

From the Vampire Diaries: An Untold Tale

Matt & Elena: Tenth Date

On Wickery Pond

“You know what this is?” Elena had greeted Matt, for once without the cheerleading squad of girlfriends on the second story. They were planning to see a horror movie at Fell’s Church’s one working theater and then have dinner at a small Italian restaurant in Ridgemont.

“What?” Matt had asked, feeling stupid staring as he was at Elena’s golden beauty as she came down the stairs, this time dressed in an slim pearl-white sheath, with an oversized black velvet belt showing just how small her waist was, and a black velvet ribbon around her slender throat.

“Uh . . .” Matt tried to remember if there was some holiday coming up, or some dance he’d forgotten to ask her to.

“It’s our anniversary, silly! It’s our two-month, official tenth date anniversary.”

“*Almost* two months,” Matt had said as Elena had put on an ivory coat with faux fur—it looked real, but she’d confided to Matt that it wasn’t—at the cuffs and collar. He knew how long it had been to the day

and minute, because he had been thinking about Elena nonstop ever since then. He thought about her even when he was supposed to be thinking about something else. His football coach was disgusted with him, but all the guys on the team were green with envy. Elena and Matt were formally together.

“Our tenth—oh, no!” Matt slapped his forehead. “I swear, Elena, I swear, I bought this little pearl ring for you—we can go to my house and—
whoa—!”

“Shhh.” Elena silenced him most expediently—by kissing him. It was a beautiful soft, chaste kiss, which branded Matt’s lips like fire. Elena was so light and delicate—almost fragile-feeling in his arms. But warm, definitely warm. “Don’t say a word about rings, especially where Aunt Judith can hear you,” she whispered into Matt’s ear, which gave rise to such pleasant sensations that Matt could hardly follow what she was saying. But he’d managed to nod, and to say hello to Aunt Judith as she came from the kitchen, and then sweep his treasure out into the cold late-fall evening.

“And I don’t care about rings, silly,” Elena had said when they had driven a few blocks away from her house and she’d given him a dizzying kiss or two. “I just want you to know that this is an important day.”

She said it so adorably earnestly, looking at him with those lapis lazuli eyes under their ridiculously thick lashes, that Matt wished he could haul her over the central console of the car and kiss her hard. But if he had learned one thing about Elena Gilbert, it was that kisses weren’t

things to be casually snatched up, not even if they were a couple. Elena could turn into an Ice Princess in an instant if a kiss wasn't her idea. Matt thought that she might have some cat in her heritage, somewhere way back.

"Did you bring Uncle Joe?" Elena asked, solemnly, as she always did when they went somewhere, even to Warm Springs with a picnic lunch.

"Of course," Matt said, as he always did, and at a stoplight he showed her his wallet with the precious hundred dollar bill in it, and Elena said "Hello, Uncle Joe," as seriously as if she saw his face instead of Benjamin Franklin's there. She also opened her tiny black velvet purse and showed him what she always carried since their first date: her aunt's Visa card.

This time, as on the last eight formal dates they'd been on, there was no need to resort to either extremity, but as always, Matt had the feeling that Uncle Joe was somehow with him, sometimes criticizing, sometimes cheering for him. Since good old Uncle Joe hadn't been able to hang on to even one of his three wives, Matt had decided that this was a bad fantasy and tried very hard not to listen to Uncle Joe's whiskey-and-tobacco-hoarse voice.

The real-life horror of that date began as Matt was driving Elena back home, hands carefully positioned on the steering wheel at the ten o'clock and two o'clock positions. He couldn't help but feel dizzy inside every time Elena touched his arm. Outside, it was freezing, but the Garbage Heap was flooding them with hot air from below, so Elena's pretty toes couldn't be too cold.

They were chatting aimlessly. Ever since their first date Matt had found Elena amazingly easy to talk to. They talked about things happening in the world, in Fell's Church, and as they grew steadily more fond of each other, about things closer to their hearts. Like about their childhoods and how they had really known each other for years, although they had never *known* each other. Elena admitted that she had tried cigarettes years ago, but to Matt's relief added that the first one had made her so dizzy that she'd fallen down and so nauseated that she'd almost thrown up. And, to Matt's even greater relief, the rumors that were flying all around school that Elena Gilbert had tried *everything*, everything legal or illegal in this part of the world, looking for kicks, were completely unfounded. She hated the taste of alcohol, so at social drinking affairs she could be usually seen drinking a rum and coke—sans rum. She would never go near drugs, she said, because of a cousin of hers that had died when she was only fourteen.

"I cried so hard at the funeral service that they had to take me outside the church," she said. "Breanna had so much to live for. Why did she even start drugs in the first place?"

"I don't know," Matt said, feeling grim. "To fit in, maybe. There's a fair number of jocks that aren't clean, either." He used the derogatory term lightly—as a jock himself. "They drink vodka from thermoses in the locker room. It's a wonder we don't lose half our games—*hey!*" He interrupted himself. "Did you see that? There's some people out on Wickery Pond."

“*On* it? Skating? This early?” Elena turned almost completely around to see the pond, which might better have been named Wickery Puddle, because it was such a small pool off Drowning Creek and froze over so early and easily. But the water was deeper than most people thought. Matt could remember being young and stupid and sliding and skating on the pond, too, a month ahead of the real skating season. Matt also remembered his mother’s story of a girl who had died there before he was born. The barely-there ice had cracked under her gliding skates, and had taken three of her friends in the water, too. The rescuers had only managed to get the three friends out. There was even a ghost story about how the girl lived under the pond, seizing the feet of anyone who broke ice over even the shallowest water, and pulling them down, down, down . . .

“Matt, turn the car around.” Suddenly Elena sounded neither like a sweet Southern angel or an indifferent Ice Princess. This was the Elena who always ended up chairing the Robert E. Lee High events committees. It was the voice of authority, and as usual, Matt found his muscles reacting before he had quite grasped what he was doing.

“You’re—you’re not going to try to talk to them?” he asked, feeling spaghetti turn to lead in his stomach. “They’re just bratty elementary school kids. They’ll laugh—”

“Not at me,” Elena said quietly. She didn’t sound embarrassed—and she didn’t sound coy. She was just making a statement.

And Matt suddenly sucked in a deep breath as he realized that it was true. He’d heard girls scream at Elena, with tears and mascara and

everything else running down their faces; he'd seen boys huddled in hushed bunches listening to the proud Prom King of the year bragging about his "night with *the* girl," but he'd never heard anyone laugh at her, even behind her back.

I wonder how the world looks when you're Elena Gilbert, he thought suddenly thinking back on their relationship. Different than it looks for the rest of us, I'm sure. It must feel like having a ticker-tape parade for you all the time. A nonstop party, with the spotlight always on you.

Then he slapped himself mentally. He knew none of that was true—not inside Elena's mind. He knew it as well as if he'd taken a microscope to her brain and examined and analyzed all the thoughts and feelings there.

