

I KISSED A GIRL II

More Virgin Lesbian Stories

EDITED BY
REGINA PERRY

ra^venous
romance

I Kissed a Girl: Volume II
More Virgin Lesbian Love Stories

Edited by Regina Perry

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Introduction

It has been my pleasure to edit *Volume II* of *I Kissed a Girl: More Virgin Lesbian Stories*. Sexuality has been a journey of discovery and acceptance for me. Exploring new boundaries and testing the limits has enhanced my passion and also magnified my ability to love unconditionally.

Editing both volumes of *I Kissed a Girl* has introduced me to a most diverse and talented group of authors. I have found true friendship, kindness, and compassion. Interest in exploration beyond heterosexuality spans the globe from Australia to Europe to Central and North America, as represented by these authors.

This divergent collection delves into the paranormal, touches on domination, and celebrates the beauty of female interaction and devotion spanning throughout history. May you enjoy the journey.

Regina Perry
February 2011

Queen of Swords

by Inara Lavey

Sweat pours off me in rivulets, soaking the thin cotton beneath the bronze and boiled leather armor I wear during weapons practice. It's especially annoying under the breastplate, and I can't wait to strip down and bathe. My helmet comes off first. Even with my hair braided and wrapped around the crown of my head to cushion my skull, repeated blows to the helmet leave me with a headache and ringing ears.

Unbuckling my scabbard, I toss it carelessly onto the rumpled silk sheets of the bed. The battered leather of the scabbard and tarnished bronze of the sword hilt look out of place against the cobalt blue silk. A study in contrasts, like much of my life.

I could take that train of thought further but choose not to. I want my bath, to lie back in hot scented water and drink spiced mead until I drift away to sleep, maybe even slip underneath the water and never wake up again—

"You look tired, my Queen." My maidservant, Lyra, enters the bedchamber, a pile of freshly laundered garments in her arms. Her gentle voice interrupts my dark thoughts. She sets the laundry down and comes up beside me. "Your bath water is drawn. Let me help you disrobe."

"Thank you, Lyra." I stand still as she deftly unbuckles the various pieces of armor, placing them with care on a massive wooden chest I use to store my weapons and other fighting accoutrement. The bronze must be wiped down, the leather oiled before they're put away. She retrieves my scabbard and sword from the bed, adding them to the pile on the chest as I stretch, feeling the aches and pains from practice lurking in my muscles, waiting to make themselves known the next day. But they would be minimal compared to the aftermath of previous combat. I no longer care enough to push myself.

Lyra starts to peel off the sweat-soaked cotton shift, but the sound of heavy footsteps makes us both freeze in place.

Ismet, ruler of the Kingdom of Swords, strides into the room, regal in robes of vibrant crimson silk. The fabric billows out and away from his body as he walks, displaying caramel-colored skin covering muscles toned to perfection. His eyes, framed with thick black lashes, are the same blue as the bedclothes; a blue so rich and vivid they seem unreal. Luxuriant black

hair ripples down to his shoulders. He is magnificent, every woman's fantasy come to life.

He is my husband.

And I hate him.

Lyra fades silently into the background as Ismet approaches me, careful to do nothing to attract his attention. Catching Ismet's eye rarely results in a happy ending, so unobtrusiveness is considered a survival trait amongst servants and courtiers alike.

I stare straight ahead while Ismet moves behind me, hard body pressed up against mine as he runs rough hands over my shoulders, fingers catching in the flimsy cotton on either side.

"Your cuts were apathetic, your parries weak, and there was no fire in your belly." One hand travels down to my stomach, fingers splayed against it. The other pulls the shift down over one shoulder, strong fingers idly caressing my skin.

"I was tired."

"A day before the tournament and you're tired?" Ismet's laugh holds no humor. "One would think you don't care about winning, my queen."

"I haven't been feeling well." I keep my tone even, knowing any hint of emotion will provoke him.

"Could there be something else in your belly?" His palm presses against the curve of my well-muscled abdomen. "A child, perhaps?"

I can't help the hiss of indrawn breath. This is cruel, even for Ismet. My inability to bear a child is one of the reasons I am once again competing in the tournament for the crown. A queen is given thirteen months to prove herself able to bear the King's heir. If she fails in this most essential royal duty, the tournament is held to give other ambitious—and foolishly romantic—women the chance to compete for the privilege of proving themselves more fruitful. Such ambition and romantic dreams are why I am now standing before the King of Swords and wishing either he or I was dead.

He hears the catch in my breath and smiles. "No child, then." He caresses my skin. The deceptively gentle touch makes my flesh crawl. "It is a pity, Adisa, for you are by far the most beautiful woman to wear the crown and share my bed thus far. Maybe you will win, and we'll have another thirteen months to try."

I know what comes next, so I'm ready when he rends the shift from my body in one swift move and shoves me onto the bed. His teeth sink into the chafed flesh between neck and shoulder where my shoulder guard had rested as he lifts his robes so he can thrust himself into me.

Ismet is nothing if not predictable.

The first time I experienced Ismet's brand of sex, I cried and pleaded with him to be gentle. This only led to acts of greater cruelty. Then, as I learned to hate him, I fought. This pleased him as it gave him a challenge in bed. I finally learned the only way to guarantee a quick finish was to be impassive. That way Ismet would grow bored and finish quickly, taking his perverse pleasures on more responsive partners, both willing and not. He only lay with me these days to ensure no one could accuse him of not carrying out his royal duty to produce an heir with the greatest female warrior of our kingdom.

So now I lie here still and silent as he ravages me, his magnificent body used as a weapon to hurt and subdue. This is not an act of love; it's an act of war. By the time he's finished, I hurt inside and out, but I keep my pain hidden.

He rises off the bed, his robes falling back around his body as if they'd never been in disarray. Without a backwards glance, he strides to the door and leaves the room.

Within seconds Lyra is at my side, helping me to my feet and leading me to the adjacent chamber containing a huge marble bath sunk into the tiled floor. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon rises towards me as I lower myself into the tub, hissing slightly as the hot water hits the scrapes and cuts I sustained during practice. Lyra keeps a firm grip on my arm until I've seated myself on the submerged ledge. Her fingers brush my shoulder and neck before she busies herself removing the pins holding my braids in place.

I shut my eyes and listen to the tiny clink of pins landing in the copper dish Lyra uses to hold them. When she finishes taking out the pins, she nimbly unbraids my hair from three separate braids, fingers gently running through the copper strands to shake them free. I sigh as she massages soap into my hair and scalp, strong hands working wonders from scalp to neck. I feel the tension dissipating from my muscles and rub my head against her hands like a cat seeking to have just the right spot scratched by its owner. Lyra instantly responds with more pressure where I need it. Her hands are magic.

The downside to this release of tension is an inadvertent opening to a floodgate of emotions I've been holding back for days. Tears slip down my face and my body starts shaking as I try to force them back. But they won't be stopped. And neither will the cold fact of the matter.

"I am nothing," I murmur without thinking.

"My queen?" Lyra's hands pause in their ministrations.

"What good is a queen who cannot bear her king a child?" My hands clench under the water, self-hatred flooding through me.

Lyra pours warm water over my head to rinse my hair, taking care that the soapy water stays out of my eyes. Then she speaks. "My queen, it is not your fault. King Ismet has taken three wives to his bed and lain with numerous servants and ladies of the court." A pause as she draws her fingers across my forehead and down the back of my scalp. "None of them has borne fruit." She finishes rinsing my hair and wraps it in a towel to keep it out of the scented water. I keep my eyes shut as she slowly scrubs my shoulders and back with a rough sponge, careful to avoid the abrasions.

"How..." I swallow, unwilling to accept this easy dispensation for my guilt. "How do you know this?"

"My lady, it is common knowledge throughout the palace in the servants' quarters. Very little happens here that we don't know about first." The sponge dips down my back to my waist and around to my stomach, the gentle circular motion as soothing as Lyra's voice as she speaks again.

"Please don't give up, my queen."

"What do you mean?"

"The tournament." There's a soft splash as Lyra enters the bath, something she's never done before. "Don't let him destroy you." She kneels in front of me in the bath. "Please. I beg you."

I look at her, really look at her for the first time since I became queen and she my maidservant.

Like everyone in the royal palace, Lyra is beautiful; my husband requires everything around him to be aesthetically pleasing, be it furnishings, artwork, or servants. But I've never before this moment noticed just how truly lovely she is. Dark brown hair streams down her back in glossy waves, drawn back from her face in several intricate braids starting at her brow and connecting at the back of her head. Her eyes, now gazing at me with an intense pleading look, are the same chocolate brown as her hair, and lined with thick black lashes. Her nose is straight and fine and her lips, dark pink and shimmering with a faint gloss, are as full as my own. She wears a robe of white silk, a bronze belt around her tiny waist. The silk clings to her small, rounded breasts and full hips. Her arms and thighs, glistening with moisture, are beautifully toned, the skin like golden velvet over the muscles beneath. She is a work of art in her own right.

"Lyra, you must mind your clothes or you'll ruin them." She freezes like a doe, her eyes wide with fear that she has displeased me.

"My Queen, I beg you, forgive me. I should not have presumed to enter the water with you—"

I raise a hand to calm her alarm. "Hush, Lyra. It is not your company that troubles me. You belong here in the water. It is your lovely silks and belt that do not."

Her cheeks grow flushed for a moment, and she lowers her gaze.

"You are right, of course, my queen." She rises from the pool to stand before me, water sluicing down her legs. Demurely, she unclasps her belt, folding it daintily before setting it down on the tiles with a soft click. Then, with lowered gaze, she bends down to gather up the wet folds of silk and pulls them up, first past her knees and thighs, then swiftly up and over her head, silk robe and cotton undergarment alike. She stands there, diffident and silent: her head down, her hands clasped before her in all modesty, even as her breasts stand proud. Then the moment passes, and she lowers herself into the water to take her place before me once more.

I close my eyes, numb with this blackness hollowing out my heart. Despair seems too small a word for the grinding emptiness it leaves behind. What flesh remains feels cold and stony, as though stricken by a medusa's baleful eye. A flicker of warmth stirs my skin: Lyra has returned to her ministrations. Her hands cradle my face as she rubs my temples and drives her fingers through my hair, easing my aching skull. I open my eyes to find hers intent on me.

"My lady?" Her face is that of a concerned mother leaned over the cradle.

"My life will almost surely end tomorrow, Lyra." I silently curse the fresh upwelling of tears that I cannot stop. A queen does not cry before her subjects. But I can't stop them, or the words that rush out of me without volition on my part. "I feel dead already, my life force running out of me like wine spilled from by a careless drunk at a feast—"

"You are wrong." The intensity of Lyra's voice stops my self-pitying monologue. I'm shocked by her trespass, but even more by the penetrating gaze of her eyes. Somehow it is fierce, determined, imploring, sorrowful, and bright all at once. It overwhelms me. If I were Ismet I'd call for the guards to have her punished—but I'm not Ismet. And even if I were so inclined, I cannot move a muscle, not even speak.

She clasps my face close to hers with an iron grip, and commands me with words like hammered steel. "Hear me, my lady. Your life is *not* yet forfeit, and you will *never* surrender to death tomorrow, or any other day, until you are old and wise with hair as silver as your sword, in your bed surrounded by your children's children. Do you hear me?"

I nod, dumbstruck.

"You will do this, and you will do it for your subjects who love you."

Her tone alters almost imperceptibly. “My lady... my queen... Adisa... you will do this for me, I who love you most of all.”

Her lips meet mine and conquer. I succumb completely to the strength of her desire. Her kiss awakens my heart; it roars to life like bellows on a forge. I reach for her, clasping her to me. Suddenly I want nothing in the world so much as I want the touch of her lips on mine and the press of her body against me. Cinnamon- and vanilla-scented water splashes over the marble lip of the tub as we wrestle together, but we pay it no heed, distracted by our kisses.

At length she slips an arm around my shoulders and hooks the other around my hip, lifting me so I float suspended in the water. I am a virgin maiden lying down beneath her princely suitor; I am a baby nestled in the crook of her mother’s arm. And like a babe, I turn my mouth to her breast and suckle on its firmness. Lyra holds me tightly, groaning her pleasure while she strokes my cheek and ear. I cling to her, happy for the first time since I became Ismet's bride and had my romantic dreams destroyed in a night of sadistic rapine.

Lyra's free hand trails from my face to squeeze my breast before caressing me down the length of my body and settling on the curve of my bottom. Her nimble fingers make me feel as wanton as a tavern wench. My excitement builds; I have to pull her head down for more kissing, deeper this time, our mouths open and eager.

Never have I been so hungry for the kiss of another, not even in my youth—certainly never for my royal husband. My lips move of their own accord to the graceful curve of her neck, tracing the line with the tip of my tongue and enjoying the hiss of indrawn breath this elicits. Emboldened, I graze my teeth against her flesh, feeling her life pulse against my mouth as I bite and suck just hard enough to leave a mark. A tiny part of my mind cries out for caution as I do this. After all, adultery is considered high crime against the king and if caught in the act, the punishment is a slow death. I wonder, though, if the laws set down apply to another woman. And even if they do, the fear of pain and death cannot dissuade me. But still—no need to make it public. Reluctantly I stop nibbling on her delectable skin.

Lyra slips a hand between my thighs and plays with me there, stroking, rubbing, tickling me with an audacious, knowing touch. Under her nimble fingers and relentless kisses, my legs become weak and slippery like eels, but then the opposite occurs: my limbs stiffen and my whole body arches, seized by a tremor of sheer delight, the likes of which I scarcely even imagined possible. Again I feel like a newborn babe. I cry and shake, making wordless sounds to express feelings I hardly even understand.

Lyra is not finished with me. It pleases me, since now I desperately want to return the pleasures she has so generously bestowed on me. She has me lean back against the side of the pool and extend my arms to grasp the marble rim for support. Then she swims up to me like a river nymph. Now I truly feel like a young princess about to be ravished by a bold knight. I cannot stop my legs from their trembling. She takes hold of my shoulders and pulls herself close, bringing her body to bear atop me.

I wonder for a moment what she could be planning—until her sex presses against mine, and I gasp at the tiny lightning bolts racing up and down my spine. She pulls us closer together still, and we grind our womanhood into one another. Our gazes lock together as well. I am stunned; I had no idea two people could yield such pleasure with each other, to say nothing of two women without the benefit of any manly parts.

When the raptures take her, she closes her eyes and moans and groans as if in a swoon. I can feel her shudders; they bring me along with her. Even after our delights fade to a sweet, gentle afterglow we hold each other, floating in the warm, scented water, lost in one another's arms before finally moving to the bed for the remainder of the night.

She holds me against her, my head cradled on her shoulder. Kissing my hair, she says fiercely, "Promise me you will not die tomorrow, my queen." "I promise," I whisper as I drift off to sleep.

* * * *

I watch the tournament in the royal seating area, my chair butted up next to Ismet's, no chair arm between us so we can sit as close to each other as possible. I wonder if anyone else in the audience notices the irony of this arrangement, especially since I'm pressed against the far side of my chair to make as much space between us as possible. Luckily Ismet is too engrossed in the combat below to pay much attention to me. Once in a while his hand reaches out to caress my thigh or arm in a proprietary manner, just to remind anyone who might be watching that I belong to him—at least until one of the several dozen challengers in the arena below defeats me in battle.

Ismet drinks goblet after goblet of spiced wine, frowning at me when I refuse to drink with him. I eschew the heady brew for water, knowing I need a clear head if I am to live to see another day. This year's crop of challengers are fierce, each one determined to be the one to replace me at Ismet's side, and in his bed.

I might know some, if not all, of these women, but I have no way of recognizing them. Tradition decrees that boiled leather masks that stop right

above the wearer's mouth cover the faces of all challengers. There are openings for the eyes and nostrils, but it's nearly impossible to identify individuals. Hair is pulled back into tight braids and tucked under simple metal helmets held on with leather straps buckled under the chin. Their bodies, on the other hand, are revealed clearly in short white gauze shifts with minimal armor covering their extremities. Breastplates and arm guards are allowed but otherwise it's all down to how well the combatants wield their short sword and shields.

This is a test of agility, skill, endurance, and pain. Bruises and welts are raised. Blood is spilled as sharp blades slice through unprotected flesh. But no one dies. Only one match is to the death.

Only I am allowed bronze armor, having earned the right by defeating the fully armored queen before me.

Only a true warrior can aspire to be queen of the Kingdom of Swords.

Ismet watches the bouts with a smile curving his full lips. He comments on the fighting skills of each combatant, as well as their physical attributes.

"That one," he says, pointing to a particularly ferocious warrior who has won three consecutive matches. "She reminds me of you when you first fought for the crown. She moves like a jungle cat."

I watch the woman who has caught Ismet's attention. She's lithe and toned, skin kissed a smooth gold by the sun. She wears a boiled leather breastplate, and she wields a sword like she was born with one in her hand. She is a warrior to be reckoned with, and I know it is she who I'll be facing in the final bout.

I pity the ambitious bitch because I have something worth fighting for now.

The smell of sweat, blood, and sand blend together as the morning turns into afternoon and one by one the combatants are weeded out from the tournament. I eat a light meal of bread, fruit, and cheese, just enough to give me energy without weighing me down. My turn in the arena is drawing near, the last bout before the final challenge drawing to a predictable finish. The lithe warrior fights as though possessed and even though her opponent is skilled, she is no match for the other woman and concedes defeat.

There will be a short break to give the victorious fighter a chance to catch her breath. Not too long, of course, because stamina is one of the qualities the Queen of Swords must possess.

Ismet turns to me, eyes aglow with the anticipation of the bloodshed to come. "I knew it would be that one. She is a worthy opponent for you, Adisa." His smile is cruel as he adds, "And perhaps a worthy replacement." He lifts his goblet in a mock toast. I surprise him by taking it from his hand and downing the contents. It's only a quarter full, just enough to fire my blood without muddling my head. And if this is to be my last drink, let it be the best wine the land has to offer.

I toss the empty goblet back to Ismet and pick up my helmet, shield, and sword. Then, without a backwards glance at my husband, I go to meet my fate.

The crowd cheers as I take the field of battle. I wave to them with the confidence befitting my station. I am already wearing my armor and it is a matter of seconds to don my helmet. I limber up with stretches and lunges, then take a few practice swings with my sword to warm up my arms and shoulders.

My opponent returns to the sands and the crowd cheers her as well. I don't mind; she deserves their accolades. I admire the play of muscles under her golden skin as she walks towards me, the controlled grace with which she moves. Her death will be a waste, but it is the law. Life's blood must be shed at the end of this fight.

We face each other. I give a small nod of acknowledgment and salute her with my sword, pommel pressed to my left breast with the blade held high. She returns the salute and we both drop into fighting stances. I lead offensively, blade and right foot forward, shield held at the ready, while my opponent's stance is defensive, her shield in front. I find this surprising, as she has fought offensively in every other bout today.

We circle one another warily, looking for openings. I feint a cut to her left shoulder, then lunge with the point towards her stomach as she uses her shield to defend against the feint. She is quick to recover and parries the thrust with her blade, responding with a head cut that I deflect with my shield before launching a series of cuts and thrusts that cause her to retreat as she uses both sword and shield to keep my blade from reaching her flesh.

I press my advantage and ruthlessly launch another offensive, forcing her to retreat yet again. This time my sword catches her across a shoulder, then her thigh, drawing blood with each cut. The animal grace and confidence that marked her movements in previous fights seems diminished, as if I intimidate her. The audience hisses and catcalls its disapproval at such a one-sided fight and, indeed, I am disappointed to find her less worthy of an opponent than she had appeared. But I have no desire to draw the fight out any longer than necessary even though I know such an

anticlimax to the tournament will disappoint the crowd and infuriate Ismet.

I charge, smashing her shield with mine, the impact sending her sprawling on her back on the hot sand. She raises her sword in an attempt at defense, but I sweep it aside with my blade, giving a flick of my wrist that wrests the hilt from her grasp. The sword flies through the air and lands a few feet away. I quickly kick her shield aside, pinning it and her left arm to the ground with one foot. Then I lean forward, sword point against her neck. The audience roars in the anticipation of the blood to come.

"I do not wish to kill you," I say. "I had not planned on seeing another sunrise. But I made a vow that I cannot and will not break."

"I understand, my queen." Her voice is muffled by the leather helm, but there is no anger that I can hear in her reply. She tilts her head to one side, baring her neck in preparation for the deathblow. The cords in the slender column of her neck stand out. I see her pulse beat.

And I see the faint bruise and what look like teeth marks at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and I know why my opponent has lost the fight so easily. "Lyra?"

Her lips curve up into a smile under the helm, and I drop to my knees beside her, horrified by the realization that I'm responsible for the blood running from the cuts on her body. I unbuckle her helmet and toss it to one side, seeing my beloved's face covered in dirt, sweat, and yet more blood. "I almost slew you," I whisper.

"Better I should die at your hands than live after seeing you slain by another," she says, her smile so full of naked adoration that my heart swells near to bursting.

"You shall not die today." I stand and help Lyra to her feet, turning to face Ismet as the crowd continues to call for blood.

Ismet stands, swaying unsteadily from too much wine. "What is this, Adisa?" he yells. "Kill her now!"

The crowd echoes his sentiment. I stare them down, turning in a slow circle until I once again face my husband. "I will not kill her."

Unsheathing his sword, Ismet leaps over the balustrade of the royal box onto the sand of the arena, fury marking his every move.

"Life's blood must be shed in combat on this sand," he shouts, his voice carrying across the arena to the highest rows. "It is the law of the Kingdom of Swords!" He turns to us, sword raised. "My queen, either you spill this blood or you forfeit your crown and your life."

I step protectively in front of Lyra and say, "I defy you, Ismet." I do not yell the words, but my voice carries to the guards, the court, and the royal counselors, who all stare at me with varying degrees of shock.

Ismet's face turns purple with rage. "You dare..." Speech fails him for a moment as he strides towards me, sword at the ready. "Then you die, my queen." He thrusts the point of the blade toward my stomach in a killing blow—that I deflect with my own sword, sidestepping as I do so. In one quick move I reverse my grip and drive my blade into Ismet's stomach, the bronze slicing through silk, flesh, and muscle with equal enthusiasm.

Ismet's face registers pain and disbelief in equal measure. He falls to his knees, and I pull the blade out, bracing one foot against his thigh as I do. I raise my sword again and decapitate Ismet with one well-placed blow. Wrapping my fingers in his hair, I heft Ismet's head into the air, holding it so all can see. "Life's blood has been shed in combat!" I cry with the full force of my voice. "The law of the Kingdom of Swords has been upheld!"

Guards and audience alike gape at me in shocked silence. I stare back at them defiantly as the Royal Counsel begins muttering amongst themselves. An order is shouted and the guards break free of their stunned immobility to surround us, swords drawn. Lyra slips her hand into mine and we wait to see if we will die together this day.

After what seems an eternity, Abad, the oldest and most revered of the advisors, steps carefully onto the sand and approaches us, four guards on his heels. I steel myself for what I hope is a swift and merciful death for both Lyra and myself.

Abad stops in front of me, his face impassive as he looks from me to the fallen body of his king. He gives a little nod, then turns to the crowd and raises his arms, immediately commanding the attention of all who are present. "The Royal Counsel has ruled that the law has indeed been upheld. Queen Adisa, the rule of the Kingdom of Swords falls now upon your shoulders." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "May you rule with more wisdom and compassion than your predecessor."

The crowd erupts in chaos, shouting and cheering as I pull Lyra to me, tasting the tang of blood and sweat on her lips. And the kiss is pure because it tastes of freedom—and hope.

Monkey Business

by Fifi Bernard

It's 2010. Twenty-ten—don't you like the sound of that? A decade of new beginnings. And thus begins a first in my lifetime experience—up in a tree house.

You'd think the rainy season would be perfect for the Rain Forest Aid concert on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, but hardly anyone comes and those who could slip and slide their cars out of the parking lot have already gone home. All the better for us. The meager attendance dwindled by constant rain has raised our chances of winning the big raffle prize: a free weekend in a tree house resort, Finca Mono Verde.

At the finale, the rain pours down on the soccer field, splashing mud up to our asses. Barely audible through the pounding rain, I hear, "And now, the big raffle prize! The ultimate tree house experience, a weekend stay at Finca Mono Verde goes to ... Angelina White."

I scream, "Wow! I did it!"

After jumping up and down and clapping, my husband Joe's big laugh becomes a huge hug and kiss. "Angie, you're my lucky star. What would I do without you?"

"I've got a real surprise for you this birthday," says Joe, as he nuzzles my neck in the place that gives me goose bumps all over.

"You think I've forgotten about the tree house vacation?" I roll my eyes. "My memory's not that bad."

"No, there's something else."

"Hint?"

"Okay. It'll include Mark and Claire."

"Superb. We have such fun together."

"You'll find out more about it tonight at dinner when you open your presents."

It's the winter holiday season in Costa Rica, and there's excitement in the air. Our little pueblo on the beach is packed with snowbirds getting away from a white Christmas, and local families setting up their traditional camps near the water's edge during the holiday.

The night of my birthday we meet Mark and Claire at the open air seafood restaurant on the beach for our favorites: either *pescado entero*, whole red snapper fried to perfection right down to the crispy tail, or freshly caught lobster dripping in melted butter with all the local trimmings. We order two of each and share, licking our fingers in contentment. For dessert Claire produces her *piece de resistance*, a chocolate decadence cake, served with fresh strong Costa Rican coffee.

“Oh, Claire, what a wonderful, tasty gift. I don’t know how you can make and eat these things without gaining a pound.” She’s dark, willowy, gorgeous, and could pass for a *Tica*, the local diminutive for a Costa Rican. Mark, on the other hand looks totally gringo, a good-looking, blond-brushed-with-grey, surfer-type. We’ve built houses on the same mountain, and first became good neighbors, then best friends.

“The cake isn’t the only gift,” Mark said, handing me an envelope that I immediately tear open.

On the front is a photo of one of the beautiful tree houses that are part of the Finca Mono Verde resort, high up in the canopy of jungle giants. Inside I read, *The more, the merrier! Let’s swing like the monkeys!* And out falls a certificate: *Good for a three-on-one massage. Happy Birthday!*

“Is this luxury, or what?” I exclaim.

“It’s planned for this weekend. There are two bedrooms and all the amenities. What a treat!” Joe rests his arm around my shoulders.

“This is the most exotic gift I’ve ever received. Swinging in the trees? I’ll bet you were in on this, Joe?”

“Sure.” He shrugs and kisses me, his long grey curls bobbing as he nods and grins like a Cheshire cat. “And I read they have ziplines to help us get around, since we don’t have monkey tails. That is, if there’s any reason to leave our little aerie. Heh, heh.”

* * * *

The four of us are on our way to the resort with our directions in hand. It begins:

You won’t find billboards or roadside signs that lead you to Finca Mono Verde. We are not a full-service spa, but we’re pretty fancy. You won’t find TVs in our solar-powered cabinas. What you will find is a fully comfortable, eco-friendly retreat from the outside world to explore and enjoy on your own.

As per directions, we follow the coastal highway south to the remote pueblo of Piedras Negras and turn left at the only restaurant in town.

According to the pointer sheet, it serves the best fried chicken in this area, and since it's lunchtime we decide to stop. We eat, have a few beers, and get into the vacation mode. Joe plays footsie with me under the table. We've already started celebrating my birthday by reviving our latent sexual desires. A once-in-a-lifetime concurrent lunar eclipse, winter solstice, and Mercury coming out of retrograde has lifted us to new heights in several areas of our lives.

"My horoscope this week said I'd be experiencing something new and very delightful, and it's already happening." I laugh.

It looks like Mark and Claire are feeling the same vibes as they laugh at something he's whispered in her ear. They both look good, Claire especially.

Back in the car we finally see the obscure sign for Finca Mono Verde. We follow the dirt road a few miles to the base camp and pull into the only parking area. The community center, kitchen, and dining room are surrounded by well-kept gardens and trails through twenty acres of primary forest. Co-owner Sue greets us, shows us around, then leads us through the jungle to our tree house. The trail is long, steep, and slippery. As the luggage gets heavier Joe asks, "Where are the ziplines?"

"We use those mostly for bringing in supplies to each tree house. If you're interested in trying them, my husband Paul would be happy to show you."

Thank goodness we're in good physical health, but the destination is worth every step. A handmade sign, "Mis Brasas Treehouse," points to a two-story wooden structure set high in the canopy of four giant rainforest trees with one more steep ladder-like staircase to our heaven.

After showing us around and giving last-minute advice, Sue leaves us with, "Will you be coming for dinner at seven back at base camp?"

Mark opens the fridge. "Hey, all the food we ordered is here." It's stocked with fancy olives, gourmet cheeses, pate, assorted wines, and beer. On the counter are fresh-baked bread and croissants for breakfast. "We don't have to go anywhere."

We all agree and thank Sue.

"Okay. See you all tomorrow. Enjoy."

We sit on the balcony and soak in the exciting new adventure of being an integral part of the majestic jungle hundreds of feet below and above us. "We're so lucky ... because you are," says Joe, winking at me. "You win stuff all the time."

But luck isn't all of it. Whether you believe in horoscopes or not, taking risks and making changes is what makes our lives rich and exciting. And

now here we are in the treetops of the Costa Rican jungle drinking Cuba Libres, nibbling gourmet snacks and cookies. In our faces, the insistent sound and sight of the waterfall intertwines with sweet and raucous birdsongs and fluttering blue iridescent flashes of morpho butterflies. We relax and slowly melt into the scenery.

