

Mary Poser



By

Angel A

Poser: (*noun*) A person who strives for social approval by mastering stereotypical behavior.

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

 *Rumi*

Prologue

I'm confused. I haven't missed church on Sunday since I was six. And that day, it was only because my dumb kid brother cast a fishhook through my ear, and I ended up in the hospital in the company of a doctor and a pair of pliers. I've jumped through every hoop my family, my friends, and even my boss have told me to jump through. Everyone tells me I'm so cookie cutter perfect, I'm starting to think I was born in a cake tin. I've always got a smile on my face no matter how fake it feels. If I dressed any more 'country,' they'd stand me on the Nashville turnoff to wave to folks as they drove into town. I studied my butt off and completed both my degrees in sociology and theology with honors. I actually only wanted to study sociology, but I figured I'd make both Mama and God proud by adding religion to my list of interests. They elected me as valedictorian at Vanderbilt and, notwithstanding my morbid fear of public speaking, I did my best to make the university proud of me too. Despite all these efforts, my long-term boyfriend who seemed more in love with his guitar than me, dumped me with the usual, "it's not you, it's me" speech. My life has turned out to be a twenty-three-year-old version of what I've been doing all my life—desperately trying to make everyone else happy. I'd scream if I weren't so busy being the poster girl for "sweet and accommodating."

So why am I not happy? If there's a recipe for happiness, then God, my family, and the rest of the world have been holding back the secret ingredient. I put in four years' hard labor with Mr. Right despite his distracted behavior. Mama and Daddy were so proud of his emerging singing career. I felt like such a failure to them for not holding his attention long enough for him to put a ring on my finger. Despite this, they still label me as their "good girl." Bless their hearts. I'm just not as good as I'd be if I were married. No one ever tells me I'm a source of disappointment. But I sure feel like it sometimes. Am I the only one who's struggling to keep it together?



This is love: to fly toward a secret, to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment.

First, let go of life.

Finally, take a step out, but not with your feet.

 **Rumi**

Chapter One

I burst into my bedroom naked and dripping wet from the shower. I'm not in the habit of scooting around my apartment in my birthday suit, but I was running awfully late. Charlie looked up at me from his bed with mild curiosity. He's quite accustomed to seeing me rushing about frantically. The fact that I was naked didn't seem to have any impact on his interest. He was probably only looking for clues that he was going to be included in something.

My clothes were laid out on my bed in order of demand. I grabbed my underwear from the corner of the bed closest to the bathroom and slipped them on. Scooping up my bra, I shot my arms through the straps and joined the clips behind my back with lightning speed. I was usually running late and had devised a system to accommodate. Tonight was a big night, and although I was positive no one was going to see my underwear other than Charlie, I'd chosen my favorite Victoria's Secret black lace matching set to at least feel alluring and sexy.

I glanced back at Charlie, who had lost interest and turned his head away to sleep some more. Not a great confidence booster, but I was used to males brilliantly destroying my self-worth with a dismissive gesture. I think it's conditioned me into being a little paranoid about my nudity and the vulnerability of dressing in front of a male. What if he chose to reach for a TV remote to watch something more interesting? I'd be devastated. So I usually avoid the circumstance to save myself the humiliation.

Anyway, I couldn't be angry with Charlie for not commenting on or applauding my black-laced sensuality. He's a dog, and a perfectly adorable one at that. He's a pound mutt that I was told was likely a mix of labrador, terrier, and poodle. It was a rough guess as his curly coat is a random assortment of brown, gray, and tan. He has beautiful brown eyes that are only half visible under his thick bushy eyebrows.

I reached for my 'big night out' red dress with long sleeves that I'd carefully pressed earlier that was also laid out on the bed. I sometimes like to wear long-sleeved dresses because I've got some unsightly scars on my arms that I'd rather cover up. I quickly stepped in through the unzipped back. I wanted to keep the knee-length skirt of the dress off the ground so as not to crease it, so I lifted my other leg high to enter the dress. That didn't work. I hopped around the bedroom with one leg in the dress and one leg out before ungracefully tangling myself up in the material. I lost balance and landed on my butt right in front of Charlie's bed. So much for not creasing my dress. At least I hadn't torn it. Charlie was up and out of his bed in a flash. I had probably scared him awake. He started licking my face, his tail wagging wildly. He eagerly took my prostrate position as an opportunity to climb up and over me for a cuddle. I couldn't push him off. I didn't want to either.

There's something wonderful about a dog's exuberant affection and unconditional love that beats any compliment a man could ever give about my red dress. I resigned myself to wriggling into the dress on the floor while Charlie pinned me down with his wet nose and paws.

Maybe Charlie's role in life was to remind me that I shouldn't be so eager for compliments. If I spent less time worrying about and preparing myself for public display, I could enjoy more time playing and rolling around the floor with my dog.

Who was I kidding? I looked across at my bedside clock radio. The LED display read 6:30 pm. "Oh Lordy, I'm so late!"

Frankie Ballard was singing "Helluva Life" on the radio, an anthem to hard times, simple pleasures, and being a little lost. "I hear ya, Frankie," I remarked as I looked again at the time on the clock, quietly hoping I'd misread it. I hadn't. I rolled my torso out from under Charlie's weight and stood up. It's an escape technique I'd developed from the many occasions Charlie had enjoyed climbing all over me.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," I said apologetically. "I know this means we won't have our evenin' walk tonight. But I promised Chloe I'd come support her Yap promotion, and it's all the way across the river in Green Hills." I stopped for a moment. I'd forgotten what I was doing because I'd been too busy explaining myself to my dog.

"Shoes! I need shoes!" I scrambled to my closet and hunted through sandals, boots, sneakers, and pumps before I found my black high-heeled Christian Louboutin knock-offs. I pulled them out of the closet and resumed giving excuses to Charlie, "Then Chloe and Alice will probably want to go for drinks afterward, maybe even to a club, which means we could end up downtown, and—"

I grabbed my black clutch purse from the dresser. Shoes dangling from my left hand, car keys in my right hand, I high-tailed it out the front door, shouting a final promise to Charlie that I would be back.

Five seconds later, I was back in my apartment, searching desperately for my emergency makeup bag. "Get it together, girl..." I muttered. I finally found it in a corner of my kitchen counter, buried under an avalanche of mail, bills, and invitations to save my soul by attending the Joseph Trinity Revival Meetings on Sundays. All of which tumbled out of my mail tray as I grabbed the makeup bag. I shouted, "I'll be back!" to Charlie and ran out of the apartment *again*. After a quick dash back to make sure the door was locked, I finally made it into my car. It's a blue Mazda hatchback I bought used last year.

I looked through the darkening evening for stray children, pets, bicycles, and other cars, threw my car into reverse, and backed out of my parking space. I'm always impatient waiting for a gap in traffic, so I gunned my car into a small opening. That got me an angry honk from the driver behind. I scooted on down the road for a couple of blocks with Miranda Lambert blasting from my radio about rage and grief her mama couldn't understand. That's a song my mama should listen to.

I live in East Nashville, which I like because it's so green. There are trees everywhere. I'm also just a short drive from Shelby Park, where the dog park that Charlie loves is located. Shelby Avenue is my main drag. I use it to get everywhere, especially over the Cumberland River to go downtown or to visit my Aunt Sara.

I began to put on my foundation, using red lights to do my eyeshadow and mascara. I know it's not the brightest thing to do, but I was in a hurry. I've had to put my makeup on in my car so many times I've got it down to a fine art. I need to use only one hand for my lipstick and rouge, so I'm able to weave in and out of traffic while applying it. If I can gain a few seconds here and there, I can

make up a little for being so late *again*. Chloe was sure to be mad as a hornet because tonight was all about supporting her and her promotional stand at the event for Yap—the social network of the future! She insisted it was going to leave Facebook and Twitter for dust. She'd arranged VIP tickets for Alice and me, and I knew she was depending on us and probably already rehearsing her chiding remarks for my tardiness. I estimated it was a fifteen to twenty-minute drive from my apartment, depending on traffic.

Luke Bryan was rocking out “That’s My Kind of Night,” bless his hunky draws, as I started across the Cumberland River on the Korean War Veterans Memorial Bridge. We call it the Gateway Bridge—I guess because it’s the gateway to all the downtown action. Downtown has the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Broadway, of course, where all the honky-tonk bars shake, rattle, and roll until the wee hours of the morning. I balanced my nail polish bottle in the nearest corner of the box lid sitting beside me on the shotgun seat. The box was stacked with get well cards, another job I was late to deliver on. At least the stacked box held up my nail polish for now. I started brushing red nail polish onto my fingernails as I passed under the sweeping silvery-white arches of the Gateway Bridge.

“Shoot!” I’d forgotten to call my friend and coworker Hannah. What is wrong with me? Well, I’ll just have to call her tomorrow night while I’m baking the pecan pies I promised Mama for the church social on Saturday. Hannah had just broken up with Henry, her boyfriend of three years, because he wouldn’t pop the question. She just had to cut her losses and leave, even if he did have killer abs and a taut butt, which is what had caught her attention in the first place.

I wondered if Mama knew that Hannah and Henry had split up? If she did, that’s all she’d be talking to me about at the church social, until she started talking about my ex, and that just killed me. I didn’t like thinking about him, let alone talking about him. And I really didn’t want to listen to my mama go on and on about what a fool I was to leave such a talented and handsome and nice young man. How was I supposed to tell her that the nice young man made it real clear that I wasn’t good enough for him?

The next step would be to stop her from throwing me at every eligible guy she met when I didn’t want to love, let alone trust, another man for as long as I lived. How could I tell her I’d locked my heart in a steel chest? It was safe and cozy in there, and that’s where I wanted to keep it.

Mama married right out of high school when she was eighteen, and then she had me right on schedule a year later. She thinks I should have done the same. Now, all she can see are the horrors of me being a wrinkly old spinster all alone in the world. She worries that I’ll have no one to cook for and no one but some cats to talk to. When I finally go to bed, I’m sure she thinks I cry into my pillow all night long over the waste I made of my life because I let a nice young man slip through my fingers. That’s why I hope my mama doesn’t know about Hannah and Henry.

Mama loves me, and she means well. It’s just that she considers getting my brother and sister and me to the altar to be one of her main duties in life, and Mama takes her duties very, very seriously. When you’re a pastor’s wife, you have to be a shining example to the congregation, the community, and God...and the Bible is pretty clear about the importance of getting married.

I passed the “nekkid” statue at the end of Music Row, a statue of nine young men and women that celebrates music and life—and nakedness, I guess. It’s pretty racy for a culture that’s proud of its conservative values, according to Mama anyway. I began to breathe again because I now had a straight shot to Green Hills.

