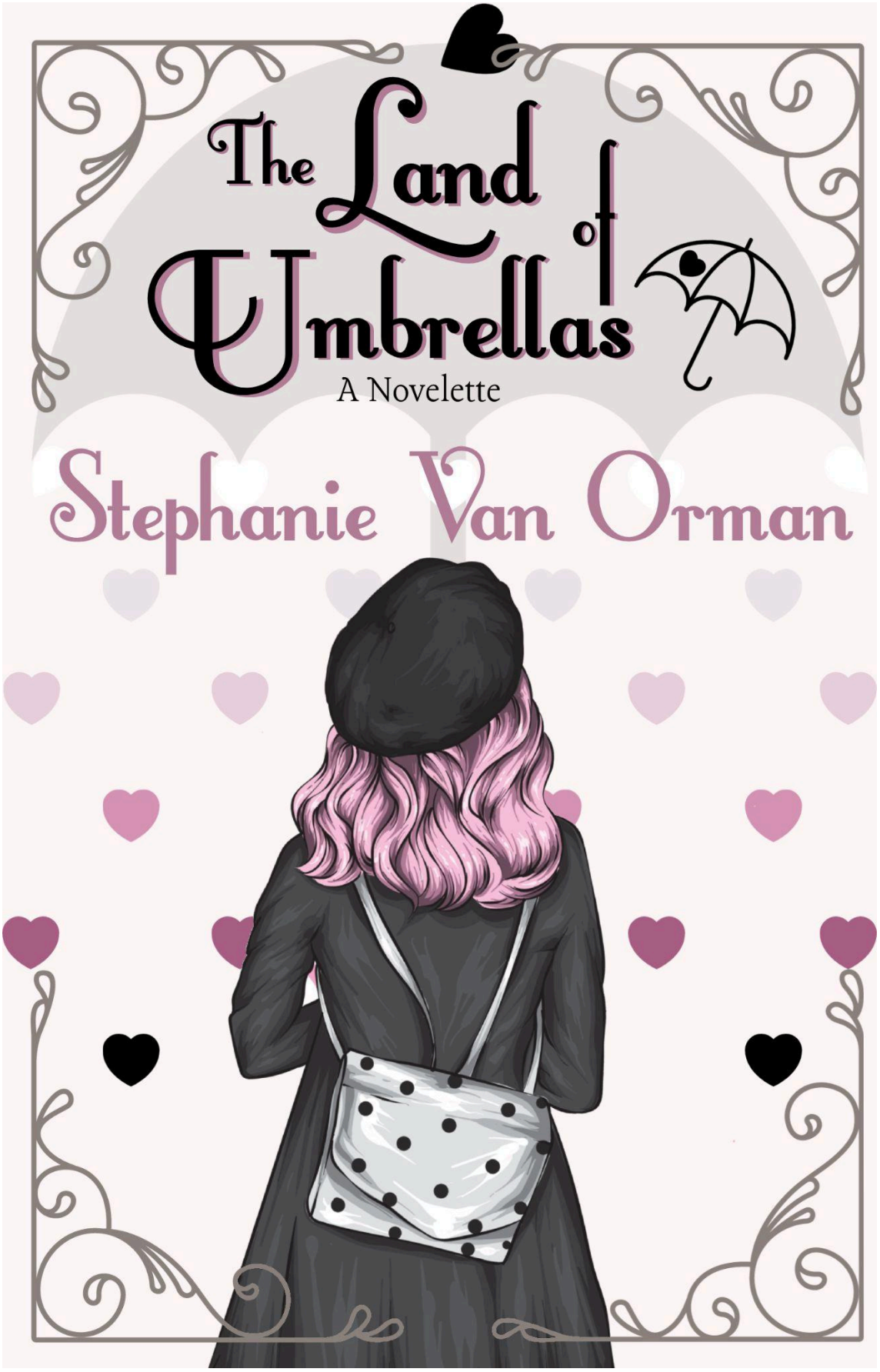
# The Land of Umbrellas

A Novelette

Stephanie Van Orman



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# The Land of Umbrellas

A novelette by
Stephanie Van Orman

Chapter One
If He Wraps His Car Around a Tree…

“I think we should break up,” Lindsay said to Oliver in the darkness. Her voice was little more than a cracked whisper that spoke more of her pain than what her words actually meant.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, his hand reaching for hers, though he couldn’t see her well from around his inflated airbag.

“I told you. You drank too much to drive,” she replied, refusing to answer his question. “And yes, I’m hurt. My airbag didn’t inflate. I hit my head. I’m bleeding and my legs are pinned between the seat and the dashboard!”

“Okay,” he said, collecting his wits. “Can you reach the lever that pulls the seat back?”

