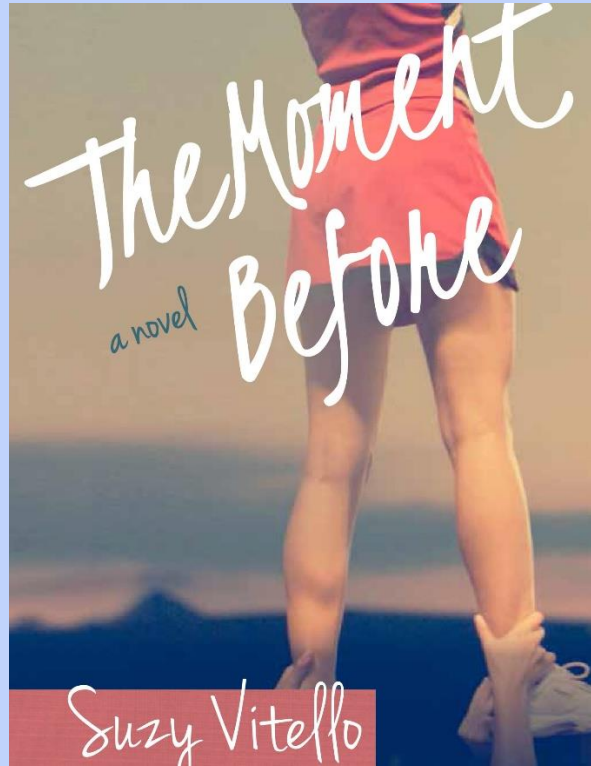


*An exclusive chapter from Suzy Vitello's book, THE MOMENT BEFORE!*

*(It's also a "first kiss" chapter!)*



*Grieving sister wants answers* is the above-the-fold headline in the Life & Lifestyles section of the paper the next morning. Smack in the middle, there's a photo of Sabine and me, taken at the Raising Cheer event a few months back. It looks like we're clinking pop bottles, all smiles and good times. Really, what was going on there? I was trying to grab a rum-loaded drink away from her. She was shit-faced, and later that night she puked her guts out. The granite countertops of Connor's house shine brightly in the background—the same setting where just yesterday, he'd rejected my kiss. And under that photo, another one. Sabine, under a tarp on the Greenmeadow gymnasium floor.

I grab the section of *Portland Journal* before my grandparents can see it and shove it in my backpack. This, they do not need. Nona is busy making eggs and bacon, wanting to send me off to school with some food in my belly. Nono is still in bed.

“I gotta go, Nona,” I call over my shoulder. “I’ll grab a Starbucks on the way. Can’t be late for school.”

“You want you can take the car, Brady,” she calls. “We not going nowhere today.”

The thought of negotiating the Lincoln and its ginormous hood through the high school parking lot gives me chills. “Thanks, but that’s okay. I’m used to the bus.”

“I make sauce today,” she calls out after me. “We eat at five.”

As soon as I’m out the door, I pull the section of paper from my backpack. From the blocks of ink, I pull out my crazy ramblings: *She was my hero. So strong. So brave. Her neck snapped in half. Like a toothpick.*

And then: *She was trying to win another trophy for her squad. Nobody stopped her. She wanted to do something no cheerleader had ever done.*

And then, next to the picture of my dead sister, under the sheet of plastic, a little call-out: *She tried to hide it, but she was having boyfriend issues. Big ones.*

Rory Davis, that zealous reporter, named the boyfriend. Who couldn’t be reached for comment, by the way. Probably because he was outfitting his new car with a stereo system.

What happened to the arts funding article? The entire Cupworth Prize issue was summarized at the end of the article, hidden on page eight, after all the gruesome statistics on

how cheerleading is the most dangerous sport in high school. Clearly, Rory Davis saw a bigger story than the yawn-yawn of yet another school-funding piece.

By the time the bus comes, I'm pretty convinced that if I go to school today, I'll be shot on sight, so, when the 5 pulls up to the mall kiosk downtown, instead of riding toward Greenmeadow, I get off the bus. I get off with my backpack and the article about how sad and pissed off I am, and the \$46 Mom put in my overnight kit plus the \$29 Bingo winnings from Nona, and I'm thinking that'll buy a lot of chocolate croissants and double skinny chai lattes.

Downtown is chilly this morning. The homeless guys are still burrito-wrapped in their sleeping bags in the various doorways of semi-abandoned buildings. A few dreaded teens are setting up their panhandling stations on the busy corners by Pioneer Square. It's still too early for the Greenpeace kids, and the Sponsor an Orphan from Africa kids, but the real destitutes, the prostitutes, and the crazies are floating around amongst the gainfully employed.