The Green Hills Regal Cinema is catty-corner to the upscale mall across from the parking garage. Thank God! was all I could think as I finally pulled into the cinema's parking structure. I was just about to gun it onto the ramp that would take me to the second level when I saw a big shiny black pickup pulling out of a space on the ground level. A miracle! Thank God again. I darted into it, set the brake, opened the car door, and slid on my high heels. How did I look? Imagine Mae West, a curvaceous dame with long waves of lush blonde hair and a bust you could set a dinner plate on. That's what I like to imagine anyway. Sure, I'm blonde, and my hair is long and can hold a curl or two for a couple of hours, but God had clearly run out of the ample-bosomed molds when he was designing me. I'm told my butt is worth a second glance, though. It should be. I work on it enough at the gym! But I think my legs are my feature. So killer heels are always a high priority in my wardrobe.

I hit the ground running. I dashed past the pedestrians in the parking lot and shuffled through the folks mingling outside the cinema on my way to the red carpet—a real red carpet!—and ended up outside a big white tent with security guards limiting entry to only those with official passes.

I stopped. I had no choice by the look the security guy gave me. I opened my purse and pulled out the plastic encased name card Chloe had got for me—“Nashville Film Festival - SPONSOR Mary Poser”—and slid its cord over my neck so that the card hung down over my chest. The security guy relaxed his staunch posture and kindly stepped away for me to enter. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and walked further into the tent annex. I had made it, I was alive, and now I didn't have to do anything except give Chloe my moral support. No responsibilities for the next hour or two. Another miracle! I didn't have to think about Mama or Daddy or the church or my ex or no marriage prospects or work or Charlie or anything. I just had to focus on having fun.

Smiling happily, I walked deep into the noisy crowd of people. A musician was strumming out familiar country and western music on his guitar near the tent entrance. With his style and his voice with a distinctly Latino accent, he could have passed for John Wayne and Elvis Presley's Latino love child. He wore cowboy boots and a hat, and his shirt was covered in swirls of brightly colored sequins. I had to scoot around him as I looked for my friends Chloe and Alice. The tent annex has the bar, so the place was packed with the typical Nashville crowd with a mix of casual artsy-looking types to those, like me, who were dolled up for a big event.

You'd think in the capital of country and western music there'd be a lot of bling. But there isn't. This isn't Manhattan or LA, thank God again. This is Nashville, where folks are more relaxed in their attire and those with money prefer to flaunt their wealth with their land and homes.

I blended easily into the crowd as I continued looking for Chloe and Alice. I saw the mayor and his wife, a couple of Metropolitan Council members and their wives, some local TV personalities, and a couple of up-and-coming Hollywood stars who always seem shorter in real life than on the movie screen. But I couldn't see my friends.

So I worked my way into the much bigger main tent, which has the food and a special corner at the far end for Very Important People. *Oh lordy!* I gasped to myself. I was being tasered by a pair of gorgeous dark brown eyes. Goosebumps sprung up all over my skin as if it were Christmas morning.

Until you've found the fire inside yourself, you won't reach the spring of life.

 *Rumi*

Chapter Two

My heart was battering my ribs. The most gorgeous man I'd ever seen in my life was staring at me. His dark brown eyes widened as they met my gaze. Why was he looking at me?

I had to look away. I know what happens when I don't pay attention to where I'm going. I was likely to trip over something or bump into someone's drink. What a great first impression that would make. I had only looked at him briefly, but his image was burned into my retinas. He was likely in his late twenties or early thirties. He was tall, about six feet, with slightly curly black hair that fell past the collar of his white shirt. There was something wildly exotic about him. He definitely wasn't from these parts. He stood out like a Ferrari at a rodeo. He had a beautiful oblong face, a broad forehead, and an archer's-bow mouth with a full lower lip that seemed to burn my mouth from twenty feet away. He had a long, muscular throat and a lean, powerful body draped in a black suit that flowed like liquid silk over his body. His white shirt was partly unbuttoned, so I could see a bit of his well-defined brown chest. How on earth I remembered all that in just a glance is beyond me. It was like every cell in my body recognized and responded to him, but he was completely new to me at the same time.

I stopped breathing. An unfamiliar fear iced my lungs because of this electric connection I'd never felt before and the sudden urge I had to spend the rest of my life just standing there, basking in his hot gaze.

"There you are!" Chloe announced, pulling me into a hug that dragged me out of my intoxicating daydream. "Late again, but at least you're here."

I stared at Chloe, trying to bring myself back into my head, into the tent, and into this crowd of people who had all momentarily disappeared for me. Chloe's my best friend. She's about my height, pretty, with lovely ebony skin and a shapely silhouette—all blessings of her African heritage. When in public, with the way she talks and the way she walks, Chloe is the most perfect Southern belle I've ever known. But behind the scenes, she's got a sassy attitude that can be quite confrontational sometimes. I secretly wished I had even half her self-confidence. Tonight, she was on show with perfect raven hair and perfect makeup, all presented perfectly in an emerald green sheath cocktail dress.

Standing beside her was our friend Alice, a pretty and always cheerful brunette Maori girl from the north island of New Zealand. Alice has beautiful mocha skin and a very pretty Polynesian look about her. She radiates a tomboy cheerfulness that's always fun but sometimes a little rambunctious for some. She was wearing a black A-line dress with a V-neck and three-quarter sleeves. Her ever-present greenstone tiki was dangling between her enviably full breasts. I've never been able to convince Mama that Alice's pendant wasn't a symbol for a foreign devil-worshipping cult.

"Hi, bro," Alice greeted me in her usual casual manner, accompanied by her warm and welcoming smile. I never knew exactly how to respond to being called "bro." I had to constantly remind myself that "bro" is the same as "buddy" here in the US.

My head cleared. Late. I was late again. “Hey, y’all. I’m so sorry! I should’ve called and warned you I was running behind. I just didn’t have time. I had to work late unexpectedly, and then traffic was terrible. I wanted to get you a gift, Chloe, so you’d have a special memento of your first gig as the official coordinator for Yap, and I wanted to get a present for you too, Alice. It took forever to find what I wanted, and then when I finally got home, I started to wrap them but couldn’t find the tape, so I had to go to my neighbor Olivia’s apartment to get some. She was havin’ a problem with her cat because it was coughing up furballs, and she’s seventy-eight and easily flustered—Olivia, I mean, not the cat—so I helped her pour some oil down the cat’s throat to bring up the rest of the furballs. Then I left without the tape and had to go back for it. I finally got your presents wrapped, but then I forgot to bring them because I was rushing to get here. They’re on my kitchen table. I’ll bring them to our lunch tomorrow, I promise. I drove here just as fast as I could and... Well, I’m sorry.”

Alice stared at me, amazed. “How do you do that without breathing, bro?”

“Practice,” said Chloe with a frown. “You’re forgiven, Mary, as always. Let’s get you a drink. What’ll you have? Champagne?”

“Sure.” It’s always an obligation to drink with Chloe. I’m not that keen for alcohol, but heaven forbid I ever order a juice or pop. So I just order whatever makes her happy for me to drink.

Chloe smiled broadly at me, knowing full well I was fixing to make her happy. “What about you Alice, champagne?”

“Beer. Thanks, bro.”

Chloe winked at us. “I’ll be right back.”

While we waited, Alice told me about her latest part-time job. She now worked in the box office of the Grand Ole Opry. I barely heard her because I was looking for the man with the heart-stopping brown eyes.

I spotted him near the crowded buffet. But he wasn’t alone. My spirit sank. He was chatting with a young and impossibly beautiful Middle Eastern-looking woman with flawless olive skin. Her head and shoulders were covered by a black silk scarf that flowed across her shoulders and partway down her back. Her perfect hourglass body was wrapped in a gorgeous white silk dress. *Oh well*, was all I could think as I prepared to talk myself into philosophies about what was and wasn’t meant to be. I couldn’t compete with someone like that. *No one* could compete with someone like that.

“Here you go!” Chloe sang out.

I grabbed the champagne she handed me and took a larger than usual sip. The bubbly alcohol shocked me back into my senses, or at least helped begin the process of dulling them. Either way, it helped.

“I’ve earned this,” Chloe was saying after taking a sip of her champagne. “Yap loves me. I’ve generated a tremendous buzz about them throughout the film festival, and the VP in charge of operations asked me earlier today to work on the event planning for their IPO announcement in June.”

The beautiful Eastern woman was laughing at something my heart-stopper had said, and I could feel myself reacting to the very notion of him charming her.

“That’s amazing, bro,” Alice said.

“Um...yeah. Congratulations, Chloe,” I said with forced enthusiasm.

“It’ll be tight,” Chloe said, “because I’ll also be working on promoting Bugle Records at the CMA Music Festival, but I can do it.”

The Eastern woman was walking away from my heart-stopper. Yay! Now, if he’d just stick to the plainer, more wholesome females in this crowd, I’d be—

He suddenly locked eyes with me again, and I was nearly knocked out of my heels with surprise. My heart was pounding again. It scared me to be so easily affected by a look. I couldn't catch my breath. All I could think of was why was he staring at *me*?

And why was I staring at him?

Why couldn't I look away?

I watched as he walked up to an attractive guy about his age, a little shorter and more casually dressed. I watched as the two of them began to make their way through the crowd. I watched as the two men walked right up to us!

I was shaking so badly I was sure I'd spill my drink.

"Excuse me," the heart-stopper said to Chloe. Why wasn't he talking to *me*? "Are you local?"

"Well, my friend Mary and I are," Chloe said with a brilliant smile. "Our friend Alice is from New Zealand. I'm Chloe."

"I'm Simha. Simha Das," said the most gorgeous man I'd ever met in the most enticing accent I'd ever heard, "and this is my friend Rob."

"A pleasure, ladies," said Rob with a cheeky smile.

"We're filmmakers," Simha said.

"On the cusp of fame and fortune!" said Rob, with what was now obviously a New York area accent.

"We're here for the film festival," Simha pressed on. "Are you in the industry too?"

"I'm an actor," said Chloe brightly. "Well, you know, an *emerging* actor, but I've already appeared in three music videos, including one for Taylor Swift. My day job is working as an event planner for a local company, Gideon Events. Maybe you've heard of us? I'm here to promote Yap, the new social networking site, but some of us," she glared at me, "just turned up in time for the drinks."

"You know," said Rob, "we should make a documentary about this. The interesting interactions and experiences of a couple of filmmakers attending a film festival. It would be a huge hit...at least at film festivals."

Alice looked puzzled. "What did you say your name is?"

"Simha."

Alice grinned. "What a crazy-ass name."

Chloe and I both glared at her, but it had no impact. It never does. Whatever Alice thinks, she says.

"Ask him what it means," said Rob with a grin.

"I'll bite," said Alice. "What does it mean?"

"Simha is the Sanskrit word for lion," said the beautiful man in his beautiful voice.

"Sanskrit?" said Chloe.

"It's an ancient language of India."

"You're a lion?" said Alice. "Well spank me, that's so cool!"

Simha grinned, and I suddenly felt like I could feel myself being physically pulled across the table into his warm smile. "Thank you," he said. "I think so, too."

"So," said Rob with a flirtatious smile at Alice, "what's a gorgeous Kiwi like yourself doing in Nashville?"

"Just following the road signs, bro."

"To where?"

