

# *Our Wavering Hearts*

*Wavering Hearts Series – Book 3*

*A Novel By*

*Diane Rose Duffy*

# Prologue

Krista

Raggedy Andy or Whatever  
His Name Is

Toby Wilder and his family moved into the vacant house located caddy-corner to ours the summer following my sophomore year of high school. At first glance, I simply chalked him up as a geeky nerd boy, not giving him a passing thought. I caught my first full-on view of him as he and his little brother casually made their way past my house. They were toting grocery bags while I was rinsing dishes, leaning against the kitchen sink, gazing out our kitchen window and staring at nothing when the pair came into view. His straw-like brown hair was sticking up every which way, as if unfamiliar with the invention of a comb or brush. Not to mention, he was sporting an ensemble of green plaid pants, a bright orange striped tank-top, and hideous flip-flops which undoubtedly had begun their existence as house slippers. With a dripping plate in one hand and a partially dipped sponge in the other, I stared at him thinking, *Jeez Louise, who dressed you this morning? A circus clown?*

Now, I'm not one to pass judgment on a person's clothing choice, considering my own wardrobe doesn't lean farther than thrift store eclectic, but this was a bit out of left field even for my own anaesthetized fashion taste. I've never given much thought to the opinion of others on how I dressed myself, but never in a million years would I be caught dead in a get-up like the new boy-next-door was wearing. Our eyes met before my

expression of curiosity could be concealed, but he simply smiled and slightly lifted one eyebrow in lieu of a wave.

Honestly, I may have a fairly wild imagination at times, but I declare, this boy purposely slowed his pace, allowing me ample time to get an eyeful of all the unique awesomeness that is Toby Wilder.

Naturally, my mom was the self-appointed neighborhood welcoming committee. As was customary, she promptly boarded her welcome-wagon and baked enough pastries to provide a third-world country with treats and pastries for a month. My mom's radar had quickly amped to full alert when she detected one of our new neighbors appeared to be around my age. Mom was also quick to point out how lovely it is to see young people being polite and helpful to their parents. There was definitely a tangible undertone in her comment indicating I could take lessons from the new and seemingly nice young fellow.

No sooner was the oven dial turned off before it's suggested I should accompany her to the new neighbor's house. After all, it's time to deliver her basket of tasties. When I say 'suggested', that actually means ordered, because when my mom requests something of me ever so nicely, there's no doubt she'll always get her way. She possesses a unique talent whereby she subtly demands with an invisible layer of sugarcoated frosting. It's quite effective. In fact, it works damn near every time.

We made our way across the hot street pavement to waste my precious weekend hours, because that's precisely my mom's plan. Her plans are to make lifetime friends with these new adult neighbors. I won't stand a chance in hell of escaping until she's finished delving into their entire life history; which, for her, entails birth to present.

My arms are piled high with pastry baskets and a sourpuss attitude that surrounded me like a black cloud as we reached their front door. My finger happens to arrive on the doorbell first. Suffice it to say, their doorbell has probably never experienced such a workout. Sometimes you need to reach for any small amount of satisfaction when an opportunity presents itself.

Of course, it's Raggedy Andy or whatever his name is who answers the door. There it is again, a tingling that swirls around my stomach, like déjà vu, as his lips

formed a genuine smile, lighting up his entire face. As our gazes meet, my breath suddenly freezes in my chest and I find myself completely mesmerized by his eyes, a hue I didn't recognize. He has been blessed with his own unique one-of-a-kind color. Like magic, they seem to transform from a steely gray tint to a dark cobalt blue.

At this point I knew I was blatantly gawking, but I'm not the only one with eyeballs zeroed in on a target. He has focused his undivided attention on me as well and I'd wager a bet that he's mentally storing away a picture to revisit again and again. A strange, irrepressible sense of freefall fills my mind, but feelings of losing control are completely unfamiliar to me and not at all in my nature...it's Awkward with a capital 'A'.

A middle-aged woman who is clearly the matriarch of this family arrives seconds later, opening the door wider and inviting us inside.

