



SADIRA STONE

RUNAWAY

Love Story



An aspiring artist flees the ordinary—until an ordinary guy unlocks her dreams.

He stepped closer, close enough to feel the heat rolling off his body. A flush painted his cheekbones and his long, straight nose. Exercise, sunburn, or something more interesting? The air between them vibrated with tingly energy.

She focused on the floor, because looking into his face felt too dangerous.

He moved still closer, his toes nearly touching hers. “We’re good now?”

Her gaze slid up from his long, muscular calves, covered with blond fuzz, to his powerful thighs, to the impressive bulge between them, then up his slim torso, his muscular chest, his broad shoulders, until her gaze rested on his face. His lids lowered, his lips parted. As if magnetized, her fingertips skimmed up his arm.

Stop. She dropped her hand. “We’re good. I’m sorry, Doug. I saw something between you two, and I jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

His smile blossomed slowly. “I’m glad that’s all cleared up.”

Not all, but it’s a start. Another thought, a crazy one. *I could just kiss him, right here, right now. Get it over with, see what happens next.*

Once that seed was planted, it was as if a giant electromagnet switched on, tugging them together. Its power hummed in her bones. Invisible sparks crackled between them. She slid a few inches closer.

PRAISE FOR
THROUGH THE RED DOOR
Book One in the Book Nirvana Series

~*~

“...a beautiful love story filled with wonderful characters and if you like your romance hot, hot, hot look no further. It is a story about being able to begin anew and still love the one you lost.”

~*Linda Tonis, RWA Paranormal Romance Review Team*

~*~

“The erotic scenes in this book were off the charts - even the ones that were only Clara’s “dreams.” Ms. Stone’s debut novel is a rich mix of love, sex, and thoughtful introspection as she tries to move on with her life.”

~*Peggy Jaeger, author of Christmas and Cannolis*

~*~

“This book is in a class by itself...from the graphic descriptions of the erotica collection that’s locked in a room of widow Claire’s bookstore to the hot-hot-hot interactions she has with a certain hot-hot-hot widowed professor with an intellectual interest in that collection...

“What elevates this book is the excellent writing, the memorable characters, and the captivating story. PLUS...parts of it are verrrry funny. I mean laugh-out loud funny. There are also some very touching parts, too. Parts that’ll bring tears to your eyes.”

~*Susan Flett Swiderski, author of Hot Flashes and Cold Lemonade*

Runaway Love Story

The Book Nirvana Two

by
Sadira Stone

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Runaway Love Story

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Chapter One

“I told you so.”

That’s exactly what her father would say, with his smug, tight-lipped expression that made Laurel’s jaws clench.

And he *had* told her. The knowledge burned in her stomach as she took the turn-off for Cottage Grove, Oregon. Only two hours from Portland, but light years away from the life she tried to build there. Tried, and failed.

She rolled to a stop in front of her parents’ house. Faded and beige, just like her future. Pushing up and out of her elderly VW Beetle, she rolled her stiff neck and swept her long hair behind her ears. *Just a temporary setback*. She squared her shoulders and strode up the walkway. Just a few weeks home to lick her wounds, retool her resumé, and formulate a plan. Great-aunt Maxie always said a woman with a plan was unstoppable.

Fluid piano jazz drifted from the house. Mom was finally playing again. Laurel hardly recognized her in the photo her sister sent, elegant in her sequined sheath dress, bent with feverish intensity over a baby grand. Sparkly, glowing, passionate.

But the front door opened to reveal the same old Mom. Tall and rangy, wearing pastel capris and a faded floral blouse.

“Laurel.” Her cheeks bunched like shiny pink apples. “Good to see you, my baby. Lunch is ready. Let’s catch up before you hit the road.”

She blinked in surprise. “Hit the road? I just got here.”

Her mom waved absently. “Well, you know how afternoon traffic can be on I-5.”

Willow waddled through the kitchen door carrying a steaming casserole. She set it down and shuffled over to welcome the black sheep.

“Laur-bear!” Her massive pregnant belly pushed Laurel as they rocked back and forth. She pulled back and gave her a head-to-toe inspection. “You’re too thin. Come eat.”

“Here.” Laurel pulled a wrapped package from her bag. “I made something for your baby.”

