

Cycles

by
Deborah
Boyer



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Aphrodite Unlaced, Inc.

www.aphroditeunlaced.com

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First published online by Aphrodite Unlaced, March
2005

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Friday

I feel suspiciously like a beefsteak tomato. Huge, fleshy, on the verge of rotten—about to burst through a too-thin skin. Yep, it's the time of the month when a woman whose period is no longer useful—I've had my kids, thank you very much—gets to rue its continued existence. Today is my third day in the trenches and I'm swollen from scalp to toes, bleeding like a stuck pig, irritable, bitchy—and horny as hell. Such a great combination. I can see it now: Cole comes home and I say "Do me, baby, but don't touch".

I got the boys off to school and figured now was as good a time as any to clean out the crawlspace. A little solitude, you know? Keep my moody self to myself and accomplish something while I do. But procrastination goes with my sluggish, over-ripeness and I'm sitting here, poking through old pictures: baby pictures, wedding pictures and now, near the bottom of the box, dating pictures. Young love. Taken when we believed nothing would cool our passion. We were going to be the old couple who still holds hands. But here we are, going on twenty years and we're in a rut. A truck-stopping, crater-sized, frozen-slush-filled rut.

Things aren't bad, generally speaking, because we're still best friends. And we've had rocky years—everybody does—that's not the problem. Simply seems the last ten months or so, when it comes to sex, we can't get it right. Time is one problem; between the kids and housework and skiing and the vet practice, we're rarely both in the mood. Even when we eke out an evening alone, sex isn't very good. Like having

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your mouth all ready for prime rib and ending up at McDonald's—it fills the space, but it's flat and tasteless. Simply put, sex has gotten boring. Dull enough to be a chore. And lately, I think we both take any excuse to avoid it, even when we want it.

I say we because I'm not the only one who lacks enthusiasm. Take this morning, when Cole found out Bryce and Joel were going to a sleep over. He waggled his brows with obvious intent until I shook my head, motioned at the calendar and held up two fingers—two days until my period's done. He shrugged like it was no big deal and that was that.

But you know, looking at these pictures, I remember when it wouldn't have mattered. It didn't matter who was tired, who was indisposed, who had to get up early—sex was still exciting and delicious, and we'd come so hard we could barely breathe.

And once we caught our breath, we'd start over.

What's so different now? We don't get as creative as we did in the beginning. It used to be we were always looking for new ways to light the fire. But after so many years, there's not much left that's new, I guess...

Well, nothing I'd do anyway. I mean no extra people and no farm animals, thank you very much.

I snort at my own sarcasm and the dust gives me sneezes.

Wiping my nose, I laugh. At least I've cheered myself up a little. But seriously, I don't think there's something Cole wants that we haven't done, either. If there is, I wish he'd ask, or tell, or write it down because I would be on it like snow on the slopes! Maybe we're both out of ideas. Maybe

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we've reached some secret matrimonial stage where everybody discovers that, from this moment on, it's touch-by-numbers—and I'm really praying that's not the case.

Because I love him. I like him. All of him. Even as we get older, I still like the way he looks. So it's not a physical dissatisfaction I've heard other women complain about. I mean, sure, he's not the hardbody he once was—but I'm certainly not defying any gravitational barriers. And since he's still interested enough to watch me get undressed, I don't think he's bothered by that either.

We also talk less. Only because we don't need to. I used to get a charge from trying to figure out what he's thinking. But now—his eyes are so expressive they scream what he's feeling, I know exactly what's on his mind, and I'm hardly ever wrong. We know each other inside out, so why talk? We can have a whole conversation from opposite sides of a room—and there's something wonderful about that. We're comfortable, I guess. And I don't know what to do about it. But something has to give, or I'm going to strip naked and run screaming through snowdrifts just to numb this aching longing for something that's gone—and might not come back. Not like this. Not like the sex we were having when these beaming grins were snapped.

I touch our shiny faces, the colors faded and blurred. If this is what married sex is doomed to, no wonder old people don't seem to touch—they can't bear the reminder.

All right, enough of this, because now I'm completely depressed. Maybe coming up here wasn't such a good idea after all. My tomato body is begging for a pressure release

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and this isn't helping. One little orgasm and I'd feel a whole lot better. I could take off my pants, sit in that rocker and be playing with myself when Cole gets home for lunch. Not new, but maybe surprising.

My laughter is muffled by the boxes.

"Darla? Are you up there?"

I jump. Damn! Too late. It's lunchtime already.

"Yeah, hang on, I'm coming." I dump our smiles back into the box and clamber down the ladder, happy to see him—but he doesn't notice. He's sorting through the mail, tense shoulders saying he has a full afternoon of farm rounds to survive before he can relax—the animal world must be as cranky as I am today. Ah well, best laid plans. I touch his arm. "Soup, or just a sandwich?"

