

Changeling Press Presents:
Candy Hearts #5
My Valentine
Kate Douglas

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The Legend

A priest by the name of Valentine served during the third century in Rome. Emperor Claudius II believed single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, so he outlawed marriage for his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, believing the emperor's decree to be unjust, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages in secret for young lovers. For his bravery and his belief in love, Valentine, the priest, was put to death... but St. Valentine lives on.

Chapter One

North Dakota, 1918

Ginny took one last, nervous glance at the northern sky and slapped the old cow on the butt. She watched the scrawny beast trot out through the open gate with a sense of the inevitable. The chickens had already gone to roost in the small tangle of willows near the creek and the horse had been dead so long she didn't even give his skinny carcass, still lying somewhere in the back forty, a second thought.

As she turned to head back to the house, though, Ginny paused a moment to think long and hard on what she was about to do. Her gaze fell on the two graves near the old oak. One, still fresh, she would always think of with loathing, the other, dug a year ago, she thought of with a sweet pain that never left her heart.

Soon, my precious babe. I'll be with you soon, God willing.

The good Lord didn't look kindly on someone ending their own life, but with any luck, Ginny hoped He might make an allowance for her. And if not... well, she'd done all she could to make a go of it out here on the bitter plains of North Dakota.

She'd almost celebrated when Richard died of the influenza last week. She was free, now. Free to join her sweet baby boy, free to leave this world that had brought her nothing but misery.

Oh, Joel...

Richard hadn't wanted her to name the babe, the perfect child she'd held close to her heart and her aching breasts for such a brief time. Her husband's anger still burned in Ginny's memory. He'd blamed the woman who bore him a dead son, cursed her, then wrenched the lifeless little body out of her arms, wrapped it in a bloodstained blanket, and buried Joel in a hastily dug hole near the oak.

Ginny had named him Joel after a little friend she'd had in a time long ago, that almost fantasy time before her parents had died, before her uncle had bartered her to Richard Matson.

Traded for an almost-new shotgun and a beat-up mare. That was the extent of her worth. There'd not be much value at all, now. Now that Ginny Matson was all used up.

A gust of icy wind lifted the hem of her threadbare skirt. Stinging drops of rain cut through her thin shawl and she glanced skyward once more. The temperature would drop quickly now. By morning, this gray and brown landscape would be covered with ice, frozen solid. It might be mid-February, but temperatures plummeting below zero were typical for this Godforsaken land.

Ginny opened the door and took one last look at the barren log and sod cabin Richard had called their home. She'd done her best. She'd tried so hard, even after Joel's little body was in the ground, even when Richard had beaten her half to death. She'd tried, but it hadn't mattered.

Nothing mattered. Nothing at all.

She stepped inside, went directly to the wooden cupboard near the dry sink. Took down a beautifully carved ivory box that had once belonged to her father and withdrew a small, lacy card.

Tears filled her eyes, but she willed them away. No, this was not a day for tears. That day had been exactly one year ago, February 14, 1917, the day her precious Joel was born.

The same day he died without ever seeing the sunrise, much less the beautiful little card she'd made for him. Ginny stroked the finely woven lace surrounding a paper heart, a precious scrap of fabric she'd saved from her mother's wedding gown... all she had left of her mother's.

The only gift Ginny'd made for her son.

Carefully, she set the card on the small wooden table in the center of the one room cabin and propped it there, against the stub of a candle.

Be My Valentine. Ginny stroked the letters she'd drawn so carefully during the long, slow hours of labor, and smiled. Today, God willing, she'd see her baby boy again.

Wrapping her thin shawl around her shoulders, Ginny walked slowly outside, closed the cabin door behind her, and sat down on the front step to face the blizzard.

* * *

One minute he'd been enjoying the sweet song of angels and a bit of celestial cheer, the next he was slogging through a freezing blizzard on the back of a shivering white stallion.

Val glanced skyward and shook his head. What he'd really like to do was shake his fist at the Boss, but he figured He wouldn't take that sort of thing lightly.

Especially now. Not if what Val suspected had actually happened.

Be careful what you wish for...

He'd wished for love, for the chance to understand and experience the emotion, the passion and the physical, sensual side of love. Val never dreamed it would actually happen.

For whatever reason, his Lord had seen fit to release him from his vows. Val accepted the knowledge with a soul-deep certainty that left him feeling strangely empty. To have existed so long with a finite set of rules -- now to have those rules changed without warning or preparation.

He sent a silent word of thanks skyward, careful to hide whatever misgivings he felt.

