

Chapter 1

Viviane Nowak hummed as she toted the bulky grocery bags up the last few stairs to her second-floor apartment. She was looking forward to impressing her boyfriend, Kyle, with a gourmet dinner. Pausing to unearth her keys from the abyss that was her purse, she wrestled the door open and kicked it shut behind her. Oops, the message light was blinking on the phone. Carefully depositing the bags on the living room floor, she plunked herself down on the sagging couch, kicked off her shoes, and called voice mail.

“You have one new message. Message received at 10:15 a.m.,” the automated voice intoned.

“Hello, Mr. Weaver? This is Dennis calling from Superior Jewelers on Thursday morning. Just wanted to let you know that the special item you ordered came in and is ready for pick up. The number here is 1-800-555-0199. Let us know when you’re coming. Talk to you soon. Bye!”

Viv inhaled sharply and punched in the number on her phone, her heart fluttering with excitement as she waited for the call to connect.

“Hello, Superior Jewelers? Is this Dennis? Hi, I’m calling on behalf of Kyle Weaver. You left a message for him on his home phone. He was on a flight from Vancouver this morning. He’s been by the store already? Oh, that’s great. I was afraid he wouldn’t get the message in time. By the way, I’m Kyle’s girlfriend. I don’t suppose you could tell me what the ‘special item’ is he ordered? What’s that? Yes, there are lots of secrets on Valentine’s Day. No, I understand. Okay. Thanks. Bye.”

Viv ended the call and sat still while the information that Kyle had special-ordered something from a jewelry store sank in. Three seconds later, she was bouncing up and down and shrieking with joy while the sofa springs groaned in protest. Forcing herself to calm down, she called one of her two best friends. The phone rang twice before it was picked up.

“Julie, guess what,” Viv blurted.

“Heddo?”

“Olivia, is that you? It’s Viv. Where’s your mommy, honey?”

There was the sound of footsteps crossing the floor and a voice saying, “Did you answer the phone, Olivia? Give the phone to me, honey,” while the two-year-old squawked, “Heddo? Heddo?”

Finally, a voice said, “Hi, it’s Julie.”

“It’s me. You’ll never guess what happened.”

“What?”

“There was a phone message for Kyle from a jewelry store when I got home.”

“Really? What’d it say?”

“It said that the ‘special item’ Kyle had ordered was in.”

“What do you think it was? Wait, you don’t think?”

“I do. I think that Kyle bought me an engagement ring!”

“Oh, sweetie, that’s fabulous! I’m so happy for you! How romantic.”

“I know. It’s just perfect. The most wonderful man in the world is going to propose to me on Valentine’s Day. This is going to be the happiest day of my life.”

“What about the job interview? Has he called yet?”

“No. We agreed not to talk about it until he got home from work. He doesn’t want anyone to suspect he’s applied for a new job until he’s sure he got it.”

Something clattered to the floor in the background, and Julie said, “No, Olivia, wait for mommy. Viv, I’ve got to run,” she said, returning to the conversation. “I promised Olivia we’d make cookies, and she’s getting antsy. But I’m so pleased for you. It’s about time Kyle proposed.”

“I know, but he’s been worth the wait.”

“Uh huh. Call me tonight, if you get a chance. Let me know if Kyle got the job, and what the ring looks like.”

“I will, if I can, but I’ve got a feeling that we’ll be doing some pretty heavy celebrating.”

“I bet. See you at school tomorrow.”

“Bye, Julie.”

Viv put down the phone and stared around the apartment in a happy daze. It had been their little love nest for the past six years. Sure, the walls needed a fresh coat of paint and the furniture was mostly shabby hand-me-downs from their university days, but Kyle had insisted that they not go into debt buying new stuff until he had finished articling and she had a permanent teaching job. Later, when their careers were established and they could afford a roomier apartment, he had convinced her to spend their money paying down his student loans ahead of schedule so they could save on the interest. He was so smart with money and so disciplined; not like her, having trouble sticking to a budget. She was lucky that Kyle was planning for their future.

She smiled at the place fondly; they had made a lot of happy memories here. Part of her would be sorry to say goodbye if he got the job in Vancouver. It would be really tough leaving her friends and her father behind, not to mention the kids at school, but entertainment law was a competitive field, particularly here in Toronto, and this opportunity could be a real boost to his career. Oh, she could hardly wait until Kyle got home and told her what had happened!

