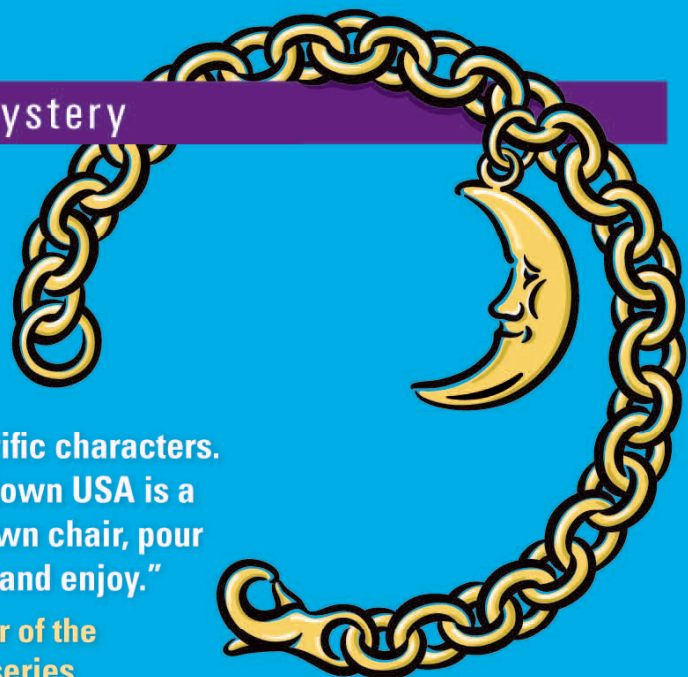


# AUGUST MOON

A Murder-By-Month Mystery



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j e s s l o u r e y

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**AUGUST  
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*June Bug*

*Knee High by the Fourth of July*

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*September Mourn*

# AUGUST MOON

A Murder-By-Month Mystery

j e s s l o u r e y

MIDNIGHT INK  
WOODBURY, MINNESOTA



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## **DEDICATION**

For Jen, who treats me like her little sister  
even when I don't deserve it.





# ONE

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AS I BRUSHED MY hair for the seventh time, I made a deal with myself. If Johnny knocked on my door tonight, I would open up to him like a lilac on a golden May morning. If he didn't show, I was packing it up and moving back to Minneapolis to join a nunnery or finish my grad program and become a dried-up, cat-collecting, fist-shaking, asexual English professor. No one could claim I hadn't given Battle Lake a chance, not after what I'd been through the last three months. But oh, did I hope that Johnny would do right by me tonight.

While I waited, I tried reading an old copy of *Vanity Fair* magazine that I had recycled from the library, but I didn't even have a sufficient attention span to follow Christopher Hitchens' latest rant. A *Frasier* rerun on my grainy TV was no more engaging. I settled on spending most of the early night beaming at my animals. Johnny Leeson was coming to my doublewide tonight!

My long dark hair was loose and natural. Except for the wisp of mascara around my gray eyes and shiny, honey-flavored gloss on my lips, I was makeup free. I didn't want to do the Mary Kay bait-and-switch, where you are all curled hair, smoky eyes, and sultry lips at the beginning of the make-out session and scary, oven-baked clown face at the end. With me, what you saw was what you got, which might explain why there weren't a lot of men seeing and getting in my life. Johnny had spent time with me at my worst, though, from inarticulate and dorky to bruised and battered, and he had still asked to come over tonight. I hoped our transition from friends to lovers would be a smooth one. I had tried the relationship conversion before and found it to be like that moment when you stroll onto the dance floor and shift from walker to dancer—if you think about it too much, you mess it all up.

I watched anxiously through the kitchen window for his headlights to appear down the driveway and pushed open all the windows on the back of the house so I would hear his car if I didn't see him approach. I breathed in deep the spicy woodsmoke-and-zinnias scent of Minnesota in July and listened to the clock tick a happy beat. Johnny Leeson was going to be with me tonight! I moved from the couch to the kitchen table and then to the edge of my bed, where I tried reading a book. When the clock ticking began to sound a little too much like Chinese water torture, I slid a CD onto my stereo. I blipped through Sting, the Indigo Girls, and Gillian Welch before I figured Norah Jones would convey the desired attitude of suave aloofness and cool availability that I was after.

