

A Man for Lacie A. J. Cove

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Shelby slid one hand up along his hard thigh, savoring the feel of the bunched muscles, tensed beneath her finger tips. She cast a glance up to gauge Tor's reaction, pleased to find him with his head thrown back and eyes closed, enjoying her touch. When she reached...

"Lacie Liu!"

Lacie jumped, sending the romance novel she'd been drooling over flying through the air and landing haphazardly atop the foot thick world encyclopedia. She grimaced, thinking the musty tome hadn't seen so much action in years.

She scrambled over to retrieve her book and return it to its rightful place—between several other seldom used reference books—until she could finish reading the story that had her practically panting with jealousy. She wished it were herself who was having an affair with a man. It had been too long.

With a sigh, she straightened her wool skirt, re-tucked her blouse and went in search of her boss. His bellow was ridiculously loud for a library. Soon she spotted him bent over the copier and pounding buttons, while a patron stood impatiently nearby.

"Mr. Chan, may I help you?" she whispered, with a soft touch to his arm.

He turned and the scowl marring his aged features cleared, "Oh, there you are Lacie. I can't get this thing working. I know you can work your magic on it." He took her hand, dragging her forward to the machine. The gold dragon ring on his finger bit painfully into her soft skin.

"I'll see what I can do." In seconds, she had the copier working and her patron happy. When she turned, Mr. Chan was waving to her from his office to come inside.

Lacie sighed. She took her time crossing the ten or fifteen feet to his door. He had no doubt found another old man, probably born as far back as the Ming Dynasty, to take her out on a date. He meant well, but she hadn't reached the point of desperation to take on a man old enough to be her great grandfather.

"Mr. Chan..." she began when she reached him.

"No, no. Lacie, come inside." He shuffled her ahead of him and closed the door, with a self-satisfied grin across his face. "You'll never guess what I have to tell you."

Was he joking? "Mr. Chan, if it's another blind date, really I can't accept. I can find someone on my own. Besides, I've signed up for classes to get my advanced degree and—"

Heavy, liver-spotted hands pounded her shoulder, "Nonsense, Lacie. You need my help, being so young and without your parents. I have to look after you."

She clasped her hands in front of her and waited. There was no use arguing with the man. He did care for her as a father would his daughter. He could be a little meddlesome and sometimes too clingy. But Mr. Chan had been there when she lost her father last year. He'd helped her to make all of the arrangements and had given her as much paid time off as she needed until she was fully recovered from her loss. It was these memories and others that continued to guilt her into accepting the parade of men he brought to her. If only *one* could be under thirty-five for a change.

"You'll like Jack. He's young and he's got a good job too."

Her ears perked up, "Young?"

He nodded, pulling her to a seat beside his oversized desk. "Yes, only forty-nine. He owns a house and is looking for a wife."

She winced. Did the man remember that she was twenty-eight? She'd reminded him time and again, yet he still didn't understand. She wanted someone like the hero in the romance novel she was reading. Tor was thirty-two, had long blond hair, an impossible physique and his piercing green eyes had made Shelby quiver with desire from the moment she laid eyes on him. Oh, why couldn't *Lacie* have that?

"Don't worry your head about anything, Lacie. I've made all of the arrangements. I'm letting you off at four-thirty. That gives you plenty of time to get home, clean up and be ready by eight."

Unable to find suitable words to express her disbelief, she shoved her glasses higher on her face and stood to return to re-shelving books. She was sure tonight would be another fiasco.

Lacie unlocked the double doors leading into the library and eased on tiptoe down the long marble hallway to the adult fiction room. Unfortunately, Mr. Chan's office was directly across from the door into that room, so she crouched low, hoping he wouldn't look up from his desk.

With a sigh of relief, she flattened herself against the wall just inside the room and shoved a lock of hair out of her face, flinching when a strand caught in her glasses. After she'd calmed herself somewhat, she strolled along to the miniscule office at the end of a row of books and ducked in there. If she could get settled quickly, there just might be enough minutes to read before the library opened.

