

Anything's Possible
& other stories
Elizabeth Sage

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Anything's Possible

Cynthia doesn't even look at the guy who sits too close beside her. The mall is Christmas crowded after all, so of course folks will plunk down just anywhere. And anyway, she's engrossed in the novel she's just bought. So she simply shifts her tired body, her charcoal wool coat and shopping bags, and keeps on reading.

But the guy moves right along with her, almost forcing her into the potted plant at the end of the bench. Still she ignores him. She begins humming along with the relentless holiday music that fills the hot, stuffy air. Maybe he'll think she's odd and go away.

He doesn't. In fact, as *Jingle Bells* jangles into *Deck the Halls*, he seems to be trying to read over her shoulder.

Well, so what? Anyone could be driven to strange behavior by this huge downtown mall on a December Saturday. She had been. That's why she's sitting here reading, instead of finding a something for her mother, or at least heading home to get her Christmas cards done.

She came down early from Northington on the train for a day of shopping in the city. But instead of giving her a break and getting her into the spirit of the season, her excursion has left her exhausted. Everything she's bought she could have found closer to home. Why did she ever let her daughters convince her that a sweater purchased in the city was somehow better than the same one from the suburbs? And why hadn't she opted to give gift certificates for their favorite stores anyway, instead of trying to choose things they'll inevitably exchange? Really, the entire day has been a waste of time. She could have had her whole house decorated and several dozen cookies baked.

But she doesn't feel like going home either. The longer she stays out, the more chance her daughters will begin making dinner, since all three have invited their boyfriends over for a festive family evening. She dreads it. They are so full of energy and new, young love. It makes her feel so left out, so old and tired.

All she really wants to do is rest and read, something she never has time for. So when she'd sat down on the bench she hadn't even tried to stop herself taking out the book she'd bought, just for a quick look. The next thing she knew she'd read the first three chapters.

Then *that guy* came along and scrunched up against her, disturbing her peace. And now he's speaking. "Let me guess," he says, actually taking hold of the book and turning it over so he can see the cover. "You bought this for a gift but you're reading it yourself first."

Cynthia does look at him then, her mouth gaping wide. He's staring at her as if he knows her, or would like to. She gathers herself to say *I don't really think that's any of your business* in the voice she uses for her most difficult students. But what comes out is a soft and sexy, "How did you know?"

"Well, maybe by the way you're being so careful not to open it all the way, not to break the spine or mark the pages." Then he shakes his head and holds up a bag. Same bookstore she shopped at. He reaches in and pulls out the same book. "But mostly

because that's exactly what I'm doing. I bought this for my sister, but I'm not going to be able to resist reading it before I give it to her."

Cynthia makes a little gasping sound. "This is for my sister too!" Her mouth feels dry, and she has a sudden desire for a glass of chilled white wine. "So," he says, "what do you do when you're not sitting in a mall reading somebody else's Christmas present?"

Cynthia laughs. "I'm a teacher, in real life. Third grade." She likes his looks. Tall, balding a little, but the rest of his hair is full and dark, and he's fit, not paunchy.

"Hey, I teach too! Outdoor Ed. I'm up at the Rockwood Center, we do orienteering, wilderness survival, winter camping."

"Oh, I've heard of that, you do those special programs for disabled kids." Her face feels flushed and there's a tingling at the base of her spine she hasn't felt for years. She wants to run a comb through her hair and check her lipstick.

"Yeah, we've had a lot of success, we're pretty proud of our program." He puts his book back in the bag. "I'm Logan, by the way." He's wearing hiking boots, just-right jeans, a flannel shirt and down vest. "Um, buy you a coffee?"

Cynthia has to swallow hard, twice, to keep the words *yes, yes, oh please yes*, from bubbling out. She often has coffee with men who aren't her husband, but only other staff, and only at lunch or recess. This feels different. Seriously different. She checks her watch, which is old-fashioned, not digital. She could catch a later train. She puts her book away and picks up her coat and bags. "I'm Cynthia," she says. "Let's go."

The guy called Logan escorts her across the Food Court, which smells hot and salty and greasy, to a little cafe offering specialty coffees. Huge poinsettias grace the entrance and white fairy lights glitter around the windows. She really shouldn't be doing this. Not that she's the least bit afraid to go with him.

