

Tingles Collection, 2005

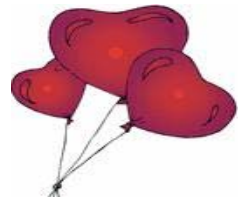
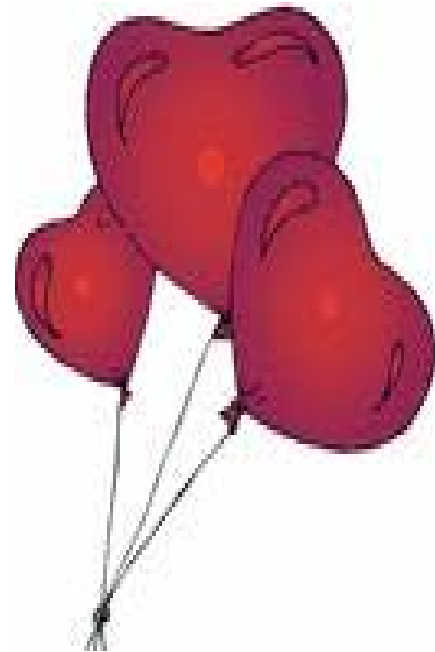
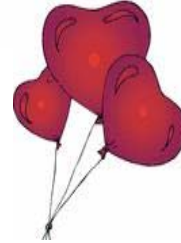
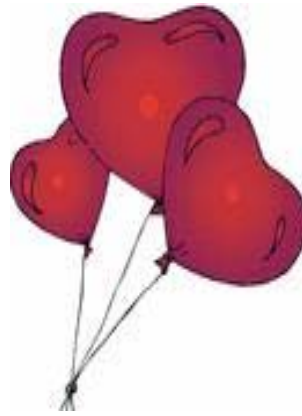
by Various Talented
HeatWave Romance Authors

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DESERT TRICKSTER, by Kathy Kulig

Sara woke up naked on the warm desert sand, craving his touch. The sky was dark, and no hint of light shone in the east. Millions of brilliant stars glittered like tiny fragments of polished silver. How long had she slept? And where was he?

Earlier that night, he had summoned her. He had said he'd make a fire next to the tall saguaro cactus behind her house, and she should meet him there. When Sara saw the flickering light from her bedroom window, a twirling sensation of anticipation pulled in her stomach. She knew it was his signal and was instantly aroused.

Slipping out of her nightgown, she yanked the Indian blanket from her bed and strode toward the fire. She wasn't afraid to go into the desert at night; he said the fire would keep her safe from all the desert creatures. In a semi-trance, she reached the campfire, stretched out on the blanket and waited. She was primed and aching for sex.

The flames crackled and sent sprays of sparks into the air. Peering into the dark shadows surrounding the campfire, Sara tried to spot Dante, but saw no sign of him. She would wait. She closed her eyes and soon, drifted off to sleep.

When she woke, it was well after midnight and still no Dante; she sighed heavily with impatience. Her body sizzled with need, wanting his touch. He had promised to come. She slid her hand across her breasts. Her skin felt cool, and her nipples sensitive and erect. She glided her hand across her flat stomach to the soft, curly hair of her mound, then touched her swollen clit, her wet folds, dipping one finger inside for a moment. Oh, she wanted him.

"Mmmm. That looks nice," said a husky voice behind the saguaro cactus.

She jumped. "Dante."

He gave a low, sultry laugh. Her heart skipped a beat, and a trickle of moisture tickled her pussy. He knew his power over her; just his voice awakened her lust. Every inch of her body ached for him. Finally, tonight would be the night.

"How long have you been standing there?" Sara asked.

"Long enough. Don't stop, I like to watch."

"Come join me."

"Only after you let me watch some more."

In the firelight, she could see Dante's dark brown, almost black eyes, glinting with mischief and sensuality. Long, dark hair shone like black obsidian. The golden light from the campfire flickered odd shadows across his smooth, bare chest. He wore only a pair of dark suede pants.

"Make yourself wet for me." His voice was low and husky.

She closed her eyes and rocked her hips as her fingers, slick from her arousal, stroked her clit. Harder, then softer, she played and teased herself. The thought of him watching excited her, but she wanted him pumping his hard cock inside her.

Soon her breathing became deep and raspy. She was reaching the point of no return -- she slowed her hand. Dante dropped his pants on the sand and stood naked above her, his cock at full attention. The sight of his body hard and glistening in the firelight thrilled her.

Kneeling beside her, he took her mouth, kissing her hard, probing with his tongue. Then his lips traveled down her neck; she shivered from the wet trail his tongue made. When he reached her breast, he captured a nipple lightly between his teeth and circled the tip with his tongue.

Her body writhed as he glided his hand to her mound, gently flicking her clit with his finger. A needy sound escaped her lips. If he continued like that she would come.

Then he slowly, tortuously slow, moved between her legs, his lips and tongue teasing her clit until forceful waves of pleasure wracked her body. "Oh, God," she cried.

"Mmmm. Yes."

Before her orgasm faded, Dante plunged his engorged cock deep inside her hole. She lifted her hips, wrapped her legs around his ass and rocked against him. His groans sounded hollow and strange in the night air of the desert. His teeth clenched as he pumped harder and faster, then spasms rocked his body. Sara felt the muscles of his ass tighten. He lay on top of her, breathing hard.

When, their heartbeats slowed, he rolled off her and laid his arm across her waist. Sara sighed heavily and dozed.

After what seemed like a few minutes, she opened her eyes, but Dante was gone. She was a little annoyed that he would leave her alone in the desert, but she shrugged it off. All part of his game, she decided. She lay on the red and gold Indian blanket, spent and exhausted. Dante had bought that blanket for her the other day, when they wandered the flea market. She pulled the sides of the blanket off the sand and wrapped herself in its warmth.

"Red and gold for passion and excitement," he had said. And that was all she wanted in a man right now. A casual friend, good sex -- safe sex, she made sure - - and no commitments. She moved to the desert to get away from the city, her controlling ex-husband, start a new life and find a little adventure and peace. At thirty-five, she needed a break from stressful jobs and a lousy, painful marriage.

She'd met Dante at her new job as a laboratory technologist at Drake Diagnostic Laboratory. The veterinary lab performed tests for animals at the local ranches and at the Saguaro National Park. Every exotic test was available to monitor the health of wild and domestic animals. She loved her new job and felt like she was doing something important. Like her, Dante was new to the area and the job, too.

He'd meet her for lunch, at the employee picnic area, where a few picnic tables were arranged beneath several shade trees. Most employees stayed inside with the air conditioning, but Sara liked the fresh air.

She wasn't sure what department Dante worked in, and she didn't care. The less she knew about him, the easier it would be to keep her distance. She was not interested in a serious relationship, only fun and some male company.

He was handsome, charming and sexy. He told her he wanted the first time they made love to be adventurous and a little unusual. She was open to a little adventure and desperately needed some sexual attention. She hadn't had sex in a long time.

The other day at lunch, Dante explained his plans for their first sexual encounter. "When you see the campfire burning next to the tall saguaro cactus behind your house, come out into the desert naked. Bring the Indian blanket. Then place it next to the fire, lie down -- and wait for me." The thought of playing his little sex game excited her.

How appropriate to summon her to the largest saguaro cactus near to her home. The thick column-shape that towered above her stood like a phallic symbol in the harsh desert, but with several rows of thorns along its thick skin, was more like a sadistic phallic symbol. Many saguaros had curving arms, typical of those seen in old western movies. They gave character to the desert.

She knew Dante was a little eccentric, but she liked that. His request had seemed odd at the time, but she agreed. Over the last few weeks, they had spent time together hiking in the park, meeting for lunch and wandering in the flea market in town. She felt comfortable with him and very attracted.

"Sara, you must be losing your mind." She scolded herself as she sat up on the blanket and tried to shake off the grogginess. She wondered if it was Dante or the desert itself that had hypnotized her, seduced her and drew her out in the middle of the night to meet him.

He excited her and she wanted him. He was an obsession, always on her mind. On a few evenings, while sitting alone on her back porch, she thought she'd seen him walking in the desert.

He even invaded her dreams, and once, after waking from a sexual dream, she thought she'd seen him in her bedroom, but he had vanished as soon as she sat up in bed. She must have been just horny and a little lonely, she figured.

A slight breeze stirred her out of her musings and raised goose bumps on her skin. The air was fragrant with a woody turpentine smell mixed with the scent of the sweet flowers that bloomed only at night.

In the east, streaks of red, purple and gold radiated from the horizon.

"Oh God, Sara, what are you doing?" She felt a little foolish lying there naked, but deliciously decadent. If she didn't get up, she'd be late for work. "Dante, you are a very passionate and mysterious man."

A rustling in the scrub brush startled her. She sat up and froze, clutched the blanket to her and strained to hear. "Dante?"

No answer. Then she heard a few snaps of dried twigs. Sara's heart was thumping wildly in her chest. She was frightened and excited at the same time. "Dante?" She called again. "Please be Dante," she whispered.

Sara's eyes darted to a movement behind a tangle of low bushes, and the animal appeared -- a coyote. Sara leaped to her feet. "Get! Go away!"

The coyote raised his snout defiantly a moment sniffing the air, then turned and retreated into the desert.

The fire had burned down. Sara threw sand on the smoldering ashes, then wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She stepped into her sneakers and trotted in the soft sand, dodging brush and cacti, and headed toward her house. At least she had sense to put shoes on. Walking around barefoot in the desert with all the spiny, prickly plants was not a good idea.

She could see her house in the dim light. Headlights from a car were coming up the road in front of her house. As the car got closer, she noticed it looked like Jake's Jeep Cherokee; already he was heading to work at the park. Her property bordered the Saguaro National Park and the park entrance was only a couple miles down the road. Jake, a park ranger, usually passed her house while she was sipping her morning coffee. She was late for work.

* * *

A few days later in the lab, Sara studied the test results performed on several deer and coyotes Jake had found dead. "I've double checked the results, and I can't find any immunological, viral, or bacterial cause of death for those animals."

"It's puzzling. The animals weren't shot or injured, and didn't appear starved. They were just found dead." Jake rubbed his face in apparent frustration.

In the first time of her life, she had two men in her life. Just dating, nothing serious, no commitments, she promised herself. She admired Jake in his ranger hat and uniform. He was tall, with short dark hair and built like a lean football player. Few visitors would challenge him. His physical appearance looked intimidating, but his soft brown eyes revealed his sensitive side.

"I don't know what to tell you," Sara said. "Maybe the deer and coyotes just died of natural causes."

His forehead furrowed. "It's unusual for so many to be found dead at one time. I'll notify the other rangers that the results didn't show anything. I hate the thought of losing more animals. Not sure what we'll do."

"Let me know if I can help."

Jake nodded. "So, are we still on for dinner tonight?"

Dinner. She almost forgot she planned to have dinner with Jake. She hadn't heard from Dante. The sex game was fun and exciting, but afterward, she felt a little unsettled. Two nights in a row, he had summoned her out into the desert

with his campfire signal to play his sex game, but she hadn't heard from him since. Fine. She refused to fall back on old habits, sitting at home by the phone waiting for a man to call. She had other plans for this evening -- dinner with Jake.

* * *

The small Mexican restaurant at the edge of town was rarely visited by tourists. The old, rundown brick building had little atmosphere, but excellent food. Jake and Sara ate their fill of tacos and fajitas made from homemade corn and flour tortillas.

After dinner, Jake drove Sara home. Her white adobe styled house looked orange-gold in the setting sun. The house was small, but Sara loved the high beamed ceiling, the stone fireplace and wide deck in the back that looked out onto the Sonoran Desert. No other houses spoiled her view; she liked the isolation. The wild desert terrain was peaceful, hypnotic and seductive.

"I make great margaritas, and it's a nice night to sit outside. How about it?" She asked.

"Don't have to twist my arm."

A slight breeze rustled the scrubby pine trees in her back yard. Beyond the thorny bushes, the tall saguaro cacti and buff-colored sand were the rocky peaks of the Rincon Mountains silhouetting the evening horizon.

Sara lit several candles and places them along the railing of her wooden deck. The candlelight cast odd shadows on the deck and illuminated her back yard with a yellow glow.

Sara picked up her margarita glass and sat next to Jake on the wicker love seat. As she licked the salt from the rim of her glass and sipped her drink, she watched a lizard scurry across the wooden railing, leap off onto the sand and disappear under a spiny mesquite bush.

Jake leaned back in the wicker love seat and sighed deeply, his margarita glass held between both hands. "I'm off tomorrow. Would you like to go on a hike?"

She hesitated for a moment, wondering about Dante.

"Unless you have another date," Jake added.

"I don't have any plans. A hike sounds great."

"I'd also like to stop at my grandmother's house, if you don't mind. I have a few things to drop off. I think you'll enjoy meeting her. She's part Navajo and holds onto the old beliefs and customs. I've always been captivated by her stories."

"I'd like to meet her. How old is she?"

"Ninety, but she's very self-sufficient."

"She sounds like a great lady."

Jake nodded. "She has her own theory about the animal deaths."

"Which is...?"

"She believes Iktomi is killing them."

"Who?"

"Iktomi, the Trickster, from old Native American folklore. He's known as a seducer, a prankster, a manipulator, and he's evil."

"Why is he considered evil?"

"According to myth, he can travel between the Otherworld and our world. He draws the life energy of animals and people to gain power, which allows him to live in our world. The legend says, if you are seduced by Iktomi three times, you will be lost to the Otherworld. At least, that's what my grandmother says." He winked at Sara.

"Lost? You mean die?" Sara rubbed her arms, stood and picked up her Indian blanket from the side table, the one that Dante gave her, and wrapped it around her shoulders. She snuggled up to Jake, and he slipped his arm around her.

"Cold?"

"Just a little."

"I'm not sure what 'lost' means," Jake said. "Either disappear into the Otherworld or die, I suppose."

"Do you believe in the legend?"

Jake hesitated and took a drink of his margarita, finishing it and setting the glass down. "Some legends are based in truth." He detoured around her question. "So what time would you like me to pick you up in the morning?"

"Is 9 o'clock too early?" She felt a little twinge of disappointment; he was ending the evening early. They had been seeing each other for weeks, but he never pushed her into anything more physical, other than some heavy kissing. Sara was beginning to feel frustrated. Jake knew she saw other guys -- well one other guy, Dante. She wondered if that was why Jake hadn't tried to make love to her.

Sex with Dante was intense and passionate, but afterward she somehow felt drained and used. Dante was also insatiable and selfish, but she got what she wanted too, as long as she was in control. Dante was more like her "fucking buddy," not someone you planned to marry and settle down with. That was fine for her and that seemed fine with Dante. Besides, she wasn't looking for a happily-ever-after, at least not yet. Jake was the type of guy who was looking for someone to settle down with, but she wasn't ready for that step yet.

Jake lifted her chin with his hand and lowered his mouth onto hers. His kiss was gentle, but deep and seductive. Sara felt her heart quicken and her pussy throb in response. Maybe he wouldn't leave so soon. The thought of waking up next to him sent a fluttering sensation in her belly. She wondered if he would stay the night, hoped he would.

Jake intensified his kiss, probing his tongue deeper. As he fondled her breasts, Sara forgot about Dante.

A needy sound escaped Jake's lips as he lifted her legs over his lap and kissed her harder, then trailed his lips and tongue to her neck, just below her ear. Sara moaned softly and was instantly aroused and wet. He hadn't kissed her this passionately before. He squeezed her breast, then yanked her cotton tank top out of the top of her skirt. His hand, warm and rough, slid under her shirt touching bare skin and squeezing her breast. She wasn't wearing a bra, and she felt his hand hesitate a moment as if he hadn't expected to feel her bare breast.

Beneath her thigh, she felt his cock bulging hard through his jeans. God she wanted him. She ran her hand down his shirt, undoing buttons and reached inside his shirt feeling his muscular chest. Then she glided her hand over the large silver belt buckle on his jeans and stroked the bulge. A low groan from him encouraged her to stroke harder, then she tugged at his belt.

The sound of snapping twigs startled them both, and they pulled away from each other.

"We have company," Jake said with a little annoyance in his tone.

Sara slid off Jake's lap and spun around on the seat. Standing at the edge of her yard was Dante.

"Hello, Sara, I didn't know you had a visitor." Dante said.

Sara stood up; Jake remained seated. "Hello, Dante. I wasn't expecting you." She introduced the men to each other, and they nodded. The tension in the air between the men felt heavy and stifling.

"I thought you'd be interested in an evening walk in the desert," Dante said to Sara slyly.

Sara assumed he meant another sexual adventure in the desert. "Thanks Dante, but I'll have to pass this evening."

"Another time then."

She nodded.

"Good night...for now." Dante spun on his heels and walked away. Soon he disappeared behind the trees and thick brush.

"I should be going." Jake's voice had an edge to it, as he buttoned his shirt and stood up.

"You don't have to leave."

"Think it's better if I do."

"Jake, you know I see other guys. I'm with you now. Don't let Dante spoil our time."

He folded his arms and looked out at the desert. "I know you said you're not ready for a serious relationship, and you've always been honest with me, but I can't say I like it, and I don't want to have to take a number."

Sara didn't comment. Then out in the desert, next to the tall saguaro cactus, she saw a light. "Oh, great." Sara groaned.

"Is that a fire?"

"A campfire." Sara sighed. "It's Dante." Now, she was annoyed. She needed to tell Dante she doesn't put up with controlling, possessive men. An image of her ex-husband flashed in her mind. She wasn't having that in her life again.

"Persistent." Jake stated through clenched teeth. "Better tell your friend he can't have campfires out there."

"I have a feeling he won't leave us alone, so I'll go talk to him. I'm sorry this ruined our night, Jake."

"It's fine." But his expression showed it wasn't. "That's my clue to leave. Good night, Sara."

"So 9 o'clock tomorrow? Should be a good day for a hike." Tears stung her eyes. She knew his answer.

"I think I better take a rain check." Jake fished his keys out of his pocket, and walked around to the front of her house, got in his Jeep and sped off down the road.

Sara's heart twisted in her chest. She blew it, and she couldn't blame him. This incident with Dante made her realize how much Jake meant to her. Could she be falling in love with Jake? She now saw Dante for who he was -- charming and charismatic, but also controlling and possessive. Well, she could end this before it got out of hand. She strode toward the campfire.

"Dante? Where are you?"

"Here." He stepped around a huge thorny bush. "You're not naked. You're supposed to be naked when I call you."

"Dante, I'm sorry, but I'm not playing your game anymore. This doesn't work for me. Please don't come around here. And stop building campfires."

Dante started to argue, but stopped. "I'm sorry, Sara. I guess I got a little jealous with your ranger friend."

"How do you know he's a ranger?"

"I've seen him around." He walked up close to her and gave her a sultry look. "It was all in fun, not meant to scare or hurt you."

Sara felt a little pull in her stomach. Dante was exciting, he knew how to please her, taught her how to be more sexually adventurous, but she realized she was in love with Jake, and Dante was not who she thought he was -- he was bad news. She hoped she hadn't ruined her chance with Jake. "It's been fun, but to be honest, I'm falling in love with Jake."

"No! You're mine," he shouted, then lowered his voice. "Sorry...I understand, Sara. But you're here now, just be with me one more time under the saguaro." He reached out to her and tried pulling her into his arms. As he lowered his mouth to kiss her, Sara pushed him away.

"Stop. I'm going now." As she spun around, he grabbed her arm.

"No. You can't leave. I need you one more time."

She cried out, tried to kick him, but her sandaled feet did little damage. Then she elbowed him in his gut. He let out a rush of air and let her go. Losing her balance, she dropped to her knees. As she scrambled to her feet to run, she saw a large shadow race by, heard a smack and then a thud. She spun around and saw Jake standing over Dante. Jake's hands were balled into fists. Dante rubbed his jaw and slowly stood up.

"I wasn't going to hurt her," Dante said, then turned to Sara. "Come with me -- I need you."

"No, just go." She was shaking with anger, not from fear. "Don't come here again."

Dante smiled slyly. He turned and started walking into the desert. Then his image wavered like heat rising from a radiator. He changed form, no longer a man, but an animal. Sara stared in disbelief, then glanced at Jake. He was nodding his head and didn't seem surprised. The coyote faced Sara and Jake, raised his snout defiantly, sniffed the air, then trotted into the desert.

"Oh, my God. You're grandmother was right. Did you see that?"

"I knew it was him," Jake said. "After I left you, I had a very bad feeling, so I came back. I'm sorry I ran off." Jake took her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Sara. I know you've been burned before and don't want to risk getting hurt again. We can go slowly...at your pace. I won't pressure you."

In his arms, she felt safe, content and in love. "Loving someone is worth the risk of pain. I do love you, Jake. I just need some time. I'm working on putting the past behind me."

He lowered his head and kissed her until they both gasped for air. As they held each other tight, they looked out into the desert.

"Do you think he's gone?" She asked.

"For now. When I was nine years old, I saw him change from a coyote into a man. He terrified and taunted me with that sly smile. But my grandmother always said the Trickster can't hurt you if you don't give in to his tricks. If you deny him his wish, he loses his power."

"What would have happened if I had agreed to sleep with him one last time?"

"Don't know. But he won't try seducing you or another human for a while. I also hope he has lost enough of his power to stop killing the coyotes and deer in the park."

* * *

Sometimes, Sara sees Dante in her dreams or hears his voice calling her name. Sometimes while she sits on her porch in her wicker chair, gazing out across the Sonoran Desert, she thinks she sees him walking among the mesquite, sagebrush and the tall saguaro. But she knows he can't hurt her anymore, can't control her or seduce her. She knows his tricks.

~ The End ~

LOVE'S DUTY, by Cassie Walder

The number of cars parked in the drive at the her aunt and uncle's Nevada ranch said that the regular Friday night poker game was going on in the kitchen. That familiarity felt good. Even though there were guests present at her aunt and uncle's home, they were people whom she knew. She was glad of that. Cat was simply too tired to deal with strangers.

She grabbed the one piece of luggage she had brought with her, a well used leather backpack, from the back seat of the Jeep. Then she sent her personal bodyguard away for a well-earned week of R and R. She wouldn't need him at home.

Cat walked around the house to the kitchen door. It would be good to be with people whom she loved. This house was the only real home that she had ever known. Secure in her welcome, she did not knock before entering. She hung her jacket and pack up on pegs by the door in the mudroom just off the kitchen.

As she had thought, she observed from the kitchen door, the poker game was well underway. Instead of the usual four players, tonight there were five. She didn't bother to look at the fifth man closely. Oh, she was aware of the fact that he was dark haired, tanned, well constructed, and probably reasonably good looking, although she could not see his face from where she stood. More than that, she was immediately aware of his presence in the room; presence with a capital P. This was a man whom no one would ever be able to fully ignore.

Then Cat caught sight of the fifth man looking up at her. His was a face she could have drawn from memory. In that one instant, she would have rather been anywhere else in the world.

What was Brig Matthews doing here, of all places? And why was he looking at her like that out of his piercing blue eyes? Cat would deal with Brig Matthews, later. The last thing she could afford to do was to allow anyone to see the deep animosity she still held towards the man.

Her uncle, Hank, was seated with his back to the door. She walked up behind him and placed her hands over his eyes.

"Now," the big man said, as he placed his cards face down on the table, "who could this be?"

"Three guesses, handsome. And the first two don't count," she replied with a small laugh, as she removed her hands from his face and stepped back.

With a swiftness that would have amazed anyone who didn't know Hank, he rose from his chair, turned to her, and held her tightly within his strong arms.

"Kitten, sweetheart! I didn't expect to see you until Tuesday evening. How was the flight? Does Ellie know you are home?"

"How do you expect me to answer, when you are squeezing all the air out of me?" she demanded.

"If I thought that it would do any good, I'll handcuff you to that chair and make you stay put. Don't you know that it isn't safe for a good looking, rich, American, girl to travel in some of the places that you go?"

She laughed. "Come on, Hank. Give me a very large break. It's been years since I've been young enough to be called a girl. I know the risks before I walk into any situation. If the risks are too high, I walk away. I might have many faults, but I am neither stupid nor suicidal."

"I still think that I ought to handcuff you down to a chair and make you stay put."

"Lock me down to a chair, Hank? Wouldn't do any good. I'd just pick the lock."

"Yeah, you probably would," Hank admitted with a large smile. "You work too hard, Kitten. So, you are here for something besides a flying visit, I hope?"

"Oh please, don't use the word 'flying'."

"Rough flight?" Hank asked.

"Sydney to New York is not my idea of fun."

"You work too hard," Hank replied.

"Look who's talking about working too hard, Uncle Hank. Workaholics Anonymous could use you as a poster boy!"

Masculine laughter went around the table.

Jim Edwards cleared his throat. "If he was the poster boy, then you surely would be the poster girl, Kitten. You look totally exhausted."

"Thanks Jim," she countered easily. "That is just what I needed to hear after having been detained by a set of thoroughly obnoxious custom inspectors today."

"That sounds like loads of fun," Jim drawled.

"Only if you have a large streak of masochism in your psyche. Unfortunately, that is not one of my numerous quirks, so it was a singularly unpleasant day."

"So, did Customs, for all their efforts, confiscate any contraband this time, Miss Cat?" Bill Grimes interjected in a teasing tone.

"No. Bill, you ought to know by now that if I am going to end up in jail, it is going to be for something much more interesting than smuggling."

"What did you bring back this time that sparked so much interest from customs?" Hank asked.

"I wasn't about to entrust a small fortune in precious opal to a courier, bonded or otherwise."

"Carrying those stones on your person wasn't a smart thing to do," Hank chided.

She went to retrieve her pack. Bringing it into the kitchen, she placed it on the table and removed a large, black velvet wrapped package. "You have to see these stones. They are nearly beyond belief. I only brought back the extraordinary ones. The rest from my share of the mine, I sold there and transferred the money back to the States." She laid some of the stones out on the table, displaying them against the bed of velvet. The degree of excitement on her face was such that her enthusiasm was contagious.

She caught the sight of Brig Matthews glancing alternately at her and the rainbow fire of the stones.

"Candy had a pair of opal and diamond earrings that you had made for her," Brig said, his voice both quiet and pained. "They were beautiful."

Cat swallowed hard as the realization hit her that perhaps, just perhaps, given that degree of pain in his face and in his voice, Brig Matthews had actually loved Candy. She sighed. "Then again, Candy could have worn a paper bag and people would have thought it beautiful. She was such a classically gorgeous blonde; petite, thin, dainty."

"True. She was a beautiful, and fragile, woman," Brig acknowledged. "But those earrings were extraordinary."

"You knew Candy Haines?" Hank demanded.

Brig nodded tightly.

Cat just looked at Brig for the longest moment. The fact that she could see that pain in him, that he was showing that pain, gave her pause. Yes, he'd been hurt by Candy's death. God, have mercy! Could she have been wrong about him?

"Candy's been dead for a long time," Hank remarked, his glance going from his niece to the man and back to his niece.

"Thirteen years, five months, eleven days," Brig answered. "Sometimes, it doesn't seem she's been gone that long. Sometimes, it seems she's been gone a good deal longer."

Cat nodded as she mentally did the time calculation. To her amazement, he was right to the day. That took her breath away and made her reassess a good many of her perceptions. If Candy's death had affected him so strongly that he had counted the days, if the pain was still with him, if this had made such a large mark on his soul, then she needed to find a way to apologize to him for the things she had said to him at Candy's funeral and for the actions she'd taken against him since then. She didn't like to think that she could be so wrong about anyone. But, she had to face it. She'd screwed up, royally.

She forced a small smile. "Candy and Brig were engaged. They'd had a fight just before she died, but in time I'm sure they would have reconciled, got married, and lived well together. They loved each other."

Bill Grimes made some sympathetic comment that Cat registered only in a general sense.

"Life moves on, and moves us with it. God rest her soul," Cat said.

Brig asked, "Are you responsible for the flowers that are always on her headstone? Every time I go out to the cemetery, there are fresh pink carnations there."

"Yes, I send those. She loved pink carnations. It's really a silly gesture, come to think of it."

Brig sipped good whiskey from the crystal tumbler at his right hand.

Cat noted that his hand wasn't quite steady.

"No sillier than the fact that I still take her flowers when I go to the cemetery," Brig offered.

"I wondered who did that," Cat said, her voice quiet. "I've seen them and wondered which of her friends had gone to call on her."

"I usually drop into the church near the cemetery and light a candle for her soul," Brig offered.

"Yeah. Me too."

Jim cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Those are beautiful stones. This one looks like it has a bird in it. What do you intend to do with it, Cathryn?"

She smiled at him, like a child with a secret, then she looked around to make certain that the door was closed. She knew that the ladies were probably in the living room playing bridge and gossiping while their men were in the kitchen trading both tall tales and pots of money. "Mary does have a birthday coming up in February, you know. Don't you think that this picture stone would look magnificent set in an yellow gold filigree necklace, maybe even with half carat diamond baguettes for sparkle and quarter to half carat emeralds to bring out the green flecks in Mary's gold eyes?"

"I still think that you were taking an unnecessary risk in carrying the stones back on your person," Hank stated.

Cat carefully repacked the stones. "Don't worry about it, Hank. I'm a big girl who is more than capable of taking care of herself in most circumstances. And besides, I had Roger with me. Anything I can't handle, he can."

"Speaking of your shadow, where is he?" Hank demanded.

"I gave him a few days off. Last I heard, he was planning to try out his new craps system in your casino," she told her uncle.

Hank rolled his eyes. "Terrific," he drawled.

"It's not a bad system. I ran the odds on it. It doesn't have more flaws than any other system, but it doesn't have any fewer, either," she said with amusement. "I doubt that you'll lose much in his attempt."

"I don't like him," Hank said. "I wish that you'd get rid of him."

"I know you don't like Roger. He's a hard man. But he does his job well. He's very good at protecting me. That's what a bodyguard is supposed to do."

"Why don't you just walk away from the whole situation, Miss Cat? You've got more money than you will ever spend in a dozen lifetimes," Bill Grimes asked.

"I'm beginning to wonder if this all is worth the price. Maybe, I ought to think about retiring from business and concentrate on other things."

"Like what?" Clayton Wilton replied, his voice amused.

"Maybe I'll take up knitting."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to tell us something, Kitten?" he asked with a hopeful smile on his face. "Are you, finally, pregnant?"

Cat's face went pale for a brief moment. "Not unless you hear the rustle of the wings of the Archangel Gabriel and I'm overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Celibacy does have costs."

"Well, you can't blame an old man for hoping for a grandchild to give joy to his declining years," Jim said after a moment of strained silence.

"I don't see any old men in this room," she replied with a small smile. "And there isn't a one of you anywhere near your declining years."

"Flatter away, Miss Cat," Clayton told her, as humor sparkled in his eyes. "The day that you are content to sit back in a rocker and knit will be the day that I give up gambling."

"I wouldn't want to cause you to change your life, Clayton."

"Did you succeed in what you set out to do on your trip, honey?" Hank asked, his voice careful.

"I acquired the rights to that new hydro fracturing process I wanted. The agreement is signed, sealed and delivered," she answered as she rubbed her

neck. "The news should break sometime in the next twenty-four hours. These stones were a bonus of the trip from my Australian mining interests. The mines there finally have started yielding well."

"I'd say so, judging by these stones. That deal better have been worth it for you to come home in this condition. You look like hell. Was it worth it?" Hank demanded.

"My, my, what is this, be cruel to Cat night? With comments like I've been getting from all of my loyal friends and family tonight, my ego should be in tiny tatters."

Brig Matthews laughed. "I rather think that it would take more than some good-natured jesting to demolish your ego."

Cat bristled. Then she forced a smile. There was nothing untrue in his statement. It would take more than a little good-natured joking to destroy her ego. And he'd said it in a non-threatening way. "Probably."

Hank asked, again, "Was this deal worth it, honey?"

"Within tolerances. I got fewer concessions than I had hoped for, more than I was willing to accept. All in all, I'm happy with the way that the deal went down. So is the good Doctor," Cat replied. "I've already made initial contacts with a half-dozen oil companies to reclaim 'played out' wells using this process. If three of these pan out, I'll have my money back and a good profit. Doctor Klein made back his development costs plus a profit. Isn't that the best kind of deal: where both parties are happy with the terms?"

Cat ignored Brig's glare and walked over to the refrigerator. She opened it, and looked inside. She felt Brig Matthews' eyes staring at her. Funny, she had always thought that when people spoke of feeling someone staring at them, that the saying was pure hyperbole. Now, she knew better.

"Deals seldom work that way," Brig said, his voice thoughtful.

"No, deals don't always happen that way, but I usually try not to leave my boot-prints on people's backs in business deals." Cat removed the makings for a sandwich from the refrigerator.

Jim Edwards laughed. "In fact, Kitten, we might even go as far as to say that you were the most trying person that we know."

She turned to the group of poker players. "With you all, who needs enemies? Just for that, I won't ask if anyone else wants a sandwich."

Brig Matthews was still looking at her. She knew that with absolute certainty. She sliced into a large red onion and a tomato, peeled a leaf from a head of Boston lettuce, and placed some already sliced rare roast beef, along with the other ingredients on two slices of dark rye bread which she had spread with brown mustard and horseradish. A few carrot sticks from a container in the refrigerator and a spear of a kosher dill pickle joined the sandwich on the plate.

The play in the card game had resumed before she had put away the sandwich makings. The game was always played for high stakes. She stood there, munching on the first food she'd had in almost two days, trying to force herself to eat slowly. There was something approaching thirty thousand dollars in the pot for the second hand, judging by the stacks of chips there. She watched as her father-in-law raked in the pot with the winning hand: a full house of aces over kings.

"Want to sit in, for a few hands, Kitten, honey?" Hank asked as he shuffled.

She shook her head negatively, as she swallowed the last bite of her sandwich. "No," she said on a yawn. "Not tonight. I'm too tired right now to do justice to your game. I'd probably fold while holding four aces and a deuce, with deuces wild."

"You are coming to the little party that Sue Mae and I are having tomorrow night?" Clayton Wilton asked.

Clayton's 'little party' she knew from past experience was likely to have a guest list of over one hundred people. There would be dinner, dancing, and a lot of business conducted in the guise of socializing. She would go, if only to keep track of some of her competitors and potential clients in the oil and mineral business.

"There will be plenty of young men there to keep you company, including my boys."

"Now, Clayton, don't you and Sue Mae start matchmaking between me and any of those boys of yours. There isn't a one of them who has ever done anything bad enough to deserve to be saddled with me."

"They're all hell raisers," Clay countered, his voice proud and indulgent.

That much was true. The problem was that the Wilton boys were exactly as handsome and successful as their doting parents thought them to be, and the boys knew it. One day there would be found women would be able to lure the Wilton sons into marriage. Frankly, Cat had sympathy for any woman who thought that she was strong enough to be a suitable mate for any of them. Each and every one of the Wilton boys could only be described, charitably, as possessing a strong personality. The boys had always been her friends, never boyfriends, mostly because they tended to see her as the sister they never had.

Jim Edwards spoke, "It's time that you had children of your own to raise. You aren't getting any younger. There isn't a judge in the state who would hesitate to grant a divorce, to allow you to start over while you are still young enough to do so. If it wouldn't be a violation of ethics for me to do it, I'd sign the order myself." He added in a world weary, cynical, tone, "But, all I'd have to do was to present the order to any of my fellow judges. You could have that divorce in minutes, if you asked for it."

"I wish people would just stop riding me about Michael. The vows were for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until we were parted by death. There is no way that I am going to break my solemn vows to him just because he's sick. And even if I did break those vows by divorcing him, I couldn't remarry in the Church as long as he's alive. There's no way to get an annulment of the marriage. The fact that he's as he is doesn't invalidate the sacramental nature of the marriage. And that's just the way it is."

Jim's face became tight. "Mickey has been in the coma for twelve, nearly thirteen, long years." His voice trailed off. "Kitten, dear, we love you and want you to be happy. Please reconsider taking him off life support. There is no future there. No one would fault you. Taking heroic measures is not warranted any longer. Just because his heart still beats doesn't mean he's alive. Mary and I accepted his loss a long time ago. It's time for you to accept this, end it, and move on."

Cat closed her eyes against the pain in and caused by Jim's words. "I am more than aware of just how long that Michael has been as he is, Jim," she replied in an equally pain-filled voice as she looked at her father-in-law. "I was with him when the accident happened, remember?"

Horrible images went through her mind as she was momentarily back in the car, trapped helplessly for hours beside the motionless body of the only man whom she had ever loved. Ruthlessly, she dismissed the images from her mind.

* * *

Brig Matthews was more deeply affected by the momentary look of bleak, hopeless, despair on her face than he wanted to admit. If he could have, he would have taken her into his arms and gently stroked her and whispered comforting words to her. That surprised him. He seldom, almost never in fact, had felt protective of a woman, any woman. Objectively, he knew that this woman in particular would not be one who would kindly welcome anyone attempting to wrap her up in a protective, cushioning, cocoon.

But that desire to protect her blended with the desire to possess her in the fullest sense of the word to produce a sensation the likes of which he had never felt before. How could he feel this blend of emotions for this woman, of all people? The woman hated his guts. Unfortunately, it was hate grounded in just cause.

* * *

"I'm not willing to give up all hope of his finding his way back," Cat said, her voice more even.

Jim cleared his throat. Then he spoke in a gentle tone, "Kitten, honey, Mickey's gone. He's never coming back to us. Let him go."

"Leave it alone, Jim," she advised. "I know you mean well. But, I can't do what you want me to do." Her voice broke. "I just can't. Don't ask me to do this."

"Kitten, the hardest part of this is just seeing you wasting your life, working yourself to death, and being so damned miserable."

"I'm not unhappy, Jim. I'm actually content in my life. I'm busy. I like being busy."

"'Content' is a pale descriptor for you to use to describe your life. You ought to take some time to raise children. Marriage isn't necessarily a prerequisite for a woman having children, these days. Besides, as things stand any child would have Mickey's name. You know that Mary and I would accept any child as our grandchild."

"If I won't divorce him, Jim, what makes you think that I'd be unfaithful to Michael?" Cat demanded.

Hank interjected. "You have had seven separate proposals of marriage during the last year. So, don't tell me that you haven't had the chance to have a man in your life."

Her eyes narrowed and glittered in rage. "You are remarkably well informed, Henry Alvin," she replied in a voice which could have easily frozen Lake Mead during the warmest days of July. "Enjoy your sources, while you have them, Uncle. You can make book on the fact that whoever it is, or whoever they are, the persons in question will not be employed long enough to be able to call his/her/their attorneys in order to start breach of contract proceedings."

Jim smiled and whistled through his teeth. "Seven proposals of marriage?"

"For your information, your Honor, the opportunity is not sufficient grounds to commit matrimony. There has to be some degree of motive."

"You make marriage sound like a crime," Clayton remarked, humor dancing in his eyes.

"Did I? Well, if I had accepted any one of the fortune hunters who delight in chasing me, it would have been both a crime and sin," she said, her voice quiet. "Adultery, as the sin. Bigamy would be the crime. Probably complicated by Grand Larceny on his part. I deserve more from a partner than a man who sees marriage to me as the opportunity for a lifetime sinecure."

"Of course you do," Clayton replied.

"What exactly are you looking for in a husband?" Bill Grimes queried. "We might be able to put our heads together and find you some suitable candidates."

"Come on, guys. I don't want you all to be playing cupid. I appreciate the concern behind the idea, but please refrain. I already have a husband. I'm not in the market for another," Cat shook her head with an amused look on her face. After a small pause, she added, "I think that you all worry more about me than I do."

"Probably," Hank admitted.

"Someone's got to look after you. You certainly don't seem to care about yourself since you push yourself so unmercifully," Jim answered his voice gruff. "I'll bet that you haven't slept since you left Australia."

"I can't sleep when I travel. You know that," she said, her voice stark and pained.

"So, it's been what, forty hours or so, since you had any rest at all?" Hank demanded in concern. "And at least that long since you last ate, since you can't eat when you travel either."

Cat couldn't help it, she laughed. "If I didn't know when to walk away and take care of myself, would I be here now?" "Don't give me that, woman!" Hank told her. "If you knew when to walk away, when to pull the plug, you'd be a widow now, instead of trapped for more than a decade in this gray area of being neither wife nor widow. Mickey will never be anything but the vegetable that he is, lying in that nursing home. If you would remove life support from him, this all would be over."

"Michael isn't on a machine that I can pull the plug on. Yes, his existence is being supported by hydration and nutrition tubes. Yes, that's life support. Would you have me order the doctor and nursing staff to starve him to death?" Cat asked, her voice pained. "I can't do that. I wouldn't treat my worst enemy that way. I certainly won't do that to the only man I've ever loved."

"Mickey's gone, Kitten. All that's left is the shell that was his body. There are no upper level brain functions left. Let him go," Jim told her. "Extraordinary measures are not called for any longer."

"Since when is giving someone food and water an extraordinary measure?" Cat countered, her voice pained.

"Honey, he's gone. He died in the accident. If he hadn't been defibrillated and put on a ventilator in the ER, if he hadn't been pulled through all the cases of pneumonia by heroic measures, his body would have ceased a long time ago. There's nothing of Mickey there except an empty shell. It's time to stop the heroics. Let him go," Jim urged. "It's not kind to anyone to stretch this out."

She shook her head. "Sometimes I don't know why I bother to come home. I can get abuse from so many other sources," she replied wryly as she went to the sink to rinse off her plate and the knife before loading them into the dishwasher. "Good night, gentlemen. Goodbye, Brig."

"Not so fast. We have to talk, Cate," Brig told her. "Why else do you think I'm here?"

"I can't think of anything that we would possibly have to discuss."

"Private or public, Cate, it's your choice. But, we are going to talk."

"Hell will freeze over first."

"Demons are strapping on ice skates, even now."

"Well, if anyone could give them lessons in skating on thin ice, you could."

"Private or in public. I don't much care at this stage. It's up to you."