"A sandwich is fine."

I watch him while I slap together meat and bread. A slight frown over the electric bill, a smile at the silly postcard from Cindy. Comfortable, yes. And maybe it's not such a bad thing. He didn't used to care if he was late because we were screwing. I should start something right now, because looking at him standing there, still every inch the handsome man I married for better or worse, fills me with—

"You have to make the boys turn out the lights," a terse command. "The electric bill's twice as high as last year."

Well, I could've started something but he had to go and open his mouth. Impulse and desire evaporate and I'm defensive. "You're here, too, Cole—you tell them. I've told them until I'm blue in the face." Okay, so maybe I don't have

to be so bitchy about it but in my current state, I'm not inclined to be the cheery little wife.

I feel him looking at my back. He's examining me like a patient, his deductive brain trying to work out what my pain is.

"Are you trying to start a fight?" he asks mildly.

He does know me as well as I know him. "I'm sorry," I say with a sigh, "I guess I am."

One of his many frustratingly endearing traits is his acceptance that there are times I can't control my moods. That he goes out of his way to avoid conflict once a month is really quite sweet—and horribly unsatisfying to Mother Nature's design.

He munches and reads the paper, effectively ignoring me. Enjoying its hour of hatless freedom, his hair stands up in clumps. I cross the room and smooth it down. I love the feel of it, thick and unruly. Why doesn't running my hands through it make me want him anymore? Just playing with the chestnut stuff used to make me wet.

He smiles and kisses my hand.

* * * *

Saturday

"Ooo, look—there he is." Lindsey turns to watch the new guy's progress across the taproom. He's a buff engineer-in-diapers, twenty-five if he's a day. The council hired him to help plan the new Town Hall.

"He is so damn fine—and so damn shy," Lindsay grouses. "I've tried to talk to him at least a dozen times and he keeps staring at the floor."

With a total population of three-hundred-and-seventy in Lancer, Pennsylvania, fresh blood always gives everybody something to talk about, and folks are still watching his every move, poor kid—although most of them for different reasons than my two friends, mind you, but he's green enough for our stares to be unremarkable. A definite plus. The tavern's pretty crowded even for Saturday and there's nothing like a busy night at Bill's for generating rumors of unseemly behavior.

"Maybe he's the silent type," I say.

We watch him bend over to talk with Joshua Strickler.

"Who cares what type he is when he's got an ass like that," Carol observes.

"Mmm-hmm," I mutter thickly at the tight behind, "I'll take two scoops, please."

"Darla!" Lindsey giggles. "Hands off. Single women need only apply. Besides, he might be a two-scooper, but Cole's definitely a banana split—and don't even try to tell me his butt's not just as scrumptious."

"Anyway! You don't really think we come over to your house all the time just to see your sour puss, do you?" Carol asks with a huff.

"That's just it," I drawl in self-pity, "you're not seeing any more of Cole than I am most of the time."

"So stop doing his laundry." Carol shakes her head. "Cole is all that and twelve bags of chips, and always has been, you

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silly cow. Look at him," she points with her chin, "he's watching you watch the newbie—somebody's in trouble!"

I catch Cole's watchful blue stare and he gives me a melting, lopsided smile. He may have a six-pack in him but he's not stupid—and despite the girls' teasing, I'm not in trouble. Any more than he is when I catch him looking at Rachael in the post office. I shrug—the girls are right, he is a gorgeous treat for the eyes—and grin back. He shakes his head and returns to his conversation with the sheriff.

"Just because we're on a diet—" I start.

"Doesn't mean you can't look at the menu," Lindsey and Carol finish with a groan.

"Oh, puh-leze," I mutter, "at least you two can still order take out."

Lindsey snorts. "But we sure don't get the free delivery."

We've been friends since grade school—the three of us and Cindy. When we graduated, Cindy packed her bags and moved to California. Carol's been married and divorced—twice. Lindsey says she's got a smorgasbord here, since the town's predominantly male, and she's not about to settle for one. I'm lucky to have friends like them. In a place as small as Lancer, who you can and can't confide in can be dicey. At least I have two women I can tell anything and be sure it will go no further.

"Free maybe, but then it's not hot out of the oven, is it?" I sigh again. "As dull as things are, I have to get my jollies somewhere."

Carol wrinkles her nose. "Quit complaining. He'll come around, they always do. And if he doesn't, I volunteer to take

him for a night." She raises her hand. "I'll slather him with toppings and send him home a new sundae."

I laugh. "I bet you would—probably pineapple because you know I hate it." I pull a sour face. "Nope, no deal. I'm not ready to share, I'm just frustrated."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Lindsey scolds. "You simply need a chance of pace. Maybe you should drag him into the bathroom right now and give him a blow-job—that will perk things up. And then," she adds slyly, "Carol and I can sit out here and fantasize about what you're doing. We need our vicarious jollies, too."

