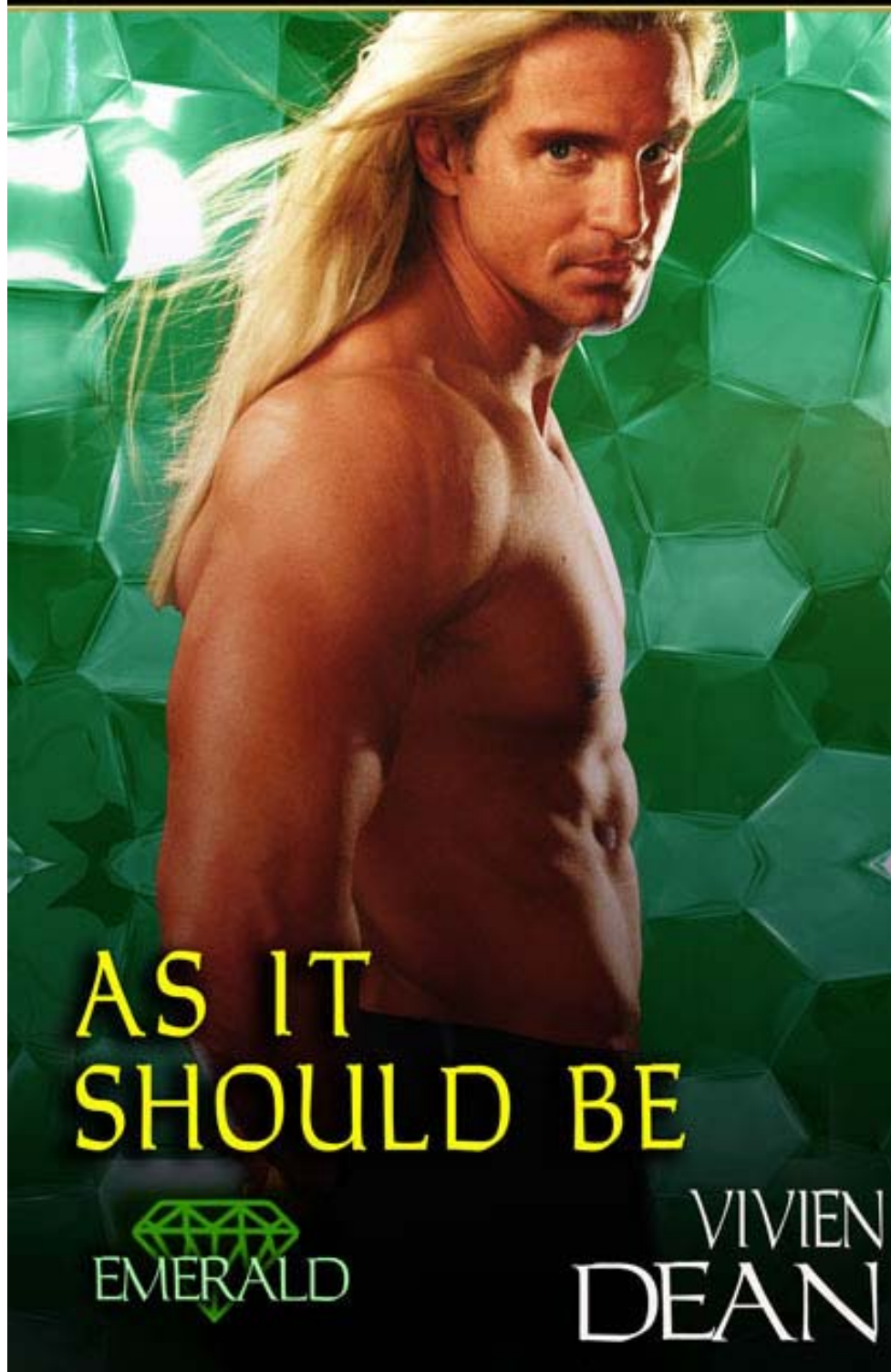


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



AS IT
SHOULD BE


EMERALD

VIVIEN
DEAN

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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As It Should Be

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AS IT SHOULD BE

Vivien Dean

*Dedication
To Craig*

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Ford: Ford Motor Company

Jell-O: Kraft Foods, Inc

Safeway: Safeway Inc.

Chapter One

Nora Ensley didn't recognize the woman in the mirror. She didn't know the snow-white hair, cropped short in a fitting cap and she didn't understand how her skin could sag so visibly, folds and wrinkles lining features that otherwise looked the same. The blue eyes were still clear, her mouth was still too wide. When she woke up in the morning, Nora always rose from bed without an ache or a pain. It was more than disconcerting to turn the light on in the bathroom and see someone seventy-five years old staring back at her over the sink.

She was lucky, she knew. Most of her friends were on multiple medications, for diabetes, or heart problems, or arthritis, or some things much, much worse. But time had been kind to her mortal bones. Many of the age-onset diseases that struck down her loved ones never seemed to afflict her. Her doctor credited it to Nora's active lifestyle and her healthy diet.

Nora knew differently.

She knew living long and well was her punishment for letting the best man she had ever known get cut down in the prime of his life.

Her hands shook as she turned off the tap. Today was going to be a bad day. May third was always a bad day. It had been for the past fifty years.

Nora threw herself into her morning routine, getting dressed, watering the plants, checking online to see how her stocks were doing. Many of her friends teased her about how she embraced modern technology and while she let them have their laughs, she knew they would never understand her need to stay as much out of the past as she could. Looking to the future was the only way she'd ever been able to cope with her loss and if that meant getting funny looks from twenty-somethings when she took adult education classes at the college, then so be it.

The knock at her door came as she was logging off.

"No arguments."

Her neighbor, Tamara, bustled in without invitation, just as she always did. She was a whirlwind of energy, enough to exhaust Nora just by looking at her, but she was also the best friend Nora never knew until recently she'd needed. In the eight years they'd lived next to each other, Tamara had not once forgotten a special occasion, missed a shift in Nora's mood, or refused her help when even Nora didn't realize she needed it. It was like the woman had a second sense about these things and without her own family to fuss over, she'd turned to Nora to satisfy those urges.

Now she barreled her way into Nora's kitchen with Safeway sacks hanging from her arms, the plastic rustling as she set them on the counter.

"I know what today is," she said without looking back at Nora lingering in the doorway. "And I'm not going to let you mope around the house all by yourself."

"I'm not moping."

"Not yet, maybe. But you will." The edge of her long skirt caught in the cupboard after she pulled out a frying pan and Tamara had to open and close the door again to set herself free. "But like I said. I'm cutting you off at the pass."

Nora stepped up beside where Tamara bustled at the stove, peering into one of the bags. Eggs, bacon, cheese, there was even a bottle of white wine that Tamara whipped out and stuck into the refrigerator before Nora had the chance to read the label.

"Does cutting me off at the pass mean giving me a heart attack?" She waved a thin hand toward the food. "You know I can't eat most of this stuff. I'm not thirty years old anymore."

"I don't care. We're having a special brunch. You and me. Because you shouldn't be alone today."

"Tamara—"

"Don't." She paused where she had been grating the cheddar, her warm brown eyes settling on Nora. She was not an attractive woman—and probably never had been, even in her youth—but there was something soothing about Tamara that Nora had always found comfort in. "You shouldn't be alone," she repeated. "Regardless of how you feel about it, I know today would have been your fifty-fifth wedding anniversary and I know if I'm not here, you're going to spend the whole day thinking about Marshall. Which you should, honestly. But the good parts, not the bad."

Nora's mouth tightened. They didn't talk about Marshall. She did everything she could never to mention his name. But that didn't mean Tamara didn't know the full story, that she hadn't seen the faded photographs tucked away in the albums. Every once in a while, usually on a holiday, Nora broke down and pulled them out. They told the tales she couldn't.

"Here." Tamara rooted around in one of the sacks, pulling out a small flat box. "I got this for you."

