

## “Classy Girls”

“Classy Girls” by the Lumineers, is a fun song and has a recurring role throughout this story.

To hear the song, go to YouTube  
and search Classy Girls, Lumineers

## Prologue

My sister, Sylvie, had never broken the most minor law until the day she drove off a cliff into the Truckee River, taking my brother-in-law, Devin McCabe, with her. I suspect I know what led to her one brief crime spree, but it's only speculation. I'll never know for sure.

Their daughter, Brontë, was four and a-half, and a witness. She hasn't spoken a single word since. You could say the whole thing was a tragic accident, except that Sylvie flagged down a Good Samaritan, complained of car trouble, and asked if Brontë could sit in the backseat of his Jeep Grand Cherokee to stay warm until AAA arrived. Sylvie tucked a blanket around her daughter, put her little backpack beside her, and in the dark she wrote my phone number in purple ink on Brontë's palm. Then she climbed behind the wheel of her rusting Ford Fairlane, gunned the accelerator, and went right over the cliff, like Thelma and Louise, into the river below.

You could also say it was an odd thing that Devin sat compliantly in his seat while Sylvie pulled off her deadly deed. But the autopsy showed that he was dead before they ever took the plunge. So, what we did say was, man, we never saw that coming.

“Big day, huh?”

Brontë looks at me with those wide eyes, so like her mom’s.

“Okay, I got you this.” I hand her a cell phone, not new, and not one that has an i-Anything in front of its name. It’s just a phone, the kind that will generate lots of smarmy comments from her classmates should they see it, which is highly unlikely. “You know, for emergencies.”

Brontë shrugs, as if to say, “Sure, okay,” and gives that little smile that charms me every single time. How I love this girl. “If you need me for anything, just text. My number is programmed into the phonebook. Right here.” I show her how to access it.

She takes it from me and slips it into a pocket of her backpack.

“The bus should be at the stop in five minutes. Better get going.” Brontë pivots on a tennis-shoed heel, but I say, “Hey, hug,” and she turns and slips into my open arms. I kiss the top of her head. Her hair is silky and smells like a fruit bowl. Her squeeze lasts half a second, then she’s out the door.

I watch until she rounds the corner, aware that my heart is beating faster than normal, faster than Brontë’s, I have no doubt. I wouldn’t go back to middle school for anything, not even a backstage pass at a John Mayer concert. Especially the first day. But Brontë seems as normal as ever. And yes, I’m fully aware that *normal* is a relative term in Brontë’s case. As it

is in my case, and in the case of any number of people I know. But okay, especially in Brontë's case.

In the kitchen, I pour the last of the coffee into my mug, add enough creamer to turn it a tawny brown, then head to my office. The term "office" is a stretch. It's actually the second bedroom of the two-bedroom duplex Brontë and I share. One side of the closet holds a tall, narrow book case, stuffed with office supplies and books and such. The other half holds what clothes of mine won't fit into the other bedroom closet. Neither Brontë nor I are clothes hounds, but the closets are small, as are the bedrooms, the one bathroom, the kitchenette. In fact, the whole place is small. But so is the rent, which was the duplex's most appealing factor when I moved in eleven years ago. That and the huge camphor tree in the front that's probably twice as old as I am. Of course, when I moved in it was just me, and I worked in a real office downtown, which gave me hours of breathing room. I didn't mind a small nest to come home to. That isn't the case now. Hasn't been for seven and a-half years.

I boot up the computer that sits atop a boxy desk that's a tad too low. It makes me hunch, and as I sit there, I have to remind myself to sit up straight, or else. I envision myself an old woman, bent, with a hump on my back. The hunchback of Auburn, California, that's me. I tug open the file drawer that holds my current accounts. Old files are stored in any one of the three mismatched file cabinets I bought at garage sales and squeezed into the free space on the south wall. I could use a fourth cabinet, but there's nowhere to put it. So, I learn to cram. I'm pretty good at that. In more ways than one.

