



The Lost Letter



A LOVE STORY

Donnie Stevens

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*Dedicated to my son, Justin, and his bride, Jennifer.
Thank you for the many special moments
and smiles you bring into my life.*



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CHAPTER 1

(July 1975)

Trudy wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand as she walked on a carpet of wilted blooms she'd pinched from flowers in the afternoon heat. Glancing up, she noticed she had already picked through more than half of the plant beds stretching for several hundred feet under the netted top. With her blue jeans cuffed so they wouldn't get wet or muddy from the frequent irrigation, she wore a light blue, sleeveless, cotton shirt with the tail hanging loosely over her hips. Her long, blond hair was tied back to keep it out of her face in the sweltering July heat.

Suddenly, water spewed everywhere. With only one way out of the maze of plant beds, she squealed and sprinted through the rows of flowers, sidestepping and jumping over plants the best she could. Since the irrigation system was turned on manually, she knew someone must have intentionally turned the water on her.

Then it dawned on her. Earlier, she'd seen Richard ride over to the packing shed on his dirt bike. Always playing pranks on each other, he must have purposely turned the water on to get even with her after she had grabbed his hat from the tractor seat and hurled it on top of the shed. Winking at the wagonload of workers waiting to be taken out to the fields, she had hoped they wouldn't tell on her. She then went down to the lower plant beds, working where she could easily watch him.

Rushing out of the shed and climbing onto the tractor, Richard had glanced around for his hat. Not seeing it anywhere, he climbed down and looked under the wagon. He searched diligently for several minutes before Raymond, his younger brother,

finally told him where his hat was and pointed toward Trudy in the plant bed.

Watching him climb the ladder to fetch his hat, Trudy tried hard not to burst out laughing. She pretended not to notice as he looked her way, shaking his head and mumbling to himself.

As she ran from the plant bed, her mind raced on how to get back at him for spraying her. She was soaked from head to toe, her clothes clinging to her curvy body.

Knowing he expected her to run into the shed where he would laugh at her, she went to the back so he would have to come looking for her. She turned the outside spigot on full force and crouched down behind pallets of mulch with the nozzle of the hose ready in her hand.

Hearing footsteps, Trudy peeped through the stacked pallets and saw Richard looking around for her. She couldn't help noticing how handsome he looked in his baggy, gray trousers held up by suspenders, his tight white T-shirt and his wavy brown hair sticking out under his big-brimmed, gray hat.

He turned away as if to leave, so Trudy threw a wood chip at some barrels in front of her. Turning back, he slowly walked toward her. She waited with the nozzle ready, relishing her chance to wet him down. Once he was near her, she sprang from her hidden spot and sprayed him with the full force of water from the hose.

"Ahh!" he hollered, stumbling back, waving his arms and knocking his hat off.

Every way he turned, Trudy stayed with him, spraying him from head to toe and laughing. "You thought watching me run from the plant bed was funny, did you?"

Unable to get away from the spray of water, Richard grabbed the nozzle and wrestled with Trudy. Both of them, now soaking wet, tripped on the tangled hose and fell to the ground. Dropping the nozzle, Richard landed on his back with Trudy sprawled on top of him.

As they gazed at each other with grins on their faces, Richard said, "Gosh. That felt great. Thanks."

"Yeah! I'm sure you wanted me to wet you down."

Richard placed one arm behind his head for support. Looking into her face, it was apparent from her smile that she was gloating.

"I say, Trudy, it looks like you've done gone skinny dipping again but forgot to take your clothes off," Richard teased with a grin.

Trudy glanced down at her wet cotton shirt clinging snugly to her breasts. "I still can't believe I did that with you last summer. You're never going to let me forget it, are you?"

"I never want to forget anything about you," Richard said. He untied her long, blond hair and let it drop to her shoulders. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you being half a world away from me while I'm at school." He grinned. "I won't have anyone to pick on."

"Does that mean you're going to miss me?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Probably every hour of every day."

"I'm going to miss you, too." Trudy sighed, her eyes focusing on his. "Just make sure you don't look for someone else to pick on."

"Don't worry. If it were up to me, I would stay here and go to school. Father is just so adamant about my starting college in the Netherlands."

Trudy shifted off Richard and rested her chin on her hands.

"Well, next year after I graduate from high school and we both turn eighteen, we'll have more say over what we want to do with our lives."

"That's almost a year away," he reminded her.

"Next summer will be here before you know it."

