

The Stained Glass Window

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Section 1: Description

Lily Brannan is beautiful, quirky, and successful. A well-known author, her personal life is somewhat unusual. When she inherits a house in Vermont under mysterious circumstances, she decides that moving there is exactly what she needs.

Soon, the handsome and romantic Roberto Romano asks her out, and Lily finds herself falling hard for him. He professes his devotion, but something seems off. Is it just her imagination? And where does the gorgeous contractor, Tom Givens, factor into her future in Vermont?

And, mystery of mysteries, why was she given this house?

Chapter One

I was standing in my brightly lit kitchen, stirring the pasta in the boiling water. I was starved. Famished. Ready to eat anything.

Yup, this is my life. Forgetting to eat until I was so hungry, I would want to eat anything. Then, forget about decent food. If there was a bag of chips in the house, I would eat the whole damn thing while the water boiled.

Why not eat at normal times? Like a normal person? Well, the simple answer is that I'm probably not a normal person.

I was down to three minutes on the pasta. Everything else was ready. I had some chopped chicken with spinach, onions, and zucchini, ready to be tossed with the pasta and some olive oil. A shower of parmesan over the whole thing, and it would be a great dinner.

Dinner? Had I eaten lunch that day? Shit, I hadn't. So, my last meal had been a cup of coffee and a banana early morning. No wonder I was hungry!

Taking a sip of red wine, I tapped my foot. Would crunchy pasta really be that bad? I could wait two more minutes now, right?

Just then, the phone rang. Noooooooo! I didn't want to talk on the phone right then; I wanted food. My phone was on the table, so I couldn't actually see who was calling. My decision was instantaneous. The caller could wait. If it were important, the person would leave a message or call back, and I could drain my pasta, put my meal together, and sit down at the table. Then, once I'd had a few bites, I could call the person back. Finally, Alexa sounded the timer tone, and I could drain my pasta. Once I'd dumped it into the pan with the rest of the ingredients, I gave it a rudimentary stir, and scooped most of it into a pasta bowl.

The blasted phone started to ring again. Still nope. I was going to put cheese on my dinner and take it and my glass of wine to the table. Then I would see who wanted to talk to me so badly.

At the table, I quickly ground a decent amount of black pepper on my food, then a little bit of salt. I topped off the wine and took my first glorious bite. It was so good! Maybe it wasn't fancy, or maybe not even that good, but to me, it was ambrosia. No, not the gross marshmallow filled supposed salad, but the food of the gods of Greek mythology. In fact, it might have been the best meal I'd ever eaten, or at least the best since yesterday when I'd forgotten to eat then too.

Three bites later, I was ready to look at my phone. Two calls in such a short time, and as I looked at the screen, I realized they were from the same person. James Lions had been trying to call me. Hmm... That was either a good thing or a really bad one.

Just then, my phone lit up with a text. *Lil- call me!* It was from James. I took a sip, then hit the button to call him. Three rings, and he answered. "About time."

I smiled. James always made me smile. "I was making dinner. You could wait until I'd had a couple of bites."

"You should treat me better, you know that, right?"

That made me laugh. "I know. You're a prince to put up with me."

"Good to hear you say it."

"Always good to make you happy." I took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. "So, what's up?"

"She's dead."

Those two words caught me off guard. For a moment, I didn't know what to say. Then I croaked, "When?"

"About two hours ago, we think."

I took a sip of wine. "What happened?"

James, as always, kept to the facts when talking with me about her. "She told Willy she was taking a nap before dinner. Willy helped her to bed. She laid down on the top of the bedspread and told Willy to wake her when dinner was ready."

I interrupted. "Her normal 4:30 dinner unless she had company to impress."

"Of course. When Willy got to her room, she knocked and knocked, then when she didn't respond, Willy opened the door and found her. The medical examiner thinks it was a heart attack while she was sleeping and says it was instantaneous and painless."

I tried to hold on to basic human decency. "I should be happy about that."

James chuckled. "Lily, you don't need to do that for me. We both knew her well, so let's just say that it's over."

I leaned back in my chair. "Amen." I pulled a notepad toward me. "What do I need to do?"

"Nothing right now. Her orders were no service, no event of any kind. Two weeks from now, we will have the formal reading of the will, and you need to attend that, but I can schedule that for whatever works for you in terms of a day and time. It does have to be in New York, but we can make it work for you. You know what's in the will. God knows, she beat you over the head with it for decades."

That was an understatement. That old bitch had made that will a weapon of incredible power and cruelty. "And Willy? Please tell me she did something for Willy."

James sighed. "Not what she should have, that's for sure. Her health and dental insurance will be paid for the rest of her life, and she gets one year of pay, but after all she did, it certainly isn't fair."

I took a bite, chewing slowly while I thought things through. Finally, I spoke. "Okay. I could be in New York on the 17th."

"I'll make that work. Any specific time?"

"No, I'll drive up the night before. Could you book me at the Four Seasons?"

“You don’t want to stay at the house?”

