

*

CHAPTER 1

Geraldine 'Gerri' Madison's corner office on the thirty-eighth floor of the Pro/Advice group's flagship building in downtown New Millsboro echoed from the plasticky clicks that came from her laptop's keyboard as she finalized the contract she had spent the last ten days brokering. Though she had a secretary who was a far better typist than she was, she had always preferred to do the rough drafts herself to get a feel for the words on the pages.

Her fingers swept across the plastic keys with an eighty percent success rate, but each time she typed the name of the woman seeking the job, she was jolted out of her comfort zone and into making mistakes - the applicant happened to share the first name with one of Gerri's exes, and she felt she was transported back in time to the dark, final days of their relationship each time she typed the letters.

The sixth time she needed to type out 'Justine,' her fingers simply disobeyed her commands and wrote Die You Bitch instead of the woman's name. Sighing, Gerri hurriedly pressed backspace until the incendiary words had been deleted.

"I know what's wrong... Valentine's Day looming large but all I have to look forward to are warm milk, chocolate chip cookies and an old, romantic movie on the teevee.... I'll be me, myself and I. Ugh... I need a break," she mumbled as she saved her work and pushed herself back from the desk. Standing up, she pulled down in her navy blue skirt suit before she stepped over to the Espresso machine she'd had installed in her office.

While the expensive machine whirred and blubbered, she took off her metal-frame reading glasses and rubbed her brow and the bridge of her nose. As a graying forty-five year old who hadn't been able to shed the extra pounds she had gained overnight when she turned forty, she knew she wasn't the youngest, nor the prettiest single white female on the market.

It made her feel even worse when she realized it had been nearly a full year since the last time she had been on a real date. Even that had only been one of a mere handful of dates since her relationship with Justine had ended in bitter tears and angry shouting; she felt the dating game was only suited to a very specific type of individual, and she wasn't it, full stop.

The electronic ding from the Espresso machine snapped her out of her miserable frame of mind. After putting her reading glasses back on, she reached down to take the small cup with the rocket fuel.

Sipping it, she shuffled over to the large windows at the other side of her office to take a peek at New Millsboro far below. The smog wasn't too bad so she could see for miles and miles, clear out to the body of water that had given the city its name centuries earlier.

A sudden urge to hear a friendly voice made Gerri spin around on her heel and walk over to a small couch arrangement with a three-seater leather settee and a glass table with chrome highlights. As she sat down, she took her telephone and found her parents' home number in the registry.

The delay was brief, but long enough to make Gerri move the telephone away from her ear. She was about to turn it off when she heard her mother's voice at the other end of the connection.

'The Madison residence. This is Ruth Madison speaking.'

"Hi Mom, this is Geraldine," Gerri said and kicked off her heeled shoes so she could fold her legs up underneath her in the couch.

'Oh, hi, honey! To what do I owe this pleasure?'

"Oh, nothing special," Gerri said and leaned her head on the top of the backrest. As she did so, she spotted a few cobwebs in a corner of the ceiling that the cleaner team had missed. Chuckling inwardly, she made a mental note of its location. "I just wanted to talk for a while. How's Florida?" she continued, taking her cup of Espresso.

'Nice. How's New Millsboro?'

"Nice."

'Well, I guess that's settled, then. Baby, are you lonely again? And don't lie to me, I can always tell when you aren't telling the truth.'

Gerri shook her head slowly - ever since she had been knee-high to a grasshopper, she had been unable to hide the emotions in her voice from her mother. *'I guess that's what mothers do,'* she thought as she took another sip of the strong coffee. "Yeah," she said into the telephone, knowing the tone of her voice would explain it all.

'Oh, baby, I'm sure there's a nice woman out there for you... somewhere. You got the blues because of Valentine's Day, right? You're always down this time of the year.'

'Ain't that the truth!' Gerri thought as she took off her glasses and put them on the table next to the cup. "I know."

'How many great gals have you come across recently where you said, wow, make way for my U-haul!'

"Mom! It doesn't quite work that way, you know!"

'Sure it does! That's how your father and I met, remember? Until he was my high school prom date, I thought he was the biggest doofus of them all, but then he turned out to be

pretty entertaining. We had a great time that night and we're still together all these years later.'

"Yeah, but... it doesn't work that way anymore," Gerri said, looking wistfully at the hazy blue horizon beyond the large windows.

'I suppose... honey, have you ever thought about using a dating service... you know, an online dating service?'

"That's for the desperate people, Mom."

'Oh, and you're not?'

"Well..." - Gerri pinched the bridge of her nose again. Of course she was. "I guess."

'Duh!'

"Mom!"

'Sorry.' - Snicker - *'Young lady, if you want something, you gotta work for it. Isn't that how you made it into a corner office? Why can't you do the same in your personal life?'*

"I don't know, Mom," Gerri said and took the cup. At first, she just held it at arm's length like she was afraid of it. Then she took another sip. "It's such a big step... I'd be putting myself out there for the world to see... and... I don't know. It's a little scary."

'I understand, but I think you should at least consider it. I've heard it's where all the cool people are these days.'

"Huh... the cool people... huh," Gerri said with a dark chuckle. "Okay. I'll consider it. And in a month or so, I'll call you again and weep and moan when nothing came out of it."

'Oh, I doubt it, honey. In fact, when you call again, I'll bet I'll be saying I Told You So! And you better not make it another month until we talk again, young lady!'

"No no... figure of speech, 's all."

'All right. Just checking.'

"Is Dad home?"

'No, he's gone bowling with our neighbor. Oh... uh... the doorbell... wait a minute.' - The faint sound of a doorbell came through the connection followed by a few bumps and muffled words. *'Hello, Geraldine?'*

"Go on."

I'm sorry for breaking up our conversation, but I promised another of our neighbors that I'd go down to the mall with her. The plan is we're gonna have dinner down there at a new restaurant. If you want, I can call you back when I get home at eight or so... uh, that would be around five where you are.'

"No, you don't have to do that, Mom. I just wanted to hear your voice for a little while. Thanks for the advice about the dating service... I'll think about it," Gerri said and put her feet back down on the parquet floor of her office. "I'll call you next weekend, okay?"

'Okay, honey. Thank you for calling. Bye-bye. Love you.'

"Love you too, Mom. Give Dad a kiss from me, okay?"

'You betcha!'

Chuckling over her mother's enthusiastic reply, Gerri closed the connection and put the phone back on the glass table. "An online dating service...?" she said quietly as she took her cup of Espresso. "Mmmm... I guess it couldn't hurt to check out the market."

._*_*_*._

At the end of her long working day, Gerri packed her slim, stylish briefcase with the items she needed and walked over to the hallstand to get her trench coat. After checking to see if she had forgotten to turn anything off, she flipped the light switch and left her office.

In the anteroom, Gerri's secretary was busy processing the recently finalized contract, and the young woman barely had time to look up at her employer when she went past.

"Let's call it a night, Miss MacGrath," Gerri said, stopping at the metal desk to look at her secretary. The hazel-eyed Briony MacGrath was in her mid-twenties with a blonde ponytail and a freckled face that gave her an air of carefree youth, an attribute that had long since fallen by the wayside for Gerri.

"All right, Miss Madison," Briony said and moved back from the keyboard to show respect for her employer. "I'll just finish up here."

"Mmmm. If anyone calls me before you leave, just tell them to try my personal number. Have a nice evening, Miss MacGrath," Gerri said and began to move away from the desk. With a faint smile, she turned around and walked over to the elevator that would take her down to the parking garage some forty floors below her office.

"Thank you, Miss Madison," Briony said and moved back to the keyboard. Her eyes suddenly grew wide and she hurriedly spun around to catch Gerri before she could make it to the elevator. "Oh! Oh, Miss Madison, I nearly forgot..."

"Uh, yes?" Gerri said, stopping with her index finger hovering near the button for the elevator.

"Miss Madison, would it be possible for me to get next Friday off? I promised my husband that we would drive upstate to his parents on Valentine's Day."

"Oh, certainly. No problems," Gerri said, thinking that it was just plain impossible that time could go by so fast. Hadn't it only just been Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve?

"Thank you very much, Miss Madison. Do you have a Valentine this year?"

Grunting, Gerri turned around and pressed the button for the elevator before she came back to her secretary. "In a one-word answer, no."

"Oh... I'm sorry for bringing it up, Miss Madison," Briony said and offered her employer a smile.

"That's quite all right, Miss MacGrath. I'll be fine. We old maids have all the fun," Gerri said as the elevator arrived behind her. With a small nod, she stepped inside and selected Parking Garage Two.

._*._*._*

Driving home through the busy city streets, Gerri couldn't stop thinking about her mother's suggestion and what it would imply. An online dating service? Even without knowing anything about it at all, she could tell there would be positive as well as negative aspects to it. She had no way of knowing which of the two would weigh more heavily, but she had a hunch it would be the latter.

*'I guess such a site will have user profiles,' she thought as she entered the turning lane from hell. Eleven cars were already waiting ahead of her, but only two or three made it across the intersection each time the traffic lights changed to green. 'Will people be truthful? Will they post pictures of fashion models instead of themselves? Whose picture should *I* post? I always look like something the cat dragged in when I take snapshots of myself... I suppose I'll need to book a professional photographer. Ouch, they're always so darn expensive. On the other hand, I might as well take it myself because I guess I really do look like something the cat dragged in...'*

Finally allowed across the intersection - after honking long and hard at a delivery van that ran a red going the other way - Gerri drove up the four-lane, one-way Erskine Boulevard and turned into the inner lane to get to the parking garage of her apartment building.

She had lived there since she had broken up with Justine, four years in total, and she had come to cherish the park across the busy boulevard.

Truly a green oasis in the middle of the concrete canyons, the park was popular with the local residents throughout the year. At the size of four city blocks, it had plenty of space for everyone: there were tables for those who preferred to sit in one place, it had a smooth, paved track that snaked its way through the park for the skaters and the joggers, there were courts for street soccer and basketball, and above all, it had plenty of greenery for all to enjoy.

From November 1st to the first weekend of March, the central area of the park turned into an ice rink that was lit up in the evenings with rows of warm, multi-colored LEDs and even old-fashioned light bulbs attached to the trees lining the arena.

Gerri looked so dreamily at the people skating on the ice rink that she almost forgot to turn down into her own parking garage, but she managed it at the last moment.

._*_*._

After a quick dinner and an even quicker look at the headlines of the news providers, Gerri shuffled into her living room in her comfort clothes: a New Millsboro University sweatshirt and pair of cotton casual-wear jeans.

Outside, evening had fallen and the many lights of the city created the perfect backdrop to the adventure she was about to embark on. The view from her apartment on the sixteenth floor was breathtaking, and she had to force herself to look away from the lights and onto her laptop that was placed on her coffee table.

