



Meet  
Me In

*Fantasyland*

Mary Martinez

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# Meet Me In Fantasyland

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**Meet Me in Fantasyland**  
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## Chapter One

Clarissa Tate, Rissa to her friends, stacked another box on the growing pile. Sitting on one of them, she sucked in her breath and tried to calm her heart rate. A trickle of sweat dripped from the curling tendrils of hair around the shell of her ear.

The clock on the wall said several hours had passed. A promise was a promise, even if only to herself. All of Tom's things would be in boxes by the end of the day.

Although it might kill her.

Twenty years of marriage and Tom was gone. Poof. One minute there, the next gone. Now what?

Wiping an arm across her brow, she reluctantly stood. The attic was next. With one foot hovering over the bottom stair, Rissa glanced toward the kitchen. A margarita would be heaven. Hell – a shot of tequila, forget the frou-frou.

Getting soused in the middle of the day was not a good idea. Making her choice, she headed for the dusty attic, armed with a glass of white wine.

The window allowed a small amount of light through the dirty glass. She stood hands on hips and contemplated the cobwebs. If one hideous spider came out of hiding, the next county would hear her loud scream.

Rissa almost turned around and gave up. Another two or three hours lay ahead of her. Where to start?

*Okay, let's be methodical about it.*

A deep breath and a sip of her wine and she turned left, to work her way clockwise around the room. Many of the boxes were hers, and old clothes of the children's. Not everything would be Tom's.

Rissa sat cross-legged on the floor in front of a dirty box. Her wine glass perched on a table; a vague memory teased her brain that this table once had graced their family room. Pulling the end of her sleeve down over her hand, she swept it across the top of the box.

*Diaries* was scribbled across the top in red crayon. The box probably belonged to her daughter, Sandra. When Rissa looked inside, though, she discovered they were all hers.

She took one from the top; the book fell open to a middle page. The date in the upper corner revealed her second grade year. Plucking the glass from the table, she sipped, letting the sweet liquid slide down her throat, and began to read.

*Today, Bobby and I put a toad in Mrs. Clarkson's desk. Mommy grounded me for two weeks. I haven't been able to call Bobby, but I bet he got a whuppin.*

Mrs. Clarkson—Rissa chuckled, remembering the look on the teacher's face, the way she'd squealed as the frog leaped from the drawer. She smiled as she read over the young handwriting and immature wording. Thank goodness, she never aspired to be a writer. Closing the diary, she placed it to the side and reached for another. A sigh broke from her lips. It had been a long time since her best friend Bobby Graham had graced her thoughts.

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Freshman year—oh that had been an emotional year for her. Fifteen years old and not allowed to date but that didn't stop her hormones from raging or having the biggest crush on the senior football captain.

*I told Bobby today that I was going to marry Derek Jones. He laughed so hard you'd have thought I told him a joke. I almost slapped his laughing face. I just don't understand Bobby sometimes.*

*At least he told me he was sorry. Then he told me he was in love with Georgette Madsen. Then I started to laugh. I stopped real fast. It wasn't Bobby's fault he was a geek and Georgette was one of the most popular girls in school.*

The diary dropped to her lap. Bobby had laughed at her for the same reason. Derek was a senior and to him, all freshmen were beneath his notice or *geeks*.

Carefully closing the diary and setting it aside with the first ones, she pulled the next one out. A tingle ran through her when she noticed the date. It was from her graduation day; Bobby had moved away shortly after. Her confidant, best friend, love advisor and co-conspirator. How she'd missed him! Brushing a stray hair out of her face, she wondered where Bobby was now.

*Today, I'm losing my best friend. Bobby's dad got transferred to Florida. What am I going to do? I can't remember Bobby not living next door. I know we're both going away to college, but if he didn't have to move, we'd have the summer.*

Rissa took a sip of Riesling and remembered. There never had been a need for girlfriends because of Bobby. After losing her best friend, it had been doubly hard to leave home for college with no one close to share the experience.

Ever since Tom had deserted her, there had been a fire in the pit of her stomach, not unlike when Bobby left all those years ago. Swiping at the tear sliding down her face, she picked the book up to read the next entry.

*Bobby came over to say good-bye and we made a pact. We're going to meet twenty-five years from today. We had a hard time deciding where. I suggested at the top of the Empire State Building like that old movie. Bobby didn't know what I was talking about.*

*He said we should meet under the arch in St. Louis. I told him that was lame. We ended up laughing at all the dumb places we both suggested. We finally decided on the dumbest one; the bridge leading to Cinderella's castle at Walt Disney World in Florida.*

Rissa smiled. They'd laughed so hard that her sides had ached. Taking another sip, she let her gaze wander through the attic. The break felt good, but now it was time to finish gathering Tom's things to put out for the Goodwill truck the next morning.

The diary closed with a small snap, she reached into the box to replace it and her hand paused. She narrowed her eyes in concentration; something niggled about the date. Rissa opened the book and found the page again.

"Oh my God." She took a gulp of wine, choked and spewed it all over the front of her. "Twenty-five years is in two weeks."

Was it a sign to find her old diaries? Should she go meet her old friend? No need to worry about what Tom would think.

The twins would be home soon from their last day of school before summer vacation. A trip to Florida would be a nice surprise for the kids. At sixteen, they were a little old though. Bobby probably wouldn't even show up. Now that the diary had been found with the reminder about the pact—

If she didn't go, she'd always wonder.

Rissa tackled the rest of the boxes with renewed energy. Sooner than expected, she was taking the last box down the stairs to the Goodwill collection.

The door flew open. Sandie blew in with Seth close on her heels. Coming to a skidding halt, they both looked up at her.

Seth gave her a cocky grin. "School's out!"

He began to sing, off key, an Alice Cooper song that had been popular even before her high school days.

Sandie elbowed her brother. "Grow up, we're going to be in eleventh grade, start acting like it." Throwing a punch toward the sky, she turned and almost ran into the stack of boxes. Frowning, she glanced back at Rissa.

"I'm sorry guys, your dad called and told me to get rid of all his things." Descending the bottom couple of stairs, she placed the last box on the pile.

Seth stopped singing and reached for one of the boxes. Rissa placed a hand on it to stop him from opening it.

"Leave it. I've worked all day to get things ready for the Goodwill truck tomorrow."

Both her children looked bewildered and she couldn't blame them. When Tom had left four months ago, he'd never come home to get any of his possessions. It had been as if one night the door would open and their dad would call out, "Hi I'm home."

Then this morning, out of the blue, his curt call told her to toss everything. Why wait? It was best for everyone to start clean without reminders of Tom all over the place.

"But isn't Dad going to be mad that you're getting rid of *all* his stuff?" Seth asked. "Doesn't the guy need clothes? Even if he did leave us for that slut."

"Watch your mouth, son." Rissa ran a dusty hand through her tousled hair. The euphoric feeling of finding the diaries dispelled as the discussion continued.

"Yeah Mom, Dad might come home to us after he realizes that *she* is barely older than Seth and me." Sandie frowned at her brother. "How old is she anyway? Twenty?"



I'm sure Dad's just going through that middle age thing." Her daughter turned to glare at the boxes, as if it was their fault.

"When I spoke to your dad this morning he informed me that he didn't want any of his things." Rissa took a deep breath and placed an arm around Sandie. "You both knew your dad filed for a divorce. I'm sorry, but that's not a mid-life crisis, honey. It will be final in the next couple of weeks."

The twins looked at her in bewilderment, as if they never believed the worst could happen until they saw the boxes, proof of his leaving. Sandie, tears in her eyes, shrugged Rissa's arm off to turn and run up the stairs.

Seth glanced back at the boxes. "How can he just leave all his things? Is he going to buy everything new?"

"Tom needed clothes long before this. I'm sure he already has a new wardrobe, Seth. Your father wants to start fresh and that means no reminders of the past." A lump formed in her throat at the pain in her son's eyes. It cut deeper than her husband's betrayal had. "I'm so sorry but it *is* best to give everything away."

Rissa waited for him to say something. Her son closed his eyes for a moment, his throat working as if swallowing his hurt. Seth wouldn't want to break down in front of her. His deep breath sounded ragged, as he forced the words out.

"I guess that's probably best. Sandie is positive he's coming back." Seth started to follow his sister up the stairs but hesitated, cocked his head to one side and asked. "Is Dad going to want to see Sandie and me? Or does he want to get rid of us too?"

How do you tell your children that their father is too uncomfortable to have them around his soon-to-be new wife, because of the closeness in age? There were so many things Rissa didn't understand and that made it impossible to explain to the children.

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Being a coward didn't help her children. Rissa couldn't let her children stew about what was happening in their young lives. Another glass of wine would fortify her. Damn Tom and his selfishness!

They'd been happy once. So much in love that nothing else mattered. Thinking back, Rissa wondered if it had been true. When the twins were born, his mother and hers had taken turns the first couple of months staying with them to lend a helping hand.

Together, they had watched the two take their first steps. Start Kindergarten. Then had come the school functions and parent/teacher conferences.

But somewhere along the line, Tom had turned into the proverbial work-a-holic, always claiming he had too much work and would she mind if he skipped out this once? Once had turned into every event; he always had something at work more important than his children or family.

Or had he? Had there been other women before what's her name?

By the time the children had turned into teenagers, her marriage was in name only. Rissa would turn to Tom at night for comfort. Instead, he would tell her how long his day had been, sorry he was tired.

Rissa shuddered in remembrance of the one time she'd forced the issue. Tom hadn't made love to her, it had been pure hurried sex – embarrassingly forced. The experience had never been repeated.

How long had that been? Two years? Three? Obviously, he'd taken care of his needs elsewhere.

After one long sip, Rissa set her wine down with a click on the glass tabletop. Why was it her job to clean up of his mess? Tom was off in la-la land with Blondie of the big boobs.

Rissa would comfort and guide her children through the change ahead, making sure that they *knew* their dad loved them. Somehow, she would convince the twins the divorce was strictly between Rissa and Tom and had nothing to do with them.

The problem was, when her ex-husband called that morning, Tom made it clear he wanted time alone. He'd made a point of telling her the lawyers were looking at the papers. As soon as possible, Tom would marry his bimbo. It would be a while before a visitation plan would be in place for the twins.

How in the world could he do this to them?

Rissa couldn't leave them alone any longer; it was time to explain the facts. But how? Pushing away from the table to stand, the wine went straight to her head. She held the back of the chair for a moment to get her equilibrium back in sync.

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## Chapter Two

Rissa knocked on her daughter's door.

And waited.

Placing an ear to the door, she could hear nothing on the other side. After a moment, she turned the knob and poked her head in. Her daughter sat on her bed, eyes closed, headset on, Ipod in her lap.

Raising her voice, she said, "Sandie?"

