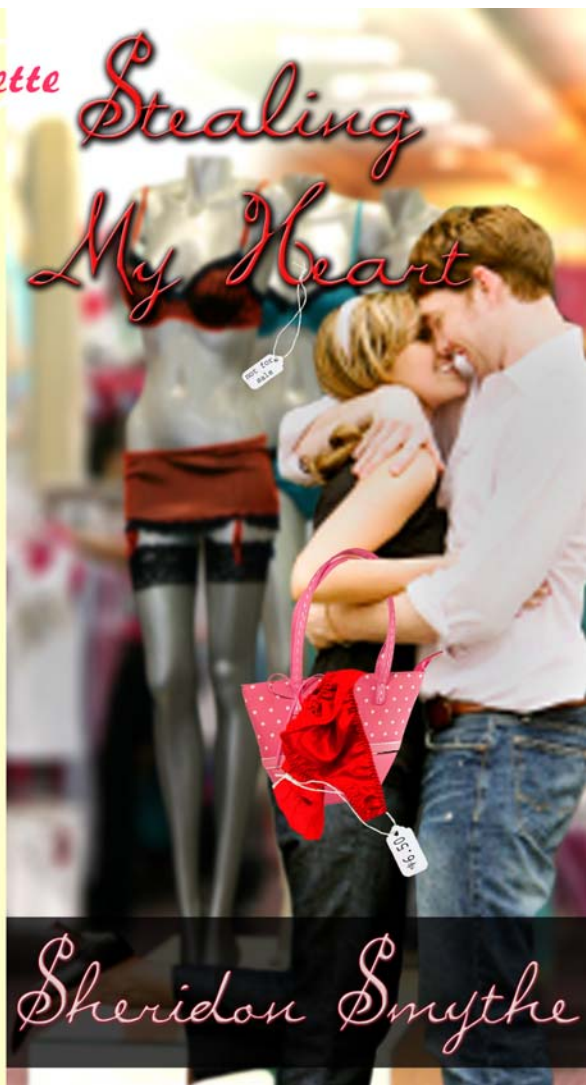


Champagne Rose

Rosette

Stealing My Heart

Sheridan Smythe



Stealing My Heart

by

Sheridon Smythe

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Stealing My Heart

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Praise for Sheridan Smythe

MR. COMPLETE: "Sprinkled liberally with laugh-out-loud scenes, and not one but several yummy hunks, this fast-paced story will keep you engrossed to the last page.

—Romantic Times

"Humorous and hunk-heaven, Sheridan Smythe spins a delightful tale."

—Midwest Book Review

THOSE BABY BLUES: (Romantic Times Top Pick!) "A compelling, sexy romp that leaves you smiling!"

—Christine Feehan, New York Times bestselling author

"The interaction between the characters is first rate and highly entertaining...a fast, fun and tender story sure to touch the reader's heart."

—Romance Reviews Today

"Sheridan Smythe has created a warm and touching tale of love that just keeps expanding."

—Romantic Times

A PERFECT FIT: "Lots of good chuckles and a modern relationship that goes from zero to racing speed in seconds flat."

—Romantic Times

"Brooke and Alex's sexy interactions will keep you reading."

—All About Romance

MR. HYDE'S ASSETS: "A warmhearted and charming tale of secrets, lies and true love."

—Romantic Times

I was standing at the grocery checkout counter when a perfect stranger grabbed my arm. "Honey, you forgot about the stuff you put in your purse because you didn't want to push a basket around."

Mouth gaping like a fish, I turned around to let the stranger see that he had obviously mistaken me for someone else.

I did a double-take. The man was gorgeous, from the top of his sandy blond hair to the bottom of his expensive-looking leather mules. My dumbfounded gaze focused on his sensuous mouth, which continued sprouting outrageous lies.

"Don't you remember, sweetheart?" He looked so concerned and sincere, he nearly convinced *me* as he shifted his attention to the clerk behind the counter and confided, "She fell down the stairs last week and just hasn't been herself since. We're scheduled for an MRI tomorrow."

"I don't know you," I blurted out, wondering for an insane moment if I truly *had* fallen down the stairs and, by some miracle, this hunk was my sweetheart. Or better yet, my husband.

Big, brown, bone-melting eyes focused lovingly on my bewildered face. "Dumpling—"

Good grief! Had he really called me dumpling? Did anyone even use that endearment today?

"—I knew it was too early to have you out and about, but you insisted. Next time I'm going to listen to my instincts." He switched his gaze to the clerk, who appeared to be as mesmerized by his sexy voice as I was. "She begged me, literally begged me to take her shopping for some new undies—"

Had he really said undies?

"—and I tried to be firm, but you know how it is when you love someone as deeply as I love my wife."

"Wife?" I echoed disbelievingly. "Are you crazy?"

I almost melted on the spot when he turned his liquid brown gaze my way again. Did I sound as if I minded him calling me his wife? Because if I did, I didn't mean it. I could honestly say I'd be his anything, as long as he looked at me that way. Sadly enough, however, I knew he had to be demented. It was a damned shame, too.

“God,” he said with a make-you-believe-it ache in his voice, “You’re so beautiful when you’re confused.” He took my purse from my unresisting grasp and opened it, pulling out several pairs of almost-nothing underwear still on their plastic hangers. He handed them to the clerk and even managed to blush adorably. “Here you go. She hates to push a basket, and I refused to hold them.” He lowered his voice to a purr. “You know how it is.”

The clerk finally spoke, her voice curiously croaky, as if she were waking from a dream. “Um, yeah, sure. Anything you say.”

I could tell, woman to woman, that she meant exactly what she said. If he had told her I was from another planet, she would have agreed with him. The man literally put Viggo Mortensen to shame, and I’m a big Viggo fan.

Maybe if I hadn’t been so dazed and bedazzled, I might have protested when he pulled out his wallet and paid for my purchases. The only thing I’d meant to buy was a scarf, but the clerk bagged the scarf and undies, beaming at me when she handed me the shopping bag. Then she leaned in close, her gaze fixed on my ‘husband’ as she cupped a hand to the side of her mocha-painted mouth.

