

Dandelion
Jack_Sample

CHARLIE DARLING

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CHAPTER ONE

Milky, starry fluff exploded into the air around Britt Kirkwood's tanned legs as she made her way through the fallow fields to Promise. Dandelions. Their riot of early color now faded, like everything else in the late-August heat, were ripped into feathery nothingness by her walk.

She allowed herself a moment of self-indulgent melancholy for the fleeting nature of all life. After all, she was visiting a cemetery. Of sorts.

Laird's last project. His most ambitious. A planned community—what people now derisively called 'the projects'-- built in the blighted streets where plywood windows had looked out onto garbage-strewn asphalt. A fresh start, renewal in every sense of the word. World-renowned designers and builders, a four-year

timeline. Chalky white high rises defiantly tall and straight amid the weedy chaos of the crackle and static below their elegant shoulders. Blocky exteriors, smooth as a sheet of cream pouring from some celestial pitcher high above. Long narrow windows that let in blades of light but kept out heat. Community spaces every few floors. Thoughtful little details—linoleum floors because it made cleaning up a snap, same with washed- cement walls. Built-in appliances in the kitchen, accordion doors on closets. Those same details reporters focused on in critical articles later, as Promise started to fall apart.

“Brutalism—it’s such a misnomer for the goals of the movement.” Laird traced Britt’s jaw with a long, narrow finger as he spoke. “Public access, democracy. No more locked gates with fuck-you curlicues dripping with the blood of the working man.”

Britt smiled at her suddenly Marxist husband, and tapped his Cartier watch with a manicured nail.

“I can see you’re a real fan of the common man, since you understand his plight so well,” she laughed.

He had been leaning over the edge of the olive tweed couch in their conversation pit and he swung a leg over onto the cushions and launched himself half onto her, tickling her until she squealed. And then kissing, and touching...

With effort, Britt turned her mind away from those sepia-toned memories. That was six years ago, almost to the day.

She and Laird had been in a wonderful celebratory mood after the elaborate ribbon-cutting ceremony for Promise. Champagne, expensive chocolate, a soufflé that had only fallen a tiny bit after she took it out of the oven. Nat King Cole on the hi-fi and dancing around the living room, just a little drunk.

“A new hope! A new era for our wonderful city! Another beautiful day in Promise!” the mayor exclaimed. Out of the corner of her eye Britt saw the private security force dragging a scruffy protester away, and a chill of portent ran over her shoulders. If only she’d listened to that, spoken up. But what could she have said? Nothing could have stopped Laird in pursuing his dream, his magnum opus.

And his coffin. Maybe. But definitely the last place she’d seen him—or anyone had.

Britt forged ahead through the tumbled, burned-out towers, now a curdled milk color streaked with faded graffiti. A brace of children ran past her, shrieking and laughing, chasing a mangy mutt onto the parklands beyond the projects.

She startled, shaken out of her reverie. What was she even doing here? Clutching her pocketbook to her side, she smoothed her hands over her crisp little day dress and reflexively touched the chubby gold heart on a chain that had been Laird's last gift to her.

7 years after he disappeared into these project towers, into Promise, Britt was here to say goodbye.

"This is quite final, my dear. You will effectively be a widow," the stern clerk gazed over his half-glasses with pursed lips at Britt. She'd worn her celery-green Chanel suit and navy Ferragamo pumps and had her hair washed and set for the occasion. Typically, she wore mini-skirts and white knee-high boots and frosted lipstick or even jeans and a battered sweatshirt from Laird's alma mater, Harvard, if she were just puttering around the house and garden. But today she had to look her best. The bookend to her wedding.

Having Laird declared dead legally. She bit her lip to stop a burst of sharp, pained laughter from escaping. She nodded and the clerk stamped the paper, the sound flat and final in the fug of the relentlessly beige government offices.

"Are you sure?" Wendy, her older sister, asked, that same week. She stirred her martini with a finger and then licked

it, giving Britt a raised-eyebrow look. “How did you get The Munsters to approve?”

Britt laughed lightly. “Laird’s parents, you mean? It was their idea. They like me well enough but I think the strain of dancing around the topic at every family holiday finally wore them out. We would both like to have a sense of an ending. Even if that ending is not at all what we hoped.” Her voice faltered on the last word.

