

ARC

**TORRID TEASERS
VOLUME 13:
SHADOWS OVER SEA VIEW & MIDNIGHT IN
HIS GARDEN**

by

Susan M. Sailors

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT
TORRID TEASERS VOLUME 13:
SHADOWS OVER SEA VIEW &
MIDNIGHT IN HIS GARDEN

Add Here

Dedication

To David

SHADOWS OVER SEA VIEW

by

Susan M. Sailors

Victoria stood motionless in the foyer of the great Gothic mansion. She'd only seen such high ceilings in churches. George Patterson, her grandmother's lawyer, continued to walk ahead of her, but turned when he noticed she didn't follow.

"Pretty crazy, isn't it?" he said. "I couldn't have rattled around here all by myself—I'd have gone nuts."

"It's very beautiful though," Victoria said.

"And dusty," George said. He looked up at the chandelier. "It's a pain to change those light bulbs, too. I can't imagine that thing lit up all by candles."

Victoria smiled at the image. She imagined candles everywhere, giving the room a soft, romantic glow.

"Office is through here," George said, resuming his walk to a door by the grand staircase.

The ceilings of the office were not quite as high, yet still very impressive. Most of the books looked old, but a few shelves by the door contained more contemporary volumes.

Victoria sat down at the desk. George laid out all kinds of papers before her and explained what each one was and where it was kept in the enormous desk.

"You've got accountants and me to take care of most of this, but it's good for you to know what everything is and where it is, too," he said.

Victoria nodded. "Does anyone work here? Any staff?" she asked.

"There was a maid, but she retired about six months ago, and Mrs. Macleod never did hire anyone else," he said. "Only the north wing is open now, so it's really not that much to take care of."

"Which wing is the haunted one?" she asked.

George sighed. "Well, if you're interested in all that palaver, it's the east one," he said. "Ask any local kid and each one will tell you a different story."

"Is the ghost a member of the family?" she asked, unable to resist. She remembered hints from her grandmother, and some rumors that had floated around town, but she'd never been told the whole story.

"That'll be depending on who you ask," he said. "I don't know anything about it myself."

"My grandmother believed it though?" she asked hopefully. "Didn't she?"

George considered his answer for a moment. "She never came right out and said so, but I rather think she did," he said. "She could be funny about things concerning this place sometimes."

Victoria saw she wasn't going to get much from him, so she asked, "What's it called again? The house, I mean."

"Sea View," he replied.

"Sea View," she repeated. "That's lovely. And you can see the water from here, can't you?"

She stood up and looked out the window behind her. About fifty feet from the back of the house, there was a sharp drop-off into the sea. She could hear the waves from where she stood, even with the window closed. A sharp clank caught her attention and she turned around.

"Those are all the keys," George said. "I've got to get back for a meeting, but I'll take your bags up to the guest room in the north wing."

"Thank you," she said.

"Will you be needing anything else today?" he asked.

Victoria shook her head. "I don't think so. I'll drive into town later and get some dinner and pick up a few things," she said.

George nodded. "The people in town are real nice. Some of them will tease you with old stories about this place, but don't let that bother you," he said.

"I won't," she said. "I might just go looking for them." Now that she'd inherited Sea View, she wanted to find out all its secrets. She'd never had any kind of ghostly encounter before, but she thought that her own family home would be the most likely place for something so exciting to happen.

George laughed as he left the room. "Suit yourself, Miss Macleod," he said. "I'll see you around."

"Goodbye," she said. Victoria turned back to the window and opened it. It didn't stick at all and she imagined her grandmother sitting at her desk with it open to let in the breeze from the sea. She closed her eyes as the wind caressed her face and fluttered through her black hair. As she stood there, she felt more relaxed than she had in months. She suddenly snapped out of her revelry and whirled around, touching her neck. She was certain that someone's fingers had touched the back of her neck, just at the nape, working up into hair. But there was no one there. As soon as she caught her breath, she smiled.

"You're doing it already," she said to herself. "Kathryn said you would."

At the thought of her friend, she picked up the phone and dialed her at work.

"Department of Engineering, this is Kathryn," her friend answered in a neutral tone.

"Kathryn? It's Victoria," she said. "Can you talk?"

"Of course I can talk!" Kathryn said, sounding thrilled to be brought out of her drab workday. "How is it? Is it gorgeous? Huge? Dusty?" She giggled. "Haunted?"

"Very gorgeous, exceedingly huge, only slightly dusty," Victoria said. "And most definitely haunted."

"Really?" Kathryn said.

"Oh yes," Victoria answered. "My east wing is occupied by an unknown ghost. I'll find out more about him later."

"So certain it's a him?" Kathryn teased.

"How could it not be?" Victoria said. "You should see this place. Your dear architect would love it."

"I bet he would," Kathryn said. "But he'd want to redo it and take away all its charm. I'll tell him hands off when we come up to visit."

"How is married life?" Victoria asked wistfully.

"Wonderful," Kathryn said. "I do miss living with you though. We're gonna run up some major phone bills with you up in the hills of Maine."

"I'm sure we will," Victoria said. She already missed her friend, but she was very excited about her new adventure.

"Will you call me tomorrow night? I've got to get back to this end of the week paperwork," Kathryn said.

"Sure thing," Victoria said. "Bye."

"Bye," Kathryn said. "Hope that ghost is cute and single."

"Oh Kathryn," Victoria began, but her friend had already hung up. She wished she could have told her about what had happened when she was standing at the window, but now it would have to wait 'til tomorrow night.

Victoria left the office and made her way up the thirty steps that led to the first landing. She stood for a moment, pondering which way to go, but opted to head straight to her room before doing any exploring.

The guest room was simply furnished with a bed, nightstand, bureau, dresser, and chair, but the furniture was the very best in contemporary reproductions. Everything was elegant and delicate, the

walls a soft yellow and the furniture a rich cream. The bathroom was a light green, with fluffy towels on the counter and scented soaps and candles everywhere. One of the candles was burning, and the air smelled musky. The flame flickered suddenly, as though a draft had made its way through the room, even though Victoria saw no windows. As she turned back to the bedroom, she felt a chill go up her spine. Moving quickly to the window, she threw open the curtains to let the sunlight in. But clouds had blocked the sun, and very little light reached her where she stood. She picked up her purse and decided to head into town.

* * * *

She was exhausted when she returned home and headed right for bed after putting her groceries away. She stowed her clothes in random drawers, not even filling half of them. As she lay down, she knew she would be asleep in no time. The bed was incredibly soft and the comforter engulfed her in its warmth completely.

"Victoria," a voice called.

"What?" Victoria said in her sleep.

"Victoria," the voice repeated.

Victoria opened her eyes and found herself standing on the cliff by the sea.

"Victoria," whispered a man's voice, very close to her ear.

She tried to turn, but he was right behind her, holding her.

"Isn't it beautiful? Don't you want to stay here forever?" the man asked her, his voice husky and intimate.

"Yes," she whispered. She tried to turn her head, but she couldn't see his face. "Who are you?"

"That's not important," he said, his mouth close to her ear, his hand caressing her cheek.

"This is a dream," she said.

"It could be a very pleasant one, if you'd let it." His hands moved down her body.

"Let me see you," she said.

He held her tight against his hard body. His erection felt too good to be a dream. She felt heat course through her body. Ashamed yet excited, she tried to turn and see him. He distracted her by bringing his lips to her neck and cupping her breasts in his hands.

"Is this really a dream?" she asked.

"The best kind," he mumbled against her hot skin. His lips slid down her back as he pulled her nightgown up slowly, his hands caressing her breasts and thighs.

His hands became more insistent. "You're so warm, so alive." His fingers found her clit and he moved back up to whisper in her ear, "You feel so good, Victoria."

She couldn't respond. No man had ever touched her like that. She was suddenly convinced that her former lovers had known nothing about touching women. This man's hand felt so good, and he knew exactly how to caress and stroke. He was right—this was the best kind of dream.

"I want you so much," he whispered.

"I'm all yours," she gasped.

"You will be soon."

"I'm yours now," she moaned as an orgasm coursed through her body. She pressed her body against his, wanting to see him, feel his arms around her, look into his eyes and show him what he had done to her.

"Soon," he whispered. "But not tonight."

He released her and she turned, but she saw nothing but the wall of her bedroom. Victoria jumped out of bed and looked outside to where she thought she had been standing. Her legs were shaky, and she reached down and felt the wet heat between her legs. Moonlight spilled over the cliff, casting eerie shadows all around, but there was no one there. And no reason for anyone to be there. She moved back to the bed slowly, unable to believe how real her dream had been.

