

A person wearing a dark suit and a white shirt is holding a large, glossy red heart with both hands. The heart is the central focus of the image.

Queen of Hearts

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Queen of Harts
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Twila Hart peered through the windshield at the swirling snow. She barely saw past the end of her car. The vehicle slowed to a crawl. Home wasn't that far. Of course, driving like this – she checked the speedometer – she might make it by morning.

Monday morning.

Wait. What was that? Twila focused on a growing shadow. Something that looked an awful lot like a... "Cow!" Panicked, scared to death of hitting the poor thing, Twila jerked the wheel, slammed on the brakes and screeched as the car spun past the cow and right off the road. Through a snowdrift and a fence. Backward.

The cow blinked at her through the glare of the headlights.

Twila tried the key. Nothing. Damn. Stupid Hereford. She turned off the headlights and hit the flashers. Without power it was going to get cold in a hurry. She glared at the cow. "I don't suppose you could get your master and have him bring a tractor?"

"Moo."

"You're a big help."

Snowplow or sheriff was bound to find her soon.

She blinked. Her cow had cloned itself. Two, no three Herefords surrounded her car. They came through the hole in the fence. "Oh, no you don't," she muttered. "Are you guys trying to become hamburgers? Get back inside."

There was no help for it. She struggled out of the car and went to shoo them back into their own field. Waving her arms didn't work. Whacking the cows on the butt with her wand didn't, either. God, she wished it was real. Finally she grabbed one by the nostrils and pulled – and it followed her. "I'll be damned. Mack was right. It works." She got all three away from the road, but it was freezing. Icy snowflakes clumped on her lashes and made her eyes water.

A distant barking sounded, and through the snow shone a headlight. A flash of black and white fur darted between her and the cows. The Border collie herded the cows away from the gap in the fence and presumably back toward home. She

shielded her eyes from the glare of the approaching headlight. ATV, with a heavily bundled rider.

"Are you all right?" a familiar rough baritone voice shouted.

Twila nodded. Who was he? "Car went off the road."

"I can see that. Nice gate you built, by the way." He approached to circle her car. "Man, that's not going anywhere without getting yanked back onto the road. I doubt anyone will come out before morning." He came back to her, and in the lights she recognized him. Mack Adams.

"M-Mr. Adams." Why'd it have to be *him*?

"Ms. Hart." He stared at the wand in her hand, the shining red satin skirt showing beneath her coat. "Do I want to know?"

Oh, God. She shook her head and dropped the wand in the snow.

"Well, hop on. Let's get you someplace where you can warm up and use a phone."

Twila had to hike her skirt up over her snow pants to straddle the seat. She wrapped her arms around his waist as he turned the machine around and headed for distant lights that grew into a respectable farmstead. The cattle milled about a large feeder. The Border collie sprawled on the front porch.

Mack cut the engine and helped her off. "Tell me you don't teach driver's ed."

She rolled her eyes. "No – fifth grade math and science."

"Thank God." He motioned toward the front door. "After you."

Inside the brightly lit kitchen was blissful warmth. The scent of a wood fire and coffee. Hardwood floors, granite counters and stainless appliances. The dog crowded past her as she pulled off her gloves and boots. She pushed back her hood, removed her hat and caught him staring with a weird look on his weathered face.

"What?" she asked.

"What'd you do – run away from the Miss Wisconsin pageant?"

Twila reached up. Oh, Lord. Her cheeks heated as her fingers brushed the tiara she'd forgotten to remove. She unwound her scarf and shrugged out of her

coat. His gaze skimmed the entire satin-and-lace costume with disbelief.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?"

"Uh, the queen of hearts." Why did he always get her tongue-tied? She sounded like an idiot. "School Valentine's Day party. I was on my way home when I swerved to avoid your cow and crashed."

He glared. "Your car broke my fence and let my cows out."

She fisted her hands on her hips. "I didn't go through your fence – I went over it. You need to fix that if you don't want your cows tangoing with cars."

