

Hearts that Bleed

By.

T.L. Tate

Copyright 2017 by T.L. Tate
Cover Photo Copyright of Karramba Production/Shutterstock

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Maybe I'm in love with the idea of being in love. Maybe I'd fall for you, even if there were someone else. Maybe I'd allow my heart to break, just to touch you. Maybe I would turn my back on love, just to have you. Maybe you're the only one for me.

Chapter 1

♂ Meeting ♂

I was woken by the sounds of bells. Not the pure crystalline sounds of a knocker on glass but the electronic whirling of falsehood. I stumbled, bleary-eyed, out of bed and practically crawled down the stairs.

Ding! Dong!

There it was again.

"Damnit! I'm coming." I grumbled to myself. Once I made my way down to the front door, I saw a slim shadow piercing through the small glass partition. I instantly knew who it was and considered just going back to bed.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Open up!"

I heard the foul screeching of a truly detestable woman come from the other side of the door.

"I know you're in there Michael. Open up!"

Oh, what the hell? How bad could it really be?

I stumbled to the door and yanked it open. The glare of the falling sun blinded me, and I had to squint my eyes against its harsh light.

"Jesus-fucking Christ! Look at you. You look like shit!"

I truly hated this woman. "It's good to see you too Eva. What do you want?"

She pushed me aside and confidently strode into my house, her chocolate curls floating in her wake. "Do you even know what time it is? It's 7. 7PM; mind you." She crossed her arms across her chest while cutting her eyes and turning her nose up at me.

If there were a picture in the dictionary for *judgmental bitch*--it would be her.

"You look like you've been drinking again. All night I'm sure. Gods above! Don't you even have an ounce of decency left in you? You're a god-awful piece of shit! I don't know what my sister ever saw in you!" Apparently, Eva was only capable of exclaiming negativity.

This was about the third time this week she has come over here to give me this very same lecture. Eva and I never got along. She didn't like me from the beginning when I first started dating her sister, my wife, Lana. When I first met Eva, she was a senior in high school. A beautiful and sexy 18-year-old with a smart mouth and quick wit that could crush anyone. Anyone...except for my Lana.

~

Lana and I met while we were undergrads. The first time I saw her was like something out of a children's fairy tale. This graceful and elegant woman walked by just as the clouds opened and strode into the middle of a falling ray of sunshine. It was as if the sky opened up and pure heavenly radiance shined upon her. She paused in front of me to look into the sky and smiled at the bright sun, as if she were greeting a long-lost friend. I watched her in awe, my jaw on the ground. As she continued her stroll, I followed after her--my legs moving before my brain had a chance to catch up.

Although this was my second year at school, I hadn't made many friends. All of my life I found it difficult to make friends; as if there was something untoward about me. I'm an only child and my parents, my father a surgeon and my mother a lawyer, worked all of the time. Growing up, the only time I remember seeing them was on holidays and my birthday. Otherwise, I was pretty much raised by my grandmother. She was a sweet woman, filled with love and was the first person to accept me completely. She treated me as if I was her own and I began to see her as my mother and father instead of my grandmother.

It was my grandmother who convinced me to go to this college. One day I came home from hanging out at an arcade...alone...and she was sitting at the table with a pile of college brochures.

"Mikey, you're 17. It is time you decide what direction you want your life to go." My grandma was sweet but she did not mince words. "If I don't pull you by the ear you'll just sit on your hands and you'll end up staying in this lonely house forever!" Pulling out the top brochure, "I think you should go here! This is where your father and mother met and I bet you'll meet a nice girl here too!"

It wasn't as if I had any other plans so at the insistence of my grandma, I applied in the fall of my senior year and was accepted. Since I didn't have any friends or for that matter, a girlfriend, I spent a lot of time studying so my grades were perfect.

The day I got my acceptance my grandma was so excited. I remember her grabbing onto my waist and spinning me. It was as if I was a little boy again.

But college wasn't so different from any other time in school. I was still getting straight A's but I wasn't making any friends. I tried to connect with my roommate and the other guys on my floor, but they were all the stereotypical frat boy types, and me being a bit of a bookworm, didn't fit in easily.

Eventually, I was able to make one friend though. It was a girl in the library, Lisa Elliott. She was awesome. She was beautiful, easy going and had a smile that could illuminate the darkest of rooms. She was my very first friend and my first love. We spent a lot of time hanging out in my first year. She was a third year and brought me along wherever she went: parties, trips—you name it. When I wrote home to tell my grandma about the great friend, I made she was ecstatic but warned me to be careful. Her exact words were, "Girls can be misleading." I didn't know why she said that so I ignored the warning. I was just grateful to have my first friend.

Lisa introduced me to a lot of people and forcefully dragged me out of my shell. I had such a huge crush on her and then one day, after I had worked up my courage to finally ask her out. I went to the library. I knew she would be working and thought that if we were on common ground that our age difference wouldn't stand out so much. But she wasn't there. All the courage I had accumulated just to ask her on a proper date drained out of me like I was a container without a bottom.

