

# MAY DAY

By Jess Lourey

## Chapter 1

Tuesday marked my tenth official day alone at the library, but the heady draw of being my own boss had worn off. I didn't even like the smell of the lilac bushes outside the open windows anymore. The old black circle-dial phone was taunting me. I wrestled the urge to call the number to the Battle Lake Motel where Jeff was staying. He knew we were supposed to meet last night, and he hadn't come. I needed to find a good space with my emotions where I could be cool, not shrill, inviting but not needy, before I called him.

I tried not to dwell on the fact that the only decent man in town had stood me up. Actually, he may have been the only literate, single man in a 70-mile radius who was attractive *and* attracted to me. The warm buzz that was still between my legs tried to convince the dull murmur in my head that it was just a misunderstanding. To distract myself from thoughts of Jeff's laugh, mouth, and hands, I downed a couple aspirin for my potato chip hangover and began the one job I truly enjoyed at the library: putting away the books.

I glanced at the spines of the hard covers in my hands and strolled over to the PI-Sca aisle, thinking the only thing I didn't like so far about the job was picking magazine inserts off the floor. Certainly the reader saw them fall, but without fail, gravity was too intense to allow retrieval except by a trained library staff member. I bet I found three a day. But as I walked down the carpeted aisle, I discovered a new thing not to like: there was a guy lying on the tight-weave Berber with his legs lockstep straight, his arms crossed over his chest, and a reference book opened on his face. He was wearing a familiar blue-checked shirt, and if he was who I thought he was, I knew him intimately. This created a sour citrus taste at the back of my throat. Alone, the library aisle wasn't strange; alone, the man wasn't strange. Together, they made my heart slam through my knees. I prodded his crossed legs with my sandal-clad toe and felt no warmth and no give.

My eyes scoured the library in a calm panic, and I was aware of my neck creaking on its hinges. I could smell only books and stillness, tinged with a faint coppery odor. Everything was in order except the probably dead man laid out neatly on the carpeting, wearing the same flannel I had seen him in two days earlier. I wondered chaotically if dead people could lie, if they still got to use verbs after they were gone, and if maybe this was the best excuse ever for missing a date. Then I had a full-body ice wash, five years old all over again, a nightmare pinning me to my bed as I silently mouthed the word "mom."

Had proximity to me killed him? My mind flashed grainy, reel-to-reel clips of my father pushing me on the swings before his brutal death. I veered to thoughts of another dead body, one I stumbled across twenty years ago. It was a newborn kitten squashed on a gravel road, so little that its eyes never had a chance to open. I wanted to bury the kitten in a shoebox, but my seven-year-old brain was too easily distracted to dig a hole that big. I settled for wrapping it in a pink sock and hiding it in the woods and saying a solemn, loving goodbye. I was never again able to find the spot where I had deposited it. Now it was kitty bones in the dirt, and Jeff was going to be man bones in the dirt, and some waxy part of me realized that I was losing my grip.

I shook my head once, like a dog, and pinched my ear, yanking myself back from crazy. The horror let up a little, and I found myself bizarrely wondering what Jeff's face looked like. His body was neatly laid to rest in a grotesque homage to those of us who fall asleep while reading, and the open encyclopedia shielded his face. I noticed it was the twelfth volume, containing all of the noteworthy "L" words, and then I was surprised to observe my hand pulling the reference book off him.

His face didn't have that slack-mouthed look of the processed dead. Rather, he appeared to be in an irritated sleep, his lips unyielding, his beautiful straight nose still, and his eyes tightly shut. Except for the clean circle of a hole in the center of his forehead, I would have thought he was napping. I knelt down, careful not to touch his body, and leaned in. The symmetry of the hole surprised me, as did the complete lack of blood around him. It was like someone took a hole punch to a mannequin's head, except for the angry, reddish-black contents I could see inside. I was perched inches from his body and could smell his cedar wood bath soap mixed with something sweet-rotten. Solid coldness radiated from him.

