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LOVE

An Anthology

by

Whiskey Creek Press Authors and Poets

**Katherine Smith, Giovanna Lagana, Judith Fox, Diane M. Wylie,
Marsha Briscoe, Crystal Inman, Daniel Wilder, Barbara Baldwin,
Kristy McCaffrey, Janet Mills, and Barri Bryan**

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *TITLE*

Add Here

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We'd also like to thank the Whiskey Creek Press authors and poets who participated in this anthology. Their creative talents have made this anthology the best it can be.

Giovanna Lagana and Katherine Smith
Editors of LOVE Anthology
Whiskey Creek Press

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“A Slender Debt” by Katherine Smith:

When his ship is run aground, Adrian Keitly, Duke of Northallerton, does not expect to be plucked from the sea by an angel disguised as a lovely young woman. Injured and far from home, he discovers that despite his wealth and title, his privileged life might just be a farce and he has much to learn from his heaven sent rescuer...

Widowed and lonely, the last thing Sarah wants is to suddenly find she has to care for a handsome and enigmatic stranger. What is worse, she is attracted to this dark, mysterious man, trading her future for a night in his arms and finding an unexpected paradise...

Together, Adrian and Sarah find that social rank does not matter, but the heart most certainly does...

“Unbounded Love” by Giovanna Lagana:

There's a serial killer on the loose and he has targeted police-woman, Adrienne Wilcox, as his next victim. Regardless of Adrienne's rebuttal, the chief assigns the handsome detective, Justin Murray, to be her stake out. Little does the chief know something happened between Adrienne and Justin at the Christmas party that Adrienne wants to forget.

But after getting a direct order, Adrienne accepts having the handsome detective as her guard. With the sexual tension between her and Justin at an all time high, will they be able to control their emotions long enough to nab the killer, or will the killer use their sexual attraction as an Achilles' heel and strike when they least expect?

“Remember” by Judith Fox:

Penelope Curtis travels back to Salal Island twenty years after she lost her true love. She applies for a job tutoring and caring for a small child. At a majestic mansion on the island, she finds her love for Brent Eden has not changed. But the barriers she must conquer for him involve ghost-like memories and murder in the dark lush forests of the Pacific Northwest.

“A Soldier To Love” by Diane M. Wylie:

Why did Daddy have to die in this hole of a town in Georgia and leave me alone and penniless? Christine Lawson is desperate. With no money and no place to live, that forty dollar enlistment fee to join the Confederate Army is sounding better and better...too bad she is a girl.

A surprise attack, one cold night in the Alleghany Mountains, lands Private Ryan Bishop flat on the ground and thankful to be alive. But his savior turns out to be someone he never expected and finds he cannot forget.

“Meant To Be” by Crystal Inman:

Lynn would never learn. Left at the altar by a man she didn't love, she jumped into her car and changed her life. The accident scarred her face, but her new reality scarred her heart. It was her fiancé's brother, Max, who Lynn started to care for. But when she went to talk to him, another woman was there in his bathrobe.

It was easy to listen to Jerry and hear him profess his love for her. But it never felt right. And when Max walked up to her on the day of her wedding and told her Jerry wouldn't be there, she felt sorry for Max. It was the woman in Max's bathrobe that left with his brother.

After the accident, Max took Lynn into his home. But did he feel sorry for her? Or did his feelings run deeper?

“Of Eros and Psyche” by Marsha Briscoe:

A Petrarchan sonnet deeply rooted in classical Greek mythology: Just as Marsha's novel, *A Family Matter*, renders the ancient Greek Phaedra myth encompassing the love triangle of Phaedra, Hippolytus, and King Theseus in a contemporary setting, so too does this sonnet “Of Eros and Psyche” draw upon classical mythology and transport those mythical figures to a modern setting. Marsha's two sonnets included in this *Love Anthology* are taken from her collection of poems entitled *Erato and Euterpe*. It is fitting that Erato was one of the nine Muses and the patroness of Love poetry. Euterpe was another of the nine Muses and patroness of lyric poetry. Marsha's title “Of Eros and Psyche” draws upon the archetypal Eros, who was called Amor or Cupid by the Romans, and Psyche, the

bride of Eros. To go a bit deeper, Eros was the attendant of Aphrodite and often inflicted the wound of love upon mortals and deities. When Psyche was accused of betraying Aphrodite and of keeping the identity of her lover, Eros, secret, she said something that caused him to flee and not return. In order to gain Aphrodite's forgiveness and to be reunited with Eros, Psyche traveled to the underworld to seek counsel from Persephone. Eventually Eros and Psyche were reunited and dwelt together in heaven.

"Effusion of Dawn" by Marsha Briscoe:

An Elizabethan sonnet rooted in classical mythology that deals with Aurora, the goddess of the dawn and the lover and seizer of handsome young men. Known also as *Eos*, Aurora presents as a chariotteer with two steeds closing off the sky's darkness by heralding in the light of dawn. The sonnet's title word, *Effusion*, connotes an unrestrained, overflowing expression, an expression of love.

"The Arrangement" by Crystal Inman:

Brendan Wardlow is a writer. That translates into questionable sanity at best. But he really starts to question himself when he finds a beautiful woman who assures him she is sent for him. Mara declares she is a Muse. His Muse. And when she's around, Brendan writes the story he has always dreamed of writing. But then he finds himself falling for Mara in a most unexpected way. She not only touches his writing, she touches his heart. But her term is temporary, and she will move on to another writer. It is the way of her people.

Brendan wants to keep her in his life. But will he give up his most cherished dream?

"From the Hand of Guinevere" by Daniel Wilder:

A contemporary Ballad depicting the early temptation of Lancelot by Queen Guinevere, wife of King Arthur, Lancelot's best friend. The growing love affair between the once chaste and pure Lancelot and his King's wife created pandemonium in Camelot. All the world knows of this forbidden love which eventually leads to Lancelot's banishment from Camelot, Guinevere's fall from grace and her final days spent in a convent, and the ultimate dissolution of King Arthur's Round Table.

“Restoration Of A Broken Heart” by Barbara Baldwin:

Molly Bonner, a middle-aged divorcee, decides to restart her life in the small town of River Bluff, where she buys an Ante Bel-lum mansion to convert to a Bed and Breakfast inn. Her contractor, Joe Austin, not only has the knowledge to restore the mansion to its former glamour, but he has the heart to help Molly regain her self-esteem and learn to love again.

“Echo Of The Plains” by Kristy McCaffrey:

Ecacusayet. Lightning flash. The renegade stallion known as Echo has eluded capture ever since he escaped the Ryan homestead shortly after birth. Seventeen-year-old Eli Ryan plans to change that. As his search narrows to the location of the horse’s hideout, Eli nearly runs down Cassie Callahan in the Texas desert. Although an intriguing diversion, not even her compelling green eyes will deter him from his goal. But her stubborn protection of the legendary stallion just might steer him off course.

“Worthy Hearts” by Janet Mills:

Alicia Cortez lives with three men who watch over her like brothers. If he can safely navigate the gauntlet of questions Ali’s friends and family inflict on every potential boyfriend, Trey Whitlock just might have a chance to win her heart.

“Where the Heart Is” by Barri Bryan:

When Angela Murray left Paul’s Valley ten years ago in the wake of heartbreak and rejection, she vowed that no matter how uncertain her life became, she would never again return to this place. After all these years of self-imposed exile, the finality of death has done what the uncertainties of life could not—it has brought her home once more, to her sister’s funeral and to face her brother-in-law, Dan, who is the only man Angela has ever loved. Can she hope to mend a broken past and heal old wounds or has fate conspired with circumstance to once more snatch happiness from her grasp?

A SLENDER DEBT

by Katherine Smith

The ship had come into the traitorous cove like a nut cracking its shell, shaving into the rocks with a grinding scream of flayed wood.

Standing numbly on the wind-lashed cliff, Sarah Howell could do little more than finger the tiny gold cross around her neck and whisper a prayer even as the tears mixed with rain slid down her face.

So many men lost...so many.

Staring out over the tumult of water and wind, she shivered.

The cliff was steep and Sarah slipped as she tried to navigate the treacherous path, one hand going deep into the mud, her skirts sodden and heavy. If the drowning men below were shouting, she could not hear it for the heavy roar of her own breathing in her ears and the howling of a banshee north wind around her. Water ran down her neck and into the bodice of her dress, cold and unfeeling as a barren grave.

Grasping tufts of dying grass, she half-ran, half-fell down the slope, sobbing as she went.

Too late.

Reaching the rocky shore, she fisted her hands in her dress.

The ship was illuminated by the vagaries of a fickle moon, the light dying and then coming again through the tearing clouds. The mast listed sideways and she caught the glimmer of the water-lashed deck before the vessel gave an almost human groan and suddenly shuddered out of sight.

And it was over, she thought blankly. The ship might have been a product of her imagination except for the slim mast that protruded from the unruly water. Standing in the pouring rain with her hair plastered to her neck and face, she felt unbearably bereft.

She almost didn't notice the dark form bobbing out in the water as she turned woodenly to leave. Squinting in the darkness, she dashed the moisture from her eyes and blinked several times.

It was undeniably there. Lax and a victim to the hostile surf, but probably human from the way it moved and rolled.

She didn't stop to think. Jerking off her shoes as if that bit of weight would make a difference, she waded out into the water, the waves sucking immediately at her heavy skirts. In a panic, she realized she couldn't possibly swim out in water so tossed by the storm in her clothes. *Very well*, she thought defiantly, and unbuttoned her bodice, shimmying out of her dress and stepping away. Without the folds of confining cloth to hamper her, she struck out, saying a small thanks to her brother, long since lost in Wellington's campaign on the Peninsula, for teaching her the forbidden art of swimming at least a decade and lifetime ago.

Cold water slapped her face with insistent waves. She tasted salt, and choked, coughing. The sea lifted and fought her forward progress, but luckily, it also pushed the black shape toward the shore. In just a few minutes, her fingers were tangled in the damp fabric of a man's coat and she

turned, using the buoyant surf to her advantage and letting it rush her back toward the small beach.

Dragging the limp form out onto the sand was a Herculean effort. The man was tall and a dead weight. Panting and dripping, she rolled him over, noting his pallor and closed eyes. Neither was he breathing, she realized with a sinking feeling. She had rescued a dead man.

"What a pity," she murmured out loud to the stormy night. Shivering in only her wet chemise and kneeling on the sand, she reached over and brushed a dark lock of hair that clung like seaweed to his cheek. His cold pale features were chiseled and well-shaped; a straight nose, high cheekbones, a sensual mouth, and firm chin. He was also dressed well; that she could tell even in his soaked condition. The wet material of his open coat was velvet and the fabric of his white shirt underneath so fine a linen that it was transparent where it clung to his broad chest.

Someone would mourn this handsome young gentleman. Her eyes filled with sudden stinging tears. She knew only too well about mourning someone lost at sea...only too well. Reaching down again, she softly touched his face.

Suddenly, his chest heaved, followed by a water-filled cough. Startled, she snatched her hand away, and then realized what was happening and frantically attempted to lift him up so he could spew the sea from his lungs. Choking and coughing, he shuddered, coming alive, bracing himself with one hand, his long body shaking. She helped by holding his heaving shoulders until the worst of it seemed to pass and he fell limply to his back again.

This time though, his eyes were wide open.

The wind tore past, whistling through the tiny inlet with an eerie sound. For a moment they simply stared at each other and then his lips curved slightly. He whispered, "I am fairly

certain I have done nothing in my life to deserve an angel pulling me from the depths.”

Sarah blinked, still kneeling over him. And then she realized he was looking at the cross that hung suspended between her breasts. She essayed a tremulous smile. “I am not an angel.”

“No? Even better,” he murmured.

His gaze strayed lower. With sudden chagrin she remembered that she was clad only in a thin wet shift that clung to her body. Heat climbed into her neck and cheeks, and she sat back on her heels, self-consciously folding her arms across her chest. “I would have drowned trying to swim to you in my dress,” she said defensively.

“So you are resourceful as well as beautiful.” He sat up, weakly bracing himself with both hands until he struggled to his feet and began to shrug out of his fitted jacket. “Please, take my coat. You must be very cold. It is wet but will block this hellish wind.”

She accepted the weight of the garment, swallowing her embarrassment as best she could. Standing, he towered over her, lean and wide-shouldered. Swaying a bit and running a hand over his face to wipe away some of the sand, he turned toward the sea. “My ship?”

“Lost.” Sarah said the word simply. “She went down in minutes.”

“We must search for other survivors.” His profile was defined and etched in the uncertain silvery light. A certain determination, even arrogance, showed in the set of his mouth, despite his obvious weakness.

“You are not in any shape to rescue anyone, I’m afraid.” Sarah noted that one sleeve of his white shirt was soaked with dark blood and it was dripping from his hand. “Nor do I think I can drag anyone else to safety. Please, let us go to shelter.

Once there, I can walk to the nearest neighbor and have them alert the village of what has happened. They are well-used to looking for lost sailors and can do more than we could even attempt. This is not the first ship to impale itself on this wild coast."

She grasped his good arm, both to support him and urge them toward the cliff path. Under her fingers, his muscles were rock hard but his body swayed again under a fierce buffet of wind. "I cannot just walk away."

She smiled at that, a grim laugh stuck in her throat. "That's true, sir," she muttered dryly, "I will be surprised if you can walk at all."

* * * *

The warmth from the fire felt good on his skin, a contrast to the stinging pain in his left arm. Stripped to the waist, Adrian Kielty sat on the short stool, his legs stretched out before him, his eyes closed in weariness. The *Seahorse* had been a good ship but her loss was not as acute as the crew that had gone with her. Captain Ross had been with him for years, as good a man as whoever had sailed...

"Am I hurting you terribly?" A soft question interrupted his dark musing. "It is almost over, this I promise."

Lifting his lashes, Adrian looked at the woman who was sitting next to him, so carefully stitching his wound. Frowning in concentration, she made each dip of the needle with precision, her soft fingers brushing his lacerated arm. Her hair, which he'd thought a light brown, was drying into dark gold strands that shimmered in the firelight. Her features were delicate and fine in an oval face dominated by long-lashed eyes the color of deep water. Her figure was just as feminine; slender and fine-boned, and he had to marvel that such a fragile looking creature had managed to plunge into the ocean and

pull him to safety. He said quietly, "The pain is nothing. At least it shows me I am alive."

That brought her head up, her fingers arrested for a moment. Those grave eyes glimmered with sympathy. "If any are left alive, your comrades will find shelter and warmth with the people of James Cove."

"If everyone is as generous as yourself, I'm sure that is true." He watched with detachment as she took one last tiny stitch and neatly tied off the thread, clipping it close before picking up a soft white cloth and binding his arm. The cut had been long and jagged, no doubt acquired when he'd stepped onto the deck just as the *Seahorse* had run afoul of the rocks. He'd been flung out into the water and that was the last he remembered.

Gathering her supplies, the young woman rose to her feet and crossed the room. He watched through heavy-lidded eyes, noting that she'd put on a plain gray dress that buttoned to her throat, though her tumbled curls fell to her waist and her feet were still bare under her brushing skirts. Her attire was as simple as the room; plain plank floors, a scrubbed table with several chairs, two chests and a tall clock in the corner. Yet the place felt warm and somehow comforting, and there were neat curtains at the windows, a bright rug by the fire, and two silver candlesticks on the mantle. More surprising than anything to him was the collection of books, held in a simple case in the corner. The way she spoke suggested an education belied by the surroundings. In truth, he realized as he sat there determined to ignore his throbbing arm, his guardian angle intrigued him.

A doorway must have led to the bedroom, only a curtain keeping it from the rest of the space, and she disappeared inside, coming out minutes later with her arms full of cloth. She glanced at his bare chest, and in the flickering light, he could

swear she blushed. "These might be a bit small, but they are dry and clean." Handing him the bundle of clothes, she moved away, lifting a heavy kettle from a hook by the fireplace. "I'll make us some tea and there's bread, fresh baked this morning, if you are hungry."

Adrian sat, holding the clothes, still feeling infuriatingly weak but not as dazed. "How long will the village men keep up the search?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. "You said there were ten men."

It was a simple answer. Until ten bodies, or at least close to that number, were recovered. It was sickening, this sense he had of helplessness. Adrian stood slowly, the room spinning for a moment, then settling. His arm ached dully and he knew he'd lost quite a bit of blood. "If I could trouble you for one more thing, please?"

Her eyebrows lifted a fraction in question.

He smiled with effort and said softly, "I don't believe I know your name."

That smile, which he used in the past to charm, beguile, and generally melt any available female, didn't seem to have the same effect on his lovely savior. She regarded him coolly and replied, "My name is Mrs. Howell. Sarah Howell."

* * * *

Sarah stopped on the path and looked out over the crystalline blue waters, pondering how the beautiful scene could conceal the fact that it had been a stage for death and horror just the night before. Now, birds circled in slow graceful passes, the sun sparkled off the rippling waves, and the air smelled of late spring, clean and sweet.

There was no news from the scene of the shipwreck except that three bodies had been washed ashore. She somehow dreaded telling this to her unexpected guest, though she

wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the weight of responsibility she sensed he felt, weighing down those broad shoulders.

Who was he?

Somehow, even though he'd referred to the lost craft as his ship, she doubted he was a sea captain. His clothes and manners were wrong, for one, and his speech much too polished for a rough sailor. Sighing, she squared her shoulders and pushed open the door.

Mr. Kietly was up and dressed, sitting quietly in a chair by the fire. She'd been right, Joshua's clothes were a little too small, the shirt was open at the throat because he could not button it all the way, and the trousers clung tightly to his long legs. Neither were they fine linen and velvet, but then again, beggars—and shipwreck victims—could not be selective.

His hair was long and sleek, hanging in ebony waves around his face. Obviously he'd washed in the warm water she'd left from her own bath for there was a towel draped by the fire to dry and his clothes from the night before in a tidy heap on the floor. He said in his deep baritone, "Good morning."

"Good morning." She carried her basket over and set it on the table. "I hope you got some breakfast."

"The cheese and bread you left were delightful, thank you."

Delightful. It was an interesting choice of phrase for simple farmer fare. Hiding a smile, she asked, "How do you feel? Is the arm so very sore? I have some ointment that might help—"

"There is no word, is there?"

"Three dead for certain," she admitted, lifting out the chicken and putting in an iron pot. "I'm sorry, truly I am."

His curse was low, barely audible. "What a terrible tragedy. Captain Ross was an experienced man, yet I suppose the storm was too much for him."

"Yes."

He sat there for a moment, seemingly intent on that fateful disastrous moment when the ship slammed into those deadly rocks. Then he visibly roused himself. "I'm terribly sorry. Can I help you, Mrs. Howell?"

She slanted him a long look. Sitting there with his legs sprawled, looking pale and drawn yet compellingly masculine, he somehow did not look like someone who could help prepare a chicken. She asked politely, "Do you cook, Mr. Kietly?"

"No. But the offer still stands." His arrestingly handsome face took on an expression of cynical amusement. "However, please note that I am actually certain you would be better off without my assistance."

She laughed out loud, something she hadn't done in quite some time. "Not to worry, I assumed you were incompetent in the kitchen. Most men are."

"Where is your husband, Mrs. Howell?"

The question threw her, she wasn't quite sure why. It was a natural thing to ask. She admitted quietly, "Joshua is dead."

His eyes were very dark, very direct, and disturbingly attractive. "I see. I suppose these are his clothes. I'm sorry."

She ducked her head, busying herself with adding water to the pot. "It's been two years now. But I still thank you for the sentiment."

"How difficult, to be widowed so young."

"Yes," she agreed.

There was an awkward silence.

Please don't ask more, she thought desperately.

Please.

The candles flickered, the light leaping across the plain rough-hewn walls. Outside the night had lowered, but the window shutters were still open, letting in the cool air. Somewhere a night bird called mournfully against the incessant movement of the sea.

The chicken was mouth-watering, even though it was simply prepared with little more than a few onions, carrots, potatoes, and fresh herbs. The bread, which Adrian had smelled baking all afternoon was unlike anything he had ever eaten, crusty yet soft in the middle and slathered with sweet butter. Instead of wine, she served ale, a hearty, bitter brew which reminded him that he was somewhere off the English coast in a tiny fishing village. With a woman he found more interesting than any he'd met in a very long time.

Visions of perfumed and beribboned *ton* beauties faded before the simply-dressed young woman who sat across from him, her thick hair lit to dark gold, her hands folded demurely in her lap as she watched him finish his meal. And she was attracted to him as well; he could read it in her eyes, in how her teeth touched her lower lip, in the self-conscious way she held her body. If there was one thing he knew well, that was how to read the opposite sex.

Setting aside his fork, he said ruefully, "Obviously, I thought that was excellent. I believe I ate more than my share."

Her smile was enchantingly shy. "Since you are about twice my size, it makes sense that you would eat more. I am glad you enjoyed it, sir."

"Please call me Adrian."

That request seemed to disconcert her and she stood, leaning over to take his plate.

He snared her wrist in one hand and looked directly into her startled eyes. "You'll let me help you, won't you?"

She instantly shook her head. "You are injured."

"But not an invalid," he argued, feeling the pulse leap under his light grip. Still holding her deep blue gaze, he said slowly, "I owe you a great deal."

Her lashes lowered slightly and she cleared her throat. "You owe me nothing. What I did, I did freely because I wanted to save a life, if it was within my power to do so. The fact that you lived is my reward."

His fingers tightened involuntarily. In his world, the cold glittering arena of fashionable society, very few did anything for anyone but themselves, much less risk their lives for someone unknown. The concept of such selfless giving would be incomprehensible to most of his friends. Even those with more money than they could spend in a lifetime rarely gave thought to provide for the less fortunate. Including himself. It was a damning realization.

Letting her go abruptly, he swallowed. "You will have to forgive me if I wish in some way to repay you."

Her smile was whimsical. "For a life saved? I don't think you can repay such a thing anymore than you can purchase it."

Sitting there at the simple table and watching her graceful movements, he smiled. "So you are a philosopher as well as an angel? Tell me, Mrs. Howell, where did you learn to read?"

Plunging the dishes into a basin of water, she responded willingly enough to the change in subject. "My mother taught me. She was the youngest daughter of an earl, educated in both France and England. However, she fell in love with my father, who was nothing more than a groom in her father's tables, and was disowned."

"And so they moved here?"

She shook her head, her golden hair, caught back in a simple ribbon, moving across her shoulders. "No, they are both gone. This cottage was Joshua's idea. He always wanted a place by the sea. He bought it before he left for Spain."

"Ah, a soldier?"

"A captain." There was a hint of pride in her voice. Though she continued to scrub the dishes, her gaze seemed to shift, out the window toward where the night sky glimmered. "He was wounded at Talavera and sent home."

Adrian watched her profile and prompted softly, "And?"

"The ship never made it. There was a terrible storm, much like last eve, I imagine, and it sank somewhere off the coast of Portugal." Her voice was calm, almost off-hand. "I received the letter saying he was coming home the same day they brought me the news he was dead." She visibly squared her shoulders, her hands wrist deep in the soapy water. "But lest you pity me, please remember that I am better off than most. At least my husband left me this cottage and a small monthly portion so that if I live modestly, I can be self-sufficient."

It was a tragic story, but undoubtedly common enough. Adrian imagined other wives had also waited for that ill-fated ship that would never arrive. He murmured, "You must miss him a great deal."

She didn't answer, but suddenly made a great production out of rinsing the plates and setting them on a rack to dry. He quietly persisted, "What do you miss most, Sarah?"

The use of her first name suddenly charged the room with a certain tension.

At first he thought she would refuse to answer, but after a moment, she murmured, "The companionship, I suppose. The feeling that someone cares for you, wants to be with you."

“Wants to be with you...or *wants* you?” It was a delicate question.

At that very personal question, she turned, wiping her hands on her apron. She said coldly, “I think that is none of your business, Mr. Kietly.” However, her cheeks were flushed and she refused to look him in the eye.

And with that, he had his answer.

* * * *

As far as she could tell, under those smooth manners, her guest was only too well-aware that his wickedly attractive smile had an effect on her.

It was unsettling and she had a life that was very, very settled. Dull perhaps, but settled and...safe.

He sat at her table with his bandaged arm propped across the top, looking for all the world like a rakish pirate with his dark hair curving at his lean jaw and a gleam in those dark seductive eyes. To make matters worse, he murmured, “You’re lonely, out here all alone, aren’t you? Who wouldn’t be?” The question sounded almost introspective.

She *was*, of course. There were nights when she would have sold her soul to have strong arms around her, to hear the comforting sound of Joshua breathing in the darkness next to her. And worse, she had memories of what it was like to be desired by a man, to be held and kissed and loved...

Stiffly, she admitted, “It would be unnatural to not feel some solitude. I am not of the village because of my education and background. They are cordial, but not completely accepting.”

“I could ease your pain, if only for a short while.”

The offer was made quietly. She looked up, held suddenly immobile by the searing heat in the eyes of the man who sat so still across from her. Hoarsely, she said, “I do not need your gratitude, Adrian.”

"I think you do." He stood, the muscles moving fluidly in his legs, his strong neck visible through the open neck of the white shirt. "You are young and beautiful. No one would ever know if you found solace in my arms, even if it were for just one night."

Her face felt as if it were on fire, even if her body reacted to such an indecent suggestion. "If you seek to satisfy your lust, sir, do so somewhere else." She added firmly, "In the morning, you should move to the local inn. You are well enough."

He said evenly, "Do not worry; in the morning, I intend to send a message to London. However, there is still this evening, and the offer was not made in the spirit of lust, but that of friendship." His voice dropped, the tone becoming darkly sincere. "I do not seek to seduce, but to...to—"

"Yes?" She asked acidly, standing there with her hands twisted in her apron, staring at him.

"To give," he answered finally, very simply. Then the corner of his perfect mouth lifted in a sardonic smile. "Not something, I assure you, I do often. I have a somewhat checkered past, I admit, but if there is one thing I know how to do, it is how to pleasure a lady in bed."

Such a frank declaration should shock her. In fact, it *did* shock her. But standing there in her simple house, she felt an answering ripple of excitement. And when he moved around the table with the grace of a hunting panther, she found she couldn't move.

* * * *

Adrian moved lightly, not wanting to startle the woman watching him with wide eyes. He stopped in front of her, only reaching out to touch her soft cheek. Her gaze was transfixed on his face, as if she couldn't quite move to openly resist.

For once, his legendary charm would do some good.

Lowering his head, he gently brought his mouth to hers.

Warmth, sweetness, a sense of euphoria that wasn't usual but he didn't care to analyze. He kissed her gently at first, with infinite tenderness, though that wasn't his nature. And she responded from the first moment, her arms coming up around his neck, her body melting into his. He savored her mouth, exploring tenderly, feeling a growing urgency. When he finally lifted his head, it was Sarah that sighed in disappointment, her closed eyes and flushed cheeks showing both surrender and a poignant vulnerability. He whispered, "If you wish to pretend I'm him, do so."

She didn't answer.

Due to his injured arm, he couldn't lift her, so instead he simply urged her toward the bedroom. Once inside, he undid the top buttons on the bodice of her gown, one-handed, swiftly pushing it from her shoulders. For all his experience, he felt almost as impatient as a green boy.

Her breasts were perfect, small and round, and the tawny nipples fit perfectly into his mouth. He suckled one and then the other, listening to the shifts in her breathing with satisfaction. Her fingers twined in his hair and her skin tasted sweet, like peaches and wine.

"So perfect," he murmured against her skin. "Help me undress."

To his surprise, she didn't object, but swiftly undid his shirt and even the fastenings of his trousers. As he slipped out his garments, she did the same, revealing a body both slender and infinitely female. No longer resistant, she lay down on the bed and opened her arms.

And never in his life, he thought in wonder as he lowered himself over her, had he ever made love to a woman who had given him more than he could ever give her.

Propping himself on his good arm, he began a slow seduction, tasting, licking, ignoring her shocked gasps as he did something she had obviously never experienced before, beguiling her with intimate kisses and exploring hands, all the while with the sea breeze drifting in the windows and the low sound of the surf against the cliffs outside. Using the expertise gained in a myriad of high-born bedrooms, he brought her to brink of fulfillment time and again.

And yet somehow, he could not curb the selfish impulse to be part of her. Lifting his head, he kissed the delicate arch of her eyebrows, the perfect length of her nose, until he finally tasted her mouth again. "Now?" he asked in a raspy voice.

Eyes still closed, she whispered against his lips, "Yes."

Was he Joshua? he wondered with a jealous pang as he parted her thighs. She was softness and pleasure, her body melting in liquid heat around him as he penetrated and moved forward. Her soft sigh in his ear was more enticing than any of the tricks the practiced courtesans he knew had ever used to arouse him. His erection swelled and he began to move fluidly and quickly, his urgency answered by the lift of her body. It was only moments before she clutched his shoulders and shuddered around him, sending him over the edge.

Lying there in the darkness, still in her sweet body, he whispered huskily in her ear, "Open your eyes and look at me."

Very slowly, her lashes lifted.

With unprecedented insecurity, he demanded, "Were you thinking of him?"

In answer, she smiled and touched his cheek. "No."

* * * *

That smug, lying, smoothed-tongued rogue...

Smoothed-tongued, thought Sarah, suddenly arrested at the top of the hill, was only too apt. Her face suffused as she remembered the night before when she'd made love with him...what three or four times? And afterwards, she slept in his arms, drifting off to the sensation of his fingers sifting lightly through her hair.

The cottage looked ironically the same; half-timbered and white-washed, with the roof starting to show needs for repair. Stalking up to the door, she flung it open.

He was sitting by the fire, almost where she'd left him, reading a copy of what looked like Voltaire. She said hotly, "How dare you!"

"I beg your pardon?" He tried to look surprised, but his dark eyes were wary.

"You're a duke," she announced bitterly. "That was your ship, because you owned it. And half of England, if what I understand is true."

"Half is rather an exaggeration—"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

The book fell into his lap. He was wearing one of Joshua's shirts again, not quite buttoned across his broad chest. "What difference would that have made?"

The question took her aback. From what she'd just heard in the village, she'd made love last night with one of London's most wealthy and legendary bachelors; the one that no woman could coax to the altar. She felt a little sick, and wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was learning that their worlds were so very far apart.

Turning away, she muttered, "You're right. No difference. It was my choice. My mistake."

That brought him to his feet. "Mistake?" His dark brows arched infuriatingly upward. "I don't believe that is how you felt last eve."

“No true gentleman would mention that.”

His smile was cynical. “I may be Adrian Kietly, the seventh Duke of Northallerton. I may have wealth and position and power, but I have never claimed to be a gentleman.”

Sarah could do nothing but stand there and stare at him.

“In fact, you seemed to have gleaned something of my reputation. I am notorious for my disdain of the notion that a man needs to marry someone with equally exalted bloodlines just to breed an heir for his title and fortune. That, of course, makes me a rake if I choose to...er...shall we say, enjoy a woman’s company?”

The way he’d enjoyed hers last night. Sarah swallowed and looked away. “How come you haven’t wanted to send word to your family? You have been here for several days now. They must be frantic with worry.”

His sardonic laugh made her feel a sudden chill. “My only close relative is my younger brother, Goeffry. No doubt he and his grasping wife are drinking champagne from my wine cellar and toasting my probable demise. He stands to inherit a great deal if I don’t produce the requisite heir.” He added softly, “Besides, I was rather enjoying your company, lovely Sarah. It isn’t often that I meet someone who seems to truly want nothing from me, much less one who gives to me freely. Make no mistake, last night was not a casual seduction.”

Could one be handsome, titled, and wealthy, and still feel the same loneliness that sometimes haunted her nights? Some of her anger melted away, leaving her bereft instead. When she looked back at him, she kept her expression carefully shuttered. She said, “I would appreciate it if you would appear to be more injured than you are when you arrive at the inn. The people in town know you have been here for two nights. An invalid and a young woman alone is acceptable. You are not an invalid.”

"I see I am being dismissed." From the tone of his voice, she somehow had the unsettling feeling she'd hurt him.

Instead of answering, she turned away. What else could she do?

* * * *

Adjusting the cuffs of his snowy white shirt, Adrian reached for his coat. His valet fussed in the corner of the room, packing the essentials for their upcoming journey. After nearly a week at the inn in quiet James Bay, the young man seemed more than ready to go home.

Adrian had kept his word to Sarah, feigning deep weakness, and keeping to his room even after his message to London had brought his carriage and personal staff.

His brother, he noted cynically, had certainly not hastened to his side when he'd heard of his ordeal and near fatal experience. In fact, Adrian had sat and brooded for long hours in the tiny room with the view of the sea for the past days, wondering if anyone would miss him at all, even if he had perished.

And he had sat and dreamed of a lonely angel with dark gold hair and a spirit so generous it humbled him.

"All ready to leave for London, your Grace." Bryant, his young face flushed from exertion, tugged the trunk toward the door.

Adrian murmured, "I'll be down in a moment."

After settling a generous amount on the delighted innkeeper, he went outside into the dazzling sunshine. His carriage waited in the yard, the sleek horses moving restively. Giving orders to the coachman, he swung into the vehicle and settled into the seat.

He was ready to resume his old life.

Well, almost.

* * * *

Sarah was hanging out clean laundry to dry when the elegant carriage came up the road at a brisk pace. The horses were magnificent with plumes on their harnesses, and the liveried driver was an impressive sight. She realized at once who it must be and her stomach twisted.

She knew, of course, that he'd stayed at the inn for much longer than he'd needed to stay.

The vehicle drew to a rocking halt and when the door was thrown open and her visitor emerged, she drew a sharp breath. Here indeed was the exalted Duke of Northallerton, with his perfectly tailored rich clothes, his sleek hair tied back in a queue, and his boots polished to a glassy shine. His handsome face was a dark contrast to his immaculate white cravat.

He spotted her standing there on the hillside, a faded dishtowel in her hands. With long strides, he came toward her.

The wind smelled sharply of rain today, she reminded herself abstractly, willing herself not to react to the tall man walking up the path. Just like it had the afternoon prior to the storm. And with a twinge of illogical chagrin, she wished she wasn't wearing her oldest dress.

Adrian stopped just a few feet away from her, his dark eyes direct. "Hello."

Hello. She almost let a nervous laugh escape, but instead inclined her head. "Your grace. I take it you are headed back to London. I wish you Godspeed."

One ebony brow lifted. "Nothing else. Just be on my way as soon as possible?"

She bit her lip. "What else is there to say?"

"What else indeed? I suppose that is the logical thing, for me to return to my somewhat superficial existence and leave you to your own lonely one."

Sarah opened her mouth to protest, but then closed it. The truth stung a little.

"However," he smiled, that dark, attractive smile that had no doubt seduced legions of ladies, "I am not inclined to be logical. Instead, I wish to propose that you come with me."

Sarah stared. "I...I beg your pardon?"

He stepped closer, reaching out and gently tugging free the old dishtowel and dropping it on the ground. He took her hand, his fingers warm and firm. Gazing down into her eyes, he said softly, "Come with me, Sarah. I want you."

For a moment—just one second of madness—she was actually tempted. This man, with his tender touch and masculine allure, promised excitement and infinite pleasure.

But he also promised, common sense sharply reminded her, scandal and ruin. Her life might be tedious and uneventful, but it was secure. She shook her head. "Thank you for the offer, but I have to refuse. Despite what happened between us, I am a wife, my lord, not a mistress."

"Very well." His agreement was nonchalant.

"What?" The word came out a gasp.

"That suits me well enough." His dark gaze held hers. "My near brush with the hereafter has me pondering the priorities in my life. Having a wife and children sounds...pleasant." His tone deepened. "And having an angel in my bed every night is undoubtedly the closest I will ever come to heaven."

She sputtered, "But you hardly know me, we hardly know each other."

He went on as if she hadn't spoken, "You would be getting the worst part of the bargain, it's true. I am arrogant and demanding at times, no doubt of that. Also, my holdings and other financial interests occupy a great deal of my time. How-

ever, I have contemplated it at length and feel I could make an adequate husband. I vow to you I will do my best.”

Her mind was reeling. She protested again, “You don’t know me.”

His free hand came up to touch her cheek. He smiled. “I know enough. I know you have courage, generosity, and loyalty. Combine that with a capacity for love and passion, and I would be three times a fool to return to London without you. All my life I have known beautiful women, you are the first that is as lovely inside as you are outside. I believe I have been waiting for you.”

That rare compliment brought sudden stinging tears to her eyes. And when the warmth of his arms slipped around her, she did not protest. His kiss was full of both tenderness and unhidden hunger and she could not help it, she returned it with equal fervor.

And when he finally released her and she saw the gleam of that wicked smile, she knew her arrogant lover assumed she’d accepted him.

And, of course, she had.

About Katherine Smith

The author of nine novels, Katherine Smith is an avid fan of both mystery and romance. She believes that the only thing better than curling up with a good book is the privilege to aspire to write one.

She lives in rural Indiana with her husband Chris, her three children, and an assorted menagerie of pets. If you enjoy historical romance, look for her novel, *Wayward Sun*, a #1 bestseller for Whiskey Creek Press and a finalist in the Wis-RWA Write Touch Reader's Choice Awards. It was published November 2004 and is available from WCP. She also has two mystery books available from WCP, *The Summer Bones* and *Blood Is Quicker Than Water*.

Katherine would love it if you would visit her at www.katherinesmith.net

UNBOUNDED LOVE

by Giovanna Lagana

“Wilcox, Murray is your stake out and that’s final!”

Adrienne Wilcox took off her hat and ran her fingers through her straight, short blond hair in frustration. She crossed her arms defensively and rebutted, “But, sir, I can handle myself, or better yet give me Sully.”

“No, Wilcox, Sully is on another assignment. I told you before, Murray is the best we got. He has been on the Hangman case from the beginning and knows how the killer works. The Hangman targeted you in today’s e-mail he sent to the precinct. He intends to make you his next victim. That’s why you need twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

“But, sir—”

“No buts, Wilcox! I don’t understand why you’re making such a big fuss anyway. You and Murray were partners some time ago. You always got along. What’s the problem now?”

Adrienne took a deep breath and felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She wondered if the chief was being sarcastic or if he honestly hadn’t heard the rumors circulating around the station—the rumors that had her and Justin Murray having a torrid love affair.

The gossiping had started a few months back right after the Christmas party. She had had one too many drinks at the party. Seeing Justin Murray there all spiffed up and looking so ruggedly handsome in his suit had sent her into a fluster. Before she knew it, she was all over him.

Everything that happened that night was still fuzzy in her head, but she did remember waking up the next morning on her sofa, not knowing how she got there. Her shirt was partially unbuttoned and she reeked of men's cologne. A blanket had been rumpled on the floor.

What Sully, her partner, told her when they were on patrol the next day was that she was so plastered at the party that Murray, who was sober, took her home to make sure she got there safely.

Since then she was the talk of the precinct. It didn't matter that she hadn't seen Justin Murray since the party. Whenever she walked into a room, everyone suddenly hushed up and stared at her with plastered smirks on their faces as if they were dying to ask her what exactly happened on that God-forsaken party night. She wanted to scream, "Get a life!" but was too embarrassed to say anything.

As she opened her mouth to protest the chief's orders once again, there was a knock at the door. The chief uttered, "Come in."

A tall, broad-shouldered man stepped through the door and said, "You wanted to see me?"

Adrianne turned to look at the door. The second Justin Murray saw her, he stopped talking. Their eyes locked. It seemed like the chief had disappeared and the only people who existed in the universe were Adrianne and Justin. His dark eyes were so intense that Adrianne felt the fiery heat in her cheeks spread throughout her whole body. God, why did his stare turn her insides to mush?

Even though he wasn't dressed in his dapper, black suit, Justin did look scrumptious in his tight, black turtleneck and blue jeans. She could see his burly chest as the black cotton clung to every curve of his upper body. Her heart skipped a beat just imagining how delectable he'd look without his shirt. No other man had ever had this effect on her and she did not like feeling so vulnerable.

Just when Adrienne thought she couldn't take Justin's piercing stare any longer, the chief said, "Murray, the Hangman just sent in another e-mail."

As if the chief's voice just broke some kind of spell, Justin blinked and turned towards the chief to ask, "Yeah, what did he write this time? Were we able to get a trace?"

"No, no luck in getting a trace. This guy's super smart, but he did mention who his next victim is."

"Who?"

Adrienne pointed to herself. "Me."

Justin's eyebrows rose in bafflement. "You? The Hangman wants to make you his next victim?"

The chief answered, "Yup, so that's why I'm assigning you to her case."