Nora took it with a shake of her head. "You shouldn't spend your money on me. I don't need anything."

"You need this. Open it."

Rolling her eyes, Nora obeyed, lifting the top off the square box. Nestled inside on a bed of cotton was a gold chain, with a tiny emerald pendant dangling from its delicate links.

"Fifty-five is the emerald anniversary," Tamara said. "I don't care if Marshall's dead. You never remarried, so you're as good as still married to him."

Tears pricked the back of Nora's eyes and her fingers shook as she tried to replace the lid.

"I can't accept this."

"Yes, you can."

Firm hands wrapped around hers, taking away the box. Through a blur, Nora watched Tamara pluck the necklace out and step behind her, arms coming around in order to position the jewelry around her neck. There was no weight to the tiny gemstone as it nestled in the hollow of her throat but Nora reached up and fingered it anyway as Tamara did up the clasp.

“Now, you’re going to help me get brunch ready and then we’re going to eat and then we’re going to spend the rest of the day, drinking wine and talking about all the wonderful things you and Marshall used to do together.” From behind, Tamara gave her a quick hug that made her ribs hurt. “No arguments.”

Nora could only nod. She was too overwhelmed by the magnitude of the gift to speak.

* * * * *

Her worries about the pain of facing her anniversary came to nothing. When Tamara finally rose to leave that evening, Nora didn’t want her to go. Her head was light from the two bottles of wine they’d consumed that day but her heart almost matched that. She had told stories about her brief marriage that she had never shared before, like when Marshall had attempted to rescue a cat from a tree in their lawn and got stuck up there himself, or when she had tried to make his favorite dish for their first wedding anniversary and ended up spending the evening on the sidewalk, watching firemen work on extinguishing the flames inside their apartment building.

Tamara had laughed at all the right spots, smiled at others, patted her hand when she’d been particularly foolish. Not once did her friend press when she shouldn’t, though the fact that Nora’s wineglass was never empty probably made that a moot point.

That was all right. It was the easiest anniversary she had spent in years. And she owed it all to Tamara.

"I can't begin to thank you for today," Nora said as she followed Tamara to the door. "You were right. I probably would have sat around and moped all day."

"Of course, I was right. I would think you'd know that by now." Hesitating in the open doorway, Tamara's gaze drifted down to the emerald necklace resting at Nora's throat. "Do me a favor, will you? Wear the necklace to bed tonight. I'll bet you dream of Marshall."

Nora smiled. "As tired as I am, I doubt I'll dream at all." She toyed with the pendant, just as she had been doing all day. It was so light that she was sure she would forget it was there if she didn't constantly touch it. "You have to let me make it up to you tomorrow."

Tamara broke the spell and stepped out into the hallway. "I have to go back to work tomorrow. You can make it up to me this weekend when I make you tell me what I'm doing wrong with that damn spreadsheet program you showed me."

Nora laughed and waved as Tamara disappeared into her own apartment. With a smile still on her face, she closed her door. She'd sleep well tonight and if she was lucky, Tamara's little prophecy would come true.

After all, Marshall only lived on in memories and her dreams.

* * * * *

She woke slowly, her head groggy, her body overly warm. *That's it. No more wine. I'm too old for this.* Feebly, she kicked at the blankets that seemed to be weighing her down, knowing full well that she would likely not be able to move them without waking up a little bit more.

Her heel came into contact with something hard.

"I knew if we were together long enough, you'd show your true colors," a sleepy voice said. Something tightened around her waist and something else tickled across her nape. "I married a kicker. I think that should be our slogan on this year's Christmas cards."

Nora smiled automatically at the playful tone but as she fidgeted against the heat, a shiver ran down her spine.

She knew that voice. It had haunted her dreams for fifty years.

She bolted upright with far more strength than she realized, the blankets falling away from her as she whirled to face the man curled around her back. He blinked at her as his thick brows drew together in a frown but Nora was frozen at the sight of him.

The square jaw. The long nose. The tiny cleft in his chin she'd always said made him look like a movie star. The dark blond hair waving across his forehead, refusing especially now to behave itself.

And the deep blue eyes, currently gazing at her in confusion.

"What is it?" Marshall asked. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Nora covered her mouth to stifle the hysterical laugh that threatened to bubble out. A bad dream? His death and the time without him had been gut-wrenching.

But he looked the same as he had the day he'd died. And when she looked around the room and noticed the pictures hanging on the creamy walls, the cherry dresser they'd found for a song and refurbished, the shirt lying on the floor where Marshall had always dumped his clothes before crawling into bed, Nora felt like she was in a time warp.

Was she dreaming? She had to be. Everything looked like it had —

She leapt from the bed to run for the bathroom, tripping when the blankets tangled around her feet. As she kicked to get them off, she saw her bare legs for the first time, poking out from beneath the hem of her simple white nightdress.

Smooth. Firm.

She turned her hands around to stare at the back of her unlined fingers.

Young.

Marshall's head appeared at the edge of the bed. "Is this going to be the new morning show?" he teased, resting his chin on his folded hands to gaze down at her. "Funny. But I think I like you being *in* the bed better than being next to it."

Nora met his twinkling eyes and her stomach flip-flopped. Nobody but Marshall had ever created that effect in her. The chemistry between them had been undeniable, all the way from the start. They'd been introduced by her cousin at a Fourth of July picnic, spent the whole day talking and less than a year later had married. They couldn't wait any longer, though Nora would've given Marshall what they both wanted far sooner than that. He had been the lone voice of reason, arguing he wasn't going to put her in a situation to explain an early pregnancy in case something happened.

That didn't stop either of them from going down on each other, though. Nora had gotten very good at blowjobs by the time she had a ring on her finger.

"I guess I'm just a little disoriented still from the dream," she said, latching on to that as an explanation. As far as dreams went, this was the best one she had ever had. Never had they felt as real. Her stomach was even gurgling for breakfast.

Marshall reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Come back to bed so I can make you forget all about the dream, then. You don't have to be at the hairdresser's until after lunch, right?"

The heat flaming in her face just at that slight contact was muted by her confusion. "Hairdresser's?"

"You said you wanted to get it styled for dinner tonight." His finger coiled around a single lock, his gaze softening. "Though I don't know why. I like it the way it is."

Her mind raced. She was going out? They had dinner plans? They didn't go out that often. Though Marshall had a good job at the marketing firm where he wrote ad copy, it was expensive to live in Chicago. They kept talking about moving out to one of the suburbs but they decided to wait until pregnancy made that a necessity. They liked living in the city, even if it meant they had to be frugal. Going out for dinner was a luxury reserved for special occasions.

Like wedding anniversaries.

Any desire she'd had fled. The day Marshall had died had been their fifth wedding anniversary. She had gone out to get her hair done and run late, prompting her to call home and ask to be picked up at the salon in order not to miss their dinner reservation. She could've taken the bus but she hadn't wanted to mess up her new haircut. She hadn't even thought twice about asking Marshall.

He never made it. Two blocks from their apartment, a truck ran a red light and plowed into the side of their Ford. Marshall had been dead before the police even arrived.

"What is it, sweetheart?" His voice was soft with concern, his fingers tucking beneath her chin to tilt her head up. "If you want to get your hair done, that's fine. You know I'm just kidding. The important thing is that we're together. Five years down, fifty more to go."

So she was right. She was dreaming about the anniversary. After spending the day reminiscing with Tamara, she should have expected it.

But if she was dreaming, that meant she didn't have to relive it. She could mold the events to her own liking.

She could stop Marshall from ever leaving the house.

"Let's not go out tonight." She clambered up from where she'd fallen and pushed on Marshall's shoulders so he stretched back out on the bed. Straddling his hips, she added, "Let's stay in."

His hands smoothed up her thighs, pushing up her nightgown at the same time. They were warm and wrapped around her legs as if he was made to hold her. She'd forgotten about that tiny detail. "I thought you wanted to do something special."