My mom introduces herself as Marion, the neighbor down the street. She should've just told it like it was, spit out the truth and got it over with: *I'm Marion and I will be in your face until you like me, and I mean like me a lot! You will be my new best friend because I suggest it. I will use my special powers, and best friends we will be.*

Of course, the woman who introduced herself as Candy Wilder was already a total goner. Yes indeed, that's the way my mom operated. Candy and my mom became best friends immediately.

My mom introduced me, making sure to say it's Krista with a 'K', then Owens, and finally I found myself greeting Toby. His arm eagerly reached out and we shook hands. I couldn't help noticing how my arm hairs instantly stood at attention at even this formal touch. I retracted my hand like a rattlesnake had bitten it. I was thankful and actually sighed in relief when Toby's brother Eric entered the room, interrupting our awkward moment. Now that all the introductions had been made, it's quite obvious Toby's dad was no longer in the picture.

My mom eventually obtained the skinny on that sordid tidbit of gossip, because that was another one of her superpowers—weaseling deep, dark secrets from tightly

sealed lips. We learned Toby's dad had divorced Candy several years earlier to marry the bimbo receptionist employed by his dental practice...might I add, the much younger dental receptionist. Out with the old and in with the new.

From that day forward, Toby and I began spending more and more time together. Looking past the weird exterior that camouflaged the real Toby, I discovered he was truly a unique individual.

As I got to know him, I grew to appreciate his quirky fashion sense and came to love not only his kindness but also the way he was neither self-centered nor judgmental. As time passed, I realized Toby was the most loving, compassionate, intelligent, soft-spoken, and giving human being I've ever met.

I felt truly blessed to have him in my life. He and I would talk to each other for hours about anything, everything and nothing. He was wise beyond his years. If I ever had a bad day, Toby always found a way to lift my spirits. He accepted me for who I was, which was the complete opposite of him.

I have a few tattoos—okay, a lot of tattoos—whereas his skin is unmarked. Sometimes words would spew from my mouth before I considered the outcome. Truthfully, I've always blurted out shit that, more often than not, would've been better left unsaid. My mouth has gotten my ass handed to me on more than one occasion. The list could go on and on about our differences, but the point to be made here is that Toby and I have grown to love each other and have been locked at the hip since high school. He is my soul mate and there has never been another man who holds my heart like Toby.



After high school, Toby and I both attended the University of California, Berkeley, graduated together, and established our careers. Toby is off-the-charts smart and has a software-developing job he absolutely adores. He is quite the techie nerd. In fact, the spare room in our home resembles a CIA computer lab. Indeed, he has that much computer equipment. In addition, Toby is a volunteer firefighter in our small town of Downey, Oregon. It's a job he thoroughly enjoys, as it allows him the opportunity to help the citizens of our community.

I am pleased to have secured a job with one of the most respected bioresearch firms in the country. I'm currently conducting research on a project geared toward developing a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Toby and I purchased a small two-bedroom house together about a year ago located six blocks from our moms. In truth, we love our families and wouldn't wish to have it any other way.

Both of our moms keep us well-fed. Unfortunately, I inherited very few of my mom's Suzie Homemaker skills. The long and short of it is that my talents don't extend to kitchen skills, whereas both our moms' cooking creations are what legends are made of. They're delighted to deliver all manner of goodies to us in Tupperware containers and we happily return the emptied bowls to be refilled. In my mind, we have a perfect system in place. It works well for us!

If possibly you're wondering why I chose to start my story with such gushing, gooey girly-stuff about Toby, all I can say is: treasure those you love and savor every single moment.

In a nutshell, they don't all last.

# Chapter 1

Krista

## Won't Drive a Minivan

Today is the day! My nerves are shot all to hell and back. I'm going to propose to Toby tonight. Okay, I realize this isn't the traditional way these things are customarily done, but here's the gist of it. Toby has asked me to marry him—not once but twice. He's done the *bended knee with ring in hand marriage proposal* twice during our relationship but as of yet we still aren't engaged.

