

An Untold Tale

Matt & Elena: First Date

Dedicated to Red and Natalia—a sweet tale of new love blossoming

A date . . . with Elena Gilbert!

Matt nervously opened his wallet again and counted his cash. A ten dollar bill and six cents left over from what the six neighbors on the cul-de-sac had given him to rake all the autumn leaves from each yard into a giant bonfire-pile. The rest had gone into buying this crisp new pair of casual/formal dress pants. Seven dollars and twenty cents left over from cleaning attics and mowing lawns—the rest of that money had been carefully invested in the jacket he was wearing right now—a letterman’s jacket wouldn’t do, not on this occasion, and he’d heard that Elena didn’t like them. A ten dollar bill from helping Mr. Muldoon carefully change all the light bulbs in his house that the old gentleman couldn’t reach any longer.

Twenty-seven dollars and twenty-six cents . . . *plus* . . .

He turned the wallet around and pulled it out from its special place of honor—a concealed compartment in the wallet’s side. And there it was, folded in half, as crisp and new-looking as when Uncle Joe had given it to him.

A hundred dollar bill.

He could remember Uncle Joe—Great-Uncle, really, but always called Uncle, pressing the bill into his hand while the nurses were out of the room. “Don’t blow it on just anything,” Uncle Joe had whispered in his grating voice. “Keep it till a special

occasion comes. You'll know when the time is right. An' fer God's sake"—a pause, while Uncle Joe had a long and racking coughing fit and Matt held him up—"don't y'dare spend it on cigarettes, right? Don't you get the habit, boy, cause it's only going to bring you grief."

Then Matt had gently lowered Uncle Joe. The glass-shattering coughing was beginning and Matt wanted a nurse to check on Uncle Joe's oxygen saturation level. It was 85 when it should have been 100—maybe Uncle Joe needed more oxygen.

That had been exactly two years ago and two days ago. Exactly two years ago today, Uncle Joe had died.

Matt found that he was grinding one fist into his thigh, painfully. It was hard, hard to remember how Uncle Joe had gone.

But now, looking at the hundred-dollar bill, all Matt could think about was the old man's mischievous smile and his rasping words, "*You'll know when the time is right.*" Yes, Uncle Joe had known, hadn't he? Matt would have laughed himself sick if Uncle Joe had told him *what* he'd be spending the precious money on. At just-fourteen young Matt's thoughts about girls and cooties had not entirely separated. Okay, so he had been a late bloomer, a slow learner. But now he'd caught up. And he was going to wear his new pants and an ironed shirt, a real tie that his mother had given him last Christmas, and his brand new sports jacket to the most wonderful event he could imagine.

Blowing over one hundred dollars in one night with Elena Gilbert.

Elena . . . just thinking her name made him feel as if were bathed in sunlight. She *was* sunlight. With that marvelous golden hair that floated halfway down her back, with

her skin, the color of apple blossoms, even after tanning season, with her eyes like luminous, gold-flecked blue pools, and her lips . . .

Those lips. Together with the eyes, they could turn a guy upside down and inside out in no time. At school those lips were always in a model's slight pout, as if to say "Well, really! I expected more than *this!*"

But Elena wouldn't be pouting tonight. Matt didn't know where he'd gotten the courage—he'd as soon have dumped an ice bucket over football Coach Simpson's head after they'd *lost* a game—but he had managed to work his way up to asking her out. And now, with Uncle Joe's hundred-dollar bill, he was going to take Elena Gilbert on a real date, to a real French restaurant: a date that she'd never forget.

Matt glanced sharply at the clock. Time to go! He certainly couldn't be late.

"Hey, Mom! It's quarter to seven! I'm out of here!"

"Wait, wait, Matt!" Mrs. Honeycutt, small and round and smelling of cookies, came at almost a run down the hall. "Going without at least letting me see you?" she scolded, her eyes beaming. "Who ironed that shirt, may I ask? Who heard about the sale on jackets in the first place?"

Matt gave a mock-groan and then stood, genuinely blushing, as she looked him over.

Finally, Mrs. Honeycutt sighed. "I have a very handsome son. You look like your father."

Matt could feel himself going an even deeper red.

"Now, you're going to wear your overcoat—"

"Yeah, of course, Mom."

“You sure you’ve got enough money?”

“Yes!” Matt said. *Yes!* he thought jubilantly.

“I mean, this Gilbert girl, you hear all sorts of things about her. She goes out with college boys. She expects the moon on dates. She doesn’t have any parents to watch over her. She—”

“Mom, I don’t care who she’s been out with; I’ve got plenty of money; and she lives with her aunt—as if it were her fault that her parents got killed! And if I stand here another minute, I’ll end up getting a speeding ticket!”

“Well, if you’ll just let me find my purse, I’ll give you ten dollars, so you’re covered, just in case—”

“No time, Mom! G’night!”

And he was in the garage, smelling the familiar smells of grease and oil and rust and must.

His car—well, he was sort of hoping Elena wouldn’t look at his car. He’d hustle her into it and out of it. It was just a junkyard collection of miscellaneous parts that Matt had somehow managed to attach to the skeleton of his dad’s wreck and make use of as a vehicle. In his own mind, he referred to it as “The Garbage Heap.” But there was nothing he could do about it, so he was just hoped Elena wouldn’t see too much of it in the darkness. He had the way to *Chez Amaury* memorized, so he wouldn’t have to turn on the map light.

Oh my God!

This was her street. He was here already! With a sort of gasping gulp he couldn't help, Matt loosened his collar a little as he turned. He felt as if he were drowning.

Okay. Gulp. Outside her house. Off with the ignition. Pull out the keys.

Okay. Gulp. Keys in his pocket. Outside the front door.

Okay—gasp—finger on the doorbell. Matt spent about a minute getting his nerve up and then he forced himself to press the little round button.

Distant chimes . . .

And then he was looking at a thin, rather plain woman, who gave him a bright smile and said, “You must be Elena’s new date. Come in, come in. She’s still upstairs, you know these young girls. . .”

The woman seemed as hospitable and kind as his own mom, and she did everything she could to make him comfortable. But eventually there was a pause in the conversation that couldn't be ignored.

“Y-you’re Elena’s Aunt Judith, aren’t you?” Matt managed.

“Yes! Oh, don’t tell me I forgot to introduce myself again! Yes, you can just go ahead and call me Aunt Judith like everyone else. Here, I’ll get you some chips or something while you’re waiting. These young girls, you know. EH-LAY-NAAA!” She hurried out as Matt cringed and resolutely refrained from covering his ears.

“Here you go; some Fritos,” Aunt Judith was bustling in with a bowl. But Matt’s eyes weren’t on her. They were on the vision in blue descending the stairs.