"Wherever they take me."

“What made you stop in Nashville?”

Alice shrugged. “I don’t know, bro. This is where I’m meant to be right now.” She pressed her fist to her heart. “I just feel it.”

“Tell me,” Chloe jumped in because Chloe hates not being the center of attention, “what kind of films do you make, Rob?”

“He makes Modernist New Wave musicals,” Simha joked.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin with that,” Rob retorted. “I, ladies, make film noir thrillers.”

Alice turned to me. “Are they still speaking English?”

While Rob was explaining his film genre, Simha Das turned slightly and looked right at me.

I forgot how to breathe.

He seemed to shimmer in an aura of masculinity, sensuality, and sophistication. If he’d said he was from a different planet, I wouldn’t have questioned it. I couldn’t look away.

“So, Simha, what kind of films do you make?” Chloe demanded eagerly.

He turned back to her, breaking the spell he’d been weaving. “I prefer to work with music and dance and spirit-based stories,” he replied. He looked up and nodded to someone behind me. I couldn’t help but follow his gaze. I noticed Chloe and Alice were just as captivated by his every gesture.

A shaggy-haired, artsy-looking guy wearing a hat, a bit shorter than Rob and probably in his mid-thirties, staggered toward us with an eager smile. He had clearly interpreted Simha’s nod as an invitation. He worked his way up to us through the crowd with a distinct lack of poise and balance. He was clearly drunk.

Simha politely introduced him to everyone as Virgil, a producer from LA, and, darn it, he casually latched onto me! Just when there were enough men to go around, I got stuck with an intoxicated producer named Virgil, who quickly made it clear that I was so lucky to meet him. He started asking me what films I’d seen at the festival and, particularly, if I’d seen his “amazing” movie, *Orion’s Belt Buckle*. When I explained I hadn’t seen any of the films, he started to tell me, scene by scene, the plot of his movie. Now, in the South, we’re trained to be sweet and accommodating under all circumstances. It’s called Southern comfort. It’s an attitude, not a drink. This was one of those times where I had to paint on the sweetest smile I could muster and ride out the conversational storm as he excitedly slurred his way through a speech about his work and anecdotes about himself with the assumed possibility of impressing me into his hotel bed.

Drunks always make me uncomfortable. I don’t know whether it’s the loud and imposing behavior or the lack of a filter in their rambling that does it. I’d come across my fair share in the years I followed my ex and my brother and their trio The Nashbros in and out of Nashville’s bars in my loyal attempt to support their music career. All I could think of behind my accommodating smile was how on earth was I going to get out of this?

“Virgil,” said Simha, taking his arm and turning him away from me, “have you met Alice? I bet you can’t guess where her accent is from.”

“Start talkin’, angel face,” Virgil said, happily throwing an arm over Alice’s shoulder. I felt sorry for Alice, but I was happy for the escape. We could call it sharing the load.

I was feeling a mixture of relief and gratitude, and then Simha touched me. He took my elbow and fried every synapse in my brain as he pulled me a couple of steps away from the other four.

“Have you lived in Nashville all your life?” he asked in his low, caressing voice.

Had I lived in Nashville all my life? I couldn’t remember.

The festival guitarist began to sing a rocking Latino cover of "Sweet Caroline."

"Um..." I said brightly, my mind a complete blank as I looked at everyone and everything except Simha, desperate for something, anything, to say on any subject.

A lift in the music jump-started my brain. "Yes," I replied gratefully. "Both sides of my family have lived here for a few generations."

"Really?" Simha said. "So this town is your—"

The singer began singing the chorus of "Sweet Caroline". A familiar cue popped into my head from the lyrics of the song.

I turned automatically with Chloe, Alice, and every other local in the tent to sing loudly, "Dum-dum-dum!" It's a regular Nashville thing. I turned back to Simha. "Sorry! You were saying?"

"I was wondering if you also work for Yap?" Simha asked politely.

The party singer continued to offer us cues in the song that were an ode to good times—good times we were all having right then.

Chloe pulled at my elbow enthusiastically. The crowd responded to the singer again. Chloe, Alice, and I had our own version of the reply to sing. "So good! So fine! All mine!"

I returned my attention to Simha. "No, that's Chloe's thing. I'm just here to support her."

"What do you do?"

The singer beckoned us to respond again.

"Dum-dum-dum," I sang along with the crowd, including a lot of the foreigners who were catching on. I looked back to Simha to find him smiling warmly at me.

"Is there more?" he asked.

"No, that's it. Until the next chorus."

We just stood there in the crowded, noisy tent, grinning at each other like teenagers.

"I like it here," he said without taking his eyes off me. Was he talking about Nashville? The festival? Being with me? I really wanted to ask him to be more specific, but it just didn't seem polite. So I diverted to small talk. Sigh.

"So, uh, what have you managed to see so far, besides the film festival, I mean?"

"Well, Rob and I went to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. We also took the backstage tour of the Grand Ole Opry. The people have been great. Southern hospitality is very appealing."

"We take hospitality and good manners very seriously. My mama always says, never offend 'cause you never know who's gonna give you your last drink of water."

Simha laughed warmly.

The song's chorus was back again already, but I didn't want to ignore Simha's conversation again.

"Dum-dum-dum," Simha sang with a broad smile.

The singer continued to prompt the crowd as he strummed his guitar.

"So good! So fine! All mine!" Simha sang along with me as we leaned in toward each other. His eyes never left mine as he sang the lines. I wondered if he could ever mean what he was saying.

The singer finished the final line of the chorus.

"Dum-dum-dum." We sang along with all the exuberance of children who were happy to act foolishly together. I didn't want the moment to ever end.

"What a great shot for the documentary!" Rob said. He pushed his iPhone forward, using it as a video camera to film Simha with me. "This will be great. Showing a more sensitive side of the tyrannical director."

“Rob,” Simha said, a hint of warning in his voice, “do you have to do that?”

“I’m a filmmaker. It’s in my blood.”

Simha gave me an apologetic smile, and I gave him a reassuring one, and we could have just stood there awkwardly smiling at each other, but Rob had other ideas.

“I want to go to a bar! Simha, we need to experience more of this city while we can. Who’s in?” he said. Alice threw her hand up with her usual instant enthusiasm.

“I’m game,” she said happily. Alice and I looked to Chloe. For some reason, she usually had the final say on what we did or didn’t do.

“Let’s go,” said Chloe, eagerly disengaging herself from Virgil, who had moved across to her after falling flat with Alice.

“It could be fun,” I said a little tentatively because I couldn’t read Simha’s expression. Did he want to go or not? “How about Tiny’s? It’s less than ten minutes away.”

“I love Tiny’s!” said Alice.

“Then let’s go,” Rob said with a grin, hooking her arm through his.

I looked at Simha. “I guess we’re goin’ to Tiny’s. Do you, um, want to go in my car?”

“That’d be great,” he said with a warm smile that sprung my heart back up to full throttle against my chest.

I took a steadying breath. “Great!”

We followed Chloe, Alice, and Rob out of the main tent, then the tent annex, and into the cold night air.

“We’ll take my car,” Chloe announced. She makes good money. She’s got a newish Camry.

“I’m going with Mary,” Simha announced.

Chloe raised her eyebrows at that, and Alice grinned. From behind us, Virgil said, “I call shotgun, Chloe.”

We all turned to the LA producer. Was he still with us? I guess so because he proceeded to follow us out of the tent.

“Great!” Chloe said with a forced smile.

“You’re all set then,” I said with an equally determined smile. “We’ll meet you there.”

We crossed the road to the parking structure. Chloe and company turned left, and I turned right with Simha.

“My car isn’t very big, and it sure isn’t fancy,” I warned him.

“As long as it fits the two of us, that’s all we need,” Simha said.

The two of us. Oh lordy. I realized in that crystalline moment that I was alone with him. He was a stranger. And yet he wasn’t a stranger.

I opened the passenger door for him, hurriedly shifted the box lid full of get well cards to the back seat, and then darted around to the driver’s side.

“You drive a manual transmission?” Simha said with surprise as I fastened my seatbelt.

“Anyone who can’t drive a stick-shift in the South should just hang their head in shame.”

I turned the engine over, and Kenny Chesney blasted out of the car radio. I hurriedly turned it off.

“Do you only listen to country music?” Simha asked.

“Of course not! I also listen to western music and classic country,” I joked with a smile.

He chuckled, which distracted me. I nearly backed into Chloe’s car.

Alice was leaning out of the rear passenger window, her arms spread wide as the car sped past. "Woohoo! Look, bro, I'm flying!" Her voice echoed up and down the garage. Chloe dragged her back into the car. "How come she gets a lion?" was the last thing we heard as they drove off.

"Don't mind Alice," I said as I felt my face flush with embarrassment. "She's from New Zealand."

Love is the bridge between you and everything.

 *Rumi*

Chapter Three

We were heading down Hillsboro Pike, and I hadn't realized until just that moment how incredibly small my car is. But I was achingly aware of it now because sitting beside me in the dark was Simha Das. I was breathing in his subtle masculine scent that was my new favorite cologne, and I could sense his long, muscular legs stretched out so near mine. His shoulders were dangerously close to brushing against mine. I seriously needed to get a grip of my senses as they were threatening to drive me to distraction, and I *was* driving.

I was so fixated on not getting us killed as the car scooted on down the road that I didn't have a single intelligent thought in my head. I couldn't think of a thing to say. Blessedly, just when I thought the silence stretching between us was going to make him think he was sitting next to a mannequin with driving skills, he saved us.

"I've never known such a young town with so many churches," Simha said, looking out the passenger window.

"Young? Nashville? I think it's over 200 years old!"

"Comparatively young," he said with a smile.

Oh, right. I'm such a dolt! He comes from a country that's thousands of years old. "We have lots of churches," I said, steering wide of a battered pickup truck that was lazy in keeping a straight line, "because we take religion very seriously in the South, at least on Sundays, and during music award acceptance speeches."

Without looking at him, I could feel his smile. It was a nice feeling.

"Is it important to you?" Simha asked, turning his body to face me.

"Well, I was raised on it. My Daddy is a Baptist pastor."

"You're a minister's daughter?" he said with interest. "Then you must be the eldest."

"How'd you figure that?" He's psychic too? If he can read minds, I'm in a pickle.

"I just imagined that if you were the youngest, you'd be more of a rebel. Maybe a Goth or a New Ager," he added.

I laughed. "That's Erin's job. My sister. She's the youngest. She's our little rebel. But don't give her any ideas. Mama'd flip if Erin went that hard at breakin' the mold."

"Any other siblings?"

"A brother. Toby. He's a year younger than me."

"So I take it you're the sensible one. The responsible one."

"Yeah, I guess so. That's what's expected of me anyway." If only I could admit to where I failed so miserably in that regard. "Is it the same for you?"

"Even worse," he continued. "I'm an only child. In my culture, that makes me the golden child. I'm expected to be as perfect as how my parents dream a golden child should be."

