



Sunny Day



SHAE CONNOR

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By Shae Connor

How do you tell your best friend you're falling in love with him?

I woke up with the thought in my head and lay on my back, staring at the ceiling as everything that had been nagging me for days coalesced in my mind. I don't know why it happened then, what made it all come together. But I knew it was the truth.

No, not quite. The truth was that I'd already fallen in love with him.

I closed my eyes and brought up my new favorite image of him. We'd been at the beach the weekend before, and Vic, dripping with sea water, had thrown himself down onto the blanket we'd spread on the sand, rolling onto his stomach and grinning up at me. The sun's dying rays shot gold and copper through his quickly drying dirty blonde hair, and his deep brown eyes sparkled with happiness. He was beautiful, and my body had reacted immediately, catching me by surprise.

I'd never been attracted to a man before. Not like this, anyway, nothing past basic appreciation for something aesthetically pleasing, like looking at a painting or sculpture. It wasn't a big deal to me, though. College was for figuring things out, right? Besides, the group of friends surrounding me, the ones Vic and I met in the months after we came to UCLA together, had always had some fairly fluid definitions of sexuality.

Vic was included in that. Since we'd left our small hometown for college in the big city, Vic had taken to defining himself as "straight, but not narrow." He said it jokingly, but he'd been my best friend since we were in grade school, and we rarely kept secrets. I knew he'd had more than one encounter with guys over the past year and a half, and even a threesome once with a couple who were feeling adventurous.

So the idea of being with a guy didn't bother me. It was just another option. But the idea of being with *Vic*? Taking that big a risk with our friendship? *That* bothered me. That bothered me a *lot*.

I forced myself to get out of bed and start getting ready for the day. I needed a big cup of coffee, that much was for sure. Vic worked part-time at one of the on-campus cafes, and I usually got coffee there, but I couldn't quite face him this morning. I got my giant latte at a different spot and crossed campus toward my first class, vowing to lose myself in learning and forget about whatever the hell was going on with my heart.

I was only marginally successful. By the time my study group broke up that evening, I'd managed to embarrass myself three times, my mind wandering back to Vic over and over. The last came near the end of the study session. "Hey, Ian!" Fingers snapped in front of my face, and my eyes focused on a knowing smile coming from Brianna, a fellow art history major and one of our circle of friends.

"I know that look," she said, laughing at the blush I could feel warming my cheeks. "Don't think I'm going to let you off the hook, buddy, but we should finish going over this chapter first."

I forced myself back to the task at hand and somehow, though I couldn't quite remember how, managed to escape the library without Brianna waylaying

me. I knew that wouldn't last, but I'd have a little more time to get used to feeling this way before I had to undergo an inquisition over it.

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I should have expected what happened that night. I didn't remember details of the dream; I just knew Vic was there with me, kissing me, touching me, and I woke up as I came in my boxers, moaning out Vic's name. I lay there panting, mind whirling, more grateful than ever that my roommate spent most nights with his girlfriend. A wet dream would've just gotten me teased. A wet dream ending with my best friend's name would've been more than I cared to try to explain.

A glance at the clock told me it was all of 3 a.m., less than four hours after I went to sleep. I sighed and dragged myself out of bed to get rid of the wet boxers, using them to wipe away the come covering my stomach before dropping them on top of the pile of laundry in the floor of my closet. I stood there for a minute, hands on hips, unwilling to go back to bed but not sure what else to do.

Well, there was always the laundry.

Half an hour later, art history textbook and a bottle of Coke in hand, I sat ensconced in the deserted laundry room and tried to read the chapter on sculpture we'd be discussing in the next class. Every paragraph, something made me think of Vic. Hard marble, sleek lines.... Much more of that, and I'd have another pair of boxers to wash.

I gave up and closed the book on the table in front of me, folding my arms over it to use as a pillow for my head. My eyes couldn't seem to decide if they wanted to be open or closed, so they hung in limbo, and I watched the wall through the curtain of my lashes.