The search engine was quickly loaded, and a few clicks later, her screen was filled with the intro page of the Executive Dating web site, a service *'For those among you who crave quality and elegance in every aspect of life.'*

The site was held in cool gray and even cooler ivory, and there was something about the design that didn't connect with Gerri. She scrunched up her face as she clicked around the site, checking out a few test profiles and a few features. The thing that caught her attention the most was the unfortunate fact that no one smiled on any of the profiles - well, that and the fact their business titles seemed to have greater importance than even their first names.

"No," she said after a little while. "This isn't for me. Too cold... too detached. There's no heart, no soul, no... huh. No thanks."

After clicking back to the search engine, she got comfortable on her swivel-chair and put her arms behind her head while she looked out over the big city that stretched out towards the horizon like a huge, psychedelically colored blanket.

"I guess I need to go to the heart of the matter," she said and entered a few keywords in the search field. Before long, a link for another dating site called The Rainbow Coalition turned up in the list, and she clicked on it.

She quickly read the initial promotional blurb and was surprised to learn the site had nearly eighty thousand users.

It took her all of two seconds to decide that it was a far better home for her than the other one. The design of the new site was warm and inviting, the colors suited her perfectly and the profiles centered on the personality of the person in question rather than their CVs like Executive Dating had done.

"I have found my Nirvana!" Gerri exclaimed solemnly before she let out a giggle or two at the nonsense of speaking to herself. Like before, she checked out a few test profiles to convince herself fully, but it didn't sway her opinion - she had already made up her mind.

"Create profile," she mumbled as she clicked on a button on the screen. After the new page had loaded, she put on her reading glasses and leaned forward on the swivel-chair. "Okay, so far so good. Full name: Geraldine Elizabeth Madison." - *clickety-clickety-clickety* - "Age: twenty-two... no, I better be honest. Forty-one to fifty bracket," - *clickety-clickety-clickety* - "Zodiac: Scorpio," - *clickety-clickety* - "Vegetarian: No." - *clickety* - "Smoker: No." - *clickety* - "Drinks alcohol: Yes." - *clickety* - "Special needs: No." - *clickety* - "Are you a pet person? No." - *clickety* - "Personal interests... hmmm. I wonder if I'll be blocked if I write Xena Warrior Princess? Anyway... personal interests... reading books that have plenty of humor and romance, going on romantic midnight strolls, listening to music, watching old movies, engaging in deep conversations..." - *clickety, clickety, clickety, clickety, clickety*.

"The last field is Looking for... hmmm. Now that's a good question," Gerri said and leaned back on her chair. "What am I looking for? Who am I looking for? Well, a woman, obviously," - *clickety* - "but other than that... hmmm. Am I looking for someone like me? I think I am." - *clickety, clickety* - "I learned the hard way with Justine that the concept of opposites attract only works in novels. Ages, thirty-five to... hmmm. Fifty." - *clickety, clickety*.

"So... I guess that's it. Submit profile," Gerri mumbled as she clicked on the button on the screen. A few seconds went by with no activity before a bright green notification sign flashed, informing her that her submission had been approved but that she needed to add a photo before the profile would be made public.

"All right. A photo... well, if it can't be helped," she said and turned around so the background would be suitably neutral. Taking her phone and smiling for all she was worth - though not too much in case it would look unnatural - she snapped a string of selfies to make sure that at least one would come out right. "One of 'em is bound to work... I hope," she said as she fished around her desk drawer for the USB-cable she would need to transfer the photos.

._*._*_._

The next morning, Gerri couldn't wait to check her in-box at the dating site, and she didn't have time to make coffee, eat her yogurt, or even change out of her pajamas before she sat down at the laptop. With fingers that flew across the keyboard, she entered her log-in info and waited for the network to connect. Once she was online, she started the browser and accessed the Rainbow Coalition.

"You have four messages in your in-box!" Gerri echoed and hurriedly moved the mouse up to the little symbol. Clicking it, she leaned forward to be real close to the words - then she let out a disappointed grunt.

"Oh... one is a 'welcome aboard' message from the site... the next is an automated reply that my picture was approved... the third is... huh... the third looks like it's linking me to the profile of some guy from Boston. I must have made a mistake somewhere in my own profile... and the final one is... is... is from Hawaii...?"

Grunting, Gerri clicked on the message linking her to the man's profile. She skimmed through the automated message and then the profile itself but couldn't fathom how the two could have been matched up - at least, not until she reached the Personal Interests field where it said that he loved reading romantic, humorous books. "Oh... okay. Huh. I guess guys are allowed to read romantic books as well. Huh."

She quickly added a check-mark to the No Interest field next to the message and clicked on a button labeled Action - the unwanted message was soon whisked away.

After reading the 'welcome aboard' message and saving it in the Storage folder, she went down to the last one. It was the profile of a forty-seven year old associate professor in chemistry at the University of Hawaii, and although most of the information matched Gerri's spot on, a three-thousand mile relationship definitely wasn't what she was looking for. "Oh, why couldn't you have lived next door?" Gerri mumbled as she studied the profile photo of the admittedly attractive professor. "No, it just won't work," she continued, adding a check-mark to the No Interest field.

All the excitement that had built up inside her fizzled out like the air from a leaky balloon and left her feeling quite deflated. Most of all, she wanted to head back to bed and stay there for a week. Sighing, she knew she had to give herself a kick up the backside to get on with her regular morning routines, so she did.

Following the disappointment, her breakfast was consumed with less fervor than usual. She only cast half a glance at the newspaper she was reading, and she didn't hear more than every third or fourth word said by the news anchor on the wall-mounted TV in her kitchen.

All her thoughts were centered on the unfortunate and highly depressing fact that even out of nearly eighty thousand profiles, she couldn't get a match with anyone except a random guy and the undoubtedly nice lady who lived half a world away.

The yogurt seemed to taste of less than it usually did, and her morning coffee had gone stale and uninviting despite opening a new vacuum bag of her favorite premium brand. All in all, she was simply going through the motions, trying - and failing miserably - to pretend the electronic rejections hadn't hurt her whatsoever.

From one bite of her buttered toast to the next, she plopped it down onto the plate and settled for staring into dead air without seeing anything at all. A long, deep sigh escaped her lips and she began to shake her head over and over again. "My life in a nutshell... eighty thousand profiles, and yet, the only matches that were out there were worthless to me."

Gerri's peripheral vision picked up a green flash in the far distance and she turned her head to look at its place of origin, the laptop in the living room.

She was short-sighted so she could barely see the laptop display, much less read what it said on the green notification sign, but she knew she should check it out, so after dabbing her lips on a napkin, she pushed the kitchen chair back and shuffled into the living room in her slippers.

"You have a message in your in-box... yeah, right... probably another guy who loves to read romantic novels," she mumbled as she sat down on the swivel-chair and put on her other pair of reading glasses. Sighing, she clicked on the in-box symbol and waited for the new page to load.

The message that came up linked to the profile of a woman living in New Millsboro, and that tidbit alone made Gerri sit up straight and pay attention. Clicking on the link, she waited impatiently for the profile to show up.

"Brooke Kerrigan, forty-two, Aquarius, not a vegetarian, not a smoker, drinks alcohol, no special needs, not a pet person... so far so good," Gerri mumbled as she clicked Next to get to the second part of the profile, the one that revealed the picture of the other woman. "Whoa..." she continued as she looked at a highly professional photo of a woman with long, elegant, honey-blond hair, soft features, sparkling eyes and a confident smile playing on her lips.

"Personal interests are movies from Hollywood's golden age, dancing to live music and talking 'til the break of dawn in the company of close friends. Oh, that sounds almost too good to be true... mmmm. The world must be seriously messed up if a woman who looks like that can't get a date the regular way," Gerri mumbled as she studied the rest of the profile. "Of course... I don't know if she can. Maybe she's just hedging her bets," she continued in a similar mumble while she slowly slid the mouse towards the button labeled Interest, Accept match.

She paused briefly before she clicked on it, but everything felt just right so she let her index finger do the talking.

A bright, green notification sign flashed up on the screen claiming the connection had been established - a second later, Gerri broke out in a cold sweat over the implications of her actions. "Boy, this better work... this had better work," she mumbled as she clicked out of the web site and shut off her laptop.

*

*

CHAPTER 2

After a long, stressful day at work involving a hysterical agent and an even more hysterical actor who felt his status as a silver screen heartthrob should give him unlimited access to the agent's list of contacts, Gerri had just enough energy left to plump down onto her swivel-chair and boot up her laptop. The computer clicked, whirred, whined and beeped before it was ready, but by then, Gerri had almost fallen asleep.

She quickly logged on and connected to the Internet. Her eyes were so bleary she could hardly focus on the list of links on the display, but she needed to try the Rainbow Coalition in case her match had been online to see the linking had been accepted.

The customary green notification flash lit up the screen, but this time, the message it delivered was far more important than what Gerri had expected. "She's... she's sent me a personal message! Oh my flippin' Gosh," she howled and bolted upright in the swivel-chair.

Her eyes quickly went up to the Inbox bar, but that was empty.

"What? Where is it... oh, where is that darn thing?" she said as her eyes roamed across the screen on a fruitless quest for the offending item. She finally found a small area off to the right of the in-box bar that said (1) PM, and hurriedly moved the mouse up there to click on the digit.

When the personal message came onto the screen, she reached up to turn on a reading lamp so she didn't have to strain her already bleary eyes. The message read,

'Hi, Gerri!

I hope I may call you Gerri, that's the nickname you put on your profile after all. My name is Brooke and it seems we're a match... at least on paper. Or on the profile, to be exact.

I must admit I was quite excited to see that you live in New Millsboro as well. The Rainbow Coalition is a great site, but people from all over the United States have added profiles to it and it seems the search algorithms don't take that into account. Oh... I hope I haven't scared you off with the tech-speak ;)

Yes, I work in the computer biz on a managerial level, running a department of lovely eggheads programming in a language called CALUMLA-B - I doubt you've ever heard of it ;)

Before I put you asleep, I would like to ask what you think the best part of our city is?

Yours,

Brooke Kerrigan.'

Gerri fell back against the backrest with a big, old, goofy grin on her face. A few seconds later, it dawned on her that Brooke's parting question could be seen as a precautionary measure against people with ulterior motives, simply to check if they really were from New Millsboro. "Oh... clever. I better say something that can't be found on Google Maps," she said as she composed her answer in her head.

Opening the Notepad app, she cracked her knuckles and put her fingertips to the plastic keyboard to type up a reply.

'Hi, Brooke.

Yes, you may indeed call me Gerri. The only person who calls me Geraldine now is my mother. She and my father live in Florida in a wonderful little gated retreat they share with literally hundreds of people of their own age - they've never been happier.

I'm a contract intermediary slash broker so I know all about tech-speak, though my lingo will no doubt be different from yours. I can't say I've ever heard of CALUMLA-B, but it sure sounds... exciting ;)

You said on your profile you love classic movies; do you have a favorite genre? I have to admit I can pretty much lose myself in the lush MGM musicals from the 1940s and 1950s like On The Twon or Anchors Aweigh.