"He's way too happy," I say, watching Cole fire down another mug, "which means it would take too long and I don't have an ounce of patience today."

"Oh, come on," Carol says, batting her lashes. "Do you mean to tell me you don't enjoy drunk-man sex?"

"Oh yeah," Lindsey chuckles, dropping into a pale male imitation, "'hang on, I don't know what's wrong, it just doesn't want to cooperate'."

We burst into girly giggles which draw curious looks from several other conversations.

"Uh-oh," Carol says breathlessly, "oh, that lovely, lovely man of yours—look!" The newcomer, Rory, is listening intently to Cole and casting furtive glances in our direction. "Cole better be telling him the hottest girls in town are sitting at this table. And you can tell him I said so, too, Darla."

"Since we're on the subject of ice cream," Lindsey muses, "I can't help wondering if he's a vanilla kind of guy, or chocolate."

Carol smacks her lips. "Rich, fudgy, spank-me-baby chocolate, I'll bet. You know those shy ones."

Rory nods and makes a beeline for us.

"God," Lindsey chokes, hastily setting her beer on the table and arranging her face in a neutral mask by the time he arrives.

"Hi."

My companions stare. I can tell they're trying not to snicker. "Hi." I raise my brows in question.

"Doc Gar—I mean Cole—said you—could you do some mending for me, Mrs. Garber?"

Lindsey pokes me with her foot and I'm tempted to laugh. "Sure," my smile is broad, "just bring it by and I'll see what I can do."

"Cool. Thanks."

Another nudge from Lindsey's boot prompts me to say, "Rory, have you met Lindsey and Carol?" I indicate my tablemates.

"Uh, yeah—hi." No, not much of a conversationalist, is he? I drown my urge to giggle with beer.

Carol isn't shy. "Hi. I saw you at the slopes the other day with the men's team. You were giving the kids pointers."

"Yeah, I'm sorta helping Cole out with the little ones."

"That's great. I look forward to seeing more of your pole action," she continues, ignoring the pointed look from Lindsey.

"Uh..."

"What she means," Lindsey corrects, "is we're looking forward to you working our slopes along with the other guys."

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It's all I can do not to laugh and Lindsey quickly takes a drink, pretending not to notice her Freudian slip.

Unfortunately, Rory didn't miss it. The man is coloring, the blush creeping over his ears. "I haven't skied regular in a couple years, so we'll see if I'm still any good."

"You'll do fine," I use my soothing mother tone, "and Cole really appreciates your help with the Junior Team. This year's bunch is a little rambunctious, so it's tough for one man to keep them corralled."

Rory nods, fidgets, wants to be elsewhere. "Thanks, Mrs. Garber. I'll bring my stuff over tomorrow."

"That will be fine, but make it in the afternoon, please? And if you're going to call him Cole, I'm Darla."

"Okay, Darla. Uh, see ya." He nods at Lindsey and Carol before fleeing like his feet are winged.

"I hope he moves half as fast on the mountain," Carol says wryly.

* * * *

Sunday

The boys are building a snow fort. They're so mature these days but is any male ever too old to play? Bryce wants to go to college, so it won't be long before he's gone, and Joel will follow in the blink of an eye. They might come back, like we did, but they won't be my babies any more. I used to look forward to the day when the house will be mine and Cole's again. We used to lie in bed and talk about what it will be like, how we can do it on the kitchen table if we want to.

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Strong arms circle my waist and Cole's warmth surrounds me. He smells so good; fresh air, damp wool, sun block, and the cinnamony aftershave I gave him at Christmas.

"Wha'cha doing?" The intimate whisper makes me glow.

"Watching them grow an inch every second." I clear fog from the window.

He nuzzles my ear. "We're going to need a new table soon, aren't we?"

Reading my mind like that makes my heart swell. A fluttering desire fills my stomach. I need him—now. "Well," I say playfully, turning into the embrace, "the table's clear and they're totally occupied. Do you want to test its durability?"

"Is your period—over?"

The doctor in him always thinks of those things. "Enough, yes." I feel almost panicked, desperate to hold onto wanting him. I tug his winter beard, nuzzle his freshly-shaven neck, nibble his chin and kiss the soft mouth hiding in the thatch.

"Would it be cruel if we locked the door?" he asks against my lips. Pressed into my belly, I know he's more than willing to carry through with this.

"Don't, we'll hear them the second they hit the mud room." I fumble under the bulky sweater, search for his fly. I can't let him walk away because desire could dissolve as quickly as it arrived. Finding the heat of his stomach, I slip my hand under the waistband of his jeans—roomy enough to cover two layers of thermals, there's plenty of space to stroke him.

"Mmm," he groans as I squeeze, quickening the moisture which springs between my legs.

