

# WENDY LYNN CLARK

*San Juan Island Stories #1*



**Fatty Patty**

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by

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Fatty Patty is a short [7,000-word] story about: A woman attends her five-year high school reunion to prove herself to the classmates who tortured her and to the boy who broke her heart.

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Because you're awesome.

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No one works in a vacuum. Except an astronaut. Or an arc welder.

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Because Pepper's not the only attendee.



**I**f living fabulously was the best revenge, Pepper McKay could be its poster-girl.

She was no longer the fat klutz who couldn't walk a mile in PE. She was no longer the sad blob who overheard the other girls whisper about body odor—which she *never* had—and sweat stains, which were unavoidable in the humid coastal classrooms. She was no longer the victim of the unknown bully who kicked her wobbly seat at the start of assembly. The plastic had given way with a sickening crack and everyone had watched her fall.

Her four-inch Kate Spade Licorice heels, size-five Ella Moss strapless mini, and Sixth Sense chocolate Burberry satchel all proclaimed that refined adulthood had arrived. Five years too late, maybe, but sophistication *had* arrived, in her life and at the sultry Bellingham, Washington marina.

She was thin now.

Thin like a Thin Mint.

And tonight, everyone would finally know it.

Pepper waved her boarding pass before the attentive, muscular dock hand, curved her lips in a confident smile coated with Yves Saint Laurent iced plum Sheer Candy, and strutted up the gangplank onto the *Island Spiriter*, a hundred-foot cruise ship decorated in the purple and gold of Friday Harbor High School. *Welcome, class of the Millennium*, the sign at the top step proclaimed. She mentally capitalized the “C” of “class” as she continued onto the deck, to the table manned by the reunion officer.

Time had not been universally fabulous. Allison Payne, who had once lit up the stage as Rizzo of *Grease* and taken the over-excited athletics department to the state championships in Cross-Country, licked a swelled finger and squinted up at Pepper. “Who are you with? I don't—” Her jowls flattened. “Oh my god. Patty?”

The name hit her like a curse, burning a hot flush onto her cheeks. She cleared her throat. “It's Pepper.”

Allison's lips dropped further and her neck rolls gobbled up her silver “Mother” necklace. She grabbed Pepper's nametag and a thick black Sharpie. “I wondered! When did you change your name?”

Pepper gripped her satchel and struggled to maintain her iced smile.

In high school this woman had been one of *them*, the blade-slim girls who sprawled in patches across the sunlit cafeteria, waving flirty fingers at the hottest boys, pushing ugly people like Pepper to the cold retreat of study rooms.

She coughed. “Actually, it's always been Pepper.”

Allison uncapped the Sharpie. “Nobody will recognize you unless I fix this.”

Dread uncoiled in Pepper's stomach.

The Sharpie touched the laminate.

Pepper snatched her tag away, black ink drawing a long, wobbly line across the top. She tried to wipe it off. The line smeared like the grease of an old food stain.

Allison reached for her nametag. “But no one will know—”

“I want to be myself now. Thanks.” Pepper pinned the badge above her left breast. A smudge was still better than what was about to be written. Her heart beat, hard and regular, in her chest and she shifted her handbag higher on her shoulder.

The waning sun seared her pale shoulders. Pale *slim* shoulders.

She tucked her salon-relaxed walnut hair behind her silver-pierced ears. “Is Julian here?”

“He’s already inside.” Allison leaned forward. “You won’t recognize him. He’s changed so much. It’s *huge*.”

No way. “He’s fat?”

Allison’s brows knit. “Huh? No, he’s turned into ... well, you’ll see.” And then her brows lifted, as though she had solved a problem. She heaved herself to her feet, crossed the deck to the main cabin, and threw open the doors.

The other members of their class stood in cliques—the same ones as in high school, it seemed—an odd mix of optometrists, seafood vendors, and hair dressers milling around under long swathes of purple and gold decorations. She knew from their MySpace profiles, the ones who had let a few months go by and then suddenly had the guts to friend her. She had friended them back, sure, but never posted a self-portrait. Let them think she was the same, let them settle into the routine of their lives, let them post their own fattening photos as they gave up intramurals and exercise to settle into grad school, marriage, and kids. Things she didn’t have. Things they probably thought she never would.

Her stomach twinged again. She tightened her Pilates-toned abdominals. This was not Homecoming. She was no longer the only one stepping into a dim music-filled room without a friend or a date.

And even if she were, that wasn’t why she was here. She wasn’t here for herself.

She was here for revenge.

Across the almost-familiar faces, across the almost-filled buffet, across the almost-emptied wine bar, she locked eyes on the one man she had come to see.

Julian.

He chatted with a shorter man and a buff woman in skin-tight bike shorts. Tanner and taller, fitter and full-postured, Julian settled on his heels as though he had finally discovered his true center. Why had Allison thought he looked different? He was still a snowboarder without a mountain, a surfer without a swell, an athlete without a field to dominate. Except for his hair, and maybe his posture, he was exactly the same.

