

S T A Y



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Stay

By Selena Kitt

I knew Isaac was dying. He was limping now, his left leg following him slowly and pathetically whenever he was forced by hunger or some other bodily function to make his way toward some physical peace. He was dying, and I hated watching, but I couldn't let him go. He still slept in my bed every night, his body big and warm next to mine, even his snores a comfort. When he started coughing, I took him in again. They said he had pneumonia, and they gave me more medication and told me to say my goodbyes, because they didn't think it would be much longer.

They were wrong. I had stroked his head in my lap while he coughed and wheezed, and my tears fell onto him in the darkness. A few times, he had stopped and I thought, *Oh my god, this is really it!* But he had drawn another breath—a harsh, raw sound—but there it was, and he was still with me.

Isaac liked to follow me around the house, although it was obviously painful for him, so I tried to stay in one place when I came home at night. Work had become a nightmare. I spent eight hours worrying that he was in pain; that I was going to come home and find him gone.

I wanted to be there at the end. I wanted him to remember my hand stroking his graying chin, my voice singing to him, even if it was choked with hot tears.

When my sister called, the obligatory weekly call, I could hear her children arguing in the background.

"You need to let him go, Claire. What you really need to do is sell the house altogether and move on. Get a little apartment somewhere. Start dating again. Seriously."

I knew that she wanted to help. I thanked her politely for her advice, changed the subject, and listened to her ramble on about her life, her job, her husband, her kids.

Then, I would go snuggle in bed with Isaac.

There was just nothing else I wanted to do more.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true. Even I knew that.

* * * *

"Isaac?" My voice was panicked already.

He hadn't been at the door when I unlocked it and stumbled in with groceries. He wasn't lying on the couch, or even in front of it, a spot he was settling for now that he couldn't manage the painful step up without my help. I tossed the groceries on the kitchen counter, my purse and briefcase forgotten in front of the open door, my keys still swinging from the lock.

"Isaac?" I called, more loudly now, listening for the lumbering, lopsided sound of him climbing off the bed and down the stairs. Nothing.

"Isaac?" I was nearly screaming as I took the stairs two at a time. I looked in my room first. He wasn't on the bed. He wasn't next to it.

I flew through each room, calling him. The silence was choking me. I couldn't understand where he could possibly be. I was still in heels, and nearly twisted my ankle coming down the stairs. I steadied myself with the handrail, and tossed my shoes off, heading toward the kitchen in my nylons. I surveyed the kitchen. Nothing out of place.

Then I heard something—a faint yelp. I noticed the basement door was slightly ajar, and I knew.

"Isaac!" I cried, throwing the door open wide, and there he was at the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't tell how badly he was hurt, but he was alive. He lifted his head to look up at me. I was strangely grateful for that.

I grabbed a thick, heavy bath towel and ran to gather him up. This was never easy, even now, when he weighed half as much as he used to. He still weighed enough to make me strain and grunt as I picked him up. He whined and cried but let me lift him and carry him to the car.

I remembered my purse and my keys, but I left my shoes and remembered them only when I was sitting in the waiting room and saw that my feet were filthy and my nylons had holes in the toes.

* * * *

"Claire, I want to put him down."

I was stubbornly shaking my head before the woman had even finished her sentence. This new vet had kind eyes, and there was such sympathy in them that I had to look away. This couldn't be happening.

I wished Matthew were here. Matthew would have pursed his lips into a thin white line, prescription on his pad and sent us home. There were no broken bones, after all, although this new vet seemed to think Isaac might have suffered another "doggie stroke," which may have caused the fall.

"Listen, doc..." I started, then stopped, unable to approximate anything close to what I was feeling in the moment, or to offer any explanation, let alone an impossible decision.

"Call me Mary," the vet urged. I wasn't really hearing her, my focus was on Isaac.

"I shouldn't have left the door open. I don't know what I was thinking," I blurted, reaching a trembling hand out to stroke Isaac's thick red coat. He was panting on the table, his pink tongue lolling onto the metal surface, leaving a pool of saliva.

"This isn't about a fall, Claire," she said. "This dog is fifteen years old. He's had three vestibular incidents—"

"That he's recovered from," I interjected. Those were the "doggie strokes," although unlike human strokes, they weren't blood clots, but had something to do with miscommunication between the brain and inner ear.

"Yes," Mary went on. "To a degree... but you know he still has a great difficulty walking. He also has a very large tumor on his left haunch here that we know is cancerous, and he's blind in one eye."

