Maisie came back with another armful of clothes, he asked her, “How old was your aunt when she died?”

“She was forty-five,” Maisie said slowly.

“Forty-five? How did she die? ... If you don’t mind me asking,” he amended softly.

“Blood clots,” Maisie replied quietly.

“It must have been a shock,” Bart said, trying to be tactful.

“It was one of the saddest things I’ve ever experienced,” she replied. She turned from him and took a moment to collect herself. “Let’s not talk about it. I can’t keep all these clothes and it is so lovely of you to offer to help me to go through them. Let’s make three piles: things I want to keep, things that can be sold, and things that can go to a thrift store.”

Bart wanted to help her. He hadn’t been on a date with a woman who was picking up the pieces of a life that had suddenly and unfairly ended. However, Bart was a person who was good at compartmentalizing and he put his unexpected feelings aside and focused on identifying the clothes Maisie put in front of him.

He found a website on his phone that did exactly what he needed. It explained which brands were valuable and which pieces within those collections were spectacularly rare. It was upsetting how many of the pieces had been purchased in the last five years and how new all of them looked. Had they even been worn?

He picked out the cream of the crop and handed a pile to Maisie for her to try on. She came out in outfit after outfit. She and her aunt had similar figures and everything her aunt owned fit Maisie very well.

“Aunt Rita had the best taste in clothes. Maybe I should get rid of all my clothes and just wear hers?” Maisie asked with sad, pouty lips.

Bart didn’t know if it was a good idea for anyone to walk around wearing a dead person’s clothing and none of their own.

“How do you feel wearing that?” he suddenly asked her.

She was wearing a black suit with a flare in the waist of the jacket and very tight pencil legs. It was a good look for her, with her honey-colored hair falling onto the black material, but if she was planning to work as a florist, then where would she wear it?

“I don’t know,” she said blankly. “I never saw my aunt wear this. It’s only hers because it was in her closet.”

He came forward and took her hands in his like he was more important to her than just a guy she’d been out with a few times and he said, “If you keep it, you need to pay attention to how you feel when you wear it. If it hurts to have such a thing on your body, you have to get rid of it, or, at least, put it in a box somewhere. You can’t have the things of hers in your face that make you remember your aunt in a sad way.”

Suddenly, Maisie kissed him on the cheek.

She was just as shocked by that development as he was. They stood for a moment looking at each other’s stricken faces. Maisie tried to step away from him, but he held onto the hand of hers that he had suddenly grasped.

“Wait. I’ll skip the doorstep kiss for one kiss right now,” he offered, a tiny bit desperate to bring her close to him.

She nodded.

He kissed her, and an entirely new feeling filled him.

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Normally, when Bart kissed one of his two-week women, it was a very controlled production. He had to have the right look in his eyes, he had to approach her the right way, put the right amount of pressure on her lips, open his mouth the right amount, control his breathing, move his hands the way he practiced, and more. He was so concerned with how well he performed that, if he had asked himself if he enjoyed the kiss, the answer would have been that he didn’t feel it. If the woman was breathless, if the look in her eyes said she wanted more, that was good enough for him.

When Maisie gave him the okay, he absolutely forgot the proper way to kiss a woman to leave the right impression—to seem cool and yet warm blooded. He had worked hard to be the perfect paradox—passionate and aloof—the two most polar of romantic reactions at the same time.

He forgot.

Completely.

He kissed her like none of those old rules ever existed, which meant that instead of sweeping her off her feet, he was swept away himself.

Maisie kissed him back until the slightest hitch in her breath made him stop. He pulled away gently and gave her an admiring glance, before sending her to the back of the house to change her clothes.

Once he was alone, Bart was left wondering why a single kiss should make him tingle all over. His brain was more than happy to supply a few theories.

First, he was comforting her. She needed comfort and his lips conveyed to her sensitive mouth so much heat that she didn’t need to be held, she was already a raging furnace.

Second, Maisie did not like expectations. Thus, she liked the idea that he forfeited his expectations for immediate gratification. And truly, the win for that night was dependent upon his not asking for a doorstep kiss, which he could do since he had not been expecting a kiss that night anyway.

He had been very lucky she took the initiative.

After some light pondering as he waited for Maisie to come out in the next outfit, Bart realized that the doorstep kiss was something deeply cruel that men did to women. They refrained from kissing them all night and then on the doorstep, they gave the woman their love in the form of a kiss. She wanted to be loved, so she would want to be kissed more, thus increasing the man's chances of being invited in.

Bart had to figure out ways to make Maisie feel loved that didn't put all that pressure on her in the last moments before they said goodbye. That was what she feared.

She came out of the bedroom in the next dress. It had a wide skirt and it flounced as she did an experimental twirl for him. "I love this dress," she said, dancing a little on her toes. "Where could I wear it?"

"Out with me, next week," he answered breezily.

Cut Like Glass

SIX

Bart was successful in getting Maisie to date him.

On Monday, he changed his flower supplier to The Buttonhole Bouquet where Maisie worked. He showed up in the middle of the day and personally went over the flower orders he normally put in through his assistant. Maisie was confused and delighted that he came in personally. Surely, he had better things to do. He assured her that he did not and that the time out of the office was just what he needed to keep himself fresh for his late afternoon meetings.

The next week, he took her out to dinner. She wore her dress that cinched so pleasantly at the waist and flared at the hip. She wanted to be admired so he was careful to keep his gaze adoring and not heated as he let his eyes linger on her slimmer parts and then on her rounder parts. It was easier than he expected. He even allowed his hand to linger at her waist a time or two. He did expect to get his hands slapped, but apparently, in the black dress, he was allowed to escort her like the glory of the dress had something to do with him.

It was officially fall and, once at the table, he spoke to her again about taking her to the mountains to ski.

“My whole family goes,” he explained. He told her about Nina and her family. Then he told her about his brother, Morris, his parents, and some of the cousins who would sometimes come. “We have a cabin we share on the side of the mountain.”

“How many rooms?” she asked cagily.

“You’re worried that my family will be snoopy about whether or not we’ll sleep in the same bed?”

“Yes.”

“There are enough rooms that you will be able to sleep on your own without anyone even noticing. I just want to take you skiing. I don’t even know if any of my relatives will be there, but if you’re okay with it, I’d like to ask my sister and her kids to join us. They really brighten up the bunny hill.”

Maisie put her head in her hands. “I’m going to be outclassed by children?”

He chuckled. “We’re all outclassed by the kids. They’re just better at learning because they’re babies, but they’re really nice kids and I think it would make for a memorable weekend.”

“You like kids?” she asked skeptically.

“I like *these* kids.”

She took a sip of her water. “Well, that’s more than a lot of men can say.”



Bart finally got his way and Maisie sat in the breakfast nook of his family’s cabin in the frosty mountains. Her honey-colored hair spilled down her back in graceful curls. It wasn’t breakfast. It was early afternoon, but he had just finished making their lunch and he set it down in front of her.

"I'm still surprised you didn't want to stop somewhere to eat," she said, admiring his spread.

"I want to cook for you," he said simply. "It's so strange. You keep refusing to come to my house, but you'll come here with me."

"You can cook at my house if you want. No one is stopping you from buying groceries and coming over, or just pulling whatever you want out of the fridge and making it work. You can do either of those things at any time."

"Can I?"

"Of course, you can," she said, with a smile that almost undid him.

Bart couldn't take his eyes off her.

They had been dating for more than two months. His favorite way to pass the time was to kiss her for as long as she would let him, but she had clear limits and he never dared to ask for anything beyond them. She had already dumped one fiance, surely she would have no problem dumping him if he tried to take things too far without understanding why she had her rules.

In the time they had been dating, he had been grappling with the idea that if he really wanted to be with her, he had to ask her to marry him. Having fallen for her, he had already bought the ring.

It was white gold with a marquis diamond stone in the center. He had chosen it carefully because it had absolutely nothing in common with the ring she had worn for her last fiance. That ring had been rose gold with princess-cut diamonds glittering in a line.

The ring Bart bought for Maisie was such a striking piece that no one would ever miss seeing it on her finger. It absolutely screamed, "My husband loves me the most!"

Of course, he hadn't given it to her. He didn't know when he should give it to her. Timing was crucial if he wanted to hurry her, but if he gave it to her at the wrong time, it would ruin everything.

Instead, he placed a fruit plate between their sandwiches and pointed out landmarks in the view. "And there's the old mill, and behind that is Mount Washington."

"And that's my old house!" she suddenly cried with glee.

He turned in the direction she pointed, but he didn't see what she was looking at.

"I'm from here. I've seen Mount Washington before," she said softly.

He chuckled at himself and turned back to face her. "The view is better this way anyway."

"Have you ever been engaged?" she suddenly asked him. "Or married? I've never asked you those things before."

"No," he replied easily, stretching out his neck to the side, so his Adam's apple bobbed a little as he spoke. That angle did wonders for his jawline. He hoped she appreciated it.

"Neither?" she persisted.

"Neither," he answered flatly.

"What about your longest-lasting girlfriend?"

"Well, she was excellent," he said, drawing his words out.

"Tell me more," Maisie urged, getting more excited.

He was about to build up a flowery description of Maisie but stopped short. He was about to say that when he first saw her in the limo, she looked so delicate that he felt an immediate urge to take care of her. Like she was a goblet of purest crystal left on the edge of the table. She had to be caught and removed from her precarious position. When he saw her standing in her

garden, he never wanted to leave. Even at that moment, when she sat across from him in the breakfast nook, all his thoughts were geared toward finding new ways to make her happy.

They were all things no woman wanted to hear in the context of his last lover.

He exhaled his held breath with a puff. "I'm sorry. I wanted to pull your leg, but uh... I can't. You are my longest-lasting girlfriend."

Her eyes widened. "We haven't been dating that long. Do you mind telling me why you haven't dated anyone longer? I've only been in long-term relationships."

"Oh. I broke up with them. We weren't a good match and I broke it off before anyone got hurt. I mean, there was lots of annoyance, but no one got their heart broken."

"I see."

"Do I look like the man who could break your heart?" he asked with a cheesy grin.

She scoffed under her breath. "I have had quite a few long-term relationships break my heart. That's part of the reason I've been so bored. So, if I got really involved with you, let you completely into my life, let you butter my toast and you cruelly dump me... I'd get over it. I'm already over the guy I dumped three weeks before I started dating you."

"Wanna tell me any more about that?"

"Soon. I... um... want to wait a bit," she admitted hesitantly.

"Why?"

She tilted her head like she was checking off a box with her forehead. "I'm still not finished using you. I have a really large shelving unit coming next week and if you don't come over with your power drill and help me assemble it, I think that will break my heart. I want a library."

He laughed out loud. "That's why you're here, isn't it? I want to take you skiing and you want me to assemble some beast of a shelving unit?"

"Guess how many walls it covers?" she asked, thrumming three fingers against her upper arm.

He nearly died on the spot, she was so adorable.

"That sounds fair," he agreed because he would have agreed to anything she wanted. "You give me three days in the mountains and I give you a personal library that covers three walls? I'm on board."

She smiled as if she had beaten him at an invisible game he didn't know he was playing.

At that very moment, Nina and her family came through the door like an avalanche.

Bart had asked his sister to come with her kids. Her husband had to work, but Peyton and Jaime were free, so they came to enjoy the weekend skiing with their uncle and his new girlfriend.

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None of it was as awkward as Bart feared. Not that he had many fears, but he had plans to show Maisie how wholesome he was. Peyton and Jaime chirped in at the right times saying the right things that made him sound like his relationship with them hadn't been posturing in order to win her approval.

She favored him with multiple approving glances.

For Bart, Nina was the real wild card. If she decided that Maisie was in some way not good enough for Bart or their family, the teasing would be merciless. Bart had seen it before, and if it

reared its ugly head, he had retaliation plans of his own, but everything seemed to be going smoothly.

They went skiing in the afternoon. They skied on the bunny hill until the kids convinced Maisie there were a few larger hills that weren't that much harder than the bunny hill. They swore to her that skiing on a longer run would help her understand what was so nice about skiing.

"And if you fall and someone is watching out for you, that's when you know your family really loves you," Jaime said with a childlike grin. "They come and help you."

Maisie hesitated for a second and Bart wasn't sure, but he thought he noticed her lower lip trembling. Had what Jaime said moved her particularly?

She agreed to try the larger hill and went up the chairlift with Jaime showing her what she needed to do. Bart rode in the chairlift behind them with Nina and Peyton and watched her like a hawk. Was she really okay?

After the skiing, Bart made dinner at the cabin. He seared steak, and Maisie helped him put the meal together. If something like this was another part of married life, it was a married life Bart could see himself living. Bart felt the ring burning a hole through his pocket. It wasn't in his pocket, but the burning was as real as if it had been.

After dinner, Nina sidled up beside Bart. "I like her," she said as she pretended to wash a dish that was already clean so she had an excuse to stand beside him at the sink.

"Your approval is impossible, so that's unexpected," Bart said crisply.

"You didn't think I would approve?"

"Whatever you thought long-term, I didn't think you'd offer up your approval on the first day," he hedged.

"No. Really. I like her. She hasn't been brownnosing the kids or me. She doesn't laugh at stupid stuff to give us the impression that we're all having a really good time when we are actually having a decent time. She doesn't eye you up like you're her favorite snack, which I always find so distasteful in a woman who is dating my younger brother. In short, she's fabulous. Don't let Morris see her before you've put a ring on it."

His eyes widened. "How did you know I was thinking of that? Not about Morris, but the ring?"

"I dated my husband for three weeks before we got engaged. Mom and Dad dated for two weeks. Grandma and Granddad dated for seven days straight and then signed the papers. I figured you were a three-week man and that's why you ended all your relationships after two weeks. But it's been quite a bit longer than two weeks."

"So I'm not bananas for already wanting to marry her?"

"Oh, no. You're a freak. It's just that the rest of us are too. It's a family thing. Everyone in the world thinks we're crazy, but if she lasted more than three weeks, then you want to marry her. You're one of us."

Bart sighed in resignation.

"How long have you been dating her?" Nina asked, begging for details.

"Three months."

"Better start warming her up to the idea."

"How did you warm up Stewart?"

"I didn't. I told him that if he ever wanted to see me again, he had to show up with an engagement ring or to forget about coming over."

“How long—”

She interrupted him. “Two hours. That’s how long it took to drive to the jeweler, pick a ring, pay for it, and drive to my house. He may have also had a shower.”

Bart sighed again. “Let’s hope Maisie’s like Stewart and she can tolerate us.”

Cut Like Glass

SEVEN

After that, Nina threw Bart and Maisie outside telling them to go get dessert or something while she put her kids to bed.

"They're too excited to sleep with you around," she explained dismissively.

Bart took Maisie down to a village pub where he ordered cherries on chocolate brownies served in martini glasses. They each had one. The atmosphere around them was quite charming. There were fairy lights inside the pub, a fire burning in the fireplace near them, a couple kissing with wild abandon to their right, and bells playing in the background.

Bart couldn't wait for a moment to come where he could pull Maisie into his arms and kiss her. He no longer waited until the end of the night, but the moment didn't come. The timing was always off.

As they left the restaurant, he swung his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him. He was about to say something to get her heart racing when suddenly someone said, "Maisie? Is that you?"

She turned her head and her contented expression fell. As Bart followed her gaze, he saw the person who had interrupted them.

It was her fiance. His name was Chalmers. Bart recognized his ratlike features from Instagram.

Maisie stepped forward and in doing so, stepped away from Bart. He couldn't let her get away and came up beside her.

Maisie fumbled her greeting. "So charming to see you."

"What are you doing here?" Chalmers snapped. "You shouldn't be here."

Maisie rolled her eyes and snapped her tongue. "Here it comes," she muttered under her breath, not loud enough for Chalmers to hear but loud enough for Bart to hear. Louder she said, "Bart, this is Chalmers. Chalmers, this is Bart. My ex and my current meet at last."

"Your current?" Chalmers questioned, like he barely realized that Maisie had a man's arm around her.

Bart's left arm was around Maisie, so he extended his free hand and offered it to Chalmers. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you," Chalmers bit back like he hardly had the energy to say it. "If you're her new man, why are you letting her come to a place like this? Don't you know how dangerous a ski resort is for a person like her?"

Bart was so perplexed by what the other man said that he didn't have the sense to be reproved by Chalmers' threatening demeanor.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking. You look well too," Maisie proceeded with the conversation like Chalmers had said something normal with his rat face instead of what he had actually said. "How about if we just part ways here for tonight?"

As she spoke, the last three words were smacked with blood as her nose had started bleeding again.

Chalmers and Bart both dug into their pockets for something to blot her nose with, and Chalmers won when Bart only had his wallet in his pocket and not a travel-sized tissue pack.

"Is this your first date?" the other man asked Bart snarkily as Maisie took it and dabbed at her nose.

"What makes you think this is our first date?" Bart asked, getting defensive.

"Sorry, man," Chalmers said, relaxing further. "I jumped down your throat for not taking better care of her, but you can't be very close to her if you don't have tissue in your pocket. Get some. You'll need it." He started backing away. "And get her indoors. You don't want her to slip and fall."

All of that made Bart want to commit second-degree murder. How dare he say that Bart wasn't ready to take care of her? How dare he act like Bart wasn't close to Maisie? How dare he!

"This isn't our first date. She hasn't had many bloody noses," Bart said like he was biting ice.

Chalmers was turning to go, but he was looking at Bart like he pitied him, like he envied him, and like he couldn't wait to get away from the both of them. "Welp, tell you what. If you marry her, make sure to invite me to the wedding."

"You don't think it could possibly last?" Bart hissed as much as a gentleman could hiss. "Sour grapes?"

Chalmers pointed at Maisie to show Bart what he was missing and turned away to rejoin his group.

Bart looked down to see what Chalmers was pointing at. Maisie had bled through the tissue and there was blood seeping between her fingers.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly, but firmly.

"Oh... I haven't told you," she said, her words were framed like what she was saying was nothing, like it was funny, like she was telling him some cute gossip that he wasn't quite in the loop enough to have heard yet. "I have a blood clotting disorder. I have to take blood thinners to help me not die, and as a consequence, I get bloody noses. Sometimes, they're pretty bad."

"Oh?" he said, following her as she started walking back to his truck at a quick gait.

"Yep. I told you, didn't I, that my aunt died of a blood clot? Yeah. I know I did. I just didn't like to mention that I have the same disorder. So did my mother, which is why she died when I was seventeen. When that happened, I went to live with my Aunt Rita, which is why her house is so special to me. She wasn't exactly like my mother, but she was a really good 'other' mother." She was walking away from him while she talked.

Bart chased after her. "Why haven't you told me this?"

She skipped ahead like a little girl playing a game where the object of the game was to die in the most carefree way possible. He saw her skip on the other side of cars like they were trees and he was a kid playing night games outside with his friends after dark.

"Because," she said, almost like she was telling a ghost story. "If you look up how to care for people with my disorder, the number one thing you must avoid is... What? Bart? What?"

He stared at her quizzically before he straightened and answered her. "Head injuries."

She laughed like she was the head bully leading a mob in the schoolyard. "Exactly right! Give the man a prize!" She clapped her hands like it was more wonderful than anyone could take before she jumped and side-hopped down the parking lot. "No one was more surprised I didn't die the night we met than I was."

"It's icy. Please slow down," Bart called after her.

She laughed before she fell down. He raced around the back of a car and he saw where she had fallen. She had landed next to a tree with her knees on the lip of the circle of bricks that surrounded it. For some reason, she looked like she had fallen into a martini glass and the snow was what they had used to rim the glass with. They were in the adult world again, and she lay in the imitation cup like a garnish they used to decorate the drink with. Was she a slice of lime, or an olive on a toothpick?

"I didn't hit my head," she said as she let her head fall backward as looked up at the clear night sky. "And a really bad bruise anywhere could be my undoing."

"This was why you kicked me out of the hospital the night we met? So I wouldn't hear you talk to your doctor about what was really going on?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that. I just didn't think you could take it that night from a legal perspective. None of what happened was your fault. Even if I dropped dead in the hospital, which could have happened, I didn't want you to feel like it was your fault. It wasn't. Even if you had been the one to throw that glass that hit me, it still wouldn't have been your fault. Some things... Some people are just not meant to last."

He crouched next to her beside the lip of the cup. It was a cold night. Normally, he would have hurried to put her in the warm cab of the truck, but something was different under the night sky filled with stars. He wanted to hear the story before even one more thing happened. "So, now are you ready to tell me about Chalmers?"

She breathed, her breath like ghost vapor, floating up into the air like death was all around them. "When we were engaged, I asked him for a wedding date on two separate occasions. When I went to open my mouth to ask for a wedding date the third time, I stopped myself. Why would this time be different from the times he refused to give me an answer? I tried the words out in my head a few times. Then I said them aloud when I was alone, just to see how they sounded. Do you know what I sounded like asking for a wedding date?"

"What?"

"I sounded like a child. Like a whiny child who wasn't getting her way, talking to a parent who is putting her off. The parent wants to do what the child is asking for, but for reasons that are too complex for the child, they're not going to explain it to her. They are going to brush their child off and hope that they forget about the thing they were asking for. At least, that was how my mother used to speak to me. And I realized with a gut-wrenching lurch that a part of him wanted to marry me and another part didn't. I mean, if there's something I really want to do, I want to do it right away. I thought he felt the same way since he knew about my condition when he asked me to marry him. I'd already told him I didn't need a big wedding. We didn't need to spend a year planning it or spend tens of thousands of dollars. I just wanted to get married and get the most out of my life."

"What did you tell him the third time?"

"Oh..." she breathed, staring at every star in the sky rather than meeting Bart's eyes. "I never had that conversation with him. There was no point. Something had changed since he proposed. He didn't want to marry me anymore, but he didn't want to break up. Breaking up with a woman who could die at any moment is complicated. I've seen it before. So, I went back to basics. If he didn't want to marry me, then the next question was if I wanted to marry him. Did I want to marry him so bad that I couldn't live my life without him? Well, it turned out that I had

cooled off too. As I explained before, he wasn't my only long-term boyfriend who *thought* he was the type of man who could get together with a woman like me, but after a good long think... he couldn't. *They* couldn't." Maisie turned to Bart and finally looked into his eyes. "I'm a coward for not telling you sooner."

"Do you think I'm like Chalmers?" Bart asked, rubbing his gloved hands together.

"Most of the men I've known want to play a love game where they call the shots," Maisie said softly. "If he wants the woman for a one-night stand, she should be okay with that. If he wants her for a perpetual girlfriend, until he finds the woman he truly wants to marry, she should be fine with that too. If he wants her to marry him and have his babies, she should do that too, but I'm a terrible choice for all three women. I can't be someone's one-night stand. One thwap too hard against a headboard and I'm in an ambulance and he's talking to the police."

"Has that happened?" Bart asked in a territorial rasp.

"No. I may be careless, but I'm not that careless. Whoever I'm with has to know my situation. Still, I can't be anyone's long-term girlfriend. I require too much maintenance. The point of a long-term girlfriend is that it is the relationship that requires the least amount of work. I'd make an even worse wife, dropping dead after having babies. No one is going skiing with me. I'm not good for vacations, bearing children, or even planning a life with. It's... the worst for a million reasons. What if I die tomorrow? What if I live to be eighty? What if I take on responsibilities and take on the burden of another person's heart and then I'm just gone?" She touched Bart's face with her wet-gloved fingers. "I'm sad I had to tell you the truth."

"Do you think that I'll leave you now that I know all this?" Bart asked gravely.

Maisie let her head loll back even further into the snow and looked at the sky instead of him. "No. If you're like other men, tonight, you'll act brave. Tomorrow, you'll still think that being with me is a great idea. It won't occur to you until after you've been with me a while that you are losing your opportunity to be with healthy girls who can be slammed up against headboards... or who don't bleed onto white pillowcases for no reason and give you reason to worry whether or not they have dropped dead whenever they don't answer the phone immediately. It wears people down. You have nothing to be ashamed of if it wears you down too."

Hearing all that put Bart in a pissy mood. He wanted to scream things. What things? He wasn't exactly sure. He did not want to be like the other men. Bart didn't answer her. He ground his teeth together and didn't answer.

"Chalmers was at my aunt's funeral with me," Maisie explained. "Before that, he didn't think my blood disorder was something real, even if I told him my mother died when I was seventeen, even if I told him the doctor told me to be careful, even if my nose bled. It wasn't real until he saw Aunt Rita's corpse and she looked thirty instead of forty-five in her casket. Suddenly, everything I had told him was real. Her funeral was quite a long time before I got possession of her house."

"I bet," Bart agreed, knowing a bit about how long it took inheritances to be received.

"Perhaps I should have broken up with him in person, but I didn't want to hear what he had to say about our breakup. He wanted it. He just didn't want to ask for it. Wanting to dump me made him feel like a monster. You saw him. He didn't have anything to say. When he met me at the restaurant on the night you met me, I had already broken up with him. He just wanted to leave me with the impression that he wasn't a bad guy because he felt squeamish about marrying me. Listening to him made me want to slit my wrists just so I would never have to listen to another

man say those horrific, defensive, washed-up excuses again. I warned him. I began our relationship by warning him, but it wasn't real to him until there was a dead body."

Bart blew a stream of air into the stars above their heads. "So, you didn't tell me?"

"No. I didn't. I still wish you didn't know because I wish it wasn't true."

"Why? You don't think I'll understand?" he asked, sitting up straighter and brushing the snow off his coat. "You could have told me that first night at the hospital."

"I don't know if you'll understand or not. All I know is that now that all this is out in the open, you're going to want to have multiple conversations about it. Should I go skiing tomorrow? Is it safe? What if I dismount the ski lift poorly and it hits me in the back of the head?" She put her elbow in the snow and turned on her side. "What do you think?"

If Bart hadn't been a banker, he might have replied the way Chalmers did. He might have told Maisie that she had to play it safe. If she played it safe... Suddenly, he remembered all the old televisions screens they had packed off to the eco-center. Her aunt had played it safe. She had stayed home, watched TV, and interested herself in a safe hobby like clothes, but she had still died at forty-five.

The reason being a banker stopped Bart from falling into the same trap as Chalmers was that when he invested money on behalf of his clients, there was risk. Often, there was a lot of risk. Risk was a natural consequence of going for something that had a large reward. The thing that made Bart such a successful banker was that he was unaffected by the risks others took. He put those risks out of his mind when he did his work.

Looking at Maisie now, he understood why her other men had failed. They weren't the type who could throw everything they had into one madcap scheme, and they certainly couldn't throw all of Maisie into it. The truth was that they didn't want to be responsible. If Maisie died, they didn't want to pick up the pieces. They didn't think that the joy of being with her (while they could) outweighed whatever pain was caused when she died.

But she might not die.

Just like she said, she might live to eighty. Every minute, doctors got better at treating disorders and diseases. She might be just fine.

They weren't willing to take that risk every day for the rest of their lives. Maybe they were afraid they'd end up alone. Maybe they were afraid they'd end up alone with children they needed to parent. Maybe they were afraid they'd be left with children who would die just like their mother.

Bart swallowed.

It was a big risk.

"Maisie," he said, suddenly falling on his back next to her in the frozen martini glass of salt-like snow. "I love you. I bought a ring. I was planning to ask you to marry me."

She gasped next to him.

"And I want you to go skiing with me tomorrow. I love skiing and it's something I want to do with you. Right now, I don't understand all the limits. Maybe I don't want to understand them. I understand that being with you is risking everything each day. I can really understand those boys crapping themselves when you don't answer the phone. What I can't understand is why they would want to cut themselves off from you. You are the loveliest woman I've ever met."

Her breath caught and she didn't answer him.

“It could be,” Bart said gently. “That the thing I love about you most is how you approach life because you know it’s fleeting in a way they don’t. If every day is a miracle to you, I want to live my life that way too.”

“Are you asking me to marry you?” she asked in a hushed whisper.

He rolled his eyes and looked at the stars. “I have been thinking of what kind of proposal would be best for you. I’ll ask you to marry in any way you want me to. With a thousand balloons? A thousand candles lit in a heart? On one knee at the fanciest restaurant in the city? What dream do you want to come true?”

She rolled over onto him. “I want this.”

He held her and kissed her as the moment lasted.

Kissing in the cold is a little like kissing a dead person, as their lips are cold like frost, like death, like the future is already past. The stars gleamed in the sky above them and their breath froze like mist. It all reminded them that some things last forever and some things are gone like the breath of a person’s words that disappear in the chill of the night.

Cut Like Glass

EIGHT

Bart threw a green tie over the back of his neck. In the past, he didn't normally wear bright ties to work, but ever since he married Maisie, he didn't want to wear his old ties. The old ones were gray, navy, or dark red. They had patterns that reminded him of tiled floors or the bricks of a wall. There would be plenty of time for mourning in his life. He'd pull the old ties out then. After all the changes in his life, he wanted bright ties. They were the one spot on his outfit where he could show how he was feeling.

That morning, Maisie was asleep. She had the day off because she had a doctor's appointment later that morning. For the first time, she was letting him come along with her. A grand concession that she only permitted after their wedding. He just had a few things to do at the office before he came back to pick her up.

Moving in with her instead of moving her to his mansion on the side of the mountain was a fantastic idea. It only took a few minutes for Bart to get to work each morning. He did not realize how much of his life was spent in transit when he lived outside the city's main cluster. Or how lovely it could be to give away all the things he had in his life just to prove his status.

What had his status been for anyway?

If it had only been to prove himself to women he romanced and then discarded after two weeks, then that had been a pathetic way to live his life. He told himself that he had to do things like that in the past to secure the best clients, to impress his bosses, and to enhance the glamor of his position for the people who worked under him. After marrying Maisie, it turned out he didn't need any of those things—comparing people to animals and amusing himself with a constant flow of criticism only to convince himself of his superiority. Now people were people, including him. The lone wolf that he had been had evaporated. He was a man with a woman like cut crystal between his fingers. He loved the change in himself almost as much as he loved Maisie.

He and Maisie had their wedding at his mansion on the side of the mountain. It was beautiful.

Bart found out he was the kind of man who cried when his bride came into view in her white wedding dress. He couldn't help himself. She was all in white. She was all for him like a present that had all of life wrapped up inside. It was the most precious moment of his life.

Bart also insisted that Maisie invite her ex-fiance, Chalmers, to the wedding.

Under normal circumstances, Bart would have thought that doing such a thing would be unnecessary and something people did only to make themselves completely wretched, but Bart twisted it on its head by explaining that they needed to show her ex-fiance that Maisie was going to be okay. Chalmers needed to see the moment when she married someone else, landed in the arms of someone capable and came to a home he could never give her.

It was something Bart said would comfort him and let him know that she forgave them.

Bart wondered if he had made the right choice when Chalmers took his seat at the wedding without a plus one, but the ex-fiance looked at Maisie the way someone looked at an angel. An angel is a person who brings a message from God. In her case, she brought a message about

life and joy through difficulty. Chalmers couldn't be the man for her, but Bart thought, as he admired her in her wedding dress, as he watched her twirl in her first dance with her new husband, that somehow he would be a better man because he knew her.

Chalmers didn't cause a scene or even act sore.

He stood up after the first dance and spoke to Bart for a moment. He approached, congratulated Bart, and turned to leave. But at the last moment, he paused and asked Bart one last question. "What makes you different from me? What makes you able to handle all this?"

Bart brushed his hair off his forehead in a sideways motion that people usually use at their neck to make a motion of someone getting their head cut off. "It's simple," he said casually. He wanted to look cool if nothing else. "I'm just greedier than you."

Chalmers had not expected that. He did a double-take. "What does that mean?"

"It means that greedy people know that what they collect cannot last. Boats sink, houses burn down, cars crash, and money shrinks. We know that the best things in life cannot last. We don't expect them to. We still buy the boat, the house, and the car, and we don't shrink back because our hopes and dreams will one day end up at the bottom of the ocean. Your greed just wasn't as strong as mine."

Chalmers' mouth twisted. "I don't believe you. It's not greed. It's something else."

"What?" Bart questioned.

"I don't know, but you can't sell me on the idea that you're doing this because you're a greedy millionaire."

"I am a millionaire," Bart answered calmly.

"Oh?" Chalmers chirped. It was clear from the look on his face that he did not believe Bart.

"This is my house," Bart explained. "You should see my cars. You should see my truck. I have a boat, but it's been out of the water for a few years. I can't seem to find the time, and now I won't..." his voice trailed off as his eyes found Maisie.

She was talking to Nina and laughing, her bouquet jiggling in her hand as her body shook with joy.

"Excuse me," Bart said as he covered the space between him and Maisie.

"I have to have another dance," he said as he pulled her into his arms. "Dance with me again. I want to make your dress twirl."

Maisie bounced a little in his arms as he took her back onto the dancefloor. He kissed her hand to show how much he adored her, and then he twirled her, making the iridescent beads on her dress shine in the late evening light.

"I never want tonight to end," she whispered to him when he pulled her back into his arms.

"Tonight is never going to end," he replied. "Tomorrow morning will still be tonight and tomorrow afternoon will still be tonight and even if we go to sleep and wake up again, it will still be tonight."

She kissed him to stop him from saying enigmatic nonsense.

Except it was not nonsense. It was the way things were. That night never ended.

Not even once.

THE END

The Land of Umbrellas

A Novelette

Stephanie Van Orman



The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter One

If He Wraps His Car Around a Tree...

"I think we should break up," Lindsay said to Oliver in the darkness. Her voice was little more than a cracked whisper that spoke more of her pain than what her words actually meant.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his hand reaching for hers, though he couldn't see her well from around his inflated airbag.