I wanted to touch him. I needed to gather him in my arms and shake him awake and kiss the soft spot under his earlobe until he tingled. Then a buzzing fly landed on his body and danced over the cold earth of his face toward the hole in his head. My stomach churned, and I turned away. It was at that precise angle that I spotted the small, darker shape in the shadow of the newest Anne Rice book butting out from the bottom shelf a few feet away. At first I thought it was a magazine insert because of its size and shape, but then realized it was too thick. I gently rested the encyclopedia back over Jeff's head, careful to keep it on the same page. I pushed myself off the floor and reached toward the shape in the shadow. It was a fancy envelope, thick with something, on which was scrawled "For Your Eyes Only" in ornate writing. I grabbed it just as the front door of the library opened with a somber dong, making me realize my heart was still in my chest because it stopped beating. I was pretty sure my urethra relaxed a little, too, but I was out the door in such a flash of speed and light that the underwear I didn't wear would have dried too quickly to notice.

I zipped past my first live patron of the day, Mrs. Berns. She was one of those elderly ladies who shaves her eyebrows and then pencils them in, giving her a permanently shocked look completely appropriate for this occasion. Once in the parking lot, I shook myself from head to toe. Mrs. Berns followed behind.

"What's wrong, dear? See a spider?" she asked.

"Bigger, Mrs. Berns. Can you get the police? I think we need some help here." The calmness of my voice amazed me. Living life at a distance has some benefits in crisis times. I smiled ruefully at her as I stuffed the envelope into the back of my jeans and covered it with my shirt.

Mrs. Berns squinted her eyes suspiciously and looked reluctant to leave. Needing the police for something other than underage drinking or toilet papering a house was big news in a small town, and it was currency at the Battle Lake Senior Sunset where Mrs. Berns lived. Something cop-related could get her a week's worth of lemon bars.

"I'll wait right here and not let anyone in until you get back, Mrs. Berns. If you hurry, you can beat the police." This was a small lie, maybe. The police station was one block over and Mrs. Berns was closer in build to a stewing chicken than a spring chicken, but I wanted to at least give her a chance. I suppose I could have gone myself, but I was feeling a little proprietary about the body now that I was distanced from the horror of it. After all, I had found him, in more

ways than one. Once Mrs. Berns was gone, I went over to the bushes and heaved until my stomach was as empty as my heart.

## Chapter 2

It all started with a cockroach.

Don't get me wrong. I'd had bad days before in Minneapolis, but this one was the mutha of all bad days. I had moved to the Cities straight from high school, on the run from Paynesville, the small Minnesota town where I played hide and seek in a cornfield that stretched for miles, and learned the guilty pleasure of drinking stolen, sweet wine in an abandoned farmhouse and the delight of wearing Guess? jeans with a rainbow shirt while I curled my bangs into the perfect tube. Then I grew up but quick and headed east to Minneapolis the minute it was legal, high school diploma in hand. I was tired of the small town gossip and people referring to me as "Manslaughter Mark's daughter."

In Minneapolis, I quickly learned two things: anonymity is lonely, and being able to make the perfect curlicue on a Dairy Queen cone didn't cut one many breaks in the big city. I was more than a little fish in a big pond—I was Bananarama in the land of Hüsker Dü. I grew out my perm and let my dark hair flow long and natural, I stopped wearing mascara and eye shadow to bring out my deep-set gray eyes, and I started smoking clove cigarettes. I even relaxed enough to cease being a walking foot watcher when I realized nobody within 100 miles had heard of my dad, or cared that I had gone to the prom with Linda Dooley, the girl who always smelled like farm, because no guy would touch me with a ten-foot fishing pole. I blended in and earned my BA in English in under six years.

Somehow, though, I morphed into one of those slack-eyed West Bankers who waited tables during the day so they could afford to drink at the music clubs at night. I squeezed in a few graduate classes so there seemed to be a point to it all, but I started to feel like I was back in Paynesville only with more places to drink. My dad had been a heavy boozer for as long as I could remember, and I knew I would have to make some changes soon before my denial card expired.

Enter the cockroach, who set in motion a sequence of key events that slapped me on the ass and sent me to Battle Lake, the land of no return. I had been discussing my day-to-day existence with Alison, my supervisor and friend at Perfume River, a Vietnamese restaurant I had waited tables at for six years.

"It just seems like I'm not where I'm supposed to be, you know?" We were wrapping silverware in paper napkins for easy grabbing during the lunch rush. It was a sunny March day, and the fresh-mopped floor was soon to be a salty, slushy gray.

"What about Brad? I thought you two were doing great."

"I don't know. He always seems distracted when he comes over, which now he only does after bar close." Brad and I had been dating for five months. He was cute, in a blonde Jim Morrison sort of way, and he was in a band. That had been enough.

