

## XI. TRUE LOVE

Tony was surprised how little that she had changed. Her eyes looked a little more focused. There was more of a certainty in her gait. But it was the same Helena. He, on the other hand, seem more weathered by time. It hadn't been that long, but he had lost some of his magic. They met in the lobby of her hotel, the Columbia. It was a big room full of mirrors. The greeting had been polite. She kissed him on the cheek. Both were reserved.

"I'm glad that you came," he broke the ice.

"It was hard for me!"

"I know."

"I don't want you to think that you've won because I'm here. I'm still mad at you. I just needed to see with my own eyes."

"I know that you're still angry. I would be too."

She looked at both them in the mirror. The years had made her radiate confidence. He only seemed desperate.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" he made her an offer.

"I'm still feeling jet lag. I had a nap when I first got in. I'll probably feel better after lunch."

"I know a great place. It's only a short walk from here."

As she ate lunch with him, she thought about the image of both of them in the mirror. She was feeling more and more distant

Even as he talked she hardly listened. She didn't want to hear about Vanessa and her lovely flowing red locks.

"I have a son now. His name is Andrew. I have a picture"

All these details only filled up the time. He was only disappointing. She hated herself for even taking the time to care about him.

She started to wake up as she worked her way through her salad. By the time she had eaten most of her pasta dish, she was quite alert. This made him appear more pathetic. His motive was apparent. She wasn't going to fall for it.

He assumed that they would be together after lunch. He had a fantasy that she would collapse in his arms. For her, he seemed faded. It was like a photograph that has lost its contours in time. She tried to hold on to something. It was long gone.

She spent the afternoon wandering the National Gallery. It brought back her days at St. Ingrid's. She still had the sparkle in her eye. She had her eye for art. Now these lines were so defined. The battles were resolved. The history was all too remote.

At this point she thought she had done everything that she could in London. She had a life back in New York. It was pleasant to visit here. But there was really nothing here for her anymore. She didn't want to go back to the misery of her past. Even her good times seemed like only a preparation for something more. Even without the love of her life, she felt complete. Tony was not going to threaten that feeling.

He called her when she got back to the room. He wanted to get together for dinner. But she begged off. She agreed to another luncheon date. She spent the evening wandering Soho. She had some risotto at an Italian restaurant. Afterwards she grabbed a canoli at a nearby pastry

shop. They had even wrapped it in a little box. She walked over to the theater district and looked at the placards for the upcoming shows. As continued her progress, she opened the box and finished her sugary delight.

She retired early that evening. She had none of the dread that might have accompanied her journey. It all made sense. After a great sleep, she crossed through Lancaster Gate for a walk in Hyde Park. It was beautiful day. The sun reflected in the waters of the fountain. She sat and watched the children play. She again thought back to her troubles from years ago. What made her act the way that she did?

He met her for lunch at a Thai restaurant. She ordered rice and shrimp in a hot sauce. She used her chopsticks with dexterity. He was less adept.

“I’m glad that you took the opportunity to meet me again.”

He sounded like he was doing a business transaction.

“I thought it was only fair to hear you out.”

She questioned whether he could really say anything to bring back the former spark. She surveyed his eyes for some sign that a heart still beat in there. But he seemed so cold. How could he plead his case and seem so weak? She wished for her own sake that she could say something to make him come alive.

The whole project was now appearing worse than expected. She had thought that he would plead his case. She would feel a slight twinge of the old romance. And she could go on her way. But he was pathetic. There was nary a thing to remind her of the time together. The playboy of London seemed like a haggard businessman rushing back to his affairs.

“Tony, I’m not sure why you didn’t just let things be when you found the letter. It’s been too long to go back. You have a wife and child now.”

“I told you how I regret everything.”

“I accept your apology if that’s what it is. But you’ve lost the chance to change anything, What are you going to do? Put Vanessa and Andrew out on the street.”

“I could divorce her.”

“Really! Think about how that would disrupt your financial empire.”

She could be almost passionless in her prosecution. She felt that she had satisfied a desire for revenge even if that had not been her intention. She could sleep with him and then leave for that last ounce of satisfaction. But she didn’t even want that.

“Do you want to spend the afternoon together?”

“I’d love to, Tony. But I need to be honest. There’s really nothing between us.”

Outside the restaurant, he gave her the parting kiss. As he did, he brought his hand to rest just below her breast. She closed her eyes as she kissed him. She tried to imagine their time together on Corfu. She wondered if it would be worth seeing him again.

