



A Gaze

AFTER ALL

Katherine Robles

A ROMANCE IN THE PARK NOVEL

Agape after All

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*
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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2023
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9915-5
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my husband, my best friend.

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1

Vanessa dropped her sleeping bag onto the picnic table next to her freshly purchased tent. She gazed around at the tall, damp trees of Hickory Run State Park and sighed in contentment. The car ride had been long and she wanted to use what was left of the day's light to enjoy the woods. Her phone buzzed in the pocket of her jean shorts. She smiled at the name and held it to her ear. "Hey, Collin."

They'd said their goodbyes only a few hours ago. She hoped everything was OK.

"Hey, sweetie, *crshshshsh*?"

Collin's voice crackled with distortion. Vanessa peered up at the dozens of tree trunks towering above her head and walked briskly toward the main road.

"Collin? Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I—" His voice crackled again.

"Hang on. I'll try to get better reception."

She speed walked toward the paved main road where the sky was free of tree branches. Her footsteps crunched on the gravel camp-loop road and she heard rather than saw another person join her. A man had exited one of the campsites and was walking parallel to her in the same direction. He waved hello. She flashed him the polite but uninterested smile she reserved specifically for males her age and turned away.

"Can you *crshsh* me now, sweetie?" asked Collin.

"It's better but not great. I needed to leave the campsite."

She stepped out onto the main road and stopped to look both ways for cars but there were none in sight. She wasn't surprised since only campers used it. The stranger walked a few steps closer and pointed uphill with his phone. There were rain drops on his glasses from walking under the wet trees.

"It's better up the hill," he said in a stage whisper.

She nodded and the man started up the road's incline. A faint ringing came from his phone's speaker. She gave him a head start and then followed. Nice guy.

"I'll head up the hill a little and see if it's better," she told Collin.

She walked along the side of the road and with each step Collin's breathing became clearer. The sky above the road was tinged with the orange of the setting sun. A car rumbled past and turned into the camping loop. Every time the breeze blew, the rustling of leaves covered the distant chatter from campsites.

"I think we're good now," she said. "Is everything OK?"

"Of course. I just miss you."

"I miss you too."

It was a bald-faced lie, though a sweet one. She didn't miss him because she hadn't had time to miss him yet. But it was one of those things one said no matter what, a standard call and response. *Thank you. You're welcome. How are you? Fine thanks. Miss you. Miss you too.*

"How was the drive?" asked Collin.

"It was good, no traffic, though it rained the last hour. We drove through a tunnel in a mountain. Carla had us try to hold our breath the whole way."

She stopped at the top of the little hill. Black asphalt dipped and climbed ahead of her like a dark river between forested banks. The short little climb sent a thrill through her and she couldn't wait to experience more of the mountains. The bottom two thirds of her native Delaware was pancake flat. As a child, she'd had to sled on the side of a highway exit ramp.

"It's been really nice to catch up with Joyce and Carla," she said.

"You see them all the time."

"Long drives are special. They lead to a different kind of conversation."

She hoped Joyce and Carla wouldn't worry when they returned from the bathroom and found her gone. She also hoped they would start assembling the tent. She really hoped they knew how. A cold breeze blew down the road and she shivered. The sun was setting much more quickly than she'd anticipated and the light was dimming fast. She hadn't thought to bring her flashlight that was still in the car.

"How's the park?" he asked.

"Beautiful." The two percent of it she'd seen was lovely, though damp from the rain. "We plan to get a fire going and cook hot dogs for dinner. I'm getting pretty hungry. And it's getting dark."

She hugged herself and glanced around. The stranger stood about twenty feet away, talking on his

phone and looking up the road expectantly. A car passed in the middle of the road and its lights blinded her momentarily. It was time to get off the road.

"Campfire hot dogs are the best," said Collin. "I'm having PB&J all by my lonesome."

Vanessa shivered again. A familiar surge of impatience bubbled up and she tamped it down. Love isn't selfish, she reminded herself. Love puts another's needs before her own and Collin needed a few minutes of company.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Pretty standard. I got that new AC unit installed on Upper King Road."

She listened patiently while he described the challenges posed by a yappy dog and stripped screw heads.

"Cool," she said when he finished his story. "Hey, babe, I had to walk away from my campsite to get reception and it's getting cold."

