

HYSTERICAL LOVE

a novel



Lorraine Devon Wilke

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by Lorraine Devon Wilke

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CHAPTER 1

I AM FLUMMOXED by relationships.

That is not a glib statement; it's the frank admission of a man who can't seem to get it right, even under what would seem to be the very best of circumstances. Relationships bewilder me. They knock me to my knees, and leave me baffled as to why something as essential as love is so damn fraught with confusion. At least for me. Which is disappointing. I don't think I'm an anomaly, but I did think I'd have it figured out by now.

It's not that I don't fully appreciate the value of a good relationship. I do. I'm the guy who wasn't a player in school, high school *or* college. I always had a girlfriend and was always loyal and faithful to that girlfriend. Not because I'm so good, but because I'm not good at chaos. I hate the complication of it, the balancing of opposing forces (i.e., more than one girlfriend), and I'm a horrible liar, all requisites of a successful player.

And, truth be told, I *like* being in a relationship: the comfort, the dependability, the shared meals and regular sex. These are all good things for a man who wants to avoid complication. So why, you may ask, am I flummoxed?

Because, despite my affinity for the state of being, relationships tend to explode on my watch. I'm not sure how or why, but it's typically things like her deciding I'm not motivated enough, or me deciding she's not fun enough (I had one who "hated the outdoors"...what do you do with that?), or both of us deciding the other is unexciting enough that moving on would be more exciting than staying put. But it's always messy, it's always painful, and it usually involves weeping, tossed closets, and new sets of keys. So as I've attempted to evolve in life, I've tried my best to choose better and do it right. *More* right. At least as right as I can.

Which I thought I'd done over these last three years. Thought I'd gotten it really right on both the choosing and the doing. But as I sit on the edge of a strange bed in a strange bedroom and reflect on the very strange night that has just ensued, it's clear I miscalculated. Misjudged. Regardless of good intentions, I once again set the whole damn thing on fire. Or she did. I'm still not sure.

Even more disheartening, this relationship had gone much further than any previous. It lasted longer, had less drama, and we'd actually embarked upon those iconic discussions of the future, that gaping, wide-open, impossible to imagine place I'd been assured was both warm and welcoming. I thought, I think we both thought, we were out of the danger corridor, that weird zone after the early hot years where relationships wander to get battered by irritation and boredom. We were past that, we'd transcended, we were golden.

We were fucked. By love-smugness. It gets you every time.

In retrospect, I should have caught it. That smugness should have been fair warning. But while I was off reveling in our relationship excellence, our learned skills at the craft of compromise, our sense that we

exemplified the very best of love in a modern world, I missed the fact that it had all been going too well. And we know what happens when *that* happens. You dare acknowledge the joy and happiness you've managed to gather around you like soft little bunnies of optimism and, somehow, despite amazingly good behavior on everyone's parts, and often against the nature of all parties involved, someone in the room pulls the pin. I just didn't figure it would be her (or was it me?), or on the night we finally set a date for our wedding.

Now, there's a word with some weighty baggage...*wedding*. Just saying it stirs a reflexive response that settles somewhere near the pit of my stomach, though not for the reasons you might expect. Not the cliché of commitment phobia or the panic that I'd wake up one morning and realize I had no idea why she was in my bed and what particular point there was to marrying her. No, I can honestly say I'm wild about this woman who would strap on a white gown to publicly declare she'd love me forever. The problem?

Thirty-three. That's the problem. I am now thirty-three. And I have a theory about that number:

Something bizarre happens to a man at thirty-three, some particular strain of dread and confusion. Not the whininess of, say, twenty-four, or the doom and gloom of forty, but something completely endemic to thirty plus three years. I don't know why that is. Maybe because Belushi, Alexander the Great, a few rock stars, even Jesus Christ himself succumbed at the age. But thirty-three is a mile-marker for those of us with plans to make it through.