What she's afraid of is her own eagerness. She's acting like a teenager, leaping up to follow this guy like she's never even seen a man before. She hasn't flirted like this since before she was married. Thank God her oldest daughter forbid her to wear her comfy yoga clothes and made her put on the outfit she'd bought for parent interviews: slimming black skirt, high black boots, turquoise silk shirt, dangly silver earrings shaped like stars.

Logan buys them both a cappuccino and chooses a private table near the back, where candles arranged with pine and holly cast a mellow glow. "So," he says, "I'm sort of out of practice, I just got a divorce. Is this when I ask, do you come here often?"

Cynthia giggles. She can't believe she isn't even embarrassed. "Actually," she dabs at the cinnamon-flecked whipped cream on her cup, "I don't usually come into the city at all." She licks the thick froth from the spoon. "I live in Northington, we have everything there. Today was a mistake – I thought I'd get away from home – all that rushing around for Christmas – I just couldn't face it. But then as soon as I got here, I started wishing I hadn't come, it was all so totally overwhelming. Which is why you found me reading."

Logan sips his cappuccino. "Do you have kids?"

Cynthia realizes she's staring at his mouth, which is wide and full-lipped. "Three girls," she says. "Seventeen and fifteen and thirteen." She doesn't mention popular and gorgeous and smart. She is immensely proud of her daughters, but also just a tad jealous. She never looked as good as they do even when she was their age, and she never had guys calling her day and night.

She's only ever had Holt.

"But you couldn't possibly," Logan gives her a deep, probing stare, "have kids that

old.”

Cynthia’s heart lurches. Then she narrows her eyes. “And you couldn’t possibly be flattering me?” She knows she looks her age, which is forty-seven. More salt than pepper sprinkles her hair, laugh lines crinkle her eyes, and the faint brown beginnings of liver spots speckle her hands.

“Sorry.” Logan picks up his cup, looks at it, then sets it down again. “I’m really not used to this, it’s been years since I, um, oh you know, since I did this.”

Cynthia nods. “I’m afraid I don’t *ever* do this.” She fiddles with her silver bracelets, spinning them round and round. “And I really must tell you something.” She looks him straight in the eye and says, “I’m married.”

Logan looks crestfallen. “So why’d you come here with me?” Then he looks cross. “And you’re not wearing a ring.”

Cynthia examines her hands, notices a nasty new hangnail. “No,” she says, “I’m not.” And she isn’t about to tell him why either. How can she say her rings are stashed away in her jewellery box because, after twenty years, they no longer fit, and that she refuses to have them made bigger because she’s certain to lose fifteen pounds soon. “I’m really sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to lead you on.”

She pictures Holt, her solid, steady, loving husband, who will have spent his day buying groceries, driving Leigh to dance class, and helping Meg with her science project. There is no question she both loves and respects him. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she says.

Logan reaches out and pats her hand. “Hey, it’s okay.” His touch is warm and comforting, like the cappuccino. “Now I can relax. This is good practice.”

“You know what?” Cynthia says. “I’m so grateful you tried, you can’t imagine. I mean, I’m happily married, and I know I’m lucky. My husband’s a brick. I’ve got a nice home, a good job and great kids. I couldn’t ask for more. But sometimes, oh god, sometimes I just miss, you know, excitement. I miss falling in love. I watch my daughters do it all the time and there’s a kind of vicarious pleasure in that, but it’s not the same.”

Logan raises his eyebrows, but looks willing to listen.

“Sometimes I’m just so envious of them. What I really miss is being in that state of perpetual bliss like they are, you know? That lighter-than-air feeling, when major issues are just a background blur, and tiny details are cosmic, and you’re just so alive, so full of desire. And I can see it’s going to go on for years, and how on earth am I going to live through that?”

Logan shrugs.

Cynthia knows she should stop blathering but something inside her has come undone. “And somehow the festive season makes it all worse,” she tells him. “How I ache for that fantastic sensation of being newly in love at Christmas. But how do you get that in a marriage? I mean, do you realize that if fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, then *fifty percent must end in marriage?*”

Logan tilts his head to one side and grimaces.