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I lean into his broad chest, absorb the rising lust. Breathlessly, I abandon his erection and yank at his fly. A little sucking will get things rolling right along.

"Shit," he mutters.

"What?" He's frowning over my shoulder into the yard. "Don't tell me they're coming in already!"

"Did you tell Rory to come today?"

"Shit," I echo the sentiment and know what I'll see before I look. There's Rory, with an armload of shirts, talking to the boys.

"Later?" Cole kisses my cheek and the sound of his zipper closing is loud. "I guess I'll get to the wood pile after all."

I nod. "Okay."

Yes, later. After I've cooked dinner, cleaned up and seen to homework. Later. After he's been chopping wood all afternoon and is asleep on the couch before the boys are even tired.

While Rory takes off his coat, I try to look cheerful and hope the disappointment eating into my heart doesn't show.

* * * *

Monday

It's late, quiet except for the muffled creak of fresh snow on the roof. I slide into bed next to my favorite heater and snuggle tight. It was a long, long, day and bed is heaven.

"Sleep good, baby." I peck Cole's cheek.

"C'mere." He pulls me back for a real kiss. Our tongues play and his hand slips under the covers to stroke my hip. Very nice, but I'm so tired it doesn't raise a spark.

"I'm sorry," I say softly, "the spirit is willing but the body's beat."

"That's okay," he says, "I'm about dead, too."

"This is ridiculous." I suddenly want to cry.

"No, this is just life, Darla," he says with a smile meant to comfort. "Don't worry, we'll get around to it."

* * * *

Tuesday

The creases in his forehead say it's been a rough day. The gruff "hello" means it was worse than usual.

I ask, "What happened?"

"Damn tourists, skiing where they shouldn't and with a horse in tow, if you can believe that kind of stupidity."

"Ah." I let him be. It's the best thing to do or we'll be scrapping like infants in no time, because he'll take it out on me. Not that I don't use him the same way sometimes. I know it's not personal, it's just you're there, y'know?

He eats dinner in silence, occasionally acknowledging the boys' yakking. Every time he looks at me, I smile, encourage him to unwind without words.

I keep Bryce and Joel occupied with Scrabble while he reads by the fire. By the time I've checked behind the boys' ears and am sure they're tucked snug, the living room is empty and the fire banked. I find Cole already in bed, blankets to his ears.

Easing in, I kiss the curve of his shoulder, stroke his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just worn out—and cranky."

"How about a little stress relief?" I kiss his neck, slide a hand under his sweats to play with the springy curls below his abdomen. "I'll even do all the work." I brush the root of his penis for enticement.

"Darla," he rolls toward me with a frustrated huff, "I'm sorry, I really am. I'm just not up to it. Tomorrow?"

"Town meeting."

"Oh. Yeah, I forgot."

I explore a little more to see if I can get any rising indication he isn't as worn out as he thinks. He lets me try, I'll give him that—but when he said he's not up to it, he wasn't lying. Which makes me feel guilty for pushing. With a sigh I pull the blankets around us in cocoon comfort and listen to his heartbeat until I fall asleep.

* * * *

Wednesday

Rory smiles. "Thanks, Darla. Are you sure you only want ten bucks?"

"I'm sure. It wasn't anything too involved."

"You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen."

What? Did the kid say what I think he said? Even though Cole is a few feet away, I see his attention snap toward us, ears practically sticking out of his head.

"I'm sorry," I try not to laugh like a nervous school girl, "but pardon me?"

"Nothing, never mind." He's blushing again. Don't tell me he has a crush. It's nice to know I'm not as much of an old

bag as I feel these days, but I don't need any puppy adoration right now.

Two steps and Cole is beside me, brawny arm draped around my shoulders. He is so full of presence when he wants to be—and right now he's all Dr. Garber. "Rory, are you trying to sweet-talk my wife?"

"No, I just—" Rory stammers, "I mean, yes, but—my mother always said a gentleman should compliment a nice woman if she—I meant no offense, Cole."

"Your mom's right," Cole says with a grin. Devilish bastard. I can tell he's pleased with himself, having made his point so easily. "She does have beautiful hair," he adds, kissing the top of my head like I'm his pet woman or something.

I narrow my eyes. If Rory wasn't still standing here, I'd stick my tongue out at the boy I'm married to. "Thank you," I say to Rory and accompany it with a polite smile, "it's sweet of you to say."

As Rory retreats, Cole says for my ears only, "Yeah, he wants you."

I thump his chest. "Like you have anything to worry about, stud."

He angles his head and studies me, gaze denim-blue and serious. "Are you sure about that?"

My chest aches with love. "Yes, I'm sure."

But his eyes are troubled. He feels the undercurrent, too. And he doesn't know what to do about it any more than I do.