The air definitely felt different. It was cool and hazy, as if the misty moonlight had drifted into her room and engulfed the bed. She ran her hands over her neck, as if her skin might still be warm where he had touched and kissed her. The rest of her was certainly overheated.

She settled into bed again, pulling the covers up to her chin and wondering what her mystery man looked like. Had she dreamed of a sexy stranger because of her own imagination, or had it been something else, something to do with the house? She puzzled over this for a time, but soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Despite the heavy slumber she had slipped into, Victoria woke just after dawn, unable to get back to sleep. She showered and went down to the kitchen, feeling relaxed yet alert. She felt something different in the air. She paused for a moment and set her strawberry-print mug down on the counter. It was as though there was a smell in the air that she couldn't identify or single out, yet she didn't think it was a new smell or anything like that. The house genuinely *felt* different. The answer floated just beyond her consciousness as she distractedly moved about the kitchen.

After a good, strong cup of coffee, Victoria explored the house. Most of the rooms were nearly empty and obviously hadn't been used for years. When she came to the east wing, she was surprised to find the door unlocked and ajar. The corridor was dark, yet candles lined the walls, candles that looked as if they had been used recently. All the curtains were drawn and every door was closed. The large double doors at the end of the hall caught her attention and she walked slowly over to them, examining the pictures that lined the walls. She didn't know who any of the people in the portraits were, yet they still exuded a palpable presence in the hall, almost as if they were watching her.

When she reached the doors, she carefully grasped one of the glass doorknobs and turned it slowly. The air inside the room was cooler than in the hall, and she could see candles glowing against the far wall. She hesitated in the doorway.

"Is someone here?" she called. "I hope you realize that you're trespassing." She tried to sound confident, but it didn't come through in her voice. A draft blew past her shoulder, moving her hair aside.

Victoria stepped into the room, carefully scanning it as she moved towards the candles. Those candles couldn't have been burning for long, and that meant someone was in the house. She should have called the sheriff, but something pulled her forward.

"Someone must be here," she said softly. "Why are you here? Are you trying to frighten me? What do you want?"

"I want you," a voice whispered in her ear. "I want you to stay with me forever."

Victoria jumped and backed into the table the candelabrum stood on. The voice was the same as the man in her dream. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Silence was her only answer.

"Can't you tell me?" she asked softly. "Are you a ghost?" Blushing, she added, "You seemed real enough last night."

"Did you enjoy that? You certainly seemed to. You looked so beautiful when you woke up."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she managed to ask, "You were watching me?"

"I watch you all the time."

Victoria could feel her heart pounding. How could this man enter her dream and watch her all the time? Was she really talking to a ghost? She thought about all the psychic investigation shows she'd ever seen and tried to remain calm and objective. Memories of her orgasm the night before were not helping.

She thought for a moment. "Can't you tell me who you are? Am I supposed to spend the rest of my life playing Gothic guessing games?"

"You'll find out soon enough," the man said. He sighed. "Tonight perhaps."

A gust of wind came from nowhere and blew the candles out. Victoria finally succumbed to the rational voice in her brain and dashed for the door.

That night, she stayed out until the diner in the hotel closed. She wasn't exactly afraid, but she was apprehensive about her discovery. It hadn't been just a dream. There really was a spirit of some kind in her house. That wasn't as threatening as a trespasser...and yet, maybe a ghost could be more dangerous than a real person. The sheriff certainly couldn't arrest a ghost, and the last thing Victoria wanted was for the locals to think she was crazy. Yet the effect her dream man had had on her . . . she would do anything to feel his touch again.

She'd called Kathryn from the pay phone at the hotel, but she hadn't mentioned anything about the ghost. Kathryn would never believe she had actually had any sort of supernatural encounter, and it would worry her. She'd convince her husband that her friend had a stalker and they'd blaze a trail up there with police in tow. Victoria didn't feel that she was really in any danger, unless she counted the dangerous way her heart had skipped when she'd heard him, felt him near. She tried to shake away such thoughts as she locked the front door behind her and stood in the foyer.

Everything around her was quiet and still. The doors to the east wing, though she didn't go too near them, seemed to be securely shut. She hurried to her room and took a long hot bath before slipping into bed.

As she lay in bed half asleep, she felt something brush her hand. She pulled it away and rolled over. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder and she sat up quickly. As she fumbled for a light, she felt the firm hard body of a man pressed against her back. This was no ghost. She tried to scream, but his hand came over her mouth.

"Don't be afraid, Victoria," he said. His lips touched her neck. "No one could hear you anyway," he added with a touch of menace. He moved his hand away from her mouth.

She knew his voice: and a chill ran through her body. She didn't understand how he could be lying beside her and touching her. Surely a ghost couldn't do that?

"Who are you?" she demanded. "As if I haven't had to ask you many times already."

He ran his hand through her hair and touched her cheek with his finger. "My name is Quentin," he said. He kissed her shoulder softly and an electric jolt surged through her.

"And you're a ghost?" she asked as his hands moved over her shoulders slowly. "You feel pretty solid for a ghost. This isn't a dream." It felt even better than the dream, but she tried to push that thought away. She couldn't let him control her.

"No. I'm not a ghost, and you're wide awake."

"Then you better give me a good explanation before I call the sheriff." She didn't know how she would do this, or what she would say, but Quentin didn't have to know that.

"How's this?" He kissed her neck as he had the night before.

"Let me see you," she pleaded. She felt her desire to escape drifting away as the desire to see and touch him took over. She reached for the light, but he grabbed her hand.

"Not yet." The room seemed to grow darker, as if clouds were blocking the moonlight.

He moved closer to her, turning her head so he could kiss her cheek. She reached up and touched his face, trying to picture what he would look like. His body felt so good against hers. She knew that this was no dream, that it was completely crazy, but she gave in anyway, wanting nothing more than to make love with this man.

His lips lingered on her neck, as they always seemed to, but he slowly moved down to her breasts, caressing them with his lips, teasing them with his tongue. Her nipples hardened, begging for his caress. He slowly circled one dark bud, and she arched against him, tangling her fingers in his hair.

"Your heart is pounding," he said as his lips moved lower.

"That's your fault." Her breasts felt heavy, and the nipples tingled, longing to feel his lips again.

"Yes, I'm always causing trouble," he said as he kissed her thighs.

His fingers found her clit and she shivered, remembering her dream from the night before. He rubbed slowly as his lips came closer and closer to her pussy. His hot breath made her writhe, but he held her firmly.

"There's no escape for you, my dear."

"I wouldn't want to." All she wanted was him. She didn't know him, didn't understand what was happening, and yet her desire for him grew with each second.

"That's what I'm counting on." His tongue moved slowly over her, and she whimpered. His tongue delved deeper as he continued to taste her, to drive her wild. He moved away for a moment and she felt his teeth graze her thigh. She shivered, amazed at how alive she felt under his touch. He laved her clit with his tongue as first one, then two fingers began stroking in and out of her pussy.

"Quentin," she moaned.

His fingers pressed deeper, finding the spot that would soon send her over the edge. As his fingers worked inside her, he moved beside her and held her body against his. His breath was hot on her neck, and his lips soothed as his teeth grazed the skin erotically. She turned her head and tried to kiss him, but he moved his face away. She suddenly realized her had never kissed her on the lips. Her mind spun as her orgasm built, and she could hardly concentrate on anything but how good he made her feel.

"Quentin?" she gasped, finding it hard to breathe as his fingers drove her wild.

He didn't answer, but her climax soon pushed all worries from her mind. Her entire body pulsed with pleasure. She moaned as her legs shook and the blood pounded in her ears. She ran her hands over his hard, muscled body, trying to get closer to him.

"Quentin?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Why wouldn't you kiss me?" A kiss seemed insignificant compared to what he'd just done to her, but she'd wanted that personal connection with him and couldn't understand why he'd deny her.

He was silent, and she didn't think he was going to answer her question, but then he sighed and said, "I'll explain some day."

That wasn't enough for her. "And I have to settle for that?"

He laughed. "Planning a future with a man you've never even seen?"

She was so frustrated, she didn't feel embarrassed at his teasing. She ran one hand over his face. "I wish I could see you. Maybe I'd understand you better." *Maybe I'd understand what you are*, she thought.

He snuggled into her neck one last time and kissed her shoulder. "Pleasant dreams."