When Sandie's eyes opened, tears glistened on her lashes. Rissa walked to the bed, sat on the edge and waited while her daughter turned off whatever had been on the stereo.

"Will you come down to the living room? I'm going to go get Seth. I think we need a family meeting." Rissa held her arms out for a hug, but Sandie avoided them and frowned.

"Without Dad?"

The fire in the pit of Rissa's stomach turned to molten heat. She could practically feel the ulcers forming. "Yes."

Rissa swallowed down the hotness and waited. Sandie finally leaned in and put her head on Rissa's shoulder. She let her arms close around her daughter.

"He's really gone?" Her daughter's voice was a mere whisper.

“Yes.” Rissa pulled back a bit, leaving her hands on Sandie’s shoulders. “We’ll get through this, I promise.”

Rissa gave her daughter a kiss on the forehead, and then pushed herself up to stand by the bed. “I’ll go get Seth and call for pizza so we can have dinner as we talk.”

“Okay, but Mom, I’m not hungry.”

“I’m not either, honey, but we have to eat. It might as well be something fattening.” That brought a small, weak smile to Sandie’s lips as Rissa left the room to round up Seth.

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With an arm around each of her twins, Rissa told them, word for word, about the conversation with their dad that morning. Knowing they would be hurt, but determined to be honest, she knew in the end that it would be best.

“Dad may not want to see us ever again.” Seth sniffed.

Her son held back the tears, determined to be a man about things. If only he would let loose once to get it out of his system. He refused. Hopefully, the boy wouldn’t be alone when the pain eventually surfaced.

“I think right now the idea of the two of you joining him and his new wife is a little daunting. Especially because of the age difference; she’s not that much older than either of you.” She imagined Tom felt he had three children instead of just two. If he kept them apart it might be overlooked how young Blondie really was.

Rissa placed a kiss on Seth’s forehead then did the same to Sandie. “He’ll come around when he’s ready. In the meantime, I’m here for both of you if you need anything.”

"But who's going to be here for you?" Sandie asked.

If they only knew there hadn't been anyone to lean on for years. "Okay let me put it this way. We'll be here for each other. How's that?"

"Sounds good, Mom." Seth grinned, a little weak, but still there. "When is that darn pizza man going to get here?"

The doorbell rang as if on cue and they all laughed. Seth bounded off the couch to answer the door, while Rissa stood to search for her purse.

Just this once, an exception to the food in the kitchen only rule, they ate in the living room. Paper plates, pizza cartons and pop cans were spread across the coffee table.

Sandie turned on her favorite television show *American Idol*. The finalists on the program were down to six. Seth made it known he thought the hot looking girl would win. On the other hand, Sandie rooted for the handsome young man who sang like Frank Sinatra.

Rissa sighed, waiting for the right moment to broach the subject of a trip to Disney World. The trip would still be an adventure even if the twins were a little old. They could do lots of things, like visit Universal Studios and Sea World.

Ryan Seacrest announced they would be back in a moment, providing the break she'd waited for. "I was thinking maybe we'd take a vacation. You know get away, enjoy ourselves, what do you think?"

"Where?" Sandie turned her attention away from the dancing bunny and looked at her.

"Florida? Disney World."

"Lame," Seth announced around a mouthful of pizza.

"Oh fun! I hear the Tower of Terror at MGM is great." Sandie countered. "And they have fun water parks. Come on, Seth you like to swim."

“And we could spend a day at Sea World or Universal.” Rissa smiled, hopeful they’d say yes.

“I guess that would be okay. When would we go?” Seth asked.

“In two weeks.”

“Why can’t we go sooner?” Sandie frowned.

Rissa put the can of pop to her lips and gulped down a swallow. “Promise not to laugh?”

Seth looked around her at his sister and raised a brow. “Sure.”

“Have I ever told you about my friend Bobby?”

“Yes,” They chorused.

“Well, when Bobby’s dad was transferred we made a pact to meet in twenty-five year at the bridge to Cinderella’s castle.”

“Oh man, how corny. Why in the world did you pick that place?” Seth asked as they both laughed.

“It’s a long story. I’d forgotten all about it until I found my old diaries earlier today. Bobby probably won’t even be there, but I thought if we all go for a vacation I can check it out.”

“You two must have been great friends. Why didn’t she ever write you?” Sandie’s gaze swung back to the young Frank Sinatra wannabe. “Hold on a minute.”

Ryan Seacrest took stage and called the two contestants to stand on either side of him. The twins scooted forward as if they wouldn’t hear if they didn’t get as close to the television as possible. Seth’s hot chick smiled at the audience, but then Ryan said, *America voted and you’re going home*. Young Frank threw his arms around the losing singer, but it was hard to tell if he comforted her or not.

“Man, I voted for her. I know everyone red-blooded male in this country did too.”



Rissa tried not laugh, but a chuckle escaped nonetheless. "The boy had more talent though."

"Yeah, it's not all about looks, you know." Her daughter smiled. "So are we going to go meet your girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?" Rissa was puzzled for a moment, and then realized Bobby could be a girl's name. "Bobby isn't a woman."

Both her children turned to her in question and a shiver of unease slid down her spine. Maybe they wouldn't understand. After all, even though four months had passed since Tom left, she had packed up all his clothes today – making the hurt fresh.

"Bobby and I were just buddies."

"Is he gay then?" Seth asked.

Without warning, the laugh erupted from the bottom of her stomach. Leave it to her son to believe that was the only way a guy could be a buddy to a girl.

"No, he used to ask me advice about girls all the time. And I'd ask him about guys."

"So why didn't you marry him instead of Dad?" Sandie asked.

"He moved away and we lost touch. I loved Bobby like a brother." Rissa pictured him the last time, standing on her porch. The look on his face made her pause a moment. Had it only been friendship?

"Well I think it's romantic to meet after twenty-five years." Sandie threw her arm around her and gave her a squeeze. She gave her daughter a startled look. What did the exuberance mean?

Seth winked at her, "I'll let you guys drag me to Florida then. I want to meet this guy. I bet he really is gay and just wasn't out of the closet back then."

"Seth!" Rissa laid a hand over her flat tummy as if it would hold back more giggles. "Believe me he wasn't."

“Yeah right, Mom.” He shook his head.

Picking up her can to drain the last little bit of cola, she bent and grabbed the paper plates. Sandie reached over, gathering dirty paper towels and Seth followed suit. Rissa blinked. Usually, unless a reward was offered, neither of the kids helped. Well it seemed to be a miracle.

One she would enjoy for tonight.

\* \* \* \*

After the twins settled in for the night, Rissa went to her room to read for a while. Sleep would be a long time coming. Excitement and memories tumbled through her brain, causing smiles over the diaries and sadness for the closure of her marriage.

Until today, nothing had felt permanent although she'd had four months to get used to his side of the bed being empty. As she packed, a shirt would remind her of something, or a picture would bring back the events of that day. Continually throughout the afternoon, fragments of their life together had flashed through her mind. When she closed the lid on the last box of Tom's belongings, it snapped with finality.

He would never come home.

Selecting a book from the bookshelf, she caught her reflection in the mirror out of the corner of her eye. Striding over, Rissa stopped, tilted her head to one side and took inventory.

Her metabolism worked in her favor; there had been no weight gain after high school. In fact, after the babies were born, paranoia had set in about regaining her

former figure and like a maniac she'd worked out every day. There wasn't a calorie that wasn't counted or noted before crossing her lips.

The results had been wonderful. Rissa ended up in better shape than ever and ten pounds less than before the kids were conceived. Since then she'd been careful and hadn't added even an ounce.

At forty-two, no gray strands threaded through her rich sable hair. Her breasts were still firm but the southward journey progressed a little every day. Thank God for Victoria Secret's push-up bras.

Apparently, it wasn't enough to keep her wayward soon-to-be ex-husband interested though.

A long sigh escaped through clenched teeth. Why beat her head against the wall? For several years, the blinders helped her to ignore the signs. Rissa could no longer hide behind the illusion of their happy family. Only two more years until the twins were eighteen, not that long to keep up the pretence. Why couldn't Tom have waited?

To be truthful, she could admit to herself now that Tom's possessions were gone, a weight had lifted from her shoulders. He wouldn't change his mind so there was no need to waste her time and energy wondering.

Thank goodness, Rissa was financially solvent, the house paid for, and the divorce settlement gave her child support and alimony. Eventually if she wanted to stay that way, though, she'd need a job. Her resume was something she might as well start on in the morning.

## Chapter Three

Where had the two weeks gone? Their suitcases were by the door. Rissa walked to the stairs and looked up. Where were the twins? The taxi would be there any minute to take them to the airport.

“Seth? Sandie? Light a fire and hurry!”

No response. Ever since she'd found the diaries the butterflies in her stomach had made sleep impossible. Her wardrobe was a disaster. What do you wear to meet a long lost friend, who could turn out to be the man who should have been the love of her life? Maybe there would be some quiet on the plane. She wouldn't accept black bags under her eyes.

Why even worry about that? Bobby had never been anything but her best buddy. Casual clothes had finally won the toss. It was a vacation after all, and Bobby probably wouldn't even remember. *Especially if he had a wife.*

Guys didn't keep track of things like women did. Besides even she'd forgotten the pact until the diary had been found.

A honk blared outside. “Taxi's here you two, lets go!”

Running feet sounded in the upstairs hall. A moment later, the twins appeared at the top of the stairs, pushing and shoving their way down until they would probably end in a tangled heap in the entry.

Both in such a hurry.

Finally, the two stood unscathed in front of her and a breath that had been held in her throat escaped. "Take it easy, we want to get there in one piece."

Seth threw a brotherly scowl at Sandie. "*She* was hogging the bathroom."

"You could have used mine." When it looked like Sandie was about to argue with Seth, Rissa interrupted, "Come on grab your bags; let's get going."

Her backside held the door open while Sandie and Seth battled to go through first. She raised her head and prayed to the heavens then grabbed her bag and followed them to the taxi.

It was going to be a long vacation if this was any indication of things to come. The two usually got along. It had to be the fact this would be their first vacation without their father.

\* \* \* \*

Rob Graham stood at his car and waited for his daughter Mandy. His watch said it had been fifteen minutes – so much for her promise of two.

Girls! Did it get worse after thirteen?

Would he survive?

Mandy's friend Sharon would be the next stop. If the gods were smiling, she'd be ready. Then, there would be the hour or more drive to Orlando from their home in Tampa. Nerves tingled along his body; the wait didn't help.

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Would Rissa be there? Twenty-five years was a long time and they'd lost touch after both had started college. Would a husband be there with her? After all, theirs hadn't been a sexual relationship. He'd been the brother she had always wanted.

