

Too Busy for Love series

A Dippity Doo Romance



LEAH BUSBOOM

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A Grumpy/Sunshine Opposites Attract Romantic Comedy

By Leah J. Busboom

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Dedication

To all of you who enjoy romantic comedies, may this story
make you laugh out loud.

To my amazing husband—I couldn't do this without your love
and support.

To my grandmother, owner of the *Starlight Beauty Salon*. She
was the inspiration for this story.

Life is more beautiful when you meet the right hairdresser.

— Peter Coppola

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One – The First Impression

Bruno

Everything is pink. The huge sign sporting the name of the business, positioned in a prominent location on the red brick storefront . . . The awning over the front door . . . The lettering in a fancy-schmancy script scrawled on the front window advertising various offerings. Pink . . . Pink . . . Pink.

I detest pink. I'm a camouflage and tan kind of guy, never straying too far from the beige palette, with an occasional splash of. . . gray.

Hesitant to enter this over-the-top, frou-frou-looking establishment, I sit uncertainly in my massive black pickup truck idling in the parking lot. A guy like me has never been surrounded by all this pink. I occasionally wear a polo shirt in a dusty rose hue (a Christmas gift from my sister) but it contains just a hint of pink, not these vibrant, eye-popping colors I'm staring at now.

Do I need a haircut badly enough to ignore the obvious ode to Barbie—or maybe it's a nod to bubblegum?

An older gray-haired lady with ankles as wide as her calves emerges from the shop. She spies me and stops, staring at me as if I'm some lurking riffraff. She clutches a large black purse as if it holds her entire fortune. Her bright yellow dress is fit for a Sunday morning. At least it isn't pink.

Every hair is in place, and her bouffant hairdo has a sheen that hints at some styling product strong enough to withstand a tornado—although she probably shouldn't get within five feet of a blowtorch. Well at least it looks like the Dippity Doo does quality work.

The woman skirts my idling truck as if I'm a criminal, quickly hopping into her sedan and speeding away. I better decide soon whether I'm going to set foot in this place of business, or else someone is going to call the cops on me.

Their suspicion is probably based in part on how shaggy my usual neat and trim buzz cut has become. I've been out of the country on a special assignment for three months.

Although I'm no longer part of the military, I get called up for covert duty every now and then. My skills are still sharp, and I specialize in technologies that the Marines find useful. But I was too busy to get my hair shaved, and now it's a bit floppy on top, and the sides have grown out to encroach on my neck. Definitely time for a trim.

I tried to drop in at my favorite barbershop yesterday, only to be met with a sign on the door. *Out of Business*. Apparently giving only basic haircuts doesn't cut it anymore (pun intended).

Flummoxed as to where to go for a trim, I called my friend the General to see if he could offer any advice. The man has never struck me as stylish, so I figured he'd know where to go for a basic haircut.

"I go to the Dippity Doo," he said in his rough-as-sandpaper voice.

Huh? What's a Dippity Doo?

"Dippity what?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Remember that gal we met at Oliver's Christmas Eve party? Bobbie Sue?"

Oliver is the General's daughter Breezie's husband, although he was her boyfriend at the time of the party. Unfortunately I missed their wedding because of my overseas trip.

"Right. The woman wearing pink from head to toe at a Christmas party," I replied with a smirk. If I remember correctly, she was rather attractive, aside from the choice of color for her outfit.

"She had a sprig of holly in her hair," the General huffed, as if that offset the inappropriate color of her attire.

My brows drew together trying to bring up her image. All I remembered was a pretty brunette with nice curves. No holly.

"Okay, so is Bobbie Sue a barber?"

A laugh roared across the line. "No, son. She owns a styling salon named the Dippity Doo. Breezie recommended it

to me.” Is it a coincidence that her name rhymes with the place? *Bobbie Sue at the Dippity Doo.*

“Um, I’m really just looking for a cut. Nothing special.” And I certainly don’t need any of those high-priced styling products they always try to upsell you at a place like this. I went to one of these salons by mistake once and never returned.

He grunted. “You asked for my recommendation, and I gave it.”

The General is not known for being warm and fuzzy, but I didn’t expect this curt reaction. Maybe Bobbie Sue pays a referral fee? That would make sense.

“Fine. I’ll give it a try.”

“You won’t regret it. She’ll give you a haircut that’s modern and up to date, unlike that buzz cut you’re so fond of.”

Click!

I frowned at my cell phone’s screen, shocked that the General hung up so abruptly and that he criticized my usual hairdo. I guess he didn’t want to debate the merits of a buzz cut. It’s as simple as a paperclip to care for. No combing required. And I’ve been sporting one ever since I joined the military on my eighteenth birthday.

A noise draws me back to the present. A guy driving a cherry-red Ferrari squeals into the lot, ragtop rolled down. He’s wearing sunglasses, but when he hops out of the car my eyes go wide. The guy must be over seventy—with a shock of deftly styled pure white hair undisturbed by the open-air ride—and he’s wearing skintight black pants—surely not leather—paired with a bright blue Hawaiian shirt. The lime green sneakers clash decidedly with the outfit. He ignores me as he strolls into the salon, flipping his keys in his hand, then disappears behind the tinted glass.

Well, if that guy goes here, I guess I can give it a try. At least I won’t be the only male in the establishment. It’s also a plus that he isn’t wearing pink. My eyes swivel to my black T-shirt and pressed khaki pants. The outfit is from the

monochrome color wheel, but with all the retina-popping colors around me, I'll blend into the background like an ant at a picnic.

Decision made, I turn off the engine and jump out of my massive truck, vowing to only get a basic haircut, nothing else, and I certainly don't plan on purchasing any of those fancy shampoos or styling gels. Marching towards the entrance, I shore up my defenses against all this frou-frou. Despite being surrounded by an overload of pink, a guy can be comfortable in his own skin, right?

Two – Muscles and a Buzz Cut

Bobbie Sue

He marches into my salon like an army drill sergeant, with a fixed stare plus a set of pecs and a pair of biceps that a girl could seriously fall for. His no-nonsense demeanor screams all business. His shaggy locks, clearly once shaped into a tight buzz cut, screams he's never been in a styling salon before.

Lydia and Valentina—we all call her Val—spot the fine male specimen at the same time. A small skirmish ensues near the shampoo station as they grapple for who's going to greet our hunky visitor at the checkout desk. They duel in a wrestling match fit for the professional circuit, almost knocking over the Sultry Strands for Men display. Two hip checks and an impressive arm drag later, Lydia stands behind the desk while Val glares at her from behind the shelf of recently acquired all-natural body washes. Lydia pats her beehive hairdo, adjusting it to its former height.

“May I help you, honey?” she asks, her voice dripping with as much sugar as my mama's sweet tea.

The man nods towards her slightly askew pink uniform. “Impressive moves,” he says in a rumbly voice that sends shivers down every female spine within a two-mile radius. Well, at least every female spine in the salon.

Giggling like a schoolgirl, Lydia says, “Why thank you!” She shoots Val a triumphant glare that could peel paint. “Are you here for a cut and a style?”

“Is Bobbie Sue around?” he asks.

The forty-something's face falls. “Yep, I'll go get her,” she says, striding towards the back hallway where I've been observing the proceedings undetected. I quickly pretend to be inspecting our latest shipment of botanical-infused styling gel.

“Customer up front for you,” Lydia says in a flat voice, showing her competitive nature when it comes to men. She's always on the rebound from a bad breakup; her turnover in men makes your head spin. Lydia wanders off to the

breakroom muttering something about “the good-looking ones are always taken.”

“Thanks,” I say to her back. Surreptitiously adjusting my bubblegum-pink uniform so it accentuates all my curves, I smooth down my new stylish blunt cut and apply a quick glide of cherry lip gloss from the stick hidden in my pocket. As Mama always says, “A girl needs to look nice for a gentleman caller”—or for a handsome new salon patron.

The man is focused on taking stock of our shampoos, conditioners, and styling products when I approach. Having the display prominently located beside the checkout desk was a brilliant marketing move. The array of colorful bottles lures most customers to make an impulse purchase, whether or not they actually need the shampoo, conditioner, or styling gel.

Up close the man is even more impressive than I thought and looks vaguely familiar. *Where have I seen him before?*

He’s built like a tank, his massive chest stretching the limits of his plain black T-shirt. But his confident demeanor draws you in: the angle of his square jaw, the upright set of his wide shoulders, and his poised hip-width, legs-apart stance. He’s the guy you can count on in an emergency. Someone who won’t let you down when the going gets tough. He’ll follow through on any responsibility, big or small. Although looks can be deceiving. You never can tell who has commitment issues.

I’ve had my fair share of those run-for-the-hills types the minute a relationship hits a bump, and I don’t care to get tangled up with anyone like that again. Rodney immediately comes to mind.

“I’m Bobbie Sue. How may I help you?” I say in my sultriest southern drawl.

He turns and fastens those sky-blue eyes on me. My heart does a funny flip as he locks me into his stare. “The General recommended your services,” he says, and my eyes widen. What general? Surely my salon is not on a military referral list.

“The General?” I reply, confusion marring my tone.

He barks out a laugh. “Winston Monroe. Breezie’s father. I was in the Marines with him.”

“Oh! That general,” I say with a chuckle. It then hits me that I was briefly introduced to this man at the General’s daughter’s boyfriend’s Christmas Eve party.

How did I not notice then how attractive he is? My lips turn downward remembering that I was dating boring, uptight Edison at the time.

“What’s your mission, soldier?” My voice may have come out a tad bit flirtier than I intended, but it has the desired impact on my new client. He grins, transforming his rugged features into something positively irresistible. A dimple graces his left cheek, and his full lips look like they’re meant for kissing.

“My barber just up and quit. Winston recommended your shop. He said I could get a reasonably priced basic haircut at this fine establishment.”

His voice sounds flirtier than I expected. The military guy is full of surprises. My eyes flit back to the top of his head, envisioning him in a new hairstyle. His closely cropped locks don’t appear to be much in need of a trim, but my fingers itch to shape his hair into a more modern, updated cut.

“Well, then, follow me to my chair and we’ll get started.”

Every eye in the shop tracks us as we make our way to my station. Several women fan themselves, and a few lick their lips when he passes by in those perfectly pressed tight khaki pants. It’s a sight to behold. Even seventy-year-old Gordy Higginbloom gives the guy a once over while Priscilla does a comb over on his white toupee—referred to by beauticians now as a “hair system” to help avoid the stigma associated with the fake hair piece.

The Marine folds his well-built body into my cherry-blossom-pink hairstylist chair—a special order, one-of-a-kind shade of pink that no other stylist in this shop has. I whip out my hot pink styling cape, unfurling it and fastening it around

his bulky neck. His massive body fills up the chair, but he looks no less masculine because of the traditionally feminine colors surrounding him.

Pumping the hydraulic lift, it sticks partway up, and I apply extra pressure with my foot to position him at the height I need to cut and style his hair. *Wish this chair had a smoother lift.*

“I’m so glad that the General recommended my salon. What did you say your name is?”

He grunts. “Didn’t say. You were too busy getting me into your chair.”

His criticism raises my hackles. “I apologize for not getting out the tea and cookies so we could make formal introductions.”

The guy’s broad shoulders shake. “You’re quite a firecracker, aren’t you?”

Not sure if that’s more criticism or a compliment, I reply in a snarky voice, “Gee, thanks.”

A contrite expression crosses his rugged features. “I sense we’re getting off on the wrong foot. I’m Bruno Thompson. My apologies if I insulted you, Bobbie Sue.”

Running my fingers through his brown locks, I say, “Guess I’m a bit cranky. I haven’t had my second cup of coffee yet.”

“Understandable. I’m not a functioning human until after my second cup.”

Chuckling at his backhanded apology, I say, “So, Mr. Thompson, what hairstyle are we going for?”

“Call me Bruno,” he says, then sits even straighter in the chair, his posture reminiscent of an oak tree. “I want a no-frills, standard military buzz cut. That’s all.” His rumbly voice has a no-nonsense tone, as if he’s forestalling an anticipated debate over what haircut he wants. “If it takes more than five minutes to shampoo and style, I’m out.”

Those requirements are rather limiting; maybe I can sweet-talk him into trying a new style.

Fluffing his surprisingly soft strands that curl around my fingertips, I say, “May I be frank, Bruno?”

Our eyes lock in the mirror over my station, his piercing blue orbs drilling into mine. “Sure, I can take it.”

My lips twitch. “The buzz cut went out of style several years ago. And frankly with your amazing head of hair, it’s a shame to cut those locks so short. The only thing a buzz cut will do is make you look years older.”

His eyes narrow. “Look older?”

“Most men in their thirties don’t sport a buzz cut. It just isn’t done. Women will think you’re in your fifties with that cut.” I toss that out, hoping to appeal to his male ego.

A pensive look crosses his handsome face as he ponders my words. “Fifty, eh?”

I nod. “Let’s get you an updated style that will please your girlfriend,” I suggest.

“Don’t currently have a girlfriend,” he grumbles.

My heart does a flip in my chest at that declaration. This hunk of manhood is single? Hopefully neither Lydia nor Val overheard that statement.

“Well, then, a new updated hairstyle will have the women flocking to your feet.”

He shrugs, although a glimmer of interest appears in those intelligent eyes for a couple seconds. Bruno is intrigued at the thought of a new, updated look. My comments about age work every time.

“May I suggest a high-and-tight cut?” His slightly curly locks will look marvelous that way. It’s really a shame that he’s been cutting off these gorgeous brown strands.

Bruno chuckles. “Not really sure what that is.”

Pulling out a style magazine from a drawer in my station, I whip it open to a page full of examples of high-and-tights.

Pointing to the photos, I say, “See how this haircut features tapered sides and back with a slightly longer length on top?”

He nods.

“You’d look great in this. Plus, the cut was inspired by the military. It’s very masculine yet has minimal fuss.” I truly believe the words I’m saying. Plus Bruno is going to be a lady killer in this new style.

An adorable blush heats his cheeks. “I suppose I could try it.”

“Excellent! Val will give you a quick wash and we’ll get started,” I say, pointing him in the direction of the shampoo station.

~*~

Precisely twenty-four minutes later, Bruno’s transformation is complete. I can almost hear the collective sighs of all the female patrons—aged twenty to ninety—in the shop as they gawk at the military man’s new look. If I thought he was good-looking before, he’s positively swoon-worthy now.

Whipping off the cape, I brush his neck, then spin the chair so he can see himself in the mirror. “There! Do you like it?”

He rotates his head left and right, squinting closely at the haircut. “It’ll do,” he says in a neutral tone, but his lips curl into a grin.

“You like it!” I say excitedly.

“Don’t get yourself into a tizzy. Proof is in the pudding. It needs to be easy to care for, no more than five minutes after a shower to get it looking like this.”

He’s a tough one to please. I’m not going to promise the style will meet his five-minute rule, but I wisely keep that thought to myself. Motioning for him to accompany me to the checkout counter, I select a bottle from our vast line of Sultry Strands for Men haircare products.

“This shampoo will go a long way to keeping your hair in excellent condition, thus eliminating the need for any after-

shower styling products. The mixture of botanicals provides the right amount of moisture for a healthy, non-dry scalp. No flakes, no itching. Just luxurious locks that style with a quick comb and a dry. Plus, the faint scent of coconut and vanilla attracts the ladies.” I plaster a big smile on my face after giving my well-rehearsed marketing spiel.

Bruno cocks an eyebrow. “That stuff does all that?”

I nod.

“And how much will that set me back?”

Giggling, I say, “Thirty bucks. But you only use a dab smaller than the size of a dime for each wash.”

Rolling those gorgeous blue eyes at me, he says, “Go ahead and add the shampoo. Who could turn down a marketing speech like that?”

I give him a flirty wink, then plop the bottle on the counter and ring him up, putting the shampoo in my salon’s signature cotton-candy-pink bag and handing it to him. “You won’t regret getting the shampoo, Bruno. May I make a future haircut appointment for you in five weeks?”

“Sure. Gotta keep my locks trimmed, so I may as well come here,” he replies. Not exactly a huge endorsement of our salon and our services, but I’m itching to see him again, so I’m glad he’s up for a return visit.

Wishing I could see the handsome ex-Marine sooner than five weeks, I schedule the appointment and send him on his way. Am I finally over my last disastrous relationship? Is there a way to bump into the ex-Marine?

Three – Advice from the Dippity Doo

Bobbie Sue

The minute Bruno departs, the elderly sister team of LaVerne and Shirley arrive looking like they're going to church. I've never seen them wear anything other than flowery dresses, support hose, and sturdy black shoes. They're every inch the southern lady, and both have a standing weekly hair appointment for a shampoo, trim, and style for a hairdo that went out of fashion in the 1980s. Neither one ever wants to update their hairdo despite all my efforts.

“Whoeee! Who was that hot military man that just left?” LaVerne asks as she fans herself with her left hand, her black pocketbook—*purse* in twenty-first century terms—dangling off her right elbow.

“How do you know he's in the military? I think he's a weightlifter,” Shirley adds, thumping her identical black pocketbook against her sister's hip.

I chuckle as the two bicker back and forth while I clean up my station.

He's a secret agent.

He's a trainer at a health club. (I think they mean fitness center)

He's a former NFL football player.

I stride to the checkout desk to greet them before they come to blows.

“Ladies! So nice to see you,” I say, handing them both a ten-year-old *People* magazine. They insist on reading these older editions to catch up on celebrity gossip where they know who the celebrity is. “Who's going first this time?”

Shirley gives me a firm Sunday-school-teacher glare. “Bobbie Sue, was that hot-looking piece of manhood your client?”

LaVerne gasps and elbows her sister, both women's purses colliding into each other. “Ladies do not speak so

frankly. What would Mama say?"

Shirley's terminology even made me blush. Thankfully eight-year-old Paisley didn't accompany her mom this morning. "Yes, Mr. Thompson is a new client of mine," I say, trying to portray a nonchalant vibe.

"Don't let that one get away!" Shirley pipes up.

"When are you seeing him again?" LaVerne adds.

I clear my throat, wishing this interrogation would end. "He has another appointment in five weeks."

"Five weeks!" Shirley squawks. "He'll be taken by then."

"But Shirley, he did have a bottle of that Sultry Strands for Men shampoo. He'll think of her every morning," Laverne points out.

"Olfactory memory is not sufficient! He needs to see her pretty face," Shirley scoffs.

Stepping into the fray that's about to happen, I say in a soothing tone, "No need to worry since I'm not currently interested in dating anyone." After my last relationship cratered and burned, the pain is too fresh. I told myself I need to take a break—although the ex-Marine does intrigue me.

"I thought you broke up with that Rodney fellow?" Shirley says, her gray eyes probing mine.

"I did," I say briskly. "Okay, who's going first—"

"That hunk will help you forget you ever dated that loser," LaVerne adds, wagging her eyebrows.

Note to self: would the General have any suggestions for how I could have a "chance encounter" with the ex-Marine?

I clear my throat. "Now, if I remember correctly, it's LaVerne's turn to go first," I say, deftly taking control of the conversation.

"We traded because LaVerne had one of those giant burritos for lunch. She wants to stick close to the ladies' room for the next thirty minutes," Shirley says as she strides over to my station.

I wrinkle my nose at the image that blunt comment elicits, but LaVerne doesn't dispute the statement as she calmly takes a seat in the waiting area. I notice she's in the chair closest to the restroom.

As I unfurl the stylist cape and put it around Shirley's neck, she says, "He was such a polite young man too. He assisted LaVerne out of my Cadillac and even walked both of us to the door. You really shouldn't let that one get away."

Obviously. Note to self: call the General as soon as I get home.

Four – New Hairstyle, New Man

Bruno

Dang! The next morning a strong pang of buyer's remorse hits. How did Bobbie Sue talk me into purchasing this high-priced, fancy shampoo? Truth is, the instant I looked at her pretty face, my defenses crumbled faster than a breached fortress wall.

I gladly opened my wallet and forked over thirty bucks. I've never paid such an outrageous price for shampoo before in my life. My usual cheap discount-store bottle costs less than five dollars and lasts for months. Hopefully these botanicals at least keep my scalp healthier.

When did I start to care about a healthy scalp?

Despite my moment of weakness regarding the shampoo, I have to admit that the new haircut is a nice change of pace. It's an excellent substitute for the buzz cut.

Does the style make me look years younger?

I preen like a teenager before the bathroom mirror, turning left and right, taking stock of my new hairstyle while trying to judge whether I look younger than my thirty-five years. Not that I thought I looked like a fifty-year-old before, but I do think this hairstyle makes me look more youthful.

The extra length on top allows my usually buzzed locks to look fluffier, and there's a bit of a wave I didn't even know I had. Sporting the same cut since I was eighteen, I've never given my hair a chance to curl, kink, or twist. The strands feel silky as I run my fingers through the extra length on top, and a whiff of coconut and vanilla scent floats towards my nostrils. Maybe this shampoo was worth the cost after all.

The extra few minutes it took me to get out the ancient blow dryer my sister left behind on one of her visits and dry my hair—which I usually towel dry—might also be worth it. I chuckle remembering how I told Bobbie Sue that my morning hair routine could not exceed five minutes. This new look is worth spending ten minutes on every morning, especially since it makes me look younger.

Thinking about the beautiful hair stylist puts a frown on my face. I won't see Bobbie Sue for five long weeks. Her sexy southern drawl and ability to talk me into a new cut and expensive shampoo intrigued me. Maybe it's time for me to get back into the dating scene. Mom would be overjoyed. She's been on the "why don't you settle down" bandwagon ever since I retired. Something about having grandkids to spoil before she's eighty.

Can I dream up a hair emergency as an excuse to see her sooner? Ideas float through my brain . . .

The Glue Catastrophe: while doing one of my DIY projects, I accidentally get glue in my hair.

The Shampoo Mix-up: I use the wrong bottle in the shower, and instead of shampoo, I lather my hair with a cleaning substance that turns my hair a putrid shade of green.

The Bubblegum Debacle: While enjoying a piece of bubblegum, it unexpectedly gets tangled in my hair, creating a sticky, gooey mess.

Would Bobbie Sue believe any of these excuses? *Nope.*

Time to get some advice from the General. Since the man is old school—text messages go unheeded for days—a phone call is in order. This is an urgent situation and needs immediate attention.

"Winston here," the General says after the first ring.

"Bruno here," I reply, with a bit of snark in my voice.

"I knew that because your ugly mug appeared on my screen. How can I help you?" His statement surprises me because he's usually techno-challenged, so his daughter or her husband probably added my photo to his contact list.

Should I send him an updated pic featuring my new hairdo?

Where did that thought come from? The General will be as interested in my new hairstyle as a vegetarian is with an In-N-Out burger.

Back to the topic at hand. I clear my throat nervously. How do I ask my former superior officer for dating help? “Um, I need a way to bump into . . . er, um, Bobbie Sue,” I finally spit out, my voice cracking like an adolescent boy.

A bark of laughter pierces my left ear. “So I take it the visit to the salon went well?”

“If you call dropping eighty bucks on shampoo and a haircut ‘going well,’ then I guess it did.”

Another bout of laughter floats across the line. “She talked you into some of those fancy haircare products?”

I grunt. “Maybe.”

“Whooee! The ex-Marine is now sporting a trendy new hairstyle and using shampoo spun from gold. Am I right?”

How does he know this? Dodging the embarrassing topic, I say, “Well? Any suggestions for bumping into Bobbie Sue? Or should I call Breezie?”

His laughter stops. I knew he couldn’t resist a little matchmaking challenge. “Bobbie Sue frequents the Magic Bean. Stops there every morning at oh-seven-hundred hours. Rain or shine.”

I don’t even bother to ask how he knows this. Since Oliver and I staged an intervention to help the General clean up his act last year, the man’s become a real social bug. For a former recluse, he sure gets around.

“Duly noted. Thanks for the tip.”

“Any time. Oh, and she loves those pink frosted donuts they make with sprinkles on top.” *Click!*

I chuckle at the General’s abruptness. The man is not one to chat on the phone. Googling the Magic Bean, I make a battle plan to be at the coffeeshop tomorrow before oh-seven-hundred hours.

What should I wear?

~*~

As I drive to the coffee shop, there's already traffic flooding the roadways. I cringe to admit it, but I'm not usually out and about by this early commuter hour. My mornings are typically spent dawdling at my kitchen table over several cups of coffee and reading the latest news on my phone. A person can reside in California more harmoniously if they avoid morning rush hour traffic.

With the extra time my new hairstyle has added to my shower routine, I got up before oh-six-hundred in order to be showered, blow dried, shaved, and ready to leave the house thirty minutes later. One lock of hair simply wouldn't cooperate and insists on dangling onto my forehead. Belatedly, I regret not purchasing some of that pricey styling gel. That stuff could hold your hair in place even during a hurricane.

Deciding to pull out all the stops, I donned my dusty rose polo shirt, pairing it with a new pair of brushed denim chinos from the Macy's Resort Collection for Men. Those jumped into my cart while shopping yesterday for my new boat shoes. The salesperson assured me that these shoes are timeless and won't go out of fashion. She also thought that the chinos were a price-effective choice, despite the seventy-five-dollar price tag. Oh well. I was anxious to impress my coffee date with my complete style makeover.

Ten minutes later, I stroll into the Magic Bean and spot a hot pink dress in line ahead of me. I peer over the heads of the two people in line between us, confirming that the dress belongs to Bobbie Sue. *Now to make it look like an accident that we ran into each other.*

She orders some fancy coffee that takes a minute or two to prepare. While she waits, she wistfully eyes the pink frosted donuts in the bakery case. By the time her coffee is ready, I'm first in line.

"Bobbie Sue?" I say, feigning surprise in my voice, as the barista hands her the to-go cup.

She whirls around, almost colliding with the gentleman in front of me who ordered an iced coffee. Personally, if I can't get coffee at a scald-your-tongue temperature, I don't want it.

“Bruno? What are you doing here?” she says with a squeak. Her eyes roam me from head to toe, my new outfit obviously making an impression.

“I have a business meeting this morning, so I stopped here for coffee. I’ve heard good reviews of this place.” *Every secret agent needs a cover story, so this is mine.*

“Yeah, their coffee is to die for,” she says, smiling from ear to ear. “Well, I won’t delay you since you have a meeting.” She turns to leave, but I hold out a hand.

“I’ve got a few minutes. Would you like something from the bakery case? I’m hankering for one of those pink frosted donuts.”

Her eyes go wide as saucers, and she licks her lips. “How nice of you to offer! I guess I have a few minutes to have one of those too.” A blush turns her cheeks pink, almost matching the confection’s frosting.

Suppressing a grin, I order two donuts along with my plain black coffee. “Shall we find a booth in the back?” I say once I have my order in hand.

She grins and trots beside me, then slides into the booth. I place her donut in front of her and slide in across from her. We accidentally bump knees in the process.

“Sorry!” I mutter, ruing my long legs.

“No worries,” Bobbie Sue says, then takes a huge bite of donut. Some icing and a couple sprinkles cling to her lips, making my mouth go dry. I long to kiss those off her luscious glossy pink lips.

Where did that thought come from?

Gulping, I take a couple bites of my donut and sip my plain coffee while she devours the donut and daintily swallows her tall caramel macchiato (I heard the barista call out her fancy order when he handed her the cup). A satisfied smile lights her face. I’ll have to thank the General for the pink donut tip.

“So, how have you been?” I ask, the lame question rolling right off my tongue.

She giggles. “Well, let’s see. Since we saw each other just two days ago, I don’t have anything to report except for receiving a shipment of hyaluronic acid hair masks. These are the latest rage as salons start to focus on skinification of hair.”

My eyes literally roll back in my head. “Skinification of hair? How is hair even remotely similar to skin? Do you believe in that, er, horse manure?” I remember at the last second to tone down the term I was going to use instead.

A loud cackle escapes her throat. She laughs for several beats while the couple beside us throws her a frowny look. Bobbie Sue ignores them as a few tears leak from the corner of her eyes. “Tell me what you really think,” she retorts.

“Bobbie Sue, you can’t honestly tell me that skinification of hair is a good idea. Can you? Who came up with that anyway? It’s just an excuse to sell more pricey products.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, then gives me a glare reminiscent of my drill sergeant. “Those products are based on scientific research by dermatologists and cosmetic chemists.”

Shifting in my seat at my obvious verbal blunder, I sputter, “I apologize. I didn’t mean to insult you, but I won’t be purchasing any hair masks.” I silently kick myself for my bluntness turning our “bump into each other” into a “collide into each other” disaster. Scrambling to get back on her good side, I add, “But that Sultry Strands Shampoo for Men is a real winner. I’m a convert.”

She wrinkles her nose and stares at me, while I plaster a convincing expression of a pricey-shampoo convert on my face.

“I’m glad you like it,” she says, grudgingly accepting my apology, I think. Closely eyeing my hair, she points to my forehead. “You’ve got a rogue curl. Want me to fix it?”

Patting the miscreant lock, I say, “Um, sure.”

She hops to her feet, joins me in my side of the booth, then whips out a tiny bottle of styling gel from her pocket. She

drabs some on her fingers, runs them through my hair, and gently repositions the curl. All the while, tingles of attraction run up my neck and I suppress a sudden urge to kiss her. After my insulting skinification products comment, she'd probably slap my face.

"There! Much better," she says. Holding up the bottle she adds in a saucy tone, "You probably should purchase some of this on your next visit to the salon."

A light bulb goes on and I nod amicably. Purchasing salon products is an excellent excuse to see her again.

After giving me a flirty wink, she returns to her side of the booth, calmly picks up her drink, and sips, staring at me over the top of her cup.

"Um, thanks. Guess it wouldn't hurt to get some of that stuff."

She grins, sliding the tiny bottle across the table. "Here. This one's on the house."

I slip the bottle into my pocket, vowing to keep my opinions about haircare products to myself from now on. "I'll try it tomorrow."

Nodding, Bobbie Sue glances down at the pink leather watch on her delicate wrist. "Sorry, but I've gotta run! Thanks for the donut," she says, hastily collecting her purse and sliding out of the booth. "By the way, I love your outfit. Very stylish," she says with a jaunty wave as she waltzes out of the coffeeshop.

While I drink the rest of my coffee, I ponder whether I just made inroads with Bobbie Sue or if the mission was an abject failure. I really need to work on my flirting skills because I stink at wooing a woman. At least she noticed my new clothes.

Five – When Will I See Him Again?

Bobbie Sue

Bumping into Bruno at the Magic Bean was pleasant, albeit unexpected. He only ordered a plain black coffee. I'd expect a guy like him to brew that at home, not go to a pricey coffee shop for that.

His new threads also took me by surprise since his previous outfit had been a bit dull, nothing flashy. The new outfit, while still not flashy, was trendy—weren't those chinos from the Macy's Resort Collection for Men? I got my dad a pair of those on Father's Day. And the ex-Marine also looked oh-so-sexy in that pink polo shirt! *Swoon!*

As I unlock the door to the salon, I kick myself for not setting up another encounter with Bruno when I saw him. As Mom would say, "strike while the iron's hot."

LaVerne and Shirley's advice also rings in my head. I shouldn't let this one get away. He's so unlike the guys I've recently been dating, every relationship eventually crashing and burning. Why not give someone who's not my usual type a try?

Panic sets in. Since I've never seen Bruno at the Magic Bean before, I may never see him there again. So how am I going to bump into him before his next salon appointment, which is five whole weeks away? Even though he insulted my new skinification haircare products, I still have a major crush on the man.

Before the gals arrive at work, I whip out my cell and call for advice.

"Winston here," the General says after the first ring.

"Hi Winston! This is Bobbie Sue from the Dippity Doo."

"Nice to hear from you! Did you get those skinification hair masks in yet? I'm dying to try those."

His excitement over the masks strikes me as hilarious, and I'm barely able to suppress a giggle. Despite Bruno's skepticism of the products, one military man is obviously

jazzed over them. “As a matter of fact, we just got our initial shipment in! Shall I place a bottle on the reserved shelf for you?”

“Yes, please do that. Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

I hesitate for a few beats. How shall I phrase my question? Asking the General for dating advice suddenly seems awkward. “Um, Bruno Thompson and you are friends, right?”

“Affirmative,” he says.

His clipped response doesn’t buy me any more time to ponder how I’m going to phrase this. It’s time to bare my soul and see if the General can help me, rather than beat around the bush any longer. As my daddy would say, “Time to fish or cut bait.”

I take a deep breath. “Winston, I’m going to confide something to you that I don’t want you to share with Bruno.”

“My lips are sealed,” he says, excitement tingeing his tone.

“I may have a small crush on Mr. Thompson. I’d like to see where this attraction leads, but I don’t know how to casually bump into him, if you know what I mean.”

A bark of laughter pierces my left ear. “I’ve got several ideas,” he says gleefully. “Have you ever been to FlexFit Forge?”

My brows draw together. A military-sounding gym? *Ugh!* I hate exercise.

“Winston, quite frankly, exercise and I are as compatible as tea and brownies. You’ve gotta have coffee to go with chocolate.”

“Umm, I agree about the coffee with chocolate thing, but I’m not quite sure what that has to do with exercise.” I guess my analogy sailed right over his head. He plows on. “FlexFit Forge has a beginner’s yoga class that you’ll love. And I know

for a fact that Bruno just started attending it. He got bored with Zumba and moved on to yoga.”

Yoga? An exercise where you wear a skintight outfit and then try to bend your body into the shape of a pretzel?

“I don’t know. I’ve never even been able to touch my nose to my knee,” I admit.

Another laugh roars across the line. “No problem. This is a true beginner’s class. Bruno is about as flexible as a steel pipe, so don’t worry about embarrassing yourself. He’ll do that for both of you.”

“Well, that’s nice to know. But did I mention that I hate to sweat?”

“The room is kept at a perfect seventy-two degrees. Plus, the instructor provides frequent hydration breaks. Get yourself one of those cute yoga outfits and go catch yourself a Marine!”

He sounds like he’s spouting out an advertisement for FlexFit Forge. Maybe he gets a referral fee? Voicing my final objection, I say, “Those skintight outfits never look becoming on me.” My voice has a definite tinge of anxiety.

“I’ve got the perfect solution! Write this down: *The Fashion Finesse* blog. A gal by the name of Margarite Consuelo DiSilva Coronado Wells writes great recommendations, especially for fitness wear. She turned me onto ZenithFit track pants, and I’ve never looked back. I’m sure she’ll have a recommendation for yoga attire.”

I scribble down the name of the blog. How does he know all this? Winston is a man of many surprises.

“Thank you! I’ll check it out. Do you happen to know when the beginner’s class meets?”

“Oh-nine-hundred every Saturday morning.”

That gives me only four days to find an alluring yoga outfit and maybe do some stretching exercises so I don’t look like a fool.

“I’m sure Bruno will be there. When the man starts something, he sticks to it.”

There's no doubt about that. I felt that vibe radiating off Bruno the minute I set eyes on his square jaw and broad shoulders.

"Thanks, Winston. I appreciate all the tips. Stop by at your earliest convenience for your skinification hair masks."

"Will do. Keep me posted about catching that Marine's eye. He may look intimidating, but he's rather shy, and I don't think he's dated anyone for a long time. Bye!"

Click!

Bruno, shy? Hasn't dated anyone for a long time?

A sassy grin crosses my face. That hunky Marine isn't going to know what hit him when Bobbie Sue Williams sets her sights on him. Jiggling the mouse on my laptop, I bring up that blog.

~*~

Wowza! These ZenithFit yoga pants are a dream come true! Just like Maggie promised, they accentuate my body in a positive way, not making me look like a marshmallow stuffed into a body suit. I'm positively in love with both the tickle-me-pink and the more muted misty rose-pink outfits. On impulse, I ordered matching crop tops and cover-up jackets too. The top has wide horizontal stripes, and the jacket is adorned with a cute geometric pattern: everything coordinates but isn't too matchy-matchy.

The yoga class starts in thirty minutes, and my palms are already starting to sweat. I pray Winston is right and the beginner's class doesn't make me look like a bumbling idiot.

I try not to think about the unfortunate incident at that "try it for a dollar" yoga class a few years ago where I fell asleep in class. Priscilla, our resident exercise queen and hair-dye expert, talked me into trying it. When I woke up, everyone was collecting their mats, giving me a wide berth, while I was still in the peace pose. The last thing I remember the instructor saying was, "Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Notice how your body rises and falls with each inhalation and

exhalation.” Right. My body rose and fell into a deep sleep. Hopefully I didn’t snore.

