

## CHAPTER EIGHT: MAX

“How do you know her name is Brenda?” Max asked me.

“It says so on her notebook.”

He gave me a wry smile, “Very observant.”

“Indeed!”

I guess he was afraid of my desire to fictionalize everything around me. We had met for coffee at Starbucks. I waited outside while he went to get his drink. It was a lovely April day. We were both enjoying the vibrant spring, as she was.

“You can’t just travel around town picking off subjects for your new novel. People are going to catch on.”

“People are catching on.”

He gave me a confused expression, “What do you mean by that?”

“Her. She knows she’s watching her.”

“Of course she does. That’s what got her out in the first place. She spreads her work all over a table like this. She wants everyone to see what she’s up.”

“I know. Go on, Max.” While he talked, I started to survey what was on the table.

“She’s acting like she’s busy. That’s not as if to say that she is getting things done. She wants people to think that she’s industrious. So the average Joe isn’t going to bother her. And if he does, she can simply stare him down to make him go away. But she wants that special sort to interrupt her. She had her little speech all ready. She wants the world to learn about her marketing campaign.”

“She might as well have brought a marching band.”

In serendipity, a car of clowns pulled alongside us. Neither Max nor I cracked a smile. We are not meant to see this.

“At what point do you think that I am actually telling a story and not simply reporting on our meetings around the city?”

“That is really my question for you. You’re the one who tells me that you’re working on a novel.”

“It could be your project to run with. There’s all the ammo around here to make any idea viable. It’s not as if this reality is all mine.”

“I have thought about writing some stories. I just can’t get going. What do I need to motivate myself?” he was looking to me for some kind of answer.

Max took a sip of his coffee. I watched Brenda for a moment as she took some shiny strips of paper and rearranged them in her binder.

“You have to feel that you’re in the thick of things. Even at a calm moment like now, you are in the middle of the action.”

“Sure, I can sense it. But it is a bitch trying to convey that to someone else.”

He shifted his cup around on the table. He wanted his own game that she could observe. But her back was to us. She would have to turn around actually to observe him.

“You have to care about something. Something living.”

“I do!”

“Then complete that thought on paper. You need to see something so precious that every

second lights up with your sense of wonder.”

For a second, this was too much to contemplate. He reached for his coffee cup and drank some more. This was the answer that he craved, the taste of the coffee. He knew that it was always something this palpable that piqued his desire.

I could crave the frustration that came with watching Brenda in the hot sun. He needed to resolve the tension. Either he would have to say something to her, or he would need more coffee. For the moment that he sat across from her, she was the inspiration of a story. But he could never rush home and start writing. By the time that he finally made it home, his encounter with the immediacy of his reality would have been too exhausting. He would manage a few lines then curl up in his bed.

If he was in school, he could maintain his sense of commitment. He could crack the books and come to a resolution. But it was always so difficult to stray outside the path. Work and school. That was enough.

Even when he took a fiction class, he had lagged in his assignments. Everything seemed tied to the whims of the teacher. He had no source of inspiration on his own that could guide him to actual completion. She thought of him as an adequate writer. But he would never live up to that potential. But he was the perfect foil for me. If I was ready to turn out volumes, he had the perfect roadblock to every turn on my part. He had enough venom to stop me in my tracks.

He chided me, “You could sit here all day watching her and do nothing.”

“You’re contradicting yourself, I’d be sitting here and watching her. I wouldn’t be doing nothing.”

“That’s not what I mean. You’d desire her. But you’d never say a thing to her.”

“I could watch her and tally up the details of her experience. But that hardly means that I would be doing nothing.”

He became impatient, “You don’t understand what I’m saying to you. You still wouldn’t approach her.”

“That’s not the point. I’m not meant to approach her.”

“You have no idea what kind of person she really is.”

“If I have *no* idea at all, then my observation skills are useless. You said yourself that she has spread these papers out here for a reason. Even you recognize that she is performing for us or whoever else is here taking a peek. And we just might be her ideal audience.”