Matt had heard of something so stunning it knocked your eyes out, but he'd never imagined that he'd actually see something like that metaphor in the flesh. And yet here it was, in front of him, walking down the staircase.

Elena was an angel.

That was what this dress somehow hinted at. It was . . . well, Matt didn't know the right names for such things, but it was strapless and sort of followed her curves at the top. The color was a pale silvery-blue that made him think of moonlight on snow. The top was embroidered with some kind of clear beadwork, and there was a silvery flower at one shoulder. The bottom of the dress was layers and layers of some see-through material—chiffon?—and the layers foamed and bubbled down to Elena's knees. Her long gorgeous legs looked even longer and more gorgeous than usual, and she was wearing adorable silver high heeled shoes with flowers on them that matched her dress.

Elena smiled at him as she came down the stairs and for just a moment Matt thought about all the other guys she had smiled at that way. Coming down those stairs all dressed up was a regular occasion for her, smiling down at a guy was a everyday thing. But then Matt put the thought out of his mind. He and Elena were going to have a wonderful evening together. Tonight that smile was just for *him*.

"Listen, I want you to make sure you keep warm—" Aunt Judith was beginning, when Elena, never taking her eyes off his—said, "Hello, Matt."

Her voice was sweet, with just a trace of a southern accent that lingered in your ears. It made everything she said sound like a secret she was only telling *you*.

Something stuck in Matt's throat. He couldn't get a word out, not while he was so close to her, so close that he could smell her perfume. She smelled like roses in

summer, and lavender from an old dowry chest. And also like. . . another scent that must just be her natural fragrance, *eau de Elena*. Matt was glad he'd scraped the dirt and grease out of his fingernails with a toothbrush and scrubbed the rest of himself lobster red in an effort to get rid of the smells of old car and musty attic.

But he still hadn't spoken. And then somehow, old Uncle Joe, who seemed to live in Matt's back pocket, gave him a wallop and the words, "You look great, Elena," came out in a rush.

She did look great. Her skin was like magnolia petals, but always with that faint tone of rose over her cheekbones. She wasn't wearing any makeup that Matt could see—but how could you know these days with girls? Her eyelashes were long and thick and dark and they looked almost too heavy for her eyelids—as if, Matt admitted to himself, she was slightly bored with what she saw. But the eyes that they framed were alive with a living eager flame. They really *were* blue with little splashes of pure gold here and there in them. Her lips, though—yeah, she was wearing lipstick. He didn't know what name it went by but it should have been called Invitation to Criminal Attack.

Suddenly Matt froze. There was a sound of giggling nearby—multiple sounds of giggling—and they weren't coming from Elena. He turned slightly and saw, yes, the Top Four, Robert E. Lee High's most sought-after girls. Elena's best friends. They looked like a rainbow.

Dark-haired Meredith Sulez, wearing something comfy-looking in lavender, glanced over at him and smiled. Caroline Forbes, more formally dressed in turquoise—maybe she was going on a date too?—smirked and tossed her auburn head. And dainty,

diminutive Bonnie McCullough, the cute redhead in pale green, hid her mouth with her fingers, still giggling.

Their job, obviously, was to put him through the gauntlet.

“Hey, girls,”—that was Caroline, “he looks like a jumpy one to me.”

Meredith: “Then he can’t take her out. Nobody jumps Elena—”

Bonnie: “He can’t take her anyway. He hasn’t asked our permission!”

Caroline: “I think *I’ll* go with him instead. He and I go way back and he’s cute!”

Meredith: “Cute? He’s delicious! And a quarterback, too. Although he hasn’t filled out yet.”

Caroline: “He should eat more meat.”

Bonnie: “He has blond hair *and* blue eyes. Just like a fairy tale.”

Caroline: “I say we kidnap him and keep him for ourselves.”

Meredith: “It all depends on how well he pleads for it.”

Pleads? Matt thought. What are they going to make me do, get on my knees?

Elena, who had calmly been putting on a silvery-blue bolero jacket and checking her face in a small compact mirror, now snapped the mirror shut.

“They’re a nuisance,” she said to Matt, nodding at the three girls. “But it’s easiest if you just ask their permission to take me out. That’s what they want, but if we don’t hurry we’ll be late. Try to make it flowery, too; they like that.”

Flowery? Make a flowery speech in front of three of the harshest critics on guys that humankind had ever produced? While Elena was listening in?

Matt cleared his throat, choked, and felt a sharp slap from behind. Uncle Joe was helping him again. He opened his mouth with no idea of what was going to say. What came out was:

“O fairest blossoms of the night . . . help me in my desperate plight!
Please let me steal this flower rare—to watch her with devoted care,
I need to beg your kind approval
Before I risk her quick removal.”

There was a profound silence. At last Caroline shook back her bronze hair and said, “I suppose you had it all made up before. That halfback Terry Watson told you. Or that other guy on the football team—what’s his name—“

“No, they didn’t,” Matt said, getting his courage from two places: his back pocket, and his long association with Caroline Forbes. “Nobody told me and I don’t plan to tell anybody else. But if we don’t get out of here, *now*, we’re going to be late. So can I take her or not?”

To his surprise all the girls began laughing and clapping. “We say: yes!” Meredith cried, and then they were all yelling it, and Bonnie threw him a kiss.

“Just one thing,” Aunt Judith said. “Please tell me where you’re going tonight, in case—well, *you* know.”

“Of course,” Matt said, without a glance up at the girls. “It’s *Chez Amaury*.”

There was a rustle above him, murmurings in all different cadences, the gist of which was, “Wow!”

Elena said softly, “That’s one of my favorites.”

One of her favorites. Matt felt himself shrink—then, with a kick in the butt from Uncle Joe, straightened up and felt better. At least he’d picked a good restaurant.

And then, before Matt knew what was happening, he was being hustled out the door. And then he was alone on the porch . . . with Elena.

“I’m sorry about that circus,” she said in her smooth, gentle voice, looking up at him like a little girl. “But they insist on doing it to all new boys. It’s really juvenile, but we started it back in junior high. Yours was the best poem I’ve ever heard.”

Who could be mad at her? Matt escorted her to the car and opened the passenger door for her as quickly as he could and got her settled in. Then he ran around to his side of The Garbage Heap and got in himself.

“So,” Elena said after he’d made a turn away from town, “are we going somewhere before the restaurant?” She spoke without even seeming to see—or smell—anything unusual about the vehicle.

“Yeah, our first stop—that’s a secret. I think we may just make it by seven-thirty. I hope you like it.”

For the first time, Elena laughed out loud, glancing at him sideways. And the laughter was warm and genuine and like a soothing balm to all Matt’s senses. The glance was quick, intelligent and merry. “You’re just full of surprises,” Elena said, and to *his* surprise, she slipped a slender, cool hand in his.

