

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Happy Valentines*

Let there be no misunderstanding. I loved Kevin. But as his bike disappeared off our drive, I dashed to the bedroom and slipped back under the covers. Our last lovemaking had been so fast and Kevin-centric, I'd been left completely unsatisfied. Yes, I know he was in a hurry to get to work, but geez—a girl can die from dropped orgasms. At least, I thought so.

I pulled my buzz-companion from inside the bedside cabinet drawer and flipped the switch. Assuming the usual circular pattern, I closed my eyes and dreamed.

You might think me a wanton hussy for not dreaming of my own boyfriend, but when my eyes closed, my fantasy took charge, swirling for a moment in a cloud of misdirection before deciding which way my erotic train of thought was destined to take today.

In my creative mind's eye I saw lights, lots of lights, streaming around me like a child at the funfair, long, violent streaks of vibrant colors. And then things slowed, and a dark, ominous, yet desirable shape towered before me. My imagination was blind to his face, but I knew I wanted him.

And yet when he proposed that I follow him, I was strangely reluctant. Perhaps because I had no control over where he wanted to go. When he offered me his hand, I took it anyway. He led me to a strange room with no furniture but a large bed, covered in a plain, white cotton sheet.

I stood in front of it while he slipped my dress off my shoulders, leaving me naked and exposed. In my dream he did not undress, exactly, but remained an ominous figure of manhood, looming over me.

Then there he was, his faceless head between my thighs, pleasuring me with a skillful tongue that had a magic understanding of my clitoris, and how best to satisfy it. My tense hands grasped the sheet, my whole body delirious with delight. He worked me with his practiced mouth, probing into my vagina with his fingers. Nothing existed in my world but me, him, and that mystical spot between my thighs. The fireball inside me began to grow, and would burst supernova any moment. On and on he caressed me, like an adept pianist, until at last my passion reached its crescendo, and I could hold back no longer.

He was suddenly inside me, fucking me like a madman, bent on achieving simultaneous climax, which somehow we always did at the exact same moment. I grasped his back, my body demanding that he fill me up, my satisfaction demanding this moment be about me, and the fulfillment of my self.

And then we both came in glorious union. My whole body was alive with the light of a thousand tea-candles. I could smell my own sex where I'd become so wet, and for a little while I laid there in delicious delirium, in that total tranquility and calm that only came after a good orgasm.

Then I remembered Kevin, and I felt a guilty smile spread across my face. What a shock he'd have if he ever caught me with my electric friend. Perhaps he'd want to play, too, I dunno, it was hard to say. He was such a straight-up kinda guy. Yes. It was probably best to keep this my little secret. Somehow I knew Kevin would see this as dirty, and a sign that he didn't satisfy me, which he really did, most of the time.

Reluctantly, I pushed myself off the bed and took my little power tool into the bathroom for a date with a sanitizing wipe. As I cleaned the thing off, my little faceless fantasy friend popped back into my head for just a second. Such a man didn't exist. Couldn't. Kevin was real enough and loved me deeply. I sighed and smiled. I had much to be thankful for, that was true. And what harm in a little private fantasy? As far as Kevin knew, this minuscule contraption was a relic from my single days, before he came onto the scene. There was no need for him to know any different. And it wasn't my fault he never had the curiosity to ask why the batteries were always fully charged. I grinned stupidly into the bathroom mirror, then, after washing my hands, took my little power friend back to his regular home inside the drawer of my bedside table. There he would remain until the mood came upon me, and he was needed again. Which was rarely too long away.

But perhaps not tonight, for tonight was Valentines night. It was definitely going to be a great day for the sex diaries. The rushed fumbling this morning was just a warm up, I was sure. And though it was wrong to anticipate it, I had a sneaky feeling tonight was going to be especially special. Kevin was not exactly Mr. Subtle, and his questions of late had an altogether marital bent. So, secretly, I hoped he was going to pop the big question at last! With the satisfied sigh of a contented cat, I fixed the bed up nicely, and got myself dressed and ready for work. Go, me. Everything was looking up.

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Miah picked up my iPhone and shook it like a snow cone, though I'd no idea what she expected to happen. I mean, it was in sleep mode, anyway, so no bells or whistles were likely to come on. After a moment, she put it down, glanced out of the window, and sighed.

"Valentines. It's such a depressing night of the year. Even worse when it's raining. Oh, Abby, I'm so not looking forward to going out tonight. All those happy couples. Ugh! Maybe I should just stay in with you and open a bottle of Pinot or something?"

I put down the iron and flipped my shirt over. Miah had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. She was as gay as a ginger-nut biscuit, but we never let that come between us. At this particular moment in her life, Miah was single. And that sucked, for both of us, since she was forever whining about eating out on her own. Which she did. A lot.

"We can have a Pinot now, if you like. There are two bottles chilling in the fridge, ready for when Kevin and I get home later on. It won't matter if we drink half of one now. Go on. You know where the corkscrew is. The dude will be home in a minute, and I want to be all dressed and ready to go out when he gets here."

"What for? He'll only rip it all off again five minutes later."

"I don't think so, not tonight. We're going out. He's booked something special."

"Ooh, where?"

"He wouldn't say. It's a surprise. Anyway, he called a little earlier and said he was running late. The weather's probably slowing him down. Anyway, get us both a drink, 'cos I wouldn't mind one myself."

With the enthusiasm of a zombie, she pushed up off the window seat and hauled her sorry ass over to the fridge door. While she poured us a drink, I finished ironing my shirt, snorting up the homey smell of freshly ironed cotton. As soon as it was done, I slipped it onto a hanger, hung it over the kitchen door, and turned just as Miah put a full glass of vino into my hand.