"You said it yourself." Nora fell forward until her mouth hovered above his, her hair shielding them from the morning light filtering around the curtains. "The important thing is we're together. I know you love me. Maybe I should spend the day proving to you how much I love you."

He exhaled slowly, tilting his head to brush a kiss across her lower lip. "And you're not going to be disappointed?"

"With you? Never."

Nora stopped Marshall from questioning her choice further by sealing their mouths together, lips parting at the first contact to allow their tongues to sweep past their defenses. Kissing him was like remembering the words of her favorite song, something innate, a part of her that couldn't be taken away even with the passage of time. His hands slid around to cup her ass, holding her firmly against his morning erection, but it was the small moans he could never contain that put the final touch of verisimilitude on the scene for her.

Maybe it was an effect of the wine but she was remembering details of her life with Marshall that she hadn't considered in years.

And it felt absolutely wonderful.

Nora skimmed her fingertips over his bare shoulder, relearning the sculptured muscle. A dip here, a swell there, a ticklish spot just above his collarbone. His pulse throbbed through the skin, growing faster with each passing second, and she kissed a path from his mouth downward, past the rasp of his morning beard to the softer skin at the base of his throat.

He arched his head back into the pillow, giving her all the room she wanted. "I'm beginning to think that wasn't a nightmare, after all. Are you having sex dreams without me, you little minx?"

She smiled against his skin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Marshall chuckled. The sound caught in a gasp when she bit at his Adam's apple before soothing the sting with her tongue. He tasted salty and real, each texture coming alive. Running her mouth over his stubbled jaw and neck prickled like the sandpaper of a cat's tongue. Nora had to close her eyes when the sensations grew too much to bear.

Another groan issued from his mouth when she reached the sensitive hollow she sought. Gently, she nibbled along its contour, focusing on the heat from his flesh. Every

sweep of her fingertips along his arm echoed through her, like she had never been bereft of his attention or company, like she had only woken up yesterday in this very same bed and made love in this very same way. She could never touch him enough. If she stopped, he might just fade away into another dream that wasn't nearly as nice.

His hands inched upward, pushing her nightgown to her waist. When he reached the band of her panties, Marshall slipped his fingers inside to press skin to bare skin. It pulled the soft fabric down her hips, allowing her mound to rub directly against his erection and his breath caught when she started to grind more purposefully.

"I don't care what you were dreaming about," he said. "Anything that makes you this excited can't be bad."

"No. Definitely not."

Finally managing to tear her mouth away from him, Nora lifted her hips, giving Marshall the room to remove her panties the rest of the way. He pushed down his pajama bottoms then, tossing them to the floor where they joined her underwear. The only garment now in their way was her nightgown. As Marshall peeled that over her head, Nora straddled him anew, nestling his cock in between her wet folds.

He stilled beneath her and a slight line appeared between his brows. "Aren't we forgetting something?"

She knew what he was talking about but she didn't even glance over at the nightstand where they had always kept their condoms. "Do we have to?"

His hands slid up her back, pulling her flat against his chest. The hair rubbed against her aching nipples but Nora was too absorbed in the fire in his eyes to appreciate it.

"As beautiful as a baby of ours would be, you know we're not ready." Marshall reached to the side, pulling open the drawer and taking out the box. "Besides, half the fun is you putting it on me."

Playfully, she slapped at his chest. "Half isn't giving the rest of it very much credit, buster."

His laugh rolled through her. The sound of it thrilled her so much, he had one of the condoms out and the box set aside before she could argue any further.

When he pressed the packet into her palm, Nora knew she couldn't refuse. Why her fantasy Marshall would insist on birth control, she had no idea, but the similarity to her real Marshall was too close for her to protest. She sat back, resting on his thighs, and tore open the wrapper. Without looking away from his face, she gripped the base of his cock and angled it away from his body, rolling the rubber slowly down his hot shaft.

Marshall shuddered. "Oh, that's it. Come here."

She didn't have to be told twice. Falling to his chest again, their mouths fused together in a desperate, hungry kiss. Marshall buried one hand in her hair, holding her still, while the other caressed her hip. Nora took his guidance and angled her body in order to catch the tip of his cock with her pussy, then slowly lowered her weight, engulfing his length at the same time. They both sighed as he stretched her tight passage, the heat building with every inch. By the time he was completely sheathed, Nora was trembling.

"What's wrong?" His voice was a whisper, reaching through years of longing to wrap around her even more thoroughly than his body. "You're not hurting, are you?"

"No, no..."

She rested her forehead against his, her eyes closed. How to encapsulate in words what feeling him did to her? Even if this wasn't real, even if she was going to wake up in the morning and see an old woman staring back at her in the mirror, this, right here, right now, felt like all she had ever needed, all she had ever wanted. Words couldn't do that justice.

So instead, she began rocking, the tiniest of movements at first, letting her pussy get used to the way he filled her up without losing the contact between them. Her tongue darted out to capture the salt of his skin, licking a path along his strong jaw, up his cheekbone, across his brow, only to repeat the pattern in reverse along the other side.

Before Nora could pull away, Marshall turned his head to meet her mouth with his own. "Ride me," he said in between kisses.

She didn't have to be told twice.

The small strokes turned into long glides, easing up his thick shaft until only the tip of his cock was inside her before sliding all the way back down. The heavy slap of his balls against her ass sent electricity arcing up her spine. If she had more time to appreciate the dream, perhaps she could bend it in directions that might satisfy longtime fantasies. Ideas she'd been exposed to over the passing years, things she had never explored with Marshall because of his untimely death.

For now, though, she was going to savor simply getting to feel him inside her body. How his hands never stopped sweeping over her curves, loving her with each caress. How it took only the slightest of shifts, moving just a little bit to the left, to get the head of his cock pressing against her g-spot every time he entered her. How heat and ice rolled into inescapable flames to lick across every inch of exposed skin.

Her breathing grew ragged. "I love how you feel," Nora murmured. "I always will."

Marshall tightened the hold he had on her hips and strengthened his countering thrusts, driving into her quivering pussy harder, faster, until it was all she could do to hold on. Her skin grew slick, beads of sweat gathering between and beneath her breasts to start dripping down her stomach but it only made it easier to slide against him. It only made both of them hotter and hotter.

Nora pushed herself up, bracing against his chest. The change in position made it possible to sink even further and she cried out as the first fresh stroke made her clit scrape across his skin.

"That's my sweetheart." Marshall's voice was as rough as his thrusts and his blue eyes glittered with rising hunger. "Come on, Nora. I want to feel you finish." He released one hand from her hip to reach up and pinch her nipple.

Fire shot through her veins and the world swam to a blur. Nora dug her nails into his sweaty chest and when she heard him grunt in approval, she shook her damp hair out of her eyes in order to look down at him. One of her hands had closed over his nipple, digging into the dark flesh. On impulse, she pressed harder. Marshall bucked even more violently.

“Think you’re so tough?”

With a taunting gleam in his eye, he let go of her breast to dive for her pussy. His strong fingers pushed through her curls and though she knew what was coming, his almost vicious tug at her clit knocked her off balance. Her orgasm ripped through her, making her thrash so violently that Nora lost her rhythm. All she knew was the tipping of the room around her, the shuddering she couldn’t control, then the softness of the mattress as Marshall flipped her over.

He moved inside her with deep, strong thrusts but it was the fierce emotion in his eyes that wound Nora up and sent her hurtling into the abyss again. She cried out, clamping down around his cock. Seconds later, his ragged shout joined hers, his hips snapping once, twice, a third time, as he shot into the condom. Nora wound her arms around his back, forcing him down so that he nearly smothered her with his weight but all she wanted – all she needed – was to feel his mouth on hers as her breaths escaped.

Their kisses matched the slowing ebbs of their bodies, lengthening as each stroke shortened. Finally, Marshall stopped moving altogether, seemingly content to stay there until she forced him off.