Willow unwrapped a round mirror, its wooden frame painted with colorful dots, zig-zags, and spirals. She turned it over and read aloud, “Welcome to the world, beautiful baby, from your Aunt Laurel.”

“The patterns are supposed to be stimulating, or something. I read an article...” She’d tried to mimic the expensive wooden toys in Portland baby boutiques. Now, in her sister’s hands, the gift looked like something made by an over-eager first grader.

Willow flashed a plastic smile. “It’s lovely.”

No mention of Laurel’s bad news. Very odd. The last time she lost a job, she endured two weeks of nagging and lectures.

You’re not a kid anymore. Isn’t it time for you to give up that art nonsense and settle down?

When will you get a real job?

Why can’t you be realistic, like your sister?

Maybe, focused on the arrival of their first grandchild, her parents would cut her some slack this time?

“There she is, our little dropout.”

No such luck.

Her dad loomed in the doorway, wiry arms crossed, pale eyes narrowed. “What’s with the blue hair? Who’s going to hire you looking like that?”

Willow lifted the turquoise tips of Laurel’s heavy mane. “I like it. It’s—artistic.”

Dad harrumphed. "It's juvenile."

Might as well take the bull by the horns. She straightened her spine. "I didn't drop out, Dad, I got fired."

Mom shot him a tight glare, then patted Laurel's arm. "Well, you'll find something in Eugene."

She stepped back. "What are you talking about? Why would I go to Eugene?"

"Didn't you tell her?" Dad asked.

Mom shrugged. "I thought you told her."

"For goodness' sake, let's eat." Willow gestured to Laurel's customary spot at the dining table. "Lunch is getting cold."

"Not until you explain—"

"Sit, Laurel," Dad ordered. "Your mother made your favorite. Let's show some appreciation."

With a weary sigh, she took her seat, and the past ten years slid away like a coat dropping to the floor. Two days ago, she was an assistant in a trendy Portland art gallery, making big strides toward her dream career. Today, thanks to one stupid decision, she slumped in her chair, a gawky, sullen college girl.

And chicken casserole topped with potato chips was *not* her favorite. She loved Indian curries, fiery Vietnamese pho, garlicky falafel. Not gluey casseroles.

Willow passed the salad, mostly iceberg lettuce, with a sprinkling of shredded carrots and—were those raisins? She took a bite and wrinkled her nose.

"Something wrong with the food?" Dad asked, his pale eyes sharp.

"It's fine." She forced a grin. "Thanks, Mom."

Dad poured iced tea from the plastic pitcher. "So, fired again, eh?"

She flushed, but before she could snap out a retort, her mother interjected, her tone smooth as Jell-O, “Let it be, Dave. It’s not easy to break into the art world.”

He stabbed his food as if it were trying to scurry off his plate. “What did she expect, majoring in humanities?”

“Dad,” Willow hissed.

Easy for her to say. Willow’s office job at the wastewater treatment plant met their father’s definition of useful and practical. Another point in her favor, she was married to a nice, boring guy who’d grown up in their nice, boring town.

Laurel huffed. “Mom majored in music.”

“Your mother’s music is practical. She plays at church. Why can’t you—”

Mom cut him off again. “Laurel, you need to go help Aunt Maxie.”

She straightened in her seat. “Help her how? Is she okay?”

“No, not really.” Mom set her fork down and folded her hands. “She called us last week. She’s been having—she calls them ‘spells.’ She forgets where she is and how she got there.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard to dispel the scratchy lump in her throat. At ninety, her great-aunt still lived in a cottage stuffed to the rafters with her oddball art projects. Maxie was the only member of Laurel’s family who appreciated her artistic ambitions, her bohemian style. Wiry and feisty, she’d seemed invincible to the ravages of age. Until now.

Willow laid her hand over Laurel’s. “She’s moving to an assisted living facility. She wants help sorting through her stuff.” She patted her belly. “But I can’t really go in my condition.”

Mom added, “I have my piano students. And a gig this Saturday.”

“Don’t look at me,” her dad said through a mouthful of casserole. “You know I work long hours.” He swallowed, his sharp Adam’s apple bobbing, and pointed with his fork. “You’re the one with time to spare. Considering all Maxie did for you, I’d say you owe her.”

