

HYSTERICAL LOVE

a novel



Lorraine Devon Wilke

CHAPTER 1

I AM FLUMMOXED by relationships.

That is not a glib statement; it's the frank admission of a man who can't seem to get it right, even under what would seem to be the very best of circumstances. Relationships bewilder me. They knock me to my knees, and leave me baffled as to why something as essential as love is so damn fraught with confusion. At least for me. Which is disappointing. I don't think I'm an anomaly, but I did think I'd have it figured out by now.

It's not that I don't fully appreciate the value of a good relationship. I do. I'm the guy who wasn't a player in school, high school *or* college. I always had a girlfriend and was always loyal and faithful to that girlfriend. Not because I'm so good, but because I'm not good at chaos. I hate the complication of it, the balancing of opposing forces (i.e., more than one girlfriend), and I'm a horrible liar, all requisites of a successful player.

And, truth be told, I *like* being in a relationship: the comfort, the dependability, the shared meals and regular sex. These are all good things for a man who wants to avoid complication. So why, you may ask, am I flummoxed?

Because, despite my affinity for the state of being, relationships tend to explode on my watch. I'm not sure how or why, but it's typically things like her deciding I'm not motivated enough, or me deciding she's not fun enough (I had one who "hated the outdoors"...what do you do with that?), or both of us deciding the other is unexciting enough that moving on would be more exciting than staying put. But it's always messy, it's always painful, and it usually involves weeping, tossed closets, and new sets of keys. So as I've attempted to evolve in life, I've tried my best to choose better and do it right. *More* right. At least as right as I can.

Which I thought I'd done over these last three years. Thought I'd gotten it really right on both the choosing and the doing. But as I sit on the edge of a strange bed in a strange bedroom and reflect on the very strange night that has just ensued, it's clear I miscalculated. Misjudged. Regardless of good intentions, I once again set the whole damn thing on fire. Or she did. I'm still not sure.

Even more disheartening, this relationship had gone much further than any previous. It lasted longer, had less drama, and we'd actually embarked upon those iconic discussions of the future, that gaping, wide-open, impossible to imagine place I'd been assured was both warm and welcoming. I thought, I think we both thought, we were out of the danger corridor, that weird zone after the early hot years where relationships wander to get battered by irritation and boredom. We were past that, we'd transcended, we were golden.

We were fucked. By love-smugness. It gets you every time.

In retrospect, I should have caught it. That smugness should have been fair warning. But while I was off reveling in our relationship excellence, our learned skills at the craft of compromise, our sense that we

exemplified the very best of love in a modern world, I missed the fact that it had all been going too well. And we know what happens when *that* happens. You dare acknowledge the joy and happiness you've managed to gather around you like soft little bunnies of optimism and, somehow, despite amazingly good behavior on everyone's parts, and often against the nature of all parties involved, someone in the room pulls the pin. I just didn't figure it would be her (or was it me?), or on the night we finally set a date for our wedding.

Now, there's a word with some weighty baggage...*wedding*. Just saying it stirs a reflexive response that settles somewhere near the pit of my stomach, though not for the reasons you might expect. Not the cliché of commitment phobia or the panic that I'd wake up one morning and realize I had no idea why she was in my bed and what particular point there was to marrying her. No, I can honestly say I'm wild about this woman who would strap on a white gown to publicly declare she'd love me forever. The problem?

Thirty-three. That's the problem. I am now thirty-three. And I have a theory about that number:

Something bizarre happens to a man at thirty-three, some particular strain of dread and confusion. Not the whininess of, say, twenty-four, or the doom and gloom of forty, but something completely endemic to thirty plus three years. I don't know why that is. Maybe because Belushi, Alexander the Great, a few rock stars, even Jesus Christ himself succumbed at the age. But thirty-three is a mile-marker for those of us with plans to make it through.

My mother calls it "tweeniedom," a land, according to her, that's populated by overgrown teens who, kicking and screaming, are about to be forced into their deeply dreaded adulthoods. I'd say that's a bit harsh, even a little unfair, because, I'm telling you, this thing is *real*. And it's strange. You hit the year and it rolls over you like no year of life you've lived so far. My friend, Bob, who has a propensity for titling things, calls it Fate Turmoil Syndrome. He's also referred to it as Advancing Age Agitation. I think it's the Kingdom of Hell, where one minute everything is right in your world, the next...hissing madness in the blink of an unwary eye.