Without any reason, without any rhyme, he turned in her direction and looked up. His gaze locked on her.

The intensity hit her with a hot force. A pulse-beat in her belly, sure and strong, regular as the tremble of her fingers curling around her purse straps, undeniable as the awareness flushing through her body. His chin rose and his gaze raked her figure once from tip to stern to tip again. His hands tightened around his drink and his brows lowered.

He was going to be so sorry for what he had done to her.

She would make sure of that.

Pepper smoothed her mini, tucked any stray locks behind her ears, and started forward with a radiant step.

Allison stepped forward at the same time and threw her arms wide. “Look who’s here, everybody.” Her hand swung at Pepper’s cheek.

She jerked back, too committed to duck.

“It’s Fatty Patty!”

Pepper’s Kate Spade four-inch heels slipped out from under her as though skidding across a seaweed-coated rock. In front of everyone’s shocked gaze, she tumbled like so many scattered pebbles to the unforgiving deck.



Julian was smart. Smarter than she was, even though she worked a thousand times harder to make it show in her grades.

He was also brave, strong, and beautiful.

She snuck glances at him in third-year French class while he fended off the teacher’s nagging in his salt-accented *Québécois*, and she bit the end of her mechanical pencil while she pretended to study.

Julian was kinetic, tipped forward as though by the weight of his hair fluffed out in a wedge from his head, a brown sea sponge of strands that would not be tamed by ties nor headbands nor Mia’s borrowed blue barrettes. His dad was French Canadian, but his mom had dragged them all around the world and they finally washed up here, on the shores of San Juan Island, where she dumped them and continued on to some exotic unreachable place.

His eyes were blue, she knew. It was general knowledge; everyone knew. She conjugated the verb to know. *Savoir. Je sais, tu sais, il sait. Je sais qu’ils yeux sont bleus.*

He slept through *Manon of the Spring* in weekly 20-minute increments and stared hungrily out at the busy soccer fields during the *Cyrano de Bergerac* season.

“*Tu aimes football?*” she finally got up the nerve to ask.

His gaze settled on her. Warm, lazy. He stretched. “*Oui, oui,*” and slipped out a string of words like an oyster spitting out pearls. He dropped to the desk and tilted his head, smiling up. “That’s not all I love.”

The way he said it, and the knowingness in his gaze, as though he could feel the waves of shy desire emanating from her seat, made her unable to even ask what the other things were that he loved. But she found out soon enough. He also loved rugby and watersports and basketball and something called luge.

They talked to each other while Gerard Depardieu used his dying words to lie to his true love. Julian sat by her during her shaded study room lunch. On the club days, he met her at her locker, never minding that such kindness carried its own danger.

When the other boys walked by with their chests puffed out and their chins lifted like dominant sea walruses, Julian didn’t look away. He never looked away. Not from her, and not from the boys who broke from the pack and approached her, razor-tongues sharpened for a new torture.

“We have to go to club,” she said to Julian, under her breath.

Julian dipped his head and slowly, too slowly, shouldered his backpack.

Ellis slammed her locker shut and started the chant that had chased her from second grade throughout the rest of her life. “Fatty, fatty, ate too many Peppermint Patties. You’re glistening today. Are you half whale or does your family have to oil you in blubber fat?”

She cowered.

He sneered over her red face at Julian. “Hey Frenchie. You like fat girls?”

Julian squared up to Ellis. “Yeah. I do.”

White waxy fear churned in her belly.

The hall squeezed in, hot and sweaty. Ellis and his friends laughed with a rictus, forced sound at her puffy body, white as the inside of the candy, and at Julian’s warmer tone for his crueler words. Ellis elbowed his friends and turned back to them. “You get it up for puffy chicks?”

Julian tilted his head. “You must have read my diary.”

Ellis stepped forward, shoulder first, cheeks taut. “You keep a diary? Fag.”

Which was usually the kind of thing he said right before he slammed a person.

Pepper tugged Julian. “We have to go.”

Julian moved easily with her to the club room. Not intimidated. Not even the slightest put out. Indifferent to the walruses in a way that inspired loud fury.

Ellis and his friends followed to the lip of the classroom. The teacher was engaged with a freshman, so he swaggered inside with all of his jock friends. “Frenchie. Fat-girl-lover. You’re a fag, aren’t you? You’re a total fag.”

Julian’s easy smile narrowed. He slowly stretched and leaned back in his seat, his feet resting on the back of her chair with a little bump. “Why? Are you interested?”

Ellis screwed up his wedge-shaped face. “What?”

“Are you asking me because you want to know? Or—” he tilted his brow in calculated amusement “—are you hoping my answer is yes?”

Ellis reddened from his neck up. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying you spend all day clinging to sweaty boys in spandex and you ask if *I’m* gay.”