We continued to spend time together and I never brought up the date. I was a coward and shied away from anything that may ultimately rock the boat. I wanted our relationship to progress naturally and assumed that in time she would see me as more than just a little freshman. Nevertheless, when we would hang out with her friends and they were drinking and smoking, I always felt like a kid. Well, I *was* always the designated driver so I couldn't blame them for treating like a kid, but the only person that treated me like an adult was Lisa. When she would drink or smoke too much, I would always be there to take care of her. I found that I just couldn't leave her alone. I liked her.

She would always slur, "I love you Michael. You're the bestest ever!"

I would always smile, "I love you too, Lisa. Now lie down." I would always be there to take care of Lisa—my best friend.

A few weeks after my failed attempt in the library, I got a call from Lisa, and she was crying. "M-Michael. I'm just so lonely. Can you come over?"

"Of course!" And like any self-respecting gentleman, I rushed out of the dorm and ran to her off-campus apartment.

Her roommate wasn't there so she let me in herself. When I saw her, my chest tightened. I could tell she had been crying...hard.

"What's wrong, Lisa? Did someone hurt you?" I was ready and willing to annihilate whoever or whatever it was that made her sad.

"Oh Michael!" She pulled me into her arms and held me. But this wasn't like any other time she hugged me. Her body was pressed intimately to mine. I could feel the plushness of her breasts and the warmth of her womanhood. Despite myself, I stirred.

She pushed me back and wiped tears from her eyes. "Oh Michael! You are such a little devil!" She had a sad smile on her face, and her eyes were cold--distant.

She took me by the hand and led me into her room.

In the 7 months that I knew her, I had been in her room countless times and have even slept here on occasion. But none of those times were like this day. As we walked hand-in-hand into her room, my heart was beating a mile a minute.

There was something in the air--something, *different*. It caused every male instinct in my body to stand on end.

Once we were in her room, she shut the door and then locked it. When she turned back to face me there was heat in her eyes.

"Do you have protection?"

I was confused, "Protection? From what?"

"Not *from*. *For*. And *for* this!" She pulled at me as my body pinned her against the door and then she kissed me. She kissed me, and my brain imploded.

I've kissed a girl before, but never like this. It was as if her tongue was manipulating my entire body.

I gently pushed her back. "L-Lisa, what are you doing?"

"What am I doing? I'm doing exactly what you've been dreaming about for months now." Without another word she peeled her t-shirt off of her body and then quickly stepped out of her shorts and panties. She stood before me, 5'6" of pure, delectable womanly perfection. The sun shone through the window causing her red-tinted hair to resemble fallen rubies. Her skin was flawless and, in the sunlight, she looked like a dream.

I tried to swallow, but there was no moisture in my body.

"Oh my god."

"Do you like what you see?" She stepped closer to me and I stepped back.

"Y-yea. I mean y-yes! You're beautiful." I couldn't take my eyes off of her body.

She kept stepping closer and I kept retreating.

"You sure know how to sweet talk 'em. Don't you, Michael?" She stopped as the back of my knee hit the bed and I toppled over. I struggled to right myself.

"Nervous?" She said as she bent over and started tugging at my pants.

"N-no way!"

She looked up at me and smirked, "Liar."

Okay, sure I was lying. I was scared shitless! But I couldn't tell her that.

"What are you doing, Lisa?"

She finally succeeded in removing my belt and unbuckling my jeans. When she spoke her voice was flat, it was devoid of her usual energy and enthusiasm. Then she looked at me, and the distance she had in her eyes when I first held her suddenly returned.

"I'm going to fuck you. Aren't you a lucky boy?"

"F-f-sex! But..."

Now she froze and turned her head to the side as she observed me, "So it's true what they think about you."

"W-what do you mean?" I was desperate for something else to discuss other than sex.

"You're a virgin." She said it so matter-of-factly that I couldn't take offense, but nor could I answer. Instead my face turned bright red.

"Aww, that's cute!" she snickered. "Don't worry, I'll be gentle."

It was awkward. I had no idea what I was doing, but Lisa did. She told me what felt good and what didn't. Eventually I felt bold enough to take charge.

"Oh, yes! Finally! That's it, Michael. That's it!" She screamed as she wrapped her arms and legs around my body.

I was in heaven. Lisa was my first love and I was finally one with her.

When we were done, we lied on the bed both quiet in our reflections.

"I love you Lisa."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I love you too, Michael."

Then she rolled off the bed and went into the shower. When she came back five minutes later, she looked pained.

I wanted to do something to help her. "Hey, umm do you want to go over to Gregory's for a slice?"

"Umm, I'm sorry Michael. I'm pretty tired. It's been a long day. I think I'm just going to get some sleep."

"Oh, okay." I was deflated.

"Yeah. But, umm...thanks." She kissed me on the cheek and then ushered me out of the door.