He got excited because, he thought that he was finally on to his point, “And how could you ever know that if you just sat here watching her? You’d have to say something to her.”

“I know that I could never know for sure if I met her criteria. But I could figure out with total certainty if I didn’t meet her expectations.”

“She could just be doing a job.”

“Right. But look at the way that she does it. She’s respectful and fastidious. Not only is she committed to the job, but she is adding another layer of flair to seduce her charges. That is what she is all about.”

He looked skeptical, “So what?”

“She cares about what she does. She is telling us and every other shmo who walks by here that this is the one thing that really interests her.”

“And?”

“If I feel that she is coming on too strong, I can’t tell her that she’s a workaholic.”

“Exactly!”

“Yeah, exactly. It proves my point. Look at the book that she is reading: *Women Who Feel Too Much*. That is her. She is the woman who cares too much about her work. Too much about her love life. So she doesn’t want some dickhead guy telling her that she is extreme.”

“Sure thing!”

“But you were the one that said I can’t know that by looking at her shit on the table.”

“That still doesn’t change the fact that you don’t say a thing to her.”

“The whole situation is just too much work for me. She has thrown herself into her job. She always rushes head first into things. Then she’s over her depth. She drowns.”

“You could be the one guy who throws her a lifeline.”

I knew where he was going with this. He wanted me to get involved. But he refused to credit my acumen. I wasn’t going to rush into things. That was Brenda’s weakness. She constantly went for the guys who messed with her agenda. And she was always impressed that they had their own stubborn and reckless agenda.

Max continued on, “You want to be a writer. But no one wants to read a story about a guy who hangs around Starbucks tongue-tied.”

“I’m not tongue-tied. I’ll walk up to Brenda and offer my services as her biographer.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No. There’s really nothing more that I can do for her.”

“You’re not going to write her life story even if she let you. You’re playing around with metaphors. You are tongue-tied.”

“I don’t feel any real motivation to approach her. She seems friendly enough. She’s a purposeful person. She doesn’t live off cheap flattery. But she’s her own worst enemy. She likes conflict. Not the sort that I’m into.”

“You sit alone in your car all day watching Atlanta pass you by. Other people have real lives. But you’re untouched by their emotions. How can you be a real writer?”

“I’m not here to make Brenda life promises.”

“So it’s take it or leave it.”

“I haven’t made an offer. I haven’t ignored her cat. I haven’t stood her up. I’m not two-timing her with some other girl. I’m sitting here on a Saturday afternoon. She just happens to be sitting near us. And I am watching her.”

“And you wish that she could better fit your script.”

“I’m not wishing much of anything. She gets excited over a self-help book. I’d feel better if she were reading *Middlemarch*. At least, we might have something in common.”

“But how is George Eliot going to solve anyone’s problems today?”

“I don’t think that was ever George Eliot’s vocation. A writer does not set out to solve the world’s problems. That is the task of the magician and the fly-by-night psychologist.”

He seemed even more thwarted, “Why are you so difficult?”

“I’m relaxing.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so comfortable.”

“Why not? I don’t need some pop psychology to quiet me down.”

He glared at me.

“Max, is that what you need. You talk to her if you’re so involved.”

He had already given me volumes by his passionate discourse. But that was that. If he did anything, he wouldn’t commit our talk to memory. He’d bluster up to her and state his case. And his story would fly out the window. So his only hope was if she really saw sympathy in his case. That was what he was preparing. I feared being in his way.

“But you are in my way!”

Where had this broadside come from? He wasn’t really aggressive, more defensive on his part.

“How do you mean that? If you want to talk to her, go ahead.”

“I’m your friend. I’m not like that.”

“How do you mean?”

He explained, “We wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for you asking me here.”

“It’s not as if I own her.”

“But you do. You see all these things about her.”

“You do too. You noticed how she had spread her work around the table.”

