

July 14: 5. Cubby Love

Rose needed to think, and she could not think with him there. Her brain stopped functioning when he looked at her with those puppy dog eyes. And, she needed a smoke really badly. She had been on her best behavior since the meeting, but the diminishing level of nicotine messed with her mind.

A conscious decision to quit drinking made her feel worse. She wanted to order at least wine for dinner, but an embarrassing loss of control in front of Peter frightened her. Although she would never admit it, Rose knew how silly she could behave when drunk. The trash press delighted in printing photos of her sitting or lying on the floor after an alcohol-induced spill. Even worse, the Internet contained many videos taken by clubbers with their mobile phones that showed her staggering around while laughing hysterically. So far, Peter had not commented on her drinking, but his choice of soda spoke volumes. Nicotine displays no embarrassing aftereffects, so it had to do for now.

Rose got the ashtray containing cigarettes and lighter out of the hiding place in the fridge, and sat down on the bed. *Ah, what a kick.* The air conditioner going full blast hopefully would get rid of the stench.

This is totally too good to be true. Peter's friendly, if somewhat sad, puppy dog eyes touched at her core. A devoted fan who was not a stalker, but a gentleman. *A kind, gentle, funny, intelligent, funny, good-looking, handsome, funny guy who loves me!* These things only happen in Hollywood movies, not "IRL," as her friends would text. *In real life,* nothing concludes after 90 minutes with a happy end. There had to be a catch.

Can you surf the Web on an iPod? With her iPhone certainly, but what about its smaller cousin? That picture got to her. Did he download it *after* he recognized her? *How?* He did not touch his iPod until the last room. *Voice commands, maybe?*

Peter did not speak to it, either. How did he get her picture on there?

Anna. Her real estate agent knew about the trip and the meeting with Peter. She took her there and had a week to arrange things. But, arrange what? What perfidious plan unfolded here? Embarrass Rose? Spy on her to sell a story to the press?

The ashes of the cigarette had grown precariously long. Peter would notice cigarette ashes on the sheets. Or smell them. She grabbed the ashtray. Her eyes fell on the hotel logo, and she seized up. Anna had booked the room under her own name and checked in, so Rose's did not appear in the register. Anna had all the time in the world to prep the room. Mechanically, Rose dropped the ashes in the ashtray. Her heart raced.

A hidden camera thing, maybe? Punk Rose for some comedy TV show. Or, worse, did someone hire Peter as a gigolo to seduce her into having sex for a video? A raw, pornographic sex video for sale on the Internet. There for all the world to gawk over. Like the ones with celebrity heiress Paris Hilton or buxom Bay Watch star Pamela Anderson.

The cigarette failed to calm Rose. She could still feel the blood drumming at her temples. Her hands felt clammy. She scanned the ceiling and walls. The light-green wallpaper with raised patterns slowed her progress. Nothing obvious, but anybody can buy nanny cams, cameras hidden in teddy bears or dolls. She peered around the room. Nothing obvious. *In the flat-screen TV on the desk?* She could not tell. A small camera could hide anywhere.

Her eyes fell on the big mirror in the hall, and she froze again. Rose's breathing stopped. *A two-way mirror! Like in Mission: Impossible to film the interrogation.* Anna only had to rent two rooms next to each other and drill a hole. The mirror did not provide a view of most of the bed, though. *It just does not compute!*

Rose herself scheduled the second meeting. The conflict with soccer practice showed Anna had other plans. Peter tried to leave. Rose asked him to stay. Does not work with the conspiracy theory. She thought about the Mel Gibson movie full of conspiracies involving secret government agencies. Peter the master spy? She imagined him in a tuxedo saying, "My name is Bond, Peter Bond." He sure looked good in a tuxedo.