This morning I don’t dare eat any breakfast for fear it might reappear after doing some of the yoga poses. My stomach growls with disdain, demanding to be fed. I keep my fingers crossed that it doesn’t protest too loudly during class.

FlexFit Forge is an intimidating steel and glass structure that screams muscles, testosterone, and pain. Lots of pain. Grabbing my mat, I don’t let the building put me off as I enter through the heavy brass front doors declaring “Join now, 50% off!”

A friendly guy sporting a meticulous high-and-tight—he must have an excellent stylist—directs me to where the yoga session is being held. The class is about half full when I arrive. Scanning the room, I don’t see a hunky Marine anywhere. My eye latches onto a perfectly coiffed white hair system that I’d recognize in my sleep. Gordy Higginbloom gives me a jaunty wave as he flirts with a twenty-something clad in an eye-popping outfit sitting beside him.

Pouting slightly that Bruno isn’t here, I unroll my hot pink mat and take a seat on the floor. Soft music plays in the background as attendees continue to stroll into the room. People chat in whispered tones while sitting in small groups. Despite the Zen vibe in the room, my heart rate skyrockets. My palms start to sweat in anticipation of seeing the Marine and trying to fake my way through this class. Bumping into Bruno again at the Magic Bean would have been much more advisable than this.

A small commotion draws my eyes to the doorway. Two female attendees are tittering like schoolgirls about the latest arrival. My eyes widen when I realize who they’re discussing.

Oh my goodness!

Bruno looks fabulous in his black yoga pants and tight black T-shirt, both molding perfectly to his muscular frame. The man could be a yoga ninja in that attire.

The instructor is going to need some smelling salts based on the reaction Bruno is garnering. One twenty-something is fanning her face, while another is smacking her lips. A gray-haired lady rubs her hands together like she can't wait to get her fingers on the Marine. A catcall whistle erupts from someone near the back of the room. Two women scuffle, bopping each other with their rolled-up mats. The one still standing after the dust clears motions for Bruno to put his mat down beside her.

I roll my eyes. *Seriously*. These women need to chill. Haven't they ever seen a fit Marine before?

Bruno seems oblivious to the havoc he's leaving in his wake as he calmly strolls towards the back of the room, his eyes landing on me. He smiles and saunters up to where I'm sitting. "May I join you?" he says in that rumbly voice.

I nod, unable to form words. Those pecs on display in that form-fitting T-shirt leave me breathless.

A collective sigh of disappointment floats around the room as Bruno unfurls his mat beside mine.

"Do you like yoga? I didn't see you at the last class," Bruno says, his sky-blue eyes locking with mine.

I wave my hand in a dismissive motion. "I love yoga! Unfortunately, I had to skip last Saturday due to a prior commitment, but I try to never miss a session." The moment the words leave my lips, I want to suck them back in. Now I'll have to attend this torture session every Saturday!

"Great! Maybe you can give me some pointers. I just started last week."

Sweat trickles down my neck and I feel slightly faint. How am I going to impress this guy with my inept yoga skills? Maybe I need to dash off to the ladies' room? Is a sudden bout of diarrhea better than being embarrassed looking like an uncoordinated dork? *Oh my!* I've gotten myself into quite a pickle.

Kicking myself for not asking Priscilla to phone me with a haircut emergency two minutes into the class, I smile as if I

don't have a care in the world as the instructor starts the session.

The first pose is sitting cross-legged with our hands resting on our knees. My pose looks as good as all the other women in the room. My ZenithFit yoga outfit rocks, making me feel confident and strong. *I've got this!*

Of course, the yoga ninja beside me has perfect ramrod straight posture and every female eye is watching him. I can only hope that he's too busy listening to the instructor and focusing on his breath to notice what I'm doing.

After ten minutes, I'm still feeling pretty good. My poses aren't perfect, but I've managed to mimic what the instructor is doing so far. *Sort of.* I definitely feel a leg cramp coming on, so I back off in my attempts to hold the tree pose for the prescribed amount of time. Substance over form. Or in this case, warding off a cramp over perfecting the stance.

We fly through the next set of poses. Warrior I, Warrior II, and Goddess poses. *All easy peasy!* Why didn't I like yoga the first time I tried it?

When the instructor demonstrates the plank pose, I groan (internally of course). Holding my body in a plank-like position with only my toes and arms for support for any length of time is not even remotely possible. I assume the pose, smiling at Bruno like this is a walk in the park. Just when my arms are shaking so badly they're ready to give way, a man in the front row yelps in pain.

"Leg cramp!" he yells, then writhes around on the floor.

Both the instructor and Bruno rush to his side. Bruno takes the man's foot in his own palm and flexes it into a 90-degree position, giving the poor man some relief.

Another collective sigh echoes across the room as everyone watches Bruno's efforts as a medic. The instructor tells everyone, including the man with the cramp, to hydrate so no one else gets a muscle contraction. I make a big show of slowly drinking from my water bottle.

Bruno assists the man out of the room and presumably to his vehicle. I sigh with relief that the Marine won't see me try to perform any more poses. The disruption takes a big bite out of class time, so we rush through the last few poses—all ones that I'm barely able to perform—ending with the peace pose, although this instructor calls it the corpse pose. *That's a scary thought.*

I focus on keeping my eyes open during the cooldown pose, then pop up along with everyone else, grateful I didn't fall asleep. We repeat "Namaste" to each other and the teacher as we roll up our mats. Bruno jogs back into the room right as everyone starts to disperse.

Several women congratulate him on the heroic medical assistance he provided. Bruno shrugs and smiles while I want to point out that all the Marine did was help the man flex his foot—even a civilian would know to do that—and then carried the guy's mat while escorting him out of the room.

Heroic? Not hardly.

"What did I miss?" Bruno asks while rolling up his plain black mat. The man needs to learn to add more color into his life, although I did get a glimpse of what must be his alter ego—wearing that pink polo at the coffeeshop.

"Oh, not much," I say in a breezy tone. "Unfortunately, we had to skip the eagle and the dancer poses," I say, infusing my voice with fake disappointment. When I saw those poses on the oversized poster at the back of the room, I thought there would be zero chance I could perform either of them, so I'm truly elated at that lucky coincidence.

Bruno pats my arm. "I'll make sure Althea covers those next time."

He knows the instructor's first name? Of course he does.

There won't be a next time if I can help it. That sudden bout of stomach flu is going to hit right at oh-nine-hundred hours next Saturday.

Bruno strolls beside me as we exit the building; we both blink when the bright sunshine hits our retinas. My stomach

decides this is the time to emit a loud, unladylike growl that rumbles across the parking lot like the noise coming from a hungry bear.

“Would you like to get some breakfast?” Bruno asks, politely ignoring the inelegant sound. His lips twitch, but he manages not to laugh.

“Ah, sure. How about Sonny’s Diner? They make a killer blueberry pancake.” Before my stomach can embarrass me further, I hop into my modest sedan, slam the door, then crack the window. “See you over there!”

He nods, then jogs over to a behemoth pickup that looks like it eats little cars like mine as a snack. As I drive away, I take inventory of my purse. Maybe there’s a granola bar in there that I can snarf down to feed the bear.

Six – Jumbo Stack or a Combo?

Bruno

Bobbie Sue beats me to the diner: apparently she has a lead foot in addition to a loud stomach. I join her in the packed waiting area, grinning at how pretty she looks in her yoga ensemble. Several other male eyes are also appreciating the form-fitting outfit, so I toss them a territorial “she’s mine” look. I might be overstepping, but I don’t care.

“What’s good here?” I ask in a teasing tone, sliding onto the uncomfortable-looking chair beside hers in the waiting area.

Grinning, she hands me a laminated menu as big as a poster. “They have a wide selection,” she says with a giggle.

Talk about too many choices. *How does one choose?*

“I love the blueberry pancakes, but the omelets are also excellent,” she says pointing to an area on the menu called All-Day Breakfast.

“Right, you did mention those pancakes. How many come in an order?” I ask, squinting at the menu’s tiny print.

She laughs. “I usually get the short stack, which is three. But they also offer the big stack, the jumbo stack, and the colossal stack. I think those are either five, eight, or twelve pancakes.”

My eyes widen. “I’m not sure about putting all my pancakes in one basket, so to speak.” Bobbie Sue chuckles at my poor analogy. “Think I’ll get one of these combo breakfasts. Have you ever had the Farmer’s or the Lumberjack’s Combo?” I ask, reading from the menu.

“Sorry, no. I usually stick to the pancakes.” She reads the menu across my shoulder, then says. “You can eat all that?”

I don’t know whether she’s referring to the Farmer’s or the Lumberjack’s list of inclusions, including different presentations of meat, potatoes, and eggs. Arching an eyebrow, I point at myself. “Big hungry man.”

Bobbie Sue shakes her head in amusement.

After seating us at a table, an older gray-haired lady, her pen poised over the tiny pad in her hand, asks, “Are you ready to order?” She looks like a strong gust of wind could blow her away. I suddenly feel guilty asking this sweet old lady to schlep me the Lumberjack combo.

“Do you have assistance with delivering orders?” I ask.

Glaring at me over her half-glasses she says, “I’m a lot stronger than I look, sonny.”

Now feeling chastised, I say, “I’ll have the Lumberjack Combo with sausage links rather than bacon.”

“Hashbrowns or breakfast potatoes?”

“Which one do you get the greatest number of?” I ask, then wince realizing that sounds rather uncouth. Just to emphasize the point, my stomach makes a loud rumble.

Both women snicker at my question. “I’ll mark you down for the hashbrowns,” the server replies.

“Miss?” she says, turning to Bobbie Sue.

“I’d like the short stack blueberry pancakes, with whipped cream, please.”

“A wise choice,” the waitress says, then throws me a stink-eye, as if I made the worst order possible. Before I can change my mind to the Farmer’s breakfast, she flies off to the back kitchen, the shiny metal door almost hitting her in the rump.

“Having second thoughts?” Bobbie Sue asks while stifling a chuckle.

“She acted like my order was something a dog wouldn’t even eat,” I huff. *Was it the sausage links?*

Reaching across the table, Bobbie Sue pats my hand. “Settle down, big guy. Everything here is delicious. I think she was still peeved about you suggesting she couldn’t handle carrying the plates.”

I lean in, then whisper, “A gust of wind would blow her away. She’s probably not even ninety pounds soaking wet.”

My breakfast companion shrugs. “You know what they call someone who assumes something,” she teases, then takes a sip of her ice water.

A flush heats my neck. “Duly noted.” Deciding to broach the topic on my mind, I say, “Did you enjoy the yoga class?” My eyes bore into hers, trying to read her mind. I got the distinct impression that she hated the class from all the grimaces and groans she made during it.

She toys with her silverware for several beats. “I’m going to be honest, Bruno. I’d rather get a root canal than do yoga.”

Bingo! I howl with laughter. “Why did you come to that class? FlexFit has several other options, such as the low-impact pole fitness or the hula hoop dance class.”

Her nose wrinkles like she smells something rotten. “Honestly?”

I nod, carefully watching her expression. She’s as transparent as glass. I won’t be recommending she join my poker club.

A loud sigh floats across the table. “Bruno, I’m thirty-four years old and haven’t had a decent serious relationship since Obama was president!” She flails her hands, then continues, “Every guy I date is either a flake, a rattlesnake, or a ghost.”

My eyes widen at that confession.

“I went to the yoga class in order to bump into you.” She mutters the words, then bites her lower lip.

My chest swells with masculine pride. “Really?”

“Yep,” she says, popping the p, then focusing her eyes downward as her finger rubs a water spot on the tabletop.

“I’m flattered.”

Her eyes flit up to mine. “Really?”

“Confession time,” I say. “My trip to the Magic Bean was just to bump into you.”

Her hand flits to her lips. “So . . . we share some mutual feelings? I was scared you weren’t interested in plain ol’ me.”

I grunt. “Trust me, there’s nothing plain about you. And yes, the feeling is mutual. We seem to click, other than our difference of opinion about skinification hair masks.”

She rolls her eyes, her lips twitching up at the corners. Skin care products on hair sounds like a terrible idea—who slathers hand cream on their hair? I drop that topic for now, but she’s never going to get me to try those things.

“How about we go out on a real date and see where this leads?” I suggest.

A grin spreads across her pretty face. “Promise we won’t be doing yoga?”

I snort. “Absolutely no yoga. I was only attending that horrible class because the General recommended it. Do you know how difficult it is to hold that plank pose when you have a bum knee and a trick elbow?”

Her brows draw together. “How’d you get those?”

Not wanting to burst this fun, flirty mood with a tale about a Marine-mission-gone-bad, I say, “That’s a story for another time.”

Her concerned expression shifts into a half-smile, then she holds up her water glass. “To a real date without any blood, sweat, and tears!”

I clink her glass. “Where would you like to go?”

She taps her finger on her chin, as if pondering several options. Personally I hope she doesn’t want to eat at one of those hoity-toity restaurants where they serve such minuscule portions you have to stop at the McDonalds drive-thru on the way home.

“Surprise me,” she says with a wink.

A noise off to my left draws my attention. Here comes our petite elderly waitress carrying no less than two large plates and three side plates balanced on one arm, with a pitcher of syrup dangling from her finger. She grunts, then plops the various plates down on the table with precision and loud thuds. She slides the syrup in front of me and pulls a bottle of ketchup from the pocket in her apron, plunking it beside the syrup. *Wow!* My eyes widen at her efficiency and dexterity.

“Do you need anything else?” she asks, giving me a smirk.

I hold up a placating hand feeling duly scolded. “I’m impressed. I’ll never judge a waitress by her size again.”

She nods. “I can do fifty pull ups in a minute. My husband, God rest his soul, was a Marine.”

Bobbie Sue places her hand over her heart. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

The waitress blinks rapidly, holding back her emotions. “Thanks. Enjoy your meal,” she says, then turns on her heel, her orthopedic shoes squeaking as she walks away.

“I’ll have to leave a big tip,” I say, digging into my scrambled eggs.

“Good plan,” Bobbie Sue says, slathering her pancakes in syrup, then forking off a big chunk and popping it into her mouth. We eat in companionable silence, too busy forking food into our faces to talk.

A few minutes later, Bobbie Sue nods towards my almost-empty plates. “Everything to your satisfaction? No regrets over getting the Lumberjack combo?”

“Zero regrets! These were the best pancakes I’ve ever had. Those hash browns were just the right crispness. And the sausage links were spicy but not greasy. I’m definitely coming back here.”

She giggles at my off-the-cuff review of the food. Now that we’ve both admitted our attraction for each other and our

mutual dislike of yoga, I don't feel like I have to put on a false front, pretend to be someone other than who I am.

And who I am is someone who strikes when the iron is hot. "How about Friday night for our first date? We'll get something to eat along with the activity I have in mind."

"That would be lovely, Bruno," she says quietly, sporting an adorable pink blush.

For a guy who's rusty on the dating scene, I've probably given her the wrong impression. I have no clue where to take a beautiful woman in order to romance her. Guess I'll have to contact the General for more dating advice.

Seven – More Advice from the Dippity Doo

Bobbie Sue

Mrs. Noonan strolls into the salon at precisely ten o'clock. She's a whiz with that walker of hers. I wonder which neighbor gave her a ride to the salon this time.

I hop up from my seat at my station where I was looking through the latest styles for eighty- and ninety-year-olds. Maybe I can talk Mrs. Noonan into a new hairdo. I've only been trying to do so for five years, but I feel like she's at the cusp of agreeing.

"Mrs. Noonan! How are you doing?" I ask. Oddly enough, she's been coming here for all this time and I still don't know her first name. Everyone always calls her Mrs. Noonan.

"Fine, dear."

"I'm so glad to hear that. What are we doing today?" I ask, giving her tight gray curls a once-over with my eyes. She never has a hair out of place, and I suspect this standing appointment is more of a social visit than a necessity.

After I have the elderly lady comfortably settled in my chair, she replies, "Do you have any suggestions, dear? I think a new hair style is in order."

Chuckling, I whip out the style book I was just reviewing for this very discussion—the same one we have every week. "Do any of these catch your fancy?" I ask, handing her the magazine.

She flips through several pages, pausing a few times, but then continuing. After a few minutes, she hands the book back to me. "I'm afraid those styles are a little too avant-garde for me. How about a shampoo, trim, and blowout?"

"Of course. Your current style is very becoming." It's like we're reading from a script, as we perform these same lines week after week. Lydia and Val giggle beside the reception desk. When money changes hands, I remember their long-

standing bet as to whether Mrs. Noonan will ever change her hairstyle.

I assist the elderly lady to the shampoo station. “Which shampoo shall we use this time? The coconut and vanilla or the citrus?” I ask after carefully wetting her gray curls.

“Which did you use last time?”

“The citrus.”

“That one is very nice. Let’s go with that again.”

Keeping track in my head, I tally the score. Citrus 59, Coconut and Vanilla 1. I roll my eyes when another round of money changes hands at the reception desk.

As I gently massage the shampoo into her damp locks, she says, “How’s your dating life, dear? Did you finally ditch that boring Edison guy?”

Mrs. Noonan lives vicariously through me, and I keep her amused with my dating fiascos. Chuckling, I reply, “Oh, Edison is old news! Do you remember the ex-Marine who attended Oliver’s Christmas Eve party? He came with the General.”

The older lady grins. “The man with muscles of steel and a buzz cut?”

A laugh slips out. “Yep, that’s the one.”

“I wondered why you didn’t flirt with him at the party. He’s a looker.”

“I had just started dating Edison at that point, so I was officially off the market.”

A *hrumph* sound emerges from Mrs. Noonan’s bright red lipstick-colored lips, telling me exactly what she thought of Edison. Too bad I didn’t wise up about him sooner. I wasted two months on that flake.

Before Mrs. Noonan can comment further, I plow on. “Bruno and I bumped into each other at a coffee shop and at the gym, then he asked me out. We’re going on our first date this Friday night.” My heart does a little flip.

“Ooh! Where is he taking you?”

I finish rinsing her hair and escort her back to my chair. Once she’s safely seated, I reply, “Unfortunately I told him to surprise me.”

She makes a *tut-tut* sound. “Surprises are never good, dear. You won’t know what to wear.”

That’s an understatement. I’ve been stewing about my outfit all week. “He said to wear something casual, so I’m not worried.” My glib comment attempts to hide my anxiety.

“Well, when in doubt, I always fall back on a nice dress and heels. When my late husband asked me on our first date, I dressed in my Sunday best. We used to do that back in my day.”

“Where did he take you?” I ask, ignoring the dress comment.

A sad, nostalgic look crosses her face. “We went to a jazz club for cocktails and dancing. It was so romantic.”

My heart feels a pang of sadness for sweet Mrs. Noonan. She lost her husband about four years ago. By the expression on her face, she misses him very much.

“That sounds very romantic!”

She giggles, as if still caught in fond memories of the past. “Maybe your Marine will be just as romantic. Wherever you go, have a nice time, but don’t let him kiss you on the first date. That will send the wrong message.”

My eyes widen at her frank comment. “Good advice. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I wasn’t even thinking about kisses, too busy worrying about where he’s taking me and what to wear. Now I’ll fret the rest of the week about whether I should let him kiss me or if he’ll even want to do so.

Eight – First Date Jitters

Bobbie Sue

I'm on pins and needles as I wait for Bruno to arrive. It doesn't help that I have no idea where we're going. So much for asking him to surprise me. I've changed my outfit three times and restyled my hair twice. Thankfully my usual three-hour styling routine using my new line of skinification products is shorter now that I have this short blunt cut.

Bruno said to dress casually, but what does that mean coming from an ex-Marine? Dry-washed blue jeans paired with a T-shirt? Khaki wide-leg pants and a button-down shirt? A maxi skirt and flowy peasant blouse? I can't decide between a traditional, trendy, or relaxed look.

All week I've been worrying about my flippant remark to Bruno about surprising me on this date. I should have considered that he's a testosterone-laden ex-Marine, a guy who probably lives on the wild side. Going bungee jumping is to him like going to a flea market is to me. I should have laid out some strict parameters or guidelines first.

No trampoline parks.

No outdoor rock climbing.

No paintball adventures.

No white-water rafting.

Absolutely no hang gliding.

Basically, anything that produces a rush of adrenaline is out . . . Anything where my feet leave the ground is out . . . Anything that messes up my hair is out.

By midweek, I almost texted him my list but convinced myself that he wouldn't take me to any of those places anyway. Hopefully we're going somewhere conventional, like dinner and a movie. Maybe I should have dropped a few movie hints, so we don't end up at a Mission Impossible flick—although Tom Cruise is pretty easy on the eyes.

With thirty minutes remaining until my date arrives, I turn to my friend and employee Priscilla for advice. She joined our crew at the Dippity Doo about two years ago, after going through a difficult divorce. The fifty-year-old mother of two desperately needed the income after being out of the workplace for several years while she raised her kids. I waived her station fees for the first year, which allowed her to get back on her feet. We've been friends ever since. And unlike Lydia and Val, she's not interested in the ex-Marine, so there's no competition between us for the man's attentions.

"I knew you'd call," Priscilla says with a chuckle after the first ring.

"I'm having a wardrobe meltdown over here and need your advice!" I squeak.

She laughs. "Let me guess. You've tried on everything in your closet and still can't decide on an outfit."

"Yes," I groan.

"Just pretend this is another day at the Dippity Doo. You, along with the rest of us, would be wearing pink. Like we do. Every. Single. Day," she says with the slightest grumble to her voice.

"Not helpful," I reply in a much grumblier tone.

"Sorry," she says, not actually sounding sorry in the least. She clears her throat, "Do you have any idea where he's taking you?"

I shake my head despite the fact she can't see me. "He mentioned food, but nothing other than that."

A loud *tsk-tsk* noise reprimands me across the line. "If I remember correctly, you told him to surprise you." An ear-splitting cackle pierces my left ear.

"I admit that was a mistake, but what do I do now? He's going to be here in twenty-five minutes!" I wail.

"What's your favorite outfit? The one you feel most comfortable in?"

"That's easy. Blue jeans and a T-shirt."

“Well, let’s work with that. Do you have a favorite, best-fitting pair of jeans?”

My mind rummages through my closet to those soft denim-washed jeans I bought on clearance last year. Plus, they fit me like a glove. Rushing over to where they’re hanging, I rub my fingers along the soft fabric. “Yes, those denim-washed ones. Although they’re not really in style anymore.”

A bark of laughter causes me hold the phone away from my ear. “You think the ex-Marine is going to notice anything other than how you look in those jeans? I doubt he’s a fashionista in disguise.”

Yanking the jeans off the hanger, I remove the wide-legged pants and change into the soft denim. “Okay, so I’m wearing the jeans.”

Another chuckle crosses the line. “Wear that cute V-neck T-shirt, the one we found on our shopping expedition last month to Macy’s,” Priscilla advises.

Right! I wore that shirt one time, then stuffed it in my drawer. I don’t dare wear my nicer clothes to work in case I get hair styling products on them. Flitting over to the dresser, I tug open the drawer. The bubblegum-pink shirt is on top of the neat stack of tees, just waiting for me to wear it. Removing the stuffy button-down shirt I put on a few minutes ago, I slip on the tee, marveling at how it perfectly accentuates my curves. “I forgot I had this.”

My friend laughs. “Says the woman who claims she has nothing to wear!” She makes another *tsk-tsk* sound. “Now what about hair?”

“I can’t do much with my new length, but I’ve added a cute headband to keep it out of my eyes in case we do something athletic.” I love my new shorter bob because of how easy it is to care for, but it doesn’t offer too many style options.

“Athletic?”

I can just imagine her rolling her eyes. “Yes, like going on a stroll in the park or renting one of those cute two-person

paddle boats on the lake. That sort of thing.”

“Bobbie Sue, can you envision that hunk of manhood strolling in the park or paddling one of those tiny boats? He seems more like a mountain climber or speedboat type of guy.”

These concerns have plagued me ever since I accepted his invitation. He strikes me as an adventurous guy and I’m a stay-at-home gal. Deciding not to vocalize my inner doubts, I smoothly change the topic. “Priscilla, you’re a lifesaver with your outfit advice! Thank you!”

“You owe me a mocha latte tomorrow,” she says, thankfully dropping her drilling regarding my compatibility with my date. Or incompatibility, whichever way you look at it.

“You got it!” I reply.

“And I want to hear how the date went and where he took you.”

Thankfully Lydia and Val aren’t working the Saturday morning shift, so I can openly confide in Priscilla without jealous ears overhearing our conversation. “Keep your fingers crossed he doesn’t take me bungee jumping,” I joke, then sign off.

Surely he wouldn’t take me bungee jumping, would he?

Nine – Pink Overload

Bruno

The General was no help in planning this surprise date with Bobbie Sue. He had such lame suggestions.

Take her to a flea market—isn't that kind of like watching paint dry?

Take her to dinner and a movie. He suggested going to the latest rom-com flick that I'd probably fall asleep during. Mission Impossible is much more my style.

Take her to an art gallery and one of those tapas places where she and I can share tiny plates of food while our stomachs rumble in protest. We'd have to order fifty plates to fill me up.

I'm a "live on the wild side" type guy. Bobbie Sue's sassy outlook must indicate she has an adventurous spirit, so I'm going to show her how to let loose and enjoy herself.

The dates with my previous girlfriend may have influenced where I'm taking Bobbi Sue. An image of my ex pops into my head. She loved a good adrenaline rush, just like me. We hang-glided, rode ATVs, and participated in iron man, er iron person, competitions together. Mom never warmed up to my ex, saying we were too similar, but I feel certain Mom would love Bobbie Sue.

Shaking my head, I clear it of these oddly timed thoughts. I should be focused on my date with the beautiful beautician.

As I drive up the street where Bobbie Sue lives, I spy a small craftsman-style house painted hot pink with white shutters and a white picket fence. I'd bet my rare first-edition Mickey Mantle baseball card—yes, I'm a collector—that's Bobbie Sue's house.

Pulling into the driveway, I spot the house number painted on the fuchsia mailbox. Yep, this is 4664 Flamingo Lane. My eyes scan the quaint little neighborhood consisting of houses painted pastel colors with neatly tended yards, white picket fences, and porch swings. It looks like a picture right

out of a fairy tale. I'm expecting a prince to ride up on a unicorn any minute.

Her lush green front yard is neatly trimmed. Several bougainvillea bushes burgeoning with colorful pink blooms line the sidewalk. Two clay pots filled with pink geraniums sit on opposite sides of the robin's-egg-blue front door. *Did she run out of pink paint?*

My humble adobe is rather like a fortress, with my wrought-iron fence and heavy steel front door. The red-brick structure blends in with all the other red-brick houses sporting black shutters and black front doors. Only Mrs. Morton broke with tradition and painted her front door fire-engine red. The neighborhood and colonial style homes are conventional, sturdy, and bland compared to this pastel oasis of unique, whimsical, and vivid houses.

Ding! Dong!

At least the doorbell isn't one of those fancy kinds that plays music. I don't know Bobbie Sue well enough to know her music preferences. Give me AC/DC or Metallica every time.

"Bruno! Please come in," she says shyly, opening the screen door just wide enough to let my large frame enter. *Wowza!* She's wearing a pair of form-fitting blue jeans and a bright pink top. Both clothing items accentuate her curves nicely. This outfit is going to be perfect for the activity I have planned.

Not sure whether a first date after a coffee and a yoga encounter warrants a friendly gesture, I stand awkwardly in the tiny entryway wondering if a one-arm hug, a kiss on the cheek, or a handshake are in order. Just as I lean in, Bobbie Sue dashes off towards an arched doorway, relieving me of making that weighty decision.

She motions for me to follow. "Do you want something to drink before we go? I've got sweet tea, soda, or water," she says over her shoulder.

I follow like a docile puppy, briefly taking in her cozy living room. My sharp, well-trained Marine eyes scan the room, noticing that she used pink as the primary wall color, although there are a few yellow accent pillows on the gray sofa and loveseat.

“Um, I don’t need a beverage right now, but do you have any bottled waters we can bring along?” I ask, my voice sounding raspy since she’s the first person I’ve talked to so far today.

My feet stop at the threshold to the kitchen, and I stare in open-mouthed astonishment at the sight. All the appliances look like they came from the 1950s—vintage style yet obviously new—and they’re . . . pink.

I blink, suddenly feeling like I’ve wandered into Barbie’s house. My testosterone level takes a dip, and I feel like the proverbial bull in a china shop. My bulky, oversized frame is so out of place in this feminine utopia.

Bobbie Sue waves her hand in Vanna White fashion, encompassing the pink appliances. “I couldn’t resist when I had the kitchen remodeled a few years ago. My designer showed me a photo of a kitchen decorated like this in Santa Barbara and I just had to have it! I know it’s a bit over the top,” she says, in an apologetic tone.

“It’s definitely, er, um, er, girly,” I say, grappling with how to voice my opinion politely. Give me a camp stove and a cast iron skillet and I’d feel more at home. I can imagine her whipping up a frothy strawberry milkshake in this kitchen, but it’s difficult to picture her frying up a thick, juicy steak.

“Girly?” she says, arching a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“Honestly, I’m expecting that strawberry cartoon character to appear any minute, along with that pink pony,” I say, shuddering as I remember those overly pink cartoons my baby sister used to watch.

“Strawberry Shortcake? My Little Pony?”

“Yes! Those are the ones. My ten-year-old self was forced to watch those with my little sister.” Another shudder

runs through me at the memory.

Bobbie Sue pats me on my bicep. “Poor baby! When you wore that pink polo shirt to the coffeeshop, I thought you were a man in touch with his feminine side. I guess it was forced on you by your sister,” she teases.

“Sorry, but it’s difficult not to feel overwhelmed by all this pink. A black stove or stainless-steel fridge would have been nice.”

She rubs her hand lovingly over the vintage refrigerator. “This baby is a Big Chill Retro Original Fridge in the pink lemonade color. All the appliances are from their Retro line, including the countertop microwave, blender, and toaster,” she says with a giggle.

No wonder I feel like there’s pink everywhere. There is.

“What? No pink coffeepot?” I ask in a snarky voice.

She grins, then slides open a roll up door on the countertop revealing a pink coffeemaker. “Voila!” she says.

“Will wonders never cease. I didn’t even know they made this many appliances in pink.” *And how many of them do they actually sell? Bobbie Sue’s and the ones for that house in Santa Barbara?*

“It was a lucky find, that’s for sure!” she enthuses.

Where did her obsession with pink come from? I’ll have to ask that question once I get to know her a little better, otherwise she might take it as a criticism. Well, it is. Sort of. Considering the thousands of potential colors, why limit yourself to pink? It strikes me that I’m the proverbial pot calling the kettle black because my house and my clothing choices consist mostly of gray, black, tan, or the occasional pop of camouflage. Lego Batman’s famous line pops into my head. “I only work in black. And sometimes very, very dark gray.” That’s me in a nutshell.

Pulling open the fridge, she extracts four bottled waters and sets them on the island. “Will these be enough?”

I nod. “Yes, those should do it. We should probably get going. I made a reservation for two o’clock.”

Her eyes light up. “You need a reservation? Where are we going?”

Chuckling, I say, “I thought you wanted this to be a surprise?”

Tugging her lower lip between her teeth, she gazes at me with what looks like a mixture of trepidation and excitement. “I’ve decided surprises are overrated,” she says.

“You’ve come this far not knowing where we’re going. Let’s not spoil it now,” I tease, grabbing the waters and motioning for her to follow me out to my pickup.

“Am I dressed okay for this outing?”

“Yes.”

She frowns at my brief response. Obviously she’s as curious as a cat about the activity I have planned. I can’t wait to see her expression when we get to the Adrenaline Heights jumping center.

Ten – Anything Other Than Bungee Jumping

Bobbie Sue

My feet skid to a stop when I spot his behemoth parked in my driveway. Although I've seen the vehicle from a distance before, I suddenly notice every detail as the hulking pickup towers over me. It's massive and it's black, with not an ounce of chrome to break up the ominous exterior. The word *Raptor* is splashed across the front grill and aptly describes this beast. This thing could eat my little nondescript sedan for dinner and still have room for dessert.

"How do you get in?" I ask, wondering whether there's a retractable step hidden somewhere.

Bruno chuckles. "Do you want a little help?" he asks politely as I eye the five-foot ground clearance.

"Yes, please."

What follows are several awkward moments as I try to get into the vehicle and Bruno tries to avoid touching my backside while he assists. He finally relents and gives my derriere a firm push, causing me to sprawl onto the leather seat. His gentle push on my backside felt rather nice but thank goodness Priscilla suggested wearing these figure-hugging blue jeans rather than a sundress (sorry Mrs. Noonan). I quickly scramble into an upright position.

Wow! The view from up here is spectacular. I can see clear over the fence of the Rosenberg's backyard. *Is that a swimming pool?* How did I miss seeing that get installed? Hazel wanted one but Arnold said he didn't want to spend a dime on such an extravagant expenditure. Looks like Hazel got her way.

"What kind of music would you like to listen to?" Bruno asks once we're a couple miles down the road.

"How about country? I listen to 96.5 KWWK, which is modern country music," I reply.

He grunts, then tunes the radio. Strains of Kelsea Ballerini's latest song float from the speakers. I enjoy the sinister, comedic vibe the lyrics have. Kind of like that Carrie Underwood's song where she keys a guy's truck for cheating on her.

"Wow, that woman is intense," Bruno comments once the song ends. "I didn't know country music had such dark messages."

"It usually doesn't, but I think she's being tongue-in-cheek in that song," I say.

A loud laugh rumbles out of Bruno's impressive chest. "Guess I'd rather listen to someone croon about their little d-i-v-o-r-c-e," he teases.

Following his lead, I make my own snarky comment about country lyrics. "Or how about the guy who says money can't buy him happiness . . ."

"But it can buy him a boat," Bruno adds with a chuckle.

We banter back and forth for a few miles, each trying to outdo the other by citing the cheesiest, corniest lyrics from country music.

The woman whose clothes fall off when she drinks tequila . . .

The guy who's going to miss his wife because he chooses fishing over her . . .

The guy who gets drunk on a plane while taking his honeymoon by himself . . .

"And what the heck is a badonkadonk?" Bruno asks, winding down our discussion.

I shrug. "But you've got to admit that song has a catchy tune. How long have you been a country music fan?"

"I'm not exactly a fan," he clarifies. "On one of my deployments, I bunked with a kid from Tennessee who played country music all the time. He was only nineteen and homesick, so I figured I could learn to tolerate the twang, but I much prefer hard rock."

His admission bursts my bubble a bit. Our incompatibility strikes again. Can two people be more at opposite ends of the spectrum? I prefer country or pop; he prefers hard rock. I prefer pastel colors—namely pink—and if his truck and clothes are any indication, he prefers a dull boring palette like black, gray, or tan. We mix like oil and water.

On the flip side, he's funny and I can't wait to see where he's taking me. Maybe a little adventurous activity that knocks me out of my comfort zone would be fun. I'd be open to an indoor climbing center with a beginner's six-foot high wall, complete with safety harnesses and a padded floor.

Right after my inner adventurer rears her well-groomed head, we pull into a gravel parking lot overflowing with mostly testosterone-laden vehicles just like Brunos. My head does a double take, and my heart rate goes into overdrive when I read the crude hand-painted wooden sign. *Adrenaline Heights*.

Did that say what I think it said? Adrenaline and heights in the same sentence?

“Where are we?” I ask between wiping my suddenly sweaty palms on my jeans and taking calming breaths.

“You're going to love this, Bobbie Sue! They have three different jumps, at various heights. It's almost as good as going skydiving, but I thought that might be a bit much for a first date.” His face looks like a kid in a candy store as we walk towards the entrance.

“Are we at a bungee jump?” I screech, my eyes going wide as I take stock of the tall supports with what looks like a giant rubber band attached to them. Squeals fill the air as someone plunges towards the ground then bounces up and down.

“We are! It's the best setup I've ever seen. Plenty of thrills, but they're also very safety conscious. There's no risk other than to your hairdo,” he says with a chortle.

Patting my hair, I wonder if the headband will hold during a jump. “I don't know if I'm up for this. I get heart

palpitations during takeoff when I'm riding in a jumbo jet.”

Bruno stops walking and gently puts his hands on my shoulders, turning me to face him. “No pressure. If you don't want to do this, we can go somewhere else.” His eyes search mine, concern written on his face.

