

## Do Us Part

By Chloe B. Young

"This cannot happen."

While she spoke, Val looked down at her hands instead of at Robert. Her index finger was red, getting purpler by the second as the strand of hair choked the blood in it. It was gruesome, but better than the alternative, which was chowing down on the same strand, a habit she'd put behind her in college, except for in times of stress. The wind picked up the rest of her hair, whipping it in her face as she avoided his eyes.

"Oh," said Robert, sounding less than entirely warm and hopeful for the first time in their short acquaintance. "I'm so sorry, I guess I misinterpreted what was--"

"No, no. You didn't." Val forced her fingers to unclench then placed them on her knees, fighting her instinct to squeeze them until her knuckles were white. "I've been flirting outrageously with you."

Robert smiled. Val added another mark to the tally she was keeping of how many times Robert could smile--with teeth--in a single conversation with a complete stranger. They were at 10 already, and Val thought that if she had to describe Robert to a police sketch artist--and she couldn't think of a single reason why she would, given that they'd known each other for less than two hours--she wouldn't be able to stop describing his smile to move on to the other parts of his face.

It was an average face in every way. Brown eyes, an unremarkable nose, very little chin. But Val didn't think she'd come across a face she liked more so quickly.

"I'm glad," he said, then he leaned toward her with a conspiring tilt to his grin, the bench creaking under him with the perfect horror movie door opening sound cue.

"I know I have been, too, though I'm not sure what counts as 'outrageous'."

"I'm sorry," Val said, her throat closing up. "This has been entirely unexpected."

Robert nodded. "I'd say so."

"And highly enjoyable."

"For me as well."

The wind blew again, its keen edge slicing through the trees and the light jacket Val had thought would be able to keep her warm while she visited her father's grave. For a while, it had been. The walk from the parking lot was long enough that her cheeks had been warm with blood while she stood and looked down at his plain, angular headstone, wondering if she should have stopped for flowers and trying desperately to feel something different from normal because she was standing on his final resting place instead of in her tiny kitchen at home, lost in memories both good and bad.

She hadn't felt anything, any deeper sense of connection simply from being geographically close to his remains, and it had made her wonder if she truly was as desensitized to the concept of death as her sisters told her she was.

She wasn't the single tear down a cold-flushed cheek sort of person. She tended more toward guttural sobs through snot and itchy hot tear tracks. She'd sat down on the nearest bench and cried her stomach sore until she was freezing, tired, and no closer to forgiving herself for not missing her father more than she did.

*"Are you alright?"*

A kind voice. A stranger hovering by the end of the bench she'd claimed. That was all it had taken to set her off again.

"Yes," she'd said, damply. *"My father died."*

*"Oh, I'm terribly sorry."*

She'd sniffed grotesquely. *"Don't be. It's fine. It happened 10 years ago."*

The man had shoved his hands in his pockets out of the wind. *"Goodness. You must have loved him very much."*

*"That's the problem. I really didn't."*

The man--*"I'm Robert. Would you like to talk about it?"*--had sat down on the lonely bench in the grim graveyard and proceeded to let her talk...and talk and talk, and then do some talking of his own, about everything and nothing of importance. Through the dreary late morning into early afternoon, when the temperature warmed almost imperceptibly from the sun's feeble attempt at shining.

Val hadn't known it was possible to talk to a complete stranger for so long that he wasn't a stranger anymore. He was just Robert. And now she had to say goodbye, because life didn't hand out meet-cutes like free T-shirts. And she'd never been a lucky person anyway.

"I'm sorry," she blurted, yet again.

"Don't apologize." Robert's hand twitched like he wanted to offer it to her, but instead, he placed both of his palms on his knees, tapping his long, thin fingers against them, just like she had. Val wondered if his fingers were warm, or if he was the type to always have cold hands that needed heating. He didn't have anyone, he'd said. Alone in a mid-sized city, with no one to keep him from getting chilly on a rainy day.

"I can't do this with you," Val choked out, blinking away the altogether too easily pictured images of what they, together, might look like.

"Do what? Have a conversation?"

She shook her head. "Have the kind of conversation that leads to you asking for my number, then phoning me to see if I want to get coffee, and me saying yes, and me liking you too much to say no any time after that."

Robert sat a little straighter, hope appearing in his eyes between one blink and the next. "But why can't you? I won't lie. I do want those things. But up until now, I was under the impression that you wanted them too. Was I wrong? Did I say something to change your mind?"

"No. You've said all the right things. It's just that..." She sighed and mashed her clenched fists into her face, then exploded, "I can't meet my soulmate in a graveyard!"