Why now? Now, when he was finally getting used to the lifestyle, the perfect weather, the sameness of days, always clear and warm, the sense of "otherworldliness" one felt when no longer attached to a temporal existence.

An icy blast hit him. Val shivered and hunched his shoulders against the wind. Couldn't get more temporal than this. Val hadn't been cold since, oh, around the third century. There was that icy dungeon just before Claudius had him put to death. Water

running down the walls, cold blasts of wind through a metal grating. Not a particularly pleasant spot to spend his final days, though he didn't actually remember dying.

Waking up surrounded by angels... now that was memorable.

Angels who were a lot warmer than he was about now. Val glanced skyward and shivered again, almost missing the camaraderie, the fellowship and friendships he'd found over the millennia.

Powerful winds blew ice crystals horizontal to the ground. If it weren't so blasted cold, he might appreciate the beauty, the power of a storm like this, but whatever clothing he was wearing, though it was definitely better than a linen tunic, wasn't sufficient to keep him warm.

Val glanced down at his legs, covered in rough blue britches. The fabric was stiff, like the cloth used for sails on fishing boats. His coat was more familiar, made of some type of hide with fur around the collar. Wool gloves protected his hands, leather boots covered his feet and lower legs. A woolen scarf wrapped over and around his oddly shaped, wide-brimmed hat. It appeared to serve the double purpose of holding the hat down on his head and the blowing snow out of his collar.

Whatever the purpose, it wasn't enough to keep him warm, and from the look of the storm in the fading light of afternoon, he'd better find shelter, and fast.

He gave the horse his lead, figuring at least one of them would know which way to go. Val certainly didn't have a clue. He had no idea *when* this was, much less where. At least he had some idea of why, though the details weren't clear.

A blast of icy air practically lifted him off the saddle. He clamped his knees down tight and leaned close against the beast's neck.

A few moments later, the horse snorted and jerked to a stop. Val raised his head. A small building with a porch across the front stood directly in front of him, barely visible through the swirling snow. White drifts blocked the door, but at least the cabin would offer shelter.

Slowly, stiffly, Val crawled off the horse. Grabbing the halter, he led the animal around behind the cabin in search of shelter. He found a small lean-to, pulled the

saddle off the large beast and led him into a protected stall out of the wind. From the musty odor, this had obviously been home quite recently to at least a cow or two.

Val couldn't find any grain, but he did find a few flakes of hay. It wasn't much, but should keep the horse happy for now. Val broke the ice on the water trough. The stallion snorted, as if just being out of the frigid blast of wind had raised his spirits.

Val spotted a heavy striped blanket neatly folded over a sawhorse, grabbed it, and covered the horse's back. The animal turned his head and whinnied, as if in appreciation.

Rubbing his hands together, Val walked once more into the howling blizzard and around to the front porch. The cabin appeared empty, cold and dark without fire or light, but with any luck he might find enough dry wood inside to start a fire. Then and only then would there be a chance to figure out what he'd been sent back for. Freeing a man of his vows, returning him to the mortal plane... neither was an act lightly taken.

Pondering the potential challenges facing him, Val headed up the stairs to the front door.

He almost fell over the woman's body. Buried in drifted snow, she slumped against the porch railing, as cold and still as an ice sculpture. Her hands were frozen, clasped around a thin shawl that barely covered her shoulders. Her eyes were closed, her dark hair stiff with sleet.

Heart suddenly heavy in his chest, Val carefully lifted the woman in his arms and carried her inside the tiny cabin. He couldn't tell if she still lived, saw no sign of pulse or breath, but finally he understood.

This fragile being was the reason he'd been yanked back to life.

Chapter Two

Her limbs were stiff from the cold, her skin like ice. Val undressed her carefully, yet quickly, uncovering a body as pale and still as alabaster. The bed in the corner was neatly made with a heavy quilt on top. He slipped everything from her slim body, including the rough cotton underthings.

He almost groaned with the ethereal beauty before him. His heart ached to think he might have been too late. With trembling hands, Val wrapped the woman in the quilt, laid her carefully in the center of the bed, and set about building a fire.

She made no sound. She didn't even shiver, just lay there beneath the cold blanket. He got a fire roaring in the open fireplace, stripped off his own clothing, and crawled naked into the bed beside her.

Foremost in his mind was the thought he'd never been naked with a woman before. As a celibate priest, the closest he'd come to the pleasures of the flesh was watching the joy in the eyes of the couples he'd married.

