

Zelen Rijeka

Saturday, June 10, 2023

Marla's eyes locked onto the figure that hopped off the Amtrak at 2:36. She peered through the large window at the street in front of the motel. It should have been vacant, because it was the middle of the night in Green River, but the figure did not seem to care. A stranger, wearing a grey hoodie and blue jeans with rips on the knees strolled by. Marla took in every detail she could. The person walked left, down the road, appearing and vanishing between the illumination of the streetlights. She could tell he was a man with his wavy brown hair that didn't reach his shoulders. He was a bit lanky, at least six feet tall, and couldn't be much older than 20. He wore black combat boots, and had a book in his hand, but Marla couldn't see the cover. He continued down the road, Marla's eyes following him until he was out of sight. Maybe the strangest thing about this guy was his smile and his sunglasses because A. It was nighttime, and B. He was in Green River. What was there to be so happy about?

Don't get her wrong, Green River had its perks. Namely, Colton and Sophia. She grew up with them, and they spent many nights wandering the streets of their town together, since nothing bad ever happened. Come to think of it, nothing really happened at all. To alleviate the boredom, Marla told stories, and Colton and Sophia hung onto her every word. She didn't know how she did it, but Marla could craft a story in any genre, avoiding plot holes, exiling cliches.

Her mother was the librarian of The Green River Public Library, so Marla spent many days reading in her company, sharpening her skills with each word. Her father was a psychiatrist, and inwardly he worried his daughter was using storytelling as a coping mechanism to find a

sense of fulfillment in her uneventful life, but he never voiced those worries. Not for lack of caring, but because he loved the twinkle Marla got in her eye when weaving the web of a new story. He knew she'd find her place in time. But after 18 years of living in Green River, Marla had grown restless. What if these stories were the closest, she'd ever come to experiencing an adventure? No. Marla refused to become another fixture of Green River.

That's why she worked the night shift in Mr. Anders' motel. Mr. Anders was the best boss she could ask for. Picture a sweet fifty-something-year-old family man, then make him sweeter. He was about five feet seven inches tall, with a round belly that was a badge of honor earned after years of serving as the taster of his daughter's baking. He always wore a suit, and nearly never wore the same tie twice. He also never had any customers. Green River wasn't exactly a tourist location. But that didn't bother him. He'd inherited this motel from his father who inherited it from his. Marla was happy to work the overnight shift on Saturdays because she knew nothing else would be happening in town anyway, and this shift had the highest pay. She'd save up her money, buy the yellow Volkswagen Beetle Mrs. Laten was selling down the road, and drive to a place where people chose to be, not just a place filled with people who were born there and just kind of never left.

But wait, did that strange man who got off the train choose to come to Green River? Everyone knew everyone in this town, and Marla knew she didn't know him. Her mind raced from one explanation to the next. Maybe he was lost. Maybe he was trying to get to Denver or Sacramento and completely got lost and gave up hope and got off as soon as he could. But then he probably wouldn't be so happy. And Marla had worked this shift before, yet she never saw a train arrive at that unstaffed station at this hour. In fact, she never saw a train at that station ever. It was built in 1883 to be a shipping point for livestock and mining equipment, but as the town

grew smaller, so did the need for trains. She kind of assumed the station wasn't operational anymore. A new route perhaps? Or, even better, a train from a different realm, like in that one movie with the girl and the dragon and the giant baby. Marla laughed, mumbling under her breath, "Relax Marla, this isn't one of your stories."

She closed the book she was reading, one her mom recommended about lions and tigers and bears, and spent the next three hours theorizing about the mystery man. Marla sat behind the reception desk, her steady breathing, and the buzz of the neon "Open" sign in the window the only sources of sound within the 36 square foot lobby. Around 5:30, Marla fell asleep, as she inevitably did during nearly every night shift.

A ding jolted Marla from her sleep. Taking a few moments to catch her breath, she gradually regained consciousness. By the time her eyes fluttered open, the lobby door was closing behind the person who rang the call bell (it only took a few steps to reach the door, after all). He walked right, toward the train station. Marla saw his black combat boots. She grabbed her phone, flinching from the brightness of the screen, which read 5:58 am. With another look, she noticed a train sitting at the station. Marla watched him hop on and leave with it. She couldn't help feeling disappointed that the most interesting part of her town was already gone. Sure, he was kind of a jerk for ringing the bell for apparently no reason, but she had so many questions. Her eyes wandered downward after watching the train leave, and she noticed a note tucked under the call bell. Written neatly, the note read, "Sleeping on the job? Can't be good for business. Don't worry, I won't tell Mr. Anders. See you next week! :) "

Marla read and reread the words. Then, she softly placed the note in the small waste bin beside the reception desk and took the ten-minute walk to her house, hoping Mr. Anders'

kindness would prevent him from being too upset with her for leaving the motel unsupervised for the last hour of her shift.

