PHAZE FLARE FREE FICTION



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The Stars Look Down

By Leigh Ellwood

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

My voice gave way when the shadowed figure craned his torso toward me and smiled. He was perched, cross-legged, on the edge of the smooth, rock slab jutting out from the cliff at the end of the trail. He was about ten yards away, yet even underneath the dimming sky, streaked red and orange with dark cirrus clouds, I could see he was quite handsome.

Long, dark hair, tucked behind his ears and cinched in a ponytail, trailed down the back of his gray T-shirt, with the frayed split ends just brushing the waistband of his khaki walking shorts. Two dark eyes studied me over a pair of round-rimmed glasses with tinted lenses. I had to wonder how much darker, more mysterious, the world looked to him.

"You didn't realize what?" he asked.

His smile was welcoming, almost expectant. He looked very much at home here, and that further enhanced the feeling inside me that I was intruding upon something. Spread across the rock slab was a red and white checkered blanket, pinned against the slight breeze by a heavy straw basket at a far corner, while the heel of one of his hands pressed against the other. Two clear champagne flutes, the collapsible sort I'd seen at some outdoor gear shops, stood in the dead center, filled with sparkling light liquid.

It was clear he had wanted the time, and space, for himself, too. Actually, himself and one other, whom I couldn't see anywhere in the clearing. There were no trees on the precipice to conceal anybody, either, just the slab and the wide, darkening sky.

"You were saying?" he prodded, and pushed the glasses up to the bridge of his nose. His voice was light and smooth, yet flavored with a smoky timbre that no doubt would send shivers down the spine of the sunset companion was he expecting when coupled with the right words. Just the last three he had said to me alone caused my heart to numb.

"I-I..." I took a step backward. My hiking boot snapped a twig and I reached for the nearest pine trunk for support. The tightened grip on the knob of my walking stick betrayed my attempt at grace; my knuckles were white and bloodless, my palm perspiring. He wouldn't stop staring, or smiling, at me.

"You look like you're expecting company, er, privacy," I finally managed. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I'll go."

Yet, as the words awkwardly tumbled into the air, I had to ask myself why I was suddenly feeling so guilty. I had not tread upon private property. Anybody could hike this same five-mile mountain trail to enjoy the distant views of the New River Gorge and the large trestle bridge of the same name, which, as I could see now, were quite breathtaking. It was a inspiring, twilight view I had hoped to have for myself, one I thought I would have exclusively since there were no other cars in the gravel lot at the head of this trail. I had assumed the hikers were gone for the day.

The pack strapped to my back felt leaden. I thought of the sketchbook tucked inside, the bottle of cranberry juice and the peanut butter sandwiches, no doubt rendered limp and tasteless from being tossed around with my aggressive pace. I had planned to sit here and draw, with my back against a tree and my jacket draped over my bare knees as protection from the coming chill. I was going to stay out of the way in case any other twilight hikers happened my way. It was not my view to hoard, after all.

This look on this stranger, now turning completely to face me, said clearly that it wasn't going to happen. His smile bothered and enthralled me.

"I was expecting company," he said. "She was late."

"I'm sorry." I craned my neck to look behind me. The path to this point had darkened considerably for the overhang of foliage blocking the sky. The raised tree roots I had been careful to avoid on the way here were blurred into the dirt, invisible now, and I silently hoped the flashlight in my pack had enough juice to get me back to the car.

I listened, and heard no approaching footsteps behind me, nor any gasping for air or grunting under the uncomfortable weight of a similar pack. Whoever she was, wasn't coming anytime soon.

"What kept you?" His voice was calm.

I turned back to him. "What?"

He beckoned me closer with a crook of his long neck. The cords underneath his skin looked tight with the simple gesture, then relaxed. Now there just one smooth, graceful line from his jaw down to what was exposed in the wide neck of his shirt. It looked like the perfect place for a woman to nuzzle, plant a kiss. Whomever he was expecting really had to be a heel for standing him up, was my thought.

But as his gesture prompted me to step cautiously forward, I caught the full meaning of his words.

He was expecting company.

She was late.

Was.

Is?

I turned around again. Just like that mellow America pop song: trees and rocks and plants and things. No people, but us.

I took another step forward. He smiled at the confusion creasing my brow and lifted a glass in my direction.

"You're waiting for me?" I said, my voice a mouse's squeak.

"Do you see anybody else?"

"Do I know you?"

"Probably not." He smiled. "If you'll sit down, you'll soon have that opportunity."

