

Chapter 8

Two weeks had gone by, and still Roger Penfield had not called again or even emailed. She'd read, of course, that some men were like this--somewhat on the thoughtless side. Then an idea flashed through her mind that made her smile. Maybe all of sudden he'd realize how much time had slipped by and, feeling guilty, he'd send her flowers!

But soon a disappointing sense of realism returned, and she acknowledged that such events had never characterized her experiences with guys in the past. Why should it be any different now? Maybe he hadn't called because he had no interest in seeing her again. Yes, she had to admit that possibility; it would be much more in line with those past experiences. Yet she was sure he'd enjoyed himself--and liked her--at least enough to ask for a second date.

Oh well. She hadn't exactly been swept off her feet either. There was a lot about Roger that just seemed odd. Maybe she'd get a new contact from MyForever.com soon.

When she got to the station and started her prep for tonight's show, Tom Hawkins stuck his head in her office.

"Hey, Kristie. Got a minute?"

He sounded different. Tom, senior DJ at the station, had always enjoyed kidding around with her, but this time he sounded serious.

"Sure, Tom, come on in. What's up?"

"I was wondering if we could go out a little later and talk. We'll get some dinner. My treat. I've got some big decisions to make and, well, I just wanted to get your take on a few things. There's no one around here I'd rather talk to about it."

What a nice thing to say, she thought. "I'd be glad to. Just come and get me whenever you're ready."

He nodded his head and left. Kristie had always liked Tom and actually enjoyed their frequent sparring matches. She was touched that he came to her now when he evidently had something serious on his mind.

Two hours later found them sitting in a nearby restaurant.

"Kristie, I wanted to ask you something. I've been dating a girl now for about nine months. I guess you could say we're pretty serious about each other."

She smiled brightly. "Tom, that's great!"

"Yeah, well, I...we..." He looked perplexed. "I'm thinking of asking her to marry me."

Kristie reached across the table and put her hand on his. "I'm so happy for you. She's a lucky girl."

That seemed to build his confidence a little.

"You really think so? No, don't answer that!"

"What's her name?"

"Megan." He paused. "The problem is...I guess I have to admit I'm not a very romantic guy. Not very creative on that subject. I want to propose in a really romantic way, but I'm not coming up with any ideas. You're a girl, and I thought...well, I didn't want to go to any of the guys and talk about these things.

"You know," he continued, "I listen to your show a lot more than you think. I can tell...you've just got a real sense of what girls would find romantic. I was hoping maybe you could give me a few ideas."

Her estimate of Tom's character had been accurate after all. Despite his playful sense of humor, he was really a sensitive guy. This Megan truly was a lucky girl!

"Wow, I'm flattered! Sure, we can brainstorm. I'll help you in any way I can."

"Here's one thing that's bothering me. You know I cut up a lot around the station. I enjoy those antics, but sometimes they make me wonder. Marriage is such a big step, such a big responsibility. Do I have a serious enough nature for it? Am I really ready for marriage?"

"Tom," she said consolingly, "the very fact that you're here asking me this proves that you're taking this responsibility seriously." Kristie waited, then leaned forward a little. "Do you really love her? Is she the whole world to you?"

"Yes. Yes, she is," he answered softly. "Like the Righteous Brothers said, she's my soul and my life's inspiration. She's all I wake up for each day. She's my reason for laughing, for crying, for living, for dying."

Kristie smiled impishly. "She's not also walking out on you, is she?"

Tom laughed. "No, that part of the song doesn't apply."

Then in a more serious tone, she asked, "Does she love you?"

"I still find it hard to believe, but, yeah, I really think she does."

"Then that settles it! You're going to have a wonderful marriage. And you jolly well are going to invite me to the wedding. By the way, that's the first decision you're going to make, right here and now. None of this J.P. stuff. You're going to have a real wedding, Tom. If you want to know what a girl finds romantic, there is nothing, *nothing*, more romantic in her life than her wedding to the guy she loves. You're going to sit down with Megan and plan a wedding, one that'll make all her dreams come true!

"But you're not only going to do that for her," Kristie added. "You've got a

lot of friends, Tom, more than you probably know. They'll want to be there for you and share this moment in your life. The same is true for Megan."

Tom grimaced. "A formal wedding with a lot of people and all, that's going to make me pretty nervous. But I know you're right. I'll do it!"

"Now about that proposal," Kristie began.

Tom interrupted. "Yeah, the first question I had was about the ring. Should I buy the engagement ring and surprise her with it when I propose, or should we pick one out together?"

