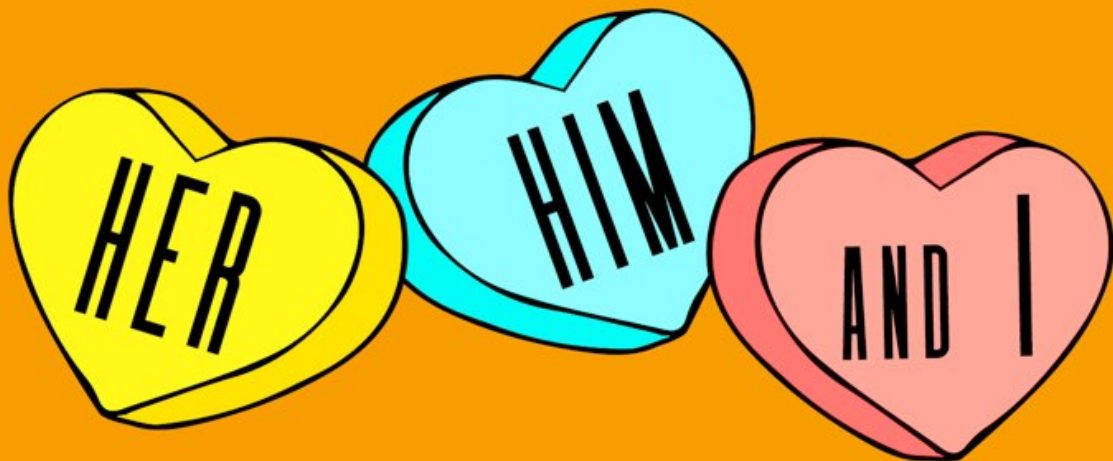




A ROSE SISTER NOVELLA



JG FOSTER

Chapter 14

A new Face

Fragments of conversations and lights on strings drew closer. Arabelle patted her white dress down. She stood in front of the beer garden with borrowed clothes on her skin. At first, she thought Lea had pulled her leg. In Lea's hand hung a crocheted blanket. Arabelle must have made an incredulous face.

"I made it myself," declared Lea. The shape and flower pattern only showed after Lea let the dress hang from her hand. The flowers reminded Arabelle of stitched together coasters. "It's my favorite dress. Paul not only saw me wear this dress countless times, but he watched me make it, putting it on, making changes last spring."

"Ha," Arabelle choked out, shoving any criticism down her throat. "You are very skilled. The only skill I have is folding paper." She shrugged.

The dress sat too tight on her hips, and Arabelle caught herself adjusting her cleavage. She took out her phone to check her reflection. Her make-up was done. Her hair styled. The dress wrapped around her body. Arabelle elevated her chin, pulled up the edges of her lips, displayed some teeth, pushed her shoulders back, and marched with renewed energy to Paul's table.

A man dressed in navy blue jeans and a dress shirt greeted next to Paul, "Hi, Arabelle."

"Nice to finally meet you, Michael," Arabelle answered.

Michael looked nothing like Paul. Laugh-wrinkles marked his sun-kissed face on his eyes and cheeks. Grey beard stubble graced his chin and jaw bones. Shaking his hand, she noticed his biceps stretching the fabric over his arms. Arabelle forced her eyes to look into his. "How long have you been in Boston?"

"For a couple weeks now," Michael explained.

“For a couple weeks,” Arabelle murmured to herself.

“Hi, Paul.” Paul Arabelle pressed her cheek against his. Her boyfriend’s eyes took Arabelle in. His eyes wandered from her bare shoulder’s down to the edge of the white-knotted dress. “Where... I mean, is that dress new?” Paul stuttered.

“New to me. I have a friend who’s downsizing. I looked through her stuff and found this dress. I felt like the dress looked like summer, and I needed it in my life.”

Paul pressed his jaw together.

“You don’t like it?” Arabelle’s sweet voice pressed out with a smile on her face.

“Well, yes, I do. It’s just different from what you usually wear. You look great.” He placed a glass with red liquid in front of her. “I ordered a pomegranate juice for you.”

“It’s so nice to see you guys still complimenting each other,” Michael offered.

“Yeah,” Arabelle dismissed him. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. I can’t really believe that we have never met before.”

“Well, yeah,” Michael responded. “Thanks to our parents. So here we are, a lifetime later me reaching out to my little brother in an attempt to reconnect.”

“To connect, actually,” Paul chimed in.

“That’s true,” Michael concurred.