The letter had her hanging on. The suspense had made her anxious. She had built him up into something special. Now this.

After lunch, she decided to catch a film that she had looked forward to seeing. As she sat watching it, her mind wandered. She could hardly keep her eyes open. She hadn’t done that much walking at all. Perhaps, the traveling had finally caught up with her. She actually dozed as she was watching the film.

She had planned to stay three more days. When she got back to the hotel, she planned to

call the airlines to re-book her flight. She needed to leave tomorrow if she could. There was no reason to stay longer.

Already the afternoon haze had passed into the evening twilight. There was a dampness in the air. It was getting to her. She thought if she walked quickly, it would dissipate. She felt less chilly but there was a remaining queasiness.

Helena kept moving without any sense of direction. She kept walking south even though her hotel was north. She didn't think much of it. She didn't have a clear destination. She could feel herself slipping back in time. Now she was walking in a fog. She had no idea where she was even though her body felt like it had a direction.

Her trek lasted over an hour. She kept going and going. She felt that she was getting further and further away from any sense of purpose. London had once been like this for her. She had to check the bus stops just to see where she was going. This time she didn't even look at a map. She was like a bird heading south for the winter. She could feel her direction inside her body. And it was becoming all too apparent what was happening.

She had deliberately avoided the Tate galleries in her reminiscence. But the images were locked deep inside her. The London air was releasing the ghosts again. Her Ophelia was again working the old magic. She felt that there was no New York to call home. This was her beginning and her end.

Bessborough Gardens seemed like such a desolate place. Why had she made the mistake of returning? It was so strange how she had put this out of her mind for good. But time had taken right back to that identical feeling as if nothing had changed.

She was tired from walking. She went to sit on the bench.

"I'm glad that you came."

She turned around to see Tony.

"How did you know that you'd find me here?"

"I didn't. But I'm here. You're here."

She felt a relief that he had finally come to take her out this place."

"Tony, hold me."

He hugged her with all his might. All her defenses came crumbling down. She didn't want explanation, she just wanted to hold him.

The passion seemed to bring him alive. She could sense the old flair that had made him so appealing. She looked in his eyes and could again see that fire.

His kisses were deep and gratifying. But they also made her want more. He pinned her against the stone fence. She could feel his body surround hers.

"I've got a car."

"We could go back to the hotel."

They were like teenagers sneaking up to her room. The elevator seemed to take forever. When it came, they jumped in. She held him close and they started to kiss. When they arrived at the floor, they hesitated to get out. They were so lost in their passion.

She could hardly work the key in the door. A bit of nervousness. The years disappeared as they shed their clothes. There were no questions asked. No answers to be given. The rhythms of the two bodies accommodated all the distress of those years. For the rest of that night there was no let up in their ardor. The Columbia shook from the shared affection. He experienced an

endurance that he thought that he had lost after all this time. He was again a lover of twenty-six. Their bodies said everything; their doubts vanished.

“Why didn’t we do this sooner?”

She smiled at his self-assurance. Would it be enough? She buried herself in the covers. He wrapped his body around hers. She was left wanting for nothing.

As the dawn peeked in the room, the sleeping lovers were getting what little rest they could from the remaining night hours. They were locked in their nocturnal embrace.

With the coming of morning, they did not want to deny what they had experienced in the darkness. A passionate kiss led them down the same winding road. As their bodies moved together, they never wanted to separate.

“I can join you back in New York. That’s how it was meant to be. We have an office there. It’s actually doing most of our business.”

“You’re talking crazy, Tony.”

The couple tried to gain perspective at breakfast. Helena continued.

“Tony, that was just the magic of one night. You can’t let the ruin your life. I did. And then I snapped out of it.”

“Don’t tell me that this isn’t what you’ve live for all your life.”

“I’m not seventeen. We felt good together last night. But I don’t think that I could gamble my whole life on that feeling.

“It’s not a gamble. It’s a certainty.”

“I’m not a client. You don’t have to convince me. I know what we had. And it was great. It was like a vacation. You enjoy it for what it is. You savor it up to the very last moment. And then you get on a plane and go back to reality. We should have done that when we first met. You did.”

“Not really.”

As he chewed on a piece of sausage, this exuberance filled his face.

He held her hand on the table, “I don’t want this to end.”