Matt couldn’t explain the sensation then. It was simply like lightning flowing up from her cool fingers into his palm and up his arm and then on upward until it fried his brain with a million volts.

It was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

It was also lucky that his car knew the way to the flower shop all by itself, because his brain definitely wasn’t there to direct it. Elena talked without chattering, and

without leaving any awkward pauses when he had to gulp in air. She talked about decorating for the Fall Fling, told an amusing story about how, while trying to disentangle the colored spotlights for the Fling, she'd ended up caught in the rafters, and finished up with a genuinely funny joke that wasn't dirty or a putdown of any culture, race or sex.

Matt Honeycutt fell in love.

He hadn't realized he hadn't been in love before: only infatuated. Of course anybody could become infatuated with Elena, the way that bees were drawn to flowers. She sent out pheromones; she conformed with the perfect image of the perfect girl that was somehow woven into every Caucasian boy's genes, or else that was propagandized into them by the time they were three years old. Elena's beauty was perfect, absolutely without flaw. But if that was as far as you went, you weren't talking about *love*.

Love was when you got to know the girl behind the mask—as he was sure he was getting to do now. Love was when you saw the world through the eyes of an innocent, merry, amusing young girl, all of which he couldn't help doing when she spoke. Sure, she was a little bit stuck on herself, but how could she not be, the way everyone treated her? He didn't think it was such a bad thing. He *wanted* to pamper her.

“Okay,” he said, “We're coming up to the first stop. Shut your eyes.”

Elena laughed. The very sound of her voice was like birdsong. Matt got out of the car.

And then his heart started pounding—and not in a good way. The door to The Flowery was closed and its windows were dark. He'd planned everything out beforehand, had even paid beforehand for a single, white rose. He was going to give it to Elena, with

one single piece of feathery fern behind it and a spray of baby's breath in front of it—and he'd even asked for it to be tied with a blue bow!

And now—the door wouldn't open under his wrenching hand. He'd wasted too much time. He'd blown it. The florists had gone, and they hadn't even left his rose in a box by the door.

Matt didn't know how he got the courage to get into the car again.

But Elena was smiling at him, her eyes open.

"Elena, I'm sorry—I—just—"

"It's not your fault—it's mine for making you late. Oh, Matt, I'm so sorry! But this isn't a dance. You didn't need to get me flowers."

Matt opened his mouth to tell the story of the white rose, then shut it again. He wanted so much to tell her, but wouldn't that make him seem even more pathetic? In the end he gritted his teeth and said in a voice he tried to make light,

"Oh, it was just something I was going to get for you. Never mind. Maybe I'll have another chance tonight."

"Are we at least on time now?"

Matt looked at the clock. "Yeah, just barely. Make sure you're strapped in."

And then Matt had a once-in-a-lifetime experience: seeing Elena do her comfort act. At first, she said nothing, did nothing, just sat a little forward, smiling to show she liked the song that was playing. And then, when he managed to gulp the ball of disappointment down his throat and swallow it, he realized that she was looking at *him* and smiling. And he couldn't help smiling back.

“Hey, we’re going to be on time,” he said, and he realized that he was saying it happily. The night had just begun. There might be those strolling flower sellers at *Chez Amaury*. He’d get her a whole sweetheart bouquet. How could he be unhappy when the incomparable Elena Gilbert was with him?

They wheeled into the parking lot at 7:59 p.m., seatbelts already unfastened as they cruised up to the valet stand. Matt hurriedly handed his key to a valet driver, and tried to turn away before he could see the man’s reaction to Matt’s car.

He didn’t turn fast enough. But he saw no revulsion, no sneer of disgust on the valet’s face. Instead he saw fascination. Following the valet driver’s gaze, he saw a slim, swaying figure in blue waiting for him.

That was when Matt knew that his luck had changed. Elena had chosen to wear just the bolero jacket that matched her stunning little dress. She must be freezing but she looked gorgeous. He slipped around her and held the door open for her and they both entered the dim, plush interior of *Chez Amaury*.

The employee who led them to their booth was snooty. He smiled graciously and a little wonderingly upon Elena, but when his gaze swung around to Matt he merely sniffed and looked sarcastic.

It didn’t matter. They were in a bubble of their own little world together, Matt and Elena, and everything was right. Matt had never been any good at talking to girls. He got by by being a champion listener. But somehow Elena drew words right out of him without seeming to try to. He liked to talk to her. She was fun. Her words . . . sparkled.

And she had a will of steel behind those lapis eyes and that magnolia blossom skin. When the waiter rather deliberately gave them their menus, murmuring something

about alcohol and I.D.s, Elena let loose a volley of French which had the effect of sending the man creeping—almost slinking—away.

“I’m studying French for this next summer,” Elena told him, cheerfully watching the waiter depart. “I can already insult people in it pretty well. I asked him why they’d kicked him out of France where everyone our age drinks wine.”

“What’s happening this summer?” Matt asked.

“I’m going to France. It’s not an exchange thing; it’s just something I want to do. To stave off boredom, I guess.” She gave him a smile that seemed to turn the whole world into dazzle. “I hate to be bored.”

Don’t be boring. Don’t be boring. The command thudded through Matt’s brain as Elena began to tell a story, while his higher thought processes were in a whirl of confusion.

She’s so beautiful. . . delicate, like fine china. . . her hair like old gold in the darkened restaurant . . . and by candlelight her eyes are almost violet—with gold splattered across them. Jeez, I can even smell her perfume in this tiny booth—I guess they gave us the worst that they had . . . but it’s still pretty impressive to *me*.

Elena finished the story and began laughing. He laughed with her, unable to help it. Her laugh wasn’t shrill; it wasn’t sharp; it was as melodious as a brook winding its way in and out of a forest glade. Wow, check it out, that was almost poetry, Matt thought. Should he tell her he’d written a real poem about her at home? Nah, he’d bet dozens of other guys had said that to her.

“But I’ve been doing all the talking,” Elena said, with a little side glance as if to say, *And you’ve been doing all the staring*. “Tell me about you.”

“M-me? Well—I’m just an average guy.”

“Average guy! Quarterback and MVP for the football team. Tell me how it feels when you win a game out there, with everyone screaming and cheering.”

“Um. . .” In all his years of playing football, nobody had ever asked him this. “Well—” There was something wrong with him; he was going to be honest. “Uh, well . . . Actually, really it feels a lot like this!”

“Like eating French bread in a restaurant?”

“Oh. . .” Matt hadn’t even realized that there was any bread. He’d completely missed seeing it put down. Now he broke off a hunk and spread it lavishly with butter, suddenly remembering that he hadn’t eaten any lunch.

Elena watched him in amusement over a glass of sparkling water.