I laughed, but even to my own ears, the sound was cold and devoid of joy. “I’d throw a match on the place if I could. I don’t ever want to walk through that door again.”

“I’ll book you a suite there. The estate will pay for it.”

“Thanks, James.”

“And we’ll get dinner that night after reading the will?”

“Absolutely! How about we get room service and an enormous bottle of tequila?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

After James hung up, I ate the rest of my dinner. James had been part of my life since I was sixteen. He was only ten years older than me and was a good friend and confidante.

How the hell had he ever worked for her? No matter how much lawyers pride themselves on offering representation to anyone, she was more than most. But he’d done it with professionalism, decency, and a sense of humor. Without him? I would have been terrified and isolated. When we got together, we dealt with business, then ate a great meal, drank too much, and had a platonic sleepover.

Shit. She was dead. I’d waited for this day for almost as long as I could remember. Now she was finally gone. I didn’t really know how to feel.

Chapter Two

Two weeks later, I sat in James' office. I knew most of what I was going to hear already. After all, it had been used as a weapon against me for most of my life after my mom died.

I'd dressed for the occasion. I'd like to say that I am a mature person, not prone to sarcasm or wise-ass gestures, but that would be a lie. I have turned sarcasm and wise-ass-ness into a high art. And yes, wise-ass-ness is a word. I am a highly successful writer, so I know words.

Back to my outfit for the day. I was in a severe black wool blazer, and black slacks, and black stilettos. She hated stilettos. She called them "slut shoes." And then there was my blouse. Bright red silk, lowish cut, low enough to show my cleavage. After a quick hello hug, James looked at me, his handsome face creased in a smile, and he was clearly trying to hold back laughter. Finally, he shook his head. "Lil, you know she's dead, right? She can't see your red blouse."

I laughed. "It's the principle of the thing, James. You're supposed to wear black, or so she told me, when someone dies. And yet to sort-of quote from Moonstruck, I always wanted to tell her that someday she'd die, and I'd wear red to the funeral. No funeral? This is the best I could do."

"Fine. And I understand the feeling."

I had always wanted to ask. "Why did you put up with her for all these years?"

He motioned to a chair facing his desk. "Have a seat, and I'll answer."

I sat. He sat in his desk chair. I looked at his familiar tanned face, blond hair that I suspected he had lightened now that he was older. He always was calm, professional, and impeccably dressed. And he was a good friend. A damn good friend. He'd been my friend and protector for as long as I'd known him. Outside of his law practice, I knew he loved to hike and kayak, played a mean game of squash, and had been married three times to gorgeous society bimbos.

He tented his fingers. "She was a bitch, but as far as clients go, she wasn't that high maintenance. Her biggest tantrums were the times she tried to figure out how to deny you your trust fund, but otherwise, she paid her bills on time, didn't waste my time with nonsense, and was cold but not crazy." He smiled sardonically. "To be blunt, she paid for my house in Aspen."

"Okay, that makes sense." I leaned back. "Let's get this over with, please."

He nodded. "Want coffee? Water? Whiskey?"

I smiled. "Black coffee now. Tequila tonight."

He buzzed for his assistant, who brought in coffee in two gorgeous china cups on matching saucers. Just because I chose to not live like the dead bitch didn't mean that I didn't still appreciate some of the finer things. "Thank you."

After he took a sip, James pulled a file in front of him. "Let's do this."

I sat and listened while he read me my Great-Aunt Helen's will. The content was much as I had expected it, with a few nasty digs in the commentary she'd left to be read with it. As I

listened, it was clear that no matter how much she would have preferred that I get nothing, she hated charities more, so she left most of it to me. The brownstone in Manhattan. The cottage on Cape Cod. The furnishings in both. Her season tickets to the New York Yankees, one of the only fun things she ever took part in regularly.

Then there were Helen's financial holdings. I listened as James read them to me, not really caring. I already was more than comfortably well off, so this was nice but not life changing. I would have much rather not inherited a thing and have my mom still be alive.

Wait. I should probably explain myself. Yes, you could say I'm wealthy. That's true because of three distinct factors. First, my grandfather Alfred, whom I never met, had one child, my mom. When he died, he left everything to mom, who had just recently died. She had no contact with her parents since after the day she'd found out she was pregnant with me. He didn't even know she was dead when he died. The estate went into a trust for me, that I inherited in full when I turned twenty-five.

Then, well, not to toot my own horn, but I'm a successful writer. Three New York Times Bestsellers for fiction in the last three years. I have one coming out soon, and the advance on it was six figures.

Finally, I'm well off because both my ex-husband and I did well, invested well, and when we divorced, we shared everything 50-50. At that point, he had made more than me, but it still was split down the middle.

I didn't need a damn thing from Helen, that's for sure. I suddenly realized that James was sitting looking at me in amusement, clearly waiting for me to answer him. "What? Did I zone out?"

"Yes." His tone was patient.

"What did I miss?"

"That you also have inherited a house in Vermont."

That shocked me. "What the hell are you talking about? She didn't have a house in Vermont."

He shrugged. "I don't know if she ever went there or not, but she did own one, and had for at least as long as I represented her."