My favorite part of the city? Well, it has to be the public park on Erskine Boulevard. It gives me everything I need: space, air, color, life. There's always something going on. Here in February, there's a new artist performing each night. As I type this, it's an-'

Gerri quickly jumped up from the chair and moved over to her bookshelf to grab her binoculars. Once she was at the window overlooking the park, she zoomed in on what was going on in the spectator area, spotting a ventriloquist performing tricks with a dummy that had the audience in stitches.

Smiling, she put down the binoculars on the windowsill and hurried back to the laptop. It took her a few seconds to get back to where she had left off, and she started by removing the N from the last word.

'A ventriloquist performing magic tricks with some kind of dummy. Looks like he knows what he's doing, too.'

Well, I hope I haven't sounded like a sleeping pill, either :)

Yours,

Gerri Madison.'

Crossing her fingers that she wouldn't bore Brooke to tears with her lengthy reply, Gerri moved the mouse over to Send and clicked on the button. Once it had been sent, she leaned back in her seat and re-read the words on the monitor, though her bleary eyes made it hard for her. "Oh, hell! On The Twon! 'Twon'?! How about 'Town,' you dipstick! Oh, now she'll think I'm an illiterate fool-"

The green notification sign suddenly popped up on the screen with a newsflash there was a new personal message for her.

"Whut? She must be online right now! Ohhh, this is so exciting," Gerri said and clicked on the little symbol. She adjusted her reading glasses and moved up close to the monitor to practically lap up the words, but when she started reading, she wished she hadn't:

'Tracey, are you stalking me?! This is too fucking creepy! How the fuck do you know I live on Erskine overlooking the park? What, are you in an apartment somewhere, looking at me in a telescope hoping to catch me in the buff? Is this the game you're playing, you sick woman? Well, it's juvenile, it's fucking creepy and I'm sure the site owners will kick you out once I've reported you... which will happen in ten seconds! BYE, TRACEY!'

Brooke.'

"Oh my God, she thinks I'm someone else! Oh no, how could that happen?" Gerri cried as she composed a new message at a feverish pace before she would indeed be kicked out.

'Brooke, my name is Gerri Madison, honesty! I live at #2154 Erskin just opposite teh main entrance of the prak! I'm not Tracey and I'm not stalking yopu!'

"Send, send, typos be damned, send!" Gerri howled as she reached for the button. Clicking it, she fell back against the backrest of the swivel-chair and rubbed her face. The unexpected surge of adrenaline slowly fizzled out, leaving her as a blubbering, dead-tired mess. "I just knew it would fall to pieces..." she mumbled and stared at the screen.

As she had expected, nothing happened for several minutes, and she pushed herself away from the table with the laptop. Just as she stood up and stretched her back - making it snap, crackle and pop - the green notification sign popped up on the screen: *'You have a new personal message.'*

"This has to go into the history books as my shortest ever relationship... hell, as my weirdest ever relationship," Gerri said with a deep sigh as she sat down and moved the mouse up to the (1) PM symbol. The message that flashed onto the screen read,

'Hi, Gerri.

I don't know what to say other than I'm truly sorry for blowing my lid like that. As you may have deduced from my rather short-tempered, profane message, Tracey is an ex who wouldn't take no for an answer.

It's been a few years since she poisoned my life and I was really worried she was back. Once again, I'm truly sorry - also for the profanity. That was uncalled for and it made me sound like someone from the gutter. I hope I haven't ruined everything with that ill-bred tirade.

I'm living at #2157 Erskine down by the Ninety-Eighth Street entrance, the Oscar Rathman Building. We're practically neighbors. Do you think that's a good omen?

I'm sorry (again) for being so volatile, but I've had a long, stressful day and I need my beauty sleep, so... talk to you tomorrow? (Please?)

Yours,

Brooke.

PS. Brigadoon is probably my favorite classic musical. A great story and Cyd Charisse was such a hottie ;)'

Gerri re-read the words of Brooke's last message a couple of times before she understood that everything was back on track. The unexpected development had left her stunned and speechless, so she settled for shaking her head slowly while she closed the browser and shut off the laptop.

*._*_*_*._*

The next day; Saturday.

Just because Gerri didn't have to go to her office didn't mean she could sleep in. She always used the weekend for the myriad of things she didn't have time for during the weekdays, and come Sunday evening, she was more than ready to head back to her real job.

In between sorting her laundry, watering her plants and unwrapping a frozen lasagna she was planning on nuking for lunch, she tried to compose a reply to Brooke in her mind. With the two of them living so close to each other, it would be far simpler - technically speaking - to ask the honey-blonde woman out on a casual *get-to-know-you-date* that wouldn't necessarily involve the same level of commitment and obligation a *date-date* would.

She had already booted the laptop and accessed the Rainbow Coalition, but there had been no new personal messages during the night. However, two further profiles had been matched with hers.

She eyed them wearily while she processed what she really felt about the whole thing with Brooke. Sitting down, she put her hand on the mouse and began to play around without clicking on anything. "Well..." she mumbled as she stopped playing and clicked on the first of the new matches, "like I always say to my clients, don't just jump into the first deal you're offered. You need to scout the market. The original deal may still prove to be the best, but if you haven't looked around, you'll never know whether or not it actually is. Let's see here..."

The first match linked her to a thirty-five year old woman who was living upstate in what she described as a 'picturesque' village. She was an artist, a painter, who could apparently lock herself up in her studio for days without eating while she worked on putting the finishing touches on her paintings. The thing that connected her to Gerri was their love for midnight strolls.

"No, that wouldn't work... when I'm in a relationship, I yearn for closeness and intimacy... if I'm forced into spending so much time on my own, what's the whole point?" Gerri said and added a check-mark in the No Interest field. Once she clicked Action, the profile was whisked away.

The other of the two new profiles that matched hers belonged to a forty-nine year old elementary school teacher. According to her profile, she longed for someone to hold at night; man or woman didn't matter, just a friendly soul who would whisper sweet nothings in her ear when she needed it the most.

"You and me both, Sister... you and me both. Well, not the guy-thing," Gerri said and re-read the profile to give it another chance. In the end, she didn't feel it was right and added a check-mark in the No Interest field.

All this had given Gerri a clear indication that her first instinct had been right - she needed to set her sights on Brooke Kerrigan and she needed to do it before someone far more suited would show up and establish a connection that was stronger than anything she had to offer.

A knot formed in Gerri's stomach and a cold shiver ran down her back when she made the Notepad app ready. "Oh, I haven't asked anyone out on a date for... for... for... I can't

even remember when! What should I say? What shouldn't I say? How will she react? I'll never know if I don't ask... but I'm too scared to even write her name! Oh, hell, this seemed so easy two minutes ago..." she mumbled, rubbing her suddenly flushed face. "No, I have to do it now before I chicken out and run away..."

'Hi, Brooke!

First of all, don't worry about your last message. I understand what you've gone through, believe me.

Secondly, you can obviously say no to the following suggestion if you don't feel like it.

Do you want to meet for a talk someplace?

Just a talk, I promise. I'm not trying to groom you or take photos or anything, it'll just be a simple conversation between grown-ups.

We could talk about Brigadoon, or anything else we can think of. What do you think?

Yours,

Gerri.'

"All right," Gerri said as she clicked on Send. "Let's see what happens. And now, I need something strong to calm my nerves..."

*_*_*_*_*

Late on Saturday afternoon, Gerri returned from a refreshing walk in the park. As she took off her trench coat, she sneaked a glance at the laptop in the hope Brooke had replied to her personal message - lo and behold, she had.

"Ohhh... and my nerves just gave me a big-time punch in the gut," Gerri mumbled on her way over to the computer. Sitting down, she put on her reading glasses and got ready with the mouse. Working in perfect synchronicity with herself, she clicked on the link to the personal messages and licked her lips at the exact same time.

'Hi, Gerri.

Meet for a talk?

Please don't take this the wrong way; I'd love to meet for a casual talk, I just don't have the time the next couple of days - I'm really sorry.

Tomorrow evening (Sunday evening), I'll be flying down to SoCal for a business meeting with the board of executives of a company we may get as clients. I'll fly back on the red-eye Wednesday evening which means I'll be bombed out the entire Thursday.

Oh my God... is that just the world's WORST excuse or what? Unfortunately, it's also the honest to goodness truth, Gerri.

I'll understand if you don't want to wait for me to come back from Calif, but on the off-chance you do, Friday evening would work for me. Once again, I'm truly sorry.

*It's up to you *Flower**

Yours,

Brooke (who's slamming her fist into the table right now).'

The first thing on Gerri's mind was an all-encompassing "Shit!"

Once she had walked around the table to work off the disappointment, she sat back down and re-read Brooke's message for her. "Friday... that's Valentine's Day! Hell of a day to choose for our first... what? Date? Talk? Chance encounter?"

Rubbing her face, she grunted several times until she ran the Notepad app to compose her reply to Brooke.

'Hi, Brooke.

Friday evening works just fine for me - although we do need to take into account that it's Valentine's Day. I'm guessing that most proper restaurants are booked up that night, and I'm quite simply too old for a milkshake bar or a fast food joint! ;)

What luck that we have something far better at our disposal: the park right where we live. I know from imbibing there a bit too often that the hot drinks vendor by the ice rink makes the world's most wonderful and tasty hot chocolate. Oh, I'm sure I don't have to tell you - if you know the park, you know Mr. Chocolate. Perhaps that would be a perfect spot for us to meet?

There'll also be plenty of people around in case you're worried about being alone with me the first time we meet.

Shall we say at eight at Mr. Chocolate's cart near the ice rink?

Yours,

Gerri (who's crossing her fingers right now).'

"All righty," Gerri said and sent the message. "A pretty good solution if I do say so myself. Boy, I hope Brooke thinks so, too. Heh... if she gives me another excuse, she doesn't. Ohhhh, don't go there... don't even think about going there..." she continued in a mumble as she pushed herself back from the table to visit the bathroom.

Various chores of an increasingly tedious nature meant it took Gerri nearly an hour to return to her laptop, and when she did, she was more than ready to throw in the towel and call it an early night.

Brooke still hadn't replied so Gerri opened the Solitaire Suite instead and played a few hands. It couldn't keep her interest at all and she struggled to stay tuned in. When she had messed up yet another hand for a lack of concentration, she had finally had enough and went into the kitchen to re-nuke the rest of the formerly frozen lasagna she'd had for lunch.

A few minutes later, she came back to the table with a healthy helping of steaming hot pasta. The béchamel sauce smelled so delicious her stomach growled as she put down the plate next to the laptop.

She debated with herself - for all of two seconds - whether or not she should take a glass or two of wine, and decided that she should. Saturday evening was, after all, the only evening of the week where she could cut loose. Well, Friday and Saturday, to be precise.

