

Chapter One

A hat is just one more way to define a person. Lily Vanderhoof appreciated the many styles of hats, but not the symbolism. Women with the fanciest feathers, jewels, flowers, embroidery, or ribbon certainly lived in the most lavish houses. A way of life she could only dream about while sipping iced tea and wearing an old fashioned 1920's cloche from the last decade.

Outside the diner window, the eight-fifteen evening train had arrived in Hub City. Her small town swelled with folks from all over Wisconsin since every track intersected the city like spokes of an old wagon wheel. Travelers paraded across the street in the latest fashionable headwear, piquing her discontent.

The bell hanging from the door chimed and she spun in the booth. A woman wearing a straw hat entered, crossing the black and white checkered tile floor to her table.

"So, you're Lily Vanderhoof? Can't see why you'd catch Ira's eye."

Lily examined her. Under the brim, loose strands of golden-brown hair were similar in color to hers, although much thinner. Yellow flecks streaked the woman's blue eyes, cautioning her as much as the choice words and that smug grin.

“Uh...do I know you?” Lily tipped her head to the side, pushing a loose bobby pin snugly into her hair.

“You should, that’s why I followed you to Flo’s.” The woman stood with her arms folded and her legs stiffly rooted on the floor. “Besides, I overheard you’d be here. I thought it was time you knew.” The woman yanked a hand from her tight fold, filling the air with a floral scent. Remnants of talcum powder speckled her forearm. The familiar aroma of Cashmere Bouquet Lily’s older sister used. “I’m Bessie. A friend of your fiancé, a very good friend.” Her voice lightened with amusement. “In all honesty, he’d be much more than a friend. You see...”

Lily backed away. She wouldn’t oblige such an unwelcome gesture. Bessie’s demeanor told her everything. A bitter, scornful woman who wanted her out of Ira’s life. Lily had been with him for three years. Why now finally show up? Her engagement must have enraged the woman.

“Look at you sitting there in that moth-eaten cloche. You must have played on Ira’s good-hearted nature, didn’t you? You should be ashamed of yourself luring away a fruitful man.” Bessie jabbed her finger in Lily’s face, demanding attention. “You are the other woman. The poor damsel in distress waiting to be rescued. Not me.” Bessie directed her finger at her own chest. “I was the first. His first.”

Lily circled her hands firmly around her glass of ice tea. “His first what?” She glared at Bessie and the dress swaying around her shapely frame.

“Don’t you dare question what I’ve been telling you.” Bessie swung her hand onto her hip. “I’ve got proof.”

“I don’t need any seedy detail.”

“I’ve seen his scar. Have you?”

Lily’s heart sank into the depths of her stomach. *Ira’s scar*. The one he’d gotten as a teenager running into a barbed wire fence while a neighbor girl chased him. The mark she’d seen only one time, an inch-long slit right under his ribs. An intimate fact to the woman’s story she couldn’t push aside. If she would ever use profanity it would be now, but a good Catholic girl couldn’t do such a thing. “Leave.” Her hand jerked, knocking the glass across the table and dousing the woman’s skirt. “You’ve said enough.”

“Ugh! You simpleton.” Bessie pushed her shoulders back, displayed a satisfied smile, and exited.

Lily solemnly vowed from then on to detest straw hats. As the surge of adrenaline subsided, her hands trembled and a burning sensation stirred behind her eyes. She ran to the lavatory, slamming the door shut while tears wet her cheeks. Hopes of marriage with Ira shattered over a few words from a stranger. She should have asked when this happened. And more importantly, if their “friendship” was still happening. She blotted her eyes with a tissue. Her assumption the woman told the truth couldn’t possibly be right. Ira would disprove the story. If he didn’t, she’d be an unfortunate twenty-one-year-old in a similar situation as her unmarried sister.

She stood in front of the oval mirror above the sink. Could he have ignored all the years they’d been together and still be unfaithful to her? The image in front of her reflected definite signs of crying. Her eyelids were puffy, the whites of her eyes bloodshot, and in the center of her blue irises were dilated pupils. The slight brim of her cloche wouldn’t hide them. Before Ira arrived, she had to compose herself. She splashed cool water on her face. A few droplets dotted her tan cotton dress and the bow around

her neck had loosened. She tightened the knot, held her head high, and marched back into the diner.

Ira sat in their usual corner booth wearing a white button-down shirt and black suspenders. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows, exposing his tanned muscular forearms from manual farm labor. A plaid flat cap, which had compressed the blond curls on his head, rested on his knee. He didn't appear any different.

