

## The Last Year and a Half

By Gina Hickman

In the wee hours of the morning, as I drive north on Interstate 5 through Weed California, I'm realizing maybe I should have taken the coastal route. At this point I have no idea where I'm going. I'm just going. I have left behind a life that wasn't...what wasn't it? It wasn't what I expected, or chose, or was geared for. So, I'm escaping. I'm escaping the cancer, the boyfriend, the job, the friends...friends that I thought I had anyway.

My cell phone rings in the console next to me. It's May Pearson, my very best friend in the whole world. The one friend that I've managed not to alienate. But, then she has been in Seattle for the past twelve years. I haven't told her about the cancer, and not sure if I want to yet.

"May, what's up lady?" I ask cheerfully even though I'm not supposed to be talking and driving, but there's no one else on the road.

"What's up?" she says a bit irritated. "What do you mean, what's up? Where the hell are you? Lee just called me, and he says you just up and left?"

"Yeah, well, not exactly up and left. We split up. It's a long story."

"Oh shit, Liv, I'm sorry. What happened? He didn't say a word about it." My name is Olivia, but May has always called me Liv, or Livie. Once in a while she calls me Olive Oil, when she's trying to irritate me.

"Things fall apart, always do." I'm being tight lipped because I don't want to get into it on the phone.

"You guys have been together for more than eight years. I'm sorry for sounding so shocked, but you guys were practically married."

"But, we weren't. Better that we didn't do that."

"Why do you sound so cynical?"

"I do not sound cynical."

"Well, where the hell are you?"

"I'm on I-5, just past Weed."

"Hey! I've got some time banked up for vacation. Why don't you," and she draws the word you

out, “meet me in Sisters. There’s a cabin I rent there once in a while. We’ll just chill for a bit, and catch up. Whatdya say?”

“Sisters? Where is that?” I only ask because I just want to keep driving until I hit Alaska or the North Pole.

“In Oregon, dope!”

“And how am I supposed to know this?”

She wants to hang up and see if she can get the cabin nailed down, then call me back with the coordinates. “It’ll be fun. Just like old times.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so. I’ll call you back in a few minutes.” I haven’t seen May for a few years, and even though I’ve spoken to her on the phone just about weekly, and we email back and forth, I haven’t told her what I’ve been going through for the last year and a half. I keep asking myself why, but I have no answer for myself. She will be pissed when she finds out. I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. She calls back. I ask her to hold on so I can pull over to write the directions down to this Sisters place. Okay, stay on I-5, and go east on Highway 22 up by Salem somewhere. Got it. She’s going to meet me there. She’s packing as we speak and she is going to leave within an half hour. She tells me it will take about five hours to get there from where I’m at, and for her about 6 hours. She tells me to meet her at such and such restaurant. She urges me to drive slow.

“I love you and can’t wait to see you, Livie. Drive careful,” she blows a smacking kiss into the phone.

“I will. Love you too.”

How will I explain this to the one person I’ve known for twenty years, what hell I’ve been through, and that I didn’t involve her? May is closer to me than a sister. She is like the best part of me, the rational side, the strong side, my conscience and my rock. The day I found out I had breast cancer, May was the first person I wanted to tell. But, it turned out the more I thought about it, the less I wanted to say about it. I didn’t want to tell anyone. I told Lee only because I had to. I lived with him, he would know eventually. I was a walking disease, an outcast and a pariah. Something was chewing me up from the inside and I couldn’t make it stop without cutting off ‘the girls’. I’ve had these girls since I was twelve years old and now they are gone. In their place are two foam bumps that are supposed to make me look normal. I’ve lost twenty pounds and look like a crack addict. My skin is pale and mottled. I have no hair

so to speak. The long blond locks I had, have been replaced with short dark brown wispy hair. Very chic. I can't taste my food or even stomach it sometimes. My last bout of chemo was three months ago. This has been my life for the past year and a half. Cancer at thirty years old. I hate my life and everything it represents. I am no longer Olivia Scott, magazine editor's assistant, Lee's girlfriend, friend to all, but Olivia the cancer patient, breast less, and tired.

I roll down my window in my small SUV packed to the gills with everything I wanted to take with me. The late September air feels fresh and clean as I drive over the Siskiyou. How can anything be wrong right now? What am I going to say to May? How will I say it? I didn't plan on seeing her for some time yet. At least until my hair grew out some. That damn bridge looks like it may come sooner than I anticipated.

I'm about one hundred and thirty miles into Oregon, and realize I haven't noticed the scenery around me, lost in thought, and worrying about what May will do or say. It's so green, with trees everywhere. Mostly evergreens, and some not, starting to turn yellow. If there is a God, this is His country. Rolling hills gently flow over the landscape, and in some spots it looks as if someone has taken a razor and shaved off some of the tops of the hills. Logging I imagine, but don't know. A deer and her fawn graze at the side of the interstate. I realize I have never actually seen a deer, only on TV. This makes me smile. My first deer. It makes me want to pull over and just watch her and her fawn with the spots. I don't, and continue onward still thinking about the deer. That was awesome to see.

As I make the turn off of I-5 some hours later onto Highway 22 eastward, I have my radio blaring with old time rock. I sing along with Creedence Clearwater Revival, being born on the bayou. Great music to listen to while driving. Lee loved CCR. Shit, I had to think about Lee. I don't want to think about Lee right now because I'll start crying. It's funny how little you actually know someone until the unthinkable happens. We never thought it would happen to us, would always be happy, would always be together and love life. He knew I was going in for my first mammogram. I was only twenty eight but my gynecologist felt lumps on both sides. Of course, she said it was probably nothing to be concerned about but better safe than sorry. Probably just some cysts. I went in for the mammogram two weeks later, got a call two days after that, saying she wanted to see me as soon as possible. I didn't tell Lee at that point, but I was scared shitless. I hate those calls when you see them in the movies. I was envisioning the best case scenario, not wanting to think about the worst case. I strolled into her office and waited, looked at the watercolor paintings on her wall that promote happiness and well-being. Looked at the picture of

her children on her desk, still young, pink cheeked and full of life. Then I started getting nauseous, and looked down at my hands in my lap that were shaking uncontrollably. Sweat began to form on the front of my neck. Panic. My reaction was to run. Run out of the office, fast and far. What I didn't know, couldn't hurt me. Take a deep breath and relax. Whatever she tells me, Olivia will handle. Dr. Mathews walks into her office holding my folder, and she's not smiling.

"How are you, Olivia?"

"You tell me." I tried to smile, but it just made my lips quiver. She sat down at her desk and opened the folder. Then got straight to the point, which changed my life forever. I still think about that defining moment, the moment that rocks you upside down and tears down your ability to think clearly. That turns you into a jellified mass of quivering flesh.

