

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing, on a dark, rocky shore. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a black top. The man has dark hair and is wearing a white shirt. In the background, a white lighthouse with a glowing light at the top stands on a grassy hill overlooking the ocean. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

The Lighthouse

Nicola
BEAUMONT

He wanted to put his arms around her, but he stopped himself. If he touched her, he might never let go...

“Malachi,” she said softly. “I need to ask you a question.”

She looked hesitant, and he wondered why. They could tell each other anything—she knew that.

He waited for her to speak.

“Have you ever thought about what it would be like if we ever became more than friends?”

His heart skipped a beat, and then pounded fast and hard against his ribcage. He envisioned taking her into his arms and telling her about all the love and passion he’d kept hidden these past years, but he wasn’t sure she could handle the total gospel, so he stalled while his mind searched for a version of the truth that wouldn’t panic her. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes the way you look at me, it makes me wonder.”

He stepped closer to her, acutely aware of the twigs snapping beneath his hiking boots. Something rustled through the canopy and landed with a soft whoosh, as it hit the blanketed forest floor. The breeze shifted the honey coloured tendrils of the hair framing her face. She smiled.

He didn’t. He couldn’t. She had to know this was serious. “What would you say if I said, yes, I’ve thought of it? Would you accept that, would you want it, or would it ruin our friendship?” He moved a step closer.

Her gaze dropped to his feet, and then traveled back to his face. She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

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by

Nicola Beaumont

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To J.C., my heart. Everything I am is yours.

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The Resurrection of Lady Somerset:

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best-selling author, Linda Lea Castle

*My eyes are upon you, O GOD, my Lord; in you I take
refuge...Guard me from the trap they have set for me,
from the snares of evildoers.*
—*Psalm 141:8-9*

Chapter One

Malachi watched the candlelight flick red-tinted shadows across Rachel's creamy skin. It bathed her in a variegated light that didn't do justice to her regal beauty. She fidgeted in the booth and smoothed out a crease in the red-checkered tablecloth.

He could see from his cloaked vantage across the room that there were no wrinkles in the cloth. She was just nervous.

And so she should be. Internet dates were dangerous. He'd always believed that, but the more Rachel had told him about this mystery guy, the more apprehensive Malachi had become. No way was he leaving her alone on this—even though she'd never forgive him if she caught him following her.

Something was just not right; he could feel it in his bones. He tried to warn her six months ago when she'd first mentioned the Frenchman...

Rachel burst into Malachi's house giggling like a schoolgirl, her face flush from the crisp April air. Plopping down on his tan suede sofa, she bubbled with infectious excitement, causing his lips to split into a wide grin.

“What’s up?” Seeing her happy made his heart do somersaults. Her eyes danced, her skin shone, and she became acutely aware of everything around her, elaborating on every minute detail.

“Is that a new shirt?”

He smiled, glanced down at the polo, and then looked back at her. “My sister sent it to me for my birthday last week.”

Her tongue popping out from between her lips. “I totally forgot.” She shrouded her mouth with her hands. “I’m sorry,” she bubbled between giggles.

“Sooo,” he coaxed her. “What’s up? I haven’t seen you this giddy since that time you sucked helium at Polly Anna’s birthday party when we were twelve.”

She laughed, but then, she always laughed when he mentioned Polly Anna. They’d grown up with the girl, and that was her real name. She was the pessimist of pessimists, which was the true irony. Never mind how sad it was that she had parents who’d named her Polly knowing full well, their surname was Anna.

He eyed Rachel in anticipation, unable to suppress a smile. He didn’t know why she was so thrilled, but he did know her mood was infectious. One day, when we worked up the nerve to tell her how he felt, he hoped to have the same affect on her.

“I’ve met someone.”

Her words sucker-punched him. All the air in his lungs evaporated. Rachel had had boyfriends before, but not since he’d realized his own feelings for her. Her admonition crushed every drop of hope he’d bottled.

He forced himself to smile, unable to breathe, unable to speak—not wanting to hear the details, but knowing that as her best friend, he had to appear enthusiastic.

“Malachi?” She was stone-still and staring at him with eyes dulled by concern.

He couldn’t find his breath.

“Malachi?” she asked again.

He tried to respond, but his entire body went paralytic, and he felt as if he were watching the scene from outside himself, outside of control.