Stupid! I berated myself. Leaving the basement door open. What was I thinking?

"This old guy has lived a great life, but he's in a lot of pain now... really, a lot of pain," she emphasized, and I turned my head, closing my eyes for a moment.

"We need to think about what's best for him." Mary patted Isaac on the back, and I noticed the slight wince he made, although he accepted the affection readily enough.

I looked miserably at Isaac, and when I slid my hand up to his head to scratch behind his floppy ears, he looked up at me with such love and trust and sheer adoration that I felt nauseous.

Mary dipped her head, trying to catch my eye, but I evaded her. She sighed, leaning back on the table, and stroked the dog's fur. The silence stretched and become more brittle. I knew the vet was angry at me, that she somehow felt that I was being

selfish and irresponsible. I didn't know how to explain it to her, so I said nothing, and just continued to pet Isaac like he was the only living thing in the room.

"Listen, I know this is a hard decision," Mary said. Her voice never lost that softness, and in that moment, I hated her for it. Mary's hand edged close to mine in the dog's fur, and brushed over it lightly, pressing gently before moving on. "I'm not asking you to make it today. But I would like you to think about it. Would you do that?"

"Please," I said shakily. "You just don't understand."

"I do," Mary assured me, touching my hand again. The warmth startled me, both in her hands and her voice, and I looked up at her. Mary's eyes were trying to tell me something, but I didn't know what. "It's ok, Claire. You can take him home. Keep him on the medications he's on, he'll be... well, the same as he's been, I imagine."

"Thank you," I breathed. I smiled through tears at Isaac.

"Come on, big man, let's get you home."

She helped, in spite of my protest, get Isaac settled in the front seat of my car. We stood there for a moment on the gravel drive, and I looked across the street past the wrought iron gates where the sun was just beginning to sink behind trees and headstones while Mary tucked her thick dark curls behind her ears against the wind and watched.

I found it surprising, in spite of the fact I'd been coming here since Isaac was just a puppy, that this place was right across from the cemetery. Somehow, I never noticed before. Maybe I'd just never had a reason to pay attention. My stomach clenched.

Reaching for Mary's hand, I squeezed it and gave her a sad, apologetic little smile. "Well, thank you," I said, clearing my throat. "Thanks for helping Isaac. I've got to get going."

"Listen, I want to tell you something." Mary leaned in to touch my arm to keep me from opening the driver's side door when I let go of her hand. I looked down at the hand on my arm and then up at her, unsure. "I know you love him, but he's suffering, Claire. You need to let him go." She pressed me, her words, her hand on my arm. I bit my lip, and then looked down at the keys in my hand, fumbling for the right one.

"I can't," I choked out, shaking her arm off and unlocking door. Mary let me go, stepping back away from the car as the tires crunched the gravel underneath.

"No, no, no..." I breathed, one hand in Isaac's fur, the other on the steering wheel. I glanced up, and my rear view mirror revealed Mary still standing there, hands in her coat pockets, watching me as I pulled away.

* * * *

It amazed me that the dream was almost always the same—although it had probably been a year since the last. It was always so real, so like the way it had really happened. I could remember Jack's face, how pallid and thin, absolutely motionless. I would believe him dead already, except for the steady beat of the breathing tube going into the hole in his throat.

I watched that pulse with all the force of my being, willing him to live, wanting him to sit up and smile at me again, just one more time, knowing that every breath was a miracle and held only one thing now—hope. There was only me and Jack and the steady beat of his heart.

Then there was a flurry of activity, talk of living wills and signing papers, and tubes being removed, and then as I watched, that heart that had held for me everything I knew in the world, every secret, every quiet, tender moment, simply stopped beating, and he was gone.

Isaac howled every time I woke up gasping from this dream.

In the beginning, I had, too, burying my hot, wet face in his fur and howling with him, sobbing and sobbing until I thought we might end up broken things, unfixable. Over the past couple years, I had grown used to the dream in the ways I had grown used to life without Jack, in ways I never thought possible.

Tonight, I woke up breathless and shrieking, my hands at my throat, always at my throat, as if I could give him my breath somehow, even now. Isaac was next to me—I could feel the weight of him in the bed.

The digital clock read 2:28 a.m. I leaned back on my arms, letting my head fall forward, waiting for the physical transition from dream to consciousness. It was slow in coming, and made me tingle, like blood beginning to flow into a limb that had been deeply asleep.

