



NEVER-TIED NORA

WILL LOVE TRIUMPH
OVER FAMILY?



CHEYENNE BLUE



CHAPTER 1

SHE WAS EXACTLY MY KIND of woman.

I was interested from the first moment I saw her leaning against the bar in my favorite queer club, sipping demurely on a glass of white wine. Her lush figure enticed me, and her dark hair and olive skin made me wonder if she was from warmer climes. That she was new to the London scene was obvious as she was alone, but from the glances coming her way from women on the prowl, I knew that wouldn't last long. She was at ease in the club, unlike the girl sitting alone who was obviously a nervous straight woman out for a different kind of thrill.

Ignoring the hopeful glances of the straight girl, I honed in on the dark newcomer, sweeping in with my practiced patter and casual seeming touches. "I'm Nora," I said as my fingers brushed against hers in an approximation of a handshake that lingered and caressed rather than grasped. "You're new here. Let me protect you from this mob." With a wave of my other hand, I indicated the rest of the patrons.

She smiled, and it was wicked and feline. "I'm perfectly able to look after myself," she said in delightfully accented English. "But you can entertain me however you like, Nora."

Bingo. I signaled for two more glasses of wine, picked up her hand, and pressed a kiss to the palm. "What if my intentions are less than honorable?"

CHEYENNE BLUE

“Then I would like you the better for it.”

The wine arrived, and I linked my hand firmly with hers and led her off to a dark corner. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see at least a couple of other women lose interest in the face of my obvious stake. *Tough*, I thought. *They should have been quicker.*

My dark beauty slid into a booth, and I sat next to her, my thigh pressing firmly against hers. She pressed back, her movement assured, and picked up her glass. “*Salud*, dear English girl.”

“I’m Irish,” I corrected. “My family is from Ireland where we have clouds and cliffs that go on forever and the most beautiful women in the world.”

“I’m Giovana,” she said, “and I’m from Italy, where we have food and wine to make you melt. Our women are hot and fiery, and *they* can keep going forever. You can call me Gigi.” Her hand explored the long line of muscle in my thigh.

I was home and hosed, as my Aussie friend, Sue, liked to say. Onto a certainty. I captured Gigi’s hand and held it palm down against my leg. It was hot, even through my jeans. I thought of how her hands would skate over my body later, putting her heat to good use.

I tilted my head and let my gaze linger on her throat where her pulse beat fast and urgent. “And will I get a chance to see if I can outlast you?”

She leaned forward, and her breath feathered over my face. “Nora, I think you and I will get to do many things together. But you have to come home with me tonight to find out.”

I wasn’t going to argue.



NEVER-TIED NORA

“Nora...” Gigi whispered my name into my mouth as we kissed for the first time in a dark corner of the club. “Nora!” She gasped as I gently bit her nipple through her clothing. “Noraaaaa,” she sighed in a dark doorway on the way to her place. And finally in bed she screamed my name loud enough to wake her flatmate and bring him crashing into the room brandishing a bedside lamp to use as a weapon, only to find me between Gigi’s thighs, mouth clamped to her pussy as she came in great gulping waves of pleasure.

When Gigi finished coming, when her flatmate finished apologizing, when all three of us finished laughing, Gigi asked if her flatmate could join us. I refused point-blank, and he backed out the room, still apologizing even as his boxers clearly outlined that he wasn’t sorry at all. I locked the door, and then Gigi showed me some lusty Italian loving that lasted well into the early hours.

“Stay if you want.” Gigi sat up in bed, tousled and delicious. “I’m at my most...creative in the mornings, and Italian coffee is the best in the world.”

For a second the idea was tempting, but I’d had enough awkward morning afters with near strangers to know it was never as good as it sounded. I mustered a smile. “I would like that very much, but I have to be at my family’s place for breakfast. We Irish are early risers. I have to go.” I took a last pass along her body with my lips and got out of bed. My clothes were scattered around the room, and I retrieved them as I dressed.

I kissed Gigi goodbye and deflected her hints about meeting that evening. One night with a new woman was a charm, but I wasn’t looking for more. “Never-Tied Nora” my family called me. Originally a childhood joke about my inability to tie my shoelaces, but now a reference to my footloose ways and single

lifestyle. So I kissed Gigi thoroughly, told her what a wonderful night it had been, and repeated with all the Irish charm I could muster that I was so sorry I had to leave.