He keeps hold of me for half an hour—a possessive strangulation that makes me antsy. While it's also nice to know he still wants to make sure everybody knows who I

belong to, it's pretty annoying when he thinks he has to prove it to some young buck.

He should let it go. But alone in the truck, wedged among his traveling vet gear, he has to bitch about it. Like it's some kind of personal affront to his masculinity that another man finds me attractive. I bite my tongue. I know this 'tude. There's nothing to be gained by contradicting him and I'll tease him for it later. But he's still glowering as I open the front door and huskily asks if I'm coming to bed as soon as I check on the boys—and that ticks me off.

I let him go ahead and I'll wait until he's asleep. It has been too long, but I'll be damned if he's going to make love to me just to prove I'm his. I've never given him any reason to doubt my fidelity—and I resent having to prove it with sex on demand.

* * * *

Thursday

"...so I don't know when I'll be home."

Cole sounds tired even through Mr. Bell's wire filter.

"Where are you meeting him?" I ask.

"Bill's. You know the sheriff, it's his night out. And I really have to—it's the only day this week I can talk to him about something."

"Okay. Be careful—and don't let him get you too drunk."

"I will. Be careful, I mean." He pauses. "I love you, Darla."

"I love you, too."

"Very much."

"Yeah, me too."

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I hang up the phone more adamantly than necessary—and find Carol and Lindsey frowning at me from the table.

"You guys really are in a slump, aren't you?" Lindsay says sympathetically.

"Look," Carol takes charge, "you need to do something about this right now. Send the boys over tomorrow after school. Brian's coming home from college and the four of us will have a great weekend. You can pick them up Sunday afternoon. That will give you and Cole plenty of time to work on things."

Lindsay looks me over critically. "Maybe you should wrap yourself in Saran Wrap or something..."

Carol strangles a laughing snort. "Oh that'll work, Lindsay, squash her boobs flat as a pancake—that's sure to turn him on."

"No, seriously."

"I am not wrapping myself up like hamburger."

"I'm telling you, drop the boys off, don't tell Cole the house is empty—and when he gets home, jump his bones. Then you have two days to go at it until you get it right."

"She has a point," Lindsay agrees, "no quality time is your worst enemy here. He worships the ground you walk on, Darla—and you damn well know he does."

"But having time doesn't really help." I'm whining but can't help it. "It's still the same old thing—do this, do that, rub this, rub that, slam-bam, over and done, what do we got to eat in the fridge?"

"Christ on a cracker," Lindsey barks, "then do something outrageous! It's sex, woman, not physics. Do something

Darla Miller would have done that Darla Garber's forgot she likes."

"But I can't think of anything we haven't done a hundred times!"

"No," Carol smiles faintly, "I guess you've probably covered all the bases—lucky thing. So do something unexpected then. Even if it's stupid, just so it's out of the ordinary. Put a note on the door. Tell him to strip in the mud room, that you're both going to be naked for forty-eight hours."

Lindsey agrees. "She's right, you know—it's the effort. It might be all the jump start you need."

"Right," Carol says. "What you guys need to do is talk about this honestly—and there's something about being naked and silly that makes it easier. Do it, leave him a note. But for God's sake, do something proactive or else stop crying about it!"

I gape. They're talking good sense and my mind is flooded with ways to improve upon their suggestion. I have to laugh. "You guys are so smart, sometimes I want to kiss you both!"

"Well control yourself, please," Lindsay says with mock indignity, "'cause baby don't play that way."

* * * *

Friday

I'm standing in the middle of the Garber Love Shrine. Cole is going to laugh himself sick. I can't even look at it without grinning like an idiot. It's silly, but it's romantic. I think so anyway, because I can safely say there's not a picture taken

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of us before we were thirty left in the crawlspace—they're all here, taped to every available vertical surface.

I check my scene. The wine is cold. I tried to wedge it into the refrigerator, but it wouldn't fit, so I put it in a bucket of snow—and it looks a lot nicer than I thought it would next to the bed. Although dragging the mattress down the hall wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, it's in front of the fire and dressed to the nines in fresh, air-dried sheets. I even aired out the down comforter and used the Egyptian cotton duvet I was saving for next winter.

I spent all day getting ready for Cole to walk through the door and I can't remember the last time I was this excited about him getting home, so I went a little overboard.

Well, no—make that a lot overboard. The present condition of my living room says I've probably started at least one rumor that will be all over town tomorrow. Other than the bed and the pictures, the source of possible Rumor Number One—the world's biggest bottle of baby oil that I doused with a bit of eucalyptus—sits warming by the fire. Possible Rumor Number Two has to do with what's stuffing my fridge. And the source of possible Rumor Number Three is that Mrs. Garber bought six bottles of wine—I really hope Cole hasn't gotten wind of that one already.

