

Letters from Rome



a Novel by
Walker Smith

LETTERS FROM ROME

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Chapter 2

Lady:

Please give your name and telephone number to Anthony, the ball-boy. I want to talk to you. —Rome

I was standing in my bathroom thinking of Rome and staring critically at myself in the mirror as the bathtub was filling up. I sighed, took off my robe, and eased myself into the tub.

After listening to Rome Lewis's voice over the telephone for two weeks, the prospect of hearing it in person was making me a brain-dead zombie. Rome Lewis had the deepest bass voice I had ever heard in my life. Believe me, Barry White had nothin' on this brother. And if that wasn't enough, his conversation was infinitely more fascinating than what I'd been hearing from the young brothers in Louisville, who thought that every female's name was "baby." Although I had to admit I wouldn't mind hearing the word "baby" come out of Rome Lewis's mouth.

Oh, hell. I would have to start thinking about his mouth. Not just full and luscious, but the most symmetrical lips I'd ever seen. So then I couldn't even concentrate on the mechanics of taking a bath for thinking about kissing him. But at least it was becoming clear why I was so nervous. I had never experienced the voice and the face simultaneously before. I had seen him in person only twice, and neither time presented an opportunity for conversation.

The first time I saw him was at the airport where I worked at the Information Desk. I had been hired after two months of nonstop job interviews following my graduation from Grant High School—a school I had only attended for two months.

I had been born and raised and schooled in New Orleans, but when my father's employer promoted him, it meant a transfer to Louisville, Kentucky. I had no choice but to go with him, since Mama had died and there was nobody who could afford to take me in. So I sulked through what was left of the last semester at Grant and graduated with a bunch of strangers.

Before my eighteenth birthday, I was already in hot pursuit of a job. My plan was to make enough money to move back to New Orleans, where all my memories and real friends still lived. Although my Daddy's job took us to Louisville, New Orleans was still home to me. I couldn't wait to get back to the Crescent City—the gumbo, the music, second-lining in the streets, and non-stop parties during Mardi Gras time. But most of all, I needed to be where I

could feel Mama and my brother Frankie near me. For some reason, their presence wasn't as strong in Louisville.

The information clerk job at Standiford Field had been a longshot. I had only lived in Louisville a short time, so how much information could I have possibly have? So when I got the "you're hired" call I was shocked. But armed with my airport maps, airline schedules, and notepads filled with reminders, I quickly became a walking Encyclopedia of information. Plus I'd always been talented in the area of faking my way over the rough spots. So after a month and a half on the job, things were going pretty well.

That's when Rome walked into my life.

It was one of those boring midweek afternoons that made my shift seem like an eternity. I was penned inside my tiny booth wearing my cheesy uniform with that mandatory green scarf strangling my neck when a herd of giants suddenly lumbered past me. As I looked up from the stack of schedules I was correcting, my eyes widened. The only basketball team I had ever seen was the New Orleans Jazz, but that was on television. In person, the only players I'd ever seen were the comparative runts on high school teams. I noticed one of the giants looking at me, so I averted my eyes, suddenly remembering that it was rude to stare.

But when they were a few yards away, I snuck another peek. They had congregated near the baggage carousel and they were a colorful group. Over half of them were brothers sporting nicely groomed afros, bell-bottomed slacks that must have taken yards of material to make, and wide-lapelled shirts in blinding colors. A few carried leather jackets over their arms. The white players were also dressed in disco regalia, only their hair was cut in "shags."

Remember the seventies?

Anyway, I kept looking over while pretending not to, but when I spotted the tallest player, my mouth dropped open. He looked about eight feet tall (platforms, if you can believe that) and he was wearing a full-length white fur coat. I wasn't even accustomed to seeing women wearing fur coats—not in Louisville. And certainly not in October. And the only fur-coat-wearing man I'd ever seen was our neighbor's uncle, who came to town for Mardi Gras one year. Somebody must've told him that a red-fox fur coat was the hippest thing goin' in the French Quarter, 'cause that's what he had on when he walked out to get in the car. And honey, he was struttin'! My brother Frankie and I took one look at him and couldn't figure out whether to laugh at him or ask him for his autograph. We finally decided he must be a pimp.

It took considerable effort to force my eyes away from the eight-foot giant and back to my schedules, but I did it. Then, as the baggage carousel began humming, I became aware of a presence in front of my counter.

“May I help you?” I asked without looking up.

“Oh, yeah. I bet you could do a lot to help me, baby,” a throaty male voice said.

Three of the giants were standing there, and I felt my face catch fire. Then I heard a barrage of awkward mumbling: “Uh, uh, hello... uh—” I groaned internally. It was me.

Not exactly cool under pressure. My tilting mind did a quick stumble back to the cartoon days of my childhood. The heat from that blush made me feel like the “Human Torch” from the Fantastic Four. You know the one—he’d foil the villains by hollering “flame on!” and then igniting himself and everything around him.

The middle giant was looking me up and down like I was a hamburger, hot off the grill.

“I need some information, sweet thang,” he said. “I need the name and telephone number of this fine little information lady I just met. Can you help me?”

“Sweet thang” clanked in my ears.

The man to his right laughed and leaned closer to me. “Hi, Red. I’m Eddie Roth. Forget this clown, ’cause see, you were meant for *me*. I’ll treat you right, all day and all night.”

I frowned. What was it with these mack-daddies? I hated being called “Red.” You know my complexion isn’t *that* light—not in the official definition of “light-bright-redboned-Pinky-Johnson” light. Just a light enough brown to turn an annoying shade of brick red when I get embarrassed. And unlike some of my Louisiana cousins, who were still suffering from that tired color-struck psychosis, I had never taken “Red” as a compliment. And don’t call me “Pinky” unless you want to get socked in the eye.

So as I stood there feeling nervous and offended and yeah, okay, *red*, Eddie Roth extended his hand, but the third man swatted it away with a scowl.

“Be cool, Ed! Let her make up her own mind.” Then he smiled at me like some form of salamander. “You want some tickets to tonight’s game, Foxy Mama? Just say the word.”