In the end, a nearly-full bottle of red Chateau Du Beauchamps 2008 was added to the dinner, just to be on the safe side.

The lasagna proved so irresistible that she wolfed it down with the only breaks being repeated samplings of the fine red that she had bought on the recommendation of a client. At fifty dollars a bottle, it was meant to be sipped and tasted, not chugged down, but by the third glass, Gerri didn't have much brainpower left to consider such minor details.

The wine, the lasagna, the chores she had completed, the long walk in the park and the lateness of the day all mixed together into working as a highly effective sleeping pill, and it wasn't long before Gerri fell asleep right there on her swivel-chair, with her hands in her lap and her chin resting on her upper chest.

On the screen of the laptop, the familiar, green notification sign flashed to tell Sleeping Beauty that a new personal message was waiting for her.

Gerri briefly stirred to smack her lips a couple of times - then she mumbled something unintelligible and went back to a wine-induced sleep.

._*_*._

Several hours later, Gerri awoke with a grunt that turned into a pained groan when she realized her neck was practically frozen stiff.

Her entwined fingers were locked in something akin to an eternal embrace, too, and she could hardly get them untangled. At one point, she was worried she had accidentally dipped them in superglue, but she finally managed to separate her left hand from her right.

She could barely lift her arms to remove her reading glasses, but she knew she had to in order to rescue the fragile bones in her neck that had to be bent way out of shape already. Slowly, very slowly, she moved her head upright to get back on equal terms with the rest of humankind. The crunching sounds that came from her vertebrae told a colorful, R-rated story that wouldn't have been out of place in a Hollywood horror flick.

"Gaaawd," she croaked as she sat up straight. The bottle of Chateau Du Beauchamps mocked her in all its empty glory, but she pushed that and the equally empty plate aside.

The laptop's screensaver had long since been activated and Gerri cursed the fact that she had protected it with a password. "How am I supposed to remember that now... how am I supposed to remember anything now...?" she croaked as she shuffled around on the swivel-chair that she had grown somewhat attached to. "Naw... gotta... I gotta... pee," she said and got up on protesting legs.

Once she came back from the bathroom, she shuffled over to the windows overlooking the park so she could close the curtains. Standing in the darkness, she gave herself a moment to look at the magnificent view of New Millsboro at night.

She wondered if Brooke had ever studied the nightscape; the many little white and pale blue lights that looked like stars, the reflections of the neon lights further downtown, the blinking red warning lights on the smokestacks at the power plant on the other side of the city, and finally the red and green lanterns on the ships way out in the bay.

Almost as a subconscious extension of thinking about the city's sights, she hesitantly slipped a hand up under her blouse to feel the roll of fat she carried there. Despite her efforts to combat it, the paunch never seemed to grow any less, leaving her feeling quite frustrated, even disgusted, with herself and her lack of grace.

Turning away from the window - and herself - she closed the curtains, turned on a few lamps and shuffled back to the table with the laptop.

As she was sitting there, contemplating life and the unfairness of the strong kick found in fine red wine, the password suddenly came to her, and she entered the eleven-letter combination into the appropriate field. "X8G4EvrArg0," she mumbled, keeping track of what she wrote.

Once the laptop came back to life, the defragmentation program had started itself because of the inactivity, but she quickly exited that and ran the browser to access the Rainbow Coalition.

"Let's see if Brooke... yep. She has," Gerri mumbled with an excited smile playing on her lips. Reaching for the mouse, she moved it up and clicked on the (1) PM symbol to read her new personal message.

'Hi, Gerri :)

Yikes, I had forgotten all about Friday being Valentine's Day... oh, brother. Hmmm.

Anyway - YES, I would love to meet you at Mr. Chocolate at eight o'clock on Friday evening! I know his cart quite well... I have visited it a couple of times... maybe a hundred times, I couldn't possibly say ;)

That makes me think... it's inconceivable we haven't already met down in the park somewhere. I use it to clear my mind after long days at work - most days (unless it rains, I'm not a rain girl), I take a little evening run around the jogging track to recharge my batteries.

Oh, and by the way, you shouldn't worry about me getting worried about being alone with you (did that come out right? LOL). I know how to take care of myself :)

Yours,

Brooke Kerrigan (who's smiling right now).'

The smile that Brooke said she was wearing was transmitted through the Rainbow Coalition and onto Gerri's face where it graced her features from ear to ear. "She wants to meet me... she really, honestly wants to meet me," she said dreamily, leaning back in her swivel-chair.

She thought about writing another message straight away, but decided after a peek at the system clock that Brooke probably wouldn't read it - after all, it was already a quarter past one in the morning.

"Oh, how time flies when you're having fun," she said, shaking her head to try to get rid of a very faint shimmer of her approaching hangover. Suddenly yawning, she exited the browser and turned off the laptop.

The few lamps in the living room were quickly taken care of, but the empty bottle and plate would have to wait until morning even though she knew it would be murder to scrape the congealed cheese off the enamel. "Ah, who cares," she said and put the plate back down on the table.

Inside her bedroom, she quickly shed her clothes before she went into the connected bathroom to brush her teeth and take care of the rest of her evening business.

Virtually the same second Gerri put away her reading glasses and the paperback she had been reading bedside, the butterflies began to flap their wings in her gut. Wearing an oversized sleeping shirt graced by the likenesses of Xena and Gabrielle - it always gave her a strong sense of companionship - she slipped her bare legs under her quilt and snuggled down to make herself comfortable.

She quickly clicked off the reading lamp on her bedside table and watched the familiar shadows play across the walls. Her bedroom was so dark she needed to have an unintrusive, fluorescent green night lamp on for when she had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, but looking at the soft, greenish light it produced, she wondered what a seemingly sophisticated woman like Brooke would think of it.

"Oh," she whispered, needing to hear her own voice in the darkness to make sense of it all, "did I do the right thing by asking her out? I mean, I feel we're a pretty good match, but... ugh, there are so many things that can go wrong. And she's got a temper, boy, does she have a temper! Like Justine... but unlike Justine, she doesn't seem to have arrogance or spitefulness lurking underneath the shiny surface. Oh, what did I let myself into...?"

Another yawn crept up on Gerri and cracked her face wide open. "Tomorrow... I'll think about that tomorrow..." she said and slipped over onto her left side.

*

*

CHAPTER 3

By the time Valentine's Day rolled around, Gerri's insides had turned into a giant icicle borne of spine-chilling nervousness and gut-churning anticipation - an icicle whose frozen tendrils spread out into her fingers and forced her into writing the craziest typos ever committed to a computer screen.

Her entire day at work had been that way, and it didn't help that Briony MacGrath, her secretary, had the day off to travel with her husband to his parents somewhere upstate.

"Ohhh..." Gerri groaned through clenched teeth as she deleted yet another block of unintelligible text that only had a passing resemblance to English.

Letting out a frustrated huff, she pushed herself back from her desk and jumped to her feet. She briefly considered bailing out early - her wristwatch only read a quarter past two

in the afternoon - but came to her senses and settled for walking off the pent-up energy by trailing the edge of the circular rug she had on the parquet floor of her office.

Around and around she went until she had calmed down sufficiently to continue working on the draft of the contract. Not only was it supposed to be ready by the seventeenth, she had so much work left to do she had doubts she'd be able to get through it all.

"If only my damn fingers would let me type in English instead of... of... of... the blabberlabber they produce!" she said, staring at the meager output on the computer screen. "Oh, I better get on with it," she continued, resuming her typing.

Three hours, twenty closely written pages and a broken nail later - the broken nail came from catching the edge of the keyboard when she thumped her fist onto the desk in frustration - Gerri logged out of the network and turned off her computer.

The icicle in her gut returned with a vengeance when she realized she had less than three hours to get home, check to see if Brooke had sent her another message, eat, shower, use not one but two cups of mouth wash, find the right outfit, fix her hair, change her mind about the outfit, find the right shoes, get dressed, beautify herself, remember to put her phone and her house keys in her pocket and finally go down to the park to Mr. Chocolate's cart.

Even thinking about the sequence of events she needed to go through nearly sent her into an unrecoverable tailspin, but she managed to stay upright for the time being.

Gerri grunted and walked over to the office door. As she turned off the lights and checked to see if she had forgotten anything, she kept lingering in the doorway, almost like she was hesitant to go home. "When I get back here on Monday morning... what will have happened? Ohhhh, I hope we'll have a fun, non-embarrassing evening. Please! Pretty please!"

._*._*._*_

The mounting tension made Gerri unable to eat anything beyond a hastily nuked tomato sandwich, and even that had to be chased down by a full glass of water.

Checking her wristwatch, she was surprised to see the hands of fate storming towards eight o'clock. "Ohhhh, I'm gonna be late..." she groaned, looking back at the makeup mirror while trying to apply just the right amount of lipstick. She didn't even know if she should, but she felt inadequate without it, so on it went.

The foundation, the faint eyeliner and the even fainter blush looked all right so Gerri turned off the light and closed the lid of the pink beauty box she had bought for herself when she turned eighteen.

At least she knew the outfit she had chosen couldn't be bettered: an elegant, forest green straight skirt, a v-neck blouse in electric burgundy, and a three-quarter length jacket matching the skirt. To round off the ensemble, she had chosen an off-white scarf with golden highlights.

Putting on the jacket, she flipped her hair out of the collar and took a moment to get it back to the neat waves she had spent half a can of hair spray on. As she swept the scarf around her shoulders and adjusted it so it was on just right, she had to admit that she looked pretty damn fine, indeed.

A confident grin quickly flashed across her lips, but it was gone as fast as it had come. "Don't get cocky... bad things happen to people who are cocky... like pigeons shitting in their hair..." she mumbled so quietly she could hardly hear it herself.

With fingers that trembled slightly, she finally reached the last part of her to-do list by taking her house keys and her telephone. Sighing deeply, she walked up to her front door and let herself out.

Down on Erskine Boulevard, the traffic was as heavy as ever with honking cars and smelly delivery vans everywhere, but most of them respected the traffic lights so Gerri was able to cross the street without major dramas.

There was no cloud cover so it was a chilly evening - and the weather forecasters had even promised snow later - but the lack of clouds meant the sky was romantically dark with faint glimpses of the few stars that were strong enough to shine through the massive layer of light-pollution.

A homeless man sat near the main entrance to the park playing a slightly skewed version of an old folk song on his accordion, and Gerri politely put a five-dollar bill into the tin cup.

Inside the park, the trees near the ice rink carried rows of warm, multi-colored LEDs and old-fashioned light bulbs that illuminated the amusement and the people there.

Several couples were hard at work on the ice, trying to stay upright for long enough to actually claim they had skated on a genuine ice rink. Despite a few falls and wild maneuvers, everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves - except perhaps a young'un who had dropped his ice cream cone on the ground where it had splattered all over his boots.

His wailing, his mother's gentle hushing as she wiped his boots, the laughter created by the people skating and finally the jazzy tones from a promenade concert further into the park blended together to create a romantic soundtrack that would be just right for a first date on Valentine's Day - or so Gerri hoped.

