

1

The End

The scowl on his face hadn't changed since filling the car a quarter of a tank ago. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* lay open on her lap, its broken spine a memorial to the enjoyment she had found in it so many times before. Its pages had once held the odor of new. When she initially purchased the book of poems... she opened it, pressed her face against the pages and inhaled deeply, smelling the aroma of vestal paper. The first hours of reading had been like a religious experience, turning each page as a priest would, seeking the Gospel. The printed words – dark, clear, holding their treasures yet to be discovered.

Now she just looked at the familiar words, not reading them – now she merely touched the pages, the pages that no longer bore the texture of prophets...

She closed the book and snuck a peripheral glance at the man driving the car... so handsome, so strong, so... And those hazel eyes looking out from the shadows beneath heavy brows had a mesmeric quality.

What was he thinking... His financial business? The conferences? The late-night meetings? What else in his life was more important than his work? Certainly not their marriage. That had gone by the wayside along with the leisure of he and she, the lingering early morning caresses, the coffee forgotten, clocks disregarded...

All that remained of the memories they had shared, whatever promises had been made, whatever vows declared before filled pews – all that remained was his work. He had finally succeeded in pushing her away.

Again, she opened the book...

Again, she didn't read the words...

Again, she closed her eyes and remembered...

“Sebastian, we've had this date planned for weeks...”

He absentmindedly turned and looked at her. She had done her hair and was wearing a new dress. She was beautiful – she was always beautiful. From the first time he saw her across that horseshoe-shaped bar he'd thought she was beautiful. And this evening was no different. And, not for the first time, he was going to disappoint her. He had to get this damn spreadsheet figured out.

Tonight.

Now.

Shit.

“I know... and I'm sorry... but this...” He didn't finish his thought. His attention was drawn back to the spreadsheets reflecting on his face from the large dual monitors. His eyes darted across the cells filled with numbers. He could do the calculations in his head, but there was an error in one of the formulas. He couldn't leave it alone until he solved the problem – a problem that would weigh

heavily on him all night. And until he fixed the issue – until that problem was solved – he could not relax with his beautiful wife.

He was a textbook example of left brain thinking – analytical, logical and detail oriented. And now it was logical to him that he remain holed up in his office, analyzing every detail until he found the solution.

She didn't understand. She wasn't the logical one – she was the impulsive one. The one who had wanted to have sex with him the first night... The one who had wanted to move in with him, not ever staying in her own place again. And now she was wearing her pretty new dress...

He mumbled, "Just another minute..." But a minute turned into fifteen, then thirty. She tentatively moved closer to his chair – and touched his shoulder, gently combing her fingers through his long hair. At one time her touch had made him come alive. He said he would die without her touch. Now he shrugged off her life-giving touch.

She whispered, "Should I go alone... without you?"

He didn't answer. His attention was still on the spreadsheet formulas. And he didn't hear her walk out of his office...

And he didn't hear her descend the stairs...

And he didn't hear the front door close. His attention was still drawn to those damn formulas...

And again, she was alone...

She tried focusing on *Drum Taps*, but the print bled across the page. She whispered his name – *Sebastian* – its sound resonating like something new and sweet born out of darkness and confusion, captivating her very soul. She was impatient to be with him, this man who sat so close but whose thoughts she was sure were a millennium away.

She was months away from achieving her master's and the thought of graduating without him at her side was painful – so similar to those feelings of abandonment she felt after her father died. He was her hero and a giant of a man. But she was just a girl when he was killed in that horrific train accident. And now, Sebastian would become just another painful memory.

Though he was driving well over the speed limit, the impulse to collapse into his body was powerful, the temptation fierce to seek his lips. Instead, she leaned into her side window, pressed her forehead against the coolness of the glass and turned her attention to the passing fields of corn, soybeans and threshing machines standing idle.

"*Kelly...*" the driver sighed her name. The way he said her name was so different from the way he'd lovingly whispered it not so long ago. Was it that long? Yesterday? Last year? She couldn't remember – her memory was like the pages of the book, well-worn and grey.

The long drive to the cabin had always been a happy trip, both he and Kelly looking forward to putting the week behind them and enjoying the solitude, the beauty of the area. The pond and the woodlands that surrounded it was their refuge against the world.

But today, this last trip out to their property was anything but happy. The bittersweet memories of their married life haunted him. While he drove the Porsche Boxster – his wrist resting across the leather-wrapped steering wheel, his body leaning against the door – he couldn't keep from thinking about the woman sitting next to him. And Sunday mornings...

His mind saw her in the diffused light of the morning as gauze over the camera lens. She in his stolen terrycloth hotel robe standing near the stove, her small breasts barely apparent behind the loose material – he sitting on a stool at the butcher-block counter reading the paper by the glow of the pendant lights. She pouring more of the rich dark brew – he warming his hands around the large stoneware mugs. She pouring thick cream into her coffee – he observing her silent motions with interest.

Sunday mornings were their time to reconnect, their quality day – time to review the week and catch up on missed opportunities to talk, listen, feel, touch, sense. Those were the mornings he loved.

With a searing pain in his heart, he remembered how happy their life had been. Her body... her soft, warm woman body... Even now, he could feel her skin – taste her skin. The memories were burned into his soul...

And in the evenings when he didn't have pressing work, he helped review her students' essays – her college homework, too. He envied her knowledge of literature, and marveled at the number of books in her personal library.

Over the last eighteen months, the demands as a financial planner became greater. As owner, he alone was responsible for all aspects of his business, including schmoozing prospective clients. Many times, he wouldn't see his wife for days, sometimes even an entire week if he had meetings out of town. He was overburdened but felt stimulated, and couldn't take the risk of turning down another prospective account – not yet.

His work, his drive, his dream now took up more of his time than he had originally planned, surely more than she had bargained – for better or for worse? Had they considered that in their marriage vows? Where was it written, that element which had been overlooked...

Lately, he was even forced to bow out of many of the things they used to do together on the weekends – walking along the boardwalk that edged Lake Superior, or taking his wife dancing down at the pub by the harbor. It seemed he was always either too tired or too busy. And though it would secretly kill him to see her walk out the door without him at her side, he knew she deserved a night out, a time to be free from her responsibilities. She needed her space, and the fact that she was enjoying herself justified the guilt he felt about staying behind. He needed to fine-tune a computer program, or create a spreadsheet specifically designed for a high-end account.