“I am so sick of being the one who keeps it all going so my daughters can have a great time,” Cynthia says. “And I, oh my god, I’m so sorry, I’m spilling my silly little soul out to you, how embarrassing, I mean I didn’t even know I thought these things and I don’t even know you and—”

“Hey,” Logan says, “it’s okay. I think I see what you mean.” He grabs her gesturing hands, holds them down and still. Cynthia opens her mouth to speak, to try to explain and

excuse herself. But now her shameless torrent is done no words at all will come out. Stunned by her confession, she just sits there, speechless.

She stares at her aging hands, captive under his. She can feel both tension and hope in Logan's grasp. She can feel that anything's possible.

With only the slightest movement she could start something. Something thrilling and exciting and dangerous. She only has to turn her palms up to meet his. With a simple shift of her wrists, she can begin an affair, a wild, passionate affair.

Why not?

A rush of sexual longing seizes her. It's the way she feels when she watches her girls with their boyfriends. The way she used to feel with Holt, but never does anymore. Not even when she's wearing her fancy save-the-marriage lingerie on designated date night.

She stays absolutely still, memorizing the feel of Logan's touch.

When the moment has passed, she takes a deep, calming breath and faces him. She offers a friendly smile. He nods and gently withdraws his hands. They finish their drinks in companionable silence.

"Well, I've got to get home," Cynthia finally says. "All three girls have invited their guys to dinner tonight." She touches Logan's shoulder lightly as she leaves the table. "Thanks for the cappuccino," she says. "And thanks so much for, you know, offering. I really mean that. I am pathetically grateful."

Then she walks away. Away from this attractive man who is available. Who is interested. Already she's turning the encounter into an amusing little anecdote to tell her daughters later. *Guess what? Some guy hit on your old mom at the mall today. Can you believe it?*

But then again, maybe not. Maybe she'll keep Logan to herself. Her daughters are too young to understand about him. They'd be shocked at her revealing her deepest feelings, exposing her naked emotions, to a total stranger.

They'd be right. She'll never see Logan again, but he'll be out there somewhere knowing these secret, private things about her. And somehow that feels more intimate than if she'd actually had sex with him.

No, she won't tell her girls. Let them think she's in a good mood because she's full of the Christmas spirit. Let them think she came home smiling because of the great time she had shopping in the city.

Some Storm

“Looks like it’s going to storm,” I say to my daughter Tess, as if I don’t care at all. I put the chicken pesto salad I’ve just made into the fridge. “So you know I’ll have to open the bloom shades.”

The bloom shades are actually old umbrellas I’ve rigged up in the garden over my exhibition dahlias. They’re tied to the dahlias’ bamboo stakes, and depending on what the weather’s doing, I run out about ten times a day to open or close them.

I got the idea from a book on Victorian rose gardens. The shades protect show blooms from harsh rain or opening too soon or fading in excessive sun. They seemed the perfect answer to last year’s disaster, when a freak storm tore through my garden the day before the Woodbank Flower Show.

When I couldn’t find such a thing as Victorian bloom shades in any shop or catalogue, I decided to make my own. I started collecting old umbrellas in March, asking everyone I knew for castoffs and picking through the neighborhood trash. I didn’t realize that Tess would consider it a major crime.

Maybe I should have dropped the idea. But I kept seeing last summer’s ruin: My poor dahlias’ heads snapped and broken, their petals ripped and torn and strewn all over the ground. I couldn’t let that happen again.

And so the umbrellas stayed. Tess hates them, to put it lightly. The first time she saw all twenty-five open, I’d said to her, “Looks kind of fun, don’t you think?”

“No,” she said. “Absolutely not. Looks totally embarrassing.” Things went downhill from there. All summer those umbrellas have embarrassed her, making her critical and unforgiving. Now it seems that our disagreement is the only thing we still share.

And that’s made me turn more and more to my garden for refuge. I’ve become like someone who starts drinking alone in the long afternoons, except that my addiction is to weeding the borders, deadheading the annuals, and watering the dahlias once again.

“Tess?” I say to her now. “I really don’t want to upset you, but I have to open the bloom shades.”

“Seriously, Mom?” she says. “You’re insane! You need help.”

“What I need,” I said, “is for you to stop being a hypocrite. You make such a big deal over saving the environment and all. You should be happy I’m recycling those umbrellas.”

“Yeah, right,” she says. “You acted like some bag lady, picking those out of the garbage, and even stealing from my school’s lost and found.” She pauses for a dramatic eye roll. “No Mom, you’re the hypocrite. You always say winning isn’t everything, but look at you. You’re obsessed. All you want is to win first prize in that flower show.”