Let me set the stage for my particular conflagration so you get the whole picture:

First of all, I'm Dan McDowell, the thirty-three-year-old male in question: a softball aficionado (currently in off-season), a reader of the classics, a decent best friend type, and a working photographer. Which means I make an actual living at my craft, even if it is predominately grade school pictures, corporate yearbooks, family portraits, and the occasional wedding. In the artier industries you don't snub your nose at these sorts of things.

I live in Los Angeles—Toluca Lake, to be more specific, the gentrified but modest suburb attached to the hip of hipper LA where you can rent a decent house without bartering away your first-born. I'm that rare breed of native actually born in the city, though people tell me that's not so rare anymore, not since mommy blogs made it clear you really *can* raise children in Hollywood. I have one older sister, Lucy: thirty-five, never married and currently single, who owns a small, very successful restaurant in the Larchmont District. We get along, if scrappily. And I have two marginally eccentric parents: my father is a retired high school American Lit teacher; my mother, the good wife who lovingly endures him—I mean, adores him. They live not too far and far too close, but as a nuclear group, we manage okay. That's the family of origin.

Then there's Jane, my fiancée. At least until recently. Like earlier tonight.

We've been together for three years, happily ensconced in a small but classic bungalow in a complex of

equally small, classic bungalows on a street where the most vivid feature is the daily presence of an ice cream truck owned by a sweet guy named Tomas. Beyond sheer nostalgia, that truck is beloved for its toffee ice cream bars (that might just be me) and the fact that local parents can regularly indulge their kids without having to brave LA traffic, always a boon. The rest of our neighborhood, while tasteful and well-maintained, is generally less colorful than Tomas’s truck, though Jane and I have contributed a decorative Color-Me-Mine door plaque that reads “Dan & Jane Live Here” in vibrant hues. Jane’s idea. A nice touch that always makes me feel located.

Jane is Jane Bennett, a lovely, moderately insecure, generally delightful twenty-eight-year-old I’ve known and loved these past three years. She’s a UCLA graduate, originally from a small farm town in Montana, an accountant working at a business real estate company in a job she seems to like well enough. And she’s a looker, as they say, though in that real-girl way that makes you feel lucky but not too intimidated: long dark hair, great eyes, athletic body (thankfully this one *does* love the outdoors!), and a killer smile. She tells me I’m hot—says she particularly loves that I’m tall, blond, and generally well-dressed—but I suspect I fall somewhere on the same looks spectrum as she does. Just two average/hot people who found each other and fell in love. Which we did back when I was shooting portraits for her company’s website and she was the one who made sure I got paid. We’ve been together ever since and were moving toward the inevitable “till death” portion of our trajectory when...yep, hissing madness.

You know those experiences that are so unexpected, so out-of-the-blue, that you can’t quite piece them together afterward when you’re trying to reconstruct the debris field? Your memories of the event are hazy and out-of-sequence; you can only recall them in weird, disassociated flashes, like those drug trip montages in bad B-movies? That’s how the scene that cracked the core of Jane’s and my relationship played out. And since everyone in this hometown of mine is a screenwriter, and I’ve had occasion to read a few in my time, I can think of no better way to relay the incident than in movie scene format:

BEDROOM - NIGHT

Spent and sweaty, we’re in a postcoital spoon on the bed. Our madly discarded clothes are everywhere (testament, I think, to our continuing sexual chemistry), and there’s an iPad and a large desk calendar that have been kicked to the foot of the bed in the rumpus of wild lovemaking. The mood is all glowy, sweetness, and light. Conversation commences:

JANE

(whispering in my ear)

So, we’re really doing this?

ME

(smiling and acquiescent)

I believe we are.

JANE

I do think July will be perfect. We can count on the weather; everyone'll be relaxed, no crazy family stuff. Right?

ME

Absolutely. If Dad gets twitchy it'll be warm enough to just hose him down.

This was funny enough that we both laughed...then there was a slight pause. I pulled her to me and we did that soulful stare we're known to do in our goopier moments.

JANE

Are you sure, Danny? *Sure* sure?