“It doesn’t have to. We can keep the image alive in our minds. But this is our past talking in us. We can’t let this happen again.”

“I’ll be back tonight for some more of the same.”

“I have a plane to catch.”

“You never changed your flight. Remember.”

“You have a wife.”

“I’ll see you.”

As he went off to work, she remembered her own advice. Sh couldn’t trust a married man. But she would make the best of it while she was here. He hd matured as a lover. He had seemed so caring in bed. His kisses would never stop. Her body was like a furnace. Drenched in sweat, they had ridden their dreams deep into the night. She had felt one with him like she had never been with a man before.

She saw the trap. And the hole was gaping wider and wider. She felt that she was preparing a dive into an empty pool. She only concentrated on her finesse. She forgot about the disastrous conclusion.

That evening she gave little thought how he made it back to her side. His excuses to

Vanessa were not her worry. She just wanted to pleasure him. She had more than enough zeal to contain his fire. She drew all the force from him. She drained him of all his resources. But he would not stop. And he filled her up with his own vigor. She melted in his arms. It was no longer the physical sensations as she floated together with him. Their ocean was limitless. It went on and on and on.

They both discovered a strength that they didn't realize still remained. They found an aggression between them that made the interchange more and more fierce. She was in great shape. She didn't hold back. She worked him to his physical limits. This was way beyond their tenderness. The bodies spoke one language. Nothing would hold them back. And they swayed back and forth for hours on end.

She was overwhelmed by their staying power. Lying together in the night stillness, she would never want to go back to the world of her imagination. She rested her face on his firm chest muscles. She wanted to feel him deep inside her soul. She felt this warmth that flushed across her entire body.

Even in the morning they could not let up. There were these spats of passion and these lulls to recover. They stretched themselves in new ways so that the body had an electricity without respite. They renewed themselves on their lavish kisses and feasted on their magnanimous caresses. They were rich in their affection.

"I can't go back to Vanessa. I can't face her."

"You have to do this like a man."

He had his back to her while he dressed.

"She knows what is going on. She is sure that you are here. I shower before I see her but she can sense the passion. It shows in my muscles. In my smile. She questions what is the source of my new life."

"See. You have your argument."

"You're right. I have to be more courageous."

"Just think about us."

She still believed that he would leave Vanessa. All this passion was only possible because down deep he could care for Helena. It was the escape that he needed. But not the love that he could live with.

Just as she knew his body, she knew that he still was vain. He had covered himself with this protecting surface over the years. Without it, he would only destroy his family. But now it had again melted away. Helena thought that she would only be one in a string of lovers. She couldn't give in to that illusion.

Her greater fear was what she saw about herself. She was a creature driven by her desire. She used her ghosts to try to hide that from herself. She felt that she had released this serpent deep inside her. She had no control over this monster. It could only be fed by this anonymous passion. She derided herself for being so driven. This was what she had hated about Claire and Rachel. That they were only sexual beings. And she was becoming just that.

Her artistic illusions now seemed more pronounced. She had veiled this part of herself. And the veils had built up so that she could hardly present the Helena that was inside. If she lived for a man's touch, then that only made her seem to be a slave to her passions. She had to throw off this terrible addiction.

She made her way to the Tate that afternoon. She needed to investigate the roots of her feelings. She saw the paintings in a new light. The twisted bodies and the scorned lovers. The passions without end. The futility of Ophelia now asserted itself in a different way. She also was subject to the pull of her feelings, too devoted to matters of the flesh

She dispensed with the shame that had captivated her years. This had all come down from her mother. She had seen Caroline's disaster and not wanted to end up the same way. But now it all made sense. The flesh had its language. All other voices only translated those primeval words. In the arms of a man, she was learning to speak for the first time. That night they let the bodies do their talking. She saved nothing. This would be the last time together. She wanted him to vanquish her of all reserve. She would live for nothing but this passion. It would be the only thing that could quench the eternal thirst. As the two of them held together, she crossed over to her paradise where she was meant to reside all her life.

"I want you to come back to me. I told you of my plans. I'll see you back in London in three weeks. I'll meet you at Bessborough. And we'll sail away together."

"You're dreaming."

"No, I really mean it."

"You'll never leave Vanessa. I knew that all along. I just wanted the sex. I knew it would be great."

"It was great because we believed it to be great. We can be free in each other's arms."