“You are one lucky woman,” she whispered fervently. Then she leaned away and fanned herself—as if the hottie wouldn’t have a clue what she could be hot about. “Ya’ll have a nice day!”

The bemusing image of her somewhat lewd, heavily mascared wink followed me out of the store.

And so did the crazy hunk.

The moment we stepped on the sidewalk, I gently pulled my elbow from his very warm and disturbing grasp. At least my sanity had returned, and I came back to earth a very embarrassed woman. But my embarrassment came out sounding defensive. “Thank you, but I don’t need your help.”

His sensuous mouth formed a perfect O. “You don’t need my help? You *don’t* need my help? Of course you don’t need my help—*now*. I just saved your butt from getting arrested back there!”

I thrust my chin upward, refusing to let him know

he'd stung my pride. "My butt wasn't yours to save— whoever you are!" Oh my God yes, he was hot, a hunk, and for a few moments I had nearly forgotten my own name due to his on-a-scale-of-one-to-ten charisma. But he had no right to pretend I was his wife or to embarrass me by paying for my purchases.

To my complete astonishment, he took my hand, bowed, and kissed my fingertips. "Lake Daniels, at your service."

The instant tingling his lips created made me jerk my hand back to safety—and sanity. I wasn't going to let this madman send me spinning into a daze again. "Stop that!"

I narrowed my eyes as his words sank in. Curiosity got the best of me. "Lake? What kind of name is that?"

His chiseled—I kid you not—cheeks fused with color. Actually, that's my stage name. My real name is Luke Denver."

"What's wrong with Luke Denver?"

He shrugged broad and very appealing shoulders. "Does anyone really like their given name?"

"I do," I said before I could think. When he lifted a fine dark brow, I felt my insides start quivering. I quickly and silently scolded them, but the stringent reminder didn't stop me from adding, "My name's Amber James."

"That's a beautiful name," he drawled in a low, sexy voice. His eyelids dropped to half-mast, making me forget all about the constant push of people coming and going around us. "That's exactly the kind of name I would have picked for you, if you had made me guess."

I tried to clamp my mouth closed, but it seemed to have a will of its own as my lips formed the suddenly very important question, "Why?"

His heated gaze moved slowly over my face, as if he had all the time in the world to spend talking just to me. Me, the little nobody from Alabama. Softly, he said, "Because your eyes are the exact color of amber." He reached out and used the rough tip of his finger to stroke my temple.

My knees nearly buckled.

"Almost the color of fine whisky...or maybe the best sherry."

All I could think of to say was, "You drink?"

He shook his head, his eyes twinkling with admonishment at my quick judgment. "No, I'm a bartender. My father was a drunken bum, so I don't touch the stuff."

I felt a twinge near the region of my heart and realized it was sympathy. I wanted to know more, to hear more about what I knew instinctively was a very painful childhood for him.

"I'm sorry," I said, and was surprised to find I meant it. It wasn't that I was unfeeling, but I didn't know this guy from Adam and his actions so far didn't exactly scream 'I'm a sane person, so believe anything I say!'" But then, he'd caught *me* stealing, so I guess I couldn't point fingers.

Luke continued stroking me senseless. I wanted to push his hand away, but my arms felt leaden, yet aching. It was a totally confusing mixture of sensations.

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault, it was his." For a moment, his eyes darkened, hardened. "Thank God my mother finally left him."

His sudden, blazing smile made me physically reel in place. He reached out and caught my elbow again, as if he had anticipated my reaction. It was a disconcerting thought.

"Why don't we have a drink together?" His smile was pure mischief. "Soda or something. Something tells me you're not a coffee drinker."

It seemed my lot in life to suddenly be full of stupid questions. "How did you know?"

He flashed a dazzling white smile. "Because your teeth are too white."

"You came to that conclusion all because my teeth are white?" It was too amazing to be true.

"Well, yeah, but that's the part I haven't told you about." He began to steer me into the middle of the heavy flow of people. It was Saturday, so the mall population was at its peak.

I was extremely aware of his fingers curled around my suddenly super sensitive skin. "H-how do you know so much about me, and where are we going?"

That lethal smile flashed again, making me aware of

my own not-so-bad smile. "I make it a point to notice things about people, and we're going to the food court to get a soda. Diet, right?"

His perception continued to intrigue and amaze me. "You guessed that about me because I'm fat, didn't you?"

He shot me a surprised glance that was too unplanned to be fake. "You've got to be kidding! I don't think I've seen a more perfect figure since Marilyn Monroe."

"A lot of critics would claim Marilyn was fat. Sure, they called her curves sexy then, but now—"

"That's bullshit, Amber." He said it with enough conviction to cause a warm glow to settle in my heart. "Don't let anyone kid you. Men will choose a woman with curves over a skinny woman nine times out of ten."

I wasn't convinced. Although I wasn't obese, I had battled a weight problem all of my life. "And you know this for a fact?"

He reached out to steady me as a man pushed past me, obviously in a hurry. With a heavy, half-threatening frown, Luke stopped to stare after the man, as if he were seriously contemplating calling him on the rude action.

After a moment, he shook his head and resumed walking. "As a matter of fact, I do. I worked for a company that did surveys for magazines, and that was one of their surveys. Men prefer women with curves."

I found myself believing him, and the warm glow spread to the rest of my body beginning with the hand he had stroked and ending in the pit of my stomach. I felt renewed, hopeful. And completely vulnerable. This man was way out of my league and I knew it, yet I continued walking with him as if I didn't have the willpower to resist.

And wasn't that the honest to God's truth?

Yes, it was. I couldn't resist finding out where this walk would lead me. I'd married right out of high school, gotten pregnant, and had a baby. Five years later I found myself divorced and living in a city three times the size of my comfortable hometown. My parents were frantic, calling me every night to make sure nothing awful had happened to me in the big bad city. No matter how much I assured them Memphis was not a crime capitol, they

didn't believe me.

In fact, I could safely say the strangest thing that had happened since moving here was happening right now. Feeling reckless and oddly exhilarated, I said, "You said earlier that Lake was your stage name. You're an actor, then?" I'd never met an actor, and always thought actors swarmed in happening places like Hollywood.