"It won't happen fast enough for me." His eyes narrowed. "Do you think your father and mother will approve of me taking you for my wife?"

"Sure they will," she responded enthusiastically. "Mom and Dad want me to go to college, but I can go to school and still be married. I know other girls who're married and still in school."

Richard rolled her hair into a bundle with his free hand.

"What are you doing, Richard?" she asked, raising up and pulling her hair loose.

"I want to see what you'll look like with your hair rolled up under a bonnet. After all, you'll be a Dutch wife."

Trudy reached for one of his suspenders, pulled it out and let it snap back against his wet shirt.

"Ouch!" he hollered, sitting up and rubbing his chest. "What'd you do that for?"

"I see right now these suspenders have got to go. They're beginning to warp your mind." She giggled. "Yes, I think you'd look great in a pair of bell-bottoms and one of those fluffy-sleeved French shirts should do it."

"Miss Trudy, you're a girl with a free spirit, I must say," he replied, teasingly.

"What's wrong with that? After all, aren't you the one who's arguing with your father all the time?"

Richard rolled over on his side, his head propped on an elbow. Trudy stretched out beside him. His brown eyes and handsome face were too much for her to resist so she leaned over and kissed him.

"Father and I just don't always see things the same way. He wants to get his way with everyone, and all he thinks about is how to make more money," Richard said, petulantly.

"What's wrong with making money?" Trudy laughed. "You can't have too much of that, can you?"

"No, but Father uses it as a control thing with everyone."

"You know he doesn't care for me, don't you?" Trudy said, observing Richard closely.

"Why do you think that?"

"Oh," she rolled her eyes, "just the way he looks at me when he sees us together, I suppose. Just call it intuition."

"It doesn't matter whether he likes you or not. I'm the one who counts."

"Yes, Richard. But I know that you and your father don't always get along. I'm afraid that once he knows you and I are planning to get married, things might get worse between you two." She winced. "I wouldn't want that to happen."

"Don't worry about it," Richard uttered nonchalantly.

"But it bothers me. Did you notice how he and your grandfather stared at us while we were having lunch with the workers from the fields? I know they were talking about us."

"You're just imagining things. Trust me. I'll make it work out for us one way or another. I promise."

"You know I trust you," she said, moving closer. She began to trace his broad, tanned face with her finger, beginning with his eyelids and then circling his eyes, nose, and lips.

Richard's arm cradled her and his hand began moving up the small of her back, causing her to shiver, even in the July heat. Then he pulled her face toward his, ever so gently, and kissed her.

Although she knew they should get back to work, Trudy melted in his arms. She passionately returned his kiss, figuring a few minutes of making out with Richard wouldn't matter. After all, they were behind the shed and no one could see them.

Richard pulled her body closer against him. Yielding to the familiar passion, she responded to his advances. Richard's weight caused her to fall back as he moved on top of her, his body pinning her down. Trudy savored the feeling he ignited inside her.

Suddenly hearing a noise, Trudy opened her eyes. Richard's father, Patrick Vanderveer, a husky man, was walking briskly toward them, a stern look on his face that was intensified by his heavy, dark eyebrows. Richard's grandfather, a tall, lanky man with a gray beard, wearing a big-brimmed, straw hat, followed close behind,

Trudy pushed Richard aside and sprang to her feet, almost falling, but Richard jumped up in time to catch her. Still not meeting his father's eyes, he brushed loose grass from his trousers.

"Father," Richard stated quickly, "I'm getting ready to get the tractor to pull another load of berries in."

"I see what you're doing," Patrick shouted angrily. "Now get on out of here and back to work. I've got laborers waiting for you in the fields."

"Mr. Vanderveer, it's my fault," Trudy interjected. "I finished pinching the blooms from the flowers and saw Richard up here and sprayed him with the water hose."

"No, Trudy. You don't need to make excuses for me," Richard retorted. He picked up his hat and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I see what you're doing, young lady," his father spoke angrily. "You need to go home and make yourself proper and put on some decent clothes. We don't run around on this farm looking like..." he gestured with his hand, searching for words.

The grandfather stood shifting from one foot to the other, continuously pushing his big-framed glasses up on his nose. His jaw jerked every so often as if he wanted to say something.

"Father, none of this is her fault," Richard interrupted, raising his voice. "I turned the sprinklers on while she was in the flower bed." He turned to Trudy with a pleading look. "Go ahead and leave. I'll take care of this."