Before I met the ex-Marine, I'd never even considered doing something like this. *Where's my spirit of adventure?* My dating history is riddled with boring activities that did nothing to challenge or excite me.

There was John who took me bowling on one of those nights when they had bumpers lining the gutters. A pair of ten-year-olds beat us because John kept knocking down only one or two pins. He even complained to the manager that the alley was uneven.

Then I dated Felix, and he took me putt-putt golfing at a rundown course where the outdoor green carpet had holes and the waterfall was only a trickle. I scored a hole-in-one, which put Felix in a bad mood for the rest of the nine holes.

Most recently, Edison and I attended a poetry slam at a local library in which he read a poem, boasting a style called limerick ballads. You haven't lived until you've heard, “It was not death, for I stood up, to the old man of Nantucket, who kept all his cash in a bucket.” Or some such drivel like that.

My brain skids to a stop when I reflect on Rodney. Don't even get me started about Rodney. We were about as compatible as oil and water. *Wait! Didn't I just think this about Bruno and me?*

Bruno gently squeezes my shoulders, bringing me back to the present, his blue eyes boring into mine. “Well? Do you want to try one jump, or should we go bowling? We could also go mini golfing if you prefer.”

A giggle slips out. At least he didn't suggest attending an offbeat poetry reading. “You go first and then I'll decide. Is that okay?”

“Of course! Let's go!”

~*~

Fifteen minutes later, with my feet still firmly on the ground, I anxiously observe Bruno from his position on the jumping platform. He's strapped into the safety harness, ready for his jump. The safety equipment looks sturdy, and the guy manning the jump explained how the harness won't allow you to get within five feet of the ground, even if the large elastic cord broke.

I wave and clap encouragingly from my perch at the base of the jump, a smile on my face for him while my palms sweat and my heart beats like a kettle drum in my chest. Bruno gives me and the instructor a thumbs up, then leans forward from the tiniest platform I've ever seen, plunging towards the ground. His form is spectacular, and he yells like Tarzan as he free-falls back to earth. Peeking through my fingers, I watch the elastic cord do its job, yanking my date upwards, then bouncing him like a yo-yo until the kinetic energy has dissipated. I learned that terminology during the instructional video.

Two guys on the ground lower Bruno and assist him from the apparatus, then he joins me in the waiting area, limping slightly and looking a bit windblown, but happy.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, pointing towards the leg he's favoring.

"Naw! Just a little twinge." His words belie the fact that he bends down, rubs his knee, then straightens with a small grimace. "That was a rush. It's almost as good as jumping out of an airplane, but not quite."

"You've jumped out of an airplane?" My concern for his knee vanishes, while my voice rises a bit like Minnie Mouse.

He nods. "Yep. That was all part of my special forces Marine unit training."

Who is this guy? He's like Rambo, Ethan Hunt, and Jack Ryan all rolled into one.

"Are you going to try jumping? No pressure, but I think you'll like it." He rocks back and forth on his feet, excitement written on his handsome face.

My heart rate skyrockets again merely at the thought. “You looked like you were having fun, and your form was perfect!” I enthuse, deflecting his question much like he did with me a few seconds ago. I keep my hands at my side, although my fingers want to straighten a miscreant lock dangling on his forehead, returning it to its proper position. I should spritz it with the styling spray I have in my purse, which will keep it in firmly place if he decides to go for a second jump.

His eyes narrow as they scan my face from forehead to chin. Either my lip gloss is smeared from me biting my lips during his jump, or he’s trying to read my mind, I don’t know which.

“You can always try the kiddie jump first,” he adds, nodding towards a jump where you sit in a seat instead of free falling headfirst.

A sigh slips out, knowing that the chances are high this date will end abruptly as soon as I utter my response. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to pass. It looks a little too adventuresome for me. Sorry.”

He takes my hand. “No problem. We’ll come back when you’re ready,” he says as we walk back to his vehicle. Surprised, yet pleased, that he didn’t say he’d drive me straight back home, I tightly grasp his hand and give him a beaming smile. *Maybe this date can be salvaged after all.*

“Is there another activity you’d like to do before we head over to the restaurant for dinner?”

“How about we save that for another day?” My neck heats and I grimace, realizing I’ve just brazenly suggested a second date.

His face brightens. “Sure! How about you be in charge of our second date!” he says, then pauses. “Um, that is if you want a second date with me.”

I squeeze his hand still clasped with mine, relief flowing through my veins at his mention of a second date. Despite our apparent incompatibilities, there’s an attraction between us

that I can't wait to explore. "I'd love to go on another date. Let's discuss options first though. No surprises."

He laughs. "Sounds good." Clearing his throat, he asks, "Do you like Italian food? I have a reservation at The Restaurante Italiano if that's suitable."

"I love Italian food!" I enthuse. My heart lifts at the fact that we do have something in common.

Eleven – Breadsticks and Bobby Pins

Bobbie Sue

I didn't realize I was so hungry until we stroll into the tiny Italian restaurant, the nondescript building tucked between Elmo's Auto Repair and The Tangled Web, a shop apparently specializing in yarn if the window display of skeins of brightly colored spun wool and knitting needles is any indicator.

The air is filled with an aroma so utterly captivating, I want to grab a menu and place my order before we're even seated. Bells above the door jingle, and several guests waiting in the small alcove make eye contact as we enter.

"It's a thirty-minute wait," the hostess drones without looking up from her stance behind a cluttered podium. The tone of her voice indicates that she's been asked the wait question too many times already this evening.

"I have a reservation. Bruno Thompson," my date says in a clipped tone, his rumbly voice giving me goosebumps.

Her eyes lift from whatever she's reading, taking in every detail of the hunk at my side. A spasm of jealousy hits when she gives him a flirty smile.

Scanning a list on the desk, she marks off an entry, then grabs two menus along with two silverware packages wrapped in a white napkin. "Follow me," the hostess says, sashaying her way across the restaurant, her hips swaying to the beat of the Frank Sinatra tune crooning in the background.

After making a show out of seating us, especially the flourish she did towards Bruno's chair, the woman finally leaves, reluctantly returning to the hostess stand.

"She's quite efficient," Bruno comments.

I grunt. "Couldn't you tell she was hitting on you?" I murmur while staring over the top of the oversized menu.

"She was?"

My jaw drops at the clueless Marine's response.

“I only have eyes for you,” he adds, causing a tingle to zing up the back of my neck.

“Good recovery, Thompson,” I say with a chuckle.

He grins, then focuses back on the menu. “Any idea what you’re ordering?”

My attention returns to the leather-bound tome in my hand, which, quite frankly, lists far too many selections. How do I choose between the pasta carbonara, the spaghetti Amatriciana, or the house lasagna?

A waiter bearing a basket of breadsticks pauses beside our table. He sets the carb container in the middle of the table along with little tubs of butter. Without further preamble, he says, “Today’s special is penne all’Arrabbiata, with a spicy tomato sauce and a side of steamed broccoli.”

Before the man can utter another syllable, Bruno says, “I’ll take that.”

“I’ll order the special,” I say at the same time.

We grin at each other. Two minds thinking alike—or possibly we’re both too tired to scan the menu any further. The waiter flits off to another table. I immediately want to grab him and steer him towards the kitchen to place our order before he takes another one, but my genteel upbringing keeps me rooted to my chair.

“That menu was way too long,” Bruno says. “They need to take some advice from Robert Irvine.”

At the mention of one of my favorite TV shows, I chuckle for a few beats. Leave it to the ex-Marine to relate to the ex-Marine featured in the restaurant make-over show. “I agree! How does one choose between fifty-nine options?” I may be exaggerating slightly since I didn’t count the number of menu items.

“There were sixty-two,” Bruno replies with a straight face.

“You counted them?”

He barks out a laugh. “Naw, just pulling your leg. But the expression on your face is priceless.”

We settle into witty conversation, discussing everything from our favorite TV shows, to our favorite foods, to our pet peeves. I grin when we discover that we share one peeve in common, leaving dirty dishes in the sink.

It’s as if we’re covering all the topics during this date, those that are generally discussed during dates number two, three, and four. Being that we both suffer from Type A personalities, I’m actually not surprised.

After exhausting those topics, Bruno asks, “So, what inspired you to become a beautician?”

Warming to one of my favorite subjects, I say, “I come from a long line of beauticians. My grandmother and my mother both went to beauty school and then opened their own shops. One of my fondest memories is getting my hair fixed at my grandmother’s salon. She was a magician with hair. All she needed was a hundred bobby pins and some Dippity Do styling gel to turn my stick straight hair into ringlets.” His eyes widen at the mention of the styling gel that was the inspiration for the name of my shop, spelled slightly differently to avoid any trademark infringement issues.

A few beats tick by as I chuckle while re-living the memory. “Sitting in her big cushy styling chair was an experience like no other.” Come to think of it, that’s probably why I’m obsessing over owning a one-of-a-kind styling chair of my own.

“I’m impressed with your shop and your ability to imagine a hairstyle for a new client. You nailed it when you suggested this tight and upright cut for me.”

Suppressing a giggle over his mix up of the style’s name, I beam at his compliment. “Why thank you!”

He nods. “Frankly, I wouldn’t know the difference between mousse and—,” he pauses, then points to the next table where a couple is sharing a slice of lemon pie. “Meringue.”

His odd quip brings another smile to my face. “Meringue is good for your hair; the egg whites give your locks a luxurious shine.”

“People slather that stuff on their hair?” he says, his brows drawing together.

I hold a deadpan expression for no more than two seconds, then burst into laughter. “Naw, just pulling your leg,” I reply, using his turn of phrase from earlier.

His grin sends my heart into overdrive. “Well, I didn’t doubt you, knowing about those skinification hair products you’re so fond of.”

“You’re never going to buy into those, are you?”

“Nope.”

Our flirty banter—which feels very much like the Marine is trying his best to romance me—is interrupted by the waiter bearing steaming plates that smell divine. We unwrap our silverware bundles and dig in.

~*~

What should our second date be?

As Bruno drives me home after the delicious meal, my mind spins trying to come up with an activity where your feet are firmly planted on the ground while at the same time you get a rush of adrenaline. I’ll Google some ideas when I get home.

When he walks me to my front door, Mrs. Noonan’s advice rattles around in my head. Bruno has been a perfect gentleman all evening, but is a little peck on the lips such a bad way to end the evening? Does that really send the wrong message?

By the time we’re standing on my front porch, my nerves are frayed. Just like when he first arrived, he leans in, his lips headed for mine. I quickly turn my head and his lips land on my left ear, making goosebumps run up my neck. I ignore the sensation, give him a quick pat on the back, and say, “Thank you for the adventure and dinner!”

I fling open the screen door, almost hitting him in the face with it, and dash inside. Staring at my living room, I cringe and slap my hand against my forehead, replaying the awkward ending to a nice date.

Why did I listen to Mrs. Noonan's advice?

Bruno probably thinks I'm a prude after I acted like a nervous teenager on her first date. Geez.

I seriously need to get some clients who are under the age of eighty. First the "don't let him get away" advice from LaVerne and Shirley, and then the "wear a nice dress" and "don't kiss on the first date advice" from Mrs. Noonan. Is there a modern dating handbook I can read rather than listen to advice offered by my elderly Dippity Doo clientele?

Twelve – Like Watching Paint Dry

Bruno

The date with Bobbie Sue had a bizarre, awkward ending that I've played over and over in my head, trying to figure out what happened. Is a quick peck on the lips too forward after a first date? Maybe I should have gone for a handshake instead. Vowing to let her take the lead from now on, I'll wait for her to kiss me first.

At least she isn't going to ghost me. Bobbie Sue does a thorough job researching options for our second date. Over the next week she makes several suggestions for activities that she says might lead to an adrenaline rush but still be in her comfort zone. She must be digging deep; I chuckle as each one is more ridiculous than the next.

Bobbie Sue: There's a blindfolded food tasting challenge at the park this Saturday. Sounds kind of fun. Interested?

Me: What kind of food is involved?

Bobbie Sue: A new sushi place, just opened

Raw fish? That's a hard pass.

Me: I'm not much into fish.

Bobbie Sue: I take that as a firm no. Let me see what else I can find!

She doesn't disappoint as she texts suggestion after suggestion.

Giant Inflatable Sumo Wrestling: Don inflatable sumo suits and engage in a sumo wrestling match.

Me: Sounds too sweaty, plus do you really want to wear a suit someone else has sweated in?

Bobbie Sue: Good point. Pass

Human Hamster Ball Bowling: Step inside giant inflatable hamster balls and take turns rolling into oversized bowling pins.

Me: Frankly, regular bowling sounds more exciting

Bobbie Sue: Are you The Big Lebowski? Hey! Maybe we should watch *The Big Lebowski*! I'll keep that on the list.

Comedic Obstacle Course: A humorous obstacle course with challenges like banana peel slaloms, giant foam finger hurdles, and silly string tunnels.

Me: After getting the best time on my Marine training obstacle course, I feel like this will be like asking Superman to walk not fly

Bobbie Sue: Brag much? (strong arm emoji)

Is vocalizing the truth really bragging?

Bobbie Sue: Let's forget about an adrenaline rush and settle for something I want to do.

How bad could her suggestion be? Plus, I owe her since she was a good sport when we went bungee jumping, politely listening through the entire instructional video and then cheering me on during the jump. It was like having my own gorgeous cheerleader.

Me: Sure

Bobbie Sue: How about we check out the new flea market that just opened about fifty miles away?

Okay, this odd suggestion warrants a phone call. She answers on the first ring.

"A flea market? Where they sell a bunch of old stuff?" I grumble as soon as she picks up.

She sighs. "Bruno, maybe we should just admit that we're not compatible and move on."

Dang! I don't want to blow my chance with her. Panic loosens my lips.

"Okay, I'll go to the flea market, I'm open to expanding my horizons," I blurt. This is going to be about as exciting as playing chess or like I said before, as watching paint dry.

"Really?" she squeals. "You won't regret this. I've been wanting to find a Belvedere 6000 for a long time. I hear that

one of the things this flea market specializes in is used furniture.”

Right, this flea market sounds like something that’s perfect for an adrenaline junkie like me. *Not*. Do they offer extreme flea markets where you cross an obstacle course between booths? Maybe I should reconsider the comedic obstacle course, at least it would be good for a few laughs.

“We can go out for dinner afterwards,” she adds.

I can work with that. Maybe a thick juicy steak will make up for however boring the flea market is.

“Ok, but I get to choose the restaurant,” I say, putting my foot down to expanding my horizons any further in one day.

She laughs. “Of course! The market opens at ten. Since it’s on nine and a half acres, we’ll need several hours to explore every booth. We can probably make an early dinner around 4:30 if you want to make a reservation.”

What am I getting myself into? Eight hours exploring a flea market?

“Okay, I’ll make a reservation.” I’m going to be famished after the *exciting* market expedition. That or bored stiff. Either way, copious amounts of food will be in order.

“This is so exciting! I might actually find a Belvedere!” Enthusiasm leaks from her voice, keeping my lips sealed. I don’t want to burst her bubble by backing out now, so I keep silent until we hang up.

Belatedly I wonder, *What the heck is a Belvedere?* I should have asked before our conversation ended. Will this Belvedere thing, which must be a piece of furniture, make the flea market more tolerable? Probably not.

I immediately have second, third, and fourth thoughts. Eight hours looking through other people’s trash? I know the saying; other people’s trash is someone else’s treasure. But who really needs a bobblehead of some baseball player you’ve never heard of? Or a crocheted Kleenex box holder? Or a broken chair with one of the legs missing?

Let's hope Bobbie Sue finds this Belvedere thing, and fast.

~*~

My date sweet-talks me into driving because my truck will come in handy to carry all the stuff she plans on purchasing. I'm fine with that because if I get too bored, I can fake a sudden case of diarrhea and insist we leave. *Every mission needs a retreat plan. This is my retreat plan, and I'm sticking to it.*

Bobbie Sue is sitting on her front porch when I arrive. She looks beautiful in her khaki pants, neon pink flowy shirt, and pink sun hat. I instantly feel a little dull in my tan cargo shorts and black T-shirt. Maybe I should have worn the dusty rose polo again? It's my only item of clothing that deviates from my usual dullsville palette. Maybe another trip to Macy's is called for . . .

She grabs a voluminous bag and trots out to my vehicle. Before I come around to assist, she opens the passenger door. "Thank you for driving!" she says in a breathy voice as she tosses her bag onto the floor with a loud thump and then scrambles into the truck. Her use of the running board and arm rest for leverage is very impressive. Obviously, she's a quick learner, not needing my assistance to get in, but I must admit to a pang of disappointment.

Once she's slammed the door and fastened her seatbelt, she says, "I want to get there as close to the ten o'clock opening time as possible."

Chuckling at her sense of urgency to look at a bunch of antiques, I say, "Give me the address and we'll get going." I type the address into my GPS, and we take off.

As my truck eats up the miles, Bobbie Sue pulls out a thermos of coffee and some muffins from the giant bag. "I thought you might want a snack on the way. Fuel up before our long trek at the market."

I hate to tell her that a "long trek" is having to run a marathon during Marine training and that this walk around the

flea market is going to be a piece of cake. The coffee smells delicious as she pours me a steaming cup. “Thank you! What else do you have in that bag?” I tease.

“Bottled water and a few turkey sandwiches in case the food at the market doesn’t appeal. Sometimes all they have are fried cheese sticks, funnel cakes, and corn dogs.”

Those don’t sound unappealing, but I nod as if in agreement, then take a bite of the tasty oversized blueberry muffin. “This is delicious,” I say, holding up the treat. “Did you bake these?”

“Nope. We buy them in bulk at Costco for the salon. The regulars love these things.”

Wonder why I didn’t get served a muffin when I was at the salon? Maybe you have to get there during certain hours to get one. I’ll make sure to schedule my appointment accordingly next time.

After we both finish off our coffee and muffin, I say, “This Belvedere 6000 must be something special. Tell me about it.” I’ve wondered all week why she’s so excited over finding this particular item.

She claps her hands, excitement written on her pretty face. “The Belvedere 6000 is the highest quality salon chair ever produced, despite the fact it was manufactured in 1975. The guy who designed it was an auto mechanic, so he gave the chair the best hydraulic system available. His girlfriend owned a beauty salon and had complained about the inferior pump systems in most chairs.”

Huh? Have there not been any improvements in hydraulics since 1975?

“Don’t modern chairs have better hydraulic systems?”

Swiveling in her seat, Bobbie Sue turns her full attention towards me. “The hydraulics in the Belvedere are unmatched to this day.” Her expression turns thoughtful. “But it’s also the color of the chair that I’m attracted to. Mr. Belvedere manufactured only eight chairs, all in his girlfriend’s favorite color: rose blush. By the time he got the initial chair produced,

his girlfriend had passed away, so she never got to use it. He was heartbroken and only made an additional seven chairs because he had all the parts.”

My eyes widen at the tragic tale.

“I love the chair, the quality of the hydraulic system and the color, but at the same time, I’m fascinated with the story behind it all. It’s an ode to a man’s true love.”

Suddenly I feel invested in helping her find this one-of-a-kind, special chair. “Have you ever seen one in person?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’ve only seen photos. I’ve been trying to find one for about ten years.” My eyes go wide when she mentions how long she’s been looking for one of these chairs. Her dedication to the mission is impressive.

“They are impossible to find on the internet. But the rumor is that the original designer frequents flea markets, where he sometimes sells one of the remaining chairs to a worthy new owner.”

“How does he decide who’s a worthy new owner?” I ask.

“No one knows. If I find the chair, hopefully he’ll think I’m a worthy new owner,” she says with a concerned look.

Reaching across the console, I take her hand in mine. “Bobbie Sue, I’m sure he’ll think you’re worthy of the chair. Let’s hope he’s at this flea market!”

She giggles as I catch her excitement over finding the chair. The flea market no longer seems quite as boring because we’re now on a mission. Any Marine can get behind a mission.

Thirteen – The Elusive Belvedere 6000

Bobbie Sue

We've scoured every booth in the first half of the market for the Belvedere 6000 with no luck. The stalls are filled with a plethora of used salon chairs, and even a few reproductions that sellers are trying to hawk as antique, but no Belvedere.

My feet are starting to hurt, and I need some nourishment. Much to my chagrin, my hunky companion appears fresh as a daisy and ready to walk another hundred miles if needed. The guy's stamina amazes me and makes me feel like an out-of-shape wimp.

"How about we stop for lunch?" I suggest in a flagging voice. My stomach emits a loud growl right after I mention food.

Bruno chuckles. "Sounds like the lady is hungry. Do you want to stop at one of those picnic tables and eat the sandwiches you've been toting around?"

My nostrils get a whiff of the aromas coming from the food court area, a blend of grease, fried sugar, and grilled meat. Suddenly the cold turkey sandwiches don't seem quite as appealing. My stomach roars its desire for one of these unhealthy choices.

"Do I take that as an indication that we should peruse the food vendors?" Bruno teases.

I frown. "The turkey sandwiches will be much healthier," I reply, and he laughs.

"But what fun will that be? Let's augment those sandwiches!" he says, grabbing my hand and tugging me towards the varied food sellers whose brightly colored booths and tantalizing aromas draw me in like a moth to a flame.

Both Bruno and I stop in front of the corn dog booth. They're pumping out some enticing odors that are attracting quite a crowd. "I haven't had one of these since I was a kid," he comments as he eagerly gets in line. "Do you want one?"

“A fried wiener on a stick?” I joke, pretending to be a scandalized health food junkie. My nose betrays me, that tantalizing aroma making my mouth water. “Why not?”

Bruno stands in line to purchase corn dogs while I hit the funnel cake booth, grabbing one of the fried cakes to share. He meets me back at the picnic tables where I’ve spread out our eclectic feast, complete with red checkered tablecloth, two Yeti tumblers filled with water, a couple plastic plates, silverware, and napkins.

“You come prepared, don’t you?” Bruno says, arching an eyebrow as he scans the table. “Was all that in your bag? Are you Mary Poppins?” He grins.

An embarrassed laugh escapes. Unfortunately, I can’t seem to go anywhere unprepared. Even if it’s bright and sunny outside, I’ll bring an umbrella. “I thought it would be a nice touch,” I reply.

Bruno plops the corn dogs down, then pulls me in for a hug. “I approve. It’s always better to be prepared. Plus, this feels much more like a real picnic!”

His hug fills me with warmth and allays my burgeoning anxiety over being seen as over-prepared. Rodney would get on my case for that all the time. I suppress a sigh when Bruno lets go and we take our seats on opposite sides of the table and dig in. Even though we purchased additional food, we snarf down the turkey sandwiches, followed by a corn dog chaser. Bruno eats two corn dogs and over half the funnel cake. His ability to pack away food is astonishing.

Patting his full stomach, Bruno says, “Now I need a nap.” He punctuates his words with a yawn.

“Seriously? Right in the middle of our mission to find the Belvedere 6000 and you need a nap?” I tease. He’s been a great sport so far, and after I told him the story behind the chair, Bruno’s been 100 percent bought in. An ex-Marine on a mission is a spectacular thing to see. My hope rises that with Bruno’s help, we’re going to find the elusive chair.

He chugs the rest of his water, stands, and salutes. “No rest until we find the Belvedere!”

We both laugh as we repack my bag. Bruno takes the straps and hefts the heavy bag onto his broad shoulders. He grunts in surprise. “If I’d known this bag was so heavy, I would have offered to carry it from the outset.”

I chuckle at the sight of the brawny ex-Marine with a bright pink and lime green bag slung over his arm—quite a contrast with the muted colors in his outfit. Raising an eyebrow, I say, “Are you sure your male ego will allow you to be seen carrying that?”

He grimaces. “I’ll survive. Now lead the way and let’s find us that salon chair!”

~*~

The next two hours are spent examining every booth containing vintage furniture in case the Belvedere is hiding behind a French Rococo armoire or an early American hutch. Right when I’m giving up hope, I spot a stall in the far back corner filled with salon chairs.

“Come on!” I squeal, yanking Bruno towards the booth, moving at a run not a walk, as if the Belvedere will be sold out from under our noses.

An older man sits at the entrance to the booth reading a newspaper. Inside the booth is row after row of antique salon and barber chairs, neatly arranged, with large white price tags attached to each one. We skid to a stop, and I say in a breathless voice, “Do you have a Belvedere 6000?”

The man peers at me over his half-glasses, while his bushy white eyebrows crawl like two caterpillars towards his hairline. “How do you know about the Belvedere 6000?” he asks in a rusty voice.

“I’ve been looking for one for years! Mr. Belvedere made only eight of them and I’d love to have one for my salon.” Excitement leaks from my voice.

He rotates his eyes to Bruno. “How about you? Are you as excited over that antique chair as your girlfriend is?”

Bruno's chest swells as he says, "I'm here to help her out anyway I can. That Belvedere sounds like an impressive chair."

My heart flips when Bruno doesn't correct the man's use of the word *girlfriend* to describe me.

A small smile tips the man's lips as he says, "Ah, you're the brawn and she's the brains!"

Bruno and I exchange quizzical looks. Was that an insult or a compliment?

"Something like that," Bruno replies.

I clear my throat. "The hydraulic foot pump is unparalleled, even with today's technology. Plus, the rose blush color will fit in perfectly with my shop's décor," I add.

"Obviously you like pink," he says, jutting his chin towards my outfit. "What's the name of your shop?"

Does he interrogate everyone like this who comes into his booth? No wonder we're the only shoppers here.

"My salon is The Dippity Doo. We're located in Hudsonville at Fifth and Main. You can't miss it!" I infuse as much positivity in my voice as possible even though I'm becoming a bit annoyed at his twenty questions. *Does he have a Belvedere or not?*

He grunts. "I don't have a Belvedere 6000 on hand but go ahead and take a look around. There are other chairs that are equally high quality."

My face falls. "I'm not interested in anything but the Belvedere," I say in a disappointed tone.

"Do you ever get Belvederes? Could you let Bobbie Sue know if you acquire one?" Bruno adds.

"Bobbie Sue?" the old man says, giving me a confused look.

I point to my chest. "I'm Bobbie Sue Williams," I say. "Nice to meet you."

He stares at me for several beats, during which I expect him to return the favor by introducing himself, but he doesn't. "It's doubtful I'll ever have one of those for sale," he says, then flips his newspaper open and returns to reading it, dismissing us in the process.

My shoulders slump as we turn and walk away. The chance of ever finding a Belvedere 6000 feels like it's slipping away like a gust of wind.

"Maybe I should just give up," I say dejectedly, my thoughts escaping through my lips before I can stop them.

Bruno takes my hand and squeezes it. "I'm game to keep looking as long as you are."

"He was sure a grouch. No wonder he doesn't have anyone looking at his booth," I mutter, flinging a disgruntled look over my shoulder and noticing that the old man is still hiding behind his newspaper.

"Did you get the feeling he could get his hands on a Belvedere but didn't want to?" Bruno adds.

I stop and face the ex-Marine. "I did! But why wouldn't he want to help us?"

Bruno shrugs. "I don't know."

"Maybe I should have mentioned that I know the story behind the chair?" I say, belatedly wondering whether I could have swayed the man into helping me if only I had said the right thing.

Squeezing my hand again, Bruno says, "Improvise, adapt, overcome!"

I laugh. "Is that a Marine slogan?"

"Yes, ma'am! It's the mindset every Marine uses to accomplish their mission."

Rolling my eyes in amusement, I say, "So, how do you propose we overcome the old man's unwillingness to help us?"

"We'll come back again and again. Wear him down. Our persistence will give us the edge over all other buyers."

I shrug, not convinced Bruno's stick-to-it-ness will work. I'm so discouraged right now, and I don't relish coming back just to be snubbed again by the cantankerous old man.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I stew over the grumpy seller during the walk back to Bruno's truck. That man may be the key to obtaining a Belvedere, but he didn't want to lift one finger to help us. Why?

Fourteen – A Steak and a Plan

Bruno

As I drive out of the dusty parking lot, Bobbie Sue remains uncharacteristically silent. Her slumped shoulders and dejected pout tell me that she's close to giving up on the search for the Belvedere. I'm angry at the old man for snuffing out her enthusiasm and her dream. He could have let her down a little more gently.

"Food will make you feel better. Is stopping at a steakhouse okay? Or we can stop anywhere you like," I say.

Bobbie Sue gives me a watery smile. "Thank you for trying to make me feel better, Bruno! Yes, a thick juicy steak sounds great."

I chuckle at her gusto for beef, although I should have asked sooner whether she's a vegetarian. "Don't let that guy get to you. We'll still look everywhere you can think of for the Belvedere," I say.

Her lips twitch upward. "So the ex-Marine won't sleep until we've completed our mission?"

I make a fist in the air. "Darn right! We'll look high and low, even if that means we have to hit every flea market and antique shop between here and Los Angeles!" Deciding it's time to educate her on proper terminology, I add, "A Marine is never an ex-Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine. You can simply refer to me as a Marine."

Her eyes widen. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize."

She grins. "Okay, Marine, let's get on with the mission."

Focusing my eyes back on the road, I start planning our next move. Considering I never wanted to set foot inside a flea market before this, I'm surprisingly energized to comb through every one of them. The pretty lady sitting beside me and the mystery surrounding the grumpy old man and the Belvedere chair has motivated me. I feel in my gut that grumpy guy is essential to finding one of these rare chairs, but I just don't

know how we convince him to help us. But it's time to forget about him and romance my date lest she think all I care about is finding that chair.

~*~

The Flame and Fork Steakhouse is packed by the time we arrive. Even though they have extended parking in a gravel lot next to their paved lot, almost every spot is taken. I manage to squeeze my truck between a VW bug and a Land Rover.

Bobbie Sue still looks rather dejected as we walk inside the restaurant, but when the delicious odors of grilled meat and peanuts attack our noses, she visibly brightens.

“They give complimentary peanuts!” she says with a grin, nodding towards the paper bags filled with in-shell peanuts at every table. I'm not sure free peanuts scream romance, but apparently Bobbie Sue doesn't mind the somewhat cheesy ambiance.

We wait in the cramped entry, looking through a leather-bound menu as thick as the old Sears Christmas catalog we received when I was a kid.

“They have a huge menu,” Bobbie Sue whispers as she leans into my shoulder, reading through the weighty tome.

I chuckle at the understatement. Remembering the Italian place, I wonder, do all restaurants feel compelled to offer this many selections?

“That they do. But I think I'm going with the daily special,” I say, nodding towards the chalkboard where “10 oz. Prime Rib, baked potato, and unlimited trips to the salad station” is scrawled in yellow chalk.

“Wonder what they offer at the salad station?” Bobbie Sue murmurs, peering across the room where a line of people holding plates select food from behind a plexiglass screen. “I just love pickled beets, so I hope they have those!”

My nose wrinkles at the mention of that food group, but I don't comment. Mom always pushed pickled beets on Dad and me every summer, but we never acquired a taste for them.

No more than ten minutes later a waitress whisks us to a table the busboy is still wiping down with a damp cloth. He does one final swipe and we sit, our elbows sticking to the wet surface. The waitress sets two water glasses on the table and says, “What are you having?” She doesn’t have an order pad, so I hope Bobbie Sue’s order isn’t too complicated.

“I’ll have the daily special,” I say since Bobbie Sue is still glancing through the menu.

“Loaded baked potato?”

“Sure.”

“And for the lady?” the waitress prompts.

“Does the grilled salmon come with the salad station?” Bobbie Sue asks.

“Yes, all our entrees come with unlimited trips.”

“Excellent! I’ll have the grilled salmon, no special sauce on the fish, and a loaded baked potato but hold the bacon bits and add just a touch of sour cream,” Bobbie Sue exclaims. Baffled by the fish order, I wonder: was she just being nice when she said a juicy steak would taste good? Women and their mixed signals are so confusing.

“Plates are at the salad station; go ahead and make a trip through the line,” the waitress says, then grabs the menu from Bobbie Sue’s hand and disappears.

“She was efficient,” my date comments.

I nod, although I’m wondering if she’ll get Bobbie Sue’s complex baked potato order correct. “I thought you were in the mood for steak?” I blurt.

My date juts her chin towards the table beside us. “My daddy always said steak is a slice of heaven on a plate, but I can’t eat one as big as a platter,” she whispers.

Chuckling, I say, “I would have been happy to help finish any leftovers.” She rolls her eyes, exactly the reaction I was going for.

After a quick trip through the salad station—where they do have pickled beets, much to the delight of my companion—we settle back down at our table and dig in. My plate is stacked high with one scoop from every salad station selection sans the beets, plus two of the homemade yeast rolls available at the end of the salad bar. Bobbie Sue was more judicious with her salad station choices, concentrating on lettuce topped with dressing and other vegetables, plus a generous helping of those beets.

Eating in comfortable silence for several seconds, I enjoy the variety of tastes from the salad station, including pasta salad, potato salad, and red Jello filled with fruit cocktail. Bobbie Sue holds up a forkful of beets. “These are just like my Nana used to make! Delicious!”

I grin at her enthusiasm for a pickled vegetable, then my expression turns serious as I vocalize the question that’s been rattling around in my brain ever since we left the flea market. “Do you know if there even are any Belvedere 6000s still in existence? Maybe there simply aren’t any to be found.” When her face grows serious at the question, I mentally kick myself for bringing up the chair. My brain scrambles to latch onto a topic that might help this date come across as more romantic. *Should I order a slice of that double chocolate cake for us to split for dessert?* Chocolate and romance go hand in hand.

She chews on her forkful, then replies before I can change the subject. “Here’s what I know. Mr. Belvedere made eight chairs. Six are in salons around the state of California, so that leaves two unaccounted for. The rumor is that he’s keeping the last two chairs until he deems someone as a ‘worthy’ new owner.”

My brows draw together, remembering her previous mention of Mr. Belvedere deciding on a worthy owner for one of his precious chairs. “How do you know all this?”

“I follow the *Mystery of the Belvedere 6000* blog.”

“Do they even have a podcast?” I ask in jest.

She nods excitedly. “Yes! I’ve listened to it several times. The latest speculation is that since Mr. Belvedere is getting up

in age, he's anxious to find a home for the last two chairs." While she may not seek out an adrenaline high by bungee jumping or sky diving, I recognize that spark in her eyes—the thrill of the chase.

"Hmm . . ." While part of me wonders if this is all just a hyped-up mystery and that there aren't really any chairs remaining, I can't bring myself to vocalize that and dampen the light in Bobbie's eyes. But it's gotten my wheels turning. "That guy at the flea market sure didn't seem very interested in finding a home for one of these chairs. Maybe he isn't a source we can tap into."

Bobbie Sue leans forward. "I think he's part of the mystery," she whispers.

"Why?" I whisper back.

"He knew right away what a Belvedere 6000 is. During all my flea market searches, I've only found one other seller who even knew what I was talking about after some explaining," she replies.

Slumping against the back of my chair, I shovel a spoonful of pasta salad into my mouth, pondering this mystery. After a few beats, I ask, "Is there a photo of Mr. Belvedere in the blog?" Maybe the grumpy seller is in fact the designer of the chair.

"Nope. He's as elusive as the chair, apparently."

A brawny server delivers our plates, reminding us they're hot. "Is there anything else you need at the moment?"

"No thank you," Bobbie Sue replies for both of us.

The prime rib and loaded baked potato are delicious. Bobbie Sue seems to also be enjoying her salmon.

"Make a list of flea markets that might have the Belvedere and we'll put together a plan to visit each one of them," I say. "We'll let them help us spread the word that there's a very interested buyer. Maybe we can lure Mr. Belvedere out of hiding." Excitement leaks from my voice as I mentally formulate a plan to achieve this mission that I've suddenly become so invested in. Bobbie Sue's passion is

inspiring—and reminds me a bit of myself on overseas assignments.

Clapping her hands in delight, Bobbie Sue's face brightens, and she says, "Thank you so much for helping me! If there's a Belvedere 6000 out there, we'll find it!"

I smile, despite the fact that I'm not as confident as she is about actually finding the chair. What I am now confident in is that together we can have a blast while doing something we both enjoy: executing a well-planned mission. I make a mental note to add today's flea market to our list to revisit. If Bobbie Sue can't charm the reticent old man into helping us find a chair or selling us one, maybe I can twist his arm.

Fifteen – Brilliant Advice from the Dippity Doo

Bobbie Sue

I'm so confused about my relationship with Bruno. Are we dating? Or is he just enamored with the hunt for the Belvedere 6000? Once I had time to roll all our conversations during that date over in my mind, doubts set in as to Bruno's motivation.