After naps and showers Claire sets up the spa. She and Mark have done their share by contracting with the owners to supply the fancy food and drink, and a mini spa with all the trimmings. The afternoon sunset is infusing the room and its occupants in a golden glow.

“Strip and lie face down on the table. Are you ready for the luxury of a lifetime?” Claire pats me on the ass. As the professional masseuse of the group, she chooses my torso. Joe positions himself at my head and Mark at my feet. We’ve all enjoyed her hands and learned a lot by reciprocating. Flickering candles and tinkling music complete the scene.

Three sets of hands in different places on my body—sliding, kneading, pressing, tingling—soon become one swirling vibrating rainbow. First it’s butterflies, then snakes. Utter relaxation turns to electricity as light fingers drift under my armpits and follow the line of my breasts. More hands are following all the lines, cracks, and crevices of my body: backs of knees, between fingers and toes, over the curves of my hips and ass. I inadvertently groan in ecstasy, my body pulsating with energy.

“Okay, turn over.”

I open my eyes. It’s dark now except for the candles’ glow. Everyone’s face looks as dazed as mine. They’re enjoying this almost as much as I am. A cool scented towel is placed over my eyes. Gentle strong fingers massage the muscles of my breasts until I can feel my nipples turn to ripe firm blueberries. It’s got to be Claire. She can feel it too. A woman knows exactly the pressure needed. Other hands slowly encircle my navel in ever-widening rings to the edges of my pubic hair. I begin to slither, my head flinging back as my chest rises and my hips begin to gyrate. The hands follow and match my movements. Fingers are placed in my mouth to suck and tongue, and in other orifices, like busy bees, to find sweet nectar spreading over and through me. Tremors radiate out from my breasts into earthquakes felt through my whole body with waves of such intensity it surprises us all. They cover me in warm towels and slowly drift away to let me recover in solitude.

None of us knew the massage would end like this. Or—am I the only one who didn’t know? Joe has always had an interest in a threesome—which we tried once, two guys one girl—but three on one? I’d read that back in the early 1900s, “hysterical” women were prescribed orgasmic

massages to give them release from their stress. Often the prescribing doctors gave the treatment.

I smile; it works.

Is this the prelude to our foursome? It was Claire who really turned me on. Why have I never tried a woman's sexual touch? I drift off, remembering the tornado of communal pleasure.

I'm awakened by Joe and led to a bed under a dark bruising sky pelting rain onto the thatched roof. He enfolds me in his arms and feeling his insistence evokes an immediate reaction to the incredible past experience. We're all over each other, both of us hyped like never before: sharing kisses and fluids, licking and biting, moaning and laughing. Reaching ecstasy together makes us laugh out loud.

At dawn's first light, still wrapped in each other's arms, we awake to the booming calls of the howler monkeys marking their breakfast territories. We take ours on the balcony as the sun glitters diamonds through the billowing mist above the falls. The birds call good morning, flying through the shocking blue iridescence of dozens of morpho butterflies. Claire and Mark join us, arms wrapped around each other and smiling a bit guiltily. We smile back as I put us all at ease. "I just want to thank you all for the most unusual and pleasurable experience of a lifetime. I don't think any of us thought it would end the way it did, but let's just chalk it up to getting lost in the moment. Again, I was the lucky one. I hope you guys had as much fun as I did, and later, we did." They nod and look relieved.

"We definitely all got carried away, didn't we?" Mark laughs.

We're startled from our conversation by something huge flying through the air. Is it a bird, a plane? No, it's SuperPaul on his zipline. "Hey, good morning!" he yells, landing on a platform nearby. "Just on my morning rounds. Do you all need anything?"

"Well, I'm interested in flying through the air," says Joe. "Any chance we could try the zipline?"

Mark nods. "I'd like to try it, too."

"Sure. Meet me at the zip platform just below your tree house. Girls?"

"I don't want to leave this paradise. You guys go." I answer.

Paul advises, "Well, there's a short trail to that beautiful waterfall you can see from your balcony, with a bathing pool beneath it."

"I'd love to get in the water," replies Claire. "Let's hike to the waterfall while the guys act like monkeys."

* * * *

After watching the animal life in the canopy, we decide to join it. The first trail, though short, is a steep heart-pounder. It takes us up to the edge of the waterfall that has been the backdrop to our treetop aerie. Standing atop the massive surge of water is exhilarating yet frightening. “It feels like it’s sucking me over!” Claire yells over the deafening roar.

“Yeah, it’s too daring for me. Let’s find calmer water for a dip.” We follow the trail in sinewy curves down and along the crystal-clear Rio Mono Verde rippling over smooth rocks. Eden calls. Stripping off our sweaty clothes, we frolic like otters in the cool water, then slither onto the flat hot rocks to bask in the sun.

Claire raises the subject of the previous night’s passion. “Angie, I had no idea things would progress the way they did either, but everyone was carried away with pleasure.”

“Well, I obviously was, and it was your touch that started it all. I’ve always known women’s bodies could turn me on as much as men’s, but I’d never tried it. My breasts have always been the key to my sexuality and you sure knew how to unlock the door.” Just thinking about it makes my nipples harden to that ripe berry stage, and Claire notices.

“I have tried it and learned a lot in the process. Being a masseuse had something to do with it.” Facing me, she gently puts both hands on my shoulders and begins a slow massage down my chest and around the slight mounds of my breasts. Then, opening her hands, she begins circling her palms on my already erect nipples. The effect is breathtaking as my back arches and my chest unconsciously strains towards her mouth. Her lips take in the nipple as her tongue laps the areola. My knees draw in and spread, revealing a blossom ready to burst, demanding touch. First her fingers caress each fold with life-giving nectar until I ache for her tongue. When it comes I move with it faster and harder until I split open, moaning, then laughing in bliss—thinking not of the past or the future, but of the momentous now.

When I recover, I take her in my arms. “Tenderness of touch, that’s what I love, miss, need. It’s my turn.”

Claire’s laugh is delightful. “Can’t wait.”

“Perfect. Let me love you from tip to toe.”

I start slowly, recalling my pleasure, following my instinct to kiss her—the perfect beginning. I gently rub my lips over hers until our tongues can no longer stay still. They tentatively touch and retract like little chameleons, then intertwine and explore inside and out. I continue down over the fast pulse in her throat, across her chest, over her full breasts to her dark, rich nipples, sweet as chocolate drops—so different from mine.

She sighs and sings and gently leads me lower. I savor her smooth curves and deliciously soft skin, so different than Joe's, leaving snail tracks on her stomach, around her navel. My hands precede my mouth as I part her thick dark bush and savor the mysterious loveliness of another woman's sexual flowering. My tongue draws into this bud, each emerging petal sticky with her sweet mead covering us both in love. Claire trembles all over in visible elation. "You're *so* good."

"You're a great teacher!"

Replete in the moment, we hold each other until our passion ebbs and the future dribbles back in. Will this be our secret? Will we draw our husbands into the melee? Will we do nothing? It's not the time to answer these questions. I sigh and quote, "Our flesh surrounds us with its own decisions."

Humuhumunukunukuapua'a

by Kilt Kilpatrick

“C’mon, Mila, just try it,” Mina says. She’s so gorgeous it makes my teeth ache, but I can’t just jump right in with her. I have to drag out the fun a little longer.

“No.” I pout. “I can’t...” I’m such a tease.

“Here, just let me show you.” She leans in a little closer, adjusts her top. I pause as if considering it, but I don’t overplay the shy act.

“Mm ... okay.” That makes her eyes light up.

“Thatta girl ... all right, we’ll take it real slow and easy, okay?”

I nod again, delighted. She sits up straight, all business, like a dedicated schoolteacher who really loves her subject. It’s irresistible.

“Now see what I do, then you try it. Ready?” She licks her lips. I nod, and she begins.

“Humu...”

“Humu...” I repeat.

“Un-huh. Now another humu...”

“Humu...”

“Nuku...”

“Nuku...”

“Nuku...”

“Nuku...”

“Apu...”

“Like the Kwik-E-Mart guy on the Simpsons?”

“Yep. Just like.”

“Apu...”

“A’a...”

“Ah-ah...”

“Close enough. Now start to put them together. Humu-humu...”

“Humu-humu...”

“Nuku-nuku...”

“Nuku-nuku...”

“Yeah! You’re doing it. Okay, let’s bring it home.
Humuhumunukunuku”

“Humuhumu ... nukunuku”

“Altogether now.” I take a deep breath.

“Humuhumununu-noo-noo...” I blow it and start giggling. She laughs too, but slaps my arm.

“No! So close! C’mon, get it together, girl!” But now I can’t stop the gigglefest. She’s smiling, but I know inside she’s exasperated. She takes her native culture *very* seriously. She soldiers on.

“Hey, it’s shorter than supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, and you can say that.”

Just between you and me, I *do* totally know how to say it, but I can’t help it—learning how to say the ridiculously long name of the Hawaiian state fish is practically a rite of passage here. I just love the way Mina looks when she says the word. Every syllable looks like the beginning of a kiss.

God, that *did* sound totally lesboid, didn’t it? I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I guess Hawaii makes me gay for everyone: the surfer boys with their perfect tans on their perfect bodies; hair spiky short like hedgehogs or long straggly sun-bleached strands; their arms black with dense, intricate Polynesian tattoos; shark-tooth necklaces and cocky grins. And not just them, the girls too: blond mainland tourist girls shopping in sarongs; chic Japanese schoolgirls dressed for strolling Manhattan or decked out in crazy *Harajuku* street fashions; the knockout native *waihine* surfer babes striding across the beaches with their boards under their arms. I mean, just look at them. Hey, gorgeous is gorgeous.

And Mina is definitely gorgeous. The first thing I noticed about her was how perfectly *red* she was. Her cute pixie-cut hair is the exact same color as her soft tropical skin. Both are this striking shade of deep red, like schoolhouse bricks or maybe the surface of Mars, except that makes her sound ugly, and she’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen. Let’s say she’s the same color as cinnamon or paprika or saffron. Saffron’s red, isn’t it? Anyway, I’m sure if we went down to one of the little Asian markets I could find a bin of some exotic precious spice in just her color.

Her Apache red skin is offset by the most perfect Polynesian smile of dazzling flawless white teeth and bright almond eyes, a djinni’s eyes. She says she’s a mutt, a mix of native Hawaiian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Portuguese, and God knows what else. It all comes together so beautifully to make her one hundred percent *kama’aina*.

I had only just arrived on Oahu from upstate New York with my mom, a newly transferred flight surgeon. Me? An army brat in a new place where I knew nobody and nothing, out of my element as usual. I couldn’t even get my bearings straight. On Hawaii, there’s really no such thing as north, south, east or west. Everything is either *mauka*, toward the mountains; *makai*, toward the sea; and either toward Waikiki or toward Ewa. So you

ask somebody for directions to somewhere, and they might say “Kapaolono Park? Dat on the *mauka* side of Kilauea, *waikiki* of Pokole.” I tell you, Hawaii is a different planet.

One happy surprise was discovering I had a particular advantage here. I’m half Canadian French-Indian and half Russian, and even though I was a total east-coast girl with genes from the frostiest parts of the world, somehow my brunette hair and Iroquois eyes made most island folk assume I was a native. At least until they asked me something in Pidgin.

The plan was I would start college next semester. Until then, I was free to get a summer job and take advantage of living in paradise. I resolved to thwart my natural tendency toward shyness. So when I stumbled onto a flier for a Zumba class at a neighborhood gym, on a whim I went in and signed up. But when I walked into the studio on that first day, I got self-conscious again and stuck to the back of class, intimidated by the competence of the other students. Everybody had clearly done this before. They breezed through the choreography, segueing effortlessly from spicy salsa jiggles to reggaeton gyrations to undulating belly dance moves. I struggled to follow along, always a beat behind the rest of the class. My frustration grew. One girl took pity on me.

“Don’t sweat it,” she said with a kind smile. “You’re doing great. Lemme show you. It’s easier if you forget about the arms and just worry about the footwork.” It was Mina, of course, shaking it in tight black workout pants and a bright floral-print tank top. Ignoring the rest of class, she walked me through the steps. I watched her swaying hips carefully, grateful for her help. She was right; it *was* easier to get the footwork down first. Soon, I had it.

“Hey! Look at you—you’ve got it!” Her spirit was infectious.

Then the next number changed tempo again, and I had to start all over, but I had definitely turned the corner in my attitude, if not my aptitude, for dance.

Toward the end, our perky instructor called out, “Freestyle,” and encouraged us to do any steps we wanted to the music. I went for samba moves, the style that was giving me the least trouble. Mina, meanwhile, shifted into a hula routine: She did a gentle bow, swept out her arms as if gathering flowers, brought her hands to her heart, brought them up again in exquisite gestures for birds, for fragrant blossoms and ocean waves. All the while she swiveled her hips and moved in graceful little orbits. I was enraptured.

As class wrapped up, she flashed me a last smile and a little wave before she left. I watched her go and followed her from a safe distance. In the

locker room I hesitated for a few anxious moments of nail biting, but finally screwed up my courage and came over to her.

“Hey, um, I just wanted to say thanks again for rescuing me back there. You’re so good at this.” She looked up from untying her shoes.

“Oh, hi! Hey, no worries. I thought you moved your *okole* great once you got the hang of it.” She dropped her sneaker and stood up. “I’m Mina.” She leaned in and whispered, “It’s short for Wilhelmina, but I don’t like that so much. I don’t even know why I just said that.” She laughed. I was touched by her disclosure.

“My name’s Mila,” I said, and lowered my voice too. “It’s short for Ludmila, which I’ve never told anyone in my whole life, *ever*.”

“We’re both bound to secrecy, then,” she said conspiratorially. We laughed and shook on it.

We were inseparable after that: Mila and Mina. Since we were both between boyfriends, it was easy to spend long hours together just hanging around the neighborhood in Kaimukī or heading off to the windward side beaches. We would bop down Kapahulu Avenue hitting the thrift stores or browsing the Goodwill or checking Peggy’s Picks for irresistible bargains on jewelry. If we were feeling flush from our part-time jobs, we’d go shop for bikinis at the funky little boutiques. When we grabbed a bag of M&Ms from the cramped little corner market, we would tell each other that they were made especially for us, and somehow the joke never got old.

Grabbing a lunch of native grub at Ono’s became part of the ritual. She got me hooked on oodles of varieties of meat, usually pig and usually wrapped in taro and ti leaves: *pipikaula* pork jerky, shredded steamed *kalua* pig, *laulau* (sort of a Hawaiian dim sum) and *na’au pua’a* (don’t ask). Even Spam tasted good Hawaiian style, though I still haven’t quite warmed up to poi yet. Most of the time we’d finish with jiggly blocks of *haupia*, coconut milk pudding.

Once Mina inherited her cousin’s beat-up Jeep, we really started going places. We drove up to Kuli’ou’ou and hiked up the ridge trail all the way to the top. We felt like Indiana Jones in the jungle, especially the higher we got, when the muddy, slippery trail became so razor narrow you could see the mountain dropping off sharply on either side. Thick flood rivers of mist filled the valleys between the curdle of tropic green mountains, except when the occasional break would surprise you with a queasy reminder of just how high up you were. On the steepest portion of the trail, we pulled ourselves to the top with ropes. At the ragged little summit of bare, packed earth, we shivered with cold and fear of heights, but the view was spectacular.

Other days we would drive up to the North Shore to see the sea turtles

nesting at Laniakea beach, and freeze our mouths polishing off a delish shave ice at one of the venerable little roadside places up Hale'iwa way. Because Mina was a native, she knew all the secret breaks on the leeward side, and we could go surf there without getting hassled by the fiercely territorial island boys. At the end of the day we would find a public park at the top of the rises and listen to the cicadas while watching the sunset transform the baby-blue sky over Honolulu to a swirl of fire, sherbet pink and golden butter. We would joke about what a waste all this romance was on the two of us girls with no guys to take advantage of it. But secretly, I thought everything was just perfect the way it was.

I never uttered the word *lesbian*, not even in my own head. I just had the biggest crush on my friend and loved spending as much time with her as I could. She was just so easy to hang out with, and we always had such fun together. Though gradually, I realized I was developing a kind of itch I couldn't quite scratch. I surprised myself with how badly I wanted to touch her. I didn't want to, you know, *do things* to her. I just wondered what it would be like to kiss her, and sometimes when I was alone and sure no one could catch me, I would kiss my hand and pretend it was her lips.

I kept an eye out for any sign that Mina might feel the same way and treasured every tiniest little positive clue, analyzing its significance for hours while I thought of her late at night in my bed: the smile she would shoot me when we'd meet, the way she would grab my arm when we made jokes, the little bone-hook necklace she bought me at a roadside stand. I'll never forget the sensation when she helped me put it on, the touch of her fingers against the back of my neck when I pulled up my hair so she could get the tiny little clasp closed. It sent a tingle from the base of my skull all the way down.

But mostly I kept the feelings to myself. For every hopeful indication floating like a flower on the sea, there was a crushing wave of anxiety. What if I was wrong? What if I tried something and she freaked out? I couldn't stand to lose her—better if I kept it all to myself and let things stay the way they were. If only I could—

The day I blew it started out so nice, too. I ran out, happy as a songbird, as soon as I could hear Mina's battered old Jeep coming down the street. She was adorable as usual in sunglasses, a raspberry-colored bikini, Daisy Duke cutoffs, and an island cowgirl hat, woven from straw with a thin leather band of cowrie shells.

"Hey, cowgirl, cool hat!" I called out as I hopped in next to her.

"Yeah, you like it? Good, 'cause I got one for you too." She pulled out a matching one from behind her seat with a flourish, like a magician presto-

change-o'ing a bouquet from out of thin air.

"Really?" I said with a little squeal of glee. I grabbed my present and without even thinking gave her a tight hug of thanks and a peck on the cheek. A split second later I realized I was squeezing the side of her boob and let go, a little too quickly. The shock must have registered on my face, and I scanned hers for her reaction. But no disaster yet; she wasn't freaking out. I added that to my mental collection of hopeful signs.

We drove up the Pali highway to Lanikai. According to Mina, the beach there had become overdeveloped, like so much of the island, but she thought there was still a secret place she could find for us. I liked the sound of that. She parked the Jeep in an alley behind a row of houses, and we walked down to a little unmarked beach access, guarded only by a trio of chickens. It's surprising how much poultry seems to roam the island freely, afraid of nothing except the occasional mongoose, which also wanders freely.

A few footsteps later I had to catch my breath. The nondescript suburban walk suddenly opened up onto a bright, sunny vista of surf and sand, postcard-perfect. Crystal-clear water the color of blue topaz and emeralds lapped at a beach that seemed to be made entirely of miles and miles of golden brown sugar. Just a little ways off the coast lay a pair of hilly islands, like a couple of great green dromedary humps floating in the ocean. "It's perfect," I sighed.

We strode barefoot for maybe a mile or two until we came to a nice secluded spot—just us and tiny brown lizards sunning themselves on the outcroppings of sharp, spongy black lava rock. After staking out a place for our stuff, we stripped to our bikinis and spent an hour or so snorkeling through the coral reef beds along with a colorful menagerie of tropical fish. When our fingers were pruning, we came out again and rolled out our beach towels. We helped each other put on suntan lotion. No, nothing like what you're thinking—it was perfectly innocent. While we helped each other touch up our cheekbones and the sensitive areas under our eyes, she started up our Hawaiian language lesson for the day—with mixed success, you'll remember. Like I was saying before, she finally grumbles, "Hey, it's shorter than supercalifragilisticexpialidocious and you can say that."

I hated for Mina to think I was some kind of feeb, but a perverse part of me wanted to torment her longer, so I begged off the lesson and stretched out on my towel to catch some warm sun on my backside. She lay down next to me, but I could tell she was still miffed. She rested her chin on her folded arms and hid beneath her cowgirl hat. The two of us lay like that for a few prickly minutes. I took advantage of the lag time to sneak a peek at

her through half-closed eyes. Her bikini bottom was so cute; it had little ties on the sides and the dusting of golden sand on the wet material caught my eye. I decided I had better make nice. I rolled over, facing her, and on a whim, reached over and gently poked her in the ribs.

“Quit it,” she growled from under her hat. I didn’t. Instead, I began writing on her back with my finger in one long string of ornate cursive letters.

“What are you doing back there?” she muttered, all Miss Grumpy.

“I’m writing. Here, I’ll do it again.” This time I printed, and went extra slow for good measure: I M S O R R Y

She got it this time, but her highness still wasn’t fully appeased.

“You’re really bugging me today. You’ll need to do better than that.”

My heart skipped a beat at that last part. Was she giving me a signal? Or was it just wishful thinking? I proceeded with caution—or so I thought. I got up on one elbow and leaned over her in order to draw a picture on her back. First I wiped the tiny droplets of seawater off her skin to clear the canvas. With my finger, I encircled a big ball over one shoulder blade for the sun, and drew rays coming off it.

“What are you doing now?” she asked, a bit softer now, genuinely curious.

“I’m drawing you a picture. That was the sun.” I moved on to the ocean. I dragged four fingers down the curve of her back, tracing a line of gentle waves from her shoulders all the way to the hem of her bikini bottom. She gave her approval with a wordless groan of *mmm*. I added curvy v-shapes for birds in the sky, tickled her with little fish in the sea, drew a stick figure *us* on our blankets.

“That feels good,” she murmured.

I got bolder, a little drunk on her smooth skin and encouragement. I let my fingers drift, not drawing, just running the back of my hand up and down her beautiful sun-drenched back. I watched carefully for a reaction, but she remained still and let me do as I pleased. I slipped my hand under the string of her bikini top and idly rubbed between her shoulder blades. She was very quiet. I bit my lip and ran my palm down, settling into the indentation of her lower back, and let it creep slowly further, to the edge of her raspberry bikini bottom—then past that, to softly caress her butt.

The sight hypnotized me. It felt like I was watching someone else doing it, or that my hand had a mind of its own. Then I felt her stir, and shot my hand back again. Mina lifted her head, agitated. She didn’t say a word, but sat up, her gaze locked on me. Oh God.

“Mila? What did you do that for?” She looked baffled, like she was

trying to solve a particularly thorny puzzle. *Oh God. Oh God. Oh my God.* I didn't have anywhere near the nerve to play it cool and shrug it off as an accident. I just lost it. Deep inside, my heart began crashing around like a bird in a cage trying to fly away. Pinned by the look in her eyes, I started to cry and my voice went all high pitched and weepy.

"Oh God, Mina, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Mila ... are ... are you gay?"

My breath started tripping over itself in my throat. I was sure I was going to pass out. "Omigod, no, I swear."

"Then why...?"

"I didn't mean to! It was just an accident, oh God, Mina, I would never do anything like that to you!" I kept babbling hysterically, and Mina kept staring at me. Finally she'd had enough.

"Mila! *Mila!* Shut up! Just shut up and listen to me!"

I choked off my apology in mid-sentence. She continued, in a cool slow voice.

"I'm not a lesbian, understand?" she said. My heart slipped off its precarious hold and tumbled down to hell. I couldn't bear it for another second. I had to get out of there. I tried to get up and run away, run anywhere, run off a cliff on to the rocks, but Mina grabbed my arms, furious, unwilling to let me escape.

"Hey! Look at me!" She shook me until I did. Her voice was cool and collected. "Listen to me. Look, I'm not gay. I'm just not into girls."

I stared at her, my eyes streaming, miserable. Her voice softened, and she pulled tear-slick strands of hair away from my face, resting her forehead against mine so we were eye to eye.

"But Mila ... Mila, baby ... I'm so, *so* into *you*."

What? What did she just say? I couldn't process a response. I could barely string together her words, let alone believe she had really said them. I stared at her beautiful, so-serious face until a tear came down her cheek, and she broke into a smile.

"I wouldn't even mind if you wanted to kiss me. That's what you want to do, isn't it?" she asked in a soft voice, her eyes wide and earnest. I kept staring, then sniffled, bit my lip, and nodded, numb and mute with overwhelming emotions rising up in me. Her response was barely audible.

"Then come here." She took my face in her hands and pulled me into her. My lips parted just a bit before they met hers. Oh my God! Her lips tasted so good—so soft, so warm, just as delicious as I had imagined. Our kiss went on and on like a dream. I suddenly went all lightheaded, feeling like we were spinning on a carousel. I held on to her to ride out the

dizziness. She wrapped protective arms around me and squeezed me tight.

I know I said I only wanted to kiss her, just a sweet little innocent kiss on the lips, no more than that. And it really did start out so warm and tender, but the longer it lasted, the more urgent it became. Our tongues met, and our breathing came in ragged bursts as our sweet, gentle little kiss turned into a hard, deep lip lock. I felt our excitement build, growing hotter and hotter. I wanted more. She did too. I felt her hand slide around and start to knead my breast. Her touch made me gasp, mouth wide open. She took the rising nipple in her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“God, your tits are so nice, Mila. I’m so jealous,” she panted. Her hand slipped back behind me again. I could feel her untying the string to my top, and then it was gone.

“Mmm ... I want them,” she purred in my ear. I leaned back, starting to shake a little as she kissed her way down my neck toward my breast until she reached her target. As she wrapped her mouth around my areola, I groaned and dug my fingers into her hair, clasping her head to my chest while she kissed and suckled on my hard nipple. I shuddered under the touch of her insistent tongue and lips, and she took advantage of my vulnerable state to gently but firmly ease me back on my beach towel.

I hugged her to me with both arms, trapping her head while she kept going back and forth between my breasts, teasing them with her mouth. She straddled me. I felt both her thighs clasping mine. I let her go, but only so I could feel her up. I ran my greedy hands over her bikini top. Her breasts were a little smaller than mine but nothing to be ashamed of: round and wonderful, fitting her frame just right. I couldn’t wait for my turn. I pushed her off, just enough for her to sit up so I could better grope her. She laughed as I undid the knot in back and pulled off her top. Her tan lines were coppery compared to her tropical scarlet skin.

“Hi there,” I said to the twin sunbursts of her sweet little nips. I made Mina squeal when I tweaked them, which amused me greatly. Before she could recover I craned my neck to lick them. She closed her eyes and grinned while I nuzzled her happily. Her nipples were small and sensitive. I had to be careful to keep from tickling her. I could feel her legs tensing too, and with a twinge of surprise I realized she was riding me, humping my thigh with her pussy. The realization lit me up from the inside like a line of fireworks going off. I reached down and grabbed her butt. With a jerk that made her whoop like a cowgirl on a bucking bronco, I pulled her closer so that her knee was right up tight in between my legs, turning her whole leg into my sex toy. She took the hint and leaned forward again, supporting herself on her outstretched arms so that we could grind our laps into each

other. What a rush! I shuddered out another one as she stared down at me, her eyes smoldering with a look I had never seen from her. I could feel her trembling, too. I held onto her sweet butt and kept pulling her into me.

“I want you,” I told her in between sharp intakes of breath.

“I want you too, *Ipo*.”

Time to take it up a notch. A delayed flash of paranoia pinged in my head. I quickly scanned the beach to see if any innocent bystanders or axe murderers had wandered up. All clear. The nearest people were tiny specks a mile or so down the beach, or cavorting in the surf on the twin islands across the water. I locked eyes with her and started to undo the little ties on her bikini bottoms. Her eyes grew large again, but she gave me a little nod, and held still while I undressed her. She never looked so beautiful.

“Now you have to get naked too,” she breathed. I smiled and reached down for my bikini bottoms, but she stopped me before I could shimmy out of them.

“No, wait. I want to do it.” She snaked her hands under me, as I lifted my ass to let her peel them down past my hips. Once she had the loop of swimsuit bottom untangled from my ankles and tossed them to the side, she came back to me, straddling me again, but this time so that our torsos were locked V to V. We were both so wet, our juices were mingling as we ground into each other. It felt incredible, so utterly intimate. I had never been so turned on, but again, inventive Mina surprised me further. From behind her back, she slipped her hand between her own legs to work over my poor love-starved pussy. Oh. My. *God!*

She was feeling it too. My clever girl was thumbing her own clit while her fingers strummed me. I held on to her for dear life while my body stiffened and shook and came so hard as she finger-fucked me over and over, until I couldn’t take anymore and begged her to stop. She was having way too much fun.

When she finally relented I sat up, panting hard, and gave her the evil eye. She grinned back and tried to play innocent, but she was giggling too much to pull off her *who, me?* I raised an eyebrow in determination and with a sly smile pushed her down on her back. My turn to torture her. I played nice at first, pinning her arms down and giving her a big fat kiss. She squirmed a little underneath me, rubbing hers against mine, which was pretty effing awesome, actually. But I had a plan, so after a few minutes of her yummy distraction, I had to leave her warm delicious lips and pull away from her lap dance-from-below. I started laying a trail of kisses from her clavicle down to her breastbone, to her belly button, and headed further south—further *mukai*, I mean.

I spread her thighs apart and gave her one last bit of direct eye contact as I lowered my face down to her waiting folds. I was a little freaked out by my own boldness and wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do, but I was ready to surf that wave and figure it out. Acting on instinct, I made a beeline for her clitoris. I touched it daintily with my tongue first. *Whoa, look at me. I'm going to eat her out.* Then I dove in and sucked it hard. Too hard. Mina's whole body wrenched and she let out a weird little squeak.

"Oh, oh, oh ... too much, too much! Sorry, hon. My clit is way too sensitive for that."

