

STORM CHASING



DONICA COVEY

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Champagne Books

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CONTENTS

[Other Books By Donica Covey](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty One](#)

[Twenty Two](#)

[Twenty Three](#)

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

[Twenty Four](#)

[Twenty Five](#)

[Twenty Six](#)

[Twenty Seven](#)

[Twenty Eight](#)

[Twenty Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty One](#)

[Thirty Two](#)

[Thirty Three](#)

[Thirty Four](#)

[Thirty Five](#)

[Dear Readers,](#)

[Glossary](#)

[About Donica](#)

* * * *

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Champagne Books Presents

Storm Chasing

By

Donica Covey

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Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Other Books By Donica Covey

Tides Of Maryna's Love

Dragon's Angel

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

To my aunts and mother who were the inspiration for this series of books. This book is specially dedicated to my mother for her inspiration in some of Storm's personality quirks.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Prologue

Storm Duile stood outside the restaurant and waited for her sisters to arrive. Wisconsin was usually such a cold state but spring was coming, the air was warm and the sun shone bright in the clear sky. When her sisters arrived, they greeted each other with hugs then headed into The Odyssey. The crowd was slim owing to the time of day, which suited them just fine.

Slipping onto a booth, she was followed by Ember, Maryna and Tara who slid in on the other side. Relaxing into the red leather seat, she looked at each sister. It had been almost a month since the girls had gotten together and she was anxious to catch up.

Before she could say anything, Ember erupted, "How long does it take to get a waitress in this place, anyway?"

"Ease up Em, we've not been here that long," Storm argued.

"It's not like they have a full house, four customers not including us," Em shot back. After waiting a whole two more minutes, her impatience grew. Finally, with a snap of her fingers, menus materialized and she passed them to her sisters.

Storm gave her sister her best censoring look. Ember's fire red hair matched her temperament. "Em, not here. You know better than that."

Tara looked at her older sisters. "You two aren't going to fight again, are you?" She tossed her golden brown hair

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

across her shoulder and scrunched her lips into a pout. "Every time we get together, all you do is argue."

Storm felt her face flush with heat. She glanced over at Ember who was a little pink around the cheeks but didn't say anything in reply. *Well, better let it go.*

Maryna's voice broke the heavy silence that had settled over their table. "Let's look at the menu. I'm starved."

Pleased that peace seemed to be restored for the time being, Storm started again. "So, how have you three been? I've not seen you since the dinner at Aldera's last month."

She paused when a tired looking waitress with buff colored hair and light green eyes walked up to the table. "What can I get you ladies?" she asked, with a smile.

The poor girl looked near to exhaustion and Storm felt a spark of pity for her. "I'd like a BLT, hold the lettuce, extra mayonnaise and pickles on the side. And an iced tea, no lemon."

While the others placed their orders, Storm scanned the room. *Nothing but old people.* She returned the smile of an old man sitting at the counter. "He's got a kind face," she said when the waitress walked away.

Ember gazed in that direction. "He's wrinkled and old, and he's ... he's one of *them*." The final word dripped with disdain.

"We don't have problems being around them, it's not like they're going to infect us with anything. Let's just relax and enjoy lunch, okay?" Tara entreated.

Storm smiled at their youngest sister. Tara was always the calming voice of reason. She was a tiny thing; no more than five feet tall, with golden brown hair that matched her golden

brown eyes. "So, we'll start with you, little sister. What have you been up to?"

Tara's smile was brighter and then she flushed. "Nothing really."

Storm could tell her little sister was holding something back. "There's something. I can see it in your eyes. What's going on?"

All faces turned expectantly to Tara. She blushed a deeper shade of red and squirmed in her seat. "Really, there's nothing to tell."

Storm sighed. Something was going on, but she decided not to press the issue for the time being. She glanced at Maryna. Her long blue-black hair shined in the lights of the restaurant, and her aqua blue eyes twinkled with a mischievous spark. *Maryna has something up her sleeve.* "All right Maryna, spill it," Storm ordered, but their meal was delivered before Maryna could speak. "We eat, then we talk." She turned to the waitress. "Thank you."

"Sure."

Storm looked down at the meat-filled toast slices. It looked delicious. Mortal food was usually bland compared to Aradia, so finding appetizing looking fare was unusual, to say the least. She picked up one of the slices and took a bite. "Oh, this is good." She waited for the others to say something, anything, about their choices.

"It really is delicious," Tara added.

When Em and Maryna said nothing but ate in stoic silence, Storm became irritated that they were so unhappy with the

choice to be here. "You know when I suggested we come, neither of you said no."

They looked at each other, back to Storm and then both shrugged. "It's a change from the usual routine," Maryna answered.

Suddenly she heard the giggles that Maryna tried to stifle. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I was just remembering one of my last visits here."

"What about it?" A sinking feeling gathered in the pit of Storm's stomach. "What did you do?" she asked. Knowing Maryna, it could be anything.

"You know how the country was set off-kilter a bit by a wrestler becoming a governor?"

Ember's laugh rocked the table. "That was you? How funny."

"You mean, you meddled in mortal politics?" Storm was appalled.

"Why not? Remember Uncle Horace? What about when he came and America ended up with an actor for president?"

When the laughter died down they finished the rest of the meal with casual topics. For them being on neutral issues, Storm was grateful. She loved her sisters but Em and Maryna could be pains in the butt at times.

Maryna was the first to finish and she waited for the other three to do the same, her drumming fingers mimicked Em's early show of impatience.

When the others finally pushed their plates away, she pounced. "I've been thinking. We're all in need of a little

excitement; things at home are getting pretty dull. We should liven up our lives a bit."

"And how, pray tell, sister dear, do we do that?" Storm asked.

"I propose a challenge. We each find a man, a *mortal* man, get him to fall in love with us, *without* using any magic. And then when we've got him, we walk away."

Em beamed a smile. "I love the idea!"

"Wait, wouldn't that hurt him?" Tara's mild-hearted concern tinged the question.

"Come on, this is a *mortal* we're talking about, it doesn't matter how they feel," Maryna replied.

Storm sat in quiet contemplation. Messing with someone's emotions, even a mortal's, didn't sit right with her. "I don't know. It seems awful cruel."

"You aren't up to the challenge?" Em spurred.

"Of course I am, I just..." She considered the idea more. This would relieve the boredom. And, after all, it wasn't like they were going to kill anyone. "What are the rules?"

Maryna steepled her fingers and pressed them to her lips as she thought. "The challenge is to be the first one to get him well and truly hooked. The man you must find should be one who is ... who specializes in your element."

"I have to find a mortal who deals with the earth element?" Tara wanted to know.

"Right. Ember has to find a man whose field of work involves fire in some way. Storm has to find one who deals with air or weather, and I have to find someone who plays with water."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"What would we win?" Storm was warming to the idea.

"The undying respect of your sisters," Maryna replied. Her glance danced in each sister's direction. She sighed. "I haven't decided yet."

"Then what's the use? Why compete?" Em asked.

"Oh come on, don't be such sticks in the mud. It could be fun, and I promise the prize, whatever I decide it is, will definitely be worth the effort." She looked at them in turn.

"Besides, it's our pride on the line, you know."

"I'm in." Em grinned and put out her hand.

"I guess I am too," Storm finally agreed.

"It goes against my better judgment, but okay," Tara answered. She added her hand to the other three and they broke.

"Remember, no magic," Maryna reminded. "Now, how to keep track?"

"Good question. We need someone impartial to keep a record. Someone who won't show favoritism to anyone of us," Em added.

They sat in thoughtful silence wondering whom they knew that would be up for the task. "Aunt Meggie," they said in unison, then collapsed in a giggling fit.

"I'll get her." Storm stood and, walking outside, went to the back of the building. After she made sure no one was watching, she called out, "Aunt Meggie, can you please join us?" She waited for a moment. "Aunt Meggie," she called again.

"I'm right here, dear, no need to shout," the reply came from behind her.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Storm looked at her favorite aunt and grinned. Aunt Meggie was nearly five hundred years old but she didn't look a day over sixty. Meggie's shoulder-length hair was twisted into a light Gibson girl bun. Today's color of choice was a faded indigo blue. Meggie's hair constantly underwent color changes. She said there were many colors in the world and she intended to try them all.

Storm pressed a kiss against Meggie's cheek. "The girls and I need you to do us a favor." She took the older lady's arm and linked it with hers. "We'll have some tea while I fill you in."

"Sounds wonderful, dear."

They walked back inside and joined the other three. After snagging the waitress and ordering the hot tea, Storm began. "We've decided to have a contest of sorts, Auntie. We're going to see who can snag a mortal man first."

"Right, he has to specialize in our elements, and we can't use our powers to make him fall in love with us. It has to be a choice of his free will. Whoever gets the proposal first wins. We want you to be the scorekeeper. Oh yes! We have to live in the mortal realm for the duration of the contest,"

Maryna finished.

Meggie sat and looked at each of them; a smile crept across her lips. "I'll do it. You four..." She didn't continue, merely laughed and shook her head. A curl of blue hair slipped over her eyes. "I do have a few conditions. As soon as you're settled, you contact me and I'll assign you each a chaperone. Don't cause any catastrophes and please keep a rein on your tempers. Living here will be different from being

at home. I know that goes without saying, but I said it anyway, didn't I?" She chuckled lightly.

Storm grinned, Aunt Meggie was a dear, but sometimes she was a little flighty, to say the least. "We'll be good, Auntie."

"I'm sure you will, dear." She took the pot of warm tea and poured herself a cup. "I do wish I had some Antiban honey."

Tara wriggled her fingers. A small glass vial of thick, dark purple liquid materialized in her hand. "Here you are, Auntie." She passed the vial to the older lady.

"Thank you, dear." Meggie poured the rich, thick liquid into the steaming mug, swirled the contents until it mixed, and took a sip. "Mmm, paradise."

They sat quietly while Meggie finished her tea then slipped from the booth.

"You all have your assignments. Let the fun begin," Ember grinned.

"Who's going to cover lunch?" Storm asked.

Tara stepped out. "Guess it's my turn." She headed to the counter with the bill. Once it was paid, she linked arms with her three sisters.

They stepped back out into the warm sunshine and walked toward the back of the building. "Happy hunting, my little imps. Keep an eye out for each other and have fun." Aunt Meggie gave and received a kiss on the cheek from each girl.

"I'll be in touch soon, Auntie. See you three in the winner's circle." Maryna vanished in the breeze; her taunting chuckle hung in the air for a moment before it too dissipated.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Love you all. Bye." Tara waved and dematerialized from the group.

"Thanks for agreeing to help Auntie. Love you. Bye, Em." Storm disappeared from sight.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

One

Storm reclined on a pink fluffy cloud. The 'find a mortal' challenge was issued only yesterday, but she still felt like she was behind. Had her sisters already found their targets? It wasn't enough that they had to find a mortal and get him to fall in love with them. No, he had to have a special interest in her element. She reviewed what she knew of mortals. On earth, many different men dealt with the air element. There were weathermen, pilots, and parachutists, just to name a few. If she was going to do this, it had to be someone exciting, someone who could make her heart race.

She tapped her index finger against her lip as she thought, *Maybe MC would help*. She sat up and after tracing a square into the air, a crystal screen appeared. Slowly mists swirled and showed her the Mortal Channel. She flipped through the pictures: islands and water. Earth's concentration of H₂O would make finding a man for Maryna easy.

"Hold up." She landed on a screen filled with a man in black SUV. He was hanging out the window, a camera gripped in his hand. The sky to his west blackened; the winds whirled. His black hair whipped around his head. He had bronze skin and a close-up showed his black eyes dancing with joy. Under his arm on the door, hand-painted white lettering proclaimed, *Storm Chaser*.

Laughter erupted from her chest and shook the cloud. "A definite sign, if ever I've seen one." She observed the man, identified by the news channel as Vance Nodin. He was a

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

meteorologist, based in some small town called Red Cabin, Oklahoma. "Looks like I'm headed for Oklahoma." She snapped her fingers.

Within minutes, the serene peace of the cloud chaise was replaced by chaos of the swirling, angry winds. Debris flew past her head. "Whoops. Overshot my mark."

She made adjustments and landed on a sidewalk in what she assumed to be Red Cabin. First thing to do was set up a normal mortal home nearby. Then she'd track him down.

* * * *

Vance Nodin pulled the camera away from his face and rubbed his eyes. Looking back through the viewfinder he saw the previous apparition had vanished. "I'm really tired." He turned to his partner Heidi Fingerhoffer. "You'd never believe what I thought I saw out there."

"Knowing you, it was either a four-inch thick porter house steak, a gorgeous redhead or big, cold bottle of Dr. Pepper. Which was it?"

Heidi had been Vance's partner for close to three years. She'd begun as an intern and ended up chasing the winds by his side.

"Actually, she had this white-blond hair that whipped around her face in the wind. She was small ... Wow! I need some sleep and maybe some sugar—Look out!" The tornado had veered around, and was now headed directly for them.

"Hang on!" Heidi shouted over the rushing wind. She threw the truck in reverse and floored the gas.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

For nearly a mile, they drove in reverse as the tornado bore down on them. Suddenly it took a ragged turn and rushed off in the opposite direction again.

Vance stopped shaking and turned to Heidi, "Now *that* was amazing, Rusty! Knew I could count on you to keep your head. I got some good footage."

"Ready to move on?"

He stared out as the tornado began to unwind. Damn. If The Tank had been ready, this would have been the perfect deployment for it. "Yeah, let's keep track of this beast."

The Tank was a monster vehicle he and Mike Dale, from the National Weather Service, had designed. Then Vance hired in a few guys to bring the beast from paper to life size. They started with the chassis from a nineteen ninety-nine Chevy four-by-four. Then they took a layer of specially designed military/weapons grade steel to fashion the body and hood. The windows and sunroof were made from three layers of bulletproof glass.

It cost nearly a million dollars to create but once it was complete, he was confident that they could safely *punch the core*, so to speak, of the tornado and take readings from the inside.

Punching the core was a term used when someone drove straight into the tornado. Not always the smartest of ideas but for their purposes it was the best bet.

For data collection they were going to sight up a tornado, determine to the best of their ability, its exact path, then drive the tank straight into the line of fire and wait for the tornado to come to them.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Vance grinned as he envisioned The Tank. After it was finished one of the guys, Albert McHale, a self-described auto artist chased them all out and several weeks later, they were allowed to see the finished work.

Finally, Albert opened the doors to his shop to reveal a vehicle that would rival any monster truck in design. He had painted the entire thing to look like an actual military tank, including painted-on tank treads with a black tornado that *swirled* beneath it.

Vance had been blown away. "You realize that no matter how great this looks it will only take one bad storm to destroy the paint job?"

Al had nodded. "That's the reason for the six rolls of film. Several pictures taken at each stage of the game. Take care of my baby now."

The Tank cost a fortune to feed, and it was hungry—often. Just one good reading would have paid for it. Unfortunately, each time they missed it by a hair's width. It was increasingly frustrating for all of the team.

"We'll catch it next time, Boss."

"Sure we will." He tried to sound confident but deep inside he felt they'd always miss it by *just this much*.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Two

Storm spent an entire day scoping out locations for her home away from home. She settled on a lovely apartment building, and went inside to see the landlord. After scanning the mailboxes, she discovered that the proprietor, a V. Daniels, could be found in apartment A.

She followed the hall and knocked on the door. A sweet-faced woman, looking to be in her sixties answered the door. "Hello, Ms. Daniels?"

"Yes dear, may I help you?"

"I'm here to inquire about the apartment."

"Oh, of course, its apartment D second floor, give me a minute and I'll get the keys." She disappeared back into the doorway, then returned. "I'm sorry to say we don't have an elevator, these stairs can wreak havoc on an old body."

Storm smiled. She instinctively liked the old woman, and when they reached the apartment, she liked it also. It was a quaint two-bedroom with a small balcony that looked out to the west, perfect for watching the sunset. The walls were a cream color accented with real wood trim. "I'll take it."

"Wonderful, we'll go down to my apartment and fill out the paperwork. When would you like to move in?"

"Immediately," Storm replied.

"It will take a couple of days to check your references and then I'll get back to you. Where can I reach you until then?"

Where indeed, she wracked her brain. "The hotel down the road."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Oh yes, Stonebridge, a lovely place. Which room?"

"Two fourteen," she answered knowing if there wasn't a two fourteen, then she'd have to make it be there anyway.

"Wonderful." Mrs. Daniels opened the door to her apartment. "We'll get those papers filled out." She went into a room that served as the office and pulled out a file. "When you're finished with these, let me know and we'll be all squared away."

Storm accepted the pen and went to work. Writing the mortal way was tedious and she was tempted to just have the papers filled out with the flick of her hand. It took close to ten minutes to fill out all the forms and return them to Mrs. Daniels. "Here you are, all finished."

Mrs. Daniels took them and looked them over. "Storm, what an unusual name," she commented offhand. "No dogs allowed in the building." She smiled. "It used to be no pets at all, but when Snowball showed up, I couldn't turn her away." At the mention of her name, a large white fluff ball appeared in the room.

"What a lovely cat." Storm reached down and scratched the Persian under the chin. The cat purred deeply and arched her back under her hand. "Are there any other rules?"

"No loud music, especially after ten p.m., and no loud parties. You look like a sweet girl so I'm sure there'll be no trouble. I'll call you soon." She ushered Storm to the door. "Take care, dear."

"Thank you." Now she had to get to that hotel, check into the room she needed, then she had to make the boxes of her

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

things show up without causing a disturbance. She'd also need to do something about a car. The to-do list was growing.

At the hotel, she went inside and walked to the front desk. A smiling young brunette woman stood behind the counter. "Welcome to Stonebridge. How may I help you?"

"I'm looking to book a room for a few days, and I'm kind of a superstitious person I was wondering if room two fourteen was available?"

"Actually it just opened up. Let me get things together for you." The girl fiddled with some papers and punched a few keys on the computer. "It will be a bit before the room is ready. We have a lounge if you'd care to wait."

Storm filled out the registry and paid, then she walked to a large sitting room. For a small town like Red Cabin and their *Green Acres* appearances, the amenities so far were amazing.

She sat down on a large sofa. It was covered with pine green and burgundy printed fabric. The arms and legs were carved from oak. A heavy sheet of glass lay across the top of an old, but well polished portion of a tree trunk—it looked like white pine—that served as a coffee table.

Dotted around the room were wooden statues of animals. Even from distance, she knew they were chainsaw carved. The angles in the objects created in this particular art form were unmistakable. The rest of the room had rough cedar-paneled walls. Ansel Adams' artwork, as well as old spurs in a shadow box and a couple of faded Indian horse blankets hung on the walls. A large stone fireplace was built into the wall at the end of the great room that served as the lounge.

It amused her how the mortals loved their "technical" advances, and thought the past people were old fashioned, but they still held to decorating their places in the old fashioned manner. She stood from the well-cushioned sofa and headed for the bar. There were only two other customers and a bartender in the room. *Alone again.*

"What can I do you for?" the handsome bartender asked as he swiped the bar in front of her with a damp rag. She eyed him, appreciating his brown hair and molasses-colored eyes. If he weren't a mortal she could definitely get stuck in them. *Focus.* "I'd like a tequila sunrise, please."

He nodded and after returning her studying gaze, moved off to prepare her drink. She was making a list of what all she'd need to set up house when he returned with her glass. She sipped the smooth, fruity concoction as she concentrated. The apartment was furnished with a stove, refrigerator and dishwasher, but she scoffed at the thought of actually using the items.

To look like she really belonged, she'd need a television, entertainment center, stereo, sofa and chairs, a dining room table, bedroom furnishings and clothes—like any normal woman moving in. She would zap up a moving van and what she needed when she got the move in date from

Mrs. Daniels.

A porter approached the bar. "Miss Duile, your room is ready; may I get your bags?"

Her bags. Nuts, she'd forgotten that tiny detail. "Um sure, they're right here," she pointed to her side where a suitcase and travel case materialized on the floor by her feet. She

suppressed a laugh at the young man's look of shock. "I guess you didn't notice them."

"No, I uhh," he stammered while picking up the bags. "Right this way, ma'am."

She rose from her seat and followed him to the elevator. They rode quietly to the second floor and when the doors opened, he allowed her out first.

"Right this way." He moved off down the hall and she followed until he stopped at the door, swiped the card and opened it. "The ice machine is down the hall, along with vending machines. Washers and dryers are downstairs off the elevator to your left." He sat her bags down on the bed. "May I fill your ice bucket?"

"Yes please." The service was definitely a five-star rating. *How could these small town people afford to have such a grand hotel?* She waved away the thoughts and opened her suitcase.

She took out tops and jeans, shorts and tees and placed them in the drawers. A knock alerted her he had returned. In this world the help always got a tip, so she produced a five and opened the door. "Thanks for your help." She took the bucket and replaced it with the bill.

"You're most welcome, ma'am. Anything you need, just call. My name's Josh and I'll be happy to help you." He smiled and retreated from the room.

Once alone she let out a sigh of relief, zapped her cases unpacked and laid on the bed. She picked up the television remote and switched it on. Maybe she'd find something about the man she'd come all this way to find.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Nothing was showing on the channels the hotel provided so she decided to find him on her own. She pointed at the TV. *Mortal man I seek, appear on this screen so that I may peek.*

The screen filled with his image. He was seated in a den, behind an old mahogany desk, poring over charts, maps and papers. A computer whirred in the background. He looked so handsome with the single curl hanging over his forehead. She had the urge to push it back from his face.

She raised her hand and grinned as the curl moved back into place and he'd not even noticed, so engrossed in his work as he was. She sat, contented to watch him a while longer. The screen grew dark, a chill entered the room.

"Hello Storm," Maryna called and plopped on the bed. "So you've found him, huh?"

"Yes, get this, he's a *Storm Chaser*." They both giggled.

"Let's just hope he lives up to his name. So, you're living here?"

"No. I'm waiting on word about an apartment a couple of blocks away. Funny."

"What is?"

"For one thing, they have to run my references. I've never heard of that before."

Maryna rolled up on her side. "Well, you know how crazy some of these mortals can be. What's the saying? Isn't it *be prepared*, or something?"

Storm grinned. "Something like that, I guess. The place is run by a sweet little old woman, and I think it's really nice."

"Nice, huh? When do you move in?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"As soon as my references are checked." She produced a drink for Maryna. "Have you found your target yet?"

Maryna took a sip and shook her head. "Not yet. None of the rest of us have been as lucky as you." She paced to the window. "Aunt Meggie's decree that we have a chaperone must be because she's afraid we'll cheat."

"I wouldn't cheat. And Tara is as honest as the day is long." Storm looked at her sister, "You and Em, I'm not so sure about." She dodged the flying pillow Maryna had acquired.

"When you get settled, you are to check in with her and she will send your chaperone. Maybe Meggie will ask that nice little troll Chad, or the Greg the gnome."

"My new apartment doesn't allow pets so I hope she doesn't decide on Sherba," she said picturing the large saluki that was one of Aunt Meggie's many friends. "I'd have a hard time explaining the presence of a troll or a gnome."

Maryna let out a large laugh. "Can you see the faces on these stuffy mortals to find a three foot, bearded troll rushing around?"

Storm joined the laughter, imagining the looks of disbelief from the small town folk. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to move into the new place, maybe we can get accustomed to the mortal world together."

"I don't know. I'm looking for my own man to chase. But I do want to know when you get settled, and also when you make contact." She waved her hand over the screen. "He really isn't bad looking for a mortal. He looks kind of like a ... what do they say? A total hunk?"

"I'm definitely going to need to know how to speak *mortal*, Storm laughed. "I'm starved. Would you like me to whip something up?"

"I would, but I really need to get researching my target. I'll be in touch!" She vanished in the blink of an eye.

Storm looked out the window at the town below her. The road was a brown color that made the green of the grass and trees more brilliant. The sky was bright blue; the golden sun haloed above.

She rode the elevator to the first floor alone, passed through the lobby, then stepped out into the warm spring air. If she remembered her mortal calendar correctly it should be early May. The air was filled with sweet fragrances of the flowers blooming all around.

Storm called the image of him to mind, visualizing the scene from the TV; he was sitting at that large old desk poring over his maps. His white t-shirt pulled taut across his broad shoulders and well-sculpted chest.

Now she had to concoct a scheme to accidentally bump into him, somewhere. He was based right here, how hard could it be to find him in a town this size? There was only one grocer, two gas stations, the lounge in her hotel and a bar just to the south of town. She'd just have to find out where he was and show up there. The deal said no magic to win him; it said nothing about using magic to find him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Three

Vance met his team in Ogallala, Oklahoma, to survey the carnage left behind by the recent twister. He stopped by two signs lying on the ground. They were bent to face each other. The center of the tornado had been right over this spot. He stepped between them and looked out over the destruction. The way the buildings were broken and ripped from the ground, he estimated the winds were in the one hundred and thirty mph range. If he had to hazard a guess, he'd say they were looking at a classified EF-3 on the Enhanced Fujita scale.

The lowest on the EF scale was a 0 with only about sixty-five to eighty mile an hour winds. Even these dismissively viewed tornados could be devastating. He knew of a case where a person was unlucky enough to be out when the gust hit. A piece of metal was tossed violently and connected with his head. He died a short time later.

The most devastating on the EF scale were the 5's. These left nothing behind. Entire towns had been demolished by one of these monsters. Almost seventy percent of the tornado related deaths came from these beasts. The most recent still haunted him: Greensburg, Kansas. It was horrifying; nothing but kindling wood in what had once been a beautiful and peaceful area.

He came across a house that had been leveled. He was sure the building had been up to code but that wasn't good enough. They needed to change the building codes for the homes in tornado alley. They needed to develop stronger

building materials that could withstand some of the most violent forces of nature.

Steve Palmeri walked up to him. Steve shared Vance's opinion on the building codes and materials. He was an architect but he was also a scientist, and he was trying to develop ways to compress the house lumber into a matter that could withstand the forces.

It wasn't going well. Not at all. At least they could work together to develop the new codes and see them enforced. These were all at the top of Vance's to-do list, but for the time being he needed to get his own project completed.

He was in the process of developing a computer-activated chip that would not only be able to detect an approaching storm and the tornadoes it would spawn, but would alert the endangered communities with an hour's warning. This would give them plenty of time to gather what they needed and get to safety.

He knew from experience that many people ignored the warnings altogether. The general population did heed the warnings but many were still injured, or worse yet, killed because they didn't get the alerts in time. "Hey, Steve."

Steve was shaking his head and looking like a beaten man. "I just can't do it. I've tried and tried but I can't figure it out."

Vance sympathized. "I know. But tell you what, I'll get my warning system running and that will buy you the time you need in your laboratory. Deal?"

Steve chuckled and extended his hand. "Deal. How's your work coming?"

"Slow, when it comes."

"How has The Tank worked out so far? Is it strong enough?"

Vance shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't been able to find out yet. We just keep missing them. Last week we had one, it was spot on target. We set it up and waited. At the last second it sheared off." He shook his head in disgust. "Nearly a million dollars. Almost all my grant money, gone."

"I guess I'd better get busy. Good luck. And, Vance?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's not wait for the next natural disaster to get us together for a cup of coffee, okay?"

Vance chuckled. "All right. My place next time." He headed back for his equipment van. He punched up the computer and fed the digital images into the system. While they uploaded, he scanned the NEXRAD Doppler. With this more recent addition to the Doppler radar equipment, he could read weather formations up to one hundred and forty-three miles in any direction.

Nothing. He heaved a sigh and reached for his phone. He dialed Mike and waited for an answer. "Hey, listen. I see nothing around us. Have you guys picked up anything?"

"There is a system we're looking at. It's moving in from the west. And one moving in from the Rockies, but it won't affect this area for several days. Looks like there isn't a chance for you to play with The Tank for a while."

"I think we'll head for home for a couple of days' rest then."

"Great. Check in with you in a day or two."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Vance hung up and stepped outside. "Load up, gang. We're headed back."

Nods and indistinguishable words were uttered in reply. He looked back over the scene. If only they had the warning unit ready. If only the building codes had been updated. If only there were better materials. The *if onlys* pounded in his head.

Heidi came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You realize that no injuries or fatalities is a pipe dream, right? There will always be the ones who lag behind to watch, or just don't want to leave their homes."

"Let me keep my fantasies." Vance liked his partner but she could be too sensible at times. Heidi was sweet, honest, hard working and only interested in the facts. Sometimes being in the vehicle with her was excessively sobering. "I'm ready to stretch out in my own bed for about three straight days."

Heidi nodded. "I'm going to take a nice long bubble bath, cook some real food and then just veg."

* * * *

He dropped Heidi off at her farmhouse and drove home. After a long hot shower and shave, he headed down to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator was a mistake. Something had gone from bad to yuck in the three short weeks he was gone. "Dang it!"

He rummaged to find the offender. Then he stripped the fridge and scrubbed it down. "So much for relaxing," he grouched. He then turned to the cabinets, nothing. Feeling like

Old Mother Hubbard with the empty cupboard, he knew the next place to go was the grocer down the block.

Vance grabbed a cart and moved down the first aisle. He snatched up a loaf of bread and headed to the deli for some lunchmeat, then went in search of the mainstay of his diet: Fruit Loops. He was moving to the dairy, but as he rounded the end cap his cart collided with another. "I'm sorry," he said, then felt the breath catch in his throat.

She was easily the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her long hair was an unusual shade of blond, nearly moon white, and the perfectly smooth, ivory skin of her heart-shaped face made him long to reach out and stroke her cheek. Something about her pricked his memory but he couldn't place where he may have run across her before. Probably here. It was logical since Emmons was the only grocer in town. Her eyes were the same shade as a perfectly clear summer sky. Her pert nose sat above bow-shaped, pink lips that cried out to be kissed.

Okay, down boy. He'd been alone in his truck with Heidi for too long when a casual bump could make his blood pressure rise. He realized he'd been staring. "I'm sorry," he said again and felt like an idiot. "I should watch where I'm going."

She smiled at him. "That's all right, it was as much my fault as yours." She looked into his eyes. "Aren't you that guy on the weather channel?"

He smiled and stuck out his hand. "Vance Nodin. And you are?" When her hand landed in his a spark jumped from his hand and hit his head. Her hand was small, warm and fit perfectly inside his.

"My name is Storm Duile. Well, happy shopping." She moved to leave.

Vance stood rooted to the spot. He had this sudden insane urge to go after her. "Stop," he murmured, and finally pulled his head out of the clouds and went back to the business of filling his cabinets.

He was in line at the check-out when a scent tickled his nose. It was lightly floral, exotic and somehow stimulating. It was also coming from directly behind him. Before he could turn he was bumped in the butt. He turned and faced the woman he ran into earlier.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized.

"One good bump deserves another," Vance chuckled. "We really have to stop meeting like this." He finished loading his things on the belt and noticed her smiling at him. "What?"

"I was just thinking that I like bumping into you."

Her open smile was warm, and the flirtation in her eyes and tone got under his skin. It was kind of nice. "You live around here?"

"Hoping to. I've got an application in at an apartment nearby. For now I'm living in the hotel."

Too much information. Maybe ... but she hadn't said what hotel or apartment. Still, a pretty lady giving out that kind of information to the wrong person could put herself in danger. "You should be careful, you might get yourself into trouble."

Her smile seemed to heat up several degrees. "What's wrong with a little trouble?"

The words weren't as important as the way she said them. A glint was in those amazing eyes. He read the invitation she

was sending. A little trouble? She could be a natural disaster, he could sense that much. But he was a trained professional in the area of natural disasters. "I'm in the mood for a little trouble myself."

She smiled, reached out to take his hand, and pressed a small piece of paper into his palm. "Call me and we'll see what we can find."

Before he could reply, the cashier called out his total. He paid the bill and took his groceries outside. While putting bags in the trunk, he watched the door. When she swept into his line of vision he was hit again with her beauty. He could swear the fragrance he'd smelled earlier floated right to his nose. "Ouch!" he cried as his finger connected with the doorjam. He yanked the pained digit out of the space and inspected the damage. *It'll bruise nicely*, he thought sourly. He turned back to the lot and found her leaning over the passenger side of a classic convertible Corvette. Beautiful woman, hot car ... oh yeah, he'd hit the testosterone jackpot.

She jumped into the vehicle and, as she drove by, slowed. "I hope to hear from you soon!" She waved and pulled away. As her car disappeared he felt as if the ball had been dropped squarely in his court.

He got into the truck and drove home, put away the groceries, grabbed some food and watched the news. Then he crawled into bed. He'd just drifted off to sleep when it hit him; it was *her*! She'd looked familiar because she was the woman he thought he'd seen in the debris field of the tornado not twenty-four hours ago! "Nah! It isn't possible!" Still, as he

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

laid back and closed his eyes, his last conscious thoughts were of the woman in the storm.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Four

Storm had been watching him, trying to decide how best to grab him, when she saw he was going to that grocery store. She silently stalked him and when he came around the corner, she made sure she was in the right position.

Oh yeah, this was going to be as easy as snapping her fingers! A while back, she'd come across something that said mortal men were suckers for classic cars. She looked around to ensure she wasn't being watched and materialized a 1965 convertible Corvette.

Storm appreciated the low purr of its engine. She saw the look of interest in his face when she'd slowed down and shouted at him. She did hope it was sooner rather than later when he would call.

Back in the hotel, she groaned at the bag of items she'd purchased. What did she need with these mundane items, anyway? Still, the ice cream looked appealing, and she could always drink the sodas; she had to get used to doing things the mortal way, at least for the time being.

Storm lay on the bed. Doing things the mortal way was just a tad tiring. And she'd not even bothered taking a tour of the town. Well, that could wait until later. After all she'd be here for a while.

One thing she definitely had in common with mortal women was the love of a hot, soothing bubble bath, but the small tub wouldn't do. A quick flick of the wrist had it replaced with a large, porcelain whirlpool tub. She relaxed, enjoying

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

the feeling of the jets caressing her tired legs and arms. Eyes closed, her mind roamed free. She thought about her sisters and wondered if any new developments had turned up.

The phone rang. Rather than leave her haven, she brought the phone to her. "Hello?"