Vermont? Holy shit... I'd lived there from the time I was three until I was thirteen and my mom died. I had never gone back, although I had only good memories of being there. I had been happy and loved there. Vermont. "Where? What kind of a house?"

"I don't really know. I know that it is up in the north easter part of the state, and that no one has lived there in years. I know it has fifty acres with it, and there is a pond that is big enough that it had a swimming dock at one time."

I tried to think of the map of Vermont. "In the Northeast Kingdom?"

He shrugged. "How the hell would I know that? But it is on Kingdom road, so maybe."

"And why did she have this house?"

"Why did she do anything? I have no clue."

I rubbed my forehead. I'd been thinking about what I had expected I would hear since the day James had called to say she was gone. I took a deep breath. "I'll keep the house on the Cape. The house here? I want to offer Willy that she can live there for as long as she wants, the estate will pay utilities and taxes and upkeep. When she no longer wants to live there, I want to sell it. From the house, I want the grandfather clock and the piano in the parlor. The rest can be sold with the house." Now I was on a roll. "And Willy is to be paid her salary as long as she lives."

He was taking notes as I spoke. "The Yankees tickets, I'll give them to David. He loves the Yankees, and that old bitch always knew I was a Red Sox fan."

James rolled his eyes. "You're giving season tickets to your ex-husband?"

"Yes."

"What about the house in Vermont?"

"Fuck." I sighed. "I'll take a drive up there next weekend to see the place. I expect that I'll be calling you to say I want you to put it on the market, but I'll at least go see it first."

He nodded. "Do you want us to find you someplace to stay up there?"

"Yes, please. Not a bed and breakfast, or anything where I need to make small talk with people."

"Of course."

Chapter Three

The next morning, I stood at the door of my hotel room, wrapped in one of their fluffy robes. James stood next to me, fully dressed and ready to go about his professional day. He leaned down, pulling me into his arms for a tight hug. “Love you, Lil.”

“Likewise.” I leaned against him briefly. James was one of my few close friends, and I always felt a bit melancholy when it was time to leave him again. “Thanks for everything.”

“My pleasure.” He kissed the top of my head. “Text me when you leave for Vermont, and when you get there.”

“Yes, mother.”

“Just do it.”

I reached up to straighten his tie. “I will. And thanks for taking care of all of the other stuff.”

“No worries. Willy was so happy when I told her that you were going to stop by to see her today. Thanks for doing that.”

“I always loved Willy, that was never an issue.”

“I know. But I also know how hard you’ve worked to avoid going to the house. Thanks for doing that one more time.”

Four hours later, I was on the interstate, headed back to Boston. Seeing Willy had been a treat, as had seeing her reaction when she learned she didn’t have to move or find another job. After more than thirty years of being at Helen’s beck and call, it was the least I could do for her.

The drive was uneventful, and by the time I pulled into my parking space, I was bored and lonely.

I slogged up the stairs to the front door. First, I’d throw a load of laundry in, then I’d call for some take-out for an early dinner.

Standing by my kitchen counter looking at the menus, I picked up the phone and hit speed dial.

The voice was warm. “Hey, how was New York?”

“Well, you’ll think it was good. You are now the proud owner of season tickets for the Yankees.”

“Holy shit! Lily, really?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you, sweetie.”

“You’re welcome.” I bit my lower lip. “Can I come over?”

His voice deepened. “Molly is away.”

“I know.”

“Ahhh, that kind of visit.”

I leaned my head against the cabinet. Damn it, I wish I had more willpower. “Yes.”

“Come on over.”

Chapter Four

It took only five minutes of brisk walking to get to what used to be my front door. I had a key, so I rang the bell and let myself inside. Looking at my watch, I knew David would still be in his office, on the top floor of the brownstone.

I called up the stairs. “Do you want something?”

“Grab a bottle of wine, will you?”

“Sure.” Red wine. David thought white wine was almost a sin. I walked into the kitchen, grabbed two glasses and a bottle of Merlot, knowing there was a corkscrew up in his office.

I climbed the stairs. As I expected, he was at his desk under the dormer, his dark hair slightly longer than he liked it, which always happened when he was doing final edits on one of his books. He’d get so involved; he’d forget to get it cut. I smiled. Who the heck was I to comment on his hair? I kept mine long, so I didn’t have to worry about going to the salon when I was busy. “Hey.”

He turned slightly, so he could look at me. His eyes were warm. “Hey, baby.”

I walked toward him, carefully putting the wine and glasses on his desk before I leaned down to kiss him.

As my lips touched his, one of his hands reached up to cup my head, pulling me closer, the other slid under my t-shirt, caressing the bare skin of my ribcage. He growled. “Welcome back...”

Don’t judge me. It’s not what it seems. Well, yes, it is. And it isn’t. It’s both really complicated and painfully simple.

I met David on the first day of our freshman year of college. He was the hottest guy I’d ever seen, and he seemed smitten with me too. By Christmas of that first year, we were lovers.