Gigi pouted, her thick lashes downswept over her beautiful eyes. “Ah, too bad, sweet Nora. Although you didn’t want Lucas to join us tonight, I was going to ask a lady friend along later.”

So Gigi was as much of a player as me. Temptation and interest swam in my blood, and for a moment I wavered. But I stuck to my story. After all, this was London—there was always another woman.

Luckily, Gigi’s flat was in a busy area, but even so, given that it was the early hours, I walked swiftly to the main road, where I hoped I could hail a taxi. Once there, I merged into the crowds of people spilling out of nightclubs and sauntered along at a more leisurely pace, keeping one eye out for a taxi. I wasn’t worried about being alone; I was tall enough to be intimidating, and confident enough to stare down most would-be hecklers. And from experience I knew that I was fleet enough to outrun all but the fittest troublemakers.

London buzzed around me. It was nearly two in the morning, the pubs were closed, and many of the nightclubs were closing. Any taxi that appeared was snapped up before I could hail it. I was only fifteen or so minutes from my parents’ house, so I could make the story I’d spun for Gigi about family breakfast a reality. I didn’t have my key, but I figured I could probably wake my sister, Theresa, with some gravel against her window. It would be a fair payback for all the times she’d rung my doorbell at a similar hour to crash in my bed.

Tomorrow was Sunday. Breakfasts were legendary in my parents’ house, particularly on the weekend when my mam pulled out the contents of the fridge and threw it in a frying

NEVER-TIED NORA

pan. Rashers, eggs, and black pudding. Beans and tomatoes, accompanied by tea so strong a mouse could trot across it. My mouth watered, and that decided me. I hadn't had Sunday breakfast at Mam and Da's place for a while. My rackets Irish family, with their good-humored insults, bad jokes, and tough love was just the thing I wanted.

I switched direction and headed for my parents' house. The street was even busier and I had to weave my way through hordes of intoxicated people, many of whom were staggering from lamppost to lamppost, giggling and clinging on to their dates, their friends, or possibly just random strangers. Two people ahead looked familiar. A male and a female, just that little bit louder than the passersby, were weaving their way along the street in the same direction as me. As I came closer, I heard "Feck you, Dec!" and that confirmed it. It was Theresa and her twin, Declan, obviously on their way home from a night out. I grinned at my luck. That would make it easy to barge in the door with them and crash with Theresa.

I hung back watching as they lurched along, arms linked. It wasn't unusual for the twins to be out together. Both had their own friends, but usually they watched each other's back, arranged "accidental" meetings for their sibling with anyone who took their fancy, and if they weren't successful, they'd make sure the other got home safely.

I jogged up behind them, then leaped onto Declan's back and clung like a monkey with my arms around his neck and my feet around his waist.

"Feck!" Declan staggered to keep his balance and swung his arms backward, trying to hammer my ribs. Theresa's laughter must have alerted him, and he said, "Nora, you bitch. I thought you were a Flannery."

I dropped off his back and came up alongside him. “Love you too, brother.” I punched him affectionately on the arm, and he grinned his goofy gap-toothed grin at me.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“It’s obvious,” said Theresa. “She’s wearing her favorite shirt and jeans, now very rumpled. Those are her pulling clothes. The latest conquest must live nearby.”

“That way.” I waved in the general direction.

“She throw you out?” Theresa’s little face, all sharp chin and angles, taunted me. “Not surprised. I’d evict you too.”

“I left. As I always do.”

“More likely she didn’t want to keep you.”

I thought of Gigi, her olive skin warm in the glow from the bedside light, her hair disarrayed and disheveled, the marks my mouth had left on her breasts, and the magic her lips had worked between my legs.

“Oh, she wanted to keep me all right.” I grinned as I remembered her suggestion of a threesome. “Can I crash with you tonight?”

Theresa sighed in pretend reluctance. “I suppose so.”

I linked arms with the two of them, and we kept walking in the direction of our parents’ house. Three abreast, it was harder to avoid knocking into people, but we barreled along, letting our laughter carry us through. We turned onto a side street, where there were dark houses and fewer people.

Declan’s pace slowed. “Feck it.”

Theresa slowed, too, and that forced me to keep pace with them. “What is it?”

“Fergal Flannery.”

“Is Young Seánie with him?” Theresa asked.

“No, it’s Fergal and someone I don’t recognize.”

NEVER-TIED NORA

“We can take him then. Three to two—good odds.”