"Ms. Duile? This is Ms. Danielson ... about the apartment?"

"Yes, Ms. Danielson."

"I just called to let you know everything has worked out and you can move in as soon as you're ready."

"Wonderful! I'll be there on Saturday. Thanks again. Goodbye."

"Good bye, dear."

Storm returned the phone to its spot and grudgingly left the tub. She put the bathroom back the way it had been and then zapped into a lovely pair of white shorts and a pale yellow tank top. She turned on the television. If she was going to be a mortal she needed to learn as much as possible.

* * * *

Saturday was bright and sunny as she checked out of her hotel room and got into the Corvette. Now it was a matter of whipping up the moving van, movers and household items. A short drive had her pulling in front of the building.

Opening the door was like walking into a refrigerator. The building's air conditioning system was obviously in great working order.

She headed down the hall to Ms. Danielson's apartment. She rapped lightly and waited. "Good morning Ms. Danielson."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Hello, dear. Let me get your keys and we can head on up." She left and came back almost instantly. "Here we are."

"Ms. Danielson, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to go on up on my own. Unless you need to be there when I go in. I'd hate for you to have to battle those stairs again."

"Well, I've already done the checklist of the apartment, but if you find anything wrong, you make a note and I can compare it to mine."

Storm took the keys and headed upstairs. She'd just opened the door when she realized she'd forgotten the truck. She worked her magic and in a matter of minutes, the moving van was pulling up in front of the building.

The big, muscular men moved in the sofa and other large items. Then came the few boxes. And it was over. They went back down to the truck and drove off; by the time they rounded the corner they'd vanished completely.

With the blink of an eye the furniture was arranged to perfection, and the boxes were in the appropriate rooms. If she'd been a mortal woman, it'd take several days for the unpacking to be done.

She sat on the sofa and looked at the window without really seeing it. "Aunt Meggie," she called and waited. With a puff of smoke, the old lady appeared. "As you can see, I'm settled. Maryna said you wanted to know the minute it was done."

"Glad you called." She looked around the room. "It's quaint. Will you be comfortable here?"

"Of course, and if I need anything I can always get it."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Now," Meggie arranged herself on the opposite end of the sofa. "We need to decide on the chaperone."

"Yes, ma'am. Maryna said you thought we'd cheat," she teased.

"Nonsense. Now ... who should do the job?" She tapped her finger to her lip as she thought. "From the size of this place, Sherba is out."

"That's good, as the building has a no dogs policy."

"A cat would be too cliché. Beneficial, but cliché." She thought some more as she paced. Suddenly, snapping her fingers and with a bright smile, she came up with the answer. "Edgar."

The raven appeared at the mention of his name. "Meggie. Storm," he greeted in turn. "What can I do for you?"

"Storm needs a guardian while she goes about trying to win this silly competition. You're perfect for the job."

When Meggie didn't take the time to explain what the contest was, Storm assumed Edgar knew all about it. Apparently, she was right when the raven bobbed his head and said, "I'd be delighted."

Storm watched as he hopped about the apartment getting accustomed to his surroundings. "Everything to your satisfaction?" she asked with a chuckle.

"It'll do," the bird replied and went to the perch Meggie provided.

"Now, you make sure she stays out of trouble. And if she needs anything, come and get me. Once she wins that man, let me know so I can make a note and place her on the official scroll." With that, Meggie was gone.

Storm sat on the sofa and flipped on the television. "Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable, Edgar?" she asked skimming through the channels.

"I suppose I could use a decent perch. In this realm it's only normal for a bird to be in a *cage*," he said with distaste.

"Well, you only have to be inside the cage if a mortal comes in."

"We know that isn't going to happen often ... is it?" Edgar asked, his head cocked to the side.

"If I can work my magic, the only mortal you'll be seeing is the one caught in my spell."

"Against the rules," Edgar moved to the coffee table.

"It's just an expression." She settled on a program that showed some witch married to a mortal. She laid the remote on the table next to Edgar. They watched as the blond woman wriggled her nose and whipped up a dinner. "Do they really think we do that?" Storm asked, offhand.

"There are a lot of things mortals think, but that doesn't mean they're right. Besides, your wrist-flicks, finger snapping, and pointing aren't much different. And her nose is kind of cute, the way it twitches."

An instant later a garish woman with electric red hair and gaudy make-up appeared on the screen. Her dress was a filmy green concoction. When she was identified as the mother, Storm laughed. "Like any self-respecting witch would dress like that!"

Edgar made a noise that sounded like a snort and flapped over to the window. "How can you be comfortable here? There is hardly any life outside."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"I won't be here very long, I can assure you. I should be able to have this mortal wrapped around my little finger within a month."

"A tad confident, aren't we? What's your next step?"

"I already ran into him at a grocery store. I don't know what I'm doing next. I'll think of something."

She lost interest in the mortal program and tuned to Vance. He was once more sitting at his desk looking over papers and shooting his glances at a computer screen. "I wonder what's got him so worked up."

Edgar hopped back over to watch the mortal. "That's your choice? He isn't much to look at, is he?"

"He's rather handsome ... for a mortal."

"You're entitled to your opinion. He really does seem bothered by something."

Storm focused in a little closer. "There're some colored swirls on the monitor. He keeps making notes." She tried to see what he was writing. "He's got a map." She closed her eyes. "There's a storm brewing. It looks like he's planning to go off and watch it."

"Hmm, interesting. Maybe you can make an appearance wherever it is he's going."

"But I just saw him yesterday, it'd seem a little strange." She pushed up from the sofa and paced to the window. "Maybe I can whip up something here."

"Wouldn't that be cheating?"

"No, because I won't be putting a spell on him, I'd just be arranging a meeting with him." She looked out over the

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

skyline. "I'd have to wait until he gets back from this system he's chasing."

"Why don't you just make the one he's after change directions and come here?" Edgar suggested.

"Good idea." Closing her eyes she stretched her arms out and mumbled some words, and then she looked back at the screen. He had a stunned look on his face as he looked at the monitor and then back at the papers. "It worked," she grinned.

"I never doubted it for a minute." Edgar shivered his wings.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Five

Vance blinked his eyes and punched the keys on his computer. There was no way the system could just vanish; there had to be some kind of mistake. He checked and rechecked all the computer cables, searched his previous hits, and then reached for the phone.

"Hey Mike, I think I'm having computer issues. I was tracking a storm and it just vanished from my screen. It was in the panhandle, now it's gone."

"I see the system moving to the central area. If it continues on its current course, it will be hitting you in about three hours."

"I can head out now and get some readings."

"If you wait a bit it's going to come to you." There was a pause. "Go ahead and check it out. And, Vance? Be careful, buddy."

"I always am." He hung up the phone, grabbed a bag of essentials, his cameras and gear, then headed out to his truck. On the way he called Heidi.

"Hey, listen. We got another one. I'm on my way to get you and then we'll be at it. Be ready in five." He switched off and jumped in the truck. In minutes he was on the road.

Still needing to call The Tank team, he grappled with his phone. As far as he knew Al had taken the rig home and was testing out the equipment.

"Yo, boss," Al's voice boomed through the ear set.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Get The Tank moving. There's a system heading our way. I'm picking up Heidi, then we'll hit the road for Enid. Meet us at Copla Creek."

"You got it."

Swinging by the old farmhouse, he tapped the horn once and Heidi came running. "This a good one?"

"It's showing promise. After we get there, we can switch off." He preferred to be in the passenger seat for the actual chases. "I may even kick Al out and have him jump in here with you." Anticipation over the possibilities to be discovered in the eye of the storm made him nearly salivate.

They would be at Copla Creek in an hour. It might be longer as the storm was already making it difficult to drive. He called himself ten times a fool. He knew better than to let the team split up during the season. But Al had to pick up Chris "Rabbit" Martin, their intern, from the school of meteorology.

Plus, Al's folks lived up by Cherokee Village. It wouldn't be right for the man to drive right by the family and not even stop to say hello. Still, it didn't make it any less aggravating that they were so far apart.

The further out Vance got, the more ominous the sky looked. The wall clouds were dark gray. As he watched, the sky suddenly opened up and covered them in sheets of rain. Out the front windshield, he could see the partition clearly. Just a few more feet and they'd be passing straight through the wall of precipitation and out into the clear once more.

The storm's power was intoxicating. Mother Nature was putting on a hell of a show and he intended to take advantage

of it. He pulled off to the side of the nearly deserted roadway and jumped out to set up for some shots and wind speed measurements.

He watched for any signs of rotation, monitored the temperature and made notes. He took some stills and made a short video of the action. The cloud-to-ground lightning strikes were simply amazing. The earth trembled beneath his feet. The wind whipped his hair around his shoulders. The electric energy in the air coursed through him, connecting him to the fury around him.

Pea-sized bits of hail began pummeling the car. It was time to pull back. He didn't want his windshield to become a casualty. He picked up his cell and placed the call. "Hey, Mike."

"What've you got?"

"Hail about the size of a pea, a great squall line and the CG is incredible. I got some awesome video and stills."

"Any signs of major wind activity?"

"Nothing yet ... Hang on! We've got funnel going on!" The excitement made his words come faster. This was what it was all about; the adrenalin rush, and the racing heart. "I'm about thirty miles northwest of Enid."

"Any debris field?"

"Nope, right now it's just a funnel, but we both know what that means." He'd been chasing these dragons long enough that he could read the signs as easily as a Dr. Seuss book.

"Yeah, I'll get the alert out for Garfield County. Keep me updated on the progression."

"Talk at you soon." Vance clicked off the phone and then tossed it to Heidi. "Call Al and tell him to get Tank here ASAP. Check the map and find a place we can hook up between here and Copla."

They drove parallel to the storm system. His vision alternated between the road ahead and the huge wall cloud to the left.

"Vance." Heidi grabbed his arm, "Over there, to the left. Check it out."

The excitement he'd been feeling echoed in her voice. The scene sent tingles up his spine. The huge, almost-black wall accented the brilliant flashes of pink-tinged, white lightning that danced from the clouds to the ground below.

He pulled to the shoulder and once more grabbed for his camera. He kept it lined up with the beaver-tail formation parallel to the cloud wall.

"Heidi," he called over his shoulder.

"Doing it now," she called back.

They were so in sync that she could practically read his mind. Like a married couple, they could complete each other's sentences. He knew she had the computers up and was gathering precipitation values and wind strengths. Right now, she was studying the Doppler to determine the monster's path.

Standing alone on the shoulder, he felt the electric tingle of adrenalin pounding through his veins. The ground shook, his ears popped, and he realized the storm had shifted gears. The fine hairs on his arms stood at attention and the air crackled again. The lightning struck not more than fifteen feet

away. Vance gave an instinctive leap. He was far too close to the action.

"Hey! We better head for cover!" Heidi shouted through the open window.

He leapt into the passenger side as she slid into the driver's seat and pulled back onto the road. If they didn't hurry they'd find they were closer to the center than they were prepared to be.

Heading back west on the highway, trying to get back to a relatively safer location, he watched the wall cloud roll and surge in a swirling motion.

The lightning performed an electrical ballet across the sky, leaping up along clouds or stretching out to skip across the ground. "Heidi?" It was advancing fast; he knew he needed to get out of dodge.

"I'm moving!" she shouted back.

Hail pelted the truck. He didn't have time to take accurate measurements but knew it had grown to dime-sized, at least. He picked up the cell and pushed the button. "Mike, are you getting this? It's headed toward Enid at a fast clip. I have hail, rotating wall cloud action and a lightning show that's out of this world. You need to issue the severe alert and make sure they know it's time to head for shelter. I'm going to stick with this and get back to you."

He clicked off the line once more and continued on the path to Enid. The storm was increasing in intensity. He flipped on the radio hoping the alerts had been issued in time.

He continued to observe funnels develop in the sky. Spotting the debris trail, he pulled off and taped the action.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Ahead, some people pulled into the shelter of an overpass. "Fools!" he spat. All because of one video making it sound like it was a safe place to seek shelter, many lives were put in jeopardy.

Heidi pulled over. He sprung out of the vehicle and sprinted to the crowd. "Find a shelter!" he shouted.

"We're safe here," a man shouted back.

"No you're not! You need to get into a shelter. Flying debris could whip into here." He felt some relief as they reentered their vehicles. Looking back at the storm his heart leapt to his throat.

He and Heidi were directly in the path of the tornado. Fortunately, barring road obstructions, a vehicle could outrun a tornado. The tornado appeared to be right behind them. With both he as well as Heidi keeping one eye on the road and one in the rearview mirror, they headed for the nearest town and its storm shelter.

They pulled into the parking lot in front of the public shelter and ran inside. He wanted to be out in the middle of all that power, but every good spotter knew when to find a safe place to hole up. He hoped Al and Rabbit found safety. He also hoped they didn't run from the storm but were out there getting the data. By the same token, he hoped they weren't because *he* wanted to be the one.

Inside the shelter, he and Heidi were surrounded by panicked chattering people: small children clutching mothers, elderly couples holding hands. Emergency management personnel as well as volunteers from the local Red Cross hovered over them all.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Electricity surged. The whole room went black. From the rear of the room, a child screamed and was soothed by its mother. The building trembled. From outside, the sound of a train passing through the front door echoed.

Vance threw himself under a table, dragging Heidi with him. They waited. Mentally he listed the equipment, footage and photos that would be lost to the elements. Even though it'd only been minutes, it felt like hours until everything became calm. He moved from under the table and to the doors with Heidi right behind.

An officer stopped them. "Excuse me, sir?"

"I'm Vance Nodin. I'm a storm spotter for the NSW. My team and I were tracking this storm when it got hairy. I need to assess the damage to my vehicle and the area."

"We haven't gotten the all clear, sir, I can't let you go."

"It's up to my own discretion. If I don't keep an eye on this, other places won't get the warnings they need. I appreciate your concern for my safety but I really have to get outside."

When the officer shook his head and moved out of the way, Vance hit the door running. He was grateful his truck was still in the upright position with no windows smashed. He opened the door and climbed in. He needed to check over the rest of the county.

The truck rocked slightly as Heidi climbed inside and sat down. "Have you reached Al and Rabbit?"

Guilt flooded Vance. He'd been so concerned about the here and now he hadn't thought about The Tank team. "Give them a call."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Heidi searched around while he reviewed the instruments.
"Um, Houston, we have a problem."

He looked over at her. "What?"

"Your phone's not here."

"What?" He hopped out of the truck and searched the driver's side. He slid his hand under the seat and the joint at the junction of the seat and seat back. *Nothing*. "Maybe it's inside." He groaned at the thought.

"I'll go," Heidi offered before returning to the heavy block and concrete building.

Without his phone they'd be lost. He couldn't get in touch with anyone. Just by looking around at the damage the EF-4 had done to this town, phone service probably wasn't there. The radio was like any other citizen band; the range wasn't enough to get him in contact with Al.

Minutes later he was back inside the building scouring the floor, searching for the phone he was ready to write off as a casualty of the season.

"Got it!" Heidi's shout echoed in the dimly lit room.

"Great. Time to go," he yelled and raced to the door.

He barely listened as Heidi called Al. Once he heard confirmation that they were safe but that they'd missed the storm, he shut off the outside world and concentrated on the surrounding land.

According to the reports trickling in, property damage was only minimal and there had been no casualties or even injuries.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He kept the scanner on to listen for updates as he headed off in search of the beast. The sky ahead was gray and he could see the wind shears.

Heidi rode in silence, her eyes scanning the terrain.
"Everything in here made it in one piece."

"Thank goodness. Let's just hope the countryside fared as well." All around them trees were broken and scattered, utility poles broken off like pencils. A few sheds and outbuildings were damaged. Vance hoped that was the worst of it.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Six

Storm watched the television screen to keep tabs on the weather. The storms couldn't be allowed to cause any human damage. She whirled her hands, one clockwise, one in a counterclockwise motion, encouraging the winds to perform for Vance to witness. In an open field with no structures, she increased the intensity of the swirling, but as the system neared a populated area she slowed the motion and stopped it all together, making a jumping action with her hand.

Edgar watched and squawked. "You really think this is a good idea?"

"Yes, the closer I get this system to us, the closer he'll come. Once he's back here I can set my plan in action." She looked at the raven. "I'll be outside observing the storm. I'll ask him questions about his work, arrange to spend time with him, and eventually go with him on a spotting session. Then once I get him close I'll move in. He won't know what hit him."

Edgar cackled as she focused on the images in front of her. Vance sped down the highway in single-minded pursuit of the skies ahead. He looked glorious; his eyes glittered and he smiled like a child at Christmas.

She allowed the system to weaken a bit but not enough to blow itself out. The weather front was moving closer to Edmond at a rapid clip, with Vance right at the heart of the action. It wouldn't be long before he showed up. "Edgar, what do I tell him?"

Edgar looked up at her, "Tell him?"

"Yes, I have to have some excuse, otherwise he'd think I was a silly mortal woman who didn't have the sense to ... how does the expression go ... *come in out of the storm?*"

"It's *rain*, and you're right." Edgar hopped from the table to the perch then to the window. "What do you think that woman told him?"

"What woman?" Storm turned her attention to the screen and for the first time noticed the blond in the passenger seat. "She isn't very attractive."

Edgar ruffled his feathers and squawked, "Mind your actions!"

Storm snapped back to attention as the tornado whipped near a large farmhouse. She abruptly stopped the swirling, jumped her hands in the air, and moved them a few inches over. The tornado resumed its whirling a couple of dozen feet from the house. In the field it tore trees out, roots and all.

"My arms are getting tired."

"Then let it go."

"And lose him?" She sighed and slowed the hand motions, watching the screen as the tornado slowed and gradually died out. "Maybe this won't be as easy as I thought."

"You're just used to snapping your fingers and getting everything you want. Taking time to earn the prize, makes it that much more enjoyable."

She slowed the swirling motion still more, and watched as the tornado tapered into a tall white finger. Then it disappeared completely. "I hate it when you're right." She grinned.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Its not easy being perfect, but I do try," the old bird chuckled. "Now maybe you should think of feeding me."

"You should know the joys of earning it. Get it yourself." She laughed and pointed to the coffee table where a pie appeared, its crust thick and golden. The bird hopped over and started picking at the contents.

"Grubs! Meal worms!" Edgar smothered out the words. "You do spoil me, my dear."

A fluttering in her stomach drew her to the window. "Don't mention it, *please*." She paced further away. "I think I'll go out for a breath of air."

"I do thank you. Maybe next time it'd be better if I ate elsewhere."

"No, this is your home for the duration. I'll adjust." She patted his head as she walked by. "I'll be back later."

"This will be gone by the time you return, I promise."

The sound of the bird scooping the meal from the plate followed her out the door. She didn't usually get queasy at his mealtimes, but then again, she was usually far removed from his place at the table.

"Oh well," she sighed and headed outside. Walking would clear her head, get her familiar with the city and give her a chance to plan the next move.

She walked along the sidewalk that wound through the quiet neighborhood. Her building sat on a cul-de-sac, and was more a large house than apartment building. It looked like it had been an old mansion at one time. Gothic columns held up the balcony on the second floor. The buttons at the front door indicated there were a total of ten apartments. The grounds

were well cultivated; a rose garden was in the back yard off the patio. Other flowers had been planted all around the grounds. Statuary and birdbaths dotted the four-acre grounds. At the end of a short drive, an old stable had been updated and turned into a garage. In its day this must have been the envy of the county.

Storm passed a small playground where children laughed and ran around, making her smile at their actions. Young mortals drew her favor, much like puppies or kittens. But, as with animals, they tended to grow up. She was perfectly content in her world. Let them keep theirs.

Suddenly a cry reached her ears and she turned to the playground. A little girl stood alone, tears streaking down her face. Seeing no one running to the child's side, she moved to her. "What's wrong?"

The child gazed at her through tear-brimmed, large green eyes, "My dolly bwoke." Then she turned to a boy. "He bwoke her."

Storm looked at the baby doll lying on the ground, its leg and arm pulled from the body and hanging from the clothing. She looked at the boy, "Did you do this?"

He shot her a belligerent grin. "So what if I did? You gonna make something of it?"

"How would you like it if someone destroyed something of yours?"

The boy shrugged. "My parents always get me what I want. See this?" He held up a shiny new action figure. "My dad gave it to me yesterday." He pulled, snapped, and held out his hand, displaying it in three separate pieces. "Now I'll

go home and tell Dad to get me a new one, and he will." His smile grew smugger than before.

Spoiled demon. "Maybe next time they won't be so generous." She picked up the doll, placed the arm and leg back in the body and returned the mended toy to the small girl. "Here, keep her away from those boys."

The child grasped the doll in a hug and ran toward what Storm assumed was her home. Then she focused her attention to the boy. "Demon spawn cruel and drawn, time is nigh for tides to turn." She smiled and walked away as the sounds of children taunting the older boy filled the sky. He would soon learn that, when on the receiving end, teasing was not a pleasant thing.

A bully only went as far as he was allowed to go. Maybe now the neighborhood children would have the confidence to stand up to him. Hopefully he would be nicer too.

She continued her walk, getting familiar with the area, and then turned back for home. Edgar should be finished with his meal by now.

At the apartment door she met an older couple carrying a wicker basket. "Hello."

"Hi, we're the Moberly's from down the hall. We wanted to welcome you to the building."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Storm Duile."

"Interesting name you've got there." The man stuck out his hand, "You can call me Amos, or Mobe, or just hey you. I answer to almost anything."

"And I'm Ada." The woman thrust the basket at her. "I made these this morning. Chocolate chip muffins."

"Thank you." Storm accepted the basket. "They smell heavenly."

"They taste even better than they smell. Mom's the best cook in the state," Amos stated and it earned a blushing smile from his wife.

"I do thank you both for the kind welcome." Storm turned the key in the lock. When the couple didn't leave she inwardly sighed. "Would you like to come in? I'm afraid it's a bit of a mess since I only just moved in." She quickly zapped poor Edgar into a large golden cage and opened the door.

"We'd love too, wouldn't we Amos?" Ada almost rushed into the room.

Storm heaved a sigh. This wasn't good. The old woman was definitely going to be a Nosey Nelly. Storm placed the basket on the counter and stepped to the cage. "Sorry about that Edgar," she whispered.

"What in earth?" Amos and Ada sidled closer to the enclosure. "Ever seen anything like that before, Mom?"

"Never in all my born days. Is that a crow? No, he's too big. It's a raven!"

Storm nodded. "This is Edgar. He's one of the best friends I've ever had."

"Never in all my born days," Ada mumbled again. She didn't cover her snooping eyes as she brazenly scanned the room. "Well, if there's anything you need dear, you just have to ask. We live down in apartment E. Come along Amos."

"Coming. Nice to meet you Miss Storm," he said as he was dragged out the door.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Storm closed the door, grabbed a muffin and a soda, and then went to sit down on the sofa. Before taking a bite she opened the cage. "I really am sorry, Edgar. It couldn't be helped."

He came huffing out, ruffled his feathers and hopped onto the perch that stood near the sofa. "Nosy neighbors, they are going to be difficult."

"I can take care of them," she promised. The muffin melted in her mouth. "He was right, these are the best muffins I've ever tasted."

Edgar ruffled his feathers again but said nothing, only stared at her. She shrugged and popped the final bite into her mouth. "We've had a full day. Time to get some rest, I guess."

Edgar looked at the clock on the wall. "It's only eight thirty. Since when do you take to bed so early?"

"Since I've come to this boring world."

A shrill ring interrupted whatever Edgar was about to say.

"Hello?"

"Storm there, please?"

She covered the mouthpiece and looked at Edgar. "It's him!" she mouthed. "This is Storm."

"Hi, this is Vance Nodin. We met at the grocery store. Listen, I know this is crazy. I don't usually pick up phone numbers with my groceries. I've been out on the road all afternoon, but I was wondering ... I mean, you said to call sometime, and I thought..."

"Vance?"

"Yeah?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Breathe. I'm glad you called. I wouldn't have given you my number if I hadn't wanted you to. I'd love to get together. That is what you wanted, right?"

"Definitely. I mean, yes, that's why I called. This isn't going very well."

She couldn't help but grin. Mortals really were such simple creatures. "Shall we start over?"

"Please. Hello, is Storm there?"

"This is she."

"Hi, this is Vance Nodin. I was wondering if you'd like to get together for a late dinner? Maybe a drink or something?"

"That sounds wonderful. When would you like to get together?"

"Is tonight all right?"

"Perfect. Where would you like to meet?"

"How about Rowdy's Roadhouse, just outside of town? Despite the name, they do serve food."

"What time?"

"Well it's almost quarter of now. How about we say nine o'clock?"

"All right, I'll see you there. Bye, Vance." She clicked off the phone and shot Edgar a triumphant look. "If things keep up at this pace, I'll have that contest won in a few days!"

"And it will look like you cheated, too."

She frowned. "I hadn't thought of that. Still they know how silly mortals are. You show them a little of one thing and they just have to have it. They can't help it, it's just the way they are." She went to the mirror. "I can't go meet him like this."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She passed her hand over her face and slid the palm downward. In seconds her hair was nicely combed out. Gone were the old shorts, replaced by a nice pair of jeans that looked painted on. She knew they accented her curves. Her top was sheer and underneath, a flesh-tone tank fooled the eye into believing she was bare. Oh yes, she looked hot! She turned to Edgar. "So?"

"Very nice." He nodded his feathered head. "Yes, that man will be spellbound without a *bricht*."

"Don't wait up Edgar, dear." She blew him a kiss as she zapped from the apartment to the car. "Rowdy's Roadhouse," she uttered, and in seconds the car was in a spot in the lot. She scanned the other vehicles to see if he was there.

She didn't see his truck so she got out of her car, intent on waiting for him inside. Rounding the front bumper, she encountered a man. He was tall, staggering and smelled like he'd slept in a brewery. "Excuse me," she said, moving away.

His hand snaked out and grabbed her arm. "Where ya goin' darlin? Lesch me n you have some fun."

"Okay!" She pointed at him, turned her hand over and crooked it at him. "Follow me, boy."

"Wahoo!" The drunk staggered toward her. His arms opened and he reached to grab her.

"Hair of fire, breath like fog, turn this drunk into a dog." A mere second flashed and a staggering, moth-eaten hound dog replaced the drunk. "Good. Fitting I'd say. Now, you wait here and sober up. I'll be back later."

"Who are you talking to?" Vance's voice startled her.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Had he seen what she did? Storm's heart rate increased as she met his gaze. There wasn't a single note of suspicion in his eyes, which meant she hadn't been spotted. She scratched the dog behind the ear as a show of kindness. "Oh, I found him wandering around the lot. The poor old thing. I was just trying to make him feel not so lonely."

When she stood straight and faced Vance he made a sudden intake of breath and his eyes widened. He studied her appreciatively. She grinned, walked over and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Nice to see you."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Seven

When Vance dialed her number earlier he wasn't sure what he'd been thinking. Looking at her standing there, he at least could acknowledge what he'd been thinking with.

A grizzled old hound staggered from behind Storm. It swayed off kilter with each step.

"Looks like someone slipped booze into his water dish." Vance reached out to pet the dog.

It pulled back its lips and a low growl rumbled from its thin chest. The cur lurched and swayed as it moved out of reach.

"Animals usually like me," he muttered.

She only laughed and placed her hand on his arm. "Shall we go in?"

He gave her hand a squeeze and led her to the door. As it squeaked open, the jukebox blared at a near deafening level. He paused, and glanced down at her. Any idiot would know better than to ask a woman to a roadhouse for their first date. "We can go somewhere else if you'd prefer. This place is kind of noisy."

Her smile didn't slip. In fact, it seemed to grow warmer. "Not right now. I've never been to a place like this before."

He scanned the room and found an empty table in the back. He stepped inside and led the way through the crowd.

Once she was seated, he moved and sat across from her. "I'm glad you agreed to come out tonight."

She leaned forward. "What?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He groaned. The music wasn't as loud where they were but it was still enough to drown out his words. "I said I'm glad you're here."

She flashed him a brilliant smile. "I'm glad you called," she half shouted back.

He felt funny when she smiled at him like that. He'd never been one to get all tongue-tied but with her, for some reason, he felt like a high school nerd with the prom queen. It left him unsettled. "Would you like a drink, or something to snack on?"

"I'd love a Martian liter."

Her voice was drowned out by a booming laugh coming from the next table over. "A what?"

A strange look crossed her face. "A Mexicola," she answered.

He nodded and the waitress came over to take their orders. "A mexicola for the lady and I'll have a whiskey and coke." He turned back to Storm, "We don't have to stay here if you'd rather go somewhere else. It might be easier to talk if we left." He'd forgotten that it was payday Thursday, and many of the locals came in to cash their checks.

She glanced around them. Finally she nodded. "Let's have our drink, then we can go."

The waitress set the glasses on the table; he paid and turned his attention back to Storm. It was crazy, he knew it, but his mind had grasped onto her being the woman he'd imagined in the tornado's debris field, and he couldn't let it go. Maybe he'd had some kind of psychic precognition of meeting her?

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Somewhere back in time, his family had a shaman who was rumored to have been a seer. He shook his head at the fanciful notion.

"What's on your mind?" her soft voice cut through the music and grabbed his attention.

"You." He picked up the glass and took a drink.

"You're right, it is too loud here. Is there somewhere we can go and talk?"

He nodded. "There's an all night diner down the road." He finished his drink. "Ready?"

She stood from her seat and grabbed her bag. "Ready."

He placed his hand on the small of her back and maneuvered her out to the parking lot. "You follow me; it's only about two blocks. We'll turn left at the stop sign and you'll see it on the right."

"Got it." She slid into the Corvette and the engine purred to life.

Vance moved off to his truck and headed down the short drive to the All Niter. He pulled into a spot in the nearly empty lot, and by the time she had shut off her engine he was standing beside her car. "Looks like we won't have to worry about interruptions."

She squeezed his hand. "Good, I want to get to know you."

He led her inside and they took a seat near the window. After ordering coffee and pie they were finally alone. He sat back in his seat and studied her beautiful face. "What brings you to Oklahoma?"

"I needed a change of scenery for a bit. So, tell me all about yourself. All I know is you chase storms." She waggled her eyebrows and grinned.

He couldn't help but laugh. "Well, you're definitely the most interesting Storm I've encountered yet. What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Married or single?"

"Obviously single, else I wouldn't be here," he chuckled. "I've never even been close to being married. You?"

"Very single." She gave him a teasing wink. "Okay, next question. Have you always wanted to be storm chaser?"

This date was slowly beginning to feel like an interrogation. "Yes. I grew up here. Each season brought at least one tornado, most years brought along more than two. I love the feeling of power that they provide. Right now, I'm working with the NWS in developing an earlier warning system." He closed his eyes for a moment.

"I had a cousin killed in a severe storm when I was a kid. I decided then and there I was going to make sure no one else ever suffered such a loss." He took a drink of his coffee and looked into her eyes. *Time to turn the tables.* "Enough about me. What about you?"

"Right now I'm between worlds. Tell me about your family."

"Not so fast. You tell me a bit about you now."

She sighed then smiled. "I am the oldest of four sisters. We're all scattered about. Actually, right at this moment, I'm not sure where they all are."

"Do they have unusual names too?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Depends on what you call unusual. There is Ember, Maryna, and Tara. She's the baby."

"Definitely unusual. Are they between worlds also?"

She laughed, her shoulders shaking, her cheeks turning pink, and her booming laughter shaking the table.

"What did I say?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." She inhaled a deep breath to gather her composure. "Now back to a more enjoyable subject. Tell me more about you. You live near here?"

He nodded. "Just down the block a ways. How about you? You got to the Rowdy's awful fast."

"I live just up the road *a ways*."

"We're not getting very far. I feel like you know so much about me and I know nothing about you."

"I'm a tad ... eccentric."

"Tell me about your hobbies."

"I am kind of like you, interested in the weather and that sort of thing. Storms fascinate me. As you said, the power is thrilling. But I don't just stick with tornadoes. Hurricanes, blizzards, and gentle spring breezes, I dabble in all of it."

"Would you like to come on a chase sometime?" He bit his lip, but it was too late to call back the words. Unlike other chasers he knew, he didn't ferry around thrill seeking sightseers. His interest was scientific and there was a method behind his madness.

Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement. "I'd love to! When?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

It was dangerous. Not just for the natural threats that could develop, but having her close was dangerous in a different manner.

He needed to start thinking with the head on his shoulders. "I'll have to see. I have to monitor those fronts. You know, find the best one. Besides, I'm just back from two weeks on the road. Plus, I have a partner I should clear this with, before I just jump in and invite you."

"You're stalling me," she pouted.

Yes. "No, I'm not." He didn't really have to get Heidi's okay, after all this was his show. The safety concern was still an issue, although it wasn't as great as he tried to make it sound. He never gambled with the lives of his chase team. Of course, wouldn't he be doing that if she went along for the ride?

The way she affected him had to be taken into consideration. On the road, during the middle of a storm, being distracted could be deadly.

He also had the distinct impression that if Al met her there'd be definite territory problems. Territory? She was a woman, not a piece of land. A wry grin pulled on the corners of Vance's mouth. She was a fine looking piece...

"What?"

He jerked his head and hesitantly looked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"You had the most devilish little grin, I wondered what you were thinking. Was it me?"

Busted. He inwardly groaned. "Never mind."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She laughed and made a triumphant "*aha*" sound. "You were thinking about me! What was it?"

"Nothing."

"If you say so. I will tell you what I've learned just from spending," she looked at her watch, "two hours with you. You're a smart, sexy man whom I could definitely get into spending more time with."

He grinned at the appraisal. "I'd like to spend more time with you, too."

"Good." She finished off her pie and emptied the coffee cup.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Eight

Should she invite him back to her apartment? No, probably not. This was only their first date and she didn't want to give the wrong impression. She needed to be more on top of how women in this world acted with men.

Not that she was completely naïve. Mortal men seemed to have a lot in common with the male witches. They could be distracted by a smile or a gesture. She never spent the night with one of her own kind on the first date, so she wouldn't do that with Vance.