I had to go home and tell Lee that I had breast cancer in both breasts. And that they were going to remove them along with some lymph nodes and that my doctor has already scheduled the surgery for the next week. I can't drive home in the condition I'm in, so I call a taxi from her office to take me home, so I can have a talk with Lee.

Lee stood by me throughout the whole process, and even through the chemo. After the chemo was done and my hair started growing back, and I started feeling somewhat human, I wanted to make love because we hadn't for so long. I needed to know he still loved me for who I was and not what I had on my chest, or didn't have.

As we undressed and I moved into him, he flinched. Oh God. I stepped away slowly and looked him in the eye. "Should I put my shirt back on?" Simply question, right? Wrong.

"I'm sorry Livie," he said looking away. "I just can't do this."

"Do what? Look at me or make love to me?"

"Either. I'm a shit, I know, but it's so...shocking." I put my robe on, ashamed and embarrassed all of a sudden. We didn't discuss it again. We tiptoed around each other for months.

Last week, while he was showering, and I was making dinner chocked full of healthy food, I heard his cell phone buzz on the little key table by the front door. Thinking it might be work sending him a text, I picked it up and looked. I wasn't being a snoop, because I felt no need to. All it said was, "Can U talk?" from someone named Tanya. My heart thumped, and skipped and felt like it would stop. My head cleared after a few minutes, so I texted back to Tanya, "Yes can talk."

"When can we get 2gether again? Last weekend was ggreeeaatt!"

The shower turned off, and he was humming as he toweled off. No wonder he was humming. He had gotten laid last weekend, while I was at the mall shopping for new clothes that would fit me, that wouldn't make me look as if I had been swallowed whole by fabric. No wonder he didn't want to go with me, he had a lay date with Tanya. I texted her back and told her to come over right away, that Liv was gone for the evening and wouldn't be back till tomorrow. Tanya sent the message that she was leaving right then. I finished cooking dinner, and changed from a sweatshirt and shorts to a pretty blouse I had just purchased, combed my short locks, dabbed on a little make up that I felt didn't make me look like a clown because it was too bright or garish, spritzed on some perfume. If I'm going to meet my rival, I needed to look at least somewhat presentable.

Lee was watching a football game, when there came a knock on the door. I yelled from the bedroom to get that please, as I peeked out the door, the front door in plain view. Lee opened the door and his first reaction was shock. "Tanya! What are you doing here?" he whispered.

"What do you mean silly?" She went toward him.

"Stop!" he said trying to push her away.

"What's wrong?"

"Livie is in the bedroom."

"But, you said to come over." Then realization hit both of them at the same time. The jig was up. I came out slowly and walked up to her. She was extremely pretty, and shapely. The pain in my chest squirmed down to my gut.

"Hi, you must be Tanya. I'm Olivia." She looked at me like I was on fire, then at Lee who was standing there with his hand on his forehead.

"That was an odd thing to do?" Tanya said as she placed her hands on her small hips.

"That was an odd thing to do?" I started to boil over. "You fucking my boyfriend isn't an odd thing to do?"

"Lee and I..."

"Lee and you what?" I looked over at Lee who was visibly shaken. "What did Lee tell you? That he and I aren't together anymore?"

"He didn't say anything..." Tanya blurted out. My anger was getting to the point of no return. I ripped open my brand new blouse, buttons flying, and showed her my scars.

"Who doesn't have these?" I yelled. Tanya looked at my chest with horror. "I suppose not," I said

and wrapped the blouse around my chest and walked back into my bedroom, and sat on the bed. Ten minutes later, after Lee had shoed away his new friend, he came into the room and sat next me. "I'm sorry, Liv. I don't know what to say. I got scared." I bawled like a baby with my face in my hands. "I'll always love you, but...but, what. I'm a shit-ass."

"Yes, you are," I managed. I straightened up and wiped my tears and snot away with the edge of my blouse. "What happens now? Where do we go from here?"

"I'll not see her anymore. I love you. We can start over. It wasn't that big a deal with Tanya and I. Really. Nothing really happened that...,"

"No, we can't Lee. I know this has been a harsh reality for you, so the best thing for both of us is just to say good-bye." Was I really opting for a break up? I knew I had to. He wasn't stopping me.

Now, as I drive into the parking lot of a quaint restaurant that May has picked out, I check for her little yellow VW bug. I don't see it anywhere, so I call her on her cell phone.

"Where are you?"

"I'm about fifteen minutes away."

"I'll go in and get us a table then. Want something to drink?"

"Sure, have a beer waiting for me. See ya. Oooohhh, I'm so excited!" She hangs up, and I laugh out loud to myself. May is a trip. Cute, perky with her curly brown locks, but she's also earthy. She's lived in Seattle too long. I lock up my car, and saunter into this place that has logs for walls, and old antique décor. Logging pictures from decades past, deer heads on the walls along with other creatures I don't recognize. A far step away from Los Angeles, for sure. But, it's warm and inviting. A tiny little gal runs up to me. "How many?"

"Just two, please."

"Right this way." She's almost bouncing. She seats me and asks if she can get me something to drink and I tell her two Buds please, and off she trots after she lays two menus down on the table. I look around at my surroundings. God, Oregon is so different from California. It's as if I've just step through a time machine back about fifty years. The patrons wear flannel shirts and look like they work hard for a living. They laugh heartily, and talk about hunting season coming up and where they are hunting this year. How the fishing has been, how the logging industry is doing. Not one man is dressed in a suit and tie, and not one woman is dressed in a business outfit or dress and high heels. I feel comfortable and at

ease even though I don't really like sitting alone in a restaurant. The waitress brings me two beers in mugs as big as Texas. "Wow," I say enthusiastically. "Are you trying to get me drunk?" She giggles, and asks if there is anything she can get me while I wait for my party. I tell her no thank you, and off she goes. I pick up my bucket of beer and take a long drink, and it tastes good. I'm still intrigued by the banter throughout this restaurant. No corporate talk, only life, living the life, enjoying the life. An older gentleman and his wife rise to leave their table next to mine, and he takes her delicate hand and helps her out of the booth. As he passes my table, he looks down at me with a huge toothy smile and says, "You gotta try their Steak Soup. It's awesome! Have a good day." Did he actually say "awesome"? "Thank you. You do the same." I give him my own toothy grin and nod to his sweet wife. I take another drink, and if I'm not mistaken, I can already feel the alcohol running through my blood veins. I haven't had a drop of alcohol for the last year and a half, and then I realize how much of my life has been put on hold and focused on the last year and a half. No sex, no drugs, no rock and roll. Only my health has taken front seat to me.

I see May walk through the door and look around as she pushes her sunglasses on top of her curly head. Her eyes run right past me still looking. All of sudden, I'm realizing too that she hasn't seen me like this. She probably won't recognize me, but then her beautiful eyes rest on me and she has a frown plastered on her face. I wave her over, and scoot out of the booth. She walks over to me and places her bag on the opposite seat. No words come out of her mouth right then. She studies me head to toe, then looks at my hair. The only thing I can do is give her a hug and she hugs back, then pushes me back to look at me again.