The next day, buoyed by our new relationship status, I went to find her at work.

A short search didn't turn her up, so I went to our secret alcove. She showed the place to me one day a long while ago. It was a rarely used area of the library that she often used to take naps when her activities from night before were too much. I sometimes used it to study. It was always deserted so I was never bothered.

Rounding the stacks, I approached the dim alcove when I heard voices.

"She meant nothing, Lisa. Honest!"

Lisa? I stopped to eavesdrop.

"Whatever, Tony! If she meant nothing then why did you sleep with her?" That was Lisa's voice and she was angry.

Tony? I've seen him a lot. When we went to parties he was always there. He always had a girl on his arm.

"That was a lie, Lisa. I never touched her. I swear!"

"I don't believe you!"

"Lisa, I'm telling you the truth. I know I'm a bit of a flirt but you're the only girl I care about. Come on, L. You know I love you baby." I heard the distinct sounds of kissing and a quiet moan from Lisa.

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"You're always hanging around that freshman. What's his name?"

"Michael. His name is Michael."

"Yeah! Him! You mean to tell me nothing's going on there?"

This was it. Lisa would tell him about us and would end whatever she had going on with him.

"Michael? No, nothing's going on. He's like a little brother. No, more like a lackey. He comes in handy when I need a gofer."

He laughed, "That's cold, L. Now come here, baby."

I didn't stay to hear more. I didn't need to.

I loved Lisa and she said she loved me but she didn't. Tony was a pig and would sleep with anything with a skirt. I knew that and if I did then Lisa *had* to know. But still, she was willing to turn her back on someone that loved her for a guy that would never be faithful to her. It was confounding.

The next day, I went to see my counselor and declared my major. Psychology. I had an embarrassing low level of understanding for the complications present in the human animal and I knew psychology would help me to understand more.

I dove into my studies with reckless abandon.

I stopped hanging out with Lisa and her gang and became a loner once more. I still loved Lisa, and this was more confusing and upsetting than anything. How could I care about someone that would toss me aside so easily?

I called her the day after declaring my major to tell her about it. She didn't answer.

I called her several more times throughout the following days and she never returned a single message.

I wish I could say that I was dumped, but that would imply that there was more there than whatever we were.

No, I was abandoned.

I stopped going to that library and started going to one of the branches or, when the weather permitted, I would study outside.

It was a year and a half later when, on that fateful day, this goddess walked into the sunlight and changed my life.

Without realizing it, I had followed her into a coffee shop on campus. The entire time I was struck dumb by her beauty and elegance. She walked, no *float*ed like a queen and had a gentle smile that warmed my cold and lonely heart.

She ordered and then I ordered. I nervously stood next to her, desperately trying to find the right words to say to get her attention. I didn't want to come across as a creep but I didn't

want to seem dull either. Before I got a chance to say a single word, my order was finished. Coffee—black.

"Marchelo", the barista shouted while looking straight at me. I'm not sure how *Michael* translated into *Marchelo*, but looking back I'm glad it did. When I took my coffee, I turned to see Lana watching me with a smile on her face.

"Marchelo? That's an unusual name. What does it mean?"

I was dumbfounded. "M-Michael."

She giggled, "It means 'Michael'?"

"N-no, my name is Michael."

"Lana!" the barista yelled.

My mystery goddess reached out and grabbed her drink then turned back to look at me.

"I like Marchelo, but Michael fits you better."

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what? I didn't name you." She continued to smile as if she heard this wonderful joke. I didn't care if she was making fun of me. So long as she continued to pay attention to me, I was on cloud nine.

She held out her hand, "I'm Lana by the way. Nice to meet you, Michael." Her smile made me feel things I didn't know I was capable of feeling. Looking back, I know that that was the moment I fell in love with her.

I took her proffered hand and for some reason an overwhelming urge to pay obeisance to her took hold. I knelt forward and kissed her hand. Her brown eyes, so much like pools of sweet melted chocolate, twinkled. "It's nice to meet you Lana."

"My. My. My. I didn't think guys like you were still around."

"Guys like me?"

"Yeah, you know guys with *actual* manners."

"I've never really given thought to it before."

"So, you were just raised right?"

"I guess."

She seemed to decide something. "Good, then I'll see you here on Saturday. 8 o'clock."

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. "Excuse me?"

"You're going to take me out on a date. Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't this better than following me across campus?"

I felt my face turn red out of embarrassment. She laughed loud and long. She laughed so hard that others took notice and began staring. This only deepened my chagrin.

"How did you know? I-I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I saw you and I just moved. I've never done anything like this before. I'm sorry."

Her mirth died down and she turned her intelligent eyes towards me. "Don't be sorry. If I didn't want to talk to you, I wouldn't have cornered you in this coffee shop."

"*You cornered me?*"

She nodded and moved to sit down. I followed after her. "Yeah. It was pretty obvious you were following me. I was just out for a stroll and no matter where I turned you were right there. When I saw the coffee shop, I figured I would see if I could get you to come. It was a fun game."

