



Midnight Showcase

Erotic-ahh Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 06-26

SPELLFIRE **HARVEST OF** **HEROES**

For so Long Bridghid Parkinson

Yellow Ribbon Jewel Adams

Rose's Treasure Jane Carver

Educating Emily Karen Rose

The Moses Man CD Reese

Reflections HH Self

Harvest of Heroes

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Harvest of Heroes

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Spellfire – Harvest of Heroes

Journey to yesteryear and today, with ghosts and other ghoulish creatures who once donned a uniform, and shared their lives and their Thanksgivings with those whom they still love. In this paranormal town, whose Veteran League is made up of many magical and non-magical beings, who fought for valor and more, here are stories of the heart and soul of those special heroes and heroines.

For so Long by Bridghid Parkinson

Handsome WWII transport pilot, Jack, now eliminates nasty little gremlins while finding a way to celebrate his love for his wife, Rosie, even after death.

Yellow Ribbon by Jewel Adams

When an Black Ops mission backfires, injuring Noah, his empathic powers reach out to Stella Comfry, but can she help him get free before they both die?

Rose's Treasure by Jane Carver

Mitchell doesn't want to deal with Rose, but she won't go away. When he does nothing, she does. When he attacks her treasure, she runs.

Educating Emily by Karen Rose

Emily dreams of having a hero for a husband, not a mailman. It takes help from a witch for her to see that fantasy is seldom as satisfying as reality.

The Moses Man by CD Reese

On Thanksgiving, love and life lessons transcend earthly bounds when Tranice meets a ghost from the past that shows her sacrifice is worth the cost.

Reflections by HH Self

A mirror; a broken heart Teri thought she had gotten over; a secret she holds; all come together when fate brings her to Spellfire, Texas.

**For So Long
by
Bridghid Parkinson**

Handsome WWII transport pilot, Jack, now eliminates nasty little gremlins while finding a way to celebrate his love for his wife, Rosie, even after death.

**** In Special Memory ****

S.R. "Steve" Parkinson, 1907-1978
Lt. Col. 434th Troop Carrier Group,
74th Troop Carrier Squadron.
...and his real life Dolores.

All references to World War II are fictionalized references of historic accounts available on the Internet, but greatly inspired by my Daddy's photos and the stories he told me when I was young.

In the heart of every woman, is a little girl that still loves her Daddy.

<http://bridghidparkinson.blogspot.com>

or <http://www.myspace.com/dbparkinson>

For so Long
by
Bridghid Parkinson

The bells of the appliance repair shop tinkled magically. Since some of Jack's clients were ghosts or other paranormal beings in Spellfire, the magical chime tinkled anytime someone came through the door, even if the door never moved.

Jack poked his head out of the top of the washing machine where he was laying the traps for the malicious spirits known as the Cordrah. Since he was a ghost, he didn't bother opening the lid.

"Hey, Jack!" James said. "Yuck... More traps?"

"Yeah. Hang on, I'm leaving the traps, not collecting them, don't worry." Jack bent down into the engine of the washing machine and laid the spelled tangle of candy and wire near the motor fan. He exited the appliance and stood fully to greet his old friend.

James Dallingham didn't seem to mind. He stood in the lobby of the store with his hands in the pockets of his ghostly Texas Ranger gear.

"I had another vision about Rosie last night," Jack said sadly.

"She's ninety-five years old, Jack. She's had a long life," James offered.

"It still could be months. I don't want her to suffer."

"Well, most of us had the misfortune of a sudden death. That scoundrel Dowling shot me. Then of all things, they hung him for his crime, and I hardly got any peace when he came searching for me, again. Your aircraft went down in the middle of WWII. Is there any 'good' way for death to come?" James patted Jack's shoulder, narrowly missing the silver oak leaf rank insignia.

"I guess not."

“Living has a one hundred percent fatality rate. What’s important is what you do with the living part and how you choose to carry on after it’s all over.”

Jack just nodded. His familiar cigarette manifested at the corner of his mouth, always at the point where a long drag would take the edge off his jangled nerves. He grabbed the end of the filterless cigarette and exhaled a puff of smoke that dissipated to ghostly nothingness.

In the tiny breath where the conversation hung in a silent limbo, the bells over the door tinkled again, and a man in an English Army uniform with enlisted insignias entered. His heels clicked together, and he brought his right hand up in a proper salute for the British Army. “Colonel Taylor! Good to see you, sir!”

“We don’t need protocol tonight, Richard!” Jack screamed.

James’ eyes widened in disbelief.

“Let me introduce you to Richard,” Jack offered.

“Richard Westland, this is Captain James Dallingham, Scout and Mission Officer for the Texas Rangers during the Texas Revolution. He runs patrol missions with me in Iraq,” Jack shouted again.

James extended his hand forward in greeting, “Howdy.”

Richard immediately saluted in the stiff English style that exposed the palm of his hand. He quickly relaxed and extended his own hand to the Ranger.

“Richard was a communications technician in the British Royal Army during World War II,” Jack explained in a normal tone of voice. “He died from wounds he received when a bomb went off near the evacuation tunnel where he was protecting civilians during an air raid. He was able to get his messages out, but the bomb put shrapnel into his chest and ruptured both eardrums. None of the healers can fix his hearing loss, even now.”

“How did you meet him?” James asked.

“He found me immediately after my C-47 went down in France. Here lately, we just email unless we are on a new mission. I dropped him a line, asking him to come down for the Veterans Day activities in Spellfire because he was only here twice in the 1970s.” Jack used exaggerated hand gestures to help include the Englishman in the conversation.

“I don’t need my hearing to read,” Richard smiled. “I can still understand some things if the person is loud enough. You said in your email there’s a meet-and-greet tonight down at Barnabas’ Bar?”

James nodded, and Jack led the way out of the store, magically locking the door behind them and flipping the sign to 'Closed'.

* * * *

Jack and James escorted Richard down the streets of Spellfire, walking towards Barnabas' Bar. Several ghostly or Fae figures walked the streets, some in uniforms from all around the world and others that were less than fully manifested.

"Folk run around Spellfire like this all the time?" Richard asked. His gaze followed a half-naked fairy with wings softly folded behind her back.

"Sure... there are protection spells in place so that mundane tourists won't see much of the real people in town at all, or what they do see looks normal." Jack held the large swinging door open. It resembled the old style saloon doors, but the main doors were available in case of inclement weather. Loud music came from a cowboy band on stage.

"Oh, My! That chap needs to get his proper uniform on!" Richard stared into the far corner of the crowded bar. A dark man stood, wearing shells and beads wound on heavy cords around his shoulder and a loincloth. The only other indication that he wasn't a modern soldier was the heavy spear in his right hand.

Jack rolled his eyes and motioned for them to take a bench. "Richard," he snapped his fingers in front of the English officer's face to get his attention. "He is in his proper uniform! He's a warrior, originally from about the third century... B.C."

Richard looked at him in astonishment, "My heavens, lad! No, I don't want to see. He's got no business being out and about as if he were going to hit the head!"

Jack let his shoulders droop in resignation. Since the old British soldier was a radioman, he might understand if he restated with emphasis once the music stopped. At the closing notes of the song, Jack leaned over to his friend, "Third Century... B. C.?" When Richard still gave him a confused look, possibly because of the applause tapering down, Jack felt inspired to use a radio style call, "Bravo! Charlie! Bravo! Charlie!"

James tapped Jack's shoulder. "I think the British in WWII said 'Bruce, Charlie'."

Jack took a deep breath and yelled, "*Bruce! Charlie!*"

The lead singer for the band known as The Empowerers stepped to the front of the stage. Leaving his guitar hanging around his

shoulders, he raised his tattered cowboy hat and his whitish hair fell to his shoulders, "Thank you, Sir!"

"Oh, yes, I quite agree, Jack!" Richard said, clapping to the men on stage. "Good show, young man. Jolly good show!"

Jack waved at the band members and smiled. The music sounded good, but it wasn't quite what he intended. Jack hadn't figured out how, yet, the group of musicians fit perfectly into the Spellfire scene. Their brand of brash music included very old dance tunes, all the way up to some new, rowdy drinking songs. The mix of music appealed to a large part of the population in Spellfire, paranormal or not.

Jack took a long, disgusted drag from the cigarette that persistently dangled from the corner of his mouth. Conversations with Richard in email were an absolute delight, swapping old and new war stories. However, he dreaded meeting at the bar for drinks when he and Richard got together in any city.

Richard was as deaf in spirit as he had been in the last days of his life when the bomb took his hearing, before finally claiming his life two days later. Over sixty years later, Richard still couldn't hear. None of the healers could remedy it or understand why he was deaf as a ghost. Even Spellfire's finest magical healer, Heather, once tried to work on him. No one could find shrapnel in his ears, and the eardrums were whole, as were the ghostly nerves. Still, Richard heard very little. And it was worse in a crowded, rowdy bar.

Very quickly, Jack spied the answer to his communication difficulty with Richard. Manny was a disembodied hand that walked along the front of the stage on all five fingertips. Jack often counted on him during times where he had a real appliance repair to accomplish, rather than chasing a gremlin. No one else in Spellfire could handle a ratchet in tight spaces the way Manny could.

"Manny!" Jack called.

Manny jumped down from the stage, skittered around the dancers on the dance floor and jumped deftly to the top of the picnic table. He jumped up again and gave a snappy and proper salute, to what Jack thought of as a brow, but since the hand didn't possess a visible head, it was hard to tell. The only visible part of Manny was his hand and that appeared to be his entire existence. Manny looked smartly dressed in a red, white, and blue bandana, and an ornate silver band on his little finger.

"Good evenin', sir," Jack said, saluting the disembodied hand. He wasn't sure if Manny had ever been in the military, much less, what

his rank might have been, but it was a simple courtesy. “I need your help. You remember Morse code, right?”

Manny jumped into the air and gave an immediate thumbs-up, affirmative gesture.

“Good! I could translate it—if I wrote it down first—but I was never as adept as our old deaf friend was in the war. Rumor has it he can receive at fifty words a minute! Would you translate for me?” Jack pleaded.

Manny jumped to give him an A-OK sign, landing on his fingertips gracefully before he hopped again to deftly pull a tiny screwdriver from the shoulder pen pocket of Jack’s leather aviator jacket. He came to rest on the table, holding the screwdriver backwards, with the handle resting on the table surface, ready for action on the heel of his hand.

Jack turned to his deafened friend, pulling his gaze away from the band on stage back to the table, and then he placed Richard’s hands flat on the table.

Richard appeared put out at first, but when he saw Manny in the ready position, he seemed to know a coded message would follow.

Jack looked up at Manny; as unusual as he might be, he certainly wasn’t the strangest inhabitant in Spellfire. *Most of the time, he is downright...well, handy.* “The warrior you saw with a spear...” Jack eyed Manny as he beat out a rhythm on the table, “He’s supposed to be dressed like that. He’s a warrior from the third century B. C. Before Christ!”

Manny finished beating out the rhythms of dots and dashes for the old radioman. Richard’s face registered immediate recognition, “I say good chap! You should have said so! I fancy that he’s been walking ‘round quite a bit longer than I have.”

Manny tapped out more to the old British radioman.

“I didn’t know you knew the chap...he says you served in Afghanistan with him three years ago...and protecting young missionaries from the Columbian drug cartel?” Richard eyed Jack with a tinge of disdain. “I should have you introduce us!”

Manny tapped another message again. He drummed his fingers so fast that Jack couldn’t keep up with what Manny described.

Richard laughed uproariously and then Manny continued banging out the code in such rapid rhythms that Jack couldn’t understand one letter from the next, much less one word from the next. The picnic table virtually vibrated with the messages from one to the other.

Richard again laughed aloud. "Oh! Stop!" Richard gasped from laughter, "Right-o, then, did you hear the one about the old man from Kent?"

Manny tapped out, long, short, long, long, long. "No."

That much Jack understood. Partly disgusted with himself, he took a long drag from the cigarette held in the corner of his mouth and propped his chin on the heel of his free hand.

Richard still laughed a bit before he started, "There was an old man from Kent, whose member was decidedly bent. Some called him crazy, but when he loved the ladies, they said he could control where it went."

Manny started beating out a rapid interruption when a young waitress approached the table. Her body was lithe, and her wings furled against her back. "Can I get you fellas something to drink?"

"Oh, I dare say you're right, old boy! Not in mixed company." Richard gave an exaggerated wink to Manny and then looked up at the waitress with a smile. "I'll have an ale, please, and two bourbons for my friends here."

The waitress smiled and said, "Yes, sir. I'll be right back."

"Thank you, dear," Richard said. Once she was out of earshot, he straightened his slender form, shifting the breeches of his uniform and took a deep breath, "I may have to invite her for tea one day. I dare say she's a little darling."

Jack sat staring at his old deaf friend, floored by what Richard just did. "Wait!" Yanking the eternally burning, filterless cigarette from his mouth, he clenched it tightly between the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand. He used the unlit end to punctuate his words. "You mean to tell me you can understand *her*, but James and I have to scream to get you to hear a thing? What are we doing wrong?"

Manny tapped out a very rapid translation.

"No. No. My good man, that's our waitress! What else would she be here for but to see that we got our drinks?" Richard stared at him in disbelief. "What else do you think I might ask of her? I think it would be a bit early to invite her back to my hotel room. I don't even know her name, although I daresay the thought of asking her to 'ride English' crossed my mind."

"Hey, who are you kidding? The last time your member got hot and slippery, you were in the bathtub with a bar of soap!" Jack retorted. Jabs between them were common.

Manny beat out the translation before Jack could stop him.

“Negative, my good fellow. I’m not married, but it doesn’t mean that Spellfire doesn’t have a couple of sumptuous creatures that I would like to join me for an evening. I think I’m doing a sight better than James.”

James flushed, with embarrassment or anger, Jack couldn’t tell. “Hey! My wife just moved on after she died, and I haven’t met a right nice filly that could match her. Now Jack here...”

Manny beat out the translations for Richard. Jack didn’t stop him; instead, he just stared at the table. He thought, *Dear, sweet, Rosie.*

He loved her because she was a strong woman and had curves that wouldn’t quit. She would talk with him about his airplanes for hours and knew the perfect time to drive him crazy with desire. She didn’t mind the days he was gone on flights for the new airlines, or on military training maneuvers in Nebraska, when he started service for the Army Air Corps. She was a very capable woman and kept their home running like clockwork, even after his death during the war.

Rosie possessed enough strength to live to the ripe old age of ninety-five. She remarried after Jack died, but it took ten years, and even then, the marriage was a business partnership. When her new husband died, he moved on into the spirit realms. On Rosie’s nightstand, she brought out the picture of Jack again.

He promised that he wouldn’t interfere with her life, and he would simply wait for his wife to come back to him. The words struck him again, as they did every time he thought of her. They had married in 1936, and those vows were ‘until death do us part’. Jack died in action during World War II, shot down by German gunfire after releasing the paratroopers in his care. Airplanes don’t fly far without wings, but he finished his critical part of the mission before the plane went down. Over sixty years since his death, he often wondered if he even had a right to try reclaiming his wife after so long.

Their three small daughters grew to adults. They were just babies when he died, and at night, he went to the home in Long Island to tuck them in as they said their prayers. Rosie always told the girls, “Daddy is watching over us,” and pictures of him always hung in their bedroom. He watched them grow, but had no power to say no when Carl stepped into their lives. Rosie needed companionship, but Jack knew she didn’t have the love for Carl that he shared with her. They had a comfortable life, and Rosie could at last quit working in the shipyards like the days during the war efforts. He still watched over

his little girls; they were now grandmothers themselves. They hardly knew him, but the oldest named her first son after him: John Robert, with 'Jack' as a nickname.

Jack just hoped that when it came Rosie's turn to leave the world of the mortals, he might be able to convince her to come with him to Spellfire. He never had the opportunity to discuss with another ghost if this was his right to do.

Richard's hand on his shoulder shook Jack from his reverie. "I dare say, old chap, I know you loved her. If I remember rightly, she should be around ninety years old by now, seems to me that you shouldn't have too much longer to wait for her."

"Knowing she might die soon makes it that much more difficult. I want to be there."

James added, "If she's meant to find you, you will know before she passes on. You can be there for her. Lordy, you've been in Spellfire for fifty years! With the exception of our spy missions abroad, you've always been here. I don't think anyone would mind if you took some time for a personal mission... for once. Heck, even the scoundrel mayor would help you pack."

Manny tapped out the conversation for Richard.

"Aye, chap, you need to take the time to go to her. She may not have the same strength to roam the Earth as you, but you had Germans motivating you. She has to find the need to keep going the way you did. Could be, you might need to let her go after all these years."

"I don't know," Jack answered. "I've been getting... flashes. It's the best way I can describe it. I see her standing in front of me again, just like I saw her in the shipyards when I watched her learning to weld after I died. Between the two of us, we could get a smooth puddle going in that seam. Soon, she was so handy with the welder... it didn't seem like she needed me any more. I still helped out with some things around the house."

Richard seemed flustered. "I wish I might have been able to stop you from going to her at all. That may be why it took so long after your death for her to move on with her own life. You might be getting flashes because she's become ill."

The words did not comfort Jack. *Rosie might be dying.*

James smacked Jack on the shoulder to rouse him back into the real world when the young waitress with wings brought the drinks. "I

think we need some food! How about we get Richard here some proper Texas barbeque?"

Jack's eyes lit up with the thought of savory Texas fare and the familiar lop-sided smile returned. "Manny, can you join us?"

Manny jumped into the air and gave an enthusiastic thumb up, still gripping the screwdriver between two fingers.

James stood and leaned over to the waitress. Jack could see his hands motioning for large Pit Special Platters that had bits of everything. James slipped the woman a large bill of ghostly money that solidified, with her touch, to modern script. He'd seen it happen before when Trevor Jackson, the writer in Spellfire, paid him for computer repair. As the money passed from Trevor to Jack, it went from modern to ghostly script.

Jack thought, such an odd place, Spellfire. Money was money, and it didn't mater if it came from a human, a ghost, a vampire or a pixie. It would all go to the bank just the same. The First National Spellfire Bank even kept the paranormal accounts separate from its mortal accounts, but could transfer between the two types seamlessly. The mortal reporting agencies never suspected unusual activities. Ghosts shouldn't run appliance shops, but Jack's reporting went to the Paranormal Revenue Service when he filled out taxes for the year.

He sat lost in his thoughts while they waited for the food.

* * * *

"Jack Taylor?" A man's voice asked behind him.

The voice sounded familiar, and, for a conference on the scale of the events at Spellfire this weekend, it wouldn't surprise Jack if he ran into his former co-pilot or other war buddies. When he stood and turned around, the face looked familiar, but Jack didn't recognize him at all.

"Ed Piva." He extended his hand to Jack.

The wave of recognition ripped through Jack as if he just passed through a spelled wall. "Rosie's father. Son-of-a-gun! I didn't expect to see you around here."

"I didn't think you would," Ed smiled. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Well, *life* changes the way people look," Jack said. He took a deep breath, not knowing what to say next. "How did you find me?"

"The veterans' conference. We figured someone would know you or know of you."

Jack nodded with a sly grin.

“You’re getting flashes of Rosie lately, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jack stared at him. His fears—and oddly, his hopes—were confirmed.

“The doctors don’t think she’ll make it through the next forty-eight hours. Her Ma is with her now at the hospice. The girls are there, too. She’s had a series of strokes, and they can’t do anything else for her. She’s lived a good long life.”

“I know. Tough ole gal... that’s one of the things I loved about her.”

“The first few minutes and hours after death can be the most disorienting.” Ed inhaled deeply before he continued. “If I’ve got an idea anything might happen, I’ll come get you straight up. Inside every woman is a little girl that still needs her daddy. I don’t think it will be long before she orients and looks for you though.”

“How about her second husband?” Jack asked warily.

“Don’t count on it,” Ed said. “Rosie was always treated right by him... but she didn’t...” He couldn’t finish.

“I know.” Jack explained, “I promised that I wouldn’t interfere in her remaining life, but if I have a chance to be with her now, I want it more than anything.”

“That’s what I figured I would hear,” he answered. “Her mother and I are watching. We’ll come get you if there is any change, but I did want to warn you.”

“Understood, and thank you,” Jack answered. “I’ll probably be at the repair shop or the Fire Hall.”

Ed nodded and then disappeared instantly.

* * * *

Time, for Jack, lingered in a slow motion dance. The band played a softer song called, *The Back Roads of Old Spellfire*, while the dancers on the floor twirled.

“An old buddy?” James asked.

“Rosie’s father,” Jack answered as he sat back down.

After Manny tapped out the translation for Richard, they sat silent until the food came.

Jack stared at the platters of food as the waitress set the table with plates and utensils bundled up in a gingham napkin. His stomach felt like it’d been tied in knots, and in spite of the presentation of some of his favorite food, he wasn’t ready to eat.

"Manny, go right on ahead and enjoy the food. I'm gonna talk with Jack a minute, but this doesn't need beaten out for Richard," James said. "Not to be rude, we'll just explain it later."

Manny gave a waving motion up and down with barbeque sauce dripping from his thumb to his wrist. His bandana, ring and Jack's screwdriver lay neatly on the table, and the wrist of his hand was neatly bundled in the gingham napkin next to his plate.

"She ain't doing so well?" James asked.

"He'll come get me. Docs gave her forty-eight hours." Jack pursed his lips but finished, "They can't do anything more for her."

"Are you going to any of the conferences tomorrow?"

"No. I wanted to attend the dinner at the Fire Hall though."

"Go now. Ya might even be back in time for the dinner."

"And what about the store?" Jack leaned on his elbow.

"Hang a 'Closed' sign, and tell Perry Normil to take a leap. What would happen if you were on a mission?" James thought for a moment before adding, "Put a note in the window, 'In case of emergency, contact J. Dallingham, Spellfire Farmer's Market'."

"Are you sure that's okay?"

"I'll pack for ya ifn' you need me to..." James offered. "You ain't goin' to enjoy the food much, the way yer lookin'. Go on, I'll take it from here. With Manny, I can swap a few interesting war stories with Richard and introduce him to some of the fellas we served with recently."

Jack shook his head, but he knew it was the best course.

"Go to her. I waited for my wife. I know."

* * * *

Jack looked around his tiny closet of an apartment over the service store. He packed a few items in a shoulder sack.

Suddenly, the tug on his heart weighted him; it pulled from far away like a large strap that constricted his chest. *Go.*

What would have been a long trip to Long Island took only moments for his ghostly form. The swirling mists cleared, and he found himself on the sidewalk of the Hospice described by Rosie's father. An old man sat hunched in a wheelchair on the front patio, a blanket in his lap and an unlit filterless cigarette in his left hand.

As Jack approached, he saw the spirit of the man stand quickly in a full dress Army uniform, with insignias from Korean War service. His rank and insignia were spotless, and his salute was crisp and perfect. The man made eye contact with Jack for the salute, but then

stared straight ahead as if preparing for inspection. As Jack came forward, he offered a return salute and then commended him, "Exemplary. As you were."

The man sat again, his disciplined spirit slowly slumping again to match the body of the very old man in the chair.

Jack passed through the door of the hospice and focused on Rosie. He felt her presence in the upper wings and passed directly through the cement floors to the hallway outside her room.

At the doorway of one of the rooms stood Elizabeth, their oldest daughter, comforted by her husband. They were leaving the room. Elizabeth was in tears, and Jack felt certain Rosie had already passed.

"I was just coming to get you," Ed said from behind him. "It was quick. Her mother is orienting her now. Give me a couple minutes with her, and I'll let you know."

Jack watched as Ed sat down on the edge of the bed. The tiny frail woman that once was Rosie lay motionless. Her head tilted to the side, but her eyes remained half-open.

"Daddy!" Jack heard the voice of a tiny young girl.

"Oh, goodness! My angel, look at you." Ed's voice sounded through the door. To Jack, the excitement of the reunited family overwhelmed the earthly sounds of the monitoring equipment that resounded through the halls. The nurses filed out of the room with the body on a gurney, and the scene inside the hospital room transformed to a regular bedroom with the sounds of a young girl pleased to have Daddy's full attention.

"Daddy, I like art class and reading. You gots to see the pretty pictures we drew!" A moment hung thickly in silence, and time shifted forward, "And I'm getting good at my stenography, too... they are teaching us about shorthand and typing."

"Meet any handsome boys in school, dear?" Ed asked during another pause, while the universe waited for Rosie to remember her early life.

"Not in school, Daddy, they are juvenile. I went to the airfield today. I met a very handsome man there, a pilot by the name of John Taylor. His buddies call him Jack." The young Rosie took a deep breath, letting another moment hang in time. When she spoke, her words came out clear as the voice that Jack remembered. "And Daddy, he's the one I want to marry some day."

Ed looked to the door and nodded.

That was quick, Jack thought. "Hello, beautiful."

When Rosie looked up at him, she wore the same bright red lipstick that had enchanted him. Her hair was perfectly curled, and her dress hugged her hips in the same alluring way as the night he proposed. Her eyes sparkled, and she smiled broadly.

"I thought I had lost you," she said.

"Not forever, I've been waiting for you," Jack answered.

"The war was so awful. I read about the invasions, and then I got the telegram that your plane went down."

"Death was the only thing that could keep me away from you. I love you, Rosie." The sensations of time dragged out again, but Rosie's body didn't age anymore.

"I love you, too, Jack." She hesitated, "You should see how the girls grew up so quickly, and I'm a great-grandmother."

Jack laughed.

"Which makes *you* a great-grandfather," Rosie chuckled.

Again, time hung still for a moment.

"Daddy, where is Carl?"

"He sends his love, but... he's moved on, Rosie."

"Good for him," she answered flatly.

The room vanished around Jack and Rosie. They materialized inside the home they bought in 1938. "Jack, this looks just like it did when you went off to the war."

"We can stay here for a bit, if you want, Rosie," Jack offered.

"I don't... Wait... it just doesn't feel right," she said.

Jack's heart sank with the idea that she might try to move on into other realms of the afterlife. He pulled her closer into his arms, just to give himself a final tender moment with his Rosie.

"No... Oh, Jack, it's not you," she whispered.

Jack looked at his beautiful wife, and they were both on the verge of tears.

"Oh, Jack." Rosie's slender fingers reached up and brushed over his cheekbones. "I have waited for you for so long, with the hope that I would see you again. But, I don't feel right about being here. Not in Long Island... not in our old house."

"Did you want to go...?" Jack dreaded the answer.

"Oh, no... nothing like that! Would you tell me about some of the places you have been? Show me? You didn't hang around France all those years of the war, did you?"

Jack laughed as relief washed over him. "Yeah, I did."

"You still fought the war against the Germans, even though your plane went down?"

"Sure. The realm of spirits held another aspect of the war that people don't understand. A whole new war was fought by the ghosts of the soldiers killed in action, trying to influence the living soldiers."

"Tell me about some of the new people you've met."

"You'll get to meet Richard and James...I would love to show you all this, but there is one thing I would like to do first."

"What's that?"

Jack answered her question with a kiss.

* * * *

Yes. I've waited for this...for so long.

Rosie froze with the first realization that the dizzying images, flashing in front of her eyes, were not just a dream. Jack's mouth felt hot, with the lingering flavor of his tobacco mixed with mint gum. His arms held her in a heated embrace.

"Are you all right?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. I...this...it's all real?"

"Well, as real as it gets here."

"But that would mean...I'm dead."

"Yes," Jack answered plainly. "Your body is."

She watched him carefully. His glittering brown eyes had not changed over the years. Jack was such a handsome devil, a man's man. Rosie always imagined, as she got older, what he might have looked like as the times changed. Her image of him in the early seventies made her giggle for years. To see him again after sixty years, she was astonished to see he still wore his leather aviator jacket and the same clean cut look he had before the service. Even in his mechanics overalls, he always looked sharp.

Rosie tried to bring together the dizzying images. "I don't remember much, just a splitting headache."

"Your father said it was a stroke. He and Clara watched over you until the end. Elizabeth was there, too."

"So were you," She remembered the flash of him in the suit from the night he proposed.

Jack nodded. "Of course. Is there something you want to do now that you remember everything?"

"God, yes... just hold me, Jack. I sent my husband to war, and all they sent back to me were a few medals and a box with a flag. I had to tell the girls that Daddy was never coming home."

“Well, from what I see of Elizabeth, Jeanie and Carol, we still have a way to go, but we will be doing for them what your parents did as you crossed.”

“We were there when they came into the world...”

“And we’ll be there when they come into *this* world,” Jack finished.

“So...where are all the angels and the Pearly Gates?”

“I don’t know,” Jack answered. “I do know there are many layers of the afterlife. Some people who become classic ghosts never get beyond the dreamy phase. You’re past that.”

“I’m here. Here and now...whatever that might be. Thank God, it doesn’t feel like a dream to me.” Rosie held tight to Jack’s shoulders and took comfort in feeling him just as if they were human again. She could feel him, becoming erect against her body, and all she wanted to do was wrap her arms and legs around him.

“It’s okay, no one can see us. We aren’t really here.”

“I’m not sure about all this...it’s new,” Rosie hesitated.

“Think about what you want.”

Rosie focused and remembered the way Jack felt and smelled when he came out of the shower after a long day at work. She giggled from the thought of more than one burned dinner because they stopped to make love. She wanted nothing more than to feel his skin against her body.

Her skin tingled as Jack’s hands rubbed up the length of her bare back, and she felt her nipples brush the light hair of his chest. Their clothes disappeared, and she didn’t care. The smell of the soap lingered on his warm skin. She reached up to kiss him and savored the feel of his mouth.

With her eyes closed, she clung to his shoulders but felt like floating in a swimming pool as she wrapped her legs around him.

Jack shifted her gently, and she felt his mouth sucking on each nipple, arousing the same sensations. “I’ve missed you,” he said.

“I missed you, too.” Tingling sensations swirled through her. “Just please, don’t stop!”

Jack pulled her down, and she felt his rod slowly enter her. The comfort of his arms blended with the need to take every inch of his thick cock inside. She rolled her hips, and Jack moaned.

A thrill went through her when she realized that after all these years, she still could make him squirm. “This is heaven to me.”

His arms tightened around her, and tingles shot through her body. She missed the days when he was home, and they spent warm summer afternoons in the bedroom. Now as they floated through the mists, all of her memories came back, the ways he loved to have her breasts against his chest and feel her fingernails on his back. She pushed next to him in the familiar ways that thrilled them both. He pressed against the tender spot that shot electricity through her body.

Rosie felt herself losing control, spurred by listening to Jack whisper, “Yes,” in her ear. Her body trembled and then exploded into prickly heat. Her mouth found his again as he erupted.

She didn’t move for a moment as they calmed down.

“I thought for a minute you might move on.”

“Not without you,” she answered.

* * * *

Her words were music to Jack’s ears. “Rosie? After the war, I found a nice little place in Texas.”

Rosie giggled. “You always were fascinated with the west and the Texas cowboys.”

“Just my luck to be born to English immigrants in New York City. Huh?”

“Jack Taylor! Look at all those things you did in the early days of aviation. You helped Lindberg fly off to Paris, and you were on the ground when the Hindenburg docked and exploded. You were a New York City cowboy, strutting your stuff for me, when you tried stunt flying around the bridges.”

“It’s a good thing you weren’t with me.” Jack hung his head with the memories of trying to ‘barnstorm’ over the East River.

“I wasn’t getting in that plane! I thought it was a ghastly contraption. I wasn’t born a bird. Even you had to make an emergency landing,” Rosie admonished him.

“Yeah, and if you had been with me, you would have been arrested, too,” Jack laughed.

“You are my wings, Jack. I don’t need you to prove it.”

With those words, Jack’s heart took flight. She said the same thing when he came home after the arrest fiasco. She said it again when he complained that his friends teased him for the arrest. He really didn’t give two cents what other people thought. “Let me show you Spellfire.”

“Lead the way.”

* * * *

By sunrise, Jack brought her to the front of the old appliance store. The sign hung on the door with the emergency contact information—James Dallingham at the Farmer's Market. Jack pointed to the sign, "That's one of the boys I was telling you about. He's an old Texas Ranger, fought in the Texas Revolution."

"Oh! I can just hear the stories from that!" Rosie laughed.

Jack laughed too, with the memories of the many debates about the differences in the armies each of the men fought against. James would describe bloodthirsty Santa Ana and the Mexican Army in 1836. Jack described the Germans. Another Spellfire warrior, Dario Cartaray, described the Roman Army. Yin Quan described the Mongols. Oddly, the instant a new mission came up, they bound together quickly. Today, they were Americans and, from a paranormal side, they protected the troops. It didn't matter how old they were, or what country they were originally from, they banded together like a well-oiled machine.

"Gremlin extermination?" Rosie asked. She pointed at the sign on the front of Jack's store heralding *Flying Jack's Computer & Appliance Repair, and 'Gremlin' extermination*.

"Yeah! Nasty little hate balls but they aren't like real gremlins. You see on the sign the word is set off? Real gremlins are construction geniuses. Cordrah are the problem spirits. Humans got the two critters confused ages ago. Cordrah are negative energy creatures. They're just balls of bad intent. During the war, humans blamed them for mechanical problems not directly related to Axis bullets. As it turned out, the beasts deserved it."

"Not just human error?" Rosie asked.

"No. Granted, some people can be stupid, or just sloppy, but failures and shorts caused by the Cordrah are different."

"And they infect computers, too? That explains a lot!"

"Oh, yes. And that gets a little nasty because they don't always go after just the electrical components, they chase bits of code and emails around the world."

"So when did you get so good with appliances?"

"After the war. Ghosts didn't have much need for flying machines so I started tinkering with other machines. I thought, if the Cordrah can do it, so can I."

"Where do they come from?"

"The Cordrah?" Jack verified. He thought briefly that Rosie was back to her old tricks of asking questions just to keep them talking,

but he was happy about it. James often teased him about being able to talk the ears off a jackrabbit. “I’m not sure where they started, but I learned some history when I...well, interfered...with a pilot of the North Korean Army in 1951. I had to interfere in something he tried to do. The Cordrah have no intelligence. Just little negative-energy balls that attack mechanical items. The more chaos they create, the better they like it. They feed off the negative energy of the failure and the people who become frustrated.”

“How do you keep the Cordrah from getting into a machine?”

Jack smiled at her; Rosie just batted her lashes at him and smiled back. He would face several more weeks of questions like this during the time Rosie settled in, and soon they would be working together just as if she helped him create this little shop. From the look on her face, she knew what she was doing. “There’s a trap on the cables coming into the building.”

“How do you know if you get one?”

“The lights dim.”

“Ah-ha! The ghostly version of, ‘you’ve got mail’?” Rosie giggled, mocking the entire arrangement, but the music of her laughter filled the repair shop with a pleasant energy the Cordrah could never approach.

Jack reached out to her, and she stood to meet him. “I have so much to show you.”

“A lifetime won’t be enough?”

“We don’t have to worry about *that* any more.”

“How long can we stay here?”

“As long as you like. I’ve been here since just after the Korean War. That’s where I met James. He ran patrol missions for the troops along the DMZ. I helped a defecting pilot crash land his plane in a southern territory away from the shelling, and James met me there to make sure of the intentions of the pilot.”

“I thought you said James was a Texas Ranger?”

“He is, but he worked with Yin Quan—I call him Chewie—who died fighting against the third invasion of Mongols in China. We fight for modern causes now. By all modern standards, Chewie is an American, and he speaks perfect English. Wait until you hear James speak Korean.”

Rosie chortled again, and the sound of her laughter chased away any lingering doubts that she belonged with him and wanted to stay.

Jack looked around the shop, staring at the appliances lined up for repair or sale. The black and steel shades lent no color to the room. The tool benches and the sales counter near the front looked like stark white boxes. Plain white blinds covered the windows because the shop was closed. The upstairs apartment remained unused, except for storage and his small bunk. Aside from some of his memorabilia as an aviator, nothing decorated the shop. *Rosie needs a place to call home.*

“Jack?” she asked.

“I was just looking around. This shop is not a *home*, but it’s where I’ve been for the last forty...fifty years.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“We don’t exactly need to do that anymore,” Jack sighed and knew her perceptions were still human. “But—it’s a nice routine that most of us remember.”

“You never get tired?”

“Not like I used to,” Jack answered. “I get times where I’ve worked on a problem for so long that I can’t think clearly anymore, and I lay down. For all practical purposes, I sleep. When I wake up about an hour later, I know how to tackle it.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“Upstairs.”

Rosie looked at the stairway, leading up from the back of the shop. Dust covered the tops of the steps, and peculiar little round prints marred the dust in a path on either side. She stared at the pattern inquisitively.

Before she could say anything, Jack interrupted, “You are thinking like a human again. The only one around the shop that uses the stairs is Manny.”

“Manny?”

“Uh...yeah, a friend of mine.” Jack realized he needed to take Rosie on a tour of Spellfire and not just his shop. “There are a few characters around this town. I’ll introduce you, but don’t be surprised by anything you see.”

She stared at him.

He reached his hand out to her, “Come on, I’ll show you how I usually go upstairs.” Rosie took his hand, and her eyes flashed with a tinge of fear. “It’s okay. Just follow me. Hold my hand like we did from New York, and we’ll be there in no time.”

Fear didn't creep in to her eyes again, because he led her up to the top apartment of the building as he spoke. Rosie looked around the bare apartment and started to giggle.

"I realize it's not much, but..." Jack couldn't find the words to describe his frustration.

"Jack Taylor! The office in the old airfield hangar had more decorations than this! There isn't a cute calendar or anything interesting hanging on the walls!"

"Well, I just thought it would be better to keep it to a..."

"Nothing? You have a bunk, a desk with a few books and a chest. You aren't even going to get an award from Better Bunks and Foxholes! You issued more equipment to the parachutists on D-day!"

"How do you know that?" Jack stared at her.

"The government declassified it. Millie showed me one of her research papers for college—she did research about the Troop Carrier Squadrons. Even though she didn't get to meet *Grandpa Taylor*," Rosie said the words sweetly, "Between the research and the stories from me, she caught a glimpse of you."

Millie, his granddaughter, was now twenty-five years old.

"You've never looked up anyone from your old units or anything like that?" Rosie sat on the edge of the bed. "You've never tried to find out the way history sees your unit?"

"Nah, I do see my old co-pilot. He is supposed to be here this weekend. I found an old paratrooper that flew with us, too. I work on computers. Doesn't mean I like them."

"I'll show you the sites Millie used," she answered.

"Later. The sun is up. May I show you Spellfire first?"

* * * *

After an eventful morning of meeting several Spellfire shop owners, Rosie sat in a small, quiet ice cream parlor called Sinful Sundaes. She met James Dallingham, who fascinated her as a man of typical Texas character. Richard Westland was charming with his old British manners. Rosie had to stop herself from reacting as she met a woman that looked like an Egyptian Mummy and several other Spellfire notables. Now, the day was slowing down, and she wondered if Spellfire held any more surprises.

