
THIRTY-FOUR

“DO YOU HAVE A FEW MINUTES, Edwin, before Clara gets back from the mall?”

“Six-letter word for Arizona tourist attraction,” he said.

I thought a moment. “Canyon?”

“Thanks,” he said, penciling the word into yesterday’s crossword puzzle.

I doubted the clue had stumped him. He was very good at crosswords. Very rarely did I see one left unfinished. Edwin had an easy way of including me in his life. I liked that. I needed to feel included.

“Now,” he said, setting his newspaper aside, “what mischief are we planning behind Clara’s back?”

“None,” I said, laughing. I was finding it easier and easier to like Edwin. Not that I’d ever *dis*liked him. I just didn’t *want* to like my foster parents. A therapist at Foster Care had told me I had trust issues. Yeah, like I needed her to tell me that. I couldn’t believe people actually paid money for that kind of evaluation.

“Then what can I help you with, Marlie?”

Marlie. It was a term of endearment he’d bestowed upon me the day I moved in. It left me feeling warm and accepted. Like the little girl I never was. I needed that, too.

I sat on the sofa opposite Edwin’s chair.

“It’s about Robert,” I said, without preface.

“He seems like a nice young man. I can see in his eyes that he likes you very much.”

“I had no idea boys like him existed. I thought they were all...”

“Say no more.” When I didn’t, he said, “You like him.”

I nodded. Edwin waited.

Not knowing where to begin, I said, “I’ve only known him a few weeks, and we’re both still young.”

“It’s what young people do in high school, date.”

I smiled, recalling that Robert had said something similar.

“I know,” I said. “It feels right. He’s helping me to fit in, without even trying. I like him a lot, but...”

Edwin was patient.

I took a breath and continued. “You know about my past.”

Edwin nodded. If he knew where I was going, he hid his discomfort well.

“When do I tell Robert about it?”

After a moment, he asked, “Why do you have to?”

“Because I feel I’m being dishonest by withholding that part of my life from him. I want to tell him, but... What if he can’t deal with it?”

Edwin’s eyebrows rose. “As you said, you’ve only just met him. Aren’t you getting a little ahead in the courtship ritual?”

My shoulders bunched. “But doesn’t he have a right to know?”

“To what end?” He seemed to be leading me somewhere.

“So that he can make a decision if I’m the right girl for him.”

“From the way he looks at you, I’d say he’s already made that decision.”

“But he doesn’t know *everything* about me. And I have to live with his not knowing. I can see that burden growing heavier if it becomes serious, should we ever marry. Because I can see that in my future, if not with him, with someone. It’s what I want, a normal, happy life.”

The Girl Who Loved Cigars

“You’re a wise young woman, Marla.”

“Foster Care told you about the home I came from.”

He nodded.

“They felt you had a right to know, so you could make allowances for my behavior.”

He nodded again. “We haven’t had to make many. We think you’re adjusting very well. Maybe Robert *does* have a right to know. But only you can make that decision.”

“But if I wait to tell him, in three months or until after graduation, after we’ve gotten serious, attached, won’t he feel cheated, lied to?”

“It seems you’ve already made up his mind for him. Why are you so sure that his response will be negative?”

“I’m scarred, broken.”

“Scarred, yes. Clara and I can’t imagine what you’ve suffered. But broken?” He shook his head. “If you were, would you have consented to going out with Robert?”

Edwin’s question was a revelation to me; but he wasn’t finished.

“Robert seems level-headed. Have you considered he might be more understanding of you wanting to wait to share your previous life?”

“I guess not.” My life, until now, had been a series of negatives.

“You can’t yet know whether he is the right young man for you. He may be the first of several young men you date. But you desire and have hope for a normal life, for happiness. The scars of your past life will never disappear completely; but they’re shaping the young woman you are becoming: beautiful, with much to offer the right young man. You need to come to believe that. Does Robert have a right to know? Is he the right young man? I can’t say. Those choices are yours to make.”

I sighed. “But the risk.”

“Is great. It might spell disappointment and heartache, for both of you. Or it might be just the balm to help continue your healing. Love is a choice, Marla, not a feeling. All young men and women wear masks.

They want to be accepted for who they *aren't*. But inevitably the masks fall. When they do, when we see our partner's faults, their scars, and choose not to look away, *that's* love."

Edwin's wisdom nearly overwhelmed me.

"But by not telling him, isn't that like wearing a mask?"

"Only if your intent is to deceive him. Have you considered that maybe you're protecting him?"

"Maybe I'm trying to protect myself."

"And there's nothing wrong with that, Marlie. But I think you have more courage than you think."

I saw pride and love in his eyes. Two things I'd never seen in my birth mother's eyes.

"How will I know which is true?"

"I trust you'll know, when the time comes."

I thought back to what he had said about scars. "You have scars?"

He nodded. "My father died when I was a teenager. That presented my mother, a young widow with a son, with certain obstacles."

I understood that. "And Clara?"

"Her mother felt I was a poor choice for her. She didn't believe I'd be a good enough provider for her."

"You seem to have done well enough."

Edwin smiled. "Thank you. I was determined to show her otherwise. Clara is estranged from her mother. She gave her up for me, so I'm committed to not disappointing her. And losing my father at such a young age taught me that life is fragile, not to be taken for granted. Tomorrow is promised to no one."

"Wow," I said.

"Did I help?" It was rare that Edwin showed uncertainty.

"Very much," I said. "Thanks, Dad."

The smile that washed over his face was an image I'd take with me to my grave.