The problem was that he'd been in love with the young Rissa for as long as he remembered. Rob had respected her feelings, dated others and never mentioned his affection, afraid of losing their friendship.

College had come and gone. When he started work, there had been a sassy woman who caught his attention. They'd married and Rob had done everything in his power to make their life good. The love had been there; his one hope was that she passed away never knowing she held second place in his heart.

Mandy bounded down the front porch steps. "Dad, what are we waiting for? Let's go."

Just like his daughter. Rolling his eyes at her, he opened the door. "Are we going to have to wait an hour for Sharon too?"

"She just called to see why we were late."

At least something had started a fire burning under Mandy. Rob hopped in his side, anxious to get on the road. That's why they were leaving today. Bright and early the next day, he planned to be on that bridge.

On the chance that Rissa did show up, Rob didn't want her to have to wait and wonder. The thought of seeing her again made his gut wrench.

\* \* \* \*

An exclamation sounded from the back seat when Rissa pulled into the parking lot at the resort. Both the kids were awestruck. The cottage at the Boardwalk Resort looked like an old-fashioned city in the nineteenth century. She loved it on sight.

The web site had described everything from floor plan to the theme and atmosphere of the resort. She knew the small kitchen would save on meals. The list of activities and the large pool would be a hit with the twins. The nostalgic environment was such a novelty the twins were sure to have a grand time.

This vacation would be wonderful whether her old friend showed up or not. Her small family needed this time to get used to being a threesome instead of a foursome.

Unlocking the door, she stepped in and dropped her bag. The cottage was perfect. Compact and cozy.

Sandie walked past her, exploring the living and kitchen areas. "Wow, this is great, Mom."

"Yeah did you see that pool? And the girls?"

Rissa turned to Seth and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey I'm a guy."

As if that explained everything.

Sixteen and the hormones were raging. Rissa laughed. "Come on, go put your things away. I'm starved. Let's find someplace to eat. Tomorrow we can cook in if we want."

"When are you supposed to meet Bobby?" Sandie called over her shoulder halfway down the hall.

"Tomorrow."

Seth let out a sigh, "We know that, but what time?"

“It was twenty-five years ago, we didn’t think about a time.” Rissa shrugged, chagrined to realize it might be a long wait on the bridge.

“Are you just going to stand there all day?” Seth voiced her thoughts.

“I guess I’ll have to, unless he shows up early. I’ll cross my fingers and hope that happens.”

“I still think it’s romantic.” Sandie walked back into the small living area and kissed her cheek.

“Sandie, we were just friends. If he does remember, he’ll probably have his family, just like I do. And that will probably include a wife.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that.”

Sandie sounded so despondent, Rissa almost laughed. She watched the two turn down the hall and disappear through separate doorways. She should do the same. The twins’ attitude toward her meeting another man, even though just a friend, surprised her.

After losing their father to Blondie a little over four months ago, shouldn’t there be some rebellion on their part? They seemed to know that she needed someone, even as a friend, and the twins were very adult in the understanding of it all. Her babies were growing up. A tear escaped and slithered down her cheek.

Damn, no crying aloud.

So far, the kids hadn’t caught her crying and it wasn’t going to happen now.

It was easy now to think of Tom no longer in her life. The grieving process of losing her lover had been over for a long time. The hurt he’d inflicted on the twins still needed to be dealt with and this vacation would go a long way toward that end.



If, or when, Bobby showed up and any problems arose—as in the twins didn't like him—Rissa would tell him their renewed friendship would not work. Tom had thought of himself before the kids; she couldn't and wouldn't do the same.

\* \* \* \*

“Mom are you sure you're going to be okay here by yourself?” Sandie asked.

Rissa looked around at the mob of people filing over the bridge. “I'm hardly alone, dear. You and Seth go have a good time.”

Seth looked at his watch, “We'll check back here in two hours, or close to it. If we get stuck in line or something we'll call.”

“I'll be fine, honest. And I have my cell. I can call you if I have a problem. If you come back and I'm not standing here, I'll be over there on the benches.” She pointed to the side of the cobbled road that ran in front of the bridge.

“Love you, Mom.” Sandie kissed her cheek then walked away with Seth. They both turned and waved before disappearing into the crowd.

\* \* \* \*

Rob watched the mass of humanity swarm in different directions as they entered the park's main entrance. “Mandy, where do you two want to go first?”

Again, the thought crossed his mind. Would Rissa even be there? The main street that led to the bridge would take a while to navigate. Nerves shivered just under his skin. Would she look the same? Maybe he was in for a shock.

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Mandy craned her neck, looking in all directions as if to make up her mind, and turned to her friend, "Sharon, where do you think?"

"Let's go to Splash Mountain."

"I thought you didn't like to get wet." Mandy laughed. "Dad, that's where we'll go. What time do you want us to meet you?"

"Meet me at the bridge or I could be at one of the benches nearby, I'm sure you'll find me, let's say in an hour."

They ran off. Oh, to have so much energy! Taking a breath, he maneuvered around the crowd to head in the direction of the castle. He had stalled by checking out the shops. He didn't know why he was afraid. Was he fearful Rissa wouldn't be there or was it the thought of her being happily married?

With each step closer to the bridge, heightened awareness shimmied throughout his body. Then he saw her, a lone woman standing by the rail. Her rich brown hair rippled in the wind, brushing her cheeks. Memory came flooding back; it had to be Rissa.

His gut tightened, his hands shook and the churning of his insides would begin soon. How had Rissa never seen her affect on him? With determination, weaving in and out, Rob closed the distance between himself and his long lost love.

\* \* \* \*

The muscles in Rissa's legs had tightened a while ago and the strain on her eyes caused them to ache. Every man had begun to look the same. And so far, not one of them had looked familiar.

Thinking back, there had been so many times they'd discussed his desire to have a passel of little rugrats. If, or when, he did show up, it would probably be with a wife and six kids or something.

Funny, being an only child hadn't made her yearn for more than the twins. They gave her enough joy and love to satisfy all her needs. Seth and Sandie gave her plenty to keep track of.

The crowd seemed to be increasing and everything blurred together. Taking a deep breath and letting it whistle out her teeth, she turned toward the bridge, leaned her elbows on the top of the side and watched the ducks as they swam underneath. A few geese sunbathed on the bank.

"Rissa?" The deep, familiar voice was right behind her.

A broad chest was the first thing her gaze encountered. Tilting her head back slowly, she tried not to stare. Holy moly, his face...

Good lord, Bobby had never looked this good at eighteen.

His deep green eyes looked into her soul. His wavy hair was tousled by the breeze, one stray lock fell over his forehead her fingers itched to reach up and brush it back. His wide shoulders tapered down to a slim waist and if his tight t-shirt was any indication, he had a pretty good six pack going on underneath it.

Heat started at her neck and climbed to her cheeks. She'd been gawking like a teenager. Her mind went blank, trying to think of something to say.

"Bobby?"

*Oh, that was impressive.*

His chuckle rumbled up from his chest, "Yes."

Strong hands reached out, grasped her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace. Fireworks rioted through her entire body. Rissa wanted to jump his bones right in the

middle of Cinderella's Castle. *How's that for entertainment for the kids? There better not be a wife somewhere in the picture.*

His chest expanded as he inhaled. "I've missed you."

Setting her away from him, he gave her such a thorough inspection that her knees weakened. No one had ever caused this response in her, not even Tom when they'd first been in love.

"Are you okay?" A look of concern crossed his face. Confused at first, she realized that she hadn't said anything yet.

"Yes I'm fine." She laughed. "I guess I'm surprised that you actually showed up."

Rob's gaze was intent as if he was about to announce something important. Before he could, a young voice called out, "Dad."

They were in Disney World and there were a lot of *Dads* around. Disappointment flooded her veins when the girl caught up with them and hooked her arm through his.

"Hey Mandy, what's up?" The young girl squirmed away from his hand that was ruffling her hair.

"Dad, I hate it when you do that." Another girl stood back a little. "Sharon and I want to go to Space Mountain now."

There was no time to reply before a huge grin was directed at Rissa. "You must be my dad's friend. Thanks for picking this place to meet. I love it here."

"Yes, and she uses any excuse she can to have a weekend trip here." With a wink at Rissa, "I'd be better off buying a season pass."

Tapping her toe, Mandy tugged on his arm, "Daddy, can we go?"

Checking his watch, he said, "Be back here as soon as you're through on the ride."

"Thanks!" she called over her shoulder as the two of them raced away.

“So where’s Mandy’s mother?” Rissa willed the words back as soon as they were uttered.

The look of pain that filled his eyes hurt her to see. “We lost her a couple of years ago.”

“Bobby,” She tilted her head to look at him again. “I don’t think I’ll ever think of you as Bobby again. What do you like to be called Bob? Or Robert?”

“Rob, actually.”

Grinning, she hooked her arm through his, “Okay then, Rob—why don’t we go sit over on the bench?”

His lips quirked up and her stomach did a double flip. Quickly turning, she led him to the bench. He waited for her to sit first.

Always the gentleman.

“Tell me about your wife.”

“One morning she found a lump in her breast. Before the thought of her having cancer sunk in, she was gone.” The words just stopped, and his eyes misted as his gaze wandered off into the distance. Rissa waited for him to continue. “There was no history of breast cancer in her family, so she hadn’t had any reason to start her yearly mammograms.”

“Rob, I’m so sorry.” A queasy feeling rumbled in her stomach. To lose someone so young had to be hard.

“By the time the lump had been found the cancer was what they called stage four and very aggressive; she died during her first round of chemotherapy.”

Reaching out, she placed her hand on top of his on his thigh and gave it a squeeze. Just like old times, there was no need for words as they sat in silence.

He turned and placed one tanned finger under her chin, tilting her face up so she had to look at him. "So what about you? I heard you'd married."

"Tom Tate. My dream come true. Captain of the football team in college, and he *did* notice me."

"Do I hear a bit of sarcasm?" Even after all these years, the connection was still there. A little zing of excitement shot through her coupled with the awareness they were still so in tune with each other.

"A little over four months ago he left me for a younger, bustier model." Now was not the time for tears of self-pity.

"Fool." A muscular arm moved to rest along the back of the bench. Her thin blouse didn't protect her from the heat that made every nerve ending come alive. "He'll be back, Rissa."

"No, we've signed the divorce papers. He had me get rid of all of his things; he didn't even take them with him. He said 'I want to start fresh'. I haven't been in love with Tom for years. It's best this way."

There was a question in his eyes but after a moment, it passed. "Do you have any children?"

"Hey, Mom." Seth called as her two beautiful kids trotted over the bridge.

"There's your answer, my twins, Sandie and Seth."

Skidding to a halt in front of Rob, Seth gave him the once over, then turned back to Rissa with a frown. "He doesn't look gay."