It was only then that I realized that I hadn't woken Isaac.

Poor guy—he'd had a rough few weeks since his fall down the stairs. I slid my hand over his silky back and curled myself around him, aching for warmth. He didn't stir. I sat straight up in bed, the intuition and realization hitting with a horrific force. I fumbled for the lamp, but I didn't really need to.

I already knew.

* * * *

Mary's voice was clear, almost as if she'd already been awake at this late hour.

"Dr... Mary...?" I whispered into the phone. The vet's pager number, in case of emergencies, was stuck to the refrigerator with a Betty Boop magnet, and I stood, still bed-warm and shivering in my t-shirt, peering at it by the dim light of the stove hood.

"Yes, this is Dr. Rennalls. Is there an emergency?" Her voice was even stronger now, and I could tell the difference between them, now and a moment ago. I had woken her.

"Isaac," I said, my voice rising a little, trying not to be panicked. "Something's really wrong."

"Claire?" her voice changed again, somehow, her tone softer. "What is it?"

"I... I don't know. I woke up from a bad dream. He didn't wake up. He won't wake up!" I began sobbing, turning my back to the fridge, I leaned on it for support and found myself sliding down onto the linoleum, raking a large collection of magnets and papers down with me.

"Claire, Claire," she murmured. "It's ok, hang on. I'll be right over, give me ten minutes."

* * * *

I had forgotten to lock the door, and after a few minutes of knocking, Mary finally just let herself in. She found me there, in front of the refrigerator, hugging my t-shirt around my knees and rocking gently.

"Where is he, Claire?" she asked, touching my arm, my shoulder, trying to find the right point of contact. Finally, I saw her and reached for her, pressing my hot face into the cool skin of her throat.

"In my room," I finally managed.

Mary nodded, but didn't move. It was then that I began to sob, and she simply held me. I was making small hitching noises when I wiped at my eyes, embarrassed now, pushing at her. Mary let me push her away, searching my face before standing and holding out her hand. I accepted it and stood, allowing her support.

"Sit here." She guided me to one of the backless kitchen chairs. "I'll be right back."

I watched her disappear down the dark hallway. My eyes closed, and I rested my head on my arms. The moment I did, I saw Isaac chasing Andre, Jack throwing the graying tennis ball named after the graying tennis star.

It never mattered where Andre landed, Isaac would hunt him out and bring him back, leaving a sopping wet ball at our feet. It was my least favorite game for this reason, my bare toes often the victim of cold, unwelcome, slobbery wetness, but it was Isaac's, and thankfully, Jack's, favorite. Jack would spend hours out on the patio reading the paper or on his laptop, tossing while Isaac fetched. It was almost a meditation—*toss, fetch, toss, fetch*. Jack could talk on his cell, type, and still manage to pitch Andre halfway across our yard for Isaac to clamber after.

I couldn't hear anything from down the hall, although I was really listening hard.

I remembered that one of Jack's distracted throws had managed to make it over the fence, and Isaac, determined, had scaled it. He'd snagged Andre like some outfielder in a hurry, never seeing the car heading toward him in the middle of our street.

We were both standing—I remembered how my hand went to my throat. Isaac had met us back at the fence, Andre secured in his jaws, unaware of any danger, just looking over at us like, "Hey, let me back in, I want to play!" That had really been a close one.

This is just a close one, a voice whispered. He's had them before. He's going to be ok. It was a mantra I had repeated again and again at Jack's bedside. He's going to be ok, he's going to be ok. Except he wasn't.

"He's not dead, Claire." Mary's voice, incredulous, lifted my head and my spirits. "I think it's another vestibular incident, probably his last. His respiration and heart rate are very low."

The question hung there, unasked.

"You'll take him in?" I asked. Mary closed her eyes, nodded.

"Yes." Defeated, Mary said, "I'll drive."

I smiled, standing to follow her toward the front door. Mary stopped me, her eyes dipping down to my bare legs below my t-shirt.

"You might want to get dressed. I'll get Isaac to the car."

"Oh."

I fumbled through my drawers for a pair of sweats while Mary carefully collected the dog. I found an old pair of Jack's, way too long, but the waist tied. I found myself sobbing again as I pulled them on, missing the left leg hole three times before Mary was back at my elbow, guiding me. I let myself lean on her.