Okay, so I am a bit obsessed. I can’t say just when the idea of winning first prize at the Woodbank Flower Show got out of hand. But now it chokes back everything else, the way crabgrass, if it ever gets started, can take over and ruin the finest lawn. I’m as tied to winning as the dahlias are to their stakes.

Why can’t my daughter understand?

“Please, Tess.” I start browning herbs and onions in butter for the soup I’m making because Gillian and Bo Montgomery are coming to dinner.

“Please, Mom! You care more about your dahlias than your daughter!”

“Of course I don’t”

“Sure feels like it.”

“Sweetheart,” I say, “Bo won’t even notice the umbrellas. Just relax and be your usual cute charming self.”

Gillian and Bo used to be our best friends. That was years ago, back when they lived across the street. Bo and Tess were born the same month, the same year. Up until they were seven, they were always together. When they were babies, Gillian went back to work and I agreed to babysit Bo, which is how Tess came to spend her formative years with him.

But just as Tess and Bo were ready to start second grade, Gillian decided to move to a bigger law firm in the city. She moved away from Woodbank and took Bo with her, even though he was like one of our family by then.

Bo’s famous now, by the way. He plays the teen detective in that TV series, *Shatterproof*. He gets bags of mail, has thousands of friends on his FB fan page, millions of hits on his YouTube clips, not to mention marriage proposals and offers from Hollywood. And Tess is in love with him. Totally. She denies it, of course, but it’s so obvious.

We see Gillian and Bo twice a year. In the winter we go to the city and they take us out to a trendy restaurant where they spend most of the time texting or talking to other hip people who stop by our table. Then in the summer they drive down to Woodbank.

I always make the whole dinner from scratch, because besides dahlias and my organic gardening column, now also a blog, for *The Woodbank Weekly*, home cooking is my thing. Not that I have to prove anything to Gillian, but you know, I kind of feel like I do.

“Don’t forget they already know about the umbrellas,” I say. “Remember how Gillian even sent me her old one?”

“Like duh, Mom. I was here when the courier delivered it, don’t *you* remember?”

How could I forget? It started a huge fight at the time. “That’s her reject!” Tess had yelled as I put Gillian’s classic black umbrella over my favorite dahlia, Dauntless. It has giant fiery red/orange blooms with yellow tips on the petals, and I plan to win with it at the Flower Show.

I glance out the window again. From here I can see all of my garden. And there in the middle stand my gorgeous dahlias, their massive blooms bright bold bursts of heart-stopping color. I send little waves of love to Dauntless.

And I wonder, as I have so often this summer, if it’s normal for a mother to get more pleasure and satisfaction from a flower than a daughter. I ask myself if it’s acceptable, providing I love that daughter deeply, to not actually like her very much most of the time.

Tess’s unpredictable silences since I installed the umbrellas have hurt me more than I ever could have imagined. They accuse and somehow shame me. But the feathery magnificence of my dahlias fills me, every single day, with pure joy.

I add some chopped heirloom tomatoes to the soup pot, making steam rise. The oven is on too, because I’m baking my famous herb bread. Even with all the doors and windows open, it’s so stuffy in the kitchen I feel like I might faint.

I stir the soup, grind fresh pepper over it. “Could you set the table please?”

Tess gets out our best placemats. “This is unbelievable,” she says. “Bo Montgomery is coming to my house for dinner, and he’s going to think I’m a dork because of your stupid umbrellas.”

“Of course he won’t. He’s your friend.”

“Yes, he will. He’ll probably post a picture on Facebook or something.”

“Tess,” I say. “He adores you.”

Tess ignores that and gets out the cutlery. “Hey Mom?” she says. “Aren’t you going to change?” She herself has changed at least three times already.

“No, it’s too hot.” I smooth my faded sundress, which I made a few years ago. Gillian always dresses in lawyer suits and heels. “And anyway, this is my look.” Then I go for it and add, “I’ll just slip out and open the umbrellas now.”

Tess drops the cutlery. Knives and forks and spoons clatter across the tile floor. “Don’t you dare!”

“Tess, be reasonable. If it storms, my dahlias will be ruined, just like last year and—”

“And I’ll never forgive you!” But her shriek is drummed out by a major roll of thunder. Then I hear a car in the driveway.