“See, you’re not so tough,” he said with a laugh. Pushing the damp hair off her forehead, his smile warmed her through even more than the lovemaking had. “I know exactly what turns my girl into a big pile of goo.”

Nora wrinkled her nose as she matched his amusement. “Not exactly the sexiest thing to call your wife.”

“Am I wrong?”

She nuzzled against his cheek. “No.”

Marshall held her close and rolled onto his back, forcing her to come with him. "Since we're staying in, let's sleep some more. I want to be a lazy bum and spend the day making love to you but I need to keep my strength up for that."

Nora didn't want to close her eyes but the force of her two orgasms had given her body a different idea. She fought against the lethargy seeping through her muscles for as long as she could but when a yawn took her by surprise, she knew it was a losing battle.

"Just a little nap," she acquiesced.

When she felt his lips brush across the top of her head, she sighed and shut her eyes. Waking up alone was going to hurt but she was going to do everything she could to hold on to the memory of this particular dream. It was the best one she'd had in a very long time.

Chapter Two

"So what got into you this morning?"

Nora couldn't believe she was still dreaming about Marshall, but waking up in his arms, hot from the way he was draped over her, had been all too vivid. She'd even been dreaming in her dream sleep, which was weird in its own right. But she was going along with it, for as long as it lasted.

They sat at the small kitchen table, finally eating some lunch. After waking, they had lain in bed and cuddled and she'd listened to him ramble on about something going on at work. The situation seemed vaguely familiar but Nora hadn't really been paying too close attention. She was too focused on how he felt, how she could hear his heartbeat, how his skin smelled of the soap he had always favored.

"I didn't think you minded," she replied. She picked at her egg sandwich. She wasn't really hungry but she knew if she didn't eat anything even a dream Marshall would nag her.

"I didn't. But it's just usually me wanting morning sex, not you."

Nora didn't want to shatter the illusion by bringing up how she knew none of this was real. "We've turned into a stodgy old married couple if I can't surprise you," she said instead.

His eyes danced. "Never happen."

"You never know. It happened to Viv and Richard."

"Who?"

She bit her cheek. She'd forgotten. She hadn't met Viv until the year after Marshall had died.

"My point is, we need to be spontaneous. Mix it up a little."

"Spontaneous. That's what we're calling it now?"

Nora slapped playfully at his arm. She rose from the table but before she could toss her sandwich into the trash, Marshall reached over and grabbed it, setting it on his own plate.

"You didn't really want to go out to dinner tonight anyway." Turning on the water, she rinsed off the crumbs and watched them swirl down the drain. "I know you were only doing that for me."

The chair squeaked across the floor as he pushed it back and came up behind her. "Isn't that why I do everything?" he murmured, nuzzling into her neck. "You know you're my life."

His soft words radiated warmth, so much so that she felt them all the way to the bottom of her bare feet. Closing her eyes, Nora leaned back against his broad chest, fumbling for the tap in order to turn off the water. He joined his hand with hers and bent her arm against her stomach.

"It doesn't feel like five years," Marshall went on. "I can still remember how much you glowed at the Fourth of July picnic."

Nora chuckled. "That was the fireworks."

"No, that was pretty much love at first sight."

"Because you forgot your sunglasses and were blinded by all the sunlight reflecting off the water."

"Probably." She felt him smile against her skin. "Doesn't mean I don't still think I have the most beautiful wife in the world, though."

She loved how this part of the dream was turning out. Without any guidance from her at all, Marshall was making her feel more loved, more wanted, more desirable than she had ever felt. She had never really regretted not finding someone else to love after he had died but she had never really realized either just how lonely she was until confronted with him again.

Nora turned in his arms. "Still blind. But I love you anyway."

Marshall dropped his hands to rest lightly on her hips. Already, she felt his cock stirring against her stomach, hardening as his fingers started to caress her in a slow, soft rhythm.

"And we're in for the day, right?"

"Definitely."

With a sly smile, Marshall caught her nightdress and pulled it up and over her head. Neither one of them had bothered to get fully dressed, which included leaving her panties on the floor where he had tossed them earlier. When he sank down to his knees, his mouth was level with her bare pussy and her breath caught as he nosed at the hair, brushing across her clit.

"Let's go back to the bedroom," she gasped.

"Too late." He spread his hands across the top of her thighs, using his thumb to delve between her folds and open her up. "The smell of you is making me crazy."

Nora laughed. "I need to shower."

"No, you don't. You're perfect, just like this."

It was on the tip of her tongue to argue with him, when she felt him lick along her inner lips. Her hand shot out to curl into his hair but gripping him only seemed to make Marshall more determined to seek out every inch of her he could reach. He traced around her opening, torturing her with the sharp attention. Each circuit weakened the muscles in her legs even more, until Nora felt like the only thing keeping her upright was Marshall's strong hands and the counter behind her.

"We eat in here," she protested one final time.

He paused. "What do you think I'm doing here?" His hot breath soaked through her skin. "Keep it up and I'll lay you out on the table and do this there."

"You wouldn't."

Nora squeaked when Marshall suddenly stood up and scooped her into his arms, whirling around to drop her onto the furniture in question. The salt and pepper shakers went flying and she scrambled to sit up, only to be met by his firm hand on her stomach.

"I warned you." But there was a twinkle in his eye, one she'd never been able to resist. "Don't dare me not to do something. You *know* that's the best way to get me to do it."

Her legs dangled over the edge of the table. Her bottom was cold against the surface but already, Marshall's returned attention was driving thoughts of that out of her head, his hands broad and warm as he pulled her thighs apart.

"I think this is more appropriate anyway," he said. He smoothed his hand over her mound, over her swollen labia, to allow two fingers to circle her slick passage. "You taste better than dessert any day of the week."

Nora smiled. "You say that *now* but I'll bet you get a piece of double chocolate cake in front of you and you'll be singing a different tune."

"How about you *and* double chocolate cake?"

"Don't even think—ah!"

He'd pushed a single long finger into her pussy, twisting his wrist around to find her g-spot and press against it. Without removing the first, he added a second and with his gaze fixed firmly on hers, Marshall lowered his head to drag the flat of his tongue across her clit.

Nora jumped at the contact, her fingers curling into the table. Her breathing quickened but both of them remained motionless, eyes locked.

Seconds passed.

Nora swallowed. All she heard was the roar of her blood.

"Why aren't you moving?" she finally managed.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Because I'm watching you."

“Why?”

“I watch you when we’re fucking.”

“But we’re not doing that now.”

“But it’s not about the act.” His tongue skated over his lips, leaving them wet. “It’s about watching how you react to me. How beautiful you are when you come.”

As if in slow motion, he bent his head again.

His attention on her pussy was meticulous, his tongue separating inner and outer folds, his teeth nibbling at the tender flesh it found. It kept the burn simmering inside her, building so slowly that it wasn’t until his cheek brushed against her inner thigh that Nora realized how hot she really was. Then he would flick across her clit, almost as if by accident and a fresh cascade of shivers would ripple through her body.

She let go of the table to reach down and smooth the hair away from his forehead. His face shone with her juices, his eyes dark with desire. Every time her fingertips met his bare skin, his nostrils flared and his fingers pushed deeper inside her channel.

Her breathy gasps were not quite words of encouragement, not quite pleas for more. It didn’t seem possible that it had been fifty years since she had last had his mouth on her pussy. Each added stroke stripped away another layer from her memories, bringing it all back in crystal clarity as her body responded to his. Each caress reminded her of just how good it had been, how she had been right to consider him so highly, how fortunate she was now to have this dream recollection.

“Marshall...”

He lifted his head and for the first time since setting her on the table, let his gaze drift downward. “Touch yourself.”

The request took her by surprise. “What? You’re already touching me.”

“No, not here.” As if to punctuate his meaning, he brushed his thumb over her clit, making her cry out. “Your breasts.”

Nora glanced down. Her chest was heaving, her breaths shallow and quick and her nipples were hard points, aching for their own attention. A smile curved her mouth as she let go of his head, drawing her fingers up along her quivering stomach to circle one dusky areole.