"There is nothing to discuss," Cat answered in a pained and weary tone.

"This quiet vendetta of yours against me has gone on entirely too long. It is going to end. One way or the other, it is going to end. We can end this in a civilized manner, or it can be a blood bath. That's entirely up to you. This is the last chance for peace. After tonight, if it's not settled, it's all out war between us. It's your call. Now, what do you want, Cate?"

"Coffee. Very strong coffee. We'll talk in the library."

* * *

As the two of them left the kitchen, Hank rose from his chair.

"Sit down, Hank," Jim advised.

Hank looked at his friend. "Those two shouldn't be left alone. They'll kill one another."

Jim shook his head negatively. "When was the last time, before tonight, you saw any man disturb Kitten's calm? When you saw her get the least interested, for good or ill, in a man?"

Hank smiled. "You think...?"

"Just let them work it out. There's too much fire there between them for this to be nothing," Jim advised, his voice quiet.

Hank chuckled. "Hmmm...Damn, Jim, I think you're right. It's high time, too."

* * *

Cat opened the door to the library and walked inside. Brig followed her and closed the door firmly behind them.

"Well, sit down, if you're going to sit," Cat said as she put thermal carafe of very strong coffee and two mugs down on the coffee table between a leather sofa and an overstuffed chair. Then she took a seat in the chair, motioning for him to sit on

the sofa. She filled both cups and pushed one over to him. Lifting her mug, she said, "To Candy, may she rest in peace."

Brig joined her in that caffeinated toast.

"There is nothing to discuss. There is no vendetta." There was, but is no longer, she thought, yet did not say.

"You deny that you have been taking action against me because you hold me responsible for Candy's death?"

Cat sighed. "Candy is mostly responsible for her own death. I wasn't there for her, so I am also partially responsible. And you also bear some responsibility. But Candy was the most responsible of all of us. She's the one who made the decision to kill herself and the baby. God have mercy on her soul."

"I don't think there was anything that you could have done to stop her."

"Maybe not. I don't think there was anything you could have done about it either," she admitted. "I wonder sometimes if there's ever anything any of us can do to stop someone from making a major mistake. That doesn't change the fact that other people's mistakes sometimes become our midnight regrets."

"I didn't even know she was pregnant. I wouldn't have walked out on her if I'd known."

"I know that. Candy was stubborn. If you didn't want her for herself, she didn't want you to feel bound to her because of the baby. Stupid, prideful, but that was the way she was. I really don't think she intended to kill herself, just to cry out for attention. But, it went too far."

"Yes. It did."

"There's nothing we can do to change that now. I don't know that there was anything we could have done then to change it."

"You claim there is no vendetta. Do you deny that you have been taking quiet actions against me in retaliation?"

"Just what do you think I've done?" she asked, caution in her voice.

"Don't play games with me, Cate. We both know what you've done."

"Why don't you be a bit more explicit. I don't want to take responsibility for something I might not have done."

"And you don't want to tell me things that I might not know that you've done."

She yawned and took a large swig of the very strong coffee. "Just tell me what you think I've done."

"You've been buying up a large block of shares in M.I."

"My investments are none of your concern."

"Under normal conditions I would agree with you."

She sipped the coffee and waited for him to continue.

"But, as of two days ago, you hold forty-two percent of the shares of Matthews International. That is a substantial block of stock in my company. It gives you control over just under half of the seats on the board, and puts you as the next largest private stockholder in my company, after me."

"This was done legally. I filed the proper paperwork with the S.E.C. before acquiring the shares, so what's your complaint?"

"What exactly is your intention in respect to this block of stock?"

"M.I. is a good investment."

"Good enough for you to channel this large of a block of your own capital into?"

"Insecurity from you? That's amazing."

"You expect me to believe that you have simply acquired this large of a block of stock for investment purposes?"

"What exactly are you getting at?"

"I hold the documents, including sworn affidavits by the doctors, and copies of bank records, to prove that you bribed both Candy's doctor and the county medical examiner to cover up the true cause of her death. I'd hate to have to turn those records over to the authorities."

"What good would it have done for anyone to have learned that she committed suicide?"

"The fact is, you covered up the cause of her death, had it misreported as complications of diabetes. That's still a crime."

"I doubt that any prosecutor would take this to trial, or that any jury would convict. Besides, it was a complication of diabetes. Her suicidal depression was linked to her diabetes."

"You can't be sure of that."

"She killed herself and the baby. It would have done no one any good to report that to the public. Would you have denied her a Christian burial, or made her a scandal in death? Shouldn't I have had compassion for her in the time following her death? She wasn't in her right mind. If she had lived, I would have kept her attempt quiet while making sure she got the help she needed. Why should her attempt have been made public because she succeeded in killing herself?"

"That's not the issue. You covered up the cause of her death. People could well wonder why. Did you kill her? They might ask themselves. You did get a rather large inheritance from her."

Cat closed her eyes and forced down her temper. It could well be interpreted that way. Then again, no good deed ever goes unpunished. She looked at him. "That's utterly ridiculous. But the truth is often the first casualty in court cases. The scandal would ruin me, even though I would be acquitted. Check and mate. Okay, Brig, what exactly do you want?"

"Give up your plans to take over my company. Sell me back your shares."

"I'm comfortable with my holdings in M.I.. It's a good company and I have no intention of selling my shares. And I couldn't take over M.I. if I wanted to. You hold enough shares and durable proxies that you have controlling interest. Besides, you always declare a healthy dividend and the stock price is stable to increasing. These days, that's a rarity."

"Then, if you won't sell me back your shares, I want a durable proxy, so that I can vote the shares."

"You've got to be kidding. I'm not going to give up control of a large portion of my stock portfolio. Period. Mexican standoff."

"More like mutually assured destruction."

"That's about the size of it." She sighed. "There was a time I wouldn't have crossed the street to dump the contents of a chamber pot on you if you had been on fire."

Brig sipped his coffee. He raised his eyebrows at her phrasing. "Past tense?"

"I'm not quite sure. I might dump a chamber pot on you, now, whether you were on fire or not," she teased.

He laughed. "That's an improvement?"

Cat joined the laughter. "I think so."

He became serious. "I loved Candy so much that it scared me. Being young and scared, I acted foolishly in breaking off the relationship. I sent her over the edge. I regret that more than I regret anything else in my life."

Cat sipped the hot dark brew. "I can see that. But, you have to know Candy wasn't exactly stable at the best of times. Don't give yourself too much blame for Candy's snapping."

"I knew she was fragile. I destroyed her. I know that you hate me for that."

"You didn't help matters. But, she really destroyed herself and the baby. I don't think she really wanted to kill herself. She was just calling out for attention. The real problem was neither of us were listening closely enough to what she was really saying. And I don't hate you. You've been terribly hurt by all of this. I said some unforgivable things to you after Candy's funeral."

"We both said some terrible things then. Better to leave it in the past."

"For what it's worth, I am sorry about that."

"Me too, for the things I said to you. I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night after dreaming that we--Candy, me, and our children--are out doing things together."

"We all have those things that wake us up in the middle of the night and leave us shaking. God knows, I do."

"I don't think you can get through life without having at least one cause for midnight shakes."

"Is this all you wanted to talk about, Brig?"

"That pretty much covers it."

"I'm very tired, Brigham. Good night. Take the stuff into the kitchen, will you? I've got to get some sleep. I'm dead on my feet."

Brig stood. "Seal our agreement?" he asked as he pulled her into his arms.

"Brig?"

His answer came only in his lips that closed sweetly over hers.

Cat's mouth opened in surprise and response to Brig's caress. She was vulnerable to him in a way that she hadn't been vulnerable to any man in years. She simply enjoyed the taste of him, the subtle textures of his mouth, without letting herself ask questions. He was one of those men who needed to shave twice a day. His evening whiskers were a sensual abrasion under her fingertips and against her lip.

He held her so tightly that she could barely breathe. She had no defense against him. Nor did she want to have.

The sweet caress that began only a moment before became one of consuming passion. Even Michael, on their wedding night, had never kissed her with even a tithe of this sensual heat.

Unable to help herself, Cat gave herself wholeheartedly into the embrace, moving her tongue over his in a duel almost as old as mankind, tasting him more deeply each moment until neither of them were certain who was kissing whom.

She was glad he was holding her, uncertain if her now rubber legs would hold her. She couldn't deny the fact that she wanted him. Her body was screaming for more. He tempted her in ways that only one man had ever tempted her. He tempted her in ways that Michael never had.

And she was trembling in his arms. Trembling. She wasn't the type to tremble or go weak in the knees. Yet she was doing both with this man. Her fingers twined themselves in his hair, holding his head to hers as she sought more of the

firestorm of need his mouth was creating within her. Desire was quickly giving way to ravening hunger.

He cupped her ass in his hands and pulled her closer to him. Even through the cloth of his slacks and her skirt, the strength of his arousal was apparent. He was obviously as hungry for her as she was for him.

The small sane corner of her mind was screaming that she should stop this while it was still stoppable, before it escalated beyond all stopping. But she ignored that. This was simply too delicious. She didn't want to stop, even though she knew where they were going.

He tugged the soft knit fabric of her turtleneck free from her skirt waistband. She arched against him as his fingers unfastened the front hook on her bra and then encircled the hard nub of her left nipple.

He lifted her sweater to reveal her freed breasts. He broke off the kiss. His mouth then closed over one nipple while his fingers teased the other. He drew her nipple into his mouth, his tongue circling and flicking.

Each tug of his mouth sent the flames of desire swirling, licking, through her. The tension built rapidly, sweeping her along with them, as he continued to use his mouth and hands to arouse her. Suddenly, she felt that arousal reach its peak.

She gasped. Her whole body stiffened as the spasms of her orgasm began.

Brig lifted his head and looked at her, his expression a mixture of hunger and masculine pride. He couldn't believe that she had reached that peak of pleasure with so little work on his part. Then, not giving her time to calm from this release, he resumed lavishing his attentions on her breasts; kissing, licking, sucking.

His free hand went beneath her skirt and sharply tugged down the scrap of silk and lace that purported to be underwear. Then he unfastened his belt and trouser waistband and lowered his zipper.

She pushed down his trousers and underwear just as far as necessary. She wrapped her hand around his hard cock and stroked him. She could hardly wait to feel him inside her. A woman would definitely know that she'd been well and truly fucked by this man.

He moaned her name. "Cathryn" had never sounded so sexy to her.

Cat pushed him back down onto the sofa. She followed him down. Astride him, she held his head to her left breast as she shifted her hips and guided his cock into position.

As badly as he wanted to explore her responsive body, Brig's body was screaming for release. She was so hot, wet, and tight he had to find some measure of control when he had barely inched his cock inside her. His instincts screamed at him to possess her with one hard thrust. Yet, he held back. He didn't want to hurt her. This was their first time together. It was obviously her first time to be with anyone in a very long time. This encounter was already far from perfect. He didn't want her having additional cause for regrets.

She released his head. Sighing his name, she took him fully into the warm silken sheath of her vagina.

"Cathryn!" he moaned in pleasure.

* * *

Cat looked at him as he rolled them sideways onto the couch. Then he adjusted his position so that he had her neatly beneath him while he supported himself on his elbows. He thrust into her again. She was stunned by both the tenderness and need on his face.

Cat wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him closer to herself, enjoying the closeness, the weight, the fullness.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the light show playing on her eyelids with each thrust and retreat, as well as the quivering of her flesh and the building of tension. She thought that she would die if she didn't find release, and die if she did.

Her hands reached up under his sweater. She stroked his back.

"Harder," she begged. "Please. Harder. Faster."

"You sure?"

"Don't make me beg."

He increased the tempo and the strength of his strokes.

Full. Empty. Full. He took her breath away.

A few moments later, when the tension in her lower body exploded once more, she felt her consciousness dim.

He whispered to her. She didn't catch the words. She could feel him deep within her as her treacherous body rewarded him with contraction after contraction.

It was a matter of four more hard strokes until she felt him shudder with the warm pulsing of his climax.

"Cathryn," he began urgently.

She shook her head negatively as she unwrapped her legs from around him. Her legs felt unstable. She was glad that she was lying down as she didn't think she could walk. "Don't talk, Brig. It's okay," she said before she lightly kissed the side of his face.

He kissed her forehead. "You are an incredible woman."

"God, I can't believe we did this."

Brig laughed as he stroked her face. "It was amazing, wasn't it? You are so incredibly responsive. So sweet."

"So stupid. Anyone could walk in on us at any moment. Let me up."

He laughed quietly as he pulled away from her, letting her up. Then he reordered his clothing. "They would have gotten quite a show a few minutes ago."

The enormity of what had just happened sunk into her brain. She mentally calculated her place in her cycle and felt a mixture of panic and anticipation. She was quite likely fertile at the moment.

"Cate," he demanded. "Where's your bedroom?"

"My room?"

He laughed tightly at her confusion. "Cate, I want you behind a locked door with a soft bed where we can spend time learning each other's pleasures. Although, we just did a helluva job finding some of them. If not your room, then come back to my place with me."

Cat picked up her panties where they lay on the floor and shoved them into her skirt pocket. She shook her head and stepped away from the sofa. Then she refastened her bra and pulled down her sweater before she tucked it into her waistband. "No, Brig. I'm a married woman. I can't do that."

"You could have remembered that sooner," he offered in a hurt and quiet voice as he rose to his feet.

"Yes," she admitted, feeling both embarrassment and shame, "I should have. This should have never happened between us, Brig. Never. It's wrong, beyond wrong."

"It felt right to me."

"I know. That's what's so frightening. It shouldn't have felt that good, that right."

"You can't tell me you've been celibate for the last twelve, almost thirteen, years, absolutely faithful to your comatose husband."

"Why not? It's the simple truth."

"Nothing about you is simple, Cate."

"Probably not," she admitted on a sigh. "But relieve my mind? You are healthy, aren't you?"

He reached out and lightly stroked her face. Brig was encouraged by the way that she nuzzled his hand making lies of her verbal denials by the response of her body to him.

"I'm healthy."

She sighed and nodded. "That's one mercy."

"You are a sensual woman, Cate. Why have you denied this part of you for so long?"

"I'm not free to do anything else as long as Michael is alive. I'll feel guilty about this for a long time. "

"Don't. This is a memory I'll cherish for the rest of my life."

"A quickie in a library with a woman you don't trust?"

Brig looked at her and smiled. The tenderness in that expression took her breath away. "No. The first time I made love to the woman I want to have in my life. We'll be good together, Cate, better than good. Surely, you can't doubt that."

"You are explosive."

"We're explosive. There's a chemistry between us that has already blown the roof off my life."

She blinked back tears. "I can't make any promises to you. I'm still bound to Michael. This shouldn't have happened between us. It must never, ever, be repeated. We can't be alone together ever again, Brig. There's too little self-control between us. It's one thing to lose control once. It's another to place ourselves in a situation where we are going to take another tumble."

He looked at her for the longest time. "You don't trust yourself with me," he observed. "Or don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust us. Explosive is a good word for what we are together. A better phrase is an occasion of sin. The nuns always drilled into my head I should avoid those."

He shook his head as to dismiss that. "No. We could never be an occasion of sin to one another. Nothing between us could ever be sinful. I think what we are for one another is an occasion of grace."

Cat sighed. Yeah, right, she thought. "And where did you get your theological education?" she teased.

"I did go to major seminary for a year."

She couldn't help it, she laughed. "I can't see you in the priesthood."

"Neither could I, which was why I left seminary and went to work."

"Good night, Brig."

"Not yet," he told her as he urged her into his arms.

How could she resist when this was the only place in the world she wanted to be?

Then he kissed her, a sweet, tender, kiss. "There's more to this than sex, Cate. So much more."

"I think you're right. I just don't know what to do about it. Give me some time to work this out in my mind, will you?"

"All the time you need."

She looked at him and smiled as she stepped back from him. "It's for the best."

"Actually, I think it would be for the best if you came away with me to an impromptu vacation to some sunny beach where we could lay under a tropical sun and have nothing more pressing to do than to make love to each other."

"Don't tempt me, Brig."

"Too late. I already do."

She nodded in agreement and sighed. "That's true, you do. And as the nuns taught me, the best thing to do when faced with temptation is to flee. Goodnight, Brig."

* * *

In spite of the relatively early hour at which she retired to her room, and the fact that she had been dead on her feet, she slept a very short time. Oh, she had fallen asleep almost immediately. She'd been too tired to do anything else. But after a little more than four hours sleep, she awakened suddenly, after the recurrence of an old nightmare. It took her several long moments of shaking in abject terror before she came awake enough to realize she really wasn't still in the car with Michael at the bottom of that ravine. Funny, she had thought that she was over that nightmare. It had been a couple of years since the last time she had gone through the terror of reliving the experience in her dreams.

After having been awakened like that, she found it nearly impossible to go back to sleep. After showering and dressing, she brewed herself a strong pot of coffee, then took keys to one of her aunt and uncle's cars. She drove alone into Reno to the nursing home where Michael was.

"Michael," she said as sat beside his bed and took his hand. "Sweetheart, I need to talk to you. Sometimes, love, I just want to change my name, move far away where no one knows me, and forget that I have any commitments to anyone.

Sounds silly, doesn't it? Well, I do feel that way sometimes. I grow so weary of being always so terribly responsible."

She cleared her throat. "Of course, I wouldn't drop everything and move away. But, that little fantasy is all that keeps me sane some days. Oh, Mike... There are times that I need you so badly; that I need to pick your brain, or to have you hold me, or to make love with you. Those times, I get angry at you for being like this.

"Not very logical is it, my attorney friend? I mean, since I am responsible for your being like this. Oh, they all said it was an accident, I shouldn't blame myself. But, I haven't been behind the wheel of a car more than a dozen times since they released me from the hospital, after the accident. I still get the shakes at the thought of driving myself anywhere, although I will drive when I have to, like this morning when I drove in from the ranch.

"You'd think that I would have gotten used to this situation by now, but I haven't. I don't believe that I will ever get used to seeing you like this. It hurts me to see you like this. It hurts, Michael, to the very core of my being. I see you and I wonder why I am not the one lying there instead of you."

After a thoughtful pause, she continued, "My public persona is as the strong, cool, person whom nothing ever bothers. But, you and I know that I am neither strong, nor cool. I've had to put on that steel-reinforced ice maiden facade in order to survive. Now, I wonder where the facade ends and I begin. I wonder if the pretense has become the reality. After so many years of wearing the mask, I wonder if I will ever be able to take it off, or whether it has become part of who I am.

"There is so much going on in my life right now, that I don't know where to start. I've gotten the rights to Klein's process. Remember I told you that I'd be going to Sydney to talk with Doctor Klein?

"On the home front, your esteemed father would like to see me divorce you. Not that he doesn't care about you, he does. But, he doesn't want me going through life alone. Mike, I don't want to grow old alone, either. Won't you please come back to me?"

She looked down at him. There was, of course, no response, not even the flickering of an eyelid. That lack of response brought tears to her eyes.

"I look at you and wonder if you even hear me. There have been accounts of people who have come out of comas saying that they heard and understood everything said around them. For years, I've operated on the hope you heard and

understood everything that was said around you. I wonder if I've been deluding myself."

She shook her head negatively and patted him on the hand. Her hand went up and swept the errant lock of blonde hair away from his forehead.

"I loved you from the first moment that I saw you. Did you know that? It was at the party that your parents gave to celebrate your passing the Bar. I was seventeen. I'd just graduated from High School. You were twenty-five. I thought that I had never seen a man so handsome or so vital. Then when you asked me to dance with you, I thought that I would die from pure joy.

"I was so shy. I don't think that I managed to say a half dozen words to you all evening. I was so surprised the next day when you came over to see me. I think that Hank wanted to barbeque you when he found out how much time that we were spending together. I know that he read me the riot act on more than one occasion.

"You had to feel like a cradle robber. Eight years difference in our ages at that time was not a minor nuance. There you were all ready to make a professional reputation for yourself, and I was just starting on my degree.

"Then when I came back to the ranch from college for Christmas break and met you again at that party of Sue Mae's, and you asked me to marry you, I couldn't believe it. When you were willing to wait to marry until after I finished my degree, I knew that I had a treasure beyond price in you.

"But, now, I wish that we hadn't waited. We wasted three years, Michael. Three years in which we could have spent together, loving each other," she said sadly. "Maybe having a baby or two. Oh, Mike, the waste of all of that time."

She bent over him and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Remember how we used to dream together about what our children would look like? We'd lie in front of the fireplace at the cabin and talk for hours. Those were the good times, Michael. But, neither of us thought that either of us would spend so much time alone. God, if I had known that we would have ended up like this..."

She blinked back the tears.

"Men have made it obvious that they find me attractive, Michael. This is an age of frankness about that sort of thing. For the most part, the temptation to be

unfaithful hasn't existed," she said. Cat sighed. "But, it only takes once. I've committed adultery, Michael, with Brig Matthews. There, I've confessed it to you. Wake up, dammit! Call me names, demand a divorce. Do something! Don't just lie there."

There was no change in Michael.

She continued, "It just happened between Brig and me. I didn't plan it. He didn't plan it. It just happened. He touched me and I was all over him. And if he touches me again, we'll likely make love again. It's not just sex with us, Michael. I find myself caring for him. Maybe I even love him, I don't know. I know this is wrong to feel this way. But, I can't help it. 'The heart has reasons that reason knows not of'.

"We've always been honest with each other, you and I. Even that time a week before we were married, when you ran into that old girlfriend of yours, Maureen, and the sparks were still there between the two of you. I didn't understand at the time how you could have made love to her repeatedly during the week before our marriage. I almost walked away then, and called the wedding off. There are times I wish I had. At least, then I wouldn't have been driving us on that mountain. And you wouldn't have ever been hurt.

"We've always been honest with one another, even when it was painful. I have to be honest with you now about this."

She cleared her throat. "I've been alone so long, Michael. Do you have any idea of how terribly lonely I am? Of course you do. You must be just as lonely, possibly more, since you have no way of communicating with people at all. And that only makes it worse.

"I feel so guilty about being attracted to Brig Matthews. I've been faithful to you, Michael, for years, until now. I don't want to feel this way about him," she said in a low tone. "I just can't help it. He's the only man, other than you, whom I've ever gone weak in the knees over.

"I have to admit that it is a bit of a relief to know that I can still feel sexual desire. It has been so long since I've been around any man who made me feel like a woman. I was beginning to think that particular part of me was completely dead. Now I know that it isn't. I almost wish that he'd never come back into my life."

Small tears trickled down her face. "Michael, I feel so confused and upset that I can't think straight. There are so many aspects to this whole situation of this marriage of ours; this marriage that both is and isn't a real marriage. I feel like I

am being pressured on all sides. Everyone wants something from me. Everyone has a course of action which he thinks will make things better.

"Your doctors want permission not to treat you, if you become seriously ill again. Regardless of the means, or the way that the medical people phrase it, they want me to let you die. In fact, they've asked to discontinue nutrition and hydration. They don't think you are ever going to wake up. They keep telling me there is no future for you," she spoke lowly, but in a pain-filled voice. "I am so afraid that they are correct about that. You've been asleep for so long, Michael.

"Hank and Ellie want for me to quote move on with my life unquote, which is their euphemism for either divorcing you and remarrying or taking a lover. Your parents have suggested the same thing to me on various occasions. And they want me to sign over responsibility for you to them so that they can discontinue treatment and let you go. But, I think that they would be happier if I simply had a blazing affair. That way, at least, any children would be legally, if not biologically, yours."

She heard the cynicism in her voice and was immediately ashamed of it. "Oh, Michael, I don't mean to unload on you. I love your folks and Hank and Ellie. It is simply that they drive me crazy with always having to have the final word about what would be best for me. None of them have come to the conclusion that I am not a frightened child anymore."

After a short pause, she wryly added, "No, now I am a frightened thirty-three year old woman. Not a lot of difference, is there? Only now, I'm frightened not of the things that could happen, but of the things that might not happen." She sighed. "I might not ever have a child to love. I might not have a companion in my old age. I might not ever have grandchildren. Those things frighten me."

"Then there is the matter of Brig Matthews. The way he looks at me makes me feel like an oasis that has been come upon by a dehydrated man. There is something in the hunger in his eyes I find ultimately compelling. He wants me, Michael. I wish I could say that it was all one-sided, but I can't. I want him, too. I want him far more than I care to admit to anyone. I spent so many years hating him for Candy's death. But now, I think I'm falling in love with him.

"Sometimes, you are the only person to whom I can talk freely. But you always were, weren't you? I wish you would wake up and help me with this. But then again, if you did, would we be able to pick up where we had left off? So much has changed. Would you still even want me? Would I still want you? All of this is useless speculation. I know that I'm never going to have the opportunity to

find out because you're not coming back to me, ever. You're not even in there. I might as well be talking to the damned wall!

"I'm trying to work all of this out in my mind. The situation overwhelms me, Michael. I don't know what to do about any of this. I'd like nothing more than if you'd wake up and talk to me. But, the thought of you doing that terrifies me more than I can tell you, more than I wanted to admit until now.

"When I leave here, I'm going to confession. Maybe I can get good counsel and direction from a priest in this whole convoluted mess. God knows, I feel very conflicted. On one hand, you probably wouldn't still be here if I hadn't demanded that the ER team do everything they could to save you after the accident. They did their job. And here we are all these years later. On the other hand, when does intervening and keeping your body alive cease to be reasonable medical care and instead become playing God with your life? I wish I knew. Is maintaining you the use of extraordinary measures? I wish I had some real answers.

"I guess what I've really come to tell you is goodbye. I can't live this way any more. I'm going to give your parents what they want. I hope, I pray, it's the right thing to do. I'm still alive. I want to live that life to the fullest. I want babies. I want to be loved by a man who can tell me, show me, that love. It's not unreasonable. I pray that I'm doing the right thing, I really do.

"So, no matter what else happens, this is my last visit with you. I have a conflict of interest here in remaining your guardian, because all I want is for you to free me so that I can have my own life back. There are two ways you could do that. You could wake up and we could divorce. But the only way you're likely to truly free me is to die. My legal and moral obligation as your guardian is to see that you stay alive. I don't know what else to say. I don't want you to die. But, I can't stand seeing you like this, either."

She became aware of the hot tears streaming down her face. Cat dashed away the tears. "The fact is, I love the man you were. I don't think that man exists anymore. For the longest time, I thought he was there, locked in. But now, I don't even think he's there. I might as well be talking to the wall as to talk to you. So, Michael, this is it. When I leave here, I won't be back. I just can't take this any more. That's what it comes down to. I've reached the limit of my endurance."

Alice Springer, Michael's primary physician, came into the room on rounds, a few minutes later. "Hey, how's our boy doing?"

"Same as always, Alice. Doesn't appear to be any change."

"Do you really expect there to be?"

"I keep hoping something will change, one way or the other."

"I want you to reconsider what we discussed last we spoke," the sixty-something gray-haired doctor said in concern.

Cat looked at Michael. Fresh tears flooded her eyes. She blinked them back. Then she looked at the motherly woman who was Michael's doctor. This was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. "Yes, Alice," she told the doctor, her voice shaking. "It's time to let him go. This is what his parents want. I'm signing guardianship of Michael over to his dad today. I'm sure they will concur. Jim and Mary are both wanting to put an end to this."

"That's the right decision, Cathryn. I know it's hard."

"Hard isn't the word. I won't starve him, Alice. I can't do that. Continue hydration and nutrition, unless of course Jim and Mary tell you differently. But no medical intervention in terms of resuscitation if he goes into arrest again, or treatment if he gets pneumonia again."

"What about drugs, Cathryn?"

"Give him any comfort measures, necessary. I won't have him in pain. But nothing else."

"He can't feel pain," Alice told her in a compassionate tone.

"I hope you're right, Alice. Comfort measures, that's all. I still want him cared for. Keep him kept clean, and turned regularly. He's never had bedsores. I don't want him dying with them. Don't neglect him. No more medical intervention. He lives or he dies. It's time to put this firmly in God's hands. No extraordinary measures. We've been through enough of those."

Alice nodded. "That's a good compromise."

"There's nothing good about any of this. Nothing!" Her voice bobbed on that last word and the tears overflowed her eyes again. "This is so damned hard, Alice."

"I know. But it's the right decision."

"That remains to be seen. But this is what you advise. This is how they all want it."
"

"What do you want?"

"For none of this ever to have happened. To have my husband and my life back. To have had these years with him, starting a family. But, that's not possible," she said with a heavy sigh. "I have to accept that and move on. Realistically, I want a second chance at love, at life, at having babies."

Alice nodded. "No one can fault you for that, Cathy."

"Don't be so sure of that," she said, her voice pained.

* * *

The party at the Wilton ranch was every bit as Cat had thought that it would be. In fact, this party could have well been interchanged with any of the other winter parties Sue Mae and Clayton had held over the years. There were ranchers, quite a few people with mining or oil interests, several casino owners, a smattering of politicians, herself, and Brig Matthews. It was a very interesting crowd, all in all. Normally, she would have enjoyed the gathering and mixed freely with the people, throwing herself into the spirit of the celebration. Tonight, she was feeling profoundly solitary and contemplative, and not at all in a party mood. It had been a long and emotionally exhausting day. Knowing that she probably shouldn't have come, she took refuge in Clayton's study, seeking peace and quiet.

She admitted to herself most of the need for peace came from her own inner turmoil. In her mind, sex was not a game, neither was it simply a means of satisfying a hunger, however real, nor was it a tool to be used to achieve a goal. Rather, sex was the very symbol of complete commitment and love. To share herself with a man meant that she loved him enough to be willing to spend the rest of her life in partnership with him. And yet, last night, sex with Brig had been hunger, need, lust, and more. But what it hadn't been was commitment. This all confused her. It was out of character for her. She didn't like any part of it.

Well, she had really liked the sex, she forced herself to admit. And she wouldn't mind being with Brig again. Sometime, someplace, where they could take their time giving one another pleasure.

Michael's smiling face came before her mind. A small, sad, smile crossed her face. But he was never going to be able to be able to hold her or to talk with her

again. Her memories of Michael, though sweet, were not enough to keep her warm and happy. They would never again be more than memories. She had to face that fact and move on.

Thoughts of Brig Matthews filled her mind. She had no doubt that he would be able to keep her warm. If she was honest with herself, and she always was, the man was able to make her warm by her simply remembering his face, let alone the heat of the sex between them.

That attraction was quite mutual. Of that fact, she was dead certain. But Brig Matthews was the absolute last man with whom she would have expected to feel attraction. If there was any man whom she ought to know better than to trust, it was Brig Matthews. Wasn't it?

She was lost deep in her thoughts, as she stood near the massive white stone fireplace, when Brig Matthews came up to her. She hadn't even heard him approach. "My, don't you look thoughtful."

Cat laughed, betraying her nervousness at the sound of his voice, before she turned her head to look at him. She couldn't help but notice how wonderful he looked in evening clothes. There were simply some men who were born to carry off the elegance of evening dress in such a fine manner. The man had to have been placed on the face of the earth simply to tempt her, she mused dryly. It simply wasn't fair.

"Nothing to say?" he asked in amusement. "Were you planning your next brilliant coup?"

"No, not quite," she replied with a small smile on her lips. "More like a merger by mutual consent."

"You can tell me. I can keep a secret," he said in a conspiratorial tone.

"Can you?" she countered with a smile and a small laugh. Then she lowered her voice and added with conspiratorial air to her words, "That's good."

"Is it?"

"That makes one thing that we have in common."

"But she who would keep a secret must first keep secret the fact that she has a secret to keep."

She looked at him and smiled. "That's true."

"You are incredibly beautiful tonight."

"Just tonight?" she teased.

"Always. I've never seen you be less than beautiful. But, I've never seen your hair down until now. It's utterly lovely. I've had this fantasy of seeing your hair spread out over my pillow. "

"Have you?" she asked, trying in vain not to let his words take her breath away.

"Something on your mind?"

"Always."

"Come away with me from here. We'll fly someplace warm, tropical, lie on the beach and have nothing to do but make love. Sound good?"

"Don't play those games with me, Brig."

"I am not playing a game, Cate."

"Oh? Well, that must mean you are serious, then."

"Oh, I'm serious, all right! Give me a chance and I'll show you just how serious I am."

"This from a man who has been quoted as saying that he 'would rather commit murder than matrimony'?"

"A man is entitled to change his mind."

"At least until he finds one that works. Now, in the interest of accuracy, forgive my bluntness, what, may I ask, do you want from me, Brig?"

"The answer to that question would probably scare you."

"Why?"

"Because it scares the hell out of me."

"I didn't think that anything could frighten the great Brigham David Matthews." Or, she mentally added, that he would ever admit to being frightened.

He cleared his throat. "I thought that you said you didn't play games," Brig said quietly. "Neither of us are children. We both are quite mature enough to understand what it means when the chemistry between people is right. You can't deny the way I make you feel."

She sighed. "I'm not naive enough to believe that pure chemistry has any relevance outside of a laboratory experiment."

"Honey, this is no lab experiment," Brig countered. "Unless it's in reproductive biology."

Cate felt her face grow warm.

He smiled at her. An eyebrow raised in query. "Come on, Cate. You are a grown woman, one who is well used to taking what she wants when she wants it."

"I don't take anything from anyone, Mister Matthews," she said with heat in her voice. "Everything that I value, I've earned. I may be many things, but I am not a taker."

He looked at her for a long minute. "I didn't mean to touch a raw nerve, Cate."

"Don't call me 'Cate'! No one calls me 'Cate'."

Then he began to quote *The Taming of the Shrew*: "You lie, in faith; for you are called plain Kate, and bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst."

"You would never finish that speech. You, Brigham, are no Petruchio. Nor am I Katarina to be tamed and subdued."

"We could be good together."

"I don't sleep around."

He lightly touched her cheek. "Who asked you to? I want you all to myself. I don't share well. I watched you earlier this evening as you were dancing with Jack Wilton and then with Quinn Carls. I wanted to take their arms off at the shoulder for how tightly they both were holding you, for how their hands splayed across the bare skin of your back. Are you wearing anything under that dress?"

"How I dress is none of your business!"

"Trust me, Cate, no man worth the name could see you in that dress and not speculate. That's a dress to show off a woman's best assets, to drive a man mad with wanting her."

"I think it's very pretty."

"It's sexy as hell, that's for sure; cut low in front, no back to speak of if you don't count those spaghetti straps connecting the sparse front to the skirt--or what passes for a skirt since it doesn't begin in the back until well below your kidneys, slim fitting with a slit in the side seam up to your hip, showing off the whole length of your gorgeous left leg. Don't get me wrong. You look absolutely beautiful in it. So beautiful that it makes my hands itch to touch you. You can wear it whenever we're alone. But, I don't want you wearing it in public again."

"You have no right to tell me how to dress."

"No, but I'd like to have. We want each other. Sooner or later, we are bound to be together for longer than a brief tryst."

"Brig, we really shouldn't be alone together," she said on a sigh. But the last thing she wanted was to leave him.

"Oh, sweet Cate, I don't think I am going to let you go." He pulled her to him. She saw the kiss coming, but did nothing to prevent it, didn't want to do anything to prevent it. With a shock, she realized that she wanted him to kiss her the same way he had the night before. She wanted nothing more than to be swept away in a storm of passion. What she wasn't prepared for was the gentleness with which he caressed her. It was a tentative, soft meeting of their lips. She didn't expect the warm sweetness of the caress, or the fact that she nearly felt as though her bones were melting.

After what could have been either a moment or a century, the kiss deepened into one of hot and urgent need. Never had any man's touch affected her so strongly, ignited the passion within her so thoroughly in so short of a time. Virtually nothing in her past had prepared her for this instantaneous explosion of sensation, this near mindlessness of need he was creating within her. His arms tightened around her, pulling her even closer to him. The barrier of their clothing was remarkably ineffective in preventing the transmission of the message of the desire they felt for one another.

"God, Cate!" he whispered in her ear after the kiss ended and before he began to lick the tender skin behind her ear.

She drew a deep breath as she shuddered with the need she felt for him.

Brig urged them back against the wall on the far side of the mantle. He pushed the spaghetti straps from her shoulders and pulled down the cloth of her bodice to expose her breasts to his gaze.

The hungry look on his face made her even more excited. The world narrowed down to just the two of them.

He cupped her breasts in his hands. "You are so beautiful."

As he brushed his thumbs over her nipples, she keened his name. The surge of heat that flooded her took her breath away.

His right hand moved from her breast, down over her waist, her hip, and up under her dress.

Brig's fingers brushed over the garter belt that was her only unclothing.

"Say 'yes', Cate. Say, 'yes!'" he whispered.

"Yes."

The smile that came to his face was her reward.

He lifted her skirt around her waist and stepped closer.

She reached for his belt. Unfastening it, she found his waist hook and zipper. He shuddered as she pushed his clothing out of the way enough to make it possible for them to make love.

He moaned as her hand closed around his erect cock.

"Oh, baby!"

"Now, Brig!"

"Wrap your legs around me and hang on."

Cat wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Trusting him to hold her, she wrapped her legs around his hips. She had thought last night had been a fluke. But the earth moved just as much tonight in sex between them. She couldn't imagine a time she wouldn't want him.

With maddening tenderness, he slowly slid his hard shaft into her, taking care to make sure she was aroused. The cording of his neck and the tension in his shoulders told her more than anything else the tremendous control he was trying to exercise. Slow, shallow strokes went progressively deeper until she was helpless to do anything except hold onto him. She wanted to tell him how much she wanted him, how much pleasure he was showing her, but her words came out only as soft unintelligible keening sounds. In the small part of her mind that was still working, she was surprised she could manage that much.

His hand worked its way between them. He found the soft nub of her clit and began to tease it.

It didn't take long for him to bring her to her release, for her to reward his efforts with the spasms of her orgasm. The room went dark for a moment. When she came back to herself, Brig looked at her. "You okay?"

"You tell me," she said.

"Honey, you couldn't be any better."

She giggled. "Come on."

That urging was all the excuse he needed to put aside his own tight control. Hard. Fast. Driving into her as though he was trying to impress himself on her indelibly, to bind her to him.

"Yes..." she moaned as she felt the warmth of his release.

As soon as they both could breathe again, Brig smiled at her. "Think you can stand?"

Holding tightly onto his shoulders, she unwrapped her legs from around him and placed her feet on the floor.

Finally, remembering where they were, that anyone could walk in on them, she said, "We do make a habit of living dangerously."

"Don't we though?" Brig told her with a laugh as he backed away from her slightly and straightened her dress before righting his own clothes.

"Why did you kiss me?"

"Not that I need an excuse, but didn't you see the mistletoe?"

She looked up. Sure enough, a large bunch of the parasitic plant hung from the ceiling just over where they stood. But she didn't delude herself that the reason that he had kissed her was simply that the mistletoe was there. He had been trying to prove something to her. Unfortunately, she, being basically honest, had to admit to the truth of what he had been trying to tell her. The chemistry between them was strong; too strong to be ignored for long.

"I told you it wasn't wise for us to be alone together."

"Feels very wise to me."

"Excuse me," she said as she stepped away from him. Without another word, she went into the powder room off the den.

She looked herself in the mirror. "Well, Cat, you've done it now."

A few minutes later, she came out of the bathroom to find him sitting there in front of the fire.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Aside from being clearly crazy, maybe. We're not kids, Brig. Making love in public, or where we can be easily discovered, doesn't thrill me."

"Liar!" he teased as he smiled at her admission. "Then come with me, away from this party. I'll find lots of privacy and time to explore exactly what does thrill you."

She sighed. "A few things you ought to know before that happens."

"Okay," he said his voice cautious as he rose from the chair and went to her.

"First, I said goodbye to Michael early this morning, then I turned over guardianship of him to his parents."

He looked at her for a long moment, not saying anything. Then he nodded. "That had to have been hard."

She blinked back tears. "Hard is too pale a word. But, this is the way they want it. Frankly, my keeping guardianship of him right now would have been a conflict of interest because all I want is my freedom."

Brig smiled at her. "You've put him first for so many years. You have a right to be free, Cate."

"At what cost? Oh, God, Brig, they've given the orders to withhold nutrition and hydration from him. They're starving him to death," she said in a choked voice. "I never wanted that."

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly in an embrace meant to comfort. Brig stroked her hair and spoke softly to her, "It will be all right, sweet Cate."

She sighed heavily. "I knew what they were likely to do when I signed the papers. But I did it anyway. What does that say about me?"

"It says that you know your limits. That you've reached that limit, and you can't endure this any longer. Frankly, I don't know how you've endured this so far. You are a strong woman, but this has been hell for you."

"Masterful understatement."

"Do you still feel like a married woman, even after all these years of being alone?" he asked her, his tone gentle.

She backed away from him and stepped out of his embrace. "No. That's the second thing I need to tell you. I filed for, and received, a civil divorce from Michael today."

"Quick divorce, even for Nevada," he told her, a mixture of disbelief and amusement in his voice.

"Yes. It took 20 minutes, from the time I sat down at a typewriter to fill out the forms until Jim found a judge to sign them. Too easy. Doesn't change the fact that I'm still bound to him in the eyes of the Church until he's dead. Those vows were for life. The divorce is a legal fiction, Brig. But an important one."

"Why now?"

"That's my third point. Why don't we sit down, Brig?"

"Am I going to need to sit down?"

"Stand then. I don't know how to say this, aside from saying it. Chances are good that I might have conceived last night, if not last night, then maybe tonight. I'm right in the middle of my most fertile time."

Brig drew a deep breath. Then he smiled. "Okay. We neither one did anything to prevent conception. If there is a baby, I hope she looks like her mama."

"He could look like you. My father had blue eyes. I probably carry that gene."

Brig looked at her in concern. "Michael's going to be dead in a few days. Why the push now to divorce him?"

"Michael's Will leaves everything to any children of our marriage. If the marriage ends without children, even posthumous children, his money goes to charities that serve the poor. If I were still married to him at the time of his death, and there is a child, the child would legally be Michael's. I won't unjustly enrich this child, if a child exists. That would be stealing from the people his estate can help. I can't do that. Let me rephrase, I won't do that."

