

Rosette

Sweetheart Rose

The Theory of Love

by

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Dedication

To Ken.

Sparks and fireworks still zing every time you look at me.

“Oh Abigail, I’m so sorry. I don’t know why he’s not here yet.”

My lips twitched. Only Julia and my mother called me by my full name. I would have automatically corrected her except for the distracted look on her face as she scanned the intimate groups of family and friends filling her new home.

“I *know* his sister said he’d be here,” Julia murmured to herself.

Personally, I gave up on Julia’s latest *find* for me hours ago—about the same time I vowed never to let her set me up again.

Still, I had to smile as I watched my best friend gnaw the tip of a pink manicured nail. She married Peter over a year ago. From day one, Julia swore it was love at first sight, bells ringing, sparks flying, the whole shebang. Now she thinks everyone should enjoy the experience, whether they wanted to or not.

Unfortunately, I was at the top of her list.

Don’t get me wrong. I wanted a husband, family, and everything that went with the little white house and picket fence. Unlike Julia though, I didn’t think sparks and fireworks should flare as much as stability and security should count.

My friend, however, had other plans—namely Jamieson something-or-other. Not that it mattered at this point.

Pushing away from the wall my shoulder held up for the past half-hour, I stood beside Julia and tried hard to look interested. It might have been easier if I knew more about him but it was hard to get excited over Mr. Handsome-With-A-Great-Sense-Of-Humor when he was an obvious no-show.

Peter emerged from the forest of people to plant a quick kiss atop his wife's auburn curls. "I'm headed to the kitchen for some more wine. Can I get you two ladies anything?"

"No thanks, honey," Julia replied.

I looked down at the empty glass in my hand. "Sure, I could use another mineral water."

His wife's glowing face obviously held more interest than the glass I held out to him. Perfect. Just the distraction I needed to escape my friend's defective matchmaking attempt.

"Why don't I get them," I offered with a quick pilfer of Peter's empty wineglass. "You two should grab a moment to breathe before you go back to your mingling."

I'm sure I made it halfway through the maze of people before the nauseating lovebirds even realized I was gone.

The small kitchen was a welcome relief from the constant buzz of conversations in the other rooms. Various cracker boxes and hors d'oeuvre trays crowded the countertops while beverages of every shape and size decorated the kitchen table. I grabbed the neck of Peter's favorite wine and cleared a small spot on the Formica surface to set down the glasses.

With his dry Chardonnay poured, I nipped a piece of old cheddar from a nearby tray then contemplated my own choice of drink. A little extra caffeine definitely couldn't hurt.

Popping another mini cube of cheese into my mouth, I picked up the two-litre plastic cola bottle and headed to the refrigerator. Refreshingly cool air surrounded me when I opened the freezer door for some ice.

"Watch out, coming through."

The deep male voice came two seconds before the freezer door smashed against my head. Choking back the cheddar and a few unladylike words, I raised a hand to the new dent behind my left ear and slammed the door shut. The soda bottle nearly fell from

my other hand at the sight of a denim-clad tree dancing around the kitchen.

Figuring I must have been hit harder than I thought, I shook my head and took a second look.

Through the branches of a very large houseplant, I glimpsed a shock of dark blond hair, firm jaw line, and a forest green dress shirt.

Whew, I wasn't delusional after all. When the weight of the vegetated monstrosity thunked onto the floor and my assailant emerged from behind the bush, I quickly retracted the thought in hopes I could stay in my fantasy world. Surely, this had to be a mirage. At no point in my sane life did I ever come this close to manly perfection.

His shoulders weren't just broad, they were sculpted pieces of art. The chiseled jaw framed a face any classic artist would drool over and the hair, oh the hair—a wealth of thick, sun-kissed waves outmatched only by his honey-brown melt-me-on-the-spot eyes.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't see where I was going and I..." The light apology faltered as his gaze shifted to the side of my head. Concerned deepened his eyes to a rich gold.

It was a moment or two of dazed appreciation before I realized his lips were still moving. "Pardon me?"

"I said, are you hurt?"

It was then that the numb cold in my hand and the trickles of ice water dripping down my neck and arm registered. I yanked the handful of ice cubes away from my head unsure if the sudden shiver down my spine was from the cold droplets or his sudden nearness.

Wisps of an earthy cologne followed his hand as he gently pushed back my dampened hair. The heady mixture of tender fingers probing my scalp and warm breath on my cheek caused my heart to do the River Dance against my chest.

"Does this hurt?"

An answer? He seriously wanted me to form words when I could barely breathe?

"I'm okay," I finally stuttered out. "I mean, I don't feel a thing." At least not in the pain department.

His searching eyes held me spellbound. It could have been my imagination but the spell seemed to weave its way around him as well for it was several long moments before he cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be any bump or bruising." Laughter danced in his eyes as he brushed a wet curl behind my ear. "In my professional opinion, I think you're okay too."

He had a real smile, not forced or made to impress or promote, just natural with a slight curved hint of boyish charm.