Justin scratched his head. "But Wilcox doesn't fit his MO, sir. He's been going after strippers and prostitutes—not cops. And he's never named his next victim by name before. Are you sure this isn't a hoax?"

"No, Murray, I don't, that's why you're the only one I'm assigning to this case for now. We're short staffed this week and can't afford putting too many men on this just in case it is a hoax."

Adrienne added, "But, sir, like Murray said, this e-mail doesn't follow the killer's MO. It's more likely than not it's a teenage prankster playing a funny joke. Valentine's Day is today, sir, and I'm sure Murray has plans with his wife. To ask

him to give all that up for a silly prank seems unnecessary, sir."

The chief shook his head in frustration. "No, Wilcox, why would a teenager pick you, a cop, of all people? This e-mail confuses the hell out of me, but I'm not taking any chances. Murray is going to be guarding you and that's final."

The chief went to the metal hanger in the corner of his cramped, messy office and got his coat. He put it on and stated, "So that's final. Murray will be by your side for the next couple of days and I'm off to get my wife the earrings I ordered at the department store. I've got my cell on me at all times. If anything comes up, just call me; if not, I'll call you later on tonight for an update. God willing, this is a prank and we end up finding the prankster involved soon. I wish you both a Happy Valentine's Day, and I'll see you back in a couple of days."

"Happy Valentine's Day to you, too, sir," they chimed in unison, then looked at each other and smiled in awkwardness. They followed the chief out of his office. Adrienne headed to her desk to get her purse and coat. Justin trailed closely behind her.

Feeling like his gaze was undressing her from behind, she suddenly stopped in her steps and twirled around so fast that Justin bumped into her. "What are you doing?" she asked tensely.

They were practically in each other's faces. Adrienne could smell his cologne. Her stomach did a summersault. It was the same cologne she reeked of the morning after the party. *Oh, God, what happened that night? I'm such an idiot. Justin is married!*

She took a deep gulp of air to try to calm her heart. She didn't know if it was beating so fast because she felt guilty of

possibly committing adultery or because he was so damn close to her.

Justin stepped back and answered, "Exactly what the chief said. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Adrianne looked around the office realizing it had suddenly become silent. The five detectives and cops on duty had their eyes on her and Justin, and they had those same plastered, revolting smirks on their faces. She shook her head, threw on her coat, grabbed her purse, and bolted out the door.

* * * *

Justin saw her dart out of the office at top speed. Knowing her like he did when they were partners, he knew her pig-headedness would get her into trouble if he didn't follow her and fast. He ran to his desk to get his coat and PDA with all the info he had on the Hangman, then he went after her. When he got out the door, he saw Adrianne getting into her car in the parking lot. He sprinted to her car and knocked on the passenger's window.

She bent over and pushed the electric button to make the window descend and then blurted out, "Justin, don't be ridiculous! I can handle myself. I'm a cop, for God's sake!"

Justin's voice rose as he unlocked the door through the open window and got in. "No, I'm not being ridiculous! Boy, you haven't changed much, have you? You're still so stubborn, Adrianne. Why do you always have to act so tough?"

He didn't know if he should continue shouting at her or just kiss her. She was so beautiful when she acted fearless. That was one thing he loved about her, that and how she was so vulnerable deep inside. When they were partners he had wanted so many times to just kiss her and tell her how he really felt about her. But he was married.

After many months of being so close to her and not being able to tell her what he felt for her, it got to be too much. The moment he saw the detective's job opening at the precinct, he applied for it. He thought maybe by not seeing her day in and day out, those feelings he kept buried deep inside his soul would fade away to oblivion.

But he had been wrong. The moment he saw her again at the Christmas party with her hair all made up and in her silk, low-cut blouse that showed a hint of her full bosom, those obscure feelings resurfaced never to be buried again. He loved her; there was no denying it.

* * * *

He took a deep breath and continued, "Just because you're a cop doesn't mean you're not vulnerable. The Hangman can be anyone, anywhere, and without someone watching your back, you could be in trouble."

She looked at him with her gorgeous blue-green eyes. "But Justin, you need to be with your wife, not tailing me."

"Rachel is in Florida on a week's vacation."

"Florida? Why aren't you with her?"

Justin's face tightened and he started pulling at the loose skin on his fingers. Adrianne knew he always did this when he felt uncomfortable. "Rachel's on vacation with Howard."

Adrianne did a double take. "What! Who the hell is Howard?"

Justin looked at her like she was playing a joke on him. "Her boyfriend, of course! We've been separated for a few months now. What, you didn't know this? I know I didn't tell anyone at work yet except the chief, but I guess you knew because of what happened a few months ago."

She turned a crimson red, looked out the windshield avoiding his questioning stare, and started the car. *What happened at the party? Damned if I know. Thank God he's sepa-*

rated. At least I didn't commit adultery if we did end up going all the way. All the way! Was I crazy! Why would I do that?

She knew the answer to that question all right. She'd known the answer the moment she found out the handsome and daring Justin Murray was assigned to be her partner a year and a half ago. The moment she set eyes on the six-foot-two-inch hunk, her heart began to flutter. And it continued to oscillate until she found out he had a wife. Right then and there she cast those thoughts of desire out of her mind and thought of him only as a friend and colleague.

Once Justin got promoted to detective, they barely saw each other at the office. She was still a patrol officer and pretty much on the road with her new partner, Sully. When their paths crossed again two months ago, the wine she drank just catalyzed those desires she had for him bottled up deep inside her. Drink after drink, they just came bubbling out until she made a complete fool of herself in her drunken stupor.

He spoke, bringing her out of thought. "Rachel was seeing Howard behind my back for the past year." He snorted a dry laugh. "I'm a detective and didn't even figure that out. Can you believe it?"

Adrianne looked at him and said with sincerity, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Justin."

"It wasn't meant to be, you know. That's life. You move on." He returned her gaze.

They just sat there staring at each other for the longest moment. The sexual tension between them was more than either one of them could handle right now. Especially when there was a serial killer out there on the hunt for Adrianne. They needed to act and think like cops and leave their feelings and insatiable desires hidden.

Adrienne started the car and asked, "So the Chief tells me you've been on the case since the very beginning. What do you have on the Hangman so far?"

"Not much. He goes after hookers on the street and strippers in the cheap, sleazy bars. He follows them home and rapes them. Then he hangs them in their homes. He has been in contact with us through e-mails. He goes to these Internet coffee shops and uses the public computers there. He's got a public e-mail, which he changes each time. His alias on the free e-mail accounts is Joe Blow, John Smith, you know, any stupid name you can think of."

"But the people at these coffee shops can't give you a physical description?"

"Yeah, but the description varies from him being a red-head, to being a brunette, and then to being a blond. They have identified him as having short hair, long hair, a beard, and being clean-shaven. Obviously, he wears a different disguise wherever he goes."

"He's smart, all right."

"Well, the only concrete evidence we got is he is about five-feet-ten or five-feet-eleven. Husky build."

"That's something. Picked up any prints?"

"Nope, it's winter time so he goes in with gloves and doesn't take them off when he types."

"Doesn't take them off? How can he type then?"

"My guess is they are custom made. The leather used is so sheer, that it's like he isn't wearing gloves at all."

"Makes sense. That means you got zip, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Now you know why you need police surveillance?"

"I guess. So where do we go now?"

“Well, my guess is if this isn’t a hoax and he is out to get you, then he’ll make his move at your apartment. So let’s go there.”

Adrianne wanted to argue. That was the last place she wanted to be alone with Justin. But she knew their first priority was nabbing the Hangman and if it meant both of them being alone in her apartment, then so be it. They were professionals and could keep their cool, right?

“How about I cook you dinner?” Justin added, sensing her uneasiness.

“Cook? You?”

He laughed. “What, you think I can’t cook?”

“I never thought of you as being able to cook.”

“Well, I’m not great, but I get by. How about a meaty lasagna with bechemel sauce and a garden salad?”

Adrianne’s mouth began to water as she drove up to the parking lot in her building. She parked the car and got out saying, “That sounds great. I’m getting hungry already.”

She walked to the front door of the building, looking for her keys. Justin was right behind her when he heard a loud bang that sounded like a gun being fired. He shouted, “Duck!” and toppled Adrianne to the floor. He was on her with his revolver out, peering all around.

She could barely breathe. “Justin, why did you do that?”

“That’s a gun shot!”

“No, it’s not. It’s the neighbor’s old car. It kicks sometimes when he starts it. It’s so old, I don’t know why he keeps it.”

“Tell him I’ll personally take it out of commission for him.” He began to laugh but didn’t get up. He just kept looking into her eyes and smiling. “I like your perfume; it smells so sweet.”

His voice and eyes sent shivers of excitement surging through her body. Her legs felt weak. His lips were only a few inches away from hers and she could already feel the yearning they ignited. "In a quivering, whispered voice, she answered, "Thanks, I-it's Ch-Chanel."

He bent his head down, wanting to get a closer sniff. His heated breath on her neck sent her body temperature soaring. Oh God, she wanted him to kiss her.

Before either of them could react to their growing urges, the old car gave out another loud explosion, bringing both of them back to reality. Justin's eyes turned serious as he got up and pulled her up as well. "Let's get to your apartment right away. You never know where the Hangman is. He can be out here stalking us right now."

Adrianne took a deep breath to try to calm her soaring hormones and regain the oxygen she lost while Justin was crushing her body with his. "Yeah, I guess you're right." They straightened their clothes and went into the building and up to her apartment.

By the time they got to her floor, the sexual heat between them sizzled down to only an ember. Both of them had to be on guard. Who knew if the Hangman was lurking in her apartment, ready to pounce on whoever came inside?

Adrianne unlocked her door and then drew her gun, as did Justin. They slowly opened the door and crept in, ready to shoot any perpetrator in their way. It felt like old times on patrol together for the briefest of moments.

When they scouted the premises and found it was safe, Justin said, "Okay, I'll get to cooking and you can relax."

Adrianne looked at him. "You sure you can handle it?"

He laughed. "Ah, Ye of such little faith. Go. Go relax."

She smiled back and said, "I think I'll take a bath. My back is killing me from the dive you made me take outside."

He scrunched his eyes. "Sorry."

"Hey, I'm a cop. I've been through worse. By the way, you told me you've got all the Hangman's e-mails on your PDA. Can I take it into the bath with me and take a look at it? Maybe I can figure out what he wants with me. I still can't understand that part. Going after a cop is not his style."

Justin opened the refrigerator door and said, "Sure, no problem."

While Justin slaved away in front of the open stove, Adrienne got into the hot bath and relaxed her stiff muscles. The tenseness in her body dissipated but the tenseness of lust escalated. Knowing Justin was a few feet away in her apartment while she lay naked in the bath drove her bonkers.

She knew he was attracted to her. No denying it. The chemistry between them was potent. But Justin had been separated for only a few months and her wanton actions at Christmas would entice any man into wanting more. But wanting sex wasn't the same thing as wanting to be in love. Adrienne didn't want just sex. She loved Justin and couldn't bear it if Justin wanted only to sow his wild oats and then move on. She couldn't risk getting hurt again as she had so many times before. Even though she was a tough cookie on the outside, she was so vulnerable on the inside.

To take her mind off of Justin, she took the PDA and started reading the e-mails. They were all so general. The Hangman just wrote a vague description of who his next victim would be; and when he killed her, he'd send another e-mail telling the police where they could find the hanging body. Not much to go on. But there was something peculiar in each one of the e-mails. The Hangman would use "Hi There" as his salutation.

"'Hi There' Why does that sound so familiar?" Adrienne wondered aloud as she turned off the PDA and began to scrub

her back. "Who the hell uses that all the time? Yeah, Sully." For a split second the thought crossed her mind that maybe it was Sully. He was about five-feet-ten and husky. But he was a cop and she had known him for over a year. "Nah! That's crazy. It can't be Sully. I'm letting my imagination run wild. It's Justin's fault. Why did the chief have to assign him to me? This is driving me crazy."

As she finished scrubbing her back, she heard a thumping sound in the other room. She cried out, "Justin, was that you? Did you make something fall?"

No response.

Only silence.

Her cop senses flared. She got up and pulled a bath towel around her body. She looked for her gun, but realized she left it in her bedroom, in her drawer.

Damn!

She'd have to sneak out and get it.

She tiptoed to the door and placed her ear against it.

Still silence.

She opened the door a crack and peeked out. The corridor was clear. She slowly opened the bathroom door and tiptoed to her room. She peeked in. It, too, was clear. She ran inside and grabbed her gun. Then she walked slowly back down the corridor to the kitchen. Justin was lying unconscious on the floor; blood was oozing out of a deep cut on his forehead. At that moment, she forgot she was a cop and just looked at the man she loved. She didn't know if he was alive or dead. She ran to him and placed the gun down to check for his pulse. "Justin, Justin!"

He had a strong pulse. "Oh! Thank God!"

Just then the gun beside her was kicked to the other corner of the room and a familiar voice from behind said, "Hi there, Adrienne."

Adrianne didn't need to turn around, she knew it was Sully standing behind her and he had a gun pointed at her head. She ground her teeth and blurted, "Sully, you bastard! It was you. How did you get in?"

Sully bent down. His icy breath on her bare shoulders was revolting. "You lent me a key months ago, remember, when you wanted me to pick up that package and deliver it for you. Well, I made a copy then and used it today. I've been hiding under the bed this whole time. For a cop you certainly aren't thorough in your search, Wilcox." He pulled her up to her feet and turned her around so she could face him. If looks could kill, Sully would have been struck dead there and then by the look Adrianne shot at him.

"Now, Adrianne, don't look at me like that. You know all those whores deserved it, and now, so do you."

"Me, why?"

"You acted just like the whores on the street and in the strip clubs. You threw yourself at Murray at the Christmas party. Only you're worse. You gave it away for free."

Adrianne punched Sully across the face. It was so hard that he stumbled a step backwards. His face was brimming with rage as he turned towards her and revealed a mottled, red, swollen cheek. "Now you've got me mad, Adrianne. I wanted to wait until your boyfriend here woke up from his sleep to do you in front of him. But now, well, I guess I might as well have you and then kill you both when he comes to."

He looked her over from head to toe and exclaimed, "I never knew you were that sexy, Adrianne. If I knew you had that body, I would have had you long before this. No wonder Murray was hot for you."

Adrianne's blood boiled over. *Who the hell does Sully think he's dealing with! I'm a cop. I've been trained to defend*

myself. He can't exactly rape me while he is holding his gun. And in hand-to-hand combat, I'll have a chance.

Sully walked closer to her and placed his cold nose against her neck. The repulsive act made her stomach turn. It definitely didn't arouse her as Justin's affectionate gesture did earlier. No, definitely not. Abhorrence was what she experienced with the feel of his grotesque nose and lips on her neck—pure and simple disgust.

"Um, you smell yummy. I can't wait to taste all of you."

Before Adrienne could react in hostility, Sully hit her across the back of her head with the butt of his gun. She fell to the floor with her towel coming undone.

She lost consciousness.

* * * *

Justin opened his eyes a crack and felt a sharp pain in his head. He closed them again and then opened them slowly this time. His vision was blurry for a few seconds, but then he saw Adrienne naked on the floor and Sully was about to open his pants. He had spread her legs open.

Justin wanted to get up and stop him, but his hands and feet were tied. Instead, he shouted out, "Sully! Get your stinking hands off of her!"

Sully turned around and laughed. "Oh Goody! You're awake. Now you'll get to see me hump your tramp."

"She is not a tramp!" Justin cried.

"Now, that's where you are mistaken, Murray. She was all over you at the Christmas party—kissing you and whispering in your ear. Then you drove her home and she let you inside of her. In my eyes, that's a tramp."

Fury burned in Justin's veins. "She is not a tramp! She kissed me once at the party and when I drove her home nothing happened. She passed out in the car so I carried her to her apartment and put her down on the couch. I put a blanket on

her and then left. I love her. I would never take advantage of her when she was out of it. I'm not a monster like you! Now leave her alone. She isn't your type, Sully."

Sully turned to look over Adrienne's naked body and said, "Oh, but I disagree. She is exactly my type. Look at her, Murray, perfect in every way on the outside, but on the inside rotten as hell."

Justin tried to tear his hands free as Sully put down his gun and pulled down his pants completely.

* * * *

Adrienne heard Justin's voice as she was coming to. She tried to brush the foggiess out of her mind and lay there, listening to Sully and Justin argue. She heard Justin say that all they did was kiss and that he loved her. Could it be? Or was she dreaming? *Oh, Justin, I love you, too.*

Then she heard something metallic being placed on the floor and a zipper being unzipped. Bile rose into her mouth and she felt like puking right there and then. Imagining Sully taking off his pants was probably more abhorrent and vile than the actual act itself. Impulsively, she wanted to spring to her feet and run, but the trained professional in her told her to stay perfectly still. *Don't move a muscle. Just wait for the perfect time and then attack!*

She pretended to still be unconscious and waited until she heard Sully take off his pants and bend down ready to violate her, then she kicked him hard in the face. He tumbled backwards and Adrienne jumped up to get the pistol. She kicked him in the face once again and proclaimed her sweet victory, "You are one sick psycho! And I hope you rot in hell!"

Sully stared up at her with a look of utter hatred and tried to get up to fight. But then his eyes glazed over and his head hit the floor and he passed out

Adrianne went over to Justin and asked, "Are you okay?" while she undid the ropes.

Justin answered with a smile, "Never mind me. I'm as tough as an ox." When he was free, he stood up and stepped closer to Adrianne. He looked into her eyes and asked, "What about you? Are you okay?"

"Yes, my head hurts a bit, but like I said before I've been through worse. Remember when we had to stop that robbery last year and—"

She felt his intense stare. It was so distracting that she stopped talking and looked up at him and realized that he was gawking at her naked body. He definitely wasn't paying attention to a word she said.

"Oh, my God. This is so embarrassing." Beet red and humiliated, she ran to pick her towel up. She quickly wrapped it around her torso and tried to ignore his continued stare by picking up the rope and tying up the unconscious Sully.

When she finished tying her assailant, Justin came up to her and took her hand. He gazed into her eyes and asked, "I guess you heard what I said to Sully?"

Adrianne's cheeks were still red, and she looked down.

Justin lifted her face and continued, "I meant every word, Adrianne. I've had these feelings for you since the first time I met you. I guess Rachel knew it and that's why she decided to have an affair."

Adrianne looked into his eyes and said, "Oh, Justin—"

Before she could say anything else, he pushed her wet hair away from her cheek and stepped in closer. He put his arms around her slim waist as she put her arms around his broad neck. Then he bent down and kissed her lightly at first, but soon his tongue caressed her full lips and pushed them apart. His body arched with passion as his kiss became more demanding.

Adrienne could feel her body tremble with his embrace. He was definitely a great kisser, better than any she had ever had. But maybe it was because his kisses were laced with love as well as lust—the combination a perfect aphrodisiac. She got on her tiptoes so her body could be closer to his and combed her hands through his thick, black hair. The man of her dreams was here in her arms and she was in heaven.

Just as the demanding kiss was turning into something more intense, the phone rang. At first, it sounded like a soft murmuring ring. Adrienne thought it was coming from another apartment. She ignored it and continued savoring Justin's passionate kiss. But as the ringing continued, her senses began to come back down to earth, and she realized it was Justin's PDA. She reluctantly pushed Justin away.

Justin refused at first, obviously, not wanting their kiss to end. Adrienne said, "It's the phone, Justin."

He stared at her full lips and whispered, "So let the answering machine get it."

She pushed his face away and turned him towards the sound of the ring and said, "It's your PDA. It's probably the chief. If you don't answer it, the chief will have ten patrol cars out here in minutes."

Justin's love struck eyes suddenly sharpened. "Holy cow. You're right. Let me get it. I definitely don't want the whole station coming here." He bolted towards the sound of the PDA, which was in her bathroom. She had left it in there.

He came out a few seconds later with a smirk on his face. Adrienne's curiosity peeked. "So what did the chief say?"

Justin came over to her and wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. "He's sending a patrol car over here in ten minutes. Of course he flipped when I told him it was Sully."

A frown came over her face. "Great, now we'll have tons of paperwork to fill out. We'll be working the entire weekend."

Justin's smile broadened and he kissed her lightly on her lips. "No, that's the good news. The chief doesn't want to ruin his weekend with his wife. He said we will work on the report next week. Once they come and pick up Sully, we will be free all weekend long."

Adrianne looked at Justin, mystified. "Are you serious? But we need to write a report up right away and book him."

"The chief said the officers who are coming will do all that. All we have to do is give our formal statements on Monday. All the paperwork will be done by the arresting officers, not us."

That smirk was still on his face. Adrianne knew he had more to tell. "What else did the chief say?"

"He said he hopes you and I have a happy St. Valentine's Day."

Adrianne blushed. "Oh, my God, he knows?"

He laughed. "Are you serious, Adrianne? From the look we gave each other in his office today, he would have had to be blind not to figure it out."

He bent down and kissed her once again, and then said, "Now go get dressed; they'll be here in a few minutes."

"Oh, yeah." She turned to leave, but before she took a step, Justin grabbed her once again and kissed her passionately. "I love you."

Adrianne kissed him back and ran into her room, singing, "I love you, too, Justin!"

She closed the door behind her and flopped on her bed. What a day it had turned out to be. They ended up nabbing the Hangman and falling in love. Life could be sweet. She had

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the weekend off and was with the man of her dreams. *What else could you ask for on St. Valentine's Day?*

About Giovanna Lagana

Giovanna Lagana has been married for the past twelve years to her loving husband, Ghislain, and is the proud mother of three beautiful children, named Mathieu, Nicholas, and Isabelle. She has been writing for several years and has published several of her poems and short stories in magazines, e-zines, and anthologies. She's also an Editor for Whiskey Creek Press. When she isn't busy playing with her kids, writing, or editing, she spends her time reading.

Her horror/romantic suspense novel *With Black & White Comes The Grey—The Battle Of Armageddon—Book 1* is available from Whiskey Creek Press. She'd love to hear from readers. She invites you to visit her website at: <http://giovannalagana.wcpauthor.com/>

REMEMBER

by Judith Fox

The white moon above the grove of dark trees shone on the house. I couldn't remember how many times I had seen that view twenty years ago. It seemed unreal now, as though I had dreamt it.

I stepped down to the driveway from the truck, wondering what I was doing back here on Salal Island.

"Penelope, here's your suitcase. Do you want me to go in with you?" The old man grinned at me from behind the steering wheel of the ancient truck. "Just to introduce you, to make sure everything is all right. That you're comfortable."

I turned back to look at the mansion glowing beneath the moon, the water glittering behind it. The night was still with the stars twinkling in the sky.

"No thanks, Rudy." I smiled back. I might as well start my new independence right this moment." I took my suitcase and leaned in to kiss Rudy on his rough unshaven face. "Thanks for your help. You are, as usual, the most charming man I've ever met."

I looked again at the house. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said, giving myself some assurance that all would be back to normal by the next day.

Rudy climbed into the truck and as he backed up to leave, he grinned from ear to ear and I could hear him laugh gleefully as he drove away.

I turned with suitcase in hand to walk down the long gravel lane. As I got closer, it seemed the house had an aura of eeriness that I hadn't noticed before. Resolution intact, I walked up the wooden steps to the veranda and knocked soundly at the door. There. It was done. I couldn't turn back now.

I wondered how much would happen after that knock, to change my life and to change other people's lives, merely because I returned to the past after nearly twenty years. Returned to a world I had never wanted to see again.

It wasn't a coincidence that I was back on the island facing all the ghosts and memories.

Two weeks earlier, I had answered an ad I'd seen in the city paper. It was an advertisement for a live-in tutor to a young child. When I saw the address I knew I didn't have a choice. I had sent a letter with my credentials, and then waited for the reply. And so, I returned to all the ghosts and memories.

I looked towards the moon and took a deep calming breath. As I turned back, the door opened and a woman's smiling face greeted me.

"Welcome. You must be Penelope Burke. Yes, of course you are. Who else would be out on this godforsaken island at this time of night knocking on the door?" Without giving me a chance to answer, she took my suitcase, and urged me inside.

"I'm sorry to be such a burden," I said, stumbling into the house. "I didn't realize I would be arriving on the island so late. There doesn't seem to be much transportation available at this time of the night...and yes, I'm Penelope Burke, and you must be?"

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot my manners. I’m the one who placed the ad. My name is Cora Steiner. I sent Rudy to see if you were on that last ferry. The storm yesterday threw the ferry’s schedule off.”

She gave me a hug. “I’m so excited to see another woman on this island.” She led the way further down the utility hall into the house.

I remembered then how some of the island people had always seemed genuinely glad to see a newcomer, and how welcome they had made a person feel.

“I’m so glad you answered my ad. We need your help around here.”

While she pulled me by the arm into a bigger room, she threw a switch on the wall, and lights gave out a soft illumination around the baseboards of a tiled counter. The lighting circumvented what was the kitchen. As I stood there in the cream, bronze, and soft brown-colored room, I felt warm and welcome.

Cora gave another wide smile, then started to say, “Let’s see, you’re probably tired and—” when a tiny voice from around the corner of the large kitchen interrupted.

“Cora, Cora”.

A small child with thick dark flowing hair and eyes the color of warm brown chocolate, ran to Cora and hugged her legs. She stared at me, and her gaze made me feel as though I was a monster.

Cora laughed, bent down to the child and said, “Annie...this is your new friend, Penelope.”

The child stared at Cora. “Pen—”

When Cora told her my name again, I crouched down and grinned at her...and said, “Annie, such a pretty name for a pretty little girl. You must call me Penny.”

The child smiled back at me, released Cora, and said, "Penny".

I felt utterly charmed by this little person. "That's right, Annie."

Cora put her hand on the back of the child's neck, "Annie, where are your manners?"

Annie stepped forward and presented her doll to me. "Susie."

I gave Susie a handshake, to which Annie giggled, and I laughed. This child and I had bonded.

"Come now, you two, it's very late." She whisked Annie and Susie into her arms. "We must all go to bed."

I followed Cora and Annie up the stairs. Perhaps I was overly tired, but as Cora led the way down the hallways, I felt as though I was walking on clouds. She left me waiting in the hallway while she put Annie to bed.

For a moment, I admired this area of the house. Even in the dimly lit hallways I could see the ceilings with high support beams were made of beautiful redwood. The upstairs hallways were lined with pale gray-blue carpeting making it easier to find one's way despite the lighting.

The interior design was very simple and timeless.

I remembered in the past, when people first saw this majestic house they exclaimed at its location on a quiet small island off the almost-forgotten coastline.

Cora showed me to my room with soft blue walls and a blue-canopied bed. Saying good night, I dropped my suitcase on the floor, peeled off my clothes, and fell into the large bed. I pulled the big quilt up to my chin, sighed, and fell into a deep sleep.

The next thing I heard was a rooster crowing. When I opened my eyes I saw the bright light of the sun glaring into the window at the side of the bed.

I went to look out the window. Below, I saw a large fenced off area enclosing a small flock of chickens that were clucking and pecking at the ground. A large red and gold rooster stood amongst them crowing and strutting. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and I saw a Golden Labrador dog and German Shepard dog running after each other, wrestling together near the penned area. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. Idyllic scenes were a rare thing in my life.

Quickly dressing in jeans, and a sweatshirt, I walked down the hallway. It was quiet and austere. An orange cat came from one doorway, crossed my pathway and ran into Annie's room. I stopped to peek into the room. Annie was sound asleep in a lovely white canopy bed. She looked like Sleeping Beauty with her dark hair spread out on the pillow, waiting to be awakened with a kiss by Prince Charming. The orange cat lay beside her, one paw on her stomach, staring back at me as though I was an intruder. Prince Charming? I tiptoed away.

In the daylight, I could see the dark steps of highly polished redwood. As I stepped down and around, I found myself in the living room with one wall covered in ceiling-high windows overlooking evergreen trees and the ocean beyond. The windows near the ceiling were blue and green stained glass, adding more grandeur to this room. The massive stone fireplace on the wall opposite the windows was also ceiling-high, and built with a wide stone platform. I imagined it was built for a large clan of Vikings, with large comfortable cushions to sit on and enjoy the fire.

I walked through a door by the fireplace around to another smaller fireplace, in a cozy addition to the welcoming kitchen.

Humming to herself as she worked at the kitchen counter, Cora turned to see me. "Good morning, Penny.

You're an early riser." She poured coffee in a mug and handed it to me. "Did you sleep well?"

I sipped the hot steaming coffee. "Mmmm. It's very quiet here. Not like the city. I was more exhausted than I realized. But I like early mornings."

I looked out the windows over the sink. "When I looked out my bedroom window this morning, I could see I'm not the only early riser."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Penny. I should move you to a bedroom on the other side of the house—overlooking the lawn and ocean."

"No, please, I'm fine. It's lovely to see the activity in the morning. It's perfect."

I sat down at the polished wood table near the fireplace. "I happened to see Annie still sleeping upstairs."

Cora poured coffee in another mug and added several teaspoons of sugar. "She was a bit excited last night about your arrival. She came to sleep with me for a while. Before long, she'll be up and hungry."

I finished my coffee and decided to take a short walk, leaving Cora in her kitchen to prepare breakfast.

There was a cacophony of noise outside in the yard. It seemed, as I stepped down to the yard, that all the animals stopped their antics to watch me, only for a moment, and then continued on as they were before. The house and yard hummed with life.

I took a rough path towards the ocean, through the woods, which I had used often so many years before.

I wandered down the dirt path; the dogs raced around me until they sniffed something in the bushes and disappeared.

Alone again, I looked up to see birds singing in the large evergreens above my head. Rays of sunshine shone between the high branches onto the pathway. It hadn't changed since I

was last here. These pathways protected my love and I in another time. Guarded by these trees, we'd talked about ourselves and the things we loved. I was happy then, beyond anything I've felt since that time.

He would laugh that wonderfully infectious laugh, take my hands, and then swing me as if we were at a dance. His intense, brooding face became happy, because of me, I thought.

The dogs' barking brought me back to the present from my reminiscing. It was then that I remembered breakfast and rushed across the bush and jumped back onto the road.

Just as I landed on the road, someone yelled, "Look out," and from the bend in the road up the hill behind me, a man on a bicycle raced by me. He rode straight up the embankment where he crashed. His legs pointed in all angles with the bicycle, and the wheels somehow entangled with his body. He pushed himself up partly with his arms. The ferns and salal plants beneath and around him seemed to bend away from him as he exclaimed profanities.

He was trying to stand up. The dogs ran to him with tails wagging and bodies wiggling. They jumped all over him and licked his face. He fell again on top of the bicycle.

This was incredible. All the memories of Brent of years ago, flashed before my eyes, along with my feelings for him. After I'd found out the worst about him, his lies and deceit, I'd run from the island and from him. My heart was broken. I then married a man I met six months later. I learnt to love Donald, but never with the passion I'd had for Brent. Although I never regretted marrying Donald, I thought of Brent often, and wondered if he ever thought about me.

A year and a half ago, after Donald passed away with cancer, I picked myself up and decided to try and make myself useful. I didn't need money, but I needed to feel there was some purpose in my life again.

By coincidence, I saw the ad about the island and the mansion in the local newspaper. I didn't pause. I answered the ad, addressed to a Cora Steiner, and to my surprise, I received an immediate answer with an offer of a trial run as a tutor for a four-year-old girl.

Now, two weeks later, I stood in disbelief, actually on Salal Island, looking down at Brent, my Prince Charming, lying amidst bicycle and dogs, his curses ringing in my ears. Even as he lay on the ground mumbling profanities, I still found him attractive. Grey hair on his temples made him more dashing and the dark eyes appeared as brooding and threatening as they did when he was twenty-five years old. But even he, in his frustrated anger, could not extinguish the hilarity of his tussle with dogs and bicycle.

"Are you all right?" I attempted to yell above the noise of his swearing and the dogs barking.

"Am I all right? Are you crazy, woman? Why don't you watch where you're going? It's becoming more dangerous than the city around here!"

I stared at him for a moment, then felt anger rising in me. "You're a stupid, reckless driver. You're a danger to anyone in the city or in the country." I attempted to pull him up. "You think you are the only person in the world worth anything. You nearly ran me down. You arrogant fool. I'm lucky you didn't kill me, never mind that you scared me half to death."

He pushed away when I tried to take his arm to help him stand.

He struggled to stand on one leg and grabbed me to stabilize himself. Then inches from my face, his eyes widened. "Penelope. Good grief, don't you know me?"

The puzzled piercing eyes searched my face for an answer. It was as though I saw him just yesterday. I shrugged

from his grasp. "Get your hands off me, you...you...reckless driver."

"Humph, my usual friendly greeting from people when they see me. Does this mean you're happy to see me?"

He smiled, pulled me against him and kissed me firmly on the mouth. Nothing had changed. It was where I belonged. I put my arms around his waist and kissed him back. I could feel my heart pounding uncontrollably, as I felt his heart beating in his chest.

I pulled away and we stared at each other in silence, as the years fell away from between us.

Flustered, I reminded myself that I must not forget that I couldn't trust him. *That* I knew wouldn't have changed.

I turned and ran from him. By the time I arrived back at the house and safety, I was out of breath, both from the running and the ageless drawing power I felt for him.

Safely sitting in the kitchen, I was enjoying a cup of coffee, thinking about the events of a short while ago, and I knew I needed to face the problem, not run away from it again.

I thought about telling Cora that Brent was out there, for what seemed like hours, but in reality, it had only been a few minutes, since I returned home. Just as I opened my mouth to start to tell her, barking dogs on the porch excitedly announced another guest. The back door burst open with a bang, and after loud stomps, Brent was in the kitchen, bellowing, "Cora, where's my coffee, and where's my Annie?"

My heart leaped. This was just too much for a woman my age. I wanted to stand and announce, "How do you do. My name is Penelope Curtis and I am the new tutor."

But Brent ignored my presence. I sat with my hands gripped on my mug pretending this was all a normal scenario, and I had simply not been seen yet.

Cora stepped forward and laughed, pointed towards me and said, "Penny Curtis, this is the lord and master of the house, Brent Day."

"Humph, it's about time you arrived."

I intended to speak but a little voice came from the living room doorway, giggling. "I'm here, Granda."

Annie ran into the open arms of Brent and they whirled around the kitchen, laughed, and exchanged kisses and hugs.

I could feel myself a little envious, in spite of myself. There was a time when Brent and I also had hugged and kissed.

At that moment Brent turned with Annie in his arms, our eyes locked. Did he remember, too?

As I struggled for calmness, I asked, "Mr. Day, am I to understand that you are the ward of Annie, and not Cora?"

"Oh, Penny, I'm sorry," Cora interceded between us, and putting her hands to her face, said, "I'm just not doing this right, Brent. I keep forgetting to tell Penny the important facts about this job."

Brent smirked and quickly said, "Cora, Penelope and I were acquainted many years ago, one summer, just before she went to the city and married."

"Well," Cora said, "This is a pleasant coincidence for you two then—is it?"

She looked directly at Brent and he smiled, still holding Annie in his arms.

"It's all right, Cora, you did the best thing. As I recall, I was the one who chose her. He kissed Annie again. "Perhaps Ms. Curtis wouldn't have stayed if she knew it was me who needed the help."

Annie looked at Brent and said, "You need help, Granda? I'll help you. I can be a big help."

"No, sweetheart, we need someone to help you learn to read and write, and Granda's just too busy making money for us. So if you like her, I thought Ms. Curtis could teach you reading and drawing for a few months."

"Msssss. Curtis." Annie looked puzzled.

I stepped forward and looking at Annie, said, "Your Granda means me, Penny. Is it all right?"

Annie threw her arms in the air.

"Oh, Granda, I love Penny. Yes, please, I want her to stay and help us."

Brent threw her in the air, caught her, and said, "Well, that's settled then. Our little princess is going to have her wish."

During breakfast, Brent paid undivided attention to Annie and asked her what she did yesterday, while he was off the island in town. She chattered to him, explaining her day and patiently answered any questions. She was precocious towards him and I could see the charm she exuded on him.

When Annie had finished her breakfast, she ran outside to play with the animals. While Cora cleaned up the kitchen, Brent and I had coffee at the table.

Now Brent was serious, and stared at me, while I sipped more coffee.

I nervously cleared my throat, watching Cora cleaning the counter space.

"Now, Mr. Day."

I suppose I used his last name at some attempt at goading.

"Please call me Brent."

"Well, then please call me Penny."

"I like the name Penelope, I always have liked it."

I'm sure I blushed and when I looked over at him, he gave me a smile that sent my pulse racing.

It was those sky blue eyes. They always weakened me. They always did and obviously in my middle years, he still made me feel giddy, like a young woman again. "Brent. I need to know about my job and Annie."

He stared at me a moment longer. His eyes assessed me and I wondered if it was also passion I saw in them.

Cora came up, and standing between us, told Brent she was going to see her old aunt down the road for a while, and that he could look after me.

When she left, I said, "Shouldn't we go outside and watch Annie?"

"Not yet," he answered, "The dogs are her protectors. Hawkeye, the black Shepard, would give his life for Annie. And the golden Lab, Misty, is practically a mother to her." He snorted. "Some animals are more intelligent than a lot of people I know."

He glanced towards the windows as the dogs barked and Annie's laughter chimed outside the house.

"I should tell you, Penelope, that it was Cora's idea in the beginning to place an ad. She's been a great support to this family, and my friend through all. But when I found out about the ad, I was a bit peeved. I didn't want anyone else here. We argued but I knew that if I didn't cooperate, I would lose Cora. Annie would be upset, if Cora left. My life would be hell again. Too many people in her life were leaving. Sometimes I wonder if I should propose to Cora."

I blinked and wondered if he was serious.

His eyes had a devilish look.

He ran his fingers through his hair and drank some coffee.

"Anyway, when we received the letters in answer to our ad, and I saw yours, I couldn't believe my eyes. I was struck with amazement. It was as though you had returned to me. Now, I'm not a man of many words. The women in my life

have always had me at the advantage, and I try to keep silent. My fondness and respect for them as people firstly and secondly as the female sex drives some I've loved to darken my life with their dissatisfactions.

"When you left the island years ago, after I told you I was married, I should've explained more to you, and while I was deciding, you were gone."

By this time, he'd left the table, and paced about in front of me.

"I mean, I wanted to tell you about Margo and our marriage. We were married when we were too young to know better. Mostly, it was passion, and soon after we were married, we both discovered it was a mistake. Margo was a gorgeous woman, but she took to drinking after she had our son, Matthew, and the caring for him was up to me. That wasn't too good. I was so stupid about the kid. I found Cora on the island, and she needed work to support her partner and his drinking habits. So, I hired her. She was an answer to my prayers."

Brent leaned against the wall near me.

"Cora and I understood each other. She didn't talk much and neither did I. We became fast friends that way. Matthew needed her and so did I, in my fashion, which was as a housekeeper and nanny. Margo was even jealous of her, though there was nothing between us that she needed to be jealous about."

He used his fingers as a comb through his thick black hair.

"I don't know why you never found out I was married. My brilliant idea was to tell you a story about not to say anything to anyone because I had a young son, and he needed to be slowly weaned to the idea of you. That story gave me a dream come true. I wanted you so badly, I would do anything, anything to keep you."

He slapped the table, stood up, and walked towards my end of the table.

“Do you remember that old place on the crook of the road near the ferry slip? That was our house. Do you remember how decrepit it was? Really a good place to raise a kid. The night you left, the house burnt down and took Margo with it.”

He groaned and then sighed.

“It was Margo’s dream to eventually have this house. Your friends were living in it, and she was envious of them. The worse nightmare happened for Matt and I when the house burned down. The investigation showed that Margo had been smoking in bed, and that’s what started the fire. I blame myself. In the fury of another argument scene, I walked out of the house and stayed at Jake’s that night trying to get some sleep. She screamed and beat me across the arms when I tried to tell her about you. She was enraged and drank straight from a bottle of whiskey. I left her because the sight of me seemed to make her worse.” He ran his hand over his shiny hair.

“Matt was at a scout camp on the island. Thank God he was safe.”

“This morning, when I first saw you here, on the front road, I couldn’t believe you were real. You were mine again—maybe.”

I couldn’t keep my eyes from Brent as he talked.

“When we first met in the woods so long ago, and started talking, that’s when I decided somehow I would have you.”

“Brent, you were married.”

“I know. I thought I would tell you, but I never wanted to spoil it. When we went for walks in the woods and had picnics, and talked, I lived in a dream. God, I never talked so much in my whole life as I did with you. But I couldn’t tell you the truth. I had to find a way for us to be together. I was

desperate. You had become the most important thing in my life.