Already, merely from the sense of warming a woman with his own body's heat, was a new appreciation of the bond between man and woman. A sense of the wonder he might finally begin to understand.

Once more, his heart and soul choked with emotion, he sent his thoughts winging skyward.

Thank you.

Val pulled the woman close against his much larger frame. She felt like a skinny little block of ice in his arms, but before long she began to shiver. Her chilled bottom pressed tightly against his belly, but rather than make him cold, it appeared to have exactly the opposite effect.

He cuddled her closer, one arm holding her against him, his forearm across her chest, while he rubbed his other hand along her slim arm. Silently, prayerfully, he willed her to live.

He felt a tiny puff of air against his forearm. Saw, in the flickering light from the fire, a subtle flare to her nostrils. Her chest rose, fell, then rose again, though her eyes remained closed.

He discovered an unaccountable need to see the color of her eyes, then felt foolish the moment the thought entered his mind.

A strange peace stole over him, a sense of awe. Love had escaped him on that other plane, in that earlier time. He'd never imagined the chance to experience what he'd missed, the opportunity to know love.

Was it finally his turn, in this unfamiliar time, to discover what he'd only imagined? Sighing, snuggling closer to the warming body of the woman in his arms, Val drifted off to sleep.

* * *

He had to be Joel, the adorable little toddler who was standing in front of her. She was warm, warmer than she'd been in a long time, and the sweet little boy with blond curls and pink cheeks had to be her baby. He'd be exactly a year old today. Ginny reached out her hand, smiling her encouragement. The baby took one awkward step toward her, then another.

Almost there, almost close enough to hug, almost...

Cold. So very cold. Ginny's toes and fingers burned as if icy shards of glass pierced them. The baby disappeared, lost in a haze of excruciating pain, flashes of light. Ginny struggled. *Trapped!* Held captive with strong ropes wrapped tightly around her chest.

Ginny's breath rasped against her throat, thoughts whirled in a cyclone of pain and despair. She wanted her baby, needed Joel with a visceral pain that ripped her wide open and left her bleeding, screaming, fighting whatever held her.

"Calm down. You're all right. You're dreaming, but you're all right."

Ginny froze. Awareness flashed through her. All of her senses rebelled, unable to accept what her brain was telling her. She wasn't tied up, she was held in the arms of a strange man.

A strange, naked man.

Naked, hot as a pistol, and obviously very aroused.

The blizzard still whistled around the cabin. Now, though, coals glowed in the fireplace. Her dress and shawl were neatly folded over the wooden chair at the table.

The Valentine card, the one she'd made for Joel, was right where she'd left it, but next to the card was a dark brown cowboy hat on top of a pair of neatly folded pants. Worn boots rested on the floor beneath the table. A wool scarf hung to dry on the back of a chair.

Ginny's breath whistled in and out of her mouth but she was suffocating. Her lungs spasmed, her heart stuttered, stopped, started again. Who? How?

She'd been so close. First so horribly, painfully cold, then aware of the warmth stealing her life away. Taking her to her baby.

She'd almost held Joel in her arms.

Dipping her head, Ginny rested her forehead on the strong arm holding her and cried.

Muscular arms caught her close, turned her around so that her face was buried against a hard chest. Shifted her body, stroked her back, and held her while she cried the tears she'd kept inside for this last, long year.

Tears she'd held inside for a lifetime. Grief for the parents lost so long ago, for the babe who'd never drawn breath. Tears for the love she'd never known...all of it, pouring out of her in a maelstrom of grief and despair.

At long last, her body depleted and weak, Ginny felt the comforting stroke of his big hands softly rubbing her back, heard gentle words in a strange tongue whispered against her temple, felt the soft brush of even softer lips kissing away the tears.

Ginny's hoarse cries weakened, her breath rasped in her chest, and a strange lassitude entered her bones. She'd never expected to awaken. She'd not wanted to

awaken, but somehow, this someone had come along and, without permission, stolen death away.

But why?

A long leg looped over her thigh, a large hand cupped her bottom and pulled her up tight against what could only be an erection. She'd never even seen Richard's, not that she'd wanted to. They'd always lain together in darkness, but she knew from what little experience she'd had in her marriage bed that Richard's male parts were nothing at all like this man's parts.

Ginny shifted her hips beneath the weight of the muscular leg pinning her to the bed and felt the stranger's chest expand in a deep sigh. She still hadn't looked at his face. Once she looked, once she saw him, she'd have to make sense of all this.

