

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black strapless dress with a silver belt, is floating in the air. She is looking upwards with her arms outstretched. The background is a snowy mountain landscape with evergreen trees under a blue and purple sky filled with stars and sparkles.

A magical tale of young love

One  
Little  
Spell

D L RICHARDSON

**One Little Spell**  
**D L Richardson**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *A week earlier*

Rock-A-Lilly's was the name of the rehearsal studio in my hometown of Providence. Located inside a small warehouse district on the southeast side, I spent more Saturday afternoons there than my mom cared for, hanging out while Leo Culver worked to save up for his dream – to record a demo CD with his band, Volt. I would laze around on the sagging brown corduroy couch, paperback in hand, while heavy metal music attempted to throb its way through the walls.

Some girls might not consider this a romantic way to spend a Saturday afternoon with their boyfriend, yet I held an equal passion for music. It was no big deal for me to watch Leo sitting behind the counter under the tutelage of Jimi Hendrix or Aerosmith or whatever aging band's poster happened to take the owner's fancy at the time, while he replaced broken guitar strings.

Sometimes, Leo would become so buried beneath a tangle of leads and cables that I'd wonder how he ever managed to put up the Christmas tree lights at home. I'd stifle a laugh and he'd look up in time to catch me ogling him. A shy smile would accompany the brief hiatus he took from doing whatever he was doing, and then he'd blow me a kiss.

This simple gesture should have been enough of a hint that he loved me, yet when I found myself sitting in the restroom of a service station with a home pregnancy test in my hands, doubt circled around me like a silvery shadow. Or maybe I was just hallucinating from spending too long breathing in the fumes coming off the fuel tanks outside.

The gentle knock on the door startled me.

“You still in there, Ruby?”

How long had I been sitting here staring at the blue box in my hands? Long enough to have taken the test and gotten the results ten times over I suspect, yet the thought of discovering whether or not I was pregnant while sitting on the wobbly

toilet seat at a highway gas station had kind of sapped the valor out of the quest.

“I’ll be out in a sec,” I told Leo.

“Okay. I’ll wait in the car.”

Sniffing back a few stray tears, I shoved the unopened box deep into my handbag and retrieved the small parcel of photos I kept on hand for those excruciating minutes when Leo and I were apart. Sorting through the photos one by one did the trick of cheering me up. Not a lot, but enough that by the time I got out and saw Leo talking on his cell phone, my mood didn’t instantly plunge back into one of despair; it hovered somewhere between apathy and denial.

I slid onto the passenger seat, protectively clutching my handbag to my chest. Leo waved a half-eaten hot dog in my direction.

“Urgh. No thanks.”

Instead, I took a mint from the newly opened roll on the dash. Leo gunned the engine and drove out of the service station. He was still on the phone.

“Don’t talk and drive at the same time,” I said,

my voice garbled.

The usual intensity of my nagging was missing. It felt as if I'd left all my energy back there in the restroom. Leo ignored me anyway and drove off the curb, bouncing my side of the car into the air.

“Go ahead and book it,” he said into the phone, driving with his elbow so he could force the rest of the hot dog down his throat. “And tell Thomas his dad is a legend,” he added in a hot-dog-down-the-throat distorted way that only dentists would understand.

There was a pause while the caller said something that made Leo laugh, though thankfully he'd swallowed his food by this stage so he couldn't choke.

“Yeah, I reckon he'll want a song named after him too. Thanks for the update. I'll call ya later.”

As Leo turned to face me, he tossed the phone into my lap, wearing a grin that I jealously wished was intended for me.

“That was Simon,” he said. “Thomas's dad is loaning us the money to record our demo CD. Plus he's loaning us his cabin next weekend to

write a few more songs. We'll need around five more, I reckon."

"Doesn't his dad own that creepy place in the middle of the woods?"

Leo laughed. "What's wrong with Capers Cabin? It's the ideal location to write. No phone service, which means it'll be just me, Simon, and Thomas for a whole weekend with no distractions."

"Oh."