"And...let me tell you," James spoke in an animated fashion with his heavy moustache bobbing up and down, "He knows how to get to the fellas in the sniper turrets, too. I can see him leaned over and whispering in the soldiers' ears. I can't never get close enough to

hear what he's sayin', but you can see them reconsider what they are ordered to do. If'n it looks like they are going to pull the trigger then he flips some leaves in their faces and makes them delay. I'm down with our fellas, telling them to move, gotta give them that right creepy feeling that makes them look all about, and usually they can see the snipers."

Rosie had no idea that these men could haunt modern soldiers like that and achieve results that benefited everyone.

"Aye, now I can tell you, Mrs. Taylor," Richard smiled because he had been told several times already to use her name, Rosie. "We got into some tight pinches in France and in Germany, but we were fighting disciplined soldiers. As the years go on, the soldiers are less predictable."

Rosie took pleasure in the long lunch in Sinful Sundaes, and the boys continued to tell their stories about missions they served on together. She enjoyed the chance to meet Jack's friends, but felt thankful for the subtle warning that many of them were different. The only people that she met so far, that she didn't like, were Perry Normil and the frightful hag he hung around with, named Freda, who scowled at her.

Rosie took another long sip of the fabulous shake made by Electra. When she asked about the ingredients, Electra only snickered and said, "Uh... Vitamins."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a hand reach up and smack Jack's shoulder like another war buddy that ventured in for the events on Veteran's Day Weekend.

"Hey, Manny. I've got someone I want you to meet."

Rosie looked up to the end of the booth, but didn't see anyone standing there. She looked at her husband.

"Honey, this is Mano A. Mano, Manny for short." Jack gave a gesture to the middle of the table. "Manny, my wife, Rosie."

Rosie stared momentarily at the curious hand whose fingers straightened in surprise as Jack introduced them. The upper part of his head—uh, wrist—was covered in a blue bandana.

Manny, with a quick motion, pulled the saltshaker from the center of the table and began to tap loudly on the table.

=S-h-e i-s h-e-r-e?=
=

"Of course, I am. Where else would I be?" Rosie answered the curious fellow directly.

The silence at the table lingered uncomfortably.

“Did I say something wrong?” Rosie looked around at the faces of the men staring back at her.

James was the first to speak, “You understand Morse Code?”

“No, I heard letters as he tapped on the table.”

Richard looked at the group curiously.

=S-h-e h-e-a-r-s l-e-t-t-e-r-s w-h-e-n I t-a-p=

Richard straightened his form in the booth and stared at her carefully. “In your family history, Rosie, what’s the nationality?”

She replied slowly, “Italian,” allowing Richard to read her lips.

Richard waved off Manny from attempts to translate. “Any chance there is a witch—a strega—in your family heritage?”

“Yes! Quite a few from what I understand. My grandparents immigrated to the States before the turn of the century, before my father was born.”

“Jack, no wonder she fits in here so well,” James chortled. “She’s a witch!”

“I heard that!” Electra called from behind the counter. She shook her finger threateningly at the men in the booth. “Rosie, honey, come see me any time if you want any information.”

“You realize, this explains a lot,” Jack said.

Rosie could only wink at Jack. For many years, she had often wondered why there were things she just knew. She knew when Jack died, two days before she received the telegram. Talents as a witch would explain some of the eerie encounters in her life.

James tapped Jack on the arm, “Hey, I have orders to make sure you come to the dinner at six—since you’re back in town.”

Jack looked across the booth curiously. “Why?”

“Um, if a *General* gives you a direct order...” James spoke with authority, “The only answer is *yes, sir.*”

“Understood,” Jack said.

James vanished before their eyes.

“I’ll see you in the Fire Hall,” Richard stated and disappeared.

Jack turned to Rosie and said, “Close your eyes.”

Rosie giggled because she didn’t know what to expect, but she kept her eyes closed just as he asked.

Jack cuddled her close. She could feel his hands along her back, and his tongue caressed her ear. The feelings of sitting in a hard booth shifted to a soft substance.

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

“Sure, I wanted to give you a special view of Spellfire.”

Rosie opened her eyes and saw the misty fogs she experienced as they traveled from Long Island to Spellfire that morning. She saw the blue skies above and the small puddle-like lakes below. A jolt of fear tingled through her body before she realized she wasn't falling, and Jack held her tightly.

Her fear calmed quickly as intrigue of the view around her grew. She saw Spellfire sprawled out in front of her, from the interstate highway, all around the town, to the sprawling ranches with cows that looked like tiny flecks in fields of green.

"Rosie, I don't have much we can call home right now," Jack started, "But I think we can build up right here. The apartment above the store can be cleaned out, and it would make a nice place for us until we can find a real house."

"It's like we are starting over." Rosie looked into his brown eyes. They had a chance to enjoy the life denied by his death. "Instead of a lifetime, this could be a 'forever' for us."

"We don't know what could happen a thousand years from now, but we can take it one day at a time."

"I'll stay, Jack. There's never been a question."

* * * *

Jack led her back down to the appliance store, and they readied themselves for the dinner at the Fire Hall.

Rosie giggled as she learned the differences between her manifest body and her immaterial body. The clothes purchased earlier that morning could materialize and dematerialize with her, but she shifted to her favorite cream-colored dinner dress.

"You are going to drive me nuts with that," Jack teased.

"Good. You did say I could focus and keep some of the clothing I enjoyed in life...right?"

"Well, you may be over-dressed. It's a barbeque."

"Oh." Rosie giggled again. She transformed into dressy jeans and a simple white blouse.

Her perceptions of time remained the same. Jack explained during their walk in town, that she would see life in the same ways she remembered.

Jack had never been publicly affectionate, and true to his form, they walked side-by-side as they moved through the dinner line at the Fire Hall. The smoke from the roasters drifted around the front of the building, carrying the smells of roasted meats and spices. Jack joined in discussions about Iraqi security for camps while Rosie quietly

walked through the sea of strange faces. Jack seemed to know everyone in the town, and it would simply take time for the people to recognize her and for her to recognize them.

A young woman in a veil and sunglasses served a large cut of beef, the outside blackened from the fire and seasonings. Rosie smiled and extended her plate. A young woman with green skin served the potato salad and slaw. Another woman arranged large plates of vegetables and pickles, her hands neatly clad in gloves like the remainder of the serving crew. Rosie looked up into her eyes and saw reptilian slits for irises.

“You haven’t been around here long, have you, honey?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m sorry, is it obvious?”

“I can usually find the ones that are very new.” The young woman blinked, but two sets of lids shielded her eyes. “You’ll be fine. “My name is Pexitlanti. I am from South America—Incan.”

Rosie nodded, “Rosie Taylor.”

The delight of recognition showed on the young woman’s face. “Jack! Shame on you. You need to bring her around town. Don’t you dare lock her up in that stuffy repair shop.”

“Easy, Pex, don’t get your scales ruffled—she only got here last night,” Jack interjected. “I have to teach her the differences between material and immaterial and the nuances of travel. Give me a couple days.”

Pex smiled, wide-eyed. “You guys are going to get me all weepy. That’s not easy for someone that’s part reptile. Hey, I’m a seamstress. If you need anything, Jack knows where to find me.”

Rosie was delighted with the reactions as Jack introduced her to more and more people around Spellfire. Each time, there was a sense of recognition and usually an exclamation from them about Jack’s descriptions of her.

The gathering calmed when they sat and started eating. The food was delicious, but she didn’t see much point in eating when her body didn’t need food. Still, the old rituals of eating and drinking held a familiar comfort.

At the front of the hall, a young man stood at the podium and tapped the microphone to get everyone’s attention. “Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you for your attendance tonight. We have a special series of presentations we would like to make before the dancing begins.”

Applause started throughout the hall.

“Allow me to introduce the commander of the former Texas Army and former President of the Republic of Texas, General Sam Houston.”

Rosie giggled as Jack’s eyes shot over to James.

James continued to applaud as he leaned over the table, “I told you, when a General gives you an order, you answer, ‘yes, sir’!”

“You know something?” Jack accused.

“I know lots of ‘somethings’, and you better shut yer mouth while a commanding officer is makin’ an address,” James warned.

Jack began to fidget on the bench. Rosie leaned against his shoulder to quiet him.

“First, let me say thank you to the city of Spellfire and the residents that have made this gathering memorable. Special thanks to the Spellfire Farmer’s Market and to the Ladies Auxiliary of the fire department for the fine spread of food we have tonight.”

Jack reached over and smacked James’ arm as the Texan waved. Polite applause echoed through the hall.

The General stood at the podium in the uniform he wore during the Revolution. “I have a list of recognitions for special services. If I call your name, please come to the front of the hall.”

Murmurs began among the men and women. The General called out the names of five people that she didn’t recognize, but as the people came forward, two other men in more modern uniforms came to the front with small boxes and certificates. The General read out the name of the citation of merit for nighttime protective service to the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Jack leaned over, “We do things like that a lot, but these guys diverted a group of thirty Iraqi soldiers around a camp. They might have blown up the camp if they had seen it.”

The General asked, “Do we have the men and women from the Eighteenth Rescue Services Squadron from Port Lavaca?”

Thirty ghostly men and women stood up on the far side of the hall.

“Stay standing there...” The General stopped them from stepping forward. “During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, among other storms that battered the Gulf Coast in 2005, the men and women of this troop led people who could not evacuate to the safety of the shelters established in the stadiums and heavier buildings along the coast. I have a commendation for the entire squad, with a special commendation for Pierre Revideaux. This ghost, a former medic in

the French Army, led a family with young children to the shelters by transforming himself into a dog and leading them through the stormy streets of New Orleans by barking. Others in the unit flashed nearby lights, even when the city was without power, leading people through the dangerous storms.”

Applause rose as the aides passed out the awards and a plaque for the commander of the unit.

The General listed off several unit commendations, and Rosie listened quietly to the stories of how the paranormal world mixed with the normal.

“Lieutenant Colonel J.R. ‘Jack’ Taylor, please step forward.”

Jack stood and moved toward the podium.

Rosie never had the opportunity to see the fanfare with which the military honored their own, except for Jack’s funeral where she received a flag and some medals. She now watched as Jack saluted General Houston, received a return salute and then stood at attention while the General addressed the gathering.

“Lastly, we have a special award and promotion. In Iraq, the troops face small groups of insurgents as the forces move from one location to the other. Jack developed the tactics by which our soldiers ride with American troops as additional lookouts. I wish we could stop any deaths, but we know the deaths that have been prevented, even though the troops may never realize.”

The General turned and handed a case with a medal to Jack.

“For meritorious service, Jack is hereby promoted to the rank of Colonel, with his first assignment as commander of the new 97th Troop Guardians Squadron, based here in Spellfire.” He turned and pinned another insignia on the jacket Jack wore.

James was the first to his feet, followed closely by Richard.

Rosie stood to applaud her husband. Within moments, the gathering stood clapping, and the General motioned Jack to the podium to make an acceptance speech.

“Thank you,” Jack said into the microphone.

The people around them quietly settled into the seats.

“I do think there is one more group that deserves special recognition.” He turned to the General, “If I may?”

General Houston nodded and gave a brief hand motion, allowing Jack to proceed.

“It’s not a single squadron. It’s not about a single mission. Look next to you. We owe a special debt to the wives and husbands at

home. They keep us motivated with loving letters or cookies and care packages. They have one of the hardest jobs, keeping a home together while we go out and fight. They wrestle the broken furnaces or dripping plumbing. They read the children the stories or the emails from Mommy or Daddy. They will—or have—received the dreaded news that another soldier, sailor or airman has died in the line of duty. This time, it's not just any soldier; it's their husband or wife. I would have given anything to keep my wife from that shock, but she's a strong woman. She's strong enough to continue facing those hazards and join me as a resident of Spellfire. Knowing what I know about her, I wouldn't be surprised to see her join me now in the field. Rosie?"

Jack looked to the table and nodded to her. She stood quietly amid the gasps of several people in the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my wife, Rosie Taylor."

In all the years, Rosie never questioned whether loving Jack was worth the heartache she endured with his death. Her faith and love told her she would be with him in the afterlife.

Applause roared around her, and she knew she wanted nothing more than to stay with him.

In the unusual Texas town of Spellfire, she found heaven.

The End

Yellow Ribbon
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When a Black Ops mission backfires, injuring Noah, his empathic powers reach out to Stella Comfry, but can she help him get free before they both die?

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Yellow Ribbon

by
Jewel Adams

Chapter One

Ahh, the pain! Can't you hear me? Damn it all, this isn't time for games, Malaci...

Stella tried to pull out of the dream that now felt like a nightmare. Again, she heard the numbers he rattled off as if she knew what to make of them. All the while, she sensed the acute agony her dream invader suffered.

Pressing the palms of her hands over her ears didn't silence the voice. One that used her empathic abilities to speak to her. She groaned, wishing she could suppress the voice that kept her awake these last three nights. His abilities were stronger than her powers, and he refused to be silenced. Even to the point of yelling at her for trying. She groaned, knowing that he needed help. His anguish became a horrible burden that she wished she could fix.

No! You will listen to me...

Once again, she tried to speak to him, but she silenced this part of her powers so long ago...she couldn't remember how to communicate back to him.

"Darn you! Why can't you hear me?" She cried out in the darkened room.

* * * *

Oh lady, you have no idea how well I do hear you...Stella. I've tried hard not to, but I seem trapped in your mind. Beautiful though you may be, it isn't the one I need right now.

Noah couldn't hold his head up any longer and let it fall back into the dirt and stone. He tried to relax. His attempt to use his powers and reach his cousins took more energy than the last time. He refused to dwell on his present condition, the weight pressing down on him spoke volumes. Being pinned beneath the overturned truck wouldn't be his choice of how he would leave this life. "No, damn it, stop thinking like this."

Yelling at himself didn't help much, but right now, anger was the only thing left to fight the despair. There would not be any rescue. He knew that for a fact. Black Ops didn't get rescued when things went wrong, and this mission might have been a complete success, except for the mine blowing this truck over on top of him.

Only for a second did he think about calling out to the rebels that took away their injured comrades. *Only for a second...*

He dug his fingers into the muddy ground to fight off another wave of pain. He couldn't move his legs, but they sure hurt like hell. Most of the weight rested on his thighs. All his attempts to dig out from under the truck failed miserably. His fingers were bloody from trying. "Damn rocks, I must be right over a ledge."

What he needed was a miracle or better, his cousins, Damien, Derek or Malaci, to come and get him out of here. If only he could reach them. He lost track of how many times he tried to reach any of them. Failing wasn't an option.

"Stella...you must be one powerful empath to keep me trapped in that pretty mind of yours." He thought again of trying to make her understand, but Noah knew far too well how people feared his intrusion into their thoughts. Of course, his empathic skills were exactly why the government used his talents. "And got me into this mess."

He even tried to call on his Demvir blood, but his injuries kept him from shifting. The animal inside of him instinctively knew to avoid the pain.

"Stella, dare I take the chance?" Up to now, he resisted the urge to truly invade her thoughts. He dream-walked with her, but it wasn't enough. He needed to find out if she could handle his intrusion into her mind. He cursed the truth that she was his only hope of getting help. If she found either of his cousins or anyone in Spellfire, Texas that knew them, they could get to him almost instantly...as long as he remained conscious enough to lead them to his position.

Noah groaned over the possibility of failing with Stella. She could panic, call the police or worse.

His fist hit the ground in frustration. "I'm running out of time!"

* * * *

"Oh dear, she's doing it again." Molly stared into the mirror at the scene behind her. Combs, brushes, bottles of hair dye, scissors, they were all dancing in a circle of air around Stella. That her friend seemed oblivious to the comical scene she created didn't surprise Molly. Stella just wasn't herself of late, and this proved that she needed Molly's help.

"Excuse me a second, I'll be right back." Her client giggled and waved Molly away. Everyone watched as she grabbed at the flying debris before she finally stood beside Stella.

Stella looked up just as Molly grabbed the hair brush over her head. She could feel the heat of embarrassment flooding her cheeks. "I'm..."

"Don't say it, Stella." Molly moved in so she could whisper. "You need to get some help."

It hurt to face her best friend. She couldn't even argue. Molly was right.

The girl grabbed for another comb that started to rise out of the jar. Molly slammed the top down, preventing the combs from dancing in the air. "I'll take over for you and meet you in the park, say three-thirty."

Stella shut her mouth over the raised finger that Molly shook at her. She peeled off her plastic apron and dropped it into her friend's outstretched hand. Stella wanted to groan when things started flying off the shelves as she passed and began to follow her.

She stopped at the door, with every ounce of power she possessed, she concentrated on putting everything back where they belonged. Knowing she couldn't get them all to stop following her, she scooted out the door and slammed it shut, hearing them hit the door as she walked away. "Don't think, just walk to the park, Stella."

High School, yes, that was the last time she could remember her powers being this out of control. That teenage crush on Trevor James nearly exposed her powers; only Molly's intervention prevented the disaster from happening. Thankfully, Spellfire now kept them safe from prying eyes, even when things went crazy.

Stella slumped down on the park bench and tried to focus on the flowering gardenia bush, but he wouldn't let her avoid him. "At least, tell me your name so I can yell at you!"

Noah, my name is Noah.

She stood up, "You heard me!"

When he didn't answer, she took a deep breath to regain her composure. "Noah, now isn't the time to stop talking to me. Where are you? How can I help?"

Frightful Freda walked by and gave her a strange look. Stella almost stuck her tongue out at the nosey bitch, but refused to let anyone interfere with his voice.

"Noah? I'm sorry, I won't yell, honest. Please talk to me..."

The silence fell around her like a giant weight, one that made even breathing hurt. She brought her hands up and cupped them over her mouth to help prevent a panic attack. She couldn't remember having these attacks...not since she vanquished her empathic abilities.

Stella could feel the beads of sweat running down her face as she fought to control her breathing, but nothing she did seemed to work. Through quick intakes of air, she spoke. "It is him, not me. Oh gawd, Noah! Breathe, damn it!"

As if he finally heard her, the pressure against her chest began to ease. "Good, try to take in small breaths at first. I'm right here with you, Noah." Just as she spoke those words, the force grabbed her and pulled her back, back into the long forgotten empathic realm of dream-walking. She could feel the fog sweep by her face and encircle her body. "Noah?"

He felt close, very close, as she tried to see beyond the mist. "Help me, Noah, it's been too long since I've used my empathy." Like a distance whisper, she heard him and turned in the direction she sensed. "Keep trying to talk to me, Noah, I'm in your dream this time."

All the knowledge came rushing in as Stella fell deeper into the walking dream, Noah's dream. Yes, she knew she was right; somehow, they reversed their role, and she became the intruder of his dream. Yet, his dream didn't feel right. It was all gray and dangerous.

Stella spoke to him using her empathy. "Where are you, Noah?"

"I'm here, Stella."

In the distance, she could make out the image of a man and started walking toward him.

"That's close enough."

Her steps hesitated only a moment before continuing, “I’m not afraid of you, Noah.”

“I can see that, but maybe you should be.”

He began to fade away. Stella started running, but when she reached the spot where he once stood, only swirling fog remained. “Noah, come back!”

No answer came, and yet, she felt herself being shook...

* * * *

“Stella! Darn it, you aren’t going to do this again. Wake up!” In fear and frustration, Molly slapped her friend across the face.

“Holy shit, Molly, why’d you do that?” Stella moaned as she rubbed her cheek.

“Maybe because my best friend was lost in a dream, and I was afraid she wouldn’t come out of it.”

Stella raised her gaze to see the fear she heard in her friend’s voice. “I’m okay, Molly, honest.”

“Yeah, right, you were in a frigg’n dream, don’t try to lie to me. I know the signs. I should have known something was up when everything started flying today...”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t stop it. Noah has been calling to me for three days. He suddenly stopped or traded places with me. I don’t know which, but it’s all back again.” Their gazes locked over Stella’s trembling admission.

“You have to fight it, Stella. You can’t let this happen again.”

“I have been fighting it, but his power is strong, and now mine is working, and... Damn it, what am I going to do, Molly?”

“We need to find a way to keep him out, stop this from continuing.”

Stella could only nod at her friend, the old fears were rising fast and furious. Yes, she remembered only too well what this power was capable of doing to her. An hour in a walking-dream could easily turn into a day and then a week in real time. Stella shivered over the memories. She refused to think about the *coma* that nearly cost her life. Only Molly recognized that it wasn’t a coma, but a walking-dream holding her prisoner. “Who, Molly? Who can stop it? I must have broken the spell.”

Had she destroyed the protective spell that kept her empathy silent? Could they entrap it again? Stella’s head swirled with questions without answers. “I don’t feel too good...”

“Stella! Oh, no, no, it’s starting again!”

Chapter Two

“What does she keep repeating?” The doctor looked up at the nurse when she didn’t answer. His stare made her blush, but at least, she answered.

“I think it is Noah. She keeps calling for Noah.”

“If he’s here, you need to go get him.”

“Doctor, I did try, but the only person with her is her best friend, Molly.”

Roger adjusted the glasses on the bridge of his nose once more. As he walked away, he voiced his thoughts over the odd condition of the girl in his care. “Then I guess we better find this guy.”

When he reached the waiting room, it didn’t take a genius to see which girl was... “Molly, would you come into my office, please?”

He waited for the pretty redhead to follow him. He could hear the agitated strike of her heels on the waxed floor. Once he heard the door shut, he turned to face the extraordinary lady. Not one detail went unnoticed about the woman standing in front of him. “I’ve lived here a long time, and I know a magical problem when I see one. Has someone put a spell on your friend? Hexed her? What’s going on?”

Molly sat with him as he took his seat; their eyes never released their hold on each other. Her cat instincts toward the doctor set off a soft purr of approval inside her. The slight rise of his brow made her wonder if he could hear her feline self. Now that would be an interesting idea to pursue. Shaking her head, Molly pushed the thought down. Stella needed this man. “She’s in a walking-dream.”

“An empath...”

She didn’t like the distaste she heard, “No, and yes, she...somehow the spell that kept her empathic abilities under lock and key has been opened.”

“Opened?”

“Yes, she nearly died the last time this happened. We placed a spell on her ability, locked it up to stop it.”

Roger held up his hand, “You said *the last time* this happened?”

Molly fidgeted before answering. “Yes, but we weren’t here, in Spellfire. The last time everyone thought it was a coma, but I knew what was wrong. You see, Stella’s gift is also her curse. She can’t control the dream-walking. It just goes on and on, jumping from one dream to the next, depending on which is strongest.”

She watched the man go deep in thought over what she just told him. She hoped Candy was right and that Doc Roger could help her friend. Right now, Molly wished she had one of Candy’s soothing chocolate, cat-nip treats to calm her nerves.

“I’m going to need some help with this.” Roger got up and stood at the door before he turned back to look at her. “Who is Noah?”

Molly shook her head and answered, “I don’t know. She said his powers were greater than hers. He’s been calling her for three days now.”

“So she is probably in his realm now.” He didn’t wait for an affirmative response. Time became too precious to dally with the pretty lady. But once he helped her friend, Roger would be looking up Molly Purrlly.

She opened her mouth to answer, but he was gone. “You better be as good as they say, Doc.” Molly resisted the urge to dig her nails into the brocade upholstery of the chair arm. Her nerves were letting her cat self emerge. “I need some catnip.” She dug frantically through her purse until her fingers closed around a satchel filled with the herb. Long, deep breaths of the calming scent flooded over her. For now, she would suppress her feline self and go sit with Stella.

* * * *

It seemed like hours before she found herself alone with Stella. Molly moved closer to the hospital bed and took her friend’s hand in hers. She let her soothing purr flow, “Listen to me, Stella. I know you can hear me. Candy Piper, you know her, she owns the Candied Kisses shop. She told me to bring you here to Doc Roger’s hospital. He is supposed to be able to heal magical illnesses.”

She could feel the slight movement of Stella’s hand in hers, her other one patted Stella’s. “I’m glad you can hear me. This Doc Roger seems to know his stuff. If anyone can help, I think he can. I’ll keep you posted on his progress. Just don’t go anywhere else. Stay near this Noah guy.”

The room fell silent as she sat there, soothing Stella by wiping the fine sheen of moisture from her brow and face. “It will be fine, Stella, honest.”

* * * *

The sudden loss of Molly's voice, or anyone being near, sent a chill up Stella's spine. A dank fog still engulfed her. She failed to find Noah through the thick blanket of moisture.

Thoughts of waking seemed more distant than the man that brought her into this shrouded realm. "Where are you? Why won't you speak with me now that I'm here?"

"Stella..."

She spun about at the sound of his voice. "I'm here, Noah. Right here with you."

"Go back."

For a second, she almost screamed at him, but took a steadying breath. "I can't do that, Noah."

The silence dragged before he finally answered. When he did speak, it came from directly behind her. She fought down the urge to spin about and see him.

Her skin felt like heaven as Noah's fingers closed about her bare upper arms. "You should have listened to me and gone back." His lips nearly touched her ear as he spoke softly, to calm the fear he felt inside her. His eyes closed as he inhaled her essence, letting her invade his being. "I never wanted to bring you any harm, Stella."

His breath and touch warmed her like a whispering summer breeze. All the fear slipped away as she felt him press into her back. "Noah..."

"You are so beautiful." She stiffened only a second over the remark he failed to keep silent. Once said, Noah gave up the pretence of not admiring the beauty in his arms. "I have always liked gardenias."

The bold brush of his lips across her collarbone seemed to melt her resistance as her head fell back against his shoulder. She moaned over the liberty he took, kissing the line of her neck. She should be asking him why he brought her here, not letting a stranger seduce her.

But she fell beneath his kiss, and when his tongue sought entry, she didn't protest, opening to his domination. She moaned over the feel of his fingers burying themselves in her hair, holding her to his will. A shiver overtook her as his tongue roamed to claim her mouth and lips.

"Dear Stella..."

His husky voice did little to slow the rush of erotic heat engulfing her body. Stella wanted more. She didn't hide her pleasure over his

lips' discovery path down her neck. She instinctively arched back, into the swollen hardness of his attraction for her.

Noah found his way back to her ear, licking the delicate curve of her ear lobe. "I want to make love to you, Stella—wild, unguarded love that will make you howl my name."

She studied him for a minute, wondering over his odd choice of words then brushed the questions away. Her hand rose, and she buried her fingers in his thick hair, holding him closer, hoping he meant his declaration. Things were never this real in a walking-dream, at least not before Noah. She always sensed the presence, but with him, she could feel his glorious body. Experience the full, stiff rod of his sex pressing against her heat...

Words weren't necessary, Noah knew she could hear his thoughts and he hers. She felt it, too, this irresistible longing for each other. He desired her, did from the very first, but now, he knew she wanted him as well. There was something different about Stella, a feeling that struck deep into his soul, dismissing the right or wrong time for such a declaration.

She pressed back against his stiff rod of desire. Noah growled over the sensations she set free. Bold and determined, his hand reached down and covered the mound of her hot sex. "Oh, Stella, you want me...want me as badly as I do you."

His finger found the nub of her passion and he proved relentless, stirring the fires inside her, driving her against him as if she could impale herself on his hard cock. He wanted her. His finger drove into the warm sensuous heat, drawing out her sexual fluids that would insure him an easy path to her womb. Yes, womb, Noah desperately wanted to touch the deepest part of this woman, bury himself in her luxurious heat, place his scent on her and let himself explode inside her most velvet sex.

He turned her to face him, thankful for his remaining strength. If this were his last vision, last experience on earth, Noah wanted to share it with this amazing woman, and he let her hear his feelings.

Stella nearly missed his last thoughts over his devouring kiss. There was something special about Noah, she felt wild and wanton in his arms. She wondered if the other part of her had also been released...she shook herself and listened again to his thoughts, knowing she couldn't have misunderstood.

"Why are you pushing me away? Stella?"

With the last of her strength, she forced him to stay at arm's length from her. Stella looked at him. "What did you just mean about last experience on earth?" The silence hung between them. "Tell me, Noah."

She was spoiling the mood, causing Noah to growl over the reality creeping back into their time together. "Please, Stella, I don't have enough..."

"Enough what? Strength? What is wrong with you, Noah? Why did you need me to come?" She wanted to cry over the loss of his sexy dark gaze that sparked with gold and began to look anything but healthy. Dark and bleary, she could feel the weakness overtaking him...and her. "Tell me, Noah, while I can still help."

He forced himself to focus on her. "I warned you."

"I know, but it is too late for that. What is wrong? I need to know, right now!"

She reached for him but failed to hold him. He no longer held any substance for her to grip, and Stella feared the reason. When he would have looked away, she moved with him, forcing him to see her, look at her. They moved like wisps of air in the surrounding mist trying to swallow them.

"Stella, I'm injured, trapped beneath an overturned truck, I'm...dying."

Her gasp made him blink. "I'm sorry, sweet Stella, truly I am, but you pulled me to you, and I couldn't find the people I needed to help me."

"Noah?" But she realized he didn't hear her, nor could she stop him from fading before her eyes. "Oh, no, please Noah, don't give up. I can help, somehow I can help you."

The illusive quality of time in the walking-dream left her feeling betrayed and defeated. She failed to find him or see him again. How long she looked for him, she couldn't say.

Once or twice, she did see something. At first, she couldn't make it out then the fog would clear, exposing a huge black wolf. Wherever she moved, he followed, but he never closed the distance between them. Then he would vanish, leaving Stella to question what she saw.

Her tears were all too real, and nothing she did stopped them from falling, falling for him and what he brought to her in such a short span of time.

* * * *

“Doc, how much time do we have?” Molly refused to give the man any distance—he would tell her the truth.

Roger pulled the sheet up and exposed her friend’s legs. “If we don’t reach her soon... She’s dying. I suspect that this Noah is, as well.”

The darkening bruises across Stella’s thighs looked painful. “Can’t we stop it? They weren’t there yesterday.”

“It seems your friend is a true empath.”

“We know that.”

“No, not just thoughts and dreams, Molly. Stella actually takes on the injuries or illness of the person she is mentally locked to. These bruises aren’t fresh. See the change of color around the outside? That means they are a few days old. I suspect that Noah suffered an injury. Now his pain is also Stella’s.”

“How can that happen?”

“Their psychic frequencies have linked each to the other.”

Molly shook her head and tried to deny what the doctor told her. It was one thing for Stella to get lost in another’s dream, but to actually suffer his pain. “He’s killing her.”

“I don’t think he is doing it intentionally. He may not even be aware of the harm he is causing her.”

Molly didn’t wait for any more reasons, she needed to help Stella survive.

“Molly! Molly, where are you going?”

“To find the strongest witch I know!”

“But...” Roger watched the door slam shut, “it is probably too late.”

“Nurse, help me get the respirator on her.”

Chapter Three

“Candy, you must know someone here in Spellfire? I know one very powerful witch, but he is very far away and may not get here in time. I’ve sent him a telegram.”

“Electra Spellfire is very powerful. She would know if there were someone that could help, if she couldn’t.”

“I must see her right away.”

“We can go over to Sinful’s and see if she is around. Come on, we’ll find help for Stella.”

Molly paced as her friend closed up her shop. Once outside, she tried to get a grip on her emotions, knowing that hysterics wouldn’t help Stella.

Sinful Sundaes was one of the busiest places in town, this afternoon wasn’t an exception. Molly hung back as Candy scanned the crowd for Electra, but even she would have known this woman. The magic she carried seemed to glow around her. Molly said a silent pray that Electra could help Stella.

The lady took them to a back room, out and away from the crowd. Molly let Candy explain the situation until the woman looked at her.

“Your friend, Stella, has she been able to speak to you?”

“No, not since he pulled her into the walking-dream.”

“Who is he?”

“She called him Noah. She said that his magic was stronger than her own.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Even if Electra hadn’t said it, Molly would have recognized the woman’s instant awareness of Noah’s name. “Who is he?”

“He, my dear, is my cousin, Noah Spellfire, and she’s right. He is not only one powerful empath, but he is a Demvir.”

“A shifter?” Molly almost laughed in relief.

“Of the highest magic. Let’s hope his powers can keep them both alive until we can get them help.”

On Electra's final word, the room spun, she and Candy found themselves transported with Electra to the Garnet Moon restaurant. Candy's hold steadied Molly and kept her from falling from the abrupt stop. Rather shaken, her claws came out, ready to fight.

Electra caught the glint off the extended claws and reached over, patting them. "Easy, things will be fine."

Molly slowly nodded and took a calming breath, hoping her other self would slid back as things started moving like she never expected. Electra shouted out orders, directing people to bring Malaci and Damien to her. She looked at Candy, the girl was grinning from ear to ear. Just seeing how proud Candy felt over bringing her to Electra made Molly feel better. She only hoped they were in time. "A shifter...good one, Stella."

* * * *

"I'm not sure if you are a figment of my imagination, but right now, I don't care. Come over if you like. I need company." Stella let her head fall back against the tree as the wolf slowly circled closer. She figured that if he were there to harm her, the deed would already be done. Besides, right now a fight wouldn't be such a bad idea. She wondered if it would block the pain.

When the large beast came to rest right up against her, she buried her fingers in his fur, his scent and feel woke her recognition. "Noah?" She smiled, "I really need to listen to my inner self. You could have told me you were a shifter. We really do have a lot to discover about each other." Her small smile didn't vanish over the wolf's answering whine. "I know now why you found me, why you couldn't leave me."

Stella felt the changes coming over her, gawd did they feel wonderful. It had been far too long since she shifted. She felt the power flooding her as her limbs changed. The white fur started covering her. She knew now that Noah changed to fight the pain. The relief felt like a drug, but Stella couldn't allow herself to give in to the lure. Her wolf-sharp golden eyes, locked on the dark ones watching her with renewed interest as she stretched out beside him, resisting the desire to run and preventing the complete transition. "There now, that feels better."

She didn't move as he sniffed her, imprinting her scent with his. She, in turn, registered every move he made. "I can't run with you, though I promise to once we get home."

His huge body jumped up and slid over hers, teasing her, trying to get her to come with him. The desire to end the torturous pain and join him grew stronger. She fought the temptation, knowing if she didn't they would both die. Stella refused to let that happen. "I know you can hear me. Even if you are in a deep shift, you can still hear me in your mind." Stella spoke to him through thought, never releasing her hold on his dark sexy gaze.

We need to leave here, Noah. I need you to tell me those numbers again. I know you shifted to get release from the pain. I don't blame you, but my sexy dream wolf, you need to come back to me just enough to give me the numbers. She could see he heard her by the way the wolf shook his head, trying to drive her out of it. *I won't leave, sorry. When it comes to this power, I have a feeling you may have met your match, my sexy wolf. Once you are home, we can run in Spellfire Woods. I know this beautiful waterfall...*

The numbers started again. Stella repeated them over and over, praying that someone could hear her; that someone would come for him. She couldn't say how long they both spoke the numbers. It became a chant. She never lost her awareness of him even when he slowly vanished.

I will be waiting for you, Noah. I won't let you get away that easily. In the distance, she heard him howl in answer to her promise.

Chapter Four

“That’s right. Come on, Stella, you just need to open your eyes for me.” Roger knew the girl fought waking. Why she did so, would be his first question to her. “Let’s face it, Stella, you can’t stay in there and hide...”

“Not hiding...let me be. I need to help him. Noah, please, come back.”

“Stella, he’s not there. You know I’m telling you the truth. Now open your eyes...that’s it, come back to this side of reality.” He felt the muscles in his neck begin to unwind as her lashes flickered. In spite of all her denials, those beautiful golden-blue eyes of hers opened and stared at him.

“Let me go!”

“Sorry, I can’t do that. Besides, Molly would torture me if I did. Have you ever felt those claws of hers?”

The tears flowing down the girl’s cheeks nearly did Roger in, but he knew he must keep her angry to keep her with them. He could hear Electra casting her spell behind him. He hoped this one would protect the girl from her uncontrollable power.

As if she felt it leave her, her whole body took a shaking breath. She looked past him to Electra and Molly. “No! No, you don’t understand, I need to go back and find him!”

She looked at Roger when she failed to get any satisfaction from the women. “I need to help him. He is going to die and not just in a walking-dream, but physically die. The stop dreaming, stop breathing kind of dead!” Her grip on his lab coat pulled him to her as she snarled out her fears. “Please help him. I promised to run with him.”

All the fire seemed to wash out of her as she let go and started crying then rolled into a helpless fetal position.

Molly couldn’t stand it another moment and pushed past Roger to reach her friend. “Oh Stella, come on, talk to me, please.”

They all sighed in relief when Stella rolled over and hugged Molly. “He’s like me, Molly. I’ve never met someone like me before. He’s dead! I can’t believe he is gone.” Her sobbing howls filled the room.

Electra waved the doctor away, “There, there, dear Stella. Your wolf is not dead. He is fighting for life as we speak.”

The voice wasn’t familiar, but Stella couldn’t turn away from what the woman said and the promise it held. She wiped the tears away into the white fur. Realizing she was still partially shifted made her giddy.

“Yes, you are a Demvir as well. Quite a surprise. In fact, my brother is still licking his wounds.” Electra laughed at the girl’s shocked stare. “You, my dear, are quite a fighter. Seems once you set your sights for one particular wolf, he is the only one. You fought off both Malaci and Damien, to keep them from Noah.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember...”

Electra patted her cheek, “It doesn’t matter. You saved Noah. That is all that is important.”

“Where is he?”

“A hospital in Germany, all hush, hush due to the nature of his business and where you found him. Damien is with him and won’t leave until he brings him home.”

Stella pushed up and looked directly at the woman she’d only seen from a distance before today. “When will he be home?”

It felt like an eternity before Electra answered. Stella felt her stomach tighten in warning.

“I’m not sure. He’s hurt...”

“Yes, I know how bad he is hurt.” She bit her lip over the way everyone looked at her legs that were now back to her human form. She no longer felt the desire to let her wolf side free. “Will he live, Electra?”

The woman’s chin rose before answering, “Noah is a strong man, always has been. He will live, and he will come home.”

Neither of them looked away from each other as the unspoken was exchanged in their gaze. Stella finally spoke to Electra, “I will be here for him when he returns. I don’t care how long it takes.”

Electra nodded, finally turning away from Stella, looking back only once to say. “Rest up, Stella, the battle is not over.”

“I know.”

* * * *

“Okay, so don’t tell me what that was all about. But what the heck is going on, Stella?” Molly knew her since childhood, but this was the first time she couldn’t read her friend. It seemed as if Stella closed herself off from everyone, since she came out of that dream with Noah Spellfire.

“I’m fine, Molly.”

“No, no you aren’t, but I will find out what is wrong, and you will get better!”

The apartment door slammed shut. Stella bit her lip, wondering why she couldn’t talk to Molly about her feelings. Maybe if she understood them herself, things would be different.

“It seems we are still connected, Noah.” No distance or lack of a walking-dream could take away what Stella felt from the man. She could still feel his pain even if she didn’t suffer from the injury as she did in the dream. She also felt his helplessness and the smothering feeling of being trapped, which to a wolf-shifter could be worse than death.