Viv glanced at her watch. Five fifteen! Less than two hours to prepare dinner and do her hair and make-up. She wanted to look especially pretty for when he proposed. This was going to be a memorable evening for both of them, one they could share with the grandkids someday. Scooping the bags up off the floor, Viv trotted into the kitchen to start dinner.

Chapter 2

Viv pulled the mustard-and-rosemary-encrusted rack of lamb from the oven and set it on the counter to rest before resetting the temperature to 375°F. The individual cappuccino soufflés were in the fridge ready to go into the oven ten minutes before they were ready for dessert. The Scallops Yakitori was on the table. Potatoes mashed – check – brussel sprouts with bacon on low on the burner - check – Spanish red wine breathing on the table – check. It was all good.

She rummaged through the cutlery drawer for the box of matches and hurried to light the two white candles on the table. It looked like a page out of a decorating magazine with its white linen cloth and the red placemats and napkins she had picked up on sale after Christmas. The smoke from the blown-out match curled toward the ceiling while Viv took an appreciative sniff from the wine bottle. *The Toronto Life* wine critic was right; she really could smell raspberry, chocolate, and vanilla in the bouquet.

Viv heard a key turning in the lock and tossed the matches back onto the kitchen counter. Running her fingers through her hair, she started toward the door with an eager smile as Kyle stepped into the apartment.

“Kyle!” she sighed, wrapping herself in his arms and snuggling against his chest. He smelled deliciously of musky cologne, and his black alpaca overcoat was soft against her cheek. He dropped his briefcase and overnight bag on the floor and pulled her onto her toes for a kiss.

“I’ve missed you, Sugar Lips. Boy, something smells good.” He let her go. “I’m starving – I haven’t had anything except a bagel since breakfast.” Depositing his scarf and coat on a chair, he put an arm around her waist. “Wow, you look hot in that dress! Did you just get that?”

“Uh huh. From the money Daddy gave me for Christmas, so it didn’t cost us a thing. Do you like it?” Viv twirled so that Kyle could appreciate the dress, a red metallic with skinny straps and a short skirt.

“I’ve always liked you in red. You should wear it more often.” He drew her to the table and lifted the casserole lid. “What’s this?”

“Scallops Yakitori.”

“Looks great.” He nabbed a skewer and tore a scallop and mushroom from the end with his teeth. “Good.”

“Never mind about the food.” Viv turned him around to face her. “Tell me about the interview. Did you get the job?”

“I sure did.” The grin on his face was huge.

Viv threw her arms around him and kissed him. “That’s fantastic! I’m so proud of you!”

“Thanks, baby. All my hard work is finally paying off.” He patted her bottom. “Come on, let’s eat.”

She released him, and they sat down at the table. He bit into another scallop while she beamed at him.

“Did they give you a start date?”

He nodded, picking up the wine bottle and sniffing. “March 1st. What’s this?”

“It’s a 2010 Ribota. But that doesn’t give us much time. I’ve got to give notice at school, and we have to let the landlord know.”

He poured wine into their glasses. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s not spoil dinner with the details. It looks like you’ve made another fabulous meal.” He handed her a glass and picked up his own. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Viv.”

She clanked her glass against his. “Happy Valentine’s Day, sweetheart.”

Kyle ran his spoon around his dessert cup and licked it before dropping it onto his plate. “That was so good, but I ate too much.” He leaned back in his chair and patted his flat stomach. “I’m going to have to go for an extra-long run tomorrow to burn this off.”

Viv spooned some of the chocolate sauce from her cup and let it melt onto her tongue. “I can think of a good way to start burning calories tonight, if you like,” she said, playing with the spoon against her teeth.

“Come here, Sugar Lips.”

She sashayed around the table and slid onto his lap. Bending to reach his mouth, she kissed him with a tantalizing slowness, feeling the rush of heat from his lips course all the way down to her toes. When the kiss had ended, he bit the dress strap off her shoulder and nuzzled her skin with his lips. It tickled, and she giggled.

