

Chapter One

The powerful rumble of thunder rattled the windows of Abbie Taylor's second-floor apartment. The sound of the pounding rain was deafening. Two people standing together would have to shout at the top of their lungs to have a fighting chance of hearing each other.

Normally Abbie is not fond of torrential thunderstorms, but tonight was an exception. It was a rare occasion where she had her apartment to herself. Along with the pouring rain, the cool temperature of early March created the perfect conditions for Abbie to cozy up on the couch under her favorite blanket and binge-watch the latest season of her favorite show.

Abbie's best friend and roommate, Maria, was working the evening shift at a nearby restaurant in their small Tennessee town bordering the Smoky Mountains. Abbie's fiancé, Steven, was having a guy's night out on this Friday evening.

Abbie had been looking forward to this evening all week. She was freshly showered and makeup-free. Her towel-dried hair was left to finish air-drying naturally. Abbie was blessed with natural loose curls that needed very little attention. Her light brown hair was straight at the top and gradually formed loose curls that ended slightly above her shoulder blades. Her light brown eyes were a perfect match to her hair.

She was wearing her most comfortable pair of baggy sweats paired with her favorite hole-filled raggy sweatshirt. Abbie didn't care that her green sweatshirt clashed with her pink sweatpants. No one was going to see her tonight anyway. Comfort was paramount on this evening.

This 28-year-old dental hygienist would be considered cute by many, average by others. She is much more likely to be cast as the best friend than the leading lady in a typical Hollywood rom-com.

The sound of boiling water beckoned Abbie to the kitchen. She dropped in the noodles in what was to be her last night of food indulgence before her wedding. After devouring a huge bowl of mac & cheese, she planned to finish off the evening with a big bowl of cookie dough ice cream. Add to that a large glass or two of wine, and it was a final night of heaven before embarking on her plan to lose the 10 pounds needed to achieve her 125-pound wedding weight goal.

While waiting for the noodles to cook, she gazed down at the engagement ring she had received ten days earlier. Proud of her new relationship status, she had spent the last

week overusing the word “fiancé.” It had been a long wait, but now she was as content as could be.

Abbie’s attention returned to her food. She drained the perfectly cooked noodles thoroughly and poured them into a big bowl. This was not going to be an ordinary, run-of-the-mill mac & cheese. Abbie decided to take a second pack of cheese mix, double the butter and milk to make this the most decadent mac & cheese she has ever had. With wide eyes and guiltless glee, she mixed all the ingredients in a giant bowl.

She poured herself a glass of wine and was all ready to head to the living room couch to enjoy her evening. Just as she was about to grab her food, she heard a knock at the door.



Abbie opened the door to see her fiancé standing in the breezeway. Surprised by his visit, she said, “Steven?” Using a smile to mask her disappointment in him crashing her evening alone, she said, “I would hug you, but you’re all wet. How about a kiss?”

Abbie noticed that Steven was looking down at the ground. She placed her hand under his chin to lift his head up for a kiss. Instead of receiving a kiss in return, she met with cold, lifeless lips. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Receiving no response from Steven, she invited him into the apartment. “There’s obviously something wrong. Come into the kitchen, and let’s talk.”

Steven and Abbie sat down at the kitchen table. At no point did he make eye contact, his eyes directed downward the entire time. “Are you hungry?” Abbie asked. “I just made some macaroni and cheese. It’s still hot.” Steven did not respond.

Expressing her concern, Abbie said, “Okay Steven, now you’re scaring me. You won’t even look at me. You haven’t said a word. What’s going on?”

Finding himself unable to look Abbie in the eyes, Steven kept his head lowered and answered, “This is going to be even harder than I thought.”

“What is going to be harder than you thought?” asked Abbie.

“Oh, Abbie.”

“Come on Steven, open up. Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out together.”

Steven finally seemed ready to say what he came to say, “I’m not ready to get married.”

“Steven, I understand. It’s totally normal to have doubts so soon after an engagement. Look, we haven’t announced a date yet, and I see no need to rush things. I waited this long. I don’t mind waiting a little longer to get you past your nerves.”

“That’s not going to work Abbie. I’ve made up my mind.”

“I just spent the last week and a half announcing to the world that we’re going to be married. Do you know how humiliating it will be to tell everybody the engagement is off? Honey, I know it’s scary. Let’s take a couple of months without any wedding talk. If you’re still having doubts, we can discuss our options then.”

“We can’t wait that long Abbie.”

“What’s the rush? Is there another woman?”

That question seemed to give Steven enough confidence to finally look up at Abbie and state, “Of course not! You know I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Well then, what is it Steven? What aren’t you telling me?” asked Abbie.

Steven placed both of his hands over his face and rubbed up and down before saying, “There is a 14-day return policy on the ring. If I don’t return it in time, I can’t get my money back.”

Feeling both insulted and shocked, Abbie asked, “You called to ask their return policy?”

“No! I asked them when I bought the ring,” said Steven feeling his reasoning would make sense to Abbie.

“You asked about their return policy when you were buying my engagement ring!?” replied a doubly shocked and doubly insulted Abbie.

Steven looked down in shame and said, “It sounds terrible when you say it like that.”

“That’s because it is terrible! Why in the hell would you ask about their return policy when buying me an engagement ring!?”

“I don’t know Abbie. Maybe I was worried you wouldn’t say yes,” said Steven sounding like he was trying to convince himself.

“That’s bullshit Steven! You know I’ve been waiting for years for you to propose. There is no way I would ever have said no!” shouted Abbie. “If you knew you didn’t want to marry me, then why on earth would you propose?”

As the intensity in Abbie's voice rose, Steven's voice took on a quiet and apologetic tone. "I don't know Abbie. I guess after five years together, it seemed like the next step to take. I think I knew even before I went to the jeweler. I can't explain why I didn't stop then."

"Damn it Steven!" Abbie said as she took off the ring and shoved it at him. "Go ahead and return the ring. I don't want it anymore anyway. If you were having doubts, I wish you would have talked to me before proposing. Whenever you're finally ready to commit to me, I want a different ring. Don't waste any time trying to find this one again!" exclaimed Abbie in a voice that was getting louder with each sentence.

"I don't think you understand Abbie. I'm not just breaking off the engagement. I think we need some time apart."

"You're ending our relationship!?" asked Abbie as tears flowed uncontrollably from her eyes.

"Yes Abbie. I think that's best. At least for a while."

Abbie burst into a full-out crying episode. "I can't believe this is happening! I gave you five years of my life, and now you're just going to dump me? You led me to believe that we would spend our lives together. Why would you do that to me?"

"I thought we were going to end up together. At least that's what I told myself. I'm sorry," apologized Steven.

Reaching a level nearing hysteria, Abbie got up, went to the front door, and grabbed her keys. Abbie was in such a hurry to leave the apartment that she didn't take anything else on her way out. Even though it was fairly cold outside, she slipped on her open-toed flip-flops to make a faster exit.

Before slamming the door behind her, she shouted a demand to Steven, "Anything that you don't want to be thrown away, better be out of here by the time I get back! I'm going to dispose of anything that reminds me of you! I don't ever want to see you again!"

Abbie was still crying hysterically. She had no idea where she was going or what she was going to do. Abbie walked slowly to her car, hoping that Steven would chase after her. By the time she got to her car, she was soaked by the rain. She started her car, turned on the heat, and sat there waiting for Steven to find her. After waiting for 15 minutes with no sign of Steven, Abbie thrust the car into gear and took off.

Chapter Two

In the best of conditions, Abbie is not known as the best driver in the world. However, it was not just the road conditions that made it dangerous for her to be out. She was in hysterics, and the constant flow of tears made it hard for her to see where she was going.

Even if she could see, Abbie had no idea where to go. Every store, every restaurant, every park, everywhere in this small town held a memory of Steven. The only thought in her mind was to get as far away from anything “Steven” as possible. He lived two towns to the north, and the Smoky Mountains laid to be South and the East. Abbie knew she was in no condition to navigate the mountain roads, so she decided to go west.

Within 15 minutes, she was well outside of any town. She turned left, then right, then right, then left, getting both lost and nowhere fast. By the time she got back to a road that she recognized, she realized that she had been driving 15 more minutes only to get closer to her hometown. She decided it was best to stay on the main road and follow it west until she no longer thought of Steven.

There were no streetlights on this dark country road. Abbie was somewhat familiar with this road. However, between the lack of light, torrential downpour, and her tear-ridden eyes, road visibility was near zero. So far, Abbie had been able to navigate the slippery roads successfully. Up till now, the hilly road had been running in a straight line. But that was about to change.