Shelby was waiting just where she'd propped her, and Lacie flipped quickly to the dogeared page she'd left off on. When she reached the edge of his shorts, she slid her hand beneath the thin cotton to explore further. Even before she attained her prize, his shaft jumped to life, beckoning her exploration...

"Lacie? Are you here yet?"

Lacie strangled a scream of annoyance and tucked Shelby and Tor away for later. She stepped out from her alcove at the end of a row and met him half way. "Good morning, Mr. Chan."

His grin was blinding. "Well? How did it go? You will see him again, yes?" She gritted her teeth at his incessant nodding, wishing he'd go back to his office and stay out of her love life.

"It's no use, Mr. Chan. I don't think there is anyone you can set me up with that will be the one. I give up." Maybe he would get the hint. "I'm not dating anymore at all." *Please get the hint*.

The grinning and nodding continued. "Don't worry, Lacie. He will come."

She doubted it. Somehow she extricated herself from her boss and returned to her duties. Several hours later, with students lining every row, chatting a little too loudly despite warnings, Lacie ducked inside the restroom to get a bit of reading done. She locked herself inside the stall, propped her feet on the small feminine disposal cabinet on one wall, and flipped open her book again.

"Lacieeeeee."

She bolted upright, suddenly realizing she'd been asleep. The restroom was in almost total darkness, except for the slight moonlight that managed to eek through the frosted glass window. Lacie stretched her legs and retrieved the book which had fallen to the floor, just as he called again.

"Lacieeeeee."

Her heartbeat leapt to an erratic pace. Whoever was calling was not Mr. Chan. And with a quick glance at her watch, it shouldn't be one of the patrons either. Yet, the deep voice was strangely alluring. It called to something inside her, charming her to come to him.

She eased open the door and peaked out into the hall. No light emanated from Mr. Chan's office, and as far as she could tell, nowhere else either. She slipped her pumps from her feet and padded softly along the hall toward the main room. As she grew closer,

an eerie blue smoke floated from the opening, turning toward her as if it were alive and sought her.

She froze in place, but he immediately called again. Her feet followed, though her mind said run. The smoke receded the moment she reached the doorway. Each of the rows of books was empty of anyone. She searched each one twice and then paused to listen. Within seconds, she heard him walking...or something walking. The steps were heavy, accompanied by a low growl she couldn't—or wouldn't—identify.

When she didn't think she could stand another moment waiting for it to reach her, the thing turned into the aisle where she stood. A large, black panther stood between her and the exit. She choked back a scream and stepped backward to press herself against the shelves behind her.

He advanced forward, almost in slow motion. The muscles rippled with controlled power. The claws were extended, snagging repeatedly in the carpet, but he kept coming closer. He finally stopped in front of her, watching her with eyes as black as his coat.

And then, incredibly, it stood on hind legs. Its genetic makeup changed, mutating until it became a man—the one who'd called her, she was sure. His skin was a slate blue, his eyes goldenrod and his hair, reaching to his buttocks and hanging free around his shoulders, a white blond.

He stood completely naked before her. Not a stitch of material covered the raw muscle, from wide shoulders to molded thighs and calves. He stepped still closer to her, until Lacie's eyes widened at the feel of his erection against her stomach.

She forced a swallow and tilted her head back to peer into his face. "Who are you?"

A blue finger traced the curve of her brow and caressed her lips. "I am whoever you want me to be, Lacie."

"Oh." She trembled at the inflection in his voice, an accent similar to the British. She wondered if it was affected for her benefit. "What do you mean you are whatever I want?" She shook her head. "I must be still asleep in the restroom."

He chuckled, glanced over his shoulder and then pinned her with his gaze again. "You look like you're here in this book room to me. What do you want? I will give it to you."