“Don’t think I forgot about getting you something special for Valentine’s Day,” he said in a husky voice. The other strap slipped from her shoulder while Viv squirmed against him.

“I know. There was a phone message from Superior Jewelers when I got home,” she said in a breathy voice.

He lifted his dark head to gaze into her eyes. “So, you think I bought you jewelry this year?” One of his eyebrows arched as he smiled teasingly at her.

“I’ve been wondering what it was ever since I got home from work.”

“Well,” he said, sliding a brown velvet box from his jacket pocket and holding it up on the palm of his hand for her inspection, “I’d better not keep a lady waiting.”

Viv gulped. Ohmigod, the moment she had been waiting for was finally here! She held her breath as Kyle lifted the lid. Nestled inside were two golden drop earrings with diamond-encrusted hearts. Her own heart plummeted.

“Pretty, aren’t they? The store only had them with emeralds, so I had to special order them to get diamonds. Do you like them?”

“I don’t understand.” Viv dragged her eyes from the earrings to stare at him.

Kyle frowned. “You don’t like them?”

“No, sweetheart, they’re really nice. I just thought that with the new job and the move to Vancouver and all, it might be something different.” She looked away, feeling disappointed and small. “I thought you might want to propose to me tonight.”

Kyle stood up, forcing Viv to scramble from his lap.

“Look, we need to talk.”

“What about?” She was suddenly apprehensive, and began fidgeting with the ring she wore on her right hand. It was a single pearl with two diamond chips on either side. Daddy had given it to her on her sixteenth birthday.

He drew Viv to the couch and they sat down. “This new job is going to be a great opportunity for me, you know. It’s going to make my career.”

“I know. Jenkins, Weber, and Chan handle some of the biggest sports stars in Canada. They’re a great firm, and you’ll do a wonderful job for them. You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“Are you kidding? I’m so ready for this. Plus, I’ve been wanting to make a fresh start somewhere, and Vancouver is just the city to do it in.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Kyle took her hand and gazed into her eyes. “I’m going to Vancouver on my own.”

Viv’s stomach sunk. “I don’t understand. Do you mean you’re going ahead to find us a place to live?”

He shook his head. “We’ve been together a long time, Viviane.”

“I know. Six years.”

“Yeah. It’s time we decided where this relationship is heading. I think it would be best if we spent some time apart to really think things through. We were awfully young when we got together, you know. Just kids starting out after school.”

Viv’s bottom lip started trembling. “You mean, you don’t want to get married?”

“Not now. This job comes with a whole lot more responsibility. I’m going to have to focus one hundred percent to be on top of my game. I can’t be worrying about anyone else. You want me to be a success, don’t you, Viv?”

“Well sure, Kyle.”

He nodded and flashed her one of his dazzling smiles. “I knew you would. You always want what’s best for me.” He started to rise from the couch, but she snatched his arm and tugged him back down again.

“But maybe I can come visit you in a couple of months, after you get settled.” Her eyes searched his face for reassurance. It couldn’t be over between them. “We could talk then, see where we are.”

He paused, one knee on the couch. “I think it best if we made a clean break, don’t you? You’re young, Viv. You want marriage and kids. I can’t do that now, but I wouldn’t want to hold you back if you found someone else. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it before standing. “Let’s make this as painless as possible, shall we? I’ll come by tomorrow to pick up my clothes while you’re at work.” He glanced around the room. “Most of this stuff is junk, anyway, so you can keep it or donate it to charity. I don’t want it.”

He threw on his things and picked up the briefcase and overnight bag. “I’ll put my apartment key through the mail slot when I’m finished. Take care of yourself, Sugar Lips. You’ll always have a special place in my heart.”

He was out the door just as the tears brimmed over and cascaded down her cheeks.

Chapter 3

It was after midnight when there was a brisk rap on Julie's front door. She rushed to answer it before her daughter woke up.

"Where is she?" Sabrina asked, bursting through the door.

"Shhh. Olivia's asleep. Viv's on the couch." Julie nodded toward the living room. "Thanks for coming on such short notice." She closed the door behind her friend.

"Not a problem. I ditched my date early. It was no biggie – he was just a 'better him than nobody' date for Valentine's Day." She slipped off her coat and handed it to Julie.