She moved from the couch in what seemed like slow motion and, inching her way around the glass-top coffee table, came to kneel in front of his chair. She gazed up into his face. “Are you all right?”

He found the muscles that worked his mouth. It opened. Closed. Opened. No sound came out. And then his throat began to work. He cleared it.

“If you don’t say something to me, I’m going to slap you in the face.” She reared back her right hand.

His gaze shifted so he could focus on her face.

Such a beautiful face.

His jaw strained to move. “Met someone, huh?”

“Yes.” Her enthusiasm suddenly returned. She lowered her hand to his knee and nodded vigorously.

“You want to...” His voice sounded wooden, and his throat felt thick. His skin warmed underneath her touch. He absently brought up his own hand and patted hers, aware that his motor functions seemed to be working independently of his reason. “...tell me about it?”

She sat back on the floor, excitement oozing from her. “His name is Pierre. Yes, he’s French. He’s self-employed—some kind of mill, I’m not sure—and he lives in Normandy, but he spends a lot of time in Paris, and—”

“Paris?” Malachi’s senses came on full-force. “He lives in Paris?”

“Normandy.”

“Whatever.” He eyed her seriously. “I thought you said you’d *met* someone. How could you have met someone who lives in Paris?”

“Nor—”

“mandy. Yeah, whatever.” He leaned forward in the chair so he could get directly in her face. “Explain.”

She grinned, and it almost knocked him over. Why couldn’t she see how he felt? He suppressed a groan and waited for her to speak.

“I met him online. In a chat room? You know.”

“So, you haven’t actually met? You’ve just typed?”

“Yes, but we hit it off like you wouldn’t believe.”

“But you have no idea who you’re talking to. He could be some eighty year old pervert—or a girl! It’s the internet. You have to be careful. He could end up stalking you, or something.”

“I’m careful. I haven’t given him any information that would help him find me.” She giggled. “Isn’t it great? He’s great.”

Whoever this guy was, he had her wound up and ready to roll.

As if in response to his thought, Malachi’s stomach rolled on a drum of unease that had nothing to do with jealousy. He slid onto the floor with her and took her hand in his. “Listen to me, Rach. I don’t like this. You need to let this go, okay?” He kept his tone even and serious, devoid of any humour at all, hoping she would heed his warning without hesitation.

She didn’t. She discounted it with a warm laugh that reached out and drenched him in longing and dread.

A piece of him died inside.

He retreated to the chair, slid back in the seat and closed his eyes, trying to find a different tack. Her laughter died down, and he parted his eyelids to find her studying him.

"You're serious," she said. She shook her head slowly. "You can't be."

Frustration balled in his chest and fired out of his mouth like a bullet. "Of course, I am. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to talk to strangers? Don't you know how dangerous the internet can be? I mean, what are you thinki...C'mon, Rach, Don't look at me like that."

She dressed her face in a wounded expression that had remorse charging through him. He lowered his voice and evened his tone. "Look, I know you know what I'm talking about."

Her expression didn't change, and the remorse stopped its concourse and settled in his stomach, heavy and unyielding.

Once again, he slid onto the floor in front of her and rolled to his knees. Taking her hand in his, he gave her a comforting squeeze, but the pain emanating from her blue eyes remained. He moved to her side and put his arms around her. He had to make this right.

To his relief, she didn't resist, but laid her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I worry about you, that's all."

Silence owned the room for a long time; then she finally spoke. "I thought you'd be happy for me." Her voice was a tiny tendril of sound muffled by the blended fabric of his shirt.

The anguish in her tone pierced his heart. His harshness had hurt her, even though that wasn't what he'd intended.

He ignored the yearning her nearness produced and brought a hand to her hair, stroked the length of it in a gentle caress. She relaxed against his shoulder, and he gave her a comforting squeeze.

"I'm happy if you are, but I can't sit around and let you get hurt if there's anything I can do to prevent it."

He felt her smile against his shoulder, and relief settled into his bones. He caressed her hair again, slowly breathed in the flowery scent of her shampoo.

He didn't want to let her go, but he had to, and so he shifted away from her and put distance between them.

He gazed into her eyes, and she smiled.

"You like to look out for me," she said, "but you really don't have to. I'm a big girl."

