



Clumsy Girl's Guide to Falling in Love

Excerpt

Book 1 of the Friendship Heirlooms Series
© Karen Wiesner

Chapter 1

"This is like *déjà vu* all over again."
~Yogi Berra

I never could come up with a good response right away. Sometimes days went by while I obsessed over what I should have said and didn't before I thought of a decent reply. When Zsa-Zsa Wu Ling had finished "permanently" straightening my nest of brass-red, frizzy hair and proclaimed her painstaking labor a success, she'd stared at me in the mirror I was sitting before and demanded triumphantly, "Who are you now, sweetie pie?" in that adorable, Japanese baby voice of hers.

Maybe she hadn't expected an answer. At the time, I'd simply blinked at her—and myself. After all, I'd never imagined my hair looking like anything other than something a rat would love to take up residence in. For the first time, my hair was normal: Long, straight, silky, soft, and *presentable*! I was afraid to touch it and dissolve what had to be an illusion.

Zsa-Zsa Wu Ling certainly hadn't waited for my answer before she spun me dizzily in the salon chair so my friends could survey what they'd paid for.

From the time she'd uttered the question on Monday, I'd thought about it. Now, on Thursday, early evening—after waiting the requisite seventy-two hours so my new hair could avoid the humidity of a steamy shower (and exercise, if you can believe that), my three best friends had gathered for our usual girls' night and allowed me to get cleaned up properly for the first time in as many days. They'd dolled me up like their own personal Barbie and sent me off into town on a manhunt. Oh, they didn't call it that, of course, but I knew that was what they intended after all their hard work.

So here I was, taking my Maine Coon cat (a feline easily the size of the average dog), Nutmeg, for a walk in Peaceful's Pet Park. I was dressed and made up as if I was off to some party and feeling pretty uncomfortable and ridiculous. Suddenly, the answer to Zsa-Zsa Wu Ling's question came to me. *Who am I? I'm Zoë Rossdale, the clumsy girl who always has elbows, feet, eyes, and hair going in the wrong directions. I'm the clumsy girl with my dress tucked into my pantyhose, toilet paper stuck to my shoe and trailing in my wake. I'm the clumsy girl who unfathomably ended up with three, gorgeous best friends—all of whom are positively perfect with steady guys who worship the ground they walk on. I'm the awkward, clumsy misfit in the group and they all wish they could find a nice guy to all but worship me...*

At the moment of belated revelation, it occurred to me why I'd avoided this park for so long...precisely at the instant my reason for keeping a wide berth appeared directly in my path in flesh and blood. Curt Bertoletti was the jerk who'd turned out *not* to be my perfect prince three and a half years ago, which was when he'd dropped me without blinking an eye for someone drop-dead gorgeous, rich, sophisticated, and graceful—everything I wasn't and couldn't possibly ever be.

I'd never forgotten how much I'd invested in him and in the foolish hope that he'd loved me as much as I'd loved him. At final tally, the damage came out to everything I was, everything I might someday be, everything I *possessed*. These things had all gone whole-hog into my relationship with him. When it was over, I was left with nothing. Actually, to be more exact, what little remained, I lost. My entire world had seemed to collapse from the inside out.

I'd never doubted that Curt hadn't given me a second thought when he walked away. But here he was again, just when I'd gotten myself to believe that sometime in the next century I might actually heal from what he'd done to me and to *us*. His Maine Coon, Cayenne (we'd called our cats sugar and spice), must have recognized his old flame Nutmeg from the distance and took off at a dead run straight for her.

Nutmeg, in turn, also seemed to have scented the male that, as far as she knew, had abandoned her. Fortunately, she'd always been forgiving. But this one time, I wished she wasn't. She suddenly jerked and yanked me into a similar dead run. Without time to recover from the shock, I ended up flying behind her something like a balloon at the end of a leash instead of a

string.

Ahead, Curt was trying to control Cayenne, shouting at him to heel, and I couldn't do anything but hold on. I could see the outcome from a figurative mile away, and it seemed to happen in slow motion. Nutmeg met up with her true love and abruptly halted only inches before him. Unlucky for me, I was still in flight, an ungainly dodo, as I crashed at full speed right into a flabbergasted Curt. He let go of Cayenne's leash. I realized at that instant that I should have let go of Nutmeg's long ago. Now there was no need since my cat had arrived at her destination—namely, by her hero's side.