Rissa groaned and wished for the cement to open up and take her. "I promise I *never* said you were gay. Seth just doesn't understand how a guy can be buddies with a girl."

"Yeah, man, it's just not normal."

A full belly laugh burst out of the handsome man sitting next to her. The sound traveled clear through her bones and settled in her core. "I guess we did have a special relationship. But I assure you, I am not gay."

"Seth, sometimes it embarrasses me to have you for a brother." Sandie gave a pert grin at Rob. "I'm Sandie, the good twin."

Rob stood up and offered his hand to Seth, "Nice to meet you, Seth." Then he returned the grin to her daughter, "And a pleasure to meet you, Sandie, the good twin."

Mandy and her friend were making their way toward them. Rissa pulled herself up off the bench. Her stomach rumbled; hopefully, everyone was hungry and they could all go out to dinner. Shivers of anticipation raced through her blood at the thought of getting to know Rob again. Maybe bringing the kids hadn't been such a good idea.

Small consolation that he'd done the same.

Touching Rob's shoulder, Rissa pointed. "I see your daughter and friend coming."

Sandie waved. "Oh, those are the girls who were in front of us on Splash Mountain."

Seth smiled at them as the girls joined the group. "How'd you like Space Mountain?"

"Cool. A lot better than getting water in the face." Sharon grumbled.

Mandy came to a halt next to her dad and looked at the twins. "Hi, what are you guys doing here?"

"This is my mom," Sandie said.

"Your mom is my dad's friend Rissa?" Mandy smiled at Rissa, then turned to include everyone else. "This is so cool, I've heard all about her ever since I was born. Dad loves to tell how he got in trouble when they put the toad in their teacher's desk."

"I didn't want you to get any ideas."

Rissa's stomach growled loud enough to wake the dead. She hastily put a hand to her tummy. Heat simmered over her cheeks again. Rob chuckled. "Are all of you hungry?"

"Yes," all of the kids chorused.

"Where are you staying?" Rissa placed an arm around each of her twins as their group walked toward the entrance of the park.

Mandy had skipped ahead. Without stopping she turned back. "We're staying in at a cottage at the Board Walk resorts."

"So are we!" Sandie giggled. "It's fate."

Seth didn't say anything—just rolled his eyes. Sharon turned her gaze toward him at that moment. *Uh oh, the girl has a crush on him.*

Well, he was a good-looking kid if she did say so herself.

Although Sandie was a few years Mandy's senior, they seemed to have formed a friendship. That was a good sign. Especially if her and Rob would be seeing each other.

*Whoa girl, you're jumping the gun. Just because you've felt the explosives since the moment you laid eyes on Rob again doesn't mean the feeling is mutual.*

\* \* \* \*

Rob couldn't stop looking at her.

Rissa was beautiful. If possible, more so than in high school. There had been women in his life since his wife died. That didn't make him a playboy, but then he hadn't been celibate either. There were signs to let him know a woman was attracted, and the signs thrown his way during the walk back had turned his stomach inside out.



His first order of business would have been to strip her naked. His gut muscles tightened at the thought. Too bad the kids were trailing behind. Giving his head a quick shake to get the distracting images out of his brain, he concentrated on the conversation to keep himself from embarrassment.

If the Relationship Gods smiled down on him, this would be the beginning of a long one. Luckily, his daughter seemed to be taking to her twins and that was a good sign. But then Mandy seemed to be friends with everyone.

\* \* \* \*

Giggles and shouts drifted out the open window of the cottage while the kids played Scrabble. The dark blue sky beckoned and Rissa lifted her head to enjoy the twinkling of the stars. Rob placed his hands on her shoulders to pull her against his chest. The heat from his body seemed to burn through her shirt. Their reflections rippled across the pond beyond the railing on the boardwalk.

“Beautiful clear night.” His aftershave tickled her senses.

Wanting nothing more than to snuggle into his arms, she stopped herself, not willing to make another mistake. Did she seek comfort from her old friend or the arms of a lover, one who would stand by her the rest of her life?

Rob teased a piece of her hair, twisting it around a finger, “Rissa, how did you remember our pact?”

The gentle pull caused her scalp to tingle in pleasure. Closing her eyes and rubbing her arms, she concentrated on his question.

“I found my old diaries when I cleaned out the attic.” Rissa didn’t want to bring up Tom’s name and ruin the intimacy they were enjoying. “How did you remember?”

"I don't know, honestly." His look was rueful. "A couple of weeks ago, I went to a meeting in Miami and a woman walked out of a store and almost ran right into me. I froze on the spot. I could have sworn it was you, I even called out your name, but she kept walking."

"That's how you remembered?" Rissa wrinkled her brow; that didn't make much sense.

"No." Her cheek felt the rumble of his chuckle. "It made me think about you. When I got back to Tampa the next day, I happened to look at a calendar and for some reason you popped into my head. That's when I remembered."

"That makes more sense, I think. I am glad you remembered. It would have been terrible if you hadn't shown up; that's why I brought the twins."

"That's why I brought Mandy and her friend. I didn't want to be stuck at Disney World by myself."

Content to watch the water flutter across the small man-made pond, her body leaned into his. In return, his arms tightened, his whispered words feathered lightly above her ear. "Now I wish we were alone."

"Me too." Of its own accord, her head tilted.

An eternity passed before his lips met hers. Tentative nibbles at first, until her lips softened, then the kiss deepened. His tongue coaxed her mouth open. A million butterflies danced a jig in her stomach. Could this really be happening? She wanted to believe he was experiencing the same feeling she was. But Rissa had learned the hard way: men could have sex without any emotion involved.

Light spilled across them as the door to the cottage opened. The two jumped apart. Rissa felt like a teenager again. The reprieve was probably a good thing. If she wasn't careful, Rob could break her heart.

"Mom, how do you spell nemesis?" Seth called out.

"N... E... M... E... S... I... S... Who's winning?" Seth was silhouetted against the light at his back.

"Mandy and Sharon, we're playing in teams."

Female giggles, then a shout, "Girls rule!"

Rob's arms pulled her closer. Her breath hitched at the deep tremor of his laugh against her cheek. It felt so right being in his arms. *God, let this be the real thing and not a rebound emotion.*

"I guess we can't ditch the kids to be alone?" Rob's look was so wistful she started to chuckle herself.

"No, that wouldn't be a good idea."

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "We need to figure out where this is going, Rissa. I can't lose another woman I love no matter what the circumstances." Rob's hand tickled up the back of her spine, shivers followed in its wake. "Rissa, we've known each other our whole lives."

She snuggled a little closer, and though he couldn't see, she raised her eyebrows. "Twenty-five years is a pretty large gap."

"Come on, you feel it too. It's as if it was yesterday when I sat on your front stair with you and planned to meet here." True, there was no reason to argue, the years had dropped away as if they'd never existed. A little niggling voice at the back of her mind warned, *if it sounds too good be true, it usually is.* "Now we need to make sure we love each other on another level. We have to make sure that we're not using our feelings to reach out for all the wrong reasons."

Rissa pulled the sigh up from the depths of her soul. Wanted him was an understatement. Her insides quivered with need. Why couldn't they just drop into bed

and forget? That would be sex, and probably damn good sex, but it wouldn't answer the questions. It was the long haul for her the next time she committed. She stepped out of his embrace and looked up at him.

"How? You live in Florida; I still live in Missouri."

"But you live an hour out of St. Louis." What did that have to do with anything? "I have business, I'll be traveling there in a couple of weeks. Come and stay with me; let's get to know each other without the kids as a distraction."

Excitement rippled down each rib. "I could have Mom watch the twins. What about Mandy?"

"My mom will love to get her hands on her for a weekend of shopping."

That made Rissa laugh. When they were growing up, his dad always complained that Rob's mom was driving them to the poor farm with her spending.

"All right, it's a date." When Rissa said the words, excitement raced through her.

The next instant, a feeling of turmoil wrapped around Rissa, not unlike the one she felt when she went to her first prom. She knew they would most likely make love when they met in St. Louis. How would she know if their date was only a fling to him?

They lived in separate states, the geography called for a long distance relationship, if things went further. Sure, he said all the right things and their closeness seemed to be the same as when they were in school, with the one exception: she had never felt this deep attraction before.

Was she looking for love too hard? If he hadn't moved after graduation, would their friendship have developed into a life long relationship? She owed it to herself to find out. She would meet him in St. Louis and take things one-step at a time. If she kept her heart wrapped in cotton so it would never be broken again, she'd never fall in love again either.

And that meant she'd never be loved in return.

## Chapter Four

Rob rested his hip on the rail in front of Rissa's cottage. Apparently, girls were universal; they all took forever to get ready. Rissa had gone in to see what was taking Sandie so long.

For once, Mandy was the first ready. That was a shock in itself. "Are you sure you and Sharon will be okay spending the day with Seth and Sandie at the water park?"

"Are you kidding? We'll have a blast." Sandie, followed by Rissa, emerged from the cottage. "Come on. We're all here now. Let's hurry so we don't miss the shuttle."

Seth shooed the girls in the direction of the bus for Typhoon Lagoon. When they reached the parking lot, he turned and gave a salute. Rob shook his head and wished to be young and free again. Turning back toward Rissa, he held out his hand.

"Where are we going?" Her smile caused a sizzle of awareness to scurry through his body.

Taking her hand, he led her to the shuttle that would take them to the monorail. "I read in the brochure that they're having an international food and wine festival at Epcot this week."

That stopped her. "You're kidding right? I've always wanted to do some kind of wine festival."

“I called ahead and planned this just for you.” He got a playful jab in the ribs for his joke.

Pulling the schedule out of his back pocket, he handed it to her. “We can look this over on the way and decide where to start.”

Trying to ignore the storm raging through his body caused by the pressure of her hip resting next to his, he looked over the events. The monorail dropped them off at the entrance to Epcot.

Rob bought their tickets. “Okay, your choice; where do you want to go first?”

Rissa looked over the large lake surrounded by *Countries*. “I can’t decide.”

“Let’s work our way left and savor everything from Mexico to Canada, how does that sound?”

They walked stopping here and there to admire treasures from Mexico and beer from Germany. Rissa gave a carefree laugh that warmed his heart. This time, she picked up his hand and led the way.

She had spotted the Italian Pavilion. Now the old world charm of Italy surrounded the two of them as they stood at the counter. Rob sipped his Chianti Classico from the Tuscany Region.

“Oh I think I like this one the best.” Rissa exclaimed taking another taste.

“Really? I thought the Barbera d’Asti had a nice full bodied aroma. But then I like my wines dry and it was dry.” Rob turned to gaze out the window that revealed the small street through the Italian shops. They could almost be in Italy, the reproductions from the Doge’s Palace and St. Mark’s Square in Venice were fantastic. He wouldn’t mind trying some of the pasta available.

