

*Bee Balms
& Burgundy*

A NOVELLA

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First Edition

Author's Note

To every woman who has fought the battle,
and the subsequent self-doubt and fear,
win or lose...

I offer my respect.

Peace & Love

Nelson

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Four

I arose at ten minutes after ten St. Paul time. It's always so strange for me to awake in the place where I grew up. While the memories supply warm reminders of family, friends, and productive youth, they are, at the same time, somewhat disturbing. Memorabilia reiterates a lifetime already lived, a phase completed and put in the books; it demands a step *down* the evolution ladder. I'd always defined my life by my ability to progress beyond what I'd been "given" to that which I'd "chosen" for myself. In this respect, the Twin Cities acted as the inherited, Vancouver as the earned.

To my amazement, the sun shone through the

8 curtainless windows just beside my bed. My mother had redone the wallpaper and carpet in the room—my former bedroom and now the guest bedroom—prior to her Christmas visit to see me eight months earlier, and, for some reason, had yet to adorn the windows with proper tapestries. Perhaps she waited for me to do it, or perhaps she just had too many other things piled upon her plate.

I made my way downstairs and into the kitchen. I noticed the windowsill included yet another limp chickadee. This had become a running joke at my mother's house. Although she felt sincere empathy for the adorable little creatures, she couldn't help but question the animals' intelligence. Like clockwork, my mother would clean her kitchen windows and within hours another chickadee would attempt to employ the hanging plants as a resting perch, subsequently coldcocking himself against the glass. Sometimes, the bird survived the first bid but didn't get the message. After knocking himself silly, he'd come to shortly thereafter. Then, he'd give it another try, only to discover the futility in a second attempt. My mother could've placed the plants elsewhere. In fact, she'd tried to find a "safer" location several times. However, the plants needed sunlight to survive; therefore, they belonged window-side. The chickadees yearned to alight upon the plants; hence, they'd meet their fate. My mom and I expected PETA

to show up at the door any day and demand that we kill all her plants to save the chickadees from themselves. Then, the Sierra Club would come calling.

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I stepped through the sliding glass door, and picked the chickadee from the windowsill. I threw him in the woods, then headed back inside and proceeded to wash my hands. A note from my mother lay next to the sink. She was “running errands” until noon, and she wanted me to take a package to the next-door neighbor’s house—the Lawsons’ house. The parcel itself sat on the counter. So did a twenty-dollar bill. No matter how old I got, no matter how wealthy I became, my mother had a difficult time grasping the fact that I, at age thirty-two, could provide for myself. I thought it a cute gesture, but...

I pulled a glass from the cupboard and the Aloe Vera juice from the fridge—which my mother stocked exclusively for my visits, as she hated the stuff. I poured and drank, then headed up to the spare bathroom to take a shower.



I rang the doorbell and knocked on the front door several times, but no one answered. Yet, a car occupied the driveway. I made my way around the house, through the fence gate, and into the backyard.

At once, beauty deluged my senses. I recognized

the wafting sachet of sage and chive. I couldn't decipher, however, the abundant accent aromas—they teased me from every direction. A two-layer musical arrangement serenaded me; chickadees on vocals tracked over the sensuous-yet-flirty rhythm of breeze caressing leaves. And the colors...It looked as though Monet had used the yard as his test canvas. Everything bloomed at once. Up and down the flowerbeds, the red-to-violet magic thrived.

In my opinion, the Lawsons' backyard hinted at what an urban rainforest might look like up close. Large antique elms and oaks towered over the plot. The mid-morning sun oozed through strategically placed narrow shoots amongst them, creating a spotlight effect upon the parcel's far side.

The lawn itself measured a half acre—an inclined dog leg, with the dog's foot pointed toward the fence gate through which I'd just stepped. Weathered four-by-six-inch oil-treated railroad ties embraced ascending and descending flowerbeds that created a natural staircase shelf throughout the pitched yard. A six-foot cedar fence ran the lot's entire perimeter.

I made my way along the stone path and through the arched tree-limb tunnel that sheltered it—almost expecting a committee of parrots, monkeys, and panthers to welcome me. I stepped to the deck, and headed toward a bustling flowerbed at its far end.