It was absurd! "Why would you do that? What if I was some psycho?" I said the last bit a little too loud and looked around to make sure no one overheard me.

"I wasn't worried about it. I know self-defense. I can hold my own against most average people."

Lana was by far the most confident and confusing person I have ever met. I was immediately taken with her.

We talked for about ten more minutes before she said she had to head off to work in the biology lab. Before she left, she gave me her phone number.

"Remember, Saturday at 8. Don't be late or I won't be here." Then she turned and floated away.

I showed up at 6:30 on Saturday and waited until 8. There was no way I would chance being late. I probably drank 4 or 5 cups of coffee while I waited and when she showed up, I was a little too wired. She thought it was funny.

That first date was the first of many. Each time I met with Lana, my love for her grew by leaps and bounds. I would've rather chewed off my own arm than to live without her.

Lana and I dated for almost 2 months before she brought me home to meet her parents. The night that Lana brought me home to meet her parents, her mother and father seemed to approve--although it took some convincing on her father's part. However, one look at me, and Eva declared I was a "closet pervert with no future prospects". Yeah, to say that Eva and I never got along was an understatement. But for the sake of my Lana, I put up with her bratty little sister.

The following holiday, I brought her home to meet my grandma. Lana charmed Grandma Steele within 2 seconds, flat.

"Oh my god, Mikey!" she whispered, loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. "You said she was pretty but that's understating it."

"Grandma..." I whined. I looked at Lana as she glanced back at me and smiled.

Lana is my heart. She is my soul. Lana makes me want to be a better man. A man, I knew that she deserved and more. Without Lana I don't know where I would be. She means more to me than my entire life. Lana and I dated for the rest of our undergraduate years, into graduate school and all the way through our doctorate programs. I became a clinical psychologist and Lana became a doctor of biochemistry.

Before Lana, I never believed in the existence of a soul mate. I thought it was just a pipe dream that lonely teenagers used as an excuse to sleep around or to battle feelings of loneliness. But once I laid my eyes upon her, I knew I had found my destiny. I knew in the span of a heartbeat that I would give anything that I was and be anything that she needed in order to be with her.

We married two months after obtaining our PhDs. The ceremony seemed to fly by but I remember every detail as if it had just happened. The sight of Lana walking down the aisle, a beatific smile on her face. The love shining in her light brown eyes. The fragrance of her perfume. The softness of her chestnut skin. The way she laughed as we danced into the night. The pleasure I felt as her body wrapped around mine as we made love as husband and wife. I can remember it all. I can still feel it all.

Our life together was wonderful. The only thing that continued to mar our perfect existence was the presence of her bratty little sister.

~

My mind snapped back to the present. I was standing in the doorway with the sun to my back and Eva before me.

Eva just stood there, her eyes and mannerism displaying hostility. I didn't give a damn about what she said or how she felt. I had given up on worrying about her years ago.

"What do you want Eva? It's Saturday. I can do whatever the fuck I please."

She didn't like being challenged. As the youngest manager of her financial firm, I felt sympathy for the employees under her, but that's not my problem. Eva will be Eva. And once I married Lana there was no getting rid of her. Ever.

"I don't give a flying fuck what you do you piece of filth! I'm here to see my sister! Where is she?"

I took a deep breath and counted to five. When I responded I was calm and level headed. "She's in the study. Where she always is."

Eva nodded to me coldly then turned on a dime and marched down the hallway. I heard the sounds of her red heels clicking the entire way until she met the carpet on the border of the study.

I sighed and went upstairs and got into the shower.

The hot water washed away my weariness. By the time I emerged, the bathroom was covered in steam. I itched my face and knew it was time for a shave. Once I wiped the steam off the cloudy mirror, I saw two steel blue eyes staring back at me. They were alert but there was a hole in them begging to be filled. I averted my eyes and grabbed my shaving kit, the entire time refusing to look myself in the eye again. Once I was finished, I went into my bedroom to find something to wear.

Lana had taken up most of my side of the closet with her clothing. I didn't mind. I liked seeing parts of her wherever I was. I grabbed a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and got dressed.

Once I was dressed, I sat on the edge of my bed. I knew if I left now that I would have to face Eva and I didn't know if I had the energy to do so.

"Why does that girl hate me so much?" I mumbled to myself.

Every time she came over here it was pretty much the same thing. She would insult me then ask to see her sister. She would visit with Lana and then insult me and leave. I was a fool if I expected anything different.

Surely, tonight would be the same. Resigned to my fate, I headed down the stairs into the kitchen.

I made myself a light meal of humus, carrots and salami.

I heard the door to the study open and then came Eva's voice, "I'll come by in a few days to see you again. I love you sis."

When she came into the kitchen, she froze upon seeing me, her eyes dark. "Well at least you cleaned yourself up. My sister would hate to see you like that."