Monday, June 12, 2023

They sat on the soft grass, under the shade of the willow tree in Marla's backyard, Colton to her left and Sophia to her right, as usual.

Marla was going crazy. "Guys, this isn't one of my stories!"

"So, you expect us to believe a mysterious man around our age showed up on a train, at the station where none of us have ever seen a train, wearing sunglasses and black combat boots, disappeared, then reappeared to wake you up and write you a note that is either friendly or totally creepy?" Sophia's blue eyes were wide, as her hands moved all around, and her blonde ponytail swayed left to right with each word. She got her looks from her father, but her very animated way of speaking from her very Italian mother. Marla loved that about her.

"Sophia, that's exactly what I expect," Marla crossed her arms, standing her ground.

"I don't know, Mar, it really sounds like the start of another one of your stories." Colton said, looking like he was sincerely sorry. He was loyal to Marla, always willing to suspend his disbelief, and listen to anything she had to say. But, after years of hearing her stories, Colton was well aware sometimes they were based on true, much less exciting events. Like that one time, when Marla somehow turned dropping her milk carton at lunch into a story of a girl scouring the ocean floor to find the emerald that fell overboard during her trek across the Pacific Ocean. He

usually loved to indulge in her creativity, but this story wasn't as fun as the others. Maybe not believing her was his way to lessen his worry for her.

The soft brown color of Colton's eyes nearly matched Marla's, but Marla's had little flecks of gold here and there. His black hair was cut to look like that of his favorite NBA player, Luka Doncic, which would be appreciated by his teammates when he went to play for the varsity basketball team at the Green River Community College the following year. His pale skin-tone meant he almost always looked like he was blushing, though it was especially noticeable when Marla looked at him. He hated it when Marla teased him about that. So, she teased him more because even if he did hit another growth spurt, making him a six-foot-three point guard who was as nimble as a cat, he would always be the goofy kid she grew up with.

"Did you tell Mr. Anders?" Marla grimaced a little at Sophia's question. She felt bad about leaving in the middle of her shift, and even worse about not calling Mr. Anders until a few hours after she'd made it home. She blamed her leaving on a sudden stomach bug, worried that if she told Mr. Anders the truth, he wouldn't let her work that shift anymore. She needed the money to buy the Beetle, so a little white lie wouldn't hurt anyone, right? Unsurprisingly, Mr. Anders was very understanding, and told Marla to eat crackers and drink ginger ale.

"I've never left during a shift in my life. But when this guy showed up out of the blue and wrote me a note, fight or flight kicked in, and I fled. I should've fought." She mumbled the last sentence. Marla hadn't stopped wishing she talked to the man since he boarded the train and left. She hardly even saw him, yet something about him felt familiar. She didn't leave the motel because she felt unsafe, that wasn't quite it. It was more like she felt overwhelmed. All she knew was she would not let an opportunity to speak to him slip away again.

“Don’t work that shift anymore,” Colton said.

“I need to save up for my car.”

“You might not be safe.”

“It’s Green River, nothing is going to happen. I was literally sleeping behind the desk, if he wanted to kill me, he would have.” Marla rolled her eyes. She could protect herself anyway.

“I’ll come hang with you during your next night shift then,” Colton said.

“Colton, quit being a helicopter friend. Marla knows what she’s doing. And we all know she’s the most capable out of us anyway. Plus, it’s kind of romantic. Maybe this mystery guy is like a secret spy who’s been watching Marla and needs her help to save the world.”

The girls laughed, agreeing Sophia listened to one too many of Marla’s stories. They didn’t notice Colton’s eyes shift when Sophia said he was Marla’s “friend.” What an annoying word. Marla squeezed Colton’s shoulder.

“Thank you for worrying, but I’ll be fine. You’ll both be the first to know if anything interesting happens again.”

Saturday, June 17, 2023

Marla sat behind the reception desk and waited. If what he wrote in his note was true, the stranger would be back tonight. Feeling a bit inspired by Sophia, her book for this shift was about a dystopian society with Junior Spies. Hours dragged by, and just when she began accepting this whole thing had been a prank, or maybe a dream, a light shone on the little train station across the street.