She couldn't argue with that. When she gave up her track scholarship at Oregon State to transfer to the University of Oregon, Aunt Maxie made up the difference in tuition. Aunt Maxie slipped her "a little something extra" when her paycheck didn't stretch to the end of the month. Aunt Maxie introduced her to local artists, inspiring her dream of owning a gallery. If Maxie needed her help, Laurel had to go.

Aww, but Eugene. Her college bestie worked in an avant garde theater in San Francisco. He had lots of contacts in the art scene and a vacant guestroom.

She heaved a guilt-laden sigh. "Okay. Of course. I'll go help Aunt Maxie. How long do you think it'll take?"

Dad snorted. "You've seen her place. Like a rat's maze."

"I'd give it a good month, baby." Mom patted her hand. "Maybe two."

"Get yourself a job down there." Dad's grin had sharp edges. "Go work in a coffee shop with the other humanities majors."

She bit back the snark itching to escape her tightly pinched lips.

Always the good girl, Willow modulated her voice with a note of sugary sweetness. "Come on, Dad, give her a break. She'll find something."

Mom nodded. "Of course she will."

Laurel shoveled gloopy chicken down her tight throat. She wouldn't let this change of plans derail her. In fact, spending time with Aunt Maxie sounded downright delightful, compared to fending off her dad's barbed comments, her mom's cluelessness, and her sister's pity.

She pushed back her chair and popped to her feet. "Lunch was delicious, Mom, but you're right about traffic. I'd better hit the road."

Willow followed her out. "Laurel, hang on." She gripped her elbow and guided her to the shade of the big sycamore beside the driveway. "Look, I know it's hard, but can't you just—"

“Just what, Willow? Pretend everything’s peachy?” Bitterness gave her voice a ragged edge. “‘Cause guess what—it’s not. I got fired. I’m broke. Maxie’s sick.” She waved toward the front door. “And they’re too busy playing the perfect postcard family to help her.”

Willow knuckled her eyes. “They don’t get Maxie like you do. Even if they went down there, Mom would just throw away all her art stuff, and Dad would boss her around ‘til she cries.”

“Or whacks him with her cane.”

They both chuckled. Willow pulled her in for a hug. “You know, we’ve moved past it. Why can’t you? Things are better now.”

The warmth she felt for her sister evaporated like a puff of breath in January. “I dunno. Maybe I’m just waiting for someone to apologize.”

She climbed into her VW and drove off without looking back.

Her car began to hiccup at the first traffic light off the freeway. By the time she pulled into Eugene’s Whiteaker district, it developed a raspy cough.

“Come on, sweetheart, you can make it.” She patted the dashboard. “I’ll get you fixed as soon as I get my first paycheck.”

Her bank account was just as anemic as her car. Even with her best friend’s offer of free couch surfing, she’d have to build up her funds before moving on to San Francisco. Maybe Aunt Maxie could help her find a temporary job.

She rolled down her window and inhaled the fresh, green scent of summer. Maxie’s neighborhood hadn’t changed, still lushly planted with flowering shrubs and mature trees. She recognized the huge forked maple at the corner of Aunt Maxie’s street, but almost drove right past the house.

Did it look this rough last time I was here? Turquoise paint fell in flakes from the wooden siding. Above the porch, faded Tibetan prayer flags fluttered their tattered edges. The once-bright rainbow porch railing had faded to pastels, like dribbles of melting ice cream. The whole place just looked—tired.

She sat for a long moment in the driveway, stewing in her guilt. She hadn't seen Maxie since Christmastime, and already it was late summer. She could easily have made the trip down from Portland at least once a month. But instead of hanging out with Maxie, Laurel spent her weekends on pointless dates with uninspiring guys. Bunch of posers, pretending to be interested in art so they could date the tall blonde gallery assistant. Not one of those guys got her the way Maxie did.

A glimpse of red fluff appeared in the window. The front door opened, revealing a beaming Maxie in all her Technicolor glory. Her baby-fine hair glowed henna red, and rhinestones twinkled from her cat's-eye glasses. Chunky rings bedecked her gnarled, ropy hands, and her knee-length tunic bore a tie-dyed rainbow swirl.

"Laurel," Maxie bellowed. Her foghorn voice hadn't lost its power. "Get up here, my precious girl."

Grinning, she trotted up the stairs and wrapped her arms around her tiny mentor.