His friends tittered.

Ellis’s shoulders rose and his hands formed meaty fists.

His friends dropped silent.

He stepped forward.

Julian looked up at him like a manatee facing down a powerboat, nothing but idiocy to protect him from the rippling blades.

The teacher bustled over. “What is happening here, *mes amis*? *Ooh la la la*, you’re not in this club.”

Ellis’s friends shifted, edging towards the door. Ellis didn’t take his eyes off Julian.

Julian turned to the teacher. “He asked me out.”

Ellis’s friends laughed.

The jock blistered red.

The teacher raised one brow. “Club hour is not the time for *affaires de coeur*, Julian.”

“He’s not my type.” Julian looked up at Ellis again. “Don’t be too upset.”

Ellis glared at him, then at Pepper, and slammed out of the room.

The teacher shooed the others out and the air pressure rose and fell, rose and fell, as in the passing of a storm.

She twisted the pages of the *Asterix & Obelisque* comic they were supposed to translate, struggling to concentrate.

Julian went to sleep.

She poked his elbow. “You shouldn’t say you like fat girls.”

He made a sound as though jerking awake. Muffled, “Why?”



“I bet you don’t even know any.” Aside from herself, of course.

He rose up on his elbows, yawning and stretching. “My mom’s fat.”

A harpoon of hurt sank in with those words. “Don’t say that.”

“She’s two hundred and eighty-two pounds. Or she was last Christmas.” He rested his hard cheek in his palm and studied her with his blue, blue eyes. “She can kick my ass at life. And at Scrabble.”

Pepper bit her Bic. Believe him or not? If he was being mean, he was nasty subtle. She might be an idiot for her heart popping to the surface of her chest, bobbing and light.

As if he read her skepticism, he leaned forward. “Want to see a picture? Come to my house.”

So she met him that very night after her private tutoring in town. He tossed the drink he’d bought while waiting with his other friends and the two of them boarded the hot bus.

He lived in a one-bedroom that smelled like unwashed dog, though they didn’t have any sort of animal. Cigarette burns littered the brown carpet and his dad snored on the one couch. Their blocky TV, the kind she’d seen in thrift shops, alternated between QVC and static.

Julian stepped over food-crusting paper plates and ant trails to the kitchen. He opened the dull fridge. “Want a beer?”

She shook her head.

He took her outside, along secret back steps, across a neighbor’s fence, and down the hill to the edge of the world. Clinging to the underside of an oak tree, he swung over the broken rocks to the beach.

She picked her nimble way after. Careful, because whatever happened she did not want to be the fat klutz in front of him. Just for once, she wanted to be light on her feet, and when he looked up to smile at her, she actually felt like the air itself would hold her up if she fell.

They talked about nothing and watched the sunset lengthening, red and orange and yellow rays crashing across blue sky. His shoulder brushed hers, thin hoodie to thin hoodie, and his hand rested so close to her leg that it melted her outer shell of cold.

Her whole body pulsed like the ticking of a clock. Counting down, endlessly down. Wishing it faster. Willing it slower. She hung every second on his long curved eyelashes and short nose, the moist yeast from his aluminum beer, his sensitive brows and the circular scar at his neck just below the jugular.

She knew his eyes were blue, but the French had another word for knowing, a word deeper than the surface knowledge. *Comprendre*. Up close, his eyes were deep green radiating brilliant from black irises. Brilliant like a sun-swallowed sea. *Je sais que tes yeux sont bleus, mais je comprends que tes yeux sont verts comme la mer*. Untouchable. Dangerous. Forever out of her reach.

Her watch alarm finally beeped. Her parents. Dinner.

She stood. “I’ve got to do homework.”

He crushed the can on driftwood. “You don’t have to do anything, you know.”

Well, except for graduating, going to college, talking her parents out of oceanography as her “dream” career, and figuring out how to become attractive enough to interest a guy like him.

“You can leave the island. Do whatever you want. Go wherever you want.”

“My parents are starting a new intern today and they will kill me if I don’t show.”

He smiled at the can and then out at the sea, as though she had proven his point rather than arguing against it. “I’m stuck here. Destined to drink myself into a shithole stupor.” He threw the can.

It arced through the air and dropped into the waves.

His face twisted. Bitter. “Just like my papa.”

Probably not the time to tell him that littering was bad and also made her parents’ organization super angry. “Well, yeah, if you keep staying up late and drinking all the time.”

He wrinkled his nose, edged his initials into the spongy driftwood with a ragged nail. “He’d just drink it himself.”

“Well, you drinking it obviously hasn’t stopped him. It’s just makes you a drunk.”

He looked at her. Bitter and hard.

She bit the skin at her cuticle, softening it, gnawing it to nothing.

Her watch beeped again.

He rubbed away the initials, swung his legs over the branch, and easily caught her laboring up the hill. “You leave too early. Make it up to me.”