But something was wrong with her. She wanted to be with him. She was being distracted by an urge to run her fingers through his dark hair. *Stop*, she ordered her mind. She was here to win the contest and that was it, nothing more.

Still, the unfamiliar urge to be held in his arms was so strong she could barely battle it down. "I need to get home," she said abruptly and moved out of the seat.

The bewildered look on his face made her pause for a second. "We'll talk again soon." She kissed the tip of her finger, leaned forward and pressed it against his lips before she headed for the door.

He didn't catch up with her until she was already at her car. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. It's me." She opened the door and climbed in. "I'm sorry Vance, I'm just tired all of the sudden. Call me later?" She started the engine and backed out of the spot.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Home," she ordered the car and while it drove her back to the apartment, she had a few minutes to gather her thoughts.

"What's wrong with me?" she cried out when she zapped into the apartment.

Edgar startled awake and squawked. "What's wrong with you? You scare a poor fellow out of his wits and dreams! That's what's wrong with you!"

Storm flopped down on the sofa and stretched out. She pounded her head back into a throw pillow. She rolled up on her side and kicked her heel into the cushions. Finally she sat up and released a growl of frustration before shouting, "*Ámóg.*" A hammock of cloud fluff appeared in the room.

She snapped her fingers and was transported to the hammock where she laid back. The hammock swayed in the air. "I'm sorry I startled you, Edgar. I need to know what's wrong with me as far as that mortal is concerned. I met him at the place he first suggested. It was far too crowded and noisy." She closed her eyes and laid her arm across them. "So we left and went to this little diner thing. One minute we're talking, getting to know each other. The next minute..."

She sat up and leveled a gaze at Edgar. "The next I'm imagining running my fingers through his hair and being held in his arms! There was no reason for me to feel that way."

She stood up and paced across the floor. "So I left him and came back here."

"Hmm. Other than running away, did you have a nice time?"

She frowned at him. "I just told you! I ... *OH!*"

"What?"

"There was a drunk mortal in the parking lot of the bar. I turned him into a dog and left before I turned him back." She closed her eyes. "Mortal, drunk and smelling fowl, return to human form, and cease to growl." She restlessly resumed her pacing.

"A *Stóirín*, be still for a time! You make this old bird anxious with your pacing." He flapped over and landed on her shoulder. "I think it rather amusing, this newfound feeling for a mortal."

She swiped her hand across her shoulder and removed him. "I don't have feelings for the mortal."

"Ah, but love, you do. They are only minor, an attraction, to be precise. But view it thus, if you didn't have an attraction for him, would the game be as enjoyable?"

She popped back onto her hammock, considering his words. "So all that's wrong with me is attraction?"

"Nothing more."

She let loose a wild laugh. "Thank Merida! For a minute I was afraid I ... oh never mind." She lay back. "Now I have to find a way of getting back with him."

"You will. Give it time. I'd like to return to my sleep now."

"Of course, good night, Edgar." She floated to the bedroom, turning out the lights as she passed through. She closed her eyes and soon her own sleep took over. Her dreams all jumbled atop one another, splashes of color, shades of light and dark, shapeless globs.

"Storm," a soft voice called.

She sat up. "Tara! Is something wrong?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"No I just wanted to pop in and see how things were going." Tara popped on the soft fluff cloud beside her sister.

"You had to wake me up for that? It's the middle of the night."

Tara looked in surprise at Storm. "It's almost eleven in the morning."

Storm sat up stunned, "How can that be? I just went to bed."

Tara laughed. "Knowing your wild lifestyle I'm not surprised."

"It's not like that." She frowned. "I went out and met my mortal last night. We had a drink, talked, and then I came home and went to bed. That's all."

"So you found yours? What's he like?"

"This." She produced the crystal square and materialized Vance's image for Tara to view.

"He's very handsome! How does he deal with your element?"

"He's a storm chaser."

Tara giggled. "Well, is he?"

"So far he hasn't chased this Storm. But, I'm very pleased with my choice. He's got potential."

Tara nodded, still smiling. "Sometimes things work out a little different than we imagine."

Storm jumped off the bed and zapped herself ready for the day. "Is there something you aren't sharing with me?"

"No."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She studied Tara's golden brown eyes. There was sparkle that she'd never noticed before. "Tara, sweetie? You aren't a good liar."

"There's nothing to share. Honest. I've found my mortal and I'll be jumping in with both feet before long."

"Will you be near here?"

Tara shook her head and a golden brown curl slipped over her eyes. "No, I'll be in Arizona."

"I've heard of it." She studied Tara closer. "Is something wrong?"

Tara smiled softly. "Nope, just wanted to pop in on you and see how you're progressing."

Tara wasn't going to share anything until she was ready and, despite her arguments to the contrary, Storm could tell there was something bothering her little sister. Well, when the girl was ready, she'd share. "We're doing fine. Now come with me and say hello to Edgar."

She walked into the living room where Edgar was already awake and had the television on. "How are you this morning Edgar?" She placed a kiss on his sleek black head.

"I'm doing fine. Tara, *A Thaisce!*" He flapped over and lit on Tara's shoulder, then pecked a kiss on her cheek. "So nice to see you my dear." Edgar hopped over to her other shoulder.

Tara stroked his sleek feathers and kissed his beak. "It's so great to see you."

"Shouldn't you be on your search?"

"I just wanted to pop in and visit my older sister."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Storm zapped up some breakfast for Edgar and put it in a silver tray on the coffee table in the living room, then she moved to the dining room and whipped up a breakfast selection for her and Tara.

Storm sat down and motioned Tara to join her. "Hungry?"

Tara sat down and nibbled at the fruit and French toast spread. "Thanks, guess I was."

"Have you seen Ember or Maryna?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

"I saw Maryna before I got settled here. I'm sure she's off causing trouble somewhere."

Storm took a seat across the table. "You sure there isn't something you want to tell me?" She popped a bite into her mouth. "Something that seems to be important to you?"

Tara shook her head. "Can't I just visit my sister?"

"Of course you can. When you get settled let me know so I can drop in on you."

"Sure will." Tara finished the last few bites on her plate. "I guess I better get back to my hunt." She stood up and blew Storm a kiss. "See you." She waved and vanished.

Storm pushed away from the table. "I've no idea what to do with myself today."

"You could try telling the mortal why you ran away from him last night."

She pursed her lips then stuck her tongue out at him. "I don't think so."

"If I was a man and my companion ran away from me, I'd want to know what I'd done wrong so that I could apologize and get her forgiveness."

Storm huffed a breath. "We both know he didn't do anything. Besides he's a mortal. All I have to do is smile at him and all will be forgotten."

Edgar shook his head. "*A leanbh na páirte*, so much pride. You underestimate the mortal. You see him as a lower being. One incapable of having individual thoughts and feelings, but he is. The only way you can be assured of having it all your way is with the use of *dhraíocht*, and that is off limits."

Storm tossed her head and stalked towards him. "I don't have to use magic. I can captivate him without it."

"You must act like any other mortal woman, Storm. That means you have to let him know you left last night because you were uncomfortable. Ask him for a second meeting, a second chance."

She knew the old bird was right. But did he realize how hard it was for her?

She was intrigued by Vance's smile. And the warmth of his hand on her skin heated through to her core. The way he smelled. The way he moved. The sound of his voice. The strength of her attraction to him unnerved her.

She wanted to see him again. With a snap of her fingers the phone materialized in her hand and, in seconds it was ringing through the ear piece.

"Hello?" his voice was gruff.

"Hi, Vance."

"Yeah?"

"This is Storm. I wanted to ... explain about last night." No response. That wasn't good. "Can we meet somewhere for a little talk?"

The longer his end of the line was silent, the harder it was on her insides. "I'm a little busy right now. Can I call you later?"

Her initial desire to cheer at his voice was consumed by the disappointment that raced through her. "Sure, I'll be around. Bye, Vance."

"Bye."

The line clicked dead and she looked at Edgar. "He says he'll call me back."

"Then you best find something to occupy your time while you wait." He tilted his head and studied her. "He'll call, never fear. Find something else to think on."

She turned on the television and flipped through the channels. "I could use the time to study mortal behavior more closely."

"If you really want to know what its like to be a mortal woman, get a job," Edgar prodded.

Storm stared at him, her mouth gaping open, "A job? A mortal job? You must be joking!"

"Not in the least. Mortal women have jobs. Some support themselves quite well and are very successful. I'm not saying you should be a doctor or anything like that. Work in an ... office, or as a sales girl, in a trade. Mingle with mortals. Learn their ways firsthand. It will give you something to occupy your time and think of the stories you'll have to take home with you when this is over."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Nine

Storm sat back and, indeed, thought it over. Edgar had a point, and not just on his beak. "Maybe you're right. I'll do it!" She jumped off the sofa and headed for the door.

"Wait, *A Chumann*, you don't know where you're headed. Besides which, you can't search for a job dressed like that." He moved to the remote and pressed a button. "Observe how she is dressed in her job hunt. Nice slacks, blouse and comfortable shoes." He looked at Storm's denim shorts and tank top. "That will never do."

"But slacks will be too hot for a day like today." She flipped through the channels landing on a scene of a young woman dressed in a knee length black skirt, dark grey blouse and her hair in a severe knot on her head. Low heeled black shoes on her feet. "Something like that, but not as stuffy."

She twirled her index finger in the air and then looked in the mirror. Replacing her casual attire was a knee length cobalt blue, polyester skirt, a sky blue, short-sleeved satin blouse, and cobalt blue pumps. Her hair was styled in the severe knot like the girl on the screen. "I don't like my hair." She fretted, then swirled her finger in a handful of hair. Her long sleek hair was now styled in a riot of long curls that hung down to her shoulders. "Much better, don't you agree?"

He nodded his approval. "Very respectable. Now, have you decided where you are going to look for a job? Or even what kind of job?"

"No."

"Well, I gave you two options. Look in the paper and see if there are advertisements looking to hire workers."

She produced the paper and sat back on the sofa.

Rifling through the pages she found the help wanted section. She scanned the listings. "Not a lot here. There is a bank, a bar, a hotel, the grocer, a gas station, the diner, and the schools. I've no desire to mess with money so the bank is out, I have no patience for drunk mortals so the bar is out..."

"You can't be picky. Try applying at the other places. Maybe the diner, even the grocer."

She nodded. "I'll be back later." Zapping herself into her Corvette she drove over to the diner first. She got out of the car, straightened her shoulders and walked to the front door. Just as she reached out to pull it open, butterflies gathered in her stomach. She spun on her heel and rushed back to the safety of her car. There was no way that this would be a good idea ... waiting on mortals? No, there had to be other options. Getting back in the car she let it cruise the street until she came upon the gas station. In the window a sign read, *Help Wanted*.

"Another sign," she laughed and parked then went to the front door. Walking in, she looked around, finally seeing an older man in grey coveralls. "Hello," she smiled.

"Howdy Miss. What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to inquire about the position."

The man's eyes roamed up and then down her body. "Ma'am, this ain't no runway, and there ain't no office work. I need someone who can run the gas pumps, check the tanks, and work the registers."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"I need a job. I'm sure I can work the pumps and tanks. And if it means I can wear comfortable clothes even better, I'd gladly trade these pumps," she stuck out her leg and turned her ankle slowly, "for those pumps."

He shook his head to draw his attention away from her well shaped legs and he walked over from the counter. "See the thing is, I ain't got nothing against hiring a gal, but have you ever worked in a station before?"

She smiled, pointed her finger at her temple and rubbed, then she walked over to the counter, stepped behind it and moved to the control panel. "These switches are to turn on the pumps. This is the emergency shut-off valve here. There should be another couple out there by the pumps." She identified the switches and knobs. "The cash register is a little older than I'm familiar with, but it's nothing

I can't handle."

She moved to the door jam. "This is the *tank stick*; it's placed in the tank each night to measure how much gas is stored and then the measurement is noted in the notebook. Helps keep track of how much is sold. The store here is like any other shop, they bring the purchases to me, I ring them and bang, they're off." She walked back over to the man. "So, do I get the job?"

The look of shock disappeared and a huge grin split his face. "You're a little sassy, but I gotta admit you sure know what you're doing. You're a helluva lot prettier than my last pump jockey. But if you work for me, no skirts, them out there," he pointed to the gas pumps "is the only pumps I wanna see." He laughed, picking up her joke. "No shorty

shorts, no matter how great your legs are. Can't have my customers forgettin' what they come in for."

"All right."

"Here are the papers you need to fill out, pay forms and all that. Get 'em filled out and then bring 'em back up to me. We'll talk about hours and stuff then." He handed her the pen and paper.

She took it and went to the table in the back of the room. This would be tricky. It asked for something called a TIN. A little further down the page it was explained that this meant a tax identification number. How the heck did one get a number?

With a shrug, she wrote down a jumble of eight numbers and then she saw that they wanted a card and an ID. Hmm, id ... driver's license, well she could snap one of those up, the card they wanted was a Social Security one. "Oh!" she exclaimed softly, that was supposed to have the number on it that she'd put on the paper! She produced the card, and once she was finished filling in the forms, she returned them all to the older man. "Here you are."

He accepted them and looked everything over. "Storm Duile, nice to meet ya. I'm Zeke. Before I hire ya, you gotta know, I will joke, tease and flirt with you. Some gals think that's what they call that there sexual harassment, but it ain't, it's all good fun. I might tell ya you look good, or pretty or whatever. I might pat your hand, hug ya or kiss yer cheek. I won't be grabbing ya, and all that. And I won't stand fer none of the customers doing any of that neither. If any of 'em touch ya, or make ya uncomfortable you come and tell me

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

and I'll give it to 'em but good. If I make you uncomfortable, let me know. I'm a hugger. All the folks hereabouts know I'm a toucher, but I won't be making advances. Clear?"

She nodded, "Thanks for being honest."

"I expect that from you and everyone. I tell ya like it is, pure and clear, and I expect the same respectful treatment. Ya lie to me, or steal from me and that's it, yer done."

Again she nodded. "When do you want me to start? What kind of hours?"

"Well being a pretty little thing I bet you got a boyfriend buzzing about wanting your nights open. I want you to work days, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sundays. You have to be here by eight in the morning and work until six in the evening. Except on Sundays, on Sunday we don't open until eleven and work until seven. You get a half hour for lunch when the afternoon clerk comes in. You can eat anything from the deli limited to two sandwiches, a bag of chips and a cookie. You can have all the soda from the fountain to drink while on duty. After shift you pay like anyone else."

She wrote everything down on a piece of paper. "Anything else?"

"No flirtin'. Well, not a lot, and none of it serious. No boyfriend hangin' about. He can stop in and see ya, but not for all day. No swearin'. If ya smoke, you gotta keep from the customers face. If it's slow, you restock the shelves and coolers. You'll have to make sandwiches in the deli. After all that's done if you want to read a book, you can, but you work first."

"When do you want me to start?"

"You be here at eight in the morning. You have to be well rested and ready to go."

"I'll be here, thank you. By the way, what do I call you?"

He grinned, "Zeke'll do."

"All right, see you in the morning, Zeke." She shook his hand and went out to the car. She'd done it! She'd actually gotten a mortal job! She was still smiling as the car took her home. When it stopped in her parking spot, she jumped out and walked into the building. She even walked up the stairs instead of zapping herself in. She unlocked the door using the key and walked inside the room.

Surprise widened Edgar's eyes and he squawked, "You *walked* in!"

"I took the stairs too! Besides, I walked in before."

"This is different."

She grinned and nodded. "I got a mortal job, too. I'm going to be working at the gas station down the road."

"A gas station? When I suggested you get a job I'd thought of an office, not something dirty like a gas station!"

"You're disappointed?" It hurt to think that Edgar wasn't pleased for her. "It's a mortal job. Zeke seems like a nice man, and it's a job."

Edgar relaxed. "I'm not disappointed, just surprised. When do you work?"

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday from eight in the morning until six at night, and on Sundays, eleven in the morning until seven. I won't be enjoying late nights when I

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

work. I..." The ringing phone interrupted her. The phone appeared at her side and she answered it. "Hello."

"Hi Storm, it's Vance. Listen, I'm sorry for brushing you off earlier. I was in the middle of something. I'd like to see you again but I'm swamped with work for the next few days. How about we make a date for dinner on Friday?"

"That sounds wonderful. What time would you like me to meet you, and where?"

"Actually, since this is a date I could pick you up around six. We could drive over to Enid and have dinner, then maybe take in a show."

"Great! I live in the Hazard House, apartment D. But I don't get off work until six, so could we make it later?"

"Work?"

"Yes, I got a job today!" She couldn't keep the excitement from her voice.

"It sounds like it's the first job you ever had." He laughed.

"It is! I'll be working at Taylor's Gas Station. I start in the morning. So can we make it seven?"

"Sure, seven it is. I have to get back to work but I'll see you Friday night. Bye, Storm."

"Bye, Vance." She clicked off the line. "I have a date! He's coming here Friday night at seven o'clock to pick me up."

"Congratulations, *Mo Mhuirín*. I see things are working well."

"Thank you. I should be able to win this contest easily."

"I have faith you will indeed win. I feel it in my claws."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She kissed his beak again and went to the kitchen. "I'm starving. How about I fix us an early supper?" She wandered back into the living room and sat on the edge of the sofa.

"All right. I'm in the mood for Rais'es Dijorn with a white truffle sauce, Crème Brulee and Cabernet Sauvignon."

Storm grinned and shook her head. She passed her hand over the coffee table and a book appeared. Opening it, she sat back and looked through the pages.

"*Betty Crocker*? Oh Jaoqua! Please tell me you aren't going to try and cook!"

"I'm mortal for now."

"May the gods help us."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ten

Vance held the phone in his hand for a minute before returning it to the cradle. He'd felt like a jerk for having been so rude to her earlier. She didn't know he'd been buried under piles of paperwork; she had no clue he was facing a deadline for the data to be compiled and reported to the committee on the accuracy and dependability of the new alert system.

She didn't know about his concerns and worry over The Tank. Nor did she know of his frustration at not having found the perfect storm to set it up in. She had no idea and he felt ten times the creep for not having said something to her.

Still, he hadn't rushed to call her back, and now he had a date with her. It was his first date in more than six months. He couldn't stop the silly, lopsided grin from his face. "This is a day for firsts," he mumbled.

"What?" Heidi asked, as she walked in the room.

"I said this is a day of firsts. I have my first date in half a year. My first date with Storm, and she just got her first job..." he stumbled over the words. His eyebrow quirked and his head slanted. "Wait a minute. Did you hear what I just said?"

Heidi nodded. "Uh-hmm, so?"

"So how could she not have had a job before?"

Heidi shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe you misunderstood. Maybe it's her first job since moving here. Maybe she's some rich

chick from a silver spoon family and has never had to work before. Couldn't tell you. Why not ask her."

He sat back down and turned to face his computer screen, but he couldn't focus on the columns. How did she not have a job before? "You're right. I had to have misunderstood."

"You can ask her Friday night, right? Now can we get back to work?" Her stomach growled and she swallowed hard. "Sorry," she flushed.

"No, it's okay, we should get something to eat. How about I order in pizza?"

"Why don't I just go and see what you've got in the kitchen? We get enough fast food on the chase."

"That's for sure, but you may not find a lot."

"I'll manage."

Heidi disappeared into the other room and in a little bit Vance heard his cabinets being opened. Drawers slid out and back in. There was the clatter of pots or pans and the sound of running water.

While she was working, Vance came into the kitchen. "Hey, do you know how much I appreciate all the work you do for me?"

"I know, but it's nice when you tell me once in a while."

"Consider yourself told." He went and opened the fridge pulling out a soda. "Not sure where it came from, but how about some of this bagged salad with dinner?"

"Sounds good."

He walked over and pecked her cheek. "Thanks for being around, I don't miss my sister as much when you're here." He

walked back to the door. "I'll see if I can't get those calculations finished and printed up."

Vance headed back to his desk and began to punch the keys. He needed to direct his focus. The Tank still had to be tested, but he also had his responsibility over the early warning device he was developing.

He couldn't continue to divide his time between the projects. Reluctantly he reached for the phone and dialed Mike.

"What's up, buddy?" Mike answered.

"Listen. I've been thinking and I ... well ... crap." He scraped a hand down his face. He didn't want to but he was going to have to pass something on.

"Vance?"

"Yeah. Listen, Mike, I need help."

"Admission is the first step to recovery." His friend's deep chuckle floated through the line.

"Very funny. Seriously, I can't do this alone. I have to get this EWD ready. I can't do that and try to chase with The Tank. Plus all the reports I have to file and—it's just pulling me down."

"I don't do paperwork," Mike replied and his tone implied he was only half kidding.

"I think you should take the lead with The Tank. Al and Rabbit are still out on the road. They'll be in sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"But Vance, man, this was your dream."

"I have a lot of dreams, Mike. This EWD is the most important one."

"Are you sure?"

Was he? He swallowed hard. "Unfortunately I'm sure. I'll let Heidi know I won't be on the hunt any more this season."

"All right. I'm sorry it worked out this way, but thanks."

"Sure. Night."

Frustration welled inside him. Vance saw all his hard work vaporizing before him. Being the one to see that The Tank worked was important. It meant glory and that brought in more grant and research money.

But when he weighed it against the lives that could be lost or saved by his early warning device, he'd take the lives any day.

He looked down at the device in his hand. There had to be a way of making this new system affordable for the communities it was designed to serve. But they had to get all the bugs out first.

Right now, the system went off whenever the wind picked up to forty five miles per hour, but there wasn't always a bad storm associated with it, it was just that, wind.

He looked up the files on the computer and opened the schematics for the WindTalker unit. There had to be something he'd missed in getting it set up.

Ideally the EWD would be able to measure the wind gusts and shifts, and interpret the threat of severe weather. It would then send the information to a satellite that would calculate the data and send a response back to the unit that would then send out the alert, if warranted.

He continued studying the file. Maybe it was the calibrations in the message unit. He reached down and picked

up a unit, then grabbed a screwdriver and opened the small blue box.

Removing the three by two inch, computerized reader and laying it flat, he studied it, hoping for inspiration to hit him. Turning it over and over in his hand, he stared at it. "Tell me why you aren't picking things up right," he begged it.

"Vance? Dinner's ready," Heidi called from the doorway. He didn't respond so she walked to the desk. "Hey, Mr. Wizard, dinner's on."

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Just a minute. This is really making me nuts. I can't figure out what's wrong with this thing."

"Take a breather. You've been at this for almost ten straight hours. It'll come; you're just trying too hard right now."

His forehead had developed a dull throb. "I have to figure this out. We've worked on this for so long H, it just makes me crazy that it isn't fully functioning yet."

"I know, but Rome wasn't built in a day. Come and eat. Relax a bit before you try to think any more."

They sat down at the white laminate table. "What's got you so stumped?" Heidi asked as she passed him the pot of spaghetti.

"I can't figure out why the reader in the WT is having trouble. I don't know if it's on this end or if it's receiving the right data from the satellite."

"If it was the satellite itself, we'd have seen the problems at our base systems. Maybe the reader is the problem. Maybe you have something that was misprogrammed when you installed it?"

"What?" his tone was slightly harsh.

Heidi flushed but continued, "I'm not saying you don't know what you're doing, I'm saying that maybe something just got punched in wrong."

"Sorry I snapped." Vance shrugged, "It's worth checking into after we finish this great meal."

She took a drink and swiped her mouth with a paper towel. "I'm thinking of getting up a poker game for this weekend, you interested?"

"I've got a date Friday night."

"With the woman you were slobbering all over the phone with this afternoon?"

"I didn't slobber. I simply called and asked her for dinner and she agreed."

"So tell me about this young lady," Heidi began with a sly grin. "Is she well educated? Is she from a good family? You know how important it is that she be from a decent family with the proper upbringing."

"If you don't knock it off..." He pushed away from the table and put the dirty dishes in the sink. "You clean the kitchen; I'm going back to work."

He was pulled back to the computer. It was almost as if a bungee-shackle were attached to his leg. He sat down and picked up the WindTalker. He carefully took it apart and studied each component.

"Hey, want something before I start washing dishes?"

Vance glanced up at her. "I was only kidding. You don't have to do that. You're my research assistant and chase partner, not my maid and cook."

"I know, but we can't have you living like a slob, either. I'll be back in a few minutes." She sauntered out of the room.

He shook his head and turned back to the project at hand. He was rapidly running out of time. But if he didn't take a step back he'd drive himself insane. That wouldn't take much at this point in time, he was already half there.

He stood and stretched then decided to take a look at his most recent photos. He pulled out a huge binder filled with pictures.

Slowly he flipped through the pages admiring his work. He knew it was vanity but he also knew that his photos were the best he'd seen.

At the top of the page was a single thin white funnel. In a second shot it had extended into a slender finger reaching from the cloud to the ground. Several shots later it had grown from the finger to a thick, black, angry mass of swirling debris.

He stopped at one photo and stared at it closely. In the debris cloud there was ghost of what appeared to be a woman's figure. He shrugged it off. *Must be some kind of double exposure.*

Some stills showed white fingers dancing across the tops of solid black clouds. Some were pink lines of electricity that extended from the clouds and touched the earth.

"I'm heading out, Vance," Heidi called from the front door.

"Thanks a lot. Night." He stood up and followed, then shut the door and locked it behind her. He headed to relax in front of the television. Maybe something would hit him there. He

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

sat down and stretched out on the sofa. Flipping on the idiot box, he landed on a music channel.

His eyelids grew heavy, and before long he was lost in a dreamscape. Dull blacks and grays coated the entire world, then slashes of color: blue and white, pink and gold. The initial feelings of despair were replaced with soothing calm. Without realizing it, a smile formed on his lips and he surrendered completely to the sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Eleven

Storm looked closely at the cookbook, trying to find something to fix for dinner. "I don't know, Edgar." She moved and waved her hand in front of the screen. Vance's work partner stood in the kitchen cooking noodles and meat. "That's it! Spaghetti!" She turned to Edgar, "Does that sound all right to you?"

He dipped his head. "Sounds just fine. Do you have the ingredients?"

She walked to the kitchen and waved her hand over the counter. A package of pasta, tomatoes, grated cheese, a pound of ground beef and various seasonings appeared. "I didn't have time to go grocery shopping."

Edgar cocked his head and eyed her closely. "I didn't say anything."

"I know, but I can imagine what you were thinking." She turned to the television, made a square in the air with her finger, then crooked her finger. "Come," she ordered. The screen floated into the kitchen and hovered near her side. She produced a pot, filled it with water, then it floated to the stove. While it heated, she placed the ground beef into a skillet and popped it onto the stove next to the pot.

A third pot appeared. Storm chopped the tomatoes and tossed them into the pot. She eyed the bottles and jars of herbs. "How much of all this?" A large Italian man appeared on the screen. "Hey, Storm."

"Hi, Tony. I'm not sure what to do here."

"You need some measuring spoons." He waited until she'd produced a set. "You need one fourth teaspoon of garlic, more if you want."

She measured garlic and then tossed it in the pot with tomato pieces. "Next?"

"For the other herbs you will need two teaspoons of the dried sweet basil, one teaspoon oregano, and two teaspoons of the salt. Place those in your pot, cook it up to a boil and then add it to your noodles."

"Ta failte romhat, Tony."

"Prego, enjoy!" His image evaporated.

She raised her hand, palm flat to the screen. It floated back to the television and went dark.

The water pot was boiling, so she opened the pasta and added it to the water. The meat was smoking and she made a mad dash to stir it up. It was blackened and sticking to the pan. Storm scraped extra hard, and then moved back to the pot of tomato mess. This was placed on a third burner and she turned the heat on high.

She kept scraping the meat, but it continued to sizzle and pop, growing blacker with every second. "Something's wrong."

Smoke filled the room. Heat coming from the stove top was stifling. The water with noodles began to foam. It rolled over the top and slid down the sides of the pot, making a sizzling sound as it connected with the burners.

The tomato glop began to bubble and pop. The thickened liquid boiled over and oozed down the outside of the once gleaming silver. spurts of red splattered all across the wall

behind the stove. It also covered the side of the refrigerator, and splatters even flew as far as Storm's shirt.

Smoke floated out to the living room Edgar coughed and hacked. "Turn down the heat!"

Storm nodded and turned all the burners off. She smoothed hair from her forehead. What a mess. She released a frustrated sigh and snapped her fingers. Everything became clean and shiny once again

She poured the tomato conglomeration into the pot with the noodles, then stirred. She dumped the meat in next, mixing the whole lot. Turning to Edgar. "I did it! I made spaghetti," she chattered while peering at her friend through the haze of smoke.

She whipped up a couple of plates and scooped out the spaghetti. Liquid slid along the plates as she carried them over and sat them on the table.

She produced the knife and fork for each place setting, then went back to the kitchen to retrieve the parmesan cheese, glasses of red wine, and bread with butter.

With her hands and arms full, she returned to the table and sat down. She looked up at Edgar. "Ready to eat?"

He looked at the red tinted water floating around the mass of noodles, and then glanced at Storm. "Looks umm ... interesting." He hesitantly scooped up a bite.

She filled her fork and shoved in a mouthful while juice slid down her chin. "It's awful." She quickly spat the bite into a napkin. "Why is it so wet? The meat tastes like little rocks and..." Tears slipped down her cheek.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Edgar flapped to her shoulder. "There, there *A Thaisce*, one doesn't learn it just like that. It takes a great deal of time and practice to do things the mortal way. You'll learn."

She brushed the tear away and shoved the plate to the middle of the table. "Forget it, Edgar. I don't want to learn. I love being a witch and I plan on using my powers. Forget acting like a silly mortal." The disaster disappeared with a flick of her wrist. In its place sat two plates heaping with well made spaghetti. A fresh green salad in a large crystal bowl and fresh hot rolls with creamy butter filled the middle of the table. "Dig in."

"Storm, when you were a young witch, were you able to make all your spells come out perfect the first time?"

She swallowed the bite of roll. "No, of course not."

"When you began teleporting, did you get where you wanted to go the first few times?"

"No, actually there was that one time my bottom ended up in Aridya and my top went to San Maritz. Then—" she began to choke from laughing hard, "My left side went to the Martian Mayhem and my right side to Venus Days. I got to enjoy two festivals at once."

"So ... you weren't perfect from the beginning?"

Storm quirked her eyebrow. "You got me. I promise to be more patient."

"Good." He slurped down a length of spaghetti and rubbed his beak on his napkin.

After they finished eating, Storm cleared the table the mortal way and washed her dishes by hand. After the kitchen had been cleaned, she joined Edgar in the living room, and

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

she stretched before sitting down on the sofa. "Tomorrow is the big day. My first day at my new job. I've got this really strange sensation in my stomach. My first attempt at cooking must've made me ill."

"It's called nerves. Once you settle into the new job they'll vanish, I promise."

Storm pushed herself up. "I'm going to bed. Good night." She kissed the top of his head and went to her bedroom. She lay down and closed her eyes. In minutes she was asleep.

Darkness gathered in the corner of her mind. Grays and blacks were swirling in a maelstrom of activity, making her insides quake. Then a figure with copper skin and black hair appeared and silhouetted about his form were calm, bright, soothing lights and colors.

The feelings of anxiety calmed and she rushed to join him. Embraced in his arms, the world stilled and a smile formed on her lips as she relaxed into a deep sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twelve

The sun peeking in through the slats in the blinds pricked at Storm's eyes. She sat up, looked at the clock, and panicked. It was already seven thirty in the morning!

She jumped up from her bed, snapped herself dressed and sprinted into the living room. "Goodbye, Edgar! I'm late!"

She raced out the door, down the steps, then to her car. "Running late, I need to change location, let me get to the station."

She popped onto the road just outside of view of the station and zipped down the short drive. Once parked, she ran inside. "I'm sorry Zeke, I was so nervous I couldn't sleep and then I woke up late and..."

Zeke smiled and held up his hand. "Yer not late, you still had fifteen minutes. Take a minute and breathe." He searched her up and down. "Now that's more like what ya should wear here. Look mighty fine today, ma'am."

She regarded her outfit: a pair of khaki walking shorts that ended two inches above her knee, a red oversized t-shirt, with khaki colored tennis shoes and red socks. "Thank you, Zeke. I think I'm ready now."

"Good. First thing, since you already know how to turn the pumps on and off, I'll show you where the stock is for the coolers."

He led the way to the back to the refrigerated rooms. "The Pepsi truck delivers on Monday, Coke comes on Tuesday, the

dairy shipments on Thursday. You just have to make sure all the rows are filled with the products."

He noticed she was shivering. "I keep a small jacket out there on a hook by the door. You can pull it on before you come in." He finished showing her the storage places and the right way to load the bottles into the rows, and then led her back out.

"Dry stock is kept in those rooms there; deliveries come every day throughout the day. Keep the shelves dusted and stocked. Also watch them local kids. They tend to take and *forget* to pay."

She nodded, "I'll keep an eye out."

"I'll be here off and on all day. Normally I work steady on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. All other days I'm in and out, except for Sundays. I go to services with the family and we have our family meals.

"On Sundays until you get settled, Brett Daniels'll be in charge. After a while, you'll prob'ly be calling the shots. I want someone older and with a good head on their shoulders. You show me you got what it takes and you'll get the job."

She nodded and walked back to the register counter.

"What about the deli?"

"That was next on my list. Now, every morning you'll make three dozen sandwiches, a dozen each tuna salad, chicken salad, and ham salad. Wrap them in the plastic wrap back here and then put them in the counter coolers to keep fresh.

"Mabel Harris makes cookies, brownies and assorted other snacks. She brings them in about quarter after eight every morning. Once they're gone, that's it for the day. On

Saturdays she makes big batches of the best donuts in the state, some long held secret recipe. Those are usually gone within an hour of her bringing them in."

"If they're that good I'm almost sorry I don't work on Saturdays," she chuckled.

"Well if you pop in early enough I may save one for you. Maybe..." He threw back his head and let loose a laugh.

She couldn't help but smile. "So I guess I'm ready to begin?"

"I reckon. Just in time too, we got a customer."

The black unit under the window, behind the counter, chimed. She walked over and pressed the button to start the tank. She beamed a triumphant smile at Zeke. "Nothing to it."