"This can't be what you mean," she teased.

The muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed. "Harder."

The lust flaring in his eyes mirrored the glimpse of his arousal she saw tenting his pajama bottoms. Licking her lips, she brought her hand up to her mouth, licking her index and middle fingers as well. This time when it settled at her breast, she left a wet ring along the pebbled skin, cooling it for seconds before it evaporated.

"Do it," Marshall pushed. "I want to feel what it does to you."

"You can't...oh."

The movement inside her slick passage said exactly what he wanted. With her chest tightening, she caught her nipple between two fingers and pulled it taut, lifting her breast at the same time. Marshall followed the short motion and froze, waiting just as she was.

Nora pinched as hard as she could.

Fire arced straight to her clit and her muscles clamped down as she cried out. Marshall cried out at the same time and she realized his fingers had jerked with her. She pinched again. Same response. Same heat. Again. Other nipple.

Then Marshall bit down on her already too-sensitive flesh. Everything unfurled inside Nora and the world tilted dangerously around her as her head spun.

By the time she came down from it, her skin glistened with a fine layer of sweat and her arms felt like Jell-O. Dropping down to rest flat on the table, she stared up at the kitchen ceiling, desperate to catch her breath.

Marshall kissed the inside of her thigh before smoothing his palms along her hips. "So if we had chocolate cake, would you let me eat it off you?"

Smiling, Nora pushed feebly at the fingers he was torturing her clit with. "Only if we did it in here. I'm not sleeping in cake crumbs."

With the effects of her orgasm ebbing, Nora yawned and blinked, wondering how long she could lie like this before the dream would start to fade. This was the most sex she'd ever had in her sleep. It had to end sometime soon. As her eyes focused, she caught sight of a stain over the stove and frowned as she tried to identify it.

"What's wrong?" Marshall propped himself up on his knuckles on either side of her waist, gazing down at her with his own slight frown. "If you're cold, we can go back to bed."

"No, no, not cold." Nora pointed. "What's that?"

He followed the line of her finger to the ceiling. "The spaghetti sauce I splattered last winter, remember? I should probably drag the stepladder out and scrub it off." He grinned as he turned back. "Considering how much you nag me about it, that might make a pretty good anniversary present."

Now that he reminded her, she did remember. But it was a detail she'd never considered in years, if ever. It seemed odd to find it in a dream now. Unless this wasn't a dream and she was really dead and this was all reliving her life those few seconds as she was dying.

When Marshall stepped away from the table, Nora found unexpected energy to sit up again. "What are you doing?" she asked as he began to head out of the room.

He glanced back but didn't stop. "Getting the ladder. I'll wash it off, then get dressed and run out for some cake and something for dinner."

It wasn't until he was through the doorway that it dawned on her what he'd said.

Run out.

He'd run out on their anniversary and died.

It's not the same.

But it was similar enough to make her feel sick.

Nora moved with the strength of years of pain, sliding off the table and darting through the doorway. She nearly collided with Marshall as he headed back into the kitchen, the folded stepladder in his hand.

"Whoa," he said, laughing. "Where's the fire?"

"Don't go out," she blurted. "Let's stay in."

His amusement faded, his eyes narrowing at her in slight worry. "We are staying in. That's why I have to get dinner."

"I'll find something to throw together. We managed for lunch, didn't we?"

"Yeah but..." Carefully, Marshall set aside the ladder. Reaching for her hand, his frown deepened as soon as his fingers closed around hers. "You're shaking. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just..."

What could she say to him? She'd sound crazy and even if it was a dream, she didn't want to spoil what had been the perfect day by rattling off about paranoid delusions. She let him lead her to their small couch, curling into his side when they sat down.

"Something's wrong," Marshall said softly. His hands rubbed her back, calming her without having to ask for his touch. "Come on. Tell me. You've been out of it all day."

Nora wanted to argue with him, deny all of it. But Marshall was astute enough to pick up on her distress. He wouldn't let this go, even if this was her dream.

"I don't want you to go out," she confessed. "The dream I had...something happened to you in it. And it would make me feel better if you just stayed in today. That's all."

"Oh, sweetheart." He brushed his mouth across the top of her head. "Nothing's going to happen to me."

"You don't know that."

"It was just a dream."

"Maybe. But it felt real." She sat up. "Can you humor me on this today, Marsh? You can make it my anniversary present, if you want. Just don't go out."

It took a moment for him to respond, his eyes warm and inquisitive. "All right," he finally said. "If that's what you want." He lifted a warning finger. "But I'm bringing chocolate cake home from work tomorrow and you're going to make it up to me."

Nora laughed. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Anything you want."

"Good." He glanced past her to the kitchen. "You're not really going to make me clean the ceiling today, are you?"

Rising from the couch, she tugged him to his feet. "I'll do it. You can spot me."

As he followed her back, grabbing the stepladder along the way, all Nora could think about was the relief flooding through her. She wouldn't have to relive his death. Not this time.

Or at least, not this day.

She grabbed her nightgown from where Marshall had dropped it to the floor and slipped it on while he set up the ladder. After wetting the dishrag, she climbed to the top riser.

"This was definitely a better plan," Marshall commented.

Nora glanced down to see his head tilted as he regarded her bare legs. "You're supposed to be making sure I don't fall."

"I am." There was no mistaking the smirk on his lips. "Your legs are holding you up. I'll be the first one to see if they go out from under you."

With an amused roll of her eyes, she climbed back down, ignoring his cry of protest. "You can clean it," she said, pushing the damp cloth into his hand.

"What happened to not making me do it on our anniversary?"

Nora pushed him onto the ladder. "You lost that privilege when you went caveman on me. Now go."

Though Marshall pretended to complain, he took her spot on the top step with good humor. He turned away from her in order to reach the ceiling and left Nora with a perfect view of his long legs and backside. His pajama bottoms draped over the taut curve of his ass, hinting at the muscular thighs, and as he stretched, the sinew of his back rippled.

Her mouth watered. Could she really blame him for staring at her legs when his were just as delectable?

Glancing up, she smiled at how intently he focused on his task. The real Marshall would have probably done the exact same thing. The way he threw everything he was into her, his work, his play...it was just another reason why she had never been able to find someone to replace him.

Impulse spurred her forward. Desire drove her to take a taste.

"Hey!"

Nora grinned when he snapped his head around to gape down at her. "What?"

"You bit me."

"Oh, that?" She gestured dismissively toward the wet mark on his pajamas where she had nipped at his thigh. "That was just showing you who's boss around here."

He cocked a brow. "Oh really?"

When he tried to come back down the steps, Nora grabbed his hips and forced them straight again. "You're not done up there yet, buster."

"I am if you keep biting. You know what that does to me."

She did. Or she had. It might have been a product of their intimacy before the wedding, but both of them had oral fixations that begged for satisfaction. Hours lost in kisses, nights lost in exploration. Bites and tastes and licks and whatever else their teeth and tongues desired.

Her skin flushed. Fresh need pooled between her legs, but Nora wasn't going to attend to that right now. There were other, more delicious prospects to take care of.

With his gaze heavy and hot on her, she leaned forward again, tilting her head at the last moment. She dragged the flat of her tongue over the fabric-covered muscle, up the back of his thigh, all the way to the succulent swell of his bottom. Even through his pajamas, she felt him twitch, felt how ready he was for anything she was willing to give. When she reached his ass, she yielded to the urge to nip at the firm flesh, but not even his sharp intake of breath was enough to make her stop.

“Nora...”

“Ssshhh...”

The purse of her lips to quiet him warmed the material against her lips. Nora nibbled at him through it, traveling inch upon inch closer to his waist. When her mouth reached bare skin, they both moaned.

“Are you at least going to let me get off here before my knees give out?”

“This is the perfect height.” Her fingers splayed over his hips. His straining erection made the weave tight beneath her touch. “Focus and you won’t have any problems.”