Oh, Lord. The “Foxy Mama” line. My blush thawed and my eyes narrowed to two slits. But blush or no blush, I had no idea what to say to these panting hounds. Two American Airlines skycaps were passing my counter, and I gave them a pleading look. They slowed down for a second, but then just laughed and moved on. I was about to try my vocal cords again when a

fourth man sporting a black leather apple-cap appeared. And he was even taller than the three I was already trying to deal with. I was about to crawl under my counter when he grabbed the arm of the one who called himself Eddie. Eddie made a face like a ten-year-old boy who had just had his candy taken away, but then he laughed and moved away from my counter, with the others following behind him.

I let out a sigh of relief, and my rescuer turned and smiled at me as he touched the brim of his cap. Like a little salute. Now *that* was cool.

Within a week, all my curiosity about the giants was satisfied. It seemed I was the only airport employee who didn't know about Louisville's pride and joy, the Kentucky Colonels of the American Basketball Association. Even my wayward buddy Shelly, whose only heartfelt interest was drinking, knew about the team, and she had never been much of a sports fan. But her newest boyfriend Sidney Rifkin had season seats, so Shelly quickly became something of a Kentucky Colonels expert. I knew she'd love hearing about my encounter with the giants.

"Oh, yeah, girl," she told me, "the season's just gettin' started so you're gonna be seein' a lotta teams comin' through. But that must'a been the Colonels! Artis Gilmore—he's the center—always be wearin' his ermine coat. Shoot, girl! You should'a been happy they were hittin' on you! You could'a gotten some free tickets."

I rolled my eyes at her. "Yeah, right, Shelly. Sump'm tells me those tickets wouldn't have been exactly free."

But I must admit I was a bit fascinated. At least fascinated enough to take Shelly up on her offer to go with her to one of the games when Sidney had to work late one night.

My most vivid memory of that first game was the way the court looked from our not-so-hot seats. Shelly's boyfriend wasn't exactly rich, season tickets or not. I'd seen NBA games on television with my brother when we were kids in New Orleans, but a live game was vastly different. The lights in Freedom Hall were blindingly bright, and seemed to nudge my energy level like a pot of coffee. Maybe it did that to the players too. I sat there feeling like Dorothy must've felt when she first got to Oz. No, make that Toto. I was a tiny, insignificant speck in that giant coliseum full of colorful faces, noise and tangible, jangling excitement. As I sat there soaking up the new experience, the Colonels trotted out to center court amid the cheers of the

home crowd. They all wore warm-ups in the team colors of red, white and blue, and began executing drills of shooting and rebounding—something Shelly called “shootaround.” Minutes later, the opposing team made their appearance and received the expected boos.

“Well, everybody’s out there now,” Shelly informed me between gulps of beer. “See? That’s the Virginia Squires. Ever since they traded Dr. J to the Nets, they pretty much suck, so this shit ought’a be a beatdown. Okay, Rose. So, which ones were the brothers who hit on you?”

I squinted. “Not from this distance, Shelly! I’d need binoculars. Shit! Make that a map.”

“Well, maybe we’ll go down for that horse show or whatever the hell it is after the game. Then you can get a good look at the players and maybe—”

“It ain’t a horse show, Shelly. The announcer said it’s supposed to be a raffle. And I got no desire to see those giant three stooges again anyway—with their tired lines.” We grudgingly stood up for the “Star Spangled Banner.”

“Three *fine* stooges, I bet,” she laughed. “That’s why you were stutterin’, huh?”

I shook my head at her, but couldn’t help thinking about that fourth man with the cap—the nice one. “Well, maybe we can go down and see,” I said. “Just for a minute—”

But Shelly didn’t hear me. “Oooh, shit, girl! I wish they’d get Al Green or Natalie Cole or somebody decent to sing this ‘oh-say-can-you-see’ bullshit. This old no-singin’ bitch is tired!”

The game got underway and the little bit of basketball knowledge I had learned from my brother gradually came back to me. Shelly downed her usual mind-boggling number of beers and cheered drunkenly when the Colonels prevailed 141-120. All in all, we had a good time.

The instant the final buzzer sounded, Shelly sprang from her seat. “Girl, if I don’t get my ass to a bathroom right now, I’ma embarrass myself. I’ll get wit’chu downstairs.”

“Shelly! Don’t you dare leave me! I don’t know where to meet you. Downstairs *where*?”

But Shelly was already pushing her way through the crowd. “Down by—I don’t know... Hell! Wherever they’re sellin’ that damn horse, girl,” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Raffle,” I mumbled. “It’s a raffle, Shelly.” I cursed her out under my breath and began to shuffle down the stairs with the crowd. Just as I reached the main floor, a voice boomed through the nearly empty coliseum announcing the horse raffle. Again, I followed whoever was in front of me until I saw a group of people standing near the team dressing room. A beautiful bay horse stood calmly before the crowd and some bald man in a leisure suit began regaling us with bloodline information. After listening to him drone for a few minutes, I began craning my

neck for some sign of Shelly. *Probably trying to bribe the concession man to give her some more damn beer*, I thought. I had just made up my mind to go looking for her when the players began drifting out of the dressing room door. The second one out the door looked familiar.

“Oh my God!” I muttered. It was Eddie Roth—the guy who had called me “Red” at the airport. He also turned out to be the high scorer of the game I had just seen. But he didn’t even notice me. He was busy with a group of four giggling girls wearing the official uniform of the groupie: tight jeans, platform heels, and tube tops. I’m not kidding. Every one of them. I laughed and looked around for Shelly. But my eyes froze on a lone tall figure standing near the exit. It was Man Number Four from the airport. The polite one. And he was staring right into my eyes.

I tried to look away, but couldn’t. The term “eye contact” suddenly held new meaning for me. I couldn’t even move. From several yards away, a complete stranger had stunned me nearly to tears, and I wondered if I was dreaming. This was deep, probing, heart-pounding eye contact that said, *I’ve known you for a thousand years. You know that our spirits are restless for our bodies to catch up with this reunion. So come to me, and let me hold you in my arms again—the way I did a million midnights ago.*

You know. *That* kind of eye contact.

