

No Place Like Home

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS a grey and dingy day at the end of February, with low-hanging clouds that threatened snow. In the parking lot of the shopping plaza, there was little activity. Inside the building that housed the travel agency, there was even less. It was Saturday afternoon, and it seemed to Kaye Reardon, as she stared out at the parking lot, as if there hadn't been a customer all week.

She sighed and turned away from the plate-glass window. "I always thought," she said to the woman who was filing her nails at the desk closest to the door, "that this kind of weather was the best there could be for travel agents. I can't think of one person who wouldn't want to get out of Henderson, Illinois right now. But where are they all? They should be standing in line to buy tickets!"

Emily Norton blew an enormous bubble with her wad of chewing gum and popped it loudly. "Everybody who can afford to go anywhere has already gone."

"That's true enough," Kaye admitted. "I suppose if I had any extra cash, I'd be in the Caribbean right now, too."

"No, you wouldn't," Emily said, almost unkindly. "Any time you have an extra dime, it goes into your savings account. I've never seen anyone as stingy as you are, Kaye."

"I'm careful with my money."

"Isn't that what I said?"

Kaye ignored her. "I'd be lying on the beach and soaking up the sun in my new swimsuit," she added dreamily, "which is really the most gorgeous thing I have ever owned. I got it on a sale last week." And, she reminded herself, even the sale price had been extravagant. A tiny frown creased her forehead. It wasn't as if she had really needed that swimsuit.

Emily seemed to read her mind. "If it was on sale, you can't take it back, so you might as well stop worrying and enjoy it. Besides," she suggested slyly, "maybe Graham will ask you to sneak off with him for a spring vacation. He can certainly afford a week in San Juan or Acapulco."

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“Emily, Graham is not the type to suggest sneaking off anywhere.”

“I know,” Emily said regretfully. “Of course you’re right. But I have this conviction that no man can really be as damned straight and respectable as Graham Forrest seems. Now if he was just a tiny bit of a rake, I wouldn’t worry so much about what he might be hiding.”

“Does that account for your divorce?” Kaye asked sweetly. “Your husband wasn’t quite rakish enough to please you?”

Emily winced. “All right, Kaye Reardon,” she said. “That’s playing dirty. My husband was a rat, and everybody—including his second wife, the poor girl—knows it. But Graham is a different story. If he had just the tiniest hint of sin about him, he’d be perfect. He’s certainly got a stable job, and more than enough money to be eligible. And there aren’t many bachelors his age running around. But...”

“I don’t know why you think respectability is such a dreadful thing, Emily.”

“I don’t, exactly. It’s just so dull.”

“And comfortable,” Kaye pointed out. “And after the way I grew up, being dragged from one place to another and never quite sure where my next meal was coming from...”

Emily sighed. “I suppose you have a point. But isn’t there a happy medium, Kaye? You’ve dated some very nice young men. To marry Graham—”

“Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself? Graham hasn’t proposed.”

“Surely you’ve thought about it, Kaye.”

“Of course I have. If Graham proposes, I’ll marry him. If he doesn’t, I’ll...” She caught herself and changed her serious tone for a lightly mocking one, her big green eyes feigning tragedy. “I’ll just have to get another cat to keep me company on lonely Saturday nights.”

Emily snorted. “Is he taking you out tonight? Graham, I mean, not Omar the cat.”

Kaye nodded. “Dinner at Pompagno’s.”

Emily thought it over. “That might be a promising sign. Pompagno’s... If one of my dates took me there, I’d know he was serious. But to Graham Forrest, it

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probably doesn't mean a thing. What is it the Chicago papers call him? The baby-food tycoon?"

Kaye couldn't bring herself to resent Emily's slightly acid tone; Emily was right, after all. Pompagno's was expensive, and for most people in Henderson an evening there was a special occasion. To Graham, as the president and majority stockholder of the largest producer of baby foods in the Midwest, the bill would be no more a matter of concern than would a hamburger and a milkshake at a downtown diner.

"You've been dating him for months," Emily pondered. "I wonder what's holding him up?"

Kaye shrugged. "I don't read minds."

The telephone rang, and Emily put her nail file down, tossed her bubble gum into the wastepaper basket, and reached for it.

"Gulliver's Travel," she said, making a face at Kaye as she said the words.

