

“The Man Who Said He Loved Me”

By Jeanne M. Rideout

Boyce’s kiss was still warm on her cheek, and she should have fallen asleep by now. Yet Arlene stood out in the autumn night, feeling the breeze off Cape Cod Bay across her bare shoulders. Only the sound of the maintenance man closing up the shed marred the cadenced sound of the waves.

She wound her way up the dune through patches of sawgrass, her ruffled nightgown flapping around her knees, until she stood on a crest of sand. She watched the taillights of Boyce's BMW, dwindling to red dots, as he drove up the coast toward the main house.

Then the fireball exploded in her mind.

He's killing them.

She whirled, her heart pounding, her eyes riveting the cottage below.

All was quiet, nothing seemed changed. The moon glimmered on the panes of the French doors leading from the kitchen into the garden, all the rooms were dark, and the gazebo where her mother gave tarot readings was empty. Only the maintenance man's battered utility van and Louie’s Buick remained in the gravel driveway.

She began to scurry. She was halfway to the cottage when the flames flared up in the kitchen, filling the French doors with violent light. Beyond the glass, fire snatched her yellow birthday streamers, bursting balloons and shooting crackling embers into the air. Red tongues leaped across the living room's bay window, consuming the lace curtains.

Beyond the fire's maw, her mother and her stepfather Louie appeared in doorway of their bedroom, trapped behind the blaze.

Window! Climb out the window! Arlene's mind cried out to them.

"Starr!" Arlene heard Louie call her mother's name, and then her parents disappeared into the bedroom, and the door slammed shut. Then the screams began.

She ran to help them, but a fireball whooshed through cottage, and she was driven back by the heat and flames, shielding her face with her arms.

She prayed that Matt Jensen or Boyce had spotted the fire from up the coast.

Inside the cottage, a deathly stillness now lay beneath the roar of the flames.

The fire marshal's office found accelerants at the scene, and the charred corpse of the maintenance man lay outside the door to her parents' room. Police said the case remained open, but the press held the trial and passed a guilty verdict on handyman John George on the front page of that morning's paper.

"Your parents died of smoke inhalation," Detective Ron Marrow said. "Your father tried to cut through the screen, but apparently the heat overtook him."

"Louie was my adoptive father," Arlene said dully.

"So where will you go?"

"Matt said I can stay with him and Boyce for now," Arlene said. "Louie was Matt Jensen's administrative assistant. That's why we could live at the cottage."

"Matt Jensen, the real estate tycoon?" Marrow's eyebrows curled like brown caterpillars. "Who's Boyce?"

"Matt's son. He's been away at college," Arlene said.

“So it's not all bad,” the detective said. “I sure wouldn't mind living in a mansion by the sea. So think of your blessings, kid.”

Arlene nodded.

I still have Boyce.

But for how long? She was not a blood relation to Matt, and she couldn't rely on his charity forever. Her only connection to Matt was that Louie had been his employee. If Matt told her to leave, would even Boyce be able to save her?

Boyce was waiting for her outside the station.

“Hey, baby,” he said, kissing her neck as she slipped into the passenger seat. He was driving the Jaguar today, and the September sun glinted on his dark brown hair.

With a slender, well-toned body, Boyce more resembled his biological mother than he did his dad. Arlene has seen the photos of the young woman who had tragically died in a car accident while Boyce was just a toddler. He had his mother's dark blue eyes and full lips. When he smiled at her, Arlene felt a new warmth tingle under the waistband of her sundress. Since Boyce had graduated from Columbia, their days of being kids together was transforming into something deeper.

“Not a little girl anymore,” Boyce had said the first time he saw her in a swimsuit at the pool at the main house. There was a new glint in his eyes when he looked at her, and that night he held her close to him in the moonlight.

His soft whisper, “I love you, baby,” still echoed in her heart.

“How's the writing coming?” Boyce asked as he maneuvered the red convertible along the curve of the coast.