Walking away, Trudy heard Richard and his father shouting at each other. Knowing nothing she could say would make it better for Richard, she got into her mom's Chevy Impala and drove away, saddened that she had caused a confrontation between Richard and his father.

Trudy felt she was to blame for at least some of their arguments since she and Richard were seldom away from each other for long. She tried to not let her affection for Richard show too much when she was around his family, but apparently that hadn't worked. His family had always been good to her, but lately she

couldn't help noticing the stares and mumbling that seemed to be directed toward her whenever she and Richard were together.

She knew she had gotten the job at Vanderveer Farm because her Uncle Harry and Aunt Margaret were neighbors on a smaller farm nearby. Right away, she noticed that she was the only teenage girl working there, which probably meant they'd hired her as a favor to her aunt and uncle. Being her first job, she worked hard to prove she could do as much work as the boys her age. Richard's grandfather often bragged on her work ethics when she first went to work for them, and his father seemed very pleased when she told him she was going to save all the money she made from working to go to college.

This was her third summer working for them. What had started out as a friendship between her and Richard, though, had blossomed into love. Trudy felt happy with all she had to look forward to. Her dad was retiring from the military in a few weeks and would be home permanently, and she was secretly making plans to spend her life with the boy she loved. The excitement and changes in her life were more than she could contain at times. However, she knew she needed to wait for their plans to unfold once Richard returned from The Netherlands next spring. But feeling uneasy about his father, she was leery about how he would react once he found out they were planning to wed.

Finally, Richard walked away, his head hung low from the verbal thrashing he had gotten from his father.

The white-bearded grandfather had stood quietly watching what had happened. He turned to his son, and said, "I don't think much of this. My grandson taking a fancy to some girl we know very little about here in the States and look at what she's done to him." He shook his head. "She's got him talking back to you and it's so disrespectful. This wouldn't happen in the homeland."

"I thought by keeping the boys in school back there, nothing like this would happen," Patrick admitted, shaking his head. "I guess I did wrong bringing them to the States to work during summers. I thought it would be a good experience for them."

"Yesterday," the grandfather went on, "I heard Richard talking about a bunch of boys who make music calling themselves Three Dog Night and Creedence Creek Water Revival or something. It ain't right these young'uns over here making fun of animals and religion in their music."

"I know, Father," Patrick agreed, putting his hands on his hips and sighing heavily from his father's lecture. "It's just not the same over here like it is in the homeland. I wish I could keep the boys away from the local kids."

"Well, son," he shook a finger at him. "What're you going to do if he takes to liking that girl and marries her?"

"I'm never going to allow that to happen," Patrick replied adamantly, shuffling his feet.

"Son, there're plenty of girls in the homeland he can find to marry. That way we keep our wealth in our community." He pushed his glasses back on his nose and took off his hat. "Reckon I won't have any choice but to cut him out of the family inheritance if he marries one of these girls over here. Reckon he won't give me any choice," he repeated, bending the hat brim back with both hands.

"Don't worry, Father. I'll take care of this," Patrick assured him with a stern look on his face. "I'll make sure she goes away and doesn't come back."



CHAPTER 2 *(May 2010)*

Trudy fumbled in her purse for her keys and cell phone as she hurried across the parking lot to her car. Gripping the satchel of work on her shoulder, she opened the door, slid into the seat of her black Acura TL, and threw her bag to the back seat. After securing her seatbelt, she began dialing on her cell phone.

Out of habit, she glanced in the rearview mirror and ran her fingers through her recently layered, bob-cut, blondish hair. Her mind raced through all she needed to take care of for Kenneth's surprise homecoming and April's engagement party just one week away. Realizing she was late meeting April, she cranked the car and sped toward the parking lot exit.

"Hello, Mom. Where are you?" April answered.

"Hello, Sweetie. I just got out of the Foundation meeting. I purposely started at 8:30 this morning so I could leave here by eleven and have plenty of time to meet you at Isabella's Boutique."

"What happened?"

"It's the same old thing. Mrs. Winkler questioned everything I said or asked for as though I'm not capable of making any decisions without the board's approval. We actually got into a debate over my suggestion to renovate the reception area and foyer where Jennifer works."

"Why is she always second-guessing you?"

"She retired and went to work for the Foundation three years ago when I did. But because she was a supervisor in the school system and I was a teacher, she felt that she was better qualified to lead and be the president." Trudy continued to talk as she waited