

ONE DAY
A Valentine Novella
By
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ONE DAY

A Valentine Novella

The Cairngorms, Scotland

One day.

“One bloody day,” I muttered in irritation as I shoved my walking boots on. I fumbled with the torch on my phone and grabbed my last roll of toilet paper. “Bloody hell.” I’d need to get more when the rest of civilization eventually woke up.

Typical, I thought, as I jumped out of the camper van I’d borrowed from my brother. Shivering in the freezing cold February morning, I swung my torch/phone toward the woods, and contemplated hurrying back into the van for my coat.

But the pressure on my bladder insisted I move. Quickly!

Muttering obscenities under my breath I started toward the woods, cursing this cursed fucking day to hell!

Valentine’s Day!

Not once on this camping trip had I needed to pee this early in the morning. But on Valentine’s Day, on a pitch black, baltic, Valentine’s Day at five o’ clock in the morning, of course I was so desperate for a pee there was no way I could wait until the public toilet opened.

To make matters worse I was parked on a layby next to Loch Alvie. I was surrounded by hamlets. The nearest frickin’ town was Aviemore, which to be fair was only ten minutes away but ten minutes was a long time when your bladder was screaming at you. Plus... again... no public toilet was open at this time!

“The woods are probably cleaner,” I huffed, thinking of some of the dodgy public loos I’d used in the past week.

“Ah!” I slipped on mud in the woods, my heart, which had been beating hard already, suddenly pounded faster. “I’m going to die,” I whispered, my eyes round and

huge as I tried to see by the light of my phone. This was how horror stories started. I could see the headlines now:

LONE WOMAN FOUND MURDERED IN WOODS BY LOCH ALVIE.

Locals suspect mythic woodland beast!

“Oh shut up, Hazel,” I murmured, and stopped, feeling far enough away from the road not to be seen by any early work traffic. “You’re more than likely to be mauled by a red squirrel, unable to defend yourself because they’re a bloody endangered species.” And they could be vicious little buggers.

As I unzipped my walking trousers and pushed them and my underwear around my ankles, I cursed bloody Valentine’s Day all over again. Squatting, peeing in the woods in the blistering cold, I sighed. It was as though this day had it in for me. For the past ten years! What the hell had I done to piss off Cupid?

Physical relief moved through me as the pain in my bladder eased, and just as I was about to let out a grateful sigh, my whole body froze at the sound of cracking bracken. I looked up and to my shock saw a light dancing nearby.

Suddenly I was blinded by the light.

A frozen scream stuck in my throat.

I was going to die!

There was someone in the woods, looking at me peeing and I was going to die!!

Well don’t just sit there, you moron!

My body unlocked at that inner demand and I jerked up my arm to hold up my phone. The torch on it did little to help me see in the dark. What I did see was the shadow of a great big hulking figure.

That scream suddenly escaped me and I tried to yank up my trousers and underwear at the same time as running. Except I couldn’t remember in which direction I’d find the road!

“Wait!” I heard a man’s deep voice. “I’m not going—”

But whatever he said was muffled by hard dirt slamming into my body as I fell. The blood whooshed in my ears as my heart sledgehammered against my ribs. The crack of woodland behind me told me he was following me. I scrambled to my feet, desperately trying to get my trousers on. I’d succeeded with the underwear but the fucking trousers had fucking fallen again and fucking tripped me up.

“Come on!” I whisper screamed, tears burning my eyes as I got them up. Suddenly I was out of the trees and—“Ahhh!” I scrambled to a stop, slipping on the large

pebbles on the shore of the loch. I whipped around as that bright light bounced out after me.

I was *not* going to die here.

I rushed the mammoth man with all my strength and collided with his solid body. My hope was he'd go down and I'd get passed him. But his grunt sounded in my ears as we both tripped over the loose rocks around us and fell head first toward the woods. My head thudded against dirt and the breath was knocked out of me.

"Fuck," I heard the voice say. "Shit. Are you okay?"

I stilled at the concern in the stranger's voice, and for some stupid reason, instead of taking the opportunity to run like hell, I wheezed out, "Are you American?"

He shifted beside me and I realized we were all tangled up in each other, his heavy legs over mine. He gently extricated his legs from mine and placed his torch between us. A ghoulish face looked at me. I imagined my own face was just as ghoulish in the torchlight. His eyes, however, were not the eyes of a crazed madman. They seemed to hold genuine concern.

"Yes, I'm American. Liam Brody." He held out his hand to me, but I just stared at it, still not convinced I wasn't in danger. "You can call me Brody."

I continued to study his hand, wondering if I moved now, might I get away?

"I'm not a homicidal maniac," he said, amusement in his words, "I promise. I left my tent because I needed to pee and after I did, I saw your light in the woods, and then I saw you... well... and then you were screaming and taking off. I realized I'd scared the shit out of you, and probably in hindsight shouldn't have chased after you to assure you I wasn't going to kill you. So... sorry about that."

If I hadn't still been shaking from adrenaline (and blaming him for it) I might have grinned at his explanation. "Where's your tent?"

He swung the torch to my left and it lit up the shallow rocky bank of the loch. In the distance I could see the outline of a tent.

"I think that might be illegal," I said. "And bloody idiotic in this weather." I looked back at him. "You must be freezing."

"I'm not the one wearing only a sweater."

True enough I could see and feel the puffy jacket he was wearing. "I've got two T-shirts underneath my jumper."

Liam ignored that. "Where's your tent?"

"Camper van." I said, moving to my feet. "Parked on the layby."

He got up too, towering over me by a good nine or ten inches. I was small at five foot five so it was easy for a really big guy to look like a giant next to me. Feeling intimidated I took a step back. “Can you find your way back?”

“Sure, I—oh balls in hell!” I bit out, realizing I’d dropped my damn phone in my rush to get away from Liam.

“What is it?”

“I dropped my phone.”

“I have a good sense of direction if you want me to take you back the way we came?”

I contemplated him a moment. “You promise you’re not a homicidal maniac?”

“I promise. Although for future reference a homicidal maniac would probably promise that too before he killed you.”

I stared at him in horror.

“But I’m not one.”

“You really know how to reassure a strange woman who is lost in the woods with only you and your torch to rely on.”

He gave a huff of laughter and strode past me into the dark cover of the trees. “You can hold onto my jacket if you want. Or I could take your hand.”

“I’ll manage,” I insisted, thinking a little distance between us wouldn’t be a bad thing in case I did need to run for my life from him. “Fucking Valentine’s Day,” I muttered.

“What was that?”

“Oh nothing.”

We were silent, the only sounds around us the creaking woods, the early morning whisper of bugs and birds, and in the distance a vehicle driving by.

“Kind of bold of you,” Liam suddenly said.

“Huh?” I’d been intent on watching my footing in the dim light his torch left behind as he moved in front of me.

“Peeing in the woods by yourself.”

“Well it was that or pee myself.”

“You could have peed on the layby.”

Was I really discussing public urination with a strange man? I snorted at the thought. “People use that layby. I wasn’t going to pee on it. Plus anyone passing would have seen my bare arse.”

“And you’d deny them that pleasure?” I heard the laughter in his words and couldn’t help but grin in response.

“How do you know it would be a pleasure? I might have an arse like a moon crater.”

Liam chuckled. “I know for a fact that’s not true.”

Mortification flooded me as I realized he’d probably caught sight of my bare arse fleeing him! “Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

“Do you keep muttering ‘Fucking Valentine’s Day’?”

“Yes. Because it is. Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

“That it is,” he said, sounding suddenly grim.

Could it be? Had I actually found another human being who understood that VD was not a day for celebration but a cursed, commercial piece of bullshit lorded over by a tiny cherub-shaped tyrant?

I grunted in acknowledgment of his grim tone.

“Any sign of my phone?” I said, hoping we found the damn thing. It cost a small fortune.

“We’re getting closer to where you were peeing.”

I flushed at his casual mention of it. “You know, you could stop talking about the fact that you’ve seen me in such a vulnerable position.”

“We all need to pee,” Liam said matter-of-factly. “It’s not like I caught you taking a sh—”

“Tra la lah!” I cried to shut him up.

He gave a bark of laughter and stopped to look back at me. “I can’t believe you actually tra la lah-ed. No one tra la lahs.”

“I do... when I’m trying to stop rude Americans discussing my bodily functions.”

“We all need to sh—”

“Tra la la la lah, la la la lah!”

His shoulders were shaking in front of me. “You do realize you’re tra la lahing to *Deck the Halls*?”

I played the Christmas song quickly in my head. Damn. I *had* just tra la lahed to it. “Stop talking about... certain things and I’ll stop tra la la—”

“Got it,” he suddenly said triumphantly.

He bent over, and when he straightened and turned around he had his torch lit over my phone. “Looks okay.”

“Oh thank heavens.” I took it from him. “Thank you. Any chance my loo roll is there?” I gestured beyond him.

He swung back around, bent down again and retrieved the toilet paper.

“Thank God.” I took it from him.

“You need help getting back to your van?” the words were tinged with laughter.

I hated to admit it but it was either wander lost by myself for a while or take a chance that the American wasn't homicidal. “Yeah. Please.”

“No problem.”

I started following him again, using my own torch/phone to light my way.

“You know you should invest in an actual flashlight,” Liam said. “The one on your phone won't get you very far.”

“It got me far enough to pee,” I said, forgetting momentarily that I'd insisted we not talk about my bodily functions.

Suddenly we broke out of the woods, coming to a stop at the bottom of the slope that led up to the layby. Liam climbed it and then turned around to hold out his hand to help me up.

I took it, and a shiver ran through me at the feel of his callused skin against mine. His hand was huge compared to my hand and he pulled me up like I weighed no more than a feather. Putting the shiver down to the fact that it was freezing cold outside, I ignored the sharp heat of awareness I felt toward him.

His torch swung over my brother's camper van.

It was about eight years old and not the prettiest looking thing ever. Still, it was comfortable inside. Along with plenty of sleeping space, it had a sink to wash in, a burner to make tea on, and to heat up soup and beans on.

I thought about Liam in his little tent in the cold. If I were wise I'd get in my van and leave. However, I seemed to be plagued by a sense of gratitude toward the American, and an even weirder feeling of not wanting to say goodbye to him just yet.

Which was ridiculous because I'd spent the last week avoiding men and loving every minute of it.

“Wait there,” I said, striding past him to my van. I climbed in the back and opened the drawer under the burner. Grabbing the penknife I had inside it, I clambered back out of the van with the knife switched open.

“Do you want a cup of tea?” I said casually.

His torch swung from me to the knife. “How do I know you’re not a homicidal maniac planning on killing me for my handsome pelt?”

A smile prodded the corners of my mouth at his teasing. “I keep this at hand for protection and you get a hot cup of tea, or you can wander back into the woods to your cold wee tent. What’s it going to be?”

“I’ll have the tea, thanks,” he said, striding toward me.

The light from my van spilled over his face.

Holy fuck.

He had a chiseled, stubbly jawline, and short, closely-cropped dark blonde hair and he was... well he was hot.

Really hot.

He wasn’t joking about his handsome pelt.

I gave him a weak smile and gestured for him to climb on in, suddenly rethinking this idea. I wasn’t exactly immune to a pretty face and I had sworn off men for the time being.