However, her previous anticipation for the evening diminished, and the smell of homecooked food turned her stomach upside down. The woman mentioned she'd heard Lily would be at Flo's. Could it have been Ira who said she'd be here? Maybe he didn't want to marry her after all. As she neared, she ran her fingers under her eyes. "I hope you haven't been waiting too long." She took the seat across from him.

"Just got here."

A fresh glass of tea replaced her spilled one on the table. "Good. I have something—"

"Wait." He raised his hand motioning at the waitress. "I haven't eaten since dinner."

"Ira." She paused until he looked at her. "I need to talk to you."

He rubbed his stomach. "Can't it wait until we order? Besides here she is. I'll have—"

Lily turned toward the waitress. "Please come back later."

"I'd like the roast chicken dinner with mashed potatoes, corn, and a cola...please." He glanced at her. "Do you want anything?"

"No! I don't want..." The knot in the back of her neck tightened, she placed her hand over the spasm. "I'm sorry, nothing for me."

The waitress walked away.

Ira drummed his fingers on the table. "You're a bit of a flat tire. What's the matter?"

She crossed her legs and tugged her skirt over her knees. "I can't help it when your dame stopped by to introduce herself."

"Dame? What dame?"

"The one with a smashed hat and worn-out lips." Lily covered Ira's hand and the drumming stopped. "She said her name. I don't recall... I think it started with a B."

Ira took his hand away and rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Bessie?"

She swallowed slowly and couldn't force the lump any further down her throat. "How do you know her?"

He shrugged. "She's an old classmate and neighbor of mine. What did she say?"

"That you were intimate." Lily narrowed her glare at him. "She even told me about your scar since I didn't believe her. Is it true?"

Ira's eyes darted everywhere, but at her. "We weren't even engaged then." He bit his lower lip.

"We've been engaged for less than two months. Apparently, any time before that was fine with you." Her skin changed from warm to clammy, and dizziness ensued. She braced her forehead with a shaky hand and rested her elbow on the table to keep from toppling over. Ira exhibited no shame. If it hadn't been for Bessie, he never would have said a thing about it.

"How many times did you? And why didn't you tell me?"

"Once and the way I see it...I could have denied everything, but I didn't." His leg bounced under the table, causing the silverware to rattle. "As far as you know, she could have innocently seen my scar the same way you did on that hot summer day."

"I'm not naïve."

"She's got nothing to do with us."

“Then it should’ve been easy to tell me about her.” Her voice cracked. “How do you think I feel hearing such a thing from a total stranger? Don’t you think I wonder what else I don’t know about?” She touched the tear falling on her cheek. “Do you love her?”

“Ridiculous.” He broke his gaze and peered out the window. “I’m sorry. Is that what you want to hear?”

She waited for him to offer more than two pathetic words of apology, but it wasn’t his character. He could have told her he wished it never happened, or it was the worst mistake he had ever made. Maybe he’d given up on them. “I’m not sure you even know what you said you’re sorry for. Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

He pulled his cap on. “You can tell the waitress to cancel my order or eat it yourself. Let me know when you’ve come to your senses. I’ve said all I’m going to say.” He stood. “What more do you want from me?” And he stomped away.

Her hands jerked upward into the air. “Go be with her, you’re two-of-a-kind!” She cupped her mouth. Surely, her shrill voice drew attention. A heat burned deep inside like the scorching sun under a magnifying glass. She couldn’t face the people in the diner. Holding her hand to her forehead, she ducked out the nearest door in the back.

Each click of her high-heeled shoes ricocheted between the alley walls. Discarded trash along the edges left a crooked path to maneuver under the scarce light of the half-moon. She crossed First Street into the next back street. Her pace slowed, breathing quickened, and an ache arose in the emptiness of her chest. Both shins tingled like a pricked pincushion, while her calf muscles squeezed together as tight as a wringer-washer. The unbearable pain forced her to a standstill. She leaned against the red brick while massaging the knot in her leg.

Across the alleyway was the ladder to her favorite rooftop, a hideaway she'd stumbled upon at the age of nine the day she'd run away from home. By nightfall, the hunger pains made her go home. But the solitude above always brought her comfort. She lifted her skirt above her knees while taking hold of the railing. The cool metal scraped upon her palms. She carefully climbed the first set of twelve steps. Her pulse throbbed. The remaining set of twelve steps left her winded as she eased her way over the wall and onto the roof.