By six months later, we were engaged. We got married the day after we graduated and moved to Boston to start our writing careers. We were writing partners, business partners, and we edited for each other. We had a great marriage and loved each other deeply.

So then, what the hell was the problem? Well... The problem was that David didn’t want just me in his bed. David wanted an open marriage. Then, he wanted my best friend Megan as his lover while he was still with me. She wanted that too.

I was the hold-out. Although I’d come from the least traditional of family backgrounds, I was really into the idea of a traditional marriage. I couldn’t handle the idea that he wanted other lovers. So, we went into counseling. And he still wanted an open marriage. We tried, and it didn’t work. Finally, we divorced. It was more than amicable. We split everything 50-50, stayed writing and business partners, and about six months after our divorce and his marriage to Megan, we became lovers again. Now, David has two women outside of his marriage, me and someone named Rosa who lives in Manhattan, so he goes there a lot. Megan now has three other lovers, one in Boston, one in New York, and one in Rome. She’s in Rome right now.

The odd thing? It works for them. They even sometimes go on vacation with their other lovers. Everyone knows everyone else, there actually seems to be no jealousy, and no one is getting hurt.

At first, the idea of being with David again while he was married to someone else seemed wrong. Then it didn't. Now it seems natural and normal.

Two hours after that first kiss, I was sitting on the couch in his office, completely naked and more relaxed than I'd been in days, and eating Chinese food from the boxes, sipping wine with my naked ex-husband.

David looked at me. "Vermont? Seriously?"

"Yeah, an old house on fifty acres, with a pond, and no one has lived there in years. I'm going to drive up there this weekend and see it to decide what to do about it."

"Have you tried looking it up on Google Maps?"

"No." Duh! I should have thought of that.

He reached over to grab his laptop. "What's the address?"

I'd already memorized it, and so within a minute or so, we were looking at a satellite image of my new property. "It looks like a stiff wind would knock it over."

He nodded. "It does, but it also has great lines." He pointed. "Look at that sun porch. What a great writing space that could be."

"You trying to get me to move?"

He laughed. "Hell no, I'm hoping that you fix it up, so when we are marathoning edits, we have a great space to work."

"Always thinking, you are."

He gathered up the now empty boxes. "I am. And now I'm thinking that we should work off some of the calories we just consumed."

And we did.

Chapter Five

Three days later, I sat outside of a Dunkin' Donuts, and sighed. What the hell was I thinking driving up to Vermont to look at some old dump Helen had left to me? She'd probably done it out of some sort of spite.

I got out of the car and walked toward the store. A big cup of coffee would help me clear my mind. A chocolate donut would make me a nicer person for a while at least.

Forty-five minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of the cottage I was renting for the weekend. It was adorable. One story, beautiful trim work, and glorious early spring flower gardens.

The key was just where the owner had said it would be. I carried my bag inside, smiling seeing the small wood stove, and a bouquet of flowers on the table with a bottle of wine next to it. How sweet!

I unpacked quickly and ate one of the containers of yogurt that I'd brought with me. As soon as it was done, I used the bathroom, then grabbed my keys. I was going to see the mystery house!

It only took me ten minutes to get to the property, and it was a beautiful drive. I'd forgotten how beautiful Vermont was, and no matter what I decided to do with the house, I needed to get up here more often.

The dirt driveway was unmarked. Slowly, I turned into it, hoping that it would be passable for my car. I remembered that my mom said anyone in Vermont should have four-wheel drive, and I prayed that I didn't today. The path slowly climbed a steep hill, seeming to almost wind around it. Then, I was there.

The house was old. Possibly ancient. It sat on the top of the hill, looking out over the valley below. Was it a Victorian? No, not really. Well, sort of, maybe. It had a round tower on one side, and the other had a huge glassed-in porch, the sun porch David had seen. There was a deep covered front porch, which would be the perfect spot to look out at the world when I didn't want to be inside completely.

Beside the house was a huge barn with a slate roof. The red slate pieces stood out from the traditional dark gray slate, and they had been set to show the date of the barn. 1842.

I walked slowly around the house and came to the pond. The pond sat below the house, and from the porch or the hill, you could see for miles. The mountains in the distance were strikingly beautiful. Wow.

That was it. I knew in that moment that I wanted this place. I wanted to bring it back to its former glory and live in it. I was going to have a house with a view. This was going to be my *home*. I had no idea why it had been given to me, but it had, and suddenly I felt filled with an unexpected sense of hope and happiness. I was going to have a *home* again.

The key to the front door was in my pocket. James had sent a building inspector to check out the place before me, so I knew it was structurally sound. Cautiously, I unlocked the front door, and walked into the foyer, looking at the curved staircase that climbed to the second floor.

How could Helen have owned this gem and not done anything with it?

I walked from room to room, each one better than the last.

Finally, I came to a larger set of double doors, which were closed. Opening them, I found what must have been the master bedroom. Well, now it was going to be mine. A wall of windows looked out over the front porch and had a view of the mountains that took my breath away.

I was in love. This house was me, through and through. Now I needed to figure out how to fix it up.

