



Letters to a Secret Lover Preview

To Lindsey’s surprise, the Lazy Elk was fairly buzzing when she stepped inside. Billiard balls clacked together, U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” echoed from a jukebox, and something sizzled on a griddle she couldn’t see – reminding her again that she was hungry. A heavysset woman behind the bar yelled, “Add another burger to that last order, Jimmy,” and a young man’s voice echoed, “Got it,” in reply through the window behind her.

Of course, the place wasn’t buzzing so much that people didn’t stop to ogle the newcomer. She supposed Moose Falls didn’t get a lot of strangers on an off-season Tuesday night.

Glancing about, she made contact with the nearest set of eyes on her – which happened to belong to an older, grizzled-looking fellow – and lifted her hand in a small wave. “Hi.”

He nodded succinctly, then took a swig from his beer bottle.

All the stools at the bar stood empty, so she slid up onto one, pleased when the female bartender who’d just called out the burger order stopped wiping down the wood with a damp cloth and met her gaze with a friendly smile. “What can I get you?”

“Um, how about a cosmopolitan?”

The woman’s hazel eyes lit up as brightly as if someone had just given her a gift. “Are you serious?”

Lindsey wasn’t sure how to interpret the response. “Well, yeah – but if you don’t ... make those or whatever, I can pick something else.”

The bartender held up her hands in a stop motion. “No – I can make it. I’m *dying* to make it.”

“Huh?”

“You’re the first person to order a real drink in here in ages. You know, something with more than two ingredients. I *love* mixing fun drinks, but I spend most of my time serving up beer – or if someone is feeling really crazy, maybe a rum and Coke. So you’re my dream come true.”

Lindsey raised her eyebrows, pleased that someone somewhere in the world was actually glad to see her. “Well, that’s great. Since my life hasn’t exactly been very dreamy lately – more like a nightmare, in fact.”

The bartender lowered her chin inquisitively. “Wait a minute. Are you about to tell me your troubles? Because if you are, you’re my *double* dream come true. I’ve been tending this bar for nearly five years and no one *ever* tells me their troubles. So if I get that *and* a real drink to mix ... wow – you’re making my night.”

Lindsey hadn’t really planned to tell the woman her troubles, but she seemed nice, and so delighted by the prospect that she figured what the hell. Alcohol tended to give her loose lips anyway. “All right,” she replied. “A worldful of troubles coming up. But first, I have to know.” She motioned vaguely over her shoulder toward the road outside. “What the hell is that thing in the roundabout?”

The woman flipped long auburn hair over her shoulder. “Oh, the bear. Did he scare you?”

“Only out of my wits. I nearly wrecked the car.”

The bartender shrugged as she reached for a shaker. “Yeah, it’s a hazard, even for those of us who live here. Especially if you’ve had a few.”

“Well, if it’s such a hazard, why is it there?”

“Eleanor’s ex-husband – she owns the Grizzly Inn next door – made it, for the inn. But turned out it was too big for the little rock garden out front. So the town council voted to put it in the roundabout so it wouldn’t go to waste. Since the roundabout was empty except for a flower garden and people kept driving through it. And since it *is* a perfectly good bear.”

Lindsey tilted her head. “No one thought about putting, say, a moose there? Given that this is *Moose Falls*?”

“We did. But no one had a big wooden moose lying around, or the money to get one, so the bear got the job.”

Lindsey leaned closer over the bar. “So, the Grizzly Inn – is it nice?”

“Nice *enough*. Not new or anything – but Eleanor remodeled a couple years back,” the bartender replied as she added lime juice to her concoction. “It ain’t the Hyatt, but it’s tidy, and woodsy.”

Tidy. And woodsy. Hmm. It would have to do. “I guess it’s my new home for a while.”

The bartender raised curious eyebrows, clearly intrigued. “She’ll be thrilled – she usually only gets weekend guests, and not usually for another few weeks – late May or June. Now, let’s get to those troubles and what on earth a jet-setty girl like you is doing in Moose Falls. I’m Carla, by the way.”

“Lindsey.” She reached out and they clasped hands lightly across the bar. “And officially retired from the jet set, I’m afraid.”

Carla’s head tilted in a kindly fashion even as she shook Lindsey’s drink. “Tell me all about it.”

Okay, here went nothing. “Well, have you ever heard of the advice column, Love Letters? It’s syndicated in over a hundred newspapers and there’s an accompanying blog online.”

As Carla poured Lindsey’s cosmo into a martini glass and placed it on a napkin before her, she appeared to be turning it over in her head. “The one where people write in with their problems about love or sex or whatever’s wrong in their relationship?”

