

## After So Many Questions

The envelope was plain white, her name and address on it obviously typed on an old, mechanical typewriter. No return address, no label, just the postmark and that was from the next town down the road, useless as a clue. She almost threw it away but she could feel there was something bulky in it, something not paper, so she tore it open. Inside was a key card and a piece of sky-blue paper the size of a playing card. The same mechanical typewriter had been used to print it: "January 10, 2019, Royal Keolahni Hotel, Room 220. 1 PM". She'd heard of the hotel; not the most expensive place on the island but in the top 8.

Billie-Jo sat down on the sofa and stared at the card and the rectangular plastic key. This didn't make any sense. She re-examined the envelope and the contents again, struggling with the puzzle of who had sent this to her. Nobody she knew would have a reason to do this. *It's a dumb sales promotion*, her brain whispered, and she almost threw it in the trash. But still there was something intriguing about it. What if... She put the envelope aside until she could decide what to do with it.

The week until January 10 seemed to fly by. A hundred times she picked up the enigma and threw it out, and a hundred-and-one times she put it down again, undecided. It wasn't until the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> that she knew what she would do. In the morning she packed a change of clothes and a can of pepper spray, loaded the car and drove to make her rendezvous at the Royal Keolahni.

The hotel was understated opulence, with thick carpeting and plenty of polished wood and marble, and she felt a bit out of place as she walked through the lobby and found the elevators. The plastic key card opened the door to room 220 and it was then that Billie-Jo realized the room was actually a minor suite. The door opened onto a sitting room, with additional doors to a large bathroom and a bedroom. She called into the room but got no answer, so she armed the pepper spray and examined all three rooms, finding nobody there. The bath had a huge raised tub and a separate shower stall, and the bedroom's centerpiece was an immense bed that looked big enough for half-a-dozen adults to sleep without bumping into each other.

Arrayed on the foot of the bed were three objects: a manila envelope with a number 1 printed on it in a large, block font; a flat box, the kind that a dress shirt would be gifted in, marked 2 in the same font; and a smaller, similar box marked 3. Billie sat her overnight bag on the bed and ran her hand over the quilted bedspread – soft as down and thick enough to be a

pillow, a rich burgundy in color – and again wondered what the heck was going on and why she was here.

After several minutes of sitting in the silence she decided to open the “1” envelope. Inside it was a single sheet of paper with printed instructions. “Follow these directives to the letter. I know you’re confused but you will not get an explanation until you have completed all the steps. I make only two promises: you will not be injured, and you will be glad you followed the rules. Step 1: Take Box 2 into the bathroom and undress. Take a long bath; I’ve left toiletries that I’m sure you’ll like. I have provided a selection of oils and lotions and such for you to choose from, as well as a CD of relaxation music. Feel free to light the candles on the counter and turn the lights down, if you wish. Take your time and enjoy the experience. When you are done open the box and wear what is in it. Climb into the bed and use what is in Box 3, then relax and wait. You may sleep if you wish. I will join you at 4:00, IF YOU HAVE FOLLOWED THE INSTRUCTIONS.”

Billie-Jo picked up the box and pulled off the lid. Inside was a satiny blue outfit, and when she lifted it out the fabric felt smooth and cool against her fingers. More and more curious. Part of her rebelled at the idea of taking orders from whoever had written the note, and she had to admit to herself that she was a little bit afraid at this bizarre situation. But deep inside her there was something more – something primal that was enjoying the puzzle and the sense of intrigue at this weird chain of events. It was like something from a romantic novel, and with this thought came images of all the Harlequin Romance novels’ covers she’d ever seen, with their illustrations of dashing rogues, shirts hanging open as they embraced breathless, bosomy maidens. And inside her a thrilling tingle of excitement sparkled through her belly. Carrying the blue outfit and her pepper spray, just in case, she headed for the bathroom.

As she filled the tub, Billie checked the tray of things her unknown host had left. Bath oils, skin lotions, a new lady’s razor and shaving cream, shampoos, and so on, all of them higher-end items. The CD was full of nature sounds – ocean surf, gentle thunderstorms, bird songs – and she put it into the player on a shelf, lit the candles, and after she made sure the bathroom door was latched she undressed and lowered herself into the warm, scented water. She leaned back and closed her eyes and relaxed, letting the world become one of odors and sounds.

Thirty minutes into the CD there was a break in the program. A voice, as non-descript as the electronic announcer in an office phone-tree, broke in to announce, “If you have fallen asleep, please wake up.” Billie-Jo opened her eyes and stretched. The water was cooling off so she reached for the soap and a washcloth to actually wash up. She sponged scented water over her skin, letting her mind play with the conundrum of her mysterious host’s identity. Her mind kept painting images of who he might be – handsome, rugged, devil-may-care – and she was

surprised that her body began to respond. The combination of her fantastic thoughts about this romantic rogue, and the touch of her hands as she washed started a very familiar flutter down in the pit of her belly. As she drew the soft washcloth over her large breasts the nipples erected into tight bumps and her breath caught in her lungs. When she washed the junction of her thighs delicious warmth swelled in her stomach and her sex moistened inside. She closed her eyes and gasped as her fingers touched the sensitive cleft in her mound, the thought of the mysterious man who'd arranged all this spinning in her mind. For a long minute she indulged herself this way, but then she shook the thoughts away. *Don't make yourself crazy*, she chided herself. *Whoever he is, he's probably an ass who's just out to get in your pants. Don't romanticize him before you even know his name.*