I backed off and rubbed her mound with my fingers for a minute to bring her down again, then gently spread the downy outer halves out of the way so I could give her wet inner lips a nice long tongue-lashing. That got her moaning and rolling her head back. She reached her fingers out to grasp my head and groaned out semi-intelligible bursts of encouragement. I went back to her love pearl and gave it gentle love licks around its little hood instead. Ah, better. She made a soft burbling noise like a happy baby and grabbed her legs to spread them further open. A flash of inspiration came to me. I spread her folds again, kissed her lips and whispered into her. She laughed.

"Ohh ... you *can* say it ... sneaky bitch..." She sighed, then got louder, yelling, "Oh God, *Ipo*, say it! *Say it!* Yeah..." Words failed her and washed out with the tide into a sea of groans and sighs. While she writhed under my tongue, I kept a firm grasp on her thighs and continued chanting my magic word, over and over again.

Humuhumunukunukuapua'a.

Needs

by Farrah J. Phoenix

A vacation is long overdue. After all the drama from my divorce and the insanity at work, all I want is to fly south like the geese in winter. Too long has been spent living for others, taking care of others, and ignoring my own needs. I need complete seclusion: time to reconnect with myself, touch my roots and all that spiritual mumbo-jumbo they always talk about when something drastic changes in your life.

As I get off the airplane in Miami, the stale, warm terminal air seems to melt over me. I feel the tension in my body begin to release as a light glistening of sweat develops over my skin. Tingling energy flows through me in anticipation of the well-deserved retreat. It's been six years since I have felt like myself. Beaches, spas, shopping, and yoga classes will be the perfect way to relax and rejuvenate my trampled spirit.

I breeze through the airport without much notice of the people around me. A blast of Florida heat greets me at the door as I drag my luggage out of the baggage claim to meet my shuttle. Palm trees sway against the beautiful blue sky and the sun caresses my face and exposed shoulders to welcome me.

Bumping along through the streets of Miami and South Beach, I can feel my body respond to my new independent freedom. I feel like a teenager again with my heart racing, my face flushing, and my tummy dancing gracefully. I am free.

After I check in at the resort, I take a moment to enjoy the quiet of my modern suite. The view is stunning! I watch the waves lap against the beach below. The sun is beginning to descend, casting orange, yellow, and purple hues across the skyline. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and feel a new energy surge through the tips of my fingers and toes. I hear the waves outside—feel them penetrate my soul. The waves are calling me, welcoming me, enticing me.

Not wanting to waste the evening, I quickly slip into a pair of shorts and form-fitting tank and grab a sweater. I smile into the mirror on my way out

the door, taking a moment to adjust my long, wavy brown hair. I look good. I feel good!

I walk along the vacant beach, watching the sun set. Everything is quiet except for the sound of the waves. I feel my body submit with each step—as though the sand at my feet and the sun against my skin are working to gently massage away the years of tension. Together they embrace me like a long-lost lover. I shudder. Everything feels new. I am being reborn.

The sun has almost vanished completely beyond the horizon. As I turn around and head back I hear the sound of a branch snap. Startled, I turn my head towards the sound, heart racing.

Against the glow of the setting sun stands the silhouette of a woman. I blush as my eyes capture the orange reflection of the sun on her skin. Each curve of her body is bare. My breath catches in my throat, but I can't look away. The curvature of her breasts, her back, and bottom look as though they have been molded by the hands of a master sculptor.

I watch as she stretches her long form against the colors of twilight and my heart races. I have never looked at a woman this way before. I can't understand the sudden rush of blood, the beating heart or the clammy hands. I breathe deeply, trying to control myself. I'm afraid of my feelings—afraid of my response to this woman's appeal.

As she reaches the peak of her stretch, she turns her face towards me. Everything stops: my heart, my breathing, and my self control. I feel perverse standing here watching her. To my surprise, the look on her face is not one of disapproval. It's almost flirtatious. She seems pleased.

Her smile is subtle and sweet. Her lips open a bit, showing off a small portion of her teeth. Her eyes are deep and sultry. I'm afraid she can see right through me. I freeze in place, mesmerized. I can't take my eyes off her.

Bending over she grabs her towel and loosely ties it around her chest. She starts walking towards me—no, not walking, but floating. Even if I wanted to, I can't move—immobilized by the allure of the enchanting creature in front of me.

All of my blood is rushing to my face. I can feel it burn against the cooling twilight air. I can feel a familiar, warm pulsation between my legs.

As she approaches, her eyes lock on mine as though in a deep, sensual embrace. My hands tremble.

She slows as she passes by me. She is so close. The scent of coconut oil twirls around us. It's intoxicating. Arousing.

Without a word, the beautiful sun goddess stretches her hand towards me running her fingertips down my side. Her touch is electric! As her hand moves over the curvature of my breast and along the sides of my tummy, my body trembles. I close my eyes and take deep breaths. The warmth between my legs increases. I am so aroused.

Then she is gone.

I stand trembling in the sand while the sun takes its final dip below the horizon. My brain strains to understand what has occurred. My body, however, is aware and longing for more.

* * * *

The next few days go by like any other vacation. I relax on the beach with a good book with the sun casting its glow over my exposed skin followed by a refreshing dip in the resort pool. I enjoy the company of some new friends during a snorkel excursion and shop until my credit cards groan in protest. The spa and yoga classes are daily events to stretch and de-stress my tightly wound muscles. Vacation is bliss.

My naked sun goddess, however, is never too far from my mind. I think of her during quiet moments, wondering if she has been thinking the same things I had been during our brief encounter. When I hear feminine giggles pass by on the beach, my heart starts racing again, and I instinctively look to see if it is her. Hoping it's her.

Not that I'd know what to do if she does reappear. My body wants her, but my logical brain fights the desire. After all, I am a straight woman who has only been with men. I was married, for crying out loud. What is happening?

In the privacy of my suite I bring my favorite vibrating bullet out to play, but it's not a man that's on my mind. A throbbing cock thrusting mindlessly is the last thing my body longs for. I'm imagining *her*. Wanting her.

As I run the silver vibrating joy over my clitoris and rub my hand over

my breasts, I picture her sampling me, touching me, loving me. At the height of my orgasms I see her sultry eyes boring into me and smell the coconut oil on her skin. The thought of her brings about the best release I've ever experienced. I spend hours thinking of her, enjoying the fantasy.

* * * *

The end of my vacation draws near without a glimpse of my sultry mistress.

On my last night in Florida I decide to join some new friends at a local club for a fun night of drinks and dancing. The girls I accompany are a bunch of sorority sisters whom I met while snorkeling. They are a lot of fun, bouncy and beautiful. Their smiles are our ticket past the doormen at the club and without waiting a minute in line, we are inside, where the music is booming and the walls seem to vibrate from the insane number of people dancing and exalting the joys of life.

It takes precisely placed elbows at the bar to get some drinks, but after downing a Singapore Sling and a few tequila shots, the girls and I are buzzing enough to hit the dance floor.

Spinning and dancing, I feel the power of my freedom wash over me. I can't remember the last time I felt so good, so free, so much like *me*. This vacation has been everything I had been hoping for, everything I needed.

I continue to dance like it's my sole purpose on Earth. I am so busy enjoying myself that I don't notice the sorority sisters disappear into the dark corners of the club with random men. It is all good, though. I am finally comfortable just being me.

Like a scene out of a movie, the dance floor opens up out of the blue. Through the human red sea I recognize my fantasy woman. My stomach flutters.

She drifts gracefully towards me, her eyes never leaving mine. Once again I am rendered immobile, like my limbs have been filled with lead. Even the influence of alcohol cannot entice me to move.

My golden beauty approaches me head on, her intention evident. She cups the back of my head with her hands. My heart stops. *Is she going to kiss me?* Her face slowly leans towards mine.

The sweet aroma of her breath and the flowery scent of her perfume fill

my nostrils. It is intoxicating. My brain admits defeat to my body, which is now vibrating less from the music and more from this woman's presence. My body wants this, needs this.

I brace myself in preparation for new sensations to meet my tingling lips, but to my surprise she doesn't kiss me. Her soft lips graze my cheek as she leans in to whisper, "I've been watching you all week. I can see you've been thinking about me. I've been thinking about you too."

I stand in stunned silence. She's been thinking about *me*? If she only knew the way I have thought about her, and the things I was doing when I was thinking of her. Is it possible she's been doing the same?

"Come with me, precious," she whispers. "I want to give you what you've been longing for." I feel her tongue over my earlobe and across my jaw bone. My breath catches in my throat. A shiver runs down my spine and sensual juices flow freely.

Grabbing my hand, she escorts me out of the club and down the street to my awaiting suite. Inside, I am overcome by a wave of fear. Instincts try to override desires. I cower across the room like a virgin on her wedding night, breathing erratically.

With a girlish giggle she places her soft hands on my petrified face and kisses me uninhibited. Her lips are cherry delicious, her tongue deliberate. Instantly, my panties are soaked with pleasure. Having her hands on me is better than I ever imagined in my fantasies. I am scared and excited all at once. Closing my eyes, I kiss her back. Our skin melts together as our hands work to release each article of clothing. Her skin is soft and smooth under her T-shirt. Her breasts peak when I run my hands over them. The curvature of her body and the texture of her skin feel natural under my touch. I want to please her.

Bare as the day we were born, we fall together to the floor, bodies rubbing against each other, hands exploring, lips indulging. I kiss her intently along her jaw, down her neck, and between her beautiful breasts. She moans loudly as I trace my tongue around the large, soft mounds and tease each of her nipples. The movements are oddly natural to me. I've never been this turned on in my life.

"I want you!" she moans, grabbing one of my hands and guiding it between her legs.

I can feel her excitement dripping over my fingertips. At first, I'm not sure what to do so I choose to explore her slowly. The intense heat makes me quiver as I slip my fingers between the petals of her pleasure. Delicately, I remove my fingers from inside of her.

She moans, encouraging me to explore a little deeper. I feel her thighs twitch with excitement and anticipation.

Once again I stick my fingers in and pull them out, allowing my fingertips to graze her engorged g-spot. I look her in the eyes as I bring my fingers slowly to my lips. The expression on her face and the way she lightly bites her bottom lip tells me that this excites her. I have never tasted a woman before. Her sweetness is delectable. I want more. I let my fingers slowly move over my lips and the tip of my tongue so I can indulge in this exciting new sensation.

I can tell she is pleasantly surprised as she gently writhes beneath me. Reaching out, she grabs my head, wrapping her legs around me as I fall on top of her. We kiss again, licking each other's lips and embracing each other's bodies.

I didn't know I could feel this comfortable with a woman. I am no longer scared. All I want to do is bring her pleasure, and I know that's what she offers as well. For hours we toss about the suite: holding each other, exploring each other, tasting each other. Our skin sparkles with sweat. Blood rushes through me as I place my lips to the delicate, pink petals between her legs and hers to mine. Our hips rock as our tongues work at each other's engorged clitoris. I slip my fingers back inside her to overwhelm her g-spot as I suck, lick and kiss her sweetness.

The touch of her lips on my goodness is gentle and knowing. She knows how to please me as though we've been together for years. I can't remember the last time this felt so natural, so good, so real.

Upon release, her intense eruption covers my fingers and drips sweetly into my mouth. I lap up every last drop of ecstatic elixir.

Tasting her and feeling her body react induces my own release. Her tongue continues to move through my slit as euphoric waves of ecstasy crash through my body over and over again. As the waves subside, she rolls me to my back, pinning me beneath her with a playful giggle.

With her mouth still making love to me, she slips her fingers inside. The

sensation is almost unbearable. I groan loudly, desperately gripping at anything I can find. My body writhes and sways uncontrollably. Her free hand moves over my breasts, tummy, and thighs as she continues to love me. Each rush of pleasure is almost painful as my arousal increases after each orgasm. My body can't take it anymore. An explosion rocks me from the inside out.

I grab my lover's head and wrap my legs tightly around her as my hips convulse under the immense power. In that moment I release every last hang-up I have about my past, and everything I have believed about love.

All that matters is this moment.

When morning dawns it all seems like a dream. The only evidence remaining of the woman from the beach is a little note on my bedside table. There are no words on the note, simply a lipstick mark and "xo" written in delicate handwriting. That is all I need.

Buried Desire

by Jen Bluekissed

Sure, my divorce was final, but my life was far from beginning its next chapter. Until the house sold, how could I move on with everything? Ken and I weren't much for saving money, and my share of the joint assets was tied up as equity in the house. What I wanted more than anything was to get out of town to start my life over again. Scrambling to make a deposit and first month's rent on an apartment would be hard enough, but since Ken did everything in his power to wreck my credit before our divorce was finalized, even renting my own place wasn't happening any time soon.

I unfolded the crumpled-up wad of paper that had been burning a hole in my pocket like unspent birthday money from Grandma. Even though I'd read the want ad at least ten times already, I couldn't resist reading it again. There were so many pros and not so many cons to trying for this job. A roof over my head, three meals served daily, and a change of scenery were just what I needed.

The logical, grown-up part of me screamed, *you can't just quit your stable job with medical benefits to take this gig. You can't. You just can't.*

The adventure-seeking newly divorced woman inside me whispered back defiantly, *health insurance and stability be damned. Look what stable has gotten me these past seven years. A whole basket full of nothing.*

I called the phone number listed on the help-wanted ad and held my breath as I waited for someone to pick up. The way my heart was beating in my ears made me think I should start breathing again.

"No, we haven't filled the position yet. You interested?" a nasal male voice asked.

"Yes, I'd like to interview."

"No need. We need someone *asap* because the tour leaves tomorrow. Drop by with your Social Security card or birth certificate as well as your driver's license so we can complete the I-9 paperwork. Dress casually, and when you pack for the trip, bring lots of comfortable clothes and shoes. Our people are dressed to the hilt, but we need you to be able to move quickly, quietly, and with a full range of motion. Bedroom slippers. Pack bedroom slippers."

"I beg your pardon?" I said as I steadied my shaking hand while holding my cell phone to my ear. I didn't even have a pen and paper handy since I thought I was going to chicken out and hang up before someone answered

the phone.

“Bring bedroom slippers. We need you quiet as a church mouse.”

I hung up the phone and cursed under my breath. Not even something simple like a pair of slippers was easily within my grasp. I owned three pairs of them, but I’d have to run by the mall to buy yet another pair because even they were tied to the house. My ex-husband had a restraining order against me, so I couldn’t show up to collect them without getting my attorney involved. A quick trip to the mall would be less expensive than getting my lawyer involved just so I could gather more of my belongings from the house.

* * * *

When I arrived at the studio, there was a flurry of activity to get me ready for the job. I wondered why the theatre improv troupe was so quick to hire me without so much as a formal interview, but I didn’t have a whole lot of time to wonder. As soon as my paperwork was signed and I had a chance to see the trailer I’d be calling home for the next few months, I was told to go home to pack up any belongings I wanted to take with me.

“Be back for the dress rehearsal at five,” Larry, my new boss, said. “We leave tomorrow for our first stop on the comedy tour.”

“Can I at least meet everyone first?” I asked as I finished shaking his hand.

“Nope. No time. The ladies and gents are too busy packing up and saying their own goodbyes.”

* * * *

A few hours later, I returned for the dress rehearsal. The traveling comedy troupe was an improv group who does half audience suggestion, half pre-arranged skits. Every scene involved different costuming and set changes. My new job was to be the attendant to Darla Rae, one of the country’s most well-known comediennes. I learned that her stage make-up would remain relatively unchanged, but between scenes I’d have to help her change from one costume to the next. She wore everything from bib overalls as part of a farmer’s daughter scene to an elaborate Elizabethan-style gown. Most of the costume changes had to happen in less than ten minutes during the live show.

The stage manager explained all this to me while we waited for Darla Rae to return from saying goodbye to her own friends and family. I’d

begun to wonder if I'd gotten in above my head. After all, I'd never worn a corset or handled period-specific clothing before. How on earth would I be able to help this woman get into and out of ten changes of clothing for a three-hour performance? My idea of fashion was a baggy T-shirt or sweatshirt with jeans and sneakers. I stared at the signed poster of Darla Rae, which had been taped to the hallway. The stage manager walked away, busy with a last-minute prop problem. Before he was out of earshot, he pointed to the door on my right.

"Lucy, go ahead and wait for Darla Rae in her dressing room. It's unlocked. All the clothes she'll need are hanging on the rack. She's almost always late, so don't be surprised if bras are flying before you have a chance to properly introduce yourself."

I let myself into Darla Rae's makeshift dressing room and flipped the light switch. The room was sparsely furnished with two folding chairs, a rack of costumes, a sink, and a mirror. There was a folding table in the corner of the room. It was completely covered with brushes, stage make-up, and Styrofoam heads wearing wigs. None of the hairstyles was contemporary. Not even close. Well, if you didn't count the mullet. A lot of things had come back from the eighties, like leggings and crimpers, but I doubted mullets would make the grade.

I had always worn my hair in a pixie cut. I fingered the wigs cautiously and toyed with the idea of trying one on. What could it hurt? Darla Rae probably wouldn't show up for another half hour or so. I quickly plopped the white-blond mullet atop my head, then caught my reflection in the mirror. Unfortunately, I also caught the reflection of Darla Rae standing in the doorway behind me.

"Don't you look cute?" she said.

"Sorry—"

"Don't apologize. It looks better on you than it does on me."

I turned, the movement knocking the mullet slightly off-center on my head. Sure that my cheeks were red, I extended my right hand for a handshake while removing the wig with my left.

"I'm Lucy. I love the wigs. Just couldn't resist, ya know?"

Rather than shaking my hand, Darla Rae took the mullet from my left hand before gingerly placing it back atop my head like it had been when she stood in the doorway. Her smirk was cute. Dangerously cute. She had long, curly red hair that cascaded perfectly down her back. I hated the thought of covering her perfect hair with these awful wigs during the show. Her green eyes twinkled, setting off her light freckled skin. Darla's accent said Southern, but her looks said Irish.

She walked to the rack of clothing, her full hips swaying with the stride of a woman who knew how to work an audience, albeit my audience of one. As she lifted her V-neck shirt over her head, she spoke into the cotton fabric. I didn't quite make out what she was saying. While I asked her to repeat herself, she had the shirt off and was already unclasping her bra.

"Keep the mullet on. Seriously. We scrapped the eighties rocker scene at the last minute. It doesn't fit with the rest of the sketches we have planned." She sighed after her bra dropped to the floor, as if she felt relief from having it off of her body. They didn't call them over-the-shoulder-boulder-holders for nothing. Her breasts were just as freckled as her face, and her nipples hardened in the chill of the room.

"Hand me that corset, will you?"

Her jeans were already around her ankles by the time I realized I wouldn't just be handing her the corset. There was no way she could lace it up unaided. Darla Rae didn't seem the least bit embarrassed by her nakedness around me. The mullet-induced shame I felt subsided as I breathed in her fruity scent. Her shampoo smelled like peach blossoms. I made a mental note to ask her the brand. During the last chapter of my life, I wasn't able to wear anything scented because Ken was allergic. The urge to buy a whole drawer full of scented lotions, soaps, shampoos, and body sprays made me lose focus on the corset momentarily.

"Dress, please."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." *Concentrate on Darla Rae.* "Which dress?"

"The one on the end."

I finished lacing up the corset, reached for the dress, then met Darla Rae's gaze. The look was one of utter desire. She stood before me in the corset and panties, but she might as well have been nude. I lifted the impossibly heavy gown over her head, messing up her hair, but when she resumed eye contact after the gown was in place, her lips were moist and her eyes shifted to my breasts.

I had never been on the receiving end of another woman's desire before, at least not that I was aware of. Little electric jolts raced down my spine as Darla Rae touched my jaw. I leaned toward her expectantly, unsure of what I wanted to happen next. Did I really want her to kiss me? I needed a job, not anything to mess with my emotions after the divorce from Ken.

"This is the first time Larry has ever given me an assistant who was a dyke like me," Darla Rae said in a half whisper.

Then she kissed me.

My body processed the gentle caress of her lips much more quickly than my mind processed her words. Fluffy feathers of excitement rose in my

stomach as I breathed in her scent before returning Darla Rae's kiss. Her tongue slid between my lips momentarily while her hands fumbled with the zipper of my jeans.

The loud knocking at the door startled me so badly that the mullet fell off my head when I jumped. My real hair, the light brown pixie cut, would have to suffice. Larry kept knocking even though Darla Rae and I were both laughing deep belly laughs at the mullet. It looked like a small animal on the floor.

Larry's voice suddenly got louder. "Darla, get your ass on stage. We have press here tonight, you know."

"Shit."

"What?" I asked.

"Nobody brought my shoes down from storage. I can't wear this Elizabethan gown with sneakers."

"Why not? The gown goes down to the floor."

She shrugged. "I suppose you're right."

Darla Rae left the dressing room for the improv sketch. I was left alone for twenty minutes or so, her words finally registering. She had called me a dyke and kissed me. I had kissed her back. Up until that kiss, I had been denying a helluva lot about my life. Denying things to my family, to my friends, and to myself. I wasn't sure I was ready to actually think about myself as bisexual or maybe even a lesbian, but I knew that what I'd had with Ken hadn't worked. It hadn't worked from the beginning.

Neither had the other guys I'd dated before Ken.

Neither had senior prom or any of the other supposedly *best time of your life* type of experiences I'd had romantically. As I sat on the metal folding chair, my head swam with memories of shoving round pegs into square holes. Darla Rae's pronouncement and her kiss had been the first time I'd experienced anything resembling a fit.

The door opened with a loud squeak. "I'm back," Darla Rae said.

"That was a fast twenty minutes."

"Always is. Here. Help me out of this dress. It weighs as much as I do."

Once I had the dress back on the hanger, Darla Rae stripped out of her panties and pointed toward the corset. I helped her out of it while wondering why she had taken her panties off. She must have been able to read my mind because she said, "Beach scene's next. Hand me the bikini, will you?"

My eyes should have followed the projection of her finger to the clothing rack, but instead I stared at her red, curly pubic hair. It was neatly trimmed. I sighed softly as I thought about her covering it back up with the

two-piece bathing suit. I removed the bright blue bikini from the plastic hanger and then tried handing it to Darla Rae.

"I think you want to put it on me." She bit her bottom lip and shivered as she stood before me, naked and vulnerable.

"We only have a minute," I said over the drumming of my heartbeat in my ears.

"Just because we only have a minute doesn't mean you don't want to be the one to put my bikini top and bottom on me." Her grin was infectious.

She was right, of course. My words caught in my throat as I tried to reply, so I didn't verbalize my response. Instead, I helped her step into the bikini bottom. As I pulled them up her lush thighs and over her hips, Darla Rae reached for my hand. She guided my pinkie inside the crotch of the bikini bottom so that I felt her red pubic curls, then her flesh as she widened her stance then her slickness in response to my touch. My other hand was already fondling her full breast. Her hands were under my T-shirt and fumbling with my bra as her mouth again brushed against mine.

"Kiss me there," she said as she guided me onto my knees and ran her fingers through my pixie cut.

Rolling the bikini bottom down so it was around her knees, I kissed the inside of her thigh, then I parted her, my lips finding her clit. If we would have had more time, I would have licked it, sucked on it, made love to it with my mouth. I wanted to fill her with my fingers and press my face deeper between her sensitive lips. Instead, I had to be content with the simple caress of a kiss to her clit.

This was nothing like round pegs with square holes. This was more like the first time I tasted Gremlin cheesecake. Decadent. Sweet. Moist.

Larry's fists pounded on the door again. "Darla Rae, you'd better be ready," he said through the cheap wood.

I groaned as the pad of her fingertip brushed against my nipple.

"Whatever you say, Boss," Darla Rae said loudly enough to be heard through the door before ending the kiss I had placed between her legs. To me, "I'll put the bikini top on myself."

She winked as I handed it to her.

* * * *

With every clothing change, Darla Rae teased me. My arousal went in a cycle of heightening and lowering until we reached the last costume change. She entered the dressing room wearing the French maid costume I'd helped her into. By the time she locked the door behind her, my hands trembled.

She removed the black wig, which was cut into a straight bob, placing it atop the Styrofoam head. Wiggling out of the French maid uniform, she shook her ass with a grace I'd never have been able to master in a hundred years. I still sat on the metal folding chair in my jeans, T-shirt, and slippers. My bra had long since disappeared into the depths of my purse. I desperately wanted her to sit on my lap but was afraid to ask her to do so because she outweighed me by probably thirty or forty pounds. Darla Rae wasn't exactly full figured enough to shop in a different section of a department store, but she was all curves and had a few inches of height on me. I, on the other hand, was built like a female gymnast but without any athletic skill.

Darla Rae grinned at me while stepping back into the original clothes she wore upon entering the dressing room when we'd first met. By now the room no longer smelled fruity, and I wasn't sure if I was inhaling the scent of her desire or mine. All I knew was I wanted her. She was once again fully clothed, and I wanted her.

"Larry told me to give you this," she said as she handed me a key. "It's to your trailer."

"Oh."

"Don't look so sad."

"It's just that I thought—"

"That doesn't mean you're not invited to my trailer, silly. It just means you have one to call your own while we travel. Meet me tomorrow morning for a cup of coffee. Tonight I have to go and give some quotes to the press before we start the tour and pack up the rest of my stuff. Actually, my mother showed up at the dress rehearsal and will be expecting to help me pack my suitcases. She has always been a little bit of a micromanager. My trailer is the one at the end of the row next to the gate."

She dropped a second key into my outstretched palm. It was the spare to *her* trailer. Darla Rae kissed me slowly on the lips before backing away toward the door. The woman was a tease, but I didn't care. It wasn't as if I needed to go and get myself involved in a heavy-duty relationship right after my divorce. I was content with the promise of brighter days ahead with a job, a roof over my head, and a woman to teach me about my *buried desire*.

Tight Lacing

by K. Ann Karlsson

“After all these years, I see that I was mistaken about Eve in the beginning; it is better to live outside the Garden with her than inside it without her.”

Mark Twain, *Adam's*

Diary

Rome, 1898

“And over here, if I may direct your attention, is the site of the tomb of Julius Caesar, the first emperor of Rome, who ...”

I ignored the drone of the Forum guide, a mustachioed Italian man with a dreadful comb-over and a greasy bowler hat, in order to concentrate on breathing in and out. I trailed behind the group that contained Mother; Edward Mainwaring, my fiancé; and Mrs. Mainwaring, my future mother-in-law. I had waved Edward off earlier when he had politely suggested the tour might be too much for us ladies. Now, however, I regretted that moment of careless insouciance.

I'd begged Elise not to lace my corset so tightly this morning because I knew we'd be tramping through the dusty Roman Forum in the hot summer sun, but Mother had insisted. And, of course, what Mother insists on, no one had better gainsay.

“Nonsense. Pull her laces as tight as possible, Elise,” Mother had said to my maid.

Then to me she'd hissed, “Really, Miranda, one would think you had no idea how to go on. You'll wear the dark grey walking dress with the Alençon lace at the throat, and the matching picture hat. You owe it to your fiancé to dress appropriately.”

It was bad enough I possessed an overabundance of thick red hair, but I also had to contend with a body whose various parts were not all fashionably slim. Years ago, at a trip to the zoo in Central Park, I'd been present for the feeding of an anaconda. I'd felt deep sympathy for the rat the zookeeper had flung into the serpent's cage. The coils of the snake's body had tightened with every breath the frightened rodent had expelled. Constricting, squeezing—

I looked ahead to see that Edward had ventured deep into Rome's

rubble, straw hat perched jauntily on his blond head, to examine some first-century bas-reliefs. The other ladies, perhaps owing less to other people and thus not as tightly laced, seemed fine with the sedate pace, while I had to concentrate just to keep from panting like a dog. My eyes scanned the Palatine hill above the Forum with longing. I could readily picture the patrician families of Rome wanting to escape the airless heat, dust, and bustle down here for the cool breezes up there. My hand crept up under my hat, and I surreptitiously loosened the top button of my blouse at the nape of my neck.

“Miranda.”

I dropped my hand guiltily at my mother’s sharp voice, but she wasn’t paying any attention to me. She had her eye on a fashionable young gentleman on the periphery of our group, who was leaning indolently against a marble pillar at the Temple of Vesta. In the shade, I might add. When I realized he was looking straight at me, my stomach dropped and my eyes skittered away from his sultry expression.

“Do you know who that man is?” Mother spoke in a stage whisper that I was sure could be heard in Sicily.

I gripped the stem of my parasol. “No, Mother.”

“Mrs. Mainwaring just told me that it’s Alex du Plessis, the Duc du Moncr cy.”

Ah, now I understood Mother’s prurient fascination with a stranger. Alex du Plessis was the talk of the fashionable world this summer: a fabulously wealthy French duke who had been caught in a scandalous dalliance with Miss Elsie Porter, daughter of the American ambassador to Paris. Miss Porter’s upright New York family had discreetly packed her off to Switzerland, but apparently the Duc had ventured to Rome to escape the gossip.

Mrs. Mainwaring came over to trade further tidbits on the Duc with Mother, to which I only half-paid attention, “His mother ... a show dancer ... American ... so handsome and rich as Croesus, you know.”

My mother nodded as if she did know, then cast a stern glance at me, the one that warned *and* threatened. As if I was going to run over and invite the man to my boudoir right this moment. As if I’d ever done anything so rebellious.

“Oh, well. He’s gone now,” Mrs. Mainwaring chirped, nodding her head so she and my mother looked like a couple of bobbing birds.