“Hang on,” I interrupted. “Count me out. I’m not fighting anyone, not even a Flannery. I just want to get home to Theresa’s bed.”

“If you want to crash with me, you’ll stand with your family,” Theresa said in a voice as sharp as her chin. “Just because you’re never home anymore, you think the feud is done and dusted. It’s not, Nora. It’ll never be.”

“I wouldn’t even recognize most of the Flannerys now,” I said, even as I straightened, and pushed my sleeves up away from my hands.

“Take a good look,” said Theresa. “Short, pugnacious build, ginger hair, wild eyes. Look hard, for if you ever come across Young Seánie in a dark alley, he’ll be hammering into you before you can say Janey Mac.”

“But it’s not Young Seánie. Just let it go.”

“For feck’s sake, you don’t just let it go!” exploded Declan. “Especially not on a Saturday, the brawling night of the week.”

Theresa nodded agreement and then we were on them. I could see Fergal’s expression, even in the dim light, and while it wasn’t mean and ugly, he wasn’t about to invite us for a pint either.

“The fecking Kellys,” he said. “Two of them.” His gaze flickered between the twins—he obviously hadn’t recognized me.

“Three,” said Theresa. “Let me introduce my sister—”

“Nora,” finished Fergal staring at me with an eerie intensity. “So sorry I didn’t recognize you. Haven’t seen you about in a long time. Been running scared?”

I glowered but remained silent, figuring there was still a chance of getting out of this with only a few insults. It wasn’t

that I was afraid of fighting—I'd done enough in my teen years—but it was late and I was tired. I was older, too, and this whole Kelly-Flannery feud was, quite honestly, a pain in the arse.

Fergal's friend looked uneasy. He obviously had no clue whom we were and had no truck with us. "C'mon, Ferg," he said. "There'll still be on late openers at The Panther. I'd like another pint."

For a moment, it looked as if Fergal would move on, following the promise of more beer, but then Declan swung at him. It wasn't a particularly well-timed punch, it was wild and went wide of the mark only glancing off Fergal's shoulder, but it was enough that Fergal shook off his friend's restraining hand and waded in, fists flying haphazardly.

I watched them for a minute, wondering if we needed to drag Dec out. I looked across at Theresa—she was obviously more used to this than me—and she was screaming encouragement at Dec, along the lines of "get the fecker." Fergal's friend took one look at the melee and fled, his feet thumping on the pavement. Three against one was not a fair fight, so I gripped Theresa's shirt when it looked as if she might join in, and waited. The scuffle didn't last long. A couple of punches, a lot of staggering, bluster, and bravado, and then Theresa and I dragged Declan away.

"We'll let you go this time, you poor wee thing," mocked Theresa. "You're no match for our Dec. Off you go, run home to mammy."

Fergal clenched his fist, and it looked for a moment as if he might take a swing at Theresa, but with a visible effort at calm, he turned away. "Any time you're ready, Kelly," he shot over his shoulder in Declan's direction. "Let's see if you're as brave when it's just you and me, with no sisters to hide behind."

Theresa laughed, and Fergal swung around again and lunged at her. She sidestepped, and his forward momentum carried him onward where he collided with a low wall and somersaulted into someone's front garden. To give Declan credit, he made us wait until we'd made sure Fergal hadn't broken his neck. But once his red head emerged from the laurel bush, with twigs and leaves sticking out of his hair, we left and let our laughter be the final word.



Theresa grumbled like mad but threw me a pair of Declan's pajamas and let me squash into her single bed. Her bony elbows and knees were as sharp as the rest of her, but it was still better than the floor.

"You stink," she said, as she rolled onto her side away from me and kicked back with her feet to make some space. "You could have had a shower."

"It's nearly three in the morning," I said in a reasonable tone. "The noise of the shower would have woken Mam and Da. And I don't stink."

"You do so. You stink of girl sex."

I turned on my side, facing away from her to escape the worst of her jabbing feet. "That's because I had girl sex. You should try it some time."

"No thanks. I like my lovers to have a penis attached. And don't give me a lecture about your blue strap-on. It can't possibly be the same."

I was too tired to argue, but one thing needed comment. "How do you know I have a blue one?"

"Went through your bedside drawers the last time I crashed at your flat."

“For feck’s sake. Is nothing sacred?” In truth, I wasn’t surprised. Theresa was insatiably curious and had quizzed me about the finer points of girl-on-girl action before. Not because she wanted to try it, but because she was nosy. It was just like her to poke through my things. “Better not leave me alone here tomorrow. I wonder what’s in your bedside table?”