Deep in her soul, Ginny knew if she had any sense at all, she'd be terrified. Then his hand stroked her hip, cupped her bottom and squeezed gently, and thoughts of terror fled. She'd never been touched by a man before, not once. Not like this. Ginny rubbed her face against the man's chest. There was a soft mat of hair beneath her cheek and it tickled her nose. She fought a growing urge to plant a kiss on the warm flesh, an urge that made her bite her lip to keep from acting on it.

For a woman who'd set herself out to die, she suddenly felt very much alive. Having faced death, actually wanting death, she knew nothing could hurt her now.

Not even this. Especially this.

Not something so life-affirming, so completely comforting.

A strong hand cupped her jaw, tilted her head back. She closed her eyes, felt warm lips on hers, smelled the sweet scent of washed man, tasted a hint of coffee on the tongue that parted her lips.

"Oh." She'd never, not once, realized people could do that, but he slipped his tongue inside her mouth and it seemed like the most wonderful, natural thing in the world to purse her lips around his tongue and suckle him.

She heard him groan, felt the thrust of his hips as he pressed close against hers. Joined him with a soft moan of her own when the hot, hard head of his shaft rubbed against her belly.

This was a power unlike anything she'd known.

Ginny opened her mouth to his, pressed her tongue against his lips and tongue, then surged forward into his mouth. Their tongues danced, mating in the hot cavern of his mouth. Ginny heard him groan again and the sound rippled against her mouth.

Fluttered across her breasts.

Centered itself deep in that hidden place between her legs.

She thrust her pelvis forward, wanting... something. Needing... but what did she need? She knew what sex was, that painful act for making babies. Knew that Richard seemed to like it. He'd taken her once a week, always here in the bed where she'd been told to await him, to lie on her back with her gown pulled up to her hips.

Richard would make sure the fire was almost burned out, he'd douse the kerosene lamp, and when it was completely dark, he'd climb onto the bed and kneel between her outspread legs.

Then he'd stick that hard thing, that thing he called a cock, inside her and he'd pump back and forth, grunting like a wallowing pig.

The first time it had hurt and she'd screamed. He slapped her. Told her this was her wifely duty and she was not ever to scream.

Even though it almost always hurt, she'd not screamed again.

She hadn't even screamed when Joel was born, not after hours of agony. She hadn't screamed when Richard told her the baby was dead. Not even when he'd blamed her for the cord wrapped around her baby's fragile neck, leaving his perfect little body blue and lifeless.

She hadn't made a sound.

She hadn't screamed when Richard took the baby's body away, either. No, she'd cried later. There by the freshly turned earth where she'd built a cairn of rocks to cover the tiny grave.

Ginny hadn't covered Richard's.

No, she'd scratched out a shallow grave in the frozen ground, buried him in the snow, and walked away.

Then she'd planned her death.

Val wished he could read minds because he certainly wanted to know what was going on in hers. The woman hadn't said a word, not since she'd stopped crying. He'd never witnessed grief so powerful. The deep, wrenching sobs looked as if they might tear her apart. He'd felt her pain, felt her need as surely as he felt his own.

The woman stirred again in his arms and nuzzled the patch of hair in the middle of his chest. Val suspected they shouldn't be doing this, holding each other so close. It seemed wrong for a woman to allow a man the liberties he'd taken after she awoke, but the feel of that warm, feminine body so close to his, the knowledge he was finally free to experience his own sexuality, had sent blood rushing to his groin in a most spectacular fashion.

At the same time, the woman seemed to need the contact, the touching and kissing, the closeness of another warm body.

But did she need him?

Val touched her chin with his fingertips, tilted her head up, and forced her to look at him. Her eyes widened and for the first time he saw their color, a deep, emerald green. Her lips parted and he felt her breasts move against his chest as she took a deep breath.

Before she could speak, Val followed his instincts, lowered his head, and took the woman's mouth in a hot and powerful kiss. Lips melted, parted beneath his, tongues connected, danced and twisted, but this time, her body joined the rhythmic thrust of their sparring tongues.

He reached down between them, his fingers sliding along satiny skin and soft belly, finding the tangled growth of crisp hair at the juncture of her thighs. When he touched her there, movement ceased, her hips stilled. He kissed her even more

thoroughly, using his tongue to sweep the inner recesses of her mouth, diverting her attention from the slow movement of his fingers gently exploring between her legs.