With a mighty thud, I sprawled over Curt like an upended bowl of spaghetti over a toddler's all too willing head. Curt was far from being ecstatic at being knocked over like this. He lay beneath me spluttering while I tried to gain my balance. I'd like to tell you this had never happened to me, that I'd never crashed into someone and ended up in a tangle on the ground, but unfortunately I'm Zoë Rossdale, and this was a common occurrence for an über-clumsy girl.

Without warning, our eyes met. I acknowledged then that Curt hadn't recognized me in advance, the way I had him from the distance. He was blinking at me, resembling a big, goofy, adorable dope. And then he muttered hoarsely in clear shock, "Zoë? *Zoë Rossdale?*"

I removed my knee from his stomach—the hard way. He expelled an "Oof!" and then, together, we tried to right ourselves. Only he kept trying to help me get to my feet, and I was abruptly and *enormously* furious with him. I didn't want him to look at me, talk to me, or touch me. He was dead to me! As dead as I'd been to him seconds after he'd shoved me off into the lonely stratosphere of One, a place I'd never wanted to be again after I'd met him. He'd probably figured I'd be like the tagline of one of his favorite movies: *In space, no one can hear you scream*. Sometimes I would lock up tight and wouldn't utter a word, but other times I let loose with all the restraint of a wild animal. Now was one of those "scream" times. Oh, now he would hear what he hadn't wanted to back when he decided he no longer had a use for me in his life.

"Zoë...let me... What are you..."

"Get away from me! I'll kill you, fool!"

Somehow we were both standing upright again, facing each other, and the Italian Stallion *Chub* started laughing.

"Don't you dare laugh at me, Curt Bertoletti! You lost that right when you checked out..." *Wait a minute. Lost the right to what? Laugh at me? No, that's not what I meant to say...*

"You're gonna *kill* me, Zoë? What are you? A hundred pounds soaking wet, and you're gonna *kill* me?"

I grabbed Nutmeg's leash again. "Get out of my way!" I demanded shrilly, trying to stalk around him, but he was talking again and I was too mad to listen until I realized the hard way that Nutmeg and Cayenne's

leashes were so completely tangled up, it would take a dedicated effort to free them.

“Zoë, would you just stop or this knot is gonna get worse!”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

He bent to the task once more, muttering, “What’s gotten into you anyway?”

Oh, he had nerve. I was about to tell him so when it occurred to me that he looked vastly different than the last time I’d seen him. My Curt had been a big Italian chub. Not when we’d first met actually, but he’d started gaining weight rapidly when we became a couple. And I’d loved him that way. Loved that he’d come from this huge Italian family where everyone was constantly bickering and playing mean jokes on each other, and maddeningly in each other’s business every second of every day. Yet none of them would have had it any other way. I loved that they all worked together in their grandfather’s legacy to the family—at the restaurant where food was always available and flowing, and where his Mamma Cara unceasingly pestered everyone to “Eat! Eat!” I’d never had to be told twice. I’d loved that Curt was as imperfect as I was. But now...now he was a hunk and it made me feel even more inferior than usual. He was tall and slim and muscular, his beloved face carved out of stone instead of dough.

My anger unexpectedly fizzled, seeing him like this. I remembered how intimidated I’d been by his good looks when we met. He’d had such thick, black, wavy hair, that dark olive skin I’d coveted all my life instead of my milk-white opposite, and the most beautiful, deep brown eyes complete with thick eyebrows and long, plentiful eyelashes. I found myself tentatively answering the question I thought he’d asked me: *What happened to you?* Because I was wondering what had happened to *him*. “I got my hair straightened. On Monday. My friends’ idea of a good birthday present. A makeover—one that says, “You’re so pathetic that we had to spend gobs of our pooled money to make you look *presentable* if we can’t get you to look *good*.” Actually, I think they got a massive discount because Zsa-Zsa Wu Ling wanted to have some guinea pig heads to try out thermal straightening on in her salon. So I got a discount for life on the procedure because I was the first pig to be volunteered, albeit by my friends.”