* * * *

"He's resting comfortably. It's all I can do for him now, Claire. Let me take you home," Mary urged, her hand reaching to cover mine, clutching the bars of the cage.

"Can't I stay here?" I asked. Mary opened her mouth to respond and then saw my eyes and closed it again. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

Mary stood there for a moment, her eyes searching my face.

"We can't stay here," she said. "But you can come home with me if you want. We'll check on him in the morning."

I shook my head, looking down, following the pattern in the tile with my eyes. "I couldn't. I don't want to disturb you. No, I'll go home. I'll—" my voice trailed off as my eyes got caught in a swirl, around and around, on the floor.

Mary's hand slid around my shoulder as she steered me toward the door. "I'll drive you home then, ok?"

The night was cool, and I shivered in my seat, even when Mary turned up the heat. I splayed my fingers against the vent in an attempt to warm them. I often got cold this way when I was upset, as if my body was conserving its energy, drawing the blood in from my limbs into my core, deep into my heart, where I needed it most. I remembered wearing layers of clothes at the hospital and still sitting there shivering night after night.

"So, where is your husband?" Mary asked me.

I started. "My husband?"

"Your ring," Mary said, pulling the car out of the parking lot.

There was no traffic on the roads, I noticed, and I watched as the trees passed by the windows like ghosts.

I pulled my hands away from the vent, looking at my wedding ring, and replied, "He's dead."

A silence stretched between us, and I leaned back against the headrest, hugging myself, although the car was warm now.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, a hand briefly rubbing my arm.

"I shouldn't wear it anymore," I said, closing my eyes. The heat had started to reach my limbs, relaxing me a little bit. "It's been two years. It just keeps the weirdoes at bay, you know?"

She didn't respond, and I dozed to the rumble of the engine and the rolling of the wheels on the pavement. When I woke, my forehead was leaning against the window, my breath fogging the glass. The car had stopped moving. I used my hand to clear the haze, but I wasn't looking at my house.

"Where—?"

"My place," she said, cutting the engine and pocketing her keys. "Come on in with me, Claire. I have a spare room. There's no reason you need to be alone tonight."

I felt tears stinging my eyes. I was too exhausted to argue. It had been a long time since someone had been this kind to me. Maybe since those first months after Jack had died. I followed Mary into the house, looking around but unable to really take in my surroundings. I felt numb.

"What about you?" I asked as she shrugged off her coat. "Husband, boyfriend?"

"Girlfriend," she said, the hangers inside the hall closet tinkling together as she hung up her coat. "But not anymore. Do you want something? Warm milk, hot chocolate, something to help you sleep?"

I shook my head, unfazed by Mary's revelation, still hugging myself as I stood in the foyer. Mary came over, her eyes searching as she unbuttoned my coat for me, helping me take it off and hanging it in the closet next to her own.

"Come on, then." She took my hand and led me upstairs.

"Nice," I commented, sitting on the double bed and looking around the room. I was only seeing the outlines of things, as if the world had been bled of its color. I remembered this feeling but had never expected it to come again after what happened with Jack.

She went to the door, turning to say, "My room is right next door. Bathroom is down the hall, first door on the left."

"Thanks." I stared at the wall, the flowered wallpaper catching my attention. I followed the pattern with my eyes. I remembered counting blind slats in Jack's hospital room—anything to distract myself.

Mary closed the door, and I lay back on the bed. It was soft, like laying on a cloud, very different from the firm—almost hard—mattress I had once shared with Jack. My eyes closed and I saw him, tilting up my chin for a casual kiss goodbye, patting Isaac on the head before he headed off to work. I hadn't had memories like this for years. It felt like some dam had burst inside of my head.

I pulled off my sweats, wiggling under the comforter and turning out the light. I found my body responding to the softness of the mattress and the lateness of the hour. I drifted, not realizing that I was crying until the pillow became so wet I had to turn it over.

The dream was the same—it was always the same. I kissed his forehead, and he was still warm, but he was gone away somewhere that I couldn't reach him anymore.

The weight in my chest made me feel as if I was drowning, gasping for breath. I woke and grasped the comforter in my hands, searching for Isaac, still disoriented and half-asleep.

At first, I didn't know where I was, and then I remembered. Isaac was at the vet's. I was in Mary's spare room. I looked at the clock on the night stand and saw that only an hour had passed. I closed my eyes, trying to will myself back to sleep. I heard something in the hallway, and the door opened.

