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RAPUNZEL

A MODERN WICKED FAIRY TALE BY

Selena Kitt



an electronic short

eXcessica publishing

A Modern Wicked Fairy Tale: Rapunzel © April 2011 by Selena Kitt

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A Modern Wicked Fairy Tale: Rapunzel
By Selena Kitt

“Are those extensions?”

Nina Malden noticed everything and Rachel’s new hair was no exception. None of her other clients had said a word—they talked about vacations in Cabo and how difficult it was to get dinner reservations at *Tru* while Rachel mixed color and folded foil for highlights and the sharp snip of her scissors accompanied the endless chatter—but no one had mentioned her hair.

“It’s—” Rachel glanced in the mirror over Nina’s perfectly coiffed head. She’d never understood the phenomenon—who went into a salon for a cut with their hair already styled? But every client at *Rapunzel’s* showed up made-up, even dolled-up, for their appointment. As a stylist, she had to un-do before she could re-do, and sometimes up-do, the hair in question.

Rachel fingered the hair on her head, thick and long, as close as she could get to natural, a trifacta of color, brownish-red with bright golden highlights that no one could ever define. It fell past her shoulders to the middle of her back in luxurious, beautiful waves. She couldn’t admit the truth, not even to herself, let alone to Nina Malden. Telling her it was a wig would open a door she preferred to keep firmly closed.

She was thankfully saved from responding by a crisis up front. The raised voice of one of the stylists—she was sure it was Joshie—caught her attention immediately. She made sure Nina was seated and comfortable before she excused herself to go handle the drama, which involved two appointments—one cut, one perm—scheduled at once for the same stylist. Her new receptionist, just twenty-six and a graduate of NYU, had proven to be a disaster so far. Rachel was usually such a great judge of character, but she’d been distracted when she hired Carly. Unfortunately, Carly didn’t work

Saturdays, so Rachel couldn't scold her. Instead they were taking turns between appointments manning the phone.

"I can't do them both at once!" Joshie's big brown eyes, rimmed with silver eyeliner, actually filled with tears. He was wringing his delicate, ring-adorned hands as if he'd dipped them in something very unagreeable and couldn't get it off. "It's impossible!"

Rachel glanced at the lobby where the first client, a model in need of a spiral perm, checked her perfect profile in a compact. The other patron was just a young girl, maybe fifteen, bright and freshly pretty. Rachel envied her. The man beside her had to be her father—*better be*, she thought, taking in his age and demeanor, or else he was in danger of serious prosecution under pedophile laws, the way he was holding her hand and whispering into her ear.

"Oh I think you've done two at once before, Joshie," Rachel murmured, shocking her stylist into a choked laugh and letting him know his salon gossip hadn't escaped her ears. "You take the perm. I'll take the cut."

"But you've got the dragon-lady," Joshie mock-whispered, glancing over her shoulder toward Nina Malden who was flipping through a *Cosmopolitan*, her lips set in a grim line. She wasn't going to be happy.

"Well, this might be news to you, but I can do two at once too." Rachel winked and Joshie's cackle followed her into the lobby.

"Just a cut today, sweetie?" Rachel saw the girl's nervous glance, first at her, then at the man beside her. He squeezed her hand encouragingly but the girl just blushed and didn't speak. Rachel laughed lightly. "Not your first, I hope?"

The girl's hair was very long, to her waist, a thick black curtain. Her father—Rachel was sure of it now, they had the same dark, wide eyes, and his hair was just as thick and black, although much shorter and curlier—cleared his throat and gave Rachel an apologetic smile.

"I think she's in shock." He shrugged one shoulder in Rachel's direction. "But it was all her idea!"

"Something drastic?" Rachel guessed, glancing over as Joshie brought a cappuccino out for the model and took her back into the salon. She turned to check the appointment book and saw the girl's name—Emma Malden—and then saw the note written beside it, just as the girl's father offered the information.

"She wants to get her hair cut for *Locks of Love*," he told her, looking a little sheepish at his next admission. "Her mother doesn't want her to, so I brought her."

The two facts hit her simultaneously. This was Nina Malden's daughter—the name and dark tresses were far too much to be coincidence—and she wanted to get her hair cut off for charity. As a hairdresser, Rachel was familiar with *Locks of Love* and had collected a great deal of hair for the organization over the years so they could make it into wigs for disadvantaged kids whose medical diagnosis left them humiliatingly without any, either temporarily or permanently. She'd done it with a vague sort of sensitivity in the past, but never with any real empathy. Not until now.

"How much do you want taken off?" Rachel inquired, glancing toward the back and catching a glimpse of Nina Malden in the mirrors. She was swinging one very expensive Jimmy Choo pump at the end of her silk stocking foot, a black stylist cape

draped around her neck, obscuring her Vera Wang suit. She was thankfully still perusing a magazine, still distracted. Good.

“All of it.” The girl finally spoke up and Rachel heard the steel in her voice. Must get that from her mother, she surmised, seeing the dark flash of Emma Malden’s eyes, the hard set of her jaw.

“Well, I don’t think we have to shave you bald.” Rachel smiled and went over to where they were sitting, touching the girl’s hair. It was beautiful, healthy, and she’d been growing it out a long time. “You have a good eighteen inches here at least, even if we just give you a cute little pageboy cut.” Rachel used her hands to indicate the line at the girl’s jaw.

Emma frowned, looking over at her dad. “Are you sure that’s enough?”

“Ten inches is the minimum,” Rachel explained, this time looking at Emma’s father. She wondered what kind of hot water he was going to be in when his wife found out he’d taken their daughter to cut off most of her hair. Well, that was his business, right? Besides, it was for a good cause. “You’ve got plenty to spare.”

“That’s almost double, Em,” Emma’s father offered, nudging her. “That’s a lot of hair.”

“Okay, let’s do it.” Emma stood, swinging the dark curtain of hair over her shoulder, possibly for the last time.

“Come on back.” Rachel put them at a station up front but around the corner, out of the way. Somewhere they were unlikely to run into Nina, unless they had the unfortunate synchronicity to pass on the way out. Of course, having them all there

together was a bit of coincidence to begin with. Joshie was two stations down with the supermodel and he waved at her and winked.

“So your mom doesn’t want you to get a haircut, huh?” Rachel opened the bottom drawer and took out a packet. Inside was a certificate from the *Locks of Love* organization and a long red ribbon they used to tie the hair.

Emma’s father had followed them back and he stood leaning against the wall behind her, arms crossed, just watching. Rachel nodded to the empty chair at the station beside her. “You can have a seat, Mr. Malden.”

“Jake.” He took her up on her offer, sitting down and swiveling the chair in a circle so he was facing his daughter. “And you are...wait, let me guess. You’re Rapunzel.”

“For all intents and purposes,” she agreed, combing Emma’s thick tresses into her hand and then tying the length of it off with the ribbon. Glancing up at Jake, she saw his teasing smile. His words and expression seemed genuine, but the man had a sharp, rich look about him that most of her clients—and her client’s husbands—exuded. She wasn’t surprised he was Nina Malden’s husband.

“My name is Rachel,” she disclosed, picking up her scissors. She met Emma’s eyes in the mirror. They were big and dark and huge. The poor girl was terrified. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Emma nodded, swallowing. “Do it.”

“Okay.” Rachel held the thick length of ponytail in her hand, glancing over at the girl’s father for one last indication of permission. It was no small thing, cutting off this

much hair. There was a great deal of power in it, both in the length of the hair and the act of cutting it.

“She’s getting it cut off for her friend, Liv.” Jake’s gaze went to his daughter and his expression softened.

“Liv has leukemia.” Emma’s eyes filled with tears and she blinked them back. “Oh damnit. I said I wasn’t going to cry.”

“It’s a very kind and generous gesture.” Rachel swallowed tears of her own. She hadn’t even considered how difficult this was going to be. The *Locks of Love* program had, strangely, not even crossed her mind since her own diagnosis and the universe had given her a two-month reprieve from doing this. But here she was.

“Just do it.” Emma closed her eyes and Rachel cut, the sound of the scissors bright and keen, even over the noise of the salon. When Rachel put the thick, dark ribbon of hair on the counter, the red tie trailing down the white countertop, bright as a trickle of blood, Emma opened her eyes and stared at it with surprise, as if it was a finger or a limb instead of a length of her hair.

“I’m so proud of you, sweetie.” Jake reached over and touched his daughter’s hand and the girl burst into tears. He stood and opened his arms and she went to him, sobbing. He stroked what was left of her hair, cut above her shoulders, and looked helplessly over her head at Rachel. “Oh, Em, it’s okay, you’re beautiful—even more beautiful now.”

Rachel felt a lump growing in her own throat. She spoke before it threatened to cut off her voice entirely. “Can you excuse me for a moment? I’ll be right back.”

She took the opportunity to give them some privacy and left them hugging each other, a few of the patrons watching, curious, but most still chatting and combing and cutting, oblivious. Rounding the corner, Rachel stopped near the lobby, blinking fast and tilting her head back, willing tears not to fall. Not here, not now. Nina Malden was waiting.

"There you are!" Nina slid her phone closed and tucked it back into her purse as Rachel returned. "I was thinking about calling out a search party."

"I'm sorry," she apologized, glancing at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were a little bright, but that was all. No other signs of grief. "We had a little scheduling snafu up front. The new girl isn't working out so well."

"Ugh, the help." Nina shook her head and smiled at Rachel as if they shared something in common. "I know how it is."

"Well, let's get you shampooed, shall we?" She'd been in the business so long she never questioned using words like 'shampoo' or 'condition' as a verb. Nina's hair was just as lovely as her daughter's and Rachel washed it, trying to hurry, knowing Jake and Emma were waiting, but it wasn't easy getting the sticky mass of mousse and hairspray and various other styling products out.

"I'm glad you could get me in today," Nina remarked as Rachel squeezed the water out of her clean hair with a thick, fluffy white towel. "I've got a date tonight."

"A date?" Rachel's towel stopped abruptly. "Where are you and your husband going?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Nina raised her eyebrows and lifted her left hand, wagging her fingers. "We're divorced."

Well, this was news. Rachel was stunned into silence.

“Has it been that long since I’ve been in? It’s been three months since it was final.” Nina followed her over to the styling station, taking a seat, smoothing her skirt. “We’re both dating again.”

“I didn’t know,” Rachel murmured, squirting thick white lotion into her hands and kneading it through Nina’s hair. It was shorter than her daughter’s, only shoulder-length, more appropriate for a woman her age, but still long and thick. She required a lot of the conditioner.

“Well, we didn’t tell anyone until it was final.” Nina cleared her throat and Rachel saw her looking at her left hand as if there was still a ring there to admire. She remembered the thing—three carats, platinum, so shiny it could have blinded any magpie coming to steal it.

“You have a daughter, don’t you?” Rachel gathered Nina’s hair up with clips and covered it with a plastic cap.

“Emma?” Nina smiled, relaxing a little. “She’s with her father this weekend.”

Well that explained it. Rachel listened to Nina talk about her date—an Illinois congressman. That was a step up from a corporate lawyer, wasn’t it? Nina’s eyes seemed to ask. Rachel didn’t say anything, she just led her client over to the dryer and handed her a stack of magazines.