Ka-ching! "Here's to you, Abbykins."

"Oh? We're toasting? You know something I don't?"

"No. Not at all. But I have a good feeling about tonight in my bladder."

"You leave your bladder out of this." I took a long, slow sip of my wine, which was chilled to perfection. I winked. "It just so happens I have a good feeling in my bladder, too."

Miah's face contorted into an untidy smirk. "Oh, you do, do you? I see, so—"

Before she could finish her sentence, the doorbell rang.

"Maybe that's him now. It's just like him, not giving me enough time to enjoy my drink, and whisking my bestie away to do fiddly things to her."

I shook my head as I walked to the door. "No, it's not him. I didn't hear his bike pull up. Anyway, he never rings. You know, key." I opened the door to two uniformed police officers. My hand was still above my shoulder, turning an imaginary key in the air. I froze at once, too stunned to feel stupid.

"Are you Miss Abielle O'Sullivan?"

"I am."

"Can we come inside?"

In an instant, I recovered my senses and realized I had left them standing out in the rain. I blushed at my own rudeness.

"Please, yes. Come in."

I had a small place, and between the four of us we pretty much filled it to capacity. Miah stood, open-mouthed in the kitchen area. I saw the unasked question in her eyes, which no doubt mirrored my own. "Um, this is my friend, Miah Downing."

The two officers nodded, then turned back to me. The taller one spoke first.

"I think you should sit down, Miss O'Sullivan. We have some rather bad news for you."

Kevin. Where is Kevin? Oh, God, Kevin.

"Has something happened?"

"I am afraid he's been in an accident. We understand he lost control of his bike as he was speeding over the flyover. There were several witnesses that saw him skid. The water was unusually heavy, and he aquaplaned over into the opposing lane."

My hand covered my mouth. "Exactly how bad is it?"

"With regret, I have to inform you that he's dead."

I stopped breathing, my mind drowning in the information it had just received. Miah's mouth was still open, and her eyes bored into mine, equally stunned.

"No, there must be some mistake. Kevin's a great driver. He's ridden his bike for years, and he's always so careful. He never speeds. You must mean someone else, I'm sure of it."

The officer's face remained sympathetic, but offered no hope. He glanced at a photo of Kevin on the table beside the sofa.

"No. We're pretty certain it was him. He was still wearing his photo ID. I'm sorry. I know you're distressed, but we need someone to come identify the body. His donor card listed you as his next of kin."

"Oh. I guess. I mean, we're not married. But he had no one else; he was an orphan. Yes, yes, I suppose it would be me." I was babbling but couldn't stop myself.

Miah came out of the kitchen area and, as I stood up, she put her arm around me. "I'm her best friend. Can I come? She'll need someone to drive her back."

"Yes, of course."

As we bustled over to the front door, somehow I knocked my clean, perfectly ironed blouse off its hanger. Just a short while ago, ironing out the wrinkles seemed the most important thing in the world. Now I barely noticed as we trampled it on our way out.

A few minutes later, Miah and I were driving behind the police car in a state of utter disbelief. I supposed we were following them to the county morgue, wherever that was. I had no clue; why would I? The place where they took dead people wasn't much of a hot topic at the Monmouth County Kindergarten School for Girls. We drove on in silence.

It was a destination I had no desire to reach, and yet reach it we did. As they pulled back the sheet over my sweetheart's face, I stopped breathing. My heart became a brittle, weighty stone, draining the life from me. He was so white. And so terribly, terribly dead. Miah stood beside me, and I reached back and squeezed her hand. My voice was dry in my throat.

"When my dad died, and he was laid out at the funeral home, my mom told me it wasn't him anymore, it was just a shell. She said the man we loved, well, his soul had flown off to some happy place. Well. I dunno about that. All I know is, a little while ago, this was my Kevin, and he was alive and breathing."

It was too much. My tears were master now, and I doubled over, turning away, unable to look at his face any longer.

What would I do without Miah? Her arms were around me again, and she led me outside to recover.

"Can you get her a cup of tea? She likes it sweet, two sugars. And real milk if you can get it."

The officer nodded. "I'm sure I can find her something."

I heard Miah's reassuring voice, but nothing she was saying registered. All I could see

was his dead face. My brain was etching his features into my memory, imprinting his death mask over all other images I had for him. I knew it was gruesome, but this was the truth. I felt sick, and was grateful when the small plastic cup of hot tea was thrust into my hands.

"When you're ready, there are some papers we need you to sign. Plus you can take his personal effects."

I nodded and took a sip of the tea. It was little more than colored water, but nice and sweet, which was what I needed most.

When I drained the cup, Miah disposed of it, and we followed the second officer into her office. I signed blindly wherever she put an X, and then she pulled a clear zip-lock bag from her drawer and emptied his things out onto the desk.

The wallet and keys I recognized at once. But there was a small black bag I hadn't seen before, and I picked it up first, tipping its contents into the palm of my hand. I was stunned. It was just a little velvet box. A ring box. It was Valentine's Day after all, and I had hoped— My fingers trembled as I lifted the lid. Inside was the clearest emerald I had ever seen. Two similar-sized diamonds flanked the jewel. It was the engagement ring I had always told him I wanted. I closed my eyes. In my imagination, I saw him on the flyover. My careful, cautious Kevin would never speed. Never. Unless, for some reason, he was in a particular hurry to get home. Like being late for the most important date of his life. I let the box fall from my hand, slumped down on the table, and wept.