“Let’s stroll.” He set his glass on the counter and tipped the Italian hostess, who had been describing the wines.

“Where are we going?” Rissa nestled her hand in his and the contact caused a series of tingles to run up his arm.

“Why to shop in Italy, what did you think?”

Rissa didn't say anything but her smile was radiant. He spotted a sweet shop, and tugged her hand. An array of aromas assailed him as they entered *Delizie Italiane*.

“Did you see the gondola we passed? Oh Rob, I've never been to Venice, but I feel as if I'm there now.” Rob smiled as he watched Rissa wander around gazing in the glass display's of Italian Chocolates. “Okay, to hell with my diet.”

The girl behind the counter knew a sale when she saw one and walked to the cabinet to wait for Rissa's order. “I want that one with the white swirls, and let's see...”

Rob almost laughed at the look on Rissa's face, as she regarded the selection in indecision. He walked over to join her.

“How about the mint one?” He pointed to the dark chocolate.

The girl handed them their chocolates. He grabbed some napkins off the glass. Rob led the way out of the shop, down past the canal with the replica gondolas. The chocolate melted on his tongue, but it wasn't as sweet as the picture Rissa made, eagerly checking out the shops as she strolled by.

“Oh some more wine tasting!” Rissa was in the store before he had time to reply.

By the time he got to the bar, Rissa had a glass of Grappa. Oh lord, she was already tipsy. He'd end up carrying her back to the monorail if she drank too much of the potent brew.

“Sip that easy, it has a kick like a mule.” Rob accepted a glass from the steward.

Good lord, he was lightheaded. He didn't know if it was from all the tasting or because Rissa stayed by his side. Either way, he decided it was time to relax at a table and just talk for an hour – or a lifetime.



“Let’s check out the French Pavilion and maybe we can snag a table.”

They held hands like teenagers all day, except when she needed her hand to eat or drink. When was the last time he’d felt young and carefree? He felt alive for the first time since his wife died.

“Oh yes, I’d love to get off my feet for a while. We only have another hour or so until the kids meet us for the fireworks.”

Oh right, fireworks needed the dark. Rob smiled; if he played his cards right, there would be an opportunity for a few stolen kisses. Why wait? He stopped to pull her into his arms and took advantage of her mouth that had opened in surprise. His lips locked on, letting his tongue tentatively touch hers. When there was no resistance, he deepened the kiss.

The public display didn’t go unnoticed. Someone passed and muttered, “Get a room.”

Reluctantly he stepped back. “You make me forget.”

\* \* \* \*

Could her heart pound hard enough to jump out of her chest? If so, Rissa was about to find out. Without his arms around her, she had to reach out and grab his hand to steady herself.

“Wow!”

No one had ever kissed her like that. Rissa glanced around at the throng of people. The person who’d made the comment hadn’t lingered and no one else seemed to have noticed. Thank goodness! Her cheeks must be on fire; they sure felt like it.

“I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t embarrass you but I couldn’t help myself.”

“What?” Rissa’s ears were still ringing. “Oh no, you took me by surprise.”

If that kiss was any indication, would she die of enjoyment when they made love? Boy, where was a place to sit down? Her knees were going to give out.

Most of the tables were full. Rob pointed to a table in a secluded spot under a tree. She gladly followed him. The shade would afford some privacy. Maybe there would be another mind-blowing kiss.

Cool breezes ruffled her hair, as she settled back into her chair comfortably. She enjoyed the play of muscles working under Rob’s jeans as he walked to the counter for some wine. Her mouth watered. She felt drunk, but whether it was the sight of him or the wine was anyone’s guess. Thank goodness neither one of them needed to drive.

Arriving at their table with a bottle, Rob held two glasses in one hand and a tray of cheese in the other. With a flourish, he opened the bottle and poured the liquid into the glasses, then sat across from her.

“We have some time to relax. I want to hear all about you. What do you like to do?” His eyes twinkled above the rim as he sipped his wine.

His gaze never left hers. He made her feel so special. Just the touch of his hand could zing to the tip of her toes and they’d curl.

“I love to go for long walks, especially in the autumn when the leaves are turning. I’ve always wanted to go to New England; the colors must be beautiful that time of year.”

Did it really matter? Telling him seemed intimate. Tom in all the years they’d been married had never asked her what her likes and dislikes had been, whether it was food or activities. All that mattered to him was whether Tom had liked eating it or doing whatever they were doing.

"I've never been to New England. Can you imagine Martha's Vineyard in the autumn?" He reached across the table to take her hand and a sizzle raced up her arm with the contact. "You'd love Richmond, Virginia in the fall. It's spectacular."

"You like fall too?" Keeping her mind on the conversation wasn't easy with him nibbling on her fingertips to see if they paired with the wine.

"Oh yes I do. And I've some places in mind to take you." Sucking on her index finger caused her insides to turn to jelly. "Did you ever realize that I was in love with you?"

The knowledge freed a cyclone inside her heart. Rob loved her? Thinking back, there had been a certain look in his eyes. But being so young, she hadn't thought much about it. Again that pesky niggler in the back of her mind warned her it might be too good to be true. She ruthlessly shoved the thought away. No way would she ruin the day with doubts.

"I didn't have a clue. Once in a while I'd catch you staring, but I dismissed that too. Thinking I was imagining the desire I saw. Man, am I the queen of ignoring things or what?"

"We were so young; did you really know what desire was?"

Bringing his hand up and placing his palm on her cheek, she sighed. "I thought I did. I finally realized what desire was when I saw you on that bridge."

"We'll explore our desire when we're alone in St. Louis." His hand lingered a moment then slid to her neck. He leaned in to catch her lips. Pulling back a mere inch, his breath whispered across her lips. "I intend to show you how much I still love you."

Savoring the taste of sweet wine that clung to his mouth, she relished the flavor. With the tip of his tongue, he traced her lips then sucked hers into his mouth.

## Meet Me in Fantasyland

The shrill ring of a phone shattered the air. Startled, they jumped apart. Rissa answered her cell. Seth and the girls, already in the park, wanted to know where they could meet them for the firework display.

Disappointment surged through her. The taste of him lingered on her lips. Their time alone was over. Anticipation for their time in St. Louis almost overwhelmed her. How on earth would she make it through?

\* \* \* \*

“Mom?”

Rissa stared out the window of the taxi. Her heart pounded harder with each mile that took them further from Rob and closer to home

Hugging the magical memories close to her heart, she relived every moment of her time with Rob.

*Where dreams come true.*

No wonder the resort used that as their marketing campaign. The kids had whiled away their time visiting all the attractions that Disney had to offer.

Every chance they got, Rob and Rissa had snuck off to be alone. They’d never found a place they could make love while on vacation. Rolling sickness came in waves as she remembered their trip on the roller coaster at Universal. It wasn’t much fun when she lost her lunch, but it didn’t matter. They’d been like a large family.

“Mom, are you okay?” Sandie asked again.

“Hmmm...” Pulling her daughter close, she gave her a hug. Sandie wiggled out of her embrace. Her children were getting too old for kisses and hugs. “I had such a good time with you two.”

Seth snorted. "You had a good time with Rob."

His smile told her that her time with Rob had been okay. Sandie was chuckling too. Why had there been such fear that they wouldn't like Rob? Of course, they'd left him and Mandy back in Florida. Her children probably didn't think that there was a chance for a long term relationship.

St. Louis would be the test. Seth and Sandie would either accept it or throw a fit. She'd deal with it when she needed to. The car swayed as it turned the corner onto their home street. A sprinkle of anticipation ran through her as the thought of Rob calling to make sure they arrived safely.

A gasp rumbled through her daughter's body. Rissa felt the tremor along the arm resting next to Sandie's. Not sure what could be the cause, her gaze swung to the front of her yard as the taxi pulled up to the curb.

Tom's car was parked in the drive. Matters got worse when she spotted him sitting on the bottom step of the porch, a suitcase at his feet. It wasn't a good feeling that ran along her spine.

"What's Dad doing?" Seth sounded as surprised as she felt.

"I don't know honey, but I guess we'll all find out together."

Sandie turned to Rissa with a radiant smile on her face. "Maybe he's come home."

The statement was like dropping a match to some dry kindling in her stomach. As they climbed out of the car, she could almost feel smoke coming out of her ears.

"Rissa, where have you been? I've been worried." Tom demanded, meeting them halfway on the walk.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were starting a new life and didn't care what we did." Rissa fumed. What right did he have to demand anything?

Her rib took the brunt of Sandie's response. "Mom."

Seth stood ramrod straight at her side, making it very clear where his alliance would be if the line was drawn.

“What are you doing here?” Hurt filtered through his voice when he asked the question.

“Seth, Sandie.” Tom had the audacity to hold out his arms to them, as if the two were still in grade school. After all, that was the last time he’d held his arms out for his children. “Come here and give me a hug.”

There was no hesitation for Sandie, who flew into her father’s arms. Seth stood where he was, determined to be by Rissa’s side. Although it was selfish, she was grateful for the support.

“Seth?” Tom cocked his head in question.

“You haven’t told us why you’re here. Where’s Wendy, or whatever her name is?” Her son remembered the name Rissa had chosen to forget.

“I’ve come to my senses; it must have been a mid-life crisis or something. I’m home.” Tom grinned as if what he had done was of no concern.

*Please don’t throw up now.*

Rissa clutched a hand to her stomach as if that would stop the acid boiling up. The gall of the man! To put them through four months of hell, then come back expecting to be welcomed without any questions or consequences? Sandie was apparently ready to do so.

“Tom, we need to talk.” Walking past him, making sure that even the edge of her blouse didn’t touch him, she unlocked the front door to let it swing open, “Seth, Sandie take your bags to your rooms. Your father and I need to talk.”

Seth walked past and started up the stairs, when Sandie didn’t follow, he stopped and turned back. “Sandie, come on, they need to talk.”

"I don't want her to choose *him*."

Now, all of sudden, Rob was *him*. As Seth had stood at her side earlier, Sandie stood her ground by her father. The battle lines were drawn. That's all the family needed after the healing had started on their vacation.

Several minutes of silence was broken with Tom's question, "Who's *him*?"

"Sandie, please go to your room. This is between your father and I."

Sandie's words stopped her. "No Mom, Seth and I have a say in this also."

A loud ringing started in her ears and her knees felt like any moment they would buckle. This couldn't be happening. There was no way to choose between her daughter and Rob. What was she supposed to do?

Bless his heart, Seth turned to his sister, "Sandie, you need to come. Let them talk, then we'll both have our say." Walking back to where she stood, her feet planted as if in cement, he grabbed her arm. "Come on, Sandie, you're not helping."

