FIRST DATE

Jeff Strand

"WHAT DO YOU do for a living?" June asked.

Cliff frowned. "I thought I already told you." He glanced around at the other diners in the fancy Italian restaurant to make sure nobody was paying attention to them. "I'm a serial killer."

"Well, that's not really a *job*. It's a hobby, right?"

"No, it's not a hobby! It's the most meaningful thing in my life!"

June nodded. She was thirty-two, according to her profile on the dating site, with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and perfect teeth. Cliff's victims were in their early twenties and brunettes, which he assumed was why June felt safe going out with him. "I didn't mean 'hobby' in a disparaging way. But you can't make a full-time living from being a serial killer, can you?"

"Why not?"

"How do you monetize that?"

"I take their purses when I'm done."

"Then you're a robber, not a serial killer. If you're stealing from them as a trophy, that's one thing, but taking cash from your victims to pay the bills is something a mugger does."

"You're saying I should just leave the money behind?" Cliff asked. "How would that make any sense? Who would do that?"

"A killer who was trying to send the message that it's about the killing, not the income."

"I'm not trying to send a message. It's an outlet for the darkness inside of me. I don't care what anybody thinks."

"That's fair," said June. "In fact, I admire that. You're not trying to play by anybody's rules but your own. If you can make a full-time living stealing purses from your victims, good for you."

Cliff hesitated. "Thank you."

"Why'd you pause?"

"I didn't."

"You totally paused before thanking me."

"So?"

"You're not making a full-time living by stealing their purses, are you?"

"Well, no," Cliff admitted. "Women don't carry much cash with them these days, and using their credit cards would leave a trail. ATM machines have cameras, and I wouldn't want one to snap a picture of me if I entered the wrong PIN number."

"You know—"

"Yes, I know! The 'M' in ATM stands for 'machine' and the 'N' in PIN stands for 'number.' Excuse me for being redundant. Are you always this pedantic?"

"Pretty much," said June. "Most guys find it endearing. You don't?"

"It makes me want to expand my victim pool."

"Rude."

"I was just kidding."

"Uh-huh. We've been here five minutes and you're saying that you literally want to murder me. That's not how you get to second base."

"I was kidding!" Cliff insisted. "If you go out on a date with a serial killer, there's going to be some dark humor. When I take the first bite of my chicken Alfredo I'll probably say something like, 'Mmmm, tastes like human flesh!' even though I'm not a cannibal and have no intention of becoming one."

"Do you say funny quips after you kill somebody?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Nope."

"No puns?" June asked.

"That's only in the movies. In real life, serial killers don't say clever one-liners to their victims. In the moment you're too focused on the task at hand to think of anything witty."

"Makes sense. So when you're lying in bed, replaying it afterward, do you ever think of something you *wish* you'd said? Like when you've had an argument, and you realize the perfect thing you should have said, a real zinger that would've destroyed your opponent, but only after the argument has been over for hours?"

Cliff shook his head. "It wouldn't matter. The person who would've heard me be witty is dead."

"Well, yeah, that's true," said June. "Still, there's something to be said for giving them a little chuckle before they die."

"Not my thing."

"Do you kill them fast or slow?"

"I don't know. Medium, I guess."

"What do you mean by medium?"

"If I just pop up and stab a victim to death, it can be over in, like, twenty

seconds. Even faster if I slit their throat. I don't do that, but I also don't take them home and chain them up in a basement so I can have my way with them for the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours. I inject them, drag their unconscious body to my car, drive them to my lair, wake them up, and then torture them to death, but I don't drag it out very long. Fifteen minutes at the most."

"Did you say lair?" June asked.

"Yeah."

June giggled.

"What?" Cliff demanded.

"That just sounds cheesy. Lair. *My lair*. Like you're a comic book villain."

"What should I call it?"

"I don't know. What kind of place is it?"

"A cabin."

"Then call it your cabin. Lair sounds goofy. I would never let a guy put his hand under my bra if he referred to his cabin as his lair."

"Maybe I don't want to put my hand under your bra," said Cliff.

"Your loss."

Cliff picked up his knife. "Maybe instead of putting my hand under there, I'd . . . " He put the knife down. "No, I'd never do that. That's too depraved."

"That was a butter knife."

"I know."

"Were you going to cut off my tit with a butter knife?"

"No! One, I was just using it as a prop. I'd use a normal knife if I was actually going to do it. Two, I wouldn't do it right here in a crowded restaurant. That's how guys like me end up in prison. Three, before I even described what I was going to do, I said that I wouldn't really do it. I'm not the kind of serial killer who would cut off your . . . cleavage."

"My cleavage?"

"You know what I meant."

"How do you cut off a woman's cleavage?" June asked.

"You know perfectly well what I meant!"

"Are you uncomfortable saying the word tit?"

"I choose not to be crude."

"Can you say boob?"

"Yes, I can say it."

"Can you say breast?"

"Of course I can say it," said Cliff. "Anybody can say that. It's not dirty."

"Then say one of them."

"It's not appropriate dinner conversation."