The moody jazz, however, soon became monotonous, and then taunting, as the minutes ticked off the clock and fell to the floor

like gravestones. At first, I consoled myself by recalling that Johnny had simply said “tonight,” and not given a specific time. Tonight means different things to different people. I kept my optimism revved for nearly an hour after that before I moved on to worrying. Johnny was a decent guy, and he would have called to cancel if he could have. By eleven p.m., however, I was darkly pissed.

I stabbed the “stop” button on my CD player and blew out the beeswax candles that had been melting toward extinction. Apparently, Johnny had had second thoughts. Fine. That’s fine. A romantic evening with him probably would have had a terrible ending anyhow, with me discovering that he was a lousy lover, or a collector of fingernail clippings.

That’s what I was telling myself as I walked past my front door, angrily ripping off the cute rainbow T-shirt I had chosen just for the occasion, the one that made me look like I had boobs. When, I wondered fiercely, would interactions with men stop being excruciating experiences I had to learn from, instead of nurturing relationships that I could grow in? I rubbed itchy tears from my eyes, angry for even getting my hopes up. I should have known from the start. Relationships and me went together as well as dark chocolate and sauerkraut. A cloister loomed in my future, or maybe a job teaching English at a rural technical college.

That’s when the first knock came. I jumped away from the door and yanked my T-shirt over my head. I hadn’t heard or seen a car. Then came a second knock, and my heart and loins did a mighty leprechaun kick. The person on the other side of this door was going to decide whether I returned to Minneapolis/St. Paul to pursue a thrilling career in the English language arts, or stayed in Battle Lake, wrapped in the loving arms of Mr. John Leeson.

Instead of waiting for the third knock, I ripped the door open, naked hope in my eyes. The hope quickly turned to shock, and then confusion. Actually, I shouldn't have been surprised at the body in front of me. This was Battle Lake, after all. Anything can happen here, and it usually does.

"Kennie?" At first I thought she had gotten in a paintball fight, but then I realized she had been crying so hard that her bountiful makeup was running riot over her features. See? Oven-baked clown face finds the habitual makeup wearer every time. You're better off facing the world with an honest mug.

"Yeah." She pushed her way past me, tripped over Luna, my now-growling dog, and didn't give my cat, Tiger Pop, a glance. If she had checked him out, I'm pretty sure she would have seen he was smiling. He likes drama. "What you got to drink?"

Oh, oh. The only thing worse than Kennie without an accent was Kennie on a bender. I had gotten to know the mayor of Battle Lake pretty well over the past five months. She was not your average west-central Minnesota woman—fake Southern accent, tight clothes, cosmetics applied with a putty knife, crispy blonde hair, and a controlling streak that would make Martha Stewart blush. The fake accent was what set her apart from the crowd. Rumor had it she was spooning Gary Wohnt, the local police chief, but I wasn't much for gossip. All I knew for sure was that Kennie was two clicks away from crazy, and somehow she made it work.

"I think there's some vodka in the cupboard over the fridge." Think, my ass. I had bought two liters of Absolut last week, after I had lurched over my third dead body in as many months. I had managed to save half the second bottle, but only by supplementing it with wine. When relocating to Battle Lake last March by re-

quest of my good friend Sunny, who needed a house- and dog-sitter while she flitted off to Alaska with her mono-browed lover, my goal had been to take a life timeout—get sober, rest, reprioritize—and then launch myself back into the mix with both fists swinging. A small town is the perfect place to do that, right? Ha! Welcome to Battle Lake, Minnesota, where the women are churchgoers, the men like to hunt, and the body count is above average.

On the surface, Battle Lake was picturesque. You could reach it on a straight shot up Interstate 94 and a little jog north. The journey took about three hours from Minneapolis, and you'd swear it was worth every minute of that drive when you crested that last hill and spotted the red-topped water tower, tree-lined Lake Street, and wide-open, smiling faces. The town was packed with antique and knick-knack shops, an art gallery, a full-service drugstore, and its very own accountant, health clinic, municipal liquor store, dentist, chiropractor, and law firm. In the summer, there was even a gingerbread shed right off the main drag where you could buy vegetables on the honor system, leaving your folded dollars in the cash box. People didn't lock their doors in Battle Lake, and if you went in the ditch, you'd have someone pulling over to help you before you even got out of the car.

