

A MEMORY AWAY

by Melinda Curtis

EXCERPT

Did he love me?

A man got out of the truck. Dark hair. Straight nose. Familiar eyes.

It's him.

She leaned forward, peering through the paned glass, her heart sailing toward him, over ever-hopeful waves of roses and rainbows.

Jess didn't usually let herself dream. But now...today...him...

And yet...

He wore a burgundy vest jacket that clashed with a red long-sleeve T-shirt. Worn blue jeans. A black baseball cap.

Instead, she saw him in a fine wool suit. Black, always black. A navy shirt of the softest cotton. A silk tie in a geometric pattern. Shiny Italian loafers...

He took the stairs two at a time, work boots ringing on wood.

Jessica's heart sank as certainly as if someone had drilled holes in the boat carrying her hopeful emotions. Clouds blocked the sun. The rainbow disappeared. Unwilling to sink, Jess clung to joy. To the idea of him.

He entered without a flourish or an energetic greeting. He entered without the smile that teased the corners of her memory. He entered and took stock of the room, the situation, her.

Their eyes met. His were the same color, same shape, so heart-achingly familiar.

It was the cool assessment in them that threw her off. Not a smile, not a brow quirk, not an eye crinkle.

He came forward. "I'm Michael Dufraine, but everyone calls me Duffy."

His name didn't ring true.

Had he lied to her?

She couldn't speak, could barely remember her name.

The wind shook the panes. The house creaked and groaned.

He smiled. A polite smile, a distant smile, an I-don't-know-you smile.

Disappointment overwhelmed her. Jess resisted the urge to dissolve into a pity puddle on the floor.

And you are...?" He extended his hand.

On autopilot, she reached for him. Their palms touched.

Jessica's vision blurred and she gripped his hand tighter as clips of memory assailed her—his deep laughter, him offering her a bite of chocolate cheesecake, his citrusy cologne as he leaned in to kiss her.

It is him.

Relieved. She was so relieved. Jessica blinked at the man—Duffy—who she vaguely recalled and, at the same time, did not.

She'd practiced what to say on the hour-long drive up here from Santa Rosa. Ran through several scenarios. None of them had included him not recognizing her.

She should start at the beginning. Best not to scare him with hysterics and panicked accusations, of which she'd had five months to form.

Don't raise your voice. Don't cry. Don't ask why.

And don't lead the conversation with the elephant in the room.

Despite all the cautions and practicing and caveats, she drew a breath, and flung her hopes toward him as if he was her life preserver. "I think I'm your wife."