

Immortal Love



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Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC
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U.S.A.

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He saw her, for the first time in two-hundred years, on a miserable, rainy, late November morning in Portland, Oregon. Of course, he didn't realize at the time that he'd known her before, in another time, in another place, but that would come soon enough.

He was late for an appointment, which was typical, and had just maneuvered his candy-apple red Mustang GT into the only remaining parking space in the overcrowded lot of a downtown office building. Dr. Dan Lane was always late for appointments; his patients had come to expect this. Still, he was particularly worried about the session he had scheduled for this morning, a new patient, and he cursed softly under his breath at the sluggish morning traffic that, in his mind, was responsible for his current predicament.

Setting the emergency brake, he grabbed his briefcase and umbrella from the back seat, opened the door into the pouring rain, and promptly encountered what he would, decades later, describe as "The love of my life. All of my lives, actually." In his final years, this comment would cause his grandchildren to roll their eyes and cast knowing glances amongst themselves, amused at their grandfather's eccentricities. For his part, he saw the secret smiles and conspiratorial winks and even understood the reasons behind them. Nevertheless, he remained unperturbed, because he knew what they refused to believe; she had been his ladylove not only for the fifty years of their marriage, but since the beginning of time.

On that rainy Portland morning in 2010, however, he had not yet known these things, scattered and disorganized as he was. No, his goal that morning was to gather his belongings as quickly as possible and try to make a dash for the shelter of the two-story office building before becoming completely soaked by the incessant rain. With any luck, his new patient would understand, though he recognized the unlikelihood of that. Over the years his patients had been many things, but "understanding" wasn't usually at the top of the list. He couldn't blame them, though. After all, by the time they came to him they had typically spent months, even years, dealing with emotional trauma resulting from any number of circumstances, and what they wanted was relief. What they did *not* want was a psychotherapist whose personal issues seemed, if anything, larger than their own. Dr. Lane was painfully aware that his life was empty; he disliked it, however, when his patients deduced the same.

Lost in thought, wrestling his way out of the low-slung car and into the pouring, freezing rain of an ugly Oregon morning, he fully expected his new patient to be annoyed. What he *wasn't* expecting was to be accosted by a five-foot-nine-inch raven-haired beauty in a clingingly wet black pantsuit, her black brassiere fully visible under the soaked rayon of her white bargain-store blouse.

Not yet having seen her, he popped up his designer umbrella and gingerly stepped out into the rain, Pineider briefcase clutched tightly to his chest, taking care not to soak his Berluti loafers. As he pushed the door gently closed and engaged the automatic lock, he turned, and there she was, in all of her rain-soaked glory. He paused, struck not only by her beauty, but by a sudden sense of déjà vu, an irrational wave of joy, and the certain knowledge that he had known her before.

She, however, wasn't at all happy to see *him*, particularly since he had just stolen the spot for which she had so patiently waited. She had actually put the car in park—*park*—while the previous gray-haired octogenarian occupant took his time to depart (in a car that must surely qualify as a tank fit for the front lines), waiting patiently, and patience was not Katy Wallingford's strong suit. When he, the arrogant ass in the Mustang, whipped into the spot instead, oblivious to her older model Toyota Corolla on the other side, she was livid. Throwing open her door, made even angrier when it ricocheted back, smacked her in the shin, and soaked her with rainwater, she marched determinedly towards the door of the sporty car that at first sight she considered to be his compensation for ... well, for *what* she certainly didn't know, but for *something*, she felt quite certain. She couldn't wait to give him a piece of her mind.

As she slogged towards his opening door, dirty puddle water splashing up her legs and ruining her only pair of dime-store black pumps, she readied her responses, the words *jerk*, *asshole*, and *narcissistic idiot* making up the top three salutations on her list. She couldn't afford new shoes, had barely been able to buy these, and in her angered state, she placed the blame solely on the numbskull with the fancy car who'd stolen her parking spot. She was already late for an appointment, and now she'd be not only late, but soaked to the skin as well.

And it wasn't just *any* appointment, she admitted to herself, as she strode towards the moron in the Mustang, who was now bumbling his way out of his car, struggling to open his umbrella. It had taken her months to work up the courage to make this appointment, and even then, she'd only done so at the insistence of her primary care physician. The flashes, or hallucinations as her physician insisted on calling them, had begun nearly a year ago, and over time had increased in both duration and intensity. It was the commonality of the flashes that first prompted her doctor to send her to a flurry of medical specialists.

