

Lindsay Townsend
CHASING RACHEL – Excerpt

The grey bike and its blue-helmeted rider topped the final hill and curve. Michael switched off when he saw her.

“You look like a siren, enticing all comers.” He coasted down to the blue gate. “I guessed you might be up—you always did like mornings. What are you doing with that rose, casting a spell?”

Rachel grinned, noting the grey bloom under Michael’s eyes. When he took off his helmet she saw a peach-coloured stubble, a long face drawn longer by tiredness. “You look terrible.”

Stripping off his gloves and stuffing them in the helmet, Michael stared heavenward. “It was a big shout, an area-round call-up for all of us. A garage on the A30 had just gone up.”

Rachel opened the gate for him. “Any casualties?” She exhaled slowly as Michael shook his head, relieved that he’d not had to deal with death as well as fire. He and others had fought through the night whilst she was in bed.

Examining Michael with sympathetic eyes, Rachel noted how early morning and exhaustion had given him a mangy magnificence, from the fawn hair, in tangles across his forehead to the dusty black jacket, faded jeans and muddied heavy shoes. There was a smear of ash across the lobe of his left ear, missed in a hasty shower, and his shoulders were sprinkled with fallen pear-blossom.

“Come in, Cinders, and have breakfast with me.” She reached out to brush the smut off his ear. As he strode through the gateway, she handed him the mineral bottle. “The first off the bush. For you.”

Suddenly Michael was pinker than the rose, but he took the plastic bottle from her neatly enough, with only a small grumble. “Don’t know how you expect me to get this home in one piece.” Cupping the fat bud, he gunned her one of his curious stares, obviously winding himself up to ask something.

A sharp horn blast hammered the morning. In a brilliant dazzle of car door, Daniel emerged from his newly parked Mazda.

Michael’s keen, searching glance was replaced by an angry stare. Not only did he dislike this intrusion, thought Rachel, he clearly resented the older man’s style. Compared to himself, Daniel this morning was a model straight from *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, lean and tanned in white needleCORDS, blue-checked Gucci short sleeved shirt and navy shades.

“Beware of geeks bearing gifts,” Michael muttered at Rachel, who bit her lip against a laugh. Daniel was certainly carrying something in two large brown-paper bags.

“Hello! I thought you’d be about on a lovely day like this. I’ve brought a small something—something I think you’ll agree will be most useful.” Ignoring Michael, Daniel pushed past the taller man and set the larger of the brown-paper bags down on the gravel path in front of Rachel. “Look inside.”

Rachel pocketed her gardening gloves, knelt on the small round pebbles and unfolded

the bag top. “Oh, my word!” She plunged both hands into the bag. In another instant a small furry black body was in the crook of her arm, a short black tail whirling against her red hair. “She’s lovely!”

Daniel chuckled at Rachel’s enthusiasm for the Alsatian puppy, pleasure spilling out from behind his cool blue sunshades. “A replacement Moll, agreed to by Lorna. We drove to Statts farm last night to pick the beast from Moll’s mother’s latest litter. Lorna and I both thought that, as acting director of Kestrel House, you should present the new dog to Stephen personally when you visit him at home.”

Rachel found her eyes filling with silly tears at the thoughtfulness of Daniel’s gift and his foresight in realizing she would be going to see the Leeses today. Gently she let the puppy down on the path, where the Alsatian blundered unsteadily toward Michael and urinated on his shoes.

“A dog with taste,” Daniel remarked, giving Rachel a conspiratorial smile, but Rachel scarcely noticed. She was watching the pup, and Michael.

“Steady on, pixie.” Michael deposited his helmet and gloves on an old tree-stump. He crouched to pat the butting, yapping little body. “No—you don’t want to eat the rose, it’ll do you no good at all.”

“She’s probably thirsty,” said Daniel. “Maybe hungry, too.”

“What do puppies eat?” asked Rachel.

Daniel frowned, impatience beginning to show through the relaxed facade. “It’s only for a few more hours—Lorna will be able to see to it.”

“Bland things, the same as babies,” put in Michael. “Tinned rice pudding, for instance, or cornflakes and gravy.”

Daniel grimaced, but Rachel smiled gratefully at Michael. He was clearly a man of many talents. Rising in one movement, she turned to the cottage. “Bring her inside. We’ll all have a drink and cornflakes—with or without gravy.” She chuckled at the idea.

“Ah, yes, well, I’m afraid that’s impossible.” Daniel barred the path in front of Michael. “I’ve only brought enough hot chocolate and croissants for two.” He held up the second paper bag. “And your real present, Rachel.” He tapped the breast pocket of his check shirt then glared at Michael, voice hardening. “Shouldn’t you be getting along? You’re as foul as a kipper.”

Michael gave a slow, wicked grin. “I was invited first.”

“But Rachel and I have things to discuss. Personal matters.”

“You can talk about anything in front of me and pixie—can’t he, nipper?” Michael scooped up the puppy in one large hand and clambered to his feet.

Swiftly, Rachel put herself between the two men. She loathed going back on her word, but she had to grab this chance to draw Daniel out whilst her ex was being so unusually co-operative. And she knew he wouldn’t thaw or talk whilst Michael was there. “I’ll take her, please, Michael.” She held out her hands.

“You want me to leave you alone with him?”

“Of course I do.” Couldn’t Michael understand that she had to see Daniel alone, that the man would be more likely to reveal things, perhaps important clues or leads, if they were left alone? “Just go, can’t you?” she burst out, caught between irritation and a fear

she couldn't define.

Stiffly, Michael jerked out his hand and pressed the small black Alsatian onto Rachel's shoulder. "Here, give her this." He plucked the rose coolly from the bottle of mineral water, tossed it aside and placed the bottle next to Rachel on top of the nearest granite boulder. "Enjoy your breakfast."

He closed the blue gate with exaggerated care and was gone.

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