She reached up to touch his face, but he was gone. She turned and looked all around the room. He wasn't there, but a strange mist seemed to fill the air, as if she had left the window open and the fog had rolled in. But the door and the windows were closed. Victoria touched her shoulder where he had left his kiss. She was almost furious with herself for not fighting him, but something deep inside her had wanted him to stay. She sighed and rolled over. She'd had another orgasm with a man who very likely wasn't human. He'd appeared from nowhere and disappeared just as quickly and mysteriously. He had to be a ghost, though he'd felt solid and human to her. But an ordinary man couldn't have dissolved into a mist.

She looked around the room, moving her hand through the cool air, but the mist had vanished, just as he had. One thing that bothered her more than she wanted to admit was the fact that he had pulled away from her at the moment they should have been the closest. The pleasure had been amazing, but she wanted more. She wanted a man who was more than just an erotic fling every night. She wanted to make love to him, not just have him pleasure her. Satisfying orgasms could fulfill some needs, but could all her other needs be met by a man who might be a ghost? Or something even stranger? She knew nothing about him, yet she wanted him. She wanted to know him, and help him,

and in a way that was more threatening to her heart.

Victoria drifted in and out of sleep the rest of the night, floating between vague dreams and memories of her encounters with Quentin. As soon as the sun rose, she got out of bed and headed for the kitchen. She paused briefly before the doors to the east wing and almost reached out for the handle, but pulled back suddenly. She needed more answers before she went in there again.

* * * *

Later that evening, Victoria settled down with the family Bible and a cup of Earl Grey tea. Skimming the family tree in front, she soon found the name Quentin Allister linked with Sophia Allister Macleod. Sophia was the first wife of Victoria's great-great-grandfather, but she apparently died young and they had had no children. Sophia and Quentin were both born in 1795, twins obviously, but while Sophia's death in 1815 was given, Quentin's was not. A large question mark in darker ink filled the space.

"So what happened to you, Quentin? Did you just disappear?" she asked aloud. Ghosts needed to have died at some point, unless there was something else Victoria didn't know about the paranormal. Though the number of things she didn't know or understand seemed to be multiplying with every encounter she had with Quentin.

She turned to the back of the Bible and found several notations in a very neat hand. She scanned the entire page but found no other mention of Quentin or Sophia except the date of Sophia's marriage.

Victoria sipped her tea slowly, listening to the wind howl outside the window.

"Do you really want to know?" a voice asked.

Victoria nearly dropped her teacup. She looked all around the room, but no one was there.

"Who's here?" she called, even though she thought she knew the answer. She ran from the room, up to the east wing, and found the door open slightly, as she had expected. She reached for the knob, but a hand reached out for hers first.

"I'm right here, Victoria," he said, pressing his body against hers.

"Quentin?" she asked. She hadn't seen him in the hall. How had he appeared behind her out of nowhere?

"Yes," he said, whispering directly into her ear.

"I already know you're no ghost. Can't you explain things now?" she said, very aware of the heat of his body moving against hers.

"You're right," he said, pulling away from her, but still holding her firmly. "I'm something else."

"What do you mean?" she asked, almost afraid of what he might say.

He drew her to him and pushed back her hair, lowering his face to her neck. He trailed light kisses over her neck and shoulder and pressed his lips against her pulse. "Can't you guess?"

Her heart began to pound as her blood roared in her ears. His lips pressed harder against her throat, and she felt one sharp fang move over her pulse. "No! That can't be!" Victoria gasped and tried to pull away, but he held her tightly. Her mind raced even as her body began reacting to him. The kisses on her neck, the mist in her room, the way he entered her dreams and vanished into thin air—how could she believe in ghosts and yet not have guessed what he truly was?

"I need you, Victoria," he said.

"No!" she cried. "You're a vampire!" She was stunned to hear the word on her own lips, but she knew it had to be true. It explained everything he had done since she'd arrived.

"Yes, I am, but you could be my salvation," he said. "Please say you'll help me."

"I don't believe that. How could I help you? I don't know anything about the occult or the paranormal. You just want—" she said.

He cut her off. "If all I wanted was your body, would I be asking for help? I could have had you already, but I've held back. If I'd wanted your blood, I could have had it last night," he said.

Victoria still felt afraid and untrusting, and he continued to hold her so close that she couldn't turn around. "Let me see you. Now that I know the truth, can't you let me see you?"

He released her, and she turned to look at him. He was tall, with light brown hair and smoky eyes. His eyes reminded her how well they knew each other, and she turned away from his intense gaze.

"I've lived this way for two hundred years," he said. "All I want is to be normal again, to live a normal life as a real man, not some loathsome thing." He spat the last words out and turned from her in frustration.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because you make me want to be cured," he said, turning and drawing closer to her. "At first, I only thought to seduce you when I heard of your coming, but once I saw you, something about you moved me. I didn't want to use you and discard you—I wanted to love you. It wasn't just your beauty. I felt something pulling me to you."

"Do you know how phony that sounds? Lonely girl moves to an old estate and finds a dark, mysterious lover who sweeps her off her feet?"

He smiled wickedly. "Haven't I done just that?"

"I suppose you've been living on love since I came here?" she spat, angry because she was ashamed of how she reacted to him and because she wanted to believe every word he said.

"I'm not here to dazzle you with my rhetoric. I don't kill—not anymore. I can survive very well without causing anyone's death," he said sharply. His face softened. "I meant something different when I spoke of being normal. I want to walk out into the sun with you. I want to wake up next to you and reach for you. I spent so long hardening myself to human feelings, but you destroyed all that when you came. When I held you in my arms, I knew I never wanted to let you go."

"Is that why you held back with me? Why you wouldn't kiss me?"

"Yes. I wanted to hide what I was, but it's impossible. I didn't want to lose control and make you what I am. I'd rather lose you." He touched her cheek. "I pulled away last night because I was afraid I would bite you. There would have been no hope for us then."

"What would I have to do? Wouldn't you die? You should have died long ago," she said. She didn't understand how a vampire could be cured. But she wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe every word he said.

"I won't die," he said. "You must see that my sister is buried in hallowed ground."

"What?" Victoria asked, incredulous. "Sophia? I don't understand. Isn't she in the family graveyard?" She had a vision of herself being hauled through town to the county sheriff's office for grave robbing.

"Sophia made me what I am, after she was attacked by another vampire," he said. Victoria couldn't help cringing at the word as he went on. "I found her on the cliff outside, still alive. The family called in a specialist who, by chance, knew what she was. When she died, he took her body away." Quentin paused. "Though not before she claimed her first victim." He bowed slightly to indicate himself. "He said it was plague and that the body would have to be burned so the family would not interfere. He staked her and buried her, and then came looking for me. I fled this place until long after he was dead."

"I still don't see how burying her in hallowed ground will cure you," she said.

"Because she made me, my curse can only end if she is dead and buried in hallowed ground," he said. "I studied it for years, wanting to be cured, but my solitude wore on me, and I gave up. I fully surrendered to what I am for a long time." His eyes held an unfathomable sadness, and Victoria reached out to him. He pulled away.

"I wouldn't trust me too fully. I want you so badly I might lose the control I've had over my baser desires all these years. We shouldn't be together again until I am cured," he warned. "Will you help

me?" he added quietly.

"What must I do?" she asked. She didn't know how she was going to accomplish this task, but she knew she had to try, for herself and for him.

"I will show you where she is," he said. "Tomorrow, you must get holy water from the church, the one near the lake, and bring it there. Then sprinkle it around her grave and say a prayer over it. I'll leave a book on your desk tonight."

Victoria nodded and followed him out into the night, wondering if she would follow this man anywhere he led her.

* * * *

The next morning, as she stood alone by Sophia's grave, Victoria felt a little foolish. She almost believed she might have imagined or dreamed all of it. She remembered Quentin's face as he'd peered down at this spot of earth the night before and that gave her the strength to go on. Even if this didn't work, he needed this on some level, needed to feel his sister was at rest.

She had tried to call Kathryn to talk about what was going on in her life, but her line had been busy, which was probably best. She still didn't know what to tell her friend.

As she said the Latin words that would give Sophia peace, the sun broke through the clouds, its warmth giving her hope. Once she had finished, she stood silently with her eyes closed. Then she hurried back to Sea View.

When she arrived back at the great house, all was silent and still. The house felt empty. She rushed up to the east wing, but the door was locked. She pounded on it, but Quentin didn't answer. Victoria screamed his name, but still received no reply. She fought back frustrated tears and fled from the house.