"I told you. You drank too much to drive," she replied, refusing to answer his question. "And yes, I'm hurt. My airbag didn't inflate. I hit my head. I'm bleeding and my legs are pinned between the seat and the dashboard!"

"Okay," he said, collecting his wits. "Can you reach the lever that pulls the seat back?"

She reached down and found it. Tugging on it, it moved the seat and she felt blood flow into her legs again.

"It worked?" he questioned, still unable to see her.

"Yes. It worked."

"Can you open your door?"

Lindsay pulled the lever on the door, but it didn't move. "No."

"What about the window? Can you open that to get out?"

"I am not opening the window," she objected immediately. "It's raining, and if I open it, I might not be able to close it. We might be stuck here for hours waiting for a tow truck."

"Can you reach your phone?" he asked.

She groaned. "It doesn't matter if I can or can't. It's out of power. I told you that before we left. I shouldn't have let you drive."

"I'd only had two," he said, stiffly defending himself.

"Yeah. Two too many."

Oliver stuttered some sort of apology, but Lindsay couldn't hear it and even if she could, all she could think about was the string of men who had disappointed her before that moment and how she should have expected Oliver to do the same. When actually, she knew why she hadn't pegged him for the same pig from a different litter as all the other men she knew. It was because something about Oliver always made her feel like she had come home. He was like the brother she'd never had or the cousin who found her in a crowded room and introduced her to everyone like she was a star.

The plan for her to come work at Oliver's family hotel during the winter had been in motion since before she had agreed to be his girlfriend, and being his official girlfriend had been great until he wrapped his car around a tree. At the moment of impact, her first thought had been wondering if they would die.

When she saw that they hadn't died, her next thought was that she needed to break up with him. Lindsay had never been one to postpone difficult jobs. Those were the first words out of her mouth after the crash.

Now, she had to do the thing victims sadly need to do sometimes. She turned to Oliver and asked him the question that would make her inhuman if she skipped it. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes," he said quietly. His legs were not squashed between the wheel and the seat. His seat was further back to begin with. He'd hurt his wrist and his neck, he admitted in wheezy half breaths.

"Where's your phone?" Lindsay asked him.

"It's in my back pocket."

She let out a huff of annoyed air. "And I'm supposed to put my hand down your pants to get it?"

"Only if you want to call a tow truck or an ambulance," he replied crossly.

Lindsay had never heard him use that tone before. He was probably in more pain than he was admitting.

"I love it when you talk that way," she chuckled, breaking the tension.

"You never love anything," he scoffed. "You told me as much the other night when I asked you out. You said you never fall in love."

She unbuckled his seatbelt and put her hand in the back pocket of his pants. It was empty. "No. I said the opposite. I said I always fall in love. It just doesn't stick. Something always happens to spoil love for me, but you were always so alluring when you smiled and played nice. I didn't even know you could do a grouchy voice when you weren't acting. It's reassuring." She felt behind him into his other pocket. It was also empty. "I thought you said it was in there."

"I thought it was," he said, peeking around the airbag.

"Charming," she said drolly. "If it's not there, then where do you think it is?"

"It's probably in one of the front pockets," he said quietly.

"And why can't you get it?" Lindsay asked, almost at the end of her patience.

"My wrist hurts on that side and I can't reach it with my left hand over the airbag," he whined.

She patted his leg before diving into his pocket. "It's there," she said, reaching in with two fingers to tug it free.

When she turned the phone over to look at it, the screen was already lit up. Someone was calling, but the ringer was turned off so they didn't hear it.

"You're getting a call," she said. "Gavin."

"It's my brother. Answer it, and hold it up to my ear."

Lindsay answered the call. "Hello, you've reached Oliver Grantford's mobile phone. Please allow a moment for me to connect you," she said, not having lost all of her spunk.

She held it up to Oliver's ear while he spoke.

"Hey, Man. Yes, we were on our way up tonight. The girl? It's Lindsay. Remember? She's going to help with the hotel renovations since it's always impossible to get people to come. Yes... that may be... I'm sure you'll be able to find something for her to do... Yes, I was driving when you called. No, we've stopped just outside Victoria. We had a little accident. We should be back on the road in no time." There was a long pause before Oliver finally got the chance to speak again. "Fine. You're right. We had a big accident. I need to see a doctor and maybe she does too. Fine! Do that!"

The call abruptly ended and Oliver mushed his face into the airbag like he might suffocate himself.

"What's going on?" Lindsay asked.

Muffled sounds came from the airbag and it was quite some time before Oliver took a breath. He admitted to her that his brother, Gavin, had been in Victoria for the evening and was coming to get them. "He says we can have the car towed in the morning."

"Okay," Lindsay said, opening the vanity mirror over her head to see what the damage was. The cut on her head had bled, but that didn't mean it had spoiled her good looks. The car still had power and a light appeared to show her that she looked exactly like a zombie in a haunted house. She knew exactly what the zombies in haunted houses looked like. It had been her summer job two years in a row.

She hunted around for a tissue. "Don't you at least have an old Tim Horton's bag with a few napkins in it?"

"I cleaned the car for the drive," he explained, his cheek still resting on the airbag.

She would have been more impressed that he'd cleaned his car if there had been no accident. "Shouldn't that thing have deflated by now?"

"Probably," he said, sounding desolate.

"Should we pop it?"

"No. I like it. It's homey."

"Homey?" she repeated.

"It's a lot homier than Gavin is going to be when he gets here."

"Is he going to be really mad?" she asked cautiously.

"Yup."

Oliver didn't offer any more of an explanation than that, and Lindsay didn't ask for one. Instead, she sat and listened to the rain on the roof of the car. After a minute of that, she turned to him and said, "Don't sleep. People with head injuries aren't allowed to sleep."

"And I was so looking forward to our first night sleeping together," he said in a shallow monotone.

She laughed. "Our first night together is obviously a success if no one is sleeping."

He laughed too. Then he turned and looked at her with the vanity light still on. "You look like a zombie."

"So do you."

"Do you know any good necrophilia jokes? That would be a good way to pass the time."

Lindsay groaned. "What do you call it when two necrophiliacs go on a date?"

"A wake?" Oliver offered.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I asked without having a plan as to how to finish it. I thought you'd nail it without me having to come up with a punchline."

"I have a head injury if that's any excuse."

"I'll use that excuse too," Lindsay said, using the sleeve of her shirt to blot at the blood on her face. It didn't improve anything so she closed the mirror and turned out the light.

"Even though things started out badly," he said gently. "The whole thing won't be bad. We're going to have a good time and we can practice our jokes."

The last class they had taken together had been an improv class. Lindsay had loved doing it, but she felt Oliver was better at it. He always made her laugh so hard, she broke. It was all very unprofessional, a strong hint that an acting career was not in her future.

On the road, there had been headlights that passed from time to time, but nothing could have prepared Lindsay for the truck that pulled up behind them. It was massive. At first, she thought it was a tow truck, and then she thought it must be some sort of emergency vehicle, but did they have headlights shaped like parentheses? At any rate, why did they have their brights on?

"That's Gavin," Oliver said, trying to open his door with his left hand and failing at it.

Gavin opened the door for him, said something messy Lindsay couldn't quite hear, deflated the airbag, and helped Oliver out. He had an umbrella and he escorted his brother around to the passenger side door of the truck before coming back to the wreck of a car to get Lindsay.

Lindsay couldn't open her door, so she scooted across her seat and into the driver's seat. The side-view mirror practically blinded her when Gavin came back to help her. He had a flashlight in his hand and whited out her vision completely as he shone it in her face. She leaned down in the driver's seat, found the release for the trunk, and pulled it.

"What are you doing?" the man with the flashlight asked.

"Opening the trunk. My bag goes where I go."

"I'll get it," he said as he grasped her upper arm in his and lifted her to her feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping."

"You're hurting me!"

He let go and without the support, she suddenly found that her bruised legs didn't give her much to stand on and she fell, knees first, into the wet grass. He caught her again, but only so she didn't fall further. Dropping the umbrella, he put both arms around her and lifted her back onto her feet. Her head was swimming.

"You don't have to," she wheezed.

"I think I do." Gavin picked her up the rest of the way and carried her gingerly to a seat in the back of the oversized truck. He turned on the cabin lights and looked at her, but all Lindsay could do was blink at the light and cover her face with her hand. "I think you're right about the hospital," he said to Oliver. "That will have to be our first stop. I'll get your bags."

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Two

If He Gives You the Bed While He Takes the Couch...

The emergency room in rural Vancouver Island was much less busy than the emergency room in Metro Vancouver. Exactly three people were sitting in the waiting room. They were clearly all together and only one of them was waiting for medical attention. Lindsay had never spoken to a triage nurse so quickly in her life. They didn't even let Oliver sit down in the waiting room before they hauled him to the back and ordered X-rays for him.

Lindsay was left alone with Gavin, who looked like a yeti that had evolved just far enough to pass for a human. He was very hairy under his toque. His taffy-colored hair was loose and mingled with his beard which was long enough to hit the top button on his shirt. That piece of clothing was made of green plaid and layered under a jean jacket. His hands were rough and he said so little, it made him seem more like a yeti.

Lindsay was spared from having to make conversation with him immediately as a doctor showed up to take a look at her. Other than the scratch in her eyebrow, which had made her bleed like a pig, she was not concussed, nor did she need stitches. She was given a chair next to Oliver's bed while a nurse went to fetch a second chair for Gavin.

It was nice behind the curtain in the emergency room. It was past eleven, so the lights over the bed were off. The curtains dimmed the lights from the nurses' station. It was a muted light, perfect for someone whose head still hurt.

Oliver was very unwell as he rested on the bed. For one thing, he had stopped making jokes, a sure sign of trouble.

Oliver wasn't the kind of man who made a good first impression on Lindsay. For one thing, he was too cheerful and she usually went for more sullen types. However, sullen types had not treated her well, so she decided to try Oliver's wide smile, thick cheeks, and hands big enough to make a girl follow when he led her on the dance floor. Well, he hadn't exactly danced with her, but their improv class gave him plenty of opportunities to lead her.

For the first time, Lindsay wondered if he might not be all right.

She glanced over at Gavin, his eyes glinting from between the hairy line of his eyebrows and the beginning of his beard. She finally found a moment to introduce herself to him. She turned to him and stuck out her hand, but quickly retracted it when she realized how much blood was still caked on it. "Sorry for the poor introduction," she said. "I'm Lindsay Thomas."

Gavin looked at her and said gruffly, "I'm Gavin Grantford."

The only thing she could think of to say was, "That's a good name. G is the loveliest letter in calligraphy and you've got two of them."

He paused for a moment. "No one has ever told me that before."

"It's because the cursive capital G is one shape and the typeface capital G is a completely different shape. You know what the prettiest shape is?"

He looked at her strangely from under his toque and over his beard.

Normally, a look like that would have discouraged her from saying anything further. Except, they were stuck in an emergency room for who knew how long, so she continued. "It's a circle or a sphere. Think about it. Have you ever seen anything more beautiful than Europa or Enceladus?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't have if I knew what you were talking about."

Lindsay explained, "Europa is a moon of Jupiter, and Enceladus orbits Saturn, but that's not the point. The point is that a circle is the most beautiful shape and a G is a circle with a beautiful gap and line to it. A Q can be very enchanting as well, except that when you bring the capital Q into cursive, it looks like a fancy number two, which is not very appealing. A cursive capital G on the other hand is so pretty. Don't you think it looks sort of like someone swishing their cloak out with one hand? Don't even get me started on how fascinating a lowercase g is."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said blankly.

Lindsay considered that as an open invitation to shut her mouth and promptly did so. She was naturally very chatty and did not enjoy silence in general, but annoying a stranger who had driven her to the hospital was not on her list of things to do that night. Obviously, it was already a difficult night for Gavin, who had not planned on spending the wee hours of his night babysitting his baby brother in the emergency room. It wasn't easy for Lindsay either, but she was used to everything in her life flying out of her control.

The silence broke when Gavin seemed to realize that he had been unfriendly, though not outright rude. He turned to her and said, "Oliver hasn't told me much about you other than your name. Where do you come from?"

Lindsay's pulse quickened. She loved being asked questions. "Vancouver."

"And how do you know Oliver?"

"We went to acting classes together."

"And you've always been from Vancouver?"

"Yes, there and around there. Have you always lived here?"

"Yes."

She was disappointed the questions had stopped. The silence stretched out again, and then the doctor pulled the curtain back. They had already met him when he had examined Lindsay's head injury.

"Well," he said, with his calm doctor's voice. "His right wrist and arm are broken, but I'm more worried about the bump on the back of his head."

The long and short of it was that the doctor was going to keep Oliver in the hospital overnight and run more tests in the morning. There was no reason for Gavin and Lindsay to hang around. The hospital would call them when they had more news.

"Where was Oliver taking you for the night?" Gavin asked her as they walked back to the truck.

"He said something about an empty apartment over a clothing store that was empty."

Gavin groaned quietly. "I wish he had told me that was what he wanted because if he had I would have reminded him that it is unfurnished."

"I can crash on the floor," Lindsay offered. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Yeah, I'm not going to let you do that."

"I don't need much. Anything is an upgrade from a chair in a hospital. Do you have a couch?"

Gavin huffed, making his disgust clear. He opened the truck door for her, helped her up into the high-seated truck, and closed the door. "I'll take you to the hotel," he said once he joined her on the other side.

"Aren't you renovating it?"

"Yes, but some of the rooms are still being rented out. The single bedrooms need repair, but the suites are ready to be used."

Lindsay huffed, making her disgust clear. "I can't take up a whole suite."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm broke. Even if you give me the room for free, I can't afford to tip housekeeping. Isn't there somewhere I could crash quietly until we can talk to Oliver and see what plans he made?"

"You don't have to worry about tipping housekeeping or the cost of the room. I'll cover both. It's just for one night and I'll get Oliver to pay me for it later. Feel better?"

She chortled. "You think Oliver has any money? You think we came to renovate a hotel because we're swimming in cash?"

"Okay. Okay. Okay. I have a guest room at my place. It is absolutely free for you to stay there. I just didn't think you'd want to stay alone in the same house with a man you don't know."

"I'm not precious, okay?" she said, wrapping her finger around her red-brown ringlet. "And I have never once, in my entire life, been the only person sleeping in a room."

"Well, you're going to try it tonight."

"It'll be a fresh experience for sure. Make sure to bump around in the next room, and tell your girlfriend not to mind me when she gets up in the morning. She can make all the noise she wants. I can't sleep when it's too quiet."

"I don't have a girlfriend," he said tightly.

"Hmm... I thought Oliver said you did."

"Yes. I *did*."

His voice was like a door slamming in her face, the single word demanding that she stop asking questions. Lindsay decided to let it go without another word. He'd already arranged for a place for her to sleep. He didn't need to do any more for her that night.

Twenty-five minutes later, they pulled up in front of a log cabin. Lindsay had seen places like it in her travels, but she'd never stayed in one before. Gavin got her bag and led her around to the back of the house.

"This is the way in?" she questioned as she followed him.

"No, I'm leading you to the way out." If it hadn't been said with good humor behind it, she probably would have left him there, but it was said the way Oliver said things. He and his brother were the kind of men who said 'no' when they meant 'yes'.

Inside the cabin was a staircase that led up, but Gavin took her forward past the stairs and through a sitting room into a private room. With the light switched on, it looked like a hunting lodge. The logs were bare and there were antlers on the wall. The bed was made up with a bedspread of red and black plaid.

"Is it really okay for me to sleep here?" Lindsay asked quietly. "It looks too nice."

"It's not too nice," Gavin said from beneath his beard. "The suite at the hotel would have been nice."

"Thanks. Where's the bathroom?"

He showed her. He was about to leave when he suddenly turned back and asked, "Is there anything else you need?"

She thought about the gnawing ache in her stomach. She was hungry, but she'd been hungry before. She smiled and told him she had everything she needed.

After he closed the door between them, Lindsay peeled her clothes off one sweaty alarmed piece at a time. Each item of clothing felt tragic as she freed herself from it. She realized that even though she especially liked the clothes she had worn that day, she was never going to be able to wear them with the same carefree spirit she had when she put them on that morning. Forever onward, they were the clothes she had worn when Oliver crashed the car and ruined their romance. They would be clothes that had been taken off in a strange room in a strange man's house.

She tried to look at the experience in a positive light. Tried to remember that it was the first time she had slept in a log cabin, which was something she'd always wanted to try. It was her first night sleeping in a room by herself...

That felt luxurious.

Starlight shone through the window.

She thought of all the times in the past when it had been possible for her to sleep in a room by herself. The opportunity had come up, but she had always opted to sleep alongside one of her sisters, or a friend, or an aunt, or her mother. Her life had always been abuzz with friendly faces, though never a man she could trust.

She thought about the gruff woodsman outside the door. They had driven deep into the forest to come to the log cabin. It was a little like a comedy about BigFoot. A beautiful young journalist goes with a mysterious stranger on a quest to find a sasquatch when, in a bizarre plot twist, the mysterious stranger turns out to be the beast she was hunting for.

Lindsay chuckled and pulled a long silky nightgown over her head. She lifted the blanket to get between the sheets and found they were made of flannel. That was a surprise for her. She'd never slept on flannel sheets before. She imagined herself a character on a piece of felt stuck to the flannelgraph with a kindergarten teacher telling the story of how you should never judge a person by how they looked.

Her head hit the pillow and again she was reminded of that feeling she always had when she was with Oliver. It was a feeling like she had come home. But why was she feeling it in his brother's guest room? It wasn't an important bed or an important pillow. This was where he housed strangers when he couldn't put them up in the hotel. It shouldn't have felt like home, but it did.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Three

If He Lets You Wear His Shirt...

In the morning, Lindsay awoke with her head feeling clear and pain-free. The doctor was right, she only had a cut in her eyebrow that was exactly three millimeters long. She went to the bathroom and cleaned the remaining blood from the folds around her eyes. With that done, she suddenly had this impish idea that she should do her makeup before she got dressed. Lindsay was not the type of girl who looked like an entirely different person when she put makeup on, but she knew it improved things and she had made a bad impression on Gavin the night before. She had been covered in blood, been with his drunk brother, been involved in a car accident, and bored him with her conversation about calligraphy.

She got her makeup bag and went about salvaging her pride. With the arrival of morning light, she had a second try ahead of her. She wouldn't make the mistakes she made the night before. The freshly revived zombie look was already washed off. She wouldn't bore him with her nonsense. Besides, she'd look like a beauty, which always made everyone a little nicer to her when the going was tough.

Lindsay's most noticeable attribute was her hair. Her hair was too thick and had natural waves usually only worn by homeless people. She had gone unnoticed most of her grade school years, until the year before graduation, she had had an impulse to dye her hair an auburn red, which had gone splendidly. It had given her whole body a new impression and people who never noticed her suddenly took notice. The brown in her hair brought out the brown in her eyes until she made her hair cherry coke red. Then her eyes turned gray.

For her clothing, Lindsay preferred to wear monochrome—especially white. The contrast of the red hair and the black and white clothes made her even more dazzling. She used to wear lots of colors but after the hair color change, all her clothes were white, black, icy blue, and gray.

When she finished her makeup, she returned to the bedroom, went through her bag, and realized that she had left her housecoat at her last digs. She rolled her eyes. That meant it was lost forever. She opened the closet to see if there was anything already in the room that she could slide over her nightgown. To her surprise, the closet was mostly full of men's clothing.

She chose a white collared shirt with light blue lines and threw it on over her nightgown. She was too hungry to think about the closet and what all those clothes meant. Instead, she padded up the stairs and into the kitchen.

The upper floor was beautiful, all vaulted ceilings and glass overlooking the forest outside, and through the trees, she spied a lake. Or was it the ocean? She paused to admire the view and looked carefully in every direction, pretending to look for the sasquatch.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the front door. Lindsay didn't know where Gavin was, but she thought it was better to answer the door before the knocker knocked again. What if he was still sleeping?

Swinging the door open, she put a finger to her lips and said, "Good morning," as quietly as possible.

A woman stood on the doorstep. She held a cardboard box in her arms and stared at Lindsay like she was a serpent. Gawking, she said sharply, "This is from Marissa." She practically threw the box, open-topped, in Lindsay's unprepared arms. "It's what she had left of Gavin's things at her place. Obviously, she doesn't want to see him again after last night and she asked me to bring them."

"And your name is?" Lindsay asked, at least wanting to get the name of the person who dropped the box off before she disappeared.

The woman seemed as concerned as Lindsay that she needed to look cool and didn't leave immediately. She placed her sunglasses on her nose and then pointed that nose in the air. "Tell Gavin Carleen dropped it off."

"I will. Thank you. I'm Lindsay," she said, balancing the box on one arm and giving her a friendly little wave.

Carleen's mouth turned into a snarl as deliberate as her bleach-blonde hair. She ignored the friendliness and said icily, "I'm busy. I'd better be going." With that, she flipped her blonde hair, pranced down the wooden steps, and got into her compact car.

Lindsay turned around and bumped into a man coming up behind her. With zero lead-up, her cheeks were aflame.

"Hi," she said, peering up into his amber eyes. "I didn't know anybody else was here," she said, gasping for breath a little like a fish. Pausing to examine him, she didn't know if she'd ever seen a man as attractive as the one standing in front of her. In the next moment, he was taking the box from her and looking over her shoulder to see Carleen's car as it drove away.

His hair was brown with so much blond in it, she couldn't tell if it was sun-bleached or merely dyed. It grew long around his ears with bends in it that made it appear like it had recently been tied in a ponytail. His beard was clipped short and everything about him was beautiful. The cartilage in his nose, the smirk on his lips, the look of interest and intelligence in his eyes, which were framed by gold-rimmed spectacles.

To Lindsay, it felt like she had never known how to describe the man of her dreams. She had to be shown what she wanted, and it was right in front of her.

"Close the door," he said to her as he led the way back into the kitchen.

"Hi," she said again, following him. "I'm sorry we didn't meet last night. I'm Lindsay."

"We did meet last night," he said, looking amused.

She stared at him. Black toque? Gone. Bushy beard? Mostly gone. He smiled and the smile was something like a reincarnation of Oliver's smile. It was Gavin and he looked astonishingly less like a sasquatch than she remembered.

"Sorry, Gavin. You look so different. You cut off your beard?" What she wanted to say was, 'You chopped down the forest that was growing on your face,' but she wisely refrained. A tightly clipped beard was one thing, but when a beard hid a man's Adam's apple, things had gotten out of hand in Lindsay's opinion. Now, Gavin's beard wasn't

even a tight-clipped one. He was down to stubble. "Looks really good," she said out loud.

He merely nodded and placed the box on the kitchen floor.

"What is all this stuff?" she asked, trying to direct her focus to the box if only to stop herself from staring at him.

"It's everything that's left from my broken relationship."

"Everything? Small box."

He groaned slightly. "At least, I hope it's everything."

"Did things end badly?"

"For me, things ended well, because they ended. She is unhappy, which is what always happens when people don't get what they want. Hopefully, she will feel better soon."

"Marissa? That was your girlfriend's name? Ex-girlfriend now?"

"Yes," he said bluntly before kicking the box out of the way with his toe. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"I love breakfast."

"What should we have?"

Lindsay looked around a little frantically. "Something easy? Toast? Cereal?"

He looked at her. "I'm not an infant. I can cook. Do you like pancakes?"

"I love pancakes!" she gushed. She had never had a man make her pancakes in her life.

He busied himself in the kitchen preparing his batter. "I got a call from Oliver this morning."

"Thank heaven it wasn't the doctor," Lindsay breathed.

Gavin nodded in agreement. "He's fine except for the breaks in his arm. The head injury wasn't as bad as the doctor feared. I thought we'd pick him up after breakfast. He's getting a hospital breakfast, but that's all part of his punishment for crashing his car."

"Can I help you?" she asked, coming around the island to stand beside him.

He looked at her like he'd never seen her before. "No. Get out."

She slithered back to the other side of the island and sat on a stool facing the rest of the kitchen.

"Pancakes are easy," he elaborated. "And you don't know your way around my kitchen."

Lindsay remembered her vow to avoid being chatty and closed her mouth with a determination not to open it again until she was asked a question.

"Do you eat dairy?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Are you allergic to anything?"

"No."

"And there's nothing you hate and you only love breakfast?" he asked, that touch of amusement entering his voice again as he stood in front of his grill.

"I don't just love breakfast. I love food." Then suddenly, she forgot her resolution to keep quiet as a terrifying thought entered her mind. "You know, if that girl who just came by, Carleen, is your ex-girlfriend's friend, she might have misunderstood what

was going on when I answered the door. She might have thought that you'd already replaced Marissa with me. I didn't get a chance to explain anything to her."

"That's all right. It's not your problem," he said coolly, noticing what Lindsay was wearing over her nightgown. "I don't think I ever let Marissa wear one of my shirts."

"Sorry. Should I not have borrowed it?" She tugged on the collar, revealing the lace neckline of her floor-length nightgown.

He glanced at her. "It's fine. You can wear it."

If there was one thing Lindsay was confident about, it was her physical appearance. That had been a lot of the reason she thought she could be an actress in the first place. Looking at Gavin across the island, she was perplexed. Did she make such a bad impression on him the night before that she couldn't salvage it in the morning?

His back was to her while he cooked. His shoulder blades jutted slightly out of the back of his black t-shirt. He wore blue and gray plaid pants, like that was what he had worn to bed. She was suddenly interested in what his bedroom was like. The master bedroom! The idea took complete control of her mind and she wondered if she could see the doorway to his room if she swiveled around. Around she went, and what she saw was a couch with blankets and bedding spilling onto the floor. She saw with dismay that aside from a bathroom tucked beside the fireplace, the kitchen, the dining room, and the living room took up all the available floor space on the top floor.

Without another second ticking on the clock, she realized he had put her to bed in his own room and he had slept on the couch.

She had been pink before. She was red now!

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Four

If He Lets You Live in His Old Girlfriend's Apartment...

"Huh?" Gavin said as he sat across from Oliver and Lindsay in a booth at a cafe. They were having donuts and herbal tea. They were only there because Gavin had called it when he said that Oliver would not like the breakfast he got at the hospital. After they picked him up, he insisted they go out for donuts. So they sat in the booth and squabbled.

"I'm sorry," Gavin said, giving a passive-aggressive apology. "You didn't think to ask me if it was all right for Lindsay to live in Marissa's old apartment?"

"I didn't think it would be a big deal," Oliver defended. "You said she moved out. I know it's not big enough for more than one person. I thought Lindsay could stay there and I'd stay over at Ricky's. What's the big deal? It's not like Marissa is coming back and you're on the hook for the lease. Someone might as well use it."

Gavin groaned and rubbed his temple.

Lindsay did a double take. When Oliver told her of his plan to work in Cowichan Bay after the tourist season, she thought he said he would stay at Gavin's. Plans had changed, and he hadn't mentioned that to her or Gavin until that minute. She noted her annoyance but said nothing.

"It's fine," Gavin said, sounding peeved. "It's absolutely fine. Where's Lindsay going to get furniture and where is all that furniture going to go in two months when the lease expires?"

Oliver had been about to respond when Lindsay interrupted him. "Look, I'm a grown-up. Gavin, if I can borrow you and your truck for a few hours today, I can get the essentials. I won't need a lot of furniture. I've done this sort of thing on the fly many times and if I don't hate the place, can you help me make arrangements to lease the apartment in my name after the two months are up? If I hate it, I can surely find somewhere else to live during those two months."

Gavin smirked. "I guess you can borrow me. I think the lease will be renewable if you decide you want that. Oliver, do you want to come with us to buy furniture?"

Oliver groaned. "I feel terrible. My arm is broken in three places! I can't help. I'm *helpless*! You two clearly don't need me to come with you since you're such fast friends after meeting last night. Can't you just drop me off at Ricky's?"

Lindsay's eyes moved from Oliver's cast to his face in a couple of circuits until her gaze landed on his eyes. Didn't he want to talk to her about the fact that she'd dumped him? Normally, when she told a man she was dumping him, he was thrown into a panic and tried to salvage their relationship. Oliver just sat there, whining about his hurt arm and asking to be dropped off at his buddy's.

Lindsay had no idea who Ricky was.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was not there because she wanted to have a romance with Oliver. Their getting together had been a kind of impromptu thing (like everything else in her class). Maybe it didn't mean much to

either of them, but she knew one thing: she had been planning to come to the island to help with the hotel *before* she and Oliver decided to make out in the front of his car a few nights before. She wasn't trying to run off with him specifically. She was trying to start a new life that had nothing to do with acting.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and decided to forget that they had ever said anything about being a couple.

"That's fine by me," she said with a noncommittal shrug.

"I guess I can do that," Gavin said, blowing a chuckle through his nose.

Lindsay felt a little weird. She had never had brunch with two men before when neither one of them was interested in her.

Oliver started closing the lid to the box containing the rest of the donuts. "I'll just take these as a thank you for Ricky."

Soon, they were back in the truck. Oliver rode in the front with Gavin and Lindsay sat in the back. Truly, she hadn't appreciated how much space there was in the back of his cab when she'd ridden in it the night before. It was beyond luxury.

As they drove, Gavin yelled little touristy bits of information for Lindsay's benefit. In particular, he drove them past the hotel she was going to help him renovate.

The Sealion Hotel was placed on the side of a hill that looked down over the bay. It was a long thin building with many windows. Plenty of rooms to renovate. There was not a beach where the water and the land met. Instead, the hotel led down to the marina. There was a mountain on one side of the road. The other side was a strip of shops lining the bay. The marina was on the other side.

Oliver pointed to her new apartment as they made their way down the main street. Lindsay saw the shop called 999 Things to Wear and the smaller second floor on top of it. That was where her new apartment was. It had windows overlooking the bay. She couldn't wait to see inside it.

She tried to squelch her interest. It might have a beautiful view, a stunning location, and be an absolute mess on the inside.

Ricky's house was up the road. The road wound through trees past houses Lindsay didn't know were there until she saw a touch of siding between the tree trunks.

They pulled up a winding driveway and stopped. The yard was messy and the house was in disrepair. Oliver leaped from the truck saying a hasty goodbye to Gavin and Lindsay before whipping his bag out of the back with his good hand and heading for the front door. Once there, he rang the bell, seemed to realize he was an idiot for leaving without saying goodbye, and blew a kiss to Lindsay.

Lindsay didn't know what to do with a farewell like that. She had never been left that way by a man who was pursuing her. When she was seeing someone, he didn't pay attention to anyone besides her. She had never had a man she was dating blow her a kiss instead of just kissing her. Maybe he had paid far more attention to her dumping him the night before than she thought. He just wasn't that upset about it.

"Want to come up front?" Gavin asked. "It's less bumpy up here."

As she was feeling a bit carsick with all the twists and turns in the road, she did as he suggested. When she got to the front seat, the door to Ricky's house opened and Oliver ducked inside.

"Do they smoke weed or something?" she asked, looking after Oliver with a bent eyebrow. "Who's that excited to see his buddy?"

Gavin didn't comment and put the truck in reverse, getting them back out onto the road.

"Oliver skipped telling me the backstory. Care to fill me in?" Lindsay asked, hoping for an information dump.

"They've been friends since they were in grade school. Basically inseparable, but I don't know much more than that. Oliver hasn't visited lately. Maybe he's in a hurry to catch up," Gavin drawled lazily as his wheels took the curves in the road like the truck had driven the road so many times it knew the turns without being steered.

"Hmm... He's never mentioned Ricky to me before," Lindsay said as she gazed out the window.

"Would you be uncomfortable staying with me again tonight?" Gavin asked slowly.

Lindsay felt the heat forming in her cheeks. "You tricked me," she said. "I thought I was staying in your guest room. I was sleeping in your bed. I would not have agreed to that if I had known."

"I know," he said, without embarrassment or reservation. "That was why I brought you in the back door. Want to do it again tonight?"

She feigned a laugh but didn't answer. The plan was for them to buy the furniture she needed.

"I'm only saying this in case we can't find you a proper bed today," he said smoothly. "I want you to know that I'm fine with putting you up for another night."

Lindsay was always suspicious whenever a man behaved chivalrously if it meant that she was somehow placed in a vulnerable position because of it. She glanced over at him. He wasn't interested in her. His hands were on the wheel and his eyes were on the road. Unlike another man, he wasn't getting anything out of it.

"Thanks, but we'll find a bed. My standards for such things are surprisingly low. We're not going to buy a bed. We're going to buy a mattress. I've been researching how to outfit a small apartment for weeks. I have a plan. I really wouldn't like to waste more of your time than I have to. As it is, I'm really thankful for your help today."

He smacked his lips. "I'll be thankful if you're helpful with the hotel tomorrow. Oliver has started out by being useless. He won't be doing any heavy lifting with a broken arm."

Lindsay tightened her fists a few times to ease her frustration. "Will that be a big pain? Not having him help?"

"I didn't expect him to help much in the first place. Please don't quit, Lindsay," he said. "I didn't have a plan for Marissa's apartment and I'm the one paying for it, so I'm happy to let you stay there for two months rent-free."

"Really?" she gasped, in awe of his generosity.

He groaned. "I am paying for it anyway. Doing renovations at the hotel may not be your bag, but please don't quit. If you don't like the work, we can talk about it and get you doing something more up your alley. There are lots of jobs in hotels."

"What's your job?"

"I do whatever," he said gruffly. "Right now, it's renovating season. The rain is going to come down and the tourists are going to stay home. Look," he said pointing to a spot in the sky. "There's a bit of rain coming now."