“Great,” Arlene said. “This will be my first sale. I can just feel it.” She also felt Boyce's love. Her lips turned up slightly. If Boyce only knew he was the model for the hero in her romantic short story, “The Man Who Said He Loved Me.” She had just joined the Romance Writers of America, and her love story was bound to melt the heart of any editor who had one.

“Dad wants me to meet him at the office to check out a Garrison colonial he just listed in Duxbury,” Boyce said. “Want to come along?”

“No, just drop me off home. I need to get back on my writing schedule,” Arlene said.

Every muscle in her body suddenly tensed. The air seemed to thicken between her and Boyce.

“What?” he asked, glancing sideways at her.

His face blurred and he was gone.

A large yellow balloon floated between them, hiding his face, bobbing in the air current whooshing over the windshield. The balloon expanded, exploded into flames, and Boyce disappeared in the billowing fumes.

“Oh, my God,” Arlene gasped, covering her mouth.

“What's wrong with you?” Boyce's words cut through the smoke, and she was back in the car beside him.

She ran her hand over the black leather seat, trying to find the pieces of the broken balloon. There was nothing.

“Arlene, are you all right?”

“I don't know.” She didn't know. What was happening to her? She didn't talk until she kissed him goodbye at the house. She scurried through the foyer and up the spiral staircase to the room Matt had assigned her to. She had wanted to write, but now all she wanted to do was sleep.

Arlene slipped under the coverlet of the too-big bed, trying not to remember that Veronica had slept in this bed, more than understanding why Matt had moved across the hall into a guest room. Of course the sheets had been laundered, but Arlene imagined she felt warmth from the soft flesh of Veronica, Matt's trophy bride, who not long ago had showcased a coffin.

She dreamed, and her mother floated above her, handing her a gift, a coffee-colored star. In her sleep, Arlene touched the star-shaped mole on her left shoulder blade and felt her mother's kiss. When she woke up from her nap and groggily swung her legs onto the floor, her hand still caressed the birthmark on her shoulder. No, it was more than a birthmark, it was a love mark.

The sounds of a Green Day song vibrated in the hall. Arlene stepped out of the bedroom just as a woman strode toward her. She wore a denim miniskirt and a blue tank top over her helper bra, and her pink flip flops slapped a staccato along the tile. Her head was a cap of black curls tipped with frost.

“Hi, Lenny,” Arlene said.

Her mother's friend smiled. Her eyes in her milk chocolate face shone a startling pale green, almost white, with black concentric rings around the pupil.

“Brunch by the pool, Sissy, just you and me,” Lenny said with a wink.

As they floated across the pool on inflatable chairs, Arlene told Lenny about her dream. Lenny bit deep into a blueberry muffin, and for a few moments, the only sounds were Lenny's brisk chewing and the gentle lap of the water.

"You're mom's real name was Sarah," Lenny said. "She changed her name to Starr after you were born. No reason you can't hear the story now."

"I thought she changed her name because she started doing tarot and opened her business," Arlene said.

"No, Starr always did readings, as long as I knew her. Louie always made fun of her for it, calling your mom the Psycho Psychic, but she didn't care. We were like the three musketeers back in those days, all working in Matt's real estate office in town. When your mom got pregnant with you, Matt was furious. He said it put the company in a bad light. I think he blamed me. We used to go out partying, and your mom told me she met some guy in a bar and got stoned and that's when it happened."

"And I became the daughter of Sarah Provene and Mr. Unknown," Arlene said.

"Thank God for Louie," Lenny said. "He swooped in like a knight in shining armor and married her. Louie was promoted to administrative assistant and he and Starr set up housekeeping in the cottage, and I got demoted to kitchen staff."

"I never saw my mother even have a glass of wine. Did she quit drinking because Matt disapproved?" Arlene said.

"He couldn't disapprove of booze that much," Lenny said. "Veronica, may she rest in peace, was a lush."

