

MARRY ME

The Italian on the bicycle had no idea that the girl inside the tour bus chugging along the Via del Corso was named Lorie Crutchfield, nor that she was a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore from Barber's Mill, North Carolina. It wouldn't have mattered. The Italian was in love. One glimpse of her face had captivated him: the dreamy look in her bright eyes, the gentle swoop of her nose, even the rather amateurish streak of blush on her young cheek. He was so taken that he followed the bus to the next intersection and tapped on the window to get her attention. His legs soon became entangled in the frame of his bicycle and he fell onto the sidewalk.

Under ordinary circumstances, the other teenagers on the bus would have erupted into laughter. Instead they were silent. No one had ever noticed Lorie Crutchfield. A true friend would have stood up and exclaimed: *See? I always knew she was special.* But Emily Huffstetler, Lorie's best friend since preschool, was as perplexed as the rest.

Though Lorie wasn't ugly—her face had a pleasant symmetry, a neat nose with a dash of freckles, and a generous head of hair, albeit straight—she was not the sort who caused grown men to lose their composure. She was smart, but she was known more for her studiousness than her intellect. She was somewhat shy, eager to please and labored over her handwriting. Teachers loved Lorie Crutchfield. *If all students were like Lorie,* they wrote on her report card, *teaching would be heaven.*

The ten-day trek through Europe was arranged by Scholastic Adventures, a Cincinnati company specializing in budget travel. Everything was carefully synchronized and paid for in advance, including the stop at the gelateria for ice cream and the hurried march up the Spanish Steps. Madame Breton,

who led the group, had been preparing her French II and III classes for this trip for the past six weeks. Though she had warned the girls that European men might misunderstand their stares, no one had imagined that an Italian on a bicycle would lose his balance over a girl like Lorie Crutchfield and it was this that had disarmed them.

The rest of Rome was a blur. Only after everyone got their pictures back would they remember the veal piccata, the pet turtle inside the courtyard of the monastery where they stayed and the illuminated Virgin Mary at the foot of the marble steps. In Pisa, those with lira still left in their pockets had to choose between climbing the Tower or eating lunch. Years later, after the building closed to visitors, some of them would regret passing up this opportunity for one last cannoli. In Geneva, the travelers marveled more at the array of American breakfast cereals at their hotel than the bustling city itself. And until Madame Breton agreed to alternate her folk music with Duran Duran in the bus's cassette player, the majesty of the Alps was largely ignored. It was in Beaune that the teenagers had their first sip of real French wine, though what they enjoyed most was pressing coins into the soggy walls of the wine cellar. Only during the last night of their trip, in Paris, in one of those little cafés that ringed the Eiffel Tower did anyone dare try out their French. *S'il vous plait, je voudrais prendre du café au lait.*

"You must be exhausted," said Lorie's mother, on the way home from the airport. "You're so quiet."

Back in Barber's Mill, the town buzzed with the news that an Italian had fallen in love with Lorie Crutchfield. Though the pretty girls had treated her with respect in Europe, they now resented her, whispering among themselves. Things like that happened to *them*, not to a girl like Lorie Crutchfield! The boys, on the other hand, acted as if they had never seen Lore before. They moved reverently aside as she walked through the hall. They took notice of the way she drew her heart locket to her mouth during class, and the way she bent her

elbow across her desk as she numbered her test paper.

The local shoe store sold out of the brown suede clogs she began wearing. The last pair was bought by a thirteen-year-old who had to wear extra socks because they were too big for her feet. Girls as young as eleven picked the clarinet as their band instrument because they knew Lorie Crutchfield played it. When Lorie squeezed lemon juice on her hair over the summers, the school halls later streamed with an endless parade of blondes.

At night, as the mothers of the pretty girls removed their makeup in rose-scented dressing rooms, they thought about the Italian. Would he have pursued them? Their husbands shook their heads, thinking them silly. Yet some of them secretly imagined making love to Lorie Crutchfield themselves. The mothers and the fathers of the pretty girls had affairs. Some of them divorced.

The boy Lorie let take her to the junior prom wore a lilac bowtie and cummerbund because it matched her dress. As she leaned her head on his shoulder, he could not enjoy the moment because he knew that she had promised the next dance to Jeremy Wells.

People in Barber's Mill would have been surprised to learn that Lorie Crutchfield thought little about the man on the bicycle. She didn't have to consciously think about him because it seemed he was always there, hovering on the fringes. His black hair and beseeching dark eyes were there, too, boring into her soul. Though she was flattered by his attention, she knew that it was best to keep him where she had left him, on the sidewalk along the Via del Corso. Lorie was optimistic about her future.