My mother calls it "tweeniedom," a land, according to her, that's populated by overgrown teens who, kicking and screaming, are about to be forced into their deeply dreaded adulthoods. I'd say that's a bit harsh, even a little unfair, because, I'm telling you, this thing is *real*. And it's strange. You hit the year and it rolls over you like no year of life you've lived so far. My friend, Bob, who has a propensity for titling things, calls it Fate Turmoil Syndrome. He's also referred to it as Advancing Age Agitation. I think it's the Kingdom of Hell, where one minute everything is right in your world, the next...hissing madness in the blink of an unwary eye.

Let me set the stage for my particular conflagration so you get the whole picture:

First of all, I'm Dan McDowell, the thirty-three-year-old male in question: a softball aficionado (currently in off-season), a reader of the classics, a decent best friend type, and a working photographer. Which means I make an actual living at my craft, even if it is predominately grade school pictures, corporate yearbooks, family portraits, and the occasional wedding. In the artier industries you don't snub your nose at these sorts of things.

I live in Los Angeles—Toluca Lake, to be more specific, the gentrified but modest suburb attached to the hip of hipper LA where you can rent a decent house without bartering away your first-born. I'm that rare breed of native actually born in the city, though people tell me that's not so rare anymore, not since mommy blogs made it clear you really *can* raise children in Hollywood. I have one older sister, Lucy: thirty-five, never married and currently single, who owns a small, very successful restaurant in the Larchmont District. We get along, if scrappily. And I have two marginally eccentric parents: my father is a retired high school American Lit teacher; my mother, the good wife who lovingly endures him—I mean, adores him. They live not too far and far too close, but as a nuclear group, we manage okay. That's the family of origin.

Then there's Jane, my fiancée. At least until recently. Like earlier tonight.

We've been together for three years, happily ensconced in a small but classic bungalow in a complex of

equally small, classic bungalows on a street where the most vivid feature is the daily presence of an ice cream truck owned by a sweet guy named Tomas. Beyond sheer nostalgia, that truck is beloved for its toffee ice cream bars (that might just be me) and the fact that local parents can regularly indulge their kids without having to brave LA traffic, always a boon. The rest of our neighborhood, while tasteful and well-maintained, is generally less colorful than Tomas’s truck, though Jane and I have contributed a decorative Color-Me-Mine door plaque that reads “Dan & Jane Live Here” in vibrant hues. Jane’s idea. A nice touch that always makes me feel located.

Jane is Jane Bennett, a lovely, moderately insecure, generally delightful twenty-eight-year-old I’ve known and loved these past three years. She’s a UCLA graduate, originally from a small farm town in Montana, an accountant working at a business real estate company in a job she seems to like well enough. And she’s a looker, as they say, though in that real-girl way that makes you feel lucky but not too intimidated: long dark hair, great eyes, athletic body (thankfully this one *does* love the outdoors!), and a killer smile. She tells me I’m hot—says she particularly loves that I’m tall, blond, and generally well-dressed—but I suspect I fall somewhere on the same looks spectrum as she does. Just two average/hot people who found each other and fell in love. Which we did back when I was shooting portraits for her company’s website and she was the one who made sure I got paid. We’ve been together ever since and were moving toward the inevitable “till death” portion of our trajectory when...yep, hissing madness.

You know those experiences that are so unexpected, so out-of-the-blue, that you can’t quite piece them together afterward when you’re trying to reconstruct the debris field? Your memories of the event are hazy and out-of-sequence; you can only recall them in weird, disassociated flashes, like those drug trip montages in bad B-movies? That’s how the scene that cracked the core of Jane’s and my relationship played out. And since everyone in this hometown of mine is a screenwriter, and I’ve had occasion to read a few in my time, I can think of no better way to relay the incident than in movie scene format:

BEDROOM - NIGHT

Spent and sweaty, we’re in a postcoital spoon on the bed. Our madly discarded clothes are everywhere (testament, I think, to our continuing sexual chemistry), and there’s an iPad and a large desk calendar that have been kicked to the foot of the bed in the rumpus of wild lovemaking. The mood is all glowy, sweetness, and light. Conversation commences:

JANE

(whispering in my ear)

So, we’re really doing this?