“You’ll never know. It’s locked. Mam’s as bad as you.” And then there was only the sound of her soft snoring.



I slept well despite Theresa’s bony knees and elbows, and it was gone nine when, freshly showered, I made my way downstairs. The rest of the family was already clustered around the breakfast table—Mam and Da, my brother Brian, my sister Mary, Declan, and Theresa.

Like me, Brian had already flown the nest but he dropped around most weekends for Sunday breakfast and, I’m sure, so that Mam could do his laundry for him. So there they all were, shoveling bacon and eggs into their faces as if there were a famine.

I paused in the doorway, seeing the familiar dark heads of my brothers and sisters, Mam’s pepper and salt hair, and Da’s bald pate. My family. My mad, rambunctious, argumentative family. Always ready with an insult. Always up for a music session or a drinking session. Always there for me if I needed them.

“Nora, love! Theresa said you came home with her.” Mam surged to her feet and over to the cooker. Food is love in our family, and Mam showed it by reheating the frying pan and pulling more rashers and eggs from the fridge.

“Lo, sis,” mumbled Brian. The mug of tea he waved in salute sloshed dangerously close to the rim.

NEVER-TIED NORA

I raided the drawer for cutlery, dragged a chair to the table, and elbowed my way in between Mary and Da.

“Still the same careful dresser, Nora.” Mary smoothed the wrinkled sleeve of my shirt.

“She was thrown out very early by some girl,” said Theresa. “We bumped into her around two. Poor Nora, never invited to stay all night.”

“Pot. Kettle.” I gave her my sweetest smile.

“Hey, that’s below the belt!”

“That’s enough now.” Mam whirled around from the cooker with what seemed to be an instantly cooked plate of food in her hand. “Leave Nora alone. At least let her eat her breakfast in peace.”

“What else will we talk about then?” Theresa’s sharp little face glowed with mischief.

“We ran into Fergal Flannery last night.” Declan looked up from his breakfast. “With a friend.”

Da glared across the table. “I hope this story ends with you getting the better of him, and no police involved.”

“It does,” said Theresa. “The friend ran off, and Dec thumped Fergal good. He ended up in a laurel bush in someone’s front garden. You should have seen his ugly mug emerging with half a hedge stuck in his hair.”

There was a roar of laughter. I laughed too, even as I noted Theresa’s slight rearrangement of events, making Dec out to be the hero.

“Nora wasn’t much help though.” Theresa shot me a sly look. “She reckoned we should let him be.”

I glared at her. “Dibber-dobber.”

“Well, that’s what you said.”

Da’s voice was flinty and cold. “So you don’t support your family, Nora? No doubt you’d let bygones be bygones, and you’d shake a Flannery by the hand and invite them along for a pint?”

“No.” I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “But this feud’s been going on forever, and I don’t see the point in stirring it. Surely it’s time to let it go?”

Da put down his knife and fork and turned to face me. “If one of the boys said that, I’d have them out the back, son or no son. But you’re my daughter, so I’ll cut you a little slack. Sixty years ago, Cormac Flannery betrayed Oisín Kelly. The two of them came from the same village in Sligo where their fathers had been friends and their fathers before them. Cormac and Oisín hitchhiked to Dublin together. They got the boat to Liverpool together. They worked on the building sites together, moved from Liverpool to London together. And then Cormac Flannery took the foreman’s job that should have been Oisín’s, and then Cormac sacked him. That’s not how mates behave. So Nora, you make a decision right now. Are you with us or against us? There’s no easy midpoint here.”

I was silent in the face of his vehemence. Like all my siblings, I could repeat that story word for word. It had been told to me as a scrappy wee child before I started school. It had been repeated again and again whenever the Kelly kids had a fight with the Flannery kids in the playground. And it had been drummed into us as we got older. It was the one thing that could never be overlooked. The Flannerys and the Kellys were mortal enemies.

I’d lived away from home for seven years, and in that time, I’d rarely seen a Flannery. I moved in different circles now, and London was big enough that accidental meetings were rare. The meeting with Fergal last night was the first time I’d seen a Flannery in years. I’d moved on, forgotten what I considered to be an irrelevant bit of family history, just another tale of times gone by. But, I was learning, the rest of my family didn’t see

it that way. Declan and Theresa last night; Da this morning. I looked over at Mary, but she was eating steadily, playing no part in the conversation.