Wendy poured Britt a fresh stiff martini and glided over to the hi-fi to put a new record on the stack, which was winding down.

“Far be it from me to judge, you know I just want you to be happy. You’ve been in widow’s weeds for about five years too long for my taste.”

“Wendy...” Britt sighed. “He was my husband. It’s not exactly the done thing to race out to a VFW mixer 30 minutes after one’s husband disappears.”

“You know very well what I’m talking about. It’s been quite enough time to mourn him. You’re young. I want nephews and nieces, several of each.” Wendy smiled over her cocktail.

“We’re quite a ways off that particular goal. Let me get through the paperwork from my first husband before you start fixing me up, please,” Britt said crisply.

That next week was a blur. Waves of humid heat made her cotton dresses cling to her legs and she went without stockings, risking the glares of the older women at the market. The sun seemed to melt from the sky, as if the heavens themselves were aware of what she was about to do. Sever the last link. Move on.

Laird was the firefly of bright blood-orange flame dancing in the air at the end of his cigarette, as he sketched the outline of his grand plan to her. He was the feeling of a dawn swim at his family cottage in Maine in chilly water, knowing a warm towel waited at the end. He was the delicious sensation of lying in a swirl of rumpled sheets, legs tangled, bodies lightly coated with sweat, breath synced in an ancient meter after connecting on every level.

Ripples of glassy warmth wound off the asphalt, shimmering in the late afternoon air. The sun struck a thousand points of light off the broken glass everywhere in the courtyard. Where once a trim little lawn and four white-painted iron benches had sat square to a fountain, only scattered bricks remained. The lack of trees meant no breeze, no shade, nothing green for miles.

The paper plans for Promise had showed pastel washes of rounded buildings melting into soft charcoal parking lots, dotted with decorative landscaping here and there, a chubby, infantile sun beaming down on the faceless

blurs that represented the people happily milling around Promise. A few saplings that would, in time, grow to the leafy canopy suburbanites so treasured.

The reality...Britt shook her head. Promise opened in 1967. It had been completed only a month or two before the riots. The riots that burned down half the city and destroyed almost all of its East side. Emptied out Promise, left a smoking hulk of Laird's dreams.

There was no more money to repair and rebuild—the builders had been cutting corners throughout the project, graft and corruption were rampant. Promise was left to go to seed, which it did with alarming speed. Now it was a haunted wreck, a monument to folly and overreach.

She shaded her eyes and stepped into the foyer of Tower A, the only tower with any intact floors and units, to escape the relentless sun for a moment. A distinct crunch of footsteps on glass made her freeze. Britt was so lost in thought as she made her sorrowful pilgrimage through the wreckage of Promise she hadn't noticed the man step out of the shadows nearby. Too nearby.

Tower A may have been a burned-out carcass and the entire project abandoned, but it was by no means safe for a single woman at dusk—in this part of the city. Her heart beat faster and her throat constricted.

Into a shaft of golden light stepped a man. A beautiful man. Tall, narrow, elegant, stylish. He wore a lightweight tropical wool suit so light Britt suspected she could crumple it up and put it in her pocket.

Which would involve taking it off. She swallowed at the traitorous thought that rose as she locked eyes with the man. His curly dark hair and peat-moss eyes complemented his Black-Irish skin, freckled here and there with almost-charcoal spots. Full lips that she would like to kiss. More than kiss. Devour. Claim with her own and be claimed until darkness draped over them like a velvet cloak and they found oblivion together.

Britt pulled herself upright. What was happening? She was on a commemorative trip to say goodbye to her late husband. Her probably late husband. Late in a legal sense. And in a practical sense. He was gone for good.

“Get ahold of yourself, girl,” she thought. Her mind seemed to whirl and stop again and again like a washing machine with a load of laundry.

“Hello,” the man smiled, a flash of white in his gorgeously-formed face. Dark eyebrows and a square jaw gave him a slightly roughneck aura, as if he could swing from a downtown boardroom to a dockside as easily as... lighting a cigarette, which she saw he was doing right then.