It was a ridiculous name for a business, Kaye thought. She winced every time she said it, herself. But Marilyn, the owner of the agency, had what she fondly called a poetic turn of mind, and so Gulliver's Travel it was.

Kaye had worked at the agency for just a few months, learning the travel business, and she had quickly grown to like planning itineraries and smoothing out details. But she hadn't expected to be quite so jealous of every customer who came in to make arrangements for a vacation. Puerto Rico, Paris, Rome, Tokyo—they were just names to Kaye, pinpoints on a map, and likely to remain so for a long time to come. Unless Graham Forrest proposed to her.

It isn't shameful to think of things like that when I consider getting married, she told herself. Graham can afford all of those things I long for—luxurious travel, and really nice clothes, and pretty things to surround me. It isn't awful of me to consider a man's financial standing; I'm just being realistic.

Not that she was petty enough to consider only money. If she didn't like and respect Graham, she would never think of marrying him, no matter how many millions the Forrest baby-food empire had amassed over the years. And it would not be the end of the world if Graham never proposed, she told herself. She had been responsible for herself, when it came right down to it, for most of her life; she

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wasn't afraid to be on her own. But life could be so much nicer if there was a little extra cash... And cash was something Graham Forrest had plenty of.

Besides, she told herself, Graham was so steady, so dependable. So unlike her father.

Emily was reading airline schedules from the computer screen into the telephone.

I should be working on the arrangements for that tour group that Marilyn is taking up into Michigan next autumn to admire the leaves, Kaye told herself. There were just a few details left to take care of. But who could think creatively about autumn leaf color on a grimy day in February, when it felt as if it would always be winter?

The second telephone line rang, and Kaye rushed back to her desk to answer it.

It was a man's voice, deep and confident. "Kaye?"

"Hello, Graham."

"I know it's very late notice, but my mother wondered if you and I could join her for cocktails this evening. She's just gotten back from the south of France, and she'd like to meet you."

Kaye's heart started to thud so hard against her ribs that she was sure it must sound to him as if there was a jackhammer operating in the parking lot. She knew Mrs. Forrest by sight, of course; everyone who lived in Henderson did. But she had never met the woman face to face.

"I'd be delighted," she said. "But it's my night to work late. The agency doesn't close till six." She sent a pleading look at Emily, who shook her head regretfully.

"Mother will understand if we're a little late, I'm sure," Graham said briskly, "and our dinner reservation isn't until nine. I'll pick you up at quarter to seven, Kaye, at your apartment."

"Good news?" Emily asked the instant that Kaye put the telephone down. "Or tragedy? It's hard to tell from your face."

"I'm not sure. Graham's mother wants to meet me. She's asked me to cocktails."

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“And that must mean Graham is really serious. Well, I wish you the best. If my son didn’t have a basketball game tonight, I’d stay late and let you rush off to make yourself even more gorgeous than usual. What are you going to wear?”

“The dress I was planning to wear to Pompagno’s will just have to be good enough.”

Emily giggled. “Unless you want to put on the famous new swimsuit,” she said. “Seeing you in that should certainly make up Graham’s mind for him!”

When Emily left at five, there hadn’t been a phone call or a walk-in customer for two hours, and it had started to snow. “I wouldn’t mind staying,” Emily said, “if only Brad didn’t have this game tonight.”

“It’s certainly not your fault that it’s my weekend to work late,” Kaye said, and crossed her fingers in the hope that she might be able to sneak out a few minutes early.

At a quarter to six, the door opened, and a large-boned woman in a fake-fur coat came in, surrounded by a bubble of frigid air. “My goodness, it’s awful out there,” she said. “I should think you’d want to be getting home.”

Kaye smiled coolly. “We’ll be open for another few minutes. May I help you with something?”

“What have you got on Hawaii?”

Six months at the agency had taught Kaye that the most unlikely-looking people were often the ones who went first class and didn’t complain about the price. And this woman, she thought with impatience, certainly looked unlikely. “When were you thinking of going?” she asked. “And for how long? We have some package tours available through March—”

“Oh, I’m not going,” the woman laughed. “It’s for my boy. He’s got to write a report for school, and I figured you’d have a lot of stuff.”

Kaye bit her tongue. “Perhaps the library would be a better source for the kind of information he needs,” she said frostily.