What *did* she want? If this was a dream, what would she want from this being, who could change from beast to man? He was so beautiful, so perfect in every way. Though his skin was blue, it fit with his persona. She was intrigued, and now that she was becoming more convinced that this was only a dream, her boldness increased. He couldn't hurt her if he was a figment.

She lifted a hand to trace the symbols around his neck and eyed the matching ones around each of his wrists. "What are these?"

He pulled her hand away, his expression closing. "They are not important. What do you want, Lacie?"

She compressed her lips, "I want to know what these symbols are."

He answered immediately this time, "They mean that I am a slave."

She gasped.

He grinned, "I am a slave to your desires, Lacie." He leaned forward and softly kissed her lips, before whispering in her ear. "Let me show you how I can please you."

How could she deny such a request? She'd been waiting so long for a man to touch her, to kiss her. His feather touch had sent thrills racing over her skin. If this were for only a few moments of slumber in a restroom stall, it was worth it. He felt more real than Tor, whom she'd imagined for days now. She would follow this through.

"You know my name. What is your name?"

He hesitated in the act of leading her along the aisle. "Would you like me to call myself Tor?"

She gasped. He'd read her mind? Or saw the book? "How?" He didn't answer, but waited for her decision. No, she didn't want Shelby's man now. She wanted her own. She wanted his real name. "What's your real name? I *wish* to know your real name."

He turned back to face her and pulled her into his arms. She didn't resist. His touch, his body was doing things to hers that she'd long given up hope of feeling again. He tilted up her chin, the warm breath of his mouth tickling her lips.

"You may call me Genie, if you must have a name." He lifted her in his arms and carried her around the edge of the bookshelf into an open area, suddenly filled with lit candles casting a soft glow on silken comforters, spread out over the floor.

He deposited her in the middle of the luxury and reclined at her side, a look of inquiry on his handsome face. He must be waiting for her request, she thought. He was being too polite. She considered whether he really could live up to her secret desires.

She sat up and twisted to face him, placing a hand boldly on his bare chest and sliding her fingertips lower. "I'm not so confident that you *can* please me, Genie. Sure, you've got the equipment, but..."

His brows shot up and the golden eyes darkened. "Then by all means, let me prove myself."

A feral groan vibrated in his throat as Genie positioned himself above Lacie and began unbuttoning her high-necked blouse. While he worked, he repeatedly placed hot kisses upon her lips. It took little encouragement from him before she was easing her way into his mouth to have her own taste and suck gently on his tongue.

Suddenly, she couldn't wait any longer. She tore at the remaining buttons on her blouse and hiked up her skirt, all while exploring his molded frame with starving fingertips. His own hands hooked her panties and dragged them downward.

Her body fired up as if his touch had added lighter fluid to her lust. She freed herself of the last of her clothing and began to kiss his warm skin in places she'd never imagined she'd be so bold to do—and with a complete stranger, a genie.

While their kisses became more frantic, his fingers slid down over her to pierce her moist center and make her writhe with need. She pulled back from his mouth to enjoy the full force of his strokes, which were sending her on a direct flight to climax. Instead of letting her reach it, he removed his fingers and stared down into her eyes when she frowned in disappointment.

"Don't stop," she begged.

He grinned and straightened her body beneath him, bracing his weigh on one knee. "Surely you want something better than that, Lacie."

Her eyes widened. His shaft hung long and stiff, less than an inch above her mound. Vibrations of aching desire shattered her equilibrium as she resisted pleading for him to enter her. She wanted it so badly she could weep for it, but struggled for control. The moment the tip made a slow entry, she lost the last shreds of command and shoved her hips higher, until he filled her to the hilt.

She hugged him close, closed her eyes and drowned in his loving. The sensations that rippled over her body were all at once more than just lust. She was connecting with him on a physical and emotional level. As he drove deeper and faster, she groaned her response to a need that had been unfulfilled for years.

When the climax came, it was in perfect synch to his, their bodies merging and loathe for the pleasure to end so soon. She gripped him tighter, wrapping her legs around him to keep him inside her.