ME

I love you, Janie. Really, truly, and till the end of time. So, yes...*sure* sure.

From there we lunged into a trademark kiss: deep, passionate, and long enough that a break for air was required. I'm not sure how it struck her, but I was pretty impressed.

ME (cont.)

Damn, woman, how is it that you are still as hot as the day we first met?

She slides out of bed with a playful grin.

JANE

I have my ways.

ME

Yes...yes, you do. And I love those ways. As I love you. You and your lovely ways.

She turns to me, suddenly more serious.

JANE

Dan, can we honestly and truly say, without a shred of doubt, that we're comfortable with the idea of being the *only* ones we'll ever be with for the rest of our days on this earth?

Odd tone shift. Terrifying topic. I sit up.

ME

That's an interesting question at this particular moment, but, yes, that's the plan. Why? Are *you* not comfortable with the idea?

JANE

No, not at all. I mean, yes, I am. But I'm also realistic. And we *have* only been with each other since the day we met and that's already been three years.

She's smiling, playful...all good fun, right?

JANE (cont.)

Three long years of *just me*.

She's still smiling, but my eyes avert for a split second. *A split second*. And, dammit, her radar pings.

JANE (cont.)

What was that?

ME

What?

JANE

That look. What was that?

ME

What look? There was no look. I was just thinking, yeah, wow, I cannot believe it's already been three years! I mean, it's been such a great—

JANE

I *am* the only person you've been with since we met, right?

And once again, like an idiot sticking a fork in his eye, I take another unfortunate beat that lasts a titch too long.

ME

Um...technically. I mean, yes, of course, I—

The temperature drop is like the girl's room in *The Exorcist*. Which is also the sound of Jane's voice from that point on.

JANE

TECHNICALLY?!

As I recall, my thought processes then seized up, switching from clumsy to pure adrenaline-rush-protective-mode, thrashing madly to find a balance between the good, honest guy I am and the moron who just opened a door he now could not easily shut.

ME

No—I mean, yes! Yes, you are—you have been the only person...except for this weird little bit right after you and I first got together. You know, that gray area right after Marci and I ended it and you and I hooked up? It was just that weird closure period that happens after a relationship ends, where she showed up a couple of times, all sad and freaked out, and it—

My babbling was cut short by the projectile hit of a well-aimed pillow, but I unwisely continued, now folding a little indignation into the mix.

ME (cont.)

What? We weren't even living together yet!

JANE

WE WERE DATING! We'd slept together! We had a commitment! There was no "gray area"! No gray area at all!

I'll concede to some of that: we *were* dating, we *had* slept together, but, if memory serves, we hadn't yet done the "this is exclusive" thing. I figured that was worth pointing out.

ME

We did *not* have a commitment at that point! Yes, we were dating, but it was the beginning stage where things were still undefined. She and I were winding down and there was a little overlap. What's the big deal?

I'll wrap the script right there, mostly because I'm not sure how to articulate the cacophony that followed. Clamor? Pandemonium? Frenzy? Suffice it to say it involved a lot of screaming and yelling, most of which I blanked out, except for the parts that focused on the annihilation of my previously esteemed character...along with the fact that Jane was hurt, really hurt.

Because, apparently, it *was* a big deal. A trust issue, she repeatedly asserted, an issue of many tentacles for Jane. In her defense—in case I'm making her sound like a hysterical female, which she typically is not—I should mention that the only other time she got this close to the altar was with a dickhead who waited for the rehearsal dinner to tell her he'd been married twice before. So while I understood her retroactive horror at my unmentioned sexual overlap, the degree of rage made clear I was paying some fee for dickhead's oversight as well.

But whatever the catalyst, the mitigating issues, or the underlying intent of either party involved, the endgame involved the contents of my closet being flung around the living room, and a calendar ripped to shreds by my now-declared *former* fiancée, who was acting like a lunatic and demanding that I move out. Immediately. Which I did. I could've argued the point—actually I *did* argue the point—but by then my computer, my camera bag, and several pairs of expensive slacks were out on the lawn, and one never knows when those damn sprinklers will pop on. And, frankly, if there's one thing I've learned from a life of serial monogamy, it's that there's wisdom in retreating to fight another day.

(To be continued...)