As she thought about his situation, her lips slowly rose from their frown into a smile, “I know what I need to do. How stupid of me not to realize...”

She kept talking to herself as she raced to the phone and punched out the number from the paper on the table. “Yes, is this Malaci?” She started pacing as the man that answered went off to find the sheriff.

“This is Malaci, who is calling?”

“It’s Stella...” Suddenly, she lost the words. She could feel all his emotion at once. “I’m sorry...” *He must be a Demvir as well...*

“No! Stella, stay right there. I’ll come over. Where are you anyway?”

“At my apartment.”

“Okay, I’m coming over.”

Before she could answer, the line went dead. “I guess you are.”

It seemed that all the Spellfire men were rather domineering. She wondered if they all shifted, then remembered what Electra said about the fight. “Darn, I wonder if I bit him, too?”

The knock on her door made her jump, “Damn, that was fast.”

But she knew the man standing at the door, “Hello, Doctor Roger?”

He looked at her in an odd way. “Can I come in, Stella?”

“Oh yes, of course you can, I’m sorry.” Molly must have called him.

“Expecting someone else?”

“Yes, she is.”

They both turned to see the man now filling her doorway.

“Malaci?” Stella couldn’t help but notice the similarities between this man and Noah. Both men were compelling and wouldn’t go unnoticed in any situation.

“Yes, we finally get to meet. Are you all right, Stella?”

“I am.” She looked at the doctor and smiled. “Of course, my friend thinks otherwise. Right, Doctor?”

The sheepish grin the man gave her said it all. “I think I’ll be going.”

He didn’t wait for either of them to stop him. Stella looked at Malaci as he came back into the room, after closing the door. “I’m fine, honest.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Do you have time for coffee?” It was a silly question, but when he nodded, she started making a pot as he settled on to the barstool.

“You were and are an unexpected surprise, Stella.”

She finished pouring the water into the coffee maker and turned to face him. “Did I bite you, too?”

His laughter filled the room. “No, only Damien. He made the mistake of coming between you and Noah.”

“In the dream?”

“It was the only way we could reach him that quickly.”

She leaned on the counter and looked directly at the man. “How is he doing, really? I want the truth, please.”

It took a moment before he answered. She hoped he found what he looked for inside of her.

“You know how bad he was injured?”

She nodded.

“Maybe if we’d gotten to him sooner. I don’t know, but he isn’t healing very well.”

“Please Malaci, I need to know. I feel him. I know he’s still in pain and I’m worried.”

“His legs were crushed. They’ve operated, but it is still a question if he will walk again.”

She didn’t look away from his scrutiny, “I see, I had a feeling that might be a problem.”

The coffee finished, she poured them each a cup before saying anything more. She couldn't drink hers, needing to say what she called him for. "Malaci, I need to go to him."

He started to object, but she waved him to stop, "No, not go to the hospital." She smiled over his concern. "I need to go to him in a walking-dream."

Once again, she stopped his objection before it could be spoken. "I know Electra put a binding spell on me. It is stopping him from reaching me and right now, he needs me, Malaci. He needs what only I can give him."

He wouldn't be silenced this time. She didn't try. She said what her heart needed to say.

"From what everyone has told me, letting you loose in a walking-dream with Noah could kill you. I don't see how that could help him, not when he constantly demands to see you."

She straightened over the information he didn't mean to tell her. "All the more reason that I find him. You see, if I let him come into *my* walking-dream, then there is no danger for either of us. I'm not injured. In my dream, he won't be either." She watched to see how he took her statement. "Don't you see, he needs to shift, to run. He can only do that in a walking-dream."

He thought over what she said before speaking. "What would you need to reach him?"

"I need your sister to unbind my powers."

His brow rose, and he leaned back in his chair.

Stella felt defeat flooding in on her. "Electra has to do this, Malaci. She must for Noah's sake."

"I'll go talk to her, Stella."

She walked him to the door. When he turned, she smiled up at him, "Thank you so much."

"Don't thank me yet. You don't know my sister very well...I do."

With that, he left her to stare after him. "She must let me do this."

Chapter Five

Stella leaned back against her bedroom door, turning the lock. Too many arguments and heated words passed between her and Molly. The tension pressed down on Stella. Not even listening to Electra's rant and instructions, before she released her from the binding spell, exhausted her as much as Molly's outrage. "If you were me, Molly, you would take the chance as well."

For love? Could she love Noah? Her heart said yes. Against all the obstacles, she truly believed she found her one and only soul mate.

Her gaze went to the bed. "You will come to me, Noah, I know you will. We just have to make sure it is in my dream we meet."

She pushed off the door and walked toward the bed, slowly stripping off her clothes before slipping under the covers.

Another crash came from the other room. Stella regretted that Molly was in such a terrible rage. She refused to give in on her condition that no one, not even Molly, could be with her or interrupt her while she was in the dream. Everyone but Molly swore to adhere to her wishes. After their fight tonight, Stella knew her friend wouldn't interfere.

"I'm finally listening to my inner self." She turned off the light and envisioned Noah in his wolf form as she felt herself begin to shift. Slowly, she fell asleep.

She lapped at the cooling water from the waterfall, cocking her head as she glanced at her reflection in the rippling pool. A full wolf, her thick white fur gleamed in the moonlight. There, above her on the ridge, she saw his dark outline against the moon.

Her head rose back, and she howled a heartfelt welcome to Noah as he made his way down to her. They both gave soft yips and yelps of recognition, between body rubs and nips, before they took off running, running into the night—through Spellfire woods.

The magic of the night and Stella's dream flowed out behind the two playful wolves, like a ray of stars as they ran.

Stella knew, just as Noah did, that there were hurtles still to face, but for now, for this night and as many after as it took, they would be free to run...together.

* * * *

"There, that's the last one!" Stella stepped back to examine her handy work around the town square. Hundreds of yellow ribbons were tied on trees, benches, gates, light posts, anything she could tie the giant bows to wore the symbol of her feeling for the man coming home.

"Wow. Gee Stella, don't you think it is a little overkill?"

She smiled at Molly, "Nope, if I had another roll of ribbon, I'd do more of them."

"I sure hope he sees them all."

"He will. Malaci told Damien to be sure and bring him into town first."

Molly helped Stella pick everything up, "Do you think that Damien is ever going to forgive you?"

"What? For biting him?" Stella laughed, "I doubt it, but I bet he never crosses my wolf prints again."

"I suppose not."

Molly wouldn't stop staring at her.

"What's wrong? Have I grown horns or something?"

"Nope, but you are glowing." Her friend reached over and tucked a stray curl behind Stella's ear. "Positively glowing."

"I love him, wolf or man, I love them both." Stella smiled back at Molly's raised brow. She didn't want to have the same conversation that they seemed to have every day. "I need to go see Electra. Can you take these for me?"

"Sure, I'll be at the shop, let me know what time he is coming."

Stella waved back to her, "I will."

She looked back before entering Sinful's. The whole square glowed yellow. "That ought to catch his attention."

"Oh, I think you've done that, Stella."

She couldn't help but laugh over Electra's raised brow. "True, but it doesn't hurt to let him know again how I feel."

"He certainly deserves a hero's welcome. He's done so much..."

The woman stopped talking abruptly and quickly glanced around.

Stella reached over and gripped Electra's arm. "It's okay, I know not to speak of any of it. He's my hero, regardless of the untold deeds."

The two of them hugged. Electra was the first to straighten up.

“They should be arriving any minute now.”

As if the news took flight on the wind, people started coming out of the shops and buildings to line the street going around the square. Someone started passing out small American flags.

Stella guiltily bit her lip and looked up at Electra, unable to hide her smile “Guess the ribbons say it all.”

Electra just laughed. Taking hold of Stella’s elbow, she moved them both through the crowd, so they were right on the curb and could see when Damien’s car arrived.

A sudden knot formed in Stella’s stomach as she realized this would be the first time she would actually see him in person. All the unanswered questions seemed to fall down around her; she started to shake. Without another thought, her gaze rose to see car coming slowly down the road. Stella stepped out into the middle of the street.

* * * *

“Holy stars! Noah, are you seeing all this?” Damien looked over at his cousin. *Of course, he sees it...or at least, he sees her.*

“Stella...”

“I’m sure she did this, Noah.”

But Noah wasn’t listening to Damien. Neither did he look at all the yellow ribbons. Only one image caught his attention, one beautiful blonde vision that overwhelmed all his senses. “Stop the car!”

Damien slammed on the brakes at Noah’s shouted order, wondering what could be wrong. Before he could ask, Noah opened the car door and began wrestling with the crutches.

Cussing and swearing, he finally managed to get his hated new companions under control as he lifted himself off the seat to stand. Noah swore to whatever higher power was out there, not to let him fall as he took his first unsteady step, never once did he take his eyes off the woman waiting for him. With each step he took, Stella took one toward him and Noah never wanted anything as much as he did to reach her and hold her in his arms.

Stella felt the smile spreading over her as she watched the man of her dreams take another step. Tears of joy slid down her face, “He can walk, he really can do it.”

She wanted to run to him, but she also spied the pride and determination in his face as he walked toward her. Her heart swelled with love for this special man. *My dream wolf.*

Noah's head jerked up, their gazes locked. *Tonight, Stella, tonight won't be a dream.*

Her smile grew until she felt giddy as he took the final step to stand in front of her. He leaned on one crutch and reached out to cup her cheek. "Stella, dear sweet, Stella."

She leaned into his hand, loving the heat of his palm and closed her eyes. *Noah, you are so warm...*

He smiled; she was still speaking to him through her mind. All he could do was look at her, drink in her image as if she would disappear any second. Without another thought, Noah pulled her to him and wrapped her in his embrace, inhaling her scent, one that had been imprinted on his soul since that first touch in the walking-dream.

"Oh, Stella, you smell so good, feel so damn nice...*good enough to eat you.*" He felt her giggle against his chest. He buried his own laughter in her silky hair.

* * * *

"Night..." Stella shut the door and leaned back against it as if she needed to keep the horde outside. It seemed like forever before they all left. Her concerned gaze went to Noah again. She knew he must be exhausted. She smiled, remembering how adamant he'd been with his family that he intended to stay here with her. Though they never spoke of it, she felt like a weight lifted when she heard him tell them.

She ignored the dirty dishes and all the mess, to climb onto the couch on all fours, to settle up against him. "Tired?"

His arm came around her shoulder and pulled her closer. "Exhausted, but happy."

She smiled and kissed his thumb as it traced her lips. Her hand moved to gently massage his thigh as she saw him doing earlier.

"Hmm, that feels so good, Stella."

Without a word, she slid down to her knees on the floor in front of him. She pulled off his shoes and started the massage with his toes, sure they were numb by now, hoping it brought back his circulation. Thankfully, Doc Rogers took her aside tonight and told her what needed to be done to help Noah rehabilitate his legs.

"If I am hurting you..."

His fingers played through her hair as she worked on his legs, "You could never hurt me, Stella. Nor I you."

She looked up at him in question. "I could have..." Her finger on his lips prevented him from saying more.

"This is where you belong, Noah. Where I've waited to see you."

Neither of them said more as she continued to work on the next leg. Noah knew she wouldn't stop until she was satisfied. He watched her tonight. Though she rarely left his side, he wanted to pounce on any man that even came close to her. His keen hearing heard every conversation; he refused to apologize for listening. Now that he was here, he found leaving her sight harder than ever. Just feeling her touch him, to truly touch her, tightened his throat in emotion. "All the dreams weren't this good, Stella."

She brushed her lips against his thigh as she continued working his calf muscle. "I know. I'm feeling so many things, Noah."

She looked up and saw his sly grin. "What?"

There was nothing wrong with his arms. He used his strength to pull her up beside him. "I'm so jealous, I almost tore Doc apart tonight."

Stella's laughter joined his. Her hand came to his chest. She looked up at him. "It is overwhelming. I don't know how many times I almost started to shift tonight!"

He brushed the bangs out of her animated eyes as they laughed, at and with each other. Laughter quickly changed over to soft, quick and intimate kisses.

Noah pulled her blouse out of her waistband and eased it off over her head. Their gazes never shifted as she unhooked her bra and let him pull it off, freeing her full breasts.

When his lips closed over the sensitive nipple, Stella's head fell back. She growled low and sensuous, gasping when he leaned down, taking the other he rolled it between his thumb and finger. She could feel the heat pooling in her sex.

Noah's nostrils filled with the sweet smell of her arousal. So many times, they reached this point only to have to leave it for the promise of this night. He wished he were whole, right now, but he refused to let the injuries stop them once again.

"One day, I will carry you to the bedroom in my arms."

She reached up and kissed him, gently taking his bottom lips between her teeth before releasing him. "Tonight, I'll be glad to help you into the bedroom."

Their lips came together in growling impatience, neither wanting to break their hold on the other. Her fingers worked to loosen his belt, his tore at her skirt button and zipper. Down to her panties, Stella pushed up and reached for his crutches.

After a few heavy cuss words, Stella teased him out of his anger, together they made it to the bedroom. She worked his pants off before he fell back into the bed. Stella placed his crutches close to the bed post, within reach, before getting into the bed and on top of him.

She straddled his waist, moving seductively over the swollen length of his cock. In slow, sensual slides, she moved her whole body over its length. Pressing it between her breasts, she licked the love drop from the swollen head before her lips closed over it.

Noah never imagined their lovemaking could be so erotic. The feel of her tongue pressing into the opening of his cock head nearly destroyed his oath to go gently with her. The touch of her fangs against his swollen member brought forth Noah's heated growl of desire. That Stella didn't realize she was shifting became obvious. His fingers delved into her hair to soothe her as she pulled back and licked the full length of his hard-on before kissing her way back to his lips.

"You are wild, Stella."

She whined softly as she kissed him, her hands taking hold of his cock, while Noah's hands went on a path of their own discovery of his mate.

He soon discovered her erotic areas, driving Stella crazy. She tried hard not to hurt his legs, yet he made it very difficult for her to stay in control. More than once, he deliberately provoked her wolf senses, pushing her to the edge of sexual frenzy.

Noah moved her about so that she snuggled her backside up against his arousal, Stella knew nothing would stop him from claiming his willing mate. With slow deliberation, she ground against the power of his cock, letting it slide between her wet lips until it touched the swollen nub of her desire. "Take me. Noah. Love me..."

The feel of his teeth at the back of her neck sent a wild shiver of wanton ecstasy through her. Her sexual fluids flowed hot and free as she rode over his wild cock. The powerful grip of his hands directed her movements, bringing untold pleasure to Stella as her head rolled back against his chest. Her wanton howl filled the room.

"My wolf Stella, my mate for life..."

"Yes, Noah, for life. Forever, I'm yours."

One wild thrust and he buried himself deep inside her velvet prison, touching where no other man or beast would dare. "Mine, my love, for I do love you, Stella!"

"And I you, Noah!"

Harvest of Heroes

All pretense of civilized lovemaking left them as their wild sides began moving in the ways older than man, and sealing their vows as nothing else could accomplish. They rode the wave of sexual desire that reached out to the moon and forest, finding strength and safety for two lovers, running on the night wind!

The End

Rose's Treasure
by
Jane Carver

Mitchell doesn't want to deal with Rose, but she won't go away.
When he does nothing, she does. When he attacks her treasure,
she runs.

<http://janie.hhsself.net/>

Rose's Treasure
by
Jane Carver

The magical town of Spellfire, Texas realized Mitchell Green didn't want a hero's hello, a hero's parade. He returned from war, mangled in spirit and body. The town welcomed him with little notice and less fanfare.

* * * *

"Mitchell?"

He jerked hard at the unexpected sound of his name. Hoped she wouldn't notice him, standing among the last roses of autumn.

His eyes drifted shut, as his heart sped toward breathlessness.

"Mitchell?" Her voice came low, intense and as delicate as the scent of roses that surrounded him.

Did he detect a note of pleasure along with a faint tinge of uncertainty?

Looking over his shoulder, Mitchell Green saw Rose standing at the front gate, her hands gripping the pointed wooden pickets. His heart turned over at the sight. Deep brown hair fell in waves around her shoulders. Her golden-brown jacket deepened the color of her hair. The mint-green skirt that fluttered beneath flattered her moss-green eyes. Her smiling lips looked more than kissable.

Once upon a time, Mitchell planned to ask Mr. Halstead for Rose's hand in marriage. The English Royal Air Force bombers flew over Germany before he could. He joined the RAF. During his tour of duty from 1939 to 1941, he saw death up close. Now, by autumn of 1942, there were only scraps and bits of him left, not enough for Rose. She deserved more.

“Mitchell, I’m so very glad you’re home safe.” Her words trembled with emotions that she couldn’t hide. Rose never hid anything from him except one thing—her treasure.

When the Green’s aged collie ambled down the brick sidewalk to put his front paws on the gate so Rose could pet him, Mitchell heard her sigh. He refused to look at her. He kept trimming his mother’s rose bushes.

“Won’t you, at least, say hello? Admiral here welcomed me better than you. And I haven’t seen you in three years.”

“Hello, Rose.” Let her think him rude. Without a backward glance, he snipped a thin dead branch off an American Beauty rose. While puttering around a bush that was already perfect, he waited for her to move on to her house, across the street. Would the chill wind that blew down the street encourage her to go, he hoped?

“Please, Rose. Go home.” A whispered plea.

Did God still pay attention to him? Evidently He did. But, only for a second. Rose rattled the gate as she pushed away. But, then she stopped.

“Mitchell? I hate to ask, but...”

“What is it, Rose? You lost something again?”

“I... Yes, a set of science tests my students took Tuesday. I thought I put them on my desk, but...”

“Bottom right-hand drawer. Under two other sets of tests.” Mitchell saw the papers as easily as if he put them there. He glanced over his shoulder without turning. “Lose anything else?”

“No.” Rose dropped her eyes, took a step back then made her way across the street and up her own sidewalk. Out of the corner of his eye, Mitchell saw her stop at the door and glance back.

Maybe now she’d get the message. The Mitchell Green who returned home wasn’t the same man who left.

* * * *

As the faint tap, tap, tap of Rose’s pumps approached, Mitchell came outside to see her again. Not that he planned to say anything. In fact, he prayed she wouldn’t see him among the dozens of rose bushes in the yard. Beneath the low brim of his slouch felt hat, he watched her round the corner and come down the sidewalk. One thing about him, he could find all kinds of *objects*, but he knew the location of only one *person*, Rose Halstead.

He pulled his coat tighter against his thin chest. Lingering illness let him feel the autumn chill more than normal. But he couldn't resist the opportunity to watch Rose.

She looks better than ever.

They had grown up together. As a child, she sided with the underdog, and Mitchell, being three years older, became her protector. That didn't make the underdog stronger. That often meant he stepped in and defended both Rose and the other guy.

Two years into college, working on a business degree, Mitchell decided to go to England and fly bombers in the Royal Air Force. The Germans were pounding England, and he wanted to make a difference.

Rose didn't understand why he wanted to go. The war in Europe had nothing to do with the United States, she argued. Mitchell couldn't help thinking that if he didn't go meet the war that it would come to his country's doorstep. As indeed, it finally did. His decision devastated Rose.

When he kissed his mom and hugged his dad at the train station, he expected to see her on the platform, too. They were best friends. He boarded the train and took his seat, without catching a glimpse of her. The steam whistle blew a breathy blast in the winter's cold morning, and the train jerked like someone yanked a chain. The metal wheels slipped for a turn or two then gripped the frosty tracks. With determination, the train moved forward, a foot at a time.

Before it gathered too much speed, however, Rose came flying around the corner of the station. Frantically, she scanned the cars as they passed—faster now. With a powerful heave, Mitchell shoved the heavy glass window down and leaned out as far as he could, waving like a mad man.

"Mitchell! Mitchell!" Her laughter combined with tears until he didn't know which to believe, the smile on her lips or the tears streaming down her cold-pinked cheeks. She jumped and waved when his car drew near.

"Behave yourself, Rosie. I'll be back before you know it." Words that servicemen had said since time immemorial. Though their hands never touched, he felt the stroke of her fingers in his heart. Even when the train settled into its clickety-clack pattern, and the distance between them grew, he knew she still called to him—her words lost in the rattle and sway of the cars, moving down the rails.

Now she approached him in the bloom of womanhood. In the last three years, she had become a teacher. Though his mom said she dated Briley Hans occasionally, she hadn't married or gotten engaged. Mitchell wondered why some man hadn't snatched Rose Halstead for his wife yet.

His daydreaming ended when Rose stopped at the front gate again. Evidently, she saw him, where he hid, trimming shears at his feet. "Afternoon, Mitchell." Admiral raised his head from where he lay in the winter-brown grass, sniffed, but sank back into his own doggy dreams.

"Afternoon."

"Glad to see you trimming those bushes. Bet your mom appreciates that. Her rheumatism kicked up a week or so ago, and she told my mom she could hardly lift a skillet."

She chatted as if he listened. Actually, he was, but why let on and encourage her. His back warmed where a weak sun touched it, but he didn't turn toward her. No sense in scaring her to death. His cane leaned against the porch, and he considered getting it. His leg hurt like the dickens. Pride let the cane lay where it was while he endured agony.

"Do you like my new dress?"

Damn, she demanded his attention. Would she never give up? He let out a long exasperated sigh. Not for the world would he hurt her feelings though, so he turned to the left, far enough to see her from beneath the hat's brim.

She held her coat open so he could see her dress. The deep rich burgundy of the simple shirtwaist suited her coloring. Her eyes sparkled, and the color in her cheeks mirrored that of her outfit. Today, she wore her hair in a tail, tied with a cream-colored ribbon. The essence of her appeal seeped into Mitchell and tore him apart. How he desired her, Rose being all he ever wanted.

He tried to ignore his thoughts, but the word *eunuch* tortured him when he looked at her. He wasn't whole any more. The wounds to his thigh reached close to his groin. The pretty English nurses and the women who walked the streets of cities like New York got no response from him. After three failed attempts to seduce a woman, he gave up.

When Rose gave an impatient little twist and tossed her hand in the air as if she were posing, Mitchell recalled her question. "You look swell."

“Thank you.” Closing her coat and cinching the tie belt, she beamed at his simple praise. In pure feminine manner, Rose smoothed the material over her hip.

Mitchell swallowed whatever thoughts danced in his head. His eyes followed her hand. Despite the day’s chill, sweat broke out on his brow. Did she do that on purpose?

“Are you going to do the books for your daddy’s mill?”

Her question broke his focus on her hand where it rested against her hip. “Yeah.” He prayed she’d leave soon but groaned, under his breath, when she leaned against the gate. Her breasts pushed up, and he could see the least little bit of cleavage between the buttons on her coat.

“I teach fifth graders. Remember? I asked your mom to include that in one of her letters.” For some reason, Rose never wrote a letter directly to him. She asked his mom to include a piece from her in each of the letters she sent. For years, he anticipated those messages. Words of cheer, hope and compassion.

“I remember.” Before he could stop, he added, “You have all those kids, don’t you?” Shit, now why did he do that? She’d stand there and talk all afternoon.

“All thirty of them. Of course, I don’t have them all at the same time, but it certainly feels like it sometimes.” Light laughter floated through the air, resting gently against his ears. Of all the things Mitchell regretted, Rose counted as Number One. The scar on the side of his head. The piece missing off the top of his ear. The missing right arm from the elbow down. The agony of the mangled leg and hip. None of those were as painful as losing her.

His sigh of loss caught Rose’s attention. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Typical man’s answer,” she tossed back at him with a tiny smile.

His weak smile grew only a fraction, so she wouldn’t know how much her teasing pleased him.

“You afraid to talk to me?” Rose hit the nail on the head with pinpoint accuracy.

“Yes.” Why not be honest about it?

“Why, for God’s sake?” She stood with one hand on her hip while her other held her satchel and purse.

"Things have changed, Rose. We're not the same people we used to be." Mitchell dragged out his words, each one torn from his soul. He needed to make her understand.

"Some things never change, Mitchell. Look at this garden. These roses have been here for four generations now."

"We're not roses."

"Oh, so you're talking about us."

"There is no *us*, Rose."

"The way we look changes but not the way we are in our hearts." She sounded forlorn, lost.

Mitchell shook his head and picked up the shears though the effort sent a burn of pain up his leg. "The way we look on the outside makes all the difference as to how we feel about ourselves on the inside, Rose. Look at you, all grown up and beautiful." When she gasped, he rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean." In frustration, he stepped closer. "I'll bet you don't even have your treasure any more." He wanted to show her how much she had changed.

But Rose fooled him. "My treasure?" Her hand fluttered at the base of her throat. "You remember my treasure?"

A masculine snort said that he did. "Are you kidding? At the age of...What? Eight? You told the kids, in the neighborhood, you had a treasure. How many times did I fight someone who wanted to see it? And what did you tell them?"

Now she hesitated to answer. "I always told them it was mine, and it was safe."

"Do you still have that treasure?"

"Yes," but she said it very slowly.

By now, Mitchell stood on the other side of the gate, his hand against the pickets for support. "So what's the matter with it?" he sneered. Try as he might, his extraordinary powers had never located her valuable cache.

"For a while, I almost lost it, and it wasn't very safe." Evidently, that wasn't so any more because she smiled, the radiance so fulsome that Mitchell grew surly rather than give in and kiss her.

"Treasures are for kids, Rose."

"But it's my treasure, Mitchell. I've had it almost my whole life." Worry clouded her gaze, and her hand trembled, just the least bit, as if she feared someone might take what she held most dear in life.

"Damn it, Rose. Grow up. Get a husband. Let him screw your brains out, and have a dozen kids of your own instead of teaching

everyone else's." Mitchell's hand hit the gate so hard, it bounced in its latch.

Rose jumped away, as if her best friend suddenly sprouted horns and belched fire. "Mitchell, what are you saying?"

"Throw out the treasure you had as a kid. Find that treasure in some man's arms. Go away." Sick frustration closed his throat so tightly he couldn't speak anymore. With a disgusted wave of his only hand, he limped to the porch where he reclaimed his cane and mounted the steps. Who gave a damn what Rose saw or thought of him now.

* * * *

The day crawled by like a snail. Mitchell's dad helped him get started with the mill's books. To inherit the mill and its responsibilities, he needed to master the ins and outs of accounting.

After his parents left home for the evening, he sought the comfort of the glider in the backyard. A bright day left warmth behind even as the sun set. A cigarette dangled from his fingers. He reclined against soft cushions. Beneath the trees and hidden in the twilight, he felt safe.

"You weren't very nice yesterday." Rose glared at him as she came in the backyard gate. The long full-legged trousers looked good on her, and the yellow sweater gave her a glow.

His own trousers were wrinkled, and he had left his jacket in the house. With his cotton shirt unbuttoned and undershirt exposed, Mitchell felt naked before her scrutiny. He stood, ready to be rude again, and leave her alone in the yard.

"I watched for you to come out into the yard, but you never did."

"Had to go over the books with Pop."

Rose stepped closer, crowding him until he thought the air too thick to breathe. "Are you finished for the day?"

"Uh, no. As a matter of fact, I was just about to go back inside."

"Liar." Her hands fisted at her side, she stood her ground and didn't let him pass when he tried.

"What the hell..."

"Why are you running away from me, Mitchell Green? You've never run from anything in your life, least of all me. Why start now?" Rose boldly put her hand on his chest to stop him when he attempted to step around her again. Her move surprised him while the heat of that small hand spread through his tight muscles.

“What’s the matter with you, Rose? First, you barge in here where you’re not wanted, calling me a liar, and all but knock me over when I get offended and try to leave. What’s got into you?”

“What’s got into me?” she almost screeched. “I’ll tell you what’s got into me—you!” She poked a finger in his chest and, dang, if he didn’t back up a step. “No, let me rephrase that. What *hasn’t* gotten into me—is you.”

Mitchell’s mouth fell open. Did she mean what he thought she meant? Was little Rose Halstead talking about sex? His uneasy swallow sounded loud as thunder in the quiet yard.

“Oh, that makes you nervous, huh?” Rose poked him in the chest again until the glider hit the back of his legs.

One last shove and he sat down hard, Rose crowding him more. Before he knew what she had in mind, she slipped up on the glider, one knee on each side of his hips. She loomed over him, leaned into his chest. Taking his head in both hands, she brushed his lips softly with her own. “I’ve loved you almost my entire life.” She stole his breath when she caressed his lips again. “If you don’t make love to me soon, I think I’ll die.”

Anything he might have said flew out of his mind the minute Rose rubbed her breasts against him. Was she serious or merely playing? Mitchell decided to call her bluff. Wrapping his arms around her bottom, he pulled her tightly against him. When she moaned, he didn’t know if it was because she was scared or aroused.

“Open your mouth for me.” Suddenly he could think of nothing more important in the world than giving her a deep kiss, the kind he’d always dreamed of.

Sweet Jesus, Rose opened her lips, and her tongue found his. Her taste went straight to his head like hot beer. The soft texture, the feel of her moving over his body, her hands that caressed his cheeks and moved to his nape then further down to his shoulders. Before he knew it, her kisses spread across his face, following the path her delicate fingers laid out.

And glory, for the briefest moment that he could actually think, he realized his shaft stretched so big and hard that he hurt. Maybe all he ever needed was Rose.

Hell, he’d always needed Rose.

* * * *

Their shoes and socks lay in a heap by the door, and the drawn bedroom curtains concealed them from the night. Light from the

table lamp glistened on Rose's face. Holding her next to him, Mitchell used his one hand to carefully undo the buttons on her blouse. One by one, they revealed glowing skin. His fingers did their magic, and her plain cotton bra fell to the floor. He swallowed again, when she moved against him. A wanton woman, but his.

"You want something?" He chuckled low when she grew frustrated with his undershirt. Pulling it from his trousers, she hiked it up his body then pulled it over his head.

"At last," she sighed and pressed her breasts against the hot skin of his chest.

So beautiful. Mitchell didn't know whose ragged breathing he heard. One hand roamed intimately over her, finger pads tracing the curves of her body. His disfigured right arm skimmed her ribs. He closed his eyes and sighed when she ran her hands up and down his back.

With care and tender kisses, he undid the snaps of her trousers and let the material slide down her legs, his mouth tracing their fall. Her panties followed. Her taste drove him wild. Passion's musky scent filled his nostrils until he burned, hot and hard. Letting his hands touch her where no man ever had, he rose and, with ease, swung her up in his arms, his shorter one supporting her legs.

"All I've ever wanted was you. I'm not whole any more. But, right now, I don't care." He held her close for a moment. More for his sake than hers. "Love me, Rose. Love me," he begged.

Tenderly, he laid her on the bed, on the folded back sheets. When she opened her arms wide in the dark, he removed his trousers and underwear, watching for signs of fear. This would be her first time, and he wanted to make their loving perfect. When her gaze roamed his body, he swelled larger; his need for her love more desperate than before.

Her eyes grew wide when his body covered her. "Yes." With one word, she wrapped her legs around him. The heat in her eyes and the warmth of her skin seemed to penetrate the coldness around his heart.

Rose was his. Her skin brushed against him, like silk. Her breath washed over his neck as her hot kisses drained his mind of rational thought. Her heart beat as hard and fast as his. Beneath his hand, the steady thump escalated. Her soft gasp pleased him as he suckled at her breasts. She tightened her hands around the back of his head, pulling him closer.

One large finger entered her opening, tested her readiness. Slick, hot, wet. More than ready. He heard her moan in his ear, but took his time. This was too important to mess up. She explored his body as he did hers, holding back nothing, giving all. Like a watch, wound tight, his body felt ready to burst. Rose moaned, tossed and begged, her hands all over him, her kisses drugging his mind. Her body wiggled under his. The pressure grew.

The world narrowed to one place—Rose. She surrendered all and asked nothing but that he make love to her. Gripping her hips, he tried to go slowly, but the feel of her body sucking him inside made him lose control. With a grunt then her name on his lips, he entered her to the hilt.

“Mitchell!” She once again wrapped her legs around him. He soothed her, helped ease the pain he saw in her gaze then began a slow glide. Her eyes slid shut. A smile of intense pleasure replaced the earlier hurt.

“I’ll try to go slowly, Rose, but...”

His body tensed, his muscles flexed. He drove deep, taking her on the most important mission of his life. Holding back to bring her passion higher, he waited until her muscles clamped around him in climax before he pumped furiously then pushed far into her. Hot seed flooded. All he’d needed was Rose.

He collapsed on top of her, feeling as if God forgave him his infirmities. Mitchell Green felt whole once again.

* * * *

He entered the last column on the adding machine, pulled the crank and copied the figure into the ledger. Fresh air wafted through the partially opened window near his desk. No need for a fan this time of year, thank goodness. The lazy breeze carried the crisp smells of pine trees and chopped wood. The buzz of the mill’s saws filled the day with background noise. He pulled at his collar, his tie already yanked to one side. The noise outside slowed. Quitting time neared.

Through his open door, Mitchell heard Thelma’s droning voice. The company’s secretary, Thelma Bick, might be eighty, but she could still boss the mill hands around. He loved her almost as much as he loved...

Thelma’s voice jumped to a high squeak. The woman only talked like that when something exciting happened. Curious, he stood with care. He’d been in the chair since lunch, and his stiff leg threatened to give way. He limped to the door then broke into a grin when he saw

Thelma, in her tiny fairy form, silver wings flapping furiously, swooning over something in a magazine Rose held. Spellfire magic hit the office hard when Rosie entered.

"Admiring that Clark Gable again, Thelma?" He teased the secretary who immediately popped back into her human form and turned red to the top of her silver bun.

"Mr. Mitchell, you know I don't do that kind of thing." With a sniff, she reached in the desk for her purse, but it wasn't there.

"Now where the..." She looked under the desk.

"Third drawer of the filing cabinet." Mitchell leaned against the doorjamb and watched the flustered human-looking fairy.

"You put that purse there, Mr. Mitchell?" Thelma gathered her dignity but, when she left, she winked at him. "Night, Miss Rose."

The Texas sun hung just below the treetops so most of the mill yard already lay in soft shadows. Outside, men called to each other, chatting about the job they did that day and what they wanted for supper. A few trucks sputtered to life while most men walked home. Within minutes of Thelma's departure, the yard stood empty and quiet.

"What are you doing here?" Mitchell straightened to ease the ache in his right arm. Though the stump at the end of his elbow had healed, ghost pains bothered him at times.

"I've come to walk you home. And watch you fluster Miss Thelma. You have such a magical gift, and I'm so perfectly normal," she sighed. The pretty felt hat Rose wore complimented the blush in her cheeks and the pink of her lips. Her pale lavender-colored jacket and white skirt made her look young and anything but normal.

"That's kind of you." He turned to his office. "I have to close up my books and put a few things away. Can you wait?" Her even footsteps followed his halting ones.

"Sure." She leaned back against a small table to one side of his desk. Off came her hat, and she fanned herself with it, as if hot.

Only using one hand limited how fast Mitchell could clear his desk. He watched her while he worked. She waved the floppy hat back and forth while she shot sideways glances at him. Did she want him to see what she did?

A flick of her wrist and the hat sailed onto the chintz sofa pushed against one wall of the small office. Rose pulled the collar of her jacket away from her skin and flapped the material, all the while making little puffing noises.

“Is it hot in here?” This said despite a fifty-degree temperature outside.

On his straight back chair behind his desk, Mitchell squirmed. He could swear she pushed her breasts out. He forgot to answer as she moved to the window, twitching her hips. Hot or not, the heat of passion increased right there in his office.

“Shadows are creeping across the yard. Won’t be long till the sun slips completely behind those trees.” Rose leaned toward the window. Closed it then grasped the curtains, pulling them together. Wispy shadows now filled the office.

Mitchell swallowed a lump in his throat almost as big as the bulge between his legs. As she moved closer, all his aches and pains receded. “Uh, Rose, it’s going to get warm in here now that you closed the window.”

She leaned against the side of his desk, her skirt brushing his leg. “True. But no one can see us, either.” And, with those whispered words, she leaned forward and captured his mouth against her soft lips.

Desire, hot and immediate, surged through him. He pulled her nearer with his hand on her waist. That’s not where he wanted it, but he figured it would get to the right place sooner or later.

She captured his hand and slid it up until his palm filled with one breast. Rose moaned into his mouth. His tongue speared its way between her teeth and tangled with hers. She tasted of peppermint.

“Sweet,” Mitchell managed to say as his hand flexed around the globe of flesh. He turned in his chair until he pulled her on to his good thigh. His kiss deepened. She twisted until she straddled his leg. Pushing forward, she all but grounded her center into his hipbone.

“Are you always this bold?” He gasped when she dug her pelvis against him.

“Only with you.” Rose trailed kisses down his cheek and under his ear. She smiled when he shivered, her warm mouth sending goosebumps along the muscles of his arms. “Cold?”

“Hell, no, sweetheart. I’m on fire. You make me burn.” He gathered her closer then allowed her to push back when she slipped the top button of his shirt open. His tie came over his head. Before he knew it, his tie, shirt and undershirt lay on the floor.

Rose humped his hip at the same time she ran her palms over the muscles of his chest. “I can’t feel you, Mitchell,” she complained

through their hot kisses. Kisses so deep that she almost choked him. So wet, so passionate.

“Lean back, Rosie.” Each button came open slowly but that added more intimacy to what they did. Her jacket and blouse joined his clothes on the floor. She wore a half-slip so the white bra stood out against her skin, like a bright spot in the growing darkness.

While he removed it, she kissed the scar running down the side of his face. “I almost lost you. I have to be bold. You won’t come to me.” She whined when he sucked one hard nipple into his mouth. Like a starving man, he consumed her flesh, his arms holding her close, her body rocking against his.

“Got to have more.” He pushed her off and stood but didn’t let go. He leaned against her and walked her backward to the sofa.

When the back of her legs hit the thick cushion, she sat with a whoosh of pent-up breath. “Mitchell.” Her arms held out to him, she pulled him forward.

Unbuckling a belt never before seemed seductive, but when she undid his, he thought he might spray his seed before they even started.

“Oh, darling.” A tear eased its way down her cheek when she once again saw the horrid scars on his thigh and leg. She kissed the long jagged flesh, and her breath sent tingling signals to his privates.

If the swelling in his boxer shorts grew any larger, he’d push out of them. He urged her to lie down on the sofa. “I’m going to remove my drawers, Rose.” He warned her so as not to scare her. They’d made love before, but face-to-face with a full-blown erection in broad daylight might intimidate his Rosie.

Not to worry. She reached for his hardened flesh as soon as he uncovered it. “Teach me how to love you,” she asked.

Mitchell wondered if life could get any more perfect. “Let me show you how a man pleases a woman without being in her.” Life away from Spellfire, during wartime, had taught him a few things.

He eased his body down until he knelt on the floor, his weight on his left knee. “Let me touch you.” For long moments, his hands worshipped every inch of Rose Halstead.