The guide fortunately chose that moment to direct our little group down into the ruins, and I took the opportunity to lag even farther behind. When I noted Mother fully engaged in gossip, I seated myself gingerly on a fallen

column, and pressed a hand to the front of my bodice. Beads of sweat had collected at the small of my back and between my breasts, but the thickness of my gown and corset prevented any cooling air from reaching my skin.

Young ladies, I knew, did not sweat. I wondered if anyone would notice if I took out my handkerchief to dab at my upper lip. Lord, I was so hot, I just wanted to rip off my clothes and douse myself in one of the many fountains we'd seen on our way here.

"Forgive me, Mademoiselle."

A light, husky voice cut into my thoughts, and I looked up into the boyish, captivating face of the Duc du Moncr  cy. It took me a moment to realize he was holding out a glass.

"I have taken the liberty of procuring some sparkling water with lemon from a nearby caf  . You appeared in need of refreshment." His English was perfect, but held the slightest accent.

He was not tall—then again, I measured five feet nine in my stocking feet—but his build was slender and his presence such that he seemed taller. And there was something about him—maybe his dark eyes, maybe his unusual voice—that scrambled my wits entirely.

"Was I wrong?" His tone held a hint of amusement.

"What? Oh, no. That is ... thank you." I reached for the glass, my need overcoming my scruples in accepting such an offering from a stranger. I was unable to avoid touching his hand as I took the drink from him. Ignoring the jolt of electricity that shot up my arm, I tipped the glass to my lips. The cool, tart liquid felt so wonderful to my throat, I downed the entire contents in a few large, unladylike gulps. I finished with a sigh, refreshed, but an unfortunate belch escaped me before I could stop it. I covered my mouth and cast an embarrassed glance at the Duc.

He laughed.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, Monsieur," I said, wishing the earth would swallow me.

Still grinning, he gestured to the fallen pillar. "May I?"

I nodded to indicate he could sit down beside me. I had a fairly clear idea what Mother would say about this situation, but for various reasons, I was finding it difficult to care.

"Th-thank you, Monsieur. I just felt a little unwell for a moment. The heat—"

"*Tiens*. Please, you must call me Alex. And you are the famous heiress, Miss Miranda Van Heuysen, *hein*?"

I stared at him. "Yes, how did you—"

"Forgive me, *ch  rie*, for interrupting once again, but we haven't much

time before your *Maman* returns. Now, I have a plan to extract you from your uncomfortable cloth—ah, that is, this most uncomfortable situation.” My eyes widened at that pronouncement, but he continued, “I have a lovely palazzo nearby where it is cool and quiet. We can be there in a matter of minutes. But you must trust me.”

My mouth dropped open. I hardly knew what to focus on first from his stunning speech. The palazzo sounded lovely indeed, but how did this gentleman know I was uncomfortable? Had he been studying me for that long? And why did he think I would do what he asked? I felt a hot blush rush to my cheeks to add to my general discomfort. His sparkling eyes were steady on my face as he waited for my answer. His mouth quirked up in a small half smile, and he raised one of his fine, dark eyebrows.

“All right,” I said slowly. “I trust you.” As soon as the words left my mouth, my stomach plunged in terror, but I realized what I had said was true. I did trust this stranger.

His half-smile became a wide grin. “*Bien*. You won’t regret it, I promise. *Alors*.” He made a circling motion with his hand. “Turn your back to me.”

I raised my eyebrows but quickly did as he asked. Even through my thick clothes I felt the pressure of his finger along my spine as he swept it down the row of buttons that fastened me into my gown.

“*C’est diabolique, ça*.” He muttered a few more imprecations in French. Then my mind froze entirely as I realized he was unbuttoning my dress in order to loosen my stays! I would have squawked in protest, but the relief of being able to breathe was too intense for me to form any objection at all. I looked up to see my mother, Mrs. Mainwaring, and Edward barreling down on the fallen pillar where I sat with *le Duc*.

“Now, *chérie*, you must pretend to faint.”

Lord, that wouldn’t be difficult. I felt near enough to actually fainting, but how would I—

“Relax back into my arms, *chérie*, I’ll do the rest.” His voice was close to my ear, and his warm breath sent electric tingles down my neck and arms. And as if I weren’t embarrassed enough about my body’s recent betrayals, my breasts tightened, the tips rising solidly against the edge of my corset.

That, finally, was too much. The world receded, narrowing to a pinpoint. I heard Alex say, “Here, help me. I am afraid the young lady has fainted in this heat.”

Then, nothing.

* * * *

I recovered from my embarrassing swoon in one of the coolly lavish bedrooms at the Duc's palazzo, just as Alex had promised. I lay on the tester bed, looking up at the silk-draped canopy and blushing furiously as I relived every moment of our encounter. Later, I returned with Mother and Edward to our hotel without seeing the Duc.

One would think after that scandalous introduction, coupled with the Duc's mildly unsavory reputation, Mother would have had nothing further to do with the man. But that was far from the case. In fact, we began visiting his palazzo nearly every day. Mother greatly enjoyed the up-tick in social status that being known as a friend of the Duc's gained for her. For myself, I began to treasure the quiet moments when Alex would draw me aside and ask me about my interests, my preferences, and my dreams. I'd never had a man pay such close attention to my actual thoughts. It was, frankly, intoxicating to be so consulted, and I could see why Miss Porter had been tempted.

My fiancé, Edward, rarely accompanied Mother and me on these visits, preferring to poke around by himself in the dusty antique shops on the Via Baullari. I was glad. Edward's presence had become a mild irritant, and though we had never been particularly demonstrative in our relationship, I now avoided even his polite goodnight kisses. His cold-fish lips repulsed me.

It was during a late-afternoon call at Alex's palazzo when we were on the terrace enjoying coffee served with light-as-air pastries that the Duc invited us to stay with him.

"Oh ... well," Mother said, "I'm not sure that we—"

"My dear lady, I insist," the Duc responded. "The truth is you will be doing me a favor. My aunt, *la Contesse* du Roche, arrives tomorrow from Paris and she would be so grateful to have the company of you ladies, rather than just my bachelor self for entertainment. She is a recent widow, you know."

Mother commenced nodding again. Her eyes shone like stars at the thought of being in the rarified company of the *Contesse*, and the presence of the Duc's aunt made his invitation respectable, indeed. "Well, in that case, thank you, Monsieur. We would be happy to stay."

"And Edward?" I asked in a soft voice.

Alex's eyes flicked to mine, and I caught an expression of—bitterness, was it? Before he said smoothly, "Of course, he must come too, and Mrs. Mainwaring as well."

A servant arrived to announce a group of my mother's contemporaries. Alex greeted the newcomers, but when they were all settled into picking apart the latest scandals, he offered to take me on a stroll in the garden below the terrace.

I looked over at Mother. She absently nodded her assent, and my heart beat painfully in my chest.

Alex and I were both quiet as we trailed through the paths of flowers and shrubbery. Thrilled and terrified at this opportunity for a private chat, I couldn't help casting sidelong glances at my friend. Alex's beige linen summer suit outlined his slender form, particularly when he drew back the jacket and shoved his hands in his pockets. He always wore a high collar, but rarely a hat, I'd noticed, even in the hot summer sun.

We were out of sight of the terrace when he turned to me rather abruptly. "Miranda."

I met his eyes directly. I'd discovered we were exactly the same height, and there was a particular thrill in being able to look a man right in the face. "Yes?"

His eyes lifted to my hair and then dropped to my mouth. "*Je dois*—that is, I would like to kiss you. May I?"

I swallowed. "Yes."

His slender, elegant hands came up to graze over my jaw line. "So beautiful," he whispered, then cupped my cheeks and set his lips on mine.

He was delicious and exotic, tasting of coffee and sugar as his mouth and tongue nipped and shaped my lips. There was an instant of perfect stillness as I breathed him in—sandalwood and summer—and then a tidal wave of desire broke over me. My hands locked on his wrists, and my breasts swelled against my underclothes. I moaned into his mouth, which caused him to mutter in French and draw me closer. One of his hands slid to the back of my head, while the other pressed my waist. My fingers threaded into his warm silky hair as our mouths slanted and our tongues delved deeply. The movement of his soft, firm lips built a hot tension inside me, and I squirmed with the delicious discomfort. I noticed the hard heat of his body pressed against mine, and the smooth texture of his skin. *He must shave often*, I mused vaguely, but then all thought fled when his palm came up to cup my breast over my clothes.

A fine tremor took hold of me. I whimpered at the restrictions of our dress. Abruptly, I wanted to feel him, feel the skin of his body, press it close to mine, but when I gripped his shirt to yank it out of his trousers, he pulled away, grasping my hands in his. "*Assez*, enough, *chérie*. We grow too, ah, heated."

A hot blush poured into my cheeks, and I looked away from him in embarrassment.

He gently pulled my gaze back to his with a hand on my chin. "It is my fault. You are not ready for this."

I shook my head slightly, and caught a flare of regret in his gaze. Then he took my hand, kissed the palm, and placed it on his arm so we could continue our stroll. He'd obviously interpreted the shake of my head as agreement but, in fact, I *was* ready for him. The blood surging through my veins and the heavy dampness between my legs proved it. I would just have to show him, I decided.

And soon.

* * * *

About a week after our encounter in the garden, I cornered Alex in the drawing room. We'd just returned from a formal reception for the sad, lovely Queen Margherita at her palazzo on the Via Vittorio Veneto. The crush had been "exhausting," so Mother had retreated immediately to her rooms with the announced intention of sleeping late the next morning. I knew she would dose herself with her personal "restorative," which contained mostly laudanum. She would be out cold in a matter of minutes. The other members of our party likewise decided to call an early night, so I seized my opportunity.

Upon finding Alex alone in the drawing room, sorting through some mail, I shut the doors and skipped over to him. I immediately grabbed for his collar and began unbuttoning the front of his shirt.

His hands came up at once and closed over mine. "Miranda, *chérie*, what are you doing?"

I looked up into his dark gaze, my heart catching on a splinter of fear that I'd gone wrong somehow. "I want to know, Alex. Our kisses are so passionate, your touch ..." A rush of blood heated my cheeks, but I forged on, "I ... I want to know what ... lovemaking ... would be like." I bent down until my forehead rested on our clasped hands. "With you."

The stillness of his body, and the utter silence in the room, told me everything. My stomach roiled in distress. I'd shocked him. He thought I was a wanton, an adventuress. More importantly, he didn't want me in the same way I wanted him. I pulled my hands away from his and covered my face. "Oh, God. I'm sorry. You don't ... you're not ..." I shook my head, tightening my lips against the nauseating pain and embarrassment.

When he still didn't respond, however, I looked up. His mouth was

twisted as if holding back an oath, and his eyes were wide with unreadable emotion, but he made no move to touch me.

I cleared my throat and stiffened my spine. "I do beg your pardon, *Monsieur le Duc*. I have clearly misunderstood your intentions."

To my shock he whirled away and banged his fist against the wall, letting out a howl of anguish. I lifted a hand towards him and took a tentative step in his direction.

"No, *chérie*." He turned around, and my heart leapt at the blaze of desire in his eyes. But when I reached for him again, he stepped past my arms and began to pace. "No, you have not misunderstood. I long for you above all others. I just didn't think you would ever ... that is ..." He stopped, his glance toward me was direct, yet pleading. "I didn't foresee that you could ever return my passion."

"But Alex—"

He held up a hand. "*Non, chérie*. You must let me speak. I have a terrible confession, *et le bon Dieu m'aide*, I don't want to tell you because I know you will turn away from me." His voice was hoarse, his eyes tear-filled.

My heart felt wrung dry, but I couldn't stand it. "You're not really the Duc de Moncrécy."

"*Mais si*, I am indeed. That is—"

"Then you're dying of the pox."

His bark of laughter was denial enough. I frowned. "Well, if you are the man you say you are, and you're not dying, how terrible can this confession be?"

His face sobered instantly, and his voice softened. "Because, *chérie*, even though I am *le Duc*, I am not man at all. The truth is: I am a woman."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and I took an involuntary step back. I shook my head, but inside me some last piece of a deep, unknown puzzle clicked into place. A woman. I *knew* his—her—words to be true, but in my confusion I lashed out, trying to hold off the wave of pain that was surely coming to crush me.

"No. No. I don't believe it. How can the Duc de Moncrécy be a woman? That would be an..."

"Abomination?"

I tossed my hair wildly, on the verge of hysteria, and jabbed an accusing finger at him. "I was going to say an impossibility, because that would make you a woman who loves..." My hand came up to my mouth and my eyes widened.

"Women," he whispered.

I stared at the man—*woman*—I'd come to cherish. Alex's dark eyes searched my expression, but I fear he—*she*—didn't find what he was looking for because he gripped a handful of his hair and squeezed his eyes shut. My heart beat cruelly, painfully. Dear God, what had I said to cause such a look? Then he blew out a small puff of air and seemed to gather himself.

He made an elegant gesture of dismissal, in control once again. "It is a long story, one I am not willing to share at this moment because I see now you are not ready to hear it. But I will tell you this: if you have any regard remaining for me at all, you will keep this information to yourself."

I nodded automatically. Lord, who would believe me anyway?

His gaze grew fierce. "Tell no one, Miranda, even, or maybe especially, your mother. If you value my life, tell no one." He turned towards the door.

"Alex!" I had no idea what to say when he faced me, clearly impatient to be gone. "Is that your real name? Alex?"

He looked down at his boots, and suddenly I could see *her*. The woman in man's clothing. She looked up, her eyes soft. "When I was very small, they called me Alice," she said. Then her face twisted into a bitter smile and she shrugged. "'Alex' is close enough, *n'est-ce pas*?" Then she left.

Overwhelmed, I collapsed heavily onto the burgundy settee in the middle of the room. The fast beat of my heart and the emotional upheaval of the past few minutes should have incited a swoon, but I was made of sterner stuff. Alex had taught me that.

I contemplated my shock, searched it for signs of disgust or betrayal, but found only extreme curiosity and compassion. Something about Alex's "confession" jarred me, however. Determined to find some answers, I got up and followed her. I trailed her to her bedroom, where I found her in the process of pouring a glass of brandy.

I closed the door behind me, turned the key in the lock, and faced her. "Alex."

"*Mon dieu*, woman. Will you never just give up?"

I gasped in outraged hurt, but then I narrowed my eyes. "No, I will not give up. If you think I will, you have seriously underestimated me. You must tell me about, well, about you. Then we will decide what to do. Together."

She hesitated, and then her arms opened wide. I ran to her, and she caught me up. "I've been so afraid," she whispered in my hair. "I couldn't lose you, *chérie*, but to deceive you..."

I pulled away to look into her face. "Alex, I—"

She placed her thumb gently on my lips, "I will tell you all. But first ... first, I must ..." Her eyes dropped to my mouth and I understood. The surge of heat in my body made it crystal clear that man or woman, I wanted Alex du Plessis. Badly. And now.

Desperate to finally press my skin to Alex's, my hands first flew to my throat, clawing slightly to get the hated ornate necklace known as a "dog collar" off my neck.

Alex made a clucking sound. "Here, *chérie*, you will damage it, or hurt yourself. Let me." Her elegant fingers brushed mine away, and she began working on undoing the necklace.

Our mutual seduction began then, with a careful disrobing as we were both still wearing our elaborate court dress. For me, that consisted of a tightly fitted emerald satin gown with a court-length train, and a king's ransom in jewelry. Thirteen pearl strands marched up my neck, secured by diamond fasteners that matched the sparkling butterfly clips in my hair. A diamond-and-pearl-encrusted belt circled my waist to complement the bracelets on each wrist. The American wealth of the Van Heuysen's had been on ostentatious display tonight.

Alex's touch was warm and gentle, and it calmed me in a way my maid's businesslike ministrations never had. She proceeded slowly and carefully. Each piece of jewelry went into a pile on the dresser, then she gently turned me so I was looking into the cheval mirror that stood against one wall of the cavernous bedroom.

I could see myself clearly, a splash of color against the dark hue of her formal suit. In a familiar gesture, she began to loosen my gown.

"How did you get so good at disrobing ladies?" I asked, then cringed at the inelegance of the question.

But Alex chuckled warmly. "My Aunt du Roche insisted on a thorough education."

I raised my eyebrows, but only said, "Lucky me."

My gown sagged and then dropped to pool at my feet. The mirror's reflection revealed me in my corset, shift, bloomers, and stockings. The candlelight picked out the sheen of the satin corset cover and the sparkle of gold thread embroidery on my garters. The corset boning had pushed my breasts up and forward, and without the dress bodice to hold them in, their generous proportions threatened to spill over. But Alex was not satisfied with this partial disrobing. She made quick work of my corset ties, and pulled my shift up and my bloomers down, flinging the garments aside in a move that was the antithesis of her earlier care with the jewelry.

Now I was naked, except for my shoes and stockings, while she was still

fully clothed.

“*Mon Dieu*, Miranda,” she murmured, her eyes glittering in the reflected light in the mirror, “you take my breath away.”

My hair provided a bit of modesty, spilling over my shoulders and curling around my breasts. Alex groaned behind me and slid her hand around my waist, pulling me hard against her body. She raked my hair aside and pressed wet kisses on my neck and shoulder until I sagged against her supporting arm.

“But this isn’t fair.” My voice came out breathy and slightly plaintive. “I want to see you too.”

Again she hesitated, but I refused to be the only one so exposed. I turned in her arms and started with the outer layers: coat, stock, tie, sash displaying the Royal Order of Something-or-Other, waistcoat. She was not still as I took off her clothes. Her hands ranged over my body, shaping my full breasts, stroking down my arms, patting my round behind. But even with such distraction in front of her, she stopped me when my hands went to the buttons of her shirt.

I stared into her eyes. “Here is where *you* have to trust *me*, Alex.”

She bit her lip, then touched my cheek lightly with her clever fingers. “All right, *chérie*,” she spread her arms wide, “I am yours.”

Now my hands shook as I unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it out of her trousers. She helped by shrugging the shirt off her shoulders and stepping out of her pants. Men’s drawers covered her lower body, and her feet were encased in men’s socks. She reached down and stripped her knit undershirt over her head, revealing a stark white binding garment. I didn’t know what else to call it. It wasn’t quite a corset; it was too plain and straight-bodied for that, but it covered her from just under her collarbones to below her waist. It didn’t follow the natural—or exaggerated, for that matter—curves of a woman’s body. Instead, this garment was for concealment, to disguise her and turn her into a man. Suddenly I understood Alex’s sympathy with my predicament in the Roman Forum. She must have often felt the constriction of such a piece of clothing.

I set my hands on her sides. “How do I...?”

She lifted an arm to indicate the laces at the side, cleverly situated so she could tie the garment tightly herself. I pulled the knotted lace and the “corset” loosened instantly.

Alex took a deep breath and let out a shy chuckle. “Well, now, that’s better, *hein*?” The binding garment slipped to the floor, and she stepped out of it, but I still wasn’t down to her skin.

I raised my eyebrow at the cloth that wound tightly around her breasts,

smashing them close to her body. “Is this the last bit?”

Her chuckle was a gasp. I looked into her face and saw tears standing on the tips of her long eyelashes. My heart clenched, and sympathetic emotion pricked at my own lids. “Oh, my dear—”

“*Alors*,” she interrupted. “It’s all right. Just ... a relief.”

I nodded, speechless.

She handed me the end of the cloth that bound her breasts, and I circled her slowly, unwinding the last element of her deception. I noticed a small tremor in her hands and body as she slipped off her drawers and socks. Then finally we were naked, together. She was beautiful, stunning really. I could have studied her for hours. Her body was slim and strong, the muscles defined like a man’s, but her breasts were round and feminine, and her skin was flawless.

“Sh-shall we g-get in bed?” Her teeth chattered, even though the room was relatively warm. I quickly pulled back the duvet on her tester bed and climbed under the sheets with her. We embraced each other tightly, and slowly her shivering quieted.

“I am lost, *chérie*,” she whispered. “Without my disguise I don’t know who to be.”

I stroked her hair, enjoying the cocoon of warmth our bodies made in the soft bed. “Ah, my love. It is only me, your little Miranda. You can be yourself, of course.”

Even as we lay there quietly, I could feel every beat of my heart as an insistent ache in tips of my breasts, and a throb between my legs. Heat began to gather between us almost tangibly. Alex stirred and lifted her head. Her eyes were fathomless, the centers dark and wide, her skin flushed and moist. She bent down and kissed me, and my mind went white. Alex! My garden lover and my lovely lady Duc—the combination, for me, was potent indeed. We rolled and writhed together on the bed, entwining our legs, touching every part of each other we could reach.

Finally capturing my hands, she straddled my hips and sat up, laughing. “Let me see you,” she said. “You didn’t let me get a proper look earlier.”

I laughed up at her. “That’s because I wanted to see you too.”

She trailed her fingers down the center of my chest, then took my breasts in her hands. “So big,” she murmured.

I blushed hotly. “Too big.”

“No.” She shook her head sharply. “*Non*, generous maybe, but so feminine and soft.” She massaged the twin mounds, shaping them in her long fingers. I felt the pull deep in my core. “You are the Earth goddess come to life, *chérie*. Eve herself before the fall.” She bent down and set her

lips to one hard peak.

“Ah,” I moaned, “Do I ... do I tempt you?” The suction of her mouth on my nipple made me tighten my hands in her hair.

“Yes, *mon Dieu*. Yes.” Her tongue swept between my breasts to the other peak, and my lower body bucked against hers. She sat up then and reached one of her hands behind her. Her fingers stroked up my thigh, then delved into my nether lips.

I clenched my back teeth at the spear of pleasure that centered on her clever hand. “Oh-my-oh-my-oh-my...” I hardly knew what I was saying as my hips rocked in rhythm with the plunge of her fingers. My legs and arms spread wide on the bed and my head thrashed back against the pillows. I was reaching for something, something close and sweet and violent, but I couldn’t quite find it. Then Alex took my hand from the bed and placed it on her breast. Her nipple rose hard against my palm, and the sweet edge of that unknown explosion gathered speed. I pulled her down with my arm around her neck and lavished kisses and licks on her hot, soft mouth. She began to rock her hips on me, moving the hot wet center of her labia over my pubic bush.

She sat up again, and her two fingers plunged deep into my vagina. My hips pistoned against her hand, my body knowing instinctively how to move. I swept my hand down her front, and pressed my own fingers to her soft, wet core, to the little pleasure pearl I knew lurked there. She cried out, and I looked up at her: Alex du Plessis, le Duc du Moncr cy, beautiful, flushed, and drenched in her passion and strength.

“Alex! Oh, my God. Alex, I think I’m”—the pleasure crashed through me drawing out a shriek of completion as my mind shattered into tiny fragments—“dying.”

“Yes, *ch rie*, yes,” she cried. “Die with me.” Her back arched and her sleek stomach muscles rippled with the violence of her climax. She hovered there for a moment, taut and lovely, then she collapsed boneless onto my chest. My arms went around her, and I held on tightly as aftershocks jolted us both.

A little while later she moved off me, and we rolled to our sides, face to face. She reached up to tuck a dark red curl behind my ear. “*Alors, ma petite*—no, let me say this in English: I love you, Miranda Van Heuysen. You are my soul.”

I reached up and took her hand in mine, threading my fingers through hers. “And I love you, Alex du Plessis. You are my ... duke.”

We laughed in sheer, free, naked delight.

* * * *

A little later, as I traced the marks on her fine skin left by the binding of her disguise, she told me about her family and her brother, Alex.

“We were twins,” she said, her voice soft and distant. “I was born first, a strong, healthy girl, and Alex came second, small and sickly, but the son and heir. Our mother was the American opera singer, Julie Hampton. Apparently, she’d entranced my father when he’d seen her perform at La Scala in Milan. Their marriage had been the scandal of Paris in 1868.”

She picked up my hand and kissed the palm, then threaded her fingers through mine as she told me the rest. “Perhaps things would have been different if my mother had lived. But she died of complications from the difficult birth when Alex and I were barely a month old. My father, grief stricken, went off to war. He was killed soon after, fighting the Prussians in Alsace. My Aunt du Roche was named our guardian. When Alex and I were about three years old, we both contracted a fever.”

She gripped my hand tightly, and I made a small sound of comfort, but she shook her head and met my gaze steadily. “As you see, I survived and poor Alex did not. But my Aunt, in order to preserve the Moncrécy estate, made the decision to tell everyone that Alice had died instead, and then she trained me to keep our terrible secret. In fact, I have never told anyone. Until you.”

“Oh, my dear ...” I put my hand on her cheek.

She closed her eyes. “You now hold my life in your hands, Miranda.”

I leaned forward to kiss her. Her arms came around me, holding me tightly. “I will guard your secret with *my* life,” I whispered.

She pulled back after a few moments, and I caught a familiar sparkle in her eye when she asked, “Will you marry me then, Miranda? Cast off Edward, and run away with me now that I’ve had my wicked way with you?”

My heart soared as I gave the only answer possible at that moment. “Yes, my love. Oh, very much yes.”

Nimble Fingers

by Lucy Felthouse

It was the guitarist that did it for me: tall and athletic-looking with a mop of dark hair. And oh, those fingers. Long, slim, and nimble with tidy nails, that manipulated the instrument into making the most intoxicating sounds I'd ever heard. The floor vibrated; the atmosphere was electric. I was hooked.

The place was packed. I listened to the band play with people singing and dancing all around me. They waved their arms, sloshing drinks everywhere and good-naturedly jostling one another. Despite all that, I felt like the only people in the room were the guitarist and me.

I watched those fingers glide up and down the fret board and wondered how they'd feel against my skin. Would there be calluses, dry skin perhaps, to chafe my most delicate parts? I didn't care. I was deeply in lust and wanted those hands touching me, pleasuring me, delighting me.

I was quite surprised by the intensity of my feelings—after all, we'd never even met. I'd simply observed her from the floor. Yes. Her. I'd shocked myself by developing a crush on a woman. It'd never happened before, and it's never happened since. But she was special, different somehow.

I watched her, fascinated and in awe. I was like a rabbit caught in headlights. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She captivated me, almost as if she'd cast a spell to make me hers. But of course, she didn't know I was alive.

Towards the end of the first set, the lead singer announced they were taking a break after their next song. As the music died down, so did the audience. They began to make moves towards the bar and restrooms, in anticipation of huge queues at both. I stayed put. I watched her play the final notes of the piece, fingers a blur and her wild hair swaying as she tossed her head with abandon in time to the music. Beautiful.

I stood glued to the spot as the rest of the group put down microphones and drumsticks. I watched as she bent her neck forward to pull the guitar's strap over her head and place the instrument on a nearby stand. Then she looked up. A spark of energy pulsed through me as we made eye contact. She smiled, and I was in heaven. Then she left the stage and headed where any sane person would: the bar.

She'd smiled at me. I felt warmth spread throughout my body,

culminating between my legs. Then I berated myself for being such an idiot. She was just being polite, like anyone would. There was no point reading anything into it. As I was busy having this internal argument, standing in the same spot I'd been all night, I was receiving odd looks from people who were milling around, getting drinks, chatting to friends, going for a smoke.

Suddenly, those odd looks changed to ones of interest, and in some cases, jealousy. I sensed a presence by my side and turned. There she was, standing next to me as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She smiled again and handed me one of the two bottles she was carrying. I took it from her, raising an eyebrow questioningly.

"You looked as though you needed one. I'm Samantha, but most people call me Sam."

"T-thanks." My brain stumbled to catch up with events. "I'm Jessica."

"Good to meet you." Sam stuck out her hand, and we shook. It was all I could do not to stare down at her hand, imagining once again what I'd like to have it and its duplicate do to me. I kept my eyes firmly focused on hers.

Up close, she was even more awe-inspiring. Her chestnut hair hung in wild curls around her face, striking against her alabaster skin. Her eyes were beautiful, a dark shade of blue, like deep lagoons. I felt like I could stare into them forever and still not reach the bottom. At a loss for words, I took a swig from the bottle. Processing the unfamiliar taste seemed to focus my brain and calm me down. I swallowed, then took another hit for courage.

"You're a fabulous musician," I said, fumbling around for a conversation starter. "I really enjoyed that set."

"Thanks. That last song is one of my favorites. I was heavily involved in the writing and composition of it."

"It was very soulful. I felt like closing my eyes and drifting away."

"You didn't, though. Close your eyes, I mean. You were watching me."

That caught me completely off guard. There were no excuses, and the heat rushing to my face must have given me away. What she said next made the blood rush from my face to other parts of my body.

"I didn't mind you watching me. I liked it. You looked like you were imagining me naked."

I opened my mouth, no doubt to spout some incomprehensive gibberish, which I hadn't yet thought about, when she continued.

"Would you like to undress me for real?"

I looked down at the drink in my hand, wondering if I'd downed the lot, was drunk out of my mind, and hallucinating the whole conversation. That wasn't the case. I put the bottle to my lips once more and began to gulp

down the amber liquid like it was going out of fashion. I drained the bottle, felt the alcohol begin to buzz through me, and said, "Do you want me to?"

"Yes. I want you to tell me what you were thinking about when you were watching me play. What you were imagining. I want to talk about it, then I want to do it. Come back to my place after the gig."

"Um ... okay." I surprised myself. Up until that evening I'd considered myself completely straight, and here I was agreeing to go back to a total stranger's flat for some girl fun. Suddenly, the amount of alcohol I'd knocked back hit my bladder.

"Will you excuse me? I need to use the toilet and don't want to miss the beginning of the next set."

"I'll come with you. After all, they can't exactly start without me, can they?"

We headed to the ladies', and it occurred to me just how odd this situation was. I'd just about come to terms with finding out I wasn't one-hundred-percent heterosexual, and now I was heading to the toilet with my lesbian squeeze.