Arlene winced. The rumor she heard was that Victoria was drunk the day she drowned, apparently passing out, landing in the pool fully clothed, hitting her head, and

going under. Arlene's hand dipped into the water. Again, she felt a warmth touch her, as though her fingers trailed along supple flesh. She shuddered. What was wrong with her?

“Lenny?”

The woman lay with her head back, eyes closed, as blissful as if a nibble of muffin carried the portal to Nirvana.

“What, Sissy?”

“Since my mother died, something has been happening to me. My mother once she told me she saw things, like visions,” Arlene said.

Lenny sighed. “That’s what she claimed.”

“Do you think she really did?”

Lenny opened her eyes, lifting her head.

“Sissy....”

Angry words shot across the pool, male voices, and rising threats. Lenny jumped upright, almost capsizing, dropping her muffin into the water. Arlene knew that Matt and Boyce often fought about money, but how did it get so bad so quickly?

“We have to do something,” Arlene gasped.

“I ain’t going in there,” Lenny said.

Arlene paddled to the pool steps, grabbed a towel to wrap around her dripping bathing suit, and hurried into the living room. Normally, she would never drip water onto Matt’s oriental rugs, but the level of the older man’s rage alarmed her.

Arlene smelled whiskey. When he saw her, Boyce punched his father’s shoulder, and stormed out of the house. The engine of the Jaguar roared, and Boyce burnt rubber peeling out of the driveway.

Matt was struggling to open a bottle of pills. There was a glass of brown liquid on the coffee table in front of him.

His heart medicine! The thought made Arlene frantic.

She snatched the bottle from Matt and removed the cap. He popped three pills, downed them with a gulp whiskey, tossed the pill bottle into a drawer, and slammed it shut with the back of his hand.

When he looked at her, his eyes were unfocused. “Don’t ever let anyone tell that I didn’t care about you. I love you too, Arlene,” he said.

Arlene scurried up to her room. She stood in front of the window, looking down at the pool. The strange feeling, like a shiver, returned to her. As she watched, a mist rose up from the murky water.

There was a man by the pool.

Boyce? It couldn't be Boyce. He had left.

A woman sprawled across a lounge, dangling a mimosa, from one slender hand, sipping at the vodka drink with a shaky upswing. A nearly empty pitcher was on the patio table.

She stood up, one strap of her dress falling over her shoulder, speaking to the man, shaking her head vehemently. Arlene strained to see who she was, but the woman's long dark hair hid her face.

The man stepped toward her, yelling, and she quickly stepped back toward the pool. His voice rose to Arlene's window, but what was he saying?

He lurched forward, his palms striking the woman in the stomach. She doubled over, staggering. He shoved her again and she fell backwards into the water, her scream

as distant as a paper streamer. He grabbed the towel and used it to push her under the water. She writhed under the surface, her hair streaming away, showing her face.

It was Veronica.

Arlene dashed down the stairs into the foyer and down the flagstone walkway to the pool. The gate was locked. She swarmed up the chain link, throwing herself over the top, gashing her arm, landing in a heap.

“Veronica!” she screeched.

She pushed herself onto her feet. The pitcher. Hit him in the face, break the glass over him, help Veronica. She threw her body over the patio table, reaching for the handle.

Her fist closed over empty air.

She froze, staring at the bare, glimmering tabletop. A soft breeze rippled the surface of the blue water in the empty pool. She was alone.

And Veronica had died, had been murdered, weeks ago.

She slid onto her knees, smearing blood across the table, flowing out to the beat of her pulse. Her arm throbbed.

Hands. She felt hands on her shoulders.

“Arlene?” Lenny stood her. “What are you doing? We need to get that arm bandaged.”

Arlene started to tell Lenny what she had seen in her mind. But the words stuck in her throat. How could Lenny ever believe her?

Arlene waited until Boyce returned. He usually left the keys to the Jaguar in a vase near the front door. He had told her she could use the car whenever she wanted, although this time was the first. She took the keys and drove out to the cottage.