And very dark. There were a few street lights along the road but the shadows between them were deep. The stranger across the road was finished talking on his phone but still swiping at something on the screen.

"How can it be cold? It's June."

"I know." She tried to chuckle but her teeth chattered. "I almost didn't pack a sweatshirt, but Carla insisted and I'm glad she did. Apparently it gets cold in the mountains."

"I can't wait until you get home. Call me tomorrow?"

"Yeah, maybe." As much as she loved Collin, she didn't want to spend her girls' weekend on the phone. She wanted to be present with her friends both physically and mentally. "I don't know what our plan is tomorrow, but I can call you Sunday when we're on our way back."

"You have secret female plans that I can't be a part of?" His tone was teasing.

"Yup, exactly."

She started to walk down the road toward the camping loop. The man across the street matched her pace.

"OK, be careful," said Collin.

"I will. Love you."

"Love you too."

She pushed her phone deep into her pocket and crossed her arms against the chill. When she entered the light cast by one of the street lamps, she glanced at the stranger. He was across two lanes of pavement so his face was mostly in shadow, but he noticed her glance and smiled.

"Do you have a friend who's lost too?" he asked.

He meandered closer to her until he was walking down the middle of the road and she was on the side.

"No, that was my fiancé."

They passed out of the light of the street lamp but she could still make out his baseball cap and glasses.

"Congratulations," he said. "How long have you been engaged?"

"A few months, but we've been together for two years."

The voices of fellow campers drifted through the woods they passed. Here and there, a lantern or a fire pierced the darkness. Headlights crested the hill and lit up the road around them and Vanessa squinted against the sudden brightness. The man in the baseball cap quickly crossed to her side of the road and a white SUV slowed down and rolled down its window.

"Hey, Tony!" said the SUV's driver.

"Hey, you made it," said Tony. He adjusted the brim of his baseball cap.

Vanessa's phone buzzed with a text from Collin. *Miss you. Have fun, but not too much.* A wink emoji and a heart accompanied the text. Tony directed the driver to the camping loop up ahead and gave him the number for their campsite. Vanessa shoved her phone back into her pocket.

"You want a ride?" asked the driver.

"No, thanks," said Tony. "I'll meet you there."

The SUV pulled away and soon they heard the crunch of car tires on gravel. They were approaching the entrance to the camping loop. Vanessa wanted to be annoyed that this stranger felt the need to escort her off the road, but she was glad of his company. As soon as the SUV moved on, the darkness returned with a vengeance.

"Are you here with friends?" asked Tony.

"Yeah, we're having a girls' weekend."

"One last hurrah?" His smile flashed in the darkness.

"No," she snapped. "Not a last one."

She didn't mean to snap at him. She wasn't even

sure why the comment bothered her. There'd be plenty of girls' weekends after she and Collin were married.

"Good for you," he said.

They turned onto the gravel road and walked in silence for a minute. It had been dark out on the road, but it was so much darker under the trees. Nearly every campsite along the large loop road showed its occupancy with a fire or a lantern or a string of Christmas lights. Halfway around the loop Tony stopped at a site with a roaring fire that illuminated a large blue tent. His friend's white SUV squatted nearby with all its doors open like a giant metal chicken fluffing its feathers.

"If you and your friends need anything, this is us," said Tony. "We camp all the time, so we usually have extras of everything."

"Thanks," said Vanessa. The fire illuminated Tony's face and she was struck by a sudden conviction that before her stood a good man. She cleared her throat and looked away, the warmth of her cheeks hidden by shadows. She spotted Carla's red minivan a few sites away and lifted her hand in farewell to Tony.

"Have a nice weekend," she said.

"You, too."

She planned to.

2

"I can't believe it. My soda spilled."

"What, in your bag?" Vanessa angled her cell phone's flashlight to illuminate the inside of Carla's backpack.

"Yes." Carla paused and pulled something small from the bag. She inspected it for a moment and sighed. "The matches are wet."

"Now they match the rest of our equipment." Joyce shook the tarp she was spreading over their four-person tent and a few drops of water flew off to prove her statement. "I feel as if I'm making a bed here."

The rain had stopped before they arrived, but raindrops still clung to the thousands of leaves above their heads and every passing breeze shook them loose. A quarter sized droplet landed on Vanessa's neck, and she shivered and pulled up her sweatshirt's hood.