“Margo became even more difficult before I had even told her about you. She knew. I don’t know how. You women seem to have an extra sense about things.

I left her alone so much during the days and half the nights to be with you. When I wasn’t with you, I was doing work on my construction business, or staring out on the water thinking about you.”

Tiny footsteps coming towards us interrupted Brent’s story.

“Granda, come outside and watch me. Penny, you come, too.”

Annie was excited and flushed. She took Brent’s hand and he followed her out the door. I was close behind.

We stood on the porch and watched Annie jump on the trampoline set up at the corner of the garden.

“Hey now”, Brent yelled, “Remember what we agreed, Annie. You’re not to use that trampoline alone without one of us watching you.”

“You are now, Granda.” As she leaped and bounced, she put her hand on her mouth and fell on her back giggling.

Turning to me, Brent said, “How could she be so smart at four years old?”

He laughed and the laughter took away the years from his face. “Isn’t she amazing?”

* * * *

The days were all amazing after that for me. The sun shone brightly each day. There was much fun and laughter with Annie. She was a willing student and loved to read. She was also an avid artist and I hung her paintings in my room and hers. We played games and sometimes dragged Cora away from her housekeeping and cooking to play with us.

Brent was too busy to join us very often. I had to reluctantly admit to myself that I was disappointed when he didn't come to dinner. Not only for my sake, but also for Annie's sake—she adored him.

It was difficult for me not to feel warm and exhilarated when his eyes watched me, when he smiled at me, when he gave me compliments. I suppose both Annie and I were smitten, myself being the one who was smitten unwilling to show feelings or trust.

Still, with all my involvement of my feelings both for Annie and Brent, I neglected to remember or find the appropriate time to ask Brent why he was looking after Annie. I suppose I presumed he looked after her while his son and daughter-in-law, the parents of Annie, traveled on a vacation from the island.

Except for occasional quick dinners with Annie and I, it was a week before we were to see more of Brent. Cora informed me that he had arranged a small dinner party with his brother and wife, Izzy.

The day of the dinner, Annie was involved in the kitchen, trying to help Cora prepare dinner. "Let me help, Cora. I can mix lots of things in bowls. You know I can. I do flour and water to make paste all the time.

"You're right, I do need your help."

A large green bowl with flour and water was put in front of Annie, and she sat at the counter on a stool with a big white apron wrapped around her. Nothing would drag Annie away from the kitchen and Cora.

After preparing some lessons for Annie for the next day, I decided to go outside and walk in the woods on the path I'd taken the first morning I'd arrived on the island.

The midsummer sun was high in the sky. As I traveled down the shaded trail, as in the past, I appreciated the cathe-

dral-like atmosphere, rays of sun slicing through the trees. There were birds twittering in different songs high in the trees. I could hear a woodpecker hammering on the side of a tree for his afternoon meal.

This pathway eventually led down to the low cliffside by the water. Seagulls mewed and screamed in the distance, though they were heard and not seen. As I walked on this path, I threw my arms in the air, looked up to the tops of the trees and took a deep sighing breath. This whole wooded area was spine tingling. It made the world a better place for me and I wondered how I could ever leave it again.

I heard a branch break, and turned towards the sound. I could see a lovely grove of trees about twenty feet from the path. Stopping, I squinted my eyes, trying to see through the leaves. Because of some innate vanity, eyeglasses were something I was reluctant to use. I couldn't see the grove well enough, so I moved through the bush off towards the grove. There was a stream bubbling through it, and due to my lack of knowledge of horticulture, I could identify only two of the many low bushes in the area, being salal plant and skunk cabbage, which seemed to be in a small pond of water.

On the other side of the water, I saw a man looking towards me. I thought he saw me, and I waved my hand in greeting, but he'd already moved towards the bushes behind him. After giving me a feline glare, an orange cat ran and leaped behind him, and they both disappeared in the woods. I tried to see a way around the grove, and yelled, "Excuse me! Hello! Don't I know you?" In fact, he did look familiar to me. I stood for a moment thinking that he must be Brent's son, Matthew. He was a younger version and looked like the Brent I'd first met.

Attempting to catch up with him, I stumbled to my knees and fell into the bush. Hiking in the bush was not my forte.

The sun was dimming in the trees—and it felt colder. A chill rang up my back and I shivered. I felt something brush against my leg although there was nothing there. It was time for me to turn around and make my way through the bush to the path back to home—to Brent's home. A strange sad feeling suddenly overwhelmed me, and I rushed back to the house as quickly as I could.

As I neared the house, I could hear everyone laughing inside. The guests had arrived early and it was a most welcome sound.

I found them all on the deck from the living room and I came up the stairs outside.

"Ah, here she is, the returning princess to claim her island."

"Jake." I smiled as he stood up from the lounging chair to give me a kiss on the cheek.

"Penny, you remember Izzy, my wife. Well, she wasn't my wife when you last saw her."

"Hello, Penny." She shook my hand.

I turned to see Brent walking towards me on the deck with an iced drink in his hand. "Here's a cool drink. It's gin and tonic, or would you prefer nonalcoholic?"

"Thanks," I told him. As I took the glass from him, the palm of my hand brushed his fingers. I looked at the smiling eyes, bringing a blush to my cheeks. "I need a strong drink."

We sat down on the chairs and watched the clouds form darker and heavier over the water.

Jake looked over at me from his chair and reached for my hand. The charm of these handsome brothers did not escape me.

"This is a happy occasion, seeing you again. I hope you'll stay longer than you did the last time. Brent says your husband passed away a year ago, and you have decided to take on some

work. Working with Annie, in this house, must be a pleasure for you.”

“It’s a wonderful experience.” I quickly glanced at Brent. “Of course, the house is still as beautiful as when my friends, Careena and Ted owned it. I suppose this mansion will just keep aging well.”

Brent spoke with a huskiness to his voice. “This house has aged well. A lot of people age well, too. In fact, like this house, they become more beautiful, if possible.” I felt caressed by his gaze.

Annie chattered constantly at the dinner table, until Brent told her she must be quiet and eat some of the food that she helped Cora prepare. The conversation was taken over by the grownups and now Cora beamed as the comments of the delicious dinner were voiced around the table.

“Speaking of delicious food, Cora,” Izzy said, brushing her black hair away from her face, “Are you going to compete in the food fair at the community hall next month?”

“Oh no, Izzy, I never try to compete in that fair, not since Annie’s parents left us.”

This brought to my mind what I’d seen in the forest.

“I was in the forest, walking down a pathway to the ocean, just before I came back to the house. I think I may have seen Matt. He was standing in a grove of trees. I called to him, but he didn’t hear me.” I looked towards Brent. He paled and then Jake and he stared at one another

I continued.

“The orange cat I’d seen with Annie that first morning I arrived was with him. Where does he live?”

The silence in the room was broken by the crash of a glass on the wooden dining table. Annie said in a high-pitched voice, “My daddy? What did Penny say?” She jumped out of her chair and ran to Brent’s side.

“Where...where...I thought you told me Daddy was gone. You told me he couldn’t be with us anymore.”

It was the first time I had seen Brent so pale.

“It’s true, Annie. You must trust me. I told you the truth. Your daddy is gone. Penny is wrong. She didn’t see your daddy.”

Annie shook Brent’s arm and cried, “You lied, Granda. Why, why isn’t Daddy here? And where is Mummy?”

Brent picked her up in his arms as she sobbed uncontrollably. He carried her out of the room.

Again the silence, and there was no sound of a child crying to end the silence.

“Well, that was a bad scene.” Jake picked up his glass and took a drink.

I stared at Jake and clenched my hands together. “I don’t understand. Where is Matt?”

Jake cleared his throat.

Cora left the table, mumbling something about brewing coffee and Izzy offered to help her.

While waiting for Jake to speak, I realized I needed to do more to reach this family. It wasn’t my idea in the beginning. I just wanted to clear my mind, to satisfy the questions I held inside all these years. The answers were not going to sound pleasant, I was sure. But I was involved; I reluctantly started to admit to myself. Here was Brent’s brother, Jake, sitting across the dining table from me, staring at his drink.

“No one meant to intentionally withhold the truth from you. It’s difficult to talk about it,” Jake began.

“Matthew and his wife, Annabelle, were killed in a car accident a year ago. It’s been a lifesaver for both Brent and Annie that they have each other. It held them together to survive the tragedy. Brent has managed to convince Annie how much he loves her and that she has not and will never be

abandoned. It's a great thing to see Brent finally take on some responsibility after all these years. Of course, the loss of Matthew and Annabelle can never be retribution for the new Brent. He was a lost man when Margo died, but their relationship had died long before. Her terrible drinking and rages of temper made her an impossible woman to deal with. I had seen her fits and disgusting drinking. I certainly can understand his difficulties with her, and his pain afterwards. But Annie was another matter. She is his hope for a new life.

Leaning forward on the table, I replied, "Annie had to cope with the loss of her parents, and Brent had to take care of her."

This was the first time I'd realized the selfishness of the Brent of the past had been stamped out by a little person—a tiny being who was the center of his world. Annie had rescued Brent from his own torment. How perfect. Brent and his granddaughter had found each other in their mutual loss.

If this common loss was true, then where was I in that picture? I thought as I turned towards the windows that I didn't really fit in nor should I fit. Did I want to? Wasn't I there to find out the answers to my own questions and then go back home?

Jake and Izzy sat outside on the patio with me for coffee. The conversation was sparse, and after a short time, they excused themselves with explanations of early commitments the next morning.

Brent hadn't come back down.

I went into the kitchen and helped with the cleaning up. I heard Brent's steps and then turned with dishes in my hands, to see him sit in the kitchen table nook to watch us.

My face turned hot when I felt his eyes following me, but I couldn't talk yet, not with this anger welling inside me against Brent. He had lied and deceived me before. And here I

was, on this island again. What kind of love could he have for me?

Cora said, "Penny, I'm going to bed." She turned to Brent. "Was Annie asleep when you left her?"

"Yes, I gave her half a children's Aspirin, and she fell asleep while I held her."

"Good." Cora nodded her head. "It's been a long day for me, so if you two don't mind, I'll finish cleaning up in the morning. I'm going to bed."

We both said goodnight to her and watched as she left the room. I listened to her footsteps up the staircase.

Brent moved towards me. He attempted to touch me, but I stepped away, and said, "Stay away from me. I'm angry and disappointed. I thought you had changed but you still don't seem to consider anyone's feelings but your own. I thought that had changed with Annie. I was wrong." I couldn't hold back a sob and I turned to run out the kitchen door. "Never come near me again."

I ran towards the forest, down the same path where I had known serenity and peace, out towards the ocean and the grove of trees where I had seen the man I thought was Matthew. Where I had had my greatest happiness with Brent.

It was early evening and I could still see the pathway. I stopped to sit on an old carved wooden bench near the grove of trees.

The crying I heard was mine, and the footsteps I heard approach me were Brent's.

"Brent, go away, haven't you done enough to me." I sobbed softly and wiped my face with my arm. "I feel so terrible about Annie."

Brent handed me a handkerchief and I blew my nose.

As he sat on the bench beside me I stopped crying. I handed him back his handkerchief, which he stuffed in his pocket. We were both silent and the quiet air was soundless.

I said, "It's late. I have to go back to Annie now. Unless you can explain to me why you never told me about Matthew and his wife."

"I wanted to so many times. But you seemed so happy and I enjoyed your company and Annie's so much. I thought I would tell you today after the dinner." He ran his hand over his hair in the old familiar way. "I was too late. And again I hurt the people I really care about." He touched my shoulder. "Annie and I had a talk tonight. I explained to her about Matthew and her mother and I think she understood. Like I said, she's a wonderful kid."

He took a deep breath and looked around the serene scene. We didn't talk, just enjoyed the sight of the woods.

There was magic in the air.

He leaned up close to my face. "Remember, Penny? I do. It was in this pathway we met. What luck I had that day. Nothing's been the same since. His lips were close to mine. "It was the best time of my life, when you were here. Remember?" He whispered, "How much time we spent in this forest? Remember?" He asked one last time as his lips captured mine. I did remember. My arms went around his neck. The excitement that I thought my body would never feel again returned, and I quivered uncontrollably, as his arms enveloped me. His hands caressed my back and shoulders. His tongue demanded more as he traced my lips and then plunged it again into my mouth.

I don't remember how we came to be on the ground, but we were, wrapped in each other's arms, caressing each other, passion rising like a wildfire between us. It was then that I heard a woman's laughter, and turned from Brent to see a

robed figure standing in the grove of trees. I exclaimed, "Brent, who is that?"

Brent stood up, pulling me with him. "Margo?"

A voice said, "Rocky, you come to me right now, you bad cat. We have to go home."

We both stood up and stared. She was beautiful, and except for the blue eyes, she strongly resembled Annie. Her dark flowing hair hung down on her shoulders over a blue gray gossamer-type gown that seemed to float on her.

Neither Brent nor I spoke. We were her captive audience.

She laughed again as the orange cat appeared before her, purring loudly enough for us to hear, and rubbed itself against her, as cats will. She picked him up in her arms, and his body curled around her shoulder.

She turned towards the bushes behind her and was gone so quickly I thought I had imagined her. I hoped I had imagined her, because then Brent ran towards the grove yelling, "Margo". His wife had been dead for twenty years. Had he lost his mind?

I hesitated only for a moment, and then realized Brent was running from me towards the creature. He was abandoning me, as I had done to him when we first fell in love.

I felt terror lodged in my throat. I ran through the brushes after him. I calmed as I saw him running back towards me. When he saw me, he hugged me, murmuring, "Penelope." And kissed me softly on the mouth. "Come with me. We're going back to Eden Place. Are you all right?"

"Brent, what's happening? This is so unbelievable. You called her Margo. She's dead."

"I know, I know. But it looked like her." His arm was around my waist as we walked back up the pathway. "It is

strange. But we both saw her. I have this feeling I must go back to the house. Annie is there.”

I spoke with a catch in my throat. “Annie is with Cora, asleep.”

Brent took my hand in his. “Can you run a bit, Penelope? I need to get back to the house quickly, and I can’t leave you behind. His voice had an alarmed sound to it, and a panic surged through my body.

We heard the dogs barking before we arrived at the house. Misty and Hawkeye were yapping at the closed back door. Hawkeye growled and stood with front paws up on the door. Misty was throwing herself up and down pacing, frustrated and whining and then barking when she saw us. Hawkeye ran to Brent barking and then running back to the door.

“It’s all right, Hawkeye. Misty, settle down. It’s okay.. We’ll get Annie.”

Brent opened the door, and when both dogs ran inside, Brent said, “Stay, both of you, stay behind me.”

The dogs and I followed behind Brent as he walked into the kitchen. We were all silent, except for a small whining from Misty. Brent whispered, “Quiet,” and she stopped. Again, that ominous silence echoed through the house.

It was chilly. I shuddered and patted both dogs. Their bodies quivered but they still obeyed Brent. We were close behind him as he tiptoed around the fireplace into the living room. The darkness had fallen outside, but the room seemed dimly lit. The lights above the living room windows were off.

“Granda, Granda, where are you?” The little voice of Annie came from above our heads.

“Annie, I’m here. We’re coming.”

We all looked up, and when we looked back to run to the stairs, the apparition of Margo stood at the bottom of the

staircase pointing at Jake, who was lying on the floor face down.

Jake seemed to be crying, and the dogs, coming forward a few steps, growled at Jake.

“Silence, you two. We need to find Annie.”

“She’s in her bedroom and safe from harm’s way, Brent.” The voice was Cora’s. I couldn’t see her except for a dark shadow near the windows.

“Cora, what’s happened? Are you all right?”

She laughed but did not speak.

She pointed at Jake still prostrate on the floor, shaking, perhaps praying to a God he thought might be listening.

Jake leaned on his knees and turned to us.

Cora stood, her back to the drapes on the windows, staring at the ghostly thing at the bottom of the staircase.

Jake inanely said, “She’s the one who has brought this all on.” He stood up and swung around towards the ghost and us. I still struggled to give the thing a name, as no reasonable explanation or conjuring had satisfied me.

Brent said, “Cora, what is happening here?” But Cora just shook her head, speechless, and continued to stare at ‘Margo’.

Jake yelled, “She knows. Oh God, Brent, I was having an affair with Margo when you met Penny.”

Brent lurched forward and the dogs snarled. “No, Hawk-eye. Stay, Misty.”

“Jake, you, my own brother. I love you. How could you do that?” The rage was in Brent’s voice but he held the dogs back.

“Granda?” Annie called again.

Brent looked up the stairs. “You’re okay, Annie. Granda is coming for you in just a minute. Wait for me upstairs.”

When he turned to Jake, he was shaking. “You, the charming one. You who always had all the women you

wanted. You convinced them all with your gregarious Errol Flynn attitude." Again, Brent ran his hand over his hair.

He laughed. "What irony."

The ghostly woman watched and then drew closer to Jake.

Jake backed away towards Cora. "Wait, there is more I must tell you."

The light grew brighter. A humming in the air increased. I could hear and feel static crackling. The dogs whined and skulked behind Brent.

"Jake?"

"I tried to end the affair. But Margo wouldn't let go. She said she'd tell you the truth, if I left her. I couldn't bear that. The affair was over as far as I was concerned. She became vicious and drank more and more. She was a disgusting monster. A witch. That last day when the house burnt, while you were still asleep at my house, I had gone to see her. She was sprawled on the bed, a bottle in hand and a cigarette in her other hand.

She was pleased to see me, and yelled for Cora to bring another bottle. Cora wasn't home. I told Margo to forget drinking. I tried to reason with her again, but all she did was shake her head and laugh, cursing my name. Then she passed out. I was frantic. I looked at her for a short time trying to think of what to do.

It was then I saw the cigarette burning in her hand fall onto the bed where she lay. I wondered, why not leave her this way. It was horrible, I know. Walking out with her like that. In some far reaches of my mind, I thought the cigarette would burn the bed. She'll be killed. I'll be rid of her. Izzy was my new love and I wanted to marry her. I was desperate. I walked out, Jake. I walked out and left Margo as she was, with the burning cigarette smoldering on the bed."

He grabbed Brent's hand. The dogs growled, and Brent in a low voice said, "Stay."

Jake cried and then laughed. "It was lunacy. I didn't know it would happen. It was just a wish. Yes, I left her that way, but I never thought it would really happen. Please believe me."

Cora, from her corner of the room, said, "I suspected something about Jake and Margo for years. The morning before the old house burnt down with Margo in it, I was sure I had seen Brent go into the house, when in fact, it was Jake. I let it pass. I didn't think about it again. Until at dinner earlier today, I heard Jake talking when I brought coffee to the table. Jake told Penny how unreasonable Margo could be when she drank. It was the way he said it. And then I suspected. You see, then I told him before they left, just before he and Izzy went home, that I knew what he had done to Margo."

Cora groaned and put her face in her hands. She mumbled, "I didn't know what he was thinking or his plan—only about the affair. I was concerned for Brent. But he came to stop me ever telling anyone."

Brent said, "It's all right, Cora."

The strange light was fading. We looked towards the stairs. Margo was gone and the room grew dark. Someone turned the light switch on by the windows. It was Cora. She fell to the floor in a swoon.

Jake stared at the bottom of the staircase. Then he turned and saw Cora, picked her up, and placed her on the couch. He cried, "I'm so sorry. I've a lot of people to make things up to, don't I?"

Brent shook his head as he looked at Jake with disbelief.

As he ran past Jake, up the stairs, the dogs and I were right behind him.

In her bedroom, Annie sat on her bed, hunched up holding the orange cat that peeped between her arms with a glare in our direction.

“Granda.” Brent fell on the bed to catch her in his arms.

“I was scared, Granda. But then I wasn’t, because Rocky came to sit with me, and he let me hug him. He’s so pretty.” She held him tight in her arms and he seemed to tolerate the enthusiasm.

“Penny, where were you?” Those accusing dark eyes demanded an explanation of my transgression.

“I’m sorry, Annie, I just went down the road. I was coming back.”

I sat with her and Brent on the bed. As I kissed her on the head, the orange cat looked at me disdainfully and yet I felt forgiven.

Annie said, “I don’t want you to leave the house and not tell me again. You and Granda tell me to do that. You were bad and didn’t tell me.”

I squeezed her. “Yes, I know, I won’t do that again.”

Brent took both of us in his arms. “No, she won’t, Annie. You can believe me. Penny will always be here for you and for me. Just as we will always be here for her, isn’t that right, Penny?”

I looked deeply into his shining eyes and knew that he was right. We were meant to stay together always.

As the dogs ran and jumped on the bed with us, licking our faces, the cat meowed and went to sit on the bureau to watch. We laughed, and I knew that I belonged for the first time in a long time. I felt twenty years old again.

* * * *

Almost a year has passed and all is peaceful on lovely Salal Island. Jake and Izzy moved off the island to a small town on the coastline. Jake sees a therapist, and Brent is managing to

overcome any antagonism he feels towards his brother. Cora has gone to the city after deciding she needed a change and a new life.

Brent and I are married now and we live with Annie at Eden Place.

Annie has her orange cat, named Rocky, who has decided to live with us, and I have both Annie and Brent.

Sometimes, at night, when I sit out on the porch holding hands with Brent, after Annie has gone to bed, I remember. Oh yes, I remember all the love I received then and now.

Eden Place is still the same beautiful house. That eerie feeling I sensed when I first came back has gone. Eden Place offers tranquility, welcoming me to stay forever.

About Judith Fox

Judith Fox has always been a voracious novel reader, inspiring her to write sporadically throughout her life. Now she has decided to take her writing seriously. She loves telling stories in many genres, her favorite being romantic suspense. She also loves to know that readers enjoy her storytelling. She can be reached at judithfox@hotmail.com

A SOLDIER TO LOVE

by Diane M. Wylie

Chapter 1

July 1861

Christine picked up her bag and hurried down the alleyway, looking for anything that might be edible or wearable. Her stomach growled painfully and she rubbed it to try and soothe the emptiness. It was so hard to be alone, an orphan with no family, no friends, and no money. The landlord had thrown her out of the boarding house when she ran out of money three days ago. He was a big, fat, mean-spirited man and she was glad she wasn't living in his house anymore...glad...and scared. She had no place to go and it was all Daddy's fault, God rest his softhearted soul. Oh, he took care of her, after a fashion, while he was still alive. But the gambling and moving from one town to the next was hard on a young girl who no longer had a mother to teach her the finer points in a woman's life.

She lifted the lid of a barrel that stood outside the battered back door of the tavern. It stunk like nasty, rotten food, making her empty stomach turn over dangerously. Gagging, she slammed the lid back on, turned, and hurried back to the main street of town.

Why Daddy had picked this little nothing of a town in Georgia to gamble away most of their money, then die in the middle of the night was anyone's guess. The doctor, who had cost Christine a whole dollar, had not been good for much. She had been frantic when Daddy woke her, moaning and clutching his chest, calling, "Chrissy, Chrissy!"

By screaming and begging, she had finally convinced the landlord to send someone for the sloppy old gentleman doctor. He had come in the wee hours of the night just in time to see Howard Lawson draw his last rattling breath.

Sighing, she brushed a lock of dirty brown hair out of her face, picked up the carpetbag containing all of her worldly goods, and walked slowly down the boards, her feet making sad clumping noises as she wandered aimlessly. If she didn't find a job and earn some money soon, she would just have to find a corner somewhere to curl up and die of loneliness and starvation. This town was too small to need a piano teacher or a music teacher of any kind. That was the only saleable skill Christine had...and that was thanks to her dear sainted mother who had made sure she was well schooled in all the finer arts.

For the first fourteen years of Christine's life, things had been good. Then, unexpectedly, Mother sickened and died. That left her to Daddy's care and, without Mother to keep him in check, her heartsick father turned to alcohol and gambling, which, after five years of spending all of their money, had led to her situation now.

Christine turned into the general store and approached the long, fully loaded counter. The wonderful smell of bread teased her nostrils and made her mouth water. As soon as he saw her, the shopkeeper shook his gray head. His eyes held pity and annoyance at once.

"Sorry, Miss. Like I done tol' y'all yesterday and the day before, I don't have no job fer you or anyone else in this town. I'm barely makin' ends meet myself."

The wrinkled, skinny man caught her looking longingly at the loaves of fresh baked bread sitting on the counter. Furtively glancing behind him to see if his wife was looking, he shoved a loaf in her direction. "Here," he whispered urgently, "take it and skedaddle."

She took it, whispered her thanks in return, and left the store. As soon as she got outside, she shifted the bag to her left arm and bit into the crusty bread. Oh, heaven! It was the best thing she had ever tasted!

Munching on the bread and slowly walking, without a destination, the sound of excited voices caught Christine's attention.

"We'll whip them Yankees in a month and send them with their yellow-bellied tails between their legs, see if'n we don't!"

A crowd of young men had gathered in front of the telegraph office, reading a bill that was posted on the wall. They were pounding each other on the back and throwing their hats in the air.

"War! We're going to war!"

One of the young men stopped his whooping and hollering long enough to notice Christine's approach. He looked at her closely then wrinkled his long nose with disdain. "Y'all might be a pretty enough little gal, but yo' sure is dirty and yah smells bad. Why, mah own little brother smells jus' as

bad as you.” Having said his peace, he brushed by her to catch up with his friends as they moved off, talking of honor and glory.

Christine felt her eyes fill with tears. She hadn’t had a bath in a week. Anyone would smell bad if they couldn’t get a bath or clean their clothes. She took another bite of the bread, but it didn’t taste as good as it had. Then she read the bill posted on the wall. The state of Georgia was raising a regiment of infantry soldiers and they were looking for men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. The sign said that an enlistment fee of forty dollars would be paid with a monthly wage thereafter.

Forty dollars...she sure could use that kind of money. The army also gave you a uniform and food too...and a place to sleep. Christine sighed, if only she were a man, her troubles would be over.

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Chapter 2

They had been marching for hours now on their way to catch the train and join up with the rest of the Georgia regulars. The march had been hard on the raw troops who were all unaccustomed to this kind of activity. For Christine, the worst part was the awful blisters that had appeared on her feet, despite the two pairs of socks she wore with the brogans she had found in the pile of trash behind the boarding house. The ugly brogans were well broken in and the leather was soft as butter, but they rubbed her feet in places where her female shoes had never rubbed before.

Trying hard not to limp and draw attention to herself, she walked—or rather trudged—on like a man, feeling the muscles in the calves of her legs burn. The older gentleman beside her was also concentrating on keeping up with the others, but he spoke occasionally to her without looking at her, for which she was grateful. “Bet you got yourself a batch of blisters on your feet, eh, boy?” He chuckled then turned his head and spit out a stream of tobacco juice from the chaw in his cheek. The brown juice splattered on the ground inches away from the foot of the soldier behind him.

“Hey, Grandpa! Watch where yer spittin’!” the man called out irritably.

“If’n I had wanted to spit on your shoes, I would not have hit the dirt, soldier,” he retorted laughing.

Christine needed time to learn how to speak like a man and act like a man, so she had been studying the men closely. She didn’t have any tobacco, but she let some saliva gather in her mouth and turned her head. There was a gap between the two men on her left. *Ready now...aim and...* She let it fly.

The gob of spittle flew through the air in a graceful high arc and came down, down, down. With a wet plop it landed...right on the shoe of the man who had been called Grandpa a moment ago. Horrified, she looked up at his face, pushing the spectacles up onto her nose. His bewhiskered face looked down at the wet spot on his dusty shoe then turned to her without breaking stride. Christine swallowed hard and dropped her head, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. *Oh, my...oh dear!*

Silence. One heartbeat, then another, then she heard a faint chuckle then gradually the man began laughing and laughing, guffawing louder and louder. Smack, between the shoulder blades, his big hand slapped her hard, nearly knocking her over. Stumbling a few steps, Christine struggled to get

her balance as the other soldiers moved away leaving her room. A hand grabbed her arm and pulled her back in line.

"Good try, boy, but you have a lot to learn. My name's Sam Hoffert." He grinned at her, his mouth a red slash between his graying mustache and beard. He gave her arm a squeeze and let go.

"Chris Lawson, sir. Nice to meet you." She pushed her eyeglasses back up her nose and squinted up at him from under the brim of her battered slouch hat.

"Nice to meet you, too, Chris. Y'all seem awfully young to me, boy, too young to shave even. Does your daddy know you joined up with us? Did y'all skedaddle away from home?"

Dropping her head, she prepared herself to lie again. Sooner or later she would get better at looking people in the face as she lied. "Yes, sir, my daddy and momma done sent me off to make my own way in this world, what with the eight brothers and sisters I got. They jus' can't feed another mouth. I've been living the best I can on my own. I figured in the army I would at least get two or three square meals a day...and they said they would pay me, too."

"Sorry to hear about your family treatin' y'all that way, Chris. You sure is a skinny bones of a boy. Sure, we'll be getting grub every day. Stick with me, son. I lost my own boy when he was just a little tike. He'd probably be about your age now...I'd be honored if you let me help you out."

"Thank you, sir, I could use a friend, that much is a fact."

His big, blue-veined hand clapped down on her shoulder, but with a little less force this time. "Don't you worry none, little Chris Lawson, you stick with me and I'll help you learn how to be a man in this here army."

"All right," she replied with a smile of gratitude and turned her attention to moving her feet down the dusty road

again, following the backs of ninety-nine gray and butternut-uniformed men.

* * * *

Ryan Bishop lay among the snoring men in his tent and stared through the darkness at the pole holding it up. His long legs ached from the march and his body was crying out for sleep, but thoughts of home ran through his mind. Closing his eyes, he summoned the image of his cozy bedroom with the nice soft bed and the thick feather ticking, covered by the quilt that had belonged to his mother. It was a blue and green patchwork quilt that his mother had made using the colors of the sea. Mama had grown up by the ocean at the beaches of North Carolina. She always wished that Papa would take them all back there again one day. But the war had come and those plans had never been made. No one knew what would happen now. Mama had three sons who had all gone off to war. The day that Ryan, her youngest son, left, Mama had been weeping so hard that he feared for her health.

Ryan felt a little sad himself. Thoughts of the summer fair intruded with its bittersweet memories of Mary. Before he left, he had put his heart on the line and asked her to marry him as they sat on a blanket, eating a picnic lunch and listening to the band playing a sweet waltz. Now he didn't have a sweetheart any more. Mary had turned him down flat and broken his twenty-year-old heart. That was when he decided it was high time he did his civic duty and enlist like all the other Georgia boys.

Finally, exhaustion claimed Ryan and he slept, despite the heat and the hard ground, dreaming of his mother and the sadness he had caused.

* * * *

Christine carefully studied the actions and habits of the men around her and was getting very adept at burping, spit-

ting, and scratching when the time seemed right. The worst part was when she had to relieve herself. Waiting, with her bladder nearly to the bursting point, until she could get away from the prying eyes of the soldiers was torture in the extreme. But it was necessary. Sam kept a close eye on her and was always waiting for his 'adopted' son. Fortunately, he respected her need for privacy at those moments. He had even whispered to her that sometimes he couldn't perform with a crowd around, either.

"Hey, Chris!" It was Sam looking for her out in the bushes. "Come on, boy, time for the last drill and bayonet practice before we head out to join the real Confederate army and quit playing around."

"Coming, Sam!" she called. Pulling up her pants, she needed to pull the drawstring a bit tighter than before to keep her uniform trousers up. It seemed that she was losing weight from all this exercise. Even her breasts were shrinking. She gave a tug on the strings of the corset that she had converted into a breast binder. By the time summer was over, Christine was sure she would either expire from the corset or her breasts should shrink down to nothing.

Rifle in hand, she joined the rest of the troops lining up on the field. After five weeks of training, they would be leaving tomorrow for the war. She was tired, but pleased with her own performance. It hadn't been all that hard to learn how to handle this weapon she held on her shoulder. At first it had seemed so darn heavy, but now she could swing it up, load it, and fire it as quick as any of the men. It seemed perfectly natural. This marching in formation seemed a little silly, but the officers kept saying they needed to learn to respond to commands in an instant and that drilling and marching got them used to hearing orders and doing what they were told.

Standing beside Sam at attention, Christine waited for the officers in front of the group to give orders.

Reminding herself that she was homeless, and could end up starving to death without the army, was the only way she could force her aching body to move when the trumpets blew first thing early in the morning. Trying to act like a man, talk like a man, and live only among men was not easy. She couldn't let her guard down for even a minute. Concentrating on keeping her mannerisms on the coarse side and scratching or burping every so often, even if she didn't need to, took a lot of energy.

But ever so slowly over the past five weeks she began to realize that she wasn't feeling quite so bad or quite so uncomfortable as she had been. Her body adjusted to the increased demands on it and her feet developed calluses where the shoes rubbed them raw. Muscles appeared in her arms and legs where she had been smooth before.

Then something even more amazing had happened...she started to enjoy the meticulous actions needed to clean and oil her Springfield rifle and keep it in top operating condition. Sighting down the barrel of the rifle to line up the target, exercising supreme control over her entire body to hold steady and pull the trigger at just the right moment became almost a religious experience to her.

As Christine's ability as a shooter improved, she began to feel the first stirrings of excitement. Each time she registered another dead center hit on the hay bales, her confidence grew just a little bit more. Without trying to, she gradually drew the attention of the officers. The others wanted Chris to show them how to shoot better. Sam cheered her every hit and she liked it. She liked all of it more and more with each passing day. She liked the feelings of comradery between herself and

the other soldiers, although sometimes she missed being a girl and she really missed her long hair.

But she had never been a part of something larger than herself like this before. This was definitely bigger than just little Christine Lawson. She was part of a great event that would shape their world for the future. She was fighting for the right of the southern states to govern themselves and escape the oppression of the North.

Her stomach rumbled; time for the evening meal was fast approaching. After this drill session, she and Sam and her tent mates would gather around the campfire eating pork and beans and swapping stories. Life had definitely improved since she became a man.

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Chapter 3

Allegheny Mountains

Christine shifted the rifle leaning heavily against her shoulder and walked to the big oak tree that marked the end of the picket line. As she walked, she stared intently into the misty darkness that blanketed the entire regimental camp. Her nerves were on edge. That had to be the problem. Since they had marched into these mountains and started doing real army work, she had been unable to sleep and was as jumpy as a cottontail.

There! She heard it again...a slight rustling of leaves! Quickly, the gun was off her shoulder, and she aimed for the small grove of maples and poplars a few feet to her left.

Her heart pounded so hard, she was sure that the Yankee hiding in the trees would hear it.

Opening her mouth, Christine yelled, "Who goes there?" Only it came out as the squeaky whisper of a frightened girl...not the words of the man she was supposed to be.

Clearing her dry, dry throat, she tried again. "Who goes there? Come out with your hands up!" *There, that was better.* Her knees started to shake despite the bravery she tried to force into her voice.

"Don't shoot!" a rich Southern voice called out. "It's Private Bishop, I'm a Confederate soldier, too." A tall, well-formed man materialized out of the mist.

It was hard to see him very well, especially with the moisture that was gathering on her spectacles, so she took them off, dried them, and put them back on. The man who ambled into her sight with his hands in his pockets was fairly tall, with broad shoulders. He seemed so relaxed and calm out here in the wilderness, surrounded by a shrouding fog.

"Hello." He pulled a hand out of his pocket and offered it in greeting. "I've seen you around. You're that boy that is such a good shot. Everyone was talking about you during training camp."

She didn't shake his hand. He would notice how small her hands were and...he would know they were shaking with fear.

"I can't talk to you now, I'm on picket duty." She turned and began to march in the opposite direction on legs that were still slightly shaky from nerves.

Stepping up right next to her, he fell into step with her.

"What's your name?"

"I told you, I can't talk to you now, Private Bishop."

"My name is Ryan," he tried again, "what's yours?"

The buzzing of a mosquito in her left ear raised her annoyance level all the more.

"Listen, Ryan, I have a job to do," she ground out between her teeth. He stepped in front of her, forcing her to stop. He bent his knees so they were face to face and she could see his eyes glittering in the faint moonlight that gave the misty ground a slight glow. They were kindly, friendly...sexy, brown eyes set in an attractive face. The kind of eyes you could drown in.

"I've been watching you for a while. What's your name?"

She shivered. He was too close for comfort. "Chris Lawson, now get out of my way."

"I'd just like to get to know you, Chris Lawson. You sure are unfriendly-like for a fellow Georgia boy."

Oh, God! Did this stranger suspect something? "Maybe I am, but I am also a soldier in the Confederate States Army with a job to do, so move!" She stepped to the side in an attempt to go around his broad-shouldered body, but he moved to block her progress.

He must have had some coffee recently, his breath smelled strongly of it. She wished she had some of the precious brown stuff right now.

Seizing the moment, Christine turned to march the picket in the opposite direction. The man was really ruining her best efforts at keeping watch over all of her fellow Rebs. Didn't he know that this was a very important job and she just had to concentrate on it?

The fog was beginning to thin out a bit as a cool breeze blew across her face. She pushed the spectacles down her nose. A few watery beams of moonlight made their way to the ground in front of Christine. That was good. She could see a little better. Then she realized that she had not been without the specs in so long that she had forgotten how good her eyesight really was without them. When she wore the old glasses everything had a slightly distorted look. It was amazing that

she had become a real good shooter with them on. She wondered how good she would be with the rifle using just her own excellent eyesight. Those men would really take notice of her then. She rearranged the glasses back into position.

At the end of the picket line, she pivoted and headed back. Yards away, Ryan was still standing there staring at her. His hands were down at his sides and his shoulders slumped as if he were disappointed at her rejection of him. What could he possibly want from her? She was just a boy to him. The man was just so—wait! Something was behind Ryan Bishop...a large dark shape was slowly slinking out of the shadowy trees. A pair of eyes glittered from a point too low to the ground to be a man. Christine's heart pounded and her mouth went dry. It was some kind of wild animal lurking behind him. *Ryan doesn't know he's in danger!*

Immediately, Christine brought her Springfield off her shoulder. The thing crouched to attack! *Hurry!* She saw the alarm on Ryan's face now.

"Run!" she yelled. But he didn't move. The beast did. She aimed and fired.

Before the smoke from her shot had cleared, Christine was in motion. Pandemonium erupted from the camp below, but the shouts from the Confederate soldiers fell on deaf ears.

My Lord! Ryan! The large, tawny cat lay on top of Ryan's inert form with a single black hole spewing blood from between the animal's flat, lifeless golden eyes.

She knew she had only taken one shot and it had hit true. The attack of the cat had taken Ryan to the ground, but he wasn't moving! Panic washed through her, giving her the strength to shove the heavy animal off the soldier.

Kneeling beside him in the dirt, she peered closely at his still face and put her hand on his neck. His heartbeat thumped

strongly under her questing fingers and she finally took a breath.

“Ryan!” she tried to wake him and she took his head between her hands. “Come on, wake up for me, Private Bishop, this is no time to be sleeping.”

His eyelashes fluttered and his brown eyes opened full of confusion.

“Did you try to shoot me, Chris?” The hurt in his voice filled her with pain. “I only wanted to be friends.” He sounded so guileless, how could she have done that to someone she didn’t even know?

Rising, she turned to meet the tide of her comrades coming at a run, loading their weapons as they came. “If I had wanted to shoot you, Private Bishop...I would not have missed.”

“You got Yankees, boy? Where are they?” the first man on the scene blurted out, wildly looking around, trying to see the problem.

“No, there were no Yankees.”

Christine turned back to extend a hand to Ryan, who was slowly getting to his feet. “Just a big cat that attacked my friend here.”

* * * *

Friend? Ryan stood, wobbly for a moment, blinking and rubbing the spot on his head where he had hit the rock. *Big cat? Was that what hit me?* Had Chris shot at it, not him?

“You all right, son?” The lined face of a lieutenant he had seen before came into view. “You sure are one hellavuh lucky Reb. Your friend is a deadeye shot. Got that mountain lion with one shot right between the eyes.”

“One shot? My friend?” he repeated stupidly.

The man grabbed him by the arm and dragged Ryan over to the body of the wild cat, just as other soldiers swarmed onto the scene.

"See there? Just one shot, between the eyes, there...see?"

A gnarled finger jabbed at the bloody head. Ryan forced his knees to lock so his legs wouldn't buckle. Blood was beginning to congeal around the deep dark hole on the frozen grimace the animal wore. Ryan looked away—he had never been good at the sight of blood.

A noisy group was gathering around Chris. They were shaking his hand and thumping the boy on the back.

"Great job, Private Lawson," Ryan heard someone say. "Good to have you as one of us, my boy."

