



Z. MORGAN

Daffodil Road

By Z. Morgan

Chapter I

The sun slowly revealed a beautiful spring morning as I waited at the train station. I was told it was beautiful, anyway, but I didn't have much else to compare it to. My life up until then had consisted of a single winter. Really, you could have told me that anything was beautiful at that point and I would have believed you. Everything in the world was divine compared to the nothingness that had come before, but the heavenly blue of the fresh March sky and the gentle yellow haze in the air were more spectacular than all of the hospital corridors and the windows full of snowy fields that I had seen before.

"Are you excited to meet her?" asked the hospital attendant that was waiting with me. "Or meet her again, I suppose."

Language was still difficult for me. I had only just learned to speak, after all. Or re-learned, depending on how you looked at it. I took my time finding the meaning behind the attendants words and composing my own response. It was better to be slow than to make mistakes, I had learned. 'Excited' didn't seem to cover the complexity of my emotions at the time. I was excited at the prospect of spring, for the world to warm and soften like everyone had talked about. I wasn't sure I knew how to feel about anything else. "Yes," I said finally. "But also nervous. I don't remember her."

"Don't worry, you will. I'm sure it'll all come back to you once you see her."

"Perhaps," I conceded. I had been doing poorly when it came to memory. Most of the test subjects had some problems, but at least they knew their own names or recognized the faces of their family. I had started with nothing and had gained nothing throughout the long months it had taken to rehabilitate me.

It was only a few minutes later that the train became visible in the distance, piercing through the haze that lingered in the distance. I felt a tightening in my stomach, a weaving together of good and bad emotions I had not yet lived long

enough to name. The train's headlight approached like the rising sun, golden luminance scattering across the dust rising along the tracks.

Before I had enough time to take it all in, the train was coming to a stop, the doors opening onto the platform I was standing on. I didn't remember getting up from the bench I had been sitting on, but I was standing all the same, the attendant beside me. People were exiting the passenger cars, more people than I had ever seen before, but my focus didn't linger on any of them. My attention was devoted to finding a single face, the face I had spent so long memorizing from the photos the hospital had provided me.

Finally I saw her, though I wasn't quite certain at first. I already knew that people were different in real life than they were in photographs. Real people were dynamic, changing at every moment and different from every angle you viewed them from. The photos were also old, somewhat out of date, and it was obvious that she had changed since they had been taken. She was thinner, more sickly looking, and her hair had gotten longer. Her face had changed, too, but it was harder to describe exactly why. She looked older, maybe, but only in the very depths of her eyes. She wore a mask of desperation as she searched the crowd.

A second later and her gaze had met my own. Something changed within her in that moment. The desperation melted into an ocean of relief and she looked months, even years younger. A warmth that I had seen in her pictures but had been missing in her countenance returned and she rushed towards me as if out of her own control. She stopped just a few feet away, wariness flickering across her face. "Al... Alester?" she ventured, like she wasn't quite certain she believed her eyes.

"It's me," I said, hoping it was what she wanted to hear.

At once I was wrapped in her arms. "I can't believe you're really here," she said.

I returned the embrace, lightly, afraid of holding her too close even though she had already buried herself in my chest.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if there was something else I was supposed to say, she pulled herself to arms length and studied me head to toe. "What on earth have they dressed you in?" she wondered between gasps. She used one hand to wipe away

her tears. "Good thing I brought some of your old clothes with me." She paused again, studying my face this time. "Do..." she gulped. "Do you... remember me?"

I did my best to smile. "Of course, I remember you, May," I told her. I hadn't meant to lie, really, but her expression was so dire that I couldn't bear to disappoint her. I hoped I was convincing.

The relief on May's face made my deception feel worthwhile, though I hoped it wouldn't stay a deception for much longer. "Oh, good," she said, her tone much lighter than the intense relief her expression betrayed. "That's good."

"But you'll have to be patient with me," I said quickly, afraid of raising her hopes too high. "I really don't recall all that much, barely anything at all, really. It's going to be a slow process, I think. I'm... sure it won't be very easy. For either of us."

May's smile didn't falter. She was holding both of my hands in her own, now, her bag dangling from one of her wrists. "I don't care. I don't care at all. I have you back, now. Nothing else matters, as long as we're together."

I tried to return the smile, but I could tell it wasn't that convincing. My faith wasn't nearly as strong as I wished it was.

The attendant tapped May on the shoulder and redirected her attention, giving me a surprisingly relieving break from her. I followed them back to the benches, where the attendant gave May a clipboard full of paperwork for them to discuss. May would have to assume responsibility for me, if I was going to be released from the hospital's care. I took the opportunity to study her, to try and remember. She was wearing a straw hat that did little to shield her eyes from the low sun, a blouse with buttons and a professional skirt and shoes. I recognized her cardigan from her photographs, light pink and decorated with embroidered flowers. If I had to guess I would have said that she had dressed up for the occasion, though I didn't have a good enough grasp of clothing convention at the time to be sure.

I tried to will a memory into existence, to force something to trigger a flash behind my eyes. I begged for something, anything to force its way through my galvanized synapses, but there was nothing.

May looked up at me in the midst of signing documents and smiled.

