

1.

“Emily Brooks! What do you mean you’re not coming home for the holidays?” Mom all but yelled at me. When Mom called me Emily, I knew she was dead serious. Then, finally, after almost an hour of apologizing and explaining the exams were coming up and I would be working longer hours, she relented.

I eased my guilt by telling myself this would be the last holiday season here on campus before graduating.

Just before Christmas break at Michigan State, I’d met Lucy Stallworth - a true Southern belle from Georgia, whom I liked the moment she flashed that bright smile of hers at me. We were at an early graduation party when another friend introduced us. Lucy could have been prom queen, the belle of any ball, a sorority sister, or anything else she wanted. She had a gorgeous million-dollar smile, blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, and always wore just a bit of mascara. She could have been on the cover of any fashion magazine. To top all that off, as they say down South, she’s built “like a brick outhouse.”

She was the kind of girl other women either loved or hated. Hated only because of their jealousy. I, on the other hand, liked her the moment she opened her mouth and drawled out, “Hey, Emily.”

Lucy and I talked for hours at the party, becoming friends quickly. We met again on Sunday for breakfast which soon became our regular Sunday morning catch-up over breakfast. It was more like a laugh-fest; we were laughing so hard other diners would look at us as if we were drunk. Lucy and I never needed any alcohol to have fun.

On New Year’s Eve, we decided to dress to the nines and hit a couple of parties on campus. Lucy was in a red satin dress that clung to her curves in all the right places. She let her hair drape across her almost bare shoulders in lovely curls.

“Look, I can wear my red heels since there’s no snow,” she announced as she stepped out of her bedroom.

“Holy crap! You look marvelous. If I were a guy, I’d cart you off somewhere to have you all to myself,” I said before giving her a long whistle.

Lucy laughed and replied, “If you were a guy, I’d let you, but ya never know what the night holds.”

I had splurged on a sparkly silver top and had sewn several rows of sequins down the outer seams of my black dress pants. I topped the outfit off with my black and silver heels. I’ve always wanted to be tall like all the women in my family. However, I gave that up when I hit five feet and five inches and stayed there. Unlike Lucy, I have dark hair but get natural auburn highlights if I’m out in the sun too long. I’m not as curvy as Lucy with her larger bust and tiny waist; however, I am shapely. According to everyone I meet, my large violet-blue eyes are my best assets.

The first party wasn’t much to our desires, whatever that may have been. We just knew we didn’t want to sit talking and sipping wine. So we slipped out quickly to the next party on the list. When we got out of my car, the music was blasting from the open front door. We looked at each other and smiled. “That’s what I’m talking about,” we said simultaneously.

We made our way to the living room, where several people we knew shouted to us to join them. Before we could take our coats off, we had drinks in our hands. All the dining room furniture had been removed to make room for a dance floor. With drinks in hand, we squeezed into the space.

“OK, OK, I need a break. These aren’t dancing shoes,” Lucy admitted. “These are, you- want- to take -me- to -bed-shoes.”

“They go with your- take -me- to- bed red dress,” I retorted, laughing.

We both made our way back into the living room, but Lucy ran towards the front door before we could plop down on the vacant sofa. She was throwing herself at her cousin Dave that had just strolled through the door. Dave was giving her a bear hug when Lucy started squealing and kicking her feet.

“Oh, my Gawd! Rob, what are you doing here?”

And there he was, the man of my dreams. Lucy launched herself at the man I had been waiting for all my life. OK, maybe not all my life, but indeed much of it. Finally, Lucy let go of this beautiful man. Shut your mouth; you’re gawking, I thought to myself.

I tried not to drool on myself or stare. Instead, I smiled, even though no one was looking at me. He was so damn handsome, and Lucy was hugging him. As Lucy backed away from him, I got a full view. Now, I’m sure I’m drooling.

OK, it had been a dry spell. But, not as bad as Lucy had let on; I haven’t turned into a virgin again. Well, I hoped not. I just haven’t found anyone I wanted to have sex with, and skipping the romance novels and taking cold showers had been working.

He was at least six feet tall and probably a hundred and eighty pounds. But it was hard to tell because I could make out a toned body under his long-sleeved light blue shirt that was nicely tucked into a dark pair of jeans. Not a gym rat’s body but a muscled working man’s body. Mahoney reddish-brown hair was cut short but not military short. Green eyes with maybe brown on the edges. But I couldn’t tell from the distance.

Lucy turned around and shouted, “Emily! Emily! You know Dave. Say hi, Dave!”

Dave gave me a quick hug and a friendly smile; It was a good-to-see-ya-again, friendly hug.

“Emily, this is Dave’s big brother, Rob. Rob, this is my best friend in the whole world, Emily Brooks.”

As I looked up, Rob was giving me a million-dollar smile. It must run in the family, I thought. How could one family have such great teeth? It’s unnatural. I thought I was getting drunk because I was sure I knew this man’s face. Then, it dawned on me: Rob looked like Brad Pitt in the movie *Thelma and Louise*, only not as thin or as young. He looked nothing like Dave except for his smile and dark hair.