Elena knows it—how could she not know it? She knows she's the girl all the boys want and all the girls want to be. She even uses it. She's using it right now. But she's—using it for a *good* reason. Not to hurt anyone.

Satisfied with his conclusion, Matt turned off the headlights and he coasted onto dirt as they drew near the pond. He didn't want hysterical kids thinking that parents and police had spotted them, and making a frantic dash for the edge of the pond, without even looking to see where they were going.

Then, with a last glance at Elena in the dim interior of the car, Matt quietly opened his door, just as she quietly opened hers. The Junk Heap

didn't have such luxuries as an interior light that automatically went on when you did this, and that was *good* . . . tonight.

Elena had already taken off her fur-trimmed coat and thrown it in the car. He shrugged out of his heavy overcoat and out of his dinner jacket as well. They were going to need some warm, dry clothes if a kid went into the water—even at the very edge of the pond, Matt thought. Anyway they themselves were too agitated to be cold . . . yet.

“Put this and your wallet in the glove compartment,” Elena said softly, handing him her aunt's credit card. Then she was moving stealthily toward the pond, actually more quietly than Matt would have believed a person could walk in heels. His initial reaction was involuntary: a sort of swooping disappointment that his extraordinary girlfriend would think about *money* at a time like this.

“We don't want to lose Uncle Joe twice,” she added, just as softly, and Matt felt something inside his chest turn over and his spirits bounced and went swooping back up again. It was something in the—the nurturing way—that she said it, as if old Uncle Joe were still here, as if she understood the reason why Matt had once worn the same coat for two winters, even when it had pinched under the arms, rather than spend Uncle Joe's hundred.

Elena was still moving silently toward the pond, almost floating, not rustling a leaf. Matt looked down and got a shock when he saw why. She'd left her high-heeled shoes back in the car.

“You’ll free—! Freeze,” he said, changing his volume in mid-sentence from an exclamation to a whisper in reaction to a sharp motion of her hand. Jeez, she’s really got me trained, he thought, not really minding being tamed by this sweet, surprising, soft-eyed firebrand of a girl.

“But you can’t walk in bare feet on that ice,” he added, still whispering, but following her and wishing that he could avoid dried leaves and twigs the way her pale feet did, apparently without her even glancing at them.

“I’m not going to walk around the pond,” she replied in a soft little voice like a lazy bumblebee hum. “I’m going to walk *on* the pond. And I have nylons on—quite thick ones, as nylons go. They’re really almost tights, but translucent; I get them from a special place online.”

Matt tried to believe he understood all of this, but the one thought that really went through his head was, *She pays attention to every detail because she can’t stand for herself to be less than perfect. And she wants that same perfection from me, too.* And strangely the thought only buoyed his spirits up farther. Because Elena’s standards were high, but the person she’d picked to go steady with had to meet those standards.

But as for the pond-walking nonsense, well, Matt would put a stop to that, he decided. And as he decided this, he had no idea that this thought was going to go down in history as the first time he’d thought of trying to talk Elena out of a scheme.

“Elena, *I’m* wearing shoes,” he started, murmuring as she was doing.

“I know. I can hear them very clearly,” Elena said, but in her sweet little hum it sounded like the kind of nonsense traded by happy couples.

“I mean, I can walk on the ice and—”

“And probably fall right through, you great big football star.”

“Actually, I’m the most compact guy on the team—”

“I’m going to break a lifetime’s habit and tell you my weight,” Elena said, and she did, whispering it into his ear. Then she added, “I look taller than I am because I hang out with that munchkin Bonnie. Now, which of us is going to fall through that ice first?”

Matt couldn’t think of a thing to say. Not one.

“Thank you,” Elena murmured, somehow putting sunshine into the hum. Then she shook her head. “Look.”

The had reached the edge of the pond. The ice was mushy here, with dark water clearly showing through the crumbling chunks. Matt was cold now, but he was damned if he was going to leave those stupid kids out there on the pond and maybe have one of the fall into the water and be drowned.

Matt poked at the mushy ice with a stick. “Can’t get onto the pond here. We’ll have to walk around testing.” He tried not to shiver, tried not to think how cold Elena’s poor feet must be. He comforted himself with a vision of wrapping them in a blanket in front of a fire, while his mom made raspberry-chocolate cocoa for everyone.

They followed the contour of the pond, walking on leaves that now ripped soggly underfoot, sticking to his shoes, and sticks too sodden to

crackle underfoot, until Elena, tapping with her stick in front of them, stopped and put fingers to her lips.

“Good ice,” she whispered.

“Okay, what—”

“I’ll just try Plan A, okay? If it doesn’t work I’ll tell you Plan B.”

Matt was too dumbfounded to feel that his masculinity was being threatened. It was true that he’d never gone with such a takeover girl before. But the way Elena looked in the moonlight, now that the full moon had risen high in the sky . . . well, it took all the fight out of him. She looked . . . the moonlight on her golden hair . . . the way it reflected back at him in her large pupils . . . the way her lashes cast shadows on her rose-petal skin . . . she couldn’t be an angel, she was too vibrant and alive. Maybe she was an enchantress. Maybe she was a water spirit. No question that she was magic.

Matt wanted to hug her just to give her some of his own body warmth—but that was the last thing he dared to suggest. And yet a thing inside him that had never awoken before was awake and rampaging. *Pick her up, idiot!* it was screaming. Carry her back to the car—you know the moves to keep her from hurting herself. And in case you haven’t gotten it yet, I’m your primal manhood, fed up with your wimpy, that’s right, your atrociously civilized wimpy behavior. If you don’t sling her across your shoulder right *now*, you cowardly, spineless, gutless reject from a sausage factory—

But he didn't swing the girl over his shoulder, and he knew he never would. Elena might be lighter in weight than he was, but *she* had a spine of armored tungsten or something. And besides, she would have a Plan C by now. She would weep. She would tremble. And then when she'd got him distracted, she would *run*, putting herself into far graver danger than if she simply picked her way across the thin veneer of ice over the dark pond as she was doing now.

Matt didn't know why he could read her, but somehow, after ten dates he could. After all this time, he felt as if Elena were somebody he'd known all his life—somebody who'd shared her life with him, or that maybe even sometime a long time ago they had been part of each other.

And besides all that, very simply, she was too *smart* for him. No matter what the subject was, Elena was swifter at finding a snappy answer.

They were closing in on five reckless little figures. The moonlight was bright. In a minute they were going to be seen—

"Hi there," Elena called, and somehow, to Matt's amazement, she kept her teeth from chattering. "Wow, what a great night for skating."

There was a moment of pandemonium and Matt thought one of the little figures would surely go down. But then everyone suddenly stopped, staring. Three little boy-faces and two little girl-faces were turned toward them, in awe.