"Are you too tired for more?" He met and held her gaze, seemingly as reluctant as she was to let him go.

She shook her head, "No. I don't think I could stand it if we stopped now."

"That's what I was hoping to hear. Now, let me show you a few other things I can do to please you."

The slam of the front door, followed by the echoing jingle of keys, woke Lacie from her deep sleep. She sat up, stretching the crick in her back and shaking out the tingles from her arm, which she'd been laying on. She glanced around the dimly lit room, but there was no evidence of last night's activities. Even sniffing the air, there was no scent of burnt candles.

So it *had* been a dream. But shouldn't she have wakened in the bathroom? She shook her head to clear away the last of the sleepy fog. It didn't matter. Last night with Genie had been incredible. The only thing that could make it better, she thought as she eased out of her chair and tipped to her office, was if she could get an instant replay. Spending another night in Genie's arms would be perfect.

A few hours later, Mr. Chan leaned negligently in Lacie's office doorway, a look of confusion crinkling his forehead. "Lacie? You are singing? But you hate your singing voice."

She giggled, "I'm not actually singing, Mr. Chan. Humming."

"And you're so happy because?"

She choked on the sip of coffee she'd just taken and straightened her features. Looking at the elderly man who'd been her supervisor—her mentor—for the last eleven years, she was not ready to tell him of the passionate sex she'd had last night. For that matter, she didn't want to share how she was unable to get Genie out of her mind. His kisses, his touch had set her ablaze and she still hadn't been able to put the fire out. She wanted him again and again. But how could she get him back?

Secretly, when she was on her break earlier, she'd shut herself inside the bathroom to see if calling out to him would work. It hadn't. His call to her the night before must have been some type of djinn magic. It had bypassed her mind, to appeal to her craving directly for male companionship, and she'd answered the call without much hesitation.

"Lacie?"

She snapped out her reverie to return her attention to her boss. "Oh, Mr. Chan. No, I'm just having a good day today. The kids are behaving themselves somewhat and it is the weekend." She hoped he'd believe her weak excuse and let the matter drop.

He leaned toward her, squinting. "I don't know Lacie. Seems like those big brown eyes were dancing with something more than teenagers keeping the noise down. Did you have a second date with Jack?"

A shudder rippled over her. "Um. No, sir. I am just happy today. No reason." He had to be satisfied with that answer because wasn't admitting anything else.

He watched her a moment longer before nodding and turning toward the door. With his hand on the jiggling knob, broken for a month now, he turned back and she tried to look as indifferent as possible.

"One more thing."

She raised her brows. "Sir?"

"I suggest you see the fellow again who has made you this happy, because obviously I don't know the kind of man you like." With that, he winked and left.

She slumped back against her chair. He hadn't been fooled for a moment. Mr. Chan might be nearing...What?...Seventy or older? But he recognized a woman who'd been well-loved. She giggled quietly, only slightly embarrassed.

"I do want to see you again, Genie. Please." She whispered.

Lacie took a step higher on the ladder she balanced on and reached further to the right to place a book on the highest shelf. Before it slid into place, she lost control and it tumbled down toward the floor. She flinched, waiting for the loud thump as it impacted with the floor, but no sound came. She glanced down to find it balanced evenly in the hand of her genie lover.

She gasped, "Genie, you're back. I..." With a deep breath, she calmed herself. He didn't need to know how she'd longed to be in his arms again. Well not until she knew this was more than a genie granting a young woman's wish. Did he feel as connected to her as she felt for him? "You're back so soon."

Even white teeth flashed briefly in the dim light, "Odd, I had the distinct impression that you called to me, Lacie."

She blushed. So he *had* heard her. Still she wasn't ready to admit it. "I may have inadvertently."

He placed the book on a lower shelf and turned to walk away, his voice deepening as he strode and changed to the panther again. "Well, since you do not have need of me, I will leave you to your work."