"Do you know me?"

"Does it matter?"

It did to me. I had no stalkers I knew of, and I didn't recall seeing this man around my favorite haunts.

My nerves had to have been exposed at this point. Conversing with a complete stranger in such a remote area, on a cliff, where nobody knew to find me...my mother taught me better than that. He was right, I *didn't* know him, and I didn't know that he would not grasp the hand I'd use to take the proffered champagne class and hurl me into the gorge.

And yet, this feeling in the pit of the stomach, small yet powerful enough to quell the nervous roil, quickly spread a sense of calm through my blood, like some kind of drug. I figured his smile played some part in that.

"You'll have to forgive me," he said, and tipped the aloft glass. "My arm is getting tired." His eyes pleaded with me. *This is for you, you know.*

"Oh." I took the glass and, after shedding my pack, took a seat on a smaller, separate rock protrusion. His smile turned devilish.

"Chicken," he accused, and raised his glass in silent toast.

I took a hesitant sip. The champagne was dry, pungent, and didn't taste like any sinister additives had fused with it. "So," I tried to lighten my mood, "you come here often?"

He turned back to the view and enjoyed a deeper drink from his own glass. "First time, actually. I heard good things about this place."

"Yet, you knew to expect me."

He said nothing, but lifted a dewy bottle from the basket and poured himself a refill. He waved the bottle in my direction, though it appeared that I had not touched the drink.

"I didn't drug it," he said.

"I never said you did."

"Your eyes tell me different."

I looked into my glass. Only bubbles, none of them arranged in the skull and crossbones. "I'm not accusing you of anything." My voice was small. "I just didn't expect something like this." I looked into his eyes, still peering over those shades, soft yet piercing. "Did you expect me?"

"Being the optimist, I always expect something good is going to happen."

His words warmed me in the oncoming breeze. Before I knew it I had drained the glass in order to cool down. Something in his voice was persuasive enough to lead me to a second drink as he made another offer and swung the bottle toward my extended glass. The voice or the alcohol, I couldn't decide which had greater influence on me. At that moment he could have sweetly asked me to swan dive off the cliff and I would have complied.

Instead, he reached into the basket again and produced a plastic container of strawberries to go with the champagne. They looked fine, and I helped myself. We continued to talk, about everything and nothing: the view, the unspoiled beauty of the gorge, my drawings. I brought out my sketchbook to show earlier efforts from another hike; he was very complimentary.

Yet during this time I never caught his name, nor did he ask for mine. Maybe it was the champagne or the absurdity of the situation, but it bothered me less and less with each drink. I relaxed, and didn't protest as he inched closer to me during our conversation.

As the sun set over the distant bridge, though it was still light enough to see, we had exhausted the entire container of fruit and two bottles, and here he was uncorking a third. I had to wonder how he managed to lug all of that up the mountain, but he seemed fit enough. Muscles rippled underneath the sleeves of his T-shirt, pulling the fabric across his chest with every simple movement. I wanted to reach out and touch them, touch him.

Instead, I watched him uncoil to stand and pace a ways toward the trees as he undid the foil and wire contraption holding in the cork. His legs were long and cut, not an inch of fat to be seen. His shorts hung loose around his thighs, yet the outline of a small but well-toned backside was clearly noticeable. A good size, one a woman wouldn't mind so much reaching around to grasp, holding him close.

And when he turned back around, I caught a glimpse of something not so small, warping the front zipper of his shorts.

Oh, my.

I drained my glass in anticipation of another refill. Bubbles shot through my veins to every erogenous point in my body, my skin prickled with the cork's resounding pop, which echoed throughout the gorge. He let the misty vapor emanating from the bottle subside before tilting it over my glass.

He filled his own and nodded toward the gorge. "Turn around," he said. "I want to show you something."

I obeyed, sitting cross-legged now on the blanket, and drank some more. I felt him behind me, his even breathing, and the heat of his body as it nearly brushed against my back.

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it?" he whispered. "Nothing for miles. No sound, just peace."

It wasn't entirely true. There was the bridge to consider, and the distant trail of automobile headlights streaming in one direction. Though looking to the left of it, he had a point. The view was stunning, even under the dimming sky. The rock walls took on darker hues, and the gentle roar of the New River below was a comfort, one that could lull the most agitated person to sleep. To be honest, that, coupled with the drink, was leading me there.