"Are you—ghosts?" one boy asked, looking more intrigued than scared. Well, that made sense or he wouldn't be out here risking his life in the first place, Matt thought grimly. And Elena, in her slim pearl-white

sheath, with her drift of hair silvery-gold in the moonlight, barefoot in winter, did look as she might have been a ghost.

Elena laughed a sweet little, oh-so-non-threatening laugh. And then Matt saw why somebody had once said that you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Although what anybody would want with the amount of flies you could catch with honey was beyond him.

“Don’t *any* of you know me?” Elena asked, as if she were princess of the realm of Fell’s Church and they were peasants who’d never seen royalty before.

One of the girls spoke in a whisper. “You’re . . . Elena.” As if Elena were a pop star that everyone knew by only their first name.

“That’s right,” Elena said. She was pacing a little, never toward the children, but never too far away. Suddenly Matt realized why. One danger of bare feet was that any scrap of residual warmth she might have would probably melt this ice—and if it didn’t, the ice would freeze her solid in place. She gave a little twirl to show off the dress. “We just got back from a date. What do you think of *that*?”

Two little boys snickered and nudged each other. Two little girls stared with worshipful eyes. One little boy stepped forward and said, seriously, “*I’d* go out with you,” and then hid behind one of his companions.

“Well, we’re having an adventure together,” Elena said without haste. “Isn’t the moonlight beautiful tonight?”

Three heads and two little hoods nodded, five pairs of eyes staring up at the moon. “My brother Josh *said* it would be pretty in the moonlight,”

one of the little girls offered, and one of the boys blushed crimson. The moon was bright enough to show that, Matt thought, awed. He realized that he hadn't said a word so far, and decided it was better that way. Elena was charming them as if they were five identical cobras coming out of five identical baskets, and he didn't want to break the spell.

"It's a wonderful adventure," Elena said. "The only problem"—she was still swiveling, but slowly, picking up her feet like a high spirited thoroughbred, Matt thought—"is that my feet are awfully cold. You don't have a blanket or anything I could wrap them in, do you?"

The I'd-go-out-with-you boy instantly pointed back at the bank. "We have some there."

And in a reverent whisper, one of the girls said, "*I'll* go get one for you."

Aha, Matt thought. It wasn't just admiration of Elena's delicate style. It was memory. Some days it seemed at Robert E. Lee that everybody was just either just getting finished with or just started running an errand for Elena Gilbert. Now Matt saw how she managed to arrange it. Or did he? She would use different methods with older kids, of course, but . . . he shook his head. It was as if Elena had as many facets as a diamond, and you thought you saw the *real* her every time a new facet flashed.

"*I'm* gonna get it," one of the bigger boys snapped with heavy fifth-grade authority. And here, Matt thought, we have the leader of these reckless roughnecks.

“Well, let’s all go get it, shall we?” Elena said merrily, tilting her head and gazing at the kids as if she just adored children whose snout was freezing on their small red faces. As if she had finally found her true love . . . times five. It looked so far from being an act that Matt wondered if Elena herself realized she was playacting. Or . . . or . . . if she even *was* acting at all.

“Come on,” she said, reaching a hand out to the biggest boy, “Let’s be as quiet as we can and sneak up on the blankets so they don’t run away.”

This time everyone laughed. Even Matt. He couldn’t help it. Elena had just done a magnificent thing. And she’d made it look so effortless, when he could *see*—even if the young kids couldn’t—that she had every muscle locked against every other muscle to keep from shaking like a leaf in the bitter wind. He’d seen—he’d imagined he’d seen—the *real* Elena Gilbert on every date or get-together—and then he’d thought this was just a kiddy-version imposter—but now he wasn’t sure of anything except that she was the most beautiful thing under the moonlight on Wickery Pond.

“You slide and I’ll glide and we’ll both get there together,” Elena was saying merrily to the big boy, meanwhile somehow keeping enough distance between them not to stress the ice too much in any one area. “And Matt, you send the others, one by one. Won’t that be fun?”

There were giggles from the girls, and from one little boy. Elena made getting sent to shore sound like more fun than a carnival.

“Aw,” muttered the other boy, watching Elena disappear still hand in hand. “Josh gets everything.”

The boy who would date Elena in spite of highly infectious girl-cooties just sighed. The two girls were whispering about the pearl-colored sheath. “Like almost moonlight color, isn’t it?”

“Let’s all go,” the complaining boy said, but Matt, driven to speech for the first time, said, “Oh, no, you don’t. We’re playing Elena Says, and Elena didn’t say anything about you going over yet”—just as Elena’s sweet voice called out, “We made it! Who’s next?”

Figuring that the squeaky hinge should get to where the honey was soonest, Matt told the let’s-all-go-together boy, “See if you can sneak up on them from that way.” He pointed in the direction the ice looked strongest. “On your mark!” he snapped in his best imitation of his football coach. “Ready, set, GO!”

The complaining boy went off in high style, doing figure eights and S-curves—and Matt held his breath until a laughing Elena called out, “What is this, sexist chauvinism? Give me a girl!”

She’s saying everything she can to make them think of other things, Matt thought in awe. All the kids were snickering, giggling, or roaring with laughter, because “She said ‘sex,’” a girl snorted.

“I’d like to give her a girl—a baby girl,” whispered the mature-beyond-cooties boy, who had obviously fallen hard for Elena. I just hope he doesn’t wind up a pervert before he’s into his teens, Matt thought. To

one of the girls, identical except for a ponytail versus short hair, he said, “Okay, which is the first lucky girl?”

Short-hair held up her hand. “I’m Tesha! I’ll go,” just a beat before Ponytail said, “I have to go! I’m older.”

“Well, you’re a nice girl; you keep me company,” Matt said, automatically holding out a hand to Ponytail. “Tesha, let’s see if you can go where that last guy went, but *without showing off*,” he suggested and Short Hair nodded vigorously.

“All boys are show-offs,” Short Hair said firmly and then went in the direction of the last boy, but swiftly and without any figure-eights or other fancy footwork. And presently Elena called to say that Tesha was with her.

“Red Rover, Red Rover, now send *Lindie* over!” Elena called from the bank, still sounding in the highest of spirits. My God, what an end to our anniversary date, Matt thought.

“And I bet you’re Lindie,” he said to Ponytail, who nodded, impressed by his powers of clairvoyance. “Okay, off you go—try between the middle and where Tesha went this time,” he said.

Lindie squeezed his hand tightly—at least her little mittened fingers seemed to exert pressure on Matt’s numb bare hand, and then set off a bit clumsily—it could be that the ice was getting choppy there, Matt thought anxiously—or it could just be that Lindie was cold, or wasn’t such a good skater. Matt waited for Elena’s last call—

—and heard what he had been subconsciously expecting all the time. A great crack that sounded like a giant’s hammer on the ice and a

scream, almost immediately cut off, and then other screams echoing it, mixed with the sound of splashing.

She fell through! My God, she's in the water!