First and foremost, he had to keep those people happy. That's the problem when you're the CEO, he tried explaining to her. He knew she heard his voice, but assumed she had chosen not to acknowledge the words.

But always and forever, the best part of his day was at night when he came home to Kelly. Crawling into the great bed, he pressed his tired body against hers. In the dark of their bedroom, their shadows as one, their whispers the only signs of life. He had quickly gotten used to her body lying next to his – she was so warm, so soft. She was his safe haven, the one constant in his life...

...he felt her hand reaching for him. He moved closer to the woman who occupied the warm spot on the mattress. He lay on his side – and felt her fingers graze his

chest. He wasn't used to sharing his bed. But her fingers – just the lightest touch of her fingers against his skin gave him permission to accept her comforting presence. Her face was close to his – he inhaled her sweet breath.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. I was waiting for you." Her hand touched his shoulder, softly massaging his arm.

He closed his eyes and whispered, "I like this."

"What do you like?" Her hand returned to his chest, touching the soft black carpet of hair that covered his chest, finding and caressing his nipples.

"You. Your touch. You in my bed."

"I'm glad."

He sensed her eyes opening and wanted to turn on the bedside light, wanting to see her emerald eyes. But if he moved, her hand – her touch – might stop. He didn't want her touch to stop.

Sebastian again whispered, "I like this."

"Good." She moved closer to his body, pressing her warm woman body against his. He exhaled loudly – loving the feel of her... the nearness of her...

"How was your meeting?" Her hand touched his face, caressing his beard – she pulled at the latigo tie, freeing his long hair.

His hand stopped on her hip. "This is new..."

"What is new, baby?"

"I'm not used to talking about my business."

She caressed his beard and combed her fingers through his long hair. "Confidential. I get it." Kelly smiled, knowing she was quickly learning her limitations with this man. "Sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. It's just... new..." His hand continued moving, touching her skin – so smooth, so soft, so new. Again he whispered, "Please don't stop, don't stop touching." He pulled her closer to his body, his hand lightly massaged her butt and reached down between her thighs.

And she didn't stop touching...

He switched hands and sat squarely in the leather bucket seat. With his free hand, he fished around in the center console compartment until he found some tissues. Without looking at her, he proffered her a handful.

Kelly felt the soft tissue brush against her bare arm. Looking away from the speeding scenery, she noticed the flower of pastel blue. She whispered *"Thank you."* Had she lost her voice? Or hadn't need of it? She grasped the tissues, their fingers barely touching but the memory of the feel of his skin made her inhale deeply – forcing back new tears.

She pulled down the visor and opened the vanity mirror. Red and swollen eyes looked back at her, the waterproof mascara running down one cheek. Once her skin was taut, moist, glowing. We will live forever – wasn't that the promise of this generation? Have the sense to gaze only in mirrors rubbed old with age so as not to see the face – rubbed old with age.

With her tongue, she moistened the edge of the tissue and removed the mascara that clotted beneath her eyes – and inspected her face. The frown lines and crows' feet had merged with her laugh lines. She rearranged her shoulder-length auburn hair, streaked with threads of silver, bangs still falling into her eyes. Hopeless. Returning the visor to its original position, she shut her eyes, allowing her head to recline against the headrest.

Shortly after returning from their honeymoon, they had discussed her ambition to attain her master's degree in education. They both knew the sacrifices, but he had agreed that she should pursue her education. The following spring, she enrolled in the two-year program at the state university with classes that met several evenings a week. The drive was about ninety minutes one way, which meant she always returned home late.

And when she crawled into their bed chilled to the bone, Sebastian would be waiting for her, cocooning his muscular body around her – her safe haven – the one constant in her life...

Before he was so immersed in his business, before he became successful, before he lost sight of their marriage, he helped correct her students' papers. While on an out-of-town trip, he had bought bright colorful stickers, suggesting Kelly reward the better efforts with the small prizes.

But she wasn't sure shiny stars and smelly dinosaur stickers were appropriate for tenth graders. He countered by convincing her to let her students make the decision whether the stickers were appropriate – and he put a smelly dinosaur sticker on the top of a student's essay paper. Sebastian put a sticker on her college homework too, which made her audibly exhale in faux exasperation.

Thinking he had gotten this sticker-thing out of his system, she began putting the stack of student papers back into a folder. But he slyly put a sticker on her arm. She attempted to pull it off, but it stuck to the fine hairs...

"Seb! Don't waste them!"

"I'm not." He put a sticker on her leg.

"Sebastian! You're wasting them!" She was concerned she wouldn't have any left for the homework she would review over the weekend.

*"I'm **not** wasting them." And he put a sticker on her face... and on her chin... and on her neck. He lifted her – **his** – T-shirt, pulling it over her head and put a sticker on her breast... and another on her belly...*

"What are you doing?" But he didn't answer her. Instead, he collected her in his arms and slowly laid her on the bed. Sebastian kissed her – she loved kissing him, loved the feel of his beard on her face, his long hair falling on her shoulders.

She needed to know. "Are we done with homework, mister?"

"No Love. We're just starting our homework..."

Oh, how he made her laugh! But over the next year, her college classes became harder and his reputation as a financial adviser grew. Instead of working on one or two small assignments a week, he was now working with larger companies who had signed contracts with him. No longer did he sit by her side in the big bed correcting papers – she no longer wore smelly stickers on her face.

Sometimes he literally worked through the night in his office down the hall from their bedroom. As she sat alone in the middle of their king-size bed correcting papers, she tried convincing herself she understood, though she felt him pushing her away.

Leaning back further into the leather bucket seat, her thoughts drifted... She was divorced from her first husband – a bad decision wrapped up in a not so tall and not so dark and not so handsome series of misdirected hormones. That brief marriage ended badly.

For several years she lived alone until she met *Him*. He was the companion, the soul mate she had longed for. But now he no longer wanted to return the affection, nor did he have respect for the love that she would always and forever feel for him. She sniffed once, successfully stifling the approaching tears, wondering if he was just another bad decision.