Leo picked up on my disquiet. "Babe, you know I'd love you to be there. The highlight of my day is when you're by my side. You're my muse, and I know with you there I'd create the most beautiful songs."

"You don't like love songs."

"Not every beautiful song is a love song. Anyway, as much as I'd love you to be there, you'd also be the biggest distraction. Even now, I can barely keep my thoughts on driving."

As if to prove his point he ran a hand up my thigh. The car veered off the road and unidentified items stashed under the seats tinkled

– probably Coke bottles, Leo was addicted to the stuff. The passenger side tires hit the breakdown lane and spat gravel up the doors. I pushed Leo’s hand off my thigh and reached for the wheel at the same moment that he pulled the car back into the lane.

“Not funny, Leo.” My voice came out flat. Maybe I wanted him to notice my lifeless mood so he’d badger me into telling him what was on my mind.

“So, did you get what you were after?” he asked.

To lure Leo into driving to Prospect – I only had my learner permit – I’d made up a story about their pharmacy being the only place where I could buy certain stage makeup products. I sang in an all-girl band so he’d bought my story. Back at the gas station I’d also decided to create a second cover story in case I needed to return to Prospect, like to secretly visit a doctor who didn’t know me or my mom.

“They’ve run out,” I said, which was a lie. “But they’re gonna order some more in.”

Leo drove and tapped his fingers on the

steering wheel to songs in his head while I stared out the window. So deep within our own thoughts were we, that our silence could have marked us as strangers on a train.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke when I heard the tires screeching. The car did a sharp left and kept spinning. One second the view was of traffic rushing toward us. The next it was of the woods. Then traffic. Then woods.

I screamed and grabbed onto the dash while Leo pulled the car off the road and out of harm's way. The car ended up down an embankment. Thankfully it was only a gentle incline into thick shrubs, because beyond the shrubs lay the woods; tall, dark, and foreboding, even without the recent near-death experience to add to the atmosphere.

Back up on the highway, cars slowed down, but didn't stop. It stung that we could have died and no other drivers cared enough to check if we were all right.

Getting out of the car, I felt bile racing up my esophagus, so I ran down the incline and spent the next few minutes with my head in the bushes

puking up the residual crumbs of mint-flavored candy. Stupid how a girl could be in the middle of nature and still look for a tissue to wipe her face with. I found nothing to sanitize my lips, but my search did reveal a wooden cross staked into the ground. It was painted white, about two feet tall, and had dozens of dates carved into it. Tied around the cross were a handful of gold-colored roses, silk or plastic from the look of them. Beneath the flowers, and stapled to the cross was a laminated newspaper clipping.

Leo appeared at my side just as I'd finished reading the clipping.

“What does it say?” he asked.

“A woman died in a car accident in this exact spot. Her boyfriend erected the cross as a symbol of his undying love.”

“Maybe her car hit an oily patch on the road too,” Leo said.

He popped a mint in his mouth and held out his hand. Was he offering me his hand or a mint? I never could tell lately what Leo was thinking. I wished I could read his mind. I also wished he

could read mine.

“You all right?” Leo asked. “You look a little shaken.”

I stared at him and thought to myself: *No, I am not all right.*

Two weeks ago I’d missed my period. Since then I hadn’t been able to look at anything the same way. A burger was no longer a tasty lunch; it was an animal that had once lived. A black bear was no longer a pest who broke into trash cans; it was a product of a species that placed material objects above that species’ home. All of my innocent and inept teenage philosophies about life and death and everything in between had come barging toward me demanding I set down some new rules. The top of the list of discussion points was: When did a boyfriend stop being a boyfriend?

I hadn’t yet decided on the answer but the top two contenders were: 1) when he became a father; and 2) when he found out his girlfriend was pregnant and became an ex-boyfriend.

Why did the first adult decision of my life have

to also be the biggest? And why, despite the two smiling faces captured in the photos stashed deep in my bag, did it feel as if this decision was mine alone to make?

Overwhelmed, I burst into tears. Leo slipped his arms around me and hugged me tightly to his chest.