She caught her breath at the top, hot and sticky, melty in the sun. No wonder boys like Ellis thought she was gooey and icky. But in spite of all that, Julian’s complaint sounded real. Real and like he meant it.

She sucked in a deep breath. “Come to my house?”

“Now?”

“No!” Oh god, no. His face flashed a darker feeling and her tongue tripped over itself to be understood. “My graduation party’s next weekend. Will you—would you mind—what do you think about coming to that, if you have a chance?”

He grinned. Soul-sweet and aching beautiful. “Okay.”

The week passed in agonizing slowness and advanced excitement, because Julian kept inviting her over to his house, and she kept going. Night after night, staying a little bit later each time, until her parents finally complained that she wasn’t hardly at home and she defended herself by saying that she was bidding farewell to classmates who were leaving the state, and they eased off because after all, *she* was leaving the state. Julian didn’t push her about her party, even though his face changed, unreadable, every time he brought up his impending visit.

“Your parents are busier than mine,” he said, one night when she had to leave, and “There will be a lot of people at this party of yours?”

“Just the people at the organization,” she said, which was about five people including the intern, “and Mia.”

And his face set again. Darkly thoughtful. Almost nervous, she would say, but he never got nervous about anything. Not even the now silent, watchful Ellis.

At the end of the last day of classes, Mia saved them almost an entire row of seats at the school awards ceremony. Julian sat next to her, and Pepper separated him from the rest of her family. It was a weird introduction, but Julian’s coming to her graduation party later would seem normal. Her parents wouldn’t get that over-interested look and begin asking questions about career trajectories. They wouldn’t grill him like they had grilled the last boy she had invited over—in second grade. That boy had wanted to be a firefighter. Now, she was pretty sure he was thriving in San Francisco and wanted to be a handbag designer.

Nobody would think she was over-reaching. Not even Julian. She could dress up and be cool, and it wasn’t solely for him. It was expected. His visit was nothing special.

Her new black dress was not a *little* black dress, but it was a Vera Wang clone. For one brief moment, the hours she spent spraying her hair into sausage curls and trying on Wet & Wild shades seemed to be rewarded by a deeper emotion beneath Julian’s lazy smile.

Her heart fluttered. She moved her hand to cover the feeling just at the moment Julian put his hand over where hers had been on the arm rest.

Wait—had he meant to take her hand?

Before she could move back, his name floated across the theater.

He see-sawed to the aisle on Mia's side, because Pepper's side was too full of thick people.

They all clapped for his award.

Mia leaned over his empty seat. "He's good looking, isn't he?"

Hot and cold feelings pulsed through Pepper. Although saying it was like mentioning that tourists came to see orca whales. It was a fact, and someone as normally-proportioned as Mia would notice it just as much as an orca like Pepper would.

"I think he's dating a girl at the smoothie bar," Mia said.

The day shifted monochromatic, dropping below the edge of the ocean and flaring the blue sky to yellow with its last sunlit rays.

"I see him there practically every day. At the place across from the bus stop? A blonde with a surfer tattoo is always giving him free stuff."

Cold grayness seeped into her chest.

Oh.

Of course.

The drinks he tossed after her private tutoring. She had thought he was waiting for her. But that was wrong. He was actually using her for cover. Cover so he could be with a thin, beautiful blonde and score niceness points for being friends with a fat girl.

Pepper tucked her hands between her knees and hugged her elbows to her sides.

Her instinct—*who was she kidding?*—was wrong.

Julian returned to his seat and lifted a gold key. A purple foot inscribed with "Track."

She tried to arrange her mouth into his match. Little filets of pain traveled across her skin like a sushi knife, paper-cutting right up to her heart.

That depth behind his eyes wasn't interest. It was friendliness. He probably wouldn't even blink if she pulled off her black dress or all her clothes.

She couldn't hold her smile. As soon as he looked away, she did too, squeezing her hands between her knees.

The academic awards started and her name echoed across the theater in reflexive waves, echoing the effort she had put in for the past years.

Applied Science, English, Knowledge Bowl, Math. Her parents squeezed her arms as she squished by and the Danish intern gave a misty-eyed cheer. After the fourth time they all had to stand to let her by, everyone shifted over a seat and stuck her on the aisle away from Julian.

Oceanographic Studies, Physics, Spanish. The principal's special award for consecutive quarters of Honor Role.

Her family's thrilled hugs lofted her back to good feelings, though Julian leaned his elbows on his knees and studied the seat backs in front of him, completely bored.

The event ended and everyone rose.

The Danish intern ruffled her hair. "We'll start a brain trust together, you and I. Yes?"

Julian pushed past her.

She gave the intern her handful of award keys and forced her way through the crowds like a whale chasing the receding tide while deadly gravity held her to the beach. She followed him around the building, almost breaking into a jog. "Julian!"

He turned.