We had a delightful evening at the Flame and Fork, enjoying the tasty food and free-flowing conversation. In fact, for a while, the date was positively romantic. However I'm feeling conflicted after a night of restless sleep and worrying. Did I inadvertently convince Bruno to give up on romancing me? Is the Belvedere now Bruno's main interest?

To top it off, when we arrived back at my house, he politely walked me to my front door, said he enjoyed the outing, and left. No embrace . . . No attempted kiss . . . Not even a handshake. Although if he'd done that, I'd be even more depressed. Men and their mixed signals are so confusing.

The ending to the date left a bad taste in my mouth, and I'm wondering what I did to discourage him. Maybe that awkward kiss he attempted on our previous date gave him the wrong impression that I'm not interested? Or am I subconsciously giving off the "don't kiss me" vibe after hearing Mrs. Noonan's advice. *Ugh!*

Who can I seek out for some sound dating advice? None of my octogenarian clients come to mind. I'd ask Priscilla, but she's off for the next two weeks helping to care for her aging mother. I can't tap into either Lydia or Val's extensive dating experience since both are interested in Bruno. Do I contact the General again? My sweet Mama is no longer with us, or else I'd gladly give her a call. A pang of sadness hits at how much I miss her wisdom and downhome sayings.

I fret about my relationship with Bruno for the next two days. He's almost become more obsessed with finding the Belvedere than I am.

He texts me several times to inform me that he's compiled a list of flea markets we need to attack and in what order. He's read the Belvedere blog from beginning to end, listened to the podcast, and assembled a list of questions we need to answer. The guy is so focused on this mission, I feel torn. On one hand, it's fabulous to have his enthusiasm and help with finding the chair. On the other hand, it's like I'm just his sidekick, rather than his girlfriend. Did I kill the romance with my focus on the chair? A sense of unjustified ungratefulness lodges in my gut, making me feel a bit ill.

The old saying "Be careful what you ask for, you may get exactly that" comes to mind. I may get the chair, but I'm not sure I'm going to get the guy.

When I see Breezie Monroe on my schedule the next morning, my spirits lift. She's under eighty and should have some modern dating advice for me. Although she's now happily married to Oliver, she was recently part of the dating scene, unlike Mrs. Noonan or LaVerne or Shirley.

The young woman arrives a bit late for her appointment, which isn't unusual. She flies in wearing leggings and a neon orange T-shirt sporting, "My brain has too many tabs open." Gordy Higginbloom, who also just arrived for his appointment, stares at her shirt then turns to Lydia and asks the meaning of the phrase. I chuckle.

"Sorry I'm late! Oliver insisted on trying a new Christmas cookie recipe, and I'm his taste tester."

Huh? Considering Christmas is over six months away, this task doesn't seem urgent or important. But it is Oliver, Mr. Christmas Elf. They've been married for several months and they still act like two honeymooners.

"No worries," I reply calmly as she settles into my chair. "Was the recipe any good?" I ask, even though I'm anxious to get to the dating advice. I'll ease into that discussion.

Breezie laughs. "Oliver and I both agreed that it needed a touch more cinnamon and some nutmeg."

I just shrug because I'm a recipe follower, not a recipe adjuster. "If anyone can improve a recipe, it's Oliver."

Breezie nods.

"So, just a trim?" I say after I've clipped a bright pink cape around her neck.

"Yes, and Dad wants me to pick up another one of those skinification hair masks for him."

The General is one of our best customers for that new product line. At least *one* Marine—I use the proper terminology this time—has an open mind about trying leading-edge hair care products. Bruno hasn't purchased another bottle of Sultry Strands for Men shampoo, which raises a red flag as to whether he's even still using it. I need to drill him next time I see him.

Speaking of Bruno, our next flea market visit is this Saturday. He's put together a plan for efficiently visiting every flea market in a two-hundred-mile radius, and we're going to three of them this weekend. I feel like I'm part of an operation that he's executing with military precision. This upcoming date has none of the trappings of romance. I'm happy I get to spend the day with him, but he's mapped out every hour of our "mission," as he calls it. Does that kill the opportunity for whimsical spontaneity?

When Lydia and Val go on their break, I broach the subject I've been wanting to discuss with my twenty-something client. "Breezie, I need some dating advice," I say as I trim her split ends.

She grins. "Ask away! I'll try to help."

I explain about the previous flea market trip with Bruno and how he's now obsessed with finding the Belvedere. "I'm afraid I've convinced him to focus solely on finding the chair and not romancing me anymore. Our upcoming trip sounds like we're on a military exercise and not a date," I say with a pout. *Ugh!* I'm starting to sound like a complaining, ungrateful shrew, and I don't like myself for putting off that vibe.

“I can relate!” she says, ignoring my ungratefulness. “I’m married to a planner. He has to have everything scheduled down to the second, and he creates a spreadsheet for every activity.”

“Doesn’t that take the fun and spontaneity out of the event?” I hear that spontaneity is the key to romance. Being that I’m also a planner, I don’t have a great deal of experience with that, but I don’t want to blow my chances for a real relationship with Bruno.

She barks out a laugh. “It does, except I’m the wildcard. I do something unexpected, throwing off his carefully planned schedule. I’m teaching Oliver how to go with the flow,” she says proudly.

Something unexpected? Should I do something to get Saturday’s flea market visit to feel more like a date than a mission? Perhaps throw the Marine out of his comfort zone? Now that’s a challenge I’m up for.

“I see your wheels spinning,” Breezie teases as she stares at me in my station’s mirror. “Do you want some suggestions?”

I laugh. “No, actually, I can take it from here. But thanks for the advice.”

Giggling, Breezie offers her fist up for a fist bump. “Poor Bruno! He thinks he’s in charge of the mission, but he’s going to find out that he’s not.”

We both laugh. Now to see what happens when two missions collide.

Sixteen – Executing the Mission

Bruno

I'm determined to locate and procure one of the two remaining Belvedere 6000s or die trying. Well, maybe not something quite that dramatic, but I'm going to give it my all.

I've mapped out a series of trips to all the flea markets within a day's driving distance. Bobbie Sue and I are going to hit the first three flea markets on the list today. I've been up since oh-six-hundred readying for the mission. We're going to need to be efficient in our battle plan in order to have time to scour all three markets. I've uploaded a map of each market on my cell, with only those booths selling used furniture highlighted. No time to look at all the other useless stuff. We're going to be focused, with time management being of the essence.

I requested Bobbie Sue bring that gaudy bag, again packed with all the food we'll need for this excursion. We won't have time to dawdle at any of the food stands. If time permits, on the return trip home we might be able to stop at a drive-thru for a quick bite.

My lips tip into a frown when I pull into Bobbie Sue's driveway at precisely oh-seven-hundred hours. I specifically requested that she be ready and waiting on her front porch. Letting the truck idle in her driveway for a few seconds, I watch for her to appear, but the porch remains empty. Grunting my displeasure, I turn off the truck and jog to her front door where I ring the bell.

She greets me wearing a floaty pink sundress and at least three-inch-high platform sandals. My eyes go wide because I had specified pants, a comfortable shirt, and walking shoes as the uniform for today's outing. My own tan khakis, black T-shirt, and hiking boots are perfect and will provide comfort and support, even if we need to tromp across gravel parking lots and dirt paths.

Despite my disapproval of her not following my instructions, my eyes drink her in, and my pheromones can't

ignore how sexy she looks in that form-fitting dress. The shoes, while very impractical, really show off her shapely legs. I lick my suddenly dry lips.

“Come in Bruno! I’m just finishing up my morning coffee and an apple cinnamon muffin. Would you like one?” she says in a flirty voice.

A muffin sounds good . . . Glancing at the utilitarian watch on my wrist, I suck in a breath. “Bobbie Sue, we’re already five minutes late!”

She tosses me a frown over her shoulder as she saunters off to the kitchen, her hips causing the dress to sway in a most tantalizing fashion. *Gulp!* I steel myself against the distraction she’s posing, but there’s no recourse except to follow.

“You’re sure a Grumpy Gus this morning,” she says with an arched eyebrow while she stands at the counter sipping her coffee and daintily nibbling on the rest of the muffin. My stomach rumbles as I watch her consume the delicious-looking sweet treat.

Maybe there’s time for a quick bite?

I concentrate on the mission, telling my stomach to quit complaining. The dry piece of toast and cup of black coffee I ate at home were perfectly sufficient.

Feeling remorse at my earlier admonishment, I say, “I apologize for my crabbiness. But we’re on a tight schedule if we want to hit all three markets.”

Rolling her eyes, Bobbie Sue finishes her muffin then thrusts her pink-and-lime colored bag at me. I’m shocked to discover it’s light as a feather this time. My brows draw together. “I thought you were packing lunch. And waters.”

Her brow creases as if this is new information. “I thought we could just hit the food vendors instead,” she says, glaring at me like I’m some kind of taskmaster. *Oops!* I guess I’m being a little overbearing.

Deciding to roll with this new development, I mentally calculate how much excess time we have in the timetable. If we hit the food vendors when they’re not busy, we can

probably get by without the packed lunch. “Okay. Are you ready?”

She flits around the kitchen for several minutes doing unnecessary tasks . . .

She blots her luscious lips with a napkin, then loads her cup and plate into the dishwasher after carefully rinsing them off first.

She pulls out several bottled waters from the fridge and hands them to me. I bite my tongue because I desperately want to remind her these were already supposed to be in the bag.

She dashes off down the hall, shouting something about forgetting her lip gloss. Not only does this make us even later, but it fills me with ambivalence over wanting to kiss her while also keeping to my commitment to let her make the first move there.

By the time we’re in my truck, we’ve wasted eighteen precious minutes. I jump on the gas, and my tires squeal as I peel off down the street.

“Slow down, Marine! We don’t need a speeding ticket,” Bobbie Sue comments.

Backing off the accelerator, I take several calming breaths, consoling myself that we can make up time at the first market if we sprint between booths.

“Isn’t it a lovely day? Perfect weather for strolling through stalls, looking for great deals,” Bobbie Sue says with a happy sigh as she stares out the passenger window.

I grunt. “If we hope to find the Belvedere, we won’t have a lot of time for hitting up other vendors,” I remind her.

She waves her hand in a dismissive fashion. “Oh shoo! I’m sure there will be plenty of time. I’ve created a list of a few more things I’d like to look for.” Rummaging around in her purse, she pulls out a full sheet of paper and gleefully holds it up, the list of items filling the entire page.

I blink. “What! Bobbie Sue, we really don’t have time to focus on looking for anything other than the Belvedere.”

She sticks her tongue out, then returns the list to her purse. “Grumpy Gus,” she mutters under her breath.

Sighing, I say, “I thought you were serious about finding the chair?” Did she have a change of heart and forget to tell me? Here I thought I’d figured out a way to show her I was committed to her and her interests.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she says, “I am. But you’re taking all the fun out of this outing.”

Am I? Well, if she equates fun as romance, she’s hit the nail on the head. But my finely trained, mission-focused Marine brain ignores the warning bells and I say, “Won’t it be fun when we find the Belvedere?”

She mutters something I can’t hear, and I ride in confused silence for the rest of the journey to the first market.

~*~

Fortunately, we’re one of the first to arrive at market number one. Pulling up the booth map on my phone, I direct Bobbie Sue along the prescribed route, hitting only the used furniture vendors.

Not more than five minutes later, Bobbie Sue tugs my arm. “Oh! There’s an antique mirror that would look incredible in the salon’s entry!” She squeals as she veers off the route, yanking me over to a booth several yards away. Boy she can move fast in those sandals when she wants to. I have to run to keep up with her.

I tear my eyes up from her swaying skirt. “We don’t have time—”

She cuts my protest off with a dazzling smile. “I’m looking at this mirror. You can continue on if you’re so worried about the schedule.”

After being put firmly in my place, I accept that Bobbie Sue is going to do whatever she wants and I have no control over her actions. Waiting patiently, I watch as she asks the shopkeeper to get the mirror down for a closer inspection. Its bulky brass frame looks like it might have been popular in the 1990s. The monstrosity is one of the ugliest mirrors I’ve ever

seen. I really thought Bobbie Sue had better taste in wall decor than this. Plus, the thing isn't pink.

Slipping my cell phone in my back pocket, I forget about the map. Obviously we're going to the booths Bobbie Sue wants to hit.

After Bobbie Sue purchases the mirror, the vendor agrees we can come back to retrieve it at the end of our time here. At least I don't have to haul that heavy eyesore along with us; a slower pace would take another bite out of the schedule.

As we continue, Bobbie Sue glances at my hand. "Where's your cell and the map?"

I shrug. "Lead us wherever you want to go." I make a motion with my hand, directing her forward.

"The map might still be helpful," she says.

Now *she wants to use my map?*

Whipping my cell out of my back pocket, I hand it to her. "The furniture booths are marked in red."

She squints at the tiny screen, then marches off towards one of the targeted vendors. Chuckling to myself at how Bobbie Sue managed to wrangle control of this mission from me, I follow meekly in her wake. She's a force of nature when she wants to be. I hate to admit it, but I'm impressed.

~*~

No more side trips once Bobbie Sue has the map in her hand. We efficiently hit up the next ten used furniture booths. She guides us with military precision, reminding me of a former Marine drill sergeant of mine. *Why didn't I just give her control in the first place?*

"None of these vendors have ever even heard of a Belvedere 6000!" she wails when we're about halfway through combing the second market. "My feet hurt and I'm hungry!" *Maybe she means hangry?*

Biting my tongue so I don't remind her that I specified wearing comfortable shoes and to bring food in her bag (which I'm lugging along for some reason), I gently guide her to one

of the picnic tables near the food court. “You rest. What would you like to eat?”

She eyes me as if I just sprouted a second head. “Aren’t you going to complain we’re off schedule?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

Her eyes narrow. “What about Mr. Efficiency who said we didn’t have time to partake of any of the on-site food?”

Pointing to an open table, I say, “We better snag that table before someone else does.”

She grunts.

“The corn dogs smell delicious; would you like one?” I ask.

A smile lights her beautiful face. “Yes, I would! And how about some of those fried pickles?”

I cringe at the heart-attack-inducing suggestion, then quickly plaster a smile on my lips, knowing that she’ll just figure out how to delay us even more if I don’t relent and simply go get the pickles.

“Your wish is my command,” I say, resisting the urge to bow, then I stride off towards the food court while she plops down at the open table.

No matter how far off schedule we get, I’m going to romance her with corn dogs and fried pickles, maybe even a funnel cake. I guess I got too wrapped up in finding that darn chair to smell the roses, so to speak. This is a date, for Pete’s sake. I better act like we’re on one.

My commanding officer would be having a good laugh right now that a slip of a woman has commandeered my mission. Despite my initial frustrations, I’m having fun watching Bobbie Sue in action. We’re making good headway on visiting every booth on my list. So far, no luck finding the Belvedere, but I have renewed hope simply by the number of vendors who deal in used salon furniture.

The face of the old man from the first flea market pops into my head. I still feel like he knows more about the chair

than he let on. After we exhaust this list of markets, we're going back to the first market to interrogate him again. What will it take to get him to help us?

Seventeen – Forget the Schedule

Bobbie Sue

I grin as I watch the hunky Marine saunter over to the food court. Breezie's advice has been so much fun to implement and then sit back to watch the military man's reaction.

Bruno's response to my flighty and inappropriate outfit was priceless. When he spotted the sundress and sandals, he looked like he had just sucked on a lemon. Even though he tried to hide it, I saw a glint of male admiration in his eyes, because I rock this dress.

My refusal to follow his stringent plan and only visit the used furniture vendors caused him all kinds of angst. That is, until he realized he'd better just go with the flow. We've had quite the enjoyable experience since he let me take charge. In fact, he's buying me fried pickles right now despite the fact he cringed when I mentioned them. *Has Bruno finally realized that we're on a date and not a combat mission?*

Rummaging through my bag for a bottled water, I sip on the refreshing beverage, pondering whether we'll be able to find one of the remaining Belvedere chairs. Maybe the man who built them died, the last two chairs languishing in a storage unit somewhere. A participant in that TV show *Storage Wars* will purchase the contents of his unit and promptly toss the chairs, not realizing what a find they've come across.

Sigh! Is this a fool's errand and we should just give up?

"A corn dog and fried pickles for the lady," Bruno says as he slides two paper containers in front of me. "I also got a funnel cake, in case you're interested," he says, waggling his eyebrows and holding up a paper plate overloaded with the sweet concoction.

"Just what my sweet tooth needs!" I tease as he settles on the bench across from me.

He grins and my heart flips, taking my mind off my gloomy thoughts about never finding the Belvedere. Pulling out several tiny packets of ketchup and mustard from his pants

pocket, he lays them on the table between us. “I forget whether you like condiments on your dogs,” he says.

After generously slathering mustard on my corn dog, I take a big bite. My taste buds dance at the unhealthy mix of fried batter and wiener on a stick.

“You’ve got mustard on your lips,” Bruno says with a smirk, motioning towards the side of his mouth.

I grab a napkin and wipe the left side of my mouth.

“Other side,” he teases.

Chuckling, I make a show of wiping off the right side. “Did I get it?”

He nods, watching the movement of the napkin against my glossy pink lips, then he visibly swallows. Bruno obviously isn’t immune to my lips, so why hasn’t he kissed me yet?

“Thank you for letting us grab lunch here. I know these aren’t the best choices, but sometimes you’ve just gotta have fried foods,” I say while munching on a fried pickle.

He looks contrite. “I’m sorry that I lost sight of the fact that this outing should be roman, er, fun. Instead, I made it feel like a combat mission. From here on out, we’ll take it at your pace. If you want to look at those bobbleheads over there, we can.” *Did he almost utter the word romantic or are my ears putting words in his mouth?*

He nods to a booth across from the picnic area where hundreds of those cheesy baseball giveaways wobble in near-unison. Their little heads bounce up and down, making me a little seasick.

“I’ve been looking for a Mike Trout! Maybe they have one,” I squeal, knowing that even if they’re free, I won’t be bringing one of those home.

Bruno’s brows draw together. “Why not also get Shohei Ohtani?” he asks, a serious expression on his face.

Reaching across the table, I playfully punch his arm. My hand stings afterwards because his bicep is like a rock. “I’m

only kidding!”

He laughs. “I’m impressed you know those Angels players names. Are you a baseball fan?”

“Yeah, I try to catch a few games in person every season.”

His smile widens. “We’ll have to go together. Ballpark franks are almost as good as corn dogs,” he jokes.

I nod and smile, munching on another fried pickle. It warms my heart to know that he thinks we’ll still be doing things together during next year’s baseball season. *But what is the status of our relationship? Dating? Just friends?*

Well, no time like the present. “Bruno, I’m thirty-four years old, and I don’t believe in beating around the bush . . . May I ask you a frank question?” I say, hoping to vocalize what’s on my mind.

He cocks an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“Are we dating or is this relationship just friendship?” I blurt, pointing between us. Our eyes lock and I bite my lower lip, suddenly not really wanting to hear the answer.

Bruno takes my hand. “Bobbie Sue, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

I steel myself for the letdown that’s coming . . .

“We’re unequivocally dating in my book. I hope you see this relationship the same way.” A blush heats his cheeks, as if he’s embarrassed that I’m going to reply that I consider him firmly in the friend zone.

Squeezing his hand, still joined with mine, I say, “I’m on the same page. I was just a little concerned that you were only interested in locating a Belvedere 6000 and not really interested in me.”

He sighs. “I’m a dunce. My military training kicked in and I lost sight of what was important.” His eyes lock with mine and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “You, along with a little romance thrown in for good measure.”

His knee-weakening smile gives my heart a pleasant jolt.

“Finding a Belvedere for you would be the cherry on top, but in the meantime, let’s have a romantic time doing it,” he adds.

“And don’t treat these flea market visits like a military operation?” I tease.

He winces. “Right. I got a little carried away, didn’t I?”

I giggle. “You did. But I have a confession to make.”

“You no longer want to find the Belvedere?”

I wave my hand in a dismissive fashion. “No, I still very much want to find the chair!” I’ll vocalize my doubts about whether we can actually find one later.

“Then what do you need to confess?”

“Please don’t get mad,” I say.

He grunts. “I think I’m the one at fault so far in this relationship, not you.”

And here I was thinking it was my fault. Should I just keep my mouth shut? When he finds out that I purposely thwarted every one of his plans, will he forgive me? Maybe I should say something lame like, *These fried pickles aren’t nearly as good as the ones at the state fair.*

Deciding on honesty, I draw in a deep breath and say, “I dressed like this”—I point to myself— “didn’t pack a lunch, and bought that stupid ugly mirror just to be a contrarian to your mission. It was my own counter-mission.”

Bruno blinks at me. Then he bursts into roaring laughter, even slapping his hand on his knee. Tears leak from the corner of his eyes. After several beats he finally gets his mirth under control. “Bobbie Sue, I deserved every one of those contrarian actions and more! Honestly, it was very sexy how you took control.”

My eyes go wide. “You’re not put off by a woman taking control?”

“Heck no! You were very impressive after you latched onto that map. You led like a true Marine drill sergeant,” he says with a flirty wink.

Blushing at his compliments, I say, “How about from now on, we plan and execute the mission together? And be willing to take time along the way to enjoy the experience.”

Bruno nods.

Happily tearing off a piece of the funnel cake, I revel in the taste sensations of powdered sugar and fried dough. I feel lighter now that we’ve both been honest with each other.

“So you didn’t really want to purchase the mirror?” Bruno says with a chuckle.

I smirk. “Not really. Where am I going to put that ugly thing?”

We both laugh.

Eighteen – Back on Track

Bruno

I've come to enjoy the slow-burn adrenaline of hunting at a flea market. After Bobbie Sue and I are honest with each other and we set aside the strict mission schedule, the outing feels much more like a date.

We amble through some of the more eclectic booths, not limiting ourselves to used furniture. I'm amazed at the variety of stuff available, most of it junk. But there are the occasional hidden gems.

"Hey Bruno, have you ever collected baseball cards?" Bobbie Sue asks, pointing to a booth across from where we're standing. "Let's take a quick peek. My nephew is a collector."

I chuckle as she tugs me along, not waiting for my response, which has become her go-to behavior on this outing. I don't mind.

As we enter the booth, Sam Watson, one of my Marine poker-playing buddies, looks up from his perch by the cash register. He's an imposing figure, making me feel like a shrimp. Women flock to Sam like flies to honey.

"Bruno Thompson! Long time, no see," he barks in a raspy voice, then gets up from his chair and rambles our way. "What card are you looking for this time?"

Bobbie Sue's eyes fly to mine, and she arches an eyebrow. I shrug, mouthing, *I may be a collector*, which elicits a grin from my pretty companion.

When Sam is within non-shouting distance, I say, "I've been trying to find a Rod Carew for a while now. You got any of those?"

"I do! Come with me." The man bustles his burly frame to the other side of the booth and starts thumbing through a box, selecting a card and holding it up. "1973 Topps Rod Carew Twins card. These are difficult to find—very rare."

Sam thinks every card is "very rare," so I don't fall for that line anymore. I take the card, still in its cellophane

wrapper, turning it over in my hand to examine the condition. The card is pristine, and I've been itching to get my hands on one of these for quite some time.

"I'll take it," I say, then glance over my shoulder to see Bobbie Sue thumbing through a box a few tables over. "Are you finding anything for your nephew?" I ask her.

Sam's eyes land on her and he perks up, like a hound chasing a fox's scent.

"What are you looking for?" Sam says, striding over to my date, no longer interested in me. A twinge of jealousy hits when he starts flirting with her about whether to get a Trout or Ohtani card. They banter back and forth while I observe Sam's reaction to Bobbie Sue. He's definitely noticed how great she looks in that sundress.

I march over, ready to stake a claim on my date. Taking her hand, I say, "Honey, why don't you get both cards?"

She throws me a quizzical look but doesn't pull her hand out of mine. "I guess I could, love bug. Jeffrey would love these," she replies while batting her eyelashes at me.

Going with the flow, I wrap an arm around her shoulders, tucking her closer. She snuggles into my side, then elbows me in the ribs.

I don't break character as I say, "Sam, looks like you've got a sale. My little sweet pea obviously has great taste." Hopefully he'll pick up on my double meaning, referring to both baseball cards and me.

She snorts while Sam strides off to the cash register, no longer flirting but instead anxious to ring up the sale.

"Why are you acting like this?" she hisses as we trail after Sam, her elbow continuing to jab me in my ribs.

Purposely ignoring her question—not wanting to admit to my bout of jealousy—I steer her to join Sam at the register. "Ring those up together," I say as I pull my credit card from my wallet. I expect Bobbie Sue to make a fuss, but she remains silent. Guess she's still paying me back for acting like

a general on a combat operation rather than a boyfriend on a date.

“Bruno, are you joining the guys from the poker group for parasailing next Wednesday afternoon?” Sam asks. “Robert is organizing everything if you want to come.”

“Um, I haven’t decided yet,” I reply. My need to live on the wild side rears its head as I mentally review my packed Wednesday schedule. Ever since I returned from my last military consulting gig, I’ve been at loose ends. But next Wednesday I’m starting a new early morning session of hot yoga with the General. I can do that and still get to Sam’s event in time. I was also thinking about mowing the yard, but that can wait. *Yep. I’m available to go parasailing with the gang!*

A concerned look crosses Bobbie Sue’s face and a flood of warmth fills my heart. *Is she worried about my safety?*

Sam completes the transaction, handing me the cards tucked inside a brown paper bag. “You need to confirm by Monday if you want to attend.” He turns his charm back on my date. “Nice to meet you, Bobbie Sue. Please stop by again.”

She smiles sweetly. “I’m sure we’ll be back. Won’t we, sweetums?”

“Oh, for sure, sugar lump.”

Bobbie Sue wrinkles her pert nose as that endearment rolls off my tongue. Mom used to call me that all the time when I was little. *Maybe you don’t call someone over the age of five sugar lump?*

After we’re clear of Sam’s booth, Bobbie Sue turns to me. “Was that an attack of jealousy I just witnessed?”

“Maybe?” My neck heats under her scrutiny, and my cotton T-shirt suddenly feels constrictive.

She giggles, intertwining her fingers with mine. “I feel like I’ve just achieved girlfriend status!” she boasts. I nod and squeeze her joined fingers. My heart does a funny flip in my

chest, creating a sensation of anticipation and happiness. I'm oddly content applying the girlfriend moniker to Bobbie Sue.

We stroll past several more booths, none of which strike her fancy. After ignoring the booth filled with brightly colored crocheted Kleenex box covers, skipping the one advertising toxin-free cleaning products, and shunning the one overrun with handmade candles in the shapes of wizards and dragons, Bobbie Sue squeezes my elbow, her expression turning serious. "Bruno, you need to work on your southern endearments if we're going to be dating. You don't call anyone over the age of two sugar lump."

"My bad, buttercup," I reply with a wink.

She rolls her eyes. We continue, walking hand-in-hand, mostly just enjoying the sunshine and each other's company. After hitting up all the used furniture booths, it's obvious we aren't going to find the Belvedere today. But I think we've found something much more special. Each other.

Nineteen – A Kiss and an Epiphany

Bobbie Sue

Dating Bruno is like a breath of fresh air compared to my recent dull relationships. He's funny, caring, but also a little rough around the edges, which keeps things exciting. You might characterize him as a sweet grump who's willing to try a variety of Bobbie Sue-appropriate (aka boring) activities, in addition to searching for the Belvedere 6000. He's really caught the passion for finding the elusive chair.

Thankfully Bruno hasn't suggested a repeat bungee jumping date. He can do all those adrenaline-rush activities with his Marine buddies, which suits me just fine. We've discovered that we both love Italian or Mexican food, we enjoy a moderate hike through the woods together, and we do best when we have a well-planned activity—like how to efficiently hunt through flea markets for a particular item.

Today we're attending Mrs. Noonan's ninety-third birthday celebration together as a couple. It's our first "coming out" as official boyfriend and girlfriend to our friends. I'm a little nervous, but at the same time excited.

When Bruno rings the doorbell, my heart does a little flip. Will this be the day for our first kiss? I've been stewing about the fact that beyond that awkward first kiss attempt after the bungee jumping date, there's not been a repeat. Therefore, I'm going to do everything I can to give Bruno the greenlight to kiss me today. *What's he been waiting for?*

"Come on in! I just need to grab my package for Mrs. Noonan, then we can head out," I say as I usher Bruno into my small entryway. He looks hunky in a pair of neatly pressed khakis, a navy-blue polo shirt that highlights his well-developed biceps and chest, and sturdy boots. The man looks like he's equally ready for either a covert mission or a party.

"Um, you look great in that dress. Maybe I should have dressed up more?" Bruno says, his eyes traveling from my head to my toes. My heart warms—I wore my most flattering

dress and eye-catching high heels in hopes of enticing the man. *Looks like it's working!*

“You look perfect to me,” I say with a playful wink, watching a blush creep up Bruno’s neck.

He takes a step closer, and I get “that feeling,” the one where he’s asking with his eyes if it’s okay to kiss me. Since I’m the one who messed up his earlier attempt, I fling my arms around his neck and plant a kiss squarely on his lips. I feel him pause, either in surprise or in hesitation.

I pull back after just a second, to judge his reaction. His eyes widen. Time stands still, my heart thumps in my chest with anticipation, and I hang on the precipice of this being either a fantastic kiss or another embarrassing moment. *Did I read his body language incorrectly?*

A saucy grin splits his handsome face, and his arms slowly encircle me, pulling my body flush with his muscular frame. He feels like steel under my fingertips. His lips return to mine, this time with intent, no hesitation involved. The kiss makes my knees go weak, and if he wasn’t holding me up, they would buckle, causing me to swoon in a heap of longing at his feet. This is the kiss I’ve been waiting for, and it’s even better than all the anticipation and build-up in my mind.

As Bruno’s lips mold firmly to mine, tingles zap up and down my arms, causing goosebumps to form. On a scale of one to ten, this kiss is a twenty. *Goodness gracious!* This man can kiss.

We kiss for what feels like an eternity but is probably only seconds. With each pass of his lips, the attraction between us heats up more and more, making me feel like I’m caught in an inferno—or possibly the air conditioning has gone on the fritz.

He reluctantly pulls back, looking as affected as I am. We stare at each other with goofy looks on our faces, no words needed to describe what just happened.

The world around me gradually comes back into focus. Bruno’s hair is mussed, tumbling onto his forehead where my

fingers ran through it. One of my sandals sits discarded beside my foot, I can feel that my lip gloss is gone, and my sundress is decidedly more wrinkled than it was a few minutes ago. Despite my now-somewhat-disheveled appearance, my heart beats with happiness.

But reality invades, reminding me that we're now late for the birthday party. "I'll be right back!" Dashing down the hall, I stare in my bathroom mirror, quickly repairing my lip gloss and hand-ironing the wrinkles from my dress as much as possible. My lips still look like they've been thoroughly kissed, but there's no hiding that, and the truth is, I don't want to. Retrieving the gift bag I prepared for Mrs. Noonan from my dresser, I return to Bruno's side. "Ready!" I say, holding up the bright pink bag.

He's fixed his hair; you'd never know that the man just kissed the living daylights out of me. When his eyes land on my gift bag, his brows draw together. "Your package looks a lot fancier than mine. What did you get her?" he says as we walk to his truck.

Once we're enclosed inside the vehicle, I respond to his comment. "I put together a combination of hair and body care products, including our new hair skinification line."

He grunts.

"What?"

Bruno keeps his eyes firmly on the road, as he replies in his rumbly voice, "Bobbie Sue, do you honestly believe that hogwash about treating hair with the same products you would treat your skin?"

I laugh. We've had this discussion before, so I'm not surprised at his skepticism. "Believe what you want, Mr. Grumpy, but my clients swear by these new products."

"I'm not grumpy. I'm being realistic," he grumbles.

Reaching over the console, I pat his massive bicep. "Let's just agree to disagree on this point. I don't want to ruin this absolutely gorgeous day by having an argument." The clear

blue skies and balmy weather bode well for Mrs. Noonan's outdoor party.

He nods.

Swiveling towards the backseat, I scan it for Bruno's gift. "What did you get her?" I ask, the backseat devoid of any packages.

He pats the pocket on his shirt, and says, "A gift card for Wally's Burgers. According to the General, it's her and Fred's favorite restaurant."

Mrs. Noonan has been dating Fred Goertz for about a year. They are the cutest couple, both having lost their spouses and finding companionship with each other.

"That's a sweet gift, Bruno! She'll love it."

He frowns. "Your skinification products will probably be more popular," he grouses.

"Well, you can't eat those, so your gift may have the edge."

"True," Bruno says with a chuckle. He juts his square jaw towards the brightly colored gift bag sitting in my lap. "I've been meaning to ask, why the obsession with pink? Do you like the color that much?"

This line of questioning is common. My previous boyfriends, my clientele, and even salon walk-ins frequently ask me about the overuse of pink in either my shop, my home, or on my person. Glancing down at the carnation pink dress and matching shoes, I wonder when was the last time I wore something that wasn't pink?

"My *obsession*, as you call it, started when I was five. Mom painted my bedroom a bubblegum pink color and it escalated from there . . . I had to have a pink bed and dresser . . . The comforter had to be another shade of pink . . . I got a pink elephant stuffy toy for my birthday . . . My first bicycle was pink . . . You get the picture. Suddenly pink was my signature color."

“Is that why you turned your salon into a bubblegum factory?” Bruno jokes.

No one has described my shop quite that way, but I guess it fits. “Actually, when I first stumbled across the Belvedere 6000 podcast, I decided to decorate the shop as if I’d eventually own one of those awesome pink chairs.”

Bruno snorts. “Seems like you got a little carried away.”

I don’t flinch at his criticism since some of my friends have expressed the same sentiment, mulling his words over before responding. Am I carried away with having literally everything in my life be a shade of pink? My clothing . . . my home . . . my salon.

When did my enchantment with the color become more like an obsession? I’m not exactly sure when the use of pink escalated. It just happened, and now I can’t seem to stem the tide. Just yesterday I purchased some new pillows for my sofa, and they’re French rose, which is, of course, a shade of pink.

“You’re right. Maybe I should expand my color palette to include something other than shades of pink.”

Bruno’s eyes widen at my admission. “Your robin’s-egg-blue front door was a good start,” he adds in an encouraging tone.

Barking out a laugh, I say, “The HOA forced me to paint my front door that color. I originally proposed to paint it fuchsia.”

Shaking his head in amusement, Bruno says, “My HOA insisted everyone’s door be black. Mrs. Morton bucked the system and painted hers red. She grumbles, but she pays the fine each year so she can have the color of front door she wants.”

“How much are the fines?” I muse.

Wagging his pointer finger back and forth, Bruno says, “Don’t go down that rabbit hole. Surely you can live with a door that isn’t pink.”

“I’m terrible!” I squeak, the epiphany as to how bad my pink obsession is hits me like a ton of bricks. *Can I transform my pink persona? Do I even want to?*

“How about branching out to red or purple? Don’t try chartreuse or canary just yet, I don’t think you’re ready,” Bruno teases.

The vehicle slows as Bruno pulls up to the curb, joining a long line of cars already parked along the street. “This must be the place. Looks like everybody and their brother from Hudsonville turned out for the party,” Bruno says with a grin.

He takes my hand as we stroll towards the laughter and voices echoing from the backyard. Bruno’s kiss still warms my heart, and I forget about my color crisis, content, for now, to be the lady in pink.

Twenty – Revelations

Bobbie Sue

Bruno wasn't far off when he said everyone from Hudsonville turned out for Mrs. Noonan's party. I guess that's what happens when you turn ninety-three, have lived in one place all your life, and have a top-notch PR team consisting of Breezie, Oliver, and the General.

We enter through a wrought-iron gate in the wooden fence; I suppress a gasp at how beautiful and well-maintained Mrs. Noonan's backyard is. Flowerbeds surround the perimeter with several varieties in full bloom. Yellows, pinks, reds, and an occasional patch of purple provide a ring of color around the lush green yard. Mrs. Noonan must have quite a green thumb!

The lady of the hour is sitting on her back patio in a brown leather recliner that must have been brought outside for the occasion. She's surrounded by a gaggle of guests of all ages. Children chase each other around the yard while adults converse in small groups. A table laden with food includes a three-tier birthday cake, and another table overflowing with beautifully wrapped presents despite the fact the invite said not to bring a gift. Now I'm glad that I ignored that request.

