

THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER

By Joey W. Hill

Miriam had expected the mattress in the corner, but the star design quilt surprised her. So did the orange and yellow chrysanthemum petals scattered over the dirt floor.

She had been tortured here. The roughly hewn oak table, now covered with a white knitted cloth, had a knothole in the upper right corner. They had bound her body to the wood in the vulnerable spread eagle position, favored by torturers for centuries. She had had no room to squirm to change the knothole's position, just enough slack to grind it into her shoulder when her body convulsed in pain.

A crisscrossing of rafters held up the thatched roof. Strands of cut ivy now twined around them prettily, but she had stared at the bare beams for hours while her jaw muscles screamed for release from the unrelenting pressure of a steel bit jammed against the hinges of her mouth. As the hours passed, the rafters became bars of a cage that would never open. Palmetto bugs scampering in and out of the thatching taunted her with freedom won by insignificance.

She had stood on the dirt floor, where the petals lay now. They strung her arms over her head and tied her to those rafters so that they could poke pins in every place, their avid, lecherous eyes crawling over her body. Sweat had poured off her skin, turning the dirt floor to mud.

They finally found the numb place they sought, over her heart. By that time, she was numb everywhere. Miriam thought she should have died hours ago from the utter horror of it all. Perhaps she had already died, and these were the minions of Hell assigned to torment her soul for eternity.

The bucket they had forced her to use in front of them - it was that or soil herself - was still in the room. She saw the wooden curve of it behind a blanket curtain now strung in the corner. That surprised her, too. The bucket had been cleaned well; she did not smell it at all.

There were other changes, new details. Four pillar candles stood on an upside down crate next to the mattress. The aroma of the dried lavender mixed in the wax mingled with the smell of fresh bread and cheese sitting on a bread board next to them.

Grady watched her take it all in. In size, he was what she expected of a jailer. His farming life made him a strong, solid man. His linen shirt was clean, as were his trousers, and he had shaved since she had seen him this morning.

He had brought her breakfast without a hint of their plan, giving away nothing that would excite the suspicion of the day guard, a self important miller's son who watched over her with gawky brutishness. He liked to brandish his rusted flint at her when she took her daily turn outside. Miriam didn't fool herself that the judges intended compassion with the daily exercise. It was a warning to the giggling children and tight-lipped women who watched her shuffle about in the heavy irons. *Do not go outside the flock, for the wolves will get you.*

Of course, the judges were the wolves. They just laid the blame on Satan. No wonder that horned gentleman was always depicted in a foul mood. Miriam was in no fine spirit herself, being blamed for the ill that befell others because of their own vices.

"I wish it could be elsewhere, Mistress," Grady murmured, "But I thought the changes might help you think of it differently."

"So I'd act differently?" she asked, more sharply than she intended.

"No." He shook his head and went to the fireplace to stoke the fire. When he was done, he looked at her over his shoulder, a long searching look that seemed to want to ask something. Grady was approaching forty. He had a big nose, callused by a hot forge. He served as the town blacksmith when he wasn't farming his land. He had made the irons she wore now.

He wasn't given to wearing a hat, she remembered, which explained the bronze tips of his brown hair, showing streaks of silver. The ends were uneven, suggesting he had attempted the job of cutting it himself. His thick eyebrows sloped down to the outer corner of his eyes, giving him a constantly kind, somewhat sad look. Simple, strong features. He had a nice mouth, the lips slightly curved, the chin cut well. Curly brown hair covered his forearms, revealed by the rolled up sleeves of the linen shirt. There was a sweat stain on his back, but it was a cool night. He was nervous.

Grady rose, went to what Miriam had assumed was another bench, and pulled the burlap covering away. The trough beneath released a cloud of steam. A stool drawn up next to the trough held a cake of soap, several cloths cut from old clothes, and a brush.

So he wanted her clean, then. Fair enough. She hadn't expected a common man to be particular about the cleanliness of a woman he intended to bed, but then the past fortnight had given her a broadened education on men. Their physical needs were as unpredictable as women's emotional ones.

Miriam tightened her chin. Suffering was a purge; it stripped everything from one's mind except brutal honesty. She could be bitter, but her eyes still clung to the bath greedily. Two nights ago, she had sobbed in her cell, a palm tightly clapped over her mouth so no one could hear. She wept not because she might be sentenced to hang, but because she would die filthy.

Whatever the morrow brought, she would face it clean. The judges preferred it the opposite way; filthy on the outside, as they believed a woman to be on the inside. By giving her the gift of this bath, Grady risked much, and he was not a stupid man.

Her bitterness ebbed and Miriam remembered how they had come to this moment. Her sentence read, the sun setting on the first of the three days she had left to live. The voice coming out of the darkness, his voice. Grady whispered that if she claimed herself to be with child, they would spare her life until they were sure the conception was truth, and if it was, then she could carry it full term.

"And as time passes," his quiet, gravel voice rumbled through the darkness, "There's a chance they might let ye live, give ye pardon. One day, after that, they'll stop watchin' ye, and ye kin go away from here."

His dark form squatted down against her prison wall. He worked something in his hands. 'Idle hands do the devil's handiwork' flashed ludicrously through Miriam's mind. He turned his head and the almost full moon glinted off his steady gaze. She had blocked him out before that; just another dumb lackey doing their bidding. Now she remembered him.

Grady Cole, the blacksmith farmer whose wife had passed on this last winter from a lung disease. Miriam had brought the poor woman an herbal remedy for her lungs and instructed Grady on how to prepare it, how to hold his wife's weak head over a basin to breathe the vapors.

He had not stood with the others in the court, accusing her of bringing the devil into his house in the form of those vapors, and causing his wife's death. But he had been her jailer, which up until that moment in the dark seemed to represent his feelings well enough.