He wasn't kidding. The rain came down suddenly and dotted the windshield in water droplets.

He stopped the truck in front of 999 Things to Wear and he and Lindsay ran to get a look at the apartment before they went shopping.

The staircase that led to the apartment was on the side of the white-flanked storefront. They stood under the eaves as the rain came down and Gavin struggled to open the lock. Inside, the stairs went straight up with no breaks.

"This looks fun," Lindsay said as Gavin shut the door behind them.

"By *fun*, I assume you mean unbearably gloomy."

"Nah, it's not so bad," Lindsay countered. "There's a window at the top of the stairs letting all that light in. At least, there isn't a single yellow light bulb swinging from a wire. We're doing good so far."

"You're already acting nicer than Marissa did," he commented.

"How so?"

Gavin marched up the stairs ahead of her and started working on the lock. "She didn't like this place at all. I renovated it a few years ago for the owner, so I thought it was fine, but she didn't like it."

"I bet nothing at all would have made her happy if what she wanted was to live with you."

"Maybe," he said as he cracked the door open.

When Lindsay saw inside, she was pleasantly surprised. The ceiling was higher than it should have been to account for the towerish look the outside had, though there wasn't much floor space. There was a little U-shaped kitchen. One side of it had a little counter space and then the stove. Then there was a little more counter space and then the sink. The other side of the U was a length of counter that had the majority of the cabinets under it. There were only shelves over the counters.

There was a breakfast nook that was an old booth from a restaurant that had been repurposed. It was nailed down beside a window that had a view of the bay and marina. Lindsay looked out and saw the colorful houseboats docked in the water.

"Wait a few weeks and the sea lions will get here," Gavin said, coming up behind her. "They like to sun themselves over there in the fall. They wail all night. I hope they don't bother you with their bellowing."

Lindsay laughed. Like a miracle of nature such as sea lions were going to bother her. She was going to be happy with the chance to see them up close.

He snorted because he didn't believe her. "There isn't much else to the apartment. There's a bedroom up those stairs, a linen closet, and a bathroom.

Lindsay looked around. The kitchen and the dining room were best friends with each other and there wasn't much space to spare. "No living room?" she asked.

"No. Before the renovations, the space where this booth is now was the living room, with a couch and a coffee table, there was only room for two people to sit comfortably. With the booth, you can seat three, which was a pretty big improvement at the time. Plus, with the old design, there was no room for this sweet little entryway."

Lindsay hadn't seen it before because Gavin had been in the way, but there was indeed a line of hooks to hang coats and a bit of the wall had been cut away for a person to store at least three pairs of shoes.

"Oh! That's good."

"You'll just have to entertain your guests at the booth," he said dryly.

"Yes, because I'm going to have so many people up here," she droned sarcastically. "This is already leaps and bounds better than a hotel room. I have a stove! I've never had a stove before. I'm gonna make cookies."

"Wonderful," he said drolly. "As your landlord, I tax cookies. One in every six. Got it?"

Lindsay giggled.

He pointed through a doorway. "Wanna check out the bathroom?"

Lindsay followed him into the bathroom, which was nicer than she expected. Naturally, there was no bathtub, but the shower stall was less oppressive than others she'd seen in small apartments.

They moved to the bedroom, which was the largest room in the apartment, though still not large. There was enough room for a double bed if she wanted one and a dresser. Immediately, she knew she'd get a single mattress and use all that spare room for a bookshelf and the wall space for a TV... eventually. She would have to save up some money. How many things could she buy with the money she had?

She started making a list. She needed a mattress, a bed, a dresser, a mirror, bedding... etc.

"Will it do?" Gavin asked from his position at the door.

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "It will be great. I love it. Let's go shopping. I'm so glad you're willing to take me and that you have a truck. I bet we'll be able to get everything today. It's so handy that the dining room has that booth. Now I don't have to worry about getting furniture for that space. No living room makes it easier too. I'm so thankful for all this, Gavin. You gave me a job and you're letting me stay here." She was getting teary, thinking of how she'd given up trying to be an actress and how many people had told her no... Having someone tell her yes was undoing her at the seams.

She'd always dreamed of a place of her own, hoping one day her acting gigs would pay enough to get her just this much, but it never worked out. But now, looking down on the bay, she could not have asked for more.

Gavin smiled and looked like he would have hugged her, but instead, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Yeah. Let's go get you a bed."

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Five

If He Washes Clean Dishes...

Gavin stood at Lindsay's new kitchen sink and she watched him wash her dishes that may or may not have needed washing. They were straight from the store. She was wiping out the cabinets.

"When Marissa lived here, did you do a lot of dishes in this sink?" Lindsay suddenly asked.

"No. This is only my third or fourth time up here since I finished the renovations," he said stiffly.

"That makes it sound like you and Marissa didn't date for that long."

"We dated for three years."

"What?" she exclaimed. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said slowly. "From our first date to last night, it was almost three years."

Lindsay licked her lips and bit back her words until she couldn't anymore. She opened the fridge and started wiping that out too. "Care to tell me more about that?"

"It started when she asked me on a date and I said yes. Then she asked me on another date and I said yes again. Then there was a lot more of that. Then one day, a friend of mine said something about my girlfriend. I laughed and said I didn't have a girlfriend. Very politely, he reminded me that I had been dating Marissa for over a year. I couldn't believe it. Our dates had meant so little to me that I hadn't even realized that everyone thought we were a couple. I had never phoned her up for pleasure and asked her out."

"She flew that low under your radar?" Lindsay wondered out loud.

"She took me places where it felt like I was only there because she needed a plus one. I thought she was just using me as her spare, but after my friend said that, I started to wonder if she was waiting for me to do something to take our relationship to the next level."

Lindsay was so enthralled with his confession that she closed the fridge before she finished cleaning it and leaned against it, so she could listen to what Gavin was saying without interruption.

"Had you kissed her?" she asked.

"Yeah. Many times, but I'd never taken her home with me and I'd never gone home with her. Our kisses were like kisses under the mistletoe, kisses when the New Year's Eve disco ball drops, and then on her doorstep when I said goodnight. I was thinking, 'She likes this, we're adults, and this is nothing! It's a kiss, not matching funeral urns.' I didn't attach too much importance to it."

Lindsay sidled closer to him, leaning against the countertop. "You must be a very reserved person, or you weren't very attracted to her."

He scoffed. "Probably both."

Lindsay had actually been making a move on him by inching toward him and saying those things, but it had gone over his head. She didn't let that discourage her. She

was still a ragingly attractive woman even if this particular man did not find her so immediately.

"What was year two like?" she persisted.

"I outright asked her if she wanted anything more from our relationship than just the casual date every month or so."

"What did she say?"

"That she wanted to marry me and have my children."

"She didn't!" Lindsay gasped in horror.

"She did. I told her I didn't want anything more than casual dating. It was a heavy blow for her, but she said she'd take what I had to offer until she met someone better."

"She didn't meet anyone better, did she?" Lindsay ventured.

"No. She didn't. She spent the next year trying to figure out a way to get me to drop my guard, change my mind, and take her in. The biggest thing she did was get me to rent this apartment for her so she wouldn't have to drive all the way back to Victoria if we were out late. Our dates were far more frequent at that point. I got this place rather than have her stay over with me."

Lindsay put the pieces together and was horrified at the picture they made. "So that means that it doesn't matter why I was at your place this morning. There is no reason under the sun that a woman would be at your house in the morning without throwing a javelin through Marissa's heart?"

He stepped away from the sink. "Exactly."

"Are you going to tell her the truth? That I was there because I was a stubborn mule? Because I wouldn't stay at a hotel? Because Oliver and I were in a car accident and you had no choice but to help me out?"

He chuckled coldly. "There is no excuse for letting you stay that won't make her blood boil. You think you were stubborn? You think you put me in a bad spot last night? Think for a second. We're talking about a woman who wasn't just bringing something like the cheap logic you brought last night, she was bringing everything. She was offering to cook for me, clean my house, get the oil changed in my truck, and make love to me twice a day until death do us part." He laughed again before meeting Lindsay's eyes. "And if I wanted to fight you last night, I definitely could have made it so that you were not sleeping in my bed last night. So, no. I'm not going to explain it to her."

Lindsay was hot now. Maybe she'd been wrong about her flirtation going over his head and he actually liked her a lot. Maybe she just hadn't spotted it because he was a lot more sullen than the kind of man she normally categorized as her type. The look in his eyes was sending hot shivers down her arms.

But he looked away crossly.

She took a couple of steadying breaths. "When you broke up with her, what did you say?"

"That I'd been trying to put her off. That beard I had last night? I'd been growing it for almost two years and I hadn't trimmed it once. I heard her say once that she didn't like men with beards, so I grew one. When it started to come in thicker, she kept her peace. When it got so long that it aged me twenty years, she started asking me to cut it, but I wouldn't."

Lindsay groaned. "Wait a second! So, you're saying that even if I hadn't answered your front door like a little trollip in your shirt, Carleen would still have had something devastating to report to Marissa? That you had *finally* shaved your beard?"

"Unfortunately," he admitted reluctantly. "Although, obviously, I was not expecting Carleen to show up on my doorstep with all that crap. I had not given Marissa any of that stuff as gifts of affection. One of the things in the box was a can opener. I gave her my spare because hers broke. That's all there was to it and she returned it like she couldn't bear to have it in the house because every time she saw it, it would remind her of me? A can opener? Good grief."

"So, last night, you told her that you'd been trying to put her off?" Lindsay asked, trying to get him back on track.

"Sorry, I missed something. About a month ago, she moved out of here and gave me an ultimatum. If I didn't do something to move our relationship to the next level, she was going to end it with me. I thought that was the end of our relationship, hence Oliver thought it was all right to offer you this apartment. Yesterday, I got a text from her saying that she was sorry she had moved out and she wanted to talk to me. Afraid she would try to move back in, I went to Victoria to get the keys and have it out with her."

Lindsay waited for him to continue, tense. It suddenly mattered to her which way the wind had blown during that conversation.

"I told her that I never wanted a romance with her and I don't understand why she wanted to be with me so badly. The whole thing did not go well, but I stood my ground, got the keys, and made it clear to her that there was no need for the two of us to ever speak again."

Lindsay hopped up on the clean countertop. "That sounds conclusive. Do you know why you weren't attracted to her? Did she have an annoying laugh or an unbearable habit?"

He shook his head. "I should have liked her. Everyone liked her and everyone was confused when I didn't."

"Well, no one can force you to be in a relationship," Lindsay said factually. "Though I am interested in what made you want to set her up in this apartment."

He looked around. "It was for me. I'm not good at arguing after midnight. It was so she wouldn't sleep at my house, so I wouldn't have to drive her home, and so she could get a change of clothing without being annoying. She only lived here on weekends."

"And you kept on kissing her?"

"I did... I even kissed her last night," he admitted with a shrug.

"When you left?" Lindsay wanted to know.

"No," he corrected. "When I got there. I couldn't have helped it. She sort of shot herself into my arms."

By this point, Gavin had circled Lindsay. She was perched on the counter and he had slung the dish towel over his shoulder and now he was leaning over her with one hand on either side of her thighs on the countertop.

"Did you kiss Oliver yesterday? I noticed you didn't today." His head was blocking the light behind him.

“Uh, I broke up with him yesterday, when he crashed the car. I don’t know if he’s acknowledged that I dumped him, but he hasn’t texted me today even though I sent him a couple of messages asking if he was okay.”

“You know, a month ago he told me he was bringing you here to set you up with me,” Gavin said.

Lindsay’s mouth hung open. “That can’t be true.”

“That’s what he told me when I told him Marissa had left. Then he called me two days ago to say that it was all over because he had decided to keep you for himself.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes. “He’s not doing a great job of that.”

“No. He isn’t,” Gavin said, his smolder up to bruising intensity.

Lindsay wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to tell her that he was about to kiss her and that it would be nothing like how he had kissed Marissa. When he kissed Marissa, it had been placid and dull, but when he kissed Lindsay, it was going to be so hot, it would crack lava out of the floor.

To her disappointment, he broke eye contact and moved away.

She was an actress and prone to the dramatic. Of course, he wasn’t going to kiss her. Of course, he was going to wait until he knew her better, and when it was clear that her relationship with Oliver was over. It also wasn’t a good policy to make out with someone the day before they started working for you. He wasn’t going to lay a finger on her.

“Let me show you where to meet me tomorrow morning,” he offered as he ditched the dish towel and stood in front of the door.

“Yeah,” Lindsay agreed, hopping off the counter and following him.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Six

If He Can't Keep His Eyes Off You...

They strode along the length of the bay, walking by the water instead of by the street and Gavin showed Lindsay the back loading zone for the hotel, where they'd meet to start work in the morning.

"What are you going to have me do?" she asked pleasantly.

"I'm going to have you help me remove all the drywall in the bathrooms. It will be messy. Come prepared to get messy."

She nodded with relief. She could help with that. That was nothing.

On the way back to 999 Things to Wear, Gavin asked her if she wanted to stop at one of the restaurants they passed for fish and chips.

They went inside and the first thing they saw was Oliver. He was shooting pool at a table using his cast to rest his pool stick on as he set up the shot. Lindsay's eyes darted around trying to see his best friend, Ricky, but all she saw was a blond bombshell who was at least three inches taller than Oliver.

"I thought I saw your truck outside," Gavin said as he approached the two of them with a smile. He took Lindsay by the elbow and brought her closer, "Ricky, this is Lindsay. Lindsay, this is Ricky."

"Richenda," Ricky corrected, bouncing her curls over her shoulder. "Everyone keeps thinking I'm a guy when they hear me called Ricky without seeing me. I'm so tired of it!"

Lindsay burst out laughing.

"What?" Ricky defended. "I'm a hairstylist and sometimes men make appointments. They think they're going to get their hair cut by a cute guy with a flirty smile and they get me. They didn't want their cut by a woman. I mean, I do a good enough job that they aren't mad in the end, but I was definitely not what they were expecting." She huffed. "I'm sure you get the picture."

Lindsay got the picture a lot better when Oliver joined them, though not the picture Ricky had painted. Lindsay had never thought of Oliver as a shrimp, but he looked like one next to Ricky. She was taller than him with wider shoulders and more muscles. When Lindsay shook hands with her, she felt like her bones were hollow while Ricky's were made of lead.

Oliver looked uncomfortable.

"And what about you?" Ricky said, booping Gavin on the nose. "I can't remember the last time I saw this much of your face. If you're beardless, then the queen must be dead. Long live the queen!" she chorused.

"Ugh. I was being a baby," he said offhandedly.

Lindsay smiled at Gavin, acknowledging his latest escapade. So... he had seen Ricky's truck outside, bet that Oliver was inside with Ricky, and decided to cut through the pretenses by having them all meet sooner rather than later. She favored him with

a wild grin. Maybe he liked her so much he was planning on breaking a few conventions.

Not only that, but Gavin didn't look like a lightweight beside Ricky. He was a hairbreadth taller than her and whether or not he was as solid as her was unclear due to all the layers he was wearing.

"Do you have a table?" Gavin asked, still friendly.

"Yeah, that one," Ricky pointed.

"We're hungry. Enjoy your game," Gavin said, again taking Lindsay softly by the elbow and leading her toward the booth.

Oliver and Ricky's dirty dishes were still on the table and Gavin stacked them as naturally as if he was in his own home. The waitress was there in a flash. She knew Gavin well, so she took their orders and cleared away the dirty dishes.

"Do you come here often?" Lindsay asked, sounding stupid, but so stupid it was funny.

"Of course. I have lived here all my life and I've worked in the bay all my adulthood. Of course, everyone knows me."

"And everyone thought you were dating Marissa for the last three years?"

"She was territorial," Ricky interjected, abruptly sliding into the seat next to Lindsay. "She kept all the good girls away."

Before Lindsay could remark on that Oliver and Ricky came back to the table to join them.

"Oh, you're finished playing. Who won?" Gavin asked.

"I won!" Ricky burst before Oliver had a chance to answer.

He sat next to Gavin with a shrug that showed his bound arm. He put his sling back on.

"It doesn't matter that he's in a cast. I always win," the blonde bombshell said proudly.

Lindsay sat back and looked at Oliver. Considering the way he had leaped from the truck to get to Ricky's, it was now obvious that he was enamored by her. He had undoubtedly been so for many years, probably since they were teenagers. It was all so obvious why he couldn't get anywhere with her. She dwarfed him, made him feel like a little boy, and outperformed him at things he felt he should have excelled at.

One look at Ricky and Lindsay knew she had actually never had a chance with Oliver. If he was still pining for Ricky when there were so many obstacles, and they'd spent so much time together and then so much time apart, he might never get over it.

"Well, that settles it," Lindsay said, looking directly at Oliver.

He made a face that she knew meant, 'Wait a second.'

Their food came and they talked pleasantly of the things they did with their lives. Oliver talked about their improv class and mentioned all the plays and TV appearances Lindsay had had. He kept talking her up like she was something special. Hearing his praise all lined up like that felt deceptive. For one thing, he made it sound like she had actually had a life as an actress. Nothing felt further from the truth. She had parts, but she didn't make money and she was getting too old to couch surf because she couldn't afford a place of her own.

"Let's not talk about that anymore," she said softly after Oliver had already told all the best bits. "I'm going to rip up drywall tomorrow and I'd rather not think about all that old stuff."

"But you—"

"Look, Oliver, you're a doll and everything you've said has been so sweet, but I don't know if you *get* what my coming out here was about. I know we talked about it and I said some things that were meant to cover my embarrassment, but I didn't make it as an actress. I'm not taking any more classes. I came out here to get a job and make a life."

He was confused. "But you love your family. Why are you leaving them on the mainland if you love them so much?"

She scratched behind her hairline. "I wasn't able to make it as an actress, but I was hoping I could make it as a person. Do you know what that means? While I was trying to be an actress, do you know how much money I took from my family? Loads. An uncomfortable amount of money. For a long time, I thought that eventually, I'd make millions and so their support would not go unrewarded." She cast her eyes downward and reminded herself that she had planned to have this conversation with Oliver once they reached the island and if Gavin understood her situation, then it was all the better. As for Ricky listening to her over-the-top confession... Lindsay had been an actress and the content of her speech didn't even touch some of the embarrassing things she'd done repeatedly on stage. So, she continued explaining without a hitch in her voice. "Last year, I started realizing that my paychecks had not been going up. I made the same amount of money last year as I made the year I was eighteen. I'm twenty-six. It's time to give up."

"So, you're not going back to the mainland with me after the hotel is finished?" Oliver asked.

"No. At the very least, I'm not taking any more money from my family. I'm going to stay here and prove to myself that I can be a responsible adult." She turned to Gavin. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done for me with the apartment, taking me shopping today, giving me a job, and for last night."

That was a slip-up. Lindsay was used to adding a slight sexual innuendo to everything she said because she had to be recklessly and relentlessly outspoken when she did improv. She regretted it immediately as Ricky piped up.

"What happened last night?"

"He picked the two of us up when I wrecked my car," Oliver supplied dryly, squashing the innuendo. "Remember, Ricky? I think he deserves a thank you."

Lindsay nodded her agreement.

After Gavin and Lindsay had finished eating, Oliver stood up and announced, "I'm going to walk Lindsay home to her new apartment. I'll be back in a few."

Lindsay stood up and took the keys to her apartment from Gavin. He gave Lindsay a smile, reminded her where and when she was supposed to meet him in the morning, and Lindsay and Oliver left the two of them at the table.

Once outside, Lindsay and Oliver had a lot to say to each other.

"Why didn't you tell me Ricky was a woman?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to give up acting?"

Lindsay groaned. "Who cares? I don't care anymore. I don't even care that you are clearly in love with that woman."

"What? I'm not," he cried defensively.

"Yes, you are. So what if the relationship has no future? So what if she thinks you're white bread? So what? You love her whether it's a good idea or not. And what about me? You were bringing me here with the intention of setting me up with your brother?" she accused.

"Uh... Yeah, I did that. He's a really good guy and that woman he was with was not good for him. When he told me he'd finally shaken her off, I thought you might have fun with him."

Lindsay put her head back and howled in a mean way. "So, you and I weren't a good enough match from the start that you were orchestrating a fling for me?"

"Well, not a fling," he denied. "But something."

"How could it be anything other than a fling if you thought I was going to go back to the mainland after the renovations were finished?"

"Oh," he said, stopping dead in his tracks.

She felt like she had driven her point home. "Who am I to you? Someone who can just be passed around to any guy who's down on his luck?"

"Lindsay, that sounds fifty shades worse than what I was thinking. Gavin is a gentleman and he would never treat you or any other woman the way you are suggesting. He has family values."

Lindsay pushed her Coke bottle red hair off the back of her neck. "I'm not actually mad at you. I just want to make one thing clear."

"What?"

"I just want to ask you something. Were you ever serious about me?"

Oliver looked at Lindsay and the moment stretched. Finally, he said, "When I'm with you, I wish I was."

She exhaled heavily, not even aware that she had been holding her breath. "Thank you. So, can we be friends?"

He nodded. "On one condition."

"What?"

"I want you to let me kiss you one more time."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Why would I agree to that?"

"Because I like messing with things and I won't do it unless it can help me with Ricky, can help you with Gavin, or can help Gavin with Marissa."

Lindsay dropped her head on her left shoulder like it weighed twenty pounds and thought about his suggestion. "Hm... I..."

"Just say yes."

"It sounds deranged."

"It is, but if you can make me look like a stallion in front of Ricky, or I can make Gavin jealous for you, or I can take you out of the picture for Marissa because she's going to kill you because you got too close to my brother, it might all work out. I won't do it just for fun."

"Why are you making plans for Gavin? He doesn't even like me."

"Oh, yes, he does. He couldn't keep his eyes off you."

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Seven

If He Stands His Ground...

The next day, Lindsay weaved her dark flame-colored hair into numerous braids and ate breakfast by herself. For work, she dressed up in an old concert tee, some jeans she would have rather not wrecked, but she had traveled light from the mainland and she needed the job more than she needed the jeans. Construction work paid more in an hour than the price of the pants.

Gavin greeted her at the loading dock and took her down the hall to their first bathroom. The tub, sink, and toilet had already been removed and they were pulling down all the drywall. He gave her a facemask, safety goggles, and a pair of work gloves.

They ripped the old drywall loose together and then she carted the remains in a wheelbarrow to the dumpster bin in the back of the hotel while Gavin tore out the ceiling.

The time went by quickly, and soon it was time for lunch. They went to a grocery store and bought sandwiches there. She was going to buy strawberries and cantaloupe instead of a sandwich, but Gavin stopped her.

"You can have that if you want, but you need to put fuel in your body if you're going to work alongside me. Get a sandwich."

She chose one, but it was a little deviled egg sandwich on multigrain bread, unlike what he bought, which was a sandwich that had been built inside a loaf of French Bread as big as the Bastille.

In the afternoon, Gavin gave her a hammer and had her remove all the loose nails, while he took care of other things.

By five in the afternoon, she was completely bushed.

When she took her mask and goggles off, she found Oliver leaning against the railing by the bay water. He hung his cast hand over the rail and waved his good hand at her in greeting. "Hey," he said pleasantly as she approached.

"Is Ricky working? Is that why you're here?" Lindsay asked.

"Yes. She's working. But she loaned me her truck if you have any more errands that need to be run after yesterday."

"Hmm..." Lindsay contemplated. "Actually, yes. I could really use a trip to a thrift store. We went to one yesterday, but I didn't get everything I was hoping for. I was told there are dozens of them here on the Island."

"There are," he agreed. "We can do that. Do you need to buy any more groceries?"

Lindsay nodded. "Yes. I bought the necessities when I was out with Gavin yesterday, but I wasn't thinking about baking and you'll never guess what I have."

"What?"

"An oven," she said, gloatingly. "I've never had an oven in my life. I'm gonna make cookies and cupcakes and..."

"You're going to have me over, right?"

"Sure. Except I don't have a couch. You can come over as long as you don't mind sitting at the breakfast nook, which I only got to keep because it's attached to the house."

"That's handy. Can we go now, or do you need to tell Gavin that you're clocking out?"

"Oh, he already told me to leave and go have a shower."

"Do you want to do that before we go shopping?" Oliver offered.

She made a face. "Now that you mention it, I don't have any towels."

He put his arm around her. "We need to go now."



Lindsay and Oliver skipped the thrift store and went for the towels first. Then they stopped at the grocery store on the way back.

"Are you going to make me dinner?" Oliver asked as he carried two bags with his good hand up the long flight of stairs that led to Lindsay's apartment.

"If you're cool with avocado toast for dinner, then yes."

"I'd love that," he answered as they came into the apartment. "Ricky is working late."

They were greeted inside the apartment by a blonde woman screaming. She shrieked as if surprised and then calming down enough to form words, she wailed in alarm, "What are you doing here?" She looked between Lindsay and Oliver like they couldn't possibly be robbers with groceries.

Oliver smiled his smile that was all charm and no sleaze. "Excuse us," he said sweetly. "But you are the most beautiful squatter I've ever seen."

"I'm not a squatter!" she yelled. She was surprised and upset at being barged in upon, but her temper made her cheeks rosy and pretty. It wasn't what she looked like that made Oliver compliment her. Oliver was the type of man who would have said that to a bag lady.

"Well, you're standing in Lindsay's kitchen," he pointed out.

Lindsay dropped her bag of flour and flicked him in the ear. She had never seen this woman in her life before, but if she was willing to bet (and she was), Lindsay knew who it was. "This is Marissa, Gavin's..." she wanted to say ex-girlfriend, but the sight of Marissa in her apartment made Lindsay stop.

"Fiancee," Marissa filled in the blank.

Lindsay would not have finished the sentence that way, but Marissa became about a thousand times more interesting when she finished it that way.

"Umm... Well, this apartment was in Gavin's name and it was empty. He said I could live here until the lease expired. Is there going to be a problem with that arrangement?" Lindsay asked, keeping her voice simple and light.

"Are you..." Marissa started, looking at Oliver.

Lindsay wasn't sure which way Marissa was going with that, but she didn't let her finish. She had to keep the conversation on neutral facts. "This is Oliver, Gavin's brother. I guess you two haven't met."

"Sorry, I haven't had the pleasure," he said, letting a little sleaze ooze. "I've been on the mainland for the last three years."

Marissa nodded. "I remember now. I've seen pictures of you at your mother's house."
"And I'm Lindsay," she said, trying to figure out how to explain the situation further or get Marissa to explain what she was doing there when she had already moved out. "So... is there a problem with me bringing the rest of my stuff up?" The towels were still in Ricky's truck.

Marissa didn't answer. She bit her lip like she didn't know what to say. In truth, she was perfectly lovely. From Gavin's description, Lindsay had not been expecting perfect loveliness. She had been expecting someone ordinary. Marissa was older than Lindsay, approaching thirty, but it didn't stop her from being exceptional. She had short hair that was shaved up one side and bleach-blond curls topped her well-shaped head. Her purse was a work of art. Marissa dived into it to retrieve a tissue to blot her eyes.

"What's the matter?" Lindsay said, rushing to help the other woman.

"Nothing. It's just... I misunderstood. I was told something that was clearly wrong. I didn't know Oliver was in town or that he brought a girl with him." She finished dabbing at her eyes. "Everything is fine."

Lindsay rather objected to being called a girl. It was that woman's way of putting her in her place by making her sound lightyears younger when she was three years younger at the most. Lindsay was about to voice her feelings when she glanced at Oliver.

He was suffering.

Lindsay smirked and bit her lips together to stop herself from laughing. Marissa was acting teary and Oliver longed to pull her in his arms and comfort her. Lindsay had seen it many times, not just with herself, but with other women in their actor camp. He was an incurable sucker for a crying woman. His jaw clenched tightly as he held back.

Lindsay wanted to correct Marissa's second misunderstanding. Yes, Carleen had misunderstood when she dropped Gavin's things off at the cabin. She saw Lindsay in a nightgown and Gavin's shirt and she had jumped to conclusions, but now Marissa was jumping to another conclusion that was just as wrong. She thought Lindsay was there as Oliver's side piece because that made her happier than to think that Gavin had replaced her so easily.

Lindsay was about to open her mouth to explain that everything this woman thought was wrong when Gavin reached the top of the stairs and joined them in the now suffocating kitchen.

"Whoa!" Oliver said, moving so his brother could get the door open. "Hey man, we're just meeting your fiancée."

"My what?" Gavin said, carrying a hex wrench case and peering over Lindsay's shoulder to see Marissa standing by the stove. He'd clearly come to help her assemble the dresser they'd bought.

"Hi, Gavin," she said with the air of a woman who had unfinished business and she was about to finish it. "Your face looks good, without the beard."

He nodded at her, and said stiffly, "I didn't see your car downstairs."

"My sister dropped me off."

"Why? It's over an hour's drive back to Victoria from here and there isn't a bus until tomorrow morning."

She looked at him meaningfully. It was a trap. He had walked into the apartment and fallen into it. Not that the exact details of the trap mattered so much. If he hadn't been there at that moment, she would have simply called him and told him she was there. From her perspective, he wasn't going to be able to leave her alone in an unfinished apartment until the next bus came. When he took her home, she'd have a whole hour to talk to him and he would simply be a monster if he sent her home in a cab.

The look on his face was monstrous, and Lindsay could see he was running scenarios through his head as to how to orchestrate avoiding the conversation she wanted to have.

"Are you going to Victoria?" Lindsay chirped, smarter and faster than he was. "If you're going, we should all go on a double date. I haven't been to any of the spots in Victoria since I got to the island. What restaurants are good?"

"That's a terrific idea!" Oliver joined in. He slipped his arms around her waist and drew her into a back hug. Lindsay knew he did it partly to annoy his brother, but also to double the amount of available floor space.

"Yeah. I bought four plates, but can you see the four of us having dinner here? We'd be cramped like sausages! Let's go out!" Lindsay and Oliver looked at Gavin with encouraging smiles.

At long last, Gavin seemed to figure out what the two of them were offering. If they all piled into his truck, he wouldn't be alone with Marissa and he could avoid the conversation if he desired.

"Sounds fine to me, as long as the two of you keep your PDAs to a minimum," he grouched.

"I make no promises," Oliver said, tugging on the edge of Lindsay's ear with his canine.

She shrieked with laughter. Gavin frowned and held open the door for Marissa, who allowed herself to be guided down the stairs and out the door.

Over Oliver's commotion, Lindsay heard Gavin whisper to Marissa, "I didn't know you still had a key."

"The door is broken," she replied. "If you know how to fiddle with the lock, it opens every time."

"I'll have to get that fixed," he grumbled, annoyed by everything.

The ride to Victoria was joyful. Oliver kept pinching and tickling Lindsay. If the conversation lagged, her squeals kept the truck noisy and intimate conversation impossible. To Marissa's credit, she was not a wet blanket. She immediately fell into a rhythm where she treated Oliver like he was her younger brother as well as Gavin's. She even threatened to sit between Oliver and Lindsay if he didn't keep his hands to himself. He responded by pinching Marissa's side, and she enjoyed it twice as much as Lindsay did.

"I love being tickled," Lindsay said. "If I didn't love it so much, he wouldn't do it."

"You do sound like a puppy when you laugh," Oliver agreed.

Gavin placed his rear-view mirror so his eyes didn't see the road behind them, but Lindsay. She sat directly behind Marissa. It was a different kind of flirting, completely different from Oliver's pinches and giggles, but effective nevertheless. She found

herself getting warm under his gaze. It made her scream louder when Oliver tickled her.

At the restaurant, a beautiful building called the Stone Steakhouse, Marissa reminded them to be well-behaved as they went in. "I'm not sure you two are mature enough for a place like this," she cautioned.

"These people handle drunks all the time," Oliver said. "I'm sure they can handle us stone-cold sober."

Lindsay remembered the two drinks he had before he crashed her car and felt like getting rowdy with him for an altogether different reason. "I swear, Oli, if you cause another car accident, I'll..."

"Break up with me?" he taunted. "Go ahead. You can break up with me as many times as you need to. And don't call me Oli."

"Why?" she asked with her arms crossed sternly.

"Try saying my name properly. Oliver," he demonstrated for her.

"Oliver," she repeated.

"Now that you've practiced, you can try saying it at level two. O.."

"O..." she said obediently, expecting a gag at the end.

"Lover."

Lindsay choked on a laugh. "O-lover?"

"Yeah. Sounds perfect when you say it like that," he chuckled as he opened the door to the Stone Steakhouse for her.

Once in the restaurant, there was no need for conversation. The place was a cacophony with too loud music playing on the speakers overhead, and since they were dining late, the place had a more adult crowd than it would have had a few hours earlier.

Oliver tried to be charming and make jokes and Lindsay encouraged him, but it was completely impossible once their food arrived. Lindsay was exhausted and the food in her stomach had been too long coming. At the least, she should have shoved one of the bananas they bought in her face before they left to go to Victoria. It made her a ravenous beast once their food arrived. She felt sick eating so much so fast.

Afterward, they drove quietly to Marissa's. A little folk tune played on the truck speakers, and Oliver and Lindsay were too tired and full to behave like teenagers. Instead, Lindsay sat in the middle seat and placed her head on Oliver's shoulder, which he offered her like a champ.

Gavin got out of the truck and helped Marissa out of her side and walked her to her door. On the porch, their hour-long conversation was condensed into five minutes. Lindsay and Oliver sat tense, watching.

"They broke up and now she's advertising that she's his fiancée?" Oliver asked grouchy.

"It appears so."

"That's some nerve. Do you feel shaken?" he asked her.

