

A Safe Place

Jack would make fun of me as soon as he heard about this, I thought ruefully, and why not? He would never understand or relate to the need for a creative lifestyle. Maybe if I really played up the “responsible” aspects of business ownership, he would be less apprehensive. Regardless, I knew without a doubt that he would always be more concerned about my happiness than the actual pathways I took to find it – even if he didn’t necessarily agree with them.

Which was why, as I drew open the heavy glass door of the Seattle Westin Hotel, the pleasurable tickle of anticipation at seeing him again grew into full-fledged butterflies. I hoisted my new Dooney (last year’s Christmas gift from my sister) into a more comfortable position on my shoulder, along with the simple black tote bag that carried everything else, and made my way to the elevators, considering recent events.

It had been quite a surprise to see his e-mail message last week, the language as stilted and stiff (typed by the new person in my chair) as he never spoke in real life, announcing that he had been invited to participate in a symposium at the University of Washington and wondered if I would like to have dinner with him while he was here. Of course I had responded affirmatively, mindful as always that someone else would see the reply before he did, and made no attempt to chat or suggest anything other than the dinner he offered.

As commandingly adept as he was in the operating rooms, employing million-dollar equipment with relentless precision, he often seemed baffled by a simple e-mail account – that, and the fact that he usually received a hundred or more messages per day. It had been part of my duties to print those messages and collect them in a folder for his review at the end of his surgical day. He would scribble a response to each one and return the file to my desk, long after I had gone home, from which I would send his replies the next morning. It was perhaps not the easiest system, but he was not comfortable with anything else and having everything go through my desk meant that I was always in the loop, no matter what he was doing. This was a huge part of why our partnership was so successful – I needed to be needed, and his overwhelming trust had been satisfying on so many levels. Stressful, too. Really, really stressful.

I had not wanted to leave his office, but the workload became completely untenable after a number of years. I couldn't handle the volume by myself any longer and the help he promised never materialized, for whatever reason. When I realized that I had begun to anticipate two migraines per month (and usually got them), it soon became obvious that a change was necessary. *He* would not change; I had to be the one to walk away, and nothing had ever been harder.

I was scared to death to resign, but much more frightened about losing his friendship. I adored him as a human being, a caring and brilliant physician, and as someone who had always valued and cared for me. We had been best friends since the moment we first shook hands in a dimly-lit, stuffy laboratory at the University of

Washington's hospital. Four years later he moved to San Francisco to assume the chairmanship of his own department. After a short delay I followed him to UCSF for another three years that were brutal in their intensity.

The easy friendship between us changed when Jack became a chairman, someone much more visible to his staff and faculty who couldn't afford the damaging rumors we had always fought in Seattle—not that they ever stopped in San Francisco, either.

He fretted over this a lot more than I did. My feeling was always that his petty, small-minded faculty could keep right on trying to catch us doing something wrong because they would never succeed. We weren't drawn to each other romantically (or physically, either) and never had been. His wife of twenty-plus years had never felt threatened by my presence in his life.

He let me go with no visible distress (which helped) and the promise that his friendship with me would never disappear. Two years ago I had returned to Seattle and the cool, green Pacific Northwest that I had missed so much during the long and difficult years in California. As expected, there was rarely any communication between us, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. The formality of last week's e-mail was only a reminder that if my life was now very different his was not, and nothing must happen during this visit to jeopardize his carefully constructed persona even so far from his normal environment.

Basically, it meant that I could completely relax about seeing him again, and look forward to having dinner with a dear friend who wanted nothing else from me.

Jack had already provided his room number so I went directly to the elevators instead of stopping at the front desk. Normally I wouldn't pay much attention to any commotion in a hotel lobby but today it occurred to me that an uncommon number of people were milling around in here and, judging from the noise, most of them were both teenagers and girls. Nobody was really acting out, rather, an impressively acute sense of expectation filled the air, as if the young females were waiting for something – or someone.

Oh man, I thought cynically. Are the Jonas Brothers here?

I moved quietly past the nearest cluster of teens and into an elevator where I found myself quite alone, which was a relief – and it gave me a moment to smooth down my clothes in preparation for Jack's too-observant eyes. He hadn't seen me in two years, after all.

The elevator ride was short, stopping at the next floor instead of gliding all the way to 15, as I'd requested. I watched in bemusement as a long arm reached through the doors, trying to force them apart more quickly. Seconds later, the entire body shoved itself through the too-small portal, as if allowing those doors to open completely was physically impossible. I studied him while waiting for the elevator doors to close again, feeling a ridiculous – and unwarranted – twinge of irritation at these theatrics.

He was very tall and thin and slightly disheveled, wearing loose-fitting blue jeans and a gray tee shirt with a thin navy hoodie pulled over his head. He pressed

himself to the furthest wall of the elevator, keeping his face lowered enough that I couldn't get a look at it. *He's trying to hide from something.*

A moment later any hint of irritation I'd felt dissolved into concern. The young man reached up to uncover his head with graceful, long-fingered hands that were visibly shaking. And once I'd noticed that, it was impossible to ignore his ragged breathing — clearly, he had been running hard. I could almost hear the rapid beat of his heart.

Not hiding, then. He was being chased.

The young man lifted his face just then, and I found myself staring into wide, clear, blue-gray eyes. Familiar eyes — as was the precise jaw covered in dark stubble, and the tousled mass of brown hair on his head. His most recognizable character trait was running his hands through his hair, usually when he was nervous or considering his next response to an interviewer's question.

I knew this face very well. Loved looking at it.

"Um, hi," he said softly. Hoping I wouldn't overreact to his appearance. It suddenly became very important that he understand he was safe with me.

"Hi," I said gently. "Which floor?"

"Floor?"

"Yeah, where's your room?"

"Oh, right," his hands fluttered at his chest, hips and then his back pockets. I looked closely at the beautiful face as it twisted in something more than simple frustration.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry – I’m a little rattled.”

“Were they chasing you – the girls in the lobby?”

He ducked his head with a shy grin. I had seen him do this a few times, too.

It was very endearing.

“Well, you’re safe now,” I told him.

He blushed. “For the moment, anyway. I’m Rob.”

“I’m Kim.”

“Hi Kim, nice to meet you.” His long arm extended toward me with a still-trembling right hand, reaching out to clasp mine in a firm but lightweight grip that gave no indication of letting go – in a nice way. The irrational urge to protect him flared again. I squeezed his hand gently.

“It looks like they got a little too close.”

“Hmm, oh no, it wasn’t that bad,” he muttered, sounding both very British and completely distracted at the same time. So charming. “The fans are almost always really great, so polite...no, today it’s me. I’m just not –”

He took a step closer to me and suddenly clamped his left hand onto my shoulder; our right hands were still linked together. As I processed this, he swayed on his feet and automatically I reached to steady him.

“Rob, you are not okay,” I said firmly.

“Dizzy,” he whispered, still swaying. “and my head hurts.”

He dropped to his knees without another word. I knelt beside him, all shyness gone now. Though not a physician myself, years of working in a hospital had given me some experience with sick people, and I was not a person who panicked easily.

"Put your hands on the floor," I said, gently guiding his movement. "and lean forward a bit, lower your head. Yes, like that. Do you feel like you're going to be sick?"

"No, just dizzy."

"Maybe it's the movement of the elevator?" That didn't really seem likely, but I leaned over to push the STOP button anyway, and the elevator immediately stilled.

This close to him, I soon realized that Rob was trembling lightly all over, as with a fever, though there was no discernible heat coming off his body. Still...

I groped one-handed through my black tote for the bottle of water I'd left there. It was only tepid now, but better than nothing. I poured a small amount into my hands and then gently touched Rob's forehead, the back of his neck, his face. And did it again when he sighed.

"That feels nice."

"Have a drink, too," I said as he looked up. "Just a sip, though. We don't want it coming back up."

He took a small swallow and closed his eyes again. He looked very young, and so tired. I went back to patting the cool water against his skin.

“You don’t have a fever, so this probably isn’t a virus,” I said. “But you’re weak and dizzy, with a headache. I get just like this when I’m dehydrated, except I usually have a migraine by then. Maybe that’s all this is for you.”

“I’ve never had a migraine,” he said thoughtfully. His voice, though hushed, seemed a bit stronger now.

“And I hope you never do. I just meant maybe you’re a bit dehydrated. If that’s the case, some rest and fluids will have you well in no time.”

“Sleep sounds really good right now, but...” He looked at me closely now, seemingly revived a bit, though his hands were still shaking. “I...hate to ask this, but could you help me again—with something else, please?”

“I’ll try, of course. What do you need?”

“My manager got a room for me here, but I can’t remember the number.”

“Oh. Does your manager have the room key?”

He winced. “No—he gave it to me. I can’t find it.”

“We’ll get another key from the front desk. Can you stand up now?”

I smiled at him but secretly wondered how I could persuade anyone at the front desk to give me a duplicate room key on Rob’s behalf, and then realized that I would just have to handle this, because the only other alternative was to drag Rob himself to the front desk—through the hotel lobby, through the loving but overeager throng of fans. He would not want to disappoint them. I would not want to see him weakened any further tonight.

I could do this. I was an ex-Ms. Fix-It. Hadn't I taken care of Jack's overly complicated life since 1993?

Jack. At 6:30pm. Unbelievably, I'd forgotten all about him. It must be about that time now, and I was nowhere near getting this precious, dazed young actor safely settled in for the night. We'd have to move quickly now.

I stood up, keeping Rob's hand in mine as he began to rise off the floor.

"Sweetie, go slow," I said soothingly. "Just take your time."

"I think I'm okay," he murmured, now on his feet. He really was very tall, at least a foot taller than me—my head came up only to that sweet, natural indentation in the center of his chest. If I hugged him, my face would fit perfectly there. What a thought.

"Are you still dizzy?"

"A little," he swayed toward me slightly. "Not like before. I'll be all right now." He still put a hand on my shoulder to steady himself, a gesture I now considered familiar and endearing.

"Course you will," I said, reaching over to release the elevator. At the slight lurching motion Rob blanched again, and I quickly wrapped my left arm around his waist. "Let's get you to your room, so you can lie down."

In the end, it was much easier than all the scenarios playing in my head. Rob's hand moved and then his arm completely encircled my shoulders. His touch conveyed once again that he was lonely and seeking comfort more than anything else; it wasn't hard to understand that, or want to provide it for him. Slowly,

carefully, I pulled him closer to me – and my hand brushed a small package in the pocket of his hoodie. It could only be one thing.

“Your room is on 15?” he was asking.

“Um, actually, I live in Seattle. My best friend is here from San Francisco. We’re going to have dinner tonight.”

“Oh,” was all he said, but when I looked up, Rob’s eyes had closed. He thought I was rejecting him – that all I wanted was to deliver him to his own room and go my merry way this evening, leaving him ill and alone in an unfamiliar town.

Okay, maybe I do have an overdeveloped imagination, but my intuition about these things had proven right so often that I trusted it completely. And it made me feel warm all the way through to know that this young man wanted me to stay close to him – at least for a while longer. I had every intention of doing just that.

“I’d like you to meet him,” I finished. The elevator dinged, and we had arrived at the 15th floor.

“Um, I don’t think I should,” he mumbled. “Sorry, I’m just not up to it. Thanks, though –”

“He’s a doctor,” I replied, squeezing Rob gently. “Please, let him take a look at you, okay? Then I’ll get you to your room.”

“But I still don’t know where –”

“It’s all right, sweetie. Look what I found.”

His grin was both reluctant and relieved when I fished the small envelope out of his pocket and opened it to reveal not one, but two, card keys. The number 1801 was written in ink across the packet.

“See, you’ll be tucked in and fast asleep in just a few more minutes. I only want to be sure you don’t need a visit to the emergency room first. Will you come with me? Please?”

“All right,” he ducked his head shyly. “but don’t let go of me. Doctors make me kinda nervous.”

I looked straight up into his drawn face. “I promise I will not let you go. And you’ll like Jack a lot. He’s only really scary when you work for him.”

I refrained from sharing the knowledge that Jack, like most of his colleagues, would not appreciate being asked to render a medical opinion outside the clinical setting. He had done so for me on a very rare occasion; I thought he might be willing to help Rob if he believed I was genuinely concerned about him. I was.

At room 1526 I paused to slide Rob’s arm off my shoulders, but quickly reclaimed his right hand. He smiled a sweet, shy smile that curved his lips in a seriously sexy way. *Stop it – he’s sick and you don’t know each other.* But I smiled back just before I knocked.

Seconds later the door was yanked open and I was drawn into the one-armed embrace of the human hurricane that was my best friend. His other arm was busy keeping a cell phone in place at his ear, but he maneuvered around it enough to say “Kim-mee!” like he was truly paying attention to me, and then he bent to brush a

quick kiss on my lips. Only then did he notice that I was physically attached to the quiet, white-faced young man beside me. Jack lifted his eyebrows at me, acknowledging the uncommon reality of my showing up with a man, but as usual, he was cool.

“Give me a sec, okay? C’mon in.”

I tugged gently at Rob’s arm, towing him to the nearest bed where he sat down gratefully. I stood close to him, as promised, with a hand on his shoulder, but he appeared to be comfortable in these surroundings. I attributed that, in part, to Jack’s deep, smooth voice. As forceful as he could be, my doctor had the most calming, soothing voice I’d ever heard. You just knew there was no problem he couldn’t help you handle. He was rarely surprised and hardly ever fazed by anything. I trusted him, which was not something I did easily, or often, with other people.

After listening to Jack’s side of his conversation it began to sound as though he was being invited out for the evening. I had honestly looked forward to a couple of hours in his company, but things had changed somewhat with Rob’s arrival tonight. I stopped short of making new plans, opting to simply wait and see what would happen.

Jack snapped the phone shut, then walked to me and held out both arms. So help me, I can’t not go to him when he does this—he’s one of a very few people who has ever made me feel wanted. It was a satisfying moment of being held close, of

feeling his big body curving around mine, of being sheltered, safe. I relaxed immediately, as always. Then he released me.

“You look great,” he said sincerely.

“Thanks--you, too. Jack, come meet my friend – “I reached back for Rob’s left hand as he stood up, clearly not feeling any better. “ – Rob Pattinson.”

Jack extended an enormous hand, and Rob did the same. I watched in relief as Jack’s dark eyes flickered over the younger man, taking in the pale face and trembling limbs. Maybe I wouldn’t have to beg for this favor.

“Jack Towne,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” Rob replied graciously. “I’m sorry to intrude on your evening with Kim.”

“Not a problem. Any friend of my Kimmy’s, you know? What do you do, Rob?”

“I’m an actor.”

“Ah, interesting. You’re working here in Seattle, then?”

I tried to give him the evil eye so this interrogation wouldn’t become painful but of course, Jack ignored me. Rob fielded the questions with a patient aplomb that I found very respect-worthy.

“No, this is a press tour for our movie that’s coming out in November. I’m only here for the weekend.”

Jack grinned at me. “Does that explain all the teenage girls in the hotel?”

I grinned back. "It does. This one is the most popular vampire in the world right now."

Since Jack hadn't gone to see a movie since 1994 (*Speed*, as I recalled, because he actually came in that Monday to tell me how much he'd enjoyed it), the word *Twilight* would only bring to mind a particular time of day – not that he'd admit it and potentially embarrass Rob.

I squeezed Rob's hand gently, feeling his fatigue growing worse every minute we lingered here. His hand closed more tightly over mine.

"Jack, I need to get Rob to his room. It's been a difficult day. Could we--"

"Yeah, it looks like you're feeling rough," Jack observed quietly. Rob nodded.

"He nearly passed out in the elevator just now," I said. "Kinda scared me."

My tone must have sounded just right because, to my great relief, Jack gestured casually toward the bed and instructed Rob to sit. I watched as Jack looked into Rob's eyes for something only he would have recognized, then his huge hands took the young man's pulse, and palpated the glands below the strong jaw, all the while making gentle but routine inquiries to rule out allergic reactions, viruses, etc.

A minute later, Jack stepped back. "This looks like mild dehydration to me," he said. "Stay away from caffeine and alcohol for the next day or two, drink lots of water and get as much rest as you can. You'll be fine."

"Thank you, so much," Rob replied sincerely.

"You're welcome," Jack assured him, then turned to me. "Should we reschedule dinner?"

"Yes, please," I said gratefully. "Thanks, Jack."

"Tomorrow's session ends at 5:00. How about meeting back here around 6:00?"

"Sounds great. I'll be here."

"Good. Now, it's time to let Rob get some sleep. Off you go."

Rob shuffled to the door, thoughtfully giving me a moment with Jack, who bent to give me a hard bear hug that seemed to contain more than a hint of relief. Maybe he hadn't been all that excited to meet me for dinner tonight. Maybe he was put off by the unexpected appearance of another man at my side and felt uncomfortable with being a third wheel (not likely, really—he would have been relieved to see me with someone who could deal with any romantic notions I might have). Maybe the invitation via telephone tonight was simply more appealing.

Before he let me go I whispered, "Is this really okay, Jack? You're not upset?"

"I have never been upset with you, and you know it," he murmured. "Do you want to go with him?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Then you should go. I know you like to take care of people—though this is a little more hands-on than normal for you."

I blushed vividly, which made him grin. "What will you do tonight?" I asked.

“I was invited to have drinks with one of the senior panel members. I’ll accept—it’s the PC thing to do, anyway. Don’t even think about feeling guilty, okay?”

“Okay, and thanks again for your help with Rob. I was worried about him.”

“No problem. Tomorrow night I want to hear all about this little situation.”

“You got it,” I promised easily. “See you then.”

He released me with another quick kiss and followed me to the door, where he clasped Rob’s hand once more and wished us both good night.

* * *

It must have seemed like a very long time before Rob was in his room, but in reality we had been with Jack for just under twenty minutes.

Rob was mostly silent as we moved through the quiet corridors, though he leaned against me a little more heavily than before. He accepted my arm around his slender waist with a worn smile. I was very relieved that we made it to his room without encountering anyone else. Quickly, I drew one of the key cards and got the door open for him. He moved past me and sank onto the nearest bed with a sigh that sounded so weary it reactivated my protective instinct. But I hesitated in the doorway; he was now relatively safe—did he need me any longer?

“Come in, please,” he said, as if reading my thoughts. “Don’t go yet.”

“Sure,” I smiled. “for a while.”

He reached out and I took the hand he offered, a bit surprised when he pulled me forward until I stood between his long legs. Rob held my hands in both of his, and he sighed.

“I need to thank you,” he said, shushing me when I would have protested. “No, really, I don’t know what I’d have done if it had been anyone but you in that elevator today. You’ve gone out of your way to help me, and I’m so grateful. You’re wonderful, really...”

For the whole of my life I have been mortified by any excess of emotion, of attention that I feel is undeserved. It could also be a serious lack of self-esteem that I’ve had forever but never been able to identify its origins. So my normal reaction to Rob’s weary but sincere expression of thanks would have been to deflect the emotion by saying something sarcastic and funny (probably just a pathetic attempt to keep him from realizing that I didn’t really deserve the accolade). This time, however, I felt too protective of him and too tender to risk minimizing him in any way.

This time, I pulled my hands out of his and drew him carefully into my arms for a gentle hug. Rob wrapped his long arms around me, nestling his face into my left shoulder. It was the comfort of connection he wanted more than anything else right now; maybe just this once I could risk some vulnerability of my own without harm.

“I’m glad it was me in the elevator,” I told him. “and I’m glad you let me help today. You could have just ignored me there and let me go on my way without

a word. We might not have met at all, so I should be thanking you, too, right?

Thanks, Rob."