It was 3:58 am when the man got off the train this time. She wondered if he owned a private train that followed no schedule but his own. He was wearing the exact same thing as last week, down to the boots and sunglasses. However, unlike last week, he looked a bit more serious, not sporting that toothy smile. Another difference from last week was rather than walking left down the street, he was walking straight toward the motel. Marla's heart rate was up, but she hid her nerves easily. It helped that she was stubborn. One time, her mom told her it was impossible to read 50 books in a month. So she read 62. Now, she'd prove she could handle herself. The door opened, and Marla calmly glanced up as the stranger rested his elbows on the desk, inches from her.

"Listen, first of all, I'm sorry, for being late and for that note. I realized how creepy it might have seemed, and in hindsight it really wasn't one of my best ideas. I came here last week with the intention to speak to you, but I was just so happy when I saw you and realized it worked that I panicked and knew I'd say something wrong if I tried and I decided writing a note would be safer because you like my writing but somehow, I also messed that up so today I'm here to apologize. And also, to say hi." He seemed crazy, but in an endearing way. As he caught his breath, Marla realized he was much less intimidating close-up. His sunglasses had a little star on the upper corner of either side, and he was wearing dinosaur socks. Marla chuckled a little to herself. He wasn't a secret spy; he was more likely a nerd. Hearing her laugh made a small replica of last week's smile sneak onto the man's lips.

"What's your name?"

His eyes jumped away from Marla, searching for help. "What book are you reading?"

"I asked you a question first."

“I love reading.”

“Name.”

“Come on Mar, you know a good story needs time to develop. I’ll tell you, just not now. But know that you’re safe with me, I promise,” he said, softly smiling, holding eye contact through his sunglasses.

Marla was a little taken aback, and got a weird feeling, like déjà vu. Maybe because the only other people who ever called her Mar were her parents, Colton, and Sophia. She had every reason to be afraid of this guy, but she wasn’t at all. She trusted him. Plus, she was a sucker for a good story. He had a book with him again, and rested it on the reception desk.

“What book is that?” Marla asked.

He quickly picked it up, hesitating to answer. “It’s by Zelen Rijeka. A truly brilliant author. Able to adapt and change without ever losing that signature style. Most people can get stuck, but Zelen isn’t like that,” the man said.

“What’s your favorite book by them?”

“I can’t choose. But the ones that involve taking a risk to experience something new really inspire me. Zelen can tell a story and make you feel like you’re living it.” He sighed like he was starstruck.

“How do they do that?” Marla was eager to find ways to improve her own stories.

“I can’t explain it, but I know you’ll figure it out.”

She raised her eyebrow a bit. “You’re awfully confident in me.”

“Yeah,” he looked down at his feet, rocking on his heels ever so slightly. The pair sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Well, do you need a room?” Marla asked. He began backing away, like a child caught doing something wrong.

“Same time next week?” He shot finger guns as he backed away, but Marla wasn’t entertained. She needed more information about this guy if she was going to prove to Sophia that he was real and to Colton that he was not a murderer.

“If you want me to be here next week, tell me your name, and take off your sunglasses.” He paused, his smile vanished momentarily, but returned a second later.

“I can’t do that, I’m sorry,” he said.

“You apologize a lot. Do you ever mean it?” Marla spoke with an edge to her voice, and the man was affected by her words. His voice softened, and the cheerful tone she’d grown used to hearing was replaced by something more somber.

“I promise I’ll explain everything, it’s just not time.” With that, he turned and walked out the door. He probably thought he was rid of Marla for the week. What he didn’t know was earlier that night she’d committed to following him onto the train if she didn’t learn anything else about his identity. What was the worst that could happen, she gets stuck in some town a few hours away and her parents come get her? Sure, they might be annoyed, but they were never ones to yell. The risk was worth it.

The man hurried toward the platform, and Marla silently followed, far enough behind to go unnoticed by him. Mr. Anders would understand (again). As the train approached at 5:16 am,

Marla ran from the bush she'd squatted behind, and hopped on board two cars away from the man. The adrenaline was enough to distract her from her surroundings for a moment, but once she settled, she was dumbfounded. Every aspect of the train car was a luminous white, yet there were no physical lights or bulbs to be seen. The seats floated like tubes in a pool, and when she sat on one a screen appeared before her face prompting her to choose from hundreds of options, including sleep, movie, eat, and explore. Marla hopped up from her seat and headed one car back, to the middle of the train. She'd read in numerous books that this is where the conductor stays, so she strategically boarded near there just in case she needed help. But there was no one to be found.