“I hope you realize how much of a chance I’m taking,” he said, somehow managing to gracefully get his large body inside my van. “You could do anything to me in here.”

I grinned at his teasing, charmed already (and inwardly cursing myself for it!) and climbed in after him. After pulling the doors shut to block out some of the cold, I placed the penknife on the unit by the burner and hurriedly slipped on my jacket. As I did my eyes clashed with Liam’s and in the bright overhead light of the van I saw his eyes were gorgeous. Light green and expressive.

He was unfairly good-looking.

I set about boiling my kettle over the burner, a little self-conscious because I could feel him watching my every movement.

He suddenly reached out to touch my arm and I jumped.

“Your hand. You’ve got a cut,” he explained.

I turned it over to look at it and saw he was right. It must have happened during one of my falls. “It’s not too bad.”

“You should clean it. Use some of the hot water from the kettle and a cloth. Have you got a first aid kit?” He said, looking around the van.

“Behind my rucksack.” I pointed to large bag I’d placed behind the driver’s seat and watched as Liam crawled over to it. His jacket shrugged up his body and his walking trousers tightened over his arse.

I felt a little build up of saliva in my mouth.

That is a very, very good arse.

“Got it,” he said and I dragged my gaze away before he caught me ogling him.

Damn it.

“Fucking Valentine’s Day,” I muttered, rummaging through a plastic carrier bag I kept tea towels in. I found one and carefully poured a little of the hot water on it.

“Here.”

I looked up at Liam.

“I’ll do it.”

Deciding to trust the apparent sincerity in his beautiful eyes I crawled over to him and held out the cloth. He gently took it and my hand, and began to clean my cut.

I stared determinedly at what he was doing rather than at his face. “Thanks,” I murmured.

“You’re welcome,” he murmured back, his voice deep and far sexier than any man’s voice had a right to be.

A flip in my lower belly caused a shot of tingles to rush between my legs, and at the same time my nipples tightened against my bra.

It’s the cold! I assured myself, even though I knew it wasn’t.

Of course I’d meet the most attractive man ever on Valentine’s Day. It was official: Cupid hated me.

It seemed to take forever for him to clean my cut, put antiseptic on it, and then seal the cut with a plaster. Or a bandaid, as he called it.

“You’re all good.” He stroked his thumb over the top of my hand and my eyes flew to his.

His gaze roamed over my face in this interested, appreciative way I knew too well.

I yanked my hand from him. “Tea?” I said, hurriedly crawling away from him.

I thought I heard him chuckle behind me before he said, “Tea would be great.”

“I have milk in a chill box,” I said, pulling it out and opening the box filled with ice. Nestled in the ice was the fresh milk I’d bought the day before, along with some cans of Diet Coke.

“Milk would be great.”

“Sugar?” I threw over my shoulder.

For some reason that made him grin. “No thanks.”

I made us both tea (mine with milk and two sugars), and handed him his mug. Our fingers brushed as I did so and I felt that rush of awareness flood me again.

Jesus Christ.

Liam took a sip, as he looked casually around the place I’d been living in for a week. “So... you know my name,” his gaze swung back to me, “But I don’t know yours.”

Deciding there was no harm in giving him my name I said, “Hazel.”

“Hazel. It suits you.”

“It would have suited me even better if I had hazel eyes.” My mum had hazel eyes. I’d seen the photos. And all my siblings had hazel eyes. Instead I got my dad’s eyes. Big, dark eyes, so dark brown they glittered like jet in a certain light.

“No.” He shook his head, but didn’t elaborate on what his ‘no’ meant.

“So...” I searched for something to ask him. “Are you just visiting Scotland?”

Liam stared into his mug, his hands wrapped tight around the heat of it. “No, I live here.”

“In a tent?”

“No. I’m just doing a camping trip thing right now.”

“Me too. Except in a camper van. I don’t think I could sleep in a tent in this weather.”

“It’s not too bad. I’m from Gunnison, Colorado. Believe me, I know cold. This isn’t it.” He grinned.

He had a good smile. No, a great smile. His teeth were white, but they weren’t perfectly straight, and his smile was a little crooked. Somehow... it was boyish *and* sexy.

Fuck.

I ignored the sudden heat in my skin. “How cold does it get there?”

“Minus seven.”

That didn’t seem so bad.

He must have read the thought on my face because he said, “In Fahrenheit not Celcius.”

I winced. “Bloody hell. Note to self: avoid Gunnison, Colorado.”

Liam laughed. “At least in the winter.”

“So why Scotland?” I said, intrigued to know more about him. Far more intrigued than I’d like to be.

“I studied here. My postgrad. The University of Aberdeen. Liked it so much I stayed.”

I smiled because it was inherently Scottish to be pleased when a foreigner said they liked our country. We were such proud creatures, we Scots, easily flattered when an outsider understood the beauty of our land.

A beauty I’d just spent the last week getting to know better, developing a deeper bond with the highlands.

It had all been going so well until now.

No work, no men, nothing but the stunning lochs, valleys and mountains, and my own thoughts.

Until Liam Brody.

To my utter annoyance I wasn’t upset about meeting him (now that the initial shock of our unusual meeting had worn off), which was exactly why I needed to get away from the American as fast as possible.

“So how long have you lived here then?” *Yes, because more questions will get rid of him.*

He blew air out of his lips as he thought about it. “About... ten years.”

“That makes you...?”

He smiled at my nosy question. “Thirty-two.”

“So, what did you study? At uni?”

“Forestry.”

I raised an eyebrow. It wasn’t every day I met someone who studied Forestry.

“And what does one do with a postgrad degree in Forestry?”

“Become a Forest Engineer.”

I suddenly had an image of him in an open plaid flannel shirt, his rippled torso gleaming with sweat while he swung an axe at a tree. I squashed the delicious lumberjack fantasy, but my words were a little hoarse when I said, “What does... what is that? What does that involve?”

Almost as if he knew what I was imagining, his eyes gleamed with amusement.

“Log removal from timber harvesting areas.”

The sexy image fluttered across my eyes again. “Physically? By yourself?”

Liam grinned. “No, it’s a little more complicated than that.”

Knowing he'd been in Scotland so long seemed to make me more aware of his accent, and I realized that he ended some of his words with a Scottish burr. That was hot, too.

"How?" I was actually interested to know.

"I survey the timber harvesting area. That means drawing maps of the topographical features of the land using a computer program, planning and directing construction of roads and rail networks that we need to transport the logs from the harvest area to a safe storage and loading area. I ensure the safe and efficient removal of the logs by planning and overseeing the construction of campsites, loading docks, bridges, equipment shelters and water systems. And I select the methods and equipment we'll use for handling the logs."

There wasn't anything about that that wasn't interesting or appealing to me, and I couldn't explain why.

Okay, maybe it was the lumberjack fantasy.

"Forest engineer." I nodded. "Good job."

He laughed. "Glad you think so. What do you do, Hazel?"

As good as my name sounded on his lips, it wasn't good enough to dig a real answer out of me. I did not want to tell this big handsome forest engineer that my job sucked. "I'm a journalist," I evaded.

"What kind of journalist?"

"The kind of journalist that takes a break from her life by borrowing her brother's camper van."

The kind of journalist that didn't want to talk about it.

I threw back the rest of my tea.

Liam seemed to get what I wasn't saying and followed my lead by finishing his drink. He handed it to me, something like disappointment in his eyes. "I guess I better get out of your hair then."

Feeling rude and guilty since he'd offered answers to my inquisitiveness, I took his mug without meeting his gaze. "Yeah, I should get moving."

"Okay." He slid toward the back of the van and I opened the doors for him, watching as he climbed out.

He looked back at me as he turned his torch on. "It was nice meeting you, Hazel."

I wished he'd stop saying my name like that!

Ignoring the sudden urge to ask him not to go away, I gave him a tremulous smile.
“Thanks for not murdering me, Liam.”

His eyes seemed to flash at my words in a way that gave me the tingles again. With one last crooked smile thrown my way, Liam Brody disappeared into the dark woods by Loch Alvie, leaving me with this strange ache in my chest.

He was gone for good.

“It’s for the best,” I whispered to myself, closing the van doors. “Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

A while later I had a quick, cold wash over my sink, brushed my teeth, put a little make up on, changed into clean clothes (as fast as possible), and got into the driver’s seat of the van.

According to my brother, Johnny, who’d done this highland trip a few times in his camper van, there was a great place for breakfast near Newtonmore. It was kind of a middle of nowhere diner where lorry drivers stopped to eat.

Apparently the breakfast was *good*.

Following my brother’s directions, I made my way there in what was turning out to be a beautiful sunny but crisply cold morning. It had been raining for the past few days, but of course the sun would come out on Valentine’s Day.

I thought of Liam in his tent by himself, wondering what he was planning on eating for breakfast. I also wondered about his method of travel. There wasn’t another car in the layby... was the idiot walking everywhere?

Well that was a sure way to get killed by a passing vehicle.

But that wasn’t any of my business. I frowned.

Maybe I should turn back and get him.

Or maybe not!

Ignoring my concern for a complete stranger, I found the diner and parked up beside an artic lorry.

It wasn’t the most attractive place inside. Everything was grimy beige in color. The floors had rubber marks all over it, and the leather on the booths had seen better days. But it was clean. And it was busy.

I took a seat at the first empty table I could find.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” a waitress said to me as she took down an order from the guys at the table in front of me.

I nodded and stared at the menu, even though I already knew I wanted a great, big, fat, Scottish breakfast.

My belly rumbled in anticipation.

“Coffee, tea?” the waitress appeared at my side.

“Tea, please. And some orange juice if you have it.”

“Aye, sure. Ready to order?”

“The full Scottish breakfast.”

Her gaze raked over me. I was not only little in height, but small-boned, slender. “It’s a big portion, mind.”

I may be small, but I could pack it away when I wanted to. I grinned. “Perfect.

“Eggs?”

“Scrambled.”

She strode away with my order just as the door to the diner opened.

A small bearded man walked in, and I was just about to drop my gaze when it snagged on his companion.

Liam Brody.

No. Fucking. Way.

As though he sensed me his head swung in my direction, his eyes widening in recognition and surprise.

So... it would seem the universe was determined to put this American in my path.

Johnny, who was a bit of a hippy and believed in the spiritual world, fate and destiny and all that nonsense, would say this was kismet.

With his voice in my head, I thought, *oh what the hell*. I smiled at Liam and gave him a wave.

He accepted my invitation, clapped the small, bearded man on the shoulder in what appeared to be thanks and made his way over to me.

Liam grinned as he slid his big body into the small booth. His jacket was open, and peeking out of it was a red flannel shirt like the one I’d fantasized seeing him in earlier.

I tried not to flush like an idiot. “Hello, Stranger.”

“This is just weird,” he said, still grinning.

“How did you get here?”

“I was walking down the B9152 when that trucker,” he gestured behind him, “Pete, stopped and told me I was going to get myself killed.”

“He’s not wrong.” I frowned. “Why are you walking?”

He grimaced. “My car died just before Aviemore. I put it into a garage but it was going to take too long to fix it. I decided to walk.”

“I can’t believe you ended up here.” I stared around at the diner, avoiding his penetrating stare.

“Apparently the universe wants us to spend some time together.”