She caught him and wheezed, nearly bent double. Her dress stuck in patches. She hated her weakness and herself, but she had to make him stop.

His hands jammed in his shorts pockets and his face looked over his shoulder. Away.

She mustered her courage. “Did you want a ride to my place?”

“I’m gonna head.”

Her hands opened and closed. “There’ll be cake.”

He snorted and shook his head.

A hole opened in her stomach. There had to be something she could say. Something that would make him stay with her a little bit longer.

He squinted at her, behind her, and away again. Over his shoulder. As if he couldn’t bear to face her fat self.

Or as if he couldn’t wait to be with the athletic, beautiful surfer girl who was his actual girlfriend.

Her aching heart pressed her one step forward. It was pointless. She knew it was pointless. Still, she pulled out her graduation gift, a sleek new Razr. “Can I at least give you my new phone number?”

He focused on her.

She flipped it open. Gleaming. “We could stay in touch. You could visit me in New York.”

His focus shifted. Face blanked.

“As friends, you know. I don’t mean anything weird by it.”

His whole body froze into a cliff-side rock.

“We’ve got our own lives. It’ll be a good chance to get off the island. You have another person you know to visit.” Her words tumbled, faster. “Because we’re friends, right?”

He shifted, rubbed his nose, stared at the dirt beneath his ripped tennis shoes.

She poised with her phone. “Please? Can I give you my new number?”

He looked her dead in the eyes. Hard as the ocean from a twenty-story fall. Flat as a glassy, airless day. “Why would I ever want that, *Patty*?”



The deck slammed into her knees and the impact ricocheted up her body, shuddering in her jaw and elbows. She remained on the deck, palms on the wood, for one deep breath and another, unable to face the shocked-silent room. Then, still without looking up, she shifted her feet under her to stand.

Hands—her classmates’ hands—lifted her up. Concern blurred beneath the heat waving off her cheeks.

She blinked to focus and pulled her elbows free from the helpers.

Murmured “are you okay?”s crystalized in Allison’s pitying head-shake. “Not everyone can wear those high heels.”

Across the room, Julian looked away. Dropped back into his conversation with the athletic surfer woman.

The burn localized to Pepper’s chest. She recognized it. Not anger at the others. Anger at herself. And disappointment. She was not that kind of woman any more.

“Nice entrance.” Mia gravitated to her as unnaturally as they had in elementary school, one

freak to another. Her braces-straightened teeth gleamed in the dusky roll of the ship, brown eyes blinked naturally behind their contacts, and her smart business suit and smarter heels suggested that they shopped at the same New York boutiques. "He's still pretty cute, isn't he?"

Pepper shifted on her wobbling heels and tugged down her skirt. Adrenaline pounded through her body, breaking like the waves of a rough storm. "I'm not looking."

"The blonde is supposedly his client, a semi-pro surfer from Hawaii." She looked down on Pepper's wrinkled outfit and dreams. "Some things don't change. He always did go for the graceful sporty types."

The crash in her heart sounded as loud as the crack of a chair separating in assembly.

Pepper tried to make her gaze appear to focus on the buffet tables, not tempt his gaze by staring directly at Julian. "Maybe she's with the other guy."

Mia snorted. "The shorty? That's Ellis."

It wasn't fair. It so wasn't fair.

She was supposed to have been the graceful one. She was supposed to be the beauty now. She was supposed to have made Julian and all the blade-slim girls desperately jealous of her obvious success.

Julian followed the surfer babe away from the table to the side doors leading to the whale-watching area. Devoted. Practically her husband.

"I forgot our class was so small." Mia rubbed her nose as though trying to push up her non-existent glasses. "There was no need for Rizzo to introduce you. Fat or thin, your face is the same." She lingered on Julian's new girlfriend, her face echoing the jealousy in her tone. "I wish I had her quads."

"I'm going to eat." Pepper stomped to the buffet to load a paper plate with apple wedges, pear chunks, and celery sticks without dressing.

*She* was supposed to be beautiful. *She* was supposed to have attractive quads. *She* was supposed to have changed.

Ellis wandered up, munching a cracker-cheese hors d'oeuvre. "Looking good, Patty."

She snapped the celery. "My name is Pepper."

"Seriously? I never knew that."

She gave his average, ordinary, wedge-shaped face one solid glare.

Long enough for his brows to rise and his eyes to widen and genuine fear to replace whatever average, ordinary, wedge-shaped feeling had originally crawled from his hollow heart. In second grade, his stupid questions led the class in a taunt that had shaped her life. *Is Pepper short for Peppermint Patties? Did you eat too many and that's why you're so fat? Fatty Patty, Fatty Patty, Fatty Patty!* He used to be a thousand times bigger, but now she towered over him in heels.

"Now you know." She flounced to the bar.

Vastly depleted beer and wine, and mostly full carafes of orange juice and soda, greeted her wrinkled composure. The high school her would've carted the entire soda carafe to a hidden corner.