All the mysteries he'd heard of, the wonders he'd read about, here, within his grasp, seemingly anxious for his cautious examination. His middle finger bumped over a bit of raised flesh and the woman pressed her pelvis close. Val brushed it again, then once more, softly, slowly. From the woman's soft moans of pleasure, Val knew he'd found her pearl, that tiny jewel unique to the feminine gender.

He took her needy whimpers against his mouth as an invitation and slipped his finger between her damp and swollen lips. Her passage was hot and slick. Feminine muscles rippled around his intruding finger. He slipped in and out until the woman clenched her legs around his wrist, cried into his mouth, and shuddered.

Val felt her inner muscles tightening and relaxing in a hard, fast rhythm that left him breathing as if he'd run a hundred miles.

His cock ached, his balls ached even more, and whether it was the right thing or wrong, the woman wasn't telling him to stop. With a tiny, heartfelt prayer, he slipped his middle finger from her hot passage and slowly began to replace it with his cock.

Whatever she'd expected when the day began, it certainly wasn't this! Ginny shuddered and trembled in the arms of the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, his finger deep inside her woman parts, his breath sweet and soft against her ear.

She had no idea at all what had just happened, but she certainly wouldn't mind if it happened again. Her body seemed to have a mind all its own. She felt muscles tightening and releasing without her telling them to, and she was so damp and sensitive between her legs. It had always been so dry there when Richard shoved his cock inside. Right now she felt as if she'd been greased!

Ginny almost giggled, wondering what it would feel like if the man put something inside besides his finger, when he suddenly slipped his finger out of her.

A tiny whimper of frustration spilled out of her throat before she caught it. Just when his finger was beginning to feel really good again!

The man shifted his hips away, but before she could follow him, Ginny felt something big and round between her legs.

She held perfectly still while he brushed it back and forth, sweeping over that strangely sensitive part she'd never touched, never really acknowledged. Her breath caught with each smooth pass while he rubbed her with the silken head of what could only be his cock.

It was hard and slick. Ginny blushed hot and cold when she realized it was slick because of her! All that wet stuff that made it feel so good down there, all of that had to be coming from her body.

Ginny wanted to weep for what she didn't know. When a little girl lost her mother before she was ten, there were so many things that went unlearned, so many womanly secrets not passed on. Her first menses had terrified her. If it hadn't been for an understanding neighbor, she might have died of fright.

Her neighbor never told her about this, though!

Feeling bolder, Ginny rolled to her back and let her knees fall to either side. The cabin was growing brighter now with daybreak, though the raging storm made it much darker than it would normally be.

Still, she wanted to get a better look at him. That one, quick glance hadn't been nearly enough. Ginny wanted to see his face in the light of day, wanted to know more about the man who was making her feel so alive.

He followed her, coming to his knees between her legs. Even in the semi-darkness Ginny could tell he was a perfect specimen of a man, with broad shoulders and a powerful chest muscled and dusted with a coat of very thick, dark blond hair. She wanted to look down, to see what manner of cock he was preparing to put inside her, but instead, she looked up into eyes as blue as a summer sky, a square jaw, high forehead, and the most beautiful shoulder-length blond hair she'd ever seen on either a man or woman. It curled softly at the ends in a thick fall, a perfect frame to a beautiful face.

Like an angel.

His was the face of an angel and he'd come to her when she needed him most.

She reached up and touched the end of one long strand.

He circled her wrist with thumb and forefinger, turned Ginny's hand, and kissed the center of her palm.

Then, without saying a word, he reached down between them. Ginny followed the movement of his hand, saw his long fingers wrap themselves around that massive, muscular part of his body and guide it carefully toward her center.

Once more she felt the satiny tip against her softest parts, but he just held it there, touching her but not entering. She moaned and lifted her hips, feeling terribly wanton as she invited his penetration.

His big hands slowly gathered up her hips, clasping her buttocks, lifting her to meet his thrust as slowly, so very slowly, he pushed himself between her legs.

Ginny closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

Instead, she felt a growing pressure, a sense of fullness that was all about pleasure, about heat and passion. Hot and hard, he pressed against her. The feelings welling up inside Ginny were wanton and free and she knew that whatever she was doing must be a sin.

But no... not something this sweet and tender. There was no sin in an act so perfect, in the sharing and giving between lonely souls on a stormy night. This man's tenderness saved her life.

Now his loving gave hope. He pressed forward so slowly there was no time for pain, no reason to fear. Watching him, studying his face as he tilted his head skyward, his eyes tightly shut, his jaw clenched as if he searched for control, she knew she'd never seen anything more beautiful, felt any emotion more powerful.