“I would have thought you football guys weren’t allowed to eat butter,” she said, twinkling her eyes at him. Yeah, that was it. She could make them twinkle when she wanted! What a skill!

“It’s one of the four food groups,” he informed her earnestly, hoping she wouldn’t think he was crazy.. “Sugar, salt, fat and chocolate.”

“—and chocolate!” her voice chimed in with his as he finished. They both laughed again together.

This was so easy. It was like being with your favorite relative, only better. You could say anything, no matter how dumb, and it wouldn’t matter. She’d turn it into something witty. He’d never felt like this with any girl.

The waiter came back, but Elena waved him off with a languid hand. She wasn’t intimidated by the guy in the slightest. Matt added “courage” to the list of her virtues.

Suddenly he got goosebumps. This year he'd had to take a drama class to fill out his schedule, and they were performing "Two Gentlemen of Verona." Matt just couldn't get his mind into the play. Maybe it was because the actress for Sylvia was Caroline Forbes, who in fourth grade had done things like giving herself Indian burns and then running to tell the teacher Matt had done it. But right now, looking at Elena, words from the play—word perfect—came into his mind:

*Who is Sylvia? what is she,
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she;
The heaven such grace did lend her. . .*

Who is Elena? he thought. What is she? That all the guys commend her? Holy, fair, and wise is she, the heavens such grace did lend her . . .

Oh crap, now I'm getting *really* sentimental, Matt thought. That was awful. And from what he'd heard, Elena wasn't too holy, either, but she sure looked like an angel.

"Matt, can you tell me something?" Elena asked, her finger tracing a tiny flaw in the tablecloth.

Matt's heart jumped. He'd missed the last few minutes of conversation. "Sure, what?" he said.

"What is it about boys and cars? Why are they so into them?"

For a moment Matt flushed. Just thinking of his ancient, battered, skeleton of a car made him wonder if she was making fun of him.

But she wasn't. Her face was perfectly serious. She seemed to have forgotten what kind of car he had and was asking a general question about all guys.

"Well"—he had an impulse to rub the back of his neck but didn't. "Cars are. . . the ideal car. . . um . . ."

“I wondered if it might somehow go back to the days of horses,” Elena said, tilting her head.

Suddenly neurons lit up in Matt’s brain. “Hey—that’s—well, that could be it—for me, at least. I spent a couple of years on a farm when I was a kid—you know, just a rinky-dink, little farm, but it had horses. And behind the stable where *its* horses were kept, was a stable of thoroughbred horses, racing horse, right?”

She nodded and he sighed.

“I just loved to watch those thoroughbreds moving. They were the most beautiful things you could imagine—for animals, I mean,” he added hastily.

“How were they beautiful?”

“Well—just—I don’t know. They were just incredible. They had these delicate long legs, and these heads that were always up in the air, with these manes always tossing and flowing. They moved in a way I just can’t describe—sort of always lazily, but you could just *tell* they had a lot of pent-up energy inside them, too. As if they *wanted* to be running as fast as they could, forever.” Matt reached for his Coke, suddenly realizing that he’d been talking for a long time. “Sorry, got a little carried away there. What I meant is that horses are speed, and so are cars. And I guess that’s one reason I like to think about them.”

“Don’t apologize. I thought that was really fascinating,” Elena said, and he realized that she was telling the truth, that she *was* interested. She’d been holding a bite of bread in her hand, forgotten.

“Thanks for listening,” Matt said. “They . . . sure were pretty.” His voice got stuck somewhere in his throat as he gazed at the beautiful girl just in front of him.

“So speed is a part of it,” Elena said, smiling at him, her cheeks glowing pink in the candlelight.

“Speed, yeah. Like when I get to drive a better car than The Garbage Heap out there—like a convertible, and I put down the roof, and I drive really fast on a straightaway or around little sudden hilltop curves. Sometimes, somehow, you feel as if you’re *part* of the car and its part of you. It’s like flying.”

Matt stopped, suddenly, overcome with confusion. Somehow in his excitement he had picked up Elena’s hand and was squeezing it. *bread* and all. He felt himself flushing and he was just going to put it back where he’d got it, when Elena squeezed his fingers warmly and then took it back herself. Thank God the bread hadn’t been buttered.

“So there anything more about ‘really good cars’?” she asked, almost teasing, but never breaking eye-contact with him.

“Well, there’s—there’s something”—*he* had to break eye contact with *her* to say this—“there’s something sort of physical about driving a car that lets you feel every bump in the road. When you’re part of it—and it’s just you out there feeling the air and the ground—it’s sort of—physical, you know? Sort of—*sexy*.”

He was almost afraid to look at her, then. But rippling laughter made him flush and then two warm hands took hold of his. “Why, Matthew Honeycutt, you’re blushing! But”—in a suddenly serious voice—“I think I know what you mean. You mean something I’ve felt with cars—but I’ve never been able to describe.”

She went on talking, but Matt wasn’t even in the room anymore. He was circling the solar system somewhere around the planet Neptune and comets and asteroids were sailing around with him, bonking him on the head every so often.

When he came back she was laughing about a parasailing experience she'd had once when the sailors had accidentally landed her on the sand and not in the water. "But before that," she said. "It was perfect. Just the rushing wind, with the inlet big and blue underneath me, and the feeling of traveling—fast—through the air. Almost like being a bird. I wish I had wings."

"Me too!" Matt blurted. If his heart could have been pounding any harder, it would have started pounding. But it was at its maximum limit already. "I'd love to go parasailing. That must have been incredible." He looked at his plate. "Tell the truth, I think the most incredible thing that's happened to *me* is . . . tonight."

Immediately, Elena's mocking laughter cut him down to size—but that wasn't happening. Elena wasn't laughing. She was looking down at her round white plate and blushing. Then she raised her head and Matt could have sworn that there was a sheen of unshed tears in her eyes.

But she wagged her finger at him in a scholarly way. "Don't be silly, Matt. What about that game against the Bullfinches, when you threw a 50-yard touchdown pass? Now was that incredible or was that incredible?"

Matt goggled at her. "You *like* football?"

"Well, you've got me there. I don't like all the injuries, and I don't like most jocks. But my dad—he was a tight end with Clemson, and he helped them win the Orange Bowl. So I just *had* to learn about it. Dad has a lot of records, you know, most passes caught in a game, most passes caught in a season, most touchdowns caught in a season, most touchdowns caught in a career—"

Matt found himself staring. "Why didn't he go pro? Or did he?"

“No, he started a business instead. But he left me his football instincts.”