“Hey, it’s okay. We weren’t in any kind of danger. Those cars were way off. But babe, if it makes you feel any better, I promise not to drive and talk on the phone at the same time. You know I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

As Leo led me back to the car I let myself believe that our souls and hearts were like grafted plants or symbiotic life forces, like those gold-colored roses that were stapled to the wooden cross, that we were also entwined, too deeply to let anyone or anything threaten to destroy us.

But something already had.

## CHAPTER TWO

*“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see...”*

A solitary tear trickled down Mrs Upton’s wrinkled cheek. Her bony fingers were wrapped around a floral handkerchief, yet in the all the months we’d been singing to the small group of elderly ladies at Heavenlea Home, she’d never once used it to dry her eyes. I admired the strength it took for her to set her memories unashamedly free.

The smile on Mrs Upton’s lips broke occasionally to mouth the bits of the song she remembered. She often told the other residents that her hearing was so bad she needed to sit in the front row. A staff member had told me later that Mrs Upton was of the view that sitting closer to us would bring her closer to her late husband. It didn’t matter which version of events was true. Me and the girls in my all-girl band, Violet Dreamy Youth – Shanessa and Natalie – loved performing *Amazing Grace* for her because it gave us a free venue to practice in.

We continued:

*“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believed...”*

I caught Mrs Upton’s eye and she nodded, as if she and I shared a secret from the past. Both my parents’ parents were dead, so in a way she could be the closest thing I had to a grandmother. I smiled back and sang even louder. After *Amazing Grace* we sang a selection of the old ladies’ favorites, amongst them *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, *I Just Called To Say I Love You*, and *I Got You Babe*.

Afterwards, while tea and scones were served, we went to the bathroom. Natalie pulled her hair out of her ponytail and shook it free. Then she rummaged inside her handbag and gave her lips a liberal dose of Hibiscus Red. She had trouble settling on a look sometimes, and today was no different.

“How long do we have to keep coming here?” Natalie whined.

“You got something against singing to little old ladies?” I replied, holding my hand out to borrow the lipstick only to be handed her hair tie instead.

“Really, Ruby,” Natalie said with a derisive look. “Hibiscus Red with your hair?”

I smiled playfully. “Why not? Red hair and red lips go perfectly well together. You are so behind the times.”

It didn’t matter what image of fashion I pictured in my mind, I usually ended up in something hideous. Right now I wore a short polka-dot dress with capped sleeves like the ones Walt Disney had designed for Snow White. And as if to confirm that I had absolutely no fashion sense, I also wore red leggings and flat-heeled mid-knee-high boots.

“Don’t be so mean, Natalie,” Shanessa said. “It’s the highlight of their week.” She then swiped at the lipstick and stuffed it inside her pocket: the surest way of getting Natalie to settle on a color.

“It’s good practice,” I said, reminding them about why we came here each week. “Every great act has to start somewhere.”

Natalie was aghast. “Ruby, if you think Violet Dreamy Youth singing *Amazing Grace* over and over to a group of old women is gonna be on our bio, you’re crazier than I give you credit for.”

We three laughed goodheartedly because this conversation was nothing new. We’d all rather have been rehearsing at Rock-A-Lilly’s or on a stage somewhere, preferably Madison Square Garden, but at least – or so *I* thought anyway – that performing for a small group of old ladies who had no family left was a sweet thing to do.

We emerged from the bathroom to find Mrs Upton leaning on her walking frame. She usually liked to delay our departure by acquainting us with the grand adventures of Mr Upton. Today, she abstained from talking about her late husband and singled me out instead with a grandmotherly look.

“Are you all right, Ruby? You seem distracted. And a little off color.”

“Don’t mind Ruby, Mrs Upton,” said Natalie with a playful laugh. “She’s pining over her boyfriend. He’s gone away for a boys weekend. There’s no cell service and no girls allowed.”

Shanessa dragged Natalie out into the foyer for whatever reason, and because I felt a thread of connection still hovering between us, I sought out her counsel.

