

Chapter 14

Joel and Kristie spent the next day exploring old railway lines in the Keweenaw, and that evening they were having dinner at the Eagle Harbor Inn. Joel was anxious to get back to Chicago. The trip to the Upper Peninsula had fulfilled every hope and dream--for both of them. But the next step in "Then He Kissed Me" had to take place in Chicago.

"Kristie, it's only Tuesday, and you announced on your show that you had the whole week off, but I thought maybe we could finish up your vacation back in Chicago. For one thing, I'd like to take you over to meet Aunt Grace and Uncle Tony."

"That's a good idea. I'm really anxious to meet them."

"I called them up earlier this morning. I told Aunt Grace that her prayer was answered."

She gave him a wry grin. "Did you mention anything new to pray for?"

"Now, Kristie, you're going to make me blush. You know how shy I am. And besides, you wouldn't want to spoil any surprises that might be coming, would you?"

She pouted. "No, I guess not."

"That's it." He patted her on the hand. "Now, I'll drive you back to the motel, and we can get an early start tomorrow morning."

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By eight o'clock the next day, they'd dropped off Kristie's rental car at the airport and were on their way back to Chicago. After about five hours of driving, they were nearing Green Bay.

"Are you ready for lunch?" Joel asked. There's an Arby's in Green Bay not far off the Interstate."

Kristie started laughing.

"What so funny?"

"I know there's an Arby's here, and on the way up, I asked Roger if we could stop there for lunch. We did, but I could tell that he considered himself above Arby's. When we got to Houghton, he made sure we had dinner at The Ambassador."

"Humph! What did you say he did for a living?"

"An independent insurance salesman in Elmhurst."

"Well, I've always thought that those with highbrow tastes miss out on a lot in life."

She reached over and squeezed his shoulder. "I do too. Let's get an Arby's."

It was rush hour when they got to Chicago, but they were heading in, first on the Edens and then on the Kennedy Expressway. Joel looked over to the outbound traffic to his left.

"Good thing we're going this way. Just look at that over there. I knew there was a reason why I paid such an outrageous rent to live Downtown near our offices."

Kristie didn't make any response. She'd been thinking about something for the last fifty miles. She thought back to Sunday night when Joel had told her everything about Karen. During all these years since her death, he'd still felt a connection to her. Now he was ready to let go, to live in the here and now--to live in the future--and with her. Maybe there was a way to put a seal on his decision. It was a strange idea, and it could backfire. But Roy Orbison's song, "Running Scared," had come to mind. Joel had loved Karen so, which one would he choose? When he saw the grave, would his heart once again be drawn back to Karen? Or would he turn around and walk away with her?

Yes, it was a powerful song, one of Roy's greatest. It was difficult to compete with a memory, but she needed to know. She didn't want to be running scared.

"Joel, it's still pretty early. I was wondering...would you take me to see Karen's grave?"

He looked at Kristie with a confused expression on his face. "You want to see Karen's grave? Why?"

"I just thought that maybe if we went there, it might...well, it might be something important we should do together."

He didn't answer immediately. "All right, Kristie, we can go." His expression seemed tentative and unsure. "It's not far from here. Rosemont Park Cemetery's at Addison and Oak Park Avenue."

Joel pulled up to the grave site and opened the car door for her. Kristie took his hand and they walked over to the headstone.

Karen Reynolds
Born January 15, 1981
Died June 21, 2002

Beloved Fiancée
of Joel Taylor

"I paid for the headstone with her parents' permission."

Kristie put her arm around Joel and felt the tears in her eyes. When she looked up into his eyes, he blinked as tears also rolled down his cheeks.

"Why did you want to come here?"

"She was a beautiful girl, Joel, and you loved her very much. I'm sure you came here often, in a way, to be with her again. I wanted to do it with you."

"I still don't quite understand."

"Sunday night you said you were ready to let go, ready to love again. I thought of 'Running Scared,' Joel." Her voice cracked, and she almost broke down. He was looking intently at her through his tear-filled eyes. "Well, she and I are both here in a way. Do you still feel the same way you did Sunday night?"

His reaction was immediate. A smile appeared on his face, and he swept her into his arms and hugged her.

"Kristie, I feel exactly the same way I felt Sunday night. Sure, I loved Karen, but the tie is broken once and for all. I'm ready to walk away from the past. Oh, we can come back here--together--once a year and put flowers on her grave, but it's over. And now, just like that great line in the song, I'm ready to turn around and walk away with you."