"What have you done to yourself, Olive Oil?" The concern on her face is painful. Now, is the moment I have been dreading, and was hoping I wouldn't have to confront until I at least looked normal again. Then I could tell her the whole story. But, here we are, so we sit, and I clear my throat. "Are you okay? What's going on?" May looks like she's about ready to cry.

"Do I look that bad? Jeez!"

"Sweetie, you like fresh dog shit." It wasn't she that starts crying, it's me. I have held my shit together for these long months, now as I sit across from my very best friend in the whole world, the tears flow out of me like a rampant gushing river. I am torn apart by the horrified look on her pretty face. "Olivia Scott, you had better tell me what's going on with you, and I mean right now," she says playing mother role to me. I manage a laugh as I use my napkin to dap my eyes and nose. "Sorry. I don't

know where that came from. Probably the beer.” She still stares me down as she takes a gulp of beer. I begin my story, and finish after twenty minutes which got easier the more beer I consumed, and she is expectedly angry.

“Why didn’t you feel you could tell me? That hurts my feelings Liv. You and I are as close as two people can be without being conjoined. We talk about everything...everything!” she emphasizes.

“I don’t have an answer. Maybe because I felt like if I talked to you about this, then it would be real. Not to mention, you would have left Seattle and your job to take care of me.” I smile at her to ease the tension. It’s not working.

“Ya know what? Fuck you all to hell.” She shocks me with her language sometimes but I still love that she does it. “Yeah, fuck you right in the ass sister!” She looks out the window, then takes a drink. She takes a deep breath, and tries to get composure. “You’re right. I would have done that. For you. Because I love the shit outta ya. In a hot second. Screw the job, and Seattle. You’re more important to me than anything. I would have, absolutely.”

“See? I didn’t want to burden you when I had...” I was going to say Lee, but the name didn’t come out and then I start crying again. “Shit,” I say and blow my nose into the napkin. I know I’m scaring her to death right now, so I have to stop. “Okay, listen Toots. I’m all right now. I’m done with chemo, and I’m feeling mostly good. And I’m here!” I have totally forgotten about the other patrons and notice that most of the conversation has quieted in our vicinity. “It’s all good. It’s over.” I look at her eyes to get a signal of how she’s feeling. Her chin starts to wiggle a bit. “Don’t you start shit-head!” I say and I finally get a laugh out of her. I have to ask, “Are we okay now? Please tell me we’re okay.”

“Yeah, we’re okay. Of course we are. I can’t hate your ugly guts for too long, especially being a cancer patient and all.”

“Don’t go feeling sorry for me now. What do ya think of the hair do though?”

“Well, actually it’s kind cute. Needs some highlights, but yeah! I like it. It fits your face. But, good God in heaven girl, you look way too skinny. We’ll getcha fattened up though.”

Okay, that’s over with, and now I can breath better. I order the Steak Soup telling May it’s supposed to be awesome according to the locals, and it is. It is awesome.

As we unload our belongings out our cars and into the cabin, I take a look around the place. Pine cones litter the yard and I can see other cabins but not too close. Douglas fir trees reach upward and the

air is crisp and fresh and smells like pine and dirt. A few pink and white clouds dot the sky as the sun wants to go down. She unlocks to door to the cabin and it looks reminiscent of the restaurant. I comment on the deer horns on the walls, but she corrects me and tells me those are elk antlers. I ask her what the difference is, and she laughs at me. "You've been in Los Angeles too long, my dear." She leads me to my room upstairs and shows me around. There is a slight sag in the middle of my bed, but the quilt looks inviting. There are ducks, deer and elk motifs everywhere.

"So," I ask May. "How often do you come here? And with whom?"

"A few times a year maybe. Sometimes I come alone, and sometimes I bring a guy." She says the word guy as if she's done something bad.

"It's beautiful here," I add as I look around. "And, it's getting chilly."

"Let's go make a fire and gossip."

I throw my bags on the bed and reach for my purple sweater. She skips out of the room, and yells back at me, "I got the big room!" I follow her in and look around.

"Not fair!"

"You don't want this bed anyway."

"Why is that? Because you've had sex in it?" She shoots me a big grin. So, I say, "You're so gross."

As I wash my face in the bathroom upstairs nestled between our rooms, I can hear May shredding newspapers downstairs for the fireplace. Crumple, crumple, shred. I towel off and look at my face in the mirror and want to see my face as May first saw it a few hours ago. My face looks drawn. I suck in my cheeks, thinking it could be worse. The dark circles that rim my eyes could be covered and concealed, but what's the point? The blue in my eyes doesn't seem as blue as they used to be. My lips look too pale. My hair, now a couple inches long looks similar to an Annie Lennox hair style. I do look different from when she last saw me. I had blond...died of course, hair that swept below my shoulders, a lovely tan, but not too tan. I weighed 128 then, and now I weigh in at a whopping 109. I am too skinny for my 5'6" height. Then my eyes goes to my unbreasted chest. Even though there is foam padding in my bra, they look unnatural. I adjust the pads, but it doesn't help. So I shrug and head downstairs. I've just got my socks on so I have sneaked up on May, who is watching the fire come to life, but tears have stained her cheeks. I stand still watching her, almost embarrassed that I've intruded. She gently wipes the tears away with her hand and her nose with the back of her hand. Then fresh tears come. I've made her feel this way. It's my fault. I feel my own tears burn the backs of my eyes. "I'm sorry May." I stand there, and

she turns to me, her eyes reddened. "I didn't know how to tell you...I didn't want to...I just didn't know how." She gets up from the floor and comes to me, and puts her warm arms around me as we both cry.

"You're the most important person in my life, Olive Oil. Please don't ever do that again. I love you and I want to be there for you always and forever...for anything." I sob and bury my face into her shoulder. I let out the last year and half on her shoulder, so much so that I have drenched her shirt. She pushes me back with her hands on my frail shoulders. "Promise?"

"I promise," I say as I use her sleeve to wipe my nose.

"Jerk!" Then she hugs me again. "I hate you!"

"I love you, Maybeline," I also use a name that she hates.

"Fat jerk!" I am not insulted by her calling me a fat jerk, because I know I'm nowhere close to being fat. I smile in the knowledge that she loves me even though I am a jerk.

May and I go back to fifth grade. I was a new kid at school in LA, and she befriended me. She said I looked sad and it made her feel bad, so she plunked down next to me in the lunch room and began chattering like a monkey about the school, and boys, and the mean girls to stay away from. We were dorks, remained friends, and promised to remain friends forever and ever. We compared boob sizes as we grew up. Hers were always bigger than mine. Our birthdays are 36 days apart, me being the older, and jokingly, I always made her feel as if she were subservient because of it since I was so much older and wiser. Through high school, we both blossomed, and still remained friends. When college came around, she went to Washington University, and I stayed in LA, and we still managed to stay friends. After a tearful drunken good-bye, May was off to Seattle. That was that. I felt like there had been a death in the family, and life would never be the same without my best buddy.