"Why would you help me?" she had whispered.

"I've my reasons. 'Tis your decision to make," he said. "It won't be easy on ye, Mistress Miriam, but I know ye to be strong. Tell me your answer in t'morn. I leave ye this. Leave it whole if 'tis yer wish to do this thing; if not, tear off the petals."

The barely opened damp petals of the chrysanthemum had stayed pressed in her hand all night. In the morning Miriam had laid the flower, crushed but intact, on the dirt floor where he could see it.

She had been certain her death was meant to be, was not sure if she had the strength to change her thinking on it. But extraordinary things were usually the hand of Fate, and Grady's plan, offered free from anything but risk to himself and his standing in the community, was extraordinary. Also, despite the horror of the past few weeks, Miriam remembered the warmth of a sunrise, the soft press of rich soil in her fingers, the icy cold creek water in her throat, and the wind billowing her skirt before her. Those were extraordinary things as well, and she didn't want to lose them.

She assumed Grady's offer came from lust. Watching as they stripped her again and again to torture her and probe her, supposedly for the grace of God but really for the frustrated seeking of their own desires, Grady had been driven to a fever pitch of carnal desire. And what risk was there to him, really? He need only say she had bewitched him if he was caught.

But the effort expended to make this room tidy, more to a woman's liking and less of a reminder of the horrors she had endured here, did not fit the base motive. A man's lust did not take into account any of the woman's feelings on the matter. Hadn't Miriam known that very soon after she was bedded by her husband, a husband whose death had started the chain of events that led to her trial? A young widow, knowledgeable in healing and herb lore, who preferred solitude, whose husband's heart exploded in his breast as he worked his fields.

They had been sympathetic at his burial. Mistress Goodson put her arms around her while Miriam stared blindly at the corpse. Two months later, Mistress Goodson raked her fingernails down Miriam's face in court, when she accused Miriam of seducing her husband.

Thomas Goodson had needed no seducing. Miriam stopped his late night attempts to slip into her home by blowing a hole in the barn with the shotgun, missing his head by inches. She wrung her hands and claimed she thought he was a fox trying to get uninvited into the henhouse. Point taken, and so she ended up here, convicted and condemned.

“You’re thinkin’ too much,” Grady said softly. He came to her. He was a head taller and twice as wide, with shoulders that could block foul weather. They had, Miriam remembered, thinking how often he had conveniently covered her back when he guided her from the courtroom, taking the brunt of the spitting and thrown punches.

He knelt and removed her irons, his big hands gentle on her ankles. Grady slid them, clanking, under the table, out of sight beneath the draped cloth.

“Would you like your bath before food?”

“Shouldn’t we just go ahead and do it?” she cleared the words over her swollen tongue. “They’ll find you.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’ve taken care of all that. We won’t be disturbed until dawn. Come...come bathe. I put oil in the bath, that oil to soothe the skin. Remember, ye told me it would help...my wife, when her muscles ached from the coughing.”

Muscles aching from lungs struggling for air were different from those bruised from being beaten or crushed, but his eyes were so earnest, his expression so kind, Miriam didn’t have the strength to put him off. Besides which, putting him off was the last thing she was here to do.

“Did you put in rosemary?” she managed.

“Aye,” he said. “I had some left. Can I help ye to undress?”

Miriam stared at her hands, nodded. Grady turned her away from him and unhooked the torn and bloody rags that used to be a respectable dress, her Meeting dress. His fingers did not hurry, nor did they fumble.

“You’ve capable hands,” she managed, staring at a crack in the wall.

“You’re a tiny woman,” he remarked, just as irrelevantly, pausing briefly to sit his hands at her waist. The intimate contact snapped her spine rigid, like a brittle twig, but he only continued to remove the dress, as if he noticed nothing.

But Grady felt her tension. Aye, she was tiny, a thin slip of woman with a face drawn in tense lines, only a shadow behind her husband Arthur. She had straight brown hair as fine as seaweed floating beneath the surface of water. Her mouth was wide, and though he’d never seen her smile, he suspected she’d done it once, a lot. Her eyes met a man’s straight on, dark and sad, but intelligent. A long, narrow face, high cheeks. Hard work, worry and fear had creased her face with a decade more years than she had.

He hesitated, then pushed the dress off her shoulders. When the judges first stripped her, Grady had seen the cattle brand on her back. Now, when he was closer than the doorway, which was as far as the judges had allowed him, he saw all the other bruises and scars, the work of a dead man. The judges’ strikes would settle into scars over them, like layers of fossils in the earth, marking the eras of one woman’s life.

Grady looked at her, because he was a man and he could not help but notice the bare hips, the small breasts, the frost of hair between her legs, but he saw the whole woman, whose bare flesh and bare soul struck him hard. Many things had led to this unusual situation. The world was much more than he had thought it to be. He had opened himself up to this moment, and now Grady accepted its horror and its wonder, its privilege and its finiteness.

“Do not be worrit,” he warned her. He turned her slightly, directed her by guiding her arm slowly up and over his neck, then he bent, slid a hand beneath her knees and under her back, and raised her off her feet.

The weights they had piled on her legs to force her confession would make it hard for her to lift her legs over the trough edge, just as the thumbscrews that had crushed her fingers made it almost impossible for her to unfasten her own dress. Indeed, what they were here to do would most likely cause her more pain; Grady wanted to make it as gentle as possible. It would go easier for her if she were as relaxed as he could coax her to be.