The feud didn't seem relevant to me anymore, but family was family, and I owed it to them to stand with them.

Da waited for my answer.

"I'm a Kelly," I said. "Of course I'm with you. Young Seánie had better watch out if he crosses my path."

In the laughter that followed, Brian was the only one who remained silent.

My affirmation broke the tension, and once again there was the clatter of cutlery and the hiss of the frying pan as Mam put on more bacon to satisfy the bottomless pits that were my family. Things were back on the rails.

"That's the excitement done for the morning," complained Theresa. "There's only football and politics left to talk about."

There was a silence. Then Mary put down her mug with a thump. "I've got news if anyone's interested. I've met someone."

"You're joking," Declan mumbled around a mouthful of toast. "Who'd have you?"

Mary glared at him. "Way to go, baby brother. Do you want to hear about him or not?"

"Of course we do, love." Da patted her hand. "And as long as he's employed and treats you nice—"

"Fertile," added Theresa.

"Lives nearby," said Mam.

"Arsenal supporter." This from Brian.

"And not a Flannery," chorused Declan and myself, "then you can have him."

"His name's Liam Muldoon. He's from Kilkenny, lives in Shepherds Bush, works in insurance, and he supports Chelsea—"

CHEYENNE BLUE

A snort from Brian.

“—and I’m not putting the fertile part to the test for a while, if ever.”

Mam crossed herself. Even the thought of sex for recreation not procreation had her in a tizzy.

“And he loves me.” Mary—my pragmatic and practical sister—looked positively gooey-eyed.

Brian nudged me. “She’s blushing.”

And indeed she was. I opened my mouth to continue the teasing, but Mary looked me full in the face. “Laugh all you want,” she said. “Especially you, Nora. But when love hits, and it will, it’ll come with a wallop when you least expect it. You’ll be in the pub, in the takeaway, locking eyes with a stranger on the tube, and there’ll be strange feeling in your belly—”

“And you’ll think ‘I knew I shouldn’t have had the Vindaloo,’” muttered Brian.

Mary ignored him. There was an intensity to her words, a conviction. It reverberated in her low voice; it shone with zealotry from her pale eyes. Her stillness made me uncomfortable, and I fidgeted in my seat before I broke eye contact to reach for the ketchup.

“—and you’ll know that this is it. This is the one for you.” There was a silence, and then we all started clattering the cutlery once more. But I saw Mam squeeze Mary’s hand in solidarity.

Yeah, right, I thought. Love like that is for the Marys of the world—good, kind, solid, heterosexual sort of people. Not for me. And long may that last.



CHAPTER 2

THE PUB WAS DARK, ONE of those little backstreet places so dimly lit you could hardly see the level of liquid in your glass. It had cozy nooks like they have in Ireland, which are perfect for private conversation. My friend Sue and I were out for wine, a chat, and to complain about our former lovers. Sue was nursing a not-quite-broken heart; mine was more a dented ego, but we both felt the need to vent.

This particular pub was not one of our usual haunts—not the rowdy dive that Sue preferred where inked and muscled blokes strutted around the bar, and not the dyke pub with pool tables that was my favorite spot.

My bruised ego was because my friend-with-benefits had stopped returning my calls. I guessed she'd seen me leave the club with Gigi last week and had stomped off in a huff. It had happened before, but Tash and I had no arrangement past hooking up for an enjoyable few hours every so often, and in the past, I'd always been able to talk her 'round. Not this time though. We weren't "girlfriends." At least I didn't think so. Maybe, I was learning, Tash did.

Sue's boyfriend of three months, Leo, had told her he wanted to see other women. Sue was an indignant mix of anger and woe. Only the other week she'd told me it might be love.

Now her confidence was in the toes of her knee-high leather boots, and wounded pride had her spitting bullets into her red wine.

“Leo invited me to the opening of his exhibition,” she said. “Tiny paper cups of cheap wine, soggy samosas, and arty types discussing the hidden symbolism in his paintings. I was his date. I thought that counted for something. I hung around in a drafty gallery talking about brushwork and the reflection of light.” She snorted. “Two hours of my life I won’t get back.”

Last week she’d been starry eyed about his paintings and his prodigious talent with a brush—and in bed. It didn’t seem fair to remind her of that.

We settled in for some deep-and-meaningful conversation, the sort that involved fixing the troubles in our lives and workplaces. Occasionally during chats like this, when we were sufficiently lubricated, we even came up with a workable solution for world peace.