Oh my God! I hear the truck! Okay, okay, I should be in bed, blanket like this—where's my wineglass? Got it. There's the outside door! He sees the note ... in a minute I'll hear the inside door.

I wriggle, picture him reading:

"The boys are gone for forty-eight hours. I'm naked and in such dire need of professional medical attention, I'll take any vet I can get. So you better take off your clothes where you stand, Doc, and get in here and examine me."

Before I even process the sound of his footsteps, he's in the doorway—clutching a handful of roses, naked as requested, but wearing a shit-eating grin—which falters at the sight of the shrine.

"Hi," I purr.

"Hi, Beautiful." He's amused. "Looks like you had a busy day."

"Mmm-hmm. What's with the roses?"

"I'm taking them home to my wife," he says, studying the pictures, "as soon as I finish this house call."

"I see." Leave it to him to think of flowers. That we're actually in tune even when things don't seem quite right makes my throat thick. I swallow rapidly as he roams around the room, looking at where we began—considering each frozen moment like a symptom. I forgot how much I like to look at him when he's not covered in layers of clothes, and I take the opportunity to see him as my friends wish they could.

He's an oil-painted vision in the firelight—solid yet soft, muted yet sharp, subtly shaded by flickering flames. His hair curls against his bare shoulders, bringing attention to arms thickened from chopping wood and strong enough to support half-ton livestock. Skiing seven months a year *does* keep his ass as scrumptious as any underwear model's and it fits the trunk-like legs so well. No young stallion maybe, but still all

mighty male. And all mine. Yep, he's a banana split all right—and that observation aside, the way I feel about his soul alone is worth every penny of effort I can muster.

He stops at the earliest shot—us laughing after a ski meet—and touches it reverently.

"Well, Doctor G.," I almost hate to take his attention away from the picture but I need to touch him, "I suggest you start with a kiss to get the patient's confidence."

I hear a moan, his lips are on mine—and I don't think the roses have hit the floor yet. He holds my head and I tangle my hands in his hair. We kiss like the starving people we are and need of air is the only reason we part.

He searches my face. There's an indigo heat in his eyes that I haven't seen in a long time. He licks his lips but doesn't say anything.

"What?" I ask, unable to read his eyes for once and curious to know what he thinks of my preparations.

"I'm trying to find the words to tell you how much I need you, but I can't think of any that are enough."

"There aren't any, I know—so show me."

Kisses scatter over mouths cheeks eyelids, and lips tease throats. Without purpose other than love, without intention other than mutual need, we explore curves and slopes too long ignored, and I find myself hyper-aware of things I take for granted: Capable, enduring shoulders flexing under my hands. A shivering rasp of beard as he kisses my neck. His taste when it's mixed with mine. His heavier smell when he's aroused. The solace of his greater weight. The unconscious

sounds he makes as our hearts beat faster and his cock rises against my thigh.

The room is a mirage outside the few feet we occupy.

With a groan, he rolls away. "I hate to say this, but I have to pee. I had to go before I got home," he chuckles, "but I didn't think you'd want me doing that first."

I smile. "No, I guess not—I would have died thinking you thought the note was stupid—that all this was..." I take in the room with a sweep of my hand.

"No, no," he says seriously, casting a quick look around. "It's great." He takes a deep breath and says in a rush, "I was starting to think—I mean, I even—"

"Shh." I press my finger to his lips. "We'll talk later, after we've—go, before I make you stay."

"Is that wine?"

"I'll pour you some—now go!"

He scoots into the bathroom. I grab a glass and he's back before I finish filling it. "That was quick."

"It's cold in there." He slips under the blanket, accepts the wine gratefully and takes a few healthy swigs. Setting it aside, his cooled hands stroke my waist. "Now where was I?"

"Examining me, if I recall."

"Mmm, yes, I was about to take more invasive measures."

His hands trace my breasts, his lips following behind with moist murmurs of appreciation. Darting thumbs brush the tips of my nipples and his delicate ministrations turn them into ceramic conductors of pleasure. Although I'm easily wet enough to go straight to the point—I've been wet just thinking about him for most of the afternoon, in fact—I'm in

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no hurry. Tonight I will take my time and revel in his body next to mine, relish his love nestled deeper inside my heart than any surgeon's tool could reach.

His radiating heat warms me more than the fire and I tickle down his spine, goosed-flesh rippling in the wake of my fingers as they slip into the deepening cleft created by his clenched ass. His hairy torso rubbing against my body's fine-spun down is a gratifying reminder of how much I rely on his masculinity to complement my femininity. As unliberated as it might be to believe it, together we form a whole and without him, I would be so much less.

Gems of happiness seep from the corners of my eyes—tears of thanks for my man, my love, my world—and quickly evaporate as Cole's sweet foreplay ramps up a notch. Gently plucking one hard-budded nipple, he tests the readiness of my circuits. My responding groan earns a grunt of satisfaction from my perceptive mate, and his lips swiftly seize the prize.