“Good to meet you. Dave has been telling me about you,” Rob admitted.

“Oh, he has, has he?” Lucy said as she poked Dave in the ribs.

I could feel my cheeks flush as Rob shook my hand. Get a grip; you’re not seventeen! “Well, Dave and Lucy have been keeping you a secret. Glad to meet you. Lucy didn’t tell me she had another cousin.”

Dave laughed. “We keep him hidden. He’s the black sheep of the family.”

“And why is that?” I couldn’t help but wonder aloud. “Black sheep could mean anything.” Please, God let him be straight and single, I prayed silently.

Rob looked at me and smiled. “I need a drink if I’m going to explain that to you.”

And that was how it all began. We had drinks, danced, and talked the rest of the evening. Finally, at midnight, Rob asked if he could kiss me for good luck for the new year. How could I say no to that?

I had lost my heels hours ago, so I had to tip my head upwards to his perfectly shaped mouth. Rob placed his warm, strong hands on the back of my head and pulled me close to him. He stopped short of touching my lips with his and wished me a happy new year.

As our lips met, I melted against him as he pulled me closer. I was sure he could feel my knees quiver, but I didn’t care. But, holy cow, could this guy kiss! But this kiss had to be my personal record’s best New Year’s kiss. Well, except for my first-ever New Year’s kiss with a boy. Billy Woods kissed me on New Year’s when we were sixteen. It had been my first date and my first real kiss on the holiday. Billy had kissed me, quick little kisses, the kind you stole from a girl you liked. Billy had even tried to stick his tongue in my mouth, and I didn’t know what to do. It kind of freaked me out but not for long.

Before my kiss with Rob ended, my thoughts were on proving to Lucy I hadn’t turned back into a virgin, after all, as she often teased me for being single for so long. When Rob and I pulled apart, I registered all the noise around us. People were laughing and wishing each other a happy New Year, and we stood silently, gazing into each other’s eyes. It seemed pretty sappy, but who am I to judge? This perfect man had just kissed me as I had never been kissed before.

Lucy and Dave moved in to break our spell with happy wishes for us. Lucy laughed. “Whoa! Are we disturbing you two?”

“Not at all,” I lied. Grabbing Rob, I said, “Let’s dance some more.”

Lucky for me, the song ended, and the music switched to the Righteous Brothers’ *Unchained Melody*. Rob pulled me close to him as I sunk my face into the curve of his neck. He smelled of sandalwood. Just as the words echoed, “I need your love, God speed your love to me,” Rob lowered his head and kissed me again. This time I kissed him back as I meant it.

The four of us ended up at the all-night restaurant for an early morning breakfast. Finally, at about four a.m., I said I couldn’t stay any longer. I needed some sleep. I had left my Camry at the party house, and Rob had driven his big four-door F-150 pickup truck to breakfast.

“I’ll take you home. We can get your car tomorrow,” Rob said.

“We?”

“Well, sure, if you let me pick you up and take you over there after we have lunch or dinner.”

Again, with the million-dollar smile. I have no willpower when it comes to that smile. “I need to get some sleep first. Maybe dinner.”

“Dinner it is,” Rob said in agreement.

We dropped Dave off at his place, then took Lucy to her apartment, which was only a block from mine.

“You don’t have to drive me over to my place. I can walk from here,” I tried to suggest.

“How will I know where to pick you up for dinner if you walk?” Rob grinned at his question.

Lucy was on the other side of the truck, facing Rob’s back, smiling at me, wiggling her eyebrows up and down. I wanted to smack her.

She laughed and said, “Yeah, how will he know where to pick you up?” As she headed to the apartment door, she turned and yelled, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I felt my face turning red. I gave Rob the directions to my apartment, and we were there within a few seconds. He parked and turned to me, but before he could say anything, I opened the door and jumped out.

He caught up with me and walked silently with me to my door. Lordy, I’d like to invite him inside, but if he were to kiss me, I would have no willpower to say, “go home.” Just say good night and leave it at that. I got my keys out of my bag and reached for the door. Rob placed his hand on mine and whispered, “Can’t I have a good night k

iss?”

“Well, it is almost five in the morning. So I guess that would be a good morning kiss.”

“Not the kind of good morning kiss I would have in mind, but I’d still like a kiss before I go.”

I found myself leaning into him and raising my face to his. Then, finally, I broke away from a perfect kiss of any kind, morning or night. “I’ll see you tonight. About six?”

“Six, it will be.” He smiled, walked down the sidewalk, and just before he reached his truck, he turned and flashed me a grin.

I could hardly get the key into my door. My knees felt weak, and my hands were trembling. I tried to tell myself it was the late hour and the loss of sleep. And then, I thought He is too good to be true. Be careful...