Arlene stepped into the kitchen. The stench of smoke, like burnt bodies on a pyre, stung her throat. Soot blanketed the room, a gray scum covering the stove, the counters, everything.

A hole gaped in the living room floor where the couch had crashed through the weakened beams into the basement, crushing a file cabinet into a jagged V of metal. Arlene peered down into what had been Louie's office. Folders, papers, and splinters of glass from a smashed computer monitor littered the cement floor. The old semi-automatic M1911 handgun that Louie's grandfather had brought back from Vietnam was on the floor beside the cabinet. Louie still kept the gun loaded and ready to fire to scare off rabbits and birds that he said infiltrated his garden, half in mock anger, half in real. The gun lay still, like a statement that he was gone, but his strength glowed stronger than ever.

In front the door to her mother's and Louie's room, a patch of beige carpet in the shape of a man stood out against the sooty background. She stepped over it and pushed the charred wood aside. There were two touching shapes under the open window.

She slowly crossed the room, and curled her fingers under the aluminum lifts of the screen. She pulled upward. The screen didn't budge. Was it warped? She pulled harder, and the lifts cut into her fingers. She used all her strength. Still nothing.

Arlene ran her hand up the frame, searching for a bulge. Her fingers reached the top. She slid them across the top of the frame, next to the jam, and felt something. Chill ran down her arms. She pushed aside the curtain and her heart thumped against her ribs.

A wooden matchstick was shoved between the screen and the slider on each side. Someone had purposely jammed the screen shut.

She edged along the living room wall to her room, already knowing that she would find her windows also made inescapable. Whoever had planned to kill Starr and Louie, had also planned to kill her.

She looked down at the ghost-shadow that had been John George.

The arms were reaching out. She stared at the imprint, and compassion overwhelmed her.

He didn't do it.

She wished he had. The handyman's guilt had been a knotted cord ending the nightmare. If the killer wasn't him, the cord came undone, and the nightmare spilled out.

She hurried out to the Jaguar and drove back up the coast, the memory of her mother and Louie pursuing her.

Louie had always been good-humored with her, but, as long as she remembered, she had called him Louie. There had never been any illusion that he was anyone but her mother's husband.

Who was her real father?

She drove away from the cottage with more questions than when she came.

Boyce was on the veranda when she pulled up in front of the house.

"Been out to the cottage?" He asked her. "You should stay away from there. The place isn't structurally sound now. It's not safe for you."

Arlene felt like her legs were folding, but she forced her weary muscles to carry her upstairs. She tumbled across the bed, falling asleep instantly, sleeping deeply for hours.

A splash awakened her. Sluggish, she looked out the window and saw Matt climbing out of the pool, but it was not Matt she knew. The toned form emerging from the water was a younger Matt, with no gray edging his hair. And he was not alone. Her mother, slim and virginal, slid into his arms.

Matt turned his back to her. On his left shoulder blade, she saw a coffee-colored birth mark in the shape of a star. Then the vision wavered and was gone.

The patio was empty, and so was Arlene's heart. She had always believed that if the moment ever came when she knew who her birth father was, that would it be a moment of such joy. But it wasn't. Her mother had changed her first name to Starr because of the birthmark her baby shared with her lover, a man who, for whatever reason, would not change Sarah's last name to Jensen, but had handed her off to his right-hand man.

How could she tell Boyce? But what if he already knew? She remembered, like electric shocks ramming through her body, how Boyce's kisses were on her cheek, her neck, her shoulder, never on her lips. And never in front of Matt. And never beyond a brief kiss, even when she signaled she was willing to do more. Arlene lay motionless on the bed, staring up at the scalloped plaster swirls on the ceiling.

Her dreams, her fantasies of being with Boyce, burned in her mind. She wished the flames could burn away the memory of his kiss, the touch of his hand, her eager response.

She wished she could burn out of her mind her vision of Matt with Starr.

But it wasn't real. It couldn't be real. None of it, not the tarot cards, not the vision, none of those things were real. Louie had said so.