“Okay, I’ll be back in ten minutes. You stay here and get conditioned.” Rachel smiled and turned the blower on, raising her voice so Nina could hear her. “Your hair will look ten years younger when the heat treatment’s done.”

“Ten years?” Nina touched the plastic cap tentatively. “Can we do twenty? Then Emma and I could be twins.”

Rachel laughed, setting a timer for ten minutes and putting it on the counter behind Nina. “If I could do twenty, I’d be a magician, not a hairdresser.”

“I’m sentimental about hair, I admit.” Nina flipped through the magazines, choosing a *People* with a smiling Brad and Angelina on the cover. “I haven’t let Emma cut her hair since she was ten.”

“It must be very long.” Rachel swallowed, remembering that a decidedly less hirsute Emma and her father were waiting for her to return.

“It’s gorgeous.” Nina flipped the magazine open, situating herself in the chair. “She wanted to get it cut for some charity. I told her I’d write them a ten-thousand dollar check before I let her cut her hair.”

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” Rachel said faintly, really realizing for the first time just how big of a deal it was going to be when this woman found out what she’d done to her daughter’s hair. Maybe she won’t have to know it was me personally, Rachel thought as she swept past the stations and rounded the corner. Then she saw Emma, sitting back in the chair, laughing at something her father had said.

You’re a coward, Rachel Lange.

She was. Here was this young girl who had given up her mane of beauty as a sacrifice for a friend, who was going to have to face Nina Malden at the breakfast table every day with that fact, and Rachel was worried about one little confrontation with the woman?

She touched her wig, checking the adhesive—she did this obsessively all day long—and put on a professional smile. “Are you ready to get your style on?”

Emma's returning smile was radiant, making her even more beautiful, and Rachel got to work, spraying her hair down to wet it and picking up her scissors. The girl's hair was a joy to cut, thick and healthy and truly, as her mother had remarked, just gorgeous.

“I bet you feel lighter,” Rachel remarked.

“Loads. For so many reasons,” Emma agreed, glancing over at her father. He sat back in the stylist chair, arms crossed, just smiling. Rachel wondered if he was gloating, if this was some sort of payback to his wife. Ex-wife, she reminded herself.

“Your mother is going to kill me,” Jake said, crossing one very expensive Prada shoe over the other as he watched more of his daughter's hair fall to the floor. “But I'm pretty sure my life insurance is all paid up, so you're set, Em.”

“Very funny.” Emma rolled her eyes. “I'm almost seventeen. It's my hair. It's my life.”

“In theory, that is correct.” Jake grinned and looked at Rachel. “Hey, I bet you know my wife. She comes in here to get her hair done.”

“Really?” Rachel's scissors only stopped for a moment before she decided to continue to play dumb. “What's her name?”

“Nina,” Emma piped up, holding her head straighter when Rachel gently tilted her chin.

“Same last name?” If she was going to play dumb, she might as well play really dumb, Rachel decided.

“Yes. Malden,” Emma offered again before her dad could speak.

But Jake was quick to point out, “We’re divorced.” He glanced at his watch and then back at his daughter. “How much longer, do you think?”

“A few more minutes, not long,” Rachel remarked. She was cutting Emma’s bangs.

“Dad, you’re not missing anything.” Emma rolled her eyes again. She was quite good at it, but most teenagers Rachel knew had perfected the gesture. “The game will be on DVR when we get home.”

“But it’s the finals, Em!” Jake looked at his watch again.

Rachel perked up. “Hockey?”

“Yeah.” Jake looked at her speculatively.

“Game one.” Rachel positioned herself in front of Emma, checking the sides of her hair, pulling them forward to see if they were even. “Blackhawks and the Wings.”

“You like hockey?” His voice had changed entirely, Rachel noticed. It had gone from that formal chit-chat tone she heard all day to something more rich and warm, like chocolate.

“Love it,” she agreed, picking up the blow dryer.

“Me too.” Jake looked a little blindsided, like he’d rarely come across a woman who loved hockey before.

Well, she supposed that might have been the case, but she’d grown up with it. Her father had been a huge hockey fan and she’d gone to all the games with him. It was his one indulgence. He had been Rachel’s whole world, but he’d been gone two years now. Cancer. Ah, life’s little ironies.

Jake's words brought her out over her reverie. "I've got season tickets."

"Don't tell me that." Rachel sighed. "I tried to get tickets to game two. I even went to the scalpers on Craigslist, but no luck."

"I'm not surprised." Jake shook his head sadly. "They've been sold out for a month."

"I know—the Blackhawks and the Wings—such a big rivalry." Rachel turned on the blow dryer and talked over it, using a rounded brush to style Emma's hair. "They're two of the original six."

Jake sat up, looking incredulous. "I know."

"I think my dad has a death wish," Emma remarked, a little non sequitur. Rachel gave her a puzzled smile. "He's a Red Wings fan living in Chicago," the girl explained. "And, you know, then he takes me to get my hair cut..." She shrugged in that awkward way teenagers had, so caught somewhere between adult and child, knowing it but not quite sure what to do about it.

"Well, if that's the case, then you *are* brave, Mr. Malden," Rachel teased.

"Jake," he insisted, shrugging. "And I'm not all that brave."

"Oh, I don't know." Rachel turned off the blow dryer, combing out the girl's hair. "I've met your wife."

Jake laughed. "You have a point."

Rachel grabbed the hand mirror off the counter and turned Emma around in a circle in the chair. "But I have to admit, I'm secretly rooting for the Red Wings myself."

"Do you have a death wish too?" Emma asked, looking at the back of her hair in the reflection of the hand mirror.

“Hardly.” Rachel swallowed the irony of her response and changed the subject. “How do you like it?”

“It’s so short!” Emma ran a hand through her hair, fluffing it and cocking her head to the side. Her bright eyes met Rachel’s. “I love it!”

“Truly lovely, Em.” Jake stood, pulling out his wallet. “What do we owe you, Rapunzel?”

Rachel raised an eyebrow at the platinum Visa in his hand. “Come on up front. You can pay there.”

This was the dangerous part. Nina was still under the dryers in the back, facing the front of the salon, and she could probably see the lobby from where she was sitting. If Rachel didn’t want a big scene, she was going to have to get them out of there—fast. She wrote the ticket up quickly and gave him the total.

Jake gave a low whistle, handing over his Visa. “And that was just a haircut. No wonder Nina spent a mint here every month.”

“The price of beauty can be very high.” Rachel smiled and ran his card, glancing over her shoulder. Nina was still reading, that was good. But ten minutes was almost up and the timer she’d set would be going off. She didn’t want the woman to come hunt her down, that was for sure.

“Well it must be some sort of sign, both of us being Red Wings fans in Blackhawks country.” Jake leaned on the counter as Rachel waited for the authorization. Emma wandered through the lobby, picking up a bottle of styling product and reading the back.

“A sign of what?” She glanced over her shoulder again, trying not to be too obvious. This time Nina saw her. Damnit. She moved a little left, hoping to block her view of Jake. “The apocalypse?”

“Could be.” He laughed. “Hey, I have an extra ticket to game two...if you’re interested.”

Rachel handed his card back as the authorization came through on the machine. “How much?”

“Free. You’d just have to put up with my company the whole time, if you could stand it.” He took his card back, slow, his fingers brushing hers and Rachel looked up in surprise. His eyes were smiling but he had a nervous sort of look, an expression she didn’t expect to see on his confident face.

She stared at him, forgetting everything, including the receipt in her hand and the fact that this man’s ex-wife had been sitting in the back of her salon while Rachel had just willy-nilly lopped off a foot-and-a-half of her daughter’s precious hair. “But that would be like...a date.”

“Yeah, that was kind of what I was thinking.” His whole body posture spoke anxiety. If he’d been a teenage boy, Rachel swore he would have been hopping from one foot to the other like a two year old who had to pee. His nervousness appeared more subtle—a shift of his weight, the way his card missed the slot when he was trying to slide it back into his wallet—but to her, it might as well have been a neon sign.

“Oh.” Rachel swallowed, considering the offer. She hadn’t been out on a date in...god, she couldn’t remember when. Two years? It wasn’t that she hadn’t had opportunities. And she couldn’t be considered on the rebound anymore, since she and

Stephen had been broken up for five. He'd married a woman ten years younger than they were and had moved to Georgia to be near the girl's family, last she heard. And it wasn't that she didn't like men, because god knows, she did.

It was mostly work at *Rapunzel's* that had her so busy, keeping her from starting or, god forbid, maintaining a relationship. At least, that's what it had been before she got sick. Now she had even more reasons for her self-imposed exile.

But what harm was there, really? And this was game two of the Stanley Cup Finals! The Chicago Blackhawks and the Detroit Red Wings! Could she really turn that down? All these thoughts ran through her head in an instant—but it was long enough for her to hear Nina Malden calling out her name from behind and Jake's head to snap up in surprise.

"You've got a deal." Rachel handed over his receipt with a business card stapled to it. She'd quickly scrawled her name and cell phone number on the back. "Call me."

Jake took the paper and folded it, putting it into his wallet. He opened his mouth to say something but Rachel cut him off, speaking in a harsh whisper. "Your ex-wife is here. I suggest you take Emma home. Now."

Jake's eyes widened and they both heard Nina this time. "Rachel! My timer went off!"

"I'll call you." Jake grabbed Emma's hand and he practically dragged her out the door. She protested but they were gone before Nina made it to the front of the store, looking very put-out.

"My time's up!" Nina announced.

Mine too, Rachel thought, watching Jake's retreating back. He was still holding Emma's hand but they were walking at a more normal pace through the mall, heading home. *Rapunzel's* was located on the lower level of a high-rise apartment complex in downtown Chicago, just one shop in the midst of many. The residents didn't have to go anywhere if they didn't want to. They had all the amenities located on the bottom floor.

"Okay, let's get you rinsed." Rachel touched Nina's shoulder and turned her away from the store front, nudging her down the aisle. "Sorry I missed the timer, I had to ring up a customer."

"Do you do everything around here?" Nina inquired as she settled herself into a chair at a sink.

"Pretty much." Rachel turned the water on and began to rinse Nina's hair. The woman started talking and Rachel just listened—this time it was Hollywood gossip, something about Charlie Sheen and a meltdown. That was easy to say "uh-huh" and "oh really" to without too much effort, and that was a good thing, because it took Rachel an hour to finish Nina's hair to the woman's satisfaction and the entire time, she was thinking about Jake.

That, and wondering what was going to happen when Nina found out her daughter's hair had been cut off—and that Rachel had been the one to do it. While Nina herself had been sitting at the back of the salon drinking cappuccino and reading *Cosmo*. Of course, that was probably nothing compared to what the dragon-lady would do or say if Nina had known her hairdresser was going to go on a date with her ex-husband.

It would be the most sensible thing, and probably best for business, Rachel decided, if she just politely told Jake when he called that she'd changed her mind. She was going to be in enough trouble already for the hair incident.

Which is why, when the phone rang that night in her apartment at the top of the high rise, with *Rapunzel's* lights dark far below her, she closed her eyes and said, "Six? That sounds great, see you then."

So much for being sensible.