ME

(smiling and acquiescent)

I believe we are.

JANE

I do think July will be perfect. We can count on the weather; everyone'll be relaxed, no crazy family stuff. Right?

ME

Absolutely. If Dad gets twitchy it'll be warm enough to just hose him down.

This was funny enough that we both laughed...then there was a slight pause. I pulled her to me and we did that soulful stare we're known to do in our goopier moments.

JANE

Are you sure, Danny? *Sure* sure?

ME

I love you, Janie. Really, truly, and till the end of time. So, yes...*sure* sure.

From there we lunged into a trademark kiss: deep, passionate, and long enough that a break for air was required. I'm not sure how it struck her, but I was pretty impressed.

ME (cont.)

Damn, woman, how is it that you are still as hot as the day we first met?

She slides out of bed with a playful grin.

JANE

I have my ways.

ME

Yes...yes, you do. And I love those ways. As I love you. You and your lovely ways.

She turns to me, suddenly more serious.

JANE

Dan, can we honestly and truly say, without a shred of doubt, that we're comfortable with the idea of being the *only* ones we'll ever be with for the rest of our days on this earth?

Odd tone shift. Terrifying topic. I sit up.

ME

That's an interesting question at this particular moment, but, yes, that's the plan. Why? Are *you* not comfortable with the idea?

JANE

No, not at all. I mean, yes, I am. But I'm also realistic. And we *have* only been with each other since the day we met and that's already been three years.

She's smiling, playful...all good fun, right?

JANE (cont.)

Three long years of *just me*.

She's still smiling, but my eyes avert for a split second. *A split second*. And, dammit, her radar pings.

JANE (cont.)

What was that?

ME

What?

JANE

That look. What was that?

ME

What look? There was no look. I was just thinking, yeah, wow, I cannot believe it's already been three years! I mean, it's been such a great—

JANE

I *am* the only person you've been with since we met, right?

And once again, like an idiot sticking a fork in his eye, I take another unfortunate beat that lasts a titch too long.

ME

Um...technically. I mean, yes, of course, I—

The temperature drop is like the girl's room in *The Exorcist*. Which is also the sound of Jane's voice from that point on.

JANE

TECHNICALLY?!

As I recall, my thought processes then seized up, switching from clumsy to pure adrenaline-rush-protective-mode, thrashing madly to find a balance between the good, honest guy I am and the moron who just opened a door he now could not easily shut.

ME

No—I mean, yes! Yes, you are—you have been the only person...except for this weird little bit right after you and I first got together. You know, that gray area right after Marci and I ended it and you and I hooked up? It was just that weird closure period that happens after a relationship ends, where she showed up a couple of times, all sad and freaked out, and it—

My babbling was cut short by the projectile hit of a well-aimed pillow, but I unwisely continued, now folding a little indignation into the mix.

ME (cont.)

What? We weren't even living together yet!

JANE

WE WERE DATING! We'd slept together! We had a commitment! There was no "gray area"! No gray area at all!

I'll concede to some of that: we *were* dating, we *had* slept together, but, if memory serves, we hadn't yet done the "this is exclusive" thing. I figured that was worth pointing out.

ME

We did *not* have a commitment at that point! Yes, we were dating, but it was the beginning stage where things were still undefined. She and I were winding down and there was a little overlap. What's the big deal?

I'll wrap the script right there, mostly because I'm not sure how to articulate the cacophony that followed. Clamor? Pandemonium? Frenzy? Suffice it to say it involved a lot of screaming and yelling, most

of which I blanked out, except for the parts that focused on the annihilation of my previously esteemed character...along with the fact that Jane was hurt, really hurt.

Because, apparently, it *was* a big deal. A trust issue, she repeatedly asserted, an issue of many tentacles for Jane. In her defense—in case I’m making her sound like a hysterical female, which she typically is not—I should mention that the only other time she got this close to the altar was with a dickhead who waited for the rehearsal dinner to tell her he’d been married twice before. So while I understood her retroactive horror at my unmentioned sexual overlap, the degree of rage made clear I was paying some fee for dickhead’s oversight as well.