“Matt!” the words came in Elena’s voice just as the screams were suddenly hushed. Matt was wrestling with the no-cootie kid, keeping him from heading to Lindie. “*Matt! Don’t move! Stay where you are!*”—just as Matt was saying urgently to the last boy, “Stay right here! No—log-roll *that* way toward the bank.” All the kids in Fell’s Church knew about log-rolling over and over on their sides on thin ice. It spread out the pressure on the ice to the minimum and it could save your life—as long as you didn’t hit mush and go under.

The little boy, terrified, tumbled away like a log caught in a landslide. There were no more screams.

Then Matt deliberately disobeyed Elena’s edict and shouted “Lindie! I’m coming! Don’t thrash! *Float!*”—just in case Lindie could hear him—please, God, let her hear him!

Then Matt himself log-rolled in the direction that the little girl had gone. When he heard the thrashing get close enough he stopped and belly-crawled. He could reassure Lindie; tell her how long it would take her to actually drown or die of hypothermia, comfort her . . . as long as her head was up, he thought. Please God make her head be up!

And knew, as he thought it that it was all a lie. Matt had sent this little girl to her death; he was going to get her out. He was—even if he went in himself.

The splashing was deafening. Matt found himself staring into a nightmare hole in the ice, with black, agitated water all mixed with sharp ice chunks going up and down like blocks tumbling a in freezing washing machine. There was no sign of Lindie.

“She’s under,” a strange voice said and he realized it was Elena. She was looking at him from the opposite side of the hideous maw in the pond. She must have log-rolled here herself, over sharp ice, because her arms were bleeding from many deep scratches.

She’d come prepared, too—she had a long, sturdy stick with her for Lindie to grab onto . . . but there was no Lindie.

Furious, terrified, determined, Matt squirmed his way forward. He could feel solid ice under him—he thought— and he was now hovering right over the ice-toothed jaws of the hole. Shutting his ears to Elena’s horrified reaction, he plunged an arm into black water.

“Matt, no! **No!** I’ve sent the other kids for help—***don’t make things worse.***”

But somewhere inside Matt there was a mule-stubborn spot. I sent the kid in. Lindie. I sent Lindie in. *I have to get her out.*

He ignored the shock of icy agony that shot up his arm, a feeling that—like a burning flame—was a natural reaction of his body, of his limb, telling him “Get me *out* of here!” But you can’t play football and not know about ignoring pain. Matt gritted his teeth, making his arm swing back and forth in the icy water, hand clenching and unclenching, trying to keep some feeling in it, so he would know if he caught anything.

And then suddenly there was a tumult in the ice just beyond his reach, and two huge eyes stared out between hair that straggled like seaweed and a mouth opened into a scream of terror sucked in a breath.

And went down again, although Elena almost slid into the hole reaching for her.

But Matt was closer and Matt was determined and nothing on this earth was going to keep him from getting the kid. He plunged his arm down, feeling ice crack under his own chest, but reaching, reaching—
—until his fingers clenched on seaweed-hair.

Oh, God, he thought. Thank You for giving her a ponytail.

And Matt pulled. With all his strength, gripping the ice he was lying on with his other hand, Matt pulled up with his right arm. And then he reached down with his left arm too, ignoring the ice-shock, ignoring everything except that he had a grip on a two handfuls of hair. He pulled and he'd been pulling forever, and he was scared to see what came up, but he pulled and out of the paste of gray icewater came a girl's face and she sucked in another breath and she was *alive*. Lindie was alive.

After that, nothing could have stopped Matt from pulling the girl out. Nothing in the world. He got hold of Lindie's shoulders and he gave a tremendous heave and Lindie came back into the world, born for a second time, crying for her mother. Matt dropped spread-eagled on the ice and just let himself breathe, grateful that his arms were out of that water, and understanding why Lindie was sobbing.

Elena rolled to the place where the little girl was lying and held her and coaxed her and told her it was all over.

“Matt saved your life. It’s over now. You’re going to be fine. Your mom is going to come here—do you want to talk to her on the phone? I called her on my mobile because I found out your phone number from Josh. I’m pressing the redial button—okay, do you want me to hold it to your ear?”

“Mommy! Mommy! Mommy *I’m sorry!*” Deep, heart-wrenching sobs.

Matt gave the last ounce of his weight to the ice. He knew what was being said on the other side of the phone conversation, even though he couldn’t hear it. A frantic mother, probably called out of bed to hear that her daughter, instead of being cozily asleep, was out on the black ice of Wickery Pond. And now—to hear that she had fallen into the deadly dark water—that she might have been swept away by a current, with her face inches from the world of light and air, but kept from it forever—and now to hear Lindie’s voice, hear Lindie was unhurt—*and sorry* . . .

Matt grinned, although somehow even that hurt. And he was so cold and so wet. But it was time to get up, or roll up. He took a chance and lifted his head and shoulders, pushing with aching biceps.

And he felt it even as he saw it in Elena’s eyes and heard her scream.

“Matt! It’s crumb!—”

And then Matt did a forward somersault and was engulfed in darkness.

* * * * *

The cold shock. You always got it when you tumbled suddenly into icy water. It was the worst part, but what most people didn’t know was that it went away. After about two or three minutes it went away.

But you had to be able to live through those minutes. You couldn’t die of panic or heart attack. You couldn’t let the current drag you away if you’d fallen through one little hole, because then you lost all hope.

All light.

Elena meant light. He’d looked her name up after his first date with her. He even knew what her birthstone was: pearl. And she was wearing a seed-pearl bracelet that looked as if it had come from an ancient Grace Kelly film. Princess. Princess Grace.

Matt had no idea why he should think about it now. But he would lose the light and the pearl-sheathed light-bringer both if he didn’t keep his head.

And he was too tired to think.

“Never think in an emergency, kid, got it?”

That was what Uncle Joe had said, frail as a bird on his hospital bed, hands shaking, but with a gleam in his eye.

*“Think **before** the emergency, get it? Know the boy scout motto. Y’know the boy scout motto, kid?”*

“Be prepared.”

“That’s it. Y’ got it.” Scratching at the stubble on his chin, Uncle Joe nodded. *“I ain’t always been a model boy scout, okay, kid? But I was prepared. That time I went ice-fishing in Alaska, y’know. Well, first, I read this Book.”*

Uncle Joe didn’t read a lot, and you could hear the capitals when he said Book. Well, you could hear them in everything except the one most people would have capitalized. The Holy Book. The Bible. But Uncle Joe had been a lot of foreign places and had a religion of his own that he never really explained to anyone. Still, if it had a first holy precept it would have been: *“Be ye Prepared for Anything.”*

And then Uncle Joe had explained that when *he* had fallen into the freezing water, he had lost all sense of direction and had started swimming straight down. And he had remembered a passage in the Book, and how it had said “look for the light.”

“Look for the light, get it, kiddo? And I looked and”—as a nurse passed by—*“**durned** if I wasn’t backasswards.”*

Look for the light, Matt thought, realizing that even his thoughts were slow and dim. But how could moonlight ever reach him under water like this? Even the brightest moonlight . . .