“Mrs Upton, can I ask you a question?”

Her face brightened as she slowly moved over to her armchair by the window. She waved me into the empty seat next to her. In front of her sat a teapot and cup, decorated with an almost identical floral pattern to her handkerchief. “What did you want to ask me?”

I bit my lower lip. “It’s personal.”

She winked. “The good questions usually are.”

I waited until she’d poured tea into her delicate cup, suddenly having second thoughts. She put the pot on the table and stared expectantly at me. I’d thought talking to a stranger might be easier. It wasn’t.

“You always talk about Mr Upton, but you never talk about children.”

I detected a harsh edge to her voice when she answered. “That’s because I don’t have any.”

“Oh. If you don’t mind me asking, how long were you and Mr Upton married?”

“Fifty years.” Her smile quivered in wariness. “If there’s something you want to ask me, just ask. One of the advantages of being old is you no longer have the time or energy to beat around the bush.”

“Sorry. I’m just sorting things out in my head.”

If only she’d stop staring at me like she had accusations ready to leap out of her

mouth. I must have been imaging it. This was Mrs Upton, the nice old lady who liked us to sing songs that reminded her of her departed husband. *Not* my judge and jury.

“How did you know that you and Mr Upton would be together forever?”

She reached for a spoon and the sugar bowl, and took her time to stir through two teaspoons of sugar. After an eternity, she turned her gaze to me. “I guess we didn’t know, but we worked hard at our marriage. It wasn’t like today where you can get divorced the moment you discover too late that your husband has issues. Back then, you had to live with your choices.”

Mrs Upton’s shoulders slumped and I suspected she was divulging something very personal about her past. A chill settled over me. I’d only wanted to ask the secret to a lasting relationship, not open what now appeared to be old wounds.

She took a sip of her tea and talked over the rim of the cup. “You asked me before about children. Now that you’ve opened that door, I’ll let you in. People these days think nothing of telling everyone they suffer from depression. But in my day, it was seen as a sign of weakness. Mr Upton was a good man, but he was not a good provider. Couldn’t keep a job due to his mood swings. We would have been out on the streets if it wasn’t for the inheritance he’d received at twenty-one. But the money didn’t last long, especially after the drinking began. I was forced to return to my job as a secretary. I resented him for deceiving me.” She set the cup down and her voice suddenly raised a notch. “You shouldn’t present yourself as something you’re not.”

I realized too late that I shouldn’t have brought up the subject. It wasn’t like I knew her well, or at all, except as a member of a small audience that my friends and I sang to for thirty minutes most Saturday mornings.

She regained her composure. “I resented it so badly I did the only thing I could think to do to punish him. I refused to give him the children he desperately wanted. It wasn’t until he died that I realized the only person I punished was me. That’s why I ask you girls to sing *Amazing Grace*. Not to remind me of Mr Upton,

but to remind me of the terrible sin I will never be able to atone for.”

I stared at her, speechless, knowing I’d never again label her as a sweet old lady. And to think, I’d come close to considering her a substitute grandmother. She was as bitter from love as the next woman.

Natalie arrived seconds later to tell me we were ready to leave, and I was glad to go. Mrs Upton’s confession had only succeeded in troubling me further.

When we pulled up in front of my house, I counted three cars – one in the driveway and two on the front lawn.

“Wanna come to my place instead?” Shanessa whispered into my ear.

“Tempting, but I’ll be fine.”

Mom’s book club luncheons could get a little rowdy and I was rarely in the mood to tolerate this bunch of ladies, however, Mrs Upton had managed to cast my mother in a new light, almost super-nova-like by comparison. I opened the front door and their laughter cracked as loud as a gunshot, yet it never failed to warm my heart to hear my mother laughing.

