

Seventeen

Valentine's Day Slips By

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. . . Jenny headed home and, before even unpacking, she called Kyle. He was detached, but agreed to get together with her for dinner the next evening. When he arrived to pick her up, he was cordial but cool. Over dinner, they kept the conversation light. Jenny was eager to resolve the tension between them. Much to her delight, after their meal, he suggested they return to his place to continue their conversation in private.

Kyle flipped the switch on the gas fireplace as soon as they arrived. They made themselves comfortable on pillows in front of the hearth.

"As much as I love you, Jenny, I just can't take the continuous rejection," he said once he had settled in. Winky was lying nearby, keeping a protective eye on them both. "I need close companionship. This whole ordeal of your being in Arizona with Mike has been more than I can handle."

"Kyle, I got so caught up in his fight for life that I went overboard. I know it. But when someone is dying, where do you draw the line?"

"Well, I admit that I might have the same problem," Kyle said. "You have pointed out, and you're right, that we are alike in so many ways. We're both gregarious, warm people, and others are easily drawn to us. And we both have a tendency to want to save the world."

Jenny nodded, recognizing that he had articulated one of the struggles she had lived with throughout her life.

"I think we'd both like more simplicity in our lives," he continued, "because, although we can handle more complexity than most people, the number and depth of our 'causes' sometimes becomes a greater burden than we can handle."

Kyle had obviously given a lot of thought to how he was going to say that to her. He wasn't evidencing any anger, either, and he wasn't putting her down. He was simply sharing his insights with her. With this tone prevailing, Jenny relaxed. Kyle had hit the crux of a significant part of their problem. With him owning it, he made it easier for her to own it, too.

"You're right," Jenny said. "Since my divorce from Matt, you know that I've had this concept of having an inner circle of friends. Somehow, in my vision of it, we would all get along, all be on a similar journey. Through our mutual support, we'd all be drawn

closer to God. I really believed it could work.”

“Maybe it could if we weren’t sexually involved. Somehow that changes the equation. But if I step out of the way . . .”

“Let’s keep exploring this with you in the picture. I love you, Kyle. Despite what I emailed, I’m not ready to give up on us.”

Kyle looked longingly at her. She held his gaze. “I do believe that,” he said. “But just when I’m convinced you’re willing to substantially ‘rearrange’ your life so we can grow closer, something comes up which confirms that you haven’t made any significant changes at all. I want to mean more to you than Mike, Jeff, or any man. Period.”

“I know you think they are more important to me than you are . . . but it isn’t true,” Jenny said. “It’s just that I’m on overload right now. I have more than my share of people who are depending on me. I don’t know how to take care of all of them and give our relationship priority as well. I am open to suggestions, sweetheart. Really, I am.”

Kyle could sense the sincerity in her voice. He believed that she truly did want to elevate his importance in her life, and she was asking a fair question. “Okay, here is one way. So far, you’ve been unwilling to give up your Sunday dinners with Mike and his friends. I’m not sure why they are so important to you. But you have to understand that it’s hard to justify socializing on that level with another man—I don’t care if he is a priest—when you and I have a committed relationship. Can you imagine any of the men we know in relationships dining out once a month with another woman or two and their significant partners not getting upset?”

“I hadn’t looked at it that way. I’ve been having dinner with Mike on Sundays long before you came into the picture. It never occurred to me that I should stop once I met you. I don’t know how to explain it, sweetheart. All I know is that I didn’t have a father growing up. I didn’t have a brother. I was raised only by women and by nuns. Other than my high school boyfriend, who played a critical role during those years, I didn’t have any men in my life at all. Except for priests. They were my male role models. They were wholesome, beautiful, spiritual men. So for me to be close to priests is as normal as you making friends with female lawyers.”

“But what about all of this from Mike’s perspective?” he asked, pressing the subject. “Why doesn’t he have the decency to back off?”

“I don’t want whatever I say next to turn into an argument. So if I say something difficult for you to hear, are you open to hearing it?” Jenny asked.

