

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Awesome Blossom

March 11, 1988

Minutes after my heart-warming encounter with Eric and Marina, I found Arwen in the interior room of the library eating lunch alone while reading *Confess, Fletch* by Gregory Mcdonald. I stopped at the threshold, worried I would be invading her sanctuary if I entered.

“Are you a vampire waiting for me to invite you in?” Arwen beckoned me inside. I walked in with my head down and sat across from her, placing my hands flat on the table.

She kept her eyes on the book, making a show of reading and speaking to me at the same time. “David and Miriam are at the science fair. They did a project together about steps that vineyards can take to adapt to global warming.” When I allowed myself to look at her, I realized she had given herself a minor makeover. With her glasses off, her silver eyes were in full view. The ponytail was gone, and her black hair fell in long, wavy strands about her shoulders. Her black jacket was off, draped over the back of her chair. Instead of one of her usual, oversized indie band t-shirts, she wore a form-fitting red satin blouse with a plunging v-neckline. A 14-karat gold chai pendant charm dangled just above her cleavage. Between the blouse, necklace, and surprising size and shapeliness of the breasts she had been hiding under her jacket, I found myself gaping openly down her shirt. All the other times I’d seen her, she had been intent on deemphasized her femininity — covering herself in layers of boyish clothes, restraining her hair, and speaking academic-sounding sentences in a flat voice. Now, she was flaunting her plumage.

My God, she needs a concealed-carry permit for those big guns.

“How are you doing today?” she asked.

I almost leapt out of my skin. “Good, good,” I stammered, forcing my eyes back down on my hands. “How are you? How’s the. . . um. . . *Fletch*?”

“It is a lightly comic neo-noir. Like Douglas Adams, Mcdonald drives his story with witty banter and does not waste time describing setting or granting his characters interiority.”

“Silly writing style,” I observed. *Don't look at her boobs. Don't look at her boobs. Don't look at her boobs. Don't look at her boobs. Don't look at her boobs. Don't look at her boobs.*

The admonishing chant playing on repeat in my head fizzled out. I snuck another look at Arwen's cleavage. It was a sight to behold. The part of my brain not focused on following the curve of her red shirt around the underside of her breasts realized she was reading a book I had gotten in trouble for buying several years ago. Dad had thought a paperback about a beautiful, nude corpse dumped in Fletch's borrowed apartment was too risqué for me. He forced me to return it Waldenbooks in exchange for the more toffee-nosed *Paradise Lost*. At the time, I was outraged that Dad had turned Puritan on me after taking me to see *Stripes* in the theater. That was then. Now I was sitting at a table with a surprisingly sexy girl who was ‘secretly’ attracted to me, reading a book I had been barred from reading, and I was not allowed to so much as reach out to touch her hand, because her parents had declared interfaith romance forbidden. I imagined being trapped inside an unknown Edward Hopper painting: “The Library at Lunch.” Art history scholars could write exhaustingly about how Hopper rendered illicit romance — and the emotional isolation of the male — in stark, understated terms and in the most prosaic of institutional settings.

“You like my shirt?” Arwen asked, still not looking up from her book.

Caught! Pretending I hadn't heard the question, I looked back down at my hands. It was difficult to project a casual air with huge beads of sweat collecting on my forehead. *You're god damn right, I like your shirt. And I like your boobs. And I especially like your boobs in that shirt. And now I really want to see your boobs out of that shirt. Like . . . now. I want to tackle you and kiss you all over your body. Do you want me to?*

Arwen finally looked up and gingerly placed her book upon the table. She leaned back in her chair, deliberately giving me an even clearer view of her chest. It was all I could do not to lean forward, reach across the table, and caress her right then and there. *She's messing with me! What's she trying to pull?* Mischievously, recklessly, Arwen had decided to push all my buttons just to see what would happen.

Of course, I lit up and went into overdrive like some great big . . . lighting up and going into overdrive thing. I was furious with myself. One half hour ago, I had not been remotely attracted to this girl. One strategically worn red shirt later, I was a goner.

Am I that easy to manipulate? I can't be!