He chuckled, shook his head and walked outside to meet the man who had stopped at the pump. While he was gone she looked around the large shop, what was it he'd said about sandwiches?

She replayed the earlier scene in her mind. *One dozen tuna, chicken and ham salad*. She could do that. She walked to the deli counter and opened the refrigerated case. *If I were these salads where would I be?*

She searched for the bowls of lettuce but it was no use. She just didn't find them. "I've hit some glitches, need to make those sandwiches. No more of this ballad, send me the right salad."

Three separate plastic sealed containers popped in, each clearly marked. "Well that explains a lot," she murmured, as she grabbed the bread and opened the first container.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She spread the smelly tuna on the first piece of bread, laid the second on top then grabbed the plastic wrap. She pulled and tore, but the plastic ripped unevenly, then the static forced it to stick to itself.

Storm growled under her breath as she pulled off another bit to try again. Then she tried a third. When that one failed to spread evenly she fumed. "This is so stupid. How is a person supposed to make this stuff not stick to itself until you want it to?" She pointed and wriggled her finger; the sandwich was then wrapped neatly and placed itself into the cooler. "Thank you."

She looked up to notice that the truck had moved from in front of the pump and was now parked beside the building. Both the driver and Zeke were seated in a pair of cane-back rockers on the sidewalk.

She kept a watchful eye on the door, then spoke, "Chicken and ham, salad on bread, be prepared for those to be fed." The sandwiches laid themselves out on the counter one by one, then the plastic wrap followed, covering them and sealing neatly then they hovered into the coolers. In no time at all the job was done, she washed her hands, then stepped back to figure out what to do next.

Zeke still sat outside amiably chatting with his friend. She hated to rush out and ask him what she should do next, so she wandered over to the shelves. "Could use some dusting, I guess."

She materialized a feather duster and set about running it across the shelves. The sound of the unit beeping again drew her attention and she ran over to start the pump.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Just then a second vehicle drove up and stopped near the door. An older woman got out, arms laden with boxes. Zeke and the other man stood and went to her aid. They came and the woman walked behind the counter. "So you're the new one?"

"Yes ma'am, Storm Duile. I just started here this morning."

After putting her packages down, taking the others from the men and stacking them, she faced Storm. "I'm Mable. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again."

Mable opened the top box, and started placing cookies on the shelves of an acrylic display case. She then filled another with chocolate brownies, and the third was filled little yellow bars.

After completing this ritual with three more boxes of the same design she handed a cookie to Storm. "This one doesn't count as your one a day limit," she said with a smile.

Storm accepted it and took a bite. The fluffy disk melted in her mouth, the sensation of sweet hit the back of her tongue like honey. "These are really good!"

Mabel's smile grew wider. "She can stay, Zeke."

"I've never had anything like this before. What are they?"

"Mabel's Magic Meltaways. And before you ask, no you may not have the recipe."

Zeke walked over and snatched a cookie from the box. "Mabel never shares any of her recipes. Not sure how she does it, making all this all by her lonesome. Who's gonna take over for you when you leave me?"

"I ain't goin' nowhere for a long time, you old fox." She patted Storm on the shoulder. "I'll see you in the morning." She walked back out to her car and drove away.

After she left, Storm turned her attention to the two men. "I assume you're a friend of Zeke's?"

The other man nodded. "Nole Jackson at your service ma'am." He took her hand, bowed low over it and placed a soft kiss on the top of her hand.

"The pleasure is mine, dear sir."

"Enough flirtin' Nole, we best let her get back to work." Zeke looked over all she'd done already that morning. "I'd swear you'd been here for over a couple of hours with all you got done already. You sure work fast."

"Thanks. I'll get back now. Nice meeting you, Nole." She walked back to the register in time to accept a twenty-dollar bill from the lady who'd gotten gas. "Have a nice day, ma'am."

"Thanks, you too." The woman left.

Nole and Zeke followed her lead, going out to sit on the sidewalk.

Storm wandered over to the display shelves. In no time everything was neat and tidy. Dusting would be useless, but still she had to look busy. She turned the products so the labels were front facing, and even.

It was only a little after ten. This was definitely going to prove to be a long, slow day.

"Now what am I going to do?" She walked to the chair behind the counter, sat down and stared out the window.

Zeke and Nole hadn't moved in the whole time she'd been dusting.

She produced a magazine and flipped through the pages, trying to alleviate the boredom that threatened to smother her. She paused in her reading and walked over to the fountain, filled a large glass with soda, then went back to her seat.

Right before she thought she'd rupture with a scream of frustration at the boredom, three large trucks pulled up at the pumps, and five more vehicles parked around the building.

All three pumps began chiming and she quickly started each one. While those drivers gassed up, the store filled with men of all ages, shapes and sizes. They were dressed in what had once been white shirts and pants, but their garments were dusty and dirty. The men milled about picking up snacks and lined up at the deli counter.

She ran over to help them. "Hi, what do you need?"

The first man in line swallowed hard. "Well, look at this. Zeke finally got us some pretty scenery."

There were a few lewd comments that, though she didn't hear the words, she felt the innuendos.

"I haven't got all day, boys. What can I get you?"

The man grinned, "Two tuna salads and three cookies."

"Chicken salad, bag of chips and three brownies."

As they shouted out their requests she grabbed the sandwiches and other goodies, placed them in white bags that were under the counter, and tossed the bags to the men in turn. Suddenly Zeke was at her side, taking orders, filling bags and walking with the men to the registers.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Ham salad, tuna salad, two cookies, a brownie and a phone number," a man said as he walked up to the counter.

Storm grabbed the food he asked for, placed it in the bag, then subtly pulled a pen out of thin air and scribbled on a scrap of paper. She handed the bag to the man.

He looked at it with a shocked expression on his face. "I can't believe it," he muttered.

"When you dial you'll hear the answer of the local pound. I'm sure you'll find a suitable companion there."

He and his friends erupted with laughter, then he walked off to the register. The rest of the men came through, ordering, making comments and sharing smiles.

Suddenly, as quickly as they'd descended like hungry locusts, they gathered their things and were gone.

Storm stepped back, stretched out her arms and back. She was tired and achy but it was a good feeling. "Is it always like that?"

"Pretty much every day. They're local contractors working on a building site about three miles up the road. All of them are good men." He clapped a hand on her back. "You handled yourself real well."

She preened under the compliment. "Thanks Zeke, but I'm telling you, I'm tired."

"You'll have time to relax and rest for a while yet. Go ahead and grab some lunch and I'll watch the pumps."

"Can't I do both?"

"Sure can, but don't you want a break?"

"I could use the facilities, then I'll be right back." She walked out, took comfort in the *Comfort Station*, washed her

hands and then leaned back against the wall. "What have I gotten myself into?" she murmured and exhaled deeply. Squaring her shoulders, she rejoined Zeke.

The rest of the day passed easily enough, and then before she knew it, the afternoon shift had arrived. When the second shift woman walked in the door Storm had to look twice. She stood about five feet, ten inches tall and about two hundred and ninety pounds. Her long brown hair hung limply down her back. "You the new girl?"

"Yes. My name's Storm."

The woman nodded, her glance surveyed the shop noting everything in order nodded again. "You ready to cash out your drawer?"

What did that mean? "Sure," she answered weakly.

This earned a huge yellow-toothed grin. "Come on Princess, we'll get you squared away."

The woman hit a key on the register, it ran a roll of paper and then the money drawer popped open. She took the drawer and sat down at the back table.

Storm hadn't moved from the spot. The woman hadn't bothered to introduce herself, she simply took her cash drawer and just walked away. She was so condescending! "Princess, bah," Storm fumed. She joined the woman who was wrapped in a haze of smoke, counting the money. "Excuse me?"

"Why? Did you fart?" the crude woman answered without even looking up.

"Look Butch, no need for you to turn your inbred, rude mouth on me. I'm just trying to learn the ropes."

The woman sat back and looked up at her. "*Butch? Inbred?*" then she let loose a deep bellowing laugh. "Glad to see you ain't the wimpy princess I thought you was. Every day I come in and take over the shift. I sit down and balance the register drawer just to make sure everything is where it should be. Then I take the extra money, make out the deposit slip, place it in the bank bag and lock it all in the safe. That way we start each shift with the same amount in the drawer."

"So after the drawer has been ... cashed out, what do I do until time to go home?"

"Straighten, restock and clean."

Storm nodded and looked around. She could drag herself around the shop, redust and straighten. It would take up the last hour of the day. "I'll get started."

"You do that. Oh, it's Chuey."

Storm stopped and turned. "Chewy?"

"My name. C-h-u-e-y."

What kind of name was that? She must've looked bewildered when she turned and ran into Zeke.

"Ah my Little Dew Drop has arrived." He smiled at Chuey.

He moved a little closer to Storm. "Her given name is Chumani, it means *little dew drop*."

"Okay." That sweet little name just didn't fit the large robust woman. Chuey was so much more appropriate.

Storm headed to the coolers, grabbed the sweater and restocked, then did the dusting and sweeping. By the time she'd put the broom and duster away it was five minutes of six. She walked up to the front of the store. "Guess it's time for me to say goodnight."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Zeke pulled out a pocket watch. "That it is. You done good, kid. See you Friday morning."

"See you then. Good night, Chuey."

"Night, Princess," the large woman smirked and laughed.

Storm went out, sat down in the car and started the engine up. She slipped the car into gear and backed out of the spot. Her foot felt awkward as she pressed the accelerator. The car wove back and forth in the lane before she recovered and straightened it out. The speedometer read thirty but she was afraid to go any faster. This driving thing was harder than it seemed. It took almost twenty minutes for her to arrive at the house, park in her spot, and get the car shut off.

By the time she'd dragged herself up the stairs and entered her apartment, her body was aching wildly.

"I'm home, Edgar," she called and dropped on the sofa. Silence filled the room. "Edgar?" she called again. Where was he? The door had been locked; there was no sign of anyone entering the apartment. "Edgar?"

Sounds of laughter came from behind her and she turned to see Edgar and Aunt Meggie materializing. "Hello dear ... Child you look terrible!"

Storm rose and hugged her aunt. "Thanks. You look fantastic."

"I always do. Now tell me, is it so hard to live here among the mortals? Your eyes are so tired, you have mauve rings under them, and you look as if you're in pain." The older woman fretted and walked around Storm slowly.

"I'm fine Auntie. I have job and today was my first day."

"You did tell me about this, didn't you Edgar?"

"Of course, Meggie. Her working was one of the reasons we spent the day together, so I wouldn't be here alone."

She nodded. "Oh that's right, can't have you being lonely, my friend." Meggie returned her attention to Storm. "If working is going to have this affect on you, I must insist you stop immediately."

"I had the time of my life! I served sandwiches, and took money for payments, and I even drove home the mortal way!" Excitement was pushing away the exhaustion. "I met so many people, and, oh Auntie! It was the most amazing day!"

Meggie and Edgar exchanged looks and Meggie squeezed Storm's shoulder. "Promise me that if it becomes too hard you'll stop."

"I promise. But we don't have to worry. I won't be staying long. Once I've won this contest I'll leave that job and go back home."

Meggie gave a small smile. "I must be going. Edgar, you will call me again so you can have company while she's gone."

"I will. It was a most enjoyable day."

"Indeed it was. Good bye, dear Edgar." She blew a kiss to Storm. "Good bye, my love."

Storm sat down on the sofa, the tired creeping back in. "That working was hard on me today. My back aches, my arms throb and I'm really tired."

"Once your body becomes accustomed it won't be so bad, *Anail*, you wait and see."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"But how long will it take?"

"I can't say. Several days, a couple of weeks ... but it will pass. You are off tomorrow so you can recover before you have to go back."

Storm stretched out and lay down on the sofa. "I hope it doesn't take too long," she said softly, then her breathing evened out.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirteen

Vance stared at the screen. Nothing was working right and it made him crazy. He changed numbers and broke down the program repeatedly, but nothing made a difference.

Growling in frustration, he shoved away from the desk. He'd been at this since before the sun came up this morning. Now the sun was fading and he was still no closer.

He grabbed the small box and pulled his arm back, itching to throw the unit against the wall. Sense overtook his irrational impulse and he placed it back on the desktop.

He stalked away. A good storm—that would be the right distraction!

He paused and a smile split his face, a good Storm, oh yeah ... he grabbed up the phone, then punched in her number.

Just after the first ring a male voice answered, "Hello?"

"I'm sorry, I must've dialed the wrong number."

"That's fine." The line clicked off and Vance pulled out the paper. After checking it carefully, he dialed again. Once more the male voice answered. "Hello?"

"I'm looking for Storm."

The man cleared his throat. "She's resting, but if you hang on I'll get her."

Vance waited, wondering who the man was and what he was doing there if she was *resting*.

"Hello?" her voice sounded tired.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"Storm? It's Vance. Is this a bad time?" He was dying to demand the identity of the man, but he had no right.

"No, I was just napping. What's up?"

"I just called to see how your first day of work went."

"It was fine. Long and tiring. I'm not used to working, but I'll get the hang of it." She paused. "I'm sorry for rattling on. What's up?"

"Like I said, I wanted to call and see how it went today. Are you too tired to go and grab an ice cream or something?"

"As long as we don't stay out too late. I really am beat."

"I'll pick you up in ten minutes." He paused, considering the man who answered the phone. "Can you be ready in ten?"

"You'd be amazed at what I can do in ten minutes." Her laughter was mischievous and held just a hint of innuendo.

"Great. I'll be there in a bit."

He hung up feeling as giddy as a schoolboy.

He arrived at her apartment building in ten minutes. He went to the door and buzzed her apartment.

"Vance?"

"Yeah."

"Come on up."

With a loud buzz, the door unlocked and he went inside. As he climbed the stairs, thoughts of the other man swirled in his head. He was probably gone by now, but it still bothered him that she was with someone and yet agreed to date him. Perhaps it was her brother, or cousin, or some other relative. He sure hoped so. Vance wanted first rights, not sloppy seconds.

"Hello." Her smile was warm as she opened the door.
"Come in."

Vance entered the tidy apartment, and just as he stepped into the room, a squawking drew his attention to an elaborate golden cage.

What appeared to be precious gems scattered over the whole and inside, on a golden perch, was the largest raven he'd ever seen. "That's an ... interesting choice for a pet. Does it talk?"

"Of course I talk."

When the bird answered, Vance almost fell over his feet backing away from the cage. He looked at Storm; the look on her face was one of anger? Irritation? He wasn't sure.

"This is Edgar. He can say a great deal of things, can't you Edgar? Say *pretty bird*."

"Pretty bird," the bird replied.

"But it was almost like he answered me."

"He's trained in word recognition. You asked a question he's been trained to recognize, and he answered with what he was taught."

Vance, still shaken by the bird, finally reached the doorknob. "Are you ready to go?"

"Sure am." She turned to face the bird. "Good night Edgar, be good."

"Be good," the bird replied.

She pulled the door shut and placed a hand on Vance's arm.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

The feel of her small hand on his skin burned and tingled, but it was a pleasant sensation. He placed his hand over hers and they walked down the steps to his car.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Fourteen

Edgar knew better than to talk in front of a mortal, especially this one. Storm didn't care if he spoke *after* she and Vance were together, but it was too soon. It might have scared him away.

How far were the other girls? Doing this without magic wasn't quite as easy as she thought it would be. She realized Vance had spoken to her. "Sorry?"

"I asked if the local Daisy Queen was okay or if you wanted to go somewhere else."

"No, that's fine." Anywhere that she could get him into her web. This needed to be sped up.

The lights from the ice cream shop flooded the crowded parking lot. "I thought people only came out on weekends."

"As it heats up everyone likes to cool down with a scoop or two. Is it too crowded for you?"

"No, this is fine."

He parked and turned to her. "So what will you have?"

You in a bowl, she thought. Where had *that* come from? "Just a chocolate cone would be fine." She watched a horrified look come across his face.

"Just a chocolate cone? Come on! I thought you were more adventurous than that."

"Well, what do you usually have?"

"The Graveyard."

"The what?"

"The Graveyard. It's a twist of chocolate and vanilla in a waffle bowl, sprinkled with crushed Oreos, with gummy worms crawling up the sides. Chocolate syrup is drizzled over the top.

"Did you know they used chocolate syrup as blood in the old black and white horror films?" he added.

She laughed, surprised. "You are as twisted as those tornadoes you chase." She mentally envisioned the concoction he just described. *What was a gummy worm?*

"So what will it be?"

Why not try something new? "The Graveyard."

He flashed a triumphant smile. "Great. I knew you had good taste. Be right back."

She watched him disappear into the long line. She was tempted to pop home and scold Edgar, but that could wait. She pulled down the visor to check her lipstick and yelped at the face peering back at her. "Tara? What are you doing here?"

"Just checking your progress. How are you doing?"

"Not bad. A little slow in advancing but that's all right. How are you doing?"

Tara beamed a bright smile. "I've found him, and he's so handsome." Her face took on a dreamy look then. She suddenly looked as kid who was caught with their hand in the candy jar.

"What's going on? You know this *is* just a game, right? I mean you can't actually fall for the man!" Storm was horrified at the prospect. Her baby sister, in love with a mortal? Preposterous. "He may be handsome and kind," she paused

as she glanced up at Vance, "but they have their world and we have ours. No exceptions."

Tara's eyes misted, "There have been mixed marriages before."

Storm went stiff and stared at Tara. "Not in our family." She shook her head and gazed out the window. "Here comes Vance."

The faint reply of *goodbye* floated in the air as Vance set one of the bowls on top of the car so he could open the door. He passed one to her. The sheer size of the thing made her head ache. "Is there a gallon of ice cream in here?"

He laughed. "Guess I should have warned you."

She picked up the spoon to find something wiggly and bright orange jiggling on the end. Storm hesitated a moment, but when Vance dropped one into his upturned mouth and started chewing, she smiled. *So, that's what gummy worms were.* They looked gruesome enough. She popped one in her mouth and savored the sweet, fruity taste of the candy. "These are good."

"You've never had gummy worms before?"

"No."

"They taste just like gummy bears."

She tried to hide her blank look. She knew mortals had many strange concoctions here but this was a new one on her. "If I say no, will that lose me any points?"

He shook his head. "Nope, it's just one more thing I can introduce you to. The gummy bears imported from Germany are the best. There's something in the formula that keeps them moist and fresh for ages."

"If they are from Germany, does that make them Germey Bears?"

He boomed and laughed. "Too much, Storm. You are too much."

There was a drizzle of chocolate on his chin. Before she could stop the sudden impulsive action, she leaned over and ran her tongue up his chin. Although it had the desired effect, it was on the wrong person. Fire erupted inside her and her body trembled from the contact.

As unease swept over her, so she pulled away and felt herself flushing. Whether this came from the heat of the contact or from a rare bout of embarrassment, she couldn't say. The silence that filled the truck was deafening. She finally cleared her throat. "Our ice cream is melting."

How could she have done what she just did? She turned her attention to the window and stared at the darkness.

The sound of him clearing his throat pulled her gaze back. He was stone stiff and staring at her. What was he thinking? He shifted uncomfortably in the seat and her attention was drawn further south. Catching herself, she trailed back up back met his eyes watching her.

"See anything you like?" he croaked.

"Um..." It was unusual for her to be at such a loss for words. If he'd been a witch it would be easy to decide what to do. "Any answer I give you will get me into trouble."

"What's wrong with a little trouble?" He chuckled as he threw her earlier words back at her.

She put her ice cream bowl between her body and his like a shield. He took it from her hands and leaned over the seat,

his face only millimeters away. With his hand on her chin, he tilted her face upwards slightly. He moved in and kissed her.

She'd heard the expression *rockets exploded*, and now understood what it meant. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed closer to him. Sitting chest-to-chest she could feel the pounding of his heart; it matched time with hers. His hand trailed down her cheek. The pad of his thumb caressed the skin below her ear lobe.

A small voice warned: *Be careful*. She pulled away and looked into his deep brown eyes. "Our ice cream is melting," she whispered.

"To hell with the ice cream." He claimed her mouth, his tongue tracing fire along her lips, then he darted it in and out of her mouth, tangling it with hers. Finally she was able to pull away from him again, her breath hard to catch. "This isn't very comfortable."

He nodded his agreement. "What should we do about it?"

She searched her heated brain for an answer. "Your place or mine?"

"Yours is closer."

"Mine it is."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Fifteen

He backed out of the parking spot and tossed the uneaten ice cream into the large garbage bin on the way out of the parking lot. What the hell was he doing? This felt so right, it had to be wrong.

He shouldn't be doing this, he thought repeatedly on the drive from the Daisy Queen to her place.

Don't think, just act. Go with it, Nodin.

At her place, he got out and went to open her door. He took her hand and pulled her close. He couldn't keep his lips off her. "Have you got your key?" he whispered against her lips.

"Hmm," she answered.

The door suddenly opened behind him and somewhere the question of *how* made a small sound, but the fire in his brain consumed it.

With his arms around her, they walked up the stairs sideways, pressed against each other. Then he was in her apartment, his lips on hers. She walked backwards pulling him with her.

Then, she was lying beneath him on the sofa, her hands trailing up and down his body. He couldn't contain himself. "I want you."

Storm's hand slid down his thigh and he couldn't stop the moan that escaped his lips. Everywhere she touched, flames erupted. He rolled up on his side and twined his hand in her satin hair. He pulled her face to his and pressed his mouth on

hers. He took the pale pink skin between his teeth and gently nibbled on her lower lip.

He trailed his mouth down her neck, nipping at the silken skin. Her pulse beat wildly and he latched onto the skin at the base of her throat.

She shifted and moaned. He followed her wordless urging and moving and settled her beneath him.

He inched his hand under her top, bringing the hem up, slowly revealing her skin. Unwrapping such an erotic gift too quickly would be a crime.

He kissed her chest through the cotton material of her t-shirt, and then moved lower.

Then he had reached her abdomen. The porcelain skin radiated heat that nearly scorched his hand. He kissed her waist then he dipped his tongue into her navel.

She bucked beneath him and inhaled sharply. At first he thought it was a reaction to him until the sound of a male voice stabbed through the haze in his mind.

He jerked up and scanned the room. "What was that?"

"Nothing," she whispered.

He didn't care, had almost forgotten his own question, but she wasn't as responsive to his touches as before. He glanced down into her incredible eyes and watched as the bright sky blue began to darken, melting into the pre-storm gray-blue cast. "What's the matter? Is this going too fast?" He wasn't sure if he'd be able to restrain himself if she said yes. He'd look pretty foolish asking if he could take a cold shower—or three.

She glanced upward, and then her eyes stared back into his. "No. This is what *I* want."

Relief flooded over him. "Where was I?"

Her lips curved into a seductive smile. "Here." She placed his face over the spot.

Her skin was silky warmth and he felt like a man who was freezing.

She shivered as he trailed slowly lower, driving them both towards the mountain of desire.

"Wait."

Wait? He forced himself to keep rigid. "What's wrong?"

"My bed's more comfortable."

Vance inhaled deeply, allowed his body to relax and pushed up from the sofa.

She accepted his hand up and pulled him after her as she backed away from him. Heat danced in her eyes as she slowly stripped off her remaining garments.

He was every inch the clichéd *weak in the knees*. When she moved to him and undid the button on his fly, he thought he was going to fall down.

He swallowed hard.

She took his hand and gently tugged, leading him to her bed.

This would be a hell of a time for his strength to give out.

His already awkward state went even further off keel when she gave him a slight nudge, and he tumbled backward onto her bed.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She straddled his hips. Her eyes flashed along with lightning that had sparked outside her window. She undulated her hips and he thrust up to meet her.

Her hair flowed about her like a halo. "My wicked angel," he murmured.

As the storm outside intensified, so did their lovemaking. Every crash of thunder coincided with the crash of their bodies. Finally, he was spent, and she collapsed on his chest, his arm around her.

When their breathing finally slowed to normalcy, he rolled over and spooned into her body. He reached out and trailed his finger along her forehead. "Wicked angel."

"*Tugaim cion duit.*"

The words had a lilting quality, though they were unfamiliar. "What's that?"

"It's *Gaeilge.*"

"Translation?"

She smiled softly. "Maybe I'll tell you one day."

He sighed and squeezed her close. The storm outside had sounded almost as fierce as the one inside, but both were softening.

He could hear raindrops gently hitting the windows as she continued to relax in his arms. Then she was breathing deeply and evenly and he knew she was sleeping. He closed his eyes and allowed sleep to claim him as well.

* * * *

Storm gently pulled out of his embrace, trying not to disturb his sleep. Her body throbbed in places she hadn't

been aware she had. Not that she was a vestal virgin, she'd been with a couple of men before, but none had rocked her world like Vance.

She tiptoed from the bedroom and went to get a drink.

Edgar was awake, and he wasn't too happy. If it was possible for a raven to frown, he was doing it. "Do you know what you did? Where are your senses, *Ainm ceana*?" Edgar demanded.

"I know what I'm doing. Now be quiet before you wake him." She continued her path and got the water. After taking a refreshing drink she walked over to the cage. "I don't mean to be quarrelsome Edgar, really I don't. But this was just ... I don't know, right somehow."

He bobbed his head. "The storm outside was quite dramatic."

She flushed, and this time it *was* from embarrassment. When an Elemental was, to put it delicately, in the throes of passion, she created a real spectacle. In her case, storms grew and raged wherever she was. "Edgar, please."

A sound from the bedroom drew her attention. *Vance was coming*. She moved back to the kitchen counter, whipped up a small bowl of jumbo strawberries and some melted chocolate on a gleaming silver tray. She carried it toward the bedroom and met Vance in the hallway. "Thought you might be interested in a little snack."

He nibbled her neck, just under her right ear. "You're right. I did want a little snack."

She couldn't help but giggle as she walked with him back to the bedroom. They returned to the bed and with her back

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

propped on a pillow, she watched as he picked up a large strawberry, dipped it into the rich chocolate and carried to her mouth. He traced her lips with the sweet concoction, trailing chocolate in the perfect outline.

She opened her mouth, took the end of it and bit off a bite, the juice trickling down her throat. Savoring the rich flavor, she stared into his eyes as she ate the whole berry.

When she reached his fingers, she nibbled, then sucked the remaining melted chocolate from them. His sharp intake of breath told her she was doing it right.

His face edged closer and he sampled the chocolate from her lips, his tongue making small circles as he enjoyed every spot.

She pulled back and reached for the tray. It was her turn to feed him, but she didn't get very far as he took the whole berry, chocolate and all, in a single bite.

A small bit of juice slid down his chin, a dab of chocolate on his lips. "I don't seem to have a napkin."

She smiled. "I can take care of that for you." She repeated the action that brought them here to begin with, enjoying the tasty combination of sweet berry and the slight tangy salt of his skin.

He dipped his finger into the melted chocolate and trailed it from her chin, down her throat and, after sliding the robe open, continued downward. He dipped it in once more and slid the line from her navel to her thighs. After he was satisfied, he leaned back to admire his work. "I seem to have spilled some chocolate on you ... and we don't have any napkins. Whatever will we do?"

"You're a bright boy, you'll figure something out." His face lowered to hers. He kissed her. He tickled his tongue down the chocolate line, licking in lazy circles on his way down.

At her navel, he circled it, and then dipped his tongue inside, sending waves of pleasure through her body. Outside thunder sounded from a distance.

He slide his tongue up one thigh, stopping at the spot between her legs, his hot breath made her yearn for more. He moved to her other knee and trailed up that thigh, once again stopping, teasing.

He moved his mouth, his tongue dancing, making her body tremble with heated desire. Thunder shook the entire building as she reached a peak, tumbled over it, then climbed up higher.

Her fingers curled in his hair, pulling him closer. "Please ... Vance," she begged, longing for him to fill that void.

He rose high, his knee pressed her legs open wider; he positioned himself between them. The weather raged outside, the building seemed to be in a martini mixer, being shaken to its foundations by the storm.

When they had both been satisfied, despite her ragged breathing she repeated, "*Tugaim cion duit.*"

"I'd like to know what that means." His voice was husky, his breathing still labored.

"Curiosity killed the cat." She nibbled his shoulder playfully. "Maybe you can look it up on that computer of yours. I'm going to take another nap. For some reason I feel as if I've run a marathon, only this was much more pleasurable."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

His smile was one of pure male pride as he growled low and squeezed her closer to him.

Protected in the circle of his arms she relaxed and dreamed of winning, but the prize was much more than she'd bargained for.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Sixteen

Vance stretched and slowly climbed into awareness. He rolled over to find Storm curled in a ball next to him. Her hair tangled over the pillow and across his arm, she looked so innocent; nothing at all like the wicked angel who'd satisfied his every need last night.

She stirred and he felt a pang of loss when her body's warmth left his chilled. He scooted closer and tickled her ear with his finger. She flapped her hand in an attempt to make him stop. When he persisted, she pointed her finger at him; he felt a stinging sensation.

She growled, "Knock it off, Edgar."

The sting traveled to his core. *Edgar?* She'd slept with him, had sex with *him* all night, and then called him by another man's name?

Vance pushed out of the bed, grabbed his shorts and stalked to the living room. It was there it hit him. Edgar was that damn bird! "Good morning, Edgar."

The bird ruffled its feathers, made a truly unbirdlike snort and replied, "Good morning."

Despite Storm telling him about word recognition training, Vance still felt off balance about the reply. There was just something creepy about having a conversation with a bird.

He returned to bed, crawled under the sheets and rolled on his side, facing her. He feathered his finger down her side. Slowly his hand worked its way to the front of her, and he began to tease and massage the warm area.

She stretched. He would swear she was purring. "Good morning, Angel."

"Mmmorning." Her lips sought his. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him tight to her.

"Quite a storm we had last night."

A wicked grin stole across her face. "Wasn't it incredible? You bring out the best in me."

He couldn't stop the chuckle. "That was great too, but I meant the one outside. I'm surprised the alarms didn't go off with the winds whipping like they were. From what little I saw there must've been a great light show."

"At least I took your mind off of work for a while. What do you have planned for today?"

"I have to get back to the reader we've been working on for the alert system." He stood up and paced around gathering his clothes. "It's driving me crazy trying to figure out why the darn thing won't work."

She watched him getting dressed and a strange feeling formed in the pit of her stomach. She didn't want him to leave. But how to get him to stay? "How about I whip you up some breakfast?"

"Don't go to any trouble on my account."

"It's no trouble, honestly." She jumped up and wrapped the robe around her.

"Morning, Edgar," she greeted as she passed by his cage.

"Morning it is, I don't know that there is anything good about it."

"Shh! Edgar, he'll hear you. He'll be leaving soon enough and you then can come out."

The door of the cage opened and Edgar hopped out and moved to sit on the top. "Even mortal pet birds are allowed out to sit on top of the cages."

"Fine. Remember, no talking in front of him. Please?"

Before he could answer, she heard Vance moving around in the bedroom.

"Nuts!" She ran into the kitchen and opened the fridge. What would make a nice morning-after breakfast?

She decided on thick fluffy waffles, walking over to the counter. "Waffles, nice and thick, I need them hot and quick."

They materialized on two plates; the steam rising off them carried the rich scent of buttermilk. She smiled and a can of whipped cream was next to them. She sprayed it onto the hot, golden squares, then put two strawberries on the top and slices around the plate.

"Waffle maker!" Edgar hissed from behind her.

"What?"

"You have to have a hot waffle maker so he doesn't wonder where those came from!"

"Oh! Right." She turned to the open space in front of her. "Waffle maker." The white machine materialized on the counter. She pushed it back from her way. "Ouch!" She yelped as her skin made contact with the hot metal. She turned to the sink and ran cold water over the burning digit.

"Smells great in here." Vance walked in to the room and up behind her. "What happened?"

"I burnt my finger on that stupid machine." The cold water didn't seem to be helping.

He raised her hand to his lips, and what started as a kiss, turned into a lick and then a suck. It didn't cool the burn, but made another one mount to take its place. "Vance, this has to stop."

"But it's so much fun."

She couldn't deny that. "Don't you have work to do?"

That stopped him in the spot. "I do." He turned to the golden waffles. "Those look great, especially the strawberries. Next time we need some of this whipped cream." He dipped his finger in the topping and pointed it at her.

She took a step forward, slid her tongue along the tip of his finger and ate the white foam concoction. "Better eat them before they get cold." She smirked, then stepped back from him.

"At least they won't melt."

"But we need sustenance." She carried the plates to the table and realized there was no flatware. "Oops."

"I'll get it, which drawer?"

"The one on your left."

"That was a close one," Edgar whispered.

She turned a frown on him. "Are you trying to get us caught?"

He ruffled his feathers and returned to his perch on top of the cage.

Edgar was forgotten as Vance sat across the table. The first few moments of the meal passed quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. If his were headed the same direction as hers, the building would go up in flames.

"These are great, Storm. I don't know how you managed it so quickly, almost as if by magic."

Her fork hovered in the air for a split second. "Almost."

When the plates were empty, Vance picked them up and carried them to her sink. "Can I help wash up?"

"No, I've got it. You have some business to take care of, don't you?"

He nodded. "I'd rather stay here and spend the day in bed with you." He kissed her nose.

"I'd love that too, but you can come back for dinner."

"Dang, did I hit the jackpot. A gorgeous blonde who's great in bed. And she can cook too boot. Uh hmm, I must've done something right."

She kissed his cheek. "Must've. Come back about seven?"

"I'll be here with bells on."

"Will that be all you're wearing?"

"Maybe."

She walked him to the door. Their parting kiss was deep and lingering. Storm didn't want to end it. The fact he failed to pull away from her was a good indication that he felt the same. Finally, they separated. "Until tonight."

"Till then."

She shut the door behind him and leaned back against it. This wasn't going at all the way she'd planned. "Do you think he's really a mortal?"

"Of course."

"Then why do I feel as if he's put a spell on me?"

Edgar inhaled, then let out a deep sigh. "Go get cleaned up and rest for a while. I'm sure you can use it."

Storm Chasing
by *Donica Covey*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Seventeen

Vance got out of his shower and was pulling on his jeans, when the doorbell rang. "Great, I'm late." He finished buttoning his fly, then rushed down the stairs to let Heidi in.