We both adjusted, talked, emailed, and she came to visit me every so often. I had never gone up to visit her. I never intended never to go up to Seattle, but it just turned out that way. Life, obligations, and cancer are my excuses.

"Let's get shit-faced," May said as we stared at the blazing fire, which was getting a bit too warm for my comfort.

"Let's not, and say we did." I say not looking her. "I'm really pooped. That was a long drive."

"Yeah, you're right as usual. How about some hot cocoa, or tea?"

“I’m down with that.” As she puts on pot of water, she starts to say something then decides against it. “What?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t want to bring up a bad topic, but..” she sighs heavily.

“Go ahead.”

“Is there any chance for you and Lee?” She looks sideways at me to check my reaction. “You and he were always good together.”

“Yeah, we were. And, the awful thing about it, is that I still love him.”

“So, do you think so...a chance, I mean?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think he’s willing to try. This whole episode with my medical issues really turned him into someone that I didn’t recognize anymore. It’s not his fault May. I understand completely. It’s a reality check that most people our age don’t have to encounter. It’s scared the shit out of him, and what do you do when you’re scared? The fight or flight syndrome. He chose the flight...and on a jumbo jet, no less!”

“And what about you? Where does that leave you? Did he ever consider that factor in his plans to flee?”

“He offered to stay with me, to get rid of the girl. But, it was me who gave him the out. He didn’t argue.”

The pained look on May’s face tells me to change the subject. “Hey, I’m okay! I’m a big girl, I’m on my way to a full recovery in every way. What about you? Who’s on your radar lately?”

“Oh gosh! Let’s see. There was Chad, cute, brute, and a total macho shit-head. Good in the sack though! Then there was Don at work, who turns out is bi-sexual. Sweet guy. Now, there is a possible encounter with this guy named...get this...George. Very cute, very attentive, showers me with gifts, dinners, alcohol.”

“Are you an item, you and George?”

“Not really, not yet. See, here’s the thing. He’s married.”

“Oh no Maybeline! Don’t go that route again.”

“I don’t know if he’s sincere about leaving his wife. He’s says they’re separated, but I was told he was seen at a function with wife hand in hand...so,” she threw up her hands in surrender. “He really likes me, he says. When I ask him about it, he says it was only for appearances.”

“Don’t buy that line, May. Seriously. You’re better than that. And deserve better than that. Have

you slept with him?"

"You're right...and no, I haven't. We've come close a few times, but I can't get over the married thing. I don't want to be one of those women." She makes those little quotation marks with her fingers. I hate that. I once knew a woman that did that constantly, with everything she said, quotationing with her fingers every other word. "Anyway, that's it for now. I think I'm gonna go on a man hiatus for a while. I'm really starting to think I'm not the marrying kind."

"You have too much fun. You'll settle down when you're ready to, and not before." I looked at her pleasant face and beautiful hair, her curvy figure. "I envy you, ya know." I said.

"Shut up."

"I do. You're so healthy and full of life and doing exactly what you want to do."

"You have always done the same, Sugar. And you'll get healthy." She jumped up out of seat. "Hey, I've got a brainstorm! Let's do a make-over. Put some effort in trying to get you plumped up a bit. What do you say? It'll be fun."

"I think I'm beyond all hope."

"Bullshit, Sister! A little healthy food, vitamins, some new clothes, and we'll spruce up your cute hair do."

"Fine, if it pleases you to do so, Maybeline." Her enthusiasm is contagious, and I smile in spite myself.

"It would be so cool." We make plans for the next day to do some shopping and a hair thing. I went to bed feeling somehow comforted, cared for and wanted. It made me realize how out of touch that Lee and had gotten when I got sick. He did the right things, stoking my back when I was puking my guts out, making funny jokes when my hair started falling out and helping pick out funny hats to wear during the course of chemo. But, I could see now, here with May, that it had all been strained and uncomfortable for him. Poor Lee. I look at the clock and it's well past midnight. I wondered if he was screwing Tanya right now. In our bed. With most of my belongings still scattered around our bedroom. I wonder if I should call him and at least let him know I'm okay. Does he care, or is he relieved that I'm gone?

Don't dwell on it, Olivia. I can't fall asleep though and my mind keeps going back to Lee. Shit. Stop it. Count sheep or something. May pops her head into my room suddenly.

"Too much caffeine in the tea, maybe," she says with a big grin.

"Yes, I think so."

“Can I crash with you?”

“Sure,” I say and scoot over to the right side of the huge bed. She tiptoes over and climbs in with socks on her feet.

“I know how you hate cold feet,” she says snuggling under the fat quilt. “Remember when we were little and talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up, and who we were going to marry?”

“Yeah.”

“Did any of it come to true for you?” she asks. I have to think about it for a few seconds. I wanted to be a brain surgeon, so I knew that was moot. I wanted to marry a tall handsome dark haired man that made a lot of money. Have two kids, a boy and girl, two years apart.

“No.”

“Of course, ya know those were girlhood fantasies. And who knows, it still might.”

“I don’t think I’ll be a brain surgeon now though. What about your dreams?”

“I wanted to be a prima ballerina. Remember?” she asks with a giggle. “How stupid.”

“It wasn’t stupid.”

“Sure it was. But, it was fun to dream big, wasn’t it?” I nod into the big pillow. “Wanna tell scary stories?”

“I’ve already been through my scary story.”

“Yeah, but you got through it.”

“I’m tired all the time May. I just want my life back. I just want to be me again.”

“You will. It’ll take some time but you will be you again. I’ll make sure of it before you leave here.”

“How much time have you got. You’ve got a life to get back to.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Whatdya mean?”

“I got fired Olive Oil. Fired! Not laid off.” I shoot up out of the cozy comfort of my pillow.

“What!?”

“Yeah.”

“For what?”

“Okay, don’t get all pissy on me. But, I was fooling around with the boss. Boss’ wife found out and demanded that he retire my services immediately, if not sooner. Severance package and everything.”

“May!”

"I hear that tone coming. Don't say it. I know. Believe me, I know."

"I'm not going to give you a tone. I'm just...well...I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't I tell you? Why didn't you tell me? About you?" I thought for a moment before I said anything.

"Because there are just some things that are too awful."

"Bingo, Chicky."

Hearing about May and her problems put mine in perspective. I wasn't the only one with issues that sometimes we can't bear to face head on. If we can put them in a mental box, and lay that box neatly up into a closet shelf to deal with at a later date, it makes the process more acceptable...for the present.

I leaned close to her and wrapped my skinny arms around her tightly. We didn't need to discuss it anymore, and she knew I wasn't about to turn judgmental on her well-proportioned ass.