Once in the line, I felt completely self-conscious. As a teenager, I'd often sneaked boys into the women's toilets for a bit of a grope in the relative safety of a locked cubicle. Somehow, though, it would be so much naughtier with a woman.

I told myself I was overreacting. She probably wouldn't even come into the cubicle with me. Not that it would really matter. In the space of a couple of hours we'd be alone together at her flat doing heaven knows what, so what did it matter if we indulged in a little light foreplay now?

Sam grabbed my wrist and, pulling me to a just-vacated cubicle, suddenly shook me from my thoughts. We crammed into the tiny space, and she reached over me to lock the door. Just as I thought she was about to pounce, she unbuttoned her jeans before wriggling them and her panties down and crouching over the porcelain. Then I heard the unmistakable sound of peeing. She looked up at me and my face must have been a picture because she laughed.

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen another woman pee before?"

"Of course I have, I just ..." I didn't know what to say. I couldn't very well admit I was thinking she'd been about to seduce me. How arrogant would that have sounded?

She stood up, completely unabashed, and grabbed some paper to wipe herself before pulling up her jeans and fastening them. She shuffled around to let me use the facilities and she watched me as I went. By this point, I was pretty confused. Did she want me or not? Or was she just teasing?

I didn't have to wonder much longer. When I was all buttoned up and ready to go, Sam pushed me against the cold tiled wall of the cubicle and kissed me. Her body felt alien against mine, breasts pushing against my breasts, long hair tickling my collarbones and no hard lump in the groin. It felt different, but incredible. I relaxed into the embrace and opened my mouth to admit her tongue. Her lips were soft, as was her approach. It was passionate and intimate rather than rough. Her hand cupped my face and pulled me more tightly to her as she explored my mouth.

I felt my pussy getting hotter, and my juices starting to flow. Then, just as I was starting to get used to the feeling of kissing another woman and being ready to reciprocate more fully, she pulled away.

"Come on," she said, "before the guys send out a search party. We'll finish this later."

She slid the lock across and left the cubicle with me in tow. I looked around, expecting to see shocked faces staring at us because of what we'd just done. But of course, no one looked twice. Girls go into toilet cubicles together all the time. They had no idea we'd just been kissing. The whole experience felt surreal. I washed my hands, splashed cold water onto my face, then ruffled my hands through my hair to make me look a little more presentable. My face was red, but I guess people would think that was due to the atmosphere of the place and too much alcohol. Truth was, I was damn horny.

I'd been horny ever since I'd laid eyes on her, and the prolonged teasing and foreplay was adding to it. It was going to be complete torture to watch her play the second half of the gig when all I really wanted to do was see her naked and have her hands on my body.

It wasn't that bad, actually. In some ways, it was easier. During the first half of the band's gig she was just a girl I thought was hot and wanted to take to bed. Whereas in the second half, she was Sam—who felt the same about me.

Later, when it was all over and the band took their bows and did their crowd-pleasing bit, I made my way towards the door. I waited until she stood facing the crowd. I saw her eyes scanning the crowd, confused because I wasn't where she'd last seen me standing. Finally, she saw me. I inclined my head, gesturing outside. A nod, imperceptible to everyone else, meant everything to me.

I stood on the pavement, waiting for a taxi. They always passed up and down that particular road, hoping to pick up drunken revelers and relieve them of their remaining cash for the evening. Soon I was able to flag one down and was just about to ask him if he minded waiting for my friend—

with the meter running, of course—when Sam came jogging out of the club. I hadn't been expecting her so soon, thinking she'd have to pack up, so immediately I thought she was going to cancel our liaison. But then she hopped into the taxi beside me.

"That was quick," I said, unable to suppress the surprise in my voice. "I thought you'd be a while sorting all your gear."

"I called in a favor with the guys. I always help them out when they meet girls and want to carry on partying. This time it's my turn."

"Fair enough."

Sam gave the driver directions to where she lived, and off we went. Her hand crept across my lap and grasped mine. Hand in hand, we said nothing. There was nothing much left to say. Not that could be said in front of the driver, anyway. Luckily, he broke the silence with a bit of taxi-driver banter, asking us if we'd had a good night and all that. We indulged him with all the niceties, but I was relieved when Sam spoke.

"This is my road. Could you just pull in by that wall? Thanks."

We paid, and as we got out and he drove off, it was as if a spell had been broken. She grabbed my hand, and we ran up the path, giggling.

"Take your shoes off," Sam whispered. "It's quieter and safer. These stairs are a nightmare."

I could see her point. Said staircase was uncarpeted and two girls in heels would no doubt wake the dead climbing it. I did as she asked and within seconds we were at the door. Sam made short work of unlocking it, pulling me in, and closing it behind us. She relieved me of my shoes and bag and dumped them in a recess by the door.

She kissed me again. This time it felt different, more urgent. I kissed her back, my tongue slipping between her lips and my arms reaching around her neck. Again, I noticed how much more pliant her body was than a man's. Despite her obvious passion, she never felt overbearing, just incredibly erotic. She pulled away, only to walk towards a door. It was closed, so I could only guess it was her bedroom. She threw a glance at me over her shoulder and wordlessly I followed.

She opened the door, and beyond her I could see a bedroom with an enormous, immaculate-looking bed. Sam entered, then turned back to me and sat on the corner of the bed. She patted the space next to her. Once more, I was like a rabbit caught in headlights. She beckoned. Finally, I moved. Despite the flat being empty, for some reason I shut the door behind me.

I joined Sam on the bed. She reached for me and tenderly tucked my hair behind my ears.

“You’ve never done this before, have you?”

Somehow I knew she meant with a woman, and I shook my head.

“Don’t worry, I’ll look after you.”

She pushed me down on the bed and crawled up beside me. She cupped my face, and leaned in for a kiss. She was slow, gentle, and it was incredibly erotic. As our tongues intertwined and the kiss became more heated, her hand slid from my cheek and crept down my body. It found its way to my left breast, which she squeezed. I felt a jolt radiate from beneath her hand right down to my pussy.

I grabbed her face with both hands and pulled her tightly to me. Our mouths mashed together more violently now. Sam swung a leg over me so she was straddling me, our crotches grinding together through our clothes. The seam of my denim jeans rubbed against my vulva and gave my clit some much-needed friction.

Suddenly, Sam pulled away from our kiss and sat upright. Reaching down, she grabbed the hem of her skinny tee and pulled it over her head, barely breaking eye contact with me as she flung it across the room. Neither of us knew, or cared, where it landed, because next she undid her bra. That, too, ended up discarded on the floor.

Shuffling up my body slightly, Sam bent down to feed a nipple into my mouth. Instinctively, I sucked it in. I flicked my tongue around and across the nub and areole, smiling inwardly as I heard Sam moan at my ministrations. I reached up to pinch and pull at the other breast, feeling the tip grow hard beneath my hand. Popping her nipple out of my mouth, I cupped both soft mounds and pushed them together roughly so I could lick and suck both in rapid alternation. By now, I could feel that beneath my jeans and panties, my pussy was saturated, and I suspected Sam’s was too.

Sitting up, I pushed Sam off of me and onto her back. I started removing my clothes and she did the same, all the while watching each other hungrily. Once naked, we paused momentarily. I took the opportunity to drink her in, her hair tousled, cheeks colored, and eyes sparkling. Her body was incredible. Her ample breasts were blushed from my touch, her body curvy in all the right places, and a triangle of short dark hair pointed south from her pubis. I desperately wanted to follow that arrow.

Our eyes met and we moved toward one another once more. Kissing with complete abandon, I stroked her hair, her face, her neck, breasts, ass, thighs, anywhere I could reach. Soon, I grew bolder and slipped my hand between her legs and sought her pussy. Naturally, I didn’t have to search for long. I simply followed the heat and damp emanating from her core.

Sam parted her thighs to let my hand wander. I brushed my fingers

against her outer folds of flesh, marveling at the heat and how sodden she was. I was pleased and flattered that she appeared to be just as horny as I was. Pushing onward, I slid two fingers slowly inside her, growing more aroused myself as I felt her tight cunt clenching. I longed to lick her pussy, but was paranoid I wouldn't know what to do. Instead I removed my fingers and slid them between my lips, licking and sucking her sweet juices.

Taking advantage of my momentary distraction, Sam decided to return the favor, pushing me onto my back once more and parting my thighs. Her hand dipped into my copious fluids and she spread them across my aching clit, lubricating it. Then she pushed two fingers into me, maneuvering her hand so her thumb nestled tightly against my clit. She began to thrust gently in and out of me, bumping and rubbing my sweet spot expertly until I felt my orgasm begin to build.

"So," Sam said, interrupting my race towards climax, "are you going to tell me what you were thinking about me? What you were imagining?"

She'd slowed her fingers, meaning I could claw back some of my brain's functions and stutter out a reply.

"Th-this." Her thumb was tracing lazy circles across my clit, and I was so close to coming that it almost hurt. "I was watching your hands on the guitar, imagining them on me, in me."

"Really? What happened next?"

I wasn't stupid. I knew what game she was playing and luckily I had my wits about me enough to be a valid contender for the prize.

"You made me come all over your hand. In my head, it was the most incredible orgasm of my life."

Of course she obliged. She rubbed and stroked at my clit until I was writhing on the bed. Then my climax hit. I arched my back as the intense tingling throughout my body headed between my legs. My pussy spasmed wildly around Sam's fingers, leaking juices all over her hand. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, when I looked at her face, she was gazing down at me in wonder, a smile on her face and her eyes gleaming.

When I had enough presence of mind and energy in my limbs, I sat up. Our mouths met: hers sticky and sweet with the juices she'd sucked from her fingers, mine hungry for more. I pushed Sam onto her back and crawled between her legs, aching to taste her pussy. I tentatively poked out my tongue. As it came into contact with her skin, I figured if I just did what I like having done to me, I couldn't go wrong.

Judging by Sam's reactions, it was a good strategy. As I explored her folds and teased her clit, she moaned and wriggled beneath me, her hands grasping at the bed sheets. The more aroused she became, the hornier I got.

I really wanted to make her come. I didn't have to wait for long. I pulled her swollen nub between my lips and sucked it while thrusting two fingers in and out of her molten core.

Feeling Sam's body tense, I upped my pace on her clit. Seconds later, her cunt clamped down on my fingers and she cried out, the contractions of orgasm following rapidly. I stopped sucking her, knowing she'd be sensitive, and watched in wonder as she bucked and thrashed. I'd done that.

I smiled and snuggled up beside her as her breathing and heart rate returned to normal. Grasping my hand, we lay in a companionable silence.

We didn't sleep much that night. We made love a number of times, each time better than the last.

Her nimble fingers made me wish I were a guitar.

Things That Go Hump in the Night

by Elizabeth Black

Bridget gunned her Toyota's accelerator as the car jumped from sixty to eighty miles per hour. *If I keep this up, I'll crash into a bridge embankment.* So angry she white-knuckled the steering wheel, she drove aimlessly along the deserted rural Highway 14, fuming about her boyfriend, Mike, and that sharp-kneed whore who Bridget had caught him fucking—on her birthday, no less.

Mike and Boobs-on-a-Stick didn't expect Bridget to come home early to celebrate her twenty-fourth. Instead of finding a birthday cake and scrumptious dinner waiting for her, she found Can't-Keep-His-Dick-in-His-Pants and that horse-faced skank doing the mattress mambo—in Bridget's bed. Pissed enough to spit drywall screws at them, she'd fled her bedroom, grabbed the two bottles of expensive pinot on the kitchen table, which Mike had bought her as gifts, and ran from the house. So now she found herself speeding along the road as the sun set in the autumn sky, not knowing where her flight would take her.

Towns so small you'd miss them if you blinked gave way to expansive fields of corn and soy as she drove. Her anger raged until tears took over, a gamut of emotions that exhausted her after a half hour. She spied a sign in the distance, and through her tears and the glowing pink of sunset she read the lettering: *Mountain View Inn: Vacancy.*

She couldn't go home, not with those murderous feelings boiling to the surface. Her cell phone beeped, and Bridget knew Mike left yet another string of text messages, trying to make up for his big mistake. She refused to hear any of it. She needed an escape—a breather from the harsh reality of Mike's latest indiscretion. *Why do I stay with him? This is the third time he's cheated on me. I really need to break it off.*

She pulled into the Mountain View Inn's parking lot, grabbed her purse, the wine, the overnight bag she always kept in her car for traveling purposes, and walked to the main entrance. She liked the look of the place. The Mountain View Inn was one of those Scandinavian-styled wooden A-frame chalets she had often seen in the mountains near where she lived. A sign on the main entrance door said, *Rooms to Let.* An idea percolated in Bridget's head. Maybe it was time to start working on her life. She liked the inn. It was an old house, and she liked old houses. It was also in the

country, and she longed to get away from the main part of town where she lived with Mike, where it was far too noisy. A nice apartment in the inn in the quiet countryside might work out well for her. It wasn't far from the center of town so she'd add only an extra twenty minutes to her commute in the morning. She decided to wait until morning to ask the desk clerk about monthly rates and which rooms were available.

She was pleased that her suite had its own private bath and kitchen. Most Inns had communal bathrooms. Normally she wouldn't have minded, but she was not in the mood to deal with people in her current state of distress. The desk clerk gave her a key to room 1097. It was on the third floor, overlooking a pond. She'd requested a view, and she was blessed with a beautiful one.

Once inside her room, Bridget was amazed at its size and cozy appearance. Rather than seeing two beds like she expected the moment she opened the door, she found herself in a snug living area complete with couch, armchairs, a hand-carved wooden coffee table, and an entertainment center in an armoire. The red Navajo rug offset the warmth of the wooden floor and walls. A fireplace sat kitty-corner to the couch. She felt as if she'd walked into someone's living room rather than a hotel room.

She double-checked her receipt to make sure there wasn't an extra zero on the price. This amazing suite came very cheap! Must be because it was off-season.

She walked past the living room into a small dining area and dropped her wine, purse, and overnight bag on the table. A spacious kitchen sat opposite the dining area. *Oh, is that a gas stove? Be still, my beating heart!* Bridget had always wanted a gas stove but the apartment complex in which she lived was not set up for one.

This place looks more like an apartment suite than a hotel room. She opened the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony to let in the cool autumn air, which helped to lift her mood. Ducks swam in the pond outside her balcony, and she heard the sound of a breeze blowing through the pine trees.

Where was the bedroom? Doors opened to closets, but she couldn't find a bedroom until she faced a spiral staircase that led to a loft, where she found a sleigh bed and a bathroom with a shower and sunken tub.

This room obviously was at one time an apartment that had been converted to a hotel suite when the Mountain View Inn first took paying customers. The luxurious setting eased her pain somewhat, helping her momentarily forget about Mike and his dalliances. But not for long.

She returned to the first floor where she opened her overnight bag and

removed her toiletries. She pulled out a pair of black stretch pants, a T-shirt, and underwear. *Good, I have clothes for tomorrow.* As she unfolded her pants, a strip of celluloid fell out.

It was an old picture of Bridget and Mike taken at one of those photo booths at a carnival they'd attended several years ago. She stared at the smiling faces in the photos, tongues sticking out playfully, arms wrapped around each other. Happier times. Tears welled up in her eyes again. Too tired to resist, she bawled once again, dropping her pants on the table and retreating to the safety and comfort of the couch, where she cried until she exhausted herself and drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

"So pretty ... I haven't seen a woman in my room in a long time."

Bridget stirred in her sleep, her brain confused over the identity of the soft, feminine voice but not awake enough to make identification. Fingers fluffed her hair like a gentle breeze. Bridget brushed her hand around her face, as if to swat away a fly, and opened her eyes.

She lay on the couch, alone in the dim room. The full moon shone through the sliding glass doors, illuminating the entire floor with a soft glow. Her eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark. Her teeth chattered, body shivering in the chill that covered her like a blanket. The hair on her neck stood on end. Alert and nervous, she wondered why she felt such alarm when she knew she was safe. Wide awake, she scanned the room, feeling as if someone was in the room with her, but she could not see who had touched her. She hadn't imagined the tender caress through her hair; maybe it was a dream.

"Who is it?"

Bridget bolted upright. "Who's there?" She turned on the lamp, flooding the living room with light.

"Turn off the light."

"*Who* are you?" She whirled around, looking for the source of the voice but finding nothing.

The voice sounded young, like a woman barely out of her twenties, and it sounded like chimes singing in the wind. The young invisible woman spoke with a plea in her voice, as if she was afraid Bridget would flee, and fleeing was first and foremost on Bridget's mind as her heart pounded in her throat. She fought an urge to bolt from the room and run downstairs to surround herself with living, breathing people.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Please turn off the light."

"I'm not turning off the light. Who are you?"

Silence.

Bridget stood in front of the couch, frozen. Her teeth chattered, and she clenched her jaw to make them stop. A chill descended over the room, making her shiver. She wished she had a blanket so she could stay warm—and hide.

"C'mon, tell me. What's his name?" the voice said.

"Who are you talking about?"

"The guy you're mad at. No woman comes to a hotel room alone with two unopened bottles of wine unless she has man trouble."

"He's my boyfriend ... er, ex-boyfriend ... and what's it to you?"

"I saw you crying earlier, and it made me sad. What did he do to you?"

Why am I talking to someone I can't see? This is insane. Bridget looked around the room, trying to make sense of her predicament. Even in the dim light she could see she was alone. Her breath burst from her lips in a cloud in front of her mouth. Her body shivered and was covered with goose bumps. Afraid, she froze where she sat, wondering what lay in store for her.

"Well? What did he do to you?"

The bizarre nature of her position blew Bridget's mind but she couldn't help but answer. Her unseen roommate's gentle tone of voice lured her out. Bridget had felt a strong urge to dump all her sorrows on anyone who would listen, and her invisible guest made herself available. So what if she was a ghost? She was an eager and attentive audience.

"He cheated on me. And today's my birthday. I'm pissed," Bridget said as she stood up to stretch. Lying on the couch had given her a body cramp. "I can't believe he did that again, after he'd promised he wouldn't bed anyone else after the last time."

"You mean he has a history of cheating on you?"

"Yes. This is his third time."

"And you stayed with him? What a poor choice! You deserve some punishment."

Thwack! Without warning, pain gripped her left butt cheek. Bridget whirled around, looking for her unseen confidante but seeing no one. It was one thing to talk to someone you couldn't see, but there was something exciting about being touched by an invisible entity. The hand that spanked her was small but strong. Bridget wondered what else her ghostly roommate could do with that hand.

"What was *that* for?"

"You need to be spanked, and badly. Making such poor choices. Did you toss him out yet?"

"No, but—"

Thwack! The painful smack that traveled from her butt cheek to slam into her pussy, making her feel strangely aroused.

"Stop that!"

"You don't need him, someone who cheats on you and treats you like dirt. On your birthday, no less. I know exactly what you need."

"And what might that be?"

"You need me."

The playfulness went out of her voice, and she sounded gentle and tender. It was such a simple statement: *You need me*. Maybe Bridget did need a new lover, someone who would tend to her needs rather than act in Mike's selfish manner. Her ghostly roommate was right about one thing: she should have left Mike years ago, after he'd cheated on her the first time. But she was afraid of being alone, so she stayed and put up with his horrid ways.

No more.

"Please turn off the light. It's too glaring for what I want to do with you."

Bridget turned off the light. Spectral fingers alighted on her hair as her eyes adjusted to the dark, and they stroked her tresses with a tenderness Bridget hadn't felt in many years. She curled her neck until her head rested in the unseen palm, closing her eyes and enjoying the gentle caress. She had never touched a woman's body before. Now was her chance.

"I won't hurt you. Can't you sense that? Let me take care of you tonight. I've been so alone here with no one to keep me company. Please let me touch you."

"I've never been with a woman before."

A delightful, feminine giggle tinkled in her ear. "I suspect you've never been with a phantom before either. Two birds with one stone." Soft lips brushed her cheek, running along her jaw and stopping just before her lips. "I'll make you feel good. Take your mind off him."

Bridget felt fingers tugging her blouse, and she reached up and unbuttoned slowly. After removing her blouse she slipped out of her black jeans and sat them on top of the blouse on the floor. Dressed only in her purple lace bra, panties, and black ankle socks, she stretched out on the couch, allowing her ghostly visitor to have her way.

She closed her eyes, helping her enjoy her new lover's touch. *Is she my new lover? What if I never see her again?* Unwilling to allow such a

depressing thought to ruin her aroused mood, Bridget concentrated on the light dusting of fingers that grazed her sensitive skin. This woman's touch was much lighter than Mike's groping. *I don't even know her name—*

"Bridget."

"Pardon?" the ghost asked.

"My name is Bridget."

Silence greeted her for a few moments. Bridget listened to the breeze blow through the trees, and she heard the sound of night peepers in the forest not far from her balcony.

"Gillian."

Such a sweet name for a tender lover. Rather than speak, Bridget felt Gillian's lips brush along her collarbone. Fingers fumbled with the clasp on the front of her bra until it snapped open. Gillian's soft lips found a nipple and suckled it until it stood on end. Her touch was much more gentle than Mike's, who liked to roughhouse with her to please himself more than her. She liked the rough play but such a gentle touch brought forth more erotic feelings than being jerked around and toyed with.

What will it be like to be with a woman? Bridget had never before taken a woman as a lover. She'd sometimes wondered what a woman's body would feel like but the opportunity never before presented itself.

It has now, and I should take advantage of it. She felt Gillian's mouth and fingers on her breasts, but she couldn't see her. Being unable to see her lover made the lovemaking much more exciting. What would Gillian do next? Bridget couldn't anticipate Gillian's moves. Curious for an idea of how her lover looked, she reached out one hand and felt around in the air until her palm alighted on Gillian's hair. Bridget ran her fingers through her short, wavy hair as her phantom lover kneaded her breasts and flicked her tongue over a nipple. She squirmed on the couch, feeling warmth growing in her core that needed attention. As if reading her mind, she felt a small hand slip beneath her panties, fingers sliding between her folds, seeking her sex. Gillian's touch was soft and sweet, staying off her clit so that she wouldn't feel overly sensitive. *I could get used to this.* Every man she'd been with ground his rough fingers against her clit, which made her feel uncomfortable. She preferred Gillian's lighter touch.

Gillian lifted her head, and Bridget ran her palms over her cheeks. A heart-shaped face with wide-set eyes and full lips revealed themselves beneath her fingertips. She lowered her arms until her hands touched delicate shoulders and firm, full breasts.

As Bridget's hand roamed her phantom lover's naked body, she felt a familiar stirring in her groin. Bridget caressed her soft skin and lithe form,

wanting so much more. Gillian's body was lean and sweet, skin soft and pliant, possibly about twenty-five years old. When Gillian pulled away from her breasts Bridget let out a little mewl of disappointment, but her distress didn't last long. Within seconds, she felt soft lips against her pussy.

Gillian's tongue lapped at her folds with a gentleness that belied her own passion. Bridget heard Gillian's fevered gasps for breath as her lover's arousal overtook her technique. Hands gripped her thighs, pulling them farther apart. Gillian's tongue lapped at her sex, finding her clit and flicking around it in quick, excited motions. Bridget pulled on her nipples as Gillian worked her into an erotic frenzy. She felt two fingers slip inside her, more slender than what she was used to. A thumb flicked her clit like a lute.

Bridget felt light smacks on her ass that brought the blood to the surface. Before tonight, she'd never been spanked before, and she loved it. She arched her back at each smack, relishing the arousal she felt. When Gillian brought down her hand in a loud and painful *thwack*, Bridget groaned with unabashed delight.

Bridget felt an overwhelming urge to explore her lover's body. "May I touch you? I've never been with a woman before. I want to feel you."

"Of course. I'll lie next to you. Enjoy yourself."

"May I see you?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question. If I allow you to see me I won't have energy left to ravish you." She giggled her delightful laugh once again. "Besides, I think you already know what I look like. You felt my face."

"I want to feel your body." Bridget fished around in the dark until her hand smacked into Gillian's hip. Her phantom lover lay on her back on the Navajo rug. Bridget grabbed a few floor pillows and cushioned herself next to Gillian. Hands roaming over her lover's body, she felt broad hips and a slight belly. Full, pendulum-shaped breasts begged for touch. Being unable to see Gillian made her explorations of the woman's body all the more enticing. She could not rely on sight, only touch and smell. Gillian smelled of the forest: juniper and rosemary. Bridget lost herself in the heady scent that reminded her so much of fall.

She closed her eyes and allowed her hands to explore the soft flesh. When her fingers alighted on Gillian's belly the woman let out a snort, belly jiggling as she squirmed. *She's ticklish! How sweet!* Bridget found her breasts and kneaded them with both hands. Gillian twisted her body to accommodate the explorations. Bridget always wondered what someone else's breasts felt like. She had fantasized about fondling and sucking on a

woman's breasts, but the opportunity had never presented itself.

Until now.

She lowered her head and took Gillian's nipple into her mouth. It puckered quickly, growing hard the more she sucked. She kneaded her lover's breasts, feeling how firm yet soft they were. The longer she kneaded and sucked, the more urgent her own arousal grew. She lost herself in Gillian's supple breasts, as if nursing like a young child. Her hands traveled down Gillian's body, feeling her curves and soft skin, so unlike the men she had bedded. A woman's body felt so much more alluring than the roughness of a man's body. Full of curves and tantalizing, delicate flesh, her first woman lured her into seduction like no other lover.

Bridget knew how a pussy felt since she had one herself and explored it often enough, but how would another woman's feel? She slid her fingers down Gillian's belly and was surprised to find a bush blocking her way. *So, my ghost had not shaved when she was alive.* Most women Bridget knew had Brazilian waxes, especially during skimpy swimsuit season. Mike had urged her several times to get waxed. She'd refused.

So here she lay with a lovely woman whom she could not see who sported a full head of hair. Curious to experience the total sensation of Gillian's sex, she shifted her body until her face was inches from Gillian's pussy. She buried her nose in her hair, feeling it tickle her face. She smelled of woodland fog and musk, a strong feminine scent Bridget recognized from her own private fondling. What would it be like to lick a woman down there? She had been taught from a young age that women's sex was dirty, and now she knew that was far from true.

She spread Gillian's lips with her fingers and buried her face in her sweet pussy. Not sure what to do, she decided to taste her first. Her tongue flicked out and slid over the soft folds, and Bridget tasted salt and warm fluid that tasted a bit like yogurt. It was a very pleasant taste, not too strong or overwhelming, which was what she'd feared. Gillian's sex tasted pungent and alluring. Bridget lapped her up, eager to take in as much of Gillian's aroma and taste as possible. Her tongue flicked against Gillian's erect clit and her ghostly lover moaned in ecstasy. Knowing what she preferred, Bridget ran her tongue in circles alongside Gillian's clit but not directly touching it. Her lover groaned and squirmed beneath her virgin touch. Bridget tentatively made love to Gillian, unsure of what she was doing but using what aroused her as her guide.

Gillian had shifted on the rug, pulling a pillow under her body as a cushion. She and Bridget lay next to each other, faces buried in each other's sultry sex. As Bridget kissed Gillian's thighs, Gillian's mouth found her

pussy, and her tongue lapped her sex in long, languorous strokes. No man had ever been so gentle with her, nor had he aroused such intense amorous feelings. Mike had gone down on her as if he was in a pie-eating contest at the State Fair. No decorum whatsoever. Gillian, on the other hand, relished her taste and feel, taking time to explore and allowing Bridget to become even wetter with desire. Her hand came down once again in a resounding *smack* against her bare ass, making her shiver and crave more punishment.

Bridget followed Gillian's lead and flicked her tongue along her clit, at the sides but not directly on it. Her phantom lover moaned in ecstasy, squirming beneath her as she became more aroused. She synchronized her movements to the rhythm of Gillian's tongue and lips against her clit and folds. As she rocked in time to Gillian's movements, she slid two fingers into the woman's cave. Immediately, Gillian tightened around her fingers, pulling them in even further. Bridget took a chance and took Gillian's clit between her lips and sucked hard. She enjoyed the feel of her lover's soft skin in her mouth. Such silky smoothness! As she sucked she writhed beneath Gillian's talented mouth, feeling that familiar rise of passion as her orgasm overcame her. She bucked Gillian's face so hard she felt the phantom's teeth. Coming harder than ever before, she sucked on Gillian's clit until she came in her mouth, fluid gushing forth like a fountain of ambrosia.

After they'd come, Bridget crawled onto the couch to relax. She felt Gillian's arms embrace her, her head resting on her chest. Gillian's mouth brushed against Bridget's head and as she turned towards her ghostly lover, their lips met in a kiss. Soft lips pillowed her own, spreading them apart to make room for a small tongue that slid into her mouth. Gillian tasted of sunlight and mountain breezes. Her kiss was tentative and gentle, bringing their lovemaking to an end for the night.

"Happy birthday," Gillian whispered in her ear, her tongue licking her earlobe in a playful manner. Never before had Bridget felt such a tender and loving kiss. As Bridget stroked Gillian's hair and caressed her body, she drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Bridget awakened at dawn. The room had warmed up. She was alone.

After showering and putting on some clothes, Bridget walked to the front desk. She requested room rates for a long-term stay. As she waited for the clerk to return with a room-rate brochure, she browsed the pamphlets off to the side. She saw fliers for skiing in the mountains, cabins at Crystal

Lake, and one flier that caught her attention the most: the one about the haunted room at the Mountain View Inn.