“You’re just going to look for ways to justify this whole thing, aren’t you, Jenny?”

“No. I’ve never been more eager to resolve this with you. And I want to figure out what my part is in this so I can fix it. But I’m going to give you some feedback that you need to hear if you are ever going to have a successful relationship with a woman—me or anyone else.”

Jenny gazed at the fire for a moment before she spoke. “When I first met Mike, it was I who was needy and he who was able to help me through the emotional down time I was experiencing with my divorce from Matt. He also shared a lot of personal things with me, and we even talked about how close we felt to each other. But talk was as far as it went, for both of us. There’s no question that Mike loves me deeply, but—”

“And that’s the problem. He’s a priest, for godsake. He is not supposed to love a woman.”

“He’s human, Kyle. Priests may take a vow of celibacy, but it doesn’t put a fence around their hearts. You know Mike was out of the priesthood for about ten years. I asked him why he didn’t get married while he was out. He told me that he missed preaching the Gospel, both in words and by his lifestyle. Mike is a good priest, Kyle. But that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have feelings. What matters is how he *acts* on those feelings. Mike has always remained true to his vows. He has never crossed that line and never would.”

“That’s really hard to swallow, Jenny. Maybe it’s because I’m a convert to Catholicism, but it just seems unbelievable.”

“This is the part that’s hard for me to tell you. Partly, it’s because of your . . . because of your mood swings and erratic behavior. Mike loves me and, I believe, truly wants what’s best for me. But your angry outbursts, your mood swings, your obsession with me, your need to control my every move, your always putting yourself first over me—Mike doesn’t want to see you hurt me. He’s concerned that, in my moment of need, you won’t be there for me. He is terrified that, in the end, I’ll one day be devastated by your behavior. Does he love me? Yes. Does he care deeply about my well-being? Yes. Does he enjoy my company? Yes. But at the very core of it, he is afraid that you won’t stand by me when I most need you. In part, I think he’s hung in so that he can be there to pick up the pieces when you abandon me.” Jenny stopped talking and took a deep breath.

His response both pleased and surprised Jenny. “Am I really that bad? Does he see me as some kind of monster out to destroy you?”

“No, and this is as hard for me to talk about as it is for you to hear. But you have some issues. I think you won’t deny that. With Harvey’s help, you are attempting to control the mood swings with medications. But sometimes your moods get away from you. One moment you respect Mike and are grateful to him. The next moment, you describe him as the most disdainful man on the face of the earth. Apart from his feelings for me—if you can separate that out—how do you feel about Mike? I mean, really? That’s what has prevented me from having you join me in caring for him. When you’re down on him, you are *consumed* with hate. He’s scared of your behavior. And, in those times, I’m scared to have you around him.”

“You’re right,” Kyle said. “This is hard. What I need is a woman to love who will love me back. She would go to work, come home, and have no other serious friendships in her life but me. Maybe I need to keep it that simple. I don’t know if I have what it takes to deal with all of this other stuff.”

“Okay, total honesty here. Do you think that part of the problem is that you are threatened by the way Mike loves me? I mean, look at this, sweetheart. You love me but want to control me. Mike cares about me but isn’t trying to be in charge of me. You’re critical of so many aspects of my life. He accepts me the way I am. You seem to love me when I make *you* happy. Mike seems to love me and want *me* to be happy. Maybe this is what the competitiveness is all about. From your side, it’s the fear that you can’t love me

as unconditionally as Mike does, and from his perspective, that he will lose precious time with me if I give in to your demands.”

Kyle was reflecting on Jenny’s words. After a minute, he responded. “Do you love Mike? I mean, do you love him the way you love me?” There was vulnerability in his voice as he asked the question.