"Yeah, but not a very good one, I'm afraid."

"Why do you say that?" I was sincere and it was vital he believe me. "Back there in that department store, you almost had *me* convinced I was your wife, and that I suffered from a head injury. You had the clerk convinced, too, and I'd say that was some pretty damned good acting."

Luke threw back his gorgeous head and laughed, exposing a tanned throat and an animated Adam's apple. When he looked at me, I was both flattered and embarrassed by his obvious gratitude. Unless, of course, he was acting. Now that I knew, I couldn't help but question his every action. What was his true motive in seeking me out? To keep me out of jail? Did that mean *he* believed it was okay to steal? Because I didn't. Not by a long shot. What I did, I couldn't seem to help.

"Piece of cake, and I'm not ashamed to admit I've had my eye on you for quite some time."

This time I was the one who stopped us dead in our tracks. People jostled and pushed at us, but we were like a solid rock jutting from the floor in the midst of swarming humanity. "You have? But, why?"

He took my hand again and started that disturbing tingling. "Because you're unique. Because you're beautiful. And because you needed my help. I couldn't stand to see a beautiful, exotic creature like yourself go to jail."

"What makes you think I would have gone to jail?" Never mind the beautiful, exotic creature part. I didn't dare go there. He was delusional, and that was that. Besides, I wasn't ready to admit my shame.

Very gently, he took my chin in his fingers. They were so hot, I wondered if he had a fever. Maybe that was why he seemed delirious. The alternative made my nether-regions quiver shamelessly.

“Because you were stealing panties, babe.”

His gaze was compassionate, sympathetic, and questioning all at the same time. He looked me over thoroughly, from the bottom of my Gucci shoes to the top of my professionally highlighted hair. I think my entire body was blushing by the time he finished his inspection. Blushing and fantasizing about what it would be like if I was naked and he was naked and we were at my apartment alone.

At that moment, I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

“You don't look as if you're desperate for money,” he pointed out with irrefutable logic. “But why else would you steal?”

The answer he wanted, I wasn't ready to give. Heck, I barely admitted it to myself.

When I voiced the lie, I half-believed it myself. “It's like you told the clerk. I didn't have a basket because I didn't intend to buy anything but a scarf. I stuck the underwear in my purse until I got to the register.” Despite the fact that I knew it wasn't the smartest move to make, I lifted my chin again in a defensive gesture. “Until a person leaves the store, it's not stealing.”

“Nevertheless, I worked as a security guard—”

I had to butt in, and my sarcastic tone was a defensive measure. “Is there anything you *haven't* done?”

His lips quirked in a wry smile. “Yeah, I have never followed a woman around to make sure she didn't get arrested for stealing panties. If you need money—”.

“It isn't about money.” My words dried up after that statement, because I didn't know what it *was* about. Heat crept into my face. I looked up to discover we had reached the food court where anything from steak sandwiches to pizza slices could be bought.

It was time to part, I realized, from my hunk of a savior. No way was I going to drag someone like Luke, aka Lake, into my sordid problems, no matter how badly I wanted him. He was too good looking, too perceptive, and too damned nosy.

In a nut-shell, he was too good to be true, and I had a kid to worry about.

Thirty minutes later, I had forgotten all about my decision to part ways with Luke.

I was too busy laughing...and ogling him. Yes, ogling. There was no sense trying to sugarcoat what I was doing.

But I told myself it was just for today. After we finished our sodas, we'd part and that would be that. I'd have a lovely memory of meeting the hunk of a lifetime.

"Corky sounds like a great kid," Luke said after listening attentively to my proud recounting of his preschool play. "I'd love to meet him."

He didn't mean it. I wasn't foolish enough to believe anything else. So I smiled and pretended I didn't hear the latter.

"He's a great kid."

"Does he get to see his father?"

Well, okay, so it was a very personal question. I consoled myself by remembering this man had seen my panties. New ones, of course. "Not often. Sean lives in Chattanooga, so he only gets him on holidays and a couple of weeks in the summer." I started to add that my son was with his father right now, but I didn't want Luke to think I was hinting.

Luke, it seemed, was a very informed guy. "Aren't they out on Spring break right now?"

To give myself credit, I gave his question serious thought for about two nano-seconds. "Yes, they are. Corky's with his father now."

"Do you steal when your son's with you?"

His question caught me off guard. My cheeks burned. For a short time, I had almost forgotten how we'd met. "I don't steal," I said, tossing my thieving curls over my shoulder. Then, in an undertone, I added, "At least not on purpose."

When he reached out, I thought he was going to pluck a hair from my chin or something equally embarrassing, but instead he hooked his finger under the strap of my purse and grabbed it.

"Hey!" I snatched at it, but he was too quick. "Give that back!"

Calmly, as if he hadn't heard, he opened my purse and withdrew the twenty or so packs of sugar I'd obviously stuck in there. He put them back in the little

ceramic holder sitting on the table between us.

"A lot of people don't think it's stealing, but it is." He put the strap of my purse back onto my shoulder, patted my arm, and flashed a smile at me. "There. Now maybe we'll get out of here without getting yelled at or thrown in jail."

"What are you, my conscience?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Now that sounds like an interesting job."

"Forget it. I can't afford you." I clapped my hand over my wayward mouth, my cheeks burning. Maybe my vow to go without sex until I knew I was in love wasn't such a good idea after all, I thought, feeling my lips quirk beneath my hand at his leering expression.

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "I come pretty cheap, especially on Wednesdays."

I couldn't resist. "What's so special about Wednesdays?"

"It's my only night off."

"Oh." And just when I started to relax again, he ambushed me.

"Are you a kleptomaniac?"

Shaken, I looked around to see if anyone had heard Luke voice such a totally outrageous, personal, insulting...perceptive question. I swallowed hard, hedging. "Are you a shrink or something?"

"I asked first, but just because I'm a nice guy, I'll answer first. No, I'm not a shrink, but I auditioned for one and did a lot of research beforehand, so I suppose I know more than the average Joe."

He was so far from the average Joe that, for a moment, I couldn't think of anything else.

"Amber?"