Chapter Six

A week later, I drove the interstate again, this time in my new Subaru, pulling a small trailer behind me. James' voice came through the phone speaker. "I still don't understand why you don't hire someone to do the work, and you could stay in Boston until the place was habitable."

"No. I told you. I want to be there to see the process. I'm meeting with a contractor tomorrow, the one you found for me. My plan is, if it works for me to hire him, is to have him work on the kitchen and bathroom first, the bathroom on the first floor. Then my office space and my bedroom. Once my office is ready, I'll move in and sleep on the pull-out couch. Then I'll have him go room by room through the place."

"It's going to cost a fortune."

"Probably. And I have the money, as you know."

"Fine."

At the same rental cottage, I unpacked what I would need to live for the next little while. As soon as I could, I wanted to move to the house, but until it was livable, at least I was nearby.

The next morning, I was sitting on the front porch of the house admiring the view when a big pickup truck came up the drive and parked next to my car. I stood up, walking toward the truck.

The man who got out was not what I expected. He was well over six feet tall and built like a Greek god. His hair was black as coal, his eyes a bright blue, and I must admit that I swallowed hard when I saw him. He was fucking gorgeous. I'd expected some older man with a beer belly and a toolbelt. This guy looked like he could be yachting off the Cape. Wow.

I gave my head a quick shake. I needed to get my head on straight and negotiate. After all, this was a huge project.

He held out his hand. "Ms. Brannan?"

"Please, call me Lily."

"Lily it is. I'm Tom, Tom Givens."

"Nice to meet you."

He looked around. "I'd heard about this place, but I've never been up here. The view is all that people said it was."

We walked and talked, and Tom took copious notes. Finally, we sat down on the porch. He flipped through his pad. "Look, to be honest, doing the project in sections as you described will make it more expensive. You are asking that I jump around a bit, and that always takes more time, therefore more money."

"I know. But I want to move in as soon as I can, so it's the only way I can see it working."

Tom shrugged. "As long as you understand that it's fine with me." He put down his pen. "Do you want a firm estimate on the whole project, or do it time and materials?"

I looked at him intently. "I'd prefer a decent estimate, and then updates every two weeks on how close you think it will be to the estimate."

"I can do that." He stood. "Let me get to work on that and I'll get back to you no later than tomorrow."

"That would be great."

Tom drove away, and I sat for a while longer. There were so many things I needed to get in place. Next on my list was to get internet to the property, so I could work from here. It was time to get moving.

By late afternoon, I had organized a landline and internet and cable to the house, had sent off a water sample to make sure the well was good, and called a chimney sweep to come check the wood stove and fireplaces. Now, I was tired and hungry, and I remembered seeing a pizza place in town. I was going to get pizza and come back and sit and write for a while.

Waiting at the pizza place, I scrolled through my emails, sending a few responses. I was so intent on what I was doing, I didn't realize that a man was watching me from across the room. Finally, when I realized that each time I looked up, he was looking at me, I put down my phone, and smiled. "Hello."

He stood up and walked over to my table. Second man I'd seen in one day, and this one was just as beautiful as the first. Damn, they grew hotties up here.

The man gestured toward the other side of the booth. "May I?"

"Sure."

He sat and held out one hand. "Roberto Romano."

"Lily Brannan."

"The author?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"And what are you doing in our small town?" He had a slight accent, Italian it seemed to me.

"I have a house here, so I've come up to do some renovations on it."

"Oh. I see."

"And you? What do you do here?"

He smiled, and for a moment the word 'dandy' crossed my mind. While Tom had the light eyes, Roberto had longish pitch-black hair, and eyes almost as dark. His skin tone echoed the accent. My guess was that he had been born elsewhere. "I teach at the college."

"And what do you teach?"

"Italian."

"Very impressive."

“Thank you.”

We chatted for a few more minutes until the young woman at the counter called my order number. “That’s me, I need to go.” I smiled. “It was nice to meet you, Roberto.”

“You too, Lily.” He paused. “Forgive me for being so bold, but would you like to join me for a drink tomorrow night? To welcome you to the area, of course.”

Wow! When was the last time a stranger had asked me out? It felt good. “I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll meet you at Zebra’s at six tomorrow?”

“Sound good. I’ll be there.”

The next evening, I dressed with more care than usual. I’m confident in my looks. After all, I spend a lot of time on things like headshots for my books, and I know that I’m pretty. I have a better than average body, and my eyes and hair are fabulous. Just like my mom’s. I pulled on black slacks and topped them with a soft blue blouse that made my eyes look even bluer. A little bit of makeup and I was ready.

I walked into Zebra’s nervously. My social life sucks, so doing something like this was new to me.

Roberto was waiting for me just inside the door. He smiled and leaned down to kiss my cheek. “Lily, you look beautiful. It’s so good to see you.”

I wanted to tell him he was beautiful too, but that seemed too much for a first drink “It’s a pleasure to see you too.”

A drink turned into two. Drinks turned into dinner, and then a walk through the quiet streets of the town, Roberto telling me stories about the history and the residents. By the time we’d left the restaurant, we were holding hands.

