

Fuzzy Socks

and

MIDNIGHT

CLOCKS



a novel

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November 1st, Sunday

“Just give her the roast.” Mom pushed the frozen package into my hands without giving me a chance to consider whether or not I should take it. Then turning on my sister, she snipped, “Annie, do something.”

Mom was unstoppable. I had made the cardinal mistake of mentioning how much I enjoyed being single. Her long eyelashes framed her feisty blue eyes. Dad had vacated the room with my brothers-in-law, but not before giving me that look that said, Hang in there, kid.

Knowing that it was best to just let her say her piece, I held my opinions securely inside my head. “Teach your sister what it takes to get not just any man . . . but a husband,” Mom clarified, as if it were needed. I suppose from her perspective, the clarification was essential. “A good man.” She reemphasized waving her arms as though she were flagging down the last ship to save her sinking daughter.

Annie failed miserably at hiding the it-stinks-to-be-you grin on her face. Then her snarky demeanor dissolved into a faint smile. She had plenty of reasons to smile. Her tall, dark, and handsome husband worships the ground she walks on. Not only does he earn a nice living, he also does the dishes every night.

Mom turned sharply as if reading my thoughts. She doesn’t have a lot of patience when she feels that she is being excluded from our nonverbal, sisterly glances. She always thinks we’re formulating plans of wicked defiance. Hardly.

Finger aimed at me, she announced, “Lindsey, you have got to get a husband. Stop frittering around in silly little romances, and stop being yourself.” With her last comment still painting the air, maybe I could use a little defiance.

Annie snorted.

My other sister, Susy, reclined easily on the leather sofa cradling her perfect, angel baby. She was clearly out of the crosshairs. Her gaze was a pitying one.

I shrugged it off. “Mom, I don’t need the roast.” Casting my eyes around the room, and bracing for the backlash that would undoubtedly follow, I opted for the truth to free me from this stacked up menagerie of motherly emotions. “I don’t know how to cook a roast.”

This was not earth-shattering news. Everyone was fully aware of my lack of interest in the kitchen. I quickly added, “And . . . I don’t see myself eating an entire roast.” I dumped the frozen brick onto the table, massaging blood back into my fingers.

“You are missing the point,” Mom bit. “The roast isn’t for you. It is for you to manipulate a boy over to eat it with you.” Her arms flew into the air with a huff. Then, with her finger cocked and pointed squarely at me, she gave me the to-do list. “You make the roast, and you tell that pin-headed boy you’ve been gawking at to come over and help you eat it.” Her eyes pinned me like a bug under glass. She studied me hard to see if I was getting the message. Unconvinced, she turned and pointed her motherly finger in Susy’s direction. “You can practice the dinner invite on your little sister.” Then she swooped back to me. “It isn’t difficult. Just tell the boy you’ve got a roast. He’ll come running.”

I wondered how Isaac (he is the silly little romance that Mom so pointedly despises), who is busy working on his master’s degree, would feel about being referred to as a pin-headed boy. I also wondered how he would feel about being invited over to eat a massive slab of beef since he declared himself vegan two months ago.

“Mom,” Annie chimed in, “Lindsey will probably have to have him come over to cook it.”

Okay, so it was a little late, but there it was, the jab I had been anticipating. Good one, Annie.

Annie’s pointed criticism caught Mom off guard. Hooray. Her mouth twitched. I didn’t wonder what was next. It began with the twitch at the corners of her mouth. Next, her eyes scrunched up as she tried to hold it in. First, just a snort, then a big, hearty laugh. Susy and Annie swapped glances and burst out laughing.

Susy immediately caught herself and hushed as her little one stirred. Mom roared. I shrugged. What can I say? I would rather clean a bathroom than cook a meal.

Susy, who also has a perfect husband, put a finger to her lips. We all quieted.

Whispering, Susy did not miss out on taking an opportunity for a good sisterly jab. “Whatever you do, just don’t show him your weird feet.”

Ah, my feet. Perfect. Let’s lay all my weaknesses out in the open. I knew someone would bring them into the conversation eventually.

Mom turned her shocked face toward Susy. Then she gave me an almost sympathetic glance before erupting with laughter once again. Annie’s face turned pink as she tried to muffle her giggles behind her hands. Susy’s eyes danced as she cradled Michael.