I thought about Vic, and I tried to push past the usual concerns I had when I liked someone. I didn't have a hell of a lot of self-confidence about myself, and my too-thin frame, sunburn-prone pale skin, and mousy brown hair didn't help matters, especially living in the land of blond, tanned beauty. Girls had told me I had beautiful eyes, and one guy at a party who'd had a few too many told me I had "perfect cock-sucking lips." The look on his face after he realized he'd said it had told me he was expecting to get flattened for it, but I just shot back at him with "wouldn't you like to know?"

It wasn't my best retort, but the one thing I knew I had going for me was a sharp wit. I had a comeback for every occasion, and more than once people said they admired how I always seemed to be able to come up with the perfect response, the kind that most people only thought of when it was too late. Too bad it didn't carry over to the rest of my communication skills, where I still had a tendency to stumble and bumble when I was nervous or uncertain. I tried to convince myself that admitting my newly discovered feelings to Vic wouldn't make me nervous and uncertain. I knew he liked me a lot, probably even loved me in some way. And I knew he cared enough to treat me gently no matter what.

That wouldn't make a possible rejection all that much easier to take.

The washer stopped spinning, and I ambled over, zombie-like, to transfer the clothes to a dryer. Each quarter dropping into the coin slot sounded like a gunshot, and I found myself flinching at the noise. Everything seemed

magnified in the middle of the night, from the glare of the fluorescent lights overhead to the buzzing in my brain that just wouldn't stop. I couldn't live like this for long, and I knew it. Bottling things up never worked for me. If I didn't let it out my way, on my terms, it would explode on its own, and that would be a seriously hot mess.

I sat back down and sipped at my now-lukewarm Coke, watching the clothes tumble. One of the overhead lights flickered and buzzed, and one corner of my mouth turned up. A few weeks earlier, Vic had insisted on a B-movie night, and in two of the four he picked, dying fluorescents portended disaster for those onscreen: a serial killer attacked in one, and an earthquake struck in the other. Real life was much more mundane, in the sense that nothing at all happened. The light came back up, the dryer kept spinning, and my mind went right on whirring.

When the dryer did stop some time later, I'd come to no new conclusions, and my tired brain felt ready to sleep again. I shoved the clothes into my laundry basket and shuffled back to my room, dropping the basket back into the floor of my closet and kicking off the shower shoes I'd worn downstairs. I fell into bed and was asleep in minutes.

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Morning brought nothing new except a sense of resignation. I hated categorizing my feelings for Vic like that, but I knew facing him was inevitable. I'd never be able to keep this from him. At least it was Friday. We had the

weekend ahead of us, and if the worst happened, I'd have a couple of days to recover before having to go back to class.

Showered and dressed, I headed off to my only class of the day, also the only one I shared with Vic. We usually had lunch afterward, and I tried to keep my stomach from rebelling at the thought as I walked into class. Vic's gaze met mine, and he grinned, wide smile between full lips, his eyes glowing. It struck me for the first time to wonder if I looked like that when I looked at him. Did my whole face light up when I saw him? Was the grin on my face as ridiculously wide as his right now? Or was I fooling myself, and he was just happy to see his best friend?

"Hey," he said, as I took my usual seat next to him near the back of the classroom. "You want to hit the beach again tomorrow? Supposed to be sunny and seventy."

I grimaced, but playfully. "Great, another sunburn to look forward too," I groused, fighting back another grin as Vic's widened even more.

"Don't worry, I'll put sunblock on your back for you." His voice dropped in volume and register, a low, almost growling murmur that brought back my dream from the previous night, and, naturally, my body reacted. Thank God the room had desks and not just rows of seats like some of the larger classrooms. The flat surface covered for me while I redirected my mind to English literature and away from thoughts of Vic's hands on my skin.

The class seemed much shorter than the scheduled hour and a half. Maybe it was because I still carried a knot of dread about what might happen when I told Vic the truth. Maybe it was that I could have sat there next to him for hours, close enough to feel his heat and smell his clean, soapy scent,

listening to him breathe in between a few snarky comments muttered too low for anyone else to hear, meant just for my ears.