We laughed together. Okay, so he gets pressure from his folks too. I relaxed a little more. I wondered if he'd ever found an escape like I had. But that'd be the last question I'd ask. He doesn't need to know everything.

I turned onto Magnolia Boulevard, which divides into Sixteenth and Seventeenth Avenues. "This is a real famous part of town," I said, playing the tour guide. "We call it Music Row because it's lined with wall-to-wall record labels and music publishing companies. That one," I pointed to a large white house on our left, "that's Big Machine Records. They represent some big names. Do you know Taylor Swift, Tim McGraw, The Band Perry, or Rascal Flatts?"

"Are they Bollywood singers?" he asked with a cheeky grin. I couldn't tell whether he knew them or not from that reply, and again, I didn't want to ask. I had no idea where our worlds held common ground.

"Absolutely," I said with a grin. "That's Curb Records on the right. They're still releasin' records by some of the classic country artists like Bob Wills, Dottie West, Buck Owens, and the Bellamy Brothers. All of whom I'm sure are huge in Bollywood." He smiled broadly at this. I'd maybe have to find out if he actually knew any of these names another time.

"You realize I have no idea who most of those people are." He *was* reading my mind. And with that, he also put his world on the map for me—a long way away from mine.

"That's okay. I'll introduce you slowly to the best music in the world so you're not too overwhelmed."

Simha chuckled as I started into the "nekkid" statue roundabout. "That statue is marvelous," he said. "Can you go around again?"

"Sure," I said, beginning to circle all the way around. I was surprised that in the time it had taken me to go to the film festival and meet Simha, someone had dressed the statue figures in grass skirts and floral leis. They looked like a Hawaiian beach crew. There was even a surfboard tucked under the arm of one of the figures. I laughed. "That's a cute makeover. They're goin' to be hard pressed to find a wave around these parts, though. Music, we have. A beach, we don't."

"I love this town," Simha said. "I like your voice. I think *your* accent is quite sexy."

I didn't see that one coming. I blushed and laughed at the same time. I felt I needed a warning, like "compliment approaching."

"I talk just like everyone else who's from around here. To be honest, I think your accent is sexy." It's amazing how much confidence a compliment brings out in a girl. I thought I'd pry a little. "So do you take your wedding ring off for traveling, or are you more of a girl in every port kinda guy?"

"If you must know, I was recently engaged," he replied, his mood shifting. Maybe I had been too direct?

"Was?" I was committed now. Was this going to be a can of worms moment?

"My parents are quite traditional, and they had arranged for me to marry an Indian girl, the daughter of one of their friends. I conformed until I found my fiancée in bed with her lover. Apparently, I was to be her token husband to keep her family happy."

Darn it, I'd had no idea I was sticking my finger in a fresh wound. "What did your parents say?"

"They were angry with me for embarrassing them, and the other parents were angry because I refused their arrangements. I didn't tell them why I had refused. It wasn't exactly a golden child moment."

"I'm sorry." I really was. I wanted to slap his ex and give his parents a good talking to.

"Don't be. It's a blessing to have escaped before it was too late."

"And now?"

"They're likely busy arranging another girl for me to marry to make them happy. But enough of me and my little dramas. Why is the prettiest girl in Nashville not with her beau?"

Now who was on a fishing expedition? I appreciated the second compliment. I could get used to this. "Well, I just came out of a long relationship with a dud. Nothin' arranged, but it may as well have been. Mama sure thought the sun shone out of his heinie. It's simple with her—he has to be Southern, he has to be Christian, and it helps a *lot* if he plays the guitar. He sure fit the bill, accordin' to her anyway. I always thought he had someone else. I just never knew who... Anyway, it just fizzled out."

"So no foreigners?" he asked.

I had nowhere to go. Honesty was the best policy, I hoped.

"Hell no! With one exception, mind you—if I'd marry Jesus himself, if you know what I mean. Assuming he's not from these parts."

"So what if Jesus was reincarnated as, say, a Hindu from India."

I laughed so hard I almost wet myself. "Oh lordy, don't go there! Mama'd have a conniption fit—and that's just for mentioning the word reincarnation."

Simha laughed. He was no stranger to prejudice by the sounds of it. He seemed so much more comfortable with the idea than I was. I wondered what his secret was. I could do with a strong dose of level-headedness.

Tiny's is on Broadway, squeezed in between the Ernest Tubb Record Shop and The Wheel Cigar Bar. I pointed out the other bars to Simha like Legends, Tootsie's, and The Stage across the street. They were all heaving with people singing along and shakin' their thing to an assortment of honky-tonk and country classics as we crawled down Broadway looking for a parking space. Of course, there weren't any.

I had to turn onto Fourth Avenue, and I quickly found what I was looking for. I set the parking brake, and we began walking back up to Broadway. I liked walking with him. I wanted to see if we walked well together. It's not a strict science, but you can tell if you walk well with someone. So far, so good.

Tiny's is red on the outside and red on the inside. It has big plate-glass windows on either side of its inset doorway. On the other side of the windows, there are two red leather booths, big enough to seat six skinny people each, and they're always full. I'd been to the bar many a time, and I had never once sat at those prized window tables.

Tiny's broad wooden bar and beer taps run three-quarters of the way down the wall on the left. Behind the bar is a four-row-deep collection of liquor. Most space is devoted, of course, to different brands of American bourbon and whiskey. Ruling the bar is Tiny himself, a goliath of a man with two missing front teeth, an encyclopedic knowledge of country and western music, and a booming voice that shouts, "Howdy, folks!" to everyone who walks in.

He made Simha jump with his exuberant greeting, and that made me laugh.

A stage took up the entire back third of the joint. Tiny booked only the best of the local singers and bands, so you were always sure of having good music. Minuscule round tables with wooden chairs and a couple of somewhat larger tables filled up the floor between the bar, the stage, and the right wall. Chloe, Alice, Rob, and Virgil had managed to get one of the larger tables and already had two pitchers of beer on the table and a glass of champagne for Chloe, of course. They'd saved a tiny table beside them for us.

“Hey, y’all,” I said to them, sitting down. Rob and Alice looked up and smiled and then went back to telling each other their life stories. Virgil was leering happily at Chloe, who was trying to appear engrossed by the female trio playing a rousing cover of Dolly Parton’s “Packin’ It Up”—a song that cheers getting off work to party with your man.

A twenty-something blonde waitress in skintight jeans and a sleeveless blue shirt walked up to our table, turned her back on me, and looked right at Simha. “What’ll you have, darlin’?”

Thanks for ignoring me, darlin’.

He looked at me. “Mary?”

I wanted to say, “Yes, I’m with him,” but that would have been smug, so I said, “Cranberry juice will be fine.” Hopefully Chloe wouldn’t notice.

Simha asked for a double of Glenfiddich for himself.

“Sure thing, darlin’,” the waitress said with her best smile.

“Hold on a minute.” Chloe was suddenly between us. “I thought you liked explorin’ the cities you visit.”

“I do,” Simha said.

“Then why are you orderin’ Scotch whiskey? You’re in Tennessee! We have the best bourbon and whiskey anywhere.”

He thought a moment then nodded. “What do you recommend?”

“Prichard’s double-barrel bourbon. Straight up.”

“Okay then.” Simha nodded to the waitress.

Chloe was in her element. “I always take Tennessee whiskey like a favorite lover, straight up.”

Oh Lordy! “Chloe! You’re burnin’ my ears with talk like that.” I blushed on her behalf.

“All the best country love songs say real Southern gals drink whiskey straight up,” she defended.

I looked to Simha for a cue. Do I fight this battle or let it slide? His relaxed smile made it clear. Let it go.

“What about you Mary? Same?” I assumed she meant did I want the same drink and not my opinion on how I prefer to take a lover.

“Sure.” Another battle I wasn’t about to enter. I had been looking forward to that cranberry juice. Let it go.

“Okay,” the waitress said, walking away.

“You won’t regret it,” Chloe said to Simha with a smile. “Pritchard’s is a small distillery, but they’ve got a way with bourbon that will make you forget you ever heard of the Scots.”

That made him smile. He looked around the bar, at the red walls covered with pictures of country and western singers going back to the 1930s, at the other customers, the band, and Tiny shouting “Howdy folks!” to some locals who had just walked in.

“This is bloody marvelous,” he said.

Chloe moved back to Virgil. His inebriated charm was starting to work on her, it seemed. I smiled at this. Everyone was happy, and I was enjoying an evening with a fine, upstanding gentleman who still seemed surprisingly interested in me. “Did you show one of your movies at the film festival?”

“No, my submission wasn’t accepted.”

“You’re kiddin’!”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid that’s the rule, not the exception. An independent filmmaker has to be resigned to being turned down more times than he’s accepted. I’ll try again. I came this year

because both Rob and my producer insisted this was an important networking opportunity, a chance to get my name and projects in front of people who can help me get my movies into festivals and cinemas.”

“Any luck?”

He smiled. “It’s too soon to say...but I’m hopeful.”

“You’ll get where you want to go. I know it. Do you mind?” I asked, pulling my smartphone out of my purse. “I’d like to take your picture so someday I can prove to my family and friends that I knew you when you were still a struggling director and not a world-famous filmmaker.”

He laughed. “By all means.” He pulled me in close for the photo. His sheer magnetism wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed. *Keep breathing* was all I could say to myself. Such a simple function on any other day.

I took our picture together. “Thanks,” I said, putting the phone away.

Fortunately, our waitress turned up just then with our drinks, so I was able to pull myself back together and take a sip of bourbon to help calm me down some. I looked guiltily at the other table, but my friends were engrossed in their own drinks, conversation, and the music. They weren’t missing me at all. I turned happily back to Simha, who was taking a sip of his drink.

“So what do you think of Prichard’s?” I queried. Were we winning him over?

He considered the dark liquid in his glass. “Plenty of oak, vanilla, and fire. It’s...okay.”

“Whatever...”

He laughed. “Okay, you’re right. It’s fantastic.” He took another sip and set his glass down on the table next to mine.

His hand rested on the table...beside mine.

I became transfixed by his long, slender fingers. They seemed to glow, and I realized it was because of the ring on his index finger—heavy, intricately carved silver with an almost translucent gemstone. Silence was stretching between us, and a blush heated my face.

“That’s a beautiful ring,” I said hurriedly. “What is that gemstone?”

“It’s a moonstone. Moonstones aren’t valuable in and of themselves, but this ring is valuable to me. It represents love, personal power, and healing. It’s like tying a ribbon around my finger to remind myself of these values.”

I needed to order twenty of those rings. One for each finger and toe. “That’s nice” was the best I could get out in the moment. I took another sip of bourbon. He talked of love, power, and healing, and all I had to say in reply was “nice”?

“So what do you do when you’re not gracing the red carpet looking so glamorously beautiful?” he asked. This guy was never more than ten feet away from a compliment. Such a shame I was about to blow it.

