

# UNEXPECTED SPARKS

by

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## CHAPTER ONE

Kate was disappointed when Sam Madison entered her bookstore. She liked the guy all right, but today she had wanted the tinny-sounding bell hanging over the door to announce someone else.

“Hey, Kate.” Tall and handsome, with dark hair just beginning to turn silver, Sam had kept in good shape over the years, and his expensively tailored suit covered by a long coat emphasized his broad shoulders.

“Sam.” Kate watched him stroll over to the magazine rack and wasn’t surprised when he grabbed the latest *Penthouse*. She knew he was checking out the photos. He certainly didn’t buy it for the articles.

“Lousy weather, eh?” Sam returned to the counter and tossed the magazine onto the polished surface.

Kate idly rang in the purchase. “It could be worse. Remember Juan? When I lost the sign out front?”

Sam nodded. “You know, the way things are going, it’s just a matter of time before we’re hit with another hurricane. Hey, are you ever going to replace that sign?”

“Are you ever going to pay me the insurance you owe for it?” It was an old argument, and not one that held any heat by this time.

“Act of God, Kate. I would if I could, but I couldn’t.”

“Remember that the next time you’re struck by lightning.” Kate knew that a great many women found Sam attractive and charismatic, but something about him had always left her cold. It had nothing to do with the disputed insurance claim either, since that had been only a few hundred dollars. Sam had lost far more in premiums when Kate switched all her coverage to another company. She also recognized that it hadn’t been entirely his decision, since his father-in-law ran a head office in the city.

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Kate had attended university with his cold, aloof wife, Margaret, in Wolfville decades ago. She had never respected Margaret's opinion, and that extended to any man she married, especially one from Westville. Kate wondered how Margaret had fallen for the hard-edged Sam, and then decided that she must have thought she had discovered a diamond in the rough. Sam had painstakingly developed several layers of charm and wit over the years, and the average person would have no idea which side of the tracks he had started on.

"You know, Kate, you really know how to hold a grudge," he said as he handed her the money.

She smiled without humor. "Not at all, Sam. I just believe in doing unto others. Isn't that your motto as well?"

"Maybe I've learned there are better ways to live life." He grinned as if her comment had struck home in some amusing way.

Kate didn't snort in disbelief, but she wanted to. Instead, she handed Sam the bag emblazoned with the store's name and thanked him for his purchase before he exited her store. Then she promptly dismissed him from her mind as she drifted over to the large display window behind the counter. Peering out at the snowy streets, she searched for signs of a familiar figure coming down the sidewalk, a mix of trepidation and anticipation causing jitters in the pit of her stomach.

Would this Wednesday be the one when she'd finally take the chance she had been thinking about for far too long?

## CHAPTER TWO

Trudging through the spongy snow covering the sidewalk, huddled in the coat that was a little too large for her, Nikki Harris wished, not for the first time, that Nova Scotia didn't have to be so blasted damp in the winter. At the corner of Outram and Prince, she carefully mounted the salt-encrusted concrete steps leading to the entrance of Novel Companions, the icy conditions making her move like one of the elderly to prevent any inadvertent slips. Most Maritimers perfected this delicate dance between slush and pavement at a very young age.

Looming over Nikki like a stern, if kindly, kindergarten teacher, the building rose four stories, making it one of the larger structures in Truro. A tarnished gold plaque set in the brick at the side of the heavy wooden double doors read 1865, indicating that it had been built during the town's early existence.

As Nikki entered the warm interior of the bookstore, her wire-frame glasses steamed up from the change in temperature. Pausing just inside, she took them off to clean them with a tissue, glancing around through blurred vision. No other customers were there on this quiet Wednesday afternoon, which gratified her even though she felt ripples of apprehension.

Behind the counter, Kate Shannon glanced up from the book she was reading, her lips curving in a welcome that warmed Nikki far more than the décor. "Cold enough for you?" Kate made the area's traditional winter greeting sound like a personal concern for her well being.

Nikki dropped her head shyly, feeling awkward and remembering the gentle ease that once characterized their friendship. Had it only been a month ago? "It's not so bad," she lied.

Though Kate and Nikki had become friends over the past year, sharing many discussions about their lives and books and international

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current events, Nikki had recently decided to start distancing herself from Mrs. Shannon. Not because of Kate's demeanor, which continued to be as warm and welcoming as the store, but because Nikki was becoming too attracted to her. A hopeless and unrequited love was the last thing Nikki needed at this stage in her life, especially when she felt as if she'd just finished recovering from the mess with Anne.