Did he think saying my name would get my attention? All it did was distract me further. I wanted to hear him say my name in a whisper, preferably a husky, aroused, just-about-to-knock-your-socks-off whisper. "Um." I had to swallow to ease the sudden dryness in my throat. That's what months and months of going without sex will do to you. "What was the question again?"

"Are you a—"

"I remember!" I inserted hastily. The straw jutting

from my soda cup suddenly seemed interesting. I spent a long moment moving it up and down before I realized Luke was watching me move the straw in and out of the soda cup.

My face felt flushed. Maybe he wasn't thinking what I was thinking, but I was sure thinking it! "Okay, okay. I had a problem back in high school, but I'm over it now." When Luke lifted a disbelieving brow and looked pointedly at the sugar holder, I blushed guiltily. "All right! Yes, I used to be, and yes, it seems to be happening...again." I hid my miserable face behind a curtain of hair and prayed God would beam me up for a quick chat or something. Maybe a lecture on lusting after strangers.

Luke spoke softly. "Did it start today?"

I jerked my head up in surprise. "How did you know?"

He shrugged, but his smile was a bit on the smug side. "Just an educated guess."

"Share, please." I pushed my soda cup away so it wouldn't tempt me to mimic naughty things. It didn't really help, though, because looking at Luke made me *think* them.

"Trauma," he said mysteriously. When I just sat staring blankly at him, he folded his arms and explained. "You've probably never been away from your son, right?"

I shook my head, still uncertain where he was going with this observation.

"The trauma of separating from your son probably triggered your, um, nervous habit."

Habit? I choked back a laugh. "Growing up, I'd heard my parents' call my exasperating illness many things, but never anything as mild as *habit*."

"They took you to therapy for it, didn't they?"

"Yeah." So much that by the time I was old enough for college, there wasn't a drop left in my college fund. "But I got over it."

"Now it's back."

This guy got off on pointing out the obvious. "Not really. I mean—" His parental look made me squirm. "I think today was just a fluke."

"Well, we can hope, can't we?"

We? What was with this ‘we’ business? We were hardly on a first name basis, and I knew nothing about him. Okay, so I knew he worked as a bartender; was an aspiring actor; was kind, gentle, understanding, way too good looking for his own good; and had a knack for making me feel like the only woman in the world.

Wait. What the hell was I bitching about?

“You wanna catch a movie?”

“Sure.” So I wasn’t in the mood to play hard to get, and I was understandably reluctant for the day to end. It wasn’t often a lonesome woman—or any woman, come to think of it—got the opportunity to spend time with a bonafide modern day knight in shining armor.

I’d seen the movie before, so I spent most of the time sitting with Luke’s arm a hair’s breadth from my own, fantasizing about what I wanted to do *after* the movie...preferably with Luke, and not a poor, plastic imitation that always seemed to quit vibrating at a crucial moment.

Sex would be nice. Sex would be *very* nice.

I rewound my brain. Okay, sex would be nice, but getting to know him better was the smart move. We could go back to my apartment and talk, maybe look at some photo albums, then have sex.

It wouldn’t be a good idea. I didn’t really, truly know him.

The devil on my shoulder stomped with glee so hard I winced. How else, he screeched, can you really get to know someone? Get naked and have blissful, long-overdue sex! Afterward, thank him and send him on his way. Nobody would have to know but me...and Luke, of course, who was a man, which meant chances were good that he wouldn’t mind not having a relationship.

To my mystification, frustration, and outright disappointment, we did not have sex. In fact, Luke refused to even consider going back to my apartment. I could have gnawed my fingers to the bone, I was so frustrated. We were standing outside the cinema, trying to decide what to do next.

Obviously, Luke didn’t like my suggestion.

“I’m kinda hungry,” Luke said, patting his flat

stomach.

I tore my gaze from the amazingly erotic act and swallowed. "You ate a tub of popcorn the size of the Pyramid." The Pyramid was our city's pride and joy, a huge coliseum in the shape of a Pyramid, with the Memphis Bridge as a backdrop.

I wasn't kidding when I said it was big, and so was the huge tub of popcorn he'd eaten. Talking about super-sized things made my dirty mind start wandering again. Wisely, I changed the subject. "What would you like to have?" When he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and let his gaze wander slowly over my body, I felt a thrilling kick in my mid-section. I was ecstatic to know I wasn't the only one thinking naughty thoughts!

We decided on pizza, and while we were eating, Luke rarely took his eyes from me. I might have been flattered by the realization if he hadn't forced me to return the Parmesan cheese shaker and my silverware. Instead, I cringed with humiliation.

"Just try and relax," he said, taking my hands across the table. He stared into my eyes. It was the moment I found out how talented he was in the art of hypnotism. "Think about anything but how much you miss your son."

Not in a million years would I have admitted that I had not thought of my son in several hours. The realization scared me more than a little. Corky was my life.

But he was in Chattanooga with his father. My apartment was empty. My bed was empty...just waiting for someone to jump in and do...whatever.

I forced a sad sigh and said, "Okay, I'll try." If my pretense made Luke try harder to make me forget, I was going to shamelessly exploit myself. "It's just that I miss him so much." This much was true, but I had been looking forward to the time alone to get caught up on woman stuff, like getting my nails done, my hair cut, and doing lots of browsing and shopping. It was the reason I'd scheduled my vacation to match the week Corky would be gone.

Luke squeezed my hands. His foot bumped mine under the table. Instead of pulling it away, he left it pressed against my ankle. His low, sexy voice stroked

invisible fingers down my spine. He said, "Then I'll just have to try harder to distract you, right?"

I didn't have to fake a blush. "You're a good actor." *And I'm a shameless hussy.*

His smile faded a bit. "I'm not acting, Amber. There's something about you that brings out the protector in me."

He might as well have said 'pity' instead of 'protector'. I stiffened. "I don't need protecting." I need sex! I wanted to shout. Sex, sex, sex! Wasn't he attracted to me? Or was that just another act?

I got at least one of my questions answered when he left me at my car in the mall parking lot. After playing the true gentleman and unlocking my car, he held open the door for me.

Swallowing a ball of frustration, I started to slide into the driver's seat. He hooked a strong arm around my waist and swooped me up like he was Rhett and I was Scarlet.