She poured lemon-scented water into a plastic cup.

Julian sidled up beside her.

She swallowed drily. "Julian."

His voice, smooth and lazy, caressed her. "Pepper."

With just those two syllables, she fell five years back in time. Her heart pounded, her body pulsed, and her tongue twisted in her mouth. She hadn't seen him coming and now he was here, at her elbow, too close. Too hot. Too present. She thought she had prepared herself, but nothing

could have prepared her for this. She was seventeen, and thicker around than she was tall, and desperately, palpitatingly, sickeningly in love.

He gazed at her.

She felt it as a heat, even though she couldn't meet his gaze. If she met his gaze, he would know how he still affected her, and she couldn't stand that. She grabbed the nearest thing with shaking hands. "Bud Light?"

He took it from her, set it down, and selected a Coke. "I don't drink. Not anymore."

Her insides trembled. "No?"

He smiled, slow and lazy, never once taking his gaze off of her face. As though etching the lines of her in his head, in case they didn't meet again for another five years. "I didn't want to end up like my dad."

Her chest rose and fell.

He had taken her advice. And remembered it five years later. And specifically mentioned it.

Desire rose between them, shimmering, like waves upon the horizon. Waves of yearning.

She picked up her paper plate and plastic cup.

And met his eyes.

Such blue, blue eyes.

He smiled and pushed her, without her raising one objection or fighting for control, to the door.

Wind whipped past and the dark islands chugged by, houses secret on their cragged and tree-lined faces.

He moved her aft, to the covered deck, to empty chairs where she could eat in the windless sun.

She bit the fruit, sweet and succulent.

He watched her. Sitting so close, the long tender hairs vibrated on his hands where they curled around the soda cup. He studied her so deeply, all the edge-shifting in the world wouldn't alter the angle of his gaze.

"Where's your client?" she asked.

He tipped back his drink, the moisture running down his kissable throat, luscious with salt, and stretched his arm across the seat back.

Across *her* seat back.

Drawing him a little bit closer. Making her part of his orbit once again. "Calling her fiancé."

She wanted to believe that. "Why bring a 'client' on a reunion cruise?"

"They're having a pre-wedding honeymoon. She wanted a free ride." He licked his lips. "I wanted to see you."

Her other questions all died. She sucked on the sweet Bosc slices as the ship's white wake propelled her into the past.

"I heard you went to New York." He put his ankle on one knee, the thick hard length of his thigh brushing hers. He wore a loose T-shirt that couldn't disguise the underlying ripple of muscle, and surfer shorts that allowed his calves to rub hers. Skin to skin. "You're working for the Japanese consulate?"

"*Hai, hai.*" She sipped her lemon water. Cool, to stop her from perspiring. "You left the island too. Congrats."

He bumped her. Subtle but unmistakable. "Why did you come back?"

"I saw too many remakes of *Carrie*." But of course he didn't smile, because he didn't read and he didn't watch movies and he didn't sit around when there were athletic worlds to conquer.

He didn't know what it was to be mistreated, to be misunderstood, to know everyone would like her if only they knew her inner beauty. He was too easy-going to get upset about all of that. "I never showed my true self in high school. I came back to be known for who I am."

He didn't laugh or joke or say *that's deep, man*. "And who are you?"

She finished her lemon water, folded her plate, and stood.

The wind caught her hair, whipping it around her face.

She smoothed it and faced him, shadowed, as they moved deeper into the setting sun. So he would know this was truth. "A shy girl grown up to a successful woman who was once totally in love with you."

There. She had said it.

Usher in the age of vengeance.

His smile disjointed. As though the words took a moment to hit him, and his mouth heard them first, flattened in one corner, while his eyes narrowed to probe her meaning. He looked behind her. Hearing the words, re-hearing the words. The smile that he finally flashed at her settled firmly into the trench of denial.

No matter how much she changed, he didn't want someone like her to pine over someone like him. *Ugh*, his face said. *What are you talking about, Patty?*

It hurt as much as his words on that last day. Her eyes burned. She wanted to shriek at him. Didn't he see that she was finally beautiful? This was her final revenge. Telling him how she had felt, then showing off her new thin self and saying *Too bad you missed your chance. Buh-bye now*.

He didn't want to believe her. She was thin but he preferred graceful athletes. She had changed, but not enough for it to mean anything to him.

Pepper was not going to cry.

She strode to the garbage/recycling and appropriately disposed of her utensils. The trip was one-way to Friday Harbor for her. Not for him. Those who had no family on the island would take the last state ferry back to the mainland because the summer season had filled all the guest houses. Even finding a place to camp risked huge fines and worse, public embarrassment.

Julian still sat, staring out over the water. Older, perhaps, but just the same.

It wasn't fair how powerfully she felt for him. These feelings were supposed to fade with absence, not return twice as strong.

