

Scavengers

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Klara found Geoff on a dating website called Finders Keepers. He sounded great in his online profile. He was a graphic designer with a steady job, and he liked the same kinds of movies and books. But meeting him in person made Klara nervous. She had suggested an outdoor, public venue for their first date, not thinking that the weather would work against her. The breeze penetrated her sweater, making her skin painful with chill. Ordering tea or soup might help, but soup was not a first-date food. She'd spill on her new outfit. She knew it.

They shook hands when Geoff showed up. He didn't look like the kind of guy she normally dated, but that was part of the appeal. His dark crazy curls sat in a mop on his head. He had a beard. She had never dated someone with facial hair. His leather jacket, band t-shirt layered on top of a long sleeved shirt, and wallet chain reminded her of a biker.

My parents would kill me, she thought. Who cares?

"Beautiful day," Geoff said. The sky was cloudless and bright, but the wind off of Lake Michigan made Klara wish she'd brought a scarf and a coat.

"Pretty," she said. "But it's a bit cold."

"We could go inside if that's more comfortable."

"Oh, it's okay," she replied, automatically, and just as instantly, regretted it. She really needed to be more assertive. How was she ever going to find the right guy if she couldn't even say she'd rather eat inside?

They looked at the menus, Klara taking quick glances at Geoff. She couldn't concentrate on the food options.

"Have you been here before?" he asked.

"No," Klara said. "But I love trying new things."

"They have great corned beef here," he said. "If you like Rubens, they're the best."

She scanned the sandwiches, but wondered again about soup, trying not to shiver.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a large group of scruffy teenagers walking down the street toward them. Their

appearance filled her with dread. They looked like they might be in a gang. Klara looked back at the menu and tried to act natural. But one of the teens, a boy wearing sagging shorts and a t-shirt that was way too big, and clearly not appropriate for the weather, had caught her eye. Emboldened, he started toward their table.

"Hey, lady," the kid said in an aggressive voice. "Let me ask you something."

Klara's body tensed, and her mind darted to the purse on the arm of her chair.

"What's up?" Geoff asked. He straightened up and edged his chair in front of Klara so that she was three-quarters behind him.

"I'm talking to the lady," the kid said.

Klara couldn't imagine talking to an adult like that when she was a teenager, let alone someone that looked like Geoff.

"What?" Klara asked, leaning to see around her human shield.

"We need a picture of two people in love," the kid said. "You in love with this guy, right?"

Love? Klara looked at the kids, some approaching the age where they might start shaving, the others looking like angry grade schoolers.

"What?" Klara said. Maybe she hadn't heard them right.

The other kids stood behind the ring leader, appraising Klara and Geoff. Geoff scooted his chair to look at Klara in bewilderment. A chunky girl emerged from the back of the group and folded her arms across her ample chest.

"Yeah, they in love all right," she said.

Klara looked between the boy and the girl, confused, still wondering if one of them would make a dive for her purse.

"This. . . this is our first date," Klara said.

"Don't matter," the girl said. "You're gonna love this man today. Stay there – we getting a picture."

"What?" Klara asked. "Why do you need a picture of two people in love?"

The girl took a paper out of her pocket and thrust it at Klara. She unfolded it and read, "Epiphany Baptist Church Fall Break Camp: Scavenger Hunt. Use the camera on your phone to take pictures of the following items." There was a list of odds and ends, most of them checked off: bird(s) on a wire, the letter Q, a person singing in a car, roadkill, a man wearing a hat, etc. "Two people in love" was unchecked.

The teens moved aside as the girl elbowed her way to the center of the group.

"You want to take our picture?" Geoff asked.

"Yeah, man, keep up. We need the proof to win."

"What's the prize?" he asked.

"A pizza party," the girl said.

Geoff scooted his chair again, and positioned himself beside Klara.

"What are you doing?" Klara asked.

"Come on," he said. "It's for pizza."

She laughed, "Anything for children, right?"

"We ain't children," the tough kid said.

"All right, take it easy. How's this?" Geoff asked, putting his arm around Klara and leaning close.

His body pressed against hers, and she leaned into his warmth to block the breeze. He smelled nice – not overwhelmed with cologne like some men, but pleasant.

"Do we seem like we're in love?" Geoff asked. "I could kiss her if you want."

"Oh, you could?" Klara looked up at him. His face hovered above hers, his eyes conspiratorial.

"No, that's good," the girl said, snapping a picture before either of them could properly pose. Klara wondered what the picture looked like – two strangers staring at each other. Who thought that looked like love?

"Thanks," the girl said. She took the paper from Klara and faced the group. "Let's go, y'all."

The group erupted into conversation about the few remaining items on their list and wandered off down the street. Klara and Geoff stayed huddled

together. She held her breath, analyzing Geoff's face. His eyes were green, and wrinkles creased their edges. He looked like someone who had seen things – *What?* she wondered.

"Would you like my coat?" Geoff asked, inches away from her lips. "You look like you're freezing."

"Sure," she said, the tension breaking. "Thanks."

He took off his jacket and helped her into it. Klara wrapped herself in his body heat and scent and felt a little better.

"Weird, eh?" Klara said, nodding toward the kids.

"Yeah," Geoff said. "But also sort of sweet."

She looked at his tough exterior, puzzled.

"Sweet?"

Geoff shrugged, "Scavengers for love. That's all of us, isn't it?"

The waitress came back and popped open her notebook, pen poised.

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking impatiently between the two of them.

Klara looked at Geoff, not thinking about the food.

"Yeah," she replied. "I think we're ready."

Carved Digital Photography by Bob See