He chuckled, his breath very warm against the upper curve of my breast.

"Right. You only gave up dinner with your best friend to babysit me — oh, I'm so sorry! I can't let you leave here hungry."

"You haven't had dinner either," I pointed out sensibly. "Something to eat would probably get rid of your headache."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," he said, making no attempt to move. "Would you stay? We could order from Room Service; the food here is pretty good."

"I'm sure it is. I'd like to stay for dinner."

"Great. Is it all right, not going out somewhere?"

"It's perfect, Rob, honest. Should we look at the menu?"

"In a minute, please," he murmured, tightening his arms. "This feels so good."

"Of course, sweetie. Whatever you want."

"It's wonderful when you call me sweetie."

"That's how I think of you."

"I'm not sure there's a word nice enough for the way I think of you," he said, sitting up at last. "It's been a long time since I felt so comfortable around someone, and I know we only just met, but that's what it's like with you."

"That's me, a living, breathing security blanket."

Rob grinned, showing perfect white teeth. "The very best kind," he said, then abruptly smothered a gigantic yawn. "Sorry, I'm fading."

"Hey, let's get you settled in so you can fall asleep whenever you want to. Can I take this?" 'This' was the hoodie.

He raised his arms so that I could whisk it over his head. Next he yanked off his black Nikes and socks (I couldn't help but notice that even his naked feet were beautiful). When he stood up to unfasten his jeans I stepped around him with the intention of turning down the bed--but I swear the button on his Levis *screamed* when he pulled it away from his body.

"I think I'll have a quick shower," he told me.

"No need to rush," I said. "The hot water will help."

"Want to call Room Service for us?"

"Sure. What do you like?"

Rob turned back to smile sweetly. "Anything *you* like. Just charge it to the room. Back in a few."

He left that bathroom door open on purpose, I was sure of it. The water came through the shower head in a hard, fast torrent wreathed in steam, and then, faintly, the sound of his tee shirt and boxers hitting the floor.

I swallowed hard and tried not to think about that slender, beautiful young body standing naked under a soothing spray of hot water. Was he using the expensive soap provided by the Westin, I wondered, or a nice, rich shower gel of his

own – something fresh and kind of woodsy, maybe, with thick lather that would cling lovingly to all his hard, hair-covered surfaces...*ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod...*

I picked up the room service menu with hands that shook much harder than Rob's had done earlier, and hoped he would stay in the bathroom just a bit longer.

* * *

"You're better," I said with a smile.

"Yes, much. This was really good," Rob grinned, indicating his empty plate. There was now a sparkle in his eyes as his blood sugar level returned to relatively normal and with that, some of his formidable energy. It would only last a short time, of course; the fatigue was still there and would re-emerge as soon as Rob's body processed the light meal and its next most pressing need – a deep and rejuvenating sleep – demanded satisfaction. For now he was awake and happy (and pain-free, I suspected), and surprisingly eager to know about me.

"I'm impressed," he said sincerely. "You've been taking care of me tonight like you've done it for years. Maybe...you have kids at home?"

"No," I said. "No kids. I have two younger sisters, though. I used to look after them."

"I have two sisters," he said cheerfully. "They're both older than me."

"Are they very much older?"

"No. Victoria is twenty-seven, and Lizzie's twenty-five. I'm twenty-three."

I didn't know if that was his subtle way of asking for my own age (which felt vast in comparison), but I chose not to elaborate.

“Two years between each of you is a nice balance,” I said, remembering my own childhood. “My parents had all three of us so close together that it was hard for them to let us develop as individuals – they just didn’t have much time for each of us.”

“Are you not close to your sisters, then?”

“We are now. Not much while we were growing up. I think we’re really different from each other and were just forced together too much as kids. Things got better when I went away to school – my sisters were finally able to stop sharing a room. They were complete opposites and fighting with each other constantly, so one of them got my old room and everybody kind of settled down. It was much easier after that. What about you?”

Rob’s blue-gray eyes twinkled suddenly and I was once again aware of his fresh-faced, very natural beauty.

“We got along,” he said seriously. “Until I was about twelve they dressed me up like a girl and called me Claudia.”

I dissolved into a helpless chortle of laughter. Rob beamed at me across the small table.

“Sorry,” I gasped. “I’m not making fun of you. It’s just...”

“Oh, I know,” he grinned, very pleased with himself. “You’re wondering how somebody with these eyebrows could ever pass for a girl.”

"It's a good thing they gave up before your chest hair came in," I said, which made Rob laugh, too – an endearing sound, the funny combination of a cackle and a giggle.

"God, can you imagine trying to cover that up? I'd have been scarred for life!"

"I hope the experience didn't leave you with issues."

"Issues?"

"Yeah, like having to decide if you want a woman, or want to be one."

"Oh, *that*," his sweet face scrunched up as he tried not to grin. "No issues. I know exactly how I feel about that."

"Good," I said, standing up to take his empty plate. I stacked it with mine on the tray, along with the cutlery and glassware we had been provided with dinner. When I lifted the tray, Rob looked at me in confusion.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Put it in the hall, so they don't have to come in for it and wake you up tomorrow."

"Kim, no, let me do that. You're not my maid!" He rose to take the loaded tray from me and I paused a moment to admire him discreetly, standing there in a clean tee shirt and lightweight cotton drawstring pants. From the mop of thick brown hair to his bare feet, he was a beautiful picture of youth and masculinity.

"Sweetie, I've got this. Why don't you climb into bed and get comfortable?"

I managed to carry the tray and get the door open without spilling anything and knelt to carefully set it on the floor, concentrating so hard on my task that I nearly ruined everything by dropping it when the face peered around the corner. For a second it didn't quite register that I was looking at someone.

A female someone. Oh. An impossibly young face with enormous blue eyes and unnaturally pink lips opened in surprise. Her breath was coming out in short, hard pants that might have alarmed me had I not been certain of her purpose tonight. Clearly, she had expected the man of the house to open the door—her very own boy prince, who would have given her the sweet smile that lit up his wonderful face and made his eyes crinkle at the corners. He would have stepped back to allow her entrance into his world—and his darkened room with its comfy, queen-sized bed—where she would live an entire lifetime in his arms for this one night, creating memories that she could relive endlessly by Twittering the images to all her friends.

I thought, *not tonight, sister*.

Her surprise immediately turned to disappointment, which gave me a pang of sympathy. I couldn't stomp on her dream of finding Rob, but I couldn't turn him over to her, either. Instead, I simply held her gaze with my own as if to say this room was registered to me and she really had no reason to be lurking here.

Something in my expression convinced her to accept that truth and, with only a slight nod of apology, she melted back in the direction she had come.

I straightened, feeling like a heartless shit for destroying that girl's chance to be with Rob. After all, I was no stranger to having my own dreams kicked to pieces

by the fickle Universe. Wasn't that partly why I had allowed Rob's need for comfort to redirect the plans I'd made (and looked forward to) for tonight? Maybe I should step around this corner, try to call the teenager back. She could meet him, at least.

I was literally leaning out to the corridor when the deep, velvet voice spoke quietly behind me.

"Kim?"

"I'm here," I said, closing the door. "I'm right here, sweetie."

Rob was still standing where I'd left him, looking at me with an expression that coupled concern and disappointment.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I assured him, reaching out to gently clasp his wrist. His skin felt a little warmer now, and a slight tremor was returning to his muscles. He was beginning to feel the fatigue again and with it – I thought – the need for security.

"Thought you might want to leave," he said shyly. "Please, not just yet."

"I'll stay as long as you want me to, promise."

His grin was genuine now, relieved. "Great, I know you keep your promises. That's something else I need to thank you for – you know, when your doctor checked on me. You said you wouldn't let me go, and you didn't. Um, I wonder if I could try something."

"Maybe," I grinned.

Rob's hands lifted to my shoulders and urged me forward slowly, giving me the choice. His voice became husky and low.

“He—Jack—hugged you twice, remember? You looked so tiny next to him, well, you *are* tiny, of course.”

“It was done in friendship,” I told him. “We’ve been friends for almost twenty years.”

“I could see that. But his face...said it felt really good to hold you close like that, and I hoped—”

“Rob,” I said, understanding at last. “You need a hug, too.”

“Mmm, yes, please.”

It was so easy. Rob slid his long arms around me and suddenly my face was pressed into the smooth fabric just under his heart. His height was no problem for me; at 6’1” he was not quite as tall as Jack, but there was a kind, loving quality about Rob’s embrace that made me ache to discover if I could have the lifetime in his arms that I had selfishly denied the teenaged girl.

He was *my* dream, too.

So I tucked my body into his, relishing his firm hold on me. I breathed deeply of his clean, faintly musky scent; he smelled of soap and summer and Rob. I moved my small hands in endless, soothing circles at his lower back while his large, long-fingered hands began to move gently along the length of my spine. He bent nearly double from the waist to hover closer to me; I could feel his warm breath in the strands of my hair. Gradually his left hand came up to rest at the nape of my neck and, not long after that, to gently cup my head. I waited breathlessly to feel

him tilt my head back so that my face would be accessible to his, but he only pulled me closer, hugged me harder. It was bliss.

“Love,” he whispered. “is that your heart?”

It was, hammering frantically against the knotted drawstring at his navel.

“Uh huh,” I murmured. “Your heart’s beating a little faster, too.”

“It definitely is,” he confirmed. “This feels so good. I forget sometimes what it’s like to really hold someone.”

“Or to be held?” I asked, lifting my face from his chest.

“Especially that,” his fingers lightly stroked my cheek. “I meet a lot of people these days but there’s not enough time to get to know anyone. Besides...” he sighed, sounding lonely.

“What?” I prompted quietly.

“It’s kind of embarrassing, really.”

“Sweetie, you don’t have to tell me a thing, you know.”

“I know, and that’s really great of you. What I intended to say was, if I just wanted someone in my bed, that’d be pretty easy to get. Night after night, I could have a different girl in my room without much effort, and I’m not saying that just to brag, honestly. But that’s so *weird* I’d never do it – or, I don’t think I would, anyway. Last year I couldn’t get a date, and this year I can have any fourteen-year old I want.”

The truth was, I had seen this sentiment from Rob in one of the ubiquitous interviews posted online, and not all that long ago. Hearing him say it now, while

wrapped so safely in his arms, made his frustration even more obvious. I looked up into his troubled, perfectly beautiful face.

“Resist that idea,” I said firmly.

“Exactly,” he did grin, finally. “That’s why I can’t let any of them get too close. Celebrity is a very strange thing. All these women screaming for me, and I’m more alone than I’ve ever been in my life.”

I squeezed him. “You’re not alone right now, and I’m definitely not fourteen years old.”

“And thank God for that! I’m so glad you’re still here with me. I don’t think I could have handled being alone tonight. Thank you again, so much.”

“I’m glad you asked me to stay, Rob. I wanted to anyway, you know, but if you hadn’t said something I’d have gone home, and been just as alone myself.”

“Really? Why?”

“I don’t invite myself into peoples’ lives. I’d rather wait to be asked – that way, I’m sure of being welcome. It’s weird, but it’s how I’m made.”

“But I could have been completely stupid tonight and missed the chance to ask you – that would have been just awful, really. Please, please –” He shook me so very gently. “ – if you want something from me just ask, especially if I don’t mention it first. I’m so distracted all the time lately.”

I really did try to remind myself that tonight was likely all I would ever have with him, but of course, my heart leapt in hope and happiness at the thought of spending more time together.

“Well then, there is something I’d like to ask for.”

“Of course. If I have it, it’s yours.”

“Rob, will you let me get you into bed?”

Thirty minutes later and Rob was tucked into bed but still very much awake, despite our efforts to help him relax. I shut off all the lights except for a lamp in the furthest corner of the room, and he lowered the volume on the television until neither of us could really hear it. The dark circles were back under his beautiful eyes; I knew I should collect my things and go, so he could concentrate on settling down to sleep, but I also knew I wouldn’t do that.

He wanted to chat for a while longer.

I pulled an extra pillow from the second bed (where his suitcase lay open, with clothes strewn all around it) and placed it behind his head. Rob gave me a tired but nonetheless heart-stopping smile of thanks, shifting again beneath the light blanket and sheet. I stepped out of my shoes and carefully climbed onto the bed beside him, where I sat cross-legged at his right hip — above the covers.

“You know what I hate about hotel beds?” he asked.

“No, what?”

“The sheets smell too clean. And they’re scratchy. It’s just another reminder that you’re — I’m — not at home.”

The wistfulness in his tone hurt my heart. "I guess you've gotten a lot of experience with hotel rooms since last year," I said. "Or maybe you're telling me you don't wash your sheets at home?"

He laughed his funny, sweet laugh. "I can't remember where I live half the time, so I'm not thinking about my sheets. But I could show you *these*, if you're interested."

Rob lifted a handful of bedclothes, as if to make room for me. My mind started to spin.

Is he suggesting that I – no, of course not – he's teasing me – he wouldn't really want me in there – don't I wish –

"Maybe later," I whispered.

"Sure," he said, just as softly.

He reached over to take my hand, folding it carefully in his, and held it securely while he told me stories about growing up in London, painting vivid pictures of his life, his family and friends so that I could see them almost as clearly as he did. It was no surprise to hear that he missed them, of course, but Rob's voice carried an inherent strength that, given his youth, did surprise me somewhat, and I felt guilty for thinking it. I had always been considered more mature than normal at his age, and remembered how desperately I had wanted to be taken seriously. Rob didn't seem to suffer from any such conflict. He knew himself already, and was able to accept what that entailed. I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up – I was actually a little jealous.

But I hid all that in the convenient semi-darkness, letting Rob's beautiful velvet voice lull and soothe me while his restless fingers traced patterns over my hand as it lay within his.

"He calls you Kimmy," Rob said unexpectedly. I came quickly awake.

"Yes, he does," I said. "That started about two minutes after he met me."

"Do you mind?"

"Oh, no. From him, it's an endearment. He's the only person in my entire life who calls me Kimmy. I kind of like it."

"Hmm," he said thoughtfully. "I'm not sure *I* could call you Kimmy. I'll have to think of my own special name for you."

I thought, *As long as it's you calling, I'll answer to just about anything.*

But I said, "Well, let me know what you come up with."

Rob turned his entire body toward me, lying on his right side. He drew my hand to his chest and held it there. His heart beat was steady, and strong.

"Do you love him?" he asked gently.

"Yes. He's one of my best friends."

"And he loves you."

"Yes," I said, wondering where he was going with this.

"He didn't even try to stop you from leaving with me tonight. Why would he let you go so easily?"

"There could be all kinds of reasons. I'm sure he knew I wasn't ready to send you off by yourself —"

His lips curved upward again into a perfect grin.

“—and anyway, Jack and I love each other but we’re not *in* love. He’s married, with two great kids. He would never do anything to hurt his family, especially not a stupid fling with his secretary. Really, we’re friends, and that’s all we ever have been.”

Rob paused while I uncrossed my stiff legs to stretch out beside him. When I was settled, propped on my left side and facing him, I returned my right hand to his chest and put the other hand on his silky dark head, where I began to move my fingers gently through his hair. He sighed in pleasure and tried to snuggle closer to me.

“Ah,” I said a moment later. “now I know what all the fuss is about.”

Rob snorted good-naturedly. “Ridiculous, isn’t it? All those people trying to touch my hair...”

“Not entirely. It’s really good hair.”

“Thanks. You have a very nice touch. Could you do my shoulders, too, please?”

“Sure,” I said, and my hands moved to tend him.

For several minutes I rubbed long, slow circles over Rob’s shoulders, squeezing gently to work out each knot and kink. I drew my long nails upward between his shoulder blades, across his upper arms and the back of his neck, and even scraped them carefully over his scalp. Rob was quiet for the most part, arching

his back and giving the occasional moan when I massaged out a particularly tense area.

My eyes eventually sought his face, and I smiled in satisfaction; once again, the “touch” had done its job. He was only a moment away from that deep and healing sleep. His lashes were thick, full crescent shapes of an uncommon length, lying still on his cheeks. The strong, aquiline nose formed a perfect, straight line leading to his sensitive, soft-lipped mouth that curved upward just slightly now. I couldn’t remember seeing anyone as beautiful as he was.

I let my hands rest very lightly on his shoulders and then his head, trying to move them away from him gradually in the hope that he wouldn’t awaken. Getting off the bed unnoticed was going to be another matter, especially since I didn’t really want to do it. Surely it was reasonable to remain there beside Rob until he was completely asleep. Right?

When, after ten more minutes, not one of his muscles had even twitched (and I was watching closely), I slowly started inching myself away from him, but it was a struggle. I wanted nothing more than to be near him all night, but we didn’t really know each other yet and there would be the inevitable morning after. I couldn’t know exactly what to expect in the morning, but the thought that his fans and the press might be involved gave me the only reason valid enough to leave him there, wrapped safely in his dreams and scratchy sheets.

I almost made it.

“Stay,” his voice whispered roughly. “Please.”

“Sleep,” I said gently.

“I will, just...stay with me.”

I paused, deliberating just long enough that he moved restlessly, reaching blindly for me. His long fingers closed around my wrist, not tugging on me – as always, allowing me the choice – but simply waiting until I decided what to do. I slid my wrist through his fingers until I could grasp his hand, giving it a light squeeze.

“I can’t sleep in my clothes,” I said. “Give me a minute.”

“Get a shirt from my suitcase if you want to,” he suggested sleepily.

Good idea. I found a button-down among the riot of clothing and moved quietly to the bathroom, where I carefully folded my light sweater and slacks to avoid wrinkling them as much as possible and slid into Rob’s shirt. The sleeves were unbelievably long but the cotton was smooth, fitting nicely over my Hanes Her Way underwear, and reached to about mid-thigh. Not my usual get-up for bedtime at home, but quite acceptable.

I switched off the only light, and shut off the television as I approached the bed. Rob lay quietly on his right side, as I’d left him, but he had pulled back the covers for me. Briefly I prayed this would not be a monumental mistake, and then I slipped into the bed.

Regardless of the sheets it was a divinely comfortable bed, and already nicely warmed by Rob’s body heat. I relaxed almost immediately, sighing in pleasure.

A moment later I felt his right arm slide under my pillow; his left arm draped carefully across my waist and suddenly his head lay heavy on my left shoulder. His breath was hot and the beard stubble was rough against my breast, but somehow comforting, too. A long leg pressed between my thighs, but only to gain a more comfortable position. And then he relaxed into me, and was still.

I smiled in the darkness, wondering if I had missed any signs during the day that would have indicated where I'd end up sleeping tonight. But this was so much better than another night alone in my own bed. I kissed the top of Rob's silky head, and closed my eyes.

It might have been the unfamiliar surroundings that brought me awake multiple times that night: the cool, too-quiet room, the wide bed with its skimpy sheet and blanket—so unlike my down comforter and smooth, Downy-scented sheets at home—and heavy drapes that blocked any light from outside.

Or it might have been the long, hard body that kept trying to absorb mine. On becoming completely aware, that possibility seemed the most likely. Not that it was a bad thing. Not bad at all.

I had turned onto my right side for sleeping (my normal position). At one point Rob slept with his head on my pillow and his arms draped loosely over me. Sometime later his face pressed against the nape of my neck, his breath tickling as much as his beard, and he had moved a bit closer. I woke just briefly, comforted by his nearness, and soon went back to sleep.

But now I came awake to the sensation of touch, and it could not have been more wonderful or welcome. This time I was *held* in strong arms wrapped tightly around me. Rob's body created a perfect cradle for mine, his chest pressed firmly into my back and my bare legs tucked securely between his. The elegant, long-fingered hands I had admired all evening were now stroking mine in a tender, slow caress that brought me deep, rich pleasure. He couldn't have known how sensitive my hands were and yet—somehow—he did. Rob lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a soft, open-mouthed kiss into its palm, and I moaned in spite of myself.