Brig hugged her. "Most people would consider the money just compensation for years spent caring for him. But, you have the integrity to walk away from a fortune. That's one of the things I've always admired about you, your rock solid integrity. You see the right thing to do and you do it. You're a good woman, Cathryn Marie Clare."

"Yeah, good for what?" she asked, lowly. "I don't feel very good at the moment."

"Good for wanting me. You want me, as much as I want you."

"You flatter yourself."

"Well, one of us has to," he responded teasingly with a small smile and a chuckle. "I have an ego which requires constant feeding. You wouldn't want to be responsible for mortally wounding an old and dear companion through your neglecting to supply the required flattery. Would you?"

"I don't know about you, Brig," she responded with a small chuckle.

"You don't have to be frightened of me."

"I was unaware that you had qualifications in psychiatry."

"Just a student of human nature. I spook you something fierce. Why?"

She thought that over for a moment. Yes, he would have to know. More than that, she wanted to tell him. "Last night, they all thought that I was teasing about retiring. I wasn't," she told him.

He looked at her. "And what would you do after you retired?"

"Expand my hobby of designing and making jewelry into a business of its own," she said. "That's what I intended to do some years ago. But, my father's will required me to go into engineering if I was to inherit his money. It was too large a fortune to ignore. So, although he meant electrical engineering, I became a mining engineer. It was the only form of engineering that meshed with my interests in geology. I don't want to work in the field the rest of my life. That's a job for the young."

"You have a good reputation in the oil and mining communities. Do you like working in the field?"

"There is something almost addictive about the emotional high that results from sinking a shaft and coming away with a working, profitable, mine or with seeing a formerly 'played out' oil well reclaimed."

He smiled at her. "Is there any reason that you couldn't have your career and a family?"

"I work eighteen, twenty hours a day when I have a project going in the field. Often that work takes me out into the roughest, most primitive part of world. There is real danger in sinking a shaft. Cave-ins, accidents with explosives, heat, claim jumpers, poisonous snakes and other of the more nasty of God's creatures--no-legged, two-legged, or more-legged--and on and on. It isn't exactly a situation conducive to raising children."

"No, those are not conditions which children would understand," he agreed. "But that is why there are nannies."

She cleared her throat. "I was raised by a collection of nannies, governesses, and companions, until I was old enough to ship off to boarding school. If I am going to have children, then I am going to be the one raising them. Maybe I am more

than a bit old fashioned in that respect." Her voice took on a pain-filled note. "No child of mine will ever doubt that he or she is loved."

Brig reached out to her and pulled her back into his arms. There were undercurrents of desire in the embrace, but the overwhelming sensation she received from being so close to him was comfort as she buried her head into his shoulder. She stood there for the longest time, just letting him hold her, soaking up the comfort he was offering.

"Cate," he said, need evident in his voice. "Come with me, now?"

"Where?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. I'd follow you anywhere. You know that. Let me get my coat."

~ The End ~

TRY A LITTLE MAGIC, by Shara Lanel

The words came to her like melting chocolate on her tongue, smooth, flowing, delicious. She wove the spell without following any ancient rite. This was her own non-denominational earth magic, and it just felt...right.

She wore red, of course, a flowing scarlet robe. This was a love spell, after all. Correction. A sex spell.

Rose petals circled her on the white down comforter, their fragrance perfuming the air. A marble tray in the center of her king-size bed served as her altar. She struck a match and lit the red candle. Then she held the tip of the incense stick to the flame. It sparked and glowed red. She blew on it, until a stream of vanilla scented smoke created shifting patterns in the air. Gareth's picture rested in a small silver chalice on the center of the tray, as did a slightly chewed toothpick.

She'd gone through extraordinary lengths to get that particular toothpick. The teeth marks were Gareth's, infused with his DNA. Adriana had hoped for a strand of hair, which seemed more traditional and...well...less gross, but short of walking up to him and yanking out a lock, an opportunity had never presented itself.

Gareth had nibbled the toothpick in the break room, then forgotten it on the counter. Adriana had waited for the small, stuffy room to clear out at the end of the lunch hour before she'd surreptitiously swept the object into her purse.

The vibrations from Gareth's very soul emanated from that tiny stick of wood. She knew it was the key to making this spell work.

The picture came from the bulletin board in the company lobby. It was a Polaroid that had been taken at the company picnic, tacked up to boost morale. Adriana suspected the only morale it had boosted was her own, when she'd pilfered it and cut all the faces away except for Gareth's.

She'd never considered herself a criminal, but desperate times call for desperate measures, as the saying goes. This was a desperate time. She was like Tinkerbelle whose light was about to go out. She hadn't had sex in two years. Two years! It was inconceivable. She was an attractive, single woman, and without sex, her power leaked like battery acid, eroding her soul. She needed to plug herself into some serious booty.

She'd tried asking Gareth out on a date the old-fashioned way, but she'd discovered something about her sexy co-worker during that excruciating night.

He was a Southern gentleman through and through, and he was achingly shy. She suspected the shyness was more the root problem than his gentlemanly chivalry. The more moves she'd tried on him, the more he'd backed away. She'd finally given up for the evening, already calculating Plan B.

This was Plan B.

"The moon is full, the time is right, send Gareth to me, to have sex tonight."

She said the chant three times and lit two more red candles. Then she popped a Hershey's Kiss into her mouth, savoring the flavor, while repeating the chant in her mind.

The one problem she foresaw with this spell was what Gareth would think when he "came to" in her bedroom. The spell would end the moment they'd had sex. Would he remember what had transpired? She didn't know the power of the spell. Would he retain some consciousness while "under the influence"?

"You are one unscrupulous woman," she told herself, as she put the remnants of the casting on her dresser and turned down the covers on her bed. Then she changed into a red satin chemise and lacey high-cut undies. She knew Gareth liked her -- a lot. She'd spied the evidence in his pants during their date. This spell would just help him overcome his shyness. Break the ice, so to speak. She smiled as she slid white thigh-high stockings over her supple legs and reclined against her propped pillows. Any guilt she felt seeped away in anticipation of the night's activities.

She waited.

She should have specified an exact time in the spell. "Tonight" encompassed several hours. She sighed. It was the night of the full moon and she'd cast the spell at midnight. It had to work.

Gareth was the absolute sexiest man she'd ever met, even clothed in argyle sweaters or button-down shirts with khaki pants. His forearms intrigued her, for Goddess's sake! She'd caught herself staring at them when they were both eating lunch in the break room one day. She'd been utterly fascinated by the richly tanned skin with flecks of gold hair, and the visible muscle and the vein that ran along the underside of his arm. Since just that small portion of his delectable physique made her drool, she knew the rest of his body would satisfy her like a twelve-course meal.

Something clattered against her window then fell to the wide sill. She hopped from the bed to investigate. Pebbles. She looked down. There, standing on her lawn in pajama bottoms and nothing else, was Gareth, tossing stones against the glass to get her attention. She opened the window and touched her face to the chilly screen.

"Come on up, Gareth. The door's unlocked."

* * *

Part of Gareth wondered what the hell he was doing outside freezing his ass off on this cloudless night. Why had he not at least put a shirt on? You won't need it, a voice whispered in his head. And whose lawn was he standing in?

But these concerns were pushed aside when a voice yelled down from the second story window that he was to come inside. His legs obeyed, his fingers turned the knob, his feet tread across the foyer tiles, all while his mind struggled to recall the problem.

Oh yeah, why was he here? And where the hell was here?

He walked up the carpeted steps and turned the corner into a feminine bedroom. The first thing he noticed was the smell of vanilla and roses in the air. Then he spotted the gorgeous, half-naked woman on the bed.

"Adriana?"

"Come to me, Gareth."

Again his legs moved without his conscious will. As he scanned Adriana's sexy outfit, another part of his body moved without his conscious command. It rose and stiffened. God, she was gorgeous. They'd gone on a lousy date two weeks ago. The lousy part had been his fault. He'd been tongue-tied and hopeless. She'd sent him every signal in the book, but he'd been too insecure to respond properly to her advances.

It was funny. Yeah, like ha-ha. He knew he was a good-looking man now. He worked out daily. He'd grown several inches in height and had filled out in all the right places since his high school days, but all those embarrassing years lived on in his psyche. He was still the geek, the nerd that no girl could possibly want to date.

Oh, he wasn't a virgin. He'd had a new start in college, when he'd met Darlene, who'd been his steady girl for three years. She'd taught him what she knew about sex, and it had been pretty enjoyable. But she'd dropped him for a law student who'd been offered a partnership in a top Boston firm. It had been a long dry spell since then, and he had only himself to blame.

He moved to climb onto the bed.

"Stop." Adriana held up her hand, and he stopped immediately. "Strip off those pants."

He undid the drawstring. I'm naked under here. That thought didn't stop him, though. The pants slid down his legs revealing his erection. He heard Adriana's inhale. She was staring at his cock with a look of rapture. Didn't she find it odd that he was in her bedroom for no reason, without prior invitation?

This had to be a dream. That was the only logical explanation. But damn, it was a realistic dream, especially the scent of vanilla and rose. Weird. Why would he dream that up?

"Come here, sexy," she whispered, cocking her index finger to draw him near. He climbed onto the bed and crawled toward her. When he was close, almost touching, she whispered, "Kiss me."

He positioned his palms on either side of her luscious thighs and leaned forward, while still on his knees, almost like a pointer dog sniffing grouse.

Not a good analogy. Geez! Adriana closed her eyes as his lips drew near. Then their mouths brushed, skin to skin, ever so faintly. She sighed. He leaned in further and pressed his lips more firmly to hers. His knees grazed her thigh. Her mouth opened, so his followed suit.

As their tongues tangoed, Gareth's mind tried to wrap around what was happening to him. He was in Adriana's bedroom, kissing her, totally naked. Totally naked! She hadn't called and invited him over. They'd not set up the assignation at work. He'd just showed up in her yard throwing stones at her window, and she'd let him in without question.

Her fingers found their way to the back of his head. They caressed his scalp and held him more firmly to her. Her other hand gripped his shoulder, nails poking into his skin, not painful but there. She pulled back long enough to gasp, "Straddle me."

He repositioned his legs, one knee on the side of each of her thighs, his hard dick bobbing in the middle. He wanted her to touch it, to suck it, but he didn't seem to be in control of this scene. She resumed kissing him frantically, while pulling him closer with her hands. She stretched her body so that she was more horizontal on the bed, a bit further down on the pillows. Gareth followed, flattening his body against hers while still keeping his weight on his arms and legs. He didn't want to crush her. His cock pressed into her belly, rubbing against the shiny lace of her panties. Nice! He closed his eyes. Wetness leaked out of the tip of his penis. He hoped she didn't mind, since he couldn't help his body's reaction to her.

She didn't seem to notice or care. Her hands kneaded his biceps and she moved her legs wider and wider until he could settle between them. Her stocking-clad thighs wrapped around his bare ones. Her feet tapped his butt cheeks. His cock settled against the fabric covering her pussy. He bucked against her. He had to feel the friction. Ahh.

* * *

He was bigger than she'd ever dreamed! Adriana sighed and wiggled as he rubbed against her pussy. Her panties were soaking wet. She thought it was totally erotic to still have so many clothes on when he was totally naked. And, God, his biceps! The muscles flexed and strained as he held his weight off of her. She loved touching the ridges and bulges in his arms. She gradually shifted her attention to his chest, admiring his firm pecs and defined abs. Wouldn't they feel good pressed against her breasts? She moved her hands out of the way, so he could press flat against her, body to body. Her fingers explored the plains of his back.

The kissing was out of this world, going on and on. Tongues writhing together, sucking, tasting.

But it was his cock that was making her lose control. The more it rubbed against her sopping pussy, the more she wanted to scream.

He seemed to realize that more needed to be done about the clothing disparity. He reached a hand between them and ripped the panties from her body. Ow! That pinched a bit, but she was better for the pain, because now he could fuck her.

* * *

Finally, the damn fabric was out of the way. Gareth circled his hips to rub the tip of his penis against her clit. She was totally wet and ready for him, but he didn't

want this to end too fast. If this was a dream, it was the best he'd ever had, sure to end in an orgasm. If it was real, as it seemed to be, then he didn't want her to regret it in the morning. He'd admired Adriana from afar for more than a year, running into her in the break room or at the company picnic. But when she'd transferred into his department a month ago, that admiration blossomed into a full-grown crush. He knew it was stupid for a twenty-eight year old man to have a crush, but that's what it was, and he'd never expected it to be anything but.

Pulling his lips from hers, he kissed his way along the fine structure of her neck. He licked her collarbone. He didn't want his cock to lose touch with her gushing pussy, so he bent his body so he could finally draw her satin-covered nipples into his mouth. First one, then the other, back and forth, using tongue, teeth, and lips, until she was arching against him and moaning his name. Wet circles remained on the fabric as he used his teeth to pull her shoulder straps down her arms. Like drawing a curtain aside, her creamy breasts were slowly revealed, pink nipples jutting into the air waiting to be covered by his hot mouth, waiting to be sucked and nibbled.

Her hands grasped at his hair. "Fuck me," she was saying over and over. He barely heard her as the blood thundered in his ears and cock. She wanted him to fuck her. Great. No more waiting. He slipped a hand between their sweaty bodies so he could position his dick at her entrance. Then his hips did the rest, lowering and arching until he'd pushed inside her warm, wet hole. Her feminine musk filled his senses. Her vagina welcomed him, circled him, clenched him. He plunged in, to the hilt.

* * *

Gareth's cock filled her completely. The texture, both soft and hard, sent frissions of pleasure through the walls of Adriana's vagina. Her nipples were painfully stiff and wet in the chilly air, but as he fucked her, he lowered his chest against them. They heated with the friction of their bodies rubbing together. Her stomach tightened. Her thighs tightened. She saw spots before her eyes. She was going to come.

And in that moment, colors and music filled her mind, like sunlight through a prism, splitting into the full spectrum. Melodies crested and crashed. Her magic glowed. Her body orgasmed, bucking and clenching.

She barely registered Gareth's moans as he rode her wave to his own climax, but she felt his cum flowing into her vagina, filling her even more.

"Adriana." He murmured her name breathlessly and collapsed on her. She enjoyed his weight for a few moments, then the liquid dribbling down her thighs compelled her to push him to the side. She rushed to the bathroom to clean herself off.

"Oh my God, now what?" Her reflection showed her mussed blonde hair and flushed cheeks. She even had the makings of a satisfied smile on her face. Only her wrinkled brow hinted at the truth, that now she'd have to face the consequences of her spell. Oh, it had been worth it. She was charged to the max, energized. She brought the tips of her fingers close together and watched the multi-colored sparks jump across the small space. Yup, her magic was at one hundred percent. But what about her relationship with Gareth?

Gareth was sitting on the edge of her bed in his pajama bottoms, looking stunned. When he saw Adriana emerging from the bathroom, his skin tinged pink. He looked down at his toes and picked at his thumb. He cleared his throat. "Adriana..."

Shit! What should she say to him? That he'd sleepwalked to a house he'd never been to before?

"Adriana, I don't know how this happened or what came over me..."

Here it comes, he's going to claim it was a mistake...

"But I'm glad it did." He looked up. "Are you glad it did?"

His puppy dog eyes called to her. She curled her arms around his neck as she slipped onto his lap. "Very glad."

"I mean our date didn't go very well, and that was all my fault. I was just too awkward, you know. I'd been wanting to go out with you for so long."

"Really?"

"Hell, yeah. Ever since you were hired."

"But I didn't meet you until two months ago."

"You never noticed me."

"No way! How could I have not noticed a hot cookie like you?" No way!

"I tend to fade into the woodwork."

"Well, stop doing that. Give the girls a break."

He chuckled. "There's only one girl I want to give a break to, and that's you."

Adriana breathed a sigh of relief. She'd dodged the bullet on this one, but she knew the time would come when she'd have to explain to Gareth that he was dating a witch.

~ The End ~

INSIGHT, by Annie Rayburn

Sela rounded the corner of Park Meadows Mall, head down, searching in her bag for the elusive receipt, and ran into a warm wall of hard, sinewy flesh.

"Hey! Careful there. You all right?" The laughing masculine voice licked at her nerve endings, creating sparks that skittered along underneath her skin, igniting a deeper flame.

Her head jerked up, gaze locking on azure eyes exuding warmth and friendliness. She drew back from the hands steadying her, flashes of satin sheets and her own back arching in an offering flitting through her mind.

"I'm...fine."

What the hell? Even the hairs on her arms stood at attention. Who was this man with his dark good looks, and why was she so in tune with him? She'd trained herself to keep a certain mental distance, especially with strangers. But this man sliced through her walls of defense like they were made of paper. That alone was reason to take a second look.

She lowered her sunglasses to the end of her nose. A jolt of awareness made her gasp. He drew in a deep breath, the laughter leaving his gaze, replaced by a dark light that made her fingers itch to touch him.

Ah, so you feel the attraction, too. She sent out the mental message as a kind of test and felt it boomerang. The desire to run her fingers up his arm and across his chest was like a living entity. Was this man, then, her mate? She lowered her defenses even further and was surprised to hear his thoughts, loud and clear.

Damn. Fine is right. I'm standing here getting hard. How can I want a woman so much, so quickly? What's going on here?

His eyes widened slightly, and Sela pulled in a sharp breath. How was it she could hear his thoughts? That had never happened before. Vague impressions, yes. An intuitive knowledge of other people's feelings, but never anything like this. Mother had warned her this would happen someday.

She pressed her palm above the deeply scooped neckline of her sweater, trying to calm the bird-like fluttering there.

His gaze followed the movement, and he swallowed hard. Bet those aren't fake.

Hearing his mental assessment, she bit back a smile and let him continue, enjoying the advantage. But why couldn't he hear her thoughts, as well? Why didn't he just communicate in the age-old Crainesian way, if indeed he was her mate?

>Oh, hell, she'll think I'm some kind of pervert, standing here staring at her breasts. Say something. Do something.

He stuck out his hand. "Sorry to mow you down like that. I'm Jonavon Wyatt."

"Sela Marin." She shook the offered hand and smiled as her skin began to tingle. So the instant heat was mutual. The knowledge made her confident. Desire urged her to throw her usual caution to the winds and see where this consuming fire took them.

Giving him what she hoped was her sexiest come-hither look, she drawled, "It's a pleasure to meet you. Maybe it's fate, us running into each other. We should get to know each other better." Without breaking eye contact she inserted one acrylic tipped index finger through his belt loop and tugged him closer. That should make him lower those mental walls.

Reaching blindly into a side slit in her handbag, she withdrew her business card and slipped it into his shirt pocket. "We should definitely get to know one another. Call me."

I must be dreaming. Things like this don't happen in broad daylight. He rubbed his fingers across his forehead. Hell, what am I thinking? Things like this don't happen at all.

His thoughts floated through Sela's mind, bringing with it the vision of her lying back on those satin sheets, his well-muscled body rising over hers seconds before he covered her distended nipple with his mouth. Her heartbeat thundered in her throat, drowning out the surrounding noise.

Jonavon watched the alluring beauty arch slightly and heard her quiet, desperate, "Ahhh" just before she bit her very full and delectably pink bottom lip. His penis leapt painfully in response within his already snug jeans. He could have sworn her eyes took on a luminous quality.

"Jon?" Carmen's irritated voice cut into the sphere of warmth like an axe, bringing back the surrounding noises.

He turned toward her, knowing he must look guilty as hell. He felt it, standing here wanting another woman, still sporting a semi hard-on with his fiancée fast approaching. Shit.

"Carmen, darling, finished shopping already?" He moved toward her and dropped a light kiss on her offered cheek.

All the same, the magnetic connection to the stranger remained. His desire to protect her from the exotic Carmen came as a surprise. The feisty flame-haired, emerald-eyed beauty behind him had mesmerized him at first sight.

"They didn't have the color I wanted," his Hispanic beauty pouted, staring over his shoulder at Sela.

"Come. I'll introduce you. I ran into Sela, literally, coming around the corner."

"You mean that puta?"

"Carmen! Don't be rude."

"She can't hear me. She's gone." Carmen shrugged.

"Wha--" Jonavon whirled around to see the beautifully alluring woman heading across the parking lot to a bright yellow VW bug. Longing rose up, making him want to run after her yelling, 'Wait! Don't go.' He shook his head. "Strange."

"What's strange?"

"Nothing. Let's go." He took his fiancée by the elbow, divested her of her packages, and steered her toward his company truck. Why was it nothing inside him felt the same as it had when he'd gotten out of bed this morning--his bed full of satisfied Carmen? Why didn't that scenario appeal to him anymore?

He glanced at his companion, registering her surgically enhanced breasts, flawless dusky complexion, and long, long legs. He should be feeling desire, a stirring of sexual interest that was always present around Carmen. He waited. Nothing. Nada. Looking at Carmen was like looking at his sister.

Boy, was he screwed.

* * *

Across the parking lot, Sela sat in her idling car, recording the company information off the side of her future husband's truck. Wyatt Construction of Denver. Well, Jonavon Wyatt had three days to get that woman out of his life. After that, she'd handle things herself.

Her kind didn't tarry once they found a mate. He was pursued and captured, and quite willingly, too. She'd seen his interest, felt his desire for her, known they'd be together before long, and damned if she hadn't almost come with very little contact between them. Her heart beat faster, just thinking about loving the man with Colorado sky eyes framed with long black lashes.

Three days without him stretched in front of her like a long, lonely ribbon of highway across a desert. Three days wasted when they could be getting better acquainted, planning their future. Was she crazy to wait? She'd be tied in knots by then.

But...there was the little mystery to solve as to why he hadn't opened his mind to her. Was it because he was promised to another, a human? Or could she be wrong, and he no more her mate than any other?

No. Her heart already whispered his name.

Sela drove back to her tiny apartment, enjoying the oranges, pinks, and purples of a waning sunset over the Rockies. The changing colors soothed her ravaged nerves, calmed her pulse. She waited until she reached the quiet of her apartment, then reached into her bag for her cell, pushed a button and said, "Mother". A little advice was in order from one more experienced than she.

'Tiana Marin' flashed across the screen as the phone dialed. Sela tapped her foot, waiting, highly annoyed when voice mail came on. Her message was brief.

"My mate has surfaced. I need your advice. Call me."

She dropped the cell on the couch and sighed, trying to remember what her mother had said to her when she started casual dating. You will have desires, my dear, sometimes rather strong ones. You may choose to act on them from time to time, but only one mate will truly satisfy you, make you whole.

>How will I know who my mate is?

Her mother laughed softly and reached over to tuck a thick, wavy strand of hair behind Sela's shoulder. That won't be a problem my dear. You'll know immediately and without doubt. As has been the way of our people for centuries,

you'll beckon to him and he will follow, mesmerized. The equality happens after the initial joining, the eternal bonding that makes him aware of what is precious. Enjoy your fleeting moments of power. Commit them to memory. For you'll need them to remind him of his place when he becomes too arrogant, as they all do from time to time.

Sela slumped into the overstuffed couch, propped one jean-clad leg up on the coffee table and crossed it with the other. So, why didn't he follow? Why wasn't he mesmerized? And who was that Carmen woman he had called 'darling'?

The ringing phone at her elbow startled her.

"Mother?"

"Of course, dear. I've been feeling your anguish for the past half hour, but was out on a walk. Darling, your news is wonderful. Congratulations. Why the distress?"

"I'm not sure. That's what I need to talk to you about." She gave her mother a brief overview of the meeting, ending with Jonavon's departure with the lovely Carmen and her own decision to give him three days.

"Hmmm, yes. Everything sounds right, except for the ending. You know, something like this happened with my cousin Jarog's daughter, Phia. Turned out her mate was half Crainesian, half human."

"Oh."

"Sela, surely you're not a racist in this day and age? With our Crainesian population so scattered and sparse these days, one can't afford it."

"No, that doesn't bother me." She waved her hand impatiently. "I just don't know what effect it has on how I proceed. He's got a girlfriend. Are there different mating rules for this?"

"Truthfully, dear, you're pretty much left on your own. I'll call Jarog and find out how Phia accomplished her capture. Maybe that will help, but very little is known about how our abilities change when we mate with humans. Even though we're humanoid, studies have shown that the differences in offspring abilities seem to be as varied as individuals."

"Great. So, what used to be a simple joining is now a puzzle to be solved first?"

Her mother's chuckle was throaty. "Joining is never... simple, my dear."

Well, now, wasn't that reassuring? "You know what I mean." Sela didn't bother to hide her exasperation.

"Sorry. Got a little reminiscent there."

While her mother cleared her throat, Sela glanced heavenward.

"Perhaps his human side is hampering his mental receptors a little. Your instincts will see you through, but it's probably wise to wait the three days, let the need for you confuse him and take hold. Then see how receptive he is."

"Good idea. I'll do that." Meanwhile, I'm stuck with this achy, hot flash feeling until I manage to convince Jonavon we're a pair?

Tiana chuckled. "Careful, dear. Your thoughts are coming through loud and clear." Her droll comment brought Sela up short.

"Sorry. I guess I'm just rattled. Share wisely," she signed off with the ancient greeting of her people, meaning be smart with whom you allow to share your thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, Sela compartmentalized her mind again. The wall around her sexual thoughts she strengthened like never before, and hoped it held.

* * *

When the construction trailer door slammed closed on Carmen's dramatic exit from his life, Jon lowered his butt into an old, dusty task chair and buried his face in his hands. His life was out of control. His dreams were out of control and centered around erotic visions of that woman--Sela. They flickered and wavered like a silent movie throughout his sleep with her always just out of reach, making him increasingly short-tempered. For three days nothing had made sense in his life. And now this.

Well, he couldn't blame Carmen. She had a right to expect that her fiancé would be interested in her physically. He couldn't tell her that a chance encounter with a redheaded stranger had bewitched him, making his morning hard-on disappear every time he'd positioned himself between his fiancé's thighs. What was wrong with him? Maybe he needed to see a doctor.

Even now he felt a low humming of desire running through his veins. Remembered dreams starring a green-eyed vixen flashed against his closed lids like a sensual movie. He groaned.

The trailer door opened again, and he whirled around, ready to tear into whoever dared bring him another freakin' problem today.

In a russet colored sweater that hugged soft curves, and a long black and russet patterned skirt, Sela stood before him. For a second he wondered if he'd conjured her from his dreams.

Her gaze fastened on his mouth before roaming his entire length. His arousal became painful under her perusal. She trembled, and her nostrils flared when her gaze fastened on his crotch for a moment. The hunger, gleaming in her green and gold eyes, had him moving toward her like a magnet. She met him almost halfway and paused, her breathing uneven.

Like a drowning man reaching for a lifeline, Jonavon reached out to pull her closer. He stopped, clenched his fists and returned them to his side. What was he doing?

"It's okay." With a smile, Sela reached for him. He turned away from her, struggling with an overwhelming desire to touch her, to feel her touching him. He gripped the edge of his desk, fingertips white from the effort it took to hang onto sanity.

"Why are you fighting this?" Her quiet voice cut through all the noise of machinery and voices outside the trailer. "Don't you recognize the pheromone heat? Trust your instincts. Open your mind and let your insight guide you. We're life mates, destined to be together, unhappy apart."

"What are you talking about? I don't even know you." Life mates? Insight? This woman was a nut job, that's what. He whirled around, needing to get away from her and deal with the lust that pulsed through his body.

She smiled, but her gaze was puzzled. "How can you resist me? We are meant to be. Can't you feel it?"

>Definitely a nut case.

She stomped her black-booted foot. "I'm not a nut case. Stop thinking that."

Jonavon didn't know if her anger had jolted him like a burst of electricity or if it was the realization that she'd responded to his thoughts. He turned away from her. His thoughts! How was that possible?

His stampeding heart became less about lust and more about fear. What the hell was going on here? First erotic dreams, then Carmen leaving him, and now the woman in those hot dreams reading his thoughts? Oh, good Lord, was she reading them now?

"It's okay. Shhhh." Sela's arms enveloped him from behind, and her crooning voice wrapped around him, sliding over his frazzled nerves like a cure. "I'm beginning to understand how little you know of your heritage. We'll take it slow, even if it kills us."

She smiled against his back. "As long as Carmen is out of the picture, we can proceed."

He straightened, her words bringing back the fear. He hadn't told her Carmen was gone. He'd thought it. Was she some kind of weird psychic?

Sela sprung away from him as if stung and took a step back. He turned to face her. The hurt and confusion in her gaze shamed him.

"You don't know about your heritage at all, do you? Or your abilities. You don't know our dreams are drawing us together, teaching us about each other, like the human dating ritual."

>Human?

"Yes. Already I know your favorite brand of body wash, how much you miss your father, how confusing all this is for you, and that you crave strong, black coffee when you first wake up. I know that you dream of me in your bed, see me under you, our bodies moving in perfect rhythm to a pleasure we can't even imagine because those dreams are mine, too. I know--"

"Stop! I don't know what kind of mind games you're playing, but it's not going to work. Get away from me. Get out of my life. Just leave me alone!" His chest rose and fell with the ache his own words brought. A physical ache of desolation.

Her beautiful eyes darkened to a forest at dusk. His heart bled for the tear that spilled over her cheek. Jonovan reached for her, wanting to take it all back, but she recoiled and stumbled back.

"I can see you're determined to be difficult."

The quaver in her voice caused him more pain.

She took a couple deep breaths and clasped trembling hands in front of her. "I'm sorry. My fault. I moved too fast. "After another deep breath, she turned away from him, fists clenched at her sides.

The loss of her gaze on him descended like a winter storm over the mountains, swift and chilling. He fought the urge to pull her into his arms, the need for her skin beneath his fingers eating at him, and realized his own hands formed tight fists beneath crossed arms.

Sela glanced back over her shoulder and gripped the doorframe until her knuckles whitened. "I've done some checking, but I need information only you can give. Will you tell me what I need to know?"

"I don't know. What kind of information?"

She smiled at his wary words. "Your father, a Crainesian, would have left some kind of keepsake or talisman in your mother's care. Something to be passed down when she felt you were ready. What was it?"

>She's talking about the necklace I gave Carmen when we became engaged.

He noted a spark in her gaze, and the air in the room warmed.

"A necklace. Thank you. She has it still?" The words came out clipped.

He nodded. How did she do that?

"Then I will see Carmen and get it back for you. Last name?"

Montoya. He closed his eyes and shook his head, sure this was a dream. Sela was carrying on a conversation with his head, or his thoughts to be more exact. How was that possible?

"You have the ability too, you know. Try it sometime."

Hearing a soft click, he opened his eyes and saw she'd gone. The winter storm settled around his heart, an icy blanket smothering, pressing heavily on his chest. He moved to the window for another glimpse of her, and the sight rocked his world.

She sat in a cheery yellow VW bug, bent over the steering wheel, hand pressed to her chest as if in pain. The anguish twisting her face echoed within him, and he stumbled back. Feeling the task chair behind his knees, he allowed them to give way. Somehow they were sharing the same emotions, and if what she said was true, the same dreams.

Why he believed her, he didn't know. He'd heard of the Crainesians, but hadn't known his father was one. Could he learn about her, get to know her, as she seemed to know him--through the dreams? The idea was preposterous, but very appealing.

Three hours later, Jonavon rose from his living room couch and paced, excited over all he'd learned. The short nap had not only refreshed him, but he'd learned a lot about Sela. Instead of the erotic dream he'd expected, they'd talked for what seemed like hours, sharing likes and dislikes, and their hopes and dreams of the future. He'd likened it to a crash course in dating when they found things in common and laughed together over childhood stories. All he could think about was how he already missed her, wanted to see her, touch her--now.

A memory flashed in his mind of Sela putting a card in his shirt pocket, and he headed for the laundry hamper.

Freshly showered, shampooed, and shaven, he stood in front of her apartment door an hour later. He lifted his hand to knock. Before he could, the door opened, revealing Sela in a long flowing caftan. She reached for his hand, drew him inside, and handed him the necklace. A potpourri of scents including jasmine and plumeria assaulted his nostrils and relaxed him.

Hundreds of tiny candles in glass cups waved their light about the room. In the center of the living room was a huge pillow. She led him to it and motioned for him to sit, so he did. She took the necklace, with its iridescent stone imbedded in the center of an odd medallion, and hung it around his neck before sandwiching the stone between his open palms.

With her voice barely above a whisper, she instructed him, "Close your eyes and look inside yourself for all that you are."

He did as she instructed, and heard the soft whisper of her clothing fading down the hallway. When he turned his thoughts to the necklace, he felt his body being pulled into a vortex. For a moment his heart sped up, with the unnerving sensation of falling. Then he slowed and floated, or so it seemed, past scenes of his early life narrated by his father.

Later, how much later he didn't know, he became aware of the scents around him once again and opened his eyes. He was half Crainesian, descended from a very old race of people who sought to be honorable and live in peace and harmony with others. This and more he'd learned from a man whose memory would be forever etched in his brain.

His people were also fiercely monogamous and mated for life. Sela was his future, and he sought her out.

She stood in the center of a large bedroom, like nothing he'd ever seen. A massive four-poster stood proudly, draped with rich gold, green and purple satins, the comforter pulled back in invitation.

Again, scented candles adorned every surface and provided the only illumination, making her skin seem to glow. The gently flickering light, reflected in the oversized dresser mirror, created moving shadows on the walls, and gave the impression of movement in the very air around them.

She held out her arms. He stepped into them eager for what was to follow. He'd seen them together in his dreams, thought he knew all that would happen. But he looked into her eyes, heavy with desire, and knew the dreams hadn't scratched the surface.

Inching closer, he encircled her within his arms and touched his lips to hers. His senses, heightened by the vortex experience, registered the smell of the room, her perfumed skin, and delicate wisps of her long hair brushing against his hands on her back. Everywhere she touched, his skin became sensitized, until the feel of cloth against his skin enflamed him more.

Her soft, moist lips and a questing tongue left no doubt about her need for him, as she took control. Then there was more, much more. He became aware of another ingredient in the room, a more delicate element--like tender buds opening themselves to the sunlight--newfound feelings of belonging, of a perfect fit, of love.

Blood mixed with desire and raced along his veins, creating a primal need, but he held back, cherishing the feel of her gentle hands on him, finally real--not a dream any longer. The wait had seemed like eons, and he wanted to enjoy every second.

Eyes closed, he tilted his head back in boneless anticipation. Her hands slowly rid him of his clothing. All the while she circled him, touching, kissing, licking

here, teeth dragging against skin there, until he thought he would surely explode. Chest and shoulders, arms and abs, she circled, gently pushing away his hands when he tried to give back to her.

"Not yet," she whispered.

Back and buttocks, upper thighs and knees, she continued her memorization of his body, avoiding the most obvious indication of his desire. His limbs trembled as she lifted first one foot, then the other before pushing the last remnants of his clothing aside and taking him with an intimate kiss.

Shocked, his eyes opened wide. He sucked in a desperately needed breath, and looked down. Sela's bold, knowing gaze met his. Seeing and feeling the ecstasy of her pursed lips sliding back and forth on his length was amazing.

He let his head fall back, breaking eye contact and another, deeper link washed over him. Opening his mind, he welcomed the onslaught of emotion flowing from Sela into him--happiness and a kind of euphoric anticipation. Awed by the connection and her enjoyment of the unselfish act, a moan of intense pleasure sprang from him. An accompanying low hum of approval, vibrating deep in her throat, sent him over the edge.

When he became aware of his surroundings again, her silky tresses were what first registered, fisted in his hands and flowing over his forearms. He released them and pulled her to her feet, thanking her properly with a kiss.

He could feel her need as well as his own. They seemed to be within a sphere of...something. Why would she give him such a gift when her need was so great?

The answer whispered through his mind. Because we have many gifts to give one another, my love.

>I heard you!

She smiled her approval and pulled his head down to hers.

>Plenty of time for talking later.

He couldn't resist this newfound ability and continued sending her mental words of encouragement. Whisking the caftan over her head, he loved her with the same leisurely exploration he had experienced. He held on tight until her quakes subsided, then scooped her up and placed her on the bed. Renewed need

spurring him on, he rose over her, nudged her thighs apart and froze, his heart thumping crazily against his ribs.

>Tears and sex. That's bad, right?

She shook her head and gave him a shaky smile. Good. You'll see.

He glanced down and could have sworn her chest had a faint glow above her delectable cleavage. Before he could ask she surged upward, sliding her moistness against him and another tear slid across her cheek. As it dropped into her hair, he felt a warming sensation in his own chest. Another tear fell. The warmth spread.

That's it. Open your heart, my love. Her command echoed softly inside him, and something gave, loosened. The warmth increased, spreading throughout his body. Sela wrapped her legs around his waist, and turned her heat against him.

Now. I need you.

He needed no more urging. With one thrust, he made them one, fascinated by the light. The glow he'd seen on her chest now seemed to come from inside her. It was strangely erotic. He bent to pull a distended nipple into his mouth. She cried out and bucked against him, his erection pulsing in response. Heat boiled in his belly. He began to move, plunging slow and deep. As he did so, he became aware that an identical glow came from his chest.

With each joining, she surged up to meet him, urging him on with her hands and her mind. Heat built around them, the glow from within spiraling outward, curling, intertwining, creating a cocoon of tension and fire. Jonavon threw back his head and laughed at the delightful and alarming sensations. Sela gripped him tighter, matched his pace. Feeling a tightening in his groin, he drove into her with harder, deeper strokes.

Sela's fingers slid against his scalp, pulling his gaze back to hers. Mental commands, urging, encouraging, while they labored toward a common goal.

The radiance around them began to pulse. His cry joined hers in fevered fulfillment. The throbbing sensations seemed to go on forever, inside them and all around, slowly dimming, the light finally fading as their breathing slowed.

He wrapped his arm behind Sela's back and rolled, reversing their positions. Their connection held, and she smiled against his chest. Reaching for the bunched up comforter, she pulled it over them.

"Will it always be like that?" he whispered against her hair.

"In any relationship, there are ups and downs. The intensity of the joining depends on the diligence of the two in keeping communication of feelings open and honest."

"Then we must remember to be especially diligent."

She smiled. I wonder if he realizes the significance of what just happened? I wonder if he knows I love him, really love him?

Jonavon raised her chin with his index finger. "My father's crash course in Crainesian was quite complete." He slid his fingers between hers and clasped their hands together. "I am yours and you are mine. Forever. Mind, body and heart."

He heard the tiny indrawn breath at his declaration.

Then say it the ancient way.

He smiled into her emerald gaze. Just like a woman. Never satisfied are you?

Her smile dimmed. He hated that his teasing had lessened her happiness in any way. He looked inside himself and let his newfound and special insight guide him.

Our hearts are joined in love. I am yours, always and forever.

Tears rewarded his declaration. They slid over cheeks still flushed and onto his chest, spreading heat in his loins, beginning anew what he and Sela would enjoy for a lifetime.

~ The End ~

THE MEMORY OF A TOUCH, by Jean de Cherie

"Sometimes I fear I'll have to spend my life alone," a clear, rich voice soared above the din. A hush filled the Golden Lion.

"And sometimes I think that I don't mind."

Mollie paused midway down the wooden steps, as the short auburn hairs at the nape of her neck took on a life of their own.

"Sometimes I fear I'll never find a home,"

The singer picked out an accompanying melody on the guitar he held, and continued his song, but the moment was lost and the pub resumed its normal noonday sounds, the clatter of cutlery, the clink of glasses being cleared, the unmistakable slow motion whoosh of Guinness taps beginning the journey of drawing a pint. Mollie, unfrozen, continued down the stairs, gracefully balancing the tray of glassware. She reached the bottom and turned, hand on the newel post, and froze once more. It was though he was singing to her. He looked her straight in the eye as he continued.

"That nobody's listenin', I'm just wastin' all my time."

Oh, it's I that's listening to ye, laddie, Mollie thought, as she passed the group sitting on the seats near the fireplace, and it's I'm all a-quiverin' when I should be workin. Had he smiled at her? Was there a twinkle in his eye that didn't fit his song?

Mollie walked up to the group. The singer had his back to her, to most of the patrons, to the front door. She recognized most of the others, from the University, but who was the singer? There was supposed to be a group coming from Swansea, but this young man didn't look Welsh, with his tanned face, dressed in blue jeans and faded denim jacket. He didn't sound Welsh, either. She found herself wishing the woman's body a guitar was supposed to represent was her own, that it was her skin his fingers were working their magic on.

"Sometimes I fear I'll never find a home,

"That nobody's listenin', I'm just wastin' all my time."

He finished his song, and passed the guitar to the person next to him, who started to strum lightly, and asked where he'd find the loo. A plan quickly formed in Mollie's mind and she hurried to the kitchen. Picking up an empty

tray, she watched through the round window in the swinging double doors as he approached, and, timing it perfectly, backed through and collided with him. Just as she'd known he would, he caught her as she fell, and she felt another tingle as his strong hands clasped her slim waist and set her back on her feet.

"I'm so sorry," he said. She wanted him to tell her that her eyes were like the very fields of County Cork, glimmering in the early morning sun, her hair like autumn woods. That her skin was like fine porcelain, the color in her cheeks like the first blush of dawn. "I was just looking for the bathroom."

"Here an' I thought it was me lucky day," she quickly replied, flashing a smile she hoped would give him a tingle similar to the one he'd given her. "It's over yonder," she said, hoping she was using the term correctly.

"Um, thank you."

No, definitely not Welsh, but American, for sure, tall and slim. She watched his little ass and wondered how it would feel in her hands, wondered if his motions would be as fluid horizontally as they were when he was standing erect. Erect. That was an image to treasure! She sighed, knowing it would be hours before she got off work, knowing she might never see him again. Unless...