"Claire?" It was Mary, whispering. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I whispered back.

"You were crying," Mary said. "Are you sure?"

"I was?" I put my hands to my cheeks. They were damp. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay..."

"I guess," I replied, drawing a shaky breath and staring up at the ceiling. "How do we define okay?"

"Well... goodnight." Mary went to close the door.

"Wait." The light spilling in from the hallway was inviting, and Mary's presence was comforting. "Will you stay?"

Mary moved toward the bed, sitting on the edge. She was wearing a long t-shirt, I noticed. Her hand moved in my hair, pushing it out of my eyes. "Just feel like you want some company?"

"Yes."

I moved over and let her slip in beside me. We laid there in the darkness for a while, listening to each other breathe. My heart was beating fast, and I didn't know why. I slid my feet over to touch hers. Mine were cold.

"He was Jack's dog," I whispered. She didn't answer, but I heard her breathing change. She'd heard me. She was listening. "He was my dog, too, but you know how some dogs just kind of choose someone to love more than anyone else? Jack was that person for Isaac."

"Yes," Mary said, her voice and her feet warming me.

"Jack was that person for me, too," I whispered, feeling tears stinging my eyes. I couldn't talk for a while around the lump in my throat. I was remembering Isaac as a puppy, tumbling and loping after us in the mornings, always underfoot. He would lay on Jack's feet while he made eggs or loaded the dishwasher. I remembered how he never got mad—he would just step over the little red curled-up bundle. Of course, when Isaac was a hulking sixty pound dog, he did the same thing, curling up on our feet like he thought he was just a little pup. Jack still patiently stepped over him. I smiled through my tears.

"It's hard to let go," Mary said after a while. "People want to hang on to the things they love. It's only natural."

"Oh, god," I breathed. "Please don't give me the 'he's in a better place' speech."

"I don't know if it's better," Mary said. "I don't even know if it's different. I don't know. I wish I did. That moment when a soul leaves... It's so clear, that moment. One minute, the person you love is there, and the next minute, they're not."

I nodded, feeling tears slipping down my temples. I remembered watching Jack's face, hearing his breath, knowing that he was still there. It didn't matter what they said, that he was as good as dead, would be a vegetable—I could still feel him.

Whatever part of him that made him Jack was still there. And then it wasn't.

"What happens between one minute and the next? Is it the body just running down, like a clock unwinding? I just don't know." Mary sighed in the dark, and she slid her hand across the mattress to touch mine. "What do you think?"

The lump was back again in my throat. I remembered my sister explaining Jack's death to her children, how her words had made my jaw clench, my eyes burn. "He's in a better place. His body is gone, but his spirit is all around us, all the time." I'd had such an overwhelming urge to punch something when she said that—and then she said the words, "God knows best. It's his plan." My heart still ached with the heaviness of those.

"I think this is it," I replied, my voice trembling. I heard it and it didn't even sound like my own. "I think this is all we'll have—all we'll ever have. When I lost Jack, I lost him. Forever. There's no bringing him back. I hold on so tightly to Isaac because..."

"Because he's all you have," Mary murmured, and I nodded, a shuddering sigh turning into real tears. "It's ok to hold on, Claire. Loving isn't just about letting go. It's about holding sometimes, too."

I sobbed, turning to her in the dark, whispering, "Hold me. Please." She did, her hand stroking my hair, and I could feel small kisses falling on the top of my head. Her body was warm and soft, yielding to me as I wept against her shirt, twisting it in my hands, mimicking the sensation in my gut, something knotted and churning.

She let me cry until I was floating on my feelings like riding waves, up and down. My cheeks burned, my eyes felt swollen shut, but I felt cleansed somehow, like the morning after a hard summer rain. I rested against her, and we were silent except for an occasional hitching sigh.

I became aware of the warmth of us together, her sweet breath on my cheek. Her heart was a reminder, a constant lubdub under my ear. I remembered laying my head against Jack's chest like this when he was sick, hearing that sound. It was the sound of life. I reveled in it.

I turned my face up to hers, seeing just the outline of her cheek, the glimmer of her eyes. It had been so long since anyone had touched me or had seen so directly into my heart. I stroked her cheek. "Thank you."

"Claire—" she whispered my name like she wanted to say something, but nothing followed, and then I was kissing her, surprised at and lost in her softness and warmth. Her hand stroked me, my hair, my shoulder, my breast, my belly. It was a tender thing, like our kiss, stretching on and on. I let out a shuddering breath against her neck, pressing myself into her, wanting to be closer.