Abbie was coherent enough to know she should keep her speed down. But under these conditions, any speed is too fast. This was especially true as she unknowingly approached a long stretch of winding curves. Abbie was unprepared for the S-curve ahead. By the time she saw the sign, it was too late. Then Abbie broke the number one rule in a situation like that. She panicked and slammed both feet onto the brake pedal. Her car spun 360 degrees a time or two before landing her backward in a ditch at a 30° angle with its headlights pointing to the sky.

Abbie reached new levels of hysteria as she floored the gas in a futile attempt to escape the ditch. With each press on the gas pedal, she managed to dig herself deeper into the mud. Finally, realizing she could not drive her way out of the ditch, she let out the loudest scream ever and banged her head on the steering wheel a couple of times in frustration. After that, Abbie went into a state of total meltdown.

Abbie cried and cried and cried until both her tears and the rain outside slowed to a

drizzle. She had been there for at least half an hour with not a soul in sight. Finally, not knowing what else to do, she decided to get out and take a look. Being stuck at an upward angle, opening the door was no easy task. Eventually, Abbie made her way out onto the road.

The lights from her car pointed upward and were of little value to her. She had nothing to help her see, no phone, no flashlight, no emergency equipment. Abbie was in no mood to take responsibility for her predicament. Tonight, everything would be Steven's fault. With no one to hear, she talked out loud, "What kind of loser-ass boyfriend doesn't insist that his girlfriend keep a flashlight in her car? He has one in his car." Abbie wondered out loud, "Did he ever care about me? Did he ever once think about my safety?"

As sadness turned into anger, Abbie's tears stop flowing, and she just felt numb. She was cold, soaking wet, and felt completely helpless. She looked around for signs of people and somewhere she could get help. All Abbie saw were trees, fields, and the road she was on. Abbie had always laughed when people misused the word literally. Tonight was her turn as she said, "I am literally in the middle of nowhere!"

Abbie was too numb to cry. She didn't think she had any tears left in her anyway. She stood almost paralyzed next to her car, wondering how long it would be for another fool to be driving in the middle of nowhere in the pouring rain.



Abbie leaned against her car, praying for a miracle. Now that the worst of the rain had passed, she thought her chances of seeing someone would improve. Almost on cue, she saw headlights of a car driving over the hill in her direction.

Feelings of both fear and relief overwhelmed Abbie. She was out in the middle of nowhere and had no way to protect herself. She felt quite vulnerable as she contemplated that the driver of this car could be either a serial killer or her savior. Oddly, her biggest fear seemed to be that the car would drive by without stopping.

That thought didn't last long as the car slowed down before pulling over on the opposite side of the road about 30 feet away. The car's headlights blinded Abbie, but she could hear the driver-side door open and saw a shadowy figure emerge.

Abbie remained motionless as her fear levels rose exponentially. The shadowy figure walked slowly towards her. Conditions made it impossible for her to make out any detail, but it was clearly a tall, stocky, male silhouette. The man must have seen the fear in Abbie's eyes. He stopped 6 feet short and, in a deep, masculine voice, asked, "Are you

okay miss?" Abbie nodded to indicate she was okay.

The shadow man asked, "Is there anybody else in the car? Is anybody injured?"

Something about this man caused Abbie to feel safe. She wasn't sure if it was his consideration in stopping a few feet away, or was it the strength in his presence or the calming nature of his voice. Whatever it was, all feelings of fear transformed into feelings of relief. Abbie answered, "It's just me. I'm not injured, but my car is stuck, and I don't have my phone with me."

Although Abbie could not make out the man's face, she could almost feel him smile. He seemed relieved now that she felt relieved. "What's your name?"

"Abbie."

"Hi, Abbie. Do you mind if I come closer to see how I can help?"

"Yes you can. Thank you."

The man walked toward her in a very slow, nonthreatening manner. Although some details of the man's face were being revealed, the lighting made it impossible to ascertain anything specific. The only thing that she was sure of was that he was tall and stout. She wasn't sure if his size came from muscle or fat, but she didn't care. She was just happy that he stopped to help.

As he approached her, he took off his worn but stylish leather jacket and put it around Abbie. "You're shivering. Get your arms in there too."

Abbie felt the immediate warmth provided by this oversized jacket. She opened her mouth in an attempt to thank him but instead burst into tears. These were tears of relief. The man opened his arms, and Abbie moved closer, burying her head into his barrel-sized chest. She continued to cry uncontrollably as he wrapped his long arms around her. Abbie was engulfed in the embrace of the stranger. Her tears slowed. Even though she had no idea who this was or how old he was, she never felt more safe and protected. This man was built like a rock, and a rock is exactly what she needed at this moment.

Recognizing that Abbie had calmed down, the man released his embrace and took a half step backward. In a mildly authoritative voice, he said, "I'm going to have you sit in the driver's seat of my car. I want you to turn on the heat, full-blast, while I assess the situation and call for help. Okay?"

Abbie nodded yes. The man gently placed his hand on her back and guided her toward his car. He opened the car door for her. She did as instructed, sat in the driver's

seat, and turned the heat up high. Before closing the door, he said, "I'll be right back."

Abbie liked the way that this man took charge. She went from feeling like the unluckiest woman in the world to the luckiest woman in the world, having someone so able and willing to help come to her rescue.

She watched as the man disappeared behind her car, presumably to check for damage. A few minutes later, he came around to the driver's side of her car. She saw him make a call on his cell phone. He was on the phone for about 10 minutes. When he was done, he opened her car door, stopped the engine, and turned on her hazard lights. He walked back to his car, entered through the passenger side, and sat in the seat next to Abbie.



The man smiled and asked Abbie, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"I could use some good news," replied Abbie.

"We won't be able to be certain until we tow out your car, but I didn't see any signs of serious damage. The tow truck will just need to pull you out of the ditch back onto the road. I recommend that you take it through a drive-through carwash on your way home. I'd go through two or three times. Country mud is like concrete when it dries, so best to clean as much of it off while still wet. Then I'd take it into a car detailer tomorrow, so they can get underneath and remove the remaining chunks of mud."

"That is good news! I was sure I destroyed the back of my car. So what's the bad news?"

"Apparently, you are not the only one to crash your car tonight. The dispatcher said it might be a while before he can get a truck out here. He didn't make any promises, but he has one guy that lives near here, and he's going to try to get a hold of him even though it's his night off. So we might be here for a while."

"We?" asked Abbie. "I feel bad. You know you don't have to stay here and wait with me?"

The man with a confident smile said, "I'm pretty sure I do. There is no way I'm going to leave you out here alone in the rain by yourself."

"I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I don't have my purse with me. All my credit cards and money are in my purse. Do you think they'll be willing to take payment when I get home?"

"Don't worry about that," said the man. "I belong to a motor club, and I get several free tows a year. I'll tip the guy an extra 40 bucks for his time. You don't need to pay me back for that either. Just pay it forward to someone else in the future."

"Thank you so much! I greatly appreciate all of your help tonight, and I promise to pay your generosity forward."

"You're quite welcome. Do you need to call anybody and let them know you're safe?"

"No, I haven't been gone that long. My roommate is working the evening shift and won't get home for a few hours." Abbie paused for a moment and then asked, "So what should we talk about?"

"What is it, friends, family, or men?" asked the man.

"What do you mean?"

"Considering the way you've been crying and the fact that you have no phone, no purse, and sporting a mismatched outfit, my Spidey senses say you had a big fight and ran out of the house."

"Your Spidey senses are correct," confirmed Abbie. "It's men. Specifically a man."

Abbie's answer seemed to peak the man's interest. "Do tell."

"I don't know. It feels kind of weird sharing my personal problems with a stranger."

"Why? Who better to share personal problems with than a stranger? Think of it. I don't know anyone you know. So anything you tell me can't get back to them. And since I'll only hear your version of the events, I'll always take your side."

Abbie laughed. "That's a good point! Well, the short of it is my boyfriend of five years and fiancé of one week just dumped me."

Abbie was expecting to receive consolation, but instead, the man said, "Wow! You are a lucky girl."

"Lucky?" replied a surprised Abbie. "You have a strange concept of the word lucky."

"Do I? It sounds to me like you dodged a bullet."

"Why do you say that?"

"Tell me about your relationship with your ex. What's his name?"

"Steven and I had a good relationship. He's a great guy. He's good-looking, has a

steady job, treats me well most of the time. My friends and family adore him. He's reliable."