His arms quickly guided me until I lay on my back, and in that same moment his mouth gently covered mine. This man could *kiss*. His lips were soft and warm as they nibbled and caressed for long minutes, while the tip of his tongue swept over my lower lip, seeking entrance. I kissed him hard and drew him in, and it was Rob's turn to moan softly. So hot, so wet, *so good*...and still, it wasn't quite *enough*.

When Rob released my hands I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him tightly to me, seeking to touch any part of him that I could reach. It satisfied me greatly to trace his straight, dark eyebrows and the ridge of his sculpted nose. A little more so to test the width of his shoulders and the long line of his back; my hands rested briefly on his hips and then ghosted over the tight, lean muscles of his incredibly cute backside before returning to his neck and finally, to kiss the perfect juncture where his jaw met his earlobe (both sides, naturally), and I ran my tongue lightly around the shell of each ear. He shuddered sweetly.

"Oh...oh, God," he breathed raggedly. "Don't stop."

I grinned in the dark. I was really very happy. Rob pushed his hips against mine and there it was — strong, hard evidence that he was happy, too. I reached for the bottom edge of his tee shirt and pulled up until Rob got the idea and yanked it off, presenting me with more beautiful, bare skin to appreciate. At my whispered direction, Rob turned over to lie on his back and I settled myself carefully on top of him, avoiding that burgeoning erection...for now.

Having done a bit of lurking online, I had seen pictures of Rob shirtless. I *might* have had the occasional fantasy about running my hands and lips over his lightly furred chest and brand-new six pack abs and possibly exploring (in some detail) the silky wonders of his treasure trail, since that was always my favorite part of a man's anatomy.

None of the pictures had ever captured his real beauty. Photographs could not adequately depict the texture of his gorgeous skin or the unique, tender quality of his joints and limbs that suggested he was still growing into this hard, adult body. There was actually a lot more hair on his chest than the pictures indicated; it was absolutely straight and dark, growing most thickly in the center and narrowing to a long, smooth ribbon down his tight stomach, where it disappeared beneath the drawstring pants. Oh yes, I must have more of him.

As Rob sighed, I pressed my lips into the perfect hollow at the base of his throat and kissed the warm skin. He clutched at my shoulders, trying to pull me completely on top of him, but I wouldn't let him deter me.

His nipples were already hard when my mouth closed over them to lick and suckle and bite gently at the pebbled nubs, flicking my tongue firmly around the right and then the left, and then I pinched them lightly between my fingers. Rob's breath hitched as I blew warm breaths across his chest, causing those puckered, wet little nipples to tighten even further.

"So good," he gasped.

I shifted my position a bit, intending to glide down his beautiful body to the next fun place to kiss, when I noticed again his thickening erection — and this time it throbbed and leapt at the base of his hard belly, as if knowing that I watched. A small, dark stain appeared on the cotton pants just where his tip would be, drawing all my attention there. I lowered my head and gently put my lips on the wetness, letting my warm breath caress his hardness through the thin fabric. Rob hissed and rocked his hips.

"Like that?" I whispered, rubbing my mouth along his length.

"Do it again, *please*," he moaned. I did it again, nibbling carefully this time.

My hands moved then to stroke him through the soft cotton, a gentle caressing pressure over his hips; my nails raked lightly across the tender planes between his navel and groin — his breathless cries of pleasure were the sweetest music — then down to massage his thighs as they opened for my questing fingers and finally upward, to cup his taut sac and roll it briefly in my palm before sliding up to grasp his pulsing shaft and squeeze it gently.

Rob's breathing was ragged now, a little gasping and small whimpers as he thrust himself into my hand. His own fingers were clenched into the sheets, curled so tightly I could see the white skin over his knuckles. A feeling of giddy, sublime satisfaction came over me, knowing that *my* touch had brought this beautiful, sweet young man to his present, quivering-with-need condition. He would soon be writhing in frustration, aching so badly for release. I couldn't make him wait any longer.

I plucked at the drawstring and drew it deliberately. As the knot loosened and released its hold, Rob's hands were suddenly not fisted in the sheets, but clamped somewhat painfully on my arms. And they pulled at me, hard, until I was no longer poised over his erection, but over his lips.

His mouth opened mine with a quicksilver tongue that thrust urgently and licked almost halfway down my throat. His intensity turned me on, a lot. He drew my body to his, guiding and pressing and shifting me into the position he wanted and then rolled his hips until I could feel the entire long, hard length of him (impressive, even through the cotton pants) lunging helplessly between my legs, all without breaking his kiss. I couldn't help it; my body responded to his, grinding myself against him in possessive need.

I didn't even notice when he turned us. I didn't realize I was looking *up* at him, or that he had ripped open his own shirt, until his frantic hands bared my breasts, cupping and squeezing them roughly, over and over. The next whimper of pleasure was undeniably mine.

“...beautiful,” he growled. “Ah, fuck...baby, so beautiful...”

His dark head dipped and his soft-lipped, warm, wet mouth claimed my sensitive nipples in a sweet frenzy of suckling and licking and biting that had me arching beneath him as I struggled with all my limbs to pull him even closer. His lips actually popped as they released one nipple and moved to the other, where the exquisite suckling continued as if my breasts were full of milk and he was dying of thirst.

Rob shifted a bit then, to rub his engorged cock against my thigh once more. At the same time, his right hand moved imperceptibly until it slid carefully over the crotch of my smooth cotton panties. I heard his breath go out in a swift moan as he discovered that they were already soaked through. His long, supple fingers moved easily past the barrier of clothing, dipped briefly into the warm wetness and then gently stroked my aching clit in search of the rhythm I liked.

“Rob,” I cried. “*Rob!*”

“Mmm,” he murmured. “you’re so wet, so sweet. Is it good?”

I didn’t have a chance to say it; while his fingers worked their magic below, he reached up just a bit to kiss my breasts again, laving the nipples, licking gently at the undersides, and there was just no breath to speak.

I wanted him--naked, his hard body joined with mine, right now.

My hands drew him up further so that I could fasten my lips on his in a bruising kiss. Stretched out as he was, it became obvious immediately that his cock was free of the drawstring pants. The hot, silky-skinned length of him strained

toward its goal, where Rob's hand moved less urgently now. He could have me, of course; there was just one thing I had to do first.

Once more I slid from beneath him and instantly missed his warmth. Rob moaned in protest as I moved to his side, but that small sound quickly became a sigh of relief when I freed his long legs from the combined tangle of bedclothes and sweatpants.

He lay quietly as my eyes eagerly studied all his lean, perfectly proportioned lines. He was exquisite.

"Rob," I said softly. "you're beautiful."

"Well," he replied wryly. "it's dark in here. Kiss me."

I kissed his lips tenderly as he pulled me on top of him; his hands slipped inside the ruined shirt to clasp my breasts and he drew me forward until he could kiss them again.

"These are beautiful," he whispered. *"You are beautiful."*

"Oh, sweetie," I sighed, and gave myself to the pleasure of his suckling.

But his fingers suddenly dipped into the waistband of my panties, intending to ease them over my hips, and I remembered my previous goal.

With his body providing me warmth and sensory guidance, my lips brushed Rob's chest, pausing briefly to suckle gently on his own nipples before moving further to seek the fullness of him.

The dark, thin ribbon of hair from his chest flared out just under his navel, covering his lower belly in soft, thick fur. I bent happily to rub my face against his

rippling muscles, drawing my tongue wetly through the trail until the long strands were damp and his skin glistened. I couldn't resist one last tongue thrust in his belly button, kissing and biting hungrily at the delicious, deeply perfect bit of knotted flesh. Rob's beautiful body arched and rolled beneath my gentle hands and lips.

He's glorious, I thought, and then quickly--so quickly he would not have time to prepare for it--I moved down those last few inches and took him in my mouth. Rob lay still immediately, but he rewarded me with a deep, growling, blissed-out sound that I will hear in my dreams.

At first it was only the head of his cock between my lips. I licked carefully around the rim and across the tip while my hand slowly pumped him from near the base of his shaft. Like the rest of him, Rob's erection was long and slender, a perfect cylinder of hot, silky skin that sheathed a core of steel. He was impressively hard. Impressively *impressive*.

It had been quite a while since I'd done this, so while I worked on relaxing my throat in order to take more of him in, I kept both hands in motion all over him. As I rolled his cock slowly up and down (he seemed to like slow movements better than fast) with one hand, gradually I reached below to cup his testicles with the other hand, gently massaging and twirling them between my fingers. I clamped my lips a bit more firmly around his tip and sucked him lightly, being very careful to avoid using my teeth.

The slight wheezing noise startled me. I paused a moment.

"Don't stop," Rob groaned in agonized pleasure. His voice had taken on a seriously stressed quality. "Oh, Kim..."

A quick glance up at him revealed his chest heaving for breaths that weren't fully met; both his hands were again clutching the sheets in a death-grip, and tremors quivered through his entire body. I realized how hard he was trying to keep his hips still when his every instinct ordered him to *thrust* against the maddening pressure of my mouth. No wonder this was getting so painful.

I lifted my lips from his throbbing shaft, even though he moaned in torment. I put my hands over his, encouraging him to release the sheets and touch my face instead.

"Rob, sweetheart, you can move," I whispered. "Move with me; it's okay."

"Don't wanna hurt you," he said through clenched teeth.

"You won't. Rock your hips, just like that."

I kissed his belly until we found the rhythm he needed, and then gently nudged his thighs apart so that I could lie between them. When he was ready I drew his member into my mouth and began the steady routine of licking and stroking, and this time took him much deeper.

"Oh *yesssss...*" he gasped. His hips bucked and jerked; his hands came to rest on my head, keeping me in place, and I sucked him hard. "...mmm, more, please...ah... *fuck me...*"

His entire body tightened, thrusting up. With a long, low moan of pleasure, Rob let go. I swallowed one last time and released his cock, but kept my arms around his waist. We rested for a while.

Some time later I felt Rob's hands reach for mine; he drew my body back up to its proper place beside him, all urgency completely gone from his touch. He pulled the ruined shirt off me so that I was left only in my panties, and tossed the covers across both of us. Satisfied that I would be warm, Rob settled back on his pillow and tugged gently until I lay firmly wrapped in his arms, my cheek resting on his chest. His long, slender body still trembled lightly.

"Incredible," he whispered. "I never..."

I shifted a bit, to hug him. "No one's ever, um, done that for you?"

"Never like *that*," he said slowly. "This was how it's supposed to be."

That made me wonder if girls his age didn't know how to wield the oral magic or just didn't like to do it, but I said nothing. Rob kissed my forehead and squeezed me gently. If he had been tired before, nothing on earth could keep him awake now. I didn't mind at all. This had been purely wonderful for me as well.

"You are very special," he murmured. "I was so lucky to find you today."

"I was lucky, too, Rob."

"Need sleep now, but I'll make this up to you later, okay?"

"Okay," I whispered, and kissed his chest.

He snuggled us deep into the mattress in such a way that I knew sleep was already there to claim him. I held him closer, and faded quickly myself.

The next time I woke up something about the room had changed, though it took a moment to comprehend what that was.

Rob lay deeply asleep beside me, his arms relaxed but still holding me close. It looked like neither of us had moved, so I couldn't tell how long we had actually been asleep.

I raised my head to peer through the dark, finding no answer at the windows with their heavy drapes, but my eyes followed the furnishings around the room, eventually settling on a bright-red digital display from the clock radio on the dresser—and blinked in disbelief.

6:17 a.m. *I had been here all night.*

People would already be moving around the hotel, even at this early hour. *Jack* was still here, just downstairs.

I had to get out of here, *now*.

I wiggled carefully out of Rob's embrace, halfway holding my breath. He stirred and sighed as I tucked the covers around him but thankfully, he remained asleep. I grabbed my purse and my clothes and hurried to the bathroom, where I closed the door very quietly and tried to put myself back together. Not an easy job—I wear an excellent cosmetic but never carry it in my purse. Three kinds of painkiller (I frequently have a headache of one sort or another) but not even a lipstick.

The best I could do was splash my face with warm water and clear away the smudges of mascara under my eyes until it looked (I hoped) like I hadn't slept in it

last night. After that I got quickly into my clothes and brushed through my hair. It would do, as long as I didn't get too close to anybody on my way out.

Please, I begged the Universe. Don't let me run into Jack this morning.

At 6:28 a.m. I was standing next to the bed, wondering how to leave — should I wake Rob only to say good-bye, or let him sleep and put my phone number on the nightstand, giving him the way (and the choice) to contact me later?

I quickly fished a business card from my purse and scribbled a totally artless note on the back — "Sweetie, thx for last nite. Call me when you wake up. XOXO, Kim." I propped it against Rob's wallet on the nightstand.

Then I leaned over his beautiful, sleeping face to brush the lightest of kisses across his soft lips, feeling a sincere yearning to be in his arms again. I must have lingered a moment too long. Rob sighed and opened his lips to gently return my kiss.

"Hey," he murmured.

"Morning," I whispered, bending to rub my cheek against his chest. His arms came up to embrace me, his hands rubbing gently over my shoulders. I felt him give a little start as he woke more completely.

"What — you're dressed," he said. "Why?"

"I need to go, Rob."

"No, it's early. You don't have to leave yet."

"It's already 6:30. I don't want anyone to see me leaving your room —"

"I don't care what anyone out there thinks."

But I do, sweetheart. I can't stop wanting to protect you.

"I don't want to go," I said lightly. "but you said you have a full day of press things to do, remember? We don't want to give them something *else* to talk about, do we?"

"No, of course not," he sighed, understanding that I was new to this celebrity stuff. "But I still want you to get back in this bed with me."

"If I do that, we'll be in bed all day."

"Mmm, sounds perfect," he said, nuzzling a tender spot just under my ear.

It did sound perfect, but I knew we couldn't do it. My intuition sensed that Rob knew it as well; he only wanted to prolong this moment for as long as possible. I lay down on top of him, molding my body to his. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. Even through the covers I could feel the long, hard line of his cock, filled and ready to take up where we'd left off last night. How I wished we could do just that.

"Go back to sleep for another hour," I said quietly.

"You're really leaving."

"Better for both of us, sweetie."

"I wanted us to make love this morning..."

"Last night was perfect, Rob. I'll never forget how wonderful you are."

"No, you *saved* me. I don't want to let you go."

"Maybe you could call me later – if there's a chance during the day. If you want to –"

"I will," he said firmly, hugging me again. "Did you leave your number for me?"

"It's right there," I said, indicating the nightstand.

"I don't know what time it'll be, but you'll hear from me, okay?"

"Okay," I whispered, suppressing a ridiculous urge to cry. I do not cry in front of other people.

A covert glance at the clock said it was 6:42 a.m. They would start serving breakfast to the conference attendees around 7:00. I had to be gone from there before Jack went downstairs.

I kissed Rob lingeringly one more time; against my own, his warm lips said "Stay," but he released me when I reluctantly climbed off the bed.

He sat up as I slung the Dooney over my left shoulder, reaching for my right hand to squeeze it firmly.

"Thank you," he said warmly. "for last night. For everything."

"You're welcome, Rob. I'm glad we met."

"Me, too," he pressed a kiss into my palm, and then I moved away from him before the temptation to change my mind became too great to resist.

I paused outside his door, checking the corridor for loitering bodies; there weren't any. Grateful that his manager (according to Rob) always insisted that Rob's room be close to the elevators, I dashed quickly across the hall and found myself arriving in the Westin's lobby in no time.

I suppose I have been given the gift of anonymity. It might also have helped that I was dressed reasonably well but inconspicuously. Whatever the reason, I slipped quietly through the hotel without encountering anyone too closely, and gratefully avoided the one person I really didn't want to see that morning (though I would wonder later why Jack would care so much--if at all--that I'd slept with a man I hardly knew), and paid the sleepy parking attendant who didn't flicker an eyelash at my appearance in the garage so early that day.

I was halfway home, cruising north on a delightfully uncongested I-5 when the success of my smooth getaway abruptly faded and I was left with an unfamiliar, aching sensation of loss. Rob was *there* and I was *here*, speeding away from him. I had no reason to expect that I would ever see him again, but if that should be the case it wasn't because I didn't want to. His warmth and kindness had already marked me somehow; I was different from the woman I had been just yesterday. But now that I recognized a flicker of life-hope-*something* in my heart that was newly awakened by that sweet, wonderful young man, what was I supposed to do with it?

The long night (thoroughly enjoyable and not long enough) finally did catch up with me, so I showered and tried to sleep for a couple of hours. It didn't help as much as I hoped; my mind chose to replay every moment with Rob, listened again to all his sighs and moans, felt his beautiful body respond so eagerly to mine.

I tried hard not to think about taking his call later. Didn't want to hope he would remember to do it. This, added to the realization that I was due back at the

Westin by 6:00 for dinner with Jack, only increased my agitation. Before long, I got up, certain I had several things to do.

I pulled recyclables together and carried them to the curb. I threw a load of laundry into the washing machine – and then the dryer. I watered plants, checked e-mails, even decided what I would wear that night – all the while thinking of Rob, trying to envision a way to find myself back in his arms...in his bed. Short of being invited, I couldn't quite picture a scenario in which he would simply *want* me.

I guess I have self-esteem issues. Wearing make-up, finding the right haircut and clothes, etc., those things help, of course, but they're only applicable to the outside. It's been much harder to find something worthwhile about myself on the inside.

Brain surgery was good for that – not that I've experienced it first hand. Working for Jack forced me to become the best at what I could be – organized, detailed, efficient. I learned how to think on my feet while remaining flexible with peoples' needs and issues, and to solve problems before they were routed to upper management types. I was the one other employees sought for better organization techniques, and I was recruited a few times to mentor younger people who hadn't yet found a niche in the department.

I was good at working. Not so good at socializing. The prospect of spending happy hour with my colleagues from work was actually unnerving for me – and not only in neurosurgical circles, either. I still don't know why this is so, but my discomfort increases dramatically at any hint of required social activity. If it's a

conference or other meeting environment that I have to attend in order to manage the event, I'm completely fine. I've organized a number of those things with great success.

If I have a specific function, I'm fine.

If I have to be only myself, I tank.

There might be a name for my social dysfunction but I've never really been bothered by having the condition. I have always been a loner by nature. It would take a significant degree of loneliness (which I don't suffer the way some people do) to force me to seek the company of others.

This also worked in my favor during the years with Jack. He would never ask me openly to dedicate one hundred percent of my time each day to him and his many, varied pursuits – but it took no time for him to realize the work was getting done to his satisfaction for the first time in his career, and he knew that my devotion was *voluntary*. No one in his right mind would turn down such a gift. Jack certainly didn't, and the result was that we became a tight, competent team that was soon considered the gold standard among our counterparts. I had never been happier. I was valued and needed, and necessary.

I was also mostly friendless. Jack was my partner but also my employer; it was sometimes hard to consider him a *friend* when we never did anything together outside the office – no lunches, no drinks after work – the hours he worked prohibited it. His wife and family demanded any weekend time he might have available.

There were a few people in the department with whom I had deeper interactions (Pati, my personal anchor, was the first), but the unrelenting demands of my job often made it impossible to do more than chat idly at the copier or wherever we found ourselves together and, again, no activities outside the office. It was a genuine surprise to learn (years later) that many people were afraid to approach me in a personal way, as they feared Jack and believed that, because I supported him, I must be just like him in temperament. I wasn't, but I understood how it must have looked to them.