Although the two-story building wasn't the tallest in the city, the lower facade allowed her to sit on the cement ledge. Below rounded streetlights blinded her. On the next block over a dark-colored truck drove through the intersection and turned toward her house. It might have been Ira. Whenever he walked away after a disagreement, he'd always come back. How could he have acted so casual about such a serious act? His proposal to her hadn't erased what he'd done.

She yanked her engagement ring off her finger and held it over the edge. The seconds ticked by. No matter how hard she tried to toss the band, she couldn't. She shoved the ring back on.

A part of her wanted to give up and let him go, but she couldn't do it. She loved him and had grown to count on him to look after her. He had promised their own house on a piece of land from his family's eighty-acre farm. The thought had become a comfortable one, especially since her family had accepted him as a good, faithful, Catholic man. If her family found out about his indiscretions, they wouldn't allow her to make her own decision and their impression of him would be spoiled. She needed time to figure out if her heart could be forgiving.

The hair on her arms stood as chill air ran over them. Clusters of darkened clouds swept in while the wind picked up strength. The sky split open like a ragged seam on a worn pair of trousers. Raindrops pelleted upon the rooftop, and she descended the ladder. The buildings barely blocked the gusts of wind while the downpour stung her exposed skin. Maybe the rain symbolized a new beginning for her like a baptism washing away the original sins of the soul. Her heart needed the purification from her tainted future with Ira. She would never forget this awful night.

Her soaked clothes were heavy by the time she trudged the few blocks home. A shadow from the roof overhang cast the back-porch steps in darkness. As she strolled up the stairs, her parents' voices and figures became clear through the kitchen screen door. An unusual tone in her father's speech caused her to wait on the landing.

"...with the lack of work, once we get this last shipment out, there won't be anything."

Mother picked up the percolator and poured coffee into Father's cup. "Maybe they'll get another order."

"Doubtful. We need to prepare for the worst. It could be weeks, even months."

"We have a little money set aside, don't we?" Mother touched his hand.

"Not much."

"We'll make do. We always have."

"With lard sandwiches?" Father banged the cup onto the saucer. "I hate it when we don't have enough for the children."

"The garden's coming along nicely."

"Don't be so optimistic. We know how much they despise boiled cabbage."

“Frank, please look at me. Try not to be so hard on yourself. We’re better off than some.”

Father lowered his head. “How long can we continue like this?”

Lily eased her way down the steps and went around the corner toward the front door. Her father’s news came at the worst time for their family. One way or another, she had to move out and not be a burden for her parents. The small amount of money she contributed with her job at Livingston’s Women’s Wear wasn’t much. Even her older brother Arthur, who had two jobs, made little to assist with their two younger siblings. A marriage with Ira would have given them relief, but could she still marry him after what he’d done?

A slight creak came from the door as Lily glided through. The overhead chandelier lit the parlor, streaming light into the sitting room between matching tattered chairs. A sewing kit rested on the seat of Mother’s chair while Father’s had a magazine draped over the arm. A program emitted from the radio in the corner and an unplayed board game lay at the rug’s edge. Muffled voices trailed down the hallway along with the lingering scent of supper. She crept up the stairs to her bedroom.

Lily slipped into her nightgown and slid under the covers. Her body tensed on the cool sheets. The events of the night replayed in her head and finding a comfortable position seemed impossible. Could she marry a man who may not be faithful? What other choice did she have when her family couldn’t continue to bear her burden? The situation with Ira and the lack of work in her small town didn’t offer many options. She squeezed her lids tight over her swollen eyes, praying for a peaceful night. Finally, her body sank into the mattress with her hands folded together as if she were lying trapped in a coffin.

Chapter Two

The early morning church bell rang and Lily sprang forward off the bed. She wanted to keep to herself, but today, May 16, 1933, marked the most important moment of her best friend Anna's life and potentially the second-worst of hers. No doubt Ira would arrive at the wedding as if nothing happened. Playing along with the charade would be the only option in order to not put a damper on Anna and Emmett's day.

Hiding her emotions from her perceptive pal wouldn't be an easy task. The day they met in third grade Anna must have sensed her discomfort on the playground. Their schoolmates wouldn't let her skip rope. No matter how hard she'd always tried to fit in, she never did. Lily was grateful for Anna's friendship. Those trying experiences gained her an emotional strength she planned to draw from when she faced Ira again.