"Sorry." Mack shrugged out of his own coat and reached to take hers. "Bathroom's through there if you want to take those snow pants off."

Twila shut the door behind her and yanked off the bulky pants and the tiara. Her hair was a tangled nightmare, already half down, so she helped it the rest of the way. Of all the knights in shining armor, it had to be Mack Adams. High-school hero worship had turned into a major case of unrequited lust. She'd run into him a few times and been rendered speechless every time. Once at the vet's, he'd eyed her classroom guinea pigs with a "you've got to be kidding" look in his hazel-green eyes. She could get lost in those eyes.

He thought her a fluffy city girl.

She thought the cutest boy in Tessera had grown into the hottest man she'd ever seen.

And now she'd just confirmed his opinion that she was an idiot as well as a bad driver. This day just got better and better. Time to face the music. She could take any amount of ridicule for a hot cup of coffee and a working phone.

"Here." He traded her a cup of cream-laced coffee for the pants. "Sugar's on the table."

He turned to leave the room, and she found herself staring at his broad back...and his ass. Plunking the mug on the table, she dropped into a chair with a groan and buried her face in her arms.

"Hey." A large warm hand touched her shoulder. "I reported your car to the sheriff's office. Here's the phone if you want to call someone."

"Thanks." She took a sip of the coffee and dialed her best friend's number. "Hey, it's me. I slid off the road but I'm okay."

"You're calling from Mack Adams' phone?" Cheryl's tone was envious. "Do you need me to come get you?"

Hell, yes. "God, no. Your car's worse than mine." Twila shuddered and took another sip of coffee. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay, if you're sure. Bye."

She turned to see Mack standing in the doorway. "Can I get a ride home?"

"Sweetheart, I can't exactly call you a cab. I'm not going out in that mess – I've got a cow calving tonight." He crossed his arms, a stubborn set to his jaw.

"Can't I just wait at the end of the driveway for the snowplow to come by?"

"And do what – stick your thumb out and hitch a ride on the hood all the way to your apartment?" he scoffed. "I'll pull your car out of the ditch tomorrow. In daylight. With a tractor. Then you can drive your own self home."

Tomorrow? What about tonight? Twila's eyes grew big. "A cow's having a baby in this storm?"

"Give me a little credit, sweetheart – she's safe and warm in the barn. But God help us tonight, 'cause there's no getting a vet out here if we run into problems." He shrugged into his coat as he spoke. "I'm going out to check on her now. Stay here."

"Can I come with you?"

He eyed her costume and stockings with a snort. "You're not dressed for the barn."

"It was a party."

"You should have cancelled it."

"Well the storm wasn't that bad when we started. You wouldn't want to disappoint the kids."

"Yeah, well, it's that bad now," he retorted. "Better disappointed than sitting in a ditch dressed like an Alice in Wonderland character."

Her jaw dropped, but pithy comebacks escaped her as he and the dog

disappeared out the door. Snowed in with Mack Adams on Valentine's Day. Night. No clothes. No clean underwear. Not even a toothbrush. Just her luck.

She freshened her coffee and wandered into the living room. A deer head hung over the mantle of the stone fireplace. Locked gun rack in the corner. Rustic furniture, log-cabin look offset by a big screen TV and satellite paraphernalia. No reception in this weather, though. There was a DVD player. She checked his movie collection. Action, WWII, Westerns, all the James Bonds. Huh – the original Doctor Who. She snooped through his book shelf. Mysteries, science fiction, alternate histories. Joseph Campbell – and the Kalevala. She grabbed the Kalevala, curled up on a chair and turned to her favorite poem.

"Comfortable?" Mack's tone was dry, but he didn't sound angry. The dog flopped before the hearth, panting.

She jumped, and her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry, I..."

He motioned her to stay. "Which one were you reading?"

"The Bee Charms. I don't know anyone else who's read them."

"Well, now you do. I like Jack Frost." He sat down in the chair across from her. "Appropriate tonight, don't you think?"