Miriam curled four fingers around his neck and his hair covered her knuckles. His skin beneath the collar of the shirt was hot. Mistress Cole had been so cold those last few weeks; the heat of this man probably kept her warm, if Grady had kept to her bed until the end. Somehow Miriam knew he had. She suspected Mistress Cole died in her husband’s arms. He had been there, close enough to feel the soul’s departure like a kiss against the cheek. She had been close enough to feel Arthur. Miriam shuddered.

Grady lowered her into the steaming water of the tub and the shudder eased into a shiver of pleasure. Her breath went out in a throaty hum as the hot water embraced her body. Every muscle sighed in release, every nerve ending wept with joy.

“I’m going under,” she said as he drew his hands away. He only had a moment to react as she allowed herself to slip fully beneath the surface. That wondrous silence closed in, that noiselessness that held the key to Paradise. *Spirits of water, I welcome you. Be with me tonight.*

When they had dropped her into the pond to see if she would float, Miriam had thought about staying under, binding her wrists in the long strands of marsh grass and drowning in that quiet. But air called to her at last, the need to survive goading her to ignore the consequences of emerging from the peaceful promise death offered.

Miriam opened her eyes and looked at Grady through the wavy screen of water.

Grady threaded his fingers through her hair, loosening the dirt and freeing the tangles below the water’s surface. The hair felt like warm silk against her cheeks and chin, the ends brushing her lips like the whisper touch of angel fingers.

She clutched at his arms and Grady eased her up into the necessity of air.

“Here then,” he rolled up a blanket and put it behind her back, low in the water. “Lean against this and I’ll wash your hair.”

The firelight flickered against the wall, creating shadows that sculpted the planes of his face differently from moment to moment, but the intent kindness of his expression was a canvas that never changed.

Spirits of fire, I welcome you. Be with me tonight.

Miriam raised her hand out of the tub and let the water trickle out of her palm to the earth floor, mixing the two elements.

Spirits of earth, I welcome you. Be with me tonight.

Grady leaned over her and rubbed the soap in her hair, lathering, stroking, scrubbing. Miriam closed her eyes. "'Tis funny, you know."

"What's that, Mistress?"

"It's like how bread tastes when you are very, very hungry. I don't think anything has ever felt so good to me as this bath."

Genuine pleasure filled his voice. "I'm glad to hear you feel that way. I'd hoped..."

Miriam opened her eyes when he did not continue, and saw a troubled shadow on his face. "What?"

Grady lifted his shoulder, quick, embarrassed and jerky. "I was going t'say I wanted to make this night so ye felt like that about the other, but it did not sound as it should."

That was the worrisome part. Miriam knew how the rest of tonight would work. Grady had made the thought of it easier to bear, so far, but the one thing she must do to make the magic work was the thing Miriam saw no magic in at all.

"Now I've got you worrying again," he rumbled quietly.

"Am I, then?" Miriam closed her eyes, pressed her lips together. "Grady, I killed him, you know."

He stopped, hands buried in her hair. "I know that," he said. "He deserved to die."

"The judges would say that was God's decision."

"Well," he wrung a rag over her head and the water ran over her closed lids. "He's a very busy God, I'd say. Sometimes He can use a hand."

Grady cupped her face briefly with fingers as gentle as a mother's and surprised her into opening her eyes.

"Ye did what we men should ha' done the first time Arthur brought ye t'Meeting with a bloody nose," he said quietly. "I watched ye sit there and try to wipe it, watched yer fingers get bloodier and bloodier. I knew one day it would be his blood on your hands, because your blood splashed to the floor of our church and no one offered you anything, not even a kerchief. The stains are still there, like an unforgiven sin we all carry. You had to pay for it."

"You don't talk like a man angry with God, Grady," she looked down at her hands. "I thought maybe that might be one of the reasons you were doing this. To get even with God for taking your wife."

Miriam expected him to react defensively, but he shrugged and began to sponge her shoulders. His eyes followed the course of the water over her breasts. "I am angry at God," he replied. "But I'm no' so sure anymore that life and death are something God decides for us. Arthur deserved to die, but you had to kill him. My wife didn't deserve to die, but she did. You did everything you could to save her. So did I." Grady sat back and looked at her, those big, soap covered hands loose, dangling between his knees, dripping more water to the floor.

"Miriam...Mistress—"

"Miriam is fine, Grady." She glanced down at herself and his gaze followed hers to her naked breasts, and then he looked away again.

"I figured it might be fine to call ye such, but I didn't...I don't want you thinkin' I'm taking anything for granted tonight. I know why we're here isn't what ye wanted, but I don't want...I don't want ye to do anything..." he took a deep breath, ran a palm over his face. "There's a reason I beat metal for a livin', Miriam. I talk like a cursed fool."

Compassion speared her. Miriam sucked in a breath against its painful invasion. The desire to strike out at him for taking her numbness away was immediate, but by her second breath, the pain receded, and she was rational.

"You don't sound like a fool to me, Grady," she managed, raising a broken hand from the water and laying it on his wrist. Water dripped from both their fingers and reflected the firelight. Grady sighed, blessing the mixture of earth and firelit water with the spirit of wind.

Spirits of air, I welcome you. Be with me here tonight.

Bless your presence here tonight, all spirits of the four directions. Let my heart be open to the lessons you will teach, aid me in this task as the Lord and Mother will it.

"You are a man of few words, Grady Cole," she said gently. "But when you looked at your sweet Sarah, I saw all the words that have been put down since the beginning of time in your eyes. So speak from that great heart of yours and tell me in simple phrases what's plaguing you. What are you trying to say, man?"

He covered her hand, gripped it, but with a very tender pressure. "It's not like that. It's more about what's plaguing you. Arthur...he wasn't kind. I know that, saw that." He stared intently at their joined hands. "I figure that isn't the only way he wasna kind to you. No matter what else happens, I don't want ye t'feel a moment's fear, Miriam. I'll be very, very gentle. Ye won't be feeling any pain, I swear that on my very life."