He made it to the door just as it opened and she walked in.

"Well!" Heidi made a catcall whistle and circled him. "Now *that's* a wonderful thing to see first thing in the morning."

"Knock it off H. I'm just a bit behind this morning."

"That's more than a bit and it's looking pretty good."

"What's with you this morning? This is not the Heidi I know."

She grinned in a lopsided way and then swatted him on the rear. "Let's just say I don't feel like the old me today."

It baffled him, but he was too distracted by the realization that real life had intruded, and he had to get back to work. "I'll be back down in a few minutes."

"Don't get dressed on my account." Her laugh followed him up the stairs.

He quickly pulled on a shirt, socks and shoes, then ran back down. "Sorry, I was up pretty late last night."

"I figured that."

His head jerked so fast he was afraid his neck would break. "Why?"

"The storm? It was a doozy. You were watching it, weren't you?"

"Oh, yeah, I was caught up in a *Storm*."

She quirked her eyebrow and looked at him closely.

"Seems we're both in the middle of a good secret."

He sat in the leather chair before his desk, booted up his PC, and waited for the machine to run through its test phase.

"What kind of secret?"

"I could tell but then I'd have to kill you. Unless you care to share first."

He cleared his throat and a broad grin split his face, he picked up the soda Heidi had brought to him. "The computer's ready. Did you get any good pictures last night?" He took a drink.

She shook her head. "Did you?"

The image of Storm last night captured forever on film was enough to make his throat close up. The soda choked him and sprayed all over the monitor screen. He coughed, trying to clear his windpipe.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said with a strangled sound.

She looked worried, but didn't push it. "I'm sorry about that, not sure what got into me."

But you know what you got into last night, right? asked a red horned figure in his mind.

What had he gotten into? Storm was sexy. No. She was a drop dead beautiful, white-hot looking woman, extremely ... talented, flexible. That last bit made him grin.

But what was it he'd really gotten into? Would she want something more than sex, however great it was? Would she want a commitment? If she did, was he willing to make one?

"Jumping a little ahead of yourself, aren't you?"

"What?"

Heidi pointed to the screen, and he turned his attention to the images flashing. "Oh, sorry. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"Obviously. Want to talk about it?"

"I don't know."

"Might help. We're not going to get any work done while you're in this mood."

"Maybe you're right." He took a drink, nice and easy so he wouldn't get strangled again. "You can give me a woman's prospective on this."

"Thanks for noticing that much."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, go on."

"Say you met this guy, and after your second date—if you could call it that—you guys have ... umm..."

"Sex."

He was really uncomfortable talking about this with her. "Never mind."

"You are such a big baby. It's natural. Just another part of human nature. Pretend I'm a doctor, or one of the guys you sit around bragging to."

He turned to face the computer. "Okay sex, but not just sex. Mind-blowing, shake you to the core, rockets red glare sex. It was the first time I've ever felt this ... connection. It sounds corny but we fit perfectly together. I didn't want to leave after the waffles and," the image flooded his mind, "strawberries."

"Man, you got it bad. What's the question you want answered?"

"So if this was you and a man you were with, what would you want out of it? I mean, would you expect a commitment or something?"

She grinned broadly and wiggled her eyebrows. "If it was that good I'd say a commitment to meet at least twice a week was in order."

He released an exasperated sigh. "I'm not laughing."

"Look, these days you never know what the answer will be until you ask the person involved. Some women want a major, life altering commitment. Some are satisfied with an arrangement. Some are just interested in the right there and then."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "That was the most humiliating and least helpful a situation I've ever been in."

"I'm sorry, but women are different. What I want may not be what she wants. The only way to know for absolute sure is to ask her."

"And if she says she wants more?"

"What are you prepared to give? How long have you known her? It's not like you grew up together. Far as I know, she's practically a stranger, and right now you aren't thinking with your brains."

He nodded. "I know I only just met her and we've not even had a real official date yet, but there's something about her. When we're together it feels so comfortable, so right, like we were made for each other." He shook his head and pulled at his hair more.

"Man, you've got it *worse* than bad." She placed her hands on his to still their nervous motions. "You're going to make yourself bald if you keep that up, and if this woman is normal, your hair is one of the things that makes you so appealing."

His grin lifted the corner of his mouth. "I thought you were only interested in my brain."

"Then I had you fooled." She playfully swatted his hand. "Seriously, you need to talk to her and find out how things stand. How did it go when you left? What did she say?"

"That she wants me to come for dinner, about seven."

"Anything else?"

He searched his memory. "No."

"I don't think you need to worry about her wanting to get a ring in your nose just yet."

"Really?" He didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed. His eyes focused on the screen. He needed a distraction from this trail of thought. "We need to get back to work."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Eighteen

Storm had showered, napped, and was now rejuvenated and ready to roll. The problem was she had four more hours before he'd show up at her door.

She sat down and, without thought, produced her lunch and a cocktail. This was most troubling, this man—this *mortal* man—who plagued her thoughts, and wreaked havoc on her body.

She desired more of him, not just the physical bond—the weight of his arm on her shoulder, the heat of his body lying next to her—but the comfort of his presence.

"Storm?" Edgar flapped over to her arm, and perched. He pecked her cheek lightly with his beak. "Storm?"

"What?"

"You're quite pensive, what's the matter?"

"I'm confused. If he weren't a mortal, I'd say my feelings were normal. I want him, Edgar. Not just in a physical sense, although that was quite enjoyable." She flashed him a wicked smile. "But, just knowing he's here makes me feel all ... wobbly inside. Am I under a *grá bricht*, do you think? He must be a witch to make me feel this way."

Edgar laid his beak on her cheek. "*A leanbh na páirte*, just because he is mortal doesn't mean the feelings you have are wrong."

She absently stroked the smooth black beak while trying to work out the problem in her mind. "I'm scared. I've never been truly afraid before, Edgar. It was just a word to me.

Now I feel how intense it is. If I continue, he won't be the only one hurt when this ends. I fear I'll end up with a broken heart."

"Don't think about that right now. Time has many secrets, and, like the layers of an onion, they must be revealed one layer at a time."

His wisdom had never failed before, hopefully this wouldn't prove to be the first time. "You're right, I suppose." She sat up. "What will I do about dinner? Do you think he expects me to cook?"

"*Badb* grant you the ability to not make us all ill or burn the place down."

"Ember is in charge of fire." She smirked then beckoned the cookbook. As it hovered in the air, she flipped through the pages. "I don't have any idea what to do."

"You can easily grill a couple of steaks. All you need is a grill and the steaks. Then bake some potatoes. Have butter and sour cream on hand, a simple green salad, and you have dinner."

"That sounds easy enough. I just need the steaks and potatoes, and salad, and grill..."

"You can materialize a grill. The grocery store isn't far away."

She turned a frustrated frown on him. "I guess you're right. But I'd like to do it the easy way."

"You've done well so far, my dear."

"Thank you." She snapped fingers and was dressed in comfortable shorts and a tank top. "I'll be home later." She kissed his beak and walked out to the car.

Driving was still a challenge but she did it, only swerving a few times. She bumped into another car in the parking lot. The Corvette's fender was scratched and the fender of the other car had a few dings in it. Looking to make sure no one was around, she waved her hand and everything was repaired.

She grabbed a grocery cart. At the meat counter, she hoped there would be someone to ask for help. The counter turned out to be a refrigerated strip containing shelves of various cuts of meat, everything from ground beef to chicken parts. There wasn't a butcher in sight.

She found several packages marked *steak*. Which was the right one? Strip, flank, porterhouse, t-bone; what on earth was all that? Which should she choose? Finally, she grabbed a package of each and tossed them into the cart.

She then found the potatoes. Again a variety of choices faced her. Which ones? Red? Something called Yukon Gold? An orange one called sweet? Frustration mounted. "I should've done this the easy way."

"My dear, there is no easy way, unless you can sweep you arm and have it all made for you." A white haired lady stood next to her. "Maybe I can help you?"

"That would be wonderful. I'm making dinner for a ... friend and I have no clue what I'm doing."

"I remember when I first made dinner for a *friend*—we've been married now for almost forty years. If it had rested on that first meal, he'd have high-tailed it to the next county." She laughed and gave Storm a gentle nudge. "Let's see what you've got there."

"It was suggested that I grill some steak, bake some potatoes and have a salad."

The lady dug through the meat choices and picked up the porterhouse. "This is the one you want."

She hefted a paper bag of brown potatoes. "These are the baking ones. Make sure to wrap them in foil and give them plenty of time to bake so they are thoroughly done."

"Right. Thank you so much."

"Get some rolls too. Men just love steak, potatoes and bread."

"I really don't know how to thank you."

"An invite to the wedding and your fortieth anniversary party will do," the lady teased and walked away.

Wedding? The very thought made Storm laugh. It would never get that far, but the idea brought about a different reaction. One of sad disappointment.

There was no place for him in her life on a permanent basis. He wouldn't fit in her world and she would be miserable in his. The strictures on mortals were too binding.

She shook the odd feelings of sadness away and continued the shopping. She glanced down at the cart. Meat, check. Potatoes, check. Bread ... what kind of bread? A bakery section was near the back of the building, so she moved off toward it. There she found an assortment of fresh baked breads and rolls. There were also numerous cakes, pies and cookies.

Should she grab something for dessert while she was at it?

First things first. What kind of bread? There was a stack of packages holding white rolls. She selected a package and

scanned it. They were called brown and serve. How handy! She tossed it into the cart and strolled over to the desserts.

A large refrigerated case held a collection of pies. Near the front was a three-inch thick, crust-topped concoction with scalloped white cream and long chocolate curly-cues, arranged in clusters of three around the top and center of the pie. "Chocolate Silk," she read the label on the side of the packaging.

Next to it was an equally deep pie filled with red jelly-like goo and thick, bright strawberries.

She grinned. Just what Vance had ordered, strawberries, chocolate and whipped cream. She could buy both pies now and combine them when she got home ... No. She'd whip up a pie of her own creation based on the images of these two.

She glanced down at her watch. Crap! It was already quarter to five! How in the world had that happened? She rushed to the front, checked out her purchases, then hurried out the door and loaded them into her car.

She raced home and struggled to pull out the bags and carry them into the apartment.

"Where have you been, *A Thaisce*? You've been gone for nearly two hours."

"I know," she panted as she dropped the bags on the counter. "Do you suppose it takes a mortal woman as long to shop?"

"I doubt it. You'll learn, you'll see."

Storm shrugged and pulled out the groceries. "I think I have everything, Edgar. Does the book say how to do this?"

He held down one side with his claws while his beak moved the pages. "Ah! Here it is. Heat the grill. Once it's good and hot, you put the steaks on, allowing them to cook for five minutes. Then you rotate them and let them cook for another five. Then flip them over and repeat the process. Interesting. It says that the diamond type pattern this cooking method produces on the steaks is supposed to be very appealing," he added without looking up.

She paced back and forth. "I need a grill to cook these on." The cookbook jerked and pages flipped. It revealed something called a Jenn-Air. It was a set of grill bars built into a kitchen island. She snapped her fingers and a virtual model of the grill popped into the air.

It was set up to work like a standard cook top stove. All she had to do was turn it on, heat it up and wait. The device was connected to the outside by a special vent. All in all it looked amazingly simple to use.

She nodded. A length of the kitchen counter shifted and stretched. Miniature iron bars materialized over a deep catch pan. She turned on the grill to start it heating. "What about the potatoes?"

"Wrap them in the foil then put them in a preheated, four hundred degree oven. Let bake for one hour. When those things are close to done you can open the bag of salad and put it in a bowl."

"Right." She busied herself wrapping the potatoes as the grill heated. She tossed the potatoes into the oven and turned to the grill. The bars were almost glowing so she knew they

were hot enough. "Here goes." She took the two steaks out and tossed them on.

The grill top smoked, hissed and sizzled as the cold meat met the hot iron. "It's supposed to do that, right?"

"I believe so. The meat at the *La Perge* does."

"Good. Worried me for a minute." She stepped away and looked around the kitchen to the table. "That doesn't look right." With a sweep of her hand, a crisp white linen tablecloth covered the top.

Two place settings with cobalt blue glass plates, dinner and dessert, and salad bowl sat on silver pewter chargers. Beside each was a cobalt blue linen napkin in a triangle fold. The silver service was worked into a flared fan design. The stems curved into an oval opening, and cobalt blue stone set snugly into the pewter frames.

Berebi commissioned Cobalt wine goblets with flared pewter stems and matching water glasses were placed above the plates. Two deep cobalt colored taper candles stood in silver pewter filigree candleholders, waiting to be lit. The wine chilled in the refrigerator.

Everything was perfect. "Do you think I should have flowers or something in the middle of the table?"

"No. That would be too much. It's ideal in its simplicity, my dear."

The grill began to smoke and she ran over, grabbed a long fork and speared the steak, trying to lift it from the bars. She was finally able to lift and flip the meat, though it took her a bit of effort.

She couldn't help but watch the clock. He'd be here soon. Her nerves caused her stomach to feel queasy. "I don't feel well."

"Take a deep breath and relax. It will be fine."

She nodded, and at six thirty she was ready to remove the steaks from the grill, get out the potatoes, warm the bread, and toss the salad. After it was all done, she smiled triumphantly. "I did it all by myself."

"Very good. But don't you think you should be getting dressed?"

"Oh!" She rushed to the bedroom. With the clock ticking down, there wouldn't be time to do it the mortal way.

"Dress," she commanded. A lovely sleeveless sheath dress in cobalt melded itself onto her body.

"Shoes."

Silver strappy sandals adorned her feet.

"Hair."

It was swept up and twisted in a French knot with a little silver and cobalt flower sprig insert.

She zapped on a necklace. An oval cobalt-colored sapphire in a silver cage wrap was suspended on a velvet choker. Silver earrings with smaller oval sapphires wrapped in thin silver filigree hung from her ear lobes.

The buzzer sounded just as she stepped out of the room. "He's here. Do I look all right?"

"My darling, you are absolutely stunning."

She blew a kiss at Edgar and buzzed Vance up. She lit the candles and dimmed back the lights. She couldn't stop her

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

hands from trembling as she waiting for his knock on her door.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Nineteen

Vance felt nerves he didn't quite understand. It wasn't like he'd never had a date before. His mouth was dry, his hands trembled and his heart was pounding. He was probably sweating like a pig as well.

He stood outside her door, waiting for his racing heart to slow before knocking.

When she opened the door, his knees went weak. The dress hugged her curves like a second skin. The blue of the material made her amazing eyes seem brighter and larger. He shifted in place. *Can you be any more of a joke?* he thought miserably. "I brought you these." He handed her a bouquet of roses.

"Thanks. Please come in." She took the flowers, and then disappeared into the kitchen where, a second later, the water was turned on.

She stepped back around the corner and set the crystal vase with the roses on the coffee table. He glanced around the room. The low lights, the burning candles, and the table setting all hit him with thoughts of seduction. "Looks great in here."

He walked over and put his hands around her waist, pulled her close into his body and breathed in her scent. "You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble."

She twisted around in his arms. "You don't like it?"

The hurt look on her face slammed into him. "No, honey, it's lovely. Absolutely perfect." He caught the endearment the

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

same time she did, and watched as her eyes widened and her sweet pink lips round into an O.

He had to slow it all down before they both got into a mess he wasn't sure either of them was ready for. She walked over to the table and he slid the chair out for her. Once she was seated, he slid it back in, then took a seat across from her.

"Did you get that problem worked out?"

His head shot up, and then he realized she was talking about the problem with his work. "No. Trying to find the error is still driving me bonkers. It must be the unit itself, but I can't understand where the connection is malfunctioning." He stopped. "Sorry. I must be boring you."

"Not at all." She passed the platter of steak to him.

He speared one and placed it on his plate, then added the salad, bread, and potato. "This all looks so great. I had no idea you were a gourmet chef."

"I'm not. I hope it's edible."

He discovered the meat was tough-as-shoe-leather. He sawed through it and finally removed a bite.

Forcing himself to chew and swallow, he smiled. "It's different than anything I've ever had before." He was rewarded with a glowing smile and knew it was the right thing to say. He could tough out the lousy meal. He had an older sister, so he'd been through this torture a time or two before.

He watched as she took a bite and cringed. "Oh Vance, I'm sorry. I tried so hard to make this right." Sadness etched lines around the corners of her mouth.

He extended a hand and placed on hers. "It's not that bad, honestly." He forced himself to eat another bite and she gave him a lopsided smile.

He reached for his potato, unwrapped it, and found the inside still raw. "I'm not much of a potato man." He left it untouched and had a roll instead.

It had a slight crunch and he could tell it was burned on the bottom. How had she burned the rolls and not baked the potatoes?

He took a bite of the fresh green salad and relaxed a little, at least that was good. He smiled up at her, hoping to hide his reactions to her food.

She was forcing in a bite and tears sprung to her eyes. "This is a complete disaster!" She pushed from the table and ran off crying into the living room.

He slid out of the chair and went to her side. "Listen, it's all right, really. I wanted to be with you tonight. And honestly, it wasn't that bad. I've had worse." A brief memory of one of his sister's disasters came popping into his mind. "You tried, and that's what matters. Now wipe your eyes and go splash your face. You look good enough to eat and I want to show you off." He stood and gave her a hand up.

He watched as she disappeared down the hall, and he paced around, coming to a stop in front of Edgar's cage. "What I can't figure out is how the waffles this morning were so great, and tonight's dinner was such a complete disaster. What's her secret?"

The bird winked at him. Vance stared closer. "There's definitely something unique about you. I've never seen such

an intelligent looking bird. Granted you're not as attractive as an eagle, swan or even an owl, but there is something about you."

"About who?"

He looked up and was hit once again with how lovely she was. "I was just talking to Edgar."

A horrified look crossed her face. "Talking to Edgar?" She looked panicked.

"Is something wrong? You talked to him the other day and I just thought..."

He could swear a wave of relief washed over her. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry I was just used to everyone thinking I'm crazy for talking to him and then hearing you do it surprised me is all."

He grabbed her into an embrace. "Stop talking. I have a better use for your lips." He crushed his down on hers and kissed her deeply, his tongue battling with hers.

She pulled her upper torso free from his chest. "Dinner?"

He set her back from him. "Right. I want everyone to see I'm with the most beautiful lady in Oklahoma."

"Only Oklahoma?"

He swatted her cute little tush. "A little over-confident aren't you?"

"Nope. Convinced." She pecked his cheek and they went out the door.

He walked with her down the stairs and out into the warm evening air. "It's such a great night."

"It is, isn't it? The sky is so clear."

"Only thing missing is a soft breeze."

"Really?" She leaned over and blew gently in his ear.

Right at that moment, a light breeze lifted the grass and carried her scent up to him. "You smell fantastic. I noticed it the first day we met."

She slipped her arm into his and gave him a squeeze. "Thank you, kind sir. I was hoping you'd notice."

"I notice everything about you." He opened the door of the truck, and in minutes they were on their way down the highway. "The Heinberg Duchess is just down the road about ten, fifteen minutes."

"That's fine with me." She settled back into the seat.

He watched her from the corner of his eye. "Since we have a short drive, would you do something for me?"

"What?" It was both leery and tempting at the same time.

"I don't know anything about you. What kinds of music do you like? Where are you from? I know you have three sisters, a pet bird, and that you can't cook." He turned and winked at her. "That you are fabulous in the bedroom, and you seem to be up for any challenge."

"See, you know more about me than you think."

"I'm serious. I feel like there is so much more."

"I'm eclectic in my taste in music. Depends on my moods, actually. I love soft rock, hard rock, country, what you call classical, and music from my Celtic background."

"Celtic, huh?"

"Yep." There was touch of pride in her voice.

"Ireland, right?"

She paused for a moment. "Sometimes. Being Celtic doesn't always mean you're from Ireland."

"I guess you're right. That's why your last name sounds so unique, right?"

"Yes. Duile is Celtic for *elements*."

"So you're like Storm Elements."

Her booming laughter filled the truck. "I guess you could say that."

Once they were inside the restaurant, his chest swelled with pride as he felt every eye in the place on them.

She was definitely a sight to behold; a rose in a crowd of dandelions. He handed her a menu. "What are you in the mood for?"

That wicked smile he'd come to love flashed across her face. "You. My bed. Get the picture?"

His mouth went dry. "I can see it clearly." He took a long drink of water hoping to remove the cotton. "I meant on the menu."

"Aren't you on it?"

"Later," he shot back. The heat from her smoldering gaze nearly incinerated him. "We have to have sustenance first."

"Right, have to ... what's the expression, *fill the reservoir on the sex machine*?"

It was his turn to laugh, hard and loud. Seeing people staring, he coughed. "The term is, fill the *tank* on the *love machine*."

"Whatever it is, we need to ... fill 'er up."

He chuckled again. "That's it Storm, you just blow me away."

"I can." She looked over the menu.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

This woman was unlike any he'd ever known before. She was different, fun, and his yearning to be with her was growing with each passing second. He didn't just want her in his bed; he wanted to keep her in his life.

So much for his worry about whether or not she wanted a permanent relationship, he was fast learning that he was the one who wanted it.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty

Vance's nearness made it hard for Storm to concentrate on the menu.

His jeans tightly encased well-muscled thighs and cupped a perfect butt. The crisp white shirt accentuated the copper of his skin. Vance's chocolate brown sport coat emphasized the deep, rich color of his eyes. On the neck of his shirt was a black set of strings, clasped at the throat with a silver oval buckle and, in the center, a perfectly shaped turquoise stone. "What are you wearing on your neck?"

"It's my bolo tie. My grandfather gave it to me when I graduated high school."

"Bolo? It's very nice."

She turned her attention back to the menu. "I'd like the shrimp penne in white sauce, please."

"I'll have the lobster tail, French dressing on the salad."

The waitress collected their orders and menus, then disappeared back to the kitchen.

"Storm, tell me more about yourself."

Before she could answer, a couple walked over to the table. "Vance!" The man clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello Mike." Vance looked a bit uncomfortable and it bothered her. Then she saw that the woman standing beside Mike was Vance's chase partner, Helga? Hilda?

"Mike, Heidi, this is Storm Duile. Storm, my coworkers, Mike Dale and Heidi Fingerhoffer."

Storm extended her hand to each person in turn. "Pleased to meet you both."

"I thought you two were going to be out tomorrow night," Mike said with a grin as he pulled Heidi to his side.

"Ah." Storm saw the realization in Vance's eyes. "Hope you two have a very pleasant evening." He winked at Mike and patted Heidi's hand. "See you guys tomorrow at work."

"We can take a hint. It was nice meeting you Storm. Come on Heidi."

Storm watched as they walked away. "Shouldn't you have asked them to join us?"

"Probably, but then they would have."

Vance kept staring at her and it made that wiggly feeling return. "Do I have a wart on my nose?"

"You have a beautiful nose. To tell the truth, you have a beautiful everything. I just have a feeling you somehow stood up and said 'I choose you Vance Nodin'."

She had to tell him. After dinner, at her place, she *would* tell him.

How would he react? Run probably. Or—she almost giggled—call in a crazy-doctor. Or—Storm's smile died—he might turn her over to the authorities.

The arrival of dinner cut off her thoughts and she was grateful for the reprieve. It would happen soon enough. "The food looks really good."

"It sure does." He dug in with gusto.

The food smelled delicious, but knowing what was coming next was too much for her. She pushed the food around on the plate with her fork.

"You that anxious to get me into your bed?" he whispered, but not quite low enough. A passing man glanced at them both, then grinned and winked at Vance.

"I am anxious." Should she admit she had something to tell him when they got back? "I just want us to be alone together."

"Me too." He dipped the forkful of lobster into the melted butter and carried it to her lips. "Open wide."

She obeyed; the hot, slick butter touched on her lips, and swirled in a small circle before he put it in her mouth. How was it that he could make all food erotic? "Very good."

"You have butter on your lip, and unfortunately this time we *do* have a napkin."

"There's always later. I'm sure I can find something at my place."

"I thought maybe you'd like to come to mine. I mean, I'd like to show you my house, and, well..."

"That would be fine, except for two things, I have to work in the morning, and all I have is this dress."

"One of my shirts would fit you, and you could always call in sick."

"My second day?" He frowned and she wanted to erase it from his face, but she'd made her choice and now she had to deal with the consequences. "I'm off Saturday, and we do have a dinner date for tomorrow night."

"All right, I'll settle for tomorrow night."

Thank goodness, she managed to dodge the bullet after all. "I promise not to try and cook you dinner again."

"I'll hold you to that."

She laughed and finished her penne. After dinner they headed back out in the evening and Storm watched as his eyes scanned the sky. "What?"

He stared up a little longer, then answered absently, "With the halo around the moon, I say it should rain soon."

"Might at that."

She didn't speak on the drive home and he didn't seem to want to draw her into conversation. Maybe she should invite him in and tell him now, tonight. Maybe right here? The image of the car crashing into the guardrail and rolling end over end flashed into her brain. "Bad idea," she murmured.

"What?"

"I said cooking for you had been a bad idea."

"Since you brought it up, can I ask, how did you manage to make those fantastic waffles this morning, but the dinner was ... umm..."

"Miserable?"

"I guess you can put it that way."

"The waffles were made with an old family secret, dinner wasn't."

He seemed placated by her answer. They were soon walking up to her apartment. "Come in for a few minutes?"

"I'd end up wanting to stay the night, and we agreed that would be a bad idea." He kissed her cheek.

She put her arms around his waist and gave him a hard squeeze. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Right. Night, Honey."

She felt awkward hearing that term. "Good night, *Tugaim cion duit*." She watched until he disappeared down the steps

and then shut her door, rushed to the window to wait until he came out, then waved to him. He waved back and a thrill of joy ran through her.

Edgar cleared his throat. "He's been asking questions."

"Yes." She turned and walked to the cage, picked him up and stroked his head and neck feathers.

"Something's changed, hasn't it?"

"I used to think of them as lower life forms. Now I see him as an equal being. One with feelings, dreams, desires; one I want to be with, openly and honestly, sharing all my secrets."

"*Anail*, you must make very sure."

"I know, Edgar." She kissed the top of his head, set him on the back of the sofa and went to her bed. Sleep was long in coming as she played out all the scenarios of telling Vance in her mind. Just as she'd finally slept, the time came for her to get up and go to work.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty One

Vance couldn't sleep. Something was off kilter. He felt it in his bones but couldn't think what it could be. Pushing the thoughts away, he rolled over and plumped his pillow under his head.

He should be working on that component, not mooning over Storm. With sleep still elusive, he went back down to his den and turned on the computer, the component in his hand.

The cold, hard metal was a stark contrast to her warm, soft skin. "Stop it." Trying to make his mind obey the verbal order was a different struggle all together. He focused on the wires and chips.

It was out of socket! He carefully pulled the chip out and examined every single prong of the male, and then checked every hole in the female. He grabbed his magnifying glass. Finally he spotted the problem; a small plastic particle was on one of the prongs. Carefully removing it, he realigned the pieces and slid them back together.

Flipping the unit on, he mumbled a soft prayer. The WT lit up across the front and he let loose a triumphant yell. He ran to the phone and quickly dialed Heidi's number. "We did it! It works!"

At the other end of the line he heard her tired voice, "Vance, it's after three in the morning. What is wrong with you?"

"Listen to my words carefully: We ... did ... it. The ... WT ... Works!"

Her scream nearly deafened him, "Hallelujah! I knew you'd figure it out, Mr. Wizard." She stopped shouting and he heard a scraping on the phone at her end. "Look, not that I'm not happy or anything, but can we talk about this in the morning?"

"Sure, I have to call Mike."

"Don't do that!" she said in a rush.

"But he needs to know."

"Let him sleep, Vance. It's late and you really shouldn't be calling people at this time of the night."

The image of them at dinner popped into his head. "Oh man! I'm so sorry. You can tell him for me, right?"

He felt her blush through the phone. "I'll tell him. Night, you big jerk."

"Night Heidi, night Mike." He hung up before she could yell at him. He picked the phone back up and stared at it. Should he call Storm? No. She didn't have a vested interest in the project. He put it down and went back up to his bed. He could tell her at dinner tonight. It would be a celebration dinner. He'd have Heidi and Mike join them. They'd have champagne and lobster, cracked crab, steak, whatever they wanted. He would dip into his savings a bit, if necessary.

Anytime he was with Storm it was a special occasion. So what if he'd only known her, what was it now ... five days? So what if he didn't know everything about her. If he played his cards right there would be a lot of time to get to know those things.

By the time fingers of dawn's early light stretched through his window, he'd made a decision that was going to make a

very huge change on his life, hers too, he hoped. His dreams were filled with visions of them together, laughing, dancing.

Sometime later the pounding broke through the mists and he sat up. Listening closely he heard it again, someone at his front door. The clock showed it was already almost ten in the morning.

He'd overslept. He ran down the steps and opened the door to find Heidi looking almost as tired as he felt. "Look, we've got done what we've worked so hard for. The WT is working. We'll make a test run with The Tank and we'll present it in a couple of weeks. Go home, get some sleep, then you and Mike join Storm and me for dinner tonight at Robert's, seven o'clock reservations. Sound good?"

"Sounds great to me." She studied him closely. "You look like hell."

"Gee, that's quite a change from the greeting I got yesterday morning."

"You're lucky I'm coherent. I'm surprised I can speak in anything but grunts at this point."

He kissed her cheek. "Go on, get out of here."

"You need to fall in love more often, you're so much easier to deal with then."

"You can leave now." When she had safely cleared the door, he slammed it shut, then waved, smiling at her from the window in the door. She stuck her tongue out at him and retreated to her car.

Inspiration hit him. Storm would be at work by now so he could have time to pull it off. He'd seen it in some sappy chick flick he'd been stuck watching with Heidi on a chase.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He called the florist and ordered flowers, gardenias, lilies, roses, in all colors and several of the rose petals they collected and sold. It was still almost six hours before she got off work.

A garden of blooming color would greet her arrival home. Fragrances that would dance in the air. He took a short nap, showered and, by five thirty, was ready to go put his plan in motion. He hurried to the flower shop, made arrangements to have the van meet him at her building and then they headed off.

It only took a minor bit of convincing the landlady that he meant no danger. The arrival of florist's truck sealed the deal. He took the key and walked up to her apartment. At the door he stopped. Was that a television he heard? He'd just put the key in when he heard voices; she'd left her TV on?

He opened the door and found no one in the room but Edgar. He was perched on a cushion, a television remote near his left claw. The bird moved, squawked and with his beak pushed the remote on the floor. "Pretty bird, pretty bird." It flapped over and landed on Vance's shoulder. "Nice to meet you, nice to meet you." Then he rubbed his beak on his cheek. "I can talk, I can talk."

Vance captured it by the feet and carried it to the cage. "You'll be safer in here. Storm wouldn't like it if I let you escape." He shut the door and carefully orchestrated where each flower was to be placed.

After the delivery personnel left, he sprinkled a few of the rose petals in the doorway and saved the rest for the hot bath he'd draw for her when she got home. Maybe he should

change those reservations. Well if they didn't show up, Mike and Heidi could enjoy dinner on their own.

Let's see, she got off at six, and she worked about five minutes away. Depending on if she got off on time that put her home at five after, ten after if it was busy. He stopped at that thought. Busy? There weren't enough people in Red Cabin to make the gas station busy, even if they all arrived at the same time.

At six fifteen, he started the hot water to fill the bathtub, sprinkled the rose petals in the water, set up and lit the smelly candles his sister had mentioned she wanted for Christmas one year.

The tub was almost completely full when he shut off the water. Just seconds later, he heard Storm's voice,

"Edgar, I'm ... what on earth? Did you do all this for me?"

"Pretty bird, of course I can talk, pretty bird," Edgar replied.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded wary.

Vance walked out into the hall. "Your bath awaits, my lady."

She looked at him and at the flowers. "You did this?"

He moved in and embraced her. "All for you, my Wicked Angel." He started unbuttoning her blouse. When that was done he slipped the material off her shoulders. He undid the button her shorts, then removed her bra and panties.

He drank in the sight of her perfect body standing naked before him. Then he swept her into his arms and carried her to the bathroom. He gently lowered her into the water. "Not too hot, is it?"

"The water?"

"Yes, the water," he chuckled.

"No, it's fine."

"Glad to hear it." He picked up the bar of soft smelling soap, lathered it between his hands then ran them across her torso. Once she was soaped properly, he leaned her back and lifted first one leg and then the other, and rinsed off the suds. While she relaxed, he massaged her feet and calves.

"Mmm," she moaned. "Can I keep you forever?"

"Do you want to?" The motion of his hands stopped and he watched her eyes open, and then widen. She tried to jerk upward but he still had a hold on her leg and she slipped back into the tub. Her head smacked the back edge. Water splashed all over the two of them.

She coughed and sputtered, while rubbing the back of her head. "Not funny, tornado man."

He let go of her foot and went to her head. "Are you all right?" He rubbed, feeling for a knot.

"Ow! Okay, that hurt."

"Sorry." He moved backwards and sat on the commode. "Not exactly how I pictured it."

Water had splashed out and drowned a couple of the candles; the tangy smell of freshly extinguished wax and smoke filled the room. Her hair sagged around her, reminding him of a half-drowned rat.

She sat up, still rubbing the back of her head. "It was so lovely, Vance. Really, I loved it. No one has ever done anything so wonderful for me. It's just, the joke about me keeping you forever, not funny."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He moved back to the side of the tub. He knelt on the floor not caring that the rapidly cooling water was soaking into the knee of his best slacks. "It wasn't a joke. I know I don't know much about you. Hell, five days isn't enough time to get to know anyone completely. But I know how you make me feel. I know that you are amazing, and I want us to be together." He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, trying to read her face.

He was hoping to see joy, what he wasn't expecting was the touch of pain mixed with it.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Two

"Vance, I have to talk to you. Right now." Storm moved and slipped again, once more splashing water all over the bathroom.

She struggled, the water-slick tub made her stumble again. He reached out to help but she slipped in his grasp and fell back again.