I don’t remember how I found the strength to break that stare, but I finally did. When I looked up again, he had vanished. All six-feet-nine inches of him. So I stared at the space he had just occupied until a mysterious feeling of embarrassment swept over me. I realized that a dark-skinned teenage boy was standing beside me, watching me curiously as I tried to re-conjure my dream man. The boy was about my height and wearing warm-ups bearing the team logo. One of the ball-boys. He smiled and handed me a note. I unfolded it and read.

Lady:

Please give your name and telephone number to Anthony, the ball-boy.

I want to talk to you. —Rome

P.S. I apologize for those fools at the airport.

I looked at Anthony, who handed me a pen and waited patiently, as if gathering the telephone numbers of potential bed-partners for the players was one of his regular duties as a ball-boy. It occurred to me that it was probably his number-one duty. As I wrote out my name and the shaky-looking digits of my telephone number, I told myself that I shouldn’t be doing it. I gave Anthony a crooked smile, shrugged, and handed him the note. Despite the fact that this kid

couldn't have been more than fourteen, he smiled back at me knowingly. "Rome's a real nice dude," he said, and pocketed the slip of paper that would change my life.

The call came two days later—at 9:00 a.m. on a Sunday. I was still asleep.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, uh, Rose?"

That heavy voice woke me up. "Yes," I croaked. "This—this is Rose."

"Do you know who this is?"

"No," I lied.

"This is Rome. Rome Lewis."

"Oh, hi." I'm sure he saw through my nonchalant pretense, but he didn't laugh or anything. "I guess I didn't really think you'd call," I said, stifling a yawn.

"Now why would you think that?"

"I don't know. I—I guess I just felt a little foolish adding my phone number to your list."

"I don't have a list. I hope you don't think I'm like Eddie and those other fools who were harassing you at the airport."

"Well, you ain't throwin' wolf lines at me, at least."

He chuckled. "You looked scared to death."

"I was. They acted like they wanted to eat me up."

"You're perceptive. You might not believe this, but they usually get results with that foolishness. It was nice to see a young lady shoot 'em down for a change."

"Well, I think it was you that shot 'em down. And by the way, thanks."

"Happy to be your hired gun. 'Cause you looked like you needed help. So, uh, did I wake you? You sound like you were still asleep."

"You could tell, huh?"

"Mm-hmm. Your voice has that sexy still-in-the-bed sound to it."

"That's 'cause I am."

"You are? What—sexy?"

"Huh? Oh, no! I—I'm still in the bed... I mean. That's what I meant—"

I felt a hot blush creep up my face, and thanked the Lord that he couldn't see me.

"Mmmm."

“Hello? You still there, uh, Rome?”

He laughed—a deep, lazy rumble—and I fell in love with the sound of it. “Yeah, I’m still here. You sound uncomfortable sayin’ my name. Just say it.”

“Well, okay. Rome.”

“Say it again.”

“Why?”

“I just wanna hear you say my name.”

“Rome. Okay? Rome. It really is a nice name. Different.”

“My mother got to travel to Italy once when she was young and she never forgot Rome. So when she had me, she named me after the Eternal City.”

Oh, hell, I thought. He’s from some uppity rich family. Wonder what he’d think if he knew I’m still wearin’ clothes from the Goodwill and eatin’ day-old donuts for supper?

Then for some dumb reason I blurted out, “So, Italy, huh? Your Mama must’a been rich.”

That deep, relaxed laugh again. “My Mama—rich? No, little lady. The white folks she worked for were rich. They took her along to Italy to watch their kids. But on her off-days, she wandered around seein’ the sights like any other tourist. Hey! What’chu got planned for today?”

That’s when I rolled over on my side and my book fell, pulling the cord of the phone and knocking the receiver onto the floor. I nearly fell out of bed trying to retrieve it.

“Oh, Rome! Sorry. You still there?”

“Yeah. What happened?”

“I dropped the phone. My book got tangled up in the cord—” *Oh, damn! Now he’ll think I spend my Saturday nights at home with my nose in a book, like some boring wallflower!*

“What book?” he asked.

“Oh... just, uh, *Invisible Man*. I—didn’t feel like goin’ out last night.”

The truth was, I couldn’t afford a Saturday night cover charge, but he didn’t need to know that.

“*Invisible Man*?” he said, sounding a bit surprised. “Ralph Ellison, huh? That’s one of my favorite books. So you like to read?”

“Well, yeah. Sometimes. When I’m home.”

“Oh. When you ain’t out bein’ a party girl, huh?”

“Well, no. But I do like to dance.”

I didn't tell him that I only liked to dance on Wednesdays—no cover charge.

“So, what was I askin' you? Oh, yeah. What'chu got planned for today?”

“Well, I don't know my way around too good yet. I only moved here a few months ago.”

“From where?”

“New Orleans.”

“Uh-huh! So, don't tell me—you one'a those Louisiana Creole folks?”

“Please.” I rolled my eyes disdainfully. “Don't mistake me for one of those uppity, triflin' roon people.”

“Roon people? You're gonna have to explain that one to me, little lady.”

“You know—like quadroons, octoroons—I got a few pasty-lookin' cousins who try to get away with that mess—always runnin' around talkin' 'bout ‘I got a quarter Irish blood’ or ‘I'm one-eighth Swedish’ or ‘my family is descended from British royalty, ya know—one-sixteenth, on my Mama's side’ and all that kind'a silly mess. Please. Like anybody cares.”

Rome was laughing at my sarcastic roon impressions. “Sorry to break it to you, little lady, but hey. You might not be one those triflin' roons, but you ain't exactly a full-blooded African either.”

“I know that. But who is anymore? White folks took care'a that once and for all during slavery. But my grandmother—she had the right idea. When my brother asked her about that roon business one time when we were still little, she sat us both down and straightened us out, but good. She said, ‘Roon, huh? Y'all been listenin' to them fool children a'your Aunt Rita and Uncle Charles, ain'tcha? All that roon nonsense! Y'all know what kind'a roons y'all are? Blackaroons. You a couple'a little blackaroons. And that's the only kind'a roon y'all need to be worryin' about.’”

Rome laughed. “Oh—okay, Miss Blackaroon,” he said. “You sound like you got your head on straight. So did your brother turn out cool too?”

“Mmm. Y-yes.” It was the only word I could manage, and it left an awkward silence hanging in the air.