By late morning, Lily had removed the curlers from her hair, ironed the wrinkles from her dress, applied mascara to her lashes, and brightened her lips with rose lipstick. She left her house and followed the sidewalk around the corner to the church. Guests gathered near the main entrance, so she slipped into the side door. Inside Saint John's Catholic Church light streamed through the gothic stained-glass windows. The rays cascaded onto the pews and across the floor. She stopped in the middle of the aisle at

the presence of such beauty. Varying hues of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet illuminated the walls where fourteen Stations of the Cross hung. A sense of warmth enveloped her, lifting her spirit. If anyone could help her get through this day without falling to pieces, it was Him. She always found Him here. God's presence was everywhere and this was the perfect day for a wedding.

Lily opened the door to the bride's room. Anna stood in front of the mirror in an ivory gown that shimmered against her medium complexion and caramel brown hair. The simple design of the dress accentuated her slim curves. An overskirt draping gave the gown a Victorian appearance while the low back exposed her shoulders. She wore a pair of elbow-length gloves with a small bow at the wrist, which coordinated with the one at her waist. The floor-length skirt flowed around her and the veil met her hemline.

"Your dress is remarkable."

Anna twirled around. "You're here!" She smoothed her hand down the side of the dress. "Thank you. I love how well it turned out too."

"The fabric is beautiful."

"It's charmeuse! I've never worn a material so soft before."

Lily glanced around the room. "Is there anything you need help with?"

"Just this nauseous stomach."

"I know the feeling." She pulled Anna into her arms. "Everything will be fine. I'll be by your side."

"I'll always be here for you too."

Lily caught the reflection of her dress in the mirror and cringed. Ruffles flounced across her bustline and hips where she didn't want the added volume. She appeared out of proportion with her petite stature. "I wish your mother found a more flattering

material for me. Look at this color! Who else would you have gotten to wear this yellow dress? I look like a banana!”

“Only you could look so fruity and elegant at the same time.” Anna covered her mouth as she giggled into her glove. “I do appreciate you agreeing to my favorite color and for trying to calm my nerves with humor.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Yes.”

Lily took hold of Anna’s hand. “I think it’s time to make that fiancé your husband. Am I right?”

“More than ever.”

A few minutes later, Lily stood with Anna’s parents at the rear of the church awaiting the procession. As children, they’d played dress-up and Lily had loved being the bride. Her visionary husband would be tall, dark, and handsome. Of course, it wouldn’t hurt if he could also be a sweet prince charming. The fictitious childhood dream hadn’t met reality with Ira and his faults. Before last night, she’d overlooked many things because of his good qualities like honesty and dependability. Now she couldn’t get rid of the pungent taste in her mouth over his lack of shame and immoral character. Anna had what she craved with Emmett. He was a man she couldn’t live without, a man who adored her, a man... Lily’s arm was nudged.

Anna whispered, “Ready? It’s time to go. The music is playing.”

A classical bridal tune reverberated from the grand pipe organ in the balcony, creating a rich fullness within the church. Lily moved with the rhythm gazing at the happy couples sitting in the pews. One man sat by himself. He wore a spiffy blue suit

which was much fancier than the normal churchgoers every Sunday. As she strolled past him their eyes met, only she found herself unable to continue walking. Warmth swept across her face. At her first attempt to proceed, she stumbled. She refocused her attention on the sanctuary, quickening her pace without regard to the tempo of the music. Among the last few steps to the altar, she took a few deep breaths before turning toward the congregation.

All the guests stood facing the back of the church waiting for the bride, except for the man who kept his gaze upon her. His shoulders were wide and strong as if he could toss her right over and carry her out the door. The instant attraction made her uneasy, especially since nothing like this had ever happened to her before. She couldn't turn away from his good-natured smile. A grin came over her, not only to reciprocate, but because his image matched her expectations from long ago.

For the next hour, Lily faced the altar while the beautiful Latin words bonded Anna and Emmett together as one. Once outside the church, in Columbia Park, family and friends gathered celebrating the newly married couple. Lily walked across the street to her house assisting Anna's mother with the meal she'd brought. They carried food over for the crowd, bringing with them a selection of mixed cheese, cucumber and ham sandwiches, a molded potato salad, spiced Seckel pears, olives, and stuffed eggs. Last night's rain produced a muddy mess in the grass creating a spongy walk, especially for the guests in heels. Lily volunteered to take the tea and coffee around to the tables.

A cluster of Emmett's friends sat together at the far table, along with Ira. He had his back to her but his plaid flat cap along with his black suspenders unmistakably stood out. She could have stomped away as he had the night before, but she told herself she could be strong. Slow and unsteady across the soft ground she approached the table. She

stopped behind Ira, listening to the conversation. As she peered at the person seated across from him, her heart thumped in her chest at the well-dressed man from earlier. The only fitting name for such a distinguished man would be Mr. Spiffy.