"You can wear that shirt any time you want to," I said, pretending to be confident.

Arwen assumed an expression of feigned surprise. "Are you suggesting you like today's look better than my usual, 'tomboy' attire?"

"Marginally."

"You and every guy! I dress down most days, so I'm not felt up by strangers in public."

She'd sounded a discordant note I could not let pass. "Oh, *no! Really?* I'm sorry." Of course. "Every guy" followed my dad's rule of 100: Grab her tit and if she likes you, she won't smack you. That was the go-to strategy for all guys, all the time, right? So, that meant girls like Arwen were felt up non-stop by armies of strangers every day if they showed off their goods. Why had I not been able to imagine that sooner? The ramifications of the realization shook me to my core, even as I found myself caught up in an overpowering urge to jump on top of Arwen and tear her clothes off. The two conflicting impulses, both equally strong, short-circuited me.

"I am a bit surprised that you are shocked, but let's let that pass." Her expression brightened. "Today's a special occasion! Our chaperones are gone, so I wore this for you."

This last remark was encouraging enough that I dared to look Arwen in the eyes. Could they be flirtatious, earnest, wary, and sad all at once? "Why?" I asked, stupidly.

Arwen mimed casting a fishing line out, hooking me by the mouth, and reeling me in.

Her jokey pantomime reminded me that I hated being toyed with. Now I was mentally lumping Arwen in with Viola and Aurora. *These women sure love fucking with me, don't they? I'm so much fun to tease, huh?* "What about your candy empire? Aren't you playing with fire?"

Arwen let out a long sigh, like a deflating balloon.

I spread my arms wide. "Well?"

Arwen's eyes flashed lightning. "Are you *serious*? Why would you bring that up *now*?"

When would there be a better time to bring it up? "I dunno. Are we allowed to date, then? Can we go out somewhere this weekend?"

Arwen was about to shout but grew concerned that the librarian might hear us arguing. At the height of her frustration with me, she lowered her voice as much as she could muster. "Of course not, you fucking idiot."

I gestured towards her revealing red blouse. "Then what's all this in aid of?"

Arwen crossed her arms and glared at me. "You can't *possibly* be this stupid. No one is *this* stupid. Why are you sabotaging yourself?"

"Because you're not being serious! You're playing with my head. This isn't real, what you're doing, and it's not cool."

Arwen was beyond confused. "What? I don't—. What are you talking about? What's not real? You don't think these are silicone, do you? Because they are *so* not silicone!"

"No, no, no. I feel like you're playing a prank on me to get even with me for saying you're 'not-one-hundred-percent my type.' And, you know something? You're right. It was a crappy thing to say. I just was trying to navigate a tricky situation with your stepsister, and I could have done a better job. I'm sorry. I blew it. Please forgive me."

Arwen stared at me, unblinking, for ten seconds. "I ran this conversation in my head fifty times, and never once did it go . . . like *this*."

"How did you want it to go?" I asked.

I became very aware of the sound of the clock's second hand as it ticked five seconds.

"Okay, *okay*. I'll put my knockers back into storage." Arwen slipped her coat back on and zipped it up. She put her glasses back on and returned the scrunchie to her hair to recreate the ponytail. Sexy chick Superman was gone, and dowdy chick Clark Kent was back. "Just pretend they aren't there and don't let them bother you."

"You want me to sit here across from you every day, with you dressed like a mummy, and I'm supposed to pretend I don't know

you've got world-class tits?"

Arwen shot me a disappointed look. "Are you a toddler? Just be a gentleman. If you can't do that, be professional in the library. And, if you can't do that, jerk off in the mornings before coming to school. Get it all out of your system before you see me."

"I do that every day anyway. It's the only way I can function."

"Whatever," Arwen growled. "Do what you have to do to treat me like a human being."

"Holy tonal whiplash, Batman," I muttered.

"What was that?" Arwen asked. "I didn't hear you."