She trembled, twisted and moaned. Whined when his hand left a particularly delightful spot and cried out when that talented hand found a better place. When he spread her legs then leaned closer and blew on her vaginal lips, she propped up on her elbows with a questioning glance.

“Trust me?” He would not move on until he knew she was all right with what he did.

Her eyes grew soft. Her mouth sought his. “I trust you with my life.”

He kissed the inside of her thighs until she propped back against the cushions, prepared to watch. He trailed kisses down her leg, nibbled each toe, nipped and swirled his tongue back up her legs. His nostrils filled with her feminine scent of desire. Higher his mouth moved, his tongue making her shiver.

“Mitchell?” When his tongue licked the sides of her pussy, Rose tensed.

“Feel, Rosie. Feel my love.” He used his fingers to part the velvet lips between her legs. He gave her a hot glance, and, before she could ask what it meant, he washed her slit with his tongue, absorbing her salt and essence.

“Oh, God,” she whimpered in delight. One hand clutched his shoulder, the other dug into the cloth cushion.

“Want me to stop?” Could he, if she said yes?

“No!” One long wail and he dived back into heaven.

Mitchell drank her nectar. His tongue lapped as she flowed under his touch. Aware of her trembling, he sensed she moved closer to ecstasy. He teased the tiny bud that grew as hard as his body.

Rose vibrated with tension. Her hands clutched his hair while she pushed his face into her most private parts. “I want more. More. Please.”

Close to the edge, he sensed only seconds separated her from pleasure as intense as pain. He gathered her secret bud of skin and pinched. She rose off the sofa when he plunged his tongue into her body and lapped like a dog. She shuddered, vibrated like the whirl of string wound too tight. She pushed into him hard as he sucked her.

Her scream signaled climax, completion. Total satisfaction.

But he knew she was capable of more passion, greater ardor. Her body quivered when he slipped between her legs and caught her mouth in a deep kiss. Her senses overwhelmed, she offered no resistance when he pushed an inch in her body then withdrew.

His pleasure increased when she grasped his rear and thrust up to meet him. “Inside me. Now.” No further words were necessary. He thrust his body into hers until their hips slammed together with a fleshy sound. He stilled in order to savor the sensation, her clenching his penis in a velvet hot cover. But he could hold still only so long.

“Now Rose.” Gathering momentum, Mitchell acted like a mad man, ramming into the woman beneath him. He gave no thought to whether he hurt her or not. She held him secured between her legs.

Her eyes wide, she smiled at him just before she groaned and started her own violent pumping.

They came together; a fierce kind of loving that sealed them as one forever.

Mitchell lay between Rose’s legs, sprawled like a dead man. He propped up enough to see that she slept. One hip turned into the cushions, he lay on his side next to her, his heart’s frantic beat slowing. His emotions throbbed to the beat of his pulse. He couldn’t believe they’d made love in his office. Anyone could have come by and heard them. Fear for her reputation warred with his delight at her acceptance of him as a man, scars and all.

As he calmed, he realized she trusted him to keep her safe. An unexpected thought popped into his head. Did she trust him enough to tell what her treasure was? He grinned. He brushed a long strand of hair off her shoulder so he could kiss it. That’s what he would do next, discover Rose’s treasure.

* * * *

Rose visited Mitchell almost every day. Often she sat on the porch with his parents. Sometimes her father and mother joined them. Conversation swirled around topics like Mitchell’s gift for finding things—never people (Rose being the only exception), her parents’ gifts for mending broken objects and bones, and his parents’ gifts for amplifying plant growth.

Seldom did the younger couple enjoy any private time. Mitchell’s intentions of learning about her treasure flew out the window each time they met.

One chilly evening, she sat on the front porch swing with him. His hand lay on the cushion, but she managed to flip her skirt over it so she could hold it without anyone noticing. Her tawdry glances burned him. He managed not to embarrass himself up until the moment she moved off the swing.

Her parents strolled down the sidewalk with his mom and dad. He started to rise from the swing, but its sudden movement caused him to fall back onto the cushions. Immediately, Rose leaned closer to check on him. Her fragrance teased his senses as much as the dress she wore. Its high cut collar and deep front showed off her cleavage.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, Rose, just off balance for a minute.” He accepted her hand and leaned against her while he regained his balance. Her warmth excited him.

“Mitchell?” Rose supported him with one arm while her fingers played with the last button on his shirt. The button mere inches above the swelling under his belt. She twisted the button then toyed with his belt buckle.

“You’re doing it again, aren’t you?”

“What’s that?” Innocence dripped from her voice.

“You’re being bold.”

“Uh-huh.” Rose glanced over her shoulder to see if any of the other adults were paying attention. When she saw them talking, she leaned into him. “You showed me how a man pleases a woman, but when are you going to teach me how to please you?” Her hand slid down the front of his trousers until her warmth cupped his erection.

If a man could faint on the spot, he thought he might. Which thrilled him more—her request for more loving or her asking how to please him? Either way, his hard-on grew painful under her palm.

“Rose, that’s a lesson all in itself. I’ll teach you real soon.”

* * * *

He made plans for an autumn picnic in a secluded place the next Saturday. When clouds covered the sun and cold winter rain fell in sheets, Mitchell groaned in frustration. Rose talked him into visiting Sinful Sundaes for a dish of ice cream. The visit got him out in public but didn’t get him time alone with her.

At the movies, they planned to neck in the darkest corner of the theater, but Horrible Henry heckled them the entire time. Both growled from suppressed desires.

October passed into November, and every plan died without completion. Halloween came and went with its usual noisy gathering of children and adults at the Fall Carnival. Magic sizzled like firecrackers. Everyone settled down for a long winter. The temperature dropped so that even the crickets no longer sang.

Mitchell hadn’t seen Rose in several days. She and her mother went to Dallas to visit Mrs. Halstead’s sister. While his parents played dominoes with friends, he sat on the glider in the back yard, remembering the first time Rose propositioned him. He grinned, he missed her.

The air felt heavy, but warm for that time of year. Late season insects that buzzed earlier grew silent and still. That peculiar smell of

impending rain invaded his nose while a breeze caressed his skin. Somewhere in the distance, lightning flashed from cloud to cloud, but the storm lay so far away that he heard no thunder. He laid his head on the back of the glider, using one toe to push the swing back and forth. Light danced across the far sky. In the total darkness under the trees, the display dazzled him.

“Mitchell?” Like the first time he heard her call, he closed his eyes and savored the reality of this woman he loved. The realization sank into his heart, and he accepted that he had loved Rose since he fought her first battle at the age of eight, and she declared him her champion.

He needed to ask her an important question. And he needed to do it soon.

She asked a question of her own first. “Would you teach me how to please you?”

All the air left his lungs in one gigantic whoosh. “Jesus, Rose. Now?”

“This is perfect, don’t you think. Dark, still, intimate.” She came closer and stopped in front of him. “Tonight is perfect.”

“But Rose, we’re outside, and don’t you think it’s a little cool, and...”

“Please.”

He could not resist the plea in her voice. “Come up here.” He patted his lap. His leg being stronger, she wouldn’t hurt him now. He took her by the hips and guided her legs to either side of him. When she settled on him, she hooked her arms around his neck. Her lips brushed his, warm and damp. Again and again, each time deeper than before.

He couldn’t breathe. All his air belonged to her. “Are you sure?” He hesitated. “Some women don’t care to do this for their man. They find it...distasteful.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Is it like what you did to me?”

Mitchell nodded.

“I liked what you did.” She scooted back a bit on his lap so she could see the large erection she’d been sitting on. “Something like this?” She slid off his lap and on to her knees.

He held his breath. Surely, she hadn’t figured this out by herself? Evidently, she had a good idea what to do because she settled her hands at his waist and gave him a cheeky grin he saw well even in the dark.

Lightning flashed, and her eyes reflected the glow. Her hands at the edge of his belt, she undid the buckle and opened the first button. While she held his gaze, she eased each one open. At last, she laid the flaps back to expose the white drawers underneath.

“Are you sure you know what to do?” Mitchell’s lungs failed. He didn’t have enough air.

“I think I can figure it out, but I’ll ask for help if I need any.” She skimmed her hands inside his trousers to the back, which left her face close to his waist. Before going further, she dropped a soft kiss at his navel. She laughed when he sucked in a loud airy gasp.

“Lift please.” So polite. She would kill him with her ladylike manners and seductive glances.

His hips raised, she pushed his trousers down to his ankles.

“Again.”

This time, he doubted if he should oblige. He looked around. Without his trousers and drawers, he felt vulnerable. But, if she could love him in the sawmill office, he could let her love him under the trees in the back yard, in the dead of night. He raised his hips once more.

The chilled material of the cushions beneath his rear surprised him. He jumped a bit, but her hands soothed him. Her fingers worked down his belly to the joint of his hips. That smooth dent between pelvis and leg bone. She kissed him there before turning to something with more appeal.

“This fascinates me. I could touch it forever.” Her hands came together and clasped his erection. She ran her fingers up and down the length of heat and strength. “This is mine.” She cut her gaze up to his, a hot look in her eyes. “Do I take it in my mouth like you did?” Despite the question, Rose left the impression she knew exactly what she was doing.

A good thing because Mitchell could only nod.

God, he died. Her mouth closed over the head of his penis, and he simply expired. Like licking candy, she released him but ran her tongue up then down his erection again.

A handful of her hair filled his large hand, and he prayed he wouldn’t yank out any. His mind departed somewhere else. He existed on pure feeling.

She did magical things with her tongue. Her throat closed around the head of him, and she swallowed.

A loud grunt and he lifted off the glider cushion and further into her mouth. Agony beyond anything he ever experienced. Ecstasy beyond anything he dared dream. She sucked him until his body swelled to unbelievable proportions.

"I can't take any more. Come here." Mitchell hurt with the need for completion, but he didn't want to come in her mouth her first time. More forceful than he meant, he jerked her to her feet. At the same time, he raised her dress and pushed her panties to the ground. Like a crazy man, he pulled her on top of him and sank into her. She wiggled to make a perfect fit.

She locked her arms around his neck and held on as he bucked them to heaven. Tension built until he burst, flooding Rose, coming over and over until weak and drained.

At the same time, she dug her fingers into his shoulders and rode him hard. She buried her face in the side of his neck so her scream of passion came only for his ears.

As their hearts slowed, Mitchell let his hand slide off Rose's hips to lie without feeling on the cushion. His head fell back, and he closed his eyes, too spent to do more. In the meantime, she slumped forward on to his chest, as if unconscious.

After a while, he pulled her farther up so she rested with her arms around his waist and her head above his heart.

"We are so hopeless," she said in a silly giggle. "I wish I had some kind of magic so we could stay like this forever." She snuggled deeper into his embrace.

Mitchell wanted to hold her forever, too, but reality forced him to admit the truth, as he saw it. "I'm not a whole man any more, Rose. You deserve someone with two hands and legs who can run and chase you and kids."

Rose eased back so she could see his eyes. "You're saying you love me but won't marry me because you aren't whole?" Her brows drew together, and her mouth went straight with anger. Hurt radiated off her like a hot summer heat wave. She pulled her arm back and hit him in the middle of his chest—hard.

"Ow, what the hell did you do that for?"

"You're more man than anyone else I know. I love you, and I want you just the way you are. If I'm satisfied, why aren't you?"

"You deserve the best." Why couldn't she see his point? "The plain and simple truth is, I'm not the best."

“Plain and simple?” She sat ramrod straight. “The plain and simple truth, Mitchell Green, is that you’re stupid.” She backed off his lap and smoothed her dress. “I offered myself, and you rejected me. That’s truth.”

Angry now, he threw out the first thing that came to mind and the last thing he would have said if he weren’t so upset. “Well, at least you still have your treasure,” he mocked.

That seemed to infuriate her. Stomping her foot, she turned smartly on her heel and flew out of the yard, slamming the garden gate.

* * * *

Long after Rose left in a huff, Mitchell lay awake in bed. He wanted to dream of steamy hot sex with her. He wanted to feel spent and drowsy. Raw emotions ate at his gut instead. She wanted him. Like he was, scarred and half-gone. He tossed on the bed and beat his pillow a few times. She trusted him to keep her safe when they made love.

It dawned on him that if she trusted him then he should trust her. He should trust that she knew what she wanted. That knowledge seeped slowly into his brain. Calm at last, he settled in bed.

Tomorrow he would ask her to marry him. Tell her she meant the world to him and that if she wanted him like he was then he wasn’t going to argue. His decision made, Mitchell closed his eyes.

A glow through the window flickered on the far wall. Bright enough for him to notice through closed eyelids. At first, he paid no attention. Curiosity, however, pulled him to the window. In the space of a heartbeat, his dreams dissolved into terror.

A roaring fire engulfed Rose’s house.

Mitchell’s heart almost stopped. Before he could shout a warning, a terrified scream rent the air.

Rose! Rose was alone, somewhere in that burning house.

Taking only time enough to pull on shoes and his trousers despite the pain that shot up his leg, he grabbed his cane and limped to the stairs. His dad appeared at the end of the hall. He hadn’t known his parents were home. He yelled at his dad to call the fire department. His dad yelled back that the Halstead’s stayed overnight with friends.

“No one’s home, son.” Mr. Green yelled at his son.

“Rose! Rose is there,” Mitchell cried out.

No way could he get down the stairs fast enough so he reverted to a childhood practice. He leaned over the smooth banister and slid down on the front of his trousers.

Outside, he pushed forward as best he could, limping more as his leg muscles weakened. Neighbors already stood on the front lawn. Mr. Carrington held a bucket of water. With a flick of his wrist, Mitchell jerked Mrs. Whitley's blanket off her back and stuffed it into the water. Wrapping the blanket around him and pulling it over his head, he started for the door.

Using his cane to beat off the desperate hands that tried to stop him, he plunged into a house filled with blinding choking smoke. Crackling at the rear of the house indicated the fire might have started in the kitchen. Flames engulfed the back and licked at the staircase railing. The head of the stairs glowed with the eerie light from flames already burning there.

For a second, he closed his eyes and let his senses reach for Rose. Where was she? His powers served him well. Upstairs. To the right. Second door.

Dodging hot spots of fire, he clawed his way up the staircase, bellowing her name the entire time. Strangling smoke tortured his lungs. His strength failing, his body threatened to give out before he could find her. He turned right at the head of the stairs. A line of fire ran across the hallway. Not burning high yet, still it impeded his way. But nothing could stop him now. Rose needed him.

Whirling the blanket off his back, he slapped at the flames in the center of the floor until they died down. Twice he lost his balance and fell against the wall.

Awkwardly, he limped through the dying flames, his senses seeking Rose. He called. She didn't answer. He opened the second door. He heard the faint sounds of shallow coughing across the room.

"Up, Rosie, let's get out of here." He pulled her to her feet and tried to walk her out, but she was too disoriented from all the smoke to move well.

His body would pay for the abuse, but they'd both die if he didn't do something fast. Mitchell dipped his shoulder and laid her over it. She didn't have enough air to protest and perhaps realized this was the only escape left.

His short arm around her legs, he struggled to throw the wet blanket over both of them. He limped toward the main staircase, staggering under the extra weight and inability to see through smoke

that thickened by the second. When he got to the head of the stairs, he saw flames already covered them. The back staircase in the kitchen would be much the same.

Looking around, he saw that the foyer below the second floor railing was still clear. Pulling Rose off his shoulder, he stood her up and gently patted her face. Her cough matched his for pain. Smoke swirled around them, making each moment more dangerous.

“Rose.” He shook her to get her attention. “I’m going to help you over the railing then lower you by holding your arm. Then I’m going to drop you to the floor. It’s not far.” He wasn’t sure if she understood or not. Coughs wracked her body, and her glazed eyes ran with tears. He wasn’t in much better shape, and his leg hurt like it had when first injured.

Swinging her legs over the railing, he leaned over and prayed the structure would support their weight. He extended his left arm, prepared to drop Rose. She must have sensed his intentions. Her scream rang louder than the fire’s roar. The dull thud of her landing echoed mere seconds before he landed painfully beside her. Agony filled his mind, for a moment, until he remembered the danger that surrounded them. He tried to scoop her up, but his strength failed. On his side, Mitchell crawled while pulling her, fire lapping at their heels.

Water cascaded over them when they emerged from the house. Firefighters held the hose ready, in case the fire caught them. Neighbors shouted to each other and carried both to the Carrington’s lawn across the street.

The babble around Mitchell hushed when Rose fell beside him. Painfully, he sat up and pulled her up against him. Mrs. Carrington wrapped a dry blanket around them.

“Rose?” He patted her cheek. At first, she didn’t respond. Then, in a fit of coughing, she opened her eyes. Using the backs of her char-covered hands, she wiped her face until she could see more clearly.

Realizing he risked his life to save her, she clung to him and cried. Their neighbors crowded around, thumping Mitchell on the back, extolling him for both his bravery and foolhardiness. Laughter broke out when none could agree which took more courage.

While she lay secure in his arms, he suddenly jerked up straight and looked at the fire ravaging her home. *Where is Rose’s treasure?* He couldn’t sense it. Sadly, he had never been able to locate her greatest prize. Now fire had destroyed it. His attention came back to her only when she touched his cheek.

“What’s the matter?”

“Your treasure’s gone.” He kissed the tip of her dirty nose.

“No, it’s not.” She snuggled closer and wrapped her arms around his middle. Her tight hug didn’t hurt him like it should have. In fact, he didn’t hurt at all. How odd. But his thoughts returned to the one thing she had held dear since childhood.

“Where is it, Rose? Is it safe?” Brushing the hair off her forehead with his right hand, he watched the house burn.

She ran her fingers over his chest. Shivers ran up his spine. Before he embarrassed himself in front of his friends, he laid her hand flat over his heart.

“Mitchell?” Rose looked at him with the funniest expression.

“What, sweetheart?”

“Your hand.” She turned his face to one side. “Your ear.”

He reached up to feel his ear, his whole ear. He almost fainted when he saw his hand...his missing right hand. Before he said anything, he wiggled his leg. His hip and thigh didn’t hurt. What the hell was going on?

“I think Rose may have found her talent at last, son.” Mr. Green leaned over and patted her cheek. “Her mom can mend broken objects. Her dad mends broken bones. Seems our Rose here mends broken bodies. Not unusual in Spellfire, don’t you think?”

“Aw, Rose. Look what you’ve done for me.” Overcome with shock and emotion, Mitchell gazed at the Halstead home, swallowed up by roaring flames now. “And I couldn’t save your treasure.”

With a shy cut of her gaze up to his, Rose said, “My treasure is here—in my arms, where I’ve always wanted it to be.”

Confused, he didn’t know what to say. “Are you saying...?”

“You’re my treasure. You always have been. Ever since I was eight years old and you broke Tom Sharp’s nose because he made me cry. You’ve always been my hero—my treasure.”

He wondered if he heard her right, she spoke so low. “I’m your treasure?”

“You are. And I love you.” Wanting him to believe, she drew him down and kissed him with all the passion of a happy woman. No matter how many neighbors saw them. She pulled away only far enough to ask, “Mitchell Green, will you marry me?”

For a second, he thought he’d gone crazy. He let out a wild whoop when it dawned on him that this was what he wanted to ask her.

Harvest of Heroes

Drawing her deeper into his embrace, he planted kisses over her face and neck, anywhere he could reach. When disapproving murmurs from staid neighbors rose around them, he raised his head long enough to placate them.

“It’s all right. We’re getting married. As soon as possible. You see,” he paused, pride ringing through every word. “I’m her treasure.” And with gusto, Mitchell returned to kissing Rose, indeed having found *his* greatest treasure in her welcoming arms.

The End

Educating Emily
by
Karen Rose

Emily dreams of having a hero for a husband, not a mailman. It takes help from a witch for her to see that fantasy is seldom as satisfying as reality.

<http://theqspot.blogspot.com/>

Educating Emily
by
Karen Rose

Emily Jenkins shook her head sadly, looking at the pathetic bouquet of carnations on her desk. Even the copious amounts of baby's breath the florist had put in couldn't disguise the garish colors of the cheap flowers her husband had chosen.

"Honestly," she said aloud. "What was he thinking? He knows the smell of them makes me sneeze." Shoving the glass vase to the far corner of her desk, she picked up a sheaf of papers waiting to be graded. Her students at Spellfire High were currently working their way through *Wuthering Heights*, and their latest efforts on character analysis left much to be desired.

After a few minutes, she put the essays down, her mind on a hot bubble bath and a cold glass of white wine. That was always the way her favorite romance heroine, Ashlyn Armani, unwound after a tough day, dealing with the vagaries of running her poor deceased Papa's castle in Italy. She shook her head over the gaudy floral arrangement again. Ashlyn's lover, the dashing Duc de Givenchy, would never have insulted her with such an unworthy gift.

Why, in the book she was currently reading, he'd surprised her with her very own rose garden, planted in a two-week span in the dead of night by scores of laborers he'd hired from a nearby village. Of course, they'd worked for free; everyone for miles around would kill for the chance to show their devotion to the lady of the castle. Emily sighed, causing her wispy blonde bangs to blow every which way. She knew she wasn't the object of every man's desire the way Ashlyn Armani was; she was what the elderly ladies in Spellfire referred to as "handsome."

Her figure was nice enough for a woman in her late thirties, although her days of wearing a two-piece bathing suit were far behind her. She had good, strong features and deep brown eyes that looked like melting chocolate. Overall, she thought of herself as average, and most days, that was enough. But days like today, when her husband of twelve years sent her a spray of drugstore carnations that would only aggravate her allergies, she wished she were more than that. Gathering her things into a worn floral carryall, she turned off the lights in her classroom, locking the door behind her. On her desk, she left a note for the maintenance woman to dispose of the flowers.

The wintry chill outside grew worse since morning; Emily wound her scarf tightly so that it covered her ears. She unlocked her car and placed her things on the passenger seat. "Leaving so soon, Emily?" asked a cadaverous woman in a long, ill-fitting dress. "Usually you're here far later than I."

"It's the weather," she explained, although she certainly didn't need to justify herself to her colleague. Martha Dimwoody had been teaching at Spellfire for longer than anyone could remember, and the whispered rumor in the hallways was that she was a powerful witch. Emily had always been a little bit frightened of her. "I'll get more work done at home, where the heat doesn't cut off as soon as the students leave the building."

Martha chuckled. "Yes, it can be quite frosty, especially in the second floor classrooms." She showed no signs of being affected by the cold, Emily noticed. Her wool dress looked as fresh as it had at 6:30 that morning, and her cheeks were as pale as chalk. "Well, onward into the fray, I suppose. I've several hours worth of Calculus tests to mark." She gave Emily a brief nod before heading back into the building.

The front seat of her car was like a sheet of ice, emitting a squeal from her as she sat down. Texas weather lay in a class all its own, she thought, as she drove the short distance to the two-story rambler on the quiet street she and Jerry had lived on since their wedding day. She pulled into the drive and parked her car in the usual spot. Jerry would still be at work, so there was plenty of time for her to bathe in peace before he came home clamoring for his dinner.

Emily pulled the thick paperback out of her carryall and went upstairs to start her bathwater. She very nearly dropped the jasmine-scented bath salts upon seeing the state of the tub. A disgusting

warren of curling black hairs coated the drain, most of them poking through the tiny holes like little blades of rotting grass. It was beyond foul. "This would never happen to Ashlyn Armani," she said angrily, pulling on a pair of bright yellow rubber gloves she always kept close at hand. The raven-haired temptress stared up at her in obvious disdain from the cover of the novel.

Once the tub was sparkling clean again, she filled it with scalding water and a generous heaping of her scented bath salts. Averting her gaze from the mirror, she stripped off her sensible outfit of gray trousers, a matching jacket and plain white sleeveless shell, folding them neatly on top of her low-heeled black pumps. Her white cotton underwear and bra were tucked discreetly underneath the pants. Emily stepped carefully into the steaming tub, easing down until she lay comfortably against her pink bath pillow. "Ahhhh," she breathed, inhaling the sweet-smelling aroma. "Perfect." She picked up her novel and opened to the page she'd book marked. The Duc had just taken Ashlyn to see her new rose garden....

* * * *

"Shall I compare thee to a rose?" he asked, drawing Ashlyn into his strong embrace. "Thou art more beautiful and more temperate." He chuckled against the top of her silky head. "I take liberties with literature, my dear, but that is only because I do not have the words to describe your incredible beauty. I am but a poor excuse for the Bard, but I wish only to please you."

Ashlyn's violet eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "My love, you always know how to please me." A faint blush stained her alabaster cheeks. "In the bedchamber and without." A rush of heat suffused her as the memory of last night's lovemaking returned.

"Your sweet words are music to my ears, love. May I assume that the roses are to your liking? The laborers will be most anxious to know. They toiled ceaselessly for almost a fortnight. The small folk in these parts have much affection for you, my dear."

"I shall have the kitchen staff make a small repast for them. After all, it is quite a journey back to the village," she mused. His indulgent chuckle broke her out of her reverie. "Oh! Darling, I'm so sorry! I love the rose garden. You spoil me so!" Her lashes fluttered becomingly.

The Duc bent down and covered her lush rosebud lips with his own, savoring the taste of honey and cream. "You are a precious jewel, my little sweetmeat. All I am, all I do, is for you. You own my

very soul, Ashlyn Armani.” With that, he scooped her up into his strong arms, carrying her back to the castle. He could wait no longer to sample her charms yet again.

* * * *

In the rapidly cooling bathwater, Emily nonetheless felt her blood heat with desire. The Duc was so sensitive and yet so forceful in his ardor. What she wouldn’t give for a man like that! In twelve years of marriage, Jerry had never once swept her off her feet like that—he hadn’t even carried her over the threshold, thanks to his chronic back pain. Emily heard the sound of footsteps on stairs; speak of the Devil. Her husband was home.

“Babe?” he called, out of breath from the short flight of stairs.

“In here.” She pulled the stopper, and the water began draining out of the tub. Hastily, she stood and grabbed the towel; she had no intention of trumpeting her many flaws—even to her husband—in the florescent light of the bathroom.

He walked in, looking worn out from a long day on the job. After years of driving a mail truck around Spellfire, his once solid body had gone to fat. A football player in high school, he retained the broad shoulders and powerful legs, but his middle thickened considerably in the past few years. Too much fatty food and drinks with the boys gave his face the florid look of a man twice his age. “Wow! Look at you, babe!” Jerry let out a long wolf whistle. “Drop that towel and lemme get a peek at the goods!” As he spoke, he pulled up the toilet seat, positioning himself in front of it.

Emily’s mouth hardened. The Duc would never, ever speak to Ashlyn in such a coarse manner. She opened her mouth to tell Jerry that just as a stream of liquid hit the bowl. With a horrified squeak, she hurried past him, one hand covering her eyes.

“What’d you think of the flowers?” he called after her. “Pretty fancy, huh?”

* * * *

The following Saturday, she was doing a crossword puzzle in her cozy kitchen while Jerry pattered around in the garage. God only knew what the man did out there. The Duc de Givenchy played polo in his spare time, when he wasn’t strolling through his vineyards or commissioning portraits of his love. With a sigh, Emily stood and poured a second cup of coffee. There was grocery shopping to do today, as well as papers to grade. She applied a touch of lip gloss and

ran a comb through her hair before picking up her purse and heading out back. “Jerry? I’m off to the store.”

“Bring me back a chili cheese dog from that place on the corner, will ya?” He grinned sheepishly and patted his stomach. “Actually, make that two. Diet starts tomorrow.”

“The doctor said no more hot dogs,” she reminded him. “Too much sodium.”

“Aw, c’mon, babe,” he pleaded, clasping his hands in front of him. “I’ll fix the faucet in the kitchen sink. Promise.”

Emily sighed. “Fine. If you want to eat yourself into a heart attack, it makes no difference to me.”

“You’re the greatest,” he said, kissing her lips with a loud smack. “Best wife a man ever had!” Leaning in, he kissed her again, more softly this time. “You should wear that top more often. Does amazing things for your rack.” With a wink and a saucy grin, he turned and went back to the garage, leaving Emily staring after him, her arms firmly crossed over her offending chest.

* * * *

The grocery store was crowded with Spellfire matrons, scouring the aisles for bargains. Thanksgiving was in the air, and it seemed as though everyone was preparing to cook up a storm. Emily checked off each item on her list after dropping it into her cart. So much work for one meal. It seemed almost wasteful, especially considering that it would only be her and Jerry. All these years of marriage and no children. She felt that familiar ache of longing well up inside her. Why couldn’t she be happy with the life she had? Jerry was a good man. Sure, he wasn’t dashing and romantic, but he tried his best to make her happy. Why couldn’t that be enough?

Tears threatened to fall, right there in front of the dizzying array of cereal brands, with God and everyone else in Spellfire as witness. Emily fixed her gaze on that silly rabbit grinning at her from his bright red box and took a deep breath. If only her life was different. Sometimes, it seemed as though her every waking thought was filled with ‘if only.’ If only she were more like Ashlyn Armani. If only Jerry were more like the Duc. If only she could have one night of blazing passion to burn out the boredom of her humdrum life. One night like the one she had read about, long after Jerry rolled over and begun snoring. If only...

The Duc looked at Ashlyn, his heated gaze drinking in the sight of her gloriously naked form. "My dear, you are perfection. Stand there, and let me commit your beauty to memory." His hands itched for a paintbrush; oh, to capture her lush curves on canvas!

Ashlyn smiled. "Darling, these rooms are drafty. How much longer shall I remain here without the warmth of your body to keep out the chill?" She held out her arms in invitation. "Come to me, my love. Make me burn with desire."

"Your every wish is my command, sweet one." His voice grew husky with passion. Crossing to where she waited, he took her in his arms. "Your skin is like silk, love," he crooned into the small pink shell of her ear. Running his hands down her back, he cupped the smooth, firm globes of her behind and squeezed gently.

"Milord!" she gasped, starting at the feel of his strong hands. Then his lips covered hers, and she felt his hot tongue in her mouth.

* * * *

"Emily Jenkins? Are you ill, dear?"

She blinked several times, snapping out of her daydream to find Martha Dimwoody standing in front of her. The look of concern on the woman's face told her that she had been trying to get her attention for some time. "Yes, Martha, I mean, no, I'm not ill. Just have a lot on my mind is all." She smiled weakly and reached for a box of cereal.

"I would never have guessed you for someone who enjoys eating pastel-colored marshmallows in the morning," Martha replied, squinting at the giddy leprechaun on the box. "I confess I've always wondered exactly how it is they can get them into those tiny shapes." Behind her glasses, she regarded Emily with serious eyes. "Are you quite certain that you are feeling all right?"

"Yes, Martha. I'm fine," Emily assured her. "Just..."

"A lot on your mind," she finished. "Yes, that was what you said a moment ago. I did not mean to pry. I'll leave you to your shopping, then. See you Monday." She looked as though she were about to say something else, but then thought better of it. Maneuvering her cart around a towering display of chocolate turkeys, she gave Emily a nod before heading in the opposite direction.

Emily watched as Martha pushed her cart down the aisle without a backward glance. It was beyond eerie, but somehow she knew that the woman could see right through her. With a slight shudder, she replaced the cereal box on the shelf and chose one with antioxidants

and plenty of bran. Jerry had been complaining about irregularity lately. If she covered the berries with sugar, she could trick him into eating it. The man simply refused to eat anything that was healthy for him. Just last week, she'd bought some lovely whole-grain scones, exactly the kind that Mrs. Binghamton, Ashlyn's jolly serving maid, brought her and the Duc to break their fast on. But had her husband praised them to the heavens and fed her bites from his outstretched hand? No, he'd taken one bite and proclaimed that they tasted like "dirt-covered rocks." Then he'd made a game out of pitching them into the trash, one by one. Another romantic morning at the Jenkins'. She sighed and finished up her shopping as quickly as she could.

* * * *

"Great dinner, babe." Jerry pushed his chair back and patted his burgeoning belly. "We got any of that ice cream with the fudge ribbon in it left?"

Emily stacked the dishes neatly in the sink before replying. "No, you finished that off last night, remember? You can have some of my black raspberry sorbet though, if you'd like."

"Naw, I hate that fancy crap. Doesn't even taste like ice cream. How's about a trip to Sinful Sundaes? We haven't been there in a long time." Jerry got up from the table and went to his wife, folding his arms around her as she bent over the dishes. "Come on, babe. All that fat-free garbage you eat has gotta be getting to you. Let's treat ourselves, just this once." He gave her middle a soft squeeze. "Besides, I like you with a bit of extra padding. It's sexy."

"It is *not* sexy! You ask me if I want ice cream, and then you call me *fat*?" She pushed his hands off and turned on him, furious. "Look at you, Mr. Former All-Star Football Player! You can barely even walk to the end of the driveway without a water break!"

Astonished, he blinked at her, his mouth working as he tried to form a response. "Gee, babe, I was just playing around. I didn't mean anything by it."

"You never do, do you?" She shook her head, pressing her lips together to keep from sobbing. "Why don't you just go by yourself? Stop by the pub afterwards, stay all night if you want. I'm going to bed." Pushing past him, she grabbed her book and ran upstairs, slamming the bedroom door behind her. When he came home that night, he would find it locked. Emily dearly hoped the couch would exacerbate his back problems.

After changing into her nightgown, she settled down in bed with her novel. Ashlyn had just found her beloved governess, Anna Hope, in the stables with the Duc's brother, a notorious rake.

* * * *

Ashlyn held her skirts up as she tiptoed past the horse stalls. It was unthinkable that an educated woman like Anna Hope would fall for a rogue like Gavin de Givenchy. As different from his brother as night from day, Gavin's reputation kept him from being received by every decent family in Italy.

A soft moan interrupted her thoughts—it was coming from the stable lad's quarters. Her heart in her mouth, she edged closer until she could finally see the pair entwined on the hay-strewn ground. Kneeling down, she pressed a handkerchief over her mouth and nose to alleviate the stench of horse excrement. In spite of the foul smell, she felt riveted to the spot. Gavin was holding Anna on his lap, her head lolling back against his broad chest as his hands delved inside her unlaced bodice.

“Your nipples are like ripe cherries bathed in sherry, my sweet. I should very much like to taste them,” he murmured in a wicked whisper that made Ashlyn shiver in her hiding spot.

Anna writhed against him, her cheeks flushed bright pink. “Gavin, please. You'll ruin me. No decent man will have me if you...Oh!” His practiced fingers teased the turgid peaks of her nipples, causing her to wriggle in his lap.

“You like that?” His lips brushed against the side of her neck as one hand moved to raise her skirts. “I dare say you'll like this even better.”

Ashlyn watched, open-mouthed, as his hand disappeared from view. She felt herself growing quite damp, and her breath came in short pants as her lover's brother rolled her governess onto her back in the hay.

“Have you looked your fill, sweet Ashlyn?” came a deep, amused whisper. She whirled around to see the Duc crouched beside her, his dark eyes lit with laughter.

“I, well, I was just...He'll ruin her!” She gestured to the copulating couple, whose movements were growing more and more frenzied. Ashlyn desperately tried to avert her gaze, but the sight was mesmerizing. If she didn't know better, she'd think that Gavin was killing her dear Anna.

The Duc's eyes were on the front of her silk gown. "I was not aware that voyeurism excited you so, my dear." He brushed one thumb against a stiff nipple. "You are full of surprises, sweet Ashlyn." Anna was making such a racket now; there was no need to whisper.

She swallowed hard, thankful that his gaze was directed elsewhere so she wouldn't have to look at him. "You are angry with me, my lord. I have acted in a most shameful manner. I expect you will leave me now."

"On the contrary, my dear. I shall be forced to punish you most severely, of course. But I daresay you will enjoy it far more than watching my brother rut with the governess." Taking her hand in his, he led her from the stables.

* * * *

Emily was so aroused that she had to put the book down and threw the cover off the bed. She wondered how the Duc would punish her if she spoke to him the way she had spoken to Jerry tonight. Would he turn her across his knee and administer the lash whilst the castle staff looked on? Oh, she was wicked! A grown woman, having thoughts like this! She felt her face heat as desire coursed through her. What she wouldn't give for a night with a lover like the Duc.

* * * *

The next morning, she was still in ill humor, having slept little. By the time she came downstairs for her morning coffee and slice of whole wheat toast, Jerry was gone. The only evidence that he'd come home at all was the rumpled pillow and blanket, scrunched up on the couch. Emily felt a stab of guilt and chalked it up to hunger. All this fat-free crap was killing her, damn her husband for being right.

Traffic was slow, and by the time she arrived at Spellfire High, the first bell had already rung. She dashed into her classroom with five minutes to spare before her eleventh grade English class was due to arrive. Thank goodness she'd been keeping a pop quiz for an occasion such as this. The students shuffled in, groaning loudly when she directed them to clear their desks. "Since when do you give pop quizzes, Miz Jenkins?" asked one of the girls.

Since I didn't get a wink of sleep last night, and my husband slept on the couch. Emily lifted her chin and stacked the papers on the table. "You had five chapters to read in *Wuthering Heights* last

evening. If you completed the assignment, this assessment should be a piece of cake.”

More groans met this statement. She ignored them and began passing out the papers. “Be sure to read all of the directions and keep your eyes on your own quiz,” she admonished them. As soon as everyone lifted their pencils, she returned to her desk. There was an orange waiting there, her mid-morning snack, but she couldn't bring herself to begin the arduous task of peeling it. The minutes ticked by as the sound of lead scratching on paper lulled her into a dreamy state. Surely, Ashlyn Armani never had to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous teenagers.

The hours crawled by until lunchtime. Usually she ate in the faculty room with the other teachers, but today she remained at her desk. Females were catty by nature, but teachers were even more so. For once, she didn't relish the idea of sitting with her colleagues, who had elevated ripping students to shreds to an art form. Their gossip sounded worse than that of children. Very little went on at Spellfire High which the faculty didn't know about. Emily felt sure today's main topic of conversation would be Genesis St. James' latest party, where it was rumored that at least two girls had been impregnated by the same young man.

She sighed and took out her brown lunch bag. Same as everyday. A tossed salad with fat-free dressing, a container of plain yogurt and a box of raisins. It was difficult to get excited about such bland fare. Not for the first time, she wondered how Ashlyn Armani was able to dine on stuffed partridge, sweetmeats and trifle—all while maintaining the figure of a goddess. Possibly, because she was a fictional character, Emily reminded herself with a roll of her eyes.

Pushing her meager lunch to the side, she pulled out her book instead. Anna Hope just confessed her afternoon tryst with Gavin to Ashlyn, unaware that her former charge had been watching the entire time.

* * * *

“No decent family will receive me now, Ashlyn. I'm ruined!” Anna wrung her hands helplessly, a fresh wave of tears staining her cheeks.