He put another cigarette in his mouth and lit them both. She stepped forward almost in a trance. The sun flamed along the edges of the broken walls and limned the man's body, giving him an otherworldly glow. She took the offered cigarette wordlessly. Time seemed to stop and turn on its axis around them.

Lair had asked Britt out several times before she said yes. She washed out her stockings every single night in her sink with special soap. Britt allowed herself exactly one glass of wine a night while she ironed her blouses for the week, or clipped coupons at her tidy little kitchen table. Who was this wild harridan that wanted to jump into this man's arms, tackle him to the ground, rip off his clothes and give him...

"Sorry?" the man was saying something and she was shaken out of her daydream. Her face flushed and her underarms were damp. The man stepped close enough to touch her. He brushed a gentle finger over her exposed shoulder.

"You've been burned," he said.



CHAPTER TWO

His voice was salted honey, plummy with a serrated edge.

“It’s August, this summer sun,” Britt said, her voice oddly choked.

“In that case we’d better get out of it,” he smiled down at her, his peat-colored eyes swimming with lights deep in their mesmerizing depths. Like the flash of brilliant golden scales she’d seen on the Koi fish at the Japan Pagoda, 1964 World’s Fair—beauty swirling to the surface in a spark and then back to the murky depths.

“Roman,” he added.

“Britt,” she answered, relieved to note that she’d found a normal register again somehow.

She stuck out her hand to shake his and he took it in both his own, raised it to those succulent lips and

kissed her knuckles. The merest contact, the same gentle, feather-light touch as his hand on her shoulder before but fireworks exploded in her stomach. Another obscene stage play ran in full color in her mind; Roman kneeling before her and kissing his way up her legs, making his way to where every nerve in her body screamed for him.

What was going on? Was she having a heat stroke and didn't know it? She dragged hungrily on her cigarette and pulled her hand gently out of his grasp.

"I know a place that's miraculously cool and dark. Serves the best gin rickey you've ever had, and that's saying something as I've been to Raffles India," Roman purred.

"Are you informing me or inviting me?" Britt asked, her mouth quirked. Some automaton sorority girl from 10 years before woke and flirted with Roman on a glide path she didn't know existed until then.

"What do you think?" he asked, with an answering smirk.

"I think I'll be the judge of what the best gin rickey I've ever had," she tossed off, with a challenging grin she was only half forcing.

"The Library it is," Roman declared.

He took her hand and it was the most natural thing in the world. The two made their way out of Promise and

onto the city street, racing the sunset into the welcoming cave of The Library.

The business of finding a booth, settling in and ordering drinks took a moment, during which Britt took the opportunity to size up her companion. She noticed was a few years younger than she, which made her privately preen.

Every movement he made was spare, determined, thoughtful. Nothing rushed. A calm and a hush surrounded him. But the same languid aura that lay so easily on him seemed to ruffle her feathers.

“Here you go,” the waiter set down Britt’s icy cold gin with a flourish.

“On the house for a beautiful woman in a summer dress,” he added with a wink. Britt smiled, a bit discomfited. Odd for a waiter to say such a thing with Roman right there. A woman and a man at a bar together were usually given the plausible deniability of being married. And she was still wearing her wedding ring.

Shaking the thought off, she slipped her hand below the table and removed her ring, putting it in her purse discreetly. While her hand was still under the table, Roman put his hand on her leg very lightly. Just under the edge of her hem. It took every ounce of will power not to reach for it and guide it up her leg. In fact, she wasn’t 100% sure she

didn't do it until Roman removed his hand to light up a fresh smoke.

Relief washed over her. She'd exchanged a total of a half dozen words with this man. It would be beyond unseemly to allow him—to encourage him—to touch her that way. But her rebellious mind wandered right past the *Road Ends* sign and hopped casually off the cliff, into Roman's arms.

"Tell me about your lovely self," Roman sat back and blew a plume of smoke at the ceiling, looking for all the world like a glossy Cutty Sark ad.

Britt chuckled wryly. After having been married for three years, and the wife of a missing man for seven more, her dating skills were less than nil.

What was there to tell? With a grimace, she reflected on how empty her life had become, how routine. Get up, bathe. Pick out her dress, get dressed and made up. If it was a Tuesday or a Thursday, work her shift at the library, then go for a late lunch. Come home, feed the bird, do some housework. Not like the place really needed it, Britt moved so lightly through the too-still rooms.

