

## Meeting Marcus

“Hi, Marcus,” I said without looking over at him.

He jumped up on the boulder and sat down next to me, opened the bag he carried, and held out a bottle of whiskey. I sat up, took the bottle, and took a drink. My eyes watered. Marcus likes his whiskey straight up and strong. It is not that I do not like whiskey. At times, I find it the perfect drink. You drink whiskey fast to avoid the burn. It revs the system, and in excess quantities, it dulls the senses even for vampires.

My life had been like drinking whiskey. I moved fast to avoid the burn and the pain of being alone. That all changed when I met Arianna. Now, I saw in a panorama of color which I intended to enjoy and appreciate, and my mood favored a full bodied red wine sipped slowly and savored.

“You are distracted this afternoon,” Marcus commented as he downed another drink. “Are you finished hunting already?”

“Yes, I have a date with Arianna tonight.”

“Hum,” Marcus grunted and took another drink.

It occurred to me that maybe Marcus had hoped we would hang out together tonight since I had only recently returned to Weymouth. “We will stop by the Martini after dinner for a nightcap. You should join us,” I suggested.

Marcus looked over at me and took another swallow of whiskey. “Why?”

“Well, one reason is I just got back in town,” I paused, “and I would like you to meet Arianna.”

“You just met her. You don’t need me there crowding you when you are getting to know her.”

“That’s just it, Marcus. I feel like Arianna and I have known one another for years. It does not feel like a brand new relationship. I feel connected to her.”

He put the cap on the bottle then leaned back on his elbows. “I have never seen you fall for someone before. There always seemed to be distance in your relationships.”

“I have to admit, when I saw her for the first time in Chicago, I fell hard.”

“She’s that pretty?”

“It’s more than her appearance. Although she is very beautiful,” I added. “We have the same type of personality. We have a great deal in common, and we can spend hours talking. In fact, after our date last night, we talked until nearly three o’clock in the morning.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows. “She is a night owl.”

“I don’t want to use a cliché, but she is perfect for me. I have never been so intrigued by a woman or felt so in tune with a woman before.”

He let out a long suffering sign. “Well, I suppose it was bound to happen to one of us sooner or later.” He sat up and took another long drink. “I will stop by the Martini and meet this perfect woman.” He put the bottle back in the bag. “Does she have a sister?”

I laughed. “No, she has an older brother.”

“Watch out for older brothers. They can be protective of their little sisters.”

I shook my head. “Arianna and her brother are not close. He’s seven years older, lives in Alaska, and she has not seen him in a couple of years.”

“You got all that in a few days of knowing her?” He stood up, and I did as well.

“I told you, we talk about everything, and we talk for hours.”

He shook his head. “Ok. I have to meet her. I’ll be there about 11:30.”

“Sounds good.” We hopped down off the boulder. “You are going to like her, Marcus.”

“If she makes you happy, I like her already. See you tonight.” Without looking back, he took off into the forest, and I headed the other way.

I arrived at Arianna’s apartment right at seven o’clock. When she opened the door, my breath caught. She wore a sleeveless sapphire colored lace dress that had a low V cut neckline. Her hair was lightly curled and fell over her shoulders. “You are stunning,” I managed to say when my mouth and brain started working again.

She smiled broadly as she looked over my grey sport coat, white shirt, and charcoal slacks. “And you look very handsome.” She reached behind the door for a sweater and her purse. I stepped back and admired her while she locked the door. I took her hand, and we walked down the front steps to my car. This time, she waited while I opened the car door and helped her in. I closed the door and walked around to the driver’s side.

“So how was your day?” I asked as I headed out of town to the intimate Italian restaurant in Albany that I selected for tonight’s date.

“I had several students come to office hour.”

“Already?”

“I was surprised too. I also had two students come requesting to join Myths and Legends, so I gave them permission to add the class.”

I sped down the road. Arianna looked relaxed. I glanced over at her and smiled because even the silence was not awkward between us.

“That looks like a nice garden center,” Arianna commented as she craned her neck and looked at the greenhouse we passed on the outskirts of town. “I would like to get a couple of large plants for my office to make it cozier.”

“They are closed now, but we can come back during the day when they are open.”

“I’d like that.”

A short while later, I pulled up to valet parking, and an older gentleman opened the door for Arianna. She took his hand and stepped out of the car while I gave the key to the very young attendant whose eyes glistened as he looked at my sports car. “Park it away from other cars,” I said as I slipped him a tip.

“Yes, sir.”

Arianna took my arm, and we walked up the carpeted covered walkway to the front door. The door opened as we stepped up and the maître d greeted us. I gave him my name.

“Yes, Mr. Merden, your table is ready.” He took us to a table overlooking the lighted formal garden at the back of the restaurant. Each table had a small centerpiece of flowers and a candle. The lighting was low, and the tables were placed far enough apart to ensure privacy.

“This is lovely,” Arianna said as she looked out at the rose bushes under the window. She took a deep breath. “The roses smell beautiful.”

“They smell like you.” I took her hand.

The waiter brought the bottle of red wine that I pre-ordered to the table and poured. When he left, I picked up my glass. “I have known you just a couple of weeks, but I have looked for you all my life.”

“I feel the same.”

I touched her glass with mine, and we drank.