"Haven't you ever said the same thing to her? You share a child together."

"They have been nights of passionless sex. I thought that I had lost my power. I was becoming old before my time."

"You haven't lost your power,"

They both laughed. As he looked at her standing there, he felt the immediacy of their attraction. He wanted her then and there. He moved towards and held her against the wall. He lifted up her skirt. He found his affirmative. There was this convulsive quality to their union. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else.

She didn't want to wash off his scent. She wanted to remember it just as it had been. In Corfu, she was overcome by their tenderness. Over the years, she imagined an eternity to the passion. But now she sensed how raw was their heat. It was not based on the imagination. It was real.

This time she could sense that feeling just shaking her being. Their separation was not the stuff of gentle romance. It went to heart of their beings. She longed for him as if he had been cut away from her body.

As she waited at the airport, she tried to sober up. She was using her affection for him to deny that she really like sex. If it wasn't with him. It could be with anyone. This had disrupted the certainty .

All her artistic pursuits had been based on these perfect proportions. He had introduced this irregularity into her life. If she gave into that feeling, there would be nothing else for her. She wasn't that type of woman. She didn't want to lose her independence. She felt that she was now running from herself. She was not the weakling of Bessborough. But she felt a new weakness. As long as she stayed strong, she would have to deny the very creativity that gave her an identity.

She needed to think through this dilemma. She needed to get back home. England had disrupted her certainty. She would find it again.

After her lunch on the plane, she slept. She hadn't been sleeping enough while in London. She woke up groggy and disoriented. It would be a couple of hours before they landed. But she was coming back to reality.

By the time that she arrived at work on Monday, she was the same Helena. She had lived a terrible nightmare. And she had been awakened by a new providence. She could again throw herself into her work.

"I want to hear all about it."

She agreed to meet Stephanie for lunch. The morning flew past her. She thought that she would be behind and face a mound of work on her return. But her instructions had been clear. Everything was caught up. She maintained a steady pace. She worked a few designs on the computer. Her facility returned.

"Helena, this looks wonderful."

"I guess that we've earned our lunch, Stephanie,"

During their salad, Helena related the story.

"You ended up back at Bessborough. How romantic. "

"This was way beyond romance, Steph. I felt like I was coming out of my skin."

"I told you that's what you needed."

"But he says that he wants to leave Vanessa. That's just crazy."

"Of course it is. But you have to ride it for what it is."

"I'm only going to get my hopes up more."

"You can't love if you don't have your heart broken. Don't fear it!"

Helena didn't want to go crawling back to him. He now seemed to have all the cards.

"He's never going to leave her."

"We both know that. But she can't hurt you. She doesn't even live here."

"But I want a man of my own."

"See the kind of luck that you've been having, Helena. Make him make the next move."

When she got back to the office there was an email from Tony. He wanted her to come back.

"I ache for you!"

He needed to ache more if any of this was to stay real. There was still this fascination for their shared fiction. But it would wear off.

Three weeks later, the passion still echoed in her flesh. She hadn't seen anyone else since her return. She had been so busy that it didn't seem to matter. But he was again getting the upper hand. She didn't like any of this.

"You need to make plans, Helena."

"Stephanie, he needs to commit himself. He's given me no real sign of budging."

"You've let him off the hook."

She wanted follow Stephanie's advice. How could she? She didn't even have a plan.

"I'm coming to New York."

The abruptness of his email hit her like a load of bricks.

She felt like she was scurrying around the office.

“Helena, this is going to change things.”

“It sure is.”

“He’s going to disturb my only hope for peace and quiet.”

“Don’t think of it that way.”

“How should I think about it?”

“Have fun! Act young.”

“He can’t come!”

Stephanie was trying hard to convince her friend.

“He told you that he’s going to be her. You can’t ignore him.”

“Stephanie, he’s married.”

“That didn’t stop you in London.”

“This is New York, and I have to learn to draw the lines.

Helena couldn’t help it if the lines were getting blurred. Stephanie only made it harder for her to put her foot down. Did she really want to shut him out.

After work they headed for drinks.

“Stephanie, look around you. There’s a load of single guys in here.”

“And there’s also a bunch of married men pretending to be single. His wife is half a world away. Take it for what it is.”

Helena wanted to go hide somewhere. She could go about her business in upstate New York. That would help her forget about this mess.

“Helena, you are not going to Buffalo. I’ll just tell him where you are.”