She and her friends were out in the garden, but as usual a loud screeching noise prevented me from getting any deeper into the house. Our house didn’t need a burglar alarm. It had one in the shape of a peach-faced parrot called Elf. One of my mother’s infrequent ex-boyfriends had given the parrot to me as a birthday gift a few years ago. The bird had grown on me. The man had not. I was relieved when Mom and he had broken up. Not long after the breakup, my mom had decided to start a book club. I couldn’t complain, even if the gatherings were little more than an excuse for a group of women to vent about their problems, mostly men, but at least it brought a smile to my mother’s face.

Elf screeched at me to come over and give his beak a rub. He hopped along his perch and the moment my fingertip rubbed his beak he settled down. The laughter outside grew louder.

“Don’t drink anything they give you,” I warned Elf, and then I headed outside.

Mom set her glass of wine on the table and hurried over, her heels clicking on

the pavers. I was positive the lace top she wore was mine. I was pretty sure the pants were mine too, and I made a mental note to put a lock on my wardrobe. She wrapped her arms around me, and we were lucky we didn't fall over when she teetered slightly to the left.

"Here is my darling daughter who spends every waking minute with her boyfriend and never has any time for her mother anymore. To what do we owe the pleasure of your company today?"

I slipped out of her embrace and surreptitiously moved toward the crackers and dip platter. I was ravenous. "I don't spend every waking minute with Leo," I said. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Aren't the boys at the cabin this weekend writing songs?" asked a lady at the far end of the table – Thomas's mother. It was barely one o'clock and her face glowed like Santa Claus's, though in all fairness the garden setting had lost its umbrella in a storm so it could have been sunburn. Thomas's mother went on to tell the group all about her son's plans to record a demo. One lady started dancing in her seat only to be sternly told by Thomas's mother that the boys didn't write pop songs.

"What book are you discussing this week?" I asked, changing the subject and shooting my mother a look of defiance. "Or is the book club really an excuse to bitch about men like I keep saying it is."

Mom picked up a book from the table and waved it in the air. "Hah, Miss Smarty Pants. We *have* read a book."

She looked at the cover, and her face froze. She quickly slipped the book behind her back. Lunging, I easily snatched it from her. On the cover was a bare-chested man with a square jaw and flowing dark hair. Beneath him was draped a stunning woman wearing a bodice as transparent as tissue paper. I opened a page and read aloud:

"Travis pulled her roughly to him and crushed her lips with his. She would submit or she would lose everything. Selana beat her tiny hands against his chest

but nothing would sway him from this action. The King would want Selana for himself if Travis did nothing to convince her to love him and not his brother..."

I stopped reading and shot derisive looks at each of the ladies sitting around the table. "I don't believe it. You moan and groan about men, and all this time you've been reading trashy romance."

"It's not trash," cried one woman. "It's *The King's Wishes*."

Laughter erupted once more, probably over a joke I wasn't in on, and I stood up. "I'll leave you bookworms to it, then."

Mom caught me on my way out and planted a kiss on my head. "Don't be angry. We're just having a bit of fun."

I kissed her on the cheek. "I'm not angry."

"Liar. Are you all right? You look a little pale."

That was twice today someone had told me I looked pale. "I'm fine."

Mom frowned, suddenly all serious. "You're not really pining over Leo, are you? Please tell me you're not going to go up to your room and sulk just because your boyfriend has gone away for a few days. That's not how I raised my daughter."

"Okay, I won't tell you."

Up in my room, I did exactly what my mother didn't want me to do. I sulked because Leo was up at Capers Cabin where there was no cell service, and, as Natalie had callously reminded me, no girls were allowed either. In the six months Leo and I had been dating, there wasn't a day where we hadn't talked either in person or by phone. Saturday afternoons were usually spent hanging around Rock-A-Lilly's, with music blasting in the background and Leo replacing broken drumsticks and guitar strings.

I realized I should have taken Shanessa up on her offer to spend the afternoon at her house. My room was too quiet. Turned out I'd gotten so used to doing stuff with Leo that I didn't know what to do without him. And I desperately wanted to hear his voice, because earlier that day I'd finally gathered the courage to take the

pregnancy test.