The downside was that everyone in town would know you had slipped in the ditch just as quick. Plus, you could only get two channels on your TV, and short of counting dead bodies and drinking, there wasn't much to do. I had my gardening, of course, and two jobs, one as the librarian for the Battle Lake Public Library, open 10–5 Monday through Saturday, and the other as the on-call reporter and regular columnist for the *Battle Lake Recall*, which came out every Wednesday and sold for fifty cents a copy. I

was horribly underqualified to run a library, but a series of calamitous events in May had pushed me into a promotion. Mrs. Berns, the local bawdy old lady, helped me by shelving books and checking out patrons, and we limped along just fine at the library.

I wrote two columns for the *Recall*. One was “Battle Lake Bites,” and it featured a regional recipe each week. The other column was cleverly titled “Mira’s Musings,” and contained updates on local events. You wouldn’t think that would be an edge-of-your-seat affair in a town of 797 people, but you would be wrong. I had just composed a doozy of an article about the kidnapped Chief Wenonga and Big Ole statues, the former a twenty-three-foot fiberglass sex bomb that normally resided directly off the western shore of Battle Lake, and the latter a pasty, twenty-eight-foot fiberglass Norwegian “warrior” with a skirt, who was supposed to live in Alexandria, Minnesota, but who had disappeared along with the Chief. Call it a run-of-the-mill July for this whacked-out town.

However, despite the lethal mix of quirky locals and mischievous mayhem that made up Battle Lake, I had been eking out my place in the town. People waved to me on the streets, I knew where to find a good cup of coffee and some killer Tator Tot hotdish, and both my jobs centered around reading and writing, the two consistent loves of my life. And I had been deliciously excited to make a little extra room for Johnny Leeson, local hottie. I didn’t normally go for the Scandinavian type, but his dirty blonde hair was curly thick, his eyes were so blue I swear I could see waves in them, and he had these tanned, muscular hands perfect for pulling you close for a brook-no-objections, Harlequin-romance-cover, marauding-pirate kiss. Or so I had imagined, during many a long hot shower.

Better than his looks, though, Johnny was smart. He was a local who had gone on to earn a B.S. in horticulture and been accepted into the University of Wisconsin-Madison's doctoral program in same. He had been visiting his parents this past spring, set to start grad school in the fall, when his dad had been diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. Johnny stayed around to help his mom take care of his dad, and after his father died, to help his mom adjust and get back on her feet. He was making the best of his current life—working at the nursery, teaching Community Ed gardening classes, and playing around with a local band. Oh, and making pants wet everywhere he went.

Johnny would be embarrassed if he knew how many chicks in Battle Lake dreamed about him. I had sworn I wasn't going to be one of them. Nature had facilitated this questionable endeavor by turning me into a stuttering idiot in Johnny's presence. I had been safe until we ended up working together last week to find the Chief Wenonga statue. Johnny's deep blues had stared hard into my core, his vibrating cell phone had thrummed between us, and his beautiful cupid's bow of a mouth had asked if he could come over to my place. Tonight. And instead of consummating those plans, I was looking at the ass of a forty-something woman digging into my panic-attack cupboard for the last bottle of vodka.

"Why are you wearing bike shorts?"

"I was exercising when I got the news." Kennie huffed as she pushed herself off my countertop, unscrewed the silver Absolut cap, and took a swig. She critically surveyed my green and white, pre-fabricated kitchen as she swallowed. "I never liked these modular homes. One strong breeze and you're all of a sudden living in Douglas County." She fingered a hole in the wall, left over from a



party a few summers back. “The walls aren’t even a quarter inch thick. Would you look at this?”

I was grateful for the distraction, as I had been trying to look anywhere but at the giant moose knuckle spray-painted between her thighs, begging for attention. Some genius had apparently decided that sewing padding into bike shorts would make for a more comfortable ride. Unfortunately, it also made Kennie look like she had a fast-rising loaf of bread baking in the front of her shiny-tight pants.

“Maybe you want to sit down?” I asked, pulling out a chair. She shrugged and plopped herself into the straight-backed wicker kitchen seat. I sat across from her, relieved to have a table between my eyes and her privates. Too bad the table was glass-topped. I slid the fruit bowl over to block my view of her down below and snatched away the vodka, no pun intended.