It was the disruption of this view by an unidentified object flying over my head, though, which rendered me alert. It seemed to fly in slow motion in a steep arc over the cliff, then float into the increasing black. It was his shirt.

Huh?

I set down my glass.

Two strong, bare arms encircled me from behind, startling me at first. His hands stroked my belly over the fabric of my shirt, then reached up to massage my breasts. My nipples hardened instantly to his touch, yet the rest of my body became easily pliant and I leaned back against him.

I felt flush, more so when I felt his breath in my ear, then nuzzling into my neck. A hand stilled my turning head.

"No," he said, and pointed forward. "Don't move, just keep looking out there."

I obeyed, as difficult as it was to do. Light kisses dusted my neck and jaw, and his tongue traced the outer shell of my ear. Hands tugged at the hem of my shirt and teased the bits of exposed flesh underneath, then fumbled with button and zipper of my shorts. I let him do this; my will no longer mattered, it had drowned long ago in a wave of lustful feeling and champagne. I studied the view; it seemed the only thing I could do.

"Lean back a bit more."

I did. I was now cradled against him, absorbing his heat, my head resting comfortably in the crook of his neck. A hand slipped under the elastic band of my panties and raked gently south. The mere anticipation of his next move made me wet, and easier for him to find what he was looking for.

He didn't waste any time, either. Two fingers pried my labia part and took possession of my clit, stroking it in circular motion. I twitched in his embrace, wanting to cry, wanting to gain control of my body again, wanting to do something. I was helpless in this seduction and confused, for I couldn't decide whether to be angry or excited, probably because my experience in such situations was limited. I never considered myself the aggressor when it came to sex, but being the submissive was entirely new.

The scenery melted around me, usurped by dusk. I twitched again, wanting to cry, wanting to come.

And he stopped, and pulled away with a disappointed groan. But it was *my* voice. I nearly fell backward, but he propped me up to a straight, sitting position.

"Unlace your boots." His command was steely underneath his soft voice, and I leaned forward to comply, waiting for the swan dive off the cliff request. I set my boots to one side, tucked my hiking socks into them, and waited. I heard a sharp zipping sound, then the flap of fabric whipping the air as his shorts sailed over the cliff.

I had to laugh. "I hope you're not expecting me to go after--"

I twisted around and gasped, now eye-level to what had earlier tented his shorts.

Oh, my. Where was his underwear?

He smiled down at me. The breeze had toyed with his ponytail, creating a frizzy halo, and he stripped the elastic from his hair and quietly discarded it. "Did I say you could turn around?" he chided.

"I prefer this view," I said, my eyes still on his erection. All I could think of was how he would taste counteracted with the champagne. Never mind that a troop of Boy Scouts might burst forth from the trees, looking for a nighttime camping spot. I was dizzy, and I didn't care. Let

there be an audience. Hikers, Boy Scouts, nuns...so long as they stayed their distance and didn't interrupt.

I reached for my glass and took a deep drink, but didn't swallow. I had read something in a women's magazine months ago. Ten ways turn on your man, or was it twenty? Whatever, it was standard filler sandwiched in between pungent perfume ads. I hadn't the opportunity to try it until now.

My cheeks bulged with champagne, the bubbles pricked at my gums. I pursed my lips apart from my teeth and cuffed him with one hand. I brushed the tip of him against my lips for a few seconds before daring to break the seal and take him whole, making sure not to leak anything.

I felt him groan beneath me. I twisted my body around completely and gripped one of his thighs for balance. He swayed to one side and cupped my shoulders, at first I thought to prolong the sensation as I worked him further inside my mouth, but I realized he wanted me to let go. I swallowed, just the champagne, disappointed.

The sky darkened more; his face was grim and shadowed, but I saw that was only an illusion played in the dark. His gestures evoked feelings entirely the opposite.

He tugged at the collar of my shirt. "Get this off, now."

Everything came off in rapid succession: shirt, shorts, bra, panties. One by one, over the cliff, leaden weight with the sudden lack of breeze. I had nothing to replace them with, and I didn't care. I gave no thought to how I was going to get down the trail without being seen, or how I was going to be able to drive home and not attract the attention of a voyeuristic truck driver or two, sitting high in their cabs in search for just this sort of thing.

I thought of the cold numbing my skin, the relief provided by the heat of his own as he sank to his knees and took me into his arms, and claimed my mouth roughly, filling me again.

"Lie back," he managed after breaking free. I obeyed, pulling him with me, but he resisted.