Curt looked up at me from trying to free our cats and broke into laughter again. My spine went ramrod straight. Why was he laughing? Because of what I’d said or how I looked?

I didn’t trust him when he said, “It looks really good, Zoë.” He put out his hand. “Let me have your leash. Maybe I can get this fixed.”

Stubbornly, I held it away from him, and he gave me that same look he’d worn when he’d muttered, “*What’s gotten into you?*” I realized that was what he’d been asking me in the first place, not what had happened to my hair. I didn’t pause to get my breath after my last outburst. “Gotten into *me*? Is that what you have the nerve to ask me, Curt Bertolletti? What’s

gotten into *me*? Gee, let me think about this for a millisecond. How's Bon Bon *Magnífico*?"

Curt looked away, shaking his head. "Bonnie Magnoli. That's... We... It's..." As he shook his head a second time, he wore a look of humiliation.

I wouldn't relieve him of that emotion for anything in the world! "What?" I asked, mockingly sweet. "Did she drop you on your head the way you dropped me on mine?"

"It wasn't like that, Zoë. You know it wasn't. You must have realized just like I did that... I... Well, that it just wasn't working between us."

Hearing this was the ultimate betrayal. The pain I couldn't seem to leave behind, not totally, flared. I stared at him, my mouth no doubt gaping without an ounce of the prettiness other girls achieved in the same situation. "How can you say that? I'd never been happier! I'd never been *happy* period. I loved you, you jerk. I tried to make you happy and satisfied..."

He looked positively mortified now by words I couldn't have held back if I tried...and probably because of the tears filling my eyes and making my new contacts feel like they were swimming. I hated how obvious it became to me—like a *ginormous* elephant suddenly plopping down between us and our cats—that our time together had meant nothing to him. Nothing...when I still wasn't over him, still thought about and missed him every single day.

My mind chose that instant to serve up the most treacherous memories: How my whole world used to align perfectly whenever he came into view and I knew we'd be together for the day—and sometimes the night (both of us being such backslidden Christians at that time). I remembered how we used to laugh and do everything as one. Sometimes I truly thought we were two halves of a whole. We seemed to have the exact thoughts at the exact times.

But now I needed to accept that I'd been alone in all that, in all that I'd wanted for him, for me, for our love. He'd been my entire life. Nothing else had mattered to me—literally. But whatever he'd felt for me, if anything, he'd obviously gotten over in a stalled heartbeat when someone better came along and made his cheating heart go pitter-patter.

With the tears spilling over in my eyes, I shouted at him, "Well, I hope Bon Bon *Magnífico* taught *you* what it's like to be on the other side of the drop, Flat Top!" I stomped on his foot and tried to walk away haughtily. Only Nutmeg refused to cooperate and give me my justified, graceful exit. She stood her ground next to her chosen beau. At about eighteen pounds of solid cat, she was strong, and I really had to yell at her, something I'd never done before, to get her to budge. Reluctantly, she finally conceded and did what I wanted her to, all the while doing what I wouldn't give the Italian Stallion *Chub* the satisfaction of doing: She looked back longingly until Curt and Cayenne were out of sight.

I hated myself for not having the strength to fight my own heart because I already knew I'd be coming back to Pet Park with my treacherous cat

tomorrow night.



“If you drink much from a bottle marked ‘poison,’ it is almost certain to disagree with you sooner or later.”

~Lewis Carroll

Zoë Rossdale.

Curt Bertoletti stared after her and her cat, feeling almost numb with a kind of shock that had a guilty edge to it. If he didn’t know his mother was a Christian, he would have assumed she’d gone to some black magic conjurer to bring Zoë Rossdale back into his life. *But you know you’ve been waiting for this moment for the past month—since Bonnie made it loud and clear how she really feels about you. You’ve been waiting and going out of your way to make it happen.*

Zoë...

Curt let out a sigh that was nowhere as unequivocal as he would have liked it to be. He’d spent years trying to forget the seriously messed up Zoë and all her embarrassing ways. The only person who’d ever approved of the ditzy klutz was his mother, and Mamma had become relentless lately in her cause to get him married and settled down like the rest of his brothers and sisters. Surely her constant harping was what had conjured the appearance of Zoë... The rest was just coincidence. He wanted to believe that anyway.