"By what?" Lindsay asked.

"Are you bothered? Weren't you and too-cool-for-school, Gavin, going to start dating yourselves?" he reminded her.

Lindsay smiled. "The more appropriate question is whether or not Gavin still wants to date me after our tickle fight. That might have been too much for a normal person

to endure. However, I'm not normal and I'm not shaken by this. You think I can be bothered by this, their third breakup?"

"You're not?"

"No, but I am curious. What do you think they're saying?"

In perfect time to Marissa's lips, Oliver supplied her voice. "Gavin, I just love you so much. Why can't we be together?"

Lindsay took over when Gavin started talking and tried to do his voice. "I can't be with you. I like all women, and I can't settle down with just one." Lindsay giggled.

"But not having sex with you is the greatest pleasure I've ever known," Oliver said, and he said it so on point with Marissa's lip movements that Lindsay died laughing on the spot and missed her cue.

She put her forehead on the seat in front of them and howled. She turned to Oliver. "We need to interrupt them. Wanna chase me around the truck?"

"Didn't you say you were worried he'd be mad about the tickle fight? And we're going to do more?"

"I think it's more important that their breakup takes root than that I get together with him. He's still my boss. I'm not supposed to be dating him in the first place."

"I see. I'm game. Can I kiss you?"

"If you can catch me," she said, getting out.

From the glances that Lindsay had seen of the doorstep where Marissa and Gavin were talking, Marissa was doing everything in her power to get Gavin to come inside with her and he was resisting. He kept pointing to the truck and saying things. Probably things like, "I have to get these two home."

However, they disrupted everything when Lindsay and Oliver started running back and forth around the tiny garden and the front step of the townhouse. Lindsay weaved in between Gavin and Marissa and Oliver clearly had an idea that was even better than kissing Lindsay. As he ran past Marissa for the second time, he pretended to trip and in the next second, he landed an *accidental* (but totally on purpose) kiss on Marissa's lips.

He pulled off her and said, "So silky," before he shot off to run after Lindsay again.

When he got to her she slapped him across the chest. "What are you doing?" she thumped, pretending to be cross. "You can't just kiss your brother's fiancée like that. You have to apologize."

Always in the mood for chaos, Oliver leaned in toward Lindsay. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't want an apology," Lindsay said, playing it up. "I don't care if you kiss her or not."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Okay. In that case..." he grasped the hand of the flustered Marissa and pulled her toward him for a second, intentional, kiss.

Marissa allowed it for a whole three seconds before she pushed him off, but she was so flabbergasted that she didn't say anything.

Lindsay stormed over and said, "Well, if you're going to do that, then I'm going to do this."

Lindsay grabbed Gavin by the collar and was about to kiss him when Marissa launched herself between them.

"You can't," she panted, red in the face and dizzy from so many things happening at once.

Gavin and Oliver stood by tensely and watched what Lindsay would do next.

Marissa's arms were spread wide, so Lindsay put her hands on Marissa's shoulders and said to her in a calm, loving way, "I get it. I understand all of this is hard for you. It would be hard for anyone. Oliver was acting crazy just now. We all know there's nothing going on between you and Oliver. There's nothing going on between Oliver and me and there's nothing going on between Gavin and you."

"That's not true. He..."

Lindsay cut her off. "Whatever he did that made you think that the two of you had a future, you're going to need to forget it now. I plan to renew the lease in that apartment and I never want to see you inside my apartment without an invitation again. Do you understand?"

Marissa shook off Lindsay's hands. "You don't get to decide any of that," she barked. "Gavin, tell her that we're just having a little fight and you're going to need the keys to the apartment back in a week."

Gavin stepped forward and stood beside Lindsay. "No. I gave Lindsay that apartment and I'm not asking her to leave. She's going to renew the lease and there's no reason for you to ever go there again. You got off easy tonight when we took you to supper and drove you home. This is the last time I want to talk to you, Marissa. It's over." He turned to Lindsay and Oliver. "You two, get in the truck. We're leaving."

Marissa walked steadily after him citing things he had said that meant that he really loved her, but from Lindsay's perspective, they were things that meant the opposite. She tried not to listen. It was too hurtful. When they finally drove away, all three of them sat in the front with Lindsay sitting in the middle on the bench. She plugged her ears so she couldn't hear what Marissa yelled at Gavin. It was too upsetting even for a dramatic actress.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Eight

If He Locks You Up...

Gavin drove back to 999 Things to Wear. Oliver got out, got Lindsay her towels out of Ricky's truck, wished them a good night, and drove off with a wave.

Alone at last, Gavin told Lindsay what Marissa had told him about the lock on her door, and sure enough, everything she said about the lock was true. It was completely broken.

"There isn't a hardware store open at this time of night," he said, bummed. "I don't think you should stay here tonight."

Lindsay didn't wait to hear a list of possible places she could stay. "I don't think there's going to be a problem tonight. There wasn't a problem last night. Didn't Marissa stay here for months knowing that the lock was broken?"

Gavin growled and then made his argument. "Yes, but *she* knows it's broken, she knows you're staying here, she knows what time I got here and that there aren't any hardware stores around here that will be open at this time of night. The fact that she came here this afternoon to look at the apartment worries me. Worst of all, she may be angry with you for confirming all those terrible, but true things I kept telling her. She had her sister drop her off here this afternoon, but she has her own car. She could already be on her way here to terrorize you."

"Fine with me. I'll deal with her when she gets here," Lindsay said stiffly.

"You think you can handle her?" he said like he was accusing her of something awful.

Lindsay laughed. "Of course, I can handle her. I've been working as an actress for years. Do you know how many times I've had my hair pulled out, had my drink doused with something to make me vomit, and been bitched out by a woman every bit as angry as Marissa?" Lindsay stuck her nose in the air. "Marissa has no reason to be angry with me beyond what I told her. If she comes here, I won't make the same mistake again. I'll send her over to your house instead. The question is not whether or not I can handle her. Can you?"

He groaned. "I swear to you, I've been more assertive than how it appears. I have been extremely straightforward with her. She just hasn't been willing to take no for an answer."

"I bet you do something dumb to treat her nicely after something like this, don't you?" Lindsay observed.

"Like what?"

"Like sending her flowers with a note that says 'Sorry for our fight'."

He paled, confirming her accusation.

Lindsay clucked her tongue. "You do that? You're as dumb as her."

"I want to be a nice guy," he said defensively. Before Lindsay could criticize him more, he changed the subject. "Look, I'm going to go to the hotel and pilfer a

doorknob and a lock. I'm sure there's something like that in the supply room. I'll be back to change the locks, so expect me."

"Sure thing," Lindsay said as she refrained from telling him again what a bonehead he was.

Once he was gone, she got into the shower. She hadn't had one since before they got to the island and she was looking rough.

When she came out, she found Gavin had let himself into the apartment and was changing the locks as he promised. She wore an oversized black T-shirt and gray cotton pajama bottoms. She patted her hair dry with one of the new towels she and Oliver had bought that afternoon.

"Thanks," she said.

He finished up and stood up to check the lock. "My pleasure." Once he was convinced it would work, he closed it and locked it. He turned to face her. "Can we talk?"

Lindsay nodded and sat down at the window nook.

"What's going on with you and Oliver?" he asked, sitting across from her.

"Nothing. He's just flirty. He keeps talking about kissing, so I think he's feeling a little lonely. Has he ever kissed Ricky, do you know?"

"I don't know."

"I think he may be looking for opportunities to kiss women in crazy situations. He said something to me the other night when we finished our break up that he wants to kiss me one more time. He gave dumb reasons, but I think he might be hoping to gear up to kiss Ricky. He's terrified to kiss her. What would the consequences for that be if she doesn't like him back? If he's been kissing everyone beforehand then he can just claim that he's a kissing fool who kisses everyone. It didn't mean much. Something like hiding the most important kiss of his life in a pile of other kisses. Who can tell which is the important one?"

"You think that's why he kissed Marissa tonight? That was insane."

"I didn't notice you scolding him," Lindsay chuckled.

"I don't care if he kisses her."

"I think he kissed her both to warm himself up to do something crazy and so that she could kiss someone other than you. She probably can't even remember that it's possible for her to match with a man other than you. He was doing her a favor, but if he keeps this up, he's gonna get mono."

"Oh, he's already had it," Gavin confirmed with a hilarious head wag.

Lindsay smiled, her good nature spilling over her smile. "Well, if that's all you wanted to talk about... Thank you for the lock. I'll see you at work tomorrow."

She stood up and he followed her. "Wait," he said, reaching for her wrist and holding her back. "There is one more thing."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. If Marissa hadn't gotten between us, would you have kissed me?"

Lindsay nodded. "Naturally."

"I felt a little cheated that you didn't," he confessed softly.

She pursed her lips and looked up at him with a curious expression on her face. "Really? I was sort of glad she stopped me."

"Oh yeah?" he asked and Lindsay felt the pressure on her wrist slacken.

“Yeah. If I had my first kiss with you then and there, in front of Marissa, it would have been a gag. I would have spent the whole kiss thinking about her and what expression was on her face. How shocked was she? Did her jaw drop? It would have sucked because then I wouldn’t have been able to enjoy our first kiss. When we kiss for the first time, I want it to be on a day when you didn’t see Marissa. You didn’t think about her. I want it to be on a day where you only thought about me.”

She gave him a wicked little smile and she knew she’d got him. Hook, line, and sinker. She’d taken his breath away.

His eyes sparkled with excitement and his warm hand flipped her wrist in his. He kissed her on the back of her hand like she was a lady and he said goodnight before disappearing out the door.



In the morning, it was raining again. Lindsay hadn’t yet bought a raincoat or an umbrella. She was considering running through the rain to get to work. It wasn’t that far to the hotel, just down the street. She pulled the hood on her sweatshirt over her hair and went down the stairs to the door to the street below.

That was when she stopped in her tracks. The door wouldn’t open. She locked it and unlocked it three times and rattled it like a mad person. Why wouldn’t it open?

Annoyed and angry that she was proving herself to be unreliable, she sent Gavin a text explaining that the lock he’d given her was faulty and she was trapped in the stairwell.

She told herself that she wasn’t to blame. She wanted to lead a responsible life as an adult and it was high time she did, but the discouragement of the situation got to her. She really wanted to be on time for work, do a good job, and... She supposed she was lucky her boss had been the one to change the locks. Nothing could have been more convenient.

He sent her a text back that he was on his way over.

He knocked when he arrived, but she couldn’t open the door for him.

He phoned her, sounding cheerful over the line. “Hey. Having a good morning?”

Lindsay snorted. “Got any ideas on how to work this out?”

“Sure do.”

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Nine

If He Rescues You...

Gavin's brilliant idea to open the stuck lock involved throwing an umbrella with a rope attached to it up to Lindsay. She opened the window, popped out the screen, and put out her arms to catch it.

"This is a dumb idea, Man!" she shouted down to him.

"Yes," he agreed, standing under her window like Romeo in broad daylight. "It is a dumb idea, but once you catch the umbrella, you'll have a rope that runs from me to you. Then I can tie a toolbox onto the rope and you can pull it up. Once you have the toolbox, you can get out a screwdriver and remove the screws holding the door knob in place and BOOM, the door will open."

He heaved the umbrella, and it was high enough that Lindsay should have been able to catch it, but she didn't.

"Why are you throwing an umbrella again?" she asked, putting a frazzled hand to her forehead.

He caught the falling umbrella and said, "It's not going to hurt anything if it hits a window. It won't scratch a single thing it touches. It's a good shape for throwing and it's got a bit of weight to it, so it can carry up the rope. Try again now."

Lindsay put out her arms, but she missed again.

"Come on, Sweetie," he called encouragingly as people coming out of the bakery eyed him suspiciously. "Catch the birdie."

Lindsay got it on the fifth throw.

She may not have been great at sports that involved catching, but she was fine with a set of tools in her hands. She got the screws in the lock undone and opened the door.

Gavin stood outside with a replacement knob in his hand.

"Is that another reject from the hotel?" she asked crabily.

He nodded.

"Well, what good is that going to be when this one was a dud?" she asked.

"I've been standing here testing it while you unscrewed that knob. I... uh... I think it may have been my fault that it didn't work right."

She put it in his hand. "It wasn't your fault."

"Nah... I did some work on the door jam as well because I... uh... I was a little uncomfortable with you staying here if the lock didn't work."

Lindsay eyed him suspiciously. "Can't we just buy a new lock? Or better yet, get the landlord to buy a new lock?"

"That would be ideal, but I know him and he's a snowbird who has already flown to Mexico. If I called him, he'd just get me to fix it."

"What are you saying?" she asked, thinking that maybe none of what he was saying had anything to do with the lock.

"I'm saying I had a lot of fun making you breakfast that morning that you stayed at my place and if you stayed with me, I could make you breakfast again. That way, I wouldn't have to worry about Marissa coming back here to terrorize you."

Lindsay leaned in. "You're asking for a sleepover?"

He leaned in to meet her. "Yeah. I'm asking you to spend the night at my place. It's a Friday. There's no work tomorrow. How about it?"

"Are you planning on sleeping on the couch again?" she asked cautiously.

"Of course. We haven't even kissed yet."

Lindsay scratched her head. "Gavin? What about Marissa?"

"What about her?"

"You didn't want her staying at your place. Why are you so cool with me staying over and not with her?"

"Obviously because I wasn't interested in her."

"But you're interested in me?"

He nodded. "Now you're getting it."

She nodded along with him, making them two idiots who were nodding at each other outside a clothing store.

Finally, she clucked her tongue and said, "I'm not staying over. If you're worried, you can come over tomorrow morning to check on me. I'll make you breakfast."

"Okay," he said, stepping past her and preparing to fit the new knob into the lock.

"You're sure that one is going to work?"

He smiled. "Yep, the last one didn't work, but this one will."

Lindsay leaned against the wall and watched him put it together. Unless she was crazy, his words weren't just about the lock, they were also about him and Marissa. His relationship with Marissa hadn't worked, but he believed a relationship with Lindsay would work.

That was a charming idea. She loved that idea.

Her phone rang.

Lindsay looked at her phone. It was a call from her sister. She showed Gavin the call and stepped around the corner to talk to her sister.

"Hi, Sharelyn. How's it going?"

"Hi, Babe," her sister drawled. The sound of the drawl did not signify coolness. Her sister was cool, but the elongation of her syllables was a sign of hesitation.

"Something's going on," Lindsay stated.

"Yeah, so Mom told me that she gave you five hundred dollars to move to the island to start a new life and that you told her that you'd have that money back to her by the end of the month. Well, she needs it and any other money you can spare."

"Why? I thought she was doing okay."

"There was a cash call on her condo. They need a new roof and she thought she had more time to raise the money. She doesn't. She says you have a job and a place to stay."

"Wait. I don't understand. She told me about the cash call. She said she was going to get a line of credit to pay for that and that she wouldn't miss the five hundred."

"Yeah, except the bank wouldn't approve her for the whole amount. She needs like three thousand to top it off and she needs it by the end of the month. So, how's it going? Do you have any money you can spare?"

Lindsay felt her blood freeze in her veins. What was happening was one hundred percent her fault. Over the years, she had taken more money from her mother than the whole cash call of ten thousand. If she had been a responsible adult who paid her own expenses instead of being a stupid dreamer, her mother would have the money without needing a line of credit.

Lindsay wanted to scream for a year. "Uh, I have two hundred in my bank account. I'll send that much to Mom when I hang up with you."

"You don't have to send it immediately," her sister said, her every word making her sound less like the big bad wolf.

"Yeah, I do. If I don't, I'll spend it."

"Really? What will you spend it on?"

"Food."

Sharelyn groaned. "I don't want you starving."

"Listen, I'll send her what I have, but I can't talk right now. I have to get to work." Lindsay said a quick goodbye and got off the phone. She bit her lips together. It was her fault. It was all her fault.

She breathed and tried to think of what she could do. She hadn't worked enough days to have earned three thousand dollars. She wouldn't have it by the end of the month.

She breathed again and that was when she noticed the sign in the clothing store window. Help wanted.

Lindsay was not dressed like she knew how to dress. Her hair was not done up like she knew how to do hair, but she looked inside. She could work weekends. She could work evenings. She could work every second when she wasn't working for Gavin.

She inhaled and exhaled and made a plan.

The clothing store, 999 Things to Wear was not open at eight-thirty in the morning. It didn't open until ten, but Lindsay could walk home during her lunch break, change, and pop into the store to ask about the job.

When she came back around the corner, Gavin had finished installing the door knob. He held out the keys to her. "Is everything okay?"

"Yep," she lied. "Everything is great. But why are we standing around here? We've got to get to work." She grabbed Gavin by the arm and hurried him down the street to the hotel.

He gave her a funny look, but he didn't ask her any more questions.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Ten

If He Notices You Working Two Jobs...

Lindsay did get the job at the clothing store. The woman who hired her was a middle-aged woman who hadn't quite taken notice of what decade they were living in. At least, her clothing choices were anything but trendy. Everything about her was outdated, but when she gave Lindsay a tour around the store, it was clear she did know what she was talking about. Her name was Amy and she liked the idea of Lindsay working there because Lindsay wouldn't have to park her car anywhere near the store and parking by the marina was a chore and a half, so she was onboard.

Lindsay's work schedule was set so that she would work Thursday and Friday nights, and then all day on Saturday and all day on Sunday.

She was planning to do her training that night (Friday night), after work. Gavin seemed like he wanted to ask her out when they left the hotel at the same time at the end of the day, but Lindsay blew past him before he could say a word. She cheerfully shouted, "See you tomorrow," and hecked off.

He got into his truck with a confused look on his face. He didn't know where she could have to be in such a hurry, but she was in a wicked hurry.

She had drywall dust in her hair, so she needed to have a shower and shove some food into her mouth before she worked a three-hour shift.

The saddest thing about working at the clothing store was that it wasn't much money. She was making more money working for Gavin, but she needed all she could get.

The second saddest thing was that she didn't know how she was going to afford groceries after she sent her mother her last two hundred dollars. She did a search on her phone for a local food bank, but there wasn't one nearby since the marina, where she was living, was an off-the-beaten-track tourist spot.

She still had a few groceries in her apartment. She'd be okay for a week. After that... she wasn't sure.

When her shift at 999 Things to Wear ended, she was more tired than she had ever been in her life, though she did feel blessed that she didn't have to commute somewhere in the rain when she was finished.

It had started raining again.

It was only two steps to her apartment.

She didn't need an umbrella.

Lindsay went up to her apartment, made herself two slices of toast with butter and honey on them, and poured herself a glass of water.

She was lucky she had enough food to feed Gavin breakfast the next day like she promised.



By the time Gavin showed up at her place on Saturday morning, Lindsay was already ready to go to work. Her hair was done in curls, her makeup was done (she even had on fake eyelashes), and her clothes were her best.

"Uh..." he stuttered as he took in her appearance. "Is all that for me?"

"Don't I look healthy?" she asked with her nose in the air. "Like I wasn't attacked in the night by your ex-girlfriend?"

"You weren't, were you?" he responded with wide eyes.

"I was not," she reassured him.

He took off his coat like he was right at home and hung it up on one of her hooks. "Excellent. What are we having?"

"Avocado toast. Just like mother used to make."

"My mother didn't make avocado toast."

"Of course," she laughed. "Mine didn't either. No one's mother made that."

"Hilarious," he said. He noticed how much work was left to be done in the kitchen and, seeing it was hardly any, he sat down in the dining room nook. "I just want to tell you that you don't need to doll up like that for me. I see you at work all the time with dust in your hair and grime on your face and I think you look fine."

Lindsay leaned her elbows on the counter and peered at him. "That's very sweet, but this isn't actually for you. I took a job downstairs working at the clothing store and I start at ten, so we'd better start eating so that I can be on time for work."

He looked at her incredulously, astonishment all over his face. "You took another job?"

"Yeah," she said, attempting to keep her voice light.

"Because the backbreaking labor I put you through Monday to Friday just wasn't enough for you?"

Lindsay was tempted to lie to him, to blow him off, to fudge over the situation, and not tell him what was happening. But it wouldn't work. Even if what she told him ruined her chances with him, she needed his understanding more than she needed him to be in love with her.

"Uh..." she said softly. "Do you remember what I said about having borrowed money inappropriately while I was trying to be an actress?"

He nodded.

"Well, all that has come back to bite me. I'm low on cash and I need to repay some money soon... By the end of the month. The more I have, the better, so I took another job."

He took in what she said and then he stood up to speak to her on the other side of the counter. "Are you sure you have to? Working for me is going to take it out of you and you need a day off. Aren't you sore from all the grunt work I have you do?"

She was sore, but she had already shared all she was willing to share with him. "I'm fine. I didn't complain yesterday."

"You'd complain if I worked you too hard?" he asked sincerely.

"Absolutely," she lied with clear eyes and not even the tiniest hint of self-pity in her voice. It was times like that that being a trained actress really came in handy. She was the best liar in the world.

She handed him a plate and told him to sit down with a little shooing motion. She picked up her plate and joined him, offering him a glass of orange juice.

He looked at her sideways. "What are your plans after work? Can I make you supper?"

"Uh..." she said, hesitating. She wasn't sure if she wanted to tell him that she was planning on working all day Sunday as well. It would come up if he didn't get her home at a decent hour. She was about to give him a well-crafted excuse when she remembered her grocery problem. Until she paid her mother back, she had to accept any invitation that promised food. The little breakfast she was making Gavin had to be the last time she cooked for anyone until her debt was repaid. With that thought, she smiled and said, "Yeah, I'd love that."

He was suspicious of her, but he let it go.

They flirted as they ate. She kicked him out at a little before ten and then she went down for her shift. She worked until five.

Gavin picked her up. She pulled out the elastics and pins that were holding her hair up, reapplied her lipstick, and hoped that she looked date-ready.

He took her back to his place and made her steak with french fries and salad. It was delicious. Afterward, they sat on the couch to watch a movie and Lindsay was so tired, she fell asleep without voluntary control.

Gavin put her head on his thigh and did not wake her. She was trying too hard. Even Lindsay, though she was asleep, knew she was trying too hard.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Eleven

If He Finally Stands Up For Himself...

In the morning, Lindsay woke up on the couch in Gavin's living room. The alarm on her phone was ringing and someone was knocking on the front door simultaneously.

Gavin was nowhere to be seen, but Lindsay would be damned if she was going to answer the door at his house a second time.

It turned out to be unnecessary. Gavin was awake, dressed, and answering the door like someone who was well-rested and ready to go.

Marissa was at the door. Lindsay heard her say, "I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, but I need to talk to you one more time."

"This has to be the last time," he said, his voice apologetic.

"That's fine. I just need to have a frank conversation with you. I just need to lay it all out on the table. Can I come in?"

"If you insist," he said.

If Lindsay had been smart, she would have taken their conversation at the door as a cue that she should get out of the living room and literally go anywhere else in the house. Except she only had enough time to stand up before Gavin led Marissa into the living room.

The blonde woman stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Lindsay. "She spent the night again?"

"I know you're not comfortable with this situation, but I have to tell you that Lindsay and Oliver were goofing around the day we took you back to Victoria. She's not with him. She's with me."

"And you let her spend the night?" she asked again in horror.

"Yes. I did."

Marissa stared at him. "You never let me spend the night. Why her? What's so great about her? Why did you shut me down?" she blurted angrily, obviously past caring if she looked pathetic. She was so desperate for answers that it didn't matter anymore who saw her at her worst. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"I know," Gavin said softly.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said again, raising her voice. "If I didn't do anything wrong then why didn't you love me?"

"I don't know," Gavin said, keeping his voice low and steady. "I don't know why I didn't want you, not really, and not ever. I don't know. There's nothing wrong with you, except that I didn't. I'm sorry. I don't have a better explanation."

Lindsay did not want to be there. She did not want to be in the middle of Gavin and Marissa as they had their last talk. She checked her phone. If she had been at her apartment when she woke up, she would have had plenty of time to get ready for work at ten, but since she was at Gavin's, she had much less time. She hadn't even told him that she was working that day.

She sighed and found Oliver's number on her phone. She put it to her ear. Gavin and Marissa were still dramatizing their break-up as Lindsay waited for Oliver to pick up the call.

When Oliver finally picked up the phone, he answered with a cheerful, "Hey, Beautiful."

"Hey, O-lover," she called back, hoping that her playfulness won points with him. "Listen, I stayed the night at Gavin's, but Marissa is here and they're having a row. I'd sell tickets, but I took a job at the clothing store under my apartment. I have to be at work by ten. Is there any chance you could borrow Ricky's truck and give me a ride back?"

"Your head must be splitting open," he remarked dryly. Apparently, he could hear the two of them going at it in the background of the call. "I'll be there in a jiffy. But I need a favor in return."

"At this moment, I would promise you my firstborn child," she agreed.

"Great. See you soon!"

Lindsay hung up to see that she had somehow managed to get Gavin's attention during his fight with Marissa.

"Who did you just call?" he asked. Since he was angry with Marissa, he was directing that anger toward Lindsay.

"I called Oliver. I can't be here. I need to be at work by ten."

"You're working today?" The anger had not dissipated.

"Yes. I have to work today." She put her fingers in her hair. "Do you think yesterday's shower will hold or do I need another one?"

"Wait. Why are you working so much?" he blurted, holding his hand in Marissa's face as though his hand was capable of asking his ex-girlfriend to wait.

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "I told you. I have lived an irresponsible life up until now and it is time to pay the piper."

"But if you work this much, you'll be no good to me tomorrow at the hotel."

"That's where you're wrong," she said, making her way past the two quarrelers and arriving at the front door. She stuck her foot in her boot and did up the laces. "You won't notice a thing. I'll work just as hard as before. After all, you've been so kind, making sure I had enough to eat last night and letting me sleep as long as possible."

"Wait. You were concerned about not having enough to eat?"

Lindsay winced. Leave it to him to pick up on that part of her dialogue. "No. No. It was just nice of you to make dinner last night for me."

"You made her dinner?" Marissa howled over Gavin's shoulder.

He put his hand in Marissa's face a second time.

Lindsay got her second boot on and reached for her coat. "Listen, I'd love to talk more about this. It's just that you've got your own problems right now. How about you clean your own house before you tell me how to clean mine?" She pointed at Marissa as if she couldn't stand the hypocrisy of his criticism. "If I don't work well enough for you on Monday, make sure to tell me. I can't lose that job." She opened the front door.

"When do you finish work tonight?" he asked, putting a hand on the door to stop her from closing it in his face.

"Five."

"Can I call you?"

"Of course," she said pleasantly.

As Lindsay predicted, Oliver was coming around the corner in Ricky's truck. He pulled into the pine needle driveway. Lindsay ran up, turning briefly to wave at Gavin before yanking the door open and vaulting into the truck. She waved again from the passenger seat.

That was the best moment of that morning. Gavin stood on his front porch, watching Lindsay disappear from sight. The look on his face was annoyance, helplessness, and discouragement. And Marissa was there to see it. She stood next to him, eyes on his face.

Maybe she finally understood what Gavin had been telling her. She never had a chance with him.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Twelve

If He Begs You To Kiss Him...

"So..." Lindsay said to Oliver. "Do you have a plan of what you would like me to do for you in exchange for this ride?"

He gave her a sideways glance and a playful smile. "I do."

"What?" Lindsay asked curiously.

"I want you to act out a scene with me."

Lindsay scoffed. "Yeah, what kind? Under what circumstances and for what audience?"

He smiled and explained. "I want a kissing scene."

"I should have guessed," Lindsay said with an eye roll.

"Listen, it will be perfect. Here's what I want you to do. Tonight, when you get off work, come to the salon. It's just down the road from the clothing store. Ricky is doing a dye job for a regular client who has no time during the work week, so she'll be there. I'll text her the words, 'I'm outside'. When I see her through the window, I'll tap my leg. That will be your cue."

"My cue to do what?"

"Act like Marissa. Act like you're Marissa and I'm Gavin and you can't stand for me to dump you. Throw your arms around me and kiss me and I'll let you down gently. Then..."

"Then what?" she asked, giving him a sideways glance.

"I'll go inside and explain to Ricky that she's the only one for me," Oliver said gravely.

"You're sure you can do that?" Lindsay asked skeptically.

"I have to," he groaned.

"Really? After all the time you've known her and loved her and all the time you've gone without saying anything to her, why have you got to say something to her now?"

"I've been offered an acting job," he answered. "It's for a comedy sitcom that's being filmed in Vancouver. I have to give them an answer tomorrow. If Ricky says yes, she loves me, I'll stay. If she says she doesn't, I'm going back to Vancouver... And if I ever come back, I won't be staying at her place," he said under his breath.

Lindsay didn't reply, but let his resolution take form in her head. "If you promise me that you'll confess to her afterward, then I'll do it. Gavin won't like it though."

Oliver looked at her when he should have been watching the road. "Did something happen with you two last night?"

"Nothing." Lindsay pushed his temple with her index finger to make him face forward. "Don't crash," she said gently before she leaned back in her seat. "Nothing at all. I was so tired, I fell asleep on his couch and he was nice enough to leave me there."

"Then Marissa came over this morning?"

Lindsay sighed. "I'm so done with those two. I can't be Gavin's girlfriend if he can't get her out of the picture."

"Do you mean you're going to punish him for *seeing* her? Just for *seeing* her?" Oliver asked incredulously. "Isn't that a little harsh?"

"I'm going to punish him whether he deserves punishment or not. I have a really big problem." Lindsay had not had the guts to tell Gavin in detail what was really going on with her mother and her sister and the money they needed, but she had no problem telling Oliver. She told him everything.

"So you need to try to raise three thousand by the end of the month?" he asked, scratching his head.

"My mother and Sharelyn are working on it too. I just have to work as hard as I can and as long as I can until then, so I can give as much as possible. So, I won't have much time to play lovers-in-love with Gavin until it's sorted. Plus, if he hears about the little scene I'm doing with you in front of the salon, his feelings for me will undoubtedly cool. You don't think I'll be unlucky enough for him to see us?"

"Why would he be at the marina at five o'clock on a Sunday afternoon?"

"To pick me up from work," Lindsay suggested.

"Hmm... Let's hope he doesn't show up."

Oliver pulled up in front of 999 Things to Wear.

"Thank you so much," Lindsay said as she swung down from the height of the truck. "I'll see you at five," she promised before she ran into her apartment to freshen up before work.

Lindsay thought about the whole mess as she changed her clothes and sprayed her hair with dry shampoo.

She really didn't have a choice.

She couldn't have *made* Gavin leave Marissa to take her back to work. He needed to do everything possible to sever that connection and Marissa would not be satisfied with anything other than an all-out, do-or-die, fight. And who was Lindsay to get in the way of that? She wasn't Gavin's girlfriend. They hadn't even kissed!

She had to call Oliver to save her that morning and get her to work on time. He was the only other person she knew and she couldn't expect him to do another thing for her for free, even if he was borrowing Ricky's truck. It wasn't his, but it was something he could use that she couldn't. If he wanted her to help him with his little problem with Ricky in exchange, she had to follow through. He wouldn't be able to help her with anything if he took the acting job and went back to the mainland.

Besides, kissing Oliver wasn't that big of a deal. He was cute. He was fun. He was lovable in a way that would never last. Lindsay knew the way their scene would go when she saw him later. She just hoped that she would be lucky for once in her life and Gavin would be anywhere else.



It was lucky for Lindsay that she liked clothes. If she hadn't liked clothes, the time she spent at 999 Things To Wear would have been unbearable. As it was, she was okay. She could keep going. She could do the shift.

At lunch, she locked the front doors and put up a back in five minutes sign. Then she hopped up to her apartment where she unceremoniously scarfed a peanut butter and banana sandwich. It was her first meal of the day. She already knew from experience that when you start chopping meals, you chop breakfast first.

Then she rushed back to the shop and went back to folding shirts for the table displays. The people who came in for two seconds always managed to mess them up.

At five, Lindsay was feeling the opposite of great, but instead of forcing herself to look on the bright side, she let herself feel the hopelessness she had refused to let herself feel since she'd gotten the news about her mother.

If Oliver left and if Gavin was angry with her for not being available in the coming weeks, if she didn't have enough money to eat, and if she had to work all the time... What would her new life on the island look like? She rolled her eyes and then rubbed away the dampness that had mysteriously appeared at her nose instead of in her eyes.

Everything that happened was all her own fault. All of it.

She wiped her nose.

Only babies felt sorry for themselves, but it was okay if she felt sorry for herself just then. She had to go act out her scene with Oliver and the unhappiness she felt naturally would help her make the scene more convincing.

It was going to be the last scene she ever acted out so she wanted to do a good job.

She locked up 999 Things to Wear at five and sorrowfully sauntered toward the hairdressers. From quite far off, she saw Oliver. He was leaning against Ricky's truck. Lindsay saw him text Ricky and wave to her inside the shop. Lindsay saw him turn toward her and rub his leg, the way he said he would to indicate the start of the scene.

It was show time.

Quietly, Lindsay jumped up on the stoppers to stop people from pulling up too close into the parking spaces. It was only five inches up in the air, but she treated it like a trapeze rope and came toward him.

The look on Oliver's face was odd, like he was expecting something different.

"Hi," she said breathily as she arrived at the stopper in front of Ricky's truck. "I was hoping I'd see you here," she said, letting the corners of her mouth droop unhappily.

"I'm here," Oliver said briefly. If he was trying to be Gavin, Lindsay supposed he was doing a good job. Sometimes he didn't say much.

"I don't want us to be apart," she said softly, looking into his eyes like her heart would break. "Please change your mind," she reached up to put her hand on his shoulder.