Unlike the random hallucinations sometimes experienced by patients with a mental health disorder, hers had ... well, a *storyline*. The setting was often different; sometimes she appeared to be living before the Common Era, somewhere in the Middle East. Sometimes she seemed to be in Colonial America, surrounded by soldiers in red coats. Sometimes, she even suspected she was experiencing events in prehistoric times, the landscape hostile and unrecognizable.

Yes, the setting often changed, but the plot remained the same. She was always an active player in these frightening dramas of the mind, something else that set Katy's experiences apart from run of the mill schizophrenic hallucinations. No sitting on the sidelines for Katy; she had a starring role. And there was no shortage of action in which Katy could participate: sword fights, gun battles, and in one especially frightening flash, a lion, tethered to a chain but straining mightily to reach the man as a bloodthirsty crowd roared apparent approval in the background.

Ah, yes. The man—the final ingredient in this series of terrifying short stories that seemed to have taken up residence in her brain. Even more disturbing than the fact that, at the age of thirty, Katy had suddenly and inexplicably become besieged with apparent hallucinations, was the fact that in all of the hallucinations, the man died. Try as she might, Katy could never save him, though she knew, of course, after months of suffering through the flashes, what was coming, knew the man was going to die. Over and over again, Katy was made to witness the man perishing in an astounding number of horrible ways. Over and over again, too, Katy was forced to feel the agony of heartbreak as it happened, and not just any old heartbreak. What Katy experienced was an all-encompassing grief, terrible in its force, the pain a physical thing, ripping apart her insides and leaving her spent, exhausted, and despondent for days afterwards.

As test after test came back negative, Katy's physician was left befuddled. "Katy," he'd said, scratching his head as he studied her chart, his tone slightly embarrassed. "I can't find anything physically wrong with you." He set the chart down and turned to look at her, removing his glasses and studying her face thoughtfully. "Our only other option is to explore whatever may be going on with you psychologically. I want to schedule an appointment for you with a psychotherapist. He's one of the best trauma therapists in the state."

At first, Katy had balked at the idea. A psychotherapist? She wasn't crazy, for God's sake, nor had she experienced any particular trauma. Oh, sure, she'd had the usual teenaged angst, had thought, as middle children often do, that she was the least favored by her parents. But she was years past that now and had experienced nothing more traumatic than the average woman's bad dating scene, filled more with lonely computer geeks than with anything truly threatening. Initially, Katy refused to even consider the option.

Over several weeks, though, as the flashes grew worse and her physical condition began to deteriorate, Katy finally had to face facts and accept the doctor's offer. Too many sleepless nights and too many days of unrelenting despair had pushed her to the brink of collapse. Her job performance was slipping and her students were suffering; she had to get help.

And now, after all the soul searching and internal arguments, now that she'd finally gotten up the courage to call this supposed genius doctor and schedule the damned appointment, some idiot with an oversized ego was making her late. Not only late but drenched. Anger propelled Katy forward, and she reached the man just as he turned from his car.

And then the strangest thing happened. He looked at her.

Katy clutched her head as the familiar sizzling sound buzzed through her ears. Dear God, no, not right here in the parking lot, not right outside the therapist's office, she thought, just before the world turned gray. The irony was bitter, but there it was, and not a thing Katy could do about it.

She swooned as the images flashed before her eyes, this time a prairie, stretching for miles in all directions. Katy could see wildflowers blowing in the wind, the sky streaked with purples and pinks, vivid in their colors, the setting sun an orange more brilliant than any she'd ever seen. In front of her, two horses, tethered to the covered wagon in which she sat, plodded serenely through the waving grasses. She could smell the warm aroma of leather, of horses and sunbaked grass, and, more tantalizingly, of a man, the mixture of lye soap and sweat delicious and exciting.

Next to her on the seat, the reins held loosely in his tanned hands, was the man. His blonde hair was ruffled in the wind; his blue eyes crinkled in laughter as the wagon swayed to and fro across the uneven ground. His shirt collar was open, and she could see a thatch of golden chest hair curling over the unfastened button, a glimpse of his tanned, powerful chest just visible beneath. Long, muscular legs were clad in breeches of soft, brown cotton, the bottoms tucked into tall leather boots rough with wear. His feet were propped casually on the lip of the wagon; his posture was relaxed. Katy thought, as she always did during these flashes, that he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

She heard the sound of his laughter, and behind that, the rustling of the prairie grass and the steady clapping of the horses' hooves. The wagon creaked with the effort of movement, and the canvas top snapped in a gust of wind. She knew, without looking, that inside the canvas enclosure was a woolen bag filled with enough clothing for the following day.