“But you added her ounce of desperation. I didn’t see that at all.”

“Maybe that is better. You’re right. I’m only paralyzed in my situation. I will never hop up and say a thing to her. You, however, are all ready to go into action.”

“But it’s all your action.”

“We can’t be faithful to this silly honor code.”

“What then?”

I felt embroiled in a weird triangle. He offered me two choice: either I back off, or he would defend his honor in a duel. I laughed.

“You’re not laughing at me?”

“Not at all.

“Then what?”

“All this seems so absurd.”

“What does?” he asked. “Your presuppositions. Maybe she’s reading self-help so that she can get the will to read *Middlemarch*.”

“I’m just not sure if her book is going to give her the fortitude that she really needs.

“But you’re not giving her a chance.”

“I’ll give her a chance. If she approaches me, I’ll take the time to listen to her. I’m not telling her what she can or can’t do. I’m just saying the odds are not in my favor.”

“That’s a creepy thing to say. The odds are not in her favor.”

“I didn’t say that. The odds could be in her favor. I admit that now. She may know things that I don’t. She can easily prove me wrong. But from what I know now, the odds are not in *my* favor. There is more likelihood than not that she will not understand what I am all about.”

“You can’t expect total understanding from people.”

I hesitated for a moment. I needed to slow down the momentum of our talk.

“I’m not expecting anything mystical. I just don’t want to put her into one of her inevitable situations. The kind that she hears about on TV. The kind that she reads about in one of her books.”

“Life is one of those situations. The only way not to get absorbed by one of those

situations is to lock yourself in a closet. Look at her. Do you think that you really have the will to say no to her?"

"I already have."

Max mocked me, "I think that is a joke."

I looked over at Brenda. She was right in front of me. She adjusted herself in her seat.

She turned to us, "I'm going to get another coffee. Will you all watch my stuff for me?"

She had placed a special trust in our presence. She was inviting us in to her world of self-improvement.

I wanted to explore further. Her papers were out in the open. It wouldn't be difficult to take a look. Max could keep watch. But the other patrons had heard her request. They would get suspicious if I started going through her stuff.

I confirmed what I saw, "Is she giving us an opening?"

"She's taking us for granted. Sure she trusts us not to look through her stuff. Because we're nice guys. For her, desire is born of danger."

I voiced my thoughts, "So we let her catch us going taking a peek?"

"She's not looking for psychos. Besides, she protects her work space so that she can be more adventuresome in her personal life."

"All part of her pop psychology."

"Exactly, a compartmentalized life."

Despite the clarity of her plans for work, she knew that she couldn't keep everything in its place. She was vulnerable to these blurred lines. Work and play, friends and lovers.

Max offered a challenge, "You can tell all this just by looking?"

"You're kidding me."

"That's what we've been doing all this time."

"Looking. But we only see what we want to see. She may be trying to escape the narrow confines of her life. And we're shunting her back into a cubby hole."

"Are you saying that we should talk to her? We didn't come here to meet people. We came to talk about your book."

"Putting the book aside for the moment. It's a lovely day. Sunny, but not too hot. We're in the bloom of spring. And we sitting close to a vibrant personality. It's an opportunity."

Max sat at the edge of his seat, "Sure it is. And we're taking it."

"We're eavesdropping."

"More than that. We're profiling her."

"Agreed! We're trying to find a vantage point to get deeper into her life."

"So why don't we just talk to her?"

"What we know, what we have discovered, it's special. If we had a lifetime with her, we could share it. But it's not as if she wants to talk about her inner self with two guys at Starbucks."

He reminded me, "She has the damn book out on the table."

"And that's what scares me. She wants easy answers."

"What do you want? Do you want to see her wriggle on the table in pain?"

"I'm not trying to be sadistic."

"I sort of dig the fact that she has a self-help book. It makes her vulnerable. It lets me

take advantage of the situation.”

“That’s the whole problem. She exposes too much of her soul. But she lack a real commitment to anything spiritual. She wants instant paradise.”