When his lips came down on mine, I nearly swooned like a Southern belle, too. It was a brief kiss, but the impact was enormous. He lifted his head and looked at me, his expression serious and intent.

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

I licked my lips, trying not to look so damned dazed. "Um, sure. I've got some appointments in the morning, but I could meet you here for lunch." By that time, I would have my hair trimmed and my nails done. Maybe he'd be interested in taking them out for a test drive...along his naked back.

"Sounds good to me."

I shook myself mentally, belatedly realizing he was talking about our lunch date, not mind-boggling, wild sex.

Bummer.

We exchanged phone numbers and I went on my way. I stopped at a drug store and purchased an assortment of condoms, ever the optimist. While I was there, I must have lifted three packs of batteries, a headphone for a cell phone I didn't even have, and a pack of chewing gum.

I didn't realize I'd taken the items until I got back to my car. It was then I noticed how heavy the sack was and looked inside. With a groan, I threw my head back against the seat rest and closed my eyes.

Luke's handsome, chiding face stared back at me.

I knew what I had to do. Before I could chicken out, I took out the items I'd actually paid for and went back inside the drugstore. With my face flaming—proclaiming my guilt, I was certain—I walked up to the counter and handed the sack with the stolen items to the clerk. "Um, I think I grabbed someone's sack by mistake."

Without waiting for a reply, I hastened back to my car to die from shame. What was I going to do? I couldn't afford a shrink, not this time around.

"Honey, please! Don't walk away mad! Give me another chance!"

At the sound of that familiar, angst-filled voice, I froze a few steps short of the doorway leading out of the store to the center of the mall. How could a woman be so thrilled to hear a voice, yet be so filled with dread? But I knew the answer, and it had a hell of a lot to do with the purse full of cheap earrings, watches, and bracelets hanging from my shoulder.

Without turning, I waited for Luke to catch up to me.

It seemed Luke had other ideas, and it didn't involve chasing me down and snatching my purse. "I swear he didn't mean anything!" he cried passionately.

Not 'she', but 'he'. I swallowed a spontaneous chuckle. There wasn't anything ordinary about Luke, not even his elaborate acting displays. Despite my almost uncontrollable urge to laugh, I darted a quick glance to the left, then to the right. My face overheated. People were staring at me, waiting on my response to Luke's outrageous confession.

I clutched my purse and kept silent, mainly because I didn't know what to say, and partly because I knew I didn't have a talented bone in my body when it came to acting. Luke had called attention to me at a very crucial moment.

"What about our children? Will you consider forgiving me for them?" Luke asked, his voice thick with sorrow and regret.

Like yesterday, he came very close to making me believe him.

"The boys need their daddy, and our girls do, too."

Boys and girls? How many children did we have, anyway? As I stood there, uncertain what he wanted me to do, his voice drew closer, more persuasive. "Sweetheart, come back into the store and let me buy you something nice. I'll make it up to you if it's the last thing I do. How about a new purse? Wouldn't you like a new purse?" His gentle fingers curled around my upper arm and tugged.

Like a robot, I turned, anticipating seeing the face I'd dreamed about all night. I had to brace myself. He was even more gorgeous than I remembered, especially looking at me as if I could demand the world if I would just forgive him. But I didn't want the world. I just wanted sex with Luke.

And I wanted to stop stealing before I wound up in big trouble.

With an inward sigh and a reminder of why he *really* wanted to keep me from exiting the store, I allowed him to lead me over to the purse selection. The interest he'd caught with his dramatic scene waned and we were left alone.

I folded my arms and stood watching him as he emptied my purse of the stolen goods onto a discount table and handed it back.

"I'm pretty certain one of the clerks saw you," he said as if he were talking about the weather. "But he can't do anything unless you take the stuff out of the store. If they say anything to you, let me handle it, okay?"

Slipping the considerably lighter purse back onto my shoulder, I waited for the lecture, one I'd heard many, many times growing up. It never did any good, but that never stopped my parents from trying to get through to me. To this day, I don't think they fully understood that I couldn't stop myself from stealing. I didn't do it because I needed anything, or because I couldn't afford the items, or because I wanted to prove I could get away it.

I just did it. It was a mystery when it began at the age of seven, and it remained a mystery to me now. What baffled me even more was that I'd stopped stealing when Corky was born. It was as if giving birth had cured me.

Now I once again felt the crushing weight of humiliation and shame that came hand in hand with being a kleptomaniac. Getting caught by someone I

secretly lusted after made the embarrassment doubly hard to weather.

Luke laced his arm through mine and led me to the jewelry counter. "Pick something out," he instructed in a low whisper. "And stop looking at me as if you want to sock me one."

"But I *could* sock you one," I whispered back. "Why do you keep doing this?"

"Because you need help," he said simply.

"I don't want your help. I want—" I bit my tongue and looked down at the glass case displaying reasonably priced jewelry. I was stunned by how close I had come to blurting out my fantasies. Thank God I'd caught myself in time. Luke wanted to help me. He'd said nothing about wanting anything more than my company and a friendly kiss.

Okay, so maybe it had been friendly on his part. On mine, it had been a scorcher to remember.

"Oh, look, honey! It's your birthstone."

It wasn't, but I played along the best I could. "Yes, it's beautiful." I lowered my voice to a whisper again and leaned closer, extremely conscious of that beautiful mouth close to my own. "Did you miss being a boy scout or something? Is that why you're trying to help me?"

"I'm helping you because I like you. For selfish reasons of my own, I don't want you to go to jail."

In this instance, flattery was getting him everywhere. I glanced up and met the suspicious, watchful gaze of a male clerk. Pointing to a beautiful necklace made out of Ozark gold, I said, "That's gorgeous, babe." When I looked at him, my eyes told him the necklace wasn't the only thing I thought gorgeous.

His eyes crinkled when he smiled. "I agree it's definitely gorgeous."

We stared at one another for a long, extremely delicious moment. I think it was safe to say our attraction to one another had flopped out onto the table. Inside, I was quivering with anticipation.