* * * *

She knew she was in trouble when Jake pulled up in a limo. At least he didn't bring a dozen roses, she thought, blushing as a driver opened the door for her and she stepped in. Jake was drinking something amber colored from a fat glass.

"Hey there, Rapunzel." He smiled when she got in and slid into the seat across from him. "Ready for game two?"

"Let's hope it's better than game one." Rachel made a face. The Red Wings had lost game one in overtime three-to-two.

"I'll drink to that." Jake lifted his glass. "Do you want anything? Wine? Champagne?" He nodded toward the bar and she glanced over to see it was fully stocked. He'd really gone all out.

"Is that brandy?" she asked, looked at his glass. He nodded. "Got any scotch?"

He raised an eyebrow but reached over to the bar without comment. The car began to move as he poured her a shot and handed it over. Rachel took it with trembling hands. She'd spent an hour and a half getting ready for this non-date. That's what she kept calling it in her head—a non-date. How a woman could spend so much

time on beauty when she didn't even have any hair was a paradox, she was sure, but that's how long it had taken her. She didn't even want to know how long she might have spent if she'd considered it a real date.

But this was a non-date, just a ride and a ticket to the playoffs. She reminded herself of that fact when she chose to wear her Red Wings jersey, but then forgot it when the short white mini-skirt made it into the mix. She reminded herself that it was a non-date when she decided not to put her hair up, but then forgot it again when she found four-inch black strappy heels on her feet. And she tried to remind herself of their non-date status as she sat across from Jake in the limo, but totally forgot it when his hand brushed hers as he handed over her glass and little tingles went up her arm like electrical current.

"Nice limo." She looked around the car. It wasn't a stretch, but it was still a limo with a bar and a little flat screen and leather seats. Big time luxury, at least to her.

"I just thought it would be easier." Jake shrugged. "Parking sucks at the arena." He sat forward to take her glass and she relinquished it, ignoring that damned buzzy feeling in her limbs whenever he got close. She shook her head when he asked if she wanted another drink or anything to eat. There was also a little fridge. They'd already agreed on the phone not to do dinner. She'd been in a non-date mood at the time she insisted upon that. They'd also talked about Emma's hair and Nina's reaction—which hadn't been good. Not good at all.

"Well, I haven't heard from your ex-wife." Rachel glanced out at the city flying by. They really didn't have far to go, just a few miles. "I guess that means she's not going to sue me?"

"If she was going to sue you, you wouldn't hear from her at all." Jake finished his brandy and set the glass on the bar. "You'd just hear from her lawyer."

"Eek." The thought of being slapped with a lawsuit wasn't a happy one. She needed less stress in her life, not more. "Well I haven't heard from her lawyer either."

"Actually you have." He grinned, sitting back against the seat, his arm stretched casually over the back. He was dressed for the game, jeans and his own Wings jersey—white on red instead of red on white like her own. Another guy might have looked sloppy or casual but Jake looked...well, good. There was no other word for it.

"I have?"

"I'm her lawyer." He looked out the tinted window as the car began to slow. They were in traffic now. "At least, I was."

"Didn't that present a conflict of interest?"

He snorted. "Justice lets you represent yourself, remember?"

"So you're a lawyer."

He nodded. "And you're a hair stylist. I guess we've got the basics out of the way."

"Yes, the important things," she agreed with a smile. "Career, marital status, children or lack thereof, and favorite sports team. What else is there?"

"Um..." He seemed to consider this. "Dog person or cat person?"

She laughed. "Dog."

"Me too. Chinese or Sushi?"

"Sushi, definitely."

"You obviously prefer scotch to brandy. Pepsi or Coke?"

"Coke Zero. With lemon."

"Ugh, how can you drink that stuff?" He made a face. "Okay let's see...modern or classical?"

"Both. Although I have a soft spot for the classics."

He nodded. "Jazz or blues?"

"Definitely blues. It makes me want to take my clothes off." The confession just slipped out.

"Good to know." The look he gave her made her blush all the way to her toes. "I'll have to beef up my collection of B.B. King. Rock or country?"

Now it was Rachel's turn to make a face. "Rock. But I like some Garth Brooks on occasion."

"So you could tolerate a little Johnny Cash?"

She smiled. "Tolerate being the optimum word there."

"Here's a tough one. Love or money?"

"Love of course."

"Do you think rich people and poor people answer that question differently?" he asked.

"You're rich, you tell me."

He laughed. "I'm not rich."

"Compared to me you are."

"I'll give you that," he conceded. "Okay, how about freedom or security?"

She hesitated. "Security."

"I would have chosen freedom."

"I think rich and poor people would answer that one differently."

"Probably. The red pill or the blue pill?"

She shrugged. "Blue."

"Give or take?"

"Give of course."

"Of course." He looked out the window again. They had stopped, and the arena was just up the block. "Half-empty or half full?"

She paused, considering the question and then just said, "Yes."

He wagged a finger at her, shaking his head. "That's cheating. Has to be one or the other."

"Then...half-empty."

He looked at her speculatively. "A pessimist then."

"Just lately, yes." She shrugged.

"On or off?"

She glanced at him, at the light in his eyes, and wondered what he was thinking. "Off."

"On." He disagreed, grinning.

"Wait...was that lights or clothes?"

He laughed and asked, "Top or bottom?"

She flushed and was glad the lighting in the limo was so dim. "Top."

"Looks like we'll have to pick this game up later."

The driver was opening the door and Rachel was glad. The seats were just a little to the left of the blue-line—section 101. And they were only a few rows from the glass.

“I can see them sweating,” Rachel exclaimed, turning to Jake with wide eyes. They were right behind the Red Wings' bench.

“Is that sexy or gross?”

She laughed. “A little of both.”

“I thought so.”

He bought her cotton candy from a vendor even though she said she didn't want any.

He told her, “I want to watch you eat it.”

The pink stuff was sticky and melted on her fingers and tongue and he really did seem to enjoy watching her. And she enjoyed him enjoying it.

He bought himself a water and her a Coke Zero—with lemon.

“Where did you get the lemon?”

He shrugged. “I raided the Long John Silver's stand.”

The little gesture almost made her cry and she chided herself and drank her lemony Coke through a straw, giving herself another mental lecture about their non-date status.

When the Red Wings scored the first goal, Rachel stood up and danced in the aisle and the cameraman found her and put her on the big screen in her Red Wings jersey. By the second period, she had screamed herself hoarse and the score was tied three-to-three. When the Wings scored the winning goal—in overtime—Rachel jumped

up and hugged Jake, who was pumping his fist in the air and yelling as loudly as she was. Then he pointed up, grinning. They were on the big screen again—probably the only two Red Wings fans in the whole place. The rest of the crowd was grumbling, if not outright booing the Blackhawks' loss.

"Bet me we're on the news tonight. Emma's gonna be psyched." Jake had called their driver and had him meet them up front. It was a madhouse trying to get out of there, people pressed together like cattle being herded to slaughter, and Jake held fast to her hand so they wouldn't get separated. She liked feeling him against her, solid as a wall, when they stopped.

"You mean...we'll be on TV?" The idea might have thrilled Jake's sixteen-year-old daughter, but the thought made Rachel go cold.

"Sure, the game was televised."

She paled. "I hope your wife doesn't watch hockey."

"Nina watches the home shopping network and the Lifetime channel."

"But does she watch the news?"

He gave her a steady look. "Who cares if she does?"

He was braver than she was, Rachel thought.

They found the limo parked half a block away and Jake held her hand as he helped her into the car. He slid in after, not across this time, but next to her. They couldn't stop talking about the game, reliving every goal. Jake poured more liquor and they drank it as the limo idled in traffic. The fifteen minute ride in to the arena was going to take them an hour to get out but neither of them noticed the time.

What Rachel did notice was the lightheaded feeling the alcohol was giving her, although she wasn't sure it was just the scotch. It might have been the way Jake's jean-clad thigh flexed against hers every time he reached for the bottle, or the way his hand brushed hers when he took her glass. She felt too warm, confined.

"You have really lovely hair."

The comment made her breath catch and Rachel touched her wig, suddenly self-conscious. "Thank you."

She felt his hand moving, brushing the hair over her shoulder, and glanced at him. He wasn't looking at her face. His gaze followed the line of her jaw, her throat. She knew it was an opening—she could have said something, told him about her illness, but she didn't. What she really wanted to do was to erase the thought entirely from her mind and she could only think of one way to do it.

"Hey there..." He accepted the weight of her, surprised, when she turned and put her arms around his neck.

"Do you want to kiss me?" She could smell her own breath, thick with alcohol, her mouth so close to his. The liquor had given her courage, a boldness she didn't normally possess, but it had opened up something else too, an empty space inside of her, a fierce hunger, a need demanding to be filled.

"Desperately," he admitted. "Haven't thought about anything else all night."

She pressed her mouth to his, trying to recall...was this how you did it? It didn't take long for her body to remember and Jake helped her along, his tongue parting her lips, exploring the soft recesses of her mouth, the taste of scotch and brandy together making her heady.

“I take that back,” Jake breathed as they parted, breathless. “A few other things have crossed my mind tonight.”

“Like what?” As if she didn’t know. She was turned toward him, stretched across the seat, half in his lap, and his cock was a hard bulge against her hip through his jeans. Her intended distraction had turned from boldness to lust in an instant.

“I’d rather show you.” His hand moved up under her shirt, touching bare skin at her waist. She felt like a teenager in the backseat of her date’s car.

“I think you should.” Was she really doing this? Oh god, yes, yes she was.

He groaned at her assent, his mouth capturing hers again, hand moving up higher to cup her breast through her bra. She had forgotten about their non-date status when she’d chosen her underwear—black silk bra and panties and lace-topped sheer black thigh highs. Now she’d forgotten any agreement or non-agreement between them altogether, letting him feel her up and returning the attention, her hand moving against the swollen crotch of his jeans, making him shift and press up against her effort.

“Oh Rachel,” he whispered her name, his hand moving through her hair, and she cringed, aware of how long it was, how it spread out over them like a curtain, too much of it, as if it had a life of its own, eager to give away her secret.

She moved away from his hands, finding herself sliding to the floor of the limo between his thighs. His eyes lit up as she knelt and peeled her jersey off, revealing the black bra underneath.

“And I didn’t even pull out my harmonica,” he remarked, referring to her comment about blues music earlier in the night and she laughed, blushing. He had an incredible memory. And incredible hands, she noted, when they suddenly found more interesting

things to do as he fondled her breasts, thumbing her nipples through the material. The sensation made her shiver and they kissed again, tongues entwined.

Jake let one hand wander around to the zipper on her skirt, easing it down. She helped him wiggle her out of it, feeling exposed. She glanced over her shoulder at the tinted glass where the driver sat. They could see him, but he couldn't see them. At least, she hoped. Jake turned her attention back to him when his hand slipped down between her legs, cupping her mound. She rocked, moaning softly against his mouth as they kissed.

"Come here." Jake pulled her quickly into his lap again and she straddled him, his hands exploring her body, up and down her sides, over her hips, pressing her against his crotch. They danced that way, rocking together, Jake's mouth covering the tops of her breasts with wet kisses, the heat of his cock through denim rubbing against her panties, creating a horrible friction, making her want him with an urgent, keening ache. What had started out as a temporary distraction was quickly turning into a force of nature she couldn't control and couldn't stop—and she didn't want to.