Tearing her eyes away from Kate as she drifted over to the mystery section, Nikki tried not to be too obvious in her withdrawal. But her attempt at self-discipline didn't prevent her from feeling what she did or from peering over the top shelf of the counter to surreptitiously study Kate where she perched on a high stool behind the counter.

Standing about five-foot six with a trim, compact form, Kate always appeared fashionable and elegant, even in a simple turquoise sweater and jeans. Reddish brown hair fell neatly about classic features that boasted high cheekbones beneath what Nikki considered to be the most marvelous blue-gray eyes. Kate looked particularly appealing at the moment, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses set precariously on her nose as she flipped through a hardcover. Probably some scholarly tome, Nikki thought wistfully, the understanding of which undoubtedly lay far beyond that required for the mystery novels she preferred.

She supposed that other people wondered why Kate remained unattached after her divorce seven years earlier, just as she did. In all likelihood, she was just holding out for something and someone a whole lot better than she could discover in Truro. Since Nikki had no idea how or why her own feelings toward Kate had changed so drastically in recent weeks, she expected Kate would probably be vastly uncomfortable if she knew. Of course, it also occurred to Nikki that she could stop shopping at the bookstore entirely and return her patronage to the chain store at the mall, but the thought of not seeing Kate at all was too painful to contemplate.

Confused and hurting, Nikki glanced down at the selection on the shelves. Despite Truro's small-town status, Kate stocked her store with a remarkably liberal touch. The alternative lifestyles section easily overshadowed the one belonging to the large chain store, and more than a few gay and lesbian books, which were usually unavailable outside Halifax, were scattered throughout the other sections. Nikki assumed it was merely good business on Kate's part. She was aware that smaller, privately owned stores needed to compete in areas that the larger chains

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didn't exploit, and she knew she was far from being the only gay person in town or the surrounding area. It just felt that way sometimes.

Nikki looked longingly over the selection of new arrivals, knowing that she would have to limit her indulgences. Her paycheck from her job at Keebler's Building Supplies went only so far, and alternative mysteries cost significantly more than the average mainstream titles. Sighing silently, she left the part of the store where the new books were displayed and strode into the rear where the extensive used section was located. Unfortunately, books with lesbian protagonists rarely made their way onto these shelves. Nikki didn't know why, just that they didn't seem to recycle as other books did, probably because far fewer were in circulation.

As she checked out the mysteries, neatly organized in alphabetical order, Nikki took a moment to appreciate the atmosphere of the store, delighting in the scent of paper and books surrounding her and the gentle fragrance of the incense that Kate favored lingering in the air. The intricate woodwork visible around the ceiling and walls, as well as the polished plank floor, was original, well over a hundred years old, granting the interior a sense of solidness and timeless grandeur. This had become Nikki's favorite place over the past year, not only because of her love of reading and her attraction to Kate, but because it was simply such a comfortable place to be, an inviting place to linger and browse. It was what the chain stores aspired to emulate with their new layouts, which included sofas and coffee bars, but never quite managed to accomplish.

Nikki felt a sharp sense of delight when she discovered a recent book on the shelf by one of the mainstream authors she collected. Pleased at the find, which was half price, she briefly debated with herself whether she could justify the expense before she picked it up and then looked quickly through the rest of the shelves before returning to the front of the store.

"Found something, did you?" Kate glanced at the cover and smiled warmly as she took the book from Nikki to ring it up. "This is one of her best. I read it when it was first released. She really does a good job with her characters."

Nikki felt the heat rise in her cheeks, aware they had to be a glowing pink, and wished that her fair skin would not make it so obvious when she was uncomfortable. The comment was a clear invitation to chat, so

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similar to the one that Kate had first extended a little more than a year ago. At first, Nikki had welcomed the chance to be friends with Kate, finding their conversations absorbing and challenging. But now, just the slightest bit of attention from Kate made every nerve in her body sing with energy, and the feelings were becoming so intense that she couldn't even look the shopkeeper directly in the eye. "I was planning to buy it new," she managed, studying the bookmark display on the counter with intensity. "I'm surprised it showed up in the used section so quickly."

"She's a very popular author, so a lot of her books are in circulation." Kate accepted Nikki's money. "Did you see the newest Rita Mae Brown?"