Ashlyn bit her lip. Should she confess to her dear friend and former governess that she had been hiding in the stable whilst they rutted in the hay? No, it would only heighten her friend's horrible shame. Best to pretend she knew nothing. “My dear, you are fretting

over a simple tempest in the teapot. It's not as though you allowed him to take your maidenhead, is it?" She kept her eyes averted as she spoke, for, of course, she already knew the answer to her question. Anna was indeed ruined. There was no recourse for her now. She would live out the rest of her days as a spinster, whispered about by all the gossips.

"I let him do anything he wanted to me," she whispered through her tears. "He is glorious, truly, and I could not help myself! The way he touched me, oh, Ashlyn, it was like fire in my loins!" She took a deep, shuddering breath. "We made love, right there in the hay! He spread my legs and touched me with his hands until I thought I would die from the pleasure. I was wanton, dear Ashlyn, begging for him to penetrate me. Oh, the shame!" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed for all she was worth.

"Dear Anna!" Ashlyn went to her and hugged her tightly. "You mustn't cry anymore. I will fix this. Gavin de Givenchy may have a lineage that is far superior to yours, but he cannot treat you like a common strumpet. I will not allow it."

* * * *

Impatiently, Emily skipped ahead to the next chapter. Lunch was over in ten minutes, and she needed a little steamy sex to get her through the rest of the day. Besides, Anna's tears were beginning to get on her nerves.

* * * *

Ashlyn dropped a brief curtsey before addressing her lover's brother. "Milord, might I have a moment of your time?"

Gavin looked up from his cards. "Milady Armani, what a surprise to see you here. I wouldn't think a gentleman's club would be the sort of establishment a fine lady such as yourself would visit." His voice was thick with brandy as he spoke, his eyes flicking over her like crawling insects. "If you are looking for my good brother, you certainly won't find him here."

"No. It is you with whom I wish to speak. Is there someplace more private?" Masculine chuckles burst out at her words, and her cheeks immediately reddened.

"Madame, there are many such places in here, but all require payment. Have you the gold?" He laid down his hand and stood, giving her another frank appraisal. "Or perhaps you prefer to pay with another sort of coin?"

Lifting her chin, Ashlyn rose to her full height. "You cast aspersions on my character, sir. I do not care for it."

* * * *

Her eye on the clock, Emily flipped a few pages to get to the good stuff.

* * * *

Gavin closed the door behind him, trapping her in the tiny space. "This private enough for you, milady Armani?" There was barely room enough to stand between the door and the unmade bed, which smelled of musky odors and cheap wine. He smiled down at her, a wolf in custom-made clothing. "I saw you, you know. In the stables."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she managed to gasp. The air was so thick; she could barely draw enough with which to breathe. "I was in the gardens all day long, tending to my roses."

His laughter was harsh and biting. "The only flower you saw was the one I tended to with my cock. The sweet, pink rose of your governess's pussy." Gavin moved closer, putting his hands on her shoulders. She could smell brandy on his breath, brandy and other things. "Did it give you pleasure to watch us together, sweet Ashlyn? Did you pluck the petals of your own delicate rose as I fucked sweet Anna in the hay?"

Pushing at his chest, she cried, "Move aside! I cannot breathe, sir. Let me pass!" She beat at his chest futilely. "All I want is for you to make a decent woman of her! Do not leave her to suffer the sniping gossips of society!"

He pulled her hard against him, his hand pressing firmly into her lower back, just above the curve of her bottom. "And if I do as you say, sweet lady? What will I get in return?"

"What do you want?" she stammered, blushing furiously. His eyes were fastened on her bosom, which was near to bursting out of her thin bodice.

"I want to sample some of what my elder brother gets to dip into, each and every night," he murmured hotly. One hand snaked its way down to cup a firm, round cheek. "I can pleasure you in ways my staid sibling has never dreamt of, my sweet."

"Have you no honor?" Ashlyn's voice was like a whip cracking in the small space. "Unhand me this instant, you scoundrel! If I didn't love my dear friend so much, I'd have you whipped for your insolence!"

Gavin released her with a nasty laugh. "Would you, indeed, my lady? And just how would you explain being in this room with me? No doubt, you realize what this private chamber is meant for. How would you tell my dear brother that I accosted you in a locked room meant for bed sport?"

Her violet eyes filled with tears. All was lost. Poor Anna would be ruined, and there was nothing she could do to stop it from happening. "If you will allow me to pass, I will be on my way, sir," she said stiffly. "I had thought you a man of honor, like your brother. I was mistaken."

He caught her by the arm as she swept past him. "I am nothing like my brother," he hissed into her ear. "There is, however, one other bargain to which I will agree."

* * * *

"Romance novels, Mrs. Jenkins? Doesn't Mr. Jenkins do it for you?" Tami Twieg's comment was met with a chorus of giggles from the circle of sycophants she kept company with. The senior tossed her perfect mane of red hair, peering down at the paperback's cover. "Wow, that girl is *stacked*!" More giggles as Emily shut the book and hurriedly put it away in her drawer.

"Take your seats, girls. Class is about to begin." Children could smell both fear and mortification, so she struggled to maintain a severe expression. "Please clear your desks for a pop quiz."

* * * *

Her department meeting ran late, as usual, so it was past five by the time she arrived home. "Jerry?" she called as she placed her keys and the day's mail on the table by the front door. Emily never could keep her husband's schedule straight. Just as she had decided that tonight was one of his overtime nights, she heard his voice coming from the kitchen. What the man could possibly be doing in there, she couldn't imagine. Her footsteps quickened as she headed to investigate. If he ruined another one of her Calphalon skillets!

"Don't come in yet!" He appeared in the doorway, waving her back as though shooing flies away from his face. "Just give me ten more minutes." Jerry held up ten fingers and waved those at her too, as though she were too dimwitted to catch his meaning.

"Can I at least get a glass of wine?" Emily rose on tiptoe in an attempt to peer around him. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on in there, which worried her. Jerry wasn't known for his culinary skills. In fact, he once burned himself while making a bowl

of cereal. Cold cereal. “What are you using the blender for?” she asked, trying to keep the alarm out of her voice.

Jerry captured both of her wrists in one of his hands. “Sweetheart, please. Go upstairs, change out of your work clothes and just trust me. I promise you won't be disappointed.” There was an eager grin on his florid face that was somehow endearing.

Emily sighed. “Fine, ten minutes. But please, be careful in my kitchen.” Enthusiastic assurances followed her all the way up the stairs.

True to his word, ten minutes later, he led her into their rarely-used dining room. The lights were dimmed, but she could still see that he had gone to a great deal of trouble. There were flowers (stolen from the neighbor's garden), candles (smelling slightly of the garage), and two carefully arranged place settings. “Paper plates?” she inquired, taking a seat in the chair he held out for her.

“I didn't want you to have to do dishes,” he replied with a sheepish grin. “Here, let me pour you a glass of wine. The appetizers should be done by now.”

She held up her glass while he poured, trying not to wince when several droplets stained her grandmother's lace tablecloth. When the glass was filled to the brim, he hurried back into the kitchen. Emily quickly lifted the bottle before it could make a ring and placed it on top of a paper napkin. Her stomach rumbled at the sound of trays banging away, and she couldn't help but wonder what he had prepared. One time, the Duc had taken Ashlyn on a picnic in the nearby forest. If memory served, they had dined on fresh strawberries with clotted cream, a joint of rare beef and bread with butter from the castle's crockery. There had been champagne of a rare vintage, as well as a variety of exotic cheeses for dessert.

Just as she was envisioning a plump berry dipped in cream, Jerry returned bearing a covered dish. With a flourish, he whipped off the dishcloth. “I give you...wieners a la Jerry!” A wide grin decorated his face. “How many do you want?” he asked, stabbing at the contents of the dish with a two-pronged fork. “Look! I even used those fancy croissant things you like to wrap them in!”

“Pigs in the blanket,” she said with disbelief. “You made pigs in the blanket.” Hysterical laughter bubbled up, and she was unable to hold it at bay. This was her husband's idea of a romantic feast for two? Boiled Hebrew Nationals wrapped in cheap dough? If that wasn't bad enough, she saw that Jerry had squirted both ketchup and

mustard along the tops of the blanket-covered dogs. Was he trying to be festive? "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything, babe. Just dig in." With a solid plunk, two of the hot dogs fell onto her plate. She leaned back to avoid the inevitable ketchup splatter, but wasn't quick enough. Now her favorite white shirt sported red and yellow polka dots. Great. "Oops, sorry 'bout that. I'll bring you some of that Oxy stuff."

"No, no, it's fine." She smiled weakly and took a large sip of her wine. "This tastes...interesting," she said, inwardly gagging at the sickly sweetness of the beverage.

Jerry smiled proudly. "It's that Manischewitz wine that Jewish people drink for their holidays. They had it on sale at the liquor store two towns over. You like it?" He poured himself a glass and took a gulp. "Wow, that's good stuff. Tastes like grape juice!" Tilting his head back, he polished off the glass. "Drink up, babe."

Emily looked down at her paper plate, where the grease from her pigs in the blanket congealed in an oily lake. Gingerly, she lifted the corner to find that the greasy mess had indeed seeped through to stain her grandmother's tablecloth. She picked up her wineglass, drained it and then burst into tears.

"Babe? What's the matter?" Jerry hovered over her, frowning in confusion. "Is it your shirt? I'm sure the stains will come out. Have something to eat, maybe that will make you feel better." He picked up one of the hot dogs and held it up to her. "Please, tell me what's wrong."

Her tear-stained face grew red with sudden anger. "What's wrong? Is that what you want to know? Goodness, where shall I begin?" She gestured at the paper plates, the covered dish of pigs a la Jerry. "It's this! It's everything! It's you!"

Her husband's shocked stare was almost comical. Slowly, he backed away from the table, his hands going to his ears—to block out any more of her hurtful words, she imagined. "I didn't know you felt this way," he said stiffly. "I, I guess I should have paid more attention." He waved a hand at the table. "This was supposed to be a romantic evening. I'm sorry you didn't see it that way." Jerry blew out a long breath and surveyed the table he'd worked so hard to prepare. Then he turned and walked out. Emily's tears ran harder as she heard the front door slam behind him.

She supposed she must be the most horrible woman on the face of the earth. At the very least, the most ungrateful. Emily picked up

the paper napkin and used it to dry her tears. This was it, this was her life. Why couldn't she just accept it the way everybody else did? Perhaps if she just had something with which to dull the pain, she thought, glancing at the second bottle of wine. By the time the clock struck ten, she was thoroughly drunk.

* * * *

Martha Dimwoody stood outside the Jenkins' residence, her posture ramrod-straight as always. She started as a cat darted across her path then frowned after it. Cats were beastly creatures, completely detestable in every way. She long wondered whose foolish idea it had been to pair witches with felines. Her Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, Vincent, served her quite adequately as a familiar; there was no need whatsoever to keep one of those supercilious, sneaky fur balls in her home, thank the Lady.

There was a light on in what looked to be the Jenkins' front room. Martha walked up the path, her serviceable clogs making no noise on the cobblestones. She quite liked clogs, although more than one of her students whispered about her unfashionable footwear. One day, she would turn all of them to toads.

Holding Emily's floral bag in one hand, she rapped at the door with the other. It was late to be calling, especially considering that she and Emily Jenkins were not exactly bosom buddies. More like colleagues with benefits, if she could coin a phrase the children often used. She had been a teacher at Spellfire High for a long time, longer than anyone, including the current principal. A sudden crash from inside the house interrupted her thoughts. A moment later, the door swung open to reveal an obviously inebriated Emily.

"Perhaps I've come at an inopportune moment?" Martha asked, raising her eyebrows at her colleague's disheveled appearance. "I only wanted to drop off your bag. I know that you keep your grade book in it."

Emily looked up at her, chewing on her lower lip in confusion. "Martha? That you? I was juss havin' a drink," she slurred, giggling inanely. "Whyn't you come on in?"

Under any other circumstance, Martha would have refused this pathetic request outright. Control of one's faculties was of the utmost importance to her, and this sort of sloppy behavior was something to be avoided at all costs. But her senses were atwitter—something was wrong in this house. She could feel it permeating the very air. With a heavy sigh, she handed the bag to Emily and stepped across the

threshold. "I believe that coffee is in order. Strong, black, and lots of it."

"You kin have whatever you want, Marth. I'm havin' more of this fruity wine stuff. Ish good." Emily swung the bottle by its slim neck.

Martha visibly shuddered at the shortening of her given name. Nicknames disgusted her. A name was bestowed upon one at birth and should be respected. A person's full name had much power in the supernatural world, and she did not care for any variations on her own. She looked over at Emily, who was doing some sort of hip-wiggling dance on top of the couch. Her aura, normally creamy beige, was a blue as dark as any she had ever seen, in spite of the mindless grin on her face. She sighed and went into the kitchen to brew the java. It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

"Have you ever wanted a different life?" Emily rubbed her temples as she spoke, attempting to fend off the vicious headache she could already feel building. True to her word, Martha had kept the coffee coming. She lost count of how much of the stuff she ingested in the past two hours. At first, she felt a bit nervous about drinking something brewed by one rumored to be a witch, but after nearly vomiting from the spins, she had finally given in.

"I'm not certain I understand," Martha replied, taking a long sip from her own cup. She did not drink coffee unless it was freshly ground and then properly brewed in a French press. Emily's can of Folgers's crystals hardly fit that description, so she settled for something called Gatorade. It was an odd sort of beverage, but she quite liked it.

Normally, Emily would not share her emotions so freely, but Martha had witnessed her rendition of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" complete with a hairbrush microphone. She didn't see how it could get much worse. At least, she wasn't begging the woman to make a run to the border for her anymore. Thank goodness, her colleague had drawn the line at processed meat products slathered in gooey, melted cheese. Her traitorous stomach rumbled, and Martha gave her an odd look.

Before she could stop herself, she thrust her battered paperback into Martha's hands and poured out the whole story about her fight with Jerry. Then she babbled on for hours about her obsession with Ashlyn Armani's passionate love affair with the Duc.

“Oh, Martha! He's such a wonderful, giving man. The things he does for her, the way he shows his love, it's just incredible!”

Martha thumbed through the well-worn pages, her eyebrows going skyward as she perused the more graphic parts. “You do understand that this,” she frowned down at the tiny print, “Duc de Givenchy, is a fictional character, yes?”

“Of course, I do! I'm not unhinged, for goodness sake,” Emily huffed. “Haven't you ever been attracted to someone in the movies or on television?”

“I do not own a television. However, there was one time, long ago, when I had the occasion to be in a place where one was on. There was a show about a young man, a quite strapping young man, who wore a leather jacket. He would hit this sort of music player, a junk box I think they called it, with his elbow. The player would come to life instantly. He was slightly endearing, that young man.” Lost in a rare moment of nostalgia, she smiled.

She cleared her throat before speaking again. “I still do not understand why this man is superior to your own living, breathing husband. He seems like a kind fellow. Why, I remember last summer at the faculty picnic, he led everyone in some sort of game.”

“Beer pong.” Emily shook her head at the memory. It was in her all-time top-ten list of things she wished she could forget. “I want romance, Martha! Moonlit trysts in the gazebo, passionate kisses atop a grassy knoll!”

“You have a gazebo?”

“No!” Emily stood, exasperated. “I just want,” she wrung her hands helplessly, “I want a different life. I want Ashlyn Armani's life.” Her voice sounded as though it belonged to someone else. Someone who knew how to get what she wanted. Tears leaked down her cheeks. “Forget it. I'm going to bed. Everything will look exactly the same in the morning, I'm afraid.” With a heavy sigh, she picked up both mugs to take into the kitchen.

When she returned to the living room, Martha was again paging through the novel. Her long, thin body straightened up as soon as she heard Emily's footsteps. “How much do you know about what I am, Emily?”

She bit her lip, unsure how to respond. “Spellfire is not an ordinary town, everyone knows that,” she hedged. “Lots of things happen here that can't be explained.”

"You're avoiding the question," she replied in the sort of tone Emily imagined she used with recalcitrant students. "Suffice it to say that I have the means to help you, should I choose to do so. However, there are consequences. Magic is not to be taken lightly."

Certain that her jaw must be dragging on the floor, Emily sat back down. "What sort of consequences?"

* * * *

A hand caressed her shoulder, and she moved away, burrowing deeper under the covers. She'd been in a deep sleep, for how long she had no idea. The hand was persistent, though, pulling her up through layers of foggy, half-remembered dreams. It stroked her back gently then moved lower to cup her behind. "Wake up, sweetling," whispered a low, accented voice. "Oh, but the sight of you lying here at your rest stirs my blood to a raging fire!"

Emily blinked several times before dragging her eyes open. The room was dark, but she could still see him, large and overwhelmingly masculine, his long limbs stretched out on Jerry's side of the bed. "Who—who are you?" she asked in a voice heavy with sleep.

A low chuckle rumbled from deep in the man's chest. "Are we role playing again, my love? Who shall I be tonight? The stable lad caught stealing from the kitchens? Or the evil highwayman who has won your favors in a game of chance?" The hand that had been on her buttocks a moment ago reached up and around, giving her breasts a tweak.

"Oh!" she cried. Scrambling out of reach, she fumbled for the bedside lamp. Now she could see the man clearly, and the sight caused her heart to beat like a scared rabbit. "It's, it's you!" Emily couldn't help the excited giggle that burst out of her. Her cheeks flamed instantly; he would no doubt think her a simpering twit. "I mean, um, it's you, my love."

The Duc de Givenchy regarded her with obvious amusement. "Were you expecting someone else, perhaps? Am I not your wedded husband, pledged in front of scores of small folk to worship you until death parts us?" He pulled back the down comforter and got in bed next to her. "Such a lively sense of humor! Whatever shall I do with you, my little minx," he crooned, his breath hot against her neck.

Butterflies danced in her stomach as realization dawned. Martha Dimwoody, that wonderful, wonderful woman, had done it. Somehow, she had taken the Duc off the pages of her novel and

planted him here, in bed with her. A slow smile spread across her face as she considered his question. “Well, I suppose if you are my wedded husband, you may do with me whatever you wish, my lord.” This time, she was able to keep the adolescent giggling at bay.

“An excellent suggestion.” He took her hand and guided it to his erection. In the novel, Ashlyn always exclaimed over its size, proclaiming him to be the largest man she’d ever seen. Now, with her own hand on it, Emily wondered just how many cocks the lady heiress had in fact seen. She rolled over onto her side to give it a closer inspection. Hmmm. It was rather like a fireplug, short and thick with the foreskin still attached, something she hadn’t seen since that Latino boy she’d met on Spring Break in Cancun, all those years ago. But who cared? It was the Duc, in all his glory, stretched out naked on her bed. Her nipples stiffened instantly, and she felt a delicious heat course through her body.

But instead of making sweet love to her, the Duc leaned back on the pillows and closed his eyes. Emily moved closer and rubbed her breasts against his chest, sliding her leg over his. This was usually all the invitation that Jerry ever needed. He didn’t budge, just made a murmuring sound of contentment, so she shifted back to her original position and stepped up the stroking. What were the exact words that Ashlyn always said? Oh, yes. “I long to sheathe your mighty staff, milord.” Odd how different they sounded out loud instead of on the page. In fact, the Duc’s mighty staff had shrunk to the consistency of a limp noodle.

“Did I tell you how I saved the vineyard today? The peasants hailed me as a hero, and I can’t say I think them entirely wrong,” he mused. “Ah, but with great power comes great responsibility, isn’t that right, my dear?” He droned on, telling her in great detail about his triumphant solution to the day’s near catastrophe. Emily stifled a yawn and snuggled against him, content to enjoy the feeling of his strong, hard body. She was sure that when they did make love, it would be mind-blowing. That is, if he ever stopped talking.

* * * *

The next morning, she awoke to a heavenly aroma coming from the kitchen. For a moment, she wondered whether the previous night had been a dream, and she would go downstairs to find Jerry inhaling a box of Krispy Kremes. But no, that smell was better than donuts, better in fact than almost anything she could recall at seven in the morning. Shrugging on a purple satin robe—it had been an impulse

buy several years ago and had languished in the back of her closet ever since. She padded downstairs, fighting the urge to tiptoe.

For goodness sakes, Emily Jenkins, get hold of yourself, she berated silently. This posed another question. Was she still Emily Jenkins? Anxiety bubbled in her stomach, along with several dozen more worries.

“My love? What troubles you at this hour?” The Duc stood in the doorway, gazing down at her. In the early light of day, he looked even more handsome. He was like an Italian version of the actor George Clooney, only with the body of an Adonis. She was still staring at his exposed pectoral muscles, which looked to have been carved by Michelangelo himself, when he spoke again. “My love?”

“Oh! Nothing, um, troubles me, milord,” she said, this time without the giggle. The ‘milord’ part still stuck on her tongue, though. She’d have to work on that. “Just wondering what that glorious smell is, that’s all.”

He took her by the arm. “Let me escort you to the kitchen, lady. I have prepared an excellent repast for us on which to break our fast.” After he seated her at the table, he poured her a cup of coffee. “I brewed it myself. What do you think?”

She took a sip. “This is incredible. What did you do to it?” It was a far cry from her morning Folgers’s Hazelnut blend with two packets of Splenda and a dash of skim milk. Picking up the mug again, she took a much larger swallow. “This is better than Starbuck’s.”

“I am pleased it meets your approval. ‘Tis nothing but fresh cream, a heaping tablespoon of pure cane sugar, a nugget of the finest bittersweet chocolate and a cinnamon stick.”

Emily blanched and almost dropped the cup. Dear Lord, there were more calories in this drink than there were in the largest, most decadent treat that Sinful Sundaes offered. She would be the size of a whale if she drank anymore. “No wonder it tastes so heavenly,” she said weakly, using the tip of her pinky to push the cup further out of reach. “What is in that dish on top of the oven?”

“Wait and see.” He busied himself at the stove for a moment. “Close your eyes, sweet Emily.” She heard his footsteps coming closer. “Open your mouth.” A tiny thrill went through her. Perhaps he would sweep the dishes from the table and throw her on top of it? Her lips parted, and she shivered, expecting to feel his silken tongue any second. Instead, she felt...carbs?

As soon as the taste of real confectioner's sugar registered, she began chewing. God, it had been so long since she tasted anything made with actual, real ingredients. She felt like a recovering alcoholic who had fallen off the wagon. "Ohh," she moaned, savoring the spicy taste. "More please."

His low chuckle was tinged with pleasure. "I'm glad you like it. Panforte is a treat my family often enjoyed at Christmas, and since we are nearing that time, I thought it appropriate. No celebratory meal is complete without it."

"And what are we celebrating?" Emily asked around another mouthful. It was too bad she had to use a fork to eat this. Had she been alone, she would have eaten with her fingers, straight from the dish. As long as he didn't tell her what was in it, she could pretend it was fat-free.

"Every day I spend with you is a celebration, my love." He took the seat next to her and patted his knee. Emily moved to sit in his lap, taking her plate with her. Chocolate pastry and a hot man. Could life get any sweeter?

* * * *

"You are a goddess, dear Emily. Aphrodite herself would stand in your shadow." The Duc gazed upon her naked body with frank admiration. He lounged on her bed, still fully clothed, unfortunately.

Emily tried to flutter her lashes the way Ashlyn Armani often did. "Will you not...disrobe, milord?" There now, this time the word did not stick on her tongue the way it had earlier. What she really wanted to say was, "Let me get a look at the goods, buster!" Lord, she sounded like a female version of Jerry! For a split second, she wondered just where her legal husband was. Perhaps Martha's spell had transported him to a place where he could play beer pong all day long, surrounded by the Miller Light girls. The Duc's smooth voice interrupted her strange thoughts.

"All in good time, milady." She looked up to find him standing by the bureau, rummaging through a strongbox. "Ah, here they are."

Did he have toys? One of those feather ticklers, maybe? Or a pair of naughty, fur-lined handcuffs? Emily shivered in anticipation. Now this was worth waiting for. "What have you there, my love?" She crossed her arms over her stomach, which was still bloated from the rich pastry. Standing here in the buff was making her extremely self-conscious, even more so than usual. What was he doing over there? She rose up on tiptoe, trying to see. Oh no. "Is that a canvas,

milord?" Emily wondered what else she could call him. "Duc" sounded so formal, and she couldn't recall the author ever mentioning his first name in the book. Perhaps she'd been so anxious to get to the smutty parts that she hadn't paid close enough attention.

The Duc smiled. "You have sharp eyes, sweetling." He set up his paints in the corner of the bedroom, not noticing Emily's frown.

"Could this not wait until...after?" she asked, wringing her hands nervously. She did not want her many flaws immortalized on canvas for God knows who to see. And how was it that the word, 'sweetling', which sounded so romantic on paper, grated on her nerves like sandpaper when she heard it aloud?

"Time has no meaning to the true artist, love. Now, stand over there, next to the bed. Turn to the right, no, dear, that's the left. Allow me." He strode over, arranged her like clothing on a mannequin and then stepped back. "Perfection. Don't move."

For how long was she meant to stand here, posed like a wooden puppet? Emily sighed inwardly. With Jerry, there had been none of this type of foreplay, if that was in fact what she could call it. Sex with him had been straight-forward and simple; he knew where all her hot spots were, and, provided she could relax long enough for him to get to them, their lovemaking had been very pleasurable. Hell, she could have already showered, made up the bed and started dinner by now. How much longer was this going to take? It had only been five minutes, but it felt as though hours had passed. "Uh, darling? I really need to begin preparations for our Thanksgiving feast." That should work. With Jerry, food took precedence over all else. She felt sure the Duc wouldn't be any different. After all, he was a man, wasn't he?

He chuckled. "Let the serving women take care of that. I am certain they can manage without your supervision."

Serving women? Was he insane? "I don't have any...serving women, my love. I always prepare our Thanksgiving meal myself, and I fear if I do not get started tonight, we will be dining on takeout." A nervous laugh escaped her, it was somewhat absurd, standing here naked, conversing about Thanksgiving. "After all, I do have to work tomorrow."

"Work? Surely you jest, sweet Emily. It is not seemly for a lady of your station to do the job of a commoner." His smile was that of a condescending father. "Now, if you would just stop fidgeting, I can be finished in an hour's time."

“Where’s your brother?” she blurted out. He gave her an odd look. “I only meant, perhaps he can join us for dinner.” It was a lame recovery, but he seemed to buy it. “Thursday is Thanksgiving, after all.”

The Duc frowned in consideration. “You are a gem among women, my dear. But I fear that my brother’s notoriety will have an adverse affect on your spotless reputation. He is quite coarse, in both speech and manner, and I do not want you tainted. Besides, he would most likely try to seduce you, and I am sure you do not want that.” With a shake of his head, he went back to his work.

The hell I wouldn’t, Emily thought. Her right foot had gone numb, and the only thing keeping her upright was the thought of Gavin de Givenchy burying his head between her legs, his hot tongue licking at her core while she lay on her back in the hay. For the first time, she realized that there was a very big difference between fantasy and reality.

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Emily finally was able to steal an hour’s time away from the Duc by persuading him to go into town and spend time amongst the small folk, as he referred to them. Once the kitchen was cleaned to her satisfaction, she set about making her famous pumpkin cheesecake. It had long been a staple of their Thanksgiving feast, and she couldn’t deny how good it felt to do something normal.

She beat together copious amounts of cream cheese and pumpkin, trying not to think about how the painting session had played out. A solid hour of listening to the Duc’s many heroic escapades, all the while standing there stiffly, wishing she could cover her naked body from his penetrating gaze. It was a far cry from the steamy scene she had imagined from her reading. Adding teaspoons of ginger, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, she turned up the speed on her electric beater and sighed. Sex with a hero was certainly not all it was cracked up to be. Obviously, Ashlyn Armani hadn’t had much experience with men, since she thought the Duc was the best lover she’d ever had. Emily snorted, recalling Ashlyn’s likening of the Duc to a wild stallion. More like a timid foal, she huffed.

After pouring the mixture into a springform pan that already held her graham-cracker piecrust, she dragged a spoon into the nearly empty bowl, thinking of Jerry. He loved to watch her bake, especially since she did it so rarely. Every year, after she put the

cheesecake into the oven, they would sit at the kitchen table, licking the bowl clean with one spoon shared between them. A Thanksgiving tradition, he'd always called it. She'd always rolled her eyes, saying that gorging on batter did not a tradition make, but now, alone in her kitchen, she felt an inexplicable sadness.

Emily lifted the bowl and carried it over to the table. She didn't need Jerry; she would make this tradition her own. Bringing the spoon to her lips, she sighed at the taste of the creamy mixture. Out of habit, she turned to pass off the spoon, but of course, there was no one there. Tears welled up, and she blinked them away angrily. This was what she wanted, what she dreamed of! She should be the happiest woman in the world right now, and all she could think of was her husband's smile as he proclaimed her pumpkin cheesecake to be the nectar of the gods. Silly man. She was sure he was much happier now. Wherever he was.

"The lord of the manor has returned!" The Duc swept into the kitchen, holding out his arms to her. As always, he was masculinity personified, and she couldn't help her near-swoon as his strong arms closed around her. If only she could press a button and mute his annoying voice. "Tell me how you have whiled away these long hours without me, sweetling," he murmured against the top of her head. "Being parted from you is agony."

Oh, for the love of God. Emily rolled her eyes, glad he could not see her. "Well, I tidied up the kitchen a bit and then did some baking," she replied. Couldn't the man just park himself in the living room in front of the television? "In fact, I still have tons to do." Hopefully, he would take the hint.

He didn't. The Duc pulled out a chair and sat himself at the table, asking questions about every aspect of her preparations until she thought she would scream. It was one thing to want your man to be interested in your life, but quite another for him to be completely inundated in it. Before long, Emily longed for the floor to open up and just swallow him. By the time she had finished detailing every item that would grace their Thanksgiving table, she made up her mind. Tomorrow at school, she would find Martha and beg her to reverse the spell, consequences be damned.

* * * *

Half the day had passed before she finally located the witch. She was in a dark corner of the Media Center, going over advanced calculus with a bespectacled senior girl. Emily tapped her foot

impatiently, waiting ten interminable minutes until the teen provided the correct answer. “A word, Ms. Dimwoody?” she asked, using her teacher voice.

Martha held up one long finger. “Bettina, are you quite certain you do not require a third example?” The girl shook her head vigorously, gathered up her books and scurried away. “Empty-headed fool. In the Dark Ages, they would have used her as breeding stock.” She shook her head and turned to Emily. “What can I do for you?”

Emily launched into her story with barely a pause for breath. Martha listened intently, her owl-like eyes blinking from time to time, but she said nothing, nor did she attempt to interrupt. When Emily finally came up for air, she said, “Are you quite finished?”

Trying not to falter in the face of the witch’s intimidating posture, Emily took a deep breath before saying, “I want you to change it back. I was wrong, Martha, horribly wrong! I thought I needed a hero, a dashing savior like the Duc, but really, all I need to be happy is my Jerry! He’s my hero, not this overstuffed, pompous twit of a man! Do you know, he tried to keep me from coming to work this morning? He said it wasn’t right for a woman of my station to mix with the common folk! And if he calls me ‘sweetling’ one more time, I won’t be responsible for my actions!”

“I see.”

“Is that all you can say? ‘I see’? Martha, the man is...” she waved her hands helplessly, searching for the correct word. “He’s...”

“Human?” Martha supplied dryly. “Really, Emily, what did you expect? Perfection exists only on the pages of a book, not in real life. Why do you think that romance novels are so popular? People want a window into that world, a chance to escape reality for a short time to live amongst the heroes and their ladies. This sort of existence never translates well into the real world.”

“Great, fine, whatever. I get it now, okay? Just change it back. Bring my Jerry back to me, and get rid of that dud muffin.”

“I believe the term is ‘stud muffin.’”

Emily sniffed. “Not in his case, believe me.”

“I did warn you about this. Magic is not a toy that one turns on and off at whim. There are consequences to every action.” Martha’s voice grew stern. “Really, Emily, it’s not all smoke and mirrors. I can’t just wave a wand and make it all better. Nor would I, if I could. There is the code to consider.”

“Just tell me what I have to do. Please,” she added, clasping her hands together. Oh God, what if Martha couldn’t help her? What if she never saw Jerry again? And worse, what if she had to live out the rest of her days with the Duc? To her horror, she began sobbing uncontrollably, right there in the Media Center. It would be all over school in minutes; Mrs. Jenkins crying her eyes out like a fool.

“Emily Jenkins, stop this right now! Pull yourself together!” Something in the witch’s low, ringing tone made the waterworks cease instantly. “That’s better. I can’t abide tears. Now, go back to your classroom, and let me deal with this.”

“Really? You can do it? You can give me back my Jerry?” Hope surged through her. “Oh, thank you, Martha! Thank you a thousand times!” Emily wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She had been a fool, all this time wasted yearning after something that didn’t exist.

Martha rolled her eyes. “Let’s dial back the hysterics, shall we? Now, off with you. I have work to do.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “What a lot of bother,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I hope you’re grateful that it’s almost Thanksgiving, and I happen to be in a giving mood. Otherwise, I’d let you spend the rest of your life with that ninny!”

“No, no, no! I am so thankful, Martha, really I am! I’m the most grateful person in Spellfire!” Emily practically skipped out the door.

* * * *

It was freezing in her car, but she didn’t feel the cold. Emily gripped the door handle, unable to work up the nerve to get out. What if Martha had failed? She didn’t know what she would do if she walked into her house to find the Duc still there. God help him if he tried to paint her again! Nervously, she opened the door and stepped out, her breath visible in the November chill.

“Hello?” she called out, practically tip-toeing over the threshold. “Anyone home?” Silence. She put her bag down and went into the kitchen. It was empty. Emily’s throat grew dry, and she felt tears form just behind her eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she went to the coffeemaker and began the familiar motions of brewing a pot. The routine steadied her, but she couldn’t stop the anxiety quelling in her tummy. Just as she flicked the switch, Emily felt a pair of arms encircle her. She tensed for a split second then relaxed against the comforting bulk of her husband.

“Oh Jerry! I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to see you!” she sighed.

He chuckled and then kissed the top of her head. “I don’t know why, but I feel like I haven’t seen you in days, babe.” His hands caressed her stomach before moving up to cup her breasts. “So, does this mean you aren’t still mad at me? That dinner was a silly idea; I should have known you wouldn’t like something like that.”

She turned in his arms and kissed him soundly. “No! I was the silly one! I’m so sorry. I guess I’ve just been feeling so lost lately. Or rather, I lost track of what’s really important.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?” Pulling her close, he nuzzled the side of her neck.

“Come upstairs with me, and I’ll show you,” she said with a grin.

Jerry whooped. “You don’t have to ask me twice! C’mon, babe, I’ll race you!” With a smile that took twenty years off his face, he darted for the stairs. Emily giggled and then took off after him. They had a lot of lost time to make up for.

* * * *

Thanksgiving Day dawned bright and clear. Emily woke early and crept downstairs to begin setting the table. This year, she took out her prized wedding china and polished her silver to a high shine. No sense in letting such beautiful things gather dust in the cupboard, she thought, arranging a spray of fresh flowers for her centerpiece.

The doorbell rang, interrupting her work. “I wonder who that could be at this hour?” she said aloud, walking into the living room. She peeked through the spy hole to see Martha Dimwoody standing there, her breath coming in frosty puffs. “Martha!” she cried, flinging the door open. “Please, come in. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Is that today? I quite forgot.” Martha swept past a bemused Emily and took off her long gloves. “You and I need to talk.” She gave Emily a level look that made her feel as though she’d forgotten her homework.

“Sure, of course. Would you mind if we sat in the kitchen? I have to start basting.” Her voice trailed off as Martha strode past her. She had to quicken her pace to keep up. “Can I get you anything?”

Martha waved her off. “Sit,” she commanded, pointing to a chair. “I trust everything is back to normal? Your husband has returned?” Emily nodded. “He doesn’t have horns or a pig snout,

does he? These things sometimes go awry.” Emily’s eyes grew wide, and she quickly shook her head.

“Everything’s just wonderful, Martha. I can’t thank you enough. In fact, we’ve decided to try and get pregnant. Isn’t that the best news you ever heard?” Emily beamed, her face lighting with excitement. For the past few days, she’d had to pinch herself regularly. Why, she almost felt like a teenager! She rattled on, telling Martha all about how Jerry had cleaned out the spare room, readying it for a nursery.

“Lord and Lady, you are worse than the children! How you do go on!” Martha sniffed, shaking her head. “This is not a social call, Emily. We have business to discuss, you and I.” She gave her one of those looks again. “Or have you forgotten what I said about consequences?”

Her coffee turned to bile in her stomach. “I, well, I guess I did forget.” Oh dear, what if she wanted Emily’s first born child, like Rumpelstiltskin? Would she grind her poor unborn child’s bones to make her bread?

The witch’s bark of laughter startled her. “I’m not an ogre, you ridiculous ninny. Nor will I require anything as repulsive as a squalling child in payment. Really,” she sniffed, making a moue of distaste. “Your head was turned by a fairy tale, a silly piece of fluff about fictional heroes that do not exist in the real world. These ‘novels’,” her lips twisted on the word, “barricaded you from reality, causing you to cast aside your own living, breathing husband, not a perfect man, this is true, but a hero all the same. He’s been faithful, loving and true to you all these years. Not many men in this time can make the same claim.”

“Yes,” Emily agreed, keeping her eyes averted from the other woman. “I was foolish and blind. Jerry is a good man, and God willing, he’ll make an even better father.”

Waving a hand dismissively, Martha nodded. “Be that as it may, we still have loose ends that must be tied.” She cleared her throat. “I’m afraid I will require you to turn them all over to me. Every single one.” The witch folded her long arms across her chest.

A startled gasp escaped her. “My children? They aren’t even born yet, for heaven’s sake!” Emily wrung her hands, biting her lip in terror. “Please, Martha, don’t be so cruel!”

“For the love of Oz, Emily! What kind of witch do you take me for?” Martha glowered, her angry gaze like a heat-seeking laser

beam. “Your wits are addled if you think I would take on the responsibility of caring for a tiny creature that cannot do anything but eat, sleep, and cry! I have enough trouble making sure that my pig, Vincent’s, needs are met, for goodness sake. Perhaps I was unclear. I want your collection of romance novels,” she said, speaking in the slow, careful voice one used with children or the feeble-minded.

Emily leapt up and ran upstairs, taking them two at a time. She returned moments later, staggering under the weight of at least twenty well-worn paperbacks. “I have more, but they’re in boxes in the garage,” she said breathlessly. “I can load them in your car if you’d like.”

Martha didn’t reply. Her full attention was on page thirty-four of *His Wanton Mistress*. Emily smiled, as she knew it well. In fact, she’d dog-eared the very page that was so captivating Martha. She made a small sound in her throat, causing the witch’s head to jerk up. She closed the book with an audible snap and stood. “No need for you to trouble yourself. If you’ll just tell me where to find them, I’ll take care of the boxes myself.” She tucked the book under her arm. “Our business is completed. Enjoy your Thanksgiving.”