He looked sideways and then took an abrupt step backward... Out of her reach. "No," he said, not looking at Lindsay at all. "This isn't what I want."

What was he looking at?

Lindsay looked around. Ricky was watching from the salon window, but that wasn't where Oliver was looking. Lindsay followed his eyes and saw Gavin leaning against a wall by a set of stairs that led down to the water.

"Lindsay," Oliver said, looking down at her with a different expression than she'd ever seen. Perhaps for one moment in his life, he hadn't been thinking only of himself. "I can't screw up this thing you have going on with Gavin. I want your help with Ricky, just maybe not the way I had been planning. I think I want something else. Come on."

He grabbed her hand and hauled her over to where Gavin was. "Come with us," Oliver called to his brother.

"Where are we going?" Gavin shouted back.

"You're going to be my audience," Oliver announced cheerfully.

He hauled both of them into the beauty salon. Ricky's client was gone and she was organizing a cart with a collection of bottles on it.

"Richenda," he said, not calling her Ricky. "We need to talk and I need these two idiots to watch."

Her eyebrows lowered like she did not like the look of what was about to happen. "Did you total my truck? Is that why you need people here? So I can't kill you without witnesses?"

"No," he said, acting like a real man. He only said one word, but Lindsay was impressed. He didn't normally act like he was in charge like that. It only got better as he kept talking. "I am in love with you."

Lindsay grabbed Gavin's elbow as she needed something to hold onto as the scene unfolded.

"I have been in love with you as long as we've been friends," he said bluntly.

Richenda's lips parted and her jaw hung open. "You've... What?"

"I realize that all of that is dishonest and cowardly," he said, having to look up to look to hold her gaze. "I kept quiet because I can think of a million reasons why I would want to be with you, but I can't think of any reasons why you would want to be with me. I'm shorter than you," he said, addressing the elephant in the room without hesitation. "You've always dated men who were taller than you and I didn't feel like I could possibly measure up."

Richenda looked around the room uncomfortably. "I have never been asked on a date by a man shorter than me," she admitted.

"Well, here I am. I'm shorter than you and I'm asking you on a date, but I have to warn you that if you let me take you out even once, I'm going to want a lot more than anyone has ever wanted on a first date. I'm going to want to hold your hand the whole time. If I am not holding your hand every moment of this date, I will feel horribly cheated. If I'm not holding your hand, then I want my arm around your waist. I'll want you to look at me," he continued. "I feel like I have watched you look at other men all the time I've known you and I've had enough. I want you to look at me and I want the 'friend' facade that you and I have built to be blown apart. I can't be your friend anymore and I can't stand for you to look at me like that anymore."

"I thought you only wanted to be friends," Richenda said helplessly, overwhelmed by everything Oliver was saying.

"If you walk by me after a shower wearing only a towel and look at me like I'm your kid brother one more time, I'll lose it," he confessed noisily.

"You've never acted like it bothered you," she said softly.

"Yeah, well, I'm an actor. I've been acting all the time we've been friends. But I'm through acting. From now on, I'll never act in front of you again. From now on, I'm not going to pretend anything. I want you and my heart will break if you won't give me a chance. Will you go on a date with me and let me shower you with all the love I've held inside?"

Lindsay was only watching, but her breath caught.

Richenda's eyes cut to Lindsay and Gavin. "Do those two have to be here for this? Can't we talk about this privately?"

"No. They're here to support me. They can leave after you give me an answer. I'm sorry to put all this pressure on you." Oliver's face really was sorry. "I shouldn't have let it get to this point, where I'm boiling over in this way, but it is what it is. Will you go on a date with me?"

She put a hand to her face, bringing her hairdresser's apron up to cover her mouth and her flushed cheeks. "Uh... Yes. Let's go on a date."

Oliver stepped forward and put his arms around her carefully, like she was a treasure, and whispered, "Thank you."

Gavin put his hand over Lindsay's on his elbow and said softly, "We'll just let ourselves out."

Gavin was pulling on Lindsay, encouraging her to leave the scene, but Lindsay couldn't stop watching.

Richenda was kissing Oliver's forehead, then his cheek, and finally down to his lips. She saw him get the kiss he was waiting for.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Thirteen

If He Walks With You By the Sea...

Gavin was flustered as he led Lindsay away from the hair salon. The scene they'd just witnessed had an effect on him and Lindsay was surprised that his reaction was clearly negative.

"What's the problem?" Lindsay asked as they walked. "You don't have a problem with Oliver getting together with Ricky, do you?"

"Uh," he hesitated. "No. That's fine. All the power to him. Great."

If anything, Gavin's words really drove home that his tone was off.

Lindsay sighed. "Did something more happen with Marissa after I left?" That wasn't what she wanted to say, but she had enough self-control not to say, 'Did Marissa find some way to emotionally blackmail you after I left?'

"Nothing much. I let her talk it out. I let her say what she wanted to say. Then I said what I had to say."

"And then she said what she wanted to say some more?" Lindsay volunteered. She almost hoped she sounded disappointed with him. Yet, how he behaved wasn't exactly disappointing. If she were in Marissa's shoes and she wanted closure that badly, she'd be more grateful to the man who gave it to her than anyone. Except, she was on the other side of the fence, so she wanted Gavin to be more decisive instead of understanding. His continual understanding attitude was what had gotten him into trouble in the first place.

"I bet you're really sorry now," Gavin said between set teeth.

"Sorry that I left you alone with Marissa this morning? I didn't have a choice. I told you..."

He interrupted her. "No. I bet you're really sorry that you didn't do more to hang onto Oliver. If he has feelings like that and can make a speech like that... You looked really moved. Were you sorry he wasn't saying those things to you?"

Lindsay laughed. "No. I was just proud of him that he was able to make a great scene like that. I've acted with him on many occasions. He's been my partner for all kinds of acting. We took an improv class where we had classes that were basically just us daring each other as to which one of us could say the most outrageous thing. So, he's said all kinds of bananas things to me. So... he *has* said stuff like that to me before about how he loved me and couldn't be without me. That he would die in pain and misery if I didn't let him smell my hair. He didn't mean any of it. When he was talking to Ricky, he meant what he said. It was beautiful to see the change in him. I'm really grateful he asked us to watch." Lindsay smiled at Gavin and pulled his arm closer to her so they were walking very close together.

"Do you want me to make a speech like that?" Gavin asked soberly.

She shook her head in the negative. "You're mad at me. Even if you don't think you're mad at me right now, you'll be mad at me soon. I need to neglect you. I'd be

unhappy if you gave me your whole heart and I needed to give it back immediately because I had to go to work.”

“How much money do you owe? Will you be squared away by the end of the month?” he asked.

She shook her head in the negative. “I don’t know how long it will take. But now that you mention it, I’m a little heartbroken myself.”

“How did I mention something that made your heart break?” Gavin asked cautiously.

“It’s just that I wanted to be an actress so badly,” she said with the ripping of her heartstrings in her voice. “I wanted to say things on stage that melted the hearts of the people who watched. I wanted to change their minds, make them think differently, give them a lift, give them a buzz, and... If I could be at the center of all that... I wanted to be a lead actress. Even though that dream felt so real I could almost touch it, it was just a dream. It was a dream given to me by other performers. It wasn’t something I could do... I was so stupid. And I took too much money from my mother.” Lindsay sobbed with pain. “That’s who I’m trying to pay back. She wanted to believe in my dream too. She thought that if she didn’t give me the money, she wasn’t a good mother. I let her think that because I wanted what I wanted. I was wrong.”

Gavin stayed silent by her side as they kept walking. He turned her and led her toward the docks.

“More than anything,” Lindsay said, going on. “I think I wanted to be Oliver when he was talking. You know, be someone who loved someone else more than I loved myself. Now I want to love my mother more than I loved my dream of being an actress. It was amazing how he put himself on the line like that. I want to do that too.”

“Are you thinking of moving home to help out and be closer to her?” Gavin leaned against the rail over the water and looked at Lindsay’s face searchingly.

“Oh... No!” Lindsay admitted urgently. “If I went home, she’d say things that would get me to change my mind. She doesn’t think she’s suffering from the loss of the money or anything. It was my sister who called me to tell me the situation. My mother never would have called me. But I know her. I know the things she says, the things she thinks. If I went home, my mom would find auditions for me to go on and I’d fall back into the same hole I was in before. I can’t go back.”

“Wanna save some money by moving in with me?” he offered, but it seemed more out of politeness than anything else.

She smiled at him and chuckled. “You’re already paying my rent. I don’t want to take more help from you. You’ve already helped so much and I really want to learn to stand on my own. But, if you’re curious,” she said, feeling daring. “I am wildly attracted to you. If it wasn’t for Marissa, we would have already had our first kiss and our first makeout session in your truck. I would have kissed your face in a spare moment at work and I would have told you how you check all my boxes—even mystery boxes that I didn’t know I had. She’s such a turn-off.”

Gavin grumbled. “How long will it be before there’s enough distance from that?”

“I don’t know, but I told you. I want our first kiss to be on a day when you don’t see her and you don’t think about her. It has to be on a day when you only see me and only think about me.” Lindsay took a deep breath of bay water. “Now you have to take me home. I need a nap.”

"I want to meet you for supper," he said. "My treat."

"Not until eight though. I want a solid REM cycle," she told him, yawning and a thousand percent ready for bed.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Fourteen

If He Gives You His Umbrella...

Lindsay woke up from her nap. She was still tired, but she didn't want to feel sorry for herself. She was about to go out for supper with Gavin and she had no fear that he wouldn't pick up the bill at the restaurant at the end of the night. Back when she lived in Vancouver, she had been stiffed with the bill for her food and her date's drinks often enough that knowing she'd be going out with a man like Gavin warmed her heart.

It didn't stop her from feeling like a robot as she pushed her covers aside and got ready.

She put on a comfortable pair of jeans, a sparkly sequined top, little black socks, and her boots that she was destroying on the job site. She did her makeup like she was getting ready to rub shoulders with some really cool people that night. That meant she did her makeup to make her look like a little cat. She refreshed her false eyelashes and put a few little sticky jewels under her left eye like diamond tears. Then she glowed up her blush.

That was something she would miss about being an actress. She loved having her makeup done right. Even if she worked on a construction site during the week, it was still the weekend and a devastatingly attractive man was taking her out.

Her heart thrilled with the sound when she heard Gavin ring the bell. She couldn't buzz him up, so she put on her coat and went down the long staircase to let him in.

It was raining like it had been the first night they met and when she opened the door, he held an umbrella over his head and held another one in his hand. He looked just the way he did that first morning when she didn't recognize him and reintroduced herself like an idiot. His hair had that curve like it had just come out of a ponytail and his gold-rimmed glasses framed his light eyes.

He looked a little awkward. "Uh... I brought you an umbrella, but that seems kind of stupid when I brought one with me. Say, why don't you just keep this spare one and walk to the restaurant with me under this one?"

"Why did you bring me an umbrella?" she asked. "It's sweet of you to take care of me, but you don't need to go that far. Umbrellas don't cost a fortune, you know."

"I know," he agreed. "I just didn't like the idea of you getting wet and it rains all the time here. If it's any consolation, it's just one from my house. It's not a new umbrella. As a matter of fact, you should open it before you take it outside to make sure there's nothing wrong with it."

"Are you saying I should open it indoors?" she asked playfully. "Isn't that bad luck?"

"Just this once," he said, matching her tone. "I don't think it would be bad luck. I think it would be good luck."

They had a moment where they stared at each other stupidly. It was because she thought he was so handsome and he was so thoughtful. The whole thing was extra

nice because she liked the way he looked at her as if he didn't want one hair on her head to get wet if she didn't like it.

She took the umbrella. "Thanks. I'll take it upstairs."

He waited while she took the umbrella back up the stairs and hung the handle on one of the hooks. Then she came back downstairs, locked the door, and joined him under the umbrella. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him.

"I didn't tell you," he began, "but we're having dinner with Oliver and Ricky. They were supposed to go on their date tonight, but apparently, they decided to spend the afternoon continuing their talk. Did you know Oliver got offered an acting job in Vancouver?"

Lindsay nodded. "Yeah, that was why he decided to get up the nerve to confess to Ricky. If she said no, he was going to go back to the mainland and take that job."

"Yeah," Gavin said. "Well, it turns out, it's a pretty good job, so she's convinced him to take it. She's going to close her beauty salon and join him in a month."

It was Lindsay's turn for her jaw to hang open. "Are you serious?"

Gavin smiled, raised his eyebrows, and smacked his lips in the affirmative. "Yeah. They've decided they are crazy about each other and that they really can have it all. They can have friendship, love, money, and the life both of them have always dreamed about. Since they had the whole afternoon together and the better part of the evening, they want to hang out with us since Oliver is going back to the mainland tomorrow."

"Well, that's fantastic! Very generous. I'm not sure if I'd want to spend my last night on the island that way."

"I am the boy's brother," Gavin pointed out.

"Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I wouldn't want to leave the island without spending my last night with you," she teased.

He suddenly gripped her bare hand up the sleeve of her coat. "Listen," he said, looking into her eyes. "I know I'm your boss and I know you're shy about starting a relationship, but I'd really like it if we could take our relationship to the next level. I don't want to just be your boss. Boyfriend sounds stupid at our age, but I want something with you that makes me your most important person. I want to be the person you call when you have a problem. Not just with the doorknob, but with everything. Can I be that person to you?"

Lindsay swallowed. She wanted that too, but she didn't understand what would happen if they were found out. "I'd like that, but what would your boss say if he found out you were dating one of your workers?"

"My boss?" Gavin asked incredulously.

"Yeah. Would it cause a stink?"

Gavin started laughing. "Okay. I see a few things have not been made clear to you. It's not in my job description to do renovations. That's *my* hotel. My uncle owned it for decades and I ran it under him. I started doing repairs myself because getting a contractor out here is a major pain in the ass. It's ridiculous, but it's way easier, and cheaper, to hire a few assistant hotel managers than it is to find someone reliable to do repairs promptly. I am not letting that hotel fall apart under my nose. With that idea, I started remaking the rooms. When my uncle got sick, he left me in charge.

When he died, he left it to me in his will. I do not have a boss breathing down my neck.”

“Oh...” Lindsay said a little lifelessly. The news should not have brought the wind out of her sails, but she was awfully disappointed with herself. Yes, he had inherited the hotel, but he had also worked his butt off. She had been working with him. She knew how hard he worked. Why had she put all her work into something that was never going to pan out? Why couldn't she have chosen something smarter? If she had done that, she would have something to show for her work... Instead of nothing.

“And when we're finished doing the renovations,” he said cheerfully, “you will look awfully cute behind the front desk... If that's what you want.”

She smiled at him, but she was acting again.

She didn't want to act.

She didn't want to act as she sat down at the table. She didn't want to act pleased as she listened to Oliver and Ricky tell them all their plans. She didn't want to act excited with a wide spectacular smile spread across her cheeks. She had lost all her appetite and she didn't want to eat. She ordered a salad and it took all her talent to act like it didn't suck as she forced it down. She did not want to dance to the crappy country song that was playing on the jukebox, but she got up and danced with Gavin.

Well, that ended up not being so bad. She put her head on his shoulder and had a few minutes where she didn't need to pretend anything. Dancing with him was nice. When he turned her in his arms and gave her a little twirl, she looked down like she was afraid she'd lose her footing so she didn't have to meet his eyes.

He didn't twirl her again but held her close against his plaid shirt. “What's wrong?” he whispered to her.

“Sorry. I've just been thinking about all the bad choices I've made. I'm really embarrassed.”

“Well, from here, it looks like you want to let me down easy, but you're having trouble finding the words,” he said kindly like he was unbothered by her lack of enthusiasm.

“No. It isn't that. It's that I have to work tomorrow and I slept, but I'm already tired. I'm hungry, but I really can't eat well. Everything tastes like it shouldn't be in my mouth. I screwed up so bad.”

“You need to stop being so hard on yourself,” he suggested. “Are you feeling jealous that Oliver got a job acting and you didn't? Is that what's really going on?”

She smiled wanly. “I know I acted all enthusiastic about his job prospects, but that kind of job can be here in a moment and gone in a flash. TV shows get canceled all the time. More than being jealous, I hope his dreams don't go down in flames. He and Ricky are so happy and I'd be so sad if it didn't work out just the way they've planned.”

“Do you really have to do everything by yourself?” Gavin asked carefully as he maneuvered them away from where Oliver and Ricky were dancing.

Her shoulders slumped. “No. I want your help. You're my boyfriend... or the man I'm seeing? Is that a better string of words?”

“It would be easier if I could be your fiance. It would be easier still if I could be your husband. Then I'd really feel like I could step in.”

She smiled and brushed off what he said like he wasn't serious. “And if you were my husband tonight, what would you do to take all this away from me?”

"Well," he said pleasantly. "First, I'd call your sister and find out how much money you owe your mother. Then I'd send her the money—"

Lindsay made a sound to interrupt him, but he kept talking.

"She'd disagree at first too, but then I'd tell her that we're family and it was no big deal to take money from family. After all, it hadn't been a big deal when you borrowed money from your mother. So, it wouldn't be a big deal for me, the son-in-law, to pay it off."

Lindsay chuckled. She thought he was playing pretend like so many of her friends and acting buddies did. They made up stories where everything was suddenly made all right all the time. She let him go on.

"Then I'd take you back to your apartment and pack up all your clothes. Then I'd take you home to *our* place. I'd draw a hot bath for you to soak in while I hung up your clothes in the master bedroom closet. I have a ton of shirts in there that I never wear. If I cleared them out, there would be plenty of room for your nighties and whatever else you put on your body." He twirled her again. "It wouldn't take long to get it all sorted. You hardly own anything. Then I'd march over to the kitchen and whip you up some chocolate mousse with raspberries. When you got out of the tub, you'd have a little bit of an appetite and you'd let me feed it to you by firelight in the living room. You'd fall asleep with your head on my knee and I'd kiss your forehead, treating you only like the angel you are."

"No sex?" she asked, feeling her mood pick up.

"Well, in our story, we're married. There would be plenty of time for sex once you were feeling better. People who are married aren't in a big hurry for sex. They know they can have it whenever they want forever. So it's no hardship to go one night without. I'd get you the next night. Or the next morning. Well, what do you think of my story?" he asked, obviously eager to hear her response.

"Well, it sounds like perfection," she said honestly.

"Wonderful. Sadly, it will have to wait for another day. Tonight, you're tired and you're working tomorrow and nothing is going to change that fact. I'll take you back to your place now and you'll get an early night."

Lindsay appreciated that as he paid the bill and said goodnight to Oliver and Ricky. He walked her home. The cement was slick with puddles and the marina was cloaked in darkness so they couldn't see the water, only the reflection of the lights on the opposite side of the bay. His arm was solid and warm next to her and Lindsay really did stop feeling sorry for herself.

At the doorstep, she pulled him onto the landing at the bottom of the stairs out of the rain.

"I want to kiss you," she said frankly. "But there was that thing I said before about how I wanted it to happen on a day where..."

He covered her mouth with a single finger so she didn't say the other woman's name. "I'm not in a big hurry," he said, bringing his face closer to hers. "I was before, but I did a lot of thinking while you were at work and then again while you were napping. For now, if you're my... girlfriend... partner... person... I wish there was a better word. If you and I are planning out our love affair, and you're not planning one with anyone else, and you're not planning on disappearing off to the mainland, then there is really no need to rush." He removed his finger and let out a soothing breath.

"Can I see you after work tomorrow? I'll bring a grocery store picnic we can eat at your table."

"I love that idea," she said, reaching up and giving him a peck on the cheek anyway.

He gave her a loving smile, turned, and flicked open his umbrella with a practiced motion. He went back into the rain. Lindsay watched him at the door until he made it back to his truck.

He was the sweetest!

Lindsay plodded up the stairs and unlocked the second door to get into her apartment. Inside, she sat on the padded bench of the breakfast nook to take off her boots. Then she took off her coat.

The umbrella Gavin had given was hanging on the hook. She picked it up, lifted it over her head, and pressed the button to open it, only to be showered with paper money.

"What?" she gasped as it fell faster than confetti in a photoshoot.

Her reaction was so stunned and Gavin didn't even get to see it.

When she had finished with her stunned face, she got on the floor and started gathering up the money.

It was enough.

It was more than enough to get her out of trouble that month. Why did he do that?

She counted the money, made sure she hadn't missed any of it, and then she sent a text to Gavin.

"Guess what I found in the umbrella you gave me?" Lindsay typed.

"Did a bug fall out?" Gavin wrote back. "Sorry about that. It was an old umbrella."

"There weren't any bugs! Did you put something in there?"

It was a moment or two before he wrote back, "Not to my knowledge."

He was going to pretend like he hadn't given her any money!

Lindsay felt her eyes swell up with tears as she typed, "If it's not important, is it okay if I keep it?"

"The dust bunnies are all yours," he replied.

The Land of Umbrellas

Chapter Fifteen

If He Lets You Take Your Time...

The day came.

The day when Gavin didn't see Marissa, didn't speak her name, and he didn't think about her at all.

The day came when he drew Lindsay into his arms and kissed her the way she dreamed he would. Her reddish hair was between his fingers. His blondish hair was between hers... And even though Lindsay's important dream of becoming an actress washed away in the rain, a new dream rose from the clouds like a rainbow.

It was a dream where the work she did didn't disappear the moment the curtain fell. It was a dream where she wasn't wandering around a city late at night trying to make contacts. Instead, she was snug in front of a fire licking chocolate mousse from a spoon that had recently been in the mouth of a surprisingly handsome man.

It was a dream where she played in the ocean and she didn't wonder where her next paycheck was coming from. She ran along the sand and a man with powerful muscles caught her in a wide blanket. He lifted her off her feet and dumped her into a sand castle that couldn't have lasted forever.

It was a dream that was so vivid that it was almost real because when Lindsay opened her eyes in the morning, the dream was only a shadow of the life she lived when she was awake.

And as for being an actress... It still came in handy sometimes.

THE END



Born In

January

A Novelette

Stephanie Van Orman

Born in January

ONE

It wasn't the right time to leave a party, nor the right time to tell your hostess you weren't feeling well and you had to leave immediately. The hostess shook her head like the defection was nothing new and went back to attending to her more worthwhile guests. Annaliese's friend, Kimberly, offered to drive her back to the house, but Annaliese wouldn't hear of it.

"How will you get home?" Kimberly asked tartly as she followed Annaliese to the door.

"I'll get an Uber, call for a taxi, or take the bus. It doesn't matter. I just have to leave right now." Annaliese rushed the explanation as she threw her coat over her shoulders.

"Oh, I see," Kimberly said without turning her head. "You've seen someone you'd rather not see and you're only 'saying' that you're feeling sick."

"That's a good girl," Annaliese praised. "I'll make it home just fine."

"If that's the case, I won't worry about you."

"Good. Don't," Annaliese said as she hoisted her umbrella over her head and stepped out into the late afternoon rain.

Kimberly let her go down the steps and let out the usual sigh.

Annaliese was a soft sort of woman with light brown hair and light brown eyes. When she was younger, her hair would escape from her elastic and collect in wisps around her face. As an adult, she slicked it back into a no-nonsense French twist and enjoyed a level of sophistication no one would have believed possible of the child she had been.

That was who she had been avoiding at the party. Someone who had known her when she was a child.

His name was Trip. Not really, but everyone called him that. The nickname was so prevalent that hardly anyone knew what was written on his birth certificate. Annaliese knew what his real name was. She knew all about him. Every detail: his dark hair, his green eyes (which were darker than hers and often mistaken for brown), his height, his weight, what he thought about everything... except one thing. How he would feel about running into her at that dinner party on that night.

She couldn't pretend anymore.

She couldn't put that damn innocent look on her face one more time.

He'd seen her.

Trip had seen her before she made her escape. She'd felt his eyes follow her as she tumbled out of the house and onto the street.

Her phone blinged.

She couldn't look at it. Whoever it was, they would have to wait. Whoever wanted her could go to hell... even if it was Trip himself.

She didn't call for an Uber or a taxi. She walked blindly through the late afternoon rain as the wind bent the branches of the trees. Raindrops rolled down leaves collecting weight until they were blown free and smashed against Annaliese's umbrella. Her dress was wet. The sky was

getting dark. She slipped under a bus shelter and stared at the numbers on the sign. Did one of the buses that came by take her home?

Trip's car pulled up to the side of the curb. Without hesitating, he got out, came over to the passenger side of his car, and opened the door for her.

She didn't say a word. She got in.

He gave her a little bow before returning to the driver's side and getting in.

When he maneuvered the car into the driving lane, she asked him, "Where are you taking me?"

"To my house."

"I didn't know you had a house," she said, amazed at what she didn't know about him.

"Oh, I do. It's a new acquisition. If you weren't playing hide-and-seek with me, I would have shown it to you already. If you're still playing hide-and-seek, I'll take you home instead."

"No. Show it to me. You must know how tired I am of playing games."

He nodded and drove them through the city rain. He put on music that was soft and melded into the sounds the raindrops made as they splashed against his car.

More than once, Annaliese checked where they were going, confusion all over her face.

Trip noticed, but didn't comment. He wanted to surprise her.

Finally, they pulled into a U-shaped driveway of a house Annaliese knew very well. The lights were on and the glow on the gray brick made the house look golden.

"This is your uncle's house," Annaliese observed. "He's always been so annoyed with you. Why are you staying here?"

"My uncle passed away last month," he explained.

"How shocking! You should have told me," Annaliese fumed.

"What? You would have gone to the funeral with me?"

"Yes. If you'd asked."

"Hmm," he sighed. "You've been through enough lately. I did think to ask you, but you have to understand, I was not expecting him to leave me this house. He left his money to other people, his extensive properties to other people, but he left this house to me. I was stunned. Like you said, he's always been so annoyed with me... like my father. In his will, he said he left it to me because I was the only person who made memories here."

Annaliese went crimson. "Did you ever explain the situation to him?"

"No, but he found out. I don't know how, but he found out. He explained as much in his will."

"The lawyer didn't read that out for everyone to hear, did they?"

"No," Trip said, eager to quiet her fears. "I was given my portion privately. Actually, everyone was given their portion privately. Maybe it was done that way to keep my secret, but maybe other people have their secrets too."

"Did he say much about it?" Annaliese asked quietly.

"Yes. That he was wrong. That my father was wrong. That everyone who had dealt with me was wrong and he hoped that this gesture might go a long way in correcting everyone's terrible advice, incorrect thinking, and stubborn, foolish ways."

Annaliese relaxed slightly. "Did any of that make you feel better?"

"We'll see," he said, as he got out of the car and opened Annaliese's door for her. He took her hand and lifted her out of the car. He closed it quietly behind her and opened the front door of the house for her.

Annaliese had been in the entryway so many times she could hardly remember the first time she'd been there. It was huge with twin staircases rising like wings. Trip had to walk across miles of tiled flooring to reach the closet where he hung her coat.

She lowered herself onto a cream velvet chair to remove her black high heels. Before she could undo one zipper, Trip was on his knees in front of her, sliding her ankles out of the ankle boots she wore on cold days.

A painful sigh escaped her lips. "Please stop." She slid off the chair and into his lap with the layers of her black gauze skirt flowing all around them. "You're always on your knees. I hate it. Stop it."

Before he could put his arms around her, she stood up, removing her weight and herself from him. The moment the fabric from her skirt slipped between his fingers was always the moment when he felt he had truly lost her. It was not the moment when her skin stopped touching his, but the moment when even her clothes were out of his reach.

She took five steps from him and waited.

He waited too.

They were both waiting for the moment they got the green light from the other, but they hadn't felt like they'd received it yet.

"Did Uncle Clement leave you all the furniture?" Annaliese asked conversationally.

"Every stick. Even the chess set in the library." Trip got up from his knees. "Would you play a game with me tonight?"

"Of chess?"

"Yes," Trip said, his heart in his throat. "We always used to play together. It might help us relax."

"Is it still set with the old papers we used?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked at it since we played with it last, but it's always set up. Uncle liked it. He thought of it as part of the decorations."

Annaliese remembered some of the things they'd written on the papers they'd put in that chess set. It would be so much easier if they could have a conversation like normal people, but it felt too late for that. They needed a therapist... or a lawyer.

Born in January

TWO

The library was a room of unsurpassed beauty. As far as a personal library went, it was beyond luxurious. The room had originally been a ballroom. The owner of the house before Uncle Clement had been another relative. They had bookshelves attached to every wall in every corridor in the house. It made moving furniture in and out a nightmare. Annaliese and Trip both remembered the way the house had looked in those days. Sometimes a person had to turn sideways to get down a hallway.

When Uncle Clement inherited the house, the first thing he did was acknowledge that he did not need a ballroom. He purchased uniform shelving, had all the mismatched bookcases removed from the house and all the books properly stored in two lines of bookcases in the ballroom and leaning against all four walls. When all the books were moved into the new library, there was still shelf space for new books. Soon that was no longer true and more bookcases were brought in because the house was just made to be read in.

Of the many beautiful features of the library, one of them was a small table intended only for playing chess. The pieces and the board were wooden. It looked ordinary enough unless you knew that it held a secret. The secret of the chess set was that every single one of the pieces had a hole drilled in the bottom. The tube created inside was the perfect size for hiding a tiny roll of paper.

A thousand games could be played with a chess set that had a message hidden inside each piece. Sometimes the game contained commands like dares, sometimes clues, and sometimes questions. Trip said he didn't know what was written inside the pieces, and he didn't. He flipped over a black pawn to make sure there was still a roll of paper inside before pulling out the chair in front of the white pieces for Annaliese.

She believed him, that he didn't know what was inside, and sat down. She had long learned that it didn't matter what was written inside. You could ignore what was written on the papers and ask whatever you wanted.

He sat down and looked at her gravely. "Begin."

She picked up her pawn and moved it forward one square.



"I miss playing chess with you," Trip said as their game wore on. No one had shed blood yet and both sets of pieces had strayed far into the no man's land in the middle of the board.

"Are you going easy on me?" she asked suspiciously.

"I hoped you were going easy on me," he retorted.

She huffed and killed one of his pawns with her bishop. She unrolled the scroll that had been placed inside his dead pawn. It read, 'Do you like carrot cake?' She wasn't asking him a dumb question. She knew everything about him, even whether or not he liked carrot cake.

Instead, she made up her own question and tried to place it on the same maturity level so it didn't seem out of place when he read a question from her side. "Do you have a girlfriend?" she asked.

"Is that what it says?" he asked, reaching for the paper in her hand.

"Don't you trust me?" she asked coyly, like a little girl. Then, she rolled over her tongue and became a sharp woman. "Or do you not want to answer the question?" She did not show him the paper. She rolled it up and stuffed it back in the pawn.

"No. I don't have a girlfriend," he said flatly and offered no further information before moving a pawn to threaten her bishop in retaliation.

His answer did not satisfy her. It was too childish a question after all.

Three moves later, Trip killed her knight. He opened the paper hidden inside. It wasn't even a question. It was more like a fortune cookie. It said, 'Make plans for further education.' It was impossible for him to say those words to her. Instead, he pretended to read a dare instead.

"Let your hair down."

Annaliese's hair was tied up in a French twist, but familiar with this game, she didn't hesitate to do as she was told. If she wanted answers to her questions, she had to play by the rules of the game. She deposited her elastic and thirteen bobby pins into the tray where they were the dead pieces were stored.

Trip felt the tension in his shoulders ease as soon as he saw her hair fall over her shoulders. He remembered her as a little girl with flyaway wisps, as a teenager who couldn't quite bring herself to use as much product as it took to achieve perfect smoothness. Seeing the destruction of her French twist gave him a lift.

Maybe everything would be all right.

Annaliese always lost her knight first when she played chess. It didn't matter who she was playing. She was better with her bishops and took another pawn.

She opened the paper. It read, 'Wonder not. All will be revealed.' She did her best to hide an exasperated pant before she asked cleanly, "What did you think of me the first time you saw me?"

"Probably nothing," Trip answered. "I don't think I even remember the first time I saw you. I was a child."

The disappointment Annaliese felt at his statement was so palpable it surprised her. What he said was perfectly reasonable. They were three or four years old when they met. Still, she must care a lot about what Trip thought to be hurt by his honest reflection. She thought it was a bad sign for their conversation if he didn't try to make something up, even if only to please her. Had he fallen to his knees in the entryway for nothing?

"However," he continued. "I always thought the days when you were here, in the library, were the nicest."

She smiled. That did feel like a hopeful place to start.

Born in January

THREE

Meeting as children and looking through Uncle Clement's books was a pleasant memory for Annaliese too. Trip's Uncle Clement and Annaliese's mother were lawyers who worked for the same firm. Not only did they work together, but they were close friends. Hence, on some Sunday afternoons, they met to chat and unwind. Annaliese was brought to visit the library and Trip was called over to help entertain her.

Those were essential memories, but they were not the beginning of Trip and Annaliese's love affair.

Rushing forward, Annaliese was sixteen and she was set to attend summer camp. She had chosen the camp herself for the archery program and horseback riding. It was in a beautiful mountain range miles away from the sort of summer hideaway her mother would have chosen for her, but Annaliese was sixteen and granted the right to choose how she spent her summer.

None of her friends from school were going to be there, but that was part of the appeal. She was awkward with friends and didn't know what to do with them. At her high school, everyone Annaliese knew was so competitive, it was cutthroat.

"What was your score on the test?"

"How many times did you get asked to dance?"

"What was your time around the track?"