"Ya wanna watch some porn?" she asks. "The owners have tons of DVDs here."

"No, I don't want to watch porn movies, especially with you."

"Afraid it'll make you horny?" She jabs me in the ribs.

"Shut up! Eww!"

We fall asleep eventually and dream of our childhood desires. How simple it was then.

In the morning, May is already up and had two cups of coffee, ready to fix my broke body and soul. The smell of coffee is good, but I opt for some herbal tea. If I'm going to make myself healthy, I might as well start now. She cooks me a wonderful breakfast of veggie omelets and whole wheat toast. Being with her now, seems as if we had never been apart, and it feels good. We're chattering away about what we're going to do that day, and after I finish most of the omelet and push my plate aside, I ask. "What do have planned now, for work and such?"

"I don't have anything planned yet."

"Don't you think you should think about it?"

"I will...eventually...when I run out of money...and I have to think about it. I'll think about it tomorrow."

"Okay, Scarlett O'Hara." Do I ask? "How much do have saved?"

"Well, I was planning my trousseau in case I ever got married. I have about twenty thousand saved, plus my generous severance of five thousand, plus I can cash in my IRA. I'll be okay for a bit." She looked

down into her big coffee mug. "I've been thinking about leaving Seattle."

"To go where? You love Seattle."

"Montana, or Wyoming. I hear it's beautiful there. Maybe Alaska. You know, I hear the ratio of men to women are in my favor."

"You're out of your gourd!"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe back to LA. I have a friend that lives there."

"Not anymore. I am now sans home."

"Who said I was talking about you, jerk?" She smiles at me. Even though she and I banter jokingly to each other, we both know how serious our lives have become. We aren't little girls any longer and can no longer believe our make believe fantasies will sustain us. It has become depressingly serious. Both of us are thirty years old, and we need to get serious about life. But, neither one of us says it out loud.

We get dressed and ready for this miracle work that will supposedly make me gorgeous again. I know it's not going to happen, but I certainly don't want to dash May's excitement about the whole thing. We go off to town in her yellow bug. Men still look at her in that way as we saunter up the quaint street of Sisters, Oregon. "Why is it called Sisters," I finally ask.

"Three Sisters Mountains over there," and she points at a lovely mountain range, peaked with snow. "Faith, Hope and Charity."

"Aptly named then." There are still quite a few tourists that roam the main street of this wonderful place, brightly colored windows, shops of all kinds selling their wares of the local life. Art galleries, coffee shops and the like. May pulls on my sweater sleeve and steers me into a hair salon. "Do we have to do this?" I beg.

"Yes. Absolutely." She goes up to the receptionist. "We have an emergency case here," she says pointing at me, feeling my face become crimson. "She's just gotten through her chemo therapy, and this is what you have to work with. What can you do?"

"Well," the sweet young girl says. "I'm not sure what...," she starts to say but one of the older ladies comes marching stealthily toward me. She doesn't say a word. She takes my hand and leads me to her chair, and pumps me up to her height. "I think we can do something fabulous with this," and she shoots me a big warm smile in the mirror.

May smiles at me with the I told you so look and seats herself down with a magazine.

“My name is Maryanne. We’re gonna fix you up, okay?”

“Okay. I’m Olivia. Nice to meet you.”

“Olivia. What a pretty name. I had an Aunt Olivia. Lived to be 99 years old.” She talks on and on about life in the city of Sisters, where she’s been, friends, family. I don’t have to say a word. Although, I get nervous when she brings out the scissors, so I close my eyes. There isn’t much to take off already, I’m thinking. Snips here and there. Then she does something fabulous. She colors my hair, tipping ever so softly with highlights. When she’s done, she whirls my chair around. I look at myself in the mirror. She has given me a style cut, and color that makes me look almost normal. To my surprise, a small tear threatens to squirt out of my eye. I take a deep breath in, then out. “Oh Maryanne.” I gingerly touch my hair as if it doesn’t belong to me, and is not part of my head. “It’s...fabulous!” She gives my thin shoulders a squeeze.

“It suits you, I think.”

“I may never wear my hair any other way.” I look over at May who gives me the approving thumbs up, and she yells “Charlize Theron, in The Astronauts Wife.”

“Now, let’s do something about your skin tone.” She turns me around again and is a busy bee, this side and that, powdering, poking, and dotting at my face. After fifteen minutes, again she swings me around.

I stare at my reflection in disbelief. She hasn’t gone over board on the coloring at all, and has chosen a palette that goes with...me. Muted natural tones, and light shades of pinks. The color on my face makes me look healthy, not pale or gray.

“I look like a girl again!” I smile up at her. “Oh my God!” Again, I look to May. She is dabbing her eyes with a tissue, and simply nods.

Back at the reception desk, I ask how much I owe her. My first born? “No, sugar, it’s on the house.”

“What? No.”

“I went through chemo myself ten years ago. I know how it feels to feel like a slug. On the house. It was a pleasure for me.” I walk around the desk and hug her. I don’t know what possesses me to do this, because I’m not the huggy type.

“Thank you so much,” I blurt. She hands me a slip of paper with the coloring she used on my hair, and the make up palette. “Can I buy you a beer sometime?” I ask her.

“Abso-fuckin-lutely!” I am kind of shocked at her use of words, but I fell in love with her anyway.

May and I are walking on the street again. What has changed from an hour ago, to now? Men are actually looking at me. It does something no words could ever explain for me. Those simple gestures have given me hope that I am not a slug, and I am coming back to life. May sees this, and she points to a few men, and makes comments about getting that one in the sack. I pooh-pooh her, but she is insistent that I get my life back, ASAP.

We dart into a clothing shop, and again May has better judgment than I do anymore. She picks out several outfits, which I try to veto, but she's not letting me off the hook. Bright, sunny colors, fitted and flattering. I try them all on, and end up buying everything she has picked out for me.

"Now, all we need is some bling! With that hair do, you need some big earrings to go with it."

"I'm not the blingy type, May."

"We're going to change that. It's time you get some sparkle back in your life."

Afterwards, I insist that I've had enough for one day. I am getting tired. One more stop she says. We duck into a health food store, where she has a conversation with the owner, and she picks out some herbs and teas, vitamins, and protein supplements for us. Of course, specifically for my health issue. Getting my immune system built back up is the most important thing right now, she said to me with endearing eyes and feeling good that she was actually helping someone as opposed to giving someone the ability to sleep better, or lose weight, or get the muck out of their colons. It made me feel good that it made her feel good. With a last offer, she handed me a bottle of pills that are said to give you a boost of energy. Korean Ginseng. I hand the bottle back to her and say that I had tried it, and it just simply made me jittery. "Okay, try the American Ginseng then. It wouldn't do that." So, I took it from her. We thanked her for her help, and she hollered after us, "Make sure you tell me if all that stuff works!" Great. I'm a guinea pig now.