"Listen," Mary whispered, and I noticed that her breath was coming faster, like mine. "I don't think we should be doing this."

"I'm tired of *should*," I told her, sliding my thigh up between hers. "I'm tired of *supposed to*, I'm tired of *have to*, I'm just... I'm just so tired of closing my eyes so tight all the time."

Her face was inches from mine, and I could feel how taut her muscles were, as if she were holding something back. I wanted it. I wanted everything, all at once, and I wanted it now. I wanted to take and to have—and to hold. Definitely to hold.

"Claire, we—" I pressed my fingers to her lips, and then I pressed my lips there, too.

"I want you to help me," I whispered as I slipped my arms around her. "You said you wanted to help me. You brought me home so you could help me. I'm asking you to help me."

"How?" she asked, holding onto me.

"Just... just make me feel alive again," I whispered, my hands seeking her warmest, softest places in the dark. She gasped and sighed when I touched her, and I felt her longing. I hadn't felt so close to someone in so long. "Please. Touch me. Make me feel."

I don't know if it was my words or my hand rocking between her legs that convinced her, but I felt her give into it, into me, moaning softly against my mouth and kissing me, long and deep. Her tongue moved in a slow exploration as she rolled over me, the heat of her body against mine a warm shock. She kissed my throat, my collarbone, her mouth moving downward while her hands pressed my shirt up.

I closed my eyes and let her, helping her remove my shirt, tugging and pulling at hers until she took it off. When our panties were tangled up on the floor, the feel of her skin against mine reminded me immediately that I had a body, that my body was as hungry for touch as my soul was for answers. I couldn't find answers, no matter how long or how hard I looked, but I could satisfy this craving.

Everything about us together was impossibly comfortable and soothing and right in that moment. My mind wasn't racing, it was floating. My body wasn't trembling with the fear of loss, but instead it was quivering with anticipation. It had been a long time since I had looked forward to anything. When Mary's mouth reached my navel, she stopped and rested her cheek there against my belly that lifted her with its gentle rise and fall.

"Claire, are you sure?" she asked after a moment, her hand gently stroking the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

"I feel like I'm dying, too," I whispered. My hands were in her hair, pressing her downward. "Every day the sun comes up feels like another betrayal. Please." My hands insisted, and I wiggled my body upward on the bed, helping her between my thighs. I wanted to spread myself as wide as the Earth for her, trembling and vulnerable and completely open.

Her tongue brought tears to my eyes ,but for the first time since I could remember, they weren't tears of sorrow. I let them slip down my temples, losing myself in the sweetness of her mouth moving against me. She kissed my pussy like she kissed my mouth, a kind and tender exploration. It felt like a gift she was giving me, and my body responded in gratitude, riding a gently swelling wave toward a distant shore. She was carrying me with her somehow, pressing me onward.

It was like I was floating, but I was resting on her or in her or with her, maybe it was just that I became her, the soft sounds of my pleasure washing over us both. Nothing had ever felt so good or so right. She found the sensitive hood of my clit, pushing it back with her tongue again and again. I gasped and clutched at her hair,

rocking with her. I felt her hands moving over my hips, cupping my ass, guiding me against her willing mouth.

I wanted it to go on forever, such exquisite torture, my body racing to catch up to something but never quite reaching it. Mary was helping me get there, her mouth a steady, insistent encouragement, the sensation taking me with it now, instead of me trying to follow. I cried out at the moment of that swift, pulsing release, feeling completely undone. The flutter of my muscles was a delicious reminder, a tightening and a letting go, again and again and again.

Mary stayed between my legs, resting her cheek against my thigh, her whole hand cupping my mound, as if she could hold me in, but I flowed out around her fingers, a glorious emancipation dripping over my flesh. She came up to me after a while, kissing her way, making me shiver with the delightful sensation, as if my body had been numb and was now coming, buzzing and tingling, to life.

I rolled to her and we lay there, pressed belly to belly. We didn't have to speak. I closed my eyes and we listened to each other breathe, drifting off together. It was the first time since Jack had died that I felt any sense of real peace, as if I had died into my own life somehow and had been reborn. It was too big for words, and I felt her knowing it as she pulled my belly to hers, and we twined ourselves together in the dark.

