

Excerpt from *London Is the Best City in America*

by Laura Dave

Narragansett, Rhode Island

She told herself that if he touched her one time, she wouldn't leave. She told herself that if in his sleep tonight, he reached for her, or put his hand on her leg, his hand on her knee, his face near her face, his leg against her leg, his mouth against her back, his palm on her stomach, his arm on her hip, his hip beside her leg, his head beneath her shoulders, his cheek along her neck—she would stick it out. All these options, he had! And Emmy would stick it out forever. Stay put, stay faithful, stay here.

Where was here? Not home. They weren't home. It was the Friday before Independence Day and a hundred degrees outside and they were in a highway motel in southern Rhode Island, on their way to his parents' in Maine for the long weekend. They hadn't planned on stopping, but they had left the city late because her meeting with their wedding planner had run late and then he had been annoyed. And then she had been annoyed because—did she really need to remind him?—she hadn't wanted a wedding planner in the first place, had wanted just the two of them on a cliff somewhere, maybe New Mexico, high above sea level, adobe houses seeping into dry land.

Emmy turned over onto her back. The sheets were stiff here. The fire alarm was right above her head. The television remote was next to her. The ordering went: her, television remote, him. He was on his back too. She could turn on the television and it wouldn't wake him. She could get up and get dressed and go get a Coke at the vending machine and it wouldn't wake him. She could sit with her Coke by the indoor pool for an hour or two hours and her absence wouldn't wake him.

If he happened to wake up by himself and see that she was gone, he would be worried, but not so worried that he'd come look for her. He would take a shower first. He would listen to the radio and get a traffic update. He would call his family to give them an estimated time of arrival. He would wait.

At six A.M., Nick turned onto his side, his back toward her. His hands were somewhere beneath the sheets. Emmy crawled out of bed and went into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and washed her face and pulled her hair into a bun. She had long brown hair that she washed in horse shampoo to keep it soft. She put on the peach sundress she had been wearing the day before. She had very pale skin, which didn't look so good beneath peach. It looked better beneath blues and ivories and reds.

Her suitcase was already packed so she took it. She left him the car keys and the car. She closed the door behind herself. She stopped at the front desk to pay for the room. She wanted to leave him a note, but she didn't know what to say. So she got another room key from the day-manager and let herself back into the room and took off her peach dress and got back into bed with him.

Now they were face to face.

A little before nine, his eyes fluttered open. Still, green eyes. He looked at her.

She reached out and touched his cheek, first with the outsides of her fingers, then with the insides.

"Did you know it's supposed to rain later?" she asked.

Nick shook his head no. He yawned.

"It is," she said. "Big time. Big storm. It should cool things down a bit."

He nodded, his eyes starting to close again. This, of course, was only his preliminary wake-up. There would be another two, maybe three, until one took.

She wouldn't be around for those. She took off her engagement ring and put it on the pillow and got back out of bed and put back on her peach sundress and picked up her suitcase again and walked out the hotel room door again, and this time she did it forever.

Three Years Later

The main jetty in Point Judith, Rhode Island, is long and narrow. Early enough on any weekday morning it isn't uncommon to see a few people lined up along it, waving a final goodbye to the fishermen who are pulling out of port to sea. It is for luck that they do this: they stand there until the fishermen make their way past the last marker—past that last mark—drifting completely out of sight. That is, except, on the first Friday morning of any month, when Jesse O'Brien's lobster boat pulls out of that port. Then his girlfriend, Betsy, stands there waving for only a minute before running away herself. This way, Jesse is the one who ends up having to watch her leave him.

From the back room of the small bait and tackle shop, I'd watched Betsy make her full-speed run off that jetty several times. It was one of the few perks of working there: the view of the jetty, and the larger-than-life fishing boats—the pale blue ocean lumbering out farther than I knew how to see. It was a perfect view. And it almost made up for what I could see from the shop's front room—the dusty roadside with its power lines and windblown debris, and the small highway motel that I had walked out of exactly three years before.

The truth is that after my dramatic exit from the motel room, I didn't slink that far. Just down the highway, two lefts—first onto South Pier Road, then Ocean Road—right into the main part of the town, the pier, where I found a different motel room (which I paid for, immediately, through the next week) and took a shower, and lay down on my back, on the floor, trying to figure out what to do next.

I had no idea what to do next.

Eventually, though, I got off the floor and headed back outside, and took a very long walk along the ocean, and decided that if someone were going to pick a place to be self-stranded, this beach town wasn't a bad one to choose.

Things seemed to just happen from there. Within the first few days, I found a house-sitting gig in a guesthouse up on Boston Neck Road, the main road that ran straight into town, along the pier, all the way up to the university. It wasn't quite an Oceanside house, but close to being an Oceanside house. And in exchange for light housework, I had free rein with the mostly unfurnished 3,000-square-foot guesthouse: a place I rarely left with the exception of weekday mornings, when I'd drive down to the other end of Narragansett, where I became the assistant manager (aka only employee) at the tackle shop. This was *not* the famous tackle shop—the one connected to the equally famous seafood restaurant, and frequented by tourists and party fishers and summer people who owned boats with names like *So F-In Happy*. It was the other one, the one on the far end of the docks, the raggedy one nestled in right by the water tower.