Unlike the pretty girls, who dropped out of band for cheerleading and baton twirling, Lorie continued to play her clarinet, sitting second only to the daughter of the bandleader. Even though her father was just a clock puncher for the hosiery factories that had built Barber's Mill, she was invited to the par-

ties held by the children of the owners. She would have won homecoming queen if not for the pretty girls, who conspired and elected one of their own. Lorie's SATs were average—she took it twice—but good enough to get her into a university not far from home.

There were too many students at the university for any of them to be considered truly popular, yet Lorie Crutchfield was a name familiar to most. There she became as well known for her peculiar little habits as her long, tawny hair—for carrying the canvas satchel with the broken handle and her tendency to lock herself out of her dorm room. Once she accidentally let loose a bag of candy peanuts during a performance of *Twelfth Night*. The candy had rolled down the sloped floor of the auditorium and distracted the audience. Everyone was annoyed at first but when people turned around and saw Lorie Crutchfield they were charmed.

Lorie eventually selected nursing as her major because it was a four-year program and the tests were multiple-choice. She had heard that the pay was good and she knew that if she ever had children—her greatest hope—it was a profession she could pick back up again.

She met the man she would eventually marry in her freshman year, in the gymnasium where she waited for someone to drop the anthropology class she needed. Throughout the turmoil of Lorie's college years—a bitter quarrel with a roommate over a broken lease, her heartache at the end of a relationship with a German major, the death of her father—they stayed friends. His name was Mark Holcomb and he was also smart, though uninspired. She had to nudge him awake many times during astronomy lab. As Lorie began working as a student nurse at the university hospital, Mark spent another year gathering enough credits for an accounting degree.

They were married in Barber's Mill, in the church where, as an infant, Lorie had been baptized and presented to the congregation. To the pretty girls, the news of Lorie's wed-

ding came as a relief. The night before, these girls had come to Lorie's house and helped her make little bags of birdseed, which the guests tossed at the newlyweds as they ran to their car.

For her honeymoon, Lorie briefly considered returning to Europe, but decided that she deserved something new for her marriage—the clear waters of Cancun. In Mexico, Lorie and Mark swam and drank tequila on rickety canvas chairs in a deserted alcove.

In a light-hearted moment, her new husband confessed that he could have married a woman with ties to the Dupont family. In return, Lorie impulsively shared with him her own secret. She immediately wished that she had not.

“You must have done something,” said Mark. “You must have done something to attract him.”

“I didn't, I swear.”

“Of course you did.”

When she woke the next morning her husband was gone. He returned later with a hand-carved wooden saint that she had admired in the marketplace the day before.

“It's lovely,” said Lorie, relieved that their first argument had finally passed.

The Holcombs followed their college friends to Raleigh, buying a house that they couldn't afford. But they naively believed that the debt would bring them closer. Though Lorie landed a job right away in the labor and delivery wing of a private hospital, Mark took his time, not wanting to take a job that was beneath him. Their lovemaking was not the highlight of their marriage.

“Pretend that I'm your Italian,” he would whisper. “Pretend that I followed you back to your room that night.”

Lorie's job was a struggle at first. The other nurses told her she was too slow with the vital signs and that the chitchat with the patients would have to end. In the excitement of the first birth she attended, Lorie accidentally held her breath and

passed out. It would be several births later before she remembered to breathe. But she grew to love the rush of adrenaline that followed the birth of a baby. She loved the tender little bodies that conformed to hers, the toothless mouths that wailed for a nipple. Lorie eventually rose through the ranks to become lead nurse.

After five years of trying to have a child of their own, the Holdcombs gave up. Instead they adopted a baby girl born to a teenager who could not afford to care for her. Lorie named her Lucy, for her favorite character in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And as it so often happened, she soon conceived. This second child, a boy, was called Nathaniel. She loved being a mother but her husband's growing unhappiness with his career gnawed at their marriage.

When Mark turned thirty-two, the passion that he had before lacked suddenly exploded inside him. He wanted to be an architect, he announced. He was *meant* to be an architect. He blamed his late start on Lorie, who, he claimed, had made him feel that he should settle on something as quickly as she had. She responded by throwing the Mexican saint at him, which fell and broke on the tile floor of their kitchen.

"You never loved me," he said to her. "You wish I had been that Italian."