She grabbed the flier as her heart raced in anticipation of what she would learn. According to the flier, in 1996 a young woman lived in the apartment that would later become room 1097. A man who had met her and another woman at a bar on ladies' night had knifed her to death in the room. Police reports stated that he grew enraged when neither woman would pay attention to his amorous advances. Sensing they were lesbians, he followed one to her home, where he murdered her.

Her name was Gillian Michaels.

A photo of Gillian was on the right side of the flier. As pretty as Bridget expected, Gillian sported short, wavy auburn hair, large moss-green eyes, and a sweet face with a dazzling smile. In life, Gillian had owned a sex toy shop downtown that enjoyed many customers. After death, the shop closed but a plaque was erected in her honor, since she had been well respected in the town.

The clerk returned with her room-rate sheet. Bridget told him she wanted to rent the room she was in now. It was time to rid herself of Mike and get on with her life with someone who attended to her needs. Someone like Gillian. The owner was surprised since no one stayed in that room for long. Most people left it before the night was over, requesting another room. The owner gave it to Bridget at a reduced rate. Bridget knew it was because the owner didn't believe she would last in there for more than a week, if that long.

Bridget decided it was payback time for her invisible lover.

She walked back to the room. It felt a little chilly, but no phantom hands smacked her on her bum. If her little ghost was in the room, she was playing hide and seek. Bridget smiled as she opened her overnight bag, and retrieved the stash of goodies she kept in her car in case of emergency nights out with Mike. Now she'd share them with Gillian. She pulled out four silk scarves and a Hitachi wand. Now, it was her lover's turn to have some fun.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Bridget called. "I have a surprise for you!" When the room chilled even more, she knew she was in for a morning of sexual bliss with her new lover and roommate.

Girl on a Thursday

by Angela Mazzone

"The soul should always stand you ready to welcome the ecstatic experience."

Emily Dickinson

As I reached to hug, she twisted. I held a breast. More than a handful. No bra. I was embarrassed, but she simply said something like, "That was nice." No sarcasm.

I probably said, "Sweet dreams," or something like that. I was dropping her off at her new Melbourne flat. Still embarrassed, I drove off.

That moment could have easily been forgotten, except Brindi telephoned an hour later. She offered another, "Thank you for the ride," and while asking if I might visit one evening, said, "Just us."

She'd recently broke off a yearlong relationship with an older married man from Sydney, leaving her more time for friends her age—twenty-three. Although she had some butch qualities, I never thought of her in a lesbian way.

We were both free on a Thursday. Ten days to wait.

A sort of a relative through divorce and re-marriage, I'm ten years older and had known Brindi since her teen years. At family events we would sit and talk like older and younger cousins. She radiated health in a milk-eggs-lamb diet, Australian country-town way. If she paid more attention to her appearance, with blue eyes and naturally curly, short blond hair, she would have been considered attractive, even beautiful.

Since finishing university studies she'd been writing programs for computers. She was a bit shy and geeky but, at the same time, bright and confident in a knowing-what-she-wants way.

Never having had a lesbian experience, I hadn't considered the possibility until after she'd called. I became more apprehensive with each passing day. Defying my Catholic heritage, a warped parable entered my thoughts: *two Eves* eating the forbidden fruit.

* * * *

The next time seeing her we were with five mutual friends, blokes and sheilas, at a casual, come-if-you-can Chinese dinner on a Monday. Arriving late, I was not surprised to see her. Tangentially, we have the same friends. I seated myself across the round table, too far to converse. Instead, we did a heap of smiling—sort of secret-sharing smiles.

Afterward, outside the restaurant, hugs and cheek kisses were exchanged as we went our separate ways. On our parting, her hug seemed a bit more clinging, sort of confirming my relentless imagining.

* * * *

On Wednesday, Brindi called, “I’m taking Friday off work. Time to relax. Wear something informal... Yes, a white wine ... I have new music ... well, really from years ago ... so sexy ... you’ll love it.”

She didn’t say, “Plan to sleep over,” like a girl’s night in. That added anxiety. I wondered what old-new music she had that was so sexy.

* * * *

Thursday, I bathed and slipped into my best come-fuck-me jeans. On the frilly-side, a white, open at the neck, front-button shirt and—matching my hair—a black agate pendant necklace. Open-toed, low-heeled wedge sandals. No bra. No earrings.

Following a slow tram on Route 16 toward St. Kilda, I had a slightly queasy feeling, like a teenager when eating an entire bag of sickly sweet candy. Something short of panic. I parked across from the entrance. Leaving my cell phone in the glove compartment, I crossed the street. Climbing three flights to her level resulted in a bout of breathlessness.

I was greeted with a hug and kisses to cheeks. Brindi seemed nervous too. All she said was, “Nice jeans.” I was glad she took note.

I shouldn’t have been surprised at how she appeared. I knew she was a biking enthusiast. She looked quite fetching in loose-fitting biking shorts: dark blue, darts in front, button fly, pockets front and back. Nice buns. Muscle-toned, lean, attractive legs.

Gold clip-on hoop earrings were a surprise too; they, however, went well with her white blouse. Her blouse stretched the fabric in the right places. A single strand of pinkish pearls looked too formal. Maybe, I thought, gifts from the older man. A warm, spring day so, like me, she was in sandals.

To cover my speechlessness, I offered a second hug and presented the

wine, flowers and chocolates. Thanking me, she took my hand, saying, “I know just the place for the flowers,” adding, “Let me show you around.”

Brindi had anticipated the flowers. A vase with water waited in the middle of a table for two below a small kitchen window. Both the chocolates and wine were left on the table as she showed me about.

A guest room was turned into a hobby room with a work table for collages of textiles. I also saw a leather office chair and built-in-the-wall desk with her computer. She parked her bicycle behind the door. Ah, I concluded, explaining why no suggestion to stay in the *guest room* overnight.

Her bed-cover was turned back. She looked to see if I’d noticed. Playing it cool, I complimented her choice of the Monet print—the usual, restful, blue-toned water lilies—that hung over the queen-size bed. A vase of yellow tulips was bedside.

As there was a second place to dine—another table with a view outside in the living room—Brindi, after reminding me it was Chinese take-out, asked, “Where do you prefer?”

To keep with the informality, I said, “Easy at the kitchen table.”

My mind raced again to thoughts of how I needed to tell Brindi this was a first time. Better in the living room, I concluded. Later.

I also noticed a sound system and inlaid coffee table. After suggesting the kitchen, I added, “Maybe in here for dessert, cordials, tea. What do *you* prefer?”

“I like that,” she said, then added, “I’ll save the special music until later. I only recently discovered the French lovers Gainsbourg and Birkin.” She turned to face me. “Do you know them?”

Years ago, I saw one of their art-house films, something about *Jane*. Birkin is not French, as Brindi said. I knew her to be an English girl and the years-long lover of French filmmaker Serge Gainsbourg. Jane Birkin’s look on screen was sensationally seductive. She was much younger than Serge Gainsbourg. I wondered if Brindi saw some connection to her recently ended, older-man relationship.

“Yes, I know something about them,” I answered. “Let’s talk over wine.”

* * * *

Actually, when we got to the kitchen, nothing more was said about Gainsbourg and his relationship with that beautiful girl. *Later. Maybe something to talk about after eating.*

Brindi had a choice of wines including a French pinot gris. I'd brought an Italian pinot grigio. The wines had French and Italian spelling, but all were from New Zealand. Despite the sweet and low flute melodic tones, candles, wine, and a background of fleecy music, I wasn't actually enjoying the moment. My thoughts left me tense. I was too alert to everything new and to whatever Brindi says.

I couldn't say, as we moved about the small kitchen, anything sensual happens. We were, however, growing more and more comfortable sipping and making comments about the wines, about our new prime minister, Julia Gillard, and about the female premiers heading two of six Australian states.

I laughed when Brindi told me she had a made-up word for the new era of women in Aussie politics: Vagina-mite. Vegemite is an Australian breakfast toast spread—the first item packed when going overseas.

Finished with the meal, we left the table as it was. I carried our glasses, chocolates, and wine. Brindi carried two candles into the living room.

* * * *

A soft-tan leather sofa and chairs with matching cushions were arranged around her coffee table. I noticed that two large mirrors and three paintings of River Gum trees made the room appear larger. A wide rectangular window looked west.

Usually, when with blokes, this would've been time to offer a neck rub or a shoulder massage. Get things started. Instead, after placing the candles on the coffee table, Brindi slid the kitchen door closed, reached to dim the overhead light, and, turning toward me, asked, "Ready for something really sexy?"

Having just become emotionally calmer, I was now on full alert again. I took a deep breath and looked around.

With the overhead light dimmed, embers of the already-set sun hinted at a skyline. Her west-facing view was a beachfront, seen over the top of a Victorian house and extensive gardens. Palm trees marked the shore. I imagined waves brushing, stones hissing as the water receded.

My back to her, I was looking out as I answered, maybe provocatively, "Anything you are ready for." As soon as I said it, I wished I hadn't. I felt my neck muscles tighten. I turned.

She had slipped on reading glasses. Head lowered, looking over the top of the lenses, she offered a smile and quizzical look. Eyes widening, she replied, "How about if ... letting ... ah ... me ... ah, massage your shoulders?" She straightened up, adding, "I think we are both too nervous."

Hearing her also admit to being nervous, made me feel easier. A bit cheeky now, in the spirit of fun, I answered, “No drama.”

Seeing her mind occupied, bending, needing the glasses to read the buttons on her CD player, I added, “If you like. Maybe later, when listening?”

Less nervous now, she replied easily, “Yes, I'd like that.”

I continued standing as she inserted the disc. She then pointed to the sofa, shrugged her shoulders and raised her eyes in a *shall-we?* gesture.

More tense now, I said, “Go ahead. You first.”

She sat, setting out one wineglass for me, the other for herself. Before reaching for the pinot grigio she looked up, perhaps wondering why I had not yet joined her.

Needing to tell her in a non-complicating way I had never before—I pulled an easy chair in front of the sofa and sat facing her.

Sensing something was on my mind, Brindi, without expression, said, “Yes?”

I know I was fiddling with the pendent as I leaned forward.

She sat forward, too.

That made it easier, almost a whisper, as I said, “Brindi, sweetheart, you are, er, since that night when I gave you a ride, and you invited me here? Ah, well, I have had thoughts of us ... as lovers.”

It helped. It helped *so very much*, when she answered, “Me too.”

“Really? Wasn't just me imagining?”

I saw a not-just-you shake of her head. Then she bit her lower lip. I waited, thinking she wanted to say something. Then she puckered her lips, again suggesting she wanted to say something. I waited.

Brindi looked thoughtful. I looked at her eyes for a message. She squirmed a bit, and I saw she chewed on a lower lip like a child does when they don't want to tell a parent something. I reached placing my hands on her bare knees. I stroked with my fingers. I was beginning to feel more confident—yes, like an older cousin.

Since she didn't say anything, I told her how I'd never had sex with a girl. I admitted being anxious, then asked. “How about you? In college? Other girls, maybe?”

Before she answered, she placed her hands on mine and squeezed. There was a long pause as flying bats—or “flying foxes” as the Tourist Commission re-named the winged mammals—passed overhead in noisy waves.

With the screeching from above receding, she tipped her head to one side with a smug grin and said, “Maybe a little playing.” She looked into

my eyes. Seeing acceptance in my expression, she went on, “We got lonesome among ourselves. You know, bikini parties and sleepovers.” She paused before adding with a mind-casting-back expression, “Even at boarding school.”

When she said, “at boarding school,” I thought, *that means since she was a teenager*. Now, at a complete loss for words myself, I was relieved when, dropping the topic, she said, “Let's listen.”

Pointing the remote and clicking, she ushered me to sit by her. Leaving my chair and slipping my sandals off, I slid next to her. Facing the CD player as the voices began, I leaned back, half on her, half on the sofa. Brindi and the sofa felt equally soft.

She adjusted the sound. Placing the remote on the coffee table, her left hand came to rest on my upper leg at the edge of my pelvic bone.

Brindi whispered in my ear, “Close your eyes. Listen.”

As the duet with background music soothed, barely audible then more clearly, the female lead, Jane Birkin, whispered—experiencing an orgasm. Not sharp-clawed gasps, but serene, gentle. The more the moments passed, the more arousing the effect.

Perhaps two or three minutes into the vocalist's whispering, Brindi, without pause, without subtle intent, reached her left hand forward, pressing her fingers between my legs. I laid a hand on hers. I held her hand still. I wanted to absorb the duet, the music, the moment. I tried not to give in to impulse.

Brindi whispered, “Do you like that?” Hearing *that* told me she was not asking about the sensual duet.

I answered, “Uh huh.” I pressed her hand down. I was weakening.

In unison we began to rock back and forth, timed to the slow beat emerging from the speakers.

As the tune faded, Brindi took her hand from between my legs. Picking up the remote, she clicked replay. Then, as her right arm slipped under my right arm, she asked, “May I?”

Before I knew her intent, before I said anything, I felt her fingers opening buttons. She started at my collar, working down skillfully, as easily as opening her own blouse. There was no sense of hurry.

This was *not* how I'd imagined us progressing.

I sat up and turned as, with both hands, she pulled the shirt from my jeans. I let her lift and push it back. Shrugging my shoulders, it easily slipped off behind, out of sight. Embarrassed about my tiny breasts, I covered them.

Again, a polite, “May I?” as she leaned, lowering my hands, and kissed a

nipple. As her fingers offered gentle finger-squeezes to each tiny breast, I wanted to apologize about being so little, but I didn't say it. She knew I was okay when I pressed her head to my chest.

Minutes later, as her tongue licked, I thought enough for now. I said, lightly, "My turn."

She sat upright as I lifted her blouse. Removing it, I leaned forward, grasped her head, and kissed her.

With our lips together, a little tongue, and eyes closed, I was still holding her head when I felt her movements reaching behind to unsnap her bra. I sensed her lowering straps, getting bare for me—for us.

Her hands now returned to my chest. Her palms slid across ribs to my back. She drew me to her. Her breasts pressed to my chest.

I felt the need to see her breasts. I wanted to hold and kiss. I wanted to suck her nipples. With a final, generous, wet sharing of lips, my voice hushed, I asked, "May I?"

Of course, she knew. Brindi released her hold and leaned back. She was so lovely, so beautifully smooth, so fit.

As I took my pleasure, she—with nonchalance—removed her earrings. I sensed her confidence. Her experience shone as she again reached between my legs, pressing.

Then I had this idea. My grandfather was Italian. I remembered how he said, "Never to do anything important without the taste of wine on the lips." So I said, "Let's sip a little wine," and I told her about my grandfather.

So to toast Grandpa, and us, we put a little more wine in our glasses and sipped. Grinning, we looked at each other. It was a light moment. Still seated on the sofa, eyes wide, broad smiles expressed our delight. We rolled our eyes. We stared. We were actresses.

Then Brindi stood and put on a new CD. It was a tune I did not know, but it was perfect for dancing, so she danced and twirled and made sexy moves with her shoulders. As when jogging, her breasts were lively.

Provocatively placing her hand at her waist with fingers out like a model, she gave the come-to-me look. I noticed her lean biceps. Strong shoulders, too. I went.

We danced. Rubbed chests. She lifted and kissed my black pendant. I drew her beads across my lips. I was in my jeans, she in her bike shorts. Maybe we'd stop here, I thought. Maybe we'd just touch and see and kiss nipples. But she had already pressed her fingers between my legs, so I was thinking she would want to go the distance.

She changed the CD. I heard Janet Jackson belt out, *All Night Long*.

As we continued dancing she led me toward the open bedroom door.

Inside we took our own jeans and shorts off. My jeans were tight, so while I stood, she helped me shimmy out and felt where I was wet. I felt where she was moist, too. We got into her bed. The covers were pushed off. The sheets smelled fresh.

Except for the vase of yellow tulips knocked over during gyrations—like puppies tumbling—nothing was left unloved, un-kissed.

“May I” and “My turn” continued joyfully, as if tennis serves, in slow motion, into Friday's early morning.

* * * *

As the sun rose like a morning bonfire, slivers of light beamed past an ajar door. The voyeur would have seen yesterday's fresh-laundered sheets now crumpled, the plush blue carpet divoted by knees. The slender girl was remembering the taste and fragrance of green tea at the quivering temperature of slippery-wet lips; the caressing of Janet Jackson's *All Night* and the intensity of Jimi Hendrix's *Freedom* both wafting in memory; shades, textures, tastes, colors balanced in comfortable intimacy; bedside clock ticks. Yellow spring tulips remained spread, and morning light falling on pink pearls and black pendant would draw eyes to waking girls hearing flying foxes screeching a new day, before delicate cuddles, then mutual washing in the spray of warmed water.

* * * *

I felt oddly exhilarated, even if tired, as I left the main entrance of her apartment building. It was late Friday morning.

Returning to the quiet of my writing studio, I made notes. Through the fog of memory, I pieced together mosaic images from our Thursday dancing to our Friday morning shower.

Saturday, I rested.

We met at noon, Sunday, and walked the shore. Comfortable and casual, nothing was said about Thursday until Brindi offered, “I suppose because, story-writer that you are, I'll soon be a celeb?”

I answered cheerily, “I have a few notes.” With a grin, “You want me to change names?”

“Seems it's up to the author.” Then, with an equally cheery tone, she said, “That's how Jane Birkin got famous.” She grinned.

My cousin is not Italian, but offering the traditional, warm farewell, Brindi kissed her fingertips, then reached and pressed her fingers to my right cheek.

Jack's Ex

by Lara Zielinsky

Kelly

Late Friday afternoon I stormed into the home I shared with my boyfriend, Jack, and his kids, my goal the alcohol bar. I'd just lost my third client in three days. There was a missed call from the firm on my cell phone, and I intended to forget it was there.

I had a double vodka with lime twist in my hand when Leigh, Jack's ex-wife, came strolling down the main staircase. I grimaced, though this was nothing new. She hung around constantly, and it drove me crazy.

At first I was, like, fine. His kids, Jack Jr., ten, and Sara, sixteen, are her kids, too. I get that. Jack and I don't have any kids together. I want some, maybe two. Eventually. But co-parenting with an ex is not my idea of *having kids together*. I did resent some of the time Jack had to spend with Leigh when dealing with their kids, especially if I couldn't be a third wheel.

Leigh is gorgeous: tall with long legs, a pin-up quality blonde with just enough natural highlights of honey and brown mixed in not to be brassy. I'm not jealous. Jack had divorced Leigh long before he met me, so I never viewed her as competition. I consider myself good looking with dark brown hair and eyes to match. Jack is dark, too, so we make a striking couple, if I do say so myself.

"What're you doing here?" I demanded.

In my defense I had thought I'd be alone. Jack was out of town on business and wouldn't be back until Monday night. Leigh had said three days ago that she'd take the kids, picking them up directly from their schools. I wouldn't have been going for drunk if the kids were in the house.

Apparently deciding to ignore my tone, Leigh smiled and said, "Hey, Kelly."

"I thought you took the kids this weekend," I said, desperate for my drink but wanting to be sure I wouldn't be irresponsible in front of the kids.

"I did. Jack forgot something."

"Where are Jack and Sara?"

"Swimming at Grandma's."

"Great." Thus relieved of the sole obstacle, I drained the contents of my glass in one long swallow. The burn brought tears to my eyes. I wiped my

mouth with the back of my hand still holding the glass. The liquid hit my stomach and spread blessed warmth.

“Why are you drinking?”

“Why are you still here?” I countered. She gave me a look that immediately made me feel like the heel in a fight. “Fine. I lost another client.” I refilled my glass with vodka and lime, appreciating the ice clinking sound with a smile.

“You drink every time you lose?”

I waved the glass to punctuate my response. “Three clients in a row, I do.” I sipped at my second drink and settled on the nearby couch. I braced both elbows on my knees, leaning forward as I swished a thumb through the drink’s surface, making the ice clink again.

I was lifting the glass to my lips when her hands closed over mine. “Hey!” I glared up at Leigh through a curtain of hair. “You want a drink, get your own.”

“It’s not good to drown your troubles.”

“Don’t lecture me. I’d never drink in front of Jack or Sara. And I’d be *alone* now if you’d just get out.”

Damn woman pulled the glass from my hands and set it out of reach on the glass coffee table. Both her hands wrapped around mine and, despite the tingles as she brushed her thumbs over my knuckles, I continued to glare at her.

My brow furrowed, trying to decipher the unreadable expression in her green eyes. Her brow also creased. “I don’t want to get into this with you, Leigh,” I said. “I’m an adult. I’m not going to endanger myself or anyone else. I’m just going to get drunk.”

“C’mon, Kelly, you’re smarter than this. Getting drunk isn’t going to solve anything.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll feel pretty good for a few hours.” I laughed and even to my ears it sounded forced.

“And what happens after that?”

Now anger gorged in my throat. “Don’t tell me you care.”

She pulled away from me, eyes wide, seemingly taken aback. “I ... do care.”

I shot to my feet. If she wasn’t going to let me at the drink I’d already poured, I’d pour another. She intercepted me halfway back to the bar.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Leigh! Get out!”

“You’re not one for letting go, Kelly. Is something else going on?”

“Well, we all can’t be perfect like you, Leigh.” My tone was snappish, and she flinched. I didn’t care.

I thought she disliked me on principle. Oh, she never called me names or bad-mouthed me in front of the kids. But alone, alone was another story. We'd come to near blows more than a few times. After all, I was my father's daughter and not very well versed in using my mouth to solve my problems.

"I'm far from perfect, Kelly."

Our differences were never more apparent to me than at that moment. Leigh came from a tight-knit family of privilege and wealth. My background is considerably more working class. She had her work with a charity of underprivileged kids. Me? I threw up my hand toward her.

"Nothing ever fazes you," I snapped. "I lost three clients. In a *row*. I probably won't have a job Monday morning. Headhunting firms don't keep losers, you know."

She stepped toward me again; I took a step back. "Kelly," she said. "Were these people really place-able in this economy?"

I rubbed my temples to stave off the headache I felt coming on. "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not."

"Then aren't you being too hard on yourself?"

"*All* I have is my job, Leigh."

"You've got Jack."

She said it without rancor, but the implication made me snap, "Well, he isn't here." My own voice made my head hurt. I cupped my forehead in my hands and turned away from her.

"Kelly," she said. Her fingers barely touched my shoulder.

I turned fast, angry she was still here, angrier that I couldn't be alone with my failure. As a result I tripped over my own feet.

Falling backward I registered her surprised face, then I saw the ceiling fan slowly circling. Stars filled my vision as pain exploded in my head and back.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the pain and gingerly sought out the most painful spot on my skull with my fingertips. "Son of a bitch," I groaned.

"Kelly?" I felt Leigh's presence shift above me, crowding me, just as she grabbed my forearms. "How many drinks did you have before I got down here?"

"Just the one. You wouldn't let me have my second!"

"Why on God's green Earth would you drink if you can't hold your liquor?" She laughed. I snarled, pushing away from her as I tried to push myself to my feet.

She laughed again, then helped me to a sitting position on the floor, still

crouched over me. I had a view down her blouse as she examined my head. Closing my eyes against the sight of her naked breasts only made me dizzy though. I pushed her away. “I’m fine. Fine. Shit. Leigh, I don’t need you hovering.”

“You obviously need somebody.” Ignoring my protest, she continued to rub around on my head until she found the knot from my head striking the frame of the couch on my way down. That it was padded was the only reason I was conscious. It still hurt like hell.

“Hey!” I snatched her hand away from the tender spot. She lifted my chin, her gaze searching mine. I was so befuddled, I couldn’t think of anything to say. Her thumb moved against the skin of my cheek and my stomach twisted. I turned away, embarrassed I might throw up after one stupid drink.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tears leaked out. Her arms slipped around my shoulders, and I tried to pull away. Her arms simply tightened, and I felt her body moving against my back.

“God, you’re pushy.” I pushed back at her as I spoke, trying to dislodge her hold.

I turned my head to gauge my efforts, only to find her face mere inches from mine. Her warm breath ghosted across my nose and lips as I noticed the very deep green of her eyes.

Then my lips were swallowing her breath, skimming over her mouth. She made a sound—startled, but not angry. The pressure of her lips against my mouth softened. I thrust my fingers into her hair, gripping her head, holding it in place.

I nibbled at the softest lips I’d ever felt against my own. With a deep inhale, I caught the scent of perfume. It was something heady, not floral, and all I could think was I’d never been this close to Leigh to smell her scent before.

I wanted to get closer, much closer.

I twisted and pushed and pulled. Abruptly I was fully supine beneath her, my thigh rising between hers against the most incredible heat. Leigh moaned as I recaptured her lips over and over again with mine.

The fine strands of her hair slipped through my fingers, and I clasped her shoulders, arching my back so my body melded into hers.

Her lips left mine. I cried out, bereft. I felt her mouth again—hot kisses trailing across my cheek and down my throat. Her hand pulled at my shirt. I heard buttons pop. Hot breath seared the swell of my breast, followed by the soft sweep of her lips. The pit of my stomach tightened in expectation.

My hands left her head and trailed down her cheeks to her shoulders.

Which one of us was supposedly drunk here? I couldn't voice my thoughts.

She suddenly drew back. I sat up. She glanced under her lashes toward me, then turned her head away. I pulled my shirt closed with one hand and pushed the fingers of my other hand through my hair, setting it to rights. I inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly.

I cleared my throat, though what could I say?

From beneath my own struggle for thought and words, I kept stealing glances at Leigh. She'd pulled herself into a seated position on the floor, one knee under her chin, her gaze fixed middle-distant, and left fingers lightly spread over her lips.

Her eyes slowly crinkled at the corners and her lips turned up in clear amusement.

"I've never kissed a girl," she said slowly, as if she taste-tested each word before letting it out of her mouth.

The expression she shot me then was so clearly one of pleasure, I was stunned and remained silent.

"I liked it," she said.

Her gaze finally focused on me—more precisely, on my lips—and I felt my stomach flip-flop again as I recalled in intimate detail the sensations of our kiss. How her body had felt sliding against mine, the taste of her breath on my tongue, the feel of it elsewhere, and the moans of pleasure—her pleasure—filling my ears.

"I..." My voice cracked. I cleared my throat. "I liked it, too."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back—snatch them from the air and silence them. What the hell did I mean *I liked it*?

I'd never thought of kissing a woman in my life.

I liked it? I had liked it. I felt myself nodding.

Then I vigorously shook my head. No. No! What about men? What about *Jack*?

Leigh had gotten to her feet when I next looked toward her. Her back was to me, and I found myself studying the way her muscles moved, admiring the woman's visible skin in the bare shouldered style.

She stopped at the bar and mixed herself a drink.

Using the couch as leverage, I pulled myself to my feet and grabbed my vodka twist off the coffee table. Our eyes met past the rims of our glasses.

Leigh turned abruptly away. I heard a thunk as the glass she had been using fell heavily onto the bar.

"I gotta go," she said. Still avoiding my gaze, she turned around. I moved quickly to stand between her and the door.

Leigh leaving was the last thing I wanted. My gaze zeroed in on her mouth.

She kept talking, babbling really. She mentioned “the kids” and a business call she “desperately” needed to make.

I crossed the space separating us in four quick strides, grabbed her face between my palms, rubbing my thumbs over her cheekbones, and at the same time I shut off her words, using my lips to cover hers.

* * * *

Leigh

I surrendered to Kelly’s kiss: the sensations of her lips against mine, her body against mine, surrounding me, making me feel like I was drowning. I clung to her for what felt like life or death. Her palms cupped my face, causing heat much, much lower in my body. I wrapped my arms around her back, aligning our bodies together, mouths to hips.

I’ve never felt anything like this. Damn it. I should have. I’ve made love with probably a dozen men, made two beautiful children. Yet Kelly’s touch, her kisses, produced an out of this world experience.

As Kelly’s mouth unfastened from mine and trailed instead down my throat, a moan of pleasure was an inadequate expression of the feeling. My heart pounded so hard in my chest I was gasping for breath. My center throbbed in time with it, and I could already feel an orgasm building.

I cupped Kelly’s ass in my hands and lifted, rubbing my crotch against her, welcoming the heat even as I found no familiar firmness to rub against.

She cried out, lifting her mouth from my collarbone. The sound suddenly ranked near the top of my list of favorites. I pushed my body into hers, causing the sound again.

I nuzzled my face into her hair, gasping, breathing deep, and absorbing the scents of her hair and skin, a mix of citrus and something else. She didn’t smell like any man I’d ever known. Was this unique to Kelly, or women in general? Whatever it was, it was driving me insane and making my arousal nearly unmanageable. I needed to come. Right now.

I shifted and my thighs opened. I ground my hips, welcoming the pressure against my center. I threw my head back and Kelly’s arms supported my back. Her mouth found its way to a breast. I don’t even remember my top slipping down, but now I felt the stretched fabric pinning my upper arms.

The sensations were too incredible to let logic or reason back in, so I simply flowed with it. And flow I did. Kelly’s teeth trapped a nipple. I

cried out, shuddering, and felt the liquid heat pool between my thighs. My knees buckled. Instead of falling into a graceless heap on the floor, I felt Kelly's arms tighten around me, guiding me to the couch. She cupped my cheek, caressed my face, and kissed my temple. Every contact made me quiver.

"Leigh," she murmured, pulling my head into the curve of her shoulder and stroking my hair.

"Kel..." was all I could manage, my throat working to pull moisture to my mouth.