"Easy now." Maxie's smile folded her cheeks and forehead into papery pleats. "I'm not so steady on my feet these days." She thumped her cane. Typical Maxie, it was covered with rhinestones, metallic trim, and swirls of bright paint.

"New art project?"

"Oh, this?" She chuckled, her laughter raspy and deep. "One of many." Moving slowly, she settled onto a creaking wicker loveseat on the porch. "Tell me, dear heart."

"Tell you what?" One penciled-on eyebrow raised. "What happened at the gallery?"

Laurel slumped beside her. "Mom told you?"

She nodded. "She loves you, you know. And she wants you to succeed."

"As long as I do something practical. And boring."

"Now, now." Maxie patted her hand. "It's a mother's nature to worry. So, why'd they fire you this time?" She might be ninety, but nothing interesting escaped Maxie's sharp eyes. Or ears.

Her sigh lifted Maxie's baby-fine hair. "The manager put me in charge of a new display while she was on vacation. Why put me in charge if she didn't want me to use my creativity? How's she gonna attract new customers if she keeps using the same old boring set-up?" She slumped onto the seatback. "The artist liked my ideas."

"You didn't check with the boss first?"

"No." Her mouth settled into a pout.

Maxie chuckled softly. "What did you do?"

"Arranged the display panels in a maze."

"Sounds fun."

"Right?" Her eyebrows shot up. "I thought, let's invite the customers into a secret world, a different reality, like Alice through the looking glass. But noooo. Some rich-ass customer didn't like it." She picked at a fuzzball on her T-shirt. "More than one complained, I guess. So she fired me."

Maxie patted her knee. "Her loss. Come inside, my dear."

"Let me just get my things." She hauled her duffle bag through the living room, with its hand-loomed rugs and mountains of embroidered pillows, through the hallway hung with photos—Maxie on the beach, riding a camel, lounging on the hood of a classic convertible, cradled in the arms of a shirtless young man...

As she entered the room where she lived her last two years of college, Laurel braced herself for the flood of memories: cramming for her art history final, weeping into her pillow over Carlo, tossing her mortarboard the night before graduation, trying to conjure up a vision of her future. And here she was again. But where was the guest room? The familiar daybed and vintage day-glo posters hid behind a wall of moving cartons.

"We'll just move these boxes over there." Maxie waved her sparkly cane.

"What's in all these?"

Maxie sighed, a raspy, weary sound. “Memories, my dear. Fleeting wisps of joy and love. When you get to be my age, you need something tangible to hang those memories on. Otherwise, they get slippery.”

A shiver ran down her back. Soon, too soon, her mentor would be gone. *Don't let Maxie see. She's feeling bad enough without my gloom.*

She pasted on a cheerful smile. “You’re taking all this to your new place?”

“Oh, no. Only a few dozen boxes. Whatever’s left will go...” She trailed off, her blue-gray eyes misty and unfocused. “Well, you’ll help me figure it out.”

Laurel’s heart squeezed. Leaving the house she’d lived in for forty-plus years must be devastating for Maxie. She didn’t have much to offer, just time and youthful energy, but she’d do what she could to help her aunt pack up the remains of her long, sparkly life.

Three hours later, Laurel massaged her aching lower back. While Maxie directed from the sofa, she’d filled a dozen cartons, separating them into a keeper pile, a giveaway pile, and a pile marked “December.” Maxie refused to explain that one.

“I’ll call a few of my young friends tomorrow.” Maxie pushed up from the sofa. “Stanley will want those Balinese shadow puppets. And Margot would love those black lace doilies.”

Laurel fingered the lace atop the giveaway pile. “You could make all kinds of cool things with these. Goth flower pins to wear on your lapel or your hat, funky fascinators, maybe Modge Podge them onto picture frames.”

“You keep them, kiddo. Have fun.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean me.” She shrugged and dropped the lace. “I mean someone with talent.”

Maxie clucked her tongue. “There you go again. You got plenty of talent. You just lack stick-to-itiveness.”

Laurel turned to hide her smirk. A long line of art teachers hadn't shared Maxie's faith in her potential. The time finally came when persisting just felt futile. And exhausting. And stupid.

Leaning on her cane, Maxie clomped toward the kitchen. "More tea, darling? Another smoothie?"