My eyes jerked back to his, surprised that he’d said just what I’d been thinking. I gave a huff of laughter. “Apparently.”

“What can I get you?” the waitress was back.

“Uh...” Liam glanced over the menu and asked me, “What are you having?”

“Full Scottish breakfast.”

“I’ll have the same.” He handed the menu to her. “Scrambled eggs. And a coffee, please.”

She took it from him without a word and walked away.

“Well it’s certainly a friendly diner,” I cracked.

“Yeah but Pete said the breakfast is really good.”

“My brother said the same thing. That’s how I knew where to find this place.”

“The same brother who owns the camper van?” Liam said almost cautiously, like he was afraid any personal questions might send me fleeing.

Oh what the hell, I thought again. “The very same. I’m running from life for a while. I was inspired by Valentine’s Day to do it.”

Appearing as though he were trying not to laugh, Liam said, “Is that so?”

“The day is cursed. For me anyway.”

“Sounds like an interesting story.”

I settled back in the small leather booth and stared at his too handsome face. “You want to hear my story?”

He mirrored my actions, relaxing in his seat. “Definitely.”

“Okay... first off I have had grand plans of being a feature writer in a newspaper magazine like the Herald or the Guardian since I was seventeen. I’m twenty seven and still writing an advice column in a woman’s magazine I myself would rather eat than read.”

Liam covered what I knew was a laugh with a cough.

“It’s okay, you can laugh,” I smirked, “It’s pretty pathetic.”

“You just... you have an amusing way of putting things.”

“Apparently that’s why my editor won’t promote me out of the advice column. It’s not being the advice columnist that’s really the issue. I’m quite an opinionated person; I quite like giving advice to people. But I get some great letters, from people with real, troubling problems, and my editor won’t let me respond to them. All we publish are saucy affair advice problems, and “my boyfriend or my cat ultimatums”...It’s frustrating to say the least.”

“So you hate your job and presumably loathe yourself for sacrificing your happiness for money.”

“Wow.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “You’re good at that summation crap, aren’t you?”

He grinned.

“Yes. I make good money writing my pithy, often sarcastic, bordering on insulting column, that for some reason our readers love. I’ve sold my soul for a mortgage and a Mini Cooper. That’s one of the reasons I’m taking a break from my life.”

“The other reason?”

“Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

Liam chuckled. “Explain.”

Our breakfast arrived before I could, and as we were both apparently ravenous, we were quiet a moment while we dug in.

Finally Liam swallowed a bite of haggis and scrambled eggs and said, “You were saying?”

“The dreaded VD.” I scowled just thinking about it. “Ten years ago I was dating a musician that was two years older than me. He dumped me on Valentine’s Day for another girl. Apparently she actually appreciated his music.” I made face at the memory. “Three years later my boyfriend of a year, sat me down on Valentine’s Day and told me he was gay.”

Liam choked on his breakfast and I shoved my glass of orange juice at him. He took it gratefully.

“I’m fine now,” I assured him as he looked at me with watery-eyed shock. “It was quite a surprise then and I did wonder why me for a while.”

Dropping his eyes to my chest, Liam said, “Yeah, you’d think he’d go for a more boyish type of girl.”

I was fairly well endowed in the boob area despite my slender frame. My sister, Heather, who was built like me but with a chest to match, often told me enviously that God had clearly loved me more than her when He saw fit to gift me with my figure. Heather was beautiful and had nothing to complain about her physical appearance. However, I always secretly thought that God probably might love me more but only because Heather learned to be a bitch at the age of seven, and over the years became proficient in it. She was now a *raving* bitch.

I laughed at Liam's brazen ogling, putting thoughts of Heather out of my head. "Right? So... yes, surprised. But I got over it. And then a year later I was dating this wannabe bad boy, a bit like the first boyfriend. He was shagging a friend of mine," I fluffed the truth a little, not wanting to open *that* can of worms, "I found out on Valentine's Day. Two years after that, having still not gotten over my attraction to the idiot bad boy, I got dumped by my second musician when he decided to go with his band to the US. Having finally realized I was getting nowhere with the bad boy I started dating good guys. Unfortunately the first bored me to tears so I ended it. Finally three months ago I started dating a scientist. He was nice enough, quite good in bed, so I thought it might work out."

"I'm guessing it didn't," Liam mused.

"Nope. He told me he loved me a few weeks ago. I didn't say it back because I didn't feel it yet. He knew about the other Valentine's Day disaster dumpings so he kindly told me last week that he was breaking up with me now to save me from the humiliation of a fifth VD dumping. I decided then it was a good time to take a break from my life. Gather some perspective and get to know my country better while doing it."

Liam stopped eating to stare at me. "You do realize that VD also means venereal disease?"

"I do. I think it's quite fitting for Valentine's Day. But just to be clear, I wasn't dumped because I had VD."

Laughter in his voice, he said, "Thank you for sharing that."

"Do you have VD?"

He choked again, banging his fist against his upper chest. His words were hoarse, "That might be the weirdest, most intrusive question anyone has ever asked me."

Surely not the weirdest, I thought. "Do you think gay porn starring Arnie and Sly would be hot?"

“I stand corrected. That was weirder. And very disturbing.”

I shrugged, grinning. “I’m kind of a strange person.”

Suddenly his eyes gleamed with humor and if I wasn’t mistaken, a little bit of sex.
“Strange can be good.”

I didn’t understand what he meant exactly, but there was definitely flirtatiousness in his voice. “Did you just say something dirty to me?”

He threw his head back in laughter but didn’t answer.

I continued to eat my breakfast, my eyes narrowed on him. To be honest I was excited he might be flirting with me, but I was also wary. After all it was fucking Valentine’s Day. And Liam Brody was too charming for his own good.

“Are *you* a bad boy?” I suddenly asked.

His expression sobered and I saw a glimmer of pain in his eyes before he lowered them. “Not even in the slightest.”

Hmm. There was a story there. But before I could ask he said, “So, have you found what you’re looking for on this break of yours?”

“Not yet,” I said, disheartened by the thought. I’d hoped that by some stroke of luck or magic I’d stumble across life’s answers. However, I’d come to the conclusion that life wasn’t really like that. There was stumbling involved but it was *through* life.

“Where are you headed to next?”

“Fort William, but I thought I’d stop at Laggan first.”

His study of me was suddenly intense. I almost squirmed in my seat.

“What?” I said eventually.

He shrugged. “Well... I’m making my way to Fort William. To climb Ben Nevis to be exact. But I could stop in Laggan.”

“You’re just looking for a free ride,” I teased.

“I could get that from Pete.”

“The bearded truck driver you just met?”

Liam grinned. “We have a bond, Pete and I.”

Chuckling I shook my head at him. “I’m not sure I should offer a free ride to such a charmer. It can only end badly.”

“You think I’m charming?”

I sighed as if I found his charm insufferable. “Only in the worst way.”

“There’s a bad way to be charming?”

“On fucking Valentine’s Day, yes.”

“Well... what if I promise you that I hate Valentine’s Day, and that I’d like to spend the day with a woman who shares my revulsion?”

Smiling and curious, I cocked my head in curiosity. “Why do you hate it?”

“Because...” he seemed to hesitate, as if unsure whether to share with me, “a woman upended my life a few weeks’ before Valentine’s Day. I’ve disliked the day ever since.”

“Kismet,” I murmured, feeling a thrum of energy heat my blood at his confession.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I shook my head, trying to control the sudden pounding of my heart. “Just something my brother would say.”

He threw his napkin on his empty plate. “So? Do you want to spend the day with me pretending it’s just another day?”

“What the hell.” I shrugged, throwing my napkin on my plate too. He grinned, pleased. “Just remember,” I said, “I have my penknife on me at all times.”

He slid out of the booth, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket. “You know, you don’t need that knife to force seduction on me.” He winked at me.

And before I could respond to his flirtatious remark he strode away to pay for his breakfast. I had just reached the counter to pay for mine when he turned around and took hold of my hand. “Put your money away.”

“You paid for my breakfast?”

“Of course,” he said gruffly.

“Uh... thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He led me to the other side of the diner to where bearded lorry driver Pete sat with another man. “Hey, Pete, I need to grab my stuff.”

Pete looked from Liam to me and grinned widely. “So I see. Got another ride, did you?”

Ignoring the insinuation in his tone, I waited as he handed his keys to Liam. “Bring them right back.”

Still holding my hand, Liam strolled outside toward a smaller truck parked at the opposite end of the car park. “Do people always automatically trust you?” I said, referring to the fact that Pete had given his keys quite happily over to the American, and I’d let him into my van this morning.

He threw a cocky smile over his shoulder at me. “I just have one of those faces.”

“Tell me about it,” I murmured.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

When he let go of my hand to jump up into the lorry for his huge rucksack, I tried not to feel bereft at the loss of his touch. I should have been annoyed that he was holding my hand. It was after all completely forward of him to do so!

But I wasn't annoyed.

Damn.

“Where are you parked?” he said as he locked up Pete's lorry for him.

“Behind that big artic.” I pointed.

“Okay, I'll meet you there.” He threw me another quick, crooked smile that made my belly flutter, and hurried back inside the diner.

“You're in trouble,” I muttered as I walked to my camper van. “Big trouble. Biggest.” I slammed into the van, half excited, half annoyed at this whole kismet thing and at Johnny for always talking about crap like fate.

Thanks to him there was a possibility that I might lose my knickers tonight.

Suddenly the back of the van opened and I craned my neck to see Liam's huge rucksack getting thrown in. And then he was getting into the passenger side beside me.

He stared at me, smiling with those gorgeous eyes.

Yup.

There is a definite possibility I will lose my knickers tonight.

Boating was a bad idea. I knew it from the moment we got in the damn boat.

It turned out Laggan was a tiny village with very few buildings interspersed throughout the gorgeous surroundings. There were stores—a quaint, beautiful old building with a white painted sign that declared it LAGGAN STORES. There was also a country hotel up the hill, and a few homes here and there. But mostly there were green rolling mountains as far as the eye could see, dipping down into the beautiful valley that homed the River Spey.

Liam had suggested we hire a canoe boat and take in the scenery from a new vantage point.

I tried to tell him I was useless with a paddle.

“You keep veering toward the bank,” he said, grinning at my uselessness.

I huffed, “Well dear God man, you’re stronger than I am. Surely you can stop me.”

He laughed. “I don’t think an army could stop you if you put your mind to something.”

“I’m not exactly putting my mind to paddling us in the wrong direction.” I looked down at the paddle in my hand. “How is it possible to be getting this wrong?” I dragged it out of the water.

“Look, I’ll show you.” The boat wavered as Liam leaned over toward me.

“Don’t do that!” I cried.

“Nothing is going to happen.”

He moved again toward me and the boat wobbled even more. My instinctive reaction was to try and stabilize it with my own body and I moved to center myself.

However, I completely forgot I had a large paddle in my hand, and as I moved the paddle came up out of the water.

“Hazel, shit—”

My heart rammed against my chest as I realized the paddle was coming for Liam’s head. I was about to drop it but his reflexes were faster. He ducked to avoid it, overthrowing his balance, and then—

SPLASH!

Horror moved through me. I had no idea how deep the river was, how good of a swimmer Liam was, and I suddenly realized I might have to jump in there to save him!

“Liam!”