They used to go dancing. The Harbor Pub hired small R&B bands that played weekend nights. Kelly loved dancing with Sebastian. He was smooth. Oh, was he smooth! And when they slow danced, he held her close, his breath warm in her ear, his soft beard tickling her neck – making her crazy on that very small, very public dance floor.

And he knew what he was doing, because she couldn't wait to get him home and make love to her husband, her Ulysses. And when they were out on a Saturday night, their lovemaking extended into the early hours of Sunday morning.

He never seemed to tire, and after bringing her higher with his tongue than she ever had been, Sebastian always made sure he brought her to another orgasm before finding his own. He was so hard, so big, and she screamed his name or something sounding like his name as he continued pushing and thrusting into her – her legs wrapped around his waist – her hands gripping his shoulders – and his face pressed against hers. Always and forever, he was her Ulysses...

But now those nights were just a memory. Lately they rarely went anywhere together, and she invariably felt guilty when she went out without him. How could she have a good time knowing he was home working so hard? But she also knew that he needed his space, so she went out alone or with her girlfriends, but it was never the same without Sebastian.

She called him the one great love of her life – he was everything she had ever wanted in a man. As far as she was concerned, he still was...

Her thoughts fondly returned to the nights when he was late getting home from a meeting. She took advantage of those times lying in that great bed, catching up on her reading, listening for his car. She heard the front door in the kitchen open... close... his footsteps ascending the creaky stairs to their bedroom. She feigned sleep, but he was so deliberately noisy that he usually 'woke' her as he undressed and slipped between the covers. More times than not his body was cold – she gladly wrapped herself around him, this man who was the one constant in her life...

"Hi baby." She reached for him, holding him close to her chest. He enveloped her in his strong arms – pressing her warm body close to him, thawing his chilled muscles, nestling her face into his neck.

He whispered, "I like this, woman... Please... never stop."

She felt his breath on her face as he exhaled – and pulled him even closer to her – and continued pulling until his body rolled onto hers. She wanted his weight pressing on her body.

“I can never get enough of you, woman...” And she let him take over her body, kissing her, making love with her, bringing her higher than she had ever been – she allowed him to love her, gave him permission to love her. Gave him permission to seduce her into his life, his heart, his mind, his soul.

“I love you Sebastian... I love you...” She couldn’t stop touching him – his beard, his long hair, his shoulders, his smooth back. She was starved for the feel of his skin under her fingers.

“Show me, woman...”

And she did – and she did again – and she did again... She never wanted to let him go, never wanted to not have him in her life, in her heart, in her world...

She closed the book, securing the place with one finger held bent against the grey words embossed upon the well-worn page. Soon she would close the book on this relationship – soon enough. She secretly glanced in his direction but only saw his scowl.

Again, she tried focusing on the worn pages on her lap – but her mind wandered, remembering the afternoon when she met Sebastian...

2

The Beginning

Kelly had been enjoying some quality alone time outside of her English Lit classroom. Spring break was a time for students to be rid of their studies for a few weeks – for the teachers it was a chance to get ahead on writing lesson plans. But for now, she just wanted uninterrupted time to read from her book of poems. That morning, she enjoyed her first leisurely cup of coffee in several weeks. At noon she prepared a pitcher of mimosas and drew a hot bath. Of course, she had brought candles and Robert Schumann with her – a luxurious bubble bath was not complete without his Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op54.

Still in her bathrobe, she sat on the worn leather couch with her feet crossed at the ankles on the oversized coffee table. Her toes were in desperate need of a pedicure and she was overdue for a Brazilian wax. She'd make an appointment next week, but now – just rest.

A timid knock on the door rustled her out of the cobwebs of sleep. A soft voice called...

“Kelly? Are you ready?”

Oh shit! Gabriella! She had promised her friend she'd go to the pub with her this afternoon. Why couldn't she just stay right where she was – bathrobe and all! But this was her best friend, and she wasn't going to disappoint her. Kelly squeezed her eyes shut and groaned in mock anguish. She set her book down and stood, then shuffled to the door and unlocked the deadbolt.

“Come on in, Brie.”

Her friend took one look at Kelly and mouthed *WTF?* “You're kidding! We're going to miss Happy Hour. Roger and his friends are going to be there!”

“I know...” Kelly wended her way into her bedroom to dress.

While she waited, Brie wandered around the efficiency apartment. Both she and Kelly were tenured teachers at the biggest high school in town. Brie was head of the foreign language department, teaching Italian and Spanish – and she knew Kelly could get a much nicer place. But as much as Brie suggested she come up in the world a little, Kelly was just as adamant in her decision to stay. ‘Quaint’ was how she described it when she signed her lease, and it was just that – if not terribly shabby chic also.

Brie stopped before the full-length mirror and checked her long brunette hair, self-styled in a classic chignon. Her silk turquoise-colored blouse displayed an ample cleavage. She leaned coquettishly into the mirror – and opened one more button. Just one more. After all, *that bartender* would be at the pub this evening. She touched the small gold pendant hanging from her necklace, its base becoming lost in the dark abyss between her breasts. Good.

She turned sideways, sucked in her belly and examined her profile. The white linen pants she wore together with the thin leather belt were the perfect additions to her ensemble. Oh yes. *He* would notice her tonight.

Kelly finally emerged from her bedroom having donned a plain white blouse with capped sleeves and dress blue jeans. Where Brie wore high heeled wedge sandals, Kelly chose her comfy

moccasins. She took one last look in her makeup mirror and added another layer of mascara. “I hate you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re perfect without makeup, Brie, and you don’t need mascara!”

“Come on, Kell. You’re beautiful. Let’s go.”

She grabbed a sweater and the women exited the apartment. Brie watched as her friend pulled the door closed and locked the heavy-duty deadbolt.

“Roger installed that new deadbolt?”

Kelly nodded and slipped the key in her purse.

“He’s sweet on you, Kelly. You know that.”

“Brie, Roger is a friend. Come on – you said we might miss Happy Hour, right?”