He nodded toward the cliff, and nudged my hips upward. The blanket tugged along underneath us. Bits of gravel trapped underneath poked my backside; his erection tapped my pubic bone. "Further back," he said.

I tilted my head back, seeing only rock formations and blue-black sky. My chest heaved, I was dizzy with altitude and lust. He was going to push *us* over the cliff, too, was my first thought, and I stiffened. A gentle trail of kisses along my jaw, however, eased that fear.

"I won't let go," he promised, and edged our bodies further along the cliff. "Roll back some more."

The slab ended in a jagged edge at the cliff. The blanket provided only so much cushioning for my shoulder blades as I tipped my head backward into the gorge. Blood rushed to my cheeks, my hair draped into the ravine. I should have been frightened and uncomfortable and screaming for help. Instead, I never felt more alive.

Two wet lips pursed over one breast. Teeth gently nibbled. I writhed in place, then let myself become pliant to his touch as a hand delved between my thighs to move them farther apart. "Relax," I could hear him mutter into my skin, but I was already there.

When one finger, then two, plunged inside me I remained calm and let him explore me from the inside, let the pleasured feeling wash over me into the ravine. But once again, before I could climax he let go, but only seconds elapsed before his face was between my thighs, hovering over me, inhaling my scent.

One finger traced the perimeter, brushing away wisps of pubic hair. My pussy twitched in response, and ached for deeper exploration. "Nice," I heard him mutter as he pried my lips apart. His breath tickled my clit; it was torture not to feel his touch.

Then came something cold and wet. I tried to look up, but my desire had weakened me. My neck muscles ached, but I had to guess he was pouring the remainder of the champagne on me. I pictured my pussy drenched in light amber fizz, his tongue lapping up every drop. When he did, he licked my pussy from the edges of my engorged opening to my clit, stopping there to suckle until I couldn't take any more. My screams punctured the sky.

He lifted his head and leaned forward. "Nice," he echoed, and he grasped hold of his erection and scraped the tip against my core. I was still, anticipating a grand new sensation to come. When it did, when it filled me and stretched me like elastic, I flew in the gorge and soared upward.

I craned my neck. I had to see it, I had to watch him enter me, but a strong hand clasped my chin and gently forced my head back. The other hand pinned my hip to the rock as he pumped into me. "Don't look at me. Look up."

Looking up brought only a view of the other side of the gorge

formation, bordering by clear night. The cirrus clouds had dissolved and given way to thousands of stars that I tried to connect, but failed. The anticipation of another orgasm to crumble the formation underneath me had all my attention as I listened to his rhythmic, labored breathing.

"It's a beautiful night," he said.

"It is."

"You're beautiful."

I would have cried if I could. The position of my head and neck prevented that. "Thank you."

I would have closed my eyes if I didn't think he was watching me watch the sky. My palms had been pressed against the blanket. I risked a synchronized touch up his tightened arms, pleased to hear no protest. Over his shoulders and down his back I let them roam until they met at the small of his back and pressed together. A twitch of his hips changed the angle of his entry, and I gasped at this new feeling. Something was building up inside that I had never felt before, and when he arched his back and reared his head upward with a guttural cry I became his echo, constricting and pulsing and bouncing off the rocks until my body molded into the promontory and refused to budge.

Gently he scooped me by the neck and eased me to safety, rewarding my bravery with multiple kisses. "Thank you," he said as he rolled me to one side and covered me with the blanket.

"You're welcome," I murmured. At least, that's what I think I had said. He was fast turning into a mirage as, weary, my eyes closed and the stars disappeared.

* * *

Daybreak taunted. I awoke with the blanket askew across my hips; my breasts were bared to the sun, and my back and neck ached. I slowly willed myself to sit and looked around the clearing. The gorge was in place, as was the distant bridge lined with cars. My pack was where I had left it, unopened and probably smelling of peanut butter.

He was gone. So were his pack and basket. I saw even no trace of foil or thin wire from the champagne bottles we had shared. If not for the blanket, I had to wonder if he, and last night, had not been a grand, orgasmic hallucination.

"Morning," sang a voice from the trees. I panicked and covered myself better with the cloth as branches and leaves rustled, and out

stepped a young woman hefting a heavy overnight pack and brandishing a Thermos. She was pouring orange juice into the cup, which she handed to me as she took a seat on the rock formation.

She was blond, about my age, athletic. She studied our surroundings with a pinched face. "Mm, you'd have thought this time he would have left a bottle behind," she muttered, her voice tinged with disappointment. "I was kind hoping to have a mimosa this morning."