What the hell was wrong with me? I never jumped into anything, and here I was out with a man I’d only met the day before, and now I was wondering how quickly I could get him into my bed. God, he was so gorgeous. And sexy. And sweet and attentive. The little European mannerisms made him even hotter, like when he’d picked up my hand and kissed the back of it at one point during dinner.

Finally, we were back at the parking lot at Zebra’s. I leaned against my car. “I had a great time, thank you.”

“Me too, Lily. Would it be too much if I asked if we could do it again tomorrow night? I have a late class but could meet you around eight for a late dinner.”

“Why don’t you come to my place and I’ll make us dinner?”

He smiled, and reached out to stroke my cheek, and I thought I might pass out right then and there. He was doing things to my insides that should be illegal or at least controlled.

“*Bellissima*, I would love that, but that’s too soon.” Before I could feel like a complete ass, he leaned closer, his lips almost touching mine. “I would love to come to your house, but there, I know I won’t be able to control how much I want you, and you are too precious for just a fling. I want us to take our time.”

Oh... What the hell did I say to that? "Oh."

"What, *bella*? What is the matter?" As he asked, he pulled my hand up to his lips, kissing it lingeringly.

Jesus. What could I say? This amazing, gorgeous man was saying he liked me enough to not go to bed with me. Was this real? Usually, the men I know aren't that deep or subtle. I wasn't really sure how to feel... "Nothing, Roberto."

"Berto. I thought you had agreed to call me Berto, my *bella*."

"Berto. It just is unusual, that's all."

"You mean that a man would think you are such a treasure that you should be treated like the princess you are? That's what is a problem?"

Well, shit. When he put it like that, it sounded so good. "No, Berto, it's not a problem."

"Good, then let me take you out to dinner at Hemingway's, and then we can go for another walk."

"I'd love that."

Driving into the driveway of my rented cottage, I was tired. It had been a wonderful evening, romantic and fun. Wow, maybe coming back to Vermont was exactly what I had been needing to do.

Stepping inside, I was thankful that I had left lights on for me. I dropped my bag, changed into pajamas, and then turned on my laptop which I hadn't checked all day. There was an email from Tom with his estimate.

Sitting at the small wooden table in my rented cottage, I read the estimate over and over. It was more than fair. Shit... Having owned a brownstone in Boston, and renovated it, I was incredibly pleased by the cost of labor up here. I could do this!

I emailed him back. *Hi Tom, this looks great. When can you start and how much do you want for a deposit? Thanks so much, Lily.*

The next two weeks passed in a blur. A blur of excitement, emotion, and physical exertion. Each day, I was up long before sunrise, writing for hours. Then I'd head over to my house, working on cleaning inside, or working on cleaning up the property. I'd check in with Tom and his crew, then work until my body screamed with exhaustion. Then I'd head back to my cottage for a few more hours of writing, get myself cleaned up, and then go spend the evening with Berto.

In the weeks since we'd met, we'd progressed beyond handholding, but not as far as I would have liked. He was clear that he found me attractive, and he treated me like a precious jewel, like his princess. Several times each week, flowers arrived with a sweet note. When we couldn't get together because of his class schedule, we'd have long talks on the phone.

I knew he liked me. I knew he found me attractive. But he wouldn't come to my place or take me to his. Our dates were in public, or at least not at our homes. We sat by the lake one afternoon with a picnic. We went to the movies. But when the evening was over, he'd kiss me lingeringly and say good night.

I'd tried a couple times to move past this phase. And with a sweet gentility turn me down, saying it was still too soon. He'd whisper that it would be worth the wait, and I believed him, but damn, I was in a state of sexual frustration that was unusual for me.

A couple of times, I thought of taking a quick run to Boston, or seeing if David would stop up for the weekend, but that seemed wrong. I mean, seriously, I would be asking someone, him, or me, to drive for hours just because I couldn't get my seeming boyfriend to take me to bed. No, visiting David was out of the question. I needed to take things into my own hands, so to speak, and hope that Berto would be overcome with lust soon.

A week passed, and finally, I didn't go up to the house one day, needing to focus on some editing. I had just met my goal for the day, and stood up to stretch, when my cell rang.

It was Tom. "Hey, Tom."

"Lily! How are you? It was weird without you here today."

I smiled. "Yeah, I bet the guys really missed having me underfoot."

That made him laugh. "Lily, they love your energy and your excitement about the house, and the beer you bring on Fridays makes them happy as hell."

"Well, that's good."

"Hey, I wanted to tell you the kitchen and bathroom are done. We finished them today."

"Really?" I was thrilled. "I thought you said it would be sometime early next week."

"I did, but I had two extra sets of hands today, and we really bulled and jammed. Want to come see it?"

I was already grabbing my keys. "I'm on my way."