As she stood on the cliffs, the sun rose higher and higher. The wind swept over her and the waves pounded the rocks below her. She stared into the sea, mesmerized.

"How could you believe all that?" she asked herself. "You're just a repressed old maid rambling around an old house and having erotic fantasies." She shook her head and wiped the tears that had coursed down her face. A hand touched hers and she gasped.

"I hope those are tears of joy," a voice said.

Quentin pulled her to him and smiled. "You did it, my beautiful girl," he said. He bent to kiss her, but she pulled away.

"Victoria? What's wrong?" he asked, drawing back.

"You're real," she said. She looked at the sun. "It's daytime, yet you're out here."

"Of course," he said, laughing. "You saved me!"

She looked up at him and reached a hand up to touch his face. He kissed her palm.

"I am very real," he said. "And very human. Now the night *and* the day will belong to us. And I can finally do all the things I've been dreaming of doing to you."

He bent his head again and she didn't resist him. The kiss was slow and sweet, but she could feel that familiar heat in the caress of his lips.

She looked up into his eyes. "Were you really a vampire?"

"Why do you think I kept kissing your neck so much?"

She narrowed her eyes in mock suspicion. "That proves nothing."

"Care to spend the evening curled up by the fire with some very old family albums?"

"That sounds quite lovely." She had to laugh. "My best friend will never believe this."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "Just tell her you've met a charming older man with old world manners. She'll go mad with jealousy."

Victoria laughed and brought her mouth to his for another long and satisfying kiss.

MIDNIGHT IN HIS GARDEN

by

Susan M. Sailors

Emily put her bag in the trunk and walked back to the house to say goodbye to her family. She was halfway up the front walk when she heard the screaming.

"This was the worst Christmas ever! Why do you always have to be like this?" her sister Stacy yelled.

Her brother Brian yelled back, "You know what this is really about. Your idiot boyfriend was rude to mom, and I'm not going to stand for it. You act like it's mom's fault and it isn't. I'm tired of you making excuses for him, and even more tired of everyone else making excuses for you. You're twenty-five and you act like you're thirteen!"

"You are such a jerk! Damn it, momma, help me!"

Emily sat down on a stone bench and pulled her legs close to her body.

"Both of you need to rein it in right now! Look what you're doing to your mother!" her father yelled.

Emily could hear her mom sobbing. She wanted to go inside and help in some way, but nothing she did ever actually helped. She tried to be a calm voice of reason at times like this, but her attempts were only met with accusations of how she just didn't understand. Emily was angry at Brian and Stacy for fighting like this at yet another family gathering. But she was also angry at herself for even coming. She'd driven seven hours to be there, and this had been the result. She shook her head and tried to ignore the harsh words coming from the house. Mom wanted everyone to be together on holidays, so she had insisted all three of her children come home. Graduate school and a job had taken Emily to the next state, but no one considered that a very good excuse. Brian and Stacy only lived an hour away from the small town where they had all grown up, but her parents didn't seem to understand the difference. Though they had never been a close, loving family, her mom insisted on pretending they always had been, now that her children were all grown up.

Emily looked at the window, wondering if things were going to start breaking soon. She looked down at the rocks around the bench and thought back over all the holidays that had turned out the exact same way. She came home to avoid being harassed by her parents, but even the briefest of stays tended to be much worse than nagging phone calls and other guilt-inducing ploys.

"If only I could get out of here, just get away from all this," she muttered to herself, wishing she could get away with leaving without saying good-bye. But that would only result in a phone call from one or both parents, telling her how selfish she was for not wanting to be with her family.

Something inside the house crashed against the wall and shattered.

"This is certainly no place for such a beautiful woman."

Emily looked up and saw an incredibly handsome man standing beside her. He had wild blond hair with pale hints of purple and blue in it. He was dressed in black leather and deep purple velvet. His eyes were bright blue, and Emily had to admit she'd never seen anyone so sexy before.

"Who are you?" she asked. Guys like him didn't live in small towns like Red Rose.

"My name is Garren, and I'm here to grant your wish." He smiled at her. "It will be my pleasure, in fact."

"Grant my wish?" Did this guy think she was as crazy as he looked just because she'd been talking to herself?

He smiled. "You said you wanted to get away from all of this. I can give you that. I can give you everything you desire."

Emily stood up. "Okay, I don't know who you are, but my brother and father are right inside the house. You don't seem dangerous, but you just can't go around walking into people's yards and

saying stuff like that.” She paused and looked at the gate. “How did you get in? That gate creaks horribly.” She was beginning to feel unnerved by the fact that she hadn’t heard him or been aware of him until he was standing right next to her.

Garren took a few steps toward her. “I didn’t come in through the gate.”

Emily backed away. “I’m going to get my father now. You’d better leave if you don’t want to talk to him or the police.” She turned to run into the house, which wasn’t there anymore.

She collided with a rose bush and stumbled back. Garren caught her.

“You’ll thank me eventually.” He set her on her feet again. “And I’m certain you’ll love it here.”

Emily closed her eyes. She couldn’t really be seeing what she was seeing. She was in a garden, and it definitely was not the one her mother and Stacy had planted years earlier. Unbelievably tall rose bushes encircled the lush green lawn and the stone path she stood on. Beyond that, she could see tall trees and hanging vines and what seemed like miles of multi-colored flowers.

“Where am I?” she asked, looking up at him.

“You’re in my kingdom now.”

“You’re a king?” That might explain his outfit, but it didn’t help her deal with the fact that her parents’ house had disappeared.

“King of the Goblins, king of the Fey, lord of all you see, and at your command.” He bowed to her.

She didn’t know if she was supposed to bow back, and part of her wondered if he was teasing her, so she simply asked, “Where are we?”

“This is Haven, the world you’ve always known existed.”

She shook her head. “What are you talking about? I’ve never heard of Haven.”

“Today isn’t the first time you’ve wished for someone to come and take you away.”

“I made no such wish.” She had, kind of, but that this was definitely *not* what she had meant.

“Maybe this time you didn’t say the exact words, but I felt the call from your heart. You’ve never fit in with your family, and you thought moving away would help, but nothing has changed. All your life you’ve tried to escape, and now I’ve finally granted your wish.” He smiled at her as if he expected her to instantly believe every word he’d said and thank him for saving her.

“Well, now I wish to go home.” She didn’t think it would do much good, but being firm with Garren seemed to be her best option. “If you really want to give me all I desire, you’ll send me back, because that is exactly what I desire.”

He shook his head. “That’s not so easy. I can’t just let you go. If you want to leave, you have to make a deal with me, and I’m not terribly inclined to let you go.”

“Why not?”

“Emily,” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and leaning forward as though was telling her a secret. “I don’t just go around kidnapping women. This is what you wanted. I’ve been watching you for a long time.”

Emily continued looking around. Beyond the garden she could see mountains and a lake, a forest and a small town. Off in the distance she saw a shining castle.

“I must be dreaming this. I didn’t wake up at all this morning. The fight was a dream. It’s all a dream.” She turned back to Garren.

“If that’s the case, why can’t you wake up?” he asked. “Isn’t this the point where everyone wakes up?”

She smiled at him. “Why would I want to wake up when a man like you is around?”

He gazed into her eyes for a moment and smiled back, but he soon pulled away. “I won’t lie and say I’m not very interested in giving you your every fantasy right now, but this isn’t the right time. I brought you here for a reason, Emily.”

“I’ll bet you did,” she said seductively. She’d been right before—guys like Garren didn’t exist in

Red Rose, and part of her doubted guys like him really existed anywhere. For her first erotic dream, she wasn't doing half bad. She could have done without the fighting prologue though.

He crossed his arms, looking frustrated. "You don't understand. You wouldn't act like this if you knew this wasn't a dream."

Emily stopped smiling. "How can you know that?"

"Because I know you. I've been watching you for years, my dear, as I said earlier."

Emily felt her face drain of color as everything hit home. "Send me home. I want to go home."

"I can't do that," he said softly.

"What do you mean?" she asked angrily. "You brought me here. I'm sure you can send me back. If you're really king of everything here, you must be more powerful than any silly fairy tale laws!"

"Magic doesn't work that way."

She rolled her eyes and glared at him, tired of his silly head games. "There's no such thing as magic."

He laughed. "So you can believe you're in another world talking to the King of Goblins and Faeries, but you can't believe in magic?"

She tried to swallow the lump forming in her throat. "You said I could make a deal with you."