Beside him, she was anxious. "Daniel," she was saying. "How will we ever make it in time? You know Ma and Pa hate it when we're late. My sister will never forgive me. It's her firstborn son, and we'll be late to the baptism."

"Ah, Katherine," replied Daniel, flashing a smile in her direction. "Your parents will forgive us. They know I'm afflicted with lateness, but otherwise I'm a steady sort of fellow. Why, look how well I take care of you." He placed one long-fingered hand across the gentle swell of her belly, and she looked down, surprised to discover that she wore a long cotton dress of a flowered print, the skirt billowing in the evening breeze. Surprised even more by her delicate condition, the soft curve of her midsection straining against the flowing skirt.

"Relax, my love. We'll be fine. You worry your pretty head about too many things." Daniel leaned over and planted a kiss squarely on her lips, effectively ending further discussion. Then he leaned back and grinned.

Forgetting her unease for a moment, she laughed, unable to stay cross in spite of her best efforts. He was right; he was a steady sort of fellow, his one and only fault his chronic inability

to arrive anywhere on time, a small price to pay for the happiness she felt with him. And now, the baby. Ma and Pa would be so pleased at the news.

“Well, at least we’re almost there,” she said, recklessly pushing back her bonnet and removing the clips from her hair, hot from the day’s trip across the prairie and eager to feel the cool evening breeze against her face.

For a moment, they rode in silence, and then she grasped his hand and held it in both of hers, suddenly anxious again. “The shadows are long, and I don’t feel safe out here after sunset. I wish we had started our journey on time.” She glanced at the darkening sky, her brow furrowed with worry.

“You know what happened to that family from Kansas, out on the plain at night. Bandits were lying in wait along the trail. They barely escaped with their lives.” She shivered, cold fingers of dread crawling up her spine. She knew what was coming; she just didn’t know when, and she felt powerless to stop it. “Please, let’s hurry,” she begged Daniel. “The sun is setting quickly. At least the trip back will be much safer in the light of morning.”

Katy didn’t allow herself to acknowledge what she knew. Never once, in all of her flashes, had the man ever made it through until morning. Something was coming, of that she was certain, but for the life of her, she didn’t know what it was. The prairie ahead was serene, the evening peaceful under the rosy sunset.

He squeezed her small hand warmly before gently releasing it to push tendrils of her dark, luxurious hair out of her face, the strands gleaming like onyx in the evening sun. “Everything will be fine.” He stroked her cheek. “We’re nearly there,” he reassured her. “Just over that next—”

His words were cut off by the sound of a shot fired, from close range, the bandits sneaking up on them from behind, much faster on horseback than they could ever hope to be with their wagon. As Katherine stared in horror, Daniel slumped over into her lap, blood pouring out of a wound in his head, and then ...

Rain, blessedly cold, and strong arms around her, arresting her fall. The parking lot of the office building came back into focus, the asshole in the Mustang catching her as she fell, helpless against the force of the flash.

“Katherine,” he said, and she saw for the first time his unruly blonde curls, plastered to his head with rain, the ridiculously expensive umbrella and briefcase thrown aside as he rushed to catch her, their importance, their price tag, suddenly insignificant. How could he have ever believed he could fill the emptiness with such silly things?

His blue eyes, so beloved by her, gazed upon her face, not crinkled in laughter now, but darkened with obvious confusion and concern. Holding her in his strong arms, he gently pushed

tendrils of her dark, luxurious hair out of her face, the strands heavy and wet from the deluge. “Katherine?” he said again, his expression wondrous, rain streaming down his chin and into the open collar of his shirt, a thatch of golden chest hair curling over the unfastened button, a glimpse of his tanned, powerful chest just visible beneath. As always, he was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen.

“Daniel,” she breathed, reaching for his hand, clasping it to her racing heart. Suddenly it all made sense. “Daniel,” she said again, in a rush. “This time I’ll be prepared. I’ll guard more closely. I can’t stand watching you die again.” She touched his cheek, the skin warm under her fingers.

“Relax, my love,” he said, smiling down at her rain-drenched face, her dark lashes impossibly long. His blue eyes crinkled with laughter. “We’ll be fine. You worry your pretty head about too many things.” He kissed her then, in the middle of a public parking lot in downtown Portland, on a miserable, rainy, late November morning.

As he pulled her close she smelled his cologne, Clive Christian No.1 for Men. And under that, the warm aroma of leather, of horses and sun-baked grass, of frankincense, of volcanic ash and molten lava, of the sea, of the moon and the stars.

In his kiss, she tasted eternity.