Before I can add my gift to the collection on the table, Mrs. Noonan waves at Bruno and me, beckoning us over to her place of honor. "Bruno and Bobbie Sue! It's so nice to see you together," she says, throwing me a *my advice must have worked* grin. "You sure look attractive in that dress," she adds with a wink.

Bruno gives me a confused look and I mouth, *I'll tell you later* before giving the nonagenarian a hug. "What a wonderful party! And don't you look festive," I tease. Mrs. Noonan came into the salon yesterday for a shampoo, set, and blowout in preparation for her party. The staff had a cake and we all pitched in for the full treatment, including nails and skin exfoliation—all complimentary for the birthday girl.

Holding up the pink gift bag, I say, “I’ll just put this with the other gifts on the table.”

She deftly plucks the bag from my hand, tosses the tissue paper aside, and peeks in. “Ooh! I’ve been wanting to try some of these! Thank you.” Setting the bag carefully under her chair, she adds, “I’ll just keep this here with me.”

A belly laugh slides out of Bruno’s throat. “What did I tell you?” he whispers discreetly into my left ear, sending goosebumps down my neck. He slipped his gift card into the bag earlier, so she’ll find it in there when she takes a closer look.

Mrs. Noonan smiles at us. “Did I ever tell you how much you remind me of my late daughter? She was also a big fan of pink,” the diminutive woman chuckles, her eyes twinkle with what must be a fond memory. “The minute I drove by your salon, I knew I had to go there,” Mrs. Noonan says matter-of-factly.

My eyes widen. She’s been my customer for several years, but this is the first time I’ve heard about her daughter. Our conversation is interrupted when a small child and a smartly dressed younger woman approach the chair. I was worried about being overdressed, but this young woman’s flowy sundress makes me feel like I fit right in.

“Great Aunt Estella!” the lady says, bending down to hug the birthday girl. They start to chat excitedly, so Bruno and I walk off to mingle with the rest of the guests, but I feel a sting of disappointment that I couldn’t learn more about Mrs. Noonan’s daughter.

“I didn’t know her name is Estella,” Bruno comments. “She’s always been introduced as Mrs. Noonan.”

I nod. “Same here.”

“Did you know the bit about her daughter?” Bruno adds.

“No.” A stab of sadness pangs my heart knowing her daughter is no longer with us. I wonder what happened to her.

“Maybe I was too presumptuous in suggesting you ditch pink. Sounds like you got Mrs. Noonan as a client because of

your salon's signature color," he jokes. Being distinctly memorable does have its advantages, especially in the business sphere.

"Bobbie Sue and Bruno, come join us!" a familiar male voice shouts from across the lawn. The General, his wife Melanie, their daughter Breezie, and her husband Oliver plus two people I don't recognize are standing in a circle, holding snack plates filled with food. They wave us over.

Pointing to the food table, Bruno says, "We'll grab a bite and come over!"

As we load our plates from the overflowing spread, I contemplate today's discoveries: Mrs. Noonan's had a daughter who also loved pink, plus the fact that I never knew one of my best clients' first name until today. A mixture of sadness, confusion, and remorse jumble my mind.

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When we join the General, he introduces us to the other two people standing with his family. "Have you heard of the Green Frog food trucks?" the General asks. "Ash here is the owner and operator of that fine line of trucks." A good-looking guy who could be a ringer for a surfer steps forward, accompanied by a prim and proper woman in a business suit. They extend their hands; Bruno and I do a round of handshakes with the couple.

"I'm Ash's wife, Teddy," the lady says. "Do you own the Dippity Doo salon?" she asks while Bruno and Ash debate food trucks and the affordability of a mobile eatery versus a brick-and-mortar restaurant.

My brows crease. *Has she been to the salon?* "I do! I'm sorry if I didn't recognize you."

She chuckles. "I haven't personally been there, but my neighbor Gordy Higginbloom raves about it all the time. We both live just down the street from Mrs. Noonan."

"It's a small world, isn't it?" I say with a laugh. "Please stop by sometime. I just introduced a new line of hair skinification products that are quite the rage."

Teddy's expression when I mention the skinification products is similar to the one Bruno gives me whenever I mention them to him. I guess I can't win over everyone with my leading-edge hair care line.

"My niece will be back in a few weeks; we'll stop by your shop. Millie will love getting a full salon experience," Teddy says.

I smile and nod, wondering if she's just saying this to be polite. An awkward silence falls between us as I grasp for another conversation topic. *The weather? The beautiful flowers surrounding us? Mrs. Noonan's longevity?* I'm a bit relieved when two of my long-time clients interrupt the conversation.

"Bobbie Sue, do you have any of those hair skinification products with you? LaVerne is dying to try them," her sister Shirley asks.

"You're the one dying to try them, not me," LaVerne fires back with a huff, while Teddy and I exchange amused grins.

I hold up a placating hand before the two octogenarians get into a full-blown argument. "I'll set some samples aside for you. Next time you're in the shop you can pick them up."

Shirley pats me on my arm. "That would be lovely, dear." With that request satisfied, the older lady swiftly changes the subject, almost making my head spin. "Have you tasted the cake? It's delicious red velvet with cream cheese icing. LaVerne and I are going for another piece, do either of you ladies want one?"

"Sure, why not!" I say. Teddy nods and we stroll together with the sisters over to where the cake has almost been decimated.

"Ash baked the cake," Teddy says under her breath, as we both snag one of the tiny remaining pieces.

"Really? He's obviously very talented with how much the sisters raved about it and how little is left!" I enthuse.

Teddy smiles politely at the compliment. "He also catered most of the food," she says, pride leaking from her voice.

“Ash’s mom and Mrs. Noonan’s daughter Roberta went to high school together, so he wanted to contribute to the party, providing the food at no charge. He felt like he should do it in honor of Roberta.”

Nodding, I take a bite of cake, sadness stabbing me in the chest again. *What happened to Roberta?* But it feels like prying to ask. We both eat a few bites of the delicious dessert after LaVerne and Shirley stroll off to converse with someone else they know. Another awkward silence almost settles between Teddy and I, but fortunately she rambles on. “Roberta was also a hair stylist. Ash mentioned that she was a whiz with hair and owned her own salon,” Teddy says. “The . . . shoot, I can’t remember the name of the shop. It’s probably not even in business anymore anyway.”

The bite I just took sticks in my throat, and I cough. “I didn’t know that,” I croak, stunned that Mrs. Noonan never mentioned this to me.

Thankfully Bruno and Ash wander over to also partake in the last crumbs of the cake, providing me relief from having to carry on any intelligent conversation. I remain silent, letting the three of them hold up the discussion, a bit shocked and overwhelmed by all the revelations I’ve had today.

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“You’re sure quiet,” Bruno comments on the ride back to my apartment.

Swiveling in my seat, I stare at his handsome profile. “I’m feeling guilty that I never knew Mrs. Noonan had a daughter,” I say, blowing out a loud sigh. “And that I didn’t even ask one of my favorite clients her first name . . . How terrible is that?”

He reaches out, grasping my much smaller hand in his. “Bobbie Sue, you’ve been a great friend to Mrs. Noonan. I don’t see what you have to feel terrible about.”

“But have I? Been a great friend? It’s like I don’t even know the woman.”

He squeezes my hand. “You and your staff gave Mrs. Noonan a spa day fit for a queen. Her hair and skin looked like she’s seventy not ninety,” he jokes, trying to coax a smile from me.

“Guess those hair skinification products really work!” I reply in a teasing tone, but a frown wipes away the smile as my previous gloomy mood returns. “I’ve been trying to think back to all the conversations with Mrs. Noonan I’ve had over the years, and they all seem superficial now. Things like: Does she want to update her hairstyle . . . Does she need any more haircare products . . . Is she enjoying the weather . . . I’ve never asked her anything that gets below the surface because I never inquire about her personal life.” A loud exhale escapes. “All this time I thought the Dippity Doo clientele are my friends, but it turns out they are merely acquaintances.”

Clearing his throat, Bruno says, “You’re beating yourself up too much over this. You’re their stylist, not their therapist. But if you really feel bad about it, why can’t you just make a goal to get to know each client better from this point on? Ask them something about themselves each time they come into the salon. In a few months, you’ll know them just like a friend.”

His advice sinks in, making me feel marginally better. This situation is something I can fix. Having a plan always helps.

When we get to my house, Bruno escorts me to the door just as the sun sinks below the horizon. “Hey, I know it’s late, so I’ll leave you with this reminder of our day together.” He gently tugs me closer and his lips land on mine. Although I feel the zing of attraction heating between us again, it doesn’t flare into a wildfire like our previous kiss. This is a languid, thorough exploration of the lips that unfortunately ends far too soon and leaves me wanting more.

“I had a wonderful day,” Bruno says, stroking my cheek with his hand. He turns, strides off to his truck, and drives away, all military efficiency. Stumbling into my house, I trace my lips with my finger, a blissful smile lighting my face. Tomorrow I’ll put into action my plan to get to know my

clients better. Tonight, I'm going to bask in Bruno's kiss and dream about the hunky Marine.

Twenty-One – The Adrenaline Rush

Bruno

Kissing Bobbie Sue was outstanding! Now I wish I hadn't waited so long. Our relationship has really gelled in the last few weeks. We've found several common things that we both like doing—eating Mexican or Italian food, baseball, and, of course, the hunt for that elusive chair. But part of me still wishes she'd be open to some more daring activities. Like the one I'm participating in today.

Sam Watson hosts all these events. In addition to collecting and selling baseball cards, he owns a raft of high-adrenaline sports venues. The bungee jumping place I took Bobbie Sue to on our first date is one of his endeavors, along with today's skydiving, hang gliding, and parasailing adventure company.

Bobbie Sue: Enjoy your day!

Me: (thumbs up emoji)

Bobbie Sue: If you get back early enough, let's meet for dinner

I'm not sure how many people are attending, so I don't know how long it'll take for me to have my opportunity to parasail. Sometimes Sam has dinner planned, so I give a vague reply.

Me: Depends on when the field exercise concludes

Bobbie Sue: Ten-four

I chuckle at her attempt at a military reply, even though it's radio lingo and not Marine speak.

The parasailing venue is about thirty minutes away, located beside a small coastal resort. Sam gets a lot of his business from tourists seeking thrills while vacationing at the combination inn and spa. The resort also has an onsite restaurant known for its downhome seafood specialties. It isn't fancy, but it's tasty; our group often frequents it after a day on the surf.

Colonel Benton waves me down in the parking lot just as I'm getting out of my truck.

"Badger, I thought you were bringing your new girlfriend. Sam said she's quite a looker."

I grin at the use of my nickname given to me by The Fleet—it's something I seldom hear anymore, and it brings back memories of our close-knit unit. Leave it to loose-lips Sam to spill the beans about Bobbie Sue; now all the guys will rib me about her.

"She couldn't attend," I grunt.

The man slaps me on the back, the force of the hit reminding me that, despite his age, Colonel Benton is still in tip-top shape. "Well, maybe we'll have the pleasure of meeting her next time then."

Walking together across the dusty lot, we spy the rest of our group mingling near the pier—their haircuts and proud, upright stances stand out against the other tourists. My eyes go wide when I take in all the attendees.

"Guess it would have been awkward if your girlfriend did attend since Pickles is here," Colonel Benton comments as we approach the gathering. Clint "Eagle Eyes" Eagle, Forest "Sequoia" Martin, Luke "Tiny" Fieldstone, and my ex-girlfriend Bonita "Pickles" Harris are laughing and chatting as they wait. All eyes turn towards the Colonel and me.

"Badger! Where's the new squeeze?" Tiny says, getting a laugh from Eagle Eyes and Sequoia. Tiny got his nickname because he was the smallest guy in our unit, but what he lacks in stature, he makes up for in determination and proficiency at all tasks.

"Bobbie Sue was busy," I say in a terse tone, trying to stem any more comments regarding my new girlfriend. The guys snicker.

I lock my eyes on Bonita, wondering how she's reacting to Tiny's comment. She gives me a narrow-eye glare as if the girlfriend story is a ruse. If I'd known my ex would be here, I would have begged Bobbie Sue to come along for several

reasons, one being a shield against having to interact with Bonita.

Bonita saunters over to me, getting right in my face. “You and I need to talk,” she huffs, pointing a finger at my chin. I arch an eyebrow, wondering what beef she has this time. Bonita is always disgruntled about something, but I haven’t seen her for months. The rocky way our relationship ended wasn’t optimal, so I steel myself against a rant over that.

“Oorah!” Sam shouts, getting everyone’s attention. He motions towards a sleek-looking ski boat sitting at the dock. “Who wants to go first?”

A mad scramble between Sequoia and Tiny ensues, with Tiny’s speed edging out the much slower tall-but-lanky Marine. The rest of us laugh at their antics.

“Tiny beats him every time,” Eagle Eyes comments.

“Yep. Tiny was always a Water Walker,” the Colonel adds, a nod to Tiny’s superb physical fitness level that always left the rest of us in the dust.

The rest of the group disperses to the pier to assist Tiny into the harness. I sway awkwardly back and forth on my feet, wishing I was anywhere but here. Bonita takes the opportunity to have our “talk.”

“Your breakup text was a chicken liver thing to do,” she says, not mincing her words.

“Your dating that librarian behind my back wasn’t cool, Bonita,” I fire back.

“You knew about that?” she squeaks.

I cross my arms over my chest, giving her my most intense stare. “It wasn’t difficult to figure out when I saw you two being chummy at that hole-in-the-wall burger joint just off base.” I instantly recognized the librarian from the few times I used the archives at the base’s library, research for a contract assignment for Colonel Benton.

“When you said you were going to re-up for another tour of duty, I got mad. I thought you were re-upping just to get

away from me, so I wanted to retaliate,” she says, her voice cracking.

“Don’t you think you should have broken things off with me first?”

Her shoulders sag. “I made a mistake.”

Her emotional tone breaks through my annoyance. “Gosh, Bonita, I never knew you thought I was re-upping to get away from you. The Colonel convinced me to reenlist, purely for financial reasons, so I could retire early.”

“But you didn’t follow through. You went ahead and retired,” she says, her brows drawing together.

I blow out a loud breath, breaking eye contact by staring at the wooden boards beneath our feet. “I hate to admit it, but I failed the physical. My bum knee just couldn’t take it.” The embarrassment and frustration I still feel over that failure leaks through my words.

She reaches over and squeezes my arm, drawing my eyes back to hers. “I never knew that . . . We both need to learn to communicate better, don’t we?”

I nod, feeling a sudden need to make things right between us. “I apologize for that text. As you said, that wasn’t cool.”

Bonita shrugs. “Me dating the librarian wasn’t cool either.”

At one point I thought Bonita was the one, but my bitter feelings towards her were unduly swayed by the way we broke up. Considering this discussion, it looks like there’s blame on both sides.

“Are you serious about this new girlfriend?” Bonita asks after an elongated pause. She chews on her lower lip, her tell for being nervous.

“I am,” I say, the truth slipping from my mouth and slapping me in the face. Despite Bobbie Sue’s aversion to overtly adrenaline-inducing activities, I’ve fallen for the beautiful beautician.

I've been living with the misperception that my girlfriend should be a physical thrill seeker like me—someone more like Bonita. But if Bobbie Sue doesn't mind me getting together with the gang every now and then for these adventures, she doesn't have to do them with me. If I had to attend one of her scrapbooking sessions, I'd hate every minute. More proof that opposites can attract and can find common ground without having to share all activities. Maybe Mom wasn't far off when she suggested Bonita and I were too much alike. My well-meaning, albeit nosy, mother is going to fall out of her chair when I tell her that I'm dating a flea-market-stalking beautician, especially considering I used to refuse to spend more than fifteen seconds on any haircare rituals.

Staring at the woman standing across from me, I feel none of the attraction that I feel for Bobbie Sue. Was Bonita just a convenient girlfriend because we shared a Marine Corps background?

"I hope things work out with your new girl," Bonita says, all the previous bluster gone from her attitude. "Shall we go get a place in line? Sounds like Tiny's having a great time," she says with a chuckle.

The Marine's bellows echo across the water as I watch him sail hundreds of feet in the air with the blue ocean swells undulating beneath him.

There's not another boat in the area, so the revved-up engine noise vibrates off the water. This part of the Pacific coast is not as built-up, leaving it barren and wild. Aside from the vacationers at the resort, we've got this whole piece of coastline and ocean to ourselves. A perfect place to parasail without having to worry about novices getting in your path.

As we walk to the pier, I say, "You'll have to meet Bobbie Sue sometime. She runs the Dippity Doo Salon in Hudsonville," I add with genuine pride at my girlfriend's accomplishments.

Bonita halts her trek down the pier. "No kidding? My mom goes there every Saturday for a wash, curl, and blowout."

Since I've never been to the shop on a Saturday, Mrs. Harris and I have never crossed paths. That would have been an awkward encounter.

"Mom loves that salon, and she's hooked on those hair skinification products," Bonita adds.

I shake my head in amusement—Bobbie Sue's marketing prowess for those ridiculous products amazes the skeptic in me.

When we join the waiting line behind Sequoia, he arches an eyebrow and I worry whether the little tête-à-tête with Bonita might have given the others the wrong impression. Before I can say anything, Sam yells "Next!" and Sequoia trots off.

Bonita stands by Eagle Eyes at the head of the line, and they chat animatedly about the upcoming ride. This break from conversing with Bonita gives me a little time to process my confession about my interest in Bobbie Sue. Although I've been calling her my girlfriend for several weeks, up to now, I haven't contemplated our future together beyond finding the Belvedere 6000. *We do have a future together, don't we?*

~*~

Whew! I'm beat. Everyone in our group got two turns at parasailing, and I'm wiped out from the sun glaring in my eyes and the wind beating against my face. Usually the excitement of sailing through the air hundreds of feet above the ocean takes my mind off everything else. However, this time I missed not having Bobbie Sue perched on the sandy shore—her pink tennis shoes firmly planted on the ground—cheering me on. The thrills weren't quite as satisfying as in the past. Contrast this event to searching through the dusty flea markets. I don't dread those anymore; they've been surprisingly fun and entertaining. *Am I getting old, or have I lost my need for speed?*

I'm relieved when Sam suggests we all catch a quick bite at the seafood restaurant nearby, because I'm too tired to meet up with Bobbie Sue. I shoot my girlfriend a quick text letting her know.

We grab three tables, pushing them together. A waitress delivers a round of cold beers and we toast Sam for hosting the fun outing. We order our meals family style so we all can share. Heaping baskets of hushpuppies, French fries, and several varieties of fried seafood fill the table. Everyone tries something from the numerous containers, seeing who can make the funniest Marine jargon comment about the delicious seafood.

“Better than a field day!” Sequoia quips, holding up a jumbo fried shrimp dripping with cocktail sauce, then taking a big bite. The group emits a collective groan—the term is somewhat misleading. Rather than being a fun activity, a field day for a Marine means a day focused on cleaning one’s workspaces and living quarters prior to an inspection.

“I love these more than my poncho liner!” Tiny adds, snarfing down four hushpuppies in one bite. Marines revere this particular piece of field gear, especially in cold weather.

Not to be outdone, Eagle Eyes stabs a large hunk of fried cod and says, “This even beats out my salty cammies, and that’s saying a lot.” He was known for wearing a faded pair of cammies until the dye became so washed out you couldn’t tell the original camouflage color.

Silence eventually falls over the table as we focus on eating, quickly polishing off the meal. Bonita seems subdued, not joining in the fun banter, and I feel guilty at the thought that it was probably our conversation that put her in this mood.

The Colonel sneakily cleans out two baskets of fries.

“Aren’t you going to do one for Chesty?” I tease, pointing towards a third basket still containing a few of the fried potatoes.

“Negatory, Badger,” Colonel Benton grumbles, not rising to the challenge. The jargon refers to pushing yourself past your limits out of respect for Chesty Puller, the most decorated Marine in Marine Corps history.

“Thanks, Colonel!” Tiny says with a cocky grin, snagging the last of those fries. Containers sit at odd angles on the red-

checkered tablecloth, wherever someone left it after they emptied it. The waitress does a quick cleanup and leaves the bill. We all throw money on the table, and considering the denominations in the pile, our overworked waitress is going to collect a nice tip.

All in all, it's been an outstanding day. Even the confrontation with Bonita ended up being a positive thing, clearing the air between us and helping me face my true feelings for Bobbie Sue. Now what am I going to do about that?

Twenty-Two – The Competition

Bobbie Sue

We're never going to find the Belvedere 6000. The flea market target list—of those within driving distance—has been exhausted, and only one additional vendor knew what I was talking about when I asked about the chair.

Her response was, “Good luck finding one of those.”

My one find at the market, a bubblegum-pink hair washing station complete with matching chair, rattles in the bed of the truck behind me, strapped in with bungee cords and rope. It reminds me that this is another failed outing.

“I'm okay if we give up the hunt,” I say while Bruno's truck eats up the miles towards home.

“Are you sure?” Bruno asks.

I sigh. “It doesn't feel like we're making any progress. Maybe there aren't any more Belvederes in existence.”

He doesn't comment, and silence falls over the cab. This is the most discouraged I've been during the month-long hunt. While it's been fun going on these outings with Bruno and we've gotten to know each other much better, I wonder if we should try doing some other activities together. Something with a bit more excitement than a flea market. I'm not quite up for parasailing, but maybe one of those mini racetracks with bumper cars would be fun?

The miles roll on and the sound of the tires starts to lull me to sleep. “Shall we stop for dinner?” Bruno asks, jerking me awake.

“Sure,” I say, stifling a yawn.

He chuckles. “Are you sure you can stay awake?”

Sitting up straighter, I swivel towards him. Maybe if I don't watch the passing scenery, I won't fall asleep again. “Sorry! I'll order a cup of coffee during dinner, and I'll be fine.”

Yawn! Another one escapes before I can suppress it. Bruno just grins at me.

Thankfully we're entering the edge of a small town: stores and restaurants dot the side of the road as we slow down to drive through town.

"See anything that catches your eye?" Bruno asks.

I point at a blinking sign declaring *Best Tamales in the state!* "Are you up for Mexican?"

Nodding, he turns sharply into the lot, where there's only two other parked cars. A bicycle leans haphazardly against the building, and a dumpster out back overflows with garbage next to a rundown picnic table. As Bruno pulls into a parking spot, I say, "Maybe this isn't a good choice."

"Bobbie Sue, it's four o'clock and we're in a small town. How many people were you expecting to be here?"

"Um, more than two cars and a bicycle's worth?"

A long pause follows as we stare—more like glare—at each other. Bruno's been a good sport all day and apparently, he's starving, so I relent.

"Oh, all right! But if I get food poisoning, it's on you."

He grumbles something under his breath as we get out of the truck. The sidewalk is crumbling, and the front door squeaks loudly when Bruno pulls it open. I'm ready to turn around and run back to the vehicle when the aroma of spicy food hits my nostrils. *It smells divine!*

An older lady clad in a brightly colored skirt and billowy blouse greets us as soon as our feet hit the floor. "Welcome to Tico's! How many are in your party?"

Bruno and I exchange amused grins. "Just the two of us," he says.

"Would you prefer a table or a booth?" the friendly lady says in her lilting accent.

"A booth please," I reply, ensuring I'll have a place to set my purse.

We wander through the almost empty restaurant because the booths are at the far back. Two old men are feasting on chips and salsa at one table and a family of four are devouring tacos at another. So far, this is the extent of the Saturday night rush. I fleetingly wonder who rode the bicycle.

“Thank you,” we both say as the hostess points to a booth then leaves us with two menus. The red leather bench is cracked, but both the bench seat and tabletop are spotless.

“The food smells good,” I observe.

Bruno nods. “Even though my mom would call this a hole-in-the-wall, sometimes these are the best places.”

“Like a hidden gem.”

It sounds a lot like we’re trying to convince ourselves we’ve made a good choice by stopping here.

The hostess, who turns out to also be our waitress, comes back and takes our orders. She pushes the tamales, so we both get a tamale, taco, and enchilada plate.

“Raphael will be over shortly with chips and salsa,” she says as she saunters away. Before she’s three steps from our booth, a dark-haired teenager drops off the promised chips and salsa. *Ah, he must be the owner of the bicycle.*

We both dig in. Munching for several minutes, we eat half the basket before I say, “Don’t ruin your appetite.”

Bruno rolls his eyes. “Bobbie Sue, it’s going to take more than a few chips dipped in spicy sauce to fill me up.”

I giggle, ignoring my own advice and continuing to shovel in chips. “I’m surprisingly hungry,” I say between bites.

“Said Captain Obvious,” Bruno teases, nodding towards my hand hovering over the basket of chips.

Deciding that if I don’t slow down, I won’t be able to eat the plate of food I ordered, I take a leisurely sip of water, my eyes scanning around the restaurant. The front bell rings and in strolls a flaming redhead wearing lime green crop pants and a matching T-shirt, sporting an impressive bouffant hairdo and

excessive makeup which, at first glance, does hide her many wrinkles. She's accompanied by a gentleman with jet black hair—obviously a dye job.

Blinking at the pair, my jaw drops as recognition hits. “Kitty Wells?”

She swivels towards me, and a smile splits her overly made-up face. “Bobbie Sue! As I live and breathe!” Kitty replies in her southern drawl. She barrels over, tugging me into a hug. We laugh and squeal for a few moments while both our male companions look on with interested eyes.

“Kitty was my mom's friend!” I explain excitedly to Bruno. “She owns the Pamper and Shine Parlor over on Route 58. She sure gave my mom's shop a run for her money.” As I told Bruno on our first date, I come from a long line of beauticians, my mama and grandma both owned their own salon. Beauty and haircare runs in the family.

Bruno's eyes widen, and he politely shakes Kitty's and her male companion's hands. Kitty introduces the man as Bert Reynolds, explaining that they bonded over both having famous names.

“Do you care to join us?” I ask, hoping Bruno doesn't mind.

Making room for the pair, Bruno comes around and slides into the booth next to me while Kitty and Bert slide across from us. Our waitress dashes over, quickly taking their orders.

“So, what are you two doing in this area?” Kitty asks after the teenager deposits more chips and salsa.

“We went to the flea market in Riverton,” I reply.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” Bert asks.

I exchange a warning glance with Bruno, hoping he doesn't spill the beans. I doubt Kitty is searching for a Belvedere 6000, but it pays to be discreet.

“Just looking. What about you?”

Leaning in, Kitty murmurs while cupping her hand around her glossy red lips, “We were at the same market! Bert

and I are on the hunt for a rare salon chair. There's only two in existence," she whispers in dramatic fashion.

I feel Bruno's knee make contact with mine under the booth.

"Oh really? Are you having any luck?" Maybe I can wrangle some useful information from the pair.

"We've visited every flea market in a fifty-mile radius, but no luck," Bert says.

"The seller is very elusive. We're going to the Flea and Thrift next week where it's rumored that he'll be selling one of the chairs." Kitty's eyes go wide and she slaps a hand over her mouth as if she's just revealed something confidential. Well, actually, she has.

"Sweet thing, you suffer from loose lips," Bert admonishes, throwing Kitty a scowl.

As if shooing away a fly, Kitty waves and adds, "Forget I mentioned that."

Ignoring the odd exchange between the pair, my brain ruminates over this new information. The Flea and Thrift is the first market we went to, where we bumped into that grouchy old man. *Could it be . . . ?* This news comes at an opportune time because I was about ready to give up the search. You can bet your mohawk or mullet that with this new news, Bruno and I will be at the Flea and Thrift the minute the gates open next weekend.

The remainder of the meal passes pleasantly. Kitty and Bert keep us entertained with their flea market stories. The food turns out to be delicious, and I manage to eat every bite of my combo plate despite the number of chips I packed away.

Bruno gallantly pays the bill, giving him a high standing in Kitty and Bert's eyes.

"He's a keeper, honey. Your mom would approve," Kitty whispers in my ear while hugging me goodbye.

We wave to the pair as they walk towards a snazzy baby blue Cadillac convertible and we towards Bruno's truck. Once

enclosed inside Bruno's vehicle and Bert's car is out of sight, Bruno turns excitedly to me. "Our best lead yet!" he yells.

"Can you believe we just bumped into them? It's destiny!" I shout. A little voice inside my head whispers something about whether this was fate or just dumb luck and whether I should feel any guilt over stealing the lead. My obsession with obtaining the Belvedere quickly overrides any qualms about that. Mama always said, "all's fair in love and haircare," so I figure beating Kitty to the Belvedere counts.

Bruno leans over the console and plants an exuberant, albeit a little sloppy, kiss on my lips. Even though it's a quick brush, it still leaves me breathless.

Bruno's expression turns serious. "But we've got to be careful. They're our competition," he says.

"We're going to be the first people at the Flea and Thrift next Saturday!" I say. Grins spread across both our faces.

It feels like fate is finally on our side and we're going to find the elusive chair.

Twenty-Three – The Flea and Thrift

Bruno

Knowing we have competition in the search for the Belvedere rejuvenates our desire and urgency to find the chair. I'm up at oh-five-hundred on Saturday morning with a battle plan for our mission. Beat Kitty and Bert to the market, then swipe the chair from under their noses.

It's not that I didn't like the pair, but they both acted a bit fake, especially with Kitty's overdramatic disclosure about next weekend's flea market. Almost like she spilled the beans on purpose, or she wanted us to think she was superior to us. Bobbie Sue seemed genuinely happy to see Kitty, so I held my opinion to myself.

This time when I arrive at Bobbie Sue's place, she's waiting on the front porch. No dawdling around with muffins and coffee. No lost lip gloss. She has on her game face and is even wearing comfortable shoes.

"I can't wait to get to the market to see if Kitty and Bert's intel is correct!" Bobbie Sue says as she hops unassisted into my pickup. "We might find the Belvedere today!" she adds with an exaggerated fist pump.

Surprised at her zealous greeting, I say, "I thought you were friends with Kitty? Won't you feel guilty using her information to beat her to the chair?"

Bobbie Sue laughs. "Friendship doesn't trump finding the Belvedere."

Wow! She's serious about finding the vintage chair.

"Okay! Let's go find that chair," I say, echoing her enthusiasm.

As we roll down the road, Bobbie Sue goes into more details about her mom's friendship with Kitty. "Mama and Kitty both attended beauty school together. They were friendly rivals, I would call it. Each vying for top student, then both opening their own shops, then both being the first to offer additional services like nails and special occasion hairdos—

think weddings and prom. When one of them came up with a new idea, the other one copied it.”

“That doesn’t sound like friends to me,” I comment. “More like business competitors.”

Bobbie Sue shrugs. “Mama never said it, but I think Kitty was a thorn in her side. Despite that fact, Mama always acted polite and cordial towards Kitty. But I was never sure that the feeling was mutual.”

My mind spins with suspicions as to why we bumped into the pair. Was it merely coincidence or did Kitty want to feel out whether Bobbie Sue is also after the Belvedere? Did Kitty want to one-up Bobbie Sue, just like she always did Bobbie Sue’s mother? Or, does Kitty simply suffer from loose lips, as Bert suggested? I’m frustrated because the duo’s motivation escapes me.

A twinge of anxiety sets in, wondering if our strategy for today is foolproof. We’re planning to get to the market a few minutes before the gates open, so we’re one of the first people in. But what if Kitty and Bert still beat us to the chair?

“What if Kitty and Bert have an insider who helps them get to the chair first?” Bobbie Sue says, ominously echoing my thoughts.

“I’m encouraged by the fact that we’ve all been to this market before and none of us got the chair. Kitty and Bert don’t have any better shot at it than we do,” I say portraying a confidence I don’t really feel.

Nodding, Bobbie Sue stares out the passenger window, lost in her own thoughts as the miles roll by. I let her have peace and quiet, lost in my own consternation about obtaining the Belvedere.

The parking lot is still almost deserted when I pull in. Gravel crunches under my tires as my truck rolls to a stop.

“Look! That’s Bert’s Cadillac,” Bobbie Sue says in an urgent tone, pointing to a blue Cadillac with the ragtop down sitting at an odd angle in a parking spot near the front. There

can't be many of these unique convertibles still on the road, so it's a pretty good bet that is Bert's car.

"Hurry! Kitty and Bert are going to beat us to the chair." With those words, Bobbie Sue tumbles from the truck, and as soon as her feet hit the ground, she takes off running. I sprint to catch up to her.

"The gates don't open for five minutes," I shout in a breathless voice, but my statement has no effect on my companion's fast pace.

When we get to the still-closed gates, there's no sign of Kitty or Bert. Two white-haired men, a grandmotherly looking woman with a gangly teenager at her side, and three women toting large satchels are huddled in groups outside the locked entrance. They talk among themselves, ignoring us as we join them.

"Where are they?" Bobbie Sue hisses under her breath. "Those cheaters! They got in before the gates officially open."

A stout man carrying a massive ring of keys strolls up to the entrance. He jingles the keys, making a show of opening the padlock. Bobbie Sue taps her foot as we watch the production he's making out of unlocking the entrance. He tries one key, then the next, and I wonder if he's going to have to go through the entire ring to find the one that fits.

Why does he need so many keys when there's one padlock? I smirk, remembering all the abandoned keys sitting in my junk drawer that I have absolutely no idea what they open.

His delay gives me time to notice his outfit, which is a nondescript cotton shirt and blue jeans, except for an expensive pair of what looks like hand-tooled cowboy boots. *How does a guy like this afford a thousand-dollar pair of boots?*

What feels like eons later, he grins as the latest key he tries turns in the lock. He removes the padlock and chain from around the metal gate, the clanking sound echoing loudly around the grounds.

“Welcome! Enjoy your day!” he says, finally swinging the gate open with a flourish.

Bobbie Sue grabs my hand and takes off like a racehorse coming out of the starting gate. This woman can move when she wants to.

“They must have had insider help to get in early,” she whines, throwing a disgruntled look over her shoulder at the stout man—pocketing the huge ring of keys—as if he’s the guilty party. Her comment turns a lightbulb on in my brain, and the puzzle pieces slide together, explaining how he afforded those expensive boots.

We run past booths selling all sorts of eclectic items—ranging from homemade jams, wooden trivets in the shape of a cat, and cheesy ceramic Christmas figurines—making a beeline for the used furniture booth in the far back corner of the market.

The food vendors are just starting to prepare their offerings; the aroma of grease, sugar, and coffee hits my nostrils. On any other day I’d suggest we grab a dozen donut holes and coffee, instead Bobbie Sue drags me past the food court while my stomach growls in protests. *Maybe we can stop for donuts on the way out?*

When we arrive at our destination, Kitty and Bert are in a heated discussion with the old man we met on our last visit. I squeeze Bobbie Sue’s hand and tug her to a stop, wanting to catch every word of the conversation unfolding before us.

“We’ve finally found a Belvedere! Why isn’t the price negotiable?” Kitty huffs, with her hands on her hips and her bouffant hairdo looking a bit windblown. Her bright orange jumpsuit makes her look like an escaped convict.

“We want to purchase it for Kitty’s shop,” Bert adds in a soothing tone, his jet-black hair also a bit windswept. “Maybe you’ve heard of the prestigious Pamper and Shine Parlor over on Route 58?”

“Prestigious, my foot,” Bobbie Sue mutters at my side.

Chuckling at the comment, my eyes scan the booth, landing on the pink salon chair sitting in the farthest back row. *Is that the Belvedere 6000?*

Excitedly squeezing my hand as she spots the chair at the same time as I do, Bobbie Sue says, “That’s it.” She breathes the words in an awestruck voice, much like a groupie would sound over seeing their favorite rock star.

Squinting, I take in every detail of the chair. It really is impressive; from the distinctive rose color, to the brass-plated arm rests, to the hydraulic foot pedal. A true one-of-a-kind vintage chair.

The old man slowly rises from his seat near the cash register. “As I already told you, the price is nonnegotiable,” he rumbles, eyes shooting daggers at the pair.

My brows draw together. *Can’t Kitty and Bert afford the price that the old man is asking? Maybe we have a chance at winning the chair after all!*

“This is highway robbery!” Kitty exclaims, her voice rising several octaves.

Bert puts a restraining hand on Kitty’s forearm. “We’d love to purchase the chair,” he says. “How about two grand?”