Matt made himself laugh. He didn’t know how he was feeling. His heart was soaring in twelve different directions at once. But somehow he made himself look mock-stern and waved a finger back at her. “Well, I bet you don’t know about *my* real moment of glory,” he said. “We were playing the Ridgemont Cougars and the score was tied and I was desperate. The clock was running down and suddenly I had this crazy, grandiose idea, and I—”

“Ran to the right to fake giving the ball to Greg Fleisch, the halfback,” Elena interrupted smoothly. “But you kept the ball yourself and ran it—and ran it—and ran it for an amazing touchdown just before four Cougars tackled you at once.”

“Yeah; they broke my collarbone, too,” Matt said, grinning. “But I didn’t even feel it. I was soaring somewhere over the clouds.”

“People were screaming and kissing and throwing things,” Elena said. “Even the Cougars’ fans went crazy. One of them grabbed me and tried to French kiss me.”

And I bet *his* mind wasn’t on the game, Matt thought, and surprised himself by saying, “Tell me his name and I’ll break his jaw for him.”

“Oh, I already kicked him in the shin,” Elena said calmly. “Backward, so I could scrape all the way down the shinbone with my heel.” She added the last with a sweet little smile that a Spanish Inquisitor—Torquemada himself, maybe—would have envied.

“Well, I can see I’d better keep you from getting mad at me,” Matt said, and Elena laughed again, showing the even white pearls of her teeth.

“I don’t think,” she said, “that *anybody* could stay mad at *you* for long.”

Matt didn't know what to say. All those *idiots*, he was thinking. All those *losers* who only want to go on dates with her because of her looks, are just missing the whole damn ballgame. Sure, she's a knock-out, but more important, she's like . . . the world's perfect person: smart, and witty, and fun, and . . . well, just perfect. The way she makes everything easy, and how she makes you feel so good about yourself, and . . .

Matt had a crazy impulse to go down on one knee and ask her to marry him right then and there.

Then he burst into laughter at the absurdness of it all. He was just going to say something when someone behind him coughed with malice aforethought.

"Were Monsieur et Mademoiselle zinking of ordering at zis point?" the waiter ground out, obviously irritated.

"I guess it's about time to look at our menus," Elena said, putting her hand over her mouth to not-quite hide a giggle.

"We'll be ready in a few minutes," Matt said, in his most princely dismissive tones.

The waiter almost stomped off.

Matt looked at Elena. She looked at him over her curled-up hand and then they were both laughing hysterically, fighting for air.

"Poor guy," Matt said.

"Oh, well," Elena raised her eyebrows indifferently. "He *is* just a waiter, after all. Waiting is what he's paid to do."

This was the first time Matt had seen the 'Ice princess' side of Elena Gilbert, and he didn't know what he thought about it. But, he figured, if Elena were really perfect,

she wouldn't be human. And if anybody at Robert E. Lee had a right to have an attitude like that, Elena Gilbert was that person.

"Shall we?" he said and handed her a menu.

"By all means," Elena said in a mock-19th century gracious manner, and they opened the menus.

Despite all his preparation, the prices still took Matt's breath away. A New York steak was \$39. But if Elena ordered a steak, he could have the chicken, which was only \$23. That would be \$62. The entrees came with vegetables, but there was also the appetizer to consider. He could suggest they share the spinach salad, which was only \$10. That made \$72. Then even if she wanted a desert, he'd have plenty to indulge her—but wait, there were the drinks. He'd had two; she'd had one. That sparkling water was \$7 a bottle—each Coke was \$2. And the tax. And the tip. And the valet's tip.

Well, he'd just have to drink regular water from now on, and hope that maybe Elena didn't want both an appetizer and a dessert.

"What do you want to start with?" Elena whispered. "I usually like half a Caesar's salad. They make it at your table here. It's really good."

Matt nodded vigorously so he wouldn't have to look her in the eye. At least it was only one Caesar's, at fifteen dollars. Hey, wait! He knew. There was some kind of smoked salmon on the appetizers list. He could have it for his entrée—Matt knew you could do that—and it would only be six dollars. He'd just make himself a sandwich when he got home. Everything was going to be all right.

The waiter was back, looking snootier than ever.

Matt spoke up, "I—I mean we—we—we'd each like half—"

“We’d like to split a Caesar’s,” Elena said calmly, barely glancing at the waiter. She smiled into Matt’s eyes. “Right?”

“That’s right,” Matt said heartily.

When the waiter had stalked off, Elena’s smile changed, became a mischievous grin. “He’s not going to forget us in a hurry,” she said. The light from a chandelier shone over her left shoulder, framing her in rainbow light.

Matt wished he had some way to capture the image forever. There was something about Elena—as if she were sparkling at the edges—that he’d never seen in a girl before. It was as if light constantly danced around her, as if sometime she might just disappear into the light. Hell, he thought, I can just “get a stomach-ache” and not be able to order *any* entrée, he thought. Then I’ll recover in time for dessert or something. But she can have the lobster for all I care!

Now he was getting embarrassed, though. No one was saying anything.

“Do you have a pet?” Elena asked suddenly.

“Um.” Matt’s first impulse was to check if there were dog hairs on his jacket or something. Then he looked up to find her smiling into his eyes again.

“Well, I had an old Labrador Retriever,” he said, slowly, “but she got cancer and—well that was about six months ago.”

“Oh, Matt! What was her name?”

“Britches,” he admitted, feeling himself flush. “I named her when I was four. I have absolutely no idea what I was trying to say.”

“I think Britches is a perfectly respectable name.” Elena said. She touched his hand lightly, with one finger. A feeling like slow, sweet molasses, crept out from her touch and into his veins, sustaining him. He wished she wouldn’t take her finger away.

She didn’t. She said, “We keep losing cats. Margaret brings them home half-starved, Aunt Judith slaves over them and then they run around the neighborhood—” She made a slight, meaningful gesture.

Matt winced. He had a low tolerance for furry animals getting squashed, but he had to be macho about this. “Cat au vin?” he suggested, miming pouring a glass of wine.

Elena’s eyes wept but her mouth gurgled. “As in—a cat’s that been run over by a . . . yeah, that’s about the size of it.”

Matt couldn’t help but laugh, and then he told the story about how one year Britches had put her paws on the counter and picked up a half-eaten Thanksgiving turkey in her mouth and wandered into the family room holding it up like a trophy. Elena laughed and laughed at that. She laughed as the waiter made up a Caesar’s salad beside their table too, and told a story about Snowball, who loved to sleep in boxes or in open drawers, and who had been accidentally shut inside one when she was a kitten.

“The noises she made!” Elena exclaimed. Matt laughed with her. He would have thought you had to sit at attention and watch the salad being tossed, but no—Elena clearly had seen enough of such sideshows. She accepted her plate with a cheerful “This looks great!” and a waving away of the Fresh Ground Pepper Shaker, as if she’d done this all her life.

Maybe she had. Maybe, going out with so many other boys . . . but what difference did that make? Tonight she was *his*.

