

## ***Prologue***

***Summer 2006***

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Some great romances worth the telling are never told, their lovers slipping silently between life's timeworn cracks only to be pitched with yesterday's trash. As owner of a small estate-sale business, I'd witnessed evidence over the years of various couples' love lives. So I'd learned to sift through the piles of forgotten memories. Learned to appreciate a second look...and perhaps ease my pain.

That was how I discovered the postcards.

Bargain hounds and treasure hunters pushed through the heavy front door of Gabe and Pearl Alexander's beloved home early before rushing away to their next classified find. Antique buyers, who were more savvy, missed the cards because they were camouflaged among several dozen identical photo albums. Inside their vinyl maroon covers, these albums held not the usual faded family snapshots, but hundreds of colorful postcards revealing six decades of married passion recorded in rhyme beside canceled postage stamps.

Surprised to find postcard poems instead of photos, I began reading them in between my dealings with customers. As a thirty-eight-year-old man who had once committed to "forever," I was intrigued. What was this couple's secret? In a fast-food world of abbreviated relationships, what supernatural love potion kept Gabe and Pearl enamored with each other for more than half a century?

So I continued reading through lunch and into the sale's afternoon lull. I'm not sure I believed in love anymore, especially married love, but found myself becoming more entranced as each minute passed. Even though the Alexanders had lived together in the same house, the postcards were sent over the years from Gabe to Pearl, beginning in 1926. Each unique card was signed "Forever, Gabe," the poem connecting an episode of their love to the picture on the front.

My guess was Gabe died in the mid-1980s, because that's when the cards stopped.

One of the earliest cards was dated September 4, 1927. On the front was a picture of two colorful seashells. On the back, this poem:

*Two tiny shells, together side by side  
Wandering to and fro about the morning tide.  
Two tiny shells, now picked up by a man  
Who sets them out to dry upon the glistening  
sand.  
Two tiny shells, how delicate, how proud  
To be created by the One whose throne's above  
the clouds.  
And these two tiny shells are sent to you  
by me  
Because I know you understand God's wonders  
by the sea.*

*Forever, Gabe*

I was curious if he'd mailed Pearl two actual seashells along with the postcard and, if so, what had happened to them. Surely she'd have treasured them, but the only seashells in their belongings were large and obviously store-bought. The ocean must have played a significant role in their marriage because there were several cards with sailboats and beach scenes, and with Galveston so close by.

"What kind of man invests this much time in his marriage?" I said aloud, feeling a little betrayed by a guy I'd never met. Love wasn't a competition, but Gabe had left me floundering in the dust, and most other men as well. Men who loved their wives, or said they did, even though many times their actions proved otherwise.

At least I wasn't a hypocrite.

Or was I?

Just before the sale ended, a customer declared himself the Alexanders' next-door neighbor, so I discreetly asked about their interest in the sea.

“Wouldn’t know,” he said, then shrugged. “Gabe died shortly after I bought my place. Pearl would speak to me from across the yard, but she wasn’t keen on in-depth conversations.”

“Why?”

“Valued her privacy, I guess.” He shrugged again. “Spent the last year of her life confused and in an extended-care facility.”

“Can you tell me anything else?” I asked.

“Pearl had an unusual nickname.”

“Nickname?”

“Yeah, like a man’s, but I can’t remember it.” The neighbor paused. “Do you know what happened to their car? A big 1940s model Oldsmobile. Mint condition.”

I shook my head, wondering if the postcards contained Pearl’s nickname.

“The old gal probably needed the money and sold it,” the man continued. “Shame. I’d have bought it.” He rubbed his chin. “Any tools left?”

“Out in the garage,” I replied.

“The Alexanders were nice folks,” the man added before walking away. “Too bad you never met them.”

The neighbor was correct. I’d never met them, but had heard from the attorney who hired me that they had no children and were donating the bulk of their estate to charity. However, their will included detailed instructions that certain sentimental items be delivered to various relatives still living in the Houston, Texas, area. I usually contracted that job to a moving company, but since the Alexanders’ home was only a few miles from mine, and the items were small, I elected to deliver them myself. After reading the postcards, I felt strangely invested in Gabe and Pearl and was more than happy to oblige.

Over the next few weeks I made deliveries and asked questions. Some thought it odd that a total stranger would take such an interest in their kin. Others spilled all they knew to me, even digging up yellowed newsy letters. I selfishly decided not to mention the postcard albums unless someone asked about them, and no one did. So I concluded they were kept secret. In some ways, it even seemed the postcards had been written for me. But I couldn't keep them, not in good conscience anyway. At the end of my quest, I'd take them to an Alexander relative as "accidentally overlooked."

Gabe's typewriter went to their niece, Alice Davis. Alice recently had knee replacement surgery and was, in her words, "convalescing nicely." I spent a rainy afternoon wrapped up in her thoughtful recollections. She also told me about the Alexanders' deceased longtime housekeeper, Priscilla Galloway, whose daughter, Yevette, looked after Pearl during that final year. I contacted Yevette and scheduled an appointment to meet with her the following week.

I suppose my obsession with the postcards was as much a matter of timing as anything. The stinging loneliness of my divorce still lingered, the blunt ache of a failed marriage. As I sent a confirmation e-mail to a somewhat reluctant Yevette, my eyes settled on a folder I'd saved with messages from my ex-wife. I opened it and clicked on her final e-mail. Even though it was dated approximately two years prior, devastation washed over me as though I were reading it for the first time.

*Adam,*

*Today we're officially over. Thanks for respecting my wishes. If you're still hoping I'll change my mind, don't. I need my own life. You need to move on. So please, no more questions. When did I stop loving you? I'm not sure. Is there someone else? Yes. That's why I didn't contest the house. I never intended to hurt you.*

*Haley*

The words "someone else" were, unsurprisingly, still the most painful.

Someone else?

In twelve years of marriage we'd had our share of difficulties, but hadn't everyone? I had never doubted our love, nor envisioned a life without her. Other than what couldn't have been helped, where had we gone wrong? What could we have done to prevent disaster?

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