"Thanks. You taught me a lot, Sam."

Slowly turning away from the group, Ryan began to walk back to the camp alone. God, he had a headache and needed a hot cup of coffee in the worst way. That should teach him to try and make friends with someone...but for some reason he couldn't explain, he was just drawn to that Lawson boy. Ryan found himself looking for that small soldier and watching him whenever he could. There was just something about him...

* * * *

It took a long time, but Ryan finally decided to act. Even before he ate his breakfast, he set out to find Chris. He had to tell Chris what he knew. The Thirty-Seventh was camped in the same general area, so it didn't take long to go from cook fire to cook fire until he found the right one. Stopping at a distance away, Ryan watched the soldier, who looked so much like any other lad who might happen to be slight of stature. Why, sitting on the opposite side of the fire was another young man who appeared to be about the same age.

He watched Chris squatting there beside the fire in that ill-fitting uniform, frying up some corn bread in a skillet. The

other soldiers were talking and drinking coffee close to the fire while they waited for the food. Another soldier, a bearded older man... the one called Sam... was frying bacon in another pan. With oddly graceful movements, Chris reached into the pan and gave the cake a poke with a knife, then turning away, spit a wad of mucus on the ground. No one around the fire reacted to the somewhat disgusting act. It was normal in this army. Ryan had been brought up with better manners than that, but he knew his manners were gradually getting lost the more time he spent around so many men that did not act much like gentlemen.

"Hello, Chris," Ryan called cheerfully as he approached the group.

He watched the young soldier freeze momentarily, then slowly turn toward him with a forced smile in place.

"Well, hello yourself, young fella," the man called Sam responded first. Sam handed the skillet to the soldier sitting next to him and stood. Wiping his hands on his trousers, he moved around the fire and extended a friendly hand to Ryan. "So you are a new friend to our Chris here, that right?"

Ryan nodded. "That's right. We struck up a conversation one night and found out we had a lot in common."

* * * *

Christine noticed the tingling in her abdomen even before her mind knew that Ryan was there. She felt his presence deep within her feminine being and turned to meet his intense gaze. She smiled. That night in the fog he had been just another ordinary man, but then, in the light of day, she could see that he was not an ordinary man. He was tall, dark, and very handsome, the kind of man she used to daydream about marrying some day... the kind of man she used to imagine playing the piano and singing for.

Ryan moved closer and dropped down on his haunches beside the group, still watching Christine intensely. Christine shook her head and pushed her glasses up her nose. She turned to Ryan. "Ryan, I'd like you to meet my friend, Sam Hoffert," she nodded at the grizzled man, "Sam, this is Ryan Bishop."

Standing up, she stuck a finger in her ear, dug around a little, inspected the tip and wiped her hand on her trousers. It was best not to forget for a moment all of those disgusting bodily habits men had. Sneaking a peek at Ryan's impassive face, she wondered what he might be thinking.

Sam nodded then took some bacon and two pieces of cornbread out of the pan and put it on a tin plate. He handed this and two cups of hot steamy coffee to the two young soldiers. "Here ya are. Can't go off and fight this war without grub and coffee, now can ye?"

Standing, Ryan accepted the offering, nodding his thanks and said, "Much obliged, Sam. I left my own fire too quick this morning to get anything...wanted to talk to Chris here while I have a chance."

"Oh, well, I don't think I have time to—"

"Oh, go on now. You young fellas go talk. Soon enough there won't be time for such things as making friends." Sam fixed her with a stern look that meant business. She sighed. Christine knew Sam wouldn't give up trying to get Chris to come out of what he called her "protective shell." Sam had been trying to get his self-proclaimed ward to branch out and make more friends. She knew that her mentor didn't like the way Chris sought privacy and avoided contact with too many people.

Together, she and Ryan walked away from the rows and rows of dingy white tents and smoky campfires, past the lines of horses and wagons being unloaded, and away from thou-

sands of troops preparing for the day. Ryan led the way, both soldiers eating corn cakes and sipping coffee as they went.

"We might see fighting today from what I heard," Ryan started to speak as soon as they were away from the camp. He was moving closer now, looking into her face in the bright light of the sunshine. He smelled so wonderful, musky and masculine. Suddenly, before she could move, his big hand shot up and gently took off her hat and glasses. Her heart pounded so hard that she was sure he could hear it. She turned her back to him.

"Aww, now whaddid you do that for? " She put a hand out behind her, but didn't turn around. "Give 'em back."

"Is your name really 'Chris'?" she heard him ask softly. Then he was standing in front of her, looking at her face again. "Or is that short for 'Christine' and not 'Christopher'?"

Christine forced herself to stop biting her bottom lip as she watched Ryan turn away, brush away a spider and some leaves, and sit on a low flat rock at her feet. He patted the rock beside him, but she didn't sit. She couldn't, her ruse was over.

"Are you going to turn me in?" Her voice was trembling and she hated that.

"I don't know yet. Why are you here?" His voice was still gentle and calm. "Why did you join the army?"

Why couldn't she look away from his face? It was so open and honest. Those eyes were so compelling and filled with trustworthiness.

"I am ashamed to tell you." She did look away now and stared at her feet in those ugly brown shoes.

"Try me," he said. "Sit down here and tell me... Christine. What would drive a beautiful woman like you to disguise herself as a boy and live among men? Not to mention going out to kill the enemy."

How could she refuse him? Something about Ryan Bishop just drew her like a moth to a flame. Ever since he had stood in front of her in the line for rations one night, she had been ever aware of him. She had found herself seeking him out with her eyes and feasting on the sight of him from afar, when he wasn't aware. How she wished she had met this man as a woman, wearing a beautiful gown, and with her hair long and arranged in artful curls, rather than cut short and ragged.

Yanking the slouch hat back from him, she pushed it down on her head to hide her face and her shame as much as possible. Then Chris began to talk. She poured her heart out in a puddle before this man...a man she had known for a short time. She told him of the loss of her mother and then her father, of being homeless and reduced to eating garbage, and of just wanting a place to live and belong...and make a little money. It was such a relief to tell someone her secret...to let go of the lies at least for a few minutes.

"Ryan, using that rifle is something that I am good at. My country needs me as much as it needs you. I am better than you, better than Sam...and I have never ever been this good at something before."

* * * *

There was no way he could explain what was happening to him. He was sitting here with this little urchin of a person, who could have passed for a boy...but was, in fact, a very attractive young woman. From the moment she raised her lashes to look at him with so much need exposed on her pretty pale face, and began to speak in a voice that was so full of sorrow and yearning, Ryan fell in love. It hit him with a force of emotion that weakened his knees so badly that, had he not already been sitting, he would have fallen down.

As he sat and listened to Christine talk, her words barely made their way into his foggy brain. Something about being

destitute and enjoying the army...but all he could do was watch the way her pretty little mouth formed the words with those luscious full pink lips.

Gradually, he realized that there was an unusual vibration rumbling under his feet. Something was happening! Then came the unmistakable booming of cannon fire, and it was fairly close. The earth seemed to tremble under the onslaught and a shower of dirt exploded only yards away from their hiding place.

"Let's go, Christine, we're under attack!"

He saw the surprise register in her eyes. Picking up their rifles, he tossed her gun to her, grabbed her hand, and pulled her with him.

"Listen, Christine." He had to make her listen to him! The noise from the cannons and the sounds of shouting men grew louder with each step they took closer to the camp. A horse whinnied in panic. "Stay with me as much as you can. We'll get through this together."

"But, Ryan—" she sputtered.

"PROMISE!" he yelled, tightening his grip on her arm.

"Okay, okay, I promise I'll stay with you."

* * * *

Christine, her disguise back in place, was right on Ryan's heels as they ran for camp. The officers were getting the soldiers together, forming their battle lines. They huddled in little groups trying to prepare and calm themselves, and say a few quick prayers that they would be the lucky ones to survive this. The Rebel forces were going to mount an attack on the Union forces in the small valley below.

The artillery fire was gaining strength from both directions. She could hear the whine of both outgoing and incoming rounds. Terrifying explosions hit all around them. Horses

screamed, men yelled, and the smell of gunpowder filled the air.

Rifles at their shoulders, the Rebels stood side-by-side and began to move as one toward the sounds of chaos. Christine's stomach knotted with fear. Glancing quickly to her right, she was surprised to see the calm, confident look on Ryan's face. He winked. With that tiny action she knew she was no longer alone in this...she had a friend who would help her through it.

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Chapter 4

It was amazing. Over all the horrific noise of battle, Chris was surprised to actually hear the thud of the bullet embedding itself in the fleshy part of her thigh. She was on the ground before any pain even set in. Ryan was at her side in a flash, holding his handkerchief to the wound, pressing hard through the torn trousers. She looked at his strong capable hands at work and put her smaller ones on his.

"Ryan."

He looked up quickly. "I'll get you some help—"

"No, no, I'll be fine." Suddenly a white-hot burning stabbed through her thigh. "I c-can't go to the surgeon...I want to stay in the army!"

"Hush, now, Chris. Stay down!" His hand was pushing her head down into the grass and mud. The fight still raged around them as a Yankee rushed at them with bayonet drawn. On one knee, Ryan scooped up his rifle, cocked it, and fired in one smooth motion.

Chris screamed as the blue belly fell beside her, his craggy face, frozen in the shock of sudden death, stopped

inches from hers.

“Careful, Chris.” Ryan scooped her up off the ground, “you scream like a girl.”

Before she could protest, he had her pressed tightly against his hard chest and was running back, dodging the soldiers that were pressing the attack forward. The rifle he had slung over his shoulder banged against her foot as he struggled to carry her and move as fast as possible. Her slouch hat was gone, but she still had her glasses—not that it mattered any more.

Pain streaked down her leg and she felt the wetness running down her calf. Trying hard not to make any noise, she buried her face against the wool of Ryan’s uniform.

“Hold on,” he gasped, his footsteps slowing over the uneven terrain.

The next thing she knew, Ryan, breathing so hard that he couldn’t speak, carefully lowered her to the ground outside the hospital tent where many other bloodied soldiers lay moaning with pain or still as death.

“Don’t leave me here, Ryan!” Chris grabbed desperately for his arm, but he was already shaking his head.

“I have to go back, Chris,” he huffed and patted her shoulder reassuringly. “When it’s over, I’ll come see you.”

A wave of dizziness hit her hard and she let go to lie back on the ground. Turning her head, she watched the soldier she loved pick up his rifle and head back into the battle, disappearing into the haze of smoke that hung over the valley.

* * * *

It was over. The surgeon had quickly discovered Chris’ secret as soon as her trousers were removed to stitch and dress her wound. Now she lay on a cot in a private tent, away from the curious eyes of the men.

The surgeon had been kind and gentle, but when the

captain came to see her, he told her, in no uncertain terms, that her days in the C.S.A. were over. It didn't matter that she had done everything a man would do and killed her share of Yankees over the past three months; she would most likely not be given any pay since it was illegal for women to join the army.

Concern for Ryan and despair over her situation tightened her chest and closed up her throat. The battle was winding down, but Ryan had not come to see her yet. Christine prayed that he was still alive and well. Love had come when she had least expected it and when she could least afford to give into it. But she knew now that she loved Ryan Bishop with all of her mind, body, and soul.

The army wouldn't just leave her here, they would send her back by ambulance wagon to recuperate at the base hospital, but then she would be on her own. If she just knew that Ryan was all right, it wouldn't matter that she would soon be homeless and alone again.

How she missed Ryan's comforting presence. Even though she had only been with him a few short hours before getting hurt, she had felt very much at ease in his company, something she had never experienced with a man before.

Evening was creeping in, casting the objects inside the small tent with muted colors. Christine closed her eyes, the effects of the chloroform making her mind heavy and listless. Images of Ryan's big brown eyes with his trademark twinkle made her want to cry. *Please, dear God, she prayed, bring him back to me.*

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Chapter 5

"I've found Chris," Sam said as he walked up to Ryan. Both men's faces were black with gunpowder and their uniforms frayed and dirty, just like the rest of the Confederate army. "He—uh—she—I still can't believe I didn't notice—is in a tent over this way. Come on, young man."

Wearily, Ryan followed the older man. All around them men were trying to recover from the physical and mental strain of battle. Wagons, riders, and soldiers swarmed all over the grounds—some holding tightly to bloody bandaged arms or heads, some all in one piece, but all wore the same hollow-eyed, haunted look that each battle seemed to inflict. Killing people and watching others suffer death or maiming did something to a man's soul. Ryan felt it as keenly as any.

Darkness was setting in and the noise of the day was finally starting to abate somewhat. Ryan snagged a lantern from the ground where someone had left it. A few steps later, he was able to borrow a candle and light the thing to help illuminate their way. He didn't want to step on anyone lying on the ground...and lots of soldiers were lying about in the grass and mud either too exhausted to seek a tent or having no shelter of their own anyway.

"Here, Sam." Ryan offered his canteen as they walked.

"My thanks." Tipping his head back, Sam took a long, sloppy drink, letting the water run down his neck and darken the front of his uniform. "Ahhhhh." Sam passed back the canteen and stopped suddenly. "Here, I think this is the right tent."

Ducking his head, Ryan went in, holding the lantern out in front of him. The flickering light cast long shadows over the small figure lying on the bed. It was Christine and she was

asleep, lying as still as death, her short brown hair spread out on the pillow and long dark lashes resting on pale cheeks.

Setting the light on a small trunk, Ryan dropped to his knees beside the bed and took her limp hand in his.

"Is she all right, Sam?"

Sam stood at the foot of the cot looking down at his little protégé. "The surgeon said she's goin' ta be fine...jus' fine. Don't y'all worry none 'bout that."

Ryan brought her small fingers up to his lips and kissed each one tenderly. "I am certainly glad to hear that...I love her."

Sam's eyebrows shot up with surprise. "How long have you known, Ryan?"

Smiling, Ryan gently smoothed a lock of dark hair from her forehead. "About two months now, but I didn't tell her until today." Leaning over, he kissed her cheek. "I'm glad her secret is out. It has been so hard to keep my hands off her, not to mention my lips."

"That seems obvious." Her words were spoken so softly that Ryan was not sure he heard them at first, but slowly her eyes opened, settling on his face. Suddenly he wanted to stand up and run around shouting for joy! He saw the love in those rich brown eyes of hers...love for him...he was sure of it. But he decided to get some confirmation.

"Christine! You're awake! Will you marry me? I love you, Christine Lawson."

She held her arms up and pulled him down for a real kiss, a deep kiss that affected his tired body in a way that had become familiar for these last two months.

"Yes, I will marry you, Ryan Bishop. I love you so much, I want us to be together forever!"

"I think I can help y'all, if'n you like." Sam chuckled, pulling a worn black Bible from his jacket. "Yo' see, back

home, I'm a preacher. I can perform that marriage ceremony right now."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Epilogue

Summer 1864

Christine opened her eyes in time to see the sun casting a rosy glow beyond the field of corn her husband had planted a month ago. With effort, she forced her sated, languid body out of the deep feather bed and pushed herself to her feet. The wooden planks were cool on her bare feet, and she shivered just a bit when the morning breeze blew in, stirring the lacy curtains and raising goose bumps on her naked skin.

Ryan rolled onto his back, grunted, flung both arms out wide with a muffled thump on the mattress, and began snoring softly. Christine smiled as she drank in the sight of her beautiful husband. He was tanned and tall, his head nearly touching the iron bars at the top of the bed. Ryan's mother had given them the beautiful bed as a wedding gift when Chris had come to Ryan's house to live after leaving the army. Long, lean feet dangled off the end of the bed.

Another gust of wind blew in and she reached for her clothes, pausing after pulling the cotton dress over her head, to reach across and pull the blanket over her nude husband. He snored on undisturbed, looking more like a teenage boy than a grown man in his loose-limbed slumber. Giving in to the urge, Christine brushed a lock of light brown hair off his forehead, bent and kissed him softly on the cheek before padding barefoot from the room on her mission for food. She had

very nearly slept past breakfast and knew that Ryan would soon wake up as hungry as a bear. Since surviving the war and the near starvation that the Confederate army had been forced to endure, Ryan never missed a single meal. The baby would be waking soon as well. Her breasts tingled with the need to feed her child and with memories of their lovemaking the night before. Ham and fresh eggs would be just the thing on this promising new day.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Author's Note

It is estimated that somewhere between five hundred and a thousand woman disguised themselves as men to enlist and fight as full-fledged soldiers during the American Civil War. Some women joined for the money, some followed lovers or husbands, and some joined out of true patriotic duty. But they all served with dedication, spirit, and bravery amid the chaos and horror of a war that cost more American lives than any other war in our nation's history.

About Diane M. Wylie

Diane's most important job in life is that of mom and wife. A graduate of Rutgers University in New Jersey, she loves writing, reading, gardening, and auto racing. Romantic suspense and historical romances are her favorite genres.

Diane makes her home in Maryland with her husband and two children. During the day, Diane is an award-winning technical writer for a scientific instrument company in Delaware.

She is a member of the Romance Writers of America and the Maryland Romance Writers chapter, as well as a member of the Society of Technical Communication.

Her historical romance novel, *My Enemy, My Love* is available from Whiskey Creek Press. You can visit Diane's website: <http://dianewylie.tripod.com> to learn more about her and her upcoming novels.

MEANT TO BE

by Crystal Inman

“Go away.” The voice drifted over to Max in the dark. He stopped in the doorway and sighed.

“I can’t, Lynn. You need someone here.”

“I don’t need anyone anymore.”

“If you don’t take your medicine...” he began.

“Spare me.” The words came out dripping with anger and sarcasm. “Peddle your caring crap to someone else. Just because you feel guilt doesn’t mean I have to care.”

Max heard her move in the darkness. She skirted the window to avoid the moonlight.

“It’s done.” He reminded her as he walked farther into the room. “Please, Lynn. Let it go.”

“Don’t worry, Max. I’m not going to harm myself. You don’t need to baby sit me. I can take care of myself.”

“Can you?” he asked softly. “Jerry wasn’t the one for you. I only want to help.”

“Help?” she echoed in disbelief. “How can you help? Can you give me my face back? My life back? What can you give me, Max?”

“I can help.” He moved closer to her and smelled the soft scent of her skin. His stomach clenched. How could he make

her understand? “Lynn, please. Come here.” He stretched his hand out and touched her arm gently.

He heard the cry before she buried her face into his white, cotton shirt. Her body shook with the force of her sobs. His arms came around her and cradled her soft body next to his. Max wanted to gather her to him. So close she wouldn’t ever hurt again, but he couldn’t. His brother had seen to that—the selfish bastard.

Max’s jaws clenched as he thought of his brother with Tammy on the honeymoon that should have been Lynn’s.

“I’m not crying for him,” Lynn mumbled against his chest.

“I know, sugar. I know.”

She stepped back, making sure her hair fell across her face on the right side. “No. You don’t. But you need to.” Lynn moved towards the window while keeping her back to him. “I don’t love your brother, Max. I don’t know if I ever did. I thought I did.” She sighed. “And he was everything I thought I wanted.”

“Don’t,” Max pleaded. “I don’t need to know this.”

“Don’t you?” she asked. “Aren’t you the one picking up the pieces? Again?”

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” Max shook two pills out of the bottle and into his hand. He held them out to her and waited for her to take them. She didn’t even look in his direction. She opened her hand, and he dropped them into her palm. Lynn washed them down and moved towards the bed.

“Goodnight, Max.”

“Goodnight, Lynn.” He shut the door behind him.

* * * *

Lynn heard Max’s footsteps recede down the hallway. She spit the pills out in her hand and grimaced. They were bitter and unpleasant—like her life. Lynn slammed them down

on the nightstand and sat up abruptly. She refused to let Max pick up the pieces of her life. She was an adult. Jerry was a bad choice. Period. And now she would make a good choice. She had to leave here. Now.

Lynn hurriedly dressed and threw her clothes into a suitcase. Max would be in bed within a half hour. He never stayed up late. He had business to tend to in the early morning. She waited until the house was silent before she opened the door and crept down the hall. She avoided the third step because it tended to creak.

The suitcase was heavier than she thought, and Lynn cursed it silently as she dragged it across the oak hardwood floor.

“Do you hate me that much?”

The whispered words tore at her heart.

“Dammit, Max.” She stopped in her tracks. “I can’t stay here. I’m not your responsibility. If I had listened to you to begin with, none of this would have happened.”

Max walked towards her and struggled not to show his emotions as she flinched.

Lynn shook her head back and forth, careful to conceal the right side of her face. She gazed at him, praying he wouldn’t come any closer. She didn’t need his pity—never his pity.

“This is your home, Lynn, for as long as you need it. And you do need it, whether you want to admit it or not. You haven’t healed.” His fingers brushed against the scar from her hairline to her right eye.

“Don’t,” she pleaded. “Just don’t. You know they’ll be home soon, and I can’t be here.”

“Jerry is no longer welcome in my home.”

“Oh,” she snipped, flashing her eyes at him, “but the emotionally scarred and crippled chick is? This is what I’m talking about, Max. Stuff the pity.”

“And where would you go? That depressing apartment in town? Who would take care of you then?”

“I’ll take care of myself, dammit!” She kicked the suitcase and scowled at it.

“I see you’re feeling better. That infamous temper is showing.”

Lynn took a step back to calm herself.

“And now here’s the composing part. I always wondered how you could go from pissed to fine in two seconds.”

“Watch and learn.” She relaxed her face and took one deep breath. Then another. “See? All better. Now get out of my way.”

“No.”

“Pardon me?”

“That would be a negatory. Lynn, you’re staying here. I’m tired of asking. I’m telling. You’re staying. Now either you or I can take that suitcase back, but believe me, it’s going back.” He crossed his arms and studied the stubborn woman in front of him. She was furious. And she was beautiful. He watched her eyes flash again as she scowled up at him. She was only five-foot-five compared to his six-two, but that never bothered her. She gave as good as she got. Her short, brown hair hung to her shoulders and curled softly at the ends. The right side hung in front of her face to hide the scar she was so conscious of having. The left side was tucked behind her ear. Max made a concerted effort not to look below her neck.

Lynn’s body was curvy in all the right places. He knew that for a fact. Once upon a time, it was all he could think about. And now here he was, in the same predicament. And he would never be able to tell her.

"You are not my keeper," she reminded him.

"Someone needs to be." He stooped to pick up the suitcase and stood up. "Please, Lynn."

"One more week, Max. And then I'm gone. No matter what. You can't watch me all the time."

She followed him sedately to her room and saw him place her suitcase next to the dresser. He looked at her pleadingly, but she shook her head and sat on the bed. Max shut the door behind him.

Yes. He could watch her all the time. And he would.

* * * *

Lynn woke the next day and had the same thought as she'd had the previous forty-five days. She was scarred and alone. She screwed up the only relationship that ever meant anything to her. And now she was at the mercy of a man she didn't want to be anywhere near—lovely way to begin a day.

She sat up and touched the side of her face. The puckered skin disgusted her. The long, ridged line still felt foreign on her skin—another sign of her blatant stupidity. Lynn knew she did it to herself, that infamous temper in action.

And now she didn't even want to touch a car. The simple thought made her skin crawl. She was lucky she hadn't harmed anybody but herself. *Pity*, she thought in disgust. *I don't need it anymore in my life.*

Lynn swung her legs over the bed and sat upright. The dizziness made her bite her lip to focus herself. She refused to take the drugs they were giving her. It was too easy to simply sleep. She wanted to live. She needed to live.

Lynn dressed and walked out into the hallway. The smell of breakfast made her stomach growl. Max cooked breakfast every morning for her. Lynn walked down the stairs, her hands trailing over the beautiful oak banister. She used to dream of living in this house. Having roots here. Belonging.

"I was about to wake you up."

Max's voice broke into her reverie. Lynn glanced up and tried to smile. He watched her struggle and tried to ease her pain. "I've made pancakes, eggs, and sausages. Help yourself. I'm going to be working in the home office today."

"Convenient," Lynn remarked.

"You think?" Max quirked an eyebrow. "I guess it is."

Lynn laughed at his surprised tone. "I've known you for years, Max. You're not that subtle."

"Sometimes I am." His words were cryptic. He turned and walked into his office.

She walked into the kitchen and filled a plate. She needed to clear up this mess with Max before she moved on. It was past time. He had to know the truth. Lynn had one foot in his office doorway when the front door opened. She turned to see who it was, and the tray dropped from her nerveless fingers. It was Jerry and his new bride.

* * * *

Max ran out of his office and took Lynn's hands in his. "Are you all right? Was it a spasm?" He massaged her hands and looked into her eyes.

"How sweet," Tammy drawled. "I told you we should have called first."

Max's head swiveled around, and he stared in disbelief at his brother and new sister-in-law. "Get in my office now," he ordered. He practically shoved the pair inside and slammed the door shut.

Lynn stooped to clean up her mess, but Max held her away from it. "I've got it. Why don't you go fix another plate? I think it's about time I talk with Jerry."

"Max, please. I'm fine. And I'm capable of cleaning this. I'll pack my suitcase and be gone by noon."

"If you leave this house before the week is up, Lynn, I'll come and get you. Believe it." He nodded to her once and disappeared into his office.

When did he become so damn bossy? Didn't he realize this was no longer the Stone Age? She had free will. She could damn well do what she pleased. When she wanted to do it. And she would show him a thing or two. Lynn stiffened her shoulders and walked into the office with the rest of them.

Jerry looked up at Lynn when she entered the room. He glanced away quickly, and she bit her lip. It was either that or tear into his hide. Tammy smiled at her and waved with her left hand. Her wedding ring sparkled in the light. She looked at it and then Lynn. Her smile widened.

Max slapped his hands down on his desk. He looked at Jerry and then Tammy. When he was sure he had their attention, he spoke. "You are no longer welcome in this house. I believe it would be in poor taste to have you here." He turned to his brother. "You have enough money to stay in a rented house until you buy one. You don't need to be here."

"I want to be here," Tammy pouted. "It's the family house. And I'm family. I'm your sister-in-law, Max," she reminded him. "Half this house is mine and Jerry's."

"Wrong," Max spat out. "You have no part of this house."

"But Jerry said..." she trailed off.

"What? That you were entitled?" He sneered at the word. "You aren't entitled to jack. The house is mine. It always has been. The condition was that the first of us to marry would inherit the house. I've already contacted a lawyer. Your vows," he laughed, "don't count."

Tammy turned to Jerry and opened her mouth. He held up his hand, and she closed her mouth and crossed her arms over her stomach.

“Max,” Jerry began, “I think there’s a way to work this out. Tammy and I love this house. How about I make an offer, and we share it?”

“No.”

Lynn bit back her laugh. She knew good and well Max wouldn’t budge. It was that look in his dark green eyes that should have warned the two off. But Jerry didn’t know when to shut up.

“Just because you’ve taken in company,” he glanced at Lynn, “that doesn’t mean you need to turn your family away.”

“Maybe she’s more than company.” Tammy arched an eyebrow. “What is it, honey? Couldn’t get one brother so you went after the other one?”

“I could say the same for you.” Lynn looked at Tammy coolly, not letting her see the pain. Her hands curved into claws, and she told herself to breathe. The insinuation burrowed into her mind and hooked deeply.

Max came around the side of the desk and put his arm around Lynn. His smile came easily but didn’t reach his eyes. “You can stay for two days. No more. And you can keep your comments to yourself.” He turned Lynn around and escorted her to the door. “Don’t even think about leaving,” he warned her. “I still have a week.”

Jerry and Tammy walked out of the office and up the stairs, but Max’s voice stopped them. “You two will be in the guest house. Linens are in the closet. Be gone by Monday.”

Jerry scowled at his younger brother and glared at Lynn. His eyes seemed to search out her scar, and she tried her best not to shrink against Max’s side. Tammy smiled at them both and led Jerry outside to where they were staying.

Max looked over at Lynn. Her eyes were wide in her face. She looked stunned.

“I need to leave.” Tammy’s words echoed in her head.

"If I have to sleep in the hallway against your door, you're not leaving." Max escorted her into the kitchen and loaded up a plate with breakfast.

Lynn watched his capable hands cradle the plate. He placed two of everything on her plate and handed it to her. When she opened her mouth to protest, he put his finger against her lips. Her eyes widened, and she stepped back. Her life was one complication after the next. The sooner this week ended, the better.

"Thank you." She took a fork out of the drawer and walked into the living room. The morning was cool and crisp. Max had started a fire in the fireplace downstairs, and she sat on the couch in front of it. Lynn tried to eat, but Tammy's words stole her appetite. What did that witch know?

"I'll be in my office for the rest of the day. If Jerry or Tammy bothers you, let me know. I can cut their visit even shorter."

"Why?"

"Why?" Max echoed.

"Why are you doing this?" Lynn stood up and looked into Max's face. "Why would you choose me over them? Am I that pitiful?"

Max stood and towered over her. "You're important to me, Lynn. I won't have either one of them upsetting you even more than they already have." He nodded to her and walked into his office.

And what was she to do with her time? Lynn glanced around and sighed. She shut her eyes as dizziness washed over her again. That doctor and his damn pills. She'd done nothing but sleep for the first month. And Max had been there. He had immediately moved her to his home and arranged to care for her. His guilt was palpable.

Just because his brother jilted her at the altar. It was almost humorous. All those times she'd told herself she could do it, only to find out she wouldn't have to—and the look on Max's face. Lynn's breath caught in her throat. That's when she ran from the church. Her car was waiting for her. And she took it for a ride. Tears. Shame. All of her emotions spilled over, and she didn't see the curve. And then pain. Blood.

When she woke, Jerry and Tammy were in Hawaii, having their honeymoon. Lynn didn't leave her bed for another two weeks. All her mistakes added to her shame. Her life was one big blunder after another. The headache started behind her right eye again, and she touched it gently. The headaches not only hurt, they scared her.

Lynn's fingers brushed against her scar, and a single tear slid down her cheek. She wasn't vain. The scar in itself didn't bother her. Her knees were scarred up from childhood mishaps. She had a scar on her right forearm from falling through a screen. No. The scar was a reminder of her stupidity. When would she learn?

And now Tammy and Jerry were back from their honeymoon, and Tammy was acting like the proverbial cat with the canary. She would stop at nothing to embarrass Lynn and finish what she started.

Lynn plucked a book down from the bookcase and wrapped herself in a blanket on the couch. She could hear Max talking to someone on the phone, and she smiled sadly. One week. She would have to leave. She'd already done enough damage.

* * * *

Max finished up his phone call and walked out of his office. He shut and locked the door behind him. He didn't trust Jerry or his new bride. One glitch in the plan, and he would never have another chance.

He walked into the living room and looked down at Lynn. She was sleeping with a book tucked up to her chest. The firelight played over her features. Max smoothed her hair behind her ear and let his fingers trail through it.

"How sweet." The saccharine words were hissed at him. Tammy stood in the kitchen, watching him.

"What do you want?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Just my due. I couldn't get it from you. But believe me when I say I'll get it from Jerry. Too bad the princess here had to get in the way. She had such a pretty face."

Max's jaw clenched, and he fought for control. "Get out. You may have Jerry fooled now, but he'll see through you soon enough."

"You think?" she purred. "Somehow I doubt it. All of Jerry's thoughts are centered below the belt. And I can take care of that." She sidled closer to him and pressed her body to his. "You know I can." Tammy puckered her lips. "Did you miss me?"

"No," he said. "Honestly I didn't."

"Pity." She pouted up at him. Her tongue snaked out and licked his jaw. "I could always come back in after Jerry goes to sleep."

"Get the hell out of this house. Now." His voice shook with barely concealed anger. "I don't want to see you in here again. Send your husband for whatever else you need."

Tammy looked down at Lynn and up at Max. "She made her decision, big boy. And it wasn't you." With that parting shot, she sauntered out the front door.

* * * *

Lynn blinked in the darkness and waited for her eyes to adjust. She was in bed. Her arm reached out and touched the sheets to make sure. Was she losing her sense of time now?

“Don’t worry. I brought you in here.”

She gasped and sat up in bed, then reached for the lamp and clicked it on. Max was sitting in a rocker by the far wall. He watched her move her head so that her scar was covered. It angered him more than he could say.

“I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience,” she said stiffly.

“No, you’re not,” he corrected her. “You’re reveling in it. It’s your protection. Your shield. You’re on that side, and we’re all over here.”

“Leave.”

“No.” Max stood up and walked over to the bed. He sat on the edge and moved closer to her.

Lynn felt her eyes widen as she realized his intent. And then his mouth closed over hers.

He was so warm. His lips moved against hers, and she sighed and moved closer. Why couldn’t it always be like this? Where was her happy ending? And why did she always choose the wrong one?

Max brought his hands up to thread through her hair and moved her closer to him. When Lynn opened her mouth to his tongue, he dipped inside, tasting her soft mouth.

Lynn lost track of time as Max’s mouth claimed every part of hers. He gently stroked her tongue with his and brought pleasure to each area he touched. When Max’s hand brushed against the scar on her face, she jerked back.

“Leave.” Her voice trembled, and she cursed her own weakness.

“Lynn,” he began.

“I won’t be a substitute for Tammy.” She looked him in the eye. “I know you’re hurting.”

“Don’t,” he said harshly. Max stood up from the bed in one swift motion. “Just don’t.” He walked out her door and shut it behind him with a slam.

Lynn turned off the light and lay back down. She should have left a couple of days ago, before Tammy arrived. She would never forget seeing Tammy in Max's house. The image tore through her with sharp claws. Lynn wanted so badly to tell Max months ago how she felt, but when she arrived at his house, Tammy answered the door in Max's robe. And smiling that smile she seemed to have perfected.

Lynn left quickly. And then she fell into Jerry's arms. He was right there to tell her how pretty she was and how much he loved spending time with her—until Tammy. Jerry proposed to her within two months of their meeting, and Lynn accepted. Max would smile at her politely, not at all like the times they had before he met Tammy. Lynn thought he cared for her, but she had been mistaken. She'd known Max for two years, and not once did she see him date anyone. And when she had decided to make a move to pursue the relationship, she was stopped dead in her tracks.

And the wedding—the almost wedding: Lynn was having second thoughts long before her wedding day, but she convinced herself to wed Jerry. And then everything fell apart. The look on Max's face when he brought her the note from Jerry said it all. His girlfriend ran off with his brother.

Max started to say something, but Lynn ran—away from her shame, away from her life, away from everything, and into the abyss of her life now. He was obviously still attracted to Tammy. It must hurt him to be so close to Tammy and not be with her. But Lynn wouldn't be a substitute. Not even for Max.

She fluffed her pillow and lay in the darkness. Less than a week and she would move on with her life. Without Max or any part of his family.

* * * *

Lynn dressed and walked downstairs into the kitchen. Bacon, eggs, and toast were piled on the table. It was supposed to smell wonderful, but she wondered if she could keep any of it down. Max was sitting at the table, brooding over his coffee cup. He looked up at Lynn as she entered.

"Morning."

"Morning," she replied. Lynn took a plate and put some eggs, two pieces of bacon, and a piece of toast on her plate. She sat down stiffly and tried not to wince at the pain in her head. Her headache was back in full force.

"You don't have to be so damn polite all the time."

"Pardon me?"

His green eyes bored into hers. "I said you don't have to be so damn polite all the time. Your head hurts. I can see it in your eyes. But here you sit, at the breakfast table, enduring my company."

"Please, Max. I don't want to fight."

"I know." He stood up and pushed his chair into the table. "And it's a pity." He nodded once and left the kitchen.

"Cryptic men," she muttered. Lynn bit into a piece of bacon and chewed it slowly. Would she ever understand them? Probably not—no instruction manuals, no guides, nada—it was ridiculous. If she was so easy to read, why wasn't he?

Lynn was finishing her breakfast as Jerry came in. He avoided her eyes but moved to make a plate for himself.

"Don't I rate a 'good morning'?" she asked.

Jerry's head came up, and he nodded. "Good morning, Lynn. How are you?" His eyes lingered over the side of her face her hair was hiding.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "I was simply wondering why you decided not to marry me and take off with Tammy instead. Any answers?"

He sat down across from her. "Tammy and I are more compatible."

"You mean she'll screw your brains out whether you're married or not. I thought I explained that."

"It's not about sex, Lynn. Though Tammy is more than willing to do whatever I ask."

The thought of Tammy's body next to Max's had her clenching her already tense jaws. "I bet." She bit the words out.

"I'm sorry you were hurt, Lynn." Again, he gave a quick glance at her face. "But I'm happy now."

"And Max?"

"What about him?"

"Never mind." Lynn stood up and walked over to the sink. She put her plate in it and turned around. "Enjoy your marriage." She strode out of the kitchen and walked outside.

The fall leaves littered the front yard, and Lynn walked through them, enjoying the crunch under her feet. The cool air soothed her head, and she blew out a breath. She didn't want the medications the doctor prescribed. If she kept taking them, she'd be in this house for another six months.

She wandered down the path that wound around the house and into the pasture. Max owned one hundred and twenty acres of farmland. He was slowly implementing plans for cattle and other livestock. It had been his dream since he was in his early twenties. When his parents passed away a couple of years ago, Lynn met him at the lawyer's office. They began talking. She had recently lost her last parent.

Max had been sad, but he wasn't the bitter man she saw this morning over breakfast. Did he want her to fight for Jerry? What kind of nonsense was that? She didn't want him. As soon as she came back to consciousness, she knew that. Her accident lifted several veils off of her eyes. Jerry wasn't

the man for her. She was simply sorry that Max had to be hurt in order for her to see it.

“Shouldn’t you be resting your head or something?”

Lynn’s head snapped around, and she sighed when she saw Tammy. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Tammy was wearing tight, blue jeans and a turquoise sweater that fit like a second skin. She sauntered closer to Lynn and grinned. “I’m so happy you’ve recovered. It’s a pity about the accident.” Her eyes searched out the hidden part of Lynn’s face. “I heard you had quite the scar.”

“Yes.”

She looked at Lynn with glee. “Is it hard? Knowing I’ve had both of them, and you’ve had neither?”

Lynn looked the woman in the eye. “It’s hard to stomach your presence. Period.”

Tammy’s face twisted into hatred. “Ah. I see the gloves do come off. How interesting.” She walked beside Lynn down the path. “I was wondering if you had a backbone.”

They rounded the curve and kept walking.

“I don’t really want any company, Tammy.”

The path became denser, and they ducked to avoid low branches. Lynn sighed. “This is ludicrous. I don’t like you. You don’t like me. Go back to the guesthouse. Visit your husband. Whatever you want. But leave me alone.”

“Maybe I want to be friends.”

Lynn snorted and looked at the other woman. She stopped in her tracks and shook her head. “Do you honestly think I’m that stupid?”

Tammy cocked her head to the side. “Yes?” She took one step towards Lynn, and Lynn felt her feet slide in the soft dirt. Her arms pin-wheeled as she fell backwards. Tammy watched as she fell and slid down into the ditch. Lynn landed with a thump and blinked repeatedly. Her head was aching terribly.

She tried to call out, but her shout came out as a whimper. The dirt fell around her, and Lynn tried to pull herself up. Her fingers clawed the dirt, but she was too late. The dizziness overcame her, and she slumped back into the trench.

* * * *

Lynn woke and shivered in the darkness. Her body was bruised from head to toe. She tried to sit up, but it made the pounding in her head worse. *Tammy*. That witch left her here. Where was Max? Jerry? Hell, anyone. She huddled tighter into the dirt and tried to listen for footsteps of any kind.

The moon was only a sliver. It filtered through the trees and barely made a dent in the night. The leaves rustled underneath her as she shifted to try and make herself comfortable. Someone would come for her, wouldn't they?

* * * *

Lynn watched the sun peek through the canopy of leaves above her. Her throat was parched, and she tried to speak just to make sure she could. The pathway was far above her. She squinted in the light and tried to move herself again. The dizziness made her vision blur, but she bit her lip and edged herself against the soft ground. She slid her body fully against the dirt and tried to get her legs underneath her.

The pain was excruciating, but Lynn would be damned if she'd allow herself to fall back into being a victim. That part of her life was over. And when she finally laid her hands on Tammy, that woman better have exceptional medical care.

She wriggled slowly up the slope, pausing now and then to catch her breath. She clawed her way, inch by inch, almost to the top of the pathway. Her breath was coming in great gasps, and she prayed she wouldn't lose consciousness as another wave of dizziness washed over her. Lynn only closed her eyes for a second, but that was enough. She could hear some-

one call her name as her hands loosened their grasp, and she began the descent down the slope again.

* * * *

Lynn blinked slowly and opened her mouth to ask where she was, when she saw Max out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting in the rocker in her room, watching her. As soon as he saw she was awake, he perched on the edge of her bed and spoke.