Mollie hurried to the small group around the hearth and whispered in the ear of an acquaintance from her Medieval History course. He whispered an answer, and she went back to work. She felt the American's eyes on her, twice, and both times she looked into his and smiled. The second time, he winked but she couldn't respond. Some people just cannot wink: both eyes close, or both eyes open. Short of pulling her lid down with her hand, no mean feat when carrying a tray of sloshing pints, a smile was the best she could do. She'd never thought her inability to wink was much of a handicap, until now. Mollie hoped he wouldn't be put off by that failure!

She looked up as the small group left the pub, just in time to see the American--why hadn't she asked his name?--looking away, as though he'd been watching her. "Damn!" she thought, "forgive me Father," she added. Still, she knew where he'd be later that evening, and she meant to be there too.

Mollie left at six, when Fiona arrived to begin her shift, and hurried home on the bus. She showered and washed her hair, then her blow dryer tripped the circuit breaker again, and she had to find her way in the gloom to the closet below the stairs. Fortunately she was spared the embarrassment of having to apologize to her neighbors: nobody else was home. She climbed once more to the third floor, and this time unplugged her curling iron and turned off the radio before

finishing the first stage of her hair. Her auburn curls fell naturally to her shoulders, but she often tried to emphasize them. Tonight would not be the night, though--the hour was growing late and she didn't want to miss the chance of a 'chance' meeting with a certain musician.

She quickly slipped on a pair of lace knickers and a matching bra, not as sheer as she'd like but they'd do on such short notice. Adding a kilt of green and black, much the same plaid as the lining of his denim jacket, she realized, and a fine, soft cream-colored jumper that allowed her dark nipples to show through, she was set, except for the merest hint of makeup. She still remembered the teacher, years earlier, who'd told his adoring students the more makeup they used now, the more their skin would need as they grew older. He'd proved as correct as he'd been gorgeous. As an afterthought, she loosely knotted a scarf around her neck, arranging the ends so as to conceal her nipples. She set out for the nightclub in the highest of spirits.

The streets were chock-a-block, it being unusually warm for a November evening, and she stepped down from the bus as near as it got to her destination. She was cutting through an open arcade when she saw him, or someone who looked like him, anyway. He had his back to her and she was sure she recognized his rear view. There were two of them, busking it appeared, but the one playing the guitar had only enthusiasm going for him. Passersby barely glanced at the pair, and none paused to hear. The one in the denims said something to the other, and accepted the guitar. He shrugged the strap over his neck and right shoulder, fussed with the tuning for a moment, then began to play. There was no mistaking that voice--she'd found him.

Mollie joined the small crowd that quickly formed, staying toward the rear. He played a seamless set of four Beatles songs, ending with "you've got to hide your love aw--ay," followed by a ragged, whistled accompaniment to the ending chords. "Good," Mollie thought, "there's at least one thing he doesn't do well. Maybe I can't wink, but I can whistle." She could see a respectable heap of coins gleamed amid a few paper punts in the open guitar bag. The singer sketched a bow, thanked the crowd, and handed the guitar back to its owner, apologizing for upstaging him, but saying if they wanted to get into the nightclub before the doors were shut, they'd need to get moving. Mollie overheard him tell the other to keep practicing, that was the key. She doubted that young man could ever match her American's effortless style, but everyone must start somewhere. The younger one collected the money from the guitar bag and tried to give it all to her American (she already thought of him as hers, although they'd barely exchanged a dozen words). Her American accepted maybe half, insisting the other keep the rest. She thought that was very kind, considering that most, if not all of the money had only come after her American played. She couldn't keep

calling him that, she thought, feeling a sort of tightness in her chest. She had to learn his name!

Mollie knew where they were headed and she also knew a couple of the girls who worked there. It was an easy matter to slip in the back instead of waiting on the steps. The place was that packed, one out, one in. At last she saw him enter, and his gaze swept the unfamiliar surroundings. She could see him swaying slightly, in time to the music of the band. She walked right up to him and said, "Well, who'd a' thought I'd be meeting you here? It is me lucky day. Come and dance."

Before he could protest she'd taken him by both hands and spun him into the midst of the happy throng. He didn't know the steps, but was a quick study, fairly light on his feet, and wasn't the worst dancer by any stretch. The reels and jigs were simple enough, but when the band changed the pace they found this was one they both knew. She melted into his arms and as they swayed in time to the music, reached up under his denim jacket, pressing her body to his. She thought she felt a stirring against her stomach and decided to find out for sure. Extricating her hands, she deftly unknotted her scarf, flipped it around his neck and, after leaning back to make certain he got a nice view of her nipples, pulled the scarf down until their mouths were millimeters apart. Then there was no gap at all and, still swaying together, he began nibbling her lower lip. She left the scarf dangling between them and took one ass cheek in either hand. They felt just as good as she'd thought they would, and there was now a very definite bulge pressing into her belly. She let go her right hand and rubbed that bulge. It didn't seem to get any bigger, but it did seem harder and he was clearly most uncomfortable. She broke their kiss and, standing on the tips of her toes, she whispered toward his ear, "Let's get out of here, before we break something."

"Not yet," he gasped, "unless you want everyone to see what you've done to me."

"What I've done? What I've done, is it? Sure, an' if ye can't be proud of that fine specimen I don't think I want to be seen wi' ye." She turned her back, crossed her arms, cocked her head to one side and stamped her foot. Which also shook her hips, rather invitingly, she hoped. Then she made as if to walk away.

"Wait," he called out, "you're forgetting your scarf. And you never told me your name!"

"And you never told me yours," she said, marching back with a mock frown on her face. "Don't go thinking I go around kissing strangers, no. Only lovely Americans whose songs can quiet a whole pub at the noon hour." She loosely knotted the green scarf around his neck, proud of how her nipples were peeking

at the world and pleased they'd caught his glance again. "That was no mean feat. If ye'd carried on without the guitar they'd as like as not bought a round for ye and yer friends. Might even have bought your lunch. That's how much we love music here. Oh, and I'm Mollie. Mollie Monaghan, by the way."

"John Cherry, and I'm very pleased to meet you."

"I can see that," she said, running a fingernail down the bulge in his jeans. "Well. That's settled. Let's dance some more."

They'd never actually left the dance floor, only made an island in a sea of swaying bodies. Moving once again, as slow or as fast as the music required, they snuggled and kissed when chance allowed. Finally, with a "no, no, never, no, no never no more, will I play the wild rover, no never no more...We are the Wild Rovers, and we'll be back next Saturday. Hope to see you again. Goodnight, and thank you!" The stage went dark and the house lights came up. Molly took John's arm and they wound their way through the tables and chairs to where John's friends had been sitting and sat for a moment, watching the people filing out. John untied the scarf and draped it around Mollie's neck, carefully tying it in a half hitch, managing to lightly caress both breasts in the process. Mollie felt a tingle shoot right through her body to the center of her being and her indrawn breath told him all he needed to know.

"You're right," he said, "let's go before something gets broken."

They made their way to the exit, pulled along by the crowd, and neither noticed the young man with angry eyes and hair the color of old flame who watched them from a few feet away. The sidewalks were crowded: all the clubs in the area closed at the same hour and folk were reluctant to end their evenings. For the most part the throngs were happy, although a few belligerent drunks tried to start something here and there.

Moving in several directions, the crowd of revelers dwindled; the streets became quieter. Knowing the area well, Mollie steered John into a dark opening. John had just enough time to see a dim light at the other end, and a few rubbish bins outside the rear door of a shop. There was a fixture over that door, but it was dark and then she was kissing him.

Mollie felt the world grow dim and silent and wondered if she was having the same effect on her Johnnie. Their passion deepened and she leaned back, slightly, and pulled his hands from her waist to her tits. He caressed them, gently at first, then slipped his hands under her sweater and cupped each one. The lace felt delicate and her nipples were in no way restrained by the thin fabric. He gently

pressed a thumb against each and felt her fumbling with his belt. He carried on kissing her lips and fondling her tits and then gasped in spite of himself as he felt her yank his jeans down to his knees. Plunging a hand into his underwear as though she was trying to catch a fish, she pulled his cock out, holding gently but firmly as it struggled in the cool night air. She stroked the silky skin, marveling at how hard it was on the inside, yet so soft to her light touch. Mollie was tempted to drop to her knees right there, but thought better of it. She didn't relish the thought of what might be underfoot.

Never letting go, never breaking the kiss, her deft fingers busied themselves for a moment and then Johnnie gasped again. The silken scarf was now dancing over his erection in much the same way a tongue and mouth would, brief, light flicks and long, drawn out caresses. Again and again, from base to tip, tip to base she stroked, her left hand cupping his heavy balls. John was just reaching his right hand up under Mollie's skirt, wondering if he should let fly his cream on her belly or if he could get her panties down far enough to get inside her pussy before he came when something struck him. Hard. Thrown off balance, with his jeans around his knees, John slid along the wall and crashed into the waiting trashcans. They hesitated, then declined to bear his weight, but did divulge that the closed door was likely that of a restaurant or cafe, most likely Italian by the aroma. Their contents oozed over the cobbled alleyway moments before his ass reached the ground.

"You whore, you fucking tart whore bitch!" said a slightly slurred voice, "I'm gonna teach you a lesson once and for all!"

John, trying to get up, put his right hand and foot in the spreading glop, and both slid out from under him. He realized zipping his fly and re-fastening the button would likely make things easier and he busied himself with that task while, above him, he heard Mollie shout.

"Brendan! You pig, you worthless sod, what are you doing here? It's over! Over. Stop following me!" Still on her feet, she was pummeling him with enthusiasm, aggressor turned victim, victim aggressor.

"Shut up, bitch," he shouted, backhanding her. She managed to partly deflect the blow and, although it connected, it had little force. Still, she staggered and would have fallen, saved only by already being so close to the wall opposite John.

At that moment all heard a shrill whistle and a tall dark shape came toward them from the street. Mollie and Brendan froze, while John tried once more to stand, again with no success.

"All right, all right, what seems to be the trouble?" the Gardai [1] said. "Mollie girl, is that you?"

"Yeh, it's her, the fuckin' whore," said Brendan, struggling to free his upper arm from the burly policeman's grip. "Leggo my arm, you fuck! She's a whore bitch. Arrest her, not me!"

"Looks like you're the trouble here. 'Sides, I know her, but I don't know you and I don't think I want to. Now, are ye gonna calm down or would ye like to meet Bessie here?" He waved his wooden truncheon in Brendan's face. Brendan stopped struggling.

A Gardai car on the street turned so that its lights illuminated the scene, and for the first time the policeman saw John amid the bins. A policewoman cast a long shadow as she approached. "Everything under control here, Sean?"

"Think so, Maggie. I've got this one; he's the troublemaker--"

"Oh, he's a troublemaker all right," said the policewoman, "he's my cousin, my second cousin, and the blackest sheep in the family, a black sheep with red hair. Brendan," she said, "when are you going to grow up?"

"--and you know Mollie, from the Lion, right?" the policeman continued "You might check the one over there."

Mollie pushed herself away from the wall and walked with Maggie to where John sat, half illuminated, half blinded by the harsh glare of the headlights.

"Did he hurt you, Johnnie? I'll kill 'im if he hurt you," Mollie said.

"Mollie, don't be saying such things, not even joking," Maggie warned, "not when I can hear, or Sean, not when I'm in uniform. Please."

"I'm okay," John answered. "Hit my head on the wall, but it's all right, really. Nothing to worry about. Except that I'm sitting in leftover pasta sauce and who knows what else?" John didn't mention the scrape as he slid long the wall. The police didn't need to know Brendan caught them with his pants down!

The two women reached out to help him and John started to take their hands, then noticed the red sauce and all on his right. He tried to wipe it on his pants leg but there wasn't much clean area there so he only took the policewoman's. Making sure his left footing was secure, he let her pull him up. Mollie took him in her arms and kissed him, caressing the small lump on the back of his head.

"Maggie, this is Johnnie, John Cherry. He's from America."

"I noticed," she winked, "I am from the Garda [2] after all. We're trained to notice these things. I probably would have known just from the way he's dressed, although they didn't mention wearing spaghetti in my course. And then of course he spoke, which eliminated some of the guesswork." She smiled, and winked again. "Mollie, your friend needs dry clothes. Would you like me to drop you somewhere?"

"You're a princess, Maggie, yes, would you mind?"

"Not at all," Maggie said, but then John spoke up.

"Wait, I'm a mess. I'd ruin your seats."

"Not to worry, there's bin liners in the boot. We'll be fine."

As they exited the alley Mollie asked Sean to make it clear to Brendan he should stay far away from her. Sean said he'd see to it, and bundled Brendan into the Garda wagon that was collecting drunks. Maggie pulled a plastic bag from the trunk of her car, and spread it on the back seat of her sedan. John sat down--slid more like it--and tried to stay off the upholstery.

They were at Mollie's door in a few minutes. Both thanked Maggie profusely, then John followed Mollie up the two flights of stairs. At the top, Mollie unlocked her door, then led him to the bathroom and helped him undress. After turning on the shower, she dropped to her knees and stroked his cock to its fullest extent. She swirled her tongue around the tip, then plunged her mouth over it until she felt the head at the back of her throat. She'd spent some time at the greengrocer's finding a cucumber just the right size, and practiced until she could have it at the back of her throat without gagging. Sometimes she could even "swallow" and she hoped it felt as good to a cock as it did to her, feeling her throat massage the very tip, even as her tongue carried on suckling. She reached around and cupped his ass cheeks again, momentarily puzzled by the stickiness she encountered. Of course! The pasta sauce. While she thought she might like to eat off his ass, she wanted it clean first, and abruptly stopped.

"OK, that's yer lot. Into the shower. I'll be right there to help ye."

He turned, took a step, then turned back again to watch. Crossing her arms and grasping the hem, she deftly pulled the sweater over her head. She felt a thrill as she watched him watch her, melted a little inside that he was so admiring of the

way having her arms over her head accentuated the shape and fullness of her tits. He didn't say a word, but his expression--and the near vertical angle of his cock when she dropped her jumper to the floor--spoke volumes. She reached between and below her breasts and suddenly her tits were free and proud and she wanted him to touch them. Quickly shedding her knickers she pushed him backward toward the shower, lifting his leg just in time to keep him from stumbling over the lip.

The warm water sluiced over them and she squeezed shower gel into her hands, offering it to him as well. She started in his chest hair, sliding her hands down to his waist, then around to his backside. She rubbed and scrubbed and kneaded his buttocks, apologetic when she found the scrape the wall had given him, sliding a slippery finger up his crack and into his ass. She was rewarded by a sharp intake of breath and his own hands, roaming freely up and down her back, clenched her own ass cheeks and kneaded, gently, as though they were bread dough. His thumb prodded her rosebud while his fingers sought her slit, but he was too tall. Or she was too short. Either way, it wasn't working so she reluctantly brought his hands back to her tits and finished washing his ass. When all was clean and rinsed she turned off the water and stepped out. It was then she realized she'd brought no towels.

"Wait right there," she whispered, "I'll be right back." And with that she was out the door. She felt quite bold and brazen venturing out where anyone opening their door could see her engorged nipples, although that might have been from cool air on her wet skin. Grabbing a couple of towels from the chest she dashed back to the shower. John was standing there, dripping, patient, his little soldier shrunk.

"Here," she said, "let me warm that up for you." She knelt on the mat and took his cock and balls into her mouth, but the cock started growing almost instantly; so within a moment or two she had just his cock, now rigid and thick, and she enjoyed the wiggle that ran through it as he dried his upper body and hair.

"Let's go to bed," she said, her voice as thick as his cock...

Her room, across the common hallway from the shower, was small but neat. Mollie turned the bin liner John had sat on in Maggie's police car inside out, and dumped his clothes into it. She tossed her underthings in a small basket, and then carefully hung her skirt and jumper in the wardrobe. She turned and found John stretched out on the turned-down bed. She noted with approval that he'd carefully moved the stuffed animals to the threadbare easy chair rather than just tossing them in a heap. He held out his hands and she sank into his arms. They cuddled for a while, he stroking her back and she tracing the unusual scar on his

neck. She felt his fingers on her skin, gentle, asking nothing, offering much, and somehow that seemed more erotic than anything anyone had ever done to her.

This is how it ought to be, Mollie thought, I could love this man. She kissed his forehead, his closed eyes, his cheeks and, finally, his lips. He kissed her back, softly, almost playfully, but when she slipped her tongue between his lips, she couldn't find his! She probed deeper, and there it was, curled up, avoiding hers, it seemed. She tapped it, tried to hook it and suddenly their tongues were wrestling like Olympic athletes. But that only lasted a moment and they began a teasing pursuit, each hiding until caught, changing roles, hunter and quarry, fox and hound, as their breathing deepened. Mollie shifted slightly to one side, no longer resting her weight upon him, freeing her left hand. As she twirled the hairs on his chest, his fingers moved a little lower and began caressing her bum. Like evenly matched runners, each reached the finish line at the same time. John slid a fingertip into her slick slit as she brought the flower of his manhood to full vigor.

"Mollie!" he hissed, "Your scarf!"

"What?" her voice was dreamy, not really hearing.

"Your green scarf. It must still be in the alley."

"Don't worry about it now, you can buy me another."

"But--"

"Shhhh, not now." She silenced him with a kiss and went back to stroking his cock. She shifted again so he could get deeper into her pleasure zone, but it just wasn't working.

"Johnnie, me love," she said, breaking their kiss.

"Hmmm?"

"Get up for a moment, there's a dear." He stood. She arranged herself, flat on her back, legs parted. "Sure, an' if I'd known all those months ago I'd be havin' such a fine bedmate, I'd 'ave got a bigger bed. There now, come on back." She reached up with both hands, as he had done. But instead of pulling him down on top of her, she guided his hands to her pussy. "There. Unfinished business."

Mollie sighed as his fingers gently stroked her puckering outer lips, and hissed with an indrawn breath as he dipped into her waiting need for honey, honey he

spread on those outer lips in a circular motion, then a figure 8, never touching her clit. Her clit yearned, no, ached for his touch. He kept up a steady rhythm until she began to anticipate where his fingers would go next, then each time he'd change. Sometimes he'd slide a curled finger inside and rub, then straighten it and hump her with his hand.

"Please," she moaned, "please."

As though that was the signal he'd been waiting for, John plunged his mouth down over her pussy and with gentle suction held it between his lips as his tongue explored her inner folds. Mollie's hips bucked, making his tongue lose contact, but only for a moment, and then he rode her, down and up and down, flicking and licking and sucking, sliding two fingers in and out as she raised and lowered her hips as needed to accentuate her pleasure. At last she cried out, ground her cunt in his face, shuddered a few times, and lay still.

"Oh. My. God," she said, and suddenly began to laugh. And laugh. And laugh some more, laughing until tears rolled down her cheeks, laughing until a neighbor pounded on the wall, and then, as suddenly as she'd started, she stopped.

"Ah, Johnnie me love, that was delightful. Say you'll stay with me forever."

"Mollie, I can't. I've got classes to attend, essays to write. You've not known me for 24 hours and you're talking forever?"

"Well, I know forever's a long time. What about right now? Will you stay with me for right now?"

"I've no plans for the moment, except pleasuring a beautiful creature with dancing eyes and a body that would tempt a-- anyone."

"You say such fine things, are you sure you've never kissed the Blarney Stone?"

"Blarney Stone?" He struck his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Yipes, what day is it? We're supposed to go to Blarney Castle Saturday. I've always wanted to see it. And maybe kiss the Stone. Maybe you noticed I'm pretty shy around women?"

"You? Shy?"

"Me. Shy. You picked me out of the crowd, not the other way 'round. If you hadn't, I'd have gone back to Buncrana. And maybe had an interesting night with

the two German girls who wanted me to sleep in their room. Or maybe not. I pulled a real boneheaded stunt before I left Swansea--I got a hundred quid on my credit card, then put it in my current account. And of course I went off and left my checkbook in my room. So when I get here I go to Lloyd's Bank and they say they can't find any account in my name. So I says give me an advance on my card. They try to run it and say I've reached my limit. No way that happened, but you might as well argue with a stone as a banker. Like the Brits say, I'm skint."

"Well, in spite of what Brendan thinks, I'm not a whore and even if I was I doubt I'd charge you for a fuck after you were so nice. Some men have made me come, but nobody ever made me hysterical. Come here and forget money for a while. And by the way, it's Thursday, well, Friday now." She'd been stroking his cock and began licking in earnest. "You do have condoms with you, no?"

"No. I went to a chemist but didn't see any."

"Silly, this is Ireland, where the Pope carries more weight than the Taoiseach. [3] Condoms are illegal here. Doesn't mean people don't use them, just that they have to be brought in from England or Wales. Or maybe in the pockets of Americans."

"Mollie-girl, I have no pockets at the moment. Those German girls made sure I saw them buying condoms on the ferry, but like I said, I'm broke. I even had to do a little busking to get the 5 quid it cost to get in to the club tonight."

"I know. I was there, an' I was there in the pub today, yesterday. Ye could make a fine living, just singin' an' playin' yer guitar."

"But..."

"None o' that now. Shut yer gob an' love me."

With that, she pulled his cock until he stood up, then with a hand on each of his shoulders she pushed him down on the bed. As though she was mounting a horse, in one swift, fluid motion, she was astride him and impaling herself upon his spear.

"Ohhhhhhhhh..." someone said, but Mollie wasn't sure who. She flexed her knees and began, as slowly as she could manage, to slide up the slick shaft until she was poised a millimeter or so above, only to plunge down once more, clenching her muscles and gripping him for all she was worth. As her excitement increased she would sometimes rise so high his cock would flop out, resuming a more

normal angle to his belly. Time after time she aimed it at her pussy and let her hungry lips devour it.

"Mollie," he gasped, "that's so good, so fucking good I can't take much more. Better pull it out before I come."

"One more, Johnnie me luvver, one more," she sighed, and ground their hips together. A moment later she raised her bum and paused, panting.

"Come here," he said, "let me finish you off." His hands lightly gripped her hips and guided her until her knees were either side of his head. Then he pulled her down and she felt his tongue beginning long, broad, slow strokes on her gaping pussy, punctuated at irregular intervals by stabs as deep as possible, his tongue as stiff, for a few moments at least, as his cock. His cock that stood, patiently, before her eyes, his cock that was so near spurting its whitish cream only a few moments ago. She took it between her fingers and once again began circumnavigating the head with her tongue. She bent it forward so she could lick the underside of the tip, flicking her tongue now and then into the slit. To his credit, Johnnie didn't seem distracted by this; he carried on doing those most incredible things to her pussy. Mollie thought for a moment about turning around, so she could get a better angle but right then his stiff tongue neared her most sensitive place and she decided no matter what, she'd probably always have more opportunities to give blowjobs, but would she ever encounter such a talented tongue again?

So she took him in her mouth again and tried to time her sucking and licking with what he was doing to her, loving the taste of her pussy and the fine aroma of perspiration that surrounded them. She began stroking his cock with both hands, keeping just the head in her mouth and felt herself nearing another climax. He clutched her hips and held her pussy to his mouth, his nose pressing gently at her ass. She felt his balls draw up tight as she pressed the fingertips of her free hand on the ridge between his balls and ass, but too late, and was rewarded with the first simultaneous oral orgasm she'd ever experienced.

* * *

A pearlescent light crept into the room and the sleeping lovers' skin seemed to glow. Mollie opened her eyes and felt a smile upon her lips. "Johnnie me lad," she whispered, struggling with the sudden catch in her throat, "there'll never be another like you, never. I know ye'll be leavin' me an' I won't try to stop ye, but it's hard, so powerful hard." She kissed his forehead and unwound his arm from her neck. He stirred, opened an eye and started to speak, but she hushed him.

"There now, back to sleep if ye can. It's a soft day outside, one for snugglin' and such, but not just yet. You stay there; I've some errands to run." She got up and tried to work the kink out of her neck, but aside from that she felt better than she had for months, at the very least. She dressed, made a quick trip across the hall, then picked up the bag of Johnnie's clothes and went out.

The staff at the drycleaner's wasn't thrilled to see the mess on his clothes, but they couldn't deny the "same day service" sign in the front window. The shoe repairman saw no problem with her request for a clean and polish, especially as only one shoe needed serious cleaning. Mollie bought a couple of scones and, on a whim, two jam doughnuts, then sat down in the shelter to wait for the bus. She was shaking droplets of fog from her curls when an older woman came in and sat on the bench, not at the end, but right next to Mollie.

"Doncher just love what this weather does for the skin?" she said, perhaps to Mollie and perhaps to nobody in particular, for she was looking away from Mollie as she spoke, and they were the only two in the shelter. Mollie, preoccupied, made no reply. "Yes" the other woman answered herself, "I was just sayin' to Rose, she's my daughter don't ye know, I says we was needin' some more damp days because me skin was gettin' so dry. And she says to me, Mum use some lotion or..."

Mollie's bus pulled up and she climbed aboard, leaving the woman and her conversation behind. When she got to her building she climbed the stairs and found John, a blanket draped 'round his shoulders, pen in hand, sitting at her desk. He looked up, frowning at first, then brightened when he saw her. "Good morning, Mollie. Top o' th' mornin' to ya. Sorry," he added, "I always wanted to say that. You might be surprised to see how much Irish culture has permeated America."

"And top o' the' mornin' yerself she said," leaning down to kiss him. "What are you writing?"

"A poem, or at least part of one. I'm stuck for an ending."

"May I see it?"

"Of course," he said, handing her the sheet of paper. "I was thinking about what you said before you left. Where I cone from fog is a pretty rare thing, and I love it. So I wanted to capture the feeling, but like I said, I'm stuck for an ending."

She read:

"In Ireland they'd call this a 'soft' day,

"When grass clings to mist, like a babe at the breast;

"When the world's wrapped in cotton,

"The sun's a pale coin

"And the foghorn, ever mournful

"Sounds sadder, somehow...."

"Well, I like it," she said. "We have many soft days an' I suppose we' just take them in stride. I don't see them as happy or sad. Here now, what about a bit of a fire?"

"I tried to light it, but it wouldn't catch. Must have done something wrong, eh?"

"Use the paper to start the wood, then the wood starts the coal. Once the coal is burning it looks after itself."

"Your fireplace is so small, I don't see how it can heat the room," he said, tapping the end of the pen between his teeth.

"Watch and learn, me boy, watch and learn." She knelt before the fireplace and it wasn't a quarter of an hour before the small pile of coal was putting out an astonishing amount of heat. Having made no further progress, John laid the pen aside, stood up and folded the blanket.

"Mollie?"

"Yes darling man?"

"Where are my clothes? I had to go to the loo just as you see me now." He was naked.

"Oh, they're being seen to, don't worry. They were a frightful mess an' no mistake. I'll be picking them up in an hour or so, and then we can go for a bit of a drive. Would ye like that?"

"Sure, that would be nice. Maybe then I can think of an ending for this poem--I really like the first part but I hate it when the next verse isn't to be found for love or money."

"Well, keep thinking. Are ye hungry?"

"Yes. Not starving, but I could eat something."

"Aside from me?" she teased.

"That's another kind of hunger. Now I ask you, is it fair for you to be fully dressed, while I'm in my birthday suit?"

"It truly fits you well," she said, "not a thread out of place. Now, do ye fancy scone or a jam doughnut?"

They settled on scones, and Mollie brought a tub of Flora from the kitchen. They devoured every last crumb, and licked each other's fingers clean. John gave a little shudder when she offered him a doughnut, saying maybe later. She put a small shovel load of coal on the fire, then took off her outer clothes and lay down next to him on the narrow bed. She kissed him gently, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"Mollie?" he said, as her hand wandered over his belly.

"Hmmm?"

"Could we just cuddle for a while? You're a fantastic lover, but I'm kinda sleepy. I want to be ready for you later, that is if you still want me to stay."

"Johnnie, I've been waitin' me whole life for someone like you to come along. Want you to stay? I never want ye to leave. Never." His regular breathing made her doubt he'd heard.

When she was sure he was asleep, she put her jeans and sweatshirt back on and went to the shops for his clothing. Then she went to Fiona's and borrowed her Mini. Not fifteen minutes later she was gently shaking Johnnie awake.

"Come on now, clean clothes and a drive in the fog." He yawned, rubbed his eyes and stood up. She couldn't resist wrapping her lips around his erection.

"If that's what happens when ye sleep, ye should nap every hour."

"Turn loose of me, you wanton woman." He winked, and it sent a shiver down her spine. "I could beat a racehorse, and not running."

She gave his insignificant ass a playful slap as he fairly ran for the loo, pausing only long enough to put on his newly-cleaned underwear.

* * *

"I sure hope you know where you're going, 'cause I can't see a thing."

"Shhh, I was raised around here. T'would take more than fog to make me lose me way." She was a good driver, and she knew it. To show him her competence seemed an important thing: she wanted him to delight as much in her varied talents as she did in his. She pulled the car to a stop near a sign showing a car much like this one tumbling over the embankment. He wasn't sure what lay below until he wound down the window and heard the soft splashing of small waves, the muted clang of a harbor buoy and perhaps a second, farther away, before he closed the window against the clammy chill. Both fell silent and the haunting strains of a song on the radio surrounded them. [4]

Mollie looked at John and was astonished to see tears in his eyes. She reached for him and their hands clasped. He brought hers to his lips.

"Mollie," he said, "I don't think I've ever heard more beautiful music in a more beautiful place with a more beautiful woman in all my life. If I could turn my back on all my promises and my plans, just stay here with you, I would. I surely would. But I can't. I sound like some dumb cowboy in a Western movie, but there's things I gotta do. And right now, it's breaking my heart."

"Johnnie, I love ye, right here, right now. Does that count for nothing?"

"Mollie, you don't even know me. I've done things I'm not proud of. Too many things."

"Have ye killed anyone?"

"God, no!"

"Well, then, ye're not so evil then, are ye?"

"But you don't know me. Okay, I may not be evil but I'm far from perfect, and it scares me to think you could know you love me in so short a time. It scares me to think I might love you after such a short time. You scare me. You threaten everything I thought was finally settled in my life. I've made so many wrong decisions I don't know what's right anymore."

"Would it be so hard to stay here with me?"

"No. Yes. I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"But I truly have nothing to show for my life, in any material sense. I'd have no job. No degree. Hell, I couldn't even afford to rent your room."

"You wouldn't have to. It doesn't cost any more for two than one, and soon we could get a proper flat. With a proper, grand bed. You may not get rich playin' and singin' but you wouldn't starve. And you can write. Did ye know artists and musicians pay no income taxes here? Stay with me, Johnnie, and we'll make a life."

"Mollie, you don't know how tempting that is, but I can't. I just can't."

"Well then, we best be getting back."

Without waiting for a reply, she started the engine and headed back to Cork. "Kinsale's a lovely town. Ye ought to see it when the sun's shining." John didn't know what to say, but noted that she said 'you', not 'we'. As darkness fell, the fog finally lifted and the land spread out on all sides, fields so green they still held color in the light of a rising full moon.

"Mollie, I...."/p>

"What, Johnnie?"

"Well, it's like you said before, about waiting all your life for someone. I've been waiting, too. For too long, twenty years, twenty years, I waited, thinking the first girl I ever loved would come back to me. I know now it was stupid, but it seemed right at the time. Twenty years, holding back, not allowing myself to get too close, because what if she came back and I was involved, or even married? Didn't I owe her the chance to change her mind? Well, fuck no I didn't! But I was sure stupid enough to think so. And I tried to remain true to her memory, that perfect girl who walked away, and gave our baby to strangers. I've sabotaged every relationship since, so I wouldn't be committed, because I just couldn't believe she wasn't coming back, didn't still love me. Until I saw her a few months ago, first time in 20 years. And it took a while to sink in, but I found I didn't even like her. I felt like I'd been cheated out of so many years, missed chances for love with so many women, so many might-have-beens. I wasn't a saint, no. I screwed around, met some nice women, even a couple who might have gone the distance,

but I always had an eye on the door, listened for that one knock that would validate my fidelity. I heard she was married, but that made no difference; I knew she'd see the error of her ways, knew she'd realize nobody could love her the way I did."

"Johnnie,"

"But no more. I'm here tonight because I finally decided to let go of the past and embrace the future, decided to make something of my life, finish my education and maybe even settle down. I've only ever wanted one woman, didn't need to be the guy with a little black book, trying to figure out which hot prospect to call. Sometimes I feel like I'm in the presence of one of those women, one who can and will go the distance. If I didn't think you were one, I'd never have left the club with you. I feel like maybe I could be the one for you, but I'm scared, Mollie, scared. I'll be thirty-eight this month, thirty-eight. I know I don't look it but it's true. Half my life is behind me. Half my life."

"Then let's make the second half one to be proud of. Stay with me, now and always."

"Mollie, I--"

"Shhh, we're home. Come inside; let's talk."

Clearing skies meant a cold night, and the coals in the small fireplace had long since burned out. Mollie busied herself rekindling the fire, while John sat in the easy chair, watching her. She was such a fine woman, he thought, and not just because she had a terrific body and would take a back seat to nobody when it came to making love. As the edges of the coal began to glow, she sat on the arm of the chair, put her left hand on the back of his head, while her right cupped his cheek. She looked deeply into his eyes and said, "Johnnie, I could never stand in the way of your promises, especially to yourself, and I'd never forgive myself if I did, for it's likely you'd resent me and that would lead to dislike and maybe even hate. I'd rather have you leave here, maybe forever, but loving me in your way, than chance ruining the second half of your life."

"Mollie, do you have any idea how beautiful you are? Not on the outside, for you're a beauty and no mistake, but I'm awed to be in the presence of such a generous soul. When I saw you in the pub while I was singing, I thought to myself maybe it's a good thing to sleep with every woman who presents herself, for I surely wanted you in that moment, but you've turned out to be so much more. On the ferry coming over I figured those two German girls were going to screw me silly and that would be the end of it. Sex without emotion is something

I've avoided for so long, but sometimes I just get horny--do you have that word here? I'm so glad to have met you, so glad to have shared these last what, 36 hours?"

"Johnnie," she said, sliding off the chair arm into his lap.

"Yes?"

"Shut up." She sighed, then kissed him. He kissed her back, and her front, and all the places in between, for the fire burned as hot as their passion and sorrow fed their need. Clothing became less and less practical. The morning's stale doughnuts gave up their raspberry jam as he squeezed first one, then the other one, dribbling its contents, circling each breast with spirals leading to the nipple, and from her navel to her pussy. Then, slowly, maddeningly, he began to lick it off.

Lovers had sucked her nipples before, even pulled them back and forth across their teeth, but nobody had ever tongued her entire breast, covering every square millimeter, right down to the little seam where breast meets ribcage. And instead of jumping from there to her clit, his flat tongue painted her ribs, her belly, until she was squirming with anticipation. At long last he scooped the jam out of her belly button with his tongue and continued assaulting it, now and then looking up and catching her eye.

Still looking, he let his tongue trail down to her mound, and he suckled greedily, removing all traces of jam, then continued in earnest, forcing her lower lips apart and sinking his tongue as deeply as possible. She felt him bring his fingers into play, stroking, pinching, caressing, and felt herself beginning a climb to dizzying heights.

"Johnnie?" he paused and looked once more into her eyes.

"I have a question."

"Now?" he croaked, giving her clit a little flick with his tongue.

"No, don't stop, but I wanted to ask who taught you, and I'm in danger of forgetting who I am. In a little while, in case it slips my mind, please tell me."

"Sure, if I remember." Once more, gently at first, he began loving her pussy, and she started the ascent again. He'd draw her upward, then let her retreat, but each new start was from a point higher than the last. Like a mountaineer on a gentle slope, he circled her clit, first with his tongue and then his fingers, with a rub or

the merest of touches until the flock of birds nesting in her belly took wing and her whole world consisted of the tip of her clit where it met the tip of his tongue. Reaching the summit, she began the headlong descent. With a wordless cry, she clenched his head between her thighs as a gentle fart escaped. She hoped he wouldn't notice but knew it would not matter.

The warm silence was broken by the sound of a pile of coals collapsing. The room brightened momentarily and Mollie pulled John by his shoulders until their mouths could find each other, feeling more at peace than she had in years.

When she awakened, she was alone in her bed. In the soft shaft of moonlight falling through the window she could see him, slumped in the chair, fully dressed.

"Jonnie," she murmured, but he did not stir. Wrapping a blanket around her shoulders, she stepped cautiously around him and switched on the desk lamp. "Johnnie," she breathed in his ear. A slow smile crossed his face as he reached up and caressed her cheek.

"I didn't want to disturb you, but I have to go. I couldn't just leave without kissing you goodbye."

"It's come to that, has it? You were going to tell me the story of your life, or at least the part about who taught you to eat pussy," she chuckled.

"The short answer is, you did. You taught me to make love to you. Your responses to what I was doing told me what to do next, so it was fairly simple to follow where you led. Is that enough of an answer, or must I make you a chart of my progress, from first fumbings to relative skill?"

"No, I guess that says it all." She would miss the twinkle in his eye when he sported with her like this. "One last time: must you leave? Where will you go at this wee hour?"

"Yes, I must. I haven't a clue how to find Buncrana, but if I wait at the University, the coach for Blarney is leaving around half-eight, and we go back to Swansea Sunday evening. Can you come with us to Blarney Castle?"

"No, sweetness, I must work at the Lion later today. If you know where Buncrana is, I can drive you--I've still got the Mini parked outside."

"Seems like it's on the south-east side of the University. I don't recall the street, but there's a shop right on the corner, a shop with a Post Office Counter I think."

"Good enough. Let me get dressed."

They found the shop and they found the street. Having found the street, they found Buncrana. The house was dark, not surprising for 2 a.m., not even early on a Saturday morning, and Mollie was all for taking John back to her place until the morning, but standing on the walk he could hear the thump of loud music, and he leaned back into the tiny car.

"I doubt anyone could sleep in that racket, and since I have to leave you, I want to remember you just the way you are right now. Please step out of the car for a moment."

"So this is goodbye, then?" She was fighting tears and noticed the corners of his eyes sparkled in the last rays of moonlight.

"Mollie, I wouldn't trade meeting and loving you for all the money in the world. I swear by all that's holy I will never, never forget you. But I do have one question: when first we met, it was 'me' this and no trailing 'g's and now you're speaking the Queen's English, except of course Ireland has no Queen. What's the story?"

"Well, ye caught me, right enough. Like I said, I was raised not far from here but me folks wanted me to speak proppa, you know, so they made me learn the right and the wrong of it. Folks in the pub would be put off by a barmaid that spoke better than them, but I realized I didn't have to keep that up to keep you up, so to speak. It's easier to speak the way I was educated."

"There's my girl. I want to remember as you are right this minute, eyes flashing, bright, witty and one hell of a woman. Even when I'm old and gray, no matter how many or few women come after you, you'll be there, shining in the moonlight. Go quickly now, I don't want you to see me crying."

"Johnnie, wait," she started, but he shushed her with a gentle kiss and steered her back to the car. He helped her in, and closed the door. She started the engine and made a U-turn, but paused, watching him walk slowly, shoulders hunched, body trembling, toward the front door. She motored slowly down the street, noting the way the moon bathed the city, glad to be alone in the dark. He was right, she thought, it's too precious a memory for daylight.

* * *

The Sunday evening ferry for Swansea was loading. Mollie stood, watching, as a familiar figure in denim wearing a large backpack walked aboard. On either side were a blonde and a brunette, each holding an arm possessively. Just as he passed into the interior of the boat he turned, seeming to feel her eyes on him, and it may have only been a trick of westering sun, but for a moment she was certain he winked.

* * *

Seven months later

Mollie sat in Fiona's Mini, parked on the quay at Kinsale, listening to gulls and harbor buoys in the gloom. At regular intervals, the foghorn at the nearby lighthouse moaned. She opened the first of two manila envelopes that arrived a couple of days earlier, bearing Swansea postmarks, and pulled out two sheets of paper and one Compact Disc. She set the discs aside and unfolded the crisp sheets. The first was a letter.

My Dear Mollie,

Well, my course is over and I've earned a diploma in English Lit. Now it's back to the States to finish my degree, but after that I'm not sure what I'll do. Look for work, I guess. Blarney Castle was amazing: you hang by your knees about 60 feet above the ground to kiss the stone. There's a guy there to keep you from falling. I inquired after his health, about his job, just small talk. He took a drink from a skin, and then poured water over the Stone. Said it was some kind of ritual. I think you were right; he was rinsing it, for there was a strong odor of urine. But I survived. Now I've kissed the stone and should be able to charm the pants off any girl I want. Problem is, I can't stop thinking about you.

When you dropped me at Buncrana I found the front door locked, just as well for that allowed me to sit on the steps and finish crying. Then I pounded on the door, but nobody came--guess the music was too loud. So I ducked through the bushes by the door and found a bit of a ledge. I crossed that to get to the back door. Everyone was in the kitchen and I gave them all quite a fright when I opened the door, but not as much fright as I got. There was a dead pheasant, hanging upside down on the door, and when I swung it open the wings flapped and for a moment I thought it was attacking me!

The German girls had my sleeping bag rolled out in their room, but I claimed fatigue and crawled in alone. They didn't go on the Blarney trip--by the way, you were right about Kinsale. If I had my bearings right, If I'd stepped out of the car when I was there with you, I would have fallen about ten feet into the harbor.

Then again, there may have been more than one sign suggesting an errant car could easily drive over the edge.

That night the German girls were after me in earnest, but I moved my sleeping bag to another room and have slept alone since I left your side. It seems so strange--the crossing from Swansea takes eight hours but when we came it was at least ten, as we fought our way against a fierce storm. It was as though Ireland was trying to keep us away. Then, coming back to Swansea the sea was like glass and I leaned on the aft rail, watching as the waning moon laid a path for the ferry to glide upon, speeding us away until at last it vanished and I knew a part of me would be ever alone without you.

The bathroom at Buncrana was so poorly lit I didn't dare shave. So when we docked at Swansea, the Immigration folks were searching me, even made me unroll my sleeping bag. I must have looked pretty scruffy. Guess they thought I was IRA or something, until I offered my passport and police book. Once they found out I was American and allowed to be in the UK they were all smiles. That is, until I pointed out that if I was IRA, I'd probably be one of the guys in suits walking past, unchallenged: Urban Camouflage, I told them, but they didn't seem to want to hear that.