“It’s the furthest thing from glamorous,” I warned. “I’m a social worker. I work for a government-funded organization that provides housing services to the newly disabled when they leave a hospital or rehabilitation clinic. They’re in such a vulnerable place, so desperate to return to life as usual and knowin’ that can never be. We try to make the transition easier on them by puttin’ in ramps, handrails, walk-in bathtubs, that sort of thing so they can be safe and independent in their own homes. If their homes just don’t work, like a two-story house for someone who’s been paralyzed in a car accident, then we help them find new housin’. I’m the one who reviews a client’s needs. I send field workers out to review and report on housin’ issues. I create the budget for the work, and then I

assign work to the right contractors. If a client needs new housin', I'm the one who finds it. Like I said, it's not glamorous, but I love it."

"They who give have all things. It's a Hindu proverb," he said with an earnest tone. "You do vital work, Mary."

I shrugged to hide my flush of pleasure. "I like bein' of service to others and makin' our community function better for everyone. You make movies that speak to the heart. You're providin' a vital community service, too, I guess."

"You have a kind and generous heart. It shows through what you focus on."

I just stared at him, tongue-tied. What can a girl say to something like that? I would have loved to have given him an earful of how this heart has been trapped, torn, cut, and crushed. Maybe being too generous with it was the problem?

He stared at me a moment with those dark brown eyes, shadowed now, and I just wanted to sink into the floor. He took a sip of bourbon, watching the band for a minute. Then he turned back to me, his features controlled. "And are you relieved you're no longer with your ex?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. I felt safe revealing myself to a man I'd only known a few hours. I had absolute faith that he wouldn't laugh at me or judge me. "He was the only boy I ever really dated. I built my whole future around him, and I just can't seem to quite let it go yet."

"It's very hard, painful even, to let go of a long-standing and cherished dream."

"Yeah," I said, smiling at him. "That sounds like a country and western song."

He chuckled. "There is a good deal of truth in your music. I think breaking your heart allows it to open to the good fortune of finally finding the love of your life."

Maybe I should have stopped drinking if we were going down this road. "But what if you don't? Find the love of your life, I mean."

"Then I guess your heart wasn't ready for that kind of openness, vulnerability, and growth."

The band completed their set and took a break, which distracted me enough that I caught sight of the clock on the far side of the bar.

"Oh no! Charlie!"

"Who's Charlie?" Simha asked. "Should I be jealous?"

"Absolutely," I said. "Charlie is the love of my life."

"Then I *am* jealous," he said with a playful smile.

I laughed, much too pleased that Simha *was* a little jealous. "No! Charlie is the ugliest, sweetest, most loving mutt in Tennessee."

Simha stared at me a moment then suddenly laughed. He had worked it out.

I grinned at him. "Charlie was on death row in the local animal shelter. One look into his eyes, and I just had to rescue him. I just had to, even though I've never owned a dog in my life, and I'm so glad I did. Now I have someone who's eager to start every day, makes sure I get plenty of exercise, and is always there to greet me ecstatically when I come home. He's just the biggest blessin' in my life."

"As you are in his," Simha said.

"And he's also a bit of a worry," I rushed on. "I've only had him a month, and if I stay away too long, he gets anxious and starts actin' out. Last week, he chewed up one of my throw pillows. When I got home, I found white fluff all over my apartment. Today was such a rush, and he didn't get his evenin' walk, so I'm kind of worried about what he might be doin' to my apartment now."

Simha stood up and held out his hand to me. “Well then, come on. Let’s go rescue your throw pillows.”

*I have become a rose petal & you are like the wind for me.
Take me for a ride!*

 *Rumi*

Chapter Four

I stood up in the noisy, crowded bar. I was dizzy. Was it the alcohol that Chloe was insisting I drink or Simha's bold suggestion? I hadn't drunk *that* much. "You want to come with me?"

"Sure. I want to meet Charlie."

"But my apartment's so far out of your way."

"I can take a taxi back to my hotel after I've met Charlie, and you can show me more of what the city has to offer on the way. Come on," Simha said with a smile as he took my hand. "Charlie awaits."

Happiness pushed away all the confusion. My hand felt so good in his. "Okay," I said with a silly grin.

I turned to my friends in time to see Chloe removing Virgil's hand from her thigh. "I've gotta check on Charlie," I said, "and Simha wants to meet him, so we're headin' out."

Chloe looked like she wanted nothing more than to head out too—as far away from Virgil as she could get. "Okay," she said. "We'll talk tomorrow. It was great meeting you, Simha."

"It was lovely meeting you, Chloe," Simha said, "and you, too, Alice."

"You're leaving?" Alice said, looking up from her conversation with Rob. "Then plant one on me, handsome!" She stood up and gave him one of her enthusiastic, bone-crushing hugs.

He laughed and kissed her cheek. "A pleasure. I'll catch up with you tomorrow, Rob, before my flight."

"Fine," Rob said distractedly as he pulled Alice back down beside him.

"See ya, bro," Alice said, waving to me.

"Bye, y'all," I said, starting to leave, Simha's hand still holding mine.

Virgil looked at everyone blankly. "Who's Charlie?" I was sure Chloe would delight in explaining the details to him.

I waved goodbye to Tiny, who hollered "Y'all come back now, y'hear?" and we walked out into the street that was now crowded with tourists and the like, all eager for a big night on Broadway.

"This is a remarkable street," Simha said as we began walking toward Fourth. "I'm so glad I got to see it. There's no mistaking the cultural identity of the town. There's more country music going on in this strip than you could find in an entire city anywhere else. Thanks for bringing me here."

"That's the Southern comfort, darlin'. It's who we are."

He took a step closer to me. All I could do was stare up into his dark eyes and try to fend off the overwhelming urge to merge into his tall, lean body and stay there.

"So is this Southern comfort? Are you just being hospitable with me?" he said. "From the moment you walked into the party tonight, I couldn't take my eyes off you. I still can't. I don't want to." He lowered his head to me as I reached up for him.

A blaring car horn blast jerked us apart. "Hey, chocolate-dipper! Get yourself a white man!" shouted a leather-clad redneck. He was leaning out the passenger window of a battered Chevy Impala crowded with stupid white boys who roared with laughter before the car burned rubber down the street.

I grabbed Simha's arm and looked anxiously up at him. "Pay them no never mind. They're just know-nothin' white trash." I was mortified. What a terrible thing for anyone to do. What terrible timing!

"So what were we saying about Southern hospitality?" Simha said with a warm smile.

"I'm so sorry..." I began, with a profuse apology at the ready to be unleashed.

Simha laughed. "You don't need to be sorry or to make excuses for other people's behavior."

I wanted some of this calmness drug he was on. I wondered if it was available in bulk. I was quivering from head to toe while he was being totally Zen about the whole thing.

"Are you okay?" he asked, doing that freaky mind reading thing again, I'm sure.

"I'm swell." I was staring up at him again, lost in the warmth of those brown eyes and painfully aware that we had nearly kissed in front of God and everyone. *We* had nearly kissed. He hadn't just tried to kiss me. I hadn't just tried to kiss him. *We* had mutually been going for that kiss...and I still wanted it. I still wanted to kiss a man I'd only known three hours. I wanted to kiss him more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life.

"Charlie," I mumbled. I blinked and took a step back. "I've got to check on Charlie."

"Absolutely," Simha said. "I'm really looking forward to meeting him."

We took the Gateway Bridge back across the Cumberland River, lights glittering on the water below us, and then we were on Shelby Avenue. The car was silent because I was too nervous to think of anything to say. I was nervous about being so close and so alone with Simha in my car, nervous about taking him to my apartment, nervous about what he'd think of my apartment, nervous about what would happen when we got to my apartment.

Why was I driving him to my apartment? I never did this!

What did he expect when we finally got there? He couldn't think I meant to go to bed with him. We'd only just met, and I'd made it pretty clear I didn't want to get involved. But men don't think of one-night stands as getting involved. *A one-night stand?* I couldn't! I wouldn't! My hands had a death grip on the steering wheel.

Breathe, I told myself. Think. He knows you're a good girl. He must know. And he's a good guy. He may be hotter than sin, but he's a gentleman.

But we almost kissed!

The silence got longer, and I just felt so guilty. Simha was a visitor in our city, and he was a guest in my car, and it was my job to take care of him, make him feel comfortable, put him at ease. But I didn't know the right things to say to do any of that. He'd been complimenting Southern hospitality earlier, and I wasn't giving him any now. I was a failure. I didn't know what the best way to take care of him was. I didn't know what he was thinking sitting beside me, or what he was feeling. I was like that movie—clueless.

"Why is everything named Shelby?" Simha suddenly asked. "Shelby Avenue, Shelby Hills, Shelby Walk Park. I even saw a sign for the Shelby Golf Course. Who was Shelby?"

"He was John Shelby, a man who liked to keep busy. In addition to bein' a doctor, he was a farmer, a state senator, and a postmaster. He even helped build Tennessee's first insane asylum and a medical school here in Nashville. He bought a load of land, includin' a lot of what you see around us. He even built one of the first bridges over the Cumberland River just so he could get to all of his land."

"So he wasn't shy of dreaming big," Simha replied, duly impressed.

"Yeah, I imagine the phrase 'it can't be done' isn't one you would have tried out on John Shelby. He sure liked to get things done."

"What about you? Do you dream big?" Simha asked with the hint of a test.

"Why? You want me to build you a bridge?" I smiled.

"Maybe. Could you do it?"

"Well, my folks have a bit of land a little north of here. We raise chickens and grow apple and cherry trees and vegetables. I used to help take care of all that when I was a kid. Then, of course, with my daddy bein' a pastor, I'm always helpin' out at the church for Sunday service and weddin's and such. I'd call that buildin' a bridge."

"So would I," he replied with the most appealing candor.

I pulled into my apartment complex. "Here we are," I said weakly, my nerves skittering all over the place.

I parked in my assigned space in front of my apartment and then fumbled with my door like I couldn't remember where my door handle was. When I finally got out, I led Simha to my apartment door. I was so tense that my body felt like every muscle needed to be massaged out, but I wasn't about to suggest that. Who knew where that'd end up?

Charlie was already barking excitedly. I put my key in the lock, opened the door, and there he was, jumping straight up in the air like a kid on a trampoline as I flipped the light switch on. I squatted down to give him his ritual welcome home tummy rub.

"Hey, Charlie, I'm back," I said with a smile as I rubbed him all over. He threw himself onto his back, and I gave his spotted tummy some circular rubs.

Suddenly he stiffened, scrambled back onto his paws, and glared at Simha, who was standing beside me.

"Charlie, this is Simha. Be nice," I said, standing up. "Simha, meet Charlie."

The only men my dog had ever met were my daddy and my brother Toby. He sniffed Simha's beautiful black leather shoes suspiciously.

"What a good boy," Simha crooned softly.

Charlie cocked his head and looked up at him.

"Such a good guard dog," Simha continued. "You take excellent care of your lady, I can tell." He held his hand out for Charlie to sniff. Charlie considered it. Then he licked it! "Good boy," Simha said with a smile as he rubbed the back of Charlie's ears.