Today's Tuesday, the day after Labor Day, so that means I have stops at Teresi's, Winchester's, A-1 Builders, and half a dozen other clients to pick up their invoicing. It also means lunch with my best friend CJ. I text to find out the time, which always depends on her schedule more than mine. I wait five minutes, and when I haven't heard back I text again. *You there?*

The answer comes back, *I'm inherent.*

*Inherent?*

*No, I'm inbred.*

*No, you aren't. I promise.*

*Here! Sheesh! I'm here!*

*Gotta love that auto-correct. What time are we meeting?*

*10:30.*

*10:30??*

*Yep. Sorry.*

I don't take time to finish my coffee, but hurry to the shower. I check my phone before stepping in, again as soon as I step out, and yet again after drying my hair. I don't know why I expect to hear from Brontë, or what I expect her to say. I'm clearly the more agitated one between us. I need to chill.

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That's what CJ tells me when we meet for a ridiculously early lunch because of her schedule today.

"Chill."

"You obviously don't remember middle school."

CJ stabs a piece of arugula. "Oh, I remember."

"Well then?"

"She'll be fine. She's going to school with kids she knew

from last year.”

“As well as any number of sixth graders from all the other elementary schools in town, that she didn’t know last year.”

“You talked to the administrator, right?”

“And her teachers, and her counselor.”

“Then she’ll be fine.”

“I gave her a phone.”

“You gave her—” CJ breaks out laughing.

“For texting, CJ.” I use my most defensive tone with her.

“Well. Okay,” she says, but the laughter hasn’t left her eyes. “You’re a good aunt, Belle. A good surrogate mom, though how that happened is the great mystery.” CJ knows my mother. “Not in spite of, but because of.” She repeats my mantra back to me.

“It’s as easy to learn what not to do by watching someone, as it is to learn what to do. I chose not to emulate. And it’s not that my mom’s so bad. She’s just ...” I shrug. “Self-absorbed.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“She’s put a lot into her career. Easy to see why it would come first.”

“Look at you defending her all of a sudden. She practically left you and Sylvie to raise yourselves. That wasn’t right.”

I lean back in the booth and look away. “She’s trying hard to make up for it. I’m trying hard to let her.”

“How nice.”

My phone vibrates and I jump. But it isn’t Brontë, just a client leaving a message.

CJ laughs at my phone, but I’m used to being teased about it, and not just from CJ. “When are you going to trade in that

dinosaur?"

"It gets the job done."

"Uh huh. So, who's Brontë's counselor?"

"Sally Whitman."

"Perfect. Perfect." She waves an A-OK sign at me.

"I was going to request her, but she was already assigned to Brontë."

"She'll watch out for her. Heart of gold, that one."

"Yeah."

We split the check right down the middle, as always, regardless of what we order, and say goodbye in the parking lot. CJ toots her horn as she drives off in her lovely, black Infinity. I smile as I always do at the ridiculous bumper sticker displayed on her car. CJ is meticulous in every aspect of her life. Even so, that bumper sticker—which in itself is so out of character—tells you everything you need to know about CJ Davies. It says: "I dream of living in a better world where a chicken can cross the road without having her motives questioned." That little declaration defines CJ in a nutshell, or more aptly, an eggshell. A clown in Miss Prissy's clothing.

I have to make one more stop before I head back home to work. As I pull onto Highway 49, which runs through the heart of Auburn, I think for the umpteenth time, that's what I love about a small town. Familiarity. I didn't go to school here, like CJ did, which is how she knows Mrs. Whitman and half the town's population, but I've been here long enough to feel like I belong. More than I ever did in Truckee. After Sylvie's accident—and *accident* is the only way I can think of it, no matter what the sheriff's report said—any tie I had to my

hometown was permanently severed. Even more so after Mom left, which was a blessing, because that meant I never had to go back. Even now, I take the long way to North Shore when I visit Mom.

That was the most vulnerable I'd ever seen Paula Nichols, those early days after the so-called undeniable truth came out about the unspeakable thing Sylvie had done—though I'll never believe it—because Mom wasn't there for Sylvie when Sylvie needed her most. None of us were. But Mom regained her footing soon enough, and she does a superb job at masking the fallout. Much better than I've been able to. But then, I'm the one who sees Sylvie in the eyes of her daughter every single day. A blessing and a curse it is, only because it reminds me how much I miss my sister, but I'll take the bitter with the sweet if it means having Brontë with me.