Since she'd already downed a quart of green tea and two of Maxie's swamp water smoothies, Laurel declined. "I'd really like to head out for a run, loosen up my back."

"Of course, my gazelle. Go stretch those long legs."

She dug out her electric-blue running shorts and a rainbow tank. She'd need new running shoes soon, but those could wait until she found a job.

"I'll be back in an hour or two." She loped off toward the cool, soothing green of Alton Baker Park.

She'd missed her runs along the Willamette River, the rhythm of her feet slapping on the pavement, her breath sliding in and out, steady as the tides. When she ran, worries about the future unhooked their claws.

Just breathe. Just run. Just be.

Chapter Two

On auto-pilot, Doug's pounding feet carried him to Alton Baker Park. Enough sunlight remained for another hour of running, but his sluggish legs protested every step. It wasn't the workout dragging him down, it was the fat envelope that arrived in his mailbox a few hours ago. He'd known it would come any day now, but still it squashed him like a sack of rocks.

Shake it off. Man up. Move on. This kind of pep talk bullshit seemed to help his student athletes, but it damned sure wasn't helping today.

With a disgusted grunt, he ducked off the riverside path to gulp water from a drinking fountain by the playground.

A pair of little arms clamped around his knees from behind. "Uncle Doug!"

"Hey there, Princess." He grinned down at the daughter of his best friend and fellow teacher. "What are you doing here?"

"Swings. Push me." Her poufy ponytails bobbing, she skipped to the swing set, where her parents watched, laughing.

"Hey, Doug." Destiny reached up for a hug.

Palms up, he backed away. "Been running for an hour. I'm pretty ripe."

She squeezed him anyway. "I'm used to it. Besides, no one out-stinks Marcus after a run."

"Thanks, baby." Marcus shot her a snarky grin as he lifted Aliyah toward the swing.

She stuck out her lower lip. "No. Doug do it."

Destiny laughed. "Well, I guess she told you." Her phone buzzed. "Sorry guys, gotta take this one." She strolled over to a bench, leaving the men on swing-pushing duty.

"Wheee! Again." Aliyah kicked her feet, her sparkly tennies flashing.

While Doug pushed, Marcus quizzed him. "How's your mom?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes she's almost her old self. Other times, she thinks I'm one of the nurses."

Marcus grimaced. "Man, that's rough. How about you? Big day today. How you holding up?"

Crappy. I'm thoroughly crappy. "I've gotta admit, getting those papers was hard. I mean, I wanted the divorce, after what she did, but seeing it on paper's so, so—"

"Final?" Marcus flashed a wry grimace.

"Yeah. I can't even imagine. I mean, if Destiny ever—"

"She won't."

"Naw. She wouldn't. She's steady. Strong. And she calls me on my shi—" His gaze cut to his daughter. "On my stuff."

"Again," Aliyah demanded.

"Okay, squirt. Here comes a super-mega-high push. Ready?" Doug buzzed his lips in a drumroll sound and pulled the swing backward until Aliyah dangled high above him, kicking her plump little legs in delight. "Three, two, one, launch."

He let go, and she sailed skyward. Her father's cushioning arms braked her flight and brought her back to earth. "Out you go, pumpkin. Go play on the climbing castle. I need to talk to Uncle Doug."

"Work stuff?"

"Yup."

"Okay." She trotted off while they settled on a nearby bench.

Marcus draped his long arms along the back. "So, that mess is all done, eh?"

"Almost. Still dickering over the house." He bent and fiddled with his shoelace. "Guess her new boyfriend's not as generous as she thought."

"Grasping bitch. Good riddance."

"I thought—" He ran his hand over his shaved scalp. Putting this mess into words was like wrestling with a knot of eels. "I thought it would feel good to finally get the divorce, but it just..."

“Dude, it’s a big deal. Give yourself time to digest it.” Marcus clapped his hand onto Doug’s shoulder. “So, what’s next, my friend?”

“Nothing much. Just work. The race next weekend.”

“Don’t give me that crap.” He nudged him. “See, that’s why you need a good woman—to make you answer the important questions in life.”

Doug grimaced. “I don’t want to worry about dating now. Everyone’s coming at me with set-ups. I need time alone to get my head on straight.”

Marcus raised one eyebrow. “You’ve had a year alone unless there’s someone you haven’t told me about.”