She reached down and found it. Tugging on it, it moved the seat and she felt blood flow into her legs again.

“It worked?” he questioned, still unable to see her.

“Yes. It worked.”

“Can you open your door?”

Lindsay pulled the lever on the door, but it didn’t move. “No.”

“What about the window? Can you open that to get out?”

“I am not opening the window,” she objected immediately. “It’s raining, and if I open it, I might not be able to close it. We might be stuck here for hours waiting for a tow truck.”

“Can you reach your phone?” he asked.

She groaned. “It doesn’t matter if I can or can’t. It’s out of power. I told you that before we left. I shouldn’t have let you drive.”

“I’d only had two,” he said, stiffly defending himself.

“Yeah. Two too many.”

Oliver stuttered some sort of apology, but Lindsay couldn’t hear it and even if she could, all she could think about was the string of men who had disappointed her before that moment and how she should have expected Oliver to do the same. When actually, she knew why she hadn’t pegged him for the same pig from a different litter as all the other men she knew. It was because something about Oliver always made her feel like she had come home. He was like the brother she’d never had or the cousin who found her in a crowded room and introduced her to everyone like she was a star.

The plan for her to come work at Oliver’s family hotel during the winter had been in motion since before she had agreed to be his girlfriend, and being his official girlfriend had been great until he wrapped his car around a tree. At the moment of impact, her first thought had been wondering if they would die.

When she saw that they hadn’t died, her next thought was that she needed to break up with him. Lindsay had never been one to postpone difficult jobs. Those were the first words out of her mouth after the crash.

Now, she had to do the thing victims sadly need to do sometimes. She turned to Oliver and asked him the question that would make her inhuman if she skipped it. “Are you hurt?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. His legs were not squashed between the wheel and the seat. His seat was further back to begin with. He’d hurt his wrist and his neck, he admitted in wheezy half breaths.

“Where’s your phone?” Lindsay asked him.

“It’s in my back pocket.”

She let out a huff of annoyed air. “And I’m supposed to put my hand down your pants to get it?”

“Only if you want to call a tow truck or an ambulance,” he replied crossly.

Lindsay had never heard him use that tone before. He was probably in more pain than he was admitting.

“I love it when you talk that way,” she chucked, breaking the tension.

“You never love anything,” he scoffed. “You told me as much the other night when I asked you out. You said you never fall in love.”

She unbuckled his seatbelt and put her hand in the back pocket of his pants. It was empty. “No. I said the opposite. I said I always fall in love. It just doesn’t stick. Something always happens to spoil love for me, but you were always so alluring when you smiled and played nice. I didn’t even know you could do a grouchy voice when you weren’t acting. It’s reassuring.” She felt behind him into his other pocket. It was also empty. “I thought you said it was in there.”

“I thought it was,” he said, peeking around the airbag.

“Charming,” she said drolly. “If it’s not there, then where do you think it is?”

“It’s probably in one of the front pockets,” he said quietly.

“And why can’t you get it?” Lindsay asked, almost at the end of her patience.

“My wrist hurts on that side and I can’t reach it with my left hand over the airbag,” he whined.

She patted his leg before diving into his pocket. “It’s there,” she said, reaching in with two fingers to tug it free.

When she turned the phone over to look at it, the screen was already lit up. Someone was calling, but the ringer was turned off so they didn’t hear it.

“You’re getting a call,” she said. “Gavin.”

“It’s my brother. Answer it, and hold it up to my ear.”

Lindsay answered the call. “Hello, you’ve reached Oliver Grantford's mobile phone. Please allow a moment for me to connect you,” she said, not having lost all of her spunk.

She held it up to Oliver’s ear while he spoke.

“Hey, Man. Yes, we were on our way up tonight. The girl? It’s Lindsay. Remember? She’s going to help with the hotel renovations since it’s always impossible to get people to come. Yes… that may be… I’m sure you’ll be able to find something for her to do… Yes, I was driving when you called. No, we’ve stopped just outside Victoria. We had a little accident. We should be back on the road in no time.” There was a long pause before Oliver finally got the chance to speak again. “Fine. You’re right. We had a big accident. I need to see a doctor and maybe she does too. Fine! Do that!”

The call abruptly ended and Oliver mushed his face into the airbag like he might suffocate himself.

“What’s going on?” Lindsay asked.

Muffled sounds came from the airbag and it was quite some time before Oliver took a breath. He admitted to her that his brother, Gavin, had been in Victoria for the evening and was coming to get them. “He says we can have the car towed in the morning.”