Coming to a stop close to the much-lauded hot drinks vendor, Gerri looked around to find a shock of honey-blonde, but couldn't see one anywhere. The sweet, delicious, warm smell that wafted up from Mr. Chocolate's cart sent her empty stomach into a frenzy that nearly bowled her over, and she had to restrain herself from going over there and start the party on her own.

To get away from the temptations, Gerri turned around and strolled along the outer rim of the ice rink. After half a dozen yards or so, she pulled back her sleeve and saw it was four minutes past eight. *'All righty... I'm here. But no Brooke. Relax, Miss Scaredy Cat... she'll be here. I hope...'*

._*_*_*._

Five minutes later, Gerri had just about accepted the bitter taste of getting stood up when her peripheral vision picked up a woman in a brown trench coat hurrying towards her on the jogging track. Turning around, Gerri gave the running woman a longer glance but quickly came to the conclusion that it couldn't be Brooke - for starters, the woman didn't have a shock of honey-blonde hair.

Not long after, her conclusion was proven dead wrong when the mysterious running woman came to an abrupt halt right in front of her. Up close, it didn't take Gerri two seconds to recognize the sparkling green orbs and the delicate features, but she had a hard time tearing her eyes away from the other woman's hair. Instead of the golden fleece she had expected to see, the woman wore a short, shaggy, white-blond haircut that was almost boyish in styling - in fact, it made her a good decade younger than her forty-two years.

"Buh...!" Gerri exclaimed and immediately felt a blush creep over her cheeks for the unrivaled brilliance of her opening statement.

"Hi, you must be Gerri! I'm Brooke Kerrigan," Brooke said and put out her hand in the traditional gesture between huffing and puffing from the jog. "I'm really sorry I'm late, I couldn't get my Dad to hang up... parents, you know... and these shoes definitely aren't made for jogging..."

Once again, Gerri stared at the shorter woman in front of her without uttering a word. Brooke's rich voice and slightly lyrical accent gave her such a jolt where it mattered the most that she forgot every single one of her good manners. "Uh... hi," she croaked as she put out her hand. At long last, she realized she was acting weirdly and responded to it by blinking a couple of times. "Uh... pardon my lack of... of... aptitude and- anyway, I'm Gerri Madison. How do you do?"

"Oh, just fine, thanks!" Brooke said and gave Gerri's hand a good shake. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Since eight o'clock," Gerri said, looking at Brooke's clothes. The dark brown designer trench coat matched her body's curves perfectly, and it appeared she wore navy blue pants underneath. *'Probably a pant suit,'* Gerri thought, *'and great shoes, too!'*

"Oh..." Brooke said and hooked her arm inside Gerri's, much to the taller woman's befuddlement. "I'm sorry, I couldn't- uh, tell me, do I have something on my face?" she suddenly said, brushing away whatever it was that had caught Gerri's attention to the point of staring.

Busted, Gerri blushed again, immediately averting her eyes from the shorter woman's face and hair. "Gosh, I'm really sorry... that was so rude of me. No, your face is f- uh... fine. And clean."

"Oh, that's good, that's good," Brooke said with a laugh.

"It's just that your hair looks completely different from the pic on your profile...?"

"Ohhh... right. Yeah, I got a haircut a couple of weeks ago. Well, I guess it was just after the New Year. Do you like it?" Brooke said, fluffing her locks with her free hand.

"I, uh... I do," Gerri said, relieved that she was allowed to study the hair closely without standing a risk of getting smacked. Squinting, she appraised the white-blonde locks and came to the conclusion that while she liked the long hair on the profile picture a bit better, the short, boyish hairstyle was a pretty good match with the woman's bouncy style and natural grace.

Smiling, Brooke gave Gerri a little squeeze through their coats. "Great. That's such a nice outfit you're wearing. What a lovely scarf!"

"Oh gosh, thank you."

"Mmmm... but you look different from your profile pic, too. If I may be a little harsh, it's not a good photo of you. You're far more attractive in person."

"Aw, sh- I mean, thank you," Gerri mumbled, ducking her head.

"You're welcome."

"It was a stupid little selfie up against a bare wall in my apartment... I didn't want to spend a lot of money on a professional photographer in case I didn't get any matches..."

"Oh, I understand! Mine was done by a pro, but only because I got a discount. The regular price was nearly \$250 but I got it for... oh no, listen to me blathering on and on," Brooke said and performed an embarrassed little shimmy. "To tell you the truth, it's 'cos I'm as nervous as a duckling on her first flight away from the nest. I'm not used to this

dating thing, you know! I suspect you can deduce that from my inane ramblings," she continued, ending the sentence in an embarrassed giggle.

"To be honest, you don't strike me as the nervous type..."

"Oh, but I am! Especially when I'm meeting new people."

Gerri couldn't quite believe that, but the statement made her nerves calm down somewhat from their initial shaky high and she even allowed a cautious smile to grace her lips. It had been too long since she had last spoken - at least on friendly terms! - with someone who shared her outlook on life, and she decided to get the most out of it while the mood was right. "Well, I am, too. How about we went on a little walk where we could be nervous together?" she offered, adding a genuine smile.

"Oooh, I'd love that," Brooke said, once again speaking in a lyrical accent.

'That's funny,' Gerri thought, furrowing her brow ever so slightly, 'it didn't say anything on the profile about her background other than the most basic, but she sounds like she isn't from around here... I don't want to ask, it would be too embarrassing if I was wrong and she really is a local...'

They turned around and began to stroll along the ice rink. All around them, people laughed and cheered when someone either fell or was able to perform the graceful pirouette they had attempted. Gerri cast a nervous glance at the slippery ice and hoped that Brooke wouldn't suggest going for a slip and a slide.

When a young woman performed a particularly impressive jump to show off to her friends, they responded by cheering wildly. Brooke cheered along with the others though she didn't know anyone involved. "Gerri, have you ever tried to skate?" she said, leaning into the taller woman.

Gulp! - "Uh... no. I would be like Bambi on ice, I'm afraid. I'd be one for the late late show, but not in a good way. I'd be in the Fool Of The Week clip. But... uh... uh... if you'd like a spin or two, be my guest. You can rent-"

"Me? Ha! No thank you, Ma'am!" Brooke said and let out a loud laugh. "Nuh-uh, ice skating scares me witless even though I'm originally Cana-jian."

'Oh... I guess I got that right... for a change...' Gerri thought, looking down at Brooke's sparkling eyes. "A Canadian who doesn't know how to skate?" she said as they stopped to watch the hapless heroes on the ice. She added a little wink to take the sting out of the words but noticed that the pretty blonde hadn't taken offence.

"Yeah, it's shocking, isn't it? Yeah. I'm from Newfoundland originally, but my parents moved to New York City when I was eleven. We got US citizenship because my Dad had

become a traveling representative for General Electric. We lived in many of the northern states. From the Big Apple, we moved around on a regular basis."

"I see."

With the excitement in the ice rink coming to a natural break, the two women continued around the large arena. They still had their arms hooked inside each other's, and Gerri had to admit it quite simply felt wonderful to be so close to the bubbly, pretty blonde. She had hoped they would get along, but could never have dared to dream they'd hit off so well.

A warm wave of comfort and joy rolled around inside her, and suddenly, she hoped there would be a kiss in it somewhere along the way - no, not hoped, yearned. It obviously wouldn't be a requirement, but it would definitely be the perfect way to end the date. It would make it go from a pretty special occasion to the date of a lifetime, Gerri thought, smiling shyly.

When she realized Brooke had kept talking, she snapped out of her reverie and concentrated on the lady on her arm.

"-in Seattle," Brooke said and looked back at the ice rink where a young man fell flat on his rear much to the amusement of his buddies, "and I think that's where my stubborn inability to commit to steady relationships comes from. I changed school so often I hardly got to know the names of my teachers. I guess it sort-of carried into my adolescence and young adulthood, but now that I'm older, I can feel I need something... more... substantial... oh brother, I'm sorry, Gerri..." she said, clapping a hand over her eyes.

"Uh, huh... why? For what? Do you have to be somewhere else?"

"No, for talking like the flippin' Niagara Falls!" Brooke said while she rubbed her brow. "I swear I don't talk this much all the time... it's just because I'm so stinking nervous!"

"Oh, you don't have to be nervous around me, Brooke," Gerri said and moved her hand up from Brooke's arm to the center of her back. "I'm just a big, cuddly teddyb- OOF!"

Gerri never made it to the end of the sentence before Brooke had wrapped a pair of strong arms around her body and had gone in for a hug and a snicker. Even through two winter coats, it was impossible for Gerri to miss that the shorter woman's grip was quite intense, and she couldn't help but paint a pretty picture of what Brooke could possibly look like with a few layers of clothing removed from her body - all in good taste, of course.

"So, Gerri..." Brooke said as she stepped back from the hug. "Now that you've seen all my negative traits... the nervousness, the endless ramblings, the fiery temper back in one of the first mails... I'm still sorry about that, by the way."

Gerri chuckled and adjusted her scarf that had been knocked slightly askew by the hugging Brooke. "Yeah, that was a bit of a wake-up call..."

"I'll bet. Yikes, that mail was just inexcusable. You know? All that swearing, oh brother... anyway, since you've seen my bad sides, I think you should see some of my positive traits. In other words, the hot cocoa is on me."

"Now you're talking!" Gerri said with a broad smile. Chuckling, she put out her arm to allow Brooke to hook hers inside it again. Once locked in a sideways embrace, they strolled back towards the hot drinks cart.

By the time Gerri and Brooke got back to the cart run by the man affectionately known as Mr. Chocolate, a whole sea of people had had the same idea and were crowding the cart in an unruly line.

The elderly, white-haired man who bore a passing resemblance to the popular image of Santa Claus - except that he was always wearing dark green, insulated garments typically used by hunters - worked as fast as he could, but the sheer number of customers meant the line moved ahead very slowly.

Grunting, Gerri pulled back the sleeve of her jacket to check her watch. It was half past eight already and she didn't know how much patience Brooke would have for the whole thing. She hoped it would extend to enjoying a mug of Mr. Chocolate's famed product, but she couldn't be sure. A sneaky glance at the blonde's expressive face didn't yield much other than she was still looking quite excited.

"Uh, Brooke-" -- "Gerri, I-" they said at the exact same time.

Their initial surprise was turned into a pair of wide smiles when their next attempt ended in a pair of simultaneous "Go on-" -- "After you!"

Laughing, Brooke clapped a hand over her mouth to show that Gerri should go ahead.

The sound of Brooke's rich laughter carved a permanent smile onto Gerri's lips, a smile that wouldn't fade no matter what she did. "I just wanted to ask if it's taking too long? We could, uh... take another stroll and-"

"Oh, no, no... this is just fine, Gerri. The wait's definitely worth it. Huh, I remember an incident a couple of years ago at Christmas... there was a line seemingly a mile long to get the hot chocolate. A scuffle broke out between some of the dads whose kids had teased each other and-"

"Oh, I remember that, all right. And you know why? I was right in the middle of it!"