The first time Toby proposed marriage was the evening of our college graduation. We had always known we would tie the knot one day. It was never a question of if, but when. The point of conflict was the 'when', which we'd never discussed at length, much less agreed upon. Once the festivities of our graduation had concluded and we were alone in the restaurant's garden area where a dinner in our honor had been held, it happened. Toby was so handsome with his hair freshly combed and adorned in his suit, which surprisingly color coordinated for a change. I honestly can't recall ever loving him more. He gently took my hand in his, reached into his jacket pocket, and pulled out a ring box while slowly dropping to one knee.

With the realization of what was forthcoming, a jolt of astonishment swept over me. Shocked was the emotion shooting through my brain. My inner thoughts kept repeating the same words over and over, *No, no, no! Ahh shit, shit! Don't do this, Toby! Please don't do this now.*

Toby continued, oblivious to my impending emotional breakdown. I loved Toby with my entire heart and would take a bullet for him. But—yes, here comes the but—I wasn't ready to get married yet.

“Krista Owens...I love and adore you with all of my heart. We've been together for years, and my love for you grows with each passing day. You're a beautiful and truly special woman, and I can't imagine spending my life without you. I'd be honored to have you as the mother of my children. Babe, I want to grow old with you. Will you please make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?”

The floodgates opened and tears began gliding down my face. It broke my heart to disappoint Toby by telling him I'm just not ready to be his wife. I was certain I was about to lose our relationship, and with that, I would also lose my best friend, lover, and soul mate.

I waited for Toby to rise so he could look directly into my eyes. I'm hoping with all my heart he'll realize the sincerity in what I am about to say.

“Toby, you know how much I love you. You have to know that, right? I'm flattered you want to marry me. Truly, I am. The thing is, well, *ahh*...it's just that I'm not ready to get married yet. We've just graduated, and our lives, our careers...everything, is up in the air. We should be settled and secure before taking such a huge step. That doesn't mean we can't be together as a couple, though, right? We can still live together and work toward our goal of becoming husband and wife. Can we do that?”

Toby hesitated and there was a silence as a series of emotions flitted across his face. Hurt, frustration, disappointment and, lastly, acceptance. Never anger though, because Toby didn't have an ill-tempered bone in his body. That's just the way he was built.

“Krista, I’ll wait however long it takes for you to be my wife. I’m not going anywhere. I love you now and I’ll love you forever. We’ll wait until you’re ready. This ring will be close at hand when you feel comfortable and the time is right. How about we go home and celebrate our graduating with honors?”

Which is exactly what we did. We celebrated most of the evening in our tiny one-bedroom off-campus apartment with walls thin enough to almost see through, using very loud music to, hopefully, block out the more ‘festive’ sounds emanating from our bedroom.

The second marriage proposal was presented the evening we signed final escrow closing papers on our small home. We were official homeowners...what a mind-blowing feeling that was! It was a gigantic step into adulthood for both of us.

Once again, I declined Toby’s invitation to be his wife. I felt we needed to get comfortable in our new home and replenish our savings account before accumulating the expenses of a wedding. The timing didn’t feel right. Toby was clearly disappointed, but accepted my decision. He was willing to wait however long it took for me to catch up to his mindset on the subject of matrimony.

This brings us to where we are today. Toby adores his job and is making a rather hefty income. I received an unexpected and generous salary increase this very afternoon. Our joint savings account has grown into a sizeable nest egg and we’ve settled nicely in our home, so there’s absolutely no reason not to seal the deal. My heart is telling me it’s the perfect time to tie the knot with the man I love.

Truth be told though, the major reason I’m having a change of heart is I feel my woman-eggs getting antsy with each passing day. It’s time to start creating those two point five kids. Perhaps Toby should give some thought to constructing a white picket fence in our front yard to go along with my little fantasy. However, you couldn’t pay me enough to drive a minivan. I wouldn’t be caught dead in one of those suburban housewife boxes with the ridiculous stick man figures plastered on the rear windows if my life depended on it. Oh hell no, that’s not happening. Toby maybe, but me...not in a million fucking years.

Toby just left the house for his customary evening run so I'm rushing around preparing for our big moment. Holy Cannoli, Toby's going to be blown away when I pop the question. The wine is chilling in the ice bucket with the delicate stemmed glasses arranged neatly on the coffee table. There's a trail of rose petals strewn from the living room floor, down the hallway, into our bedroom, and atop the bedspread. This evening will be a night to be treasured and remembered. It'll be a night to tell our children and grandchildren about.