"I can't breathe," she gasped. Her body perversely began to slide back down into the water, where air would be denied her altogether.

Grady caught her, sliding his arms around her back, bringing her up. He knelt by the tub, holding her wet, gasping form against his chest, letting her head drop onto his shoulder. Miriam sobbed for air as he rubbed her back and murmured soothingly to her. It was a few moments before the roaring in her head died down enough to let her hear him.

“---just calm down, now, yer all right. Just an attack of nerves. My Sarah used to get them when something upset her a lot. You’re just not used to kindness, not really ready for it. You’ve been thinking that you had to be like a good cookpot, with no holes or cracks. A good cookpot keeps what’s inside it boiling, and you think that’s what’s helped you survive, and maybe yer right. But kindness turns down the flame, and you’re thinking ye won’t be able to keep makin’ the stew without it.”

She shook and he tightened his hold, but Miriam shook her head against his jaw and pushed at him with her feeble hands so he’d let her up and see her hitching, weak laughter.

“Grady, you are too much. Sarah used to warn me of your analogies.”

“Oh?” his face creased in a dozen places when he smiled, a well-furrowed field. He lifted his hand and knuckled away one of her nervous tears. “Did she, then? She always was a sassy woman. What did she say?”

“She said you could figure a way to compare the coming of Christ to feeding the chickens in the morning.”

“Well,” he considered it, his eyes twinkling a bit. “So I could. If ye think of the chickens as a flock--“

Miriam placed a finger on his lips, and the humor died out of his eyes as it disappeared in hers. “I can’t bear to laugh again right now, Grady.”

He nodded. “Sit back then, and let me finish your bath.”

He poured a bucket of warm water over her head and ran his strong hands through the locks of hair, squeaking them to make sure the soap was gone. Grady pushed it all back off her face, lifted it from her shoulders and over the edge of the trough before it could get the itchy, gluey feeling it left on drying skin. He eased her back against the rolled up blanket and added another bucket of hot water to the tub to keep it blissful. Then he took up the cloth again, soaped it, and started on her shoulders.

He rubbed in slow, round circles, taking off the dirt and loosening the muscles beneath, making them even more loose with his capable fingers. He lifted one of her arms out and ran the cloth up and down its length, taking great care between the curled fingers, not even bringing a murmur of complaint to her lips. Miriam’s eyelids drooped, and as Grady began humming a quiet tune, she closed them completely again, giving herself over to the smell of steam and soap, of warmth and the man next to her.

He switched sides, did the other arm in the same fashion, up and back, up and back, every expanse of skin cleansed and stroked. His arm came around her back, lifting her in the cradle of his shoulder and chest to run the cloth on the underside of her arm, back and forth in the moist indentation of each armpit. His breath whispered past her ear, his shoulder and chest a solid, generous pillow.

Grady shook her slightly, a gentle vibration as he dipped the rag and turned the soap on it again. The cloth came back to her shoulder again, only this time it ran up the column of her throat. His fingers stroked her neck, around, under her hair, up along the curved path behind her ear. Miriam lifted her chin, letting him have greater access, no longer wondering that cats liked it so much. She had never had such a bath.

He stayed at her neck a long time, and she continued to expose her throat to him, curling and uncurling her fingers on her thighs at each stroke as if she were indeed a feline kneading.

His finger traced her larynx through the cloth, down into the tender pocket where the edges of the collarbone met. Then, instead of going up again, the soapy rag traced a path down her sternum, right to the water's edge. Miriam drew in a breath and the cloth changed direction, his fingertip and the cotton sliding across the top curve of her breast, etching the line where air and water met, the boundary between elements where magic was possible. So it was, for a hot surge of energy ignited where his fingers touched, and speared downward, tightening into a coil somewhere below her stomach, just above her...

"Grady," she whispered, "What—"

"Ssshhh," he murmured, raising his hand and laying it gently on her forehead, smoothing her wet brow with his thumb. "Just relax, lass."

"I don't know..."

"I know ye don't, love. But I do, and 'twill be all right."

The cloth swept gracefully below the water's surface, and tickled over her nipple like a fish's fin as he traced the water line along the top of her other breast. Miriam swallowed, fighting a strange desire to lift her breast out of the water, let him cover it. What spell was this?

"Easy, girl," he crooned. "Just relax, and stay with me."

Several moments later, Miriam thought she would go mad if he stayed above the water much longer. His hand descended and the washcloth molded over her left breast, cupped in the strength of his hand. An animal-like moan wrenched from her throat, startling her. The knuckles of two of his fingers slid over her nipple and then the knuckles came together, a gentle pressure, close to pain but nothing like.

Arthur had pinched them all the time, making her flinch until his beatings taught her not to, but this was not that. Her body had become weightless and writhing in the water, without any propulsion or direction. Miriam lay helpless against the support of Grady's arm around her back as his fingers kneaded and pressed, kneaded and pressed, swelling her nipple to twice its usual size. His hand moved to the other, but he put the washcloth in her hand first and guided it over the abandoned nipple, showing her how to pleasure herself as he brought the other one to the same blood filled state.

"Grady," she whimpered. "What are you doing to me?"

"Giving you pleasure," he murmured into her ear, brushing her lips against the curve.

"I can't...I don't...oh..."

His hand left her breast, slid down her belly. Legs she forced open with a prayer for courage against Arthur's punishment now fell open to Grady's touch like a gift.

At his first touch there, she spasmed and hissed through her teeth. Miriam dropped the washcloth and her hand sought his shoulder, her good fingers clutching his

hot skin beneath the coarse linen shirt. His fingers stroked and teased, butterflyed against her sex, made circles and tiny dips, drew pictures of mindless things, things that dissolved into one slow torturous design.