"We have to be quiet," Jake murmured, cupping her face in his hands and kissing her again. "Can you do that?"

She gasped when his fingers nudged her panties aside, tracing the puffy swell of her lips. They were as smooth as her scalp—she didn't have to shave at all anymore. As much as she hated the treatments that made the hair on her head fall out, it was a benefit when it came to other parts of her body.

"I'll try to be quiet," she whispered, whimpering as Jake slipped a finger inside and found her wet—embarrassingly wet.

“Oh god.” His finger moved in and out, eliciting little noises from her throat. “When you say that, I want to make you scream.”

“I’ll be quiet,” she promised, shivering and biting her lip as his thumb found the sensitive nub of her clit. He rubbed there as he fingered her, her nipples hardening under her bra. “Just please don’t stop.”

He gave a low growl, pulling the material of her bra down with his other hand, letting her breasts spill free against his face. She arched so he could reach them with his mouth and he teased them back and forth, round and round, matching the motion of his tongue with the fingers between her legs.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered, reaching back to feel him. His cock strained against his zipper. She undid it, sliding her hand in and finding the tent of his boxers underneath. Jake helped her, slipping his cock free and groaning softly, her nipple between his lips, when she took him in her hand.

“Quiet,” she reminded him, smiling at his soft moan into her breasts as she stroked him against her behind, his precum wetting the silk of her panties.

“I’ll try,” he breathed, his fingers pumping in and out of her wetness, matching the tug of her hand between his legs. “But oh my god, I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything so good...”

“I know.” She swallowed, rolling her hips, wanting more. It had been so long, too long, and he was right, it felt far too good to stop. “Wait.”

She shifted her hips, rubbing the tip of his dick against her clit, circling it there, and then sliding it down her slit, nudging the fingers away with what she really wanted—his cock—pulling her panties further aside for him. Jake grabbed her hips as she

positioned herself, easing down slowly, taking his length. They both sighed when she bottomed out, rocking her pelvis up against his.

“I was wrong,” he gasped, looking up at her. “This feels even better.”

“Mmmm hmm,” she agreed.

“And look at that,” he teased, shifting his weight, making her gasp at the pressure of him inside. “You’re on top, just how you like it.”

“So I am.” Rachel laughed softly, her fingers gripping his shoulders for balance. His hands were moving again, up over her sides, her breasts, cupping her face so he could bring her to him and kiss her. She sucked at his tongue, feeling his cock throb in response, but when his hands moved through her hair again, she distracted him by putting them somewhere else, this time her ass.

He grabbed her behind and thrust, making her moan. She remembered her promise to be quiet and bit her lip.

“So where did our little game leave off?” he inquired, moving his hips to meet her.

“Game?” she gasped. She couldn’t think. She could barely speak.

“Hard or soft?” he asked, demonstrating, first with a few hard strokes, followed by a slower, easier pace.

“Oh god.” She dug her fingers into his shoulders. “Hard. Please.”

“Deep or short?” Another demonstration—long, deep strokes, followed by short, fast ones.

“Ohhh! Deep! Deep and hard!” Rachel begged, her thighs trembling as they clenched his.

Jake gave her just what she wanted, keeping his hands on her ass and fucking up to meet her. Rachel couldn't take much more. Her clit was throbbing, her whole body aching for release.

"Up or down?" Jake whispered.

"Yes!" Rachel cried.

He smiled, eyes half-closed. "In or out?"

"Yes!" Rachel panted, grinding her pussy down on him. "Oh god yes, more, all of it, everything, please!"

"Oh god." Jake's grip tightened and she felt his thighs flex under hers. "Rachel, baby. Oh...wait..."

"I can't," she breathed against his ear. "I'm going to come all over your cock."

"Yes!" He forgot all about being quiet, shoving deep and hard and fast into her pussy, driving her up toward the ceiling of the limo with his hips, groaning loudly with every thrust. She knew he was coming, could feel the heated throb of his cock deep inside, and she was just seconds away from coming too.

"Oh please," she begged, reaching down and rubbing her clit in fast, hard circles, sending herself flying over the edge into a blissful freefall, trembling and writhing in his arms as her orgasm rolled through her. Her pussy seized his cock with such force he howled and buried his face against her breasts in an effort to muffle the sound. She milked him with her climax until he shuddered and begged her to stop, stop, please, god, I can't take it anymore...

Rachel came to earth slowly. The sound of their breath came to her first, still harsh and panting. Then the movement of the limo—they were on the road again, going

fast, probably on the highway. Then the realization that they were naked—well, she was, mostly. He had just undone his jeans.

Rachel reached for her jersey, pulling it back on over her head and then adjusting her bra underneath. Jake zipped and straightened, and soon they were both dressed again, tucking and smoothing things over.

“So much for being quiet,” Jake teased as she picked up her purse—it had fallen to the floor in the middle of things.

Rachel felt her cheeks grow hot and she glanced toward the tinted glass. “You think he heard us?”

He chuckled. “I think they probably heard us down in Texas.”

The car slowed to a stop and she leaned over, looking out to see her apartment building towering above them.

“Looks like we’re here.” Rachel met his gaze for a moment but she was too overwhelmed to do it for long. “I had a great time, Jake. Thank you.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment and the silence stretched. She knew he was waiting for her to ask him up—and she should have, considering. But she couldn’t do it. Her apartment was her sanctuary, the place where she could let her hair down—quite literally—and she didn’t know if she could trust anyone there, even him.

When the limo driver knocked on the car door instead of just swinging the door wide, Rachel knew he must have heard them.

“Open up,” Jake called and she flushed at his words. The driver opened the door and waited. Jake grabbed her hand as she started to slide across the seat, stopping

her. He slid close enough to kiss her softly and she melted at the touch of his lips, the draw of his tongue, but when his hand moved in her hair, she shrank away.

“Goodnight, Jake,” she murmured.

“Goodnight, Rapunzel,” he whispered. She gave him a little smile, hearing him say, “I’ll call you!”

She slipped past the driver and pushed the door open to her building and escaped, afraid to look back to see if Jake was following her with his eyes.

* * * *

“Rach, he’s on the phone again,” Josh hissed, holding his hand over the receiver.

It was a Tuesday—almost two weeks since she’d gone on a non-date with Jake and had non-sex with him in the limo—and Carly should have been answering the phone but Rachel had finally had to fire her after she’d double booked two more appointments and then failed to show up to work without calling last week.

Rachel sighed and shook her head. “Tell him I’m not here.”

“Like you’re ever not here.” He snorted, uncovering the receiver and putting on his phone voice. “I’m sorry, Mr. Malden, she’s unavailable.”

Rachel cringed and continued sweeping the floor. Joshie had just finished a cut, but it was a touch-up for one of the other stylists who had gone home early. It was now the two of them now and the place was pretty much dead, which wasn’t surprising for near closing on a Tuesday night. Well, *Rapunzel’s* might have been empty, but she had to find something to do to keep herself busy.

“I will...” Joshie nodded against the phone, rolling his eyes. It reminded Rachel of Emma and she wondered how the girl was doing, how her friend had fared with her

cancer treatments. She could have asked Jake of course, if she'd taken any of the three hundred phone calls she'd received from him since that night in the limo, but she was too ashamed to answer. Thank god for voice mail and Joshie.

"You really need to talk to that man." Joshie put down the phone and gave her a long, steady look. Rachel shrugged, using the dust pan to sweep up wisps of hair. "So you had sex on the first date—lots of people do, you know. It doesn't have to be the end of everything. It can be a great beginning!"

"It's not that." Rachel hid her blush as she dumped the hair in the bin and hung the broom and dust pan. Okay, so it was that. She was embarrassed by how she'd acted, how much she'd let happen that night, but it wasn't *just* that. Life was too complicated right now. She couldn't afford a relationship, and she certainly couldn't do crazy things like having sex with practical strangers.

"Pul-eeeeeeeeeze!" Joshie rolled his eyes so far back in his head he looked like he was going to pass out. "You are so transparent. I'm gonna nickname you 'Casper,' girl!"

She turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest. "I am not."

"You like him." Joshie smiled, a slow, knowing sort of smile that made Rachel want to strangle him. "You like him so much it scares you."

"I do not." She turned and stalked to her station, straightening, putting scissors away, the blow dryer back in its place.

Joshie came over to stand beside her. He was short and stocky and his chin was the perfect height to rest on her shoulder as he looked into the mirror.

"Look at that." He pointed to her reflection, meeting her eyes. "You're a beautiful woman. He was attracted to you. Believe it."

“Without this?” She tugged on her wig, feeling the adhesive underneath starting to give. It was a strong sort of glue, but as the day wore on, it became less and less effective.

He put his arms around her waist and gave her a strong squeeze. “He’s not going to like you any less because you’re sick.”

“How do you know?” She let herself relax a little against him.

“Because he’s a good guy,” he insisted. “And if he leaves when he finds out, well then hell, we both know he wasn’t worth it.”

Rachel sighed and moved out of Joshie’s arms, sitting down in the salon chair and giving herself a long, hard look. The wig was a good one—she’d paid a mint for it—and didn’t look too obvious. But she knew what was underneath it—the few golden-auburn wisps that were left. And what was underneath that—her insecurity, her self-pity, her fear of rejection, her self-doubt and how it had all made her question her own basic femininity.

Josh peeled up the edge of the wig, peering at her hairline. “How’s it going under there\ anyway?”

“Awful.” She made a face. “It’s almost all gone.”

“It’s a barbaric treatment...almost worse than the damned disease.” Joshie petted her wig. It was real human hair, a big luxury in wigs, especially one so long. Someone like Emma had donated her hair for a wig like this, Rachel thought, leaning her head back against Joshie as he smoothed the hair over her shoulders. “Sometimes I think they might as well just use leeches.”

“Don’t say that.” She reached back and squeezed his hand. “I’m hoping it works.”

"I hope so too." His smile was bright—too bright, and she knew it was for her benefit, a sort of fake optimism. But she didn't blame him. It was hard to be truly hopeful in the face of mortality, your own or anyone else's. "How many more treatments?"

"I'm done for this round." Rachel sounded relieved, and she was. "Now it's just wait and see."

"Want me to give you a scalp treatment?" Joshie brightened, for real this time. "Come on, no one's here and our appointments are done for the night. It will do you some good. And you've got to be suffering under that thing."

"I hate it." Yet her wig was gorgeous, the envy of everyone who came into the salon. They all thought it was her real hair. Her deception was a good one.

"Then let's get it off you."

It took a lot for her to let him, but in the end, she trusted him enough to say yes. Joshie applied adhesive remover under the edges of her wig and sat her down like a client in a chair with a magazine and brought her a cappuccino to wait for it to start to work while he mixed some sort of concoction in a tray.

"What is that?" she asked, sipping her coffee, glad she splurged for the good stuff for her clients.

"Lots of stuff that's good for your skin." Joshie looked like a mad scientist with bottles lined up on the counter. "My last boyfriend shaved his head and I used to do this for him once a week. Made his head soft as a baby's bottom."

"You must have enjoyed that."

Joshie grinned. "You have no idea."