A girl was walking around the room selling little sweetheart bouquets and single roses. Elena talked to Matt without once giving the girl a glance. There was no reason to do it—it was a stupid impulse—but something inside Matt burst as he saw the girl, who was dressed like a gypsy, turn away.

“Wait,” he said. “I’d like to get *that*.” He gently touched one rose that was in almost full bloom. It was mostly white but the inner petals were touched with pink and the outer petals with a color that was almost golden. It reminded him of Elena: her skin, her cheeks, her hair.

“Very nice; perfect choice,” the gypsy girl said. “A genuine Florentine rose such as Botticelli painted. And only fourteen dollars.” She must have seen Matt’s look of shock—the single rose he’d bought at the florist’s had been only five dollars. The gypsy added quickly, “And of course it comes with a love fortune—for each of you.”

Elena was opening her mouth, and Matt could tell that she was going to send the flower seller away. But he instantly said, “That’s great!” and she shut her mouth, and looked a little sober for a moment before smiling.

“Thank you so much,” she said taking the rose, while Matt wondered suddenly if he should have bought her a whole bouquet—he could see the sign on the basket now, and they were only a dollar more because the rose in them was a miniature—or maybe an all white rose to go with her outfit. God, he was dumb. Why not just buy her a red rose and make the colors clash completely?

“One fresh, long-stemmed Florentine rose,” the gypsy girl said “and a double love fortune. Show me your palms, both of you.

Flushing, Matt did as she asked. Then he was caught with a case of the snickers. He knew he couldn't laugh, either roaring or giggling—but he almost couldn't hold it in. Oh, God, he thought, don't let me fart! Not now, while the gypsy lady was poring over their out-thrust palms, going, "Hmm," and "I zee," and "But yez, of course," in a fake French accent.

Finally, he sneaked a peek at Elena and from her hand over her mouth and her crinkled up eyes he saw that she was having the same problem, and that immediately made it twice as bad.

Finally, the gypsy lady stopped muttering and spoke to Elena. "You will have nearly a year of sunshine. Then I see a darkening—there will be danger. And in the end, you will prevail over the darkness and shine anew. Beware of dark young men and of old bridges."

Elena bowed gravely in her seat. "Thank you."

"And you," the woman said to Matt, still looking at his palm, "you have found your lady love, half-child and half-woman. Now that you have fallen under her spell, nothing will tear you apart from her. But I see a time of darkness of the heart for you, too, before you move on. You will always be ready to put your love's interest ahead of your own."

"Um, thanks," Matt said, wondering if she expected him to tip her, but she said, "For potions, love or hex, visit me in Heron, at my shop 'Love and Roses.'"

She handed Matt a card and went ambling on with her bouquets.

And then Elena and Matt could laugh as hysterically as they wanted, which was quite a bit. Matt only calmed down when he remembered he probably should have gotten the white rose, to go with Elena's outfit. He felt dumb. But Elena was still laughing,

"Meredith would have taken her to pieces," Elena gasped finally. "'A time of darkness before you move on . . . ' But the rose. . . it's the prettiest I've ever seen."

"Really?" Matt felt a rush of passionate relief that came out as rather silly laughter. "Um, better than a white one?"

"Of course." Elena stroked her cheek with the bloom. "I've never seen another one like it."

"I'm so glad. It, well, it reminds me of you."

"Why, Matt Honeycutt! You flatterer!" Elena tapped him gently with the rose, and then began caressing her lips with it.

Matt could feel another flush beginning, but this one was for two reasons. Normally, there would have been a third, an embarrassment about how to word what he needed to say, but his need to figure things out was so urgent that he simply said, "Would you excuse me a minute, please?" and scarcely waiting for her gracious nod, he hurried off in the direction of the bar to find a restroom.

The men's room was right down a little corridor. Matt went in and took a stall, pulled his wallet out and began to calculate frantically.

Hey, relax, he told himself before he started. You've got plenty. Just don't do any more impulsive things like the rose, and don't plan on giving big tips.

Now, if she had, say the chicken and wild mushroom piccata—he felt he had the menu memorized by now—that would be \$25. And then he could have the salmon cakes

appetizer, which was only \$12. And then they could even have desert and coffee, too, if he cut the tips to the bare minimum.

“Get back out there and entertain yer girl,” he swore he could hear Uncle Joe saying, while at the same time the feeling of a boot to the backside seemed to come from his back pocket. And it was good advice. The only problem was that it made him need to take a look at the hundred-dollar bill, to touch it for good luck, and to gaze at it for comfort.

Shaking his head at himself, he twisted the wallet sideways so as to expose the secret compartment and felt in it.

And felt in it.

And felt frantically in it and around it, managing to almost turn the wallet inside out.

At last he had to let the words surface in his brain.

The hundred-dollar bill wasn't there.

It was gone.

It was gone.

Where? When? He'd last seen it when he was playing with his wallet at home, day-dreaming about the date. He knew he'd seen it then. What could have happened to it?

Desperately, he searched the rest of his wallet. Nothing. His other money was there; he hadn't been robbed, but . . . no hundred-dollar bill.

Matt spent the next ten minutes in the most frantic and most intimate skin search of his life . . . on himself. He looked everywhere. Could he have slipped it into a sock?

Could it have somehow got taken in with his laundry? No. Other compartments, anywhere? No.

Finally he had to admit that nothing else but the bare fact mattered. The hundred was gone.

And the terrible thing was that it hadn't had to happen this way. There was a rumor that Elena Gilbert never went out if she didn't pay half. She'd actually confirmed that to him when he'd gotten up the courage to stammer out the words, "Will you go out with me next Saturday?" He remembered exactly how her blue eyes had lit up and how she'd said, "Yes, but I always go Dutch." And he, idiot of idiots, had puffed out his chest and said, "Not this time, you won't."

Hoist on his own petard. Whatever that meant.

Now, what to do about it? God, what *could* he do? Most of his buddies were practically broke in autumn—besides it was a half hour drive for them. His mom—he glanced at his watch and winced. It was after 9:00—no wonder that waiter was so mad—and his mom would be asleep by now. Her shift at the bakery started early.

Damn! He could almost cry. This was—how was he going to walk up to Elena and tell her that he didn't have the money to buy her dinner *when they were already there eating it*? Oh, God, she wouldn't speak to him for the rest of his life. And he'd be arrested, locked up as a con man . . . or whatever you called it . . .

He couldn't do it.

But he had to.

It just had to be done.

And telling himself that, the way a soldier on the night of his very first battle might, he made himself march back to the table. There he made himself sit down facing Elena.

She was bubbling with good cheer. “Monsieur Garçon came by but I sent him away. He’s going to be back in—” She suddenly stopped, her whole manner changing. “Matt, what happened?”