His ragged breathing was as much of a reward as seeing the way he leaned forward to grip the edge of the cupboards. “This is the last thing I would ever call a problem.”

Nora smiled to herself as she caught the elastic waistband between her teeth and pulled. The front of the pants caught on the tip of his cock, but she didn’t let that stop her from tugging the back down until his ass was exposed. Goosebumps erupted along his skin. She licked over the nearest patch and whimpered at the texture against her tongue.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she breathed.

Marshall twisted above her. “What did you say?”

She met his shining eyes. The color had risen in his cheeks and beads of sweat had broken out upon his brow. If she moved her fingers just a few inches, she’d be able to touch his arousal. Nothing had ever felt more real.

"Nothing." She sampled the same spot of skin again, this time ending with a bite that made him groan. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

His free hand came down to the top of her head, resting there briefly before his fingers stroked the side of her face. "You know I am, sweetheart."

Her lashes fluttered at the warm contact, and she turned into the touch. The tip of her tongue darted out to taste his salty palm, but when he tensed to descend the ladder, Nora pulled back.

"Not yet." She glanced at the awkwardness of his clothing. "But I'll let you take your pajamas off, if you want."

Marshall didn't have to be told twice. When she stepped away to give him room, he pushed the pants down his legs, kicking them to the floor. The moment his cock sprang free, Nora ran her finger over the wet tip, collecting the pre-cum gathering in the slit.

He watched, his gaze ravenous, as she licked the clear fluid from her skin. "Now you're just teasing," he accused.

Nora shook her head. "A tease wouldn't follow through." She pressed into the side of his leg, grasping his shaft in one hand, caressing his ass with the other. "I have every intention to see this through to the end."

"At least let me turn around."

"Eventually." Without letting go of his cock, she slid behind him once again. "I have other things in mind right now."

She didn't stroke him. She didn't even move her hand. All she did was run her nail along the tender underside of his length. When he jerked and groaned, Nora bent her head to savor more of his skin.

It was heady how good he tasted. Licking across the upper part of his thigh tickled the coarse hair across her tongue. She had been with other men since Marshall, learned more about what they found pleasurable, even discovered just what a prostate gland was and what it could do for a man, but knowledge didn't make the experience better.

The partner did. Other men might have taught Nora about life and desire, but only Marshall had made her love them.

Only Marshall would benefit from that education now.

Nora ran her tongue along the seam of his ass. For now, she didn't go deeper. While she suspected Marshall would enjoy it, she also knew that it was far more daring than she had ever been in real life. Considering how much this dream Marshall reacted like the real one, she didn't want to risk startling him and spoiling the mood by pushing too hard too soon. Instead, she settled at the bottom, gently prodding him to part his legs and allow her access to the velvety skin behind his balls. Marshall lifted his leg to rest his foot on the counter, giving her exactly what she wanted.

His sharp breath hissed through the kitchen when she sucked his sac past her lips. "Remind me never to question you again," he managed to get out. "God, Nora...you will never cease to amaze me."

She hummed. His cock jumped in her hand, forcing her to tighten her grip. Marshall wrapped his hand over hers and caressed the back of her fingers. His were trembling. If she couldn't already feel how hot he was, smell the desire seeping from his skin, that would have been a dead giveaway.

Slowly, Nora began to pump his length, his hand following over hers. It didn't guide, and it didn't push. The touch was too loving, too tender to be that forceful. But he helped her remember just how it was he liked to be touched, the way he'd liked her to run her palm over the tip, rub the pre-cum over the velvety crown. Or the way to stroke all the way to the base so that the side of her hand pressed into his balls. In this position, doing that pushed the sac harder into her mouth, and she whimpered at how badly she wanted even more.

Within just a few strokes, Marshall wasn't the only one with shaky legs. Her orgasm on the table had left her with liquid muscles, but the encroaching fire of his arousal made her yearn to feel him inside her again. For a brief moment, she debated dragging him into the bedroom to ride him until they both came. But when he

whispered her name, a desperate exhalation, she knew she couldn't torture him any longer.

"Turn around." Her words came out between pants for air. She couldn't even let go of his shaft for fear of shattering. She stepped back only enough space to allow him to do as she instructed, and as soon the swollen head of his cock faced her watering mouth, she murmured, "Oh, yes."

Marshall threaded his fingers through her hair when she leaned in and licked over the sticky tip. He didn't say a word as she took him in, or when she slid down, or even when she paused with her mouth full. He only made a sound as she dropped her jaw and swallowed, letting his cock push into her throat, and that was just a long, shuddering sigh that wafted over her.

She closed her eyes. His scent filled her nose. His touch made her feel like she was going to burst out of her skin. Nothing could ever compare to how desirable he made her feel.

Slowly, Nora sucked back up his length, but after just a single circle of her tongue at the head, she went back down again. This wasn't going to last long. Neither one of them could wait for the release. She scratched across the front of his thighs, reaching for his balls, twisting them lightly as she swallowed him down again.

The hand in her hair tightened and her scalp prickled. Marshall thrust into her mouth, more than meeting her halfway. She couldn't remember him ever making the sounds that now came from him, especially when she snaked a hand around his hip to trace the curve of his ass. It set him alight, set her afire, and she sought out the tight hole on instinct, desperate to heighten his pleasure.

He shouted when her nail scraped over the clenching muscle. On the next stroke past her lips, the vein running along the underside of his cock pulsed. Nora barely had time to adjust before he was buried in her throat again, his body rock hard as his orgasm ripped through him. They remained locked in that position until his cock finally

stopped jerking, and she swallowed down the last of his cum as he pulled out of her mouth.

She didn't fight him as he came down the stepladder this time. There wasn't room to argue with anything before he swept her into his embrace to devour her mouth.

"I am the luckiest man on the planet," he murmured.

"No." She burrowed into his chest, still shaking, and squeezed her eyes shut. Nothing had ever felt more solid or secure than the warmth of his chest. "I'm the lucky one."

Chapter Three

The sound of the shower filtered from the bathroom. Nora sat cross-legged on the bed, edgy from the conflicting emotions raging through her. On the one hand, the fact that the dream hadn't dissipated yet was good. She and Marshall had spent the afternoon wrapped around each other, only venturing from bed to use the bathroom or to grab something they wanted. They had even ignored the telephone when it had rung insistently around four. Now, at nearly ten o'clock, Marshall had finally made a concession to the end of the day by taking a shower in preparation for returning to work tomorrow.

But on the other hand, the odd familiarity of it all made her uneasy. There were details here she didn't understand how she could remember. It wasn't Marshall. It was their surroundings. The contents of her nightstand, for instance. When she'd dug around for a fresh handkerchief, she'd seen the dog-eared copy of *Marjorie Morningstar* that she had never been able to slog through. She hadn't thought of that in years. It even had the coffee stain on page fifty-eight where Marshall had jostled her elbow one morning.

There was the hole in the rug, the one they strategically placed the floor lamp over in the living room. The mismatched table runners, because Marshall had inadvertently used bleach in the wash when he thought he was helping. The tiny chip in his favorite coffee mug. Why was her mind choosing to reconstruct her entire world in such minute detail?

Curiosity finally drove her to her feet. Careful to listen to the sounds from the next room, Nora went to the closet and opened the door, surveying the neatly hanging clothes on the double rails. She ignored her own stuff. Those were more likely to be

remembered anyway. Her hands went straight for Marshall's shirts, sliding them as far down the rail as possible in order to best view them, one by one.

A lot of them were similar—white button-downs that he wore beneath his suit jacket for work. He had always owned a lot of them, because he was invariably spilling something on himself. Past those were his colored button-down shirts, not nearly as many and her hand paused on a light blue one.

It had been a favorite. He wore it most often without a jacket or a tie, when it was just the two of them going out to the movies, or running down to the corner café for an impromptu meal. The edges of the button placket were soft with use and there was a loose thread hanging from the second button from the bottom. She had always meant to tighten it up before he lost the button altogether but then...