“Uh-oh,” he said. “You got kind'a quiet there. Hope I didn't ask the wrong question—”

“Well see, it's just that my brother is... gone.” I hoped Rome understood my meaning, because I still couldn't bring myself to use the word “dead.” Not about Frankie and Mama. I tried to make it clearer. “His name was Frankie.”

“Oh, Rose. I’m so sorry. Recent?”

“Four years ago. But it feels recent. See—he just couldn’t make it back from Vietnam.”

“Oh, man,” he groaned. “I’m so sorry. I really am.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know. Did you—did you ever have to go over there?”

“Well no—see, I—”

I knew that I had made him uncomfortable, so I cut him off. “Oh, Rome, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad for not goin’. I wish nobody had to go. I was a big protester, even when Frankie was still there.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah. I mean, I was just a dumb kid, but I got it into my head that if I carried enough signs and hollered with everybody, then they’d send Frankie home. Well, they sent him home, all right. In a box.”

“Hey, little lady, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“No. It’s okay. I learned a lot from those anti-war hell-raisers. I found out that no matter what war it is, those rich white men in Washington sit around in their suits and send all the poor folks’ kids off to die so rich folks can get richer. And Frankie was one of those front line pawns. I’m *glad* you didn’t go, Rome.”

“Well, it was close. I was playin’ ball at Santa Clara University and makin’ pretty good grades, but I think it was that high draft number that saved me. I guess I was one of the lucky ones. So what about the rest of your family? Any other brothers or sisters?”

I sensed that he was trying to shift the conversation away from death, so I hesitated in answering his question. “Well, no. Just me and Frankie and Mama and Daddy. But Mama passed last year, so it’s just me and Daddy left. And we’re not gettin’ along too good these days, to tell you the truth.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, when his job transferred him out here to Louisville, I didn’t want to come. We fought and fought about it, but he won. New Orleans was too full of bad memories for Daddy. Too much death, he kept sayin’. But I wanna go back someday.”

“No bad memories for you?”

“No. I like to remember Mama and Frankie. And they feel like they’re in New Orleans. You know—alive somehow.”

“Well, maybe that’s where their spirits feel comfortable.”

“That’s what I told Daddy! ’Cause Mama was born and raised there, and so was Frankie. That’s where we had all our fun, and I *am* going back... someday.”

Rome sighed. “You know, you’re a pretty strong young lady. You’ve been through a lot for your age. I was twenty-four when my Mama passed, and I thought I’d never get over that.”

“I know. It’s hard. I guess it’s the hardest thing to lose somebody you love.”

“Yes, it is.”

After a long silence, I felt the need to cheer him up. “So, what were we talkin’ about before all this painful stuff anyway?”

“Mmm. I don’t know. Oh, yeah. You were tellin’ me how you didn’t know your way around Louisville. But you know, you still ought’a get out and enjoy the nice weather. The weather’s still good down there, isn’t it?”

“Down—here?”

“Oh, man! I forgot to tell you I’m calling from Indiana. We’ve got a game tonight with the Pacers.”

I tried to hide my disappointment. I had been under the impression that he was asking me out. “Oh. Well, the weather’s still nice. Maybe I’ll go out for a while.”

“We’re on a two-week road trip. I’ll probably call you from Denver. We’ll be out there day after tomorrow.”

“Well, sure. If you want to.”

“I want to. I don’t have anybody to talk to out here. Well, not anybody with any sense. You see, I pretty much keep to myself on the road and just listen to my music. I might read a book sometimes, but I’m *always* listenin’ to my music.”

“*Your* music?”

“Oh, yeah. I don’t go anywhere without my music. My bags are full of tapes.”

“What kind of music do you like?”

“Oh, I guess it’s a toss-up between jazz and some of the mellower R&B stuff. Right now I’m diggin’ on the Chi-Lites. Been playin’ them since last week. You know that song ‘Have You Seen Her?’”

“Oh, yeah. That one’s pretty.”

“That one reminds me of you.”

I was grinning so hard my face hurt. “Really? Why?”

“Well, it’s all about a brother who lost his girl—she broke his heart—and it makes me think of you.”

“Why? I sure didn’t break your heart. Like I really could.” I got the uneasy feeling that he was making fun of me.

“You could. Believe me.”

“Please. You don’t even know me.”

“But I want to. For some reason, I really want to.”

“Why? If you think I’ma break your heart?”

He laughed again, but it sounded warm, not mocking. “I’ll take my chances, little lady. Listen, I gotta go now. It’s almost time for practice.”

“Okay. Uh... Rome?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I’m glad you called.”

“Me too. Stay sweet and I’ll call you from Denver.”

Two weeks after that first phone call, there I was trying to prepare myself for an actual face-to-face date with Rome Lewis. I’d cleaned up my ratty little apartment until it looked as snazzy as it was ever going to look. It wasn’t until I climbed into the tub that my ability to function normally just shut down. Even after I had stopped re-running all our telephone conversations in my mind, I couldn’t seem to get out of the tub. I guess it must have been the coldness of the water that finally snapped me out of my mental flat line. I finished my bath and dried off. Racing into my room, I grabbed the alarm clock. “Seven fifteen!” I screamed at the ceiling. “Damn! He’ll be here in half an hour!”

I knew I had to concentrate: “Okay. Get dressed. You’ve done this before... Arms in armholes of sweater. Head goes into the big hole at the top. Wait. Okay. Stop. It might be a good idea to put on a bra first...”

I’m not kidding. That’s the way it went.

I somehow got myself dressed, complete with underwear, jeans, my only good sweater that wasn’t from the Goodwill, and shoes. I was just about to run the hot comb through my hair

one more time when the doorbell rang. I froze, of course. Thank the Lord, the second ring snapped me out of my stupor.

I opened the door, and there he was. And I forgot how to breathe. It wasn't just the way his towering height filled the doorway—he was just so magnificent up close—short, neatly groomed afro, long sideburns and a perfectly sculptured Fu-Manchu. His face looked as if it had been carved from some flawless chunk of rich, dark wood—and then polished. He ducked his head slightly as he stepped inside—the instinctive habit of a man too tall for small-thinking architects. I stepped back to let him in, and prayed that he couldn't hear my pounding heart in the closeness. He paused, facing me for a beat or two, and I looked up to the spot where most men's eyes would be. But I saw only that irresistible dimple in his chin and realized that the top of my head didn't even reach it. And I was wearing four-inch platforms!