"You need to leave."

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"You're right. You were all along. I'm sorry I didn't listen." He wouldn't meet her eyes.

She threw up her hands. "Oh, that's great! Now you want to boot me out. And they say women don't know their mind." Lynn plopped back against her pillows and moaned softly as pain shot through her temple.

Max stood abruptly and looked down at her. "That's what I'm talking about. You don't need to hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?" she echoed. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Tammy told me what you said before she left."

Lynn thought back over their conversations and knew it wasn't going to be good, whatever it was. She took a deep breath to steady herself and asked, "What exactly did your sister-in-law have to say?"

"She explained to me how you felt. She said you two had talked before about your feelings for Jerry." He turned his back to her. "I realize now that I can't keep you here against your will. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"So I'm going to harm myself...over Jerry. That's what you're saying?"

"Yes." His voice was harsh.

"Now let me tell you something, Max Branton. I don't love Jerry. I never did." Max turned to watch her speak. "I don't give a tinker's damn about him or her. Well, actually, since she let me fall into that damn ditch, I'd like to wring her neck. But I'll be okay with never seeing her again."

His mouth dropped open. "What?" he yelled.

"Your girlfriend. She let me stay in that ditch and didn't go for help. She would have probably let me rot there."

"I don't understand. She told me you ran off."

Lynn's voice was edged with disgust. "Of course she did. Then she could have the both of you again. How nice for her."

"What?" His yell was even louder than the first. "What are you talking about?"

"Does density run in your family or what?"

"Before you insult me again, could you please explain what you're talking about? I've never had anything to do with Tammy." His jaw clenched and unclenched. Lynn watched it in fascination.

"I don't know why you're so mad." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at him stubbornly.

"Lynn," he warned her, "either you explain what you're talking about, or so help me..." he let the sentence trail off.

"What?" she asked sweetly. "Are you going to let me fall in a ditch, too?"

"Enough!" he shouted. Max clenched his fist and hit the doorjamb. "Tammy is not my girlfriend. She told me you informed her you were going to run away. You said I was overbearing and pushy. You couldn't wait to leave here."

"Did it ever occur to you she was lying?"

"Why would she lie?" Understanding slowly dawned in his eyes.

"Yes," Lynn said bitterly. "Tell me why that pathetic excuse for a human being would lie about this whole situation."

Please. What could she possibly gain? Oh, that's right," she snapped her fingers, "Jerry, you, and this house. Where is she?"

"They left last night. She was in a hurry. Said she felt guilty for you leaving."

"I bet," Lynn muttered.

Max looked down at Lynn and sighed. "She also told me several other things. I assume those are lies, too."

"I can't wait to hear this." She sat up straighter in bed and motioned for Max to continue. "Please. Don't leave me hanging."

"We don't have to go into this right now. You've been through a lot the last couple of months. We can do this later."

"Like hell."

"Why are you so stubborn with some things and not others? It drives me crazy!"

Lynn cocked her head to the side and grinned. "Spill it, Max."

"She said you cared about me."

The words hit Lynn hard, and she felt all the color leave her face. She knew she should have simply shut up and let it go. But no, not her, she couldn't lie to Max. Maybe she could worm her way out of the truth.

"Oh, did she?"

"Yes." Max's eyes met hers. "I thought it was rather odd for her to tell me that."

"Why?" Lynn asked.

"You've always seen me as more like a brother. Someone to talk with." His eyes searched hers before she shifted them away.

"You're pleasant to talk to."

"So is a damned stuffed animal. Help me, Lynn. Tell me what's going on."

She moved around in the bed, buying time. What did she have to lose? Lynn sighed once before she spoke. "I might have become a little more attached to you. But that ended when I came here to talk to you, and Tammy opened the door in your bathrobe."

"Hell," he muttered.

"Quite," she agreed. "So I left. And then Jerry began paying attention to me. And you had Tammy."

"I never had Tammy in any sense of the word. One of my friends dumped her on me at the club. She was drunk. I drew the short straw."

"But she said..." Lynn trailed off in absolute horror. "Damn it. I really do loathe her."

Max walked over and sat on the bed by her side. "Talk to me, Lynn. What else haven't you told me?"

The weight of the past two months crushed down on her. "I'm tired, Max...all the time...and dizzy. And I keep making the same damn wrong choices. I think I'm cursed."

He chuckled softly and moved to hold her hand. His fingers stroked delicately over her palm. She shivered as the heat moved through her. Her eyes widened when he moved forward. Lynn put her other hand out and held him back.

"Didn't you hear me explain that I'm cursed?"

"Lynn." His voice was husky. "I don't give a damn."

"Max," she pleaded. Lynn moved her hand and pushed her hair back off of the right side of her face. "This is me. I'm scarred. I'm not talking only about physically. I don't know what I'm doing!" She threw up her hands and felt the tears slide silently down her face.

"Don't cry." Max wiped the tears with his thumbs and leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

"Did it ever occur to you that I'm seriously damaged? My head aches continually. I could have brain damage. I might keel over at any given moment. You don't know."

"Yes," he corrected her, "I do. Why do you think I pushed for you staying here so often?"

"You're inherently bossy?"

Max chuckled. "That, too. But no, doctor's orders, I assured him you'd rest and take your medicine."

"It makes me sleep non-stop." She scowled in disgust.

"It's supposed to! Woman, you're driving me stupid." He shook his head. "The medicine is for your headaches. You take the recommended dosage, and then you can slowly wean yourself off of it."

"I'm not going to have an aneurysm or something?"

"You've been thinking you're dying?" he asked in disbelief.

"Maybe." She avoided his eyes. It felt like a giant weight had been lifted from her. She peeked up at him and sighed in relief when he didn't look too agitated.

"Your body will heal," he promised her. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you sooner. I was being selfish."

"Selfish?" she echoed.

"I want you here, Lynn."

"Why?" Her question was blunt.

"Because I want you in my life. I need you here. When I thought Jerry was going to marry you, I was dying."

"Why in the hell didn't you say anything?" she demanded.

"You quit talking to me. And Tammy was there to assure me you picked the brother you wanted for your husband."

"Did I already say that I hated her immensely?"

"Yes." He grinned at her. His grin turned to desire. Max's thumb traced the soft curves of her mouth, and Lynn closed her eyes and savored his touch. His thumb was re-

placed by his mouth. Lynn eagerly welcomed him. He finally drew back, breathing heavily. She moaned a little as he sat up straighter and looked at her. Her cheeks were flushed from his kisses, and he smiled satisfactorily.

“You’re staying.” Max’s eyes blazed. “When I look at you, I see the woman who holds my heart in her hands. And this,” he traced her scar with his hand, “is part of you. And I won’t take anything less.”

His words burned brightly in her heart. Max wanted her—all of her. Lynn looked over at him and smiled contentedly. She was home. Her place was with Max. And nothing would push them apart again. Lynn opened her arms, and he moved into them. He held himself back so that he wouldn’t flatten her, but she pulled him tighter to her until there were no seams. And for that, she was grateful.

About Crystal Inman

Crystal Inman is an author from Oklahoma. She lives out in the middle of nowhere, which is perfect for her writing. Crystal wants to bring a fresh voice to the romance genre that will capture her readers' hearts and imaginations. Her first novel explores romance in the world of Virtual Reality. Her second novel involves Time Travel. Her third novel is a paranormal romance. She is currently working on several more contemporary romances, a four-book set, and a suspense series.

Crystal lives with her best friend, four children, and several animals. She loves to write the romance novel that readers don't want to end. There's always a work in progress around the house and various pens, pencils, and notebooks scattered around. The writing always calls to her, and she loves every minute of it.

Crystal's novels, *Virtually Yours* and *Perfect Timing*, are now available from Whiskey Creek Press. Her novel *The Portrait* will be coming out in July 2006. Her website is: <http://chryswriter.tripod.com/>

OF EROS AND PSYCHE

A Petrarchan Sonnet

by Marsha Briscoe

When you are rent by age and time, pull out these lines
And think of one whose love you could not quell.
I, who saw you once, knew you and fell
Beneath your charm like a leaf in homage to autumn's signs.
Now never ends this ill-met love that binds
Its merciless grip has trapped me in your spell
And chases at me through the night where dwell
Those phantom hours that choke like twisted vines.
Sweet sleep that calms the frazzled edge of care
Turned false seducer—brings dreams of you with me.
Come not that sleep, for in such state lies perfidy.
Yet swathed in silk a sound consumes the air:
Your voice flows gentle, soft—with breeze caressed—
It touches me like velvet chords strummed across my breast.

© Marsha Briscoe

Note: Marsha is proud that her sonnet “Of Eros and Psyche” earned her the honor of being voted one of the top 10 best Poets published in 2001. On her web site, she has the picture of the Preditors and Editors Award: “Top Ten Finalist Readers Poll 2001”.

EFFUSION OF DAWN

An Elizabethan Sonnet

by Marsha Briscoe

To know your gentle mind is to know a dove
That soars on wings of dappled morning's light
To bring sweet peace to tilting worlds of love
That hover near but tease beyond our sight.
To have, to hold, entreat you in my heart
To touch the silky silence, the raven head,
Sing joys of love, so near yet so apart
Because you would not come to me because you fled
Too soon and sang no song to lift me high.
So I retreat to the dawn of another world
And wait 'til sun beams spray through misted sky.
Gaze round about Aurora's swirled
Effusion, ill met. Were you to know the feeling's good
We'd slow this world into a ball if we could.

©Marsha Briscoe

About Marsha Briscoe

Marsha Briscoe lives in southeastern Kentucky with her life-long *soul mate* husband and three dogs. An award winning published poet and novelist, she has over the years taught a variety of college English courses including advanced composition, British literature, and world literature.

Marsha has been a fiction editor since 2001. In addition to editing, Marsha has authored two published novels, both of which are deeply rooted in her background of teaching literature. *A Still Point in Time*, a PEARL Award Finalist, is a paranormal romance whose past life characters are loosely based on the historical Victorian poet/Pre-Raphaelite artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and his beloved model Elizabeth Siddal. *A Family Matter*, Marsha's second novel, brings the rudiments of an ancient Greek myth into a 1990's eastern Kentucky setting. Both books are Whiskey Creek Press "Reader's Choice" and Marsha's *A Family Matter* is also a WCP Publisher's Pick. These 2 romantic suspense novels are available in Trade Paperback and ebook from Whiskey Creek Press.
<http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com>

The proud mother of three grown sons, Marsha enjoys in her spare time tennis, golf, and piano. To learn more about her novels and poems, visit Marsha's author website at:

<http://www.marshabriscoe.com>

THE ARRANGEMENT

by Crystal Inman

“Help me,” the voice whispered.

Brendan Wardlow paused in his writing to look up. The park was nearly empty. The children had long since gone home. Dusk approached. He shook his head and wrote it off to his fertile imagination. His pen scratched across the paper at a rapid rate.

“Help me.”

His head snapped up. He heard a voice—soft, whisper thin. He stood up and walked a few steps.

“Help me.”

The voice was stronger this time and with a definite direction. Brendan tucked his notebook under his arm and strode towards the bushes at the south end of the park. He walked around the backside of the shrub and stopped cold.

She was a vision. Ethereal. She lay, motionless on the hard dirt. Her cerulean, gossamer gown was torn and filthy. Her complexion was waxen. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing shallow.

Brendan bent down to her and lightly stroked her cheek. Her eyes flickered open and regarded him solemnly. His head

snapped back. *My God! Who is she? How did she get here?* He was afraid to move her. She might be seriously hurt.

"Can you hear me?" he asked quietly.

Her eyes, the same color as her gown, watched his face. She nodded slightly.

"Did you ask for my help?" Again, a slight nod.

Brendan stood up and whipped out his cell phone. He was going to call an ambulance first. Then he would contact her next of kin. Her silvery voice stopped him.

"I do not need a hospital, Brendan Wardlow."

The phone dropped from his fingers.

He bent down low and studied her. "How do you know who I am?"

"I am sent for you."

Brendan stood up abruptly. She must have hit her head. Or he probably introduced himself and forgot. He tended to do that a lot. He was a tad bit absent-minded. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked down at the angel at his feet.

"You need a hospital. What happened to you?"

She bypassed his questions. "Please. Take me home. I have found you at last."

He eyed her dubiously. "You're hurt. You need medical attention."

Her eyes met his, pleading. "Take me home, Brendan Wardlow."

He sighed and bent down to help her up. She lifted her arms, willingly, and he held her closely to him. She smelled lightly of irises, and he inhaled deeply.

"What is your name?"

She smiled smoothly. "I am Mara. I am—"

"I know! I know!" he waved his hand around. "You're sent for me."

Mara smiled, satisfied. "You do not believe me now, Brendan Wardlow, but you will. I have left my other master for you."

The word 'master' stopped him in his tracks. *Uh oh. Some kind of kinky sex game gone awry?* How did he find himself in this position?

"Um, Master. When you say that, you mean what exactly?"

Her pale, blue eyes sparked with laughter. "I mean the man who had me before you."

How could she be happy at a time like this? She was abused by a man and now imprinted on him? He didn't need this complication right now. He was in the middle of writing his great American novel—okay, his semi-wonderful small book. *Whatever.*

He pushed his hands through his hair and grimaced as she clung to him.

"Um. Ah. The man who had you before me?" She nodded vigorously.

Brendan nodded his head, as though understanding. He didn't. *But what the hell?*

They stood motionless for a few minutes while his mind raced. "Okay. Give me your address, and I'll see you arrive home in one piece."

"5625 Maple View."

He damn near dropped her. "What?" he shouted.

"5625 Maple View."

"That's *my* house!" he exclaimed.

Mara brought her hands up and touched both sides of his face. "You need me, Brendan Wardlow. I am sent for you. Now, take me home."

* * * *

Brendan would question his sanity later. Right now, he did as she instructed. He bundled her into his jeep, and they drove to his house. She didn't talk, and he was too busy contemplating the finer points of his mental state to pay attention.

They pulled into the drive, and she was out of the vehicle before he could offer to help her. He whisked her inside and turned on the lights.

Mara studied the home and smiled contentedly. It was perfect.

He watched the smile playing on her lips and tried to focus his attention.

"You know. You should call the cops and report your 'master'. He has some serious issues." The word 'master' stuck in his throat. How could a woman so lovely be into that?

She turned to him. "He is my master no longer. You are my master."

Brendan held up his hands and backed up a few steps. "I'm no one's master. I'm just a simple man trying to make a living. I don't go for the um... 'master' culture."

Mara's eyes widened and she laughed until sparkling teardrops fell from her eyes. "You think I mean intimately?"

Brendan watched her laugh until she collapsed weakly on the couch. He was so glad to be a constant source of entertainment. It just did his heart good.

He waited until she lay there silently to speak again.

"Could you please explain to me how you came to be at the park, lying on the dirt?"

Mara opened her eyes and fixed him with a piercing stare. "I am a muse, Brendan Wardlow. I am *your* muse. I was held against my will at my last master's when I told him he could no longer use my services. His time had expired. He chose not to let me leave."

Brendan latched onto the last part of her explanation because he couldn't wrap his mind around the first part.

"What did he do?"

She spoke softly and looked deeply into Brendan's eyes. Pale blue met dark green. "He chained me to my bed. I could not come to you, then. He did not want to lose me. His writing was careless before I came to him. He has published three novels now."

He regarded her in silence. She must have a concussion. Maybe her last boyfriend was psycho. None of it mattered right now. She was safe. And if she wanted to pretend to be his Fairy Godmother, more power to her.

Brendan stood. "I know you must be tired. Please make yourself at home in the guest bedroom. I'll show you where the towels and extra blankets are."

Mara studied him, amused. He didn't believe her. But he would. She let him lead her down the hall and to her new home.

* * * *

Brendan woke up and blearily looked at his alarm clock. It was nearly seven. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and almost fell. Mara stood in the doorway. Her hair glowed softly, and her pale gown shimmered. She smiled and extended her hand to him.

"You wish to write?"

Brendan thanked all that was good he had worn boxers to bed the night before. He stood up abruptly and tried to scowl. "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

She brought her hands together and bowed. "I am sorry. I sensed your need and came to help."

His need? Right now his need wavered between writing and dragging her down onto his bed to stroke every inch of her body. He clenched his fists and fought for control. *This is*

insane. This beautiful woman was standing in his doorway talking about sensing his needs.

Brendan turned abruptly and wrenched his jeans on. It was a little difficult, but he managed. When he turned back to the doorway, she was gone.

"Madness," he muttered. He hustled down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Mara sat peacefully at the table, her hands folded. She looked at him as he entered the doorway.

"You wish to write after breakfast?"

He wished a lot of things right now. Writing had slipped on the list. He tried not to stare at her.

She had cleaned up nicely. If she were merely beautiful before, she was beyond magnificent now.

He made himself a cup of coffee and sat at the table. His eyes refused to leave her. She studied him silently.

"Why are you here?" The words burst from his mouth.

Mara calmly opened the newspaper to the bestseller list. She began pointing out names. "These were my masters. I am here to serve you. You will have your name on this list."

Brendan wondered if she would change her story. Apparently not. He held up his hands. "I'm sorry. You're more distracting than anything. How can I work when you look like..." he trailed off at her smile.

"What?" he demanded.

She beamed at him. "You flatter me, Brendan Wardlow."

"Brendan," he muttered. "Just Brendan."

"Brendan," she repeated. "Your writing awaits. You are an intensely, talented man."

His ego did cartwheels all the way to the couch.

* * * *

They worked for six hours. Brendan's hand never tired. He would run into a block, and she would gently coax him

around it. He felt extraordinary. Brilliant. Tireless. When she placed her hand on his, he stopped and looked at her.

Her eyes were glowing. It must have been a trick of the light. When he blinked, they were light blue.

Mara stroked his hand. "You are done for this evening."

Brendan shook his head. "But I feel great. I could at least go another couple of pages."

She stood up, and he fell back against the couch. It was as if his writing energy left with her.

"Change your mind?" Her eyes were laughing.

He looked at her. "Tell me about yourself." He paused, then asked, "Why me?"

Mara sat back on the couch and studied the man. No one had ever asked her. They had taken her gift and used it. She was a means to an end. Nothing more. This man looked at her with different eyes.

"I am a Muse. I give men the power of creation, imagination—limitless ability to channel their gifts. I move from person to person. A month is the longest I have remained with an artist. When they are on the right path, I move on."

Brendan's eyes blazed. "And what will happen to your last artist?"

"My master?"

He flinched. "I do not care for the word. You are no one's slave."

"He will lose his gifts. His greed has overpowered him. No more good fortune will come to his work."

Brendan smiled grimly. "Good." He studied her. "What is yours? What do you keep? Do you not have a home to go back to? A family? A life of your own?"

Mara's heart ached. "This is my life. I have my mas..., I mean, artists. I have their need for me to drive me. My wants are secondary. I live to serve."

"You are beautiful," he said, softly. "Will you have nothing for yourself? No family of your own?"

She turned her head to hide her tears. "It is not for me to say, Brendan. I travel where I am needed. Please excuse me. I am tired."

He watched her scramble to her room and heard the door shut. There was a Muse in his house—a beautiful, wondrous, unhappy Muse. He glanced at his notebook on the table and knew it was the best work he ever wrote.

Tomorrow, he thought. *Tomorrow I will show you there is more to you than you think.*

* * * *

Brendan woke up early and hustled down to the kitchen. He would make her breakfast. It was a good start. He cooked some eggs and sausage and put them on a plate. *Toast*. He needed toast. He placed the breakfast on the tray and nearly dropped it when he saw her in the doorway.

Mara looked at him oddly. "You are up early."

It must be hard to surprise a Muse. He put the tray down and pulled a chair back from the table. "I've prepared breakfast."

"For me?"

He grinned. "For you." He held up his hands. "I'm not the best cook, but I can make eggs. Tell me what you think."

She held the fork delicately and speared some eggs. She brought them slowly to her mouth and took a bite.

Brendan watched in silence.

"Delicious."

"Can I pour you something to drink?"

Mara stood up abruptly. "I don't understand. I am here to serve you. You need not wait on me."

Brendan took her hand in his. "I want to. It's just a little *quid pro quo*. You do for me. I do for you."

Her eyes were still puzzled. "But you don't have to do anything for me."

His eyes blazed. "I don't know what is wrong with these other 'artists'," he spit the word out, "but I believe in equality. You have given me back part of myself. I wish to do the same for you."

Mara looked deeply into his eyes. "When I am gone from here, who will make me breakfast then?" She turned and slowly walked from the kitchen.

* * * *

The rest of the day flew by. Brendan wrote for hours, but not with his Muse by his side. He knew that even her presence in his house affected his writing. It bothered him a great deal. He closed his notebook and went to find her.

Mara's door was closed. He tapped lightly and waited.

"You may come in."

He stepped inside and met her eyes. She bowed her head and spoke softly. "I am sorry for my actions."

Brendan walked quickly over to her and knelt in front of her. "Don't apologize. I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to hurt you. I wanted to make you happy."

Mara's eyes filled up, and the tears spilled down her cheeks.

He couldn't handle it. He sat on the bed and wrapped her in his arms. She turned in to him and held on. He stroked her silky hair and murmured soft words.

"You are good to me, Brendan. It makes it that much harder to leave."

His hand stilled. She would leave. His heart stopped in his chest. She would move on to another artist. Another man. Another life.

Mara turned and looked into his eyes. She lifted her lips and pressed them to his.

Brendan traced her lips with his tongue and nibbled at the corners. She brought him closer and wrapped her arms around his neck. He tried to slow his racing pulse but knew it would be impossible. The angel was in his arms.

She fell back on the bed, and he covered her body with his. *So beautiful*, he thought. *So perfect*. He rolled and pulled her on top of him. Her hair fell in a silvery curtain around her. She undid the buttons of her dress and eased it down over her shoulders.

Brendan's hands traced her body from her hips to her breasts. They fit perfectly in his hands. Mara lowered herself slightly and pressed herself into him. He groaned and held her hips. He lifted his head and brought her breast into his mouth. She purred and arched her back.

Mara slowly slid her dress over her head and dropped it on the floor beside the bed. Brendan filled his mouth with her. His senses. She was extraordinary. He slid his boxers off and pulled her to him.

She was gasping and calling out his name. He rolled her on her back and kissed her fiercely. His mouth slowly traced over her breasts, to her belly, and then lower. She pulled at his head as his mouth took her. *Sweet, so sweet*. He pleased her until she couldn't take it anymore.

Brendan sat up and pulled her to him. She opened her eyes, and her tongue poked out to hastily lick her lips. He moved into her and felt her tighten around him. He grasped her hips and rocked with her. She fit like she had been made for him. She wrapped her legs around him and urged him closer.

His body shuddered as his release tore through him. Her legs quivered, and he pulled her closer.

* * * *

Brendan lay in a semi-comatose state and prayed his capacity to bounce back quickly was still there. Mara purred and pulled him nearer. What was he supposed to say? He had never made love to a Muse before. *Was this normal for her? Was he just another master she slept with?*

"Feeling okay?" he asked.

Mara ran her tongue over his collarbone. "I feel wonderful. Was that your first time?"

His head snapped up. "What?"

She studied him. "That was my first time. I wanted to know if it was your first time."

Brendan fought back the hysterical laugh that was tickling his throat.

"Um. No. That wasn't my first time. I've done it a time or two before."

"You are good at it."

This time the laughter escaped. "Thanks," he managed.

"Is that funny?" She eyed him curiously.

He took her hand in his and kissed it lightly. "No. It's complimentary and gracious." Brendan looked into her eyes. He found it hard to believe she had never been with a man. She was extraordinary, and her beauty was staggering.

Mara snuggled closer, and he held her tightly. He had complicated matters. What was he going to do with her? Would he have a choice? Maybe she could choose to stay longer. Was there a head Muse? Someone who assigned them?

Brendan's head spun. He was out of his element, and it bothered him immensely. He hugged her even closer to his side and fell asleep.

* * * *

They worked for two weeks on his book. Mara would look over his work and make suggestions. When he had fin-

ished typing it up, she pointed out an agent's name in the phone book.

"She is the one."

The next day Brendan mailed off the manuscript with his fingers crossed. Mara pushed him to start on another book. Brendan felt like a man on fire. Inside and out. His writing was polished, and his nights with Mara were exquisite. She made life better somehow.

Weeks later, they were in the kitchen eating breakfast when the agent called. Brendan picked up the phone and promptly dropped it. He pulled it up by the phone cord and tried not to babble like an idiot.

Mara sat calmly at the kitchen table, eyes sparkling. She grinned at him, and he winked at her. When he hung up the phone, he picked her up and spun her around.

"My book," he managed.

She kissed him soundly. "I know your book, Brendan. She wanted it, yes?"

"Yes," he nearly shouted.

Mara smiled sadly. "You are talented, Brendan. Your talent will take you far and open doors. You just needed a key. And now you have it. I will be gone in the morning."

She swept out of the kitchen, and he stood there. His heart, which had been bursting, now broke. Something had gone terribly wrong. Mara gone? In the morning?

He ran from the kitchen and into his room. She was calmly sitting on the bed.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"All you needed was a little push, Brendan. I am no longer needed here. Your writing will flourish, and you will be an author envied by many."

He knelt down and buried his head in her lap. "I need you," he whispered. "Please stay. Isn't there anyway you can stay?"

Her tears fell on his cheeks. "I am unable to stay. Please do not think bad of me."

Brendan stood and pulled her to him. "Never," he whispered softly. "Never."

They held each other tightly, not saying another word.

* * * *

Mara woke him with a gentle kiss. "It is time."

Brendan sat up in bed and looked at her. "What if there's a trade? Something I have of value for you? Could you stay?"

She looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

He pulled her to him, and kissed her gently. "May I speak to your Head Muse, or whatever the title is?"

"Why would you do that? She will not be persuaded."

"Call her. Please."

Mara tilted her head and sighed. It would do no harm. The second she thought Serena's name, the Muse appeared.

Brendan gasped. *Silver*, his brain thought. *Liquid silver*. She was majestic. Her glistening gown flared brightly in his dark bedroom. Her shining eyes took his measure.

"I am Serena. You wish to speak to me?"

He stood up and bowed. Somehow, it just seemed fitting. She smiled, as though amused.

"You have manners, mortal."

"Yes, ma'am."

She cocked her head and studied the room. "Mara. Be prepared to leave. I will let your mortal speak. Then you must meet your next master."

Brendan bit down hard on the anger.

"I wish to speak of a bargain."

"Bargain?" Serena arched her eyebrow. "I do not bargain."

"I wish to keep Mara."

She frowned. "You may not."

"I wish to give you something in return for her staying."
"Speak."

"I wish to give back my gift in return for her."

Mara gasped and jumped up from the bed. "NO! You will not! Please do not say that," she pleaded. When she saw Brendan would not waver, she turned to Serena. "I will not stay." She bowed to her Mistress. "I am ready."

Brendan stood his ground. "It is mine to trade."

"So, it is, Mortal. And why do you give back your gift for this Muse?"

He studied Mara as teardrops fell from her eyes. "I love her," he said. "I would rather have her than anything."

Mara sobbed. "You cannot let him. His writing is important to him. He will be miserable."

Brendan walked over and held Mara close. "I will be miserable without you. You are my heart, Mara."

Serena watched silently. "You would love her? You would keep her?"

"I will spend my life loving her."

Serena nodded regally. "She may stay." She turned to Mara. "You are no longer a Muse, but a woman. This man has claimed your heart. You will share your life with him." She bowed to both of them and disappeared instantly.

Mara turned and looked at him with sadness in the depths of her light, blue eyes. "Brendan. I love you. But you no longer have your gifts, and I am no longer a Muse. You will come to hate me for what you have given up in my name." She let her head fall forward in shame.

He tilted her chin so she could look him in the eye. "No, I will not." He shook his head back and forth and chuckled.

Mara looked at him curiously. "Why are you so happy?"

He tucked her arm into his. "Because you are my heart." Mara smiled and kissed his lips softly. Brendan rained butterfly kisses down on her face. "And curiously, my love, because I feel like writing."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

ABOUT CRYSTAL IMAN

(See Crystal Inman's Author Bio at the end of her story "The Arrangement" in this Anthology)

FROM THE HAND OF GUINEVERE

A Contemporary Ballad

by Daniel Wilder

A searing fire from her deepest part,
A flame burns lines on paper white;
To young Lancelot's hand the parchment falls
The lines become a blinding light.

Searing lines he cannot touch,
But through his eyes they invade his soul;
The infecting flame his vision blurs,
The consuming fire he must control.

An imminent damage can be seen within:
The future is taken from his past;
All he knows and longs to keep,
By the flame would turn to worthless ash.

The beautiful flame lures the moth
Its luster more tempting than jewels and gold;
The fire has ventured to his deepest part
He lives in its heat amidst the cold.

Love Anthology

Caution not thrown, a vision he sees:
The aftermath of the consuming flame,
Burning flesh he smells in the wind
With only himself and the fire to blame.

Steadfast and strong, with all of his will
The flame he resists for life and land;
A steel-plated armor has become his skin
To stave off the touch of a forbidden hand.

Determined to never unlock his heart
He lingers by the cold languid moon;
Among scattered ashes he casts his eyes wide,
His heart now like the stone in the room.

©Daniel Wilder

About Daniel Wilder

Daniel Wilder is an Information Technology professional with degrees in Computer Engineering Technology and Technical Education. His love for space started as a child with some Time-Life® books that his parents purchased in the late 1960s. In high school, he majored in science and has ever since been an amateur student of physics and astronomy. Daniel's love of writing started in high school with poems and short stories. It wasn't until the early 1990s that he got the bug to write a novel. His love of space and unique people, coupled with his interest in astronomy, led him to create the science fiction adventure novel entitled *Impact Vector* available at Whiskey Creek Press.

Daniel lives with his loving wife in the Appalachian area of southeastern Kentucky. He currently instructs high school students in PC repair, networking, and programming.

Visit Daniel's website at: www.danbug.com

RESTORATION OF A BROKEN HEART

by Barbara Baldwin

Molly walked through the rooms of Maple Manor, an Ante Bellum mansion, stopping in one room to soak up the feeling of history in the frieze along the ceiling, the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the flocked wallpaper peeling from the corners. The workmen hadn't started restoring this room yet, but from what she had seen of the rest of the mansion, the renovations would be beautiful as well as historically accurate.

She loved American history and had always wanted to run a Bed and Breakfast, but she didn't know much about the restoration process. That's why, on the advice of her real estate broker, she had hired the reputable firm of Mallory Preservation Contractors, who were local but well known.

She knew her love of history and wishful thinking about owning a B&B wouldn't pay the rent. That was where her expertise came in. She knew people and marketing. The website was up and brochures had been shipped to travel agencies. Now, she was working on the costume ball for the grand opening of Maple Manor, just two months from today. That left a lot of work to do.

She had already opened for business on a small scale since most of the fifty-room mansion was already restored, includ-

ing the dining room, several suites, and the music room, which had a mahogany bar discretely located off to one side in an alcove. The contractors were keeping the original décor as much as possible, and all the serving staff and concierge wore clothes from the historical post-Civil War period.

She wanted Maple Manor to be more than an upscale Bed & Breakfast. She hoped people would enjoy the relaxing and luxurious atmosphere of a by-gone era, and she looked forward to making her investment pay off by hosting small conventions and retreats along with having individual guests.

She had invested her entire divorce settlement, such as it was, into the place, hoping to make a new life for herself in the historic town of River Bluff. Contrary to its name, it actually nestled on the banks of the Mississippi River, not a bluff. Wide veranda doors at the back of the mansion opened to a beautiful garden where a sidewalk meandered through rose bushes and flowerbeds until it finally ended at the river's edge.

Molly walked into the music room, taking in the subtle lighting, the dark velvet curtains and the French Rococo furniture, original pieces that had come with the place. She noticed there were a few visiting guests, with drinks, at several of the small tables.

"Good evening, James," she said to the bartender. "May I have a glass of wine, please?"

"Yes, ma'am, Ms. Bonner," he replied.

She turned at the sound of laughter, spying a group of men over in one corner. Taking in their work clothes and boots, they didn't look as though they belonged here, but she wasn't about to kick out paying customers.

Molly took her drink to the other end of the room, sitting in one of the balloon-backed side chairs placed by the window so guests could enjoy a view of the gardens. When her broker

had sent her information on the mansion and she had toured it, she had fallen in love with the river and the friendly people in the small town. Although she had wanted to be as far away from LA and her ex-husband as possible, she had decided half way across the country was as good as being on the opposite coast.

“May I join you?” A man’s voice interrupted her thoughts. He stood beside her chair, tall and tanned, the plaid shirt he wore rolled back to the elbows to show muscular forearms. He had salt and pepper hair and the bluest eyes she had ever seen—eyes that were twinkling down at her.

“If I say yes, do you win the bet?” she asked.

He laughed. “You seem to have me pegged.” He glanced back to the group of men at the end of the bar. “What if I told you I wasn’t with them?”

“Too late, I saw you talking.”

“Oh.” He looked disappointed, yet he continued to stand there.

Molly had come to the river to start over, perhaps even to have an adventure, and she supposed it wouldn’t hurt if he sat down. Even as she told herself that, her heart beat a little faster and her stomach clinched. Of course, it didn’t have to go any further than sharing a drink and a little conversation.

She put out her hand. “Hi, my name is Molly.”

His large hand was warm and calloused when he clasped hers.

“Hi Molly, I’m Joe.” He sat down and ordered them both another drink.

They ended up closing down the bar, talking and sharing stories as though they had known each other all their lives. They both had an avid interest in history, though she preferred colonial and he liked the Civil War period. Where she was a transplant, as he called her, he had lived by the river his

entire life, if not at River Bluff, then other towns along the waterway.

Given the type of music they liked and their discussion on today's youth, Molly figured they were about the same age. Of course, he politely refrained from asking and she wasn't about to tell him she had recently celebrated her forty-third birthday alone because her husband was with his new girlfriend.

"Are you staying here?" he asked when they got up to leave.

She hesitated. If she said yes, would it sound like an invitation? Was she ready to take her wish for adventure to the next level? She had been out of the dating scene for so long, she no longer knew how to interpret verbal nuances.

"I only want to walk you to your door, or see you to a cab," he said, "to make sure you're safe."

So much for her interpreting skills, she thought, trying not to feel disappointed. He was acting like a perfect gentleman, but somehow in her dream adventure that wasn't what she wanted at all.

"I have a room here," she answered, "so it's perfectly safe."

"You never know," he replied, a twinkle in his eye as he took her elbow and ushered her out the door. "There's all kinds of unsavory characters working on the renovations here, just waiting for the chance to take advantage of a lovely woman who's all alone."

"Does it show so very much?" she asked him.

"Only to someone just as lonely."

He took her passkey and slid it into the lock at her door.

"Night, Molly." He handed her the key. When she didn't immediately move, he touched a finger to her cheek, sliding it gently down to the corner of her lips.

"Sweet dreams."

And he turned and walked away.

* * * *

It was four in the morning and Molly had yet to fall asleep. She plumped the already plump pillows and turned over just as the phone rang.

"Do you want to get some breakfast?"

She recognized his voice. It was the same deep baritone that had been running through her head since he had walked away from her door.

She laughed. "It's four in the morning."

"Oh, were you sleeping?"

"No."

There was a pause on the end of the line.

"Molly, I want to see you."

Her heart skipped a beat and she couldn't think of anything to say. It had seemed forever since a man had paid attention to her, and she was almost afraid to trust her instincts about Joe.

"Why?"

"Because I'm hungry."

She laughed again, a carefree feeling running through her body that she hadn't had in a very long time.

"No, I didn't mean breakfast. I meant why do you want to see me?"

"Because I'm hungry," he said again.

She sucked in her breath, a delicious sensation spreading through her. She thought about her life. She was a middle-aged career woman who had always thought well of herself until her husband found he liked young secretaries better. It wasn't a new story, but this time it was her life, damn it, and it hurt. Now, here was Joe, a handsome man who found her interesting. Was it fair to use him to regain her self-esteem?

"I don't think I'm ready for a one night stand, Joe."

"That's not what I'm asking you for."

Still, she couldn't make herself say yes.

"Can we do this face to face?" he asked.

"Now?"

"Why not, neither of us is sleeping."

He had that right.

"Okay, do—"

A knock sounded at her door. She opened it to find Joe standing there, cell phone in hand.

"I was hoping you wouldn't say no," he said softly, his eyes glowing with passion. He stepped inside and let the door close behind him, shutting out all light and sound so there was just the two of them.

Molly hesitated, not sure what to do, but Joe had no problem finding her in the dark. His hands slid around her waist and he stepped to her. His kisses started at her forehead and with each soft brush of his lips, Molly felt herself relax into him.

He didn't rush. In fact, Molly found herself wishing he would hurry just a little. She ached all over and her heart felt like it was pounding right out of her ribcage.

"You taste so good," Joe murmured.

"Joe," she groaned his name, sliding her hands up to try to anchor herself in the maelstrom of sensations igniting fires in her body. Finally, when she thought she couldn't stand the torture anymore, he captured her lips with his, plying her senses and intoxicating her.

Molly thought she didn't need anything more in life than to be kissed by Joe. Every nerve ending tingled as his lips caressed hers. How could she be so turned on from just a kiss?

And then she quit thinking at all as he lowered her to the bed and followed her down.

Molly cried at the exquisite tenderness he showed her. She cried for all the lost years and all the times she had wanted her husband to touch her—not for sex but in companionship or comfort. Usually all she got was a perfunctory kiss goodbye in the morning and a single kiss goodnight before he rolled over and fell asleep while her body still ached to be held close.

Joe showered her with passion. Not the fiery passion of youth but rather the slow burning ecstasy that comes with living and learning. He quieted her in the aftermath with soft kisses and gentle caresses, whispering adoring things that she wanted desperately to believe.

As early morning light crept across the bed she tried to cover up. “No one except my husband has ever seen me completely naked,” she whispered when he wouldn’t let her pull the sheet up. Two children and more recently just not caring had taken its toll on her muscle tone and tummy.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her, smoothing a hand across her belly and then ever so slowly upward to cup her breast. “Don’t you know that the intriguing part of a woman is what’s inside? A man’s a fool if he only looks at the outside wrapping. No one I know can hold a candle to the kind of person you are.”

“How did you get so wise?” Molly wound her arms around his neck, pulling him down to meet her kiss.

“A hundred years of bad relationships,” he said just before he slanted his mouth across hers.

She caressed his back, his shoulders, and felt the scratchy stubble of his beard against her cheek.

He broke the kiss and stared down at her.

“You certainly don’t act like you’re that old,” she said, giving him a tender smile.

He rolled over, snuggling his hips in-between her thighs. She sighed.

“There’s nothing like making love to a good woman to keep a man young.”

* * * *

Joe left her in the morning, promising he would see her again that night. She knew he was a working man, but still wished he could stay with her. He was two years older than her, she had discovered, but he made her feel like a young girl again. It wasn’t just the sex, although that had been more than thoroughly satisfying.

He had listened to her talk about her plans for the mansion, how she was anxious to meet the restoration contractor she had hired by his references and web site only. He had smiled and told her he only hoped the man lived up to her expectations.

From what she had seen of the work being done, it far exceeded her original plans, and yet the statements she had gotten so far were well within the construction estimates he had given her.

She dressed for the day in a filmy skirt and sleeveless sweater. She would have to get herself some period clothes, she thought, as she made her way down the hallway to the business office.

“Has our contractor been in yet this morning?” she asked Tracy.

“No, but then we don’t always see him. The crew just starts early and works late.”

“Hmm, I wanted to discuss an idea I had last night.” She thought about the things Joe had told her. He seemed to know quite a lot about the history of the place and questioned whether the house might contain tunnels from the days of the underground railroad. They had brainstormed together and he had finally suggested that if there were tunnels, perhaps they could be restored and expanded into shops and cozy rendez-

vous nooks for couples wanting to linger over a glass of wine. For a man who professed only having bad relationships, she thought Joe was certainly romantic.

She found some of the men in the ballroom, sanding the hardwood floor that had been discovered beneath the carpet. Little had needed done to it before a new finish was applied, and it was looking beautiful.

"Hello, could you tell me where your boss is working?"

"Said he had some things to do and should be back by lunch," one of the young crewmen said.

Molly had to content herself spending the morning working on the plans for the costume ball. Not finding Mr. Mallory after lunch, she called the office number she had for him but could only leave a message when he didn't answer.

Joe met her at seven, a single rose in hand, and her heart melted a little more. After dinner, they took a walk in the gardens.