He filled her, closing the gap between their bodies until she felt the weight of his balls resting against her butt and the pressure of his cock touching the mouth of her womb. The hair on his groin was darker blond than his chest, tangled close against her own deep red thatch of hair.

Looking down at their bodies so tightly linked, Ginny felt a hot rush of tenderness, a feeling of love so deep inside she thought she might cry with the beauty of it.

Linked with the feeling was one of anger, that Richard had taken something so beautiful and made it ugly. Ginny closed her eyes and put all memories of Richard out of her mind, then she tilted her hips up to receive the stranger's powerful thrust.

They still hadn't spoken. Val didn't know her name. She'd not asked his. Val wondered if that was common behavior in whatever time he'd come to, but he didn't think so. There was too much wonder on the woman's face. Too much passion in her soul.

That same wonder might be written on his own face, for all he knew. He'd never really known what this could be like, this physical act of love. Oh, he'd made it possible for uncounted numbers of couples to experience this most marvelous thing, but he'd never held a woman in his arms, never felt the slick, wet heat welcoming his cock inside, clasping him with muscles designed to birth a baby or make love to a man.

Val raised his eyes skyward. Once more he sent a quick but heartfelt word of thanks.

He moved his hips, sliding out of her woman's sheath in a long, slow glide that brought a look of wonder to her eyes. Heavy waves of hair lay tangled about her face, luminous, like dark, burnished copper in the morning light. Her skin, so pale the night before, had taken on a healthy glow, though she was still a fair-skinned beauty.

Val noticed a look of sadness about her eyes, a troubled line to her mouth, but he knew it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with why she'd been sitting, half frozen on the front porch in the midst of a blizzard.

Val leaned down and kissed her as he thrust his hips forward once more. *Later.* He'd learn all about her later. Right now, he wanted to learn more about this marvelous act of procreation.

Lips parted beneath his. A sigh whispered across from her mouth to his. Val smiled at her soft exhalation as he filled her once more, then very slowly withdrew. Her hands came up, fluttering about his shoulders as if she were unsure what to do with them. They settled finally on his upper arms, grasping firmly as if he were an anchor and she a boat tossed on stormy seas.

The woman tilted her head back, spilling copper waves across the pillow. Val lifted her hips, filling her faster now, thrusting harder. She seemed to welcome whatever he did, so he leaned forward and wrapped his lips around one of her perfect red nipples, the one that had been calling out to him since she'd rolled to her back.

Her cry startled him, the sharp, strangled gasp when he suckled her into his mouth. Her back arched and once more he felt her stiffen, felt the tightening of her inner muscles. This time, though, it was his cock in the silken vise, not his finger.

Dear God, to think he'd gone his life without this knowledge. How could he have neglected what his body was obviously designed for? How could God have allowed it!

His anger evaporated as quickly as it peaked. God didn't allow it. He, Valentine, had chosen the vow of celibacy of his own accord. God had freed him of that vow. God had sent him here, to this perfect woman.

Once more Val sent a word of thanks heavenward. At the same time, he stilled all motion, unwilling to spill his seed so quickly. He concentrated instead on the texture of the puckered nipple caught between his lips. Sucking hard on first one breast, then the other, he nuzzled the firm flesh in between until he found the control he'd been searching for, then once more thrust his cock inside, going hard and deep.

This time he knew there'd be no stopping. He filled her, sliding in and out, the woman's muscles clenching, grasping, trying to hold him, finally catching his sensitive cock on a particularly penetrating thrust. His lips lost contact with her breast. He arched his back and pushed forward, pounding into her, burying himself completely as he tilted his chin to the heavens and cried out.

Fire raced through his veins, an electrical storm more powerful than the blizzard still blowing outside. The woman arched against him, her mouth open in a soundless cry, her muscles clenching, holding, milking his seed.

The coil of heat and energy that had been waiting in his balls burst from the end of his cock, filling the woman, leaving him empty and strangely exhilarated.

Exhausted but fulfilled. Complete in a way he'd never experienced, never understood or even dreamed of. Val only knew, if he ever had to explain this most amazing sensation, he would have to say heaven paled beside it.

Paled beside the woman lying in his arms, her eyes wide open and watching him with a look of pure amazement.

Chapter Three

It might have been awkward, greeting the dawn beneath a man who had just shown her the true meaning of ecstasy. Even more awkward, knowing how he'd found her, near death by her own desire. But somehow, his touch, his compassion, his gentleness as he'd shown Ginny what her body was capable of, left her feeling warm, replete, and totally at ease.