Lindsey nodded, then took the first sip of her drink. *Ah*, that hit the spot. “That’s the one,” she said. “I’m Lindsey Brooks, the advice columnist.”

Carla’s jaw dropped and her eyes went as big and round as ... well, two martini glasses. “*Shut. Up.* You’re kidding me! You’re her? The Love Letters girl?”

“In the flesh,” she answered with a wry smile.

“So are you ... a therapist or something? Because if you are, I feel pretty dumb asking you to tell me your problems.”

But Lindsey shook her head. “Nope. I took a few psychology courses in college, but I’m mainly just a journalist who was ... in love with love, I guess. It came across in my early work. No matter what story I covered – house fire, burglary, charity event – I always seemed to focus on the relationships of the people involved, making it part of the story even when it wasn’t. And rather than just fire me, my boss suggested I try my hand at a modern-day advice column, and a new career was born.”

Her momentary cheer faded, however, as she explained that she’d just voluntarily stepped down from writing Love Letters. “Because even though my bosses stood behind me after what happened with Garrett, I simply don’t feel I can go on with it anymore. Or my blog. Because how does a woman whose disastrous love life is front page news advise people on theirs? I’d be a laughing stock. No, wait, I’m *already* a laughing stock. So I’d be a laughing stock who was just inviting people to laugh even harder.”

“Wait. Stop,” Carla said. “Who’s Garrett? And what’s the disaster? And why are you a laughing stock?”

Okay, so she’d gotten ahead of herself. Maybe that was a sign that she really *needed* to get this off her chest. So, taking a long sip of her cosmo, Lindsey told Carla all about her broken engagement and naked seduction. When she got to the part about the photo, Carla responded with the appropriate gasp and scowl of horror.

“The only good news in the whole thing,” she went on, “is that – thank God for small favors – they blurred my breast in the photo. Which you can now even find on the National Inquirer’s website, and The Globe’s, too.” She wasn’t *that* famous, but a person didn’t have to be much of a celebrity for a picture like that to seem newsworthy, given the pure entertainment value.

“So what happened next?” Carla asked, reaching for some peanuts from a bowl on the bar.

Lindsey ate a few, too – then washed them down with a tasty sip of cosmo. Once she got through her story, she’d order something hardier. “Well, I woke up the next morning and realized my life was pretty much ruined. No wedding, no marriage, public humiliation, and a job suddenly in jeopardy. And like I said, it turned out that the bigwigs wanted me to keep writing the column, but I told them I just *can’t*. I need some time to figure all this out. And so I decided a getaway would be good.” She slurped her drink a little more, the alcohol turning her more honest by the

second – and making her slump her shoulders as she let out a big sigh. “Oh, who am I kidding? I ran away. I escaped. I came here to hide.”

Carla patted her hand. “I think you need another drink, hon.”

Lindsey glanced down. Suddenly her glass was empty. How had *that* happened? “I do. You make a mean cosmo.”

As Carla started filling the shaker again, she asked, “But why here? I mean, *Moose Falls*? How do you even know this place *exists*?”

“Ah,” she said, tipping her head back, then explained, “Millie Pickett was my great aunt.”

Now Carla let out *another* gasp, but this one sounded merrier. “*Millie!* We *loved* Millie around here. We miss her so much.”

Which led Lindsey to tell Carla about the canoe livery offer and how she’d turned it down but had now changed her mind. “Speaking of which, you wouldn’t happen to know who bought it?”

“Sure – everyone knows. Rob Colter.”

“All right then.” She turned resolute. “Tomorrow I’m going to track down Rob Colter and get him to sell it to me. And it will be a major step in the right direction of reclaiming my life.”

Carla only blinked, shaking the drink. “Uh, I wouldn’t count on that.”

Lindsey set her chin. “Why not?”

“Well, it’s the guy’s business, Lindsey. He does some construction stuff, too, but when he bought the place, it was pretty clear he meant to settle down here. He even lives in your aunt’s house – she sold it *all* to him, a package deal.”

A heavy feeling of naiveté settled around Lindsey. For some reason, she hadn’t actually imagined someone buying the canoe rental because they really *wanted* it – she’d more imagined someone taking it off Aunt Millie’s hands as a favor; she’d envisioned a run-down canoe shack that no one really cared about.

Still ... “I can be surprisingly charming. I’m sure he and I can work something out.”

Carla shrugged, passing Lindsey a freshly-filled martini glass. “He’s not exactly Mr. Personality, so I’m not sure charm will sway him. He’s more the gruff, keep-to-himself type.”