“You said we didn’t have any more appointments.” Rachel put down her coffee and stood as the bell to the front door rang.

“We don’t.” Joshie looked up. “Must be a walk-in...”

“Oh no.” Rachel recognized him immediately—that dark curly mane of hair and mischievous smile—but she put on a professional face, walking past a stunned and rooted-to-the-floor Joshie, already greeting them as she reached the lobby, “Hi Mr. Malden. Emma! Good to see you. Who’s your friend?”

There were three of them this time, Jake standing just behind the two young girls.

Emma introduced her friend, although Rachel would have guessed, just from the colorful scarf tied around her head. “This is Liv.”

“You can’t be here for a haircut,” Rachel remarked. She heard Joshie coming up behind her, recovered from his shock. “You just had one.”

“Actually, we are.” Emma reached over and grabbed Liv’s hand. “I want to get my head shaved.”

“Ummmm...” Rachel glanced at Jake, incredulous. He shrugged. Just looking at him made her knees feel weak and she chided herself, focusing her attention back on Emma. “Are you sure about that?”

“Liv wants to get her head shaved too,” Emma explained.

“We’re gonna go all Britney Spears together.” Liv spoke up for the first time, doing something so brave it took Rachel’s breath away. She pulled the scarf off her head to reveal the typical cancer-treatment hairdo with little tufts of fine blond hair sticking up on her scalp.

“Completely bald?” Rachel managed to ask, finding breath left somewhere in her lungs.

“Completely.” Emma’s face was resolute.

Rachel looked over at Jake. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’m fine with it.” Jake ruffled Emma’s hair. It was short, yes—but it wasn’t *gone*. That was something Rachel wasn’t sure Emma was prepared for. It was one thing to donate a length of your hair to charity. It was another thing altogether to shave your head completely bald.

Rachel took a different tact. “How did your mom react to you getting your hair cut for *Locks of Love*?”

“She went crackers.” Emma grinned. “I got grounded for a month.”

Rachel sighed and said gently, “I’m not sure this is such a good idea.”

“I can do it with a parent’s permission, right?” Emma’s jaw tightened as she nodded toward Jake. “Well this parent says I can do it.”

Rachel tried to let her down gently. “Cutting your hair was one thing, sweetie, but shaving your head...”

“I’ll do it,” Joshie chimed in. Rachel glared at him and he grinned. “Go ahead, fire me.”

“Joshie...”

He was already putting an arm around their shoulders, ushering them into the back. “Come on, girls, let’s get out the clippers and go wild.”

Rachel stared after them, sure she should stop him, but not saying anything. Instead, she turned to Jake and asked, “Are *you* sure about this?”

“I’m sure it’s what Emma wants, and she’s a little like her mother in that regard. If she wants it, she’s going to get it.” Jake shrugged and then looked at her with eyes so hungry the man might have been starving. “Besides, it gave me a good excuse to come see you.”

Rachel felt heat filling her face. The way he looked at her, everything was out in the open, so raw and naked.

“Listen, Jake...”

He moved closer, not close enough to touch but close enough she could feel his heat and hear his whispered words, “I really want to kiss you right now.”

“Don’t...” she breathed, glancing over her shoulder. The girls were back at Joshie’s station around the corner and couldn’t see them, but she could hear them giggling.

“Oh, I won’t...but I want to.” He grinned. “My sixteen-year-old daughter would just tell us to go get a room. Which I am very tempted to do.”

“Might be more comfortable than a limo.” Now she was really blushing. She could feel it.

“Oh I don’t know.” He moved closer enough she could feel him, long and lean and solid. “I didn’t have too many complaints.”

“Me either.” She felt herself giving in and tried to fight it.

His breath was sweet and smelled wintergreen. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

She tried again to distance herself, but only verbally. She didn’t step back. “It’s not you, Jake...”

His hands moved to her upper arms, squeezing gently. "Oh, you mean the reason you haven't answered any of my phone calls?"

She nodded helplessly.

"Well it can't be you," he insisted, searching her eyes with his. "Because you, Ms. Rapunzel, are pure perfection."

She knew he was going to kiss her and she didn't stop him. His lips were warm and soft and just as sweet as she remembered.

She gasped when they parted, pleading for mercy. "Jake..."

"And if it's not me..." He kissed the corner of her mouth. "And it's not you..." Another kiss, this one at her jaw line. "Then what could it possibly be?" Fiery kisses rained down over her throat and she moaned softly, her lust for him already igniting in her core. Joshie had been right. This was the reason she hadn't answered his phone calls, she admitted to herself, feeling his thigh sliding between hers, his hands moving at the small of her back. She couldn't help herself. She wanted him.

"Hey Rachel, where's our body paint?" Joshie called from around the corner.

They broke apart and Rachel straightened her skirt and checked her wig reflexively, realizing the adhesive remover was working. It was very loose.

"Our...what?" She gave Joshie a startled response as he came around the corner. Jake took a guilty step back but she could still feel his heat and it made her breath come too fast.

Joshie rifled through the drawers under the cash register. "They left some here last month, for the model shoot they did for *Vogue* remember?"

"It's..." Rachel slipped in beside him, opening the bottom drawer, the catch-all, the salon's version of a junk drawer. "Here it is." It was a little kit, including brushes. She handed it over, frowning. "What are you going to do with body paint?"

Joshie grinned. "Come see."

Jake and Rachel found the two girls sitting in chairs next to each other, both of them shaved completely, shockingly bald, as promised. The sight paralyzed Rachel with emotion—fear, sadness, pride. Her eyes brimmed with tears and she willed them not to fall.

"Oh Em..." Jake took a step toward his daughter and then stopped. He seemed paralyzed too.

Emma perked up when she saw her father. "Isn't it awesome?"

"Totally awesome," Jake said finally, his voice a little hoarse.

"Time to unleash my inner artist." Joshie opened the body art kit and was doing something with one of the brushes. "Are you girls ready?"

"He's going to paint our heads for the party, Daddy," Emma explained as Joshie's brush began to move over the girl's scalp. She had a lovely-shaped head, round and smooth.

"What a great idea." Jake gave Joshie an approving smile.

"You two are going to be the belles of the ball." Joshie returned the smile and then focused his efforts back on his work.

"There's a class party tonight," Liv chimed in, watching her friend get her scalp painted. "I was too scared, but Emma decided we were both going to shave our heads and make a big entrance."

"I think that's a great idea." Rachel sat down in the chair beside Liv, blinking back her tears. She wanted to touch the girl's smooth scalp and restrained herself. Liv was smiling, probably more happy than she'd been in a long time, and Rachel was glad she had a friend like Emma. Nina Malden's determination had clearly been harnessed in her daughter for a good purpose. She'd never seen anyone do something so selfless, so courageous, so kind.

"You know what, Joshie?" Rachel reached up, feeling her wig slip as she touched it. The adhesive had worn completely off. She glanced over at Jake, feeling her stomach clench. She had tried to tell him, but maybe it would be easier this way. She could just show him instead. She slipped the wig off her head and let it fall into her lap, revealing her own chemo-hairdo. "Let's paint the town red."

The girls gaped. Rachel didn't have the courage to look over at Jake to see his reaction. Liv seemed to know right away, making the connection faster than Emma did.

"What kind?" Liv asked, her eyes soft and wet.

"Same as yours," Rachel replied softly. "Leukemia. We can be twins."

"I'm so sorry." Emma's eyes filled with tears and then all three of them were crying—and then laughing, and then hugging in a big circle.

Joshie tsked and cooed and ushered them back into their seats so he could finish his work. He painted all three to perfection—purple paisley for Emma and blue bird's wings for Liv and orange and black tiger stripes for Rachel. In the end, they all had so much fun Rachel hadn't realized Jake slipped out until his daughter called for him.

"Daddy! Come see!"

Rachel touched her head self-consciously, glancing into the mirror. She looked strange, foreign, her eyes bigger and rounder in her face. The tiger stripes made her look wild, feral. What was Jake going to say? And then, as Emma called for him, wandering toward the lobby, Rachel realized he was gone. He had found out she was sick and had left, unable to handle the news.

“Hey.” Joshie read her mind. “Stop it.”

“It’s okay.” Rachel put on a smile, sliding an arm around Liv’s shoulder. “Ready for your party, beautiful?”

Liv’s smile was so bright, it could have powered a small third-world country. That alone made it worth it. They walked toward the lobby, where Emma was peering out the front glass door, frowning.

“I don’t understand where he could have gone.” Emma turned to Rachel. “Did he say anything to you?”

Rachel shook her head, not trusting her voice.

“There he is.” Liv pointed toward the door and they all looked as Jake walked toward the salon, holding the handles of a small bag swinging at his hip.

“Where did you go?” Emma protested as he opened the door, his eyes widening. They must have been quite a sight, Rachel realized, the three of them standing there with their bald, painted heads.

“I thought the three of you could use a little bling.” Jake put the bag down on a chair, reaching in and pulling out a blue box Rachel recognized immediately. There was a *Tiffany’s* right around the corner on North Michigan Avenue. He handed the first one

to Liv. Her jaw dropped when she opened the little box to find a pair of heart-shaped diamond earrings inside.

“Mr. Malden...” Her voice shook

“Shh.” He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “You’re like my own daughter. You know I love you.”

Emma squealed when she opened her tear-drop diamond earrings, hugging her father and quickly grabbing Liv’s arm and dragging her over to one of the salon mirrors so the girls could try on their jewelry. Joshie went with them, exclaiming over the sparkly treasures, and Jake pulled out another blue box from the bag, this one long and thin.

“Jake...” Rachel took a step back, swallowing hard as he held the box out in front of him. “No...”

“Yes.” He pressed the box into her hand. “It’s yours. Open it.”

“I can’t.” Her hands were trembling too much. “You do it.” She handed it back to him and he obliged, taking the necklace out and tenting it in his fingers.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s lovely,” she whispered, looking at the bird-shaped diamond pendant. “A dove?”

He shrugged, undoing the clasp. “They didn’t have any hockey sticks.”

She laughed. “I really shouldn’t accept this.”

“Yes you should.” He lifted the chain over her head as she turned, doing the clasp up behind her neck. “Beautiful.”

There was no hair to lift out the way as he kissed the nape of her neck, his breath warm, and murmured, “Hope is a thing with feathers...”

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she whispered, her back still to him.

"I'm sorry you had to." His hands rested on her shoulders, squeezing gently. "But you don't need to hide anything from me."

"I just thought you wouldn't..." She swallowed her words, unable to finish her thought.

"What? Like you? Want you?"

"Stay."

"I think I used all my rollover minutes just talking to your answering machine in the past two weeks." He grinned as she turned to face him. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you, Daddy!" Emma kissed his cheek. "We're gonna go. Can I have the keys?"

"And just how am I going to get home?" But Jake was already digging into his pocket and producing the desired object.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Can't you get a taxi?"

Rachel took a subtle step closer to Jake, giving him a quick, heated, side-long glance. "You can come up to my place and call one."

"Here." Jake quickly handed the keys over to his daughter. "Call my cell if you need me."

Emma gave them both a knowing look. "Don't wait up."

"You either." Jake grinned.

"Dad!" The teenager made a face, pulling her friend toward the door, as if he'd crossed some invisible line with his words.