He held his weight off of her, resting with his elbows at either side of her shoulders, his cock still buried deep inside her body. The tiny muscles she'd never known existed still clenched and released with a rhythmic pattern she found more than seductive.

She might have been shy. Now she felt bold. Looking into his warm smile and brilliant blue eyes, Ginny knew a depth of love, of emotion that brought tears to her own eyes.

She reached up and touched the harsh line of his cheek, ran her fingers down to his full lips and pressed lightly, as if feigning a kiss. "Thank you. How do I ever thank you?"

"No, the gratitude is mine." He leaned close and kissed her. His lips were soft, not demanding as they'd been earlier. Soft and loving, like a benediction.

"I was alone in the storm, lost and in need of shelter. I have found shelter in your arms. Warmth from your heart. Love in your bed. It is you who must be thanked."

His accent was unusual. He spoke as if this were a second language to him. She found each word, each nuance, intoxicating.

He leaned close and kissed her chin, her throat. Her lips. He spent a long, long time on her lips. When he raised his head, she was once again breathless.

"Why?" He pushed himself away from her, leaving her feeling empty and bereft. Then he twisted around and, before she realized what he'd done, was sitting with his back against the rough-hewn headboard of the bed and she was tucked against his chest, her butt resting firmly in his lap.

"Why what?" She knew, though. Knew exactly what he asked.

"Why did you sit out in the storm? Why did you want to die?" He ran one finger along her cheek and she realized there were tears in his eyes. "Why would you want to give up on life?"

She dipped her head, unwilling to look him in the eye, but he deserved an answer, no matter how painful. "One year ago today, I gave birth to a perfect baby boy. He was born with the cord around his neck and he died. It was my fault. He was perfect except for what I did, birthing him. I had no reason to live."

"Ah... to lose a child." He stroked her face, ran his finger along her throat, across her shoulder. "I cannot imagine the pain, the terrible grief, even though this accident was most certainly not your fault. But, there will be others. You will have more babies."

She shook her head. "No. No more. My husband tried to get me with child. None came. He died last week of the influenza. There was no reason to keep trying, no reason to live. That's why I waited out in the storm. I wanted to go to Joel."

"Joel is your husband?"

"No. Joel was my son. My husband, may he rest in hell, was a mean, hateful man who did his best to beat me to death before he died." She pulled away from him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but..."

"No matter. He is gone. What is your name?"

She laughed. It felt so good to laugh. To think she'd had the most glorious night of her life with this man and he didn't know her name. Nor did she know his.

"My name is Ginny... Virginia Walker Matson. And yours?"

"Val. My name is Val. Short for Valentine."

He left her sitting there with her mouth hanging open and walked across the small room to the fire. The coals burned low and he added a few pieces of wood. They caught immediately, flared up, then settled into a good, steady burn.

Even in the pale light of the new day, his body gleamed, strong, healthy, so sensual he made her mouth water. She'd never known such feelings, so many desires. Too much, too soon. Would he stay? Would he leave her once the storm ended? Leave her alone with nothing but memories, alone with the grave of her lost child, the grave of the man she despised... alone with her desire for death and the peace of never after?

He turned to walk back to the bed, paused by the table, and reached for the card she'd left there. The card she'd made for Joel. Ginny's heart twisted, almost stopped when he picked it up, read her carefully printed greeting.

When he raised his head to look at her, she could have sworn his eyes sparkled with tears. "When did you write this?"

She bowed her head. Not embarrassed, just terribly bereft. "When I was in labor. It was St. Valentine's Day, the day my son was born. The day he died."

"St. Valentine's Day? What... I've not heard of that day."

"It's a day for lovers. February fourteenth... I'm not sure if it commemorates the saint's birthday or his death, but it's a day when lovers exchange cards and gifts." She scooted up in the bed and leaned against the headboard, watching him. He looked sweetly perplexed, a half smile on his face, his perfect body caught in a pose reminiscent of a child receiving a wonderful treat.

He turned to her then, his face no longer childlike. No, he looked like a man who had made a huge decision, a man determined to get his way. The kind of man to make a woman weep with wanting, to make her body tingle, her breasts ache, that private place between legs grow damp with joy.

How she knew this, how she understood the depth of her need, was as much a surprise to Ginny as the need itself. She didn't question it. She merely pulled the blankets aside and made room for this amazing man.