Shortly, having cleaned her whole body and shaved her legs, pits, and mound, she stood in front of the big mirror and brushed her damp hair. The time in the bath had allowed her to think, and she had decided that her mysterious host must have romantic intentions. But who was he? She had met a number of men in her time in Hawaii but none of them would've concocted a scheme like this. She'd only known one man in her past who might have, but he was thousands of miles away – he was certainly not a suspect. She'd decided that she would ride this train until she found out who Mr. X was, then decide what to do.

She lifted the satiny lingerie and held it up to the light. The fabric was mostly open lace, barely more concealing than a spider's web laid over her skin would be. Scandalously sheer, it would do little more than make her flesh look like it was under a blue light. Completely backless, the thing was little more than panties and a bib that tied behind her neck. At first the idea of dressing in such a revealing outfit was exciting to Billie, but after she'd put it on and tied the bib up she paused, staring at her reflection. Her mind chided her, picking out flaws and imperfections. She knew the mystery man would have to see the bumps from cellulite, the faded stretch marks from childbearing and from gravity, the pounds she'd never quite been able to get rid of, the freckles...and suddenly she felt tremendously naked in the silent room.

Conflicted, feeling frighteningly vulnerable, the woman struggled with her own doubts. What would he say if she let him see her in this blue fabric showcase? Surely he had some foolish idealized image of her, like she'd begun to concoct about him. He must be expecting a more toned, slender, youthful, perfect body, not the chubby, pale, imperfect body of a mother of a houseful of children. She stared at herself for a long time, her heart racing, before fighting the rising panic down again. He had to know, she reminded herself; she was obviously not a stranger to him, he had to know she wasn't a 20-year-old ingenue. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. She needed the answer to this puzzle, and there was no way to get that without following the instructions Mr. X. had left her. *If he can't take the heat then he shouldn't have invited me into the kitchen*, she decided. With that, she began to step into the blue outfit.

Minutes later she pulled the fluffy blanket down and sat down on the bed. The satin lingerie whispered against the crisp, white sheets as she made herself comfortable. Billie opened the box marked 3; inside it was a large, black bandana and an additional message: "Blindfold yourself and do not remove it. You may sleep if you wish. I will join you soon." She folded the bandana into a wide strip and tied it around her head, trapping her red hair and covering her eyes, plunging the shadowy room into absolute blackness, then lay down and covered herself with the sheet. She fell asleep with thoughts of a handsome buccaneer kidnapping her from a captured galleon dancing behind her eyes.

"Don't be afraid. You're okay." The words, not in her dream but dangerously close to her ear, yanked Billie from her sleep. She started, moved to sit up and tear the blindfold away, but a hand restrained her. "Shh shh shh...it's okay, Billie. It's just me." The voice was familiar, but the sleepy fog in the woman's mind was making identification difficult. A warm pair of lips touched hers, then the blindfold was being lifted away and she blinked and tried to focus on his face.

"Steve?" The name was sweet in her mouth, the name of one of her oldest and dearest friends, but part of her was already whispering that it couldn't be him, that he was practically on the other side of the world.

"Hey, sweets. Surprised?" He was smiling that uneven grin she knew so well. The moustache that she'd thought looked so unruly when they'd first met in 1980 was the same, the gray-blue eyes that seemed to twinkle when he'd laugh were just as bright as she remembered. For a moment Billie was sure she was dreaming – it couldn't be him, here, now. But when he kissed her again she knew it wasn't an illusion, and she suddenly felt embarrassed and naked and as self-conscious as a school girl giving her first piano recital.

Billie's face turned a brighter red than her hair and she tried to pull the blanket over herself as she stuttered, "How...you're not in Pennsy?" Suddenly Steve seemed so close that she almost couldn't breathe.

He turned and sat down beside her on the bed. "No. I managed to finagle a bit of vacation and got a great deal on air fare and a hotel and...well, here I am." Then he lost the smile and became serious. "I hope you don't mind. I wanted to surprise you. And I knew that if I told you what I was planning you'd be scared off, like all the other times, so I figured a mystery might just get you into my lair at long last."

“But...you must’ve spent a lot for all this. I mean, it’s all very nice and everything, but why?”

“Remember last time we spoke online, back at the end of November? You were so sad, felt so alone and lost. You said you wished I could come to visit you for a while. Well, I decided to make that happen. You did mean what you said, didn’t you?”