“I get what you’re saying, Ira, but I’m a Ford man myself. Why do you like Plymouth V4’s?”

Ira held up a finger. “For one they’re a fair price.” He held up a second finger. “And two, they have increased the horsepower.”

“I agree Fords are a little more for the money, but horsepower, you want to talk horsepower? The Ford V8 is putting out sixty-five horses, and the cast-iron flathead will get you seventy-eight miles per hour. Now that’s a car. Besides, any car that’s fast enough for Bonnie and Clyde is good enough for me.”

Lily held in a chuckle. Mr. Spiffy in his fine felt fedora with an extra-wide ribbon certainly could stand his ground against Ira.

“It’s not only about the power. It’s about the style.” Ira tugged the suspender straps off his shoulders. “See these...they’re not just for holding up my pants. They’re a one-of-a-kind swanky style all their own, just like the Plymouth.”

“You may have a valid point, but did you see the new model Ford came out with this year? It’s the cat’s meow.”

Lily never understood why men talked about cars the way they did. Good looking shouldn’t refer to a hunk of steel. She moved to the side of Ira, “Would you care for some more coffee?”

“Yes.” He looked up at her with a twisted grin insinuating she’d finally come to her senses. “How about another sandwich too?”

Her jaw tensed. “Certainly, I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She wanted to say something about his request, but there is a time and place for everything...and now was not the right time.

Ira pointed across the table. “My new friend here from the opposite side of town would probably like one too.”

She glanced at Ira’s new friend.

Mr. Spiffy tipped his hat. “No, thank you. If you don’t mind though, I’d like some tea.”

“Of course.” A light breeze blew a fresh clean scent of him her way. This time the warmth trickled from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. As she tilted the pitcher, a piercing note bellowed out of the band shelter from across the park. She jerked. Her foot slid backward. And her heel sank. The pitcher moved in unison, splashing tea onto the table and barely missing the man’s lap.

“Are you all right?” He grabbed a napkin wiping the spill.

“Yes, I’m sorry. Excuse me.” She scurried away. This was not the impression she wanted to make. Now he’d think of her as an awkward, clumsy woman. She should have told Ira to get his food, then she wouldn’t have to serve him again. He sure had gall asking her to bring him something. She set the coffee and tea on the serving table. The plate of sandwiches contained only crumbs, so she picked up a few slices of cheese and a stuffed egg, placing them onto a napkin. Ira would have to be satisfied with what she could find.

As she approached, Mr. Spiffy didn’t look anywhere other than in her direction. She set the food next to Ira’s plate stepping behind him. Ira chattered away about the farm, and the man appeared as disinterested in the new conversation as she was. It must be why he stared at her. She couldn’t help but stare back. While she smiled at him, he

grinned at her. The longer he looked, the more she couldn't take her eyes off him. He had a few gentle crinkles surrounding the dark intensity of his eyes, giving her the impression of a warm inviting personality.

"Did you forget the sandwich?"

She recoiled at the sound of Ira's voice. "They were gone...sorry."

As Ira turned around, she wanted to leap like a frog on a hot tinplate, but she stayed glaring at the ground. A gentle brush on her arm drew her out of her trance.

Anna leaned into her. "Thank you for serving our guests. Emmett and I appreciate all your help."

Emmett pulled a flask from his jacket. "I've got a little something to top off those drinks." He poured a swig into the cups on the table. "Did everyone enjoy the wedding?"

Mr. Spiffy raised his cup. "I wouldn't have stood up, knelt, or sat so many times for anyone other than you two." He laughed and caused the wrinkles to crease deeper around his eyes. "I'm sure you have your reasons for all the movement. At least I can say I'd never doze off if I attended church here."

He's not Catholic. She wouldn't have guessed he belonged to a different church. But St. John's is the only Catholic church in town. Her ideal man on the outside believed differently than her on the inside. How could they ever be compatible? Her church would forbid it. The town would frown upon it. And her family wouldn't permit it. If he grew up as she did, his religion would be a tremendous part of his life too. A relationship with him would be impossible.

The flat pitch of a baritone horn rang out. “If you’ll excuse me, my father’s getting ready to play.” She turned toward Anna and her new husband. “Mrs. Wolff, would you like to come with me to listen to the band?” She snickered. “You can too, Mr. Wolff.”

Emmett shook his head. “Keep a seat open for me.” He kissed Anna. “I’ll meet both of you later. Where will you be?”