"Yes. Are you interested now?"

She knew she didn't have much choice. "Yes."

He unfolded his arms and turned away from her. He paced for a few moments before turning back to her with a smile. "I think I have an idea that will work to both our advantages."

He seemed far too smug to her, and she felt tempted to throw something at him. "I somehow doubt that."

"Do you want to hear it, or should I come up with something harder?"

She sighed. "Just tell me."

"Stay here with me until midnight tomorrow night. At that time, I'll ask you a question. If you say yes, you'll stay here with me forever. But if you say no, I'll send you back home and you'll remember none of this."

"I can't stay here until tomorrow night!" Her mind filled with visions of her mother running around frantic and her father calling the police. "My parents are probably already wondering what happened to me. They're gonna think some lunatic kidnapped me when I took my bag out to my car." She raised her eyebrows at her own words, hoping she was wrong about the lunatic part as, in a way, that was exactly what had happened to her.

Garren smiled as if he knew something she didn't. "I wouldn't worry about that."

"Why not? I'll never hear the end of this, not with my mother."

"Well, for the moment, you don't exist in that world. You were never born."

She stared at him for a long moment. "What?"

"You cannot exist in both worlds. The moment you arrived here, everyone in your world forgot you."

As if they ever remembered me except when I did something wrong, she thought. "How could you do that?" she asked. "They're my family. You can't just do something like that to them by snapping your fingers." For all she knew, he could do just that, but that wasn't the issue. Even if she had wanted someone to come and save her all her life, he couldn't do something like that without asking. She didn't care if it made her a horrible person, but she had to admit she wasn't angry about her family forgetting her, if they had indeed done so. She was angry because this man was messing with her life.

He tried to calm her down. "I can't control it. That's just the way things work here."

"But if you let me go, everything will be okay?" Her life wasn't perfect, but at least it was hers. She could work out the problems with her horrid family on her own. If she ever got back to them.

"You will find yourself sitting on that bench again, wishing to escape. But you'll have lost your

chance forever, so you'd best choose carefully."

Her own reluctance surprised her. She didn't even know what kind of chance she'd be throwing away, but something made her want to hold onto it. "So I just wait it out and you promise to send me home?"

"I don't plan on us just sitting around, but that is one way of putting it."

She smoothed her hair back, trying to stay calm and think clearly. "You said you brought me here for a purpose." As she looked around the garden, she didn't see anything that unusual, but she couldn't deny the surreal atmosphere. She couldn't tell if this place really was magic in any way, but if it was, she wanted to know why Garren wanted her here.

"Did I?" he said, scratching his head and looking into the sky. "I think I might have said something like that."

Her anger surfaced again. "You certainly did, so don't try to deny it now."

"Maybe I just like human women." He moved closer to her. "Perhaps I've been watching you for so long because you caught my eye. I certainly liked your earlier interpretation of my purpose for bringing you here." He smiled down at her. "Do you have many dreams about men like me?"

She pointed her finger at him. "But you said you don't go around kidnapping women, and you said you've been watching me. You must want me for something."

"And you would like to know, wouldn't you?"

"Now I'm not so sure. I don't know if I trust you or if I want to have anything to do with this place." She didn't feel any menace from him or this strange place, but she didn't want to let her guard down. She also didn't know how she might react if he did say that he'd brought her here to seduce her. Truth be told, she couldn't trust herself to resist him any more than she felt she could trust him not to keep making seductive suggestions.

"Perhaps we can just forget it for now." He offered her his arm. "Are you hungry? I don't think it's too early for lunch."

She took his arm, no longer afraid of him, deciding it was best not to resist, but still wary of his intentions. "Are we going to walk all the way to the castle?"

"I thought we might stop in the village."

She looked down the path, wondering how far away the village might be. Everything was so silent she couldn't believe there were people nearby, and the garden seemed to go on endlessly. "Does the king commonly stop off at the local pub?"

"Yes. I'm a much beloved and benevolent ruler," he said seriously.

"Who kidnaps people and tricks them into making deals with him."

He seemed to enjoy her mild hostility, and she found that very annoying. "You asked for help, and I offered it. That is all. If you don't like it, you'd better start being more careful what you wish for."

She stared ahead as they exited the beautiful garden and laughed. She knew she couldn't get away from this place or change her situation, so she had to make the best of it. "You're probably right. At least I've learned a lesson. Maybe something good will come out of this."

Garren smiled. "If I get my way, something very good will come out of this."

She gave him a warning look. "How about some real help?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can't you do something to make my family better? They don't get along at all, and I don't fit in with them. My parents love me, but it's never felt like the same love they gave my brother and sister. They ignore me because I'm so independent. It's like they think I don't need them."

"Like you aren't really their child, just someone they raised?"

Emily stopped and pulled her arm away. "How could you know that?"

"I've been watching you for years with great interest." He crossed his arms and put on a mock

angry expression. "I do hate to keep repeating that."

"How much interest?" she asked. With each moment she spent with him, she found it harder to ignore how attractive he was.

He laughed, and the sound sent a thrill up her spine. "Have no fear. I am a gentleman." He allowed his gaze to roam up and down her body slowly. "Most of the time."

"I'm sure you are." She kept walking in the direction they'd been heading. "Let's go. I am getting a bit hungry."

Garren smiled at her as she walked away. "So am I," she heard him whisper faintly.

* * * *

Garren held out a chair and Emily sat down. A very short blue man brought glasses of water and set a bottle of wine on the table with two other glasses.

Emily kept looking around. They were in a more private part of the tavern, but she could still observe all of the patrons fairly well. She had come into the village thinking she would recognize creatures from fairy tales, but she was at a loss. She wasn't sure which were goblins, elves, or faeries. Most of them looked human with only slight differences, like hair and skin color and oddly shaped eyes or ears.

Garren leaned across the table. "Not exactly like a page out of a storybook, is it?"

"No," she said genuinely. "I wouldn't know how to act if I weren't with you."

He shrugged. "Think of it as being in another country. They're just like you; they just look a bit different and live in another culture."

She smiled. "Is it really that simple?"

He uncorked the wine and poured them each half a glass. "Do you notice anyone staring at you?"

She looked around, even though she already knew the answer. "No."

"Exactly. They all nodded or bowed to me, but that was just automatic. Humans actually find their way here quite often, so they're used to it."

"Or used to being discreet when you bring in a new victim?"

He leaned across the table. "You don't really think I mean you harm, do you?"

She looked into his eyes and tried to answer that question. "I think you have intentions that are less than gentlemanly."

"Does that bother you?"

She took a deep breath. It didn't bother her exactly, but it did make her a little nervous. And a little excited. "I'm thinking about it. I'm not one hundred percent sure yet. I don't feel I'm your type."

"Why not? Because you aren't exotic? Because you're a research librarian? Or because you just never got around to having any confidence in yourself?"

She narrowed her eyes. Even if he had been watching her for years, she didn't see how he could know her so well. He had to be guessing and making assumptions based on her reactions. "All of the above. I have boring brown hair and boring brown eyes. I'm short, and nothing I've ever worn has ever come close to looking flattering."

"I can fix that right now." He held his glass up to her in a salute and took a sip.

She just stared at him, waiting for him to wave his hand or snap his fingers.

"There. You look lovely."

Emily looked down at her clothes. She was wearing a light purple dress. The velvet bodice was a rich brocade, woven with a vine pattern, and the skirt was covered in an extra layer of shimmering material. She had to admit that it looked good. It was low cut, but not as low as she'd expected.

"It does look very nice," she admitted. "I guess you've scored at least one point with me." She hoped he wouldn't read as much into that remark as she did.

"Emily, if all I wanted was beauty, I wouldn't have to look that hard. But beauty and brains, and

that certain something you can never describe without sounding silly...that's much harder."

"That certain something? Could you possibly mean having so little of a life that being swept out of it wouldn't be a bad thing?"

He put his glass down and looked at her seriously. "Those are your words. Or should I say your feelings?"

She peered down into her wine glass and tried to change the subject. "Is this going to do anything to me?"

"Maybe if you down the entire bottle. It's just like wine you've had before, but better. The fruit here is much sweeter."

She tried it. It was sweet and tangy, and had just a little bite to it as she swallowed. "It's very good."

"The best we have, milady." The little blue man was at her side, setting an exotic salad in front of her.

"I can believe that," she said. After he was gone, she asked Garren, "Did you mean what you said earlier?"

"You mean before you changed the subject?" he teased.