The man interrupts Abbie. Clearly trying to make a point, the man said, "He checks all your boxes, doesn't he?"

Abbie was slightly triggered and offended by this comment. "What's wrong with being with someone who has redeeming qualities?"

"Nothing," replied the man. "But you're missing the most important quality."

"What's that?" asked a curious Abbie.

"Passion! You've been with this guy for five years, and you don't even live together?"

"He has a good job two towns away, and that's a pretty long commute for work."

The man's energy increased as he said, "So what! That reason may be legit for a few months, but not a few years. People who are passionately in love with each other find a way to be together as much as possible. Except in the rarest of circumstances, no job or long commute would prevent them from living together. You said you've been together for five years? Be honest, how many of those years have you been waiting for him to propose?"

"I don't know. I guess at least three years," Abbie replied as she looked down, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"How often do you see Steven? "

"I see him almost every weekend and during the week when we have something specific planned?"

"During the weekdays, when you're not with Steven, how do you feel about that?"

"I don't know what you mean. I guess I feel normal. I know I'll see Steven on the weekend."

The man continued to speak passionately. "Don't you see how lucky you are? Steven did you a favor. He may not have been consciously aware of it, but if he waited five years to propose and bailed after a week, he knew that you two weren't right for each other. Don't you want a relationship where you're madly and passionately in love with your partner?"

"I see what you're saying, I do. I love Steven, but I'm beginning to realize it is not with

the passion you're describing. Of course, I'd love to have a passionate relationship, but not every girl gets that."

The man expressed himself enthusiastically. "So you just settle? You find a guy who checks all your boxes, you get comfortable and sacrifice the most important thing in a romantic relationship, the passion, the romance!?"

"I guess I never thought of myself as settling for Steven. But, even if I did, what's wrong with settling for a decent guy I care about? It's better than the risk of being alone."

"Not for me, not anymore. If I settle for the wrong partner, I have zero chance of finding the right one. I'd rather take the chance."

"I am starting to see your point. I've never felt that kind of passion for anyone, not even when Steven and I first got together. We got along. All the pieces seemed to fit. I guess I just got comfortable and stopped looking for anything else," Abbie conceded. A clump of drying hair fell onto her face covering her eye.

Before reaching his hand out to brush Abbie's hair from her face, he asked, "May I?"

Abbie found herself gently nodding yes without any conscious effort. The man's large hands carried a gentle touch. Abbie's eyes closed involuntarily as his fingers touched her skin. It took three soft caressing swipes to push Abbie's hair back behind her ear. Chills ran up and down her spine each time his hand grazed her cheek and intensified throughout her entire body as his fingers circled her ear, then gently slid down her neck.

When the man was done clearing Abbie's hair from her face, her eyes opened slowly, and everything had changed. This man was no longer just a shadowy hero. For the first time, she looked at him like a man. She now saw his face in vivid detail. He had strong features, dark, almost black hair, and thick dark eyebrows that contrasted his baby blue eyes. Steven had hard-to-beat Hollywood-type good looks. But something about this man made him more attractive and appealing than Steven could ever be.

She wasn't sure what it was. Was it his confidence? Was it his smile? Was it his strong presence? Was it his gentle touch? She was uncertain of the answer. While this man may not have had traditional good looks, he was quite handsome in his own way. Abbie could not think of a time when she was as attracted to a man as she was at this moment. The man's confident smile was evidence that her face must have revealed her attraction to him.

"I don't even know your name," said Abbie.

“Let’s keep that a mystery for now,” replied the man.

“You don’t want to tell me your name? Are you some celebrity or famous football player trying to protect your identity?”

The man laughed. “I played football in college, but I assure you my current profession is shared by men and women of all ages, shapes, and sizes. I promise to explain later why I don’t want to give you my name just yet.”

Unphased, Abbie said, “Okay, Mystery Man, I’ll play along for now. I don’t see a ring on your finger. Have you found your Miss right?”

“I thought I did in my last three relationships. The first two, I now realize that was just optimistic thinking.”

Abbie interjected, “And the third?”

“That relationship ended about six months ago. Like your Steven, my Jenny was a great match. She checked all the boxes. She was beautiful, a great person, my friends and family loved her, yada yada yada. But then I had an epiphany.”

“An epiphany?” asked Abbie.

“Yes! I was on a road trip with my professional football team.”

Abbie interrupted, “I knew you were a football player!”

The man laughed heartily. “I am just teasing you. I was on a business trip relaxing in my hotel room. Jenny and I were texting the usual things couples text when they are apart. Things like ‘I love you. I can’t wait to see you again. I miss you.’ And then it hit me.”

Abbie chimed in again. “Those texts weren’t true?”

“It’s not that they weren’t true. It’s that the texts weren’t important. As I was lying in my hotel room, I was thinking it would be fine if Jenny were here. I’d love to see her. But it was just as well if she wasn’t. It wasn’t as though I was completely indifferent, but I wasn’t passionate. That’s when I realized I wanted more out of a relationship. I needed more. I want to be with a woman I love so deeply that it physically pains me to be without her. I was never going to feel that way for Jenny. That is when I knew things had to change.”

“I certainly would categorize that as an epiphany. I understand what you’re saying. To be honest, before I knew Steven came over to break up, I felt disappointed that he was interrupting my alone time. So what happened with Jenny?” asked Abbie.

“When I got home, I had a painful break up with her. She didn’t understand why I was breaking up, and at the time, I don’t know if I was sure either. I just know I needed something more than a checkbox relationship.”

“And since then, you haven’t found that woman for which you yearn?”

“Well, I started dating with a new perspective. If I didn’t feel that passion on the first few dates, I ended things quickly. Even when there was chemistry and even if I really liked the woman. I had a new standard for a relationship. Unfortunately, I became discouraged as no woman inspired that feeling that I was seeking.”

“Do you think you’ll ever find her?”

“I had my doubts until tonight. Actually, until about 30 minutes ago,” the man said as he gazed deeply into Abbie’s eyes.

“Me? You think I’m that girl?” Abbie asked, uncertain how to respond.

“I know your that girl! Fate brought us together. Can’t you see it? Don’t you feel it?” Mystery Man’s words were passionate and sincere.

“I’m not sure what I feel,” said a bewildered Abbie.

Mystery Man leaned in to kiss Abbie. His kiss was as soft as his touch. This kiss triggered all the same endorphins as his caresses but at quadruple the intensity. Abbie found herself getting lost in their connection. Time and space seem to fall away, leaving Abbie with no idea of how long they had kissed. When Mystery Man pulled back, he watched as Abbie’s eyes opened, awakening to her deeper feelings for him. His smile grew wider.

“Now, Do you feel it?” asked Mystery Man.

“Yes,” proclaimed Abbie. “I just wish I was as sure as you were. How can you be so confident fate brought us together.”

Mystery Man was excited to answer this question, and his enthusiasm showed in his voice. “Think about it, Abbie. What are the chances that you’re going to find yourself in a ditch, on a country road, with no phone, no purse, no way to seek help? When was the last time that happened to you?”

“Never.”

“Exactly! Fate put this all together for us. If you hadn’t dated Steven for five years, or if he hadn’t broken up with you exactly when he did, or if it wasn’t raining so hard

tonight, we may have never met. Fate went out of its way to make sure this meeting happened. How long had you been waiting for help?"

"Probably about half an hour," answered Abbie.

"This may be a country road, but it is the main road between towns. Half an hour is a long time without seeing a car. Fate made sure that no one else got to you before I did. Let me tell you something you don't know. I am on this road because I'm on my way to my parents' place to help my father with a project on their new home. I've never driven on this road before. My parents have lived in the same home since I was a child. Then one day, poof, they tell my siblings and me that they're moving out to the country. I am totally convinced fate had a hand in that decision. We were meant to meet tonight!"

Mystery Man's enthusiasm extended into a more passionate makeout session. Abbie could not remember ever being kissed this way by Steven. She certainly never felt the way she was feeling in that moment. As Abbie thought more about it, she concluded that for Steven, kissing was more of an obligatory prelude for sex. Fortunately, this was not the case for her Mystery Man.

Mystery Man's kisses sent a message. Their kisses were connective, sincere, not a means to an end. To Abbie, his kisses were an expression of his feelings and his passion for her. She had never been kissed by anybody like this before, and she never put so much thought into what a kiss meant to her. This experience showed Abbie that a kiss doesn't have to be just something couples do. Their kissing was quickly removing many of Abbie's doubts. And when they were done, Abbie was feeling "all-in."