Mollie, sweet Mollie, I should have come back to Ireland at Easter break but the course work here is different from the US, and it took much longer to finish my essays than I expected. I moved off-campus to the Student Village and there was a girl in my house, Delyth, who was most attractive. She reminded me of you, although she was taller and her hair was a lighter red. She didn't have your wit, though. At first I thought she wanted me, then I realized she was just friendly. We had some laughs but I kept my fly zipped when I wasn't alone.

Now I'm going back to the States and it's suddenly very clear to me just how far apart we'll be. I despair of ever coming back. Don't wait for me, my sweet, for it could be a very long time and you deserve to find happiness now. I'll never forget a moonlit princess with dancing eyes, wreathed by a crown of stars.

Love always,

Johnnie

PS: On the enclosed CD you'll find a song it will be impossible to hear again without thinking of you. Enya's Watermark has "On your shore," the song that played on the radio when we sat in the fog. That was a magical time for me. I hope you'll remember me when you play it.

PPS: I finished the poem that night we parted. What was missing was to think as if it were you writing it. Then it all fell into place. Hope you like it:

"In Ireland, we'd call this a 'soft' day,

"When grass clings to mist like a babe at the breast;

"When the world's wrapped in cotton,

"The sun's a pale coin,

"And the foghorn, ever mournful,

"Sounds sadder, somehow.

"We could just stay in,

"Snuggle by the fire,

"Make plans for all the days to come--

"If there was coal for the grate;

"If you were still here."

The second envelope held a light paper-wrapped package. Carefully opening it, Mollie found a scarf of the finest silk, in a shade of green closely matching her eyes. It slipped through her fingers like water, eluding her grasp, yet left her tingling with the memory of a touch.

~ The End ~

* * *

THE LION'S DEN, by Shara Lanel

So what does it take for me to revert to a gauche sixteen-year-old once again? Just seeing Alex McCoy, biceps flexing, sweat rolling down his shirtless chest, jeans caressing muscular thighs. Yup, sends me right back to high school, and right back to my coming-home funk. Damn.

I hadn't wanted to come home at all, even for Thanksgiving. I'd rather order my turkey from a store on Third Avenue, thank you, and invite some friends over for wine and cheese late in the evening. But Mom had compelled me, blackmailed me really. She'd threatened to publish pictures of me naked in the bathtub on the Internet. Of course, I was three at the time of the photos, and Mom could be arrested for child pornography. But the embarrassment factor alone gave me hives. Knowing Mom, she'd slip it into conversation when the church ladies came over for tea, and she'd feel compelled to pull out the photos and pass them out for the chatty hens to peruse. From there, the gossip mill would take over, and I'd be done for in the eyes of the twenty-somethings of Flamington, Virginia, the best town south of the Mason-Dixon line, population 10,015.

So just don't go home, you say, then I'd never know, right? Wrong. I'd get emails from Denise at the high school alumni association and from Bob at the gas station and from Georgina at the alterations shop. I'd get cards, letters, and phone calls, too. There'd be no escaping, I'm telling you.

However, now I'm thinking all of that would be better than standing here dumbfounded, mouth open, staring at Alex McCoy's glorious pecs. My God, he lifted weights, didn't he?

"Suzy?"

Yup, that's me. It occurred to me that I should close my mouth and wipe away the drool.

"Suzy?"

"Uh huh." Yeah, five years in New York had really honed my conversational skills. Can you tell I graduated top of my class from NYU? Didn't think so.

A slow grin spread across his face, revealing his dimples and emphasizing the laugh lines around his eyes. He could be a pin-up boy, maybe Mr. July, centerfold baby.

Why was I here? Oh yeah, Mom had sent me for a hammer. Hammer, hardware store. My flummoxed brain finally grasped it. That woman had set me up! My own mother--not to be trusted ever again in this lifetime.

Why was a man topless in the hardware store? I'm sure you're wondering. Well, we were actually out back on the loading dock. I'd hallooed through the store, found no one, so I'd followed the breeze through the open stockroom door until I'd found this exceptional specimen of manhood loading plywood into the back of a pickup truck.

Instead of futilely repeating my name once again, he bent over and lobbed a board into the truck bed. I watched his shoulder muscles flex and strain. His wavy gold hair glistened where it lay against his neck. His hazel eyes with long sumptuous lashes no longer gazed at me, but that pleasure had been replaced by a tantalizing view of his tight butt. I could melt right there on the chilly concrete.

Once the wood was all loaded, he waved to the truck driver, who looked like Alice Fenway from what I could see, and turned back to me. I gripped the hammer in my hand tightly.

"Suzy, did you need something, or did you come with murder on your mind?" He gestured to the tool in my hand.

"Um." Come on brain, function. Now! "Um, Mom said she needed a hammer."

"Ah." He grabbed his flannel shirt from the prongs of a forklift and shrugged into it.

Sigh. There went my view.

"Follow me then." He strode through the stockroom and I quickly followed.

He was walking too fast for me to attack him and throw him bodily onto a bail of insulation for a quick fuck. Bummer. I willed him to turn around and ravish me. Take me, I'm yours, or I will be if you ask me. Ask me, dammit.

He stopped abruptly by the cash register and I nearly ran into him. The heat from that near-collision thrummed through my body. "I didn't know you were back in town. I thought you'd gone off to L.A. or something."

"New York actually, and it's Thanksgiving, you know."

He grabbed the hammer from my jelly fingers and scanned the bar code into the computer, scowling the whole time. "So they keep telling me. Isn't there a parade up there you could have gone to?"

"Macy's. Yeah, I went last year. Mom wanted me home this year."

He grunted.

"Are you against Thanksgiving in general or do you dislike turkey?" I asked.

"All of it."

That's when I remembered that his parents had split up over Thanksgiving dinner in 1989. So I'd put my foot in my mouth again. Nothing new there. "I'm sorry, Alex. I forgot about your parents."

"That has nothing to do with it," he barked, but I knew it had a lot to do with it. "Ten ninety-five."

"For a hammer?" Maybe that was a good price, but I'd had little call to buy hammers in my life.

"For this hammer."

I handed him the twenty Mom had pushed on me this morning. I'd offered to buy it myself. I mean, I was super chic city woman now. I had credit cards, but Mom had said she didn't know if the hardware store took credit and it was her hammer after all. I think she'd been overwhelmed with guilt for sending me into the lion's den, but please note, that didn't stop her from doing it.

"So...not to make a sore spot worse, but where are you spending Thanksgiving?"

He handed me my change. "Right here."

"Here as in the hardware store?"

"My apartment's upstairs."

"Oh." Killing Mom as soon as I get home. "Is someone coming over?"

"No." He paused and grinned. "Actually, Marie Callender."

It took me a minute. "You're having a microwave Thanksgiving dinner? No way, bub!" And before I could put my mouth on pause, I said, "You're coming over to Mom's for turkey. We eat at two, but you can get there anytime. There'll be plenty of food."

He cocked his head, his eyes got intense, and that's when all the memories came flooding back. I'd had a crush on him forever, but he'd finally noticed me at my high school graduation. His little sister was in my class, so he'd come home from Northwestern where he was studying something important for the event.

What a summer it had been, for me at least. He'd stayed at his dad's condo, and whenever his dad had disappeared on a business trip, he'd invited me over. We quickly went from heavy petting to major exploration to going all the way. Round the bases, hit a home run. He took my virginity, which had hurt like hell, but he'd also taken my heart. I hadn't told him, of course. Guys didn't want to hear the mushy stuff or have a girl sob on their shoulders. Then summer had ended. I'd gone off to NYU, and stayed in New York to live. Hadn't seen him since. Until today.

"I don't know about Thanksgiving," he said slowly, drawing me back to the present.

"Why aren't you going to your mom's or your sister's?" I knew his sis was married and living in Richmond now. His mom still lived in Flamington, as far as I knew.

"Mom's going on a cruise."

"You're kidding! That's great for her."

"And Alicia's going to her in-laws in Texas."

"Oh. Lonely." I looked around the store. Even the store felt lonely. It had to be almost closing time. I glanced through the picture windows to the artificially lit empty street beyond. Certainly wasn't New York, the city that never sleeps.

"Do you want to come up for a drink?" Alex asked. Then he kind of looked like he regretted it. Too late, buster. I wouldn't let him back out now.

"Sure."

"Does your mom need the hammer right away?"

"No. In fact, I'm not convinced she needs the hammer at all. I'm thinking she probably already has a hammer."

He smiled at me. "You could be right. Your mom did always like me."

"One of the rare things we agreed on, I guess." Oops, probably not good strategy, to wear my heart on my sleeve.

"Let me close up everything. I can't believe what a warm November it's been."

"Yeah, like Indian summer never left. We've already had snow flurries in New York."

I watched him flip the CLOSED sign, lower the blinds, yank down the loading dock doors, and shut the stock room door. Then he led me up a small iron stairway to his apartment.

You know what was on my mind? Sex. Yup, right off the bat. Sex. I hadn't had any in a while. The memories of Alex and me at the drive-in, at his dad's condo, in the field behind the fire station, those were some of the yummiest memories I had, and they had my libido in overdrive.

I think Alex might have the same type of mind as I do, or libido at least, because as soon as we stood in the middle of his living room, he turned to me, grabbed my shoulders, and pulled me into a kiss.

Oh my God, what a kiss! His lips were warm and smooth and unrelenting. Firm, hard, pressing. His tongue delved into the fray and pried my lips open. Then it was exploring my mouth. My hands gripped tufts of his hair as if they were the only things keeping me standing. Meanwhile, his hands gripping my ass were the actual items providing my stability, since my knees were spaghetti. My boobs, straining against my lace bra, pressed against his rock-solid chest. Too much fabric in the way. Need to remove it.

Alex read my mind and yanked my shirt from my waistband, pulling it up, helping free it from my arms, up to my neck. But any farther would mean separating our lips, and we just weren't ready for that yet. So he fought with my bra clasp instead, which was tricky because one of the prongs was bent and it took me longer to hook it than any of the others. However, Alex once again proved himself the master of women's clothing removal. My breasts sprang free and he fondled them with his palms and thumbs and fingers. He played with my nipples until I could no longer deal with him not being shirtless too.

Buttons were not my strong suit, but I somehow managed. He had just the right amount of chest hair, and finally I broke free of his lip lock, so I could run my tongue across his flat nipples. He moaned. I love it when a man moans. It makes my panties wet, and they were wet, dripping in fact.

So, do you think I'm a hussy? I'm sure me jumping a man's bones the first time I see him in almost a decade seems a little slutty. But honestly it had been a long, LONG time since I'd last had sex, and this man, this particular man, turned me into a raging hormone whenever I was near him. Not to mention I loved him. Still. After forever. Still loved him. Moms just suck when they know things about you that you won't even admit to yourself.

Where were we? Oh yeah, the pants. Off with the pants. Both pairs. Snaps, zippers, easy pickings.

I hadn't even glanced around his apartment. It was an efficiency, though, so the bed was easy to fall on. Didn't even have to walk through a door. It seemed to be a pullout couch that he just never put back. It was made up and covered with a soft cotton quilt. We struggled to get this out of the way without letting go of each other. Finally we were on the sheet, bodies entwined. His was hard, lean, muscular, rough in all the right places, and smooth right on the velvet head of his penis, which stroked against my stomach.

"Fuck me." Who said that? Certainly wasn't me.

"Condom." Well, he said that, so the other voice must have been mine.

"Do you have one?"

"Yeah, hold on." He reached over to his nightstand/end table. Inside the drawer he fumbled around for a package. Then he leaned back and opened it with his teeth. Efficient. I helped him roll the latex onto his shaft. He closed his eyes and wiggled under my hands. He liked that. I pressed and explored. Then I licked down his stomach and onto his thighs. Finally I sucked on his balls until he grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me on top of him.

I spread my legs on either side of his thighs and lifted up, positioning my vagina right over his hot dick. Then down I slid.

He was a tight fit, but a slick one. His eyes were closed again. His hands gripped my thighs. I let him impale me as slowly as possible, just to torture him. Once all the way to the base, I rocked a little. He opened his eyes and palmed my breasts. Then he leaned up and sucked a distended nipple into his mouth, rolling it

between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, nibbling it with his teeth. I'd never had an orgasm just from nipple-touching before, but I seriously believed it could be done.

"Fuck me." This time he said it. He'd had enough of the non-movement. Up and down. I squeezed his shaft, slicking it with my wet juices. Up and down. Slow at first, then gaining speed. Base to tip, almost out, then back down again.

"Faster." Alex used his hands to demonstrate.

I rode him. I hate horse analogies, but that's what it was like, me riding a stallion. Inside me an unbearable tension built. Each pleasurable thrust wound me tighter and tighter. He'd leaned back against the pillow, eyes closed, mouth open, but his hands groped my breasts, tweaked my nipples. Sharp, intense shots of goodness raced from my tits to my core. More wetness there. More pounding. And God...

"I'm coming!"

"I know."

And as my orgasm caused my muscles to contract all around him, he shot his come into the condom inside of me. I could feel the liquid warmth.

I collapsed to his chest without disconnecting our bodies. He stayed semi-hard inside me. I closed my eyes, listened to his heartbeat, and waited for my breathing to return to normal.

"Suzy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still want me to come over for Thanksgiving?"

"Hell, yes."

He kissed the top of my head, and I imagined him grinning at my answer.
"Good."

~ The End ~

FANTASY ON A BUS: Number One, by Shara Lanel

It was a brisk fall day when I climbed aboard the Z103 Party Bus--really a school bus painted and converted for the occasion--heading towards a sold out concert in DC. I won't say what band, since they might not like having a starring role in this story, but let's just say I was hot for the lead singer, had been hot for him since middle school, going on fifteen years now. So I'd been one of those obnoxious people sitting at work behind my 'wall' with the radio station number on redial, punching the button over and over until I finally got through. Whenever my boss had walked by, I'd feigned busyness, but the second he'd headed towards the break room I was back at it again.

Obviously I'd won the tickets and that's why I was getting on this crowded, noisy bus with a bunch of baby-face punks who looked far too young to even be familiar with this group. And that's also why I wore jeans that gripped and lifted my ass, spiky heels guaranteed to kill me on the steps at the stadium, and a bra-less white halter top. But it was a brisk fall day, so I also had a denim jacket tucked under my arm, since a brisk day was likely to turn into a freezing night. My nipples had risen to attention the moment I put the halter on, and they were still at attention now as I scanned the aisle, avoiding purses and toes, looking for a seat.

"This one's free," a luscious male voice spoke. A hand with tan fingers attached to an arm with yummy lean biceps gestured to the empty seat next to him. I followed the arm to where it became encased in the navy blue fabric of a cotton T-shirt. Then my eyes widened at the sight of a broad chest, flat stomach, and tight, faded Levis.

Look up, I told myself, knowing that I was being totally obnoxious by not looking at this youngster's face first. When I did look up, I found crystalline blue eyes that did not meet my own. Instead they stared happily at my perky breasts. Grin. A man after my own heart, and more importantly, a man with stubble from a five o'clock shadow and fine laugh lines framing the corners of his eyes. In other words, a man close to my own age, maybe even a bit older than me, but with the body of a twenty-year-old. Heaven.

"Thanks," I said, sliding into the seat and out of the way of the angry mob behind me. I positioned my backpack-style purse between my feet and turned to introduce myself to my seatmate. "I'm Dory."

"I'm Xavier."

"Xavier? Are you making that up?"

He looked taken aback. "No." He pulled out his driver's license. Xavier Elston, age thirty-five. Perfect.

"That is a totally sexy name." I know, sometimes I even surprise myself with the dumb things that come out of my mouth. You'd think I'd expect it by now.

He grinned. "Thank you."

The bus jerked into motion making the few fools still standing in the aisles or leaning over the seat backs lurch towards the back. After a few curses, everyone found seats.

Xavier glanced around. He was a tall, muscular man, making me feel dainty sitting next to him, which was an unusual feeling to say the least.

"A young crowd."

I scanned the many faces as well. "Yes. Glad you're here or I'd feel positively outnumbered."

He slapped his chest. "Ouch. Are you saying I'm not young?"

I shook my head, knowing he didn't give a damn. You could just tell he knew he was in his prime. Why else would he be here?

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I like the group."

"You're not gay, are you?" Like I said, the brain-to-mouth connection was often lacking.

"No. I like women, but..."

"What?"

"I like experimenting."

What did he mean by that exactly? I was fairly vanilla myself. Maybe I should try to find a different seat. I looked around again. Sold out concert, sold out bus. No empty seats.

I heard a soft chuckle near my ear so I turned back to Xavier.

"Can I call you X?"

"If you want."

I pulled my jacket from under my arm and patted it on my lap nervously, still wondering what he meant by liking to experiment. I liked to experiment...with new restaurants, like Thai rather than Chinese, or with new music, maybe Ska rather than Top 40.

But I really didn't think that was what he was talking about, since his statement came right after I'd asked him if he was gay. Maybe he'd misunderstood me or I'd misunderstood him and his wanting to experiment had nothing to do with sex or other men.

Two men...two sets of lips...four hands moving everywhere...

One arm stretched across the back of the seat. X was settling back for the long ride, making himself comfortable. I noticed that he too had brought a jacket, a leather one. It was tucked to the left of his thigh. Good spot to be. The warmth from his other thigh radiated into me though we weren't touching. The heat from his arm did the same. I wanted to blush from the ache in my breasts that I knew was because of my awareness of him, but why blush when he'd already carefully examined my entire chest area?

I decided to settle back, too. No one paid us any mind as the three DJs at the front of the bus amused everyone with their shtick. They told stories and handed out free tees and CDs. I listened a bit, but mainly I just remained hyper-aware of X's breathing and the fact that his arm had crept closer to the top of my shoulders. Pretty soon it would settle on them and his fingers would touch my arm. I shivered.

"Are you cold?" He spoke close to my ear and his voice was for me alone.

"Um, maybe a little," I lied to cover my reaction.

He pulled out his jacket and spread it over my lap and his. I shivered again as his arm lowered to my shoulders and his thumb played with a curl of my hair.

I should make conversation. Anything to stop thinking about his hand and whether it would move lower, and anything to stop thinking about two men and double of everything.

"So, what do you do for a living, X?"

He chuckled again at his new nickname. "I'm a physical trainer."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I used to teach Phys Ed to middle-schoolers, but I got burned out trying to teach good habits to a bunch of kids who couldn't care less."

"So do you work at a gym?"

"No, mostly private homes, and I teach a night class at the university."

Private homes. Interesting. Now I had visions of X training me. Handcuffs, blindfolds, a weight bench. Hmmm.

You know, the root cause of these sexual thoughts was how long it had been since I'd actually had sex, and how unlike me it was to think this way at all. Maybe it was a mid-life crisis. Wasn't I too young for that sort of shit? No way was I at mid-life yet, but I was horny as hell, and the thoughts running through my mind would probably shock the teenagers surrounding us. Old folks like us weren't supposed to have libidos.

I grinned and turned to X. He cocked his head and gave me an assessing look. "What do you do?"

"I don't want to talk about what I really do, my boring day job."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Do you want to talk about what you don't really do?"

I nodded and leaned in a bit closer, so I could be heard as the volume of the voices on the bus increased. We were on the road now, going sixty-five on the interstate. The bus cast a long shadow across the lanes as the sun sank lower in the sky. What could I tell X? A fantasy job. Would he think I was a freak, complete loony tunes? Did it matter? I gauged his expression. I think he understood what I was doing and I don't think he judged me for it.

"I'm a phone sex operator."

A wide grin spread across his face. "That's a good one. You've got the voice for it. Really sultry."

I'd never thought of my voice as sultry before. Nice.

"Tell me about this job, Dory."

Our thighs were pressed together under the jacket and I was a hair's breath from his chest, so he could hear me over the din. He lowered his hand to my shoulder and his thumb feathered across my hot skin. My nipples pinged with awareness, and I felt his gaze refocus on them once again. I wanted his thumb to stop stroking my shoulder and move to stroking my tit.

He shouldn't do that. Not with everyone watching, but god, I wanted him to.

"Men call me," I said, starting my story. "I pick up the phone and say hello there."

"And what do they say?"

"What would you say?"

"I'd say, Hi baby."

"That's a bit cliché."

"Yeah, but I'm paying so I don't have to be original, I just have to be turned on."

"True." His hand on my shoulder pulled me closer, so now I was leaning against his warm, firm chest. "So next I'd say, 'What can I do for you this evening?'"

"Tell me what you're wearing."

"I'm wearing a black lace garter belt attached to thigh-high stockings, crotch-less panties and stilettos."

"Are you wearing a bra?"

"No, I'm wearing a silk and bone corset, black."

"So sexy." This he breathed into my ear. His tongue flicked the lobe, tracing it. I shivered.

"What are you wearing?" I asked as I noticed his left hand dipping under the jacket out of view.

"I'm naked. It's too hot for clothes."

"What do you want me to do?"

"How do you pleasure yourself?"

Here I had to step back. If I was this woman, a phone sex operator dressed in slut lingerie, how would I touch myself?

"I wear a headset so my hands are free, you understand."

"Sure."

"I slide my palms under both my breasts, cup them, and flick my thumbs over my nipples."

"Yes." His voice had a different tone to it now, more strained, and I discovered where his left hand had disappeared to. It slid along my thigh under the jacket, out of view from the other concert-goers, my little secret. It moved past the tight curve of my thigh, cupping my mound. The denim filtered the actual sensation, but my panties grew damp from the novelty of a strange man touching me there. "Go on."

"I push the top of the corset down and my breasts jut out, pushed up by the fabric underneath, perfect for touching. So I touch them and tweak them. They're so aroused they sting. They long to be sucked by your mouth. Your voice really turns me on, you know."

"So does yours, honey. I want you to suck them for me."

"What?"

"Use your hands. Put your tits into your mouth and suck. Imagine it's my mouth sucking you."

I did imagine and as I did so, his roving hand found the snap to my jeans. He undid it. He lowered the zipper. I sucked in my breath. Whoa. I had never done anything like this before. His right hand moved from my shoulder to my upper arm, actually under my arm so the tips of his fingers grazed the side of my breast. My panties were wetter now, which he was going to discover soon, now that he had the zipper down and was maneuvering my undies out of the way.

"Don't stop, sweetheart. You're sucking your own nipples, one then the other. What about your pussy? Is it wet? How do you make your pussy feel good?"

The same way he was making my pussy feel good now. His middle finger had found my clit and was rotating in a circle. He had a very talented left hand. Maybe he was ambidextrous, because every now and then he'd use the fingers on his other hand, the one captured under my arm, to flick my nipple. A stealth mission. He'd zing me with sensation then go back to acting innocent. But under the jacket he was making me squirm, and I had to fight not to moan.

What would I do beyond my usual vanilla? "I have a vibrator."

"Hmm."

"One with swirling beads. It's extra thick and long, so while you're talking to me through my headset, and while I'm sucking my tits one at a time, I'm sliding this tool into my dripping hole."

Xavier's face was almost red. He pulled his hand from my pants long enough to direct my hand into action. He wanted to be touched, and when I did touch him, I felt a ridge that was hard as oak. He helped me unsnap and unzip the pants under the jacket, and he lowered his briefs enough that his dick could spring free. I gripped him.

Then I had a moment of self-consciousness. I glanced around to see if anyone noticed what we were up to. The girl in the seat across the aisles slouched back against her seat, eyes closed, headphones on, lost to the world. Past her another girl stared out the filmy window at the passing cars. No one else seemed to be paying us any mind. I knew the possibility that we could be caught, observed, was part of the thrill, but just the same I was glad for our momentary privacy.

As my thumb and forefinger formed a ring around his cock, his finger resumed its attentions to my clit. I really wanted to pull my jeans down more, give him more access, but they were too tight for that. I tightened the ring around his dick and slid it to the base then up to the tip. He gasped loudly, caught himself and shut up, but I was pleased that I was having this effect on him. I felt the pre-come on the head, so I squeezed some more then rolled back down to the base. Did he want to come? He'd have to catch it with his jacket. Did I want to come? I was getting pretty damn close. Would I be able to control my reaction? I already clenched my vagina and tightened my stomach with each movement of his finger.

"More," he growled, his voice vibrating through my body. "Tell me more."

"So I'm fucking myself with this huge vibrating tool. In and out, and I've got a little finger vibrator which I use on my nipples. A really cool tingly sensation. I'm dripping wet, and your voice just makes me hotter. Tell me what you're doing on the other end of the phone."

"I'm playing with my balls, stroking them, moving them around. Your voice makes me hard. I've never been so mother-fucking hard in my whole life."

"Uh huh." Another long stroke from base to tip with a squeeze at the tip, then back down and I scooped my fingers under his zipper until I could reach his balls and weave my fingers around. He groaned into my ear.

"God, fuck me," he said, and for a minute I thought he meant it. It was hard to tell what was part of the fantasy and what was part of the now.

Suddenly it didn't matter, because the sensations had coiled so tight inside of me I couldn't hold back my orgasm. My body took over. Liquid gushed from me as my vagina contracted. I turned my face into his shoulder and bit to muffle my moan.

"God, fuck me," he said again, and I felt the rush of come out of his dick. We both fought to control our outward reactions to our extreme pleasure. Man, we've just gotten each other off on a crowded bus in front of a bunch of people. I breathed in the masculine scent on his shirt, shocked that I didn't feel more embarrassed. Was I a total slut?

It took some maneuvering to get our clothes back to rights. The bus had gotten caught in stop-and-go DC traffic, but now was pulling into the RFK Stadium parking lot. By the time it stopped completely, we were able to remove the jacket and stand. I knew the first order of business once inside the stadium was to find a bathroom.

I wondered if Xavier would disown me at this point, find some other woman to play games with, but he didn't. He held my hand, like we were a dating couple. He helped me through the crowd and held the glass door open for me. I told him I needed a bathroom, and when I returned he was waiting with a drink for me.

Sweet.

~ The End ~

HEART OF STONE, by Annice Dare

When I arose that fateful Sunday the sun was already high in the sky, and the air held a stillness full of heat to come. The morning air was scented with olive oil and oregano, sun-warmed grain and acrid native shrubs.

I dressed carefully, not wanting to give the wrong impression. Anyone looking like a tourist in Frieze was always at risk from the pickpockets, the villainous guides, the unscrupulous shopkeepers. I was particularly vulnerable because I am English, blonde, and alone.

My father was minor nobility, a third son, with an income sufficient to allow him to reside in Italy, talent adequate to earn a small reputation for his portraits, and intellect enough to marry my mother, a yeoman-class woman with a knack for frugality and a face to rival the legendary Helen's. Unfortunately, her face was her misfortune. It attracted the eye of an unprincipled Italian count who kidnapped her and carried her away to a clannish village outside of Rome. I was but three years old, so I remember her only faintly.

By the time my father found my mother, she was pregnant with the count's child. Father took lodging in the village near the count's estate, and hoped for her release--but she was released only to God, for she died in childbirth, and the babe along with her. We remained in Italy, for my father had no reason to return to England. As long as he was here, there was a chance he might someday have his revenge on Count Ettore Maurizio.

I grew up in the streets of Milano, one more child among a swarm of street urchins. Father was mildly interested in my welfare, but far more concerned with my education. I learned to read by chance, but I learned of art through rigorous and constant study. To further my education, Father took a notion to remove to Firenze when I was fourteen.

For some reason, he had the idea that our lives would be better there. They were not. He died within five months, victim to some mysterious malady that turned him into an old man before my very eyes, and then killed him.

Father had not been particularly prudent, but he did leave me the suite of rooms in which we lived. The thin purse I discovered in his bureau held coins enough to feed me for a few weeks, but after that I must work for my food.

Father had taught me well. While I am no more than competent with a brush or pen, I have an eye for excellence. When we moved to Firenze, he apprenticed me to a dealer in art, an unheard of position for a female. I was required to cut my

hair short and wear men's clothing at work. Signore Mussacchio explained to anyone who questioned my youth and effeminate appearance that I was castrato, due to an unfortunate accident in my childhood. At fourteen this was to my taste, for I loved the comfort of trousers, the freedom of being a boy instead of life under the restrictions of girlhood. But now that I was eighteen and a woman, my masculine persona chafed my soul. As long as I remained Signore Mussacchio's castrato assistant, there would be no man for me. I was fated to die a virgin, unwanted, unloved.

The events of my childhood had taught me that life goes as fate commands, not as one wishes. Choosing to make the best of the life I had, I pledged myself to art. But perhaps I did not entirely relinquish my dreams of love, for on Sundays I donned skirts and went about town as Miss Lucy Raymond, proper English spinster.

Firenze abounds in art, from enormous sculptures wrought by hands guided by God to small medallions set into rude brick walls. No palazza, no via, no piazza is without its art, from faded fresco to sparkling mosaic to heroic marbles and bronzes. My favorite place is the Piazza della Signoria, where the whole world passes by, if one only has the patience to watch.

There is a sculpture there, created by the master, the incomparable Michelangelo Buonarroti. David. An enormous marble, streaked with winter rains, discolored by smoke and mildew, larger than life, yet somehow alive. He is beautiful. His feet rest on a square pedestal higher than my head, his hands are as long as my forearms. His face--oh, that beautiful, masculine face, with its far-seeing eyes and lines of human suffering--his face is the face I see on the streets of Firenze each day, narrow, spare, with deep-set eyes and thick, curling hair.

As I always did, I paused at the mouth of Via Dei Calzaoui. There I stood for several long moments, letting my gaze slowly move across the piazza, anticipating my first sight of him. I had only to stand there for warmth to begin smoldering in my belly, for the tenderness of my female parts to make itself known. My body knew what I did not, the role of a woman, a woman ripe for her man.

I, who had never been in love, who had never been kissed by a male other than my father, knew desire. What I did not know, what I would never know, was what it was to be desired.

Cease this self-pity, I told myself. You have the freedom to seek a lover, should you choose.

My problem was that the men I met whom I found attractive, the men who eyed me with interest, were not interested in me as a woman. They had seen, had desired the fair-haired young castrato--not the woman hiding inside his trousers.

I let my gaze drift past the loggia, seeing but paying little attention to the Cellini bronze, the Donatello marble, the other works of supreme artists. The massive sculpture of Hercules was only part of the scenery, unimportant to me. It was David my eyes sought, David I drank in the sight of.

He stood across the piazza on his black marble pedestal, foursquare and firm. I walked toward him, ignoring the crowd, the babble of a dozen languages around me. As I drew near, I raised my chin, letting my gaze linger over his feet, strong white feet, able to walk all day and into the night. His ankles were slim, yet sturdy, his calves well shaped. I saw the veins in his calf, the sinews connecting lower leg to knee. His legs were long, lean, strong.

Have I told you of his magnificent body, of the strength of his arms, his legs? Of the beauty of his naked chest, his uncovered shoulders? Do you know what a real man looks like, how the muscles lie close to the body, so that every movement becomes a symphony in efficiency? His right leg holds him upright, while the left relaxes. His left arm is lifted, holding a sling, with which he will defend himself--or me--from harm through the long, dark night.

His penis hangs softly, but I could imagine how it would grow under my touch--swell and grow into a shaft of velvet-clad steel--rampant, ready. For me.

My mouth dried at the thought, butterflies fluttered in my middle. I imagined his hands on my shoulders, his fingers touching my cheeks, my eyelids, my lips. I felt his mouth upon mine, not cold like stone, but hot. Wet. His tongue invaded me, swooped between my teeth, tangled with mine.

My knees grew weak. I trembled. The smoldering warmth flared into flame, consuming me. Perhaps I cried out.

"Signorina, you are ill." A strong arm encircled my waist, a hard body supported me.

I smelled sweat and tobacco, a faint aroma of wine, as I was lowered to the pavement and propped against the pedestal supporting my love.

The eyes staring into mine were brown, soft like a doe's, ringed with thick, long lashes of sooty black. The face was familiar--like so many I saw daily in the

streets, a poor replica of my David's. The hand cupping my cheek was hard with callus, but gentle, tender in its touch.

"No, I am not ill," I said, but my voice betrayed me. It quavered with the aftermath of my helpless passion.

His smile was quick, fleeting. "Of course you are not ill. Merely overcome with beauty. I saw you, saw how you could not take your eyes from...him...from David." He glanced upwards, a quick lift of his head. "He is indeed one to make a woman tremble, no?"

"I love him," I said, then bit my tongue. "I mean, I love the artistry, the beauty of the sculpture. It is incomparable."

"S`. But he would be much prettier were he flesh and blood. Here, let me help you stand. I will give you wine and bread and you will feel much better."

I allowed him to assist me to my feet, thrilled at the service. Had I been clad in my usual coat and trousers, he might have extended a hand to haul me upright. Instead he slipped his strong arm about my waist and lifted me, holding me close against his body until my feet were firmly planted on the pavement.

Standing close to him, I smelled again the male scent of him, and it rekindled the heat in my belly. I wanted to put my arms around him, to press my mouth against his, to bite him, taste him, eat him.

He smiled down at me, and I saw the face of my love.

"But you are beautiful," he said, as if surprised. He dipped his head and kissed me lightly.

I should have pulled away, but instead I leaned into him, pressing my lips more firmly against his, opening them slightly, so that my tongue could creep forth to sample the flavor of him.

His hands clutched my upper arms and pushed me away. For an instant I thought I glimpsed pain on his face, before he said, "No, mio amore, you must not." He stepped away, putting an arm's length between us. "Come. Let us refresh ourselves. You will feel more yourself when you've eaten."

I felt more myself than I could remember, but I said nothing, just let him lead me across the piazza to the small café on the corner of Via dei Cerchi.

We whiled away the early afternoon at a table near the window, where we could watch the crowds in the piazza. His name was Vido Buonarroti--he laughed when I asked him the obvious question. "I have no idea who my father was. I chose that name myself, for I admire the man immensely."

Perhaps it was the wine--spicy, a bit sweet, and all too easily sipped, no matter how often Vido refilled my glass. Perhaps it was the weather--hot and still, as if the world was waiting for something wonderful. Most likely it was the man--tall and handsome and attentive, seeing me as a woman. A desirable woman.

Yes, he desired me. I knew this even before he said, "I have a small room, humble and nothing elaborate, but a place where we may be alone. Will you come with me, mio amore?" He nibbled my fingertips as he spoke, sending shivers of ice down my spine, despite the sun now directly shining on the cafe's window.

I looked into his eyes and saw I could trust him.

I looked into his eyes and knew that I loved him.

You may laugh. How can one fall in love in a few hours? Such a ridiculous notion.

Or is it? I have read of love expressed only in words, without the lovers ever meeting face to face. I have heard of love at first sight.

I know it can happen, because it happened to me.

We walked across the piazza arm in arm. For the first time since I came to Firenze, I passed by David without my heart stuttering, without my loins heating. I still loved him, would always love him, but only as I would love any beautiful thing. He was nothing but cold, hard marble.

Vido was alive.

His room was a tiny cellar behind the Loggia dei Lanzi, little more than a hole in the wall, large enough for a narrow cot and not much else. A high barred window let in faint light. "Oh, Vido," I said, letting pity color my voice, "this is no place for a man like you. Let us go to my--"

His fingers across my lips stopped my words. "I cannot, sweetling," he said, his voice husky. "I must not go away from this place."

My next question went unasked, for his lips covered mine, and his tongue speared between my lips.

How can I describe the thrill, the deep, swirling delight I felt at that moment? No daydream, no prurient fantasy had prepared me for the taste, the sensation of a man's insistent tongue fencing with mine, sliding along the edges of my teeth, licking at the corners of my lips.

Vido held me gently, his strong arms caging me within. I could have escaped. Perhaps I should have, if love without marriage is a sin. I am glad I did not for, as I learned later, there could be no marriage for us.

He nibbled at my lips, laved my cheeks with his tongue. Nipped my earlobe and ran the edges of his teeth down my throat to the edge of my high collar. I stood helpless and completely at his mercy, caught up in senseless passion, in pleasure so intense, so all-consuming that the roof could have fallen in upon us and I might not have noticed.

His beard scraped my face, and I delighted in the small pain. When I opened my eyes, I saw the glimmer of his, dark and close to mine. There was power in those eyes, a compelling demand for all I could give him. And more.

My knees buckled...or did he lift me? I found myself supine on the narrow, lumpy cot, my bonnet lost somewhere, my skirt scarcely hiding my legs, and his hands at the tie of my collar. The air, hot a moment ago, felt cold as he laid the delicate lawn fabric back, exposing my upper chest. His lips touched me, touched skin where no man had ever ventured before. Each light kiss bought him closer to the top of my corset, to my aching breasts.

I was no innocent in the ways of men and women. No one who has studied the great works of art as I have could possibly be. I knew that men liked to fondle women's breasts, that their penises grew large and erect when they were in the throes of lust. I knew that their ultimate goal was to push themselves into a woman's most secret part. Clearly they derived enjoyment from the act, but I was not sure that most women did. To me it seemed that the woman's reward for allowing such an outrageous invasion of herself was the possibility that a child would result.

I would have liked a child, although I have no idea how I would have cared for one, given the nature of my employment.

But I digress, as did my thoughts that day. For after he had thoroughly explored my upper chest with his hot, wet mouth, Vido stood and looked down at me. "You must go," he said, and I heard sorrow in his tone, read it in his shadowed eyes. "I cannot do this."

I felt as if I had been slapped. "Why?" I quavered.

"Because there is no future for us. No future for me with any woman. I am...I cannot..." He turned away with a jerk. "Just go," he said, his voice muffled. "Please."

I sat up. In the dim light of his tiny room, he was little more than a dark shape just beyond my reach. As he stood unmoving, I thought about what had just happened. He did not want me to go. I knew that in my heart of hearts. Yet he felt compelled to banish me. Out of a sense of duty? Of sin? Or something else?

Why was he sending me away? A bad man would have taken his pleasure with me, would have promised me anything to win my surrender.

Vido is a good man.

With shaking fingers I pulled the edges of my open bodice together. The three tiny buttons below the tie fought me, stubbornly refusing to fit into their loops. I could not look down to see what I was doing, for I could not take my gaze from his back. He seemed to vibrate, and I knew that he was holding himself tightly against temptation.

What if... I thought. What if I refuse to let him sacrifice his desire for the sake of duty, of decency? What if I were to take what I want, as a man would?

I stood, took one step so I stood just behind him, our bodies not quite touching. "No," I said, my voice not quite steady. "No. Vido, I will not go."

"You must." His shoulders shook. "I can offer you nothing."

"You offered me an afternoon of love. I will settle for that." One more step and I was pressed against his taut body. I slid my arms around his waist. With uncharacteristic daring, I spread my fingers across his hard abdomen and reached lower. His penis was a hard bulge in his trousers. "Isn't that uncomfortable?" I touched lightly, tracing its shape--long, hard, straining the coarse fabric that confined it.

His long fingers encircled my wrists like manacles. "Don't!" He pulled my hands away from his body, held them out to the side.

The action pulled me even closer to his back. Pulled me fast against his buttocks. I rubbed myself against him, lay my face between his shoulder blades. "Vido," I crooned, "love me. Even if only this one time. Please love me."

I was not begging. What I spoke was a polite demand.

I felt the shudder that shook his sturdy frame. Slowly he pulled my hands back against his body. "I cannot resist you," he whispered. "Oh, mia Lucia, I cannot resist you."

He turned within my arms.

He enveloped me within his.

With exquisite gentleness, he cupped my face. His lips touched mine softly, his tongue teasing along the seam.

With infinite tenderness, he kissed my cheeks, my forehead, my eyelids. His tongue laved my chin, the cords of my neck. His teeth nipped my earlobe and grazed the edge of my jaw.

My legs threatened to give way and I sagged against him. With one sweep of his strong arms, he picked me up and carried me the two short steps to his narrow cot.

"If I lay you down there, mio amore, you will be mine. Stop me now, or accept what I am, what I will do."

I covered his mouth. "Say no more," I told him. "Just make me yours."

"Ah, mia Lucia, you unman me."

"I hope not. It is your manhood I want. Oh, Vido, how I want you."

His knees bent. He laid me on the rumpled bed and fell atop me. I gloried in the weight of him. Drank in the male scent of him.

One of his legs was hooked around mine, holding me in place. He reared up on his elbows and attacked the tiny buttons of my bodice. "Ah, what a puzzle, " he

said, as he clumsily worked each loose from its loop. "Designed, no doubt, by a conscientious duenna."

I laughed. "No, by a modista who thought me a rich English tourist."

As the last button gave way, he pushed the fabric aside, revealing my camisole. "Lace. So delicate. So soft." It was not the lace trim he stroked a rough forefinger across, but the skin just above it. I felt that touch all the way to my nether lips.

Once again he attacked buttons, this time the small pearl ones that held my camisole closed. They yielded to his impatient fingers easily. His mouth followed his fingers. Kissing, licking, nibbling across the top of my corset, where my breasts all but spilled out. His whiskers prickled, a small almost-pain on the tender skin.

I shivered, and pulled his face tight against me. "You will need to remove my outer clothing before going any farther," I told him. "The corset opens in the back." I could hardly wait until my body was bare to him. After so long of pretending to be a man, the very thought of having someone appreciate my female shape, my woman's body, was arousing. That Vido was so enthusiastic made the thrill all the greater.

"I have a better idea," he said, just before rolling to his back and taking me with him. I squealed as he teetered on the edge of the narrow cot, then relaxed--a small bit--when he scooted toward its center.

I was atop his body. My skirt hiked above my knees, my lower legs tangled with his. Both petticoats frothed about his legs, snowy white contrast to the dark serge of his trousers and the navy broadcloth of my skirt.

"Sit astride me," he commanded.

I obeyed, resting between his knees and hips. It felt strange to be there, certainly in a more intimate position than I had ever been upon my father's lap.