Their fingers brushed in the exchange, and Nikki felt the tingle move all the way up her arm. *I need to get out of here.* She tried desperately not to react visibly. "I did, but I'm not really into her new series."

"Is it because she doesn't include any gay characters?" Kate's expression was quizzical.

"That's part of it. She doesn't have to always write about gays, but since the gay in the first book is a villain, and no others appear even in a supporting role through the rest of the series, it's like she's denying us. It's too bad, since we were the ones who bought her first books, after all—not the Midwestern housewives she's apparently trying to appeal to now."

Nikki stopped, not particularly liking the sharp edge that had appeared in her tone; gay issues were not something she really wanted to discuss, particularly not with Kate at the moment. Sometimes it seemed that Kate tried too hard to steer their conversations onto that subject, as if she was somehow trying to prove that Nikki's sexual orientation didn't matter to her. But it mattered to Nikki. "I have to get going. I've...uh, I have things to do at home."

Kate lifted her eyes, the thoughtful and compassionate gaze mesmerizing Nikki. "Is something wrong? You've seemed a little uncomfortable with me lately. Have I offended you in some way?"

"Not at all." Nikki was horrified that Kate would think that, though a tiny part of her was quite pleased that she cared enough to notice. "I'm fine. I just...I need to go." She couldn't remain in the presence of that intense gaze, humiliated at being unable to deal with

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these feelings of desire and longing. She expected better of herself. “Thanks,” she mumbled as she picked up the bag and hastily made her escape, conscious of Kate’s soft eyes following her from the store.

Out on the sidewalk, the damp chill hit Nikki like a shock, and she stuffed the book into the large pocket in the front of her jacket. Still stinging from the conversation, feeling unbearably lonely, she bent her head and forged into the stiff breeze that had come up, bringing with it the scent of more snow.

A few minutes later, she unlocked the door to her small apartment with a sense of relief. Deliberately forcing Kate from her mind, she dropped her purchase on the portable washer in the corner before shrugging out of her jacket and hanging it in the closet. Leaving her wet boots on the mat, she pulled on her slippers as she moved into the tiny kitchen just off the entrance.

Nikki heard a soft thud from the bedroom as Powder leapt from the bed where he liked to curl up, and before long, he was winding around her ankles, purring audibly. “You realize that if things get any tighter, I may have to skin and eat you,” she told the pure white cat sternly as she pulled a can opener from the drawer and opened a tin of cat food. He appeared suitably unimpressed by this threat and shoved his face into his dish as soon as she placed it on the floor.

After making a tuna and Swiss cheese sandwich, putting some rice chips into a bowl, and pouring a glass of milk, Nikki retrieved her book and moved into the living room where she curled up on the threadbare sofa she had inherited from her parents after her mother had gone on one of her redecorating binges. She had always meant to replace it with a new one, but that was another expense for better times.

She relaxed as she munched and opened her new acquisition, feeling the same sort of comfort and expectation in starting a new book that she always did. Suddenly, dropping from the inside pages, a small card fell onto her lap. It wasn’t the first time Nikki had found something from the previous owner of a used book, a makeshift bookmark, something utilized to mark the page and forgotten, now offering the opportunity to peer through a small window into the life of the person who had read it before her.

Curious, she opened it and read the script sprawled over the interior: “Dear Kate, just a small token of our weekend at the Keltic Lodge. It was wonderful, and I can’t wait to see you again. Soon, we’ll

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be together for the rest of our lives. All my love, Sam.”

Kate was a fairly common name in Truro, and it was unlikely this had anything to do with the owner of the bookstore or with Sam Madison, the odious man who owned the insurance office down the street from Novel Companions. But Nikki still felt a little dagger pierce her heart. It was ridiculous, of course, but that didn't lessen how it felt or the thread of loneliness that rippled through her.

Suddenly depressed again, she dropped the card into the nearby wastebasket. She placed the book, no longer something she wanted to read, on the end table and desolately took a small bite from her sandwich, although she wasn't really very hungry any more.

Powder leaped up beside her and rubbed his cheek along her arm, almost as if he knew she was upset and wanted to comfort her, though she suspected he probably hoped for a morsel from her supper. “At least you love me,” Nikki muttered as she obligingly fed him a small piece of cheese. “Even if I am just a food source for you.” He meowed appreciatively and bumped her hand gently with his head.

Reaching for the remote, she began yet another solitary evening of television and an early bedtime, wondering when she would ever start living her life rather than merely existing within it.