"Did you tell your contractor about the tunnels?"

"No, I never saw him. I would think he's a figment of my imagination if not for the fantastic work he's doing."

"I hear he's the best," he replied, stopping on the path and turning to face her.

She let him pull her into the shelter of his arms, enjoying the warmth of his big body.

"Well, he may be the best at restoration, but there's other things a person has to take into consideration." She breathed in his spicy aftershave, touched his cheek before tracing his lips with a finger.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" He nipped her finger then sucked it into his mouth. Molly's stomach felt like a hundred butterflies had taken flight.

"Like kisses that make me tingle clear down to my toes."

"Like this?" He whispered as he sealed her lips with his.

After seven days of watching the construction progress and as many nights of tender romance and candlelight dinners with Joe, Molly decided she quite liked Maple Manor. Well, perhaps it was more Joe's attention that had begun to make her feel so at home.

He was so tender and gentle when he made love to her. For the first time in her life, she felt satisfied and fulfilled sexually, but more than that, she was content with her body. He continually told her how attractive he found her and how wonderful she was.

While making love with Joe filled her nights, he also lavished attention on her as they spent time exploring the local history. He was attentive and listened to her opinion even if he adamantly disagreed with her. He touched her often, maybe just a hand at her back or brushing deliberately against her as they walked. When they strolled around town or stood looking at the river, he would lean close and kiss her, sometimes light and brief, but more often long and deep, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close against him. He was unfailingly polite, but probably the trait she loved the best was his sense of humor and his laugh, which he did often.

"Life is too short to go through it in a bad mood," he told her one night when she asked him why he laughed so much.

She was consulting with the interior decorator one day when Joe walked up behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist. In his hand was a bouquet of flowers.

"These look suspiciously like the flowers from my garden," she said.

He scrunched his lips up at the corner in a way Molly had come to understand meant he was thinking.

"The florist was closed," he finally said.

"In the middle of the day?"

“Okay, so I was in a hurry to see you and forgot to stop.”

Tracy coughed. The interior decorator laughed. Molly could feel her cheeks warm with a blush.

“Sorry ladies, this is—”

“Call me Joe,” he interrupted, putting out his hand and giving both women a wink.

Tracy looked from Joe to Molly with a question in her eyes. She was from the area and Molly wondered if she knew something about Joe that Molly didn’t. Even though they spent a lot of time talking, Molly really couldn’t say she knew everything about him.

“I, uh, think I’ve seen you around,” Flo, the decorator, said to Joe.

“I’ve been hanging around a lot,” Joe answered.

He was still snuggled up against Molly’s back, and she wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed or not. It was such a new experience to have a man shower attention on her like Joe did.

“Can you get away?” he whispered in her ear.

“Don’t you have to work?” She turned to ask him. “In fact, what exactly do you do anyway? You never have said.”

Tracy began coughing again.

“Are you all right?” Molly asked. Her office manager raised her eyebrows, her eyes watering, hand to mouth. She nodded, unable to speak.

“Come on, I brought a picnic.” Joe took her hand and pulled her towards the door. “She’ll be back later, ladies.” He grinned at the women.

Flo gave him the strangest look Molly had ever seen.

“What was that all about?” She asked as they walked down the hall.

Joe shrugged. “They’re probably just jealous because they want my body and you’ve got it.”

She laughed. "Oh, I'm sure that's it."

"Well, damn," he said when they got to the door. "It's raining and I planned a picnic."

Molly clutched her flowers tighter. She probably should have left them in the office in a vase of water. How long had it been since she had been given flowers—maybe for her birthday years ago because it had saved her husband from having to think about what she liked?

She looked at Joe. For all the gray in his hair and the laugh lines on his tanned face, he looked out at the rain as disappointed as a little boy.

She turned around, grabbing his hand. "Come on. I know where we can go." She led the way, inserting a key in a door and pulling him inside, locking it behind them.

"One of the perks of being the owner," she said with a grin.

Lightning flashed outside the floor-to-ceiling windows and rain pounded against the glass.

"This is my favorite room so far," she said, turning one of the lamps up just enough to set a glow to the rich interior. "It was the morning room, and we'll use it as a breakfast room once we're officially opened. Mr. Mallory did such a beautiful job restoring it. One of these days if I ever meet the man, I just might tell him."

The door and windows were trimmed with dark wood that matched the mantel and sideboards. Small tables were set in one section, but the half she led Joe to had sofas, low polished tables and a fainting couch, arranged artfully in front of a fireplace.

"Do you want me to light a fire?" Joe asked.

"That would be wonderful. The rain makes it a little chilly." She watched him kneel down, enjoying the view of tight jeans stretching across his buttocks, his shirt snug against

his back. Regardless of the nudity so prevalent in the media today, she thought a man actually looked sexier when dressed. There was something sensual and alluring about wondering what was beneath the clothes.

Joe turned and caught her staring.

“What?”

She smiled. “I was just thinking about how sexy you look and how resourceful you are—bringing me food, building a fire, and being so...male.”

He grinned. “Come here, Molly Bonner, and I’ll show you just how male I can be.”

She sat down on the rug beside him. He pulled a bottle of wine, paper cups, and some cheese and crackers from his bag.

“A bottle of wine, cheese, and a lovely woman—the basic needs of a man.”

She shook her head at him. “For saying all you’ve had are bad relationships, you are truly a romantic.”

He poured some wine and handed her the cup. “Maybe I learned something along the way.”

Firelight reflected in his blue eyes as he looked at her. In just a few short days, she had come to anticipate seeing him like a college girl in the first throes of passion. She enjoyed his humor, appreciated his interest in history, and loved the way he looked at her. Given the negative turn her life had taken before she moved to River Bluff, he seemed almost too good to be true. What did a man like Joe see in her? Self-doubts surfaced.

“Joe?”

He leaned close, putting a finger to her lips. As though reading her mind, he said, “You are so lovely. The firelight glints off your hair turning it to burnished gold. I love the way your whole face lights up when you get excited and how you move with such grace.” He replaced his finger with his lips,

brushing lightly back and forth. "But I especially like the way you kiss me with your whole body."

He took the forgotten cup of wine from her hand, setting it on the stone hearth. His hand came up to her neck, pulling her close.

"You can forget the wine and cheese. All this man needs is one particular woman." He tilted her back gently to the carpet and followed her down, showing her exactly what he meant when he said kissing involved her whole body.

* * * *

Even with the strange absence of the contracting foreman every time Molly went looking for him, the progress on the inn was phenomenal. Tracy was already booking guests and events. Molly was busy with the ball, and seeing Joe at night was becoming more important than cornering Mr. Mallory.

In fact, Joe was becoming addictive. Molly kept telling herself it was an adventure and when it was over she would be a better person from having known Joe. But as every day ended lovingly in his arms, she found herself wishing that this particular adventure would never end.

In the meantime, she and Joe actually did discover the entrance to tunnels—behind an old bookcase, no less, like something straight out of a novel. Even though the wood supports and rough flooring were dank and dirty, Molly was now even more anxious to talk to Mallory to see what could be done.

More than a week later, as she finished getting dressed for her date with Joe, someone knocked on her door. The young workman she had spoken to weeks ago stood there with a funny grin on his face.

"Mr. Mallory wants to know if you can come see something he found."

So, the illusive Mr. Mallory finally deigned to meet her. Why now, when she was going to see Joe?

“Do I have to go right now?”

“Well, yes, right now.”

“Please,” he added when she hesitated.

She suddenly realized she didn’t know how to contact Joe. He had always just said he lived nearby and he always came to see her at Maple Manor. She had never needed to call him.

And she really did need to see Mr. Mallory, who didn’t return her phone calls and was never around when she went looking for him.

“Let me leave a note.” She turned back into the room.

“Oh, you don’t need, uh, that is, yeah, a note would be fine.”

She frowned at the young man’s strange comment, but he was looking down the hall so she couldn’t read his face.

She followed him to the library where he opened the bookcase to reveal the secret passage. So, Mr. Mallory did know about the tunnels. She thought it was her and Joe’s secret.

“Right this way, ma’am.”

She stepped passed him when he moved to the side. An instant later, the bookcase swung shut.

“Hey! What’s going on?” She started to shout, reaching around in the dark for the release button. When she and Joe had ventured down here, she had been behind him when he re-opened the secret door. She never thought to see exactly what he pushed. Now, she was glad she had written a note stating she was seeing Mr. Mallory. Joe would come looking for her.

She turned carefully, knowing there was a set of steps not far from the entrance and she didn’t want to fall down them.

It was then she noticed light past the first curve in the tunnel. Cautiously, she stepped down.

“Hello, anyone here?”

No answer.

She felt her way along the narrow passage, which gradually turned to where she knew there were two small rooms across from each other. She and Joe figured they had probably been storerooms along with being used to hide runaway slaves.

She gasped when she turned into the room filled with light. Candles hung from wrought iron sconces on creamy textured walls. A striped sofa was against the wall, gold and maroon matching pillows giving the room a warm atmosphere. Vintage hunting pictures graced the walls and a bur-nished wood commode, complete with pitcher and bowl, was positioned near the door. In the center stood a walnut table, already set with elegant china, silver and crystal. A bottle of wine stood chilling in a silver bucket.

She could only think that Mr. Mallory was responsible, but how had he known what she and Joe had discussed, or that she had dreamed of just such an elegant, romantic hideaway?

“Mr. Mallory?” She called to him. Regardless of the beauty surrounding her, it was a little disconcerting to be down here alone.

“Ms. Bonner.”

She spun around at the sound of his voice and thought she was looking at a ghost from the past.

“Joe?”

He wore a cutaway coat of dark brown, buff knee breeches, and high-topped boots. A white shirt beneath a gold embroidered vest was topped with a flowing cravat.

“How?” She was speechless, and he just stood there smiling at her. “How did the contractor know what we talked about?”

Joe bowed, taking her hand and planting a kiss on her wrist. “Joseph Mallory Austin, historical preservationist.” He lifted his head, adding, “I inherited the company from my maternal grandfather, Tyler Mallory.”

“It was you all the time?” she asked. “Why didn’t you say something?” Before he could answer, she added, “You never returned my phone calls!”

He shrugged, grinning sheepishly. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you certainly did that. It’s beautiful—more wonderful than I had imagined.”

Suddenly all the knowing smiles and strange comments made sense.

“Everyone knows.”

He nodded. “At first I didn’t know you were the owner. Then I wanted to see how you liked my work without being influenced because of our relationship. Don’t be mad at Tracy, I made her promise not to tell you.”

She just shook her head at him. “Are you keeping any more secrets from me?”

“Just one, but first tell me what you think of this.”

He took her hand and pulled her over to where a sideboard took up most of the wall. “Look.”

He pushed a button and she heard a motor whirl. In just minutes, the picture above the sideboard slid up revealing a dumbwaiter, on which were several covered dishes.

“Your couples can order dinner before they come down,” he said as he lifted the platters out onto the sideboard. “Then it’s served, via our silent waiter, and they are not disturbed by people coming in and out.”

“And why wouldn’t they want to be disturbed?” she asked the question, already having a pretty good idea of the answer.

He circled her waist and pulled her close, giving her a kiss that lingered until her knees went weak.

“Because they may have other things in mind to do, along with eating, that is.”

“Oh,” was all she could say.

He led her over to the sofa. She sank down onto the softness, lying back against the pillows.

“What do you think?”

“First, I want to know what your other secret is?” She looked up at him.

He dropped onto one knee beside the sofa. “I’ve fallen in love with you,” he softly whispered.

She knew her heart was shining in her eyes as she replied, “In that case, I think this particular part of the mansion is not going to be open to the public.” She opened her arms and he came to her, his laughter filling her heart with love.

About Barbara Baldwin

Barbara Baldwin was born in California, married in Iowa and now resides in Kansas. The years in between were lived in many of the southern states and three years in Japan, as her father was an Air Force pilot. That probably explains why she still loves to travel and explore new places. She has written practically all her life, beginning with journals of family vacations. She is published in poetry, short stories, essays, magazine articles, teacher resource materials, and full-length fiction. She has a BS in Education and an MA in Communications and has been a secretary, teacher, grant writer and has worked for public television. Her torrid romance novel, *How Far Will You Go?* is available from Whiskey Creek Press-Torrid Division. Barb can be reached at writer0926@yahoo.com or through her website at www.authorsden.com/barbarajbaldwin.

ECHO OF THE PLAINS

By Kristy McCaffrey

North Texas, 1895

Elijah Ryan pushed his horse into an all-out run, holding tight to the reins as the mare skimmed her way across the flat, open country. The plains extended to the horizon, only to be broken by an unexpected plateau or rocky obstacle, obliterating the illusion of endlessness. On this hot August day the forced breeze felt good, drying Eli's sweat-soaked shirt. Elation welled inside him—he was finally about to get that damned renegade stallion.

Like a ghost, Eli's prey had disappeared minutes before, but Eli had seen him—*seen him*—and he wasn't about to let his goal slip away yet again.

His mare snorted and stretched her legs while Eli hunched low. Without warning, she reared and lurched upright. Eli twisted his body to avoid being thrown, but it didn't matter—a loud whinny filled his ears and a guttural yell tore from his throat as he lost his grip on the saddle. He slammed to the ground with a bone-jarring thud. Momentarily stunned, unable to breathe, he watched as his mare's hooves landed inches from his face.

Move.

But his body wouldn't respond. He waited for his life to flash before his eyes, but when the past didn't come pouring forward to the present, he thought maybe seventeen years was too short for God to be bothered with a near-death accounting.

"Shoo! Get on back!" a female voice said.

Sprawled on the ground, Eli was relieved when he could bring a hand to his forehead. He attempted to rub the fog from his mind. The voice didn't belong to one of his sisters. Katie was helping Aunt Claire tend to T.J. Walker's wife—about to give birth for the sixth time and in jeopardy of losing yet another babe—and Josie still lay in bed recovering from the mountain lion attack that nearly claimed her life.

"Are you all right?" A southern lilt laced the feminine speech. "That was quite a spill." A knee brushed against him as gentle hands touched his left arm and shoulder.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked, her face shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat.

Eli blinked as she leaned over him and his gaze shifted to her eyes. "Green."

"Green?" Her pretty features showed instant concern. "Just lie still. That fall must have been worse than it looked. Although I have to admit—it looked awfully bad."

"Three fingers." Eli cleared his throat. "You have green eyes."

Those clear, forest-colored eyes scrutinized him, and he wondered if she was a mirage. He couldn't have conjured a more compelling one if he tried.

"Well, maybe you are fine," she conceded. "Would you like to sit up?"

A clump of curly, dark hair fell over her shoulder and Eli caught a whiff of roses. His mind went blank. Every male in-

stinct he possessed stamped forward as she braced his shoulder and pushed him upright. In a daze, he stood and attempted to shake off his reaction—his awareness—of this unknown female. It wasn't as if he'd never smelled a girl before—he had two sisters and a load of female cousins. It must be the fall making him act this way, but at the same time he had a new appreciation for what the stallions at the Rocking Wren went through when an appealing mare was nearby.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Glad he hadn't lost his ability to talk, Eli took note that he was a full head taller than her. She looked and acted like his fifteen-year-old sister Katie—they must be close in age. He knew most of the folks in the area, but she sure didn't look familiar; he would've remembered her green eyes.

"I'm sorry I startled your horse," she said. "But you came out of nowhere."

"You're lucky you didn't get hurt." He leaned down and retrieved his hat from the dirt. "Are you lost? What's your name?"

"No, I'm not lost." She extended her hand. "I'm Cassie Callahan."

Eli stared then caught himself.

He reached out to her and realized he still wore work gloves. Fumbling, he pulled them off. You didn't shake a pretty girl's hand wearing gloves.

"I'm Eli Ryan." He released her hand and wondered at his discomfort. He wasn't usually so distracted by females. "I know the Callahan's, but I don't recognize you."

"We knew each other a long time ago. C.C.?"

"C.C." That surprised him. "The last time I saw you, you were four or five maybe."

"My pa and I recently moved back from Georgia."

Eli recalled something about one of the Callahan boys cutting ties with the family over a personal matter, but beyond that his interest waned. Maybe he should've paid more attention to his ma, his grandmother, and his aunts during family gatherings since they seemed to stay caught up on the local gossip. "How long have you been back?"

"A few months now. I don't think Grandpap Callahan has been announcing it to the neighbors."

"Not that I recall."

The stallion. Most likely lost now. Maybe Lucas was successful—his cousin rode south earlier in the day. Lucas possessed the uncanny Blackmore knack for tracking. If they were lucky, maybe it would prove fruitful today.

Eli knew he should be on his way—time was wasting—but reluctance to leave Miss Callahan kept him rooted in place.

"Are you out here all alone?" he asked.

She nodded. "I like to ride."

"Have you seen a horse running wild? He's dirt-colored with a black mane, and his rump is a patch of white covered with dark brown spots—a stallion real full of himself."

Miss Callahan hesitated and her gaze became serious. "I've seen wild horses from time to time. Why are you looking for him?"

Eli thought of Josie, lying in her bed back at the ranch, recovering from her wounds. Rather than talk about the near-death of his sister, Eli turned his mind to the horse.

"There's a legend in these parts about him."

Miss Callahan waited.

A chill ran down Eli's spine. The horse was just a damn horse, he reminded himself, despite all the talk to turn the animal into something else—something *spooky*.

"The night he was born, two years back, a fierce storm moved in fast."

"The night he was born," she echoed. "You mean he belongs to you?"

"To my ma. She breeds horses and has a real knack for predicting their natures. She let my younger sister Josie birth him, she was twelve at the time. But it was dangerous as hell with the storm raging outside." Eli rubbed his nose and glanced to the horizon, where blue sky merged with tan desert. It wasn't often he was around a pretty girl—sisters and cousins didn't count—he ought to watch his swearing.

"What happened?"

"Josie pulled him from his mama as a bolt of lightning struck. It hit the mare—unfortunately there was no hope for her—and the colt bolted."

Miss Callahan gasped. "But he was just born."

"We would've tried to catch him, but we weren't sure about Josie—the jolt knocked her out, too."

"Was she all right?"

"Yeah, she got lucky. The rest of us had been standing further back. My pa and I went in search of the colt but never found him, never found his body either." A shadow blanketed the land as clouds blocked the setting sun. "There've been accounts of him—ranch hands seein' him—but he's never been caught. We've all tried—my pa, me, my uncle Logan. My uncle Nathan and his oldest son, Lucas, got close once, and caught hell for it from Aunt Em." Eli coughed. Pretty girls were a welcome novelty, but left a man a might nervous.

Miss Callahan's questioning look forced his attention back to the conversation. "Lucas broke his arm," he added.

Her gaze turned contemplative.

"My ma told us to leave the horse be, but Josie couldn't do it. We call him Echo, short for *Ecacusayet*. It's Comanche for lightning flash."

"Your ma named him?"

"Yeah."

"The story of Molly Hart's return from the Comanche was often told in the Callahan household," she said.

Eli decided he wouldn't mention that fact to his folks—his pa was fairly protective of the past that brought his wife to him, and didn't believe in sharing it with others outside the family.

"Why do you need to catch him?" Her voice held a slight edge.

"For Josie. I'm bringin' him in for her."

"He's been free for so long; wouldn't you say it's time to leave him be?"

"Recently he was shot, or so we think." Eli didn't miss the stiffening of Miss Callahan's back. Slowly, he added, "There's some who say I did it."

A look of horror crossed her face and thoughts of courting her fled. He should keep his damn mouth shut, but he was raised to talk straight. Some habits died hard.

"Did you?" she whispered.

The sky blazed a final orange to the west as the day dwindled to night.

"No." Eli set his mouth in a grim line. "Jeb Hardy has a big mouth. It's probably rustlers. I mean to make certain Echo's all right."

* * * *

Cassie looked at Eli Ryan and dread consumed her. He'd grown tall and handsome, his dark brown hair and blue-green eyes catching her interest so suddenly, she felt like the day she fell into a well—disoriented, anxious, fearful. That was

dreadful enough. But the distress that gnawed at her just as fiercely concerned the stallion. *Her stallion*. She called him Medallion, but now she knew his true name—Echo.

And she would never let Eli capture him—at least not with her help. That would be a betrayal. Medallion trusted her when she found him bleeding from a bullet wound under a mesquite tree. It took some doing, but she managed to gain his trust long enough to let her minister to him. Not that she had a vast knowledge of treating such injuries, but she cleaned the bloody opening as best she could, and the stallion, by all visible accounts, recovered.

He still accepted her presence—although she was careful not to overstep his boundaries—and continued to trust her more each day. As much as she could, she came here, to the lonely and vast plains that went on forever in North Texas, and spent time with the stallion.

That horse was her salvation.

She liked to think that maybe she was his.

“I haven’t seen the stallion you describe,” she said. “It’s getting close to suppertime, so I should get on back now.” She placed her hat on her head and took her horse’s reins.

“It’s a few miles to Callahan land. I’ll ride with you. You really shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“I don’t do it all the time,” she lied.

Eli gave her a hand as she climbed atop her horse and the touch confused her. She liked it. And Eli, well...he was interesting. Were all boys in Texas like him? If so, then she supposed she should plan on being off-balance for however long she and her pa stayed.

But what if Eli *had* shot Medallion? He said he hadn’t, but what if he lied? At only fifteen, and motherless for most of it, Cassie knew the best course of action was to avoid Eli Ryan as much as possible. It was the only way to avoid mistakes—

mistakes in friendship, mistakes in trust, *mistakes with her heart*.

The last thought caught her by surprise, whispered in her thoughts like a message from the past. No, not hers—her pa's. And she was tired of living under the patchwork of his misery.

They headed south as twilight turned the sky a shade darker and the pervasive heat of the day finally ebbed.

"Are you glad to be back in Texas?" Eli asked as they rode side by side.

"Yes." Cassie glanced at the quiet vastness of the terrain—a tonic for a sad soul. "It's so different from Georgia, but it certainly has a way to it you don't find anywhere else. Did you ever leave?"

Eli laughed. "Where would I go? The Ryan's have strong ties here as much as the Callahan's. Besides, I'm too much like my ma, or so my pa says. She can't stand being held up in the house for too long, and neither can I."

"You only have sisters?"

"Yeah, Katie and Josie. They'll be glad to hear you're back. I'm sure they'll be wantin' to have you visit and stay over a week or more."

The thought held a certain appeal, but not necessarily because of Eli's sisters. Cassie stole a peek at him from the corner of her eye.

"How old are they?"

"Kate's fifteen and Josie's fourteen. 'Bout same as you."

"Do you like having sisters?" As an only child she never had the benefit of siblings.

Eli shrugged. "I never really thought about it. It seems like they've always been around. Josie's the stubborn one, but I admit I have a soft spot for her. If you ever tell her that though, I'll deny it."

He grinned and her heart beat a little faster. "I'll try to remember."

A rider approached, a young man with dark hair and a lean build, not unlike Eli. He reined in his horse. "You didn't catch Echo, but it looks like you caught somethin'."

Cassie wondered if she imagined the glare on Eli's face.

"I nearly ran over her with my horse. Miss Callahan, this is my cousin, Lucas Blackmore."

"Miss." Lucas tipped his hat and Cassie acknowledged him with a nod. He appeared fine-looking and able-bodied, but a quick glance at the two young men told Cassie in a worrisome flash that Eli intrigued her far more.

"Since you're empty-handed, I can only assume those Blackmore instincts failed you," Eli said.

The accusatory tone caught Cassie's attention. Just how badly did he want Medallion? And would he push her aside to get him?

"I'll save my response until later since we're with a lady right now," Lucas responded.

"Please don't bother on my account," Cassie said. "I'm headed home—I'll just be on my way." Darkness was almost upon them. "I'll be all right on my own from here on out. Nice to see you again, Eli. Mister Blackmore."

"If you ever want to go riding just give a holler," Eli yelled after her.

She waved and pasted what she hoped was a friendly smile on her face. She couldn't say why, but she felt Eli's gaze on her as she rode away. She refused to turn and confirm it, to have one last look at him.

* * * *

"She calls me Mister Blackmore, but you Eli." Lucas laughed. "No wonder you gave up looking for Echo. Miss Callahan's a damn-sight prettier."

“Maybe.” No maybes about it—Cassie was the prettiest sight Eli had ever come across on these lonely plains. As soon as he nabbed Echo, he’d pay a few social calls to the Callahan place. Cassie’s wariness, especially after he told her about Echo, could be overcome with a bit of concentrated effort on his part. Maybe Uncle Logan could offer some advice—with a wife and four daughters he prevailed as the resident female expert amongst the Ryan males.

He rubbed his face, weary of looking for the goddamned horse, but he’d find him. The shootings concerned him, becoming more frequent of late. Other animals had been shot—horses and cattle—and it needed to stop. But ultimately he meant to bring Echo home; he’d do anything to see the light in his little sister’s eyes again. He knew Echo held the answer to bringing her soul back after the attack that stole it from her.

* * * *

Three days later Eli was back at the spot where he nearly ran over Miss Callahan and he himself was felled. As the mid-afternoon sun blazed in the cloudless sky, frustration filled him. He hadn’t seen Echo’s tracks anywhere all morning.

Cassie’s expressive face flashed through his mind for the hundredth time and Eli thought it would be nice to run into her again. His sister, Katie, would love to know he was sweet on a girl, so he wisely kept his thoughts to himself while off-handedly telling his folks and sisters at dinner that C.C. Callahan had returned. His ma suggested inviting her for a visit, and Eli made a mental note to hang around the ranch the day that happened.

Movement caught his eye.

Eli frowned. *Jeb Hardy.*

Horse and rider honed in quickly to Eli’s position.

“Lost?” Jeb asked, bridling his horse with more than necessary force. Hardy’s fair complexion and light-colored hair were hidden by splotchy skin and a black hat that Eli suspected hadn’t been cleaned since Jeb suckled at his mama’s breast. “Want me to show you how to get home?”

Eli held his tongue, an ability that had taken several years of practice to acquire. Jeb was an obnoxious loud-mouth, had been since they were boys, and Eli would’ve liked nothing better than to put him in his place. But his ma’s displeasure over another fistfight was enough to make Eli resist the temptation to pummel the asswipe.

“You get thrown again?” Eli asked in a casual tone.

Jeb muttered under his breath.

“There can only be one knot head between a horse and his rider, and it sure don’t look like your horse,” Eli said. So much for him holding his tongue.

“Josie still alive?” Jeb shifted a wad of tobacco to the other cheek and leaned to the side of his horse to spit.

“Go to hell.”

“Are all Ryan women so stupid? She practically walked right into that mountain lion.”

Eli’s hand twitched. If he shot Jeb, would anyone really miss him?

“Wait a minute.” Jeb laughed. “You’re lookin’ for the spook, aren’t ya?”

Eli didn’t respond.

“Well, I ain’t seen him. What a strange horse he is.” Jeb went silent in an obvious bid to put weight into his words. “You’re wastin’ your time, Eli. You’ll never catch him. No one can, not unless they got a pistol in their hand. And then that horse wouldn’t be worth ridin’.” Jeb made a sound of enlightenment and Eli hardly believed it. “Maybe I’ll try to

catch him.” He turned his horse. “If I put my mind to it, I’m sure I could outwit you. So stay outta my way.”

Eli swore under his breath as Hardy disappeared around an outcropping. *Complete asswipe.*

He wondered where Echo’s hideout could be. In the past few weeks of looking, he never found it, or any wild mares. Wouldn’t Echo have a flock of females he protected and dallied with?

Eli spent the remainder of the afternoon conducting a crisscross search pattern. Upon finding nothing, and about to return home, circling vultures drew his attention. He set out to find the dead animal that attracted them.

He tied off his horse then crept up a hillside to have a better look, using a juniper tree as cover. At the bottom of a small washbasin, a petite figure leaned over a bloody horse carcass. Simultaneously, he felt relief and concern as he realized the horse wasn’t Echo and that the person was Cassie.

Eli pulled his gun and scanned the boundary of trees and brush that encircled the basin. She shouldn’t be here. He moved toward her while maintaining focus on the surroundings.

Cassie started at the sight of him.

When Eli met her gaze he knew what she thought—he carried a gun and the horse beside her was shot.

“It wasn’t me,” he said quietly. “But whoever did it could still be out there.”

Her haunted eyes shifted only slightly. “She’s dead.” She could barely utter the words.

“Then we need to go. The vultures will take care of her.” Eli stepped forward with the intention of taking Cassie’s arm.

“No, I can’t leave.” She stood and moved away from him.

“You shouldn’t stay, and I’m not leavin’ you here alone. If there’s somethin’ wrong at home and you don’t want to go

there, you can come to the Rocking Wren. My folks'll be happy to put you up."

"What makes you think I don't want to go home?"

"There was always talk about why your pa left all those years ago. If things are tough, let me help. But right now, it's too dangerous to be roaming these hills alone."

Cassie glanced down at the dead mare, tears welling up in her eyes. The sight of the horse's ribs, bloodied and blown apart by a shotgun, sickened Eli and he knew he was more equipped to handle such a sight than Cassie. His instinct to comfort her, to protect her, came swiftly. He reached out and took her hand, warming her cold fingers.

"My ma believes the land is a living, breathing thing, that the Great Spirit encompasses both sides of this life," he said. "The mare is in good hands, Cassie." Eli took a breath, disturbed by the sight of the horse. "And my grandmother would say: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*"

"This *is* evil." Cassie's voice trembled.

Eli silently agreed.

"C'mon." He used his grip on her hand to pull her away from the grisly scene, but she stopped him.

She knelt down beside the horse and placed a hand on her neck. "Godspeed, sweetling. I'm sorry I couldn't help you." She stifled a sob.

The whinny of a horse shifted Eli's attention to the hill beyond. *Echo*.

He barely contained the impulse to run and catch the stallion barehanded.

The horse pawed the ground and jerked his head up and down. Eli glanced back at the dead mare. *She belonged to him*. When Echo approached it would be the perfect chance to nab him.

"You can't have him!" Cassie's voice abruptly cut into the anticipation he felt.

"What are you talking about?"

"You can't have him." Her green eyes held a firm resolution. It suddenly occurred to Eli how a man might give up his dreams for a chance to stand in favor of a female that captured his attention more thoroughly each time he saw her. His pa had left the Rangers for his ma. Eli never understood it—until now.

With a heavy heart, he said, "You can't stop me."

Her eyes widened and she bolted. She waved her arms and screamed, and Echo ran from the basin.

"Shit." What was wrong with her?

Eli followed, but Echo fled like the wind some would say kept him safe. Cassie stopped at the hilltop, breathing heavily.

"You're crazy," Eli yelled. "He's gonna end up like that mare. He's better off if I take him home."

"He's meant to be free. So long as I can, I'll keep him from you."

"Why?" Eli felt like shaking her. "I'm not gonna hurt him. And he rightfully belongs to my ma."

"It's been so long, he doesn't belong to anyone."

"He'll be given the best possible life." Frustration filled him. "Why won't you be reasonable about this?"

Cassie turned on him and the fierce look in her eyes caught him unaware. "Honor." Her gaze wavered. The anger jumped out and filled the space between them, impressing Eli despite all that stood between them. "I won't betray him."

"I'm not asking you to." Had Cassie gotten close to the animal?

"Just stay away from me." She backed away. "Medallion's spirit belongs to the land. Let him grieve for the mare in peace."

“Medallion?”

“Echo,” she replied softly.

Cassie strode away and retrieved a horse a quarter-mile in the distance.

Eli hesitated. Fresh tracks signaled Echo’s departure. But Cassie’s safety came first.

He trailed her, out of sight, as the day came to a close. When he felt certain she was safely on Callahan land and within sight of the ranch house, he returned to the Rocking Wren. It was too dark to find the stallion’s trail now.

He would tend to his chores in the morning then head out again. He didn’t want to hurt Cassie, or his chances of courting her—which looked slim to none now anyway, if her anger at him was any indication—but Josie would have that horse.

When his sister lay in bed, her death imminent following the mountain lion attack, Eli made a pact with God. As the days crept by and she continued to hang on, Eli hung on too. When Josie finally opened her eyes and spoke, he broke down and vowed to make good on his end of the bargain.

It was time.

Tomorrow he’d get the animal that fled his family’s barn like the bolt of lightning that drove him to it. Tomorrow, Eli would be done with it.

* * * *

Cassie left the apples in a pile on the ground and moved to sit in the shade of a cottonwood tree. A small stream flowed before her and she hoped Echo would visit. They often met in this place, but after the horror of losing the mare yesterday, she wondered at the stallion’s state of mind.

Cassie paused. She thought of him as *Echo*, not Medallion. When had that happened? She wasn’t certain.

Eli filled her mind, as did images of her pa. Her father left Texas when Cassie was five years old, taking her with him and abandoning Cassie's mama. Few memories existed of that time, except a lot of crying for her mother and watching her pa drink every night. They forged a new life in Georgia and in the ensuing years spoke very little of the Callahan clan. When Cassie was ten they received word her mama had died. In a haze of confusion and grief, she confronted her pa about what happened all those years ago.

With sadness, and still a trace of bitterness, her pa told of her mama's faithlessness with another man. Another five years passed before Cassie could convince her pa to return to Texas, but quickly the truth of the betrayal came to light—her mama broke her wedding vows with Cassie's own grandfather.

With so much tension in the household, Cassie rode almost every day. That was how she found Echo.

And Eli.

Honor. Was Eli an honorable man? Why was it so important to her?

What if Eli *had* shot the mare? Cassie squeezed her eyes shut—in her heart, she didn't believe it. She hoped she wasn't being a fool.

She couldn't stop Echo's capture, by Eli or any other rancher, but she wanted desperately for Eli to respect the life Echo lived—free and unencumbered.

But he was right. Whoever shot the mare could very well kill Echo; he'd already been shot once and might have died if not for Cassie's assistance.

Should she help Eli capture the stallion?

The thought twisted her stomach into knots. Echo trusted her and came to her, willingly and with affection. She'd never be able to look into his eyes again if she allowed Eli to rope him while she stood there and watched. Such a betrayal would

break her, much the way her mama and Grandfather Callahan's betrayal had broken her pa to pieces.

She and her father weren't so different after all.

A crunching sound broke her train of thought. Cassie smiled. "Echo."

* * * * *

Eli tracked Echo relentlessly. There were other wild horses in the area, but Echo's gait was long and the indentation of his front, right hoof leaned slightly to the outside. Eli scanned the ground with a clear and critical eye, moving swiftly, wanting to close the distance between them. Eventually, the stallion would rest and Eli would find him.

A gunshot cracked loudly and Eli's mare fell to the ground. Eli flew off her back and thrust his hand out to break his fall. Pain shot through his left wrist as it jammed into the ground. With his good hand, Eli yanked the gun from his hip holster and scanned the surrounding low-lying hills and underbrush for the location of the shooter. His mare lay on her side but lifted her head, twitching, and Eli knew he needed to assess her injury quickly.

Goddammit! His breath hissed through his teeth.

A rustle of movement a hundred yards away caught his eye; he shot toward it. With only one good hand, reloading his gun took a minute's delay, but he continued to shoot at his attacker. His wrist throbbed.

Eli crawled to where the mare lay; he grabbed more bullets and readied his gun again. Cracker snorted.

"Easy, girl, I'm not leavin' you." She was his favorite horse; he wouldn't let her go down without a fight.

Eli waited. No return gunfire, no sound of movement in the distance. Either the attacker fled or hid.

Eli examined Cracker. The bullet pierced her lower right shoulder. He pulled off his shirt, wadded it into a ball and ap-

plied pressure to the wound. He fumbled for some rope in his saddlebag and wound it around the injury, awkwardly tying it off to stop the loss of blood, difficult with only one good hand. He needed to get the mare out of here, from out in the open. He urged her to stand by firmly tugging on her reins. Tentatively, she stood. Eli protected their backs as they moved to the west in the midday heat.

* * * *

With horrified surprise, Cassie found Eli and his horse unconscious in the dirt. She left Echo and ran to their side. Eli lay on his back, shirtless, his left arm bent across his stomach. Sweat and dirt smeared his torso and his wrist lay bent at an abnormal angle. A brief check on the mare told her the horse still breathed, but the animal had been shot as evidenced by the bloody tourniquet.

She glanced to the horizon and wondered if whoever did this watched, if he waited. But there was no time for her to dally. Terrified, she ran to her horse, praying she would get there and back safely, and retrieved a canteen. In a hurried rush, she splashed water into Eli's mouth. He coughed and opened his eyes.

"Thank God."

"Cassie, you need to get out of here." Eli rolled to his side and grabbed her hand with his good one. "Someone shot Cracker out from under me. Promise me you'll go back to Callahan land and quit coming out here."

"I'm not leaving you." She braced Eli's shoulder as he sat upright. "You're hurt and your horse needs help. If we can get her to walk, I can take you somewhere safe, then I'll ride for help."

"Somewhere safe." Eli leaned heavily against her and she cradled his head against her shoulder. "Where would that be?"

"Echo's hideout."

Echo fled, but Cassie knew he watched as she led the injured mare behind her own horse into his territory. She regretted this, but there was no choice. Echo's lair wasn't far—it only made sense to come here. She could leave Eli while she rode to Ryan land for help.

She sensed Eli was in a great deal of pain, pressed against her backside, but he said nothing. Cracker walked, but without attention, her wound would soon become infected and she might not survive. Either way, the horse could be lame.

"Why didn't you put Cracker down?" she asked over her shoulder.

His good arm circled her waist and the touch warmed her. She suddenly couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

"I'm rather fond of her," he replied, his voice rough. "She's Echo's sister."

Cassie wondered if the stallion had any sense of the mare and their shared lineage. "Who shot you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think he's still out there?"

"I don't know. As much as I hate to ask a Hardy, Jeb was roamin' around yesterday. Maybe we should ask him if he saw anything."

"Jeb Hardy?"

"You know him?"

Cassie shook her head. "No, but Grandpap is having trouble with the Hardy's over a strip of land that borders our two properties. He doesn't speak highly of them."

"Few people do."

"How's your wrist?"

"I'll survive."

Cassie sincerely hoped so.

They entered a narrow pathway flanked by two large rocky escarpments. Once through, a small lush valley opened up. Cassie loved this place, was awed when Echo led her here a few weeks after she tended his wound, and had visited it a handful of times since. Echo wasn't always in residence, but mares frequently inhabited the area. Today, however, the valley was empty.

"Guess this is why I never found him," Eli said, a bit of admiration in his voice. "The bugger knew how to hide in style."

"He wasn't hiding, he was surviving."

"Is that what you've been doing?"

Cassie considered the implication. "Maybe."

They stopped. Eli dismounted before Cassie could help him. His pale skin hinted at his waning strength.

"You stay here with Cracker and I'll take your horse and ride for help," Eli said.

"What? You're injured. You stay and I'll ride for help."

"No." Eli's gaze fixed on her with finality. "It's too dangerous, you riding out in the open. God knows who could be out there."

"If you don't mind me saying, what good are you? You can't ride and shoot at the same time."

"I'd feel better if it was me out there."

"I'm not sure we have a choice. Cracker needs help." The mare stood several feet from them, twitching her tail. No doubt she suffered and was in pain. Cassie stepped near to stroke her muzzle. "There now, you'll be fine. We're wasting time, Eli. I'll ride to the SR; it's closer than the Callahan Ranch."

Eli's gaze darkened. Shirtless, he appeared dangerous and his eyes hinted at an underlying connection between them beyond their desire to help Cracker.

“Ride to the Rocking Wren,” he said. “You’ll hit it on the way to the SR. My pa can get help. Promise me you’ll stay put with my ma and my sisters. Don’t come back.”

She hesitated.

“Cassie.” Eli’s hard voice demanded her agreement.

“I won’t make promises I can’t keep.” She moved to her horse.

Eli swore under his breath. His good hand shot out and grasped her arm. Startled by the possessive nature of the touch, she was equally shocked that it didn’t offend her. To like a boy was simple enough, but this—

She looked into his eyes and wondered if she reflected the same pained look back at him. *This* was entirely new to her. This stirred a deep longing within her, a swirling desire that began in her abdomen and spread through her entire body in a rush of heat.

She didn’t want to leave him.

“Ride fast and be careful.” He moved his face close to hers.

She nodded, her thoughts confused. Her awareness shifted to Eli’s physical presence as he brought his hand to the side of her neck. She leaned her face into his shoulder and enjoyed the touch of her forehead on his bare torso.

“I never expected this,” she whispered. She wound her arms around his waist. She would undoubtedly regret such boldness later, but for now she needed to be close to him more than she needed to breathe.