I looked down at my feet and realized I hadn't unpacked my lunch from my schoolbag. That was as good an excuse as any to leave now. This library monitor gig was already proving to be a disaster. Talk about "Out of the frying pan, into the fire!" I should find my old spot by the wire fence and eat alone outside. I'd just have to hope that Mrs. Hall wouldn't know I was back there, and Fuckhead Flavio wouldn't spot me. *Oh, shit, Arwen is looking at me like she expects me to say something.* I cleared my throat. "You shouldn't feel like you have to dress like a nun to get me to behave myself. And you shouldn't dress sexy just to get a rise out of me when there's no way in hell we can ever be together. All that shit's bogus. Look, I just came from one insanely stressful conversation. Now I'm in another insane conversation that I should have seen coming but didn't. I gotta be honest, here. I'm about to totally freak out. I'm on the verge of a total nervous breakdown. I really can't take this school anymore."

I hadn't even started to stand up, but my tone had given me away. Arwen flipped from angry to fearful. "Aw, come on, Damien. Don't run away. Stay."

"This whole library monitor thing was a big mistake."

"Please?" Arwen gestured for me to stay seated. "I am sorry if you think I'm just messing with you. I swear I'm not. But you're right. I shouldn't have done it for a whole bunch of reasons. I just like you. And I had an impulse. And . . . I shouldn't have followed it."

"I don't understand what you want from me, at all," I said. "I haven't the first clue!"

Arwen's eyes narrowed. "You're a weird guy. I gotta say. I just

showed you my boobs and you got mad at me? What guy gets mad at a pair of boobs flashed at him?”

“Ha! That’s fair. That’s more than fair. The problem is . . .” I began.

The ticking of the clock made an encore performance for another six seconds.

“Yes?” asked Arwen.

“The problem is . . . it’s taking all my willpower not to jump across this table and kiss you, right now. I’m having a really hard time controlling myself, you know?”

Arwen used her innocent voice again. “Why control yourself?”

All my fears were gone. I’d never kissed anyone. I wasn’t sure if I knew how, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t know if I was going to lose my heart to yet another girl I couldn’t have. That didn’t matter either. I wasn’t sure if the librarian would barge in on us. So what? All I needed to do was walk around the table, take her by the hand, stand her up, and kiss her. I rose.

The library door swung open and Miriam strode up to the table. Hands on her hips, she looked back and forth between us. Flushed and flustered, Arwen sank back in her chair. “Hi.”

I dropped back into my seat and saluted Miriam as if she were my superior officer in the U.S. Navy. “If it isn’t the fantabulous Miriam! How the fuck are you?”

“David and I left you two unchaperoned.” Miriam sounded like the villain of Walt Disney animated musical fairy tale: arch and terrifying. She focused her suspicion on Arwen’s flight jacket. “Aren’t you warm, all zipped up indoors?”

“Oddly enough, I’m cold.”

“What’s today’s band t-shirt?”

“They Might Be Giants.”

Arwen is an impressive liar. She must have lots of practice. “They Might Be Giants,” I joked. “But They Could Also Be Dwarves.”

Miriam flicked at Arwen’s jacket. “If you’ve got your red shirt on, I’m gonna wig out.”

“Which red shirt would that be?”

“You know damn well which red shirt I’m talking about! The awesome blossom!”

With that exchange, I understood — way too late — what Arwen was trying to achieve by flirting with me. Her main goal wasn't to mess with my head. Not everything was about me. She was defying Miriam. She wanted to feel some measure of control over her life, so she was willing to make out with me in secret a time or two to metaphorically flip off Miriam. She was not daring enough to outright defy her parents by dating me long term in secret. That was why Arwen was so upset with me for killing the mood and asking for a “permission slip to make out” signed by her parents before I felt man enough to kiss her. (“I’ll kiss you, if I am certain I have your dad’s blessing.” Barf me out.) By being afraid and affronted, I spoiled a forbidden moment we would have both enjoyed and derailed a wicked fun “fuck you” to Miriam. I was deluding myself thinking more was at stake than really was. A make-out session or two with a Catholic boy would not have been a big enough infraction for her parents to cut her out of any will. I should have kissed her when I had the chance. Arwen was right. I was really fucking stupid. But Miriam would have caught us for sure. Had Arwen *wanted* Miriam to catch us?