Elena is the light.

Look for Elena, his increasingly slow thoughts told him. Look for her light.

At first it seemed that every way he looked, turning painfully while trying to stay in place, there was nothing but darkness. No light winked. But then when he looked back over his shoulder he seemed to see a faint glow.

It was very faint, in the blackest night that he had ever known. But he needed to breathe now. Whether it was the light of an earthly moon or the light that those people with near-death experiences described, it was what he was heading for.

Mat swam. With every muscle aching, and that girl who had died in Wickery Pond holding on to both of his feet, trying to pull him down with her, Matt made himself swim. He swam for his life.

And the dim glow blossomed like a flower, getting brighter and more silvery and there was still no air and he was going to gasp now, to take water into his lungs, and when he did, he was going to drown—
—and then something poked his shoulder.

It was a stick.

It was a stick. Elena's stick. And Matt had hold of it, pulling strongly, and somehow *he was being pulled up by it, too.*

There was someone else in the world and they were helping him!
Elena! Elena was pulling him home!

And then Matt broke through the surface of something like a giant sheet of glass and freezing air hit his face and then there was air rushing into his lungs, delicious, delicious air.

"Matt! Oh, Matt! Oh, thank God! Oh, dear God!"

Matt was thanking God, too, but in his mind because his body was busy breathing, which was the most wonderful exciting excruciating thing ever because he kept coughing up icy water, but the air that went in was better than one thousand cups of raspberry cocoa.

But then he felt his neck wobble and his head fell into the water, facedown. He couldn't even hold his head up on his own.

Hands pulled him up by the hair. Hands pulled up his arms, first one, then the other, to lie on the ice at the edge of the hole.

"Matt! Matthew Honeycutt! You look at me!" The voice was like a whiplash and Matt blinked and focused.

What he saw was the Princess Elena's face, but she didn't look much like a princess. There was a scratch on her forehead and dark tear-lines streaking her cheeks. She was blue-white with the cold and her teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Her golden hair was soaked, hanging in utter *dishabille* about her shoulders.

Jeez, she must have had some mascara on, Matt thought, knowing he was disoriented, but focusing on that bit of trivia anyway. Or maybe eyeliner, like those ancient Egyptians. I couldn't even tell before.

"Matthew Honeycutt," she said again, and this time with a sudden refocusing, Matt saw another facet of her. Her blue-white face seemed merely a trick of the light. The scratch was to show that she was no inhuman angel. The chattering teeth, the dripping hair were evidence of what this princess had endured on her journey to save life. And the dark tears were more like the adorable stains on the face of a child, tracks that

should be wiped away by a kindly hand or kissed by a mother smelling of cookies.

“Do you know who you are?” the princess in front of him said, and again, Matt glimpsed another facet, a nurse who had traveled many miles under abominable conditions to help a fighting soldier. Her professional aplomb couldn’t quite conceal a special interest in this one.

“Matt. I’m Matt,” he said. He looked at his arms, heavy even in shirtsleeves lying like two crooked white logs on the dirty ice. “Elena,” he added, getting the words out, with difficulty, “I have to . . . pull up now. Or else . . .” His head wobbled again on his neck. Somewhere, far away but perfectly audible, children were keening, crying.

“Liddy,” he said. “Ponytail girl. We got . . . her out?”

“Lindie,” Elena said sharply, the professional nurse at once. “Do you remember her?”

“She . . . squeezed my hand . . . then she fell through . . .”

“*You* got her out, Matt. You pulled her out safe and she’s still safe, and help is coming. Do you hear me? Help is coming. All the kids’ parents and the police.”

Dully, Matt could feel hands on his face. Elena was holding his head out of the water. She was pinching with sharp nails, but he felt . . . comfortably numb.

“I have to pull,” he said. It was all he could focus on. “Head and shoulders out of water.”

Elena nodded. Now the facet he saw was all confidence and helpfulness. “I’ll pull when you pull yourself,” she said. She gripped him under his arms. “After a three count? One, two, three, *pull!*”

Together, with all their strength, they pulled him up . . . about an inch.

“One, two, three, *pull!*”

They tried again . . . and again—four times in all.

And gained maybe another half inch.

The trouble was that Matt was too dense. And Elena was a strong girl, but the bitter chill of the wind, the walk on the pond, the “adventures” with the children, the saving of Lindie, and, finally, heaving Matt up this far had sapped her strength until Matt could she was fighting unconsciousness from cold herself.

And then the ice kept crumbling. Together, Elena and he were moving him, but only forward on increasingly mushy ice. God, at any moment the ice could break—and then Elena . . .

“Get up,” Matt told Elena, feeling surprisingly lucid. “Look, I’m gonna . . . say something . . . can’t even think of a way . . . t’make it less corny. Even Uncle Joe . . . didn’t have enough imagination . . .”

“Then tell Uncle Joe to shut up,” she said, and for a moment he was back at the hospital, angry with the sharp-tongued nurse, a guy who had always banged his cart against the waste container in Uncle Joe’s room just when Uncle Joe had fallen asleep.

“Matt?”

Elena's voice. Matt was back in reality. "We have t'say . . ."

"Tell Uncle Joe to shut up!"

"I can't. He won't . . . let me. Mom . . . I mean, 'Lena, no, Eh-leh-na," he pronounced it carefully with a tongue that felt too large. "You have to . . . get up. Get in shelter. You have to . . . to save your life. Save yourself." The corny line finally said, Matt shut his eyes, just for a moment, and the next thing he knew his face was in the water. Then sharp tongs were pulling it up. Sharp—fingernails.

"Matt! Stop being a jerk! You don't die of hypothermia this quickly. It feels bad, but *you don't die. You don't die.*"

But I'm in the water wearing only the remains of a shirt and trousers—if the current hasn't pulled them off, Matt thought to Elena. It was so much easier to just think things than it was to say them. And—I remember, Uncle Joe, yep, I got it: water chills you twenty-five times faster than air. So Elena has to get up. She's the one who has a chance.

He was so satisfied with this logic that he felt his eyes shut again.

"Save myself? So you want me to just leave you and save myself? And maybe *Lassie* will come save you? Or maybe ***Britches***? That's the stupidest name for a pet I ever heard. Laugh? I almost!"

Matt felt his face come out of the water. Someone was hurting Britches, the best old Labrador Retriever ever born—or dead. That did it. That made him mad.

"Caroline, you brat!" he heard himself say, and it wasn't just thinking it. He said it good and loud.

“Good,” a voice told him, but this voice was tender and firm, “I thought I’d lost you for a moment. Matt, I know it hurts to be in the water. But help should be here any minute. Any *minute*. Don’t give up now. I don’t know if I can hold you up much longer.” Elena was breathing hard, as if she were climbing a mountain. And Matt noticed that the hands holding his head up were trembling.

