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ROSES FOR AMELIA

Libby Riddle

The first time I walked past your little garden, it was spring. Your street is a little out of my way, but the blooms caught my eye from the corner of Main Street and Magnolia. Amelia loves flowers so I knew she would want me to go and see them. I turned on Magnolia and ambled toward your house. The roses were practically bursting from the box beneath your window. Yellow, pink, and blue petals like tiny starbursts before my eyes. I had never seen blue roses before. I loved them immediately, and I knew she would, too. But the roses were not mine, so I hesitated. You had plenty of them, but they were so perfect that it seemed a great crime to deprive you of a single one. I also knew that the blue ones were the same color as Amelia's eyes. I realized then that I couldn't leave without one.

I've stolen one rose from you every week for the past six months. I'm sorry; I didn't mean for it to become a pattern. But you always seemed to replace the one I took and then some by the time I returned the next week. Even when spring turned to summer and summer to fall, there were blue roses in your box. You must be a truly excellent gardener.

You nearly caught me one day in June. It was Amelia's birthday. I had taken nearly five roses—too many, I know—but they were especially vibrant that week. As I plucked the fifth rose from the dirt, I saw you approaching the very same corner from where I had first glimpsed the flowers. I ran from your garden in shame before you turned onto Magnolia. I never took more than one rose after that week.

Until today. I was lost in thought when I turned onto Magnolia. A man on the corner with an acoustic guitar had been playing Amelia's favorite song, and I was caught up with whistling the melody. I didn't notice you watching from your front window until I was already stepping into your yard.

I froze with one foot on the sidewalk and one placed irrevocably on your grass.

Your figure disappeared from the window and my stomach filled with dread. I was afraid you would yell at me or call the police. You would

have had every right. I had stolen from you. But you did not do either of those things. Instead, your old wooden door unlatched, and you stepped onto your porch. You beckoned me closer as you descended the steps. I forced the foot lagging behind on the sidewalk to join its brother on the grass. You gestured toward me again, and my body obeyed, walking stiffly in your direction. Soon, I had joined you in front of your flower box.

“I know you’re stealing my roses.”

I said nothing because there was no denying it. I couldn’t meet your gaze; I was so ashamed. You gripped my chin and tipped it forward so I was looking at your face. It was stern but not cold. In fact, you have lovely laugh lines around your eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, looking away. I couldn’t muster anything more. I studied the roses intently. They were something to look at that weren’t your knowing eyes, but really my hungry gaze took them in because I knew this would be the last time I would ever marvel at their beauty.

Startling me, you dropped onto the dirt in front of me. You plucked a blue rose from the earth. Then a yellow one. A pink one. An orange one. After gathering around a dozen roses, you stood abruptly and thrust the completed bouquet into my arms. I’m sure I only gaped at you. It was perhaps the loveliest thing I had ever laid eyes on. Except for Amelia, of course. I wished I could have eloquently expressed my gratitude, but you must understand that I was overwhelmed by your kindness.

“Take this,” you said with no room for argument.

I managed a breathless “Thank you” and was ready to repay your gift by quitting your presence and never trespassing on your property again when you stated, “I want to see this girl.” I simply stared at you. “She must be quite the beauty for you to commit such high crimes as flower theft in her name.” Your eyes sparkled with humor, and I felt my cheeks flush. You’re really quite observant.

“Her name is Amelia,” I breathed, flushing deeper. I closed my eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of the roses to calm my racing heart.

“Amelia . . .” You said her name deliberately as if testing how it felt on your tongue. “A beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” you decided. “Yes, I must see her.” I tried to protest but there was no dissuading you. You’re incredibly stubborn; did you know? You took my arm, though I had not offered it, and we started down the street.

Now you’re walking with me down Magnolia and Chestnut, across Main Street to Dogwood. Step for step, stride for stride; we’re synchro-

nized except your footfalls have more bounce than mine. You know each one brings you closer to the joy of seeing Amelia.

I'm afraid you'll be disappointed when we arrive at the cemetery.