But whatever the catalyst, the mitigating issues, or the underlying intent of either party involved, the endgame involved the contents of my closet being flung around the living room, and a calendar ripped to shreds by my now-declared *former* fiancée, who was acting like a lunatic and demanding that I move out. Immediately. Which I did. I could’ve argued the point—actually I *did* argue the point—but by then my computer, my camera bag, and several pairs of expensive slacks were out on the lawn, and one never knows when those damn sprinklers will pop on. And, frankly, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from a life of serial monogamy, it’s that there’s wisdom in retreating to fight another day.

CHAPTER 2

NOT THAT I wanted to fight another day, believe me. I am not a fighter. I just want it to be all better, all of it. Back to normal, no wounds, no bleeding; let's move on, can we, please?

But given her refusal to communicate either by phone, text, or email, it was clear Jane was less aligned with that general philosophy. So I decided to be patient: take my hits, give her time to settle down, then gently bring matters back to a place of logic and forgiveness. I had no doubt we would get there. We had a wedding to plan.

Besides, moving out was not that herculean of a task. It involved me dragging my duffel about thirty feet to the bungalow across the way, the home of the aforementioned Bob—Bob Fiedler, my longtime friend and colleague, and Jane's and my neighbor. Bob and I met as freshmen at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles and have been solid friends ever since. There's an easy simpatico between us. We understand each other. We have history. We trolled the streets and online portals together looking for paid photography work after graduation. We shared places on-and-off throughout the years, and he's the person who got Jane and me into this complex when a spot opened up, so he's responsible for the proximity of our habitation. He also got me the gig at Jane's company, so he's marginally responsible for my now-shattered engagement. I'd say he owes me a day or two of bunking privileges.

And not to sound too sitcomy in an attempt to be culturally relevant, but he's a gay man. I'm straight, he's gay, and we've boldly gone where people go pretty much every day of the week in this 21st century, modern men proving that male friendships can healthily exist between polar orientations. Plus—and I don't know if it's *because* he's gay, probably not—there's something to be said for a male friend who has the sensitivity to be a good listener *and* throws a killer curveball (we're in the same softball league). He's also an amazing cook (shines at neighborhood potlucks), and there's no one who kicks my ass more when I get pissy about work, my parents, my life, women, whatever. Bottom line, he's a good guy, proven, once again, when—sometime after one in the morning, post-debacle and me too wiped out for words—he opened his home and second bedroom for “whatever the duration of your exile,” promising a hot meal and a sympathetic ear after work the following day.

Good to his word, we were now in his kitchen, his signature meatloaf in the oven, him at the stove searing Brussels sprouts while I ran down the whole sorry mess. He confessed he'd gotten the gist when Jane was at a particularly high-pitched portion of the melee—that's how close our places were—and, of course, there *were* the slacks on the lawn. He got right to his analysis:

“Couldn't you have just said, ‘absolutely, sweetie, you're the only one I've been with the whole damn time’ and left it at that? Was there any point in bringing up the ‘overlap,’ as you put it, from three fucking years ago?” Bob was a big believer in the convenience of fiction. I've already mentioned I'm not a good liar.

“The point was honesty, Bob. I realize that's an earnest concept with you.”

“An earnest concept? What does that even mean?”

“It means you’re handy with the occasional twisting of truth.”

“Which is often kinder than truth itself. Like, say, last night.”

“Maybe so. And had she not leapt like a cheetah the second I blinked, I might have re-thought the strategy. But, then again, what’s the point of committing to marriage if you don’t have a basic foundation of honesty?”

“That sounds real pretty, Dan, make a meme. But you weren’t feeling so honest back when old Marci was showing up all crazy-ex-girlfriend while you were busy sweet-thinging your Jane, were you?”

“That’s cold.”

“Face it, it wasn’t necessary information then, it wasn’t now, and it’s going to haunt your ass until death do you part.”

“Assuming we even get to that point. But hey, no worries, we’ll figure it out. It can’t be that big a deal no matter what she says. I’m thinking maybe a day or two, a week at the most. Is that cool with you?”