Exhausted, but happy we went back to the cabin, where we both plopped down on the couch, my feet next to her ribs, and hers next to mine. May started laughing hysterically.

"What?" I said.

"Did you see those guys checking you out, Olive Oil? Man, I don't get looked at that much."

"You're bullshitting me, but I appreciate it." But, I did notice them noticing me. God, it felt good to be recognized as a female and not a cancer patient. I unwind and drift off to sleep. When I wake up, May is talking to someone on the phone in whispers. I get up to use the restroom, and pass by the door. She can't see me, and continues talking. I'm only catching a few words here and there. Then I hear, "Lee. You

had better man up! She needs you right now. I don't give a flying rat's ass what you have to do, Mister. Just get here." I poke my head through the door, and she says, "Yes...uhh...I'll call ya later Ma!" She hangs up the phone, and gives the worst fake smile I have ever seen on that woman's face.

"Who were you talking to, May?"

"Oh, that was my Ma. Bitching about her third husband." She gets up and walks past me into the kitchen. "What are you in the mood for tonight for dinner? Wanna go out, or have lobster tails in?" She's fidgeting so frantically right now, I almost feel sorry for her.

"May. Who were you talking to?" She picks up a pot holder, folds it into squares, puts it down, picks it up. "May!"

"Shit!" She throws the pot holder onto the counter. "I was talking to your boyfriend. Okay? Shoot me!"

"What were you discussing?"

"I told him to get his ass up here." I am livid. I am so angry with her right now, I can't bear to look at her.

"How could you...why would you do that?"

"I think...I thought you two should try to..."

"Please. May, please. Call him back right now and tell him to forget it. You made a mistake...that...that...you're sorry, but he has to just forget it. He's not coming, is he?"

"He was trying figure out if he can make arrangements at work, yeah, he's thinking about it."

"Call him back...or I will. I mean it, May." I try to regain my composure in the face of this disaster ready to happen.

"So, it was just a fling with this girl! So what?"

"You may be able to accept that kind of behavior from your men...and I emphasize "men", but I can't."

"I don't accept that kind of thing, but look at the circumstances, and he's sorry, Livie."

"Yes, you do. You always have."

"And what do you mean, emphasis on "men"?" She places her hands on her hips in defense. I always wondered why we do that when women get ready for battle.

"I don't want to get into it with you, May. Just call him back."

"No. I won't. If you don't want him to be here...you call him back. You tell him that you are so self

absorbed right now, you can't think straight. Tell him that even though he may have been insensitive about this whole thing, that you were doing to the same thing." May looks at me for a few seconds to let what she just said absorb, her eyebrows knitted in anger. "Look, dear. I don't have any idea about what you've been through, only because...me, your best friend...you haven't said diddly squat to. Me! So, I can only imagine how you've kept Lee at bay. So, Lee doesn't have to worry too much. But, all you've done is push people away, to keep them at arms length." She retrieves the pot holder that went askew across the kitchen. "We are the people that love you Olivia! We are the people that you need to be on your side."

It has dawned on me that she is right, and she knows I know she is right. I stand looking at the ceiling for some sign to tell me what to say, but weirdly enough, I am speechless. The answer is not on the ceiling. I have no defense. Other than being totally caught off guard, day after day with this whole thing. So, she says to push it in a little deeper.

"Don't lay your shit on me, and try to make me out the bad guy. Cuz, my love, I won't stand for it. You kept me in the dark and you kept Lee away. What do you expect him to do? Wait until you decide that you want a life? Look at you! You don't care what you wear, how you look, how you feel. What the fuck have you been doing for yourself in the last year and a half, other than feel fucking sorry for yourself. And then! On top of that, you expect Lee to wait till maybe someday you wake up and realize that you still have people around you that love you? You are still alive Olivia. You are still here, and still very much a woman...as Lee is a man." May lays the pot holder she has been tormenting neatly in its place. "I'm not about to walk on egg shells around you Livie, and you shouldn't expect him too either. The times that I've been around you when you just had a freaking cold, you can be one mean son of a bitch. I can only imagine...and I stress that I can only imagine because you didn't have the courtesy of even letting me know...what it was like around the Olivia and Lee home." She runs her hands through her curly hair. I am stunned and utterly voiceless. But she doesn't let up, because she knows I haven't heard enough abuse today. "Do you get what I'm saying? Do you even know what I'm trying to tell you, to get into your thick head? No, you don't because you are still so pissed that I have the gall and I'm telling you this, you can't think straight." She walks out of the kitchen, and grabs her purse. "Tell ya what. I'm gonna go into town and have a beer...or five. I'm gonna leave you here to think about what I've just said to you, let it sink in. You may end up finding yourself alone with your misery, girlfriend."

She walks away from me while I still stand there with my thumb up my ass, and slams the front

door. I have never seen May like this. Yeah, she is still pissed that I didn't tell her. Yeah, it will all blow over, just give it some time. Yeah, Lee is hurt and I am hurt. Why is Lee hurt? Why is May hurt and angry? Is Lee so angry, that he had to find company with someone that didn't have the problems I do? Do I have a problem? All these questions start running through my head all at once. My mind starts to rebel, but I have to step back and see what I've done to the ones I love most. May is not here now, so I need to think about what she has just said to me. Something that perhaps Lee should have said a year ago.

No! No! I'm not going to buy into their anger! I've got my own shit to deal with! I'm thinking that I should just get my shit and go. Keep going, until I run into someplace that I like, or suits me. Fuck May and fuck Lee! And fuck Tanya. I have had it with people, and their demands on me on what I should do for them! I need...I need...what do I need? I need to be well. I need love and reassurance from those closest to me. I need hair, and strength. What am I asking for?

I sit in the cabin for an hour and half thinking, and talking to myself about what I need. Am I being selfish? Don't I have the right to feel this way? I'm asking these questions, but no answer is coming to me. I get up and wander upstairs looking for something, but I don't know what. I walk into my room, see my stuff, all neat and tidy. I walk into the bathroom, see my toiletries all neat and tidy, and May's half strewn about. I walk into May's room, all her shit is strewn everywhere. No rhyme or reason to her madness. But, the thing that catches my attention is her teddy bear sitting on her bed that she has had since I've known her. Old Pooh Bear. His ears are torn, and the button is missing from one of his eyes. His bow has been chewed away by her dog that grew up with her years ago.

I look at this simple and childish, cherished item that belongs to my friend. I realize that she has not gone anywhere without Pooh Bear in the last twenty years whether it was camp, sleepovers with myself or her Dad. She has a constant in her life that will never change. May will probably keep this stupid stuffed bear until she dies. May will keep me until I die. Will I die and leave her alone? Burning tears spew from my eyes and give me a headache. God damn it, May. I will always have to live with the fact that the cancer might come back, even though it has taken part of my womanhood already. What more does it want from me? What other body parts can I sacrifice to save my life?