"Alright, you've convinced me. Fate rained on us today," Abbie conceded. "What do we do now? I don't know anything about you, not even where you live. "

"I live about two hours away," said Mystery Man.

"I live near here. How do we make this work?"

"I've been thinking about that since I saw you. The moment I arrived, I could feel fate had something special in mind. My suspicions were confirmed when I saw the most beautiful woman I've ever met standing before my eyes."

"Oh my God, I don't feel beautiful at all. I'm a total disaster right now," replied an insecure Abbie.

"That's fantastic! If you look this gorgeous at your worst, imagine how beautiful you will be when you're at your best. I hope my heart can take it."

"I like the way you think Mystery Man," Abbie said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I figured you lived around here, and after hearing the circumstances that brought you here to me, I've come up with a plan. Here is what we're going to do."

Abbie couldn't stop herself from mentally comparing Steven with her Mystery Man. Steven was indecisive about everything. She often felt like half their time together was spent endlessly contemplating what they would eat for their next meal or which restaurant they would go for dinner. She envisioned a much different experience with her Mystery Man. Mystery Man seemed to know what he wants. He's a man with a plan, and Abbie liked the authoritative way he was about to lay it out for her.

Mystery Man continued, "My apartment lease ends in a few months. Let's meet back here in three months. I think you'll need that time to wrap things up with Steven and be ready for us."

"But what if I'm ready now?"

He laughed. "Are you ready now?"

"Yes," proclaimed a more confident Abbie.

He beamed a smile and said, "I like what I'm hearing," as he gave Abbie a single long, slow kiss.

Mystery Man continued, "I love that you're living and feeling in the moment right now. But I think it's important to find closure with Steven and allow yourself some time before starting a new relationship. Steven is going to make a concerted effort to get back together."

Abbie piped in, "Steven made it pretty clear that he was done with me. What makes you think he is going to change his mind?"

"One look in your mirror will answer that question. He is not going to let you go that easy. Don't be surprised if you find yourself giving him a second chance. If you have been together for five years, he knows the things you like, and he knows how to play on your emotions. He'll do what he needs to win you back," explained Mystery Man.

"I seriously doubt he wants to get back together, but you're right; we have broken up before, and he does have a way of wooing me back. Aren't you worried that he might succeed?" asked Abbie.

"No, because I know that even if you get back together with him, you'll be thinking of

me the whole time,” answered Mystery Man flashing a sly smile.

“You are pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” asked Abbie as she smiled back.

Mystery Man became more serious and looked deep into Abbie’s eyes as he said, “I am that sure of us,” and then they kissed.

Mystery Man decided to go deeper into his reasoning for the three-month wait. “Abbie, the time apart is not just to get things cleared with Steven. It’s also for your friends and family.”

“What do you mean?” asked Abbie.

“You said your friends and family adore Steven. If you bring me into the picture too soon, your family may not accept me, or they may think of me as just a rebound relationship. They need to see you single for a while. They need to mourn your relationship with Steven and get their closure too. This time off is for you as well. Since my last relationship, these last six months have given me time to reset, renew, and prepare for something better. I’d like to see you have that time as I did.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m sorry I got you off track. Continue sharing your plan.”

Getting back to his plan, Mystery Man said, “Let’s meet back here exactly three months from today at noon. Then, we’ll head into town to find me an apartment.”

“You’re willing to move to my town just like that? What about your friends and family? What about your work?” asked Abbie.

“I work at home, so no problem there. I’ll actually be moving a lot closer to my parents, and my siblings are scattered across the country. As for my friends, two hours is not that long to drive. We will still get to see them often enough.” Mystery Man ups his intensity as he emphasizes, “Try and understand Abbie. None of that stuff matters to me. I want to be with you, near you. Even if everything I said weren’t the case, I would do anything just to be with you, even if I needed to get a new job. There are a million jobs. There’s only one you.”

Mystery Man could see that Abbie was struggling with her thoughts. So he asked, “Are you still having doubts?”

“It all feels so sudden, so unreal. I want to believe. I want to have the confidence that you do. But I’m scared. I don’t even know your name.”

Mystery Man decided it was time to explain why he is apprehensive about giving his

name to Abbie. "Let me explain why I don't want to give you my name. If I give you my name, the first thing you're going to do when you get home is try to find out as much information as you can about me. It will quickly become a box-checking exercise. I assure you that I will check all your boxes, and I'm sure you will check all of my boxes too. But then we become all about the details. That's the last thing I want. I want this to be about the emotion and passion we feel for each other. If we can't sustain this feeling for three months, then what is the point of it all?"

"I love everything you're saying. I feel everything you're feeling. But there is this little voice inside that warns me that this is all some sort of game. Like this is some elaborate ruse to get me into bed. I've seen men do some very creative things for no other reason."

Mystery Man looked at Abbie and thought silently for a few moments before asking, "Abbie, if I asked you to come home with me for the night or the weekend, would you do it?"

"You know I would," answered Abbie as if it were a rhetorical question.

"Exactly my point. I'm not in this for short-term fun. I'm in this for the long term. I don't want to wait three months to see you. It's going to feel like torture. But I know that this time apart is best for our long-term success. Can't you see that?"

"Yes, but I guess I just needed reassurance. This is all so unexpected. I think another kiss might help," requested Abbie with a smile. But, to Abbie's dismay, an approaching tow truck interrupted her incoming kiss.

"Duty calls," said Mystery Man before he exited the car.

Abbie watched as her Mystery Man made sure the tow truck driver took extra care when pulling her car out of the ditch. She couldn't help recognize how opposite her Mystery Man was from Steven. In the hour that Abbie knew Mystery Man, he had already shown more attentiveness and concern for her well-being than Steven did in the last three years of the relationship. She wondered how she could ever have seen Steven as Mr. right, when she now sees him as Mr. wrong, at least for her.

After a significant effort, Mystery Man and the tow truck driver successfully excavated Abbie's car from the muddy ditch. She watched as Mystery Man tipped the tow truck driver, shook his hand, and headed back to his car.

He opened the driver's side door and stretched his hand out for Abbie. She took his hand. As he helped her out of the car, he said, "Your chariot awaits, me lady."

They held hands as they walked to Abbie's car. He leaned her against the side door of her car, where they spent several minutes kissing each other.

"Does this night really have to end so soon?" asked Abbie.

"I do need to get to my parents' house. Plus, I think it's important to leave each other wanting more, much more. That will help sustain the feeling until we meet again."

"I'm worried. What happens if an unforeseen circumstance prevents us from getting here three months from today?"

"That's a good question. If we know ahead of time, we can send a messenger with an explanation and contact information. If it is a last-minute situation, let's agree that if either of us is a no-show, we wait exactly one week and meet again at noon," he said.

Still worried, Abbie asked, "But what if something happens a second time?"

Showing patience, Mystery Man kissed Abbie and then said, "Fate didn't bring us together, just to pull us apart before we get started." Then, he looked deep into Abbie's eyes and confidently assured her, "I will be there, I promise."

Mystery Man decided to lighten the mood and said, "I'll tell you what. You keep the jacket. That's my favorite jacket, and I'll absolutely be back for that."

"Good, because I love this jacket. I was planning to hold onto it anyway," Abbie joked.

Making a final attempt to alleviate Abbie's concerns, Mystery Man said, "If providing my name will ease your mind, I'll be happy to give it to you."

Abbie considered his offer and replied, "No, you're right. If I get any information about you, my roommate and I will be on the Internet all night trying to find out what we can about you. I want this to be about the way we feel about each other and not about the details."

Mystery Man opened the car door for Abbie, and she got in. She rolled down the window at Mystery Man's request. He tells her, "I did my best to make sure your car is in working order. I'll wait here while you drive off. If you have any problems at all, or you hear any funky noises. Stop the car, and I'll come to check it out." He gave Abbie a final passionate kiss and sent her on her way.

Abbie stops her car about 40 feet away, prompting Mystery Man to come see what's wrong. He asks, "Is there a problem with the car?"

Abbie smiled and said, "No, I just wanted another kiss before I go."

Mystery Man laughed and complied with Abbie's request. Then, after yet another long passionate kiss, he joked, "Get out of here before we take this thing to the next level."

Abbie smiled and confirmed, "Three months from today, 12 o'clock noon sharp," and then drove off toward home.

Chapter Three

Abbie pulled her car into the same parking spot she had left just a few hours before. After leaving her Mystery Man, she managed to run her car through the car wash twice and make it back with little memory of the drive. Her unexpected romantic encounter left her feeling on cloud nine. She was on virtual autopilot all the way home. This 45-minute trip home, including the carwash, seemed but a few seconds to Abbie.