I moved to do just that when the water rippled and splashed again as Liam soared up out of it and onto his feet. He stood, the water at waist level, and wiped the river water off his face.

I eyed his dripping clothes in guilt. “It’s shallow water here, then?”

His eyes danced with humor.

“Sorry.”

“My own fault. I should have listened to you.”

I smiled sheepishly and pointed to myself. “Bad at boating.”

My heart lurched as he grabbed the sides of the canoe boat, and for one second I thought he was going to topple me into the water in revenge. Instead he gently dragged the boat to the banks of the river and helped me onto land.

“You need to get out of those wet clothes,” I said.

“Ah,” he threw me a smirk, “So this was a master plan was it?”

I made a face. “I assure you, I don’t need to resort to almost drowning a man to get him naked.”

“I bet you don’t,” he murmured sexily.

Trying not to flush and failing, I distracted us by gesturing to the boat. “What do we do with this?”

He spun around, looking up through the trees. “I get my stuff from the van, while you tell the boat hire guys where to get the boat. And then we find some place where I can take a shower.”

“No. You come with me to the boat hire guys. If they see the state you’re in, they might not be mad that they have to go out to find their damn boat.”

That’s exactly what we did.

And I was right.

The guys were too busy giving me a lecture about not going out in a boat when I wasn’t confident in one, and putting my companion in danger, to care about having to rescue their boat.

I took the admonishment, all the while wanting to kill Liam who was trying his hardest not to laugh all the way through the lecture.

“Amused, are we?” I grumbled as we climbed the hill to where my camper van was parked.

“Just a little.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

“You know you curse a lot.”

I did swear a lot. Will, the scientist who had dumped me last week, had told me it was the one thing about me he didn’t find attractive. Unfortunately, it was a bad habit to break. I’d grown up with three big brothers and an aggressive older sister. There was a lot of swearing in our household. You swore that much, you became attached to the words. Like “fuck” for instance. It was the only word that could be put in front of any other word and still make sense. There was beauty in that!

“I’m not criticizing you,” he said softly at my silence.

“Oh?”

“It was just an observation.”

“Three big brothers,” I said as way of explanation. “It’s a bad habit I can’t break.”

“I don’t mind it,” he assured me. “You make “fuck” sound cute.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “I’m sure.”

“It’s true.” He threw me a grin before he opened the camper van doors and started riffling through his rucksack for dry clothes.

While he did that I grabbed a coat hanger out of one of my carrier bags, shoved my sleeping bag and duvet aside and pulled down a hook near the roof of the van. “Give me your jacket.”

“It’ll drip all over the place,” he said, realizing what I meant to do.

“We’ll wring it out a bit.”

After he shrugged the jacket off, we each took an end and did just that. When we got as much of the water out of it as we could without ruining the damn thing, I hung it up for him in the van.

He gave me a grateful smile.

“Now what?”

“We passed a guest house,” he said, pointing in the direction of where we’d come from on our trek back from the boat. “When we were on the water I saw it.”

“And what are you planning on doing?”

“Charming my way into the owner’s shower.”

Laughing, I followed him, carrying his dry clothes for him so they wouldn’t get wet from the clothes he was currently wearing. I had no doubt he could charm his way into a convent.

The guest house as it turned out was a moderately-sized home with the most stunning views over the River Spey. I had my doubts that the owner would let a strange man use their shower, and my doubts were founded when an elderly woman opened the door and stared at Liam like he’d just come out of the swamp. She was perhaps in her seventies, and she was wearing walking trousers and a thick cable-knit jumper. Her white hair was thick and full, and twisted up in place by a large barrette. Her skin was weather worn, and there was a no-nonsense air about her.

As he explained what had happened her eyes shot to me and she tsked, “Never go out on a boat if you can’t even handle a paddle.”

I winced. “Yeah, I get that now.”

“I’d be grateful if you’d let me use your shower,” Liam said. “I’ll even pay.”

The elderly woman studied him carefully. “I’m not in the habit of letting non-paying guests use my facilities. What if this is a scam to steal from me?” her eyes swung to me suspiciously and my lips parted in indignation.

Why was I the more likely culprit than Liam?

“I promise,” he grinned but it turned to a chitter, “We’re no thieves.”

“Och, look at you,” she heaved a heavy, taking in his dripping clothing. She stepped aside, “Come in before you catch a chill. ”

“Thank you. You’re so kind,” he gave her that boyish smile and to my surprise she preened under it.

“That one is certainly a charmer,” she said to me as she let me inside her home.

“I’m aware,” I replied dryly. “I’m Hazel, by the way.”

“Belinda. Everyone around here calls me Belle.”

“Liam,” he said as we stopped inside her hallway. “I’d offer you my hand, Belle, but it’s currently covered in river grime.”

Belle chuckled, shaking her head. “Falling in the Spey on a February morning. Were you trying to kill him?” She teased me.

“Yes, were you trying to kill me?” Liam cocked his head, his eyes bright with mirth and flirt.

I smirked. “Not today.”

The old woman laughed, and then gestured toward a room on the right. “Have a seat in there, Hazel, while I show your boyfriend to a shower.”

I opened my mouth to correct her but Liam spoke first. “You have a beautiful home, Belle,” he said as she began leading him upstairs.

Rolling my eyes, I wandered into the sitting room and took a seat on a pink velvet chair. “Could charm his way into a convent,” I muttered.

Not too long later Belle reappeared in the sitting room. “That’s him all settled. Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?”

“Oh I don’t want to put you out.”

“Not at all. I only have a few guests staying at this time of year and they’re all out and about wandering. It’s quite nice to have the company.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

She gave me a nod and then paused, looking thoughtful. “Towels. I haven’t gotten around to changing them over for the evening. He has no towels.” Before I could say anything she was gone, and I could hear the stairs creaking as she climbed them.

It only felt like a few minutes later when she reappeared in the sitting room, this time wearing an amused smile.

“Is everything alright?”

The stairs creaked, and footsteps sounded down the hall toward us before she could speak. Suddenly Liam was in the doorway.

I was momentarily frozen at the sight of him in jeans, one boot, a sock and well... nothing else.

He was ripped.

Like... seriously... his abs!

My fantasy of him had nothing on reality.

He shoved on his other boot and then strode over to me with his laces undone. Before I could speak he bent toward me, handing me his wet clothes. “We need to go now,” he muttered under his breath. “Ogle me later.”

Confused, I tore my eyes from his torso to his face.

He looked supremely uncomfortable and if I wasn’t mistaken there was a flush on the crest of his cheeks. I stood up as he shrugged on his jumper, and my eyes flew to Belle in question.

She looked like she was on the verge of bursting into laughter. “Some tea then?”

“Oh, thank you, but no,” Liam said without meeting her gaze. “We’re in a rush. But thank you again.”

In answer to my frown his eyes widened. He was trying to send me a message, but I had no clue what that message was.

“We need to be going,” he took his wet clothes back from me, “Don’t we, sweetheart.”

I raised an eyebrow at the endearment but decided to go with it. “Yes,” I turned to Belle. “My accidentally dunking him the river threw us off our schedule for the day.”

Belle’s lips twitched. “Oh well then. I’ll see you out.”

“Thank you again,” I hurried to say since Liam was refusing to look at her anymore.

“You’re welcome.” She held the door open for us, and Liam quickly stepped outside. She grinned at him and then gave me a wink. “And lucky you.”

I had no time to ask her what she meant because Liam was practically running from the house. Chasing after him, I finally cut up with him once we were out of sight of the guest house.

“What on earth happened?” I said, trying to match his long strides.

He threw me a look over his shoulder and I realized it was a look of pure mortification.

Suspicion dawned on me, and laughter trembled in my voice when I said, “She didn’t...”

“Walk in on me while I was naked in the shower?” he said, clearly horrified by the experience.

“What?”

Do not laugh, do not laugh!

“I was in the damn shower and she walked in with a bunch of clean towels for me. While I was naked. In the shower.”

“She was just being helpful,” I said, losing my battle with amusement.

Hearing the laughter in my words, he cut me a dirty look. “She stared at my...” he gestured to his dick.

“As in... was she coming on to you?” Yuck!

“No.” He shook his head, the color still high on his cheeks. “She was very matter of fact actually.” He stopped and scowled at me. “She congratulated me on my penis.”

I felt the laughter coming, and as much as I tried to stop it, it was too much. I threw my head back and burst into stomach-hurting hilarity at the image of big Liam Brody standing in a shower while Belle congratulated him on his dick.

Now I understood her words at the door, “And lucky you.”

“Ha!” I laughed harder.

By the time I got myself under control again, Liam was wearing a reluctant grin, and staring at me with warmth in his eyes that made *me* flush.

“I can’t believe that happened to you.” I said, a little out of breath. We began walking again. “Actually I can. Fuc—”

“—king Valentine’s Day,” he finished for me, smiling widely now.

And then something occurred to me, my eyes zeroing in on his crotch before I could stop myself. “Just how big are you?” I blurted out.

There was no blush on his cheeks for me. Instead he cut me a hot look that made me tingle all over. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Actually I would, that's why I asked.

Instead of saying that, I shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm not really interested in a penis that probably hundreds of women have seen."

"Not hundreds," he said, eyeing me thoughtfully.

I wasn't sure I believed that. "Oh really."

"Really," he said, suddenly sounding quite serious. "I guess I'm one of those old fashioned types that has to actually like a woman before I'll sleep with her. The sex is better."

Liking that answer more than I should, I tried to shift my wayward thoughts, imagining Belle congratulating him all over again. What a character! Part of me wished we'd had the chance to stay and get to know her a little better.

Just like that I was off again, laughing more at Liam's mortification than anything else. This time his deep laughter joined my uncontrollable giggling.

"This is more like it," I mused, letting the distant sun warm my face.

We'd grabbed some sandwiches and snacks from the store at Laggan and then we'd found a layby on the A86 at Loch Laggan in Ardverikie. We'd taken our small picnic down on to the beach by the loch, where I'd placed a couple of towels for us to sit on.

There was no one else around and the loch glistened in the winter sun.

It's hard to explain what a highland view does to me. How just sitting by the water of a placid loch, surrounded by the rugged beauty of the Cairngorms, instilled a peace in me that I couldn't find anywhere else. I'd discovered this peace in the last few days and found I was becoming slightly addicted to it.

"There's nothing like it, is there?" Liam said.

I glanced at him. "Like what?"

"The peace you find in places like this."

I stared at him, slightly awed. "I was just thinking that exact same thing."

He studied me a moment as I studied him, and my chest began to constrict with the kind of emotion I was not prepared to feel toward a man I'd met less than twenty-four hours ago.

“Tell me about your family. Those three older brothers of yours,” he said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

Strangely, unnervingly, I found I wanted to tell him anything he wanted to know. “I have three big brothers and an older sister. My mum died after she gave birth to me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

I gave him a sad smile. “Hence all the swearing. My brothers pretty much brought me up because Dad kind of gave up all responsibility to us after mum died. My oldest brother, Grant, is more like my dad. He’s a lawyer.” I smiled fondly. “He’s kind of got a stick up his bum. I tease him all the time, drives him nuts.”

Liam smiled at me. “I bet he adores you.”