“It’s fine, whatever you need.”

“And don’t let me cramp your style; just give me the signal when to get scarce and I’m gone.”

“I’ll make this easy for you, bro. If I’ve got champagne open and a hot guy dancing to Bruno Mars, there’s your cue. Can you handle that?”

“Absolutely, no problem.”

“You sure? Because I can remember a few times when it kind of was.”

Which was slightly unfair, if largely true. It wasn’t that I couldn’t handle that Bob was gay—I’m a political progressive who believes we are who we are, as we come into this life, and no part of that is any more right or wrong than anything or anyone else. But Bob has never been shy about flaunting his sexual activities and, yes, there were a few times when we were rooming together that those activities found their way into our communal space. I can’t say I analyzed my reactions all that closely, but I suppose I *was* a bit uncomfortable on occasion. He asked me back then if it would have mattered if he’d been feeling up a girl on the kitchen floor instead of a guy and I honestly couldn’t say. But it wasn’t about judgment or disapproval; it was about sexual squeamishness, the unfamiliar paradigm. I couldn’t explain it any better than that. So, true: we *did* have some tense moments on the topic, but we were good enough friends to get past it.

And I figured—since he was doing me the favor this go-around—I’d be an ass to expect him to change anything on my behalf. “Listen, it’s your pad, your life, I’m the one who’s barging in here. So, please, just do your thing and I’ll adjust accordingly.”

“I appreciate that, buddy. And I’ll try to rein it in while you’re here. It’ll be good practice; I have to go see the folks soon.” Bob’s parents were still pretending he’d be marrying a woman one of these days.

With all salient issues worked out, we sat down to an excellent meal, toasted our roommate status once again, while I, with great effort to avoid thinking about the woman across the way, promised Bob it wouldn’t be long.

CHAPTER 3

IT WAS LONG.

By the end of the second week, and with little headway on either productive conversation or even the opportunity for productive conversation, it became clear my forgotten peccadillo of years previous had scraped a scab for Jane much deeper than I'd understood. Which made me feel bad, genuinely regretful, that the woman I loved was so hurt by a thoughtless act (or two) I hadn't chosen to share with her out of fear of, well...hurting her. Ironic.

Mostly, I missed her. Sleeping with her, touching her, making love to her, even watching TV with her. Everything felt out of synch, suspended and discomfiting. I kept having to readjust my habits at Bob's, remind myself of new routines, try not to put my fist through a wall after the fourth or tenth or twentieth time she didn't respond to a call or text or email. I didn't understand the conviction and resolve of her standoff, but mostly I just missed her.

In my best moments, usually in the earlier parts of the day, I was stoked with optimism, convinced that *today* I'd be able to affect a change of some kind. I was anxious to make it up to her, start the healing, get us back on track. I rehearsed all sorts of grand speeches in which I expressed my sincere remorse, declaring restorative affirmations of loyalty and devotion, but those mental first-, second-, and third-drafts kept piling up as days passed and non-responsiveness was her only response.

Which, by day sixteen, stirred another layer of reaction in me. Anger. Defensiveness. Indignation. Real resentment, frankly, that everything good about me, about our relationship, our desire to build a life together, could be so easily dismissed, so quickly discarded, over what I felt was largely forgivable behavior of long enough ago that some proportionality was warranted. I mean, *come on!* I could understand if it was last week—or even months into our relationship. But *it was right at the very beginning...and three years ago!* Don't I get a break for my fidelity since? Or even, let's just say it, for exhibiting a remnant of sensitivity toward a grieving ex? (I do realize that's a stretch.)

These were the sorts of circuitous, rambling, largely unhelpful conversations I was having with myself while alone in the second bedroom of Bob's house, watching my own from the south-facing window like a stalker with a broken heart. The only information I could glean from conversations with others, meaning my sister Lucy, who'd spoken to Jane at least once since I'd been kicked out, was that my fiancée viewed my behavior as a harbinger of bigger trust issues to come and was, therefore, in no rush to welcome me home. Since Lucy had allowed herself to get pulled into the fracas by virtue of her interaction with my stonewalling girlfriend, I decided it was time for some one-on-one with one of the gender. Plus, Lucy is the most uncluttered female I know, and I needed some uncluttered *anything* right now.