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Joel was back on the Kennedy and approaching Downtown Chicago.

"You know," he said, staring briefly at the skyline, "as much as I like the U.P., Chicago will always be home. I just love getting back and seeing that skyline. Isn't it the most beautiful sight in the world?"

"Yes, and tonight, it's especially beautiful." She reached over and took his hand.

"Yeah, it's very special tonight. And now I've got an idea of my own. I think we ought to visit one more place before I take you back to your apartment."

"Another place? Where?"

"Grant Park."

Kristie felt her stomach churn. She looked over at Joel. "Well, I guess now it's my turn. Why do you want to go there?"

"Grant Park and Buckingham Fountain are far too beautiful to have such...bad memories connected with them, don't you think? I want to go there now with you and recapture the magic."

They parked and walked over to the fountain with its spectacular light and water display. It still brought back painful memories for her, but she was with Joel now, and he was holding her hand.

"Let's sit down and wait for the water show. It's almost nine o'clock."

Joel led her to the same bench where they'd sat before, but this time he put his arm around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"We don't want to remember this place for the bad memories it stirs," he said after a few minutes. "Let's look at it in a new way. Buckingham Fountain was the place I almost lost you, but it's now the first place in Chicago we went together after getting you back."

Kristie straightened up and turned to face him. "Oh, Joel, that was very sweet. That's the way I'll always remember Buckingham Fountain."

"Hey, here it comes," he said, pointing at the fountain.

Precisely on the hour, the water show began. The central jet shot up 150 feet into the air.

After watching the display for a few minutes, Joel turned and gave Kristie a smug look. "Do you know what the sea horses symbolize?"

"It seems to me I read about that somewhere, but I can't remember."

"The four states that boarder Lake Michigan: Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana."

"I'm impressed!"

"As well you should be!" Then he laughed. "Come on, now I'll take you home."

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The date to meet Aunt Grace and Uncle Tony was set for Saturday night. For Kristie, it was going to be very special. Not only was she anxious to meet them, but she hoped they were also anxious to meet her. So she wanted to make the best possible impression, acting and looking just right.

She decided to wear her nicest outfit, the one she'd worn on her second date with Roger: her straight-skirted, teal suit with nylons and her fanciest white blouse. Her hair turned out just right, and she was thankful Chicago's weather forecast called for low humidity.

Excited and nervous--that was how she felt as she was waiting for Joel. Of course, she'd often felt excited when preparing for dates, and often nervous. But this nervousness was new. It was because she was about to meet Joel's aunt and uncle, the closest relatives he had to parents. She so much wanted them to like her.

When she opened the door to Joel's knock, his eyes registered both surprise and appreciation.

"Boy, I've never seen you so dressed up. You look very pretty."

To hear Joel say that made her feel warm all over, but the nervousness was still there.

"Now that's a definite improvement! I remember a time, quite recently, as a matter of fact, when you commented on my appearance and said I looked awful."

However, she didn't give him a chance for a flip retort, and her tone became serious. "Joel, I'm a little nervous. You really think they'll like me?"

He smiled reassuringly and gently touched her face. "Kristie, they'll love you. Remember, Aunt Grace was praying that we'd get back together."

"Yeah, but she hadn't met me."

"Trust me. They'll love you. Now let's get going."

When they arrived, Joel knocked on the door, which was promptly opened by Aunt Grace. She gave him a big hug as they walked into the living room.

"Joel, I'm so glad you're back--and with such happy news. For once you call me right away and tell me my prayers are answered!" She looked over toward Kristie, standing sheepishly to one side. "And you must be Kristie." Aunt Grace fell upon her with exuberance and a huge bear hug. Then she backed up and put both hands on Kristie's shoulders to look her straight in the eyes. "Joel calls me up and tells me he is bringing Kristie over to meet us, and I can't wait to see you."

"I'm very pleased to meet you too. Joel's told me so much about you."

Aunt Grace let go of Kristie and stepped back to get a better look at her. "And Joel has told Tony and me--yes, he's told us a lot about you. We are not as young as we used to be, me and Tony, and I am so glad my Joel has you." Aunt Grace scanned Kristie's figure. "But I can see he still has much to learn." She turned and gave Joel a stern look. "Are you trying to starve this girl? Don't you ever take her to a good Italian restaurant? Don't you spend any money on her? Buy her candy? No, you have never bought her candy. All that money you make with that dating service of yours. Look at her: skinny as a rail. Joel, have I taught you nothing?"