The women ran down the one flight of stairs and out into the late afternoon sun. As they got into her car, Brie opened the moon roof. Kelly tuned the Sirius XM radio to the 80s on 8 channel and cranked up the volume. As the car pulled from the curb, the two friends acting like their teenage students sang *I Love Rock ‘n Roll* at the top of their lungs. The drive to the harbor took only a few minutes and almost immediately they found a parking spot close to the bar.

Upon entering the pub, they spotted Roger, but there were no seats near him. They claimed two open stools across the horseshoe bar and ordered their first round of drinks – ice cold draught beer in chilled glass steins. Kelly asked for her usual large green olive in hers.

The appetizers were arranged on long tables behind them. Taking turns, the friends scooped up what would be their dinner and returned to the bar – lobster-stuffed mushrooms with Parmesan, crab cakes, and bacon-wrapped Medjool dates stuffed with Gouda. The Harbor Pub spared no expense in pleasing their steady clientele. Both women agreed not to talk shop and spent the time feeding their faces, laughing at stupid jokes and drinking beer.

Roger appeared at Kelly’s side. He was a large man standing six-foot-four who had served in the USMC. He taught carpentry and woodworking in the technical school. A run-in with a band saw gave him the unfortunate ability of counting to 9-1/2. Both women had taken advantage of his skills, including building bookcases for their apartments. He was always thanked with home-cooked meals, which as a bachelor he never turned down. Roger was more of a big brother and not a lover – a line he never crossed.

“What are my two favorite ladies up to this evening?”

By the way he began his spiel, Gabriella knew right away he was up to something. Kelly was too busy enjoying her crab cake to notice any hidden agenda in Roger’s query.

“Fess up, Rog? What’s going on?”

Now Kelly was interested in Roger’s answer too – although if this was another set-up, she wasn’t interested. As sweet as he was, Roger was inept at the art of match-making and she didn’t want to be included in yet another failed ‘but he’s a great guy’ proposal. She returned to picking up crumbs from the crab cake with her fingers, trying very hard to ignore the upcoming speech.

Roger had been down this road before – always following the requests of hopeful suitors, but never stepping up himself. He couldn’t take the chance that Kelly would not want him as a lover. He

would rather have Kelly in his life. At least this way he had a relationship with her, though it was on her terms – as a friend.

“So, Kelly... My friend Sebastian over there would like to make your acquaintance.”

Oh God... ‘Make my acquaintance’? Roger really was reaching this time. Both women looked in the direction of the men who were now huddled in a tight group, looking something like small boys sharing a prized marble. The association made Kelly laugh, but she did like the looks of the new guy – the one Roger was trying to pawn off on her. In the dimness of the bar, she noticed his full beard – and eyes shrouded beneath heavy brows. Would she like to meet him? Without taking her eyes off Sebastian, she nodded *Yes*.



As the small foreign car sped along the highway, Sebastian knew from experience he could not fix her tears. And trying to comfort her only exasperated her tears. Instead, while he drove, he was the silent observer as she primped, wiping the mascara from her face, fixing her hair, scrutinizing herself... *What are you thinking, Kelly? Don't you know you are the one great love of my life?* She was beautiful. Even in the mornings when she believed her auburn hair a fright, he knew she was beautiful.

He didn't compliment her very often. His actions spoke for him. Words were empty, he argued. Anyone could say ‘I love you,’ but so few people really meant the words – and so few people heard the words when the words were spoken. He wasn't as verbally demonstrative as she was. He was a quiet man in a world of irreverent sounds.

After his first brief marriage ended, he had lived alone for several years, dating infrequently – but this relationship seemed so good. Kelly was the one he had searched for his whole life. She was his *Dulcinea*! How else could he have explained his feelings to her, the joy of finding the perfect woman? When they had known each other for only three months, he knew they would spend the rest of their lives together. He remembered their meeting...

His phone rang. Damn, he forgot to turn off the ringer – he usually forgot to turn *on* the ringer. He raised his hips up from his reclining leather chair and pulled the phone from his back pocket. Looking at the time before he answered – he had only been napping for a half hour, for crying out loud – he almost declined the call. There were no tax emergencies today – this was Saturday. Squinting, he looked at the name on the caller ID. Roger McClennen. Okay.

“Rog, what's up?”

“Seb! Where are you?” Roger was shouting into the phone, trying to hear himself above the din in the background.

“Sleeping... good night.”

“Come on, buddy. We're all down at the Harbor Pub. Michael. Cody. Phil's on leave. Get your shit together and get down here!”

Sebastian hadn't been very visible lately. This was, after all, tax season. After graduating college, he had been employed at a high-end financial firm. The clients were pre-screened, their paperwork clean, in order, stapled.

After six years, he left the firm and at age thirty established SGB Financial Services. Many of his new clients were unprepared and disorganized, their paperwork ripped or stained with rings of coffee – or even worse. And some didn't show up at the appointed time, arriving at the end of a very long day with children in tow, trying his already stretched impatience and expecting him to stay later than his already twelve-hour day. Only one more month.

He paused, one arm draped over his eyes. "I'll be down in five minutes, Rog." Yeah, he'd go down to the bar for a little while, have a few beers. Then return home to his La-Z-Boy and Lee Ritenour's soothing Jazz guitar. "Have a cold one waiting for me."

"You got it, Seb." He added, "Oh and hey, there're some real lookers down here, too!"

He had to chuckle at Roger's euphemism for attractive ladies. His friend was trying to fix him up with a girlfriend. Sebastian was 35 years old and again a bachelor. And he wasn't in the mood to meet anyone right now – but the cold beer sounded good.

He stood and, pulling his long hair back, quickly tied it with a string of latigo. While tucking his shirt into his trousers, he saw his reflection in the tall dining room mirror. His beard needed a trim.

There was little traffic on the drive to the harbor area, but parking spaces were already dear and his usually distempered temper became shorter. Though it was further away than he wanted, he found a space and parked. He stashed his sunglasses in the passenger visor and began the walk down the hill to the bar. The late afternoon sun was high – he regretted leaving his sunglasses behind.

It took a few moments for his eyes to become accustomed to the pub's dark interior. The pool tables were to the left, the small dance floor behind that and the large horseshoe-shaped bar was off to the right.