“Sounds delightful,” Lindsey said dryly. Then glanced down at the drink. “No lime wedge?” The first cosmo hadn’t had one, either.

“This isn’t Chicago – no lime wedge. And forgive me for saying so, but ... maybe buying a business you know nothing about isn’t what you need to find yourself again. Maybe it’s simpler than that. Maybe what you need is ...”

“Yes?” she prodded impatiently.

“Something more personal ... and empowering. Like, say, sex. How about a good old-fashioned affair?”

Lindsey considered the suggestion, aware as she sipped her cosmo that the drinks were starting to go to her head a bit. She would *not* be that easily deterred about pursuing the canoe business – she truly yearned to regain that family connection now, thinking how much it would please Aunt Millie if she knew. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t also entertain the idea of an affair. Given that she was getting just a little tipsy – well, at the moment, an affair sounded downright ... energizing.

“Yeah, an affair might be *nice*,” she said, nodding. “I was with Garrett for four long years. And honestly, even though it’s amazingly easy to hate him now, I really did love the jerk. So I’m feeling pretty wounded, frankly, and heck, maybe getting right back up on the horse – the sex horse, that is – would be the smartest thing I could do. Right?”

“Not only that,” Carla replied, “but if you’re out there sexing it up, having a passionate affair, living the dream, you can go back to writing your column with a clear conscious.”

Lindsey sipped, thought. “Well, I’m not sure that *sexing it up* equates to living the dream – my readers are pretty invested in love, the real thing, the whole enchilada, you know? But ... an affair might at least be a reasonable facsimile – as long as the sex is good, anyway.” Then she nodded, warming to the idea. “You’re smart. I like you.”

Just then a nip of cold, spring Montana air rushed around her bare arms and she looked up to see another patron enter The Lazy Elk.

A tall, dark, handsome patron. The kind of patron that made her heart flutter on sight. But more than her heart. A lower part of the anatomy actually. And the fluttering was notably ... intense.

He wore a red flannel shirt over a white waffle-weave pullover and faded jeans, much more appropriate for the chilly weather than her beaded baby-doll tee. A day’s stubble covered his chin, and his dark hair needed a trim, but she suddenly *liked* that because it was so different from

Garrett. Her first thought: this would be a perfectly good guy to help her climb back on the sex horse.

“Him,” she said simply to Carla, watching as he began talking with a couple of equally outdoorsy-looking guys at one of the tables. She noticed he didn’t smile, his expression staying completely serious, and sexy as sin.

“Yep, that’s him,” Carla agreed.

“The man I’m going to get back on the sex horse with.”

She was still looking at Mr. Sexy Flannel when she sensed Carla’s flinch from the corner of her eye. “Wait. What? No.”

She turned back to her new friend. “No?” Then she sighed. “Married?” Damn it, the good ones always were.

Carla shook her head. “No, not married. But he still won’t want anything to do with you.”

Lindsey glanced down at herself. It had been a long day of driving. Even if she still managed to look jet-setty, maybe she just appeared too road-weary. “You don’t think I’m hot enough?” she asked, raising her gaze back to Carla. “Because I can look better than this.”

Yet the bartender shook her head again. “No, that’s not the problem – I would give my right arm to be so hot.”

So Lindsey scrunched her nose. “He’s not *gay*?” He looked about as rugged as a man possibly could, like a guy who chopped down trees or wrestled bears. Like Paul Bunyan – well, if Paul Bunyan hadn’t been a giant and *had* been a complete hottie.

“No, not gay,” Carla confirmed. “Or at least we don’t think so.”

“Then why won’t he be interested?” Lindsey punctuated the question by taking another drink.

“He only moved here last summer and he’s not the social type. He keeps to himself and, frankly, he’s not very pleasant to be around – very brusque, all business.”

“Well, he’s talking to *those* guys.” She pointed discreetly to where he stood chatting.

“Steve Fisher, the guy on the right, hired him to build a room addition onto his house. So I’m sure they’re just talking about work. Trust me, he’s not interested in getting to know anybody in town. People have tried. Women, especially. But it’s hopeless.”

Huh. All Lindsey could think was: what a waste of a gorgeous guy. He had ‘fabulous lover’ written all over him without even trying. But it didn’t count for much if he didn’t want to be anyone’s lover.

She sighed, still studying him as she finished her second cosmo. How could he *not* want to be someone’s lover? He looked ... built for sex. “If he doesn’t have a social life, then what does he do? Why is he here? What’s he about?”

Carla laughed lightly at the quick barrage of questions. “I told you, he builds things. And he seems to hike a lot. And he also ... runs the canoe livery. Afraid that’s Rob Colter.”