I sketched here last summer. Hunkered down on the brick steps of Portland's outdoor "living room," with my graphite and my pad, I spent hours watching, drawing. There was a man with a dog—a beautiful boxer-pitbull type mutt. He called her Olive and as he sat in the sun, his shirt off and his eyes closed, he just stroked that dog like all that mattered in the whole world was the touch of that sun-kissed fur. The man was covered in ink and track marks. His beard was a scraggly mess, and you could count his ribs—they were Jesus ribs, the spaces between them hollowed out and smooth. This guy, he was probably no more than 30, but missing teeth.

The dog called Olive stood and guarded this sack-of-bones guy. Anyone walked up too close to her master, she would growl a low, guttural moan. You got the feeling that no matter

what this man, this obvious junkie, went through, that dog had his back. The lines and the shading and the shadow from my charcoal blended with the reality of that connection. It was like the love between those two living creatures slipped inside me and found its way out through my hand. Now the sketch is sitting on an easel in the grandest house in Portland. I wonder where the subjects are. My models. And in that wondering, I know where I need to go next.

At Blick's I buy Prang-wrap charcoal pencils. I buy a couple of sticks. A black brick eraser, a soft kneaded one. And a pad of heavy-weight paper. My left forearm always goes smudgy, so I get some free cloths from their rag bag, and some spirits to clean off all the ashy residue. The smell of oil paints and gum erasers and linseed oil—it goes into the core of me, a jolt of joy, almost a fever. It's like I feel in Ms. Bowerman's class. Home. The thereness of the world melts, and in my belly is a bed of coals, warming me for the chilly day. It's twenty-eight blocks to Forest Park, and I need to walk all of it just to settle the jumpy thoughts and ideas welling up inside me.

*Slow down,* whispers Sabine.

This is the most alive I've felt in weeks. Bright sun plays hide-and-seek with pewter clouds. There is such movement in the air. A gusty wind kicks up some neighborhood chimes. Birds are everywhere—a robin scoops up an enormous worm from a puddle in the sidewalk. But the worm's too big—the bird keeps dropping it, and the worm tries desperately to wiggle away only to have that robin grab it again. The bird is spring-fat, and I'm wondering if it's getting ready to lay eggs, or already has some nearby. The underbelly on that robin—the color of lips.

The sun disappears, and the bird flies away, its too-big worm safe for now, wiggling to the trickle of water in the sidewalk crack. More breeze and chimes. I keep walking, and now I'm on a street lined with cherry trees. Blossoms pink as a prom dress are fluttering, swirling in the wind. And then, out of nowhere, the way it can be on a Portland spring day, the sky opens and pummels everything with tiny white balls.

Hail and pink blossoms pelt me—an attack of machine gun pellets. The tat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat of them on the roofs and windshields of cars. It's deafening. My face stings with the assault. My windbreaker shields me a little, but the frozen force of the storm drills through to my bones. I keep walking toward the park.

By the time I get to the Lower Macleay sign and walk up the trail, it's over. White drifts like seafoam fill cracks and puddles. Tender bright green fir branches are covered in a skin of ice, which is already rapidly melting. A slender rainbow arcs over the forest and bird song returns. It's a Disney movie.

Right now, I'd be in Bowerman's. But, I'm not. Brady Wilson has been marked absent yet again. I've probably missed two tests in Blue Dot trig. I'm sure I have a solid F. My stomach knots up at the thought of the *Portland Journal* article buzz at Greenmeadow. Martha must really hate me, and Nick must loathe me, and it's a good thing my phone battery is dead.

Sun finds its way to the soggy trail. My kicks make a *schlupp* sound in the muck with each step. Up and up and up and up. The little hail-and-wind storm has left a path of broken nature: twigs, petals, leaves. And the manmade part of it: plastic bags and beer cans.

By the time I get to the Witch's House, the sun has melted all traces of frozen white. Spring is spring again, and there's a particularly welcoming patch of grass in view of my subject: an ivy-crusted section of a dilapidated stairway. A stairway to nowhere.

I drape the plastic Blick's bag over a flat rock on that patch of grass and sit down cross-legged. Set out my supplies in a line against some chunks of basalt. Just holding my tools, smelling them. And then getting started. The way charcoal marks a blank page like a dog peeing on a bush. Indelible. Fragrant. A witness.