* * * *

It was full morning when I woke, and Mary was gone, the indentation of her head still on the pillow next to mine. The door was open a crack, and I could hear her moving around downstairs, and I could smell eggs cooking. I thought that's what might have actually woken me. I was starving.

I was sitting on the bed, pulling on my t-shirt, eager to go downstairs, when the phone rang. There was one sitting on the night table next to the bed, and I watched it ringing, knowing who it was.

Mary answered it, and her voice carried up the stairs. I could hear her clearly. "Yes, I brought him in last night. It was an emergency—" She was listening. I could feel the silence. "Ok, thanks."

I didn't move, I didn't think, I didn't talk, I didn't breathe.

When I looked up, she was standing in the doorway.

"Isaac—" she said.

"I know." My eyes were full of tears when I looked at her, but my heart was full of some strange combination of sorrowful joy. I didn't understand it.

"I'm sorry," she said, and I saw the gift she had given me in her eyes. It was still there, like a light shining over my face as I looked at her.

"It'll be ok," I said, holding out my hand to her. And it was.

The End

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 worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

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 has also been an EPIC Award Finalist two years in a row (2008 and 2009) with [EcoErotica](#) and [The Real Mother Goose](#).

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

If you liked STAY, try:



PAPERBACK ROMANCE

Maya's heart yearns for romance and adventure, so that's what she writes about--but James Reardon, her college creative writing professor, insists she's wasting both time and talent. Determined to prove him wrong, Maya stumbles onto the fact that her professor's been keeping secrets--not the least of which is his attraction to her. Faced with a choice, she will have to decide whether or not to reveal his secret to the world--and her own desire for a man nearly twice her age.

Warnings: This title contains graphic language and really hot sex.

EXCERPT from PAPERBACK ROMANCE:

She heard him come in, and she found herself hesitating to go back out, staring at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed, and her whole body tingling, like a limb that had gone to sleep and was just waking up.

What was happening seemed so out of character for both of them—it seemed too fantastic to be real. Was she really sitting in her Ancient History class right now,

looking out the window, chewing on a pen cap, and dreaming all of this? Part of her thought that must be the case. When she opened the door, he was standing by the open window, looking out at the lake. He smiled at her and held out a hand. She took it, still marveling at his touch, and joined him. The sun was brilliant on the water as it rippled toward shore.

“Look.” He pointed toward the mallards that were paddling toward the reeds. As she watched, she saw a mother duck leading her little downy ducklings all in a row for a swim out on the lake.

She watched them in wonder, all too aware of James’ body, his hip against her hip, his hand moving around her waist. “I wonder which one is going to grow up to be a swan?”

He smiled down at her, his attention shifting, his eyes falling to her mouth. “This one.” He tilted her chin up and kissed her. This wasn’t like the tentative kiss in the car. This one was full of passion and an eager longing that matched her own. She whimpered against his lips, seeking his center with her tongue.

He breathed her in—she could feel the expanding of his chest as he pulled her in tight, his hands seeking the bare skin of her back under her t-shirt. The bed seemed miles away as they kissed and touched their way towards it, peeling off clothes and exploring each other as they went. His mouth seemed to want to devour her and she met him like a lifetime of pent-up breath until they were gasping, collapsed, his body pressing her to the floor still five feet short of the bed.

Her t-shirt was pulled up, his jacket off, shirt unbuttoned, and they were pressed belly to belly, but it made the thickness of her jeans too much—she couldn’t feel the

heat of him like she wanted. Her fingers fumbled with the snap and zipper, wiggling out, and the writhing of her under him as she exposed her panties and bare thighs brought a growl from his throat that sent a shiver through her.

She toed her jeans the rest of the way off, wrapping her legs around him when they were free, digging her heels into his lower back and arching. He fumbled with the front hook of her bra and she brushed his hands away, impatient, rolling on top of him and sitting. His eyes were full of lust as he looked up at her peeling off her t-shirt, unhooking her bra and letting her breasts spill out into his hands as she leaned forward to kiss him, her mouth hungry.

She rocked her hips, her thin panties rubbing against the material of his trousers, the bite of his belt a shock as he grabbed her sides and slid her up so he could lick and suck at her nipples like a man who had never tasted flesh before. The eagerness of his mouth made her hips rock hard and she wanted more still. She slid up his belly and sat on his chest, pulling her panties aside to show him the red fuzz between her legs. The groan that elicited was so gratifying that she gave him a little more pink, spreading her lips open so she could rub her clit...

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