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At 3:00 p.m., I heard my mother's voice in the garden calling for coffee orders. Even though listening to music on my cell phone hadn't lessened my boredom any, I purposely avoided going downstairs in case Mom got it into her head that I'd enjoy playing hostess to her intoxicated book club friends.

By 5:00 p.m., I'd relocated from my room, which overlooked the sidewalk beside our house that led to town, to my mother's room, which overlooked the front yard, to watch the party wind up. One by one her guests left until all the cars parked out front had disappeared. At once, the house was eerily quiet. Mom stayed downstairs and I guessed she was cleaning up. Once more I paced from room to room like a caged bear in case Mom got it into her head that I'd enjoy *cleaning up* after her intoxicated book club friends.

Back in my room for the hundredth time, I picked up my cell phone and stared at it, silently cursing Leo for so masterfully avoiding my growing anxiety. The pregnancy test I'd taken earlier indicated I was pregnant. And I had no one to talk to about it. I'd sort of tried talking to Mrs Upton, hoping a stranger could provide some insight into true and everlasting love, but that had backfired. I couldn't trust talking to Natalie, not after the one time I'd skipped school to hang with Leo and she had inadvertently blabbed. I couldn't trust talking to Shanessa because she and Natalie had formed a secret alliance when I'd started hanging out with Leo, one I didn't know about until Natalie had inadvertently blabbed. And no way was I going to talk to my mom about the subject. At all. Ever.

Night crept in and my anxiety grew to enormous heights. I knew that if I was to get any peace at all I'd need to go to the cabin and see Leo.

Mom sometimes liked to curl up on the sofa and have the TV send her off to sleep, and a quick check of her room told me she was still downstairs. Hopefully she was asleep, and when I got down the stairs I saw she was. Out of habit I did a quick inspection of the kitchen and the patio. Good. All clean. I didn't mind my mom having friends over, so long as she cleaned up after herself.

I found the keys to her Jeep on the sideboard, slipped a throw rug over her sleeping body, a cloth over Elf's cage, and left the house. I told myself that the test might not even be accurate, but what if it was? Lately I'd had trouble gauging Leo's thoughts, and I really needed to know how he felt about becoming a father. Before it became obvious, preferably.

The drive to Capers Cabin took twenty minutes. By the time I arrived it was fully dark, and my nerves were frayed beyond repair. I shouldn't have driven in the dark. Not that I could have driven in daylight either; I only had my learner permit. Already I regretted coming here, and Mom would make my regret eternal if she woke up and found the car missing.

Sitting in the car should have given me time to practice the imminent conversation with Leo in my head, but it didn't. The silence only served to give me the creeps.

A few minutes later I knocked on the cabin door and scowled when Simon opened it.

"Oh, hi," I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

"I'll get Leo," Simon said. Then, after a shake of his head, he closed the door in my face.

Leo opened the door seconds later, but it was closed quickly behind him. I hadn't been inside the cabin before and I was peeved about not being invited; Leo had told me the cabin had a hot tub and I was dying to check it out.

"Hey, babe. What's up?" he asked.

Leo steered me away from the front door toward the wooden love seat on the patio. With each step I felt my bravado shrink, as if my heart pounding faster was

the cause.

Leo sat down and pulled me onto his lap. His lips quickly found mine.

“I’d love to stay out here all night,” he said after we came up for breath. “But the guys are probably counting the minutes.”

“Oh.”

He tilted his head to the side. “What’s up, babe? You didn’t come all the way out here to give me a goodnight kiss, though I’m glad you did.”

No longer sure about my decision to demand he prove his undying love for me, I knew I had to say something. But what?

“I don’t want to end up like Mrs Upton,” I said.

“Who’s Mrs Upton?”

I nestled into Leo’s arms, struggling between telling him everything and telling him nothing. Right here and now with Leo was all that mattered. Suddenly all my problems, even the problems of the entire *world*, were insignificant when compared to this moment.

He nudged me. “Who’s Mrs Upton?”

“She is a bitter, spiteful old woman at the home. Her husband wanted kids and she refused to give him any.”