"Don't freak out, Marla, maybe the conductor is at the front with the train's power source. Yeah, that makes sense." She began walking back in the direction she came. When she opened the door to the first train car, rather than being met by a generator and conductor, she was face to face with a giant clock. It was as tall as her, making up the front wall of the car, hands pointing to 5:16. In the middle, the clock read, "6/18/2115." While Marla fought with herself about whether she should touch the clock or not, she heard a familiar voice.

"You know, I really should've seen this coming," the man said. "So stubborn," he mused, just above a whisper. She turned to face him. Before she could say anything, he cut her off. His timid nerdiness was missing as he spoke with authority.

"Listen. We'll be in my town any second now." He took off his hoodie as he spoke. "Put this on, keep the hood up, and stay right behind me." Although Marla wondered what town was so close to Green River that they'd arrive so quickly, she didn't want to challenge him, as he intensely stared at her, waiting for confirmation that she'd obey. She gave a quick nod just as the doors slid open.

Tuesday, June 18, 2115

Marla struggled to keep up with the man's fast pace. Above her, the sky was littered with stars unlike she'd ever seen. They were every color of the rainbow, continuously sparkling, so beautiful that Marla had to stop her hand from reaching toward them. The houses were grand and creative, mostly made of glass or chrome rather than wood or concrete, with impressive light displays and landscaping. Everything felt so futuristic, and that clock on the train was strange. Marla began to wonder... but she stopped herself. Though she loved her wild imagination, she didn't want the man to think she was crazy. After about ten minutes, the terrain beneath her feet switched from cement to grass. Then, she walked through a doorway.

"Welcome," the man laughed a little, much more relaxed than when they were on the train. She didn't know why, but Marla began laughing, too. Is this what an adventure feels like? After a few moments, Marla regained her senses. She was in a room a little larger than her bedroom back home. Marla reached down to feel the rug, which was the softest thing she'd ever felt. There was a large bed to her right in the corner of the room, and little twinkling lights seemingly floating near the ceiling. The cord must be clear, she concluded, since lights can't just float, right? A screen filled the wall to her left.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Starry Springs! We came in through the backdoor, but this is my guest house. Speaking of, please only use the backdoor, okay? You'll stay here until Monday at 2:36 am. That's when the train back to Green River comes. I'll be a few feet away in my house, so you don't have to be scared." The excited demeanor he had when he told Marla about his favorite author was back,

and she realized he reminded her a bit of a golden retriever. She'd always been a dog person. Her smile dropped when she realized she'd have to be away from home for nearly a week, not because she missed it, but because she didn't want to make anyone worry.

"I'll bring you your favorite green tea, and we'll watch all of the Harry Potter movies and, hey, what's wrong?" He noticed Marla's frown.

"In my rush to follow you onto the train, I must have left my phone at work. I'd ask to borrow yours, but I don't have anyone's numbers memorized, they're in my contacts. I'm scared people will think I've gone missing."

"Oh, well they won't even know you left," the man answered without thinking, then stopped abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"What?"

"What you just said."

"I'll bring you green tea?"

"We're in the future aren't we." Marla's mouth was in a straight line, her seriousness obvious.

"What gave it away?" The man asked sheepishly. He knew she'd figure it out, she was more intelligent than he'd ever be. As long as she didn't figure out the other thing, it'd be fine.

"The rainbow stars mostly. When you said no one will know I left, I realized that you control what day the train arrives in Green River with that giant clock. The only thing I don't get is why we have to wait until Monday at 2:36 am to go back."

“Well, technically, the train is a freight train. Its purpose is to deliver energy cubes, and time travel means it can arrive anywhere seemingly instantaneously. Humans aren’t really supposed to use time travel since it can cause wormholes and warp drives but knowing the person who invented time travel does have its perks.” He winked, and my heart fluttered a little. I had so many questions, like why me, but before I could ask any, he pulled me toward the back door. “The year is 2115. Welcome to the future, Mar. Let’s have some fun.”

Friday, June 21, 2115

Marla didn’t know if it was because she was in the future, or because she was blissfully happy, but time was flying by. The night she arrived, she and the man drove in his truck to an open field to stargaze. Marla asked about the stars, and though the man couldn’t explain how exactly they worked, he knew that the sky began to look different about 20 years prior, when the country switched to using energy cubes as their main energy source.