“There isn’t.” He slumped, elbows on his knees.

“So, when your head is straight again, what do you want?”

“Huh?”

“You’re starting a new chapter. What does that look like?”

He shrugged.

Marcus’ grip tightened. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

“Ow. Okay, okay.” He shook off his friend’s grasp. “I want a good woman.”

“Tell me what she’s like, this good woman.”

He rose and paced in front of the bench. “I want someone real. A partner, like you and Destiny.”

“Good. What else?”

“Someone who likes to be outside. Maybe a runner. Tiffany hated running.”

“Forget Tiffany. Tiffany is over. Tell me about this new woman.”

“She’s—interesting. And kind. She cares about something beyond herself.” He chuckled. “And she loves sex.”

“Hoo boy. That could be a problem.”

He sank onto the bench. “Are you telling me Destiny doesn’t like sex?”

“Oh, she likes it fine.” He laughed. “But I’m not carrying an anaconda in my pants.”

Doug quirked a wry grin. “It’s a blessing and a curse.”

“Hell, wish I was cursed like that.”

“No, you don’t.” He stretched his legs out, then subtly adjusted the tight running briefs that kept his blessing in place. “I know how a rich guy must feel. You’re never sure if a woman likes you for yourself, or just for what you bring to the table.”

“You put it on the table? Damn.” Marcus spluttered with laughter.

“Shut up.” He pushed himself up. “I better get back. It’s almost dark.”

“Don’t worry, Cue Ball. Your shiny white head will light the way.”

“Look who’s talking, Eight Ball.” Both men dealt with their premature hair loss in the same way—shave it clean off.

Destiny stepped up behind them and cleared her throat. “If you two are done comparing penises, we should get going.”

Doug groaned and hid his heated face in his hands.

“See?” Marcus said. “That’s the trouble with women. They act all cute and delicate, but they got sneaky ninja skills.” He called to Aliyah. “Time to go, baby girl.”

“I’m not a baby.” She stomped over to her parents, pausing to hug Doug’s knees again. “G’night, Uncle Doug. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

He waved as the happy family drove off toward home. With a wistful sigh, he hit the trail again. Alone.

The river breeze caressed Laurel's cheek and cooled her sweaty skin. Deep-blue summer twilight hung like velvet curtains. She should head back to Maxie's soon, but the air was so delicious, the tree-lined path so inviting. The ripe, green scent of water and trees beckoned her further into the park.

Just a few more minutes, then I'll turn around.

On the other side of the bushes, kids squealed on the playground. Lots of people still in the park. She tuned out the voice reminding her a woman alone after dark was asking for trouble. Instead, she focused on birdsong, tweets and chirps and trills and caws and—

“Yo, sweet thang. Don't run away.”

A guffaw spluttered from the bushes.

A higher voice chimed in. “Mmm. Look at that ass. Mama, you make me so hard.”

Shitshitshit. In her hurry to catch a run before sunset, she hadn't unpacked her running belt, the one that held her pepper spray. Her thudding heartbeat picked up speed, and so did her long legs. *Asshole kids hiding in the bushes, harassing women.* She almost flung a few choice words back at them, but that usually just escalated things. Better to ignore them and keep on running.

“Come back, Blondie. I just want a little taste.”

Footsteps behind her. Just one set but closing fast. She gulped air and lengthened her stride. Her quads burned, and her sides ached, her reserves nearly spent.

I'll never run without pepper spray again.

The guy was almost on her, puffing like a bellows.

“Babe, there you are. Hold up.” This voice was deeper and lacked the mocking tone of the others.

Without slowing, she risked a backward glance. A tall bald guy. Serious runner, judging by his gear. His face dripped from exertion, but his broad smile held no threat. He tilted his shaved head toward the bushes and winked.

She slowed, and he pulled up alongside her. His voice rang out, unnecessarily loud. “I stopped to tie my shoelaces, and you disappeared.”

Hard of hearing? Near-sighted?

He threw a glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. “You okay?”