By the time I learned this I had already left Jack's world. I should have been regretful that no lasting friendships had been formed there, but it was too late to change anything and that job had taken more out of me than I was able to give—and it always would, regardless of how long I worked for him.

I sighed, glancing at the nearest clock. It was just noon.

I had to get free of this introspective mood. There was no one available to talk to about Jack (or Rob) at the moment, with Jeff and Pati both at work. Each of them would tell me to stop thinking so much, let these situations develop as they undoubtedly would, and go with whatever happened. Jeff might want to grill me on the explicit details of Rob's physical attributes, but he would never let me obsess about this.

I went into my kitchen for the best kind of therapy there is. I could bake something. There was plenty of time. I pulled out measuring cups and spoons, the

much-used jelly roll pan and cold butter from the fridge. My beloved purple KitchenAid mixer glowed as I drew it forward from its corner.

In good time I was busy measuring and combining ingredients. I cut the cold butter into small pieces to toss them into the mixer as it hummed beside me. The familiar routine—no recipe needed now—soon had my mind occupied as well as my hands.

I was a fairly accomplished baker, with an ever-increasing repertoire of successful experiences, thanks in (very) large part to the Food Network and the Baker's Catalogue. Today's culinary effort came from neither of those places, but from my long-time friend Judy, who gave me her recipe for shortbread cookies and plenty of advice on turning out a perfect batch every time. I was glad I listened to her (and not just about cookies).

The steps in this recipe were easy but required both effort and attention, so by the time I began to press the crumbly dough mixture into the pan I had mostly forgotten my nervous anticipation regarding both Jack and Rob, and I had developed a plan.

Jack would want to know what I had been doing for employment since leaving his offices, and I would now be able to show him the *big idea*. We could then talk about marketing and managing my home business. While he was not an entrepreneurial type, strictly-speaking, Jack had an admirable (and often intimidating) strength of will—he could either get me motivated to begin, or help me figure out what was holding me back. Getting his input on Kira's Kitchen would

only be the smart thing to do. And I could show him, not only the product, but my way cool packaging ideas, too.

By the time I slid the pan into the oven, I looked forward to seeing him later that night. If anyone in my life could understand the need to work for myself (rather than go to an office every day), plus my love of baking, it was Jack. With his support (emotional, not financial), I could make this enormous change.

Thirty-five minutes later I made the first cut into warm shortbread dough, scoring the length of the pan. Two more long cuts were next, followed by several shorter, horizontal strokes across the fragrant mixture. That done, there were now about five dozen individual cookies. I left them to finish cooling and set up a fondue pot with semi-sweet chocolate chips and a bit of heavy cream to begin melting, so that I could dip a few cookies (on just one end) to take with me tonight. The rest could be dipped in chocolate tomorrow, or whenever I wanted them.

I stopped dipping at two dozen. That was more than enough for my purpose and besides, it was after 3pm. The chocolate had to dry (I put the tray in the fridge, just to make sure) so that the basket could be made; I still had to dress for dinner and be on my way by 5:30, so there was really no time to waste.

After a quick repair job on hair and make-up I slipped into a pair of comfortable, close-fitting black jeans, topped by my favorite purple shirt – a soft ribbed knit with a deep v-neck. I followed this with hi-top walking boots (in black, of course) and my usual minimum of jewelry. A spritz of perfume and some sheer-

colored lip gloss (I like Burt's Bees Lip Shimmer, in Rhubarb) were next, and one last look in the mirror said I was ready.

The cookie basket was easy to do quickly, since it was small and I had already experimented on a few of them. I snipped a length of purple ribbon and then a good-sized sheet of clear cellophane paper, ready to pull the whole thing together, when my cell phone rang.

The number on the tiny display screen was unfamiliar — not Jack, either — so I swallowed and answered the call before I could think too much about who else it could be.

"Hi, it's Rob," he said, a smile in his warm voice.

"Hi sweetie," I said, absurdly happy that my voice was even and calm. "Are you finished with the publicity stuff already?"

"I wish, but no — this will go for hours yet."

"Wow...will you get dinner out of it, at least? They have to feed you sometime."

"I'm sure that's all worked out somewhere," he hesitated. "I'd have called earlier, but there was just no chance to get away."

"It's fine; you said you'd be really busy. Do I hear screaming in the background there?"

"Uh huh," he confirmed, with a touch of frustration and amusement.

"There's *always* a lot of screaming. It's completely nuts."

“Is it weird having them scream like that when they don’t actually know you?”

“It’s bizarre – and they think they *do* know me. When we met yesterday I knew you recognized me, but you still treated me like I was any other guy. I really appreciated that.”

“Well, you’re not ‘any other guy,’” I said kindly. “You let me get close enough to help even after being chased through the hotel. You could have told me to leave you alone – and I would have – but I’m so glad you didn’t.”

“Oh, so am I. Last night...I wanted to be with you so badly, and it was the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time. Are *you* okay, Kim?”

“I’m so much better than okay, Rob, promise –”

“Because I know last night was all about me and I’m really not like that, so selfish and needy.”

“Needy, but women kind of like that,” I assured him. “and you were *not* selfish. If I had been able to stay this morning I know you’d have made it wonderful.”

“Well,” the hint of shyness crept into his voice, though he smiled. “I still want to see you again. Would you be able to come back to the hotel tonight?”

“I’m...” I didn’t know if it would be appropriate to remind him about dinner with Jack. “Of course I can. I want to see you, too.”

Rob smiled; his voice relaxed a bit more. How could he think I might *not* want to see him again?

"Great — well, then, I should be finished here by 7pm or so, but it'll be another hour before I get back to my room. Is it all right to meet there?"

"Absolutely."

"If I'm going to be later than that I'll call again."

"Okay. Otherwise, I'll meet you around 8. Sounds good, Rob."

"We're good, right?"

I *adored* his sweetness, his shy and unassuming nature.

"Yes," I said sincerely. "we are."

His voice actually dropped an octave. "Good. I'm looking forward to tonight. Ah, I've gotta go, love — they're calling for me."

"Don't answer to just anybody out there, okay?"

"Only to you, I promise. See you later, then."

"Can't wait. Bye, Rob."

We hung up and I stood there a moment thinking about how nice he was, and how it might be more than possible to nurture this experience into a loving, long-lasting friendship. I have exquisite taste in friends.

This reminded me of another friend who would be expecting to see me in a short time. I went back to the cookie basket to finish wrapping it, and then gathered the rest of my things for the half-hour drive downtown.

"So," said Jack, between bites of pumpkin ravioli (snagged from *my* plate), "are you happy to be back here?"

“Yeah, but I was always happy here—you were the one who insisted on leaving.”

He shuddered. “I hate the rain and the endless dark. I’ll never live in Washington again if I can help it.”

Knowing that he had grown up in sunny, sweltering Miami, Florida made it easy to accept his intense dislike of the Northwest, so I let that one pass.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t like San Francisco,” he continued. “but if you’re glad to be here, that’s all that counts. What have you been doing with yourself lately?”

Seated together in a cozy booth at the Westin’s Coldwater Bar and Grill, I leaned back and gave him a brief description of my life and activities since returning to Seattle nearly two years ago, not bothering to go into a lot of detail; he would only want the high points, anyway.

Jack finally looked me in the eyes. His are fathomless, a very dark brown. And when he chooses to concentrate, they don’t miss much.

“The kid from last night—”

“Rob,” I said, trying not to grin.

“—yeah, tell me about Rob.”

“I met him last night, about ten minutes before you did. He had been running through the hotel to avoid the teenage girls and we ended up in the same elevator. We said hi, and then he felt dizzy so I brought him to see you, then I took him to his room.”

"Uh huh," the dark eyes never blinked. "Tucked him in, did you?"

"He invited me to have dinner, since I didn't get to eat with you. *Then* I tucked him in."

"Ah, was he very tuckable?"

"He was easy to tuck, yes."

Jack gave an uncharacteristic snort; I thought he was frustrated by my reluctance to describe the evening, but I'm really not the kiss-and-tell type. Usually.

"I hope he was worth it, then."

"What's with you tonight? Jealous much?"

"I am not jealous," he said firmly, in a tone of voice that completely negated the statement. "It's just...you'll probably never see him again and he's too young to have been any good in bed."

I always hear what people *don't* say, so it was not surprising that he was trying to goad me into admitting that I'd slept with Rob. It was a surprise that this bothered him to such a degree. I tried to steer the conversation in another direction.

"I'm not expecting to hear from him often, but I think he could turn out to be a great friend. And he's not *that* young."

"Is he even twenty years old yet?"

"He's...twenty-three."

"*Twenty-three*? And you're—"

"Don't even think about saying it out loud," I hissed.

He grinned. "Okay. If you think he's not too young, go for it. Kimmy, how long have we known each other?"

"Seventeen years," I said, wondering how it had gotten to be that long.

"In all this time I've never seen you get that close to anyone. You never took your hands off him, even when I examined him. What is it about *this* guy?"

"Doctors make him nervous. He asked me to stay close, that's all. Thanks again for looking at him. I really do appreciate it."

"You asked," he shrugged. "What's in the bag?"

"It's an idea I'm working on – maybe a new side business," I said, reaching into the bag for the cookie basket, which I handed to him.

He promptly set it down to grab his pager, silence the irritating *beep* and ascertain the caller's identity before shoving it back in his jacket.

"You can call back," I said quickly. "It's okay –"

"No need. What are you going to do with this?"

"The idea is to make up a few baskets like this and take them to the independent coffee shops all over the place and see if I can get them to put in an order."

"Why not go to Starbuck's first?"

"It's too big. I don't think I could manage that kind of volume working at home."

"At home? You'd be doing the baking and marketing and selling – by yourself?"

“At first, of course. That’s the fun of it. Later, if it really takes off, I can look into getting some help – at least find a professional kitchen to work out of.”

“How will you be able to afford this?”

“The money I make from orders placed would keep me stocked with ingredients. There won’t be any overhead by working at home. Is it not a good idea?”

“Oh, I’m not saying it won’t work – but it looks like this is too much effort for not enough return. I just don’t want to see you get yourself into trouble financially.”

His pager went off a second time as I tried to formulate a reply, and I was glad for the pause. This manner was not like Jack; I watched him discreetly as he again checked the caller and once more chose to ignore it. There was something distinctly different about him – this man I knew so very well – and while this change didn’t seem to be the result of any issue between us, my inner voice told me to ‘be ready.’

“Jack, if you need to return this call, go ahead,” I said. “I can step out –”

“No, no,” he assured me. “I will have to deal with it, but not now. So –” he waved vaguely at the basket. “ – have you taken these to anyone yet?”

“I gave one to the Hot Spot latte stand near my house and one to the tattoo parlor across the street from them.”

“You’re giving these away?” he sounded offended for some reason. I knew this side of him; it would serve no purpose to react in kind.

“Yes, the baskets are just samples of the cookie. I have a different kind of packaging ready for when they order, or I could do a tray thing if they prefer. It’ll depend on what they want.”

I had brought an example of that individual package, as well as the subtly colorful business card I’d created and the matching label. I left them in my bag, untouched.

He was not behind this idea of mine.

For the first time in our long history, he did not believe in me.

When I realized the truth of that notion, it stung.

“Kim, I don’t know about these things, but it sounds like you have a plan. I hope it’ll be a huge success for you.”

“I’m not sure you really hope that,” I said pointedly.

“No – if you want to do this I’ll wish you every bit of luck in the world. I’m afraid you’ll need it.”

“Because I can’t handle it?”

“Because I know what you’re good at. What you do best.”

“Some of what I do best is in the kitchen, Jack.”

“I agree – see, I do remember the cheese bread and the homemade ravioli – but can you be satisfied with only baking cookies? I watched you pull the Annual Scientific Session Meeting together for 1200 people by yourself, without one glitch. Your organizational skills should be taught in schools. It just doesn’t make any sense to me that you could ever want to do any other kind of work.”

“You’ve never known what it costs me to be that person.”

“And I’ve never known anyone else who could make things happen like you do. I would not be where I am today if I hadn’t met you.”

“Yes, you would,” I said sincerely. “It might have taken a little longer, that’s all.”

“I’d beg you to come back if I thought it would do any good.”

“No, I’m sorry, Jack. I need to be here now – see if I can make anything happen for myself, for once.”

“I understand,” he said, but his eyes flickered in a strange way. I wondered what he was up to.

“Besides, you’ve got Tracy now, right? She’s more than capable of taking care of you.”

“She can do the work – you trained her well – but we don’t have the wavelength thing that you and I do.”

It was true. We’d always had a unique connection that made it possible to work perfectly in sync even when we didn’t see each other for days at a time.

“I’ll never have this connection again, either,” I reminded him. “I’ll miss it, but not that workload.”

The pager beeped a third time, and I saw him hesitate.

“Jack, take the call. It’s obviously important.”

“Thanks, it’ll be quick.”

He fished a cell phone out of another pocket and dialed a number. While he spoke in a hushed voice I stashed the basket into my bag (totally giving up the idea of leaving it with him, as I originally planned) and tried not to notice that he wasn't actually having a conversation with his caller.

By the time he hung up and turned to me with a comment about forgetting he'd promised to meet briefly with a colleague from M.D. Anderson – to discuss a joint project and publication – I knew he was lying.

This was a common occurrence when I worked for him; the lies he told so effortlessly were less convincing than he realized, but he had never used this technique on *me*. He should have known that I wouldn't be judgmental about his true intentions tonight – but he thought he had to lie to me. Once more, I wondered what he was doing.

And decided I didn't have to care. Whatever he was hiding could simply stay hidden. It wasn't my responsibility anymore.

"Well then," I said briskly, to cover my growing disappointment. "I can say good night and let you be on your way."

"Kimmy, there's no need to rush off –"

It was the voice he used when, knowing he was about to get his way, he could afford to be generous. That, and his lying, left me completely cold, utterly turned off. I hate people who lie when it would be easier to tell the truth.

“You aren’t the only one with plans, bud. I have another stop to make tonight, so I should get going anyway. Thanks for dinner, Jack. It was great to see you.”

“You, too,” he said, bending to give me a kiss, followed by a brief hug; he was always careful about public affection—you never knew who might be watching.

“Keep in touch. I can’t lose you.”

“Of course I will.”

“And I really do hope your business does great.”

“Thanks. Walk me out?”

He escorted me through the lovely restaurant until it rejoined the Westin. I was parked in the hotel garage, but didn’t feel like telling him that I wasn’t going back to the car.

But that was exactly what I did, for some reason I still don’t understand. It must have been Fate’s helping hand—brutal though it was—that coordinated my thought processes and the next events, to produce the appropriate result. I would be more than grateful later.

It was close to 7:30pm by that time; too early to meet Rob, and not long enough to assuage my hurt feelings over Jack’s somewhat callous behavior. It didn’t occur to me that I could wait in the bar until Rob arrived upstairs. I believe I was thinking mainly about ditching the basket, which meant leaving it in the car.

They didn't see me as I stepped out of the garage elevator and made my way across the paved floor on soundless, rubber-soled shoes — *nobody* would have heard my steps, the two of them least of all.

I swung wide of them as the man drew her body beneath his, pressing her into the hood of their car. They were both clothed, of course, but the intention was more than obvious, and I thought I heard her moan.

His back arched and his head came up as I drew nearly parallel with them, about three rows over. The leonine, silver head with its unfashionably long hair caught my eye, even though I tried hard not to look. And then I saw their faces — both of them.

The man I adored and the woman who had replaced me in his office. Locked together in the embrace he never shared with me.

"If you make love with as much care as you put into your work, I know it'd be great with you," he had said to me, about a month after I started working for him. "But I need you here. This work is too important, and you're the only person who's ever made me feel like my career is finally moving forward. Can we handle not having a sex thing?"

"Yes," I had replied. "We'll be fine."

And we were. Maybe I just thought we were.

After an endless minute of standing there, the weird deer-in-the-headlights sensation ebbed enough that my faculties returned, except for the one I really needed. Actually, stealth never has been one of my attributes, so while I managed to turn away from the shocking scene with some grace, it wasn't surprising at all when

my grip shifted and I dropped my heavy key chain. The sound of metal clanging on that concrete floor was terrifying. I bent quickly to pick it up, knowing my presence was now revealed. There was no hope of getting out of here unseen, but of course I had to try.

Jack (thank goodness) still had his back to me as I strode quickly to the elevator bay. I had the momentary, disgusting impression that he was tucking himself back into his pants.

The elevator had miraculously remained on this floor. The doors glided open instantly at my touch and I was safely inside in only a heartbeat. I kept my face turned away from the garage, but selecting a destination required more attention than I could give without looking. Reluctantly I moved to the side as far as possible but, in the end, it didn't help.

I heard Tracy's horrified gasp – not only had they been seen, but by someone they knew – and Jack turned at just that moment to lock his eyes with mine. His expression went from irritation to fear to regret, all in those few seconds it took to close the elevator doors.

I've been told I have a face that shows everything I think and feel. It might have been interesting to know what my face was showing on this last time I would ever see Jack, but in that moment it only mattered that we were finished.

I don't remember walking back through the Westin's lobby. I know I did – there was no other way to reach the hotel elevators – and when I started coming

back to my senses I found myself in one of them, moving steadily upward. I had even managed to press the button for the 18th floor, Rob's floor. Whether he was anxious to see me again or not didn't matter; he represented the only security I could (literally) get my hands on, and I needed it.

The elevator opened with its irritating *ding* that seemed to follow me those few steps to Rob's door, where I knocked quickly, wanting to be out of the hallway right now. Knocked again when he didn't answer. Fought down a fresh wave of panic even stronger than the one I'd felt downstairs.

And where was that awful dinging noise coming from?

Oh. It was me—rather, my traitorous car keys, clutched in a seriously trembling hand. I thought about what I must look like by now. I had to get a grip. Rob should not have to see me this way.

I drew a deep breath, thankful now for a few minutes alone, and opened the Dooney to drop my keys into their accustomed pocket. I don't know how I'd missed seeing that card.

The extra card key to Rob's room lay innocently in one of the inner pockets of my handbag. It must have fallen out of its envelope last night, when I opened the door for Rob, and after that I'd completely forgotten there was a second key.

Voices coming down the corridor to my right made me jump—certainly not Rob's gorgeous velvet voice, but a couple of young girls who giggled and whispered to each other. The high level of anticipation could not be masked by their attempt at subtlety.

Their footsteps quickened as they approached the T-shaped wing where I stood just across from the elevators. The teens could have been on their way out of the hotel, of course, but I heard one of them whisper Rob's name. They were looking for him, and had somehow learned his room number. I could not be found here. Too many questions would be asked, too much assumed that could be made difficult for Rob. Under any other circumstances I would never have considered doing such a thing, but tonight I was desperate.

I put the card key in the lock and hurled myself through the heavy door as soon as it unlatched.

The room was a wreck, even worse than last night. Rob's (presumably) clean clothes were scattered all over the second bed as before, but now they covered a much larger area, as though he had upended the suitcase to find something he wanted and left the carnage for straightening up later. A new stack of dishes from Room Service sat on the small table to mark his breakfast choices (he had cleaned the plate so I couldn't tell what it was), and most curious was that the other bed was still unmade. Had the cleaning people not even been here today?

Wearily I sat my purse and tote bag on the dresser, gasping as I glanced at my face in the mirror. On the best days I have an extremely fair complexion; tonight I was the color of death—ashen—with my expression frozen into a grimace of shock, as though mortality had taken me completely by surprise.