The man cooked all Marla’s favorite foods without her asking and had all Marla’s favorite movies and books. Together, they read the one about a library at midnight, and a girl who contemplated what her life could have been. Marla swore it was even better the second time she read it, and the man laughed, insisting it wasn’t possible because it was the same story.

“But that’s the beauty of an amazing story. If it really touches you, the words may stay the same, but their meaning will change with you.”

With each passing day, Marla grew more comfortable around him. Rather than asking questions about society and her surroundings, she began asking questions about him, and answering those about herself. Again, she and the man found themselves in the open field to

stargaze, but this time they laid side-by-side on a blanket in the bed of the truck rather than sitting a foot apart on the tailgate.

“Do you have any family?” He shifted a little before answering her question.

“No one nearby anymore. My parents passed away a while ago. And I lost someone dear to me this year. It’s been hard.” Marla turned her head to look at him and noticed a tear rolling down his cheek. She gently wiped it, fighting to hold back her own. She wasn’t sure why she cared so deeply for this man she’d met so recently.

“Hey, I’m here. I know human time travel isn’t exactly encouraged, but I’ll always be around when you need someone.” He leaned into Marla’s hand but did not respond.

Monday, June 24, 2115

The clock struck midnight, meaning Marla’s final hours in Starry Springs were upon her. She and the man had been sitting on the floor of the guest house, talking for hours. Marla told some of her famous stories, and the man told some of his own. She talked about her dream of leaving Green River, something she’d only really voiced to herself until then. Colton and Sophia both planned to attend Green River Community College, and her parents had no plans to leave Green River, so how could Marla excitedly tell the people she loved most in the world that she couldn’t wait to leave them. She knew it wasn’t that she wanted to leave them, rather, she wanted to see the world and meet more wonderful people to love, but she worried it would come out wrong, so she left the topic alone. Yet with the man, she felt free to say and feel anything.

“Marla, chasing your dreams does not make you selfish.”

“I guess...”

“You’re going to go to that school in New York and become a writer.”

“But...”

The man lifted Marla’s chin with a finger, so their eyes met through his sunglasses like the night in the lobby when he promised she’d be safe with him. “You, Mar, are destined to be happy. You just have to let yourself be.” His words hung in the air, and Marla was struck by the realization that she’d never felt happier than she did in that moment. Without thinking, she spoke.

“What if I stayed?” The man’s face turned pale, and he didn’t move for a second.

“You can’t.” He stood up.

“Why, I could just take the train next week. Or maybe I could just stay here for a while and continue this adventure with you. I’m happy.” The man faced away from Marla, because he couldn’t let her see how badly he wanted her to stay. It’d ruin everything. He needed to make her want to leave. He chose his words carefully, feeling cursed because he knew exactly what to say to upset her.

“I don’t want you here. I want to have my own adventures.” Marla shrunk back. She felt like such a fool. She thought they’d have adventures together, but was she keeping him from his dreams without even realizing it? It took a moment, but she regained her composure. She’d never knowingly do that to anyone.

“You’re right. I’ll be on that train.” The man nodded and exited the guest house. Marla looked at the clock on the wall. She wouldn’t burden him anymore, so at 2:00 am she left the guest house, confident she could find her way to the station.

As much as it pained her, Marla wondered if that’d be the last time she’d see the man. She mindlessly exited the guesthouse using the front door rather than the back and was shaken from her thoughts. The willow tree and house before her were unmistakably hers, and a yellow Beetle that clearly had not been driven in a while sat in the open garage. Above her, the rainbow stars still twinkled. Marla began taking big steps away from what appeared to be her house in Green River. She took the walk she knew by heart, and ended up at the train station, across from the still standing motel, proof that Starry Springs was Green River of the future. Marla sat on a bench at the still unstaffed train station, until she felt a presence beside her.

“I’m sorry for the things I said. I didn’t mean them.”

Marla turned to face him. “Who are you, really?”

The man looked down at his hands in his lap. “I should have never done this in the first place, but I just missed you so much. And you weren’t around anymore to tell me not to.”

“What do you mean?” They sat in silence, until the man spoke.

“We were married. I was trying to keep that a secret because I didn’t know how you felt about me yet. You died two months ago. I loved you so much. I love you so much. I couldn’t bear not seeing you knowing it was possible. I begged my friend for access to the time train control room and planned to visit you every now and then before you left Green River, always at 2:36 am, our lucky numbers. The second time I was late because I hesitated, worried I’d scare

you by coming again. I never expected you to follow me back here. Though I should've known.”
He laughed a tired laugh.