I'm the ghost, not Laird she thought with a start. Roman saw her body stiffen and his dark eyes were on her, soft yet intense.

“Wrong question, gorgeous?” he asked on a tender note.

“Heavens no.” Britt bought herself some time by dragging on the cigarette in the most charm school pose she knew how.

Her tawny good looks would have to speak for themselves while she collected her thoughts. Britt was a little vain about her appearance, but not without reason or result. Her hair was sleek and shiny, the color of fresh molasses. Her eyes were fringed in dark lashes and her cheeks and lips a warm peachy rust, the color of a fallen apricot bathed in molten sunlight. She was trim from ballet barre classes, and thanks to a fashion-plate mother, she knew how to best accentuate her form and coloring with clothing. She knew she was a sight, which she let Roman admire silently for another beat.

“I’m just not very interesting, I’m afraid,” she said, lowering her fluffy lashes and glancing at him sideways.

He smiled tolerantly.

“Well, we’ll just have to change that, won’t we?” he lowered his voice to a growl and sent a shiver up Britt’s spine.

Not wanting to make a scene she couldn’t live down in the bar, she rolled her eyes playfully and launched into a

tidy little precise of her life—or as much as she was willing to share with a stranger.

“I work for the library a few days a week, I went to Bryn Mayr, I love to read, and I have a bird named Peggy, short for Peg Leg Pete. I’m a terrifyingly ordinary girl, I regret to tell you,” Britt smiled.

Before she could react, Roman managed to reach into her handbag, which she’d left carelessly flap-open on the seat between them, and pulled out her wedding ring, which he held up at eye level.

He turned the ring back and forth, a thoughtful look on his face.

“I don’t know, I’d say this is pretty interesting,” he said, with a sly smirk. “Since it was on your hand when you came in here.”

Britt found herself irritated at his audacity, but more irritated at her response. An immediate, urgent need to get out of there, take him to her house. Show him what interesting really was. And, shockingly, how little that ring seemed to mean right now.

“You caught me,” she said, “I’m a freshly minted widow,” she admitted.

Roman’s elegant brows knitted.

“Minted?” he grinned. “That’s a bit of an odd way to put it,” he added.

Britt reached over to the ashtray and her cigarettes and this time it was she who lit two smokes and gave him one.

“Long story too boring for words,” she said breezily.

“Have I had the bad luck to encounter a black widow that my half-mad aunt always warned me stalked the East Coast like a panther in the night after prey?” he laughed.

“I think I need a pencil and paper to diagram that sentence before I can answer it,” she shot back, on a laugh.

“A lady of letters, I like that,” he said. He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, his lips tickling her.

“But I’ll take the panther too,” he murmured, sending a sparkling wire of electricity zinging down her spine.

As if brought to life by his words, a long, lean, hungry panther inside of Britt awakened. Seven years of slumber left a huntress starving indeed. Possessed by a force she didn’t want to examine too closely Britt reached a hand up to cup Roman’s face and draw it to her.

He responded immediately, turning his body to face hers and pulling her close. Their mouths met and at the moment a trickster demigod released a flash of lighting that illuminated the bar. As Britt tasted Roman for the first time, a clap of thunder rocked the quiet street. It could have been several counties over for all she cared. She was lost to all sensibility.

The lights in the bar dimmed, flickered, and then shut off. The sky had darkened in one of those epic summer rainstorms one only sees in too-cute made-for-TV movies, but it suited Britt's mood perfectly. Rain drummed on the roof and created a sheltering wall around the snug little bar. The better to hide the two from prying eyes and town gossips.

Roman tasted like plums, improbably enough. He parted her lips with his and teased her with his tongue for a moment. Britt was sure that she was about to risk a public indecency ticket.

He looked at her, his eyes wide, dark.

"I don't know what just happened but I don't want it to stop," he admitted.

The ardent dock worker with arms of steel sat in front of her, need fairly vibrating off him.

"I do have to feed Peggy..." Britt smiled coyly.

"Sounds like a two-person job to me," Roman grinned. "That is, if you're up for making life a little more interesting," he added.