"Ah, that's a difficult one. Some girls probably would like to pick out their own ring. But if it were me, I'd like my guy to surprise me and pick out just the right ring that he thought would look beautiful on my finger. Just be pretty sure you know what her answer will be! It's not that hard to tell if she's ready...and wishing...and hoping!"

"All right, I'll give that serious thought. Now what's a romantic way to propose?"

Kristie sat back and thought. Talk about responsibility! She was feeling the weight of it right now. Tom was asking her advice on how to handle one of the most important moments of his life--his life and Megan's. But then she had an inspiration: she thought of the Planetarium. She had felt its romantic power despite her lack-luster date there. Excitement was building as she leaned forward and looked directly at Tom.

"Kathy Young! Do you remember? 'A Thousand Stars in the Sky.' Take Megan to the Adler Planetarium in the evening. It's one of the most romantic places I know. Maybe watch a star show inside. Then walk around outside. Hold her hand. Admire the Chicago skyline. The view from the Planetarium is breathtaking. Sit down on one of the benches. Put your arm around her and look at the stars overhead. She knows what you do for a living. Tell her there's a song that always makes you think of her. She'll love to hear that! Then look into her eyes, Tom, and say the words to her:

*A thousand stars in the sky,
Like the stars in your eyes,
They say to me that there'll never be
No other love like you for me.*

*A thousand stars in the sky,
Make me realize
You are the one love that I'll adore.
Tell me you love me,
Tell me you're mine once more.*

"If she loves you, she'll be in tears. Then take out the ring, open its case, and whisper, 'Will you marry me, Megan?'"

Kristie's eyes began to water as she pictured the scene, then added, "Yeah, Tom, I'd find that romantic."

He sat there for a moment. Kristie thought sure his eyes had gotten misty as well.

"I like it, Kristie," he said softly. "I really like it. It's a beautifully romantic idea. Just what I was hoping for."

She reached across the table again and this time took Tom's hand in hers.

"It'll be a moment Megan will remember for the rest of her life." Kristie squeezed his hand and then sat back again.

They sat there for a moment or two without speaking.

Then Tom said something quite surprising and in a very tender voice.

"What about you, Kristie? Somehow you've seemed a little down in the dumps the last month or so. Is there anything I can do?"

She thought for a moment, wondering how much she should say.

"You're right, I haven't been feeling very bubbly lately. You know...there's a downside to being romantic."

Tom knew immediately what she meant. "Yeah, when you don't have someone to be romantic with. Then it hurts. That's what I thought was going on. But you know, I've never understood it. You're cute, you're witty, you're fun to be with, and I think you've got a lot of love to give. I don't know why the guys aren't lining up at your door. No prospect out there right now?"

"There was one...I thought. But it didn't work out. I don't really know why. Everything seemed so wonderful. Well, I guess you can't always have what you want. But big girls don't cry."

"Don't give me that, Kristie! Did you forget how that song ends? Anyway, I can see it in your eyes, even now."

Her eyes began to tear again as the hurt swept over her. "You're right, Tom. Big girls do cry," she said, as her lip quivered and voice cracked.

Now it was Tom's turn to be consoling. He handed her his handkerchief, and she wiped her eyes. Then he gently touched her hand. "I'm so sorry, Kristie. I've been there...I've been there too."

After a snuffle, she tried to regain her composure. "But since then I've actually had one date with a new guy. Maybe it'll turn into something." She wasn't sure just how likely that was, and Tom clearly noticed.

"Hey, Kristie, I've got an idea. Don't think about dating for awhile. Hang out with us. You know a number of us at the station are members of The Sixties Club. Well, we're having this bash in a few days called "The Psychedelic Sixties," an authentic dress party--music, decorations, everything. Several of us are going. I'm bringing Megan, but the other guys are all going stag. How about you coming with us? We'll all go together. I think I can swing it for us to use the news van."

She thought for a moment, then smiled. "Yeah, Tom, I think I'd like that."

"Oh, just don't say anything to Megan about my little surprise."

"My lips are sealed!"

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That Saturday at eight o'clock, Tom swung the van into the parking lot of Kristie's apartment. She was waiting outside and hopped in. Before starting up, he turned around and motioned for her to come to the front.

"Kristie, this is Megan. Megan, Kristie, our famous female DJ."

The van was dark, but Kristie could make out that Megan was a pretty blond wearing hippie-style earrings.

"Hi, Kristie. I listen to your show quite often. It's really great, and I love your commentary on the music." She extended her hand.

They shook hands. "I'm so glad to meet you, Megan. Tom told me you were dating. I shouldn't say this in front of him, it might make his over-sized head even bigger. But I'm really happy for you. Tom's a great guy."

Megan responded with a sweet smile and looked at Tom. "Yeah, well, I guess he'll do."