Lindsey blinked. Looked to Carla. Then back to the hot, rugged man in flannel. “Holy crap,” she murmured. “I think I’m gonna need another cosmo.”

“I’m way ahead of ya,” Carla replied, holding up her trusty shaker.

Which gave Lindsey time to peer back at Rob Colter. The guy who’d bought Aunt Millie’s business. The man who she’d just decided she wanted to bed.

He might be a tough nut to crack – and the more she watched him the gruffer he really did look – but she *had* been known to be a charmer, and trying to charm *this* guy was *not* going to be a hardship.

Whew. One too many cosmos, that was for sure. This was no time to try to charm Mr. Sexy Flannel, so when Lindsey stood up to leave, she was relieved he was nowhere in sight.

In fact, she’d be lucky if she could get to the Grizzly Inn and drag her suitcase into a room without making a spectacle of herself.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you over?” Carla asked from behind the bar.

She’d offered twice already, and now that Lindsey was trying to balance on suddenly-wobbly legs, the idea was tempting – but the Lazy Elk had gotten even busier and Carla was serving up drinks right and left. “No, I’m fine,” she insisted, then pointed. “It’s only next door, right?”

“Right.” Carla pointed in the same direction as Lindsey, so that was a good sign.

Lindsey concentrated on her steps – keeping them straight, trying to look sober – as she neared the door at the front corner of the building. *Eye on the prize, eye on the prize*, she coached herself, focusing on the dull red door. Pushing it open to step outside left her feeling supremely victorious.

Only – whew – there were steps out here. She’d forgotten that part. Big, steep concrete steps – four or five of them. Or they suddenly *seemed* steep anyway. Thank goodness someone had put a handrail here.

She kept waiting for the cold night air to snap her out of it – she was suddenly freezing now, actually – but she still felt woozy. More so than she’d realized in the bar. It was one thing to feel tipsy sitting down – that was kind of a nice, happy, isn’t-life-fun kind of feeling – but it was another thing entirely to be tipsy standing up. The world swayed even as she muttered, “Thank you, God,” upon reaching the blacktop at the foot of the stairs.

Which is when she bumped lightly into something and glanced down to see it was her Infiniti – she was balanced against the sedan’s grill. “Oh – well, this is handy,” she murmured. She’d forgotten she’d parked so close to the door. At the moment, she couldn’t exactly remember parking *at all*. “But maybe I shouldn’t drive. Maybe I should just leave you here for the night.” Then she bit her lip. “Unless the Lazy Elk would have me towed. But they don’t *seem* like a place that would have me towed. Or like a place that would ... even have access to a tow truck.” She sighed. “On the other hand, Carla won’t know you’re my car. Or, well, she will if she looks at the plates, but what if she doesn’t? What if she’s not even the one in charge of towing. If anyone is.”

Damn. She could only conclude that she’d officially passed from tipsy into drunk now. Talking-to-her-car drunk.

Taking a look around, she spotted someone in the shadows not far away, speaking with someone else in a pickup truck. “Okay, I’ll call you with an estimate,” a male voice said, and then the pickup backed away, leaving the shadow-guy alone.

“Hey,” she called, “you know if it’s okay to leave my car here? I’ll be right over at the Grizzly Bear – I mean Inn.” She pointed toward ... The Lazy Elk, then realized that was wrong, so she swung her outstretched finger in the other direction, hoping that was right.

“Yeah,” the deep voice replied. *Nice voice*. “It’ll be fine.”

Okay, good. “Thanks,” she managed, then wove her way toward the trunk to get her suitcase.

Of course, that meant wrangling keys from her purse, but she managed it after a minute of searching, then popped the trunk. Hooray – her lime denim jacket sat on top of the suitcase where she'd thrown it after an earlier stop. "Brrr," she heard herself say as she slid it on.

Next, she grabbed onto the handle of her suitcase and tugged, but it didn't budge. So she tugged harder. It was big, difficult to maneuver, and had been a pain in the butt to get into a motel room the last two nights, as well. And she hadn't even been drinking then, so this was going to be a challenge. She yanked and pulled and huffed and heaved, and still the darn thing stayed lodged in place.

"You need some help?"

She flinched, then looked up. The offer had sounded grudging at best, though, so she automatically said, "No." Then immediately added, "Well, maybe." This being-drunk-and-disoriented-in-a-strange-place thing was *hard*.

And it got a lot harder when she realized the guy who'd just stepped from the shadows to offer his assistance with a slight scowl was none other than Mr. Sexy Flannel himself, Rob Colter.

[Order *Letters to a Secret Lover*](#)