Slowly, slowly his finger entered her, then two fingers. They filled her, big man that he was. Miriam whimpered, pressed her lips and teeth against his arm, and nearly screamed against his damp flesh when the fingers supporting her back inched forward over her breast and gently pinched her nipple again.

His knuckles pressed into the soft mound of flesh above where his fingers penetrated. She bucked up with a strangled moan. Lightning flashed, blinding her. Miriam fell, spun out of control, then spread her wings like a bird and shot out of the clouds to fly.

She bowed upwards, arching like a crescent moon toward the touch of his lips on the soft flesh right above her quivering stomach. The waves of pleasure crested, and kept cresting. Still she soared up, and his fingers did not stop their movement. Her mouth opened and she cried out his name, begging him...

Hours, days might have passed when Miriam finally floated back to the earth. She made her landing like a feather, barely touching earth, quivering in the grip of the wind that had carried her. She convulsed in small spasms as his fingers slid out of her. His whole hand cupped her, sealing in the pleasure, the gift he had given her.

Miriam slowly opened her eyes. He was still Grady, but different. The hand curved along the side of her face, the thumb brushing her lips gently, was not entirely steady, and his kind eyes were dark with arousal, and passion.

"Great God," she managed at last. "What was that?"

He smiled, a slow, sensual gesture that transformed the blunt, strong features. "That was how it was meant to be, Miriam, between a man and a woman. It can be done with me inside ye, but," the smile faltered and shy, wonderfully familiar Grady came through again. "It has been a lonely year for me, Miriam, and while I could promise ye I'd be gentle, I could not promise to hold back long enough to give ye that, and I wanted ye to know how it could be."

She stared at him. "Well," she said at last. "Damn Arthur to hell twice then, for what he did to me, and for what he didn't do to me."

No wonder magical energy could be raised from such an act. She had been taught it could be so, but had not believed it, knowing only Arthur's nightly rapes. What Arthur had done to her was just another expression of violence. What Grady had done was pure magic.

"Can you help me out of the tub?" Miriam asked.

He nodded, and helped her stand. Grady swung a towel around her shoulders, slid his arms beneath her and carried her to the fire, setting her on the stool next to it.

"Just stay there and get warm," he instructed, and went back to her tub. He retrieved another towel, and a white folded garment. When he brought it to her and

shook it out, Miriam saw it was a simple white linen nightgown, edged with handmade lace at the cuffs and square neckline.

Miriam stayed the garment from her with a hand. “Should I, . . . I don’t think I should wear her things. It feels wrong.”

Grady’s eyes softened, and he threaded the garment over her head, working her hands into the light sleeves. “Bless ye, lass, for your kind heart. It was not hers, though. It was yours. She was making it for ye as a gift. When her sickness got too much, I forgot about giving it to you, and so did she, but she wanted it as a thank you for all ye did for us.”

“Is that what this is?” Miriam’s gaze stayed on him as he freed her hair from the collar and lifted her slightly off the stool to push the garment down her hips, over her legs. Perhaps it was the magic building in her body, warning her of wrong paths, but Miriam had the uncomfortable feeling her woman’s heart was involved in the question as well. She didn’t want it all to be for a debt Sarah owed her.

“No,” he said simply. He lifted the towel, laid it over her head.

Miriam closed her eyes and his strong hands massaged her scalp through the thick fabric of the towel. She inhaled fresh cut hay, and sunshine. She raised her hands and held it to her nose.

“Grady, how did you—“

“I left it out on the line today so it would smell like the things you’ve been missing.”

Miriam curled her fingers into the towel, pulled it down until it rested in her lap. She folded forward, pressing her face into it, feeling the drained exhaustion that was far beyond tears sweep over her. Desolation.

“What is it, lass? What pains ye?” Grady knelt before her and gently brought her out of the towel, prying her hands from her pale face. “Yer scaring me, now. Tell me what ‘tis, and I’ll fix it.”

“I keep waiting for it to be another part of the nightmare,” she stared at his face. “Oh, Grady, it’s so awful, what fear does to you.”

His big hands touched her face and tenderness filled his eyes.

“I don’t want to burn or hang,” she murmured, “But until this moment, I thought all I had left in my heart was hate, and that isn’t a life worth living. I’ve never felt anything like . . . what you just did, so now I’m thinking, maybe I’ve got something else left, something I can use to do what I need to do to start over, renew my life.”

“So why does that cause ye such pain?”

“Because,” she leaned forward, shyly touched his face with the tip of her index finger. He turned into her hand but otherwise let her feel the way of it. Miriam wanted to touch the side of his face, cup that strong jaw and trace her fingers through the tips of his unevenly cut hair, and as soon as she wanted, she did it.

The feel of his skin beneath her fingertips, the texture of his face, the way his eyes looked as she touched him, the smell of him, the sound of his breathing, she wanted to imprint it on her heart. A wonderful moment was as fleeting as a breath, but like breathing, she wanted to do this over and over again, to bring life back into her heart, to find out the secret to this life that she had lost. She felt so close, with her body vibrating with Grady's magic.

"I'm wasting the gift of this moment you've given me," she whispered, close to tears. "In anticipation of that future I don't now, for what I might not have tomorrow, might never have again."

"It doesna work that way, Miriam," Grady pressed a kiss to her fingers. "I fed my wife, cleaned her each day. A thousand times I thought, why am I doing all this, over and over, when we both knew she was dyin'? Maybe it was the comfort of havin' something to do, not feelin' so helpless. But when I think of it now," his expression turned inward and Miriam did it without thought, caressed the side of his face in comfort. His gaze came back to her, his eyes glistening with tears.

