

Ok. This is stupid. (Part Two)

by Jamie Sughroue Brown

Two

My breath hitches as something fuzzy brushes against my leg - and then a soft meow drifts up at me.

"You have a cat?"

"Yeah," he replies, and I can hear the grin in his voice. "I have an affection for all things feline."

"So, this is awkward . . . but as I'm about to ask your cat's name, I'm in turn realizing that I don't even know your name." I toss this out into the ether, as he's yet to turn on another light. A small desk lamp illuminates its radiant three feet in the hall, but the house is otherwise muted.

His face is shadowed, and I can barely make out his features. In this moment, I can't even remember what his picture looked like online. Jesus.

I sense rather than hear him approach me - like his housemate, he moves with stealth and a predator's lithe, light footfall. He clasps my right hand in his and gives it a gentle shake. My palm dampens in his, and I try to pull it away before he notices. He tightens his grip.

Well, so be it. I can't help my physical response to him. If that's going to turn him off, not much I can do about it.

"I'm Colin," he pronounces, while simultaneously pulling me against him so that we're nose to nose. A subtle hint of citrus wafts toward me.

Okay. So, he's aggressive. Hot.

"Uh . . . I'm Lucy," I slur, anxiety making my tongue thick and uncooperative as I move my captive hand up and down in his.

An uninhibited laugh belts out of him, surprising me. "Yeah, I know. But thanks for the reminder."

I involuntarily purse my lips and he notices, even in the dim light. He can't entirely smother the next laugh, but he makes a solid effort. "Are you nervous?"

"Pshawww . . . Who, me?" I flap my free hand at him, as if brushing his comment aside. "No way, man. I do this all the time. Are you?" I bluster, bravado deepening my voice. As if my body hasn't betrayed me with my sweaty hand he has yet to let go of.

"No. Excited." He answers definitively, smile gone.

I've known him (in person) all of fifteen minutes at this point, but the sincerity in his voice darts through my pores, piercing my heart, and adrenaline erupts from inside the chambers with its next contraction, pulsing through my arteries and enervating the fibers of my muscles.

My left eye involuntarily twitches. Happens sometimes. I need a minute. I can't catch my breath.

I take advantage of his distraction as he briefly focuses in on just my left eye, and snatch my hand back. Okay. Breaking the skin-to-skin contact, I immediately feel more in control. I wouldn't say better, but more in possession of my faculties. Like, now I'm probably not going to throw up on his bare feet or alternatively tackle him onto the rug - even with the underlying fear and distraction of potentially crushing his cat.

I take a step back and crash against the front door. Well, shit. That was less than attractive. And as I rub my smarting shoulder, I can't help but consider yanking the offending door open behind me and bolting.

What am I doing here? I don't know this guy. What am I going to do if I get into trouble? Go for the trusty box cutter from work tucked into the pocket of my bag? Sure. That'll get me far.

Looking down into the depths of my bag, I pat at the cloth and contemplate its contents. I'm crafty - I can repurpose any formerly harmless object into a lethal weapon if pressed. I grasp a package of Mentos. Really? Am I going to bludgeon him with the Freshmaker? Fling each respective candy piece like a throwing star, and hope for the best? Death by mint overdose?

A kiss presses against my bare clavicle, and every last thought evaporates from my harried mind.

"You okay?" he murmurs, lips still pressed against me, goose bumps erupting on my sensitive skin beneath his warm breath.

Oh, sweet lord. As I've been sussing out ways to murder him, he's been just standing there, intently watching me. Super. Now, not only am I relatively clumsy, I also must seem vapid. I mock girls that behave like this in the terrible romance novels I secretly read on my iPad.

Get out of your head, Ball.

"What? Did you say something about a Ball?" He straightens, head cocked inquisitively and redirects his gaze at my mouth. I can't help it. I reflexively lick my lips. His eyes shoot up at mine and that's when I notice they're green as well. A lush, verdant green - like a blade of bermuda grass plucked from a midwestern lawn in May. Tiny gold flecks populate around his pupil as it dilates.

I realize then that I've spoken aloud.

"Nothing. It's fine. Just giving myself a little pep talk." My words flow out in a rush, and I make a concerted effort to take a deep breath and start again. "My last name is Ball. I was just thinking too much, and need to stop. That's all."

"What??" he laughs again, fervently. He doubles over, grasping his side.

I wait it out. This happens a lot.

"I'm sorry - you said your last name is Ball?" he coughs out, gasping for air.

Must be a smoker, I deduce. Poor air management skills. A little wheezy.

I give it another minute.

He composes himself, and looks at me expectantly.

"Yes. I am Lucy Ball. Lucille Desiree Ball. My mom is and has always been a fan. When she fell in love with and married my dad, she said she couldn't help herself - she absolutely had to name a daughter Lucy. Such a quirk of fate, for a devoted Lucy fan to marry a man with the last name of Ball. So, here I am." I'm comfortable

with this - it's a familiar story, one I've had to tell so many times it just pours out of me. I relax a fraction more.

He twists a lock of my hair. "And this? Are you a natural redhead?"

I smirk and retort, "Really? We're going there?"

He lets loose another laugh, and he tugs on the hair he's clutching. He's so free with his laughter. God, that's refreshing. I snicker back. I mean, it is pretty absurd.

"No, I'm not a natural redhead. I dye my hair on a whim, usually when I need a change in my life but don't want to do anything too drastic." Our communal amusement has apparently loosened me up as I speak without consideration. This rarely happens with strangers. I typically choose my words with deliberation, not wanting to offend nor reveal too much too soon. Learned that lesson the hard way.

He flicks on the overhead light suddenly. I blink, startled, and I feel his fingertips brush against my tank top and dip just underneath the strap. He lightly outlines my tattoo, just under my clavicle. I stand paralyzed. By one finger. No, the tip of one finger. If I wasn't so incredibly turned on, I'd be a little humiliated at my utter immobility.

He lifts said finger, hovering, pointing back down at my chest.

"Was this a drastic whim?" He continues his slow, tactile study of my scarred flesh.

"Ohhh . . . oh boy . . . no . . . Colin . . . oh god . . ."

"This texture is interesting - I've never felt someone else's tattoo before on an intimate area like this. Sexy." He replaces his finger with his tongue, and I nearly swoon. "It's, what? A sugar skull?"

The most I can do is nod my acquiescence. This is just ridiculous. My thoughts are still relatively coherent in my head, but it's like every synapse has fried throughout my body, not allowing translation to my limbs.

Swoon?! Did that word seriously come to mind? This isn't one of my treasured Jane Austen novels. I've experienced enough of life to know those are merely stories, that Mr. Darcy is fictitious and that

the snarky Elizabeth Bennet's of the world don't typically get second chances.

I pull away.