“Okay,” Lindsay said, opening the vanity mirror over her head to see what the damage was. The cut on her head had bled, but that didn’t mean it had spoiled her good looks. The car still had power and a light appeared to show her that she looked exactly like a zombie in a haunted house. She knew exactly what the zombies in haunted houses looked like. It had been her summer job two years in a row.

She hunted around for a tissue. “Don’t you at least have an old Tim Horton’s bag with a few napkins in it?”

“I cleaned the car for the drive,” he explained, his cheek still resting on the airbag.

She would have been more impressed that he’d cleaned his car if there had been no accident. “Shouldn’t that thing have deflated by now?”

“Probably,” he said, sounding desolate.

“Should we pop it?”

“No. I like it. It’s homey.”

“Homey?” she repeated.

“It’s a lot homier than Gavin is going to be when he gets here.”

“Is he going to be really mad?” she asked cautiously.

“Yup.”

Oliver didn’t offer any more of an explanation than that, and Lindsay didn’t ask for one. Instead, she sat and listened to the rain on the roof of the car. After a minute of that, she turned to him and said, “Don’t sleep. People with head injuries aren’t allowed to sleep.”

“And I was so looking forward to our first night sleeping together,” he said in a shallow monotone.

She laughed. “Our first night together is obviously a success if no one is sleeping.”

He laughed too. Then he turned and looked at her with the vanity light still on. “You look like a zombie.”

“So do you.”

“Do you know any good necrophilia jokes? That would be a good way to pass the time.”

Lindsay groaned. “What do you call it when two necrophiliacs go on a date?”

“A wake?” Oliver offered.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I asked without having a plan as to how to finish it. I thought you’d nail it without me having to come up with a punchline.”

“I have a head injury if that’s any excuse.”

“I’ll use that excuse too,” Lindsay said, using the sleeve of her shirt to blot at the blood on her face. It didn’t improve anything so she closed the mirror and turned out the light.

“Even though things started out badly,” he said gently. “The whole thing won’t be bad. We’re going to have a good time and we can practice our jokes.”

The last class they had taken together had been an improv class. Lindsay had loved doing it, but she felt Oliver was better at it. He always made her laugh so hard, she broke. It was all very unprofessional, a strong hint that an acting career was not in her future.

On the road, there had been headlights that passed from time to time, but nothing could have prepared Lindsay for the truck that pulled up behind them. It was massive. At first, she thought it was a tow truck, and then she thought it must be some sort of emergency vehicle, but did they have headlights shaped like parentheses? At any rate, why did they have their brights on?

“That’s Gavin,” Oliver said, trying to open his door with his left hand and failing at it.

Gavin opened the door for him, said something messy Lindsay couldn’t quite hear, deflated the airbag, and helped Oliver out. He had an umbrella and he escorted his brother around to the passenger side door of the truck before coming back to the wreck of a car to get Lindsay.

Lindsay couldn’t open her door, so she scooted across her seat and into the driver’s seat. The side-view mirror practically blinded her when Gavin came back to help her. He had a

flashlight in his hand and whited out her vision completely as he shone it in her face. She leaned down in the driver's seat, found the release for the trunk, and pulled it.

"What are you doing?" the man with the flashlight asked.

"Opening the trunk. My bag goes where I go."

"I'll get it," he said as he grasped her upper arm in his and lifted her to her feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Helping."

"You're hurting me!"

He let go and without the support, she suddenly found that her bruised legs didn't give her much to stand on and she fell, knees first, into the wet grass. He caught her again, but only so she didn't fall further. Dropping the umbrella, he put both arms around her and lifted her back onto her feet. Her head was swimming.

"You don't have to," she wheezed.

"I think I do." Gavin picked her up the rest of the way and carried her gingerly to a seat in the back of the oversized truck. He turned on the cabin lights and looked at her, but all Lindsay could do was blink at the light and cover her face with her hand. "I think you're right about the hospital," he said to Oliver. "That will have to be our first stop.  I'll get your bags."

Chapter Two
If He Gives You the Bed While He Takes the Couch…

The emergency room in rural Vancouver Island was much less busy than the emergency room in Metro Vancouver. Exactly three people were sitting in the waiting room. They were clearly all together and only one of them was waiting for medical attention. Lindsay had never spoken to a triage nurse so quickly in her life. They didn't even let Oliver sit down in the waiting room before they hauled him to the back and ordered X-rays for him.

Lindsay was left alone with Gavin, who looked like a yeti that had evolved just far enough to pass for a human. He was very hairy under his toque. His taffy-colored hair was loose and mingled with his beard which was long enough to hit the top button on his shirt. That piece of clothing was made of green plaid and layered under a jean jacket. His hands were rough and he said so little, it made him seem more like a yeti.