"Bye!" Liv waved as Emma dragged her out.

“Have fun!” Rachel smiled and waved back as the girls practically ran down the corridor, heading for the parking garage. She glanced over at Jake. “Think they’re going to be okay?”

“I think they’re already more than okay.” He took her hand.

“She’s a really special girl, your Emma.” Rachel squeezed his hand. “You should be proud.”

Jake nodded, sounding a little choked up. “I am.”

“You two go on,” Joshie interrupted, waving them out.

“I need my wig,” Rachel protested. “I can’t go out like this.”

Joshie and Jake exchanged glances but Rachel ignored them. She found her wig at the station next to Joshie’s. She didn’t have any adhesive left in the salon so she just slipped it on over her newly painted head, straightening and fluffing. It would do until they got upstairs.

“Go already!” Joshie insisted. He had Rachel’s purse and he slung it over her shoulder, practically pushing them out the door. “I’ll close up shop.”

Jake was quiet on the way to the elevator. Most shops were closing for the night, although there were still a few people coming out of the all-night grocery. Rachel fiddled with her wig as they got into the elevator and she pressed the button for her floor. There was a mirror on the back wall and she checked it again. It had moved a little.

Jake slipped between her and her mirror image and she looked up, meeting his gaze, although tilting her chin made her wig slide and she grabbed onto it self-consciously with one hand before it could fall to the floor.

“Come on, Rapunzel.” He put a hand over hers on her head, slowly moving her wig back. “Let down your hair.”

“Jake...” She swallowed, feeling it slip further. She knew he’d seen her without it already and yet she was still too afraid to let go when they were here alone together.

He dipped his head down and kissed her, mouth insistent, the hand holding her wig moving to her lower back. The cool air against her neck made her shiver—and so did the way he turned and pressed her back against the mirror, his body a wall of heat as the kiss grew deeper, his tongue drawing hers.

She left her hair puddled on the floor, her scalp bald and naked. It was a strange, backwards equation, but somehow the more exposed she was to him, the better she felt. His thigh slipped between hers and she opened her legs, skirt riding up high as he pressed against her. One of his hands reached around to grab her ass, lifting her more fully to him, the other twisted in front, grabbing her breast and squeezing through her blouse.

Then she remembered they were still in the elevator and it could stop at any time, letting on one of her neighbors, maybe even a client. She broke the kiss, breathless, meeting his own half-lidded gaze.

“Wait,” she pleaded, whimpering as his thigh flexed delightfully between hers. “At least until we get to my apartment.”

“I can’t wait anymore,” he murmured against her neck, licking and sucking at her skin. “I want you. I want you so fucking bad I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I spend all day thinking about you. My clients are beginning to wonder if I’m on drugs or something, I space out so often, daydreaming about you.”

She twined her arms around his neck, hanging on tight, as if she could get closer to him somehow, crawl inside his skin.

“And the nights...” He gave a long, frustrated groan, sliding both hands under her ass and grinding his pelvis against hers. She gave in, wrapping her legs around his waist, feeling the hard press of his cock bent and straining through his trousers. “I feel like a damned teenager. I can’t stop jerking off and thinking about you.”

She flushed with pleasure at his words.

“And just when I think it’s over, when I make myself come remembering your hot little pussy or your sweet, gorgeous tits...” He kissed her again, quickly, his breath hot, his words mumbled against her mouth. “You’ve got me under some sort of spell. I swear, I can come like I was fifteen again, over and over. All I have to do is remember the feel of you riding my cock and I’m hard again in an instant.” His admission made them both fill with heat. He met her eyes, his expression pained, hungry, desperate. “And this just goes on and on and on...” He pressed his lips to hers again and again. “All. Fucking. Night. Long.” He punctuated each word with a hard thrust of his hips, driving her against the back wall of the elevator.

“I know how you feel,” she breathed when the elevator slid to a stop and the bell went off letting them know they’d arrived at her floor.

“Do you?” He gripped her in his arms as if he couldn’t let her go and she wondered if he was going to, but he finally did as the doors started to slide open. Rachel retrieved her wig and went to put it back on but Jake took it from her hands.

“What—?” she protested.

“I like seeing all of you.” He hid both hands behind his back when she went to grab her wig. She was afraid she might run into a neighbor in the hallway. “And I’m gonna see a lot more of you in a minute. Which one is yours?”

“At the end of the hall.” She nodded in that direction and they made it without incident. Rachel’s hand trembled as she slipped her key into the lock, but they’d barely burst into the apartment before Jake was kissing her again and she found herself pressed against the door they’d closed behind them.

“Jake—” She tried to protest, to keep up some semblance of appearance or decorum, although she wasn’t even sure why, until he thrust her half the way up the door with his hips, using both hands to tear her blouse open. The buttons popped and scattered like marbles all over the floor and she had time to wonder if she was dreaming this before her bra was pulled down too and he buried his face against the flesh of her breasts like he was coming home.

“Oh god!” She ran her hands through the dark curls on his head, her hips moving on their own, grinding back against his. Her skirt was long, but he had it pushed far up her legs, the soaked crotch of her panties wetting the zipper of his trousers with every thrust. “Jake, please, please...”

“Please what?” His tongue bathed her nipples, back and forth, sending exquisite shocks of pleasure down between her thighs.

“I want you,” she begged, reaching down between them to touch herself, something she had done thinking about him a hundred times since the limo, getting herself off again and again just from the memory. But he was here now, real flesh and pounding blood and she had to have him. Had to. Now.

“You want me to fuck you?” He was already fumbling with his zipper, freeing his cock.

“Yes!” She moaned when she felt the length of him spring free between her thighs, the only thing separating them now the thin fabric of her panties. They were plain white cotton—nothing special today—but they nudged aside just as easily as her silk ones had. “Do it! Oh please don’t tease me, put it in! Put it in!”

He groaned and thrust, finding her center with delicious accuracy and pounding deep. There were no words then, just the hot pant of their breath as they kissed and he fucked her hard against the door, the whole thing rattling with every thrust, alerting every neighbor in the place to just what they were doing.

Rachel had a brief flash of fear that someone might call the cops but the hot pounding of Jake’s cock inside her pussy grew so intense so fast, like a flash fire between her thighs, the thought burned away, leaving her shaking in its wake. She was going to come like this, with him buried inside of her, fucking her so hard her teeth jarred, her head banging against the trembling door.

She clutched him, arms and legs wrapped tight, and tried to warn him, but it was no use. Her orgasm burst forth like a dam breaking, her juices flooding them both.

Jake moaned as her pussy enveloped his cock in climax, squeezing his length, the head buried so deep she thought she could taste it in her throat. Rachel screamed in release, her nails digging into his shoulders, hips bucking, but he managed to hold onto her and even come himself, following her by just moments, shoving into her so hard she thought the door might just splinter in half and spill them into the hallway.

“Oh god,” she whispered, still hanging onto him tightly as their bodies started to relax. “It was really real? I thought I dreamed it...”

“It was real.” Jake’s kisses found her neck, her jaw, her ear. “And this time you’re not going anywhere.”

“Mmm,” she agreed, whimpering as he grew soft and slipped out of her pussy. She wanted him still, more of him, always. He groaned when she reached a hand down to find him, slack and wet with their cum.

“Hungry little kitten,” he chuckled.

“Meow.” She scratched lightly at his balls with her fingernails and he jumped, gasping. “Do you like my tiger stripes?”

He studied her head in the dim light—Rachel had one lamp on a timer in the living room and the light barely reached the foyer.

“I’d like to see your whole body painted like that.” He grinned. “We could do a new animal every night. Tigers, zebras, giraffes...”

“Giraffes?” She laughed. “What do giraffes say?”

“Umm...I think giraffes say...‘gnork.’ The ‘g’ is silent.”

“Gnork! Gnork!” she called, both of them laughing as he followed her directions to the bathroom, not letting her down, keeping her legs wrapped around his waist the whole time until he could sit her on the bathroom counter and run the shower. He slowly stripped her down, inspecting every inch of her with his eyes, until she was sitting naked on the edge of the sink.

“Now you,” she insisted, watching as he hung his suit coat on a hook on the back of the door and undid his tie. He peeled his shirt off quickly, his trousers and boxers

dropping to the floor, and Rachel noticed he wasn't kidding—his cock was half-hard again already. He left his shoes and socks in the pile and stepped into the shower.

"Come on," he called, peeking out of the shower curtain.

She glanced at herself in the mirror. Joshie had done an amazing job painting her scalp. He was quite the artist. It seemed a shame to wash it all away without even taking a picture, but she knew she was hesitating for more reasons than just that.

Jake raised an eyebrow at her and she bit her lip, meeting his gaze.

"But then I'll be totally naked," she murmured, touching her tiger stripes.

Jake grinned. "That's the idea." He held a hand out to her and she took it, letting him pull her in. They spent a long time soaping each other up and rinsing off. The body paint came off easily enough and Rachel touched the smooth expanse of her scalp with trepidation. There weren't even any wispy hairs left. She was completely bald.

"You're beautiful," Jake whispered into her ear, his fingers moving between the wet, swollen lips of her pussy as he pressed her against the tiles. She remembered how he'd taken her, fucked her, and her clit throbbed in response.

"No, I'm not," she protested softly, whimpering as his fingers parted her, finding her aching clit and circling it with his thumb.

"Yes," he insisted, bending to capture a nipple between his lips. She moaned and spread wider for his attention. "You're so fucking beautiful I can't stand it."

"Jake..." she whispered as he sank to his knees in the shower and spread her lips with his fingers, his tongue taking up where his thumb had left off. "Oh god. Oh my god. That's so good..."

His mouth covered her pussy and he drank her in like nectar, sucking and licking and driving her wild. Before long her knees began to give way, but Jake didn't give up— instead he just threw her legs over his shoulders and delved in deeper, sucking insistently at her little clit. His fingers probed her hole, sliding into her wetness and mimicking the motion of his cock, in and out of her pussy, and that sent her shuddering over the edge into ecstasy.

“Oh fuck!” she gasped, her heels digging into his back, mashing her flesh against his lapping tongue. “Make me come! Make me come all over your face!”

Jake just mumbled something affirmative, his fingers thrusting in deep as she spasmed around them, the walls of her pussy contracting with pleasure. She moaned and felt her whole body collapsing, melting like jelly, and Jake took her weight in his arms, sliding his body up hers, keeping her pressed to the tiles as he kissed her. She could taste herself in his mouth, feel the heat of his erection against her hip.

“I want you again,” he whispered, reaching over and turning off the water.

“So I feel,” she teased, gripping his length, making him growl.

“I told you, it's like I'm fifteen again.” He grabbed a towel and started rubbing her down as they stepped out. She let him dry them both off, even laughed when he shook his head like a dog, spraying them both with water.

“I can't do that anymore,” she said a little sadly, running a hand over her bare scalp. She was afraid to look in the mirror.

“True,” he agreed, stepping close and pulling her into his arms to kiss the top of her head. “But you give a whole new meaning to the term ‘wash and go.’”