For what seemed like the first time in a long time, I acknowledged Eva's physique. Average height, curvy body, tanned skin, plump lips and cold eyes. Her brown curls fell about her shoulders in tight ringlets and she wore a white blouse with a red dirndl skirt. The tight material of her clothing showed off her curves in a way that would make most men's mouth water.

"Hot date?" I asked, hoping to avoid our normal conversation of loathing.

No such luck.

"Do you care?" Her voice was as icy as her stare. "I'm leaving. Try not to do anything to dishonor my sister, loser."

Just like that, another visit was over and done with.

I sat my dishes in the sink and walked into the study. "Hello my love. I'm sorry I slept so late today. I must've drunk too much last night. I know you don't like that. I promise to cut back."

Silence.

I moved over to the desk where Lana was and sat down on the table. "I hope you're not mad at me. I couldn't bare it if you were." I knelt down and kissed her gently.

Silence.

"Your sister sure is a handful. But Eva is Eva. Huh? I don't have to go into the office so I think I will just stay in with you all-night, if that's okay. We can listen to Sinatra and I'll tell you about some of the issues at work."

Silence.

I moved and sat on the chair, tears welling in my eyes. I felt the first lump catch in my throat. "I love you Lana. I love you with all that I am." I picked up Lana and sat her on my lap.

The weight of the urn felt like the weight of the world. I picked her up and held her to my chest as uncontrollable sobs racked my body.

"Why did you have to leave me, my love? Why did you make me promise to stay? There's nothing here for me if you're not here. Lana, I miss you. I just want to hear your voice. I just want to see you smile. I want to smell your hair and touch your skin. Lana, I love you. Lana, I miss you."

I sat there and cried for the rest of the night. I woke the next morning with Lana still in my arms. I gently placed her back on the desk and kissed her one last time before I went into the kitchen and grabbed an unopened bottle of scotch.

I fell asleep at my desk. The last thing I remembered was staring at Lana. I woke to the sound of my cellphone chirping. I had a missed message. I ignored it. I sat back in my chair, a splitting headache making me regret my choice to open the bottle of scotch that morning.

"Hurmph!" I tried to make myself stand but found I lacked the strength. I stared at Lana, my chest tightening.

Fourteen years after we first started dating a routine pap smear found a mass. Further exploration delivered to us the worst news possible. Lana had ovarian cancer. The doctors said if it were caught a year or so earlier then the prognosis would be more positive, but as it was the cancer had already spread to both ovaries and throughout her abdomen.

I was devastated. Lana and I had been trying for a year to have a child with no luck. The prognosis meant we would never have children and that soon, I would lose my heart and soul. That was when I first started drinking. The first week I was totally useless as a husband and as a friend. I would drink from morning till night and then repeat. One morning Lana came in and found me sleeping in the tub, covered in my own sweat, tears and vomit.

She kissed me softly on the cheek and held my hand. She forced me to open my eyes and look at her. Her brown eyes were full of love and sadness. "Michael, that is enough. You know as well as I that I don't have much time. I don't want to spend it in the bathroom cleaning up after you. I want to spend it like we always do. Like you promised me. I want to dance. I want to sing. I want to see you smile. Now get up. We have plans today."

She removed my clothes and ran a bath for me. The fog lifted and I finally realized that I had been grieving her while she was still with me. Instead of being strong I threw a temper tantrum and became self-destructive. Lana needed me and there I was, acting petulant. I bathed, shaved and got dressed. After that was done, I poured out all the liquor, wine, and beer in the house. I didn't have another drink while I still had my Lana.

That day we went sightseeing. We visited all of the remote places around our county that we always talked about visiting. By dinner we were both famished. We drove to the college where we met and grabbed a sandwich and a coffee at our coffee house.

"Michael?"

"Yes, my love?

"I need you to do something for me."

"Anything."

Her piercing eyes stared through me the way they did when she was absolutely serious. "I want you to promise me here and now that you will do what I say. If you don't, I will never forgive you."

I couldn't bear the thought of her thinking ill of me. "Of course. I'd promise you anything. Just name it and if it is within my power, I will do it."

She sighed and held my hand firmly. Her eyes seemed to peer inside of me. I noticed that for the first time that day her eyes were wet with tears.

It broke my heart to see her sad. "What's wrong, honey?"

"It's just..." then she was sobbing.

"Anything, honey. I'll do anything at all. Just say it."

She roughly wiped the tears from her eyes. "When I die, you absolutely must not kill yourself."

She couldn't ask me this. It was unfair. She knew I saw no life without her. I wanted to refuse. I wanted to argue. But one look into those tormented-beautiful brown eyes and I couldn't do it. "I swear it on our love."

She smiled. It was broken, yet beautiful. "Thank you." She leaned forward and kissed me.

The next week we informed her parents and her sister. All of them had tear-jerking responses. But none were as bad as Eva's. For the first time since I've known her, Eva broke down. A broken shell of a person replaced the competitive, difficult and cynical woman that I knew. She was inconsolable. Her reaction mirrored my own. It was then that I understood what Lana had to deal with for the previous week.