“Martha? Would you like to stay and have dinner with us?” Emily put a tentative hand on her arm. “Please? We’d love to have you.”

A slight flush made the woman’s parchment cheeks turn the palest pink. Her hand tightened on the battered paperback. “Thank you for the kind invitation, Emily, but I wouldn’t dream of intruding.” She held up a hand to stop Emily’s objections. “No, no. You and your husband need this time together. I will find something with which to occupy myself.” A faint smile turned her severe expression something close to girlish. “Perhaps I’ll curl up with a good book.” Her left eye twitched in her version of a wink. “I’ll see myself out.”

Jerry padded into the kitchen just as the side door closed behind the witch. “Everything copasetic?” he asked. His hand brushed the top of her head on his way to the refrigerator.

“Couldn’t be better,” she replied. “Happy Thanksgiving, my wonderful, heroic husband.”

“Hero? Me?” He shook his head and grinned. “Babe, you been hittin’ the sauce? Kinda early for that, isn’t it?” His confused frown deepened when she giggled.

Harvest of Heroes

She held out her arms. “Hush up and kiss me, Babe.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she felt a tiny, barely discernable flutter in the pit of her stomach. She and Jerry may not be kids anymore, but their lives were just beginning. What a wonderful feeling it was to have so many things to be thankful for.

The End

The Moses Man
by
CD Reese

On Thanksgiving, love and life lessons transcend earthly bounds when Tranice meets a ghost from the past that shows her sacrifice is worth the cost.

<http://www.freewebs.com/cdruechel/index.htm>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/designingwritersblues/>

The Moses Man

by

CD Reese

Chapter One

“No, I need you to make sure those Douglas Firs are delivered to the Dallas and Houston by Saturday morning. Everyone’s going to bitch about being exhausted from gorging themselves on pumpkin pie and turkey, so I’ll give everyone twenty-four hours to recover.”

She knew if anyone saw her at that moment, it would appear she spoke to thin air. The latest and greatest in cell phone technology gave her a tiny ear piece hidden discreetly by a sweeping lock of thick, light amber hair caressing her temple and the shell of her earlobe.

Long, shapely legs carried her as she paced in complete frustration. Her slender, perfectly manicured hands worked a Blackberry with the seasoned speed of a professional working woman.

Tranice Howard-Jones purposely exuded confidence that made her the envy and the bane of the staff she employed. Newly promoted to Vice President of Design and Décor for the Halifax chain of hotels in North America, she attacked the job with a vengeance. Few appreciated that, especially so close to the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday season.

One-half of the forty-five people in her employ were busy meeting the demands leveled by her to make each and every Five Star hotel sparkle with holiday delight. The rest continued to feverishly implement the interior design ideas she and her four immediate

assistants developed for the newest gem in the Halifax crown located on Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

"This should have been taken care of two months ago. Perhaps that is why Nelson got fired?" Impatience peppered her expression liberally. Her hazel brown eyes glittered with anger. The woman on the other end of the telephone call didn't deserve the snappish tone. Tranice tried to hold back, but the incompetence she wanted to weed out reared its ugly head once more.

"Thank you, Morgan. Once you get those trees, you're in charge of decorating. I've seen your work. I'm counting on you to make Halifax Manhattan the envy of all." Tranice sweetened her tone. Pacification worked wonders in her job. Pay a few compliments here and there, and things got done.

A smile crossed her face, hearing the positive response. "I think the Italian Masquerade theme is brilliant. Rumor has it the Four Seasons is going Victorian, and that is so entirely overdone. Just stay in budget, and send me updates as you go?"

She nodded her head as Morgan babbled on, answering with monosyllabic replies to the designer's ideas. The bulk of her focus lay elsewhere.

"Pardon me?" A question leveled over the line stopped her cold. "Thanksgiving plans?" Whether it was her personality, or just the fact she was the boss, no one had asked her before that moment. "Actually, I do have plans." Thanks to her grandmother's dying wish, Tranice planned to embark on a mission foisted upon her.

A fake smile colored her tone, a lie slipping from her. "I'm spending it with an old friend of the family down near Houston. According to my grandmother, I'll be off to have some of the best sweet potato pie and homemade stuffing outside of her own cooking."

Good at constructing half-truths to move things along in any given situation, she finished the phone call and moved onto the next one. Thanksgiving Eve was still a workday, and hers wouldn't end until she got on the flight to Houston in a matter of hours.

Chapter Two

Nana Howard's death shook Tranice hard. Losing her mother devastated her, but she'd only been seventeen, and time made that pain fade. Nana remained the only grip, tenuous as it was, on family. Tranice boarded the plane and took her seat in first class, feeling completely and utterly alone.

Her eighty-four-year-old spitfire grandmother made a dying wish and left Tranice with no other choice but to honor it. Never once in her entire existence did she bother with the family tradition Nana made her promise to keep up. The idea of going to a cemetery on Thanksgiving, year after year, made her stomach churn.

Her gut roiled. In less than twenty-four hours, she would stand in front of a head stone to lay flowers on the grave of a man dead more than one hundred and forty years. *The family tradition*. She shuddered at the notion. She lived in the twenty-first century, yet the history of how things got to be where they stood in modern day kept her relatives steeped in Civil War tales of slavery and ultimately freedom.

She lost count, by the age of five, of how many times she heard the story of the man who smuggled her great-great grandparents out of Georgia to freedom, risking his life for people he had no true vested interest in.

They called him The Moses Man.

She called the long dead man an inconvenience. Tranice fired up her laptop the moment she was able to and worked on budgets for New Year's Eve decorating at the eleven hotels in the U.S. With well-choreographed plans calculated, she planned to show up at the cemetery, put the flowers down, say a quick thanks and be able to fly back to Dallas before the sun set on Thanksgiving Day.

* * * *

With only her Louis Vuitton overnighter and her attaché case in tow, Tranice walked up the stairs of the stately Victorian manor house converted into a Bed and Breakfast. The family tradition ensured her a room despite the fact she knew hotels always overbooked during the holiday seasons.

A smiling face greeted her the moment she was spotted. The elderly woman nodded and motioned her closer, ready to extend more than just the token greeting.

“Your grandmamma said one day you’d be here and my, if you aren’t the spittin’ image of her. Well, ‘cept for your hair. I’m Rosalee Beecham, proprietor of The Hallowed Hollows Inn.” Tranice smiled politely, resisting the urge to run a hand over her critiqued long locks, and shook the arthritic hand the woman offered.

“Your family is up to one hundred and forty one years now, and I’ve seen seventy-eight of them. It’s such a pleasure to have the next generation here, and I’ve got the Blue Bonnet room reserved for you.”

Tranice quickly discovered any sort of formality tossed aside. Rosalee didn’t bother with registration. She grabbed an old-fashioned iron key and hobbled her way toward the grand staircase, just off to the side of a simple desk. A gnarled finger crooked at her, beckoned Tranice to follow.

She realized quickly there was no need for sympathetic thoughts toward the old woman. She took the steps two at a time with a bounce in her stride. Following closely behind, she took in the ambiance as she went along. From the hand-carved mahogany staircase to the fabric-covered walls, the décor struck her as something straight out of the late nineteenth century. Only the lighting and plumbing seemed modern.

“Your great-great grandparents stayed in this exact room and traveled from Fort Worth every Thanksgiving to visit. As the story goes, Mary Black carried the pressed bluebonnet flower given to her by the Union soldier and purposely asked for this room. She said it seemed fitting.”

Tranice muttered something about segregation and watched Rosalee come to a stop and whirl on her toes to face her. “Miss Jones, here in Spellfire, you’ll find that for as long as this town has been in existence, segregation is a concept based on personality, not color or breed.” The rebuke made Tranice draw a sheepish and puzzled look.

Rosalee continued, stopping before a simple oak door with a brass plaque bearing the room’s name. “And here we are.” She

unlocked the door, and Tranice took the key. “We serve breakfast here from seven until nine in the morning, and tomorrow, we’ll be having our Thanksgiving buffet all day.”

She took in all the information Rosalee tossed out casually while admiring the décor. The four-poster bed sat regally centered against the north wall, a handmade quilt and pillow shams covering the mattress. White lace curtains graced the windows. The armoire and vanity matched the ornately carved patterns on the bed frame.

Everything called out quality and beauty. From the washing basin and stand to the handmade rug beneath her feet, Tranice felt the bygone era of stately elegance envelop her as warmly as one of her grandmother’s hugs.

The crowning touch brought a subtle smile to her lips. On the nightstand, a crystal vase sat, burgeoning with bluebonnets as bright and beautiful as those gracing the wallpaper.

“If you need anything, just give that pull cord a good tug. I’m afraid we never bothered putting a phone here in the room. No need to.” Tranice arched a brow at the unapologetic tone. “While you’re here, you’ll be doing other things that don’t require talkin’ on a phone anyways.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She thanked Rosalee and discreetly herded her toward the door. “I’m expecting a flower delivery tomorrow. Is that all right?”

Rosalee snorted and rolled her eyes. “Course it is, hon. Lily over at the florist knows your business here. She’ll be by at nine sharp. Will you need a ride to the cemetery?”

Tranice shook her head no. Her rental car would be packed, gassed up and ready to leave as soon as she got her business done at Sacred Ground Cemetery. Her flight home would have her back in Dallas by six in the evening, barring any interruptions. Her duty to her grandmother and the family tradition would be done.

“Very well then. You have your key, and there are more pillows and bath towels in the armoire. See you in the morning, Miss Jones.” Ten minutes later, she closed the door and locked it; six ‘good nights’ to the elderly woman more than enough to not seem rude.

She made quick work of unpacking, hanging her Richard Tyler two piece cocoa shaded suit to prevent further wrinkling and laying out her toiletries on the vanity. The bathroom, she quickly discovered, was a community affair, the only charm of the place she couldn’t

appreciate. The idea of waiting in line to utilize the facilities took her back to days she chose to forget.

The last item unpacked bothered her the most. In a well-polished and well-worn brass frame laid a photograph as old as the family tradition. The image staring back at her, somber faced, yet seductive in an old charm sort of way, was one she'd seen all her life.

Cast in shades of antiqued brownish-black and white, she knew what the man looked like in vivid Technicolor. Tales passed down from her ancestors told of the emerald green depths of his kind eyes. His complexion matched the darkness of her skin, only bronzed, not her shade of brown. Broad shoulders bore the Union overcoat he wore with tailored sharpness. Dark slacks hugged long, strong legs.

Time and time again, her focus dwelled on the chiseled beauty of the man's face. He could not be called handsome or cute. The sharpness of his cheekbones, the fullness of his lips, the strong jaw line; all came together to form a face that took her breath away. More than once, the Union soldier had been the subject of sensual dreams where she was led, not out of slavery, but straight to his bed.

She thanked God dreams were just that. If the man were alive, temptation to cross-racial boundaries would overtake her. The stories of his bravery and compassion endeared him to her as a child. As an adult, propriety and society would dictate she stay as far from him as possible. Even today, black women were still frowned upon if they became involved with white men.

Tranice slipped under the covers and snuggled into the downy soft comforts of the crowning centerpiece of the Bluebonnet Room. One last glance at the photo of her ancestor's savior sent her to sleep, wondering if he truly did have a Scottish accent strong enough to send her heart rate soaring.

Chapter Three

For thirty-one years, Tranice Howard-Jones escaped the fate waiting for her upon waking. Her mama called her ungrateful after a while. Her grandmother stepped in and said it simply wasn't her time yet. Nana Howard did warn her one day, making the pilgrimage to Spellfire, Texas would happen. Tranice sat up in bed, sunlight streaming through the lacy curtains, and she accepted the fact her nana was right.

A good portion of her didn't want to get out of bed. She'd never found a more comfortable mattress in her life, and Halifax hotels worldwide boasted about the comfort of their beds. Every bit of the bright white, blue and green-decorated room exuded the same sort of comfort the bed and the quilt, snugged tight, gave her.

Reluctantly, she slid out from under the covers and walked straight to the door. She took a peek out into the hallway and saw the bathroom, three doors down, unoccupied. Tranice made quick work of her morning ritual despite the antique claw-footed cast iron tub beckoning her to stay a spell and soak away her cares. Across town, the family tradition awaited her and she knew she could put it off no longer.

At 7:05, she sat in the dining room, the first guest there, sipping a cup of coffee and running through her voice mail. Her job waited for no one and nothing, holiday or not. Designers and suppliers around the world understood the Americans had their Thanksgiving holiday, but her ability to work through the day and not miss a beat helped get her promoted quickly. The trip to the cemetery remained blocked in from 9:15 until 9:30 A.M. From there, she planned a quick drive through the picturesque and slightly bizarre town, perhaps a stop at - Cosmina Del Costa's boutique, Bella Vestiti, then back to Houston and the flight home.

"It's Thanksgiving." A childlike voice interrupted a recorded message from Paris and her supplier of all things wrought iron she

used in the Halifax Boston hotel. Tranice glanced over and nearly dropped her phone in her coffee. The girl had pointed ears quite prominently displayed. The mossy green hair and brilliantly glittering amethyst eyes added to the shocking effect.

“I, um...”

“Do you really need to be on the telephone like that?” A slender green brow arched on the pixie-like face staring back at her, and Tranice sat at a temporary loss for words. “You just eat your breakfast and enjoy the special day. Cora and Sarah never brought work with them.”

Tranice scowled slightly. The fact people evoked her nana and mama’s name like they were old friends bothered her deeply. “I’m not them. I have work to do, no matter what the day. I get Christmas off.” Her retort came with barely constrained irritation. The niggling feeling she’d have no peace until she left the town rose inside her.

“What a pity.” The tiny woman shrugged her shoulders. “No matter. I’m sure when you pay your visit, Ol Zeke will make sure you take the time to appreciate the sentiments behind Thanksgiving.”

Tranice opened her mouth to reply, but the woman put a bran muffin and bowl of fresh fruit before her in time with her cellphone ringing. She ignored the glaring look from the waitress who looked like a real life Amy Brown creation and abruptly answered the call.

The stare-down between them lasted until the call ended. “Just going to warn you,” Pixie Girl said with a flick of a slender hand at Tranice’s food, “That phone is gonna die real quick. It’s called respect. He’s earned it.” Tranice just rolled her eyes and started in on her dish of fresh melon and berries.

Food became difficult to digest along with what her eyes processed. The guests trickling in as she ate made her wonder if she had yet awakened from her dream state. The bed and breakfast was a business, so she couldn’t fault who the owner allowed to stay, but groupies from a Sci Fi convention made her crinkle her nose discreetly.

She left her meal half finished and retreated to the comforting embrace of the Bluebonnet Room, tempted to stay until the very last moment. Lingering memories of her grandmother and their wonderful times together filled her thoughts and took her back to a sweeter, more innocent time in her life. Ambitions and Ethan hadn’t yet taken over. Sunday afternoons were filled with the smells of fresh baked

apple cobbler, and the record player spun old Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald classics.

Pixie Girl thought she ignored everything she was thankful for in her life. As memory after sweet memory overtook her, Tranice whispered her thanks for the last bastion of simple goodness left in her life. The memories would forever be her sanctuary no matter what luxuries surrounded her, no matter what successes she found. She understood what the day signified. Tranice Howard-Jones merely chose to reflect and celebrate in her own discreet way.

* * * *

Normalcy greeted her at the front desk promptly at nine a.m. The delivery boy from Dryaed's Floral Shop met her with a bouquet of Forget-Me-Not flowers. Tranice suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. In her family, there was absolutely no possibility of forgetting the memory of The Moses Man. Hallowed and revered by every descendant since 1864, the Union Soldier held an elevated position in the legacy of her family that rivaled Jesus himself.

Already checked out, she tipped the teenager, took the flowers and headed for the Mercades rental car with directions to Sacred Ground Cemetery and her first visit with the storied legend that was Ezekiel Ferguson.

The view outside the windows of her car held a cheesecloth lens effect. No matter how hard she blinked, the fuzziness with which she saw the scenery bothered her. Something deep inside struck her as entirely too odd about Spellfire. On the surface, it resembled a typical small town, with a polished main street and well-kept homes and businesses. Every blink of her eyes showed her things that betrayed logic.

She chalked it up to exhaustion.

Chapter Four

For all the hype her family had given the man for over one hundred and forty years, Tranice expected a spectacular monument. No angel with outstretched wings stood guard. No granite cross cast a shadow over the grave. The headstone barely stood two feet high, listing slightly to the left, lichen splotched in places.

Ezekiel Ferguson, b. 12 April 1838, d. 23 May 1864. The grave marker read nothing more.

"This is it?" Tranice looked around, brows furrowed. She found it hard to digest someone in her family didn't bother to immortalize the Moses Man in granite or marble, placing the family legend up on the pedestal, tangible much like they did verbally.

Carefully, she squatted down and laid the blue flowers down in front of the humble marker. "Well, if they haven't bothered, Ol' Zeke, I'm just going to leave it as is. Nana didn't say to come down here and make sure you got a twenty-first century facelift."

She crinkled her nose. The marble needed repairing. The stark white seemed at odds with the blackish-green mold dotting it. She pulled a handkerchief from her Birken bag and made due with spit to wet it before she tried to scrub off the marring.

"That won't help, ma'am"

Tranice startled and fell straight to her butt, the damp ground soaking her slacks instantly. Back on her feet in a flash, her heels sunk into the moist soil. A hand on her elbow kept her upright.

"Thank you for scaring the daylights out of me! It's bad enough I have to step foot in a graveyard, but did you really have to sneak up on me like that?" She brusquely dusted her bottom and turned around, yanking her elbow free of the gentle but instant hold.

“I truly do apologize for that, ma’am. It was never my intention, but you’d have wasted your time. That stone doesn’t need any polish.”

Tranice looked up. And up. The man before her stood at least a foot taller than her and dwarfed her by his sheer bulk alone. Heart rate soaring, the fact he took her breath away didn’t stem from his dark beauty. There before her dressed in full Union regalia was the ghost of the Moses Man himself. A nervous laugh bubbled up and left her lips a split second before her world tilted and went gray. The last thing she heard before fainting was the politest curse ever uttered.

* * * *

The fuzziness in her brain lifted, but the world around her seemed unfocused. Not a whit of what assailed her made sense. The air felt soggy, heavily laden with humidity. The stench of something unidentifiable filled her nose. Bugs that made more noise than a swarm of cicadas sang their angry, buzzing songs.

Her natural reaction to stand and get a better look met with a large hand against her neck pinning her as a hushing sound competed with the insects.

“Do not move. Do not make a sound.” The voice breathed hot against her earlobe and startled her.

“If you don’t get your hand off me right this inst-“ Another large hand cupped her mouth tight. She looked from the grip upward and sucked in a hard breath. The family’s Union soldier glared at her, dark eyes glinting with anger in the dim light around them. He also looked like Hell welcomed him, roughed him up, then spit him back out.

“Welcome to my own private Groundhog Day,” he murmured, referencing the comedic movie she knew and loved. “For the next lil while, Miss Tranice, you are Mary. And you get to live through what she did.”

Before another protest could be stifled by his hold, the scenery blurred. The soldier and a stocky, bullnecked black man tugged her through boggy water and swarms of mosquitoes. Malaria came to mind while she swatted furiously at them. In the reality around her, she pressed on, every muscle in her body on fire, taxed so greatly.

Dogs howled in the distance. The eerie sound splitting the night air sent shivers through her aching frame. Hunted. They were prey. The story told to her year after year came to the fore. The gravity of her predicament hit her painfully hard and drew her to a halt.

“We can’t stop now, Miss Tranice.” The forceful words made her turn her head and meet the fierce look of determination in Ezekiel Ferguson’s eyes. She shook her head no, defeat swelling inside her. She could control her destiny enough to climb the corporate ladder she was on. But she had absolutely no ability to endure playing the part of a runaway slave in a tragedy that took place nearly a century and a half earlier.

She was Mary Black, dressed in tatters and filth, her hair bundled up in a once crisp white cloth. She felt like a hunted version of Aunt Jemima, trapped with no way out of circumstances that played out so many years earlier. She felt the slave woman’s fear, the pain, the exhaustion. Helpless to change the scenario, Tranice stumbled with blind obedience, combating the urge to escape from the sickening reality foisted upon her.

For three days, she spoke not a word. Every time she opened her mouth to protest, the soldier glared at her. She slept in snatches, traversed swamp and marsh, stomped through acres and overgrown fields. All the while, the dogs bayed in the distance, so close but for the time being, far enough away.

She’d heard the story. She knew it by heart and waited for the tragic end to play out in vivid Technicolor. They ran. They hid. Offered up silent prayers to the God they worshiped. Through the split screen view of the never-ending nightmare playing out, Tranice wanted to rail against the futility of it all. The slaves slipped off to freedom while tall, dark and filthy guides hung from a noose as an example of what happened to those aiding the escape of slaves.

The fifth and final day of the tragic tale drew the misery to an end. She smelled the burning torches in the distance. The dogs found their marks. When it seemed no chance of freedom lay before their eyes, Ezekiel did exactly what historical account dictated. He pointed in a westerly direction and whispered one word before he walked away. “Run.” In the dream, Mary obeyed without question. Tranice, on the sidelines of her mind, cursed the fool and stood helpless until she saw his body jerk and crimson pepper the air. Three bullets and a noose ended the life of Ezekiel Ferguson, and Tranice never got the chance to ask the dumb ass why he did it all in the first place.

Chapter Five

“It’s called The Inbetween.” A cup of tea mixed with a liberal splash of whiskey was pressed into her hands, and Tranice downed half in one gulp. Ezekiel brought her back to what he called his home, a replica of the ranch he left behind when he went to serve the Union in the Civil War. She sat in his mother’s rocking chair, wrapped in the favorite wool shawl the woman knitted, desperate to fend off the chill that seeped into her very soul.

“I don’t care.” With a gentle motion, she put the lovely rose-pattered Royal Dalton teacup aside and looked up at the man who had sucked her into the wretchedness of his existence. “I want to go back now. I have a job. People are missing me even as we speak. They’ve probably filed a missing person’s report because I have never shirked a day’s work since starting for Halifax Hotels.”

“You go back when they let you, not me. But I can assure you that mere seconds will have passed, no more.”

Tranice drew a narrow look and stood. “You tell whoever is keeping me here that I want to go home. Now. I never asked to be here. I never wanted to come down to Spellfire in the first place.” She swept a hand up and down, disdain on her face as she surveyed the filthy man before her. “And I certainly didn’t ask to be exposed to a man who has probably given me fleas, at the very least.

Underneath the thick beard and dirt streaks, beneath the blood and muck-stained clothes that hung in tatters over his darkly golden, battered frame, she knew the soldier in the picture, the one in her dreams, existed. Seeing him as he was, forced her to keep her hands at her side and fight the urge to scratch herself all over.

“I don’t have fleas.” He glowered. She snorted and took a step back. “Your nana warned me you were an uppity snob.” She watched

a taunting look fill his dark green eyes and jumped backward, stumbling over the rocking chair when he scratched his fingers through his long black ringlets.

“Go... Go take a bath! Shave! Burn your clothes! Do something. By God, you even stink to high heavens. You are not giving me some kind of disease here! I have to get back to work tomorrow!” Tranice wrapped herself in his mother’s shawl and realized she ruined it, transferring the grime from her own garments.

Letting out a low wail, she threw it aside. “And get me out of this ridiculous costume you put me in. The show is over. I got the point.” She growled low when he merely crossed his arms across his blood and dirt-crust chest.

“Fine. I know there is at least running water around here somewhere, and that fire looks mighty inviting.” No man ever pushed Tranice Howard-Jones around. She refused to be bullied or intimidated any longer, no matter what realm she stood in. She yanked the dingy cloth off from around her head and shook her caramel-colored locks free.

To challenge his blasé look, she undid the strings to her skirt and shimmied her hips, letting the material fall in a heap at her feet. A soft snicker erupted from her as his eyebrows raised and a portion of his pants started to tent. Men were men, and she knew she had a few looks and a fairly decent body to use as a weapon against the stubborn mule before her.

“I don’t know what kind of pacifists my relatives were when it came their turn, Mr. Ferguson, but you get to deal with me now.” She tugged the over shirt off and dropped it aside, standing clad in only the petticoats of the period. “Either get me out of here, back in my regular clothes and on my merry way, or you’re going to learn the hard way the kind of woman I can be.”

His reply brushed her ears, husky and thick with his native brogue. “A tease? Men round here pay good money to see a woman do just what you’re letting me have for free.”

Tranice laughed sarcastically. “Honey, you aren’t getting anything like that from me. Now point me to the bathtub and my real clothes, so I can look at least partially presentable when I get out of this madness.”

“Bathe all you want, Miss Tranice, but it won’t make a difference. I don’t have the energy left in me to change anything back. Ya think I like looking like this?” He stalked closer and pinned her

back against the rocking chair. “It takes power I don’t have to change things back. You’re stuck until the Divine All sees fit to let you go.”

She shoved him back, both hands hard against his chest. “Stay out of my personal space, you grunting barbarian.” Her nose crinkled as she frowned. A mental note was tucked away: work on better insults for alpha male wannabes. “Call whoever you need to right now, and get me back to Spellfire!”

He shoved her back and braced his hands on the arms of the rocking chair to pin her there. “I knew your nana well, Miss Tranice. She had manners, and some had to rub off on you. Best you start using them because I have no idea how long you’re here for. I was told because you’re the last, this will be different, so shush that viperous mouth of yours and bear with this just as I have had to.”

She glared at the grungy replica of the man who haunted her dreams for years and wondered where Ezekiel Ferguson, Union soldier and lover extraordinaire, disappeared. She faced a bitter, unruly version and disliked him with a growing passion. “What do you mean, the last? I’m not dead yet, just divorced. I plan to remarry one day and have kids. Ohhh...” She smirked and folded her arms over her chest. “I hope to God I have a girl, and she drives you nuts. I may not succeed, but I can pass on my deepest wish.”

He shook his head *no*, and a twig fell from his hair onto her lap. She hissed expletives under her breath, brushing them off her petticoat.

“Ungrateful shrew.”

“Filthy Cro-Magnon.”

“You were never paddled as a child, were you?”

She smacked his face hard for the comment. “I was beat enough as a grown-up.” She offered him no apology for the strike. He struck the most raw nerve in her heart and soul, and her defenses took over.

He whispered a quiet “I’m sorry” and backed away to the other side of the living room, turning his back to her and facing the fire blazing in the fieldstone hearth. “I didn’t mean to stir up those memories, Miss Tranice. Your nana told me about your bastard of a husband.”

She furrowed deep in the spacious rocking chair, curled tight as she shoved back demons threatening to make an appearance after years of being banished. “Figures she did. She always felt the need to tell anyone she could about her poor little granddaughter.”

“She wanted the best for you. It shattered her heart what happened, Tranice. Don’t speak ill of her for hurting right along with you,” Ezekiel countered sharply.

“Whatever.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She knew exactly what Ethan’s abuse did to her grandmother’s spirit. More pains she refused to let rise up and take root again. “Start talking.”

He turned around and looked at her, puzzled. “About?”

A change of subject would quell the ache starting to build in her. “Why the hell did you give up this pretty little life and play sacrificial lamb for people you had no vested interest in. I’ve heard my family’s version. Now I want to hear yours.”

Chapter Six

“I doubt you’d even begin to understand why, Tranice.” He raked his hands through his long locks and sighed. “In the day and age you live in, most so-called sacrifices are made to benefit one person, not the course of history.”

“Oh, bullshit. You obviously don’t get cable or newspapers up here.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Why did you work three jobs and push and claw your way up through the ranks at the hotel?”

“To have a better life. To get my mother and my nana out of the slums we lived in all our lives.”

He disagreed. “Your mother and your nana did just fine where they were. Be truthful, Tranice.”

“This isn’t about me! Don’t change the subject.”

“You lost sight of your original dream the moment you tasted the good life. I’m glad I died before I had the chance to go back to my life at the ranch. I never had my purpose clouded like yours has been for years.”

Tranice rose to her feet, ready to defend herself, and he motioned her to sit. “I did what I did because of the injustice of life around me. I read about the war tearing our country apart. I read the reasons why. My ancestors rallied against oppression, and I couldn’t sit back and just do nothing.”

She watched as his expression grew distant, old memories mulling around in his mind, etching pain and sadness on his face. She’d seen that look on her nana’s face too many times, but hers were borne of regrets in her life.

“I went up to St Louis and joined the Union side. My family was strongly opposed to the notion of slavery, and the Union side fought

to end it. The ranch here served well enough for the job I was given after I got drafted. We sold horses to the cavalry regiments, bred and trained them to endure the war. My commanding officers saw that as a perfect chance for me to get behind enemy lines and spy for them.”

Her brows shot up. No one, in any retelling of the story, mentioned the fact he took on a mission like that.

“I’d been in a Confederate camp, them pushing their way toward Alexandria to secure a fort just south of there. I was the eyes and ears for a Union courier, working as the stable master for the senior ranking officers’ mounts. I heard it all, saw it all. No one thought twice of me because I was just a Texas rancher, aiding in the war effort for the South.”

He fell silent for a long moment, and Tranice watched, cringing as a hard shudder racked his large frame. “One day, two slaves were dragged out to the center of the encampment. The man was forced to watch as his wife was beaten because she dared say no to a Confederate soldier. When she passed out from the whippings, he took the rest of the lashes.” Ezekiel flinched, and Tranice jumped.

“The stray dogs around the camp were treated better than the slaves were, all because of their skin. They bled red just like we did, but it never mattered to those soldiers.” He sucked in a hard breath and looked at her, anger and bitterness in his gaze. “I had enough. My father’s best friend died so Texas could be free. If he could lay down his life, I could risk mine to help set an entire nation free.”

“Sometimes, never stopping to think of the risks makes it seem foolhardy in some people’s eyes, but it spurred determination in me. I couldn’t help everyone, but I could help those two. Six days after that whipping, we ran. The rest you already know.”

With a note of finality in his tone, he stood and flicked away a clump of dirt on his pant leg. “Now, it all boils down to this. Over a hundred and forty years of reliving my actions and you being foisted upon me longer than any of your ancestors. Somehow, I feel a life lesson in store for you. I was warned you’d be different. Don’t know why.” He shrugged, feigning indifference. “But we’ll find out soon enough.”

“I don’t need a life lesson. My real life has dealt me enough already,” Tranice grumbled.

“Obviously, something didn’t stick. Here you are, prissy and prickly, and driving me a bit nutters,” he shot back.

“Pardon me? You are the one standing there looking like you’re ready to be bestowed sainthood for your trials, you jerk.” She jumped to her feet and stomped over, stabbing a finger against his chest, letting loose a torrent of insults that let him know in no uncertain terms she disliked him more and more by the second.

Ezekiel rallied back, refusing to back down. Tempers flared and fanned the flames of discord until a disembodied snicker interrupted the revived exchanged of heated words between the two, echoing through the living room. The fact Ezekiel cringed silenced her immediately. Tranice spun in a complete three-sixty, searching for the body that accompanied the sound. She broke her silence a moment later and screeched in terror as a tentacled beast appeared and dove straight onto the ghost.

“Get the bloody hell off me, you ridiculous twit! I told you to stay away!” His roar added to the panic rising in Tranice. The squid-like creature, hanging on Ezekiel’s back, brought two tentacles around and slammed them into his chest. She watched helplessly as the creature glowed in a blinding light as it enveloped the soldier. From between her fingers pressed to her eyes to shield herself from the unearthly glow, all she could make out were the man’s legs convulsing uncontrollably.

The ragged jerking stopped, and the glare faded. Tranice risked pulling her hands away in time to see Ezekiel collapse, curled up in a tight ball, shivering violently. Looking up, she no longer saw an eerie million-watt sea creature. Next to the quivering Union soldier stood a man that looked like a throw back to the days of dandies, over-laced and all.

“Now,” he declared flicking his frilly cuffs and smoothing a lacy cravat, “we’re getting somewhere.”

Chapter Seven

Tranice stood torn between focusing raw rage at the stranger in the room and Ezekiel, slowly uncoiling from his odd shock treatment. “Could I please have an explanation?” she asked with a trembling voice, her body shaking just as hard.

“H-He’s a bastard,” Ezekiel panted.

“No, my parents were married, Ezekiel. I keep telling you to find an insult for me that fits, my friend.”

She stepped closer, fear tempting her to take a yard of the lace around the fop’s neck and strangle him with it. He hurt her Ezekiel somehow. “What did you do to him?”

“I merely moved things along, Miss Jones. Trust me, if I did not step in, you would be here for ages, having a shouting match with this ridiculously noble fool.” A long, slender hand extended to Tranice. She merely pushed it aside. “Manners, Miss Jones. Here is where you place your hand in mine, I brush a kiss across your knuckles, and you swoon over the fact that chivalry and romance is only quasi-dead.” Sky-blue eyes twinkled with mirth as a smile quirked on his long, slender face.

“Manners dictate you explain why you nearly electrocuted Ezekiel.”

“You’re on the right track, but if this makes any sense, Miss Jones, it was for his own good.” He slipped backward a step and gave her a flourished bow. “Permit me to introduce myself. I am Arthur Charlemagne Hallingforth Whittleston, at your service. Everyone irreverently calls me Art, for short.”

“Bastard,” Ezekiel muttered, and Tranice looked down. Her breath caught in her throat. Gone was the filth, the tattered clothes, the raggedness that made her skin itch, wondering if he carried fleas. Clad in only nineteenth century work pants, he lay sprawled on the floor, his broad chest bared, rising and falling rapidly as he worked to catch his breath.

“I knew you’d like that view, Miss Jones.” Art snickered softly as Tranice felt her cheeks heat. She couldn’t take her eyes off the view. “Zeke is entirely too honorable to do this himself, so it is my duty to move things along.” He put a finger under Tranice’s chin and turned her face to look at him. “My official title is Chief of Distribution, Electroplasm Department. What this self-sacrificing boob here denies himself, my section doles out. He is our biggest problem child, literally and figuratively, so I pay him visits when he needs a boost he refuses to ask for himself.”

Tranice looked between the two men. Art stood with a smirk on his face. Ezekiel hefted his large frame upright, murder in his eyes. She could sense a full out typical male pissing contest about to start and was in no mood for it. “Before you two start posing down and chest thumping, just remember I have asked to go home, and one of you is going to honor that request.”

She moved between the two men and searched their expressions to see who would accommodate her first. She could endure the hostility no longer. They were too busy glaring back and forth between each other. Eventually, Art focused on her first.

“Miss Jones, there is a reason you’re here for this long. Of course, I have to tell you that I am not the one to give full disclosure, but I can assist in the matter. Your soldier here tends to be more than self-sacrificing. As far as ghosts go, he might not show it tangibly at the moment, but he has an energy disorder. Think anorexia.” Art reached up and twisted Zeke’s ear, making him howl in anger and pain. “He never accepts his full quota of ‘plasm, hence why it has taken this long to clean and dress you back in that smart suit of yours. He starves himself because he tends to play the moping brooder all too well.”

Tranice gasped and jumped backward when Ezekiel’s arm darted out and grabbed Art around the neck. “I didn’t want your help, Art.” He growled.

“You’re getting it regardless. She is the last, and you know what Nana Jones told you. I think you’re just too much of a coward to figure it all out.” Art rasped, as the hold around his neck grew tighter.

She thought to interfere then remembered both were ghosts in a realm where living beings were already dead. They couldn’t kill each other. Returning to the rocking chair, she sat and let the two men have their snapping match. She saw enough of the behavior with her ex-husband to know it had to run its course.

The view of Ezekiel's muscles rippling as he toyed with Art served to burn away any lingering hostilities welled up inside her. The man's sculpted physique and breathtaking features replaced anger with a familiar heat she felt in every dream she'd had of him.

As they insulted each other, her thoughts wandered to the one dream that she cherished the most. Ezekiel came to her after a particularly brutal night at the hands of her ex-husband and beat the living hell out of him for her. She knew two wrongs never made a right, but he came to her rescue and told her one day, she would be free from the pain and in his arms where she belonged. Deep in her heart, she'd ached to believe a man like him would appear and take her away from the pain and loneliness.

"Aha!" The bellowed exclamation broke her from her thoughts and startled her further, seeing the two men's reactions. Art stood buffing his knuckles on a patch of his satin coat while a blush trailed down Ezekiel's entire body. "There is a reason you two have shared the dreams you have. Now get busy. Even the Divine All can get impatient." The chiding Art gave them hung in the air as he flashed from sight in a bright burst of light.

Chapter Eight

Silence hung between them for a long moment as their gazes locked. She judged by the flicker of desire in his eyes and the lingering flush to his skin, she hadn't conjured the dreams out of a misplaced need for the perfect man.

Her throat felt too parched to speak. Everything had changed in a flash of electropasmic glory. Her hands itched to reach out and touch him, the desire inside her growing more and more as she stood, seeing Ezekiel in all his chiseled beauty. Despite the fact he was a ghost and she could never have him in reality, her body suddenly ached for just one more dream night with him. She could have that then let him go, knowing he would never be back.

"Forgive me." The simple, quietly spoken request broke the silence. The smoldering look in his eyes told her he felt the same sudden change.

"For what?" She blinked, confused.

"My selfishness over the years." His broad shoulders slumped. "The moment your nana showed me your photograph...I know sending the dreams was wrong, but..." he trailed off and looked away. "I'd never seen a more lovely lass in my life. Such determination, such beauty. You captured me with your smile alone."

His words bore the same potency as hands stroking over her body. Heat built higher and higher inside her. She clenched her hands into fists at her sides to resist reaching out and stroking her nails over the hard planes of his chest and lower. In the dreams, he loved when she dragged them over his skin.

"In life or death, I've never wanted a woman more than I've wanted you, Tranice. I can't explain the pull, why the Divine All has seen fit to torture me so, but I'll never regret a single moment I have spent with you, in dreams and here, even now with you nattering at me like a shrew."

She ignored the last part of his statement and took a step toward him. No man she'd ever known spoke so simply, so honestly. Her heart began to race. One last time, she whispered to herself. One more night in his arms. One more night, feeling like the most cherished, most desirable woman in the world.

"Aye, woman, you are," he whispered, reading her thoughts. "If I'd have met you in this modern time, I'd have claimed you the moment you were old enough." Before she could reply to his possessive statement, he had her in his strong arms, her lips captured in a branding kiss.

She offered no struggle to be free of his hold. Tranice slid her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his, molding her soft curves against the hard planes of his. The dozens of dreams she'd had before paled in comparison to being with him now, full comprehension of what and why coursing through her mind. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pushed his head down harder as she stood on tiptoe. She wanted...no, she *needed* to be devoured by this man who made her feel like the woman she always wished to be.

Bruising kisses gave way to a searing line of soft nips and warm strokes of his tongue as he trailed down her neck. Her head dropped back, offering more for him to brand with his mouth, caress with his hands, take utterly and completely. Ghost or not, her body and soul craved the man who loved her like no other in a realm she ached to be a reality.