“Let’s start from the beginning. You were exercising when you got *what* news?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“So why’d you come over?”

Her face screwed up. I thought she was going to burp, but then she started sobbing in loud, horsy snorts and seized the vodka bottle back. “It’s Gary.”

“Gary Wohnt? Is he okay?”

“Someone else,” she said, between sobs. Her makeup shifted another level.

“Not Gary?”

“No! Gary’s found *someone else*.”

Ah. Police Chief Gary and Kennie *had* been dating. “Oh. I’m sorry.” Mostly, I was sorry that she was in my house. We weren’t

exactly girlfriends due to our differing viewpoints on how to treat people, dress, speak, and think, and I took it as a depressing statement on her personal life that she had only me to turn to right now. She must be one of those people who equated proximity with friendship.

She certainly was a pitiful figure, snuffling and wiping her fist across her face to divert the cry-snot. Her hand trailed a little mascara mustache on her upper lip. "I have done everything for that man. And he has left me for another."

"Who?"

"Gary. Gary has left me for another. Try to pay attention, Mira. I'm spilling my heart."

"No. Who'd Gary leave you for?"

Kennie sighed dramatically. "God."

"I'm sure it must be tough." I waited for her to continue.

"No, *God*, you idiot. Gary left me for God. He's found the church, and he doesn't think it proper for us to continue our 'unholy' relationship. That's what he called it."

For once, I agreed with Gary. I reached for the vodka and chugged, dismayed to find that it tasted salty. "What sparked his conversion?"

"Some new minister in town, a friend of a friend, Gary says. Rat bastard took my man."

I wasn't sure if the rat bastard in question was God or the minister, but I was all about trashing on the unfair sex right now. Gary had chosen God over Kennie, and Johnny had chosen who-knows-what over me. "You can't rely on one single man in this town."

"Hallelujah. Do you know that I just got done nursing that man after nose surgery?"

“Gary got a nose job?”

“No, he got his sinuses drilled. They clean out all the junk and then stick some cotton tubes up the nostrils to absorb the blood. You couldn’t pull ‘em out for days.”

I threw up a little in my mouth. “You must have really liked him to do that.”

“I did.” She sniffled. “And who else am I supposed to date? I can’t go out with strangers.”

Ah, the *Little House on the Prairie* model of dating. Being from the tiny Minnesota town of Paynesville, I recognized this attitude. You could only go out with men you met at the Mercantile, or a friend of a friend you ran into on an occasional trip to Sleepy Eye for some poplin. Developing a relationship with someone no one in your circle knew, or, heaven forbid, seeking out new experiences, was out of the question. I did appreciate the benefits of sticking with the familiar, but the downside of this dating model was that even a Mr. Edwards or a Willie Olsen would start to look good after all the Almanzos were taken. Hence the plethora of smart local women living with seasonally employed mouth-breathers.

“Maybe you could just be single for a while?”

She snorted and took a long pull off the vodka. “You got any more liquor?”

I did. It was for emergencies only, but if not now, then when? I got up and strode to the rear of the double-wide, fishing the bottle of tequila out from under the bathroom sink. I cracked it and shivered at the spicy kerosene smell. The bottle felt hot and heavy in my hand, and I recognized I was riding the buzz cusp, that point where you’re sober enough to know you should go to bed right

now and drunk enough not to care. I glided back to the kitchen and mixed us both a tequila on ice with a squirt of lime juice.

“How long had you and Gary been dating?” I asked, handing Kennie her drink.

“I’ve known him since high school. He worshipped the ground I walked on.”

The liquor I was drinking like Kool-Aid made me generous. “Well, of course he does.”

“Did. He did. Now he’s all godly.”

“Bastard.”

She clinked my glass. “I suppose you don’t have to worry about none of this, being a lesbian and all.”

I coughed, sending burning tequila through my nose. “Huh?”

“Oh, is it supposed to be a secret? Then you really should start wearing makeup, honey. And curling that fieldworker hair of yours. Else, you might as well wear a sign that says you don’t want a man.”

I ran my fingers through my hair and self-consciously wound it into a bun at the nape of my neck. Holding my hands up that high made me feel dizzy. “I don’t want a man, but not for the reason you think. They’re unreliable. The whole lot of them.”