"No!" She scrambled down the ladder and ran after him. The panther's large paws covered the floor leading to the exit in much less time than Lacie took to get to the end of the aisle. "I mean. Surely you can stay a little while longer, Genie? You've come all this way." She had no idea how far he'd come or where he lived. She knew nothing about him beyond what they'd shared the night before.

He stopped and growled over his shoulder at her. Something told her he was annoyed that she asked him to stay. It suddenly occurred to her that he didn't want to be with her tonight. The realization hurt.

With that thought, he evaporated in an instant and then re-appeared in front of her in human form. She trembled and swayed against him when his hands came up gently along her arms to encircle her in his embrace. Their lips met seconds later, Lacie wanting nothing more than to savor the sweetness of his kiss and breath in his rugged scent, for the next few hours.

Too soon, he broke the connection, "Lacie, you are beautiful and desirable. Everything in me cries out for your touch, as if we never shared last night and I am still starving for my mate."

She gasped. His mate?

"But, I'm asking you to tell me no tonight." He dropped his hands to his sides and stepped back.

She was confused. What did he mean, tell him no? Why would she do that? She didn't want to deny what they both wanted. They were consenting adults. There was no reason to resist what their bodies, possibly even their hearts, were telling them to do.

She shook her head and reached to pull him back toward her, "I'm not telling you no. I won't. I wish for—"

"No! You mustn't wish it, Lacie. Please." He was almost begging. His unusual eyes were dark with concern, fear.

"I...I don't understand, Genie. If you want me just as I want you, there can be no problem. We could make love just like last night." She searched her mind for some reason to explain his hesitation. "If you're worried I'll become too attached and—"

"That is not it, Lacie. I cannot explain. I'm just asking you do to this for me. Tell me you don't want me."

She couldn't do it. That would mean he'd leave and she wasn't willing to let him go. She didn't know if her call would be strong enough for him to come again. What if it was a matter of a limited amount of wishes as in fairy tales? What would she do then? Feeling

a heartache steal over her, she began to consider that it would have been less painful to accept one of the old men Mr. Chan set her up with. Anything was better than this.

"I can't let you go," she whispered. "I just can't."

Before he could respond, a crackling sound like lightening filled the room and thick black smoke spread across the room toward them. Lacie jumped and screamed. If this was another genie, with its dramatic entrance, she didn't want to know. Accompanying him was the unmistakable presence of evil.

An outline of a man appeared in the smoke, and Genie stepped in front of her to block her view. She peered around him, trying to make out this new person.

"She doesn't want me, master," Genie lied. "I've tried to convince her in the time allotted to me."

Lacie gaped. Master? This was the one who'd enslaved Genie? In spite of her fear, she wanted to know what he looked like and find out if there was any way she could free Genie. No one deserved servitude, least of all her lover.

"Lies!" came the harsh bellow. "I listened to you. You disobeyed me and you'll suffer the consequences."

The man stepping from the smoke screen was dressed in a floor length black robe, accented by jade silk at the collar and wrists. The ornate amulet hanging about his neck, glowed red, reflecting in his hate-filled eyes and bouncing off the gold of the dragon ring on his left hand. Though his face was still blocked somewhat from the smoke, she knew who it was at once.

Eleven years she'd known Mr. Chan. He'd been all that she could have wanted in a surrogate father, except for the blind dates he'd set up for her. But she'd always believed he meant well. Never could she have imagined he held the power that was now emanating from his being.

The red glow expanded menacingly, beginning at the amulet and spreading out over the master's body. Within seconds a beam of lightening shot out from his fingertips to strike Genie's chest so hard, it lifted him from his feet and sent him crashing against the wall.

She screamed and ran to Genie, sobbing at the sight of the burn on his chest. "Genie, please. Do something. You have powers," she begged.

He shook his head and held up his wrists. The symbols snaking his wrists and throat were glowing and pulsating. "He owns me. I cannot fight against him or I will die."