He slipped into bed beside her, pulled her into his arms, and hugged her as if she were the only thing keeping him alive. Held her in a passionate, loving embrace, so close she felt his heart pounding against her cheek, felt the rush of blood in his veins, the rush of air in and out of his lungs.

"Dear God, let me stay with this woman. I need her. Don't make me leave."

His prayer, heartfelt as it sounded, frightened her. She raised her head and cupped his cheek in her palm. "Why would you leave me? Please, I want you to stay. You give me hope. I..." She couldn't say she loved him, could she? Even though she knew the feelings bursting in her heart must be something more than mere passion, more than the physical act that had bonded them during the night.

He kissed her. Slow, dark, and dangerous, a kiss that curled her toes and frightened her at the same time. "I don't want to leave you, but my Master..." He sighed. "My life is not always mine to control."

She knew she must look like a fool, staring at him, mouth slightly open, eyes wide with confusion, with need. "You can't..."

"I..."

He faded in front of her eyes. Wavered like a cool fog, his form going misty and bright. Ginny held her hand out to touch him, to hold him close but, like the morning's frost when the sun rises, he was gone.

She gasped, cried out, then fell... down, so far down, until she was merely a breath of air falling, twisting, floating, a bit of thistledown on the morning air.

* * *

"Valentine, what I offer you cannot be undone once chosen. You may return here, to dwell forever in Paradise. You may join the woman in what is probably one of the most inhospitable spots on this world. If you join with her, you will once more embrace mortality. You will live out your years and grow old. You will die and once more return to me, but it will be a long, possibly painful journey."

"But it will be a journey shared?" Val squinted against the glow surrounding the Master. "I'll have Ginny beside me?"

He sensed, more than heard the laughter. "Ah, yes. She will be beside you... she and your progeny."

"Children? We'll have children?"

"She is with child now, Saint Valentine. She carries your daughter."

"Send me back to her. Now."

Again, Val was almost sure he heard laughter. "Your wish is my command. Be happy, grow old with your true love. I'll miss you... Happy Valentine's Day, Val."

Suddenly, Val was back in Ginny's bed, holding her chilled body in his arms. He glanced across the room and realized the fire had gone out. He looked once more at Ginny and saw the path of dried tears on her cheeks.

"Ah, Ginny, my love. What's wrong?"

She blinked, as if coming awake after a long, hard sleep.

"Val? I saw you dis..." She blinked again, shook her head slowly. "Val, where did you go?"

He thought a minute of telling her the truth then changed his mind. "Out to check on my horse," he said. Val hoped the horse was all right. He had no desire at all to leave Ginny's bed. At least not in the foreseeable future.

Val took Ginny in his arms, took her lips, her soul, her very being, into his heart. There would be no going back, no desire to return to Paradise, at least not now, when he held Paradise in his arms.

"I love you, Ginny. I know we're practically strangers but I do love you. I promise to be good to you, always to love you. Will you be my wife? Will you carry my babies? Will you be my Valentine?"

My Valentine. Ginny glanced toward the card on the table and said a gentle good-bye to Joel. Then she looked at the man holding her so close. In the past twenty-four hours she'd gone from despair to hope, from the depths of pain to a lightness of being she'd never before experienced.

All because of this man. Whatever it was about him, whoever he was or wherever he came from, she knew he was her anchor, her savior, the one she needed

most. She reached up and cupped his beautiful face with her palm, smiled, and kissed him full on the lips.

“Yes. Yes, I will be your wife. I will carry your babies, should we be so blessed. I will love you, now and forever. I will, now, always and forever, be your Valentine.”

The End

Or perhaps, more correctly, the beginning...

Kate Douglas

Kate Douglas writes Romance.

Wonderfully talented, whimsically perverse, and always the consummate professional, Kate Douglas has been lucky enough to call writing her profession for over thirty years. She's produced ad copy for radio, flown over forest fires in a spotting helicopter as a photojournalist, drawn a weekly comic strip for a worldwide health agency, co-authored a cookbook and written numerous freelance articles. She's won three EPPIES, from the international authors' organization, EPIC -- two for Best Contemporary Romance, and a third for Best Romantic Suspense. Kate's also won EPIC's Quasar Award for Cover Artists.

She and her husband of over thirty years live in the northern California wine country where they find more than enough subject material for their shared passion for photography, though their grandchildren are most often in front of the lens.

Visit Kate at www.katedouglas.com. For regular updates and a chance to win copies of Kate's books and other cool stuff, sign up for her newsletter by sending a blank email to KateDouglas-subscribe@yahoogroups.com