"How's the cow?"

"It'll be a while yet." Mack's gaze slid over every inch of her costume. It felt like a physical caress. "I really have to find you something else to wear. You can't go around in that all night. It doesn't look very comfortable."

"It's not," she confessed. The lace itched like crazy. "Do you have a pair of sweats?"

His lips quirked. "Be right back."

Twila watched him go. God, he had a fine ass. And she was going to spend the night in his clothes. Life had such a sense of irony.

He returned with Packer sweats and held them out to her. "These should work if you roll them up." He eyed her dress again. "Need help with that zipper?"

She swallowed as she rose, clutching the clothes. "Umm, yeah."

"Relax, teach," he drawled, amusement obvious. "I'll even close my eyes."

Twila shivered as he moved behind her. She felt his body's warmth before he even touched her with his hands. Was it her imagination or did he take his own sweet time?

"There you go," he whispered in her ear. "Anything else I can help you with?"

Heart pounding, she turned to find him staring down at her. Up close, those smoldering eyes stole her breath. "I-I got it, thanks." She escaped to the bathroom. The dress pooled in a heap at her feet, and the stockings followed. She pulled on Mack's clothes and tried not to think about them covering every heated inch of that hard male body.

Too late.

She stared into the full-length mirror on the back of the door and laughed. They all but swallowed her up. Rolling up the legs and sleeves didn't help – she looked like a Packer. Or one of those Herefords. Bulky. Even the siren-red painted toenails didn't soften the image.

Total non-man-bait.

She sighed and opened the door.

Mack turned from the coffee pot, and his lips twitched.

"Don't you dare laugh," she ordered. "At least it's less frothy – and warm."

"I wasn't going to laugh." His gaze swept her from tangled dark hair to red toenails and back. "Damned if the thought of you in my clothes isn't just a little bit hot. Weird, huh? I made some more coffee. You want something to eat? It's going to be a long night."

"I'm fine, thanks." Twila decided to ignore the hot comment. No good would come following that train of thought. They barely knew each other.

"I'll check on Ma in an hour. You play cribbage?"

Cribbage seemed harmless enough. Twila sat down at the table and Mack set out the board and pegs. "Shuffle," Mack said. "You deal."

Twila tried to focus on the game, but the motion of his hands kept distracting her. Such strong, capable hands. She still felt them sliding down her back, and shivered.

"You still cold?" he asked.

She shook her head.

The stove dinged. "Time to go back out there. Come on," Mack invited. He stood up and headed for the entryway. There he handed Twila a pair of thick wool socks and pointed to her things hanging on pegs on the wall. "There's an extra pair of boots, too. Wear everything. It's brutal out."

She bundled up to her eyeballs and followed him and the dog out into storm. Even with all the layers, the wind stole her breath, and she was gasping when they entered the barn. Mack turned on extra lights and headed to a corner stall.

"I didn't think you kept cows in stalls," Twila commented.

"I don't," he replied. "But I've got a couple for birthing so the new moms don't have to worry about nosy neighbors right away."

Ma didn't look too worried. She lay in the straw chewing her cud. Mack ran his hand along her side. Twila watched the cow's muscles ripple at his touch.

"You always were in a hurry, Ma." He turned to Twila. "We're not going back to the house for a while."

"You mean she's in labor? Now?" Twila cast Ma a doubtful glance. "She doesn't look like she's suffering. I thought she'd be more restless or something."

Mack snorted. "She's an old pro at this. Cows tend to give birth quick and quiet. Don't want to draw predators. Come on. Let's get ready." He led the way to a utility room and they changed into clean coveralls. Then he grabbed two buckets. "Grab a stack of towels and that med kit." He was already filling the buckets with hot water and washing his hands. "If you're squeamish you can wait in here."

"I've done too much playground duty to let a little blood throw me," Twila retorted, washing her own hands.

"Uh-huh." Mack dried his hands and grabbed a pair of long latex gloves. "Come on."