The lamplight in my small living room highlighted the planes and angles of his face as he moved toward the sofa, and again I noticed the richness of his coloring. Images of dark velvet and satin merged in my mind with memories of Mama stirring pots of chocolate pudding on the stove, and my mouth watered. My expression must have given me away, because he gave me an amused smile—wide—like he wanted to laugh at me. I couldn't even be embarrassed because the smile revealed the surprise of two more dimples at the corners of his mouth. He finally spoke.

“Hello, little lady.”

Little lady. Guess all females would be little ladies to him. *I've got to get past his height*, I thought. Not an easy trick when a man overpowers a room the way Rome Lewis did. But it wasn't his height that made me so nervous, although it was certainly intimidating. After two weeks of long, late-night telephone conversations with him, I was convinced that he was intelligent, witty, respectful but verrry sexy, and down to earth, all with no apparent effort. I never caught him trying to impress me with some tired line, and he seemed genuinely interested in my views and philosophy—or whatever I had in my eighteen-year-old mind that passed for philosophy. And he seemed to understand me in an almost intimate sort of way. After a while we could practically finish each other's sentences. That is, when he wasn't surprising me with some worldly observation about life. Sometimes we wouldn't talk at all; we'd just listen to his music. I'm sure his phone bills were astronomical, but he always shushed me when I mentioned the expense. In short, the brother was perfect. At least so far.

I smiled and managed to maneuver my shaky legs—knocking knees and all—over to the sofa where I boldly sat down next to him. A real accomplishment. Deciding that I'd better respond to his greeting before he thought I'd gone mute, I took a deep breath and said, "Hi. I—I, uh—" *Great*, I thought miserably. *I can walk. I just can't talk.* My eighteen years of life had not prepared me for Mr. Right. Not yet. Wasn't there something about kissing a gang of frogs before the prince comes along?

I must have looked tragic, because he reached over and touched my cheek lightly. "You're a little nervous, aren't you?"

I nodded and felt my face heat up. "I don't know why—"

A deep laugh rumbled from his throat. "I'm nervous too. It's different face to face, huh?"

A gentleman. How perfect could this brother be? His confession loosened things up and I laughed. "It sure is. I couldn't stop runnin' my mouth on the phone, and now I can't think of what to say to you."

"Well, then. Why don't you put on an album and we'll let the music do the talking till we think of sump' to say."

"Oh! Okay. Good idea."

I sprang to my feet and wondered why I hadn't thought to put on the new O'Jays and Dramatics albums that had practically wiped out my last paycheck. But they were an investment, because I knew Rome loved ballads. During the past two weeks of telephone conversations, I could always hear slow, soulful music playing in the background of whatever hotel room he was in. "You like this song?" he'd ask me. "Wait a minute. I'll turn it up." It was apparent that the man was wild for all the crooner groups like the Dramatics, the Moments, the O'Jays, and the Chi-Lites. There was something boyish and charming about the way he took possession of their music by calling it "his" music.

My bottom-of-the-line speakers could hardly do justice to the power of Eddie Levert's raw emotion as he sang "You've Got Your Hooks In Me," but Rome didn't seem to care.

When I heard him sigh and begin humming along, I slipped three more albums out of their jackets and stacked them on the turntable. Yeah. Atmosphere.

"That's the only way I can relax anymore," he was saying, "Sittin' in my big easy chair late at night, gettin' lost in my music. He patted a spot next to him on the sofa and smiled. "Sit down, little lady."

I sat.

I felt an overwhelming pressure to say something, and I finally came up with something asinine. “So—how was the road?” I resisted the urge to slap myself.

He shrugged one shoulder and gave me a long, steady look before answering. “Lonely.”

Now I might have only been eighteen, but even I knew better than that. “Oh, come on,” I said skeptically. “I saw all those girls hanging around by the team dressing room.”

Flame on! What the hell was I saying? After all, one of those girls hanging around the team dressing room had been *me*. No, wait. I was different. I was only hanging around after the game to wait for Shelly and to get a look at that horse... Right.

His amused grin told me that he’d noticed my blush. I tried to think cool thoughts.

“You’re right about all the girls,” he was saying. “There are some guys on the team that go through two or three a night. Like it’s some kind’a damn hobby or something.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “But not you, I suppose.”

Instead of a verbal response, he gave me a piercing look—part hurt feelings and part anger. I either couldn’t or wouldn’t look away. I’m still not sure which. It was clear that we were studying each other.

“As I was saying,” he continued, “some of the guys can’t wait for road trips. They’ve got girls in every city, and that’s not counting stewardesses, hotel clerks, and all the rest. Man, I don’t know how they do it and still play ball.”

“Stewardesses, huh?” I murmured. And I’d always thought that the only good reason to be a flying waitress was the travel opportunities. Now I knew the real reason. Date potential.

“Oh, yeah, little lady. Professional athletes probably make up the biggest percent of the Mile High Club.”

“What’s the Mile High Club?”

He started to laugh, but after giving me a quizzical look, he instead patted me on top of my head. “How old are you?”

“Twenty,” I lied.

He nodded his head thoughtfully. “Mm-hmm. I was right about you. You’re sweet.”

Sweet?! Damn! I knew I should have gone braless. Oh, well, I don’t want him to think I’m some groupie or something. So I settled for “sweet” and smacked his arm playfully. “I’m grown.”

His eyes did a slow scan of my body and he nodded his head. “Oh, yes. I can see that.”

Flame on! Another blush. But at least we had moved into the realm of flirting. Progress.

L.J. Reynolds was crying a song from my old stereo: “I Want to go Outside in the Rain.” Rome closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the wall, and sang along.

“You have a nice singing voice,” I murmured, genuinely impressed.

But Rome was lost out there in the rain with L.J. and didn’t hear me. He sang along without missing a lyric until the fade-out. When he opened his eyes, he looked at me hard. “I am *not* a member of the Mile High Club,” he said softly.