We ate Chinese food for lunch, laughing a lot over our mutual clumsiness with the chopsticks. I found out that Luke was from a large family, with five other siblings and dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins. He was taking a

break from his acting career, he told me with a self-depreciating wink, and had never been married.

In return, I told him about marrying my high school sweetheart, which turned out to be a mistake. "I think everyone believed we were in love, so we were convinced we must be. We're still friends, though, for Corky's sake."

"So what do you do when you're not on vacation?" Luke asked, taking my hand again.

I'd discovered Luke liked holding hands, which was definitely okay with me. "I'm a pediatric nurse," I told him with quiet pride. Lucky for me I had started nursing school when Corky was two. By the time Sean and I separated, I had a good paying job that allowed us to live modestly well.

Luke whistled to show he was impressed. Then his eyes danced with mischief as he said, "Let's just hope you don't start sticking babies in your purse."

I tried to look offended. "That's not funny. I don't steal babies, just things."

"Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"Payback's going to be a bitch," I warned. But I wasn't angry. Maybe I should have been, but Luke made me feel special even as he joked with me about the serious subject of stealing.

He walked me to my car afterward, more to assure himself I wasn't going to be doing any further shopping I think, than to be gentlemanly.

"Hey, why don't you come to the bar tonight? Thursday nights are pretty slow, so I could probably get a few moments to talk. After work, we could go for a walk or get a soda or something."

Since I liked the idea of seeing Luke in action, I nodded. He kissed me and I got in my car, watching his cute butt in the side mirror as he walked away. I think that was the moment I realized I really liked this guy, and it wasn't just lust I felt for him.

Back home, the strange silence in the apartment put me on edge. Corky was a normal, rowdy boy, so I wasn't used to the quiet. I discovered I didn't like it as much as I thought.

So I decided it was a good time to stock the fridge.

I'm being honest when I say I completely forgot about my little problem. I was rudely reminded when the grocery store manager caught up with me as I pushed my loaded shopping cart to my car. I was daydreaming about cooking a wonderful, home-cooked meal and inviting Luke over, so I was a little confused when the manager took my arm and pulled me to a halt.

"Stop right there, ma'am. I'm afraid you'll have to come back into the store with me."

I blinked at him and it slowly dawned on me *why* he'd stopped me. With leaden feet, I followed him as he pushed my heavy cart back into the store.

He took me into a small office at the front of the store and shut the door. His expression grim and disapproving, he informed me, "I've already called the police. They should be here any moment. Is there someone you need to call?"

My mind was spinning. Calling my parents was out of the question, and I was too embarrassed to call any of my friends.

Then I remembered I'd written Luke's cell phone number down in my check book. "Could—could I get my checkbook out of my purse?" I asked timidly. "It has a number on it that I need."

The manager looked suspicious, but eventually nodded. He never took his gaze from my purse, I noted, growing more nervous by the moment. I couldn't recall what I'd stolen, but it all came back to me when I opened my purse.

My face flamed as I pushed aside a package of film, extra-sour candy worms, an inactivated calling card still in the package, and a TV guide. Impulse buys cleverly displayed at the checkout counter when a customer is waiting in line.

Or...impulse steals, as in my case. I'd bought over a hundred dollars' worth of groceries, so it didn't make sense that I would steal a package of candy worms, a calling card that was useless unless scanned anyway, and a TV guide I could easily afford.

Would the manager believe me if I explained my illness to him? I looked at him, noting the stubborn jut of his jaw and the unrelenting judgment in his eyes, and

decided no, he wouldn't.

So I pulled out my checkbook and called the only person who had ever shown any patience with me and my irritating illness.

Luke answered on the second ring. In the background, I heard music, and people laughing and talking. Glass tinkled, and someone shouted, "Another round over here!"

"I'm sorry to bother you at work," I said, feeling afraid for the first time since the manager stopped me in the parking lot. "But I'm in trouble, and I couldn't think of anyone else to call."

"Where are you?"

His voice sounded sharp. I winced, my face heating another ten degrees as I told him the name of the supermarket and the street it was on.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Do me a favor and don't say anything until I get there. Promise?"

"Okay." The moment I hung up the phone, the manager started grilling me.

"Was that your husband? Is he coming?"

Remembering my promise, I kept silent and only nodded.

Luke and the police came through the door together. I braced myself, wondering what Luke would say and do. What if he had lost his patience with me?

And wasn't I being a little presumptuous, expecting him to come to my rescue again? I told myself I would be happy if Luke just held my hand while they interrogated me and contacted my parents if they hauled me off to jail.

While the cops dumped the contents of my purse onto the manager's desk and began to separate the stolen items from my own personals, Luke knelt in front of me. His gaze was gentle and filled with convincing concern as he swept the hair from my forehead with a tender finger.

"How are you, sweetheart? Any headaches? Nausea? Dizziness?"

I blinked rapidly to let him know I wasn't following him. Was I pregnant? Amnesic? The options were mind-boggling.

"Don't worry, darling. As soon as I explain to them about the brain tumor—"

“Brain tumor?” It was the manager, proving he *had* been listening. “What’s this about a brain tumor?”

Luke shot him a quelling look. “Please lower your voice. Loud noises can make her go into convulsions.”

Just like before, Luke was so convincing I didn’t even feel the urge to hide a smile at his outrageous lie. He now had the full attention of both cops and the manager, who was beginning to look a little green around the gills.

Standing, Luke opened the door and looked out, sighed, then shut it again. “Red lights,” he said. “Those red light sales you’ve got going...no wonder she had one of her spells.”

“Spells?” The manager began to sweat. He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his upper lip. “I don’t understand what my strobes have to do with her stealing.”

Luke shook his head. He took out a bottle of pills from his pocket and opened it, urging me to take one. “You know you can’t go anywhere without these,” he scolded gently.

With complete and utter trust, I swallowed the pill dry, casting my gaze to the floor. Unlike Luke, I wasn’t an actor. I didn’t want anyone getting a gander at my eyes...which would surely give me away.

To the men, Luke said gravely, “Loud noises cause her to have convulsions, and strobe lights freak her out. She goes into a daze, and when she’s like this, there’s no telling what she might do. She’s not even aware of it.” His voice dropped several octaves and filled with pain. “The doctors say the bigger the tumor gets, the more she’ll forget and maybe do something totally crazy.”