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“It’s closed,” the woman pointed out. “I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii. I thought I’d like to read about it with him.”

There was a wistful note in her voice, and Kaye was heartily ashamed of herself for her impatience. *There isn’t much difference between us*, she thought. *We both long for sun and sand, and Gulliver’s Travel might be the closest we’ll ever get to our dreams.* “I’ll be happy to give you some brochures,” she said, more gently. “The pictures will be useful, at least.”

It was ten after six when she locked the door of the agency behind her, and there was already an inch of snow covering her old car. She brushed it off with the sleeve of her coat, discovered that there was ice underneath, and groaned. “Dammit,” she said aloud. “Wouldn’t you think that one single thing would go my way tonight?” She was only ten blocks from home. She could drive the distance in five minutes, but it would take half an hour to clear off all the windows.

She scratched out a ragged gap on the windshield and a tiny circle on the rear window and defiantly got into the car. *There’s no point in cleaning it all off*, she told herself. *It will just get covered up again as soon as I’m home. I will drive very slowly and very carefully, and nothing will happen.*

That was what she was thinking as she put the car into reverse and backed, very slowly and carefully, directly into the front corner of a small car that had just pulled into the plaza parking lot.

The shriek of metal against metal and the blare of a car horn blended into a horrible squeal that scraped Kaye’s nerves. She stepped hard on the brake and sat clutching the wheel and shaking.

A car door slammed. *I have to get out and face the other driver*, she thought miserably. *I am completely at fault, and I wouldn’t be surprised if I end up in court over this.*

She slid out into the snow. The other driver was bending over the corner of the car she had hit, inspecting the damage. She sneaked a look. He was definitely male, not particularly tall or big, but certainly nothing to tangle with, and—if her instinct was worth anything at all—he was furious.

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One glance at his car and she was certain. It was small, and not new, but it was well-kept, and it was polished to a gleam, at least where the snow wasn't hiding the finish. And it was apparent, even to Kaye, that it would never be quite the same again.

If that was my car and he had hit it, she thought, I'd kill him right here in the parking lot. No questions asked.

The driver straightened up and turned to look at her. He was rubbing a leather-gloved hand along his jaw, and Kaye eyed it with uncertainty. Her first impression had been correct; he wasn't terribly tall, but he was solidly built and compact, and beside her own slender five-foot-three, he was quite large enough to be threatening.

"Wouldn't you think," he said finally, "that the cosmic forces would at least let me make the last payment on it before it gets smashed?"

Kaye blinked. Whatever she had expected, it hadn't been that. Profanity would not have surprised her; she would have stood there meekly and listened while he lambasted her character, feeling that she deserved every word of it. But this mildness... Somehow, it was even scarier than threats would have been.

"I'm very sorry," she ventured. "I was in a hurry, you see."

"Yes, I gathered that you must have been." He didn't sound interested. His eyes flicked over the back of her car, assessing its age. "Might I be allowed to ask if you carry insurance on that thing?"

"Of course I do!" Shock was catching up with her. "And you don't need to be sarcastic about it!" she added irrationally.

He had bent over his car again; he looked up when her voice cracked, and said, "Surely you aren't suggesting that *I'm* the one who caused this accident?" Huge snowflakes were dusting his bare head, lying starkly white against his dark hair.

Kaye fought back tears and said huskily, "I'm sorry for yelling at you. Of course you're not to blame."

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“Good. I’m glad we agree on that much. If I may have your name and the necessary insurance information, I’ll let you be on your way to whatever was so important.”

She recited it woodenly, and he unbuttoned his dark wool overcoat and reached for a small notebook from an inside pocket. The leather gloves he wore made it hard to write, and he dropped his pen once. She braced herself for an outburst then, but he only stooped to pick it up from the snow and said, “Kaye Reardon,” spelling it back to her.

She nodded. “I work at Gulliver’s.”

“I see. I’ll get estimates of the cost to repair the damage, and I’ll call your insurance company. You’d better do the same.”

She looked at her own car. “I think it only scratched the bumper.”

“These big cars are built like tanks,” he agreed. She looked at him suspiciously, but he didn’t sound sarcastic. “Nevertheless, it might be wise to have it checked out. Here’s my card, in case you need to reach me.”