When he raised his knees, I fell forward, barely catching myself on my outstretched hands. "Vido!"

"Come closer. Sit...here." his hand lightly touched the elongated bulge in his trousers.

I raised on my knees and moved forward, half-crawl, half-walk. But I did not sit where he'd indicated. I wanted to explore, for I'd never seen a fully aroused man

before. My understanding of the effects desire had on the male body was drawn from conversations overheard when men talked of their conquests. Thinking me one of themselves, they had never hesitated to describe graphically what they had done to the puttane they patronized, or to the innocent maidens they'd seduced.

I knew a man's penis grew large and hard, but until now I'd no idea how large and how hard. As I settled myself astride Vido's hips, I laid both hands, fingers outstretched, across his pelvis.

He gasped when my thumbs pressed across that long shape. "I have buttons too," he said, his voice strained.

I toyed with one. "I see you do. And what am I to do with them?"

"What one usually does with buttons, dulce Lucia. Undo them."

I looked into his dark eyes. Desire burned there. My body responded with a gush of fluid, one that left my petticoats damp. I reached for the fall of his trousers and undid the buttons along one side. Three of them. Before opening the other three, I traced again the long shape elevating the front of his trousers.

"Lucia!" The word was a plea.

I opened the other side and laid the flap back. His penis sprang free.

I thought back for an instant to my visions of David's penis engorged and erect. How paltry my imagination had been. This was the magnificent spear of a warrior, when I'd imagined a lad's toy.

Taking it between my palms, I squeezed lightly, wondering at the contrast of satiny skin and steely core.

Breathe hissed between Vido's clenched teeth. "Be careful," he gasped.

I traced a finger across the swollen tip of him, where a narrow slit oozed a glistening droplet. It was hot to my touch. "Careful? Why should I be?"

"Because if you are not, you may find yourself surprised."

I slid my hand experimentally down his shaft, back up again. Another droplet had formed at the tip. Without thought, I leaned forward and touched my tongue to it.

"You are salty."

"You are reckless," he replied. His hands grasped my wrists again, but this time they pulled me to him, instead of pushing me away.

He pulled me higher on his body, until I sat directly over his penis. Transferring both my wrists to one of his hands, he reached down with the other and pulled my skirts from between us. I felt the rough serge of his trousers against my intimate parts.

Embarrassed, I tried to move back. It was one thing for me to dampen my own clothing, quite another for me to soak his. Despite my belief that such a secretion was a natural thing for a woman, it still struck me as somehow...impolite.

Not so Vido. "I feel your wetness," he whispered hoarsely, a moment after I was firmly seated astride his belly. "You are ready for me." An expression of wonder filled his face. "You truly desire me as I do you."

"Of course," I told him. "Why else would I be here?" Leaning forward I kissed him, boldly pushing my tongue into his mouth. A faint memory of the wine he'd drunk earlier remained, adding piquancy to his unique taste.

I ran the tip of my tongue across the edges of his teeth. His tongue came to meet mine, to spar with it. A soft humming vibrated his chest as he sucked my tongue even deeper, held it prisoner.

By the time he let me go, I was weak with wanting him and he was breathing in deep gasps, as if he'd just run a long race.

"It is time, Vido. Let there be no more play between us."

His lips firmed before parting in a flashing smile. "You will not allow me to be noble, will you, cara mia? I was about to offer you one last chance to--"

"To be a fool," I snapped. "Or is it you who is the fool? Do you not realize that I have already made my choice? I will not renege." Two deep breaths calmed me. "Vido, we have something special between us. I have never felt...never wanted...oh, I haven't the words. Just believe me when I say that I have no doubts, no hesitations."

I held my arms out to him. "Love me. Now!"

As if released from bondage, he moved. His strong arms lifted me away from him and he rolled to his feet. In the next instant I was standing, my back to him, as he stripped me of my outer garments. Before his nimble fingers attacked the laces of my corset, he paused to lay a line of kisses along each shoulder, to lick my nape, then chill it with the heat of his breath.

Now that the sun was lower in the sky, a golden beam drew a narrow path across the floor. He pulled me into it, so that my body seemed magically gilded. His hands at my waist turned me, until the sunlight washed my entire body.

I felt no embarrassment, was entirely without modesty as he gazed at me, a gaze so intense, so palpable that I felt it like a ghostly caress.

"Mia Lucia," he breathed, awe clear in the sound, "you are beautiful."

I am not, at least not by the local standards. I am too thin, too angular. My skin is pale and freckled, my hands and feet large. I make a far better lad than lass. But when I shook my head, he caught it between his big hands.

"You are beautiful. To me you are the most beautiful woman in the universe. I have waited for you for...for a long time." Slowly he bent and kissed me, not with passion this time, but with tenderness.

His hands cupped my breasts then. I started in surprise. I have sometimes imagined a man's hands upon me, have touched my own body, but my hands are small in comparison to his, and soft, lacking the hard callus of his palms.

My nipples flowered and he caught them between his fingers, rolling them, plucking them, until I was ready to scream with pleasure. I sagged, and immediately he caught me up in his strong arms. Once again he laid me on the bed, but remained standing beside it.

"You are still clothed," I said, rising onto one elbow. "Let me--"

"Not this time." His hands pulled his shirt from his trousers. "I daren't let you touch me." In the space of two breaths he stood naked before me.

I stared, wondering why unclothed he seemed familiar. Since I had never before seen a living man without his clothes, I put the thought aside as mere fancy. Instead I reached up with open arms. "Come to me now."

He knelt beside the bed. "First I will pleasure you." His hand cupped my mound, pressed.

I reared against him, wanting more. "No, let me--"

"It will pleasure me as well," he said, as his fingers stroked the thick, curly hair that concealed my woman's parts. "Seeing you, touching you, knowing I can pleasure you, make you scream with pleasure."

One finger dipped deeper, parting my nether lips, touching, briefly, the small bud that lay hidden there.

"Ah, you like that?" He dipped again, then slid his whole hand between my legs. I felt a finger at the entrance to my vagina, spread my legs to encourage it to enter.

But he only teased, running the finger back and forth, back and forth, until I was sobbing with anticipation, with need. "Please," I gasped, "please...please!"

"So impatient, so eager" His smile told me how I pleased him with my impatience.

His hands moved higher, eliciting a sob of disappointment as they left my oh, so sensitive tissues. Before I knew what he was doing, he had rotated me on the cot, placing me so that my lower legs hung over the edge. My toes brushed the floor, my calves hung on either side of his thighs. I rubbed my ankles against him, felt the slight rasp of coarse hair against the skin on the inside of my knees.

Once again he cupped me, but his hand lingered only briefly as he came even closer to the edge of the cot. His hands stroked my legs, from knees to ankles, but instead of returning to my knees, he encircled my ankles with his long fingers and lifted them to his shoulder.

"No--" Hot blood flooded my face and chest. Even in the dim light, what must he be seeing?

Turning his head, he kissed the inner part of my thigh, then nipped, catching a small fold of skin between sharp teeth. Although there was pain, there was infinitely more pleasure, particularly when his raspy tongue laved the small injury. "I must taste you," he murmured, "as you did me."

He bent to me.

How can I describe the sensations as his mouth opened over me? At last I understood the ecstasy of Santo Teresa, pierced by an angel's golden arrows. His

tongue, hot and agile, circled my sensitive bud, bringing it to plump turgidity, awakening it to every sensation, sending waves of heat through my body. A tingle began in my toes, hovered there, and rushed up my legs. It met the inferno burning from my belly, and the two exploded as Vido's mouth closed over me. He drew me between his lips and suckled.

I screamed as I bucked against his face. My legs locked around his head. I held him imprisoned against me as waves of sensation swept again and again through me.

An eternity later, he pulled free and sat back on his haunches, smiling. "You liked that."

It was not a question.

I nodded slowly, unable to move anything but my head. Perhaps next week I would regain my strength. Or the week after.

Vido removed my legs from his shoulders and let them slide to the floor. He bent over me and lifted, his hands raising me as if I weighed no more than a feather. Once more I lay lengthwise on the hard, lumpy cot. I could have been on a bed of nails, for all I cared.

He lay down beside me, the two of us only just fitting on the narrow cot. The sunbeam had moved across the room and now illuminated the white plaster wall behind the bed, so brightly that the entire room was alight with a golden glow.

I raised my self on an elbow and looked across his supine body, curious about the place where he lived. Beyond a chair and the bed, there was nothing. Three shelves were hung on the wall to the left of the door. They held books and a few other items whose identity I could not discern. Two pegs, on which hung dark clothing, protruded from the wall to the right of the door. There was no cupboard for food, no chest for personal items or treasures. "How do you live here?" I wondered aloud.

Because I had glanced at his face when I spoke, I saw the swift grimace of--pain?--that passed across his face. "I have few needs," he said. "This is only a place to sleep."

His tone told me I was trespassing on forbidden ground. I let my temper get the best of my common sense. "And a place to bring foolish young women who cannot resist your manly wiles." How many, I wondered. How many women had he brought here, had he pleased beyond belief.?

He was silent a long time. Long enough to give me time to regret my words. After all, he had made no promises, had not disguised his intentions.

"There have been others," he said at last, his voice little more than a husky whisper, his words halting. "I have lived here many years, and in that time there have been women who shared themselves with me for a day or a week. None have ever chosen to remain for long." Raising his arm, he laid it across his eyes. "I have been lonely more often than not."

How could this be? Even with his face mostly covered, I could see the beauty of it. His mouth, sensuous enough to tempt a saint to damnation, his eyes, deep-set and darkly mysterious, his chin, strong and determined. Not a pretty face, but a memorable one, masculine. Good.

Before I could stop the words, they spilled out, forced from my mouth by the hope in my heart. "Have you ever asked a woman to stay?"

"I cannot." A deep breath shuddered from his body. "It is...not permitted."

I lay back down, wondering about his words. Was he a criminal, confined to a certain area? Or was there something...wrong...with him. I had heard of men who behaved in bizarre fashion, had listened as the old women in the marketplace smacked their lips and related horrible tales about rapists and robbers and murderers. Of course I knew there are dangers in the world--my mother's fate was ample evidence of that--but somehow I never thought of myself being in danger. I am a cautious person. I never take chances, never step off of the narrow path of prudent behavior.

So? Giving yourself to a man whom you've known for mere hours is prudent?

A long, shuddering sigh from Vido broke into my dark self-reproach. It brought me to my senses. "I must go. It will be dark soon."

He pushed himself upright. "Yes," he said on a sigh, "I suppose you must." With that sinuous grace I so admired, he rose to his feet and reached for his clothing.

Most men, when pulling on their trousers, are ungainly. Or at least I always feel as if I am, when I don mine, along with my male persona. I should have been dressing, but instead I simply watched him.

Vido's every gesture, every motion was smooth, as if he was totally at home in his body, as if he personally commanded every muscle, every tendon to perform

perfectly. His flesh gleamed in the last rays of sunlight, making him seem more gilded sculpture than flesh-and-blood man. I did not quite drool like a nursling, but saliva gathered in my mouth as I watched him. Had he but glanced my way, spoken one kind word, I might have promised then and there to stay with him forever.

He turned toward me, still stuffing the tail of his shirt into his trousers. "I will walk you to the edge of the piazza." For a long, heart-stopping moment he stared at me, still naked, still lying in his bed, my skin marked with love bites, my hair tousled, my lips--both sets--swollen and tender.

"Yes, all right. I will...just let me... Please!" I could not rise and clothe myself with him watching me. I fluttered my hands at him. "Go away, please. Outside."

With a curt nod, he opened the door just wide enough to allow his body to slip through. Once alone, I made short work of clothing myself, pulling the strings of my corset just tight enough that I might fasten the petticoat strings. I stuffed my stockings into my pocket and slipped bare feet into my half-boots. There was no mirror, so I ran shaking fingers through my hair before covering it with my bonnet. When I was dressed, I pulled the door open. He was standing just outside. "I'm going now," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady. "But there is no need--"

"There is every need, cara mia. Come, take my arm." Instead of waiting for me to obey, he caught my hand and laid it across his forearm.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked when his grip pulled me toward the fountain. "This is not the route to my home."

"I want you to see something," he said. "You might understand." There was a curious emphasis on you, as if I were somehow special. He urged me forward. "Come."

We walked past the fountain of Neptune and along the front of the palazzo. Since I had always approached my David from across the piazza, I saw a different side of him, with his face turned away and his penis concealed by the hand that hung against his thigh.

Vido pulled me to a halt not six feet from the base of the sculpture. "Look," he commanded. "Tell me what you see."

"What am I supposed to see? It is a sculpture, the most beautiful sculpture in the world. I have seen it a thousand times, and each time it is new and wonderful." I

had begun speaking in irritation, but as I gazed upon splendor, I was soothed, and my last words came out almost a croon.

"Look again. Do you see anything...familiar?"

He was trying to tell me something. What? I looked again. I walked all around David, staring intently, mentally tallying the features that make the marble seem almost alive--muscles, tendons, flesh and hair, all carved by a master's hand, yet somehow seeming so vital, so alive that David should be able to breathe, to move. To step off his pedestal and walk the streets of Firenze like any native.

Did I see anything familiar? "Of course," I said. "How could it not be familiar? I have seen--"

David smiled at me.

Oh, yes, it was a trick of the light, of the slanting sunbeams shining across the piazza. Marble lips could not smile. Only living--I turned and stared at Vido.

He smiled at me.

"You!" My mouth gaped as the thought exploded into my mind. "You and he...it...whatever. How?" No. It was impossible, what I was thinking.

My legs gave way. I fell in a heap on the pavement, still upright, but in grave danger of sprawling. Vido moved quickly, catching me, holding me so that I leaned against his chest. His breath warmed my cheek, icy despite the late afternoon heat.

We remained that way for perhaps ten minutes, he kneeling, with me held safely within the circle of his arms, me with my legs sprawled across the dirty pavement, my skirts disordered, my bonnet brim bent.

I shivered, despite the day's heat, despite the warmth trapped in marble and brick. Even Vido's embrace could not warm me. "I m-m-must go," I told him at last. "It is l-l-late."

"Yes." With that single curt syllable, he rose and held out his hand to me.

I ignored it and got to my feet without touching him. "I will see you again," I said, as I shook out my crumpled skirts. "In a week, perhaps. Will you be here?" As I waited for his reply, a small, terrified part of me hoped he would say no.

He nodded. "I will be here." He turned away, his shoulders sagging.

So did I. But as I took the first step away from him, I thought I heard him say, "I am always here."

The next seven days passed, somehow. Each seemed endless. I was distracted, filled with conflicting, chaotic, incredible thoughts. Several times Signore Mussacchio admonished me to pay attention to my work. At last Sunday morning dawned.

I rose early, before the sun, unable to sleep longer. This day I would have answers, I told myself. I would discover if my suppositions, my conclusions, my unbelievable belief were possible.

Never before had I arrived at the Piazza della Signoria so early. The air still held the soft freshness of night. Only a few people strolled the piazza. A small flock of pigeons explored forlornly, seeking seeds and crumbs left from yesterday's generous visitors, too early for today's offerings.

As I always did, I paused at the mouth of Via Dei Calzaoui. There I stood for several long moments, letting my gaze slowly move across the piazza, anticipating my first sight of him. I had only to stand there for warmth to begin smoldering in my belly, for the tenderness of my female parts to make itself known.

Today I felt none of that. Only a dread expectancy, that Vido had been the fantasy of a frustrated virgin, driven mad by her unfulfilled desires.

Or worse, that he would be here, waiting for me.

I walked slowly toward David, never taking my gaze from his face. There was no longer doubt in my mind. His was the face that had looked down upon me as I lay naked and satiated in his bed. His eyes had glowed with love for me. His lips had wrought unimagined delights upon my body. His hands had brought me to dizzying heights of ecstasy beyond my wildest fantasies.

I halted a dozen paces from him. All week I had wrestled with the bizarre thoughts, fantastic suppositions, telling myself that I had only dreamed of Vido. A dream stemming from my dissatisfaction with a sterile life, coupled with my yearning for a future full of love and companionship. Add my fascination with this magnificent sculpture, and the only logical conclusion was that I had suffered a temporary derangement.

Logic be damned. "Vido?" I called, "Where are you?" My voice broke, so the words came out in a near-whisper.

Behind me pigeons took to the air with a rustle-squeak of many wings.

"Vido, come to me," I called, louder this time, my voice steady. "Come to me. I love you."

Strong arms encircled my waist. A warm breath stirred the short hairs at my nape. "Cara mia," a deep voice said in my ear. "Ah, dulce Lucia. L'amerò sempre. I will love you forever."

I turned in his arms. "I don't ask for forever, Vido. Only for today. And for some answers."

"Come. Let us have coffee and pastries. I will tell you what I can."

I resisted his pull on my hand. "No, let us have loving, and afterward coffee and pastries."

His face, so dear to me, relaxed into a smile, tentative at first, then wide and joyous. "Yes! Let us have the loving first." He swept me into his arms and carried me to his little room.

We were scarcely through the door when he caught me close. I entwined my arms around his neck. "I love you," I told him again. It was important that he have no doubts.

He lowered his forehead to rest against mine. "You love the man I seem. When you know the truth..."

"I will love you no less." I brushed my lips over his. "I have given us much thought, Vido. You are...unique. Like no other man in ways I cannot understand. I can accept that. What I cannot accept is losing you." I slid my fingers through his hair and tipped his head down. When our lips met, I deepened the kiss, tasting him, teasing him. "I love you."

"Cara mia. Dulce Lucia. Mio amore." He murmured the words against my mouth.

My lips traced over his cheeks, feeling the sharp prickle of his heavy beard. "Just let me. I love you."

I sensed his indecision, his hesitation. I could not bear the thought that his better instincts might overcome his body's needs, his heart's desire. With all my heart and soul, with the seductive skills he himself had taught me, I fought to convince him that we were meant for each other. A time would come, I knew, when we would have to face the reality of what he was, what I pretended to be. For now, I simply wanted to convince him of my love.

His muscles were taut and knotted with tension. I petted, stroked, licked, kissed. He was so controlled. But I was determined. After an interminable, suspenseful time, his tense body began to loosen.

I pulled the tail of his loose shirt from his trousers, pushed it up so his hard chest was exposed. I pressed my lips against his breastbone, felt the steady beat of his heart. His arms tightened around me as I explored with lips, teeth and tongue. I felt his heartbeat grow more rapid, felt his almost silent groan as I suckled a flat nipple.

"Wait." His voice was strained. "My shirt--" Releasing me, he stepped back and skinned it over his head. It landed on the floor.

His trousers hung low on narrow hips, revealing his navel, the faint dusting of hair that arched lower, leading the eye to the swelling in his trousers. I would follow that line soon, but first... "I love the taste of you." I ran my hands up his sides, feeling the ridges of his ribs, over his shoulders where muscles twitched and jumped at my touch. I flicked my tongue over his heated skin. "All of you."

He embraced me again, walking me backwards until my calves hit the edge of his cot. "I have not yet tasted you." He moved quickly, lifting me in a whirl of skirts. As he sat, he pulled me onto his lap.

Dissatisfied with my position, I pulled my skirts up so that my knees were exposed. A wanton gesture, but since he had seen me naked, how important were exposed legs? I wriggled around, until I was straddling him. Once settled, I looked into his eyes and saw burning need in the rich brown depths. My own blood quickened.

Watching him, I untied my bonnet strings. The poor, crushed thing was already dangling down my back. Once released, it dropped to the floor with a soft thud. I undid my blouse, shrugged it off. Beneath I wore only a sheer batiste camisole, lacy and very nearly transparent. When he looked down, I felt my nipples throb as if his mouth was already suckling them.

But he only touched a hand lightly to my cheek. "Let me take you to bed."

I smiled. "Let us take each other there." I quickly unbuttoned the camisole and, stripping it away, tossed it aside. As I combed my hands through his thick, silky hair, I thrust my body against his, flesh against flesh. "Take me, Vido," I demanded, then crushed my mouth against his.

His eyes flared. In one violent motion he had me pinned under him, flat on the bed. He fed on me, his mouth wide, sucking my flesh in and scraping the sharp edges of his teeth against it. His ragged breath gusted against my skin, chilling where his open mouth had left a moist trail. One of his hands streaked under my skirts, found me wet, ready. His fingers shoved into me, hard, driving in and out, while his thumb pressed against that most sensitive bud of flesh wherein lay my release. Greedily, recklessly he drove me higher and higher, until I crested with a scream.

I was still panting, still trembling, when his hands, wet with my honey, skimmed up my body, closed over my breast. Delicious pain inflamed me as his teeth scraped against tender flesh. The thrill that shot through me had my heels drumming against the mattress. I dug my fingers into his back, urged him on, twisted under him. I needed him desperately, now. "Now!" I cried. "Oh, Vido, take me now!"

My hands scrabbled at his back, pushing him away, pulling him closer. I struggled as he fumbled with the ties of my petticoats, arched as he dragged at twisted fabric, kicked my legs free of the smothering layers.

No sooner was I freed from my garments than my fingers attacked the buttons of his trousers. I ripped them open, not caring when one popped loose and went skittering across the stone floor. All I cared about was getting my hands on his sweat-sleeked body, on his satin-over-steel penis.

"More!" I cried. "Give me more!" I locked my hands around his penis, fought his restraining hands to bring my mouth to its dark tip. It was hot, so hot and wet, tipped with a droplet of divine nectar.

His fingers found me again, and stroked into me. My hips pumped, my thighs captured his hand. I wanted, needed, release again. My body arched, lifting from the bed, held in singing tension on shoulders and heels. My breath sobbed from my throat as I gushed around his hand.

He gave me no chance to recover. Instead he drove me ruthlessly up again, with fingers, teeth and tongue. His body loomed over me as he kissed his way from

toes to knees, to thighs, to navel, not touching my female parts. I writhed beneath him, wanting the heat of his hand, the roughness of his callused fingers, on me.

He tortured me. Each touch, each nip, each wet stroke of his tongue against overheated skin was agony. Yet it was a delightful, voluptuous agony, a transcendent ecstasy.

At last his mouth was on mine. I could feel myself about to shatter yet again, when he plunged into me. And I did.

But he gave me no time to rest. Even as I shuddered with the last paroxysms, he raised my legs to his shoulders and came deeper inside of me. My vision blurred then, until all I could see was his face, that immortal beauty I had loved upon first sight. "David," I cried. "Oh, David, I love you."

Seconds later he shouted his own release, and drove me over the edge into rapture again. We collapsed together, a damp, sticky tangle of arms and legs and bodies, gasping for breath. He lay half atop me, so his breath warmed the side of my breast, his free hand clasped the other like something precious. "Cara mia," he whispered, "did you call me--"

I covered his hand with my own. "David. That is your true name, isn't it? Will you tell me how..." I hesitated, still unwilling to voice the absurd conclusion that had come to me through hours of staring into the dark. "Or is this one more thing you cannot reveal?"

Gathering me into his embrace, he rolled to the side, so that we lay face to face, body to body. "There is nothing I cannot tell you now. Nothing, for you have said the words that unlocked my tongue." He smiled widely, and in doing so, became...who?

David? Or Vido?

Gradually my preposterous, impossible conclusions sorted themselves into order if not sanity. "You are David, aren't you? Somehow...in some unimaginable manner, you and that..." I flung an arm in the general direction of the magnificent sculpture I had so long admired. "...that are one and the same."

I craned my neck, managed to look him in the eye. "How? Tell me how?"

He stared back,. His eyes swimming in tears. "I cannot tell you. There are rules. I...oh, Lucia, mio amore, I could not tell you. Unless..." He shook his head and a single tear left a glistening trail across his swarthy cheek.

"Are you immortal?" Part of me worried that he was a construct of Satan, created to tempt foolish virgins. Yet he was so kind, so tender, that I'd not been able to convince myself that he was come from evil.

"No, but neither am I mortal. For three years, while my master carved my image from that block of marble, I felt my soul slowly being stolen from me. I was frightened, yet could speak to no one about it. When the last chip fell away from my master's chisel, my soul was pulled entirely from my body." His voice broke.

I sought words to comfort him, but was speechless. All I could do was pull his face to mine, kiss his lips, whisper, "I love you." His cheeks were wet with tears. I kissed them away.

After a great, shuddering breath, he spoke again. "For three hundred years I have been trapped here in the piazza. For three hundred years I have been able to tell no one how...or why."

"But you told me."

"Because you know who I am. I have no idea why, but when you spoke my name--my true name--I felt the proibizione--the forbidding that I speak--lift." He turned to his back and lay his forearm across his eyes. "I have had friends, lovers, in three hundred years. I do not deny this. But I was always alone."

"You are not alone now." Nor would he be, not if I were to have my say. "I will sell the lease on my rooms, find others here, overlooking the piazza. I will make a home for you."

When he didn't move, I raised myself onto my elbow, looked down into his face. "Unless...unless you do not wish..."

"Ah, Lucia, mia dulce Lucia. You do unman me." When he raised his arm, I saw tears again in his eyes. But his smile was wide and luminous. "You would do this for me?"

"I want nothing more than to live my life with you." I bit my lip. "But you will not...you will be forever young, won't you?"

The corners of his mouth turned down. "Will that matter to you?"

"No. No, I don't believe it will. But won't you be ashamed someday to be seen with an old woman? You are young, beautiful. While I will grow gray and wrinkled."

In reply, he wrapped his arms around me and held me close, so close that I could scarcely breathe. "I have been lonely for a long time, cara mia. It has taught me to take joy where I may find it. And with you I have joy." His lips closed over mine in a kiss so heartbreakingly tender, so filled with love and devotion, that I wept. My tears mingled with his as he rolled me over and slid into me.

He stroked slowly, as if the journey was less important than the company. His lips stroked over my face, his tongue laved away the tears, and his breath mixed with mine as our hearts beat in perfect rhythm. As the relentless force built within me, as passion's inexorable power began to radiate outward from where we were joined, we looked into each other's eyes. Into each other's souls.

And when we cast ourselves into that endless chasm, I smiled and whispered, "Vido. I love you, David."

* * *

I am old now, and Vido is eternally young. Our neighbors here in the apartments overlooking the Piazza della Signoria believe he is my nephew. At least some of them do. The others cast significant glances at us when we stroll the piazza together on Sunday afternoons. A young, handsome lad and an old, wealthy man are, after all, cause for comment.

Our lives have been rich. I realized considerable success in my work, eventually becoming the owner of Signore Mussacchio's Art and Antiquities Studio. In fact, Studio Raimondi is now considered one of Firenze's premier galleries and I have profited from its reputation. After I confessed to Vido about my masquerade, he convinced me to eschew women's clothing altogether, and so I have lived the last forty years as a man.

Only in our comfortable rooms do I become a woman. David's woman.

Vido's love.

~ The End ~

PUMPED UP, by Alisse Alders

Lauren had watched him for weeks. Watched his long muscular legs flex as he ran on the treadmill. The familiar thump, thump of his feet impacting the belt helped her focus on her own workout. At least that's what she told herself. She watched his hard biceps ripple as he worked the machines, watched the sweat shine on his shaved head. She'd long since stopped listening to her portable CD player. Stopped reading her book.

He'd become her motivation. Her single obsession. Though he'd never noticed her. Not once. They hadn't even made eye contact. He was probably married to some stunning, twenty-year-old with a body to die for.

And she was divorced, forty, and apparently a voyeur. How pathetic was that? But hey, a woman could fantasize, right? The fact that he made her heart pound and her pussy throb just sweetened the pot.

Shaking her head, Lauren smiled at her thoughts as she wiped the gym towel across her neck. She glanced over toward the running track and sighed. The gorgeous hunk of dreams had gone. He always ran for ten minutes, to cool down before he left. But it was late and the gym was almost empty. She had been so lost in her wet imaginings she hadn't realized the time. She checked her watch and headed toward the locker rooms. Stripping off her bike shorts, tee shirt and underwear, she tossed them on the wooden seat and turned the jets to the shower on full blast.

She sighed as the hot water streamed down her back, and closed her eyes. Despite the long day she'd had and the dreaded ten page synopses she had to finish tonight, Lauren didn't feel tired. She felt as horny as hell. Something about that man energized her. Inspired her. She'd lost ten pounds and toned up since she first 'met' him. She looked better than she had in years. Her writing had improved. It flowed to the point that she couldn't seem to type the words fast enough.

Hmmmmmm, maybe he's my muse, she thought. Yeah a bald, six foot, two hundred pound Adonis your muse? Shit, Lauren, you're losing it. Chuckling, she lathered the soap and rubbed it across her stomach. Muscles clenched, reminding her how aroused she was. She stroked a hand across her nipple and gasped. Shooting pings of desire vibrated through her pussy. She moved a hand down and flicked a finger across her clit. It was swollen and slick.

Restless energy filled her. Damn, she needed to come.

She turned the shower off and leaned back against the cool tile in the stall. Sliding a finger inside her pussy, while another stroked the outer lips.

She moved one hand up to pinch her nipples and whimpered. Her mind wandered to her 'gym man', naked with his bald head buried between her legs. She imagined his tongue laving her throbbing clit. The orgasm came intense and fast and she groaned.

A sound brought her back to earth and she jumped. Was it her moaning she'd heard? Or something else? Oh shit. She pulled the shower curtain over, closing the gap. She'd had no clue the plastic sheet was gaping.

Jesus, what if someone had seen her? But it had been so quiet and empty, she reassured herself. Rinsing off, she dressed quickly. Not bothering to dry her hair, she applied some mascara and swiped some gloss across her lips. Old habits die hard. She grabbed her gym bag and swung through the locker room door.

Her heart was in her throat. Instantly. He stood, half leaning against the cement wall in the foyer by the office, his sea green eyes staring at her intently.

"Sorry, I hope I didn't startle you." He moved off the wall and jingled a set of keys in his hand. "I need to close. The trainer, John, asked me to stay for him today." He smiled. "I was locking up."

She felt the flush creep up her face. Oh God, he hadn't seen her had he? Of all the times she'd daydreamed about actually meeting him, this particular scenario had never entered into her fantasies. Shit.

"I'm sorry , I didn't realize how late it was." She fiddled with the strap on her bag and tried to get her act together. A pregnant moment of silence stretched between them.

He opened the door, then cleared his throat. "Was there something else you needed?"

"Ummm, no." Lauren, get it together. "Thanks so much for waiting, and have a great evening." She moved toward the door he still held open. His size seemed to shrink the entrance by half. Her heart pounded faster. As she moved through the opening her breasts brushed against his chest and a tingle rippled down her body.

"Oh, I will Lauren. Thank you." he answered, in a soft, deep drawl.

She didn't need to turn to see the smile. She could hear the amusement in his voice.

"I'm Dane, by the way."

She turned back to him. "How did you know my name?"

"John, told me. He said you were still here and to make sure I didn't lock you in."

Lauren forced a smile and escaped to her car as fast as she could.

Dane watched Lauren as she hurried away. He could still picture her wet, naked body, undulating against the tiled wall as the orgasm hit. He knew he wouldn't forget that scene anytime soon. Every time he worked out he looked for her. Watched her, watching him. She was tall, blonde and toned. Gorgeous, there was no doubt there. He'd seen his share of attractive women. But Lauren possessed an innate, sensual aura that was enough to give any man a hard on. There was more than that though. A deeper, emotional pull.

He ignored it. He wasn't over Angie and he didn't want to be. It was easier that way. No pussy, no problems. Hell, the misery suited his warped state of mind just fine. Wallow in self pity for awhile longer, that was his plan. It was too hard to throw himself out there and try to make conversation, playing the usual dating games while he waited for the rejection.

Still, watching her pleasure herself, eyes closed, back arched, pink nipples crowning her small, firm breasts, had been an unexpected treat. He'd almost come. Right then. He wanted her badly. He could admit that much, but acting on it was another thing. He re-adjusted his hard, throbbing cock, and resisted the urge to stroke it.

* * *

Lauren, tried to stay away from the gym. She lasted two days. She scanned the area as soon as she walked out of the locker room.

He wasn't there. Turning the volume up on her now reinstated CD player, she set the controls to the treadmill. She concentrated on her stride and willed herself to stop looking toward the door. If he'd seen her, witnessed her writhing and moaning while she experienced one of the most intense orgasms ever, she'd be so embarrassed.

He saw you... a little voice in her mind taunted. And damn, despite the humiliation, the knowledge that he may have seen her made her pussy flood with moisture all over again. Forcing her attention to the magazine in front of her, she attempted to lose herself in the story and picked up the pace.

"Excuse me." Lauren felt a warm, hand grasp her shoulder. She looked up at six feet of bald, hunky Dane and jumped half out of her skin. Her feet missed the machine belt and she tripped. His arms wrapped around her pulling her onto the carpet in one sweep.

Yanking her headphones off, she stuttered an apology. His hands still hugged her waist. Lauren sucked in her stomach automatically. He felt so hard and warm against her. Damn why hadn't she kept her eyes on the door?

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Your towel fell and I was worried you'd trip over it."

She took a deep breath and looked directly at the wide expanse of his chest.

He spread his fingers then, resting them just under the curve of her breasts.

"Thanks so much." Her heart felt like it was going to burst, it was beating so fast. Shit, this man was a workout in itself. "And... Well , I tripped anyway," she answered. But still she didn't move out of his grasp.

His lips curved in a small smile. "You're staying late again tonight?"

Lauren almost choked on her spit. " Umm, I guess that depends how quick I shower."

"Take your time." He moved his right hand up slightly. His pointer finger was almost touching her nipple. "I'm closing."

The nipple tightened, begging to be touched. Her pussy clenched.

He released her, turned and walked toward the office. Just like that.

She watched him go. Chicken that she was, she skipped the shower, grabbed her bag and almost ran for the car.

Lauren rearranged her schedule in the days that followed, going to the gym at lunchtime. She was flat out avoiding him and she knew it. Part of her felt embarrassed that he'd witnessed such an intimate act, but another part grew

incredibly horny reliving the experience. Lauren Allen: desperate for sex and terrified of rejection.

Shit, how sad was that? She'd been divorced for two years and hadn't had one remotely serious relationship since then. Unless you counted a miserable long weekend in Phoenix, with an impotent, hopeless-in-bed, co-worker. Or was she the one that was hopeless in bed? Amazing what a cheating husband could do to a woman's psyche.

She leaned back against the kitchen counter and drained the last of her wine, contemplating another. She decided against it and set the glass in the sink. Her love life was beyond pitiable and she didn't need a hangover to add to it.

The only one who can change that is you.. She wanted to ignore the damn inner voice she spent so much time avoiding but in her heart she knew it spoke the truth. 'Seize the day', her mom had always said. Pulling a black, silk nightshirt over her head she retraced her thoughts and made a silent promise to herself.

* * *

Over the next two weeks Dane wondered what had happened to his sexy blonde admirer. He'd looked for her every day, but no Lauren. Despite his determination not to get involved, he felt more than a passing twinge of regret. There was something about the woman, and he couldn't seem to get her off his mind. Setting the weights down on the bench, he shrugged his shoulders in an effort to release the tension bunching the muscles in his neck. He looked up at John's 'Yo!' and caught the keys his friend threw at him.

"Yeah, I'll lock up again buddy, but you owe me a drink." He tossed them in his gym bag and laughed. " Hell, make that two."

Catching a glimpse of delectable female in the mirror on the far wall, he turned toward the pool. Lauren stood there, clad in a stunning black one piece bathing suit. It clung to her like glue showing every curve of her tall, lithe body. The high cut emphasized her long, shapely legs.

As she smoothed her wet hair back off her face, she met his gaze. The impact of her stare hit him like a fist to his gut. She wasn't her normal, flustered self. She seemed different somehow. Calm, and sexy as hell. He watched as she smiled, and flicked a tongue across her bottom lip. His cock hardened instantly. Damn, she was coming onto him. Blatantly.

He knew she was divorced. Gossip ran rampant in the gym. He couldn't understand why a man would be stupid enough to let her go, though. He smiled back and followed her firm little ass with his eyes until she disappeared into the locker room.

* * *

Lauren folded and refolded her clothes, stalling her shower. An older, grey-haired woman on the bench near the door was talking on her cell phone.

Okay lady end the convo, Lauren silently pleaded. And get out of here.

Would he come to her? Was she brave enough ? She was wet, her nipples were so hard they hurt. I can do this.

A few minutes later the locker room door swung closed behind the older woman with a soft whoosh. Lauren sighed with relief.

She stripped and stepped into the shower. Before she could turn it on, she heard the door swoosh back open. Damn. The woman was back. Oh Lauren you're being such a friggin' idiot anyway. She pulled the white curtain back an inch and peeked out.

He stood there leaning against the wall, just as he had that night in the foyer. Only this time she was naked. Oh my God. She yanked the plastic back in place and turned the shower on with shaking hands, swallowing a yelp as cold water streamed over her.

What the hell am I doing?

Lauren lathered the soap between her hands and tried to ignore her tingling breasts and throbbing pussy . Too scared to pull back the curtain again she held her breath, listening to see if he was still there.

He cleared his throat. She almost dropped the soap. Do it Lauren. Do it, her inner voice begged. Be wild for once in your life. You promised yourself. She stood there completely still, while her thoughts warred with each other, then with shaking hands she slowly pulled the curtain open.

He was standing in exactly the same position, sexy smile intact.

The moment crawled by with agonizing slowness.

His deep, southern tone finally broke the silence.

"God, you're gorgeous. You look like a nymph with the water cascading down your body."

Lauren couldn't answer. Her tongue felt too thick, like it was stuck to the roof of her mouth, but her pussy throbbed silently in reply.

"Touch your breasts for me." he demanded.

His voice had changed, Southern with a Scottish lilt.

She hesitated for a long moment, then cupped her breasts and ran her thumbs slowly across her hard nipples. The soft soapy film made them feel as soft as satin and so sensitive. Her breath hitched. She moaned out loud.

He groaned. The sound filled her with a sense of power. She trailed a hand slowly down her stomach and watched his eyes follow. Emboldened by his obvious arousal, she stroked a finger across the lips of her pussy.

"You're so beautiful."

She could see the outline of his hard cock clearly through the material of his sweat pants. She slid a finger deep inside her passage and whimpered as shards of pleasure rippled through her.

His cock jumped in response. "I want to see you play with yourself. I want to see you come for me, baby."

The deep, gravelly sound of his voice and his intent gaze took her to the edge. As she teetered there for a brief second, he spoke again.

"Look at me, Lauren."

She met his eyes and felt something she'd never experienced before. The intensity of the emotion careened through her, like a freight train, forcing her to gasp for air. Their brilliant, green color reminded of summers spent in Ireland, or the moss that covered the rocks by Lake Michigan. So many things. It was as if she'd known him before. Full of emotion, fraught with gold glinting in their depths, his eyes brimmed with all the things she'd wanted for so long. She gasped his name as the orgasm ripped through her and she went over the precipice.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been leaning against the wall of the shower stall. Her entire body felt like pool of jelly.

"My turn?"

His warm breath brushed her neck, sending shivers down her back. Although she was still languid, lost in that surreal orgasm aftermath Lauren jumped. She hadn't even heard him come up to her. She turned, mumbled a yes, and smiled.

"You sure, lass?"

"Yes. I'm sure," she managed, before his lips claimed hers.

She didn't think it was possible to become aroused again so fast. But her heart renewed its frantic beat and her already soaked pussy throbbed again. He kissed her deeply for what seemed like hours, stroking her tongue with his own, teasing her with its softness. He fucked her mouth, simulating the action with his tongue. She didn't resist when he turned her back toward the shower wall.

The hair on his moustache tickled as he nibbled and kissed his way from her neck down her spine.

"You have a gorgeous ass," He bit down hard enough on her flesh to make her flinch, then ran his tongue gently across the spot. "Was that too hard ? I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"No...no not at all." Lauren leaned her forehead against the tile and tried to slow her breathing. She was so close to orgasm again. "I just... It's well...its just been so long."

"I understand, love." He kissed his way back to her neck and covered her breasts with his hands as she arched back against him. He pinched her nipples. She whimpered. His cock pushed against her lower back, twitching and pulsing.

"Do you want me, Lauren?"

"Oh yes." She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me lass." He bit down on her neck. "Tell me."

"Yes. Yes, Dane, I want you to fuck me. Hard."

He grasped her ass pulling it toward him. He spread her cheeks and pressed the tip of his cock against her clit. She bit down on her lip as she felt the orgasm coming. He pulled away and waited until her breathing slowed.

Then he plunged into her. She groaned trying to hold off. But his strokes were so deep, his cock filled her up so well she couldn't control herself. She moaned and begged him to slow down. "It's okay. Don't wait baby. I'm right there with you." He rammed his cock deep inside her and they went over the edge together.

The cold, wet tile against her cheek brought her back down to earth. The hot, hard male plastered to her back made her smile. She didn't even feel embarrassed that she'd been so wild. Actually she felt just the opposite. She felt renewed.

"I guess we need to move eventually." His voice vibrated against her neck and she shivered.

"Yes, I guess so."

But he stood there holding her for few more minutes.

"I'd like to see you again." He ran a hand over her hair and chuckled. "We kind of did this ass backwards."

"Yeah. We sure did."

"So then... How about we go for coffee and act civilized?"

"I'd like that." Lauren answered, turning toward him.

"I'll be waiting by the desk." He kissed her gently on the lips and left.

She watched him go and smiled as a wave of happiness bubbled up inside her heart.

You did it, Lauren

~ The End ~

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY, by Jean de Cherie

Kelly Samuel woke slowly. The house was a little too warm--she'd forgotten to open the window when she got ready for bed. She stretched, and realized her legs were tangled in the sheets and blankets. She unwound and kicked them off, making a disorderly pile on the polished hardwood at the foot of her single bed.

She stretched again, and thought about the New Year's Eve party she'd attended the night before. She ran her hands lightly over her bare, too-small breasts, once more certain they were the reason she'd come home alone. Sure, there were plenty of guys there, but as long as Randy Taylor was around she wasn't going to pay any attention to anyone else. Not that he knew she even existed.