The manager found his tongue. “Why the hell is she by herself, if she’s that sick?”

I had been wondering the same thing. I stiffened, half-expecting Luke to stumble. But of course he didn’t.

“I wanted her last few weeks to be as normal as possible,” he whispered thickly. “So when she wanted to go shopping, I didn’t think there would be any harm. I didn’t know about the strobe lights, or I wouldn’t have brought her here.” An edge entered his tone. “I’ll have to take her straight to the hospital to make sure she isn’t...that she isn’t...” Luke choked back a sob.

I choked back a gasp of shameless laughter.

The cops murmured their sympathies, and the manager fell all over himself gathering up the items scattered on the desk and putting them back into my purse. "Well," he said, sounding decidedly rattled, "I guess I can overlook the theft, considering. If you'll just please take her out of here?"

"Of course." Luke took my purse and helped me to my feet with the loving care people extend to invalids. I kept my gaze glued to the floor. By this time, my chest was literally aching with the effort to contain hysterical laughter. Maybe it wasn't funny, but Luke made it funny with his inventive acting. He'd managed to make the store manager feel guilty for allowing strobe lights in the store.

He loaded my groceries into the car in silence after seating me in the passenger seat of my car. It wasn't until we had pulled out of the parking lot that he spoke. "That was close. Could I possibly convince you to stay home the rest of the week? I'll come to you. We could watch movies or just sit and talk. Look at photo albums or something."

Did Luke sound scared—for me? And I could think of a few other things we could do to keep busy. Feeling bold, I reached across the seat and took his free hand. I brought it to my lips and kissed his fingers one by one. There was no mistaking my gratitude when I said, "Thank you so much, Luke. I don't even know you, yet you were the one person I wanted to call."

He shot me a surprised, sideways glance, just long enough for me to see that he was flattered and pleased. "Have you ever watched that movie, *There's Something About Mary*?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well, there's something about Amber." He hesitated, and then added seriously, "I think you might be the woman I've been looking for all my life."

Just to show him he wasn't the only one with a sense of humor, I said, "You've been looking for a kleptomaniac?"

He laughed and squeezed my hand. "Honey, if you didn't have flaws, I'd be worried. Besides, I've got a sneaking feeling that once Corky is home, your stealing days are over."

"I hope you're right." Then it was my turn to hesitate before saying, "And I think you're the man I've been looking for, too."

Luke pulled the car over to the side of the road and kissed me. When we came up for air, he framed my face with his hands and said softly, "Let's put away the groceries and talk about our future."

I closed my eyes and gathered my courage. "Let's put away groceries and make love," I countered bravely. And then I stunned myself by adding, "Better yet, let's make love—on the kitchen counter—*while* we're putting away groceries."

His laugh sent warm air tickling my ear. "Okay, I like your idea better. Let's do it."

Back at my apartment, I think I broke the record for putting away groceries in the least amount of time.

But I didn't put away *all* of the items.

I left out the chocolate syrup.

Luke grabbed the canned whip cream and candied cherries.

When he picked me up and set me on the kitchen counter, I gasped, linking my arms around his neck. Our eyes met. His smoldered with erotic promise.

I'm pretty sure mine were enormous with anticipation.

"I'm going to pretend you're a bowl of creamy vanilla ice cream," Luke told me, his voice rough with desire. He let go of me and uncapped the top on the whip cream. It clattered to the floor.

With his free hand, he ever so slowly unfastened my blouse. His hot gaze never wavered from mine as he uncovered my lace-covered breasts one inch at a time.

It wasn't until my lungs began to burn that I realized I wasn't breathing. Deciding it would be prudent to be conscious, I took a deep breath, and then let it out in a low moan as Luke closed his hand over my breast. I could feel the heat from his palm searing my skin through the fabric and silently urged him to remove the barrier.

Ah...I discovered I could add mind reader to Luke's list of talents. He moved his hand around and unsnapped my bra clasp in one sure stroke. "I think I might be melting," I whispered, staring at his mouth, wishing he'd

kiss me. Maybe if I thought it hard enough—

"Then I'd better start licking," he said, and proceeded to do just that. When he had one breast swollen and aching, he moved to the other. My blouse was shoved aside; my bra somewhere on the kitchen floor. Who cared?

I buried my hands in his hair and bit back a silent scream. Luke turned me on...big time. After a long, delicious moment, he leaned back and brought the can between us. He brought the cold nozzle to my nipple and squeezed.

Whip cream foamed over my nipple. I held my breath as he slowly brought his mouth to the creamy dessert and began to suck my nipple clean. The shock went all the way to my toes. Breathing hard now, I pulled his head up and began to lick the remains of the cream from his mouth. When he moved away after a moment, I moaned my disappointment.

He flashed me a knee-weakening smile. "Patience, my kitty."

Did I mind being called a kitty? *Hell* no!

He squirted whip cream on my other nipple, and then reached for the chocolate syrup. The smile on his face told me how much he was enjoying the seduction, and I can't say how much *that* turned me on, too.

After decorating his human sundae with syrup, he topped it by placing a candied cherry on top of my nipple. Amazingly, it stayed.

He leaned back to survey his creation, then moved in for the kill. Listening to someone chew had never, to my memory, turned me on before.

Until now, that is. Knowing that Luke was eating the cherry he'd stuck to my nipple made liquid pool between my legs. I'd never been with anyone so damned creative. *Wow* just doesn't cut it.

"God, you taste delicious," he growled. "I can't get enough!" With a final swipe over my rock-hard, aching nipple, he kissed me long and slow, giving me ample time to suck the sweet remains from his tongue and lick the rest from his lips.

I couldn't speak for Luke, but I was about to explode—and I still had most of my clothes on! If this is what he could do with a little whip cream, I shuddered to

think what the man could do when we got naked.

Aroused to the point of boldness, I cupped his jaw between my hands and stared into his darkened eyes. "Could we—do you think we might—" Okay, so maybe I wasn't so aroused I could finish that plea. Sue me.