Lindsay was spared from having to make conversation with him immediately as a doctor showed up to take a look at her. Other than the scratch in her eyebrow, which had made her bleed like a pig, she was not concussed, nor did she need stitches. She was given a chair next to Oliver's bed while a nurse went to fetch a second chair for Gavin.

It was nice behind the curtain in the emergency room. It was past eleven, so the lights over the bed were off. The curtains dimmed the lights from the nurses' station. It was a muted light, perfect for someone whose head still hurt.

Oliver was very unwell as he rested on the bed. For one thing, he had stopped making jokes, a sure sign of trouble.

Oliver wasn't the kind of man who made a good first impression on Lindsay. For one thing, he was too cheerful and she usually went for more sullen types. However, sullen types had not treated her well, so she decided to try Oliver's wide smile, thick cheeks, and hands big enough to make a girl follow when he led her on the dance floor. Well, he hadn't exactly danced with her, but their improv class gave him plenty of opportunities to lead her.

For the first time, Lindsay wondered if he might not be all right.

She glanced over at Gavin, his eyes glinting from between the hairy line of his eyebrows and the beginning of his beard. She finally found a moment to introduce herself to him. She turned to him and stuck out her hand, but quickly retracted it when she realized how much blood was still caked on it. "Sorry for the poor introduction," she said. "I'm Lindsay Thomas."

Gavin looked at her and said gruffly, "I'm Gavin Grantford."

The only thing she could think of to say was, "That's a good name. G is the loveliest letter in calligraphy and you've got two of them."

He paused for a moment. "No one has ever told me that before."

"It's because the cursive capital G is one shape and the typeface capital G is a completely different shape. You know what the prettiest shape is?"

He looked at her strangely from under his toque and over his beard.

Normally, a look like that would have discouraged her from saying anything further. Except, they were stuck in an emergency room for who knew how long, so she continued. "It's a circle or a sphere. Think about it. Have you ever seen anything more beautiful than Europa or Enceladus?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't have if I knew what you were talking about."

Lindsay explained, "Europa is a moon of Jupiter, and Enceladus orbits Saturn, but that's not the point. The point is that a circle is the most beautiful shape and a G is a circle with a beautiful gap and line to it. A Q can be very enchanting as well, except that when you bring

the capital Q into cursive, it looks like a fancy number two, which is not very appealing. A cursive capital G on the other hand is so pretty. Don't you think it looks sort of like someone swishing their cloak out with one hand? Don't even get me started on how fascinating a lowercase g is."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said blankly.

Lindsay considered that as an open invitation to shut her mouth and promptly did so. She was naturally very chatty and did not enjoy silence in general, but annoying a stranger who had driven her to the hospital was not on her list of things to do that night. Obviously, it was already a difficult night for Gavin, who had not planned on spending the wee hours of his night babysitting his baby brother in the emergency room. It wasn't easy for Lindsay either, but she was used to everything in her life flying out of her control.

The silence broke when Gavin seemed to realize that he had been unfriendly, though not outright rude. He turned to her and said, "Oliver hasn't told me much about you other than your name. Where do you come from?"

Lindsay's pulse quickened. She loved being asked questions. "Vancouver."

"And how do you know Oliver?"

"We went to acting classes together."

"And you've always been from Vancouver?"

"Yes, there and around there. Have you always lived here?"

"Yes."

She was disappointed the questions had stopped. The silence stretched out again, and then the doctor pulled the curtain back. They had already met him when he had examined Lindsay's head injury.

"Well," he said, with his calm doctor's voice. "His right wrist and arm are broken, but I'm more worried about the bump on the back of his head."

The long and short of it was that the doctor was going to keep Oliver in the hospital overnight and run more tests in the morning. There was no reason for Gavin and Lindsay to hang around. The hospital would call them when they had more news.

"Where was Oliver taking you for the night?" Gavin asked her as they walked back to the truck.

"He said something about an empty apartment over a clothing store that was empty."

Gavin groaned quietly. "I wish he had told me that was what he wanted because if he had I would have reminded him that it is unfurnished."

"I can crash on the floor," Lindsay offered. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Yeah, I'm not going to let you do that."

"I don't need much. Anything is an upgrade from a chair in a hospital. Do you have a couch?"

Gavin huffed, making his disgust clear. He opened the truck door for her, helped her up into the high-seated truck, and closed the door. "I'll take you to the hotel," he said once he joined her on the other side.

"Aren't you renovating it?"

"Yes, but some of the rooms are still being rented out. The single bedrooms need repair, but the suites are ready to be used."

Lindsay huffed, making her disgust clear. "I can't take up a whole suite."

"Why not?"

“Because I’m broke. Even if you give me the room for free, I can’t afford to tip housekeeping. Isn’t there somewhere I could crash quietly until we can talk to Oliver and see what plans he made?”