"Seb!" He turned toward Roger's baritone voice, spotting him on the near side of the bar. Sebastian had to laugh. Roger's thick black mustache – along with his military high-and-tight were his best friend's unmistakable characteristics. The other men gathered included Phil, home on leave from the army, Michael, president of his local IBEW, and Cody, owner of a plumbing supply store. It was Happy Hour and the beer flowed in frosty mugs – so good, so cold – and his long list of tax clients became history as he began relaxing.

Soon his eyes rested on two women sitting on the opposite side of the horseshoe bar. Roger followed his friend's gaze. He was acquainted with both women and told Sebastian they were teachers at the high school. Sebastian knew neither, but was more than interested in the redhead. Uncharacteristically, he asked his friend to introduce her to him.

Roger was usually so inept at these schemes. However, since he was not the instigator of this meeting he was – gratefully – released from all blame if the connection failed. He walked around the bar to where the two women sat.

Sebastian watched as he spoke with the women. Before long, the redhead looked in his direction and, without taking her eyes off him, nodded. The women spoke to each other as Roger motioned at him to join them.

He made his apologies to his friends, making them promise to call him when their pool table opened, and sauntered over to the trio. Somehow Roger managed a simple introduction.

"Sebastian Bonsignore, this is Gabriella Murray and her friend Kelly Cameron."

Her friend Kelly was all he wanted to know. He briefly shook Gabriella's hand, but when he took Kelly's hand, he held it longer, almost caressing it, and asked if he could sit with her for a bit. The women looked at each other, grinned, and shrugged their shoulders. Brie agreed to give up her seat.

Roger helped her off the stool, and taking one last look at Kelly, escorted Gabriella back to where his friends were huddled in conversation. There, quietly and with mild interest, he and Gabriella and the others watched as Sebastian and Kelly compared notes.

He couldn't take his eyes off this red-headed beauty. He knew he was staring, but he didn't care. Her large emerald eyes were like nothing he had ever seen – and they were staring back at him. This was either a dream – *Oh, Lord, don't wake me now!* – or he was the luckiest man alive. But he knew his life wasn't based on luck, and he definitely wasn't dreaming. This was his reality and he'd better open his mouth or he was going to miss out on his future.

But before he could say anything, she made the first lob. Amidst the cacophony swirling around them, the music in the background – *which could be turned down!* – and the sound of his beating heart, her voice was that of an angel's.

“So, Sebastian, did you force Roger to make that introduction?” From what she knew about Roger, no one could force him to do anything.

“No,” he chuckled softly. “I just asked him nicely to make the introductions – and I slipped him a twenty.” His eyes sparkled.

She laughed. Good, he's got a sense of humor. Check! She continued her interrogation. “So what inspired you? What was it about me?” Kelly looked directly into his hazel eyes.

“Inspired me?” He took a moment to think, never taking his eyes off her. Could he tell her he saw Dulcinea sitting across from him? When he first saw her, he finally understood the words that described the fictional character... ‘The most beautiful of all women, my queen and lady.’ Too corny? Would she laugh at him? Would she even know of *Don Quixote*? He was not a great reader of literature, but he knew that one.

And he was pleasantly – more than pleasantly surprised when her friend Gabriella, buxom and beautiful, left her stool, relinquishing it to him. Though she had many obvious charms, she wasn't *the one*. She didn't have the emerald eyes.

“Your eyes,” he answered slowly. “Your eyes inspired me.” Yes, he had wondered if she wore tinted contacts. Some women he knew did. But like the color that comes out at the end of the night, fitting into little white cases, so did the fantasy – and the reality was as fake as their eyes. No – he knew they were her eyes. Though when he first sat next to her and stared hard at her, he checked for the telltale halo just to confirm his instincts were right on.

And she had a delightful sense of humor. As he would on a balance sheet, Sebastian was checking off all her assets, and that column was quickly filling up. He had not brought a drink with him and her stein was almost empty.

“Kelly, may I buy you a drink?”

She gave him one of her looks. “I think you should, don't you?”

Though he was surprised by the look, he was pleased with her smart-ass attitude and responded with a crooked grin. He flagged the bartender...

His shirt was wrinkled! He had napped on his recliner in this shirt, and he still wore the same baggy chinos he had put on the day before. Why hadn't he changed clothes before he left his house? Because he didn't know he would be meeting his Dulcinea! And to top it off, his beard was in need of a trim. He knew he looked like a cave man. His liabilities were adding up. Could she see past his unkempt outward appearance and really see *HIM*?

While he waited for their order, he continued their conversation. "What made you say *yes*?"

It sounded like he was challenging her. "Yes, to what, Sebastian?"

"Yes to uprooting your friend so I could sit here... close to you... here." He leaned into her, his muscular shoulder almost touching her bare arm.

"Oh, Brie? She knows I'm an easy mark for a good-looking guy." She laughed, feeling more at ease now.

The fresh, frosty beers were set before them, one with a swizzle stick stuck into a large green olive. He raised an eyebrow at the olive, but Kelly just smiled. Sebastian handed the bartender a ten and told him to keep the change.

"So now I'm a good-looking guy?" He sat up straight, striking a model's pose.

"You have potential."

He offered to get more appetizers, including more of the delicious Medjool dates, but before he could leave his stool, she tested his culinary knowledge.

"You know what they are? The Medjool dates?"

"Of course." He answered in a mocking tone. He had been a chef for many years and he knew his dates, but he played along. And the more she talked, the more he wanted her. He rose from the stool, and while he took his time plating the goodies, felt her watching him – and felt his body responding. The bar was dark and so were his trousers. She'll never notice. Or did he want her to notice?

Kelly watched as he rose from his stool – his shirt sleeves tightened around his shoulders and biceps. There were muscles under those wrinkles. Check! Her eyes followed him as he walked over to the long tables where a few of the appetizers remained.

While he stood plating, she took stock of this man. His shoulders weren't too wide, his waist wasn't too narrow, and his long hair hung to the middle of his back. And though his trousers were baggy, his glutes filled out the seat of his pants just fine. At one point he reached across the table, bending at the waist to procure a few of the delicious mushrooms. Oh yes, he had a very nice ass.