"There must be a way." She bent to help him to his feet, glancing back over her shoulder. "What does he want?"

Genie winced in pain, causing an echoing pain to race through her own being. When he was on his feet, he pulled free from her hold and shoved her behind him.

"He wants you. He has always wanted you."

For the second time, she was at a loss for words. That was impossible. It was sick, disgusting. "What do you mean?"

He sighed wearily, still eyeing his master, and then glanced down at her. "He's a warlock. He wants to own your soul, Lacie, just as he owns mine. He can gain it only with our mating. It's why I asked you to deny me tonight." He caressed her cheek for an instant. "I know you felt it too last night, our connection. It would allow his power to take control of you, and unfortunately, I had to obey his command to take you again. But I couldn't do it, if you said no."

She saw the disillusionment clouding his eyes and wondered if he had given up, accepting what he saw as the only way out of obeying Mr. Chan. Lacie wasn't ready to give up her lover so quickly. She'd spent years alone—lonely—for someone to share her time with. In spite of who he was, she felt sure Genie was that someone.

She slipped around Genie's blocking form and faced her new enemy. "Mr. Chan, I don't understand why you're doing this. You've been like a father—"

He ignored her as if she hadn't spoken, "Obey me. Take her now." His eyes bore into Genie and Lacie trembled, half grateful he hadn't turned his attention upon her. "Take her!"

Her eyes widened as Genie turned toward her, one hand caressing her cheek again and sorrow in his eyes. "Lacie," he choked. "I've been alone so long. You cannot imagine."

She nodded, "I can."

"Remember."

Remember what? She was about to ask him when the warlock started up his attack again. The ball of fiery lightening hurtled toward Genie and this time, she didn't think, but dove in front of him.

"No!" Before she could plant her feet and brace for the blow that would probably kill her, Genie dissolved and reappeared ahead of her. His answering burst of power blocked the attack and sent it thundering back.

In the same instant the impact took the life out of the man, its effect was mirrored on Genie. He collapsed to the floor and she followed him down, grasping him with desperate hands that willed him to stay alive.

"Genie," she sobbed. "You can't die. Oh God, please Genie don't die." She whimpered with her trembling lips pressed against his. The warmth faded unnaturally fast from his body and she sensed her ability to stay conscious slipping, in the wake of this trauma. Darkness descended upon her and she gave in to it without a fight.

"Ma'am, are you ok?"

Lacie flinched and struggled to rise.

"Hold on, let me help you." It was a police officer leaning over her, where she lay on the floor still.

She glanced around her for Genie. His body was gone. Had they taken him away? She dared not ask for fear they'd think she was crazy. Maybe she was and she'd imagined the whole thing.

With the help of the officer's steady hold, she rose to trembling legs, squinting at the early morning light beaming in from the high windows. She gazed around the room, noting the five or six other policemen, two standing over a covered form near the door. The blood drained so quickly from her head, she swayed.

"Ms. Liu?"

She turned to a man who was obviously the detective on the case. "What's happened?" It was all she could muster. Maybe this nightmare had been just that, a dream. Maybe she hadn't lost a man she thought she could fall in love with.

"Briefly, Ms. Liu, your boss" he indicated with a point of his chin toward the body, "Mr. Chin, may have been involved in the recent theft of some very valuable artifacts."

She gasped, "Why do you think that?"

He held up the amulet, now encased in a plastic bag. "This little item was lifted from a museum not far from here. He was wearing it. Is there anything you can tell me about this, Ms. Liu?"

Confusion clouded her mind. First Mr. Chan was a warlock, now he was a thief? And how many of those eleven years had he lusted for control of her? The deliberate bad dates were explained, but the rest was a mystery. "I don't know anything about it." She raised a hand to the back of her head, a lump rising. Possibly she'd hit her head when she fell.