Right then and there, my dog became Simha's best buddy. He threw himself onto his back, and Simha obligingly gave him tummy rubs. Charlie practically purred.

Dogs can tell so spontaneously if someone is trustworthy or not, kind or mean. Charlie's vote of approval for Simha was a welcome sight.

He stood up and smiled at me, and the living room just telescoped around us. "You're right," he said. "Charlie has the most...remarkable appearance."

"I'm glad you like him," I said, feeling that hypnotic urge to merge into the man. "He clearly likes you."

Simha chuckled. Then he slid his fingers through the hair at the back of my neck, and my heart just stopped.

"I'm not sleepin' with you," I whispered.

"Of course not," he said. Then he clasped my head and kissed me.

The floor tilted under my feet, and warm honey poured through my bones. With a moan, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. My body molded to his, drinking him in, tasting the oak and vanilla of the Prichard's and something far more intoxicating that was all Simha Das.

He wrapped his arms around me tightly as our kiss went on and on. I could feel his heart pounding against me. He slid his hot tongue into my mouth, and my knees buckled. If he hadn't been holding me, I'd have hit the floor.

I gasped for breath. "I think we'd better sit down."

"Good idea," he murmured. He pulled me over to my sofa, and then he pulled me down onto it beside him.

Before I could think straight, he was kissing me again, and I forgot all about thinking. There was only this perfect man holding me and kissing me slowly, silkily until I was burning and tingling all over. He slid his tongue into me again, and it was so different from any kiss I'd ever known. So much better, so much more intimate, caressing, arousing. I tentatively slid my tongue against his, and his groan rumbled into the back of my spine as his arms tightened around me.

I couldn't stop kissing him. I didn't want to stop kissing him. His mouth was lush and hot, sometimes caressingly soft, sometimes demandingly hard.

Our kisses went on and on, saying so much more than words could say, connecting so much more than our bodies pressed together could do. The world had contracted into Simha's mouth caressing, sucking, kissing, brushing mine and his warm hands roaming over my back and his heart pounding against me.

Time disappeared. There was only Simha and me and endless kisses that blurred one into another and bodies that melted into one another. Our kisses became gentler, sweeter, more tender. I lay my head on his chest, and he embraced me so tenderly that I felt safe and perfectly at ease in his arms. He lifted his hand and began caressing my scalp as he ran his fingers through my hair. I can see why his touch won over Charlie so easily. I could feel myself melting against his chest. My breathing slowed, and my eyelids became lead weights with the gentle stroking of his hands against my skin. The last I remember were his soft, warm lips against my forehead. "So beautiful..." he said, and I slowly drifted off to sleep.

*Your breath touched my soul
and I saw beyond all limits.*

 *Rumi*

Chapter Five

I woke slowly, wrapped in a warm, golden cocoon of happiness. The slow, steady beat of a heart below my ear filled me with perfect peace.

Simha's long fingers stroked through my hair again. I was in heaven.

"Good morning," he said softly.

"Morning?" I cried as I jerked myself up and off his chest. I had been lying half on him and half on the sofa. The throw from the back of the sofa was draped across my shoulders and hips. When did that happen? How long had we been lying there together?

I had never in my life slept the entire night with a man. My ex and I had hooked up some, but we'd never actually spent the night together. He always had to be somewhere else in a hurry.

But now, with all the evidence staring me in the face, I still couldn't quite comprehend that I had just spent the night in the arms of a man I'd known less than twelve hours. A man who could make my knees buckle with a single kiss or glance. A worldly man, a man who was flying out of Nashville and my life in only a few hours.

It immediately got worse. I stared at Simha's chest, hoping that what I was seeing was a dream that hadn't quite faded. Remnants of my lipstick and makeup were smudged right in the middle of Simha's white silk shirt where my face had been resting. There was also a damp circle on his shirt. "Oh Lordy," was all I could mutter. He followed my gaze and chuckled. I didn't know where to look or what to say or what to do. "I'm so sorry! I-I-I can't believe I ruined your silk shirt."

"It's fine—" he began.

In a panic, I grabbed the corner of the throw rug and started rubbing the stain frantically, hoping I could rub out the moment more than anything else. I slid my hand between his buttons to lift the material of his shirt. It was definitely damp. Please Lord, no. I had drooled in my sleep! Why couldn't the earth have just swallowed me up to save me from having to face this moment? My face flushed hot with searing embarrassment. I rubbed furiously at the stain, which just seemed to spread across his shirt.

I couldn't meet his eyes with mine. I was fixated on that cursed stain as my head started whirling through possible solutions. "Maybe seltzer water will get it out?"

"Honestly, it's not a problem—"

"Or a stain remover pen. I've got a stain remover pen!" I cried, jumping off the sofa.

He caught my hand before I could run off and stood up. With his other hand, he tilted my chin up so I had to look at him. "Mary, stop worrying. This isn't a problem."

I wanted to weep with embarrassment. Looking across Simha's shoulder, I could see that rain was pouring outside my living room window. Nashville's weather understood how I felt.

Charlie was sitting about five feet away, his tail thumping on the floor. His eager face said everything of his sole concern—he hadn't been fed yet.

I looked at my sunburst clock hanging on the opposite wall and blinked to make sure I was reading it right. Seven forty-two!

“Jeepers! I’ve got to get to work!” I shouted.

Simha smiled and calmly took control. “You get ready for work, and I’ll call for a taxi.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry,” I babbled as I ran into the kitchen, so incredibly grateful to put some distance between me and the gorgeous reminder of last night’s fever-inspiring kisses on my sofa.

I pulled open the pantry and scooped some dry dog food into Charlie’s blue bowl. I saw Chloe’s and Alice’s wrapped presents on the kitchen table, and every moment of last night hit me like a brick wall. For a moment, all I could do was stand on the linoleum and feel nearly twelve hours of Simha Das packed into a single moment. Charlie charging past me to his food bowl helped bring me back to my senses.

“Thanks!” I whispered to my ravenous dog. I dashed to my bedroom, incredibly grateful to be doing something other than looking at Simha’s beautiful, stoic face, thinking about something other than wondering what he must think of me, feeling anything other than the wild, careening emotions of waking up in his arms.

I stripped off my dress, pantyhose, and underwear and left them where they fell on the floor as I ran into the bathroom and locked the second door that opens up into the living room. It took every ounce of self-control I had to hold back a scream when I caught my reflection in the big bathroom mirror and saw what Simha had just seen. My hair looked like it had been mashed and then electrified. Most of the makeup on the left side of my face, the side that had rested against Simha’s chest for most of the night, was gone. Mascara, eye shadow, rouge, and foundation were smudged across the other side of my face.

That was what Simha had woken up to.

Groaning, I scrubbed my face clean, brushed out my rat’s nest of hair, and pulled it back into a ponytail because I just didn’t have time to mess with it. I ran back into my bedroom and pulled panties, bra, and pantyhose out of my dresser. I put them on without killing myself then plunged into my closet looking for something, anything, that would be appropriate for work. I grabbed my short-sleeved navy blue jersey knit dress, pulled it on, topped it with a sweater, and then began hunting around for a belt which, of course, I couldn’t find.

I ran back out into the living room and almost groaned aloud when I saw what Simha had been left with—an unholy mess. Half a dozen doggie toys, a couple of tug ropes, and three different rawhide chews littered the camel-colored carpet. The dining table at the far end was strewn with magazines, mail, and case files. One of the pale green armchairs across from the sofa was covered in dog hair—Charlie likes to sleep there during the day—and the other was piled with clean laundry I hadn’t yet sorted, folded, and put away. The coffee table was littered with a week’s worth of grocery coupons, this week’s *TV Guide*, and three different remote controls. Beyond the armchairs against the opposite wall was my TV, sitting on a console with about a dozen DVDs scattered over it. My only decorations were my sunburst clock, a couple dozen family pictures, and a poster-size framed painting of Jesus. Mama had given me the poster when I got my own apartment after I graduated from college. I guess she figured if she couldn’t watch me like a hawk, Jesus would. I was suddenly embarrassed for what I’d done last night on a whole new level.

It would take me about an hour to explain away the mess to Simha, who was standing near the kitchen doorway, his expression unreadable, his eyes shielded as he watched *everything*. But I didn’t have time to explain anything, so I ran into my bedroom to hunt for a belt and then hurried back

with the first one I could find in my hand. By this time, Charlie had finished his breakfast and was ready to play, so he was chasing after me, barking excitedly. Simha laughed at both of us as I ran around my apartment getting everything I needed for work.

“Charlie, I’m real sorry, but I just don’t have time!” I said to his insistent attempts to get me to play with him.

I heard a couple of squeaks from his favorite red rubber squeaky ball in the other room. Simha was calling, “Charlie! Here boy!” My dog tore off like a bat out of hell to play with the stranger in my living room.

Simha. I could feel the way his gaze had locked on mine last night, the way his hands had cradled my head, the heat of his mouth on mine.

Shoes!

I ran back into my bedroom, scrounged through my closet, pulled out my red and white pumps, slid them on, then looked frantically around my bedroom. I felt I was forgetting something. And what in the world was I going to say to the gorgeous man waiting for his taxi?

My attention was drawn to a familiar sound outside my bedroom. I looked at the rain streaming down the window. Seriously? With a sigh, I grabbed my raincoat out of the closet, pulled it on, and buttoned and belted it. I took a deep breath and pretended I was brave as I headed back out to the living room. I saw Charlie tearing after the red ball Simha had thrown into the kitchen. I could hear Charlie’s claws skittering over the linoleum in frenzied pursuit and then the squeaks of the ball he had triumphantly captured.

But all I could see was Simha. He was staring at me, looking kind of stunned with those dark brown eyes of his. Despite all of my embarrassment and worry and fear and the mess of other emotions roiling inside me, I started to melt into my red and white pumps.

Then he suddenly looked away, and the spell was broken. He glanced at my clock and then back at me. “Nine minutes,” he said. “That’s impressive.”

A couple of sharp horn blasts told us the taxi had just arrived.

I grabbed my red clutch purse and shoved it into the pocket of my raincoat. “I’ve got an extra umbrella you can use,” I said, rushing into the small foyer and searching through the umbrella stand. “It’s cheap, but it’ll keep you dry until you get into the cab.”

“That isn’t necessary,” he said.

“You shouldn’t ruin your beautiful suit in the rain,” I insisted as I glanced at the smear on his shirt. “I mean, no more than it already is.”

Did I just say that out loud?

“Really, I’ll be fine. I’m used to wet weather.”

I grabbed my large red umbrella with the curved wood handle and finally made myself look at him. “Well...” That’s as far as I got. The silence stretched between us as I looked at him and he looked at me with expressionless hooded eyes. What was he thinking? Why didn’t he say something? Maybe he couldn’t wait to get the heck out of my apartment and was figuring out the best exit line.

The taxi horn blasted again.

“I should go,” Simha said.

“Right.”

I opened the front door, and we stepped outside. I locked the door and opened my umbrella. Simha was still just standing silently.