I rushed to the bathroom (my brain registered later that Rob had left the toilet seat up) and straightened my clothes and hair, then turned on the tap and let the

water run until it was hot. I thrust my hands into the stream of warmth until I could really feel it; the sensation gradually spread through my arms and legs and I began to tremble a bit less. A couple of minutes later, the reflection looking back at me in the big mirror was much more like my own.

The sound of a key being thrust into the door lock made me jump. I returned to the dresser, hoping again that Rob would not be upset to find me here without his permission.

He burst through the door as if this room was his only sanctuary – as it might well have been – with a slight frown between his dark brows. In only another second he realized he was not alone, and it was like watching a wall come up all around him as he prepared to deal with an unwelcome intruder. *Poor sweetheart, this must happen a lot.*

I took a step toward him, into the golden glow of the table lamp. Rob's beautiful face relaxed into a dazzling smile.

"You're here," he said happily.

"I can explain about letting myself in –"

"It's all right, really. Now I don't have to wait."

"For what?" I asked breathlessly.

"This," he said, and fastened his mouth on mine in a sweet, lingering kiss that I was delighted to return. A moment later he straightened, to gently pull me into a warm hug. "I've wanted to do this all day," he murmured.

"Me too," I whispered into his chest. "You have no idea."

Without releasing me Rob sat down on the dresser and drew me between his long legs. I moved even closer to him, winding my arms around his neck. His arms tightened around me.

"That's better," he said. "Now you don't have to reach up so far. Hi."

"Hi," I said, and kissed his bristled cheek.

I must have been clinging a little too tightly, or he noticed some desperation in the way I clutched at him, but Rob only put his lips near my ear.

"Rough day?" he asked gently.

"Not as rough as yours, but I'm definitely glad to see you."

"You were supposed to have dinner with Jack tonight, weren't you? Did it not happen again?"

"No, it happened," I said, finally able to release my death-grip on his jacket.

Rob shifted so that I had to take a step back, allowing him to study my face with honest, searching eyes.

Gosh, he is so beautiful.

"Was he angry about last night? I'll talk to him, explain—"

"Sweetie, thanks, but he's not upset about last night—it was his idea to reschedule, remember? We met for dinner, and everything was okay."

"You are very pale, shaking all over and your heart is beating too fast for everything to be okay," he said, his voice kind but firm. "He did something to hurt you. Tell me."

"No," I whispered. "not now. Could we just stand here a minute?"

“As long as you want. I’m not letting you go.”

His embrace relaxed a bit as I gratefully leaned into him again, hiding my face in his shoulder; I’m not at all comfortable with being openly emotional. His warm, long-fingered hands came up to rub gently at the nape of my neck and then over my painfully tight shoulders. There was a welcome silence between us; Rob didn’t try to make conversation or ask questions that I wasn’t prepared to answer. He simply held me close, somehow folding his own body around mine, offering his warmth and strength, his goodness.

I felt it then, the sensation that Rob had forcibly restrained his own erratic energy (stoked, no doubt, by the soaring love vibrations shrieked at him all day, plus the certainty of sex with me tonight), drew it deep within himself and set it aside, just to be the man I needed at this moment. It was a gift of self that made him utterly precious to me. I could never let him go now, whatever this relationship of ours was destined to become.

My control returned soon enough (I’m Aquarius, so it’s my nature to compartmentalize problems in order to deal with them later) and I reluctantly released Rob, though his arms remained loosely clasped around me. I was unspeakably moved by his kindness.

“I’m all right,” I said shyly. “I can handle it now.”

“You’re sure? Because I have another shoulder if you need it.”

“Tempting, but not necessary – not right now, anyway. Thanks, though.”

“I’m amazed,” he said, grinning. “All of that without one scream.”

I pulled back to look directly into his twinkling eyes, his sweet, luminous face.

“The, uh, last girl never internalized *anything*. Whatever was on her mind came right out of her mouth at that exact moment, and very loudly. The only thing I could ever predict about her was that it would happen again, but never when. It was quite unsettling.”

And just like that, we were back on solid ground – together.

“If you want me to scream we’ll have to be doing something else,” I told him.

“Just what I was hoping for,” he said, and leaned forward to kiss me.

I waited in the messy bedroom while Rob took a shower (“I smell like a million different people,” he said ruefully), although he did invite me to join him.

My cell phone rang; I looked at the number and dropped the phone back into my purse. If Jack wanted to explain, fine – but he could talk to my voice mail.

Restless now, I moved to the bed, thinking to straighten the sheets before we climbed into them again. My hands brushed lightly over the white pillow that still bore the imprint of Rob’s head from this morning, and encountered something else just under it.

His shirt – the one I’d almost slept in last night. It was sadly the worse for wear now, unforgivably wrinkled for having been jammed under the pillows all day. The button placket had ripped beneath Rob’s wonderfully anxious hands but even intact it would have been useless, for not one button remained on the shirtfront. It pleased me to recall how this shirt had come to its present condition,

but I also remembered that this was not where I'd left it earlier today. It had seemed a bit foolish to fold it, but I had done so anyway and placed it neatly on top of Rob's suitcase.

He came from the bathroom just then, flinging drops of water from his hair, and stood there wearing only a towel--a small towel at that. He grinned as my eyes took in the incredible sight of him, warm and still wet, mostly naked.

"Rob," I lifted the ruined garment. "it looks like I owe you a shirt."

"Oh no, I want this one just the way it is," he said quickly, reaching to take it from me.

"I could replace the buttons--"

"No, it's fine. I'll put it with the others. Sorry about the room," he said conversationally, as if he *wasn't* standing there in a towel. "I don't let the maid come in to clean when I settle into a place. I guess I should have today, huh?"

I watched him in bemusement; something had made him nervous. Did he really think I cared about this room?

"Sweetie, it's okay," I said gently. "It doesn't matter about the room. I just don't remember leaving your shirt over here when I left this morning."

"You didn't," he mumbled, not looking at me. "I found it after you'd gone and, well, it has your perfume all over. I could still smell you in it, and I just... liked that. It helped me go back to sleep. You smell really good."

Someday I'll have to tell Rob that this tender little moment was when I fell in love with him. Since I wasn't actually aware of it myself at the time, I simply moved

to put my arms around him from behind and hugged him hard. He turned immediately to bend and give me a warm kiss that soon became urgent.

“I really didn’t want to rush things,” he panted against my lips. “but do you think you could undress now?”

“Sure,” I whispered. “Um, but you’ll have to let me go first. Rob.”

“Just trying to help.”

“I can do this part. Sit down—over there.”

He grinned so happily that I couldn’t help returning it. I was just about to kick off my shoes when my cell and Rob’s rang in tandem. We looked at each other and shrugged.

“Go ahead,” I said to him, going to my bag. As if I’d have needed to look. Still, I couldn’t disconnect the call without opening the flip-top phone, which action would connect me to the caller. It was that, or let it ring until the voice mail picked up. I opened the phone.

“Kimmy, just let me explain,” he said.

“Don’t call me that again. And I don’t need an explanation. I saw enough to know what’s going on.”

“You have every right to be upset—”

“I’m not upset. It happened, and now it’s over.”

“Are you still in the hotel?”

“Yeah, how’d you guess?”

“There’s no answer at your house. Where are you—I’ll come up—”

“NO,” I nearly shouted, my nerves already frayed too thin by the strain of this useless conversation. Facing him now would be completely impossible. “I’m with Rob, and... we were just leaving.”

“Giving him a tour of Seattle, or your bedroom?”

I hung up on him. Stood there holding my phone in a hand that was visibly shaking again. I hate confrontation; I’m just no good at it.

Behind me, Rob stood up and discarded his towel.

“I’ll get dressed,” he offered quietly. “and we can go.”

I looked at him in surprise. He shrugged and stepped into a pair of jeans.

“You told him we were leaving. Where to?”

“Home,” I said, and my voice cracked.

“Home it is, then.”

By the time I turned the car north on I-5, I was ready to talk about it.

Rob listened attentively as I described the long years of my partnership with Jack, the complexities and pleasures of working as closely as we did and finally, my complete puzzlement at this last, bizarre twist.

Having said it all, the anger and frustration gave way to an odd fatigue that I would not allow any hold over this evening. If this was truly the last time I would see Rob, the night could not be wasted on anything negative.

He put his left hand over my right, where it rested on the gear shift (a longtime habit after driving a stick almost exclusively since I was 16).

"I've only met him once," Rob said thoughtfully. "and don't be upset when I say this, please – but it was obvious that he cares about you. His affection was real, I'm sure of it."

Before I could ask how he arrived at this notion, the lovely man grinned widely. "I *pretend* for a living – that's the job, not the real me – it's easy to spot someone else doing the same thing. Jack knew he had someone valuable in you, a friend, partner. He trusted you with almost every bit of his life, except the one thing he couldn't give you – himself. Maybe that's why he used you all those years."

"I thought it was just because I couldn't say no."

"That's part of it too, but think about it – he demanded all your time and attention so you'd feel needed and stay with him. Maybe he really didn't want to use you in the one way that would have driven you out of his life – like what he's doing with this other woman. You don't really think he loves *her*, do you?"

"I wouldn't know. You're very insightful for just having heard all this."

"It isn't emotional for me," he said simply. "Last night you told me you loved him – as a friend, yes, I know – but he is definitely not acting like a friend right now. Just try not to hate him for it. You were happy for a long time; don't let tonight be the only thing you remember about him."

"Then why would he say...that...at the end?"

"Because he's a complete and utter ass who got caught doing something that he knew would hurt you, and now he knows he's lost you forever."

Rob squeezed my hand, then my shoulder, and his fingers brushed gently at my cheek. "Did I say too much?"

"No," I replied truthfully. "it was just enough."

"Good. Because when we get to your place I'm taking you directly to bed, and I don't want anyone else in there with us."

"Rob, I like the way you think."

We didn't go *directly* to bed. Arriving home, I watched in satisfaction as Rob exclaimed happily at my extensive collection of books, music and movies. He moved around the living room, the adjoining dining area that served as an office of sorts and into my small, but well-appointed kitchen. His eyes were alight with pleasure.

"This is wonderful," he said sincerely. "It's really a home. Everything is just where it should be."

"After a while you learn how to live in small spaces," I said. "But I've been really happy here."

"How long?"

"About two years."

"The pictures, the colors," he mused, returning to the living room. "they all go together perfectly. I want to look at every single thing in here – but not tonight. There's only one more room I need to see. Show me?"

“This way,” I whispered, and took his hand to lead him down the short hallway.

Suddenly shy, I went to the bed and began to remove the extra pillows, turn down the comforter. Behind me, the door gently clicked shut, and I looked back at Rob, whose eyes burned in his pale face.

“Mine now,” he whispered.

My mouth went so dry that I could only smile at him, but I became very wet in other places. Symbolic or not, Rob’s gesture of shutting out everything except the two of us was significant. I was moved again by his generous passion and again, a little surprised to find it directed at me.

Those thoughts came later, of course.

The moment Rob took me in his arms the world instantly narrowed to this one small room. When his soft, warm lips fastened gently on mine and began that sensual, open-mouthed kissing, I forgot where we were.

When he ground his hips into mine and his hard cock rubbed insistently against my belly, I only knew where we *weren’t*. I raised my hands to his chest and pressed until he lifted his face.

“Need you,” I whispered. “Now.”

Clothes were discarded with due haste—Rob simply threw his to the floor, but I didn’t do much better—and after a 60-second pause that lasted an eternity (finally, completely naked), Rob’s arms drew me back to his warm body as we sank into my comfortable bed.

He continued kissing me, with eager thrusts of his tongue, licking and nibbling on my lower lip as though we had been separated by days instead of hours.

“You taste so good,” he whispered.

“There’s more,” I said, drawing his head down to my breasts, already peaked, aching with need. In a sweet, perfect repeat of last night, his mouth latched on to each stiff, pale nipple in turn. He made quick flicking motions with his tongue, followed by gentle suction from his lips and then he set his teeth against each tight little bud and sucked hard – carefully, of course, but with enough pressure that my entire body writhed beneath his. I cried out in pleasure, and he smiled.

“I’m going to do this all over you,” he promised.

Rob kept his word.

I lost count of how many times I reached for him that night. And every time I sought him he was there, eager to gently open my thighs and press his hard, smooth-skinned manhood deep into my body. When I desired it, he plunged recklessly and fast, driving us relentlessly to a shared, sticky-wet climax that was every bit as satisfying as those moments when he cradled me in his arms and held me close while he loved me slowly and so gently that I could feel his living heart beating quietly in my own breast.

My body had been made for his.

It was all I could think of, when (at last) there was time to think. Rob slept deeply – as I should have been doing also – his long limbs draped over mine, heavy with fatigue and satiation. I studied his quiet face, beautiful even in the darkened

room. He moved once to nestle closer, resting his stubbled cheek on the cool skin of my bare shoulder. It was then I began to contemplate what had just happened between us.

At first I thought his young age would be the deterrent, but such had not been the case; I had seen him handle pressure from Jack, ill health and anxiety (mine and his own) in a considerate, mature manner that was very respect-worthy. He treated me with kindness and deference, with trust and generosity. He gave easily of himself even as he lived in the fragile fishbowl of celebrity, where his every waking moment was documented in lush detail and spread all over the world, so that complete strangers felt they knew as much about him as he did himself. And still, he was kind to all those he encountered.

I knew he was a talented musician; the two songs he contributed to the *Twilight* soundtrack were my favorites. He was self-deprecating and self-conscious, like me. And like me, he was lonely.

We had been given this chance to connect with each other and (fortunately) had accepted it. There was no way of knowing what future might be possible for the beautiful, gifted young man whose star was glowing white-hot these days and me—a middle-aged...well, whatever I was.

But as I lay there with Rob's breath warm on my skin and his body constantly seeking the closeness of mine, I realized the future didn't really matter. What would be, would be—whether we gave it any help or not. Truly, there was only right now,

and right now I was Rob's friend and blissed-out lover. I would still be both those things tomorrow, even if I never saw him again after this night.

Satisfied (for the moment) that I could probably handle whatever happened next, I felt a very strong need for something cold to drink. I slid off the bed and into Rob's discarded shirt, made sure he was covered warmly, and padded off to the kitchen.

I had completely forgotten about leaving cookies on the counter; only half of them had been dipped in chocolate. I grimaced at the thought of melting more chocolate at this hour (it was nearly 2am), but couldn't leave the tray unprotected all night, either.

Crap. Now I have to put this stuff up.

But first I went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of sparkling water, chugging down a healthy swallow. My body responded very favorably to the cold, carbonated liquid (had sex ever made me *this* thirsty before? I didn't think so – then again, I'd never had this much sex in one night before), and soon I felt able to deal with the tray of cookies. It was only necessary to store them in airtight containers, then I could go back to bed with Rob – he would never know I'd been gone.

As I leaned into the fridge to return the bottle of water a splash of color in the door caught my eye. Red. A jar of strawberry jam. And suddenly I had an idea.

It took just a minute to spoon a bit of jam onto a plate. Cold as it was, the stuff didn't seem really spreadable (that would likely mean putting it in the microwave or warming it on the stovetop – options for later) but the sweet-smelling

goop actually did lend itself nicely to the first cookie, and it was much prettier than chocolate. The taste was better than I expected as well, the tangy strawberry mixture made a wonderful contrast to the buttery richness of shortbread. I thought I might be onto something here – without giving up the popular chocolate, I could offer Kira’s potential customers a choice. This could be a very good thing. I picked up a pastry brush and got to work.

His arms slipped around me from behind as I finished coating the last cookie.

“Hi,” I said happily.

“Hi,” he bent to kiss my cheek.

“Was I making too much noise?”

“No. I got lonely – why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, turning to embrace him. He was still beautifully naked, with that delicious scent of warm, sleepy male hovering over his skin. No cookie ever baked would smell as good as Rob did just then. “I only got up for something to drink –”

“Oh, good idea – in here?” he let go of me with one hand to reach eagerly for a bottle of water, which he gulped down as thirstily as I had done earlier. “What are you doing?”

I gave him a description of Kira’s Kitchen, briefly explaining my idea and plan, and finished with how I had the thought of using both chocolate and strawberry jam. The whole thing seemed less important now that I was in Rob’s

arms again; all I could think of was getting his beautiful, warm body into bed. Into me.

“This is a wonderful idea,” he said sincerely. “Can I have one?”

He ate the first cookie quickly (admittedly, they’re fairly small) then started on another while I hastily filled a couple of containers.

Looking at him was my undoing. His hair stood up in all directions (and not even that made him unattractive). His beard was a little heavier now, a strong contrast to his cut-glass cheekbones and the dream-like gentleness around his eyes.

But it was the tiny splotch of strawberry jam on his lower lip that got me salivating for him. Rob waved a third cookie as he noticed I was staring at him.

“Bloody good,” he mumbled, and took another bite.

I grabbed him firmly by the shoulders and pulled him down to me, planting my mouth on his as I savored the new taste of strawberry Rob. His lips opened for me and I could also taste the cookie he’d just finished.

I’m a pretty good baker, actually.

I pressed my body against his, indicating that he move with me out of the kitchen. Rob snickered but pulled me tightly to him, so I could feel his shaft rise and harden.

“What – we’re not going to do it on the counter?” he teased, but he was pulling me forward as quickly as possible.

“Not while there’s a bed close by,” I assured him. “Oh Rob, wait –”

“No, can’t wait,” he muttered.

I pushed him down until he sat on the sofa, breathing hard, wild-eyed. His cock stood straight out from its thick, chestnut-colored nest. In a singularly graceful movement (probably never to be duplicated in this lifetime) I shed Rob's tee shirt and moved quickly to seat myself on his thighs.

He moaned when my hand slipped between our bodies to gently stroke his throbbing shaft. His lips brushed my sensitive throat.

"Put me inside you," he whispered.

"Yes," I said, and positioned my body so that I could coat the tip of his cock with the wetness pooling between my legs. Then slowly, carefully, I lowered myself onto him, stopping only when he was completely sheathed in me.

Rob leaned back as I began to rock gently, his eyes closed, lips parted slightly. His hands clasped both my hips to steady me as my pace increased.

"Oh yeah," he breathed. "Kim, can you — ah! — harder, please."

The truth is I prefer my man on top, mostly for this reason. I love to feel his body moving on mine, hips pistoning, his hard shaft thrusting its way to the very entrance of my womb. If I'm on top the sensation is no less pleasant, but it is quite different. Still, because Rob asked it of me, I wanted to try something that I'd only read about.

I leaned toward him enough to grab the back of the sofa. This put my breasts very close to his face, a position we both enjoyed. With Rob still buried deep inside me I spread my legs open a little wider — he moaned appreciatively. I lifted myself almost completely off him, and then slammed back down. Again and again, finding

a perfect rhythm that made Rob arch and quiver beneath me while his soft lips continually clamped onto my nipples until I was soaking wet and each of us strained so very hard to delve even deeper into the other.

Rob's arms encircled my heaving body, keeping me safely balanced atop him, but occasionally his hands moved to cup a round breast or a curving hip, and I wiggled in pleasure. But then he reached down to gently tickle my swollen, neglected clit, his long fingers moving easily to collect the dewy nectar from the place where our bodies were joined, rubbing the moisture over my tightened bud, and I came so violently, so unexpectedly, that I shrieked from the force of it. Only his hard kiss kept me from waking the neighbors.

"That's what I wanted," he growled. "Come for me."

"Now you," I gasped.

And then he pressed me down to the sofa, covering my body with his, still pulsing hard and hot within me. I shivered in anticipation as Rob gathered himself to lunge.