He wrapped his good arm around her and Cassie felt flush with a longing that pierced her with its intensity.

“My ma told me once she hoped I’d find a girl who could smooth over my rough edges.” Eli’s voice broke. “I’ll admit I don’t know much about that, but it’s becoming harder and

harder to put you out of my mind. I'm of a mind to ask your pa for permission to court you."

Tears burned Cassie's eyes. She squeezed them shut. "I can't guarantee I don't have rough edges of my own." She buried her face into his shoulder.

"I'm thinkin' I wouldn't want it any other way."

She peeked up at him and wondered, briefly and wildly, if she should kiss him, but a snort from Cracker reminded her she wasted precious time. Reluctantly, she withdrew from his arms.

"Stay alert and don't take any chances," he said. "Hide if you notice anything in the terrain that seems odd, or you see riders in the distance."

She nodded. He helped her mount her horse and with one last look she rode from the valley.

Cassie pushed hard and headed east. She had a vague notion of the SR ranch's location—Eli's grandfather's ranch—so she moved in that direction. The sudden appearance of Echo in the distance startled her. He ran at an angle and intersected her horse's path, forcing her stop.

Echo reared on his feet. Cassie held tight to her horse's reins as the animal stepped back to the obvious aggression of the stallion.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Echo butted his nose at her horse until they turned around then chased after them as they began to move back in the direction from where they'd come.

"No! Echo!" Cassie tried to guide her horse away from the persistence of the stallion, but Echo was too fast on his feet, cutting back and forth with lightning speed.

As they came close to the rocks disguised as a hill that hid Echo's secret valley, Cassie glimpsed several men on horses milling about.

What if they were the ones who shot Cracker? What if they discovered where Eli hid? In a panic, she wondered what she should do. If she rode to Ryan land, would she get help in time? No, she had to stay. She had to help Eli—somehow.

* * * *

Cracker was agitated and restless. Ignoring the pain in his arm, Eli scanned the natural barrier of rocks and shrubs that protected Echo's valley as he readied his gun. He sat near the supine horse and hoped to hell Cassie had gotten through safe and sound. Concern gnawed at him—it was a new emotion. He'd worried over his sisters, his horses, his ma once when she took a long fever, but never had he felt that the purpose of his days might fall away.

Three successive gunshots cracked in the distance.

Eli relaxed beside his horse and breathed a sigh of relief.

* * * *

Cassie heard the gunshots and jumped from her horse to hide behind a clump of underbrush. She whipped her head around at the sound of several birds startled from their perch, taking to the sky in a flurry of wings. Her horse suddenly bolted and Cassie fell in the dirt as she tried to grab the reins. In dismay, she watched the animal escape. Before she could stand, a hand snaked from behind and locked around her neck then covered her mouth. She fought with muffled screams and twisted from side to side. The assailant yanked her arm behind her and she dropped to the ground in pain.

"Don't move, would ya?"

She didn't recognize the voice. Something hard pushed against the back of her head, and Cassie's heart stopped. Would he shoot her?

The pressure of the gun against her skull abated as the attacker moved to stand in front of her. Now the weapon pointed at her face. Cassie's entire body began to shake.

The man was young, and his face showed signs of strain. Blood covered one side of his shirt.

"You're a Callahan," he said. "Don't that just beat all. Where's Eli? You protectin' him? That sonofabitch shot me. You enjoy hanging around with cowboys who shoot at anything?"

Cassie didn't respond.

"Answer me." The man jammed the end of the gun into her temple.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her words came in short gasps and her lower lip trembled. "I don't even know who you are."

"Well, I'm Jeb Hardy. You must be backward as hell not to know that. You better tell your granddad to stay off our land. Where's Eli?"

"I don't know." The whispered lie didn't sound convincing.

He cocked the hammer on his pistol. "I said, where is he?"

A horse's screech like nothing Cassie had ever heard pierced the air as Echo bore down on Hardy and knocked him to the ground. The man shrieked in agony as hooves pummeled his arms, legs, and head.

Cassie scrambled on all fours to grab the gun knocked from his hand, stood, and aimed the weapon.

"Echo, stop!"

The frenzied horse continued until Hardy's body no longer moved. Only then did the stallion ease back. He tossed his head several times and snorted in defiance.

Hoof beats resounded in the distance.

Fearful Jeb's cohorts might be coming to help, Cassie grabbed at Echo's mane. *She had to get away.*

“Steady. Steady.” The words were more for her than Echo.

With strength she never thought she possessed, she pulled herself onto the wild stallion. He reared and she clung tight, trying to grip Jeb’s gun at the same time, but the weapon slid from her hand. She let it go and firmly grasped Echo’s mane. With incredible speed, the horse sped away, and Cassie struggled to hold on. Her eyes watered and the landscape became a blur.

Echo truly wasn’t of this world.

* * * *

As Eli rode behind his pa, they crested a hill and he immediately saw the lone figure skimming the horizon atop the fastest horse he ever witnessed. The setting sun cast an orange spotlight directly on the spectacle.

Cassie. And she rode Echo.

“Who’s that?” Uncle Nathan asked.

“I think that’s Cassie Callahan,” Lucas replied to his pa. “And from the looks of it, she’s riding Echo.”

“I’ll be damned.” Uncle Logan whistled. “She’s got some guts for a Callahan.”

Eli shifted his broken wrist, wrapped for the ride home. Spellbound at the sight of her, he said his thought aloud. “I mean to marry her.”

Silence ensued.

“Your ma rode a horse like that once,” Nathan said. “It wasn’t long after that Matt married *her*.”

“You think she’ll bring Echo back so Josie can see him?” his pa asked.

“She wants the horse to be free. I can’t seem to change her mind.”

His pa laughed. “Then you haven’t tried very hard. You’re young yet. And so is she. Marriage can wait.”

"Maybe," Eli responded.

"No maybes, son. I insist on a proper courting, otherwise we'd never hear the end of it from old man Callahan."

"Proper courting?" Eli asked. "Like the kind you did with Ma? Or how Uncle Nathan ended up with Emma? Or what about Uncle Logan—he married Aunt Claire to claim an inheritance."

"Don't be twisting the truth, Eli," Logan said.

"One year," his pa said.

Jeb Hardy's unconscious body abruptly blocked their path. Bruises mottled his face and blood covered his torso. Nathan dismounted.

"He's alive. Lucas and I'll take care of him."

"I'll help," Logan said.

Eli noticed the wound on Jeb's shoulder. "I must have shot him after all."

"It also looks like a horse trampled him," his pa said.

"Echo." Suddenly, it all made sense. "Make sure you keep his gun so we can check it against Cracker's injury."

"You think *he* shot at you?" Nathan asked.

"I think maybe he's the one who's been shooting horses and livestock."

"Then young Jeb's due for some jail time." Nathan hoisted the body onto his shoulder then slung it across his horse.

"I'm taking Eli home," his pa said.

"Send for Claire to tend his wrist," Logan said.

His pa nodded.

"No," Eli said. "I want to catch up to Cassie first. She was going for help before you found me."

"I'll get her," Lucas said.

"You're tracking lately stinks," Eli replied, none too thrilled at the thought of his handsome cousin spending time with Cassie.

"It all depends on what you're tracking." Lucas grinned.

"Don't give me a reason," Eli warned.

"Don't worry. I've seen the way she looks at you. Getting between that would require more work than I'm willing to put out for any female."

"That'll change," Nathan said to his son.

"Everyone come back to the Rocking Wren tonight," his pa said. "We'll make sure to feed you."

His uncles rode southeast with Jeb's unconscious body and Lucas rode south in search of Echo and Cassie.

"Do you think I'm wrong to feel this way about her?" Eli asked his pa. "I hardly know her."

"You may think I have the answers, but I don't. This land is vast and yet you found her. That's how it was with your ma. She'd probably give you a more spiritual, meaningful reason as to why life unfolds as it does, but I'm not of a mind to question those things. Every day's a blessing, and you gotta hold tight when you find the thing that matters most."

The wind picked up, blowing away the past and ushering in a future Eli never imagined.

"But about the romance." His pa cleared his throat and moved his horse at a slow gait. "Maybe its time we had a talk about how much, or how little...closeness the two of you ought to have."

His pa's discomfort made Eli smile.

"Don't do anything the lady hasn't agreed to."

Eli stared, uncertain he heard him right.

"And don't tell your ma I said that."

Eli grinned. "Yes, sir."

* * * *

Cassie came to the Rocking Wren atop Echo, escorted by Lucas Blackmore. Although well past dusk, many people milled about the ranch.

Echo reared and pawed. Lucas tried to reach out and help.

"No," Cassie said. "It might make him more nervous."

"This is his home."

"I know. Give him a chance to remember it on his own."

Cassie hoped she wasn't wrong to bring the stallion here, but once astride him something changed. He accepted her in a way he hadn't before. Maybe he would accept the Ryan's again, too.

A crowd gathered before them and a woman emerged—dark-haired with a slim build. When she smiled, Cassie saw Eli's features reflected in the woman's face.

"Cassie, it's a pleasure to see you again at last. I'm Molly Ryan. I knew your mama." Eli's mother reached her palm out to Echo's snout and the stallion calmed. "And I knew your mama, old boy," she said to the horse. "*Ecacusayet*. It's been a long wait for you. Welcome home."

The stallion accepted Mrs. Ryan's touch.

"And we welcome the girl who brought you back to us." Molly shifted her gaze to Cassie and smiled.

Tears welled in Cassie's eyes and her throat tightened. She hadn't expected to feel this way, as if she'd come to a place where she might belong. As much as she was a Callahan, that ranch had never been her home.

But the Rocking Wren felt like home.

Anticipation stirred in the air, and Cassie knew she sat on the brink of something that would change the course of her life.

"How's Eli?" she asked.

"He's fine and resting. I know he wants to see you. Will you let me try to handle Echo?"

Cassie nodded. "He belongs to you. I've brought him home."

"As much as I'd like to keep him, I'm not sure he's still ours."

"But Eli's been trying to capture him."

"Well, men do take a more pragmatic approach to problems in life. Eli has only ever wanted the horse for his sister."

A young girl appeared and Mrs. Ryan smiled and put an arm around her. A light brown braid draped the girl's shoulder and freckles dotted a pretty face. Her eyes glowed as she watched Echo, and Cassie had no doubt of the girl's identity.

"I never thought we'd see him again, mama."

"We have Miss Callahan to thank. Cassie, this is Josie."

Cassie acknowledged the girl.

Josie held her hand out, the deep scratch marks on her forearm hard to miss, and tentatively touched Echo's nose. The horse stilled. An electric silence filled the air and Cassie felt as if she were intruding on a private moment.

"I pulled you into this world," Josie said to the horse. "It's nice to know you remember me."

"Animals always remember," Mrs. Ryan said. "We'll give it some time, Josie." She turned to speak behind her. "Matt, can you get me some rope?"

Matt Ryan appeared, a rope in hand, and a serious expression on his face as he looked directly at Cassie. "Since your pa's not here, I'll state for the record that riding wild animals bareback is dangerous. But I can tell you'll fit in just fine here, Cassie."

"Thank you, sir," she replied.

"Don't mind him," Mrs. Ryan added.

“Step back, sweetheart,” he said to Josie. Then, to his wife, “When was the last time I let you rope a dangerous animal?”

Mrs. Ryan glanced at her husband. “Never.” She raised an eyebrow. “But then there were all those other times—when you weren’t around.” She grinned, but stepped back and addressed Cassie. “Let him secure the horse before you dismount.”

Mr. Ryan roped Echo before Cassie blinked. Lucas appeared out of nowhere atop his horse and grabbed her as Echo resisted the restraint around his neck. Lucas set her to the ground and Cassie moved to the porch while the stallion fought and reared. Several men moved to help Mr. Ryan. A group of young boys and girls whooped and hollered as the horse was coerced to the corral.

For a brief moment, Cassie felt a pang of remorse at what she’d done. She led Echo directly to his capture. But a glance at Josie’s face, brimming with a subdued excitement, made her feel that all would be made right in the end.

Maybe Echo brought her here for a reason.

Maybe Mrs. Ryan could fill the gaping holes present in Cassie’s memories of her own mother.

Maybe Eli...

“I’ll take you to my brother, if you like.”

“Thanks. Is he well?”

Josie laughed. “Well? He hasn’t been well for years.”

Alarmed, Cassie froze.

“Just joking.”

Relief flooded her.

“He’s got a broken wrist. He’ll live another day to be a splinter in my rear end.” Josie guided her through the front door and into a large hallway. “You know, you’re the first girl

he's ever really talked about. Do you think you might marry him? Then he'd move out and I could have his room."

Cassie didn't know what to say. They went upstairs and stopped outside a closed door. Unnerved by the talk of marriage and the fact that Josie appeared stronger than Cassie imagined her to be, she blurted the first thing to come to mind. "He adores you."

Josie became solemn. "I know. I wouldn't trade him for the world." She knocked on the door. "Eli? You awake?"

"Yeah," came the muffled response.

Josie opened the door and indicated for Cassie to go inside. "Don't let him hog you. Come back downstairs when you're done. We've got lots of food and Aunt Em makes the best peach pie."

Cassie agreed and entered Eli's room; he stared at her from where he lay on his bed. Using his good arm, he pushed himself upright. Shirtless once again, it unsettled her, far more than it had earlier, in the intimate awkwardness of his room.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Cassie nodded.

"I saw you riding Echo. It had me worried."

"Me, too." Cassie remained rooted to her position at the door.

"I'm glad you're here."

"Lucas told me you found Jeb. Do you really think he was the one doing the shootings?"

"Apparently he confessed once he was back home. He was tryin' to take care of the boundary dispute with your grandpap himself and thought the shootings would scare the Callahan's into submission."

"Then he doesn't know my grandfather very well."

"Or his granddaughter."

The look Eli gave her made her toes curl inside her boots.

"How's Cracker?" she asked.

"My ma tended her and thinks she'll be all right."

Cassie wondered what she should do next.

"Are you gonna make me get up and come over there?" Eli asked.

She shook her head then moved around the bed. Her legs felt like they were tied down with heavy wooden posts. Eli took her hand.

"From all the commotion outside, I'm guessing you brought Echo here."

His touch distracted her. "Yes."

"I know you didn't want to." Eli pulled her down to sit on the edge of the bed. "Thank you."

"Now you can give him to Josie."

"I'll give him back to *you* on one condition."

Cassie looked at him in confusion.

"If you'll stay with me."

"Stay with you?" She didn't understand.

He leaned forward and kissed her. His warm lips surprised her, as did how much she enjoyed it. She felt as if she still rode Echo, the terrain whizzing past in a heady experience of doing something at first unthinkable, and then becoming the most natural thing in the world.

"Stay with me, Cass," he repeated. He shifted his hand in front of her. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

She frowned. "One."

"That's how long I'm supposed to court you."

"One year?"

Eli nodded. "Unless your pa would go for one month."

"Not likely."

He kissed her again and hope consumed her.

“Let’s get down to the corral,” he said. “Echo’s probably looking for you.”

Cassie helped Eli from the bed and fetched a shirt for him. Together, they joined the Ryan and Blackmore families, as well as the ranch hands. At the center was the horse everyone hoped to tame, but Cassie knew she’d already done that. Echo would always be a part of her. And now, because of the stallion, she was a part of the Ryan clan.

Eli grasped her hand, and the silent implication rang in her head.

Welcome home.

About Kristy McCaffrey

Born and raised in Arizona, Kristy McCaffrey's love of writing emerged at a very early age. She kept exhaustive journals, corresponded to dozens of pen pals around the world and wrote short stories, most of which she never shared with anyone. Setting aside her desire to write, she graduated from college with two engineering degrees, married and had four children. But dreams have a way of persisting and writing soon became the perfect fit for a schedule geared around her kids. She currently resides in Pennsylvania, penning historical western romances in salute to her old West upbringing. Her debut book, *The Wren*, was a 2003 CAPA winner for Best Author Traditional and a 2004 HOLT Medallion Finalist for Best First Book. *The Dove*, the second novel in the series, was released in March 2005. Both books are available from Whiskey Creek Press. Visit her online at www.kristymccaffrey.com.

WORTHY HEARTS

by Janet Mills

Alicia Cortez strode across the carpet to answer the knock at the door. "Be nice," she called over her shoulder, giving the three men in the room what they would recognize as her most serious look.

Emilio winked at her. "That goes without saying."

"If it went without saying, I wouldn't waste my breath."

"You're breakin' my heart, Ali," Mac said. "You know we'd never do anything to sabotage a first date."

"I don't think it classifies as a first date when they've already gone out for lunch," Skeeter said.

Ali wagged a finger at them. "Just mind your manners. He's a really great guy." She took a breath and opened the door. "Hi, Trey."

He stood beneath the beam of her front porch light, tall and handsome, his brown hair appealingly mussed from the breeze. Eyes that reminded her of dark liquid chocolate, the kind you drizzle over strawberries and angel food cake, met her gaze.

"Hey, Ali. You look beautiful."

He leaned forward, and her heart skipped its natural rhythm. Trey Whitlock smelled of leather, sage, and citrus. He glanced into the room beyond her.

"You said they like beer." He held up a six-pack.

She smiled. "You didn't need to bring anything." Warm breath tickled her ear as she sensed Skeet directly behind her.

"Aw, sure he did." Skeeter stepped around her and stuck out his hand. Ali could see the confusion on Trey's face, and she felt a flicker of sympathy. The poor guy obviously didn't know if Skeet wanted to shake his hand or grab his beer.

"I'll take that," Skeeter said, relieving Trey of the six-pack. When Ali shot him a quick glance, her friend's other hand grasped Trey's and gave it a perfunctory shake.

"Sterling Kleminis Tiebault the Fourth."

"You can see why we just call him Skeet," Ali said.

"Good to meetcha, Skeet."

Ali watched the exchange. Skeet was usually the hardest to impress, and tonight was no exception. It would take more than a free six-pack to win him over. She stifled a sigh. If her three best friends didn't scare away a prospective boyfriend, her very large and very loud Mexican family often did.

"Come in," Skeeter told Trey, stepping back to let Ali's date into the house.

She glanced at her watch, then gave Trey a meaningful look. "Don't we have a dinner reservation or something?"

"We've got a little time," he assured her, following Skeet into the living room. Emilio and Mac got to their feet and shook Trey's hand in turn as Ali introduced them. "Nice house," Trey said, nodding as he looked around.

He was being generous, Ali decided. The place was a hodge-podge of his, hers, and his, with various remnants of what Emilio had left behind when he moved out following his wedding. His wife Marti had been smart to refuse the cowboy

hat lamp and the Felix-the-Cat wall clock in their new condo.

Trey shook his head when Skeet offered him a beer. "I'll have something with dinner," he said, smiling at Ali. Like a gentleman, he probably wouldn't sit down unless she did, so she sank onto the green plaid bowl chair Mac had bought for a few dollars at a neighborhood yard sale the previous month.

Trey settled on the other end of the couch from Emilio. He didn't seem the least bit nervous. "So, you all live here together?"

"Except Emilio," Mac explained. "He fell in love and bailed on us."

"Marti is the best thing that ever happened to him," Ali added. "They married a few months ago and expect their first baby in the fall."

"She understands the importance of our friendship," Skeeter said, directing his remark at Trey. "We've all known each other since junior high."

"So I've heard. That's remarkable."

The room fell quiet a moment. Ali knew her friends were thinking about the same person she was—her brother Luis. Just ten months older than Ali, they had been in the same grade. When he died in a car accident their freshman year, his best friends, Emilio, Mac, and Skeeter had soothed the ache in Ali's heart with their steady companionship. She had grown to love them like brothers, and they in turn had earned her family's trust.

"You bet it's remarkable," Mac agreed, breaking the silence. "If you knew what a pain in the ass these three are, you'd know how hard it's been to stay friends this long."

Ali smiled. "Mac is the consummate housekeeper. We'd live like pigs if it weren't for him cleaning up after us." *Oops.* She had never let that little piece of information slip so early

in a relationship. If Trey spent any amount of time with Ali's friends, he would learn plenty about her.

"I'm kind of a neat freak myself," Trey admitted.

"Then you can imagine my frustration with slovenly housemates. And don't get me started on the cat hair—"

"I think he gets the picture," Ali interrupted.

"Well, speak of the devil," Skeeter said.

Rufus, their overweight tomcat, sauntered toward them. The territorial feline sniffed Trey cautiously, then to Ali's surprise, he rubbed against the man's leg. The sound of Rufus's purrs drifted through the room.

"Geez, Rufus," Skeeter said with disdain. "Have a little dignity. You just met the guy."

Trey chuckled, reaching down to scratch the big cat behind the ears. Rufus arched his back in pleasure and squeezed his eyes shut. Ali noted that Trey's black jeans were beginning to show clumps of Rufus's long gray hair, and she got up to retrieve the lint roller. Handing it to Trey, she gave him an apologetic smile. He answered with a grin, the same disarming one that had caught her attention at the grocery store a few days earlier, when they had both been caught in the slowest checkout lane.

"We don't know anything about him," Skeet had told her that night when she showed her friends the slip of paper with Trey's name and phone number scrawled across it. "Who the hell is Trey Whitlock?"

"A shift supervisor at the recycling plant," Ali had explained.

"Tree hugger," Emilio decided.

"He's environmentally conscious," Ali argued.

Skeeter aimed an index finger at her. "He has to come over before you go out with him."

"I'm having lunch with him tomorrow."

Emilio frowned. "Don't you think you're kind of rushing it?"

"It's just lunch," Ali said.

Skeet pressed his point. "Well, if he asks you out for dinner, we get to meet him first."

She tilted her head, pressing her fingertips together in her best *I Dream of Jeannie* imitation and adding an eye roll for effect. "Yes, master."

"That sounded sarcastic," Mac said, but they all knew that she would bring Trey to the house as requested.

Now she watched as Rufus jumped into Trey's lap. She considered the man's expression as her friends fired questions at him like an interview team. She searched for the usual signs of wearing down, the familiar indicators that she probably wasn't worth the hassle of earning a blue ribbon review from three of the most important men in her life. Few suitors had made it through the gauntlet.

Trey glanced her way and smiled warmly as if to reassure her that he was perfectly fine with the onslaught of questions. Most men Ali had brought home over the last few years resented the situation that Trey was currently experiencing, yet he seemed relaxed in the company of strangers. His gentle, mesmerizing gaze lingered on her another moment before he returned his attention to her housemates.

He had reeled her in with that grin and those eyes at the store, then again at lunch the following day. Something passed between them every time their gazes met, and she had felt a connection with him from the start. Her instant attraction for Trey created ripples of excitement and alarm in Ali at the same time.

She watched her friends interact with him. Ali knew they looked out for her best interests, and she adored them for it. Luis's death had left a mark on each of them, and they had be-

come an unlikely team afterward, bound by their mutual grief and similarities as well as their differences.

Emilio was the jock, the star athlete, captain of the football team, homecoming king, and senior class president. All through high school, the popular girls vied for his attention. The ones smart enough to sense Ali's importance to him befriended her. The others were jealous and sometimes cruel. Emilio's friendship never wavered, and he refused to date the girls who snubbed Ali. He was now a successful salesman for an electronics firm. The woman he married had accepted Ali from the beginning, and they had become good friends.

Sensitive and passionate, Mac poured his energies into song writing, painting, and sculpture. He had earned a collection of creative awards throughout high school and college, and now managed an art gallery by day while spending most evenings with his band. The garage attached to their four-bedroom house often resonated with the sound of jamming guitars and pounding drums. Mac's framed artwork graced the walls of the house while his intricate woodcarvings of birds hung from the ceiling.

Skeeter, raised in a wealthy home, had funded most of their teenage adventures. Aloof and suspicious of outsiders, he trusted only those people who proved they liked him for more than his money. Skeet could be your toughest critic or your strongest ally. He worked for minimum wage just to show his family he was a regular guy. Meanwhile, the house was crammed with prototypes of his various inventions. His plans included hitting it big with a contraption everyone wanted to own. Then he could be rich and famous on his own terms.

All four of them enjoyed dissecting the motives of heroes and villains in action movies, taking road trips, putting together complicated jigsaw puzzles, and playing pinochle. Ali had been ahead in their running totals of pinochle points since

they had started keeping track years earlier. They played every Thursday night, with the men attempting in vain to catch up.

Trey laughed at something, and Ali's attention returned to the men in her living room.

"What?" she said, her gaze landing on each of them in turn when no one spoke for a moment.

"Do you really snore like a chainsaw?" Trey asked.

Ali glared at Skeet. His bedroom was beside hers upstairs.

"Just thought he should know," Skeeter said with a shrug.

"She can't cook," Emilio added. "I don't think she even knows how to turn on the oven. I nearly starved when I lived here."

"That old argument? Just because I'm the only female doesn't mean—"

"Ali makes a great salsa, though," Mac cut in. "I think there's some in the fridge." He stood and headed for the kitchen.

"Oh, Trey doesn't want to spoil his appetite," she said, sending her date another let's-get-out-of-here look.

He gave her the grin of a good sport. "I'd love to try it."

Mac returned with a bowl of salsa and a bag of tortilla chips, setting them on the coffee table in front of Trey. Ali's dinner date took several generous bites before his face turned an alarming shade of red. She hurried to bring him a glass of milk and debated thumping him on the back.

"That's really...good," he managed after draining the glass. "Is that an old family recipe?"

"Passed out from generations of Cortez's," Skeeter replied.

"Passed *down*," Ali corrected. She turned to Trey again. "I think it's time to go."

“So soon?” Emilio asked. “We’re just beginning to get to know the guy.”

Trey started to get up, then winced as Rufus sunk his claws into his leg.

“You bad boy,” Ali said, stepping toward the couch.

Trey’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I meant Rufus.” She unhooked the animal’s claws from Trey’s jeans and nudged the cat away. Rufus growled low in his throat. “Don’t start,” she warned, keeping one eye on the big tomcat while she pushed the lint roller back and forth over Trey’s muscular thighs. The air in the room grew silent and warm. Ali’s hand stilled while a hot blush began at the base of her throat and rose to envelop her face. Awkwardly, she stuck the lint roller in his hand without looking at him. She could feel his smile on her as every nerve cell in her body went on alert.

“She’s good at back rubs, too,” Mac said matter-of-factly.

“I can imagine.”

“Okay, then,” Emilio said around a cough. “You two kids have fun tonight.”

From the openly amused expressions on her friends’ faces, Ali knew the three of them liked Trey Whitlock. She also knew, without a doubt, that she would be teased mercilessly about this night for a very long time.

* * * *

Trey watched as Alicia climbed gracefully onto the passenger seat of his pick-up. He had held his smile in check back in the house, but now he allowed it to spread across his face for the length of time it took him to walk around the truck. He settled into the driver’s seat.

“Your friends seem like good guys.”

“Mm-hmm.”

"I don't blame them for giving me the third degree about what I do for a living and how I think. They clearly love you, and they just wanted to know my intentions."

She looked over at him, her dark expressive eyes full of questions. "I may have missed your response."

He chuckled. "Then I guess you'll just have to ask one of them what I said later." He nodded toward the house. "We should probably wave."

She glanced at the three faces peering over the back of the couch through the living room window. "Oh, for crying out loud."

Trey put the truck into gear and pulled into the street. Neither of them spoke for a few moments as he maneuvered through the residential section and headed for the main street into town.

"I feel a little stupid for having made reservations at La Cocina," he said, tossing her a quick look. "You being accustomed to authentic Mexican food and all."

"Oh yeah. My salsa is to die for. If you're not careful."

Trey laughed again. He liked everything about Alicia Cortez so far: her wry sense of humor, fiery spirit, gorgeous Hispanic looks, and her obvious loyalty to her closest friends—even if they were all guys.

"I've never dated any of them," she said, turning toward him. "Everyone wonders that."

Of course he'd been curious. "That's really none of my business," he smiled at her, "but it's good information."

"They drive me up the wall sometimes," she went on, "but I adore them. Did you know that Skeet has filed for a patent on his DVD juke box/HDTV combo?"

"So that's what that was."

"It can sort your movies by title, genre, or director, then play your selection with the touch of a button on the remote

control. He's seriously clever. And did you see Mac's carving of a barn owl in the corner over the recliner? It's so life-like."

"I expected it to cough up a pellet any second."

Ali's warm laughter washed over him like a wave.

"I'm assuming that painting of you on the wall by the front door is his work, too."

She nodded. "He made me look so exotic."

"You are."

She gave him a pleased smile.

"Emilio took most of his stuff with him when he moved in with Marti. He had a bunch of trophies from football and just about every other sport."

"I played some ball in high school, too. Then I blew out my knee and couldn't play in college like I'd planned." He frowned at the memory. "But it turned out okay. I majored in environmental studies and landed a good job."

"You have a good attitude about something that had to be a huge disappointment."

He shrugged. It had been a long time ago. "You play the hand you're dealt."

"Funny you should say that. I tell the boys the same thing every time we play cards. I usually win and they can't stand it, so they accuse me of cheating." She paused. "I'm not a very good loser either."

He gave her a long glance. "Few of us are. For me, it depends on what I'm playing for...or what's at stake." He pulled into the parking lot of the Mexican restaurant. "We can go somewhere else, Ali," he offered.

"It's up to you," she told him, a sparkle dancing in her eyes that he could only attribute to his reaction to her four-alarm salsa. "But I love this place."

"It's one of my favorites, too. Let's go on in."

A pretty young woman greeted them, then showed them to a booth next to a window. The room was softly lit, decorated with bright colors and an assortment of Spanish decorations. For the next half hour, they were treated to a steady stream of attention as various employees served them ice water, margaritas, bean dip, salsa, and tortilla chips, took their orders, and checked on them so often it began to frustrate Trey. He longed for one full, uninterrupted minute with Alicia.

"Does it seem like these people are spending more time at our table than anyone else's?" he finally asked her.

She glanced around. "Nope."

"My imagination, then. Why don't you tell me about your job? You've heard all about mine."

Ali smiled with unbridled pleasure. "I love teaching kindergarten. The kids are amazing—so small, so in awe of the world around them. They're like little sponges, soaking up everything. I can do no wrong with five and six-year olds. It's all 'Miss Cortez says,' and 'Miss Cortez does'. My word is gospel, and my way of doing things is *the* way to do them. God, I love it." She laughed.

"I bet they love you, too." He couldn't imagine anyone being near Alicia Cortez and not falling head over heels for her. From her students and her best friends to perfect strangers in a restaurant, Ali drew people in and made them care about her. Trey felt his heart being tugged as well. "I've heard that teaching can make some people second guess whether they'll ever want to become parents themselves."

"Oh, I know I'll have children of my own someday. I want—"

She stopped, blushing a lovely shade of pink. He felt his own face go warm. Talking about having kids was generally not on his list of first dinner date topics, but he was pleased

with her response. An only child himself, he'd always wanted a big family.

A waitress brought their entrees, and they began to eat. Trey found another trait he admired in Ali—she didn't hesitate to show her enjoyment of a good meal. Some women took dainty bites and acted full from just a few. Ali dug into her smothered chimichanga, clearly savoring every forkful that passed her perfectly shaped lips. Little sounds of satisfaction drifted across the table, and he couldn't help but chuckle at her enthusiasm.

"Hits the spot, huh?"

She nodded. "I'll tell you a secret."

He leaned toward her, eager to hear it.

"I've never grown tired of Mexican food. I could eat it almost every night, and when I was younger, I pretty much did."

A commotion drew their attention toward the kitchen. "Uh-oh," Trey said. A large Hispanic man in an apron stood near the swinging doors, gesturing angrily at one of the waitresses. "It looks like the cook is upset about something." The man pointed at Trey and Ali, then strode in their direction.

"What could this possibly have to do with us?" Trey glanced down at his plate. "This is exactly what I ordered. Are you happy with yours?"

A look of guilt crossed her lovely face. "I think I should probably tell you—"

Red-faced and sputtering, the cook came to a stop at their table before the young hostess could intercept him.

"Papá," Ali said soothingly. "Calm down. Think of your heart."

Trey stared at her, dumbfounded. "This is your father?"

Ali nodded as the man turned to glare at the hostess. "My oldest daughter comes to my restaurant, and no one tells me?"

“Oh, Papá, you are causing a scene,” the hostess said. “Everyone is watching you.”

Trey pointed at the hostess as it all clicked into place. “Your sister.”

A younger girl who had been refilling their water glasses joined the small group. “We wanted Alicia to have a nice dinner with her handsome man,” she said. “Now you are ruining it, Papá.”

“Another sister!” Trey guessed.

Ali scooted over on the vinyl bench. “Sit, Papá, before you have an apoplexy.”

Trey stared at the growing collection of people, who all seemed to share some similarity in appearance to Ali. If he hadn’t been so busy looking at her, he might have noticed the others. Trey took a breath. He had maintained his composure through the bombardment of questions from Ali’s friends. He could do it again. From the moment he had met her, he’d known she was something special. This woman was worth getting to know, even with her unexpected entourage.

“Papá,” Ali said calmly. “This is Trey Whitlock. Trey, my father Orlando Cortez.”

Trey reached across the table to shake the man’s beefy hand. Mr. Cortez gave him a thorough looking-over. “My daughter, she did not tell you this is her family’s restaurant?”

“She hadn’t mentioned it.”

“What?” Ali said, laughing. “And miss all this?” She gestured at the crowd surrounding their table. “Just like the commercials say: *priceless*.” She began to point at each person assembled. “This is my mamá, Conchita Cortez, and my aunt, Tía Rosa. These are my sisters Bonita and Maria, and my cousin Selena. Two other cousins work in the kitchen with Papá. Oh, here they are now. This is Marco and Mateo.”

By the time Trey had shaken everyone's hand, his own was throbbing from the meaningful grips many of Ali's relatives had given him. He found himself answering the same kinds of questions he'd fielded earlier in the evening.

"I didn't realize I would meet the entire family tonight," he said with a rueful grin.

"Oh, this isn't all of us." Maria giggled. "You have not met our other aunts or our uncles. And there are many more cousins."

Ali smiled at him. While he wasn't thrilled by the surprise, he couldn't seem to produce an angry thought toward anyone. He liked the boisterous Cortez clan.

"Would you all like to, uh, join us for dessert?" he asked, including everyone assembled with a sweep of his hand.

"No, no, no," Mrs. Cortez said. "We leave you alone now." She shook an index finger at her husband. "You are needed in the kitchen, Orlando. Marco and Mateo, you go."

The men obeyed, leaving the two women and three giggling girls at the table. Conchita Cortez gave Ali's arm an affectionate pat, her ample bosom shaking with the gesture. "You enjoy your date, *mi hija*. Don't let your father or anyone else spoil the night." To Trey she said, "You look like a nice man. You treat our Alicia well and you have *nothing* to worry about."

He nodded at the woman, an older and larger version of Ali. "Great. Well, it was nice meeting all of you."

Trey watched the women drift back into the shadows of the restaurant. When he turned to Ali, he could see that she was having trouble controlling her laughter.

"I'm sorry, Trey," she said around a giggle. "You didn't deserve what just happened. In my family we refer to it as the Spanish Inquisition."

He had to chuckle, too. "Advance warning would have been kind of helpful."

"I didn't know where we were going tonight until we were in your truck," she explained. "And then I was afraid if I said anything, you would decide to go somewhere else, and I really do love this food." She reached across the table and lightly touched his hand. The unexpected contact sent heat coursing through his veins. "You can tell a lot about a person by the way he acts around your friends and family."

"Did I just take a pop quiz, Miss Cortez?"

"I think so."

"How'd I do?"

"Oh, you aced it."

Her hand lingered on his, and a warm look passed between them.

He grinned. "Good thing you're smitten with me, since everyone seems to think I'm okay."

Ali laughed again. "Smitten? I've never heard a man use that word before." She paused, her smile turning shy. "But it pretty much sums up what I'm feeling. You're a really good sport, Trey. Few people would put up with everything you've gone through tonight at any point in a relationship, let alone on the first date." She searched his face. "I hope there will be a second."

Trey gave her hand a squeeze. "I'm planning on it."

His attraction for this woman, the remnants of apprehension from an evening of inspections, and the generous shot of tequila in his drink combined to make him feel a little dizzy. He took a long drink of ice water.

"So, how many people are actually in your family?" he wanted to know.

She pulled her hand back and he immediately regretted the question. "Let's see. There's my mother and father and

my two sisters.” Ali began to raise her fingers as she counted. “Tía Rosa and Tío Roberto, my cousins Selena, Marco, Mateo, and Emmanuel...” She ran out of fingers and started over again. “Tía Carmela and Tío Paulo, my other cousins Angela, Christina, and Mario...” She rattled on as Trey sat transfixed.

“And those are just the ones who live here in town,” she finally said, ending her tally somewhere in the thirties. “How many in yours?”

“Well, there’s my dad.” Trey lifted one finger. “And there’s me.” He held his two fingers like a peace sign. Ali waited. “That’s it, just the two of us. My mom died when I was a kid.”

“Oh, Trey, I’m sorry.” A mask of sadness entered her eyes as she clasped his hand again. “I lost my only brother when we were teenagers.”

Trey ran his thumb along the inside of her palm. He had wanted to ask about the young man whose portrait had graced the wall alongside Ali’s at the house. Now he knew why her male friends acted so protective of her. They were like her brothers. “I’d like to hear all about him.”

“And I want to tell you, but not tonight.”

He nodded, understanding how hard it could be to talk about someone you had lost. “I have a great dad. You’ll have to meet him.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “Maybe we’ll bring him here.”

Maria approached with a basket of sopapillas and a squeeze bottle of honey. Trey was glad to see that Ali didn’t remove her hand from his. The younger girl’s gaze flickered over their table, and she smiled broadly at her sister.

“Do you need a go-box?” Maria nodded at his leftover food.

Trey glanced at Ali's plate. She had eaten every bite of her meal while he had left almost half of his. "Sure. Thanks."

"I hope my family didn't make you sick," Ali said when her sister had gone.

"They didn't," he assured her. "I have a cast iron stomach." He didn't tell her about the butterflies that had danced in it several times during the evening.

"A strong stomach will come in handy," she said with a laugh, "next time you eat my salsa."

When he pulled up in front of her house a short time later, Trey checked for faces at the window before he slid closer to Ali on the vinyl seat. She turned to him, and they watched one another for several beats of his heart, until their smiles faded and the moment became serious. The warmth in her eyes provided the encouragement he sought. He touched his lips to hers tentatively. She angled her head and deepened the kiss, surprising and delighting him at once. After a long, delicious moment, she lifted her gaze to meet his.

"You taste like honey," she murmured against his mouth.

"And you're better than any dessert," he replied, enclosing her in his arms.

* * * *

Ali watched her goddaughter scamper across the floor on hands and knees. Trey scooped up the energetic little girl before she could reach Rufus. The tomcat still wasn't accustomed to being patted by eight-month-old Hailey, and his mood was unpredictable. Trey hovered like an overprotective parent, ever watchful of Hailey's movements.

"She's going to make it to Rufus sooner or later," Ali warned.

"Not on my watch." Trey carried Hailey over to the couch and settled next to Ali, the baby on his lap. He gave Ali a triumphant smile, but the tiny girl wriggled until he put her

back down on the carpet. The sequence of events began again, with Trey jumping up to keep the child from possible harm when she crawled too close to the cat.

"You two are getting so domesticated, it's scary," Emilio said, coming from the kitchen with a baby bottle in one hand. He stood between his daughter and Rufus. When she took notice of the wall of legs in front of her, Hailey looked up, then sat back on her diaper-padded bottom and lifted her hands for the bottle of juice.

"Trey is going to make a great dad," Ali said.

Emilio's eyebrows rose. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Ali shook her head with a laugh. "No. We'll have the wedding before we start the family."

Satisfied that Hailey was out of immediate danger, Trey returned to the couch, placing one hand on Ali's thigh as he met her gaze. His touch sent a shiver of awareness through her. After a year together, he still had the ability to turn her insides to molten heat with a single glance.

Her heart tapped out a rhythm of happiness. They had announced their engagement a few weeks earlier and would be married at the end of the summer. Like a trooper, Trey accepted the scrutiny of the people Ali held dear as part of being around her. He had continually proven his devotion to her until Ali's friends and family loved him almost as much as she did. While she had sensed he was the right man for her from their first date, the passage of time had affirmed her feelings.

Hailey tossed her empty bottle on the floor and crawled near Rufus. Ali felt Trey tense, then he relaxed when the tomcat gave them all a disgusted glance and sauntered out of the room.