Damn that Violet! She had been strutting around as usual, wearing a halter top that concealed absolutely nothing. Her nipples were perpetually pouting, and the little rings hanging from each caught and held every eye, all the guys' and most of the girls'. Of course, most of those guys and some of the girls were in lust with Violet, and Violet played it for all it was worth.

The rest of the girls were just envious. Kelly was one of the envious ones. I'd suck you, Randy, she thought, I'd swallow every last drop, and fuck you too, if that's what you want. But the last she'd seen of Randy was when he and Violet went up the stairs, he with a hand casually draped over her shoulder and toying with one of those nipple rings, she with as many fingers as she could fit down the backside of his jeans.

Kelly wondered how many of them knew Violet was still a virgin. Sure, she'd suck any cock and even let some fuck her ass, Kelly had heard, but her pussy was like a holy shrine. Except nobody was allowed to worship there. Meanwhile, girls like Kelly who didn't have knockout bodies went home alone and took care of their own needs. Not entirely satisfying, but at least she knew what went where, and, more importantly, when. Which was likely more than could be said of most college boys.

When Randy and Violet still hadn't come down an hour later, Kelly said polite goodbyes to her hostess, fended off advances from two guys most likely too drunk to get it up even if she had brought one home, and walked the scant two blocks to the house she shared with several other students.

Ter's station wagon was parked out front, and a VW Beetle that might mean Ter's friend Joey was there, too. He wasn't a student at State, he went to a private school about a hundred miles away. They'd been each other's first, and sometimes if they weren't screwing someone else they'd end up together. Looked

like that's what happened tonight. But there were no lights and not a sound to be heard. Maybe they'd gone to another party in a third car. No, maybe not. There were three glasses on the coffee table, one of which still had some dark red wine in it. An empty 1.5-liter wine bottle was atop the trash in the kitchen, she saw. One-and-a-half liters? Among three people? No wonder the house was so quiet! She hoped they were all passed out, not driving around somewhere. Too weary to think of much aside from sleep, Kelly managed to brush her teeth and undress before collapsing into bed.

Morning sunlight streaming through the window made her tidy room glow a rich golden hue. With the window shut there was no need to jump, shivering, to the bathroom next door and get warmed up in the shower. Today was New Year's Day, so she didn't have to go to work. It was Christmas Break, of course, and classes wouldn't resume for another three weeks.

She didn't have to get up, didn't have to do anything. The morning, the day, were hers to do with as she pleased. Right now she chose to imagine what it would have been like if it had been she, not Violet, ascending the stairs at the party last night...

Kelly took a nipple in each hand and imagined what they'd look like with rings in them. She twisted one, then the other, wondering how it would feel to pull on such a ring. Or, better yet, if Randy Taylor was the one doing the pulling. Maybe if he put a fine golden chain through those rings and led her through a room full of guys, every one wanting to touch her but none daring, for all could see she was his property...?

Perhaps rather than a chain through pierced nipple-rings she could wear a leather collar? One with a fur lining, so it wouldn't chafe her neck...

Kelly became aware she was wearing a fur collar of sorts, one attached to a deep rumbling sound.

"Toby," she said, "I love you, but now is definitely not the time." She pushed the long-haired, black-and-white cat off the bed, and he scampered out the door he had pushed open.

"Where were we?" she whispered, closing her eyes again and returning her hands to her nipples. "Oh yes. Randy, you say such naughty things! I'm not listening, really I'm not."

As she said this, Kelly's right hand traced light, widening circles, first around her tit, and then to her belly, and finally to her waiting pussy. Her two middle

fingers gently stroked the lips, spreading them until her little clit just peeked out. "I can't stand more than about half an hour of this, Randy," she said. Or maybe she just thought it. Who cared? She continued the gentle stroking, sometimes pinching her clit between her lips, sometimes letting it strain in the open air. Then she took it between forefinger and thumb, gently twisting and twirling, just as she'd done with her nipple. Exquisite barely began to describe the sensation.

As her clit became fully aroused, it stood erect and resisted her fingers. Kelly began an up and down motion, two fingers on either side, now and then sliding a couple of fingers inside her pussy to moisten them when the friction became too much. Shifting back to two fingers, Kelly began a slow sweep of her entire opening, alternately touching and rubbing her clit, her inner and outer lips, describing a sort of figure-eight.

Again and again, she dipped a finger inside, easier now for her lips were fully pouting. Sometimes she would slide one into her mouth to taste her own honey. She sucked greedily, imagining it was Randy's cock instead of her finger. She'd never seen his pecker, but she was sure it would be large. Sliding two fingers inside her sopping slit, she fucked in and out, wishing she had a dildo, while her other hand kept on rubbing and twisting her clit.

The delicious sensation was beginning to spread outward from the center of her pleasure when Kelly had the sudden feeling she was being watched. "Just Toby," she thought, reluctant to stop when she was so close. She kept twirling, kept sliding two fingers in and out, but she couldn't shake the certainty someone was watching her.

On the one hand, the prospect was exciting. Kelly had never let anyone watch her masturbate, but she thought back to her fantasy of a few minutes ago, of being led, completely nude, through a room full of ogling men. She imagined many would have their cocks out, unable to control themselves at the sight of her. The tingling sensation grew and grew. On the other hand, what if it wasn't a cat?

In danger of becoming distracted, yet unable to shake the certainty, she opened her eyes and let out a startled "Eep." Her hands froze in mid-motion.

A man stood there in the doorway, a stranger. He had the body of a Greek statue, if a statue wore blue jeans. And of course his skin was, well, skin colored. A trail of fine, dark hairs ran down his chest, disappearing into the waistband of his low-slung jeans. Kelly wondered how long he'd been standing there. Judging by the prominent bulge, he'd been watching for a while. Conflicting impulses raced

through her mind--should she continue putting on a show for this guy, or order him out of her room? Before she could decide, he made up her mind for her.

Placing an upright finger to his lips, he silently crossed the room and sank to his knees next to her bed. He kissed one fingertip and gently placed it on her mouth, then lowered his own mouth to her pussy.

Because he approached from the side, rather than between her legs, the sensation was utterly unexpected. He kissed her lips as though they were her mouth, taking first one, then the other between his own, gently pulling and sucking them. Although his tongue brushed her clit, he seemed to be ignoring it. That was enough to make her want to scream. Over and over his tongue snaked into her slit, making occasional, incidental contact with her clit, but always going elsewhere. He licked her inner lips, he licked her outer lips. He licked her entire pussy with the flat of his tongue. He flicked once or twice near her anus, gave a brief suck to her urethra and went back to circumnavigating the opening of her womb, her world. And his gentle fingers went wherever his tongue did not. It wasn't the first time someone had eaten Kelly's pussy, but it was the first time anyone had seemed to enjoy it.

Kelly found she was playing with her nipples, panting and fighting the need to kick her legs back and forth. She didn't want to break her mystery lover's concentration but the urge to shudder, at least, was almost uncontrollable. Then something happened that stilled her, captured her whole attention.

He had taken her clit between his lips, and was gently teasing it against his teeth. At the same time, somehow, he was also sucking it. Before she could get tired of that, he switched, once more treating her cunt as if it were a mouth, only this time French kissing her clit as though it were a tongue. Now he was sucking her clit again, at the same time lavng it with his tongue, then pulling away until only the tip of his tongue was touching her, pulling away some more until her clit had to strain to reach. Meanwhile two fingers slid in and out of her pussy, while a third just rubbed her ass.

She arched her back and found she was stretching her arms above her head, as though she'd been restrained, and all the while the assault on her clit continued. Soon she was crying out, shuddering as wave after wave of the most delicious pleasure spread through her body like ripples spread when a stone is cast in a pond. If she'd been in control, Kelly might have stopped then and there, but her mystery lover didn't let up. Soon she was shuddering again and again as the most amazing orgasms wracked her body. Finally, exhausted, she had to take her lover's head in her hands and lift him away.

"Where did you come from?" she gasped.

He just looked up, winked, and went back to gently licking and sucking her pussy, avoiding her by now oversensitive clit.

Sitting up slightly, Kelly fumbled at the waist of the mystery man's jeans. He turned toward her and helped, as she first freed his erection then slid the denim over his bare ass. He needed little prompting to settle himself between her wide-spread legs. His large cock was so rigid it slid into her waiting pussy like a hot knife through butter. After only half a dozen lovers, she hadn't seen--or felt--that many penises, but right away she could tell this one was special, if only because of the very special treatment its owner had just given her.

Kelly remembered reading, that size didn't matter. A pussy fits a cock like a glove on a hand, no matter how large or small. But here was living proof that larger is better. When he slid in to the hilt, Kelly felt as though she'd never been fucked before. No, strike that, never been made love to before. This cock filled her completely, stretched her notion of intercourse the same way his tongue had stretched her definition of orgasm. Right then, reveling in the sensation, she could not imagine any other ever bringing her to such heights of pleasure. No, ecstasy, that was a better word.

Each time he withdrew seemed to take minutes, and more minutes to penetrate again. She felt time must be moving in slow motion, as that cock slid, effortlessly, in and out of her mind and body. After what seemed like an hour at that same, deliberate pace, he started thrusting faster. She felt that familiar tingle beginning to spread. God, she was coming again--and a second time!

Clenching her muscles, she tried to hold him in her pussy, but he escaped, and she felt a sudden void. Kelly opened her eyes when she felt him move up the bed. Thinking he wanted her to suck him, she stuck out her tongue and tried to pull him to her. Instead, he laid his cock between her tits. She saw what he had in mind, and pushed them together to form a channel around it. Still slick with her natural juices, it slid easily back and forth. Each time the head neared her lips she would try to touch it with her tongue.

Finally, Kelly couldn't stand any more and pushed him over onto his back. Taking the same sideways angle he had, save only that she knelt on the bed, not the floor, she began licking up and down the shaft. She slowly and lovingly sucked each of his balls, then nibbled her way up to the head again. She found she loved the tang of the pussy juices coating his cock. She loved the slight resistance as she kept her lips together and slid the head in and out of her mouth. Although she wouldn't have thought it possible, she was feeling aroused once

more. Not aroused toward yet another orgasm--this was a different sort of arousal. It was as though all her inhibitions had drained away, leaving her pure and wanton and free to give or receive pleasure as she pleased. She'd already received more pleasure than she'd thought possible. Now she meant to give as good as she'd gotten.

Clasping him securely in her right hand, she began pumping, delighted at the way his skin slid up and down. She was in control, now, just as he had controlled her, but her angle was wrong. She pushed his legs part so she could kneel between them. That was much better. She lowered her mouth as far down as she could go, applying gentle suction on the down stroke, and flicking the head with her tongue as she came up again. Her hand moved in time with her head and she felt a thrill of exhilaration. God, she was hot! She'd never enjoyed sucking more, never wanted to make it last, never lusted so much for the feel of hot cum splashing at the back of her throat.

Slowly, dimly, Kelly became aware fingers were gently twisting one of her nipples and a hand was caressing her back. On a sudden impulse, she took her hand off his cock and grasped the one he was using to play with her nipple. Then she placed it firmly on the back of her head and, still holding it, showed him that she wanted him to force her. She hoped she hadn't misjudged him, hoped he'd be just as gentle here as he had been elsewhere. Her trust was not misplaced. He ran his fingers through her thick blonde curls as she raised her head, then gently but firmly guided as she sucked him in once more. His breathing quickened and she knew he was getting close. As she came up she felt both his hands on the sides of her head and knew he was telling her it was now or never. Even when he was about to come, his first thought was of her. She could get to like this guy! Momentarily locking eyes with him, she winked, just as he had done so many hours ago, and returned to her self-appointed task.

Kelly loosed some moisture from her mouth to help lubricate his shaft--the friction her hand had created was making it dry, and that simply would not do at this stage of the game. Now slick once more, she increased her speed all the while slightly loosening her grip, and pursed her lips once more. She used his cock to fuck her mouth, offering momentary resistance as the head met her lips, then engulfing it in her warm wetness, gently holding it with mild suction just as her pussy had done earlier.

At last (too soon except her jaw was beginning to ache he let go. Greedily she tried to capture the treasure, but she couldn't contain it all. A glob of his cum escaped her mouth and slid down his shaft. She swooped and caught it before it could reach the nest of his pubic hair. Kelly stuck out her curled-up tongue, to

show him his load, and then smacking her lips, swallowed noisily. Her smile was beatific, her mood euphoric.

"Oh, God, where did you come from?" she asked, but got only a smile in reply.

When she finished she melted into his arms and they lay like that for a time. He kissed her, softly, deeply, pulling her lower lip the same way he'd nibbled on her pussy, but she knew this couldn't last. Gently, he shifted her to her side. Then, looking her in the eye, he kissed his forefinger and laid it against her lips. He rolled out of bed and covered her with her grandmother's patchwork quilt. Her mystery man gazed at her for a moment, as though to memorize the sight, picked up his jeans and disappeared into the bathroom.

Kelly snuggled into the quilt, feeling warmth beyond what it normally offered. Her thoughts drifted back over the night before and the beautiful morning. She slept.

As if in a dream, she heard the front screen slam and, a few moments later, the unmistakable roar of a VW Beetle fading into the distance. Suddenly alarmed, she sat bolt upright. Had he left without saying goodbye? Would he be coming back? Should she tell Ter that her friend Joey had ravished her? She smelled toasting bagels and coffee from the kitchen and decided the best time to tell Ter about Joey was right away, make a clean breast of it. She slipped out of bed and into her flannel bathrobe. Finding her fluffy slippers, she walked slowly into the kitchen, feeling a little sore. No not sore, she thought, more like stretched. It felt too good to be called sore!

* * *

"So he's gone?" she said to Ter, who sat at the table, cradling a steaming mug, seemingly lost in her own thoughts.

"What? Who's gone?"

"Joey. Your friend and part-time lover. Wasn't that who just left? Is he coming back?"

"Well, yes, Joey was here, but we were in bed before you got home. If I'd known you were interested, I would have introduced you. No, to answer your other question, they won't be coming back. Not any time soon, anyway."

"Interested? Jeez, Ter, you told me he was your first fuck, and he wasn't bad, but that's like saying as explosives go, a firecracker and an H-Bomb are about the same. I'll be walking bow-legged for maybe a week."

"What are you talking ab--" a slow, sly smile spread over Ter's open features. "Was he about 6 feet tall, not bad looking, slender but built like an athlete, with a cock that makes you wish you had one?"

"Yeah, Joey, right?"

"No, honey, that was Jerry. He went to my school too, but he's older. He dated another friend of ours, Kitten, if you can believe that. She was a virgin, so I decided it was my duty to relieve his tension. That way he wouldn't be pressuring Kitt to screw him. I wasn't trying to take him away or anything--I did have her best interest at heart, after all. I didn't enjoy it, of course," she winked, "no, not me. I just did it to help her, but once they started fucking there was no tension to relieve. Too bad."

"So what happened to her, to Kitt?"

"One night they did some mescaline and somehow they ended up fucking, right there on the living room floor, she told me. That was her first time, the only time they didn't use a condom. She got pregnant. Her Mom made her have an abortion and break up with him. You know, the old 'you corrupted my daughter, stay away from her or I'll have you arrested' story. Funny thing was, her mom was Chair of the County Republicans, so the abortion had to be done on the q.t."

"And they never got back together?"

"No, she found a guy Mom and Dad--really Mom wears the pants in that family--approved of, and they haven't seen each other for a long time. Too bad, like I said, he's a pretty nice guy and I think he really loved her. He doesn't talk much anymore. Did he say anything to you?"

"Not a word. Not a single word. He must have been passing on his way to the bathroom and saw me playing with myself. I don't know if I left my door open, or if Toby opened it for me. Anyway, I just about shit myself when I saw him standing there, watching. I was about to tell him to close the door and go away when he came in and started doing the most amazing things to my pussy... At first I was imagining he was Randy, Randy Taylor, this hot guy from my English class--"

"Randy Taylor?" Ter said, "I know him. I fucked him. Twice, just to be sure, you know? Trust me, Kelly, if Randy was lost in the woods and the only way to start a fire was rub two brain cells together, he'd probably freeze to death. His cock's fairly big, but as a lover, he might make a good dentist. Might. Don't waste your time on the likes of him!"

"But--"

"Girl, if you just spent an hour with my friend Jerry, nobody is going to satisfy you for a while. Doesn't mean you should stop looking, just means you need to aim higher than Randy Taylor. For some girls, he'd be enough, but he's not even good enough for me. You're gorgeous, and smart to boot. Not only does he not play in your league, he's not even playing the same sport!"

Kelly thought of Violet and her nipple rings, of Randy and cold campfires. She thought about what a good friend Ter was, and how lucky she'd been that her door was open this morning. She thought of what a good lover Jerry had been. He might be someone she could love, as well as make love with, but clearly his path, his demons, were driving him in another direction, one she could not share.

Ter just sat there, looking owlish behind her round glasses, but said not a word. Kelly mused on what Ter had said. She was too good for Randy, though she meant it without spite. If Jerry had stayed, he might have proven to be human, not just the spark that lit the fuse. The last thing she needed right now was someone else's baggage. With a mild start Kelly realized she and Ter had adopted the same pose, both sporting half smiles, each contemplating the one that got away.

~ The End ~

ENCHANTED STONES by Kathy Kulig

Carolyn Moyer hammered the last tent stake into the mossy ground just before sunset. Hands on hips, she admired her tidy campsite and breathed in the scent of pine sap and dry leaves. October foliage glowed red and gold in the late afternoon sun, and a breeze softly moaned through the tall evergreen and maple trees.

Camping felt strange without Brian. Occasionally, a painful memory of her failed marriage would pester her like an annoying mosquito buzzing around her head, but after a year she didn't mind being alone as much. She gathered firewood, set stones into a circle to border her hearth, and started a fire. Twilight settled in the Appalachian Mountains and darkness would soon follow. Although the evening was warm for October, she enjoyed the company and glow of a wood fire.

The sound of rustling leaves startled her. She turned toward the disturbance and scanned the forest. Within seconds, the noise escalated into loud stomping. Something approached her camp. Her heart pounded while she waited for the animal to appear. She hoped it was a deer and not a bear.

She spotted the tawny brown figure. The deer zigzagged around trees and brush, stumbling every few steps. Finally, it reached the edge of Carolyn's campsite and collapsed. She slowly walked to the deer, then gasped. A yellow arrow stuck out from its hind quarter, and a streak of blood trickled down its leg.

Another sound echoed through the woods, and she stepped back from the deer as a large albino buck appeared. Carolyn blinked and shook her head, wondering if she was dreaming. Deer were common in this area, but not snowy white ones.

The buck stood defiantly between the wounded doe and Carolyn, pinning her with his angry glare. His eyes were crystal blue, hard, calculating and intelligent. Gripping the arrow in his teeth, he yanked it out of the doe. He snorted and scraped the ground with one hoof, then dropped the arrow. Carolyn watched as he licked the wound and prodded the doe with his nose until the animal struggled to its feet, then sprinted off into the woods without a limp.

Gooseflesh prickled Carolyn's neck and down her spine as the white buck walked toward her. Suddenly, a man emerged from the woods with a bow and a quiver of arrows in his hand. The white deer spotted the man and charged off in the opposite direction.

"Hey, there! Did you see that albino deer?" The hunter asked. "Very rare. Some trophy he'd make."

"Don't you know hunting is illegal here? This is a state park." The fury was evident in her voice.

"I know where I am, lady. I shot a doe on legal ground, and I've been tracking her for hours."

"It's getting too dark to track deer." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"I hate to lose that doe. She'll die now. Such a waste of meat," the hunter said breathing heavily.

"I don't think she'll die." Carolyn pointed to the arrow on the ground.

He picked up the shaft. "Ain't that the damndest thing?" He surveyed her tent and campfire, then eyed Carolyn up and down. "You camping here alone?"

Carolyn clamped her jaw tight, trying not to let fear show on her face. What could she do if this guy tried anything?

"No, the lass is not alone," said a deep voice behind her with a thick Irish brogue.

Carolyn spun around; a scream caught in her throat. A tall man stood by her fire. His compelling blue eyes crinkled at the corners, hinting humor, but his full mouth showed no signs of a smile.

"You best be heading home," the man said to the hunter.

The hunter nodded. "Just leaving, sorry to disturb you folks." He walked into the woods and disappeared into the darkness.

Carolyn stared at the man and placed a hand on her chest, feeling her heart thump.

"I didn't mean to be startling you, lass, but should you be out here all alone?"

"There's nothing wrong with camping alone. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Well now, as it happens, I was in the area and heard the commotion."

"That hunter was tracking a deer, but it got away. Did you see the white buck?"

"Must have missed him." He reached his hand out to shake hers. "I'm Rory Donovan." His unfathomable eyes somehow put her at ease, but also stirred delicious yearnings in her thoughts.

"Carolyn." Although he was tall and broad in the shoulders, he didn't seem threatening. Long dark hair brushed his shoulders and glistened like polished obsidian in the moonlight. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and suspenders, attached to brown trousers, were stretched over his muscular chest.

"You live nearby?" Carolyn asked.

"Just over that mound, not far from the Druid's circle."

"I found the stone circle on my last camping trip. It's like a mini Stonehenge. Do you know anything about it or how long it's been there?"

"The site be at least several hundred years old." He stared up at the moon for a moment. "It be a magical place and guarded by the Sidhe."

"Sidhe? And who are they?" She smiled suspiciously. Did he think she was gullible or was he just teasing her?

"Beings of the otherworld, beyond the veil. They guard the sacred ground for the Druids."

"What do the Sidhe look like?"

"Only saw one. He be a wee man as tall as my knee with long white hair, clad in a cloak of green, and wore a crown of gold."

"Can't say I've seen any Sidhe." She grinned.

"Glad to hear that. You only see them if you desecrate their domain."

Now she understood his point. "Don't worry, I always clean my campsite when I leave."

Rory poked at her fire and added another log. "I don't expect that man to be bothering you again. I should leave you now."

"I was making some tea and roasting a couple franks for dinner. I have plenty to share if you'd like to join me." It wasn't like her to be so impulsive, she thought.

"Very kind of you. I've already eaten dinner, but a cup of tea would be grand."

Carolyn steeped the tea in large tin cups while Rory dragged a log over to the fire for a seat.

"I'm not keeping you from your family, am I?" she asked.

"No, I have no family. What about you?"

"I'm an only child and my parents live in Florida."

"You not be married then?" A smile twitched at his eyes.

She loved that Irish accent. "I was."

"Ah, he died then."

She was surprised at his assumption. "No, he found someone else. I'm divorced."

"I was married too. We emigrated here from Ireland, but she was ill and died on the trip over."

"That's very sad. I'm so sorry." She wanted to ask how long ago his wife died, but didn't want him to dwell on the painful memory.

Rory stood up. "Well, I best be heading home. Thank you for the tea and conversation."

He grasped her hand as she stood, and heat rushed to her face.

"I enjoyed meeting you Carolyn. Maybe I'll see you again," he whispered.

Her heart tugged like the pluck of a harp string. She felt drawn to him and didn't want him to leave. She had never believed in love at first sight, but she might now.

His mouth looked inviting, and the thought of his arms around her sent tingling sensations through her chest and to other more intimate areas. She shivered more for the intensity of his gaze than the briskness of the evening. Even though she had just met this man, she'd let him kiss her if he tried.

This time the sparkle of amusement in his eyes matched his smile. With one hand, he gently touched her shoulder length hair. "It's the color of a fawn, and just as soft." He raised her hand to his mouth and lightly touched her fingers with his lips. "Good night, Carolyn."

He released her hand and walked into the dark forest. When she managed to draw air into her lungs, she whispered, "Good night."

* * *

After a day of hiking along the Appalachian Trail, Carolyn felt invigorated. She had scanned the forest during her hike hoping to see Rory, but she couldn't find him. Why hadn't she invited him to visit her again?

She stopped at the Druid's circle to watch the sunset before returning to her campsite. Several stone megaliths encircled a small meadow and rose several feet above her. The site had been studied for years by various groups, resulting in many theories, but no definite age or origin. She loved camping up here. It was her little escape from the hectic world, a place where she could be alone to reenergize, and de-stress from her job.

Sitting cross-legged, with her back against one of the megaliths, she admired the view of the tall stones casting eerie shadows from the setting sun. The air was fragrant with earth and autumn leaves. She rested her head against the rough surface of one stone and closed her eyes. The megaliths were like silent sentinels. She tried to imagine the stone's energy flowing into her, healing her body and spirit.

She dozed, and when she finally opened her eyes, the moon shone brightly on the stones, and a white, hazy mist had settled in layers along the ground. The sound of crunching leaves shook her fully awake. Squinting through the darkness, she waited, heart pounding. The white buck reappeared and moved into the circle. Not wanting to scare him, she remained still, watching him. He bent down and nibbled at the dried grass, then lifted his head toward the moon.

The white deer vanished, and Rory now stood in the same place. Carolyn leapt to her feet, her body shaking.

"Oh, my God," she gasped, her chest heaving and her knees threatening to give way.

Rory quickly closed the distance between them. "Easy, easy lass. I'm sorry I startled you." He reached out his hand and grasped hers, but she yanked it back.

"Don't be afraid, Carolyn. I have enough to bear without scaring you away." The moon reflected the pain in his eyes.

She started to back away. "Can't be... What I saw..."

"What you saw is the Sidhe curse."

She shook her head. "I know there are things in this world that can't be explained. I even saw a ghost once, but this...I'm not even sure I can trust what I saw." She stared up at the sky, focusing on the silver glittering stars and the white misty light from the moon glowing through the tree branches. The night sky was something she could understand, something she knew was real. When she looked at Rory, he seemed real, but trying to grasp the image of him changing from a white deer into a man, that was too bizarre. She shivered.

Rory looked up through the trees. "Isn't it a fine fresh night? A good time for a story, if you'd let me tell it." He extended his hand. "Please, let me walk you back to your camp." His words were soothing and unthreatening. Too stunned to argue, Carolyn followed him back to her cold campsite.

He stacked logs in the hearth, and soon a fire was snapping and crackling. The flickering flames cast surreal orange patterns on the canvas tent.

"Sit a bit." Rory took her hand and rubbed it between his. The concern in his face pained her.

"I am bound to this predicament by me own err. The Druids escaped from Massachusetts during the witch burnings and settled in these mountains. They arranged the stone megaliths for the purpose of power and protection, then commanded the Sidhe to guard the circle."

Rory prodded the fire with a stick and threw on another log. "Are you cold, lass?"

"A little, I'll go grab a wrap." Carolyn walked into her tent and pulled a sweatshirt over her head, then brought out a blanket and handed it to Rory. This will be a long and very strange story, she thought, and she wanted to hear it all.

They settled on the log again. Damn he was handsome. His mouth pursed while he seemed to concentrate. Again she wondered what it would be like to kiss him. He slipped his arm around her shoulders. It had been so long since a man held

her. The hardness and warmth of his body was comforting, and she didn't pull away.

"There has to be some logic in all this...there has to be some explanation."

"Will ye not believe me?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't believe you."

"I can only tell you what I know." He pulled the blanket around Carolyn's shoulders and his. "I left New York City, and settled in these mountains in 1805."

Carolyn's body went rigid. That was about two hundred years ago. A chill crept up her spine, making the hairs at the nape of her neck stand up.

"I stumbled upon the standing stones while hunting, and shot a deer within the circle, but then a strange thing happened. The Sidhe appeared and held a bow with a silver arrow notched in its string. He spoke in a musical tone, 'Ye hath defied this sacred ground; the Sidhe curse ye shall suffer.' I laughed, thinking the cold had frozen my eyes and chilled my mind."

"You laughed?"

Rory nodded. "Then the Sidhe shot his arrow into me, and I changed into the white buck. The Sidhe said, 'Ye are cursed, but ye will have the power to heal the creatures of this forest.' He said that the curse could only be broken during a full moon on the eve of Samhain with a sacred offering."

"And how often is there a full moon on Samhain?"

"About every sixty or seventy years." Rory leaned back and gazed into her eyes. He seemed desperate for her to understand and believe him.

She had seen him change with her own eyes; she couldn't deny that. "I believe you, Rory."

He let out a breath and smiled. "Thank you." His face moved close to hers, and she felt his warm breath. His fingers slid along her jaw, and his eyes became sultry. Tilting her chin up, he brushed his lips lightly over hers. When Carolyn didn't protest, he took her mouth again, more deeply, their tongues gliding and exploring.

Her heart pounded fiercely when he pressed his body against hers.

Carolyn clung to him, enjoying his powerful arms around her, and his mouth that made her head spin and the stars blur. "I just don't know how to take all of this. How do you change form?"

"If I can capture a glimpse of the moon, I can change into a man for a time."

"Can you break the curse?"

His eyes clouded, and he stared into the fire. "I've not had the opportunity before. I must make an offering during the full moon on Samhain -- tomorrow."

"What kind of offering?"

"An offering of milk and curds within the stone circle."

"That sounds easy. Curds, you mean butter?"

He nodded. "The sidhe are said to be descendants of the gods that control the ripening of crops and the yields of cattle. Milk and butter are offered to honor their efforts. But there be another offering." His hesitation worried her. "I have to fall in love and pledge my life to a maiden in a dance of bliss -- make love to her."

Carolyn abruptly pulled away and nearly fell off the back of the log, but he caught her arm. She jumped up and shouted, "Oh, that's slick. And I fell for it." She perched her hands on her hips and stomped around the campfire. "That was certainly the most creative line I've ever heard. I don't know how you did the magician thing, but it was a good trick." She shook her head and glared at him. "You should leave."

But the sadness in his eyes made her heart feel like lead. He should be pleased, not sad, that he almost convinced her to believe his wild story. She pressed her lips together to keep them from quivering.

He looked up at the moon, then stood and walked up to her. Heat radiated to every nerve, and she nearly reached out to touch him, but hesitated.

"I regret upsetting you. Your presence has stirred feelings I hadn't thought I possessed. I didn't mean to...I won't visit you here again." The depth of sorrow in his words tugged at her heart. He turned and started walking into the forest.

A lump formed in her throat. As she took a step to tell him to stop, a cloud drifted over the moon, darkening the sky. Only a few feet away, Rory's body

became diaphanous, then changed into the white stag. Carolyn sucked in air, her knees gave way, and she collapsed on the dewy earth.

* * *

The next morning she awoke inside her tent, lying on her sleeping bag with a blanket tucked around her. Her mind wandered to the previous night. Did Rory change back and carry her into the tent? After she saw him change into the deer she couldn't remember what happened. It couldn't be a trick. She had been standing right next to him.

She stumbled out of the tent and blinked from the glaring sun shining through the tall pine and bare hard wood trees. Most of autumn's glory had fallen, leaving behind a tangle of gray, creaking branches, and blanketing the ground with golden paths. But the beauty of the forest did nothing to comfort her today. She had been using her camping trips to run away from problems or avoid relationships. It was time she stopped running from life.

She searched the woods for Rory. She had to tell him that she was falling in love with him. If she didn't find him by this evening -- Samhain's moon -- he wouldn't have a chance to break the curse.

At dusk, she opened her cooler and pulled out a stick of butter and poured a cup of milk. She carried a blanket, a sleeping bag, the butter and milk to the Druid's circle, then placed them on the ground at the center. After stretching the sleeping bag across the dry grass, she pulled the thick, fleece blanket around her shoulders, and paced around the stone circle. She watched the sun dip behind the mountains, and several stars winked at her in the darkening eastern sky. She'd remain all night if she had to. She wondered if he could remember her while in the deer form.

"Rory! Rory!" After calling him all day, her voice was hoarse.

Then the white stag crept out of the woods and slowly stepped inside the circle. "Rory," she whispered. He stopped at the opposite end of the circle. She didn't move, afraid that he'd run away.

The deer lifted his head, apparently searching the sky. Waiting. The moon hadn't risen yet. The snap of a dried twig startled the white buck. A whistling sound pierced through the trees and a sickening thud followed. Carolyn was horrified as the white buck collapsed on the ground; a yellow arrow impaled his side.

"I got him! Clean shot!" The hunter she had seen days ago ran up to the buck with another arrow notched in his bow.

"Stop! Don't touch him!" Carolyn ran over to the white deer. She dropped to the ground and stroked the buck's neck.

"Come on lady, he's dead." The hunter kicked the buck's hind legs, then put down his bow and arrow.

"Murderer! Evil, heartless murderer." The tears streamed down her face, and each breath fought through her heaving sobs.

"Leave him be lady, it's too late -- "

The buck moved. He slowly lifted his head, and gripped the arrow with his mouth and wrenched the shaft out, dropping it on the ground.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," the hunter whispered.

The full moon hauntingly appeared between the trees, and a white haze glowed within the stone circle. The buck became transparent, and as the image of the deer faded, Rory appeared.

The hunter, forgetting his bow and arrows, stumbled backwards, disappearing into the forest.

"Don't weep lass. I've wept enough tears to fill the oceans." Rory stood and took Carolyn into his arms.

"But you were shot." She patted his side.

"I told you, this is sacred ground, no creature can be harmed here." He tilted his head, captured her mouth and kissed her fiercely. He pulled away and cupped her face in his hands. His blue eyes reflected the milky orb of the moon. "Carolyn, I love you, but I won't take advantage of you."

"You're not taking advantage. I love you, Rory. Let me help you break the curse." She moved into his embrace. "I've come prepared." She pointed to the milk and butter.

He grinned, a wonderful crooked grin, then studied her for a moment. "You sure, lass?"

"Never in my life have I wanted another man more."

"I have no will to refuse you." His smile faded, his eyes were heavy-lidded as he gazed into hers.

She raked her fingers through his long hair, then ran one finger over his full lips. They parted and the tip of his tongue licked her finger. She moved her hand around the back of his neck, then kissed him, enjoying his tongue gliding, searching and probing.

"Rory," she whispered against his lips, then moved to the base of his throat and ran her lips and tongue to the V of his shirt. With shaky hands, she unbuttoned his shirt. Coarse hair tickled her fingers. She slid her hands along his hard chest, but it wasn't enough; she wanted to feel more of his warm skin. Hooking her fingers under his suspenders, she pulled them over his shoulders, then yanked off his shirt.

His hands then grasped the bottom of her sweatshirt and slipped it over her head. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw she wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

"Ah, lass," he said. "You are so beautiful." He palmed her breasts, and when she moved against his hands, he squeezed and fondled them harder. Her nipples puckered from his touch and the cool night air. Crouching, he trailed kisses from her stomach upward between her breasts, to her neck. His heated tongue then retraced his path, grazed along her neck, to her breasts, and teased each peak, sucking and nibbling gently. Sensual delights rippled from deep within her, then surged and inflamed every nerve.

"Yes," she breathed as he continued to tug on one and then the other sensitive nub.

Her hands first gripped his hips, then moved to the swollen ridge beneath his pants.

"Carolyn."

She quickly unbuttoned his pants and slid her hand inside, grabbing his thick cock. His breath caught, and she slipped his pants down over his hips. He kicked them to the side and stood naked before her. His muscular body glistened in the moonlight. Wet heat moistened her panties and desire surged through her body when she saw his aroused sex.

She fumbled with her jeans, and he helped her ease them off, tossing them next to his on the grass. His hand slid down her body, torturously slow, touching her over the thin wisp of panties now soaked. Her body quivered. "Cold?"

"No. Sensitive and deliciously warm."

"Good," he whispered against her ear, as he hooked a finger under the edge of her panties and slid them off.

His fingers spread over her belly, then lower to her mound, and rubbed her engorged clitoris. Her inner depths clenched and throbbed, aching for the feel of him inside her. If he continued to touch her there, she would soon come. She brought his hand up to her breast, then reached out and wrapped her hand around his swollen and hardened shaft, stroking it up and down.

"Mmmm," she purred.

"Oh, Lord," he said, pushing her hand away. "Not yet, lass. We have plenty of time."

Then he knelt before her, delicately flicking his tongue over her swollen clit, then gently, so gently sucking her. He had a wonderful mouth. She grabbed his head with her hands, tangling her fingers in his hair, as a wave of pleasure began to rise out of her control. "Oh, that's so good."

Thrusting a finger inside her opening, he pushed her over the edge. She cried out as the orgasm pulsed through her with such intensity she feared her knees would give way. He pressed his face against her thighs and wrapped his arms around her legs while her body continued to quake.

"I can't wait. I want you now," she breathed.

He stood, pulling her close, his erection pressing against her belly. A low growl vibrated from his chest, then he lifted her off her feet and gently laid her down on the sleeping bag.

He eased his body over hers. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she felt the wonderful warmth and weight of him, then his thick cock pressed against her moist opening and plunged deep inside with one effortless thrust.

"Oh yes," she said, raising her hips to allow him to move deeper. Snaking her arms around his back, she grasped his buttocks and rocked her body in rhythm

to his. In the moonlight, she saw passion raging in his face and tension straining the muscles in his neck.

"Tell me what you want." His voice was low and lustful.

"This...Yes...Like this." Hot pleasure swirled inside her. She called his name as another release shook her.

The cries of her climax mingled with his groans.

"Oh. Lord." His body shuddered as he pumped harder, faster, and then found his own release. She gripped his buttocks tighter and raised her hips to draw him even deeper, writhing beneath him until he was completely spent and collapsed on top of her.

Afterward, he rolled beside her and wrapped his arms around her. Resting her head on his chest, she listened to his rapid heartbeat and clung to him. Soon his breathing and heartbeat slowed to normal, and Carolyn smiled. A cool breeze blew across her heated skin and made her shiver. Rory pulled the fleece blanket over them, and they snuggled close.

Beneath the glow of the moon, surrounded by the dark forest and the protection of the megaliths, they avowed their love for each other. Their contented sighs were carried on the misty breeze swirling around the standing stones.

* * *

The morning sun warmed the earth and burned off the layers of fog that had settled within the meadow. Carolyn saw brightness behind closed lids as she stirred out of her dreamless sleep. Her eyes popped open, and she sat up.

Rory was beside her, still asleep.

She shook him. "Rory, wake up!"

One eye opened. He smiled, then pulled her down, cradling her in his arms.

"You won't change back on me will you?"

"No, the curse is broken, lass. Now, you best get under this blanket." His smile was sultry and tempting.

As they lay together, something bolted through the thick mountain laurel. They sat upright as a white buck burst out of the forest.

"How is that possible?" Carolyn asked.

"The hunter," Rory said sadly. "It's his judgment."

The buck ran across the meadow and back into the woods.

"Now, my darling..." He wrapped his arms around her. "I believe there be two hundred years of loving I need to make up."

~ The End ~

*Quarry the innocent on sacred ground
Hath suffer the sting of silver arrow,
And dwell as fair creature, woodland bound.
May cede the glamour of faery sorrow
With dance of bliss on Samhain moon,
Wee bounty of milk, and offer of curds,
The powers that be will find the way soon,
To pierce the veil betwixt the worlds.
---Sidhe Curse*

KATIE AND THE GHOST, by Amy O'Conner

The wind had risen steadily for the past two hours, the old timber sign directly below her window creaking as it swung in the gale. Kate rolled onto her stomach, pulling her pillow over her head.

Ugh. Of all the ridiculously hackneyed, touristy tricks...

A sudden gust of wind caused a particularly tortured squeal. She sat up in disgust. How on earth was anyone supposed to sleep with all that racket? She could hear the wind racing along the eaves, could feel the sudden draughts as it occasionally changed direction and snuck in through a minuscule crack between the shutters. It even smelt right--like damp old salt and tar. That she could live with. It was the damn sign that was driving her nuts.

She grabbed the robe she'd trailed over the end of the bed, determined to complain. The first touch of chill floorboards under her feet had her drawing her legs straight back into the bed and under the covers. What was the point? Hell, the landlord probably put a lot of effort into getting the chains supporting the sign to squeak with just the right amount of ominous groan.

Goosebumps flared over her skin, and she snuggled deeper under the covers. And that was another thing. According to the guide book, the inn had central heating. Well, apparently not in this particular room! It was bloody cold.

Just another cheap trick, she guessed, muttering to herself as she tried to block out the irritating noise. Kate jerked upright again as a loud thump echoed through the room. The walls actually vibrated, it was so loud. She flopped back onto the bed and punched her pillow, finding it hard to believe how obvious the supposed 'ghost' was. In twelve years of ghost hunting, she'd never yet found a real one, yet the landlord had just smirked--smirked, mind you!--when she'd checked in earlier in the evening. Usually, the owners of haunted houses weren't nearly so sanguine. He had an awful lot of confidence in himself, and she was quite looking forward to wiping the smirk off his face come morning. More so, now he'd totally disturbed her sleep.

She tried to relax, staring at the ceiling and attempting to think peaceful thoughts. Her image of a tropical beach where the sea shushed gently over the sand was overridden by a vision of a wild grey ocean pounding mercilessly into the stone pier at the end of the street, the real sound of the sea reaching her ears from two blocks away. It was a dark and stormy night...

Kate laughed out loud, and gave up. She may as well start to debunk the place right now. After all, why wait 'til daylight? It wasn't like she was afraid of ghosts.

The Red Lion, the staging inn where the Earl of Heatheringham had been murdered back in 1807. For nearly two hundred years the owners had made a killing by promoting themselves as a haunted hotel. She had to smile at the way her thoughts were running. Maybe 'killing' wasn't quite the most tasteful word to describe the obscene profits various landlords had made over the years. The earl's murderer had never been caught and, according to local legend, the earl had never found his rest. It wasn't a bad story.

That was the problem though. It was a story. She pummelled her pillow in frustration as a door slammed down the hall, banging repeatedly in the wind until someone finally latched it properly. Ghosts? Huh!

"Annoying, isn't it?"

Kate sat up abruptly and scanned the room, uncaring that her nightgown was low cut and the voice so very definitely that of a man. Deeply masculine, and warm with amusement, it caressed her skin, its lingering vibrations heading unerringly to her stomach.

No one.