I had the cup to my lips, a knee-jerk reaction, but moved it away when she spoke. "What?"

She looked at me. "He was here last night, right? He had to be." She lifted a corner of the blanket.

My heart dropped down the gorge. "You know him? He does exist then?"

"We think so."

"We?"

She nodded toward the trees, and I craned my neck to see more women emerging from the trail, weary from the walk, anticipated expressions falling slack upon seeing only two woman perched on the distant rock by the cliff.

It baffled me. Was *this* the dream? Were they here to finish some sinister job he had intended, then decided against? Was I going over the cliff for real this time?

"What's all this?" I asked, and turned back to the smiling woman next to me. "Who are you?"

"You can call me Tallulah," said the blond.

"That's a pretty name."

"It's not my name," she said. "It's after Tallulah Gorge, in Georgia. That's where I was hiking last year when I met him."

Tallulah gestured to the half-dozen or so women positioned before me in a semicircle. Introductions resembled a roll call of the national park system. There were no actual names, only places: Amicalola Falls, Harper's Ferry, Yellowstone, Allegheny Trail...my dream lover had been cutting a swath across the countryside.

And there I was among them, naked in more than one respect: New River Gorge. I was speechless, still unable to decide what amazed me more, that I let a strange man seduce me in such a remote area, or that there were so many others like me, pursuing him like rabid fans of a cult music group.

The one called Allegheny reached into her pack and produced a

one-size fits all cotton dress and tossed it to me. "Helps to be prepared," she said.

I scrambled to get the dress over my head. "Thanks." What now, I wondered. "Uh, I guess you all answered the one question I had. He does exist."

The answer was a chorus of dreamy smiles and affirmations. I swallowed. He had been with all these women, enticed them into baring their bodies and souls, fucked nature with them. Suddenly my own experience didn't seem so special.

A hand touched down on my shoulder. Tallulah appeared to sense my distress. "I wouldn't take it personal, sweetie. What you had with him, it was good, right?"

My eyes were wet. "It was very good." The best.

She shrugged. "So it was for me, and everybody else here. It's sort of why we were hoping this time we'd be able to catch to him." She sighed. "But it appears he's eluded us once again."

The mood around me darkened. Not even the sun could pierce it. I sipped the juice; I needed the energy. "So what happens now?" I asked.

"Now," Tallulah said, standing, "we move on to the next park. Maybe we'll get lucky this time, or maybe we'll find another you wrapped in afterglow and leaves on the floor of some trail." I heard snickers all around me. "You coming?"

"What?" I blinked. "You want me to join you? You know where to find him?" Was there a bus idling at the mouth of the trail, another desperate 'victim' at the wheel checking her watch?

"Not really. There's no pattern to where he'll strike next. Sometimes we'll hit two or three parks or trails before we find evidence of his handiwork." She chuckled.

I gathered the blanket into a ball and clutched it to my chest. I could smell him in the fabric. My heart thrummed. "I see, and what will happen if you find him?" I asked. "Ask him to choose between the lot of you? That seems a bit dramatic, don't you think, traveling cross-country to track down a nameless man who gave you an incredible fuck."

"You would know," Allegheny pointed out, "being on the receiving end of that incredible fuck yourself. You don't want another one?"

Of course I did. Nothing would have pleased me more than to have woken up in my nameless lover's arms. But I had enough sense to know that the anonymity of the moment we shared would not give rise to a relationship. It was what it was, a union of bodies amid nature, pleasure shared under the stars. I couldn't let the obsession these women were harboring spoil that for me.

So I stayed behind, and watched them leave in single file back down the mountain. Not a one turned back as if expecting me to change my mind. I gave them my answer and they shook me from their hiking boots, determined to chase their shared dream. Me, I had better things to do.

I stayed behind for most of the morning, dining on last night's forgotten sandwiches and sketching in my pad. The distant rocks and river below were ignored as my charcoal pencil scratched against the paper, forming a perfect image of his smiling face. It's a memory I continue to treasure, especially on a starlit night, when I feel the urge to fly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Ellwood is a multi-published author of romance and the creator of Phaze's award-winning Dareville series. An EPPIE nominee in a former life, she was honored with the 2005 Golden Rose Award for Best Erotica (*Dare Me*) and the second place prize for Best Pansexual Erotica by the ERWI (also for *Dare Me*). She is proud to make Phaze her primary home for her romantic novels and short stories.

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