With a quick intake of breath, Bobbie Sue’s eyes fly to mine. “Two grand?” she mouths. Her lips tip into a frown at the steep price. The threesome is so intent on their conversation, they don’t even notice we’re standing here. The loud bickering continues.

“I said the price isn’t negotiable,” the old man reiterates.

“We’re offering two grand,” Kitty screeches like a petulant child.

“I’m getting out my checkbook,” Bert says, making a show of getting the object out of his pocket.

With another paint-peeling glare, the old man replies, “Five grand. That’s the price. Period.”

Bobbie Sue flings me another shocked look and I nod, reluctantly agreeing with Kitty that the price is highway

robbery.

The old man's words get a new rise out of the redhead. "You'll never get a better offer than ours."

Bert continues to drone on about writing a check, while Kitty continues to berate the seller.

I lean in and whisper in Bobbie Sue's ear. "What price are you willing to pay?" Maybe we should hop into the fray with our own offer.

She turns distraught eyes towards mine. "I can't go over two grand either."

With his arms folded over his chest and a defiant set of his mouth, it's obvious that the old man isn't going to budge regarding the price for selling the chair. He says nothing further and simply resumes his seat behind the cash register. Grabbing the newspaper from beside the register, he unfolds it and starts reading.

I feel Bobbie Sue's breath against my neck. "He's one obstinate man," she comments. My thoughts spin, wondering if he's hiking up the price, not really wanting to sell to Kitty and Bert. *What if we'd gotten here first?*

Kitty looks like she's grinding her teeth as Bert writes out a check. "Here's your five grand," he says, reluctantly handing it to the old man. "We'll send a truck to get the chair later this afternoon."

The seller nods, accepting the check, then walks over to put a SOLD sign on the chair. Bobbie Sue makes a disappointed sound in the back of her throat, and I feel her shoulders sag.

After three steps, our competitors notice that we're standing here.

"So! You two are also on the trail for the Belvedere," Kitty says in an accusatory voice, no trace of the friendly woman we had dinner with at the tamales place.

I feel Bobbie Sue stiffen beside me, but we both remain silent.

“Sorry you lost out, honey!” Kitty says in a triumphant voice, not sounding the least bit sorry, then she marches off with Bert trailing behind her.

The old man glances our way, as if noticing us for the first time today. “I had to sell it to her. The market’s rule is first come, first serve,” he says. I think I hear a touch of remorse in his voice. “I honestly didn’t think they’d match my price,” he mutters.

He sure didn’t complain when Bert handed him the check. Was this all about money?

Bobbie Sue gives him a polite nod, accepting the sale without a word of censure. I hold my tongue, wanting to tell the old man off and that he just broke my girlfriend’s heart. She strolls away, dejection over losing out on the chair screaming from every pore.

“Why didn’t you ask him about the one remaining chair?” I ask once we’re out of earshot.

She gives me a sad shrug. “Maybe I’m not supposed to have the chair.”

Surprised by her defeated tone, I grab her hand and say, “I don’t believe that for a minute! How about we get some of those delicious-smelling donut holes and coffee, then we’ll go home and regroup.”

Bobbie Sue nods.

“If my math is correct, that chair was number seven. Since the old man is the only seller we’ve ever encountered who actually had a Belvedere, he must at least have an idea of where the last one is. Maybe he has it too, who knows. Let’s put a plan together for convincing him to tell you everything he knows and sell you the remaining chair if he has it.” Having Kitty and Bert beat us to the chair really stings. This makes me even more determined to obtain that final chair for Bobbie Sue.

Twenty-Four – Another Revelation

Bobbie Sue

The shop doorbells tinkle as my new customer ambles into the shop a few minutes before his appointment time. Several heads turn—a male under the age of seventy entering the salon is a rare sight. Lydia and Valentina scramble to be the one to greet the handsome newcomer. Val beats Lydia to the checkout desk, then flirts as she checks him in. Her smile slips a bit when she learns he's here for an appointment with me. However, she has no need to worry, I've got my Marine and I'm not looking for another one.

“Sam, come on back,” I say in greeting, gesturing for him to follow me to my chair. I perform the usual perfunctory activities of clasping a cape around his broad neck, pumping the chair to the correct height (it sticks as usual and I wish I had the Belvedere), and taking stock of his current haircut.

“Do you just want a trim? Or are you looking for a new style?” I ask.

“Bruno says you're the best, so I'm open to your suggestions,” Sam replies.

Eyeing his shaggy cut, I reply, “How about I take about an inch off the sides but leave some length on top?”

He nods. His hair smells clean, so there's no need for a full shampoo and wash. I spritz his locks with water and get to work. We chat about the weather, then Sam asks, “How did your nephew like the Ohtani baseball card?”

“That was a real winner! He framed it and has it on display in his bedroom.”

“Good man. That card will be worth a lot of money someday.”

Snipping away, I ask, “Did you and Bruno serve together, or how do you know each other?” Bruno called Sam a military buddy, but he didn't expound on the relationship other than they occasionally play poker together and do adrenaline-inducing activities like the parasailing event last week.

“Yep. We did a tour together in Afghanistan. Several of our old platoon members live around here, so I’m the one who holds poker night and plans outings. Since I own several adventure companies, I became activity chairman,” he says matter-of-factly.

Unpacking his statement, I wonder whether he owns the bungee jumping center. “Do you own Adrenaline Heights?” I ask.

“I do! Have you been there?”

“Yes, that was where Bruno took me on our first date.”

“Oh? Did you enjoy the jump?”

My snipping pauses, as I contemplate my response. “Actually, Bruno jumped while I watched from the ground.”

He barks out a laugh.

Not wanting to debate the merits of bungee jumping, I swiftly change the subject. “How many from your platoon live around here?”

“Well, the General, for one. I believe you know him because he also recommended your salon.”

The General has been a referral machine for me. I need to comp him with some more skinification haircare products.

Sam rattles on after a brief nod of encouragement from me. “Then there’s Bonita. She was a logistics specialist first class while we were stationed in Camp Dwyer in Afghanistan. Fraternalization isn’t allowed between enlisted team members, but she’s a civilian now, so Bonita dated Bruno, but kept it on the downlow.”

I almost drop my scissors. “Oh? How long did they date?”

Sam shrugs. “Maybe a couple years. I never knew why they broke up. Bonita still participates in activities sometimes. She was at the parasailing event last weekend.” His casual tone and his comment set off alarm bells in my head.

Bruno's ex-girlfriend participated in parasailing and he didn't mention it to me? I don't know whether to be peeved at this revelation or not. Surely it means nothing, but a twinge of doubt sets in knowing how much Bruno loves adrenaline-rush activities and how much I hate them. *Maybe he has more in common with the ex-girlfriend than he does with me?*

"Colonel Tom Benton, Clint Eagle, Forest Martin, and Luke Fieldstone usually attend poker night and all went parasailing. Do you know any of them?"

I shake my head, realizing suddenly how few of Bruno's friends I've been introduced to. Aside from the General and stumbling upon Sam at the flea market, we've not mingled with any of Bruno's buddies. Is that intentional or just happenstance?

Sam holds up his side of the conversation, oblivious to my inner turmoil, describing their upcoming jet ski and picnic at a nearby lake. "I'm sure Bruno is going to invite you. All the guys bring their girlfriends to this kind of thing," he says. "We grill burgers and brats, and everyone brings a dish to share. My girlfriend Tamara usually makes her famous German potato salad, and we'd love to have you bring one of your specialties. The ladies generally focus on desserts. I can have my girlfriend give you a jingle."

"I'll talk to Bruno first," I say, trying to act nonchalant about the fact that I know nothing about this outing.

"Of course," Sam says. "Tom also brings his ski boat, so if you prefer water skiing, we've got that covered."

After Sam leaves, I stew about everything I learned during that haircut. Sam is more of a gossip than my Aunt Clara.

Should I mention to Bruno that Sam casually spilled the beans about their group's upcoming picnic? Or would he prefer to spend the day with his ex? The warning bells inside my head blare: Bruno isn't going to invite me. That tells me a lot about my relationship with the Marine, doesn't it?

Twenty-Five – A Cold Shoulder

Bruno

Bobbie Sue slides into the seat across from me and I toss her a happy smile. She's been so busy at work; this is our first time to get together in over a week, meeting at this greasy-spoon diner for a late dinner. She looks a little tired, coming here directly from work—this is her day to close the shop. Her pink dress is wrinkled, but her hair is neatly combed, as usual. She grabs a menu from the holder at the back of the table and hides behind it.

Huh? No hello. No smile. No peck on the lips. Nothing.

Maybe I'm misreading the freeze out. In my cheeriest voice, I ask, "Did Sam come to your salon?" Bobbie Sue loves referrals, so I expect her to perk up, thanking me profusely for sending my buddy her way.

"He did, just today actually," she replies, her eyes never leaving the menu. Since we've been here a couple of times, she's familiar with their selections, so I find this behavior very odd.

"What did you two talk about?" I ask, grasping at straws as to the cause of her frostiness, unless . . . Sam's known to be a blabbermouth. Did he possibly mention me seeing my ex? My heartrate ticks up several notches.

She sighs loudly, placing the plastic-coated menu on the table in front of her with a brisk snap. "Oh, let's see . . . Your ex-girlfriend attending the parasailing event . . . The upcoming picnic that Sam invited me to but my boyfriend never even mentioned to me . . . Stuff like that." Her eyes shoot daggers at me as she calmly takes a sip of her ice water.

Oh no! Sam's loose lips got me into a boatload of trouble. I should have guessed.

Holding up a placating hand, I say, "I didn't mention seeing Bonita because it didn't mean anything, and I knew you'd misread the situation—"

“Bruno,” she blurts in a curt tone, cutting me off mid-sentence. “Not being completely transparent smacks of trying to hide something.”

My shirt collar suddenly feels tight under her intense gaze. I suppress the need to tug at it; instead I take a gulp from my water glass, my mind quickly forming explanations and apologies.

“What are you having?” a nasally voice asks, making both of us jump and me almost choke on the water. I cough several times while the waitress glances between Bobbie Sue and I, tapping her pen on a small pad clasped in her hand.

“I’ll have the Big Buddy cheeseburger, regular fries, and a Coke,” I nervously croak out, still trying to catch my breath from the water going down the wrong pipe. Falling back on my go-to meal, I add, “No mayo,” remembering that they slather their burgers here with the stuff.

Bobbie Sue shoots me another annoyed look; apparently my ordering first adding to her still-brewing snit over Sam’s disclosures—then says, “I’d like the chef salad. No croutons. Extra tomatoes. Exactly four black olives. And French dressing on the side please.”

My angry companion’s very specific order reminds me that I want extra pickles, but I hold my tongue lest I incur any more demerits. The server nods while she scribbles, then walks away. A pregnant silence falls over the table for several long beats.

I crumble first. “Bonita and I dated for a few years, but we’ve been broken up for months. The parasailing event is the first time I’ve seen her since our breakup. I realized that I have absolutely no feelings for her anymore.”

A crease forms between her brows, as she glares at me with narrow eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me? It really hurts to find out about this secondhand.”

She has a good point; my lack of communication skills is what got Bonita and I into trouble. “I apologize. It didn’t seem

important, but now I realize that was a bad assumption on my part.”

“And the picnic? Were you going to invite me?”

Now I’m between a rock and a hard place. I have to tell her the truth, even though in retrospect it sounds terrible. “Honestly, Bobbie Sue, I assumed you wouldn’t want to hang out with my Marine buddies while we water ski and swap deployment stories.” She frowns. “Again, I made a bad assumption.”

Picking up her purse, she slides to the edge of the booth. “Bruno, I don’t understand your logic. I could have met the other wives and girlfriends and hung out with them.” Blinking her eyes, she adds, “But you really don’t want me to meet your ex, do you?”

Is that why I didn’t invite Bobbie Sue to the picnic?

“Your silence says it all,” she says, hopping to her feet. “Maybe we should take a break. You obviously want to keep a part of your life separate from me and I don’t think that works for me.” With that, she turns on her heel and walks away.

My mind reels in shock as I sit here like a statue, unsure whether to run after her or let her go. Surely her anger will fade in a few days and then we can have a calm, levelheaded discussion.

Her heels click angrily on the tile floor, and I watch as she stops at the cashier, gets her salad in a takeout container, and splits.

Not more than a second later the waitress slides my plate onto the table. She plunks a bottle of ketchup down and says, “Is there anything else you need?”

I shake my head, but I want to yell, *Yes! I need a do-over with Bobbie Sue!*

What can I do to win her back?

Twenty-Six – Missing the Big Lug

Bobbie Sue

My anger dissipates as soon as I storm out of the diner. I overreacted. I should have stuck around to talk things out with Bruno.

Dang! All my insecurities—feelings of doubt and frustration—about our relationship boiled over, causing me to fly off the handle. I sit in my car for a full minute, hoping that Bruno will rush out of the restaurant after me. When he doesn't appear, I drive away. The big lug is probably enjoying his hamburger right now, and I'm going home with a cold salad.

After a restless night, I arrive at the Dippity Doo bleary eyed and dragging. Regret over the breakup sits in my gut and I can't even enjoy my usual two cups of morning coffee.

“Okay, what's up? You look like something the cat dragged in,” Priscilla says as she joins me in the break room. We've got a half hour before opening to get everything in order, but I can't seem to find any sense of urgency to move my butt from the seat at this tiny table.

“Humph,” I mutter, more of a noncommittal noise than a reply, my brain refusing to form actual words.

“Let me guess. You and Bruno had a fight. Did you break up?” she asks, staring at me over her coffee cup like a principal scolding a misbehaving student.

“How did you guess?” I say, holding onto my scowl for a little longer.

Her eyes widen. “Bobbie Sue, you wear your heart on your sleeve, and right now that heart is bleeding.” She reaches across the table and pats my arm. “Tell me what happened.”

The encouragement in her tone breaks through the wall holding back my emotions. My words tumble over themselves as they leave my throat in rapid-fire progression. “He saw his ex at that parasailing event and failed to mention it to me. His buddies are planning a picnic next weekend and he failed to

invite me. He wasn't going to mention any of this if his blabbermouth buddy hadn't told me."

I spout out Bruno's transgressions like a list of charges against a criminal, but they all end up sounding petty when I vocalize them to my friend. Blowing out a noisy breath, I wail, "I accused him of keeping part of his life separate from me when not more than a few weeks ago I told him I was okay with him getting together with his buddies without me!" Swiping a tissue from the box on the table, I dab my eyes and blow my nose rather loudly, sounding like a sick goose.

Priscilla sips her coffee as she waits patiently for me to collect myself. Three tissues later, my emotions are back in check. Sort of.

"Well, this thing with Bruno must be serious because I've never seen you this upset over any previous relationship breakup . . . Not even the poetry reading guy."

Not even my black mood can suppress the grin that her teasing tone evokes as it takes over my lips. The poetry reading guy was my biggest dating mistake and she knows it. "Please don't mention Edison and relationship in the same sentence."

She roars with laughter, then collects herself. "Seriously, is this breakup with Bruno final? Surely you can fix things. Just apologize and move on."

Priscilla approaches relationship obstacles much like a driver navigating speed bumps. Drive over them or drive around them but put them behind you as quickly as possible and get on down the road. I wish I could do that.

"Maybe we're simply not compatible. He's an adrenaline junkie and I'm a risk-adverse wimp," I say in a dejected voice, my shoulders slumping as I stare into my still-full coffee cup.

"I don't believe that for an instant," my friend says, with a snort. "Plus, what happened to the joint mission to obtain a Belvedere 6000? You both seemed to thrive on doing that."

Aside from Bruno, Priscilla is the only other person I shared my desire to get the elusive chair with. "That's another

miserable story. Kitty Wells beat us to the chair at the Flea and Thrift. She and her toupee-clad boyfriend swooped in before the gates opened and swiped the chair before we even had a chance. I'm not sure there's really another one to be had.”
Chair number eight could simply be a myth.

“Well, aren't you just a Downer Debbie today? Maybe Val and I should handle your clients so you don't run them off.”

Groaning, I say, “You're right! Let's get ready for our clients, we've got ten minutes before the doors open.” Plastering a smile on my face, I hop to my feet and stride to my station, determined to forget about Bruno and the Belvedere 6000. At least for today.

~*~

After a blowout for a new client and a walk-in haircut, Mrs. Noonan—Estella—shows up precisely on time for her standing appointment, looking dapper in her dress and heels. I don't think I've ever seen the woman wearing a pair of pants.

“Mrs. Noonan! Please come on back, I'm ready for you.” I extend my elbow and assist her to my station, leaving her walker in the waiting area.

Once she's settled into my stylist chair and pumped up to the height I can reach her head without stooping, my usual conversation starter pops into my head, but I resist asking her whether she wants to switch up her hairstyle. We've gone down that road enough times. “May I call you Estella?”

Chortling, she says, “Why, of course, dear! I'm not sure why I didn't suggest that sooner.” Her voice rings with delight and I kick myself for not being the one to suggest it earlier.

“Estella, your birthday party was lovely. It was so nice to meet all your friends and family.” I spritz her hair and pick up my scissors—this is her monthly trim appointment, straightforward and simple.

“I'm truly blessed,” she replies, striking a pang of sadness in my heart. Incredible how she has suffered the loss of both her daughter and her husband but doesn't dwell on that.

We chat about the delicious food provided by her neighbor Ash, all the fun gifts she received—the skinification hair products being a favorite—and seeing family members she hadn't seen in years.

“I had never met my great-niece's son Stewart. That was a highlight, for sure.” Before I can reply, she plows on. “How is your romance with the handsome Marine progressing? You two make such a cute couple.”

“Um, well, we're taking a break.”

“Oh no! What happened?”

Blinking back my emotions, I proceed to spill all the details, much like I did with Priscilla. Why don't I seem to have a filter anymore?

Mrs. Noonan—I mean Estella—reaches up over her shoulder to pat my hand. “My late husband and I had a rough patch one time. He hired a much younger woman as his secretary and I felt threatened, which was just silly. Hubert wasn't interested in the young lady, but I jumped to conclusions when I bumped into her at Hubert's office. Of course I knew he'd hired a new secretary, but what I didn't know was how young and attractive she was,” she says with a chuckle. “I overreacted. Did I really expect Hubert to provide a photo of her? No. But when I saw her, I felt like he omitted telling me that on purpose.”

“How did you get past the rough patch?”

She smiles. “I admitted my mistake after I stormed home and created a bit of a scene. Hubert even offered to move her to a different department. She and I ended up becoming friends, but she moved away a while back. We still exchange Christmas cards every year.” Her grin widens. “Making up with Hubert went well, I must say. Roberta was born nine months later.”

I blush at her unexpected TMI. This is a side of Estella that I've never seen before.

“Take the first step, dear. Admit you overreacted and make up with Bruno. I'm sure you won't regret it, and on your

fiftieth wedding anniversary, you won't even remember this happened."

Two friends giving the same advice shouldn't be ignored, should it? *How do I take the first step?* My mind swirls formulating a make-up plan that will take the Marine by surprise and knock his white crew socks off.

Twenty-Seven – Advice from Mom

Bruno

“When do I get to meet your new girlfriend,” Mom says without issuing a good morning or hello. Leave it to my mother to cut right to the chase.

“Good morning! Was that why you phoned? To interrogate me about Bobbie Sue?” I grumble. Just the mention of my possibly-ex-girlfriend’s name makes my heart hurt, especially when I think about the scene at the diner. I kick myself for not handling things better and for not stopping her from getting away.

“You’ve kept her a secret for far too long. I assume her shop is closed on Sunday. How about you bring her down for dinner then? Dad’s going to barbeque and I’m making my famous Marzetti dressing coleslaw. You know, we’re only a two-hour drive away.”

I’ve been a neglectful son ever since they moved to a retirement community in the southern part of the state, using the distance as an excuse not to visit. They’re busier than I am, filling their days playing pickleball, woodworking classes for Dad, and ceramics classes for Mom. In the year they’ve been there, Mom’s made me a cheesy Santa-shaped cookie jar and a spoon holder shaped like a football, neither of which I needed but gracefully accepted.

“We’re on a break,” I say, using the term made popular by *Friends*.

“Oh no! Why? What did you do, Bruno?”

Prickling at her assumption the breakup was my fault—although if I’m truthful, it was my fault—I reply, “We had a breakdown in communications.”

“That’s double-speak for you failed to communicate something and she got mad. Am I right?”

My sigh zips across the line as ear-splitting as an exhale through a bullhorn; there’s no way Mom didn’t hear that. “Maybe.”

Mom laughs. “Talk me through what happened.”

Usually every fiber of my being resists confiding in my mom, but this time the logjam bursts and words fly out of my mouth, almost without my permission. “I bumped into Bonita at that parasailing event and didn’t mention it to Bobbie Sue.”

A *tsk-tsk* hits my ear. “Not a wise choice, son. She viewed it as keeping something from her, right?”

“Right. But I didn’t intentionally not mention it to her. I just didn’t think it was important.”

“Full transparency is always the best road to follow,” Mom says, making me bristle. Mom and Dad have had difficult times in their relationship, so I don’t see why she thinks she’s a relationship expert. I open my mouth to vocalize those thoughts, then think better of it, and snap my mouth shut.

The pause doesn’t faze Mom, as she rambles on. “Dad and I learned that lesson after several mistakes. Do you remember when I joined that ladies bowling league and Mr. Brewster was on our team?”

That was just plain weird, I remember the situation very well. “He was always a couple cookies short of a dozen,” I say.

Chuckling, Mom says, “No matter how strange Dino was, your father didn’t take kindly to me bowling for half the season before he found out Dino was on our team. As if I had any interest in the man! The fact is, Dad thought I was meeting a bunch of women for bowling, and omitting the fact that we had a male on our team was an egregious error on my part. When Dad stopped by the bowling alley to drop off my bowling shoes, he flew off the handle, storming out with the shoes. I’ll never forget I had to bowl in those germ-infested alley shoes. Oddly enough, I bowled one of my highest scores ever that evening.”

I roll my eyes. Leave it to Mom to embellish the story with a bunch of trivial facts. “Don’t leave me hanging. What happened after you got home.”

“Oh, your father had cooled off a bit. I apologized, we talked things through, then made up. Your sister was born nine months later,” Mom says with a giggle.

Yuck! I didn't need to know that information. Like ever.

“TMI, Mom.”

“TMI? What's that?” she asks.

I wince. Knowing my mom, that explanation will take a while. “Never mind.”

“Go apologize to your gal and then bring her to dinner in a few weeks. We can't wait to meet her.”

Once the call ends, I slump down beside the island in my kitchen, staring at the phone. Did Mom just give me some advice that I'm going to follow?

While her story was a bit much, she has a point. Shaking my head in amusement, I ponder the next steps. Every good Marine needs a combat plan. What's a Bobbie Sue-worthy apology? I'll pick the General's brain for suggestions; I'm sure he'll have some brilliant ideas.

Twenty-Eight – Exactly Three Black Olives

Bobbie Sue

As the city lights sparkle like a thousand diamonds through a haze of rain, I see myself standing outside of Bruno’s fortress of a house, clutching a bouquet of pink carnations and rehearsing my apology speech for what feels like the hundredth time. A giant magenta and coral pink mastiff appears, growls, then fades into the mist. My subconscious balks at the image. Bruno doesn’t have a dog. *Am I dreaming?*

The thought vanishing like sand in an hourglass, I take a deep breath and rap my knuckles on the fuchsia door, bruising them in the process. The sound echoes throughout the house, making my heart race. After a moment that feels like an eternity, the door slowly swings open, revealing Bruno’s puzzled expression. His eye-popping hot pink polo shirt gives my heart a jolt.

“Bobbie Sue? What are you doing here?” he says in his rumbly voice, making goosebumps pop up on my skin.

“I . . . um, well, I was just passing by, and I thought I’d drop by to say hi. And, you know, I brought you these flowers,” I stammer, thrusting the bouquet toward him like a shield. I stumble over my words, my carefully prepared and practiced speech eluding me.

Bruno arches an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. “Just passing by? You live on the other side of town.”

“Yeah, well, I took a wrong turn, and here I am,” I say, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

An awkward silence, along with the flowers, hangs between us as we stand in the doorway. The cold air seeps in while my arm becomes numb. *Is he going to accept my peace offering or not?* Finally, I decide to take the plunge. “Listen, Bruno, there’s something I need to say. I’ve been thinking a lot about our last conversation, and I realized I made a mistake. A big one,” I admit, shifting from foot to foot.

Bruno crosses his arms over his massive chest, studying me with a combination of skepticism and curiosity. “Go on.”

”I should’ve never have walked out of the diner without talking things through. I mean, who breaks up with someone before they buy you dinner?” I say, my words coming out with just the perfect mixture of flirtatious and contrite. *At least I hope so.*

Bruno’s expression softens, and he chuckles. “Did you get exactly four black olives?” My brows crease at this unexpected question. “With the salad? I’ve been anxiously wondering about that for the past week.”

Understanding clicks and I grimace a little under Bruno’s teasing. I always make my orders so complicated, they’re rarely correct.

“There were three,” I reply in a flat voice. “Exactly three black olives. By the time I got home and discovered the shortage, it was too late.”

We both gaze at each other, then burst into laughter. The absurd discussion over black olives seeps into my consciousness. I roll over, punch the lumpy pillow, and focus on resuming the dream. I need to know how this turns out.

“I’ve been feeling like I need a do-over,” I blurt.

A hint of amusement plays on Bruno’s lips. “A do-over with the salad? You’re that keen on getting exactly four black olives?”

I smack him in the arm, his steel-like muscles making my hand sting. “No, silly! A do-over with us. I flew off the handle and made a mess of things, and I want to apologize and make it right,” I confess.

Bruno shakes his head, a smile breaking across his face. “Thank goodness we’re not still talking about olives.” He slowly removes the bouquet from my hand. “But, in terms of a Bobbie Sue–Bruno do-over, I’m in. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

And just like that, I fling myself into his arms, crushing those ridiculously pricy flowers I drove out of my way to

purchase. We kiss like we've been broken up for months rather than weeks as an Elton John tune—the name of which escapes me right now—plays quietly in the background. Relieved that he so readily accepted my apology, I'm ready to continue writing our own romantic comedy—one quirky chapter at a time . . .

My melodic ringtone splits the silence as it jarringly breaks through to my consciousness. I scan the screen, notice it's a spam call, and disgustedly toss the device back onto my nightstand, annoyed that it interrupted my lovely dream. Now if only my actual apology with Bruno goes this well.

Twenty-Nine – Sorry Seems to be the Darndest Word

Bruno

The rain pours down in sheets as I stand outside Bobbie Sue's front door, clutching a soggy bouquet of roses and wearing an outfit that is now more waterlogged than stylish. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that I'm about to embark on the grandest apology gesture the General or I could think of. Rapping my knuckles against the door, I ignore a trickle of water as it slides down my neck.

Awareness of my surroundings seeps into my consciousness. The little clapboard house is sporting a boring tan color, complete with dull green shutters, giving it a camouflage vibe. *Huh?* Did Bobbie Sue paint or am I at the wrong house? *Or is this a dream?* a small, easy-to-forget voice at the edge of waking whispers.

Relief floods my body when Bobbie Sue flings open the door, although my subconscious continues to nag me over the color of the house. Like a gnat, I swat away those concerns, squeezing my eyes tighter shut in order to block out the obviously absurd house image. *Maybe I only know how to dream in gray, black, or tan.*

Dressed as if I have just stepped out of an old Hollywood movie, complete with a trench coat and a fedora—both in tasteful shades of tan—I burst into song..

“What have I, um, something, something, gotta do?” I belt out the tune, but the words I've practiced a hundred times suddenly escape me, and I valiantly fill in the voids with placeholder words. *Why can't I think of something other than something?*

Embarrassment creeps up my neck, but I soldier on, continuing to croon off key. “What happens when lightning strikes me . . .” My voice trails off. *With how much it's raining, this could actually happen.*

Bobbie Sue's eyes widen in surprise, her expression shifting from confusion to amusement. “Bruno, what on earth

are you doing?”

I fall dramatically to one knee, splashing water everywhere. A cramp hits the moment my knee makes contact with the unforgiving concrete, and I belatedly wonder whether I'll be able to stand up on my own power. “Sorry seems to be the darndest word,” I sing loudly, then fling my hands out, almost hitting Bobbie Sue in the face with the flowers.

She deftly dodges the bouquet, laughing at the absurdity of the situation. “You're singing Elton John to apologize?” she squeals.

I nod, relieved she recognized the song after I butchered it so badly. Still on one knee, water dripping from my hair, I reply, “It's the sincerest form of apology, or so they say. Now, can we talk about how I messed up?”

Awkwardly assisting me to my feet—it takes two attempts before we're successful—Bobbie Sue ushers me inside, shaking her head but with a smile playing on her lips. “You're ridiculous, but fine. Let's talk.”

I hand her the flowers and remove my trench coat, which fortunately kept my suit dry, and we settle on the couch. I try to maintain some semblance of dignity, despite my sopping wet appearance and the puddle rapidly forming at my feet.

“Bobbie Sue, I want you to know that I messed up. I should've never omitted the fact that my ex attended the parasailing event. Not only that, but I should have invited you to the picnic, and I'm sorry . . . I figured a singing telegram would make my apology more memorable.”

Bobbie Sue chuckles, shaking her head. “Memorable is an understatement. But, Bruno, you don't have to go to such lengths to apologize. From now on, just be honest with me, and there'll be no need to apologize.”

I sigh. “I know, I know. Honesty is always the best policy. I just thought a bit of singing might spice up my apology. Can you find it in your heart to forgive this drenched Marine?”

She giggles and rolls her eyes playfully. “You're forgiven, Bruno, despite the horrible vocals. But let's not have

to say that darn word ever again. Open lines of communication at all times are all I'm asking for."

"Agree," I say with a brisk nod. "In the spirit of full disclosure, tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred I'm seeing a female physical therapist for my bum knee."

My no longer ex-girlfriend bops me on the head with the flowers, petals floating down onto my jacket and pants. *Maybe she should put those in some water?*

Our eyes lock, we laugh at the absurdity of the situation, and I can't help but think that maybe Elton John was onto something—sometimes, sorry does seem to be the hardest, darndest word. And I don't ever want to sing it, rap it, or say it again.

Notwithstanding my dreadful musical rendition, at least Bobbie Sue has forgiven me. In a living room soaked with rainwater and rose petals, our romantic comedy continues, one hilariously misguided gesture at a time . . .

The Addams Family theme song blares across the bedroom, startling me back to reality. Of course Mom would call in the middle of dreaming about my apology to Bobbie Sue. I let the call go to voicemail, annoyed at the interruption. Now if only my real apology goes this well, minus the rain.

Thirty – Coffee, Kisses, and Pink Ribbons

Bobbie Sue

Today's the day! After stewing—and dreaming in technicolor—about my apology to Bruno for far too long, I've decided to rip the Band-Aid off and just do it. The scenario has played over and over in my head, now it's time to execute it.

I don't know why I think bringing a bouquet to a Marine is the right thing to do, but that's what I did in my dream scenario, so I'm going with it. It's an unexpected gesture meant to surprise and delight. Plus, if he doesn't want the flowers, I'll take them home with me.

The parking lot at the neighborhood market is crowded for a Tuesday evening. The rain pelts down as I pull in beside an over-sized pickup, hoping it's gone when I return. I hate trying to see over a behemoth when I'm backing out, especially since my older sedan doesn't have one of those fancy backup cameras.

After I flip my taffy pink umbrella open and rush into the store, it's apparent that the majority of the shoppers are the gray-hair set, several of them zipping around on motorized carts. Is this a designated time for anyone over the age of seventy to shop for groceries?

Heading to the florist section, I quickly discard the idea of purchasing one of those already prepared cellophane-wrapped sprays. There are at least twenty matching bouquets and not a single pink flower in any of them. The inside joke won't be lost on Bruno when I hand him a bouquet of pink flowers, as I envision in my plan.

“May I help you?” a tall, lanky teenager, awkwardly lounging behind the counter, asks as I approach. A glass-front refrigerated case containing bins of flowers hums behind him.

“Yes, what kinds of pink flowers do you have?” I ask, standing on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder at the case.

He turns, staring at the flower bins, as if this is the first time anyone has inquired about pink flowers. “Um, how about those?” he says, pointing to a bin of pink carnations.

I guess knowing those are called carnations is above his pay grade. “Sure, I’ll take a dozen. Can you tie a pink ribbon around them and wrap them in cellophane?”

Bumbling around under the counter, he produces a spool of pink ribbon. When he unfurls several feet from the spool, it reveals that the ribbon is embossed with “It’s a Girl,” repeating over and over in white letters.

I arch an eyebrow. “Is that all you’ve got?”

He bends, rummaging again under the counter. A few seconds later he pops up holding a garish fuchsia ribbon sporting the words “Happy Mother’s Day.” His victory smile is short lived when I frown after reading the sentiment.

“I’m purchasing these for a man,” I explain.

“How about this one?” he asks, grabbing a roll of bright green ribbon adorned with four-leaf clovers.

“You don’t have any plain pink ribbon? With no words on it?”

The teen is a trooper as he sets spool after spool of ribbon on the counter. We spend the next five minutes unwinding each one, reading the message, and discarding the reel. There’s “Sorry for Your Loss,” “You’re a Great Boss,” and “Congratulations on the New Puppy.”

After a while, I start to giggle as each spool we read contains an even more inappropriate theme, with nothing even close to “I’m Sorry.” There’s “Happy Birthday,” “Good Luck in Your New Job,” and last but not least “Happy Graduation.” A spool of black ribbon is embossed with a skull and cross bones—don’t ask me what that one is for—and another baby blue ribbon sprinkled with tiny booties. There’s simply no plain pink ribbon to be found. *Who knew ribbon came in so many sentiments?*

“Let’s go with white,” I say, my shoulders slumping as I nod towards the spool we haven’t unwound yet.

“Are you sure?” the kid asks, sensing my disappointment.

“It’s just plain white, right?”

He nods. “Can’t the guy overlook the words?” he asks, picking up the “It’s a Girl” ribbon once again. His encouraging grin spurs me on.

“Okay! I’ll get the pink ribbon and hope he doesn’t bother to read it.”

We both laugh.

“It will take me a about five minutes to prepare, if you want to do some shopping while you wait.”

Nodding, I head off to the coffee aisle. We ran out of everyone’s favorite Pumpkin Spice ground coffee at the shop, so I’ll replenish our supply. As I turn the corner, I hear a familiar voice.

“Can you reach that one, dear?” she asks. “Fred loves his Highlander Grogg.”

I skid to a stop, sighing wistfully as I watch my hopefully-not-ex boyfriend retrieve a bag of ground coffee from the highest shelf. Mrs. Noonan grins when he hands her the bag. My lame attempt to hide behind the display of coffee filters fails, when the older lady looks up and spots me.

“Bobbie Sue! Look who I bumped into!” she chortles.

Bruno and I lock eyes. Time stands still and the world around us contracts, making me feel like we’re in our own coffee scented bubble. Without hesitation, we stride towards each other.

“I’m sorry!” “I’m sorry!” Our apologies overlap. He sweeps me into his arms, leans me back, and kisses me like he means it. *Wowza! This is even better than my dream.*

I hear a couple “awws” somewhere behind us as the kiss goes on and on. His lips meld perfectly with mine, the pent-up longing and passion from our weeks-long separation quickly flaring to life. This is much better than the silly apology I had planned, showing up at his house with flowers. Eventually, in what could be one minute or ten, reality of this very public

kiss hits, and we reluctantly break apart, the lip-lock leaving both of us breathless.

When the aisle, along with its brightly colored coffee packages, comes back into focus, Bruno slowly releases me, and my eyes land on a line of shoppers grinning at us. Mrs. Noonan smiles broadly, clasping hands with Fred Goetz. Gordy Higginbloom, standing beside the pair, calmly hands Fred what looks like a five-dollar bill. Several other faces I don't recognize wave at Bruno and me as they disperse to other parts of the store.

A blush slides across my face. Bruno keeps his arm around my shoulders, which I'm grateful for since I'm still a little unsteady on my feet after that heated kiss. He bids Estella and Fred goodbye, says a couple words to Gordy, then steers me off down the aisle.

My faculties return once we enter the main section of the store, where you can do self-checkout or have an associate scan your groceries for you.

"Oh! I have something I need to pick up," I say. Bruno adjusts our route as I nudge him towards the florist section.