Ugh, let me explain.

It is a vicious challenge. I have ugly . . . very ugly . . . toes. As a kid, I didn’t know anything was different. Toes are toes, right? Then I started catching stares when I would go to the swimming pool. The comments followed.

“What did you do? Did you put your feet in a blender?”

“When my dad lost his marbles, they all stuck to the ends of your feet.”

“You really need a pedicure.”

This is the reason closed-toe shoes are my friends in every season. Afterall, feet hiding is a delicate skill.

My sisters and mother regained their composure when Michael started to fuss.

Such was the grand finale of my weekend visit to see my parents and sisters. And, as you can see, there are reasons that some things should be kept hidden, especially from family.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, I did bring home the frozen roast. Dad convinced me that it was a sensible food item to have on hand. I’m sure I can find a blog for a yummy way to cook a roast, or I can always gift it to one of my neighbors. Possibilities.

Until next time . . . Me



November 4th, Wednesday

I had better explain some things here, for my future posterity. I am an elementary school teacher. I teach fourth grade. I am five foot eight. I am half

African American. My eyes are deep brown. My hair is black and curly. I am currently finishing my master's degree. You also need to know that I paid off all my debt from my bachelor's degree before starting the master's program. (Silent applause!) The finish line is now in sight.

You should also know that I did see Isaac today, the famous pin-headed boy. We crossed paths on the commons lawn as I was hurrying to my night class. No, I didn't mention the roast. However, he did invite me to dinner on Friday.

Isaac and I have known each other for the better part of a year. We met at a crowded lecture where he offered me his chair. I gratefully accepted and, as Mom would say, have been "gawking at the pin-headed boy" ever since. He and I have been seeing each other a lot lately. I thought it best to keep Mom out of the loop. I'm sure you understand.

It was sweet really, how he asked me out. With his hand on my arm, my skin sizzled, he lowered his head just slightly, and asked. "Lindsey, do you have plans for this Friday?" The outdoor lights reflected on his hair.

Smiling, I shook my head. "Nothing that can't be changed." Lifting his head, he smiled warmly back at me. "Have dinner with me?"

Something jumped and twirled in my middle. With a small nod, I said, "Yes."

There's one for Mom to digest. I have another date with Isaac, no roast required. I suspect that I will put Mom in the hospital if I do not marry before the next winter Olympics. Thank goodness that's her worry and not mine.

Until next time . . . Me.



November 6th, Friday

I like teaching. I do. Lately though, I just keep feeling that something's off. I catch myself considering doing other things. Other careers. Or . . . keeping the career but moving somewhere else. I don't know what it is. Mom would say I need a husband, a family, the stable things in life, or something like that. I don't know. Maybe I'm just restless.

Now, let me tell you about this evening's dinner with Isaac.

I wore my black dress. Yes, the cute one with the slender silver belt. I love that dress! With my ankle boots, closed toe of course. I couldn't miss.

Isaac picked me up late, but with an extravagant bouquet of pink roses. "You look amazing," he gushed as he held the door of his SUV open for me. His dark eyes sparkled. "We need to do this more often."

I smiled and slid myself onto the leather seat.

Mom may call him a pin-headed boy, because she thinks he's skinny, but I've gotta say he is hot. Don't judge me harshly. I do spend my days with nine- and ten-year-olds. "Hot" is a perfectly acceptable adjective to describe the man. Isaac is tall and fit. His dark eyes are an exquisite match for his dark, perfectly placed hair.

Braving the Las Vegas traffic, we ate downtown at Le Chateau. Walking into a restaurant with him is like walking into a classroom with ice cream bars. Heads turn.

We sat at a private table, as per his reservations. His conversation was riveting as we discussed everything from our career dreams to world events.

"I like being with you," Isaac spoke as he softly lifted my hand. His smile simmered.

I smiled back, and my cheeks got hot.

He slowly lifted my fingers to his lips and kissed them lightly. Butterflies ice-skated inside me. I shivered.

"Can I see you again this week?" He lowered my hand to the table but did not let it go, his fingers wrapped neatly around mine.

I nodded like a fool. Smiling up at him, I asked, "What day?"

Releasing my hand for a quick minute, he reached into the inner pocket of his blazer and produced two tickets to Michael Jackson ONE—The Cirque du Soleil show—I had been dying to see. Even though Michael Jackson was from my parents' generation, I wanted to go to the show for ages now. Isaac cleverly knew that. With his eyes twinkling, he asked, "How about tomorrow night?"