Walking through the door to the kitchen took my breath away. It was exactly what I'd always wanted. I mean, I know, I don't cook all that often, but when I do, I am a good cook. This was a space designed by me, for me, and it was gorgeous. Then I peaked in the bathroom and felt the same rush of joy all over again. Tom and his crew had worked miracles. I turned toward Tom, and I could feel the smile on my face. "Tom, I don't know what to say. It is absolutely perfect. I can't believe you pulled this all together in such a short time. Thank you."

Dressed in his faded jeans and a snug navy-blue t-shirt, he was the epitome of a hot guy who did hard physical labor. He was fucking gorgeous, and he gave me a lazy grin. "I am so glad you like it. I'm pleased with how it came out."

"You should be."

He gestured toward the fridge. "I put a bottle of champagne in there so you could celebrate this part of the project being completed."

I was touched. "Thank you." Suddenly, I felt shy. "Would you stay and have a glass with me?"

He suddenly looked uncomfortable, and I wondered if I'd put my foot in my mouth. Did he have a wife or girlfriend? He wasn't wearing a ring, but what did that really show? He paused, then quietly asked, "How will your boyfriend feel about you having a drink with me?"

“What?”

His eyes never left mine. “Everyone in town knows that you’re seeing Roberto Romano. I’m happy to have a drink with you Lily, I’d love to, but I also don’t want to cause an issue.”

I had to stifle a smile. Okay, this hunky sweetheart was worrying about stepping on Berto’s toes, and my ex-husband had wanted to have an open marriage. I sure knew how to find interesting sorts of people. “He’s not my boyfriend. We see each other, but it’s not like we are serious. Please, stay.”

“Sure. Let me make a call quickly, then I’ll be right back.” He grinned. “I took the liberty of washing some glasses for you, just in case you had a friend join you.”

“Thanks.”

He was back in a few short minutes. When he reappeared, I opened the fridge, and smiled when I saw there was also a plate of fruit and cheese with the wine. “Wow.”

He looked pleased with himself. “Well, it’s my idea, but I have a helper who put things together for me?”

I needed to know. “Wife? Girlfriend?”

He shook his head, and for a moment, I saw what seemed to be a flash of sadness in his eyes. “Mother.”

“Oh.” What did I say to that? Was he some kind of mama’s boy?

He reached over and took the bottle, quickly and efficiently opening it, and filling two flutes. “Lily, welcome home. It’s not done yet, but it’s getting there.”

I clinked my glass with his. “Thanks to you.” I took a sip, and then popped a perfect strawberry in my mouth. “Your mom can pick fruit. Please thank her for me.”

“I will.” He took a sip. “Go ahead and ask.”

By now, we were both sitting on the stools on either side of the kitchen island. I was facing him, and in the soft light of the overhead lantern, his eyes glowed warmly. Shit... He was gorgeous, and he didn’t seem to have a woman other than his mother in his life. “What do you mean?”

“Am I a mama’s boy, or what?”

That made me laugh, and I was momentarily afraid I would shoot champagne out of my nose. “Okay, are you?”

He shook his head. “No, my mom raised two independent sons and one even more independent daughter, mostly on her own because our dad died when I was four.”

“I’m sorry. My mom died when I was thirteen and I never knew my dad.”

“Then I’m sorry too.”

“Sorry, I interrupted. Please continue.”

“So, when I started this business, my plan was to get into the big commercial construction and make a fortune. But then my brother and his wife were killed, leaving my nephew orphaned at only two months old.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah. My sister lives out in California, and is literally, a stunt double. She constantly on the road and works crazy hours. My mom was going through breast cancer at the time my brother Jimmy was killed, and my sister-in-law had no family left. So, I adopted my nephew, and I bought the house next door to my mom’s. She helps with my son and with things like bringing champagne to a site when the job is done, or in your case, the first big section is done.”

Wow. Taking in a baby and adopting him as a single guy. That was ballsy... “And your son?”

“Is four now. He’s a little hellion, smart as can be, independent, loves to help. He’s a great guy.”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

“Nah, I’m lucky to have him. Before him, I was so focused on making it big, and I was doing it. And I was selling my soul to work on projects that I really hated. Since he came to live with me, I remembered that there is more to life. Playing trucks in the dirt with him is way better than bidding on a huge projects.”

I tipped my head, looking at Tom through newish eyes. “I’d like to meet him.”

“I’d like that too.” He grinned. “When we get to the outside work, sometimes he comes to help.”

“Cool.”

Sitting in the kitchen, we finished the bottle of champagne, and ate the cheese, fruit, and crackers. And we talked and laughed. Finally, Tom stood up and stretched. “Okay, Lily, I need to head home.”

I stood up and wobbled slightly. It made him smile. “Lily, did you eat anything today other than what you just had?”

I shook my head. “No. I was working and sometimes I forget to eat.”

That made him start to chuckle. “Jesus, Lily, you’ve got to be all of a hundred pounds soaking wet, and you just had half a bottle of champagne on an empty stomach.”

“Hundred and nine.”

He was confused. “What?”

“A hundred and nine. That’s what I weigh.”

He held out his hand. “Thanks for the clarification. Now come on, I’ll give you a ride back to the cottage, and will get you tomorrow to pick up your car.”

