



Big Time In A Small Town, A Pandemic Meet Cute

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Chadwick appeared harmless enough, silently lying down under the wrought iron bistro table. She fed him from her plate, though I couldn't see what without leaning closer to her, which would have violated our socially distanced table spacing. The woman of about 75 wore sporty walking shoes and a sunhat that covered most of her face.

"I always liked names that start with the letter 'C' and he looked like a preppy dog, so I named him Chadwick," she'd explained to the two women at the table on the other side of her when they'd complimented her companion's cuteness. "You should see him when he wears one of his neckties." Now she had my full attention.

I put my phone down to engage in the conversation, trying to avoid potential off-spray from the woman shamelessly hacking up phlegm behind me. Public coughing always grossed me out, but now I dove from it as though dodging a bullet. I reminded myself that the COVID cough is a dry one and that her wet hack was probably just something chronic.

Too hungry to notice if the coffee at Linn's was any good, I added what I hoped was half and half but was likely low fat milk, judging by the hazy shade of brown in my white cup. Anything tasted better than the powdery packets of chemicals they stocked in my hotel room.

While I picked apart my bacon to find the crispiest parts of each strip, fingers saturated in grease, I noticed him. Tall and lean with a broad, swimmer's build, he hustled from the host stand to various tables wiping them down in between customers. He hadn't been at the front when I checked in and the conversation about Chadwick under our netted tent in the parking lot must have distracted me from noticing him sooner. For just one moment I thought, *what is Kyle doing here?*

It couldn't be *him*, here in charming Cambria, and this couldn't be the way I run into him—sweaty from my morning hike, not a stitch of makeup and unwashed vacation hair. No. Kyle was back in New Orleans, the only place he belonged.

I'd been dying to see this man without his mask, curious if he had the same sexy flesh-colored lips as Kyle. Part Tate Donovan, part Tony Goldwyn—not at all my type. Neither was Kyle.

We'd spent our first date at a French restaurant in Venice Beach, a cozy spot a few doors down from The Whaler. It had been a Tuesday, so not a huge crowd. Actually we locked eyes all night, so I don't remember who else might have been in the room.

He'd placed our bottle of Pinot Noir on its side, a cheesy move he'd learned from the movie *Sideways*. Months later I'd tease him, and we'd laugh about how much better I knew wine than this good old boy from Louisiana.

We'd both moved to LA within months of each other, and both of our fathers were dying at the same—a topic that would often serve as foreplay, our shared anxieties and guilt revealing themselves.

We held the same job in different marketing departments at a pharmaceutical company. His starting salary was \$30K more than mine, a fact I obtained by stealing his paycheck before tossing it into the 9th floor shredder. Direct deposit—no harm done.

He'd come into my life like a hurricane, but left merely like a grey day, so unceremoniously that I fail to remember the details. I hadn't seen him in years and suddenly it felt like he was standing right in front of me, here in the middle of nowhere—hundreds of miles from LA and many more from New Orleans.

He needed a name. Two syllables, one better than Kyle. Brian? Patrick? No—Jason, that's it, Jason. He looked unnatural here among the tourists and local country folk—some farm or vineyard owners; others retirees from cities and towns louder and with more color.

Witness protection program? Jason stood out in this environment like the handsome surgeon, still single at 45 who falls for the big city girl when she returns to her hometown to sell her dead mother's house in every Hallmark movie.

Maybe it's a family business, the restaurant handed down through generations. He's a financier from NYC pitching in for his sick mother/aunt/cousin. Aunt, definitely Aunt Linn. Not NYC, he doesn't move as fast or with the sense of purpose of a New Yorker. Boston, maybe—no. Seattle—Seattle! He's a tech guy from Pac Northwest—yes.

Though we'd fallen in and out of touch over the years after he'd moved back home for a new job, our occasional contact was now through Twitter, born out of a mutual hatred for Donald Trump.

I snapped two quick photos of Jason. With less thought than I used to order my breakfast, I sent Kyle the pictures on Twitter. "I found your twin. I swear I thought this guy was you." Not my most clever work. Moments later, Kyle replied, "Pretty close!" Pretty close exclamation point? An exclamation point is something you use when you wish an insincere happy birthday to a high school friend on Facebook. Pretty close! No, *where is this, how are you?* What a dick. Times like this made me miss flip phones. There was nothing satisfying about pressing a button on a touch screen. Nothing compared to snapping that top part of the phone onto its bottom half in disgust or delight. Both flips were gratifying, especially if you mastered it one handed.

Jason nowhere in sight, I paid the check, slipped my mask on and set out for some shopping. I'd walked about a block when I realized I didn't have my sunglasses. I turned around to head back to Linn's, and there he stood holding my Tom Ford aviators. Not Jason but Kyle, facemask pulled down, revealing those flesh colored lips.