My smile stretched halfway across the restaurant.

Sliding the tickets to me, he added, "And you keep the tickets. That way if you get a better offer, you can kick me to the curb and still go to the show." Leaning back with a smile and a sigh, his white teeth put the flickering candle on the table to shame.

I laughed and scooped the tickets up from the table. My eyes bulged. He had purchased expensive seats. I tucked them into the front pouch of my

purse.

I can't wait for tomorrow.

Dropping me off at my apartment, Isaac politely, softly, and with just a hint of lingering, kissed me goodnight.

Sweet dreams . . . Me



November 8th, Sunday

I am exhausted.

Isaac picked me up thirty minutes late yesterday. Poor guy. Instead of flowers, he showered me with compliments.

“You are pure perfection. How do you do it?”

I soaked it up.

We had planned on having dinner before the show, but due to Isaac's tardiness, there just wasn't time. We did manage to steal a few minutes to walk a little and drink Italian sodas before the show. He made me laugh.

It felt good to be with him.

Our seats were perfect. Three rows back, dead center. It was like nothing I have ever seen, or heard, or experienced. I loved it. I am pretty certain that Isaac and I were the youngest people in the audience.

After the show, Isaac was sweet and bought me a souvenir t-shirt. Next, he took me to Lupo, an Italian restaurant where I stuffed my face with the most amazing pasta. After dinner, we walked and talked. He told me about his work, his family, and his dreams. It was easy to walk and listen.

Stopping at a beautiful, tiled fountain, we sat on its edge and ate ice cream. Isaac polished off his ice cream then bent over and began unlacing his leather oxfords.

“What are you doing?” I asked, nearly choking.

He grinned mischievously, cocking his head sideways to see me. “I might get arrested, but I have always wanted to wade in a fountain.” He surveyed the surroundings. Sitting up, he bobbed his head in either direction, “There aren't too many people. I might get away with it.” Stooping, he tugged off his shoes

and paused. “But probably not.” He winked at me and pulled off his navy-blue socks that were covered with yellow pineapples. Kicking his shoes and socks against the base of the enormous fountain, he stood and offered me his hand. “Join me in the fountain, my princess?”

“What?” I panicked. All the blood drained from my face. “No. No way!” No way was I taking my shoes off for anyone. Not Isaac. Especially Isaac. What if he saw my weird, misshapen toes and ran away crying, like I was a circus freak? I was physically shaken at the thought.

“No problem.” With a flourish, he was on his knees heading for my shoes. I jumped up. He couldn’t get them off of me if I was standing. I held my position like a statue at Easter Island. He gave a few jovial tugs at my feet. I was rock solid.

“My princess . . .” he pleaded with his arms open wide.

A few people filed past us. Most glanced our way.

Shaking my head vehemently, he finally gave up on me.

With a look of gloomy defeat, Isaac sat back down on the edge of the fountain. He replaced his socks and his shoes. “Maybe some other time,” Isaac smiled back up at me. All was forgiven. Relief . . .

Offering me his hand, we stood together. A security guard magically appeared and watched us. Too late. There was nothing to patrol here now.

We walked on. My jitters melted like cotton candy on the tongue. I was safe again.

Leaving the glittering lights, Isaac took me home. As he pulled to a stop in the parking lot of my apartment, I said. “You really surprised me.”

Isaac laughed, a warm easy laugh. He inhaled deeply and replied, “Sometimes I surprise myself. I guess it’s the kid in me. Sometimes it just wants to get out.” He leaned over, touched my face, and kissed me sweetly. I climbed out of the SUV and floated home. I pondered on what could be.

Morning came, as morning does. I wasn’t ready for it. Thankfully, I was still on time to church.

For posterity, I should mention that I attend a family ward. I like it.

You should also know that Sundays tend to cause me to wax a little poetic, or long winded, in my journal writing. But hey, it is all for posterity. The future and rising generations deserve a shot at deciphering the intricacies of my brain. Ha ha!

To enlighten the masses, I am going to tell how I came to be me. That was a good line. Laying biology aside, and stepping into an almost soap-opera storyline, let me give you the scoop. I am the daughter of Janet and John Jones. I am their only daughter.