"It was my way of tellin' her how much I loved her. The Lord gave me this precious gift, and I was determined to take care of her every second He gave her to me, even if He was about to take her away. Maybe it wasna how we wanted to be spending our time together, and what might happen tomorrow or the next day was always a shadow over us, but when ye think of it, isn't all life like that? When I was plowin' and I saw bluebells growing beside a rock, I took the time to stop and bring them to her, sit and hold her hand a moment before I went back to the field. And she wanted to sit out on the front stoop when the weather would let her, and watch me go back and forth at my chores. We took joy in every moment we had together, every moment."

Grady covered Miriam's hand against his face and the firelight caught a spark of fierceness in his expression that surprised her. "Whatever we have to do to get you to that new beginning," he said, "We aren't wasting this moment. It's a memory you can hold onto, no matter where it takes you, and your memories form the shape of your soul, keepin' it from shrivelin' into a dry corn husk."

A lump formed in her throat, and did not allow Miriam to speak. She nodded, bowed her head. He rose, took up the brush, and began to stroke it through her hair, using his fingers to painlessly work out the last knots.

He spoke again, but now his words were a quiet rumble, no more intrusive than the crackle of the fire, or the soft scratching of the brush on her scalp. He considered how the bees were making extra honey this year, how the cow Mrs. Darby claimed dried up from Miriam's hex hadn't given milk or calf in ten years. He murmured the chant of the earth, soothing the uneasy writhings of her soul, opening her heart and mind further to the possibilities that she had been afraid to hope existed.

At length he laid down the brush, put both hands on the crown of her head.

"So then, Miriam. Let's do what we must to give you a tomorrow."

"You know they'll kill you for this." The fear of it clamped around her heart, squeezed as mercilessly as the screws.

“Maybe,” he nodded, unafraid. “’Tis all right. You’re worth dyin’ for, Miriam.”

Arthur dead, no friends, parents or siblings, no one to claim or protect her any more than the packed dirt beneath parishioners’ feet on the way to Meeting was claimed or protected, yet suddenly there was this, this man, out of nowhere, elevating her into a light that blinded her. It burned.

Miriam could bear the light of his soul, but the reflection of her own in it caused her pain, made her shrink in fear. Her soul had existed in shadow for so long....but Grady saw her, saw all of her.

He had not come out of nowhere. Miriam remembered now every time his eyes met hers on the way out of Meeting House, the kindly fingers giving her a hand up into their wagon when Arthur was tied up with the church elders. Grady had come to the farm several times, trying to offer Arthur chickens or a bag of grain in thanks for her kindness, and Arthur had taken them out of greed, not in welcome, never letting Grady stay to speak to her.

Maybe it was all a horrible prank; she had already been strung on the gibbet and the devil tormented her with this gift. In a moment, when her hope was at its peak, Grady would dissolve and she would be pitched into hell where Arthur would beat her again and again for all eternity.

Grady was on his knees before her again and Miriam focused on him. It was not a prank. There could be nothing in the world more real than this man before her, strong and smelling of earth and honest sweat. Sarah had once said that Grady was big enough to carry two hearts in that great chest of his. It must be so, because Miriam knew for certain that he had given his whole heart to his wife. But now he offered to die for Miriam.

“Give me a greater gift,” she murmured. “Live for me.”

Grady hesitated, searching her face, then nodded. “I will not take off the dress if you do not wish it,” he murmured, his hand resting lightly on her knee.

“No,” she whispered. Arthur had done it that way, rucking up her skirt just to her hips, as if she was nothing above what was between her legs, no heart, no mind. “See all of me. Let me be a whole woman to you.”

“You’re already that, lass.” Grady studied her face. Her hard angles had gone soft, and not just from the kind touch of the candlelight. Her dark eyes burned with a fire that defied the bruises and torn skin at the corners of her mouth. He had lit a flame within her and now it illuminated the beauty that had been buried beneath hopeless endurance.

Grady put a hand on her jaw, his large blacksmith’s palm cradling the fragile shape as if he handled the curve of a lily’s unopened bloom.

“What is it ye mean to do, lass, and how can I help?”

She turned her face to his touch, pressed hard, but kept her eyes on his. “Make love to me with every wish in your heart and soul, the deepest wish of every man in your heart and soul.”

Miriam did not mean it just as a lover's statement, a caress of words to enhance the intimacy between them. That much was clear from the expectant intensity of her dark and serious gaze. Grady thought about her words, weighed their meaning and opened his mind still further to allow room for whatever might come. Each step he had taken away from all he'd known had been a step closer to the light, and whether it was light from the fires of hell or from the glow off of angel's wings, it was preferable to darkness. He knew the shape of darkness, knew its suffocating, anguished embrace.

He stood. "Hold on then, Miriam," he bade softly, and she slid her arms over his shoulders, around his neck, the neck Sarah used to say had to be thick as a grizzly bear's to hold up his hard head, and he lifted her again, this time to take her to bed.

But when he got her there, she did not lie down. Miriam stood before him, looking up at him, shadows of flickering candlelight making her eyes dark and mysterious, her mouth sweet and full.

"Grady," she murmured, "I want to dance for you. For us. I...I'd like you to take your clothes off and sit and watch me."

Grady had a good sense of humor, buried in deep, slow smiles like the timeless wonder of a mountain. "I think I ken manage that, lass," he managed gravely. "But, your legs, they're..."

"They'll be fine, Grady. I think I could fly tonight."

His kind eyes dwelled on her face, the surge of life there, an energy he had never seen. "Aye, mayhap you could." He bent down, cautiously touched his lips to that sweet mouth, felt longing and need swamp him as she clutched him, leaned into the kiss as if it made her dizzy.