Eva drank and smoked herself into oblivion. She didn't go to work and she didn't go home. Presumably, she was out every night with a new guy. She didn't listen to her parents and wouldn't even speak to Lana.

Surprisingly, I was the only person that was able to calm her down and piece her back together.

One day Lana came and asked me to hunt down Eva.

"Babe, your sister hates me. If she won't talk to you what do you think I can do?"

Lana shrugged, "You're the psychologist dear. I'm sure you can think of something."

Finding Eva wasn't the problem. It was convincing her to talk to me that was. Eva was a creature of habit. Sunday afternoons meant coffee and laundry. She would drop her clothes off at the dry cleaners and then go to the coffee shop around the corner with a book and read in a corner.

When I entered the small establishment, I saw a messy stock of brown hair hiding behind a book. As I moved closer, I heard the sounds of sobbing.

"Eva?"

My softly spoken words caused her to jump. She slammed her book down and searched for the source of the sound with wild blue eyes. Upon seeing her, I took a step back. I was shocked. She looked like a wild and wounded animal. Her make-up was a mess, her hair was a disaster, her clothes were filthy and the look in her eyes could have stopped a heart.

Once she saw me standing above her, her eyes focused in anger. "Jesus! What the fuck do you want?"

"May I sit down?"

"Can't I have a moment of fucking peace?"

I tried again. "May I have a seat?"

"Humph! It's a free country isn't it?"

"Thank you." As soon as I sat down, I realized I didn't have a plan on how to confront her. I didn't have a thing to say.

"My sister sent you, didn't she?"

I nodded.

"There's nothing you can do. I don't even like you. Just leave. Tell her you couldn't find me."

"I can't do that."

She slammed the book down, "Why the hell not?" Her outburst caused several heads to turn in our direction but I didn't back down.

"My wife asked me to do something and I told her I would. I will never break a promise to Lana."

"Mister Chivalry", she said sarcastically.

"It's not chivalry, it's respect. I love and respect your sister. I always have. She's worried about you."

"I'm fine."

"You're *not* fine."

"Fuck you, Michael!"

I reached across the table but was careful not to touch her. "Listen, Eva. You're going through the different stages of grief. If you're not careful it can blossom into a psychosis."

"Really? Wow! You're a *great* psychologist. Can I have some more arm-chair therapy please?"

"Granted, you don't need to be a licensed psychologist to diagnose what's happening with you. But I'm serious Eva."

"So, the hell what! I don't care if you're serious. Look, you're married to my sister. That is the only reason you even know me. Don't pretend like you give a shit about me because I sure as hell could care less if you fucking died tomorrow!"

I sat back and looked her straight in the eyes. "I do care about you Eva. Despite your manner, you're a good person. You'd like us all to think otherwise, you go out of your way even. But you're a good person. Some people don't notice, but *I* do."

"Shut up!"

I didn't stop. "You've learned a lot by watching your sister. You idolize her and try to be what she is; only you both have different talents so you had to adjust your approach a bit. This is referred to as social learning. However, ignoring that, you could have moved anywhere after you graduated from university. Yet, you decided to stay close to your parents so you could help your dad out when he had his heart transplant 7 years ago."

"I said, shut up!"

"You are at your parent's house every other day to help out with chores and to make sure your dad isn't over doing things, even though he has improved remarkably and can handle the chores without any undue stress. You volunteer at the children's hospital in your free time, reading and acting for the children. Your eyes tear up anytime you see a stray animal as if you want to save it. You watch your sister's back and would pounce on anyone or anything that threatens her. You love your family and your friends and go out of your way to make sure everyone is taken care of. You put up this false front of bitchiness to protect your insecure and

immature emotions but in reality, you're looking for the same thing that Lana and I have. You want someone to love you the same way that we love each other and it kills you that you haven't found that yet."

"Are you done?" She wasn't looking at me. She let her hair fall over her face to cover her eyes. But the slight trembling of her shoulders belied her cynical tone.

"Almost. Your sister loves you. I know what this is doing to her. When I found out about it, I was also devastated. I was useless and Lana had to straighten me out. Now she's asked me to do the same for you."

I reached out and grabbed her hand and used the other hand to push her hair back so she was forced to look at me.

"Lana's time is limited and that's not fair. But what little time remains she wants to spend it with everyone that she loves. If you show her this side of you it will put her in her grave. We all need to be strong for the time being. Grieving will come, but only after she is gone. Until then I want you to move into our home. I know both you and Lana would want that."

Lips trembling and tears streaming, Eva finally cracked. I moved over to her and wrapped my arms around her. "Shh, I'm here. It will be okay. We're family."

I held her as she cried. We sat this way for almost half an hour. When she was done, she excused herself and went into the bathroom to clean up. I took the opportunity to send a quick text to Lana.

We will be having a houseguest for a while.