She sighed. "Don't make this difficult. You said earlier you brought me here for a purpose. Is that purpose more personal than I first thought?"

"What did you first think?"

She toyed with her salad. "I guess I thought it was something out of a fantasy or sci-fi novel. Like that I'm the One or something."

He smiled. "Perhaps you are."

She took a bite of her salad. Like the wine, it was familiar and different at the same time, and delicious. She swallowed and said, "That's the best answer I'm going to get?"

"For now."

She figured it was best to accept that. "Are you Fey?" He looked human, but humans hadn't quite learned how to teleport, or whatever it was he had done to get her into his kingdom.

"My father was. My mother was human."

That certainly made things more interesting. "How did you come here?"

"I was raised here. My mother died when I was two months old, so my father found me and brought me here. I remember nothing of living as a human."

"I'm sorry. Was your father king?"

"No, but it wasn't long before they knew I was meant to be the next king."

She had a brief vision of a sword-in-the-stone-type scenario. "How?"

"I started having dreams that I didn't understand. When I told people about them, they sent me to the wise man. He told me that even though sadness had brought me here, it would all end in joy."

"And has it?"

He looked at her for a long moment. "I certainly hope so."

* * * *

Emily sat at the table, swirling designs in the chocolate left on her plate. Garren had seen someone he wanted to speak with and excused himself. She didn't want to seem nosy or impatient, but she turned slightly to see where he was. Garren was still talking to the same man.

He was well-dressed, possibly a noble or some royal official. They weren't looking at her, so she turned back to the table.

Garren was handsome and charming, and she was certain he didn't mean her any harm. The question was how the rest of the evening was going to go. His hints and seductive looks could just be affectations, but she wasn't going to bet on that too heavily.

She couldn't deny that she was interested, but she wasn't sure if giving in would be the best

decision. What were his plans? He kept saying that he'd brought her here for a purpose, and she had a vague suspicion that said purpose had nothing to do with anyone but himself.

She'd been angry at first and a little scared. But what was really so great about her life? She loved her job and her house, but she'd only made a few friends since moving, and all her friends from high school and college had gotten married and disappeared into domesticity. And her family? She had never had a real relationship with either of her siblings, and she knew her parents valued Stacy and Brian more than they valued her, even though she was the baby of the family, four years younger than Brian and two years younger than Stacy. They loved her, but Garren had hit it exactly right. She'd often felt that she was different, that she wasn't part of the inner circle, kept at a distance for some unknown reason.

"What are you thinking about?" Garren whispered in her ear.

She jumped and blushed, more from his nearness than her thoughts.

"That good, huh?" he teased.

"I was thinking about what you said. About my family."

The teasing look left his eyes. "Yes?"

She took a deep breath and asked, "Do I really belong with them?"

"Certainly not," he said, offering his hand to help her up. "You belong here with me."

She wasn't going to let him change the subject, though she didn't understand why he wouldn't want to talk about her family since he'd been so anxious to convince her she didn't belong with them. "I'm being serious. Am I really theirs?" He led her outside and she hoped he wasn't going to ignore the question.

"You certainly catch on fast, my dear." The night air was cool and refreshing. A carriage was waiting for them. It was jet black on the outside, but the interior was dark purple.

"You like purple, don't you?" She held her skirt up and stepped inside.

He climbed in beside her. "I know what I like and see no problem in indulging myself."

She smiled. "But how about really answering my question?"

"You've already guessed it. You were a changeling, exchanged at birth for a human child."

"What's a changeling?" Emily asked, confused by the term she'd never heard before.

"A changeling is a Fey baby who is exchanged for a human one at birth. Centuries ago, it used to happen all the time. Sometimes it was a very severe punishment, forcing a Fey family to give up their baby and raise a human because the mother or father had broken one of our laws. But often it was done for purely mischievous reasons. We aren't allowed to interfere in the human world, but this was often allowed because it was seen as bending the rule, but not breaking it. Many older Fey still do it today, as in your case. They get a feeling of power from it. We no longer use it as punishment and try to stop the Fey who do it now, but unless the swap is caught soon, the humans become attached to the Fey child and we can't make another change without using magic on them, which is to be avoided at all costs."

"What happened to the human baby? Is she here?" she asked. From what she'd seen so far, she felt a little jealous. Given the choice, Haven seemed like the ideal place to have a happy childhood.

"Melanie, the human baby, was raised here. But her childhood wasn't perfect. It's true she didn't have a family like yours, but she felt the same things you do. In some way, she always felt like she didn't fit in."

She held up a hand to stop him so she could get her own thoughts straight. "But, if she lived here, surely she'd have known about changelings."

Garren shrugged. "Humans used to know about changelings, but then they stopped believing in them."

"So where is Melanie?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Remember when I said you couldn't exist in both

worlds?"

Emily closed her eyes. "Please don't tell me something happened to her because you brought me here."

"Something did happen to her. She took your place. That's why your family doesn't realize you're gone. They forgot *you*, but not their youngest daughter, Melanie."

Emily opened her eyes and looked at Garren. If she could be standing in her yard one minute and in a garden the next, why couldn't anything be possible? Even if it made absolutely no sense. "But she's okay?" Emily finally asked.

"Yes, she is. I promise."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"Trust me?"

She laughed. "Look where that has gotten me!"

He smiled mischievously. "If you hadn't been staring at me like you wanted to have me for dessert, you would have noticed a girl leaning against your car."

She had to admit she hadn't really noticed anything else around her after he'd arrived, but that wasn't the issue. "You brought her there? What if I hadn't wanted to go?"

"But you did. This is your true home."

"I don't recall being given a choice, actually." She sighed. "So I'm Fey?" Part of her brain thought that suddenly everything in her life finally made sense. But all the other parts began fighting about how impossible Garren's statement was. Believing Garren was Fey or even that she was in some enchanted, faraway kingdom just didn't feel the same as believing that she was Fey herself.

"Full blooded at that. A perfect choice."

"For what?"

He laughed. "You can guess that you're a changeling, but not that the only reason I brought you here is so I can have you for myself?"

"You said you brought me here because I wanted to escape."

"That's true. Fate worked things out perfectly."

She wasn't as convinced of that. "You don't seem to need much help. You're handling this very well."

"And what exactly am I handling?"

"Seducing me."

"So it's working?" He pulled her against him and looked into her eyes. "Do you feel it too?"

"Feel what?" All she could feel was the warmth of his arms and the pounding of her heart.

"That you're finally where you belong." He brought his lips down to hers.

She couldn't resist him, even if she'd wanted to. Part of her mind had been imagining this moment since her first glimpse of him. His tongue parted her lips and he deepened the kiss as she brought her hands up to rest on his chest. She could feel the blood rushing through her body and a tell-tale pulsing began between her legs.

He ran his fingers through her hair and pulled back. "Your hair isn't boring. It's the color of autumn. And your eyes are captivating. I could get completely lost in them." He kissed her again gently, and when he finally pulled back, he smiled. "I could tell you how I feel about the rest of you, but I think I'd prefer to show you."

She tilted her head and looked up at him. "I think I'd prefer that as well." The rest of the carriage ride was a blur, but it also seemed to last much too long.

* * * *

The castle was even larger than it had appeared from a distance. Mirrors and candles covered the walls. All the floors were marble, and everything was exquisitely beautiful; silver and crystals and candlelight danced enchanting patterns across the mirrors and floors. Emily almost managed to

distract herself, but there was no denying the warmth of Garren's arm around her waist.

He led her into a large bedroom. The walls were once again covered in mirrors and candles.

"I see another theme," she said, looking around.

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her neck. "You don't mind?"

She looked at their reflection in the mirror. "I think I could get used to it." She watched his hands roam up and down her body. He met her gaze in the mirror, and continued kissing her neck. She relaxed in his arms, but she soon noticed something. One by one, the candles around the room were being lit by an unseen hand.

She laughed softly and ran her fingers through his hair. "Nice trick."

He turned her around and pulled her close. "And I'm just getting started." He picked her up and carried her to the bed.

"I wouldn't normally do this," she said, unsure why she felt she needed to. "I'd probably want to, but I just wouldn't."

"I know," he whispered as he set her down on her feet. He began unzipping her dress. "I know you better than you think, and that makes me even happier." He kissed a trail down her back.

She sighed. "What do you mean?"

"It means so much more that you're here with me now." He stood up and cradled her face in his hands. "It certainly gives me hope."

She smiled, attempting to hide her face behind her hair.

He laughed. "I can take off your dress with no problem, but sweet words make you blush?"