Kelly turned back to the bar – she had been holding her breath. She smiled and exhaled through pursed lips. Oh, hell yes.

When he returned with a nice assortment, she noticed he had placed the canapés on one large plate which he put on the bar between them.

"You expect we should eat from the same plate, Sir?" Kelly was taking a playful haughty stance.

"Hogs at the trough, Miss. Hogs at the trough." And he smiled.

Oh, it was a beautiful smile, a perfect smile – and that perfect smile intrigued her. Another check in the positive column.

She was about to eat a piece of a crab cake, but to her surprise he picked up one of the bacon wrapped dates and offered it to her. She put down the uneaten tidbit. Sebastian carefully brought the delicacy up to her and held it close to her lips. She looked at him, then opened her mouth and allowed him to feed her. She took a bite out of the date – he popped the remainder in his mouth. Oh, sharing food on the first date. How hot!

But he apparently wasn't done. Sebastian offered her a piece of the stuffed mushroom, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. After Kelly accepted the morsel, she quickly clutched his wrist, holding his fingers close to her lips, and bravely licked his fingers.

“Oh Lord, woman!” he breathed. “You're going to be the death of me.” He was happy she had taken the initiative to show her hand, so to speak. But he wanted to reciprocate in his own special way...

He loved the feel of a woman's thighs around his head, the smell of her musk. Would she allow him to let her experience the ecstasy he could give her? Oh, he could fantasize, but fantasy was not satisfaction. How long would he have to woo her, date her until she let him taste her...

Enough! He was going to drive himself crazy with these thoughts. He had to come back down to reality. Sebastian wanted her – he wanted her in his bed. His heart had finally quit beating out of his chest – his breathing calmed. But before he could explore her body, there was so much he wanted to know about this woman.

Kelly looked across the bar where Brie sat. The startled look on her friend's face was obviously a reaction to the way she had interacted with Sebastian. Could she tell her friend that she really liked this guy? Could he be my Ulysses?

She turned her attention back to Sebastian, who had resumed drinking his beer. “I need to know more about you, for my friend, you know. She's going to quiz me later, so spill.”

He flashed that same crooked grin. “For starters, I'm a financial planner and I own my company. I'm also a CPA. That's Certified...”

“For crying out loud, Seb!” She said in frustration. “I know what CPA means! Give me more.”

“More?” He considered her request. After all, she did say he had potential. “I've worked as a chef and I'm still a pretty good cook. I could prove that to you if you want.” He let the last words fade, giving her a chance to take his bait.

“Well Sebastian, I think that's a possibility. What do you have in mind?” Now she waited, watching him take *her* bait. Kelly loved this playful tête-à-tête, but she wanted him to make his move. She leaned her whole body into him, resting her forearm on his shoulder and softly caressing his long hair with her fingertips.

He made his move. “I think we should make a date. What time do you usually get off work?”

“Oh, I don't work.” Kelly laughed, then clarified her response. “I mean I do, but I'm a high school teacher and this is spring break.” She suggested they could take a walk in the park before dinner.

He shook his head. “I don't do parks. Birds crap on my head.”

She mockingly echoed his words. “Birds crap on your head? Seriously?”

He looked hard at her. “Seriously.”

Awkward... “Um... Okay, well we could walk where there aren’t any birds. Or you could wear a hat!”

“Kelly,” he spoke carefully, not wanting to put a damper on this budding relationship. Sebastian took a breath and continued. “As sweet as you are, I’ll let you take your walk all by yourself and your birds, and meet me at my home when you’re done communing with nature.” He didn’t mean to sound so stern, but he wanted to set parameters. Returning to his beer, he hoped he hadn’t messed up what could be a very good thing.

“Are you dismissing me?” *No no no!* She quickly regrouped. “Okay, Plan 2.”

“Plan 2?” he asked. “I take it bird watching was Plan 1?”

Now she was on to Plan 2. Oh, he was falling for this woman! He hoped Plan 2 was anything but nature. Sebastian wanted her to give him something to work with here. And the symphony – definitely not the symphony.

“Plan 2,” Kelly began. “Since you’re not an outside kind of guy, I have season tickets to our wonderful symphony.”

Of course she did! Didn’t he figure she was a class woman? And didn’t class women dress up and go to the symphony? From experience, he knew the symphony was a good place to take a nap.

He suggested they could listen to his music. “Give me some R&B, Marvin Gaye, Marshall Tucker... Or Jazz... Rippingtons, Boney James, George Howard... Any of those names spark an interest?”

“Um... no.” This was not going well at all. Kelly would try another approach. “What do you like to read?”

She looked hopefully at him, thinking he must be a man of literature. But to her dismay, he said he read newspapers, namely the *New York Times* and *The Chicago Sun Times*. Sebastian lobbed the question back into her court.

“Since I teach literature, I read the classics – Poe, Melville, Whitman...” Her sentence quietly dropped off a cliff. Maybe he could have shared the *Dulcinea* comparison with her, but he wasn’t sure she’d appreciate the connection.

Kelly looked down at her plate, contemplating leftover crumbs. “I think we’re at a stalemate here.”

He noticed her dejected look. “Do you like to eat?” He spoke so softly she almost didn’t hear the question.

“What?” She slowly looked at him – crinkling her nose. “Do I like to eat?”

“I cook. Do you like to eat?” He sounded each word with a staccato beat, giving her that same crooked smile.

She shook her head at the man who asked such a silly question, and answered his query with incredulity. “Of course I like to eat.”

Sebastian turned and faced her. “Kelly, come to my home for dinner.”

He couldn’t read her. He took her hand – which made her turn back to him – and kissed the back of it. Oh, she tasted sweet! *Would every part of her taste that sweet?* With his free hand, he took a long drink from his empty stein – tipping it, buying time, waiting for her answer.

“Come to your house for dinner. Just like that?” When he kissed the back of her hand, his mustache tickled her skin. *Kelly silently wondered how his mustache would feel lightly brushing between her thighs.*

“Yes, just like that. Come to my home for dinner. I don’t walk in nature, you don’t listen to Jazz. This is something we can agree on.”