He dropped his gaze, studied the short width of tan carpet that separated them. She had wanted him to get something besides tan—something besides Berber, but he'd wanted to cover the floor in a masculine carpet. Maybe a cool light green would have been nice. Maybe tan was too dull. Maybe Berber did look like indoor-outdoor carpet. She thought so.

He glanced back up at her. She was still looking at him.

Waiting.

The idea that he should tell her how he felt about her squeezed his heart. He opened and closed his mouth. There was nothing wrong with telling her. *Not* telling her wasn't working.

He opened his mouth again. "Promise me you'll be careful?"

She nodded and smiled. "I promise." She emphasized her oath by X-ing over her heart with her right index finger.

She was going to break this promise, he knew already. She wasn't going to be careful; she was going to be reckless.

And he was helpless to stop it.

He pried himself off the floor and walked into the kitchen. He hadn't let her sway him on the carpet, but all his small appliances were red. He supposed they looked masculine enough sitting atop the black marble countertop, but then, he hadn't much cared at the time. She'd been so enthusiastic about finding matching red toaster, coffee pot and can opener, that he hadn't had the heart to tell her he didn't really want red, especially since he'd gotten his way with the tan carpet. Her happiness was his first priority, but now she was going to start pulling away from him.

That reality iced the marrow in his bones. He told himself he was being irrational. She'd only just met this French guy. Her excitement was just the normal initial honeymoon stage. She wouldn't take the guy seriously. Thousands of miles separated them.

But something ominous told him this was different.

He padded to the cabinet, drew out a glass and filled it with tap water. He wasn't particularly thirsty; he just needed to get away from her for a minute—gather his thoughts. Rein his emotions.

He turned, and she was standing in the doorway smiling. The glass slipped. He flexed his fingers and got a grip—on the glass, at least.

"You know you'll always be my best friend, right?"

He sipped some water. Yeah, he knew, and that would be great, if that's all he wanted. He forced a smile. "Of course. Why?"

She shrugged. "No reason. Just wanted to be sure."

"Oh." He chugged the water, and then turned away from her. Outside the kitchen window, a sparrow hopped around the ground looking for something that obviously wasn't there.

Malachi could relate. He'd been looking for something in Rachel that evidently wasn't there: Love for him.

He rotated to face her. "So, what do you want to do today, friend?"

She threw him a look he couldn't comprehend, and then shrugged. "Let's go find something for your bedroom wall."

At least that activity was benign. At least they weren't talking about a guy who put a Cheshire smile on Rachel's soft plump lips. He mentally shook himself. "Sounds good."

An hour later they were standing in the gallery at Coleson's gazing up at an art print that looked more like a three year-old had splattered paint. Malachi shrugged. "I don't know about this. The colours match, but then that's not difficult when every colour of the rainbow is flung across the canvas—I mean, paper."

She gave him a playful slug in the arm. "Malachi! I can't believe you just said that." Her gaze darted around the room.

He chuckled. The gallery owner was tucked safely in the back somewhere, having gone to retrieve some information for another couple who was perusing the prints.

"I was thinking," he continued. "Instead of a print, maybe I should hang an original."

She beamed. "That's a great idea. The gallery on the next street over has a bunch of originals. They do exhibits all the time."

"Actually, I was thinking about just going to Home Depot, grabbing four or five different pints and flinging them on the wall behind the bed. An original 'Malachi.'" He motioned to the print on the wall with a nod of his head. "Bet I could do as well as that."

She scoffed and shook her head. "You are so bad."

The door jingled and drew his attention. Malachi's stomach dropped to his feet as Tiffany Carpenter walked through the door. He turned back to the wall hoping she wouldn't see him.

He'd dated Tiffany for about a month a year ago, and she seemed to think they had hit it off a little better than he did. Now every time she saw him, she tried to rekindle a relationship that didn't exist to begin with.

Rachel linked her arm through his. "It's your favourite person."

"Shh. Maybe she won't notice us."

Tiffany's saccharine tone shattered all peace. "Malachi. Oh, wow! Who knew I'd see you here?" She sidled up to him, smile splitting her lips, her arms outstretched as if she were going to give him a hug.

He faced her and backed up a step. "Hi, Tiffany."

She lowered her arms as she realized he wasn't going to touch her, and her smile faded. Then her expression morphed into something Malachi knew was supposed to be seductive, but just turned his stomach instead.