Understanding dawned. *He’s rescuing me.*

“I’m good. Thanks.” She jogged to a stop and bent over, hands on her knees, gulping air. He waited beside her, facing the bushes she’d fled, his breathing hard but steady. Expensive running shoes. Above his big feet rose long, well-muscled legs encased in snug shorts and—God help her—the finest ass she’d seen in a long, long time. High and firm and muscular, with an adorable hollow at each side that made her fingertips itch to trace its contours. He kept his back to her as he scanned the trail. And what a back it was, outlined by his sweat-soaked T-shirt, narrow at the waist and broad at the shoulders. He ran his long fingers over his shiny shaved head, then turned to face her.

Late thirties, she guessed. High cheekbones, long, aquiline nose, straight, pale brows, and deep-set eyes, blue as the summer twilight. A shadow of golden scruff covered his sharp jawline. His lips spread in a slow smile, transforming his friendly, bony face into something dazzling.

Their eyes met, and a spark jolted her, strong and sharp and aimed straight at her center.

Uh-oh.

She’d felt this spark before with Carlo, her college boyfriend, the one who loved her hard and fierce for two years before dumping her just before graduation. Instant attraction like this spelled trouble, the last thing she needed. Especially now.

She gave her head a little shake. *Just a nice, friendly guy. No need to panic.*

“Thanks for stopping. Those guys—”

A voice rang out from the bushes. “Blondie, where are you?”

Then another. “Come back here and show me some love.”

And a third. “You know you want to.”

His easy grin slid into a scowl. “ ‘Scuze me.” He sprinted toward the voices. At his approach, the shrubs exploded in a flurry of rustling.

“Shit, it’s Mr. Garvey.”

“Run!”

Scuffling sounds followed, along with cursing. A moment later, the tall guy emerged, his arms crosshatched with welts and scratches, clutching a plump, pimply teenager by the back of his shirt. The kid squirmed in a vain effort to escape. He couldn’t have been more than fourteen. Eyes bulging, he blinked up at his captor, then at Laurel, both of whom towered over his greasy head.

The man leaned in, his handsome face thunderous, and snarled in the kid’s ear. “What do you say to the lady?”

The boy lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

He gave the kid a shake. “And?”

“It won’t happen again.”

Not so brave now, are you, little macho? She swallowed a snort of laughter and glared at the kid.

His eyes brimmed with tears. “Please don’t tell my dad, Coach. He’ll kill me.”

For a moment, she thought the kid might wet his pants.

The man glared like an eagle clutching a rat in its talons. He relaxed his grip. “Get out of here.”

The kid scrambled back into the bushes.

A tickly, nervous giggle escaped her throat. “Coach?”

“Cross country. North Eugene High. Home of the Highlanders.” He chuckled. “And a few low-lives, like Justin and his buddies.” He shuffled his big feet on the pavement, then fixed his blue, blue eyes on hers. “I’m Doug, by the way.”

She extended her hand. “Laurel.”

His palm was warm, his grip firm but gentle. He held her gaze so long she filled the awkward silence with embarrassed blathering. “Great name for a tall girl, right? Like a tree.”

She calculated his height. Six foot six? Or seven? Six feet tall in her bare feet, she seldom met a guy who towered over her like this. He made her feel delicate, for once.

She cleared her throat. “Are you going to tell his dad?”

He tapped his lips with his forefinger, then grinned. “Nope. His mom. She works in the school cafeteria.”

“Ooo. A lunch lady. They’re tough.”

When he laughed, his craggy face lit up with a playful energy that made her want to—what, exactly? She wasn’t looking for a new boyfriend. After her last break-up, she’d promised herself to go three whole months before dating again, time to reset her priorities, find her center—stuff like that.

She cleared her throat. “Well, thanks for being my pretend boyfriend. Best fifteen-minute relationship ever.”

“Let’s make it a bit longer.” The corners of his wide mouth lifted, and a by-God dimple winked in the hollow of his cheek.

“Oh, um...” In her belly, a swarm of fireflies began their jittery, glowing dance.

“It’s nearly dark. Let me run you back to your car.”

The fireflies winked out, leaving her oddly disappointed.

“Actually, I came on foot.”

“Okay, I’ll run you home. Which way?”

“It’s not necessary, really.” His open, earnest smile tugged her toward surrender. *Maybe just a little flirtation to pass the time until I move to San Francisco?*

She gave herself a mental kick. *Nope. Gotta be ready for a fast exit.*

Still, it would be fully dark soon. “Okay, thanks. I’m a few miles back that way, over the bridge.”