You're god damn right I'm angry! Cancer has no right to invade my life the way it has and leave me in pieces. It has no right to take me to the depths of despair and make me shun the people that mean the most to me. Fucking hell! You son of a bitching bastard!

I am angry. And I have shut them out of that part of me that eats away at me, and will probably continue at some point in my life. Yes, I have shut them out. For what purpose? To save them the pain of losing me someday? Or more to the point, to save me the anguish of having to leave them?

These are actual issues I have never had to deal with, you know, the box on the shelf thing. Have I destined myself to die, before I'm even dead? As I look at May's bear, I realize that for some odd reason, she has held onto me for the same reasons she held onto this scruffy bear. Reassurance, acceptance, love, devotion, patience, companionship, love, love and love.

She is no better without me than I am without her. I have alienated her to the point of giving her grief and causing anger and pain. I have been selfish. It's been all about me and my recovery. May should have been the first person I called when I found out I had cancer. Not true. She should have been the first person I called when my gynecologist wanted me to go get a mammogram just to be on the safe side. May was the one I should have called to cry to, to yell to, to run to. But, I didn't because I was being selfish.

I turn and look in the mirror, but I can't see me. I see May. My Maybeline. My best friend in the whole world. What have you done to her Olivia Scott? You have told her, without saying it, that she is not important enough to you to discuss one of the most important events in my life. You are such a golden fucking shit, Olivia!

I run downstairs and pick up the phone. I dial Lee's cell phone number, but he doesn't pick up and goes directly into voice mail. I don't want to leave a generic message, so I hang up. I grab my keys and wallet and head out the door. I have no idea where May is, but I've got to find her. I back out of the drive, gravel flying and head out to the main road. Her yellow bug is pretty obvious so I have to go up and down the main street to try and find her. I am panicked all of a sudden. After a couple passes up and down the street, I'm about to give up and start bawling. I see her yellow VW bug parked in the back end of a bar parking lot. I whip in and park. My heart is beating wildly right now, I can't get a deep breath. As I lock the door with my key fob, I can hear country music playing from the bar. I envision that I will walk in and find her cavorting with some random guy. When I walk in, the place is filled with Saturday night locals. Playing pool, drinking, flirting. I don't see May right away. I don't know why this strikes me funny. I walk up to the bartender, and ask if she's seen a gal with her description. No, she hasn't. I walk back out to the parking lot to see if the yellow VW has her angel charm dangling from the rear view mirror. Yes, it does. Now, I'm getting worried. I look around for some other place she may be patronizing. The

only thing I see is a motel next door. It dawns on me.

I walk over and ask the clerk if a woman with her name has checked in. Well, yes, in fact, just a few minutes ago, and he is obliged to give me her room number.

I'm not ready for another confrontation. Not with May. Not right now. But, I have to do this. If I didn't make the effort to track her down at least, our friendship could end up irreparable. That's not an option.

I stop myself in my tracks as I'm walking toward room number 23. Turning on my heels, I head back to the bar next door, walk in, and order a shot of tequila. She asks if I want lime and salt with that. No, just the shot. Jose goes down the gullet and burns on his way down, but I keep my face straight even though a shiver goes up my spine that I can't hide. The bartender smiles knowingly at me. "Another," she asks.

"Um, yeah, one more shot of courage," I say, unsure how the first Jose is going to act upon me. I down the second, which doesn't burn so badly. I pay the bartender and thank her. As I walk out the door, I can feel the alcohol run through my veins. I walk back towards May's room, and as I get closer, I can hear talking inside. Oh gosh, what if she's with a guy? Is this bad timing on my part? Should I flee without letting her know that I did make the effort to track her down? The tequila is making itself known. Making me brave and fearless. I put my head to the door gently. It's a television I hear, then a sob.

May is crying in there, alone. My own sob catches in my throat. After a deep breath in and out, I knock softly. The TV has been muted, and she calls out, "Who is it?"

"It's me, May. Open the door." Silence. I hear her blow her nose, and a few seconds later she opens the door. Her eyes are swollen and red, along with her perky nose.

"How did you find me?"

"A private investigator."

"How much did you pay him?"

"Plenty. Too much in fact. You're not worth it." She smiles and steps aside, and I walk in. "Nice digs, Maybeline. Reminiscent of hunting season." Again, ducks, elk, moose décor, but at least no heads on the wall. If I see one more animal head on a wall, I think I'll scream. "How much did you pay?"

"Plenty. Too much in fact. I'm not worth it."

I sit down in a chair situated by the bed, and she sits on the bed strewn with used wadded tissues.

“Look how wasteful you are,” I say looking at those tissues.

“Yeah, but they came with the room, so...,” she shrugs.

The tension is still too tight, even though we are both trying desperately to untighten it. Now, my friend Jose is saying hello to me. Please Jose, don’t make me say something stupid. I clear my throat, and allow myself to speak.

“Okay, here’s the thing,” I say trying to choose my words correctly. “You are the most important person in my life. That’s never going to change, I hope.” May’s eyes are fixed on a wad of tissue in her hands that she’s in the process of shredding to pieces. I reach over and touch her knee. “Please look at me. This is important.” She brings her eyes up, and they are watering, catching the light of the lamp by the bedside. She looks like a small child that’s being scolded. I continue with my diatribe that hopefully will bring her peace. “You have done nothing wrong, you have to know that. It’s been me. I’ve been so totally consumed by...this thing that has a life of its own. I had no control of it, and it controlled me, all the time. How I acted towards people, what I ate, how I ate it, what I do everyday. What I said, and how I said it. How I lived wasn’t under my control. This illness...this cancer, ran over me like an out of control freight train, that left this mass of angry ugly flesh behind.” I watch her expression changed from someone being chastised to guilt.

She starts to say something but I have to stop her. “Please let me get this out.” I bend forward and set my elbows on my knees, getting closer to her. “I think...no, I know, the only thing that I did have control over was my anger and bitterness. To me, that was something tangible. I could feel it, and touch it and wrap myself up in it. And, strangely enough, my anger made me feel better. I can’t explain it. And then, I could control who I told. I didn’t want to burden you with my bitterness and angst. I hated anyone that was well. I hated you because you’re so vibrant. I hated Lee for having the energy to help me through it.” She starts to protest and I hold my hand up to her. “It was ugly, May. I got ugly. I’m not talking about the physical part of it, but the psychological part of it. I turned into someone that I didn’t even recognize. I had to force myself, every fucking day of my life, to get out of bed, to interact with people, to eat, to take a shower. I mean I actually had to force myself to do these simple things. Not just like, gee I’m feeling a little blue today, I think I’ll just veg. This was a monster that hung on my shoulders everyday. There were points during this whole chemo thing, that I wanted to say, I’m done. I can’t do it anymore. Lee did help me with that. He did. He made me go, and went with me, and held my hand, and brought me home so I could run in the bathroom and spend the next four hours with my face in the

toilet. I know he felt helpless, and I think I inadvertently distanced myself from him. I didn't want him seeing his girl turn into this disgusting blob."