She flopped tiredly back onto the bed, again staring at the pitted plaster of the ceiling. It wasn't the first time a recorded voice had been used, supposedly that of the ghost. What was a first was the fact that the voice had appeared to be talking to her. Not mumbling about some wretched lost love, or carrying on about vengeance and retribution as the supposed ghost floated through a wall, but a pithy comment about the fake 'ghost effects'. It was certainly different; she had to give the innkeeper brownie points for imagination.

"And the creaking sign does grate on the nerves after a while."

Her stomach curled with pleasure. It was such a beautiful bedroom voice, the sort of voice that if he asked...well, she'd certainly have to consider.

Kate smiled at her thoughts. It was obviously too long since she'd had decent sex. Actually--she thought back, tallying quickly--it was too long since she'd had any sex, period. Her vibrator was just not the same as a hot-blooded male. She pondered what he looked like, the actor who'd made the recording. Absolutely the most gorgeous voice in the world had to belong to Sean Connery, there was

no question about that, yet he was...a little too old. Okay, so Sean was a lot too old. Yet, if he asked...

"You're probably sixty-three, and about as sexy as a wilted petunia," she announced to the room at large.

"I beg your pardon?" The voice was languid, faintly amused.

"And butt-ugly," she added.

"If that means what I think it does, young lady, then I fear..."

Kate drew a long, quavering breath, the rest of his comment lost in her stampeding thoughts. She'd suddenly realized she was having a perfectly sensible conversation with a recording.

A recording? Not likely.

The landlord definitely got extra credit for creativity, she decided, sitting up and drawing her robe loosely around her shoulders. There'd be a tiny microphone hidden somewhere in the room so he could hear her every word, and a speaker so she could hear his replies.

"It's all quite simple really." She was muttering aloud as she groped on the floor for her slippers, her memory of the freezing floor boards on bare feet still extremely vivid.

"What is?" Polite interest resonated in that gorgeous voice. God, if she could fuck a voice, he'd want to watch out for himself. She'd have him up against the wall and assuming the position in no time flat.

"Where are you?" Kate glanced around the room, her eyes skimming over her small suitcase, the spindly-legged dresser and the one comfortable arm chair. "I know you're hiding somewhere close."

He had to be outside the room. Who was he? Surely not the landlord? She'd have noticed if his voice had been quite that...delicious.

A resigned sigh surrounded her. "Well, if you insist." There was no mistaking the sound of a put-upon male. "But no screaming," he admonished. Kate could practically see the finger waving threateningly under her nose.

She sniffed her disbelief. "I don't scream."

"Really?"

She nodded firmly. "Never."

Kate was staring fixedly at the door, and barely noticed the breeze that swirled briefly around her ankles until a flash of color near the fireplace in the corner caught her attention. She spun around to find a man watching her, chocolate brown eyes almost comically wary.

She could have kicked herself. Eyes. Of all the dumb things to have noticed when she should have been looking for the secret passageway that must have somehow been hidden in the wainscoting.

He bowed low, seemingly quite at ease in her room, even if it was the middle of the night. "Nicholas, Fourth Earl of Heatheringham. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

She felt her eyebrows fly up. The very suddenness of his appearance had her flustered. Why hadn't she heard the hidden door opening and closing? More to the point, if the landlord could keep the hinges of the hidden door so well oiled, why couldn't he have spared a squirt of oil for the damn sign? Even as she was staring at the stranger in disbelief, she was aware of the wind picking up and the sign groaning even more piteously.

'The Earl' flicked a lethargic hand towards the window, apparently sharing her thoughts. "I do wish the landlord would do something about that damned..." He winced. "Sorry ma'am. That rotten sign."

Kate laughed. She couldn't help herself. He was playing his role to the hilt, the epitome of a regency earl. Even the clothes were right. The tight-fitting pantaloons molded his legs nicely, showing off his muscular thighs. His Hessians gleamed black and, even in the limited light, she could see the sharp creases in his cravat. His navy blue coat fitted snugly over his shoulders, highlighting the breadth of his chest, and she had an unexplainable longing to trail her fingers along the seams, to see if was really all him under the immaculate clothing.

Unashamedly, she inspected his costume from head to toe. Even his dark hair was correct for the time period--short, but carefully mussed at the front to look like he'd just been out in the wind. Well, maybe not quite the gale that was blowing on the other side of the window. Her tongue darted out to moisten suddenly dry lips. Yep, it was all him under the clothes, with not a sign of padding in sight. There was something so, so...masculine about him, about the

way he was standing there with a mocking smile on his strongly chiseled face, one foot resting negligently on the fender.

Of their own accord, butterflies started to flutter against her stomach, and her fingers clenched. Actor or otherwise, she was in lust. It was positively sinful for a man to look that good. And to look that good in period costume...

Oh my.

Every secret fantasy she'd ever had about being ravished by a dashing earl was stirring itself into life.

"Are you going to introduce yourself?" he asked, returning her scrutiny.

"You know who I am. Good game though." Although she'd never admit it out loud, she was secretly impressed. The landlord had gone all out to convince her the room was haunted. Now, however, she had other things on her mind.

Things like that gorgeous hunk of a man who was quite unconcernedly making himself comfortable in her wing-backed chair.

"You should watch that," she pointed out smugly. "If you were really the Earl of Heatheringham, you'd have waited for the lady to sit before taking your own seat."

His eyelids were half closed, and he looked up at her somewhat broodingly. "If I were the Earl of Heatheringham," he replied, "I should hope that I was intelligent enough to realize that customs have changed. It is no longer necessary."

His fingers strayed to his single fob, catching Kate's attention. An image of those fingers stroking her naked skin as soothingly as they were rubbing on the dull gold skittered through her head, and she almost missed his next words.

"I believe the year is 2005?" A single eyebrow was raised in laconic question, but his fingers continued their mesmerizing action.

Reluctantly, Kate lifted her eyes back to his, only to be met with a look of wry male amusement. The tingling that had been slowly spreading across her skin immediately evaporated, replaced by a slowly burning anger. This jerk was still trying to convince her that ghosts existed. How dare he try and play her for a fool like that?

"Of course it's 2005." Her tone was scathing, and she took two quick steps across the room until she was so close he had to bend his head back slightly in order to hold eye contact. "And I dare say your last pay slip had the date printed on it too."

He managed to look mildly interested. "What is a pay slip?"

Oooh, he was good.

As a wave of his cologne wafted around her, Kate suddenly realized that maybe standing this close hadn't been such a good idea after all. He smelt absolutely divine--like lemons and cedar--and she could feel his body heat radiating out to enfold her in a velvet blanket. Hot, musky male...Unconsciously, she shifted a little closer, her arm actually reaching out, nearly touching his shoulder, before she hastily jerked it back.

"Stop acting dumb." Angrily, she spun on her heel, and paced back across the room to stare at his reflection in the shuttered window. She had to keep her distance. It was the only safe thing to do when she was around a man whose body simply screamed SEX.

"I'm not stupid, honey." A smile creased his lips, a dimple appearing briefly in the corner of his chin. "You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"I'm not your honey," she spat. "And of course I don't believe in ghosts."

"Touch me."

"What?" She felt her own jaw dropping comically open. On second thought, though, it was an offer she wouldn't mind taking him up on.

"Touch me," he repeated patiently.

Kate started slowly back across the room. He was just sitting there, sprawled in the chair, his head lolling against one of the wings. One leg was draped casually over the arm, swinging gently as he watched her approach from under his sexily half-closed lids. If ever a man had bedroom eyes, this had to be him. They were absolutely lethal.

She stopped a foot away. For no apparent reason, every tiny hair on her body had suddenly stood to attention. Did this man have charisma, or what? Her hand reached out, almost hesitantly.

"Scared?" His voice was husky, teasing--annoying. She grabbed her scrambled wits together and reached out confidently for his shoulder. It definitely seemed the safest--and least blatantly sexual--place to touch. Still, the power she imagined in those shoulders, the way they would ripple as they held her weight, arranged her under him...

Her fingers touched smooth linen fabric, and she looked up triumphantly. "See!"

"Look more closely," he suggested. There was something in his voice that made her look abruptly downwards. Her fingers were resting on the wing of the chair, the smooth weave of the upholstery directly under her fingertips. Her hand appeared slightly blurry, passing straight through his shoulder and...

"Aaaahhh." She jumped back, so abruptly she tripped on the solitary rug, and slumped untidily against the bed.

"I thought you said you never screamed?" That blasted eyebrow was raised in sardonic enquiry. "Never, you said."

"So I lied." Her eyes were wide, staring at the man who hadn't moved when she'd put her hand right through him.

"Apparently." His lips quirked. "Do you believe in ghosts yet?"

"No. You're a, you're a...an illusion. That's it." She was thinking furiously, as she pulled herself upright, smoothing her nightgown and pulling the neck more closely together. "That's it! A hologram!"

Her confidence miraculously restored, she walked back across the room, and totally ignored him, circling behind the chair and peering high up at the walls and ceiling, trying to spot the projector.

He chuckled, a rich rumble that had her tummy doing funny little flips. "A hologram? What an imagination."

He stood languidly, and she spun back to watch him, fascinated by the way each individual muscle undulated with the movement. She shook her head in disbelief, her mouth watering. "You are just too good to be true." Kate murmured the words, her eyes still glued to his legs. Oh how she wanted to feel those legs tangled with hers, the weight of them pressing her into the bed as he...

She shook her head again, totally annoyed at his loud bark of laughter. "You're rather sweet--in a skeptical kind of way. May I know your name?"

"Kate Morland." She answered absently, hardly aware she'd even done so. There was something so engrossing about the way the pantaloons clung to his legs. They left very little to the imagination, and they seemed rather, well, filled around the groin area. Surely that had to be padding?

"Well, Katie, I'm sure we'll meet again."

"Kate," she corrected. "Never Katie."

He chuckled, the sound making her clench her thighs together in silent protest. How could a sound arouse her like that? God, she must be desperate.

"Come on, and kiss me, Kate?" he asked mischievously, bowing pleasantly in her direction. His shape started to waver and she stared, totally enthralled, as he faded away. From a distance, she heard his voice echoing in her head, fading but still amused. "Until later, Katie..."

* * *

Kate had spent over an hour scouring the room for either the projector or the microphone before eventually giving up for the night and returning to her bed. It was cold between the sheets, heavy old linen that took forever to warm up. She shivered, wishing it was already morning. She could hardly wait to start her search properly. There was still the hall outside to check, and the room right beside hers. She hadn't quite discounted the possibility of a secret passageway either. It could be linking her room to... To where?

Putting her hand right through him had pretty well proven there wasn't an actual person in the room with her, so there was no real need for melodramatic passageways and things. Pretty unlikely in an inn too, she realized. Now, if he'd been murdered in his own bed, then she'd have been looking high and low for secret passageways and spy holes. The older manors and castles were absolutely riddled with that sort of cool stuff, and Heatheringham Place had existed for a couple of centuries before the Earl was murdered.

Excited as she was by the possibilities, she eventually forgot about the mind-numbing cold and fell asleep. Even the tortured groaning of the inn's sign couldn't keep her awake any longer.

She was dreaming, half-formed images flickering behind her eyes, when she became groggily aware that the storm outside had slowed. After hours of listening to the wind howling in the background, the sudden silence was almost

eerie. She shifted restlessly, pulling the sheets closer under her chin and cursing the change. If anything, the noise had been the perfect accompaniment to her dark dreams of handsome earls and deceitful actors.

The earl's murder had happened on a stormy night--similar to this one, if folklore was to be believed. She could just imagine a cloaked man skulking up the creaking stairs, perhaps hovering outside the door in last minute indecision.

Slowly, so slowly, the door swung open. Only a crack, but enough for him to sidle through--a deeper, more menacing shadow in the darkness of the room. He approached the bed softly, long dagger gripped in his white-knuckled hand, a sudden flash of lightning painting him in stark monochrome. The roaring wind covered the stealthy sounds of his approach: his heavy breathing, the rustle of his clothes as he raised his hand slightly upwards. For an instant he looked down on her, his eyes nothing but a cold glint deep under the hood. Then the air whistled, the knife plunged, struck deep--

Kate jerked upright, her heart pounding in illogical terror. It hadn't really happened like that. It couldn't have. She shook her head fretfully. As the knife had struck, the hooded cloak had slipped, revealing the face of the murderer. The earl's younger brother. But the murder had never been solved, so how had she known that?

Just a dream, she told herself forcefully. But...

Dreams were usually based on something. Maybe a too-rich dinner the night before or, more often, the last thoughts before falling asleep. That was all it was. Her subconscious was playing tricks on her.

As her heart steadied, she glanced towards the window--nothing as new-fangled as a clock was provided in this particular room. Streaks of grimy light were creeping through the shutters. Pre-dawn. She tried to untangle her brain, to force herself fully awake by focusing on the things around her. Just things, but so much more substantial than that terrifying dream world.

It was warmer than she'd expected--had the landlord finally taken pity on her and turned the central heating on? Orange light flared in the corner as she flopped back into the pillows, the sudden warmth having made all her good intentions about getting up fade away to nothing.

The fireplace? She turned her head fully, intrigued by the way the light played on the walls. A roaring fire filled the hearth, the flames racing each other up the

chimney. The heat it threw was staggering, and more than explained the warmth of the room.

Fair enough. She closed her eyes, consciously relaxing.

But hadn't the chimney been blocked off...?

It was probably just another trick she decided. But who cared? It was too pleasant lying here in the warmth, watching flame shadows chase each over the ceiling, to bother wondering about it. A cooler breeze danced across her legs and she reached for the sheet, vaguely surprised to find it snagged about her ankles. She must have done a fair bit of thrashing about during the nightmare to have kicked it right off.

"Uh-uh." A firm hand gripped her wrist, steering it away from the sheet and placing it at her side.

Too startled to speak, she didn't struggle for a minute, then sanity and self-preservation returned. Kate wrenched at the restraining hand with all her might. She could feel him leaning on her more heavily. If it wasn't for that tiny extra pressure, she wouldn't have believed he'd even noticed her struggling.

She flung her other hand across her body, hand curled and fingernails bared, clawing at the intruder. Her hand passed through air. It seemed there was nothing above her wrist, yet she couldn't move it, could still feel the pressure of strong fingers digging lightly into her flesh.

Oh.

My.

God.

There was no possible way this was happening to her. None. She so did NOT believe in ghosts. Especially ones she could feel, but couldn't touch.

No, this was not happening.

Even as she struggled against the man, she heard his husky chuckle. This time she even felt it rumbling through her skin. In order to hold her steady, he'd shifted his body so he was half over her. She kicked at his legs, frustrated when he just settled himself closer.

Worse than the fact there was a strange man in her room, was the way her brain was whispering about all the wicked things she could do with him, reminding her of all the different ways she'd imagined an inventive lover would drive her to orgasm.

And that chuckle! A thousand hummingbirds were trying to batter their way out of her stomach, and she could feel an embarrassing trickle of liquid between her thighs. His voice, his chuckle, his large hands slowly pushing her nightgown up to bare her breasts to the cooler air...

Rough fabric scraped over her naked skin, and she could feel his erection nudging against her stomach. The sudden chill between her legs reminded her she hadn't bothered with panties last night. That would teach her to go commando...

She was nearly nude. He was fully dressed.

It made her feel vulnerable. And, that made her stomach clench, her nipples pebble. She was aroused, and it just wasn't fair. Attractive as he was, he was still a stranger, and she wasn't in the habit of hopping into bed with strange men.

An extremely gorgeous, strange man...

"I don't believe in ghosts!" she wailed, fruitlessly trying to push off an attacker her hands passed right through.

"Don't you?" The Earl's voice was an amused murmur beside her ear, his breath warm and moist.

He blew gently and she felt the tiny hairs on her neck standing on end. Then his tongue was darting deep into the shell of her ear, licking and teasing. He puffed lightly, just once, and her whole body shuddered uncontrollably.

Once more she tried to toss him off, to jack-knife her body off the bed. Her arms flailed through blank space, yet still he was there on top of her, holding her down. Damn.

"This isn't logical!"

"No, but you'll enjoy it," he promised softly, the sheer seduction in his voice stilling her struggles.

With her eyes open wide, Kate could just see him, could see his immaculate clothing and boyishly ruffled hair. There was nothing boyish about the expression on his face, however. His eyes were dark, his features taut. He looked like a man who wanted. A man who wanted her like he'd never wanted anything, or anyone, ever before. The little voice in the back of her mind was positively crowing in glee.

Lips dry, she watched as he lifted himself onto his elbows, positioning his body so her legs were trapped between his knees, his arms to either side of her head. For a moment he held himself immobile, simply watching her reaction. She licked her lips, saw his mouth open slightly in response. Then he lowered himself slowly, deliberately, until his lips were brushing hers in the faintest caress.

The last thing she saw before her eyes drifted closed were the ghostly flames reflected on the ceiling above their heads. Without conscious thought, she gave in to her own desire; the need to taste him--just once.

His lips moved on hers, a teasing glide of cool flesh over her own bed-warm skin, then his tongue joined in the game, wetly licking the seam of her mouth until she accepted him, opening her lips to his gentle invasion. As his mouth closed more firmly on hers, his tongue began a leisurely exploration of her mouth, rimming her gums and her teeth, dueling playfully with her tongue. The heat built slowly and, as her arms reached up to him, uselessly trying to draw him closer, the kiss changed. His gentle introduction became a forceful attack, and her arms dropped to the bed, all thoughts swallowed in the siege. When he finally allowed her to emerge for breath, her mind was spinning, her body hot and aching with the need to feel his naked skin against hers.

He'd literally kissed her senseless, and the knowledge of it was doing strange things to her. It wasn't like she'd never had an assertive lover before, but certainly never anyone so unconsciously...powerful. God, he knew exactly what he was doing. She lay limply beneath him, her head as light as if it was stuffed with nothing but fresh air. She couldn't even find the energy to be annoyed at the way he was watching her so smugly. So much for her desire to kiss him just once--once would never be enough.

"Damn," she muttered, raising her arms obligingly over her head as he tugged her nightdress higher, dropping it in a heap on the floor.

He stepped away, and Kate felt the mattress lurch as his weight was removed. She propped herself up on an elbow, her inner voyeur eager to watch as he

stripped off his own clothes. The dawn was growing brighter and, even in the dull grey light, she figured she'd see exactly what was under the cloth.

She could still see him--just--but, disappointingly, the Earl wasn't nearly so clear in the daylight as he had been at night. It wasn't like he was see-through, exactly, he just wasn't quite...solid. Not a morning person, when she first woke up, she saw everything through bleary, sleep-fogged eyes. That was what he looked like now.

Still, it didn't stop her mouth watering as she watched him drag his cravat from around his neck and drape it over the chair. He shrugged the coat from his shoulders. His fingers worked the buttons on his shirt. The whole time he watched her, his knowing eyes fixed on hers. If he was just a little closer she'd have reached out for him, grasped the buttons and ripped. She wanted him naked. Now.

But she couldn't touch him, she remembered. It was so unfair!

His fingers slowed, teasing, and she glared across at him, hating the way his lazy chuckle vibrated right through her body.

"You're not married, are you?" she asked, suddenly suspicious. It was one thing to be a little wanton, but another altogether to sleep with a married man.

He raised that eyebrow and, not for the first time, she wondered how it was possible. Most people raised both eyebrows at the same time...

"Well?"

"After two hundred years?" He sounded amused.

"You know what I mean."

"No." He was serious for a moment. "I hadn't married when my brother inherited, so he provided the heirs."

Kate stared at him. "Oh. You, uh, you know that..."

"That I was murdered by my brother? Yes." He smiled sadly.

"Ah, well..." She was uncomfortable now, and wishing she'd never raised the subject. A few impulsive words, and the mood had flown out the window.

The earl shrugged. "It was a long time ago." A wicked grin lit his face. "I haven't, however, forgotten all my skills."

"Skills?" She could feel her face turning red.

"Mmm-hmm. Skills," he purred, letting his gaze drift down her body.

Everywhere his eyes touched, she felt their heat, felt her skin igniting. Simmering desire suddenly burst into an inferno of need. With nothing that hot gaze caressing her, she moved restlessly, desperate for his touch.

He pulled his arms free of his shirt, dropping it carelessly on the floor, then bent to tug off his boots. There was something unexplainably sexy about a man in stocking feet, she thought, watching avidly as he rested his hands on his waistband.

"Hurry up," she urged, trying not to look disgruntled when he smiled.

For a long moment he stood without moving, simply looking at her. She wondered what he was seeing? A naked woman sprawled across the bed... Suddenly self-conscious, Kate drew her legs closer together. The way he was looking at her--the hunger in his eyes--had made her feel her nudity.

"There's no need to do that," he murmured, and he started across the room.

Even in the dim light, his outline fading, she couldn't help noticing the sheer elegance of his movements as he prowled towards her, stalking her. She shivered. His face was set, a hunter who never failed, and she was so obviously his chosen prey.

Perhaps his hunger was catching? Her heart stuttered as he paused at the foot of the bed, and she stared up, caught as helplessly in his gaze as any small furry animal.

Touch me, touch me.

Now.

A silent mantra, but she couldn't help it. She needed him.

Please.

He leant forward, eyes intent, and she forgot to breathe.

Then his hands were around either ankle and he'd yanked her down the bed, pulling her until her legs were hanging over the base. She gasped as he hunkered down, large hands pushing her thighs apart, his dark gaze taking in every detail of her damp core.

"I...uh..."

"Shhh." A gentle caution, yet his tone was anything but. He expected compliance. Kate opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. She'd always dreamt of a real earl. Now she had one, she should accept him as he was, old fashioned attitude and all.

Behind her head, she could feel the way her hair had spread across the sheet and she automatically reached up to tidy it.

"No." This time, the command was even more abrupt, like he wasn't paying much attention.

She looked down at him, to find him still looking, taking his fill. Then he breathed deeply, inhaling her scent, and she wriggled, totally embarrassed. His hands didn't move, her thighs remained wedged open.

"You smell good," he whispered, his mouth hovering so close to her pussy that she could feel his warm breath against her skin, "Do you taste as nice?"

Unable to tear her gaze away, she watched his tongue flick out, watched as he ran a single long, wet lick between her folds. Her eyes closed as he flicked it back in the opposite direction.

Okaaay. Apparently, he was getting straight into it. No mucking around for this particular ghost...

Oh my God, a ghost. What was she doing, letting herself get fucked by a ghost? But she wanted him so badly... Every tiny touch sent a new wave of electric sparks right through her, and they were all beginning to gather between her legs. If he kept it up at this rate, she'd be exploding within, oh...the next few seconds.

Almost as if he were reading her thoughts, he chuckled into the soft skin of her inner thigh, making her shudder helplessly. "You're an impatient little one, aren't you?" He nipped sharply and she jerked, her eyes flying open.

Before she could protest, he was sliding up her body, his hips settling between her thighs to hold them open. The fabric of his pantaloons was unbearably rough on her sensitized skin, and she groaned softly. She wanted him naked!

His mouth hovered over a nipple. "Do you know how long it is since I've made love to a woman?" he whispered. "I'm in no hurry. Are you?"

His breath sent goose bumps up and down her arms. She heard herself whimpering in protest as he nuzzled her breast, his mouth circling maddeningly wide of the hard little bud that was so desperate for attention. She thrust her breast upwards, trying to force him to take it into his mouth. Laughing, he complied.

Kate's back arched uncontrollably. He'd wrapped his tongue around the nipple, tugging it gently, using his fingers to do the same to her other breast. When he suckled strongly, she cried out and jerked into his mouth, unable to tell if the sensation was pleasure or pain. Whichever it was, there seemed to be a direct connection between her nipple and her pussy, and she rubbed herself sinuously against his legs.

"More?" He swapped sides without waiting for an answer, possibly aware that she had no chance of putting together a coherent thought, let alone a sentence. She jerked again as he bit down, this time using his teeth to tease her nipple.

Kate heard the breathy cry, for several moments unable to place it. A husky moan followed, and she realized the sounds were her own. She writhed restlessly, needing to feel him more fully. Her naked pussy scraped against his clothes again, and she shoved at him, trying to push him away, wanting to force him to finish getting naked.

"Do you want me to go?" he asked, tugging sharply on the nipple before sucking it deeper into the warm cave of his mouth.

"No." It was hard to get the words out, to concentrate on anything other than what he was doing to her body, and how quickly he seemed to have taken control. "I want you..." She moaned as he suckled.

"You want me?" She could hear the muffled laughter in his voice.

"I want you undressed."

"Good." The laughter vanished, and he propped himself up, his elbow resting beside her head. The pillow dipped, and she was forced to look at him, couldn't avoid the naked hunger in his eyes. "Because I want to fuck you 'til you scream."

Ah.

That sounded good... Didn't it?

Before she could think too hard about exactly what he meant, he'd rolled off the bed and she found herself stranded in the center, her sprawled body open to his scrutiny. She pulled her legs decorously back together, aware she was probably blushing again, and started to sit up. Maybe it was time for a little re-grouping...

She could only just see him now, a vague outline of a man in the brighter morning light. It didn't stop her staring though, as he peeled his pantaloons away from his legs, revealing thighs that were just as muscular as she'd imagined, and a cock that was erect and hard. When she'd considered how well-filled his pantaloons had been before, she hadn't dwelt too long on the reason why.

Oh.

My.

Kate sat up straight, her hand reaching for him before she remembered. Dammit! She couldn't touch him. She wanted to feel him filling her hand, to fondle his balls, maybe even run her tongue over the baby-soft skin. She could smell him too now. The unmistakably musky smell of an aroused man.

A very aroused man.

Delicately, she licked her lips, hoping it was driving him wild. Damn, but she wanted to take him in her mouth and suck until he begged for mercy. There was nothing like the sight of a big, strong man on his knees. Figuratively, anyway.

His cock twitched, and a drop of cum glistened at his tip. She wondered what he tasted like. Could she taste him even if she couldn't touch him? It was certainly worth trying. She leant forward, unconsciously moistening her lips.

Strong arms swept her up before she could try her experiment, pushing her back onto the bed. His shoulders wedged her legs apart and when she reached down, unthinking, to run her fingers through his hair, she found her wrists gripped and pinned beside her hips.

She felt curiously vulnerable, more so than before. It was almost like seeing him naked had proven that he was real, and had proven that he was so much bigger than her.

A ghost, real? Duh!

She'd started to lift her head, wanting to see him, when he buried his face between her thighs. All thoughts fled, and she fell backwards as he used his tongue, his teeth, his mouth, to drive her to the brink.

This time, it wasn't the gentle gift of pleasure, but a ruthless attack as he suckled and licked, thrust his tongue between her folds, and let his teeth scrape over her clit. Her hips bucked as he nipped sharply, holding tight and drawing the sensitive piece of flesh taut. Simultaneously, his tongue probed her entrance, circling and licking before thrusting deep.

She squirmed under him, feeling his fingers biting into her wrists as she struggled futilely to avoid his assault. He was driving her out of her mind, way beyond anything she'd ever felt. But he didn't let up. Just as she thought that surely he'd tip her over the edge of oblivion, he retreated--just a little--and contented himself with blowing warm air onto her damp pubic hair. She was panting, gasping for air, her body strung so tight she was sure she'd explode. Uncontrollable shivers wracked her. Her head rolled back and forth on the pillow, yet he didn't let up.

"Please." She gasped it out between breaths.

"Not yet." The tiny vibration of his words was enough to send her spiraling heavenwards, but he refused to let her go, implacably holding her to earth while his tongue returned to its sensual torture.

"Now!" It should have been a demand, but she was pretty sure it had come out more as a desperate mewl than anything understandable.

"No."

Kate forced herself to lift her head, to look down at the man who'd taken control of her body and refused to give it up. Keeping her eyes open was near impossible but she managed, only to see... Nothing.

Full daylight was flooding around the edges of the badly-fitting shutters, and the Earl was completely invisible. She could feel him clearly--vividly--but all she

could see was her own body thrashing helplessly on the sheets, her legs spread wide, invisible bonds anchoring her hands to her sides. Her hands were clenched, fingernails digging into her palms, and the muscles in her legs were jerking in time with her hips.

Was this what he was seeing? A woman so gone with passion that she couldn't stay still? Didn't want to stay still? The idea sent another rush of heat flaming through her, every individual pore in her skin on fire.

What did he look like? Was his face tight? His eyes bright? Was he aroused by her lack of inhibition? Oh, God, she hoped so. She'd have hated to be the only one feeling this amazing heat.

Her head fell back as his tongue probed and his teeth nipped. The first waves of orgasm were approaching; she could feel them heading her way like some unavoidable--and totally uncontrollable--tsunami.

As the first ripples overtook her, she felt him moving, uncaring of what he did now so long as he let her come. Then her wrists were free, she was caught under his body, and he was surging deep inside her, filling her.

His cock pushed against her inner walls, the extra friction as he leaned further over enough to send her flying into outer space. The orgasm surrounded her, filled her mind with streaks of Technicolor light, and she let herself go, helplessly riding the waves.

The rough hairs of his bare chest resting on her sensitive nipples brought her back to reality. He was slumped tonelessly across her, his weight somehow comforting. Like her, his chest was heaving.

Exhausted. It was the only possible word to describe the way her muscles had gone on strike. She doubted she could have moved to save herself, even if the inn was on fire. And the way his legs were tangled with hers, sprawled across the bottom of the bed...

She sighed her content. Nice. Very nice.

Kate looked sleepily upwards, every movement a struggle against the gooey treacle her body seemed to be trapped in.

Nothing. Not even a shadow.

Damn the early morning light! She really wanted to see his face; to see him lying there, relaxed and satisfied. Maybe even to see him without that smugly male half-smile that always seemed to be playing around his lips. Not to say that his smile hadn't grown on her...

"Well Katie?" His voice was slumberous, and sexier than ever.

She may have thought Sean Connery's voice was unbeatable, but that was one opinion she was definitely going to have to change. How could his voice--beautiful as it was--compare with the one that was right this minute murmuring wicked things in her ear about what he wanted to do to her next?

No, she thought dreamily, the Earl of Heatheringham's voice was pure sin. But wonderful sin.

"Katie, honey?"

She realized he'd been talking to her for a while, but she'd been far away in her own little dream world. Automatically, she looked towards him, stretching her neck, cat-like, as he nuzzled under her chin. "Mmm?"

She blinked sleepily, aware he was no longer quite so heavy on her. His weight seemed to be evaporating with the fast-brightening light.

"Do you believe in ghosts yet?" The Earl's voice was coming from a distance.

What? He was leaving her? All of a sudden she had the ridiculous urge to reach out to him, to run her hands over the fascinating contours of his broad chest...

A fading echo of his chuckle resonated around the room. "Until later, Katie..."

~ The End ~

A BALL DROP BETWEEN FRIENDS, by Shara Lanel

Yes, that last shot of tequila had been one too many. I admit it. Rex and I were sitting on my natty couch watching the ball drop on TV--in other words, having a really glamorous New Year's Eve--when he leaned over and kissed me. I know it's traditional to kiss someone after midnight on New Year's Eve, but we've never done the kissing thing, for safety's sake.

You see, Rex has been my best friend since elementary school, and we've been denying our attraction for years, because of that friendship. No, not during elementary school, or even middle or high school for that matter. It flared a bit during college, but we were dating other people. Then I got engaged, which totally didn't work out, and Rex got married. That nipped any romantic possibilities in the bud, but we kept in touch, remained friends. A few years later he got divorced, and this became our tradition, sitting in my living room, drinking and watching baby-faced rock bands ring in the New Year.

My name's Kelsey Mitchell, in case you're reading this out of the blue. And let me tell you, kissing Rex Percell is pretty damn nice. He has soft lips that work magic, on me, at least. He had me mesmerized that night, for sure, and I swear we kissed for ten minutes straight. Then we went back to the chips and chocolate and our game of checker shots. That's what caused the trouble. I was losing. Every time he took one of my guys, I had to drink a shot. I was heading towards a massive hangover, but before that I got massively looped.

Quick tip: Kelsey's hangover cure, hot sex. Yup, hot sex is all you need to avoid dizziness and puking after too much tequila.

So Rex clobbered me with the checkers. By now we'd switched the digital cable to one of those music stations that plays through the TV. It even had some kind of ambience graphics that moved with the beat. Those can make you dizzy if you watch too long. I know. There's been many a night when I sat there, alone, drinking a glass of wine, watching the expanding ovals or multi-colored waves.

Picture that scene at the beginning of *Brigit Jones*. "All by myself..." Except I never sing. Ever.

Back to the moment. New Year's Eve, after midnight, a slow 80's song comes on and Rex asks me to dance. Well, how stupid to be dancing in my living room to the singing television, but I'm pretty toasted, so I say yes.

And it was nice. Really nice. Rex was hot in his stone-washed jeans and dark blue sweater. He held me close and I leaned my head against his shoulder and

closed my eyes. His hands ran up and down my back, like a gentle massage. His thighs pressed against mine, and we moved as one. He even hummed a little bit in my ear, which normally I would have found annoying, but the hum caused a little vibration in his chest that transferred to my body. It ran through my chest and stomach all the way to my vagina, which responded with a clench. Whoa, I was getting turned on by Rex, my old friend. Weird, not cool, and something I would never tell him. No way!

Unfortunately, I didn't have to tell him, because my body had a mind of its own. My nipples pressed against my T-shirt, and I wore no bra, since I never felt the need to dress up in front of Rex. And I think my pants were getting a bit damp, but the strangest thing was that I felt something poking at my hip. Was he wearing his wallet in his front pocket? No.

No!

Rex had a hard-on while we were dancing. Oh shit! His hands drifted lower and lower. One massaged my ass, while the other fiddled with the hem of my tee. He lifted my shirt a bit and slid his hand underneath. When it touched my skin, it was like an electric current zapped through my body. Every part of me clanged in response. He pulled me closer -- we were already pretty close -- and I snuggled closer still. He started kissing my cheek and my chin. Little kisses trailed to my neck. Ooh, I love having my neck kissed. There's this one spot...He found it. That spot is guaranteed to make me wet, I mean gushing wet. He traded kisses for licks and I moaned. I couldn't help it. His warm, wet tongue laving my neck felt better than hot sun in Cabo.

"Don't stop," I whispered, when the slow song changed to something head-bangy by Metallica.

"Let's sit on the couch." He guided me to the piece of furniture that had definitely seen better days, while still maintaining as much body contact as possible. I had planned to sit next to him, but he pulled me onto his lap. "You are so beautiful."

"Rex, I think you've drank too much. Drunk too much. Had too much to drink."

"I have, but I thought you were beautiful before then."

"If you say so." I wanted to go back to the kissing without examining this too much. If I examined it, my buzz would wear off and I'd probably realize this was a bad idea. So I took matters into my own hands. I kissed him square on the lips while my hands slid along the plains of his chest. His sweater was in the way.

"Let's take this off," I said, already tugging on the hem.

"Gotcha." He whipped it over his head and flung it to the floor, which revealed his yummy sun-baked skin and pecs of perfection. Rex had a weight set in his apartment, but his preferred form of exercise tended to be beach volleyball. We lived in Hampton, Virginia, close enough to the beach to visit every weekend if we so desired. Usually I didn't, but Rex did. I'd become a homebody lately, which was why I was in my living room on New Years Eve. I couldn't explain it. I was approaching thirty and totally unmotivated to go out there guy-hunting. I worked out faithfully at Bally's, so my body was pretty svelte, in my opinion, but I just didn't feel like looking at date-material, and I rebuffed the occasional offers I did get. Sad. But maybe there was something my subconscious knew that I didn't.

Rex lifting my shirt pulled me back to the moment. I let him slip it over my head, and, like I said, I had no bra on. I wasn't thinking clearly. Tequila and lust had fogged my brain. He seemed surprised at my lack of bra, like he'd expected one more layer to coax off of me. Nope. He had the Full Monty, and he seemed to like it. Well, almost the Full Monty. My jeans still clung to my legs. I had no intention of taking those off. Rex and I were best buds. Just friends. Really. I was wishing I'd thought to padlock a chastity belt around my pussy before the evening began.

"Whoa," Rex said. He was concentrating on my breasts, totally enamored of them. My breasts are medium, I'd say, B to C cup, depending on the mood they're in or the brand of bra. My nipples had perked to bright pink, hard pebbles in reaction to Rex's hot stare. I glanced down, surprised to see them, since I rarely thought about them when on my own. They were just a part of me, but Rex was obviously impressed. He placed his palms over each one reverently. His hands were warm and my nipples were so sensitive. I moaned and more juice leaked into my panties. He moved his thumbs to the tips of my nipples and circled lightly, creating intense pleasure that jetted from my chest to every nerve ending in my body. I closed my eyes and just...I don't know...felt.

Wet warmth encircled one nipple. My eyes flew open and I looked down. Rex was sucking me. My best friend had his smooth, sexy lips on my tit. I threaded my fingers through his soft brown hair and reveled in the feeling of lips and tongue on my breast. So good.

He didn't neglect my other breast. That was next on the agenda and equally good. Meanwhile his hand unsnapped my jeans and worked the zipper down. Underneath I wore a slim, black thong. Don't ask me what possessed me to wear that tonight, since I usually wear thigh-high bikini underwear, the cotton serviceable variety, not the kind with satin and lace. I think the idea that I would

actually see a man, any man, that evening, when I hadn't for a while, led to the selection of the thong, even though intellectually I had been sure Rex would never see it.

Well, seems I was wrong about that, too.

He worked his fingers under the coarse denim to touch the silk thong. He pushed against the fabric, which in turn rubbed against my clit, and I gasped, "Rex!"

He leaned me back against the couch cushion, which was a bit itchy against my skin. We could have gone to my bedroom, but maybe he was afraid of breaking the moment by suggesting it. Would brain cells have prevailed if we'd paused to change to a more comfortable locale? Somehow I doubt it. Tequila and hormones make one wicked love potion, not to mention several years of denied lust.

Rex's fingers circled my clit through the soaking fabric, then pinched my love knob. I was aching to come already. When his fingers pushed the fabric aside to plunge into my wet hole, I couldn't stop the sounds coming from my throat. You could call them moans, but they were more varied than that. Sometimes it sounded like purring, sometimes growling. Even occasional swear words popped past my lips as index finger found and massaged my G-spot.

But he stopped the magical movements of his fingers before I came. Ugh. He pulled them out of me. I think I slugged him on the shoulder at that point, but he ignored me. He concentrated on the more pressing business of working my jeans down and off my legs, followed by the thong. Shockingly cool air touched my skin raising goose-bumps. Rex's jeans and briefs dropped to the floor next, and I found myself staring at a huge, engorged dick. Wow! I would never have guessed that Rex was so well endowed. He leaned a knee against the couch near my head, bringing that gorgeous rod really close to my face.

"Suck me?" It was definitely a question, a request to which I could say no, but I didn't want to. I turned my body and lifted up onto one elbow. Then I licked the glistening tip. Think of it like licking a lollipop, if you haven't tried it, albeit a somewhat salty lollipop. The licking advanced to sucking, and Rex moved his hips in a slow rhythm. He groaned and petted my hair, but I could tell he was totally preoccupied by the sensations my lips and tongue were creating on his cock. I stroked his balls with my fingertips. This earned a new response.

"Kelsey, that's so...good."

But I was feeling neglected, so I pulled away. "Warmed up yet?"

"God, yes." He located his jeans and pulled a condom from his pocket.

"How old is that thing?"

"Brand new."

I lifted my eyebrows. "And how come you have a brand new condom in your pocket when you knew you were just hanging out with me tonight?"

"Because I knew I going to see you." He ripped open the packet and slid it on. "Kelsey, I've been hoping for this for a while. I just didn't know how to bring it up without risking our friendship."

"So you liquored me up."

He grinned. "Well, we were going to do that anyway. The mood just seemed right." He climbed on the couch and climbed between my welcoming legs. "Is the mood right? I'd really hate for you to regret this in the morning." He stared at me with beseeching puppy-dog eyes, soulful eyes, lustful eyes.

His cock bobbed against my mound. He hadn't positioned it yet. He was waiting for my answer.

"Are you hoping for a relationship?" I asked, a little scared at either possible answer.

"I'd like to try. We've got something I didn't have in my marriage. Friendship. Seems like that might be something good to build on."

"Yeah, that might be." I smiled and reached down and squeezed his dick. "Now screw me, will yah?"

Ah, now he moved his thick rod to where it pushed at my entrance, with just a little guidance from my fingers. He moved the tip in a circling motion, spreading the wetness that he found there, catching my clit, then moving back to my more-than-ready vagina. He pushed in, stretching me some. It had been a long time. Too long. Deeper and deeper he pushed, filling me up. It felt so good. Once he was inside me to the hilt, he rocked his hips, creating small movements within. I lifted my hips, moved them in rhythm, so that his rod hit my cervix and abraded my G-spot in a pleasing fashion.

Then he went back to kissing me and his thumbs brushed my breasts. My hands played with his hair and stroked his chest. Finally I grew brave enough to slip a finger onto my clit, while his cock stroked in and out of my body. I was getting really close to an over-the-top orgasm, and my finger was the icing on the cake. Small wet circles on my clit sped me closer to climax. My heart rate ratcheted up and his thrusting went turbo.

"Fuck me," I screamed for good measure just before my pleasure crested. I exploded over that edge, just moments before he did. Warmth spread inside me, filling me up and cooling me down, like the end of a workout. I relaxed against the couch cushion, happy with Rex's weight on top of me and in me.

I was so happy with the world that I actually fell asleep. I probably snored too, since I tend to do that when I drink too much alcohol. But I think Rex passed out as well, so it was doubtful he'd notice. And he'd held my head over the toilet on enough drinking binges to probably know at least that one secret about me.

It was kind of comforting, that knowing he already knew most of my faults and foibles. And he'd stuck around through it all. As a friend.

A few hours later, I woke to find myself under a cozy blanket in my warm bed. Rex was spooning me, his breath tickling my neck. It felt right somehow.

At the very least, it felt like a possibility.

~ The End ~

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