I shrugged because I knew Grant loved me. It was just that Scottish men weren’t very comfortable expressing those kinds of emotions. Or at least, my brothers weren’t. With the exception of Johnny. “And then there’s Douglas. He was a professional football player. Never has to work again. Invested his money, made the right choices, is forever lecturing me about my lack of direction and passion. I know it’s because he worries but one of these days I’m going to knee that man in the goolies just to shut him up.”

He winced. “For his sake, don’t.”

“And then there’s Johnny. A total hippy. Believes in auras and spirituality and destiny and all that rubbish. Invested money into a software program when he was twenty, and now lives off the rather bounteous fruits of that non-labor, travelling all over the world, taking beautiful photographs he sells to magazines.”

“Your siblings are successful.”

“Just a bit.” I shrugged, that lead weight in my stomach returning any time I thought about it. I felt like an utter failure in comparison.

“And your sister?”

The lead weight grew heavier. “Well Heather is ruthless, ambitious and beautiful. She had an affair with her best friend’s husband who also happens to be the CFO of a telecommunications company. He left his wife for Heather, married her, and when she refused to get pregnant for fear of ruining her figure, he agreed to adopt children and hire a nanny.”

Liam was quiet a moment. “You don’t get along with her?”

“That friend I told you about...” I glanced up at him, squinting against the sun, “The one that shagged my boyfriend...”

Sympathy darkened his eyes. “Not a friend. Heather?”

I nodded and looked back out over the loch, searching for that peace. “She was always horrible to me growing up. Tearing me down about the way I looked, about my accomplishments at school. Starting fights with me. I mean hair pulling, nail scratching, vicious fights.” I shuddered remembering them. “She made me tough, I’ll give her that.” And then I uttered something I’d never said out loud to anyone before. “She hates me because she thinks I killed our mum.”

“Jesus,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Surely not?”

“She told me. When I asked her why she slept with him, with my boyfriend, she told me it was revenge.”

“That’s fucked up.”

I laughed humorlessly. “Tell me about it.”

“No, I mean... she has *issues*.”

This time I laughed for real. “Yeah, she does. The boys and I aren’t close with her at all anymore. She blames me for that, too.” Hearing the dullness in my words I shook my head, embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I got all serious and depressing on you there.”

He nudged me with his shoulder. “You can get all serious and depressing on me anytime.”

I smiled gratefully and nudged him back. “What about you? Your family?”

“Back in Colorado.” He said. “I try to visit every couple of years. They can’t really afford to come here.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Yeah. But we video call. I catch up with them every few weeks.”

“Brothers? Sisters?”

“Both. My parents wanted a big family and they have it.” He grinned out at the water as he thought about them. “I have a big sister, Melanie. She has four kids of her own. Then there is me. No kids,” he shot me a smile, “Yet. Next are the twins, Kyle and Leanne. They both have two kids. And then my baby sister, Beth. No kids. She’s at college.”

“Wow. That is a big family.”

“Yeah. We have our dramas like everyone else, but it’s a good family to be a part of.”

“They must miss you horribly.”

“For all you know I could be a terrible brother and they’re glad to see the back of me,” he teased.

“No way.” It wasn’t possible.

“No?” He gave me a sexy, inquiring smile.

I felt that flip in my lower belly again. Feeling brave I shrugged, giving him a cheeky smile in return. “You’re too likeable.”

He narrowed his eyes, his expression playful. “Oh I get it. You’re attracted to me.” *Cocky bugger.* “So. *You’re* attracted to *me.*”

Liam grinned, his gaze dipping to my mouth. “You are not wrong.”

My breath stuttered, wondering if he would kiss me. The blood whooshed in my ears, blood that grew hotter in my veins as I waited for him to make a move.

I was yanked out of the moment when he abruptly looked away, staring back out at the water. “I can’t make up my mind if it’s those beautiful eyes or those sexy-as-fuck dimples. It might be the dimples.”

“Huh?” I said, confused, dazed, wondering why we weren’t kissing.

“Your dimples. They slay me.”

Amused at the thought of my dimples slaying anyone, I pointed to the one that creased my right cheek as I grinned. “These little things?”

Amusement danced in his eyes. “They have power over me. I imagine they have power over many men.”

I laughed, delighted by the thought. “If only I’d use the power for good instead of evil.”

Chuckling Liam reached for a bottle of water, but he made no move on me at all after that.

Instead, having openly admitted we were attracted to each other only made the awareness between us more intense. Sexual tension was strung taut between us like a live wire. And every time our hands or arms brushed, tingles shot to all my girly parts.

“If you have such a wonderful family, why are you here instead of over there?” I suddenly said, breaking the tension-filled silence.

He narrowed his eyes in thought. “When I came here for college it was for an adventure. I’d always planned on going home and being a forest engineer there. But something happened when I got here.” He looked at me. “I fell in love.”

For some reason the thought of him in love with some other girl made my heart twist painfully in my chest. “Oh?”

“With this country. I fell in love with this country.”

Inexplicable relief moved through. “It’s a seductive place.”

“It is that.” He sighed. “I felt more at home here than I did back Colorado. The country, the people, the humor. It fit me better. But I love my family too. It was difficult for me. I was split in two.”

“So how did you come to the decision to stay?”

“I went home for a while and I missed being here. My family told me to go back to Scotland. They knew I wasn’t happy.”

“They sound like a good bunch,” I said, and for some weird reason I found myself wanting to meet them.

I realized I wanted to know everything about Liam.

The connection I felt toward him was crazy, but I couldn’t deny it.

“They definitely are that.”

“And do you love your job?”

“I do.” He nodded, serious. “I don’t want to do anything else.”

“So why the camping trip?”

I thought I saw him tense at the question and my curiosity was peaked.

“I just... I needed to get away. Some alone time. Sometimes we all need that, right?” he said pointedly.

“And here I am intruding on it,” I teased.

“I’m intruding on yours, too.”

“Well you’re taking my mind off things.”

“Like Valentine’s Day?”

“Well you were until you mentioned it,” I shoved him playfully. “Nah. My job. I was talking about taking my mind off my job. I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do about it.”

“Quit.”

Startled by the blunt response, I said, “Are you insane?”

“No.” He looked deep into my eyes, in a way that made my breath stutter again. “You’re smart. You’re funny. You can do whatever you want to do. Don’t wake up ten years from now, Hazel, and regret your life because you were afraid to lose your house or your Mini Cooper.”

“And what do you suggest I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Write about real people, real issues, maybe try and help them.”

“Then do it.”

I gave a guffaw of laughter. “It’s that easy, is it?”

“Yes,” he insisted. “Fight your editor harder. Or find another magazine that likes your ideas. Do something. Anything. Annoy people, piss them off, but get in their face and make them sit up and pay attention to you. That’s how we do it in America. You all are too polite here.”

His words percolated, and he let them, giving me silence as I thought about what he’d said.

“Better yet,” I whispered, an idea forming, “My brother... he has tons of contacts in social media... I could write an advice blog.” I stared at Liam, dumbfounded by the fact that I’d never thought of this before. “I could write a blog and Johnny might be able to help me spread the word online about my blog. If it got big enough I could make money from ads...”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

“But I’d need money to support me in the meantime.” I sighed. “I have some in savings to keep me going for a bit...”

“Give up the car. Give up the mortgage. Are they really that important at the end of the day? You’ve been living happily in a camper van for a week. Surely a small, inexpensive rental flat with internet connection is a step up?”

It was crazy. A totally crazy, bampot idea.

But it made me excited. And I hadn’t felt excited about anything in a really long time.

I grinned at him. “I’m glad I met you, Liam Brody.”

“I’m glad I met you, Hazel.” He grinned back, and then he said, “Even if you keep on calling me Liam when I told you to call me Brody.”

“I like Liam.” It suited him better than Brody.

We stared out at the loch again as we fell into comfortable silence.

And then, just as my eyes were drifting closed against the sun, I heard him say softly, “And *I* like you.”

The sun was setting as I pulled into the car park outside the pub and inn that Liam directed me to in Fort William.

“I’m taking a room here tonight if they have one.” Liam said. “I need a good sleep if I’m going to climb Ben Nevis tomorrow.”

“It looks nice,” I said, unhooking my seatbelt as I looked up at the white stone building.

“It is. I stayed here a few years ago when I climbed Ben Nevis for the second time.”

“I’ve never climbed it. It would probably be the end of me if I tried,” I said. “I’m not really the athletic type.”

He just nodded, as if he were distracted, and just as I was about to get out of the van he said, “Can I say something without it pissing you off?”

The question made me a little apprehensive. We were enjoying a great day together. The best in fact. I didn’t want to get pissed off and ruin it. “Try me,” I finally said.

“I don’t mean to go all macho cave man on you, but could you not sleep in your camper van tonight? Or any night from now on?”

Confused, I think I made a ‘huh’ sound.

Liam glanced back at my sleeping arrangements, scowling. I also noted the muscle in his jaw was flexing with annoyance.

“Are you trying to scare my sleeping bag out of there with a scowl?” I teased.

He didn’t laugh. “It’s dangerous. I can’t believe your brothers let you take off in this thing. Sleeping in a camper van in a layby in the middle of nowhere? Are you trying to get yourself hurt, or worse?”

Oh.

He was concerned about me.

My belly fluttered. “I have my penknife.”

“A lot of good that would do you if someone bigger and stronger than you broke in to attack you.”

Now I was scowling. “Are you trying to scare me?”

“Yes. Out of this van.”

“I’m very careful, you know. Almost bordering on paranoid.”

“Yeah, I can see that, what with you letting a strange man into your van and then spending the entire day with him alone.”

“You found me out,” I said dryly, “I’m a thrill seeker.” Shaking my head at his nonsense I pushed open my door.

“Hazel,” his deep voice stopped me. When I looked back at him, I stilled at his somber expression, “If you sleep in this van, I’m just going to worry about you.”

My chest tightened with that strange, swelling emotion I’d felt earlier in the day. After a moment or two, I finally managed to find my voice. “I’ll get a room at the inn, too.”

He gave me a small, relieved smile. “Thank you.”

It turned out there were a couple of rooms available and we each dumped our stuff in our rooms. I needed a shower, so I told him I’d meet him downstairs for dinner.

The shower felt amazing. A hot shower, after a few days of none, could make you feel completely human again.

As I dried my hair, I contemplated my clothes. I didn’t have anything really nice to wear with me, so I had to make do with a fitted turtleneck and my black skinny jeans. I also wore a wee bit more make up than I’d been wearing lately. My reflection didn’t scream seductress but I looked a damn sight better than I had when we arrived.

Liam seemed to think so too, his eyes raking over me slowly and deliberately as he stood up at the table he’d gotten us in the busy barroom. “You look great,” he said, surprising me by leaning in to press a kiss to my cheek. “Fuck, you smell great, too.”

I shot him a saucy look as we took our seats near the crackling fireplace. “You’re not shy with compliments, are you?”

“I say what I think,” he said. “Never seen the point in not.”

“I’m not complaining,” I assured him.

Soon a meal was served to us, along with a glass of ale, and we talked about everything and nothing. I told him what magazine I worked for and that my column title was “Dear Hazel”. I regaled him of tales of the plethora of older women who wrote to me about wanting to bonk their personal trainers, and my sarcastic but hopefully helpful advice. He told me about his friends at the Forestry Commission and how wild their Christmas staff parties could get. We laughed as we enjoyed the

warmth of the pub restaurant, and delicious food, and as we did so loud Celtic music filtered through from the other side of the inn.