I was at the bar getting the next round when *she* walked in. Medium height, curvy build, and looking damn fine in tight, dark jeans and a white gypsy shirt with lacing down the front. It was her hair that made me look twice. It was the richest auburn and fell in bouncing curls nearly to her waist in a wild, untamed cloud. Her skin was creamy and dusted with freckles, like caramel drops on milk. She paused in the doorway and looked around as if she was meeting someone. Her gaze passed over me, paused, and snapped back. For a fractured instant, our gazes met across the bar, and in a strange and wonderful moment, I saw my past and present and future in her eyes. She took a step into the room, and for a wild and glorious second, I thought she felt it too, that she was moving toward me.

I took a pace in her direction. The noise of the bar faded to a muted buzz, and the only thing that mattered was her eyes

and how they made me feel. But then the barman returned and put down the wine, and his request for money was loud enough to knock me out of my trance.

As I fumbled for cash, my mystery woman waved to someone outside my line of sight and moved away to a corner. Although I looked, I couldn't see whom she was meeting. My gaze followed the hole she left in the room. A surge of lust arrowed down to my pussy, but there was something else as well. I had a curiosity about her. It wasn't just the hair, which was a wondrous thing in itself, or her intense eyes that had trapped me in their gaze. It was the way she carried herself with a quiet confidence. I wondered what her name was and where she lived. I wanted to get to know her. And too, there was a tug at the back of my mind, a blur of memory, as if she were every fantasy I'd ever had, as if hers was the shadowy face I'd seen in my head when I was still a believer in True Love. Her body was the shape I'd seen as a teenager when my fingers learned the route to my clit. She was the wisps of smoke and memory that haunted my dreams.

I realized I was clenching the glass so hard my knuckles were white. I dragged in a deep breath, returned to the nook where Sue waited, and thumped the wine glasses down on the scarred table. "I've just seen my future wife," I said to Sue. "I want to woo her, date her, and live with her. In a couple of years, I'll send you a wedding invitation."

Sue peered at me over the top of her specs. Such romantic declarations were not my usual style. She was used to me playing fast and loose with lesbians, bisexuals, the bi-curious, and even straight women when I was sufficiently tempting to pull one in for the night. Sue took a hefty gulp of wine, and then seeing my faraway expression, took an equally enormous gulp of mine. "Who?"

“Over there.” I gestured toward the far end of the bar. “She went that way. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Sue twisted around to see where I was pointing, but the crowd was thick. “Beautiful? That’s okay then; you’re in lust, same as usual. You’ll get over it.”

“No,” I started to say, bursting with the need to tell Sue about my epiphany. “It’s—”

But she finished her wine in big mouthfuls and stood. “I’m off. I’ll leave you to your hunting.”

“But I’ve just bought wine.”

She smirked and held up her phone. “Leo texted while you were at the bar. He wants to talk, and I am so going to make him pay for what he said.” She bent and kissed my cheek. “But I’m not going to waste a glass of plonk.” She scooped up my wine, squeezed my shoulder, and then she was gone.

I was left alone with an empty glass and a burning need to find out more about the red-headed woman. I didn’t begrudge Sue her opportunity—indeed, it allowed me to make my own pursuit. I headed back to the bar.

“Same again?” the barman asked, and I nodded. Now armed with two glasses of shiraz, I went in search of the woman who’d captured my attention so fiercely.

She was sitting in one of the high-backed booths, talking to another woman. There were papers that looked like spreadsheets covering the table, and her companion was checking a column of figures. Then she stabbed a finger at a different part of the sheet, and the two of them bent to study it. It looked like a work meeting, although why anyone would have a work meeting in a busy pub was beyond me.

I waited, propped against the bar opposite and sipped my wine. My patience was rewarded when the other woman

gathered the papers, slipped them into a satchel, and slung it over her shoulder. Both women stood, hugged briefly, and the other woman left.

My beautiful redhead had been the subject of admiring glances from men and women in the bar, so I didn't waste any time. I slipped into the booth and sat opposite her. The seat was still warm. I put the second untouched wine on the table.

"My friend had to leave in a hurry," I said. "Will you share a glass of wine with me?"