Robert was startled into leaning back, his face blank with surprise at her outburst. "Oh. That makes a certain amount of sense, I suppose. I don't think anyone would blame you, though. Who knows? It might make a great story at parties."

Val's head bobbed hysterically. "It definitely would, which is why it cannot happen. For a normal person, it would just be another funny bit of trivia to tell our friends when we were sure we were going to last. But you don't understand. I am a *taxidermist*."

"A taxidermist," Robert repeated.

"Yes." Val looked Robert straight in his eyes to make her point. "I make dead things look alive for a living, and I love it. I can't tell people that I went to the place

where people bury their dead and came out with a new boyfriend. I simply can't. I would *die* of embarrassment the first time someone asked me how we met."

The flicker of hope had disappeared from Robert's warm eyes almost completely. "Oh," he said, slumping fractionally. "I imagine that isn't the easiest profession to explain at dinner parties."

She nodded. "You understand, then? How morbid it would be? I mean, this isn't even a nice graveyard!"

"There are nice graveyards?"

"Yes, of course! Some of them are so neat and orderly that they're basically parks. Except that there are dead people in them. But with the flowers, and the cute little trees, and the gazebos, it's easy to forget about them."

A shadow of a baffled smile returned to Robert's lips. "I never thought about it that way."

"There is no forgetting about the dead people here. I mean, look at it." She flapped a hand at the oldest part of the cemetery with its uneven rows of headstones. "Most of it is run-down, creepy and old. There's a wrought-iron fence over there. The groundskeeper has a pitchfork he carries around with him just for fun. It looks like the setting of a video game that'd keep me up all night."

The straight-backed posture Robert had relaxed in his disappointment returned. "You play video games?"

"Of course," she replied, before she could stop herself. "Whenever I have the time."

"Xbox or Playstation?"

"Xbox. Do you--Wait, no. Stop it." She pointed her finger in his face, then put it back in her lap, because only knowing someone for a short time didn't excuse rudeness. "I cannot get into this with you."

"I'm sorry," he said, immediately.

"No, I'm sorry." It wasn't Robert's fault that she forgot minute to minute that she was trying not to learn anything about him that would make him more appealing than he already was. She couldn't start anything. Not like this.

She wouldn't even be able to lie convincingly about it. Her sisters would know that whatever excuse she came up with--that they met online, or in the grocery store, or through friends--wasn't the truth. They could always see right through her, and they had no problem sharing everything they saw with anyone who would listen.

They sat in silence for a few moments, both of them with their hands in their laps, shrunk in on themselves and away from the world outside the cemetery and from each other. Val knew that she should get up. She should walk away now, if she was going to do it at all. She'd already made up her mind, so there was no point in lingering, was there? All she had to do was stand up and follow the path through the chipped, crooked stones toward the new, straight, and shiny ones to her car. Get in. Drive away. Go back to her life as a lonely, odd woman with a lonely, odd profession.

She shivered. The wind...

But the air was still. There was no wind.

"Why are you so afraid, Valerie?" Robert said, quietly.

Val looked up. Robert wasn't smiling anymore, but his eyes were no less warm.

"I don't know you," he continued. "Not as well as I'd like to. I've never wanted to know anyone as much as I'd love to know you. But from my perspective, I think you're letting other people keep you from being happy."

Dozens of her sisters' phone calls played on a confusing, muddled loop in Val's head. Her eyes stung, but she didn't look away.

Robert shrugged. "If it doesn't work out--if we go for that coffee and find out we have nothing else to talk about once you aren't crying and I'm not a knight in shining armour--" He grinned sheepishly and a laugh bubbled up from Val's ribcage. "--Then you won't have missed anything. You won't have let what other people think hold you back from what you want. Why not give us a try?"

Robert placed his hand on the bench between them, his long fingers fanning out toward her. Val looked down at it and thought of every time she'd ever done something she hadn't wanted to do because of another person's whims and desires. One thing, she thought. This one thing--one person--for herself was not too much to ask.

"Okay," she breathed, and she placed her hand next to his own on the bench, touching the tips of her cold fingers to the edge of his.

"You don't have to worry, though. I promise," Robert said, quietly, smiling vaguely, but happily at the wide expanse of grey-green grass. "If you go out for coffee with me, then for dinner after that, and we find that this conversation we're having isn't one that we want to end until we're a hundred years old and have said everything we could possibly say to each other, then I'll still have you beat."

Val blinked. "What do you mean?"

Robert's lips stretched in his widest smile yet. "I'm a mortician. When I tell people I met the love of my life in a graveyard, they'll be too busy laughing at me to worry about your dead animals."

Val's surprised laughter bounced off the many headstones, echoing into the trees and over the rows of the silently approving dead.