She walked to the fore where the wind hit her fullest on the face, and took a long, deep breath. Regardless of whether she was graceful, she loved herself now, and no rejection or embarrassment could ever take away that knowledge. *Je comprends que je m'aime*. She had melted away the inessential parts and found her own true center.

Julian slid next to her against the rail.

Her heart ached at his nearness. His presence filled her with a distant sort of longing, one that she had thought telling him of would finally make go away, but instead, like hearing the sound of the Pacific, only made her more nostalgic for it. She gripped the rail and deliberately studied the passing boats, bobbing like so many white pieces of debris. "What are you doing here?"

He followed her gaze with the easy familiarity of a dive instructor who spent much of his time on boats like this. "I go where the current takes me."

"Well, then, go back to your graceful, athletic girlfriends."

He snorted, then sighed. "I told you, she's just a client."

"She's your responsibility."

The tendons on the backs of his hands rose as he scratched his nose. His nose, in profile, was

hooked. In high school, his hair had always covered the upper half of his face. Now his hair dropped to the powerful plane between his shoulder blades and only the barest curly wisps pulled from the thick black band at the base of his neck.

Her fingers itched to touch it.

The ache intensified.

“She’s not going to get lost,” he said. “There’s nowhere else to go.”

“She’s all alone.”

“Coming along was her idea. I don’t owe her anything.”

She twisted away. “You *would* think that.”

His mouth opened. Then closed. And opened again. “I...to you...”

Whatever he was about to say, she didn’t want to hear it.

His lips tightened and he turned around, resting his back and elbows against the railing. “Last year I finally got my GED.”

She twisted to face him. “Your grades weren’t that bad.”

He didn’t look up from the deck, even as his tone lightened. “You had Ivy League plans. I was lazy and stupid. But then, sometimes...” He flicked up to her. “I thought you might see something else in my future. Something that interested you. More than the geniuses surrounding your family.”

“Anyone can study. If you get a degree, nobody cares about a GED. And you don’t need one anyway. You’re fearless and beautiful and—I mean, you don’t need it to work at a surf shop.” Curse him.

His lips curved—stopped—curved again, harder, as though he was remembering something about her that amused him. Something that he loved. Something that finally allowed him to let go of fear. “You disapproved of everything I did.”

“You slept in class. You littered.”

He grinned more broadly. “I would have single-handedly saved the whales if I thought that would impress you.”

His cruel warmth twisted her heart. “You were never interested in me.”

“I wanted to be smart.” His cheek bones stood in sharp relief, his blue eyes deepened into the rays of green, his lips drew a more perfect casual smile. So lovable. So himself. “Can’t you forgive a stupid kid like me?”

She licked her lips. “I never thought you were stupid.”

“You thought I was irresponsible—”

“I loved everything about you.” She rocked onto the tall heels, mirroring his height, and back down. “Even the littering, over-sleeping parts.”

His eyes darkened. He shifted closer, his arm touching hers, and heat flared from that connection. “You should have told me.”

She strangled the guard rail. “I was fat.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“You cared at the awards ceremony.”

“You friend-zoned me.” He closed his eyes, shook his head. “And anyway, I didn’t actually call you fat.”

“You called me by *that name*.”

His mouth twisted with bitterness. “Everyone called you that name. But you only got angry at me. Even five years later, you’re still only angry at me.”

“Obviously it’s because I still love you.”



He blinked.

Her heart contracted. “I mean—the memory I had for you—because we spent the most time together—not because it meant—we were just always together—”

He narrowed his eyes and turned back to the deck.

*As friends.* The words died. She raised her head. Not so heavy now on her thin shoulders. “Because I spent the most time completely and totally in love with you, and I still am. So that’s why I’m mad. Sorry.”

He jerked up to her. “Sorry?”

She didn’t blush. She was stronger than that now. The clarity inside matched the clarity of her skin. Translucent, like sun filtering down to warm her dark, essential core.

His fingers played under hers. “Sorry, huh.”

Flickers of desire curled in her belly.

He teased her fingers up, peeling them back like a determined limpet. “Why, I wonder.”

“I wonder,” she echoed, as the fire from his touch danced up her arm, breathing deep into the dormant embers of her heart.

He lifted her hand from the rail, touched the fingers to his lips, slid himself into the space, and curled her fingers back over the rail along his other side so that she was caging him, pressing herself, willingly, against the hard body that was his. “You should’ve said so a long time ago.”

She licked her lips. “You should’ve done this a long time ago.”

He started to grin, melted a little into tenderness, grinned again. “I should have.” He brushed his lips to the beating pulse at her jaw, branding fire where she had dabbed a hint of Calvin Klein Obsession; and her cheek, sweet hot feathering desire; and the smooth plain of her forehead, stamping her with his touch; and the tip of her nose, playfully; and then he took a deep, everything breath that sucked in her love and her agonizing desire and her soul, and he touched her lips.