Annaliese struggled because she wasn't above average at any of those things. She was plagued by a haunting feeling that she didn't belong there. She was an imposter, but she couldn't tell anyone she thought that. The last thing in the world she needed was to land herself in therapy or have even one person tell her mother that she felt that way.

So, Annaliese chose her camp and she was allowed to go mostly because when her mother was researching the camp, she discovered that Trip was going to be there.

On Annaliese's way to the camp, there was a mixup at the airport. A limousine company was supposed to take her from the airport to the camp and the mixup meant that instead of merely going from point A to point B in a shiny black sedan, she arrived at the camp in a white stretch limo.

It made quite the sensation.

All the girls and all the boys stared.

However, Annaliese was a pro at showing no emotion. That was the thing that carried her through attending a school where the average student was an over-achieving showoff. She didn't give them any reaction and instead looked unimpressed and vacant no matter what happened.

Annaliese couldn't see the sensation she created as she pulled up, but Trip could. He was standing on a balcony that overlooked the U-shaped drop-off point. Everyone was watching as the white limousine pulled up. When the chauffeur opened the door for her, the effect was quite dazzling. She was not dressed like a person who ought to be coming out of a limousine. She was wearing frayed cut-offs, a white undershirt with a short-sleeved plaid shirt over it, tied at the

waist. She wore yellow high-top sneakers and carried a backpack. She yanked her headphones from her ears and stowed them away while the driver unloaded her luggage.

Her dark blonde flyaway hair was straightened, her tan was the perfect shade of golden and suddenly, everything about her was rich with a capital R.

"I know her," Trip said to his friend Jamison, who was standing next to him.

"Sure, you do," Jamison sniggered back. "What's her name?"

"Yeah. That's Annaliese Strider."

Jamison clicked his tongue. "She must be famous."

Suddenly, it struck Trip as a mistake to let on how he knew her. He had been one of the first people there and he noticed something from the way the other campers arrived. He and Annaliese were rich by comparison. It meant that his family was far wealthier than the families of the other campers, but he decided not to show it off. He got the counselors to hide all his best tech toys in the camp safe and vowed not to use them. He decided that the use of his gear was more important than whether or not anyone knew where they came from. He ripped the logos off his hiking gear and drew on his shoes with a permanent marker.

He came to the camp to have a normal summer, a stress-free summer, and he couldn't do that if he was labeled as a rich kid. What if he was targeted by some brat who had something to prove?

Staring down at Annaliese, it was already too late for her. He racked his brain. Why had she arrived in a limo? Of all the stupid, careless...

He looked down at her and his tirade stopped. Maybe it didn't matter how she arrived. She looked like white gold and sunshine. She probably caused a riot wherever she went.

A second later, she was wheeling her modestly sized suitcase behind her as she passed through the log arch into the camp.

Annaliese was not surprised when she saw that she was rooming with three other girls. It said she would be on the website, but still, she was surprised by her roommates. They were friendly, unlike the other girls at school.

She went to dinner with them under an outdoor canopy. She saw Trip on the other side of the cluster of tables, surrounded by his bunkmates because everyone was eating with their bunkmates for the first two days. She tilted her head at him and gave him a cool-girl salute, which he returned in the form of a wink.

There was no rush to meet up with him. She knew he had been told to watch out for her. She'd meet up with him eventually.

As she chewed on her grilled cheese sandwich, she glanced at him repeatedly. He had really changed since the last time she'd seen him. They were almost the same age. He was born on January third and she was born on January nineteenth of the same year. What right did he have to have gotten that tall? They had been the same height for as long as she could remember.

Finally, she acknowledged that it had been a while since she had last seen him. Two years? Three?

She chatted with her roommates and tried to ignore their awestruck gazes as they grilled her about what school she went to and what her life was like as a super-rich heiress.

Annaliese tried to explain that the limo to the camp had been due to an error and not because she was a super-rich heiress. She told them it was the first time she'd been in a limo,

which was a lie, but it was the first time she'd been in a stretch limo, which was the truth. She wasn't sure if she was curbing their enthusiasm, but she continued to try, while the rest of the camp did not hear her explanation.

Born in January

FOUR

Trip was awoken that night by a counselor, a twenty-year-old named Skyler, hissing in his ear. "Trip. There's been a problem. Can you get up?"

The clock read 12:30, so he hadn't been asleep that long. "What's going on?" he asked as he flopped out of bed.

"Shh! Don't wake up the other guys. I only need you."

Trip was confused. What could they need only him for?

Skyler led him to the administrative building and to the counselor's lounge.

Trip heard Annaliese crying before he saw her and quickened his pace. He knew exactly what Annaliese sounded like when she cried. In the room, a female counselor was hovering over Annaliese, clearly unsure of what to do.

As soon as Annaliese saw him, she rushed him like a little girl who needed a hug. Trip put his arms around her. It was only a little awkward and the strangeness of them touching like that melted away in seconds.

"What happened?" he asked the counselor over Annaliese's head. The top of her head only came up to his jaw.

"Someone put a dead, bloody, rabbit in her bed. Either she got into bed and didn't notice it at first or someone put it in after she was already in bed. Needless to say, when she put her feet down at the foot of her bed, she felt something weird, investigated and this is the result."

"You need to call her mother," Trip said instantly.

"Let's not be hasty," the female counselor said.

Trip understood immediately. This counselor, Camilla (Trip read her name tag), knew that Annaliese's mother was a lawyer and didn't want to involve her. Instead, she wanted to see if she could de-escalate the situation on their own. The first thing they needed to do was calm Annaliese down. They asked her if there was anyone in the camp who could comfort her, and she gave them his name. Trip tightened his arms around her.

Camilla went on to explain that it would be wisest if Annaliese and Trip took a few minutes to calm down in the counselor's lounge while she found out who had put the dead rabbit in her bed.

Trip agreed that was fine. They might be able to rectify the situation before they reported the incident to Annaliese's horrifying mother. If they couldn't set things straight, nothing was going to stop the horrifying mother. It was much better to try to find a solution first.

He pulled Annaliese over to the couch and held her close as he yanked a tissue from the box free.

Camilla left and Annaliese took the tissue from him like he was a hero and blew her nose.

Skyler held a garbage can out to her.

"How are your feet?" Trip asked the weeping girl.

"How do you think? I left bloody footprints all down Roger's Hall."

“Did anyone take a picture? You’re going to want that for the scrapbook,” he chuckled ironically. “So many memories.”

“This is serious,” she wailed. “I have to see a doctor in the morning! I’m up on my tetanus shot but I’m going to need a round of antibiotics.”

“So you got your feet washed?”

“I washed them in the bathroom sink, but I don’t know. They still feel weird,” she wiggled her toes.

“Let me see them,” Trip said, moving to look at her feet.

She had cute feet, perfectly polished toes, and an anklet made of string, which had absorbed a bit of blood through the ties that dangled.

“Your anklet is ruined,” he observed. He pulled her ankle onto his knee and undid the knot. “I hope this wasn’t like a friendship bracelet.”

Annaliese did not have close friends. “Nah, I made it myself, but I’m annoyed. I liked it. I bought the materials myself and learned how to make it myself so I would have one.”

“Let’s keep it,” Trip said brightly, exuding a next-level charm he didn’t know he had. “Can we get a baggie?” he asked Skyler.

The counselor looked surprised but could see no reason to deny them a sandwich bag, so he got up.

“Are your feet clean enough? Do you think we should wash them again?” Trip asked, turning her foot around in his hand.

“I dunno. I scrubbed them. I want a pedicure.”

“You know,” Trip said with a cheerful, yet wicked, smile. “If we told them you needed a pedicure to feel better, I bet the two of us could spend tomorrow in that cute little tourist village we passed on the way here.”

She turned to him. “Are you good at milking things?”

“I bet I could make you cry all over again if you want to make the appeal look genuine.”

Annaliese’s mouth fell open. Alone in the counselor’s lounge, she bent toward him. “You want to go to the village, go to a spa, and get a pedicure with me?”

“I’ve never wanted or had a pedicure in my life. But, I was told that I was supposed to look out for you at this camp, and so far... this is a bit beyond my pay grade.”

“They’re paying you! I could die of embarrassment,” she cried as she pulled a throw blanket off the back of the couch and covered her head with it.

“They’re not paying me!” he said as he pulled the blanket off her head.

“Really?” she asked with wide eyes.

“Really,” he said flatly. “All I was saying is that this is a little more drama than I was expecting on the first day! I require professional assistance.”

“Look, I know you didn’t come to this camp to hold my hand.” At that moment, he was literally holding onto one of her feet. Annaliese was not able to articulate that the gesture was the most reassuring thing about having him come to comfort her. If he was willing to touch her foot, then what happened must not have been that big a deal. She pulled her feet back and tucked them under her on the couch.

Trip didn’t get to say anything further before Skyler came back with a ziplock and a tray of snacks and drinks. He turned on the TV for some background noise and prepared to hunker down.

“Was Camilla thinking that she’d figure out who did this before sunrise?” Trip asked.

“She was hoping,” Skyler replied.

Trip thought that was impossible, but far be it for him to criticize. He spent the rest of the night on the couch watching old TV programs and convincing Annaliese that it was fine to snuggle with him.

The whole thing was a bit of a revelation for him. He learned that he was cool-headed in a crisis, that he enjoyed cuddling with a girl, and that he could outlast a camp counselor in a game of which one of them could keep their eyes open the longest. As soon as Skylar was asleep in the recliner next to them, Trip maneuvered Annaliese so she was using his lap as a pillow and leaned back himself.

He hadn’t been aware that he had a crush on her. He had a soft spot for her from their collective childhood as he had always thought she was very sweet. He liked her better than the other girls he knew. She was not fascinating to him in a novelty kind of way. He had crushes on girls at his school sometimes, but it never felt like a replication of what he felt for Annaliese.

He clicked his tongue dryly and wondered if she was his first love. Part of him hoped she wasn’t. The idea of a first love sounded doomed to failure in his mind. The other half of him timidly suggested that he would have to find someone very attractive for him to find them more attractive than Annaliese.

The idea was simply impossible.

Born in January

FIVE

The next day, Trip kept to his word. He went with Annaliese to the village. They began their day by visiting the doctor, where Annaliese got the prescription for the round of antibiotics she knew she needed. Then they went to the pharmacy to get the prescription filled. Then to the spa for pedicures.

“Really, Trip, you don’t have to do this with me,” she said, shaking her head wearily at him, but also squelching her laughter as they stretched out at the spa.

“I’m only doing this because it’s so funny for you,” he said with his feet in the whirlpool bath.

He was wearing a T-shirt with a Batman logo on it. No one could have looked more out of place. The sight of him made Annaliese cover her mouth to stop the giggles.

“Do you want polish?” the beauty consultant asked Trip.

He flipped his head toward Annaliese. “Do I want polish?”

“No!” she gasped.

He flipped his head back. “I guess not.”

When they left, he took her out for lunch. Skyer was with them, saying consoling things about how Camilla hadn’t been able to figure out which camper had played the rabbit prank.

“Maybe we should stay at a hotel tonight,” Trip suggested casually. “You know, because we don’t know who did it. The criminal’s still hanging around the camp. Annaliese can’t be expected to return to her bed tonight or to spend another night in the counselor’s lounge.”

Annaliese and Skyler exchanged looks. Clearly, they both thought that suggestion was too demanding, but at that moment, neither of them had a better idea.

When the three of them returned to the camp, it turned out that the situation was more serious than they thought and the camp counselors were considering alternatives.

It seemed that even though they spoke to everyone in the cabins and interviewed everyone, no one knew anything. The rabbit had been hit by a car, so it was probably hit by one of the people coming to the camp, but it had been fresh enough to make a bloody mess. Had whoever hit it stopped their car, got out, put the rabbit in a bag, and then dumped the whole thing out in Annaliese’s bed? That would require an alarming amount of forethought.

None of the campers knew how it happened. No one had any memory of their vehicle hitting a bump or anything.

With no new information, Annaliese was finally encouraged to call her mother, but she knew that if her mother heard what happened, she would be pulled from the camp. She glanced at Trip and worried that if she decided to go home, it would not be the last time she saw him. They were getting older with only two more summers before they graduated from high school. She went to a different school than him. She wasn’t sure how much more time she could spend with him if she bailed.

“Could I be moved to a different room?” she asked Camilla.

The camp counselor hissed in hesitation. "There aren't any other beds available in the girls' dormitory. There is an empty cabin for sick campers that we could set you up in until we find the culprit."

"That sounds perfect," Annaliese said.

"It's behind the front office. Do you think you'll be scared to stay alone? I'd feel better if we could get another camper to stay with you."

Annaliese shook her head. "As far as I know, the only camper here who couldn't have pulled the rabbit prank was Trip. You aren't going to let a boy stay with me, so I'm fine staying alone."

"What's your relationship like with Trip? Is he your cousin?" Camilla asked, digging a little deeper.

"He's not a relative. We've been friends since we were little kids."

"So, he's like your brother?" she asked, still picking.

Annaliese didn't know where that line of thought was going, so she answered, "I don't have a brother. Of the people I know, I guess he's the closest thing."

Camilla smiled knowingly and helped Annaliese cart her luggage out to the infirmary cabin and helped her get sorted from there.

Afterward, Annaliese went under the canopy for dinner and saw Trip sitting all alone at a table. She was supposed to be sitting with her roommates, but since she didn't know if they were the ones who had left the rabbit in her bed, she walked at a measured pace over to Trip. He got up with her and they joined the line to get food.

"Why are you by yourself? Aren't you supposed to be sitting with your roommates?" she asked in a sly whisper as they moved through the buffet, choosing their dinners.

He leaned over and whispered into her hair, "I was removed from my room this afternoon."

"Why?"

"They moved me to a room by myself."

"Huh? So there were no free rooms in the girls' cabins, but there were plenty of free rooms in the boys' dorms?"

"Something like that." He gave her a meaningful look.

Annaliese didn't know what that meant. When she sat at the table, she expected Trip to sit across from her, but he didn't.

He sat next to her, with his shoulder brushing hers, and whispered, "I'm supposed to sneak out and sleep in your cabin."

Her face flushed red. "Do they know how inappropriate that is?"

"They said that since I'm like your brother *and* we have been friends all our lives *and* since the person you wanted when you found the rabbit was me, I should be there for you. Just until they find out who did this and then you can return to your room."

"Even though all that is true," Annaliese hissed back, "we're not actually that close."

"I heard Skyler tell them that in the eighteen hours he spent with us he has never witnessed less sexual tension between two teenagers than us."

"That can't be true. Half of these kids barely know the difference between their knees and their elbows. How could all of them be raring to go?"

"I agree."

Annaliese swallowed, but the cool, empty look was on her face. "What do you think about staying in my room with me?"

“We need to make a deal,” he said, trying to match the coolness on her face. If he could look as indifferent as her, it could only serve them both.

“Should we talk about it tonight, when we’re alone in our... cabin?” Annaliese asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

Trip nodded.

Born In January

SIX

Trip snuck out of his room by merely packing a backpack with what he needed for the night and walking out his front door. The hall of the cabin was empty and the counselor on supervision knew he would be leaving and that everyone was fine with that.

Annaliese waited for him. She had changed into her pajamas, ones she never thought would need to look good for a guy, and felt her heart hammering like there was construction going on inside her.

He tapped on the door three times as they had already decided that would be their secret knock and she opened the door for him.

Once inside, he dropped his backpack and locked the door behind him.

The room was generally used as a sick room, so there were six beds lined up instead of the regular four of the dorms. He saw which bed she was using and put his stuff on the bed next to hers.

"I have a problem," he said, trying to keep his mask of indifference up.

"Me too," she said, sitting on the bunk facing him.

He mimicked her and they sat together with their knees touching. "This isn't a good situation for me."

"Not me either," she confessed.

He started off easy. "I don't like being here on the pretext that I'm 'like your brother'."

"I agree. I've never thought of you like that," she reassured him.

"I'm relieved to hear it," Trip said steadily. "The thing is, I think I like you too much to be here, spending the whole night with you. It would put my mind to rest if you merely told me that even though I am not your brother, you're not available. You have a boyfriend at your old school."

"I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend," Annaliese squeaked.

"You're not?"

"No. My mother is fiercely opposed to my dating until I finish law school."

"Law school?" Trip echoed in bewilderment. He started counting the years in his head. "You couldn't possibly finish all that before you turn twenty-six."

"I know, but she didn't get married until she was thirty-eight and she didn't have any children until she was forty-six, so I'm not going to win that argument. Besides, I haven't wanted to fight with her. She's a terrifying lawyer. If she turns all that on you, you don't win fights with her."

"Ah. I have a similar problem, though not exactly," Trip confided.

"What's your problem?"

"My father and my uncle don't believe in being with one person. They believe I should date as many women as there are weeks in a year. They think I should never be on a date with the same girl twice. They want me to die having sworn on an affidavit that I have screwed half the population of mainland Vancouver."

Annaliese was appalled and showed it. "Do you want to do that?"

“Do I want to become the source of all sexually transmitted infections *and* diseases? Of course not. Those old men are mentally unstable, and even though I have spent Sunday afternoons lolling around in my uncle’s mansion, my mother raised me. No, that is not what I want for myself.”

She started snapping her fingers. “I know what this is. It’s my mother and your uncle. They’re friends. What do you want to bet he’s never slept with her? If he’s slept with everyone, what do you want to bet he’s never got together with her? She’s the fortress he could never topple?”

Trip continued the train of thought. “And on her end, she’s proud of her perseverance and wants to raise you the same way?”

Annaliese tapped her lips with her fingertips. “Our old people are weird.”

He agreed.

“Back to what you were saying before,” Trip said, getting ready to say what he had to. “You say you aren’t allowed to have a boyfriend. Have you tried dating someone behind your mother’s back?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t been asked and I haven’t wanted to.”

“This,” Trip said, indicating the cabin around them, “Is pretty far behind her back.”

Annaliese huffed in surprise. “Are you saying you want to date me?”

“Yeah,” he said breathlessly.

She hesitated. “You’re not talking about one date and tossing me aside after it ends.”

“No. I want us to be a thing,” he said, sticking to his sweaty guns.

She scoffed, skipping the question as to *why* he wanted to do such a thing and going straight for the *how*. “How could we possibly date behind my mother’s back? Your father and uncle would certainly tell her everything.”

“We hide it from them too. We hide it from everyone.”

“This is the deal you mentioned in the dining hall? You want me to be your secret girlfriend?”

He nodded.

Instead of answering, Annaliese got up and started pacing the room. “We would have to make a detailed bargain.”

“Yes.”

“You couldn’t have any other girlfriends other than me, secret or out in the open.”

He leaned back on his elbows. “Same goes for you. No one but me.”

She snorted. “You think there’s a lineup of guys who want to date me?”

“There is. You just don’t see it because you’re always looking over it with that distant, snobby look you wear so well.”

“I’m not distant or snobby,” she contradicted with her nose in the air.

“You *don’t* do it because you’re trying to keep people away. You’re *doing* it because you’re trying to keep people away.”

“You said the same thing twice!” she exclaimed.

“I know. You’re using it as a filter so you only let the good ones in. I’m flattered by it constantly because I’m one of the rare ones you let in,” he admitted with a warm smile.

“What would agreeing to this tonight entail?” she asked briskly. “Are you saying all this because this sleepy-time arrangement is too good to pass up?”

“No. I don’t want anything,” he said, without hesitation. “I don’t want to do this because I want to fool around with you tonight. I’m doing this because I want your phone number. I don’t have it.”

“I’d give you my number anyway,” she said, rolling her eyes, and grabbing her phone.

Trip needed more of an answer than that. “Look, I don’t think this is the first time we’ve talked about this, or that I’m whipping this out of thin air. Do you remember playing pretend with me in the library?”

She did remember, but it was pretty embarrassing to bring up. When they were little kids, they used to play games where she was the princess and he was the prince. They’d enact little weddings on occasion. It was also true that they had little affectionate rituals. They’d hug when they met and when they said goodbye. He’d kiss her booboo if she skinned her knee. They held hands when they crossed the street.

It was just that she had always wanted to believe that that was just how a little boy and a little girl acted when they were friends.

It wasn’t special until he said it was.

“Okay,” she said, putting up her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I believe you. I even want to do this crazy thing with you. I’m just not sure how we can do it. If we’re only going to date for the five weeks we’re here, then that’s one thing, but what will happen to us when we go back to school in the fall?”

“I don’t want to act like we’re going to break up. Let’s make plans for the fall,” he said quickly.

She swept her hair off her shoulder, a plan springing to her mind. “I’ll get my mother to switch me so I’m going to your school instead of mine.”

“How will you do that?”

“I’ll tell her how much better my life will be if I go to a school that’s close to home. My schedule right now is murder. I spend an hour and a half on the bus every day just going one way,” she complained.

“Yeah. You’ll tell her, I’ll tell her, and we’ll get anyone else who’ll listen to tell her. My school costs less and it’s less of a big deal, but you *need* something less rigid.” His emphasis on the word ‘need’ cracked her up.

“We’ll do better telling her I get motion sick and that I would like a shorter commute rather than fighting on the grounds that I need time to be a teenager.”

“Should I tell her that too?” Trip offered.

“No. You shouldn’t say anything. It would make it look like you care where I go to school. It would be a mistake that would make her suspicious. I’ll just tell her that you told me about your ten-minute commute and I got jealous. After all, we don’t live that far apart.”

“Do you think she’d send you to board somewhere near your old school rather than switch schools?” Trip wondered. “If the prestige means that much to her.”

“No,” Annaliese said firmly. “She did not go through the trouble of getting me only to send me to boarding school. She wants me around.”

Trip picked up on the odd construction of that sentence and idiotically pointed it out. “Doesn’t a mom usually say the trouble of *having* a child rather than the trouble of *getting* a child?”

“My mother was forty-six when she got me. She did not give birth to me. I’m not really her kid,” she admitted candidly.

Trip's mouth hung open. "I didn't know you were adopted. Were you adopted, or surrogate?" he stumbled over the word badly.

"Not a surrogate. I had a different mother before I was adopted. My new mother adopted me when I was three. I thought you knew."

He stayed silent like he absolutely did not want to stick his foot in his mouth a third time. He also didn't know exactly what that meant.

Suddenly, Annaliese started laughing. "You are so sweet. Everyone knows I'm adopted. I don't look anything like my mom or my dad."

Trip thought of Annaliese's sixty-year-old mother and her sixty-five-year-old father. It was hard for him to tell if her mother had once been the harvest breeze Annaliese was when she was old enough to be her grandmother, but he didn't like to say.

She continued, "And there has never been a time when I didn't know I was adopted."

"Really?"

"I was three when my mother got me. I remember a bit about my biological mother."

Trip didn't dare ask her any questions about that. "Oh... sorry, I didn't realize any of this."

"It's okay," she said softly. "So, let's say I start going to your school. What then?"

"Then, we tell everyone that we're friends. That way we can hang out as friends in front of everyone without any issue. The rest of the time, I have to make an appointment to have some alone time with you. If we duck around corners and kiss, we'll get caught fast."

"I think that too," she agreed.

"We'll have to take our secret dating seriously. I'll invite you over to my place when no one is home and vice versa."

Annaliese nodded.

"And for now?" he asked, leaning in for more conspiring.

"You want me to make the rules for camp?" she asked, leaning forward also.

"Yup. Make the rules."

"We just started this, so let's just try being friends in public and see how that goes."

"We can do that," Trip said, nodding. "But I do need a little more tonight."

Annaliese swallowed. What was he going to ask for?

Trip continued, "I said I want to date you, which felt like a pretty big confession at the time, but now it doesn't seem like it was enough."

"Why?"

"B-because you haven't told me that you like me," he stuttered.

Annaliese leaned further forward. "I like you. Everything about you is just a little strange because you've grown so much since I last saw you."

"You'll get used to me," he said confidently.

She kissed him, giving him a sweet lingering kiss that was preceded by deep looks and fluttering eyelashes before the knock on the door startled them both.

Trip jumped to answer it.

Skyler stuck his head in. "You didn't think we'd let the two of you sleep alone, did you?"

Trip widened the door for him.

Skyler came in, observed their beds and the placement of their things, and nodded. Everything was in order as far as he was concerned.

Born in January

SEVEN

In the morning, a dead squirrel was found in another girl's bed and after thoroughly investigating it, or claiming they had, the counselors decided that the girl who was targeted couldn't have been the culprit. The squirrel was also roadkill but not as fresh as the rabbit found in Annaliese's bed and the girl was just as freaked out as Annaliese had been since the squirrel was flattered and in two large pieces.

The girl, Dawn, was invited to join Annaliese in the cabin. It was noticeable how much the two girls had in common. Both were blondish, with light builds and huge eyes. Annaliese was bigger because she was three years older, but they still looked a little like different versions of the same girl.

With another girl, Annaliese did not expect Trip or Skler to join them. She was stunned when Trip showed up anyway, tapping three times at the door.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed after opening the door for him.

"Skyler will be here in a few. We're not going to stay the night," he said immediately. "I'm just here to make sure you're both all right and make sure you have the correct number of people to play cards. Hearts? Rook? I've got both!" he said playfully as he showed a set of cards in both hands.

"I guess you can come in," Annaliese said grudgingly as she stifled her giggle.

Trip came in and locked the door behind him. They pushed a few of the beds together so they could all sit cross-legged on the mattresses. Skyler brought snacks from the kitchen and tried hard to turn lemons into lemonade, hoping to turn their misadventure into a fun story for later.

As they played, Dawn was in complete awe of Trip and Annaliese. They were older, more confident, and downright beautiful. She was too shy to ask them questions, like if they were dating, how long they'd known each other, or even why he was there at all. They played cards until two in the morning when Dawn was so tired she would have fallen asleep on the mattress with the dead squirrel on it.

Annaliese walked Trip and Sklyer to the door. Skyler was saying reassuring things about the deadbolt and the phone if Annaliese heard anything outside.

Behind him, Trip gave her a look that she would learn to recognize as the equivalent of a kiss, and the two of them left to go back to the cabins.



It turned out that it was good someone had been walking around late that night because Trip and Skyler saw some campers out of their beds. They followed them and hid behind trees until they saw them head back to their cabins. Once they were gone, Trip and Skyler returned to their base and lit it up with a light Skyler kept on his keychain and found a stash of dead animals.

Yes, they found the animals, but they weren't in time to stop a dead skunk from arriving in a camper's bed that night. It was a boy.

"Wow. They hit someone different every night since we got here." Trip whistled the next morning when he talked it over with Skyler.

"You said you saw three people?" the counselor pressed. "I only saw two."

"Yeah," Trip said, detailing what he'd seen in the forest for the second. "The thing that makes the most sense is that they have two girls and one boy who are doing this. It's someone who's in their rooms who's doing this, so that narrows your suspects down to nine since there are four campers in each room. One of the girls is one of the girls who shared a room with Annaliese, another one is one of the girls who shared a room with Dawn, and the guy shared a room with last night's victim. I mean, if you don't think the boy who was targeted with the skunk is a suspect."

Skyler frowned. "I do suspect him. His name is Powell. I think he has a grudge against Annaliese and Dawn and that's why he put the skunk in his own bed. He thinks he'll get pulled out of his dorm room and sent to join the girls in the cabin. Then he can do something really outrageous to them."

"Then don't send him to join the girls. Put him with me in my room," Trip offered.

"Really?" Skyler asked, surprised. "Aren't you worried something will happen to you?"

"Like what? What can he do after we've gathered up all their dead animals? I'm pleased no one will get that stack of dead snakes in their bed."

Skyler followed after Trip to the canopy, where breakfast was being served. "You don't have to be a hero, you know."

"Who's trying to be a hero?" he asked with his hands in the pockets of his cargo shorts.

He separated from Skyler and joined Annaliese and Dawn at their separate table and told them they were going to the village for some special treatment. He wanted to get Annaliese and Dawn off the campgrounds while they disposed of the dead animals.

"Why are you saying that?" Dawn asked. "You're not a counselor."

"I know, but I have a big beautiful mouth and I've got them to do most of the things I've asked for. I'm sure I'll be able to get them to do this too."



Catching the culprits was easy from that point. They put a camera over the crate where the dead animals were being stored and when Powell and his two girlfriends showed up, they took a video feed of them.

When questioned, it turned out they didn't have anything against Annaliese or Dawn. They were just interested in seeing how long they could get away with it. They were all sent home, which was apparently their goal in the first place.

Once that was done, Annaliese and Dawn went back to their rooms, but Trip didn't. He said he preferred the private room. He used the alone time to write Annaliese love letters. He didn't sign them with the moniker Trip but decided to sign them with the reason he was called Trip. Three marks, III, because he was not a junior, but a third. Trip was short for triple. He would joke privately that he was going to name his son Quip since that would be cuter than Quad.

He folded his love letters into tiny books that had to be dismantled if they were going to be read and stuffed them into Annaliese's pocket when he had a moment to swing a hand along her hips and slide the book into her pocket.

One of Trip's love letters looked like this:

Annaliese,

I saw you today in the archery range. You looked beautiful as you drew your bow. I wanted to call out to you, to cheer you on, but I had to move. I was carrying a volleyball net. I'll watch you next time. I'm horseback riding tomorrow. See if you can come with my group.

III

By the end of summer, she had little stacks of his books.

In an attempt to return his feelings, she ransacked the arts and crafts tent and made him the most masculine friendship bracelet she could manage. She ended up making a stack of them and dropping them in his lap when she walked by him.

One of the other guys stopped her and howled. "Why are you giving him those? Are you guys dating or something?"

Annaliese yawned. "I was bored, so I made them. I'll make one for you if you want."

"Yeah, I want," the guy said with eyes large with shock. He clearly didn't think she'd make one for him.

"Kay. Next time I'm bored I'll make one for you."

She made him a yellow one with stars. She thought it was too girly for him to be happy, but it ended up being a thing where every guy in the camp wanted a friendship bracelet from Annaliese. She was swamped with requests. By the third day, Trip started helping her make them. Together they made enough for every guy in the camp and even some of the girls. It was lucky the rest of the girls acted like they didn't want them or it would have turned into a labor camp.

Trip had a stack of black and navy ones on his brown arm, but one odd one that was yellow with stars. It was one he knew for a fact she'd made.

Born in January

EIGHT

Back from camp and in the real world, it took Annaliese about a minute and a half to get her mother to agree to send her to Trip's school. Apparently, she had been wondering if Annaliese would prefer the change before Annaliese mentioned it, but she had been uncertain if her daughter wanted to leave her friends at her old school.

Once Annaliese had given her mother the green light, Annaliese's life changed very quickly.

Each morning, Annaliese would wait at the bus stop, the bus would pick her up, and at the next stop, Trip would get on. Without a word and with his headphones on, he sat next to her. She'd leave a flap in her backpack open and set it on the floor. He'd slide the little book in through the gap.

They tried to take as many of the same classes as possible. They'd write each other post-it notes and leave them within the pages and switch textbooks.

A school dance came up to celebrate the harvest. When someone asked Trip to the dance, he went. Annaliese went stag with a few of her friends who were also proclaiming their independence and went alone. Annaliese didn't feel alone. Her eyes met Trip's three times that night, and she wouldn't have gotten more out of the event if she'd had a date of her own. It didn't matter who Trip was out with... he loved only Annaliese.

Later at school, in the girl's bathroom, Annaliese heard Trip's date talking about him with one of the other girls as they vaped. "You would not believe what he told me."

"What?"

"He told me not to ask him out again. He says he has to spread himself around, so I shouldn't ask him twice."

Annaliese flushed the toilet and came out of the bathroom stall.

"Hey, you're that girl who's always with Trip," the girl said, deliberately exhaling her smoke away from Annaliese. "He was clearly blowing me off, but was what he said real? Does he only date a girl once?"

Annaliese nodded. "Yeah, that's how he rolls."

"Well, have you been out with him?"

Annaliese shook the water off her hands and grabbed a paper towel. "I won't date him. I've known him since he was four and I would never bother."

"But you didn't ask anyone else to the dance," Trip's date noticed.

"Yeah," Annaliese shrugged. "I didn't see anyone I thought was interesting. Maybe next year."

She swept out and saw that Trip had been waiting for her to get out of the bathroom. Whether he heard any of that didn't matter. She put his headphones over his ears and they went out to catch the bus.

It was months before Annaliese's parents were out of the house for a few hours. Trip came over. He kissed her feverishly as soon as the door behind him was shut. When it ended, they were too bashful to look at each other. They went to her room and made a little bookshelf for all the tiny books he gave her. It was made out of gift boxes they'd bought together. Thus, on one of her bookshelves, she had a box that looked like nothing. No one would ever guess that it contained entire books that were nothing but Trip writing 'I love you' in different ways on repeat.

At Christmas, they started wearing couples' rings, though no one noticed. They wore them on their middle finger on their right hands and they didn't match. His was a Celtic knot and hers was fake diamonds all around her finger.

They read books to each other over the phone to pass the time.

Annaliese came to the library when Trip had permission to invite her to his Uncle's house and they'd replace all the papers inside the chess pieces. The first time he filled his up entirely with the words, 'I love you', and he filled up hers entirely with 'I miss you.'

No one noticed.

If Uncle Clement saw or noticed, whether he approved or disapproved, he said nothing.

Everyone else knew they were close friends. Everyone knew they were inseparable, but it seemed like no one knew they were a couple. Her parents would invite his whole family over for dinner sometimes and whenever any of his brothers teased that there was something going on, they'd both gag.

"Not if you paid me," she'd say.

"I wouldn't even date her *once*," he refuted when his relatives wanted him to date everyone at least once.