I relaxed into her embrace. I'd always thought Jack had made a nice match with Kelly. Though she had no experience with children, she made an effort with ours. She was prickly, though, in a way that felt unconsciously territorial, often resenting my presence in her life.

I knew about her past. Jack had told me about the distant father and the mother who died when Kelly was six. But she was always trying to get the parenting thing right with Jack Jr. and Sara. I appreciated that, even when we argued about the exact solutions to each problem.

She felt strong here now, yet delicate as we rested against each other. I've always gone for men bigger than me, because I like the feeling of their strength surrounding me. But the delicate feeling of Kelly made me wrap my arms around her, actually offering her my comfort in return, something I'd not done with any male in my entire life. It felt good—amazing, actually. I squeezed her lightly to try to convey this.

She drew back. Her gaze, a deep, dark brown that had caught my attention the first time Jack introduced us, searched mine. "You, um, wanna talk about this?" Kelly asked, sweeping a lock of her hair behind her ear.

Yeah, I did, but then again, I didn't. I did want to say something, however. "Talk, um, doesn't seem to be a strong suit with us."

"I'm willing to give it a try," Kelly said.

"Maybe when your head's clear," I diverted.

"Maybe you're right." She rubbed her temple, and I found myself resisting the urge to rub it for her.

"You gonna say anything?" I asked.

"Who am *I* gonna talk to about *this*?" Kelly gestured between us.

"Then it's agreed." I felt ultimately frustrated, not sure exactly what I had wanted to hear, but knowing that dropping this wasn't it. My weak knees were gone. I stood, straightened my clothes, pulling my blouse back above my breasts, and strode out the front door. I pulled it shut behind me with a satisfying slam.

* * * *

Kelly

Tell someone? What was she, nuts?

My train of thought abruptly halted at the slam of the front door.

I stretched out on the couch. My nose caught the scent of sex lingering on the leather cushion. I pushed up, brushing a hand over the warm spot Leigh had just left. I smiled and in that instant my heart swelled with pride. I chuckled.

I kissed a girl.

And I made her come.

Pandora's Box

by Cheri Crystal

For twenty not-so-terrible years, I took pride in being a successful juggler. I was a married working mom. Michael and I raised twin teenagers, Shannon and Jared, who I'd give my life for, and the change-of-life baby I'd wished for, my sweet toddler, Jessica.

Nobody told me being a mom meant everyone else needed, and felt entitled to, a huge chunk of me. Didn't I crave being wanted? But how much of my self-worth did I have to part with in order to maintain harmony at home? I was becoming a slave to the snooze alarm, with thoughts of taking a hammer to the darn thing to silence the buzzer once and for all. I knew I needed time for me, but I couldn't fathom how to fit it in or what to do with it once I found myself alone—until I found catharsis in writing.

There was no escape into work. Where once I had looked forward to my job, now employment in a nursing care facility meant sicker patients, overwhelming responsibility, endless paperwork, and less staff than necessary to do what was required. Reduced job satisfaction and feeling abused by the system had me believing the stress of being a nurse was bad for my health.

At night, when I could finally catch a breather, Michael was planted in our bed with the remote. I could walk around naked with tassels hanging from my tits and Michael wouldn't notice. He'd lost interest soon after Jessie was born and in the two years since then, we went from having sex four nights a week to three times a month, if I was lucky. Not a satisfactory sex life by any standards. Further depleting my self-esteem, he only commented if the house was a mess, his dinner cold, or someone interrupted his ball game.

I discovered late in life that I could add a little spice and keep my sanity by reading and writing lesbian erotica on the sly. When I started to write saucy tales without a single episode of real life experience, my cyber-buddies warned if I traveled that road it would open a Pandora's box.

One dreary day at the end of January, with the holidays a distant memory, the windowpanes fogged and rattled as a result of frigid winds, ice, and snow. We were headed for the snowiest winter in years. Nostalgic visions of Michael keeping me warm were quickly

replaced with those of him playing with his brand-new snow blower instead. I turned my attention toward getting ready for play group.

Twenty active two-year-olds and adults converged weekly at the local church for Toddler Time. I looked forward to it probably more than Jessie. She needed lots of prompting to switch gears between activities. I had all sorts of tricks, but the battle of wills grew tiresome. At forty-six, I didn't have the stamina I had when the boys were her age. I lifted Jessie out of her car seat, not easy with a bulky winter jacket and a death grip on her car toys.

"Jessie, honey," I cajoled, "you love play group." I untangled the belt, only to get it caught in her hood, trying not to take her head off as she squirmed. "Come on, it's a brand-new session. You'll meet lots of new friends."

"Nooo, don' wanna."

"We can't stay here all day. You'll miss juice and cookies."

"Tookie, tookie."

"No tookie, ugh, cookie unless you be Mommy's best girl."

"Me best girl." She lifted her arms and grabbed my neck. With her weather-induced runny nose, she wiped her snot on my face. Before gathering my pocketbook and diaper bag, both filled with enough junk to sell in a local thrift shop, I made noisy kissing sounds on her chubby cheeks while she succumbed to a fit of giggles. Finally, Jessie and I were on our way toward the building, thank goodness.

Other moms with toddlers scurried toward the door, which blew open as if it'd pop right off the hinge. Jessie's excitement kept me warm, but imagine my shock when I grew hot just peering into the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. She had stunning hair so black in contrast to her pale complexion that I was tempted to touch a silky-looking lock as she wrestled with her feisty son.

"Here," I said, switching Jessie to my other hip so I could grab the door. "Let me help you."

"Thanks, but I can manage." She spoke with an accent I couldn't place, but the sound and inflection complemented her exotic appearance.

"Damien, *fronima se parakalo, kane ipomoni ftanoume se ligo.*" Just then Damien kicked his way out of her arms. By sheer luck, I had enough time to drop my bags and grab his sleeve before he bolted into traffic.

I handed the child back to his grateful mother and waited while

she scolded him in what sounded like Greek to me, and probably was Greek. Meanwhile, Jessie demanded freedom. I placed her down, holding her hand firmly as the children interacted. Damien spoke in the same English as Jessie and their gibberish was music to my ears.

The Greek goddess—an author-inspired title befitting this regal woman who stood approximately ten inches taller—was decked out in a black tailored hip-length pea coat with a crimson turtleneck sweater showing. I involuntarily cruised her long length and took in the effect her slightly flared, neatly pressed jeans and stylish boots had on her shapely legs. She had done nothing to shelter her face from the elements and yet her unspoiled features remained alluring, although as frozen as my gaze upon her shimmering eyes, high cheekbones, and kissable red lips. The natural blush from cold air drew my eye to her cheeks. I made a mental note to model my next character after this beauty, praying I could remember every detail. I hoped my perusal wasn't obvious.

“Hallo, and thank you. He is quite a handful, no?”

“I have twin boys and know all about energetic young males.”

She smiled. I swallowed my unbidden lust, worrying if I drooled, ice crystals might form. Her shoulders were hunched practically up to her earlobes. She sported many earrings along the rim with a shiny hoop pierced through the cartilage on one side. She had to be at least ten, maybe fifteen, years my junior. Most of the moms were younger. I got used to being one of the oldest parents in this crowd and thanked genetics for my youthful appearance with only a little effort.

“I'm Janice. What's your name?”

“Melina.” She held the door, nodding for me to go first. Our children, still fascinated with each other, followed us into the warm hallway where everyone awaited the group leader.

I raised my voice to be heard above the noise. “Melina is a lovely name. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“I love your accent. Where are you from?”

“A small village in Greece.” Her earlier enthusiasm waned like a tire with a slow leak. “My mom recently passed away.” Tears formed and clung to her dark bottom lashes. Had one droplet escaped nothing would have stopped me from wiping it away.

“Oh, gee, I'm so sorry.”

“Thank you. We remained in Greece while she was alive. The cancer quickly spread but, thank God, she only suffered at the end

and it was short. Once she was gone, I couldn't bear to stay..." She cleared the emotion from her throat, and I wanted to hug her so badly. I touched her sleeve in a small gesture of comfort.

"Forgive me," she said.

"It's okay," I murmured, feeling her pain.

"I agreed to move here. My husband always wanted to come to America to be closer to his brothers, but I would not leave my mom. I have no brothers or sisters and his family is my family, I guess."

"How long have you been here?" I was intrigued at her candor with a complete stranger.

The kids grew restless and the moms did their best to keep them from running around lest they get hurt. An elderly lady emerged from the office to inform us the facilitator would be late. "Miss Marcia apologizes for her delay," she said, but by then the crowd was too busy interacting to take much notice. I repeated my question.

"When did she ... how long have you been here?"

"Only a few months." As tears fell, I wiped them away and pulled her in for a hug. I would have held her longer if the kids hadn't intruded.

"I didn't mean to unload all this on you," she said, finally able to get a hold of herself. I located tissues in my diaper bag and handed her a tissue.

"I wish I could take away your pain, believe me."

She smiled through her tears, which reminded me of a field of flowers after a sun shower. I wanted to kiss her that instant, protect her from any storm.

"Thank you. I don't know what came over me."

"You're in mourning and understandably so. I'd lose an important part of myself if I lost my mother."

"You two have a good relationship?"

"Yes, she's my best friend."

"Mine was too."

"She'll always be with you right here." I patted the place between her breasts and the innocent touch was too much for me. I withdrew my hand.

"I can tell you're going to be a very good friend," she said.

"Good, because I can always use another one." I changed the subject before she had me crying or confessing I thought she was gorgeous. "Your English is impeccable."

"I studied English literature."

It was my turn to be impressed and God help me for hoping against hope I'd found someone who shared my love of literature right in my own neighborhood. Could I tell her I wrote lesbian romance? I decided no. That would probably kill any budding friendship.

Her diamond-studded platinum thumb ring sparkled when she ran her sleek fingers through both sides of a silken center part, showing off more of her face before her hair fell back into place. I managed not to swoon and got a pang of intense longing deep inside. I was falling for her.

I told myself to extinguish these dangerous notions immediately, if not sooner. It wasn't as if secretly lusting for women in film, on television, in books, or in my fertile mind was acceptable either. I was married to Michael and pretty sure I said "I do" to commit until death do us part. I enjoyed sex with him very much—when I could get it. He could be quite the competent and caring lover—when in the mood. But the longer Melina and I conversed, the more my body laid its own plans, superseding anything my brain decided.

Jessie yanked at the bottom of my jacket repeating, "Uppy, uppy."

"Don't you want to stand up like a big girl and play with Damien?"

She poked her finger at Damien's chest. "Play 'mee-an.'"

Melina and I shared a maternal moment, which further sealed my fate. She was too pretty for words and appeared all dressed up, even in the casual wear.

That morning, I had tugged on my favorite faded well-worn jeans. The hem had frayed a bit, but this was play group, not a fashion show. I wore a teal waffle henley beneath a plaid flannel button-down for layered warmth.

With Melina staring intently into my eyes, a shade I used to appreciate, but now a pale green in comparison to her electrifying blue, I wished I'd worn the cream mohair cowl-neck sweater that flatteringly hugged my voluminous breasts and slim waist. I've been told my hourglass figure was my best feature, next to thick, strawberry blond curls, even if I always hated being called "Red" and thought my butt, hips, and thighs could use a good shearing. Too bad the sweater was in the wash pile. I hoped I didn't look like a ragamuffin and contemplated keeping my coat on. Unfortunately the church felt like an oven, and we weren't even bouncing around to the latest kiddie craze yet.

I stole my eyes away from Melina's for a moment to see what my girl wanted next. "Tookie, tookie."

"Soon, baby, soon." I fingered her flyaway blond hair, only to get caught up in static electricity. "Ouch," I reacted, hoping Jessie hadn't felt the shock too. "Sorry, Jessie." But she didn't seem to notice.

"Jessie is a nice name for a girl. I like it."

"Thanks, it's short for Jessica. Her brothers chose her nickname and it stuck."

"How old are your boys? You said they were twins?"

"Seventeen." Now I knew my age was showing.

"You must have been less than that when you had them."

"Hardly, but flattery will get you far, dear Melina."

"You can't be old enough to have teenagers, surely not," she adamantly added. Conviction looked exceptionally good on her. Everything did.

"You want to make a bet?"

Just then the facilitator bustled in, bringing with her much-needed cold air to cool off the hot flush creeping its way up my neck. Moisture dripped between my breasts. I had to take off my coat or die from a heated rush.

When I did, I caught Melina unabashedly checking me out. My breath caught. She undressed me with her eyes, and the blue of her irises were nearly black. I knew this look. I wrote about it plenty, for heaven's sakes, but I feared I would faint dead having it turned on me. I could barely speak but managed to grasp Jessie's hand as we haphazardly lined up double-file to march down the few steps towards our classroom. I was behind Melina, leading her well-behaved little boy. I wished I understood what she had said to quiet him and figured it was a bribe. Damien was only two and already bilingual. He also got to hold her hand. Jealous of a toddler; imagine that.

With no choice but to stop fantasizing about how she made me want to weep from want, I joined in as we assembled in a circle with our children on the inside. No matter what we were told to do, I couldn't help glancing over at Melina frequently. She was as openly affectionate with her son as I was with Jessie. The more I discovered we had in common, the more enamored I became with my Greek goddess. We really connected during our wait, but there was so much more I wanted to know.

To entice the children to join in, we all danced around like

lunatics. I was too busy watching Melina to feel silly singing *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* with moves to match. I really loved the way Melina did the *Macarena* and nearly landed on my ass tripping over my daughter because I wasn't paying attention to her missteps.

When the hour was over, I commented aloud how fast the time went. Jessie was easily persuaded to get back into her jacket for the trek to the car after I promised her two favorite DVDs. So young and already she was negotiating with me.

The wind blew the top layer off the snowdrifts, across the cleared surfaces of the parking lot, and all the way to the other side. The sky had grown dark for midday. Going home to a messy house didn't hold appeal. With only one weekday off, I had to weigh priorities carefully, and spending quality time with Jessie held the top spot. Reading or writing was a good second, followed by enjoying a peaceful meal, or just relaxing in front of the television catching up on my Netflix stash. Housework, well, there's no surprise where that landed on my to-do list.

One of the moms commented her weather forecast app showed we were headed for a blizzard.

"Is the weather always this brutal?"

Melina startled me. I turned and found us a hair-width apart. I inhaled a hint of mint amid an earthy fragrance I was hard-pressed to name, but would never forget.

"Not usually, but it's supposed to be wetter to make up for the drought we had over the summer."

"Oh, I see," she said in a sultry whisper while she maintained eye contact. Her proximity made me desperate to kiss her supple lips, if only to prove my theory that she was probably a great kisser. I had a sixth sense about these things.

I'd often dreamed about what a lesbian kiss would be like. All sorts of salacious scenarios entered my mind and writing them down cemented my obsessive quest. I'll never forget the first time I heard Katy Perry sing lyrics surely written for me. Heck, I even found myself humming the tune at work, when nobody was around.

Here I was, literally dripping with desire, imagining Melina melting the glacier inside my loins, when she interrupted my delicious reverie. "Are you going food shopping?"

"No, I have tons of stuff on hand for emergencies. What about you?"

"My husband is away this week." Her eyes glistened with a hint of

sadness. “It’s just me and Damien.”

I wanted to invite her over, but I worried she’d notice my relaxed housekeeping skills. It seemed like she was fishing for an invitation and the more I hesitated, the further she withdrew. A gnawing ache burned a hole in my empty stomach as lunchtime approached. The resulting gurgle from my gut made us laugh and broke the tension. It would be wonderful to have lunch with her, but I couldn’t get up the nerve to ask. I guess she couldn’t, either.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Janice. See you.” She lifted her son, now putty in her arms, and bundled him—jacket, hat, mittens, and all—under her jacket.

“You’ll freeze like that,” I warned.

“I’d rather he stay warm. I’m not worried about myself.”

“Okay then, bye.” I waved as she dashed to her car. I watched her get into an SUV and ventured over to mine. I hugged Jessie and didn’t realize how tight my grip was until she fussed. “Sorry, baby, Mommy has it real bad.” I doubted she understood and saying the words aloud sent smitten feelings circulating in my veins.

It was going to be a long week until next Wednesday.

The roads had started to ice and driving was slow going until I pulled into our driveway. I left my bag in the car and took a now cranky Jessie into the house, dropping my keys on the credenza, running to answer the phone. Michael said he was staying the night in a motel and would dig out as soon as he could. The moment I hung up with him, the school called about early dismissal and closing the next day. This was going to be some blizzard. I prayed we wouldn’t lose power, but decided to get the defrosted chicken in the oven as soon as possible.

Although busy, I couldn’t stop thinking about why I hadn’t invited Melina. I wanted to smack myself silly. Since when did I give a hoot about my housekeeping? I knew perfectly well why. Her lusty gazes in my direction and the way she watched my every move held the promise of things I dared not think about. We could be friends—nothing more. A true friend was someone who came over to see me, not my house. I was tempted to fetch my class list and call her, but I had to get dinner ready and do laundry, in case of a power outage.

The house was too quiet except for the DVD. I glanced down the stairs to the den. Much to my relief, Jessie, wrapped in her *blankie*, was fast asleep on the floor. The sight of her angelic face and her adorable tush high in the air melted my heart. Maybe she hadn’t

given up her naps. The phone rang and Shannon asked if he and Jared could chill with their friends. They were good boys, responsible, but I reminded them to be home for supper and to be especially careful. I wished they had worn their boots, but teens were stubborn to a fault when it came to looking cool rather than staying warm.

“Call me if you need a lift.”

“We can walk.”

“Love you,” I said. Call-waiting signaled another call. I got it just in time. “Hello?”

“Hallo, Janice?”

I knew her voice in an instant, my heart rate escalated and my mouth went dry.

“Hi, Melina!”

“How did you know it was me?”

“By your sexy accent.” I couldn’t believe I said sexy. Yikes.

She laughed, a hearty sound I was growing to adore. In the next moment, I extended an invitation just as she asked if I wanted company. We both laughed.

“Yes, please come over but drive safely.”

“Don’t worry, I have four-wheel drive.”

“Good. Jessie’s asleep but she’ll be happy to see Damien.” Then I remembered. “Oh, and please excuse my house. I work and—”

“I’m not coming to see your house, Janice. I’m coming to see you.”

I was happy she felt that way and gave her directions. The moment we disconnected our call, I scurried to get the sweet potatoes in the oven; it would add a welcome home-cooked aroma. I tossed a salad and remembered I had a pre-baked apple pie and ice cream in the freezer for dessert. My restored exuberance helped me straighten up the house and prepare a full meal.

Responding to a knock at the door, I peered out the peephole and loved what I saw. The moment I opened up my home, I relieved her of one sleepy little boy while she stamped the snow off her boots before stepping indoors and removing them.

“Come in, come in.”

“What a delicious smell.”

“I’m making dinner and hope you’ll stay. Michael is stuck at work, and the boys won’t be home till later.”

“I couldn’t intrude.”

“You’re not. I’m glad you’re here. Let me take your jacket.”

"I feel as if I invited myself."

"Nonsense. Now please, make yourself comfortable." Damien fell asleep in my arms. His jacket pleasantly held the scent of his mommy's perfume. I hoped it would rub off on me.

"I'll take him," she said, her arms out and ready.

"Do you think he'll sleep in a porta-crib?"

"Yes, he's a good sleeper. I worry he sleeps too much."

"He's very active. I bet he just wears out his batteries."

"You're a smart mom. He's my first. I never had siblings and feel I am learning as I go. My mom helped with him, but you know."

"Yes, I do. My mom saves me all the time."

"I always wanted a big family. You're lucky."

"Your husband has brothers."

"Yes, but their wives are, I don't know the English word, they're ... they keep to themselves, and I often feel left out."

"That's too bad. I can't imagine anyone not welcoming you with open arms."

"You Americans are funny."

"How so?"

"You speak your mind and make me say far more than I would have dared."

"I've been told I'm much too honest for my own good," I admitted.

"That's an endearing trait."

I wondered what she'd say if I disclosed what I was thinking. With Jessie sleeping on the rug and Damien comfy in the crib, I was ready to snatch her pretty face and press our mouths together so I could explore her with my tongue. I shivered.

"Are you cold? It is nice and warm in here." With her eyes cast downward, she added, "I can't turn the heat high enough to feel as warm and comfortable as I am here with you." She looked up with her dark, thick lashes, and I melted on the spot.

"You're welcome ... anytime."

"Good, because I like you already."

"I like you already, too." I had to sit or fall. "Come into the kitchen. Have you had lunch? Do you want coffee?"

"Yes, coffee, although American coffee doesn't compare. Oh sorry. I'm used to coffee back home and well ... oh, no, I didn't mean to offend you." She was floundering. I stifled a grin, loving this too much to rescue her, but alas, I couldn't see her suffer.

“I know what you mean. No apology needed, but I have fresh beans to grind and a coffee press. Why don’t you judge for yourself if my brew meets your standards?”

“If it comes close, I’ll marry you.”

Taken aback by her remark, I was sure as shit going to make the best darn coffee in New York. With bated breath, I waited for the verdict. Her mouth opened, she blew on it before resting her lips on the cup. Then when I was sure I’d die, she took a taste and let out a most satisfied sigh before exclaiming, “I like my coffee light and sweet but yours doesn’t need cream and sugar. It’s perfect. Marry me.”

“I’d love to!” A glance at her puzzled look had me desperate to sweep her up in my arms. “I’m glad you like it,” I amended.

“There’s more where that came from. In fact, why don’t we add something stronger? Do you like liqueurs in your coffee?”

“Absolutely.”

“Come help me choose the best accompaniment.”

“With pleasure.”

She followed close behind. I feared I’d trip over my own feet.

“I adore your hair.” She captured a healthy handful, playfully wiggling her fingers through it. I stood, immobilized. “Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?”

“No.” Where was she going with this? I prayed she wouldn’t stop. My usual reply would be something to refute her claim, but she had my tongue and stomach all tied up in knots, hoping beyond hope she’d elaborate or shut up and just kiss me already. She appeared as if she wanted to kiss me. I’d never felt surer of anything, and I couldn’t hide my desire anymore than she could. I wanted her, and I’d bet anything she wanted me, too.

“Well, you’re striking, truly.” She continued to play with my hair and I let her. “Your husband is lucky,” she purred. “I bet you make love every night.”

I shook all over. She ran a finger along the side of my face. I faltered and encircled her hand with mine. “Such lovely skin, I could kiss your freckles, one at a time,” she said, and my knees buckled. There was no shame in her tone. Her confidence was as hot as hell. I wanted what she had. I needed to taste her skin with my tongue. I imagined her breasts filling the palms of my hands, her clit. I wanted her to come in my mouth.

My breath heavy with desire, I practically pleaded, “Kiss me,

please.”

She cradled my head and leaned in, her lips moist, inviting.

The second her mouth closed over mine, my heart leaped with joy.

I opened my mouth wider and explored her with my eager tongue, marveling at soft skin not marred by stubble. I couldn’t get enough of her nor she of me.

When our breasts met, my body ignited with more yearning than I’d had in a very long time, if ever, in fact. Her kiss far exceeded anything I had ever penned or even dreamed.

“You taste wonderful,” she said.

I would give anything if she’d promise never to stop touching me. I wanted her to touch me everywhere. I had to rid us of our clothing. Mere thoughts of lying naked with her titillated my senses. If I didn’t have her soon, I’d die.

I nibbled on her ear, followed by kissing every spot my mouth could reach. “You’re gorgeous ... so soft ... so perfect.”

“Make love to me, Janice, please.”

Heedless of consequences, I grasped her hand and led her to the guest room where, like extra food, I had a bed ready—just in case.

Throwing off the bedspread, I helped her onto the bed. I climbed on top of her, my knees on either side of her hips. I couldn’t stop kissing her. Her moans of pleasure spurred me on.

I worked my way down to her breasts and fondled them. As soon as I brushed against her breasts her nipples hardened. She scooted up enough to remove her sweater, revealing a red lace bra. Her nipples protruded, ready to pop right out, so I reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. Together we cast it aside and she helped me shed my top.

Her breasts were round and perky, more than a handful and perfect for a mouthful.

“Your breasts are magnificent,” she said, kneading mine. She drew a nipple into her mouth and it stiffened. The glorious feeling radiated down my body and settled in my crotch.

“Oh, Melina, keep that up, and I’ll come in my pants.”

“Then we should remove them right away, no?”

“Yes.”

With haste, we helped each other strip. I gasped in delight at the dark, lush, and full neat triangle between her slender thighs compared to my auburn curls.

She flipped me over on my back with surprising strength and grace. I could look up into her cerulean eyes for centuries and not tire of the sight. Sprawled atop of me, she grasped my wrists above my head, rendering me useless while she explored my body with her tongue.

Her mouth neared my core. I whimpered. Pools of desire seeped out and my clit stood erect.

“Oh, heavens, Melina, kiss me there, please.”

“I intend to do that and so much more.” Her kisses, licks, and sucks rapidly brought me close to climax, but I forced myself to slow down, to enjoy the journey.

“You’re so good at this.” My hips jerked to meet her mouth. My clit was about to burst, but I ignored it. “Like you’ve done this before.”

“No, you’re my first woman.” She let go of my wrists to open my pussy lips wider, carefully inspecting my clit in the most wanton way.

“Mine, too.” Then there was no holding back. I let the orgasm reach its peak once more before letting go of any inhibition, save one. I stifled a scream so I didn’t wake the kids, and came hard. My body quaked. She eased her ministrations until there was nothing left but me lying there motionless and sated.

When I regained my strength, I sat up, kissed her, and let her know it was my turn. She smiled her response, and I delighted in pleasing her as she did me. Making her come was even better than my own climax had been.

Snuggled in each other’s arms in post-coital bliss, we were warm and safe.

“I never knew a kiss could feel like this.” Melina couldn’t keep her hands from my hair, and I loved the way she teased me with her talented fingers.

“It was better than I imagined.”

“Have you imagined it, then?”

“Yes,” I couldn’t lie, not after surrendering and opening myself up so completely. “Many times.”

“Me too.” She pulled me in tighter, and I knew we’d delve deeper into this topic when the time was right. I didn’t want to ruin the tranquil mood by commiserating about the effect our lesbian liaison and sordid kisses would have on our husbands. Worrying about the children would only make me cry.

The buzzer, signaling my chicken was fully cooked, woke the kids. We hurriedly dressed and flew down the stairs, breathless, but giddy.

Jessie ignored us while she showed Damien her toys and the twins called asking permission for a sleepover at their friend's. After one glance out the window, I consented. When I hung up, I informed Melina she was sleeping over because I couldn't let her drive home in good conscience. It didn't take much persuasion and when the children weren't looking, we stole another sensational kiss. There was so much to discuss, but I was content enough to enjoy a family meal with Melina, Damien, and Jessie, before tucking the kids into bed so the grownups could play.

This was one story I wouldn't have to write because something told me I'd be too busy living it.

Love Thy Enemy

by Alexandra Rowan

Leah still tasted Vicki's lips on hers and the flavor was breathtaking. She couldn't believe she could admit that, not even to herself, but it was true. No one had seen the kiss at least. And she was positive they'd been out of view of the library's security camera when it'd happened. If Tom ever found out, she didn't know what she'd do.

Vicki had a live-in boyfriend named Dan who would no doubt be livid that her lips had brushed against anyone's but his, but screw her and him. She didn't give a damn if her boyfriend shit a brick over it, and she didn't give a damn about Vicki, period.

And why the hell should I? Their relationship at the Buffalo Public Library had been frigid at best over the past five years. Leah blamed herself for none of their professional woes because she understood a protocol for behavior and work ethic must be followed, and she couldn't help it if Vicki had conceded to none of them.

Whenever she'd raised the point to her colleagues, she'd been met with answers like, "Oh, you'll never change her," and "If she gets in shit with the powers that be, that's her problem." But those answers had been simply insufficient for Leah. She worked her fingers to the bone, and she expected her co-workers to at least carry their own weight.

She'd taken charge of that sentiment last December when she'd caught Vicki surfing the Internet at the circulation desk. Leah loathed that habit more than anything, and Vicki was a seasoned professional at it. So she'd leveled an official complaint with the library director's office. Rumor had it that Steve had gone easy on Vicki, but had threatened to write her up should the event ever repeat itself.

Vicki had refused to speak to her for a month following the fiasco, and Leah supposed she'd known who'd blown the whistle on her. Co-workers had regarded her with a manner of disgust, which had been part and parcel of working in a union shop, she supposed. Yet she saw herself as a woman with convictions who had done her duty by reporting Vicki.

And Vicki had achieved retribution in some respects. Leah had run an evening film program, and had been short on volunteers, which led to everything going haywire. She'd snapped at Vicki when she hadn't stepped lively enough to help her serve the crowd. The spat—or temper tantrum, as

her colleagues had dubbed it—had triggered her own meeting with library director Steve. The meeting had yielded the same results as Vicki's Internet-gate episode.

In spite of her colleagues' insistence that she'd been in the wrong—she'd taken every opportunity to bitch about it at the office—she couldn't believe that anyone could defend that woman for any reason. Vicki should have been fired eons ago, and in any other workplace she would have been.

Then Leah had taken her turn to serve up some cold-shoulder treatment. She'd managed to perform every duty that concerned Vicki, sans excess verbiage. In fact, she'd said nothing to her at all except when she'd not been able to help it.

When she'd been asked to cover the circulation desk for an evening shift, she'd been required to relieve Vicki at five o'clock. An abrupt dinner hour had forced her to be five minutes late, by which time Vicki had walked off the desk, leaving it unattended. Leah had chased her to the back and confronted her.