“There’s a Ceilidh on tonight,” the waitress said, putting our dessert down on the table “It’s always a good night here when there is a Ceilidh band playing.”

My eyes lit up at the thought. “I haven’t been to a Ceilidh in years.”

“Yeah, me either.” Liam said and then moaned after putting a forkful of cheesecake in his mouth.

“Good?” I teased.

He just nodded, clearly too in love with dessert to form words. I watched him devour the cake as I slowly ate mine, but I wasn’t really focused on dessert. Flushed with food and ale (I was a lightweight), and couldn’t stop myself from blurting out, “This is been the best day ever.”

The words made him still, his expression soft. “Yeah, it has.”

I beamed at his agreement and his study of me became intense. “What?” I whispered.

“I just met you. Less than twenty four hours ago.” He dropped his fork on his plate and rubbed his hand over his short hair. “I shouldn’t feel like this.”

“It’s insane, I know.” I leaned forward, relieved I wasn’t the only one feeling this crazy connection between us. “But not impossible.”

“No?” He reached over and started fiddling with the silver bracelet I wore.

“Have you ever seen *Dharma & Greg*? The TV show?”

Liam shook his head.

“They meet and fall for each other in a day. In fact they get married the day they meet. Not that I’m...that we’re...pfft,” I flushed, embarrassed, “That came out all wrong.”

He chuckled, trailing his fingertips from my bracelet and down over my hand. “Do you want to dance?”

My gaze flew to his at the abrupt change of subject. “At the Ceilidh?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded, excited by the idea of any kind of physical activity with him. “Let me just use the ladies restroom first.”

Once I stepped inside the tiny empty restroom, I stared at myself in the mirror. My dark eyes glittered, my cheeks were flushed, and I could swear my boobs had swelled to attention. Everything about me said, “Liam, take me now.”

Because I wanted him too.

I'd never, not once, had sex on the first date... but this was different... this was...

"Kismet," I whispered. "Fucking Johnny. Fucking Valentine's Day." I laughed softly and then went about my business.

I was drying my hands after washing them, when my gaze snagged on the unit attached to the wall next to the hand dryer.

It was a condom dispenser.

Without over analyzing it, I grabbed my purse and bought a small packet out of the dispenser, tucking the condoms into my little shoulder bag.

Belly fluttering intensely, I tried to appear calm and nonchalant when I returned to Liam. It was hard to when I was suddenly imagining his face between my thighs, that sexy stubble of his scraping my skin...

"Let's dance," I grabbed his hand, needing the distraction.

The room was brimming with people— some sat around tables that were crowded around the edges of the room, drinking and clapping along to the music. The Ceilidh band was set up on a small stage at the far end, and in the middle of the room people danced.

At present they were dancing the Highland Barn Dance, one that took me straight back to school and our Christmas dances.

"Come on!" I cried over the music, pulling Liam into the crowds of dancers.

We were immediately welcomed, and Liam, caught on quickly to the steps, making me laugh as he did an exaggerated hop before skipping sideways into the center of the room, while I skipped toward the edge with the rest of the women.

By dance three we were sweat-soaked with flushed cheeks. It was a night of heat and laughter, capping off a perfect day.

But as the music started up for the Gay Gordons dance, and Liam took my left hand in his, pressed my back to his chest, and held my right hand at my shoulder in his... my laughter started to die.

Feeling him pressed against me, a dance that had always been light and playful turned weirdly seductive. In fact after the polka part of the dance, movement that was jarring and completely out of sync with how we were feeling, Liam nudged me out of the circle of the dancers and led me out into the quieter, empty hallway.

My hands rested on his chest where I could feel his heart thumping wildly beneath my fingertips. He nudged my shoulder bag out of the way to grip my hips.

We stared into each other's eyes for a long moment, everything fading around us.

"Let's go upstairs," I said, feeling like I might burst out of my skin if I didn't get him inside me soon.

The feeling was only made worse when I felt his erection prodding my stomach. He closed his eyes, as though he were in pain, and when he opened them they were blazing. "I don't have anything," he said, voice hoarse. "Protection, I mean."

Excited laughter trembled on my lips as I pressed deeper into him. "I do. There was a condom dispenser in the ladies restroom."

Amused, he smirked, "Well that was awfully presumptuous of you."

Grinning, I slid my hand down his hard stomach and between our bodies to cup his growing erection. "Awfully," I whispered. "But you did say you like me, and you also said you only fuck women you like."

He hissed under his breath. "Hazel." His grip on my hips turned bruising as he ground into me. "I was wrong earlier."

"About what?"

"When I said you were cute when you use the word 'fuck'. Not cute." He shook his head, suddenly edging us backwards. "Hot. Fucking hot." And then suddenly he let go of me only to bend down and catch me up in his arms.

I let out a little squeal, wrapping my arms around his neck to hold on as he powered us up the main staircase to his room.

As the soon as the door slammed shut behind us, he gently eased me to my feet, removed my shoulder bag, and yanked me back against him. Liam's lips crashed down on mine as I stood up on tip toe, my hands fisted in the back of his sweat-soaked T-shirt. Two seconds later he gripped my bottom in his hands and lifted me for easier access. I obliged, and wrapped my legs around his waist, our kiss hard, hungry and wet. It was the best bloody kiss ever! A possessive kiss that got me in all my tingly places. I loved the way Liam held me— one arm hooked under my bum, while his other hand threaded through my hair to hold my lips to his. No escape.

He was in control, and it was him that pulled back first. We panted against one another's mouths, trying to catch our breaths.

This feeling... these feelings between us... it was nuts! But it was also kind of more than incredibly amazing.

I looked into his green eyes, and swore I felt myself falling.

And then I literally was because he threw me on his bed caveman style. I didn't even have a chance to catch my breath because he was on the bed with me, kissing me, his hand fisted in my hair. The feel of his tongue stroking mine, the taste of him, the smell of him... I had never been more turned on in my life.

I broke the kiss, my skin on fire, "Clothes off," I murmured against his mouth, trying to push him up.

He took the hint, pulling back to straddle me as he whipped off his T-shirt.

I reached out, sex-dazed, to run my hands over his hard abs. "How do you gem mm mmm," my question was muffled as Liam yanked my turtleneck, and thus my arms, over my head, throwing my top behind him.

I felt my hair cloud wildly around my head but Liam wasn't paying attention to my mad hair. He was already reaching for my bra strap.

Cool air tightened my nipples as he pulled the material away and threw the bra behind him too. His eyes seemed to glaze over as he stared at me, probably feeling what I felt when I looked at those fine abs of his.

"Do you even realize how sexy you are?" he said hoarsely, as he cupped my breasts in his large, hot hands.

I moaned as his touch sent sparks of arousal down my belly to between my legs.

"Hazel," he groaned, leaning over to press soft kisses down my chest and over my breasts. When he wrapped his mouth around my right nipple, I gripped his head in my hands and held on as desire rippled through me. My hips undulated against him, impatient to get to the main act.

As if he read my thoughts, Liam's fingers went to the button on my jeans. He pulled away from my now swollen nipple to yank the jeans down my legs. He slid off the bed to do so, and then immediately got to work on removing his own jeans.

He stood naked before me and my mouth went dry. He was all tawny and sculpted, with deep cuts in his obliques that told me he was used to *a lot* of physical activity.

"Condoms?" he said, his voice guttural with sex.

"Purse," I gestured to the floor where he'd dumped it as soon as we got in the room.

I almost whimpered with bliss as he turned around. His arse. Oh my God, his arse was quite possibly the finest thing I'd ever seen.

"Get back over here," I said, panting. "Now."

Smirking arrogantly in a way that only increased my lust for him, Liam crawled back onto the bed and lowered himself over me. I dropped my gaze to his cock. He was so hard the thing was almost touching his belly.

My eyes flew to his face and we stared at each other a moment, both of us breathing rapidly.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so wet in my whole life,” I blurted out, apparently unable to control my thoughts-to-mouth filter around this man.

My words seemed to snap whatever control Liam had because suddenly he was tearing at the condom wrapper with his teeth and rolling it up his impressive hard-on all in three swift seconds.

And then he was kissing me again, his stubble scratching me every now and then in a way that made the fine hair on my arms stand up.

Everything about this man was knicker-meltingly-sexy.

My fingers tightened in his hair and Liam’s fingertips glided down the curve of my waist, across my belly and down between my legs. I moaned into his mouth as he pushed two fingers inside me, the moan turning to whimpers as he pumped them in and out. He left my mouth, his lips trailing down my chin, my throat, my chest, before they tickled across my left breast and closed around my nipple. I threw my head back on a deep groan as the pull of his mouth shot more streaks of heat to my sex.

I clasped his head to my chest as he sucked and licked my nipples. All the while my hips flexed against the thrust of his fingers between my legs. It wasn’t enough. I needed more.

But Liam seemed intent on making me come, and soon my nails were curling into his broad shoulders, his name escaping in panted gasps from my lips as the tension inside of me increased. It tightened and tightened until I froze, breathless.

And then the tension exploded.

“Liam!” I cried out, the word ending abruptly in a whimper as my climax rolled through me, my inner muscles squeezing around his fingers as I jerked against them.

I didn’t even have time to catch my breath as he slipped his fingers out of me, braced his hands at either side of my head and pushed inside of me.

I spread my legs wider for him, holding onto his waist as he nudged deeper. Swollen from my orgasm, it was a tight fit, and Liam gritted his teeth as he sank into me. “Oh God! I cried, feeling overwhelming full.

I clutched onto him, watching the way his eyes flared.

“So tight.” He groaned, moving his hips gently and groaning again. “Jesus, Hazel, you feel fucking glorious.”

Wow.

No man had ever said anything so wonderful to me during sex. I flexed my hips against his, urging him to move. And move he did. My fingers dug into the supple muscles of his back as he began to pump into me in deep, hard drives that threatened to blow me apart.

We began gasping each other’s names as the pleasure escalated with each thrust.

“Harder, Liam,” I begged, my fingers digging into his skin. “Oh God, harder.”

“Fuck,” he grunted, his powerful drives slamming into me until the headboard was banging against the wall. I didn’t even care if anyone heard us. All I cared about was the pleasure burn of his cock dragging in and out of me, setting my nerves on fire.

It came. My body stilled for a fraction of a second, and then, “Yes!” I screamed, as the most exhilarating orgasm moved through me.

I could feel my inner muscles rippling hard around Liam’s cock, tugging intensely on him, so intensely I felt him swell even thicker inside me before he shouted my name. His hips shuddered against mine in quick, deep jerks as he came.

He collapsed over me, his mouth against my neck as he panted for breath.

“Fuck me,” he groaned, pressing a kiss to my sweat dampened skin. “Fuck me.” He rolled off of me, giving me room to breathe, but he lay close, and curled his hand around my breast as we tried to catch our breaths.

“That was...” I tried to search for the right word.

“Mind-fucking-blowing,” he offered.

“Yeah, that,” I huffed.

My limbs were useless to me. I felt as if they’d all melted into the mattress beneath me.