"Whoa! That's what you wear for a 'better him than nobody' date?"

Sabrina smiled and twirled, her auburn curls flying from her shoulders. She was wearing a cream-coloured halter dress with two strands of pearl beading accentuating her exquisite back.

"I thought I'd throw the poor guy a bone. After all, he bought me five courses at Café Vert."

Julie whistled softly. "Olivia and I had homemade chicken fingers and sweet potato fries for dinner," she said wistfully.

"Sounds good to me," Sabrina said as she followed Julie into the living room.

Viv was sprawled in a corner of the couch with her eyes closed. She was wearing grey sweat pants and a "Hello Kitty" t-shirt, a treasured Christmas gift from one of her Grade 1 pupils. Her long blond hair was pulled back into one of Olivia's scrunchies, and her face was puffy and red from crying. An empty wine glass sat on the coffee table next to her.

"Oh, hon, I'm so sorry." Sabrina sat down on the couch and pulled Viv into a hug. Viv sniffled, opened her eyes, and rested her head on Sabrina's shoulder.

"S'okay, Bri. I felt bad before, but not anymore. I don't feel anything anymore. I'm dead inside." Sabrina glanced over her head at Julie, who frowned.

"That bastard, Kyle," Sabrina sputtered. She rubbed Viv's back in tight, angry circles. "I never liked him. He took advantage of you, Viv. Of your beautiful, generous, loving nature. You're too good for him – you always were."

"S'not true." Viv detached herself from Sabrina's arms while peering blearily at her. "Kyle took care of me. I was hopeless before him. He taught me stuff. Like how to roast a chicken. How to do the laundry. He even did my taxes." Her face crumpled. "Now who's going to do my taxes?" she sobbed, collapsing into Sabrina's arms. Julie snatched a bunch of tissues from the box on the table and mopped Viv's face.

“You don’t need Kyle, Vivvie,” Sabrina said over her weeping. “An accountant can do your taxes.”

Viv stopped crying and lifted her head to peer at her friend. Sabrina nodded encouragingly.

“S’right,” Viv said with a sniff. “Who needs stupid old Kyle?” But her face fell, and she toppled back onto the couch. “Who am I kidding? I do!” she wailed.

Sabrina stood up and pulled Julie a short distance away to where Viv couldn’t overhear them. “How long has she been like this?” she whispered.

Julie checked her watch. “Almost two hours. She was hysterical when she got here, so I gave her a glass of wine. But we’ve almost polished off the bottle, and I’ve only had one glass.”

“She can’t go back to her apartment like this.”

“No. She can stay with me for a couple of nights. I’ll tell the school tomorrow that she’s sick – let her sleep it off – but we’ll have to figure out a better plan over the weekend. I just don’t have enough space for her here.”

“She can move back in with me, temporarily. It’ll be tight, but we’ll make it work.” Julie nodded gratefully, and they returned to the couch, taking a seat on either side of their soggy friend.

“Sweetie, you’re going to sleep here tonight,” Julie said. She stroked Viv’s hair. Viv nodded and wiped her face with her sleeve. “Stay home tomorrow. I’ll tell them you’re sick.”

Viv shook her head. “No, I gotta go in. Tomorrow’s Super-Star Friday.”

“Super-Star Friday? What’s that?” Sabrina asked, looking at Julie.

“Every Friday, one of Viv’s students dresses up like his or her hero. Viv takes the kid’s picture and puts it on a special wall of fame.”

Viv hiccupped. “Tomorrow’s Noah. He’s gonna be Spider-Man. Can’t miss it. Can’t let him down.” She sighed and slumped against Julie’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. You get some sleep, and I’ll wake you up in time for work. How’s that?”

Viv nodded without opening her eyes, exhausted from her ordeal.

“Good.” Julie slid out from beside her and went to fetch a throw while Viv nestled her head on a pillow and fell asleep immediately.

“Poor thing,” Sabrina whispered as Julie draped the throw over Viv. “I’d like to kick Kyle right where it would get his attention. Didn’t she have any inkling that this was coming?”

Julie shook her head. “Totally blindsided.”

Sabrina sighed. “Sometimes I just hate men.”

“I’ve got no use for them whatsoever,” Julie replied.