I liked it. I liked it a lot.

"So you're a doctor then?" I returned, curiosity raising my brow.

A sexy little indentation in his cheek deepened. "Technically speaking, yes."

"Technically?"

His head dipped down for a moment as a chuckle rippled across his shoulders. When his gaze next met mine, there was a new spark of mischief in his smile.

"I am a doctor. It's just that most of my patients have four legs and a tail."

"An animal doctor?" A burst of laughter escaped my lips. "Sorry, a veterinarian," I amended.

It definitely explained why I felt like purring when he touched me.

A discrete cough from the kitchen doorway turned both our heads. I didn't recognize the face jammed through the opening.

"Hey Jim, Melanie's been looking for you."

Stale air filled the void of his hand as it fell away.

"Thanks Vic. Tell her I'll be there in a minute."

Reality kicked fantasyland out with a deafening thud. My stomach rolled the two cheese cubes over in protest. *He's spoken for*, I groaned inwardly. *I should have known. The good ones always go first.*

I turned away to hide the disappointment tightening my chest. Two glasses stared back at me from the counter, one full, one empty. Refusing to let myself wallow in their deeper significance, I pitched the half-melted ice cubes into my glass and unscrewed the cap off the cola bottle.

"Someone waiting for those?" The question was spoken softly over my shoulder.

"Yes, I guess he is," I replied dejectedly.

"Oh."

I ignored the part of my mind that thought it heard disappointment in the single word reply. It was much easier to focus on pouring the dark liquid.

Then again, maybe not. Uncommonly shaky hands left as much on the counter as in the glass.

With a frustrated sigh, I turned to reach for a cloth but came up short against a solid chest instead. My hand flew up automatically against Jim's shirtfront for support. Just my luck, the warmth emanating from that specific spot sent heated little fireworks of electricity coursing through my palm.

I jerked my hand away. "Sorry," I said, mortified at the breathy undertone my voice held.

Jim's smile, however, was contagious and even through my embarrassment, I returned a small one of my own.

"I thought you might need this." He reached around me to wipe the cloth over the wet counter.

"Thank you."

I made the mistake of looking him full in the face. Caught again in the liquid depths of his honey-brown eyes, my body rebelled against my brain's commands to turn away.

"I guess we should get back to the party." The low, rich timbre pulled my gaze to his lips. I could almost make myself believe a hint of regret marred his smile.

Shaking my head at the ludicrous thought, I gave myself a quick lecture on the flights of fancy then nodded my agreement.

I scooped up the refilled glasses and left the good doctor alone in the kitchen with his ridiculously large plant. Of course, he was the lucky one. Unlike me, he wouldn't be alone for long once he caught up with Molly or Melinda or whatever her name was.

The sudden buzz of conversations droned like a slap-in-the-face wake up call and I was disgusted in myself for mooning over a complete stranger.

"If I'm not careful, I'll be buying into Julia's sparks and fireworks theory next," I muttered under my breath.

My friends were in the same spot I left them what felt like hours ago. Peter, in a conversation with an older gentleman, gave me a distracted smile as I handed him his glass of wine; Julia, on the other hand, looked as though she had eaten the proverbial canary.

"Jamieson has finally arrived," she cooed.

Woohoo. Not.

Ignorant of my internal sarcasm, Julie rambled on. "I saw him going to talk to his sister a moment ago. I know he's late but give him a chance, okay?" A puzzled expression wrinkled her forehead. "What happened to your hair?"

In no mood to meet another disaster, I flicked at the damp curls with an I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about shrug while I plotted how best to make my escape before her latest 'find' found us. The moment her eyes lit up at something over my shoulder, I knew it was too late.

"Julia."

The rich voice preceded a shock of sparks from the solid hand placed gently on my back. Inordinate pleasure is too mild a term to

describe my reaction when familiar golden eyes sparkled down at me in amusement. If not for my utter inability to put together a coherent thought, I might've even sung out a chorus of Glorious Halleluiah.

"Sorry I was late," Jim apologized as he placed a quick kiss upon Julia's cheek. "I had a last minute patient." The roguish wink he sent me shot my heart rate straight to the stars.

"I'm just glad you could make it." Julia beamed. Motioning to me she added, "Jamieson, I'd like you to meet Abigail."

"Abbey," I corrected automatically as a smile of pure, unadulterated delight grew on my lips.

"And I prefer Jim," he said in a conspiratory whisper. "Only my mother and Julia call me by my full name."

Julia's look of confusion when I laughed aloud was priceless.

"Do you two know each other?"

Jim raised a hand to brush the same errant curl back behind my ear. "We've bumped into each other once or twice. Oh, which reminds me," he chuckled looking back at our hostess. "Your housewarming gift is in the kitchen."

Jim's handsome face turned and we shared another secret smile. In that exact moment I decided to honor the vow I made earlier. I was never going to let Julia set me up again. There was no need. I finally understood her sparks and fireworks theory—and found myself falling with a breath-catching, heart-stopping bang.