After a minute or so of silence, Liam got up and disappeared into the bathroom. When he returned the condom had been disposed of. I watched him stride across the room, confident in his nakedness, and if I wasn’t mistaken he was sporting a semi.

“I’m impressed,” I nodded toward it.

“I want you again,” he shrugged like it was a given. And then he collapsed next to me on his back. “First I’m going to taste you.”

I sat up and looked at his face, my core already pulsing at the thought. “Taste me?”

“Taste you,” his eyes smoldered, “Climb aboard, Beautiful.”

So I did, holding onto the headboard as I straddled his face. When I felt his tongue thrust into me I was lost all over again.

My climax this time was slower, sweeter, but no less wonderful, and when I was done, Liam flipped me over onto my stomach. He guided me up onto my hands and knees and then I felt his heat disappear.

Glancing over my shoulder I watched as he grabbed another condom from the packet in my purse. He stilled at the sight of me, his eyes darkening, his features hardening with lust and determination.

“You are the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” he said, his swelling erection proving he meant it as he hurried back to me.

My head fell between my shoulders, my hair brushing the bed, and my belly fluttered with anticipation at the sound of the condom wrapper crinkling.

“Ah!” My back bowed as he slid slowly inside of me, tortuously slowly. “Liam,” I begged. “Oh God.”

But he was determined to take his time, smoothing his hands over the globes of my arse as he glided in and out of me in gentle thrusts. Those magic hands of his coasted up my ribs and he wrapped his arms around me.

He pulled me up off my hands, until I was sitting on him, my head resting against his shoulder.

“You are so beautiful,” he said hoarsely, cupping my breasts in his hands and giving them a delicious squeeze that made me cry out. “And you feel amazing. So amazing.”

I curled my arm around his neck and closed my eyes as I bounced up and down on his cock in slow, deep drives.

This was sex, I thought euphoric. Finally, this was good, no great sex, no AMAZING bloody MAGNIFICENT sex.

The first thing that seeped into my conscience was the hard heat of a body pressed down the whole length of mine. There were legs tangled with mine, too. Slightly hairy legs that tickled mine.

I grinned, still not quite awake, as the memories of last night played behind my eyes.

Warm lips kissed my shoulder. “Good morning,” Liam whispered in my ear.

Turning my head toward his, I pried my sleepy eyes open and stared into his blurry handsome face. “Morning.” He smelled of soap, and his hair was damp. He must have showered already.

“We need to check out really soon.”

“What time is it?” I mumbled. I felt exhausted.

“Ten fifty in the morning.”

I groaned. “We only fell asleep a few hours ago.” We’d had lots of sex. Lots and lots of fantastic sex.

He gave me a smile, but it was the first smile he’d given me that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m aware.”

Feeling cold and tense, and very much awake all of sudden, I froze as I watched as he climbed out of bed. As he pulled on his underwear and his jeans, I said, “Are you okay?”

Having never slept with a man on the first date before, I had to wonder, with dread in my gut, if this had been a one-night stand and only I hadn’t known it.

Liam stopped to look me directly in the eye as he buttoned his fly. “We need to talk.”

The dread spread through my whole body and I quickly shuffled out of the bed, ignoring the ache between my legs and the twinge in my muscles from sexual overuse. Uncaring of my nudity I picked up all my articles of clothing off the floor. I could feel Liam’s eyes on me, but unlike last night it didn’t make me want to throw him on the bed and have my wicked way with him again.

Once I yanked on my final piece of clothing—my turtleneck—I snatched my purse up off the floor.

Liam frowned. “Where are you going?”

“Well this is the brush off, isn’t it?”

He scowled, looking pissed. “No, it’s fucking not.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, astounded that this man could make me feel more vulnerable than any of the men I’d dated for much, much longer than a day!

Waiting as he shrugged on a T-shirt and a flannel shirt, I tried to imagine what on earth we needed to talk about. If he wasn’t giving me the brush off, and he wore protection, then I couldn’t think what could be responsible for the serious little crease between his eyebrows.

He gestured to the bed as he stepped toward me. “Sit?”

I did so and Liam sat close beside me, our legs touching.

His continued silence was driving me nuts. “Are you planning on saying anything anytime soon?”

Heaving a sigh, his nod was somewhat reluctant. “Do you remember I mentioned a woman who upended my life before Valentine’s Day?”

The dread intensified. “Yes,” I drawled slowly.

“Well...” he rubbed a hand over his short hair nervously, “It was kind of *this* Valentine’s Day.”

“Explain,” I bit out, feeling my blood start to burn with anger as I guessed at his meaning.

“I’m engaged.” He cut me a soulful, searing, apologetic look as if that could somehow soothe the emotional punch he’d just thrown to my chest. “I mean, I *was* engaged.”

“Are or was?” I snapped. “Two different things.”

Liam flinched. “Was. I mean... Her name is Fiona. We met three years ago. I thought we were happy... until a few weeks ago she told me she fucked her colleague. Multiple times. On different occasions.”

I couldn’t even bring myself to feel sympathetic because I was still reeling from this knowledge. Knowledge he could have imparted on me any time in the last twenty-nine hours!

“She still wants to marry me but I... I told her I needed space. That’s why I’m on this camping trip.”

Hurt, deep, wrenching hurt cut across my heart. “So am I revenge?”

“God no,” He gripped my hand, but I snatched it away from him and took my whole body with it, crossing the room to put much needed distance between us.

I stared at the door, wondering how it was possible to hurt this much over him.

“Hazel, I never expected to meet you.”

“What does that even mean?” I whispered.

“That we have a connection.”

I whirled around, glaring at him. “You had sex with me multiple times last night. Never once did *Fiona*, your fucking *fiancé*, cross your mind?”

“No.” He stood up, his expression hard. “Not once. I was caught up in you last night. And you can’t tell me you weren’t just as lost in me.”

“But I don’t have a fiancé.”

He scrubbed a hand down his face and groaned. “This is so messed up.”

“You could have told me about her at any point yesterday. It’s not like we didn’t talk. In fact... I’ve told you some things I haven’t told anyone.”

“I know. I just... I just wanted to keep you for a while. I thought if I told you, you’d take off.”

“I would have,” I agreed. “Because I don’t know you, Liam. Not really. Who is to say that you’re not just a player?”

“I’m not.” He strode over to me and gripped my biceps, pulling me into him. “You know I’m not. I’ve never done anything like this before. I wasn’t planning on it—”

“Just happened,” I finished, the words bitter.

“Don’t.” He pressed his forehead to mine, and I hated him for the way I wanted to sway into his hold. “It doesn’t make sense... but you *know* me. And I know you.”

It didn’t make sense. But up until two minutes ago I’d been thinking the exact same thing. But this was reality. Not some fucking fairytale insta-love story.

“Are you going back to her?”

Liam pulled away and nodded slowly, every nod cutting me deeper. “To talk things out with her. You and I... This is crazy, right? We’ve known each other a day. I’ve known her three years. It would be unfair not to... I mean... what I mean is... fuck,” his gaze darted to the alarm clock on the bedside table. “We need to check out. Grab your stuff from your room and meet me downstairs. We’ll go somewhere and we’ll talk this out.”

Go somewhere and talk? About what? About how he was going back to his fiancé? There was no need to talk about that, other than to have him say sweet things to me so he didn’t feel like a shit when he left.

I nodded numbly, not wanting to argue about it.

Falling for a guy after a day.

What a moron.

Once I was outside his door I moved fast. At superspeed. All I needed to grab was my still-packed rucksack, and I nearly tripped downstairs as I fled with it on my back. My room was charged to my card so I didn’t waste time on that. Liam could check me out. It was the least the bastard could do!

Adrenaline flooded me. I was shaking as I hurried out to my camper van and threw my rucksack inside. With one quick glance back at the inn, the tears started to fall down my cheeks. Fury and hurt surged through and I wanted to scream.

I jumped into the driver seat, and I probably left rubber marks, I reversed so hard and spun so fast out of there.

I glanced through my tears in the rearview mirror and saw Liam run into the car park shouting after me. He dropped his rucksack and started kicking the hell out of it. Just as I was about to disappear out of sight, he fell to haunches with his head in his hands.

And then I was gone.

“Fucking Valentine’s Day,” I sobbed.

Three months later

My life had changed epically since I met Liam Brody.

Sometimes I couldn’t even believe it.

To begin with, I’d never felt as lonely as I did than when I drove back to Glasgow and returned to my family and friends. How could I tell them that by some absurd twist of fate I’d met a man, fallen in love, and had my heart broken all in one day?

It sounded ridiculous even to me.

But my chest ached constantly. I cried at romantic comedies, and not happy, joyful mushy kind of crying. No, I cried hateful, envious, bitter tears and then threw stuff at the television.

Nothing made me excited. There was a pall over my days.

Friends commented on it. Johnny took one look at me and said my aura had splotches of black in it, whatever that meant. Even the answers in my column had become so pessimistic and depressing that my editor had to give me a warning to “buck up my ideas or find myself out on my arse without a job”.

That was actually the moment that saved me.

I did need to buck up. Liam Brody was not going to do this to me! No man was! I had a life to get on with.

The first thing I did was talk to Johnny. My brother was the most enthusiastic man on the planet. How he'd ended up with his fiancé, Marie, a woman who apparently didn't know her cheek muscles could move into what we humans called a smile, I had no idea. Anyhow, his enthusiasm for my career change was exactly what I needed.

While Grant was extremely concerned when I quit my job and put my small two-bed house on the market, Douglas was impressed with my take-charge attitude. With mixed reviews from my big brothers, I had to shut their opinions out for once and just go with my gut.

Johnny had gotten a friend to create my website "Ask Hazel" for free, and I got a deal on all the maintenance charges. He was also using his contacts to spread the word about it, and I'd already gotten a lot of shares on my opening article, enough to receive my first lot of emails from people asking for advice.

They were strong starting emails. One was about a woman who was a recovering alcoholic. She'd married a recovering alcoholic. Recently his son from his first marriage had died in a car crash, and he'd started drinking again. She loved him but she couldn't seem to get through to him, and was afraid of losing herself in the process. It was a tough one to reply to, but that's what I needed. The challenge of really helping someone who desperately needed help.

My advice to the first two letters got a ton of comments and loads of shares on Facebook. People thought I was insightful, kind, but also funny. I wasn't going to lie it was kind of an ego boost. Even better than all that was the response emails I got from the original writers, telling me that my advice helped and it meant a lot to them. It made me feel good about myself, and about what I was doing for the first time... in well... ever.

More emails were coming in, people looking for guidance, and I was feeling optimistic about it.

I'd sold my car and my house was on the market. I was hoping to sell soon. I planned on moving back to Hamilton, where I grew up. There were a few one bed flats in the area that I could afford while I tried to get my online career off the ground.

"I can't believe I've let you do this to me twice now," I groaned to my friend Shona. As part of my plan to keep so unbelievably busy I wouldn't think about a certain American, I'd decided to let my super fit friend, Shona, take me out for morning runs with her.

Within five minutes I felt like my chest was on fire and like my legs were strapped down with weights. I hated every minute of it.

She handed me bottled water as we walked around the corner onto my street. “You just need to build up your stamina.”

I shot her a look. “Why is it necessary to be able to run a long distance?”

“What if you got followed home one night and needed to outrun your would-be attacker? Or *28 Days Later* became a reality?”