She looked up, and our eyes met. There was an amused half smile on her face—clearly she was used to clumsy pickup lines. Close up, she was even more breathtaking. Her skin had a creamy clarity that was usually only brought about by clever use of Photoshop, her eyes were a deep, sea green, and that wild mane shimmered and danced. I held her gaze, wondering if she was going to respond to my invitation or—heaven forbid—if she was straight. She'd probably cut me dead if so. But then she smiled, and I knew even if she wasn't gay, she was at least prepared to consider the idea.

"That's not a very original pickup line, and your own glass is nearly empty. Do you mean for us to share the full one?"

"After you." I gestured to the glass. She picked it up and narrowed her eyes wickedly at me over the rim. The sip she took left a smear of clear lip-gloss on the edge.

When she set the glass down, I captured it and our fingers brushed in the lightest of touches. Deliberately, I set my lips to the exact place where hers had been.

She watched me drink and then took the glass from my hand before it could reach the table. Her fingers were warm against mine for the briefest moment before I relinquished the glass. She turned the glass until she could again drink from the same spot.

CHEYENNE BLUE

I tried to take a deep breath, to maintain my calm and collected image, but it was impossible. She flashed a quick glance at me through lowered lashes as she drank, and when she put down the glass, her quick smile stole what air I had left. She was definitely flirting, and I was breathing as fast as if I'd sprinted for the train.

With any other woman in this situation, I would've moved around the table, sat next to her, close enough to touch, to flirt with the brush of fingertips, close enough to rest a hand on her thigh. Close enough to let the tension build between us until there was only one possible explosive outcome. But I didn't. I stayed in my seat, my heart pounding as I watched her assess me.

Her gaze raked over me, checking out my hair pulled back in a ponytail, my pale-green T-shirt, and dark jacket. She must have liked what she saw, because she said, "I'm Ger. Short for Geraldine. Blame my Irish roots for that one."

"I'm Nora. Blame my Irish roots as well." The glass was empty. "Can I buy you another drink?" I asked. "A whole glass, all to yourself?"

Her eyes crinkled in amusement. "What will you do if I say no?"

If she had been any other woman, I would have taken that as a cue to push forward. "But you won't say no," I would have said, and I would have moved closer, picked up her hand, and made a longer skin to skin touch. But I hesitated, remembering the gut-crunch of my initial reaction. If I was right, if Geraldine was someone for more than a night of my life, then my practiced patter was out of place. If she was special, then I wanted to treat her in a way different from usual. Not as just another pickup.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I'm hoping you won't. One glass of wine, Geraldine, and then if you want me to go, I will."

NEVER-TIED NORA

“It’s early. My work meeting took a lot less time than I anticipated. I’d like that, Nora. After all, wine drunk alone doesn’t taste as good.”

My smile was wide and unrestrained. “Same again?”

“Indeed. Red wine and conversation. It’s what I like the best.”

I slid out of the nook and went to the bar, returning in record time. Geraldine was sitting exactly as I’d left her. Once again, I slid in opposite so that I could see her face and watch her reactions.

There was silence for a moment. I didn’t want to slip into my routine, into my chat-up lines and moves of seduction. But I found I didn’t immediately know what to say. I wasn’t usually at a loss for words, but I’d never been in this exact situation before. Ger, too, was silent. Maybe she was waiting for me to speak, to assess my intentions.

“I saw you walk in,” I said, “and then I watched you from the bar. It was obviously a work meeting. And I thought ‘what eejit has a work meeting in a busy pub?’ Are you some sort of pub mystery shopper?” I smiled to highlight the humor in my words.

Geraldine grinned. “My colleague has a baby and works from home. She told me she was desperate to be somewhere where there were no rattles, pureed carrots, or nappies, so she suggested meeting here.”

“And is this your usual pub?” If it was, I resolved to make it my mine as well.

“No. I only came to meet Jean. Have I walked into your local?”

“This is the first time I’ve come here as well. My friend, Sue, suggested it because she wanted to try the Korean

restaurant around the corner. But she got lucky with her ex and abandoned me.”

“So I’m saving your evening?” Her eyes crinkled again, in a way that made it obvious she wasn’t put out.

“You’re making it, Ger. I think you’ve just made my week.”

“Wait until I start boring you with talk of my model train collection. That’s the point most people suddenly remember they have to be at their granny’s for dinner.”

I silently blessed Brian’s geeky, anorak stage in his teens. “OO or HO gauge?”