A look of malice—an expression a mother never wished to see a daughter's face—scorched Rissa before Sandie turned to follow her brother. She clutched a hand to her stomach; she could not believe the look of pure loathing Sandie had given her. The poison roiled in her stomach and she wondered if it would be permanent.

Grabbing the newel post for support, she released the air trapped in her lungs and it hissed through her teeth. A moment or two passed before she felt strong enough to face Tom. Gulping in a cleansing breath, Rissa turned and walked to the office. She stopped long enough to let Tom pass and then shut the door with a snap once he'd cleared the entry.

Rissa sat in his old chair behind the desk. She wanted to make the statement that he was no longer the head of their household. Rissa folded her arms and rested them on

the polished oak. Let him speak first—this was his show and she had nothing to say to the man.

“What was all that about?” A cocky grin curved his lips.

What? Did he expect her to forget everything and grovel at his feet, thankful for his return home?

*Tom old boy, you better think again.*

“Why are you here, Tom?”

Shrugging with his damnable half-grin, half-smirk he had the nerve to say, “Rissa, give me a break. You know men of my age go through a crisis. I’ve just had mine. It’s over, I’m home.”

Disbelief flooded through her as Tom pulled himself out of the chair and started to walk around the desk. Anticipating his move, she swung the chair the opposite way and jumped up to pace toward the window before he could take her in his arms.

Dropping his outstretched hands to his sides, a phony hurt look crossed his face. “Okay I get it. I’m sure you’re going to make me pay a little. I guess I deserve it.”

She looked over her shoulder as the incredulous look spread across her face. Had she heard him correctly? The contrived look of shame still lingered on his face. Nope, there was no chance of misinterpreting his words.

“Oh, you deserve something all right.” She pivoted to let her back rest against the cool window pane and considered him a moment. “You’re not invited home. You chose to leave and have me get rid of your things. Well you know your way out; go start over like you wanted.”

For a split-second Tom looked as if he were going to cry and then his infuriating grin cleared his face as if something had just dawned. “Oh, you’re joking. Come on, Rissa, let’s kiss and make up.”



Insane. That was the only answer. With measured steps, he started to close the distance as if she'd fall into his arms as Sandie had done on the porch. Her decision was going to be hard on the kids. It would be a long time before Sandie would forgive her. In fact, Sandie may never believe that this had *nothing* to do with Rob.

She had to face the truth. She had no feelings lingering in her for Tom. She didn't love him and only love would give her a reason to work her marriage out. Their divorce had been very expedient. She wasn't sure how Tom had accomplished the quick turn around. If things had been different and the time frame had been longer, maybe it would have been easier on their children.

The four months he'd been gone had caused her to look and see him for what he was. Rissa had chosen the safe way to live. She had stayed for the kids. There had been no love in their marriage for years.

No more.

"So how many midlife crises have you had Tom? I know that Barbie of the big boobs was not the first."

For a stunned moment, silence reigned, and then he burst out laughing. "Barbie of the big boobs? Her name is Wendy. And I can't explain it. But I realized you and the kids are all I want."

"Until when? The next blonde bimbo comes along? Or do you choose a different color every time?"

"Rissa, I love you. Why won't you believe me?" His little boy look implored her to believe him.

A terrible notion crossed her mind that he may have practiced in front of the mirror. She didn't care. The time had come for Tom to leave, to move out of her home for good. What she needed to do was to go to Sandie and Seth.

Her children were the important ones – the innocents who were hurt by his actions and hers. In the long run, she believed that it was best to cut the strings. It was only a matter of time before he'd revert to his cheating ways – a month, six months or even a year from now.

"I'll answer your question with a question."

"Okay, anything as long as I can come home."

"When was the last time you made love to me? If you're so much in love with me, I'm sure you'll remember." She pushed away from the glass and paced to the closed door. "Well?"

"What has that got to do with anything? I just told you that I've been going through some emotional problems. Everyone goes through it." Tom started to follow her.

She halted him with a raised hand. "How long have you known Wendy?"

A frown crossed his face. "About six months, why? It doesn't matter. I've come home to you. Where I belong."

A sour laugh erupted from her clenched mouth. "So, if you loved me, then it would stand to reason that you would've made love to me until you met Barbie – excuse me, Wendy."

"Yes, I had a lapse. I knew you'd understand."

"Two years, Tom. Now get out. I don't know how many others there have been, but you haven't loved me in any way for at least two years."

That she had stunned him was an understatement. Clearly, the length of time hadn't dawned on him since the two of them had *really* shared a bed. He'd come home because, other than his parents, he had nowhere else to go. What grown man wants to run home to mommy and daddy?

A crushing weight sat on her chest. Barely managing a whisper, she choked out. "Please leave now."

He stared at her for several minutes – or it seemed like an eternity but was probably only seconds. "I realize that you have had a shock with finding me on your doorstep after your little tryst, so I'll come back after you've had some time to think about who you really belong with."

"No Tom, I will not change my mind." She nodded her head indicating for him to leave. "Goodbye."

He turned, as if he admitted defeat, and walked out the door. Tom picked up his case in the entry and left without a backward glance.

Following him to the entry, she stood frozen at the bottom of the stairs by the newel post. For how long she stood was anyone's guess. No energy flowed through her body, at least not enough to traverse the stairs and walk the short distance to Sandie's room. Rissa had no other choice. Something this important couldn't be left until the morning.

When she knocked there was no answer, she knocked again. "Sandie, we need to talk."

"Are you going to kick me out too?" Sandie's voice sounded muffled with tears.

Pushing the door open, she stepped in. Seth sat next to his sister on the bed; they were holding hands. A small smile of encouragement crossed his face, for which she could have thrown her arms around him and kissed him.

Her knees were shaking so hard that the walk to the bed seemed like an eternity. Sitting on the edge, Sandie sandwiched between herself and Seth, "Sandie, I'm sorry. I couldn't let your father stay."

"Because of Rob." Tears flowed as she sobbed and buried her face in her hands.

Gently, Rissa pulled the fists down to look into her daughter's eyes, "No, dear, not because of Rob."

She turned to Seth, who seemed to have aged into a wizened old man overnight. Seth gave her a sage nod, prompting her to continue, as if he knew what she needed or was about to say.

"Rob has nothing to do with your father and I. Tom divorced me and it was final before we went to Florida. I know you're only sixteen, but I think this is something I need to talk to both of you about as adults. Can we do that? Sandie?"

Seth snaked an arm around his sister's shoulders. "I can, Mom. Sandie come on, we're sixteen. How many kids at school have divorced parents? We know how things are. Give her a chance to explain."

A deep breath shivered through Sandie's body before she turned, "Okay I'll listen but I'm not promising to agree."

"Will you promise to listen with an open mind, sweetheart?"

"All right." Scooting back, Sandie rested her back against the wall, knocking Seth's arm off in the process.

Reaching across to pick up each of her children's hands, they formed a circle. Somehow that little bit of symbolism helped Rissa choose her words.

She plunged right to the point. "Your father and I have not been intimate for over two years." Both her children gasped, not knowing if it were the statement or the bluntness. Not giving herself time to change her mind, she continued as if there had been no interruption.

"I've known deep down," Rissa let go of Seth's hand for a moment to put her fist to her heart, "that your father was seeing someone else. I let myself pretend, thinking if

only I could ignore the signs until your eighteenth birthday, I'd be protecting you. Then your father left us for Wendy."

Taking Seth's hand again, she dropped her head forward and let the tears escape. She sniffed, not looking up; she couldn't let herself see the look of pain on their faces. She wouldn't be able to continue if she did. "Tonight I asked him how long he'd known her. Just to give him the opportunity to prove to me, she'd been the only one."

"He couldn't prove it, could he Mom?" Seth's whisper could barely be heard.

"No, he met her six months ago. I can't pretend any more. If he came back, he'd find someone else." Knowing she had no right, she begged her children with a pleading glance to understand. "I'm sorry."

"You can't be positive he'd find someone again! Maybe he's gotten it out of his system," Sandie charged.

She twisted her head to the side in order to consider her daughter, "He hasn't loved me for two years or longer. He loves the both of you. I'm sure that's what broke him up with Wendy. He knew in his heart he had to choose between her and you, but he felt he had to take me in the bargain."

"He loves you Mom; I heard him say so," Sandie said.

"How do you know?"

Seth answered for his sister. "She went back down and listened at the door, I tried to stop her."

"That wasn't nice of you."

"Mom, he begged you to let him come back and you were so cold." Her voice, sounding younger than her age, quivered with accusation.

"Only because he wanted to be with the two of you." She tried to pull them both close. Seth came easily. Sandie resisted with all her strength until Rissa let her be.

“Neither one of you have to choose between me and your father. You can see him whenever you want. I suspect he’s gone to stay with your Grandma Tate.”

Rissa let go of her son so she could push off the bed. Once standing, she leaned down to kiss the top of Sandie’s head but the girl jerked out of the way. “Someday I hope you understand that I couldn’t pretend any more, that it is better for all of us to make the change now.”

“I understand Mom,” Seth said.

“Thank you.” She paused at the door.

Not a word or a look came from her daughter. Sighing, Rissa let herself out of the room. She had a sinking sensation in the depths of her heart that the rift between her and Sandie would be a long time healing.

## Chapter Five

Bacon sizzled in the pan while Rissa flipped pancakes. She glanced at the clock. What could be taking the kids so long? She needed to drop them off at her mother's and still make it to St. Louis by noon.

"You're really going through with this?" Sandie startled her from behind. "You're going to meet *him*."

"Sandie we've been through this. You went to see your father at Grandma's the other day. Didn't things go well?"

"They went fine."

"Did you talk to him about your relationship?" Rissa prodded.

Two days earlier, she'd met Tom at the lawyers. Surprisingly, they'd had a good discussion about the kids. What had come out hadn't been that revealing; the only reason he'd attempted to come home was because of his love for the twins, not her. Both agreed it was best for the children to stay apart.

"Yes and he told me he loved me, everything he knew I wanted to hear but one thing," Pouting, she pulled a chair out and plopped down in front of the table. "He's not coming home."

Seth entered the room in time to hear the last part. "Sandie, Dad's going to get a house of his own and we can go stay there whenever we want."

Ignoring Seth, Sandie continued, "I told him you were going to meet *Rob*."

Sandie's lip went into a fuller pout, if that were possible. Good Lord, she was acting ten years old! It was plain that her father hadn't given her the response she wanted.

"And?"

"He said good for you." A choking sound slipped through the pout.

"I promise things are going to work out just fine. You and Seth will be juniors in high school next year and you're not going to have time to worry about your dad and me."

The aroma of bacon interrupted the conversation; it was time to serve up breakfast. Thank goodness no more outbursts were forthcoming from her daughter. During the drive to her parents' home, she caught Sandie staring at her in the rear view mirror with a thoughtful, almost plotting look.