Smiling the instant the teen sees me, he retrieves the neatly wrapped bouquet of pink carnations from the counter. His eyes hop between Bruno and me, a smirk forming on his pimply face. "Enjoy!" he says, handing over the flowers. "You can pay up front," he adds before I can get my wallet out of my purse.

Bruno reads the ribbon through the wrapper. "Who had a new baby?" he asks.

"No one," I say, striding over to the self-checkout to make my purchase. His brows draw together, but he follows and doesn't ask any other questions.

An older gentleman points at us then confers behind the back of his hand with his wife. They giggle as they scan their purchases. After completing my transaction, I grasp Bruno's hand, tugging him towards the exit before any other of our coffee aisle audience spots us.

“Where are you parked?” Bruno asks, his eyes scanning the vast parking lot.

“I’m over there,” I point.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

Thankfully the rain has turned into a soft drizzle, so I keep the umbrella in my purse. Bruno holds my hand, and it’s as if we’ve picked up our relationship right where we left off. A comfortable silence fills the air, along with the blaring of someone’s car alarm.

“What did Gordy say to you?” I ask, remembering that Gordy and Bruno exchanged words.

“Nothing, really,” Bruno hedges.

“Why did he hand Fred that money?”

Clearing his throat, Bruno says, “Um, well, they had a bet on the length of our kiss.”

“Really?” I squeak.

“Yep. Fred bet we’d kiss more than two minutes and apparently, we did.”

My jaw drops. “That was a longer-than-two-minute kiss?”

Bruno’s chest swells with pride. “I aim to please,” he jokes.

I swat him with the bouquet and then hand it to him. “These are for you,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says, confusion written on his face.

“I had this big apology scenario planned by bringing flowers to your house,” I explain.

Pointing to the pink ribbon, Bruno jokes, “And this was the message you wanted to convey?”

“They had a limited selection!” I huff. “It was that or a black ribbon with a skull and cross bones.”

“Glad you didn’t choose that one or I’d really be confused.” Chuckling, Bruno opens the door to his truck—

which is the behemoth parked in the slot beside mine. Since there's a million trucks like this one on the road, it never occurred to me it was Bruno's truck.

He leans in to get something from the front seat. "These are for you," he says as he swivels back to face me, his lips twitch when he hands me a bouquet of pink roses.

I bark out a laugh. "You bought me flowers?"

"I had an apology planned as well," Bruno replies. "Along with some terrible, off-key singing, but I'll spare your ears." Oddly I wonder whether he had an Elton John tune planned.

Pulling away the cellophane wrapper, I read the salmon-colored ribbon. "Are you trying to tell me something?" I ask between chuckles. *Where was this ribbon when the teen and I looked through all the spools? It's sort of pink.*

"The kid in the florist section thought that message might work," he quips.

Shaking my head in amusement, I say, "He was quite helpful, but how does this translate to 'I'm Sorry?'"

"How does 'It's a Girl' set the tone for an apology?" he jokes.

"I was going for pink," I say with a shrug.

Taking my hand, Bruno gazes into my eyes and says, "Look, Bobbie Sue, I apologize for not telling you about—"

I cut him off with a finger pressed to his lips. "We both made mistakes. How about we commit to open communications from now on?"

He nods. "So we're good? We're no longer on a break, right?"

"Right! We're back together," I say in a firm voice.

"In the spirit of full disclosure, tomorrow at oh-nine-hundred I'm seeing a *female* physical therapist for my bum knee."

Rolling my eyes, I say, “At oh-nine-hundred tomorrow, I’ll be cutting the General’s hair.”

We burst into laughter, drawing looks from a few of the shoppers loading groceries into their cars.

“Would you like to go for tacos? It’s Taco Tuesday at Jose’s,” Bruno says.

Leaning in, I plant a sloppy kiss on his lips. “I’d love that. I’ll follow you.”

As he steps into his truck, I say, “And thank you for the flowers!”

He grins. “Same!” he says, waving the bouquet in his hand.

On the drive to the restaurant, I glance at the gorgeous bouquet then laugh. The words “Sorry to Hear about your Operation” stare back at me. *They have a ribbon for that?* At least it sort-of captures Bruno’s sentiments. I can’t help but laugh.

Thirty-One – The Discovery

Bruno

We're back on the hunt for the Belvedere. I convinced Bobbie Sue not to give up on the search for the last chair. Our best lead seems to be the man at the Flea and Thrift, so we're driving there on this beautiful Saturday morning with hope in our hearts and an appetite for those specialty donuts and coffee available only at the market.

Bobbie Sue jogs out to my pickup the minute I pull into her driveway. She takes my breath away with her tight blue jeans, pink T-shirt, pink baseball cap, and matching pink sneakers.

"Good morning!" she says, leaning over the console to plant a kiss on my lips. As soon as our lips touch, we both become invested in the kiss, reminding me of our reunion kiss in the coffee aisle. In our exuberance, I knock off her baseball cap and it lands in my lap. We pull apart a little breathless and she giggles.

"I believe this is yours." I pick up the cap and hold it towards her with a twirl.

A saucy smile lights her lips and she fans her face. "Whew! We need to move along," she says. "You never know when nosy Mrs. Beedehorn will walk by."

Laughing, I back out of the driveway and head off down the street.

Bobbie Sue smooths her hair, then plops the cap on her head. "I did a little more internet research this morning and there's a new post," she says pulling a notebook from her oversized bag. Both items are, of course, pink.

Arching an eyebrow, I say, "And?"

"I told you about the previous post by Kitty bragging about getting the second-to-last chair. Right?"

I nod. As soon as Bobbie Sue told me about Kitty's post, I read it myself. The redheaded beautician made quite a spectacle in her post, including photos of the chair in her shop

—her sitting in it like a queen with a tiara and a smug look on her face. The post went on and on about the smooth hydraulic system, buttery soft rose-colored leather, and brass fastenings. She even suggested, in a most boastful tone, that she got the final chair and there are no more to be found.

“I didn’t believe Kitty’s rubbish about her chair being the final one in existence. Today’s post proved me correct!” Bobbie Sue says, a hint of excitement warms her voice.

My ears perk up at this news. “Tell me all the details,” I say, a bit of excitement leaking through my words.

Snickering, Bobbie Sue teases, “You’re even more invested in finding this chair than I am.”

“Hey, my girlfriend deserves that final chair,” I reply, all levity gone from my voice. “I’m serious. The last Belvedere 6000 belongs in the Dippity Doo.”

She reaches over and squeezes my forearm that’s resting on the console between us. “Ah, you’re so sweet, Bruno.”

My neck heats. I’m not used to hearing my name and sweet in the same sentence. “Please don’t say that when we join my buddies for rock climbing and a barbeque next weekend,” I reply with mock irritation. I was so pleased when Bobbie Sue readily agreed to join the event. She’s even bringing her mom’s special recipe dark-chocolate-and-caramel brownies. Whether I can coax her into doing any rock climbing is unclear, but I don’t care as long as she enjoys herself.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Marine! Wouldn’t want your buddies to know that you’re a real softie inside,” she jokes.

I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant even though my face heats as my blush deepens. Clearing my throat, I say, “Please go on about the post, don’t leave me hanging.”

She gives me a side-eye look and I expect her to tease me more, but instead she starts reading from the notebook in her hand.

“A Francine Worthington wrote the post. She was a friend and co-worker of Mr. Belvedere’s girlfriend. In her post she

claims that the original chair was installed in the girlfriend's shop and remains there today." Bobbie Sue pauses, blinking back tears. "Guess what Mr. Belvedere's girlfriend's name was," she says, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Is this the first time the girlfriend's name has been revealed?" My pitch rises, along with each word.

"Yes."

"Do we know her?" I ask, shock coursing through my body.

Bobbie Sue nods. "We know who she is." A tear slowly tracks down her cheek and plops onto the notebook. She absently wipes it off the paper with her thumb. "Roberta Noonan."

Even though Bobbie Sue says the words in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper, they bounce around the cab of my truck as if she shouted them through a bullhorn.

"What! No kidding?" I squeak, nearly steering the truck into the ditch. When the tires hit the gravel at the side of the road, I jerk it back onto the asphalt surface, at the same time easing off the accelerator. My mind swirls with this news, quickly formulating a new plan for how to find the chair.

"Our best lead has been under our nose the whole time, and we didn't know it," Bobbie Sue says distractedly.

"Should we turn around and go to Mrs. Noonan's house? Certainly, she must know what happened to the last chair," I say, still stunned at this piece of the puzzle. Keeping my eyes focused intently on the road, I look for a spot to pull off in case Bobbie Sue wants to turn around.

"We've come this far, so let's interrogate the old man at the flea market, as we planned. I can broach the subject with Mrs. Noonan at her hair appointment next week."

My brow creases. "I'm surprised you aren't more excited over the news. I'd think you would want to talk to Mrs. Noonan as soon as possible."

“I do and I don’t,” Bobbie Sue says, throwing me an uncharacteristically uncertain look. “Frankly, Bruno, I’ve been hesitant to ask Mrs. Noonan about her daughter, not sure whether I can hear that tragic story and deal with the emotions—hers and mine.” She pauses, lost in thought. “Maybe that isn’t a conversation to have at the Dippity Doo,” she adds.

In full agreement, I toss out a suggestion. “How about you bring lunch over to Mrs. Noonan next week so you can talk in private?”

“Great idea! Will you come with me?” Bobbie Sue turns pleading eyes my way, waiting for my response. I guess I’m in for a penny, in for a pound as the saying goes.

“Yes.” I won’t admit it, but I’m not sure whether I can deal with the emotions either.

~*~

Ignoring the tantalizing smell of fried dough as we pass by the food court on our trek to the back of the market, my stomach rumbles loudly.

“We’ll get some of those donuts you love as soon as we’ve talked to the old man,” Bobbie Sue assures me with a playful wink.

“Hey, you got me hooked on those things.”

She laughs. “Go ahead and blame me, but I didn’t hear you protest when I wanted to try them.”

Frowning, I mutter, “I usually avoid sweets.”

She stops, puts her hands on her hips, and says, “This from the guy who just had to taste test my mom’s brownies.”

My mouth flops open and closed like a dying fish, another protest drying up under my girlfriend’s intense glare. “Guilty,” I admit begrudgingly.

Grabbing my arm, she propels me forward. “Come on. The sooner we talk to the grouch, the sooner you can have those donuts.”

Matching her shorter stride, I ask, “Do you have your questions ready?” I’ve been pondering everything I want to ask the man and I’m certain Bobbie Sue has, too.

She holds up the notebook. “Yep. Written down so I don’t forget anything.”

A few minutes later, we reach the used furniture booth. As usual, no other buyers are milling about. I guess that’s why the market stuffed this booth at the furthest out corner of the property. The old man sits behind the cash register, hiding behind his newspaper, and doesn’t move a muscle as we walk up. Bobbie Sue clears her throat loudly and he reluctantly lowers the paper.

“Hello again!” Bobbie Sue says with a jaunty wave, a bright smile, and her cheeriest tone of voice.

The man scowls as if she asked to borrow money, or worse, his precious newspaper. His reaction puts her off her game plan for an instant, but she quickly recovers. “Since you aren’t busy, I was wondering if you could answer a few questions.”

He grunts. “Could get a rush at any time.”

She makes a point of looking around, but there’s no one within fifty feet of this booth. I stifle a laugh. “If that happens, we will, of course, suspend our conversation,” she replies brightly.

Folding the newspaper in half, he sets it on the counter, crosses his arms, and leans back in his chair, giving both of us a stony look. “Shoot.”

The grouch is a man of few words, that’s for sure. *Has he ever considered that his demeanor isn’t conducive for selling his used furniture?*

“Are you William Belvedere?” she asks, reading from her notebook. My eyes widen as this is the first time I’ve heard mention of the chair designer’s full name.

“No.”

“Do you know William Belvedere?” she says, not missing a beat.

“Yes, but I don’t see the point of this line of questioning.”

It sounds like I’m watching a made-for-TV courtroom drama. Bobbie Sue’s eyes narrow, she draws in a big breath, and continues.

“Sir, I’ve been on the hunt for a Belvedere 6000 for many years now. After I read the story and listened to the podcast, I was intrigued by the act of love shown by William Belvedere when he built that chair for his dying girlfriend.” Her words sound like she’s reading from a romance novel. I carefully watch the older man’s face, expecting him to bristle, but his expression remains neutral.

Bobbie Sue’s voice wobbles but then gains strength as she talks. “I’m sincere when I say that I will take marvelous care of that chair. It will fit perfectly into the décor at my beauty shop and will be a focal point for conversation as well as a seat for giving incredible haircuts,” she says with a teasing grin. “Wouldn’t you like another Bobbie to own the last one?”

My eyes grow wider. *How does she know Roberta’s nickname was Bobbie? Or was that a shot in the dark?*

The man’s expression softens after her impassioned speech. He blows out a loud breath. “I’m William’s brother, Charlie,” he says, extending his hand.

Bobbie Sue beams as they exchange handshakes. He barely tosses me a look and doesn’t offer his hand my direction. This is Bobbie Sue’s show, so I ignore the slight.

“It’s nice to meet you, Charlie. So, how do we find William? I’m hopeful he will sell me that final chair,” she says sweetly.

He swipes the notebook from Bobbie Sue’s hand and scribbles something down. “Here’s his address. He’s usually home, but it’s best to catch him on Friday afternoon. You can’t miss the place, it’s painted pink.”

I bark out a laugh while Bobbie Sue's shoulder's shake.
We swap amused grins.

Pink? What are the odds?

Bobbie Sue scans whatever is written in the notebook,
then nods. "Thank you."

As we start to stroll away, the man shouts, "Tell him your
name is Bobbie Sue right away before he evicts you from the
property with his shotgun."

My girlfriend and I exchange alarmed looks, but then the
older man laughs. "Don't worry, I'll warn William you're
coming."

That makes me feel so much better.

Thirty-Two – The Starlight Beauty Salon

Bobbie Sue

Now that Charlie has given us William's address, I'm not sure we need to ask Mrs. Noonan any questions. Is stirring up emotions about her daughter of any value at this point? Bruno convinces me it is, so here we are bringing Mrs. Noonan her favorite lunch of chicken and dumplings from Sonny's Diner.

"Come in!" Mrs. Noonan says the instant our feet hit her front porch. She's quick on her walker as she leads us into her kitchen—I jog and Bruno lengthens his stride to keep up. The 1990s fixtures and modest white appliances gleam, everything spotless from floors to ceiling. A tray of cookies sits cooling on the counter, my nose detecting the scent of cinnamon and ginger.

"What do you want to drink?" she asks, directing us to set the food containers on the small round kitchen table tucked in the corner.

"I can pour drinks," I say grabbing the glasses off the table. "Shall we all have water?"

"Sure," Bruno replies.

"That's fine for now, but we'll have tea with our cookies," our host says.

I noticed the porcelain tea pot and cups sitting on a tray in the corner, as if we've come to have tea with the queen.

Once the water is poured, we sit, each of us focusing on the delicious meals inside the white Styrofoam containers. I ordered a chef salad and Bruno a hamburger and fries.

"It's so lovely to have someone to eat with!" Estella says as she tucks into her fried chicken. Her comment gives me a pang of guilt that I've never offered friendship outside of when I see her at the Dippity Doo.

"Those cookies sure smell good," Bruno says between bites. "What kind are they?"

“Ginger snaps. My mother’s recipe,” she says, smiling at the compliment.

“I love those!” I say.

Estella turns my way. “So did my daughter.”

Her comment throws cold water on my enjoyment of the meal because it reminds me why we’re here. Bruno gives me an almost imperceptible nod, indicating I should take the opening.

“Estella, may I ask you a few questions about Roberta?”

Estella’s eyes widen. “Of course, dear. What do you want to know?”

“Did you know about the chair that William built for her salon?”

The old lady’s face brightens. “Oh yes! It was such a lovely chair. Roberta loved everything about it. The shade of pink. The hydraulic system. The fancy brass armrests. William took all her ideas and incorporated them into his design. He went all out on that chair . . .” Her voice trails off, her smile replaced by a wistful expression.

“Bobbie Sue’s been following the podcast about the chair. She’s been trying to acquire one for her shop for several years,” Bruno chimes in.

“Podcast?” she asks.

“It’s a series of stories about the Belvedere 6000 that you can listen to. I try to catch every episode,” I reply.

Her brows draw together. “Like a radio show?”

I nod. “Yes, only you listen on your computer or cell phone.”

She shakes her head. “Well, I don’t know anything about such a thing. But I can tell you this, William built the chair as an act of love. He was head over heels for Roberta. Wanted to get married, but after Roberta received her diagnosis, she refused. I encouraged her to change her mind, but she didn’t.”

Mrs. Noonan's voice cracks as she stares at her remaining dumplings.

Sadness hits when Estella mentions her daughter's illness. Blinking back tears, I say, "His brother Charlie gave us William's address and we're going there tomorrow."

She nods. "Before the diagnosis, William did everything he could for Roberta to make her happy. He even painted their house pink! Said he personally hated the color, but he was determined to please Roberta." A look of sadness crosses Mrs. Noonan's wrinkled face. "He built a little building for her salon right behind the house. They outfitted that salon with all the latest fixtures, including that gorgeous chair. William said he didn't want Roberta to have to commute to her shop. I bet it was less than twenty steps from the back door . . ." Her voice trails off, and we're all lost in thought for a few beats, with me thinking about the star-crossed lovers.

Maybe I shouldn't take the chair from William. It's the last part of Roberta he has left.

Glancing between Bruno and me, Estella adds, "You two remind me of William and Roberta. The way you look at each other. And that scene at the market! *Wow!* Made my heart race just like one of those Hallmark movies."

Bruno grins and locks eyes with me, an unspoken question written on my face. *Does he also think we have a future together?*

"Life's too short. Don't wait to settle down together if you're in love. That's why Fred and I are getting married next week," Mrs. Noonan says as calmly as if she's describing the weather.

"Married?" I squeak, my mind reeling at this abrupt, unexpected announcement.

"So Fred finally popped the question?" Bruno asks with a chuckle. Obviously, he knows something I don't. *Maybe Fred confided in him?*

"Yes. It's a low-key affair at the justice of the peace," she replies, a blush warming her face.

“I’d love to fix your hair free of charge for the ceremony,” I say, hoping she’ll accept my offer.

Estella claps her hands. “Let’s try one of those new hairdos you’re always suggesting!”

I shake my head in amusement. I’ve suggested trying a new hairdo at every appointment without success, but she’s willing to try a new look for her wedding. Val is going to be thrilled when she finally wins that long-standing bet with Lydia.

“What day works best; I’ll get you on my calendar,” I say, staring at the salon scheduling app on my phone. Several seconds tick by as I enter the appointment. I want to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming. *Mrs. Noonan is getting married?*

After we wrap up lunch, I signal to Bruno that it’s time to leave. I need to get back to the salon, and I’m not sure there’s much more to learn from Estella about the chair.

Mrs. Noonan’s expression turns serious. “I’d love for you to have Roberta’s chair, but I’m not sure William will part with it. He turned into quite a recluse after we lost Roberta. Be careful, he might greet you with a shotgun.”

My eyes widen and I throw Bruno a worried look. Charlie and now Estella have both warned us about William. Is he a crazy old man, wallowing in his grief? What are we going to find when we get to his house?

~*~

“Are you worried that William will actually greet us with a shotgun?” I ask, mostly in jest, as we approach William Belvedere’s house on Friday afternoon per Charlie’s recommendation. My heart rate ticks up a notch when I spy the bubblegum-pink structure at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Bruno shrugs. “I guess anything could happen.”

Surprised by his nonchalant attitude, I let him lead the way to the front door. My courage slips as we walk towards the porch littered with dry leaves and what appears to be geranium petals, although there’s only an empty flowerpot

sitting in the corner; it doesn't look like the porch has been swept in years.

The bell is shockingly loud as it reverberates inside the house. If William didn't have his shotgun ready, he will now. The inside door slowly swings open and a white-haired man peers at us through the screen door. Although there's no shotgun in sight, I hover behind Bruno.

"I don't want any," William rasps, then starts to shut the door in our face.

"Charlie suggested we come visit," Bruno says. "Bobbie Sue is interested in your last Belvedere 6000." When he says my name, Bruno draws me forward, and the old man scans me from head to toe, a look resembling a scowl and a hint of curiosity on his wrinkled face.

"You're Bobbie Sue?" he asks, his voice sounding like sandpaper rubbing against wood.

Plastering on a confident smile that hides my nervousness, I say, "I am. It's nice to meet you Mr. Belvedere."

He doesn't move a muscle, but he also doesn't slam the door, so I keep on talking.

"I own the Dippity Doo Salon on Fifth and Main in Hudsonville. I'm fascinated with the salon chair you designed for Roberta—a marvel in engineering and design. Since pink is also my signature color, the chair will fit perfectly in my shop . . ." My voice trails off as I try to decipher his cryptic expression, but he remains an enigma. *What have I got to lose if I lay all my cards on the table?* Plunging ahead, I add, "I would love to purchase the last chair from you."

Several beats of awkward silence hang between our little group, while Bruno and I hold our breath, waiting for what's going to happen next. Bruno tosses me a squinty side-eye look and nudges me with his elbow, but I'm at a loss on to how to proceed. I feel as if the decision whether William will sell me the chair hangs in the balance, and I don't dare utter another

word in case I say the wrong thing, but my jaw loosens and my lips move of their own volition.

“Mrs. Noonan is one of my clients.”

William’s expression softens slightly. “Estella is a fine lady.” His eyes dart between Bruno and I, then he motions his hand in the direction of the back yard. “I might as well show you the chair since you came all this way.”

He shuffles out the door and leads us at a painfully slow pace along a little stone walkway that turns the corner and meanders through some trees, ending at a tiny quaint structure no larger than a shed. It’s painted the same shade of pink as the house, with white shutters and two flower boxes—devoid of any plants—hanging below the windowsills. A white sign hangs over the door and cursive pink letters spell out “Starlight Beauty Salon” in faded peeling paint. William pulls a key from his pocket, turns the lock, swipes away several cobwebs, and opens the door with a loud creak.

My breath catches after we walk inside. Beauty shop instruments and apparatus are positioned such that it looks as if the salon owner was called away and will return in a few minutes, everything frozen in a decade-old time warp, a fine layer of dust coating all surfaces. Scissors lay neatly on the back counter, a bright pink cape hangs on a hook, and a pair of clippers are still plugged into an outlet—all ready for use at a moment’s notice. A jar of half-used Dippity-Do styling gel sits beside the scissors, along with a comb and a styling brush. If a client walked in, I would have all the tools of the trade ready at my fingertips.

But it’s the gorgeous salon chair that draws my interest. A focal point sitting in the middle of the cream-colored linoleum floor, the lustrous rose-colored leather and shiny brass accents sparkle in the sunlight, making the chair appear brand new. A pang of sadness hits, along with the realization that its intended owner might have had little, if any, opportunity to use the magnificent fixture.

“May I sit in the chair?” I ask, awe lacing my voice.

William’s head moves in an almost-imperceptible nod.

I sink into the butter-soft leather, the chair swiveling slightly under my weight. Just sitting in the engineering marvel causes goosebumps to form on my arms and tears to gather at the corner of my eyes. I blink furiously, holding back the emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. An unusual mixture of awe, jealousy, and sadness fills my heart.

What I'd give to have this chair in my salon! Yet at the same time, a little voice inside my head whispers that the chair needs to remain here, as a loving memorial to the owner, from the man who obviously loved her very much.

Several minutes tick by while I sit in the chair. Bruno examines the old-fashioned hair dryer—a bulky contraption with a large hood suspended above a chair. William ignores us, he's slouched on a folding chair, intent on reading a thirteen-year-old magazine featuring the marriage ceremony of William and Kate.

When the silence starts to feel awkward, I clear my throat, stand, and run my fingers along the brass armrests. My foot goes to the hydraulic pedal and I give it a few pumps, the chair rising smoothly and effortlessly to the new height. Even if someone as large as Bruno were sitting in the chair, I know it would ascend with very little effort on my part. Glancing at Mr. Belvedere, I remain mute, wishing that he would break my conundrum and offer to sell me the chair.

"I simply can't part with it," William says, eyeing me over the magazine, responding to my unspoken question. His voice cracks and his lips wobble.

Walking over to where William is seated, I rest a gentle hand on his arm. "I know." Our eyes perform a wordless exchange, as if we can read each other's mind, sharing a sense of loss so profound it's indescribable. The chair suddenly becomes a symbol of a life and a love taken from this world far too soon. "Thank you for letting me see Roberta's chair."

A look of confusion mars Bruno's face as I turn to walk out the door. He opens his mouth, then snaps it shut, aware that this conversation is not his to control.

“If you ever want to sell Roberta’s beautiful chair, please contact me first,” I say, handing William one of my salon business cards that I always carry with me. He nods and accepts the tiny pink rectangle, slipping it into his shirt pocket.

We exit through the door as it emits another loud squeak in protest. The oddest impulse to purchase some WD-40 and oil the hinges pops into my mind, despite the fact that I know I won’t be coming here again. This is Roberta’s hallowed space, which will remain undisturbed until William gets over his grief, which may never happen. He may very well spend the rest of his lifetime mourning his lost love.

“You and Bobby would have been friends,” William says before we’re out of earshot.

I nod, giving him a wistful smile. “I wish I could have met her, but I feel like I know her after seeing her salon.” Before we turn the corner to walk around the house, I look back at the Starlight Beauty Salon one last time, etching it and the Belvedere 6000 into my memory.

Thirty-Three – Brownies and Rock Climbing

Bruno

The visit to William Belvedere proved to be even more emotional than our lunch with Mrs. Noonan. Bobbie Sue surprised me when she didn't push for William to sell her the chair. As she explained on our drive home, that salon is obviously a memorial to Roberta and should remain that way.

Now that we've reached the end of our hunt for the Belvedere 6000, what will propel me and Bobbie Sue forward? I'm a little nervous that our relationship was built around finding that chair. Today's rock-climbing event with my Marine buddies should tell me a lot about my future with Bobbie Sue.

She meets me at the front door with a pan of brownies and a smile. I haul her into my arms, planting a kiss on those luscious lips. As usual, the attraction flares between us, making me lose track of time. We kiss for what could be a minute or three. Bobbie Sue pulls back when the pan clasped in her hand clunks me in the side of my head.

Giggling, she says, "Oops! Sorry about that."

With the moment ruined, I rub my slightly bruised noggin and say, "We better get going so we don't miss the BBQ." Sam informed everyone that he's cooking first and then once lunch is settled, we're going to tackle a few of the climbing walls at his new indoor rock-climbing facility. The girlfriends and wives can participate in the climbing or simply gossip and observe (Sam's words not mine). I'm a little anxious that my ex will somehow spoil the outing for Bobbie Sue and me, but I don't mention that to my date.

"I wasn't sure what to wear," Bobbie Sue says. I take in her outfit consisting of leggings and a tight-fitting T-shirt—both pink, of course. "Priscilla suggested I go to Bob's Sporting Goods where I found this outfit, and the lady at the store assured me that it will be fine for indoor rock-climbing."

“You’ll fit right in, and you look terrific, as always,” I reply. “But are you really going to try rock-climbing?” I ask, surprise evident in my voice. “You don’t have to. Plenty of the wives or girlfriends won’t be participating.”

She throws me a saucy wink. “I might have to give it a try. Let’s see how I feel after lunch.”

Knowing that Bobbie Sue prefers to keep her feet planted firmly on the ground, I say, “I’ll act as belay. You can try out the beginner wall, but only if you really want to give it a go.”

Her bright smile warms my heart. “I’d hate for this outfit to go to waste.”

Waggling my eyebrows, I say, “Believe me, the outfit isn’t going to waste.” She bonks me in the shoulder with the brownie pan, we both laugh.

~*~

Ascend Arena has only a handful of cars in the parking lot when we arrive. Sam’s reserved the entire facility for our group, including the outdoor picnic area and playground. A few of the guys have kids, and we can hear the squeals of delight from the little munchkins as they scramble on the plastic fort and ride the swings.

“This is really nice,” Bobbie Sue says, taking in the immaculate grounds. Sam’s already manning the grill, and some of the women are setting up the serving table. Tiny is assisting in bringing out the food from the kitchen, probably so he can do some early taste testing. Eagle Eyes, Sequoia, and Colonel Benton stand in a small group talking and drinking beer. Sam waves us over.

“I want you to meet my girlfriend, Tamara,” he says, waving over one of the women directing setup. A pretty blonde trots over, extending her hand to Bobbie Sue and then me.

“Nice to meet you! Don’t those look yummy,” she says, nodding towards the pan in Bobbie Sue’s hand.

“Those are world famous dark-chocolate-and-caramel brownies. I can personally attest that they are delicious,” I say.

Bobbie Sue chuckles. “They’re my mama’s secret recipe. He had to test several batches before deciding they’re delicious.”

Tamara laughs and shakes her head. “Typical.” The pair throw me an amused look then wander off as if they’ve always been best friends. I hear Tamara making introductions to the other women over by the serving table. Thankfully I don’t see my ex in the group.

“Bonita cancelled late yesterday afternoon. Said she had a conflict,” Sam says when I join him at the grill.

I feel the anxiety leach from my body. “Good news! I’ve been dreading all week introducing Bonita to Bobbie Sue.” Even though I don’t have any feelings for Bonita, just the thought of introducing her to my sweet girlfriend was giving me hives. No telling how the interaction would have gone, because Bonita is about as predictable as an earthquake.

“Well, the heat’s off, Marine. You can relax, enjoy the food, and then show off your climbing skills to your girlfriend,” Sam teases.

A part of me wants to show off, as Sam calls it. But another part of me just wants to chill with Bobbie Sue. Surprisingly, the potential adrenaline rush from scaling one of the advanced walls suddenly holds very little appeal. I’d love to help Bobbie Sue try out her climbing skills. That would be more satisfying than ringing a silly bell at the top of one of the difficult walls. *Have I put my adrenaline-seeking days behind me?* Right now, a visit to the Flea and Thrift sounds more interesting than scaling Sam’s V10.

~*~

After consuming the appetizing potluck lunch, we sit around a picnic table swapping memories. We’re all too full to do any climbing at the moment. Tamara’s potato salad was devoured after the first pass through the serving line—I regret not taking a bigger scoop. Most of the other side dishes contain only traces of what once filled them, except for the still-half-full vegetable tray sporting celery and carrot sticks. No doubt Sequoia will consume those before the end of the day.

Bobbie Sue's brownie pan sits empty among the other barren dessert containers. A partial piece of apple pie, missing most of the crust, and half of a chocolate chip cookie are the only remnants. As usual, after eating two hamburgers and three brats, Tiny packed away a whole plate dedicated to desserts. His sweet tooth is legendary.

"Hey, Badger," Sam says from his position at the head of the table, all eyes turning towards me. "Remember when you were bunking with Sequoia and you short-sheeted his bed?" Sam asks with a teasing glint. Considering Sequoia is over six-foot-five, it was quite the sight when he tried to get into bed that night. It took him a couple of tries before he figured out what was up.

I frown. "If I remember correctly, he got me back by raiding my footlocker where I had my stash of Mom's cookies," I grouse while the rest of the table laughs.

"Hey, you never shared those cookies with anyone! It was my way of getting even," Sequoia fires back.

I'm not sure a short-sheet bed justifies raiding a guy's cookie stash, but I let the comment slide. Bobbie Sue leans in and whispers, "You should have told your mom to add cayenne pepper to the next batch."

A laugh rumbles from my chest and my eyes go wide. "Remind me to never play a prank on you," I whisper back.

She shrugs. "Beauticians have other means. There's always temporary blue hair dye as a good retaliation technique." This is a side of Bobbie Sue I haven't seen before. I've underestimated her. She'd be able to keep up with any of my prank-playing Marine buddies.

"Okay, enough stories. How about we scale a few walls?" Sam says, motioning for whoever wants to join to follow him into the climbing center.

"Do you want to try the beginner wall?" I ask Bobbie Sue, expecting a firm refusal.

"You know, I do want to try it! Let's go."

My girlfriend amazes me again with her unexpected response. We join hands and follow Sam and several others. I'm going to stay on the ground this time, content to act as teacher, coach, and belay. The sugar rush from lunch cancels out my need for any adrenaline rush on the climbing wall.

Thirty-Four – A Color Other Than Pink

Bobbie Sue

"You're wearing blue?" Priscilla screeches as I waltz into the salon on Monday morning.

Glancing down at my dress, I shrug. "I wanted to try something new." In fact, my whole weekend was filled with trying something new. Meeting Bruno's Marine buddies, along with their wives and girlfriends. . . Successfully scaling the beginner's climbing wall. . . Purchasing this new baby blue sundress when I spotted it in the window at Macy's.

It's as if I've turned over a new leaf now that I've put the Belvedere 6000 behind me. While pink will always be my signature color, I don't have to wear it exclusively anymore.

"Well, knock me over with a styling brush," my friend says after filling her mug from the coffeepot in the breakroom and taking a seat at the tiny café table. "Got any more surprises up your sleeve?" she asks when I join her.

"I did some indoor rock-climbing with Bruno on Saturday."

She chokes on her sip of coffee. "No kidding?" she wheezes. "Are you going parasailing next?"

Should I try parasailing? Maybe someday. "I'm not sure I've conquered my dislike of heights enough for that yet."

"Are you doing these things to please Bruno or because you want to?"

Her words give me pause; my coffee cup stopping midway to my mouth. Mama used to always say, "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." By switching up my color choices, am I doing that?

After I take a sip, I contemplate the motivation behind my new behavior. "You know, I realized that life is too short to not try new things, including new colors." My visit to William's house and seeing how Roberta never got to use that gorgeous chair gave me a kick in the pants. Plus dating the Marine has

opened my eyes to how much more there is to experience if you're willing to explore new things.

“So what's next?” Priscilla asks with a grin.

I giggle. “I'm going to paint my living room canary yellow. Maybe swap one or two of those pink kitchen appliances for stainless steel.” I've even got my sights set on one of Charlie's salon chairs that I saw during our hunt for the Belvedere. It will make an interesting focal point in the shop. Yes, it's time to switch things up.

~*~

“You sure you want to go to Charlie's booth?” Bruno asks as we dawdle over cider donuts and coffee at the flea market food court, both of us hooked on the sweet treats. “Won't it just remind you that you didn't get the Belvedere?”

“I want to see if he still has that green salon chair. The one with the silver trimmings.”

Bruno chokes on his coffee, spewing his previous sip into the air. I lean back to avoid the spray. “No kidding? That is a beautiful chair, but it isn't pink.”

I swat his arm, his muscles feeling like steel under my fingertips. “That color is going to stand out in my shop—make a statement! It matches exactly the original color of vintage Extra Hold Dippity-Do styling gel. Everyone will want to get their hair done at the Dippity Doo in the Dippity-Do chair!”

He grunts. “Can't say I know what vintage Dippity-Do looks like, so I'll trust you on the color.”

I give him a playful wink then we wrap up our nutritional breakfast, depositing our trash in a nearby bin. As we walk towards the far back booth, Bruno says, “So you're over not getting the Belvedere? I thought you would be more disappointed after all those years of research and all those flea markets we went to hunting for it.”

“The chair is where it should be—in the Starlight Beauty Salon. William may come around and eventually sell it to me, but I don't have to have the last Belvedere. It belongs to Roberta.”

Bruno puts his arm around my shoulder and tugs me close to his side. “I wondered why you weren’t wearing all pink today. Is that also part of your new outlook?”

I chuckle, glancing down at my pink T-shirt sprinkled with yellow flowers. I had it tucked away in one of my drawers. Mom bought it for me one time as a joke. At the time, she teased me about branching out of my comfort zone. “I’ve decided to expand my color palette. Yesterday I wore a blue sundress to the shop.”

Bruno skids to a stop. “Really? I bet you caused a commotion with your employees and your customers!”

“I did! Guess what Gordy Higginbloom said,” I reply as we resume walking.

Bruno shakes his head. “What did the gentleman say?”

I try to emulate the expression Gordy had on his face, a look you’d see if you were called into the principal’s office. Wagging my index finger at Bruno, I say, “Young lady, it’s about time you wore something other than that Barbie color. Mrs. Noonan owes me five bucks!”

A laugh rumbles from Bruno’s chest. “Gordy and Estella had a bet on when you’d wear something other than pink?”

