

TENDER ARE THE TONGS

“In 500 metres, your destination will be on the right.”

The normally flat, robotic voice of the GPS sounded confident, friendly, even, probably due to its refined British accent. Kristen almost reflexively thanked it, before remembering that there wasn't actually a tiny, dapper Englishman living inside the navigation system of her car.

“You have arrived.”

Kristen didn't even hear the GPS this time. As her car turned into a theme park-sized parking lot, she audibly gasped as she took in the sight that laid before her sweet, doe-like brown eyes. It was the biggest grocery store she had ever seen; a veritable cobalt blue fortress. The elegant glass doors slid open as a family emerged, laughing and pushing a cart loaded with bags and bags of...wait, was that a new printer? What kind of grocery store was this?

Kristen's eyes moved slowly upwards as she squinted at the grand lettering in the bright blue sky: Real Canadian Superstore.

A week earlier, she had complained to her friend Mary that her local grocery store never seemed to have fresh strawberries; every package contained at least one berry that was covered in mold or marred by a suspicious bruise. Mary had *insisted* that Kristen had to make the 30-minute trek to Real Canadian Superstore, where the produce was not only fresh, but guaranteed to be the lowest price. Kristen was skeptical, but Mary assured her that she wouldn't be disappointed.

“Trust me,” Mary had said. “I'm a working mom from Western and/or Central Canada, 35-45, and I wouldn't be able to *survive* without Real Canadian Superstore. They even have a wide selection of household appliances, like waffle irons and slow cookers. And enough drinkable yogurt to last a lifetime.”

Kristen recalled their conversation as she floated towards the entrance of the store. She stole a glance at the happy family as they loaded their new printer into their trunk along with apples, pears, and what Kristen estimated to be about fourteen kinds of drinkable yogurt. So Mary hadn't been lying about the drinkable yogurt. Kristen loved drinkable yogurt.

Once inside, fingers trembling, Kristen pulled her phone from her purse and opened her Notes app, where she kept her grocery list. As she made her way to the meat department to pick up some fresh chicken breast, she took a detour through the fresh produce section. The selection was staggering: enormous watermelons, green as a freshly cut lawn; raspberries, red like a cardinal's wing; string beans, long and thin like lakeside reeds. She put some of each in her cart, plus some perfectly ripe

avocados, which she didn't know existed until now. It took everything in her to keep from twirling in the aisles.

Now that she had more fresh produce than she could ever want, Kristen knew there was one more thing she needed — and she needed it *bad*. But would they have it? Pulse quickening, Kristen rounded the corner and pushed her cart into the housewares section. She scanned the shelves upon shelves of coffee makers, panini presses, and then...there they were. Blenders. A million choices. All Kristen had to do was decide what was most important to her: a quiet motor, a large pitcher, or blending horsepower. She went with a deluxe model that promised maximum blending efficiency for some of the harder vegetables she had picked up in the produce section, like fresh Okanagan carrots and Manitoba red potatoes, the rubies of the tuber world. When would she ever need to blend a potato? She wasn't sure. But if she ever had to, she'd be prepared. After all, the price was well within her budget. "YOLO, Kristen," she said to herself. "YOLO."

Kristen audited the items in her cart. Tons of produce, a blender, some fresh steak — but something was missing. Ahh, yes, tongs. She had some at home, but she had gotten them years ago. If she ran them through the dishwasher one more time, she was afraid the hinge would break. No, it was time to upgrade to some nice ones; maybe even silver ones that made a resonant clicky sound, like windchimes ringing out on a chinook. As she breezily strolled to the kitchenware section, she saw a gleaming pair hanging delicately on the lowest shelf. She bent down and reached out to examine them when a large, muscly hand met hers.

"Oh, I..." Kristen awkwardly started to retract her hand, ready to apologize. But when she saw who the hand was attached to, she forgot her words completely.

Together, they stood up and took one another in. The man was tall, broad shouldered, biceps bursting in a casual heather grey V-neck t-shirt and stylish dark blue jeans. His thick black hair framed smoldering brown eyes; three-day stubble hugged his strong jaw. But it seemed he was having a hard time maintaining eye contact with her. As soon as he saw her rosy cheeks, porcelain skin, and sophisticated brown glasses, he could only look at his sneakers and grin bashfully, exposing a row of perfectly white chicklet teeth.

"I, uh, love this store," he told his shoes, letting go of the tongs and rubbing the back of his neck shyly. "I'm Dominic."

"Me too," Kristen stammered. "Oh my gosh, I mean, I love the store, too. I'm not Dominic. I'm Kristen." The gaffe made her giggle, but it came out as a snort. Her face changed to a mortified grimace.

Dominic laughed. "I knew what you meant. Kristen. That's a beautiful name. Almost as beautiful as those tongs you're holding."

“Huh?” Kristen had forgotten all about the tongs. “Oh, right. Yeah, they’re pretty great. And so affordable, too.”

“It’s a shame there’s only one pair left,” Dominic mused. “But you’re probably far more deserving of them. I would say I’m a super-bad cook, but I hate when people—”

“Use the word ‘super’ when they only mean ‘very’ or ‘quite?’” Kristen interjected instinctively.

Dominic looked like he had just found out he had won the lottery. In some ways, he felt he had, too. “Yes!” he exclaimed incredulously. “‘Super’ means something is the absolute best. When I was a kid, I only said it when I was talking about, you know, superheroes and stuff.”

“Or amazing grocery stores, like Real Canadian Superstore.” Kristen spread her arm, like she was showing Dominic her home.

“Or amazing people in the housewares section.” Dominic gazed meaningfully into Kristen’s eyes. She blushed.

“I feel bad taking your tongs,” she managed to get out, suddenly too aware of her tongue in her mouth. “At least they have a wide selection of other kinds to choose from.”

“Yeah, but I had my heart set on those. And when I have my heart set on something, I get it.” Dominic’s tone was playful, but Kristen wondered if they were still talking about the tongs.

“Oh?” Kristen decided to play along. This could be fun. “Well, is there anything else you want besides tongs?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.” Dominic took a confident step forward. His mouth was level with Kristen’s ear. He was close enough for her to feel his breath hot on her neck. It smelled like fancy cheese.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Kristen closed her eyes.

“What I want,” —Dominic lowered his voice to a gravelly mumble— “is some fresh, tender AAA Grand Prairie prime rib for the lowest price, guaranteed.”

Kristen felt herself go weak at the knees. She had thought finding fresh produce and an incredible selection of housewares at the same store was super. But this — well, this was just too much. What would she do?

TO BE CONTINUED