Abbie remained in her car as she reflected upon the night's events. She found it ironic that this same parking spot held the worst moment of her life just a few hours ago. Abbie was at her lowest low. But now, she felt at her highest high.



Abbie entered her apartment and was immediately greeted by her mildly panicked roommate. Maria gave Abbie a big hug and asked, "Where were you? Are you okay?"

Abbie replied, "Yes, I'm fine. What are you doing home? I thought you had to work until 11?"

"Steven told me what happened. He has been looking all over town for you, and he's freaking out. He said you ran out of the apartment hysterical, and you didn't have your phone with you. I started to worry too and left work early to be here when you made it back home. I've been calling everyone we know trying to find you. But don't worry, I didn't tell them what happened. I just said that you forgot your phone, and I wanted to let you know it wasn't lost, and I have it."

Maria observed that Abbie did not look hysterical at all. In fact, she looked the total opposite of hysterical. Maria commented, "I expected to see you devastated or furious or upset. But, instead, you're wearing a men's leather jacket with an expression on your face like you've been touched by an angel."

Abbie smiled and replied, "Touched by an angel, how poetic. I was touched by an angel tonight, alright. An angel called fate."

Maria's phone buzzed, indicating an incoming text. Abbie watched as Maria replied to the text and informed Abbie, "That was Steven. I let him know you were home and safe. He totally regrets breaking your engagement. He's not going to return the ring, and he didn't tell anyone but me about the breakup."

Abbie laughed and said to Maria, "That's funny. He told me Steven would want to get

back together.”

“By ‘he,’ I presume you mean the owner of that jacket?” asked Maria.

Abbie was still vibrating from her romantic encounter and wanted to get out of her cold, damp clothes. “I promise I’ll tell you all about it, but first, I need a nice, hot shower.”

“Am I going to want to hear the story?”

“I’m pretty sure you will,” replied a smiling Abbie.

“Am I going to need a glass of wine before you tell me what happened and why you are wearing that jacket?”

Still smiling, Abbie replied, “Definitely!”

“Oh God,” remarked Maria.

“While I’m in the shower, can you do me a favor and let Steven know that he and I can meet tomorrow. I’ll text him in the morning. Tell him I need to sleep on it. I’m not ready to see him. Make sure he doesn’t come here tonight.”

“Gotcha! I’m on it.”



Abbie strolled into her bedroom, feeling on top of the world. This is one of the many times she’s glad she pays \$100 a month more than Maria so she could have the master bedroom with a private bathroom. The privacy of her own bathroom and the isolation of her shower provide an ideal environment to reflect upon the days’ events.

She reached in and turned on the shower a little bit hotter than she normally would. While the water heated up, Abbie returned to her bedroom and grabbed a hanger from her closet. She took off the leather jacket she was wearing and put it on the hanger. Then, she returned to the master bathroom and hung the jacket on a towel hook that is easily visible from her bathtub.

She completely undressed, deciding to just leave her damp clothes on the floor for now. Her skin was cold and wet from the clothes, and this made stepping into the hot shower all the more soothing. She stepped completely under the hot streaming water and found herself reliving the best parts of the night’s events. Abbie was in ecstasy.

She replayed every touch, every kiss, every word, every embrace repeatedly in her mind. The one time shadowy, blurry face of her unknown rescuer had transformed into a

crystal clear image of the man who had captured her heart. Every detail of his face was now etched in Abbie's mind. This would be the only place she could access it for the next three months.

It all felt like a dream. Several times she peeked outside the shower curtain to make sure the jacket was still there. That was the only evidence she had to prove to both herself and Maria that this night actually happened and that her Mystery Man was not imaginary.

Abbie was in no rush. So she took her time to wash her hair and her body and perform her nightly beauty routine. When she was finished, she got into her nighttime outfit, grabbed the leather jacket, and headed out to the living room.



Abbie walked through her living room to hang Mystery Man's leather jacket on the coat rack, where it can dry properly and be seen from the living room couch. Abbie was gleefully aware that this jacket had become her new obsession. Maria was finishing off her glass of wine when Abbie sat down with her.

Maria opened the conversation. "I talked to Steven, and after a lot of convincing, he agreed to stay away tonight. He really is upset, Abbie. He knows he messed up big time. If I were you, I wouldn't let him off the hook so easily this time. You know Steven, he'll go all out. You might as well get some flowers and gifts to make up for the nightmare he put you through."

"I'm not going to get back together with Steven," replied Abbie.

"I'm afraid to ask, but does this have something to do with that leather jacket you can't seem to take your eyes off of?"

"You might want to get yourself another glass of wine. You'll probably need it for what I'm about to tell you."

Maria again exclaimed, "Oh God," and then got up to pour herself another glass of wine. Abbie graciously rejected Maria's offer to pour her a glass of wine as well. Maria returned to the sofa, swallowed a large gulp of wine, and said, "I'm ready. Let's hear it."

"First of all, don't worry. I'm not injured. My car wasn't seriously damaged either when I slid off the road and got stuck in a ditch."

"Are you sure you're okay!?"

"I told you not to worry. I am more than fine." Abbie continues with her version of the evening's events. "I was in the middle of nowhere when I slid off the road, and I had no way to call for help. That is when fate rained on me. You are right Maria. I was devastated, upset, and furious with Steven. I was stuck out there for half an hour until my Mystery Man came to save the day."

"Mystery Man?" asked Maria.

"Yep!" said Abbie with a huge smile. "He saw I was freezing and needed help. So he pulled over, put his jacket on me, and wrapped me up in his arms with a big hug. He was so considerate and wanted me to feel safe and comfortable. He put me in the driver's seat of his car while he assessed the situation and called for help."

"Well, that sounds exciting! Why do you keep calling him Mystery Man?"

"I never found out his name," answered Abbie.

"This is getting more interesting by the minute! Describe this Mystery Man to me?"

"It was the strangest thing, Maria. For the first 20 minutes or so, I couldn't even tell you what he looked like. I just knew that he was big."

Maria interrupted to ask, "Big in a good way or not so good way?"

"Definitely a good way. It was dark, and hard to tell his exact build. I didn't perceive him as a bodybuilder type, but the man was built like a house. My first thoughts were that he was some sort of lumberjack or football player," Abbie said, laughing.

"Do you have any idea how old he is? Is he cute?" asked an intrigued Maria.

"If I had to guess, I would say he is a few years older than us. Cute is the wrong word. When I finally began to look at his face, I wasn't sure if I was attracted or not. I'm so used to Steven. His features were strong, and his face was, how can I say it, more mature. I don't mean old. I just mean more mature."

"Hmm, I am struggling to visualize him, but he doesn't sound like your type at all," noted Maria.

"That's very true. However, I've never been so attracted to anyone in my life. You asked if he was cute. I would not describe him as cute, but he was incredibly handsome. He had that good kind of confidence. He had the most amazing smile and beautiful blue eyes. Even though he was built like a house with hands bigger than my head, his touch was as gentle and soft as could be," Abbie said as she felt herself gazing into space,

recalling the feeling of the moment.

“You let him touch you!?” asked a concerned Maria.

“Relax, it was all very innocent. At least at first. He was just brushing the hair from my face. But I got to tell you, Maria, I had never felt the things I felt when that man touched me for the first time. It was magic! It was exhilarating! And yet, paled in comparison to how I felt when he kissed me.”

“You kissed another man beside Steven!?” asked a stunned Maria.

Abbie could feel disappointment and even a little judgment from her roommate. Maria only had a friend-level attraction to Steven, but she liked him very much and didn’t seem to like the idea that Abbie had kissed another man.

“Don’t forget Maria. Steven had just dumped me. If I had thought about it first, I might have held back. But I in no way regret any of the kisses I shared with my Mystery Man.”

“I get that he broke up with you. I guess I’m just struggling to think of you with anyone else but Steven. You said kisses? You kissed him more than once?”

“We kissed more times in half an hour than Steven and I have kissed in the last six months, maybe longer. The kisses were so much more passionate. Every kiss brought me closer and closer to realizing the truth. Fate had delivered me my soulmate,” proclaimed a confident Abbie.

“Soulmate? I can’t even believe I am hearing these words leave your lips. I’ve never heard you describe anyone, not even Steven, as your soulmate,” stated a bewildered Maria.

Abbie remained calm and serene and said, “That’s because I never met my soulmate until tonight.”

“If this ever gets back to Steven, he is going to be crushed. I am terrified to ask this next question, did anything more happen than kissing.”