I'm lighting the final candle in the dimly-lit room as Toby enters our living room. He pauses just inside the doorway to take in the transformation of our home from normal everyday living to the 'romantic, someone-is-sure-to-get-laid,' setup. A cheesy grin lights up his face as the realization that he's going to be a lucky man tonight sinks in and buries its mental anchor. We move toward each other, meeting in the middle of the room without a single word having yet been spoken.

Our eyes lock as I reach for his hands. I'm attempting to control my trembling as we stand facing each other, gently caressing each other's fingers. It's urgent I do this now before my nerves shatter into a million pieces.

Springing into action, I drop to one knee while maintaining eye contact with the love of my life. Taking a deep breath, I prepare myself for our lives to be forever changed from this moment forward, if all goes as planned.

"Toby, I love you so much. You are my best friend, my lover, and the man I want to be the father of my children. There is no other man I would rather spend the rest of my life with than you. Hopefully, I haven't missed the opportunity to become your wife. It's been said third time's a charm. This is the third proposal, right? So, what I'm wondering is... will you marry me?"

Oh holy Mary Mother of God, Toby frowns and releases my hands. What the fuck? Now he's wiping his palms down the sides of his face, clearly trying to decide how to respond. Now I realize how he must have felt when I declined his marriage proposals. It sucks big time ass. Here it comes, wait for it, and wait for it...

Toby's face is sporting a grim expression as he begins to speak, and my heart drops to my stomach.

"Here's the thing, Krista. It's just that...well..." I begin to tremble and my eyes are stinging with unshed tears.

"Oh, baby, come here. You know I'm just messing with you! I'll marry you. Of course I'll marry you! Nothing could make me happier. Finally—YES! Let's go start making those babies!"

With a loud whoop, Toby slings me over his shoulder and I'm being carried down the hallway toward our bedroom. He swings me in the doorway of our room a little too quickly because there is a loud thwack as my head connects solidly with the door. Not the most romantic of moments, but a goose egg isn't about to dampen the mood of our evening.

"Oh, babe, sorry! So sorry. Did that hurt?"

*Ouch! No duh!*

"No, it's fine. Didn't hurt. It's all good," I lied. Of course it hurt and I pretended the tears standing in my eyes were from unrequited love...not the area on my head I'm trying desperately not to fondle.

Toby pauses in front of his dresser to quickly retrieve my engagement ring, where it's been stored for a very long time. Placing me upright on my feet, my future husband slides the gorgeous ring onto my finger, where it has always belonged. He kisses my ring finger and we fall together on our bed. Toby mentions he should take a shower because he is sweaty from his run. A shower isn't necessary, because by the time this evening is over, Toby's going to be drenched in all kinds of messy sweat.

Toby tries to take control as usual, but tonight I want to be the lover in charge for our first go-around. There will be multiple sexcapades happening between these sheets tonight. That you can believe.

I whisper, "Wait, slow down, hold on. Let me enjoy you for a while, okay? How about you just lie still and allow me to savor you a little...yes?"

Toby's eyes snap open and a mischievous grin spreads across his face. In one quick motion, he slides off me and is on his back with both hands placed behind his head.

"I'm all yours. Anything you want, you know you don't have to ask me twice."

He's downright smirking at me now. He's ready (totally ready if you know what I mean) and waiting to be lavished with all my womanly bedroom expertise. Little does he realize what I have up my sleeve.

"Okay, babe, but there's just one rule: You can't touch me. Your hands must remain right there behind your head. Deal?"

"*Ahh* okay, but there isn't going to be any pain, right? No sneaking in tattoos or any shit like that. We've discussed limits. Tattoos are your thing, but I really don't like needles."

"Jesus, will you give it a rest? There won't be pain so stop analyzing. You're entering buzz-kill territory."

It's one of the drawbacks of loving a brainiac: they do tend to analyze every little thing into the ground and then dig it up to re-hash it over and over.

