

Eight

Carrie stumbled up the stairs and leaned against the doorframe. Sweat trickled down her back as she struggled to find the key in her purse. She swung the screen door open, unlocked the door and stepped inside the cool of the cabin. She threw her purse on the couch and leaned against the wall to catch her breath. Her right leg was aching a bit. It was getting better every day now, just like the physical therapist had told her it would. She pushed herself away from the wall and stepped back out onto the front porch to get the groceries that would soon be melting in the heat. As she stepped outside, she looked out at the lake. People were sitting on the beach and swimming already, and it was only ten o'clock in the morning.

Carrie picked up the paper bags and brought them into the small kitchen and started putting everything away. "Paper or plastic?" She never knew what the right answer was. If you got paper, you were a tree killer, but plastic was also just as bad for the environment. The right thing to do was to buy those reusable shopping bags and bring them yourself. She'd been meaning to do that for a while now, but hadn't gotten around to it. She went over to the dining area table – the dining area and living room of the cabin were one "great" room – and picked up a spiral bound notebook. She flipped it open and added "buy reusable grocery bags" to her list. Number nineteen. Since the accident she'd been making the list. Things she wanted to do but had never gotten around to. She'd done a few so far, in no particular order, including attempting water skiing a couple of days before. She'd fallen more than she'd been up on the skis, but at least she had tried.

"Knock, knock," a voice said from the front porch. It was Elinor.

"Come on in," Carrie replied.

"Oh, it's so nice and cool in here," Elinor said, as she came into the cabin and plopped down on the couch. She laid down, put a throw pillow under her head and swung her legs over one of the arm rests.

"Tired?" asked Carrie.

"I haven't had my coffee yet. I wanted to clean the cabins before it got too hot," said Elinor. She and her husband, Max, had bought the old motel lakefront property with their wedding money six years before. Max, who had worked as a carpenter since high school, had built the cabins himself. Elinor had convinced Carrie to come and stay for a month during the summer. She and Max had originally declined to take any money, but Carrie had refused to stay unless she paid her fair share. Elinor had said the water would heal her soul. She had been right.

"I love what you've done with the place," Elinor said, waving her hand around the room. Clothes were laying carefully over almost every empty seat in the room.

"I need you to help me decide what to wear," Carrie replied.

"I still don't know why you insisted on making dinner. He offered to take you out."

"I'm a great cook, everyone says so," Carrie said. For the last few months, Elinor had been telling her about this "great guy" she wanted Carrie to meet. Carrie had totally rejected the idea, but in the two weeks she'd been at the lake, Elinor's constant nagging had worn her out and she'd finally relented. Elinor was right, Michael had offered to take her out to dinner, but Carrie had wanted to be able to control the evening. And the lighting.

"Yes, you can cook. But this is so stressful, don't you think? Cooking for someone on the first date? You should wait until the fourth or fifth date. Then cook him breakfast after he spends the night," Elinor winked.

"It's not too late to cancel the whole thing, y'know," retorted Carrie.

Elinor sat up and the two women stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Come here," Elinor got up off the couch and motioned Carrie over to the full length mirror on the back of the closet door.

“Why?”

“Just get your butt over here.”

Carrie reluctantly walked over and stood in front of the mirror. She stared up at the ceiling.

“Look at yourself.”

“I know what I look like.”

“Just look. Please?”

Carrie lowered her eyes and looked in the mirror. She had gained almost ten pounds during her recovery from the accident. Being unable to walk did that. The huge, ugly bruise on her right thigh was almost faded. Elinor reached around her and moved the bangs off of her forehead, revealing the big, red scar that traveling from the hairline on the right side of her head down to the left eyebrow. She winced, reached up, and pulled Elinor’s hand away.

“It looks good. A lot better,” Elinor said.

“It’s huge,” Carrie said, her eyes filling with tears.

“The plastic surgeon said it would take a year to fully heal.”

“I know,” Carrie whispered.

“It’s going to be a wonderful night.”

“Oh, c’mon. This is a mercy date. You don’t have to pretend,” Carrie snapped.

“It’s not, I promise.”

Carrie turned around to face Elinor, “What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing.”

“He’s forty years old and not married. Something’s gotta be wrong. Oh, God, does he live with his parents?”

Elinor crossed her arms, “No. You’re afraid that you’ll be judged by the way you look. And you too are almost forty and not married. Kind of hypocritical, don’t you think?”

Carrie sighed and walked over to the table and sat down. She reached into the bowl in the middle of the table and grabbed a piece of chocolate. She unwrapped the candy and popped it into her mouth, closing her eyes for a few seconds as she chewed. That was number six on her list. Eat more chocolate. Which also accounted for the ten pounds.

“You have a point. Other than the fact that he’s a State Trooper, you haven’t told me much.”

“I told you. He had girlfriend for a really long time and they broke up a little over a year ago. He hasn’t dated much since. He’s a really nice guy. Would I set you up with a jerk? He’s perfect for you. I know you’re going to like him. And have fun. And you have to get started on numbers eight and nine.” Number eight on Carrie’s list was to fall in love. Number nine was to have more sex. Obviously, she hadn’t started on either one - yet.

Carrie laughed out loud and stood up, “All right, so look around and tell me what you think I should wear.”

Elinor walked around the room and picked up various items of clothing. She wrinkled her nose and looked at Carrie, “do you have any dresses?”

“Yeah. I have a couple. What’s wrong with what I have out here?”

“These are all pants with long shirts. It looks like my Grandma’s closet.”

“It does not. I have a lot to hide.”

Elinor rolled her eyes, “Oh, please. Put all of this stuff away and go get the dresses.”