Her fingers tightened on the sleeve, her eyes stinging. This was the hardest part about seeing Marshall. About reliving this day. Because when she woke up again, he was still going to be dead and she was going to be old and these hours where she got to save him from an accident that should never have happened in the first place would evaporate into the ether.

Yanking the shirt off its hanger, Nora clutched it tightly in her hand as she went out into the living room. She curled up in the corner of the couch with her small sewing kit and threaded a needle, all too aware of how easy it was to see the tiny eye and how steady her hand was as she guided the pale blue thread into it. Making a quick knot, she spread the shirt over her lap, holding the placket firmly between her fingers as she poked through the underside, trying to find one of the holes on the button.

Maybe it wouldn't mean anything in the long run but she had to do this. This wasn't going to be even more unfinished business she was going to leave behind.

She was biting off the thread when she heard the shower finally stop. Marshall appeared at the end of the hall moments later, a towel draped around his hips, dripping water all over the carpet.

"What're you doing?" His gaze fell on the shirt in her lap. "If you were so bored you had to resort to mending, you should have come into the shower with me."

"I wanted to get this done."

"I can think of a lot more exciting things to be doing on our anniversary."

Nora smiled. "Didn't we do those already?"

"We're done? Who says?"

She quirked a brow, deliberately looking at the mess he was making on the floor. "Says the woman who's going to have to clean up after you."

Marshall glanced down at his towel. After a moment, he plucked it off his hips and dropped it to the floor.

"Like this?"

"Marsh!"

"What?"

The twinkle in his eye made it difficult to keep a stern face. So did his semihard cock. "You are not seriously going to leave that there."

"Why?" He ventured into the living room. "What are you going to do about it?"

There wasn't time to tease him about being a slob before he pounced, pinning her to the couch with his wet body as he shook out his even wetter hair.

Nora laughed and squealed, trying to break free. "Stop it, Marsh! Stop!"

She tried to use her hold on the shirt to get it between them, to protect herself from his damp skin but he tore it out of her grip and tossed it onto the floor behind them. His hands slid beneath her shirt, finding all of her ticklish spots, while his strong legs kept her from wriggling free.

They were both laughing and panting by the time they paused. Nora's clothes were mostly soaked from the wrestling, while Marshall's skin was mostly dry. Both of them had flushed cheeks and a gleam in their eyes.

"Now isn't that more fun than sewing on a stupid button?" he said.

Her heart caught in her throat at the sight of his shining eyes. "Yeah," Nora breathed. Unable to resist, she craned her neck in order to meet his lips with hers, sighing the moment their tongues made contact. Nothing had ever felt as good as Marshall's kisses. Nothing ever would.

Letting go of where he had her wrists pinned, Marshall slipped an arm under her back, cradling her against his hard chest as he deepened the caress. His cock hardened to its full length against her stomach, heavy and hot where it weighed down upon her. Nora marveled at his stamina, a gift of his youth but almost quickly dismissed it. This was a dream. Of course he would get it up whenever she wanted it. That was one of the perks of having a dream like this in the first place.

She had been waiting for the bubble to burst all day. With bedtime drawing nigh, it made sense that it would happen soon. What a wonderful note to end it on, even if it was going to be bittersweet waking up to the real world.

Nora opened her legs, welcoming the way he fitted naturally between them. When the tip of his cock nudged her opening, Marshall broke away from the kiss, lifting up to gaze down upon her. He didn't speak. Rising from the couch, he carried her to the bedroom, her legs wrapped around his waist. Her blood roared in her ears, drowning out the sound of him tearing open the condom wrapper, the squeak of the bed as he sat down on the edge. As she balanced on his lap, he rolled the rubber down his shaft.

Still, they didn't speak.

He took his time to press forward, content with rubbing along her growing wetness. His free hand toyed with her hard nipple, never too hard, never too soft, flitting from place to place on her body until she lost track of where he'd touched and where he hadn't. She was awash with sensation, warming with every move of his body, so that by the time she finally grew frustrated and dug her nails into his bare shoulders, Nora felt like her skin was going to blister from the heat.

Marshall leaned their brows together as he slowly thrust inside her. His breath was sweet, his skin mouthwatering from the scent of his soap and his thick cock burned

where he scraped against her sensitive walls. Nora welcomed the ache. It was the deep satisfaction that came from too much loving, the sense of knowing who she belonged with and how much he desired her. It wasn't the hard, hungry sex from that morning. It was mutual need born of love. It had always been the best type of sex of all.

They rocked against each other, deep and slow. His murmurs of adoration filled her as surely as his cock and Nora whispered them back, living in the moment, this magic moment she'd been granted. Her nerves scorched, heart and breath quickening in rhythm with his. They grew even hotter with each scratch of his hair across her smooth skin, or each graze of his teeth when he would bow his head and nibble at her flesh. And still, Marshall never stopped.

She came with a whimper, his mouth muffling the sound as he pumped again and again. He stiffened when he climaxed, but their never-ending kiss drew them both to the mattress. She held him as tightly as she could, hoping against hope that this would be the way she woke up.

Her lips tingled when he pulled away.

"We keep this up and I'm going to have to shower again," he joked.

She smiled. "No, let's just sleep."

Letting go was impossible, but somehow, Marshall disengaged from their embrace. Nora blinked lazily and stretched out, watching him go around to the other side of the bed. He set the alarm clock before sliding beneath the blankets, rolling onto his side to face her.

"Not a bad fifth anniversary, if I do say so myself, Mrs. Ensley," he said.

"Nope. Not a bad one at all." She caressed his cheek. "Staying in was the best gift ever."

Her words sparked something inside Marshall.

"Shit," he muttered and turned back to the nightstand. The drawer opened and closed and he came back to her with a long white box in his hand. "You got me all turned around so that I totally forgot about giving you this today."

Nora sat up, leaning against the headboard as she took the small box. With a curious smile, she lifted the lid and promptly felt her heart stop beating.

It was a necklace. A delicate gold chain. A perfect emerald pendant. The exact same necklace Tamara had given her.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. Her fingers shook where she caressed the fine filigree. "You shouldn't have. It must have cost a fortune."

"Since when do I let that stop me from showing you how much I love you?" Marshall tilted his head, searching her face. "I know it's not your birthstone or anything but the clerk at the jewelry store said that it was an anniversary symbol. Apparently, emerald is for the fifty-fifth, so the way I see it, this is my promise to you for another fifty more years to come."

If he kept this up, she was going to start sobbing hysterically.

"Help me put it on?"

His fingers covered hers in order to pick up the necklace but as Nora set the box aside and turned her back to him, pulling her hair out of his way, she felt him hesitate.

"Are you sure you want to sleep with it on?" he asked.

She nodded. "Please. I just... I'd like to wear it. I want to be able to feel it on me when I wake up in the morning."

The pendant appeared before her eyes as he looped it around the front of her neck and she followed it down to see it nestling against her breastbone, shivering at the slight touch of his fingertips at her nape. The tension in the chain eased as he secured the clasp. Against her pale skin, the green looked like it was pulsing with life.

When Marshall pressed a kiss to her neck, Nora closed her eyes. "This is the best anniversary ever," she said. Without looking, she turned to meet his mouth, the soft

caress more fulfilling than anything else the entire day. "Thank you so much for giving it to me."

All he did was hold her more tightly against him and deepen the kiss. By the time they parted, he was lying down and Nora was nestled into his side.

"You can thank me in the morning when neither one of us wants to get up to go to work," he said, reaching to turn off the lamp on the nightstand.

As the room fell into darkness, Nora flattened her hand over his bare chest. His heart pulsed against her palm. Warm. Steady. Alive.

"I'll do that," she said. She'd thank him every day of her life, if she could. Just to have him there.

Chapter Four

Every joint felt stiff and sore as Nora struggled to wake up. At some point in the night, she'd pulled the blankets up around her head and when she blinked back into consciousness, all she saw was dark.