Arwen poked her finger at Miriam’s crotch. “How about you unzip yourself and show us your panties? One look at you with your pants pulled down and Damien would pitch a tent!”

Miriam stepped back as Arwen’s fingers brushed the denim over her upper pelvis. “Knock it off. You know why I’m here.” She regarded me again. “Why do you wear purple shirts so damn often?”

“Purple is my favorite.” I went into motor-mouth mode to distract Miriam from interrogating her stepsister. “You know, purple is a rare, pretty, and underrated color! The color of aristocrats, mystics, geniuses, artists . . . and the perennially over-the-top!”

Miriam nodded. “Don’t forget the color of sexual frustration.”

“Well, that’s news to me.” I snorted. “I appreciate you bringing that up. Thanks for that.” I decided it was time to start ignoring her and fish my lunch out of my backpack.

Just then, the library door opened again and a guy who wasn’t David eased his way inside. Tight blue jeans, a crisp white t-shirt, and fingerless black leather motorcycle gloves gave the stranger a “1980s Fonzie” look. He kissed Arwen on the cheek. “Howya doin, honey?”

“Good, Rolf,” she said sweetly, avoiding looking at me directly because she knew Miriam and I were watching.

Rolf? I thought. *There’s a boyfriend? Named Rolf? Rolf is my sixth favorite Muppet. Miss Piggy, then Kermit, then Fozzie, then Statler and Waldorf, then Rolf.*

“Just wanted you to know I hadn’t forgotten you here, all alone in the library,” Rolf said, flashing his perfect white teeth first at her, then at me.

“I do have Damien to keep me company,” Arwen observed airily.

Rolf nodded in my direction. “You taking good care of my girlfriend?”

I raised my eyebrows innocently. “Sure. We’re having fun.”

“Yeah? Don’t have too much fun, now.” Rolf winked threateningly at me.

“Keep an eye on this one, Rolf,” Miriam said. “He’s angling to be your replacement.”

“Replacement?’ For God’s sake, I just met Rolf *two seconds ago*.”

“Okay,” Arwen grumbled. “You two stop threatening my friend and go away.”

Rolf rankled. “We just got here and you’re chasing us out?”

“Just don’t be a dick to Damien, alright?” Arwen warned.

Rolf Kaminsky and Miriam stayed another ten minutes, talking about nothing much but keeping an eye on my reactions to everything they said. If they expected Arwen to do something suspicious in front of them, they went away disappointed. Rolf got Arwen to agree to come over his place later, then headed away with Miriam, who shot me a triumphant smile as they left.

Once the door closed behind them, Arwen picked up her book and resumed reading it.

“I should have known there’d be a boyfriend running around loose,” I said.

Arwen chuckled. “Of course!”

“I assume he’s Jewish?” I asked.

“He’s Polish, so Miriam and my parents think he is,” Arwen said smugly.

“So, he’s Catholic, but your family thinks he’s Jewish. How marvelous for you. Is it too late for me to pretend to be Jewish, too?”

Arwen continued to talk to me through her book. “The word is out on you, my Italian Catholic Republican friend.”

“How does everyone know me and everything about me?” I asked myself, out loud.

“Everyone knows all about you because you have the world’s biggest mouth.”

“I don’t know anyone’s name, or anything about them. It’s because I’m loud and wear a raincoat, isn’t it? Am I that fascinating? Wish I weren’t. Damn, shit, and fuck-a-doodle-doo.”

“I understand how you feel.”

“Am I wildly off base here, or does the sudden appearance of a secret Catholic boyfriend make my position in your little universe even harder to fathom?”

Arwen lowered the book and offered me a pained look. “I know. I’m sorry.”

I gestured towards her jacket. “I tell you what: How about you give me another look at them perfect titties and I’ll consider forgiving you?”

Arwen smirked, showed me her middle finger, and went back to her book.

The sound of the second-hand of the clock returned with a vengeance.

“Why did his name have to be Rolf?” I asked rhetorically.