Sabine used to tell me that when she arched into her scorpion, she'd visualize a bird perched at the end of a twig—delicate, strong. She said that cheerleading perfection was the marriage of grace and strength. And when she got it right, the high was better than anything. As I draw my hand across the page, make the lines, and find that one place where they intersect—the one place that creates form—that's what I feel, too. Grace and strength.

The way the ivy winds and covers the stone, rising and thriving on a dead and broken thing, that's what I want. On the paper and in my heart. Blurring edges, finding perspective, recreating real.

Sun pours down now, baking off the damp, steam rising from the ground in a fog. Pencil, then stick. Eraser, then pencil. It grows. It takes shape. Stairs that end at the sky. A violent sky. Unpredictable. Angry. Then, forgiving. The ivy is holding the stones, keeping them rooted to earth. In all the world, there is not a holier feeling.

And then, soft footsteps coming up the path. The crunch and mud-sucking of someone large. And when I raise my eyes, it's a familiar shape loping up the trail. And in his hand, a bright pink, slightly soggy, Voodoo Doughnuts box. "Thought I'd find you here," he says before

sliding onto the patch of grass beside me and brushing a layer of plastered pink petals from my jacket.

Connor tells me he comes in peace, and offers a selection of Voodoo's finest: a Jimmy-studded ice cream cone, a doughnut covered in bubble gum, one sprinkled with Tang. And the signature doughnut, a voodoo doll, pierced through the heart with a pretzel rod. I point to that one.

“Apropos.”

“I knew you wouldn't be in school today,” he says.

“What was your first clue?” I say, going back to my sketch. I don't want to make nice with Connor. Not yet.

“That's awesome, by the way,” he says, pointing to the project at hand.

I shrug.

“You got some balls, girl. Calling that douchebag out. Well done.”

“That comment? Not making me feel better.”

He goes back to picking petals from my shoulder. Like a monkey preening its buddy for lice.

He says, “Did you collide with a Rose Festival float or something?”

“Sort of. What the fuck do you want, Connor?”

Connor drops the box of doughnuts on the grass, grabs my charcoal-wielding hand, and turns it over in his. “Delicate. But, such a mouth on you.”

I want to slap him. Say *How dare you?* I want to pull my hand away from his and keep sketching the stairway to nowhere. But, of course I don't. And why don't I? Connor's hand on my hand is sending jolts of knee-buckling electricity up and in and through.

"Here's a memo," he says, his green and amber eyes straight into mine. "I'm an idiot."

I'm not wearing a 1950's house dress anymore. The black and blue Dad bruise on me has faded. Probably what I most resemble at this moment is a molting flamingo. With black smudge on my claw. Clearly as un-kissable today as I was yesterday.

"That's not news."

"Can we have a do-over?" he says, half serious and half joking.

"What, exactly, do you want to do over?"

Connor drops my hand and gently lifts my sketch pad and places it on top of the doughnut box. He stands, pulls me up and into him. Leans my head against the hollow of his neck, and just holds me, his arms around my body the way I know they held my sister. Firm.

He tangles his fingers in my hair and pulls just a little bit, so my face and his face, there's no looking away.

His breath is a little weedy, a little doughnutty. Traces of sugar on his lips. And his tongue, when it finds mine, it's the flesh of everything in nature. Wild, hungry. Spring.

I kiss back, and the parts of me know what to do, like they've gone off and taken a course in this. Without telling me. It's like my hand with the charcoal. Finding connection, language. There is no sound between us. Not one sound. Am I dreaming with the audio unplugged? It's like we're under water.



Who knows how long we're kissing? Who knows how many birds have witnessed this? How many blossoms? Hate:love. Just like that.

Footsteps pull us away from each other. A park official looking for off-leash pets, open containers. He slows as he walks by, no doubt assessing our age and truant potential. But we're almost eighteen. We could pass for adults. For high school graduates rather than the dropouts we are.

*You're not dropping out,* says Sabine. I say, "Hush."

The park official marches on in his bright orange vest. Bigger fish to fry.

"Do over," Connor says. "Was worth it, don't you think?"

I'm a little dizzy. "That was pretty masterful."

He sighs. "Yeah. Not bad."

Would Sabine approve? Think I'm nuts? And like he's reading my mind, he says, "I want to tell you a couple more things. They're about Sabine. And me."

I melt back down on my plastic bag, reach my hand underneath the sketch pad and into the soggy doughnut box. Before I let my teeth sink into the chocolate face of the voodoo doll, I say, "Okay."

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