“Okay,” I whispered, still not getting it.

He broke into a smile. “I’ll explain it to you someday... when you’re a little older.”

I knew he was teasing me, but I didn’t care, because I was sure he was about to kiss me. But he didn’t. He leaned back and yawned, stretching his arms over his head.

“Hey, Rose.”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you go on and turn the stack?”

“Huh?”

Pointing at the stereo, he displayed his dimples again. “The records.”

“Oh! Right.” I sprang up and fidgeted around with the albums until we had music again.

“Uh, would you like something to drink?”

“Just a glass of water—that’d be fine.”

I fetched the water and placed it on the coffee table.

“You got any jazz?”

“No. I tried to swipe a couple of my Daddy’s Miles Davis records when I moved out, but he busted me at the door.”

“That’s okay, little lady. I like what you’re playing. I was just wondering what you had in your collection.” He smiled and reached into his pocket. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No. Go ahead. I’m used to it.”

Without taking his eyes off mine, he lit up and took a puff of his Marlboro. “Who smokes around you? You don’t, do you?”

“No. But my Mama used to smoke like a fiend. Our living room looked like a night club with all the smoke hangin’ in the air.”

“Oh. Your Mama, huh? So—none of your men smoke?”

So that’s what he was driving at. I rolled my eyes at him. “I don’t have any *men*.”

“Oh, just one man then, huh?”

“No. I don’t have *any* men. If I did, I wouldn’t be sitting here with you, would I?”

This was actually my idea of conversation back then. Remember, I was only eighteen.

“How do I know that?” he asked. “I could be just one of many.”

“So could I—be just one of many.”

“But you’re not. It’s like the song says—you’re as rare as a rose in winter.”

Then he started singing again and all I could do was stare at him and sigh.

What can I say? I’d never been serenaded before. And he was so subtle. He sang along softly—not one of those loud, hammy performances like the guys bellowing into their dates’ ears at high school dances. I rested my head on his shoulder and watched his fingers snapping in time to the music. With his free hand, he reached for one of mine and I stared at it. It shouldn’t have surprised me that his hand was nearly twice as big as mine. At the Virginia game, I’d watched Rome Lewis palm the basketball, swing it back behind his body and up in an arc over his head to avoid the reaching hands of a defender. Then, without ever touching the ball with his other hand, he had passed it downcourt to his teammate like it had been shot from a cannon. Basketball hands. But now this athletic hand held mine like it was a piece of fine china. He brushed his palm gently against mine, entwined our fingers, let go, traced light circles in the center of my palm with his forefinger, and then repeated the process, but never in the same order. His touch was not rehearsed. It was spontaneous and full of whispered messages. And I was listening.

The concept of time suddenly shifted, making no sense, and I was surprised when he patted my hand and announced that it was time for him to get rolling. Hadn’t he just arrived? Or had he always been there? He stood up and I walked him to the door, hoping that I’d done something right—anything that would make him want to come back and see me again.

“Thanks for the music, little lady.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for the singing.”

“Aw, man,” he murmured. He reached up and tapped his forefinger on the ceiling self-consciously. I couldn’t help smiling. He didn’t even have to straighten his arm. I was in the presence of a bashful giant.

“I like talking to you,” I offered.

“I like talking to you too, Rose.” He smiles. “I *love* your name. You know why?”

“Why?”

“The song, remember? You’re like a rose in winter. And you are, you know.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re rare, all right.”

“Come on,” I laughed. “You don’t even know me. Not really.”

He took a step closer to me and looked at me hard—the same way he’d looked at me that night at the game—like he was searching for something behind my eyes. “I know you.”

I shivered.

Suddenly his voice was casual again. “Hey. I mean, look at all these books you got around your crib. Not a lot of girls your age enjoy reading. Have you read all these books?”

“Well, not all of ’em. Maybe about three-fourths of ’em. I’ll get around to the rest. See, I’ve never been anyplace but New Orleans and now Kentucky, so when I read books like *War and Peace* and *From Here to Eternity*, I feel like I’ve been there. You know, Russia and Hawaii and places like that. Especially Hawaii. I sure would like to see Hawaii someday.”

He smiled and took my face in his hands. His palms were hypnotically warm, like sun-dried laundry, fresh off the line. “Maybe you’ll get to travel one day.”

“Maybe,” I croaked. A long silence followed, but I didn’t know how to break it. Thank God he did.

“Rose.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I—I’ve got a feeling about you.”

“What kind of feeling?” I whispered. His face was looming so close above mine that anything else would have seemed like shouting.

I watched his eyes scan every detail of my face, from my forehead to my chin before those luscious lips parted to answer my question. “Unexpected.”

I felt a chill on one side of my face as his hand left it to move around my waist. His other palm slid around to the back of my head to pull me closer.

It was the strangest, most exotic kiss I’d ever had; it came at me one section at a time. A gentle touch of his bottom lip was accompanied by a sound from his throat that was half-sigh,

half-moan. Then he took my whole mouth with a more insistent pressure, only leaving it to brush his lips across my forehead, down the side of my face, and then rest at my ear. “Rose—”

I buried my face in his chest and inhaled deeply. The scent of his freshly-ironed shirt, the faintest trace of cologne, and a light essence of coconut balm from his hair filled my senses. I couldn't believe I was doing it, but I reached up with my left hand and unbuttoned one of his buttons before pressing my lips against the warmth of his skin. I rose up as high as I could on my tiptoes and searched for his mouth. In one swift movement, he wrapped both his arms so tightly around my body that I could feel his fingertips digging into the front of my rib cage. That's right. I said the front. Hey. The man had long arms.

My shoes had long since been abandoned and I could feel my toes barely grazing the floor as he lifted me, pressing my body into his. That was the moment I finally understood all my high school girlfriends who had “fallen” from virginity because they “just couldn't help it.” For the first time I wanted a man, body and soul. But at that moment, mostly body. I can't lie. No time to think about the consequences. I had rounded the bend with Rome Lewis. I was his for the taking. All he had to do was take. But he didn't.

I was at the height of my new-found passion when I heard him let out a long sigh. His grip relaxed and my feet were back on the floor. I looked up into a serious face. “What's wrong?” I whispered.