The message he’d referred to swam up from Billie-Jo’s memory. They’d talked about her feelings since her mother’s death and how the pain just didn’t seem to be getting any better. She had said that she felt detached, adrift somehow, and yes, she had wished he could be with her for a time. But nowhere in her fondest dreams had she thought he’d be able to travel to be with her. Yet, here he was, a knight without armor come to her tower to rescue her. Her eyes were suddenly hot and tears came. She was so confused – Steve had always been so good to her, standing by her in any storm she’d had to fight, her dear friend and confidant and always professing his love for her, even when she’d married another man and bore his children – but they’d never been physically intimate, never crossed the line to being lovers. There had been intimate conversations and flirting, and many, many hugs, and more than a few kisses – even a few wet, open-mouthed ones – but no farther. Yet she couldn’t deny the feelings she had carried about Steve for so long. The daydreams about “what if,” the conscious desire for his strength and caring, and even the heated fantasies and dreams of him, all of them were real and strong in her heart. But now...and the memory of how she looked in the almost-invisible lingerie he’d provided flashed on the screen of her mind. Oh, how she looked! And Steve wanted to see her like that? He obviously had plans to finally pass the boundary and become at last her lover, but could she bear him seeing her so naked and unshielded?

“Hey, penny for your thoughts,” he whispered, and he laid his hand on her arm, yanking her back to reality. “You okay?”

“Yeh..yes, I’m okay,” she lied. “I mean, I was just thinking...you mean you want...me? Really, me?”

“You don’t know already? Oh, Billie.” He reached for her face and she flinched, but he still caressed her cheek with his fingertips and smiled gently. “You know I’ve been in love with you almost since the first day we met. I’ve wanted you to be mine for so very long, and now you need me worse than you ever have. Well, I found a way to make it happen, to be there for you and for myself as well.” Then he sat back, his smile fading. “But listen, if you’re not ready for

this I'm not going to twist your arm. You have to come to me willingly, Sweetheart. I won't force you. Love doesn't do that. If you really can't go the distance we can just go out for coffee and a sandwich and go back to being friends. But from what you said before I think now, as I did then, that you need more than just a close friend and listening ear. You need to be held and treated like the precious ruby that you are. I can give you that. I want to give you that. I've wanted to for more than thirty years. But you've always been afraid...wanting, needing, desiring, but afraid to actually taste the forbidden fruit that I offer." He cupped her cheek in his palm, guiding her face to look into his eyes, the eyes that she had so often wondered what may be concealed behind them, and said, "Do I lie, Billie? Have I not told the truth?"

His touch seemed to be sending tendrils of heated smoke through her skin. *What the hell is he doing to me*, she wondered. But the heat washed on, and the feelings she'd had in the bath returned; the pale pink tips of her breasts stiffened and a hot wave flashed down through her belly as her well whispered hungrily. "No," she murmured. "You haven't lied. And you're right – you're completely right. I've been so afraid of you...of us...but I do need you. God, Steve," and the tears brimmed in her eyes, "I do need you now. I don't want to need anything or anyone this much, but I do need you. I need you so much," and she threw herself into his embrace. "I need your warmth and your touch and your love." Then in a voice made breathy with resignation, "I need you to make love to me. I need my dreams to finally happen. Please. Tonight."

His reply confused her for a moment. "Thank you, God, for this woman." He held her, kissing the top of her head before whispering to her, "Thank you, my cherished, beautiful treasure." Then he was pulling free of her clinging arms and drawing back the sheet, baring her in her blue lace illusion. He leaned over her, looking down at the image of the woman for whom he'd ached for so long. "Magnificent," he whispered, and it sounded almost like a prayer. Then he was beside her in the massive bed, taking her in his arms and raining kisses on her face and neck.

Billie-Jo was in a whirlwind, not knowing up from down or now from before or later, as Steve swept her up into the misty neverland between the Earth and the stars. The blue lingerie seemed to vanish like a magician's rabbit, without her fully realizing it had disappeared at all. He touched her deftly, finding her secret places and making them pulse under her skin. His mouth was everywhere, the moist flame of his tongue tickling and caressing and probing and entering and keeping her on the edge, teetering between perfect release and stark insanity, then finally forcing her over the precipice. She plunged over the brink and as the world seemed to explode into brilliant fireworks inside her he breathed her name and that he loved her. As he tasted her climax she shook and silently screamed his praises even as she wondered that he might be tearing a piece of her very soul away, so shattering was it all. And when he finally shed his own clothes and entered her at last and the wet heat flooded into her his lips gasped her name.

Later, she lay silent in his arms for a long time. There was no need for words, no words that could be better than the closeness, the intimate quietness. But finally, “Never,” she whispered in the darkness. “No one ever...I felt...love.”

He kissed her damp lips, barely touching them with his own. “That’s what I’ve been trying to give you for so long, Billie. And there’s more, all you want. All you need.” Another kiss, stronger this time. Another caress on her naked skin. “Together we can find the answers you need. Together we will solve your mysteries and clear your thoughts. I won’t leave you to fight the battle alone.” But she didn’t hear him. Her eyes were closed and her grip on him loosened as she slipped deeper into sleep. “Rest, my cherished child,” he murmured to her. “The future is just beginning, and you aren’t facing it alone anymore.” Then he closed his eyes and joined her in sleep.

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