He giggled foolishly. There was something he should say, something he should insist on. But he’d forgotten it. Uncle Joe had become a positive personality tonight, even if he was dead as a doornail. Matt was looking to him for help, and he got it immediately. He shouted it triumphantly.

“Bubala bubala
Bubala bubala
Bubala bubala **BUM!**”

That was what Uncle Joe had always said, scratching his stubble, when he couldn’t remember what he had been talking about. It always gave him immense pleasure to see people’s reactions to it. Matt had told Elena the story on their second or third date and she had laughed hysterically. Now, dizzily, hazily, Matt opened his eyes to see who was there and what *they* thought of it, eh?

He saw a very beautiful girl, maybe some kind of snow girl. Her hair was wet and chunks of ice were frozen on it. She was looking at him with eyes that were dark blue, but the moon was shining full on her face and the moonlight showed that, splattered across the deep blue, there was

gold. Blue and gold eyes . . . should make green. But these eyes were like lapis lazuli. The golden speckles and splatters didn't mix with the blue.

"Elena Gilbert," he whispered.

The snow girl nodded weakly.

"Our anniversary date?"

Another weak nod.

"And this . . . is the end," Matt said. He meant just to slide out of her fingers and go under like that, but what she said next stopped him.

"No! You're not dying, like Uncle Joe was. You're just cold. You can take it. Besides . . . are you leaving this time without—kissing me goodnight?"

Matt felt some deep inner response. He should think about this, he realized suddenly and gravely. End their important tenth date without at least *trying* to kiss her?

"No boy's done that for years," she whispered sorrowfully. "And now you'd rather die than do it one more time?"

"No," Matt's whisper was husky and dry. He tried to put his tongue out to lick his lips, but he couldn't feel with his lips very well.

"Okay, then. *I'm* going to kiss *you*. But if you give up I won't be together with you."

She's keeping me listening, keeping me aware, Matt thought. Like I used to talk to Uncle Joe. He had so little time after they found the cancer—it had spread so far . . . I wanted every minute to be some special memory.

“O-kay,” Elena said, and there was a touch of the diva back in her voice as she spoke. “Now I’m going to put your hands under my armpits. That’s the warmest place I’ve got left. But I’m telling you, Matt Honeycutt, that if those hands try to feel their way down onto something lower and curvier that I’m going to *push* your head under water. Mm-kay?”

“Got it . . . boss-lady,” Matt said, half humble and half-laughing. “Sorry . . . I mean, ‘boss-woman’ . . . of *course*.”

“Of *course*,” Elena hummed. “But just ‘Boss’ will do.”

Meanwhile, she was stuffing his white, clawed hands under her armpits. Matt was amazed to feel a bit of life return to them, something that was not exactly warmth but the shadow of warmth. He could feel them unclaw.

Elena was gripping him by the elbows, keeping his hands in place. Slowly, Matt began to feel something else. Pins and needles, the agony of life coming back into lifeless flesh. He knew that his eyes and his nose were running, but he didn’t care. He was too grateful for this gift of pain that made him feel almost alive.

And certainly more alert.

“Do I still get a kiss?” he asked, giddily.

“Yes, but first we’re going to do a little wiper-oo.” Elena said. Keep your hands where they are—this will just take a second.”

She reached down and tore at one of the pearly bottom of her dress. The material ripped off easily and then Matt was having a face bath from a

cat's scratchy tongue. That was what it felt like. But that was good, too; it was good to feel his face, to know his skin was there.

"All better now. You look great," Elena announced in her sweetest drawl and Matt realized that he was going to be kissed by the most beautiful liar who'd ever walked the earth.

She pushed forward slowly, slowly, eyes shut but eyelashes flickering occasionally to refine her aim, lips indrawn to gather heat from her mouth. And then warm lips were touching Matt's, and he went straight to heaven, with no need to pass go or to collect a hundred dollar bill.

Elena Gilbert was kissing him for the last time.

Granted the circumstances were not ideal. Matt's lips were numb and what he felt of the kiss was simply a gentle, warm bumping. But suddenly he could smell again and Elena's perfume went to his head where it made him as dizzy as if he'd had a glass of champagne.

"Now then," Elena said, relaxing, lying on his arms, molding her slender self to him, "We can stay up a bit longer, can't we?"

"Yes," Matt said, with all the breath left in them.

His strength was gone. *Her* strength was gone. But Elena had something besides physical strength. She had a power of sheer will that went beyond physical strength, that rose above it. That power was what was holding them both up now.

Time lost meaning. Matt would feel himself resting—and then Elena's voice would call him back, or Elena's nails would prick his face

pulling at him, or—if he was lucky and hadn't slipped down too far, soft chilled lips would touch his.

It wasn't a bad way to go, he decided. Things had turned into a sort of loop so that sometimes he was dressing up to meet Elena for his first date with her, sometimes he was driving to her house, sometimes he heard the laughter of three lovely girls as they looked him up and down, demanding that he prove himself worthy. Sometimes they were in a restaurant, eating delicious hot, oh, hot hot chocolate soufflé along with hot coffee. Hot water sounded delicious to him right now. He could drink a bubble bath full.

It probably lasted no more than five or ten minutes. But it seemed . . . it *was* much, much longer, in *real* time, as counted by the number of dizzy thoughts that went through his head.

"Matt?" Every ten seconds or so Elena asked that, getting her strength from somewhere beyond his understanding. And every time she said "Matt?" he woke up a little to give back to her a "Yes." If he didn't do it right away, he would feel the dimmest of prickles on the sides of his face and he would know that Elena was using the last of her precious energy to try to lift him out of the water. So Matt stayed in a zone, where he could still say, "Yes," with lips as numb as if he'd just had a trip to the dentist, and lower body gone.

The noise started out in a roaring in his ears that sounded like a waterfall, and he had confused, icy black thoughts of going over the edge. Then he heard Elena's voice in a kind of whispered glad cry.

“Matt! They’re here! I told you they’d come. *Matt, they’re here!*”

Although Matt only half understood it at the time, it was the amateurs who had arrived first. The paramedics, the sheriffs, were still yet to come. But four sobbing children, all terrified to move from the bank of the pond, all huddled like puppies around a damp little girl in wet blankets, sharing their body warmth with her, told of the boy who had pulled Lindie out and had gone under, and of Elena Gilbert, *the* Elena Gilbert, who had pulled *him* out.

“*His* name is Matt,” one of the girls offered shyly.

And that was when Matt heard something other than the background roar.

“Matt Honeycutt!” a voice bawled from the side of the pond. “It’s Dr. Alpert, and I’m here to help you out.”

Matt turned watering eyes to see what the adults would do. They had an aluminum ladder, and that was good. That was a good improvisation for spreading weight around. And *now* they were unhitching the ladder, and *now* they were sliding it out toward him.

But he didn’t realize who was sliding on the ladder coming toward them until he saw white eyes and a white, grim smile glinting at him in darkness. Then, in the moonlight, he could make out the outlines of the old town doctor, not the clinic doctor, but the old-fashioned one who still made house calls.