Kennie nodded sympathetically. “Like your dad? The murderer?”

Christ. No wonder Kennie didn’t have any girlfriends. She didn’t know how to hang. For the record, my dad was guilty of manslaughter and not murder, but it hurt everyone involved just the same. When he was alive, he nearly drank himself to death, and when that proved too slow, he’d drink and drive. One night, he crashed into another car, killing himself and the mother and baby boy in the other vehicle. I was sixteen when it happened and people started

calling me Manslaughter Mark's girl. Not to my face, of course, but I had heard the whispers and sometimes thought I still did. Suddenly, the tequila tasted sour in my mouth, and my stomach felt oily.

"I'm tired, Kennie. I think I wanna go to bed."

"That's fine, honey chile. I'll just crash on your couch." She made the "sh" on "crash" long and snaky.

"What?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm as quiet as a dead man."

Oof. That hit too close to home. "Can't you sleep in your car?"

"No can do, sugar. I biked here. I'm going to look so hot by the end of this month that Gary Wohnt will forget all about God."

"Biking home right now would be great exercise."

But Kennie wasn't listening. She pingponged over to the sectional couch with the rust-colored, cabin-in-the-woods pattern, where she fell face down into the nappy cloth. She twitched and wriggled a little before she began snoring so vociferously that it came out her ears. I sighed, stumbled over, and lifted her head to the side so she wouldn't suffocate. My hands were sticky blue with her eye shadow when I pulled them away. I capped the tequila, returned it to its hiding place in the bathroom, and shoved the empty vodka bottle to the bottom of the garbage so it couldn't judge me in the morning.

Soft tears slid down my face as I cleaned. Without Kennie to distract me, I was left with my dark and slippery thoughts, which came surfing back on the tequila and vodka. Johnny hadn't shown up, and he wasn't ever going to. I had been an idiot to get my hopes up, and I sure as hell wasn't going to make that mistake again. It was long past time that I realized I wasn't going to find love here,

or anywhere. I was an independent woman, á la Kate Jackson, circa *Charlie's Angels*. I didn't need anybody, and for sure nobody needed me in this lousy, dead-end, murder-drenched town. In that instant, my mind was made up. I was going back to the Twin Cities as soon as I could find a real librarian to take over my job.

---

I woke up Friday morning with a hangover so familiar I considered it a friend. Feeling a little sad, a little relieved, and a lot empty, I chewed four bitter aspirin and took a shower. I was quiet as a clam so as not to wake Kennie, who had flipped herself over in the night. Her melted makeup had attracted some tufts of couch lint as well as a healthy dose of calico cat hair, thanks to Tiger Pop. He lay benevolently on her chest, a Cheshire grin on his pink kitty lips. Every now and again his tail would twitch over her nose, causing her to honk and sniffle in her sleep. I grabbed him off her, as much to save him from getting any more lipstick on his fur as to do her any favors.

I pinched an apple and a bottle of juice and opened the front door to herd out Luna and Tiger Pop. Outside, the sun's rays tattooed my hungover head, piercing my eyes like hot needles. The July morning was humid and pushing eighty degrees, even though it was not yet nine a.m. This summer had been tropical, and my vegetable garden looked like something from *Land of the Lost*, with monstrous green tomatoes dripping off the staked stems and orange squash blossoms as big as dinner plates opening up to the sun. I rinsed out Luna and Tiger Pop's water bowls and filled them to the top before hiding them in the shade under the house. Part

of the apron had come off the double-wide, creating a cool retreat for my animals as well as a wayward skunk or two. I slid a couple bowls of food under there and promised them that I'd be home before dark.

"Stay out of Kennie's way," I warned them. T. P. rolled his eyes at me, but Luna was eager to please, as usual. Dogs are such sluts.

Kennie's bike, an ancient no-speed with big black handlebars and a banana seat, lay flush on my blooming roses. I had planted the peach and white climbers against a wooden trellis on the sunny south side of the house this spring, and they had been doing great right up until the bike had flattened them. When I disentangled her two-wheeler, the salty-sweet smell of crushed roses drifted up. I rolled the bike to the front porch so Kennie would be sure to see it first thing and be on her way.