Then the dreams came crashing back. And she squeezed her eyes shut again to stop the flow of regret.

As far as ways to remember the anniversary, there were worse ones than spending the night dreaming about what would have been a perfect day. Without even trying too hard, she still felt the heat of his body as she'd finally fallen asleep next to him, still smelled the scent of his soap from his late shower. She would always remember the light in his eyes when she'd opened his gift too. That gleam of expectancy, hopefulness and love, all rolled into one.

Her hand went up to her neck. Following the line of the chain, she felt the pendant resting on the sheets, pulled down by her position on her side. So small. It was difficult to believe that such an insignificant stone could create such vivid dreams. The power of wishful thinking, obviously. An image of everything that could have been, frozen into a perfect clarity for all time.

Though she knew what she would find, Nora stretched her hand out, smoothing over the sheets. The deserted sheets. She was alone. There was a fraction of a second where she would have sworn that the material was warm to the touch but she dismissed it as pure folly. She was feeling what she wanted to feel. She wanted Marshall to be there. She wanted a few more seconds of feeling his firm body against hers, hearing his voice soak through her as they talked into the wee hours of the night. She wanted to be able to wake up to him, just one more time, just as she had in her dream.

Except that was impossible.

Abandoning the fantasy, Nora pulled the blankets more tightly around her. There was no reason to rush out of bed. She might have had to rush off to her job as a librarian assistant in her dream, but here, in the real world, if she wanted to indulge and sleep in, she had every right to. She had lived a long time, damn it. She had worked when most women hadn't, grateful she had never stopped after getting married. Marshall had encouraged her independence...

She stopped that train of thought before it got too far out of the station. Once you were old, you were supposed to be able to be selfish and demanding. The only person who would even notice was Tamara and if Nora knew anything about her friend and neighbor, it was that she would be the last person to ever tell Nora she couldn't do something.

She was almost asleep again when she heard the muffled sound of a door closing, followed by a low whistling.

Her body stiffened. Somebody was in her apartment. Had Tamara let herself in? She wouldn't do that unless she thought something was really wrong.

The whistling grew louder, an old Sinatra tune she hadn't heard in years. "Hey, you're not still asleep, are you?" A drawer opened. "I thought you wanted me to take you into work this morning."

Her eyes flew open. That voice. Was she still dreaming? She had to be.

Carefully, Nora pushed the blankets away from her face. Marshall stood at the dresser, his back to her as he dug around in his sock drawer. His white shirt was untucked from his trousers and his tie hung loose beneath the collar. By all appearances, he looked like he was going to work.

He glanced back and smiled. "There you are. I guess I shouldn't have kept you up so late last night."

Her attention was fixed on a small nick in his cheek. He'd cut himself while shaving. What an odd detail for her subconscious to put in.

His smile faded as she didn't speak. "Are you feeling okay?" Abandoning the drawer, he came to the side of the bed and sat down, his hand going to her forehead. His palm was broad and cool against her skin and the scent of his aftershave more overpowering this close.

"You're not warm." Marshall relaxed. "Just tired, huh? I don't blame you. If we didn't have bills to pay, I'd still be in bed. Maybe trying to recreate the magic of yesterday."

"Yesterday?" But it had all been a dream. It was all still a dream. It had to be. "You're really going to work?"

Laughing, he rose to his feet. "Not if I can't find any socks." He began rummaging in the drawer again. "Oh, I poured you a cup of coffee already. Maybe that'll help wake you up."

Nora stared at him in disbelief. He really was going to work. He really expected her to. As if on autopilot, she pushed the blankets away, realizing the aches in her body that she'd noted earlier were from a day of lounging and sex, not from the maladies of age. Why wasn't the dream over?

Everything was exactly as it had been. The wall felt solid beneath her fingertips, the floor hard beneath her bare feet. The scent of fresh coffee drifted out from the kitchen but as Nora reached the entrance, she stopped and looked over the living room.

The blue shirt she had mended was now draped over the back of a chair, picked up though Marshall hadn't bothered to take it into the bedroom to hang up yet. His shoes were on the shoe rack near the front door and the throw cushions were out of place on the couch. He'd put them back without caring about how she normally arranged them. Just like he always did.

Her heart pinched. She didn't want to do this. One day of bliss was wonderful but she didn't want the fantasy to continue. She wouldn't be able to bear it, once she did wake up.

“Do you want me to get your clothes out for you?” Marshall called from the bedroom.

Nora didn’t know how to respond. She pinched her arm, hoping that would be enough to startle her awake but all it did was hurt.

She turned away to go get her coffee, hoping that maybe some weird detail in the kitchen might yank her out of the fantasy, when something white caught her eye. Tilting her head, she frowned at the envelope stuck beneath the front door. A letter had obviously been delivered overnight—it hadn’t been there when she’d been fixing the button. She glanced back at the hall. Marshall hadn’t picked it up. Maybe he hadn’t seen it.

There was no stamp on it, no postmark. Just a name written across the front in script that looked very familiar.

Her name.

Nora slit the seal and pulled out a single sheet of paper.

Well, if all has gone well, you’re reading this with a smile on your face and a spring in your step. When I thought about you spending your anniversary mourning Marshall again, I knew I had to do something. You have been such a good friend to me over the years. I owe you for so many different things. So my gift to you is this. A life with Marshall. Don’t ask how it’s possible – you really don’t want to hear about the whys and wherefores of what I am. But, thanks to the emerald, the magic is real. It’s not a dream. This is the life you should have had, Nora. This is the life you both should have had.

Love him. Appreciate every single day. I’ll miss your friendship but your happiness is more important to me.

Love,

Tamara

Nora read the letter two more times before its meaning sank in. Magic shouldn’t have been possible. There was no such thing. Tamara was eccentric, yes, but even this

was too much to believe. Incense and a propensity for always seeming to know what Nora needed did not mean her best friend was a witch.

But how many times had she fallen asleep during this dream already? And woken up to the same reality? That never happened to her before.

And the anniversary gift? Tamara had never given one before. As Nora racked her memories, she remembered how it had been Tamara's suggestion they open the wine, how Tamara had been the one to steer her toward the happier times.

But Tamara couldn't even keep her accounts straight for her bookstore without Nora's help. How on earth had she done something like this?

"Nora?"

She started at the sound of Marshall's voice. Stuffing the letter back into the envelope, she turned back to see him holding a white blouse in his hand, watching her quizzically.

"You didn't answer me." He smiled, holding up the shirt. "I thought this would look good with the necklace."

Her hands went automatically to her throat. The weight of the emerald was a mere feather but it was warm against her fingertips and if she concentrated, it almost felt like it throbbed at the same rhythm of her heartbeat.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"Jansen Jewels. Why?"

"Do you remember who sold it to you? The one who told you it was for the fifty-fifth anniversary. What did she look like?"

His gaze slid sideways for several seconds. "Tall. Older. A little plain but really friendly brown eyes." He looked back to Nora with a grin. "And she wore a skirt that kept getting caught in the sliding doors. She had to stop and disentangle herself three times while I was there."

Nora's heart thudded at the familiar description. "Do you remember her name?"

“No but it’s probably on the receipt. Hang on.” Draping the blouse over his shoulder, Marshall pulled out his wallet and rifled through various slips of paper before extracting a folded pink one. “Here it is. Tamara.”

The world tunneled down to the necklace at her throat. It was real. Whatever Tamara had done, however she had managed it, Nora was exactly where she thought she was. This was her home. This was her second chance. She had already saved Marshall from getting killed in that car accident. The future was a clean slate.

She nearly knocked Marshall over with the force of throwing her arms around him. Laughing, he hugged her back, though she could tell from his tone that he had no idea what the exuberance was about.

Nora didn’t care. She’d explain it to him tomorrow.

Because this time around, he would be there.

About the Author

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multi-published author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Nominees, and readers favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her British husband and two children.

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