She stood with her back to me, tending to the

many blossoms that enveloped her bare legs. Ani DiFranco's "Here for Now" resonated with moderate volume from a small, portable CD player set upon the deck. She wore a pink bandana on her head, faded denim shorts, and a forest-green Minnesota Wild tee shirt. Although five-foot-six, she couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds.

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I'd known Mia for what seemed like forever, although I hadn't seen her in almost two years. We'd grown up next door to one another, two school grades apart. With me being an only child and Mia much younger than both sisters—who'd married wealthy brothers and now lived out east with teenage children—we'd served as a mock step-sibling duo for much of our lives; I assumed the big brother role, and she portrayed the little sister.

I'd held an affinity for Mia since our friendship's first hour. She truly qualified as the best person I'd ever known. She gave her time to everything; a woman who brought home a stray anything then spent the next week in a frenzy trying to place the animal with just the right family. Afterward, no matter her age, Mia would always cry when she had to bid farewell to her furry little friend.

I pulled up behind her. "Hey, stranger."

She turned around, pruners in hand, gloves stained with dirt. "Nicky." She swiped her forehead with forearm. "God, I haven't seen you forever."

I stood with crate in hands, at the flowerbed's edge. "You out for the weekend?"

She studied her pruners as she fondled them. "Um..." She looked to me. "I'm living here again."

"Oh." Odd, my mother hadn't mentioned anything about Mia moving home. "Listen, the UPS guy dropped this with my mom for some reason." I handed her the wooden, breadbox-sized parcel.

"Thank you." She shook it. "Wonder what's in it." She inspected the crate for a moment, then grinned. "Guess we'll find out later." Mia stepped down from the foot-high bed, and set the crate on a small three-plank bench mounted upon the deck. "God, how are you? Your mom told me you were coming home for a few days."

"I'm good. And you?"

Mia giggled, as she looked down at herself. "Skinny, as you can see."

"I guess so." I didn't know what happened to her weight. Mia had always been an avid runner with a slender physique, but I'd never seen her this *thin*. While her legs remained relatively toned, her torso appeared to have withered. I just couldn't picture her, *Mia*, with an eating disorder.

"Are you in hurry?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"Please stay and chat for a while. I've been looking so forward to seeing you."

“Ah...OK, for a bit.”

“Look, my bee balms are blooming.” She glanced beyond her shoulder.

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“Really?”

“Yeah, look.” Mia pointed the pruners toward the bed from which she’d just stepped. “They’re my new favorite flower—and they’re blooming! It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve seen in a long time.”

Hmm. To me they looked more like scarlet-hued tarantulas being electrocuted atop an eighteen-inch stem. Nonetheless, I played along. “Great.”

Mia smiled, as if she read my thoughts. “You have no idea what they represent, do you?”

“Guess I don’t.”

“I planted them the morning I went in.”

“Went in?”

“The day I began my treatment.”

“Treatment?” I grinned. “You mean like rehab?”

Mia giggled. “No, not rehab. You’re too funny.” She gazed at the bee balms while she spoke, her tone placid. “No, when I began treatment for the cancer—for my breast cancer.”

I almost swallowed my tongue. If only her house were brick, I’d have run into it at full sprint, head-first. And I had a notion me ol’ mum knew about this and just *happened* to overlook telling me.

“Oh, man. I’m sorry, Mia. *Really, really* sorry. I had no idea.”

She looked to me. “How could you know? You couldn’t have known. Don’t worry about it.”

I motioned toward the bee balms. “So they represent the beginning of your treatment?”

Mia turned and again eyed the spidery blooms. “Not exactly...” She crossed her arms. With index finger and thumb on chin, she surveyed the bed. “I planted them last fall, when I began chemo, yeah.” She placed both hands in pockets. “But...” She turned to me. “I wasn’t sure I’d still be here to see them bloom.” She smiled. “And I’m still here.”

What lesson did I need to learn, and why did I suddenly need to learn it? For dumping Sonja? Come on. I felt like *I* was going to die.

Mia posed her best “slacker” parody. “Don’t look so sad, dude. We’re here today, aren’t we, bro?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “We appear to be.”

“Well then, let’s take pleasure in the moment.”

I motioned toward the flowers. “By the way, why are they called ‘bee balms’?”