He hadn't said a word about all of those kisses last night, or holding me through the night, or waking up with half my face plastered on his shirt. Was he regretting all of it? Was he wondering what to do with me? Should I ask if he thought he'd ever come back to Nashville, or if I'd ever hear from him again? Oh, I couldn't! And I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Thank you for one of the loveliest nights I've ever had," he said, looking right into my eyes.

"You're welcome," I said, feeling shy all over.

He suddenly kissed me on the forehead. Then he made a long-legged dash through the rain for the yellow taxi, and all I could do was stand there under my umbrella, still feeling his warm, soft lips on my forehead as he got into the back seat of the taxi.

I blinked. He hadn't asked me for my phone number, or my e-mail address, or my mailing address, or anything. Now I knew where I stood. I was just pleasant company and a bed for the night. He probably hadn't wanted to bother finding his way back to his hotel last night.

Simha got back out of the taxi and dashed toward me through the rain. "We've been in such a rush, I didn't get your number," he said with a smile as he held his cell phone out to me.

"Oh," I said, more confused than I'd been all morning, "sure." I quickly punched in my name and cell phone number. "Here you go."

"Thanks," he said, pocketing his phone. He pulled a silver case out of his breast pocket, opened it, pulled out a business card, and handed it to me. "Here's my card. If you ever...need anything, just give me a call."

Need anything? Like another silk shirt to ruin? Another manly chest to drool on? Information on upcoming film festivals? What in the world did he mean by that? He reached out, took my free hand in his, and locked his warm brown eyes on mine. I couldn't breathe.

"I think you're one in a million, Mary Poser," he said in his low, silky voice. Then he let go of my hand, turned, ran back through the rain to the taxi, and jumped in. The taxi scooted out of the parking lot.

I stood there staring after the blur of yellow in the downpour, feeling more confused than I had in the entire twelve hours I'd known the man. Had he been sincere? Oh, how could he be? He was a world traveler, and I was a small-town girl. That was probably just a line he used when he said goodbye to the latest girl in his newest port of call. That was all it was. A line.

Or was it? What if he'd been sincere? What if he really thought I was someone special?

I must have been holding my breath because it came out in a gust. What did it matter if he liked me, if he thought I was something special? He lived in another country, another world, and I'd probably never see him again.

Feeling depressed and blaming it on the rain, I got into my car and drove to work.

Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul, there is no such thing as separation.

 *Rumi*

Chapter Six

It's a good thing I'd been driving the same roads these last two years because my mind sure wasn't on the road or the traffic as I headed to work. It was on Simha Das and lush, endless kisses and the way he had looked at me when he'd said I was one in a million.

Oh, what was I doing to myself? The man was gone. He'd driven out of my life, and I had to stop thinking about him. Him and me, we just didn't make sense. We had nothing in common. Besides, what kind of a future could we possibly have with him in India and me in Nashville? None. And why was I even thinking about a future with him in it? We'd promised nothing. It wasn't love, surely? I'd locked my heart away in a steel safe, and I liked it there. No man could touch it there, not even a gorgeous filmmaker with addictive kisses and strong arms that could hold me as if they'd always hold me.

"Oh lordy!" I shouted. I had to stop thinking about the man. I'd never hear from him or see him again, and that was that.

The rain had slowed the traffic down like it always does, but I still had a chance of getting to work close to on time. I drove through the older residential neighborhoods on Shelby Avenue with their gabled, single-fronted family homes surrounded by trees whose green leaves looked heavy and forlorn in the rain and gray light. I thought about what I could do to keep myself distracted at work today. I wanted to stop thinking about Simha's hot mouth on mine. I planned how I could I get Chloe's and Alice's gifts to them. Long-distance relationships never work anyway, particularly when the guy in question lives in another country. I'd probably work through lunch to catch up. Simha should be just one of those things. A nice memory for my diary, if I kept a diary. He'd given me a single wonderful night, and I should just leave it at that. I mean, let's get real. What would I do? Drop everything and follow him back to India? That was ridiculous. Besides, I didn't want a relationship. No way, no how.

I turned left onto South Fifth Street, awash in two-story red brick apartment building complexes surrounded by grass and trees. A block down on my right was Annie's Diner with its shingle roof and welcoming front porch. Its parking lot was always crowded. Annie's served only breakfast and lunch, and I'd eaten a ton of both. The diner had some of the best cheese grits in town. Just a week ago, I'd had breakfast there with Mama to kick-start her day of door-to-door knockin' to spread the word about Daddy's church.

Passing Annie's Diner in the rain confirmed for me that I'd been right to let Simha go without a word. I wouldn't find cheese grits in India, or my Mama and Daddy, either. If I ever decided to unlock that steel box keeping my heart safe, I was bound to find plenty of reasons to do it right here in Nashville. I had no need to go flittin' halfway around the world.

A little farther down, half a block north of the Davidson County sheriff's office, was the two-story brown brick headquarters of Nashville Disability Housing Services. I pulled into the small parking lot running along the north side of the office and felt only relief.

I ran through the front door, just five minutes late. Considering I'd stayed almost an hour late the day before, I tried to feel righteous rather than guilty as I folded up my red umbrella and said hey to Stacey, our polyester-clad receptionist.

"Hey, Mary. Ain't that rain somethin'?" she said.

"It sure is," I said.

"George and I are the only ones who got here on time. I'll bet there's been an accident on the interstate."

"Probably more than one in this rain," I said as I headed to my desk.

"I'm sure glad I live in Maxwell Heights. I get to miss all that nonsense."

"I feel the same way about Lockeland Springs. Hey, George," I said to the short, stout dynamo whose desk was just a step from mine.

"Hey, Mary," he said without looking up from his computer monitor.

"How's the kids?"

"Samuel's got the chicken pox, which means the other three will get them soon enough."

"Sorry to hear that," I said as I hung my raincoat and umbrella on my coat rack and sat down. "I'll send some chicken soup on to your wife."

"Thanks, Mary. She'd appreciate that."

I stared at my desk with something approaching despair. I couldn't even see the desktop because it was covered with so many files, reports, papers, and phone messages. How was I ever going to catch up?

Sighing, I set to work. I called Fred Turnbull, the client I'd stayed late for yesterday, to see if he was comfortable. Then I called the contractors working on his house in Highland Heights. I said hey to Ed, Angie, Eli, Katherine, Tiffany, Lori, and Brooke as they straggled in and commiserated with them one by one about rush-hour traffic in the rain. I said, "Hey, boss" when Tammy stomped in, grumbling about rain, traffic, and her kids' dentist appointments after school. Tammy is the biggest, blackest go-getter in Nashville. If she can't get something done, it just isn't worth doing. I always tried to look real busy for her benefit.

Then Hannah shuffled into the office, looking like death warmed up. When Hannah loves, she loves with her whole heart. Her latest ex-boyfriend, Henry, hadn't been able to do the same. She was taking it hard.

"Get caught in the rain?" Tammy barked.

"Kinda," Hannah mumbled.

"You'll make up the time at the end of the day."

"Yes, boss."

"And grow some self-respect!"

"Yes, boss."

Hannah walked up to her desk to my right and just stared at it. George sat to my left. He took one look at her and went to get himself another cup of coffee.

"Tammy's right," I said.

"I know," Hannah said with a heavy sigh as she shrugged out of her raincoat and hung it up.

We'd been friends for six years, ever since we met in our freshman year in college. Her daddy is a white police officer, and her mama is a black Episcopalian minister. Hannah turned out to be a tall, brown astrology fanatic. Rather than follow the church, Hannah sought guidance from enthusiastically reading about what her stars had in store for her that day. She'd been the biggest thorn in my mama's side for six years because, despite all of Mama's best efforts, she couldn't convince Hannah that she should seek guidance from her husband, a Baptist minister, and not an astrologist.

"Venus is in retrograde which, for me, means I'm going to be struggling to stand up for myself at the moment," she said.

An "I see" would be the best I could offer in support. I didn't voice it, though. I wasn't about to challenge my mother's faith.

She opened her purse with a sheepish smile and pulled out three half-pound chocolate bars.

"Well, get to it," I said with a smile.

I reviewed the most recent field reports. I talked on the phone to contractors, most of whom thought rain was an excuse to take the day off, even though most of their work for the agency is done inside under a roof. I reviewed new client interviews.

Every few minutes, I'd feel Simha's mouth on mine or his hands stroking through my hair, or I'd hear him whispering in my ear, "Thank you for one of the loveliest nights I've ever had."

I could have said the same thing right back to him. I couldn't remember ever talking to someone and feeling so completely in my body, or feeling like such a *woman* when a man looked at me. Sighing, I gave up and fished his card out of my raincoat pocket. At the bottom was a website address. Looking all around to make sure none of my coworkers were watching, I typed the address into my computer.

I blinked at my monitor. There he was! A headshot of Simha stared out at me, commanding me to take him seriously as a filmmaker. One tab had a list of his films—he had made six shorts and four feature-length movies, and he was only twenty-nine! Another tab listed his works in progress—seven of them! The final tab linked to Reviews and Awards. I read these avidly. He'd been a semi-finalist at two film festivals, and he'd actually won a film festival award in Europe. All of the reviews spoke admiringly of his passion, his creative use of light and shadow, his compelling stories, his craft. Most of them called him a rising star.

Happiness just built and built inside me. He was everything he'd said he was and so much more.

My feelings must have been strong enough to send him a psychic message because my cell phone started vibrating. There was a text:

Simha: May I have your e-mail address?

What? No "howdy"? No "hope you got to work okay"? No "how's your day?" or "I had a great night"? Who does he think he is? Why does he want my e-mail address?

I wanted to be mad at him. Admittedly, I *was* a bit irritated, but mostly I was happy. It hadn't been a line. He'd been sincere. He wanted to stay in contact with me! After reading about him on his website, I couldn't help but feel flattered that a gorgeous, globe-trotting, award-winning filmmaker wanted to stay in contact with a small-town girl who had drooled on his silk shirt at the first opportunity.

I texted him my e-mail address without even thinking about it. As soon as I had pushed “Send,” though, I got uneasy. Part of me was happy that our goodbye in the rain wasn’t goodbye forever, that we’d be communicating now and then, even if it was just over the internet. The other part of me was worried, unsure if it was wise to keep him in my life even if it was just on the periphery. What did we have to say to each other? How could I possibly give him anything he wanted or needed? What in the world could he give me?

It made no sense to keep him in my life. I should have never sent him my e-mail address. I should have said no. This was ridiculous!

But I couldn’t wait to hear from him again.

Groaning, I grabbed my cell phone, called my Aunt Sara, and asked if we could get together on my lunch hour.

Just after noon, with the skies clearing fast, I drove across the Gateway Bridge, through downtown, and turned onto Fourth Avenue South on my way to the Nashville Zoo. Country music blasted from my car radio as I fought against all the memories of Simha and last night that kept bubbling up. How could I have let that happen? How could I have slept an entire night on my sofa with a stranger? How could I want to do it again? Confusion turned my mouth sour. The only thing that kept my hands steady on the wheel was the thought of Aunt Sara and all her calm and whimsy and wisdom waiting for me just a few minutes away.