“We’ll find a spot up close.” Lily locked arms with Anna as they made their way through the oak and maple trees toward the red-bricked shelter. Her father, Eddie, sat in the last row of the second regiment band on the pinewood stage. A dozen men tapped their toes while the tune progressed in harmony. A few open chairs were near the front and they paraded toward the seats. She enjoyed listening to the music, but her attention remained focused on Mr. Spiffy. A man whose real name she didn’t even know. Maybe for her sake, she shouldn’t find out, but her desire made her touch Anna’s arm.

“Who was sitting across the table from Ira?”

“Why are you grinning like that?”

“I am?” She covered her mouth with her hand.

Anna’s eyebrows rose. “Why are you asking?”

“I almost dumped tea on him.” She leaned closer to Anna’s ear. “So, do you know his name?”

“Benjamin Claussen. Emmett worked for him at the Ebbe Company after high school.”

“He owns the company? I thought he was our age.”

“No, his dad and uncle do. He’s at least five or six years older than us.” Anna tilted her head toward Lily. “It’s my turn to ask a few questions.”

“Yes, certainly.”

“I noticed you’re not yourself today.” Anna placed her hand on Lily’s. “Is there something you’d like to talk about?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“Don’t forget how long I’ve known you. What aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s not the right time. Besides, it’s your day. Let’s not make it about me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Lily wanted to confide in her about Benjamin, except that meant she would have to tell Anna about what happened with Ira. Besides, she’d made her decision before anything could potentially develop. It’s the best choice; the only choice. But how can there be such a loss when she and Benjamin were never together to begin with?

Chapter Three

Benjamin Claussen locked the Ebbe Company's side door. The overcast sky hid the warmth of the sun while the cool breeze chilled him. He flipped the lid on his pocket watch, which displayed a few minutes before six o'clock. He'd never been this late before, and the gang probably started the card game without him.

As he approached his car in the parking lot, Vivian stood next to the fender. If he would have any chance of getting to play tonight, he needed to display the appropriate poker face now. He gave her a grin, revealing his teeth. "Good evening. This is a surprise." He kissed her on the cheek as always. "What brings you here?"

"Can't your girl stop by once in a while?" She squeezed his arm and batted her lashes over sea-green eyes. She was always impeccably dressed and her makeup applied like a movie star on the big screen. "I finished up some shopping in town. I thought I'd stop over."

He glanced around. Never once in the four years of their relationship had she shopped and not bought anything. "I don't see any packages. The stores didn't have anything you liked?"

"They certainly did. My trip was so successful the store is having my packages delivered." Vivian ran her gloved fingers up and down his arm. "Wait until you see the

dress I found. It's the perfect shade of blue to emphasize my locks." She swept a strand of her berry red hair aside. "You can tell me how much you like it when you pick me up in a half-hour for dinner."

She's not changing the plans this time. Ever since their engagement this past year she'd insisted on having him do things her way. He was tired of being tolerant. "It's Thursday, the fellows are waiting for me."

"I'm sure you can miss one night of cards." Vivian pouted. "You saw them two days ago at the wedding."

He needed to appease her, so he kissed her on the opposite cheek. "I promised I'd play. I can't go back on my promise now, can I?" His word meant everything. Hers had the sour smell of selfishness.

"You could if you wanted to." She put her hands on her hips. "All you have to do is go there and tell them you can't stay. By that time, I'll be ready."

"I'm sorry." He took her hands in his. "I'll take you out another night. You can wear your new dress then."

Vivian pulled away. "If you loved me, you would take me out tonight. I can't believe you'd choose to spend time with them instead of me."

"How's Saturday? You decide where you'd like to go. I'll make the reservation." The offer came more from obligation than a genuine invitation. Besides, she wouldn't go. She'd be upset for days and not come around until she calmed down. At least then he'd be able to consider his next steps without any pressure from her.

"Make it for wherever you want. I'm not going." She swung around and walked away.

Vivian's heels clicked rapidly upon the ground sounding as if they would break at any second. When the noise faded, Benjamin opened the car door and slid onto the seat. He should be relieved he was able to go, but somehow the situation seemed like the beginning of something worse to come.

Less than four minutes passed until he arrived at Hotel Charles. The main floor housed the restaurant with poker tables scattered near the bar area in the back of the room. A half-wall surrounded three sides of his card pals' usual table but they liked the privacy and the close access to the bar. Benjamin strode through the main dining room amid drifting scents of Thursday's fried chicken special toward Emmett and his cousin Louie. He slipped his hand into his pocket and tossed a handful of change onto the stained felt table before flipping a nickel into the pot. "Sorry I'm late."