"If ye can make yerself wings, then ye do it, lass," Grady whispered against her mouth. "Fly where you'll be safe. Even if I can only hold ye for this one night, I'd rather see ye winging far above me in the sky than have ye never fly at all."

His words set off a spiral of feeling that exploded through her senses and shattered the grip of another belief. She had been certain that love, if it existed at all, had to grow over time, that it did not come in one blinding moment of light and thunder that rocked you to your toes. But maybe it had always been there, a seed crushed under a rock, only waiting for the briefest touch of sun to explode with life and promise. Could this be what love felt like?

Miriam backed away from him. She turned away, and he had the pleasure of looking at her slender form, bathed in the moonlight streaming through the window, which turned her dark hair into a brown bird's shimmering wing.

Grady pulled his shirt over his head slowly, watching her weave her fingers through her drying hair. A soft humming rose from her like a waft of perfume and she began to sway, her fingers floating through her hair and out, her palms turning up to catch the moonlight in their cup and then spilling it free over her bosom like water. He watched her movement, and though he had been aware of her as a woman, Grady had made himself be very mindful of her injuries. Now this simple movement, the silver light outlining the milk crescent of her breast like a reflection, stirred a want in him so strong

he almost went to her. Instead, he swallowed, and focused a moment on folding his trousers and shirt, his long underwear. He laid them neatly on the bed. He sat down on the straw mattress, but the rasp of the filling brought her around.

Grady was a modest man as a normal course, and he suffered a heartbeat of bone deep embarrassment that she saw him aroused as well as naked, but it eased as her eyes reflected her emotions – soft, gentle, and pleased.

It was unnatural to feel ashamed of it, he supposed. Whatever God was had brought them into the world this way, and made their bodies so they would respond to each other like this. No feature of Miriam's he could see needed covering in any way.

She smiled as if she heard the thought, and she came toward him. She put her feet daintily one before the other, slow mincing footsteps, like a deer in the forest, her body shy and alert, shimmering with it.

Just as she reached him, Miriam turned from him again, her hair brushing her bare shoulder blades, her arms rising and then settling gracefully with the movement, like a bird wheeling in the air to alight on a branch. She stood so for a moment, tilted her head back and Grady gave in to it, reaching out and stroking through the mane presented to him, coming out of it and tracing the indentation of her spine. His fingertips whispered over the curve of a buttock as she moved away. He kept his fingers hovering in the air before him, slightly spread, wondering at the sensitive tingle, the aftermath of the touch of flesh to flesh.

Miriam turned again when she was nine paces away, and then came back toward him, dancing up, turning with a soft swish of hair, dancing back at a different angle, raising her arms, lowering them. The firelight dappled her skin, hiding the bruises, enhancing the gold, further marrying the image of a deer to her graceful prancing form.

She clasped the cup of wine he had left with food for her by the bed. Miriam raised it aloft in both hands and, taking a deep breath, started to spin. Her knees straightened and bent as she came around, so that the sense of dancing continued as she spun and moved, making a wide circle as she created smaller ones with the movement of her body. The tilt of her rib cage with the lift of her arms brought her breasts up high, and as she turned, Grady watched the shift of them and her hips, and the soft glade of dark hair between her legs.

The fire seemed to be getting brighter, hotter, higher. His body was well roused, but he felt no shame. Miriam danced for him, and for herself. All that went on between them in this room was just for them, and as ancient in its voice as God itself. Their purpose was strangely far from his mind, seemingly unimportant, as the flame continued to build.

Miriam flung the wine about her as she spun, marking her white breasts with drops of deep red. She put the cup down on a smooth turn and retrieved one of the candles, doing the same dance again, the flame reflecting dark fire in her mysterious eyes.

Grady swallowed. She began to sing, something gentle and strong, rhythmic like the far off beat of drums. Her dark eyes lit with desire upon him and he was able to keep himself from going to her only because he sensed it was best to let her come to him.

The judges would call his feelings lust, but that was like calling a skeleton a man. There were ways for a man to take care of lust on his own and Grady had, viewing it in some wry amusement as no more or no less needing to be done than a chore to stave off starvation or thirst, flood or fire. He had done it less and less, though, because the lust brought a relative with it hard to send away – loneliness. Loneliness waited on the edges of lust like a ravenous wolf, waiting for the fire to die, as it always did.

This feeling had no loneliness to it. In fact, as he watched her put down another candle and dance closer to him, Grady felt certain that the answer to his loneliness might be found in her arms, whether he held her one night or a thousand.

Miriam spun to a halt between his splayed knees. She stared at him a moment, eyes wild and dark, chest rising and falling with exertion. She went to one knee before he could prevent her, knowing the pain it must cause her battered muscles, and kissed his feet.

Grady drew in a ragged breath and Miriam rose slowly, her breasts brushing the inside of his calves. She kissed his knees.

Her hands went to his knees for balance, and he covered them with a soft groan as her brow brushed his quivering stomach. She touched her lips to his swollen sex. Miriam straightened, linking hands with him, and pressed her mouth to his abdomen, then to the skin and fur over his thundering heart. She climbed him as if he was a tree of life that bent to her nurturing and whispered of longing as the winds of desire passed over them both.

Her tongue as well as her lips touched his throat and he tilted his head back, wanting to take her, thinking only of taking her, melting within her fire and with her, but he held back, wanting her to have and discover it all.

She straightened and he steadied her on her trembling legs. She pressed another kiss to his forehead and crown. His mouth and nose pressed to her breasts, that wondrous gift of motherhood and lover both.

“Take me, Grady,” she said softly, folding her arms around his massive shoulders. “I am a chalice to be filled. Come into me, and we will bring the world back to what it should be.”