Today, I was hanging there long after my shift ended—just circling the back room—long after Betsy came and disappeared. It seemed better than the alternative, which I was forced to remember every time my eyes fixed on my boss's Porsche-of-the-month calendar hanging on the

wall. I had circled today's date in bright red marker. July 4. Independence Day. In the "4" square, I had written—ny. In small, small letters.

"Hey, Manhattan." I turned toward the back room's doorway, leading storefront, to see Bobby, the shop's owner, with two steel fishing rods in one hand, a bucket of Dum Dum lollipops in the other.

Bobby was sixty-seven, recently remarried to the same wife for the third time, and regularly annoyed at everyone in the world except for me, even if he did still refer to me by the nickname—Manhattan—that he had coined my first day on the job. He was always especially angry at the shop's few loyal customers, whom he blamed for keeping him from the retirement he'd been talking about since before his wife came back to him for round two. Weekly, he'd remind me to look for a new job. Daily, he'd say that we'd soon be closing down for good.

"Aren't you supposed to be on your way home by now?" How could I answer? I was. I really was.

"I'm just bracing myself," I said.

He gave me a look, which I ignored. What I was bracing myself for was this: my brother Josh was getting married. I needed to start driving toward suburban New York, toward my childhood home, for his wedding. But I just couldn't bear the endless questions that I knew would come my way as soon as I walked into wedding-weekend territory: What's your personal life like? When are *you* getting married? What's your plan after leaving Rhode Island? And what, again, are you still doing there?

"Would you mind bracing yourself out front then?" he asked. "We've got overflow."

Overflow, for us, was more than two customers. A quick peek out front revealed we had three. This included a young waitress from the fancy seafood restaurant/tackle shop, who liked to

come over to us during her breaks. I wasn't quite sure why. In three years, I'd never seen her buy anything. Not even a Dum Dum.

Who was I to judge? From the beginning, no one back home understood all the time I was spending in this tackle shop—or my decision to stay in Rhode Island at all, for that matter. So I came up with a legitimate reason for sticking around. I decided to make a documentary about the wives of offshore fishermen. Where better to do that than in a fishing town? I thought it would be interesting to take a look at all these women who were constantly being left. Who were needing to take care of everything alone again for one, two, three months at a time when their husbands were off at sea. Who were, ultimately, in a constant state of waiting.

It seemed like a very good idea. But all these years later, the project wasn't exactly where I'd hoped it would be. Where anyone could rightfully expect it to be. This was in no small part due to the fact that while I had initially planned on interviewing just a couple of wives to keep the project manageable—four or five wives, tops—I had moved *a little* beyond my initial subject pool.

I was on wife 107.

At last count.

Somewhere along the line, it had all just gotten so warped in my head. The different wives all starting to blend into each other—blond hair becoming brown, cigarettes becoming bitten-down fingernails, tattoos become reading glasses—until I couldn't see them at all anymore. Three Amys and four Jens and six Christinas and one Daisy and seven Jills and two Laurens and four Lindas and three Gayles and five Josies and three Ninas and four Therasas and one Carrie and five Nicoles and six Emilys and eight Maggies and four Dianes and three Kristies and two Sues and four Beths and nine Julies and three Maras and seven Lucys and two Junes and five

Kates and two Lornas and four Saras—and I couldn't see anything they were telling me. Not any of them.

All I could see, still, was Matt.

Bobby readjusted the lollipop bucket in his arms. “You know what, Manhattan? Forget it. Just get going already. Weddings wait for no man. Believe me.” He turned to head back out to the front.

The clock on the wall said 3:35 P.M. I was supposed to meet my brother at the Scarsdale Pool in exactly four hours and ten minutes to watch the fireworks. I had promised Josh, promised my whole family, that I'd be home in time for that. Considering the inevitable holiday weekend traffic I was about to face, if I didn't leave right then my lateness would be the first thing I'd need to explain.

From the shop's back exit to the driver's side of my car takes forty-eight seconds. I knew this now because I counted as I went—nine fast paces across the parking lot, closing the car door behind me, adjusting the rearview mirror, buckling myself in. It stopped me from thinking for a minute. But then I saw all my bags in the backseat of my car, the greater half of everything I owned staring back at me, and I still couldn't help but wonder if I'd forgotten something important. If I'd forgotten the one thing that would tell everyone I was okay. If I'd forgotten the one thing that I thought would convince them I was doing just fine, here, on my own? A short-sleeved purple sweater? That seemed doubtful.

I put my car in reverse, pulling out of the parking lot just as June Martin (aka June #2) was making a left into it, riding close to the wheel in her red Volvo station wagon. Her kids weren't in the backseat, but all their things were clogging up the back windows, the trunk windows even: car seats and balloons, candy-food wrappers, stuffed toys.

June had three girls: Dana, Carolyn, and Holly. Tomorrow was the youngest one's birthday party. June brought an invitation to me at the shop last week. It was still in my glove compartment—all pink and shiny—like a leftover wish. When you were hoping to attend a kid's birthday party, you knew you were in trouble.

“You going this way?” June mouthed, pointing in the direction of my house, moving her wagon forward so I could make the right of way.

But I pointed in the other direction, pointed—with something like reluctance or resolve—in the direction of the highway, and New York.

“This way,” I mouthed back, giving her a small smile, a wave good-bye. She waved back. Then I headed where I said I would.

I was going home.