"*Annwy!*" She spit out the curse and finally righted herself.

She snatched the towel he held out. "Can you give me a few minutes?" she snapped, then felt bad. "I'm sorry. It's just kind of a shock. This happened so fast, it took my breath away."

He stared at her. Her irritation made reading his expression difficult and she wanted to snap at him once again. Finally, he shrugged a sigh. "I'll wait in the living room."

"I'll be out in a few minutes." She rushed into the bedroom, longing to zap herself dry and dressed but she couldn't. Well, maybe ... she zapped her body dry and clothed, but kept her hair damp in the towel. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but nothing about this situation was working out.

He stood in the living room, wet and miserable looking. Storm took his hand and they sat down her sofa.

She turned his face so she could look deep into his eyes. "Vance, this was the best, loveliest thing anyone has ever done for me. I never thought I'd feel this way. There's a song

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

I heard that says exactly how I feel." Storm launched into song, not feeling the least bit self-conscious, "'I'd never given my heart to anyone, I didn't want to need you, I didn't want to love you.' That is so me, Vance. I never thought I'd feel this way about anyone ... like you." She stroked his cheek. "I fell in love with you over these short five days. Because I love you I have to be completely, totally honest. After you know the truth, if you don't still feel the same, I'll leave here for good."

"Nothing could be so terrible as to change my feelings for you."

"Vance, when you asked me where I was from and I didn't answer, it was because I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"Are you an alien or something?" Laughter filled his voice.

"Or something," she muttered then inhaled and exhaled once, twice, trying to calm both her stomach and heart. "I'm from Aradia."

"Arabia? What's wrong with that?"

She shook her head. "No, Aradia." Storm spelled the word. "My family, my *kind*, all live in Aradia. Well, most all. There are a few of my kind here in the mortal realm." She saw the moment her words hit him.

"Look, if you aren't interested, just tell me the truth. Don't play these little games." Anger was written on his face.

"Vance, I am telling you the truth. I'm a witch."

"Like *gather before bonfires at the solstices, use herbs, and dance naked beneath the moon?* That kind of witch?"

"No. I'm from another realm. A fourth dimension. I came to earth for ... well, the reason doesn't matter. You remember

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

how you told me you felt like you had been chosen? You were. The first time you saw me I was inside that tornado."

Surprise flitted across his face, and then anger returned. "Now *you're* the one who's not funny. I thought I'd lost my mind, and you're turning it around on me."

"You never told me where you thought you'd seen me before." She moved away from him to stand by the window. "I'm Storm Duile. My last name means *elements*. Remember the joke you made about me being *Storm Element*? Well you weren't far off."

She moved the curtains aside. "My Celtic name is *Anail*. I'm the element of air, well, not actually air. Well yes actually, but ... what I mean is ... Oh Balderdash!" She pointed her finger in the air and lightning flashed outside the window. The wind picked up and a small cyclone swirled above the coffee table. It lifted papers and the television remote, swirling the items in the air.

His look was of pure disbelief. He glanced from her to the window, to the spinning objects, and back. Then he shook his head. "The window's open. That explains it. There is a freak wind gust outside."

She stopped the whirlwind and went to stand by his side. "Window, huh?" She pulled her hands together and the window closed and fastened. "Now, no windows open. No vents. You can check them yourself." He walked through the apartment and checked each one. "Satisfied?"

"Yes."

She pointed her finger in the air again, made a small circle, and the cyclone returned. She made it whirl faster and faster.

"Would please hurry and believe her, this is making me quite dizzy and pulling some of my feathers out."

She stopped and moved to the cage. "I'm so sorry, Edgar."

"Quite all right." He flew over to land on Vance's shoulder. "I'm so glad the truth has been revealed. I was getting rather tired of that pretty-bird nonsense. Oh dear, Storm. I believe he's going to fall down!"

Invisible hands came around to support him from behind. Vance righted himself and looked from Storm to Edgar, and back. "Let me get this straight, you're a witch from *Aradia*." He looked at Edgar again. "And you can talk?"

"That pretty much sums it up."

Vance nodded and, still supported by the unseen hands, paced to the window. "And you control the air?"

"Well, now that's where it gets a little sticky. I don't really control it, as much as I *have* control *over* it. See?"

He nodded and then shook his head. "No."

"I can use the air element, I have power over it. I can create tornadoes, massive wind gusts. I can make it rain, but that's a power I share with my sister Maryna."

"Umm, all right. So you can create and control storms, too?"

She nodded. "Yes. Remember the night before last?"

"You?"

Again she nodded. "Me. That was the first time I've created something so powerful. It was my first sign that you

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

were made for me. We just fit together so perfectly. Vance, I've never felt the way I feel for you." She moved to him and held on to him tightly. "So?"

He jerked away. "So? You drop this kind of bomb on me and all you have to say is, so?"

"I'm sorry." She blinked several times, trying to keep the tears from showing. "All right, I understand." She moved away. "I thank you for the lovely flowers, bath and ... all of it. I hope to talk to you soon." She opened the door.

He walked past her without looking. She swallowed the hope that he'd stop and tell her it didn't matter, that he loved her and wanted her. It didn't happen. "Keep him in a safe arm, protecting him from harm," she incanted as he disappeared down the stairs.

Once his car was gone, she allowed the tears to fall. "Oh, Edgar!"

The bird hopped onto her shoulder extending a wing across the back of her head and, with a feathered touch, stroked her hair. "Shh, all things in their own time."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Three

Vance looked up to see his house before him. How'd he get home? He ignored the obvious answer and went inside to change his clothes. Though they had mostly dried they were still uncomfortably damp in some places, like his crotch. He shook his head. He didn't want to think of crotches ever again. He slipped on his relaxed, well-worn jeans.

The phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, Buddy. Where are you? We were supposed to meet here at seven thirty."

"Oh, right, Mike. Sorry. Something's come up and I'm not going to make it. You and Heidi enjoy dinner." He didn't even say goodbye before hanging up.

He stretched out on the bed, head swimming. He'd only been drunk one time that he could remember but his head was whirling worse now than then.

Had she merely claimed to be a witch, it wouldn't have been so bad. Had it been one of those pagan religion things he could deal with it. But she was an actual *are you a good witch or a bad witch* type witch.

The more he thought about it the more his head spun. He had to be very methodical about this. Things that didn't add up before now made sense. Yes, he still desired her, but could he spend the rest of his life with a ... witch?

Too many questions and not enough answers. He laced his fingers and slid them under his head. That didn't stop the spinning but it helped alleviate it some.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Images ran through his mind like a wild movie.

Had their encounter in the grocery store been planned? She said he had been chosen. By whom? Why?

The next scene was in the parking lot of that bar, talking to a scraggly looking dog; was it like Edgar?

Then the ice cream parlor; the way she looked at him, the fire in her eyes. The unbelievable night of passion they shared, while the storm raged outside.

She was incredible and meant so much to him, but he couldn't make a decision just like that. He had to weigh the options.

He refused to answer the phone at all Saturday, never left the house the entire day.

Sunday was another day of solitude. In the old days his people had gone to sweat lodges to think and purge themselves and find answers to their problems. Maybe that's what he should do.

He walked up the stairs and went into the sauna that he'd had installed the first year he owned the place. His bare feet padded softly across the hardwood floor and he sat on the bench. Steam filled the room, and within minutes sweat was pouring off him.

As Vance's body relaxed, his head cleared. He had to face it, he wanted her, *needed* her more than anything else in this world.

He turned the sauna off and went to take a cold shower. Once he was done he'd call her.

No, he'd rush over there and take her in his arms, tell her how much he loved her; he'd describe in vivid terms, all the

ways they could be happy. He'd just stepped out of the shower when he heard someone in the room. "Who's there?"

"Easy Buddy, it's just me."

"Mike! You're lucky I didn't clobber you. What are you doing here?"

"Someone doesn't answer his phone. We have to leave, now, tonight. The meeting with the investors has been rescheduled. They want to see us ... now."

"Now? We haven't even had a true test of the equipment. It still has a few bugs that need to be worked out. I wanted to test it with The Tank."

"They say it's now or never. We've got to go."

"I have to make a phone call first."

"No time, man! Get dressed, I'll pack this bag for you, and then it's adios. Any phone call can wait."

"You don't understand..."

"I understand that if you mess this up you're a dead man, career *and* physical-wise. You've worked too hard—we've worked too hard—to throw this out the window. Now get a move on!"

Vance rushed through getting his clothes on, making sure his bag had everything he needed then grabbed his emergency shaving kit.

He could call Storm when they got back. He wanted to talk to her, see her, but Mike was right, there was no time right now.

He followed Mike down the stairs, out the door and into the truck. In a few minutes they had Heidi picked up and were on their way.

"Why didn't you answer your phone? We've been trying to get you all day," Heidi snapped.

"I had some thinking to do."

She softened her tone. "What's happened?"

"I just had to make some major life changing decisions."

"I told you he was going to marry her." Heidi smiled triumphantly at Mike.

Vance couldn't help but wince at the word marry. Was he going to marry Storm? He closed his eyes and tried to imagine life with her. He had never really thought of having a wife before.

Sure, he'd known at one point in his life he'd marry. A woman to cook his meals, keep his home neat and tidy—that was a foregone conclusion when he was younger, but now? At this stage of life?

Of course, his fire insurance would have to be updated regularly, given the damage her attempt at cooking had done. That thought made him smile for the first time in a couple of days.

But more importantly he wanted a woman who would ride beside him, enjoying the rush of power the storms provided. A woman who would comfort him, hold him, love him unconditionally. She had to be intelligent. Someone who wasn't big on fancy clothes, or expensive jewelry. Of course, this was from necessity; on his salary, a gold band would be an extravagance.

He envisioned Storm sitting beside him as he chased the latest tornado. He saw the excitement glittering in her eyes. And if he needed a storm to develop he'd just ask her ...

Maybe she was what he needed. He could set up The Tank and the WindTalker, then call her and have her put an FE5 right on top of them.

With her powers, she could prevent anyone from being hurt or any property damage. Maybe she could—no, he couldn't do that. It would be like cheating. He had to do things on his own. Still, it wouldn't hurt, would it? Strictly for the test purposes, of course.

What was he thinking? Just a few days ago the idea of her having magic powers was ludicrous.

"Vance?"

He jerked his eyes open and looked back at Heidi. "What?"

"I asked if marriage is really what you want? Being married can put a real crimp in your lifestyle. Now you can just pick up and take off whenever you want. Once you're married, that all ends."

"I know, but I feel this is the right thing to do."

Heidi grinned, tapped Mike on the shoulder and gave him a wink in the rearview mirror before asking, "Doing the right thing? Is there some special secret we should know about?"

Vance felt the irritation with Heidi's teasing. "Knock it off H. I'm serious."

He flipped on the radio and the song Storm had quoted was playing. "What group is that?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, why?"

"Someone mentioned the song is all." He leaned back and called the image of her face to mind, lying beneath him, standing beside him, on top of him, her luscious hair flowing around her face. "I have to make a phone call."

He pulled out his cell, but couldn't get a signal. "What's going on?"

"Something wrong?"

"No reception."

"Try mine." Mike passed him the phone.

"Nope. None on yours either."

"I knew there were a few dead spots but I didn't realize this was one of them."

"I hope we don't have an accident," Heidi fussed.

"H, your only problem is that you hate it when someone else drives."

"You got that right. I'm the only one I can trust behind the wheel."

"I'll break you of that yet," Mike said with a smile.

Vance tried to ignore the warmth in Mike's voice when he spoke to Heidi. They definitely brought out the best in each other; he'd never seen Heidi as radiant as she'd become over the last of couple of days. Love brings out the best in people, maybe even people as opposite as him and Storm.

"I have to use the phone as soon as we get the chance."

"All right, take it easy. Vance, what's the matter with you?"

"I made a big mistake and I have to let her know I love her."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Four

Storm was a wreck at work. She reached for the coffee to refill the basket and knocked the pot off the counter. The carafe shattered sending hot coffee and bits of glass all over the floor.

Later, she was standing in the middle of the store, unsure what she had planned to do. Vance was so strongly in her mind there wasn't room for anything else.

She forced herself to concentrate. One good thing, Sunday was a slow day. When the front door chimed, she looked up to see Chuey there. "I thought you were off on Sundays."

"I usually am but the regular guy is out sick and you aren't ready to tackle this place alone." Chuey joined her behind the counter. "Hey Princess, you been crying?"

She wiped a Kleenex across her eyes. "No. Allergies."

"Yeah right, and I'm a monkey's uncle."

Storm sniffled. "I just ruined the best thing that ever happened to me. I've lost someone I love. Now I have to figure out a way to tell Zeke I'm quitting my job and leaving town."

"You're going to let some testosterone-laden jerk run you out of town? Come on Princess, I expected better of you."

"I can't stay. I told him if I didn't hear from him that I'd leave town and never bother him again."

Chuey shook her head in disbelief. "I thought you had more guts than that. The first day we met, you showed me

you had some major cojones, now you're running away. Did you put up a fight?"

"No."

"If you love him so much, fight for him."

"I once read a saying that went, *if you love something let it go. If it comes back to you, it's yours forever, if it doesn't it wasn't meant to be.*"

"The saying I know goes, if you love something and it leaves, hunt it down and kill it." Chuey chuckled. "Come on, Princess. Fight for this man you love, and even if doesn't work out, you still have a place where you belong. Right here at this gas station."

"Thanks Chuey, guess you must kind of like me after all."

"Nope. I just don't want to have to pick up your schedule on top of mine." Chuey's grin got wider and she smacked Storm on the back.

Storm finished the day and rushed home hoping there would be a message from Vance. She dashed into the apartment and searched the phone machine. No messages.

"He didn't call," Edgar said softly.

Storm wiped her eyes. "Well, I guess we should go. It's been two days and he hasn't come to me. I really messed it up."

Meggie popped in. "You lost the contest?"

"Auntie! I don't give a troll's chin hair about that stupid contest! I've lost Vance!"

Meggie put her arm around her shoulders and motioned at the crystal square. "Look there."

The image of Vance in the truck with Mike and Heidi glowed on the screen. "What's happened?"

Meggie did a rewind. "Some kind of testing or something."

Storm sniffed and then accepted the lace handkerchief that Meggie provided. "That's good, the project he's been working so hard on is finally finished. I'm very happy for him." She stared at his image longer. "I'm ready to come home now, Auntie. He's gone and life here isn't worth it without him."

"Hush child." She turned up the volume.

Storm couldn't breathe when she heard Vance say, "I made a big mistake and I have to let her know I love her." The tears of misery turned to ones of joy as she danced around the room, grabbing first Edgar then her aunt and spinning. "He loves me! Oh, Auntie! Edgar! He loves me!"

"Never doubted it for a minute," Edgar crowed and pecked her on the cheek.

"I want to go to him!"

"Not yet, child, he's still with the others. You've told him your secret, you two should guard it closely. Keep watch and when he's in the hotel room you can go to him." Meggie kissed her niece on the cheek. "Must be going now, other girls to check in on. Love to you, my dear girl."

"Love to you, Auntie!" Storm couldn't pull her eyes off of Vance as she waited impatiently for them to get to the hotel. "Maybe if I..."

"You'll remain here until he arrives at his destination."

"Oh, pooh! They wouldn't be able to see me. I just want to be near him. Be right back." She blew a kiss and vanished at the same time.

Invisible, she sat on the seat next to Vance, unable to resist she blew gently in his ear. Her warmth breath tickled him she could tell, when he moved his hand to his ear. "What the...?" He fidgeted with the window making sure it was up, and then sat back.

Once more she blew gently in his ear. "Vance."

He jerked up. "Storm?" he blurted.

"What?" Heidi and Mike asked in unison.

"I said I can't stop thinking about Storm." He turned in the direction he'd felt her presence. "I don't want to stop thinking of you. I love you."

Joy washed over her and she touched his hand. "Tá mo chroí istigh iona."

"One day you have to tell me what that means."

"One day soon," she promised and squeezed his hand. "I'm going back now. Let me know when you get to the hotel. I'll come to you there."

"I can't wait."

"Buddy, you're going to have to stop talking to yourself back there, or we're going to drop you by the funny farm."

"Sorry guys, just been an unusual few days."

Storm popped back on the sofa, watching his every movement. He didn't know all her secrets. He didn't know about this yet. Maybe she shouldn't tell him, that way she could watch him all the time without him, what was the current phrase, *freaking out*?

When Vance dozed, she lay back on the sofa and did the same. She needed her own rest anyway; she had to work at her mortal job again. From now on she would try and do

better. The place was interesting, the people intriguing, and the job, while a bit mundane, was enjoyable.

"Storm?"

His voice broke through her slumber. She stretched and rolled over, fell off the sofa, landing with a hard thud on the floor.

"Vance?" She searched and found him on the screen, standing in a hotel room, calling for her. She sat up. During the short zap to join him, her hair, clothes and make up received a refreshing little zap. She was sitting on his bed, watching him before he uttered her name a second time.

"Hey, sexy."

He spun around and she laughed as she reached out and helped him right his staggering steps. "You're here."

She threw her arms around him. "Whenever you want me, all you have to do is call and, no matter where you are, I'll be there."

"So what if you're a witch." He kissed her. "Every married couple has to make adjustments. It's just a cultural difference, isn't it?"

"Pretty much. We are different from you, but we're also similar. Our children aren't born green skinned, with warts on their noses ... not usually anyway."

At his horrified expression she let loose a hardy laugh and swatted him. "I've only personally known of two occasions where the child was born looking like that. Once was when Shimalla and her frog Prince had a child. And once when my cousin, Augolar and his troll bride had their baby."

A knock at the door interrupted the kiss they almost shared and she sagged in his arms.

"Hey Buddy, it's Mike. Can you let me in?"

Storm frowned and leaned her forehead on Vance's chest.

"What does he want?"

"I won't know until I open the door and ask him, can you..."

Before he could finish the question she'd vanished from view. She stood invisibly in the bathroom doorway.

He opened the door to a red faced Mike. "What's wrong?"

"They only have one room."

"What? No."

He nodded. "So Heidi," Mike stepped aside so she could walk into the room, "suggested you might do the gentlemanly thing and let her have the room while you slept in the truck."

"What about you?"

"Where she goes, I go." Mike grabbed Heidi by the waist causing her to drop her bag on the floor.

"We can all share the room, it's not like Vance and I haven't slept together before." Heidi picked up her bag and moved it to the second bed.

Storm felt intense rage at the offhand remark, she moved over and kicked Vance in the shin.

"Ow!" he hopped on one foot rubbing his injured leg.

"What happened?"

"Walked into something. Come on H, you better watch how you phrase things or people will get the wrong idea."

"I know you two sleep together. Accomodations at some places are worse than others." Mike sat on the bed beside

Heidi's bag. "If we promise to be really good and really quiet, can we share the room?"

"All right, but any late night moaning and you two are out of here."

Mike winked and nudged Heidi. "Buddy, that goes double for you."

So, they would all be in the same room. That would make being with Vance extremely difficult. "Come into the bathroom," Storm whispered in his ear.

Once the door was safely shut she materialized. "I can zap us back to my place and then return you in time for your meeting."

"Don't you have to work in the morning?"

"I do, but we need to be together."

"We will be. When I get back on Tuesday."

"All right, if you're sure." She kissed him then pulled away. "I'll have strawberries, chocolate sauce and whipped cream waiting for your homecoming party." Her eyebrows wiggled and then she was gone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Five

Images of Storm and her welcome home present kept him awake all night long. He was afraid that if he allowed himself to sleep, he'd make the small room seem even smaller and more uncomfortable by moaning and disturbing his friends.

He must've dozed at some point because he felt a sharp jabbing in his side. "What?"

"Come on, Buddy. Time to get a move on. We have thirty minutes to inhale breakfast, get the charts and booklets together, and set up our presentation."

"Oh, right." Vance jumped up, raced through his morning routine and was ready to fly out the door in ten of the promised thirty minutes. Was Storm up already? Looking at the clock, he noted she would already be at work by now.

"Love you, my Wicked Angel."

"What?" Heidi came to dead stop in front of him.

"I was just saying..."

"I heard 'love you my Wicked Angel.' I hope you weren't talking to me."

"No, just a pet name I have for Storm. She told me to make sure I call her once in a while."

"Oh, so you got a hold of her last night?"

So to speak. "Yes. She was very understanding."

"You really are in love with her, aren't you?"

"Enough to make her my wife, if she'll have me." Was Storm somewhere even now, listening?

"We need to get our stuff together so we can knock this presentation out of the ball park."

"Right." He picked up his briefcase, the DVD, charts and the WT unit. "Ready and set."

In minutes, they had stuffed a frenzied fast food breakfast down their gullets and were setting things up in the meeting room at Chandling & Dowden. The company had financed his work on this project for the last four years; now it was time to show them their money had been well spent and would be useful to others.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Mike stood and called Vance's attention to the arrivals.

The older of the partners, Baldwin Chandling, offered a gruff nod in his direction. He sat at the head of the table.

The younger Alden Dowden took the chair to his immediate left. "This project has cost us a great deal of money and time. Is it successful or not?"

Vance groaned. He inhaled a deep breath and slid into his seat after the other men took their chairs. "It can't be said to be one hundred percent, as we haven't had time to complete the testing phases."

Alden Dowden peered over at him. "You've had ample opportunity. What's the problem?"

Vance bit his tongue. He hated these blasted meetings. If he could work strictly behind the scenes and never have to speak to anyone outside his intimate circle, he'd die a happy man. He shifted a glance in Mike's direction.

Mike nodded and stood up. "The weather is our biggest obstacle at the moment sir. Mr. Nodin has been working night

and day for nearly a year, creating the program, building the components."

"The last update we received," Mr. Chandling pressed a button on his PDA, "two months ago, was that the device was operational and all things were progressing on schedule."

"There were some minor glitches that needed to be ironed out. I'm pleased to say they have been, but we haven't had the chance to fully test their capacity," Mike countered.

"What I want to know is, can these be counted on?" Mr. Dowden demanded.

"Without complete testing, I can't answer that."

Mr. Dowden leaned in close to Mr. Chandling and the two men whispered back and forth.

Vance's nerves stretched tight. This could break them. If only he could have had the chance to test the unit. He was confident it would work. Was it really confidence or was it wishful thinking?

"What were the results of your previous tests?"

Vance rubbed a palm against his thigh. "In my most recent test we found that the device gave us a forty-five minute warning."

Mr. Dowden nodded. "How soon can we have these units ready for distribution?"

"We still need time for further testing. The device wasn't accurate at all phases. In some cases it was almost too sensitive."

Mr. Chandling blinked behind his thick glasses. "How hard is it to make the adjustments?"

"I've made modifications but, as Mike said, the weather has been against us."

Again Dowden and Chandling put their heads together. Vance glanced over at Mike. Mike shrugged his shoulders slightly and Vance rolled his eyes in reply.

Acid churned in his stomach. He needed this funding but this meeting set all sorts of little red flags off in his head.

"If the unit design was fully operational, would it be easy to produce?"

Vance cocked his head slightly. Maybe he'd just jumped to conclusions. The thought rejuvenated his flagging confidence. "Very easy. Theoretically, if the tests were completed tomorrow and yielded the same positive results, then we could begin production in the next week or two."

"They are cost effective?"

Vance nodded again. "I kept the cost of each unit in mind because I know there are communities with less expendable cash than others, but it will still be costly to produce at the outset."

"How much of a profit can we expect to see?"

That question threw him for a loop. He glanced over at Chandler. "Pardon?"

The man's owl-like blinks increased dramatically. "How much of a profit?"

Vance looked over at Mike before he answered, "Sir, the whole point of this venture was the fact that despite the ability to pay, each community would work out an agreement to receive what could ultimately prove to be a major life-saving product."

"You're dodging the question here, Nodin. What will it cost to manufacture each unit?" Mr. Chandling's voice took on a harsh note.

"I've tried, but I can't get it any lower than ten thousand. That's just for the components; I'm not sure what adding in labor will bring the cost to."

Mr. Dowden's face smoothed and he gave a ghost of a smile. "With a price tag of twenty five, maybe thirty grand, we should be able to get this program back in the black."

"You've done it, be proud of that, my boy." Mr. Dowden walked over and clapped him on the back. "You've created a modern masterpiece that will revolutionize the early warning world. But everything has its price. We've lost a great deal of money on this project and now we need to earn it back."

The urge to hit the old man and watch him slide down the well-slicked mahogany tabletop surged through Vance. "We did this to help, not turn a profit!" he erupted, knocking down his chair as he leapt to his feet.

"When we went into this venture, it was to look for a way to better serve our community." *Profit?* What about helping mankind? They couldn't use it to turn a profit if it wasn't ready for market. "I said, theoretically. As we haven't had the proper environment to test it out thoroughly, it won't be ready for some time."

"Then get it done. We want to be ready to move forward with this in the next quarter," Mr. Chandling said.

Vance was seeing red. "Sure, I'll just run right out and command the weather to brew up a severe storm."

Mr. Dowden's eyebrow quirked. "There's no need to take on such an attitude."

"We've explained to you why we haven't been able to fully test the device. I can't pull nasty weather out of a clear day," Vance shouted.

He felt a light hand on his shoulder and Mike pulled him back. "Vance," he muttered. "Calm down."

"I can't believe this."

"Obviously you can't be objective here, so I say it's time to terminate the project."

A hush fell over the room and Vance's legs wavered beneath him. He dropped back against the wall for support. His loss of control just cost them much needed funding. Damn it all.

"We will take all your research and files. Please have them sent to us immediately."

"But—" Vance's heart slammed three-quarter time into his ribs, his mouth felt thick with cotton and the skin along his scalp prickled. "This is important work," he argued weakly. "There are people who need this device."

"I agree with you," Mr. Chandling spoke up. "Which is why we'll be passing this on to another research group. One who can get the job done on time."

Anger pulsated through him. "What? You expect me to give my research to someone else? Have you lost your twisted minds?" He stomped across the room and came face to face with Mr. Alden Dowden.

"Listen to me, you worthless old goat, I've spent most of the last few years of my life developing this program,

inventing this design. Now you're expecting me to hand it off?" He released a mirthless chuckle. "Not on your life."

Mr. Dowden's spine stiffened. "We, at Dowden & Chandling, provided the funds. Therefore, the information is ours. You refuse to work within our time frames, so you forfeit the rights to the work."

He would rip that smug little jerk into a million pieces. Vance lunged for the older man but was stopped in his tracks by Mike grabbing hold of him.

"Come on, calm down, Vance," Mike ordered.

"Your friends are very wise Mr. Nodin. I suggest you have anything related to this project assembled and ready to transfer to our possession within the week." Mr. Chandling stepped toward the door.

He put his hand on the knob then turned to face Vance. "I suggest you do as you're told. We would hate to have any unpleasantness develop." He turned the knob and walked from the room.

"Within the week," Dowden reiterated before following in the other man's wake.

"Damn it," Vance spewed. "My work. All ... my ... work."

He frantically paced back and forth across the room. It was all swirling from his grasp. How could they expect him to give up everything?

"Vance?" Heidi said gently.

He stopped in place. "I won't do it; I won't give it up to them. I can't."

"How can you stop it?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll find a way."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"We'll think of something. Let's go home. Storm will be waiting for you." Mike nudged him in the ribs.

The mention of her name cooled some of Vance's anger. He could have everything bagged up and be back with her by the time she got off work, if they left right now. "I'm ready to go home, how about you?"

"Definitely," Mike and Heidi agreed simultaneously, and the trio left the building, each flashing a one-fingered salute over their shoulder as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"I'm coming home," he murmured to the roof of the truck and wondered if she could hear him. "I've lost almost everything, but I still have you."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Six

The day dragged mercilessly. It was noon, and the workers hadn't come in for their lunches so there wasn't anything to break up the monotony.

Storm dusted every shelf at least three times. Everything was stocked. The deliveries arrived earlier, but even those were put away in less than fifteen minutes.

She went to the fountain and poured herself a soda. Vance would be coming back today and they would be able to start fresh ... together.

She looked ahead to the life with him in nervous anticipation. Telling her family she was going to have a mixed marriage wouldn't be easy.

How would her parents react?

"Mom, Dad, meet my husband, Vance, he's a mortal. Let's eat." Oh yeah, that would make for a great dinner conversation. The traditional hazing would probably kill him, literally.

A witch could physically withstand the trials to become a member of her family. They could be anything, from something as simple as walking through a wall of fire, to milking a Venusian yak, levitating a mountain, all the way to the more difficult tasks of creating an eclipse, aligning the planets or creating and controlling a meteor shower.

Vance couldn't even dream of being able to do those things. Maybe they'd simply require him to eat a bucket of

chocolate covered grasshopper livers. Eating such a horrible concoction would definitely be proof he loved her.

Where would they live? Would he want to remain here in this world? Probably. Besides, Aradia was no place for a mortal to live. She wouldn't be happy anywhere Vance wouldn't be welcome.

They'd just have to stay here. She'd keep this job and house while he went out and chased his storms, wrote his papers and played with his gizmos. Would the boredom of being alone drive her mad?

Her mind whirled like a circus wheel on speed. "Was that right?" she mused quietly.

"Was what right?"

She jumped, then recovered. "A saying I was trying to remember. *A circus wheel on drugs?*"

Chuey threw back her head and laughed. "Princess, the saying is *like a Ferris Wheel on steroids.*"

A chime told her they had a customer, the first one in almost two hours. Storm started the pump and went back to pretending to dust. She was already learning how some things worked here in this world.

By listening to the radio or watching the little TV Zeke put on the counter in the corner, she was picking up more and more of the language. All this plus some things she had overheard Chuey say—things she wasn't completely sure she should be saying—helped her become more familiar with everyday language.

"So you've decided to stick it out here in our little paradise, hey Princess?"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She glanced over at Chuey. "I believe things are going to work out. I didn't have to fight that hard. He loves me and that's what matters. He went out of town on business but he'll be home tonight. I can't wait to see him."

"You are a sickening sight." Chuey chuckled. "Being all in love, with a goofy grin on your face. Almost look like you're floating on air."

"Haven't you ever been in love, Chuey?"

"Once." She closed her eyes. "We didn't fawn and moon over each other. We just lived every day like nothing was different."

"What happened?"

"He wanted to leave, so I let him go ... then I hunted him down and shot him."

Storm inhaled a shocked breath. "You what?"

A booming laugh escaped Chuey. "I'm just messing with ya Princess, no need to get all hysterical. Bones and me decided to go our separate ways. Not sure, but last time I heard from him, he was traveling across country on his Harley, somewhere out west."

"You know what? I can picture you clearly as a motorcycle mommy."

"Momma. Motorcycle Momma. Princess, you have got to learn how to talk right."

"Maybe you can help me with that. How about writing down phrases for me to use so I fit in?"

"Why should I go to that kind of trouble just for you? I don't even like you." Chuey walked past and disappeared into the back of the store with the cash drawer.

Storm turned her mind back to a more pleasant topic. Vance would be home some time tonight and she knew everything she wanted to say to him. *Searc, gráim thú*, but most importantly, *tá mo chroí istigh ionat*. She roamed listlessly between the rows of shelves to the counter and back again. A glance at the clock clicked off the minutes as if the hands had been dipped in molasses.

Just when her torture seemed unending, Zeke entered the shop. "Well Chuey, I think you can run the show and we'll let Storm get out of here."

"I can leave early?"

"Don't see no reason why not. It's a slow day and you done a good job keeping on top of things, but I think Chuey needs the distraction."

"I'd rather watch paint dry than sit here and have to watch the Princess moon over some man."

The gruff manners of the older woman no longer bothered Storm. She liked the large woman's personality and bluntness. That, coupled with Zeke's good nature, gave her a feeling, however disjointed, of being part of a family. Twisted, to be true, but a family feel none the less.

She grabbed her keys and ran outside. Before anyone could blink she was on her way back to the apartment. At least there she could watch the crystal and find out where he was and how soon he could be back.

"Hello Edgar, I'm here."

"Welcome home. You're a bit early, aren't you?"

"A bit. They gave me the rest of the time off. No customers." She zapped on some comfortable lightweight

flannel shorts, an extra large t-shirt and the crystal all at once. "I wonder where he is now."

"If I know you, and I do, I believe you'll find out soon."

She smiled at the surly reply. "There he is." He was leaning his head on the back of the seat. His eyes were closed; a worried frown creased his forehead.

Something was wrong, but what? If she appeared next to him, he'd be surprised and cause a scene. If she didn't she'd have to wait until he got home to learn the reason behind his troubled look.

From what she could tell it would be another hour, maybe even two, before he'd arrive. She wasn't sure she could wait that long. "What can I do to pass the time?"

"Try and clean the mortal way?" Edgar squawked.

"That isn't as hard as you might think." She pursed her lips at him, produced a feather duster and began to clean the apartment furnishings with it. "See? That was done in short order."

"What about the dust that is now on the carpet?"

"Easy." She took the duster and ran it over the pile of carpet.

"No. You have to use a vacuum cleaner."

"A what?"

"An electrical appliance that, when plugged into an outlet and turned on, beats the dust from the carpet and sucks it into a bag or collection cup, thereby cleaning the carpet."

"Huh." Storm sat on the sofa. A vacuum cleaner, learn something new everyday. "Something to remove this dust is a definite must."

A gleaming black contraption with hoses, attachments, and a cord appeared before her. "I take this part here," she held up the plug, "and stick the metal into the funny holes on the wall, right?"

"Right."

"Piece of pie."

"Cake. The saying is, piece of cake."

"One is just as good as the other." She stuck the metal into the wall and held onto the handle. She waited but nothing happened. "It's not working."

"There should be a switch to turn it on, and one to make the handle lay down as well as stand up."

Storm looked all over, finally finding one button on the handle by her hand and another on the bottom of the unit by her feet. "I bet this is the power one." She flipped the switch and loud whirring could be heard. With a tap on her toe on the lower lever, she brought the handle down from its awkward position. She ran the machine all over the carpets in each room, and the bare floors in the bathrooms and the kitchen. "Done."