“I love Mike. It’s obvious by my actions. We’re exceptionally close friends. But I’ve never been physically involved with him. Kyle, I’m *in* love with you, not Mike, and I keep growing more in love with you every day. I missed you terribly when we were apart. I want to blend my life with yours and, to do that, I am willing to make some adjustments—like my Sunday dinners. But I’m not willing to give up my friends entirely to have a life with you. Obviously, my friendships will change over time, but do you really want me to relinquish them all together? Most of all, I want you to trust me, to believe that I really do love you even when I’m not with you.”

“But when you’re with Mike or Jeff or Sherri or Kerry, you really love them, too. That’s the problem, Jenny. You give yourself so completely to whomever you’re with.”

“That’s me, Kyle. That’s who I am.”

“Maybe part of your bond with Mike is that he’s safe.”

“I do feel safe with Mike,” Jenny said. “I know he cares about me and would never abandon me.”

“Except for dying. Death is a form of abandonment.”

“I hadn’t thought about that. But you’re right,” Jenny acknowledged. “Even though it will not be his choice, I will experience abandonment when he dies. And even more so when Mom dies. There is no worse kind of pain for me. Fear of being abandoned goes so deep with me.”

“And with me, too. Josh and I were both abandoned by our parents, whoever they are.”

“So maybe you and I are too much alike to be able to complement each other’s needs.”

“Maybe that is the root of your bond with Mike,” Kyle said. “You trust him completely. With me, you feel vulnerable.”

“It’s true. You could leave me anytime your mood swings in that direction. Maybe I hold on to my inner circle because if I fall, I know they will catch me. But if I fall with you, I’m not sure you’ll be there. Maybe that’s why I hold back with you.”

“Would you have ever married me . . . I mean, if we worked out this trust issue?”

“It is a trust issue, isn’t it? On both our parts. You’re afraid that I’ll love others more than I love you. And I’m afraid that you’ll leave me. We love each other, but we haven’t learned to trust each other yet.”

“So what happens if we ever mastered both at one time?” Kyle asked.

“I still don’t know that I want to be married in the traditional sense again. You know how hard I worked at both my marriages. At this stage of my life, I’m just not sure that is what I want or need. I’ve told you how I feel. It all seemed simple before you came to matter so much to me.”

“Why? Do you think I’ve complicated it?”

“Ogod! Let me count the ways,” Jenny teased.

“Okay Ms. Browning,” Kyle mocked as he pulled Jenny closer.

“I love you so much, Kyle,” Jenny whispered.

“I love you too, sweet pea,” Kyle said as he squeezed her tighter.

“There are so many reasons why we should go our separate ways. But do you understand why it’s hard for me to let go of you?”

“Because I’m so handsome and even-tempered and understanding . . . and steady in your life?” Kyle grinned.

Jenny poked him in the ribs. “I wish!” Winky perked up to join in. He licked Kyle’s face, then Jenny’s, and settled back down in front of the fire.

“Seriously, Kyle, I trust in our ability to grow together. There aren’t many men out there like you. Even though we may not be where we should be yet, I believe in our ability to get there eventually.”

“You’ve already helped me grow,” Kyle said. “I’m a Catholic now, for starters. And you got me through one of the worst depressions I’ve ever known. But your need to be so emotionally involved with other people won’t change, Jenny. And I can’t go through the same unhealthy cycle with you again. I secretly suspected we’d pick up as usual when you returned home. And I knew we’d fall right back into our old habits until the next time. But the truth is, I do want marriage and everything it entails. We are just two people hopelessly in love but destined to walk different paths.”

Jenny started to cry. She was exhausted from all that she had been through in Mike’s fight for life. She was distressed at seeing her mother and facing serious doubts about her winning her fight for life. Kyle held her as her tears turned into sobs.

“I feel a bright spot in my heart for all the wonderful experiences we’ve shared,” Kyle whispered. “No one has ever made me happier. I have no regrets and neither should you. I want us to be at peace with each other.”

His seeming detachment from her made Jenny want him more. Hearing him confirm their breakup devastated her. She couldn’t meet his eyes, nor could she speak.