“Nothing's wrong. It's just time for me to go. I could mess around and get carried away with you, girl.”

I suddenly felt like a romance-novel seductress. “Well, maybe I wouldn't mind.”

He responded with a smile and a quick, chaste kiss to the top of my head. “I'll call you, Rose. Stay sweet.”

“Good-night, Rome.”

That night I experienced hours of fantasy-driven insomnia.

I didn't hear from Rome for a week and a half. By the time he finally called, I was into the midnight hour of another no-telephone-ringing Saturday night. I had just about given up on him when the phone finally rang. I waited for two rings before answering. “Hello?”

“Hello, little lady.”

“Rome?”

“Yeah. Listen... I’m sorry it took so long for me to call, but I had some thinking to do.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “And?”

“And I know it’s late but—I was just sitting here in my big chair listening to my music and... I thought you might like to come over and join me. You know—check out my collection. What’chu think about that?”

“I think—yes. I’d love to listen to some music with you.”

Silence.

“Rome? You there?”

“Mm-hmm. I’m here. You sure it’s not too late?”

“Rome, look. I’m not very good at playing all those games like hard-to-get and all that. I want to see you and I don’t care what time it is.”

More silence. Then: “See that? I told you you were rare. I’ll pick you up in a few.”

I almost laughed when I saw his car. The six-foot-nine-inch man of my dreams drove a black 240Z that looked like a toy when he stood next to it. After I got in, I couldn’t resist peering out the driver door to see just how he intended to fold up all those long limbs of his and get them into that tiny sports car. But he did it—effortlessly. Deceptive amount of leg room, I guess.

We talked and listened to his cassettes until we arrived at a palatial ranch-style house in a much nicer section of town than the one I lived in. He pressed the button on a remote control clipped to the sun visor, and the garage door silently ascended. I didn’t say anything, but I’d never even seen an automatic garage door before. He waited until the garage door closed and then got out and opened my door. When we went inside, the house reminded me of a museum. The long, formal table and matching china cabinet were definitely *not* from a Montgomery Ward bargain basement sale. Rome pulled me along by the hand through the dining room and to the door of his den.

“Can we turn on the lights so I can see the rest of the house?” I asked.

“Well... this is the room I really wanted you to see.”

I smiled. “Your music room, huh?”

“Right. And I fixed it up just for you. Close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes and felt Rome’s hands around my waist, guiding me into the room.

“Okay. You can open ’em.”

I opened my eyes and blinked at the biggest fireplace I'd ever seen—with a warm fire crackling away inside. In front of it lay a large wooly gray rug piled high with pillows of assorted colors and sizes. Rome hurried over to the built-in shelves lining the entire left wall of the room, which held albums, a turntable, a reel-to-reel tape player and enough other equipment to launch the house into space, I was sure. He flipped a few switches, and the room was filled with the sounds of an orchestra playing the intro to "Stairway to Heaven." I turned in a complete circle, staring at the high ceiling.

"Quad systems. Two of 'em," he informed me. "The sound comes from the ceiling and all four corners of the room, so I'm surrounded by music."

I smiled at him and then caught sight of the only piece of furniture in the room—a plush, forest green lounge chair—king size. "Your chair."

"Mm-hmm. But I'm not sitting in it tonight."

"Well, where then?" I asked, seeing no other place to sit.

"It's a chilly night," he said, easing himself to the floor to adjust the pillows. "I thought we'd warm up right here by the fire."

"Oh, I get it. This is the part you fixed up for me, huh? You got some kind of ideas I don't know about?"

"Maybe." He smiled and patted a cushion next to him as he stretched out his long legs.

After slipping off my shoes, I knelt down facing him and felt myself falling in love way too fast. He reached for my hands and pulled me down into his arms. This time there were no preliminaries. We were instantly locked in a deep kiss.

While Rome taught my body wild new sensations with his hands and whispered song lyrics into my ears, my emotions continued freefalling into dangerous territory. A tingle shot through my body and I grabbed his face with both hands. Tears stung my eyes, but I didn't know how to tell him what I felt, or whether I even should. I was afraid of scaring him away with the intensity of my emotions. He turned his head to kiss my palm and then he stared into my eyes for a long stretch of time. All around my head was the sound of a familiar voice—Eddie Levert wailing "Let Me Make Love to You." Rome's dimples made an appearance before his soft laugh, and I grinned at him. That song was our cue, and we both knew it. With shaking hands, I reached down and began to pull up my sweater, but he grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

"You sure you're ready for this?"

I nodded my head and even managed one syllable. “Yes.”

“Okay, then. Sit up and raise your arms up.”

I did, and felt my sweater glide easily over my head. Next, he went for my jeans, which were pretty tight. But he seemed to have no trouble getting me out of them. My bra and panties seemed to present no problem for him either. I barely felt them disappear. He paused just then, giving my body one long sweeping gaze, which made my heart thump wildly. I don’t know whether it was sexual excitement or just stark fear at being scrutinized in my birthday suit by a man, but I was too petrified to move. He rose to a sitting position to undress himself, and I relaxed enough to notice his broad chest and the smooth finish of his skin. The firelight danced on his bare shoulders in a thousand different shades of gold and bronze, with that blue-black undertone unique to brothers. You know—that deep darkness that reminds the eyes that they’re looking at a descended Son of Africa.

Suddenly, something about the whole scene ran a shiver through me. I’d seen him before—watched a reflection of flames gleam on his body. The left side of his face was in shadow, transforming his features into a face I knew from somewhere else—some *time* else. It was the face of a long-lost love, and I felt an overpowering compulsion to shout out his name. But the name escaped me. To this day, I don’t understand what was going on with my emotions that night, but it was the weirdest sensation of *déjà vu* I’ve ever had.

I managed to snap out of it when he leaned down to kiss me again. After a gentle brush of his fingertips across my forehead, he slowly lowered his body over mine. And we touched.

It was a feeling I’ve never forgotten over all these years. From my perspective, that first time with Rome was a confusing but sweet blur. The heat of his body pressing against me, intertwining legs, clinging arms that pulled me into a place that felt familiar, even though my mind told me I’d never been there before. I was aware of an intermittent pain, but it seemed too distant and hazy to worry about. And it was eclipsed by the comfort I felt in the way he held me. Everything was so right with Rome. Nothing like the clumsy, heavy breathing of high school dates, whose grabby hands made it easy to say no.