Anyway, my parents met in Las Vegas. My mother was working part-time at a restaurant called Pie A La Mode. Dad was a mechanic for a car dealership. They met in a classic romance sort of style. Mom was newly divorced and a single mom. It was just she and a two-year-old, Annie. Dad would eat at the restaurant, leave extravagant tips, and always ask for a date. After two months of coaxing, Mom went out with Dad. It was all the dreamy magic that any romance should be—chocolates, roses, and expensive shows. Annie even tagged along. After a dreamy courtship of about two months, they married at the Chapel of Love.

Great story, so far, huh? Keep reading. It gets better. Turns out that my dad had just the tiniest bit of a gambling problem. Well, that's a complete lie. Forgive me, posterity. I will tell it to you like it was—or as I have been told. Dad was hooked on gambling. He was one of those sad cases you hear about. He could spend an entire night in front of a slot machine. He didn't need to eat, drink, or sleep when he was in front of the machines or playing at the tables. It was chronic. Just prior to meeting Mom, he had checked himself into a rehab clinic for gamblers. Serious addiction. He was on the mend when he and my mother crossed paths. After the marriage, however, he went downhill in a blink. The stress of a wife, a daughter, and a baby on the way (me) was more than he could manage. As fast as the paychecks came in, they were devoured by the slot machines and gaming tables. Mom picked up a second job and prayed he would change. She was really a trooper.

Regrettably, he did not change. Gambling was like a noose around his neck.

My parents ended their brief marriage shortly before I was born. So, I never really knew my dad. I just heard the stories as I was growing up. I am not completely sure that he ever even knew about me. Mom has always been a little vague about that.

As a child, I used to wonder about him. I would make grand plans to run into the nearest casino and rescue him from the clanking machines. I never did.

Now, don't think that my history ends there. It doesn't. There is more.

Like the miracle that it was, my mom reconnected with her first husband. Oddly, he came to find her at Pie A La Mode. He was devastated without her. He regretted the divorce and the mess he had made. They were in love again.

At only a few weeks old, I was dolled up in a ruffly, pink dress, and I was passed from one relative to another at the wedding reception as the parents that I know got married.

Confused? Hang in there.

Two years later, they gave me a little sister, Susy. That is the true story of how I came to be the only child of John and Janet. It also explains why I look nothing like either of my sisters. Mom, Annie, and Susy are all blue eyed and blonde. I am the only African American in my family. I am thankful my parents gave me such beautiful genetics.

Good night . . . Me



November 11th, Wednesday

First thing, an update on my education. This is my second to last semester of classes. Then I will be the proud earner of an MED degree. That's a Master's in Education. I can't wait! I won't be rolling in the dough, but I will get a raise and that is nothing to sniff at.

I received an impromptu surprise. Isaac caught me after school and took me to a play. It was on campus. The title was *The Sound of Violets*. Weird title. Weirder story. I really do not know what it was about. However, with Isaac, it was lovely. He smelled good, and I got to breathe him in for two and a half hours. Just lovely.

I can easily list all the things I like about him. I love his attention. I love the attention of being seen with him. I like how he smells. I even like the flair that he adds to all of our dates: flowers, chocolates, or something fun. Once, shortly after we met, he brought me a frisbee. We were going to a convocation on *Mistaken Beliefs in Educational Practices*. The frisbee was the promise of another date—something a little lighter than educational practices. That's Isaac.

Sleep well . . . Me



November 13th, Friday

They say that if you want to have a better day, go and do something for someone else. Well, I had a whopper of a day.

One of my colleagues, Tammy Bradley, broke out in a horrible case of hives. I spent my prep, and all of my lunch, trying to help cover her class. There was some miscommunication with getting a sub. For the last hour of school, I taught a combined class. We got through it, but I'm beat.

To combat my self-pity, I am going to make cookies for my neighbor. (Yes, I bought the cookie dough.) My self-centered, tired brain is rebelling, but I am determined. My neighbor is a sweet, kindly soul that leaves treats at my door from time to time. Besides, I could also use some of her goodness to rub off on me.

Because my neighbor keeps a "Shoes Off" sign by the door, I'll be sure to wear socks when I take the cookies.

Isaac just texted!