"Excuse me, but you can't just walk off the desk like that!" Leah shouted. "What if someone has an accident?"

"Sorry babe," Vicki answered, "but when five o'clock rolls around I'm done for the day. Up to you to be here on time."

"Oh, that's a great attitude."

Vicki raised her fingers as if to rebut, but instead their arms opened up and they took each other. Leah's lips tasted magnificent meshed with hers, and she loved being pressed against her firm, round breasts. Vicki's tongue burrowed into Leah's mouth. She didn't object. Then her fingers combed through Vicki's fiery red hair.

When their lips parted, Leah felt like duct tape had been torn off her mouth at light speed. They stared at each other, stunned, wiped their lips and darted in separate directions.

* * * *

Leah arrived at the library early in response to Vicki's phone call requesting a private meeting. *She probably just wants privacy to tell her she was going to level a sexual harassment complaint.* But she couldn't really do that. It hadn't been she who'd motioned for the kiss. But then, Vicki hadn't precisely lunged at her either. Who had made the first move seemed terribly unclear.

The tremors in Vicki's voice suggested to Leah that she might have been scared Leah would level a complaint of her own. Leah wasn't ready to do

so just yet, but it never hurt to keep that trump card tucked away.

When the back door clicked open, Leah jumped, and she spotted Vicki. She looked ashen, as though she hadn't slept a wink in the fourteen hours since the kiss. Leah herself had tossed and turned and had been unable to look Tom in the face. Plus, the suspense was boring a hole through her.

"Last night was just a—" Leah started, but Vicki unleashed the same phrase before they both stopped dead.

"I just want you to know that what happ—"

Again, Vicki cut her short. No doubt the bitch had been rehearsing lines too. "Who are we kidding?" Vicki said. "It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"It was?"

"Of course it was. I remember boys in school that got on my nerves ... boys that I absolutely *hated*. But on some level, I liked them. I *wanted* them. It wasn't like a crush. They just created a deep, heated desire in me, you know?"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Leah frowned. "I won't."

Even Leah would admit to herself she threw up that kind of resistance as a defense mechanism. Judging by Vicki's plain expression, she wasn't buying it.

So when Vicki inched up on her and brushed her lips against Leah's, Leah collapsed into her arms. This time, she was welcomed by more than just Vicki's breasts. This time she felt Vicki's nipples, hard and sharp, ready to rip through her shirt. The feeling made her own nipples grow rock hard and tension consumed her clitoris.

Then Vicki enveloped her. Leah lacked the strength to take the initiative a second time. Their arms hooked around each other's necks and their tongues burrowed into each other's mouths.

It was happening all over again. They were getting fresh with each other in the workplace, which was so very wrong, inappropriate and unprofessional. Leah couldn't bring herself to continue such down-and-dirty behavior—yet she could.

Their lips parted. Vicki wrapped her arms around Leah's waist and hoisted her onto the nearest desk. Shoving papers aside, Vicki hauled her shirt over her head to free her braless breasts, which left Leah breathless in the truest sense of the word. Leah's chest heated up as she found herself turned on by something that'd never sparked her desire before. Not only was she turned on, but she felt too wild to stop herself.

Vicki inched forward to feed Leah her nipple. Leah cupped Vicki's right breast with both her hands and sucked it like drinking from a jug of milk.

All the while Vicki rubbed Leah's crotch.

Leah could see the hunger in Vicki's eyes, the desire. This woman knew what she wanted in the bedroom—or wherever she chose to fuck—and she was determined to have it sooner than later. Vicki's boyfriend was a very lucky man, indeed.

Vicki gripped Leah's blouse and tore it open too fast to hear the buttons pop. Leah jumped into the act by unhooking her bra and tossing it over her shoulder. Vicki slipped off Leah's pants and panties, burrowed her face between her legs, and flicked her clit with fast, sharp strokes.

Leah shouted from the abrupt pleasure. She'd never shouted when her own husband did that, or anything else for that matter. Pleasure had been a quiet and private state to her until now. But when Vicki licked her pussy, she thought she would erupt with the most monumental orgasm of her entire life. Vicki must've known that. Like any good lover, she knew how to pleasure her mate, but also when to turn down the heat so she wouldn't come before they reached their crescendo.

Then Vicki grabbed her own office chair, sat down, and spread her legs. Leah had never even fantasized about this before, but she dropped to her knees and flicked Vicki's clitoris with her tongue, first to experience the taste, and then to savor the experience. When she rolled her eyes up, she noticed Vicki's head thrust back and her fingers clamped down on her nipples. The woman was putty in her hands, and she needed only to continue to push her over the edge. So she continued flicking Vicki's clitoris and worked her fingers into her sex.

Vicki wrestled Leah to the floor, which seemed like the perfect spot for them. Down and dirty. Vicki was teaching her to love her sex that way. Then Vicki's legs burrowed between hers until their pussies met. When their labias meshed together, Vicki took charge, grinding, pounding, gyrating.

Leah exploded with so many orgasms she lost count, while Vicki's grunts and groans told her she was experiencing the same rush of pleasure. When they finished, they collected their clothes. Leah reeled from an experience that she didn't regret.

Leah's lips parted, as she meant to thank Vicki, but Vicki stopped her. "You know this can't happen again, right?"

Leah paused. She didn't know it wouldn't. She was certain that Vicki would piss her off again, that she would piss Vicki off likewise, and that they both would need to relieve some serious tension.

Maybe Leah would do something just to piss her off. Make a mess around her desk or get extra snippy when something went wrong. And certainly Vicki would piss her off too. She was certain of it.

Ketchikan Connection

by Regina Perry

The ache between my legs gnawed at my soul. It tickled and churned, mocking my self-esteem. Then it tugged at my heart until it defeated what hope I had left. My exhaustion of the past eleven hours, flying from one airport to the next, compounded my loneliness. One more stop before landing in Juneau. With any luck, I should be in my own bed within six hours. My bed—alone.

It'd been five months, seven days since Derrick had left. But who's counting? I'd insisted he leave. His drinking was destroying us both. Countless times he'd tried to quit. Countless times he started again, drinking more than he had before. I'd decided maybe *I* was the problem. Last time I heard from him he'd been sober for thirty-three days. Guess I was right.

"Flight 785 to Ketchikan will begin boarding in a few minutes. Would Group One please proceed to Gate 34?" an Alaskan Airlines's clerk announced in the Seattle terminal.

I raised the handle of my carry-on and readied myself for next call. As the announcement for Group Two came over the loud speaker, the girl behind me tripped over her bag and thudded into my back.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped. "My foot caught in the strap."

"No problem." I reached to steady her as she detangled herself from her luggage.

"I'm always tripping over something." She chuckled. "It's my parents' fault. They named me Grace."

"I guess you don't believe in the Law of Attraction."

"No, I believe in it. I just think it has a sarcastic sense of humor."

I burst into laughter. "Well, I can certainly see you have a great one ... sense of humor, that is. It's fun meeting you, Grace. I'm Laura," I said, extending my hand. I guessed her to be about my age, mid-thirties.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. You stopping in Ketchikan or going all the way to Juneau?"

"I'm afraid I'm in for the long haul. You?"

"Me too. Where did you start?"

"D.C."

"And I thought I had it bad. I'm from L.A."

“So you’re just visiting Juneau?”

“Yes, business. Goldbelt, it’s one of the Alaska Native Corporations. Have you heard of it?”

“Heard of it? I work there, and it’s why I was in D.C.”

“Wow, what a coincidence. So Juneau’s home now?”

“Yes, for six years.”

“And you like it?”

“I used to love it. Maybe the long, dark winters are starting to get to me.”

“I think I could get used to the darkness if I had someone to cuddle up to.”

“True.” I sighed. At the attendant’s bidding we worked our way to the gate and down the jet way. “You’re welcome to sit with me if you like.”

“They don’t mind if we don’t sit in our assigned seat?”

“Not usually. It’s not a full flight.”

* * * *

The two-hour flight to Ketchikan passed quickly. We discovered we not only worked for the same company, but also had kayaking and tennis in common. She’d also experienced a break-up the year before and had been alone since.

Horrific turbulence battered the plane as it began the descent into Ketchikan. We could see snow whirling past the windows and feel the howl of the wind. When the plane dipped, she clutched my hand. The next plummet, her nails dug into my palm. I placed my other hand over hers.

“We’ll be all right. Alaskan Airlines’ pilots are used to flying in these blizzards.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, her eyes closing.

I hoped I was too.

At the approach, the plane slid onto the runway, the tail swerving left. Grace squeezed her eyes and screeched a hum through her lips. I feared she was going to draw blood on my hand before the brakes took hold. At last, the plane skidded to a stop and the passengers heaved a gigantic sigh in unison.

By the time we’d taxied to the gate, it was evident to everyone we wouldn’t be flying to Juneau tonight. Once inside the airport, the loudspeaker informed us there were vacancies at The Landing Hotel.

* * * *

“What is *this*?” Grace exploded, as we slid down the ice-covered gangplank to the ferry.

“We have to take a ferry to the mainland.”

“Why?” She was almost in tears.

“You know that bridge-to-nowhere Sarah Palin liked to brag about?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she must have never been caught in a Ketchikan connection. It would have connected the island, where the airport is located, to the mainland.”

“Oh my God.”

* * * *

Standing in line at the lodge, Grace turned to me. “Want to share a room?”

“If you want to. Sure.” I was surprised she’d asked. After all, the company would have paid the expense.

“After that flight, I’d just rather not be alone tonight. That must really sound stupid, I know. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. It was harrowing. No reason to be embarrassed.”

* * * *

A blazing fire greeted us as we walked into the room.

“The staff must have heard about our landing,” Grace squealed. She dropped her bags and ran to the fire, holding out her hands to soak up the warmth.

“That’s just Alaskan hospitality.” I smiled at the sight of her crouching over the fire. She had a childlike innocence and playfulness that was quite attractive. It matched her curly blond hair and petite figure. I hung my coat and began to unpack my toiletries.

Returning from the bathroom, I noticed the bed. Yes, the bed. I’d been so engrossed by her antics at the fireplace I hadn’t noticed the room only had one bed. “I guess they were sold out of doubles.”

“Huh?” Grace turned and saw what I was talking about. “Oh, I guess so. Do you mind? I could bunk on the floor in front of the fire.”

I was taken back by her kindness. “Don’t be silly. I’m not afraid of you.” I laughed.

While Grace was in the bathroom, I hurriedly undressed and slipped my flannel-lined pajama top over my head, not bothering to unbutton. I hadn't packed the bottoms, preferring my bare legs against the sheets. Crawling into bed, I wondered what Grace had packed to sleep in.

I was hoping I'd be asleep before she came back, but I couldn't stop thinking about her, wondering what it would be like sleeping in the same bed with another woman. I hadn't done that since sleepovers in junior high. A blizzard raged outside, but I wished I was wearing something filmy and sexy. *Am I that lonely?*

Grace opened the door and tiptoed to her suitcase to put away her cosmetic bag. I stared at her midnight blue, see-through teddy. It was form fitting with cutouts at her sides, creating an hourglass of fabric, front and back. Her butt cheeks pressed against the fabric as she dug around in her suitcase looking for her toothbrush. Once found, she clamped it in her cheek and whirled around. Her nipples seemed to poke through the sheer voile. She stopped short and removed the toothbrush. My eyes must have been bulging.

"Sorry. I didn't pack anything decent to sleep in. I like to pretend I have a lover, even if I don't."

"Doesn't bother me," I lied.

While she brushed her teeth, I felt for the ache between my legs and discovered a pool.

Soon, she slipped between the sheets and stretched her toes, forward and back, forward and back. "This is how I unwind," she explained.

"I should try that."

"Not as effective as some other things I can think of, but a girl does what a girl has to do." She turned on her side, facing me. "You're really pretty. Classy looking. Not like me. I'm more of a tomboy."

"You're adorable. Cute and sassy," I said, still lying on my back, my face turned toward her.

"Really, you think so?" She raised, cocked her elbow and rested her head on her hand.

"Of course. I can't believe you haven't had your share of men."

"I've had a few. But it's not easy finding that right one, you know?"

"Yes, I do." I rolled to my side to face her directly.

She extended her free hand, and ran her fingers through strands of my hair. "I love your long, straight auburn hair. And I swear, your eyes are actually sapphire blue. I don't think I've ever seen eyes quite that color before."

"Daddy's eyes."

“Daddy? You still call him that?”

“Yeah. But he’s gone now ... died seven years ago. Guess I always had this fantasy of being Daddy’s little girl, so I never let go of calling him that. He used to sing that song to me.”

“What song?”

Daddy’s Little Girl.

“Ah, how sweet. But was it true?”

“Not exactly. How’d you know?” I asked, tucking my arm beneath my pillow.

“You did say ‘fantasy.’”

I sighed and smiled at her perception. There was more to this cute little pixie than I first realized.

“Anything you want to talk about?” she asked.

“He loved me as much as he was capable. He had his own issues. What human doesn’t?” I attempted a laugh to lighten the mood.

“Isn’t that the truth? All families are dysfunctional, just varying degrees of it.”

She arched her back and stretched. Again, my gaze fixed upon her full breasts pressing against her teddy. Since the afternoon I’d discovered Daddy’s *Playboy* magazines in the end table next to his recliner, I’d been fascinated by women’s breasts. It’s probably not an accident that mine are so sensitive. I can orgasm from nipple play alone.

“Yeah, if anyone thinks their family was perfect, they just haven’t discovered the skeletons in the closet ... yet,” I said.

“I agree. Every family has its problems.” She yawned. “Sleep tight, Laura. Glad it was you I fell into today.” She stretched again and closed her eyes.

“Me too, Grace. Night.”

* * * *

Sometime during the wee hours, or mid-morning—one can’t tell in Alaska—I was startled awake by arms and legs wrapped around me. My muscles froze until I could assess my situation. *Where am I? Who’s in bed with me?* Realization flowed through my body, and I relaxed like a deflating balloon, then realization struck again and I tensed. I listened to gauge her breathing to see if she was sleeping. Her deep, steady breaths assured me she was. She must have become chilled in her sleep. No surprise, with what she was wearing.

She stirred and squeezed against me. My body, with a mind of its own,

reacted and pushed its buttocks against her front. Once my brain caught up with my involuntary action it joined forces and wiggled my ass. *You hussy. What would she think if she woke up?* She didn't. My mind took flight, fantasizing what could happen next, forgetting the angle I'd extended my butt to maintain contact with my unexpected bedmate.

Floating, spinning, delirious—the mythical orgasm played out in the gut of my brain. Grace moved her arm, her hand grazing the underside of my breast, and I was jolted alert, holding my breath and cursing thick, flannel pajamas. Her strong, steady breaths convinced me she was still asleep. I reached to the placket at my neckline and slowly, carefully began to unbutton. One, two—and my hand brushed against hers. She stirred, then settled into me—her leg tighter, her hand higher. I clamped my hand over hers, which was now cupping my tit. The sensation beneath her touch had my nipple agonizing in a whirl of tingle and ache.

In minute increments, I tugged at the flannel barrier between her hand and my skin. Tug. Wait. Tug. Wait, until her warmth radiated my orb, my nipples stood erect, and the sensation quivered down through my core and into my pussy. When the agony reached unbearable proportions and I was ready to bolt, her index finger hinted at movement. A moan escaped from my throat and the hint became deliberate, circling my areola. Her breathing quickened. I wagered she was conscious, and turned slightly toward her.

Her hand slid to my other breast and I continued rotating until I could see her face. Embers in the fireplace provided enough glow to see the glisten in her opened eyes. She not only didn't stop but intensified her massage of my breast. As she moved to unbutton my top, I cupped her cheek and moved toward her, stopping within an inch of her lips—silently asking permission. She answered by lifting her mouth to reach mine.

Our lips met, held, parted. Tongues circled our own lips, then touched, tongue-to-tongue. I pulled back and questioned her eyes once again. She responded by leaning in and fully, firmly locking her lips to mine, pressing, sucking, coming up for air, circling, alternating angles, kissing, kissing, kissing.

Slow motion converted to swift. She pulled my sleeve over my shoulder and down my arm as I rose to be rid of the hated flannel. I, in turn, slid her teddy off her shoulders and down her body. Then I stopped. She lay before me in naked splendor. I'd never been within inches of female nakedness. Even though I'd spent hours examining my own body with mirrors from every angle and varying degrees of magnification, fretting how I compared to other women, it was as if I'd never seen the female body before. I marveled at her beauty in the flickering light. I revered the miracle of a

woman. She appeared fragile and soft. I touched her so very lightly, fearing she'd shatter like porcelain.

Recognizing my apprehension, she took charge, thrusting her front to mine. She girdled my buttocks with her arm and pulled me into her as she began to rock her pelvis. Our mons ground into each other, and with each plunge she managed to maneuver lower and deeper.

I didn't know how to respond. *What should I do next?* I just knew I wanted to be devoured, ravaged. My desire for her fingers, her lips, her body consumed me. Lust has no patience.

I felt a finger slide through my creases. I pushed against it, craving its pressure. She pulled her body away to focus on ministrations with her hands and fingers—spreading, examining, parting, circling, flicking. Once aroused, I've always become an exhibitionist. I yearned to expose. I relished being seen. I desired the attention. And I loved every moment of her scrutiny.

Her investigation concluded with the discovery of my pearl. Having found her treasure, she doted on it. I could feel her lightly touch it, inspect it, tilt it. I found my legs and projected my torso higher to present her with my jewel. Then she licked her index finger and circled her prize, claiming possession.

With her other hand she inserted a finger and tickled me, like *come hither*. I squirmed and my g-spot ignited. Grace continued to fondle my clit, gradually working toward more direct stimulation. *Why hasn't anyone known to do this before?* This dual-trigger effect had me immersed in ecstasy. I beat the mattress, then grasped the sheets as my head reeled from the most intense pleasure of my life.

I reached for her. I wanted her close, pressed against my bosom. The urgency to meld overpowered me. She came to me, snuggled into my extended arms, and laid her head onto my heaving chest.

Holding her kindled a spark to give her the same joy and exhilarations she'd given me. I stoked her body. She responded to my fluttering fingers with writhes and groans. I feathered my strokes across her arms and down her legs. She rolled to her back. I twirled a finger around her navel, enlarging each circle until it brushed against her breasts and tickled the triangle that parted her legs. Her abdomen and hips rolled in waves of pleasure, begging for more. Her eyes pleaded with mine. But I was merciless.

I savored her desire—never wanted it to end. I shifted my weight and concentrated on her feet, teased her legs, brushed her inner thighs. As I neared her flower, I quickly reversed my stroke before beginning the ascent

again. She parted her legs wider and wider with each approach until I was drawn into her fountain. At contact, she shuttered and screeched, drawing up her knees. Overcome by passion, I fell beside her and tucked my arm beneath her neck to cradle her. My hand reached to massage her folds—outer and inner—running my fingers up and down, in between the creases, while I kissed her eyes, cheeks, chin, lips.

I explored her petals with the lightest of touches, knowing the frustration of being overpowered. Her reaction told me when I'd reached her bud. I circled and tickled it until her legs stiffened, her back arched, and she screamed her delight before sinking into the cocoon of my arms, quivering with sporadic jerks.

The rising sun peered through the window and revealed the flush on her cheeks. *After eight o'clock.* The morning flight to Juneau wasn't scheduled until eleven thirty.

I smoothed a flaxen curl from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. The corners of her mouth upturned as my finger traced her jaw line, but she didn't open her eyes. She sighed, shifted her weight, and began nuzzling her face against my chest. Before I realized her strategy, she latched onto a nipple and suckled my breasts like a newborn. Currents, like lightning bolts, streaked through me, reverberating throughout my core, settling in the sacral chakra.

Gaining strength, she rolled me to my back and slid headfirst to my nether region, her body aligned on top of mine, her dripping pussy positioned over my waiting mouth. I licked the nectar from her folds as I clamped her butt checks in my grip. I wanted to devour this delectable fruit.

Grace wrapped her arms around my legs, slid her hands up the underside of my thighs to lift my knees and spread my legs before burying her face at my Y. She stationed her lips within my lips—sucking, licking, even slurping my juices. She cried out, sending me vibrations and messages of her eagerness and joy.

I reciprocated, clutching her hips to settle her above my face. I wanted to view her sex, examine that tiny organ of her ecstasy. She scooted her knees forward to support her weight and free my hands. I spread her labia and gently pulled back her hood. I rose and tentatively tapped it with the tip of my tongue. She didn't flinch, so I wiggled it, gradually increasing the pressure.

Her attention shifted to what I was doing. She raised her upper body and rolled her hips giving me more access and better position. "Oh ... my ... God!" she screamed, nearing the pinnacle. I wondered if anyone was in the room next to us but didn't care. She jerked away, collapsed beside me,

and begged for mercy. “I ... never ... thought ... I’d ... say this,” she huffed, “but I don’t think I can take any more. My brain might burst.”

I continued to lie, spread beside her. I stretched my arm to her waist, pulling her closer and massaging up and down her side, before sliding my hand between her legs and applying counter-pressure to her secret garden, which she’d so graciously opened to me.

“You’d better look out, Missy,” she panted. “You’ve got a tongue lashing comin’ your way.”

“Mm.” I smiled and felt tiny little men—or maybe it was women—performing somersaults in my lower abdomen.

She rolled over and crawled between my legs and positioned herself on her knees. She placed her hands beneath my ass and lifted me to her lips and delivered her promise. I squirmed and screamed and thought I might pass out. She confirmed my suspicions that this wasn’t her first time. *How lucky for me?* Just when I was so sated I thought I might explode, she mounted me, sex to sex, our legs forming an X. It was the most incredible feeling, wet against wet. She ground against me, rode me, fucked me, and timed her crescendo to mine. In unison we reached new heights.

She cuddled beside me. I embraced her and pulled her close. Within minutes, she was fondling my nipples again.

“What are you doing?” I giggled and twittered her nips in return.

“There’s no end, baby. We can just keep going and going. There’s no reason *we* have to stop.” She winked.

As realization registered, my eyes widened and my mouth flew open. “That’s right!”

“This really was your first time, wasn’t it?”

“It wasn’t for you?” I waited, wondering if she was going to admit it.

She feigned innocence—a demure look, puppy-dog eyes, and pouty lips that were oh, so sexy.

“I think I just got seduced.”

“I didn’t hear any complaints,” she teased.

* * * *

The morning was consumed making love—avant-garde experiences and explorations I’d never imagined. We existed somewhere between oblivion and utopia until Grace flung her arm in a motion of bliss and knocked the clock radio off the nightstand.

“It’s twelve thirty-eight! We’ve missed our connection,” she yelled, picking up the alarm.

“Seriously? You really believe that?”

Recognition flooded her face as a smile radiated from the corners of her lips to her eyes. “Oh ... no ... no, not at all.”

THE END

Visit www.ravenousromance.com for more great lesbian love stories!

About the Authors

Fifi Bernard is the *nom de plume* of a former teacher of multiple subjects from marine biology to English, a small business owner of a funky hippie-clothing store and a health food store. Now she lives in Florida and Costa Rica, climbing mountains and surfing the waves. In between, she travels the world, trying to save the environment. She also loves writing, dancing, yoga, reading, and playing with her beau of fifteen years. She has been writing short stories and essays for small magazines and on her blog <http://www.costajill.com> This is her first story for Ravenous Romance. Her first book, *Free to Bloom* at <http://www.freetobloombook.com>, is a series of interconnected short stories to be published this spring. A work of fiction, the real people, places, and events have been molded by memory, changed by time, and altered by necessity.

Elizabeth Black's erotic fiction has been published by Romance Divine, Circlet Press, Excessica, Xcite (U.K.), Whiskey Creek Press Torrid, Scarlet Magazine (U. K.), Torquere Press, and Fanny Press. Her fiction ranges from very erotic romantic paranormals to darker erotic horror stories. Her werewolf novella *Feral Heat* was Romance Divine's current number-one bestseller at AllRomanceEbooks in late 2009. She won Best Short Horror Story with the Preditors and Editors Poll Awards 2008 for her short erotic horror story *Sweet Spot*, published by Whiskey Creek Press Torrid in its *Monster Mash* Halloween anthology. An accomplished essayist, she was the sex columnist for the pop culture e-zine *nuts4chic* (U.K.) until it folded in 2008. Her articles about sex, erotica, and relationships have appeared in *Good Vibrations Magazine*, Alternet, CarnalNation, the *Ms. Magazine* Blog, *Sexis Magazine*, On the Issues, *Sexy Mama Magazine*, and Circlet blog. She also writes sex-toy reviews for several sex-toy companies. This is her first publication with Ravenous Romance. Visit her website at <http://trishwilson.typepad.com/blog>, <http://www.facebook.com/elizabethablack>, and http://www.romancewiki.com/Elizabeth_Black

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Cheri Crystal's debut anthology, *Attractions of the Heart*, is a 2010 Golden Crown Literary Awards Winner. A voracious reader and prolific writer, Cheri has many published stories in anthologies with Alyson, Bold Strokes Books, Cleis Press, and many more selections of her work online at <http://www.loveyoudivine.com>. When Cheri isn't busy spending time with her family, working, or writing her own lesbian adventures and erotic romances, she enjoys all types of intellectual and physical activities. Visit her website at <http://www.chericrystal.com> or contact her at cherilynn5@verizon.net. She'd love to hear from you.

Lucy Felthouse is a graduate of the University of Derby, where she studied creative writing. During her first year, she was dared to write an erotic story—so she did. It went down a storm and she's never looked back. Lucy has had stories published by Cleis Press, Ravenous Romance and Xcite Books. Find out more at <http://www.lucyfelthouse.co.uk>

K. Ann Karlsson received a degree in international relations, then spent some time in the U.S. Navy. Among other less exciting experiences, she stormed a beach with Marines and launched torpedoes from a submarine. Even though she found the ratio of men to women in the military wildly favorable, she left the service several years ago to settle down with her own personal hero. Together they have traveled the world, lived in Europe and Asia, and returned home often enough to figure out that love really does make the world go 'round. When she's not dreaming up new ways for her characters to torture—erm—challenge each other on the way to a loving commitment, she likes to ride her bike and shop for shoes. K. Ann's stories can be found in the Ravenous Romance anthologies *Rekindled Fire* and *I Kissed a Girl*.

Kilt Kilpatrick is the pen name of an Irish author sometimes called “the Ferris Bueller of San Francisco.” Besides writing sexy stories of all stripes for Ravenous Romance, he is a nonfiction writer, public speaker, event organizer, has been saber fencing for more than twenty-five years, and, somewhat oxymoronicly, is a biblical historian and atheist activist. He is linguistically promiscuous; he speaks Irish Gaelic and can say almost nothing in almost everything else. He lives in San Francisco with his steady girlfriend and number-one fencing partner Inara Lavey, also a writer. And yes, he does wear kilts. If you know anybody like that, it's probably him.

His latest novel is *The Manny Diaries*.

Inara Lavey is the romance-writing *nom de plume* of a San Francisco mystery writer and former B-movie actress who has lived many of the experiences she writes about in her sensuous fiction. She has traveled throughout Europe, and worked in the uncharted wilds of Hollywood as a screenwriter, a script doctor, an award-winning documentary producer, a stuntwoman (her background is in theatrical sword-fighting), and actress in more than one cult classic. She has a deep passion for all things feline, and for many years has worked with her beloved tigers, leopards, jaguars, and other exotic cats at an exotic feline conservation center. Another love is the sea; she adores living by the beach, surfing, strolling the strand, and beachcombing. Her many friends know she can always be tempted by bad movies or good wine, preferably combined. When she is not hard at work writing or preparing for the coming zombie apocalypse, she can be found doting on her cats or sword fighting with her Irish lover. Previous works for Ravenous Romance include: *Ripping the Bodice*, *Champagne*, *Succubusted*, and short stories in the following anthologies: *I Kissed a Girl*, *FangBangers*, *All I Want for Christmas is Two Hot Men*, and *Hungry for your Love* (under her alter ego Dana Fredsti).

Angela Mazzone, a freelance journalist, is a speck of Australian sand.
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Regina Perry is honored to edit the second *I Kissed a Girl Anthology*. An attempt to reconcile herself with her own sexual curiosity resulted in her debut novel at Ravenous Romance, *Playgirl*. Growing up in conservative mid-America, she was forced to keep fantasies hidden and experiences limited. After graduating from The University of Kansas, she taught middle and high school English before moving to Florida. *Dorothy* has slipped into her new shoes and journeyed the yellow brick road of sexual discovery. Check out her shoes and *Double Life* blog: <http://www.reginaperry.com>

Farrah J. Phoenix was born in smalltown Ontario, Canada and grew up with a strong sense of imagination and a love of books, words, and writing. Farrah has always enjoyed putting pen to pad or fingers to keyboard to bring her imagination to life. In fifth grade her teacher declared she would grow up to be an author. Currently residing in the big city of Toronto, she aspires to one day find herself spending sunny afternoons with her pen and notebook on a beach in Europe, writing to inspire—physically and

spiritually. Check out her blog, Discovering Life Anew: <http://farrahjphoenix.com/blog/>

Alexandra Rowan was born in Fort Erie, Ontario, in 1981 but now calls Toronto home. She holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Toronto and is the editor of *Sweaty Sex: An Anthology of Sports and Sex*.

Lara Zielinsky is the published author of two novels and several short stories, all exploring themes of women loving women. Happily bisexual, she lives in Florida with her spouse of nineteen years. Website: <http://www.lzfiction.net>