Hugging her children, Seth gave a grunt of displeasure at the public show of affection. Sandie's was a little tighter and for some reason a shiver of dread went down her spine. Was she having a premonition?

A genuine smile and a wave from her daughter helped Rissa shake off the feeling. By the time St. Louis came into view, there was something else running down her spine.

And it definitely wasn't dread.

\* \* \* \*



Giving the receptionist Rob's name at check in, the girl informed her that a key card and message waited. Rob would be longer than planned in a meeting. Could she meet him at the pool?

She smiled and grabbed the envelope with the card from the receptionist. Turning to survey the mingling people in the lobby, she spotted a bank of elevators in the corner.

Pulling the door of the suite open, her breath lodged somewhere in her throat. Talk about extravagant! A soft, plush bedspread in white covered the large king-sized bed. Two wingback chairs of the same material had prominent positions by the bay window.

It was a winter fairyland in the middle of summer.

Plopping her bag onto the rack she extracted her swimsuit. Taking her time, she hung the rest of the things in the closet then went to the bathroom to get ready for the pool. The sight of the large jetted tub sitting in the middle of the room on a dais had her stopping to stare. Now that would be wonderful later that evening, with a bottle of champagne to sip.

Sunlight filtered through the umbrella to the lounge chair causing pleasant warmth to spread over her body. By pure luck, she'd purchased a new release by one of her favorite authors, giving her something to fill the time.

By the time Rob joined her, her body hummed in anticipation. Whenever her mind had wandered from the book, images of the coming evening in the jetted tub flitted through her mind. Rob caught her during one delightfully decadent fantasy.

"I'd love to know what you're thinking right now, little Rissa, because you've got a decidedly wicked gleam in your eye." The sizzle zapped through her body from the kiss on her forehead to her toes.

"I'll show you later." Rissa knew the flush on her cheeks had nothing to do with the sun.

"Sounds promising." Sitting on the end of her lounge chair, a strong tanned hand reached out and with the tip of his index finger, he left a trail of fire from her thigh to her knee.

Tingles sang just under her skin, causing her nerve endings to send electricity from his touch to the center between her legs. Gulping, she resisted the urge to jump him right there.

"I'd planned to join you for a while, but the day got away from me. I'm starved. Let's go have some dinner and then I've got plans."

An image stole across her brain, "Does it involve champagne and a jetted tub?"

"You'll have to wait to see." Rob offered his hand to pull her up.

The warmth of his touch spread through her. The magical weekend spread before them. How on earth had she missed the attraction twenty-five years ago?

\* \* \* \*

From her vantage point at the window, she could see the famous arch and the sky sparkled with lights. Unbelievably, she felt shy. Her whole body had been alive with sensation during their intimate dinner. The wine had helped ease her, but nothing could calm her nerves strumming in anticipation.

Rissa was scared and excited, both sensations rolled into one bundle of awareness. Tom had been her first and only lover. Now after two years, she'd learn what it meant to have passion in her bed.

"Rissa, come here." His deep voice vibrated across her senses.

He held the bottle of champagne she'd hoped for, ready to pop the cork.

"Let's start with a glass to relax."

A loud pop accompanied the cork as it flew across the room. A cascade of bubbles followed and he filled two flutes with amber liquid.

His flute clicked against the side of her glass, "May this be a night to remember."

"I think it will be."

Overdressed in her backless cocktail dress, she shivered down her back. His gaze intent, he put both flutes on the table next the bed. His hands on her shoulders brought her flush with his body. Her eyes locked with his and little zings bounced around her body, making her feel alive with electricity.

Slowly, his head descended. Rissa lifted her chin to let her mouth meet his halfway. But instead, his lips touched the corner of one eye, and then nibbled to the base of her ear. His tongue traced the delicate shell, and then kissed a path to the side of her mouth, leaving a molten trail of fire in its wake.

Fingers walked their way down her bare back and desire quaked through her. His hands settled on her hips and he took a small step back as he turned her around.

Whispers of warm breath feathered across the base of her spine seconds before his lips met her skin there. Kisses followed the zipper's path as he pulled it down. Only a slight tug and the dress slithered down her body to the floor.

Strong fingers slid her panties to her ankles allowing her to step out of them. Feathery touches followed a trail up the outside of her thighs as he stood. Once at his full height, he moved his hands around to cup her breasts.

Running his thumb along the lace of her bra, the clasp in the center slid open. The bra fell and joined the rest of her clothing on the floor.

## Meet Me in Fantasyland

Taking advantage of full access to her nipples, he brushed his thumbs across each. Twirling her to face him, his head dipped and his teeth found a small pebbled nub to tease.

A startled gasp escaped when he bent his knees and gathered her into his arms to lay her on the bed. Together, his mouth and hands worshiped her body as if she were a delicate morsel to savor. The pressure inside built until she didn't think she could stand the intensity.

Her breaths came in short gasps. The cadence of her heart matched the rhythm that throbbed through the moist center of her thighs. She was on the precipice ready to fall over the edge.

One long finger slid into her, her body clenched and then an orgasm rocked her to the core. Her eyes flew open and encountered his, sensual and intent. At some point, while lost in his magic, he'd shed his robe.

\* \* \* \*

Strong arms strained in the effort to keep things slow. This wasn't easy when Rissa's body quivered in response to his touch. Letting his knee nudge her legs apart, Rob grit his teeth and slid into her in one smooth motion. It was like coming home. Watching her reaction to his thrust, he savored the feel of her around him.

Soft brown eyes widened each time he entered. Not wanting to miss any of the emotion or reaction to his lovemaking, he kept his gaze locked with hers. Pressure built with each stroke. His chest tightened in response to her nipples marbling to hard nubs. Rob's entire body and soul was alive with awareness.

\* \* \* \*

How could a body take any more? Rissa couldn't breathe. Her heart had turned into a jungle drum, pounding out a rhythm as ancient as time.

Suddenly, vibrant colors burst behind her closed eyes like skyrocketing in the air. Never before had such a powerful release rumbled her world. Her muscles bunched in places she'd never imagined. Rob tensed and let out a grunt that sounded like her name as he reached his peak.

How long they lay motionless as if neither had the energy to move she didn't know; it could have been minutes or hours. Rob's weight slid to her side, his breath whispered through her hair, "Rissa, I feel like I've come home. I love you."

"I love you too."

\* \* \* \*

Startled out of a deep sleep at the piercing ring of the phone, Rissa blindly reached out and encountered a warm hard body. Memories and sensations come flooding back.

Light poured over the room, causing her to shade her eyes. Rob reached across her to grab the offending receiver.

"What?" he barked into the phone.

Annoyance crossed his face then it turned into concern. "How long has she been gone?"

Dread slithered down her spine as the same feeling from earlier in the day barreled back with a vengeance. Something had happened to Sandie. Her hand fell to his leg and squeezed until he looked toward her.

Mouthing, "Is it Sandie?" He nodded and continued to listen.

"We'll be there as soon as we can. Call your father." Hanging up the phone, urgency laced his words. "That was Seth. Sandie's run away from your parents. Hurry, get dressed."

"Oh God. I shouldn't have come." She threw back the covers to climb out of the soft warm bed she'd found so inviting only moments before. "Why didn't I wait until she'd forgiven me for not letting Tom move back?"

"No regrets, Rissa; you couldn't have foreseen this. She's a teenager and this is a ploy to get her parents back together."

Pulling up her panties, her gaze sought his. "I can't go back to him."

Rob placed his hands on both of her cheeks, pulled her face up and kissed her as if there were no tomorrow. "I'm not going to let you."

A small smile crossed her lips, and then she continued to dress. Luckily Rob's business had been completed with the last meeting of the day. Within fifteen minutes, they packed, checked out, and waited for the valet to get her car. Rob left his rental. The agency would pick it up later.

Sliding into the passenger seat, she let Rob drive the hour-long route home. When they'd cleared the city limits and were headed toward Ridgefield, she pulled her cell out and dialed her mother.

As soon as the call was picked up, she said, "Have you found Sandie?"

"Seth called Tom and he's out looking for her, as are his parents. The police say she hasn't been missing long enough to file a report."

"We'll be home soon, can I talk to Seth?"

When he came on the line, his voice sounded husky, as if he were having a hard time controlling his emotions.

"Seth, honey, are you all right?"

"Yes mom. I'm so sorry; I tried to talk some sense into Sandie."

"She planned this?" All of a sudden, the looks from that morning and the extra tight hug made sense.

"She thinks if she forces you and Dad to look for her that you'll realize you still love him."

Rissa wondered how to convince her daughter that her ploy wasn't going to work. Rob had been right. Sandie's running away was the manipulation of a teenager.

"Seth, do you think that will happen?"

"Mom, I understand you'll never feel that way about Dad again. I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do to change that." Rissa had lost her little boy somewhere along the way and a young man had replaced him.

"Thank you, Seth. We'll find Sandie."

"I know. She's hiding. I'm sure she hasn't really run away. And when we find her I'm going to..."

"Seth, you let your father and I handle the situation."

There was silence for so long that Rissa thought he may have hung up. "All right, Mom."

"Rob and I will be at Grandma's within an hour."

After saying good-bye to her son, she talked to her mother, asking her to call with any news. Silence filled the car as the scenery passed in a blur.

Feeling Rob's eyes on her she turned, but his eyes were back at the road. "Do you think Sandie will be okay?"

“I think we’ll find her. Don’t worry. Sandie’s old enough to take care of herself. She’s used to having both her parents.” One of his hands left the steering and patted her leg.

“I don’t understand why she didn’t act out when Tom divorced me for Blondie; I can never remember her name.”

The grin he threw her way curled her toes. “Wendy, I believe it is.”

Blushing, she choked out, “Yes Wendy.”

“I’m sure that Sandie didn’t feel threatened by a woman so close to her own age. She probably thought it only a matter of time before the novelty wore off for her father. But then I walked into the picture and Tom came home. That’s a whole other kettle of fish.”

Again that insight into teenage girls—he must be a wonderful father to Mandy. It was something Sandie needed.

That and a good swift kick to the butt.

It was Rissa’s fault too. She’d never called Tom on his other indiscretions, choosing to look the other way. Didn’t that tell her daughter she would take him back?

“Do you think the twins knew their father had been cheating on me for the last two years?”

Rob took his time answering, as if wanting to choose his words. “Did you know? Think—I know you said you chose not to see your problems. But did *you* know?”

Had she known they had problems? Huge problems? And underneath it all, *know* about his infidelity? Her head rested on the back of the seat as her gaze rolled to the window.

She’d known. Or, at least, strongly suspected. There had been no proof, but then she never looked for it. Deep down, hadn’t wanted to find out her suspicions were true.



