

LOVE STORY Exclusive Excerpt

“Spock, we’re giving you Horny!” my mom blurts out, apparently fed up with my denseness.

Her utterance is too much for my siblings to handle and they both burst out laughing, retreating into the kitchen to rejoin the party where there’s wine.

Oh what I wouldn’t give for wine right now.

“I, um . . . you’re giving me the car?” I ask.

“Because yours broke down,” my dad explains, walking forward to thump Horny’s dented hood.

“And this one’s . . . not broken down?” I ask skeptically.

Look, it’s not that I’m not grateful. My parents are trying to give me a car, I appreciate the sweetness of the gesture, it’s just . . .

Here’s the thing about Horny: he barely got us three kids through high school. I mean, Horny is the car that sputtered and shook making it the 3.2 miles to Jefferson High, no matter who was behind the wheel.

I’m even going to come all the way clean here and say that early on in my freshmen year, I was embarrassed showing up in Horny. Then I realized I was lucky to have a car at all, and well . . . I dunno, I guess Horny became a part of us Hawkins kids’ charm, because the station wagon was practically an institution from Craig’s high school reign all the way through Brandi’s.

But poor Horny quit working years ago. Much to Brandi’s chagrin, he gave up the ghost a mere two months before her high school graduation, and I spent the last bit of her senior year being picked up by my parents.

“He’s going to take you to California,” Dad says, giving the car another thump.

“Really?” I step forward and run a tentative finger along the familiar panel. He’s had a bath, so at least that’s something. “Because last I knew, he wouldn’t even make it out of the garage.”

“Yeah, well, we neglected him for a while, but he’s right as rain now,” Dad says, puffing out his chest as though Horny’s a fourth child.

“Like, as in he actually starts?”

“Purrs like a kitten,” my mom says with an emphatic nod, even though I know she doesn’t even like cats. “We didn’t believe it, but we took him to church on Sunday and there were no issues.”

I literally bite my tongue to keep from pointing out that this is hardly a feat. Sacred Presbyterian is 0.8 miles away from the house.

“You took Horny into a shop?” I ask, starting to warm to the idea of having a car again. I’m a little touched, actually. Money is tight for my parents. Dad’s a PE teacher, and Mom gives a mean winery tour, but the gig’s never paid much.

“Not exactly, it was more of a bartering situation,” Mom says.

“Yeah?” I say, going around to the driver’s seat, already giddy with the prospect of telling Oscar I’ll be able to come see him in Miami after all, even if I won’t exactly be riding in style.

“Reece agreed to fix him up.”

I'm lowering myself into the car as my dad says this, but I reverse so quickly I hit my head. My skull doesn't even register the pain, because I'm too busy registering the hurt in my heart at the familiar name. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Reece," my mom says, giving me a bemused look. "He's always been handy with cars."

"He fixed up the car in exchange for what?"

And then I feel—I actually feel—the air change around me as the side door to the garage opens, and a new presence sucks all the air out of the space.

I don't turn around. I don't move. But I feel his eyes on me. Over me.

"Reece is headed out to California too," my oblivious mother chatters on. "It worked out perfectly actually. Now you two can ride together, and your dad and I don't have to worry about you alone in the middle of nowhere with a twenty-something-year-old car.

They think the car is going to be the problem here? It's not the car that's toxic to me. It's him.

Reece Sullivan. My brother's best friend. My parents' "other son."

Slowly I force myself to turn, and even though I'm prepped, the force of that ice-blue gaze still does something dangerous to me.

He winks, quick and cocky, and I suck in a breath, and I have to wonder . . .

I wonder if my parents would feel differently about their little plan if they knew that their makeshift mechanic is the same guy that popped my cherry six years earlier under their very roof.

And then broke my heart twenty-four hours later.