"Maybe you should get a tattoo." Alison put the last silverware package on top of the pyramid as the first customers walked in. "I got 'em."

She sat them in my section, and I grabbed a couple glasses of ice water and strolled out.

"How are you two doing?" I could tell from her immaculate makeup and his manicured fingernails that they weren't the regular college crowd we drew.

By way of an answer, he sneered at me. "What are your specials?"

"All our meals are \$4.95 or less. We think everything is special." I capped this off with my best perky smile.

The woman gave a slight eye roll and turned her page. "How many shrimp come with the shrimp and bamboo shoots?"

"Six."

"Well isn't that special." She flipped the page again. "I'll take your vegetarian spring rolls, no carrots in them, around them, or in the area they are prepared in. Do you understand?"

I could feel the skin at the base of my neck crawl. "Sure."

"Then why aren't you writing it down?"

I wrote down "VN1," the code for spring rolls, and made a mental note to rub a whole carrot up and down both rolls like it was their wedding night. "Got it."

"Can I see it? What you wrote. I need to make sure you got it right."

I glared over at Alison, who was wiping out ashtrays. She raised her eyebrows and gave me a "better you than me" look.

"Sure." I handed the woman my pad. As I did so, a black cockroach peeked at me from behind the Kikkoman soy sauce bottle. Its shivering antennae felt the air, possibly sensing the tension and wondering if it should come back at a better time. I had seen cockroaches at the dingy Mexican restaurant I worked at when I first moved to the Cities, but never at Perfume River. Ba, the owner, was meticulous about order and sanitation in his kitchen. I shook my head at the little guy.

The woman grabbed the pen out of my hand, scribbled "no carrots" next to the VN1, underlined the words three times, and handed the pad back to me, a smug look on her face. "You must not work for tips."

I think I may have actually been leaning forward to spit in her hair when the cockroach darted to the middle of the table and stood stock still, basking in its public premiere. The no-carrots woman screamed and jumped up, knocking the table over. The soy sauce crashed to the ground just as a table of ten walked in.

"You horrible dirty people! Dirty people! I'll call the health department. I'll have you shut down!" The woman's shrieking reached a glass-shattering pitch.

The man with her handed me a card out of his wallet, said "Expect to hear from me," and like that they were out the door.

I looked down at the card. "David Jones, Jones and Jones Law Offices. Somebody's Gonna Pay."

It was at that point that Ba rushed out of the kitchen. When I explained what had happened, he was so upset that he made me go home. Forever. It didn't do any good to tell him that it wasn't my fault. I was now and everlastingly associated with cockroaches in his mind.

I walked home with my hands thrust in my pockets, my face down against the biting wind. I was so intent on not thinking that I almost ran down a man in a street-length sheepskin coat.

"Sorry. I didn't see you."

His close-set eyes lit up when I addressed him. "Wanna buy a guitar pedal? I have reverb. \$50."

"What?"

He opened his coat and showed me a bag of guitar pedals. His breath smelled medicinal up close.

“I don’t play guitar.”

“Maybe you could learn. Or what about your boyfriend? You gotta have a boyfriend.”

“No, thanks.”

I tried to walk around him, but he put himself back in front of me and dropped his pants, quick like a wink. “How about some of that?”

His cold weenie stared sadly at the ground, looking for all the world like an overcooked green bean on a big, white plate. Before I could think of a suitable response, someone brushed past the Bean Flasher. He packed up his treats, gave me the peace sign, and ran off in the other direction.

“Thanks for making a shitty day a little bit shittier!” I yelled at his back. I stomped the two blocks back to my apartment, a gray cloud with a black lining over my head until I saw Brad’s bicycle parked by the back door. My doubts about dating a man who biked in the winter gave way to relief that there was someone at home for me.

Brad didn’t have a key and he wasn’t out front, so I figured he must have gone to the store. I entertained thoughts of him right now buying flowers to surprise me with or fixings to make dinner for us both. He wasn’t normally the romantic type, but after my day so far, I deserved to dream.

I went inside to wait for him, passing the two other apartments on the second floor on the way. My three neighbors and I all lived above an art supplies store, and our apartments were actually refurbished offices. They had fifteen-foot ceilings, hardwood floors, and were cheap. One neighbor was a law student and the other was a professional saxophone player in his 60s. His name was Ted, and we had had many great hall conversations in passing. His niece had been watching his apartment for the last month while Ted was on tour, and I was surprised to hear from the music wafting from her 1B that she was home in the middle of a weekday.