Her response was immediate.

I love you so much! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Eva appeared shortly after that. She looked refreshed and calm. "I'll go pick up my laundry and pack some clothes and I'll be over in a few hours."

I nodded and she turned to leave.

She hesitated and then turned. "Thank you." She leaned down and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. It was the most affection she had shown me since I've known her.

I watched her leave, and then I did the same.

The months that followed were some of the happiest in my life. I don't know why. They should have been the saddest, but they weren't. It must've been the knowledge of the limited time I had with Lana. Whatever it was, we made so many amazing memories. We traveled to Greece and through Japan. We spent time with family and friends. We renewed our vows in a glorious celebration. Every moment of which was captured on camera.

A year went by and the cancer started to take a toll on Lana. Still she was tough and loving. She smiled through the pain and made sure that I felt her love. I returned the gestures. Every day I had with her was precious. Every moment we shared was worth a lifetime. I would trade any remaining days that I have to spend even one more moment with her.

Lana passed away 6 months ago. When she went, I was at her bedside and so was Eva. Her parents and my grandma were in the room at the foot of the bed. We were all covered in tears with smiles on our faces.

Lana laughed. "You all look ridiculous! If you're going to cry, then cry. If you're going to smile, then smile."

Eva cut in, "You'd never forgive us if we all started balling you idiot."

Lana laughed, "Good point, nerd."

Eva chuckled.

Lana looked at me, "Remember your promise. I don't want to see you again for at least 50 years."

I just nodded and kissed her lips. "I swear it on our love." When I pressed my lips to hers, I could taste the salt from her tears. I knew she could also taste the salt from mine.

She turned to Eva. "Come here, Eva."

Eva bent down and Lana whispered something in her ear. I didn't hear what it was but eventually Eva knelt back and nodded. Lana smiled sweetly at her little sister.

Lana looked around the room, "Michael, Eva, Mom, Dad, Grandma?"

In unison we all responded, "Yes?"

"I love you all. Thank you for making my time here on this earth feel so special. I could never thank you enough even if I had 3 lifetimes. Thank you and goodbye."

She smiled. It was the sweetest expression I had ever seen and the most damaging. It lifted my heart while at the same time crushing it as I realized I would never see it again.

She took a deep breath, then a shallow breath. She turned her head to me and mouthed, "My love." Then I saw the light leave her eyes.

My Lana was gone.

The months that followed were meaningless. Monday thru Friday I would work at my practice, although my partner, Gavin Rodgers did most of the work. Friday nights thru Sundays I was hammered. I spent as much time as possible in the study with Lana's ashes and all the photos we accumulated in that last year and a half. I can't count how many times I watched our renewal ceremony. Eva came around often. But upon Lana's passing, our previous cease-fire agreement had dissolved and she was even more treacherous and judgmental towards me. I was hardly able to function and had devolved into that grieving mess I was when I first learned of Lana's illness. These days I handled the administrative work at my practice and didn't see patients. I simply can't handle it. I know it won't be long before I have to walk away from the practice entirely, although Gavin keeps trying to convince me to stay.

~

I got up and went upstairs to shower. While I was in the shower, I heard the landline ringing. No one called my landline but telemarketers. I ignored it.

Five minutes later it rang again. It rang again two minutes later. By now I was annoyed and had a mind to give whatever person on the other end a piece of my mind.

I marched into the bedroom and snatched up the receiver.

"What?" I shouted.

A pause, "Jesus Mike. Do you have to scream into the phone?"

"Gavin?"

"Yeah it's me. Give me a minute to get my hearing back please."

I sat down on the bed feeling sheepish. "Sorry."

"No, don't worry about it."

"So, what's up? Why are you calling me on a Sunday?"

"Well you never responded to my text so you didn't leave me much choice. It was either call you or come by. You're 30 minutes away so I thought this would be easier."

"Fair enough. So, what's up?"

Gavin hesitated. "Well, I need your help with something."

I grabbed the towel and roughly dried my hair. "Yeah? With what?"

"Look I know you're not seeing patients but I have a lady with a severe case of Major Depressive Disorder. I can't help her. Nothing I've tried works. I need you to step in and consult. I think you'd be better suited to help her than I."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're joking right? Major Depressive Disorder? I'm the fucking poster-child for depressive disorder."

"Mike, I know I'm asking a lot. But this woman really needs our help. Otherwise, I'm almost positive she will turn and we will have to inform the state to secure her so she doesn't harm herself."

"Fuck!"

"Yeah."

"So, what's your plan here? Fight fire with fire?"

"Something like that."

"I-I don't know Gavin."

"Please. Michael Steele you are her only hope."

I had to laugh at that. Gavin was a self-professed fanboy. "Fine, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you! I really appreciate this buddy."

"Don't worry about it. You've carried my ass this last year. It's the least I can do. So, when's the appointment?"

"It's tomorrow at 10. Umm--there's something I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Her name."

"Her name?"