I rush out to greet our guests. Tess picks up the cutlery before she follows. I know she doesn’t want to seem too eager to see Bo, and I admire her restraint.

Gillian and Bo step out of their black BMW as if they’re at a photo shoot. Both have the smoothest highlighted reddish-blond hair, perfect teeth and tans. A gust of wind blows a lawn chair across the patio and crashes it into the shed. Tess comes outside and stands there looking lost.

Gillian gives me a big hug, and says, “Dinah! So good to see you. I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

“Hey,” Bo says to Tess.

“Hey,” she says back, blushing.

“Looks like it’s going to be some storm,” Gillian says.

“No kidding.” Oh, she has no idea. “Better take shelter,” I say, and we all hurry inside.

I pour drinks and Tess mutters, “I’ll finish setting the table.” There’s an awkward moment, and then Bo goes to help her. I’m sure I can feel her heart pounding at him being so close.

As Gillian and I chat, I overhear Bo say to Tess, “So, when we’re done here, want to pull out the oven drawer and play with the pots and pans like we used to when we were little?”

I’ve just taken a big nervous gulp of wine and almost spray it out my nose. What a nice guy. He may be a very hot TV star, but here he’s still just Bo, and he’s trying to put Tess at ease.

She giggles. It’s a happy sound that makes me think of champagne bubbles. “Sure!” she says. “Or maybe we can go get all my stuffed animals and play zoo keeper.” Then they’re talking like they’ve never been apart.

And then I hear rain against the screens. I set down my wine and rush to shut the windows.

“Good thing about those umbrellas,” Gillian says. “Isn’t that flower show coming up soon?”

“Yes, in three days.” I make my voice sound calm and casual. But I’m doing my deep

yoga breathing to keep from freaking.

Out the window, the sky hangs heavy, like one big bruise. A fierce wind begins to howl. I picture my dahlias after last year's storm. I look at my daughter, in her glory with Bo Montgomery.

"Mom?" Tess says.

"Tess?" I answer.

"The umbrellas aren't open yet!" It's an accusation, as if they were *her* idea and I'm disobeying *her* rules. She looks me straight in the eye for perhaps the first time all summer. "Mom, your dahlias will be ruined!"

I hesitate just long enough to see that Tess is nodding her head hard, asserting her teenage prerogative to change her mind *if and when* she feels like it.

"I know." I start serving the soup. My hands are shaking and I concentrate on keeping the ladle steady so I won't slop.

Tess grabs Bo's hand and says, "We'll open them for you."

"Sure," I say. "If you want to. Thanks."

Tess and Bo run outside, and the rain pelts them hard, drenching their clothes. They race about, trying to get the umbrellas open. But the storm wants to tear those umbrellas from their stakes and blow them away. It turns some inside out and they have to fight to hold them down. But they save the dahlias.

And then the storm moves on, leaving Tess and Bo in a soft drizzle, soaked to the skin. Bo throws his arms around her and they dance up and down the muddy garden like lunatics. With her hair hanging in dripping ringlets and her face wet with rain, Tess looks toward the window and smiles up at me.

Stretch Marks

Sally read the review yet again and raged inside. In the books section of the national newspaper the revered literary critic, Adrian Dougal, had written: *Sally Halton's latest novel is contrived and more than a little silly. Who wants to read yet another book about middle-aged women searching for identity through love? Stretch Marks is nothing but a dreary domestic drama. How on earth it was ever even nominated for the Paxon Prize is hard to fathom.*

The damning review was also, of course, posted online.

Sally made a little spitting sound with her lips. She'd waited so long for him to review her work, and now this. Her agent had said not to worry, that any review was better than no review. And her editor reminded her that *Stretch Marks* had in fact won the prestigious Paxon Prize. But Sally couldn't let it go. She knew Adrian Dougal wanted to ruin her. He always had.

She'd been only nineteen and working as a summer research assistant in the university science department when she'd first met him, way last century. He'd been sitting in the cafeteria, surrounded by adoring female students. When he called her over to join them, she'd felt honored and overjoyed. His bohemian look left her breathless.

Adrian, a lecturer in the English department, was making ends meet teaching summer school, but he was destined to be a great writer. Everyone said so, including Adrian himself. After all, he'd already sold a story to *The New Yorker*, a fact he managed to mention in almost every conversation.