"Sorry, you're right...have your way with me. By all means, proceed with all you've got."

Now I have to get myself psyched again. Sheesh!

Climbing on top and straddling him below the ribcage, I leaned down, brushing my breasts against his chest as our mouths meet. The kiss begins softly, and when Toby attempts to insert his tongue in my mouth, I pull away.

I spread soft butterfly kisses across his face, working my way towards his neck. Reaching his ears, I take his earlobe into my mouth and gently suck and tug on it until Toby's breathing becomes slightly raspy. Approaching his neck again, I kiss and gently suck my way down to his chest, leaving pale red marks along the path. Arriving at his nipples, I take turns moving from one to the other, swirling my tongue in circles around the tips before sucking them into my mouth. Toby is squirming beneath me, however, his hands remain clasped behind his head as instructed.

I'm nowhere near finished with what I have planned. I whisper, "Baby, lie still and enjoy. There's more to experience. Relax...don't move."

I spread kisses across his chest and downward along his rock-hard stomach. Before arriving at the part of his body craving the most attention, I spread his legs and also shower kisses on the inside of his knees, working slowly up his thighs.

"Babe, you're killing me here." He moves and reaches out for me, so I sit up, cross my arms under my bare breasts and shoot him my notorious stink eye.

"What did we agree upon? You aren't supposed to touch me, right? Your hands are supposed to remain behind your head. Would you like me to stop? If you do, simply say the word."

"Oh, God no. Sorry, no way, don't stop. By all means proceed. Please don't stop. Have your way with me. I promise not to move my hands. I'm all yours...all of me."

Spreading his legs further apart, I inch my way up, again spreading kisses and little love bites onto his upper thighs as I get closer to his glorious manly goods. Sitting upright, I observe the man I love and see the naked desire in his eyes. I momentarily fondle my breasts to present him with a show I'm confident he'll enjoy (yes, Toby is a boob guy) then gradually lower myself to his magnificent cock. Toby audibly catches his breath as my tongue begins slowly circling the tip.

Gently grasping his balls in one hand, I grasp his thickness with the other. He gasps and clutches our headboard when I take him fully in my mouth, or at least as much of his length as possible. But true to his promise, he doesn't reach out to touch me. I'll give him credit; he's keeping to his part of the agreement. I've established a rhythm of gently massaging his balls while squeezing his shaft up and down to coincide with the movement of my tongue and mouth. I hollow my cheeks and increase the suction until I know Toby is on the verge of shooting his load in my mouth.

Here's where my plan is going to come into place. I'm familiar with my man and know exactly when he's on the brink of losing control. This is that time. A few seconds before Toby reaches his point of climax, I release him and remove my mouth. Furthermore, I climb off and move to sit beside him on our bed.

Glancing over at a bewildered fiancé, I begin to chatter. “Gosh, you know, Toby, I’m really hungry right now...totally thirsty, too. Maybe we could get up and make some snacks, or better yet, uncork that bottle of wine. I’m pretty tired, too. Perhaps it’s time to get some shut-eye. What do you think, babe?”

His eyes are like saucers. “What do I think? Krista, what the fuck? Are you kidding me here? Seriously? My dick is about to explode and you want to go munch on some cheerios and drink wine or some such shit?”

At this point, I can’t contain myself any longer. Attempting to speak between my spurts of laughter, I explain to him, “Ha! Gotcha! Sucks to have your feelings played with, doesn’t it? Payback's a bitch, right? Getting you back for dicking me around when I proposed to you. How’s it feel?”

The light suddenly switches on in Toby’s smart brainy head. Oh, he totally gets it now. Before I realize what's happening, he has me flat on my back as I'm being tickled silly. He knows I'm wickedly ticklish and he’s taking full advantage. We're flailing about on the bed, wrestling and laughing so hard, tears begin streaming from my eyes.

Shortly after, we find ourselves locked in a passionate embrace, the likes of which we’ve never experienced in all of our years together. It feels as if we're consummating our union as a married couple. The marriage may not have been endorsed and officiated on paper yet, but in our hearts, I believe we both truly felt as one in that moment.