He nodded, answering her unspoken thoughts, "Our theory is you surprised him when he was trying to stash his items. He knocked you over the head and then another thief tried to get an easy score, maybe followed him here and killed him."

If they wanted to believe that, she'd let them. She had no better explanation, at least, not one they'd believe. "May I go home? I'm not feeling well."

He nodded again, "Sure. I'll be contacting you later for a statement, though I suggest you see a doctor about your head. Make sure everything is ok."

Lacie agreed and made her way slowly toward the exit. She avoided looking down at Mr. Chan as she passed by, sorrow for her loss and disillusionment rising within her. A moment later, she stepped out into the street, the sun sending shards of pain racing across her brain.

She raised a hand to shade her eyes and glanced up and down the street, struggling to make the clouds dissipate from her thoughts and emotions. If it wasn't true, the pain was a cruel twist of her active imagination. Tears blurred her vision as she stepped toward the curb.

Genie.

Suddenly, a bright red Lamborghini roared down the street and stopped so close to her, she had to leap backward to keep from being run down. An annoyed retort rose to her lips before dying away as quickly as it came. The tall, chiseled and tanned man who stepped from the vehicle, dressed in an all white suit and very dark sunglasses, flashed equally white teeth at her. As he raised a hand to remove his glasses, her stunned gaze fell on the tiny tattoo on his otherwise smooth bare wrist. It read, "Ex-Genie."

She gaped as he moved around the car and stood just inches from her, leaning against the car. "Well?" His rumbling voice was as familiar as her own.

Needing no other encouragement, she toppled into his arms with a laugh of delight. Genie was not dead after all, but how? "How?" she choked out over her laughter. "And where did you get the money for this car, Genie?"

His arms encircled her tightly and lifted her from her feet for a long kiss before setting her down again. "Apparently, giving one's life for a fair maiden is a good thing, he grinned.

"But—"

"Come, I'll tell you all about my illustrious family history and my real name after."

"After what?"

His gaze dropped down over her figure, taking her in from head to toe, as he replaced his glasses, and Lacie had no further need of explanation. At least...not today.

THE END

Author Bio

My mother tells me I opened books from the age of four and made up what I thought the story was about, though I couldn't read yet. From that time, I guess, I have been in love with books and reading.

After a period of reading Harlequin romances at the age of thirteen, I realized I wanted to be a writer. By eighteen, I wrote short stories, and in a fit of inspiration, typed out two full length novels within a matter of weeks. I have no idea if any of it was good. My sister says so, but she happens to love me, so who knows. Anyway, the first magazine I sent my short story to rejected it and being overly sensitive I gave up writing for the next nineteen years.

Now that I'm thirty seven, I'm getting back out there. My love of English has led me to pursue a degree in English and apparently I can weave a decent tale.

I enjoy writing most types of romance, including fantasy, science fiction, multi racial, paranormal and contemporary. Please visit my site at www.ajcove.com and drop me an email. I enjoy hearing from my readers.

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If Only... by Elissa Kyle

Jackson watched Sarina and Brant walk away, not quite believing she left for good. He stood there for long minutes, staring down the long corridor, waiting to see her appear once more. She'd turn around, run to him and say she was wrong, she really did love him and wanted to be with him forever. He waited and waited, his hopes rising as he heard the elevator bell. Those hopes crashed when he saw an elderly couple emerge, making their way to their room. Slowly, he sank to the floor, feeling totally numb. He finally made the right decision and it was too late. Sarina didn't love him anymore. That thought nearly stopped his heart. *She* was his heart. How was he supposed to go on with out her?

A long time passed before he found the strength to get up. Taking the elevator, he got off on the third floor and went to his room. He peeled off his suit and threw on a pair of shorts. Making his way over to the bar in the corner, he took out a bottle of Scotch. He walked out on the hotel balcony, taking a large swig from the bottle. All he wanted to do was get royally smashed.