She looked over at Brie, who by now was in deep conversation with the bartender. Kelly took a deep breath and answered, “Yes, I would like that.”

“Yes?” he repeated.

She loudly exhaled. “Yes.”

Sebastian smiled his best smile and kissed her hand again. Oh yeah, definitely another check! Kelly gave him her number – he etched it in his heart. She entered his number into her phone. He promised to call her in a few days for the date.

From across the bar, Michael called out to him. “Sea Bass! Pool! Our table’s open!”

He was reluctant to leave her side – the attraction was powerful. But he had made a promise to call her, and hopefully would see her in a few days. He boldly leaned in and kissed her chastely on her lips. “I’ll call you...” And he was gone.

Brie returned to the stool recently vacated by Sebastian and sat next to her friend – her friend who still had that goofy *I think I just fell in love* look on her face.

“Kelly. Earth to Kelly. Come on girlfriend. Spill!”

She turned to Brie – and rolling her eyes, exhaled, and smiled...

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The lost memories of that day – that first meeting with Sebastian... The passing scenery blurred behind fresh tears...

# 3

## The Date

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She wasn't surprised when she heard from him the next morning. If he hadn't called, she would have been disappointed.

In preparation for this special night, she made an appointment for her pedicure and also a Brazilian wax. She wanted to be ready just in case... She didn't date a lot, practically never during the last several years. And it had seemed forever since a man had gone down on her. No one really interested her – no one except Sebastian. She hoped he was the one.

Kelly arrived at the address on time. His home was a huge, two-story brick mansion built on two acres. The front steps led to a large wrap-around porch resembling something from the days of southern plantations. She pulled up to the garage and parked.

One last time, she checked her hair in the car's vanity mirror. Her bangs hung in her eyes – she should have gotten a haircut. But she had chosen her wardrobe carefully, wearing her favorite pink blouse – the one with pearl buttons that unbuttoned easily. She also left her bra and unders at home, and felt wickedly naked underneath. Still looking in the mirror, Kelly whispered, "*It's showtime*" and flipped the visor closed.

Their first date had to be unforgettable. Relying on his years of culinary experience, he created a menu of pan-roasted salmon with beurre blanc, and his homemade fettuccine with Alfredo.

He heard her car drive up to the garage. Sebastian quickly went into the dining room and pressed play on the stereo. He returned to the kitchen and waited until he heard her footsteps on the porch, then opened the front door... He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, and felt like he was meeting her for the first time.

Sebastian had only seen her in a dark bar – now he was looking at this woman in his home. Her emerald eyes in the bright light of his kitchen had the same effect on him as when he first sat next to her at the bar. And she was tall, standing just shy of six feet. Her shoulder-length auburn hair framed her beautiful face in soft waves.

Kelly listened for a moment and recognized the music. Vivaldi's Concerto No. 2 in G Minor. She smiled, knowing Sebastian had chosen that music especially for her. Upon entering the kitchen, she approached a long narrow butcher-block counter. On it were a tall glass vase of white roses and a bottle of Cline Ancient Vines Zinfandel. Obviously, Roger had clued Sebastian in on her likes and dislikes.

She put her purse on one of the stools, and took a minute to look around the kitchen. Black soapstone countertops lined the perimeter of the vast kitchen. Stunning!

He seemed anxious, so different from the confident man who simply had to sit with her at the bar. Hopefully, having a drink would calm him. She watched as he poured the wine into two long-stemmed crystal goblets. Nice touch.

Sebastian offered one of the sparkling goblets to her and croaked, “To you, Kelly.” He didn’t recognize his voice. *Why was he so nervous?* It wasn’t like he hadn’t dated before. But the fact that she – this stunning redhead – was standing so close to him made him nervous as hell.

“Thank you, Seb,” she graciously replied. “You know, Cline is my favorite label.” Sebastian silently thanked Roger for cluing him in on Kelly’s likes and dislikes.

This was ridiculous. He needed to relax, and knew once he started cooking he would. Sebastian was in his element in the kitchen. He had already prepped the salmon, applying a thin coat of a brown sugar and cumin rub to one side. The fettuccine that he had made earlier was drying across thin wooden dowels. And he wouldn’t start the Alfredo sauce until after the pasta went into boiling water.

“Kelly, please sit.” She thanked him and sat on one of the tall stools. Now she had a perfect vantage point from which to watch the former chef in action.

Sebastian almost felt self-conscious, but as soon as the thick steaks were placed in a pre-heated pan, he exhaled. He had never cooked with an audience – and this audience was the woman with the emerald eyes.

“Where did you grow up, Kelly?”

She put down her goblet, but still held the delicate stem. “I grew up in Colorado.”

“What brought you to Minnesota?”

“That’s kind of a long story...”

“We have time...” He gave her a crooked smile.

“My grandma – my mom’s mom grew up here, up north in Grand Marais.”

“That’s quite a leap.”

“Yeah, well, she married a man from Colorado. And when he wanted to move home, so I’ve been told, she didn’t want to live without him. So she followed him back to his home – in Grand Junction.”

“So, how does that bring you here?”

“I told you it was a long story.” She sipped more of her wine. “She always talked about Lake Superior. And through her stories, I guess I fell in love with the lake, too.”

“And so?”

She laughed. “So, after I graduated from college, I checked out the teaching opportunities here and...”

“And here you are.”

“Yes... In your kitchen.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“I’ve taught for ten years, so I guess a little over ten years.”

“Do you own a home?”

“No, never wanted to be tied down with a mortgage... I live in an efficiency.” She again looked around his kitchen. “Not anything like your impressive home.”

“What grades do you teach?”

“Grades 9-12.” Kelly knew she was causing this big man much discomfort – she hid a smile behind her crystal goblet. Sebastian carefully turned the steaks and placed the pan in the preheated oven.

Kelly was intrigued as she watched her personal chef pour Jack Daniels Whiskey into a small pot. He added crushed pineapple with juice, minced chipotles in adobo and crushed garlic, bringing the mixture to a boil.

“This all looks so good...” Kelly sat up a little straighter and inhaled deeply. “And the smell is fantastic!” She wanted to know more about him – the man who was so comfortable in his kitchen. “So, what brought you here?”