Until meeting him, Sally's passion for science had made her weird and nerdy, but Adrian claimed it was what attracted him. Apparently he'd never met a woman with such rational thinking skills, who truly understood logic, and who swooned over equations rather than poetry.

And Sally had never met a man so intelligent who wasn't enthralled with physics and math, whose idea of a good time on a Saturday night wasn't settling down with a microscope or a Bunsen burner. She hung on Adrian's every word. He was a king and she his willing slave. In return, Adrian introduced her to a whole new world of emotions and physical pleasure she'd never even realized existed. He helped her see her fellow scientists as devoid of humanity, living as they did in a cloud of abstract ideas. They were robots, he convinced her, just enormous brains without bodies or hearts or souls.

At the end of the summer, Sally decided to abandon her plans to study science. How frivolous to have dreamed of a Nobel Prize in chemistry. Her love for Adrian was chemistry! She switched to an arts program and the very next day Adrian dumped her for a biology student.

Remembering all that now, Sally tore the nasty review into ragged strips and flung the shreds all over her dark wood floor. She fluffed her thick coppery hair – hair that Adrian had called Byronic and utterly irresistible – and resisted the urge to post certain embarrassing and quite possibly incriminating old photos of Adrian Dougal on her Facebook fan page.

When Adrian had left her, Sally had found a replacement lover also, although if Adrian had called, she would have run right back to him. She trained herself to be the one who, once the rush of a new relationship wore off, got bored and moved on. She was careful never to give all of herself again – she simply enjoyed her addiction to being in love. She never asked for a commitment. Which made her immensely popular with men.

Eventually, inevitably, Sally got pregnant. She married the guy because he was a grad student in chemistry, and she'd fallen for his solid, steady, predictable nature. Soon they had four daughters, and for a number of years her husband and girls absorbed all the love Sally had.

Of course she'd watched for Adrian's first novel, but it never did appear. All she saw were his increasingly pretentious reviews. She found it impossible to forget him entirely, but came to think of him as a fading scar, a reminder of past pain, like the stretch marks from pregnancy on her belly and thighs.

When her youngest was finally off to school, Sally sat down one day to write a shopping list, but to her amazement wrote the first page of a romance novel instead. Within a few months she had the book finished and sold.

After that she'd fallen happily into the rhythm of writing every morning, using the pen name Carilla Chase. She never had any trouble finding material – she simply transported her former love affairs into other times and places.

In ten years she turned out seventeen romances and made heaps of money. Sally adored writing as Carilla Chase, who was forever thirty, with a slender body and stunning good looks. Carilla's upper arms were toned, her breasts didn't droop, and she never suffered PMS or irregular bleeding. And she was always, always, in love.

One day though, for no apparent reason, Carilla quit. Sally opened her laptop, but Carilla had nothing to say. Surprised but not worried, Sally took a few days off. She visited a spa. She shopped. And then she decided it was time to try something new.

She started another book, this time a literary novel, and using her own name. She worked on it for three years, long enough for Carilla Chase to have written ten books. But Sally didn't mind, because now she was considered a *real* writer. Sales were, by Carilla Chase's standards, ridiculously low, but her book was noticed and critically acclaimed, although not reviewed by the renowned Adrian Dougal.

Sally's second novel was ignored and her third received mixed reviews. But her fourth, *Stretch Marks*, a sweeping saga of four sisters' intertwined lives, was an outstanding success. She let herself fantasize about Adrian Dougal finally reviewing her work with glowing praise, and took pleasure in imagining him remembering her, perhaps even lusting after her as he called her book *exquisite* and *luminous*.

"Oh, how could he?" she cried now, jumping up off her cream leather sofa to stomp on the remains of the review that held his hateful words. But shredding the newspaper couldn't destroy them. Sally knew those words by heart, and they were all over the internet: *Some have called Halton's work fresh and exciting, but in truth she borders on inane. Everything she says has been said before, and said far better. Whoever awarded the Paxon Prize to this soap opera of a book must be menopausal.*

Sally revised her raving hysteria until she had a short, sweet, suitably stinging letter to the editor. She mentioned that those who criticize are often those who fail to *do*, that the glowing fan letters she'd received from readers were the true measure of *Stretch Marks*'s worth. She mentioned the astounding number of copies sold, the book club edition with

reader's guide, the reprints and translations in the works, the bidding for film rights.