“Well, now, well, now,” she said, taking his wrist in her dark- brown hand. “So this is what young people do for dates these days. Me, I’d stick to the movies and buttered popcorn of my day, I think.”

“We already did it tonight,” Elena said, in a croaking whisper.

Matt laughed, but only inside. Something in him was hurting because he could hear from Elena’s voice how much *she* hurt.

“Young folks will get into such shenanigans,” the doctor said, and suddenly Matt’s eyes were focusing on her in the moonlight and he was realizing that despite the cold, her forehead was covered with little sweat drops. She had passed a rope around him, and she was beginning to tie a knot.

For a moment there was only the sound of hard breathing, from both Matt and Elena. And then, almost simultaneously, they cried, “*No!*”

The doctor gave them a weak smile. “I never was much good at tying rope-sized knots,” she said. “Now, if this were a little suture—”

“Are there other grown-ups out there?” Matt gasped.

“Three of us, and would you believe, I’m the lightest?” The doctor wriggled her substantial hips. “That’s why they sent me out. They’re going to pull, once I tie this rope around you.”

”The knot—it has to be strong enough to hold him while they pull him through the ice,” Elena said forcefully. Matt had no idea where she got the force from and even less idea where she got the knowledge. Maybe she just knew everything. All he could do was whisper, “And if it tightens as they pull—my chest—”

Dr. Alpert was nodding already. “Your ribs,” she said worriedly. “Crack, crack.” Matt hated to admit to seeing concern on a grown-up’s face, but there it was.

“I wish I’d been a girl scout. They teach you how to light fires and tie knots and things. But when I was young, things were . . . well, different.” Dr. Alpert gave a rueful smile. She was still trying her best to tie a knot in the rope.

“Wish I’d been a girl scout . . .” A girl scout . . . A boy scout . . .

Matt gasped suddenly and forced himself to speak clearly. “What we need is a bowline. A bowline knot.” He pulled his hands out as Elena lifted herself up, but his fingers had clawed again. “I . . . can’t . . .” he realized and inside him there was a terrible crashing as all his hope fell into darkness, smashing down the entire way. He couldn’t use his hands . . .

“But you can tell her how,” Elena was saying, as if she could read his mind. Her eyes were fixed on his as if she could make the words come out by sheer will alone.

BUBALA BUBALA *BUM!*

For a moment, Matt was afraid he’d said it out loud. But the two others were still looking at him, with intense and hopeful speculation.

“To tie . . . a bowline knot . . . well, first take the rope off of me. Now, you make a loop . . . with plenty of rope left . . . on the right of it . . . more than that . . . more . . .” and on until he said, “Now you . . . can

lassoo . . . that big loop over me. It won't slip . . . it will only . . . swell in the water . . . and it won't break my chest."

Elena's cheer was loud enough to be heard by those on the edge of the pond, and Matt heard a shrill echo of applause.

Suddenly everything was moving fast again.

"All right, I'm sliding back," Dr Alpert said. "Elena, can you roll to the shore?"

"I have to," Elena said simply. "I will."

Matt had been looking back and forth, listening to this conversation. Now, as he looked Elena's way, he was bumped softly on the lips.

"See you on solid ground," Elena whispered, in a tiny whisper, just for him. And then she was rolling away in her pearl-white sheath, with her wet hair sticking icily to her back.

When Matt looked away he saw that the doctor had gone, too.

But now the ladder was being pulled. Matt thought he could help himself a little, by grabbing hold of the last rung, but his hands wouldn't stay closed around it.

He was all alone, and the shouting and cheering seemed far away.

Then he felt a tug on the rope. He tried to tug back, to show he was ready. He wrapped his arms around the rope, which was around his chest, under his arms. And *then* . . .

He was suddenly plowing through icy water breaking ice with his face, with his head, with his outstretched hands. And then somehow miraculously he was out of the water, sliding out as smoothly as a seal,

and coasting on good ice until he reached the edge of the pond. Then strong hands were pulling him out of the water entirely.

And then everything turned into a flurry. Someone was giving him a sippy cup, the kind kids drink out of, but there was coffee inside. Hot coffee. He heard a voice say, “Don’t let him burn himself,” and another answer, “It’s only lukewarm.” But it felt hot and he drank it in desperate gulps.

Some pioneer spirit had built a bonfire. Matt tried to stumble toward it and was caught by kindly calloused hands and led there. Elena was sitting by it already.

And she had changed again. By the look of her hair, she must have found somebody and borrowed a brush. Or found somebody to brush it for her, more likely, Matt thought entirely without prejudice— whoever it was, was one lucky chump. He himself would have happily brushed it for hours and let her charge him, on top of it. Charge him a hundred dollars.

He shook his head at such thoughts. But just then Elena turned around and the feeling he had on seeing her was an actual physical shock. Her face was pale and drawn, but it suited her, her eyes were dewy and wondering, and as she saw him she held one slim pale arm out of the blanket—and then he was sitting beside her.

“Matt!” It was the beginning of something, some explanation, but there was a wrong look in her eyes. They should have held only joy and

celebration and instead they were wholly anxious, questioning—and holding back something unfinished.

He could only think of one reason. He sucked his breath in. “Lindie didn’t make it.”

“Oh, yes, oh yes, she did!” Elena cried in one sweet rush. “Her parents—they’re driving her to the hospital just in case. People say they’ll take us, too, when the paramedics get here.”

“Then, what? Something’s wrong. What’s wrong?” Just as the moonlight had shone down on her with silvery light earlier, the bonfire outlined her with red-gold now. When she turned toward it, her eyes were violet.

“I have to know,” she whispered, just as someone came along with cocoa for them—in sippy cups. Well, fine, nobody had perfectly steady hands right now.

“What?” he whispered back.

“The bowline. Who taught you . . . the bowline knot?”

“*Huh?* That was what was making her look so haunted? He shook his head. “It was a long time ago. I’m not even sure we made it right.”

“It held!” Elena flared.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, as if saying “there, there.” He took a swig of cocoa-nectar. “It held. Well, it was so long ago, but I guess . . .” He paused. He felt his own eyes go round. “It was . . . it was . . .”

“I knew it!” Elena cried, clapping her hands. Two big tears ran down her cheeks. Then almost like some strange prayer: “Uncle Joe! It was Uncle Joe!”

This time Matt didn’t need a kick in the behind to know what to do. He took the slim, weeping girl in his arms, and he felt the warmth of the fire-heated blankets around her.

“You’re not warmed up yet,” he said, almost accusingly.

“I stayed by the pond to watch them bring you in,” she murmured.

Damn fool, Matt thought, but there was a lump in his throat as he thought it. Anyway, it was a good excuse to hold her closer.

“Hey, somebody drove my car over to here,” he discovered, seeing the Junk Heap flashing in the firelight.