He looked down at the beach, watching the waves roll in. There was a strong breeze and the water seemed a little choppy. But, it was still a beautiful sight. Sarina loved the beach. They had spent many hours walking along the sand, picking out seashells and building sand castles, back at home. Time he wanted back.

"Look at this one, Jackson," Sarina exclaimed, holding out her hand and showing him a beautiful coiled reddish striped seashell with delicate edges. "Isn't it beautiful? I'm taking it home to add to my collection."

Putting it up to her ear, she could hear the surf roar and her eyes lit up with excitement. "I love that. You have to hear this." Lifting it up to his ear, her hand brushed his face and his eyes locked onto hers as electric currents jumped between them. His hand rose slowly, covering hers and the softness of her skin made his heart skip a beat.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. "Do you even know what you do to me?"

"The same thing you do to me," she managed, breathless at his touch. Watching as his head lowered, her eyes drifted shut as their lips met gently.

A groan tore from within him as he pulled her close, deepening the kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. The feel of her was stealing his sanity and he wanted more than anything to take her right here on the warm sand and make love to her all night long. But he also wanted to make her wedding night everything she dreamed of so reluctantly he drew back.

The smoldering desire in her gaze and the fine trembling of her form almost made him change his mind but he steeled himself to not respond to the call. Willing his eager body to calm down, he spoke, his voice rough with unfulfilled desire. "I think we might need to cool off a little. Tell me more about this seashell collection."

Grateful to him for being strong where she was weak, Sarina took his hand and joined him on the blanket they had laid out. Reaching for a sandwich, she unwrapped the cellophane and took a small bite. "I started collecting shells when I was about five. Papa took us to the beach that summer and we spent all day playing. He carried us out in the waves on his shoulders and even let us bury him up to his chin in the sand!"

"It sounds like fun. It's great that you have special family memories like that. I loved the beach too. Michael and I spent so much time in the water, Mother said we were going to grow fins." He moved the picnic basket to the side so he could stretch out, pulling her up against him.

"Did your grandfather ever go with you?" she asked, looking up at him.

He shook his head. "Most of the time, no. I do remember him going once and he sat in a beach chair under the umbrella reading a report the whole time. We built this big castle with a moat and everything and Michael tried to get him to come see it but he wouldn't, saying how silly it all was. Then a big wave came in and washed most of it away and he laughed, saying 'I told you so.'"

Sarina laid her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. I know that must've hurt you," she said softly, seeing something flash in his eyes, however brief.

Jackson shrugged. "We were used to it by then. But, we're getting off the subject. Why did you start bringing shells home?"

"Well, we didn't have a lot of money. After papa died, Carlos began working part time jobs here and there until going into the academy. I hated to ask mama to buy me things because there were always so many bills. So, I started scouring the beach for treasures I could keep for free."

Jackson was in awe of the generous spirit this woman possessed. Her concern for others superseded anything else and she gave so much for so little in return. He had never had to worry about money as a child, spoiled and indulged by his parents. Her selflessness made him rethink his whole value system. "You have an incredible heart, Zari."

Coloring lightly, she smiled. "I don't know about that. I'm a simple girl who looks for the best in life, that's all."

So many simple things made her happy. Not him, though. He broke her heart, he thought, as he took another generous swig. Suddenly he spotted a girl with long brunette hair, down by the water. Sarina!

Running as fast as he could, he ran onto the beach calling her name. The girl turned around as he got closer but he could see it was not her. Disappointed, he sat down in the sand and continued drinking. The emptiness he felt was staggering. Shutting his eyes, all he could see were her beautiful brown ones looking at him with hurt and disillusionment. He had to get her off of his mind or go crazy. Throwing the half filled bottle down on the sand, he got up and stumbling, made his way towards the surf. Maybe a swim would clear his head. As he waded in deeper and deeper, he began to feel sleepy. He wasn't much of a drinker—that Scotch really went to his head. The force of the tide began to pull at him and right before a large wave took him under, he thought of Sarina.

I'm sorry.