"Yeah, it's...Lana. Lana Groves."

"Lana?"

"Y--yeah."

I had to take a breath. It's just a name. It's just a name. "I'm okay. I can deal with that much."

"O-okay. Listen I've got to run. But thanks again."

Gavin's tone suggested he was still being evasive. "Everything okay?"

"Y-yeah. Thanks again." Then the line disconnected.

"Strange guy." I looked at the receiver and set it back down.

I got dressed and went to the study and pulled out my copy of the DSM-V, to read up on Major Depressive Disorder.

The next morning, I felt an unfamiliar feeling of excitement. It was the first time since Lana died that I looked forward to going to work. Maybe it was the idea of helping someone who was going through what I was going through. Perhaps it was the novelty and challenge of having a new patient. I'm not sure. But whatever it was, I was ready for it.

I got dressed in my professional clothes. Went downstairs and grabbed a dry bagel and a glass of orange juice. I went into the study and kissed Lana and then left.

Ms. Groves was my first appointment of the day so I didn't show up at the office until 9:50. I greeted the receptionist, Mira. Then I went to go see Gavin. When I made it to his office he was sitting behind his desk, his shirtsleeves already rolled back as he typed away on his computer. His muscular ebony forearms a constant reminder that I should probably go to the gym once in a while. He looked up at me, and his brown eyes lit up.

"Mike!"

He jumped out of his chair and came across his desk and gave me a hug.

Gavin was a friend I made during my doctoral program. He was granted an MD a semester after me but that didn't stop us from becoming fast friends. When I opened my own practice there was no one else that I wanted to partner with. Now the Steele-Rodgers practice

was quickly becoming the go-to place for people experiencing a range of psychoses. Professionally, it was great having Gavin partner with me. He was a psychiatrist so he was able to prescribe medication in the instances where it was required for treatment but he was also a trained therapist. His skills as a therapist were second only to my own. He was one of my best friends so it was great coming into a place where I could see him.

I returned his embrace. "Hey Gavin! What are you working on so seriously?"

He turned towards his desk, "Just typing up some of the results from the labs."

"Isn't that why we have interns? Documenting research results should be their job."

"Normally it is. But I've sent them all on different errands for the research and I want the data to be inputted correctly. So, I figured I would do it while I have the time." He turned back to me. "So, are you ready for this appointment?"

I nodded. "Of course. Anything I should know before going in?"

He chewed on his lip. "Just don't freak out."

I figured he was talking about counter transference, "Don't worry I'll keep my own demons in check." I looked at the clock and saw it was a couple of minutes past my appointment time. "Well I'd better get going. I'll see you later."

I left his office and walked up to my administrative assistant, Carol. "Good morning Carol."

Carol looked up at me and her face was stone white. "M--Mr. Steele. Good morning sir." *Since when did Carol call me Mr. Steele? Well, whatever.*

"Everything alright, Carol?"

She shook her head left to right, vigorously but said, "Everything is fine. Everything is fine."

I didn't believe her, but also didn't have the time to pry. "Is La—Ms. Groves in my office?"

"Who?"

"Ms. Groves. The 10 o'clock?"

"O-oh yes she is. She's waiting for you."

"Thanks." Before she could say more, I strode into my office.

When I stepped into my office, I saw that Ms. Groves was standing by the window, looking out at the woods below, her back was to me.

I took my jacket off and hanged it from the hook by the door. "I'm sorry I was running a little late, Ms. Groves. My name is Dr. Michael Steele. You may call me Michael, or Mike if you like.

Ms. Groves turned her back to the window, the bright sunlight that filtered through the window placed her face in darkness. She held out her hand. "Hello, Dr. Steele. I'm Lana. Lana Groves."

I reached out to grab her hand as she took a step closer.

The world stopped moving and the room swam. I instantly began to hyperventilate.

"Lana?"

She tilted her head to the side, a bewildered expression on her face. "Dr. Steele? Everything okay?"

I felt my knees shake, ready to give out. Other than her shoulder length raven hair, she looked just like my Lana. Her intelligent brown eyes. Her perky lips. Her chestnut skin. Her high cheekbones. Her soft, yet athletic figure. It was as if Lana was reborn and was standing before me.

My entire body was shaking. My mind stopped working. "La-Lana? My Lana?" I stepped closer to her and Lana stepped back in response.

"Dr. Steele?"

I froze. Her voice. Lana's voice was like silk over wind, Lana Grove's voice was like bourbon over clouds. It was her voice that snapped me back to reality. I blinked twice. Still, she was standing there—a worried expression on her face.

"Lana?"

She reached out and grabbed my hand. Her small hands were soft and warm. "Yes, Dr. Steele, I am Lana. Lana Groves."

"Lana Groves."

For the second time in my life my destiny walked out of pure shadows and changed the trajectory of my life.

It was as if fate had given us a second chance. I felt a smile come to my face as I gripped her hand in mine. Like a prayer I greeted her.

"Lana."