"No way..."

"Sure I was. I ran away as fast as I could 'cos I didn't want anything to do with it! It was quite scary, actually," Gerri said and chuckled as she remembered the wild situation. Time had mellowed the experience enough for her to laugh at it, but being caught in the fracas had been anything but a joke while it happened.

The line finally moved several spots ahead in one go as a large family had been handed their cups of hot chocolate. Brooke chuckled darkly and shook her blonde head. "I was up in my apartment, looking at the whole mess. The police came in droves... and I thought, what in the world is going on down there!?! You know, I actually thought it was a drug bust or something similar. The next day, I read in the papers that half a dozen dads had engaged each other in fist fights... sheer idiocy if you ask me."

"Mmmm... can't argue with that. Oh, here we are," Gerri said as she and Brooke stepped up to the elderly man at the cart. "Good evening, Sir. My friend and I would like two cups of hot chocolate, please," she said, smiling at the man behind the cart.

"And I'll pay," Brooke added, digging into her coat pocket to find what she needed.

The elderly man smiled back at the two women and took two Styrofoam cups and a large dipper. As he opened the sliding door to the tank where the liquid chocolate was cooking, a cloud of warm steam rose to engulf him like an old wizard standing at a cauldron.

The steam brought forth an aroma so delicious that Brooke and Gerri let out identical moans of pleasure - although Gerri's quickly turned into a grunt of embarrassment.

"Here you go, Ladies," the elderly man said after he had filled the two cups with steaming hot chocolate. "That'll be four dollars, if ya don't mind."

"Thank you very much. Keep the change," Brooke said and put a ten dollar bill on the stainless steel counter next to the tank.

"Much obliged," the vendor said, quickly whisking away the bill.

Brooke offered the man a wide smile before she stepped out of the line so she wouldn't hold up the people behind her. "C'mon, Gerri... let's go over to the benches," she said, using her free hand to point at a cluster of wooden bench-tables not far from the vendor's cart.

"Right behind you," Gerri said, blowing furiously on the scalding hot chocolate.

Though the wind had gained a chilly edge, the two women still chose to sit at the bench. They did so opposite of each other so they didn't have to crane their necks all the time - and to enable them to look at each other on a more permanent basis. Both smiled as they tried to get the lava-like surface of the chocolate cooled down sufficiently for them to drink it.

For nearly the first time since they had met, Gerri had an opportunity to look closer at Brooke's expressive face. The blonde only wore a minimum of makeup, but her natural coloring and grace meant she didn't really need any at all. Gerri suddenly felt that she had put on too much makeup herself - the lipstick hadn't been necessary, nor had the faint eyeliner. Looking away, she concentrated on her chocolate for the time being.

Brooke tried the tiniest of sips but found that it was still far too hot to enjoy. "Ouch! Too soon!" she exclaimed as she put down the cup and touched her lips.

"Yeah, hot chocolate tends to be hot," Gerri tried, but immediately felt foolish for attempting a silly joke like that.

"Oh, ha ha... really? I never would have guessed," Brooke said and let out a little chuckle. She fell silent, apparently studying the face of the woman sitting opposite her. "Gerri, I hope you don't take this as a low-rent come-on, but you have such beautiful eyes. There's a special depth to them... I see knowledge, sincerity, compassion... but also a strong will. You said you're a Scorpio, right? The Zodiac?"

"Uh... gosh, thank you so much, Brooke. I haven't had a compliment like that f- for ages..." Gerri said and ducked her head so far down between her shoulders it was hardly there at all. "Uh, yeah, I'm a Scorpio, though I don't really believe in any of that stuff."

"Well, I don't believe in all of it, either, but some of it is true," Brooke said and took another sip of the chocolate. "Oh, it's just the right temperature now!"

"Great," Gerri said and hurriedly took a sip. After savoring the rich taste of the high quality chocolate used by the vendor, she licked her lips and glanced up at the blonde. "You're a very attractive woman, Brooke. If you don't mind me saying so, how come someone like you has to resort to the Rainbow Coalition to find a date...?"

"Oh, it's not that bad... I mean, look who I found there," Brooke said, reaching out to briefly put a hand on top of Gerri's. "A dearth of eligible gals in real life is the reason why I tried an online dating service. The company I work for has very restrictive guidelines on relationships between employees... and besides, the guys outnumber the gals five to one there. And they're all eggheads, ha ha! Yeah... I guess I'm just not the type who traipses through smokey bars late at night to pick up hot babes, you know."

"Oh, I know. Believe me, I know," Gerri said and took another sip.

"And you?"

"Much the same, to be honest. I run my own company as an integrated part of a larger group, but I only have one secretary and she's happily married to a great guy, so... well. And I know I need to stay a mile away from my clients! All in all, I don't really have any opportunities to meet anyone."

"Mmmm," Brooke said and raised her cup of hot chocolate. "Three cheers for the Internet and the Rainbow Coalition! Without 'em, we would never have met! Hip, hip, hooray!"

"Hooray!" Gerri echoed and took a healthy swig of her drink. Putting it down, she ran her tongue across her upper lip to wipe off her chocolate mustache. As she did so, she noticed that Brooke's eyes were fixated on the pink muscle, and that sent a highly pleasurable jolt rumbling through her body. Smirking over the unexpected - but flattering - attention, she cleared her throat and leaned forward to put her elbows on the wooden table.

Brooke seemed to realize she was staring and hurriedly took another sip of her own chocolate.

'Oh, what I wouldn't give to know what's going on behind those green orbs,' Gerri thought, glancing shyly at the pretty blonde opposite her. 'That was some look she just gave me... this takes the prize as the best date I've ever been on... uh... which isn't saying much. I wonder what'll happen if... if I... oh, but I can't. What if I'm jumping the gun? What if she turns me down? That'll be the end of it for sure... but I gotta try. Just this once, I gotta try...'

Gulping down a lump of nervousness, Gerri decided to follow her heart's plea and ignore the warning messages her brain screamed in her ear. Her heartbeat grew more frantic, pounding ever stronger inside her chest as she inched her free hand across the wooden tabletop. Her hand finally came to a rest at the exact halfway point between them. She had done what she set out to do; now the rest was up to Brooke.

A few seconds went by without activity, but then Brooke moved her hand on top of Gerri's and gave it a little squeeze. The gentle gesture was backed up by an unwavering look of interest in the emerald green orbs - and the hand stayed where it was.

Inside Gerri, a dramatic, colorful explosion of joy nearly made her let out a whoop but she managed to swallow it at the last moment. Instead, the emotions that bubbled up to the surface manifested themselves in a shy but genuine smile that spread over her lips.

Moments later, Brooke mirrored the smile with one of her own.

*

*

CHAPTER 4

They sat like that for a little while - it could have been a minute, it could have been an eon, Gerri didn't have time to count - but inevitably, the beautiful moment came to an end when Brooke slowly withdrew her hand. The look in her eyes remained, however, and for that, Gerri was grateful.

When the contact was broken, the world around them faded back up from the shadowy realm it had descended into. Smiling shyly, both women concentrated on their hot chocolates.

"Well," Brooke said after clearing her throat, "that was something I didn't expect would happen tonight."

"Me neither. But thank you," Gerri breathed. She noticed that her speech produced a plume of steam, but put it down to the fiery furnace inside her.

Brooke briefly looked up to lock eyes with the woman sitting opposite her, but averted her gaze almost instantly. "Heh, you're welcome. It was my pleasure... it felt right."

The jogging track that ran past the benches and the ice rink was suddenly packed with people, indicating the jazz promenade concert further into the park had ended. The spectators weren't a uniform group but consisted of men and women of all ages, colors and sizes out for a fun event on Valentine's Day. The merry chitter-chatter that rose from the crowd as they passed by the bench proved they'd had a great time, and many of them were couples who held hands or leaned into each other as they walked.

Gerri tracked them with her eyes but soon came back to the pretty blonde sitting opposite her. She dearly wanted to ask Brooke up to her apartment for a drink and a chat, but at the same time, her mind was begging her not to - it was too soon, too inappropriate, too presumptuous. This time, her logical mind won out over her heart and she let the moment pass with a sigh that she concealed as a small cough.

In the meantime, the hot chocolates had cooled down enough for them to chug down the rest in one gulp, and they both did so silently.

Looking up, Gerri could see that something was brewing behind Brooke's emerald green orbs, but she didn't dare ask about it. Instead, she shuddered inside her jacket as the chill seemed to have turned into a decided cold snap.

"Oh, this is getting kinda icy," Brooke said, and the plume of the steam that escaped her mouth when she spoke underlined the point. "I heard the weather people talk about snow later tonight... I can believe that," she continued, looking up at the dark sky where the first grayish clouds had floated in since the last time they had looked.

"Yeah," Gerri said with a similar plume of steam.

"Gerri," Brooke said and suddenly reached out to take Gerri's hand again, much to the older woman's befuddlement. "I have a proposition for you... would you like to come up to my place? It's too damn cold down here now, but I don't want the evening to end so soon. Please say yes."

"Uh... buh... to your place? Now?"

"Well... yeah. But... uh, if you don't... uh, feel like it-" Brooke said, pulling back from Gerri's hand with a mask of negative surprise creeping onto her expressive face.

"No! I mean, yes! Hell yes! Yes, I'd like to come up to your apartment," Gerri exclaimed, nodding enthusiastically to make it very, very clear what she meant.

The look of hesitation and surprise was blown clean off Brooke's face, replaced by a wide, warm smile that completely transformed her being. "Ohhh... you had me worried there for a few seconds, Gerri..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... to tell you the truth, I was... well, I had considered asking you up to my place a couple of minutes ago... but I didn't dare!" Gerri said sheepishly.

Brooke leaned her head back and let out a loud laugh that floated away in a plume of steam. "Oh brother, at least we're on the same wavelength, even if we have to work a bit on the communication. All right."

"All right!" Gerri said and moved her legs around the bench to stand up.

"Yeah," Brooke said and followed the taller woman away from the wooden bench. "I was thinking we could make some Irish Coffee and maybe hot apple pie. It's certainly cold enough."

"Hot apple pie?" Gerri breathed, coming to an abrupt standstill in the middle of the jogging track. "With whipped cream?"

"Definitely. What's apple pie without whipped cream?"

"Ohhh... careful, you might get yourself a permanent house guest!" Gerri joked, but only discovered far too late that her quip had an unintended double meaning. Blushing, she looked away in case Brooke didn't think it was particularly funny.

Fortunately, Brooke's sense of humor was intact and she hooked her arm inside Gerri's as they began to stroll towards the exit at the tail end of the group of people who had come from the promenade concert. "Mmmm... well, I s'pose you could say that was the whole idea of visiting a dating service... eh?"