“That’s just a nickname.” Mia turned toward the bed. “The flower’s real name is ‘monarda,’ but ‘bee balm’ is what most people call them. Because they attract bees, you know? They also attract hummingbirds and butterflies sometimes.” She waved the pruners twice. “Come here.” Mia stepped up into the bed she’d previously occupied. She whispered, “Look at this.” She knelt, then pointed her pruners

toward a blossom. “See, ‘bee balm.’”

I too stepped into the flowerbed and squatted. I lowered my head toward the blossom. I squinted just a bit. For some reason, I was awestruck.

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There, upon a seemingly shock-induced scarlet-hued tarantula’s leg, an insect in sleeveless fur coat laden with black and yellow horizontal stripes hung by what appeared to be her two front “paws”; she swayed to and fro while she climbed against her own inertia—as if she performed pull-ups.

“Wow! Cool.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Mia leaned over a blossom, and closed her eyes. She filled her lungs with its scent. “Smell them. Take a good long whiff.”

I leaned to an adjacent blossom, and inhaled. A scent resembling lemonade-bathed juniper leaves feathered my nose. “Mmm, smells good.”

Mia flexed her eyebrows. “I know. Smells sexy, doesn’t it?”

I smiled. “Why are they your favorite?”

“Oh, so many reasons. One, because I love their color; they’re so rich and yummy looking.” A fey state enveloped her eyes, as she cradled between her fingers the blossom I’d sniffed. “But also because they propagate so readily. They’re always breeding more and more life.” Mia brushed her thumb along a petal, mesmerized. “They don’t die. They just keep multiplying their beauty and energy.”

I stared at her. It didn't take a Pen Award winner to find this statement's metaphor. "OK, then it's *my* favorite flower now too."

Mia giggled. "And what *was* your favorite?"

I chuckled. "Didn't have one."

"OK, good. Now bee balms are your favorite. And if you're around next June you can see my lovely evening primrose bloom too. They're a delicious shade of yellow." Mia pointed toward the flowerbed next to the bee balms' living quarters. "They're the green plants right there."

I fixed upon Mia, as she surveyed the out-of-season primrose and then the bee balms. She appeared unaffected by her own statement; if I did indeed see her "lovely evening primrose bloom," *might* it be without my garden guru at my side?

She turned to me and winked. "They're little propagators too. They breed like rabbits."

I smirked. "Is that so?"

"That's the truth, Mr. May."

Mia got up, as did I. We stepped from the flowerbed to the deck. Mia took two strides to the bench and stopped. She eyed the crate for a moment while she caressed it. I stood just behind her. She turned around, with tender gaze.

"Nicky..."

I waited for her to complete the sentence.

"Do you think..."

Again, I waited for her to complete the question. She stood speechless, in bashful manner.

I grinned. "Mia, what?"

"Is there any way you might..." Her eyes followed the pendulum motion her foot made as it swept back and forth across a railroad tie. She exhaled an anxious breath. Then, her eyes returned to mine. "Is there any chance you might have lunch with me?"

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I perused Mia's face; I studied her cheeks and their contours, her skin's clayish texture, her full and bowed but arid lips. I noticed not a single hair of her once-flowing, sandy-blond mane protruding from beneath the bandana.

But for all the stress her body had endured, the incessant physical *strain*, her eyes showed none of it. Cerulean-hued and dewy, they spoke of mysticism, dreams, and earnest intent. I'd been enraptured with these eyes since a young boy, and they now so self-consciously hung on my reply. Yet, I said nothing.

"You don't have to." Mia watched her foot as she jabbed it against the railroad tie. "I understand if you don't want to." She looked to me. "But if it means anything..." She sounded so gentle. "I'd really like you to stay for a while."

I'd learned about bee balms. I'd discovered delicious yellow evening primrose blossoms initiated summer. I'd witnessed a fur coat-clad insect demonstrate the art of pull-ups while she dangled from a

18 spider's leg. And I'd already grown somewhat restless with my stay at my mother's house after a mere fourteen hours. Hmm.

"Yeah, sure. Sounds intriguing."

Mia beamed. She removed her glove and took my hand. "Intriguing, yeah. I couldn't have said it better myself." She stepped toward the back door with me in tow. "This way, sir."

Thank you for reading Chapter 2 of *Bee Balms & Burgundy*. If you'd like to continue reading, you may pick up a copy in hard-cover or ebook by [clicking here](#).