Louie grumbled. "You told me you were leaving more than a half-hour ago."

"I forgot about the numbers that needed to be done before the morning. Besides, Vivian stopped by after you were gone and wanted me to take her out tonight."

Louie flicked his cigarette over the ashtray. "That explains a great deal."

"You sound bitter." Benjamin pulled out a padded chair. "What did she ever do to you?"

"It's not what she's done to me." Louie took a puff and blew a cloud of haze into the air, merging with the scents of cigar and pipe smoke. "It's what she's doing to you."

Emmett pulled the cards together into a pile. "I think we should play." He laid them next to Benjamin as he took a seat. "Besides, I'd guess your lateness has more to do with your father grooming you harder than Louie's to take over at Ebbe. Either way, you're both set up pretty sweet for running the company."

Louie snubbed out his cigarette. "All right now, my father works me just as hard as Benjamin's. Ask him who works longer when it comes to fishing season. He's the first one out the door."

"It's true." Benjamin dealt a round. "Five card stud aces high."

"Take it easy on me tonight." Emmett picked up his cards. "I need to come home with some money or I'll have some explaining to do."

Benjamin fanned out his cards. "I'll do my worst." He grinned. "Tell me, the lady in the frilly yellow dress at your wedding...who is she?"

"Lily Vanderhoof. You're not interested in her, are you?"

Louie tossed a coin to the middle. "Of course, he's not. He's got the lovely Miss Vivian tied to his money clip."

Benjamin glanced at Emmett. "She brought me some tea. We never did get around to introductions." He turned toward Louie. "And Vivian doesn't have her hands on any of my money."

"Well don't take this the wrong way, but take a look at Vivian's mother." Emmett pushed two nickels into the kitty.

"You're both plotting against me now?"

"I'm pointing out her mother acts like she's a queen." Emmett cracked his knuckles. "I'm sure you've heard what they say about apples and trees?"

Louie tapped on the table. "One rotten apple spoils the whole tree."

"Both of you are wrong. She's nothing like her mother. And Louie, you mixed two sayings with different meanings again." Benjamin lifted the edge of his card. "I thought we were here to play poker. Not analyze my fiancée."

“You know I’m only pulling your arm.”

“Leg.” Benjamin tossed in two nickels and raised another.

Louie swept his cards together on the table. “You know me. I don’t understand women at all anyway. I’d be lying if I said I did.”

Emmett matched the bet. “First fold of the night. You know what that means, don’t you, Louie? It’s your turn to get the drinks.”

“I’m going.”

Benjamin was familiar with Louie’s harsh comments, but Emmett had never spoken up before. Maybe he should consider their frankness since they both noticed Vivian’s altered behavior. It was becoming more apparent these last few months the issue might not go away. He couldn’t continue to ignore the problems with Vivian.

“Are you still in?”

Benjamin had three diamonds showing and one in the hole. “Yes, I’m in.” He rolled two more coins into the pile.

“Now that Louie left, is there more to the story with Lily?”

“I found her intriguing.”

“And?”

“And it’s only been a couple days since we met, but there hasn’t been a day I didn’t think of her.” Benjamin put his hand up between them. “Before you say anything, I know I’m engaged. Believe me, I know.”

“I don’t envy you one bit. The ties you have with Vivian’s family...well, any man would dread making the wrong choice.”

“I’ve made my share of bad decisions lately. On the day of your wedding, Vivian was ready to go and at the last minute she changed her mind.”

“Why?”

“I told her maybe she could get some ideas from the small wedding you were having. I think it may have annoyed her.”

“How come?”

“She said there was no way she’d be seen in a Catholic church, friend of mine or not.”

“Well, this friend likes her less and less.”

“She always makes more out of everything I’m trying to say. I only tried to remind her of our original plan at First Presbyterian.” Benjamin stretched his arms out as wide as they’d go. “Now, it’s turned into a gigantic social event.”

“Princess Vi doesn’t seem too far-fetched, does it?”

Benjamin chuckled. He spun a coin on the table. “I guess not.”

Louie returned and pulled out his chair. “Since I lost the first round, I got each of you an extra drink.” He pointed to the short waiter headed their way balancing a tray on each of his palms.

“Let’s finish this up.” Emmett turned his card over showing a pair of kings. “What do you have?”

Benjamin flipped his card over.

Emmett’s jaw dropped. “A flush?”

“Luck must be on my side, at least in cards.”

The waiter set the tray of drinks on the table and left.