There was only the pleasure he gave so generously. I wrapped my arms and legs around his beautiful body, whispering his name as he thrust and withdrew and thrust wildly nearly a dozen times. At last, his entire body clenched and I knew it was time. Rob set his mouth against my shoulder and emptied himself into me with a deep, throaty moan of satisfaction.

We lay together like that until it became too uncomfortable to stay there. Rob peeled himself off me and pulled me carefully to my feet, rubbing briskly at my chilled hands.

“You’re freezing,” he said kindly. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t have the energy for anything more.

He snickered again, but when I leaned into his wonderfully warm body he simply held me close and guided us quietly to the bedroom. He tucked me in on the right side and slipped in behind me on the left, pulling me firmly against him. I shivered hard for a moment, but the combination of Rob’s warmth and my luscious bedcovers soon had me relaxed and sleepy. I had to do one more thing before letting myself go tonight. I turned back to Rob and pressed my lips to his.

“It’s never been like that for me before,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

Rob kissed me back. “It was wonderful. I’m glad we waited till tonight.”

“Why?”

“I wanted it to be right. We wouldn’t have had enough time this morning.”

“And we don’t have to sleep on scratchy sheets, either.”

“Just another reason this was the best place to be tonight. Sleep now, love.”

“Will you be here when I wake up?”

“Yes. And I won’t let go of you till then.”

It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me. I kissed him good-night and turned back to snuggle into my pillow, filled with a kind of peace I’d

never felt before. If my body had been made to join with his, it seemed possible that – given sufficient time – my heart might also find safe haven in his care.

The car picked him up just before 6pm on Sunday. Until that moment, it had been a perfectly wonderful day.

Rob woke me that morning by gently brushing his lips over my closed eyelids. When my lashes fluttered – indicating that I was waking up – the soft lips moved lower to caress my own, and when I responded eagerly to that, he kissed pretty much everything else.

“Your skin is really beautiful,” he whispered later, bending to nuzzle the top of my pale breast.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, waiting for the inevitable comment about how I 1) glowed in the dark; 2) had vampire tendencies, or 3) had lived underground all my life. Rob said none of those things, but laughed when I explained what I’d been thinking.

I held him close to me in the shower, searching his beautiful body with soap-slick hands for places I hadn’t kissed yet (and there weren’t many). I really just wanted to memorize him. He would probably have to be on his way soon, either right after this shower or perhaps after breakfast, but I knew I couldn’t keep him much longer. We had known each other for only two days and yet, my heart already dreaded that unavoidable good-bye.

As I carefully divided an omelet onto two plates I told myself sternly to suck it up. Rob couldn't stay — there was no real reason he would want to — and I needed to accept that fact so he could leave today without a scene from a hysterical woman. Okay, *not* hysterical; that isn't my style. But I still didn't want him to see that his exit from my life was going to hurt me. With a face that showed all my thoughts (even as I tried to control it) I wasn't sure I should look at him today, knowing I couldn't stand to do otherwise.

He came to the table when I called, and bent to kiss my cheek.

"This looks great — I'm starving," he grinned.

"Dinner was a long time ago," I agreed.

"We worked it all off, too."

He was right; for several minutes we both ate ravenously. He was also mannerly, waiting until I picked up my own fork before touching his, refilling our juice glasses from the pitcher I had set on the table without any prompting. He accepted the last sweet, red seedless grape from my plate, but not until I offered it, bending his head so that I could place the fruit in his mouth while his eyes twinkled.

"You can cook," he said later. "It was so good. I can't wait to see what you'll make us for lunch. Could I look through your books?"

"Sure," I said automatically as I cleared the table — which Rob also offered to do — when I realized that he intended to stay with me a bit longer. The surprise had to show on my face--and in my voice, too, because he turned back from the living room to look at me.

“Kim, I wasn’t thinking at all. I should have asked if you’d made other plans for today.”

“I didn’t,” I said hastily.

“Then...is it all right if I stay here with you?”

“Of course it’s all right, Rob. I’d love for you to be here.”

He grinned, but there was relief in it. “Good. I really don’t want to go back to the hotel.”

“Wait – don’t we need to go get your things?”

“No,” he said simply. “There are people who take care of that. I just have to show up at the next place when it’s time.”

That sounded flat-out lonely to me.

“Well then, how long will I have you today?” I asked.

“Until about six, if that’s all right.”

“I’m not sure that’ll be long enough, but it’ll have to do. Explore away, sweetie.”

He perused my bookshelves while I straightened the kitchen – if I was going to make lunch I needed the countertops and sink cleared of dirty dishes – and I heard him chuckle upon finding the boxed set of *Twilight*, volumes I-IV.

“I like vampires,” I said to his quirky grin. But I made sure he also saw the other vampire books and movies that I’d been collecting for years.

He moved quietly through the entertainment center, occasionally choosing a book or movie for inspection. Though it wasn't in plain sight, he invariably found the *Twilight* DVD. I'm sure I blushed for no apparent reason.

Rob tapped a finger on his own face as I came up beside him.

"This guy is such a dork," he said playfully. I assumed he meant Edward Cullen, but with his penchant for self-deprecation it was hard to tell. "I can't believe you bought this."

"Kind of had to," I said blithely. "He's a friend of mine."

"Oh," Rob said softly and replaced the DVD in its niche.

"I support my friends, but Edward Cullen isn't one of them."

Rob hugged me tightly. I looked up into his apprehensive face, anxious to soothe him.

"Rob, I know that you and Edward are two completely different people—and he's not even real. You are. And you are so much more than a teenage vampire."

"I'll never get away from him," he fretted.

"Yes, you will," I said with certainty. "You're already doing it every time you choose a new role. Each new character will be as different from the vampire as you are yourself. I think you just need to keep doing that—and people will start to realize that the only thing those characters ever had in common was the incredible actor who played them."

He kissed me sweetly on the lips. "Thank you--for seeing me, not him."

“You’re welcome, Rob. Besides, if it doesn’t work out with the future projects just remember — all the teenagers chasing you right now have to grow up *eventually*.”

Rob’s cell beeped and he glanced at it in irritation, then sighed.

“I have to take this — it’s my agent.”

I squeezed him gently, and let him go. He wandered back toward the bedroom, head bent over the stylish BlackBerry in his hands. His long fingers moved as quickly over that tiny pad as mine did across a regular computer keyboard. Maybe I’d get him to teach me the finer points of texting — I thought it might be a useful tool if I was going to communicate regularly with a guy who never sat down long enough to write anything by hand. I smiled at the newborn certainty (even if I didn’t quite know where it came from) that this would not be the last time Rob and I would speak to each other.

His beautiful voice floated back to me for a few minutes, its tone respectful but strong. I imagined he was not often *told* what to do. I puttered in the kitchen during this time, taking stock of any ingredients that could be pulled together for lunch. It was several minutes later that I realized Rob had stopped talking but remained in the bedroom. He was quiet for so long that I (as usual) began to think something had gone wrong. Only one thing could truly ruin this day.

I walked toward the bedroom with my heart beating painfully hard.

Please, not yet. I haven’t had him long enough yet.

Rob stood by the oak bench at the foot of my bed, completely relaxed. His right hand pressed an object against his face while he breathed in deeply with his eyes tightly closed – the camisole I had worn yesterday.

I waited quietly in the doorway until he lowered the soft cotton garment and looked up, a little startled to see me there.

“Oh...hi,” he grinned, trying to hide a charming blush. “I ...like your perfume. What is it called?”

“Coco,” I whispered. “by Chanel.”

“It’s wonderful – what’s wrong?” he asked sharply.

“Are they...coming to get you?”

“No,” he said in puzzlement. Then he looked at my face and reached out a hand to me. I went to his arms without hesitation, and was soon cuddled safely against his chest.

“You thought I was leaving now instead of this evening? I’m sorry; no, I have to check in at least once before I get on a plane, in case the itinerary has changed. And I had to tell him where to pick me up later. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I murmured into his shirt. *Don’t go, Rob.*

Rob sat down on the bench and looked up at me. “You look sad. I don’t want you to be sad.”

“I...” I wanted to acknowledge this feeling, if only this once. If Rob had been anyone else, I wouldn’t have been able to say it. “...I just don’t want you to leave yet, that’s all.”

"I will have to go—we already know that—but I don't want to. Sit down here for a minute; we might as well do this now."

I sat beside him. Rob took my very small right hand into his long-fingered left hand, and turned his face to me. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear this next part, but it obviously had to be said.

"I think there's something happening between us," he said slowly. "Not just the sex—and that's been incredibly great—but a connection. It started for me in the elevator. I knew I could not let you get away."

"And I felt right then that I couldn't leave you."

"Yeah, we were brought together. I believe in karma."

"I do, too."

"Ah, good," he smiled. "Something else we have in common. But now I have this very strange job. I'm literally all over the place and hardly more than two days at a time. It's getting very hard to keep myself together; I guess you could see that."

"I only saw someone who was stressed and exhausted. I've seen that before."

"I really *want* to tell you that I'll be back to see you in a month or so, or at least that I'll be working somewhere long enough for you to come visit me, but it might not be true. I would rather tell you the truth."

"Yes, tell me the truth," I said firmly. "No matter what."

"The only thing I can promise is that I'll stay in touch. You'll have all my numbers and I'll have yours, and I will talk to you every day for as long as you want to hear from me."

"You don't have to promise me 'every day,' sweetie. Some days you'll be too busy or too tired to chat. I understand about that; it'll be all right. Let's just not lose each other, okay?"

Rob kissed my fingers. "No, let's not do that."

I stood up then, feeling positively brazen. "Let's do something else instead."

"Oh?" he grinned. "Like what?"

"Close your eyes," I said, leaning toward him. He did so, and I pulled the collar of my shirt open just in front of his face. Rob caught the fragrance I wore as it rose in a warm, sweet-smelling cloud. He moaned and slipped his arms around my waist.

"I thought you might tell me if the scent is better in my clothes, or directly from my skin," I whispered to him.

"I need to explore a little further," he murmured, his lips pressed into the upper curve of my breast. "but I think it's the skin..."

Later, just before we slipped into a nice little catnap, I kissed him.

"I promise to be there whenever you want to talk," I said.

Rob only smiled and turned his face into my shoulder, and then drifted off.

"Where will you be going from here?"

“South Africa, I think,” Rob said, glancing at his phone. “Yeah – Johannesburg first, then Cape Town.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Twilight fans are all over the world,” he shrugged.

“I guess so. That’s a seriously long plane ride.”

“And I don’t look forward to it,” he grinned. “but there’s no other way.”

“Cape Town is really beautiful, if you get to see any of it. I know people there.”

“Really? If you’d like to visit them now I could give you a ride.”

I leaned over to kiss his smiling lips. “There’s a thought.”

“The flight’s about thirty-two hours from Seattle – we could cuddle together for a long time.”

“That’s what I’m thinking about.”

“What are you going to do with that?” Rob indicated the bowl in my hands and then looked at the items on the kitchen counter in some confusion.

“Lunch is going to be something called Chicken Crescents,” I said. “I make them all the time, they’re really good. Want to help?”

“I’m not good in the kitchen, but sure,” Rob said, and rose from his chair as I opened the crescent roll dough and separated the eight triangles on the counter.

“You can do this, it’s easy. I’ve already mixed the boned chicken and cream cheese together, so now you can put a spoonful of the chicken stuff on each triangle until they all have about the same amount.

“Now, take the top two corners and pull them over the chicken—it’s fine just like that—and roll it up the rest of the way. Stuffed like this, it won’t be a crescent shape.

“Roll this in the melted butter, make sure it’s coated on the ends too, and then roll it again in the stuffing mix till it’s covered. Now it goes on the cookie sheet. Start the next one while I turn on the oven, okay?”

Rob’s first solo crescent roll was a bit lopsided, but no worse than the first one I made more than 20 years ago. He studied the movements of my hands as they worked beside his, and soon his long fingers were confidently creating the same neat, compact shapes. In just a few minutes the cookie sheet was ready to be put into the oven.

“That was easy,” he said happily.

“They are easy,” I agreed, very pleased that I could share my love of cooking with him. “and they come out right every time.”

“I think you’re a natural teacher. Show me something else.”

The day was like that, a gentle give-and-take between us, a sharing of knowledge and abilities. The discomfort I expected to feel at having a man so close to my safe place (home is the only place I ever feel emotionally safe) never materialized with Rob there. Though I couldn’t discern any justification for it, he seemed genuinely interested in me and my life.

After lunch we sat together on the sofa, each of us wearing the same, satisfied grin at the memory of our 2am romp there. This time we talked.

Rob asked pointed questions about my family life, favorite things, friends and work. I told him about my beloved beagles Daisy and Bonnie and our decade-long love affair. I lost them in 1989, but will never stop loving them. I was even able to tell him about the dreams that occurred when I was over-tired and over-stressed, where my girls come to me. I drop to my knees and they run into my arms for the long, loving hugs we used to share. Their perfect, unending love often kept hope alive in my heart.

Rob listened to me attentively, with only kindness and understanding etched into his beautiful face. It was much later--after he'd gone--that I realized there had not been a single moment of embarrassment for me as I exposed my vulnerable heart for his inspection.

He cuddled with me on the sofa as we half-heartedly watched *Iron Man*, his arms wrapped securely around me as his lips frequently brushed my cheek and the nape of my neck. About halfway into the movie I asked if he wanted something to drink.

"That'd be nice," he said gently. "Could I have a cookie, too?"

"Of course. No, I'll get them—I've seen this movie a few times already."

As I returned to the sofa with a plate of cookies and bottles of soda, Rob pointed to my black tote bag on the floor near us.

"What's that in your bag?"

“Oh, I forgot about that. Remember I told you about Kira’s Kitchen and the sample basket? This is what the sample looks like,” I said, lifting it out of my tote to show him.

“It’s brilliant,” he said sincerely. “Kim, I love this idea, really. I don’t know how you could *not* succeed with it. Let me have this one, please?”

“You can have it,” I grinned. If only Jack had been this supportive.

And so went the afternoon. Eventually it was 4:45, then 5:30, and my heart grew a little heavier as the minutes seemed to speed past. Rob grabbed the notepad and pen from my coffee table and began to write quickly in his bold, legible hand a series of telephone numbers, followed by a couple of e-mail addresses.

“The first two are my private lines,” he explained. “The third is my agent’s number and the fourth is my parents’ phone—just in case. I don’t check e-mail as often, but you can text me at either one, just like I showed you. I’ll tell everyone that they might get a call from you if you haven’t been able to reach me, and they’ll need to find me right away. There, that should do it for me; do I have all the numbers to contact you?”

Rob returned the business card I’d given him so that I could add my home address on the back, with the hotmail.com e-mail account that I used for IM chats with Jeff, also just in case. His phone chirped, indicating a text message.

“It’s them,” he said quietly. “About ten minutes away. I’m sorry; I thought they’d give me more notice than this.”

"It's all right," I assured him, though I certainly did not feel it. "We need to get you ready. Have you got everything?"

He took a look around my place, but there was virtually nothing to collect since he had left everything at the hotel. I found a Starbuck's bag under the kitchen sink with both handles intact, and put the cookie basket inside it for easier carrying. When Rob ducked into the bathroom I hurried to the bedroom to retrieve the soft white camisole that still bore my perfume. I folded it into a neat little bundle and tucked it carefully in the Starbuck's bag. Maybe it was assuming a bit much, but I wanted Rob to have something of me to take with him.

We came together in the living room for a hard, warm embrace. I pushed my face into Rob's chest, trying to memorize his own scent.

"I should have loved you one more time this afternoon," he said roughly. "I wanted to—"

"No," I said quickly. "I didn't want them to drag us out of bed; that would have been too hard, Rob."

"You're right, of course. Too hard."

He began to tremble in my arms. If my shaking hands were any indication, he felt the same thing from me. *Don't cry*, I thought. *Let him go. Don't cry*. The damn tears filled my eyes anyway.

"This was the best time I've ever had, Rob. Thank you for these two days."

"Kim, *you saved me*. You don't know how close I was to losing it that night. It would have happened if you hadn't been there. Thank *you*."

"I'm glad it was me," I said fiercely. "I'll always be glad."

"Me too," he whispered. "I have to kiss you now, love."

"Sweetie," I murmured, raising my head so that his warm hands could gently cup my face and tilt it back until his mouth fastened firmly on mine. It was a long, tender, caressing kiss without the sexual hunger of earlier today. This one tasted of promises made, and regretful farewell.

Rob drew back only enough to touch his lips to the single tear that rolled down my pale cheek. When I finally looked up at him, his eyes were not wet but they held volumes of sadness.

"Don't cry," he breathed. "I can't bear it if you cry."

"I won't, I promise."

And then I heard someone coming up the steps to my door. Rob and I looked at each other in painful silence, waiting for the polite knock which followed. He straightened first.

"Let me," he said. "It's not that I don't want them to see you—I'm just not ready to share you yet. Okay?"

"Okay." It was totally okay. I didn't want to see them, anyway.

Rob went to the door and spoke quietly. I couldn't hear most of what he said, except for the last—"I need just a moment, please." He walked back to me and drew me close for one final hug.

"Will you do something for me?" he asked gently.

"Of course, anything."

“Um...don’t be mad, but would you not walk me to the car? I want to remember you like this, here in your living room with all your nice things around you. I can just pretend you’re on your way to the kitchen, or something. It’ll be too hard to leave if you go to the car with me.”

“Not mad,” I said truthfully. “And if I don’t see you leave, it’ll be easier to pretend that you’re coming right back.”

He looked very relieved, managing a small but perfect grin. “See, we *do* think alike. Now, kiss me again and give me my cookie basket, and I’ll be off.”

I kissed him again – and again – and then put the Starbuck’s bag in his hand. I only walked with him as far as my front door.

Rob put his hand to my cheek once more, and gave me a smile. “Promise you won’t let go of me,” he said, reminiscent of our conversation just before meeting Jack.

“I promise I will not let you go,” I replied.

His grin was bright and warm as he bent to kiss me lightly one last time, and then he yanked open the door and disappeared through it as quickly as possible. I stood in the tiny entryway until the car pulled away. Until it registered in my mind and my heart that he wouldn’t be running back up the steps today.

I did not cry. I was sad, but I could manage this.

My footsteps wandered back to the living room, where we had just been standing together. I always thought this place was too small for two people to live in, but with Rob immediately gone the sudden emptiness was almost frightening.

An unfamiliar beep from my cell phone drew my attention to the coffee table where I'd left it. Oh, a text message – the very first.

Miss you already, he wrote. You ok?

Miss you more, I said. Not ok – you?

Not ok at all :(Call you from the airport.

And he did.

The apologies started rolling in two days later. It must have taken that long to work up the nerve – for which I gave him snaps – but this was the first time his velvety voice didn't change my mind.

It began with a brief voice mail message at home, asking if he could explain the situation. I wasn't quite ready for his version of what happened, so that message somehow got itself deleted.

He tried my cell next, and that message also went to voice mail because I was busy (and happy) texting with Rob, who was not enjoying the temperatures in South Africa but having fun there anyway.

A vase of blood-red miniature roses arrived a day later. I knew they were from Jack without looking at the card. He sent this same bouquet for my birthday quite a few times in our years together. The card said simply "I'm sorry."

His e-mail late that week was an exhausting account of his life since I'd left UCSF and in spite of my reluctance to lend more energy to his endless drama, I did read through the entire message. It was a sad truth that he did have some issues I

was not aware of—his marriage ended soon after their youngest child left home for college. The newly-empty house was just too oppressive for his wife, who had long been accustomed to Jack not being there.