“Shall we?” He broke into a slow, loping pace, graceful as a giraffe. She fell in step beside him. They crossed the DeFazio Pedestrian Bridge and turned toward Maxie’s neighborhood.

“Here’s my place.” He nodded toward a big apartment complex.

“Oh.” A lump of disappointment settled in her middle. “Thanks for running with me. Maybe I’ll see you later”

He didn’t break stride. “Who said I was stopping?”

“You don’t have to—”

“Hey.” He slowed, looked at his watch. “I’m training for a 10K. I need at least another half hour. Let me take you home.”

“Um…”

He spread his hands, palms up. “Please? Otherwise, I’ll worry about you running alone in the dark.”

Stupid to let a strange man know where she lived, but something about him inspired her trust. He was a teacher, after all. And a coach.

“Okay, sure. Thanks.”

A few neighbors still lingered outside, chatting over fences, and a pair of kids dribbled a basketball in their driveway, its hollow plunk, plunk, plunk a counterpoint to Doug and Laurel’s footfalls. But most Whiteaker residents had retreated indoors, their air conditioners humming. TVs glowed and flashed through plate-glass windows. Maple leaves rustled overhead.

“Peaceful out here,” he said. “Have you lived here long? I haven’t seen you in the park.”

“I just arrived today. I’m staying with my great-aunt.”

“Ah.” He inclined his head. “I used to live out here. Over on Adams.”

“Why’d you move?”

His voice went flat. “I got divorced.”

She winced. *Way to put a nice guy on the spot.* “Oh. That sucks.”

One shoulder lifted. “Yeah, it does.”

“Well, here we are.” She trotted to a stop in Maxie’s driveway. Living room lights blazed through the sheer curtains. “Guess she’s still a night owl. Hope I have her energy at ninety.”

His eyebrows rose. “Ninety? Wow.” He crossed the driveway in a few long strides. “Interesting house. Good bones.” The porch rail wobbled beneath his hand. “Better get this fixed. Don’t want your aunt toppling into the rose bushes.”

“Yeah, the place needs some TLC, for sure.”

The screen door banged open. “Get off my porch,” Maxie bellowed, wielding her bejeweled cane overhead. Her flaming hair stood on end, and her thin lips curled into a snarl, like a mangy Pomeranian.

Doug took a step backward, palms out. “Sorry, ma’am. I was just seeing Laurel home.”

“Who?” Maxie brandished her cane. “You two get out of here, or I’ll call the cops.”

He shot Laurel a wide-eyed glance.

Her heart gave a wobbly thump. “Maxie, it’s me.” She stepped toward the porch light. “Sorry I’m late. I lost track of time.”

Maxie’s face sagged. “Susan?”

Laurel suddenly understood the expression *Her blood ran cold*. She clenched her hands to still their shivering.

“I’m Susan’s youngest, Laurel. I came to help you move, remember?”

Maxie blinked, her jaw hanging slack.

Doug’s hand fell softly onto her shoulder. She wanted to lean into him, let his warmth drive away the cold dread. Instead, she held out her hand to Maxie.

A lone tear trickled down her furrowed cheek. “Who’s this?”

“This is Doug. He’s—my friend. We went for a run. Okay?”

Maxie nodded and backed into the house. Her gravelly voice wavered. “Of course. Excuse me.” She shuffled into the living room and sank onto the sofa.

Tears prickling her eyes, Laurel stared after her, then up at Doug.

He rapped on the door frame. “Ma’am? Could I borrow a pen?”

Maxie pointed to the little table beside the door. “In the drawer.”

Taking Laurel’s hand, he scribbled a number onto her palm and lowered his voice. “I’ve seen this before. My mom has dementia. Call me if you need anything. Or just to talk. Maybe I can help.” He grasped her hand. “I want to help, Laurel.” He tilted his head toward Maxie, who stared into the distance. “What’s her last name?”

“Schmidt.”

He leaned through the doorway. “Good night, Ms. Schmidt. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too, young man,” she muttered. “Come visit us again.”

Doug squeezed Laurel’s arm before trotting down the stairs.

The cloud over Maxie’s eyes evanesced. Her voice strengthened. “Well, come inside, dear. Don’t stand there letting the bugs in.”

A violent chill rattled Laurel’s spine. *Oh God, what am I going to do?*

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