“You don’t have to worry about tipping housekeeping or the cost of the room. I’ll cover both. It’s just for one night and I’ll get Oliver to pay me for it later. Feel better?”

She chortled. “You think Oliver has any money? You think we came to renovate a hotel because we’re swimming in cash?”

“Okay. Okay. Okay. I have a guest room at my place. It is absolutely free for you to stay there. I just didn’t think you’d want to stay alone in the same house with a man you don’t know.”

“I’m not precious, okay?” she said, wrapping her finger around her red-brown ringlet. “And I have never once, in my entire life, been the only person sleeping in a room.”

“Well, you’re going to try it tonight.”

“It’ll be a fresh experience for sure. Make sure to bump around in the next room, and tell your girlfriend not to mind me when she gets up in the morning. She can make all the noise she wants. I can’t sleep when it’s too quiet.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he said tightly.

“Hmm… I thought Oliver said you did.”

“Yes. I *did*.”

His voice was like a door slamming in her face, the single word demanding that she stop asking questions. Lindsay decided to let it go without another word. He’d already arranged for a place for her to sleep. He didn’t need to do any more for her that night.

Twenty-five minutes later, they pulled up in front of a log cabin. Lindsay had seen places like it in her travels, but she’d never stayed in one before. Gavin got her bag and led her around to the back of the house.

“This is the way in?” she questioned as she followed him.

“No, I’m leading you to the way out.” If it hadn’t been said with good humor behind it, she probably would have left him there, but it was said the way Oliver said things. He and his brother were the kind of men who said ‘no’ when they meant ‘yes’.

Inside the cabin was a staircase that led up, but Gavin took her forward past the stairs and through a sitting room into a private room. With the light switched on, it looked like a hunting lodge. The logs were bare and there were antlers on the wall. The bed was made up with a bedspread of red and black plaid.

“Is it really okay for me to sleep here?” Lindsay asked quietly. “It looks too nice.”

“It’s not too nice,” Gavin said from beneath his beard. “The suite at the hotel would have been nice.”

“Thanks. Where’s the bathroom?”

He showed her. He was about to leave when he suddenly turned back and asked, “Is there anything else you need?”

She thought about the gnawing ache in her stomach. She was hungry, but she’d been hungry before. She smiled and told him she had everything she needed.

After he closed the door between them, Lindsay peeled her clothes off one sweaty alarmed piece at a time. Each item of clothing felt tragic as she freed herself from it. She realized that even though she especially liked the clothes she had worn that day, she was never going to be able to wear them with the same carefree spirit she had when she put them on that morning. Forever onward, they were the clothes she had worn when Oliver

crashed the car and ruined their romance. They would be clothes that had been taken off in a strange room in a strange man's house.

She tried to look at the experience in a positive light. Tried to remember that it was the first time she had slept in a log cabin, which was something she'd always wanted to try. It was her first night sleeping in a room by herself…

That felt luxurious.

Starlight shone through the window.

She thought of all the times in the past when it had been possible for her to sleep in a room by herself. The opportunity had come up, but she had always opted to sleep alongside one of her sisters, or a friend, or an aunt, or her mother. Her life had always been abuzz with friendly faces, though never a man she could trust.

She thought about the gruff woodsman outside the door. They had driven deep into the forest to come to the log cabin. It was a little like a comedy about BigFoot. A beautiful young journalist goes with a mysterious stranger on a quest to find a sasquatch when, in a bizarre plot twist, the mysterious stranger turns out to be the beast she was hunting for.

Lindsay chuckled and pulled a long silky nightgown over her head. She lifted the blanket to get between the sheets and found they were made of flannel. That was a surprise for her. She'd never slept on flannel sheets before. She imagined herself a character on a piece of felt stuck to the flannelgraph with a kindergarten teacher telling the story of how you should never judge a person by how they looked.

Her head hit the pillow and again she was reminded of that feeling she always had when she was with Oliver.  It was a feeling like she had come home. But why was she feeling it in his brother's guest room? It wasn't an important bed or an important pillow. This was where he housed strangers when he couldn't put them up in the hotel. It shouldn't have felt like home, but it did.

Chapter Three
If He Lets You Wear His Shirt…

In the morning, Lindsay awoke with her head feeling clear and pain-free. The doctor was right, she only had a cut in her eyebrow that was exactly three millimeters long. She went to the bathroom and cleaned the remaining blood from the folds around her eyes. With that done, she suddenly had this impish idea that she should do her makeup before she got dressed. Lindsay was not the type of girl who looked like an entirely different person when she put makeup on, but she knew it improved things and she had made a bad impression on Gavin the night before. She had been covered in blood, been with his drunk brother, been involved in a car accident, and bored him with her conversation about calligraphy.