Her eyes wandered around the rest of the room and fell on...Peter's iPod, lying on the floor between the sofa and the armchair. It must have fallen out of his shirt pocket when he leaned over to try to kiss her. Rose stared at the device as her heart raced. *Wrong! Verboten. Exciting.*

She needed to know. What government secrets did it hold? *Agent Double Rose Seven On Her Majesty's Secret Service.* She sat down on the carpet next to the iPod, with her back up against the seat of the armchair, and stared at the device some more. Finally, she picked it up.

Peter had not locked the screen. *Memo to self: turn on lock on my iPhone.* The drumming in her head annoyed her. Her sweaty fingers slipped on the wheel, but she managed to click her way to "All Photos." Rose hesitated. *Eighteen pictures.* The icon showed some other woman. This terrible pounding in her chest. Why could she not breathe?

She clicked again. Rose recognized some well-known actresses in the spread. More clicks to look at each picture. There: hers. *If he noticed, I'm wearing almost the same blouse as on the picture?* The embroidered chiffon so revealing, yet the cotton underneath blocking all lusting eyes. Except for the deep cutout. Sexy and demur in one. *Love it!*

Click. Another picture of her, in the dress Rose wore to the SAG awards, given by the Screen Actors Guild, her labor union.

Click. And another picture. A glamour shot from her last premiere where her ears showed off those twinkling diamond stars. Her eyes lingered on the image.

Click. Some unknown woman.

Three out of eighteen. Almost 20 percent. Major! He really likes me. Among all these beauties, he elevated me. Moi! Threefold. She looked up and admired her smile in the hallway mirror. The pictures did not tell her much about Peter, though.

What else could she find? Rose tried the "Video" section. "No Videos" appeared on the display. *Men!* A woman would have videos of her boyfriend, all her girlfriends, her pets, and her family.

On to the "Music" section. The "Artists" list appeared with the blue highlight on megastar entertainer Madonna. Rose also liked her.

She scrolled up. The iPod made its usual clicking noise with every entry. Madness, Luther Vandross, Loona. No rhyme or reason to his music selection. Her eyes fell on a name. *No. Don't say. Unreal.* She did a double take.

Lindsay Lohan? Who has Lindsay Lohan on his iPod? What next? Paris Hilton? Heart don't fail me now!

Jealousy overcame her.

"If he really loves me, he better have my albums on here, or else... I sold way more than those two..." she said out loud.

She hastily scrolled down. The rapid fire of the clicker came to a sudden stop. Norah Jones and no further. No Paris Hilton, and no Rose O'Rourc.

She slowly scrolled up again. Nirvana...New Kids On The Block...Nelly Furtado...Nazareth. *What a weird hodgepodge of styles: Grunge, boy band, songwriter, Hard Rock.* And what style is Natasha's Ghost? What a weird band name. How would the band of a dead woman sound? A shiver went down her spine. *Ah, like, too creepy. Next.* She turned the iPod wheel again.

'N Sync jumped out at her. A "Disney" guy? The Walt Disney Company with all their behavior clauses—past home to Rose and actress/singer Lohan. Maybe Peter worked for the studio, undercover, checking on whether artists maintain Disney's code of conduct. *Studio Gestapo!*

Or, traumatized as a kid by the Mickey Mouse Club, he turned into a psycho hunting down former Mouseketeers. Rose scrolled up. The list started with k.d. lang. Her former cohorts from the house of the mouse all missing: Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Hilary Duff. More questions than answers. Rose put the iPod back where she found it.

The ashes on her cigarette had reached a precarious state again. She had left the ashtray out of reach on the bed. *I should quit smoking.* Peter would be back soon. Rose needed time for the air to clear. She grabbed a plate from the coffee table, crushed the cigarette on it, and covered up the evidence. Her eyes fell on Peter's backpack under the chair.