I listened to his breathing. It was deep but rhythmically slow, in perfect sync with his body movements. His heartbeat was strong and so loud, I could actually hear it. It sounded like a drum. And he paid as much attention to my eyes as he did to my body, with that same soul-

searching gaze. The only time his eyes left mine, his voice was in my ear, repeating my name over and over: *Rose... Rose... Rose...*

Heaven doesn't begin to describe it. But then everything stopped—abruptly. He raised up on one elbow and stared down at me with a shocked expression on his face.

It can't be over, I thought. I didn't think I'd technically “gone all the way” yet.

“What's wrong?” I whispered.

His chest rose and fell a few more times until his breathing returned to normal, and he finally spoke. “You never—you never did this before... did you?”

My mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“Oh, God,” he moaned. “Get dressed.”

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. “What?”

He was already slipping on his slacks. “I said get dressed. I'm takin' you home.”

“Wait... Rome—” I struggled to get into my jeans and sweater, not wanting to have this conversation while undressed. “Did I do something wrong? Are you—mad or something?”

He was just about to pull his sweater over his head, but stopped to give me a pitying look. “No, baby, no. I'm not mad at you.” He strode over to turn off the music and returned to where I was still fumbling with my sweater. By this time, I was a mess of silent tears.

Dropping down on one knee, he gathered me up in his arms, but something about the way he did it felt different. Oh no. A “brotherly” hug. I degenerated into full-scale sobbing.

“Don't cry. Look. I'ma tell you the truth, Rose. Look at me.”

I blinked and tried to look at him.

“I don't want to be your—first time. I'm not the right man.”

“Yes you are,” I wailed. “I love you.”

“Don't!” he said loudly. “Don't love me. Look. I'm sorry. I didn't have any business makin' you love me. You need to find yourself a younger man—and take your time.”

“But I want you! I felt so *right* with you... Everybody has to have a first time, you know.” I knew I sounded like a kid, but I couldn't help it.

“I'm not the right man,” he repeated, shaking his head and looking miserable.

“You think I'm just a kid, don't you?”

“No. That's not it, baby.”

“Then what is it? Please don't send me away like this. Tell me, please.”

He seemed angry at having to tell me the truth. “All right. Look... You know why all the lights were out and I brought you straight back here to the den?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Because I was afraid you’d see my boy’s room. Rose, goddammit, don’t you get it?” He grabbed my shoulders tightly and whispered, “I’m not the right man, baby. I’m married.”

I waited until 6:20 that morning before dialing Shelly’s telephone number. I knew that she’d probably been out all night drinking, and would curse me out for waking her up, but I didn’t care. She deserved it. After five rings, she finally answered.

“Shit! Whooza hellzis? Goddammit!”

“Wake up, Shelly,” I shouted clearly into the mouthpiece. I tried to make my voice hit her like a bucket of ice water over the head.

“Rose? Ya sorry bitch! Somebody’s ass better be dead!”

“Not yet, Shelly. Not till I get my hands around your scrawny little neck.”

“What the hell you talkin’ ’bout, girl?”

Just trying to force out the words made me lose all composure. I’d been sobbing uncontrollably ever since Rome dropped me off at 2:15, with only my rage at Shelly providing me with a short respite. “You lied!” I wailed. “You told me the only married players were that big fur-coat-wearin’ fool—that center—whatever his name is.”

“Artis Gilmore.”

“Yeah, him. And that other one—that Eddie Roth guy!”

“Yeah, they’ both married. I seen their wives at the game. Wait! Oh, shit, girl! You tryin’ to tell me—Rome Lewis? He’s married? Ooh! And you finally hooked up with him?”

“Y-yes.”

“Oh, shit! And you *sure* he’s married?”

“Yes, Shelly, that’s what he told me. He’s married.”

“No shit! Ooh, girl! Don’t tell me you finally had your first time—with Rome Lewis?!”

“No. Not exactly. He—he didn’t want me, Shelly.”

“What? Wait a minute, girl. I got a pretty vicious hangover, and you ain’t exactly makin’ sense here.”

“I think—I think I love him. And he’s married! And he doesn’t even want me. I could chop your drunk head off, Shelly! I was a happy girl before I went to that damn game with you. I never thought I’d get into some mess like this. A married man...”

“But I didn’t know the brother was married, Rose. I swear to God I didn’t.”

“But why’d you tell me they were all single, Shelly? If you didn’t know? I would’a never given him my number.”

“I’m sorry, girl. Really. But come on now. Nobody falls in love in no two weeks. Not *really* in love. You’ll get over him.” She coughed out a little half-drunk laugh. “I mean, come on. You’re only eighteen. You’ll find somebody else.”

Somebody else. It was the first time those two words made me flinch. But it would not be the last.

I tried to hate Rome. As I tossed and turned in my bed, I called him a dog and muttered about how his wife would feel if she knew he was out chasing girls the minute her back was turned. And how would I like it if he had done the same thing to me? After a week of this, I really thought I’d worked up enough anger to cure me of my Rome Lewis fever. But then he called, and my temperature went right back up. I never had a chance.

“Rome?”

“Hi, little lady. I just called so see if you were okay.”

“Oh, I’m all right, I guess. I—I’m glad you called. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.”

He let out a long, tired sigh. “Look, Rose, I just wanted to apologize to you—”

“No, please, Rome. Let me tell you all these things I been thinkin’ about, okay? I know I was a disappointment to you—”

“Stop.”

“No, Rome, listen—”

“I said stop, Rose. You are not a disappointment to me. You’re not now and you never were. I can’t explain how bad I felt that night. I wanted you more than I thought... Aw, man, I got myself into sump’m here... Look. I can’t talk right now. We have a home game tomorrow night. Go to the Will-Call window before the game. I’ll leave you a couple of tickets and a note. Maybe we can meet up after the game and I can talk to you.”

“I don’t know if I can, Rome. I mean—”

“I know. But if you change your mind, the tickets’ll be there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Rose?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Nothin’. I just wanted to say your name.”