She got her makeup bag and went about salvaging her pride. With the arrival of morning light, she had a second try ahead of her. She wouldn't make the mistakes she made the night before. The freshly revived zombie look was already washed off. She wouldn't bore him with her nonsense. Besides, she'd look like a beauty, which always made everyone a little nicer to her when the going was tough.

Lindsay's most noticeable attribute was her hair. Her hair was too thick and had natural waves usually only worn by homeless people. She had gone unnoticed most of her grade school years, until the year before graduation, she had had an impulse to dye her hair an auburn red, which had gone splendidly. It had given her whole body a new impression and people who never noticed her suddenly took notice. The brown in her hair brought out the brown in her eyes until she made her hair cherry coke red. Then her eyes turned gray.

For her clothing, Lindsay preferred to wear monochrome—especially white. The contrast of the red hair and the black and white clothes made her even more dazzling. She used to wear lots of colors but after the hair color change, all her clothes were white, black, icy blue, and gray.

When she finished her makeup, she returned to the bedroom, went through her bag, and realized that she had left her housecoat at her last digs. She rolled her eyes. That meant it was lost forever. She opened the closet to see if there was anything already in the room that she could slide over her nightgown. To her surprise, the closet was mostly full of men's clothing.

She chose a white collared shirt with light blue lines and threw it on over her nightgown. She was too hungry to think about the closet and what all those clothes meant. Instead, she padded up the stairs and into the kitchen.

The upper floor was beautiful, all vaulted ceilings and glass overlooking the forest outside, and through the trees, she spied a lake. Or was it the ocean? She paused to admire the view and looked carefully in every direction, pretending to look for the sasquatch.

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the front door. Lindsay didn't know where Gavin was, but she thought it was better to answer the door before the knocker knocked again. What if he was still sleeping?

Swinging the door open, she put a finger to her lips and said, "Good morning," as quietly as possible.

A woman stood on the doorstep. She held a cardboard box in her arms and stared at Lindsay like she was a serpent. Gawking, she said sharply, "This is from Marissa." She practically threw the box, open-topped, in Lindsay's unprepared arms. "It's what she had left of Gavin's things at her place. Obviously, she doesn't want to see him again after last night and she asked me to bring them."

“And your name is?” Lindsay asked, at least wanting to get the name of the person who dropped the box off before she disappeared.

The woman seemed as concerned as Lindsay that she needed to look cool and didn’t leave immediately. She placed her sunglasses on her nose and then pointed that nose in the air. “Tell Gavin Carleen dropped it off.”

“I will. Thank you. I’m Lindsay,” she said, balancing the box on one arm and giving her a friendly little wave.

Carleen’s mouth turned into a snarl as deliberate as her bleach-blonde hair. She ignored the friendliness and said icily, “I’m busy. I’d better be going.” With that, she flipped her blonde hair, pranced down the wooden steps, and got into her compact car.

Lindsay turned around and bumped into a man coming up behind her. With zero lead-up, her cheeks were aflame.

“Hi,” she said, peering up into his amber eyes. “I didn’t know anybody else was here,” she said, gasping for breath a little like a fish. Pausing to examine him, she didn’t know if she’d ever seen a man as attractive as the one standing in front of her. In the next moment, he was taking the box from her and looking over her shoulder to see Carleen’s car as it drove away.

His hair was brown with so much blond in it, she couldn’t tell if it was sun-bleached or merely dyed. It grew long around his ears with bends in it that made it appear like it had recently been tied in a ponytail. His beard was clipped short and everything about him was beautiful. The cartilage in his nose, the smirk on his lips, the look of interest and intelligence in his eyes, which were framed by gold-rimmed spectacles.

To Lindsay, it felt like she had never known how to describe the man of her dreams. She had to be shown what she wanted, and it was right in front of her.

“Close the door,” he said to her as he led the way back into the kitchen.

“Hi,” she said again, following him. “I’m sorry we didn’t meet last night. I’m Lindsay.”

“We did meet last night,” he said, looking amused.

She stared at him. Black toque? Gone. Bushy beard? Mostly gone. He smiled and the smile was something like a reincarnation of Oliver’s smile. It was Gavin and he looked astonishingly less like a sasquatch than she remembered.

“Sorry, Gavin. You look so different. You cut off your beard?” What she wanted to say was, ‘You chopped down the forest that was growing on your face,’ but she wisely refrained. A tightly clipped beard was one thing, but when a beard hid a man’s Adam’s apple, things had gotten out of hand in Lindsay’s opinion. Now, Gavin’s beard wasn’t even a tight-clipped one. He was down to stubble. “Looks really good,” she said out loud.