“And here she comes with a cup of paradise in her hand.”

She came back with her purchase and put it on the table. She turned and smiled.

“Thanks for watching my things.”

Now was our opening. She wanted us to ask her work. We kept watching her. But we didn’t say a thing to her.

“We’re not weak?”

“I answered, “We’re smart. If it was right, we would know.”

“How could it be more right?”

“She lives in Alpharetta. She likes suburban life. More power to her. But this is part of our problem. Girls like this never like a crazy lifestyle. And the people that we know are too overwhelmed by their own craziness.”

“You know that she digs drama,” he pointed out.

“Private drama. She’ll expose herself to a stranger, but she still loves the protection of a sprawling suburb with its well-ordered subdivisions.”

“That’s just how she organizes her papers.”

“And her psychology is just the same. All in a bound book.”

“Like a case study?”

“More like a bad habit.”

Max offered an attempt at humor, “I could be her bad habit.”

“Could you now?” I wondered.

Indeed he could. He was conveying to me that his own life was on track and not haphazard. But Brenda could make him twist in the wind on her whim.

“You have your chance!” I advised him.

Was I seeing his story right before my eyes? It was scene from rehab. She had sworn off losers. And here he was ready to take the plunge. Both were clutching their copies of *Lovers Who Care Too Much*.

At that moment, she fielded a phone call. It seemed pretty serious. She hopped up so that she could get the kind of privacy that she needed. And she became very involved in the conversation. She wasn’t upset. Just preoccupied. It was almost as if we weren’t even there.

“Her guy?”

Max was still protecting her interest, “A friend.”

“A girl?”

“It’s all very private.”

“Can you guess what she’s saying?”

“I thought that we were over eavesdropping.”

“Just for the record.”

“What record?” he asked me. If he played along, the result might ruin his chances. He hardly wanted to go down that route.

I gave him a concerned look, “You’ve been hardly with her very long, and she’s already breaking up with you.”

“Just because she talks with some guy doesn’t mean that she’s going out with him.”

“You never know!”

“Okay! But she doesn’t trust herself with him.”

“She doesn’t trust herself with anybody.”

“Honestly, Max, are you here to rescue Brenda?”

“I’m here to talk to you. Do keep talking.”

I could tell that he was becoming anxious. He didn’t even know this girl, and he was already crazy jealous. I loved it!

“Max, Max, come back to reality!”

“Quit teasing me!”

“You’ve drank too much coffee.”

“I drank too much life!” He looked defeated. I needed to cheer him up.

I turned my glance to Brenda as she paced back and forth. She wore a pair of loose fitting black pants.

“Did you see that?” I asked.

I didn’t want to be crass. She had that elegant wiggle that again seemed like part of her performance. I took that image for myself. Something that he could not share.

“You are right!” I went along with his perspective.

“How?”

“She doesn’t love the guy.”

“Can she even loved at all. That’s the point. She’s learning to love.”

“She’s turning pages as far as I’m concerned.”

“And I can help her turn the pages.”

“You want her to be pure for you. But that’s part of the act. You can’t jump in the river without part of it moving downstream. You’re missing the action.”

He looked even more confused.

“Max, it’s simple. She tells people that she’s messed up. That she needs to be fixed. But that’s her form of well-being. Chaotic. She doesn’t want some normal guy to fix her up. She thrives on crisis.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I’m as certain about that as I am about the midday sun.”

“Help me out here!”

“This is our form of entertainment. We have real lives elsewhere.”

“Where is that elsewhere. Why don’t we enjoy ourselves. This is crap!”

“OK, when she gets off the phone, sit down at her table and tell her your pathetic story. See what she says.”

“I’m not you! I’ve got a decent job. A life!”

“You want to be an artist or a writer. Whatever. You mull all these ideas in your head. But you never even act on any of them.”

“I am getting on with my life. Not wallowing in self-loathing.”