Clothes were peeled away, removing the last barrier between them. In the wake of his touches, kisses lit her on fire. Unable to stem the tide building inside her, soft moans escaped her on the heels of every reverent brush of his fingertips and lips over her.

Strong hands played lightly, teasing, caressing, taunting her with promises of erotic pleasures to come. She stood before him, her body his to love as gently or as hungrily as he chose. Tranice needed one last trip to the heavens she felt wrapped up in his seductive embrace.

His hands settled on her bottom and nudged her back against him. Her nipples grew tighter, more sensitive as they met the heated smoothness of his bared chest. "I need you now, Tranice." She nodded and found herself lifted upward with practiced ease. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding tight as he carried her to his bedroom, kissing him as if there truly was no tomorrow.

She felt the coolness of cotton against her back when he laid her atop the handmade quilt covering his bed. Heat radiating from him

seared her from above. Looking up into his dark green eyes, she smiled seductively. She wanted to burn, and only he could stoke the fire to consume them.

Slowly, she began to move under him, her legs locked tight, her arms holding him against her. The blatant invitation she gave with her eyes met with barely leashed control from him. She felt his muscles tightening as she stroked like a cat beneath him. Seeing the tic from his clenched jaw made her surge upward, tempting him.

Strong hands stilled her restless body as he whispered soft and low against her ear. "We have all the time in this world, Tranice. You keep moving like that..."

She raked her fingernails lightly up the smooth, taut skin of his back, feeling goosebumps rise on his flesh and a shiver hit his body. "You said you needed me now," she purred.

"Aye, I do, but I've waited too long for this moment to take you hard. I want to savor..." She silenced his husky burr with a fierce kiss and another press of her body, felt the joining begin as the head of his cock slipped inside her.

Her heels pressed harder against the small of his back, and she pushed yet again. The more he resisted, the more determination grew inside her until his control snapped. He pinned her hands above her head and claimed her lips once more with a passion that mirrored the linking of both body and soul.

"Mine." The single word uttered on a hoarse growl set Tranice bucking up to meet his deep, fierce strokes. She buried the denial of his statement, choosing instead to lose herself in the blazing hunger that ripped through her. She dragged her nails down further, her nails pressing in as her body arched, riding the growing wave of all-consuming desire.

She studied his face, amazed that the man over her held such hunger for her blatantly etched on his handsome features. He made her feel wanted, needed, but most of all, cherished despite the impossibilities of a future together. As his lips trailed across her jaw line and down her neck, warm words of adoration heated her skin. With every driving stroke into her, he reaffirmed his place in her heart. Caresses from his calloused hands laid an invisible claim to what he believed was his for eternity. Tranice lost herself in every word and sensation, cresting on the peak of total desire, crashing under him as an orgasm more powerful than any other she'd felt before exploded inside her body.

He swallowed her cries with bruising, devouring kisses. He continued to push her for more, demanding, then begging softly for her to give him all. She gladly obliged. He pulled her up, cradling her in his strong arms, urging her silently to take what she desired. She rode him with total abandon, pushing him to his own release, pulling it greedily from him.

Over and over, it was give and take, desperation in everything shared. Above him, below him, tangled around him, she let each moment sear into her soul, until they collapsed against each other, sated, but knowing there would never be enough, and while they had their night of hungry passion, tomorrow loomed on the horizon, unable to be stopped even in the magical world of The Inbetween.

Chapter Nine

Tranice woke to the soft sounds of a contented man's light snore. The bulk of his solid frame spooned against her, a few tendrils of his coal black hair tickling her skin and leaving tingles in their wake. For a moment, she didn't move. It had been too long since she felt the warmth and comfort that a lover's enveloping embrace brought upon waking. Savoring the heat, letting his steady heart beat lull her back into a relaxed state, she soaked up the moment, committing it to memory.

It would be the last she'd have of him. Deep in her heart, she knew this was the end for both of them. It didn't matter that somewhere in the midst of their wild and sweet lovemaking, she lost her heart completely to him. Reality beckoned like a cruel mistress, and Tranice heard the call.

The Inbetween offered her one last delicious taste of Ezekiel. Each kiss, each touch of his hands, each curve of his beautiful body became permanently etched into her mind. A bittersweet pain joined those memories. Today would be the day she let it all go. After she left, he would be free of his past. She needed the same release.

The sting would fade in time. She never planned to admit it to the burly Scotsman, but the trip to The Inbetween had a profound, life-changing effect on her. She suspected it was the reason she stayed trapped in the realm longer than her other relatives. She needed to make over her life back in the real world, and for as much as it pained her, she couldn't do it with his ghostly presence haunting her.

Slowly wriggling herself from his loving embrace, she slipped to the edge of the bed and watched him sleep for a few moments. Regret began to rise in her, but she convinced herself it would be for the best in the end. They both needed to move forward, and neither could follow where the other was destined to go.

"What's the going rate for your thoughts these days, Tranice?" His soft burr sounded against her ear, startling her from her dark

thoughts, sending heated tingles through her. Gathered resolve helped her to her feet, away from the temptation to stay wrapped in him for eternity. “Too much, Ezekiel and you’ve taken enough already.” Eyes trained on the hardwood floor beneath her feet, she busied herself looking for discarded hair pins to reassemble her once stylish coif. If she dared a single glance at him....

“What have I taken that wasn’t freely offered, Tranice?” The bed creaked, and she knew he left the bed to reach her. She tightly clutched the four bobby pins she found and dashed into the living room, his comment ignored, her resolve beginning to fray around the edges.

“Tranice, you can’t just walk away from this. We finally have a chance to talk about what we’ve shared. We need to discuss this!”

Her hands trembled as she twisted and pinned her shoulder length locks of hair. She failed as she felt his hands snake around her waist and pull her back against his hard body. “Don’t do this, Ezekiel.” She squirmed to break free of an embrace she never wanted to leave, but her body betrayed her in ways she’d deal with later.

“Do what? Tranice, this wasn’t just a dream. This was a consummation of something that has built inside us for years and years.”

His words scored deeply into her already fragile soul. Leaving a relationship where she felt cruel hands and destructive words beat her down seemed a million times easier than giving up the one comfort in her life no one could take away.

Tranice turned in his hold and looked up at his beautiful face one last time. “The only thing consummated here was the end to all of this. I am not coming back. I don’t want you back. Ever.” Her words spilled from her, thick and raspy, laced with tears welling inside her.

“You’re lying.” He growled low and tightened his grip around her waist. Tranice reached back and pried his arms free. “I can’t afford lies, Ezekiel. Nor can I afford to continue to waste my time on a ghost. It doesn’t matter what I feel for you in here. You are dead in my world. There is no getting around that point. You will move on with your afterlife, and I will get on with my life.”

Strong hands cupped her face, forcing Tranice to look directly into emerald green eyes filled with flickering shadows of pain and fear. For a moment, he held his tongue, silence a heavy burden between them. A quiet sigh of resignation banished it soon after.

“Very well, Tranice. I will let you be, but one thing first.” He feathered a thumb across her lips then let his hands drop to his sides.

“Believe all or none of this, *a stor mo chroi*, but I now know why I did everything all those years ago. The ripple effect of my actions carried on for over one hundred and forty years and stopped at you for a reason. In my living years, I never found the woman I was meant to love. It took dying and waiting in this purgatory to meet my soul mate, the one woman to keep my heart in her hands and do with it as she saw fit. You are that woman. Fate may be cruel, but the Divine All knows the reasons.”

He brushed a soft kiss against her lips Tranice ached to melt into once more. He stepped back and left her to accept a finality she pronounced only moments earlier.

“Deny it all you wish, but in this realm, in my arms and my bed, I saw the deepest parts of your heart and soul. You may never utter those three cherished words, but I will always know you loved me, too.”

Tears filled her eyes and blurred the breathtaking view of Ezekiel as he walked back into his bedroom. The sight and sound of defeat hit her with every shuffled step he took. “Ghost or not, Ezekiel, I would have never been worthy of holding your heart, but deep down, I will always love you.” She kissed her fingertips and held them up in the air, wishing he still stood before her to accept the meager token of her affections.

Fate and the Divine All denied her that parting hope. Tranice blinked away her tears, focused once more and found herself standing in Spellfire’s cemetery, looking down at Ezekiel Ferguson’s headstone as if not a second had passed.

* * * *

Purposeful strides carried her to the bar, and Tranice slapped her hand on its gleaming top. “Bartender? Martini, straight up, no olives and keep them coming,” she called out. She glared at the bearded, gray-haired barkeep as he arched a brow at her and quirked his lips into a half smile. She hated smiles like that. They reminded her of Ezekiel’s. “Please,” she added as an afterthought, taking a seat and dropping her Fendi bag onto the bar.

The name of the bar fit her mood. Rage. The strong emotion surged through her as her heart silently railed against the cruelty of Fate and the machinations of the Divine All. It no longer mattered if Ezekiel was black or white, a simple horseman and a chest thumping

alpha male of the finest caliber. She knew if they met in her lifetime, they would have been more than dream lovers. She wanted a man like him to saunter into her life and fill the emptiness that dwelled in her soul.

The bartender walked over and put the drink in front of her, holding up olives she waved away. One long gulp finished off the first of many vodka martinis he delivered. Booze was no cure at all. She understood that, but the alcohol temporarily numbed the growing pain.

Her cell phone rang, and Tranice dropped it to the floor, admiring the quality of her Kate Spade stiletto boots as the plaguing device shattered under a spiked heel. Ezekiel Ferguson sacrificed his life for her so she could plow through her own with selfish determination. Guilt hit her as hard as the pain from losing a love that truly transcended earthly boundaries grew. His selfless determination mattered. Hers merely enabled her nana to get out of the projects in Dallas and live in a prettier house.

“Some say that alcohol makes a person show their true colors.” The bartender mused before her. “I think it’s more of a truth serum for the majority. Seems like the truth is hitting you hard, ma’am.”

Tranice looked up at the man who introduced himself as Sam and gave him a cool look. For a brief moment, she thought she saw the image of Ezekiel as an older man. She blinked hard and shook her head. “Thank you for your wisdom. Share it with someone who needs it more than me?”

He held up calloused hands and grinned. “Fair enough, but I’m just going to say one more thing, before I let you finish that last martini and call you a cab. If it’s meant to be, it will not matter what you do to interfere with it.” He winked and walked away as Tranice slumped forward and rested her head against the bar.

“If only you were right, old man,” she whispered. An hour later, back at the Hallowed Hollows Inn, his words spun around in her mind. She stared down at the tatters of the only photograph of Ezekiel Ferguson the family had and decided the bartender was very, very wrong.

Chapter Ten

Her employees had called her ‘Scrooge’ and with subtle irony playing about it, she had taken it as a compliment. She was no Ebenezer, and Ezekiel was no Marley, but the ghostly visit she got on Thanksgiving Day did everything to change her outlook on life. She tore the photo of the Moses Man to bits, declared an end to the past and worked to make herself over from the inside out.

No one at the employee Christmas party walked a wide path around her. She smiled more, and they approached her with no fear of being snapped at, or worse, fired. Her pleasantries came from the heart, not placation. Letting go of the past set her free to be the person her nana died hoping she would become.

“Miss Jones?” Tranice looked down and smiled warmly at a very pregnant blonde she recognized from the Halifax, Chicago catering team. “I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas, ma’am.”

“And the same to you. Linda, correct? When are you due?” She made a mental note to call Nordstrom’s on Michigan Avenue and have a baby gift package done up for her.

“Not ‘til February, Miss Jones. Twins. Much as I hate the weight, I’m in no rush for them.” Laughter and small talk passed between the two women for a few moments, then a question rose Tranice felt hard pressed to answer.

“What would I like for Christmas?” Tranice rubbed the bridge of her nose, quickly pushing away the image of Ezekiel clad in nothing but a strategically placed red bow. “I’m not quite sure.”

Soft laughter spilled from Linda. “If I were you?” She pointed behind Tranice, a grin lighting her face. “I’d say him, under a tree with just a bow on.” Tranice turned her head in the direction of the finger, straining to see exactly what brought on the smile. “He’s been asking around for Tranice Howard-Jones. If I may be so bold...”

Handsome, well groomed, the perfect shade of brown. The man holding up his drink in acknowledgement fit what used to be

requirements for even a second glance. Ezekiel changed everything. Tranice smiled back then excused herself from Linda's company. She nodded greetings to those who spoke as she nudged her way out from the ballroom to the coat check window.

A cursory glance around the gilded and glittering foyers of the Halifax Houston's ground floor did little to alleviate the heaviness growing in her heart. Her team accomplished so much in so little time with the hotels under her domain. She wished they could conjure the impossible, not just the beautiful.

She passed off her claim ticket to the woman behind the counter and, a few moments later, walked out into the biting cold winter night, wrapped in designer elegance but feeling no pleasure in it.

She returned to Dallas the day after Thanksgiving and threw herself into her work. Insomnia claimed her the first week, her heart unable to bear the thought of a single image of Ezekiel in her private dream realm. Never once did a glimpse grace her catnap moments. Resignation settled like a heavy cloak over her. Coasting through life more alone than ever became easier to do day-by-day, and she hated that very fact.

Tranice tucked her gloved hands deep into the side pockets of her Burberry tweed coat and shuffled down the glittering streets of downtown Houston, her mind and heart betraying her. While the strains of a fifty's doo-wop version of *All I Want For Christmas* streamed from the speakers overhanging the main entrance to Macy's, she tried to deny the fact all she wanted for eternity was the one thing she gave up.

Ezekiel under her custom decorated Christmas tree, wearing only a smile was the gift she wanted. She stopped believing in Santa Claus when she was seven, but her experience in *The Inbetween* told her someone or something out there could hear a wish she didn't dare make.

Lights twinkled gleefully. People passed by, calling out Happy Christmas greetings. She mustered weak smiles and nods for replies. Inwardly, she asked herself how she could celebrate anything, let alone the holidays, when no one shared it with her. Only a month ago, she had the ability to conjure her dream man. They could set the scene any way they wished. A Swiss chalet sounded perfect, with a roaring fire and fur blankets to curl up in as snowflakes fell silently outside, turning the landscape into a winter wonderland. No cell phones, no

obligations, just two people crazy in love, celebrating the holidays together and looking forward to many more in their future.

On a hard sigh, Tranice turned and made her way back to the Halifax Hotel, her gaze and her spirits downcast. “You’re hopeless, T.” She muttered. “You can’t let him go. He’s dead. He’s a ghost and nothing more than a dream. Face it. You’re screwed.”

The Divine All thought differently.

Chapter Eleven

“We’re losing her! I need that O Neg stat, and where the hell are those spinal films!” Lost in a myriad of chaotic thoughts and images, the sounds of the trauma team barely brushed the edges of her consciousness. Tranice found herself on a gurney at Mercy Medical Center, unable to speak or move, her mind caught in a horrific loop replaying an accident she never saw coming.

Onlookers screamed for her to look out. Lost in her thoughts, she never saw the car careening out of control. She felt pain as her body collided with the vehicle then the ground and smiled as blessed unconsciousness lifted her from the agony she lay in.

Doctors and nurses shouted orders. Tranice heard the sound of squealing tires and crunching bones. Deep down in the safest, furthest reaches of her mind where she retreated, a part of her laughed. The accident took her mind off Ezekiel, if nothing else.

* * * *

“Child, you always did find reasons to sleep in and never rise with the sun,” Cora Jones scolded, and Tranice growled as a reply. “Get your bee-hind outta bed right this instant, young lady. I may be older than you, but you know I’ve always been able to roust you regardless.”

As it always had been with her nana, Tranice tugged the covers over her head and waited for the hard yank right back. The game started when she was barely two and continued up until the day she moved out of her grandmother’s house to strike out on her own. The covers slipped off her body, and she reluctantly sat up, grinding her fists over tightly clamped eyes.

“Much better. Get up now. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Tranice peeked her eyes open after the sounds of footsteps faded behind the closing door. She wanted to flop back and roll over, sleep another two hours then rise, but Nana Jones didn’t take kindly to being disobeyed. She raked her hair back, clipped it in a barrette

always available on her nightstand, and rose to face the day. Being at her grandmother's meant a breakfast of homemade biscuits and gravy and Ella on the CD player to sing along with.

Awareness didn't dawn until she was half way down the narrow staircase, leading to the kitchen that her nana had been dead for nearly a year, and she found herself trapped in an illusion more painful than her Thanksgiving ordeal.

"Nana!" Swift steps took her down the rest of the stairs and into the kitchen. Her heart raced as she watched her nana ladling up a bowl of gravy, her slender, arthritic hips still swaying in time to classic Ella Fitzgerald jazz filling the air. "Nana! Something is very wrong with this picture."

The kindly, warm gaze of her grandmother rested on her, and a knowing smile graced her weathered features. "Ain't nothing wrong with this picture, child. You know right where you are, and I'll tell you why after you're done eating. All that work you do leaves you skin and bones." A gnarled hand waved at her to sit at the familiar kitchen table. "It won't make no never mind out there, but I can do my best to put meat on those thin bones of yours here."

Tranice sank onto a chair before she fell over. A painful replay of the accident ripped through her mind and brought tears to her eyes. "I died?" she croaked out.

"Well, you did take a nasty hit, Neechie." Tranice leaned into the soft touch of her nana's hand to her cheek, dampening it with tears spilling from her eyes. "I know, baby. Hard to take, but you should know that in life or death, I am always watching out for you. Now you eat up for me. Don't matter here or there, you need to keep your strength up. I ain't gonna put up with behavior like our 'Zekiel."

Tranice flinched and grabbed her nana's hand harder at the mention of his name. "Does he know yet?" She braced for the answer, torn between wanting to know and praying to the Divine All she could go back to forgetting.

"He don't. Our boy has issues of his own he's dealing with. Eat, or I'll make you, baby." Cora gave her granddaughter a kiss on the cheek Tranice relished.

"What issues, Nana?"

"And you care, why, Neechie? You been denying him since you left The Inbetween. Didn't think you cared anymore."

Tranice lowered her head in shame and embarrassment. "Just the opposite, Nana," she said, barely above a whisper.

The sweet, melodic tinkle of her nana's laugh rose above Ella's classic voice, filling the kitchen and made a new ache grow inside Tranice. "Good. Makes this all the easier for me. I'm too old to be waiting for you to come 'round to your senses."

Tranice looked up at her grandmother, confused by the comment. "Baby, you did it all wrong when you were here last. That boy gave you his heart, and you refused to take it. You were supposed to say yes and forever." Cora clucked her tongue in a soft scold. "You know how to get over hurdles, Neechie. You done it all your life. Now you have to decide if you got the strength to jump this one."

"He is a ghost, Nana. I happened to be alive at the time. Are you telling me that I had to have a car flatten me to make this play out like it was supposed to?" Tranice shoved her plate of biscuits away and stood up. Zeroing in on the coffee pot, she poured a cup of the strong brew, scowling. Dead at the age of thirty-one just to get her dream man didn't please her in the least.

"Baby, love transcends all bounds. How do you think I ended up with your grandfather?"

Tranice mustered a little laugh. "You looked at him, Nana. He didn't need anything more than to see your face."

"You know better than that, Tranice." Cora joined in the laughter as she stood beside her granddaughter. "Sacrifices were made. Love needs that to make it stronger. Now here you are, and you have to make a heart-and-soul changing decision. Do you love Ezekiel enough to give up your life to be with him?"

Chapter Twelve

Tranice snorted softly. “It seems that part’s been done for me.” She knew deep in her soul if the sacrifice was asked of her, she’d give up her life on Earth to be with the one man that would never hurt her. She caved to that thought during her last time in the otherworldly realm. The rest of her soul still wanted to live. She felt too young to die.

“Neechie, I’m just going to tell you this. The Divine All doesn’t take away our ability to choose. It just offers us options and knows you’ll pick the right one in the end.”

“Let’s see.” Tranice furrowed her brows as she moved her hands in a motion, weighing her options. “Life or death. Gee, at age thirty-one, that’s a no-brainer. Live and make my mark on the world, or die just so I can snag tall, dark and broody.”

She watched her grandmother shake her head, discouraged. “You don’t get it, do you, baby? You think too black and white. Look at the gray, and then make your choice.”

“What choice? I’m dead! The Divine All chose for me.” She returned to her seat at the kitchen table and stabbed at the biscuits on her plate. “Nana, I know you’ve always said when it’s our time to go, we go, but damnitall, I am not ready. I’m too young. I don’t want to be dead. Thanks to Ezekiel, I had plans for the rest of my life.”

“Such as?”

“Making a difference like he did with his life.” She couldn’t give every woman in the world a man like Ezekiel to love and cherish and protect them, but she planned to open up a shelter for battered women and children to give them a hope just as potent.

“And Ezekiel?” Cora asked.

Tranice looked over at her grandmother and sighed hard. “And what about him, Nana. If I could have the best of both worlds back on earth it would be great, but you know the realist I am.” She brought the bowl of sausage gravy over to her plate and ladled a large portion over her biscuits. Decisions already made for her; she considered their discussion a moot point and let her grandmother know by focusing on breakfast instead.

* * * *

The Inbetween stirred even more melancholy in Tranice’s soul. While she had her nana back in her life, her heart felt hollow. Only one person could fill the emptiness, and she saw no sign of him as each day passed. No amount of wishing made seeing his handsome face or hearing his mish-mashed, Scottish-laced Texan accent happen.

She fiddled in her grandmother’s garden. She redecorated her bedroom three times. Tranice puttered around the mock-up of a life she shared with her nana when she was younger, but felt not a whit of joy in any of it. Knowing Ezekiel was in the realm, but nowhere to be seen or felt tore at her night and day. Absence didn’t make the heart grow fonder. It began to make hers shatter.

She fell asleep on the tail end of her first fortnight in the realm with tears dampening her pillows. Her death should have brought her together with Ezekiel. It gave her precious time with her nana, but she needed that last piece, him and the heart he offered to her for eternity, to complete her afterlife.

She drifted off to sleep, expecting another night of restless and empty dreams. An annoying beeping plagued her instead. Over the steady sound, she heard her grandmother whisper a tender, tear-filled goodbye seconds before pain wracked her entire body and pulled a scream from her.

Sitting up in bed, her eyes focused not on the textured mauve walls she’d settled on for her bedroom, but sterile white ones and machines all around her.

“Your nana wanted me to clear a point, Tranice. She never said you were dead.”

Painful as the process was, she turned her head and saw Ezekiel sitting in a chair next to her hospital bed, a smirk on his darkly handsome face. “You didn’t die. You just took a much needed vacation back to The Inbetween. Cora said you’d need the time to think about things, so Art arranged everything.”

Tranice blinked once, then again. “Where were you?” Her throat hurt, but she needed to ask questions to get answers.

“Here. I’ve been by your side the entire time. By the way, I’m your fiancée, so you might want to play along until I can propose properly and make it official.” He winked, and Tranice shuddered hard, sending another frisson of pain through her body.

She let him help her lay back and find a comfortable resting position. “They can see you? You let Art give you enough juice so you’re really here?”

“One better, *mo chroi*.” He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

Tranice cupped his face with her hands and refused to let him move for a moment. “What do you mean, one better?”

“It means the love we have for each other brought me here. I’m not a ghost. We’re not in the Inbetween. The Divine All has given you a chance to make your mark on the world, and I get to stand beside you every step of the way as your husband if you’ll have me.” Her breath hitched in her throat as he took her hands and kissed them softly.

Tears flooded her eyes, the magnitude of his words filling her heart with a joy she never expected to experience in any lifetime. “You’re not a ghost anymore?” she rasped.

“I think I’ll be one again in about fifty or sixty years, but for now, I’m flesh and blood, and as soon as your body heals up, I plan on...” He brought his lips to her ear and whispered things that brought a bright blush to her cheeks.

“I think I can definitely live with that.” The smile on her face hurt where her cheek impacted the pavement, but pain meant she was alive, and he stood next to her, ready to help her heal from more than just the physical marks she bore.

A somber look touched his expression for a moment. “Promise me one thing, Tranice?” She nodded, concern flooding her eyes. “Never think that I will treat you like...”

She put a finger to his lips silencing him. “You won’t, so the thought will never cross my mind. Just bear with me. I need to get used to having the man of my dreams step into my reality.” Tranice moved her finger and replaced it with her lips, smiling against his.

“Take all the time you need, just as long as I get to help you...adjust.” She laughed softly at the seductive look he gave her. Saying yes to the chance of her lifetime was easy enough. When he

dipped his head to nuzzle her belly with a delicacy that belied his size and strength, she knew she made the right choice.

"There is one more detail that we'll have to tend to soon enough, Tranice." She met his warm gaze with a questioning look of her own. "You have to marry me regardless. Make a decent man of me. The doctors said that this little bundle here survived the accident." He stroked a hand feather-lightly over her abdomen, causing a painful flinch in her.

"What are you talking about?" She tugged at a lock of hair to bring him back to a sitting position. "Don't play like that. I have broken bones, and I still have to get over the shock of seeing you here," Tranice chided.

"Add becoming a mum to that list." He beamed with typical male pride over his words, and Tranice frowned.

"What do you mean by that? You do some sort of In Vitro process while I was out?"

Whiskey rough laughter filled the air. "Ah, *mo chroi*, the Inbetween might be a different plane of existence, but we're as alive as we want and need to be there. Deep down, I knew that ending there was a new beginning somehow. We'll just have an extra heart to share it with us now."

She gasped and sputtered and mumbled for a moment. "You-You knocked me up?" she finally stammered.

"I think I prefer the idea of creating another chapter in our legacy, but if that's what ya want to call it, aye." He grinned smugly, and she couldn't help but laugh.

"You won't love me when I'm fat and waddling," she challenged.

"I'll love you more, knowing why you're fat and waddling," he countered with a roguish wink.

"I'm not giving up my job."

"Fair enough. I can be your kept man."

"We'll have to have a quick wedding once I can walk again." She looked down at the cast on her left leg and prayed for a speedy recovery.

"I'll carry ya down the aisle if need be."

"Even if I'm fat?"

"You need meat on your bones anyways. I like my women sturdy."

Tranice shrieked softly and pinched the closest limb she could reach. He rubbed at the red mark on his arm, frowning a bit. "Here in

the real world, you never call a woman sturdy.” She sighed and clucked her tongue. “Guess I have my work cut out for me, to help you survive the twenty-first century.”

“We’ll get it done together, Tranice,” he assured her. She saw the glint of determination in his eyes and readily agreed. Alone, she knew she didn’t have the strength to build a new chapter in the storied legacy that began with the Moses Man. With him at her side, loved and cherished and protected, she planned to face the future with the past and a tall, dark and broodily handsome guide along for whatever came their way.

The End

Reflections
by
HH Self

A mirror; a broken heart Teri thought she had gotten over; a secret she holds; all come together when fate brings her to Spellfire, Texas.

www.hhself.com

Reflections
by
HH Self

The windshield wipers moved in a slow steady rhythm, momentarily blurring the world outside, the dark low-hanging clouds encapsulating it. Cars speeding by tossed sheets of water up in their wake. For a few seconds, the road ahead seemed distorted in the torrent. Maybe, if she sat motionless—long enough—the falling water would wash away the green and white specter, posing as a road sign. The clicking of the four-way flashers fell in step with everything around her; the sound of tumbling rain striking the car's roof, the thumping of her heart.

Like life, the route chosen is not always the one given us. Winter storms to the north and closed roads forced her to detour south through Texas. A shaking hand turned off the flashers and put the car into gear. Some things were so far removed from the present they should be forgotten, at the least, kept safely hidden most of the time. All she needed to do was drive away; keep the past at a safe distance, keep memories from picking at scars until they bled once more. Tugging the blinker lever down, she inched the car forward. A flash of black, in the form of an eighteen-wheeler, roared by. The water slung into the air made everything disappear; the car trembled under the cascading weight. For the space of a skipped heartbeat, Teri feared it had been an illusion, now washed away. However, when the rubber blades cleared the glass, the road sign still read, "Spellfire Next Right." She pushed the signal lever up and exited the highway. Some things could never be forgotten; some people were a part of our every heartbeat, no matter what separated us.

The backcountry road wound over rolling grass-covered hills washed clean. Scattered rays of sunlight broke through the clouds and danced on the glistening green pastures. Understanding the

fragility of life, she comprehended its beauty with a clarity few perceived. Cresting a small hill, the town Jimmy called home came into view. She jerked back in her seat. A cold caress moved over her cheek. Memories from a lifetime ago she told herself.

* * * *

The main street appeared exactly like Jimmy described, a Rockwell-esk lane. Every building set perfectly in place, within the memory he gave her long ago. He so loved this town. Pulling up in front of Sinful Sundaes stirred a moment of déjà vu. She fidgeted with the seatbelt latch and then the door handle. Stepping half out of the car, she stood frozen, one foot on the pavement, the other clinging to her escape. This was real. A tribulation she should have endured thirty-five years ago. No easier now. A single drop of rain fell from a clearing sky, landing on her cheek, its touch surprisingly warm. Almost as tepid as the tears she promised herself long ago never to shed again. She closed her eyes and pulled in a deep breath. The scent of rain-washed air, its cool caress to burning lungs, helped her take the last step from the car.

Teri's right foot connected with the pavement, her eyes opened, and she could almost hear Jimmy saying, "You have to taste the ice cream there. It's so good you would swear it's magical." A nice thought—magic. You twitched your nose, and the world was set right. The love of your life never...Teri wiped the raindrop from her cheek. Too bad life was never a fairytale with happy-ever-after endings. It just had endings.

The bell over the door to Sinful Sundaes rang out as she pushed the entrance open. A sound Teri expected, yet it gave her a start when the ringing pressed through regrets swirling in her mind. She stood in the doorway, looking around a place that could have been from her life, if—

"Come on in and have a seat, I'll be right with you," a friendly voice pulled Teri's attention to the woman behind the counter. A soft smile made her aware she was staring.

"I'm sorry," Teri tried to break her locked gaze. "You remind me of someone a friend once told me about, long ago...I'm sorry." The woman looked remarkably like the owner Jimmy once described, not a day older, her daughter no doubt.

"Not to worry. I'm Electra." A hand extended out over the counter.

“Teri Willis,” she shook the offered hand, but when Electra’s brow furrowed, she pulled back. Feeling like her touch told the woman too much. Silly.

“So what can I get you, Teri?” Electra’s smile returned.

“Maybe, something cold to drink...how about a root beer?”

“Go ahead and have a seat, and I’ll bring it to you.”

Teri sat at one of the small round tables. The forefinger and thumb of her left hand tugged at her upper lip as she fiddled with the keys to her car in her right hand. Her gaze moved from Electra to her gray rented Lexus, her escape, just on the other side of the large window.

Electra set the frost-covered mug in front of Teri along with a small bowl of ice cream. “You have to try our ice cream. It is so good you would swear it was—”

“Magical,” Teri interjected.

“Well yes, magical.” Electra sat across from her. “So who is this friend that described me so well?”

Teri grinned. “I was mistaken. If it had been you, I would definitely want to know what moisturizer you used.” She forced a soft laugh as she glanced at her own hands. Their skin wrinkled. “Jimmy Roads was his name. He grew up here in Spellfire.”

“You and Jimmy were close?”

Teri tugged at her lip and squeezed the car keys so hard she felt them trying to cut into her skin. “Once, a long time ago. Back in seventy-one.” She pulled her hand away from her mouth. “Do you know if...if he still has family around here?”

Electra reached out and placed her hand over Teri’s. “The Roads’ house is at the end of Cedar lane, but I am afraid his family moved away not long after...two blocks up Main and then left. 1313 Cedar Lane.” Electra leaned a little closer to her. “Are you—?”

Teri pulled back her hand. Her chair made a sharp squeak from the force of the move. “Sorry...I...Do you think anyone would mind if I took a look around his place?”

Electra’s hand withdrew back to her lap. “I think sometimes we need to examine the past so we can deal with the present. With Thanksgiving only a few days away, now might be the perfect time for you to take a long look at both.” Electra stood up and walked halfway to the counter before looking back. “I’m usually around here, so stop by anytime.”

Teri thanked her and then took a bite of the ice cream. The cold sweet flowed over her tongue and slipped down her throat. It almost made her believe there might be a touch of...well, there was something special about it. She took her time finishing the frozen treat and her drink. Several people came and went while she sat there, but she paid little attention even to the friendly ones who spoke. Bits and pieces of a past, she thought safely tucked away, were starting to play in her mind. With the last excuse for sitting swallowed, she walked to her car, then drove through Spellfire to find 1313 Cedar Lane.

* * * *

A setting more fitting of Halloween than Thanksgiving, Teri thought. Evergreen bushes that once trimmed the walkway to the house, now reached into the pathway. Trees stood with broken dead limbs tangled among those still trying to hold on. A patchwork of bare earth and weeds replaced the large lawn. But the house underscored the mood. Weathered paint, faded and wrinkled, clung in blotches to wood grayed and cracked with age. Shutters hung crooked from failing hinges, and the roof looked as if more shingles covered the ground than its balding surface. At one time, the house must have been beautiful, but now...now it teetered close to the end of its time.

She stepped from the car, for a few seconds keeping the metal between her and the house. A deep breath exhaled, she maneuvered the path with cautious strides. At the entrance, her fingers ran over the rough surface of an inlaid tarnished R. She gripped the doorknob and tried to nudge the door open then gave it a heavy push. Hinges, long neglected, yielded, but not without a moan of disapproval. Light filtered through crumbling curtains illuminating the dust-cloaked room. Hesitant steps on a creaking floor brought her to the middle of a room, both familiar and foreign. She heard Jimmy's voice from so many years back telling her about every picture and chair, but the smell of misplaced time, which filled the room, reminded her how far away those thoughts came from. Painfully missing were the laughter and interwoven conversations. When Jimmy's family left, they left a sadness, one still clinging like dust to everything there.

Teri pulled out a chair from the big table and sat down, imagining her place to be the one beside Jimmy on Thanksgiving Day, so many years ago. A day misplaced, at least for them. She closed her eyes tight and played back the story her lost lover once told. How his dad's low laugh filled the room like sunshine on a warm summer day. The

aroma of his grandmother's sweet potatoes and his mom's turkey permeated the air. His grandfather would be telling a story of "back when" while his cousin sat wide-eyed, thinking more about the food to come than anything else.

Her eyes opened, tears slipping from their corners. She pushed back from the table with a whispered, "You promised."

The curtains shifted by a broken window as a breeze too warm for a cool rainy day floated through the room. Teri squinted, trying to see into the shadows pervading the corner near the window. The long yellowed cloth twisted and reached out and, for a second, looked as though it covered something. She stood up and took a step closer, trying to get a clearer view. The curtain shifted once more, and her scream filled the room. A quick step backwards slammed her into the edge of the table. She stumbled, only to catch herself at the last moment by grabbing the back of a chair. Her heart pounding, she realized the apparition to be her reflection in a large mirror. The decaying veil, with the help of the wind, played with the large wooden frame holding the thick beveled glass.

Laughing at how silly she felt, but still feeling the goose-bumps of her fright, she walked over to the mirror. Pulling the sleeve of her jacket so it covered her palm, she took a swipe at the glass, clearing the dust. She rubbed a little harder, trying to remove the persistent stain at her shoulder height. A flaw in the glass, she thought, and she shifted a half step to the side. The flaw, resembling a hand, followed her image. With all her strength, she raised her gaze; a head's height above her, a dark reflection of Jimmy's face hung. She heard— no, felt— him say "Sorry." But before she turned to see the reflection's source behind her, the image in the mirror vanished.

Every step of flight from the house landed with a jolting force. She kept expecting the evergreens to reach out and drag her to the ground, as she bolted down a walkway that seemed but a narrow ribbon. Reaching her car, she tried to scream, she tried to cry, but neither came out. She should be cringing in terror, racing away from this place as fast as she could, she told herself. Yet, what she felt beneath the shaking held her in place for a moment more as she scanned the windows for his face.

* * * *

The car barely came to a stop in front of Sinful Sundaes before Teri jumped out and hurried through the ice cream parlor's door. She rushed up to the counter. "You are not going to believe this. But I

think I just saw a ghost!” Before Electra said a word, Teri started pacing around the shop, her hands gesturing almost as fast as she talked. “I know, I know, it sounds nuts. But I saw him. Jimmy. He was there. Just for a second. Scared the hell out of me, at first. But it was him. I mean. I could feel Jimmy. It’s been so long since I felt truly safe. Yeah, I know I’m not making sense. Safe, scared, but it does. Well, at least to me it does. And yes, I’m tired from the drive, but I saw him. And then he vanished, and I have to know why. Why didn’t he stay there with me? Why the hell did it take him so long to come find me? I’m not nuts! Really, I saw Jimmy.” Like a car running out of gas, she coasted to a stop in the first chair she found. Breathless, she stole a quick glance at Electra then her gaze locked to the floor. Tugging at her upper lip, Teri fought back the tears she looked for when she stood before the house.

Electra sat across from her, placing a glass of water on the table. “Do you believe in the spirit world?”

“No. Well, I didn’t until...Maybe my mind is effected by...I guess I could have imagined what I saw, but the feeling...I can only remember having that feeling when Jimmy held me. Electra, I need to be getting to Boston. I have an appointment there, but I need to know if it was Jimmy...Do you think...maybe it could have been him?”

“I think you have one more journey you need to take before you go to Boston, a journey more of the heart and mind than anything else. I also think you should get something to eat and some rest before you start on this search for answers. The Bent Shadow Inn is four blocks up Main St. Why don’t you go get a room, at least for tonight? I will close up here, and we can have dinner together and talk about some of the things you might consider doing. Say, the Hotel dining room in forty-five minutes?”

* * * *

Teri sat fidgeting with her fork when the lovely woman joined her. “You never answered my question, Electra. Do you believe I saw Jimmy’s ghost?”

“I think you may have.” She cleared her throat “The ghost population in Spellfire is rather large. Jimmy may be among them.”

“Now you’re making fun of me.” Teri rolled her eyes.

“No! I’m not. I am trying to tell you Spellfire is one of those unique places where two worlds come together. Jimmy never talked to you about the different kinds of people living here?”

"He told me when I came to visit him here it might take awhile to see the people for what they truly were. But everywhere is like that."

Electra's head tilted a little to one side, her brow furrowed. "I'm not sure how much about the secrets of Spellfire you need to know to accomplish your task. I have a feeling you will find them all out as you go along."

"Secrets?"

"Let's say you are in one of the few places where it won't be hard finding what you need to go looking for Jimmy's ghost." Electra pulled a note pad from her purse and wrote down an address and name. She pushed the paper across to Teri. "The book store is called Trinkets, you will need to ask for Jeth when you get there. I will call first thing in the morning and let them know to expect you." Electra put the pad away. "For now, what do you say we order? The food is great here."

"Sure." Teri tugged at her upper lip as she stared aimlessly at the menu.

"Teri. Teri?"