Where did the truth lie? At the door of the cottage where her mother gave birth to Matt Jensen's baby? Arlene curled on her side and let the tears come.

When she could cry no more, she crept downstairs and walked down the long road in the moonlight to the cottage. She went to the shed and took the flashlight that John George had always kept on the shelf inside the door.

She stepped into the kitchen and touched a shard of balloon near the electric coil of the stove. She smelled gasoline.

And she saw Boyce, not a substantial body, but a figure with indistinct, wavering edges kissing her goodnight after her birthday party as she had stood there in her ruffled nightdress. Arlene watched as Boyce drifted through the French doors into the shed. She followed, and she saw Boyce support a balloon on the bench and slip the end over a funnel, carefully pouring gas into the balloon and tying it tightly shut. He glided back into the kitchen. He turned electric stove on low, placed a sheet of the cardboard on the burner, and placed the gas-filled balloon onto the cardboard. Then he faded away.

How many minutes would it take for the cardboard to singe, for a small flame to lick at the balloon? Long enough for him to drive away in the BMW before the balloon burst, spurting flaming gas over the stove, over the counter, catching on a dish towel, over the walls, onto the streamers.

Arlene fled into the living room. A thousand thoughts snapped thorough her mind, like fire snapping along birthday streamers. At each step of the way, she has a vision of her dying parents, until she couldn't go any farther, because the cavernous hole in the living room floor stopped her.

Something crackled behind her.

She felt him behind her.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Boyce said. “Baby, you shouldn’t have come here alone. I told you, the structure is unsafe. An accident could happen.”

In her mind, she saw his hand rise against her before he ever raised it, and she was prepared. When he shoved her through the hole toward the razor-sharp edges of the file cabinet, she momentarily envisioned her body landing, her neck breaking, her sightless eyes gazing upwards as her body lay on the cement floor.

Then she dropped the flashlight and, grasping a rafter like a trapeze artist, she swung and landed on the floor with flexed knees. Angry pain jabbed at her ankles, but she was still standing. She heard Boyce pounding down the stairs, each step ringing through the basement.

The flashlight on the floor caught Boyce in a cone of light.

“Why, Boyce?” she asked. She didn’t expect him to answer, but for a fraction of time he faced her.

“Why should half of everything my father owns go to you? I didn’t get rid of Veronica just to give it up to you. That’s what my father planned, baby, for half of his estate to be yours. He never even told me about you. That was going to be his little bonus gift to me after he died,” Boyce said.

“The birthmark,” Arlene said faintly. “When you saw me in my bathing suit, you saw the star and you knew I’m your sister.”

He lunged at her, grabbing her injured arm. She screamed, and hit back hard enough for him to grunt and let her go. She dove into the darkness behind the file cabinet. Boyce snatched the flashlight and pinpointed her, shining the beam into her eyes.

Arlene knew it was there, somewhere close. Her hands scrabbled in the shadow and closed over the M1911.

She aimed just above the circle of light and fired.

Arlene stared at her monitor, reading “The Man Who Said He Loved Me.” She slapped the laptop shut, and then went to the garden.

Lenny was waiting.

Arlene sat down on the stone bench next to her.

“He said he loved me,” she said. “A part of me still loves him. I don't understand how he could say he loved me and hurt me so much.”

“He probably did love you, but there were stronger emotions inside him. To you, love is everything. To him, love was expendable,” Lenny said.

Arlene looked out over the dunes to the incoming tide.

“So what do I do, Lenny?”

“You feel empty now, but think of what you do have,” Lenny said. She seemed to be counting waves. “The tide comes in slowly, but it does come in, and, bit by bit, your heart will be full again. Go inside and finish your story, Sissy.”

Arlene winced. “There's not much of a story now that my dream turned into a nightmare,” she said. Yet she went to her laptop and began to slowly type.

She mailed “The Man Who Said He Love Me” in a few days, and the acceptance letter came soon, but not from any romance magazine. Her story debut was in *My True Horror Story*.