Sweat ran down his back, and though the fire was warm in the grate, it raged like a purifying inferno through his blood. The air seemed to have heated to an intimate closeness, like sharing the blankets on a cold night, a lover’s feet tucked between warmer thighs. Grady moved his toes, found hers cold and smiled. It did not lessen his desire, but reminded him the dark eyed mystery before him was woman, not spirit, and fragile, even though she aroused and enticed him to a higher pitch than any succubus the judges could conjure in their minds.

Grady eased her into his lap and kissed her, then turned so that she lay beneath him on the bed, her thighs open to hold him. He saw a flicker in her eyes and framed her face.

“Don’t worry, lass,” he said thickly. “’Tis all joy, this. Way it was meant to be.”

“Magic,” she whispered, and buried her face in his throat, wrapping her arms and legs tight around him.

She was ready for him and he surged into her, tide rushing to meet earth. Miriam arched beneath and threw her head back, and he caught it in both hands like a delicate egg.

The fire roared, the rain outside drummed the roof, and the reflection of candles on the window briefly illuminated her face for him, wide dark eyes.

His touch, his emotions reached her and gave her what Arthur never had. Miriam had thought sex was the energy to do the magic, but now she realized it was merely the carrier of the energy, like the friction of two sticks to make fire. Emotion was the energy itself, the substance that came out of nothing and exploded into something, something that spread, consumed, illuminated... She had found her altar, the foundation on which she could build her magic.

“Take me, Grady,” she urged again, with a long, whispering breath like silk along his cheek. “Take me, so that I can take us both far from here.”

Grady captured her lips in an open kiss, and the meeting of moisture, of flame and breath and earth, consumed him and he gave himself to it, losing all he was in her, and letting go of all he had known.

The wish of every man and every woman, the wish for connection, for Love, for the certain connection to whatever was God, filled him. They emulated and honored it in the joining of their bodies, hearts and souls. Their wishes and joy, their love came together, and the world exploded with magic, all possibilities.

The wings of their souls spread, and they erupted out of the fires of hell as a pair of phoenixes.

* * *

When he arrived for morning duty, the miller’s son noted that the prisoner had already been taken out of the rudely built shanty prison. He went to the interrogation cabin. He shifted his flintlock to his shoulder and lifted the bolt, hoping that they might have decided to interrogate her further, so he could get a glimpse of her stripped before he was shooed out by the stiff-faced clergyman and elders.

He froze in the doorway, cold fear making the old musket fall from nerveless fingers.

At least three of the five candles placed around the room were still burning, though they were short stubs in pools of white wax, speckled with the red clay of the dirt floor, like drops of blood.

The candles were at the five points of a star, engraved in the floor and circled by the stamped out pattern of footprints. Even if that had not etched out the symbol, the dozens of chrysanthemum petals would have, sprinkled in the grooves of the pentagram that pointed north.

“Reverend Jameson. Reverend Jameson!” the miller’s son backed out, tripped over his gun, and sprawled over a basket by the door. It rolled away, spreading the smell

of the chrysanthemum petals it had held, and loosening the few that had been trapped in the weave to fly away in the wind.

* * *

Grady opened his eyes to the touch of a hand and the kiss of the sun. Miriam smiled down at him, her angular face framed by the fall of her straight, dark hair.

“Miriam,” he murmured. “Miriam!” He sat bolt upright. “We must---“

He stopped and blinked, staring about him stupidly. They sat on a beach of white sand that curved like a crescent moon against an ocean as blue as the sky above it. Waves furlled in toward shore with a soft rush like a mother’s lullaby, the breeze like the cool touch of her hand on his head.

“Where are we?”

“Where our magic brought us,” she said. Miriam sat back, folded her hands in her lap. “I am what they thought I was, Grady, but that isn’t what they think it is.”

He smiled at the way it sounded, and earned a shy smile in return, one that brought just a hint of laughter in her eyes, something he had never seen there before.

“So where did ye bring us, then, my beautiful witch?” he asked. His voice was gentle and his eyes curious, not wary or accusing. Miriam lifted a hesitant shoulder. “Life is just a series of spirals, Grady. I took us to another loop, a step up I think, but up and down don’t necessarily mean anything. A different turn of the spiral means we, you, I can begin again. If you,” her fingers curled, “prefer to do that alone, I shall come to no harm.”

“And if I don’t prefer that?” He watched her closely.

She looked at him, eyes full of wonder. “You never lose your way on the spiral, as long as you don’t forget it’s built around love. I turned away from that, and you brought me back to the center, Grady. It was as much your magic as mine that brought us here.”

He considered that, and linked his hands around his knees, looking around them. Far down the beach, a white horse swam out of the waves and shook away the foam collected on its flank. The sun flashed on the horse’s golden horn.

Grady looked back at her. “Well, then,” he cleared his throat. “I’m thinkin’ they might need a blacksmith here.”

She followed his gaze, and the hint of a smile spread. “I’m not sure about them,” her face turned back to him. “But I do.”

There was no humor in her eyes now, just yearning. Grady cradled her serious face in his hands and pressed his forehead to hers.

“If it was the magic we created together that brought us here, then together is how we were meant to be,” he murmured. “I’m yours, lass, for as long as ye’ll have me.”

Miriam closed her eyes, covered the rough warm skin on the back of his large hands with her palms. “All right, then,” she whispered, touching the corner of his mouth with her lips. “Let’s discover where our magic brought us.”

They rose and followed the path of the unicorn. Grady held Miriam's hand as they walked along the water's edge, that magical boundary between earth and sea, and the incoming tide swept their footprints away.

The End

Joey W. Hill writes epic fantasy, mainstream fiction and women's erotica. For more information about her published and upcoming works, log onto her website at www.storywitch.com.