“Yep. Apparently, several clients had wagered on it. Priscilla was running a pool; you could bet on the date when they’d see me wearing another color.”

“Wow! Now I wish that I’d gotten in on the action.”

I roll my eyes. No telling what else Priscilla and my clients are wagering on. Probably when Bruno is going to pop the question, but I won’t mention that one. A few seconds later, we arrive at Charlie’s booth, so I drop the topic.

My eyes widen. A small crowd mills about at his used furniture booth today. Since we’ve never seen anyone else other than Kitty and Bert at the booth, this is a surprising sight. *Is he having a sale?*

“I think that’s a genuine Robertson 555,” a lady whispers to the man at her side.

He nods. “Sure looks like one.”

My eyes swivel to the piece of furniture that the couple are discussing. It looks average to me, a salon chair from the nineties, in that teal color which was so popular at the time.

Two white-haired men walk up to the chair, carefully inspecting it from headrest to footrest. The lady marches over with her companion in tow. “We were here first! Hands off!”

Bruno and I exchange amused looks. *Is an altercation going to happen at the used furniture booth?*

“You haven’t paid for it yet!” one of the men replies. He swipes the price tag then dashes off to the checkout counter where Charlie is calmly reading his newspaper.

A scuffle ensues between the woman and the man over the price tag. They collide with the cash register, then knock the newspaper out of Charlie’s hand, each one trying to get control of the small scrap of paper. As they wrestle over the price tag, Charlie grabs a whistle from his pocket and blows it. The shrill sound draws everyone’s attention from adjoining booths, plus it scares a flock of swallows from a nearby tree.

Two uniformed policemen run up, jumping into the fray. *The Flea and Thrift have an on-site police force?*

The lady grabs the price tag, ripping it in half. She dances around, wagging the paper in the man’s face. If she were in the NFL, she’d get a penalty for taunting. The man tries to make a final grab for her part of the tag, but a few seconds later the police separate the two combatants.

Charlie, with his glasses askew, watches the police escort both groups from the booth. “We’ll be back to get the Robertson! Save it for me!” the lady shouts, holding up her half of the tag.

The Belvedere brother finally notices Bruno and I hovering off to the side. He gives us a broad smile. “Well! That’s what an effective Facebook post will do! Generate excitement over another rare chair at the Flea and Thrift,” he says. *Ah, that explains the sudden interest. I must have missed that post.*

His eyes flit to mine. “Sorry William wouldn’t sell you the Belvedere,” he adds with a look of contrition.

I step forward. “That’s Roberta’s chair. I’d like to purchase the beauty over there.” Pointing to the vintage emerald chair glimmering in the sunlight, I say, “Can you ring me up that one?”

“Happy to. That’s a fine choice, Bobbie Sue. It’s an authentic Holstrom 450. They only made five of these chairs, so you’ve got yourself a rare find,” Charlie enthuses.

Bruno laughs. “Did you know it was a Holstrom 450?” he teases.

“I did,” I whisper behind my hand. “They have a podcast dedicated to this one as well.” Who knew that the vintage salon furniture business was so rife in mystery and suspense? The designer of the Holstrom 450 was a woman. She hasn’t been seen or heard from for twenty years. No one knows what happened to her.

“You’ll love the Holstrom. Don’t tell William, but it has a hydraulic system that rivals his Belvedere,” Charlie says after ringing up my purchase.

“Plus, it’s the perfect color! Dippity-Do green,” I add.

“I’ll pull the pickup around,” Bruno says to Charlie before we leave the booth. As we walk hand-in-hand towards the entrance, my heart hums a happy tune, excited about my purchase and how the chair is going to be a fabulous focal point in my salon.

Wonder if there was a betting pool on whether I’d obtain a Belvedere 6000?

Thirty-Five – A Remodel and a Shocking Revelation

Bobbie Sue

My staff and I gather in the break room the next morning, as I requested. Now that the Holstrom 450 is in my possession, I'm determined to remodel the salon, using the new chair as a focal point, as well as letting my employees express themselves with their own color selections.

“So, what's up?” Priscilla says before my butt hits the chair at the head of the table.

“Green is an excellent color on you,” Lydia adds while Val rolls her eyes at the obvious brown-nosing comment.

“Thank you,” I say, glancing down at the green V-neck T paired with black pants. A matching scarf with swirls of different shades of green dresses up the outfit while drawing out the color of my eyes. *Why haven't I worn green sooner?*

Blowing on my hot coffee, I carefully take a sip before launching into my prepared speech. “First, let me say how grateful I am to have all of you on the Dippity Doo staff. However, I've been a terrible boss and I want to change things immediately.”

The pink-clad threesome exchange confused, worried looks.

“You're a great boss, Bobbie Sue,” Lydia says as Priscilla and Val nod in agreement.

“I haven't allowed you to express yourself in the workplace. By insisting that you wear pink, every day, all day, I was wrong, and I'm sorry. From this point on, you can wear any color you want, and you can decorate your cubicle in the color of your choice.”

Lydia fist pumps the air and squeals. “Does this mean I can paint mine burnt orange?” I know this is her favorite color because she's an avid Texas Longhorns fan. Lydia even knows the name of that giant longhorn steer they run around the stadium. *Bert? Beau? Benji?*

“Yes. And you can order new styling capes in any color you desire.”

Val shakes her head as if she doesn't believe me. “What if I want to paint my cubicle puke yellow?”

“Fine,” I reply without blinking an eye.

Her brows crease. “How about lime green?” she adds.

I wince wondering how bad that will clash with the Holstrom green I plan to paint my cubicle and the reception area. “You can paint any color you want,” I reiterate, determined not to sway their choices.

“Mud brown?” Priscilla suggests with a smirk.

I nod. “That sounds lovely,” I quip, suppressing a grin.

Val pops out of her chair, laying her hand on my forehead. “Do you have a fever?”

I push her hand away with a smile while the group animatedly discusses paint colors for the break area and restrooms. Thank goodness I don't hear any more talk about puke yellow or mud brown.

Holding up a hand to stem the chitchat, I say, “Ladies, I've decided that my life won't be ruled exclusively by pink anymore. Or by my obsession with the Belvedere 6000. I spent way too much time thinking that finding a Belvedere would make my life complete.” A boulder lifts from my chest that I've finally admitted the truth.

Coming into work this morning, my steps felt lighter. I feel pretty wearing this green outfit. I love my new green styling chair. Now, as long as I don't go overboard with the green, I feel like I've opened myself up to so many more possibilities, including falling in love with a color-challenged Marine.

The group stares back at me with wide eyes.

“When can we start making these changes?” Priscilla asks, coming to the conclusion that I'm serious and not pulling an early April fool's joke.

“I’m going to hire an interior designer to help us, just so our spaces blend and don’t clash.” My team nods. “She’s meeting with us tomorrow afternoon. You can each spend time with her, discuss your color selections, and we’ll put together a remodeling plan.”

My team exchanges excited looks. I drink my coffee listening to their animated chatter. The meeting adjourns when the bells above the door jingle, alerting us to our first customer of the day. Lydia and Val flit off down the hall, anxious to wrangle the new arrival.

Priscilla squeezes my shoulder on her way out of the room. “I’m proud of you, Bobbie Sue. But don’t forget who you are. I don’t think you can be happy without wearing pink every now and then,” she says with a wink.

My friend’s sage advice hits home. In my attempt to put the Belvedere 6000 behind me, am I also giving up on my own identity? The things that make me uniquely Bobbie Sue? Pink has been so much a part of my life; I shouldn’t toss it away entirely. Plus, I still love the color. There’s nothing wrong with pink.

~*~

“Hey, boss. There’s a lady here to see you,” Lydia says a few hours later. I glance up, knowing that I don’t have another customer on my schedule for the rest of the day. I’ve been hiding out in the break room, looking through online catalogs in preparation for placing an order for new styling capes. Who knew they come in so many colors? It’s mind boggling.

Wondering what person would stop by who Lydia doesn’t know, I say, “Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.” I make sure to save my shopping cart, then close my laptop.

Stealthily making my way down the hall, I peer around the corner, instantly spotting the flaming red hair. *What’s she doing here?* My last interaction with her was not a pleasant one. Plastering a fake smile on my face, I approach my guest.

“Kitty, I’m surprised to see you,” I say, forcing my hands to remain at my side, avoiding a handshake, contrary to my

polite upbringing.

“Uh, do you have a minute to talk? Somewhere private?”

My eyes narrow as I stare at her, not keen to have any sort of conversation with this woman. Upon closer inspection, Kitty doesn't look anything like the woman who stole the Belvedere 6000 from under my nose. Her face has aged—wrinkles and crow's feet are evident in the fluorescent lighting; her hair's bright color has faded, sprinkled with touches of gray; and her shoulders are in a permanent slump. An unexpected feeling hits me, a combination of remorse and regret that I may have thought too unkindly of her.

“Yes, please follow me.” We head down the hallway to the break room where I was sitting only a moments ago. “Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?”

She shakes her head, then takes a seat, her eyes barely making contact with mine. I join her, taking the chair across from where she's sitting. Silence fills the room as I wait for her to speak first.

“Bert left me for a younger woman,” she says, her words almost imperceptible, like a whisper.

My eyes go wide, but I reply automatically, “I'm sorry to hear that.” Then I wonder what Bert's leaving has to do with me.

Kitty clears her throat, finally looking up. “I can't continue to keep the Pamper and Shine open without his financial assistance.”

Her revelation shocks me to the core, my jaw unhinges, hanging open for a few seconds. From all her online postings, you'd think she had the most profitable salon in the state.

Several awkward beats hang between us, my mind still spinning as to why she came to see me.

“I'll sell the Belvedere 6000 to you for what I paid for it,” she says, as if this is such a magnanimous offer.

“What you paid was highway robbery. I won't pay that.”

Kitty blows out a loud breath. “How about two thousand? Will you buy it from me for two thousand?” Desperation leaks from her tone.

My heart skips a beat. I open my mouth to agree, then quickly snap it shut. *Hold on!* I’ve been obsessed with the Belvedere for so long, it’s a knee-jerk reaction to accept. But I don’t need the Belvedere now that I have the Holstrom. *What’s wrong with me that I’d even entertain her offer?*

“I don’t want to purchase the Belvedere for any price. I’m sorry, Kitty, but you’ve come to the wrong place.”

Her shoulders slump even further, as if she’s caving in on herself. “I’ll have to close the shop.”

“Surely you can find another buyer,” I enthuse positivity into my voice. “The Belvedere podcast still has a large following.”

“The chair doesn’t work properly. The hydraulic system is busted.”

My initial reaction is outrage that she just tried to sell me a bum chair. But she’s a desperate woman, so I give her some grace. “I know Mr. Belvedere’s address. He should be able to fix it for you.”

She puts her hands on her head and groans. “I don’t want the darn chair! My life’s been nothing but a series of hardships ever since I purchased it. The Belvedere 6000 is jinxed,” she bellows. My head reels at her confession, but I can’t get a word in as she continues, her voice rising as she picks up steam.

“I broke my wrist and couldn’t work . . . Then one of my employees quit . . . Then Bert left me . . . One disaster after another . . .” Her voice trails off, her shoulders shake, and she begins to sob with her head against the tabletop.

Feeling sympathy for her situation, I grab a tissue from the box on the counter, then hand it and the box to her. This is a multi-tissue ugly cry if ever I’ve seen one.

Resuming my seat, I quietly allow her to cry it out, which takes a minute or two. My mind spins, mulling over the

information Kitty just provided. I don't remember the podcast ever suggesting that the Belvedere was cursed.

"Did you know that none of the other chairs work either?" she says, then blows her nose, sounding like an injured elephant. Yanking several more Kleenex from the box, she blows and wipes her nose repeatedly, leaving a pile of crumbled tissues on the table. I refrain from going over to retrieve the trash can in the corner.

My brain finally catches up with the conversation thread. "None of the other chairs operate properly?" I squeak. *How does she know this?*

Nodding her head, she dabs a tissue at her red nose several more times. "I contacted the podcast to find out if they knew anything about the other chairs. They said there had been other complaints." Her eyes bore into mine. "Funny thing, they referred me to a man named Charlie Belvedere. He's the one who provides all the information for the production."

What?! Charlie? William's brother is behind the podcast?

I slump back in my chair, the wind knocked out of me. Pieces of the puzzle suddenly slide into place. Charlie's the one creating all the hype around the chair. He's the one starting rumors like the one that the last few chairs will only go to a *worthy* buyer. He's the one dropping hints about how to find the chair. It all feels like a setup, a concocted tale to sell off the chairs. Charlie's motives no longer seem altruistic but instead like they were driven by greed. Me, along with all the other podcast listeners, have been hoodwinked.

Selfishly, my romantic heart hopes William isn't also part of the scheme because his love story with Roberta would be tarnished. All this time, was I more enamored with the love story than with the chair itself?

We sit for an indeterminate amount of time, both staring off into space, before Kitty says, "I went back to the flea market to confront Charlie, but his booth was closed. Apparently, he's vanished. *Poof!* It's as if he never existed."

This is getting weirder and weirder. Frankly, I don't have the energy to track either brother down to demand an explanation. As long as the Holstrom chair's hydraulics work—and they do—I don't need to uncover anything else about the Belvederes—the chairs or the brothers.

“Kitty, why did you and Bert get to the flea market early that day? And how did you get in?” I ask. Why I feel compelled to ask these questions at this moment in time, I don't know. But their motives behind snatching the chair from me and how they got in before Bruno and I arrived has been eating at me for a long time.

She blinks a couple times, then clears her throat. “Bert saw the look you and your boyfriend exchanged when we met up with you at the Mexican place. Because Bert's a professional poker player, he reads body language real well. He said he'd bet money that you two were also looking for the chair. I just couldn't let you beat me to it.”

Dang! I guess our poker faces weren't as good as we thought they were. Knowing Kitty's competitive nature from when she knew my mom, I'm not surprised that she duped us in order to get to the chair first.

“You had to cheat to get in early,” I grouse, still miffed over her and Bert doing an end run. Then it hits me, and my anger evaporates—Kitty saved me from paying a lot of money for a broken chair. *Maybe I should be thanking her instead?*

She shrugs. “Bert knows the guy who runs the place. You probably saw the man. He carries around a boat load of keys.”

A letting-go-of-my-anger laugh bubbles out from my throat before I can stop it. I put my hand over my mouth and my eyes fly to Kitty's. She quirks her lips and we both start to laugh. Good old-fashioned bring-tears-to-your-eyes laughter.

Moments later, Kitty wipes the moisture from the corners of her eyes. “Oh my! I needed that laugh. When you look back at it, the whole situation is rather ridiculous, isn't it?”

I nod. “Yes. Very. Maybe we should stick to purchasing stuff off the internet and avoid flea markets from now on.”

That statement brings on another bout of laughter. Amazingly, during the last few minutes, I've bonded with this woman. She isn't the evil villain I once thought her to be. A flood of compassion hits.

"Kitty, if you close your shop, come work for me. But please leave the Belvedere behind."

She grins. "Thank you, Bobbie Sue. I just might do that. Your mama would be proud of you."

We both stand and exchange hugs. I guess we've become the "sisterhood of the Belvedere chair" or something like that.

After Kitty's gone, I open my laptop to place the order for the new styling capes. There isn't a pink one in the bunch.

Thirty-Six – Advice from The General

Bruno

Three Months Later

“Winston, here.” My old commanding officer answers on the first ring, his voice sounding like sandpaper. I wasn’t expecting such a prompt response, so my thoughts come out scrambled.

“Um ... er ... hello,” I say, then want to kick myself.

“Bruno?” he asks.

“Yes, sir,” I reply automatically.

“What’s the nature of your call, Marine? I don’t have time for useless chitchat,” he barks.

Since the General recently wooed his ex-wife back into what appears to be a thriving relationship, I thought he would be a great person to ask for advice, but his gruff reply puts me off.

“I was wondering what you think of those skinification hair products that Bobbie Sue sells at her shop? How are those working for you?”

There’s a couple beat pause, before he replies. “I love the stuff! My hair hasn’t been this luxurious since I was a baby.”

Huh? The uncharacteristic reply strikes my funny bone, and a laugh blurts from my lips.

“Gotcha!” the General cackles. We both laugh for a few beats, then the General says, “That’s not why you called, is it? What can I help you with, son?”

The laughter and his encouragement shake loose my thoughts, and I babble out a rambling explanation. “I want to ask Bobbie Sue to marry me, but I don’t know if we’ve been dating long enough. Mrs. Noonan has been dropping hints to me, but she’s a romantic, so I wanted to see what a no-nonsense man thought. Would this be too soon to pop the question? How creative do I need to be with the proposal? Do

women really expect a grand gesture, or would a simple get-down-on-one knee do it—”

“Hold up there, Marine!” he bellows, thankfully cutting off my diarrhea of the mouth. “If you think she’s the one, then what’s stopping you? Look at Estella and Fred. Both over ninety, but that didn’t stop them from heading to the altar.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. My silence spurs him to continue.

“Bobbie Sue’s a practical gal. I doubt she expects you to hire an airplane to fly a banner around town asking her to marry you or for you to put your proposal on a jumbotron at a ball game. Be yourself. Do it your way. If she’s in love with you, she’ll love whatever you come up with.”

Surprisingly, the vague advice eases my anxiety. I’ve been mulling over ideas for how to propose and suddenly they gel in my mind. I know exactly where and how to propose. I just need to decide when to do it.

“So you don’t think I’m jumping the gun?” I ask, hoping he helps me banish my last remaining doubt.

“No time like the present,” he replies.

Relief flows through me. “Thanks, Winston.”

“Of course, what are friends for?”

Up to this point, I always considered the General as my old commanding officer and nothing else. But he’s right, we’ve become friends.

“And, Bruno,” he says, “You should really try those skinification hair products. I wasn’t totally kidding about them.”

I grunt. One step at a time. I’m not sure I’m ready to branch out of my haircare comfort zone yet. “Duly noted,” I say then hang up.

My palms start to sweat and my heart rate escalates as I start to plan the Bobbie Sue proposal mission.

Thirty-Seven – Mission Pre-Op

Bruno

Two Days Later

Everything is still pink? Bobbie Sue said she was doing a salon remodel, but I thought she meant inside and out. I haven't been in for a haircut for three weeks, but the place looks exactly the same.

The huge sign sporting the name of the business positioned in a prominent location on the red brick storefront is still pink. . . Same as the awning over the front door. . . The lettering in a fancy-schmancy script scrawled on the front window advertising various offerings is. . . pink.

Oddly enough, I suddenly realize that I kind of love all the pink. *Maybe Bobbie Sue got cold feet on the remodel?*

I sit uncertainly in my massive black pickup truck idling in the parking lot, nervous over the next few minutes that will determine my future. Well, mine and Bobbie Sue's. I debated whether to do this here or at one of our homes. But our romance began at the Dippity Doo, so it's only fitting that our Happily Ever After begins here too.

An older gray-haired lady emerges from the shop. She spies me and stops, then starts waving at me as if I'm some long-lost relative. Her bright yellow dress is once again fit for a Sunday morning. Oddly, I wish she was wearing pink.

Every hair is in place, and her bouffant hairdo has a sheen to it. I personally know that she uses one of Bobbie Sue's natural styling products to give her hair such luster. The environmentally friendly products can withstand a tornado and won't light on fire if the older lady would get within five feet of a blowtorch.

She hobbles over to my idling truck as fast as her short legs and stout body allow. I roll my window down an inch or two.

"Is today the day?" she asks, excitement written on her wrinkled face.

I nod. “Yep. I’m just collecting my thoughts before I go inside.”

Throwing a fist pump that almost causes her to drop her purse, she says, “I knew it!” Laughing like a hyena, she dances a little jig beside my truck. “I beat that Gordy Higginbloom! He wagered on that date next week. I just knew you’d do something unexpected. You’re gonna shock the socks off Bobbie Sue.”

With one last chortle, she skips off to her late model sedan, tosses her purse inside, and drives away.

That date she’s referring to is Valentine’s Day, and I pondered on whether to succumb to tradition and do this on the most romantic day of the year, but that just didn’t feel right. Instead, I chose ninety-days to the day from when Bobbie Sue and I visited the Starlight Beauty Salon and my girlfriend finally sat in a Belvedere 6000. That day transformed her life in the most unexpected ways. She not only gave up her preoccupation with the chair, but she also gave up her obsession with all things pink. She’s been a changed person ever since. Last week she even went parasailing with me.

A noise draws me back to the present. A guy driving a cherry-red Ferrari squeals into the lot, ragtop down. He’s wearing sunglasses but when he hops out of the car, I wave. The guy is wearing a bright pink Hawaiian shirt. Leave it to Gordy to come wearing pink. He gives me a jaunty wave as he strolls into the salon flipping his keys in his hand, then disappears behind the tinted glass. He’s going to be disappointed when he loses the betting pool.

Taking a calming breath, I turn off the engine and jump out of my massive truck, knowing that Bobbie Sue is going to trim my hair then try to sell me some more of that fancy hair skinification shampoo and conditioner. Today’s the day I’m going to finally take up her offer and purchase some of that stuff.

My palms start to sweat as reality sets in. I’m planning on popping the question in between the haircut and the product

upsell.

Marching towards the entrance, I double-check my pocket for the ring and waltz inside, ready to execute my mission.

Thirty-Eight – Muscles and a Ring

Bobbie Sue

He marches into my salon like an army drill sergeant, but with an up-to-date hairstyle any beautician would admire. He's still got those set of pecs and a pair of biceps that a girl could seriously fall for. Well, this gal sure has fallen for them.

His high-and-tight cut looks a little shaggy, but I'll fix that. Those hair skinification products would transform his locks so they flow and glisten, if he'd only give them a try.. Maybe today will be the day I break through his haircare product resistance.

Lydia and Valentina spot the fine male specimen at the same time. Val nods at Lydia, deferring the client to her. Lydia would beat Val in any skirmish, so Val bows out without even a hip check.

“May I help you, honey?” Lydia asks, her voice dripping with as much sugar as my mama's sweet tea. “Are you here for a cut and a style?”

“Is Bobbie Sue around?” he asks.

The forty-something's face splits into a wide grin. “Yep, I'll go get her,” she says, striding towards the back hallway where I've been observing the proceedings undetected. I quickly pretend to be inspecting our latest shipment of botanical-infused styling gel.

“Hunky Marine up front for you,” Lydia says in a friendly voice. She gives me a playful wink, then wanders off to the break room, muttering something about checking on her date in some betting pool. I guess Priscilla is running a pool for when Mrs. Noonan's great-niece is going to have her baby.

“Thanks,” I say to her back. Surreptitiously adjusting my emerald-green uniform so it accentuates all my curves, I smooth down my new stylish layered cut and apply a quick glide of pumpkin and spice lip gloss from the stick hidden in my pocket. As Mama always says, “A girl needs to look nice for a gentleman caller”—or for my handsome boyfriend.

The man is focused on taking stock of our shampoos, conditioners, and styling products when I approach.

Up close the man is impressive. He's built like a tank, his massive chest stretching the limits of— My eyes go wide as saucers. His usual plain black T-shirt has been replaced with a bubblegum pink one, so bright you could see it from space. I blink a couple times at the unexpected sight.

Once I'm over the color shock, I take a moment to admire his confident demeanor that draws you in, the angle of his square jaw, the upright set of his wide shoulders, and his poised hip-width legs apart stance. He's the guy you can count on in an emergency. Someone who won't let you down when the going gets tough. He'll follow through on any commitment, big or small. I know this from his unwavering support during the hunt for the Belvedere 6000.

“Come on back, Marine,” I say in a flirty voice.

He follows me to my pride and joy. The Holstrom 450 is even better than I ever imagined, with a hydraulic system as smooth as silk, buttery soft green leather, and shiny silver arm- and footrests. A true marvel in salon chair engineering.

I've been following the podcast dedicated to the myth and mystery surrounding the Holstrom. Bruno and I are intrigued by the disappearance of the chair's designer and have been following tips from the podcast to try to locate her. Oddly enough, all clues lead to her living in Hudsonville. Maybe we'll be lucky enough to find her someday so I can tell her how impressed I am with the chair.

“I was surprised you didn't do any remodeling out front, but what you've done inside is truly spectacular,” Bruno says after taking a seat.

Clasping a royal purple cape around his neck, I effortlessly pump him up to the height I need for trimming his brown locks. “I decided to keep our signature look on the exterior. But once I got started in here, I couldn't stop.” I jut my chin towards the main room, with the new brightly colored salon chairs in ruby red, sapphire blue, and canary yellow sitting at each station. No other fixtures are emerald green. I

wanted the Holstrom to be the focal point and gleam in the center of the room, like the gem it is. The hair dryers and wash sink are still pink, but the interior designer did a terrific job of getting all the colors to coordinate and blend. The new design is bright and cheery, sporting a plethora of colors, and you no longer feel like you're in the middle of the Barbie movie set.

"You'd never know it's the same place," he comments as his eyes scan the room. "I like it, but I'm also glad you kept some of the pink."

Picking up my scissors, I spritz his hair and start to cut, taking a mere quarter inch off his sultry strands. "Well, thank you. My clients love the new design. I get compliments about it all the time."

Bruno sits back and relaxes as my scissors make their *snip, snip, snip* sound. We're both content to remain in companionable silence while I finish up his cut.

"All done!" I say a few minutes later. I unfurl the cape and brush off any hairs from his neck. Twirling the chair so he's facing me, I ask, "Are we going to the Flea and Thrift on Saturday?" Bruno's become an intense flea market shopper. In fact, all three of the new gemstone-colored salon chairs came from one of the used furniture booths that replaced Charlie's. That scoundrel skipped town, and no one has seen him for months.

Sadly, the Belvedere podcast shut down since they no longer have Charlie feeding it bogus information. However, William Belvedere appeared in the final episode, apologizing for the broken chairs and offering to fix them. My heart beats happily knowing his love for Roberta was genuine and, unlike Charlie, he didn't sell the seven chairs out of greed. In fact, he told the audience that Charlie had agreed to sell them at cost. Kitty's red hair probably flamed when she heard that.

Bruno stands, grabs my hips, and sits me in the Holstrom—faster than you can say Dippity Doo. He kneels, pulls a ring out of his pocket, and says, "Bobbie Sue I'm in love with you. Will you become my wife?"

My jaw drops in shock while my staff and clients start applauding.

“Dang! Who had today’s date?” Gordy bellows. Priscilla walks over to the older man and whispers something in his ear. His expression goes from disappointed to elated. “She’s never won a pool, so good for her,” he says.

Arching an eyebrow, Bruno wiggles his hand holding the ring. I snatch it from his fingers. He chuckles. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes! I love you too!” I say, leaping from the chair and into his arms. Our lips lock and we lose track of time as we kiss.

“Well, it’s about time,” a voice says off to the side.

I crack open an eyelid to see Mrs. Noonan beaming at us. She has the appointment after Bruno, and I forgot all about it.

“I placed my bet on Valentine’s Day, but leave it to the Marine to pop the question earlier,” she says, shaking her head with amusement.

“It’s three months to the day since Bobbie Sue sat in Roberta’s chair,” Bruno explains.

Heads nod around the room as if that’s explanation enough for the unusual proposal date.

Bruno plops down in the Holstrom, tugging me onto his lap. I hold up my ring finger, the diamonds sparkling in the sunlight. “This is a gorgeous ring,” I say.

“It was my grandmother’s,” Bruno replies.

Tears pop into my eyes because he gave me a family heirloom. I love vintage things, so the ring is perfect. Staring closer at my finger, I notice that the center diamond is a different color than the others. “It has a pink diamond!” I squeal, rotating my finger back and forth so the sunlight catches the rose-pink stone.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d like that or not, since you’ve moved on from your pink era.”

Leaning in, I plant a kiss on Bruno's cheek. "It's perfect. I still love pink, and I love the ring as much as I love you!" Snuggling into his chest, I gaze over the faces of my friends as they grin back at us. This group is so much more than simply employees and clients—we're also family.

The onlookers disperse to the other salon chairs around the room, and the hum of happy conversations and snipping scissors fills the room.

"Ours is a Dippity Doo romance, wouldn't you agree?" my fiancé says.

I couldn't agree more. "It is," I whisper as love for this man and my Dippity Doo family warms my heart.

THE END

Note to Readers

Dear Reader—thank you for reading Book 7 in my new Rom-Com series, **Too Busy for Love**—clean and wholesome romantic comedies filled with humor, quirky characters, and laugh-out-loud situations. As the saying goes, “laughter is the best medicine,” and we can all use more laughter in our lives.

The Color Pink: The *Barbie* movie inspired me to make Bobbie Sue’s color obsession be with the color pink. I don’t mean to malign the color, so if you love pink, please don’t be offended and know that my poking fun of Bobbie Sue’s preoccupation with pink is all in good Rom-Com fun. When I was a kid, my room was painted pink, so I’m one of the ranks who like pink (though not as much as Bobbie Sue).

I’m part of a seven-author Rom-Com series that’s launching in the fall of 2024. It’s going to be so much fun sharing all these books with you! Watch my newsletter for announcements.

Book 2 in the **Connor Brother’s Next Generation** series is in the works for spring/summer 2024. *Always in my Heart* is Faith Connor’s story. The daughter of Max and Maddie flits from boyfriend to boyfriend, not realizing that her dream guy has always been right under her nose. Will she come to her senses before Hudson gives up and moves on?

An author’s most gratifying reward for all our hard work is that you enjoy one of our books and find inspiration in the story. Let me know if that’s the case! I love hearing from my readers—Email me at leahb1959@gmail.com. Also, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. Just a few words can inspire another reader to take a chance on this book.

Please follow me on my website, Facebook, or Amazon author page or subscribe to my newsletter to be informed about upcoming book releases. Links to all of those are included in the “[About the Author](#)” chapter below.

Thank You and Happy Reading.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my amazing editor Bonnie McKnight. She's been with me every step of the way, including on this new series. Her suggestions and encouraging comments improved this story. She makes me a better writer and I truly appreciate her wisdom and guidance.

I'm thankful for all the wonderful people in my life. A little piece of each of you finds its way into my stories. And I'm especially grateful to my supportive husband who chuckles when he sees himself in one of my books.

As I mentioned in the Dedication, my grandmother owned a beauty salon. The Starlight Beauty Salon was in a little building behind her house. She had one of each of the usual beauty shop fixtures: A chair, much like the Belvedere 6000—hers also was pink but not as fancy . . . A salon hair-washing bowl . . . And one of those old-fashioned hairdryers that you stuck your head inside of and almost made you deaf from all the noise it made.

She lived in a very small town and drew clients from across the surrounding area, mostly farm wives who didn't want to drive into a bigger town to get their hair styled. Grandma Evadna was the inspiration for this book. Although she's no longer with us, the fond memories of having my haircut and styled in the Starlight Beauty Salon live on.

About the Author

Leah Busboom wanted to become an author since the day she learned how to read! She specializes in the clean & wholesome romance genre because she loves great stories with a happy ending. Her books are known for their heartwarming stories, intriguing characters, and hilarious real-life situations that make you want to laugh out loud.

Leah is an Amazon #1 bestselling author. Several of her books have won awards including a 2022 International Reader's Choice book award.

Leah currently lives in Colorado with her wonderful husband, her Blue Bomber bicycle, and a hundred bunny rabbits that roam free in the neighborhood.

Find out about Leah's latest book releases, sales, and giveaways.

- AuthorLeahBusboom.com
- [Newsletter Sign-up](#)
- [Leah Busboom Facebook Author Page](#)
- [Amazon Author Page](#)

Books by Leah Busboom: (all available on Amazon)

My hilarious new Rom-Com series has the perfect blend of laugh-out-loud scenes and heart-touching moments.

Too Busy for Love series: (Clean, laugh-out-loud Rom-Coms):

- [*Shopping for the Grump*](#) – Avery & Gavin's story (Book 1)
- [*Cooking for the CEO*](#) – Ash & Teddy's story (Book 2)
- [*Planning for the All-Star*](#) — Ari and Griff's story (Book 3)

- [*Fake Dating the Grumpy Bigshot*](#) – Libby and Brent’s story (Book 4)
- [*Crushing on the Boss*](#) – Maggie and Ethan’s story (Book 5)
- [*The Grinch and the Fruitcake*](#) – Breezie and Oliver’s story (Book 6)
- [*A Dippity Doo Romance*](#) – Bobbie Sue and Bruno’s story (Book 7)

Paradise Springs series: (Clean Christian romance with humor & heart)

If you loved my Potter’s House (Three) Christian romance books, my Paradise Springs series is a spin-off of those books, featuring your favorite characters, plus introducing new ones.

- [*The Melody of Joy*](#) – Juanita and Brenden’s story (Book 1)
- [*The Song of Grace*](#) – Amber and Mack’s story (Book 2)
- [*The Music of Love*](#) – Marci and Jared’s story (Book 3)
- [*The Chorus of Happiness*](#) – Christine and Reid’s story (Book 4)

The Potter’s House (Three) series: (Clean Christian romance - Stories of hope, redemption, and second chances)

- [*A Time for Faith*](#) – Rae & Noah’s story (Book 6)
- [*A Reason for Hope*](#) – Riley & Logan’s story (Book 13)
- [*The Courage for Love*](#) – Ellie & Zander’s story (Book 20)
- [*Potter’s House Series Box Set*](#) – All three books in a box set collection

Love at Christmas Inn series: (Holiday Christian romance)

- [*Snow Angel*](#) – Willow & Jace’s story
- [*Cupcake Angel*](#) – Harper & Chase’s story

- [*Glitter Angel*](#) — Lexi and Brady’s story

Connor Brothers Series: (Clean & Wholesome small-town romance)

Here’s the complete series so far:

- [*Finding You*](#)—Hailey and Quinn’s story (Book 1)
- [*Loving You*](#)—Maddie and Max’s story (Book 2)
- [*Wanting You*](#)—Daisy and Jacob’s story (Book 3)
- [*Needing You*](#)—Ashleigh and Brock’s story (Book 4)
- [*Mistletoe, Tinsel & You*](#)—Sylvie and Ford’s story (A Holiday Rom-Com, Book 5)
- [*Casseroles, Kisses & You*](#)—Bea and Nate’s story (A Sweet Rom-Com, Book 6)
- [*Rescue Me*](#)—Starr and Bryce’s story (Book 7)
- [*Inspire Me*](#)—Addison and Ian’s story (Book 8)
- [*Choose Me*](#)—Luci and Austin’s story (Book 9)
- [*Return to Me*](#) – Mary Sue and Cooper’s story (Book 10)
- [*The Holly Berry Dress & You*](#) – Amelia and Doug’s story (A Geeky Rom-Com, Book 11)
- [*Forever You*](#) – Laci, Matthew, and Jeremy’s story (Book 12) (2022 International Readers’ Favorite bronze medal winner). Also available in Audiobook.
- [*Connor Brothers Box Set*](#) — Books 1–4 in the series

Connor Brothers Next Generation (Clean & Wholesome small-town romance featuring the Connor Brothers kids)

- [*Always and Forever*](#) – Lilly and Noah’s story (Book 1)

Chance on Love Series Trilogy:

Note: These books are steamier than my other series. They contain mild, on-page intimacy.

- [*Second Chances*](#)—Matt and Samantha’s story (Book 1)
- [*Taking Chances*](#)—Danny and Paige’s story (Book 2) (Winner: 2018 Rocky Mountain Cover Art Contest —Sweetest Cover)
- [*Lasting Chances*](#)—Gabe and Megan’s story (Book 3)
- [*Chance on Love Series Boxed Set*](#) – Books 1–3 in Chance on Love series

Unlikely Catches Series Trilogy:

Note: These books are steamier than my other series. They contain mild, on-page intimacy.

- [*Catching Cash’s Heart*](#)—Holly and Cash’s story (Angel Wings & Fastballs) (Book 1)
- [*Stealing Alan’s Heart*](#)—Brianna and Alan’s story (Stilettoes & Spreadsheets) (Book 2)
- [*Winning Trey’s Heart*](#)—Abby and Trey’s story (Playboy & the Bookworm) (Book 3)
- [*Unwrapping Sam’s Heart*](#) – Lynn and Sam’s story (A Christmas Novella) (Prequel to Book 3)
- [*Melting Nick’s Heart*](#) – Bethany and Nick’s story (A Valentine’s Day Novella) (Sequel to Book 3)