Zoë, who looked so little like the girl he remembered. Instead of frizzy, fire-engine red hair that stuck out every-which-way—worse when she’d spent hours chewing on the ends—her hair tonight had been soft and smooth-looking, lying flat and straight for the first time ever, as the silken strands curved around her thin, strangely lovely face. The mass was still flaming red, but he wouldn’t kid himself that he’d always loved her hair color, even when her head looked like she’d had the shock of her life. Tonight she’d looked sophisticated, feminine, not frazzled to a pulp. And she hadn’t been wearing those ridiculous, oval-shaped, mile-thick, tortoise shell frames on her adorably bumpy nose, a bump that did nothing to keep the glasses from slipping down, in constant danger of falling right off her face...

Curt had spent years steeling himself against the slightest memory of affection for that woman. He’d put his time with Zoë out of his mind, convinced that he’d done the right thing dumping her so unceremoniously. She’d been too annoying, too embarrassing... But that thought made him feel guilty, and he didn’t want to. Even after more than a month, the horrific

situation that had changed his life and his whole way of thinking still had the power to scald him.

“Come on, Cayenne,” he said forcefully, tugging on the leash to get his ultra-strong, classic red and white tabby to go along with him—in the opposite direction as Zoë and Nutmeg. Cayenne protested with his loud, unhappy yowl and looked back yet again. Curt knew he had to get as far from Zoë Rossdale as he could, and fast. He was *not* going down that road again. No way.

Even still, on the final of his three-times-a-day walks back to his apartment over the family restaurant, he vowed that he wouldn't stray again out of weakness or whatever had him stone-gone over Zoë before. His life had been a mess back then, trying to find his place in the family business, not wanting to simply do what was expected of him but something bigger and more influential. *Something the rest of them won't consider a joke.* He could cook as well as any of his brothers and sisters, but that part had never interested him as much as the business end. But he was the baby of the family, and none of his six siblings took his efforts seriously. Three years ago, he'd realized they wouldn't until he gave them a reason to. So he'd made a series of decisions to bring their change of heart about. He'd altered his major in college with the purpose of taking over the business side of the restaurant. Ciatti's Italiano, named after his grandfather Ciatti Bertolotti, who'd started the business and had worked hard to earn two Michelin stars for it, would someday become a three-star chain if Curt could get his hand in the process.

His mother had been doing the administrative business duties since his father died almost four years ago, but the work filled practically every minute of her day. She insisted often that she loved keeping busy, but Curt suspected the truth was that she saw what needed to be done and so she did it.

Since he'd graduated with his business degree, he'd been taking over a little bit from her at a time, and she'd let him without complaint or restraint. Still, she stayed around the restaurant most of the day, as if not knowing what to do with herself and unable to conceive of a life outside of the family business. Despite a huge family of kids and grandkids, she seemed lonely and Curt and his siblings had talked about how worried they were about her.

In addition to pursuing his desire to be taken seriously by his family, possibly with more optimism than warranted, Curt had been regimentally determined to get on with his life, improve his health, and stay on the straight and narrow. He'd lost seventy-five pounds by exercising and cutting down on portions and the snacks his mother was constantly pushing on all of them. When he'd been with Zoë, he'd never possessed her insane metabolism. As thin as she'd probably always be, she could put away three times more food than a normal man. In fact, that'd been how they met. When his family had taken a booth at the annual local fair one summer and

offered an eating contest, Zoë had won over a guy who'd been close to three hundred pounds. The prize had been a month of free lunches at Ciatti Bertoletti. She'd never missed a single day they were open. Maybe part of that had been because she'd realized they attended the same college and things had begun to get romantic between them.

In any case, being with Zoë had further spurred his love of food. All his life, Mamma had been forcing food on everyone, and he'd eaten more than his fair share. Despite that, until he'd met Zoë, he'd managed to keep his weight under control. Those few months they'd been together, he'd steadily packed on the pounds to keep up with her. Zoë never seemed to mind, even while his siblings teased him and called him *Panzone* (fatty), *Pallone* (big belly), or *Botte* (barrel) relentlessly. But Curt had become ultra-sensitive to the teasing, mostly because Bonnie Magnoli— Zoë's Bon Bon *Magnifico* in that comic strip she wrote and drew like a diary—had begun sending him signals that she was interested in him. Bonnie was the daughter of the owner of an Italian bakery in La Crosse, about an hour from his hometown of Peaceful, Wisconsin, and their families had been old friends. Bonnie attended the same college he did and shared his class schedule almost exactly.