It really should have come as no surprise to anyone, least of all me, that I'd fall in love with this man.

Class dismissed, we headed out across the fresh spring grass toward the dining hall. A few high clouds dotted the otherwise brilliant blue sky, and a light breeze stirred through the trees on either side of the sidewalk and ruffled our hair. Mine was in need of a trim, the thick waves getting unmanageable, and I ran a hand through it to push it out of my face. Vic kept his hair short on the sides, almost to the point of military precision, but he let the top grow longer, hanging across his forehead, and some of the strands caught on his eyelashes as he blinked. His smile hadn't faded one bit, his eyes still flashed humor and happiness, and my heart was slowly clawing its way right through my ribcage, trying its dead-level best to get to his.

"Let's get sandwiches and go down to the beach to eat." I almost jumped at my own voice. I didn't know I'd even had the thought until I was speaking it, but it sure sounded appealing. I don't know that I could've sat across a small table from him long enough to eat lunch without blurting something out or touching him in a very non-platonic way. The beach wouldn't be empty, but I could find a private enough spot to get out what I needed to say, and if he left me stranded there, I could always get the bus back to campus.

It took me a moment to realize Vic had responded and another few seconds to process that he'd agreed, enthusiastically. Not that he wasn't enthusiastic most of the time. Vic attacked life head-on, diving into everything he did with everything he had, more often than not pulling me along with him. Just one more thing to love about the guy.

We loaded up on sandwiches, chips, and sodas, stuffed everything into our backpacks, and hopped the next bus to the beach. Vic had a car, but he almost never used it except to drive home for breaks. Traffic and parking were just more of a hassle than they were worth. The bus was mostly empty when we got on, and Vic snagged a seat near the back door, looking up at me like I'd grown an extra head when I hung back.

“What, do I have cooties now or something?” He held out his arms, gaze running down over his body, and I only barely managed not to let my own eyes follow the same path. I just snorted out something approximating a laugh and flopped down in the seat next to him.

Our arms pressed together and pulled apart as the bus rocked its way toward the beach. I resisted an almost overwhelming urge to tilt my head just far enough to rest it on Vic's shoulder. He was an inch or so shorter than me, but since the difference came in my longer legs, we sat at exactly the same height. He'd been gradually filling out over the past couple of years, while I never seemed to gain an ounce, but he was still long and lean, built like a typical California surfer. He did surf, but he'd never been as taken with it as some of our classmates. He looked at it as something fun to play at, not a challenge to be conquered.

The water came into sight, and something shifted and settled deep in my bones. I didn't know why just the sight of the ocean soothed me, but it had been that way as long as I could remember. I was less a fan of being *in* the water than *near* it, though. I much preferred sitting on the beach or a boat, able to see and touch and smell the ocean without being covered with it.

Vic, by contrast, loved swimming in the ocean. He'd spend hours out there, dodging waves, diving through breakers, body surfing, sometimes even

just floating. He'd drag me out into it, too, but he never protested when I headed back for dry land. He'd just give me enough time to dry off before he'd show up and flop down next to me, soaking wet, shaking his head like a dog and spraying me with a fresh round of warm saltwater.

“Something funny?” Vic's voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I turned my head to meet his soft, curious gaze. I knew I was smiling, and I was pretty sure everything I felt was written all over my face. I watched his eyes darken, and the magnet of his body drew me in until our faces were inches apart. I was about to kiss him, right there on the bus, with a half-dozen random people for an audience.

I caught myself just in time, pulling back and dragging my eyes away from his. I shrugged and attempted a grin. “Just wondering how long it'll take you to decide you want to go swimming, even though you don't have a suit with you.”

He didn't respond immediately, and I wouldn't look at him. Finally he chuckled. “Suit's in my backpack,” he said, his tone light. “I always come prepared.”

I didn't let myself ask if he came prepared for other things as well.

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I stepped off the bus behind Vic and immediately shivered. “Wow.” I wrapped my arms around myself. “Cooler than I thought it would be.”