"Get the brown tote bag out of the car, will you, Vanessa?" asked Carla. "And find the lighter. I'll help Joyce with the turn down service."

Hickory Run State Park offered three levels of wilderness experience. Carla had pushed for the truly rustic experience where the campsites were a quarter

of a mile from any civilization, but Joyce refused to come if she couldn't see the hot showers from her tent. Vanessa was glad that they chose the middle of the road option. The tent was pitched twenty feet from the car. If she liked camping, she might look into the RV option. The thought of camping with a bed and a microwave was appealing.

Vanessa opened the back of Carla's minivan and dug into her backpack in search of the grill lighter. She made a mental note to pack it near the top of her pack next time. She wondered if Collin would bring her camping if she asked. She'd always loved the woods, though Delaware's woods were sparse and small compared to Pennsylvania's. The scent of wet leaves and campfire smoke from next door tickled her nose. She carried the tote bag of food over to the fire pit, and then held the lighter close to the pile of damp sticks they'd collected upon their arrival. The lighter was the only thing that burned.

Joyce unfolded a camping chair and sank into it. "It looks as though the tent is wearing a shower cap. This is not filling me with confidence."

Carla laughed. "You'll love it. Or appreciate your bed. Either way, I'm so glad you guys came."

"You promised us s'mores," said Vanessa.

She stood and handed the lighter to Carla. Carla was the expert.

"I'll get some dry material from the car," said Carla. "Vanessa, we need to make a tepee."

"OK."

Vanessa crouched down. Her sneakers crunched

on the tiny stones that carpeted the campsite. She picked up a few sticks and laid them in a rough circle. She wasn't sure if Carla meant she was bringing TP from the car to burn or if the sticks were supposed to be shaped like a roll of toilet paper, but her stick circle could work either way.

She pushed her bangs out of her eyes. Normally they stayed above her eyebrows where they belonged, but the dripping trees had moistened them enough that her bangs were touching her lashes. When she went in for her next haircut, maybe she would copy Joyce's highlights.

Sneakers crunched up beside her. "What is that?" asked Carla.

Vanessa traced the circle of sticks with a flick of her finger. "TP is round."

Carla doubled over and her laugh exploded next to Vanessa's ear. "Tepee, not TP!"

Vanessa looked to Joyce for help but Joyce was hiding her laughter behind her French manicure.

"Native American house," squeaked Joyce.

Warm blood flooded Vanessa's face. "Oh."

Carla was still laughing as she stood the sticks on end in a circle with their tops touching in the middle. She gestured at the soggy wooden structure and grinned. "Tepee!"

Joyce let her giggles loose.

Vanessa pressed her lips together. Stupid. That was a stupid thing to do.

"We're not burning our TP," said Carla. "We'll need that for our hike tomorrow."

Joyce's laugh died in her throat. "Say what now?"

Carla winked at Vanessa. She set down a handful of fast-food trash from the car and selected a few napkins. "It was an honest mistake. I forget sometimes that not everyone thinks like my boys."

Carla had three sons and an active Cub Scout troop under her wing. She'd married young and had her children young so though she and Vanessa were the same age, Carla was the ultimate boy mom adventurer while Vanessa was just starting to feel like a real grownup. Carla stuffed the napkins into the center of the tepee. Vanessa picked up a cheeseburger wrapper and added it carefully to the pile. Maybe the fire would smell like burgers.

Carla held the lighter to the napkins and their edges turned black. After a few moments black turned to yellow flame. Smoke drifted into their faces but Vanessa didn't mind too much: it was warm. Carla passed her the lighter and she lit the burger wrapper. It burned bright and fast. Too fast. In moments, it turned to ashes without igniting any of the sticks.

Carla stuffed a brown paper bag into the tepee along with more napkins. Vanessa flicked the lighter and the tiny flame sputtered and failed. She tapped it against her palm and tried again. Nothing.

"How can it be empty?" she asked. "My brother grills all the time."

"Maybe that's the problem," said Carla. "He used it all."

Joyce slumped in her camp chair. "Now what? Graham crackers for dinner? I'll eat the chocolate bars

cold if I have to.”