Ma was breathing heavier. Twila watched Mack work with a sense of wonder. The love he had for his animals was evident in his soothing voice and gentle hands as he helped the new calf into the world. It was over quicker than she would have

thought. Within minutes Mack was tearing the sac and cutting the cord. The new little Hereford shook its head and blinked enormous brown eyes at Twila. Ma scooted around and began licking her new baby.

"That never gets old," Mack stripped off the gloves as they both watched the little one struggle to all fours.

"She's a miracle," Twila whispered. "And I would have missed it. Was worth crashing my car. You have to name her Valentyna, of course."

Mack ran a hand through his hair. "Umm, Twila, not a good idea to name her. Need I remind you what we raise Herefords for?"

She whirled on him. "Mack Adams, you are *not* eating my calf!"

"*Your* calf?" Mack's jaw dropped. "I don't recall selling her to you."

"Well, you can keep her for breeding then. But if you sell her, you sell her to me! You can't eat Valentyna after this! That's just wrong."

"All right, I promise if I sell her you get first dibs." He frowned. "Happy now?"

"Yes!" She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

They both froze.

"Damn, if I knew that'd be your reaction I'd have sold you a calf years ago." Mack grinned. "Almost makes up for the fence."

"You mean the fence that was already broke when I got here?" Twila demanded. Her voice sounded thin and breathless even to her ears.

"That's the one." His gaze dropped to her lips. "You know, now that Ma and Valentyna are settled, I can think of more comfortable places to continue this discussion. Let's get cleaned up here." When everything was spotless and they were bundled back up into their coats, Twila led the way back into the house.

She was more than glad for a cup of coffee now. "Geeze, it's cold."

Mack stirred the embers into a blazing fire again. "Come on over here. This'll warm you up."

Him or the fireplace? She dropped to the floor and leaned against the couch. Not surprisingly, Mack sat next to her.

"Never expected the queen of hearts to drop into my lap tonight," he said.

"Never expected to be dropping," she quipped. "But if I had to crash, I'm glad it was here. I wouldn't have missed Valentyna for anything."

"Not even to be safe and warm at home with those guinea pigs?"

She elbowed him. "Hey! I like guinea pigs."

Mack glanced over at her, and her breath caught in her throat as his gaze caressed every inch of her body. "I was right." His voice dropped to a low growl. "There's something incredibly sexy about you wearing my clothes."

"My knight on a shining ATV," she teased.

"You know, after tonight I'll have to take you out. Women who like animals, aren't squeamish and have read the Kalevala are a pretty rare combination."

"Ha ha." Twila took a sip of coffee to steady her shaking hands.

"Was that a yes or a no?"

He was serious. Twila froze. "I'm thinking it over," she whispered.

Mack took her cup and set it aside. "Then let's see if I can convince you." Cradling her head in one hand, he brushed her lips with his. A slow, sensuous slide. His mouth moved over hers, coaxing her response.

She turned to lay her hands on his shoulders, and tilted her head to kiss him back. A tingling started that shimmered from her lips throughout her body. Even her fingertips felt the shock of that kiss, and tightened on his shirt. When he stroked his tongue across her lower lip, she opened to him, and lost herself in the glow of Mack's kiss.

"Still thinking about it?" Mack voice was rough and uneven.

The thought that she could affect him so, with just a kiss, thrilled her in a deep, secret part she'd never known existed. He brought her face to face with a woman she'd never met. Twila wondered if she dared release her. She dragged her eyes open to meet the heat of his gaze, and swallowed hard. "You're awfully convincing."

"Good." He ran a hand through her hair, and she leaned into his touch. "I have a feeling this could be quite an adventure."

As his lips captured hers once again, Twila couldn't agree more.

Biography

Renee Wildes lives & writes in central WI. Married w/2 kids, 2 horses & a cat. I love horseback riding, reading fantasy books, watching the PBR (esp. Wiley Peterson!), & scrapbooking. I am a serious writing-book junkie, and a major Joseph Campbell & Tolkien groupie.

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