Vic threw an arm across my shoulders. I flinched. I couldn't help it, but he didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he ignored it.

"It'll be fine, we'll just find a nice sunny spot," he said. He pulled away, and I managed not to reach for him, to pull him back around me, and not just for the extra body heat.

I followed him down to the beach, staying some distance away from the smattering of people out enjoying the early spring day. A cool breeze came off the water, but the sand and sun were warm, and once we were settled and had our food spread out next to us, I didn't feel cold any more. That didn't stop me from wanting Vic's arm around me again. Both arms, actually.

Vic popped a chip into his mouth and smiled around it as he chewed. "So," he said, pausing to swallow and take a sip of his soda. "You look like a man with something on his mind."

I couldn't look him in the eye. I pretended to concentrate on my sandwich, pulling one half of it apart and reassembling it more neatly as I shrugged. "Nothing... well, not nothing, exactly," I admitted. "I just.... I need to figure out what to do about it."

He was silent for a few long moments, and when he spoke again, he sounded concerned. "Anything I can do help?"

I laughed. It was the only thing I could do, and I shook my head, still smiling, still not looking at him. "No, I think you've done more than enough already."

There was another long pause, and Vic's hand covered mine where it sat on my knee. I stared down as he twisted his fingers, weaving them between mine.

“I think maybe you aren’t the only one with something on your mind.”

My heart was doing that trying-to-crawl-out-of-my-chest thing again, and I lifted my eyes slowly. His eyes were so wide, so soft, and so full of everything that I felt.... I *had* to be imagining it. Projecting. Making myself believe he felt the same way about me that I did about him.

And then he leaned forward and kissed me.

I’d heard every cliché in existence about moments like this. Hearts stopping. Minds blanking out. The rest of the world ceasing to exist. None of that happened. My heart kept right on pounding, my mind never stopped working, and the sound of the waves hitting the beach off to my left continued as if my life hadn’t changed completely.

But the truth was that everything was changing at once, and all I wanted was more of it. We slid together on the sand, heedless of our sandwiches and backpacks, twining our legs together and our arms around each other. Vic’s body was solid and warm, his lips soft and supple, his tongue strong and sure. Small moans and whimpers came from both of us as we explored with mouths and hands territory so familiar in some ways and so unknown in others.

When we finally broke apart, Vic rested his forehead against mine, and we breathed into the space between us. He smiled a little. “I take it that was the right answer?”

I smiled so wide my cheeks ached. “Yeah,” I whispered, bringing one hand up to comb long, sun-kissed strands back from his face, relishing the feel of the soft hair between my fingers. “You always were better than me at taking risks.”

Vic grinned too, lifting his head away so he could look me in the eye. “I don’t know how much of a risk it was.” He shrugged a shoulder. “You’re my best friend. I’d like to think that would hold up to almost anything. Even me falling in love with you.”

Okay, *then* my heart stopped. “You.... I....” I couldn’t get it out. My mouth didn’t seem to be working right. Vic kissed me again, and I fell into it, kissing him hard, tangling my fingers into his hair.

This time when we broke apart, I was ready. “I’m in love with you too,” I gasped out. “I can’t believe you.... Oh my God, Vic. I was so—”

“Freaked out?” Vic was grinning at me again, his long arms wrapping around my waist to pull me tighter against him. I ended up sitting on his lap, looking down into his face. “Wondering if you were crazy? Trying to figure out what to say?”

I laughed up into the sky. “All of the above.” I brought my head back down, watching my fingers slide down his cheek. “I’m not as brave as you,” I said, my voice gone soft. “I would’ve done it. Eventually. But it would’ve been stupid and mixed up and confusing, and oh *God*, am I glad you beat me to it.”

Vic grinned up at me. “I’m glad you were waiting for me when I got there,” he said, and I dipped forward to taste that smile, all sunshine and salty air.

So how *do* you tell your best friend you’re falling in love with him? Sometimes, you don’t have to. Sometimes, he tells you first.

*Sunny Day*

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