The last part of my morning ritual was feeding the birds. I am not a fan of the winged population, and they don't exactly wait in line to beg my autograph, either. I get pooped on at least three times a year, but I keep the birdbath and feeders full in hopes of an uneasy truce. They still like to play chicken with me, lunging at my head at opportune moments and then veering away after I make some embarrassing spastic gesture to protect myself, but at least they don't charge en masse, and I figured that was because of the food I put out every morning.

I curled into my two-door Toyota Corolla, slapped on the seat belt, and donned sunglasses against the bright, blazing ball rising behind me. I'm sure it looked gorgeous reflecting its lavender and tangerine rays off Whiskey Lake outside my front door, but I wasn't in the mood for beauty. I was all business, intent on heading directly to the library to write a help-wanted ad. By the time

I opened at ten a.m., that ad would be in all the regional newspapers, every college in the five-state area with a Library Sciences program, and on all the major Internet job search sites.

I noticed my hands gripping the steering wheel tight enough to leave marks, and I forced myself to relax. Any life change was sure to create stress, I reasoned, and that's why I was so uptight about last night's decision to move. The thing about change is at the outset a good change felt as scary as a bad change, and sometimes you just needed to jump and hope you landed right.

That's what I was telling myself as I drove into Battle Lake, already bustling as tourists drove their boats and RVs into town. I nodded at Harold Penderly, the owner of the Hardware Hank, out front washing his own windows, and pulled into the library parking lot, cruising into the spot marked "Reserved for Librarian." I stared at the yellow brick building that I had come to know so well, and shook my head to clear out any sentimentality.

The phone greeted me shrilly as I unlocked the front door. I jogged over to it, my keys jingling in my hand. "Hello?"

"Mira! I was hoping I'd get you."

My heart leapt to kiss the phone and then dropped like a bag of kittens tossed in a river. "Johnny?"

"Yeah! How are you? I just called your house, but you weren't home. Did you know Kennie Rogers is there?"

Anger, disappointment, and a third, unrecognizable emotion fought for my attention. "Yes. What can I do for you?"

He sighed. "You sound mad, Mira. I don't blame you. I should have called last night, and I'm sorry I didn't. You know when I left you to go check in with my mom? When I got to her place, there was a call from the University of Wisconsin. At Madison."



There was a pause as he waited for me to respond. “Mira? Are you there?”

“Yup.”

“It’s amazing, but it was one of my old professors! She said she has a six-week project she needs a research assistant for, and it might lead to a full ride for fall semester. She said she needed me out here immediately.”

“Here? You mean you’re in Madison right now?” My old friend, the hangover, suddenly felt like a hangman’s noose.

“Yeah!”

“I thought you were taking a year off to help your mom.” It was a spiteful thing to say, and I immediately regretted it after I heard the guilt in Johnny’s voice.

“I was, but she said she’s fine and would never forgive herself if I didn’t go.”

“Well, I guess there’s nothing holding you back. Good luck.”

He was quiet on the other end of the line, so quiet that I almost apologized for my chirpy, dismissive words. “I’ll be visiting a lot. There are some people in Battle Lake who I care a lot about.”

“Yeah, there’s some nice people here.” I squished my eyes shut. I hated being a crybaby.

“I mean you, Mira. I think we have something.”

“I guess we’ll never know, huh? You’re in Madison, and I’m moving back to the Cities.”

“What?”

“Yeah, there’s not much for me in Battle Lake, you know?” I liked myself a little less with every word that cracked out of my mouth, but I couldn’t stop. “You’re a good friend, and we should keep it that way. Hey, maybe we can be pen pals!”

A pause. “That’s what you want?”

“It is. I’ll be sure to check in on your mom for you when you’re gone, okay? Until I move, that is.”

“Okay. Fine. Bye.”

“Bye, Jeff!”

“What?”

“Johnny, I meant! Sorry. I was just putting away a book by some Jeff guy. It’s still early, for me. Bye, *Johnny*.” The name of my murdered ex-lover dangled heavy in the air between us, and I couldn’t for the life of me decide if I had thrown it out there on purpose.

He hung up without another word. I went into the back room to splash water on my face. On the way, I gathered all my feelings around me like a billowing parachute, carefully folding and tucking until they fit into a neat knapsack, which I put off to the side. It was the last time in my life I’d be able to compartmentalize so easily.