“You better not.”

When he arrived Helena tried to play it cool. The next thing that she knew they were walking in Central Park and looking for Italian ices.

“This is a wonderful June day,” he marveled. “We don’t get it this nice in London.”

She gazed at him in the eyes as he pulled her close. This was what she had missed in the last few weeks. But she had to know if he wasn’t just using her. She felt a bit like a whore. Only his kiss could tell her.

He started to nibble at her lip. He was taking it very slow. The touch was gentle and convincing. She had no doubts left. She now felt helpless.

Back at his hotel room, they carried on from their time in London. She was totally rambunctious in the bedroom.

“I didn’t want you to do it like that again,” he remarked flippantly. They both giggled. His hand explored her body with audacity. There were no longer any restraints on their knowledge of each other.

“This is going to have to stop when you go back to London.”

“I want you to meet me back there. I’ve decided to leave Vanessa.”

“You’ve been saying that over and over again. But I don’t feel like I can believe you.”

“You have to believe me.”

His promises made her seem less and less compulsive. She appeared to be acceding to his plan. He had his back to her. He was naked in the sunlight.

“This should never have to end.”

“Helena, what are you saying.”

“What we are doing is wrong.”

“But we can make it right. Love can make it right.”

“Are you saying that you love me?”

He hesitated.

“I just did. I said love can make it right.”

“Your love. Do you love me? Can you even say it?”

“Yes, I can. I just did.”

She was working too hard for his acknowledgment. He had what he wanted. She wanted what he wasn't willing to give. She knew that he would never sacrifice his life. He lived within his own complacency.

He gave her a wild glance. She took it as a sign that he wanted more fierce loving. Both were willing to oblige the other. Could she hope for anything more?

The next day she was more philosophical.

“Stephanie, I'll never get any work done as long as he's here. I missed a whole day yesterday.”

“The passion will cool down.”

“Then what will be left?”

“What is always left.”

“I'm still not sure what that could be.”

“None of us are. You have to live for the moment.”

“The moment is about to come to an end.”

At a candlelight dinner she was more critical of his motives.

“Tony, you need to quit leading me on. It's going to be over when you go back.”

“But you will follow me. You can test me to see if it's real.”

“I'm failing my own tests. I just love your body too much.”

“I don't know what to say to that.”

She still found him insensitive. But she was so attuned to his ferocious passions that it no longer mattered.

“You've given me what no other man could give me.”

“What is that?”

“My dreams. I thought that I had lost them for good but you brought them back to life”

She repeated herself, “You've given me something else that no one else could give me.”

He said nothing. They both smiled deeply as their bodies merged.

She didn't know where to take their love. Helena just needed Tony to disappear.

“I want you to come back to London with me.”

“I have my life here.”

“I know. So do I. I'm going to come back to live here. But I need you to meet me in London.”

She had just taken time. But she understood the urgency.

“I'll do what I can.”

After he had left New York, she tried pretending that nothing had happened. Stephanie had encouraged her up to this point. But the caution flags now came up.

“You had your fun with him. Now you can cut him loose.”

“I thought that you told me to have fun.”

“I did. It was great while he was here. But you need to let him go. Now and forever.”

The two of them were in a restaurant high above the city. The setting sun blazed across the sky in rich reds and purples. She felt this incredible sense of well being. She had won her dream back. Anything else would be asking too much.

“He wants to me to follow him to London.”

“He’s a lunatic.”

“I’m going to go. My mind’s made up.”

“He’s going back to his wife.” Stephanie was adamant.

“I know. They always go back. But I need to go.” Helena couldn’t get off the roller coaster. She wanted some kind of accident just to reassure her that she was alive.

Helena continued, “I think that I love him. I know that he doesn’t love me. But it’s not going to stop me. I have to follow him.”

“You’re repeating your old patterns.”

“I’ve had the most wonderful time the past few days.” She was gushing.

“You have to be stopped. I’ll stand in your way.”

“It’s too late. I bought the ticket.”

“You can cancel. You can go another time. I’ll pay the money for you not to go.”

“My mind’s made up.”

“But your body has to say no.”

“My body is already over there.”

Helena had been taking chances like this all her life. And the reward seemed meager. This time she was going to take a chance. She was gambling everything with nothing apparently in reserve.

As the plane prepared for take off, she counted the number of times that she had made this journey. She wanted this trip to be the decisive one.