“If *28 Days Later* becomes a reality, I’m throwing you at the zombie fuckers to distract them long enough for me to get away without my lungs exploding.”

Shona smirked. “I love how you love me.”

I pulled my key out of the little pouch I had tied around my waist and let us into my house, stooping to pick up the mail as Shona passed me.

“Have you any fruit?”

“Some bananas, maybe,” I grumbled, shuffling through the letters. To my surprise, I found this week’s copy of the magazine I’d worked for in the bundle.

“Speaking of bananas,” Shona said as I wandered into the kitchen, “There is this delicious new intern in my office who I think you’d love.”

“Intern?” I said distractedly, throwing down the mail and pulling the elastic band off the magazine. An envelope with just my first name written on it fluttered out from between the pages.

“Yup. He’s a wee bit younger than you but I swear his arse is worth the disparity in maturity levels. Plus, rumor has it,” she held up a banana and grinned, “He’s well endowed.”

“I’m not interested,” I muttered, pulling a note out of the envelope.

“It’s been six months. That’s way too long for any woman to go without a good seeing to.”

“I have a vibrator.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Shona, shut up for a minute.”

“Very nice,” she grumbled.

I shot her a look and she frowned, coming toward me, “What is it?”

I held up the note. Scrawled in feminine writing were the words:

I thought you might be interested to read this week's advice column.



Your Successor

Dear Lola

“What the hell?” Shona murmured, reading it over my shoulder.

I shrugged casually, when I felt anything but casual inside. In fact I felt as if I'd been hit with a shot of adrenaline. It was like my whole body was anticipating something, even though I didn't know what that something might be.

Hands shaking, I flipped the magazine open to the column.

Once upon a time there was a cartoon of a girl who looked a bit like me with the words DEAR HAZEL scrawled next to it on this page. It had been replaced with a photograph of a pretty stylish redhead and the words DEAR LOLA printed above it.

Every week the most interesting problem letter was placed in the middle of the column in a colored box and printed in a font-size larger than the rest.

My heart started pounding as soon as I began to read it.

Shona began reading it out loud behind me. “Dear Lola, this letter is actually intended for your predecessor Dear Hazel. As I have no other way of contacting her, and your annoying boss wouldn't give me her personal details or even just pass a long a message (helpful guy, that one), I thought this might be my only hope to get this to her. So, Hazel, I have to hope you still read this column out of curiosity, or rely on the kindness of your successor to maybe send you a copy. If you're reading this, I need you to know that I'm sorry. What I should have said to you that morning was that even though I knew rationally falling for you in a day didn't make sense, it did happen. I did fall for you. I had no intention of walking away from that. I just wanted to talk about where we'd go from here. After all I had unfinished business I needed to take care of first before I could hope to have a fresh start with you. But I wanted that. With you. And I should have made that crystal clear.

I swear I've never felt worse than that moment in the car park watching you drive away, knowing I didn't know anything about you but your name. Not even a surname. Just Hazel.

Do you know how many Hazels live in Scotland? A lot. A depressing amount of Hazels, and very little hope of finding the one that I wanted. Watching you go, feeling

desperate and powerless, it made me realize that I don't give a damn if this is crazy. I don't. I even watched *Dharma & Greg*. It was funny. I liked it. I got it.

Do you get it? Did you fall as hard as me?

If you did, I want you to meet me at the pub we spent the night together. Meet me there May 16th at 3PM.

I miss you every day. Liam.” Shona turned to face me, her eyes tracking the tears running down my face. “Who the hell is Liam? What did I miss?”

Instead of answering her I threw my arms around her and she immediately caught me. I cried into her shoulder as she hushed me gently, and finally when I managed to calm myself she let me go. I swiped at my wet cheeks with a trembling hand.

“Fucking Valentine’s Day,” I laughed through a sob.

She frowned at me in concern. “What?”

“I met a man on Valentine’s Day. I fell in love.”

“In a day?” she said incredulously.

I nodded. “In a day.”

For a moment my friend stared at me like I was a loon, and then finally she sighed. “Are you sure you both weren’t just really, really drunk?”

Knowing she’d never understand without my telling the whole story I started from the beginning; from the moment he caught me with my underwear down in the woods, to my speeding away from him without giving him a bloody chance to explain.

By the end of my tale, she was staring at me in amazement. “That is the most fantastically fucking romantic thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to go, right?” she snatched up the magazine and waved at me. “You have to!”

I laughed at her sudden turnabout. “Yes, I’m going.”

She squealed and bounced up and down like a kid. “Oh my God, oh my God! What date did he say again?”

“The 16th,” I hurried over to my phone, “Which is—”

“Today! Fucking Today!” Shona cried.

I whirled around, realizing she was right. “Fuck.”

“Okay, what time is it?” She glanced at the digital time on the oven. “Okay. It’s eleven o’ clock. Plenty of time.”

“The pub is in Fort William. As in over three hours away! I’ll need to borrow your car. And I need to shower. I can’t turn up all sweaty and icky. Ahh!” I rushed by her, thundering upstairs.

“You’ll make it!” she cried up after me. “You have to bloody make it! I’m invested in this now! If you don’t make it, I’ll kick your arse!”

Since she was a black belt in Taekwondo, I had no doubt Shona could do just that. I’d never showered faster in my life.

The whole way up to Fort William I had to coach myself to stop speeding. Every now and then my foot would take on a life of its own and I’d check the speedometer on Shona’s Golf and see I was ten miles above the limit.

My brain was whirring the entire time.

I kept lecturing myself about how mad this all was, and then my heart would tell my head to fuck off as it remembered the way Liam had made me feel. One day. Just one day. But he had made me feel more interesting, more at peace, and more safe than anyone I’d ever met.

And the sex.

“Oh the sex,” I moaned, just remembering.

I had gotten through many a vibrator-induced orgasm remembering the details of that night over the past few months.

And his letter!

My God, how romantic was that?

But Lola... I had a mind to kill Lola! I could understand my editor refusing to pass on a message to me because he was crusty old git who was extremely pissed off at me for leaving the magazine. But Lola! She could have just sent me Liam’s letter rather than waiting until publication day. The day I was supposed to bloody well meet him! For all she knew we met in a pub in Istan-fucking-bul!

“Advice columnists,” I huffed. “All about the drama.”

Gravel kicked up under the wheels of Shona’s car as I whizzed into the car park at the pub at five minutes to three. Not wanting to look like I’d dashed up to Fort William like a maniac, I got out of the car with a casualness I did not feel. In fact I very much felt like a little girl at Disney World. Like one who had spotted her favorite Disney Princess but whose mother wouldn’t let go of her hand, so rather than running

and throwing herself at the princess, she had to walk at the agonizingly sedate pace her mother had set.

My legs felt a little wobbly as I walked in my low-heeled boots across the car park and into the cozy pub. I gave the bartender a tremulous smile as I walked into the barroom, and then swept the space for Liam.

He wasn't there.

My heart fell.

What the...?

Glancing at the grandfather clock in the corner it read ten minutes to three.

Okay.

Fiona's car clock was fast. I was early.

"Can I get you anything?" the bartender called to me.

"Soda water and lime, please," I said, needing to be completely sober for this moment.

"Grab a seat, I'll bring it over."

I nodded my thanks and took my shaking legs over to a table by a window that faced the car park. I wanted to be able to see Liam arriving so I could ready myself.

That thought made me snort to myself.

How could I possibly prepare myself?

I smiled my thanks at the bartender as he put my drink on the table and left.

Not only was I excited at the prospect of seeing Liam again I was also terrified. What if that one day we'd spent together had become so mythical that it didn't live up to the actual reality of being with him?

And if we did decide to be together, how were we going to work it all out? He lived outside Aberdeen. I lived in Glasgow.

You could live anywhere.

I tried to ignore that insistent thought. It would be insane to move to Aberdeenshire to be with a man I'd known a day.

But you want to.

I did.

Oh hell, I was so screwed.

"I hoped you'd come."

I froze, every little hair on my arm rising at the sound of his voice behind me. Turning to look, I stared up at Liam Brody as he walked around the table and took the seat opposite me. Those gorgeous green eyes of his never left my face as he did.

My God, he was even more handsome than I remembered.

“Christ, you’re beautiful,” he said softly. “I forgot just how beautiful.”

I smiled, stupid, girly tears pricking the corners of my eyes.

“There they are,” he grinned back. “Those dimples.”

“These?” I pointed to them, teasing.

He nodded and let out a long, shaky exhale. “I was worried. Really worried. I thought you might not see the letter.”

“I did. This morning. I may have broken the speed limit a couple of times getting here.”

He laughed, and that warm ache, that ache only he could make me feel, suffused my chest. For what felt like minutes but was perhaps only seconds, we just sat there, staring at one another, drinking each other in.

“There were moments over the last few months that I wondered if you were real.”

I nodded. “I had those moments.”

“I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” My smile faltered a little. “But... Fiona?”

Liam sighed. “I went home and I broke it off with her for good. That was my intention all along. Even before we met. I couldn’t be with someone that betrayed me. And I realized that if I could meet a woman and fall harder for her than anyone in just one day, then what I had with Fiona wasn’t the real thing anyway.”

“I fell for you, too.” I reached across the table and covered his hand with mine, delighting in the feel of him. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you explain. I just... I just didn’t want you to see how much it would hurt when you told me you were sorry but you were going home to your fiancé.”

“I realized that was what was probably in your head.” He clasped my hand tightly in his.

Laughter bubbled past my lips as excitement and fear mingled inside me. “We’re crazy. Everyone is going to think we’re crazy.”

He leaned over the table toward me. “Fuck everyone else. And anyway,” he suddenly stood up, tugging gently on my hand so I had no choice but to stand up. He pulled me into his body, and I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. I’d forgotten

how bloody tall he was. Brushing my hair back from my face, Liam cupped my cheek in his palm and leaned down to murmur against my lips, “What a great story to tell our grandkids.”

I laughed at his outrageous romanticism, secretly loving it, and relaxed as I let myself give into this madness. “What? That their grandfather caught their grandmother with her knickers down in the woods?”

My body shook against his as he laughed. “Great fucking story. For the rest of my years I will not forget the sight of your cute little ass running away from me in those woods.”

I snuggled closer, wrapping my arms around him. “So what now?”

“One day at a time. Together.” He kissed me softly, but I felt the bite of his hunger in his grip on my waist, hunger he was holding back because we were in public.

“Let’s get a room,” I whispered.

His eyes darkened. “I already did.”

I smirked. “Well that was awfully presumptuous of you.”

He patted my arse playfully. “Awfully.”

Without any fight at all, I let him lead me out of the barroom and upstairs.

“And just think,” he murmured, his hands roaming over my body as if he couldn’t help himself. “Our anniversary will be on Fucking Valentine’s Day. Suddenly your name for it has taken on a whole new meaning.”

I shivered in anticipation at the sexy promises in his eyes. “In that case, let’s make every day Fucking Valentine’s Day.”

Liam slammed the door shut behind us and then started guiding me toward the bed. “I’m planning on it.”

THE END

Author note:

I would never advise any woman to invite a strange man that caught them with their knickers around their ankles in the woods into their camper van. Or follow him around for the day.

Unless of course he’s Liam Brody ;)