She laughed again, letting him kiss her, his hands roaming all over her body. She felt like a teenager again too, eager but self-conscious, excited and a little afraid. He followed her directions again, this time to her bedroom, and they rolled around, kissing and petting on her down comforter until they were breathless with lust.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he groaned, kissing his way down between her thighs. She couldn’t let him focus on her pussy again like that, giving her so much attention without any distraction, so she turned herself around and rolled on top of him, playing with his cock. It was leaking precum and she licked it off, enjoying the taste, the silky feel of his skin against her lips and tongue. She hadn’t had a cock in her mouth in a long time.

“Oh Rachel,” he moaned as she took his length, as far as she could, deep into her throat. “Oh Jesus, sweetie, go slow...fuck!”

She smiled as she came up on his cock, rubbing the head over her lips, smearing more precum there. His mouth was still busy between her legs, licking and sucking at her pussy, greedy with lust.

“Are you close?” she teased, smacking his cock lightly against her mouth and tongue.

“You have no idea,” he gasped, his voice strained. She could actually feel his thighs trembling beneath her with the effort to hold back. “Your mouth is so good.”

“Think if I made you come now, you could get hard again?” She gripped him in her hand, stroking fast, making him thrust up into her fist.

“For you?” He gave a strangled cry, a half-laugh. “I have no doubt.”

“Good.” She ran her tongue around the head, still tugging on his cock. “Because I want you to come in my mouth before you fuck me again.”

“Oh god,” he whispered against her pussy as she started to suck him in earnest, working her mouth and tongue up and down his length. He seemed to forget about her altogether for a moment, just resting his cheek against the smooth expanse of her thigh as she took him again and again into her eager mouth.

“Rachel,” he warned, his arms wrapping tightly around her hips, squeezing. “Oh god, baby, you’re gonna make me come!”

Her only response was to suck him harder, faster, cupping his balls in her hand and feeling their weight, the skin there tightening in anticipation. He was very, very close, and she wanted it, she wanted to feel him explode against her tongue, wanted to swallow every drop of his cum.

“Ohhhhh!” He finally gave in, driving his cock so deeply into the back of her throat she had no choice but to take his cum. It flooded her in hot, sticky waves and she gulped madly, trying to catch it all and not spill a drop. His cock pulsed between her lips as he emptied himself completely into her waiting mouth.

“Yum.” She turned around on him, kissing the corner of his mouth. He was still shaking with the force of his orgasm. “Now...how long do you think we have to wait?” Her hand was already grasping the softening length of his cock.

Jake groaned, barely opening his eyes to focus on her. “Suck all you want—we’ll make more.”

“I want to fuck you,” she murmured, sliding a thigh over his to straddle him, rubbing the wet flesh of her pussy into his crotch. “Just like this. Remember the limo ride?”

He held onto her hips. “Not likely to forget that ride for the rest of my life.”

“Me either.” She rocked on top of him, using the still half-hard length of his cock, rubbing it against her clit. “I come so hard when I think about it.”

“You too?”

She nodded, biting her lip. “I have a little vibrator in that drawer. I use that.”

Without another word, Jake reached over and opened the night table drawer, fumbling around inside until he found it. It was small and sleek, and it hummed nicely when he turned it on.

“Here.” He handed it to her, still buzzing.

She slid it down between her pussy lips, rubbing her clit with the tip, letting out a soft moan. Jake jumped when the vibrator touched the head of his cock.

“You like that?” she asked, using the vibrator to tease them both.

Jake just moaned, his fingers digging into her hips. She could feel him getting hard again as she slipped the humming tip of the toy back and forth, around and around. Her pussy was on fire. She’d lost count of how many times she had come already but she wanted more, and she desperately wanted his cock inside of her when she came again.

“Ready for my pussy?” She grasped his length, squeezing, tugging, testing his hardness, but there was no need. He was thick and stiff and ready for her again. He just

nodded, gasping when she slid down onto his length, settling herself into the saddle of his hips.

“Oh god.” Jake’s head went back, eyes closed. “I’m gonna come too fast.”

“Wanna race?” She smiled as she slipped the vibrator between her pussy lips, focusing on her clit, the sensation almost too good to bear.

“On your mark...” Jake muttered as she started to ride him, grinding her pussy down into his crotch. “Oh fuck...”

“Get set...” She squeezed her muscles hard around him, her pussy already contracting in anticipation of her orgasm. Her vibrator always made her come fast. Very fast.

“Ohhh!” He began to thrust up into her, unable to resist the sweet pulse of her pussy.

“Go,” she whispered, rolling her hips, feeling his swollen cock growing even bigger inside of her as she rode him. There was no stopping now, either of them. She moved in easy circles, making the same motion with the vibrator on her clit. Jake closed his eyes and drove up into her, the look on his face alone enough to send her over, but the anticipation was so delicious she tried to hold out, waiting, not wanting to cross the finish line yet.

“Rachel!” His eyes flew open when she slid the vibrator down to touch his shaft as well as her pussy, sliding up on him so the whole thing rubbed against them both as they fucked. “Oh god! What are you doing?”

“Winning.” She couldn’t hold back anymore. Her orgasm shook them both and she cried out with her release, her clit throbbing rapidly under the hum of the vibrator.

Jake groaned and give up too, giving her a few more long, delicious, shuddering strokes before burying himself to the hilt and coming up inside her. She felt every pulse of his swollen cock as he drove up into her, pushing her toward the ceiling and making her drop the vibrator and clutch him, trying to hang on.

When they were both spent, Jake pulled her close, wrapping them up in the comforter, their bodies sheened with sweat, breath still coming fast with their effort. Rachel waited for her heart to slow, listening to Jake's racing too under the hard muscles of his chest.

"My god, you're so beautiful," he whispered, kissing the top of her head and she remembered her hair was on the floor somewhere in the foyer.

"You better stop saying that," she whispered, tracing a finger down to his navel. "I'm starting to believe you."

"Good." He chuckled. "My evil plan is working."

"Don't fall asleep," she reminded him. "You have to get home for Emma."

"Don't worry." He glanced at his watch, blinking his eyes, trying to focus. "We have hours to go before I sleep. And I'm going to make you come at least three more times."

"Aiming low, are we?"

"Gimme that thing." He grabbed for the still buzzing vibrator and Rachel squealed and tried to roll away, but he caught her and she gave up, knowing she was going to let him do whatever he wanted, for however long he wanted.

Even if her mind wasn't ready to accept it yet, her body knew, had known since the first time he touched her—she was his.

* * * *

Rachel could barely hold the phone. It trembled in her hand as she dialed Jake's number and she had to sit down before he answered, only on the second ring.

"Rachel?" He must have known from the caller ID because she hadn't said a word. "Did Nina call you?"

So he knew.

"She came into the salon." Her voice didn't even sound like her own, too faint and far away to be real. "She said she was going to sue me. She said...she said..."

"I know, I know." Jake swore softly. "Rachel, turn on the news."

"Joshie." She put her hand over the receiver and called him over. He was gathered with the other stylists, all of them buzzing like bees about the drama Nina had caused when she'd burst in and made her little scene. Thankfully they'd only had three clients in chairs at the time and the damage to *Rapunzel's* had been minimal. "Turn on the TV."

It was a flat screen on the far wall. It was hardly ever on, but occasionally they'd get busy and a client would want to watch something. Joshie did as she asked, grabbing the remote and pushing the power button.

"What channel?" Rachel asked.

"Any local news channel."

Her heart dropped at his words and it sank again when Joshie flipped to a local station. Nina was there, perfectly dressed, coiffed and composed, speaking into the microphone. "I'm sorry she has cancer, but that doesn't mean she has the right to shave my daughter's head."

Rachel put her head on the table, whispering, "I'm going to need a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer," Jake reminded her.

"The salon." She closed her eyes, feeling tears burning. "It's over. No one will ever come here again."

"You're wrong." Jake sounded angry, resolute. "I have an idea. Leave it to me. Will you leave it to me?"

"Yes." She was remembering the night before, the way they'd been together, how she'd felt falling asleep in his arms. She hadn't felt that calm and safe in a long time. Besides, what other choice did she have?

"Then let me rescue you."

She gave a short, sharp laugh. "I'm not a damsel in a tower."

"Sure you are," he protested. "And I'm a white knight. Didn't you see my horse parked around back?"

"I must have missed it," she said faintly, but she was smiling. "Was it behind the BMW?"

He laughed. "Okay, hand the phone over to Joshie."

"What?"

"Trust me," Jake insisted.

"I do." It was the truth. She called Joshie over and handed him the phone.

* * * *

Rapunzel's was all over the news. There wasn't a local news station that hadn't picked up on it, and now even CNN and the other major news networks had sniffed out

the story and started to run with it. Rachel stood in the salon, Joshie by her side, staring at the screen, incredulous.

They flashed a picture of Rachel and the two young girls, three goddesses with their bald, painted heads put together, their smiles stretched wide. Joshie had done a beautiful job, taking hours on each of them this time and adorning them with sparkles and glitter. All three looked radiant and beautiful. Even me, Rachel thought, looking at the picture in wonder.

Then it was gone, and Jake was there on the screen. “Speaking as a lawyer, I can tell you that this is a frivolous lawsuit and I’d be surprised if a judge will even hear it. Speaking as a human being, I think this whole thing is just heartless and cruel. Speaking as a father, I fully support my daughter’s decision and I’m very proud of her.”

The whole salon cheered at that.

“Rachel, this is Mandy.” Emma presented another of her classmates, this one a cheerleader with long blond hair. Rachel knew she was a cheerleader because the teen was actually wearing a cheerleading outfit. Probably for the cameras outside, Rachel realized. “She wants to get her hair cut for *Locks of Love*, too.”

“Hi Mandy.” Rachel smiled at the girl. “Come sign in.”

The list on the wall was growing. So was the line out the door with the professionally printed sign Jake had put up with that same picture on it, the one the news kept using—Emma and Rachel and Liv smiling, their bald painted heads pressed together. *Locks of Love Drive - We’re Too Sexy For Our Hair!*

It matched the billboard Jake had put up on the freeway.

"This is crazy," Joshie called on his way by as he directed another *Locks of Love* donation client back to his stylist's chair. "I think your boyfriend may have saved the salon."

"That's not all he saved." She smiled, seeing Jake pushing his way through the crowd toward her.

"Did I hear something about rescuing damsels in distress?" Jake slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. She wanted more, and from the look in his eyes, she knew he did too, but there were too many people around.

"Listen, Mr. Cocky, there's still the lawsuit to deal with," she reminded him, but she couldn't help smiling up at him.

"I told you to trust me," he reminded her.

"I do."

He nuzzled her neck, no hair in the way. "I like hearing you say those two little words."

She gave him a sharp, surprised look. "No blue *Tiffany* boxes."

"Not today." He chuckled. "But maybe someday."

"Maybe someday," she conceded, whispering her response into his ear and daring, for the first time in a long time, to hope about the future.

Epilogue

“We feel very vindicated.” Jake spoke into the microphone, Rachel at his side. On his other side stood Emma and Liv, holding hands. Both girls had hair now, cute little pixies just like Rachel’s. “I’ve said since the beginning that this was a frivolous lawsuit that should have been dismissed months ago. I’m glad the judge finally saw reason.”

Rachel felt Jake’s hand slip into hers and she smiled up at him. She barely heard the questions being peppered at them.