Matt opened his mouth but nothing came out, not even the dry brown moth he imagined being inside. What could he do? Did they even let you wash dishes to make up for it if you couldn’t pay for a meal? Or was that just an urban legend? He couldn’t imagine Elena, in her sparkling moonlight-blue dress, washing dishes.

What if he just let the meal progress to its conclusion, and then tried to have a word with the manager in private? Things were tight around the Honeycutt household right now, but when weren’t they? Surely, his mom would lend him the money in the morning? But one thought of how the waiter’s face would look and that plan bit the dust. Besides, Elena would be humiliated. Elena! His perfect precious angel would be—

“Matt, you’re sick. You’re *freezing*. We need to call a doctor.”

Matt blinked, the world slowly coming into focus. He could just imagine how he must look: blue-white in the face, with icy hands and a constant tremor going through him. Hell, maybe that would work. Maybe if he acted really sick—

“I lost the money,” he heard himself telling Elena.

“Matt, you’re delirious.”

“No, it’s the truth.” He found himself pouring out the story of his Uncle Joe to her, of the way he’d worked to make this date perfect, and of the horror it had become.

He watched as Elena's face took on a different look—he couldn't tell if it was a good look or a bad look. It was a look of quiet, lonely, suffering.

Finally, he finished the story.

He stared at the spotless white tablecloth.

And then he heard the most incredible sound. He had to turn his head to make sure he *had* heard it.

Elena was laughing.

Laughing at him? No, laughing *with* him, her head tilted to the side and tears of sympathy in her eyes.

“Oh, Matt, what you've been through. What you've done just to make all this happen! But you can stop worrying now. I should have plenty to tide us over.” She scooted and picked up a little purse that matched her blue outfit. “Here, let me see—oh!” Suddenly she was biting her lip in chagrin. “I forgot; I blew it all on this purse and some new makeup. Oh, I'm *sorry*.”

That “*I'm sorry*” was enough to rip a hole in Matt's side and hull him. But then again, he heard melodious, mischievous laughter. He looked up dully, not really caring what happened to him anymore.

“Matt, it's okay.” Under the table a warm hand found one of his and gave it a quick squeeze. “It's all going to be fine. Now listen to me, because I've got a plan—“

Years later he learned to be wary of that phrase “*I've got a plan*.” But this was the first time he'd heard it. So he listened. And his mouth dropped open. And then kept opening and shutting, like a goldfish's.

“You really think we can do that?”

“I *know* we can, because of this blank space here.” She pointed at the menu. He stared.

Then, slowly, he looked up at her and smiled.

“Okay, now wipe your face off, because you look as if you’ve just run a marathon. You lost your napkin? Here take mine.”

It had to be his imagination, but Matt actually thought he could smell her fragrance on the napkin. He wiped himself down just in time for the waiter to return. Elena immediately entwined her fingers with Matt’s on the tablecloth.

“Have Monsieur et Mademoiselle vinally decided to eat here tonight?” the waiter asked, heavily, looking at Elena, who nodded, “Mademoiselle?”

“‘Madame,’ *si’l vous plait*,” Elena said sweetly. “And I’d like a chocolate soufflé, with two spoons, *merci*.”

“Mademoiselle—” The waiter looked about to explode.

“ ‘Madame’ “ Elena reminded him.

“Madame, you cannot—cannot—” The waiter’s face was brick-red.

“But we can,” Elena answered in her sweetest voice. She pointed to the menu. “There’s nothing that says there’s a minimum charge per customer.”

“That,” the waiter said as if he were trying to keep his haughty attitude, but was blowing up like a balloon ready to hit the ceiling “is because—is because—because *ze clientele we serve* knows better without being told!”

Elena put her free fingers to her lips. “Monsieur, people are starting to stare.”

The waiter controlled himself, obviously gathering all the dignity at his command.

“And monsieur?” he said in a voice like ice, turning to Matt.

“Oh, um. me? I’d like, um, two scoops of vanilla ice cream. And two spoons,” Matt found himself saying, and curbing equal urges to flee and to burst into hysterical guffawing. “Oh—and two cups of coffee.”

“You want—”

“Two scoops of vanilla ice cream.” Matt was afraid he the waiter would burst.

“C’est impossible . . .” murmured the waiter, but he wrote something on his pad. The crisis seemed to be over now. The man had gone from red to pale, and he managed to turn away from them without detonating. “It weel take ‘alf an hour for ze soufflé to cook,” he said, with his back to him. “Meanwhile . . . *Bon appétit!*”

Once he was gone, Matt and Elena collapsed into out-of-control laughter.

“Oh, God, did you see his *face*?” Elena gasped. “The poor man—we’ll have to give him all we have left for a tip . . .”

“Tip, nothing. He was rude to you. As far as I’m concerned he gets no tip, and I’m gonna ask him to ‘step outside’ if it happens again.”

“Oh, Matt. You really are a knight in shining armor. But can I tell you something? My favorite restaurant is Hot Doggles—yes, the hotdog place back in Fell’s Church. And my favorite thing to do on a date—now, I don’t want to sound spooky—but I like to walk around the graveyard or the Old Woods in the moonlight. I—I don’t really care about fancy stuff. If I like a guy”—and here her eyes seemed to be saying something Matt could hardly let himself believe—“I’d rather just go to his place and listen to music, or bring him over to eat dinner with the family. The rest is just—” She made a dismissive motion with her hand. “Just for the idiots I have to put up with sometimes. The jocks

who need jockstraps for their brains.” She tossed her head, so that her beautiful, waving, golden hair flew from side to side.

Matt opened his mouth and again nothing came out. There was no Uncle Joe to kick him in the behind.

But somehow there was. In spite of the missing bill he felt a kick, and words just dropped out of his mouth, “If I’d known you were that kind of girl, I’d have asked you out a long time ago,” he blurted. “I thought you were—some kind of pampered princess.”

The next minute he could have bitten his tongue off. But Elena wasn’t mad. Instead she was saying sadly, “Lots of guys think that. I guess I am, really. I know what I like when I see it. And I want what I want when I want it.” And once again her eyes said something to him. And this time he couldn’t help but believe it. And he knew that his eyes were saying something back to hers, too.

“So that’s why you never asked me out. I guess it’s up to me to set the record straight.” She sat up and smiled again, this time brilliantly, “And when I take you out on our next three dates—”

“Three dates!”

She nodded solemnly. “They’ll be dates at places like Hot Doggles or something like that—have you ever tried Midge’s, right at Main Street and Hodge? It’s great—and we’ll talk and just have fun. When spring comes we’ll go on picnics. Have you ever flown a kite? I know it’s for kids, but it’s really exciting to run and run and suddenly feel the wind bite. Then you let go.” Her expression went dreamy. “Sometimes I don’t want to let go. I want to go up with the kite.”