Cole's Electric is in a strip mall on the east side of Lincoln Way. They're my newest client. The front office is empty—Edra must have taken an early lunch too—but Ty steps out of his office, beckoned by the door chime.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey, yourself," he says, with that great smile of his. Ty's a charmer, and, yes, I'm charmed. "Glad I didn't miss you."

"Oh?" I don't know why that makes me want to smile. I press my lips together to keep from it, and put on a business face.

"Yeah, we have a new guy. Wes something or other." Ty rifles through some papers on Edra's desk, then picks up a W-4. "Stilman. Wes Stilman. And this is from Edra." He hands me the folder with the invoices and time cards, and taps his

cheek. “She had a dentist appointment.”

“Oh, okay.” I wait, thinking he might say why he’s glad he didn’t miss me, but when he doesn’t, I say okay again, feeling like a ditz, and turn to go.

“Hey, um, Isabella.” When I turn back around he’s tucking his hands into his front jeans pockets. “The guys and I are playing a gig Friday night at the amphitheater. You know, by the library? Wondered if you’d like to go.”

“A gig? You’re in a band?”

He shrugs. “Me and some guys.”

“What do you play?”

“Guitar. And I sing.”

“You sing?” I don’t know why this surprises me. “Wow.”

“A little.” He shrugs again. “You know.”

“Wow,” I say again, before I can catch myself. Ridiculous, I know. I must sound like a teeny bopper to him.

“So, is that a yes?” He smiles that smile again.

No. Huh-uh. No way. That’s what I hear in my head, but that’s not what comes out of my mouth. “Sure. Why not?”

Why not? *Why not?* I do some quick calculations, and if I recall correctly, Brontë was in fourth grade the last time I had a date. But in all fairness to myself, it’s taken this long to get over it. That aside, there are plenty of reasons why not. Like, this isn’t a good time in my life. A guy would just be a distraction. And Brontë. She’s my focus these days.

“Great. I’ll pick you up at, say, six-thirty? It takes a while to set up.”

“Great. And you can just call me Iz. Or Belle.”

He nods. “Belle it *Iz*, then,” he says, laughing at his little

joke.

And I ask myself what have I done and how can I get out of it? But that smile is really something. I try to match it with one of my own, but I'm pretty certain I'm not even close. "Six-thirty." Great. "See you then."

"Oh, hey, could you write down your address?" He snatches a pen and a sticky note off Edra's desk. "And phone number?"

I jot them down, using the folder as a desk, and hand them back to him.

"Great. See you Friday. Oh, and it's casual."

"Casual is good. I'll be ready."

I start my car, back out of the parking lot, and have an intense conversation with myself all the way home. Why did I say yes? Why not say yes? Well, because. My lips keep moving, even when I hit the red light where Lincoln crosses Auburn Folsom Road. And that's saying something, because I don't even sing along with my CDs when I'm stopped at a red light, for fear the driver next to me will think I'm talking to myself. Which I do. All the time. But when you work by yourself all day and live with a girl—terrific though she is—who doesn't talk, you take what you can get.

What was I thinking? And what do I do with Brontë while I'm on this date? Well, that's not really much of a problem. I'm sure Verlie would love to have her for a few hours. It amazes me how well she and Brontë get along, how well they communicate.

I'm nearly home when I decide the only thing to do is accept it. I have a date Friday. I'll go, hopefully enjoy the music,

and that will be that. Nothing says I have to repeat my folly.

So. Casual. I do a mental inventory of my closet's contents. New jeans would be nice, but that's not going to happen. It'll be jeans just the same. And maybe the pumpkin-colored blouse. But then, what would I wear for a jacket? It'll be cool before the concert's over. Is it a concert? No, it's a gig. He called it a gig. So how long does a gig last? No matter, I'll need a jacket, just in case. So, if not the pumpkin blouse, maybe the—

Man. CJ is not going to believe this.

I try hard to focus on payroll for Cole's Electric, but I can't get Friday night out of my head. I should call Ty and tell him I checked my calendar and Friday won't work after all. Just get it over with so I can get to work. The number to Cole's Electric is right here on the tab of their folder. I pick up my cell phone and put in the first three numbers. But this is the coward's way out. No, I won't call. I'll tell him when I drop off the payroll checks. That's only right. He asked in person. I should tell him no in person. Okay, it's settled.

But then I wonder, what kind of music does he play?