"Very good. Now you have to empty the collection device."

"The what?"

"Collection device. Where all the dirt and dust went to when it was sucked up."

"That must be this thing here." She placed her hand on the clear plastic that was now dusty and dirt filled. She reached out and grabbed the handle that was built into it, but the piece never moved. She tried over and over and over again. "I can't figure it out."

"Fetch me the instruction booklet."

She whipped it up and carried it over, both of them looking at the thin paper pages. "It says to remove the dust catcher. I have to push this button and it will release it from place." She moved to the machine. "Found it."

She pressed the button and the plastic tube flapped out at her. She lifted it off, carried it to the trash bin then dumped out the contents.

"I've done it." Excitement fueled her confidence level. She carefully scrubbed every inch of her apartment until everything gleamed. She'd consumed almost two hours but when she checked, Vance still wasn't home.

They were only a few miles still out, but that would be another half hour, or even longer. "Maybe I can cook him dinner again."

"Please don't! Not another fiasco when we're making such wonderful progress."

She scowled at Edgar. "I can do it, I have to learn how to sometime, don't I?"

"Make it something very easy. Something you can't possibly destroy."

"Hamburgers."

"That would be good. No one can destroy a hamburger."

She looked at the clock. If she went now she could have the ground beef here when he got home. Then she could make the patties and ... she looked at the cookbook, fry them. It looked so simple. There was no possible way she could mess this up.

She materialized a pound of ground beef.

"I should let him know to just come straight here," Storm murmured.

She closed her eyes and focused on Vance. She could clearly see him sitting in the back of the vehicle. "Vance, have them drop you at my apartment," she whispered.

He gave a nearly imperceptible nod and she snapped her eyes open, back in her kitchen once again.

The cookbook said she had to mix the meat with an egg, add some bread crumbs then roll it into the balls. She sliced open the ground beef package and dropped the rest of the marbled meat into a bowl. Next came the egg. She mashed the two different proteins together, then she sprinkled in the bread crumbs. Once more she used her hands to mix the ingredients.

She picked up small bits rolled them into balls then laid them onto the counter as she went. In no time she had twenty four of the little balls.

"These seem rather small." She picked up three and mashed them back together then rolled them into the circular shape. When she'd finished there were now only eight balls, that would be four hamburgers each. "These aren't right either."

The book suggested she use a couple of plates and waxed paper to press out the balls into the desired shape. "Plates of glass and paper of wax, come to me as I ask." The items appeared on the counter and she began mashing the balls the way the book showed.

She then pulled a frying pan out of thin air, turned on the burner of the stove and waited for it to heat up. "Edgar, let him in," she shouted when the buzzer rang.

She zapped open the door while the meat in the pan sizzled and popped as it cooked. "I'm making us dinner," she called out as Vance walked in the door. Inside the little silver pan, the meat seemed to be almost crowded, one patty on top of the other.

She pulled up a flat metal wand with a larger flat head called a spatula, to flip the burgers over. The meat stuck to the bottom and refused to relinquish its hold. She struggled and fought. Finally the meat gave up and she flipped the hulking patties over, half at a time. The popping renewed with vengeance and smoke filled the small kitchen.

Vance was suddenly standing beside her. "Can I help?" She glanced up to see his eyes were watering from the smoky haze.

"No, you've had a long trip and I want to do this for you." She pressed a quaint kiss to his cheek and ushered him out of the room. "I'll let you know when its time to eat. Why don't you take a shower or rest?" she suggested.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Seven

He knew he was in trouble when the door opened and he viewed the room through a haze of smoke. As he warily made his way inside, the smell of burning meat met his nose and tickled it inside. The deepening of the smoke was burning his eyes.

He should've known she would try something like this. Her refusal of his offer to help just added to the turbulent feelings inside. She was going to butcher some poor recipe and, no matter how much he loved her, he wasn't sure he could survive another of her cooking attempts.

He returned to the living room and sat in a large chair near an open window. Edgar was perched on the window sill. "I envy you that."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can just take off outside in the fresh air should you want to."

"But I shouldn't want too. She does all *ar ghrá, de ghrá, ruda*."

"What is that? Gaelic?"

Edgar nodded. "Many of our kind speak Celtic, Gaelic, Aradic. Storm speaks close to twenty languages, but she has a great deal of trouble speaking mortal." The bird cut his eyes over in Vance's direction. "It's even harder for her to admit she loves. But once she's made that admission, nothing can stand between her and the man she's chosen, no matter what

the circumstances. A *Stór* doesn't give her heart away easily, or lightly. Remember that and you'll do well."

"What about her cooking?"

"Make lots of money so you can take out every meal."

They laughed then the raven shook his head. "Better yet, tell her it's all right for her to use her powers in that area. She's learned a lot just in this short time. She's done it all for you."

Vance felt his face heat. "What has she done?"

"She learned to use a vacuum cleaner. She dusted this entire place and scrubbed it by herself, no magic. She has decided to keep that job, despite the fact that she has never done a strenuous day's work in her life. Just so she can be close to you."

Vance's chest swelled with pride. She was making major adjustments just for him. He moved to the kitchen again, placing his arms around her waist waiting any second for the smoke detector to begin to chirp. "Storm, it's okay to use your magic to cook for me. I love that you want to do this all yourself, but by using your power, isn't that accomplishing the same end? You still did it for me."

He couldn't fight the relief flooding over him as she put down the pan and stepped back into his arms. "You sure?"

"I'm absolutely sure. I adore you, and if you use those powers of yours to whip up our meals that just means more time I have with you."

She seemed placated by this and turned into his chest. "I really made a mess of it, didn't I?"

He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose. "You sure did, but I love you for trying."

He watched as she straightened, moved her hands in a back and forth motion and the room cleared of smoke, the burned meat in the pan was gone and everything was fresh and clean once more.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starved." He pulled her tight and traced her lips with his tongue. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"Just what the witch whipped up."

He chuckled, nudged her cheek with his nose and headed from the kitchen to her bedroom. Who was dragging whom, he wasn't exactly sure. All he knew was this was where he wanted to be, *needed* to be, here in her apartment, in her arms, for the rest of his life.

He woke a few hours later, his arms still wrapped around her waist, her hair draped over his arm and across his face. Carefully he slid from the bed and went to get a drink of water.

A light from the television cast shadows on the hall wall as he walked into living room. Edgar was on the sofa.

"Is that all you do?" Vance asked.

"Not usually, but here in this realm it's all I've found to occupy me so far. This is really an intriguing movie. A western, I believe it's called."

Vance sat down. "Henry Fonda and Harry Morgan. The movie's called the *Oxbow Incident*."

Edgar nodded. "Had these people taken time to gather all the facts and examine them, then innocent lives wouldn't

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

have been lost. Unfortunately, it is human nature to run with what you think you know. Even in old movies there are life lessons that can be applied."

"You're quite right. In science we're taught never to leap to conclusions, but to sit down and wait until all the facts are in. A lot of theories have been ruled useless and baseless due to impatience."

"Cool heads and calm hearts lead the clear way."

Vance had the feeling Edgar had some kind of message buried in those seemingly innocent comments. "Something you're trying to tell me?"

Edgar shook his sleek head. "Nothing."

Despite the bird's denial Vance felt sure he was missing something. If there was something Edgar wanted him to know, he'd tell him.

Vance went on into the kitchen, filled a glass with ice water and drank it down. He sat the glass back down on the counter and went back to join his woman in her bed.

He slipped back between her sheets and spooned up next to her, holding her tight, then his eyes slid shut. In minutes he was dreaming of the world with just them in it.

Sun peaked through the slats of her blinds; he smiled and nuzzled the back of her neck. "Morning, beautiful."

She stretched out beside him, her eyes opening. "Morning handsome." The lazy look was quickly replaced with something akin to panic. "Morning! What time is it?" Her gaze drifted to the clock. "Seven forty? I'm going to be sooo late!"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He watched as she jumped out of the bed and ran to the closet. She still had to shower and get herself ready, and had to be at her job in twenty minutes. How would she handle it?

"I hate to do this. I wasn't going to do anymore magic but it can't be helped. Running late, must make haste, showered cleaned and pressed, no time to waste."

She disappeared into a whirlwind, and then suddenly she was back in view, fresh from the shower, clean and dressed, ready to head out the door. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Tonight, you get off at six, right?"

"That's right. Oh here." She pointed to the counter where a key appeared. "Just lock up when you leave." She kissed him quickly and said, "See you tonight." Once more she vanished.

He took a slow shower, dressed and packed his bag. He needed to get home. Home! She didn't whip up his truck or zap him home, or whatever it was she had planned before she took off. He carried his bag to the living room and set it by the door, picked up the key. "Well Edgar, it was great seeing you again, I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other."

"I'm positive of that. Did she leave your truck waiting?"

"No. I thought I'd walk home."

"No need." Edgar popped up flapped over Vance's shoulder. "Home," he said and tapped Vance on the head.

Vance wasn't sure what to expect, but to find himself standing in his own living room without having done anything more than taken a breath was a little unnerving. His bag sat on the floor next to his feet, so he picked up and went up to his room to unpack.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He wandered back down the steps to his office. He stopped in the doorway and stared at the piles of maps, pictures and the flash drives of research information.

He couldn't fathom the thought of turning his hard work over to some corporate egghead. The WT was his baby. It gradually came to life through his sweat, his blood and his tears. Damn Dowden & Chandling for interfering! He'd almost rather see it all destroyed than give it to those money-hungry bastards.

He paced toward the desk with thoughts of destruction whirling in his mind. If he could get the WT and The Tank in a system now to test them out, then all his work would remain his.

He could determine if the units were fully functional as well as test out The Tank and gather data from there. It would be simple. Just pick up the phone and call Storm.

Hell, maybe he wouldn't have to even bother with the phone. If he'd just thought of her before and she'd appeared to him, would she do so now?

He paused. She would be at work and he couldn't very well interrupt her there. But after she came home he'd sit down with her, explain what had happened and ask if she can help.

He wasn't exactly dropping on his hands and knees and begging her for help. So why was his pride gnawing at him?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Eight

Storm headed home with a smile plastered on her face. Nothing was going to keep her from being happy. Nothing. Vance knew she was a witch and he didn't care.

His truck was in the parking lot. She couldn't prevent the incantation that got the Corvette parked and her in the apartment.

She threw her arms around him and placed a kiss that rocked them both. "I missed you today."

"I've missed you too. Listen, we need to talk."

A little trace of fear snaked up her spine. "Talk? Did you change your mind? About me, I mean?"

Relief flooded over her when he smiled and held her close. "No. I wanted talk to you about something else."

She followed him to the sofa. After he sat down, she settled in next to him. "What's wrong, Vance?"

He was silent and she longed to read his mind to find the source of the problem. Finally, he inhaled and released a sigh. "The meeting I went to was about my WindTalker unit. The early warning system I developed."

She knew of three things he actively worked on: the early warning device, the deal with the architect for the safer building materials, and the monstrous truck-thing. "Right."

"The investors who backed the project called me in for a meeting. They want me to turn in all my findings."

"So they're satisfied? I didn't know you had it ready for them."

"It's not ready. I told them it needed more work, more tests, anyway. But until there are the proper conditions for a field test, the unit can't be fully operable."

She sat up and studied his face. Sadness and anger edged his eyes. "So, what's the problem?"

"The field conditions. They aren't right. I need a large active cell. I need to get a unit in place and set up to make sure it will work."

"So I'll give you a cell."

She carefully noted each subtle change in his face. There was relief, irritation, and anger mingled in the mask of skin. "I don't want that." He pushed up and paced the room. "I mean, I do. Damn it," he spat and paced to the window.

"What do you want?" His irrational behavior was beyond her. "Why are you acting like you're upset with me? I can give you what you need. Which, I suspect, is why you mentioned it. You want my help."

"I need the storm system. I need to get my testing done. I need the data for my research."

"For someone asking for help you're sure being a jerk about it," she snapped.

He spun on his heel and stared at her. "I don't want to need you to do it for me."

It dawned on her then. It was a matter of his pride. She'd heard that mortal men often had more than the lion's share of pride. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

She walked behind him and slipped her arms around his waist. She pressed a kiss into his back and rested her cheek against him. A soft smile played on her lips. "Maybe you won't

need me anyway. Weather is a tricky thing. Wait five minutes and the forecast flies out the window."

He pulled free and turned to face her. He tilted his head down and gave her a gentle kiss. "I'm sorry I'm such an ass."

"Forget it. Anything else on your mind?"

He led her back to the sofa and sat down pulling her into his lap. "I'd like to discuss a possible change in our relationship status."

"Change?"

"Yeah like maybe we only need one house, if you can get out of the lease for this place. If you want to."

She smiled. "Vance! Does this mean you are asking me to marry you?"

"Actually I was asking if you wanted to move in together."

Her smile faltered a bit. In Aradia, two committed witches could set up house together before the joining ceremony. It wasn't common, but it also wasn't frowned upon. But in the mortal realm it didn't have the same meaning as it did in her world. Living together here was a way of sharing the expenses and having the relationship, but still being able to change your mind and walk out the door if the urge to run hit. "So you want to have your cow and drink your milk too?"

"What?"

"You don't want to have to be committed, but you do want the French benefits. You want your cow and drink your milk too."

His laughter infuriated her. "I think you're confused. The sayings are *have your cake and eat it too*. And *why buy the*

cow when you can get the milk for free? And it's fringe benefits, not French."

"Stop it! I don't find it funny!"

"I'm sorry, it's just so cute." He moved over and placed his arms around her. "I thought it would make you happy. Don't you want to live with me?"

"I do, but I don't know."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"That's all that matters then, right?"

"Right. I was just hoping, well never mind." She settled back into his embrace. There would be time for the talk of a joining ceremony later. Right now they had each other. "What would you like to do tonight?"

"Stay in with you."

"Sounds good to me. I can whip us up a meal and we can enjoy it ... wherever."

Storm was wrapped tight in Vance's embrace when the lights flickered. Then the room filled with the scent of brandy laced cigar smoke. Of all times for Maxvalliano to show up ... she quickly froze time. "Max."

"My Enchantress." The blond male witch took her hand, bent low over it and placed a kiss on top of it. "I've missed you, *Céadsearc*. Come away with me now."

"I'm in the middle of something, Max."

"Ah yes, I know ... that silly contest." He moved around and stared down at Vance. "Not much to look at, is he? Well, you've got him here, and frozen. We can go dancing until

dawn and then when you get back, wake him up and scold him for falling asleep on you."

"Max, it isn't just the contest." She bit her lip. "I've decided to drop out of the contest. See, I-I love him."

He threw back his head and laughed, the derisive sound made her teeth itch. "Love him? He's a mortal! A nothing! Enough of this; come away with me now."

"Even if I didn't love him, I wouldn't be going anywhere with you. You know we aren't *pòs*. We had some laughs together, but now, you have a life of your own and I know what I want."

"You wound me deeply, Lady." He squeezed her hand. "I'm not accustomed to losing, especially to a mortal, but if that is your heart's wish, then it can't be changed." He kissed her hand again. "Think of me often and fondly."

"I will. Goodbye Max."

She waited until she was sure he was gone, and restarted time. "Did you ever decide what you wanted to do?"

Vance shook his head. "Nothing at all. We've done a lot over a short span of days. Let's just relax and enjoy each other's company."

"I'm all for that." Telling Max before she'd told anyone else was sure to come back to haunt her, but when Vance began to kiss and nibble on her neck, the heat creeping up from between her legs pushed every other thought from her mind.

As his lips made one excursion, his hands followed a different path, uniting to make her blood sing in her veins. She lifted the cushions and they rode on air to her room, where they rolled onto her bed.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He was working magic of his own. Her clothing vanished in seconds. His clothes landed on the pile shortly after. The feeling of heated skin on heated skin sent the fires kindling higher. She would never be able to get enough of his hands roaming her body, landing on the center of her being and stroking her into a frenzied explosion.

The sweet torture as he stroked her into a fury, then crashed her under the waves of pleasure, only to be pushed forward again, drove her mad.

Their bodies fit perfectly. Together they rode the waves, breathless; the sweat glistening on their skin was the only thing saving them from burning the house down.

In the quiet afterward of their lovemaking, Storm rested her cheek against his chest, the rise and fall of his breathing calming her and cocooning her. The gentle rain splattering on the window outside soothed her to sleep.

The sunrise signaled a repeat performance of yesterday's mad dash to work, and she smiled, reveling in the madness that was now her life.

She rushed into the station and ran up on Zeke. "Morning, Zeke."

"Morning, Storm. I swear, you just glow, ya know that? Don't get me wrong, you were pretty enough when I hired ya, but ya got the look of a woman in love, a well loved woman in love."

"Thanks, Zeke, I feel like a well loved woman." She set her bag down, washed her hands, then set to work making the daily sandwiches.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

The plastic wrap still wanted to cling to itself, but she'd learned how to patiently work with it. Just as the sandwiches were done, Mabel arrived with the morning load of cookies and brownies. "Morning, Mabel."

"Morning, Storm. Brought you something." She handed her a small white box.

She opened it to find hot homemade biscuits swimming in melted butter with homemade peach jam on the side. "Oh Mabel, this looks grand."

She dug in. The hot flaky layers melted in her mouth, the sweet jam tickled her taste buds. "Yum," she moaned. "Tastes even better than they look."

Zeke followed his nose over and gave Mabel his best pitiful look. "Where's mine?"

"You don't get none, now be off with ya." Mabel filled her cases and then shuffled off. "You can have the recipe for the biscuits." She whispered to Storm as she passed.

"I can?"

"Yep, just as soon as that man makes an honest woman of ya." She laughed and left the store.

"Knew there had to be a catch."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Twenty Nine

Vance was getting spoiled and decidedly thinner from being with Storm. All the physical exercise he could stand, sleeping until all hours, and being wrapped in her love was definitely spoiling him.

He grabbed his cell at the first ring. "Vance."

"Hey Buddy, listen. We've got a hell of a front moving in."

This was it. Just what he needed: a storm to test the unit and The Tank. "Where?"

"Near Oak Springs. According to the NEXRAD there's a humdinger of a system moving in from the west," Mike answered.

"Al and Rabbit have The Tank ready?"

"They're already halfway there. I have a WT in the truck. I'll swing by to grab Heidi and we'll come get you shortly."

Vance was split by indecision. Let Mike take the lead and have the team take off and play without him or leave Storm behind and explain it all later. "Don't bother coming by."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Listen, I need a break. You take Heidi and meet the guys. Run the tests and let me know what you get."

Long moments of silence stretched out the line between them. "You've worked so hard on this. It's your baby."

"No. We've all worked on it. I need you to take the point on this."

"Sure thing. We'll see you as soon as we get back."

"Be safe," Vance ordered then shut off the phone. He pulled into the drive of his house. He'd just opened the truck when a cold hand clapped him on the shoulder. He spun and looked up into the blue eyes of the blond giant of a man. "Yes?"

"You're Vance, aren't you?"

"I am. And you are?"

"Maxvalliano, a friend of Storm's. I thought it would be wise if we had a chat—me to mortal."

The condescension in the man's voice set Vance's teeth on edge. "What would you like to chat about?"

"The undo influence you manage to have over Storm. Thanks to you she's won her silly contest, but that wasn't enough for her. The chit thinks she's in love with you, so let's just say we all agree that you aren't in our league, so you need to run off to play with your own kind, hmm?"

She'd already told her family and friends about him? He felt his chest swell and held his head a little higher. "What contest?"

"You of course. The *get a mortal* contest? Oh dear, you mean, she didn't tell you about it?"

Vance felt a sickness in his stomach. "Suppose you tell me."

"Oh no, I've said too much already, I was sure she would have told you, since she loves you so much. Better ask her." Max vanished.

He climbed back inside and slammed the truck door shut. He rode around for hours trying to figure it all out. Get a mortal? Was he just some pawn in a silly game?

It ate at his insides and gnawed on his gut until he was angrier than he'd ever been in his life. He ended up parked back in the same place he'd left many hours before, and was back in her apartment waiting for her to come home.

His rage was barely in check when she waltzed in with a smile painted on her face. She kissed him. All he could do was stand there, afraid he'd let his careful control slip. "Tell me about the *get a mortal* contest."

She paled and staggered off balance. "What?"

"You love me so much and want our relationship to be completely *honest*," he sneered. "Tell me about this contest."

"How did you hear of it?"

"I met Max today."

She sat down on the sofa, her hands trembling as she fidgeted with her fingers. "I don't know where to begin."

"At the beginning."

She inhaled a shaky sigh. "My sisters and I met for lunch. We were bored. Maryna had an idea for a distraction. We would each have to go and find a mortal, one who specialized in our element. Once we met him, we were to get him to fall in love with us, propose, place the ring on our finger, and that would get us declared the winner."

"And then?"

Her cheeks flushed a slight pink and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "And then..." Her gaze darted to different points across the room. Anywhere but at him. "Then we'd dump him and go on back to our lives like nothing had ever happened."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

She turned her eyes up to face him. The tears brimming over the edge of her eyelids and coursing in little rivers down her cheeks only fueled the fire of his anger.

"Oh, witches use those fake little props too, huh? You think crying is going to make me forget how I feel and grab you up, saying, I don't care that all I was to was a plaything, anything for you?" His mirthless laugh fell like a bomb. "Well, contrary to what you think, I do care I do have feelings. I loved you, dammit!"

He stalked away, turned and looked at her. "Was that why you were disappointed that I only asked you to live with me? The ring on your finger? That was what you needed for the win? Well baby, you lost." He opened the door, walked out and slammed it shut behind him.

* * * *

Storm felt the world crumble and her heart shatter. He was gone and she couldn't do anything to bring him back. The look on his face as he left had told her he'd never return.

Hard sobs wracked her body; the tears flowed endlessly down her face onto the sofa. Never before had she known such agony as she felt at this moment.

"Storm?"

She sat up and looked into Edgar's dark eyes. "He's left me. He found out about the contest." She couldn't be consoled. "Now I understand the real meaning of a broken heart, Edgar. I feel each tiny little jagged piece that was left behind when mine shattered."

"But what has happened? When I left this morning everyone was happy as larks."

"Maxvalliano happened. He showed up here last night. I told him how I felt. He must've come back today and told Vance about the contest."

"Damn the mouth of that beast."

"I should have been completely honest with Vance in the beginning. I was sure, now that we had declared our love for each other, that it was the past." She shook her head as another round of tears spouted. "Now he's gone for good."

"*A leanbh na páirte*, he loves you and when he sees past the pain, he'll see you weren't playing with his emotions, that you really do love him."

She shook her head miserably. "No, he really has left me. I don't even feel him thinking of me." When they had first joined, their union was so strong that, awake or asleep, she could feel him thinking of her. Now it was as if he'd not only closed the door of her apartment but also the one to his heart. A hard, steel, trap door, and there's no penetrating it. "I'm going home, Edgar."

She evaporated before his eyes, and when she finally pulled herself together she was back on her fluffy cloud, the shades of gray matched the miserable mood of her pain. She couldn't stand the pain. How was she going to survive this?

Meggie arrived and began to stroke Storm's silver blonde hair. "Hush child, you'll dissolve forever if you don't stop this now."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"I don't care, Auntie, life isn't worth anything to me now. That stupid contest. I was such a fool! How could I have fallen in love with him?"

"You can't change it, my dear, you love the man. In time, when his pride is healed from the wound he'll see the truth, that you do love him."

"It won't matter, Auntie, he said he *loved* me, past tense. I'm afraid I killed the love he felt for me because I wasn't honest with him from the beginning. I was so ashamed of that silly bet."

"Time heals all, I promise you child. Now chin up, wash your face and stop this crying." She stood and forced Storm to her feet. "Oh my dear! Look in a mirror!"

Storm zapped up the glass and gasped. "Oh, Auntie! I'm almost transparent!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty

Vance slammed his door shut behind him, the wall shaking in its foundation. She'd made a fool out of him and he'd played right along with her game. "That witch," he shouted, but it didn't have the same meaning as it would have had otherwise. He punched his fist into the wall and felt the pain engulf his hand.

He didn't bother with lights as he moved from the entryway to the living room. His hand throbbed mercilessly but he ignored it.

He could be off on a chase. He could be with his team, watching as his creations sparked to life and all his goals were accomplished. He would be there watching it all first hand if not for the wicked witch who warped his life.

He stormed through the house into the kitchen and grabbed the first thing he came across. An old bottle of scotch that Mike had left behind one holiday.

He polished off the half-bottle of the amber liquid and searched the rest of the cabinets. Three hours and three bottles of various boozes later, his mind was numb. Darkness gathered just at the edges of his vision. He battled the wild, hazy, world as he moved up the steps to his room. After trying, and failing, to make it up the first three steps he gave up.

The world spun on its axis. He slumped down on the floor and stretched out. He curled up on his hip and closed his

eyes. The swirling slowly ceased as darkness pulled him under deeper.

There was a scraping sound and it echoed in his brain. "Vance?"

He cracked open an eye. "What you doing' here?" his slurred words made his voice sound foreign.

"We were excited and wanted to bring the data and images straight here. What happened?"

He pulled away from the sound of concern in Heidi's voice. "Leave me alone H."

The door opened and through the haze Vance watched Mike walk in. "I just had to—what's going on in here?"

"I think he broke his hand," Heidi answered.

"The pain is actually refreshing." The throbbing intensified and Vance was sure she was right, it was broken. Still he shrugged off her concern and headed into the den. "Look H, we deserve some time off, why don't you and Mike take off and spend some quality time together? Or maybe do some painting around that old barn of yours."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Gee, let's see, my one career dream was to create an early warning device that all communities could use that would save lives was achieved, only to be corrupted by money hungry jerk-wads in business suits. I thought I found love and I was happily headed down the aisle to end up with a ring in my nose, when I find out she's a lying, manipulating witch. Nothing's wrong with me, must be your imagination."

"Something happened with you and Storm that made you decide to take it out on your hand? Vance, you need to go to

the doctor. Look at it." She ran to the kitchen to fill a large bowl with ice.

His hand resembled a balloon character. It had turned a sickening yellowish-purple color. Trying to open his fist proved to be almost as painful as learning that he was nothing but a game pawn to Storm.

"What happened?" Mike asked as he took a seat near Vance's side.

"Nothing. Why are you here?"

"It was amazing," Mike started enthusiastically. "The system was even wilder than we expected. It was heavy enough to test out all the parameters—all of which passed with flying colors—plus we were able to pop The Tank into position. The data from the sheer strength of winds inside a tornado." He whistled.

Vance's head felt as if it had ruptured, from the harsh sound echoing in his head. "Damn witch. She's ruined yet another aspect of my life," he growled.

Heidi came back and placed his hand in the ice. He put up a struggle and she slapped the back of his head. "Look you big jerk, you have to get the swelling down and get to the doctor to have it set. Two good hands is pretty much a requirement for chasing storms you know."

He let her fuss over him and he placed the bowl of ice and his hand into a small garbage bag for the ride over to the urgent care office. The throbbing pain was almost successful in pushing Storm's memory away. Almost.

"Let's get this drunken jerk out to the car before he passes out."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Vance struggled to find his feet as Mike and Heidi tried to lever him upward. It took all three of them to find the truck and get him into it. On the fringes of his consciousness, he thought he detected Mike and Heidi's voices, but they were just distant bee buzzes on the edges of his mind.

He sat in gloomy silence as they waited for the doctor to see him, take x-rays and then set his hand. It was well past midnight by the time he and his cast-weighted arm were driven back to his house.

He let them help him inside, let Heidi drug him with the pain pills the doctor had prescribed for him, and then was downright belligerent in his sendoff of them. "Go on H, and don't come back for a while. I just want to be alone dammit!"

Mike stepped up in his face. "Don't talk to her like that."

Heidi pushed between them. "Get some rest. I'll come and check on you in the morning." She grabbed Mike's hand and dragged him away.

After they left, Vance crawled up the stairs and collapsed on his bed. His body became weightless and he tumbled into a deep, disjointed tangle of dull colors, grays and blacks, swirling in a painful whirlwind. He'd been in this dreamland before, but the calm safety that had appeared then didn't show any sign of coming to his aid this time.

Something hard hit his head. He opened his eyes and groaned as he searched for what had clobbered him. Right. The broken hand.

He made his bleary-eyed way down to the kitchen to get a glass of juice and another pain pill. After swallowing it down, he shuffled to the den. He made note of the damage he'd

done to his wall. The nice large hole would have to be filled and covered as soon as his hand healed.

He flopped down on the worn cloth of the old sofa, leaned back and shut his eyes. Only twenty-four hours ago he was waking up in her bed, thinking he was with the woman who would share the rest of his life. That blessed twenty-four hours before he'd known what a lie it all had been.

"Hey, you up?" Mike's voice called from the door.

"Go away," he growled.

Mike came into the room. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell, now go away."

Mike moved in closer and sat down in the chair across the room from him. "So what happened?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You decided to break your hand for the hell of it?"

"Something like that."

"What happened?"

"Just drop it, would you? Damn! I don't want to examine my feelings, or talk about it or any of those silly feminine notions that I'm sure Heidi drilled into your head to make you come over here and try to pursue."

Mike shrugged. "I only promised her I'd try. I have. Tried, failed, and am now leaving. But we're both here for you when you're ready."

"Thanks Mike, and thank her too, would you?"

"You got it." Mike got up and let himself out.

When he left, Vance pushed up and went over to the photos from the last chase. In the debris field of the tornado

he saw her plainly. Her hair whipped around her head, her lying lips parted in a smile. He crushed the photo beneath his hand. It was over; he had to move on and not look back.

That's what she was going to do, right? Use him then toss him away without a single thought for his feelings? She was probably somewhere right now sitting with her sisters laughing at him and all mortal men, their stupidity, their gullibility.

Anger that had pushed him to drive his hand through the wall surged back, and the desire to lash out was becoming overwhelming.

"Here."

He flipped up his head at the sound of Edgar's voice. "Great. The harpy from hell sent you to torment me more?"

"No, and before you do yourself further damage, break these." Edgar stacked up brand new bright, shining china plates. "Go ahead, you'll find intense pleasure in watching these shatter against the walls."

Vance picked up the first plate and threw it against the wall with such force that it left an impression before it shattered. He did feel better, a little.

With each subsequent plate he felt a little better. He looked up to see the piles of broken china bits scattered over the floor. "Great, now I have to sweep it up before I get cut and need stitches on top of the damned cast."

"I'll take care of it." Edgar waved his head from side to side and the room was once again cleared.

"I'll thank you and your *kind* to get out and leave me the hell alone. I was living a good life, happy and content until

that witch popped in and screwed it up. Now I just want to get on with my life, interlude over."

"No one is stopping you from getting on with your life, I just wanted to come over and visit. I found you to be quite an interesting fellow, highly intelligent conversation, witty repartee, and I thought we might have another conversation. Maybe I'll come back at another time, one when you're not so ... surly. Good day." Edgar flapped to the open window and disappeared.

Vance leaned back and shut his eyes. After a little more rest he'd take a shower and maybe even go out tonight. Time to do some real partying and begin to live.

He jerked awake at the sound of snoring, only to realize it was him. He got up, and tried to wrap his hand in plastic wrap. When that didn't work he tied a garbage bag over the cast and headed for the shower. Afterward, he got dressed and headed out to the roadhouse. Surely there was a chance of meeting someone who would help him forget about the white-haired witch who haunted him.

He drove down the road, past the little diner where he'd spent that first evening with her. He pushed the memory away, parked, and went inside where the music was loud, the crowd louder.

Vance marched to the bar and ordered a drink. As he sipped, a cute little brunette gave him the eye. He pasted a smile on his face. "Give that little lady a drink on me, would you?" he asked the bartender.

"You got it."

He watched the bartender walk over to the lady, take her drink order and fill it. When she raised her glass with a bold smile on her face, he took it as a signal to join her. "Name's Vance."

"Ashley."

"Come here often?" Boy how lame could he sound?

"Pretty regular. You?"

"Not a regular. I'm only in once in a while." The band switched to a slow song. "Care to dance?"

She nodded and he led her to the floor. Putting his arms around her waist, he found she didn't fit as well as Storm. When she put her arms around his neck, her skin wasn't as warm and silky as Storm's. Ashley's perfume was soft and musky, but didn't smell as sweet as Storm's. "Dammit!"

"Something wrong?"

"Yeah. I came here to forget someone, but all I can do is think of her."

"Maybe I can help you forget?" Ashley pressed soft kisses into his neck, and then nipped him lightly.

Before Storm, the kisses would have turned him on. He'd have encouraged the contact. Now all he wanted to do was push the woman away and go home ... alone. "Sorry, it isn't going to work. I can't stop thinking about her." He pulled away from the embrace. "Thanks for the dance."

He left Ashley standing in the middle of the dance floor and walked back outside to his truck. On the drive home he cursed himself a thousand times over for being a fool. He had the chance to be with a hot, sexy woman who obviously

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

wanted him, but all he could do was compare her to the woman who broke his heart.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty One

Storm looked at her hand in amazement. She was able to see the floor through it. "Do I look like I've faded any more?"

Meggie examined her closely. "Maybe a bit. You have to stop this grieving."

"I can't help it, Auntie. I love him, but I've lost him. I hurt him so badly that he'll never come back." She began to cry again.

"Stop! Storm, oh darling child, you'll make yourself fade faster if you don't stop. I'll see if I can find Alder Devon, maybe he'll know what we can do to reverse this." Meggie popped out.

Alone again, Storm lay down on the cloud chaise. She couldn't stop the small tears that escaped the corners of her eyes. Her heart was broken and she couldn't heal it.

"*A ghrá mo chroí*, what's happened?" Edgar's voice was stunned. "I can see through you."

"I know. I don't know how to stop it."

Edgar shook his head. "Vance is doing almost as poorly as you."

"You've seen him?"

"Yes. He's angry, he's hurt, and he's broken his hand."

"Did he have an accident?"

"No. He hit a wall. His anger made him more than a little irrational."

"I hurt him terribly, Edgar. I love him. I need him. But I'm afraid he'll never forgive me."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"You have to be patient and let him come around. It was a shock to him. Once he examines his heart, he'll see that you love him, that it wasn't a lie just to win a contest."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm always right."