Her suddenly frozen expression had me laughing. “I bet you didn’t expect anyone to actually know something about model trains. When my older brother was about ten, he had this mad train set that ran around his bedroom and out onto the landing. The track was on a ledge at head height, and he used to love booby-trapping people as they came up the stairs. He’d line up one of the engines and then accelerate it so that it was going too fast to make the corner by the hot press. It would shoot off the rails and hit them on the side of the head.”

Ger nodded. “It’s all great fun until someone loses an eye.”

“That didn’t happen. But there were a few close calls.”

“Does he still have it?”

“He’s nearly thirty now and his tastes have finally matured. His new obsession is Arsenal Football Club.”

“Is that yours too?”

I shrugged. “I guess. Tennis is more my sport.”

She leaned forward, and her fingers lightly tapped the back of my hand. “If I had any doubts at all—which I don’t—that you’re trying to pick me up, that was the cincher. Do you watch for the shot making and the thrill of the game, or because of the fit women in short dresses?”

“The former of course.” I made my voice dignified. “I appreciate the finer points of a one-handed backhand, the smooth arc and power of an effortless serve, and the grace and beauty of Maria Sharapova’s endlessly long legs.”

“Hmmm.” Ger considered, her head on one side and that wild hair spilling over her face. She flicked it back. “Personally speaking, I think the game was the poorer when Amelie Mauresmo retired.”

“Martina Navratilova.”

“Casey Dellacqua’s still playing.”

If I’d still had the slightest doubt that Ger was into women, it was dispelled by the listing of the out tennis players in the game.

“Sue and I went to Wimbledon last year. She was determined to get Roger Federer’s autograph. At Wimbledon, the players walk around surrounded by this sort of security posse, which makes it hard to get close to them. So Sue wore these ridiculous high heels—and if you knew Sue, you’d realize she is totally not a high heel person. She complained and whined all day as she tottered around on those things. But then Federer came out with his security mob, and she rushed up to him along with about a hundred other people. She pretended to trip and went crashing through the security goons, arms flailing, and landed practically in Federer’s arms.”

“What did he do?”

“To give him credit, he didn’t sidestep or push her away. He caught her and set her back on those ridiculous heels. Sue was so starstruck, she didn’t ask for an autograph, but then the security person grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away. So she lunged forward, and gave Fed a huge smackeroo right on the lips. She was then pushed unceremoniously to one side by the security goons, but she didn’t care. Made her Wimbledon.”

“She sounds like a hoot, your friend.”

“She’s Australian. Must be something in the water down there. They’re all barking mad.”

There was a pause, during which Ger and I both sipped from our glasses. My heart pounded as if I’d faced off with Sharapova over three sets, and I’d barely touched my wine. Now that was unusual.

“What about you, Nora? Who would you like to kiss?”

Oh God. Right now, with Geraldine looking at me from across the table, lips slightly parted, hair wild and untamed around her face, there was only one answer. My mind spun away, and I imagined pressing my lips to hers, feeling the full curve of them soften and part under my own. But to speak the truth, to say that right now there was only one person in the world I wanted to kiss... Would I scare her away? But the way she was looking at me, her eyes luminous in the dim lighting, a trace of red wine in the corner of her mouth, urged me on.

“You, Geraldine. You’re the only person I want to kiss.”

She was silent, and the pub noise swelled around us—the clink of glasses, the braying laugh of a Hooray Henry, the slam of the door as someone entered or left. Her silence stretched long enough for me to worry I’d offended her, that somehow against all my gaydar and common sense, I’d read this wrong. But then she smiled, and there was that light touch on the back of my hand again.

“Keep a hold on that thought.”

Daringly, I picked up her hand, turned it over, and traced a figure eight on her palm. My touch was light, but she inhaled shakily, and her hand twitched in mine.

“I’m working on it.” My fingertip made another figure eight. It was also the infinity sign, I remembered, and for a second, I wondered if that was prophecy or coincidence.

NEVER-TIED NORA

Our gazes met, and her expression was open, vulnerable, and slightly wistful. Guard down, eyes wide and anticipatory with what I hoped was the promise of us. Then her expression turned warm. “Keep working on it. I’m looking forward to the results.”

My resolution to take this slow wavered, and I cursed the table between us. All of a sudden the pub was too loud, the distance between us too great. More distraction was needed. “Are you hungry? Sue and I had a booking at the Korean BBQ place around the corner.”

“My stomach is flapping. I skipped lunch.”

I stood and held out a hand to her, and was rewarded by her soft palm in mine. “Then let’s go.”

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BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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