Kristie laughed. "I like your sense of humor. I can see why you and Tom hit it off."

"All right, all right. Enough of this chick-chat. Let's get to the party!"

Kristie took a seat and started talking with Jack and Mike, two other DJs from the station.

Chicago is divided into 77 Community Areas, and tonight The Sixties Club was meeting in Irving Park, home of Six Point, one of the more famous shopping areas in the city, an intersection of three heavily traveled streets, Milwaukee Avenue, Cicero Avenue, and Irving Park Road. Tom drove through Six Points and onto a side street. According to Jack, the party was being held in an old two-flat where one of the members lived. They picked his place because it was large and no one was currently renting the upstairs flat. Music could thus be played at the appropriate volume.

They all piled out of the van. Six steps lead to the front door. Tom knocked.

"Well, well! The contingent from WKLS has arrived!" Dan said after he opened the door. "And who's this little, bitty pretty one here?"

"Dan, I want you to meet, finally, our one and only Kristie Rydell."

"Kristie, how long I have awaited this pleasure!" He bowed slightly and

stepped aside, motioning them all to enter.

Kristie walked through the doorway and stepped into the past.

The atmosphere was heavy with incense and the room dimly lit, the only light coming from candles. The walls were covered with garish, blacklight-responsive, psychedelic posters of multicolored paisley prints, flowers, and the peace symbol. Captions included, "Love," "Make Love, Not War," "Anti-draft Week," and the names of various Sixties rock groups. From a number of massive speakers, "White Rabbit" engulfed the room in sound.

The Sixties lived again.

After they all entered, Dan reached down and flicked a switch on a large stereo amplifier. Suddenly there was silence.

"Hey everybody, listen up. We'll get back to Gracie in a few minutes. First, I've got exciting news. Our favorite Sixties DJ at last: the host of 'Musical Images of the Sixties,' Kristie Rydell."

She felt her face flush as everyone gathered around and introductions were made. Kristie was overwhelmed with their obvious excitement at meeting her. When Tom invited her, she had no idea she'd be the star celebrity.

After about ten minutes, Dan restarted Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane with "White Rabbit."

Kristie took another look around the large room. There were clearly no sexagenarians present, who would have actually lived through the Sixties. In all, there were about 20 or 25 in attendance, about as many guys as girls. All were in their 20's or at most early 30's. None of them had even been born in the Sixties. But somehow they had all become captivated by its culture and its music, reliving an era long past.

The guys were wearing typical hippie clothes: paisley shirts, brocade jackets, black turtlenecks. Denim jackets with peace-symbol patches were also in evidence. A few had headbands. The girls were variously dressed in long, flowing psychedelic gowns, miniskirts, or tight-fitting pants. Some were wearing dashiki shirts. Kristie had not bought any such exotic psychedelic clothing. Considering herself more a laid-back hippie, she wore a floppy sweatshirt and a short, cotton skirt over black tights with brown suede boots. Not that much different from Grace Slick in one of the better known photos of Jefferson Airplane.

The psychedelic music continued unabated: 'In a Gadda Da Vida,' 'Incense and Peppermints,' 'Journey to the Center of the Mind,' and 'Pictures of Matchstick Men.'

As Kristie continued to look around, she also noticed various and sundry paraphernalia associated with the drug culture of the psychedelic period that began around 1965. In fact, the room looked much like a head shop. There were several water pipes, often used for smoking marijuana, whipped cream chargers, and astrology charts. Becoming somewhat alarmed, she walked over to where Dan was talking with a few other members.

"Dan, some of the stuff you've got here worries me a little. You're not doing drugs, are you? Marijuana, hashish, or LSD?"

"No, Kristie, there's nothing illegal here. Most of us work professionally in one field or another, and we're all pretty normal and law-abiding, Tom excepted, of course." Then he pointed to one of the water pipes. "A few of us have tried smoking regular tobacco in that thing but didn't like it at all. We just collect this stuff to create the right ambiance when our meetings or parties emphasize the psychedelic aspects of the late Sixties. Our relationship to the culture of the Sixties is, well, selective, in a sense. We've adopted the music as our own, but where drugs are concerned, we attempt only to understand how they became part of the counter-culture. Other aspects of the culture, for example the anti-war movement, some of us agree with and other don't. And incidentally, we sort of 'specialize' here. Some of us really like to study the psychedelic period, but others much prefer the surfing and hot cars from the early Sixties."

"Thanks, Dan, you put my mind at ease so I can enjoy the ambiance."

Almost everyone was standing around in small groups talking, so Kristie walked over to an empty sofa and sat down. The song now playing was "Itchycoo Park." There was no doubt what was being emphasized tonight.