Wrong, so totally wrong. Like someone searching her hand bag. An unforgivable invasion of privacy. But she needed to know, *what does a Disney stalker hide in his backpack?*

The main compartment only held brochures and papers. The center pouch contained a cloth bag and a shiny black box. Rose took out Peter's netbook. *The fatherlode: e-mails, calendar, address book, like, everything. The stereotypical "black book," wellspring of women's phone numbers. Well, the new age version, anyway.*

This is really, really, seriously wrong. The grinding noise from her teeth filled her head. She stared at the box. A foreboding fear inched toward her. "Brendon," she said. Rose and her ex-boyfriend had a big fight when he found out that she had read his e-mails. But that hole deserved it. After all, he did exchange racy messages with another woman. Maybe more. For months. Peter? Love at first sight or not, he and Rose were not a couple, yet. Still. An overwhelming curiosity mixed with fear of the unknown and trepidation for the forbidden. Her fingers pushed on the lid.

The air conditioner kicked in with a thud. Rose's head jerked back and to the left. She looked at her big, frightened eyes in the mirror while listening intently toward the door. Her breathing stopped again. The fear of a shoplifter,

merchandise in her red hands, crept through her body and paralyzed her arms.

Nothing. No Peter. *Fer sure has a password, anyway.* Rose put the netbook back into the backpack. Just one quick look into the black bag. Keys, keys, and more keys. *Okay, so he's a burglar, a security guard, or a real estate guy.*

A peek in the front compartment revealed a pen flashlight. *Neat for quickie burglaries.* Rose also found a measuring tape, pens, and a highlighter. And an assortment of candies...and condoms.

"Hmm, condoms and candies; kind of rhymes," she said to herself.

Fascinating discoveries, but overall, it had been a waste of time. Her gaze fell on the business card on the coffee table. *Peter Fox...Peter Fox.* An idea popped into her head. Rose grabbed the business card, jumped to the desk, and opened the lid of her white Apple MacBook. The screen flickered as her laptop computer awoke from standby. She googled "Peter Fox." Over 14 million entries. *Figures, with that name.*

Google offered his home page as first entry, though. *Interesting.* She clicked on the link and discovered the Web site of a musician. "VISUALS" stood out. Rose clicked through the pictures. *Definitely not him.*

She added "Berlin" to the search. Half a million entries. *Getting better, but still all about the musician.*

Rose added the business name from the card. Down to 54 results. The first entry looked like an advertisement for an apartment. She tried the next one. Also an ad. And the next one. Same thing. She compared the phone numbers in the margins to the card. The numbers matched.

Rose felt relief and disappointment at the same time. Peter was a real estate agent, after all. *Downer. A rock musician would be, like, so unreal.* Undercover actress incognito in Berlin meets undercover rock musician incognito. Probably a screen play there somewhere.

Or a porn king. With all that protection he's carrying, probably major in bed. Rose felt giddy and warm, like she had her fertile period. Good that Peter had so many condoms with him. *Can always make, like, balloon animals out of them when he's wiped out.* Rose chuckled.

"Probably a boy scout: Be prepared," she muttered. "Apropos, bed, where is he?"

She wondered if something happened to him. Did he get lost? Change his mind?

Rose closed the browser. *Definitely don't want Peter seeing this.* She locked the display, just in case, and closed the lid of her MacBook.

Time to clean up. She dumped the ashtray onto a plate, covered up everything, and walked the trays to the door. After checking through the peephole that the coast was clear, she stacked them outside. Cigarettes and lighter back in the ashtray and everything back into the fridge. Touch up her makeup. Everything tidy now for Peter. Rose sat down on the bed and immediately jumped up in fright.

My breath. Peter will smell the smoke when we kiss. She rushed into the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Some mouth wash. Done. She sat down on the bed again, put her arms around her knees, and rocked back and fourth.

RoRo felt young again; like a 16-year-old; like the first time; like puppy love. Peter with his puppy dog eyes and his childish disposition.

"Yes, puppy love," she said to herself.

Wasn't there some old song? But foxes have cubs.

"Cubby love, yes, cubby love."

Me like it. Memo to self: tell Peter about cubby love. When the time was right. Time. She looked to the door, hoping in vain to see a vision of him. Where was Peter?