She took it in fingers that felt numb from the cold. “I’m awfully sorry,” she mumbled. “I’ll make sure it’s fixed as good as new.”

He shrugged and looked down at the crumpled fender. “I doubt that’s going to be possible.”

“If it was mine,” she said honestly, “I’d be furious.”

“What good would that do me? Apart from keeping me warm, perhaps. And speaking of warmth, why don’t you get back in your car and pull it forwards a couple of feet? We’re blocking traffic – what little there is of it.”

She looked up at him for a long instant. The snow had formed a solid crust over his dark hair and was falling in swirls against the glaring headlights of his car. She wondered what color his eyes were; it was impossible to tell with the light coming from behind him.

“Kaye Reardon,” he said, and for the first time there was a trace of impatience in his voice, “until you move your car, I can’t move mine. Now I’d love to be a

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gentleman and stand here in the snow all evening with you, but I do have a date to keep.”

She jumped a little, and thought, *What an idiot you are, Kaye! You've got a date, too.* “Oh,” she said. “I’m—”

“I know,” he said. “You’re sorry.” He ushered her to her car and opened the driver’s door.

She let the car creep forward a couple of feet to clear the path for him, and then climbed out again with her ice scraper. No matter how long it took, she vowed, or how late she was, she wasn’t driving anywhere until she could see through every square inch of glass.

His little car had stopped a few feet away, and the door slammed. “Here,” he said, taking the scraper out of her hand. “Let me do that.”

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“I’m not really doing you a favor,” he said, “as much as I’m trying to do a good deed for every other driver on the road.” He smiled down at her. “They can use all the help they can get.”

“And you didn’t even get his name?” Graham looked worried, and that was unusual.

“He gave me his business card,” Kaye said. “But I didn’t even glance at it at the time, and when I got home and looked for it, I couldn’t find it anywhere. I must have dropped it in the parking lot.”

“Careless, Kaye. That was very careless. You don’t even know how to reach him, and you have no idea what kind of person he is.”

“He seemed a pretty restrained sort to me,” she said mildly. “I had just put a huge crease in his car, and he didn’t even yell at me.”

Graham frowned, but he didn’t say any more. Kaye was glad. She hadn’t intended to tell him about the accident, but he’d been waiting outside her apartment when she had finally got home, and she had had to explain why she was so late. She had

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changed her clothes in less than five minutes, run a brush through her long blonde hair, thanking heaven for natural curls, and reflected that she wasn't nervous any more about meeting his mother— at least, not much.

The security guard in the lobby of the apartment complex waved them through with a cheerful greeting, and the glass lift whisked them through the five-story atrium lobby up to the penthouse floor.

“It’s beautiful,” Kaye said, with a catch in her voice. “I never would have dreamed all this could come out of an old warehouse.”

“I know,” Graham said cynically. “No one else did, either, except for my mother.”

“It was her idea?” Kaye didn’t know why that should have startled her.

A man in severe formal garb opened the door. “Good evening, Mr. Graham,” he said. He took Kaye’s coat, seeming to pretend that it was mink instead of mere wool, and ushered them into a long living room with a grand piano at one end and the curtains pulled back to reveal a stunning view of the city below, spread out along the frozen shores of Lake Henderson.

“How lovely!” Kaye exclaimed. “I had no idea this city could look so wonderful!”

“You don’t like living in Henderson?” It was a woman’s gentle voice, and Kaye turned to face Claudia Forrest as the older woman rose from a chair beside the windows. She was tiny, all blue and white, with enormous sapphire eyes and soft silver hair.

“Oh, of course I do, but...” Kaye stumbled to a halt.

Claudia laughed, a tinkling trill. “The city does look prettier from up here, doesn’t it? Graham will get you whatever you like to drink, and then you’ll come and sit by me, dear, and we’ll chat. I’m so glad you could come tonight.”

There was no one else in the room; Kaye realized belatedly that Graham had not said this was to be a party. *I really am on trial*, she thought, and swallowed hard.

But Claudia was chatting gently. “I never thought I’d end my days living in a warehouse,” she said. “Graham’s father would have been horrified, I’m sure, but I think it’s something of a joke. After all, I heard about baby food morning, noon,

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and night all the years we were married. What is so strange about living where the tons of oatmeal boxes were stored?”