That received a smile, the first one she'd allowed since Vance left. She started to speak again, but Meggie arrived at that moment, Alder in tow. "What can I do?"

Alder examined her. "This is a case of broken heart. The tears have taken their toll on you. The only way to get your form back is to regain the love you lost."

She sighed. "Then I'm going to disappear. He'll never take me back. I've hurt him too much."

Meggie and Alder exchanged glances. "Storm, you have to try," Meggie exclaimed.

"I have to be off." Edgar flapped over to peck Storm on the cheek. "We will think of a way to save you."

"A Duile never gives up without a fight. I'm ashamed of you child. You must stand up and let that man know how you feel. Win him back." Meggie paced away from Storm's side.

Storm sniffed and wiped her eyes. "I am a Duile and I have never given up. I just have to figure out how to face him in this state."

She grabbed her aunt and hugged her close. "Maybe I should check in on him, make sure he's alone." She zapped up the magic crystal and tuned in to him. What she saw broke her even more.

Vance was in the middle of a dance floor, his arms around the waist of another woman. "She's kissing him." Watching as

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

the woman nuzzled him, made her feel even worse. "He's moved on, Auntie. I told you it was too late." She became even more transparent, as the tears fell freely once more. "It's over for good."

She had to get away; she couldn't stand the looks of pity that her aunt and Alder wore on their faces. "I'll see you later." She ran her hand over her head and disappeared. She arrived on Mount Valmir and sat on a white marble bench in the grove of maribu trees. Vance was the first man, mortal or no, to make her feel alive, to feel love. She wanted that feeling back again.

Storm thought about their first night together. She had only cared about the stupid bet. Vance was merely a pawn, a means to an end. Had she meant so little that he could already hold another in his arms?

If he could move forward, so could she. Right? There were other men in the world, but she would stick to her kind. No more fickle mortals for her. None could compare to Vance anyway, of that she was sure.

Would her new resolve restore her? Her hand was still transparent, but she hadn't faded any further. At least that was a good thing. She'd ask Alder if finding a new love would help save her.

She stood and walked among the trees, the soft gurgle of the clear water in the brook called to her. She removed her shoes and dipped her feet in the water.

"Hello, Storm."

Max stood behind her. "Get away from me, you slug's belly."

"I'm sorry to have caused you such pain." As his eyes ran up and down her, they widened in shock. "What's happened to you?"

"You! You've ruined my life. Vance has turned away from me because you had to tell him about that stupid contest! Get away. I never want to see you again!" She pointed her finger and zapped him with a small lightning bolt.

"Hey, watch it! You'll singe my suit." He moved around her. "I love you, Storm. I couldn't stand to see you with him, with any other man at all. You belong with me."

"I belong with the man of my heart, and that man is Vance Nodin, not you."

"I can be the man of your heart! Let me love you, share my life."

"Leave me alone, Max!" She zapped him again. "You've done enough damage. Look at me. Now I'm doomed to fade away into nothing."

He dropped his eyes and looked at the ground. "I didn't mean to cause you so much pain. I only wanted to be with you. He really is the true mate of your soul, isn't he?"

"He is. Goodbye, Max." When it looked like he wasn't going to leave, she transported herself to a different location in the wooded glen. Alone again she sat on the lush green grass, protected by more of the maribu trees.

"I promise to never bother you again, beloved Storm." His voice came to her on the breeze, then all was silent for a few minutes.

A rustling overhead drew her attention; perched on a branch was a crimson and purple Doily bird. Its musical call

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

tickled the air with enchantment. In a vision she saw Vance, his arms spread wide, waiting for her. She ran to him, he grabbed her close, lifting her feet off the ground as he smothered her with kisses. His words proclaiming his undying love made her heart swell. "If only it would happen."

A single tear slipped down her cheek and she closed her eyes. The bird's song floating on the slight breeze lulled her to sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty Two

Vance lay awake in his bed. Not even the pain pills he'd taken could knock him out. He hated to admit it, but he missed Storm. The pain ripped through his heart anew, he felt the anger raise once more. She had lied to him and used him, and he hated her for it.

He closed his eyes. The image of her rising over him while they made love that first time stirred up a longing he was helpless to deny. She was beautiful. A wild and free spirit. She had been his for a short time. If only she hadn't lied, he wouldn't be here alone.

A pecking sound had him moving to his window. It was Edgar. Reluctantly, he let the old bird in. "I thought you were leaving me alone for good."

"I had to come and see you. There is a problem. It's Storm. She's fading fast."

"Fading?"

"When a witch loses the one she loves, the one meant for her alone, she is like any other woman. She feels the pain and cries. Unfortunately, she is in danger of fading from life forever. That is what's happening to Storm. She's lost you, and her heart has shattered. Now she can't stem the flow of tears and she is dissolving."

Storm was fading? "Why should I care? She was using me for a bet."

"Damn it, man! Did you not hear me? Only when a witch loses the love of her life, her true love, does this happen. If she was only interested in a bet, she wouldn't be dissolving!"

Vance's legs went weak. She really loved him? "How do I know this isn't just another one of her tricks?"

"If you see her, I can prove it to you."

He didn't want to see her. He couldn't stand facing her after what she'd done. Still, if Edgar were telling the truth, could he live with the knowledge that she really would be gone forever?

He couldn't lie to himself anymore, he *did* love Storm. He thought back to the movie he'd watched with Edgar, remembering the warning not to jump to conclusions without all the facts. This was what Edgar had hinted at.

He also remembered Edgar's other words, how it didn't matter the reason they'd met, all that mattered was that they'd found each other, soul mates destined for one another. "I don't know."

Edgar puffed his feathers. "What is there to not know? You said you loved her. Even if that love has died—which I don't believe—how can you kill her this way?"

"Why should I care?" he asked again, more of himself than Edgar. "Is she really ... dying?"

"I'm afraid so. There is still a chance to save her if we hurry."

He paced the floor. "Can you take me to her? I won't promise anything."

Edgar nodded. "Place your hand on my beak."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Vance did as he was told. In short order, he was standing on a mountainside. He saw Storm lying on the grass.

Rather, he saw a shade of her, he could see the grass beneath her. She really did seem to be fading. He walked to her side. "Storm?"

Her eyes opened. "Vance? Am I dreaming?" Her voice sounded weak.

"No, I'm here. What's happening?" He had to hear it from her own lips.

"I'm dissolving. I was going to come and tell you goodbye, but I was afraid you wouldn't see me."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. Before his eyes she became even harder to see. Panic welled in him. It really looked like she was dying. "Storm, was it all a lie? Do you really love me, or was it all just some game?"

"I really love you. Yes, it did start out as a bet, but as I got to know you," she drew a ragged breath, "I fell in love with you. I wanted to be with you, as my mate for as long as we lived."

She was becoming harder to see, and her voice was growing softer. "Storm." He went to her and tried to put his arms around her, but they passed through her body. "Storm, I'm sorry. Edgar tried to warn me, but I refused to listen. You tried to tell me, but I was such a fool I didn't hear." He could barely make out her shape now. "Please don't leave me."

"I love you, Vance." Her voice floated to his ears but he couldn't see her any more.

"Storm! No, Storm!" She was *gone*. He'd let her slip away "Edgar, she's gone!"

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Tears were brimming in the bird's black eyes. "I have to find Alder. He'll know if there is any way to reverse this. First I'll take you home, then I'll find him."

He put his beak on Vance's head and soon Vance was standing back in his own living room. "Please find an answer."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty Three

Vance went down to his den and picked up the picture he now knew pixel by pixel. He traced her image, so clearly visible in the debris field.

What had he done? Pain stabbed his chest. His throat burned. "Storm." He knew he loved her. "Please, let Edgar find a way to save her." His voice cracked as he uttered the prayer. "I need her."

There was a puff of green and gold smoke then an elegant old woman stood before him. On her arm rode Edgar. By her side stood a troll with a long gray beard and pointed ears. "I am Meggie Duile, Storm's aunt."

"Ms. Duile, I'm pleased to meet you."

"Save the pleasantries, boy! You have destroyed my niece. Thanks to you she has vanished forever."

"Edgar said there might be a way to save her."

The troll shook his head sadly. "Never in our history has a witch who's died from a broken heart been brought back."

He couldn't breath. *She was really gone?*

"You have killed her, and now you must live with the consequences." Meggie's rage showed on her face. She pointed her finger and whirled around the room.

Glass shattered and papers flew about. "Our family will be avenged!" She disappeared in the cloud of smoke, leaving destruction behind her.

The troll and Edgar still stood in front of him. "Please help me find a way to bring her back," he begged them.

The troll walked over to him. "You truly love her?"

"I do."

"Can you forgive her?"

"I think so."

The little troll nodded and patted Vance's hand. "I'll see if I can't find something, but be prepared for failure." With that the little man was gone.

Edgar moved to Vance's shoulder. "Where there is love, there is hope."

"Thanks, Edgar."

"You look done in, my boy. Go get some rest, there is nothing more that can be done until Alder contacts us again."

"I doubt I'll be able to rest."

"Try."

Vance finally nodded. "All right." Slowly he climbed his stairs and went to bed. He tossed and turned, but each time he closed his eyes the image of Storm fading from sight haunted him.

A fitful sleep had just claimed him when the acrid smell of smoke woke him. Two a.m. Who would be burning something this late?

The smell became stronger and it finally registered that the smoke was coming from his downstairs. He sprinted to the steps and tripped on his way down.

Standing in his front room was woman, her body consumed in blue flames.

"Where is that lousy mortal?" she was screaming.

"Calm yourself, Ember," he heard Edgar say.

"Who are you?" Vance demanded.

She spun on him. Her red hair glowed with fire. Anger lined her face. "I'm Storm's sister. Are you the rotten mortal who killed my sister?" Fire flew from her fingertips and burned a patch in the floor at his feet.

Vance grabbed a throw from the back of the sofa and began beating the flames. Sweat poured down his forehead. When he finally tamped out the fire, he faced the livid woman in the middle of the room. "I'm Vance. I'm sorry about your sister." He didn't know what more to say to the woman who was literally burning with rage.

"You're *sorry*? You killed her and all you can do is say you're *sorry*?" More flames flew from her hands and set fire to the drapes.

"Ember! It won't do any good to burn the house down around his ears," Edgar shouted.

Suddenly rain fell from the ceiling and the fire smoldered out. "Ember! You can't kill him yet," a newly arrived woman cautioned. "What if Alder finds out that we need him to save Storm, then what will we do?"

The one called Ember stomped over to the window, a ferocious scowl on her face. "You know there is no saving her. No witch has ever been brought back."

"There is a chance, although slight. If there is no answer, then we can kill him." She walked over to Vance. "And believe me, mortal, you will die a very slow, very painful death."

This one could control the water; she must be Storm's sister Maryna. "If she can't be saved, I won't fight it."

She smiled a nasty smile. "You couldn't fight it." She waved her hand and all the damage in his house was undone. "Hello, Edgar."

"Maryna. I'm glad you arrived when you did, Ember was about to destroy us all."

"Do you blame me?"

"Not at all, but we have to find out if we need him first."

Alder startled Vance by popping back in. "What did you find out?"

Alder placed the antiquated, leather-bound tome on the table and opened it. "It doesn't look good. All I have found so far tells me that there is no way to save her."

"I have to live without her?" If his hand weren't already broken, he would've driven it through the wall again. "You're supposed to be such powerful witches, can't you bring her back?"

Edgar shook his head. "They are witches, not goddesses. There is no being that has the power to bring back the dead."

Life without Storm wasn't worth living. When he looked at her sisters' faces he knew that wasn't a concern. He was a dead man. "Go ahead, I'm ready. I love her with all my heart. Without her I don't have a reason to live. Storm was my life. She showed me that before her I merely existed. I was a fool and I deserve whatever you dish out."

Ember pointed at him. "I can make a fire that will burn, causing you such unending agony you won't know the sweet release of death from the pain." A white-hot flame gathered at the tip of her finger.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"While you burn I will drive you mad by water dripping on your head. Close enough to drink, close enough to soothe, but far enough to increase your agony," Maryna promised.

He prepared himself for the pain. Suddenly he smelled the exotic floral scent that had been uniquely Storm. He whirled around the room; she had to be there! "Storm?"

"Storm," he cried again.

A misty haze in the shape of Storm's body appeared in the center of the room. She was lying in repose, and the form was almost completely transparent, but Vance could see her.

He ran to the mist and reached out for her only to have his fingers pass straight through the hazy image. "Please Storm, come back to me," he whispered.

Was it his eyes or was she changing? There seemed to be a little more substance to her than there was a mere second ago. Again he reached for her, and once more he felt nothing but the emptiness of space pass between his fingers.

The phantasm was still. His eyes and chest burned. She was dead, and he was being haunted by her specter. Pain ripped through him. "Storm," his voice cracked and a tear slipped from the corner of his eye.

He stroked the air where her hair appeared to be hanging. He could feel its silken strands slipping between his fingers. *The mind is a curious thing, indeed,* he thought disjointedly.

Vance blinked at the tears that filled his eyes. Storm's ghost seemed more substantial than before. He could almost believe she was breathing.

Storm's eyes slid open. "Vance?" she whispered his name.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

It wasn't possible! He jerked his gaze away and swept it around the room. He met their angry glares. He looked back down at Storm. If she had truly spoken, was truly coming back, then her family would know. Their lack of reaction proved it was merely his mind playing tricks on him.

His fantasy grew. Storm's eyes opened wide, and she struggled to sit up.

"Vance?" her voice was stronger than before. She reached for him and their hands connected.

She was alive! "Storm!" He pulled her to him. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

She collapsed into his chest. "I thought I died."

Alder walked over to the couple. "You did. You dissolved completely."

Ember and Maryna pushed Vance away in order to hug their sister.

"No one has ever returned before! How?" Ember wondered.

"I'm not sure."

All eyes turned to Vance. "How did you do it?" Maryna asked.

He could only shrug. "I have no idea."

Edgar puffed up, "Alder?"

"There is no precedent for this."

An ancient manuscript appeared on the table on top of the ones Alder had brought. Meggie stood beside the table and unrolled the scroll. "Here is the explanation."

"Cen uair fíorghrá tagaim tarlaionn se dom muiluilig olc dicetla brisim."

Vance was confused by the strange words. "What does it mean?"

"It means that true love breaks bad spells." Maryna mused in a voice tinged in wonder.

"So it is true love." Ember didn't look pleased.

Storm looked at her sister. "Em?"

"I'm glad you are back, Storm. I just don't understand your true love being a mortal."

Storm held Vance close. "I never would have expected it either, but it happened." She turned to him. "*Tá mo chroí istigh ionat.*"

"To ensure that there is no chance of this happening again, I recommend a joining ceremony," Edgar suggested.

"I agree most assuredly," Meggie added.

"Auntie, Edgar, don't press. It will happen in its own time." Storm argued. "Let us enjoy our reunion first, please."

Ember and Maryna still didn't look thrilled. Storm went to them. "Please be happy for me. I love him, and that's what matters."

Maryna hugged her. "You're right. Your happiness is all that matters." She leaned in close to Storm's ear. "Besides you haven't gotten the ring yet," she whispered softly.

Ember took her in a hug. "I don't like it. I don't understand what you see in that silly mortal, but as long as you're happy. I have to go; I have something to get back too."

"All right, love you, Ember."

"Love you, too." Ember disappeared in green flames.

"My turn to take off. Bye Sis, see you soon!" Maryna lifted her hand, swirled it overhead, and she, too, was gone.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

Meggie, Edgar and Alder remained in the room; Storm hugged each of them. "Thank you for all you've done. Now can Vance and I please have some privacy?"

"I suppose, but I don't like leaving you alone with the man who killed you."

"He also saved me," Storm reminded Edgar.

"You wouldn't have needed saving if not for his pigheadedness."

"Auntie."

"All right, we're leaving. Edgar, Alder! Let's be off."

They left, and finally Storm was alone with Vance. She went and held him close. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you everything from the beginning. I was afraid of how you would react to the contest. I wanted you to know that I loved you. I never meant to hurt you."

He squeezed her. "Let's let the past go and move forward from here. I'm the one who needs to apologize. I was such a jerk. I let my pride get in the way and blind me to how we feel about each other."

"What do we do now?"

"You move in here with me."

She nodded. "I don't want to be any further away from you than I have to be."

"Good, because I am never letting you go again." He couldn't believe she was back in his arms. He was emotionally and physically exhausted. The uncertain hours were behind them, finally. She was alive and back where she belonged.

"It's been a long, hard day. I think we should go to bed."

"To sleep?" she asked with a teasing grin.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

For some reason he wasn't quite as tired as he'd been mere seconds ago. "Whatever my wicked angel wants."

"Not to sleep." She let him lead her up to the bedroom.

Once there, she stood while he undressed her, basking in the gentle touch of the man who loved her. He kissed a trail down her belly, making tightness gather in his groin. His hands trailed their way up and down her, reacquainting himself with every inch of her soft skin. She writhed beneath him, moaning and urging him on until he couldn't restrain himself any longer. As his tongue plunged between her lips, he felt the warmth of her wrapping around him. Outside he heard the thunder and couldn't suppress a smile when he pulled back from her slightly.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty Four

Storm rolled over and felt the cold spot in the bed where Vance had slept. She sat up, a cold panic forming around her. Was he gone for good this time?

She popped into a robe and slowly made her way downstairs. She heard a noise coming from the back of the house and went to investigate. She found him in the kitchen. "Vance?"

"Good morning, beautiful. I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

"I could have done it. You know what I can whip up."

He grinned. "I wanted to do this for you."

"All right, then I'll pop back upstairs. I'm feeling tired and a little weak this morning, kind of like I returned from the dead."

He groaned. "That was truly bad. Go to bed. I'll bring you breakfast when it's ready." He kissed her lightly and sent her on her way with a pat on the bottom.

She went up and lay under the covers. So, it took dying to make him see how much he loved and needed her. Now that they were together she would never let him get away again.

It seemed like forever before he showed up in the room, a battered wooden tray in his hands. On the tray was a plate of golden pancakes, warm maple syrup and hot tea. "Hope this is all right."

"Vance, it looks wonderful." She accepted the tray. "They smell so good."

"I hope they taste good. I'm a better cook than you are, but I'm not a gourmet chef."

"Everyone is a better cook than me." She took a bite. "Fantastic. They are so light and fluffy, they just melt in my mouth." She took a bite and lifted the fork to his mouth.

"Not bad, if I say so myself." He moved his face close to hers. "You have maple syrup on your chin."

"And we don't have any napkins," she smiled.

"I'll take care of it for you."

"Can I finish eating first?"

"Only if you absolutely have to."

"I do." She quickly took another bite, and then waved the tray off her lap. "Now you can get rid of the syrup."

He licked off the smudge and kissed her. "Blast it!" he growled when the phone rang. "This better be important."

She frowned as she watched him on the phone. The caller had been identified as Mike and she could tell by Vance's face that he was being asked to head out again. She knew he had a job to do but she was hoping for some time before it had happened. "Weather that threatens high winds and rain, depart and cease to be a pain," she incanted.

She saw him smile and heard him say goodbye to Mike. "You don't have to leave me after all, do you?"

"You know I don't. Something happened and the weather just suddenly cleared. Can't figure it out, can you?"

"I haven't got a clue." She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. "We have something to do." She ran her tongue across his lips and teased his with hers. "*Tá mo chroí istigh ionat.*"

"Are you ever going to tell me what that means?" he asked, in a whisper against her lips.

"It means *my heart is within you.*"

He rolled over on top of her. "You're going to end up putting that storm back, I promise you."

She reveled in the way his hands played her body like a cherished instrument. He knew exactly where to touch to make her blood sing in her veins and the fire of desire burn to her core, turning her insides to molten lava.

Later that afternoon, she once again found Vance was gone. This time she wasn't worried; he had proven that he wasn't going to leave her alone. She went down and found a note letting her know he'd stepped out for a few minutes but would be back soon.

She went into the kitchen to clean up the mess from breakfast, then she went into the den.

On the table near his old sofa was a stack of pictures. On top was one of her in the tornado. "The first time he ever saw me," she murmured.

They would have the picture to show their children. "This is the day Daddy first saw Mommy." She smiled at the thought of having a child with Vance. A little boy with Vance's dark hair and her eyes. A little girl with her light hair and his eyes. Either would please her, and she was sure he'd be happy too.

She was still sitting there an hour later. She had the urge to call up the crystal and try to find Vance, but fought it. She had to trust him, and that meant no spying.

She felt restless and had to do something. She fidgeted her hands, paced the room, then went outside to walk around

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

the property. The front door opened to a large wraparound porch where a pair of cedar rockers and a porch swing all faced west. She loved that they could sit outside on the warm summer nights and watch the sun set.

Around the side of the house, a row of mimosa trees lined the south yard filling the air with their sweet fragrance, their pink and white flowers in different stages of blossom.

The east side of the house sported a variety of roses. She smiled. A man like him having a rose garden. It was a quaint, amusing thought. She'd definitely ask him about it when he got home. The yard was massive. The house sat at the end of a long gravel drive. There wasn't another structure to be seen. She loved it. No neighbors, no traffic noise, it was an ideal place to build a life with him.

She wandered slowly back to the porch. His truck pulled into the drive and she felt a thrill just knowing he would be back in her arms. He parked the truck and she ran over to him. As she got closer she saw the frown on his face. Was he angry with her again? "Vance?"

"I can't believe it! I just can't believe it! They did it! They are selling the WT to the communities with a price tag of fifty grand!" He slammed the truck door and made his way up the stairs.

"I don't understand," she said catching up to him.

"The early warning unit I designed ... and created. The company—those money hungry asses—have priced it so high many of the smaller communities won't be able to budget it in. Not all of them have the cash flow of cities like Oklahoma City, Edmond or Tulsa. There are several small communities

like this one, and the reservations where people live below poverty level, that don't have the money to invest in the device."

"What can you do?"

"There's nothing I can do. They hold all the cards and the rights to the device because I made it on their dime. It just makes me sick that they can do this."

The concept of mortal big business was still something she didn't understand, but she knew that what this company had done was wrong. Maybe there was something she could do to make it right.

"What are you thinking?"

She flashed him a smile. "Not much. Just wishing I could make everything as perfect for you as you have made my life."

"You just being here is perfection enough. How about going out and grabbing dinner? I can still afford to take you out to eat for a little while longer."

"I want to stay here, alone with you. Is that okay?"

"That's more than fine with me."

"I'll fix dinner for us." At the look on his face she grinned. "I promise to whip it up."

"Whew. I was afraid you were going to cook. My house has been burned enough already."

"Burned?"

"Yesterday, Ember was spewing fire, literally."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes. But lucky for me, Maryna showed up and put it out. She flooded the place in the process."

Leave it to her sisters to wreak such havoc. "Is there anything I need to fix?"

"No. I just wish there was something I could do about the WT." He turned away and walked to his den.

His distraction and obvious frustration with the situation spurred her to action. This company had to learn not to take advantage of people, and she was just the witch to teach them. "This company, do they have a lot of employees?"

"A few hundred I think, why?"

"I was just wondering if they were trying to make a lot of money to pay their employees."

"I'm sure some of it goes to payroll but most of it lines the pockets of Dowden & Chandling, and their board of dictators."

She nodded because that seemed to be the right thing to do. "Dowden & Chandling?"

"The name of the company that invested in the device. I just don't understand why people do some of the things they do. These men have more money than they'll spend in a lifetime and they don't think it's enough."

"It doesn't do any good to dwell on things you can't change, right?"

"Right." He kissed her forehead. "I'm just glad to be home with you—poor but in love."

"We will have all we need. I know you can provide enough."

"I hope so."

She needed to distract him from the problem, then once she had a minute she'd see about fixing Dowden & Chandling. "Tell me about the rose garden."

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

He grinned. "My sister lived in an apartment down in Tulsa. No property, no grounds, but she loved roses. So I let her plant a garden here and I take care of it for her. She doesn't get to come and visit very often but when she comes it gives me real pleasure to watch her get lost wandering amid the flowers. Then she got a new job that transferred her even farther away, out to Pennsylvania. I still keep the roses so she can enjoy them when she gets to visit."

His thoughtfulness touched everyone in his life. "I can't wait to meet her and your parents."

"I can't wait for you to meet them, and you will, one day soon. I promise."

"I'll go get dinner on."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Thirty Five

Vance sat on the sofa while Storm prepared their dinner. He was beginning to worry about what their future would hold. Sure she could make food appear in the cabinets and on the table, but he didn't want to depend on that forever. It was his job to provide for his family. He made enough to pay his bills for now, but how long would it last?

"I'm going out for a walk," he called.

She came into the hall. "What about dinner?"

"I'm not hungry." He stalked out the door and went down the trail in the back of the house. He climbed on the large collection of boulders under a stand of maple trees and sat to think. If they were careful he could do it, but there would be no more fancy dinners. They would have to budget very tightly for a while.

"Hello, Vance."

He looked up to find Edgar watching him. "Hey Edgar, do people still want to roast me alive?"

"They will get over it." He flitted down to the ground beside Vance. "I've brought you something."

He produced a golden ring and placed in Vance's hand. Vance examined it. "This is a Claddagh, isn't it?"

"Yes, the design was the symbol of the fishing Kings of Claddagh, the meaning being: *then in love and friendship let us reign*. The heart symbolizes love; the hands symbolize friendship, and the crown, loyalty. When you place it on her

finger, it is to go on the left hand, the heart pointing inwards as a sign of true love."

"The heart-shaped yellow stone, what is it? I've not seen one before."

"It's a yellow sapphire. Yellow symbolizes air, her element. Each daughter has a specific stone in place of the heart to symbolize her element. The rings can only be found when true love has come to them. Storm has found her true love, her soul mate, so the ring was made available."

Vance turned it over in his hand. On the underside of the heart the initials V.N and S.D.N. were inscribed. "I don't understand. Those are my initials."

"It was destined for you two to find each other."

"Is it destined that we have a comfortable life with me getting rich?"

"You may not be rich in worldly possessions but you will be rich in happiness."

Vance felt relieved in an odd way. Somehow he knew everything would work out for them. "Thanks, Edgar. It's time to go and place this on her finger."

Edgar nodded. "I'll be back to visit one day soon, she is still my charge. At least until the joining ceremony when she will truly be yours completely."

Vance watched as Edgar flew off out of sight, then he returned to the house. "Storm, can you come in here?"

She walked into the front room. He led her to the sofa.

"I have something for you." He took her left hand in his. "Here in my world there is a tradition of the man presenting the woman he loves with an engagement ring. A token to

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

show that she is loved and her heart has been claimed by one man alone."

He pulled the ring out. "I was told that when you found your true love, your one and only, that a ring appears. This ring," he placed the Claddagh on her finger in the exact position Edgar told him, "is the ring that was destined for your finger."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Oh Vance!" She threw her arms around him and kissed him deeply. "I love it and I love you! How did you get it?"

"A little birdie brought it to me."

She caught the joke and her musical laugh filled the room. "Thank heavens for that little birdie."

"When would you be ready to get married?"

"The mortal joining ceremony? When do you want me to?"

"Now."

She laughed. "I don't think we can right now."

"Tomorrow then. We can go to the courthouse and be married by a judge. Then later, when your family is ready for the joining ceremony, we can repeat it."

"Are you sure? It's awful fast. Don't you need time to think about it?"

"No. I want you as mine forever."

"Then yes, let's get married tomorrow!"

He pushed her back on the sofa. "Let's have our honeymoon right now." He undid each button and pushed her shirt open.

His hands glanced across her chest and up underneath the lace bra. He teased her nipples to hard nubs, and then his mouth replaced his hand.

He pulled the zipper on her shorts and nudged them down her thighs. His fingers skimmed underneath the lace of her panties. Her hot moist folds welcomed him. Her breaths were coming in hard pants, her hips undulating with his strokes. "You are so beautiful."

He quickly removed his own clothes and as they made love the house shook around them. He wasn't sure if it was rolling thunder crashing outside or the pounding of his own heart as he filled her. And he felt her shudder beneath him with her own release.

In the early hours he lifted her sleeping body and carried her up to the bedroom. After the wedding, they would hide in here, away from the world for at least a week, maybe longer.

When the sun rose high in the morning sky, Vance leaned over and kissed her shoulder. "Ready to get married?"

"Are you ready to take a wife?"

He nodded. "If only we didn't have to leave this bed."

"We'll come straight back to it."

"We need witnesses. I'll call Mike and have him and Heidi meet us at the courthouse in an hour."

"All right, I'll be ready shortly." She climbed out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

He reached over and picked up the phone. "Hey H, I need you to get Mike and meet me at the courthouse in one hour."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I'm getting married."

"To Storm, right?" she asked with a laugh.

"No, to some girl I picked up in a bar. Of course to Storm."

"I'll get Mike and we'll see you there."

He hung up and went to get himself ready. He put on a pair of dress slacks, a white shirt and his bolo tie. Then he went down to wait for her. "Almost ready?" he asked as he passed the bathroom door.

"Almost."

"See you downstairs."

"All right."

He paced the downstairs while he waited. He heard a sound at the top of the stairs and looked up to see her coming toward him.

She was wearing a dress of pale yellow, sheer over a darker yellow satin material. Her shoes matched the dress. She glowed like the sun. When she reached the bottom step she put her hand out to him, he took it. "You look stunning."

"Thank you. I'm ready to become your wife."

"I'm ready to make you my wife."

They walked out to the truck together and drove to the courthouse. Mike and Heidi were waiting in the parking lot for them. "Hey guys," Vance greeted with a broad grin.

"Storm, you look terrific," Heidi said.

"Thank you. Heidi, I feel pretty terrific."

Vance was ready for this to be done. His hands were beginning to shake and if they waited much longer he wasn't sure his legs would keep up. "Let's go in."

They had a short wait for the judge. Then, before he could blink, he was signing the paper that made them man and wife.

Vance and his new bride ran out the door and hurried to the truck. "Don't call me for at least a month," he called over his shoulder to Mike and Heidi.

"Bye. Congrats to you both," Heidi and Mike shouted as they got in the truck and drove off.

At home, he carried her across the threshold and up to the bedroom. He unzipped the dress and slid it off her shoulders. Once he had her completely exposed, he stood as she undressed him.

Three days later, Vance ventured downstairs and found Edgar perched on the back of a chair. "Good morning. What are you doing here?"

"She is still my charge."

"Wait, what?"

"Storm is still my charge."

"But we got married, three days ago."

"I'm aware of that, but it was only a mortal ceremony. Until the joining ceremony, Storm is my charge and I will remain with her."

"You mean you intend to chaperone her?"

Edgar nodded his sleek head and blinked his dark eyes. "It's my job."

"Storm," Vance shouted up the stairs.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she asked, rushing down to him.

"Edgar, tell her what you just told me," he commanded.

Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey

"I merely informed him that until the joining ceremony you are still my charge and I will remain here."

"But Edgar, I no longer require a chaperone. Vance and I married." She waved the ringed finger in his face.

"Until you are joined in a proper ceremony, I am staying."

"Storm, I don't know about this." Just knowing the bird would be watching their every move made Vance's skin crawl. "What if Mike and Heidi pop in, Edgar? You hated doing the pretty bird thing. Now you'll be stuck doing it again."

"Then you'll just have to see to it that they don't pop in often."

"Vance, you didn't have a problem when we lived in my apartment."

"That was before I knew that he wasn't just another bird."

"You could always live apart until time comes for the ceremony."

"No!" both Vance and Storm shouted.

"I'll deal with it, I don't have to like it, but I can live with it, I just hope that joining ceremony comes soon," Vance grinned.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dear Readers,

This book has been a lot of fun to write and has meant a lot to me. The following is a basic breakdown of the Celtic words used by Edgar and Storm. Where possible, I have added the pronunciations.

Thanks for taking the time to read this book. I hope you enjoyed it and are in as much anticipation of the entire series as I am writing them.

Be sure to watch for the other three sisters: mischievous Maryna in *Tides of Maryna's Love*. Be prepared for fiery eruptions by the smoldering Ember in *Ember's Flame*. Get lost in a desert paradise with Tara in *Finding Tara's Heart*.

Huggles,

Donica Covey

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Glossary

Bricht: magick, the spoken spell

Ámóg: hammock

A Stóirín: (ah store-een) My little darling.

A Thaisce: (ah hash-keh) My Treasure

Dhraíocht: spells.

A Chumann: (ah hom-un) My Darling, Sweetheart.

Mo Mhuirín: (ah wer-need) My Dear

Ta failte romhat: Thank you

Anail: (ah-nawl) Air element

Tugaim cion duit: I give you affection

Ainm ceana: Pet Name

Grá bricht: Love spell

A leanbh na páirte: My Dear Child

Badb: A Celtic Deity

Annwy: the Under World.

Tá mo chroí istigh iona: My heart is within you

Searc: Love (between lovers)

Gráim thú,: I love you

Ar ghrá, de ghrá, ruda: For love, for the sake or,
something

A Stór: (ah store) My Darling

Céadsearc: Firstlove, Also: Beloved one.

Pòs: Promised

A leanbh na páirte: My Dear Child.

A Ghrá mo Chroí: (ah hraw muh hree) My Heart's
Beloved, My Darling

**Cen uair fíorghrá tagaim tarlaionn se dom muiluilig
olc dicetla brisim:** With love bad spells are broken
Tá mo chroí istigh ionat: My heart is within you
Tá mo chroí istigh ionat, A Ghrá mo Chroí: My heart is
in you, My Heart's Beloved, My Darling

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About Donica

Donica Covey spent most of her childhood making up stories starring herself and the hunky actors of her time. From there blossomed a love of fiction. Family members were convinced that she would either be a politician or a writer. Thankfully she chose the latter.

She makes her home in a suburb of St. Louis with a large loving family that includes a teenage daughter and a grown son as well as one clingy Cairn terrier. When she can break the chains from her computer she can be found reading, hiking, ATVing or hanging with her friends.

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Storm Chasing
by Donica Covey



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