Because there wouldn't have been a choice but to confront him.

Letting her head twist back to look at Rob, "I knew. I just didn't want to face the truth. I looked the other way."

"Your children are young adults and chances are they knew something was wrong. Since you never addressed your fears, they probably followed suit."

Before she could form an answer, Seth called. "Any news?"

"Sandie just called me from Candy's house. Candy's mom gave her a good tongue lashing about running away from home and hiding at their house."

"Good for Silvia! I owe her one. Is she bringing Sandie home?"

"Dad's on his way there to pick her up. He's going to meet you here at Grandma's."

Rissa looked at Rob. "How much further?"

"Another fifteen minutes should get us into town."

Seth said, "I'll see you guys in a few."

Her tension released with a sigh. Her daughter was safe, but they had a long way to go to mend the damage. Rob again took one hand off the wheel to place it over hers where it rested on her leg. Warm contentment traveled through her veins.

\* \* \* \*

No sooner than the car came to a halt, than Rissa had her seatbelt off, door flung opened and was on her feet in a fast sprint for the house. She felt, rather than saw, Rob follow more slowly. This was not the best time to rekindle his friendship with her family, but Sandie had taken that out of her hands.

Her mother waited in the doorway. "Tom took Sandie to the office."

"Thanks, Mom." After kissing her cheek, she turned to Rob, but he waved her on.

## Meet Me in Fantasyland

Rissa raced through the sliding door to find her daughter sitting next to Tom crying on his shoulder. He looked up and winked at her. Was that a good sign?

\* \* \* \*

The office door swallowed Rissa. Rob felt a strong pull, as if he were on the losing side of a tug of war. He'd fallen in love with her. A mature love. How in hell does a man compete with his love's daughter?

"Hello Bobby, it's been a long time." Startled, he turned toward Rissa's mother.

"How have you been Mrs. H.?" Carol Howard. The whole neighborhood had shortened her name to Mrs. H.

Stepping forward, he gathered the petite woman into a bear hug. Time slipped away. Wasn't it just yesterday when he trailed behind Rissa into the kitchen for some fresh baked cookies?

"We've been doing well." Dropping back into old habits, Carol turned toward the kitchen, expecting him to follow.

Seth sat at the table doing homework, and Rob walked over to sit next to him. The boy looked up with a distracted smile at Rob, and then turned his attention back to his book.

"Bobby, do you still like peanut butter cookies?" Carol asked.

"If they're yours, you bet."

As if by magic, a plate full of golden brown cookies appeared on the table. Seth reached for one and she slapped his hand. "Not until your homework's finished."

That admonishment brought so many memories to the front of his mind. A grin spread across his face. "You haven't changed a bit." Rob turned to the boy. "She'd do the same thing to your mom and me."

"I always thought you and my Rissa would get married." A stricken look crossed her face so she turned to her grandson. "Not that your mother didn't chose just fine on her own, Seth."

"I know what you meant, Grandma." Seth winked at Rob, who raised his eyebrow at the boy. Seth didn't seem to be opposed to him; that must be reserved only for Sandie.

Reaching for another cookie, Seth announced, "I'm done with my homework—as much as I know how to do, anyway."

"I thought school was out for the summer."

"I got Mono during the school year. I have to take a few summer classes to catch up."

"The kissing disease huh?"

"Well, unfortunately there was no kissing involved." The kid sounded so despondent that Rob couldn't help but laugh. "Let me see if I can help you."

"Really? You know geometry?"

"I'm an architect what do you think?"

"Sweet."

Rissa's mother left the two to work on angles and polygons, and anything else related. Rob's couldn't keep his attention from wandering from time to time to the office where Rissa and her daughter settled his future. A slow hour passed before anyone entered the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

“Dear, are you going to do anything like this again?” Tom asked.

Rubbing her temples to ease the ache, Rissa wondered how long had they been listening to their daughter. An hour? Getting all of Sandie’s feelings out in the open was for the best. Otherwise, how would they know what needed to be dealt with? For once, Tom seemed to be on the same page with her and the meeting, on their sides, anyway, had gone smoothly.

“No Dad, I promise.”

“Good,” Rissa and Tom chorused.

“Can’t you two at least talk and try to work things out?” Sandie asked again.

She stood so abruptly the action almost knocked her chair over. Good lord if she heard that question one more time her scream would rock the foundations of the house. She walked to the window to stare out. Darkness had fallen.

No good would come of getting upset, so she bit her tongue to keep from snapping at the girl. They’d been over the question so many times in the past hour, there wasn’t another way to answer.

“Sandie, your mother and I no longer have the strong feelings for each that are needed to keep a marriage together. But we both love you and Seth.” Tom repeated, sounding like a broken record.

“It’s all because of *him*.” Sandie’s glare was hot enough to singe, but Rissa was immune.

Tom’s frustrated voice boomed. “Sandie, it’s not because of Rob. If anything it’s because of me.”

Sandie jumped up. "That's not true!" Her narrowed gaze swung to her mother and pinned her like a bug. "Dad, you came back to us. Mom told you to get out because of that man."

"No!" Rissa and Tom shouted at the same time.

Chest heaving with emotion, Sandie took a startled step back and sat down. "Why then?"

"I've been avoiding telling you and Seth and even your mother this for a long time." Tom turned away from Sandie and looked at Rissa. "I think your mom knew."

"Knew what, Daddy?" Rissa knew her daughter was afraid of the answer, otherwise she wouldn't have called Tom *daddy*.

"I'm ashamed to admit this, but your mother is right not to take me back."

"No she's not!" Sandie cried and almost catapulted out of the chair and into her father's arms.

Keeping her mouth shut, Rissa let Tom talk his way out of the mess he'd created. It was way past time for a little clean up. Actually, she was impressed at his maturity to shoulder the blame and come clean.

Maybe after all the melodrama was over they'd have a chance to put their lives back together. Be the stronger for it. And one could hope she could be with the man she'd loved since childhood.

"Sandie, I've had several affairs, Wendy was just the last in a long line. Rissa is right; I came back to the house because of you and Seth—and the fact I didn't want to go home to my parents' house." Pulling their daughter into his arms, he ran his hand through her hair. "Sandie, I'm so sorry, but if your mother had let me move back in I would have found another woman."

His eyes caught Rissa's above Sandie's head. They pleaded for forgiveness as he talked. "I'm just not in love with Rissa in that way any more. And I really don't think she's been in love with me either."

"I'm sorry Sandie," Rissa said. "I wish I could tell you something different. Your father and I have turned a blind eye to each other for too long. We did it to keep the family together." She walked over, letting her arms circle both of them. "Let's start to rebuild a new life where we all get along and can love each other for who we are. You'll see your father all the time."

The three stood together for a few more moments. Rissa knew her daughter needed the contact of both her parents. Sandie gave a final sniff and stepped out of the joint embrace.

At the door of the office, Rissa and Tom turned as one and waited for their daughter. Sandie stood where she was for a moment. She let out a heartfelt sigh then walked to them and paused.

"You two really are over, nothing I can say or do will change that." Relief surged through Rissa at the sound of resignation in Sandie's statement.

"Nope." Tom opened the door. "Now let's go find the others. I'd like to meet Bobby. I've heard about him for years so I feel like I know him."

Tingles of electricity shocked Rissa at the thought of seeing Rob. Had it only been an hour since she'd left him standing by her mother? Was this what true love felt like?

When the group entered the kitchen, Rob and Seth had their heads bent over a book. Seth looked up with a worried frown as Rob gave Rissa a smile that made her shiver to her toes.

Tom extended his hand and Rob stood to accept it. "So you're the infamous Bobby! Somehow I always thought you were gay."

Rob turned a frown on Rissa. "What in the world did you tell your family about me?"

"I honestly don't know. I only told them about our friendship."

Sandie sat next to her brother leaned over and snagged a cookie from the plate. "I always thought Bobby was a girl."

Seth nodded. "Yeah, Mom made it sound like you were her best friend."

"He was – is." Rissa put her hands to her cheeks. Sure enough, they were on fire.

Tom chuckled. "Well I'm glad you're around. Rissa needs someone." Then to the twins, "It's time I got home, I have work to do. Come give me a hug and I'll see you next weekend for our fishing trip."

Seth and Sandie walked Tom to the door. Rissa watched for a moment then turned back to Rob who stood next to her.

"How did things go?" Rob took her hand and pulled a chair out for her, then took another chair for himself.

She avoided his question. "You always were the gentleman. Why was I so blind back then?"

"You know what they say; you miss what's right under your nose."

Chuckling, Rissa asked, "Who says that?"

"I don't know, it just sounded good."

Carol came back into the kitchen and sat across from Rissa. "How is my granddaughter?"

She could no longer sidestep the question. "She's going to be fine. We spent the entire hour convincing her that Tom and I weren't getting back together. Tom finally admitted his infidelity; that's all it took for her to understand it was over."

Chancing a look at Rob, she saw relief flood his face. Reaching across the table she took his hand in hers, then without looking at her mother, she asked a question.

“Mom, do you think the kids could still stay the night? Rob and I have some unfinished business.”

Her mother cleared her throat. Rissa turned to look at her and almost laughed. Her mother was blushing.

“Well, of course, they were planning to stay here anyway.” She looked at both of them sternly. “I always knew you two were meant to be together; get it right this time.”

Before Rissa could reply, the kids came back to the kitchen. Sandie, had tears shining in her eyes. Rissa stood and went to her daughter and put her arm around her.

“Are you okay?”

Sandie threw her arms around her, “I’m so sorry for being such a brat. I guess it’s time for me to grow up huh?”

“As long as I can still think of you as my baby girl.”

Sandie laughed and dashed the tears from her face with her sleeve. “Come on Seth, let’s go watch some television.”

Seth turned Rob. “Thanks for the help on my homework.” Then he followed his sister from the room.

“You have some terrific kids.” Rob stood and walked to her and slung his arm around her shoulders, Rissa felt the now familiar electricity race through her. Rob turned to Rissa’s mother. “Thanks for the cookies, brings back a lot of good memories.”

“Thank you. We’ll see you in the morning.”

Rissa gave her mom a wave then took Rob’s hand as they went to the car. Thoughtful silence filled the drive to her home. She didn’t know what Rob thought, but the scene with her daughter kept replaying through her mind.



Everything would be fine. She knew it.

They were at her house in minutes. Rissa gave a squeal when Rob gathered her in his arms and carried her over the threshold.

Without turning, he kicked it shut again, reached awkwardly behind them with one hand to lock the deadbolt and winked down at her. "You don't happen to have a jetted tub do you?"

Giggling like a schoolgirl felt good; it had been too long. "Sorry, but I do have a king-sized bed."

## Meet Me in Fantasyland