

## LOVE TOO SOON

I'd just returned from the Coffee Buzz with two Americanos and a hangover. I'd asked Hunter what he wanted while he was still strangled in the lavender sheets, his hairless chest banded in cotton, his superbly arched left foot dangling off the bed. I was relieved when he answered with a pithy, "Americano."

I'm a bartender, and I like people who order simple drinks or, better put, hate people who don't. There'd been a man in front of me at the Buzz, horseshoe mustache, biker-shorts, who'd ordered a macchiato that was slightly less complicated than an mRNA vaccine and replete with a triple shot, almond milk, a dash of cinnamon, and then, God help me, "two sprinkles of Splenda." I wanted to throw a sharp stick between the spokes of his Cannondale as he rode away, Byzantine macchiato in hand. But I had Hunter's chest and foot waiting, and there wasn't a stick handy.

Now, we sipped our unfussy coffees at my kitchen table and looked at the collection of novels that lined the east wall of my San Diego studio. I'd told him that I was an avid reader, but he still seemed surprised to see actual, tangible books. Though his lips moved slightly as he read the titles, he looked sturdily appealing in his navy boxers, shirtless, with a morning dew look in his brown eyes and his black hair a tangled mess. We'd been dating for two weeks, but this was the first time we'd woken up together, the first time we'd braved the candor of puffy eyes, unbrushed teeth and direct sunlight.

He cupped his Americano with both hands and took long, slurpy sips by leaning over the front edge. "I love you, Maia," he said.

Was he serious? After two *weeks*. I didn't even hear a *think* or a *could* in there. I blushed, blinked, sipped, looked away and wanted to plummet into the black abyss in my cup. Had he made this declaration when drunk or during sex, it could and would be lawfully be ignored. (At the bar, some drunk told me they loved me at least once a month.) But this was a cool and sober assertion of fact, as intentional as a press release. Okay, the Americano was good but not *that* good.

I wasn't even sure if we were girlfriend and boyfriend. Sure, we seemed headed in that direction, but that destination was many long miles and a number of grimy rest stops away. Why did he sell himself so cheaply? By declaring his love at such an early stage, he'd diminished it. Was he some twenty-dollar man-whore in his spare time? Did he equate sex with love like some sort of arrested Victorian? If so, he could just Middlemarch his way right out of my apartment. I'd only declared my love once, to my boyfriend in college, and he broke up the day after I graduated. (He now lived in Finland, forsaking me, my English major, and sunlight for a woman weightlifter who could out drink Hemingway.)

"I just wanted you to know that," Hunter said. As if I hadn't heard it the first time. As if I hadn't purposefully ignored it.

God, he was persistent. And confident. And in touch with his feelings. And honest about them. All laudable characteristics that are rarely found in conjunction with testicles -- which I would've doubted he possessed if I didn't have unimpeachable evidence to the contrary. I nearly told him to get out of my apartment.

Okay, yeah, until now, there wasn't anything I didn't like about him. He didn't wear his shoes on the wrong feet or have a fascination with ear wax. But we'd never even been to a restaurant together. How did he treat waiters? I bet he's one of those people who asks for the server's name and proceeds to beckon them all through the meal with unreasonable demands and unfunny jokes. Many of my friends were waiters and that was a deal breaker. So *sayonora*, Hunter baby.

Did he even know what love was? Did I? My parents had divorced after twelve ugly years and my ex-boyfriend was engaged to the Finnish Schwarzenegger, so who's to say? What about Hunter's family? He hadn't mentioned them at all. I bet they'd disowned him because of a devious reverse mortgage scheme he'd attempted. And even with the money he made screwing his relations, he's probably still struggling under a massive quantity of debt to support his ketamine addiction. That's why he always seemed so upbeat. So, sure, the sex was great, but does it really count when powered by ketamine?

I'd hadn't spoken since his declaration, and it was becoming increasingly clear that I had to say something.

"How's your coffee?" I finally blurted.

He chuckled, acknowledging my dodge. "It's great. No complaints"

"When you order coffee, do you always get the same thing?"

"Yep, straight-up Americano. I'm not one of those people who takes half an hour to order a cup of coffee."

He padded to the bedroom in his navy boxers with his black hair tousled and his chest as hard and sculpted as Michelangelo's David. He was kind, Hunter was, and fun and not stupid and he smelled like maple syrup when he sweat. I swallowed the bitter remains of my coffee and wondered how he felt about Finland and weightlifters and sunlight and if this love that he'd so easily declared was even possible in a sun-drenched, surf-side city at this late stage of American capitalism. They say sun is a disinfectant, but I wasn't so sure.