“So don’t come out to suburbs and vent about your sad life. This is the last place that they’re willing to listen. If you ask Brenda how she’s doing, she’ll tell you fabulous. Because that’s her story. The self-help book is not your invitation to help. It’s a sign that she can get

everything that she wants just by plopping down her American Express card. A chocolate latte, a new dress, a self-help book. You are just along for that ride. Love it for what it is. And when we're finished, we'll go back to our lair."

"Quite a sermon. You should get it down for your book."

I pointed to my head, "It's all up here!"

We both smiled.

"She's still pretty hot."

"Then speak to her."

"I'm not sure."

"You're more conflicted than I am."

He peered at me, "How do you do it? Just sit in judgement of everyone. It must get pretty lonely at the top."

"I'm hanging out like you are. This is entertaining."

"Nothing more?"

"I'm not getting caught up in it."

I wanted to believe that I wasn't getting caught up in it. But when I glanced over at Brenda, I again noticed that cosmic wiggle in her walk. I was becoming susceptible to every weakness that Max had observed. My image of her left her little room to define herself. Failing to meet my expectations only made it easier for me even to dismiss her attempts. No wonder she needed a book to ward off the demons that fed off her.

Did she realize that I was looking at her like this? Certainly, she wasn't prancing around in a performance. However, she could feel her life balance on the tight rope. There was no net, no one to give her a hand. All this time, she had still been still talking on the cell phone. So she was living in this other world that she could not see, but which made more sense to her than everything that was immediate. At the other table, Max and I sat dressing her down for our literary analysis. And there were other guys like us who had been much more aggressive with her. Even if she was talking with one such creep, the distance of the phone call gave her enough security that she did not feel overwhelmed by his jabs.

"You're not going to let it be."

"Brenda?" I asked Max. "What can I tell you to make you more sympathetic?"

For all his sympathy, he was the one who was forcing the clock. He imagined himself looking back on the incident and cursing his lost opportunity. He didn't want his chance to get away.

"What are you going to do, Max: wrest the phone from her?"

"The phone call is a pose.

"She's pretty in to it. When she comes back to the table, she won't even look at us."

"What if we left right now?"

"I didn't think that we came here to talk about customers at the Starbucks."

He adopted a serious tone, "Why are we here?"

"I thought that you wanted to hear about my new novel.

"This is not part of it?"

"Explain yourself."

"You're this guy who spends his time analyzing women that you see in public. But you



never say a thing to them. Instead, you love off this romantic imagery that you have created in our mind.”

“What is going on here: a game of cock blocking?”

“I didn’t think that you were even about that competitiveness.”

I defended myself, “I am not. I’m just not sure what game you have mind.”

“I came here to listen. Offer me your wisdom, oh mighty one.

“Max, now you are being a dick.”

“Be honest. Nothing that we say between us is the same thing as what we would actually say if we talked to her.”

“Not entirely. Everything that we say to her is about something that we see. And she has to be aware of this.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re the one who’s built her up as some kind of angel. And you’re pissed at me for criticizing her book.”

“Her book is your advantage.”

“We’ve already lost her.”

“Not at all. If she was really involved, she would have packed her things up and taken off. This is more delay on her part.”

We both came here for a story. Certainly, Brenda was our story. And it was long and dragged out. And occasionally boring. The most interesting part was the mock rivalry between Max and me.

“You could use this for your novel.”

“I am using it for my novel.”

“How does writing about it differ from the actual experience?”

“In the novel, it is more about the mystical possibilities of the moment.”

“Whatever that means.”

“It’s about a sense of affinity to her that we enjoin just by being here.”

“Affinity what? There’s no connection if we don’t say anything.”

“But this may not be the right time. And the written word gives us the opportunity to unearth that hidden connection.”

“Sounds like more bull shit to me.”

“Maybe. But that’s why she buys her book. She keeps making the same mistake. Taking things to mean what is right before her eyes. She needs to learn a new way of seeing.”