Gerri just ducked her head and mumbled a few unintelligible words into her white-and-golden scarf.

After saying a quick goodbye to Mr. Chocolate who was packing up for the evening to protect himself from the mounting cold, Brooke and Gerri exited the park and strolled up the sidewalk.

The traffic on the four-lane, one-way Erskine Boulevard was as massive as ever, and since none of them felt a need to dice with their lives by running between the cars, they strolled towards the traffic lights at Ninety-Sixth Street to join the other people already waiting there.

Standing in line at the red light, Brooke craned her neck to look at the row of impossibly tall apartment buildings across the busy street. "That's where you live, right? #2154?" she said, pointing at the concrete colossus.

"Yep. Up on the sixteenth floor," Gerri said, looking up. She wanted to point at her windows but found to her amusement that she couldn't pick them out among the identical floors. "I moved in, oh, close to four years ago now. I haven't regretted it for a second... even though the traffic can be murder sometimes."

"Yeah... I share your opinion. I can see the lobby isn't manned?"

"No...? Is it up in the Rathman building?"

"Yes. I'm not aware of the reasoning behind the decision, but it gives me a sense of protection," Brooke said with a sigh as the traffic kept on coming in an endless, four-lane wide stream of cars and vans. "When we have a deadline at the company, I often get home in the middle of the night and it's quite comforting to know there's someone in the lobby looking out for me. We have an attendant in the parking garage as well, actually."

"Oh, that's nice," Gerri said just as the traffic lights finally changed to green. They and the group of people they were with had to wait for the inevitable couple of cars that didn't respect the red light, but the street was soon clear to pass.

On the other side of Erskine, the flow of people on the sidewalk was just as thick as the flow of cars had been, and it seemed Brooke and Gerri had to swim against the tide to get up to Brooke's apartment building near Ninety-Eighth Street.

"Ouch... you better hang onto your valuables... there might be pickpockets here," Gerri said for Brooke's ear only when she had been bumped into for the umpteenth time by dark figures who quickly escaped into the crowd.

"Yeah I know, thanks. Boy, we might as well have taken our chances out on the street!" Brooke said with a strained chuckle. "Oh, here we are... yikes, that was tough going."

Hurrying through the revolving door and into the brightly lit lobby of the Oscar Rathman Building, Gerri and Brooke checked their pockets but found that all was in good order. "Phew... phone, watch, wallet, loose change... all there," Brooke said before she folded down the collar of her trench coat.

"Yeah. Wow... that's what I call a lobby," Gerri said, looking around at the lavish entrance. Held mostly in red and gold, the lobby was equipped with a plush wall-to-wall

carpet in deep crimson, several original paintings on the golden walls, and a ceiling replete with what seemed like three hundred built-in halogen spotlights that all shone a golden light onto the paintings and the floor below.

Right on cue, an Africa-American guard in his early forties wearing a dark suit, a white shirt and a red silk tie rose from his seat inside a booth and came out to greet the two women.

The man's size was hard to ignore, and Gerri found herself staring at his broad shoulders and square jaw as he walked closer to them. His intimidating presence was offset by a friendly smile, but even so, Gerri couldn't help but gawk.

"Hello again, Miss Kerrigan," the large man said in a rumbling voice.

"Hello, Morris," Brooke said and offered the human oak tree a brief wave. "This is a friend of mine, Miss Gerri Madison. There's a pretty good chance she'll be coming over regularly."

"I see. How do you do, Miss Madison," the guard said, putting out his large hand.

Gerri gulped again but shook the hand out of politeness. The man's grip was surprisingly soft, and she shot him a puzzled look. "Just great, thanks. Hope you are, too."

"I'm just fine, thank you."

Smiling, Brooke stepped over to Gerri and put a hand on the back of her coat. "C'mon, Gerri, let me show you the elevators. Have a nice evening, Morris."

"Thank you, Miss Kerrigan. You too," the large guard said before he turned around and went back to his booth.

Over by the elevators, Brooke pressed the up-button and took a step back to wait for the car to arrive. The LED display above the sliding doors showed the elevator was in use on the nineteenth floor, but also that it was approaching fast.

"My gosh, that's a big fella," Gerri mumbled, casting a sideways glance at the guard as he sat down and picked up a newspaper.

"Oh, Morris is a great guy. I believe he's a decorated soldier. Airborne Ranger... or something to that effect. I don't know the terminology. But anyway, don't worry about him."

"He looks like he could tear me in half with his pinkie..."

"Oh, he probably can... but like I said, he's a great guy. I've met his wife, they're a real gorgeous couple."

"Huh."

"Yep," Brooke said and turned around to face Gerri. After looking left and right to make sure the subject of their conversation couldn't hear them, she leaned in towards the taller woman and whispered: "If you ask him, he'll show you his wedding photos. But you need to be really polite because he doesn't like people laughing at the deep purple tux he was wearing."

"Uh... I'll keep that in mind..."

With that, the elevator arrived, and Brooke and Gerri stepped inside and selected the eleventh floor.

The corridor that ran from the elevator and down to Brooke's apartment was just as lavishly decorated as the lobby, and Gerri couldn't help but compare the splendor to her own, less-than-stellar apartment building - among other things, the paintings in the hallway seemed to be originals. All in all, she was getting a little worried that she was stepping into a palace where she'd look and feel out of place.

Brooke had moved ahead to orchestrate a grand entrance for her guest. By the time Gerri caught up to her, Brooke swung open the reinforced, burglar-proof door, clicked on the light and held out her arm. "Welcome to my home. I hope you'll consider it an oasis in a world of confusion, like I do," she said as she ushered her guest inside.

The first part of the apartment was much more down to earth than Gerri had feared. The white, angular hall was dominated by an open wardrobe on the right and a large mirror inside a narrow indentation in the wall on the left. An impressive row of boots and shoes were lined up under the open wardrobe, and Gerri spotted a pair identical to one she had bought for herself in the autumn sale. "Thank you very much. So far, it looks really nice," she said and stepped inside.

Brooke slid in behind her and closed the door. Reaching up, then down, she twisted two special sliding locks that clicked into place with hefty thumps. "King Kong couldn't break down this door," she said and dusted off her hands.

"Mmmm!"

"Gerri, you can hang your jacket here," Brooke said and pointed at the open wardrobe. "I'll just put my coat in my bedroom. Uh... I hadn't expected to bring home a visitor, so that particular room is... uh... not as tidy as the rest of my apartment, if you know what I mean," she continued, winking.

"I do... trust me, I do. Will any coat hanger do, or do you have a strict system?" Gerri said, reaching for, but not taking any of the hangers that seemed to be color coded.

"Oh, you look right through me," Brooke said and let out a girlish snicker. "Any coat hanger will do, Gerri. I wouldn't want to impose my foibles onto you."

Taking off her scarf and her jacket, Gerri hung the items on the first coat hanger she found and put the whole thing back onto the rack. "Oh, that's all right. I have a few quirks on my own when it comes to clothes."

While Gerri spoke, Brooke slipped further up the corridor and went through the first door on the left. A few moments later, she came back out without her trench coat, revealing a mother-of-pearl blouse and a pant suit cut like a business suit. She had also grown two inches shorter - a fact that was pressed home by her socked feet. "Would you mind if I put on a pair of slippers? I know it's a little grandmotherly, but..."

"Oh, no worries. I love slippers," Gerri said with a smile as she walked down the hallway.

Smiling back, Brooke peeked into her bedroom to check before closing the door behind her. "I have a pair for you too, if you want to cut a bit loose."

"Oh... I doubt you have, to be honest. My teenage nickname was Bigfoot," Gerri mumbled, purposely not looking down at her size elevens.

"Now that's just rude!"

"Eh, I got used to it after the three hundredth time..."

Brooke grunted and went back into her bedroom. A short minute later, she came out with a dark brown pair of slippers. "It just so happens I have a pair for you... they're brand new. I bought them for my Dad last Christmas, but our wires got crossed and my Mom had bought a pair as well. I decided to keep 'em... I suspected they would come in handy one day, and they have!"

"Oh... you don't have to do that, Brooke..."

"I insist. C'mon, lose the shoes. These are much more comfortable," Brooke said, wagging the light-weight slippers by her fingertips.

Thus equipped, Gerri stepped into the bright, tastefully decorated living room that was held primarily in white and cream. The room - with a parquet floor and a few, loose circular rugs in bright colors - was dominated by a sandy microfiber couch arrangement and a beechwood coffee table with a hockey-puck-like ceramic sculpture that had holes for four tealight candles. The table also carried a bowl filled with dried leaves and flower buds that sent a sweet fragrance into the air. In each corner of the living room, a brushed aluminum upright cast out a filtered cone of light that seemed to fall down to illuminate the rest of the room perfectly.

Two of the living room's four walls were covered by beechwood bookcases that were bulging at the seams from the many books and DVDs they had to carry. A pair of sliding doors off to the left connected the living room to the kitchen and what appeared to be a dining room, though the latter had been converted into an office. A laptop was opened on a desk inside the office, and Gerri couldn't help but think of the impact that little piece of home electronics had had on her life in an insanely short space of time.

"Oh my, this is such a nice apartment, Brooke!" Gerri said, looking around at the many books and DVDs. "So cozy and warm and friendly... wow!"

"Thank you," Brooke said, stepping out of the kitchen carrying a tray with a stack of napkins and two mugs for their Irish Coffee. "It's my sanctuary. When I come home from work, I always feel a sense of peace in here... a peace that recharges my batteries. In all honesty, I love this place."

"It shows. There are so many beautiful details, like the bowl on the table with the dried flowers... the pretty cushions and the throw... or even the cast iron candlestick up there," Gerri said, pointing at an intricately sculpted item on top of one of the bookcases.

"I'm glad you can see it too, Gerri. That really means a lot to me..." Brooke's voice momentarily trailed off into an oddly pregnant silence. She soon shook her head and smiled at her guest. "My, that's a very pretty blouse! What is that color, electric burgundy?"

"Yes, indeed," Gerri said, highly conscious that Brooke's eyes were on her torso. Most of all, she wanted to suck in her gut - especially seeing the graceful shape of her host - but she knew it would make her roll of fat stand out even more, so she didn't. Instead, she smoothed down her forest green skirt to have something to do with her hands.

Brooke looked up and briefly locked eyes with Gerri, but the older woman averted her gaze almost at once.

"Quite pretty," Brooke said cryptically in a voice tinged with a certain amount of mirth. "Tell you what, why don't you make yourself comfortable while I get our feast started? Oh, and don't be alarmed by the sound, I'm going to make us real whipped cream, not that artificial nonsense you can buy in a can."

"Oh, in that case, I'm giving you a hand," Gerri said and spun around to head for the kitchen, but Brooke's firm shake of the head and even firmer "Nuh-uh!" convinced her otherwise. Instead, she smiled and went back to the couch arrangement where she sat down closest to the bookcase with the DVDs.