I was shocked. “I can drive myself!”

“No, city girl, you can’t. You’re buzzed, and driving on these roads, when you still don’t know them that well, isn’t a good idea. Come on.”

He was right. “Fine.”

As he drove me to my cottage, Tom told me about the places we were passing. As opposed to when Berto had walked me through town, Tom’s information was funny, personal, and told me a lot more about the community I was joining.

At the cottage, he pulled up and parked. “Okay, Lily. There you go. Get some more food, and some sleep.”

I smiled, feeling strangely protected. “I will, thanks.”

“I will be up at the house for a bit tomorrow morning. Want me to come get you on my way, so you can get your car? Otherwise, I can take you back later in the day.”

“On your way would be great. Just text me when you are headed this way.”

“Will do.”

“Night, Tom. Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

Walking inside, I felt almost giddy. That had been fun. Silly fun. We’d talked about all sorts of things, and laughed, and those laughs were needed, that’s for sure.

Just then, my phone rang. “Berto!”

His tone was curt, something that I’d never heard from him before. “Where have you been?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have been calling you for hours. Where have you been?”

Okay, now let me be clear. My mother used to say, “I’m single, and over 21, no one gets to ask me where I’ve been.” And frankly, that’s been my motto too...

“Berto, they finished the kitchen and bathroom at the house today, so I went to see it.”

“And that took hours? What, did you need to spend time with that contractor?”

Ewwwww. The way he said ‘contractor’ it was almost an obscenity. Ouch. “Berto, I don’t like your tone. Not your tone toward me, or your tone about Tom.”

“And I don’t like that my woman is off with another man.”

Now my temper was coming out. It takes me a while to get mad, but when it happens, well, let’s just say that when I was a teenager, my temper usually got me into physical fights.

“I’m not your woman. We are seeing each other, but that does not involve possessing me. And I can be with whomever I want.” I took a deep breath. “Good night, Berto.”

And I hung up and turned off my phone.

Chapter Seven

Two more weeks had passed since the night I'd had champagne with Tom. The next day, when I'd gotten back to the cottage with my car, there had been a huge bouquet of roses waiting for me on the front steps with a note from Berto. It said, *Bella mia, I am so sorry for how I acted. The idea of you being away from me even for a minute makes me crazy, and to think you were spending time with another man was more than I could handle. Please forgive me – your Berto.*

I'd let him sit and spin for a while. Okay. Like an hour after I got home. Then I called him, let him grovel and accepted an invitation to join him for dinner at a small Mexican place in the next town.

After that, Berto had been incredibly careful to not upset me, but also had been more demonstrative. It was nice, but still, if he cared that much, why wasn't he trying to take it to the next level?

The day before, Tom's crew had finished my office on the sun porch, and the dining room and parlor. Each day, the house was coming back to life more and more. Today, I was officially moving in there, leaving the cottage, and setting myself up in my office. I could sleep on that pull-out couch for a while, if I could be in my own house.

The next morning, I was up long before sunrise, and I made a batch of blueberry muffins and brewed extra coffee for the guys. Over the last weeks, I'd gotten to know them, and really liked them. They made me laugh, were impressed that I was a writer, but not too impressed since I couldn't do a lot of practical things, and they didn't worry about offending me. It was fun!

After joining them for muffins and coffee, I settled into my office, my writing table already set up exactly where I wanted it. Later in the day, I would set up the rest of the office, but overnight, I'd figured out a plot issue in my latest work, and I couldn't wait to get to writing.

Five pages in, I was cruising. When the writing comes easy, I can't work fast enough or long enough. Time melts away, and it was happening in a big way.

Five more pages, and I was elated. This was fabulous! I stretched my shoulders, knowing I should stand for a bit. Reaching down, I hit the button to raise the desk so I could stand and work. Just then, I heard Tom's voice. "Lily!"

"In my office."

His voice sounded off. "You should come see this."

"Where are you?"

"In the front bedroom."

I hurried up the stairs. Whatever it was, I wanted to see it quickly and get back to work. "What is it?"

"Come in here, please."

I walked into what would be my bedroom with an odd sense of foreboding. There was now a gaping hole in the wallboard, which I had known was going to happen as they wired the room properly. But under that wallboard? A piece of what looked like stained glass.

“What the hell is that?” My voice cracked with visceral shock.

“A window. But it wasn’t a window here. It’s like it was just hidden between the interior and exterior walls.” Tom carefully picked up the large piece and took two steps so the sun’s rays could stream through the panes.

The last thing I remember was seeing the image lit with the sunlight, and feeling the world fade away around me as I slumped to the floor.



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Kris’ novel *Tomorrow and Yesterday* is available on Amazon and other online retailers, as is her memoir *Of Grief, Garlic, and Gratitude*.

Late 2021 or early 2022, Kris will release her newest novel, *Competing with the Dead Man* with Between the Lines Publishing. Three other novels, *That One Small Omission*, *More Than I Can Say*, and *That Missed Call* will also be re-released by Between the Lines Publishing in the winter of 21/22.