She ran her hands over his chest and finally looked up. "Why don't you take my mind off it?" She began unbuttoning his shirt.

He gazed down at her, obviously enjoying her gentle touch, her fingers brushing against his chest.

When they were both naked, Emily continued running her hands over his chest, gradually moving her body closer to his. She soon felt his cock pressing between her legs. She rubbed against him.

He crushed her body against his and kissed her soundly. She allowed her hands to roam over his back and become entangled in his hair. He released her and sighed against her lips. They moved onto the bed together, their gazes locked.

He brought his mouth down to her breasts, teasing one nipple, then the other. His mouth moved lower, and she drew in a deep breath.

"Will you let me taste you?" he asked as he hovered over her pussy.

She looked down at him. How could she deny the hunger in his eyes, his husky voice, or the quickening of her heart?

"Yes," she managed to whisper.

He smiled wickedly and moved closer to her. His breath was warm between her thighs, and she could feel her pussy tighten in anticipation. First he circled his tongue around her clitoris slowly before he ran it over the full length of her sex and delved into her very core.

She sighed, but it came out as a whimper. She tensed up for a moment, suddenly self-conscious. But then she felt him rubbing her thigh.

"Just enjoy it," he whispered against her.

His tongue probed deeper as his finger stroked her clitoris gently. She could feel her body relaxing as her pussy coiled tighter and tighter until she was aching for release. He began lavishing her clitoris with his tongue and inserted two fingers into her pussy. She cried out as she went over the edge.

As her orgasm ran its course, he moved up her body slowly, kissing every inch of her. When he reached her face, she looked up into his eyes. "I followed your advice."

"What advice?" he asked as he touched her cheek.

"I enjoyed it." She snuggled closer to him.

He wrapped his arms around her. "You certainly seemed to."

She kissed him. "And what about you?" Her hands trailed down his chest to his stomach. Her fingers lingered around his navel.

He sighed and smiled. "I'm perfectly content, but I won't object if you have something in mind."

She moved her hand lower and wrapped her fingers around his hard cock. "There are a few things I can think of." She rubbed his cock slowly, watching his face.

He pulled her closer and kissed her. She let him have control at first, but after a moment she rolled him over so she could get on top of him. She sat up and looked at herself in the mirror.

"I've always kind of wanted to watch myself," she said when she looked back at him.

"I'm at your command, my lady."

She positioned herself, and slid down onto his cock slowly. She leaned back so he could thrust deeper into her. She glanced in the mirror. Garren looked so strong and masculine under her. They looked good together, she had to admit. And their union felt better than she'd imagined.

She moved up and down as they found their own rhythm.

"Emily," he whispered.

She looked down at him. Their gazes remained locked as the pleasure mounted, and they came at the same time. Garren groaned and held her in place as he thrust deep inside her. She cried out again and collapsed onto his chest.

He held her there until they were breathing as one.

He began slowly. "I'm supposed to say something so perfect that you'll agree to stay. But all I can think of is this."

She shifted so she could look into his eyes.

"Tonight was beautiful, and I'm going to cherish it no matter what happens."

She pushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. "Let's just leave what might happen to the Fates," she said after a long moment.

He smiled and kissed her. She nestled against him, and he rubbed her back until she fell asleep. He held her for a long time and looked out at the stars, hoping the Fates knew what they were doing.

* * * *

Emily awoke in Garren's arms. She was not, however, in the bed she'd fallen asleep in. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Garren?" She turned to see that he was wide awake. They were both wearing dark purple silk robes, lying on a blanket in the middle of the garden he'd first brought her to.

He smiled and kissed her cheek. "I thought I'd surprise you with breakfast in bed, but I thought this might be more original."

"It is. I'll give you that." She looked over the scrumptious spread and finally plucked a strawberry from a crystal bowl.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

She nodded. "Better than I've ever slept in my life." For a moment, she looked very sad.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything here is better than everything in my life at home, if I should even still call it my home." Though she felt she already knew the answer, she decided to ask Garren, "Does that mean I belong here instead?"

"That's up to you."

"I know. Just because everything here is wonderful doesn't mean I should abandon my family." She picked up a croissant and tore it in half thoughtfully. "My family who aren't really mine and who don't miss me because to them I never existed."

"But that doesn't mean they didn't love you, or that they wouldn't continue to love you if you went back."

She swallowed her bite of croissant and shook her head. "Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, despite my desires to the contrary."

She picked up another strawberry and leaned back so she could feed it to him. "So I have about fifteen hours to figure all this out and make the right decision?" Sarcastically she added, "Sounds like fun."

"Or you could enjoy a vacation in an idyllic setting. When the time comes, your head and your heart will have come to the right conclusion."

"Do you know what that is?" She knew he wouldn't tell her, if he did know, but she couldn't resist.

"Even I can't know that. But your presence in this world will work itself out."

She nudged a rose petal with her finger and watched the dew drops scatter and fall. "That's reassuring and disconcerting at the same time."

"Magic has a tendency to be that way. You just have to put your faith in it and believe all will work out for the best."

Emily stared up into the sky. The clouds were moving at a leisurely pace. "So what lovely distractions do you have in store for the rest of me while my heart and mind are busy?"

He turned to look into her face. "I have several intriguing ideas, but we'll leave them to later. This morning I want to take you around my kingdom." He paused for a minute, hesitant. "And first thing, there are some people I want you to meet."

She sat up and poured each of them a glass of juice. She handed one to him. "Friends?"

"Very dear friends." He sipped the bright red liquid slowly. "I hope they'll come to mean as much to you."

Emily wanted to ask him what he meant and why he was being so mysterious. Surely he'd warn her if he was about to introduce her to the royal family or something like that. She decided to stop asking so many questions and just focus on enjoying herself.

* * * *

"Gloria? Are you home?" Garren called into the farmhouse.

"Just a moment!" a woman called.

"We'll go around back and see the children."

Garren led Emily around to the barn, where she saw a young woman throwing feed down and two small, twin boys chasing chickens. The girl looked about twenty or so, and the boys were nearly ten. They abandoned the chickens when they saw Garren. The boys ran over and bowed very formally before tackling him all at once in a monster hug.

Garren introduced everyone. "This is Emily, my new friend. Emily, this is Tabitha, and these two rascals are Toby and Eric."

"Hello," Emily said.

The two boys just stared at her, but Tabitha extended her hand and smiled widely. "Nice to meet you. We've heard so much about you."

Emily shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you." She looked at Garren. "Have they now?"

"Of course," he said. "You're my favorite subject."

A short woman came bustling out of the house. She had brown hair and eyes, just like her children, and she was very animated. She walked right up to Emily and hugged her.

"You must be Emily. My, aren't you a pretty thing? I'm so pleased to finally meet you."

Emily didn't know what to say. "I'm glad everyone is so thrilled to have me here."

"If you only knew, deary. Now everyone come in and have some tea. I'll go get Michael."

They all piled into the kitchen and Tabitha began setting the tea things on the table.

Michael, obviously her husband, seemed as anxious as everyone else to meet Emily. He shook her hand warmly. "A pleasure to meet you. A real pleasure." He was very handsome, a distinguished, grown-up version of the two boys, and he had a kind face.

"Nice to meet you as well." Emily looked around the table. Everyone was staring at her, except for Garren, who was very fixed on stirring his tea.

Gloria talked animatedly about all that had been happening on the farm. The two boys giggled to each other occasionally, and their father pretended to reprimand them. Tabitha kept smiling and adding details to what her mother said. She was engaged, and even though it made her blush, she allowed her mother to tell every detail of the wedding plans they'd made thus far. Something about Tabitha was so familiar, but Emily couldn't figure out what it was. When the thought finally hit her, she nearly choked on a muffin.

Gloria stood up, concerned. "Are you all right, deary?"

Emily sipped some water. "I'm fine. Just had an odd thought." She looked at Garren, who was again not looking at her. Tabitha was paying a lot of attention to the tablecloth, and Michael was showing the boys how to fold their napkins properly. "Really, I'm fine."

But she had something very serious to discuss with Garren.

* * * *

Once they were out of sight and no longer had to wave endlessly at the boys, Emily grabbed Garren's arm. "You have some major explaining to do."

"What do you mean?"

She wished there was a mud puddle to push him into. "You might be king of the faeries and king of the goblins and whatever else lives around here, but you aren't very subtle or diplomatic."

"Would you please explain what you're upset about?"