She dipped her lashes and pursed her lips into a twisted pout. Taking a step towards him, she wet her top lip with her tongue. "Malachi, I don't know why we don't get together anymore."

He swallowed slowly, trying to think of one more painless let-down. He was running out of tactful brush-offs.

Before he could speak, Rachel stepped closer to him. Putting her arm around his waist, she reached on tiptoe and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. Then she leveled a narrow gaze on Tiffany. "I know why." She encircled him with her other arm and rested against him.

He sucked in a breath and willed his pulse to slow. His heart punished his ribcage, and he worried that Rachel might notice—that Tiffany might notice—that the couple across the room might notice. Perfume slowly rose to tease his nostrils. He imbibed the sweet scent that was exclusively Rachel and suffered a fresh infusion of need. Breathing became his enemy.

She tightened her hold around his middle ever so slightly, and he gulped down his rising desire. *Lord, help me keep it together.* He focused his attention on Tiffany's confused expression.

"I thought you two were just friends?" Tiffany's voice came out shrill, and Malachi felt a twinge of guilt.

"We are—"

"We are—"

He and Rachel spoke simultaneously.

He quieted as she glanced up at him. He let her continue. He didn't know what to say anyway. His brain couldn't function normally with her holding onto him the way she was.

"We are," she said again. "But we finally figured out what was right in front of us all along."

He looked down at her as she gazed up into his face. Her azure eyes glowed with such warmth they reached out and filtered into his skin, fed his veins.

He closed his eyes and reminded himself she was just acting the part for Tiffany's sake.

"Isn't that right?" Rachel's voice seeped into his mind, and he forced himself to focus on her words, not her face.

He looked at Tiffany. "Y-yes. That's right," he said, vaguely aware of Rachel shifting her weight, sliding up his body as she reached up to his face.

Her arm somehow moved to his jaw. She gently nudged his chin with delicate fingers and turned his face to hers. Then her lips touched his.

His breath caught. Rational thought fled. His hand came to her waist. But, suddenly she was no longer touching him. He blinked away his confusion, made his mind replay the events until comprehension dawned.

She was play-acting.

He focused on Rachel smiling at him, and then looked at Tiffany who stood with a look of disbelief still marring her porcelain features.

"So, you see, Tiffany," Rachel was saying, "it's nothing personal." She let out a tiny giggle. "Between you and Malachi, anyway."

The girl's gaze dropped to the polished tile floor. "Oh, I see." Then she pinned them with steel in her green eyes. "Well, I hope it all works out for you both. Wouldn't want you to lose your best friends. And, you know, that's usually what happens when friends become romantic, and then it doesn't work out." She spun on a stiletto heel and skulked into the back room.

Rachel looked up at him. "She works here?"

He shrugged. "That last bit was a little harsh, don't you think?"

"You've been trying to let that...that *woman* down easy for almost a year. I thought it was time to

get a little tougher.” She grinned. “How’d you like my little act? Worked pretty well, didn’t it?”

Malachi gulped. “Very effective,” he murmured.

“I especially liked the part about what was right in front of us. Made it sound real.”

“But it wasn’t real.” His voice echoed flat in his ears.

Rachel didn’t seem to notice. “Of course it wasn’t, but it worked.” She touched his forearm. “Look, I know you don’t like pushing someone away, but Malachi, if a person is in it for the wrong reason, you have to let them go, and, sweetie, *she* was in it for the wrong reason. I recognize her type. In it for the *bling*, the trophy. You deserve better. You deserve someone who loves you solely for you. Unconditionally. Understand?”

He understood, and she was right. Tiffany was superficial and pursued relationships to advance her own status. That’s why he’d stopped going out with her in the first place. Their dates had become more like interrogations about his business associates and bank account rather than casual encounters. He shuddered, just thinking about it.

“I guess you’re right.” He smiled down at Rachel. His senses acutely registered her hand still on his arm as she gave it a little squeeze. He realized in that moment that it wouldn’t have mattered if Tiffany had been the epitome of perfect. Rachel was the only woman he wanted.

She just didn’t know it.

Tiffany’s words echoed in his mind. *Wouldn’t want you to lose your best friends*. It was true. If he told Rachel how he felt, and it didn’t work out, he would lose his best friend—and she would lose hers.

She’d never forgive him for that.