“No, the judge didn’t award *Rapunzel’s* any damages,” Jake countered to one of the reporters. “We didn’t countersue for any. But the judge did say that if we had, he would have awarded them to us.”

Rachel glanced out into the crowd. Nina wasn’t there. She’d been in the courtroom but had left almost immediately after the verdict. Emma had tried to talk to her mother but she’d disappeared too quickly. Emma saw her only on the weekends. Jake’s daughter now lived full-time with her father, a request she’d had to make before yet another judge.

“That’s correct, Olivia Riley is in complete remission.” Jake smiled down at the girl and she smiled shyly back. The news had come just a few weeks ago and they’d taken the girls to Disney for the weekend to celebrate, their choice. “So I guess everyone gets a happy ending after all.”

“What about Ms. Lange?” one of the reporters inquired. Rachel’s head came up at the mention of her name.

Jake’s smile faltered as he glanced down at her. “Well, we’re still waiting for test results, but we’re hopeful...”

Rachel leaned in to the microphone, her heart thudding in her chest. She hadn't planned this. She'd wanted to wait until after this whole court thing was over to sit both Emma and Jake down to tell them the news. But somehow this just seemed right.

"Actually, I heard from the doctor yesterday." Rachel cleared her throat and spoke into the microphone, wincing a little at the sudden feedback. Jake's hand tightened in hers and she glanced up at him, seeing the blindsided look on his face. Her eyes filled with tears. "It seems this happy ending thing must be catching because he told me my cancer is in remission too."

The crowd around them exploded with cheers and applause—it was even louder than the first wave, when they'd just come out of the courtroom. Jake pulled her into his arms and kissed her so hard she could barely breathe.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered harshly against her ear, hugging her tight.

"I just did," she gasped as he held her at arm's length, his eyes drinking her in, looking at her as if she might disappear at any moment. Emma and Liv were around them, jumping up and down and hugging them both at turns. "Surprise."

"Daddy's got a surprise for you too," Emma whispered as her arms went around Rachel's neck, but the teen spoke too loudly. Jake heard and shot her a warning glance. "Oops."

"Surprise? What surprise?" Rachel asked, not realizing they were so close to the microphone.

The reporters heard the word and started asking the same question. Soon the crowd caught on and started chanting, "Sur-prise! Sur-prise! Sur-prise!" Jake flushed and stammered into the microphone, but it was hard to resist pressure like that.

“Okay, okay!” he relented, turning to Rachel in front of the crowd. “Rachel, I have to ask you something.”

“What?” she asked, puzzled. She didn’t fully understand, although she had hoped, had held fast to that hope for months. They both had. “Jake? What are you doing?”

“Loving you,” he replied simply.

Then she did understand, and the hope that had settled in her heart, right under the dove pendant Jake had given her months ago, took flight in her chest as he reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a blue *Tiffany’s* box.

Then, like a magician, he got down on one knee and turned hope into something with wings.

ABOUT SELENA KITT

Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr-and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

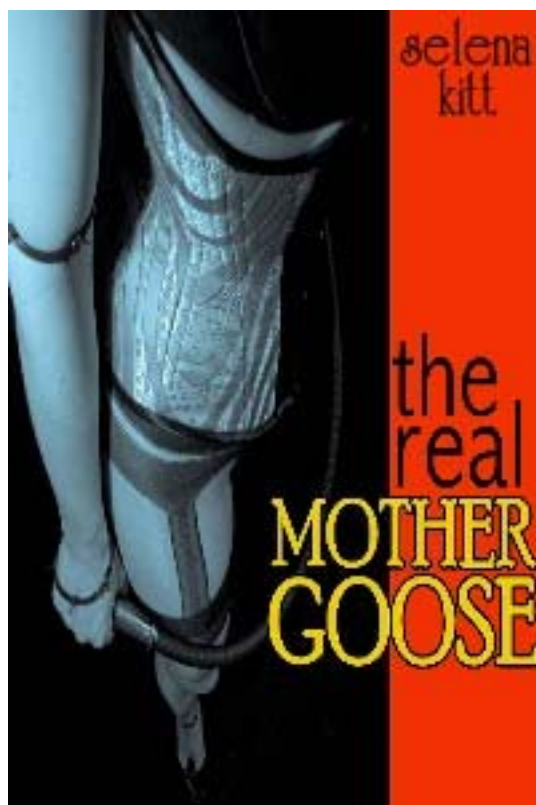
Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out-this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she devotes herself to her family—a husband and four children—and her growing organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her books *EcoErotica* (2009), *The Real Mother Goose* (2010) and *Heidi and the Kaiser* (2011) were all Epic Award Finalists. Her only gay male romance, *Second Chance*, won the Epic Award in Erotica in 2011. Her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the 2006 Rauxa Prize, given annually to an erotic short story of "exceptional literary quality," out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read "blind" (without author's name available.)

She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com

If you enjoyed A MODERN WICKED FAIRY TALE: RAPUNZEL,
you might also enjoy:



THE REAL MOTHER GOOSE

By Selena Kitt

Settle yourself in for a wicked bed time story, a hot, wild ride through nursery rhymes like you've never heard them before. Set in a fantastical world where the privileged few own and raise sex slaves like beloved pets, Mother herself is the star of the show, wielding a riding crop and taking care of and training her young charges with a firm and skillful hand. But where has Father Goose wandered off to, and who will take Mother in hand when she ventures too far?

2010 EPIC EBOOK AWARD FINALIST

"Selena Kitt puts an amazingly unique and hot twist on the key players from the well-known nursery rhymes. Many of the scenes definitely made me pause in admiration at her ingenuity. I refuse to spoil it for anyone interested in reading this book by going into more detail. The author worked too hard to offer a salacious spread of inventive sex and characters. There is no way I will reveal the erotic goodies and wildly titillating scenes she has so painstakingly transcribed in this raunchy, racy fantasy. There are a couple of plot twists and turns that will leave you with your mouth hanging wide open in surprise. Voracious reader that I am, I certainly didn't anticipate one shocker in particular and I'm the first to admit it was refreshingly creative. Batten down the hatches because The Real Mother Goose runs riot and I guarantee you'll be swept away on a tempest of passion! The inspiration might be from nursery rhymes but it's certainly not for anyone

under age 18. There are loads of familiar faces from all the various rhymes in a variety of X-rated scenarios that will astonish and delight you."

-Patrice, Joyfully Reviewed

"Erotic author, Selena Kitt has won a new fan in me. The Real Mother Goose gives a whole new meaning to bedtime stories. These are stories you should read either with your boyfriend, husband, lover or by yourself. Selena really knows how to get the heart racing. If I wore glasses, I would have had to keep wiping them off from the steam. I did like how this book smoothly went from one story to the next but incorporating characters from prior rhymes that would lead up to the next story. I plan to check out more good reads by this author."

-Cheryl, Manic Readers Reviews, 4.5/5 STARS!

EXCERPT from THE REAL MOTHER GOOSE:

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
And can't tell where to find them.
Leave them alone,
And they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

"Peep!" The voice shook the room and the startled girl looked up as Mother came in. "Do you know where your sheep are now?"

"No, Mother." The girl looked up from her position, kneeling on the floor, her blue eyes wide. "I penned them before I left, I swear it."

Mother Goose came toward her, the high heels of her soft boots clicking on the floor. She squatted down before Peep, whose hands were bound behind her to her feet with pink satin sashes.

"You are a pretty little one." Mother lifted the girl's chin and studied her face, her gaze moving over the girl's body, the pink and white corset drawn tight, her blonde curls spilling over her shoulders, partially hiding Peep's rosy little nipples. "Sometimes I think you're just playing dumb."

"No, Mother," Peep implored, shaking her head. "I penned them. I promise you."

"Is that so?" Mother stood. Peep looked up Mother's long legs, encased in black fishnet stockings and garters, the dark triangle between her legs exposed, as it always was, for easy access.

Mother had taken to wearing black since Father had crossed over, and her mood was ever changeable, but lately she seemed often cross and hard to please. Mother tapped her toe in front of Peep's knee, folding her arms over her ample breasts, pushed up high in her black corset, but covered with the sheer, lace peignoir she always wore, unbuttoned to the floor.

"Mother, please," Peep pleaded. "I will go tend them, if you let me."

Mother walked over to the cabinet and the girl moaned, the sound caught halfway between regret and anticipation. "I think we need a little correction, don't you?" Mother's voice drifted over her shoulder as she chose a small cat o'nine tails from her collection.

"Please," Peep pleaded again, her eyes downcast. "I'll be a good girl."

"Yes," Mother murmured, coming to caress her cheek with her soft hand. "You will."

Mother reached behind the girl and began untying the pink satin ribbon binding her. Peep sighed in relief, rolling her tired shoulders once her arms were free. She leaned forward onto her hands and knees as Mother began to untie her feet, but then the older woman stopped.

"No ... this is good." Mother tightened the sashes at the girl's ankles, chuckling. "Turn around, Little Bo Peep who's lost her sheep, and doesn't know where to find them."

Peep did as she was told, turning her face toward the wall on her hands and knees, using her hands to slowly work herself around. She felt Mother's hand caressing her ass, and she shivered, looking back over her shoulder at the older woman. Mother squatted down behind her, beginning to drip the many straps of the cat o'nine tails over Peep's behind like a little leather waterfall.

"Peep's little puss," Mother whispered, parting the dark blonde fuzz with her fingers to peer in at the pink treasure. "I love peeping at Peep's little puss." Mother giggled, wiggling her fingers through and finding the girl's clit.

"Oh, Mother!" Peep moaned, lifting her bottom in the air as much as she could with her feet tied together at the ankles.

"That's right, Peep," Mother encouraged, with her finger and her voice. The girl's clit was swollen and pulsing. "You like it so much, don't you?"

Peep nodded, glad her long blonde hair covered her red, flushed face. Mother's fingers rubbed there, making her moan with pleasure. Peep's little puss was incredibly responsive, her lips swelling, the pink color deepening to a rosier shade.

"You've been a naughty shepherdess, haven't you, Peep?" Mother asked, standing behind her. The girl nodded, her blonde hair falling in waves falling over the stone floor. She felt the first blow from the cat o'nine tails, almost a gentle thing, with just a little sting. She twisted and squirmed.

"Oh, Mother, please," Peep whispered. Her pussy throbbed from the older woman's attention.

"Yes, tell me." Another blow, and then another. Mother waited.

"I lost my sheep," the girl sobbed, feeling another slap, another. Her bottom felt hot. She cried out as she felt three more stings from the cat o'nine tails in quick succession. "Oh, Mother! Please!"

But the older woman was catching a rhythm now, and Peep heard her working hard. She lashed the girl again and again, until Peep's bottom felt red and raw and huge, and her pussy--it was on fire, throbbing with longing. She hid her shamed face behind her curtain of hair, her tears falling onto the stone floor.

"Now, are you going to find those sheep, Miss Peep?" Mother grabbed the girl by the hair and pulled her head back, looking down at her tear-stained face. Peep nodded, moaning softly, looking dazed, her eyes glassy. "But first, you're going to do penance, aren't you? On your knees."

Peep nodded, tears still streaming down her rosy cheeks. "Yes, Mother."

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"THE END!"**

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