May's tears fall silently down her face, as she puts her hand to her mouth to hide her trembling chin. "I didn't want to live, let alone talk about it to anyone. I just couldn't get past my own despair. I know it sounds selfish, and it is selfish. May, I honestly didn't even realize I had done that until you and I got together." I reach out my hand to hers, and she takes it. "I am sorry. Sincerely sorry. For excluding you in a major event, for allowing myself to go far beyond the realm of rationalization. If you had to go through this and had done the same thing, I would have been furious at you. Being here with you, has opened my eyes to the last year and a half. I had my eyes so tightly shut, I had forgotten about all the people and things that matter most. God forbid, if I ever had to do it again, at least I would know better. It would have made the process a lot more tolerable if I had opened up to you."

I stop and let what I've just said sink into, not only her skin, but my own. May takes a tissue and dabs at her wet eyes and nose. I realize that I have just said more to her, here in these past fifteen minutes than I have in the last year and a half, to anyone. May takes a deep breath and smiles through her red puffy face.

"Jerk!" It makes me laugh and cry at the same time.

"Yeah, most definitely." We both stand and embrace each other for long minutes, feeling the rough edge of reality settle itself down into its own corner of the mind. Letting the scathing remarks, and wounded feelings find their own way out.

"Ya know," she says letting go. "This is first real disagreement that we've ever had. Weird."

"That's not true. Remember when we were thirteen years old, and there was that boy in middle school that we both had a crush on? What was his name?"

"Ronny!" May snaps her fingers.

"Yeah, that's it. And we said we were gonna break up over him?"

"Oh gosh, that's right. Ronny McAllister. I forgot about that. And as I recall, he didn't give a shit about either one of us." She laughs letting the memory flood in.

"I love you, Maybeline. I truly do." We hug again.

"Have you been drinking? You smell like tequila."

"Yes, I have. So what?"

"So, let's go get another."

A few hours later, we head back to the cabin. I've had three more shots to May's six. We're both feeling pretty peachy. One of the gals at the bar gives us a ride home because we're too far gone to drive ourselves home.

We stumble out of the car, and I notice a strange vehicle parked in front of cabin. "Who's car is that?" I ask. May doesn't recognize it. The gal asks us if we want her to stick around to make sure we're okay. May tip toes up the cabin, giggling like she's being sneaky. Just as she gets to the front door, it swings open, and there stands Lee, scaring May half to death. "Jeez, you almost made me pee my pants, Lee!"

"Sorry," Lee says looking confused.

"What are you doing here," I ask, but not belligerently.

"May told me to come."

"She just talked to you this morning. How did you get here so fast?"

"I flew into Portland, grabbed a rental car. Are you two drunk?" He asks with a smile.

"Yes, we are," May says.

"Liv, you know you shouldn't be...,"

"Shhhh!" I say. "You're gonna ruin my buzz!"

We thank the girl, and she drives away with a wave. As we walk in, Lee gives me a light hug and kisses my cheek, and I let him. He gives May a bear hug, and she hugs him back. "I'm glad you came, Lee." May has always liked Lee. She's not one of those girlfriends that knit-picks everything about your boyfriend because she feels he's taking time away from her.

"Thanks for calling me. I was wondering where in the hell she went. I called hospitals, motels, hotels." Then he turns to me. "Why would you just take off like that? I thought we had a lot more to talk about."

"It's a long story, Lee. Where's your girlfriend...Tanya?" I see May out of the corner of my inebriated eye, slithered into the kitchen.

"Tanya is not my girlfriend. I thought you were."

"So, did I." Lee takes my hand and leads me to the sofa, then asks May if she can brew up a pot of coffee. My hand disengages from his, but not with a yank, as I sit.

He leaves me on the sofa, and chats with May, as she makes coffee, asking her about what she's

been up to these days. He leaves me there to stew for a few minutes. They bring in three huge mugs of hot coffee and I drink, trying to get my buzz to a minimum, so I can have an intelligent conversation. Lee is mostly still chatting with May, and they are laughing, and catching up, like old friends that they are.

Lee is sitting across from me in a chair. "I have to say, Liv. You look great." I run a hand over my hair unconsciously. "Really Babe. You look beautiful."

"I do?" I ask with a smile realizing he hasn't said it for the last year and a half. When I started losing my hair, he would try to make me feel better about it, he would take me out to get some cute beanies and hats. But, I would end up chastising him for being a liar.

"May did it," I blurt out. "She forced me into it."

"Thanks, May," Lee says. May rises from her seat and gives us both kisses on the cheek and says she has got some sheep to count. Over Lee's shoulder, she nods her head at me towards Lee. She is telling me without words to talk to him. "I'll be upstairs if you need anything. Lee, there's an extra bedroom...if you need it."

"Thanks again, May."

"But, hopefully you won't. Nighty-night."

Lee takes a drink from his mug, he looks tired. I have to say something, and quickly.

"I'm sorry May called you up here."

"I'm glad she did. You had me worried sick, Liv."

"Maybe I wanted you to worry sick." The coffee is kicking in, thank God. "I need to get this off my chest before we even get anywhere else Lee. Who is she?"

"Tanya is a co-worker."

"Great!"

"She does have a thing for me, and the weekend that she was referring to, she and I went to lunch together." My guts churn. I hate hearing this, but I need to, to move forward. "Then we spent the afternoon in the park, mostly talking. She made it clear that she wanted to see me outside the office. But, I mostly talked about you. I was flattered. I was. And, I also thought about it." Lee stood up and came to the sofa, and sat next to me. "But, I was hoping that you would come back to me. That my Livie would find her way home to me. I know I didn't do things right, didn't know how to handle the whole thing, got scared and wanted to run. But, I swear Livie. Nothing happened between Tanya and I. I can't honestly say that something might not have happened. But, I'm still in love with you. I still want you, still

need you. What you and I had before the cancer, was special and exciting. I kept thinking, if I'm patient enough, and love you enough, that we'd have that again. I'm willing to wait as long as you need me to. Just don't shut me out. Don't treat me like I was the one who gave this disease to you. Honestly, you made me feel like shit on your shoe most of the time."

"I know."

"You're not going to argue with me?"

"No, Lee. You're right. One hundred percent right." Lee adopted a lost look for a second. "So, what now? Where do we go from here?"

"I have to stop feeling sorry for myself. Until then, as you said, you need to be patient with me. I'm so glad I came here. May made me realize what I was throwing away, and made me take a good hard look at myself. She shamed me Lee. She shamed me bad."

"Good for her."

"Do me a favor, Lee?"

"Anything." He takes my hand and squeezes.

"Don't let me go there again."

"I won't, Livie. I promise." He hugs me passionately, and kisses my mouth softly like he used to. "Let's erase the last year and a half."

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