“Like skydiving,” Matt said, watching her face eagerly. He loved to look at her when her cheeks flamed and her blue eyes took fire.

“Oh, yes, like skydiving. Wouldn’t that be fun to do together? Or a balloon ride. . . I hear they have those over in Heron. We’d have to save up, though—in winter we can make snow people!”

“Snow ‘people’?”

“Oh, that’s Meredith. She says we always say ‘men’ when we mean ‘men and women’ so we’re all used to using ‘people’ for everything by now. I want you to meet them all: Meredith, and Bonnie, and Caroline.” She held up a finger sternly. “No dating them though. Bonnie’s got a crush on you. But I have first dibs.”

Matt didn’t know where he was going. He didn’t care, either, because it felt as if he were headed straight for Heaven.

“I’ve known Caroline for years and years,” he heard himself say. “I thought you were like her, only, like, multiplied by ten.” Then he saw her glance at him and wanted to clap his hand over his mouth.

“Well, sometimes I am,” Elena said. “You’ll just have to find out in what ways, won’t you?”

Just then the dessert arrived. Matt watched as the waiter solemnly placed a chocolate something-or-other in front of Elena—and two spoons, and two round balls of vanilla ice cream by his place—and two spoons. Then he poured them coffee, put down a little folder with the bill inside it, and turned on his heel as if he never wanted to see them again. He didn’t even say *‘Bon appétit.’*”

“Did we make it?” Elena whispered as Matt frantically calculated the tips for waiter and valet.

“With a dollar to spare!” he whispered back, and again they broke out into laughter together.

They each wanted to let the other one have the first bite of chocolate soufflé. Finally to save the ice cream that was melting, Matt took a heaping dessert spoonful, dabbed it in one of the melting ice cream balls and smiled at Elena. Then, while Elena opened her mouth to ask if it was good he swiftly brought the loaded spoon to her mouth and pushed. Elena had only a fraction of a second to decide. Either eat the dessert or get soufflé all over her moonlight-colored dress. She made the right decision, almost too late and by the time large drops of brownish white were falling off the spoon it was safely over a napkin that Matt was holding with his other hand.

“I can be stubborn, too,” Matt said. And then, hoping she wasn’t mad, “Is it good?”

“Delithious,” she said a little indistinctly, finishing up with a sip of water and a last dab. The, before Matt knew what was happening an object loomed out of nowhere at him and cold steel touched his teeth. “Open *wide*,” a sweet voice chimed in his ears and he quickly opened as wide as he could to take in a huge sticky bite of delicious hot chocolatey-goo mixed with sweet cool vanilla ice cream.

He was sure that he looked like an idiot as he sat there chewing on the giant mouthful, but it was so good, and Elena looked so pleased with herself, leaning forward as she did to scoop dollops of gloop off his chin as carefully as a barber.

“S’wonderful,” he managed, swabbing his face with the only napkin in sight.

“It is, isn’t it?” Elena twinkled back. Then her face looked serious. “No, it’s not.”

“It’s not?” Matt’s heart almost stopped.

“It’s . . . perfect!” And she laughed, showing white and shining teeth despite the chocolate. Matt could only hope that his own relieved grin was as free of goo.

“You know what?” Elena said, then, looking him deeply in the eyes.

“What?” Matt barely breathed.

“We’d better eat all this quick before it melts.”

And so they did, laughing and feeding each other an occasional bite. The dessert was wonderful, but more wonderful was the look in Elena’s eyes every time Matt looked up. Of course, he had a hard time believing the look, so he had to look up frequently. This resulted in a number of small spills of chocolate—fortunately none on the moonlight blue dress.

They were just drinking the last of their coffee when a shadow loomed over Matt’s left shoulder. What do you want now? I paid the bill, Matt thought, but it wasn’t the waiter.

It was an elderly couple, perhaps in their sixties. Oh, no, God! Matt thought. They’re going to ruin everything by complaining about the noise, by complaining about how long Matt and Elena had stayed, or by complaining about . . . *something*.

“We’ve been watching you two young love birds,” the man said, in a slightly quavering voice that made Matt readjust his age by maybe ten years up. “And I have to say—“

“—it brought us both right back to our first date again,” the old woman said in a flutey voice that made Matt readjust again up to maybe late seventies or even eighties. Normally he liked old people, loved to listen to their stories, loved to see their old attics full of memoirs. But now he was gut sure that this couple would say something that would take all the shimmer off the date, like rubbing a butterfly’s wings with dirty fingers.

“You two obviously have something very special,” the woman fluted, smiling at Elena. “You’re a very lovely young woman.”

Elena blushed charmingly and said nothing.

“And you, young man,” said the gentleman, “obviously have money to burn.”

Matt could feel his face turn red. He’d known they’d spoil it. They were making fun of him.

“Or at least to step on, anyway.” The old man nodded toward Matt’s shoe. “Do you realize you’ve got a bill stuck there?”

Everything went very sluggish and hazy. Slowly, with a dark mist obscuring most of his vision, Matt pulled up one foot and then the other, looking at the soles.

And there, on the bottom of his right foot, was the hundred-dollar bill.

It was almost like a message—a joke—from old Uncle Joe. *You think I’d really leave ya in the lurch, kid? Nah. But the way to this girl’s heart isn’t through showerin’ her with fripperies—yes, Uncle Joe actually said that: “showerin’ her with fripperies.” It’s through showin’ her yer own heart. What, now are you gonna pout? Just look at her!*

Matt looked through the dimness at Elena’s shining face.

“I—I’m so sorry,” he managed. “It must have fallen out when I first opened the wallet and then I stepped on it and then I couldn’t see it—but—everything that I put you through—”

“Matt, isn’t it wonderful!” Elena was saying. There were tears in her eyes. “And thank you, sir, for noticing it before we got outside and it got all muddy.”

“To tell you the truth, I’d have mentioned it before,” the old gentleman whispered. “But you were managing so well yourselves—we were in the booth right here”—he indicated a booth behind him—“that I couldn’t bring myself to spoil the dream.”

To spoil the dream.

And that was what this had been in reality—a dream date.

Matt looked at Elena and Elena looked back and then she laughed and hugged the old man. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for not spoiling it. I’ve been here to this restaurant”—Elena shrugged—“twenty times or so, but tonight was the best.”

“And I say that any boy who can wow a girl while feeding her only bread, lettuce and chocolate must have something special.” The old man chuckled, looking at Elena appreciatively. “Hang on to this one, my dear.”

“Thank you,” Elena said again, and she added, “I think I will.”

And she took Matt’s hand and held on to it all the time it took to ask the valet driver if he had change for one hundred dollars.

To Be Continued . . .

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