He merely nodded and placed the box on the kitchen floor.

“What is all this stuff?” she asked, trying to direct her focus to the box if only to stop herself from staring at him.

“It’s everything that’s left from my broken relationship.”

“Everything? Small box.”

He groaned slightly. “At least, I hope it’s everything.”

“Did things end badly?”

“For me, things ended well, because they ended. She is unhappy, which is what always happens when people don’t get what they want. Hopefully, she will feel better soon.”

“Marissa? That was your girlfriend’s name? Ex-girlfriend now?”

“Yes,” he said bluntly before kicking the box out of the way with his toe. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“I love breakfast.”

“What should we have?”

Lindsay looked around a little frantically. “Something easy? Toast? Cereal?”

He looked at her. “I’m not an infant. I can cook. Do you like pancakes?”

“I love pancakes!” she gushed. She had never had a man make her pancakes in her life.

He busied himself in the kitchen preparing his batter. “I got a call from Oliver this morning.”

“Thank heaven it wasn’t the doctor,” Lindsay breathed.

Gavin nodded in agreement. “He’s fine except for the breaks in his arm. The head injury wasn’t as bad as the doctor feared. I thought we’d pick him up after breakfast. He’s getting a hospital breakfast, but that’s all part of his punishment for crashing his car.”

“Can I help you?” she asked, coming around the island to stand beside him.

He looked at her like he’d never seen her before. “No. Get out.”

She slithered back to the other side of the island and sat on a stool facing the rest of the kitchen.

“Pancakes are easy,” he elaborated. “And you don’t know your way around my kitchen.”

Lindsay remembered her vow to avoid being chatty and closed her mouth with a determination not to open it again until she was asked a question.

“Do you eat dairy?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Are you allergic to anything?”

“No.”

“And there’s nothing you hate and you only love breakfast?” he asked, that touch of amusement entering his voice again as he stood in front of his grill.

“I don’t just love breakfast. I love food.” Then suddenly, she forgot her resolution to keep quiet as a terrifying thought entered her mind. “You know, if that girl who just came by, Carleen, is your ex-girlfriend’s friend, she might have misunderstood what was going on when I answered the door. She might have thought that you’d already replaced Marissa with me. I didn’t get a chance to explain anything to her.”

“That’s all right. It’s not your problem,” he said coolly, noticing what Lindsay was wearing over her nightgown. “I don’t think I ever let Marissa wear one of my shirts.”

“Sorry. Should I not have borrowed it?” She tugged on the collar, revealing the lace neckline of her floor-length nightgown.

He glanced at her. “It’s fine. You can wear it.”

If there was one thing Lindsay was confident about, it was her physical appearance. That had been a lot of the reason she thought she could be an actress in the first place. Looking at Gavin across the island, she was perplexed. Did she make such a bad impression on him the night before that she couldn’t salvage it in the morning?

His back was to her while he cooked. His shoulder blades jutted slightly out of the back of his black t-shirt. He wore blue and gray plaid pants, like that was what he had worn to bed. She was suddenly interested in what his bedroom was like. The master bedroom! The idea took complete control of her mind and she wondered if she could see the doorway to his room if she swiveled around. Around she went, and what she saw was a couch with blankets and bedding spilling onto the floor. She saw with dismay that aside from a bathroom tucked beside the fireplace, the kitchen, the dining room, and the living room took up all the available floor space on the top floor.

Without another second ticking on the clock, she realized he had put her to bed in his own room and he had slept on the couch.

She had been pink before. She was red now!

Chapter Four
If He Lets You Live in His Old Girlfriend's Apartment…

"Huh?" Gavin said as he sat across from Oliver and Lindsay in a booth at a cafe. They were having donuts and herbal tea. They were only there because Gavin had called it when he said that Oliver would not like the breakfast he got at the hospital. After they picked him up, he insisted they go out for donuts. So they sat in the booth and squabbled.

"I'm sorry," Gavin said, giving a passive-aggressive apology. "You didn't think to ask me if it was all right for Lindsay to live in Marissa's old apartment?"

"I didn't think it would be a big deal," Oliver defended. "You said she moved out. I know it's not big enough for more than one person. I thought Lindsay could stay there and I'd stay over at Ricky's. What's the big deal? It's not like Marissa is coming back and you're on the hook for the lease. Someone might as well use it."

Gavin groaned and rubbed his temple.

Lindsay did a double take. When Oliver told her of his plan to work in Cowichan Bay after the tourist season, she thought he said he would stay at Gavin's. Plans had changed, and he hadn't mentioned that to her or Gavin until that minute. She noted her annoyance but said nothing.

