

Chapter 5

Sunday afternoon found Joel Taylor at Rosemont Park Cemetery looking down at the grave and its headstone. It had been several months since he'd been here. Eight years ago, he had come everyday. And cried.

He remembered that first year all too well. It had been difficult to keep a solid grip on life. For some people, an emotional tie is so great that death can have a strange influence on the concept of love and faithfulness. During that time, Joel had felt the bond hadn't been broken, that love still connected them. He would picture her lying there. He sensed a desire, a pull, to stay with her, to go with her, to be with her again, even in death.

Those feelings, of course, represented a slippery slope, a spiraling descent that could end in only way. But another part of him said that he had to let go, that it was all right to let go. They would be together again, but not now. He had remembered David's reaction in the Bible to the death of his infant son. "He cannot come to me, but I will go to him." But David didn't go just then. It was many years later when he died a natural death.

That part of Joel had won. He also found that time did work the miracle that others had encouraged him to expect. But it wasn't quite as simple as "time heals all wounds." Normalcy and routine did slowly, incrementally reestablish themselves in his life, and gradually he returned to the grave site less and less often, now only on holidays and anniversaries of special events in their lives together. In a sense, the tie had weakened over time. Somewhere along the line, the tears no longer came.

But the tie had not completely broken. Joel realized all this as he stood there today. He still believed that his heart belonged to Karen. The love and the loyalty he felt for her no longer beckoned him to go to her, but he didn't believe he could or even should ever love another. But then a few years ago he realized, quite to his surprise, that certain long-dormant emotions could be stirred again, that loneliness and the desire for tangible love could again bring other girls to his attention.

Indeed, there'd been a few girls who had attracted him. The result, however, was a raging conflict of emotions within him, tearing at him: the new attraction versus remaining faithful to Karen. He remembered how he'd finally resolved the conflict. His heart would always belong to Karen precisely because he would not allow himself to get into a position where he could feel such pain again.

That was when he'd decided to start MyForever.com. He would help others meet and fall in love. He would even enjoy some of that thrill vicariously, but vicarious it would remain.

Since making that resolution, he'd dated a few girls that he liked, but it'd been relatively easy not to let any serious romantic relationships develop. He'd come to think that his life would continue to be that simple.

That is, until he went out with Kristie Rydell.

Kristie had affected him like no other girl since Karen. It was more than a casual attraction. There was a chemistry between them that stirred feelings much deeper. Already on their first date, he'd sensed it--when he held her hand and when he took her into his arms and kissed her. Since last night, he couldn't get her out of his mind.

Thinking about it now, he must have known something special had ignited between them that first day they met in his office. Is that why he had asked her out? Sure, he liked her, he enjoyed being with her, and she had become discouraged again. He'd sensed her discouragement when he saw her in the restaurant. But he had to admit that he didn't ask her out just to cheer her up after her latest string of flops from his dating service. He'd wanted to ask her out because of how she made him feel.

And the way she made him feel when he was with her and when he held her stirred too many of those old conflicting emotions. He must not ask her out again.

Once again, Joel looked down at the headstone, at Karen's name carved into the cold granite. Then it struck him.

What a fool he was! He was thinking only of himself, and there was Kristie to consider. She had already experienced too many disappointments. Would this be another one? What were her feelings about him? How had she been affected by their date?

Joel scowled. Guys have such devious egos, and egos complicate things. Was she falling for him? Or was it just his male ego that made him think she was? If that was the case, there'd be nothing to worry about. But had it been more than a casual date for her too?

"What should I do, Karen? What should I do?"

He turned away and walked slowly back to his car. As if it weren't enough for his own emotions to be in turmoil, he now had to figure out Kristie's too. At least he had to try. How else could he figure out how to do what had to be done?

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Later that evening Joel was sitting in his Downtown Chicago apartment overlooking Lake Michigan. The window gave him a breath-taking view not only of the Lake and Navy Pier, but also of the Chicago skyline along Lake Shore Drive. Ordinarily, that view was a great comfort to him. But not tonight. Tonight his heart was too heavy.

He'd been reliving his date with Kristie and how happy he'd been when he was with her. It certainly had been an exciting, happy date--so much fun being with her. He'd felt comfortable, relaxed, playful even--no pretense, no acting, no putting on some front to try to impress her. He had just been himself. And so had she; he was sure of that. They had so much in common. They both had a similar sense of humor, liked the same things, the same types of places, the same activities, even the same music.