Fourth Avenue South changed names to Nolensville Pike near the Tennessee State Fairgrounds. Couldn’t anything stay the same? I drove through mostly suburban neighborhoods, each highlighted by their own flavor of church on every other corner, and finally turned into the zoo—a tree-packed oasis gleaming in the fresh sunlight. I flashed my pass at the parking attendant and found a parking space in the lot near the pedestrian entrance, which was a blessing because things are pretty spread out in this zoo.

I trotted to the zoo entrance, flashed my pass at the ticket takers, a formality now because they all know me, and then strode into the zoo proper. After all these years, it was still a surreal experience for me to walk along the winding trails lined by dense clumps of bamboo and exotic foliage to the sound of howler monkeys and tropical birds. One minute, I was in downtown Nashville with its bars and restaurants, and the next, I stepped into a twilight zone of verdant beauty, featuring wild animals, birds, and plants from all corners of the world. With my senses so tantalized by what I saw, smelled, and heard, I would often transport myself far away within my imagination to visit the home of some of the more bizarre creatures in their natural habitat.

I walked into the butterfly enclosure and was instantly transported into a lush Brazilian rainforest. If it weren’t for the two levels of textured concrete pedestrian paths, you’d need a machete to make your way through the foliage. The 6,000-square-foot glass-enclosed structure has a huge variety of carefully pruned tropical and subtropical trees stretching to the four-story glass roof. Ferns and flowers like butterfly milkweed, lilies, and pansies are everywhere, sprinkling bright splashes of color high and low. A narrow stream winds through green and flowering shrubs before tumbling over a rocky waterfall into a deep pool where turtles and fish live. Broad-leafed vines climb up everything. Thick moss drips from some of the trees. The air is rich with the scent of lilac, wisteria, and honeysuckle.

Almost every living surface is dotted with butterflies, thousands of butterflies in every conceivable color, with wonderful patterns on their fragile wings including spots, stripes, and paint splashes. Butterflies flutter from flower to bush to tree or just soar around with the sheer joy of flying. Once a

year, the migrating butterflies are released, filling the Nashville sky with shimmering and dazzling color.

I followed the concrete path, carefully weaving my way between the gleeful enclosure visitors. It's impossible to be grumpy in the presence of these beautiful little fairies flittering about. The unbridled enthusiasm of the children is wonderful to watch as the butterflies glide effortlessly about their heads. The butterflies can land wherever they like, and they often delicately perch on and around the visitors, so you have to be careful where you tread. I made my way up to the second level and there, in the middle of this butterfly oasis, stood the zoo's butterfly specialist, Dr. Sara Collins, a plump, brown-haired lepidopterist with a PhD in entomology. It wasn't until I was a sophomore in high school that I could pronounce those scientific titles properly. It was important to me because Dr. Collins is also my beloved aunt.

She stood there misting a white orchid and keeping an eye on a couple of teenage boys further down the path.

"Hey, Aunt Sara," I said as the warm, humid air filled my lungs with the first deep breath I'd known all day.

"Hey, yourself," she said with a smile. "How's my favorite butterfly?"

"Well—" I said, looking at everything but her. Aunt Sara has a freaky sixth sense—I'm sure of it. She can always tell when something is going on. Like now.

She looked me up and down. "You've met a man," she said with a grin.

I blushed. "How can you tell?"

"You're more fluttery than any other butterfly in this enclosure."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Of course you do. It's bubbling out of you. Have you made love to him yet?"

"Aunt Sara!"

"That's no answer."

I folded my arms over my chest. "No, I have not made love to him."

"But you want to."

"No, I don't!"

"Yes, you do. Tell me why you haven't."

"Aunt Sara," I said, arms akimbo, "I only met him last night... But he did stay the night."

"Ooh, tell me everything!"

I had to laugh. "You love to pry, don't you? All we did was kiss—a lot—and then I guess we fell asleep...on the sofa. I think he held me the entire night."

"Really? He sounds very promising. What's his name?"

I turned a little away from her and focused on a long black and white cocoon hanging from the narrow limb of a blue orchid tree. "Simha. Simha Das."

"Hm. Indian?"

"Yes," I said, stroking the cocoon with my index finger. I could feel a slight movement within.

"He's a director. He was here for the film festival. He asked for my e-mail address, and I gave it to him. And now I think I shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

"He lives in another country!" I said, beginning to fidget with the cocoon. "It makes no sense to correspond with a man I might see only every couple of years or so, if at all. In a different life, it might be perfect, but I'm here, and he's there."

I started peeling away the opening of the cocoon for the struggling butterfly within.

“Mary, what are you doing?”

“I’m just tryin’ to help this butterfly out of its cocoon.”

“Stop!”

I turned to her, confused. “Why?”

“Darlin’, it’s a chrysalis, not a cocoon, and a butterfly needs to struggle within it to develop its wings, and then it needs to break out of the chrysalis by itself to get even stronger. If you open the chrysalis too early, the butterfly won’t be ready. It won’t be able to fly.”

“Oh no!” I cried, turning back to the chrysalis I had partially opened. “I’m so sorry! I was just tryin’ to help.”

Aunt Sara hugged me from behind. “It’s okay, Mary. It was an easy mistake to make. We’ve got lots more, and they’re doin’ just fine.”

I pointed to a withered-looking chrysalis on a tulip tree. “Not this one, it seems. What happened to it?”

“Not every caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The chrysalis offers no guarantees.”

“That’s not fair.”

“That’s life, darlin’. This one will never know what it missed. Its life was complete as a caterpillar. That’s all it was meant to be. This one, though,” she said, pointing to a green and black speckled chrysalis, “is doin’ just fine... And so if Mr. Das likes you, as any sane man would, I imagine he wants to further your...association.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I insisted. “It was just one night, and he lives too far away. Besides, I don’t know the first thing about India.”

“Perhaps this is your opportunity to learn. You’ve always had a curiosity for the exotic.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I probably won’t ever see him again.”

I left my Aunt Sara, feeling disgruntled and unresolved for the first time in a long time. She hadn’t given me what I’d wanted. She was usually like a crystal ball for me, full of wise directions and clear visions. But as I got back in my car, I was more confused about spending the night in Simha arms than I’d been when I’d arrived.

As I scooted down the road, I turned my car radio volume up full blast and sang “Emotional Girl” along with Terri Clark, and together we bellowed out all of the contrary emotions and extremes that made up our days and nights. It didn’t help. I could feel Simha sitting beside me as he had last night, filling up my little car with his sensual masculinity. How could I have taken such a dangerous man home with me last night? What was I thinking?

I rolled my window down partway and let the warming afternoon air flow over me and blow some of the cobwebs from my head. I made myself focus on the road and the traffic. When Nolensville Pike forked, I drove onto Second Avenue South, which took me under all of the highway overpass nonsense and into downtown.

By the time I was approaching the Gateway Bridge, Dierks Bentley was singing “What Was I Thinkin’?” about his late-night exploits with the pretty daughter of a real dangerous man, and I was grinning like a fool. But my fun got interrupted by my phone, which was vibrating. I had a text. I kept one eye on the road as I searched through my purse, hauled my phone out, and saw that I had a text from one of the contractors working on Fred Turnbull’s house. He had a question about the front ramp.

I sighed heavily. I had answered the same question twice already. I started to text my reply when a furious truck horn blaring jerked my head up in time to see that I was veering into another car lane and straight at a huge black semi-trailer.

I desperately swung my steering wheel to the right to avoid the truck. I didn't see the car beside me on my right and, like a ball in a pinball machine, my car bounced off his front guard and spun back into the path of the truck in the opposite lane. The truck tires screamed on the road, and smoke billowed around them as the truck's brakes locked. I veered right across in front of the ominous black metal beast. I was heading straight for the railing of the bridge! I panicked and swung my steering wheel violently to the right, hoping to make it around the truck on the opposite side. My car lurched heavily to the left beneath me from the rapid change in direction, tilting my passenger window up toward the truck. I could see the driver desperately trying to correct as his trailer started jackknifing behind him. My little Mazda scooted past the front of the truck, inches away from its heavy bull bar. But it was too late. The bar clipped the back of my careening vehicle and flipped me up like a pancake off the road. I felt my car shudder as the truck hit, and I lost all control as my car flew up into the air.

All I could do was scream as my car and I soared over the railing of the bridge. I squeezed my steering wheel in petrified horror as time stretched out to an ominously slow reality. I was going to die...

In a moment, the bizarre feeling of flying changed to a sickening sense of falling. I was falling on and on, and then, in my car, I slammed into the Cumberland River.

I woke with a startled gasp. How long had I been unconscious? I had never been so cold in my life. It consumed my first breath, turned my muscles rigid, and filled my veins. Outside my car, light was falling away, leaving me in a shadowed world.

My ears were deluged with the sound of rushing water.

Water was pounding against me, swirling around me, pouring under me, around me, over me.

"No!" I screamed. This couldn't be happening!

I pushed away the deflating airbag in my face. My rigid seatbelt had me strapped against my seat, and my car was filling fast with freezing dark water.

I screamed as my car sank farther and farther into the depths of the Cumberland River. I tried to unbuckle my seatbelt, but my hands were numb and useless. "*Help!*" I screamed. "Someone help me!"

Then freezing, murky water began to fill my mouth. I spat it out and clamped my jaws shut. I tilted my head back as far as it would go to find some oxygen, but the water kept pouring relentlessly into my car, filling it, sinking it.

I was underwater.

I struggled like a madwoman against the seatbelt, but it kept me pinned implacably against the driver's seat.

The desperate need for oxygen overwhelmed me and forced my mouth open even though, in my mind, I demanded it stay closed.

Frigid water gushed into me.

I gagged. I choked. There was no air. Only water. Cold, demanding water.

Questions, so many questions, pierced my frozen brain like icepicks. Somewhere far away, I heard a muffled voice. "Where are you going, Mary Poser?"

"I'm goin' to the bottom of this river!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm dyin'! Oh God, I'm dyin'."

"Where are you heading?"

I wanted to weep with frustration and terror and resignation. "Can't you see I'm busy dyin'?"

My vision blurred. I could feel my body go limp, become still.

"Did you find love?"

"What?"

"Did you find love?"

Was this to be my final confession? My vision was sliding rapidly into blackness. "No," I muttered to that insistent voice as I let go to the engulfing darkness, "I was too busy."

I relaxed and resigned myself to falling away forever to the overwhelming silence in my car that had become my tomb.

I felt something. I'm not sure what it was. With my last bit of strength, I forced my eyes open. There was a brilliant white light piercing the murky depths of my grave.

Reaching out of that light was a hand. Was this God? Was it an angel? Then I saw it. On the index finger was a silver ring with a glowing, mesmerizing moonstone.

The last thing I knew, the last thing I felt in the world that had been my life for twenty-three years, was that hand grasping mine and tugging me upward. Then the relentless darkness claimed me again.