“There may have been some over the clothes hand wandering, but I assure you it was PG-13 at most. But I was up for more if he pursued it.”

Maria’s face expressed the shock she was feeling inside. “Oh my God! Are you telling me that you would’ve slept with this man if he wanted it?”

Abbie smiled and responded with a catchphrase she is famous for, “You got that

right!”

At this point, Maria was beside herself. “I don’t know if I’m ready to hear anymore. It’s been a long time since I’ve pictured you with anybody but Steven. I know he broke up with you, but it just feels wrong. I mean, come on, Abbie, you don’t even know his name? You couldn’t have been with them for more than an hour or two. So how can you say he is your soulmate?”

“I don’t know for certain how far I would’ve gone with him so soon after the breakup, but I wanted more. I’ll explain why I don’t know his name in the second. But I want to say that none of it felt wrong to me. All of it felt right.”

Abbie could see that Maria was still struggling and tried to find a way to comfort her. “I know it’s hard to think of me with someone besides Steven. Until tonight, I felt the same way. Compared to Mystery Man, I was slow to recognize the feelings we had for each other. He didn’t reveal his feelings for me until he could see that I was ready. He was quickly able to show me that Steven and I were not right for each other. Somehow Steven knew it, and I didn’t.”

“But Steven regrets what he did. He wants it to work between you two.”

“Steven is just scared to be alone. He waited five years to propose and broke the engagement because deep inside, he knows we are not right for each other. Steven and I have a checkbox relationship,” explained Abbie.

“What does that even mean?”

“It means he checks all my boxes, and I check all of his. The relationship looks good on paper. It may even look good in practice. Mystery Man helped me understand what I think Steven inherently knows. There is something seriously lacking in that relationship. Steven and I are both settling for each other. Steven and I are comfortable together, but there is no passion. When he’s not around, it’s no big deal. It’s not a problem because, like clockwork, I’ll see him on the weekend.”

“What’s the problem with that?” asked Maria, sincerely trying to understand.

“I don’t want to be in a relationship anymore with someone I am comfortable being without. I want to be in a relationship with someone who I am uncomfortable being without. Does that make any sense?” Abbie asked, hoping that Maria was getting on board with her new perspective.

Maria paused for a second to consider what Abbie was saying. “I think I get what

you're saying. While from the outside, you and Steven look like a great match, but inside, it's all routine and no passion or excitement. And you want to be with someone you miss terribly when they are not around instead of the mediocre feelings you feel when you and Steven are apart. Is that about right?"

"That's a good summary. Steven and I have never been passionate about each other. I want that feeling, Maria. I deserve that. So do you, so does everyone. Don't you want to find your soulmate? The one you can't bear to be without. The one who makes you feel wonderful with nothing more than a simple touch. Don't you want that, Maria?" asked Abbie, almost pleading with Maria to understand.

"Of course I want that. Who doesn't? I guess that just seems more like movie magic than real life. Are you sure you're done with Steven? Do you still love him?" asked Maria.

"I was thinking about that after my shower. I do still love Steven, and it's more than just friendship. I love Steven like a boyfriend, but not a soulmate, and not a life partner."

"Are you sure that you couldn't have that was Steven if you both made an effort? How do you know it would be any different with your Mystery Man?"

Abbie explained, "It would be awkward to try and manufacture that feeling with Steven. It's just not there. It's over between him and me. I already have that feeling, that passion, that emotion with my Mystery Man. It was effortless to fall for him. I don't have to manufacture anything. I may not be as certain as he is that fate brought us together, but I am getting there. And I am 100% sure he is the right man for me."

"As I hear you explain things, the more I'm beginning to see your relationship with Steven in a different light. I am not as convinced as you are that you couldn't make things work with Steven, but I do get what you're saying. This might be easier if I knew more about this Mystery Man of yours. Can you tell me why you don't even know his name?"

"Sure! The thing about my Mystery Man is that he is all about passion. He's been stuck in comfortable relationships that look good on paper but lacked when it came to feelings of the heart. So he decided to take an all-or-nothing approach and risk loneliness for a chance to find his true love."

Maria interjected, "And he sees you as his one true love? And what does that have to do with not knowing his name?"

"He would say that he knows I am his one true love. He felt it the moment he saw me. He felt like fate had set this all up ahead of time. Eventually, I came around to his way of thinking. But he could see that my confidence wavered a bit. And he also thought it

was important that I find closure with Steven, even if it meant giving Steven another chance. He also said it was important for my friends and family to see me single for a while. So that they won't think he is nothing more than a rebound relationship," replied Abbie, still not answering Maria's question.

"Honestly, that all makes a lot of sense. But it still doesn't explain why you don't know his name."

"Mystery Man knows that if he gives me any information about him, the first thing I'm going to do, we would do, is hop on the Internet and find out everything there is to know about him."

"Damn right we would! And why is this a problem?" questioned Maria.

"He said it was a problem because then I'm going to try to make the relationship work on paper. He doesn't want to risk this becoming a checkbox relationship. He assured me that we most certainly both check each other's boxes, but that's not what he's after. And now that I understand things differently, it's not what I'm after either. He wants the feeling to sustain us until the next time we see each other."

"When do you plan to see him again?"

Abbie laid out their plan. "His lease is up in a few months, so we decided to meet again at 12 noon, three months from today at the exact location fate first brought us together. Then I'm going to help him find an apartment in town, and we're going to start a relationship."

"It all sounds so unreal. But, Abbie, the most important thing to me is that you're safe and happy. I can't help but worry this Mystery Man fantasy that you have comes crashing down on you. I am glad that I have three months to get used to the idea. Of course, I will support you, no matter what. But I also plan to protect you if I see this thing going sideways."

Abbie smiled and gave Maria a hug. "I wouldn't want it any other way!"

"While the whole thing makes me nervous, I gotta say in the ten years that I've known you and the many guys you've crushed on, I've never seen you look like this before."

"You mean that I look like I've been touched by an angel?" Abbie said with a wide smile.

"That is exactly what I mean."

Maria and Abbie spent a few more minutes talking before retiring to bed. They both agreed to keep Mystery Man a secret between them for now. Neither of them wanted to hurt Steven and decided silence was the best way to prevent that from happening.

Chapter Four

Abbie was finishing her morning routine before Steven arrived. She felt as well prepared as she could be for what was certain to be a painful conversation. A full night's sleep served to strengthen Abbie's resolve. She knew she was making the right decision.

She felt it was a huge benefit that she and Steven had been together for so long that she knew him inside and out. She knew that she had to be firm in her decision. So that Steven would know she was committed to the breakup. At the same time, she still did love Steven in the way that she could and planned to be compassionate and caring in the process. She had mentally visualized their upcoming conversation several times this morning and was confident she knew how it would play out.

On this day, the only communication they had was the texts establishing a time for him to come over. Abbie heard Steven knocking on the door and went to answer it. She opened the door to find a humble Steven looking down and waiting to be invited in. Abbie hugged Steven and told him that she was not angry with him. She directed him to sit on the sofa while she got them each a cold bottle of water.

Steven said, "Let me start. I want to apologize for what I did last night. I got cold feet and acted without thinking it through. When you told me to pack up my stuff, I wasn't sure what to do. I grabbed a large garbage bag and started to put my things in there. It was then that I realized I had just thrown our whole relationship away, and that was a mistake. By the time I ran out to find you, your car was gone. I drove everywhere I could think of to find you until Maria told me that you had arrived safely home.

"Abbie, I love you. I don't want to throw away everything we built together. I know the stakes are higher than they have been in the past. Maria told me not to expect you to easily forget what happened last night and want to get back together. I plan to do whatever it takes to earn back your trust and show you that I am serious about this. This will never happen again!

"Please forgive me and give me another chance. If you're not ready to put this ring on, I'll save it until you are. I don't care about the money. If you want me to exchange this for another one, let's go right now to pick up whatever you want!

"So what do you say, Abbie? Can we give this another try?"

So far, everything Steven said matched Abbie's expectations, and she was ready with her reply. "I know you're going to want to interrupt me, but let me just say what I have to

say before you reply. The first thing I want to say is you were right to break up with me last night.”

Abbie could see that Steven anxiously wanted to interrupt her, but he held back. Abbie continued, “I have no regrets. Somehow you saw what I couldn’t see the whole time. We got comfortable and settled for each other. I do love you, but not the kind of love that makes a lifetime relationship successful. As much as we may care about each other, we lack that deeper love and passion that I want in my life. I want you to have that in your life.