But all that had to end.

He got up and went over to his computer. MyForever.com had many features beside a simple data base of profiles. Joel had hired several prominent psychologists and relationship experts to write short papers that provided accurate and helpful information about dating, love, and marriage, such as how to meet someone online, how to recognize someone with whom you're compatible, and how to start building a relationship. But there was one paper in particular that he wanted to reread tonight. It had been written by a female psychologist and explained the subtle, nonverbal signs a girl gives when she's romantically attracted to a guy and believes him to have long-range potential.

The result did not simplify the situation, and he pushed the keyboard away from him in disgust. What was he doing reading an article about subtle signs? What had happened between them was anything but subtle. It was hard to misread Kristie's emotions when she snuggled next to him in the backseat of his car, when she repeated those lines from "Angel Baby," and when she'd melted into his arms as they kissed.

He decided not to do anything for maybe a week or so. Then he'd send a light, innocent email asking if she'd gotten any new prospects from MyForever.com and, if not, encouraging her that it's only a matter of time until she did.

Yes, that seemed a reasonable strategy. Going out with her again could only make things much worse for both of them. Stepping gracefully out of her life now would minimize whatever disappointment or hurt she might feel. As far as his own feelings were concerned, he would just have to deal with them.

Odd, very odd indeed. The thought of losing Kristie tore deep at his heart, almost like when he lost Karen.

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Kristie was in a really upbeat mood for her program Monday night. Since Saturday, she couldn't get Joel out of her mind. Their date had been so great. She replayed it in her mind over and over again--everything they had said, everything they had done.

It all had put her in such a giddy mood that she was going to have two special dedications tonight. First, she was going to get a hilarious revenge on him for saying she was hippy. Second, she was going to send him just a little hint of how she...well, of how much she liked him and what his kiss had meant to her.

"I'm going to do two dedications tonight, but I need to give you a little background on this first one. It's by a group called the Swinging Blue Jeans, a British Merseybeat group from Liverpool, the home of the Beatles. The name Merseybeat comes from the River Mersey that flows through Liverpool. Merseybeat, or the Liverpool Sound, achieved only local popularity until the Beatles brought it to the whole world. Like the Beatles, most Merseybeat groups consisted of lead, rhythm, and bass guitars plus drums.

"The Swinging Blue Jeans had only one hit that made the Top 40 in the U.S., a little ditty called 'Hippy Hippy Shake.'" She couldn't help giggling. "What a name, huh? It was released in December of 1963 and by the following March had risen to

24.

"Now I want everyone to understand what this song is all about. I happen to know for a fact that there's at least one guy out there who's confused about this, so let me set the record straight. The song refers to *dancing*. That's really quite plain in the lyrics: *I can't stand still with the hippy, hippy shake/You shake it to the left, you shake it to the right/You do the hippy shake shake with all your might*. Pretty clear, okay?

"So for all you guys out there with an overactive imagination, the song has nothing to do with the size of a girl's hips or how they shake when she walks. Here it is then," she added in a light, humorous tone, "listen and learn: 'Hippy Hippy Shake,' by the Swinging Blue Jeans."

Kristie barely got the mike off before she started laughing, trying to imagine how Joel was reacting to her little retaliation.

But she soon started getting nervous as the song was nearing the end. Her next dedication was going to be much more serious. She wanted it to be just right. Only a few seconds to go...now.

"The next dedication is by Jay and the Americans. It was a million seller and reached number 6 on the charts in 1969. To me, it's one of the most romantic songs from the rock era. Tonight Kathleen dedicates this song to Joel to celebrate their first kiss on their first date. Here is 'This Magic Moment.'"

Kristie turned the mike off and sat back, closing her eyes as the song played quietly in her earphones and sailed gently on the ether throughout Chicagoland. She pictured Joel listening to it in his apartment, sensing the connection between them.

*This magic moment,
So different and so new,
Was like any other,
Until I kissed you.*

*And then it happened!
It took me by surprise.
I knew that you felt it too,
By the look in your eyes.*

*Sweeter than wine,
Softer than a summer night.
Everything I want I have
Whenever I hold you tight...*

When the song ended, Kristie had tears in her eyes.