But he knew what I wanted. I could see it reflected in his eyes. He smiled, and my stomach bottomed out. His hands went to the top snap on my jeans.

"Is this what you want? You want me to take off your jeans?"

Mutely, I nodded. I'd always been a secret fan of a little dirty talk. How could he know? Was Luke my soul mate? Did I really have to ask myself?

"You want me to slide them down—like this?"

I eagerly lifted my hips up so he could pull my jeans over my hips. So what if I happened to have on simple cotton bikini panties? I was pretty confident by the bulge in Luke's jeans that he didn't care.

He finished removing my jeans before looping his fingers playfully in the waistband of my panties. With a sexy glance upward, he said, "Are you particularly fond of these panties?"

I swallowed hard and shook my head. This had to be the most erotic moment in my life, and I savored every damn minute of it.

His fingers swept back and forth, lightly teasing my skin above the waist band. My stomach broke out in goose bumps.

"Then you won't mind if I...rip them a little taking them off?"

This time when I shook my head, I sent my hair flying in both directions. His deep chuckle turned the remainder of my bones to liquid as he pulled my panties down and off in one erotically rough sweep. I don't think they ripped—but if they had, I truly wouldn't have cared.

I hardly recognized my own voice as I asked, "Are you particularly fond of this shirt you're wearing?"

His smile deepened. I didn't think it was possible, but his eyes grew darker with desire. He slowly shook his head.

"Good." I licked my dry lips as I started on the buttons. "Then you won't mind if I pop a button or two?"

"Not at all."

He sounded as if he hoped I would, so I didn't disappoint him. I ripped through the rest and pushed his shirt from his shoulders, eyeballing his tanned, smooth skin. He was tightly muscled, yet lean.

I didn't waste any time getting to his jeans, eager to release that intriguing bulge and fill my hands with it. When he sprang free, I sucked in a sharp breath.

Impressive. Very impressive.

Closing my hand around him, I stroked him slowly. I looked into his glazed eyes. "I want to drizzle chocolate syrup on you and lick it off...slowly."

To my surprise, Luke shook his head, smiling ruefully. "I'm afraid I wouldn't last a minute if you did that. Maybe next time?"

Before I could get my mind around his words, he dipped his finger inside me. I jerked and grabbed his wrist to stop him, making him chuckle with delight.

"So I'm not the only one...on the edge, hm?"

"No, you're not," I whispered against his mouth. I was panting in little short, telling bursts by this point, so very close to satisfaction I was afraid to move. Fumbling in my haste, I opened the drawer beside me and pulled out the box of condoms I'd placed there earlier. I used my teeth to rip the tab aside and pull one out.

"I think we should finish this," he said thickly, watching as I unrolled a condom over his erection, "before we both explode. I want to be inside you when it happens."

"God, yes," I agreed, kissing him as he positioned himself between my legs. The anticipation was intense, unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I knew he was going to feel good.

But the reality still floored me.

He sank slowly into me, pausing enough to make me whimper for more. I locked my arms around him and squeezed hard, feeling my climax build with the force of an impending volcanic eruption.

"God, you're tight," Luke growled thickly against my mouth. I could feel him tense as he withdrew, and then slowly sank into me again. After the third stroke, he began to pick up tempo, which was a very good thing for

me...because it coincided with my scream of pleasure.

I honestly can't say who screamed the loudest. It was incredible...mind-blowing.

Afterwards, we both went limp against each other, breathing hard and laughing softly. His mouth felt warm against my neck as he kissed me over and over again. Finally he captured my mouth and gave me a soul-stirring kiss that rocked my world.

He drew back and looked me in the eyes, framing my face with his big hands. With a straight face, he said, "It is *not* the same with every woman."

Yes, he made me laugh, but his words made me feel treasured...special.

And then he said the incredible words every woman who finds herself in love wants to hear.

"I think I love you, Amber James, mother, nurse, part-time kleptomaniac..."

My heart did a couple scary of flips at his declaration. I was just a tad more cautious. "Do you think it's...possible that we can already be in love?"

His brows shot upwards. "How can you doubt it?"

I felt my self starting to grin. "You're right. How can I doubt it? I love you, too."

Over the next few blissful days, Luke kept me so occupied in bed...on the kitchen table...bathroom cabinet, etc., there was no opportunity to steal, had I the urge...or the strength.

And then my ex brought Corky home. I was so nervous about my son's reaction to the new man in my life, I actually took money from Luke's wallet! I didn't realize it until I found it later in my jean pocket. When I confessed to Luke, he tried to look stern as he promised to spank me later. Talk about fueling a fantasy!

Corky seemed a little reserved at first, but I discovered Luke not only had a way with women, he had a way with kids, as well. I'm sure it helped that Luke could do great impressions of some of Corky's favorite movie characters, including Optimus Prime from *Transformers*.

By the end of dinner on Corky's first night home, I knew a peace I hadn't felt in a long time.

It got even better. Luke challenged Corky to a game of checkers, so I shooed them out of the kitchen, rejecting

their offer to help with the dishes. About fifteen minutes later, curiosity got the best of me. I crept to the living room doorway to shamelessly eavesdrop. After all, my future depended on my two guys getting along.

"Thanks for not just letting me win," Corky was saying to Luke.

I bit my lip, smiling. I knew where Corky was going with this.

"Let you win?" Luke asked, sounding incredulous. "Why would I do that? I plan on wiping the floor with you, buster."

"Good," Corky said, sounding pleased. "Because I hate it when Mom treats me like a baby and lets me win."

I found myself grinning from ear to ear as Luke let out a put-upon sigh.

"Yeah. Women, huh? Can't live with 'em and can't live without 'em."

I heard the slap of a high five, then Corky's boyish giggle. My heart melted. Tears stung my eyes, but they were happy tears.

Needless to say, my stealing days were over. I'd found the man of my dreams, someone I hadn't believed existed. Six months later as I watch Luke and Corky playing touch football in the backyard, I'm still pinching myself. But when I begin to doubt my good fortune, Luke is always there to laugh at my fears and convince me in his own special way just how silly I'm being.

Love at first sight *does* happen, and we're living proof.

Sheridon Smythe

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