“Some girls brought it just a few minutes ago,” a tall man, who was just a pair of legs standing away from the firelight said. “You shouldn’t go around leaving it with the keys in the ignition.”

“No,” Elena agreed, letting Matt hold her softness as hard as he wanted. And then, “Our coats were in that car.”

“And here they are,” announced a seductive feminine voice. “Safe and sound at last.” A tall and feline girl with a mane of tousled bronze hair knelt to wrap Elena’s fur-trimmed coat around her.

“Caroline,” Elena murmured. “Thank you.”

“And yours, sir,” Another tall girl, this one with dark hair and eyes.

“Uh—Meredith,” Matt said, instantly tongue-tied.

She smiled at him. “We’re just sorry we didn’t hear about what happened sooner,” she said.

A small feminine figure, seeming even smaller by comparison to the long elegant legs of the first two girls, threw herself bodily on Elena.

“Ooooh, God! I thought you were lost forever,” she sobbed, strawberry hair blazing in the firelight.

“Oh, Bonnie!”

“Actually, they called to say they’d pulled you out about a minute after they called to say you were in,” said Meredith.

“But the agony I suffered in that minute,” Bonnie said in an injured voice. “Or has velociraptor sisterhood just *collapsed*?”

“Of course not,” Elena said, displacing Matt to comfort her. And eerily, with no visible signal, four voices rose in the darkness.

“Velociraptor sisterhood! You bite us; we bite you back!”

“All I’m worried about,” Matt said snuggling deeper into his coat is: “is what happened to my wallet?”

“Oh, yeah, we found it,” Caroline said carelessly. “It was empty, though.”

For a moment, Matt felt a terrible pang. Then he saw that Elena was smiling at him.

“Maybe Uncle Joe went off on some new adventure,” she said.

“Yeah.” He did his best to smile back and managed it pretty well. It did seem . . . well, kind of too bad for somebody who would think it was just money, and not realize it might be something more. But he couldn’t

honestly complain. He had his life, he was out of the water, and he had Elena Gilbert, too—for a while still, anyway. Elena was notably a rover.

“But Elena, your *dress*,” Bonnie wailed, almost wringing her hands, going from the humanitarian to the cosmopolitan in seconds. “It’s—done for.”

“We’ll have to put it down for its own good,” Meredith agreed, dryly, not a muscle moving in her lovely olive-skinned face.

“You’re definitely a spectacle,” Caroline said, with a certain note of relish in her voice.

“It’s been . . . quite a date,” Elena said softly. “But then, it was our tenth date anniversary.”

There! That was it. Elena said the words with a slow, dropping inflection. If you didn’t know what she really meant by it, you might think it had been “quite a date” in another way.

But now that Matt knew Elena, he found he didn’t care. Didn’t care? Ye gods, he wished it *had* been that kind of date, even if everybody, including his mom, came to know it.

Looking at Elena now, with her coat covering up most of the damage, she was like a pale and lovely pioneer. She was dressed in her Sunday best, but ready to go out and pluck a few chickens for dinner. The cut on her forehead was neatly bandaged, and the sparkle was back in her lapis lazuli eyes.

God bless you, Uncle Joe. Thanks for tonight, and have a good trip, Matt thought. Elena offered her arm, and unhesitatingly Matt took it. We'll hold each other up, he thought.

Just then a small round personage bustled up to him, who always seemed to Matt to smell of fresh-baked cookies.

"Mom!"

"Matt! I got the news just after Mrs. Sulez, and she brought me down here—you know what it's like with me trying to drive at night—but the last I heard you were under the water. Oh, Matt, I've been so worried—and Elena, some kid said it was your idea . . ." Her voice rose a little, both in volume and in pitch. Matt tried to move in front of Elena. If his mother said anything to hurt her—

"They said it was you who kept him from drowning," his mother finished. "And, all I can say is—"

And then, by some mysterious means of feminine transportation Elena was in his mother's arms, having apparently teleported *through* him, and they were both crying.

"This is the girl who saved my Matt's life," his mother announced to all within earshot—and at the top of his mom's range, that covered quite a few ears.

"This girl kept his head above water until rescuers could come and she didn't leave him until he was safe." she announced. "And I say this girl is a hero, and anybody who says different, that person can stand up right now and say it to me!"

“Mom—” Matt groaned softly.

But there was an outbreak of applause, while Elena, blushing brushing away traces of tears, said, “Well, Matt is the real hero. He got Lindie—Jacobs, isn’t it?—out of the water. And Dr. Alpert got him out. All I did was a little talking.”

And a little kissing, Matt thought luxuriously. So what if I didn’t really feel it? I’ll feel it tomorrow.

And just then as he and Elena stood blushing and beaming near the fire, one of the tall men, a parent or neighbor, said, “Hey, kid, you really shouldn’t be leaving your money in a wallet in an open car. I took it out and kept it for you. But a credit card and a hundred dollar bill like that—well, some kid might’ve been too tempted, get me?”

And with that, he restored Uncle Joe (and Aunt Judith’s Visa card) into Matt’s still-numb hand. He looked up and saw Elena looking at him with an expression of speculation.

“Looks like Uncle Joe isn’t through having adventures with you,” she said finally. “Oh, that’s clever,” she added, as she watched Matt automatically fold up the bill and slide it into the hidden compartment.

That’s right, Matt thought. I did that before once before, too, on our first date, when that old man at the restaurant found it. That time, I could understand how it could fall out; I was fiddling around with it. But this time—how could the tall guy know where the hidden compartment was . . . ?

He looked around for the man, whom he had registered as a pair of legs, but couldn't see him. And anyway, there was suddenly a tumult at the other side of the bonfire.

Caroline appeared beside them, bursting with feline excitement. "Bonnie's gone and fainted for real. She said she saw a ghost disappear. And then she went . . ." Caroline put a hand to her forehead, palm up, staggered back like Hamlet, and then made as if to swoon forward. "If Meredith hadn't caught her she'd have fallen in the fire."

"Well, for heaven's sake, go get her some water to drink—in a sippy cup, too, or she'll spill it all over. Tesha—you're still Tesha, right? Go run to Dr. Alpert. Make sure she knows there's a girl who's fainted. And, Matt"—she paused, looking at him where he stood warming by the fire—"just one question—did you ever see pictures of your Uncle Joe when he was a younger man?"

"No," Matt admitted. "I guess we weren't a very picture taking family. I only saw him when he was dying."

"I see," Elena said, slowly. "so it's perfectly possible that . . ."

"That what?" but Elena didn't answer. Because she knew he knew what she would say.

"Oh, well," she said turning her back on the bonfire to toast her other side. "We'll think of it as good luck, shall we?" She held up her sippy cup of cocoa toward him. "Here's to lots and lots more adventures!"

There was only one thing to say to that, and Matt said it. After the first word, Elena joined in, ignoring the stares of bystanders.

“Bubala bubala
Bubala bubala
Bubala bubala **BUM!**”

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