At the time, he hadn't made the connection between Bonnie's sudden interest in him and their similar career goals. He now knew that her goal in life had been to take the easy way out of everything. Without the slightest protest, he'd let her copy his homework whenever she asked, peek at his answers during tests. Basically whatever she needed, he'd been willing to do because she'd led him to believe she wanted to be with him. Maybe he'd imagined her outrageous flirtations and what had sounded like promises to him. But she'd used him the whole time. No more kidding himself about that.

In large part, he'd dumped Zoë because Bonnie was an Italian beauty without compare, her body enough to turn him to stone at the mere glimpse of its perfection. She'd been nothing like Zoë, and maybe that explained why his mother had never liked Bonnie, despite their family connections. Mamma loved Zoë from the first time she'd met her as Curt's girlfriend.

His brothers and sisters hadn't shared his mother's zeal for her. They'd pounded it into him that Bonnie was the only woman of the two worth pursuing. Their selfish encouragement had led him to believe he had a chance with Bonnie. Their efforts had been rewarded when he broke up with Zoë, and it'd taken years for Curt to realize the ramifications of what he'd done.

Once he'd scraped up an ounce of his pride from the floor, he'd put all his energy into getting over what Bonnie had done to him when she'd made it brutally clear she'd never had the slightest interest in being with him or seeing him as a serious boyfriend. The sting of her cruelty hadn't quite left him in the time since *The Incident*, but he was determined to forget her.

Was it worth it? Duping myself into believing Bonnie had any interest in anything but cheating off me in school? Zoë hadn't been far off in her estimation tonight of why he'd dumped her as abruptly as he had. All that time together, she'd shown her jealousy only through her comics, and he'd denied any merit in her worries whenever he read them. But she'd known the truth better than he did. Just like Zoë had pointed out, women like Bonnie loved themselves alone, end of story.

Women like Zoë...

Curt let himself into his apartment and unhooked his cat from the leash, his mind on the past. Why couldn't he stop remembering how well he and Zoë had fit together? They'd truly been two abnormal peas in an even stranger pod. He couldn't deny that any more than he could refute that no woman had ever gotten such a misty look in her eyes when she gazed at him, or kissed him like she'd forgotten anyone or anything else existed. *I don't like to remember it, but no other woman made me so happy, so mad, so sad, and so content.*

Thinking like this was stupid. He couldn't call to mind the good times. He'd escaped what could have been a fate worse than death, hadn't he? He was walking stronger in the Lord than ever before and he knew what he wanted in life now. Zoë Rossdale was absolutely not *it*, and that was true, matchmaking mother or no matchmaking mother. He wouldn't tell Mamma he'd even seen Zoë again. She'd be a dog on a bone then, and he'd never get loose from her gnawing.

I have to forget Zoë and be done with that whole crazy thing. The biggest reason to forget is that I know she'll never forgive me for what I did to her. She's not the forgiving type, remember? She'll put me through sheer and utter hell and then she might not even decide I'm worthy of her precious forgiveness. How often did she say, "Good intentions do not equal effort or outcome" whenever I failed her, which was more often than not? Worse than that, she hates men. Her opinion of my "species" is so bad...

Curt groaned in realization. If her opinion of men had been monumentally horrible before, he'd tripled it with the way he'd dumped her for a "bon bon" like Bonnie. No, Zoë wouldn't forgive. She wouldn't forget. Why put himself through that torture? What could ever make that worth doing? *Nothing. Finito!*

Stripping off his clothes, he stepped into the shower, trying to convince himself through the whole task that he wouldn't go there, into that place he and Zoë had created together, ever again—if he knew what was good for him. But the desire to see her again was so strong, he couldn't shake it and kept coming up with alternatives to avoiding her like the plague for the rest of his life. Could they be friends? He had to be crazy to even consider it. But then he recalled her fury at him tonight. *"Get away from me! I'll kill you, fool!"*

Against his will, he found himself grinning...and scheming in his plans for

their next encounter.