Kristie tried to project pure innocence. "Actually, Aunt Grace, he told me I have big hips."

Aunt Grace looked aghast. "No! My Joel said that? Joel Taylor, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!

"Well, you know, I was just..."

"Don't you know girls like to hear how pretty they are? You think I am so old I don't remember that? And Kristie here, well, she is not Italian, but she is very pretty, no? And such a wisp of a girl too! Hasn't got an ounce of fat on her. Big hips! Where do you get this big hips foolishness? Well, we are going to start to fix things tonight." She turned back and looked at Kristie. "Come into the kitchen with me, dear. You can help me get things ready. I've made lasagna--old family recipe from the old country. My grandmother, God rest her soul, taught me to make it. Tonight we will feed you proper."

Kristie looked back at Joel with a "So there!" smile on her face as Aunt Grace led her to the kitchen.

While Aunt Grace was mixing a salad, Kristie pulled out dishes and

silverware.

"Kristie, dear, these last seven, eight years have been very hard on my Joel. I pray for him every day. You know about Karen?"

"Yes, he told me everything, and he told me how much you helped him."

"Ach! I try to talk sense into him. But you make me so very happy. I can go to my Lord now in peace when I die. Yes, it was very difficult for Joel. We almost lost him too. Did he tell you that?"

Kristie was stunned. "No, he never said anything about that."

"Yes, his pain was almost more than he could bear. They loved each other very much. But I told him, yes I did, it was time to let go. Karen would have wanted it. I tell him that. I knew it to be true because that is what I would want for my Tony. But you are the real answer to my prayers. You are so perfect for him. For the first time since he lost poor Karen, his heart is alive again. I can hear it in his voice, and I can see it in his eyes--especially when he looks at you."

Kristie's heart was almost bursting with happiness. She put down the dishes she was holding and went over and hugged Aunt Grace.

"I love Joel very much", Kristie said. "I think I have since the first day we met. You know, with other guys I've dated, I'd be nervous sometimes...well, most of the time...always trying to make just the right impression. With Joel it was different. It just felt so natural to be with him and so wonderful. When he looks at me with those eyes of his, I go weak in the knees."

Aunt Grace gave her a warm and understanding smile. "Yes, dear, I can remember what that feels like. It was like that when I met my Tony back in the old country."

Later, as they sat around the dining room table, Aunt Grace looked at Joel. "So, you went up to that cabin of yours to find Kristie. You call Tony and me after you find her and bring her back, but you don't call us and tell us you are going up there to look for her. A fine thing! You think I wouldn't pray extra hard if I knew?"

"I knew you were already praying hard, Aunt Grace. I didn't want you to be disappointed if I came back without her."

"Humph! You think I have never known disappointment in my life? How did you know where to look for her anyway? How could you find her?"

"There was only one possible way--if your prayers were answered," Joel answered softly.

That answer seemed to make Aunt Grace very happy. "Well, the good Lord above answered all my prayers for you, Joel. You found her, and now you have each other, even though you hurt so bad. I see how happy you two are, and I forgive you for not telling Tony and me you go to look for her."

But Aunt Grace shook her head again. Turning to Kristie, she asked, "So tell me, dear, where did he find you up there in that wilderness?" It was evident that Aunt Grace did not consider the U.P. a civilized place to live.

Kristie decided not to go into the part about going up there with Roger and how he had walked out on her.

"Well, I was hiking up near Eagle Harbor."

"Oh?" There was a definite lilt in Aunt Grace's voice. "That's near Joel's house, no?"

Kristie felt a little embarrassed but tried to act nonchalant. "Yeah, I guess it wasn't all that far. Anyway, I was hiking and all of a sudden this rain storm whipped up. I got soaking wet. Then I slipped and fell. Cut my leg and twisted my ankle. I just sat there a while getting drenched and feeling sorry for myself. Then Joel just appeared out of nowhere like the guardian angel Gabriel."

"So he rescued you, did he?"

She smiled sheepishly. "I guess you could say that. He helped me stumble back to his beautiful house on the lake shore. That's when he told me I looked awful." She gave him a quick smirk. "I guess I did look a sight!"