Even though this was not true, she let him leave because she knew that that was what he wanted to do. His departure was difficult at first. Because he went back to school, his monetary support was limited. Lorie often worked double shifts at the hospital. A younger sister moved in for a while, to help with the children. Money became even tighter after Mark married a graduate student and started another family. But Lorie had no regrets.

When Lucy turned thirteen, her biological mother showed up on Lorie's doorstep. The woman regretted giving up her baby but understood that it was too late. All she wanted, she said, was to see Lucy and then she would leave. Lorie wanted to slam the door in the woman's face but instead she made a

place for this woman at their dinner table. Lorie hoped that this visit would be the woman's last but when Lucy began cutting classes and smoking marijuana, Lorie knew that it was not. To keep the peace, she let this woman live with them from time to time because this was what her daughter wanted. It was she who comforted Lucy when this woman left for good.

Her son inherited Lorie's eagerness to please but was frequently unable to concentrate in school. The counselors told Lorie it was because he missed his father. Though his absences worried her, she agreed to let him spend his summers in Massachusetts, where his father now lived.

As the children grew older and finally found their way in the world, Lorie realized that she missed having a man in the house. The intermittent affairs since her divorce did not compensate for the void in her life. Though her friends often arranged dates for her with men that they knew, Lorie grew to dread these awkward encounters.

Just when she had ceased to worry about her flagging love life, a stranger at the Broadleaf Nursery asked if the snapdragons in her cart were difficult to care for. Later, over dinner, she realized what it was that made her accept his invitation. It was the way one of his incisors pierced his lip as he smiled. His name was David and he managed a co-op where local farmers sold their vegetables. In his spare time, he painted wildlife. Unlike the other men she had dated, he did not seem consumed by himself. Six months later, with her children standing beside her, Lorie Crutchfield Holcomb became Lorie Crutchfield Holcomb Maness.

It was the pretty girls who organized the twentieth high school reunion back in Barber's Mill. Though they greeted Lorie politely as she introduced her husband, inside they still burned with resentment. The boys, too, turned away, remembering her rejection. It was with satisfaction that everyone observed her slight weight gain and the gray at the crown of her head that she had left unchecked. "Can you believe that's Lorie

Crutchfield?" everyone whispered. She walked through the crowd, looking for a friendly face.

"Lorie," called out Emily Huffstetler. "There you are."

By the time she was forty-four, Lorie had been to Europe several times, visiting places that the Scholastic Adventures tour bus had bypassed. She took the time to read about Versailles before she went, and at Le Petit Hamcau, she imagined Marie Antoinette happily churning butter. She laughed as poodles queued up outside the Abbey at Mont St. Michel, waiting for their owners to emerge. In England she and David rented a car and drove through the Lake District and then north to Scotland, where they took the sunset ferry to the Isle of Skye. She had yet to return to Italy, but she had not ruled it out.

Her husband knew nothing of the Italian and the fifteen-year-old girl from Barber's Mill. He loved Lorie for the woman she had become. For the way she held a hand to her mouth when she laughed. For the way she applied hand cream to her elbows first and moved downward along her arms. For buying more begonias than she could plant and giving them away to her neighbors. For taking her granddaughter around the garden and bending down roses for her to sniff. For keeping a bowl of shells from their trip to Shackelford Banks on the coffee table. He loved how she ended up sharing his pillow at night because their Pekinese had taken over hers. She was the finest woman he had ever known.

Frequently he wondered what made her different. He wondered what was on her mind as she waited for him to take his turn at Scrabble. He wondered what she thought about in the mornings, as she lay quietly awake. He wondered what she thought about as she stretched out on the Adirondack lounge he had built for her birthday. "Join me," she always said, when her eyes met his.

It was true that from time to time Lorie did think of the Italian. But this memory was tucked away too deeply to wound her marriage. Certain aspects had dimmed over time—had he

been wearing a white linen shirt or had it been blue—but her feeling at the time, that simultaneous rush of pleasure and embarrassment as he had accosted her on the sidewalk next to the gelateria, remained fresh. For she knew that the man on the bicycle had not been a gigolo, as one of the chaperones whispered. Nor, as Madame Breton had said, was he one of those Italians who made a habit of following American girls and propositioning them.

His passion for her had been agonizingly real, for she had heard it in his voice. She did not need to know his language to understand his plea. The words, which he repeated over and over again, were to her young ears the most sacred words she would ever hear. And though Lorie was happy with her life, from time to time she did allow herself the harmless little luxury of imagining what would have happened if she had broken away from Madame Breton's grasp, accepted his outstretched hand, and said *yes*.