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In his apartment, Joel was listening to Kristie's two "dedications." He smiled at her antics in playing "Hippy Hippy Shake," but the smile disappeared during her second dedication. That one pierced his heart.

So he had already gone too far in asking her out at all. "Their first kiss on their first date," she had said. This left little doubt that she thought there'd be a lot more of both. She was going to be hurt. What had he done?

This forced his hand. He had to contact her sooner than he had planned. Email? Call her on the phone? Meet her for lunch?

And what would he say to her? The song by Gary Lewis and the Playboys popped into his head: *Where will the words come from/When I tell you I don't want you?* Especially when his heart screamed just the opposite.

The question was so difficult and painful that he somehow managed unwittingly to fill his time with other things that all of a sudden called for his urgent attention.

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Monday turned into Tuesday, then Wednesday, then Thursday, and still Kristie had not heard from Joel. She'd been hoping he'd call soon after Monday's dedication, maybe asking her for another date.

Her mind was suddenly consumed with an old doubt--her deepest fear. Could it be happening again? There had been those times in the past. Was another guy that she really liked losing interest in her? And after only one date? This would be a record!

Maybe she was being paranoid. There could be any number of reasons why Joel hadn't contacted her. Yes, she should have more confidence, more faith. She had seen something in his eyes after they'd kissed; she was sure of it.

But she was just so anxious to hear from him again, if only to allay her fears. Perhaps a little encouragement might be in order. Nothing blatant, certainly not asking *him* for a date. An email seemed appropriate, a humorous email, so it wouldn't appear that she was being too forward or pushy.

Now what would make them both laugh? Of course! Joel's own joke and her "retaliation." So Thursday afternoon Kristie sat down at her computer and sent Joel an email.

Mr. Taylor: I hope you were listening to my show Monday night. "Hippy Hippy Shake" is the description of a dance, not the size of my hips or any other girl's hips. And I'll have you know that my hips measure a mere 34 inches. So there! Kathleen.

Kristie chuckled to herself as she clicked "Send."

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In his office, Joel leaned his chair back in utter dismay. He should have sent an email or called Kristie right away on Tuesday morning. Now it was worse. She was still being playful.

He hadn't even come up with anything better than his original strategy: send

her a light email asking if she'd gotten any promising new prospects and assuring her that it was just a matter of time. He wouldn't indulge in any romantic playfulness and certainly wouldn't say that she seemed to have taken their date more seriously than she should have. He'd have to word it carefully.

Hey, Kristie: I always hear your show! I'm glad you weren't angry at my little joke. I think John Kennedy once said that we should be able to laugh at humor even when we're the object of it.

Have you gotten any new contacts from MyForever.com? I still want you to be encouraged with your new profile and remember that it could happen any day. I'm confident that a really great guy will come along for you.

Joel

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Kristie stared at her computer monitor in utter disbelief. Joel's email was friendly and he was trying to encourage her--but encourage her to find another man! As if Saturday had never happened. Could she have misread him? Hadn't he felt any...well, romantic interest in her at all? Everything had been so wonderful, and she had been so sure. Had he really lost interest in her already? Didn't he want to keep dating her?

Tears filled her eyes as her long-standing fear resurfaced with all of its debilitating power.

Could he have misread her? Couldn't he tell what their date had meant to her? Didn't he understand what she was trying to tell him by playing "This Magic Moment"?

She had to talk to him. No more emails. It was too late this afternoon, but she would call him first thing tomorrow morning.

How Kristie got through her program Thursday night, she wasn't sure. It had been the most difficult broadcast of her career. On the air, she had to be happy, carefree, and fun-loving. The audience probably couldn't detect that behind the front she presented, her heart was breaking. Only one date, but, yeah, breaking. They had been so happy that night. She'd been so sure it was just the beginning. And now already he had lost interest in her. She couldn't believe it, just couldn't believe it. Joel...she thought it would be so different with him.

Friday morning, Kristie called Joel at his office. The receptionist wasn't going to put her through. Kristie was already upset before she'd even dialed the number and now this!

"Look, this is a social call. Joel knows me. Just tell him Kristie Rydell."