As I was turning the key in my door, I realized it wasn’t just any music I heard coming from Ted’s apartment. It was the very hard to find music of Portuguese flute players that I had special ordered for Brad’s birthday last month.

“Oh no you di-uhnt,” I whispered to myself as I tiptoed over to the door kitty corner from mine and slapped my ear to it. I couldn’t hear anything inside except the music and some rustling. I kneeled down to peek through the old-fashioned keyhole on the leftover office door that served as Ted’s front entrance but could only see prisms of light glinting through the houseplants.

The quiet part of my brain that some people might call my common sense told me that Ted’s niece could also like Portuguese flutists and that I should just go in my apartment and wait for Brad to show up. I rarely listened to that part of my brain.

Instead, I tiptoed back down the hall and tried the door handle to Ted’s outdoor garden space. I had seen his patio area from mine and knew that it was directly in front of his apartment’s skylights, a feature my apartment didn’t share. His patio door was locked. I considered breaking it down, or just knocking on Ted’s front door, but both ideas lacked the stealth I was after. I was feeling crazy, but not crazy enough not to know it.

I thumbed through my keys and found the tiny one that unlocked my patio door. I hadn’t been out here since I had cleaned my herb and tomato pots in October. The area was small, maybe ten feet by five, and it was covered with brittle March snow accented by a chute of gutter ice. There was also a rusty ladder leading to the roof. Before the quiet part of my brain could organize its arguments, I climbed up the ladder, onto the roof, and crawled over to Ted’s side of the building.

The March wind hit me like needles up this high, but the rush I always got from acting instead of waiting kept me moving forward. When I was by Ted's skylights, I army crawled over and peered down. Staring back at me was my second penis of the day, and here it wasn't even noon. Brad was tied up to Ted's loft, about four feet from my face, and if his eyes hadn't been closed in ecstasy, he would have seen me staring down at him.

Ted's niece, whose name I was really going to have to find out, was swaying toward him like a naked snake charmer, only she was on her knees because there wasn't enough headroom in the loft to stand. When she got to him, she put her mouth near the top of his penis, and from my angle, I swear it looked like she was blowing and tickling him at the same time. For an absurd moment, I wondered if she was one of those poor women who had taken the term "blowjob" too literally, when I realized what she was doing. She was playing Brad's flute, accompanied by the nice Portuguese musicians I had bought for his listening pleasure. I had seen enough.

I crawled carefully back down the ladder, the March wind no match for the fumes coming from my head. I considered storming into the apartment and demanding an explanation, but Brad wasn't clever enough to juggle shame and an erection at the same time. Besides, I hated confrontations. The shitter was I had been thinking of breaking up with him, and now he got the last word. Or the last note, in this case.

No, clearly there was only one way this could end well for me. I let myself out the back door, removed the nuts holding the front tire onto Brad's bike, and went for a walk. When I returned home that night, having decided nothing except that my life sucked and today would forever be known as Cocks'n'Roach Day, I was grateful to get a call from my good friend Sunshine Waters. She and I had met through my college roommate freshman year and had hit it off instantly. She was funny, smart, and wasn't afraid of chocolate. She also lived on a little slice of heaven in Battle Lake, Minnesota, a town of 798 people that was three hours west of the Twin Cities and two hours north of Paynesville. When she turned 21, her parents had willed her 103 acres of land and lakeshore, with a doublewide trailer—gray with maroon trim—in the center with various outbuildings sprinkled around it.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mir! It's me. Sunny. What's up? You sound funny. You OK?"

I wiped my eyes. "Sure, if you consider losing your job, getting flashed by an out of work guitarist with a penis like a microwaved legume, and finding your boyfriend cheating on you OK."

"You caught Brad cheating on you, huh?"

"Yeah. The good part is he doesn't know I know, so I technically get to break up with him."

"He was a weasel anyhow."

"I know."

"Hmm. You want to hear my good news?"

"Will it make me feel like even more of a loser?"

"Probably."

"I'm all ears."

"I'm in love. You remember Rodney Johnson?"

I riffled through my list of Battle Lake names and pulled up a picture of a short, dark-haired guy who was always smiling. "The guy who took a girl to her prom when he was 31?"

"That was a few years ago. He's changed. He's a real sweetheart."