She didn't know if being Fey might give her the power to breathe fire, but she felt like she was going to. And for the moment she wouldn't mind if Garren got in the way. "That was my family! My real family! How could you take me there without telling me?"

Garren didn't even try to deny this. "How would you have felt if I'd told you beforehand? I don't understand why you're angry. I wanted you to meet them. I promised that they could, but I didn't want you to feel manipulated. I wasn't going to just say, 'Here's your real family. Aren't they lovely? Don't you want to stay here with them and marry me?' How would you have felt if I'd done that to you?"

"I've been manipulated ever since I got here."

"You think so? You've seemed pretty damn happy since you got here."

She turned away. "You seduced me, tried to make everything perfect, then you brought me here, all so I would want to stay." She paused and swallowed a few tears. "Did you say marry you? You want to marry me?"

"If I was only after something else, I could have had it long ago. Human women are seduced all the time," he said before turning away angrily.

She realized he was referring to his mother. Maybe his father hadn't been a bad man, but his parents obviously hadn't been in love. "I'm sorry, but I'm very upset." She sighed. "Can I be alone for a few hours?"

He sighed too. "Yes. But hear me first. Those people are your real family. You were stolen from them by one of the ancient Fey who still keep the old ways and think it's okay to meddle in human lives. They raised a human child in your place. She never fit in here any more than you fit in there, and I daresay she's happier."

Emily interrupted him. "But at least Melanie had the choice. She knew she was a changeling, and she came to my world with you. She knew what she was in for."

"Yes. But I wanted to introduce all this gradually, even though I haven't exactly succeeded. I

wasn't going to pop up, tell you that you were a fairie, show you the girl who was going to take your place with the only family you've ever known, and then whisk you away." He took a breath and went on. "These people love you, and so do I. And yes, I want to marry you and make you my queen." He looked off into the distance. "Perhaps we should part for a few hours. You have much to think about, as do I."

"Thank you," she said. She walked over and kissed his cheek. "I'll be back soon, and maybe this will all make more sense."

She turned away, and he stood in the middle of the road until she disappeared from his view.

* * * *

"Garren! Can I talk to you?" Tabitha called.

Garren moved to the balcony and saw her standing in the garden looking distressed. "Come on up."

She hurried over to the steps and joined him. "Did we ruin everything?" she asked with concern.

"If anything has been ruined, I was the one who did it. I was rushing things."

"You can't blame yourself."

He looked up at her and smiled. "You look just like her when she graduated high school. Your hair is longer and you're taller, but the resemblance is still there. I should have known better."

Tabitha bit her lip. "I knew it the moment she'd guessed. She looked at me and her eyes got as big as saucers. I didn't know what to do."

"There's nothing any of us can do." He'd never felt so powerless before, but he knew he had to give Emily the time she needed.

Tabitha looked off over the gardens. "Do you think Melanie is happier in the human world?"

"I would imagine so. She's thought and talked of nothing else since she found out she wasn't Fey."

"But if Emily won't stay, she'll have to come back?"

"Yes." He knew he couldn't force Emily to choose to stay, but he also knew that her leaving would result in a great deal of unhappiness for all of them.

"I wish I could help."

Garren tried to show the confidence he wasn't sure he had. "The Fates made a way for her to come back, for everything to be set right. She made the wish that summoned me because she was meant to. Do you really believe this will all be for nothing?"

"I certainly hope not." She looked at him sadly. "And not just for myself."

He tried to reassure her. "I can worry about myself. You run back home and help your mother with those brothers of yours."

Tabitha hurried off, and Garren looked at the clock again. Emily had been gone for five hours. Surely she would return soon.

* * * *

Emily stood staring at the castle, wanting to move forward, but afraid to. She couldn't be angry at her family for wanting to meet her, but she was still angry at Garren. Every move he'd made had been calculated to convince her to abandon the life she'd known and put her fate in his hands after only knowing him for one day.

He'd been sexy, mysterious, charming, and kind, all while weaving a seductive spell around her. Had he really done it because he loved her, or just because he wanted her? Was she a prize or the real key to his happiness? If she left, would he find another beautiful changeling and romance her? Would she spend the rest of her life missing him? Would she forget him altogether and keep wishing for someone to come and rescue her from her miserable life?

She'd finally come to one conclusion. Her life was livable, but it had never been happy. She'd tried to remember good times with Brian and Stacy, but all she remembered was fighting and being forced to play nicely. Neither of them had ever liked playing with her, and it wasn't only because she

was younger than them, and her mother had forced them to include her. Her father had ignored her all her life, and her mother had only given her the barest of attention. She'd mothered and nurtured Stacy all the while giving Emily sage advice and telling her to figure things out for herself. Everything made sense now, but that didn't make it any less disturbing. They couldn't have known she was a changeling, as they would never have believed in such things, but they must have known on some subconscious level, just as she had somehow known that she hadn't fit in.

Emily did want to stay in Haven. She wanted to be a part of the warm, loving family she'd met that morning. She felt tears running down her cheeks. She turned away from the castle. The question left nagging her concerned Garren. Would she be allowed to stay if she said no to his marriage proposal? Could she even dare to ask? Could she live here and just forget about him? Would it be fair to snatch the woman who was now living in the human world back to this one where she hadn't been happy? Could she return to her old life and live there happily without Garren? She knew deep down that she couldn't.

She walked back to the garden. She knew she wasn't ready to see him yet. She would just have to wait for him to ask her that all important question and see what her heart and head finally came up with.

* * * *

At ten minutes to midnight, Garren walked into the garden, angry and anxious at the same time. He couldn't believe Emily had stayed away the entire day, denying him what might be his last moments with her. Was she angry enough to leave him forever? He couldn't bear the thought.

When he didn't see her anywhere, he called her name. "Emily! Where are you?"

"Right here," she called.

She didn't sound upset, so Garren began to feel a glimmer of hope. He turned the corner and found her lying naked on the blanket they had left there that morning. He stopped and stared at her.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked, sitting up.

"I was very angry at you, but now you've spoiled it," he replied.

"That makes us even in my book." She stood up and walked over to him. "I was very angry at you, but every thought of you spoiled it."

He took her into his arms. "I have something to ask you, and now I'm no longer afraid to."

She ran her hands over his chest and gazed up into his eyes. "Did you really think I'd say no?"

"When you didn't return, I thought I'd ruined everything."

"How can you ruin what the Fates have already worked out?"

His heart pounded in his chest, and he was almost afraid to believe that she'd really changed her mind about everything. "I couldn't help being afraid. I'd waited so long only to have everything fall apart before my eyes."

She rolled her eyes playfully. "Why don't you quit being dramatic and ask me what you came here to ask me?"

He smiled. "Will you stay here with me, Emily? Will you marry me and be my queen, join me in ruling the world that is truly your home?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "Yes," she whispered against his lips as she moved his hand down to her wet and ready core. "Now make love to me."

"As you wish, my love." He carried her over to the blanket and set her down gently. He covered her face in kisses as her hands explored every inch of him. She bit his neck gently, and he growled low in his throat. He pulled her into his lap and thrust his cock into her as his lips and teeth and tongue teased her breasts.

"I love you, Garren," she gasped, holding his head against her and riding him hard.

"I've always loved you," he said between thrusts. "And I always will." He captured her mouth in a fierce kiss as they both came, their moans and sighs becoming one just as they were one.

As she lay looking up into the night sky, Garren continued to kiss her breasts as he ran his hands over her stomach, occasionally allowing his fingers to stray down to her pussy just long enough to tantalize her.

“We’re so perfect together. Is it really fair to keep me waiting?” she teased.

“You kept me in suspense all day,” he said, looking into her face. “Besides, we have all night.”

She laughed. “And many more nights to come.” She pulled him closer and rubbed his hard cock against her wet pussy. “But I think we should make the most of each and every one of them.”

He climbed on top of her again and plunged into her wet heat. She gasped then moaned with pleasure.

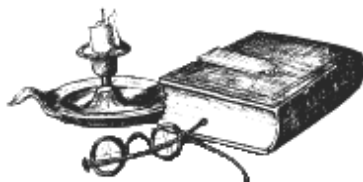
“We certainly should,” he said as he plunged into her very heart and soul. They moved as one, already learning exactly how to please one another.

The stars shone brightly above them, as perfectly aligned with the Fates as the two happy lovers were.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan M. Sailors lives in Knoxville and lectures at the University of Tennessee. Her works of horror, fantasy, and romance have been published in over three dozen magazines and webzines.

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