He holds my aching nipple captive for his taunting, lashing tongue, which seems intent on sending me to paradise. Turning his attention to the other peak, he enslaves it as well, and my breath catches as the soldering current courses from his mouth, streaks through my belly, transforms my clit into a burning filament that sheds its glow into my deepest recesses—recesses that gush with moisture, ready to embrace the coming flames.

His engorged cock, passion-swollen and undoubtedly aching with a greed of its own, imprints itself into my hip. I twist, try to make enough room to give his ignored rod solace, only to have him hastily push my hands away.

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He is close already.

There *is* a special and unique power in this comfort of ours. With sure knowledge stemming from years of study, I know each and every unspoken signal. I know when to stroke him soft and when to stroke him hard. Whether by vision, touch, smell or sound, I know when he is a simple act away from finishing. I know each and every hot spot—and every last little thing that will drive him over the edge.

Denied the satisfaction of playing with him in return, in a passion-colored blur of senses, I trace his ear with my tongue, travel its hills and valleys as if I never visited its mystical hollows before. The insidiousness of my expertise invokes a growl of delight and Cole shudders, shrugs my tongue away. But rebuff only spurs me to giggle and, by deliberate design, a nip of his earlobe ignites further expansion. He butts his rampant erection insistently into my thigh.

I laugh into his ear, breathy and proud.

In defense, he returns his mouth to mine with bruising fervor and our tongues wrestle for dominance. Sweat springs from my pores, its sheen evidence of the height of my arousal. He spreads my lower wings and circles my throbbing clit with pure preponderance of purpose—proof he knows the location of every last one of my buttons, too.

I buck against his hand, whimper as his fingers enter me. Ever-appreciative of how he can double my pleasure, the heel of his palm applies matching rhythmic pressure to my clitoris.

Writhing under his petting, I burn for release and know I can't take much more of his decadent indulgence without

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exploding—but before I do, I want to make him the center of my attention, just like he is making me the heart of his.

I want his succulent hardness in my mouth. I want to feel the tensile iron façade of his cock twitch under my tongue's rasping, while I please him in a way that's just for him.

But divining my intent, Cole keeps me from moving downward and rolls me to my back instead. I look into his eyes and know there will be no more prolonging the journey to what we truly desire.

My legs part around his hips without a thought. Poised, with his cock a hot pulse against my hungry need, he hesitates.

Panting, I yearn for his prodding, anticipate the gloriousness of our union. Yet he gives me only the tip of his readiness and again hesitates, gazing into my eyes with serious contemplation. His cockhead is barely stretching my starving entrance, a tease of momentous proportions that strums my taut body and my heartstrings. I moan, craving his entire length like I have never craved it before.

"You," he murmurs as he slips scant inches into my famished sheath, "are my life."

Before I can say he is mine, too, he claims me with a thrust, adamant phallus driven into my soul without further warning. I cry out, sheer rapture in being impaled on the staff of his enduring adoration.

"God, Cole, it's been—I love—"

His lips stop my voice as he moves, the center of my yearning empty and full by turns. I want to scream: You are all I want! You are all I need! But something lost has been

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found and I can only whimper as we engage in warm joy instead of cold sex. He is half of me and I am half of him, and when we are joined in pleasure instead of habit, I know we will never be anything less.

"God, baby," he groans, "I can't—" Thrusting harder, faster, he bathes my insides with exquisite release while the climax strips him of speech.

I'm not far behind and milk his spurting organ with my slickened passageway, lift my hips to meet him. He doesn't withdraw but pushes up to slide his hand between us, teasing the nugget of molten gold that quivers above his penetration. I sob with pleasure, reach for the looming cliff with everything I am—oh God, please, I'm so very close! I need to feel him inside me when I—

Launched into the cosmos of love's purest reward, where neither rational thought nor concrete planes are allowed, my convulsing tunnel milks his remaining rigidity as I swim through the celestial flashes of forever, seeing only an eternity spent loving the man boring into me, until the last of my orgasm spills into my muscles, and is reabsorbed.

The room fades into focus and I submerge in his loving eyes, as blue as spring skies that are within easy reach.

"God, Cole..." I'm drained, relieved—as limp as he is. It takes an amazing amount of strength to reach out and stroke the soft scruff of his cheek.

"I couldn't hold back," he murmurs, kissing my palm, "it's been too long."

"Mmm, do you hear me complaining?"

"No, but—"

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"Shut up, Doc. Give me a couple of minutes to recover and I'll feed you—then we can start over."

He laughs, low and satisfied. "Okay." He props his head up to look at me. "Do we really have two days?"

"Until four o'clock Sunday."

"How did you..." he trails off, stroking my belly.

"It was Carol's idea, actually."