"You are such a good watchdog," Ali murmured.

"Then where's my treat?"

She smiled, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. His brown eyes held the promise of more to come when they could steal a moment alone. Tender and reverent, his kisses reached down into her soul. Trey touched her heart in a way no one else ever had. No man before him had found her worthy of the time and effort it cost to earn the approval of the people in her life, yet he had managed it with finesse and a ready grin.

The front door opened, and Mac and Skeet entered the house. The scent of take-out chicken followed them. Ali's stomach growled in response.

"Hey, Whitlock," Skeeter said. "You bring the beer?"

"Special brew, just like you requested."

"You da man."

"You da pain in da butt," Ali quipped.

"We've got a deal," Skeeter reminded her. "He keeps showing up with the beer, and I let him marry you."

"It's a good deal," Trey agreed.

Mac set the bucket of chicken on the dining room table and glanced at Ali. "I need to borrow your fiancé for a minute to help me make a salad. He knows I can't stand to slice up onions."

"Makes him cry," Trey said. He rose and followed Mac into the kitchen.

Ali listened as the good-natured banter between Trey and her friends filled the house. Smiling, she bent to pick up Hailey as her goddaughter crawled by the couch. She lifted the pretty baby above her and gave her a gentle shake. Hailey gurgled with delight, then unceremoniously spit up on Ali's chest.

"She never does this to Trey," Ali said ruefully.

"Well, she has a wicked crush on him," Emilio explained, "just like every other female I know in a ten-mile radius." The

doorbell rang. "Except for my wife." He opened the door to let Marti in, greeting her with a kiss. She still wore her nursing outfit from her shift at the hospital, but the lines of fatigue in her face softened the moment she saw her husband and daughter.

"Uh-oh," Marti said with a laugh as she approached Hailey. "I'll take her, Ali, so you can get cleaned up."

After the dinner dishes had been cleared, Trey and Marti played with the baby on the living room floor while Ali and the boys gathered around the dining room table for a round of pinochle.

"Don't forget our deal," Skeet reminded her. "You have to hit one million accumulated points before we let you move out."

"I can do that tonight."

"Wanna bet?"

Ali glanced at the cards in her hand. "Oh yeah." She looked across the room to Trey, who sensed her gaze and met it. The warmth of his smile filled all the spaces inside her. His love was the real prize.

With a confident grin, Ali returned her attention to her cards. She had been dealt a family in hearts.

About Janet Mills

Janet Mills is an avid reader who began writing stories in early childhood. As she grew up, her interests changed from mysteries and science fiction to the happy endings found within romance novels. She writes western historical romances, contemporary romances, and romantic short stories. Janet lives in Wyoming with her handsome and romantic husband. They have three children and a toy poodle.

Janet has set at least one novel in each state where she has lived: Wyoming, California, Nevada, and Colorado. Teaching elementary school allows her lots of writing time in the summers. She enjoys networking with other writers and is a member of various on-line writers' groups. Her contemporary and historical romance novels, *Best Of All*, *The Sweetest Gift*, *Nothing Less Than Love*, and *Midsummer Nights* are available from Whiskey Creek Press. Her latest novel, *One Italian Summer*, will be coming out in May 2006 with WCP. Her website is: <http://www.janetmills.net/>

Author Awards:

Reviewer's Choice from notable romance review sites

Publisher's Pick from Whiskey Creek Press

Author of the Year from Fallen Angel Reviews

Favorite Feature of the Month from The Romance Studio

Favorite Feature of the Year from The Romance Studio

Top 5 Finalist in Affaire de Coeur's Reader/Writer Poll

Top 10 Bestseller from Whiskey Creek Press

Recommended Reads from notable romance review sites

5-Star Reviews from notable romance review sites

WHERE THE HEART IS

by Barri Bryan

The sign read: PAUL'S VALLEY CITY LIMITS—Population 59, 241. Angela Murray pulled her sleek sports car off the interstate and stopped on the shoulder of the access road. After all this time she was home again. Sights and sounds hovered around her, stirring half-forgotten images and recalling poignant memories. Lingering sadness brought a belated revelation: She could *return* to Paul's Valley but she could never erase the years and *go back* to that lost place in time that had once been her heart's safe abode.

Her mother's face swam into memory's focus. Sylvia Murray's condemning voice sounded in her mind's ear, "How could you be so stupid, slipping around to be with a man who has a terrible reputation as a carouser and a womanizer? Dan Seymour is too old for you. And he's too damned handsome for his own good." Mother's eyes narrowed. "Are you pregnant?"

"I'm not pregnant." Angie wasn't sure that was true. "And you can't stop me from seeing Dan."

Angie had loved Dan Seymour with all the fervor and intensity that first passion brings. Her clandestine affair with him ended the moment her mother learned she was meeting

Dan at the Circle Motel each Saturday night. "Oh, yes I can!" Sylvia Murray's voice vibrated with emotion. "You're only seventeen years old."

Angie shot back, "I'm seventeen years and ten months. In two months I'll be eighteen and I can do as I please."

"But you're not eighteen yet and for the next sixty days you will not have any contact with Dan Seymour. That means you don't call him and you don't see him unless you want to see him in jail. "Mother's voice dropped and took on a pleading note. "Angie, darling, you have a wonderful future ahead of you. Don't throw it away on some glib-tongued, no-good, skirt-chasing truck driver."

She knew arguing was useless, still Angie persisted, "Dan's none of those things."

Mother's lip curled. "Dan's not a truck driver?"

"He is a truck driver but he's none of those other things. I'm in love with Dan and he loves me."

Mother snorted, "You're too young to know what love is and what Dan feels for you is nothing more than good old-fashioned lust; it won't last, believe me I know."

Angie was set to argue. Mother lifted her hand. "The subject is closed. If you contact Dan one day before you're eighteen I will file statutory rape charges against him."

Angie knew her mother would make good on that threat. How could she get a message to Dan? She sent her older sister Jenny.

It seemed hours before Jenny returned. The moment she came through the door, Angie asked, "Did you see Dan? Did you explain? What did he say?"

Jenny closed the door and sank into a chair. "I saw him all right. I explained but it didn't do a lot of good. You lied to him, Angie. He thought you were nineteen years old. How could you have been such a dummy?"

Anger made Angie indiscreet. "I'm smart enough to have a scholarship to the best university in the state. *You're* a high school dropout."

Jenny retorted, "I dropped out of school because Mother got sick. I can always go back."

"You dropped out because you were failing and you won't ever go back." She was being unnecessarily cruel. "I'm sorry, Jenny."

Jenny smiled at her younger sister. "It's all right. I understand."

Angie asked, "Did you tell Dan I could see him the moment I turned eighteen?"

Pity softened Jenny's gaze. "I did and he said not to bother. He doesn't want to see you again."

Angie couldn't accept that. She called Dan. He hung up on her. She wrote him several letters. Each one came back stamped 'Return to Sender'. Two weeks later, she called Dan again and again; he hung up when he heard her voice.

The next day Angie accepted the scholarship she'd been offered. The day after that, she left town. As she sat in the back of an outward-bound bus watching Paul's Valley become a speck on the horizon, she promised herself that no matter how uncertain her life became, she would never go back to that place again. Now the finality of death had done what the uncertainties of life couldn't—it had brought her home once more. Her sister's funeral was scheduled for three-thirty tomorrow afternoon.

Angie drove down the main street of Paul's Valley. As she sped along, disturbing recollections crowded into her mind. She had been little more than a child when she left this place ten years ago. Today she was an accomplished, sophisticated woman with a Ph.D in English Literature and a secure

position as chairperson of the English Department of a prestigious private university.

Angie slowed as she drove down Main Street. The inescapable hand of change was subtle, but sure. National Bank and Trust now boasted a neon sign. The Court House was adding an annex. The Rialto Theater was closed. In the midst of these mutations, how familiar it all seemed—the clean-smelling air, the well-kept lawns, and the stir of people moving up and down busy streets. Angie made a right turn onto Third Avenue. A shiny new McDonald's had taken the place of the old Blue Goose Cafe. She made another right turn and drove east, then traveled three more blocks before pulling into the driveway of 248 Hackberry Street.

The little house had a new coat of paint and the backyard was fenced now. But it was still home, that safe haven of her lost young years. Taking her keys from the ignition, she reached for the door handle.

"Angie?" A skinny, stooped-shouldered woman appeared in the doorway. "Is it really you? We were afraid you wouldn't come."

The years had not been kind. Sylvia Murray looked old and tired and frail as a swatch of antique lace. Angie kept her voice calm. "Hello, Mother." The full impact of her mother's statement registered: "We?"

"Dan and me, of course."

Angie subscribed to the *Paul's Valley Gazette*. She knew Dan and Jenny had married the year she was a senior in college. That must have been a bitter pill for her mother to swallow. "Is it all right to park in the drive?"

"Of course." Mother held the screen door open. "Come inside."

Tension throbbed between them like remembered sorrow as Angie stepped through the open door and braced herself to confront ghosts from the past.

Once inside her eyes took in every detail of the tidy living room. The wallpaper had been stripped away and the walls painted a neutral shade of beige. A wool carpet covered the floor. The changes had an exorcizing effect. Angie relaxed—just a little. “You’ve redecorated.”

“Just the living room and the kitchen.” Mother pointed toward the hall. “You can freshen up. You know where the bathroom is, and your old bedroom is waiting for you.”

“That’s kind of you, but I won’t be staying here.” Angie sat on the end of an overstuffed sofa. Her mother was much like this room; she had changed even as she’d remained the same. “I have a reservation at the Circle Motel.”

“You’re welcome to stay here.” Mother eased into the only piece of furniture Angie recognized, her Grandmother’s old rocker. “This is your home after all.”

It wasn’t and it hadn’t been for a long time. “I’ll be more comfortable at the motel.”

Mother looked down at her work worn hands. “Dan and I would like for you to stay with us.”

Surprise straightened Angie’s backbone. “Dan is staying here?”

“Dan lives here. He and Jenny moved in about a year ago.”

Conflicting emotions tore through Angie, hostility toward Dan, pity for her mother, grief over Jenny, but most of all anger toward herself. She should have come home years ago. “Why did Dan and Jenny move in with you?”

“There was a trucker’s strike. It was going to be temporary, but Jenny got sick and—” Mother raised her hands and

then let them fall into her lap. "It seemed the best way to handle the situation."

She was being judgmental. That was the one thing Angie had promised herself she wouldn't be. "I should have been here to help you."

"I wasn't the one who needed help." With some effort, Sylvia got to her feet. "It's almost six o'clock." She moved toward the kitchen. "Let me make you something to eat."

Angie asked, not unkindly, "Why didn't you tell me my sister was dying? You owed me that much."

Sylvia turned to face her daughter's unforgiving stare. "I owed you?" She seemed to be turning that thought over in her mind. "Maybe, but then you owed me the courtesy of calling home more than once a month." She shuffled toward the kitchen. "Come along. I'll make sandwiches."

Angie followed Sylvia into the kitchen, sat in a chair, and watched as her mother made sandwiches and brewed coffee in an electric pot.

As she spread mustard on bread, Mother asked, "Do you like what we've done to the house? The kitchen is much more cheerful now, don't you think?"

Angie looked around the room. "It's very nice." She thought, even as she asked, that she shouldn't. "Was my not calling you the only reason you didn't let me know how ill Jenny was?"

"I wanted to tell you." Sylvia laid her knife aside. "But Dan thought we should respect Jenny's wishes."

"Are you saying Jenny didn't want me here?" Angie suspected that it was Dan who didn't want her around. She could understand that, but she couldn't forgive it. "He had no right to make that decision and you had no right to let him."

Mother's eyes were unusually bright. "The decision was Jenny's. She didn't want you to know. "

Angie poured coffee into her cup. "I should have been here for Jenny and for you. I would have been, if I'd known."

"Jenny was sick for a long time. Dan didn't think you'd want to leave your position at the university and to be honest, neither did I."

There was some truth to that statement. This was Angie's first year as Department Chairperson. "I could have called and talked to Jenny. I could have come home on weekends."

Sylvia used a paper napkin to blot a wayward tear. "Lost opportunities are a dime a dozen. Mourning them is a foolish waste of time."

The front door slammed and a masculine voice called, "Mother, where are you?"

Angie would recognize that voice anywhere. *Mother*. Her eyebrows elevated. Dan Seymour had no right to address her mother as 'Mother'.

Sylvia called out, "We're in the kitchen, dear."

After all these years Angie was coming face to face with the man who had been the catalyst that had changed her life forever.

"Angie?" The baritone was honey sweet and whisper-soft. "Is it really you?"

Angie's heart soared with sudden elation. That unexpected reaction was as puzzling as it was annoying. She'd gotten over Dan Seymour years ago. What was wrong with her? The answer came with startling speed. The magnetic sexual attraction that ignited the first time their eyes had met across a crowded dance floor was still there, as potent and as powerful as it had ever been. On the heels of that revelation, came an even more frightening disclosure. With the slightest provocation it could flicker, spark, and blaze again into an all-consuming inferno. She breathed deeply before saying, "Dan?"

He stood in the doorway, his muscular body tense and unsure, his handsome face strained. His ebony hair was longer now and feathered with gray. Lines fanned from around his wide-set hazel eyes. "We were afraid you wouldn't come."

Years of conditioning herself to give appropriate responses came to Angie's rescue. "It's good to see you."

"Welcome home." He came across the room, sat at the table and hitched his chair closer. With a visible effort he broke the gridlock of their gaze and fixed his eyes and his attention on Sylvia. "Is there a possibility of getting some coffee around here?" His light tone couldn't quite disguise his discomfort.

"I wasn't expecting you." Mother was obviously relieved that an awkward moment had not transformed itself into an embarrassing incident. "You're early." She put a cup before him and filled it with coffee.

"I had errands to run so I took the afternoon off." Dan poured cream into his coffee.

Mother said, "Dan's a dispatcher now. He works in the office."

Angie nodded as she looked around the room. "I like what you've done to the kitchen."

Dan stirred his coffee and laid his spoon in his saucer. "I'm glad you approve."

"Did you make the final arrangements for the funeral?" Mother put a sandwich before Dan and sat beside him.

"Everything is done." Lifting the top slice of bread, Dan studied the contents. "This looks good. Ham and cheese is my favorite."

Mother patted his arm. "I know, dear."

"You're a sweetheart." Dan took a big bite of his sandwich and smiled at Sylvia with doting tenderness.

"And you're a love," Mother replied.

Disgust—or was it jealously, coated Angie’s tongue. Her mother had certainly done an about face. Ten years ago she’d considered Dan Seymour a glib tongued, no-good, skirt-chasing bum. Now he was a love? She pushed her cup aside. “I have to go. I have a reservation at the Circle Motel.”

Dan’s sandwich stopped midway to his mouth. “Why can’t you stay here?”

“I’ll be more comfortable at the motel.”

“But your mother wants you here.”

Mother intervened. “It’s all right, Dan, really.”

Dan half stood. “No, it’s not.” Then he sat back down. “Okay, Doctor Murray, have it your way.”

Who was Dan Seymour to come into her home, worm his way into her mother’s good graces then dare treat her as an outsider? Angie raised an eyebrow. “I think we know each other well enough for you to call me Angie.”

Dan scowled. “The Angie I knew would have stayed with her mother.”

He did have a point. “It’s too late to cancel my reservation. I’ll stay there tonight and here for the remaining three nights of my visit.”

“That sounds reasonable.” Dan smiled. “Then things are settled?”

Things between Angie and the man sitting across the table would never be settled. She would carry to her grave a broken heart and a nagging sense of loss and defeat. “Things are settled.”

“Mother needs you now.” Dan looked at her from over the rim of his cup. “I think you need her, too.”

“I should have been here before now.”

“You’re here now,” Dan said. “That’s what’s important.”

Angie's heart picked up an uneven beat. There was one more thing she must do before this day came to an end. "Is Jenny at the Shady Rest Mortuary?"

Dan answered, "No, she's at Sunset Acres."

"On my way to the motel, I'm going to see my sister."

Dan scowled as he shook his head. "That's not a good idea."

"I'm not asking your permission."

Angie read in his look the intent to argue, and then his expression changed from one of concern to acceptance. "You can't go alone."

"Of course you can't," Mother echoed and then added, "I'll go with you."

This time Dan did stand. "The emotional strain of going there is too much for you. I'll take Angie to the funeral home."

Maybe it was time Angie set them both straight. "I don't need either of you, thank you. I'll go alone."

Mother grabbed Dan's arm. "Don't let her do that."

Dan's features hardened. "Angie, for once in your life, will you listen to your mother?"

Angie surrendered by ungraciously saying, "If it will put Mother's mind at ease, come along."

"Now you're being reasonable." Dan pushed his chair under the table. "I'll take you over in my pickup. You can come back and spend some time with Mother before you go to your motel."

Angie reached for her handbag. "I'll freshen up and be ready in a few minutes." When she returned to the kitchen, Mother was seated with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. "Dan's waiting for you in his pickup, dear."

The drive to the funeral home was not a pleasant one. Dan seemed on edge and that made Angie tense and nervous.

As they passed the new McDonald's, Angie pointed. "Paul's Valley has changed."

Dan kept his eyes on the road. "Ten years is a long time."

Angie reminisced, "Jenny and I used to come to The Blue Goose Cafe every Saturday afternoon. We'd sit in a back booth and wait for Mother to get off work. Mac, the manager, gave us hamburgers and ice cream. If tips had been especially good that week Mother would take us to the movies after she got off work. Now the Blue Goose is gone and the theater is vacant. It's almost as if neither of them ever existed."

Dan glanced briefly in her direction. "Everything changes with time." He shifted his eyes back to the road. "So does everybody."

Was he voicing some inner sorrow? "Are you saying the only constant is change?"

"You're the doctor, you figure it out."

What she perceived as a caustic remark cut Angie to the quick. "I've offended you. That was not my intent."

Dan pulled his pickup into the parking lot of the Sunset Acres Mortuary, set the brake and turned to face her. "Come off your high horse and stop talking down to me."

Angie unfastened her seatbelt. "Maybe you should stop wearing your feelings on your sleeve." For the remainder of her stay here, she would think of Dan as her dead sister's grief-stricken husband and forget, if she could, that he was also the man she had once adored. Her voice softened. "I can make it the rest of the way alone."

"You may think that, but you can't." Dan took her arm. She tried to pull away. He wouldn't let go. "Have you ever viewed a dead body?" He held the mortuary door open for her and then followed her inside.

A gnome-like man materialized from the dark recesses of the funeral home. "Good evening, Mr. Seymour."

"Mr. Haskins, hello." Dan gestured. "This is Doctor Angela Murray, my sister-in-law. She would like to view her sister's body."

The man motioned with his hand as he shuffled toward the inner sanctum of the mortuary. "This way, please."

The chamber they entered was dimly lit. A halo of light filtered from the ceiling softening objects, casting shadows, and distorting images. Soft music played in the background. A flower-draped casket stood in a far corner.

Angie quickened her pace until she was staring down at the still figure reclining on a bed of quilted white satin. Jenny's eyes were closed. Her hands were folded across her chest. Her only adornment was the plain gold band on the third finger of her left hand. Angie touched her sister's cold fingers. "Hello, Jenny," she whispered, then drew back her hand and shivered. Turning to Dan, she asked, "Do you think she can hear me?"

"I'm sure she can." Dan put his arm around Angie's shoulder. "Take comfort in the thought that Jenny's in a better place now."

Those words, meant to console, had the opposite effect. The full impact of death's finality hit Angie with collision force. No one ever came back from that final rendezvous, not even her beautiful and vivacious sister. She fell into Dan's arms, and wept bitterly.

Dan held her as wrenching sobs wracked her slim body. After several seconds, the sobs subsided. Angie broke the embrace and brushed her tears away with her fingertips. Her one thought now was to escape this place that seemed stalked by ghosts, both sacred and profane. "Let's get out of here."

As Angie turned, her legs turned to rubber. She dropped down onto a couch as cold despair choked in her throat. "I should have come home long ago."

Dan sat beside her “Why didn’t you? Was it because of me?”

Angie blinked. “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. I never have.”

The truth fell from Angie’s lips with childlike honesty. “I was angry and hurt when you refused to talk to me and didn’t answer my letters.”

“Under the circumstances what else could I do?” Leaning his head against the back of the couch, he stared at the ceiling. “I had no idea that you would run away before you were eighteen and I was free to see you again.”

“Things worked out,” Angie said. “You married Jenny.” She had to ask, “Were you happy?”

“Happiness comes and goes.” His head came down. “Is there some special person in your life now?”

Angie thought of Professor Edward Lancaster, tall, distinguished, erudite—a man content to share what she was willing to give physically without demanding what she couldn’t give emotionally. “Yes.” She waited, expecting him to pose questions or ask for details.

He did neither. Instead he took her arm and helped her to her feet. “Let’s go.”

As they stepped out the door and into the waning warmth of a setting sun, Angie said, “You were right. It was best that Mother didn’t come here.”

Dan nodded his agreement. They were in his pickup and driving away before he spoke. “Mother is anxious to spend some time with you.”

Angie was in no condition to face her mother. “Could we drive around for a while first? I need some time to pull myself together.”

Dan turned a corner and drove toward the highway. “I know this is hard for you.”

"It's very difficult and I'm not coping very well." In her grief, she spared a thought for Dan. "It must be even more difficult for you." She'd been so consumed with her own grief that she had never once thought to offer any words of sympathy to him. "Accept my condolences for your great loss. You must have loved Jenny very much."

"I cared deeply for Jenny. But I'll survive. I'm an old hand at loving and losing."

Reaching across the space that separated them, Angie gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

He cast a sympathetic glance in her direction. "I'll drive you up to Look Out Point. It's quiet there and restful. You can have a few minutes to pull yourself together."

Look Out Point! What a host of memories that name evoked. On that wind caressed hill one warm spring night they had made love for the first time. It was definitely *not* the place for her to 'pull herself together'. Obviously, Dan didn't share her sentiments about what had once been 'their place'. Maybe he had replaced memories of the times they had spent there with newer and better recollections. "Do you go to Look Out Point often?"

Dan slowed for a sharp turn. "It's always been one of my favorite spots. When I first learned that Jenny's cancer was terminal, I spent hours up there trying to come to terms with the fact that I was going to lose her."

What had she expected him to say? That he still carried memories of the moments he and Angie had shared there? That he remembered, as she always would, the magical times when they had sat in Dan's pickup and looked down at the town's lights as they made love and made plans? "Take me home." In the distance the lights of the town gleamed against a darkening landscape, out of reach but not out of sight. "Mother is waiting for me."

Dan asked, "Can you handle going home now?"

Angie wanted to acquaint him with a bitter reality; nobody ever *really* went home again. Instead she nodded her head and said, "Yes."

Dan turned his pickup around. "I know it sounds trite but this too will pass." Pulling onto the highway, he drove in the direction of the house on Hackberry.

Angie looked out the window at the passing scenery. Her mind was weary and her heart ached.

They traveled down Main Street and toward 248 Hackberry Street in unsettling silence.

Mother met them at the door. "Come on in. I've made coffee and baked a chocolate cake."

Dan held the screen door as Angie stepped inside. "My favorite, but you shouldn't have." He followed Angie into the living room.

Mother shut the door. "Sit down, both of you. I'll bring the cake and coffee in here."

Angie offered, "I can help."

"I don't need help." Mother pointed to the couch. "Sit and relax."

"If you're sure." Angie perched on one end of the couch.

Dan said, "Nothing for me. I'll take a walk and give you and Angie some time alone."

Mother wouldn't hear to that. "You're a part of this family. Whatever Angie and I have to say, you're welcome to hear." She bustled toward the kitchen.

Dan eased down on the other end of the couch. "This is going to be a difficult night for your mother."

"I know." It was going to be a difficult night for all of them. And tomorrow would be an even greater ordeal. Angie was beginning to count the hours until she could go back to the safety of her apartment in the city.

Mother reappeared carrying a tray laden with cups, saucers, forks, spoons, a carafe filled with coffee and a luscious-looking chocolate cake. She deposited her load on the coffee table in the middle of the room.

Angie said, "That tray looks heavy. You should have let me help."

Mother smiled as she served Dan coffee and cake. "I know how to manage a tray of food. I wasn't a waitress for twenty-five years for nothing." She served Angie and herself before sitting in an easy chair across from them. "Dan, Mrs. Avery called while you were out. She wanted to express her condolences. You remember Tom and Martha Avery? They lived over on Elderberry Street until Tom took a job with that big trucking firm in Dallas last year."

Angie balanced a cake-filled plate on her lap and sipped from her coffee cup as she listened to Dan and Mother talk about people she didn't know and events that were strange to her. Her mind began to drift. The moment she got back to the city she was going to make some long overdue changes in her life, beginning with Professor Edward Lancaster.

As Mother and Dan chatted, Angie lifted the tray above her head and hurried to the kitchen. She was wiping the tray with a damp cloth when Sylvia came to stand in the doorway. "Where is Dan?"

Mother walked to the table, pulled out a chair and sat in it. "He went for a walk." She looked old and tired and defeated. Nodding toward a chair, she said, "Sit down."

Angie hung the towel on a bar beside the sink and came to sit in the chair across from her mother. Their eyes met briefly before Sylvia looked away. "I should never have separated you and Dan."

Angie asked, "Why did you?"

Mother refused to look Angie in the eye. "You were so like me when I was a teenager, bright, impetuous, willful; so sure of what you wanted, so heedless of the pitfalls of life, so determined to have your own way, so deaf to all my pleas and warnings." Mother brought her eyes in direct contact with Angie's bewildered gaze. "I had to do something to stop you."

"Stop me from what?" Angie asked.

"You had such talent and ability. I didn't want you to throw it all away and then spend the rest of your life regretting what you'd done. I didn't want you to marry a man who'd desert you. I didn't want you to be left with children to bring up alone. I didn't want you to end up being a waitress in some greasy spoon diner. I didn't want you to turn into me."

"That wouldn't be the worse thing in the world." For the first time, Angie caught a glimpse of the past from her mother's perspective. "I gave you a bad time."

"Nonsense, you were my pride and joy." Mother wiped her eyes with a paper napkin. "You still are."

Angie had been living her mother's dream, not hers, and she would have gladly traded it any day of the week for what her sister had—a happy marriage with Dan. No point in saying that now. "It's all right, Mother. I understand."

"It's not all right. When I saw you with Dan earlier today I realized that you truly loved him and that you still do."

For once her not-so-insightful mother was right on target. "There's no future for Dan and me. His life is here in Paul's Valley. Mine is at the university."

The front door slamming heralded Dan's return from his walk.

Angie stood. "I'm going to the motel. I'll see you in the morning."

Over her mother's protests and Dan's pleas, Angie said her goodbyes and drove to The Circle Motel where she spent

the longest and most disturbing night of her life. The events of the day kept playing through her head like episodes from an old movie melodrama. Dawn was turning the eastern sky a rosy pink before she fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next day, Angie told her sister goodbye for the last time and then rode with her inconsolable mother and a devastated Dan to a burial plot in Peaceful Gardens Cemetery.

As Jenny's casket was lowered to its last resting place, Angie looked across the rolling hills of the cemetery and toward the far horizon. She felt at peace for the first time in years. Maybe death did cancel all debts.

She went back to the city three days later.

Shortly after her return to the city, Angie told Edward their relationship was over.

Edward countered by proposing marriage, as she knew he would. Angie refused, as he knew she would, and they parted friends.

Over the next several months, Angie struggled to come to terms with the past. Gradually, she was able to let go of remorse and recriminations.

Shortly before the lease on her apartment expired, Angie bought a spacious home in a fashionable suburb just outside the city. She'd never liked apartment living; by the same token, she'd always harbored the hope that eventually she'd go home to Paul's Valley. That was yesterday's dream. This was today's reality. She moved into her home in time to plant a spring garden in her backyard.

Angie called her mother often. She had hoped Sylvia would come to the city and live with her. Each time she made the offer, Sylvia politely refused. After a while, Angie stopped asking.

After Dan moved from the house on Hackberry Street, Angie convinced her mother to accept a monthly stipend that

augmented her small retirement, thus providing her, for the first time in her life, freedom from the strain of financial worries.

Angie's life was pleasant and rewarding. She had her work, her home, and her friends. Despite all this, she was sometimes lonely. She thought often of Jenny and her mother and grieved for all the years she had wasted because of foolish pride.

The one person she refused to think of was Dan. She had made her decision and it had been the right one.

Like falling leaves, the days went by; spring blossomed into summer with its heat and humidity. On the heels of summer a blustery autumn appeared to paint the landscape in autumnal hues. Now winter was announcing its imminent arrival with frosty mornings, shorter days, and dropping temperatures.

One chilly day in mid-December, Angie was detained at the university by a faculty meeting and a student conference. By the time she drove toward home, twilight was descending over the city. She stopped at the deli in the shopping mall and bought prepared food for dinner. It was half past eight when she parked her car in the drive and toted bags inside.

She was in the kitchen preparing a light dinner when the doorbell rang. Stopping her task, she hurried toward the door.

She put her eye to the peephole and saw Dan Seymour standing on the other side. Fear tightened in her throat as she yanked the door open. "It's Mother, isn't it? What happened to her?"

He was wearing dark pants, a turtleneck sweater, and a windbreaker. "Nothing so far as I know."

Chilly air blew through the open door, enveloping Angie's legs with cold. She paid no heed. If he hadn't come about

Mother why was he here? She stood with one hand on the doorknob as her heart beat double time and her eyes took in every detail of his dear face.

Dan hesitated before asking, "May I come in?"

Angie opened the door wider. "Please do."

As he walked past, she caught the faint scent of his cologne. A dozen sweet recollections wafted through her memory. "You're the last person I expected." She started in the direction of the kitchen, hoping that her legs would be strong enough to carry her that far.

Dan called after her, "Have I come at a bad time? Should I go?"

She stopped. "No." Through her haze of confusion, one clear thought emerged. She didn't want him to go.

"I should have called first, but I was afraid to."

Dan Seymour possessed a kind of compassionate courage that allowed him to face and master almost any situation. "Afraid? Why?"

He took off his windbreaker and tossed it on a chair. "I was afraid you might tell me not to come. I don't think I could have handled that."

Angie pointed to the couch. "Sit down." She added a heartfelt, "Please." Forgetting the food in the kitchen, she perched on one end of the couch. "Has Mother been talking to you?"

Dan eased down on the opposite end of the couch. The cushion gave beneath his weight. "Yes."

Angie asked, "When?"

"We had quite a conversation last Thanksgiving Day."

Angie gasped. "That was three weeks ago."

His smile sent her heart spinning. "You get an A in Math, Doc."

She inquired in a polite distant voice, "Did you drive up today?"

"I've been in the city two weeks."

Despite her resolve to remain detached and distant, Angie asked, "Does your coming to the city have something to do with your job in Paul's Valley?"

"I quit my job in Paul's Valley three weeks ago."

Detachment be damned. She wanted to know what was going on. "Why?"

Dan swallowed with some difficulty. "It's a long story."

Those words had an ominous ring. "I see."

"I don't think you do." Dan vaulted to his feet and paced across the floor before turning to face her. "Two weeks ago I came to the city for an interview for a job with Cross Country Van Lines. This morning I got the call I'd been waiting for; I got the job. I'll be making my home here now." He came back across the floor and sat once more on the opposite end of the couch. "Hell, that's not what I came here to say."

Angie had spent too many years building up her defenses to start tearing them down now. "What did Mother say to you?"

Dan grimaced. "Your mother said she should never have separated us." On an impassioned note he cried, "Couldn't you have trusted me enough to wait a few months until I could see you again?"

"It wasn't so much that I didn't trust *you*. I didn't trust men, period. All my life Mother had drilled into to me that men were after only one thing, sex. They were fickle they would desert you. Looking back now I can see that Daddy's leaving us made her distrust all males and she passed that distrust onto her daughters."

"Then you did care for me?"

"I adored you." The barriers Angie had been erecting for years began to crumble. "I didn't want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you."

Dan shook his head. "All these years I've thought of you as selfish and uncaring. I apologize for misjudging you so completely."

The weight of the world seemed to lift from Angie's shoulders. "I don't deserve or need an apology. I was wrong to go away without seeing you first."

"And, as your mother recently pointed out to me, I was wrong, too. I could have come to you."

"Why didn't you?"

"In the beginning, anger and pride stopped me. Later, I realized I had no right to intrude into your life again. What did I have to offer you, life as the wife of a truck driver? That couldn't hold a candle to the kind of future that was opening up to you."

Should she tell him that she would have gladly traded that bright future for the privilege of being his wife? No, it might hurt him and it couldn't help her. Angie stared down at her hands folded and resting in her lap. "I see."

"No, you don't. You never have."

Surprise brought Angie's head up. "What is it that I have never seen?"

Dan shook his head. "So many things; let me begin by saying that I too respect Jenny's memory. I cared for her deeply." Standing, he rammed his hands into his pockets. "I'm going to say this once and only once. So please listen." He took his hands from his pockets and ran one of them through his hair. "After you went away, I deliberately pursued Jenny."

"Why?"

"I reasoned that having Jenny would be the next best thing to having you. It didn't take long, a matter of months at

the most, for me to realize that I was wrong. Jenny's likeness to you ended with her physical appearance. In all other ways, you couldn't have been more different. You were fire and passion. She was sweetness and light. You were bold and daring. She was meek and complying. You were opinionated, clever, and completely unpredictable. Jenny was easily swayed, sweetly superficial, and as predictable as the sunrise."

Angie thought of all the years she had spent being jealous of Dan's happiness with Jenny. How little she had known and how foolish she had been. "I'm so sorry."

"So am I." Dan's voice was husky. "I had made a fine mess of everything. I was unhappy and I wondered how long I could keep up the pretense that I wasn't. Then Jenny became ill. She was so dear and so sweet and she was going to die and still I couldn't love her."

Angie had to interrupt. "Did Jenny know how you felt?"

"She never had a clue. I saw to that."

"What more could you have done? It wasn't your fault that Jenny had cancer."

"Knowing that doesn't take away the guilt or ease the pain." Once more Dan vaulted to his feet. "*Now* can we put the past behind us and think about the future?" Once more he sat on the couch, this time very near to Angie.

She gave voice to a question that even thirty minutes ago, she would not have dared to ask. "Do we have a future?"

"I do hope so. I know that in many ways we've grown apart." He took her hands in his. "But I love you, Angie. I always have and I think you love me."

Happiness like champagne fizzed through Angie's veins. "I have always loved you. I always will."

Dan took her in his arms and held her close. "I want you, in all the ways a man can want a woman."

Angie laid her head on his chest. She could hear the steady beating of his heart and smell his heady scent. "Show me all those ways."

His heart was in his eyes as he smiled so sweetly, so tenderly. "I thought you'd never ask."

Angie broke the embrace, pulled Dan to his feet and led him down the hall to her bedroom.

Once inside Dan let out a long, keen whistle. "This looks like... Wow!"

Angie laughed. "Like a French bordello?"

Dan chuckled. "I've never been in a French bordello."

The flamboyant chamber seemed strangely out of sync with the understated elegance of the rest of the house. The walls were white with borders of red hearts and cupids. The bed, king-sized and white trimmed in gold leafing, boasted a white lace canopy and a spread of quilted red satin. The floor was covered with a plush white carpet; pillows of various shades of red and pink were scattered about the room. In one corner stood a *chaise lounge* strewn with books and magazines.

Angie sat on the side of the bed. "Neither have I, but I saw a picture of one in a magazine when I was a child. The caption beneath it said: *Inside a French bordello*. I had no idea what a French bordello was, but I fell in love with the room. I promised myself that someday I'd have a room like that." She swung one arm around. "And now I do." Patting the space beside her, she invited, "Come and sit by me."

Dan looked around as he advanced. "So this is a fulfillment of a childhood fantasy?"

It was so much more than that. "It's my retreat, my hide-away, and the place I come to escape the outside world."

Dan pointed to the swing that hung from the ceiling in another corner of the room. "I never saw a swing with satin ropes and a padded seat before."

"It's very comfortable."

Dan swallowed. "That's interesting."

"And it's wide enough for two."

"Width is not important. How stout is it?"

Passion knotted in Angela's stomach and tingled in her throat. "Stout enough for two if they aren't weighted down with clothing." She stood, slipped her sweater over her head, unfastened her skirt, and let it fall in a heap at her feet.

By the time Dan could shed his apparel, Angie was standing before him completely nude.

He pulled her into his arms. "You are more beautiful than I remembered." His lips parted hers in a passionate, plundering kiss that ignited a need long denied and stirred passion long repressed.

They fell onto the bed and for the next half hour, used their hands to make erotic explorations and their mouths to caress and kiss intimate places. Just before Angie thought that she might explode from need and desire, she led Dan to the velvet swing and pushed him down onto the padded seat. A shiver of pure delight ran through her as she sat on his lap with her legs extended behind, settled her body very near his, and felt the pleasure of his presence inside her.

Dan gave a push with his feet and they began to swing two and fro. The gentle rocking caused a delicious friction that teased, tickled and tormented. What had begun as a titillating experience soon became a driving force toward ultimate fulfillment.

As the swing moved backward, Dan stood and without disconnecting their bodies, positioned Angie against the wall. With her legs locked around his waist he thrust into her taunt

perspiring body. Her head went back and her throat arched as that one thrust sent a contraction of ecstasy cascading through her. It triggered a climax that ran like a chain reaction through every fiber of her being. As she went spinning into the world of the senses, she felt Dan spasm and explode inside her.

As Angie's head cleared, she found herself lying beside Dan on the bed with the feel of cool of satin against her bare skin. She felt weak and spent and completely at peace. "How did I get here?"

Dan rose on his elbow and smiled down at her. "I carried you here."

Angie smiled as she brushed a stray strand of hair from his forehead. "Not before you carried me to an erotic world of sheer pleasure."

"That old magic is still there and more potent than ever." Dan sat up and pushed a pillow behind his back. "I love you, Angie, more than I ever thought possible but—"

Fear moved in to chase away Angie's happiness. She sat up in bed, "But what?"

"When you were in Paul's Valley you said you'd found someone else. Is he still in the picture?"

Angie breathed a sigh of relief. "No. Edward has been out of my life for almost a year." That should take care of the 'but' that had loomed so large in her mind only seconds before. She moved nearer and snuggled against his chest.

Gently, he pushed her away. "There's one other thing, sweetheart."

Some sixth sense told Angie that this time she should keep her mouth shut.

After a few loaded moments of quiet, Dan continued, "You and I aren't in the same league. You're a college professor and I'm a warehouse foreman for a long distance trucking firm."

Angie had waited too long and endured too much to let some sense of masculine pride snatch her happiness from her now. "I never thought you were a snob."

Dan's backbone straightened. She thought he had never looked more handsome with one curl falling across his forehead and his nude body still damp with perspiration. He rammed one finger into his chest and said, "Me a snob?"

"What else can I think? Would you be ashamed to introduce me to your co-workers and friends?"

"You know better than that. I'm proud of you."

She had to make him understand. "And I am proud of you. Have we come this far, endured this much, to throw it all away because of something as frivolous as what we do for a living?"

Dan pulled her into his arms and kissed her ardently before saying, "Hell no!" Buck-naked, he slid from the bed and knelt before Angie. "Will you marry me, Doc?"

Angie's answer was a resounding, "Yes!" She wondered, as he jumped back into the bed, how many men had proposed wearing nothing but a big smile? And how many women were as naked as the day they were born when they said yes? This would be a story to tell their grandchildren, when they were old enough to understand, of course.

About Barri Bryan

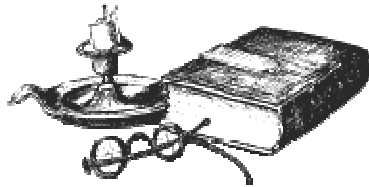
Billie and Herb Houston have been writing as a team since 1990. Billie is a former teacher and educator. She holds an undergraduate degree in History and a graduate degree in Educational Psychology from The University of Texas at San Antonio. Herb is a former teacher, computer programmer, and technical writer for the Air Force. He holds a degree in education from Trinity College in Fort Worth, Texas.

Billie and Herb write the kind of books they enjoy reading—stories about relationships; stories that explore feelings and probe emotions. The plots revolve around ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances and faced with difficult decisions.

They also teach classes in creative writing, give motivational speeches, and conduct writing seminars.

Their book of poetry titled, *Brush Country*, was published by Whiskey Creek Press in May of 2003. It won the 2004 EPPIE for Best Poetry Anthology. Their website is: <http://www.barribryan.atfreeweb.com>.

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