Dinner took two hours. After the antipasto, Arianna had shrimp with fettuccini while I had a rare steak, and we finished with panna cotta. Throughout dinner, we talked and laughed, and in my mind, I saw myself having dinner with Arianna many years down the road. I needed to tell her how I felt and reveal my true identity. I sensed she had strong feelings for me, but I worried that once I told her what I was, it would frighten her off. However, tonight was perfect, and I intended to enjoy it.

After dinner, I draped her sweater over her shoulders. “Should we stroll through the garden?”

“Yes.” She took my hand, and we walked through the archway.

I looked up into the sky. It was clear. The stars twinkled, and the moon was just a small crescent. The path was lit with tiny fairy lights and meandered to a fountain near the back of the garden. We stood and watched the water bubbling up and falling gently into the lower basin. At the bottom of the basin were coins.

I reached in my pocket and drew out a quarter. “Care to make a wish?”

Arianna smiled as she took the coin. She closed her eyes, then opened them, and tossed the coin into the water.

I gently laid my arm across her shoulder, and she leaned toward me ever so slightly.

“What did you wish for?” I whispered.

“I can’t tell you. I want it to come true.” She leaned close, and I kissed her gently. I felt her pulse quicken as I lingered over her lips. And I know I heard her hum when I lightly nipped at her lower lip. This was all I could wish for right now.

It was just before midnight when I turned onto the main street in Weymouth. “I thought we would stop at the Martini for a drink.”

“That is a good idea.”

I parked the car, and we walked toward the bar. The town was hopping. It was early in the semester, and it was a warm night. Groups of students sat outside on picnic tables in front of the pizza place. Arianna waved to a few students she knew. Cars cruised back and forth on the street, and music blared out of every bar and restaurant.

There was a bouncer at the door of the Martini. He looked at us and waved us in without asking for IDs.

“Marcus said he would be here,” I yelled over the band that was playing a bouncy tune.

“Oh, I get to meet Marcus?”

I looked over the crowd and finally spotted him. I took Arianna’s hand and led her over to his table. He stood up and looked at her. “Arianna, this is Marcus. Marcus, Arianna.”

“It is nice to meet you, Marcus.” Arianna extended her hand.

Marcus hesitantly took her hand. “It is nice to meet you, Arianna.” He held her hand a moment longer and stared into her eyes. “James said you are beautiful, and he is right.” Arianna blushed. “What can I get you?”

“Red wine, please.” She slid onto one of the high backed stools at the table and placed her purse neatly in front of her.

“Coming right up.” Marcus nudged his head toward the bar.

“I’ll help him,” I said to Arianna.

She smiled at me. “I’ll wait right here.”

Marcus and I walked to the bar. “Well?” I prompted him.

“She’s gorgeous. And so refined. I feel like a bum in a tee shirt and jeans.”

“Well, we are a little over dressed for this place.”

“Still, I would be afraid to touch her.”

“She’s not fragile,” I replied defensively.

“No, not fragile. Neat and clean. She dresses well. Like you.”

I laughed. My extensive wardrobe had always been an enigma to Marcus.

“Two red wine and a whiskey sour,” Marcus said to the bartender. He leaned on the bar and looked back toward Arianna. “She’s perfect for you,” Marcus said, “classy and sophisticated.” He paid the bartender and reached for a glass of wine and his drink. “How old is she?”

“Twenty-five,” I said as I picked up the other glass of wine.

We started back toward the table. He set the glass in front of Arianna. “To new friends and old friends,” he said raising his glass.

“To new friends,” Arianna replied with a smile and a nod of her head. She touched his glass with hers.

Marcus took a long drink and watched Arianna over the rim of his glass. “So, you are a first year professor,” he said to her.

“I am. And you are an architect.”

“And I am a librarian,” I said with a sigh.

Arianna and Marcus burst out laughing. The ice was broken, and the three of us settled into lively conversation. Just before the band finished its last set, I asked Arianna to dance. I took her hand, and we walked to the dance floor. I pulled her close, and she linked her hands behind my head.

“I had a wonderful time tonight, James.”

“I did too, Arianna.”

We moved slowly to the music. I like to dance, and I am pretty good at it since I have had a great deal of practice over the years, but there was very little room to move on the crowded and small dance floor.

“I like Marcus,” she said. “He’s a nice guy, and I can tell you two are great friends.”

“I’m glad you like him.”

We looked over and Marcus gave a little wave. “He looks lonely,” Arianna commented. “I’ll have to keep an eye out for someone for him.”

I wrapped my arms tighter around her, and she laid her head on my shoulder. When the song ended, Arianna went to the ladies' room, and I returned to the table.

Marcus finished his drink. "I like her. She is spunky and interesting. I thought she might be a little, you know, stuck up, but she's not."

"She likes you too. In fact, she is going to keep an eye out for someone for you," I casually mentioned. I finished my wine.

"Good because I haven't had a good date in months," Marcus replied.

Arianna returned to the table, and we stood up. "There's another band here tomorrow night," Marcus told us. "Want to meet here about nine o'clock?"

I looked at Arianna, and she nodded her head in agreement.

"We'll meet you here," I told him as we walked across the room and out the door.

"Well, see you guys tomorrow night." Marcus started to walk away then turned. "If you think of anyone, bring her along, Arianna." He waved and continued walking down the street.

Arianna pursed her lips.

"What?" I asked.

"I may know someone for tomorrow night. Marci, one of the Classics graduate students. She is very nice." Arianna nodded her head. "Yes, I think I'll call her in the morning and see if she is free tomorrow night."

I took Arianna's hand and kissed it. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For just being you."