Kaye giggled. “Do you mean—here?” She gestured at the elegant room with its cream-colored carpeting, pastel furniture and striking art.

“Right here. It nearly broke my heart when Graham built the new warehouse out on the edge of town. This building held such memories.”

“It was the only practical thing to do, Mother.” He put a delicate crystal wineglass into Kaye’s hand.

“Practical,” Claudia said. “Sometimes I wonder, Graham, if you will ever realize that being impractical is sometimes much more fun.”

“Also, much less profitable. You’ll never get back the money you spent on this place, Mother. You simply can’t charge enough rent in a city like Henderson to recover your investment.”

Claudia shrugged. “If it amuses me, what does the money matter? But let’s not quarrel in front of our guest.” Claudia’s voice was crisp. In the next hour, she drew Kaye out, asking about her job, her family.

“I haven’t any family left,” Kaye said. “My mother died when I was a baby, and my father several years ago.”

“You’re very young to be all alone,” Claudia murmured. The sapphire eyes were almost hypnotic.

Kaye fought down the sudden, irrational desire to say, *I’ve always been alone*. But she couldn’t say things like that to a woman she scarcely knew. She couldn’t confide those details to Graham’s mother, who would probably forbid her son to ever see this young woman again.

It was all in the past, anyway. The fact that Kaye’s father had been a less than reliable parent and provider, that they had lived on the thin edge of poverty, didn’t matter in the least. It wasn’t as if he’d been a criminal, after all, Kaye told herself stoutly. A black sheep, perhaps, but from a good enough family nevertheless – one even Claudia Forrest couldn’t object to. And so she smiled and talked of ordinary things.

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On the way to Pompagno's, Graham looked across at Kaye, cleared his throat, and said, "My mother likes you very much."

"I'm glad," Kaye said. "I like her, too."

He gave a self-conscious little cough. "I intended to wait a while to ask this—perhaps order a bottle of champagne at Pompagno's—but that's rather public, don't you think?"

"Public for what?" Kaye asked. Her heart was beating a little faster than usual. She was afraid to look at him; instead, she looked straight ahead to where the highway turned away from the frozen shore of Lake Henderson.

"Will you become my wife, Kaye?"

She closed her eyes tightly. A strange little pain rocketed through her, tingling clear to her fingertips, followed by a tidal wave of relief that threatened to drown her. This, then, was what love really felt like, she thought. She'd simply been terrified to let herself feel it before, afraid that Graham might not want to marry her at all.

I hadn't realized, she thought, just what rigid controls I was putting on my feelings.

"Kaye?" he asked quietly. "I'm sorry if it sounds as if I needed my mother's approval before I proposed to you. But you do understand why I waited, don't you?"

"Of course," she said quietly. "It wouldn't be very pleasant for any of us if your mother and I couldn't stand each other. It was only sensible to wait till she got home. Graham, thank you. Of course I'll marry you."

There, she thought. It's all decided. And I am thrilled.

He smiled at her and patted her gloved hand where it lay on the leather upholstery. "Thank you, my dear," he said gently. "We will be quite happy together, I'm sure." He laughed a little. "And Mother will be delighted. She's thought for a long time that a man in my position shouldn't be single. The baby-food business, I mean. She keeps hinting that it's time to put a picture of a new Forrest baby on the labels."

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He was blushing, Kaye thought in astonishment. Graham was actually embarrassed.

“All in due time, of course,” he added hastily. “There is no hurry about it—no hurry at all.” He hesitated, and added warily, “I should have asked about your views on the subject, of course.”

She wondered idly what would happen if she said indignantly that she absolutely refused to ever have a child, and then scolded herself for letting the relief of the moment make her get silly and half-hysterical. How could such a crazy thought ever have come into her head, anyway?

“I haven’t ever given it much thought,” Kaye said. “But I’ve always hoped to have children some day. I’d like several, I think. I was an only child, and it was very lonely.”

He laughed again, with a little relief. “Well, at least there’s no fighting when there’s only one,” he said.

He turned the car over to the doorman outside Pompagno’s, and took Kaye’s arm to usher her inside. “Kaye, my dear,” he said. “I’m honored that you’ve put your trust in me. I promise you will never want for anything.”

It was only then that she realized it. Neither of them had said anything about love.