"Then why do you hang out with her all the time?" his father once asked.

Trip looked at Annaliese like she was a bug while she looked at him like he was boring. "You know, not everything is about that."

"Oh?" his father asked. For Trip's father, everything was about love games...

Which may have been why Trip was so good at playing them under his father's nose unaware.

"She's my best friend. I've never had a friend like her, and I won't be shy about it. She keeps the other girls away and saves me from a lot of nonsense."

"You make a good argument for drowning her in a river," Trip's father laughed heartlessly as if women and unwanted kittens were the same thing.

When Annaliese had to answer, she said, "He helps me with my schoolwork. I'd be failing if it wasn't for him."

Everyone chuckled, even Annaliese's mother, but what she claimed was completely true. Between the two of them, Trip was much better in their classes than she was. She knew why that was true. It was because she was not her mother's daughter. She was someone else's daughter and her biological mother had not been a class act. All the same, Annaliese said her prayers, did her homework, and hoped that she'd be able to hobble along long enough to get through law school. It was her mother's fondest wish.



When spring came, Annaliese and Trip put their heads together for where they were going to go to camp. They decided they could not go to the same camp they went to the summer before. Instead, they sought to find one that had loose rules. Something free-spirited and less structured so they might have more time together.

It ended up being a wash. Annaliese's grades had not been good enough to go to camp, so she was sent to summer school to help improve her grades. Trip stayed home to keep her company, got his driver's license, got a job, and saw her when they could both manage it.

Then school started again.

The harvest dance came up. No one invited either one of them. They were freaks. They liked it. No one paid attention to them. They went together, showed up late, danced quietly in the corner, and left early to make out in the car on a deserted street in an unfamiliar neighborhood. They topped it off by coming home early too so no one suspected anything except that they were boring and no one liked them.

Born In January

NINE

The day before Christmas Eve was the day that Trip and Annaliese celebrated themselves. They met at the mall, as they were pretending to go Christmas shopping as friends. They went to a restaurant where they thought they wouldn't be seen to exchange gifts.

Annaliese had bought Trip a collection of ebooks she had loaded onto a memory card that she was giving him in a watch box. She thought that would be classy.

Alone in their dark booth. He opened it and said he'd like it more once he could see what books she'd bought him, but he was too nervous to plug it into his phone to look at them just then. He needed her to open her present first.

He handed her an envelope.

Annalise was delighted. No matter how many love letters he gave her, she loved them all. The envelope was fancy, with a wax seal, and felt thick and expensive. She opened it and was confused. It looked like an invitation.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Open it," he encouraged.

She did and she had to read it several times before she understood what it said. "You want to marry me?"

He nodded.

It was an invitation to Trip and Annaliese's wedding on January twentieth, the day after Annaliese turned eighteen. It was to be at the courthouse. There would be no guests, no presents, and perhaps no honeymoon.

Annaliese opened and closed the invitation in her hands. "This is because of sex, isn't it?"

"Sort of," he answered, desperate not to be misunderstood. "More than anything, I wouldn't like to give you the impression that I want to have sex with you in a casual way. I want to be with you forever. I feel that offering you marriage is the best way to show you my love rather than ravaging you in the backseat of my car."

Annaliese was contemplative. "Looking at this invitation, it does sound a little like our wedding night might end up happening in the back of your car."

"Perhaps, but no matter where it happens, I want you to know that it didn't happen casually. I want to declare that you are the only one for me and I, for one, am completely ready to spit in the face of the patriarch of my family and say I want only you. Except I'm not the only one who would need to be ready to do that."

Annaliese paled. He was right. She agreed, "I'm not ready. If anything, I'm less ready than I was two summers ago."

"I know," he said, touching her knee supportively under the table.

"It's becoming more obvious every day that I am not really her daughter. I am nothing like her. I'm an arts student and she wants me to study law. Talk about putting a square peg into a round hole, but anytime I try to talk to her about how that path might not be right for me, she is so... unbelievably nice. She says she'll pay for everything, She says it doesn't matter if I don't

do well the first time. She says there's enough time in the world for me to learn slowly if that's what I need."

"Annaliese, I've been meaning to talk to you about this. What would you think of us taking the same degree in university together?" Trip offered kindly. "I'll go and be a lawyer too and I'll help you along... every step."

She groaned. "You don't want to be a lawyer."

"I don't want to be anything. I can't think of a career for myself. I know one thing, I want to be with you, and maybe if I'm supportive of your mother's dream for you, we can come out as a couple sooner."

"If she found out I married you, she'd be so angry. She'd feel like it was a betrayal."

Trip didn't exactly go pale, but he went cold and clammy. "I don't want to put any pressure on you, but what will happen to us if we try to go on like this?"

Annaliese knew what he was talking about. She forgot the exact moment when she had started wanting to go to bed with Trip. It had been so long ago that it had become a hazy thing in her memory. He was right. They couldn't go on the way they had been, kissing each other when they were finally alone and not doing anything else. They couldn't break up either. They were too close with every aspect of their lives interwoven.

She put the invitation down between them. "I can't get pregnant," she said sternly.

"We'll be careful."

"More than careful. My biological mother was seventeen when she got pregnant with me, the same age I am now. If I were to get pregnant, there is nothing in the world that would scare me more."

He jumped on that. "I've been reading about it. If we get started with our preparations now, we can be ready to be very careful on our wedding night."

She had been about to say more, but the sincerity in his voice prevented her from adding anything. Trip had always been very courteous toward her. She couldn't believe he would turn into a selfish jerk if he started sleeping with her.

"I want at least the first night to be in a hotel for privacy's sake," she added.

He nodded. "Okay."

She hesitated to say more, thinking of her mother and her expectations of her. "And things will go on as they have, still keeping our relationship a secret, except our arrangement will be permanent?"

"We can have a fancy wedding for everyone else when we graduate from law school," he said softly.

She breathed and ran through different scenarios in her head.

"We don't even have to get different rings if you don't want to." The need in his voice broke her down the rest of the way.

"Let's get married on the twentieth."

Trip looked both ways before he bent down and kissed her on the mouth. Thus far, it was the first time he had kissed her in public.

Born in January

TEN

On the twentieth of January, Annaliese got up and went downstairs for breakfast. It was a Friday, so she was planning on going to school. She kissed her mother on the temple as she sat at the table munching on a bagel.

“What are your plans for the weekend, dear?” her mother asked, her voice sensitive and kind.

“I’ve been waiting to ask you because I was too shy, but I was wondering if you’d let me go skiing with Trip,” she asked, matching her mother’s tone and cadence. “You know, as a present for my eighteenth birthday.”

“Skiing with Trip?” It sounded so respectable when her mother said it. “Of course, you can.” She whipped open her purse and handed Annaliese a gorgeous gold credit card. “Get your own room at the lodge and charge it to that.”

“I think Trip might have paid for the rooms already,” Annaliese answered weakly.

“Then shop, pay for ski rentals, or whatever you want. It’s your birthday and your teacher called me and told me all about the improvement in your grades. Have a good time!”

Annaliese took the card and thanked her mother with tears in her eyes.

“Why must you look so sad?”

“I’ve just been feeling worn down lately.” The reason why was because she’d gone on birth control pills and they were playing havoc with her body, but she didn’t tell her mother that. She only said how grateful she was to go skiing and how she was sure she’d have a lovely time.

“Trip is such a good boy,” her mother continued. “When it comes time for you to date, I hope he’s still around.”

It was on the tip of Annaliese’s tongue to say, ‘Why wait? You could come to our wedding this afternoon!’ But even in her head, it went badly. Even lesser versions of the truth went badly.

Instead, she reverted to her old repertoire, and said, “I can’t get together with Trip. It would ruin a perfectly good friendship.”

“Atta girl,” her mother said pleasantly.

Suddenly, Annaliese got strangely giddy. “Will you let me skip school today? I’d like to go shopping and Trip won’t be leaving until three.”

“Go ahead, dear. I’ll call the school.”

Instead of going to school, she went to the mall and tried on dresses. She thought she could claim to have found the perfect grad dress. Otherwise, there was no reason for her to come home with a formal dress. However, if there was one thing she wanted (other than to marry Trip), it was to get married in a pretty dress.

The one she chose was pure magic and she was happy to throw it on her mother’s credit card. It was champagne gold sequins that broke at her knee to a tulle mermaid with a stripe of gold at the bottom, but the tulle bottom was optional. Annaliese stuffed it in the bag and wore the dress out with a black overcoat over top when she left the house that afternoon.

She met Trip at the courthouse. It was ridiculous. They both wore hats and sunglasses. They felt it was necessary since Annaliese did not know if her mother would be in court that day

and Trip didn't know if Uncle Clement would be there either. They snuck up to the third floor where weddings took place and got married more quietly than anyone had ever gotten married before.

They felt weird, trying to celebrate a wedding in the dark.

Annaliese wore a black overcoat and sunglasses, but for the actual wedding, she stripped the coat and the glasses and looked like she was made of more gold than Cleopatra. It would have been a spectacular display except that Annaliese had been eighteen for one day and because of her nerves, she looked three years younger.

Trip was just as bad. He opted to wear a black turtleneck to the wedding, but he was so ragged from nerves that he looked ten years older when he took off his sunglasses.

They both kept shushing the justice to keep his voice down, so no one would hear him.

It was the first time that Annaliese heard Trip referred to as Christopher. She knew that was his name because that was his father's and grandfather's name. Most people didn't realize that Trip was short for triple because he was the third.

They signed the papers, kissed, and received odd looks from everyone who saw them. They would have stood out more, except a lot of couples popped into the courthouse to get married suddenly, so the staff smiled and wished them well and no one realized who Annaliese and Trip were. After all, it was his uncle who was the grand lawyer and not his father. No one would mistake Trip for his uncle's son. His uncle was a famous womanizer who 'apparently' had no children.

The newlyweds made it to the car. Annaliese told Trip that she had permission to go skiing with him that weekend. He hooted. He had permission too. Had they really fooled everyone into believing that they could never be anything but friends?

Trip drove to Courtenay where they could ski on mountains with ocean views. He parked at the resort he'd made reservations at.

Annaliese was nervous as Trip got their key and handled their luggage. Everything about the place intimidated her and she felt a sick feeling spiraling from her gut.

"Feeling okay?" he asked her as he unlocked the door to their room.

"Nope. I feel gross. How are you feeling?"

"Like all of this should have been harder. Your mother gave you a credit card and told you to go nuts? I played the birthday card too and my father gave me a whack of cash and told me to have a wild time. I don't know exactly what he thinks I plan to do, but his reckless abandon has me worried. If I don't come back with a scar, a tattoo, and a cocaine addiction, I think he'll be disappointed in me."

Inside the hotel room, Annaliese walked to the window. The curtains were tied and she looked out onto the slopes where the chairlifts were still taking skiers up the mountainside. Trip left the lights of their room out and came up behind her, encircling her waist with his arms. He kissed the place behind her ear. Normally, he didn't get much further before he had to stop.

Not this time.

He didn't stop kissing her.

They were alone at last. He'd give her everything he had in exchange for this night, this life, this moment, and the one after that.

No matter how many times he said he loved her, wrote that he loved her, and showed her that he loved her, it was all leading up to this moment for him.

For the first time, Annaliese gave him everything.

Born In January

ELEVEN

When they got back to society, it was about a thousand times easier for Trip to act like their relationship was a mere friendship. He asked Annaliese to be his grad date and told everyone they were going as friends. All the tension was out of his shoulders. The time he spent with Annaliese on weekends was better. Helping her with her homework was easier because he wasn't distracted because when they were alone, all the old restrictions were off.

Life was sweet.

Annaliese wouldn't have liked to talk to anyone about teenage marital bliss, but she was much happier with their new arrangement too. She feared Trip would stop writing her little love books if they got married, but he didn't stop. He still got on the bus and slipped a book into her backpack. If they ate lunch somewhere, he would reach under the table, slip her shoe off her foot, and put her foot in her lap, where he would treat her to a foot rub while they waited for their food. Sometimes Annaliese wondered if he chose the restaurants with the slowest service in the city just so he could rub her foot longer.

Annaliese's mother was pleased with her choice of grad dress and was unaware that she had used half of it as a wedding dress. In retrospect, Annaliese's mother was sorry she found a grad dress so easily and took her out shopping several more times before grad actually came, filling her wardrobe like she was creating a trousseau.

Trip and Annaliese chose the local university because they thought she could get into it and sent in their transcripts. She took political science because she believed the classes would prepare her for law school. Trip took the same classes, not caring for a second that he was not taking a degree he was even the least bit interested in.

The summer between high school and university came. Since they had chosen to attend a university close to home, they made Annaliese's mother blissful, like all the difficulties in raising someone else's child had been nothing. How could it matter who gave birth to a child when she turned out so perfectly?

They lived at home for the first year of university, but by the second year, both of them were getting annoyed. They were getting tired of saying goodbye after spending their days together and then being forced to part ways at night.

In the second year, they rented two studio apartments that were in the same building and finally got to live together, though the situation was not ideal. It would have been nicer if they had been on the same floor. As it was, they traveled between their apartments in their housecoats with toothbrushes sticking out of their mouths.

"Let's just move in together," Trip begged one day as they walked through the hall of their building. "We can decorate it like a girl's place. Put anything you want in it and I'll hide my clothes under the bed..." he trailed off.

Annaliese's mother was standing in the hallway. Someone had let her in the building without her being buzzed in and she heard what Trip said. Not only that, but both of them were in their

underwear and housecoats. Annaliese was walking back to her apartment and Trip had followed her because he always walked her back to her place.

“Annaliese,” the old woman said sternly.

As primly as any dutiful daughter, she welcomed her mother with a smile and a kiss and decided to try her luck at winning her over with charm. After all, she was twenty years old and she thought her chances of getting her mother to listen to her were better now than they had ever been. She told Trip to go get changed and to meet them upstairs in her room.

Annaliese was lucky when they went inside her apartment. It was extremely clean and well cared for. It made her feel more like an adult and less like a bratty child.

Trip changed his clothes, combed his hair quickly, and made it back to Annaliese’s apartment before she had finished changing.

She set her mother down in the only comfortable chair in the apartment. She pulled two folding chairs off the wall and put one down for Trip and one down for her.

“Let’s talk about dating,” Annaliese began with a smile that she hoped didn’t make her look like a defiant child.

“You two are clearly not dating. How long have you been sleeping together?” her mother asked coldly, the unforgiving wrinkles around her mouth puckering distastefully.

Annaliese was deeply unhappy at her mother’s way of slicing up her and Trip’s love and for a moment, she was unable to answer.

Trip was faster. “This is a misunderstanding. We were doing laundry together. We’re just not shy about our bodies. You know how kids are these days.”

She glared at Trip. “Answer me!”

Annaliese took a deep breath and had the courage not to answer her. “Mother, I have the highest respect for you. I have always wanted to do things exactly as you wish, but asking me not to date has been a bit much for me.”

“You never complained,” her mother pointed out.

“Yes. That’s how much I have wanted to follow your instructions.”

“All right,” her mother said, straightening herself and breathing calmly. “I understand why you fell into temptation. I will forgive you completely if you gather your things together and move back home again—today.”

“But—”

The old lady cut Annaliese off. “I understand why you fell for him. He’s been there for you since you were a baby, held your hand through everything, and he’s been a gentleman enough not to take up his father and uncle’s disgusting habits. But Annaliese, it’s time for you to do this next bit without him. If he truly loves you, he’ll wait until you are finished law school.”

“There’s no way that I can get through law school without him. I’m stupid on my own,” Annaliese said without flinching. “I wouldn’t have even made it this far if he didn’t match the classes I had to take. He’s been tutoring me through it all.”

“You’ll never respect yourself if you don’t do it alone,” her mother said inflexibly.

“Then I’ll never respect myself because I would never be able to do it alone.”

The situation was tense. Annaliese had given Trip strict instructions that he was never to tell her mother that they were married. No matter what provocation came, no matter what she said, no matter what good he thought he could do, he had to let Annaliese handle her mother in her own way. Mostly, that meant avoiding her mother and going behind her back. Trip hadn’t

mindful doing that, but he also looked forward to the day when he could tell his old man that he respected women and that he respected Annaliese so much that he had already been married to her for over two years. He was completely committed.

It was a blow for him when he discovered the secret Annaliese had been keeping from him.

"If you don't come home today, I swear to you, you will lose me and you'll end up exactly like your biological mother," the pitiless old woman said strictly.

The words that came out of the woman's mouth were not like a slap. No, it was like she had shot her straight through the heart. Annaliese's eyes went wide like the moment of surprise when your heart stopped.

Trip turned to catch her, to put pressure on her wound, but where should he put his hands? There was no blood, just a sputtering like blood that spewed from her lips.

"Didn't she tell you?" the old lady continued.

"Tell me what?" Trip asked in a cold panic.

She stood up, looking down stonily at Annaliese. "Her biological mother didn't surrender her to social services, or ask for help. She wrote a note, overdosed on the sick little cocktail she was injecting herself with, and left Annaliese all alone with her corpse in a room for three days before Annaliese's crying became too much for the neighbors."

Trip stopped dead where he was.

Annaliese's mother continued coldly, "I have loved her and cared for her in a way her real mother couldn't and I only ask for the opportunity to put Annaliese on the correct path, so that she will always be safe, always be provided for no matter what man comes and goes from her life. No matter what help you gave her, Trip, I believe you meant well, but I don't want to see you with my daughter again until she has finished law school." She looked down at Trip with her dead brown eyes. "Help her pack."

"Wait. I love her," he said, on the verge of breaking his promise to Annaliese and spilling to the old lady that they were legally married. "I love her and I only want to help her. If you're scared she'll get pregnant—"

"I'm not scared she'll get pregnant because she won't be with you anymore. I'll wait downstairs for half an hour. You'd better have her most important things packed and her in my car before my timer goes off," she said, with her hand on the door.

"Or what?" he burst.

She didn't look at him. "You don't want to know."

The old lady left the room with a click of the door and the clack of her heels on the hardwood floor in the hallway.

Trip wrapped his arms around Annaliese and held her closely. Suddenly, he realized why the dead rabbit scared her so much all those years ago back at the camp. He held her again while she cried like she was a little girl all over again.

"We have to do what she says," Annaliese wailed once she could get a few words out. "I have to do what she wants."

"Why? Can't we tell her we're married because everything is fine between us? I'll never leave you and..."

"It won't be fine to her," Annaliese shrieked, cutting him off. "It won't be! I have to go down there and leave with her. I have to. We can't tell her we're married. She'd file for divorce for me. I don't want to divorce you. Even if I have to move back home and we have to go back to

how we were living when we were married and still in grade twelve, fine, but I have to go home. I can't let her file for divorce."

The last thing in the world Trip wanted was to go back to the way they lived when they were still in high school, but there was nothing else to do at that moment. Following his wife's instructions, he went around the room and picked up the things she said she needed most.

He felt sick that he was not one of them.

When the half-hour was up, Annaliese sat in her mother's car, blowing her nose and covering her eyes with a pair of sunglasses.

Trip didn't get to kiss her goodbye.

Born in January

TWELVE

Annaliese sat at the breakfast table with her mother and spooned out the sections of a grapefruit. She was unhappy with the situation of living back at home, but she didn't let it show on her face. She slid the mask of calm indifference over her face and wore it like it was underwear—the kind of clothing you never forgot to put on because you always put it on first.

She still saw Trip during her classes at university, but it was hard to find other places for her to see him.

Their relationship had turned into the weirdest thing in the world. Instead of sneaking around like teenagers with a secret, they were sneaking around like they were having an affair. Except she was having it with her own husband.

They had a large break in the middle of the day on Tuesdays, so they'd simply go home to his studio apartment to be together for a few hours before the final class of the day began. Her weekends were watched fiercely. She was trotted off to the ballet, the opera, the theater, and anything else her mother could think of to keep her busy.

Her mother was happy during this time. Annaliese could tell, and she tried to appreciate the pleasant aspects of her current situation.

The fact that her biological mother had died and she was trapped in the apartment with her corpse for days was the one thing Annaliese had never been able to forget. She was best at forgetting it when she was with Trip. For one thing, he hadn't known about the crowning spike of her painful past. For another, he was so dazzling and bright that it was easy for her to forget things that made her unhappy.

Annaliese could not believe it when her mother brought it up in that way, using her trauma to control her. Her mother did it because she was afraid. She was afraid of what would happen to Annaliese if all the boxes weren't checked... if all the Ts weren't crossed. She used the only tool she had left to make Annaliese proceed on the only safe path forward. Annaliese understood, but it didn't make hearing those things any more palatable.

For the first week after Annaliese returned home, she was flung into the nightmare she had so steadily avoided when she was with Trip. He was gone, except when they sat next to each other in class, except in the precious two-hour gap on Tuesdays when he pressed his skin against her and comforted her. He never spoke to her about the things that she neglected to tell him. His consideration meant everything to her. Every time she touched him she compared every square inch of his skin to gold.

But she had to snap out of it. The nightmare was making her lag in her classes. If she lagged in her classes, she'd never get to be with Trip.

At the very least, the little books kept coming. He began writing them again and sliding them into her backpack. Sometimes he prepared more than one a day. He tried to say things that were more meaningful than 'I love you' over and over again, but a lot of the time, that was what came out when he started writing.

The third year of university started. She and Trip took all the same classes again, arranging for more than one break a week in the middle of the day. That year she got him on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Or contrary-wise, he got her on Fridays and Tuesdays.

On Annaliese's twenty-first birthday, her mother asked her what she would like as a present. She said, "I'd like to go skiing with Trip. Could I do that?"

Her mother sighed. "What would you spend the weekend doing if I forbade it?"

Annaliese went to her room and brought out the gift boxes. By that point, there were ten boxes. Annaliese opened them and showed the tiny bookcases filled with tiny books.

"What is this?" her mother asked curiously. "I didn't realize you had a hobby like this."

"I didn't write them. Trip wrote them. He's been writing these tiny books for me for years." Annaliese chose one at random and showed her mother how to open it so that it revealed a whole page of writing.

The one she picked was one that was written the autumn before they got married. Her mother read it carefully. "This was written four years ago. How long has Trip been in love with you?"

"I don't know. Maybe since we were children. He confessed it the first time when we were sixteen and has been standing by my side ever since. You must know that I still see him and he still helps me with my classes."

"It's very noble of him to do that when you aren't sleeping with him," her mother said flatly.

Annaliese didn't answer. If her mother wanted to believe that, Annaliese wasn't going to correct her. She packed up the books and put them away.

Her mother tried to speak to her again. "I have nothing against him. I keep telling you, it isn't about him. You can marry him when you finish law school if you both still want to."

For Annaliese, it was like talking to a brick wall.

Annaliese wanted to leave home, she wanted to call it quits, to declare that she loved Trip with all her heart and she had to go to him... except that wasn't true. If she closed her eyes, she remembered being a child who had just lost her mother and the fear inside her that tainted everything. For the first few years after being adopted, Annaliese would go check to see that her new mother and father hadn't died in the night. Then she'd curl up on the floor to wait for them to wake up.

As an adult, Annaliese couldn't imagine the goodness in her mother's heart to take her into her home.

When Annaliese arrived, she had been swarming with lice, covered in bed bug bites, and caked in filth. Her name had been spelled Annaleeze like her name was a sneeze, and not like she was a precious child with a bright future. Instead, her name was the joke of a teenage drug addict. Her new mother treated her sores and picked her hair clean even though she was a high-power lawyer who had hardly touched a child in her life. She also changed Annaliese's spelling to something beautiful and the way her new mother said her name made her feel like she was a precious child after all.

She remembered the new mother, so eager to do things right, so eager to spoil her with love and attention. Reading in a rocking chair. Watching cartoons together. Swinging at the park. There was no scraped knee or broken dream that her new mother couldn't fix with laughter and love.

Trip had been there too, on those Sundays in the library, in the garden, and under the swaying trees. In those days he was a child, not a man who could give her the safety and security an adult could provide. Trip had been there for her when she needed him for the last five years, but her mother had been there since the tragedy and Annaliese couldn't ignore it.

Not only that but sometimes in the present, she wondered if her mother was well. Her sixty-fifth birthday was coming up and sometimes waves of pain crossed her features like a shroud of pain fell upon her.

Annaliese couldn't leave her mother, so she made do with Tuesdays and Fridays.

Born In January

THIRTEEN

Then there were all the ways Trip and Annaliese's relationship broke down.

For the last year of their political science degree, Annaliese had already taken all the core subjects she needed, so there were a bunch of options she had to take, and Trip didn't need to be in those classes. It was a chance for them to grow in different ways. He took computer science courses while she took art. They still timed their breaks and got Tuesdays and Fridays, but they didn't see each other during the day as often.

Then there was the time they had to study for the LSATs and Annaliese's mother hired private tutors to help her study. Trip wasn't allowed to be around for that.

Annaliese passed the exam with more breathing room than anyone expected. Her mother thought it was because the tutors were better at teaching her than Trip. That wasn't it at all. If Annaliese didn't pass, she couldn't go to law school with Trip. She had to pass.

Trip didn't pass. He failed it by a hair's breadth.

He took the exam, but when it came around, he hadn't seen his girl for weeks. There had been no Tuesdays and Fridays and he was having a hard time focusing. Not only that but there was a mean little part of his brain that knew he didn't have to get into law school. He didn't need to pass, only she did and if her mother was paying for tutors then what did it matter if he tutored her or not? He didn't even study by himself.

He should have passed.

The fall-out for his not passing was incredible. His family, not just his father and his uncle, but his brothers and his mother too, were very disappointed. The discovery he made while he scrambled for another career was jarring. He didn't want to do anything else. If Annaliese was going to be a lawyer, he wanted to be a lawyer with her.

She went to law school and floundered. Tuesdays and Fridays were a thing of the past and when a day came up where she could slip away to see Trip, he was usually working.

He was going to take his LSAT again in the spring, but for the time being, he was putting his political science degree to work and had gotten a job working at the Victoria Legislature. Each time she saw him, her teenage husband with the headphones over his ears was further and further away.

He wore suits. He got a better job and then another better job. Soon it was clear that if he stayed working for his MLA, he would have an extraordinarily cushy job he didn't have to get elected for. He gave up his studio apartment and bought a condo with incredible views.

When Annaliese visited him, it was like visiting your date's home for the first time, and nothing like going home with her husband. At least, they had decorated their crappy studio apartments together. The feeling of distance grew as he had more and more of an adult life that had nothing to do with her. He had friends he met in the evenings when she wasn't around. After a while, the whole thing felt very much like having an affair with a married man.

Actually, she was the one cheating... on the people in her life... cheating everybody. She was only keeping half of her promises.

The little books had stopped when he no longer sat next to her in class. Instead, he wrote her a love letter a week. It was typed instead of handwritten and placed in an envelope that arrived with a bouquet of flowers. Annaliese's mother saw nothing inappropriate in this and allowed it.

He had become an ordinary lover instead of the secret, whimsical one he had been.

And the letters changed over time. 'I love you. I need you. I'm dying without you!' turned into 'holidays are coming up and if you're not free at Christmas to see me then I was thinking I'd go skiing with a few of my friends. How are your classes going?'

Annaliese started writing him back. She sent him half-finished letters because she stopped knowing what to say to him and she couldn't bear to send him nothing. If the letters and bouquets stopped, she would have nothing.

Her life was terrible. She hated law school. She hated a school where Trip wasn't there. It was like she had been jolted back to her old high school where the competition was fierce and there was no handsome boy to smile at her and shield her from all the drama that went on if she tried to talk to people.

She woke up and missed waking up in Trip's arms until she couldn't quite remember what that felt like. One day she realized that it had been three months since a Tuesday or a Friday. Annaliese felt so out of sorts, that she almost called a doctor for a checkup and then she remembered you didn't need a doctor when you were lovesick.

She wasn't the only person in the house who wasn't doing well. Her mother was sick. If the old woman knew what she was sick with, she wasn't telling. If she didn't, it came on so stealthily that it snuck up on even her.

The morning that Annaliese heard from her father that her mother had passed away during the night, it was a blow to her.

A blow.

Born in January

FOURTEEN

It was March. There was a huge fuss at the funeral. Trip was there, surrounded by his whole family, but there were so many people there who demanded Annaliese's attention that he couldn't get near her for longer than a few minutes.

At her house after the funeral, he came with his family. But once again, Annaliese was thronged by people who had to tell her one last story about her mother as their way of saying goodbye before they left.

By the time all the mourners had gone, all of Trip's family had gone too, but he stayed. Annaliese was not concerned about what her father thought of her and she took Trip to her bedroom. They didn't talk. Trip took her black clothes off her, pulling them over her head, and comforted her like an adult.

When she woke up in the morning, he was gone.

At the breakfast table, her father said that he had seen Trip leave that morning. "Was everything okay last night? Were you really upset? Is that why he stayed?"

Annaliese gave a shadow of a smile. "Daddie," she said softly. "I've been married to Trip for over five years."

He gasped. "Legally?"

She nodded. "Legally."

He threw down his napkin. "Why have you been living here?"

She put a hand to her forehead. "You know why. Because mom wouldn't listen to me. Her and her damn arguing. Her lawyering. You knew I had to be a lawyer or she would never give me and Trip her blessing. I didn't tell her we got married. If I had, I thought she'd force me to get a divorce."

He nodded. "I see your problem. I'm sorry. I couldn't talk her out of it. She just said she knew what was best and I should back off. She felt that way because I was her fourth husband."

Annaliese stared. "What?"

"You know, she didn't actually get her law degree until she was thirty-eight. In her twenties, she was married to a country boy and when she only had miscarriages, he dumped her stuff out on the lawn. Husband number two was a white-collar worker, but he was unfaithful. It was pretty tough on her when she had miscarriage after miscarriage and he was off doing whatever, whoever. She stayed in that marriage for eight years before getting up the courage to leave him. Then she was married to Clement."

Annaliese nearly died at that announcement. "Trip's Uncle Clement? If they were married, why did you let her visit him all those Sundays for all those years?"

He chuckled with a twinkle in his eye. "It didn't matter. I wasn't concerned about them having an affair. When they were together, he wouldn't let her even try to get pregnant. He didn't want any of those bloody messes on his watch. Instead of letting her drive herself crazy over motherhood, he convinced her to go to law school. I'm not sure if she would have made it

through if he hadn't held her hand, but he wasn't dependable enough for her in other ways. He didn't want her to adopt because I don't think he enjoyed a single child until Trip was born. If you came over, he had an excuse to invite Trip to the house. I don't think any sight in the world made him happier than Trip sitting in his library with a pretty girl sitting across from him. He had such high hopes for Trip. That Trip would lead the life he couldn't, or wouldn't." Her father sighed and scanned his memory. "The truth is... I'm not sure if your mother and Clement were legally married. She had so much shame about the things she had done wrong in her life, she may have just said they were. It didn't really matter to me."

Annaliese felt like screaming. "She could have told me all that. Like the daughter of an overdosing drug addict wouldn't understand mistakes."

"Hmm..." he said softly, rolling over what his late wife never said in his mind. "She thought it was her responsibility to make sure you had something more... something better. Her life never really improved until she graduated from law school. Your real mother expressed a similar sentiment in her last letter. She wanted better for you. My wife became obsessed with keeping that promise. Did she keep it?"

"I don't know. I don't think I have to go to law school to live happily. There are tons of people who have never gone to law school who find a way to live in this world."

"Well, you certainly don't have to finish law school to make me happy. You can move in with Trip tonight with my blessing. He's doing well. I don't mean to do this immediately, but I was thinking that I'd like to collapse this house in the next few years."

"Where will you go?"

He looked around at the empty six-bedroom house that surrounded them. "Somewhere smaller." He leaned forward and patted her hand with his warm one. "The point is that you don't have to stay here. I'm over seventy and I don't need a place this big. A six-bedroom house is a lot for a family who only had one daughter, but I think that your mother thought this house was full with only you in it. It's because you filled her heart."

Annaliese let the tears spill down her cheeks and her father held her.

When the moment had lapsed, Annaliese called Trip. There was no answer, but she left a message that she had spoken to her father and she needed to talk to him. She went to her room and started boxing up her things, so she could do exactly as her father said and move in with Trip that night.

Except, he didn't call her back.

By the time he did call her back, two days later, she was rethinking the whole thing. He was sorry, but his phone had been on the fritz and he had been very busy with work and family problems. He was coming by the house. In an absurd panic, she fled the house and even though he waited, she didn't come back until he had gotten fed up and gone home.

No matter what misunderstandings were plaguing them, they needed to talk. They were married! Annaliese called him. No answer. She left another message, apologizing like a preteen about her lack of communication.

He called her back, but she heard a woman laugh on the other end of the line, went temporarily insane, and hung up. He called her back a second time, but she was too scared to answer the phone. What if he told her that he'd found someone new? They'd been apart for months.

That was the state of things when she saw him at the dinner party, couldn't bear to see him and had to leave.

It was still the state of things when she asked him if he was seeing someone else as they played chess in his new library—the same one from their shared past.

Born in January

FIFTEEN

Annaliese looked at the pieces on the chessboard. Trip was going easy on her. Not only was she having trouble remembering how to play chess, but he was controlling the game so completely that he was choosing which one of her pieces would topple his pieces.

"Trip," she said quietly, ignoring the game in front of her. "What I've done to you feels inexcusable. You've been beyond patient and I've done nothing but take advantage of your goodness. If you've had enough, you have to tell me."

"Why would you think I've had enough? You're the one who's been avoiding me," he said like he was the source of the patience fountain.