“How are you so young?” Slowly, the man reached his hand up and removed the sunglasses he'd worn every moment since meeting Marla. She was no longer sitting next to a 20-year-old. In his place, was a 92-year-old man. Marla tried and failed to not look too shocked.

“Technology works wonders these days.” He shrugged, slipping the glasses back on, his appearance returning to that of him at 20 years old. They erupted in laughter.

“So, you're just a time-traveling catfish?”

“Hey, that's not fair! We didn't meet until later in life, I thought you might appreciate seeing me this young and dashing” Their playful bickering continued until the train arrived. They boarded it together, hand in hand, door shutting behind them. Moments later, the doors opened.

Saturday, June 17, 2023

Marla and the man stepped off the train, onto the platform together. The train stayed put.

“I won't be visiting anymore. Things could get too messy, and I've already stolen far more time with you than was ever rightfully mine. For that, I'm so grateful.” Marla kept her gaze on the ground. Gently, the man moved her hair from her face, drawing her eyes to his.

“I'll find you; I promise.” With that, he placed a soft kiss on Marla's forehead, boarded the train, and left.

Marla was wearing the man's hoodie that he gave her the night she arrived in Starry Springs. She decided she wouldn't tell anyone, not even Sophia or Colton, about her time travel

adventure, because she'd be worried if they believed her. While walking home, she shoved her hands in the hoodie pocket, and felt a piece of paper and something cold. Her hand emerged with a small gold heart locket on a dainty chain, and another neatly written note, that read, "It's Theo."

Saturday, June 11, 2033

Marla shut the window of her apartment, exasperated. It was 2:36 am, and still people were honking and yelling at one another. They really weren't kidding about New York being the city that never sleeps. When she moved there ten years ago, she loved the excitement and bustle. She worked tirelessly to become a New York Times Bestselling Author, and the speed of the city motivated her. Though she never grew tired of writing, the attention and events were becoming draining. She found herself missing the sound of crickets and the comfort of knowing all her neighbors. She looked at the calendar hanging on her wall. In a few days she'd return to Green River, and hopefully clear her mind. She'd visited multiple times within the past ten years, and each time it was harder to leave.

Friday, June 17, 2033

After a 32-hour drive in her yellow Beetle, Marla arrived in Green River early Friday morning for the wedding of her best friends, Sophia and Colton. She was pretty sure she smiled all 32 hours. Before the wedding festivities began, Marla visited with her parents, seeking their advice.

“Honey, if you aren’t happy, you shouldn’t stay there.” Marla’s mom spoke softly while ironing her dress.

“I know, but I don’t want to stop writing. I just want to be able to go get a coffee or go for a walk without signing a book.” Her dad rubbed his chin from the couch, deep in thought.

“How about a pen name? You could continue writing but have less eyes on you in your daily life. You could even move away from the city because you wouldn’t be expected to do in-person events if you wanted to keep your identity anonymous.” Marla thought for a few minutes. That wasn’t a bad idea, not bad at all.

“What name though?” she wondered out loud.

“Try going back to your roots,” her mom suggested. “My roots, my roots,” Marla thought. Green River was where she was from, and the generations before her. But, if you kept going, she had ancestors from Slovenia and Croatia. She tried to recall her very limited knowledge of the countries’ languages. She knew green in Slovenian was Zelen.

“Mom, what’s ‘river’ in Croatian?” she asked.

“Rijeka.” Marla faltered for a split second. That word was so familiar.

“Zelen Rijeka,” Marla tested the name out loud.

“Has a nice ring to it,” her dad said. Yeah, Marla thought, it really does.

She spent the rest of the day with Sophia, fulfilling her bridesmaid duties and helping everyone get where they needed to be. She did not cry often, but tears of happiness flowed as she watched her best friends seal their marriage with a kiss. She’d spent so much of her life wanting to get out of Green River, and suddenly, she was wishing for a reason to stay.

Marla was sitting at a table with Sophia during the wedding reception when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned around to see Colton, and a very familiar man next to him. He had a toothy smile, and socks with wedding cakes on them.

“Marla, I want you to meet one of my good friends from college, Theodore.” The man held out his hand to Marla.

“Oh, so formal. You can just call me Theo.” Marla smiled, because she knew she would.