"Say tit, boob, or breast."

Cliff shook his head. “I’m not going to be bullied.”

“Okay, I get it,” said June. “You kill because you have weird sexual repression issues.”

“I do not!”

“Are you a virgin?”

“I don’t see where that’s any of your business.”

“My guess is that you can’t get hard because of some seriously messed-up issues in your upbringing, so you use your knife as a surrogate penis. It’s literally the only way you can penetrate a woman.”

“My God, you really have no boundaries,” said Cliff. “We haven’t even got our breadsticks yet.”

“The breadsticks will be harder than your dick.”

Cliff pushed his chair back. “I think we’re done.”

“No, no, no, I’m sorry,” said June. “You’re right—I have no boundaries. I shouldn’t be talking about your sexual dysfunction. It was tactless. Don’t go. I won’t make you say tit.”

“You’ve been antagonistic this whole time.”

“I know, I know. I’m not a good person. I’ll do better. Let’s just enjoy our dinner, okay?”

“Okay.” Cliff slid his chair back in place. He sighed. “I work at an ice cream shop. That’s how I pay the bills. I scoop ice cream for a living.”

“There’s no shame in that. It’s honest work.”

“It really is. And it builds muscles. Nobody ever thinks of it as grueling work, but sometimes the ice cream is *really* frozen in those tubs and it takes a lot of effort to scoop it out. You can make it easier by keeping the scoop in hot water, but still, it’s a workout.”

“And I bet having to deal with customers all day makes you hate humanity, which makes it easier to murder people later,” said June.

“No. I don’t mind the customers.”

“Never thought about scooping out one of their eyeballs and putting it on top of a sundae like a cherry?”

“Nah. I’m not really into the visuals.”

“Why don’t you get an ice cream truck? You could play creepy music and drive slowly around suburban neighborhoods seeking your next victim.”

“I don’t kill little kids,” said Cliff.

“Well, you said earlier you wanted to expand your victim pool.”

“No, I said that you being pedantic made me want to expand my victim pool. And I was kidding. I would never harm a child.”

“What if the child was all like, ‘You killed my mother!’ and had a gun pointed at you, but their hand was trembling while they worked up the courage to pull the trigger, and you knew that if you acted quickly you could stab them to death before they shot you?”

"I wouldn't have to stab them to death. I'd jab the knife in their arm and make them drop the gun."

"Then you're stuck with a kid who knows you killed their mommy."

"We'd work it out."

"How? Threats? Negotiation? Gaslighting?"

"I don't know," said Cliff. "It's a completely ridiculous hypothetical situation. I'd never be so sloppy that a kid could track me down to seek vengeance. But to answer your question, I'd use threats. I'd tell the kid that I was the boogeyman and that I'd climb out from under their bed and eat their face if they ever told anybody what I'd done."

"Damn. Harsh."

"Better than killing them."

"Yeah, you're right. What's taking our breadsticks so long?"

"They're freshly made. You can't rush quality."

"Well, I'm starving. So how many women have you killed?"

Cliff hesitated. "A lot."

"You paused again."

"No, I didn't."

"You totally did."

"I know if I paused or not. I'm the one who would have done it. I know the timing of my own words. Maybe the number is so large that I was trying to count them up in my mind before I answered."

"You can't insist that you didn't pause and then immediately explain why you might have paused."

"You're getting antagonistic again."

"Does it turn you on?"

"No."

"How many victims?" June asked. "Look me in the eye when you answer. And don't do that unconscious thing where you put your hand over your mouth—it's a dead giveaway that somebody is lying. I know all the signs. My dad was a cop."

"My dad was a plumber. I don't know shit about plumbing."

"How many?"

"That's a third-date conversation."

"How many?"

"How many guys have you slept with?"

"Eleven."

"Oh." Cliff looked down at the table. "Is that a lot?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"I don't know, either. If they were evenly spaced out it's not that many, I guess."

"You're sweating," said June.

"No, I'm not."

"You are. Your face is bright red and you're sweating. Is the sex talk making you nervous?"

"No."

"You blurted out the question without thinking and now you deeply regret it, don't you?"

"No."

"Say tit."

"Why are you so mean?"

"I'm not mean. You tried to deflect my question and it backfired. But it's good for us to talk about fornication—it's healthy to get out of your comfort zone. Have you ever touched a vagina?"

The server brought a bowl of breadsticks to their table. Cliff and June thanked her and took one each.

"Two," said Cliff.

"You've touched two vaginas?"

"I've killed two women."

"That's it?"

"How many have *you* killed?"

"None, but I didn't represent myself as a serial killer. You don't get to call yourself a serial killer if you've only claimed two victims. That's ridiculous. You're just somebody who killed two women."

"How many does it take to become a serial killer?"

"I don't know. Let me Google it." June took out her cell phone and tapped away at the screen. "Three."

"Really?"

"Yes. And they have to be three separate incidents with a cooling down period between them, or else you're technically a spree killer. And if you kill three people at once, it's just mass murder."

"Are you sure? I thought all you needed was to kill more than one person, on purpose."