The firm wetness of his mouth filled her with everything she had ever denied. She let go of the railing and let herself touch his board-tightened body.

The remaking of herself was complete. In his arms, she was finally, truly, deeply whole.

After they reached the shore, at the edge of the gangplank, Mia found them. She seemed completely unsurprised that they were together, and followed them up the long dock in Friday Harbor. “Are you catching the last ferry? Julian, you don’t have a place to stay.”

Julian waived to his client as she left with her fiancé. His dad had passed away last year. He had nowhere else to go on the island.

“Julian?”

The last state ferry rested in the docks, engines idling. Tourists passed by with Lopez Island Creamery lemon raspberry ice cream cones, steaming white bags of fish and chips, and fragrant brownie squares made with culinary lavender. The trio reached the crowded traffic circle and came to a standstill, and still he didn’t answer Mia.

Someone behind them called Mia’s name and she left her Burberry shoulder bag with them. Obviously certain that Pepper and Julian wouldn’t go anywhere without her. Because why would they? They hadn’t spoken in five years and surely weren’t that good of friends.

Pepper’s hand, where Julian had unpeeled it from the railing, still carried his scent. She cupped her hands before her mouth, as if to hide the secret of him to herself just a little bit longer. “What are you going to do now?”

Gazing away from her, he waved to passing classmates. Then he showed her that wonderful lazy smile. “I go where the current takes me.”

“Does the current want to take you to my parents’ house?” She heard the echo of that long-ago pleading day. Tremulous.

He stepped closer. His eyes darkened, deep blue and tender green. “You don’t mind introducing a stupid, lazy surfer to your brain trust?”

She had so misjudged him. They were both scarred by the taunts of the past. Both made fragile, and strong to hide it, and secretly growing to heal. “You’re not stupid.”

He snorted. “Even your friends are smart. How can an average man compare?”

Mia marched towards them, a frown on her face from the way they stood too close. “Julian, you can stay with me tonight. There’s an extra room at the house I’m staying at.”

Pepper grasped Julian's hand.

His head bobbed, surprised.

“He has a place to stay,” Pepper said.

Mia stopped. Her frown deepened. “No, he doesn’t.”

His fingers curled around Pepper's.

“His place is with me.” She tugged him forward. Because she was braver, thinner, more successful. More certain of herself. More true.

They passed Mia, her mouth hanging open, and all of the others. Allison did a double-take and nearly walked off the dock.

Julian's voice dropped low. Just for her. “I’ve waited five years for this invitation.”

“There won’t be cake now, probably.” Her hand slicked and began to slide from his palm. “My dad turned diabetic and they’ve got a raw foods intern.”

“I don’t need cake.” Julian threaded his fingers through hers and walked with her, under the pergola, into the town of her past that was the town of her future and the town of everything. “I only need you.”



## **Thank You**

Thanks so much for reading! You are the reason I've written this story. I love that I could share my characters and ideas with you!

This is the first in a series of stories around the San Juan Island High School five-year reunion. Visit my website at [wendylynclark.com](http://wendylynclark.com) to read the latest news and reviews.

If you enjoyed your experience, please consider giving me an honest review on your favorite book-selling website to help others find out if they would enjoy reading this story too!

## Acknowledgements

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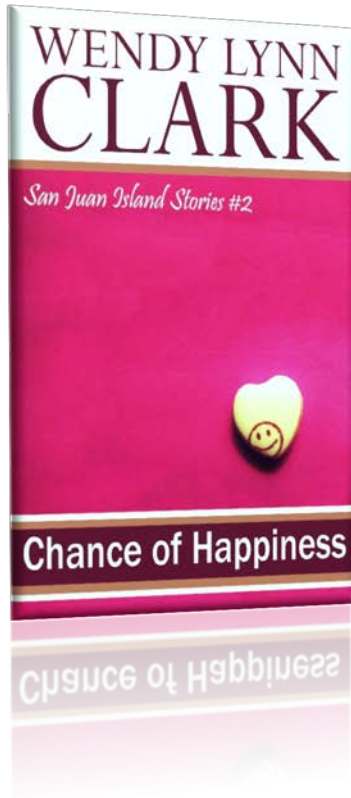
## Biography



Wendy Lynn Clark is an award-winning author of romance, young adult, and science fiction. A lifelong resident of the Pacific Northwest, she graduated *magna cum laude* from Lewis & Clark College with a degree in philosophy and a minor in English, volunteered with AmeriCorps, taught English in Japan with the JET Programme for three years, and resided abroad in England and Greece. After completing a master's degree at the University of Brighton, she returned to books and now works in an academic library. She loves learning about cultures, from how different families live in her local neighborhood to how astronauts live on the International Space Station. She is drawn to the needs that unite us all—survival, family, adventure, and love. Find out about her newest projects at [wendylynclark.com](http://wendylynclark.com).

## *What's next?*

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