“Ladies, ladies, look around us.” Carla spread her arms wide. “We are surrounded by a hundred other campers. I guarantee you one of them has some extra matches or a lighter or something. I’ll be right back.”

She started toward the loop road. That was Carla—fearless in the face of inky darkness and a forest full of strangers. Back home in Dover, she knew most of the town by name.

“Wait,” called Vanessa. Carla turned back. “Go left and look for a white SUV and some guys our age. I had to go out to the road to call Collin and a guy named Tony said they usually have extras of stuff.”

“Want to come with me?” asked Carla.

Vanessa shook her head. “I have to pee.”

Carla’s trim figure faded into the darkness. Vanessa clicked on her flashlight and headed the other direction. The square brown communal bathhouse was a hundred yards uphill. Notices near the entrance advised campers to lock their food in their cars or in the provided lockers at night because bears were known to wander the area. Vanessa shivered but decided not to be afraid. If a bear showed up, Carla would either fight it off or make it her friend.

The interior of the bathhouse was almost too bright. She checked the stall for spiders while she took care of business and tried not to look at her reflection in the mirror when she washed her hands. Fluorescent lights had a way of accentuating every flaw. Her narrow lips were overshadowed by her hawk’s beak of a nose and her bangs cast harsh shadows over her tired

eyes. It was not the mental self-image she wanted to take to bed.

The path near the bathhouse was busy and noisy as campers washed dishes in the outdoor basins and came and went as they prepared for bed, but the noises faded as she walked down the loop road. She was glad she'd brought her flashlight. As soon as the bathhouse's lights were behind her, the darkness was complete.

She almost missed their campsite. She didn't recognize it with a blazing fire. Joyce was threading marshmallows onto a three-pronged stick.

"Roasting six at a time, Joyce?" asked Vanessa.

"You'd better believe it. What if this thing goes out again?" Joyce passed her a roasting stick. "The hot dogs are in the cooler in the car if you want to risk it."

Vanessa stood close to the blaze and stretched out her hands to the heat. Two logs, which flanked their stick tepee, were fully engulfed by fire.

"Where's Carla?"

As if by magic, Carla walked into the circle of light with a bundled stack of firewood in her arms. She dumped them next to the fire pit and shook a little box of matches like a maraca. Her blonde pixie haircut was tinted orange by the firelight.

"What a nice bunch of guys," she said. She looked at Vanessa and winked. "Tony's kind of cute."

Vanessa's face flushed, though she didn't know why. She'd only seen him in the shadows. "I'm engaged."

"I know," said Carla. "But if you're going to look

around, now's the time."

Joyce nodded sagely. Her gaze never left her toasting marshmallow army. "No looking after."

Vanessa backed up a few steps so her friends wouldn't see her roll her eyes. "I'll get the hot dogs."

Joyce's three months of wedded wisdom wasn't something Vanessa was ready to accept. She and Joyce were single together for years and now they were headed down the same path: boyfriend, ring, down the aisle. Joyce was just three months ahead of her.

Carla, on the other hand, had a decade of experience to draw from. It bothered Vanessa a little that Carla joked about her checking out other guys. Did that mean she thought Vanessa looked at other men? That she wasn't faithful to Collin? Or did she mean that Vanessa should look at other men? That Collin wasn't the best choice for her? Or was it just a joke and Vanessa was over thinking an innocent comment? Vanessa stabbed a hot dog with the prong of a roasting stick. She didn't need to "look around." Collin was the love of her life.

3

Joyce pulled out a map of Hickory Run and spread it over the picnic table. Her khaki capris were spotless and her polo shirt unwrinkled. Vanessa looked down at her own jean shorts and gray sweatshirt and wondered how they'd managed to become so rumpled overnight.

"We can swim in the lake," Joyce said, her manicured finger hopping across the map like a cricket. "Take a hike, play Frisbee golf. There's something called Boulder Field."

"I think we should hike first," said Carla. "It requires the most energy and we can swim later when it's hot."

"Good morning, ladies!" called a masculine voice from the loop road.

Vanessa looked up from the map to see Tony and another man walking by.

Carla waved the men over and they crunched up the gravel driveway into the girls' campsite. "Tony, Matt," said Carla, "This is Joyce, and I think you met Vanessa."

Everyone nodded and said how nice it was to meet one another. Both men sported baseball caps and