Carrie came back carrying her two summer dresses.

“They’re black,” Elinor sighed.

“Black is slimming.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Elinor turned and walked out of the cabin.

A few hours later, Carrie had showered and put on the clothes Elinor had recommended. The blue crop pants were her own, as well as the sling back sandals, but Elinor had brought over one of her own tops. It was an off the shoulder yellow and white creation, which required a strapless bra, which

Elinor had also provided. She had to admit, the top was very flattering. Elinor had also convinced her to pull her hair back into a ponytail to reveal even more of her neck. Her bangs were carefully arranged over her forehead.

The chicken was in the oven and smelled divine. She had made a three bean salad and some coleslaw to go with it. For dessert, strawberry shortcake. After turning on the oven, she cranked the air conditioning and went out to the front porch to wait for her date. She was sipping an ice cold gin and tonic (with a twist of lime), and leaned back in the rocking chair. A few kids were still sitting on the dock and swimming in the lake. The hum of their voices and the singing of the birds lulled her into sleep.

“She’s staying over here in cabin four,” Carrie startled awake at the sound of Elinor’s voice. She sat up and slipped her shoes back on. She saw Elinor and a man walking down the sidewalk from the office. Carrie stood up, gin glass in hand. She quickly put it down on the side table next to the rocking chair. Then she sat down again. She noticed her hands were shaking.

“Carrie, are you there?” Elinor called.

“Hi...yes..” Carrie answered. She stood up and tried to lean nonchalantly against the railing.

“Carrie, this is Michael,” Elinor looked at Carrie expectantly.

Carrie stuck out her hand, “Michael, hello. Welcome. Elinor and Max have told me so much about you,”

He was cute. Not oh-my-God gorgeous, but definitely handsome. Carrie had to agree with Elinor about that. He had to be about six feet tall since Carrie had to tilt her head back to look up at him. He had dark hair and even though he had the normal police officer short haircut, Carrie could tell it was wavy. The kind of hair you would love to run your fingers through, that’s what Elinor had said. But it was his eyes that were captivating. They were dark brown. Warm. With long eyelashes. Carrie felt her face getting red and realized he was still holding her hand.

“These are for you,” Michael handed her a bouquet. His voice was a rich baritone. Warm.

“Lovely, thank you. Why don’t you come in,” Carrie turned and walked towards the door. He opened the screen door for her. She glanced back at Elinor who gave her a thumbs up. Carrie rolled her eyes stepped inside.

Three hours later, Carrie sat staring at the chess board. Number thirteen on the list was to learn to play chess. She had bought the usual learn to play chess books and played a little with Elinor, but Michael was good. Really good. So far, he’d won three games. They had eaten a leisurely dinner. He was very easy to talk to and Carrie had found out all about his childhood and career. They had planned to have dessert on the porch, but a thunderstorm had passed by so they opted to eat inside instead. Michael had noticed the chess board and asked her to play.

“Check,” she said, as she moved her knight forward, feeling very proud of herself, until Michael sat forward and moved his rook and captured her knight.

“Check mate,” he announced.

“Well, crap!” Carrie yelled.

Michael laughed out loud.

“I didn’t see that. Not at all,” sighed Carrie.

“You’ll get there. Just keep playing,” Michael said.

Carrie leaned back in her chair. Her leg was sore again and she reached down to rub her thigh.

“Well,” Michael said, “I think I’ll get going. It’s getting late.” He got up and carried their plates into the kitchen. He had already helped with the dinner dishes. The guy was definitely making a good impression.

Carrie stood up as he came out of the kitchen and reluctantly started walking to the front door. Surprisingly, she didn’t want the night to end. He smiled at her as he held the door open for her and they went out on the porch.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said.

“You’re very welcome. Thank you for beating my ass in chess,” Carrie answered. They both laughed.

The air was cooler and drier and they could see fireflies winking in the night.

“Number eleven,” Carrie whispered.

“What?” Michael asked.

“Oh, sorry. It’s nothing,” she answered.

Michael looked at her quizzically.

“It’s just my list. After my accident, I started making a list of things I wanted to do. Number eleven is to sit and watch the fireflies,” Carrie cringed, thinking she sounded like a complete moron.

“That’s cool. What’s your favorite number?” Michael asked.

Carrie gasped. In a flash, the memories came back. The headlights coming toward her. The sound of the cars smashing into each other. The smell of gasoline. Then the hands pulling her from the car and laying her gently on the road. It had been raining that night.

“You have to stay awake,” the State Trooper had said. A warm baritone voice.

She could feel the rain hitting her in the face. He had leaned over her to shield her and taken his hat off. His hair was dark, and, even though it was cut short, she could tell it was wavy. His eyes were brown. Warm.

“I’m cold,” she had said.

“I know. The ambulance is coming. You had an accident. What’s your name?”

“Carrie,” she had responded, her teeth chattering.

“Ok, Carrie. You need to stay awake for me,” he had said, as he took her hand.

“I won’t die today,” she said. That had made him smile.

“Really, why is that?”

“It’s the seventeenth. That’s my favorite number. I can’t die today,” she had said and squeezed his hand. She could hear sirens now.

“No, you won’t,” he replied.

“What’s your favorite number?” she had asked him, but he had moved away so that the paramedics could get to her.

She was put on a backboard and in a neckbrace. An IV was in her arm. She was aware of rising in the air and moving. She reached out her hand but felt air.

“Carrie,” she heard his voice as she was rolling toward the ambulance.

“What’s your favorite number?” she asked again as she was being loaded into the back of the ambulance. One of the paramedics got in with her. One of the doors was slammed shut. The other door was about to close when she heard him.

“Eight! My favorite number is eight!”