Hi Gorgeous, I can't stop thinking of you. Will you go to a party with me? It's tonight, after the basketball game. It won't be as fun if you're not there.

Hmmm . . . a party. That sounds fabulous. I even have new shoes. I would love to go with you.

Isaac picked me up at 8:30. He handed me a foam finger. "Here, I bought one for each of us. It'll make us look like real fans."

I laughed. "We'll need that, especially since we'll miss the game."

He put the foam finger to his lips. "No one will know . . . Besides, I think we'll make the last fifteen minutes if we hurry."

The stadium was crowded with screaming fans. We stood close together, as the final seconds of the game ticked down. At the buzzer, a UNLV player took a shot. It was a perfect basket. The crowd erupted. We waved our foam fingers. Air horns blared. Balloons dropped from the ceiling. Isaac wrapped his arm

tightly around my waist as if protecting me from the wave of fans that rushed out onto the floor. I savored his touch.

We left the stadium and drove to a house in a nice neighborhood. The house pulsed with people and music. Isaac held my hand as we walked up the drive. Leaning into me he said, "Thank you for coming tonight."

I smiled and squeezed his hand.

The door to the home flew open as we approached and a half dozen people spilled out. We walked into the grand house. Isaac spoke into my ear. "One of the guys at work owns this house. I think he just wanted to show it off."

I laughed as the crowd absorbed us.

Isaac waved and nodded his head at dozens of people.

Unfortunately, at that moment, my feet started to complain. After the long day, my new shoes were a bad choice.

"Hey, Lindsey." A girl from one of my night classes shouted above the noise and waved.

Surprised to see anyone I knew, I smiled and waved.

Noisy conversations about the game competed with the music.

Isaac found my waist and steered me into the backyard. He spun me under his arm and we joined a dancing crowd on the lawn. The music slowed and Isaac pulled me close. I loved his touch, but my feet were throbbing. Evil new shoes.

As soon as the song ended, a friend of Isaac's stepped up and slapped him playfully on the shoulder. Isaac introduced me, but all I could hear was the thump of the next song. The two talked with their heads together.

Slipping from Isaac's grip, I knelt to loosen the laces on my shoes. My feet thanked me for the relief. It was actually a blessing for Isaac's friend to be there. Knowing Isaac, he would have offered to rub my feet, and there was no way I was going down that road.

Before I stood, I caught a glimpse of Isaac's friend's tattoo as he passed something into Isaac's hand. I chuckled inside. A cartoon seal . . . people do strange things. I'm glad Isaac isn't tattooed.

The man left. Isaac lifted my hands in his. "Sorry about that." His smile melted over me. I forgot my aching feet for the moment.

We danced.

He kissed me lightly on my front steps when he brought me home. I'm glad I went to the party.

Smiling . . . Me



November 14th, Saturday

Isaac invited me to lunch. A very important lunch. Read on.

Isaac picked me up, his SUV gleaming with a recent detail job. I wore my new jeans and cream-colored sweater. My gray booties were perfect. (Thankfully I had had enough time to shower and clean up after helping my neighbor clean out her spare bedroom. When I took over the cookies, she asked if I could come back and help today.)

Isaac was in his element. Holding the door for me, we entered an elegant Chinese restaurant. The atmosphere was mysterious, dim lighting, golden dragons, all the servers dressed in black. Isaac impressed our server by ordering in Mandarin as we sat side by side in a corner booth. Then all his attention was on me. His black eyes sparkled in the low light. He reached across the red satin tablecloth and took my hand. It was warm and thrilling to sit there holding his hand.

I smiled and blushed as he stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. This must be right. We make the perfect pair.

He leaned in close.

“Tell me your thoughts,” Isaac spoke low, his breath tickling my ear. I couldn’t resist rubbing the sensation from my ear. I may have looked a little childish rubbing my ear, but I am okay with that.

I whispered back to him, “I think I should have ordered chow mein instead of trusting you to order for me.” I turned and met his sparkling eyes with a smile.

“You’re beautiful, you know.” He gave my hand a little squeeze.

A ripple of happy emotions danced up from my troubling toes.

His lips found my face and he kissed me gently on the cheek. With my heart gliding, I smiled. Tilting his head, he kissed my eyelids sweetly.

I turned away, not wanting to encourage him.

Thankfully, our food arrived. I can’t tell you what I ate, but It was amazing.

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