Snorting, eyes dancing, he asks, "Why am I not surprised?"

"The note was Lindsay's."

He frowns. "Just how much do they know?"

"Don't worry about them," I giggle, "they still think you're the best catch in Lancer. Hey! What happened to the roses? Or better yet," I lift a brow, "*why* are there roses?"

His delicious lower lip disappears between his teeth—sucking it is a sure sign of discomfort. "They were the sheriff's idea."

"What?" I giggle again. "Tell me you're kidding! Wait a second," I say sternly, "just how much does he know?"

"Touché."

"Seriously, Cole?" I'm incredulous. "You talked to *Thomas* about us?"

"I thought the spark was gone," he replies with concern, "and I was thinking about how we used to say we would never stop doing it. We were going to be the old couple who hold hands, remember?"

"I've been thinking about that all week."

"And who in town is older than us and obviously still going at it?"

I grin. "Jane and Thomas."

"Right. And I hope I never have to do that again. It took more beer than I thought to get up the nerve to broach the subject."

"I'm glad you cared enough to do it though."

"Me, too." He grins and his stomach proudly bemoans its lack of dinner.

I pat the damp fur covering the protester. "I never got around to lunch—I'm starved, too."

We traipse into the kitchen, hands entwined. The wood stove makes it the warmest room in the house and our nakedness seems natural. I go for the fridge but he yanks me back for a kiss. With a growl, he deposits my rump on the table.

"Wait here," he instructs, "I'll get food."

I laugh with delight as he whips open the refrigerator door and stands there, mouth open. The shelves are jam-packed with ice cream toppings—semi-sweet and milk chocolate syrups, heatable fudge, thick caramel, blueberry sauce, strawberry sauce, butterscotch, maraschino cherries and twenty-two—yes, twenty-two—cans of real whipped cream.

Eyes smoldering, he stalks toward the table armed with sweet cream—and starts shooting before he gets halfway. I squeal, duck past him, grab another can and promptly return fire.

"Take that!" I holler—and gracelessly slip on the fluffy floor. Reactions swift as always, Cole catches and kisses me in one fell swoop.

"Mmm, yummy." I lick dollops of whipped cream from his beard.

He returns the favor by lapping up some of what's dripping down my breasts. "What the hell is all of that stuff for?"

"Somebody suggested you were a banana split. I thought I would improve on the picture it put in my head."

"A banana split?" He snorts and shakes his head. "Where are the bananas?" He squints at the countertop. "I can think of several interesting things to do with bananas."

"Damn."

"You forgot them?" His throaty chuckle stirs the embers in my belly. "Well, that's okay, babe—I have a real nice one right here." He guides my hand to the stiffening fruit between his legs, groaning as I grasp it firmly.

"The best way to see if it's ripe enough to use," my voice is husky, too, "is to give it a taste." I plop my behind in a chair and pull his hips toward me.

"Wait a sec," he says gruffly, proceeding to cover his wakening cock with whipped cream until it disappears from view and the can is empty.

Doubtful, I ask, "How am I supposed to find it in there?"

"Just like bobbing for apples," he says matter-of-factly.

"Oh, sorry, I should have asked." He adds a flashing grin.

"You do want nuts with your sundae, don't you?"

* * * *

New Dawn

It will be light soon. I'm so pumped and sated at the same time, I couldn't sleep even if I wanted to. Cole's eyes are

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closed but he's not sleeping either. I shut my eyes and drift on the gentle, felt-but-unheard tune which is the core of what we are. It's back—and louder than it was before it took a vacation.

The fumbling clatter of Cole's watch hitting the floor accompanied by a quiet curse means it must be about time for him to get to the slopes.

I yawn. "We are coming back here after practice, right?"

"Rabid animals couldn't stop me," he rasps. We've been talking for hours and he's hoarse.

"I think we might actually have to sleep this afternoon," I say wistfully.

"I was thinking the same thing," he murmurs. "We might be acting like we're twenty, but we're not, are we?"

"No—and I'm glad."

"Me, too. So," he continues casually, "we have enough time—do you want to try for five?"

"Mmm, sure." I slide my hand up the inside of his thigh. "We might as well set a new record while we're at it."

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About Deborah Boyer

After a fifteen-year hiatus, Deborah returned to writing fiction when her muse presented a swift mid-life kick and insisted it be heard before it's too late. With the support of her husband of twenty-five years, she left her legal assistant stress behind to concentrate on flexing rusty creative muscles. Four years later, with one novel completed and a second one underway, she writes full time, soothing writer's block for the bigger projects with short stories and poetry. The fifth generation to own her family home in Rutherford Heights, Pennsylvania, she also indulges her physical creativity with ongoing do-it-yourself renovations while the voices in her head argue their points of view. For more information, or to read some of Deborah's poetry, visit www.DeborahBoyer.com.

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