Emmett took out his flask, sloshing some gin into each glass.

Louie passed out the drinks and raised his highball glass. “Here’s to three musketeers, all for three and three for all.”

“It’s all for...forget it.” Benjamin grinned and put his glass down. “Let’s play. I don’t want this luck to cool off.”

After an hour, Benjamin’s pile of money towered on the green felt. He struck a match and touched it near the bowl of his pipe while taking several gentle puffs. A good smoke always relaxed him, and the challenge of worthy opponents energized him. “Are you in or out, Emmett?”

“Out. This hand was awful. I’m down to the last of my change. My wife isn’t going to like this.”

Louie tossed his cards on the table. “You sure are on a streak tonight. There’s about six dollars in that mound of yours.”

Benjamin reached forward, knocking his head on the stained-glass fixture above. The light swung back and forth across the table while he drew the pile of winnings toward him. “We could quit now.” He grabbed the shade, centering it above the table.

Emmett grimaced. “One more, I have to win some time. Five-card draw. Deuces wild.”

Benjamin picked a coin off the heap and threw it in. “All right, ante up.”

Louie matched the bet and stood. “Wait for me, there’s quite a dish over there I’ve had my eye on.”

Emmett shouted as Louie lumbered away, “Hurry up, we don’t have all night.”

“It won’t be long. He’ll say something wrong like he usually does.” Benjamin laughed.

Emmett picked up his hand spreading the cards out between his thumbs. “Do you think you could let me win this last round so I can at least go home with a couple dollars?”

“Now that wouldn’t be fair to Louie, would it?” He peeked at his hand. Three tens, a deuce, and the four of diamonds. “Besides, would you even feel good about winning if you knew I let you?”

“Sure, I would.”

“Let me see what I can figure out.”

Emmett finished his drink and crunched on a piece of ice. “You know there’s a way to get the scoop on whether or not Lily mentioned you.”

“If you want.” His lips curled into a smile.

“Where’s your poker face now?”

Benjamin gulped the last of his drink. “It’s gone when it comes to Lily. She’s so easy on the eyes.”

“Shh!” Emmett pointed at the waiter wiping off the next table. “That’s her brother Arthur.”

“Splendid, all I need is for this to get around town.”

“I’m back.” Louie slid the chair toward the table. “What don’t you want getting around town?”

Benjamin slapped Louie on the arm. “The fact you got shot down again.”

“Witty. I knew it ran in the family.” Louie rubbed the welt on his arm.

“All right you two, let’s play.” Emmett held the deck in his hand. “How many you want?”

Louie bent his cards slightly off the table. “I’ll take one.”

Benjamin wanted to fold for Emmett’s sake, but not yet. “One for me too.” He tossed away the diamond.

“I’m taking three.” Emmett discarded his onto the pile and dealt himself three.

Louie doubled his bet. “I’ve got a good feeling about this one.”

Benjamin couldn’t fold now. Besides, if Louie spoke up, he knew he wasn’t bluffing.

“I’ll match your bet and raise you another nickel.”

Emmett folded. “Too much for me.”

Louie tossed in another nickel and laid his cards out.

“Good hand.” Benjamin slowly spread his hand across the felt. “But my full house beats your straight.”

“Well, at least I’ve got a few dollars left, unlike Emmett. Your wife isn’t going to be pleased.” Louie picked up his coins.

“I should have quit several hands ago.” Emmett stacked the cards and slipped them into the box. “I doubt she’ll be upset.”

“You’d be wrong for sure.” Louie flipped a coin in the air, caught it, and slapped it on the backside of his hand. “If a woman says to bring money home, she means it. Heads or tails? Tails, I’m right.”

“That’s not a proper wager.” Benjamin waved a dollar in front of Louie. “I’ll bet Anna won’t be mad at Emmett.”

Louie lifted his hand off the coin. “Heads. All right, we’ll play your way. I’ll take you up on that bet. There’s no way she won’t be angry.”

Benjamin handed Emmett a dollar. “We’ll let him hold the money.”

“All right, I’m in, here’s mine.” Louie put his dollar on top of the other one.

Benjamin winked at Emmett. “This one isn’t much of a gamble. With the luck I’ve been having lately, how can I go wrong?”

Louie stood placing his winnings into his pocket. “You may not be lucky in everything.”

“How do you figure?”

“You know how the old saying goes...lucky at cards, unlucky in love.”

Benjamin laughed. “For once you said it right.”

End of sample

See below for a link to the novel:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/Bo8N8LZBQY>