I sighed and switched the phone from my right to my left ear. Sunny picked up boyfriends like old ladies picked up cats. “Well good. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“I am happy. Gotta favor to ask, too.”

“Yeah?” I was at the window, and I made a fist, pressing the side of my hand in the frost edging the glass, and then I dotted five little toes over the top of it. A baby snow-foot.

“I’m moving to Alaska for a few months. I decided. It’s for sure. Rodney has a job lined up on a fishing boat, and we can make \$1000 a week.”

“When?” As far as I knew, she knew no one in Alaska and hadn’t lived anywhere but Battle Lake her whole 28 years. She must really like this one.

“The first week of April. Here’s the favor. I need someone to housesit when I leave.”

She paused, and I didn’t fill the empty air. Lord help me, if I had known what I was in store for, I would have screamed “No!” with my last my breath.

“You can garden, you can hike, you can do all that stuff you used to like to do.” C’mon, Mira. If it doesn’t work out, you can always leave. You’ve got nothing to lose.” Her voice was rushed but cocky. “You got to get back to the dirt, Mira.”

“I don’t know. Battle Lake is so small. What would I do there?”

“The library is hiring, and you can always waitress.” Sunny’s voice changed to a more serious tone. “I need you Mira. I can’t bring Luna with, and nobody else will watch her. And I need someone to make sure the pipes don’t freeze. I think Rodney is the one, Mira. I don’t want to blow it.”

Sunny always thought whichever guy she was with was the one, but she very rarely asked for help. I looked around. Ricki Lake was making over spandex-clad large chicks on my TV, my stove was hissing out dry heat in my kitchen, I no longer had a job or a boyfriend, and I sat in my all-purpose room waiting for my life to start. Still, I hesitated. What sort of person just gets up and moves, and to Battle Lake of all places? I cradled the phone in the crook of my shoulder and put my hand to the graffitied window just as a pigeon crashed into it. I jumped back. The bird fluttered to the roof across the street, dazed and confused.

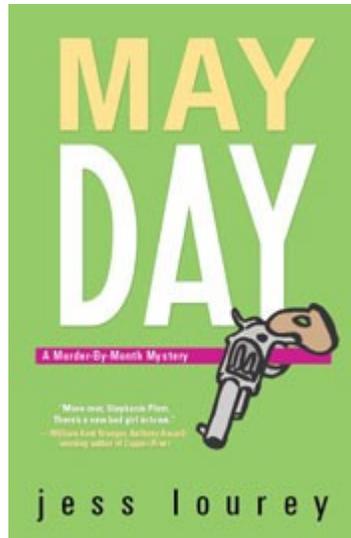
I sighed. “If you need me, Sunny, I’ll be there.”

It only took a couple weeks to sever, or at least put on hold, my Minneapolis ties. Alison, Shannon, and Maruta from Perfume River had a going away party for me, and I left with an armload of cockroach memorabilia, and even a pair of penis earrings. There were a couple women in my grad classes who made me laugh, and I left messages on their answering machine saying I was withdrawing this semester. I did the same with Professor Bundy, the journalism teacher whose class I was haphazardly attending. He told me I had a real talent for writing and should be sure to come back. I considered calling the Financial Aid office at the U, but they were pathologically unhelpful, and I would have to repay my loan whether or not I was in class. I had a month to month lease that I ended with a phone call.

My books and my clothes I tossed into tall kitchen garbage bags with yellow cinch ties at the top and stuffed them in my two-door, brown 1985 Toyota Corolla’s trunk. I put the same type of bags, only more gently, around my plants to protect them from the cold and transported them to the back seat and floor. My cat Tiger Pop, named after my second favorite candy and his mottled, white-splashed fur, was brought down last and unwillingly. I set his litter box and water dish on the floor of the passenger seat, knowing full well he would be attached to my shoulder and howling the whole two and a half hour trip.

I looked around my first apartment for the last time. The living room that was also my dining room and bedroom looked beige and lonely. Even the blue, green, and yellow watercolor

willow trees I had painted my first summer in the apartment didn't add life. I realized they would be painted over within the month. My secondhand orange-flowered couch and mismatched chairs would be brought to the dump, my three pots, five bowls, and twelve plastic cups would be recycled or trashed, and all traces of my existence would vanish. Ten years, and I had nothing but an English degree and a budding drinking problem to show for it. Now I knew how people ended up in small towns. Battle Lake, here I come.



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