Leo stroked my hair. “You don’t know their situation, Ruby. Maybe she did the right thing.”

I sat up. “Are you saying you don’t want kids?”

He fidgeted on the seat. “I don’t know. I guess. Maybe. Maybe not. I really don’t know.”

As if he was on fire, I jumped out of his arms. The unexpected anger rose and took control. “So you *would* put your career first?”

“What career? Ruby, I’m still in school.”

“You really have no idea what I’m talking about, do you? I’m talking about our future together, Leo. You, me, you know... the future. Beyond prom. Beyond high school. Beyond college. Leo, how much do you love me? And I mean really love

me.”

Leo stood up. “Babe, now isn’t the best time to have this discussion.”

“I need to know.”

“You do know.”

Just then, Simon stuck his head outside. “You coming inside or what?”

While Leo moved toward the door, I barged past him and started down the steps.

Behind me, the floorboards creaked. “Ruby, come back.”

I stopped on the bottom step and grasped tightly onto the railing. As a mistress of the furtive glance, I snuck a quick peek over my shoulder. With the door now partially open, Leo was a shape on the porch silhouetted by the glowing fire. Even immersed in shadows he captured my breath. If I’d thought I was irate before, when I spied two dark shapes skulking behind him – Simon and Thomas – my blood boiled.

“To hell with you, Leo. I deserve better,” I hissed.

I launched myself off the bottom steps and charged over to where I’d parked Mom’s car. Leo’s hurrying footsteps crunched on the twigs and dried leaves. He reached me and grabbed me by the arm, swinging me around to face him.

“Ruby, I didn’t mean it.”

“If you said it, you must have meant it.”

His voice came out shrill. “I don’t even know what I said.”

I kept my gaze on the night sky. One smoldering look from him and I was likely to surrender. Then the notion that I was just like the gullible heroine in the books my mom read incited my rage further.

“What’s up, Little Red Gem?” he asked. “And tell me the truth.”

How unfair of him to resort to pet names. My resolve broke; hysteria bubbled over and escaped as a croaking sob. “You’d rather spend the rest of your life with those two than with me.”

Leo ran his hands through his hair. “I said no such thing. You’re putting words

into my mouth and I have no idea why you're acting crazy all of a sudden."

"I am not crazy." I stabbed a finger in his face. "Don't you dare say I'm crazy."

His mouth widened, snapped shut, and then settled into a grim line. "Stop putting words into my mouth. I didn't say you're crazy." He shook his head, and it did the trick of softening his features. "Why don't you come inside and sit by the fire while we write songs?" He reached for me, but I took a step back. "Babe, come on, you know you're my muse."

My insides froze over. My mother's years of warnings against falling in love with the wrong man rushed at me.

I had believed that Leo and I would be together forever. I still wanted to believe it.

Badly. So why was I running away?

I told myself to forget about this silly argument and go inside the cabin with Leo. The other boys might not like it, but I needed Leo more than they did.

When I next blinked, instead of picturing Leo's eyes – deep pools of chocolate, warmer than the flames hungrily licking the logs in the fire inside the cabin – what I visualized was my mother sitting on the floor in front of her closet, crying and sorting through the secret box of Dad's stuff she thought I was clueless about.

"Babe, please," Leo begged. "It's cold and the middle of the night. Come inside and we'll even break the rule about spending the night together and continue this conversation in the morning. Did I tell you the cabin has a hot tub?"

Through half-closed eyelids I snuck another look at him. Dammit. He was even more gorgeous this way. And then I smelled it.

Faint, but at this close range I detected the sickly-sweet scent of alcohol. At once, I took him in with a fresh set of eyes. His lopsided grin, his messy hair, the gentle way he swayed as if he was floating on the wind...

"Leo, have you been drinking?"

He took a hasty step back. "What? No." He quickly lowered his voice to a normal octave. "No. Absolutely not, babe."