The day her letter ran, Sally received an email from Mr. Adrian Dougal himself. He would be in her city giving a guest lecture later that month. Would she meet him for lunch?

On the morning of the meeting, phrases from the review tormented Sally as she tried on outfit after outfit. Nothing, absolutely nothing, seemed right. She flung things about, heaping her bed with rejected clothing. *This* made her look old, dowdy and downright matronly, while *that* screamed *trying too hard*.

Finally she ransacked her daughters' wardrobes. From Miranda's she chose a plain black linen pencil skirt and a perfectly cut, fitted jacket. From Rosalind's she added an ivory silk shirt with a suggestive neckline and demure pearl buttons. Her daughter Stephanie did Sally's hair, taming it just slightly into a becoming topknot. Gwendolyn, her youngest, adorned Sally with simple gold earrings and bracelet.

Adrian Dougal was already seated at the restaurant he'd chosen when Sally arrived. Oh dear god. He was just as handsome as she remembered, maybe even more so with his now silvery hair. A little unexpected shiver tickled the small of her back.

Adrian stood to greet her. "Sally, you look marvelous!" He grasped her hand as firmly, as commandingly, as any of Carilla Chase's heroes would have done. Then he kissed the air near her ears, whispering, "So lovely to see you, my darling." Sally's heart lurched. His voice, she realized with some shock, was the low, melodious voice Carilla had given the heroes of all her books.

"Adrian, how are you?" Sally couldn't keep a flirtatious tone from her voice. "It's been far too long..." She'd been prepared for anything – a cool discussion of her work to an actual fist fight – anything but this total loss of self before him. Suddenly she was nineteen again, seeing him for the first time and falling madly, hopelessly in love. Suddenly she was forty-nine, seeing him after thirty years and falling madly, hopelessly in love ...

They ordered, they ate, they talked. They avoided discussing the review. And all the while Sally felt flushed, as if her whole body were blushing. To keep her composure, she began writing the situation in her mind as a scene in a Carilla Chase novel, which made her giggle between gulps of the very expensive wine Adrian had ordered.

"What's so amusing?" Adrian wanted to know. "We're talking about your literary reputation here. You could be a first class writer Sally, if you'd just try a little harder, be a little more serious."

Sally gasped. He was quoting a line from his review. All the hurt flooded back over her. How dare he lecture her about her writing? Who was this man?

"Well?" Adrian spoke as if Sally were a failing student handing in a late and poorly written term paper.

"I was just remembering Carilla Chase."

Adrian frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't believe I'm acquainted with her."

Sally smiled. "Oh no, you wouldn't be." She sipped her wine, taking her time. "She was a very good friend of mine, you see, and then one day she just disappeared and was never heard of again. Until today. Now I think I know where she is."

"That's fascinating, I'm sure, but I don't quite see the relevance." Adrian wiped his mouth with his napkin, then folded his hands together on the table.

For one last moment Sally remembered how that mouth could kiss, how those hands

could caress. Then she met Adrian's eyes and saw they were exactly the same deep, dark, and exciting eyes Carilla Chase had so often described. Eyes that were quite trite, really.

"I mean," Adrian said, "I just don't understand why you won't control the romantic element in your books."

Sally stayed silent.

"What are you working on now?" He checked his phone, sent a text and signaled for the bill. "Any new directions?"

"Oh yes, of course!" How could she ever have let his review affect her? What did she care what he thought or said about her work? She'd written Adrian Dougal out of her life in Carilla Chase's novels years ago. And now ideas for her next book were flashing across Sally's mind like lightning.

"Something important and worthy, I hope."

"Definitely." The protagonist would be a failed writer called Argyle Drake, living a bitter life as an obscure book blogger. Sally dug a pen and notebook out of her purse, eager to jot down some plot points. Argyle would be brutally stabbed to death by a bestselling novelist whose work he'd slagged. "It's going to be a murder mystery!"

"A *whodunit*?"

"I've never tried that genre."

"Oh, please."

"Should be fun!"

"It will be a waste of your time and talent." He glowered at the bill, then signed it and went on his way, not even bothering with air kisses. But this time when Adrian Dougal left her, Sally didn't even notice.

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