Waiting in the office area of her trendy and quite extraordinary restaurant, I looked around at this shiny thing my sister created and was, as I always am, honestly mystified. How did she do this? Lucy had been a crappy waitress with no real plans for her life when she literally fell into this opportunity after meeting a

restaurant investor at a rock club. Rumor has it that he was married and she'd had an affair with him, but whatever the impetus, he'd seen her potential, something the rest of us had not. And from there, this weird, argumentative, and seemingly unambitious woman became the owner and creator of a smartly designed bistro foodies gushed over, courtesy of a chef the critics anointed a culinary star.

I had to admit: it made me jealous. I'd always been the artistic one in the family; how did this burst of creative imagination suddenly emerge from the lazy sibling? While Lucy was going to community college and being ambivalent about her direction in life, something which drove our father insane, I'd actually gone to a prestigious school for a craft I was passionate about, followed by over a decade of working my ass off toward commensurate success in that field. But other than a few "street photography" exhibits of minimal importance, I had little to show for this ambition beyond a decent paycheck and the admiration of grade school parents across the basin. Yet here she was: regularly covered by the *LA Times* and getting "feelers" from the Food Network. Still, and despite my envy, I couldn't help but be proud of her. And right now I needed some of that hardcore logic she seemed to have flowing from her fingertips.

"Maybe you're not soul mates," she stated matter-of-factly, her crazy red hair jammed under the brim of a flour-dusted Clippers cap.

I was now in the kitchen, slumped across one end of the large stainless steel worktable, watching with bored fascination as she pounded the life out of a slab of bread dough. This pronouncement was dazzling in its disappointment. "That's it? That's all you've got? Lame-ass hippie bullshit about soul mates? I thought that went out with est and macramé."

"It's making a comeback."

"Really?" My sarcasm was unsubtle.

"Just think about it."

"I thought you loved Jane."

"I do love Jane. I think Jane's probably the best girl you've ever been with. I'm just being the devil's advocate."

"How about being *my* advocate for a change? I'm not getting much of that these days."

"Bob isn't the cuddly sort?" She looked up with that lopsided grin of hers.

"He's very cuddly, just not with me."

"Listen, I don't really know, do I? I think you're both great people, but there have been times when I've wondered if you really were each other's best bets."

I'd never before heard Lucy express doubt about my relationship with Jane. "Why would you think we weren't each other's best bets? And what a weird fucking way to put it."

"Dan, you asked, I'm sharing my thoughts. You can tell me to fuck off if you don't want to hear them."

"I just might." But I *did* want to hear them; her thoughts were why I was here. "Okay, whatever. Lay it out."

"It's no big thing. All I'm saying is, you're very different people, with different backgrounds, different influences, and different ideas about how to solve problems. That's not always a deal breaker, but when you look at what's been going on with you guys, I don't know, that might be something to consider. My opinion, for what it's worth."

"And yet somehow we've managed to successfully solve all sorts of problems over these last three

years, differences or not.”

“Yeah, well, maybe not so much this time around, right? What did you say it was so far, sixteen days? That’s pretty extreme, Dan, to go three years of living together, then when you hit your first big obstacle, bam, you’re out for over two weeks and counting. That seems crazy to me. I’m suggesting it might be a compatibility issue.”

I sighed deeply. She had a point; I just wasn’t ready to admit it. “I don’t actually think we’re *that* incompatible. Things are usually pretty seamless with us. This was a particularly unique bump in the road.”

“Really? Seems like pretty standard bad boyfriend, boundary issue crap to me; the typical ‘when did we get exclusive?’ debate. The stuff most people holler about for a minute or two, then get over.”

“Well, who’s to say we won’t get over it?” I decided to let the “bad boyfriend” remark go.