“You’re lying. You said you were here to write songs. You said the cabin was a great place to work uninterrupted because it doesn’t get cell service. If I go inside and see bottles of alcohol—”

I took a step sideways and Leo staggered in that direction to block my path. “Babe, let’s not fight. I haven’t been drinking, okay? Simon found an opened bottle of red wine in one of the cupboards. As he poured it down the sink, he clumsily spilled some of it on my sweater. See.”

Leo grabbed a handful of his sweater. I noticed the stain; it’d been too difficult to see earlier in the dim light. I noticed something else, too.

“That’s the sweater I bought you for our second date. You’ve ruined it.”

The sight of the stain drove me to tears. Leo hurried to embrace me, and I instinctively sought comfort in his arms. As much as I would have liked to have stayed there, I didn’t want to get hurt any more either.

Sniffing back tears, I stepped out of his embrace and gave him a weak smile. He let out a held-in breath, as if deciding I’d forgiven him, and then I surprised us both when I shoved him hard in the chest. He wasn’t expecting the move, plus I was sure he was plastered, so he fell to the ground. I bolted for the Jeep, almost ripping the door off its hinges. I jumped in and turned the key I’d left in the ignition. Instinctively, I must have known I’d need to make a quick getaway. Almost like I’d come looking for the fight I knew I’d get.

I rammed my foot on the accelerator and flicked the headlights on. But I was so hyped up on anger that instead of the lights coming on, the wipers rubbed noisily against the windshield. In a panic I sobbed and swore and fumbled for the light switch.

At last, I found the switch and the road in front of me lit up. The car lurched forward, though I hadn’t realized I’d pressed down on the pedal. When I tried to ease up, I found out that my feet weren’t taking orders from my brain. They just wanted to go-go-go.

The tires spun and darkness quickly gobbled up the car’s headlights, making

negotiating the potholes along Deer Grove Road impossible. Four more miles of this pogo-style driving until I reached the sealed roads of Providence, if I made it without popping a tire, that was.

Mist swirled amidst the beams of light. Prison spotlights would be welcomed right about now, but they'd have hardly made any difference; I struggled to distinguish anything through a river of tears.

I swiped at the tears while something jumped in front of the car – deer or wolf – yet whatever jumped out was gone in a flash. Still, the mistake was made. I'd swerved. Not supposed to swerve on a dirt road, wet road, snow-covered road, or one with supposedly oily patches.

Gripping the wheel came automatically, although the car wouldn't straighten. A *thud* from behind caused a scream to leap out of my throat.

The Jeep moved sharply to the right. Slamming my foot on the brake, I grabbed tighter onto the steering wheel. I pulled to the left, to the right, left again. I had no idea why the car wasn't operating properly. *I'm turning the wheel*, I screamed inside. Why was it not working?

*Thud.* The car jerked another few feet. This time I was pushed forward till my chest pressed against the steering wheel. Next, the car dipped and plunged headfirst down the embankment with the headlights lighting up the way. Everything happened so incredibly fast yet with such incredibly slow clarity.

Branches thick as a baseball bat smashed into the windshield. Tree limbs the thickness of a power pole crushed the doors. *Thud. Thud.* Each impact was like a wrecking ball hitting the car. With me inside. With me inside and not wearing a seatbelt.

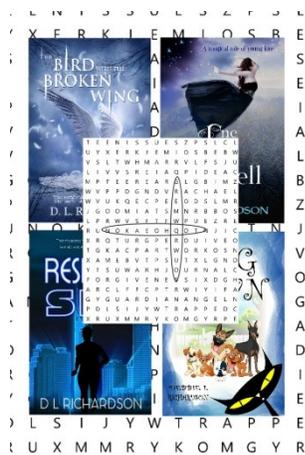
A limb caught the driver's window, shattering the glass into a silvery web. A million stars flew across my vision, bursting into the sky like snowflakes. And then the lights went out.

I hope you enjoyed this taste of “One Little Spell”. It’s easy to purchase the complete book to find out what happens to Ruby and Leo.

Simply visit the author’s website [www.dlrichardson.com/OneLittleSpell](http://www.dlrichardson.com/OneLittleSpell)

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