She smiled when she caught sight of yet another poster in an obscure corner of the room. It was an anti-draft poster, an authentic one too. She'd seen a picture of it somewhere. On it three cute girls in very short skirts were seated with their legs crossed provocatively. The caption was, "Girls say yes to boys who say no." If she remembered correctly, proceeds from the sale of the poster went to help draft resisters.

As if on cue, a guy who had been introduced as John Arnold came over and sat down next to her.

"Hey, Kristie. Are you into 'make love, not war'?"

She laughed, somewhat surprised by his forward question. But it was understandable, given the motif of the party.

"For nations, yeah."

"No free love?"

"No," John, "no free love. But I like your style. I'm sure you'll get a lot of girls with that approach."

"Yeah, right! No, it's not my style. I was just trying to be humorous in a clever sort of way. I wouldn't have said that if we hadn't been in the environment we're in right now." He gestured with his hands as he looked around the room.

Kristie touched his arm. "John, I can have fun with the best of them. Which, uh, prompts me to ask you something." Her eyes twinkled as she scanned his hair. "I love your hair--very authentic sixties! Is it really yours, or are you wearing a toupee?"

He feigned a highly offended look. "What kind of a question is that to ask? Did I ask you if you're wearing a bra?"

She leaned her head back and laughed heartily. "You're right, John. I deserved that! And yes," she said, lowering her voice, "I am wearing a bra. I haven't gotten around to burning mine yet."

"You know, Kristie, you're okay. Everything Tom's told us about you is true. A lot of fun and a great sense of humor."

"Oh? Tom talks about me, does he?"

"Talk about you? We ask him about you! You think we listen to his show? Your show's the one we faithfully listen to. We've been wanting to get you into our club for ages." He cupped his hand and whispered in her hear. "And since we're into 'true confessions,' as a matter of fact, it is a toupee."

John headed off to talk with someone else. Dan and two other members, who had been introduced as Jerry and Grant, were conversing nearby.

"Taylor's not here tonight?" Jerry asked Dan.

"No, he said he wouldn't be coming tonight."

At the sound of the name "Taylor," Kristie stiffened and focused one hundred percent of her attention on the task of listening to this conversation.

Then she thought how foolish she was being. How many guys are there in Chicago named Taylor? Thousands? But then it occurred to her where she was. How many guys are there in Chicago named Taylor who would join The Sixties Club? A club whose main reason for existence was to enjoy the rock-n-roll of the Sixties. She continued to listen, wishing the three guys were a radio she could turn up.

"Joel wasn't at our last shindig, either, was he?" Grant asked.

So the full name was Joel Taylor. She now had no doubt they were talking about Joel. Her Joel.

"No, he wasn't," Dan answered.

"Come to think of it, he hasn't been around for several months," Jerry said.

"I think it's that company of his," said Dan. "He puts an awful lot of time into it."

Kristie couldn't take anymore. She got up and joined the three guys.

"How are you enjoying the party, Kristie?" Dan asked.

"Fine, Dan, it's great. Love the music. Say, did I hear you guys talking about Joel Taylor?"

"Yeah, he and I actually started this club. Do you know him?"

"I...I met him at the station. He advertises with us."

"Yeah, right, I've heard the ads on your show, Kristie," Jerry put in.

"I've heard them, too," Grant added. "You know," he said, turning to Dan, "I've always thought that an Internet dating service was a really strange business to start after his fiancée died like that."

Kristie felt the blood drain from her face.

"I think he likes to watch others fall in love," Dan said.

"His fiancée died?" Kristie asked in a shaky voice.

"That's what he said to me once," Dan answered. "Don't know any details. Joel doesn't talk about it much, that's for sure."

The four of them split up and went their separate ways. Kristie walked back toward the sofa where she'd been sitting. As she did, Tom came up to her, looking concerned.

"Kristie, is anything wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

With an effort, she pulled herself together.

"Yeah, Tom, sure, I'm fine. My mind was just somewhere else."

Tom drifted back toward Megan, who was talking with several of the girls at the party. Kristie sat down on the sofa.

She tried to think back to that terrible day in Grant Park. What had Joel said? He had a lot of old baggage. Yes, that was it. Then he said that he'd given me the impression he was free to do something he wasn't free to do. He couldn't let himself fall in love.

Now she knew why he said that. It was true: he had been deeply hurt, perhaps as deeply as one can be hurt. To lose a fiancée in death--she couldn't even imagine how devastating that would be.

So now she knew why he wanted to put a stop to their relationship. But did that really change anything? She still felt just as helpless as she had before. It was all quite obvious: he wasn't going to trust love again. Where did that leave her? She just had to forget about Joel. It was over.

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