He wiped his hands on a terrycloth hand towel. “My folks immigrated to the United States – they were born in Italy, so that makes me and my brother first-generation Americans.” He stirred the Jack Daniels mixture. “When they came here, they settled on the Iron Range – mining was big. But before I was born my folks moved a lot, mostly my dad finding better jobs.” He looked at Kelly. “By the time I started kindergarten, they had settled in St. Paul.”

“And so?”

He laughed. “And so... we’d vacation up here. My folks would pack us up and rent out one of those cabins along the North Shore. I guess I fell in love with the lake, too. After leaving the financial firm, I moved up here and established SGR Financial.”

“That’s a pretty involved story.”

“I told you the Cliff Notes version.” He looked over at the beautiful woman who sat in his kitchen – and smiled. “Dinner’s almost ready...”

After removing the small pot from the heat, he stirred in cubes of cold Plugra butter. He opened the oven door, retrieved the large pan containing the salmon steaks and quickly put a small hot pad caddy around the pan’s handle.

While the steaks rested, he pulled dried strands of the pasta off the wooden dowels and gingerly dipped them into the boiling salted water. Next, he poured heavy cream into a small heated sauté pan. Using a flat whisk, he stirred in a thick slice of Plugra butter.

Sebastian gracefully took a step and, opening the large refrigerator, retrieved a brick of Parmesan, setting it on the counter next to a large nutmeg seed. He picked up the cheese and grated quite a bit over the sauce. Using a smaller grater, he also added nutmeg.

“I hope you’re hungry, Kelly.”

“Very... I’m very hungry.” And if he only knew what else she was hungry for. Kelly was fascinated with this man, who promised her a wonderful meal – and from what she saw this was indeed going to be delicious. All week she had been imagining what she wanted to do to this man – this man with hazel eyes shrouded beneath heavy brows. And now that she was in his kitchen, she wondered if she had the nerve. Hopefully, later this evening, the date would become unforgettable...

After sprinkling kosher salt and freshly grated pepper into the sauce, Sebastian turned off the burner under the boiling pasta. Kelly watched as he picked up strands of pasta with the grabber utensil and, with water dripping, added the fettuccine to the Alfredo. He repeated this process several times, stirring the pasta into the sauce with the flat whisk. Finally, he covered the small pan and turned off the burner.

“Almost ready...” Sebastian looked at Kelly. My God she was beautiful – and she still hadn’t taken her eyes off him. He usually wasn’t unnerved by a look, but this was more than a look.

He opened the refrigerator and put a prepared bowl of chopped romaine and baby arugula on the counter. He lifted the salmon steaks out of the large pan and placed them on two plates – and spooned the wonderful smelling sauce over each steak. Using the tongs, he placed portions of the salad on their plates. Lastly, Sebastian added the Alfredo fettuccine, sprinkling it with freshly chopped parsley – completing the lovely presentation.

“That’s it!” He walked over to the butcher-block counter, leaned over and kissed the woman who sat so comfortably in his kitchen. “Are you ready?”

Kelly bravely reached across the narrow counter and, with tender fingertips, caressed his beard. “Your beard is so soft...”

Sebastian closed his eyes – loving her touch, wanting her to touch him again, but the meal was ready. Breaking the suggestively erotic moment, he needed an answer. “So, are we eating casual or formal?”

Kelly was unsure of his question. “I don’t understand...”

“What I mean is...” Leaning into the narrow counter, Sebastian took her hand and, looking into her emerald eyes, asked, “Should we eat here or in the dining room?”

He was giving her the option. She liked that about him, and squeezing his hand, replied, “I like it here, in your kitchen.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that.” He brought over the plates, setting one at her place, and the other at her side – on the same side.

“Are you joining me?”

He grinned, “If you don’t mind...” And after setting the silverware and napkins at their plates, he eased up on the other stool. “Ready?”

But before she could answer, he poured more wine into her glass. Silently, she wondered if he was just going to get her drunk.

“Are you plying me with your fine wine, sir?”

“Just ensuring you’ll have a wonderful culinary experience, ma’am.”

“This fettuccini is so tender.” She looked over at Sebastian. “I’ve never had anything like it!”

“I made it earlier today.”

“You made the pasta?” She smiled at him. “Of course you did!” Kelly paused and put her fork down at her plate. She turned on her stool. “My mom is a great cook. When I was a little girl, she told me I’d tell her, ‘You’re a good cooker!’” She wiped her mouth with a napkin and smiled. “This whole meal is delicious. You are a good cooker!”

“So, I rate?”

“Yes, mister, you definitely rate!”

Sebastian smiled. Check one for the chef!

But she wanted to know more. “So where did you come up with the dish?”

“It’s taken from a classic French recipe that we served as a specialty item in my restaurant.”

“I didn’t know you owned a restaurant...”

Again, he felt he should simplify the explanation, or they might not ever get done with the meal – and on to bigger and greater things.

“While I was in college, I was a sous chef at the River View Restaurant in Stillwater.” He paused in his explanation. “I really hated leaving that job.”

Though Kelly was listening to his explanation, she hoped it would be short, so they could go on to bigger and better things...

“Then, when I graduated, I was offered a position at a financial firm as an associate investment analyst.”

She nodded. “That sounds impressive!”

“Well, let me tell you, it was an entry level position, which meant, I was an overworked grunt – you know, a number cruncher for the firm’s portfolio companies.” He winked at her. “And that’s where I worked until I opened my own business.”

Kelly lay her napkin across her empty plate and, turning to the man who sat so close beside her, made her play. “So, Sebastian, what do you have in mind for dessert?”

The expression on his face told her he didn’t get it.

She sat up a little straighter. “Sebastian! I didn’t come to your house just so you could cook for me.”

His mind was whirling. Why did this woman have such an effect on him?

“Look, I’ve seen your lovely kitchen. Now I want dessert!”

“Sorry... I didn’t...” Then standing, and looking around his kitchen for ideas, Sebastian slowly picked up his goblet and took a sip of wine.

Seriously? “Sebastian! Show me your bedroom! Be the dessert!”