He promised — *promised* — me that getting involved with his secretary was unplanned, something that just happened. I believed that. He was untethered after twenty-five years and completely terrified about it. Tracy responded to his charm and the unfamiliar vulnerability that made him seem a lot more human. I'd have done the same thing in her place — but that didn't excuse the fact (in my mind, anyway) that he was with Tracy, not because he had finally realized a great passion for her, but because she was convenient. She was simply there. Friendship or not, I knew beyond a doubt that he would have come for me with the same intent. I would have been his fluffy, familiar security blanket, with benefits.

His message ended with an assurance that he loved and needed me in his life. If I would forgive him and return to California he would stop seeing Tracy and set up the home with me that he had always wanted.

That was how I knew it wouldn't happen. After fifteen years (5 of them in San Francisco) of successfully evading faculty and staff who believed we were already sleeping together, Jack would never be able to introduce me back to the department as his girlfriend. Doing so would only prove they'd been right, you see.

I didn't lose any sleep over it, but let the response germinate until the next day. It was late afternoon when I sat down to answer Jack's e-mail. In the end,

though I could have explained at length, it seemed the direct approach would work best.

I told him gently that he was forgiven. I loved and valued him and wished he had told me about his divorce when it happened; he would always be important to me, and I would not trade our years together for anything in the world. And then, just as gently, I wished him every good thing and predicted that he would soon find his happiness – but not with me.

As I clicked the *send* button I sat back to wait for the wave of guilt or despair or panic that must surely be gathering around me over this difficult deed. It never came.

Instead, there was a distinct sensation of calm, the certainty that this particular door was now closed and should have been so for a long, long time. A new feeling brushed lightly at my fragile psyche immediately after, coinciding with the day's third text from Rob which said curiously, *I found it*.

Found what?

My name for you.

What is it??

Gem.

Huh?

I'm calling –

His beautiful voice held a note of happy excitement. "There's a type of diamond down here called Kimberlite, did you know?"

“No, never heard of it.”

“First I thought that was it, you could be my Kimberlite--”

“Aww,” I murmured, delighted mostly to be thought of as his.

“—but that was too long, and then I saw some jewelry made with this diamond that they cut into regular-sized gemstones and it just fit perfectly. You’re my *gem*.”

“And you’re my sweetie, Rob. I will happily answer to your name for me.”

“Excellent,” he said warmly. “Your voice sounds so good; talk to me for a while. What did you do today, dear Gem?”

As I switched off the computer monitor to better concentrate on his call I realized that one door in my life had closed just as another was flung wide open.

And the new sensation I couldn’t identify a few minutes ago definitely had a name now--it was Rob. It was love.

For anyone who has never been to Seattle or the Pacific Northwest, it is safe to say that Fall looks just like Summer — which looks like Spring and Winter. We just have a tremendous amount of rain from November to February, and it had been raining steadily for two full weeks.

It was Fall before I allowed myself to acknowledge that this “thing” with Rob was a real relationship, and it wasn’t going away.

He was comfortable with *us* much sooner than I was, even as the physical distance between us increased every day. I had no real problem with the prolonged

separation (aside from missing him terribly), but it seemed inevitable that one day he would wake up in some faraway corner of the world and come to his senses. The expectation of that phone call or message eventually became excruciatingly stressful, though I still counted on hearing from him. Rob called it my first freak-out.

“And you’ll have others,” he assured me. “Every time you look at the Internet you’ll see that I’m sleeping with someone new or that we’re buying houses together. It’s all such stupid crap – don’t believe any of it. You don’t, do you?”

“No,” I said, and it was true.

Rob’s voice became tense, even over the phone. “Are we talking about something else, then?”

“Uh, no – like what?”

“Maybe you’re tired of waiting. Maybe you’re trying to tell me it’s time to –”

“NO. Rob, no, that’s not it. Please don’t ever think that. I *want* you in my life, so much. And I’ve lived alone a long time – I can handle that part. Sometimes I just get scared that you’ll start wondering why you’re in a relationship with me when you could have anyone you want.”

“Gem, I already know why I’m in a relationship with you. I love you.”

“Oh,” I said breathlessly. Rob cleared his throat.

“I could have found a better way to say that – are you still with me?”

“Yes, of course. Yes.”

“And I’m still with you. I wish I could be there every day, but we can’t have that right now.”

"I've always understood that. It isn't easy, but I knew it was part of the package."

"I have to believe my life won't be like this forever, but some days I just wouldn't get through it if you weren't out there."

"I love you, too," I whispered.

"Ah, Kim...now I *really* need to see you."

With filming on *Eclipse* now completed and *New Moon* opening in November Rob's schedule became berserk, as did some of the antics attempted by his more determined fans. The things I saw on the Internet began to make me fear for his safety. His politeness never wavered as complete strangers broke through the security barriers and ran to him, their hands clutching at his hair, his clothes, his entire body. He actually smiled at a woman who cupped his face between her hands as he bent to open the limo door – and then he simply stepped away from her.

That night he called me in tears.

I talked to him quietly until he could tell me what happened. It was soon obvious that he wasn't really upset about the aggressive behavior of his fans; the loss of privacy was something he had been trained to deal with from the moment it looked like *Twilight* was a hit. What they couldn't prepare him for was the unrelenting, nightmarish schedule problems. Even Rob's strong young body needed rest, and he was too-frequently not getting enough of that.

I shushed and soothed him as best I could, suddenly hating the phone in my hand. I should be there with him now, close enough to pull him tightly into my

arms and let him cry out his exhaustion, the homesickness, all his doubts and fears that inevitably rose to the surface after suppressing so much for so long. I hurt so badly for him.

But it wouldn't do at all for me to add the burden that Rob already carried. Instead, I went to the bedroom and pulled a well-worn volume from the small bookcase near the bed, and began to read aloud a collection of poems by Tagore.

It worked perfectly, better than I could have hoped. In a short time, Rob's gasping, tearful voice calmed to sniffles. He was already paying attention to the beautiful words as I spoke them slowly. I read my favorite poem to him over and over:

*"Let my love, like sunlight, surround you
and yet give you illumined freedom."*

Eventually, Rob stopped sniffing. His breathing sounded husky and so regular that I wondered if he had fallen asleep. I wouldn't have minded that, but no, he was still awake.

"The poems are beautiful," he said. "Thank you. I'm all right now."

"Sweetheart, try to sleep. Should I keep reading?"

"I'd love that, but I'll just curl up with your camisole and pretend it's you."

"There must not be any scent left in it by now."

"Not much," he admitted. "but I sleep better with it near me anyway."

"Put it on your chest," I suggested. "under your shirt. Let your skin get it warm. That should reactivate the perfume."

"Not as nice as smelling it on you, but I'll try that. I'm gonna sleep now. Call you tomorrow..."

"Rob, I love you."

"Say it again," he sighed.

"I love you, I love you, I love you."

"Love you, too. Good night."

In the following months this became our favorite routine, though I frequently chose other books to read. Rob never requested anything in particular, but he responded best to the less wordy pieces – Tagore's poetry always worked and (surprisingly) so did "The Meaning of Flowers," by Gretchen Scoble and Tracy Field. We were up to "hydrangea" in that one.

"Let me get this straight," Jeff said. "He invited you to the premiere and then to spend the weekend with him in Los Angeles *and you said no?*"

"Not 'no' exactly. I just –"

"Kind-of no is still no, Kim. What did Rob say to that?"

"He said he wouldn't be going himself if it wasn't necessary."

"But he has to do it and he wants you to go with him, so why –"

"Not *with* him," I said, desperate for Jeff to understand. "I won't be able to go as his date – because Rob still needs to appear unattached in public – so I'd have to go in by myself, and sit with strangers during the movie, and then go the party afterward *alone*. You know I don't do the stranger thing well..."

By this time I'd have been wringing my hands if not for holding the phone. Jeff had been so surprised by my revelation about the premiere that he had uncharacteristically terminated our instant messaging conversation to call me, to force me to explain why I was going to refuse Rob's sweet and sincere invitation to join him in L.A. for *New Moon's* opening night in the U.S.

Thankfully, Jeff was not convinced that my attendance at the premiere would be considered a joke, a mistake or a waste of time. His tone of voice resumed its normal level of amused patience—the one he used a lot when we were talking through my issues, most of them fear-based—and I relaxed a bit. I couldn't face a confrontation now, even with this dear friend.

"Okay," he said smoothly. "let's work through it. If Rob invited you to an event as important as this, he knows you'll feel out of place—it's all new for you. I'll bet he's made arrangements to have you escorted to and from the premiere. Even if he can't show up with you, he wouldn't leave you to get there and back on your own, don't you think?"

"Um," I breathed.

"He can probably request to have you seated near him in the theater or, at least, close enough that you could see each other without being obvious. You'll know that he's anxious to be alone with you, right? Make it a fun game the two of you are playing right in front of all those other people."

"I guess I could handle that, but later —"

“Yeah, the party. I know how hard that’ll be for you – I’ve never seen anyone stress over gatherings like you do – but again, it just seems like Rob would take steps to help you be a little more comfortable in that situation, unless you haven’t told him about your paralyzing shyness in crowds.”

“We did talk about it, a bit. For him it’s just part of doing the job, but even at the party I can’t spend any time with him, so I’ll just be wallpaper all night.”

“So you go to the party long enough to make sure Rob sees you – “Jeff made a snarky sound into the phone. “ – get somebody to *introduce* him to you, I bet he’d get a kick out of that! And after you’ve had a glass of champagne and spoken to a couple of people – yes, girlfriend, just two people – you can quietly sneak out and go back to the hotel, where Rob will join you as soon as humanly possible. I’m sure you can take it from there.”

“But Jeff, couldn’t I just fly to L.A. and be in the hotel, waiting for Rob when the premiere stuff is over? If I’m supposed to pretend I don’t even know him, why do I have to go to this thing?”

“Kim,” my sainted friend said kindly. “are you with Rob?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then you have to be *with* him. This is his life right now, and all this scary new stuff is part of the deal. I’ve known you a long time, and one thing I’m sure of is that you are not afraid to love Rob or be his strongest support – you respond best to someone in need – but you’re terribly afraid of getting some attention that you think you don’t deserve, and that’s just not fair to yourself.”

“You’re right,” I said sadly. “I’m not afraid to love Rob or to work hard at keeping us together, but the exposure is terrifying.”

“Why?”

“Jeff, the first time somebody sees us as a couple and says, ‘oh Rob, is this your mom?’ I will want to *die*.”

He laughed, but in a nice way. “You don’t look anywhere near your age. You have beautiful skin and a nice, curvy little body – not that I notice these things. And you’ll never be able to keep people from talking, so ignore them and only listen to Rob when it comes to your attributes. He probably really enjoys your C-cups, right?”

“Jerk,” I said, but without anger.

“And why should you go to this thing? Because he asked you to. Maybe he can’t show you to the world just yet, but he wants you close to him on this very important night. You’re his safe place, and he needs you.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” I sniffed. Perhaps I had known what he would say, but hearing it spoken both grounded and strengthened me as nothing else would have done.

“Now, go call your boy and tell him you’ll be there.”

“Okay,” I whispered. “Thanks, Jeff.”

“No problem. And don’t get comfortable – we still have to find you a dress.”

I found a dress on my own, thank you very much. It was in the last place I tried, of course, and I'd have missed it completely had I not turned back to take a closer look at something hanging right beside it.

More eggplant than plum, the rich purple color was only enhanced by its satiny fabric. The dress was set in a subtle A-line style, with three-quarter sleeves and a deep, square neckline that was cut for a bosom slightly better endowed than mine. Disappointed, I turned to go back to the dressing room in defeat when Angie, my wonderful saleslady, asked me to wait there a moment while she rushed over to Lingerie. She returned in a few minutes with two sets of undergarments, one in purple and the other in black – a skin-hugging bustier and lacy thong.

"The dress is perfect for style and color," she said. "You just need the right foundation under it."

I can say two things about this underwear. One, she was absolutely correct – the push-up bra lifted my breasts to such unexpected new heights that they not only filled the dress's tight bodice but attempted to overflow it (though she promised me the girls would stay put), while the bustier itself lent me a decidedly improved hourglass shape. Two, I have never experienced more uncomfortable clothing in my entire life. Ever worn a thong? Enough said.

As I stood there assessing the fit, feel and overall picture, Angie beamed.

"It's perfect – you'll be the center of attention at your party."

I wanted that attention from only one person. The thought of those particular blue-gray eyes lingering on my tastefully exposed skin caused me to blush just a bit.

“I hope he likes this,” I said, mostly under my breath.

“Oh, he will,” she assured me. “Now, will it be the purple or black undergarments?”

The good luck extended beyond a dress and underwear, though it wasn’t immediately apparent.

Rob had been delighted when I accepted his invitation, and ended that phone call with a promise to help me handle the trip details. After all the travel arrangements I’d made for Jack, getting myself to L.A. was hardly intimidating but I thanked Rob sincerely anyway, loving him for his kindness and caring nature.

Privately though, I was still quite apprehensive about the premiere and after-party. My social skills were painfully limited and it was a given that Rob wouldn’t be able to spend any real time with me at either event. I told myself it was better to be prepared for this now than blindsided by it that evening, but recurring images of me trying to navigate a room full of strangers (who would probably only find me unsophisticated and dull) brought absolutely no peace.

Rob was sympathetic about my fears – being a shy person himself – and I was happy to find him so easy to talk to but again, I chose to keep the true depth of my apprehensions to myself. He already had more than enough to deal with.

A short time later I met John Finley, and from then on the pathways to *New Moon’s* premiere and my own life were suddenly cleared of their respective obstacles – though I have to admit my concerns were solely for the weekend in Los Angeles and that date loomed larger, ever closer, each day.

"I'm with Summit Entertainment," explained a deep, smooth voice with no discernible accent. "Rob Pattinson put your name on his guest list for the *New Moon* premiere. I'm calling to find out how I can be of help."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. "What kinds of things can you help with?"

He sounded pleased that I could get right to the point. He did the same for me.

"Your transportation is already handled—a round-trip ticket from Seattle to L.A. is being issued for you now. Do you mind an e-ticket? No? Excellent. A car will be waiting to pick you up at LAX, outside Baggage Claims. You'll be taken to the hotel first, where we've reserved a room in your name.

"Rob told me that you're aware of the situation with attending the premiere—and thank you for being so understanding about that. I will personally collect you from the hotel and be your escort through the entire evening, if you will permit me."

"I'd love that," I told him, genuinely grateful for his willingness to help.

"In a minute I'm going to ask you for some information so we can send your ticket and itineraries but before that, do you need assistance with an evening dress?"

"No, I have it already."

"Very good. I'll be sending you all the details in a day or two. In the meantime, do you have any questions for me?"

"Not right now, but..."

“You’ll have a number of ways to reach me if anything comes up, don’t worry. We want this weekend to be completely enjoyable and stress-free for you.”

For the first time since accepting Rob’s invitation, I felt there might really be a way to get through this event.

“I think Summit chooses its people well,” I said.

“Ah, you’re very kind. Well then, I will look forward to meeting you in Los Angeles, and please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need anything before then, agreed?”

“Agreed. Thank you, John.”

“Call me Finn, all my friends do. I’ll see you soon, Miss Kim.”

* * *

When I was five years old my parents gave me the first watch I ever owned. It had a pink leather band and a white face with numbers in the same shade of pink. Written just below the 12, also in pink, was the name ‘*Cinderella*.’ When I outgrew the leather band my mom replaced it with a silver stretch band that fit better but was a lot less pretty, so eventually I quit wearing the watch at all.

I still have it, though, tucked into a small keepsake box made of cedar. I might never reveal how many decades have passed since that timepiece came to me but occasionally I remember it, and sometimes open the box for another look. Whenever I do, all my childhood hopes and dreams for the life that Cinderella got to live resurface briefly, and I’m reminded of how differently things turned out for me.

But the day I boarded a plane bound for Los Angeles (secure in all the details Finn had handled so carefully on my behalf), I realized it was finally happening — my turn to be the happy princess. Attending the premiere and after-party would be interesting, even entertaining (confident that I would not have to appear by myself), but they were the least of reasons for my current excitement.

Rob waited for me at the end of this plane ride. My beautiful, cherished, prince of a man was already pacing anxiously in the hotel room — “insanely excited,” said his last text — and tonight I would once again sleep in his arms. For another few hours to enjoy his smiles, his touch and his delicious kisses, I was willing to share our “date” with several hundred other people. He wanted me--nothing else mattered.

At LAX I found the car and its driver, Steve, with no trouble, and soon the anticipation of Rob’s embrace began to overwhelm my senses, causing me to fidget incessantly. It had been entirely too long since I’d seen him.

The hotel staff was gracious and very professional. The young woman at the front desk asked (seeing that I wrestled a garment bag with great care) if I needed their services to ensure that my dress would be in perfect condition for this evening, and replied affirmatively when I asked if I could let her know once I’d gotten upstairs to inspect it.

The room was palatial — a suite with a living-dining area and a partially stocked kitchenette — with a glorious view of the city and the ocean. It was also too quiet.

“Rob?” I called gently. No answer.

A vase of lush red roses sat prominently on the small coffee table, bearing a small card addressed to me. I went closer to breathe in the exquisite fragrance and read the card which said only, "See you soon, Rob."

It was then I accepted the silence in this room as proof that Rob wasn't there to meet me. Swallowing hard on a wave of disappointment, I moved to the bedroom to hang my dress and put away the other toiletries and clothing I'd brought for the weekend. Nothing of Rob's was here; the suite belonged only to me, I thought sadly. Were our rooms even on the same floor?

I wandered unhappily back to the living room, mentally shaking myself. *Stop it – you're not angry with him and you aren't even really surprised. They needed him for something, and he'll be here when he can be.*

It was close to 2pm by then; plenty of time to get ready for tonight, but not nearly close enough to do that (with my clever plan of spending all afternoon in bed with Rob now officially kaput). The view wasn't enough to hold my attention for long, so I found myself looking through a few complimentary magazines left on the table with the roses. An envelope with my name written in Rob's hand fell out of the latest issue of *Cooking Light*. I grinned, and began to read the enclosed letter.

"Gem dearest,

I think I know you well enough now to be certain that you'll eventually find this mag, so I'm leaving a note for you here, where no one else would think of looking.

Please don't be upset that I'm not there to welcome you. I so much wanted to be. They've called me away for some last-minute interviews and photo ops, and I can't say no. I am truly sorry – I've wanted nothing more for this last week than to have you in my arms again. But I will be with you as soon as I can, promise.

Get some rest today, love. It will be a long night for us both, and you'll need your strength. I know you are worried about the party tonight, but don't be—I'm not. You'll be beautiful and I'll get to look at you all night. I'm so happy you agreed to be here for the weekend. It means everything to me, and I will spend all my time (starting tonight!) showing you how much I love you. I really do, you know.

Text me when you've read this, ok? I want to know you're here and safe. Can't wait to see you.

Rob"

Through the tears that streamed down my cheeks, I grabbed the cell phone and quickly sent the message he wanted: *Here now, safe. Love you so much.* Then I took his letter and went to lie down for a while. I didn't expect to sleep after this, but surprised myself by falling into a deep and relaxing catnap. And I'm sure I smiled the entire time.

After the emotional build up my mind had created, it was almost a let-down to find no real drama on the red carpet.

That's all it was—a red carpet leading into the theater. There were literally thousands of people on both sides of this crimson ribbon, and probably that many more covering nearby rooftops and balconies, but I honestly didn't see them.

I arrived there with Finn before Rob or any of his co-stars did, and when the press realized we were not celebrities there was no reason to deter us from going inside.

When we were seated and it was safe to start looking around for familiar faces (though there was only one I yearned for), I turned to meet Finn's amused expression.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm impressed. You handled that beautifully. Rob had me believing you'd never done a red carpet event before."