After a few moments Joel came on the line. "Hi, Kristie." He paused. Was he uncertain what to say next?

"Joel, I need to see you."

"Sure, anytime. Is anything wrong?"

Is anything wrong! she thought incredulously. How could he not know?

"Yes, there is. I really need to talk to you, Joel. Can we meet somewhere before my show tonight?"

"Of course. How about Grant Park, near Buckingham Fountain."

"I can be there in an hour," Kristie said.

"Me too. See you soon."

Kristie arrived early and was pacing back and forth in front of the huge fountain. During the day, the beautiful colored lights were not shining on the magnificent fountain, but it was still one of the most impressive sights in Chicago.

Today, however, Kristie hardly noticed the fountain was even there.

She shouldn't have done this. What was she going to do now? Demand an explanation? Demand to know why he didn't want to go out with her again? Something like that might be justified if they'd been dating regularly and seriously for months. But not after one date. What could she have been thinking? Joel didn't owe her an explanation--or a second date.

But she still couldn't believe that he didn't want to go out again...they'd held hands, kissed so tenderly...

Her train of thought was interrupted when she saw Joel walking toward her. He was smiling, but she also detected concern in his expression. Was he concerned just in general, because she'd said over the phone that something was wrong? Or was he worried that she would confront him about why he wanted to break off dating her?

"Kristie, what's wrong?"

"Can we sit down?"

"Sure, let's grab that bench over there," he answered, pointing to one nearby.

They sat down and Kristie folded her hands nervously on her lap.

"Joel, I shouldn't have called you. I guess I was a little upset emotionally, and I...well, I need to just forget about it."

He didn't answer immediately, and it occurred to her that he surely must know why she called, why she had gotten upset, and why she wanted to see him. Yeah, that must be it. He's not sure what to say without making her feel worse.

But knowing that was why he didn't answer did make her feel worse...and deeply hurt. It was not a new experience in her dating life. She felt tears coming and had to make a concentrated effort to keep from crying.

She laid her hand gently on Joel's arm. "It's okay. I'm going to take heart and be encouraged like you said in your email. You know, look forward to another contact. Let's just watch the pigeons for a little while before you have to get back to the office."

Joel took her hand. "Kristie, I think I know why you were upset. We had a really great time Saturday, but I was utterly unfair to you. When I sent you that email asking for a date, I really was trying to cheer you up. But there was more to it than that. I wanted that date for me too; I wanted to go out with you."

"Were you disappointed?" Aargh! What kind of a question was that? She had no right to put him on the spot like that.

"Are you kidding? It's been a long time since I'd been so happy."

"But now...now you're hoping someone else will come along for me? You don't want..." She hesitated, uncertain.

"To go out with you again?" His expression looked pained.

"No, Joel, don't answer. I've said too much already. I have no right to press you like this. If you don't want to go out again..."

"But I do. I do, Kristie, and that's why I don't dare." He gently touched her face, but then quickly withdrew his hand. His eyes seemed to project sadness. Or was it longing? "I've got a lot of old baggage...I'm just not the right guy for you. Last Saturday, if I could have kept things on a casual, let's-just-have-a-few-laughs basis, everything would've been okay. But I let my guard down. I let myself...follow my feelings. That was unfair to you."

"Why not follow your feelings?"

"I gave you the impression I was free to do something I'm not free to do."

"Not free? What do you mean? Not free to date me?" Again Joel didn't respond. "But why aren't you free? You're dating someone else?"

"No, no, not at all. Nothing like that. There's no one else in my life..." He paused, looking down at the ground. "There hasn't been for many years now. I just can't let myself...I'm just not free to fall in love." He looked into her eyes and appeared utterly despondent.

Joel stood up and Kristie also rose. She felt the tears coming.

"Petula Clark...*For the last time...? Pretend...?*"

"No, I better not." He turned to leave but then whipped around suddenly and faced her. "No, Kristie, wrong song!" For the first time there was vehemence in his voice. "No one new is waiting for me to be my tomorrow. I have no tomorrow. The right song is, "Where Will the Words Come From?" Where did they come from just now? Certainly not from my heart."

Then his face softened again, and it looked like Joel's eyes too were beginning to tear. He turned quickly and walked away.

About a week later, Kristie received a new contact. His name was Roger Penfield.

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