"It's fine," Gavin said, sounding peeved. "It's absolutely fine. Where's Lindsay going to get furniture and where is all that furniture going to go in two months when the lease expires?"

Oliver had been about to respond when Lindsay interrupted him. "Look, I'm a grown-up. Gavin, if I can borrow you and your truck for a few hours today, I can get the essentials. I won't need a lot of furniture. I've done this sort of thing on the fly many times and if I don't hate the place, can you help me make arrangements to lease the apartment in my name after the two months are up? If I hate it, I can surely find somewhere else to live during those two months."

Gavin smirked. "I guess you can borrow me. I think the lease will be renewable if you decide you want that. Oliver, do you want to come with us to buy furniture?"

Oliver groaned. "I feel terrible. My arm is broken in three places! I can't help. I'm *helpless*! You two clearly don't need me to come with you since you're such fast friends after meeting last night. Can't you just drop me off at Ricky's?"

Lindsay's eyes moved from Oliver's cast to his face in a couple of circuits until her gaze landed on his eyes. Didn't he want to talk to her about the fact that she'd dumped him? Normally, when she told a man she was dumping him, he was thrown into a panic and tried to salvage their relationship. Oliver just sat there, whining about his hurt arm and asking to be dropped off at his buddy's.

Lindsay had no idea who Ricky was.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was not there because she wanted to have a romance with Oliver. Their getting together had been a kind of impromptu thing (like everything else in her class). Maybe it didn't mean much to either of them, but she knew one thing: she had been planning to come to the island to help with the hotel *before* she and Oliver decided to make out in the front of his car a few nights before. She wasn't trying to run off with him specifically. She was trying to start a new life that had nothing to do with acting.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and decided to forget that they had ever said anything about being a couple.

"That's fine by me," she said with a noncommittal shrug.

“I guess I can do that,” Gavin said, blowing a chuckle through his nose.

Lindsay felt a little weird. She had never had brunch with two men before when neither one of them was interested in her.

Oliver started closing the lid to the box containing the rest of the donuts. “I’ll just take these as a thank you for Ricky.”

Soon, they were back in the truck. Oliver rode in the front with Gavin and Lindsay sat in the back. Truly, she hadn’t appreciated how much space there was in the back of his cab when she’d ridden in it the night before. It was beyond luxury.

As they drove, Gavin yelled little touristy bits of information for Lindsay’s benefit. In particular, he drove them past the hotel she was going to help him renovate.

The Sealion Hotel was placed on the side of a hill that looked down over the bay. It was a long thin building with many windows. Plenty of rooms to renovate. There was not a beach where the water and the land met. Instead, the hotel led down to the marina. There was a mountain on one side of the road. The other side was a strip of shops lining the bay. The marina was on the other side.

Oliver pointed to her new apartment as they made their way down the main street. Lindsay saw the shop called 999 Things to Wear and the smaller second floor on top of it. That was where her new apartment was. It had windows overlooking the bay. She couldn’t wait to see inside it.

She tried to squelch her interest. It might have a beautiful view, a stunning location, and be an absolute mess on the inside.

Ricky’s house was up the road. The road wound through trees past houses Lindsay didn’t know were there until she saw a touch of siding between the tree trunks.

They pulled up a winding driveway and stopped. The yard was messy and the house was in disrepair. Oliver leaped from the truck saying a hasty goodbye to Gavin and Lindsay before whipping his bag out of the back with his good hand and heading for the front door. Once there, he rang the bell, seemed to realize he was an idiot for leaving without saying goodbye, and blew a kiss to Lindsay.

Lindsay didn’t know what to do with a farewell like that. She had never been left that way by a man who was pursuing her. When she was seeing someone, he didn’t pay attention to anyone besides her. She had never had a man she was dating blow her a kiss instead of just kissing her. Maybe he had paid far more attention to her dumping him the night before than she thought. He just wasn’t that upset about it.

“Want to come up front?” Gavin asked. “It’s less bumpy up here.”

As she was feeling a bit carsick with all the twists and turns in the road, she did as he suggested. When she got to the front seat, the door to Ricky’s house opened and Oliver ducked inside.

“Do they smoke weed or something?” she asked, looking after Oliver with a bent eyebrow. “Who’s that excited to see his buddy?”

Gavin didn’t comment and put the truck in reverse, getting them back out onto the road.

“Oliver skipped telling me the backstory. Care to fill me in?” Lindsay asked, hoping for an information dump.

“They’ve been friends since they were in grade school. Basically inseparable, but I don’t know much more than that. Oliver hasn’t visited lately. Maybe he’s in a hurry to catch up,” Gavin drawled lazily as his wheels took the curves in the road like the truck had driven the road so many times it knew the turns without being steered.