While Brooke gave the hand-held mixer a strenuous workout in the kitchen, Gerri browsed the many colorful covers and found several of her own favorites. "That's gotta be a good sign," she whispered to herself as she reached over to take out Gene Kelly's masterpiece *An American In Paris*.

Once she had given the cover a closer look, she put it back between *Brigadoon* and *Seven Brides For Seven Brothers* and moved along the row of movies, most of which were from Hollywood's golden age though there were newer titles as well, like the remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. The row below it saw a host of foreign films including several of Ingmar Bergman's highly intellectual pieces from the 1950s and 1960s. The row below that seemed dedicated to Audrey Hepburn as several of her best-loved works were lined up side by side with the front of the cover in full view.

Gerri didn't have time to see the rest before Brooke came back into the living room with a bowl of whipped cream and a *cafetière* plunger containing steaming hot coffee. "So, here we are!" she said and put down the items on the table. After pouring the coffee and adding the brown sugar into the mugs, she stood up straight and put her hands on her hips. "I've got a great Irish whiskey... Killarney Golden Superior, fourteen years old, aged in oak casks, the works. It's got the most astonishing taste... I think we should use it."

"All right."

"How strong do you want your coffee, Gerri?"

"Oh, well... uh... I need to be able to walk straight afterwards," Gerri said and moved up to the edge of the couch to be ready to stir the mug.

"Just a little squirt, then," Brooke said and hurried over to a low cupboard at the other side of the living room from where she found a half-full bottle of whisky. Once she had put a modest amount of the golden liquid into each mug and stirred like crazy, she scooped up the whipped cream and plumped a fair-sized glob on top of the dark brown surface.

"Okay, now hang on while I nuke the apple pie," Brooke said and zipped out of the living room, much to Gerri's amusement.

A scant minute later, the hostess returned with two helpings of steaming hot apple pie and quickly slapped healthy globs of whipped cream onto them. At once, the cream started melting and oozed down the sides of the pie. "Get 'em while they're hot!" Brooke said, wearing a smile so broad it hardly fit on her face.

"Don't mind if I do," Gerri said and took the plate and her pastry fork. The sounds that came from both women as they sampled the traditional dish were once again dangerously close to orgasmic, and once again, Gerri's cheeks blushed red at the oddly inappropriate nature of her exclamations.

Gerri's first sip of the Irish Coffee filled her with an intense warmth that ran from her scalp and all the way down to the soles of her feet. There, it slowly trickled back until it engulfed her completely. "Oh, this is so delicious, Brooke," she said, discreetly wiping off her whipped cream mustache.

"Good. This is probably my number one winter favorite. I'm glad you like it," Brooke said, balancing a piece of pie on her pastry fork.

"Yeah... Irish Coffee, apple pie and great company... what more can a woman possibly want?" Gerri said in jest, but was slightly concerned to see a shadow briefly racing across Brooke's fair face at the words.

Nothing more came of it and the talk soon went off on more pleasurable topics, so Gerri stored it for later and settled for enjoying the hot drink, the pie and the company like she had said - though she did glance at her hostess from time to time to try to figure out what could have caused the unexpected hiccup.

._*_*_*._

When the traditional feast had been relished and most topics known to Woman had been covered at least once, a sated contentment fell over the two women.

Gerri had kicked off her slippers and had folded her legs up underneath her. Despite the modest amount of Irish whiskey in her coffee, she felt a little buzz rolling around inside her, and judging by the lazy way Brooke sat in her armchair, she felt it too.

The two women locked eyes again, and for once, none of them looked away. Gerri's breath hitched when she realized she wanted to go over to the pretty blonde and kiss her senseless. It hadn't started out as that kind of date, and it still really wasn't that kind of date, but Gerri's objections had a hard time getting the message across to her lips that seemed to take on a life of their own. She could almost feel the sweet contact, taste Brooke's lips that she knew would be exquisite, even hear the gentle, moaning sigh she just knew would spring forth when they were joined.

Almost like Brooke could read Gerri's thoughts, she licked her lips and sat up straight in the armchair. "Gerri... may I ask you a personal question?"

"Uh... of course," Gerri croaked, snapping back to reality.

"I know what I'm looking for," Brooke said quietly, "but I'd like to know what you're looking for."

"With us, you mean?"

"Yes."

Gerri sighed and mirrored her hostess' posture by sitting up straight. "Well," she said, again locking eyes with the pretty blonde opposite her. "What I'm looking for is..." - *love, friendship, warmth, affection, intimacy, boundless support and trust, that you'll smile when you see me like I'll smile when I see you, that we can laugh together and cry together, that you'll be there for me when I'm hurting, just like I'll be there for you when*

you're hurting... all those things I didn't get with Justine... but I can't say that! That'll make Brooke run for the hills...' - "... oh, it's so hard for me to verbalize how I really feel, Brooke," Gerri said and rubbed her brow, "but... if I called it a romantic friendship, it would be very close to the hopes and dreams that float around in my heart."

Gerri's words created a deep frown in the middle of Brooke's otherwise fair brow, and she seemed to be taken aback by the statement. "A romantic friendship? What is that... like friends with benefits?" she said in a voice that had suddenly become strangled.

"No! No, no," Gerri said and jumped up from the couch to race over to Brooke's chair. There, she hurriedly knelt down so she was at eye level with the gloomy blonde. "A romantic friendship is the exact opposite of friends with benefits! That's just sex without love... no, a romantic friendship is all about best friends who share a far deeper connection. A connection where we open up to each other on subjects that simple bowling buddies wouldn't touch... like our hopes and dreams, our fears and desires... or indeed the matters of the heart. Affection, support... inherent trust... intimacy. It could evolve into real, strong love, or it could not, but the most important aspect is the- oh, Brooke, please don't cry..."

The plea wasn't heard and several tears began to run down the expressive blonde's cheeks. Sniffing, she reached into her pockets to find a handkerchief but came up short.

Looking around, Gerri spotted a box of tissues on one of the shelves and quickly snatched it. She pulled out a string of the soft paper and handed it to her host, not yet daring to challenge their newly established connection by soaking up the tears herself. "Oh, I really stepped in it this time, didn't I? I'm so sorry, Brooke... I never meant to cause you pain," she said despondently at the sight of the sniffing woman.

"No," Brooke croaked as another tear escaped her eye and traveled down her cheek. "Your idea is exactly what I had in mind."

"Oh... but..."

"I just didn't understand the term... I thought you meant we were just gonna meet now and then for a quick f- uh... you know. B- but a romantic friendship... I think that's what I've been looking for without even realizing it. I'd love to try... if you're still interested?"

"If I'm still interested?" Gerri parroted. "I'd say yes."

Despite the serious situation the two women had suddenly been thrust into, Brooke let out a snorted chuckle and smiled through her veil of tears. "Good," she said as she wiped her eyes again, "I wish I hadn't had to go through half a dozen hopeless dates from the Rainbow Coalition before I found someone who really understood what I needed... of course, I didn't even understand myself!"

"Well, if I had known you needed my help that badly, I would have created a profile a lot sooner," Gerri said in jest, reaching out to take Brooke's hand.

Content with holding hands for a little while, Gerri and Brooke looked deeply into each other's eyes. They liked what they saw and they both knew it was the start of a beautiful friendship - or in this case, a beautiful romantic friendship.

The air between them crackled with electricity, but Gerri didn't want to push her luck by attempting to kiss the pretty blonde who had turned her entire world upside down without warning.

"Hey..." Brooke whispered.

"What?"

"Get closer, will ya?"

Smiling in relief, Gerri did as asked and leaned in towards Brooke. The kiss they shared was just as sweet, just as exhilarating and just as profound as she had expected. It stole her breath completely and sent her heart into a frenzy, but she didn't have time for irrelevant things like that. The warm wave that exploded out from the contact heightened her senses and allowed her to stretch out her soul and become one with the woman she was kissing. To add even more weight to the kiss, she reached up and placed a gentle hand on the back of Brooke's head, marveling at the silky texture of her short hair that was a perfect match to her smooth, strong lips.

Finally separating, they pulled back a few inches and simply grinned at each other.

"I'm liking this romantic friendship idea," Brooke breathed, leaning forward to nibble on Gerri's lips.

"Good... so do I."

"Mmmm... we're still on the same wavelength... and I guess we've worked on our communication," Brooke said, echoing her own words from when they had been talking in the park.

Gerri smiled wistfully and leaned in to steal another kiss while she was so close to Brooke. "I think we have. Now... thank you so much for a lovely evening. I think it's time for me to go home," she said and got up.

"Oh no, already?" Brooke said and followed the taller woman up from the chair. She didn't allow Gerri to go too far before she wrapped a strong arm around her waist and pulled her into an embrace.

Connected again, Gerri leaned into the embrace and offered Brooke a small kiss on the forehead. "We've started something wonderful tonight, Brooke... we need to let it develop on its own. The last thing I want is to mess it up on our first night by jumping, uh... to conclusions... oh, you know what I mean. I hope you understand."

"A part of me does, another part less so," Brooke said cheekily, standing up on tip-toes to place a little kiss on Gerri's lips. "No, I understand. I want to get it right, too. We need to lay the foundation before we can build the castle. Right?"

"Uh... that's a pretty good analogy, actually," Gerri said with a laugh. A final kiss followed before the two women shuffled down the hallway to get to the open wardrobe.

Once Gerri had put on her scarf and adjusted it to make it line up just right over her jacket, she turned around to sneak a glance at the pretty blonde. She could hardly believe what the evening had brought, much less what the future might hold for her, but she was more than willing to simply let down her guard and enjoy the sweet ride while it lasted. "Brooke, once again thank you for a fantastic evening. You gave me far more than I had ever dreamt of... it's been wonderful. This was the date of a lifetime for me... it's been my best Valentine's Day ever!" she said and leaned down to pull the shorter woman into a strong hug.

"Oh, you're very welcome! And thank you, Gerri... thank you for teaching me a new expression with an old meaning. I really appreciate it," Brooke said, wearing a warm smile. A cheeky, lopsided grin followed, as did a sloppy kiss right on Gerri's lips. "Let's stay in touch, eh?"

"Oh, I have a very strong suspicion that we will..." Gerri said and returned the favor, much to Brooke's squealing surprise.

As the door closed behind her, Gerri needed a moment to gather her thoughts before she could head down to the elevator. Ten billion impressions, colors, scents and emotions swirled around in her head, creating such a sweet madness she could hardly spell her own name.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath to try to sort through the myriad of confusing yet soothing impressions in her mind, but she had to admit defeat and allow the untameable love to run its course.

A genuine smile spread over Gerri's features as she resumed walking towards the elevators. All the way there, she could hear the voices of two women echoing in her mind: one was Brooke speaking words of love and affection in her rich timbre, the other was her mother saying "I told ya so!" over and over and over again.

*

*

THE END.