Aunt Grace made no attempt to hide her disapproval. "Tony, can you believe that? Where does he get such ideas? Where have we failed? He goes up there hoping to win her heart back, and the first thing he says when he finds her is that she looks awful. Honestly! Joel Taylor, you thought that was funny, yes? It's a wonder any girl gives you a second thought!"

Now it was Joel's to look a little uneasy. "Now Aunt Grace, don't fret yourself. You have to understand the context in which I said that. You see..."

"Context? What context? It was your attempt at humor again, no?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I thought the comment had a certain..."

"Fortunately, Joel, I did not have your sense of humor," Uncle Tony interrupted. "You can see how far it would have gotten me."

Aunt Grace seemed ready to issue more recriminations, but suddenly a look of surprise swept over her face. "Kristie, did you say his house is beautiful? My ears are old. Maybe you say something else."

"Yes, I loved it. Somewhat masculine in its decor, but I loved it. It was very romantic."

Aunt Grace shook her head in disbelief. "You must have the stars in your eyes thinking that dark dungeon is beautiful. Masculine decor, humph! It makes me shudder like the catacombs in Rome." Both Kristie and Joel started laughing. "I will tell you this, Joel, you are very lucky to find this girl. Me, we would butt heads over that place! Not a flower anywhere. No pretty doilies. And what do you hang on your walls? Pictures of wild animals!" She shook her head in dismay.

"Aunt Grace," Kristie said, "I love the north woods. I like hiking and winter sports. That's just the kind of house you'd expect in that environment."

Aunt Grace looked as if she couldn't believe her ears. Her penetrating eyes swept back and forth between the two of them. "Now you listen to me, Joel. You let this one get away, and you never find another one like her. Kristie, how did you get this way? You raised with ten brothers maybe?"

Kristie laughed again. "No, not ten. But I was the only girl. I guess I've always been sort of a tomboy."

"Well, Joel is very lucky to have you. And me and Tony, we are too." She reached over and touched Kristie's hand tenderly. Then she turned to Joel. "But I will hear no excuses from you, Joel. You understand me? You buy her nice things. You treat her like a lady. You tell her nice things, how pretty she is, or you will have me to deal with!"

On their way back to Kristie's apartment, she sat without speaking for a while, but inside she was aglow. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Joel, I just loved your aunt and uncle! Aunt Grace was such a gem."

"And didn't I tell you they'd love you? I can read Aunt Grace like a book. Believe me, she was ecstatic over you."

"And I can tell how much she loves you. She thinks of you as her own son, and she's very proud, very proud of you."

When they walked up to the door of Kristie's apartment, he put his arms around her but didn't lean down to kiss her.

"You know what this reminds me of? Pictures I've seen of girls' dormitories during the Sixties. Girls had hours back then--had to be in by a certain time. And guys and girls couldn't go into each others' dorms. So when the bewitching hour fell, you saw couples all around the front of girls' dorms kissing goodnight."

"This isn't a dormitory, Joel," Kristie said demurely. "Do you want to come in, have a drink maybe?"

"No, I know you're tired. Well, this was the next step in the song. I took you home to meet my mom and my dad."

"And I loved them."

He lowered his head and kissed her gently, tenderly.

"Goodnight, Kristie. Can't wait to see you again."

She smiled brightly. "Me too. Goodnight."

Inside, she sat down on the sofa. Yes, tonight was the next step in the song. There was only one more.

When she and Aunt Grace had been alone in the kitchen putting dishes into the dishwasher, Aunt Grace had told her something.

"Kristie, dear, I'm so happy for you and Joel. He loves you very much. I can see the way he looks at you. And you have helped him let go of Karen. I am scared to think what would have happened to him if he never met you. But there is a big step that will still be very difficult for him."

"You mean..."

"Someday he will want to ask you to marry him. But it will be very hard. He will remember Karen again. They were engaged when that terrible thing happened. He will remember that. You must understand what it will be like for him. It may not happen as soon as you would like. Just give him all your love. He will overcome his fear, his pain...because he loves you."

Kristie had given Aunt Grace a kiss on the cheek. "I will, and I understand. I understand Joel very well."

She thought about that conversation now. *Then he asked me to be his bride/And always be right by his side.* She imagined herself as Joel's wife. Yes, however long he needed, it didn't matter. That was what she wanted more than anything else in the world.

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