“Will she?”

“Maybe never. But that is a story in itself. If she could see all these possibilities, she could make the connection.”

“Admit it. You’re writing a novel about being a peeping tom. And if you can receive this much satisfaction hanging around a coffee shop, think how much pleasure you’d get if you started snooping even more.”

“That’s not what I’m about. It’s just the opposite. I see enough that I don’t want to watch any further.”

“That makes you just a much of a dick. You scrutinize until you can reduce the poor girl to a formula. Then she is catalogued away in that sick mind of yours.”

Was my mental picture any more vivid than his? I admit that I had done my utmost to sketch the contours of the scene. It was essential that I bring her to life if I was going to make her a character. Brenda was attracted to a casual lifestyle because it gave her the ease to put everything in its place. There was that healthy glow in her face that came from her ability to resist the pressure. But she lived in the middle of a hot house. That was why she felt the need to set things right. It was certainly the result of a rigid background.

“And you are so perceptive that you can discover all these details about her personal life without saying a thing to her.”

It was if he was listening in on my private thoughts. I guess that was my ultimate ability. I had already conveyed my vision to him. But I wanted to explain more. Otherwise, he would miss the point of what I was saying.

“My novel is about the search for a fundamental harmony between what we see and what moves the planets. If there is a discrepancy, it could be because I’m not seeing things right.”

I was offering Max the chance to stand on the shoulders of giants. But he still wanted temporary entertainment. His interest in Brenda didn’t go much past the immediate. There was nothing spiritual in his quest.

“You can’t say that. You act as if you’re such a deep seer. But everything that you see is only meant to support your own whims.”

I needed to relate more of the story to him so that he could better appreciate my understanding.

He didn’t want to let up, “You’re a writer because it makes you feel superior to others. That’s why you see these things that aren’t even there.”

“If we all had psychic abilities, we could make connections that remain outside our grasp. We could say what we really need to say. Words wouldn’t fail us.”

“We’ve done nothing but talk,” Max complained.

“But the words that we really need fail us.”

“You’re advocating telepathy.”

“If that’s what it takes. But it’s more like fiction has a way of opening up our associational networks. Ideas that have been buried for years start to well up.”

“Fiction therapy.”

“You could call it that.”

“Sounds pretentious.”

“Not if it works.”

“It does work.”

“When I write, I sense something. It’s the same thing when you read a book. The story seems to follow you around.”

“So you write a story about a bunch of people talking about psychic phenomenon. What kind of effect is that going to have on the reader?”

“It’s like people telling ghost stories. If the stories are good enough, they start to affect the imagination of the reader.”

“How does that work?”

I wanted to explain my idea, “It gets the psychic juices flowing. As if that is an invitation to the overall experience.”

He wondered, "How does that have anything to do with Brenda?"

"The more that we talk about her, the more that we feel that we know her. We start to explore her habits. We go beyond our initial impressions."

"Or we simply confirm our initial impressions."

"Then that is also part of the process. We bring so much baggage to the experience. And some of it is useful. And a lot of it gets in the way."

He goaded me, "And the more that we talk, the more we indulge our prejudices. You can't know a thing until you actually go up and talk to her."

"But language is no different than any other form of communication. For everything that is said, there is so much that is hidden. That is why we're having this conversation."

He got a little perturbed, "The conversation is counterproductive."

"Why are you getting so embroiled in the emotion. I'm not stopping you from approaching her. But you're no less reticent than me."

"I just don't want to tempt fate."

"How is that?"

"We put her in your story, then we want to get her involved talking about it. We're interfering with the process. She's going to start questioning this inner voice that is following her around."

"Look at yourself. You're getting excited. Why? Because we've touched a nerve. You're involved. This is your story."

If I left him alone, would he end up talking to her. Or was his weak will all part of his aggressiveness with me.

I wasn't sure if I had explained myself adequately to him. But things were starting to become clearer for me. We left Brenda while she was still on the phone.