"I'm sorry about that. I heard a woman laughing on your end of the phone and I wondered if maybe you'd met someone new in the months we hadn't seen each other."

"I haven't done anything of the sort. This whole situation put us in a love desert, but it was never supposed to last forever. Your mother didn't hate my guts, she just had ideas that would only be satisfied by one thing. You told me that was the deal when we were sixteen. You didn't deceive me. This has sucked, but that hasn't been your fault." The patience fountain was drying up as he raked a hand through his hair. "Now, do you have anything you have to tell me?"

"Like what?"

"Well, is there another man? Did you meet someone in law school who saw you the way I saw you, like a little stalk of wheat who didn't understand the work involved in legislative drafting and needed a hand?"

Annaliese groaned. "No, but only because I told them to get lost. I failed half of my courses this semester."

"Good girl. No more law school?"

"No! No more law school," she burst, half like she was screaming and half like she was throwing up.

He got up from his chair, came around the table, put his arms around her, and pulled her close to him. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he asked quietly, "What do you want to do instead?"

"I don't know. I don't care. What are you doing? Can I go along with you until I have had time to think about it?"

"Yeah. I still haven't given up my condo downtown. Do you want to live here or do you want to live downtown?"

She pulled away from him. "There's a choice?"

"Of course there is. This house has no mortgage on it. I own it completely. If you want to live here, we can."

Annaliese felt herself fall. His arms came around her and he stopped her from falling on her bottom on the hardwood floor. She was crying. "How can I ever pay you back for letting me have that last bit of time together with my mother? How can I ever thank you for waiting for me? How can we be in a fair relationship when all I've ever done is take from you?"

“Have my baby.” He didn’t even hesitate.

“What?”

“Seriously. Have my baby. We’ll live here and have little children run around this house the way we did.”

She panted, surprised. She didn’t even know Trip wanted children. “I’d throw out my birth control pills tonight, but if I get pregnant tomorrow, what will everyone think? No one knows we’re married.”

He laughed. “If you’re game, I’ll work it all out.”

Born In January

SIXTEEN

Trip and Annaliese had a garden wedding that summer. She wore an empire waist dress that cinched just below her breasts and though she wasn't very big yet, the maternity wedding dress was chosen on purpose. All of which surprised the salesgirl who sold them the dress. Annaliese bought a dress intended for a pregnant woman when she was still slender as a willow branch. She also brought her groom to the bridal boutique and asked his opinion about which dress to buy, but they had a hoot as she tried on dresses and he thumbs-up or thumbs-downed them. They also didn't shop around. They found a dress they liked on their first shopping trip and bought it without visiting over and over. It was all very perplexing.

The wedding vows they spoke in front of their family and friends were not overseen by someone with legal authority. They had her father pretend to marry them, saying all the flowery words and giving all the blessings they needed to hear. After he proclaimed them husband and wife, several lawyers stood up to clap and then rushed Annaliese's father to say that what they had witnessed was not a legal wedding ceremony. He told them to calm down. They knew it wasn't legal. Trip would explain everything. The lawyers stomped off to the reception in a collective huff.

At the reception under fairy globes, Trip got up and said, "It says on your program that this is the toast to the bride. I'm giving it. I would like to thank my darling wife for becoming my darling wife... five and a half years ago."

The gasp from the attendees was one of the rewards Trip got for enduring all the hardships of being married to Annaliese.

"As some of you noticed, what you witnessed in the clearing just now was not a legal wedding. We know. Annaliese and I have loved each other since we were children and had to wait a long time to turn eighteen. As many of you know, we were both born in January, so as soon as we'd both had our birthdays, we got ourselves to the courthouse and got married without any kind of parental consent or knowledge."

Trip beckoned for Annaliese and she joined him in front of their family and friends to come clean.

He went on. "We had a weekend away skiing to celebrate our wedding and then went back home to our own beds on Sunday night. The next day, we got up and went to school. I know a number of you have fantasized about what this kind of relationship would look like or feel like. I wouldn't recommend it. We managed to convince everyone we were best friends and nothing more. It feels like I have waited forever to come in front of all of you to say what I have always dreamed of saying. I love Annaliese. She is all I ever wanted and I have waited so long for the chance to say it."

They kissed and their crowd of well-wishers clapped, hooted, and whistled for them.

"Annaliese has an announcement to make," Trip said into the microphone before handing it over to her.

"We're expecting a baby... in January."

THE END

Blog ENTRIES
of the
Broken HEARTED



STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

BONUS STORY

Blog Entries of the Brokenhearted

<http://worldofheartbreak.topblog.com>

Cemetery Gates

Summer vacation started yesterday. I hate school. I hate summer too, but at least this way there are no early mornings and two whole months without pep rallies.

It's also time for summer solstice, so the sun doesn't dip behind the mountains until after ten. I went to the cemetery and looked at the graves. I'm getting more morbid every day. I picked out my burial plot. It's the most pathetic patch of grass within the fence. It doesn't overlook anything but the highway out of town. That's the way all the graves point. It's such a small cemetery, so my plot will probably be gone if I don't buy it. Pity, I have no money.

Comments: 0

Kerry turned over in her bed. It was eleven forty-eight a.m. She should get out of bed, but she refused to stir as she glared at her alarm clock. It wasn't past noon yet, so she couldn't get up.

She could hear Aaron in the living room. Her younger brother was watching Saturday morning wrestling. He didn't even like wrestling. He just couldn't think of anything else to do besides watch T.V.

Kerry wasn't like that. She hated T.V. She hated sports. She hated cooking.

Her only interest was delving deeper into the dark waters of her own consciousness. She spent hours reading the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickenson. She liked to examine art that made her feel like the person who painted it felt one-tenth of the depth of emotion that she did. Who knew if anyone had ever felt exactly the way she did?

She didn't know how to describe it. Life was a wasteland. Grade nine was wretched. Grade ten couldn't be any better. Her schoolmates were always the same. She'd been with the same fifty kids since grade two and she didn't know that even one of them was anything akin to her. It wasn't that they were unkind to her. It was like she was a ghost who moved through their halls. They all knew she was there, but they would rather pretend that she wasn't.

Now summer had begun and she knew how it would go. Her mother was an LPN in the city and she worked long hours during the school year. Summer affected no change in her schedule. Kerry's father was an on-again-off-again figure. Sometimes he was around. Sometimes he wasn't. So, Kerry would cook for her helpless brother and overworked mother. The meals she scrounged up were less than pretty, but at least they would eat. Not that Kerry cared whether the lot of them starved.

That was her life.

She rolled over and pushed herself out of bed. Now it was twelve-o-one, so she could get up. She had some idea of going back to the cemetery that day after she finished her chores.

Besides cooking, Kerry only had one chore. It was her job to go out and pick the litter off their front yard. They lived two doors down from the only convenience store in town, so there were always candy wrappers and empty slushie cups stuck in the grass. If someone didn't pick it up regularly, it would get to be a mess, like their next-door neighbor's, and regardless of their continual troubles, Kerry's mother couldn't stand the trash.

The sun was bright as Kerry picked up the garbage. She worked all the way to the property line. Even with the gigantic 'No Trespassing' sign out front, the house beside theirs was turning into a trash heap. Kerry didn't know much about the old lady who lived there—only that she was a famous crab. As she stood there, there was a nagging in her heart that she ought to help out and tidy up the lady's lawn, too, but she wasn't sure if she would get yelled at for crossing the property line. In the end, Kerry turned away and went back into the house.

By two o'clock, she was ready to head down to the cemetery, but as soon as she'd walked a block, she saw that it wasn't a good day to go. There was a hearse in the church parking lot.

Two things stopped Kerry from going to the funeral. The first one was that funerals were social occasions in her small town. If she went, she would undoubtedly be spoken to by at least half a dozen people and she didn't want to talk to anyone. The second reason was that she didn't know who had died. Likewise, in a small town, she should have heard.

Turning around, she headed back towards home.

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Burial Plot

Yesterday someone was buried in my burial plot. I'm in shock. The person who died was a seventeen-year-old boy. His name was Tenant Miller and he died a week and a half ago.

The curious thing about it is that he's not from around here. I didn't realize that the burial place I picked out for myself was actually part of his family's plot. All to the right of him are Millers. His grandparents lived here twenty years ago and no one has seen anything of Tenant's parents in decades. It's so strange. He wasn't from here. He didn't belong here and now he's going to be here for eternity.

Why?

Comments: 0

Kerry woke up. The moon was a white disc of light and it was aligned perfectly so it could shine through the vertical gap between her window frame and the Venetian blinds. She got up and looked out the window. The night was beautiful.

Then slowly, she heard something. It took her a minute before she realized that someone was in the living room watching T.V. Kerry tiptoed out and found her brother watching a late-night dating show.

“What are you watching?” she asked as a scantily clad woman explained how her boyfriend didn’t satisfy her in bed.

“Nothing,” Aaron answered, flicking to another channel that was showing a black and white film. Then he flipped again to a Star Trek episode and then again to late-night news.

She knew better than to imagine that he was really interested in the dating show. Anything he hadn’t seen before was a welcome change.

“Hey,” he suddenly said. “Do you want to watch something with me? I rented some movies tonight.”

“Didn’t you already watch them?” she asked, picking them up and examining the titles.

“Yeah, but I could watch them again.”

Kerry hadn’t heard of any of the movies he rented and from their titles, she didn’t want to watch them.

“Shouldn’t you go to bed?” she asked.

“What for? I don’t sleep anyway.” He flipped again to the dating show.

Kerry sat on the couch in the glow of the T.V. screen. His online gaming had been better than this. At least that way he got into parties and talked to the people he played with. It was because their computer was broken that things had degenerated this far. Even she had to use the library computer to write on her blog, but she didn’t mind because she was going there anyway to pick up her books.

“Aaron,” she said, standing up. “Watch one of these movies instead of this dumb show. This can only rot your brain.”

“And what you do is so much better?” he snapped.

Kerry didn’t know how to answer that. She got up and went back to bed, but instead of sleeping, she wrote in her journal. It was like her blog. No one ever read either of them.

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My Tenant

They put up Tenant's tombstone yesterday. I started by taking a rubbing of it. Then I decided to draw it. After that, I drew a picture of what I thought Tenant himself could look like. I drew six. They're at the bottom. I like the third one best. I think he was blond with dark tragic eyes.

I think I could be satisfied with the plot next to his. Do you think his family has already bought it? I want to go to the town offices and check, but do you think they'll take me seriously? I think they'll tell me to go home and then spread the news around town that I asked. Maybe I can put it in my will.

Comments: 0

Kerry's interest in Tenant grew and as it grew it became increasingly unhealthy. She wanted to die. She wanted to lie beside him and forget about her whole life. And when she sat next to his tombstone or leaned against the back of it, she felt her loneliness slip away.

She told him how she failed gym class and how she'd been held back a grade in grade two. She would have been in the grade beneath him if she hadn't flunked.

She read him her favorite poetry and even read him her favorite book cover to cover.

Yet, even though she shared all this with him, she didn't know anything about him. She didn't know how he died. After considering all the possibilities, she decided that he had been killed in a car accident. She didn't know what he looked like, so she picked his looks. Soon she had his personality all mapped out in her head and when she talked to him, she knew what he would say in return.

What if his ghost were with her? She was a ghost anyway. They were the perfect couple. She wanted to fall asleep next to him and dream the dreams of the dead – his dreams. What did he dream of?

And she wasted the hours of her life leaning against the monument of Tenant's wishing she was dead too.

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Date with the Dead

This Wednesday there is going to be a full moon and I've planned a date for Tenant and me. Do you think he'll go with me?

I'm going to pick him up at the cemetery at nine o'clock and take him down the coulee to this tiny stream I know. He's not from around here, so he won't have seen it before. Then we're going to have a little picnic. He won't be interested in the food. He'll just have to devour me with his eyes. I'll have grape juice and sandwiches, but only because of my medical condition. It's called Being Alive. I'll have to remedy that someday.

We'll lie on a blanket and talk about our dreams and I'll tell him one of my favorite fairy tales. Then I'll take him home and maybe... if I'm lucky... he'll kiss me.

Comments: 0

Kerry was careful when she got ready that night. She had a shower and curled her hair. Then she put on a short jean skirt with black leggings and knee-high boots. Then she put on a white T-shirt, a red knit cardigan and went out into the kitchen to pack her supper.

“Where are you going dressed like that?” Aaron said, actually peeling himself off the couch to have a look at her getup.

She looked down at herself. Yeah, she might have overdone it. In a small town, she looked ridiculous. Well, it didn’t matter. It wasn’t like she was going to meet anyone other than Tenant. So, she turned her nose upwards, packed her juice box along with a crystal goblet, and grabbed a blanket from the supply cupboard.

On her way to the cemetery, she saw a total of three people. Two were teenage girls in the grade below her. They were walking towards her house after going to the store. Each one was carrying an ice cream cone. Kerry couldn’t help but notice it when they dropped a wet napkin on her next-door neighbor’s lawn. She turned her head and pretended not to notice what they did, but instead of becoming less involved, she became more involved. She saw a curtain flicker. The old lady had definitely seen them.

Kerry hurried on. She didn’t want to have anything to do with the garbage trail. It was summer, so her yard had been unusually free of trash. She had only had to clean up once that week, but the neighbor’s looked like school was still in session and everyone was dropping their lunch trash in the same yard.

The last person she saw was the driver of a pickup truck. He was pulling out of the cemetery as she was walking in, but he was too far away, so she didn’t register anything except that someone was coming out as she was going in. It could have been anyone.

She walked to the far end of the cemetery and stood in front of Tenant’s grave.

“Hello darling,” she said out loud. “Are you ready?”

Then she walked to the coulee just like she planned.

The coulees in that area were amazing. The prairie stretched out long and hard and then abruptly dipped in. In the coulee, the grass grew in lush green heaps. There were mosquitoes because of the stream, but it didn’t stop the wildflowers from spreading like a brush fire.

Kerry was happy as she sat by herself and pretended she was on a date. She had never been on one before. She thought the boys in her high school had nothing to offer her if they had liked her, which they didn’t. She was on her own there... just like now.

Later, she sat on the gate of some farmer’s land and watched the sunset. When twilight fell, she started walking back to the graveyard. Once she got there, there was no one to kiss goodnight to. There was no one to smile at or thank for a good time. There was nothing.

There had to be something.

She lay down on the grass beside Tenant’s grave and put her arm over where his body should be under the grass. The night was warm and more than anything, Kerry did not want to go home. She wanted to die and sleep there next to someone who had never neglected her, who had never shut her down, and who had never told her she was too different for them to be together.

Eventually, she fell asleep. She didn’t dream at all. She was merely conscious one moment and deeply asleep the next.

Morning came.

She was bitterly cold. It was summer, but she was frozen to the bone. The sun was rising, but she felt frost-bitten. And she still had to walk home.

Rising, she wondered what time it was.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” someone shouted from down the gravel road of the cemetery.

Kerry fell backward at the sound of his voice. That was what had woken her. It was the sound of his truck. Glancing at the gates, it was the same truck she had seen leaving the cemetery when she came the night before.

Standing in front of her was John Tracton. He lived on the other side of town and he was in the grade above her, so she knew his name. He was wearing beaten-up running shoes, torn jeans, an ancient paint shirt, a mucky baseball cap, and work gloves.

Kerry stood up, immediately heated by the embarrassment of being caught in her guilty pleasure.

“Um, I was just leaving,” she muttered as she gathered up her stuff and tried to pass him.

His face was extremely distressed as he looked at the tombstone and her clothes, which he undoubtedly recognized from the night before. Dressing up cute in a small farming town didn’t go unnoticed.

“Wait. Was he a friend of yours?” John asked concernedly, pointing to Tenant’s monument.

“No,” she felt bound to admit. “I didn’t know him.” She started down the gravel road towards the gates.

“If you didn’t know him, then why did you spend the night here? That’s downright creepy.” He paused then shouted, “Hang on. Did something worse happen to you than just you sleeping here? Why didn’t you go home?”

Mercy! He thought she’d come here in desperation after someone abused her the night before! “No. Nothing weird happened. I’m fine. Leave me alone,” she snapped. Kerry was panting now in her hurry to get away from him. Didn’t he realize that he should just forget what he saw?

“Wait,” he said, running up beside her and speaking quieter. “Let me take you home. If someone sees you walking home, looking like that at this hour you’re going to look like ...” he hesitated uncomfortably before he finished saying, “a girl walking home in the morning.”

She paused. He was right. She didn’t want anyone to see her. Gossip knew no bounds in a town like this. She looked around helplessly and saw his truck. He had a lawnmower in the back. “But aren’t you supposed to be cutting the grass for the town? Won’t your boss be mad if you take off?”

He smirked and opened the vehicle door for her. “You’ve got to be kidding. Taking you home won’t take me five minutes. He won’t notice. Get in.”

Kerry got in the truck and looked straight in front of her while he revved the engine.

She wished she knew more about John. She didn’t know if he was the type of person who would keep this a secret. Truly, of all the guys in the grade above hers, he was the one she knew the least about.

“Hey,” Kerry said when they started driving. “Do you think you could keep this a secret?”

“Why?” he asked. His voice was mildly uncomfortable.

“People already think I’m a weirdo. Can we not make it worse?”

“I never thought you were a weirdo.”

She groaned. Well, if he didn’t before, he definitely did now.

“So, why did you go there?” he asked, turning his brown eyes on her.

She put her head in her hands and put her face between her knees. “I hate it here. I hate being alone. I wish I was dead.”

He didn’t answer.

When she lifted her head, she couldn't bear to look at him. Her face was tear-streaked and she was mortified that she had broken down and told him something like that. It was like a desperate call for help, but at the same time, she didn't want to seem like she was trying to get attention.

"If you hate being alone, why don't you make some friends?" he asked.

She snorted and when she spoke, her tone was sarcastic. "Yeah. I wonder why I didn't think of that. Exactly who am I supposed to make friends with? I live in probably the second most crumbled-down house in town. Socialites beware. And who isn't a socialite in this town? Kids from school obviously don't respect anything about me. They are always throwing their litter in my yard and guess who gets to pick it up sometimes every damn day?"

He flinched.

Then he pulled up in front of her house. There was trash on her lawn. Kerry got out of the truck and on her way up the front walk she kicked an empty pop bottle out of her way.

He didn't understand.

When she got in the house, she went straight for the bathroom. When she looked in the mirror she saw that her face was a mess. There were mosquito bites from the middle of her forehead to her temple and three under her right eye. She had been sleeping on her left side, so that side had been open. Besides that, she saw that John was right. She looked like the survivor of a one-night-stand.

Terrific.

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Mornings Suck

My date with Tenant was a disaster. The only upswing was that even though I arrived home six hours late, no one at my house noticed I was missing. My mother didn't get home from work until two a.m. and she was so tired she forgot to check on me. Aaron should have noticed, but he fell asleep on the couch. He didn't say anything to me this morning.

So no one in my family would notice if I disappeared. That's my upswing.

Comments: 0

It was a whole week before Kerry felt comfortable enough to go back to the cemetery. When she finally got there, she simply sat in front of Tenant's grave and bawled.

She didn't know why she existed anymore when no one cared about her one way or the other.

Sitting in the well-cut grass, she wasn't sure if she was happy that there was no way John would come looking for her, or miserable that there was no way he would come looking for her.

After sitting in the wind and sun for over an hour she decided to go home. She was getting sunburned and there was still supper to make. So, she stumbled towards the gates and mapped the route home that provided the most shade.

She wasn't expecting it, or maybe she was, but she turned her head and pretended not to see him when John pulled up in his truck.

He called to her. "Kerry."

Stopping, she turned to look at him. He left his motor running and got out of his truck. He had clearly been working all that day and was a sweaty red mess with grass sticking out of his clothes. But his brown eyes looked soft.

"Hi. How are you?" he asked.

"Fine," she mumbled, looking at the sidewalk and wondering if he really hadn't told anyone where he'd found her.

"Say, do you have plans tonight?" he asked pleasantly, like he didn't know that she was just coming out of the cemetery.

She didn't want to say, "Yeah, I'm cooking a huge pot of spaghetti that will end up tasting about as yummy as stewed hay," so she didn't answer.

"The reason I'm asking is that I got paid today and I wanted to go see a movie in town. Do you want to come with me? My treat."

Her upper lip curled scornfully. "Are you pitying me?"

"No," he said quickly. "You're not the only person I asked. I'm taking a group – very casual."

Kerry waited for an explanation of why he was asking, and when it didn't come she got antsy. "Look, I know I broke down and told you those awful things about myself, but my problems aren't yours. If possible I'd like you to forget what I said. I was just feeling especially blue that night and broke down a little. I'm better now, so you don't have to worry about me."

He hesitated before he said, "Then why is your face blotchy? You look like you've been crying."

Kerry stepped back. She had been trying to hide her face by looking the other way, but he saw through it.

"You're not better," he said before she could answer.

She started walking away from him.

But he ran after her and said, "You know, that's okay. We all have problems. Yours aren't that weird. I have problems myself. I understand."

She turned on him. "You understand?" she growled. "How dare you? What honestly makes you think you get how I feel?"

He didn't back down and met her eyes sternly. "Do you really think you're the first person who has ever felt loneliness?"

"N-No," she stuttered.

"Good, because that would be ridiculous. We all feel like that sometimes – even to the point of wanting to die. Sometimes the feeling lasts minutes, sometimes weeks – possibly years. I just want to give you a boost, not because I feel sorry for you, but because that's what you do when you find out that someone is suffering like you are."

Kerry was stunned. She had never heard anyone talk like this before. People in this town were frank like this? Whenever she had flaked out before, everyone always turned the other way. It seemed to her like they liked to pretend that nothing was wrong.

She bit her lip and as she tried to keep her tears strangled, she asked, “So after you take me to the movies tonight, you’ll forget all about me and think you’ve done me an amazing favor?”

“No.” He took a step towards her so he was in her face. “Do you think I’m naïve enough to think that your problem can be fixed with one gesture of kindness?”

“And you think you can fix me?” she snarled.

“Of course I can’t. I’m only offering you a boost. A smile, a joke, a movie, an email – that’s the sort of thing I can offer. That’s all.” He stepped back and put his hands in his back pockets.

“So, do you want to come to the movies or not?”

“Who’s going?” she asked speculatively, a little happy to have him out of her space.

“My sister Trista, my friend Ryan and his girlfriend Julie, me and you. That’s all that will fit in my parents’ car. So, do you want to go?”

“Okay,” she said reluctantly.

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Movies with John

Yesterday John asked me to go to the movies with him. It has been a long time since I saw a movie. If I lived in a city I could take the bus, but since I live in the middle of nowhere, a driver's license and a vehicle are required. I don't have either.

I didn't expect it to be very much fun. I thought they'd pick a horrible movie and actually, I didn't want to see the one they chose, but miraculously, it turned out to be acceptable entertainment. I was also surprised at how nice John and his sister were. She didn't seem to have any concept that anything was wrong with me and she didn't look at me like I was a ghost either. I didn't expect to fit in with them as well as I did.

Comments: 0

A couple days later, Kerry was in her front yard picking up trash. She had barely got started when a truck drove by her place. John was driving and when he saw her, he waved. She expected him to just keep on driving. After all, all he had promised was a boost and he had a lot of work to do since he was working for the town that summer. But he didn't. He swung a U-turn in the middle of the road and pulled up in front of her house.

"Hi," he said as he got up. As he walked towards her, he started picking up dirt encrusted napkins and paper plates.

"Thanks, but you don't have to do this. It's not your fault."

"I know, but still it's not your fault either. Living here shouldn't be a crime."

He finished helping her tidy her lawn and when they finished, he looked at her neighbour's, whose lawn was five times messier than hers. "Let's clean up this yard, too."

"We can't," Kerry said quietly.

"Why not?"

"There's a no trespassing sign."

"So, what's the owner going to do? We're helping. They're not going to come out with a shotgun." He stepped over the property line and when she hesitated, he came back to get her. Grabbing her hand, he took her across the line. "Come on. We can help."

Kerry bent over and started picking up candy wrappers. After she had picked up half a dozen things, she saw the curtains move. Her heart quickened. She didn't want to meet the old lady who lived here. They would certainly get yelled at. It was only a matter of time.

Three.

Two.

One.

The door opened and the lady came out. She was wearing a shapeless cotton dress of ancient pattern and her hair was tied in a low ponytail.

"What are you doing?" she asked sharply.

John answered, "We're tidying up. We're almost done, so we'll be out of here in a second."

"Don't you work for the town?" she asked fretfully. "Did the town send you to clean this up because it's too much of a mess? Because if they did—"

"No. No," he interrupted. "I'm just helping Kerry." He pointed to her.

"The girl next door," the woman acknowledged.

"Yeah."

"So you won't be coming back," the old lady said slowly. It seemed like she was losing strength just standing there.

"Excuse me?" John asked. "Do you need someone to help you with this on a regular basis?"

The woman's whole face scrunched up distastefully. "I don't want to bother anybody."

"Kerry, do you think you could help?" John asked, looking at her.

Kerry was horrified beyond belief that John was volunteering her for this, but at the same time, there was a part of her that had always felt that it would be better if she did help. She gave into the softer side of herself and said, "I can do it. It only takes a minute."

The lady looked surprised and a little skeptical. It was obvious that she didn't think Kerry would actually follow through. All the same, she smiled and mumbled a word of thanks before she went back into her house.

As Kerry and John walked back, he said, "Thanks for being so helpful when I put you on the spot. I appreciated your willingness. You have a good heart." He patted her on the head.

And she was speechless.

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New Heart

I haven't been over to the cemetery for days. I've hardly been home. John had a few days off work and I've been over at his house almost every day. He and his sister are so fun. They're always thinking of fun things to do. One day it was hot and they put a sprinkler under their trampoline and we all got drenched, jumping fully dressed. Another day he took me out to his uncle's to groom his uncle's horses. Then we played every board game they owned. It took all day.

I wonder why I never have fun like that with my brother.

Comments: 1

I'm so glad you had fun visiting. We had fun, too. You should come over this Saturday and hang out again.

*Love,
Trista*

John was working so Kerry was home. She was cleaning her room. She didn't realize it had gotten so gross and she didn't want Trista or John to see it like that.

She made several trips out to the kitchen as she worked – one for dirty dishes and another one for trash. Aaron was lying on the couch watching a game show. Was he sleeping? She snuck up behind him.

“What's up?” he asked lazily.

“I'm cleaning my room.”

“Fascinating,” he remarked, though he was totally bored.

Kerry was about to walk away from him when she remembered her blog entry. Why didn't she ever have fun with her brother? Was it because of her or because of him? She thought about the time that he asked her to watch a movie with him. He didn't care what he watched. He probably asked because he was lonely, too. It was strange, but that thought had never entered her head before.

She was still standing next to him chewing on that idea when he suddenly asked, “Do you want to sit down?”

She sat.

“Do you want some cheesies?” he offered, passing her the bowl.

She took them and bit into one. She hadn't eaten these in years and was shocked by how good they tasted.

It wasn't her style, but she stretched out on the other couch and watched the game show. Towards the end, she was even commenting on the contestants.

“I think that guy with the blond guy should have won,” she said afterward as she dropped the empty bowl in the kitchen sink.

“No. No. No,” Aaron said, following her. “Jesse clearly deserved to win.”

“But he was so arrogant.”

“So? You have to be aggressive if you want to win that game.”

Kerry shrugged her shoulders and poured herself a glass of water when the thought occurred to her. Maybe she had been the one who didn't want to have fun all along.

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Date with the Living

John asked me to go on a big group date yesterday. We're going rock climbing out at one of his friend's farms. I said I'd go and I'm really excited even though I am terrified of heights. Let's see if this date is more successful than the last one.

Comments: 1

Don't worry. The ledge isn't that high. I've done it a million times. If the weather is good, we're planning on going cliff jumping after, so don't forget to bring something you can get wet in.

*Peace,
Julie*

On the day of their excursion, the weather wasn't good. John told her that the idea was to get out to the farm and do their climbing before it started to rain. The cliff jumping thing was most likely a no-go, but the weather could improve.

Kerry was the only one riding in John's truck that day. He came to pick her up and she deliberately brought him into the house to meet Aaron. She thought that John would just say 'hi' and then make them leave, but instead, he invited Aaron to go with them.

Aaron was a little stunned by John's offer but said he couldn't come. Their dad was coming over that day and Aaron didn't want to miss him, so he said goodbye to them and went back to the couch.

Julie had been right. The rock face they were planning on climbing wasn't too high at all. Not only that but there were so many jutting surfaces that it was easy to climb. They didn't even need climbing gear.

When they were finished, they built a fire in their makeshift fire pit and roasted hotdogs and marshmallows.

Kerry looked out at the landscape. This area was a forty-five-minute drive from town and a five-minute drive from the farm they were visiting. She'd never been out here before, but the land—the beautiful land—looked just the same as where she had taken Tenant for their date.

She sat there and thought about Tenant. A few weeks ago she had honestly wanted to die by his side and now that had all been flipped over. It wasn't that she had a crush on John exactly. She didn't... and she did. It was more that she didn't want to admit that she liked him. Doubtless, if she told him about her feelings, he would explain to her that that wasn't why he was with her and she would be rejected. The feelings inside her were too fragile to be brought into the sun. She just enjoyed his friendship and hoped it would last into the school year.

After lunch, one of the boys suggested that they play a game of capture the flag between the rocks. They played until it started to rain. It was a while before John and Kerry made it back to the truck – the only place that was dry. The other teenagers ran for their vehicles too and everyone started towards the farm. Their vehicles disappeared around the corner as John and Kerry wrapped up in blankets.

"Sorry, they smell a bit," John apologized. "But as long as we're dry."

Kerry put her nose to the flannel and inhaled. "They smell fine to me."

He looked doubtful.

"It's totally all right. These are emergency blankets that have been in here for two hundred years, right?"

"Yeah."

"So don't worry about it. They're fine. It's nice to be dry."

John smiled and put his key in the ignition. Something grinded in the innards of the car, but the car didn't start. He tried again and again. It didn't start.

"What's wrong with it?"

"I have no idea," he said, popping the hood and going out into the rain.

Kerry watched him nervously. Everyone else had already headed back, so there was no one nearby.

John looked for a while before he came back.

"Did you figure out what's wrong?"

"No," he said, brushing the water from his hair. "It could be anything. Let me try it again."

No luck.

"Did you bring a cell phone? Can we call one of your friends?"

“No. I let Trista take my phone today.”

“What can we do?” Kerry asked.

“Wait for the rain to stop and try the engine again. It’s a long walk back to the farm, but we could do it.”

“Do you think your friends will come looking for us?”

He smiled. “It would sure be nice if they did.”

So they waited. The rain pattered on the windows and the wind blew. Kerry was quite comfortable wrapped up in the blanket even if she was a little wet. She took off her socks and shoes, which helped.

She liked sitting next to John. He didn’t talk much. Something was bothering him. It was obvious because she kept turning to her like he wanted to say something and then turning his head like he changed his mind. Kerry was fine to leave him like that. She was happy, even if they didn’t talk.

Towards the end of the afternoon, she was starting to get a little drowsy and the rain still beat evenly on the truck.

Resting her head on the window, she let herself relax. Just like that other time, one moment she was awake, and the next, she was asleep.

When she woke up, she was resting her head on John’s shoulder. His arm was around her waist and she was warm. It was muggy in the cab and the windows were fogged. She was about to push the blanket off her when she realized that it was over both of them.

“I like you,” John whispered.

Kerry hadn’t moved since she woke up. Maybe he thought she was still asleep. She closed her eyes and waited to see if he would say anything more.

“Before this summer, I thought you were different. I thought you were proud and strong and totally untouchable. You walked like you didn’t need anybody. You hurried like you had somewhere to go. I couldn’t believe it when I found you in the graveyard and you said you were lonely. How could you have spent your hours that way? I thought you had a boyfriend from a different town or something and how was I supposed to find out about you? No one knew anything.” He paused. “I don’t know if my feelings are strong enough to last forever, but up to this moment, I have never liked a girl as much as I like you.”

Kerry’s eyes opened and she turned to look at him.

He regarded her seriously, without flinching or looking away.

“I like you, too. How did you know I was awake?”

He kissed her cheek and said, “The rain has stopped.”

When they got out of the truck, there were two cars sitting outside.

“Are you two done making out now?” Ryan shouted at them.

John scratched his neck and shook his head. “How long have you guys been here?”

“Long enough. So, are you a couple now?”

John looked at Kerry and she nodded.

“Yes, we are,” he said.

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My Last Entry

Yesterday I went to the cemetery. I went to go tell Tenant that I was going out with John now. I wasn't going to go back there, but I had this needling feeling when I woke up this morning that I needed to go tell him what happened. So even though I didn't think it made sense, I went.

When I got there, there was a woman crying in front of his grave. I wanted to leave but had this feeling that I shouldn't. So, I went up to her and asked her if she needed a tissue

"He was my son," she explained.

"What did he die of?" I asked. I was remarkably calm considering how much I had wanted to know everything about him.

"Heart disease," she said pensively. "He had it bad since he was born, but you know – he loved life more than anyone. Every moment was precious."

I stayed and talked to her for a while, and I'll never forget what she said. I'll carry it for the rest of my life.

Comments: 1

That was beautiful. I'll remember this story too, and I can't wait to read your new blog. I'll be a regular visitor. What were you going to call it? Love my life?

*Love,
John*

The End

Author's Notes

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a [star rating](#) and [send me some feedback](#) on Obooko to say which story was your favorite!

Thanks,
Stephanie Van Orman
Novelist