Chapter II

We said goodbye to the attendant and May took me to a diner for breakfast. The hospital staff had taken me out in public enough times that it was no longer overwhelming, but it was still a very new kind of experience. The diner was close to the station so we didn't walk through town for very long. I did my best to savor every second of it: the feeling of the uneven bricks beneath my shoes, the way the early sun textured the buildings lining both sides of the street. I studied the few passersby that were out and about so early in the morning, trying to understand something of their complicated lives by the few details I could make out.

I tried to understand how May was feeling. I was not yet very good at discerning a person's emotions from their expressions but, fortunately, May was relatively easy to read. She seemed nervous, constantly moving her eyes and hands and saying very little. There was something else, too, though I wasn't quite sure what it was. Not excitement, exactly. Hope, maybe.

The diner was just as sparsely populated as the streets. May brought us to a table next to the window in the back corner. I'd never been to this particular diner before, but the checkered floor and brightly colored booths made the setting familiar. I was distracted by the pale scene outside the window for a moment and, when I looked down, menus were sitting on the table in front of us. Before I could figure out what sort of food I wanted to try, May crossed her arms on the table and leaned towards me, her tone casual but her posture tense.

"So, Lester," she said hesitantly. "How are you... feeling today?"

I paused for a moment, collecting my response. I needed to say something both true and uncomplicated, something that would put her at ease. "I feel great... now that you're here."

She smiled, but the tenseness remained. I wondered what I would have to do or say to remove the strain from her expression. Her eyes fell to the table and she seemed to begin her next question several times, each attempt faltering until something finally

stuck. "Did... was the... well... Are- are you sure you're okay leaving town so soon? I know Dr. Godwin wanted to keep an eye on you for a while longer."

I nodded. This was an easy question to answer. "I'm... happy to get away. To... see somewhere new."

She gave a lopsided smile. "Well, I wasn't planning on going anywhere new. Not at first, anyway. I thought you'd probably just want to come home."

"Right. Of course," I said, even though the hospital was the only sort of home I could actually remember.

"We can stay the night here, though. If it feels like things are going too fast."

I shook my head. "That's okay. I'm... ready to go. I want to... start living again."

For some reason this made all of May's muscles go rigid. She tried and failed to say something again, this time only managing a succession of terse nods. "Yes. Sounds-sounds good."

When the waitress came May ordered two slices of french toast and a parfait for herself. Then she turned to me.

"Same as usual?" she asked.

I had no idea what the old Lester usually ordered for breakfast. It wasn't the sort of thing that was included in a person's medical file. "Sure," I replied.

The waitress disappeared a moment later and May once again turned to me. She started and stopped again, eyes searching my own. She had taken off her hat when we came into the diner and tiny strands of her hair were now turned gold by the window beside us. Her once-brown eyes were similarly filled with shades of honey from one side. Her hesitant expression suddenly broke into a smile and her eyes fell to the table. She let out a small laugh. "I'm sorry, Lester. I'm making this... awkward and difficult, aren't I? I just want to say all the right things but I don't know what they are."

I felt a smile on my own face, now. "That's... a relief, really. I don't... know what to say, either. It's... an unusual situation."

May laughed again. It was a wonderful thing to see. "That's certainly an understatement. I just..." she sighed and studied my features once again, though this time the action felt more natural. "I guess I should just come out and say it, all the

things I've been wanting to say. It's just harder than I thought it would be. I don't want to say the wrong thing."

I hoped I was as reassuring as meant to be. "I don't... care if you say the wrong thing. We'll figure it all out, eventually. We have... time."

May nodded gratefully, her eyes drifting downward and then out the window as she seemed to prepare herself for something. "When you..." she sucked her breath in as if she had felt a sudden pain. "When we signed you up for the program..." There was a long pause. "I suppose I never really thought it would actually work. I dreamed it would, hoped it would, you know? But I never really expected it. I always prepared myself for the worst. I'd heard the success rates were..." she shook her head, her beaming expression turning back to me. "Like I said, I'm just so, so glad to see you that it all barely feels real. And I spent so long with this idea that you—" she almost choked on her words then, but she powered through, speaking faster. "That you weren't coming back, so it's just sort of hard for me to pick up where we left off, and I'm sorry for that. I know you probably want things to go right back to normal but I'm just not sure I'll be able to manage that, at least right away."

"It's hard for me, too." I assured her when I was sure she was finished.

May's expression fell. "Of course it is. I'm sorry, I hadn't planned to say any of that, really. I can't even imagine what you've been through, what it's like for you..."

I hadn't meant to make her feel worse. "No, don't... apologize. I mean... I meant... it will be hard for me to pick up where we left off, too. So don't worry."

May wiped at her eyes, a tight smile on her lips. "Okay—"

"And—" I interjected, before she could respond, but failed to come up with something else to say. I wanted to explain that she didn't need to feel bad for me, that I hadn't exactly 'been through' anything, but I wasn't sure if she would agree, even if she knew the full extent of my situation. The hospital staff seemed to consider my complete lack of memory as a tragedy. "And... I'm really... okay. I don't need you to... worry about me."

May reached across the table and took my hand in her own. Her eyes were wet but at least she was smiling again. "I've always worried about you, Lester."