Michael poured three glasses of red wine and offered one to each of them. “No thanks. I don’t drink,” Arabelle declared.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Can I offer you anything else?” Michael asked.

“That’s all right. I’ll stick to my juice.” Arabelle sipped on the rim of the glass. Her silver bracelet scooching towards her wrist.

“I can’t believe you guys don’t live together,” Michael commented.

“Why?” Arabelle questioned. A pebble-sized seed of dislike popped-up in her tummy.

“Well after ten years...”

This remark rubbed her the wrong way. “After ten years...” Arabelle repeated. She placed her hand on Paul’s shoulder, “Do you want to tell your brother—well, half-brother—why we don’t live together?”

Paul’s cheeks burned. “No, actually, not at all.”

“There you have it. Way more interesting if you were in a relationship.” Michael opened his mouth, but she continued. “But let me guess, you’re single.”

Michael bit his lips. “My wife died last year, if you want to know.”

“I’m sorry.” Arabelle pushed her eyebrows together.

“I’m sorry, too. I didn’t even know you were married,” Paul explained.

“It sounds like the family gossip mill only went in one direction. Mom always seems to know what’s going on with you. You know I haven’t even met your mother,” Michael declared.

“Where is your sister?” Paul asked Arabelle.

“She’s hanging out with her ‘friend’ tonight. So, only a small family gathering it is.” Arabelle’s voice broke, and she snatched her bag off the table.

“What are you doing?” Paul asked, concern in his voice.

“It sounds like you two have a lot to catch up on. And since I am not really family, I’m happy to not go down any family secret rabbit holes. I can do that with my sisters. Soon, actually, during our sister’s retreat,” declared Arabelle while making her way out the door.

“Arabelle. Arabelle, wait up.” Paul sprinted after his girlfriend, but she marched on. As he caught up with her, he asked “Arabelle! What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you choose an excuse for me? Maybe I felt out of place because you and your brother just met for the very first time a couple days ago. Or that I insulted him only to learn that his wife died. Or maybe I am just stressed because I just got overlooked for a promotion, which I had worked so hard to achieve. Or because I am learning so much new information these days that is hard to process,” screamed Paul.

“Perhaps you should create your own opportunities instead of waiting for someone to give you one. You don’t need any one’s permission to take action,”

Paul yelled back at Arabelle.

Arabelle froze, yet her mind flamed. *Paul was right*. He had hit the nail on the head. She didn't need anyone's permission. She can do what she does already by herself, for herself.

"Look." Paul moved closer. "I'm not sure what the right excuse is, but I was hoping you'd stay the night. We haven't connected in a while. I miss you."

Arabelle gaped at Paul. Vile bubbled up from her stomach into her throat. Her puke jammed up in her mouth preparing to projectile into his face. He wanted to *connect* with her. She gulped the acidic liquid down. "But your brother is staying with you. I just couldn't. This evening didn't go so well. Another night."

A grimace of disappointment swept over his face. "But—"

"I was planning to go to the theater with Yvette on Friday. Maybe she'd be happy with a date night with David and you can come with me." Paul's expression didn't change much. Paul disliked the theater, but Arabelle just threw him a lifeline.

"Let me check my calendar. I'll text you tomorrow," he promised while walking backwards to rejoin Michael.

Chapter 15

New Friends, Old Friends

“Hey, Arabelle,” Lea greeted her with a shy smile.

“Hi, Lea. This is Yvette.”

“Hi.” Yvette offered Lea a hug.

“So, shall we compare notes?” Arabelle didn’t waste any time.

“Sure, but I feel horrible. I felt so disgusted by him that I literally ran away.” Her hands pushed an invisible person away from her body. Her little finger unbalanced Arabelle’s lemonade, and the liquid dripped on Arabelle’s phone.

“Sorry,” Lea apologized.

“No worries.” Arabelle wiped her phone dry.

“And the bracelet? Did he say anything?” Yvette inquired.

Arabelle touched the metal circling her wrist. “He didn’t show any sign of recognition that I was wearing his gift again after I lent it to Lea. I can’t believe that. Paul used to be so attentive when we met. He didn’t comment on the bracelet, but the dress made him nervous.”

“So, what’s next?” Lea sputtered.

“Perhaps, we need to find something more specific to us?”

“More personal than a gift *he* gave you?” Yvette wheezed.

“Maybe. Perhaps like jewelry you made Lea,” Arabelle proposed.

“Maybe.”

“Before I forget, I was thinking about how to convince Paul to go to the theater with me. We could get a ticket for you as well? Or you could just come by before