Teri looked up to find the waitress standing beside Electra, both were looking at her. "Sorry. A chef salad and a root beer, please." She handed the menu to the waitress, wishing she still held something to hide behind.

"Where did you meet Jimmy?" Electra asked.

"At college, my freshman year and Jimmy's sophomore. Our time together was cut short. The draft board drew June third right off the bat, Jimmy's birthday. They sent him to Vietnam, just before Thanksgiving. Like now...just before Thanksgiving." Her voice lowering to a whisper, "Do you think that is why I saw him?"

"Timing can be a big factor in things like this. Sometimes it's the place. Maybe it all came together today."

Teri leaned forward. "You seem to know a lot about the supernatural. Is it a hobby for you or something?"

Electra smiled, "Or something. When the time is right, I will tell you all about it."

"Okay." Teri's lips thinned as she leaned back in her chair and shrugged.

She sat silently through the first half of the meal then in a low tone said, "Maybe I shouldn't do this, go looking for Jimmy."

Electra sat her fork beside her plate. "Why do you say that? If you could contact him, you would. Right?"

“Yes, but what if he doesn’t want to see me? He disappeared right after looking at me.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh. “I’m not the eighteen-year-old he kissed before being shipped out.”

“Close your eyes, Teri.”

“What? Why?”

“Trust me for a minute here.”

Teri closed her eyes then peeked out of the left one.

“Keep them closed. Okay, think about what you felt when you saw the image in the mirror.”

Teri shifted in her seat but kept her eyes closed.

“Take the fear and surprise from what you were feeling. What is left?”

Her nose wrinkled, and she took a few short gasps of air, “Love.”

“You have your answer.”

Teri held her eyes tightly shut, trying to hold onto the feeling, and also, afraid if she opened them, tears would fall. With a long exhale, her eyes opened to find Electra smiling. “I guess I need to at least try,” Teri said.

“I think you do, but for now you need to get some rest and take care of your own health. Tomorrow you can see where this will lead you.”

* * * *

The two said goodnight, and Teri found her room. Sleep came and went, a cork adrift soothing warm waves. A whispered touch passed over her ankle, repeated in unhurried caresses up the outer sides of her legs. Jimmy’s slow hands, she mused in fogged thought. Flared fingers held firm to her hips as thumbs traced an arched path of conflagration.

Can one get lost in a dream forever? Teri thought, prayed.

She shifted her legs further apart. Heated folds brushed open with a tender nudge; the breath of cool night air made her aware her lover watched her moistening sex. Wisps of heated breath told her how close he drew, promising the taking of her offered essence. Hands moved over her ribs and reached for breasts her arching back offered.

“Jimmy.”

Exhaled air came closer. His tongue placed wondering moist trails on inner thighs. So close. Her hungered need gripped and twisted. She feared to reach out and pull him to her. Would her demanding touch cause him to vanish in the mist of a dream? Teri

pulled at the sheets as if they were tethers, her body restrained within a quiver.

“Jimmy. Please.”

His tongue followed the curve of outer folds. Narrow and hard, it pressed to her inner ones. Widening, it raked up her cleft and over her clit. Teri’s mind raced with the need to feel the emptiness pushed from her. His kisses moved over her belly, continuing to climb at a slow torturous rate. His hard shaft brushing her inner thigh as his lips did the same to her aching nipples.

She could hold back no more. Her fingers wove into his hair and pulled him forward. Kisses moved over her throat as she felt the head of his cock press to her pussy. His touch too long absent, she needed to feel him within her. Her tugs let him know of her urgency. She wanted to see his face when he thrust into her.

The figure rose, but it did not have Jimmy’s gentle features. The face before her concealed itself in swirling shadows. The room became devoid of love. The air grew stagnate and stale. Her scream pierced the night, rousing people to her door. Heart still pounding, she reassured them a dream caused her fright, nothing more than a nightmare, all the time wishing she could convince herself as easily. She battled sleep for the remainder of the night. In the brief moments when it won, she jerked from the grip, a cold sweat entwined with the nocturnal apprehension.

* * * *

Trinkets could have been confused with a hundred other new age bookstores. From around the far corner of one of the bookshelves a man poked out his head. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so, though I am not sure what it is I am looking for.”

The man stepped into the narrow passage between two towering bookshelves, his eyebrows raised.

“I am Teri Willis and—”

“Oh yes, Electra’s friend.”

The man’s words made her smile, a friend in Spellfire, the thought set well. “That would be me.”

The man walked up to her and reached out. “I need to grasp your hands for a second or two.” Teri extended her hands to meet his. With a gentle twist, he turned her hands palm up. His thumbs rested in their center as his fingers took their weight. “Not wizard or witch. Hmm, no Gen blood nor Fairy. Not to worry; there is always a way.” He released her hands and motioned for her to follow.

Not such an easy thing to do, following someone who just checked you out to see if you were a witch or something. But Electra trusted him, so for the moment she would, too. The further they went, the older the books became, from glossy covers to those made of leather. From scripts on the binding she understood, to those she recognized only half the time.

When Jeth stopped short, Teri almost knocked him over, as she paid more attention to her surroundings than her guide. She forced a smile, and her eyes dropped, hoping her embarrassment did not show too boldly in crimson. Getting a small chest down from the shelf, Jeth paid her or her color no mind. He fumbled with a large key-ring until he found the one for the lock that looked all but forgotten. From within the box he took a small book. "Mortal magic," he said.

"Mortal magic?"

"Electra said you had not started seeing the real Spellfire yet. You will if you stay here long enough. But for now, some folk have the gift of magic. It is part of their everyday world. They can channel the magic that is everywhere around us. Some do it well because of their heritage, while others take a little practice to get it right."

"So you are telling me with a little practice I can tap into this magic?"

"Uh, no. You don't have any of that gift. But like I said, always a way. With this book of spells, you can tap into the magic of the mortal soul. Love." He reached out, offering her the book.

Teri took a step backwards. "Is it safe? What if I goof up—or something?"

"As long as the two kinds of magic don't mix, there is nothing to worry about."

"Since I don't know the difference between the two, how would I stop it? And if they did? What would happen?" She still refused to take the book offered her.

"Since you have no natural magic, it couldn't happen to you. But if someone with natural powers did use it...well, it could be the last thing they did. That is why I keep it locked away." Jeth opened the book to page thirty-four. The title read Release Incantation. "All you need to do is go back to the house, look into the mirror, and read this spell out loud. If you still hold love for Jimmy, it will release him from the captive spell. Then you can—"

"What captive spell, and what is a captive spell? I'm not at all sure about any of this."

Jeth placed the red ribbon bookmark that extended from the book's spine between page thirty-four and thirty-five then closed the book. "From talking with Electra, we both feel Jimmy's spirit has been placed inside the mirror you spoke of. If that is true, only two people can release him safely, the one who placed him there and his one true love." He put the book into her hands. "Since he was able to show himself to you, I am betting you are the latter of the two."

Teri turned the book over several times, but the worn dark cover did not have a word on it. "So if this works and Jimmy's ghost is freed...he can move on?"

"Once Jimmy is free, you two can decide what path you both will take."

* * * *

Teri stood at the front door of 1313 Cedar Lane, one hand on the doorknob, the other clenching the old book. Her legs were starting to tremble once more. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Not much over the past twenty-four hours made any sense. The only thing frightening her more than stepping into the house was the thought of Jimmy trapped for eternity in a mirror. In a very real way, she understood how lonely such a sentence would be. "Come on girl, you want to live forever?" Teri asked herself, with a broken chuckle filled with irony. She pressed the door open. Fear of the situation found itself being pushed to one side by the thought of what she would say to Jimmy. With the surest steps she could find, she made her way to the dining room then stopped dead in her tracks. Tugging at her upper lip, she looked into the empty corner.

Gone! The outline where the mirror once sat in the dusty floor was the only thing that reassured her she had not been dreaming the day before. Teri backed into the table once more, but this time she refused to run. Maybe all it took was being close to Jimmy. From the map of a long saved memory, down the hall, second door on the left, she opened the bedroom door. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of the bed. Jimmy had told her how he was going to sneak her away while everyone else watched the football games on TV. Bring her to this room and make love to her. She could feel his finger to her lips as he told her, "You'll have to be quiet though, no screaming like you usually do." How he could make her scream; no one before or after Jimmy made her scream like that. Toe curling, heart-pounding, total abandonment of every inhibition.

Teri sat on the bed's corner. Swallowing hard, she tried to clear the dry feeling from her throat, a feeling she endeavored to attribute only to dust. She took a ragged small box from her purse. Opening it, she looked at the Silver Star Jimmy's mother sent her. She remembered the first time she held it as she took the medal from the box. Then, her hands were those of a young woman, not wrinkled and spotted. She also recalled the strange note that came along with it from his mother.

"There will come a time you having this will mean everything to Jimmy."

A cryptic message, but then Teri understood how a little misphrasing by a mother in grief could happen.

She let her fingers trace the star shape, with the same care as a thousand times before; she folded the red, white and blue ribbon and placed it back into the box.

From the underside of the box's lid, she pulled a faded picture of a girl with flowers in her long dark hair. Beside her stood a young man with bellbottoms and a fluff-sleeved shirt, his hair to his shoulders. It was a copy of the picture Jimmy took with him when he left. She pressed the picture to her chest; she didn't have to look at it to see it. From the day she got it, the small box had never been far from her.

She clung to the picture a moment longer. The first time Jimmy looked at her with those blue eyes, she felt a flutter in her chest. The first time she heard his Texas drawl, the tingle between her thighs told her, this tall, confident man would change her world. In the fall of 1971, Jimmy was the biggest flirt Teri had ever known. Every girl on campus knew him, and everything her mother ever told her about men cried out 'stay away from him.' Way too handsome for his own good, or hers. A smile too tempting, and still among it all a calm. How could any woman not fall into the arms of such a man? The fact he chased after her from the first day they met didn't hurt either.

She put the picture up, and with a shaking hand, she opened the book of mortal magic to the page held by the red marker. With care, she read the passage.

*What was shared by two, half is gone
What stolen by one to do them wrong
Release the captive so near my heart
Bring them back to the start
Let no chains of magic bind*

*The love I know and seek to find
Webs of evil like glass will shatter
For in the end it is only love that will matter.*

Teri looked around the room, but everything remained the same. She read it again louder. Yet even after the third and fourth try, no Jimmy.

She pulled the dusty bedspread off the bed and tossed it to the floor. Teri curled up in the bed Jimmy and she planned to share on Thanksgiving Day, so long ago. She drew one of the pillows into her arm, squeezing it tight. She let herself dream a little longer. Soon enough would come the time to put the past in its place and get on with what remained of her life.

A smile graced her face as she closed her eyes in response to a caress down her neck, thirty-five years in the past. A brush of fevered lips, as strong fingers fumbled with delicate buttons. For three weeks, she had told Jimmy *no*. All the time Jimmy telling her they were destined for each other. Teri understood exactly what he meant, but too perfect held a scariness all its own. Yet, on that warm September night, Teri allowed herself to whisper *yes*. Sometimes things feel right, so right they are more than you could bear to lose. His hand moved under her bra and cradled her breast. A soft kiss pressed harder, until her mouth hungry for his yielded. Jimmy had pursued her with perfect diligence, now she would claim him.

Tongues danced as his hand moved lower over ribs then abdomen. When his hand neared the waistband of her jeans, she pulled her stomach tight giving him the room he needed. A slight hesitation when his fingers reached the top of her panties. Did he fear she might stop him, or was he teasing? *Only three more inches*. She twisted her hips a little and arched her back. He did not ignore her less than subtle move. His fingertips moved over moist folds until his hand cupped her sex. His hot breath moved over her ear as he whispered, "I love you, Teri. I will always—"

A board creaked at the entrance to the bedroom, and Teri's eyes opened wide. She shot up in the bed. A silhouette of a tall man filled the doorway. "Jimmy?"

A moment's hesitation before the man stepped into the light of the room. "I'm Frank. I was Jimmy's best friend." A grin covered the man's face.

Teri realized her hand was still down the front of her slacks. She jerked the moist finger free and jumped up from the bed. "I..." she

wondered if the glow of red from her face matched the heat she felt radiating from it. “How long?”

“Just got here.” His eyes finally moved from her fingers to her face when she put her hand behind her back. “I noticed a car out front and thought maybe some of Jimmy’s family was around.”

“I’m Teri Willis. I was a friend of Jimmy’s at college.”

“Teri, of course.” He offered out his hand. Teri’s got halfway to him when she recalled where it had just been. With a shrug, she placed it behind her back once more. “Jimmy spoke of you often, Teri, while we were in the green.”

“In the green?”

“In Nam.”

“So you were with Jimmy when...”

“Jimmy saved my life that day, along with the rest of the squad’s. Yes, I was there when Jimmy died. When the last thing he spoke was ‘Sorry, Teri.’ You two must have been very much in love, almost like soul mates.”

“Frank? I’m sorry, I don’t recall Jimmy talking about you.”

“I’m not surprised. You know how high school competitions can be, and then I stayed in Spellfire while Jimmy went off to college. He and I never got really close until we were put in the same unit.”

“You live in Spellfire now?”

“No, a little unfinished business brought me back and, of course, the holidays. What brings you to Spellfire, Teri?”

“Maybe fate.” She gathered up her things from the bed and placed the book into her purse. “I’m not sure yet.” She moved past him, into the hallway. One hesitant step, and she stopped. Nothing right about letting her embarrassment cause her to be rude to a man Jimmy probably called friend. “I’m staying at the Bent Shadow. Maybe you and I could have a drink later this evening. I would enjoy talking with one of Jimmy’s friends. Right now, I have to see a woman about a mirror.”

* * * *

Teri stepped into Sinful Sundaes. Walking straight to the counter, she placed the spell book on its glass top. “It didn’t work, Electra.”

“You read the spell while looking into the mirror?”

“No, someone moved it, or maybe stole it, so I read it in Jimmy’s bedroom. Four times, and nothing happened.” She tossed her hands up in frustration.

“Teri, the mirror is like a bottle with Jimmy’s spirit trapped inside. You have to be looking into it for the spell to work. You need to find—”

“Maybe I should have broken the mirror yesterday and let him out. I could forget about all this spell stuff.” She pushed the book over to Electra’s side of the counter.

“Captive spells using mirrors are tricky. Breaking the glass may have set Jimmy free, or it may have imprisoned pieces of his spirit in a thousand little shards of glass. Talk about a mess to undo.” Electra pushed the book back to Teri. “Only one safe way to get him out, and it’s up to you to do it.”

“So I have to find a mirror now. Where do I even start looking, and what if it is already broken?” Teri slid onto one of the stools lining the counter. Her fingers drummed at the book’s cover.

“If a thief took it, they would want the mirror in one piece. It would be worth more. If the person who cast the captive spell took it, they would not chance harming the mirror, as it might set Jimmy free. I think it will be safe. I’ll ask around town and see what I can find out.”

Teri put the book back into her purse. “Well, at least it’s a big mirror, and the fact it has a ghost in it will help make it stand out.” She tugged at her upper lip with a half smile. “I’ll check back with you a little later. Thanks for the help Electra.”

* * * *

Teri sat in her car, resting her head on the steering wheel. *Where to start*—A tap on the passenger side window made her jump. Frank stood beside the door looking in. “You okay?”

She pressed the door lock button and let him in. “I’m okay, just tired, and now it seems I am in search of a mirror that holds...answers.”

“A mirror?”

“Yep, a mirror. One I found in Jimmy’s house yesterday, but today it’s gone. Stolen.”

“Well, if it is a stolen mirror, we should check out the pawnshops. Isn’t that what crooks always do, pawn what they steal for cash?”

Teri gripped the steering wheel with both hands and rested her head against it once more. “I don’t even know where to find the pawnshops, let alone an enchanted mirror.”

Frank placed a hand on the back of her neck and softly rubbed at the tension there. A human touch felt so good, a man's touch felt reassuring – she was still a woman. “I don't have any place I need to be right now. Why don't I act as your guide to the pawnshops? If we don't find it there, maybe we can look at a couple of used furniture stores I know of.”

Teri rocked her head from side to side. “I wouldn't want to impose.” His strong hand pulled the tension from her neck.

“No imposition, but a pleasure. Head down Main, and take a left on Second.

“Thank you,” Teri said, as she backed from the parking place.

The first pawnshop held nothing close to the thick wooden-framed mirror she saw in the shadows the day before. Stepping back onto the sidewalk, Frank placed his hand in the small of her back. “We might as well walk from here. All the stores are close by except for one of the used furniture stores. It's out at the end of town, toward the freeway.” A few steps in silence before he asked, “Do you really think the mirror is enchanted?”

Teri withdrew from the touch to her back and took a step away from him. Was he making fun of her?

“Back in front of Sinful Sundaes, you said you needed to find an enchanted mirror.” He took a step back, putting his hands in his pockets. “I just wondered what made you think it could be enchanted.”

“I...” Teri berated herself once more for the way she treated him. “You lived in this town, so I assume you know some of the people here believe in magic.”

With a tilt of his head, he nodded.

“I saw Jimmy. Well, I think I saw Jimmy in the mirror we are looking for. Electra thinks he is trapped in it, and perhaps I can set him free.” She took a step closer to Frank and then another. She wanted his touch to return to the small of her back. Something familiar in it reminded her of Jimmy's touch.

“You really believe in magic mirrors, captive spells and ghosts?”

“No! Maybe, I'm not sure, but I feel like I need to try and find the truth.”

A block up the street, a right turn and two doors down, Frank opened the weathered door for Teri. Where the other pawnshop was filled with light, this one concealed in shadows half of what sat on the shelves. A short man with long dirty hair stepped from a back

doorway. "Well, I'll be damned, Frank Allen. Long time no see. So what did you bring for me this time?" The man rubbed his hands together.

Frank stopped short. "Tony, I didn't expect to find you still here."

The little man stretched out his arms and wiggled his shoulders. "Still free as a bird, Frankie old boy, free as a bird."

Frank's hand moved from the small of Teri's back up to her shoulder. His touch changed to something cold. His grip tightened until she flinched. "My friend is looking for a mirror."

Tony's head bobbed from side to side, "So tell me what you want and give me twenty-four hours. You know how things can just pop up sometimes, Frankie."

"Not a consignment, but something you might already have. A large mirror with a thick wooden frame, ivy leaves carved into the trim. Have you seen a mirror like that?"

Tony's eye shifted, "Na Frankie, nothing like it here."

"Thanks." Frank said. His hand on Teri's shoulder pressed her toward the door.

"You two old friends?" She asked, twisting and pulling free of his grip.

"We all have a few people from our past we would like to forget."

Next, they stopped at a used furniture store. As they strolled through the aisles, Frank's hand tried to find the small of Teri's back. The warmth returned to his touch, but she sidestepped and turned not letting it linger. It would have been easy to let the touch remain, to let the touch explore, yet something...laid beneath the warmth, beneath the pleasure of a caress...something yet unseen.

Back at the store's front door, finding nothing, Teri released a long breath, shaking her head, "I bet by now you think I imagined the mirror...and everything else."

"No, I don't, but I am afraid whoever took the mirror loaded it up and hauled it somewhere besides Spellfire to sell. But we have one more store to check." He took her hand in his. The uneasiness returned as his fingers closed around hers, but the loneliness outweighed the apprehension. Like two high school kids, they walked back to the car and started for the store on the outskirts of town.

Teri's mind filled with questions about Jimmy. Questions she wanted to ask Frank, but before she found the right words, they pulled up in the parking lot of what looked like a warehouse.

"I hope we find the mirror here, but if you don't, I guess you'll be leaving Spellfire?"

Teri opened the car door and stepped out slowly. "I guess I will." Coldness crept into her chest like the last dying ambers of a fire flickering out. She tugged at her upper lip. Her steps grew hesitant. *The mirror had to be here.* Life could not be so cruel as to let her see Jimmy and then snatch him from her once more. In the store, she insisted on seeing all the mirrors even though the clerk said nothing new had arrived for several days. As badly as she wanted the looking glass to be there, it wasn't.

At her car, she handed Frank the keys and asked him to drive her back to town.

Pulling onto the street, Frank said, "You tried, Teri. That is the most anyone could ask."

She answered with a shrug. Her eyes watched the homes they passed, glimpses of families through windows. She couldn't help but wonder if one of those homes might have been Jimmy's and hers. It should be her calling to the children in the front lawn, her walking to the front door with a man's arm around her. It would make what waited for her in Boston easier to bear. *Selfish.* But still.

At the hotel, Frank walked her to her room. A finger traced her jaw, "You don't have to spend the night alone, you know."

Teri stepped back into her room, "I am afraid I do," she gave him a kiss on the cheek, "but thanks." She closed the door and sat down on the bed. Pulling the old book from her purse, she started thumbing through it, when she found a spell called Reveal.

Place the object of connection under your pillow

~*~

Bring to me the answers I need

Within the night the truth be heed.

What I can not find within the light

Help me discover to set things right.

Within the dream, resolve the tatter

For in the end it is only love that will matter.

Teri let her fingers move over the aging paper. Answers were sometimes easier sought than faced. How much would this show? Enough? Too much? Nothing? Did the cryptic note from so long ago foretell this moment? She pulled the small box from her purse, opening it with care. She placed the medal under her pillow. After she undressed, she lay in the bed nude. One hand held the book, the other

held the small picture to her chest. She read the passage over and over, until from memory, it played and echoed in her mind, and she slipped into sleep.

* * * *

Drifting with objects from both the past and the present, Teri tried to find rhyme or reason for each being in this dream. The book, the medal, the mirror, the picture and her, all floated through images of the last few days. Then she felt herself in a bed once more. A hand moved up her outer thigh. “Not this time,” she screamed. She reached out, grabbing a shoulder and pulled her would-be lover forward. When she did, the mist cleared. Jimmy? No, a mask fell away—Frank looked down at her.

He jerked back into the darkness.

A blackness opened beneath her, and she plunged into it. Images of the past, amidst bursts of blinding light, flew past her as she struggled to find her balance. Hands reach frantically, hoping to grasp something to slow the fall. From one darkness to another she tumbled. As quickly as the fall began, it stopped.

She floated above a battlefield. Flashes of brilliant light illuminated the night. Bursts of heat and sound passed through her. Each felt, but not harming her. Movement filled the jungle below, a movement that mimicked rats scurrying under a sheet. Shouts became screams then both faded into the sound of automatic weapons fire. Shrill whistles cut the air, just before explosions rumbled like advancing thunder. Then a silence swept over the green like a wave and wrenched at her gut. The battle took a breath.

She floated closer to the ground, like a balloon caught in a breeze, along for the ride. Her descent stopped over two men, one on the ground wounded, the other bent over him. She recognized the man on the ground as Frank, and Jimmy came into view as she drifted to one side. She screamed out his name. But no one heard her.

“The bastards got me good, Jimmy.” Blood came in spurts from Frank.

“Hold still,” Jimmy said. He pressed his hand to the wound as if placing pressure to stop the bleeding. A soft glow radiated from where he touched Frank’s shoulder. Not only did the bleeding stop, but the jagged wound also faded away when Jimmy moved his hand. “You’ve lost a lot of blood. We need to get you back to base and a cold beer.”

The battle exhaled, and the sporadic pop of weapons fire started back up. From the right, a voice shouted out “Snowball, damn it, don’t shoot me, Snowball.” The young man, M16 in hand, came out from cover. “Jimmy! There must be a hundred of them. We don’t stand a chance in hell.”

“All we need to do is make the LZ, Tony.”

“But...”

Jimmy touched Tony’s arm, and the young man calmed. The same touch Teri recognized when Frank touched her back, but how did he—.

“Frank, you and Tony get everyone out of here. I’ll slow them down.”

“Jimmy?” Tony looked at him as if to say goodbye.

“Don’t give me that look. No way am I not going to get back home, back to Teri. You keep the last helo on the ground as long as you can. Now get moving.”

Everything surged into fast motion before Teri. Men scrambled through the jungle for a clearing. Jimmy moved slower, shifting from one spot of cover to the next. Stopping and firing into the onslaught right behind him. The slapping sound of helicopter blades filled the air. Gun-ships peered over the edge of the jungle, and one of the soldiers directed them with flares.

“He should make it,” she thought. The last Huey sat a hundred yards into the clearing, motor screaming, on the verge of lifting off when Jimmy popped out of the jungle. Fifty feet into the tall waving grass and a sniper shot cracked. Jimmy stumble to the ground. He tried to rise up, and a second shot slammed him back down. A burst of machine gun fire from the helicopter and the sniper fell from a tree.

Frank ran from the helo to Jimmy’s side. “I can’t heal myself, Frank. This isn’t looking so good.”

“Give me your healing power. Then I can heal you. You saved my life, all our lives. Let me do the same for you. Hurry though, we can’t stay here much longer.”

Jimmy reached out to Frank and placed his hand on his heart. A flow of glowing light moved from one man to the other. Jimmy took a deep breath and looked up at Frank. “It feels good to know you can help, doesn’t it?”

Frank took hold of Jimmy’s hand and moved it off his chest. “It feels good to know I’m not just the kid from the wrong side of the tracks in Spellfire anymore.” He turned and ran back to the helicopter.

Jumping in, he yelled, “Get us the hell out of here. It’s too late to help him.”

Teri heard the beating sound of the Huey moving away. She tried to move close to Jimmy, but the dream would not let her. She heard him whisper, “Sorry, Teri. I’ll find a way home.” Did he see her? The world fell out from under her and blackness replaced the green. The mirror bobbed at the edge of sight then vanished.

* * * *

Teri jerked up in bed. A cold sweat covered her body. Anger at Frank’s betrayal twisted deep within her; tears poured from her eyes. “And I will find you, my love.”

Groggy from the sudden awakening, it took her a few minutes to realize the night and half the morning had passed. She gathered up the medal and placed it and the picture back in their box. A quick shower filled with thoughts of her next move, of putting all the pieces together. “Electra might be able to help,” she thought, as she put on her clothes. When she started to back her car out of the parking spot, she noticed Frank, sitting in the rear seat with a pistol.

“See, the thing about some dream spells is everyone in them is aware they happened.” He leaned forward and pushed the Colt 45 into her ribs. “What I can’t have you doing is running off telling everyone. Drive us out to the edge of town.”

“So you can kill me?”

He pressed the gun a little harder into her ribs. “Drive please, before I do shoot you. And no, I’m not going to kill you. Why kill a dying woman?”

“How did you...?”

“Part of the power to heal is to sense what is wrong in people. In a few weeks, your cancer will kill you unless...”

“Unless?”

“We could come to a deal. You get back on the highway and just keep going, and I cure your cancer.” He tapped her shoulder with the pistol, “Win, win.”

Teri tugged at her lip, as she watched Frank in the rearview mirror. “Okay.” She pressed on the accelerator as they pulled on to the street.

Frank’s lips thinned, and his brow wrinkled. “Okay? That easy?”

“Sure, why not. We both get to keep our lives.”

“I think you’re lying.”

“And you’re not?” She slammed on the breaks, throwing him into the back of her seat. When he bounced back, blood ran from his nose. She turned around and made a dive for the gun. “You killed Jimmy, you bastard. I’ll see you in—” From the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the fist coming at her head. Then black.

* * * *

“Hell.” Her head throbbed, and even with her eyes open, the blackness did not vanish. She hurt way too much to be dead though. Neon lights flickered and then filled the small room with their glow. In the corner, across the room, stood the mirror. She frantically looked around for her purse.

“It’s not here, if you’re looking for the spell book. But see, you found your precious mirror.”

“Why bring me here?”

“Well, good hiding places are hard to find,” he chuckled. “And besides, it will be so much easier to place your soul in there, once you die. Just like I did Jimmy’s, when his spirit came to Spellfire, hoping to find you.” Frank stepped back through the open door. “Don’t worry though. I’ll keep you well fed until the end. I need this to look like a natural death.” He slammed the door closed.

Teri ran to the door, her fists crashing into its solid mass. “Damn it, Frank, why are you always the coward?” Her gaze moved to the mirror. Jimmy’s image, like a faded picture, pressed at the glass trying to break through. She started toward the mirror, but when she saw her reflection beside his, she stopped. She was so much older than the young woman he once loved. It didn’t change what she needed to do, but it did change the happy-ever-after ending she hoped for. Even if happy-ever-after was only a few weeks spent with a ghost before she became one. When she got within three feet of the mirror, she heard Jimmy’s voice in her mind.

“Break the glass, Teri! We have to get you out of here.” His gaze darted from her to the door behind her. “We will get you out, and we will find another healer. Frank told me about the cancer. Please break the glass.”

“If I break the glass, you could be trapped in there forever.”

Jimmy’s gaze stopped shifting and locked to hers. “That’s a chance I’ll take. I might be able to do something with the door. I’m not really too sure how this ghost thing works. I didn’t get to do a whole lot before I wound up here.”

Teri's fingers glided over the glass, following the curves of his face. "We don't need to break the glass. According to Jeth, all I need to work the magic is love. We have that." She placed one hand flat on the mirror. Jimmy mimicked her reflection. Gazes locked.

*What was shared by two, half is gone
What stolen by one to do them wrong
Release the captive so near my heart
Bring them back to the start
Let no chains of magic bind
The love I know and seek to find
Webs of evil like glass will shatter
For in the end it is only love that will matter.*

Like a mist, she felt Jimmy's hand touch hers. She took a step back. The connection held, and she drew him from his prison. Teri tried to embrace the shimmering figure before her, and though she felt it, like a cool breeze on a hot summer day, she could not hold it. She took a step back, remembering the reflections in the mirror. Her head tilting down, her gaze locked to the floor. "You should go while you can."

"Look at me, Teri." His diaphanous touch grazed her cheek.

When she raised her gaze to his, Jimmy's brow furrowed, and his eyes questioned. "Go?"

"I don't know how ghosts see things. But the simple truth is, I'm...well a lot older than the last time we were together."

The furrows smoothed, and his eyes smiled, as did his lips. "The simple truth is you are beautiful, Teri. You always have been, and you always will be." The fog of his fingers touched her lips. "I love you." He leaned closer, his lips finding hers, their touch more memory, than real. "Okay, we need to work on this ghost/person relationship a little, after we get you out of here." He moved to the door and then passed through it. Coming back into the room, he stuck a finger into the keyhole and wiggled it around. "You know, in the movies this would work. I suck at this ghost thing." He tried once more with no better luck. "I am going to go get Electra. I'll be right back."

Before he took a step, the door handle started turning. Jimmy motioned for Teri to be quiet and moved to one side of the door. When it opened and Frank stepped in, Jimmy came at him, arms waving wildly, the screams of a banshee filling the air.

Frank looked at him, shaking his head. "You really suck at that." Jimmy threw a punch, but it passed right through the man. Frank

pulled the Colt 45 from his belt and pointed it at Teri. “Unless you want ghost-company sooner than expected, I’d quit that. It’s damn annoying.”

Jimmy looked at Teri and shrugged. He crossed the room and stood by her.

“Much better. Maybe there is a little magic in you, Teri, to get him free without this.” Frank held up the book of mortal magic. “So, it only seems fitting I use it to get rid of both of you.”

“No! Frank, leave her out of this. You still have my healing power. I’ll go back into the mirror, just let her go.”

“Jimmy, he has us. No use fighting it.”

“Teri?”

“Jimmy!” She gave him a narrow-eyed glare.

“Both of you shut up.” Frank started thumbing through the pages of the book. “Release spell, we’ll leave that one to the amateurs.” He looked at Teri with a grin and turned a few more pages. “Spell of joining, this could be interesting. Wonder what happens when you join a ghost and a mortal’s destiny and toss them into a mirror?”

Jimmy moved toward him, but quickly moved back when Frank added, “Or we could try it with two ghosts.”

Candle light flickers and weaves with the night

Rivers rush forward and join the ocean’s might

The hand holding the book trembled

Rain drops fall from the heavens set free

Their journey begins back to the sea

Beads of sweat gathered on Frank’s forehead.

Let the fate of one, be the other’s to endure

Two paths united, one destiny to ensure

Frank took a half step on unwilling legs. Maybe, Teri thought.

Join now what time may not scatter

For in the end it is only love that will matter

A blue cord of mist started weaving between Jimmy and Teri, working its way from their feet up. She tried to move, but each time the cord passed through one and then the other, it cinched them a little tighter together. The blue thread moved faster and faster. Everything around her began to blur. She felt an ebb and flow deep within her, a feeling not unpleasant, but disconcerting. She strained to watch Frank from the corner of her eye. Soon. Maybe. Frank pulled what looked like a stick from his jacket pocket. She realized it must be a wizard’s wand, another thing stolen, no doubt.

Frank raised the wand and drew circles in the air. Teri did not understand what he mumbled, but when he pointed it at them, she felt as if caught by a vacuum. In an instant, the blue cord vanished. The blurred vision went away. She stood in a black room, a large window the only thing prominent in the darkness. The backside of the mirror, she realized to her horror. Frank stood on the other side, putting the wand back into his pocket and then the book of mortal magic. She hoped him using the book would have put a stop to all this. But Jeth never said how long it took for the effect of mixing natural and mortal magic to take affect. The dark around his eyes, the deep lines of a face reflecting pain, the consequences came too slowly to save Jimmy and her. She watched Frank leave the room, his steps slow and shaken. And then she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

She turned to find Jimmy standing behind her. He looked older, but still the handsome man she loved. "What happened?"

"The magic pulled us together. I'm older; you're younger. We have been..."

When he touched her face, she understood they shared the same reality. Whether they were both ghosts or mortals, she didn't know. She didn't care. She threw herself into his embrace. Her arms around his neck, she pulled him to lips too long without his. Lips brushed. Trembled. Opened. The kiss deepened as fingers undid buttons and snaps in search of heated skin. Teri felt her clothes falling from her body, not a dream or wishful thought, but Jimmy. Strong hands remembered exactly where and how to touch her so her knees doubted their strength. Nor had lips and, oh God, that tongue.

He lowered her to the floor. A flickering tongue circled her bellybutton as smiling eyes looked up at her, eyes filled with mischief as he moved down her body. His hands, fingers spread, caressed her outer thighs. The tip of his nose pressed to her clitoris. His tongue weaved past sodden folds. Though passion tried to fog her gaze, she would not let anything take him from her sight. Her fingers weaved into his hair, and she raised his gaze back to her.

"Make love to me" She gently pulled at him. His kisses moved slowly up her body as a stroking finger glided over her pleading clit. When lips still tasting of her need brushed her, the pounding in her chest filled the room with thunder, the empty aching between her thighs reaffirming the urgency. "I want to feel—" The head of his cock raked over her pussy. "Yes."

He pressed into her body as he whispered into her ear. "I love you, Teri. I always have and always will." Buried deep within her, he arched his back and brushed a stray strand of hair from her face. His eyes echoed his words.

Heads tilted, and lips joined. She could close her eyes this time. He was not going to ever leave her again.

His hips shifted, and his girth pulled almost all the way out. "Oh, Jimmy, please." His answer thrust deep within her, retracted, replaced. She felt the heat of his body racing after hers. "Jimmy." Her hips heaved, slamming into him. "Oh God." Her back arched. "Harder." Her hand grasped his ass. "Yes!" Her breath moved in waves, falling into cadence. "Jim...m...y." Her head swam in a sea of the scent of carnal pleasure, all control drifting from its shores. Every place his body touched hers, she burned with delight, from his lips grazing her cheek, to his cock at her core. Teri felt her toes curling. "I'm...!" His body shuddered. Her legs wrapped around him, holding him so tight the quiver of one became the other's.

His hand moved over her leg as they curled together.

She heard a rumble, a creaking and then the feel of motion. Grabbing her clothes, she put them on as she moved to the glass barrier. The room outside was moving? No, the mirror was. Frank pulled the mirror away from the wall. With a face showing panic, he took hold of the moving dolly now in the center of the room and disappeared behind the mirror. In a few seconds, he stepped back in view. His hands shook as he pulled the straps around the mirror, a pronounced limp to his gate. Teri felt Jimmy's hand on her hip as he stepped beside her.

Jimmy leaned close to the glass, trying to get a better view. "Frank, what are you doing?"

"Moving day, Jimmy boy. I think it will be much safer to have this mirror a long ways away from Spellfire. When mortals can come around and start screwing up spells... I ask you, Jimmy, what is the world coming to?" Frank moved from view and, in a few seconds, the mirror tipped toward the ceiling.

Teri watched as the ceiling passed over them. They moved through the doorway and then the bumping of moving up steps, each step taking a little longer than the last. Frank groaned, and the slow ascent became a rapid descent. The outside world bounced and flickered past. The mirror tilted forward, and she saw the bottom of the steps come fast. In a fraction of a second, everything slowed to a

snail's pace. The glass plate slammed into the wall. Bouncing back, a high-pitched sound filled the darkness. Teri saw the first crack in the mirror, moving from the top right corner. The fracture crept out, and then the entire glass exploded into countless pieces. She lunged forward, trying to find her balance, as she was thrown from the dark world back into her own reality. Stumbling, she braced herself against the wall.

Frank sat at the top of the stairs, looking at her like a frightened child. Jimmy! The fragments of mirror lay strewn across the floor. In an instant, she knew where he was.

Join now what time may not scatter.

The blue cord that bound them an hour before began to rise. One end wrapped around Teri's wrist; the other end frayed and reached to every piece of glass on the floor. The cord tightened and pulled her forward, toward the shards. "No, not this time. This time, we are both going to make it." The cord shortened, pulling her hand into the frayed part of the rope. She felt herself coming apart. Teri widened her stance and pulled with all the strength she had. A half step back, one, then two, and like a cork from a champagne bottle, Jimmy popped out of the pieces of mirror, the blue cord weaving him back together as quickly as he appeared.

As the two embraced, they heard a moan from the top of the stairs. Jimmy looked up at what appeared to be a dying Frank. Jimmy touched Teri's cheek. "There are a couple of things I need to do."

"He is not worth it. Hurting him won't make things any better for us."

He smiled at her. He climbed the stairs and sat by Frank. "Seems things have come full circle. You are dying once more."

"Save me. I really didn't mean to hurt you or her."

Jimmy placed his hand on Frank's shoulder. "Of course, you meant to hurt us. You have never cared for anyone but yourself." He leaned closer to the dying man. "Return my powers, and I will save you."

"Yes! Of course." Frank reached up and placed his hand over Jimmy's heart. The glowing light passed back into its original owner.

* * * *

True to his word, Jimmy saved Frank's life. Justice in Spellfire worked a little different than most places. The judge took twenty years from Frank and gave them to Jimmy and Teri. They were the

Harvest of Heroes

young couple they were always meant to be, and, of course, Jimmy cured her cancer.

Now, if you ever pass through Spellfire, be sure to stop by the teal-colored house with the white picket fence, right on the edge of town. Be it Thanksgiving, Christmas, or any day, friends and laughter, children and love sit at their big table, and there is always room for one more. For in the end, it was only love that mattered.

The End