“Said the man on day sixteen. Look, I have no doubt you’re compatible enough with day-to-day stuff; obviously you wouldn’t have three years going if you weren’t. But my experience tells me it’s when the more challenging issues come up that you notice disparities you hadn’t paid much attention to before. Believe me, I know, I’ve been there. Down that same fucking road.”

She had. Many times.

“And, come on, Dan, you guys are *so* different. You can’t tell me you don’t see that!”

“I don’t! I’ve always thought of Jane and me as substantially similar people. How is it you think we’re *so* different?”

“Okay, how about your basic, human imprinting, family-of-origin stuff? Like, you’re a creative, raised by a man who was obsessed with words and literature, who practically browbeat you into an appreciation for the arts, who told us higher culture was the only dividing line between man and beast. She was raised on a pig farm and became a bookkeeper.”

“An accountant.”

“An accountant, whatever, who just might not be as attuned to the same worldview as you. I’m suggesting that’s possibly why this moderately fucked-up thing you did three years ago has turned into such a clusterfuck. Soul mate deficit.”

“Okay, even if you’re right, what does that ultimately mean in the real world? What do I do with that?”

“I don’t know; maybe you—”

“And how does her being hypersensitive right now translate into her not being my soul mate, or me not being hers, or whatever the fuck you’re saying?”

“I think sixteen days is a little more than hypersensitive.”

“So do I! Which is why I wanted your perspective on how to get past it. But all you seem to be saying is that without this magical assignation from the gods we’re doomed, so what’s the fucking point?” I was flailing now.

“Jesus, Dan, calm down, it’s just a theory.”

“But you’re making it sound so hopeless! That’s not helping, just so you know.”

Her office phone rang. “I have to get this. Don’t slit your wrists, I’ll be right back.”

She dashed into the office while I sat on the table picking at broken bread crusts and thinking this was not remotely the conversation I thought I’d be having. I figured Lucy would give me her usual pep talk about “understanding a women’s perspective,” assuring me that Jane was just going through a crisis and I

needed to do whatever was required to win back her trust, that sort of thing. I did not expect magical thinking, certainly not from her. We humans truly are evolving creatures.

When she returned I jumped right back in, albeit a little less hysterically. “Be straight with me, Lucy. Do you honestly believe this bullshit about soul mates, or is this something your new age bartender shared over closing-time cocktails?”

“Don’t be condescending.”

“I’m serious. Do you really believe this stuff?”

“Why do you think I’m still alone?”

“Because you’re neurotic and hard to please?” She threw a ball of dough at me, which I caught and popped in my mouth.

“Scoff away, little brother, but I’ve been through enough crappy relationships to realize something indefinable is at play when it *does* work. Maybe some kind of Divine Intervention, I don’t know. It’s all a mystery to me. But at this point of my life, I want whatever happens to be authentic. And I think holding out for a soul mate might be worth the wait. It’s certainly better than wasting my time on someone in-between.”

“Assuming the soul mate theory has merit.”

“Assuming.”

I hopped off the table, swallowing hard to get the dough down, perplexed that my usually grounded sister sounded like a full-fledged member of the goddess community. “Did Jane say something to you about this? About our differences, about the possibility of us not being soul mates?”

“All Jane said was you’re a cheating asshole who she can’t trust anymore. The rest is all me. And, hey, if it doesn’t resonate, forget it.”

And that was basically all I got, beyond a brioche to die for and further confusion. I left wondering if she’d joined a cult.

Suffice it to say, it *didn’t* resonate with me. I don’t typically believe in the sort of fluffy romanticism that holds to the idea of souls reuniting, or fate-directed connections, or any school of thought that perpetuates the myth that why we fall in love, or who we fall in love with, is other-determined. It always seemed pretty simple to me: chemistry. You meet someone and you either have chemistry or you don’t. If you don’t, you walk away or you spend enough time together to see if chemistry gets stirred up. If it does, you’re good to go; if it doesn’t, you move on. I don’t know how it happens or why, but it’s either there or it isn’t.

Soul mate theory. Divine Intervention. Give me a fucking break.

(To be continued.....)