"That's not what the internet says."

"Oh."

"I can't believe you told me you were a serial killer when you'd only killed two women. That's way worse than using an outdated profile picture."

"My picture's not outdated," said Cliff. "It's from earlier this year."

"Then you had some serious filter action going there. I'm not saying you're ugly at all—I'd totally have let you put your hand under my bra if you'd played your cards right—but you don't look like your picture."

"Neither do you."

June stared at him for a moment. "That was a low blow."

"How was it a low blow? You just got finished saying that I didn't look like my picture, and I said the exact same thing back to you!"

"It's different. I'm sensitive about my looks and you're clearly not sensitive about your own."

"You're a fucking weirdo," said Cliff. "I may have tortured and killed two women, but there is something seriously wrong with you. So how do *you* make a living? We never talked about that."

"Apologize for hurting my feelings first."

"Fine. I'm sorry I said that you didn't look like your profile picture immediately after you said that I don't look like mine."

"I don't accept your apology."

Cliff took a bite of his breadstick. "You know, you're acting like it's not much of an accomplishment to murder two women, but let me remind you that they were both young, attractive brunettes. I couldn't just randomly kill a couple of ladies. I have a *type*. These were women with jobs and families and stuff. They were missed. If I hadn't been careful, we'd be having this date through Plexiglass."

"No, we wouldn't," said June. "I don't date inmates."

"Oh, yes, your standards are soooooo very high when you're out there banging eleven guys in a row!"

"It was eleven guys over fourteen years, and you're sweating again. It's running down your forehead and dripping off the tip of your nose."

"I'm a sweaty person, okay? Some of us have more pores than others."

"You believe that sex is dirty and wicked, don't you?"

"No," said Cliff. "Sex is perfectly fine, if you're into that sort of thing."

"What were you hoping to get out of this date?"

"Nothing."

"Were you planning to kill me afterward?"

"Ha. You wish. You're a blonde and you're too old."

"Then what were you looking for?"

Cliff said nothing. He picked up his napkin and wiped the perspiration off his face.

"Tell me," June said.

"I wanted a friend, okay? Somebody who wouldn't judge me for my atrocities. When you found out that I was a serial killer and still wanted to have dinner with me, I thought you might be the one, but you're just so *unpleasant*. Yes, I think all women are disease-ridden whores and my stomach churns and I break into a cold sweat when the subject of their erogenous zones comes up, but I thought I could get past that to spend time with somebody who liked me the way I am."

June smiled. "That's sweet."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

"It's not pathetic?"

June's smile froze. "It's sweet, okay? Maybe quit interrogating me about it."

"Do you think we could start over?"

"We could, yeah, but I'll be honest—I'll behave the exact same way. You've got innocent blood on your hands, but I'm basically a psychopath. If we started over, I'd still harass you about killing being a hobby and your erectile dysfunction and the fact that you lied about being a serial killer. Then you'd wail about just wanting a friend who understands you and I'd feel a little guilty about laughing in your face but I'd do it anyway."

"I see."

"Look, the honest truth is that somebody who would date a serial killer isn't going to be the highest quality person. I kind of thought that would be obvious and that you would have already managed your expectations, but apparently not. I'm happy to finish this meal with you, but it's going to be more of the same."

"What if I threatened to stab you in the face if you didn't behave?" Cliff asked.

"You won't. You said you have a type."

"That doesn't mean I won't succumb to rage."

"If I feel threatened, I'll mention my boobs and you'll drop into the fetal position."

"Okay, look, as sad as it is to say this out loud, you're the best I'm going to get. Can you at least swear to me that you're not playing the long game?"

"What do you mean?" June asked.

"I mean befriending me just so that I'll kill an enemy of yours who happens to be a twenty-something brunette."

"No, Cliff, I'd never use you like that. I have my limits."

"So is this how our relationship is going to work? You'll keep being shitty to me, but at least I won't have to pretend to be something I'm not?"

"Technically, you were pretending to be a serial killer, which you're not, and you were pretending to not be an ice cream scooper."

"I hate you," said Cliff.

"That's understandable. I don't show it, but I'm filled with self-loathing. I'm also a cutter. That's why you won't see my tits even if they didn't scare you."

"I'm not going to take you along for one of my hunts."

"I'd never ask you to."

"I mean it. You're not my partner. Killing is my special time and nobody is invited but me and my victim."

"I'm cool with that."

"And I didn't want to say it before, but I keep their heads as trophies. I don't do anything to preserve them. I just let them rot in my apartment. They talk to me. They scream."

"That actually makes me feel better. That's something a serial killer

would do. You've only killed two women, but you'll get the third soon. I have faith in you."

"Thanks."

"I think we can make this work," said June. "It'll be dysfunctional as hell, yet in a way that's part of the fun, right? I know our meals haven't even arrived yet, but would you like to go on a second date with me?"

"I'd be honored to," said Cliff.

"Perfect. I think this is the start of a great friendship. The serial killer and the necrophile."

"Wait, what . . . ?"