“The only reason you want to get back together right now is that you are scared. I’m scared too. The next few weeks, maybe months, are going to be excruciatingly painful. A giant hole is about to appear where our relationship used to be. That’s what you realized last night when you were packing your stuff. Delaying the pain is not going to do either of us any good. It’s time to end this relationship.

“I know that you feel that you need to pull out all the stops to change my mind. And if you need to do that, go ahead. I won’t throw away any flowers you give me. I’ll enjoy them or share them with others. If you buy me any gifts, I’ll donate them to charity. But there’s one thing that is important to me, Steven. Know when it is time to stop. Also understand, I will not change my mind under any circumstances. The best thing is just to let this go now.

“One last thing before I turn the conversation back to you. Even if there were the tiniest fraction of a chance that we would get back together, and there isn’t, I wouldn’t want that ring. So don’t do anything stupid and keep the ring. Get your money back. I want you to. That ring is for another woman, not me. Look at me straight in the eyes and promise me that you are going to return that ring when you leave here.”

Steven looked disappointed and said, “I promise I’ll return the ring today.”

“Thank you,” replied Abbie.

“Abbie, I feel you got this all wrong. We love each other, and we’re good together. I just got the wedding jitters. That’s all it was. Give me another chance,” pleaded Steven.

“Steven, you’ve had the jitters for at least three years. The jitters would come back sooner or later if we got back together. It was good, and we were comfortable. That’s just not enough for me anymore. Is that really good enough for you? It doesn’t matter what your answer is because actions speak louder than words.

“We’ve been together for five years, and we’ve never once talked about moving in

together. You knew I wanted a proposal years ago, and then when you finally propose, you're asking about return policies. Steven, it's okay. I'm not angry. It all is happening how it's supposed to. Please let us go."

Steven had never heard Abbie speak this way before. He always knew that he could get her back after a fight or a mini breakup. But she had a different look in her eyes and a different tone to her voice this time around.

Steven asked, "I want to get back together, Abbie. Are you sure this isn't some test, telling me to stay away, just to see if I care enough to make an effort to win your trust back? If so, I'll do it. I don't want to break up."

Abbie replied, "This is no trick. What we had is over. Of course, you want to try, that always worked in the past. But truthfully, my respect for you would skyrocket if you just let this go."

"Is that really what you want?" asked a humble Steven.

Abbie leaned in, placed her hands over his, and answered, "Yes, Steven, that's what I want."

"Alright, Abbie, I'll give you what you ask for. If it's got to end, I want it to end on the best of terms. Can we at least still be friends?"

Abbie hugged Steven and said, "Thank you. I spent a lot of time thinking about being friends. I don't think there's any way that we will ever be able to hang out together. And for the next few months, I think we should make reasonable efforts to avoid each other. But once we've both healed and moved on, I hope we can reach out to each other if there is ever a great need. If there is some sort of family crisis, or you get a big promotion at work, I hope that you'll feel free to contact me. And I hope that you can be that for me as well."

Steven replied, "Of course, I'll be there for you, Abbie, anytime. So now the big question. What do we tell everyone?"

"I think we should tell the truth. Tell them we love each other, and we had a good relationship, but we both felt that it was time to move on to something new. We can let everybody know we parted on good terms and have absolutely no regrets.

"Relatively speaking, I feel really good about where things are with us right now. I don't think we should say anymore. So let's end the conversation here."

Abbie stood up and reached out her hand toward Steven. He took her hand, and

they walked to the front door. Abbie opened the door for Steven. He stepped outside and turned around to receive a hug from her.

Steven was hoping his sad look would buy him some sympathy as he asked, "Is there any chance I can get a goodbye kiss?"

Abbie gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and said, "You go get that ring returned now."

Steven walked away a defeated man. Abbie closed the door, climbed into bed, and spent the rest of the day crying.

Chapter Five

Abbie barely got any sleep all night. The day had finally arrived for her reunion with Mystery Man. She could hear that Maria was finally up and making coffee. The clock read 9:00 am. This meant only three hours until she reunites with her soulmate.

Abbie spent the last couple of hours trying to decide what outfit to wear. She couldn't make up her mind and decided to call in reinforcements. Abbie yelled out, "Maria, come here! I need you!"

A few minutes later, Maria arrived with 2 cups of coffee, handing one to Abbie. Abbie said, "Are you crazy? I am already bouncing off the walls. The last thing I need is caffeine."

Both Maria and Abbie laughed at her remark.

Maria asked, "Are you really going to go through with this?"

"Of course! Why would I bail out now?" replied Abbie.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Abbie. I'm worried about you."

Abbie tried to comfort Maria. "There is nothing to worry about. I'm fine!"

"That's partly why I'm worried. You have been looking forward to this day for months, and you're so sure it's going to go well. But what if he doesn't show? You're going to feel devastated!"

Abbie joked, "No, I won't. We already have a plan for that. If either of us doesn't show, we wait one week and meet again at noon. If he doesn't show a second time, then I'll be devastated."

Abbie's efforts to lighten the mood were of little comfort to Maria. Maria said, "What if he does show and doesn't feel the same as you do? You are not preparing yourself at all if things don't go well."

"I don't want to live that way anymore. What's the point of stressing something that is likely not to happen. Right or wrong, Mystery Man convinced me to embrace the feeling of our connection. That's what I am going to do!"

"I can see you have your mind made up. I suppose the worst thing would be not to go today because then you'll never know. But I have one demand, and it's non-negotiable. I am driving you there. I want to make sure you're safe," said Maria.

"I won't fight you on that! My head is in the clouds. There is no way I'd be able to navigate there by myself. Plus, I want you to meet him! Now can we move on? I need help deciding what to wear."

Maria laughed and said, "Yes, we can move on. What are the choices?"

"The weather is going to be perfect today. So I have lots of options." Abbie held up each outfit as she displayed her options. "I have my favorite little black dress, this sundress, jeans and a top, and a short set."

"What are you going to be doing today?" asked Maria.

"I set up some appointments today. We are going to be apartment hunting for him."

"What are you going for, play it cool or maximum impact?" asked Maria.

Abbie smiled and said, "Maximum impact!"

Maria took another look at the outfits before making her suggestion. "I would save the black dress for your first dinner date. I've seen you in that sundress, and you look amazing! So if you're looking for maximum impact, that's what I'd pick."

"The sundress it is!" said Abbie.



Abbie and Maria were in the same car approaching the final hill before the meeting spot. However, the driver, Maria, and the passenger Abbie were having two completely different experiences.

Abbie's excitement was palpable, as was her optimism. Unfortunately, Maria's emotions were the polar opposite. Maria was certain Mystery Man was not going to show, and her friend was going to suffer. They were one minute away from finding out which perspective was correct.

When they reached the top of the hill, only a seatbelt prevented Abbie from popping up and hitting her head on the ceiling of the car. She couldn't be more excited. Mystery Man was already there waiting. His car was facing the same direction they were driving. He was leaning on the hood of his vehicle facing in the opposite direction. It didn't appear that he saw them yet.

Abbie shouted, "He's here! He's here!"

Maria pulled over to the side of the road and put the car in park.

“Why did you pull over?” asked Abbie.

“I didn’t want to say anything until I knew if he showed or not. I happen to know that Steven is not with anyone, and he still asks about you. I can’t make any promises, but that door is probably still open if you want.”

Abbie paused her excitement for a moment so that Maria could see that she was serious. “Even if things don’t develop with Mystery Man, Steven is my past. He is not my present, and he is not my future. Getting over Steven was harder than I thought. I cried every day for two weeks straight.”

Maria interjected, “I know. I was there.”

“Then you remember that I finally decided to let it go. And since then, haven’t I been happy?”

“You been happier than I’ve ever seen you. And honestly, it’s kind of annoying sometimes,” Maria said, laughing at her own joke.

“That’s because I finally moved on and started looking forward to my future, a future that happens to be waiting for me at the bottom of this hill. So let’s get going!”

“Okay, but if I sense any danger, I’m going to keep driving. And I want you to stay in the car until I feel comfortable letting you out. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” said Abbie.

Maria put the car in drive and proceeded slowly past Mystery Man’s car. She didn’t sense any danger, so she pulled over about 20 feet ahead of him. Abbie grabbed the leather jacket and looked over to her friend, and asked, “Can I get out now?”

Maria looked in her rearview mirror and saw Mystery Man smiling, waiting for Abbie. Maria said, “I can see how excited you are. And I know you want to go out there, run and jump on him.”

“You got that right!” Abbie said with a big smile.

