

Lessons in Love
Chapter One
by Melanie Brodie

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CHAPTER ONE

First, I have to tell you how I met my best friend Roman. He was the new kid in school. Third grade. Being new was exotic and the kids in our class treated him like visiting royalty. I had other things to worry about: like separating the colors of my pack of Skittles. I only liked the yellows and greens. I selected them one by one, placing the offensive reds, purples, and oranges, into a Ziploc bag. *Waste not, want not*. It's something mom used to say. Something *her* mother used to say. I was busy plucking when I felt someone standing over me.

"What's wrong with those?" he asked.

"I don't like the way they taste," I replied.

"They all taste the same," he said.

"You want them?" I looked up at his chubby face and strip-mall haircut. I held the Ziploc bag out for him.

"OK," he said.

He took the bag, sat at the picnic table beside me and dug right in. He had rosy cheeks. He wore a yellow, hand-knitted beanie, and a Ren and Stimpy t-shirt.

With a mouth full of Skittles, he mumbled, "I'm new."

"I know. I like your t-shirt," I said.

"I know," he replied.

The rest is history, but it goes something like this: inseparable thereafter, we went to the same junior high, high school, and college. We moved into the same apartment building. We even got jobs at the same elementary school. Me as kindergarten teacher, him the music teacher. We were too cute. Everyone said so. "You two are too cute! When are you two gonna get married already?" everyone would ask. I'd laugh and reply, "We're just friends." And we were. Best friends. I couldn't imagine my life without Roman.

But I didn't have to imagine it. I lived it. Right after college, he enlisted in the army and was gone for four years. He moved a lot. The Middle East, Europe, he spent some time in Alabama. We wrote emails to each other, a novel act that felt old-timey and sweet. He once wrote me a handwritten letter stamped in Abu Dhabi, re-routed through Qatar, back to Dubai, and finally to me. It took six weeks to arrive. He never wrote another letter like that again. We Face-

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Timed as much as we could, and he came home one year for Christmas. And when he finished his service, he started work at Apple Creek Elementary where he's been ever since.

Now four years ago, I remember being nervous the night before he came home. The town council had prepared a big welcome home party for him. Everyone was so proud. If I knew Roman, the first thing he'd want to do when he got home would be to play video games. Or sleep. He liked both equally. I didn't know why I was nervous.

"You think he'll be different?" I asked my friend Kelly. She owned the coffee shop in town and was my second best friend after Roman.

"War changes a man," she replied.

She sat on my couch and curled one leg under her knee and reached for her glass of sparkling wine. I plopped two fresh blueberries into her glass.

"He wasn't in active combat," I said. "I don't know what he did, but there isn't a war on," I said.

"Still. He's seen some things. Things men have nightmares about," Kelly said and developed a far-away look in her eyes.

I frowned at her. "We email every week, but I'm kinda worried he won't be the same."

"Roman is as basic as they come. He's probably lost weight from all that running around soldiers do. Less to cuddle."

"For who?" I smirked. "And he's not basic."

"I don't know. Is he seeing anyone?" Kelly sipped her drink and directed one of the blueberries into her mouth.

"He was. Some woman he met in Alabama. Shirrie. Or Shirley or Cherry."

"And?" Kelly asked.

"Nothing. Haven't heard about her in months."

"Does he know about Daryl?"

"I probably mentioned him."

Daryl was my fiancé. He'd proposed and I'd accepted - two years previous. Still no wedding date, no plans, and immense pressure from both our parents. I loved Daryl and he loved me, but we couldn't get to planning the wedding. Not with Roman coming home or the looming holidays, work, life. You know how it goes.

"Yeah, but did you tell him you're engaged?" Kelly asked. She poured us each another glass of sparkling wine.

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“I wanted to wait until he came home. Tell him in person,” I replied.

The town council party was a sweet affair held at the community center. I wore a yellow flower-print dress that flowed like silk, even if it was a polyester blend. The whole town was there. I didn’t like the idea of surprising Roman. I figured he’d be tired after a long flight from...where was he again? I couldn’t keep track. The room swam in streamers, music played, and everyone was in a lovely mood.

“You look nice,” Daryl said, holding my purse.

“Thanks,” I replied.

Daryl looked nice too. He was in one of his nicer suits, his work suit - the one he wore to client meetings. Daryl’s father owned the mortuary in town. Perkins & Son. Daryl was the “son” part, but had bigger dreams than working in a mortuary selling caskets. He’d often talked of leaving Apple Creek; said he wanted to climb Machu Picchu. Someday. I watched the heavy metal door as the room clatter rose. Roman had arrived.

“And I’m not coming back,” Daryl said.

“Huh?” I asked, and looked to the door again.

“I’m doing it. I’m leaving. I’m getting the heck out of here. Machu Picchu. My friend Kiwi has a house in Peru. She runs a vegan yoga retreat there and...”

“Kiwi? What are you talking about?” I turned to him.

“My plane leaves tomorrow morning. I know this is sudden, but...”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

My eyes darted to Daryl and back to the door as applause filled the room. Voices sang, “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” and friends and family crowded Roman so I couldn’t see him.

Daryl handed me my purse and suddenly the noise was too loud. The crowd parted and I saw Roman, now twenty-five pounds lighter, short crew cut, and a smile like the day was new. He had on his army fatigues and he looked like a hero come to save the day. His eyes locked with mine. My knees became play slime. I bolted.

Hours later, Roman found me at the park under cover of darkness, crying. Alone and pathetic. He knew I’d be there.

“Was is something I said?” he joked.

“Hi,” I sniffled.

“You OK?” he asked.

“No!” I wailed and broke into full blubbering mode.

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Roman hugged me. “My mom told me what happened. When were you planning on telling me you were getting married?” he asked softly.

“I’m not now, so...”

“Well, he’s an idiot. Forget that loser. I’m so freakin’ happy to see you, but I just wanna go home, play Super Smash Bros. and sleep.”

Roman had muscles now. Real ones. When he’d left four years earlier, he was my chubby, dorky friend. I worried he wouldn’t last a day in the military. Now he was a man. I squeezed his bicep.

“Where’d you get this?” I teased him.

“Eh, I picked it up in Marrakesh. They sell ‘em there at the outdoor market. I bought some for you too,” he chuckled.

I sniffled and wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

“Your dad gave me a bottle of wine as a gift,” he said, twisting the cork with a bottle opener he’d produced from his pocket.

He popped the cork, took a swig, and passed it to me. I leaned it back hard.

“Take ‘er easy there, Boozy McBoozerson,” he said.

“I’m glad you’re home. You’re not leaving again are you?” I said and passed the bottle back.

“Not that I know of.” He reached into his fatigues pocket and pulled out a bag. “Got you a present all the way from Abu Dhabi,” he said and handed me a bag of yellow and green Skittles.

I took the bag and smiled. “These came from Abu Dhabi?” I asked and opened it.

“No. Gift shop at the airport.”

“What’d you bring me from Abu Dhabi?” I asked and handed him a grip of Skittles.

“Me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Brodie was born in the fictional town of Apple Creek, Ohio. This is her first self-published novella; the journey of which has been documented on her blog at www.melaniebrodie.com. She enjoys Flamin' Hot Cheetos, making up love stories, and pressing flowers in books.

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