“For now, just play it cool. We don’t know how he is feeling. You don’t want to be humiliated if he doesn’t share your enthusiasm. I’ll give you two a few minutes to get reacquainted, and then I will come out to meet him. You can go.”

Abbie decided to follow Maria’s advice and play it cool for now. However, there was little she could do to hide her excitement. Her ear-to-ear grin could only be matched by the smile of the man smiling back at her.

She walked up to him and said, "You're here!"

Mystery Man smiled and said, "There is nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Are you here for the jacket or the girl?"

"What jacket?" said Mystery Man, making it clear that he was here for her.

Somehow Abbie's smile grew even wider as she said, "Good! I was planning to keep it. It's mine now. But I'll be happy to let you borrow it anytime you want."

Neither were sure what they should do. Should they hug? Should they kiss? Maria's presence, peering at them through the rearview mirror, made the situation feel awkward. Abbie twisted her body and waved for Maria to come and meet her Mystery Man.

Maria took her time getting out of the car. The first thing she noticed as she approached was that these two couldn't take their eyes off each other. Eventually, Maria made her way next to Abbie.

Abbie made the introductions. "Mystery man, this is Maria, my best friend of 10 years, my roommate, and apparently my bodyguard for the day. Maria, this is Mystery Man."

Mystery Man temporarily broke his gaze on Abbie and turned to Maria. He flashed his confident smile and put out his hand. As Maria shook his hand, he said, "I am pleased to meet you, Maria. My name is Noah."

Hearing Noah's name for the first time caused Abbie to bounced up and down with child-like excitement. She instantly decided that the name Noah was the most awesome name in the world.

Maria returned the pleasantry. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Maria had expected a strong, firm handshake to match his stature, and was surprised at how gentle the handshake was. Her father had always told her that you can tell a lot from a person's handshake. Noah's handshake, seemed to say, "I care."

Noah's gaze had already returned to Abbie. Prompting Maria to say, "I'm feeling like a third wheel here. I am going to let you two have your space. But I'm still keeping an eye out. I am going to pull down there on the other side of the road. Wave if you need me, Abbie."

While keeping his gaze locked in the direction of Abbie, Noah pulled out his wallet and handed it to Maria.

Maria asked, "What's this for?"

"I figured you want to know all about me. If you can get a signal, my wallet has my name, business card, and everything you need to know to find me on the Internet."

Maria was impressed by this gesture. She decided to take it a step further. She put out her hand and said, "Your keys?"

Abbie scolded, "Maria! He already gave you his wallet."

Noah laughed and handed Maria his car keys and said, "I don't mind. I admire a woman who looks out for her friends."

Abbie said, "Wait up, Maria." She turned back to Noah, smiled, and said, "I'll be right back. I want to put my jacket in the car." Then she told Noah, "Don't you go anywhere!"

Noah replied, "Why would I? How could I?"

Abbie laughed and said, "Good point!" And then headed toward Maria's car.

They got in the car together to have a quick talk.

Seeking Maria's assessment of Noah, Abbie asked, "Okay, give it to me straight. What do you think of him?"

Maria smiled and said, "What do I think of him? Hubba hubba, that's what I think."

Abbie couldn't be more excited to hear Maria's words. "Really!?"

Maria was excited to share her observations with Abbie. "Oh my God! Abbie, you described him so perfectly! You were right. As big as he is, he is gentle and considerate. He may not have Steven's pretty-boy looks, but he is so much more attractive!"

Abbie's excitement intensified with Maria's every word. "You really mean this? You're not just saying this?"

"I am being totally honest. Until today, I couldn't imagine you with anybody but Steven. But now that I've seen you two together, I can't see you with anybody else but Noah. You know how much I care for Steven. But all of a sudden, he seems like just a boy. Noah is clearly all man!"

Abbie squealed and giggled with excitement and gave her friend a big hug and said, "I'm so glad you like him."

"I do like him. I'll tell you what I like most about him. It's the way he looks at you. You

look smokin' hot in that dress, and I don't even think he noticed it. It didn't matter what you were wearing. He was dialed into you!"

Abbie said, "I'm so happy. So does he have your official seal of approval?"

The always protective Maria said, "He'll still have to prove himself, and my mobile does have signal, so I do plan to check him out. But so far, I like everything I see."

Abbie put the leather jacket in the back seat, gave Maria another hug, and exited the vehicle. She waited there until Maria pulled away. Then she slowly approached Noah as she had before. No words needed to be said as they embraced and kissed for the first time in three months.

Abbie looked up at Noah and said, "That was just like I remember. Kissing you feels like...like...like home."

"Be honest, did you have any doubts since the last time I saw you?" asked a curious Noah.

Abbie laughed as she said, "Only about a dozen times!" Abbie continued, "There were times when anxiety would overcome me. It all seemed so crazy. But I would take a deep breath and remember the way you touched me, the way you kissed me, and the way you held me, and in no time at all, I was right as rain. If I were really anxious, I'd wear your jacket. It had a calming effect on me. But it's been weeks since I've had any doubts."

Abbie said, "How about you? I can't imagine you had any doubts."

Noah lowers his head to appear shameful.

"Really? You had doubts!? You always seemed so confident," said Abbie.

Noah lowered his voice, pretending to be embarrassed, and said, "Yes, Abbie. I had doubts. The minute you drove away, I thought to myself, *What was I thinking! I don't want to wait three months. I should have said two months. That would've been plenty of time for her to wrap things up at home!*"

Abbie laughed as she realized Noah was just having fun with her. "Are you being serious, or are you just saying that to be charming?"

"Both! In fact, I was so serious that I came here at noon a month ago in hopes you had the same thought. And then I've come every week since, just in case," said Noah.

"Wow, that's a long drive, isn't it?" asked Abbie

“Two and a half hours each way, plus a couple of hours waiting and hoping you’d come.”

“That’s like seven hours! You did that four times just in the hope I’d be here too?”

“Yep!” Noah said with a proud smile.

“Impressive! You are already baking some major boyfriend points.”

“I can’t wait to redeem them,” Noah said with a sexy smile.

“Me either!”

Abbie and Noah spent a few silent moments looking deep into each other’s eyes. Their next kisses were the most connective yet. These kisses established an unspoken bond of their commitment to a future together. A warm, loving embrace followed.

Abbie looked up at Noah and asked, “Noah, may I know what my future last name will be?”

Noah responded, “Jenkins.”

“Abbie Jenkins! I love the sound of that. I’d be moving up in the alphabet!” Abbie then asked, “Does it bother you that I’m already thinking about marriage?”

Noah smiled and said, “Nope! Would it surprise you if I told you that I would be shocked if there is not a ring on your finger by this time next year?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me at all. You seem like a man who is not going to wait very long when he knows what he wants.”

Noah peered deep into Abbie’s eyes and proclaimed, “This is going to work, isn’t it?”

Abbie responded, “You got that right!”

Coaching Notes

General Questions and discussion points

1. Pros and cons for Omniscient POV? Also discuss switching POV's in general.
2. Pros and cons for writing in Past-Tense
3. Is it a sin if consecutive paragraphs in a scene start with the same word. E.G. For example. "Abbie Opens the Door....Abbie gets dressed..., etc." I find this happens to me when a scene is more narrative than dialogue.
4. Dialogue tags. Is there any guideline on how often and when to use them. Currently I just go by feel. If I feel one is needed, I'll add it.
5. Excessive, Expressive Dialogue Tags. I have been careful not to use them excessively. But there are times when I want to use them, but am concerned its amateurish or writer **faux pas**.
6. How serious a faux pas is it to end sentences in a preposition. I asked this both for dialogue and narrative. I find I often end sentences in prepositions and it doesn't 'sound' wrong to me, but my grammar checker always complains. I'd like to discuss this.



Story Specific Questions and Issues

1. I'd like to speak in detail about the scene in the car. In particular I'd like to discuss my use of "mystery man" and "her mystery man." I would also like to discuss the ratio of dialogue to narrative. One of my uncertainties in writing is knowing how much dialogue is too much dialogue. Note: For this draft, I decided to treat Mystery Man like a proper name, because that is how it is mostly used.

2. I can be a little confused when it comes to the definitions of chapters and scenes. I'd like to work through this short story and discuss where chapter breaks and scene breaks would be if this were a novella.
3. Since much of the story is dialogue, I want to make sure that it is always clear who is speaking. Keep that in mind as you read the story.
4. Is my dialogue concise enough. I know some of the dialogue could be trimmed without much impact to the integrity of the story. But I am not sure if and what dialogue to trim.