"I haven't. I don't remember much about getting through it, actually—I just followed you."

"Then I'm doubly impressed—first, you were ready when I arrived to pick you up, and now no difficulties getting through the press. You're making this too easy for me."

"Well, just wait," I said tartly. "The after-party is where you'll earn your stripes tonight. I'm *terrible* at social things."

"I don't believe it," he said with a grin. "In this dress, looking like that, you'll have people standing in line to meet you this evening."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said, thinking it was more than a little true.

"Were you really surprised that I was ready to go when you came to get me?"

"Yes. It's not uncommon to have a 15-20 minute wait while the, um, last-minute details are being finished. Sometimes it's even longer."

I didn't even want to know what he meant by that. Instead, I grinned back at him.

"I guess Rob needs to get his harem in line."

“You’re the first guest Rob has invited to an event like this — oh...you didn’t know?”

“We never talked about it,” I replied quietly, suddenly so overcome with love for Rob that I had to grab the armrests on my chair to keep from turning back toward the crowd in order to search for his beautiful, striking face.

A colleague from Summit leaned over Finn at that moment, and the two men talked shop after a quick introduction to me. I took time now to get a closer look at my companion for the evening. He was not a tall man — 5’9” at most — with a trim yet solid build. His hair had once been black but was now much more salt than pepper, and still quite thick. His eyes were brown and very intelligent, full of merriment and kindness. He smiled easily and often, and it seemed genuine.

I was immediately comfortable with him. He had definitely been surprised when I answered the door earlier — though I had to wonder if Rob had mentioned my...ah, vintage...prior to this evening, and decided probably not. Finn covered his first reaction by being very pleased instead that I was not going to force a change to his carefully crafted schedule.

Beyond that, he was funny and cheerful and courteous. He made a huge effort to allay my nervousness with amusing anecdotes from his many years in Artist Relations, without actually identifying anyone — I was at once both impressed and secure. Finn knew that Rob and I were together in *that* way, but no one else ever would because of him.

He handled me competently but not so tightly that I felt any constraint. He spoke frankly and honestly – which I could totally appreciate – and allowed me to be myself. Rob couldn't have chosen anyone better to accompany me on a night when everything had to be flawless, with the sole exception of himself.

Finn's warm hand covered my wrist in a gesture both protective and grounding. I woke from my little reverie to the awareness that *himself* had just entered the auditorium – not that the combined shrieks of a couple hundred females had anything to do with that. I drew a very deep breath, wanting so badly to turn and watch Rob make his way down to the premier seating area, but I didn't do it. The pressure of Finn's hand eased considerably as he realized I wouldn't bolt out of my chair, but the comforting touch remained. I was so grateful.

Finally, there he was, elegant and tall and exquisite, moving easily within the circle of security staff and co-stars surrounding him. I watched in great pleasure as he smiled and greeted people he knew, shook a lot of hands, and then lifted his sweet face to acknowledge fans all over the room. He waved to several clusters of young women, laughing indulgently as they screamed for him in unison. A shout from the balcony had Rob turning his entire body now; once more he grinned and waved to the group above, but as his arm dropped so did his eyes. They scanned quickly, not lingering on any one spot for too long, and my heart leapt in joy. He was looking for *me*.

"Breathe, honey," whispered Finn.

So I breathed — shallowly — while Rob continued on his way, and then deeper when it became obvious that he hadn't seen me. I turned to Finn.

"Is it going to be like this all night? I can't even look at him?"

"Not all night," he assured me kindly. "But if you could see your face right now —"

"I know. It shows everything I feel."

"I just thought it might be easier if you let yourself get accustomed to having Rob in the same room before you speak to each other. Lessen the pressure, in a way."

"I see," I said — and I did. "Does he know where we're sitting?"

"Yes. He's been trying to get a look at you since he sat down. Would you like to trade seats with me?"

I'll never know what I might have said — the house lights dimmed at that moment, eliciting a shriek from the front of the theater.

"Five minutes to curtain," Finn said calmly, flicking at something invisible on his sleeve.

I remember thinking it was probably better for me that Finn kept his place at my right side. Since Rob was also seated on my right — though in a different section — it meant we could not easily make eye contact with each other, which was very unsatisfying but a lot safer, if our relationship was to remain hidden tonight.

Movement to the left indicated someone coming to take the seat beside me — someone, it turned out, to be a friend of Finn's from Summit.

This gentleman and his wife greeted me warmly at Finn's brief introduction and thankfully didn't ask any questions about my relationship with him. Finn leaned across me (somewhat unnecessarily, I thought) to speak with his colleague. I sat back as far as possible and glanced around for other recognizable faces, only to be confronted with the *one* face.

His gaze was riveted on the pale fullness of my cleavage, and then his eyes slowly swept upward, over my shoulders, the column of my throat and my own smiling lips as his opened to soundlessly mouth the words "Oh. My. God."

I could not bear to look away from him before meeting those wide blue-gray eyes, and he didn't disappoint.

The curtain went up and the lights dimmed out completely as Rob allowed himself a brief, loving glance at my face. There was no time to nod or smile, but his expression said everything I had ever wanted to hear.

The crowd settled expectantly into their seats and Finn quickly righted himself beside me, winking conspiratorially when I caught his eye.

I am so going to bake something outrageous for you, I thought.

The truth is I don't remember that much about the after-party. If I met one person I met two hundred of them, thanks to Finn's relentless networking skills. He cheerfully introduced me to clusters of people all over the gorgeous room, literally so many faces that I couldn't begin to recall any individual after a while. In addition, my unaccustomed attire — namely the unfamiliar, high-heeled shoes — were

beginning to really hurt my feet. I was more than ready to step out of them but no — Finn only whisked me deeper into the maze of bodies, asking if I wanted champagne. I accepted the first flute of twinkling liquid, but not the second or third he offered to fetch for me.

“Trying to get me drunk?” I queried.

“Trying to help you enjoy the evening,” he said kindly. “You really don’t like crowds, do you?”

“No, but I *am* having a good time, honestly. It’s just...”

Finn stepped closer so that he could speak quietly. “Kim, I *know* that all you want right now is to be alone with Rob — and he wants that as much as you do, but the socializing is crucial for his career. You understand —”

“I do, perfectly. I just didn’t know how hard it would be to stay away from him tonight. Next time I’ll be prepared for that.”

Finn smiled in a particularly nice way. “I’ll say one thing for him — he got the right woman when he met you.”

“Flatterer,” I smiled back, but secretly it made me happy to be winning his respect. “Could we meet the cast now?”

So I got to say a few words to Rob’s co-stars (the man himself was on the far side of the room — it looked like a group of black suits had him cornered). They were all very nice, except for a young girl with long brown hair whose demeanor was bored and sullen. She barely looked up when Finn introduced me, saying only “Hey...” and then excused herself to go outside for a cigarette. Kellan Lutz was a

smiling sweetheart (and HUGE); Jackson Rathbone another friendly, genuine, and completely likeable young man. The women were all a bit on the shy side, but their handshakes were firm and none of them made any attempt to avoid speaking to me; Elizabeth Reaser and Ashley Greene were perfectly lovely, and Nikki Reed was stunningly beautiful. Taylor Lautner was a gorgeous, happy young man, totally comfortable in these surroundings; his gregarious Aquarian nature made him relaxed and fun-loving. That million-watt smile of his didn't hurt anything, either. But it was Peter Facinelli who charmed me; this friendly, funny, gentle man shook my hand and then leaned down to whisper: "You're Rob's friend, aren't you?" At my look of alarm, he continued quietly, "It's all right--Rob told me a bit about you. He was so nervous about tonight, afraid you wouldn't have a good time. How are you doing with all this?"

"I'm fine," I said, relieved to be able to actually talk about it with someone who understood. "Finn is trying to keep me so busy that I won't realize I haven't even spoken to Rob yet."

"Yeah, sometimes it's better to be careful, but I happen to know Rob hasn't taken his eyes off you all night."

"I've been feeling that," I said. It was true; it was a miracle that my dress hadn't caught fire yet.

Peter laughed, and then took my arm in a protective gesture. "Finn, I'm going to borrow this beautiful lady for a minute, okay?"

“Of course, Peter – I’ll catch up with you both in a bit,” and Finn went off to have a drink himself.

I found myself being towed quite gently in Peter Facinelli’s wake, and feeling very much all right with that. He brought me to the side of a tall, beautiful woman with honey-colored hair who turned as he spoke to her.

“Kim, this is my wife, Jennie.”

I shook hands with Jennie Garth, whose famous smile was bright and genuine. We made small talk while Peter’s attention was diverted every few seconds by another well-wisher (it seemed that everyone loved *New Moon*).

“Oh, hey,” Peter said to someone beyond my line of sight. “Just the guy I was looking for – come say hi.” Peter then looked pointedly at me. “Kim, I’d like you to meet my friend, Rob Pattinson.”

It was as quick and smooth as to be completely painless. I was able to look up at the beautiful man and smile unselfconsciously as he reached out to clasp my right hand in his and squeeze it firmly over and over before releasing my fingers most reluctantly.

“Hello,” he said with a quirky smile. “I think I’m the last person in the room to meet you tonight.”

“Not the way I wanted it,” I said softly, aware that Peter and Jennie were skillfully keeping people moving around us so that no one would be able to focus on our conversation.

“Me, either. Are you all right with...this?”

"I am," I assured him. "I should thank you for sending Finn to look after me this evening; he's been really wonderful."

Rob scowled a bit; it was *adorable*. "Not too wonderful, I hope."

"Maybe just shy of that," I grinned, feeling amazingly secure. *I can do this...who knew??*

"Did you enjoy the film?" he asked for the benefit of strangers lingering a bit too closely now.

"Yes, very much. I would have liked to see more of you, though."

Rob's eyes glanced quickly at my creamy skin. "I'd like to see more of *you*," he whispered.

"You will," I promised.

He swallowed. "You look really beautiful tonight."

"Thank you," I said easily, wishing I could take him in my arms right here, right now, and carry him back to the hotel. "So do *you*, Rob. Oh, there you are, Finn—you know Rob, of course."

I was allowed only enough time to smile and repeat that it was nice to meet him before Finn ruthlessly whisked me away to the opposite side of the ballroom. This time I was not as comfortable; Rob's touch had conveyed a myriad of emotions that he was feeling, but the strongest one was that of need. He needed to be touched as a man, and to know that he was valued for himself; that someone could look upon him and see *Rob*, not the vampire character he played so beautifully. It was easy to understand how such a need could be overlooked in a setting like this. More

than ever, I was anxious to draw him out of this superficial environment and into the circle of my arms where he would be—now and always—protected, cherished, and safe. It appeared that I had reached the limit of how much pretending I was capable of, even for the sake of his career.

I nodded to a couple of people that I'd met earlier and then turned my head as Finn said something at my left ear. But the movement brought my eyes back to Rob's tall figure across the room, where he was once again surrounded by well-wishers and company men. He looked up at that moment, his eyes locking with mine. The patient, slightly weary expression Rob had been wearing changed subtly until I could feel the heat coming off him even at that distance. He was tired of playing this game; he knew that I was, too.

Come here to me, right now. It was in my head as clearly as if he'd spoken.

The compulsion in his eyes, fixed on mine, was so strong that I set down the new glass Finn had pressed into my hand.

Walk over to me, now. I want you here. I took two steps toward him.

A pair of arms encircled me firmly; how had I gotten to Rob so quickly? And yet, this wasn't the touch I knew so well, craved so much.

"Don't go to him," Finn urged quietly. "Too many eyes here; don't do it."

He whirled me gently then, as though we danced to the strains of a perfect waltz—there was actually no such sound anywhere in that room. It was over very quickly. I crumpled against his expensive suit.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “Of course, you’re right. Finn, I’d really like to go now. Would you take me back to the hotel – or call a cab, please?”

The gentleman in him would never allow a woman to return home alone, so he accompanied me all the way to the door of my suite. He took my hand and gently kissed my fingers.

“It was a pleasure meeting you and being your escort this evening,” he said kindly.

“It was my pleasure,” I told him. “You made it very easy.”

“Until that last moment, anyway.”

“I’m sorry about that – “

“No,” he said firmly. “You’d both had all you could stand. I waited too long to get you out of there, so the fault is mine. But no harm was done, my dear. And I’m sure Rob will be here soon. He’s been very lonely without you.”

“I’m lonely without him, too.”

“I can see that. And for what it’s worth, I think you two have something really wonderful and strong here – he’s told me a bit about you. It was why I wanted to be here to help tonight.”

“I’m really grateful for you, Finn. I hope we’ll meet again.”

“As long as Rob is working with Summit, it’s a definite possibility. But here, take my card – don’t hesitate to call me if you ever need anything, whether Rob is working with us or not, okay?”

“That’s very generous, thank you. Well, I’ll say good night now.”

“And I’ll be on my way. Good night, Kim—oh, and don’t be surprised if your visitor this evening comes in through the kitchen. His suite is next door to yours.”

The brown eyes twinkled merrily at my gasp of surprise, and then he turned gracefully toward the elevators, leaving me alone with my expectations.

And they were *high*. Upon entering the calm suite it was immediately obvious that my nerves had been stretched to their absolute limits. Something had to give before I shattered—

My cell phone buzzed. The loved one was texting me from the party.

Where are you? Can't see you.

The hotel, just now.

Good— you ok?

Ok--really want you.

WANT YOU. Leaving here soon.

Waiting for you, Rob— hurry please.

Yes. Love you.

Love you.

This sweet exchange did much to alleviate the stress and provided me with some motivation. Rob would certainly leave the party as soon as possible now—I could be back in his arms within the hour. Perfect.

I went immediately to the bedroom, gratefully removing the uncomfortable shoes and then the lovely purple dress, remembering with satisfaction the subtle

whisper from the full skirt as I walked in it. I put these things in the closet and drew out my long silk robe, draping it carefully over the bustier (Rob might enjoy the tight black undergarment that had created such impressive cleavage on me). I turned down the bedcovers – no need to pretend it wasn't necessary – and adjusted the dimmer switch on the light fixture until the glow provided just enough illumination.

Restless now, I moved to the living room, seeking anything to occupy my mind. In one corner sat a Bose Wave unit that I'd overlooked earlier; a little music might be nice tonight. I took some time scanning the FM tuner, eventually finding a smooth jazz station where – luckily enough – my favorite saxophonist, Boney James, was being featured. I set the station and adjusted the volume until the fluid sound was little more than a lovely murmur across the room.

The fragrant roses drew me back to the exquisite bouquet, where I gently lowered my face into the soft, cool blooms and breathed in deeply. *Hmm...I could take one of these roses to bed and slowly brush the silky petals all over Rob's naked body – he might really like that.* I lifted a long-stemmed beauty from the vase, and the door to the kitchen opened quietly.

He wasn't trying to be stealthy; he didn't want to frighten me by simply appearing in the room, but the effect on my senses was just about the same.

"Kim," he called gently from the kitchen.

"Rob," I said breathlessly, on my way to meet him without even being aware that I had moved.

My first real look at him in almost six months made all that waiting much more bearable now--his Dolce suit jacket was tossed over the chair and he yanked at the constricting tie with an expression of weariness and relief, just before he looked up to see me and his beautiful face suddenly lit from within. I rushed to him and he bent to scoop my smaller body into his arms, pulling me to his chest and holding on tight.

Something inside me went completely still, as if I'd found something essential to my life that I hadn't even known I was looking for. *He was here; I could breathe now.* With a little sigh, I relaxed into him. Instead of the ravenous, bruising kisses I would have given Rob ten minutes ago, all I wanted now was to savor him, every gorgeous, much-missed inch of him. I reached up to wind my arms around his neck and he lifted me off the floor as he straightened, giving me access to his face, his perfect jaw, the delicious hollow at the base of his throat where I pressed dozens of tiny, gentle kisses while Rob moaned and closed his eyes, leaning into my touch. I kissed his closed eyes, too.

Finally the beloved face lifted slightly and at last, his soft lips fastened on mine. It was the kiss Cinderella had risked everything to experience. When I thought about this later, I hoped she found as much satisfaction in her love as I did in mine.

"Feel so good," he murmured into the warm skin where my throat and shoulder met. I hugged him harder, and looped my arms around his broad shoulders. "I love the way you do that."

"What?" I asked. "Hug you?"

"No – well, that's good too – I love the way you say my name over and over."

"Do I?"

"Uh huh, like you've really missed me."

"Rob, dearest, I *have* really missed you. I didn't know how much until I saw you tonight."

"Missed you, too. It made me nuts all day, the waiting."

"That was hard," I admitted. "But we're together now. It's all better."

Rob kissed my cheek. "I'm sorry I wasn't here this afternoon."

"Don't be. The roses and your note helped."

"Good – ah, speaking of roses, what are you doing with just this one?" He drew back to look at me with twinkling eyes.

"I have plans for it," I said, and then showed him what they were, brushing the soft, barely-opened bud across his throat, grinning when he swallowed hard. Then his perfect lips curved into the quirky smile I loved.

"It's a good thing we've got twelve of them."

Rob set me gently on my feet, albeit reluctantly. I swear it wasn't intentional that I rubbed against his hardness, causing him to moan deep in his throat. Once I was standing, he pulled me back into his arms for a long hug. I looked up at him, questioning.

"I want to take you to bed right now," he said slowly. "but we haven't seen each other in six months – is it too soon?"

The look on his face...the fact he would even consider such a thing. I've been in love a couple of times in my life, but until this man came along – and until this very moment – I had never known real love. I took his hands in mine and slowly drew him with me to the bedroom.

Rob bent to press tiny kisses on my face, hair and even my hands as I carefully undressed him. He sat on the bed to remove shoes and socks, and then his long fingers clasped the ties of my silk robe, tugging gently until they came free. I shrugged, and the robe dropped to the floor with a quiet little whisper. Rob's eyes widened as he stared hard at the black bustier and the white skin cupped firmly within it.

"I...oh, wow...I fantasized about helping you take your dress off," he said thickly. "but this is so much better – oh my God, how did you get into this thing? It's – you're so beautiful..."

His soft lips were suddenly fastened on my newly-lush, curving breasts, pressing gently on first one, then the other. I sighed deeply as Rob drew his tongue along the line of my cleavage. His hands moved to cup the fullness, then to caress each pale, delicate beach formed by the undergarment, and he kissed them again.

"Rob," I moaned. "need you – suck on them, *please*."

At my thigh, where we were pressed together, his hard cock grew as I watched it lengthen, throbbing impatiently.

"Gem," he gasped. "how do I get this off you? Oh, *there*...mmm, those perfect round breasts. I've missed them so much."

His warm, wet mouth opened to pull on each tight, aching nipple. He knew just how much pressure to put into the tickling, licking, teething, sucking that made my head roll back on my neck and moans of ecstasy burst from my lips.

I put my hands on his shoulders and pushed at him until he looked up.

"Could we get into bed, please?" I asked shakily. "I don't think I can stand up much longer."

"Anything you want," he said, kissing my wrist.

Rob moved first to lie back against the pillows. I followed him, bringing the lightweight bedclothes over us. His hands drew me closer until I could lie completely on top of him, which I did happily. His skin was incredibly warm, the hard planes of his chest, belly and thighs covered with thick, soft hair that begged to be stroked. As Rob curled both arms around me, molding my body to his own, I felt a solid strength and energy coiling through his hard young frame, and could have wept at the tenderness in his touch.

We lay close together like that for a short time, quietly becoming physically reacquainted. I moved a bit higher up his body; those sweet lips had been kept from me far too long. Time now to replenish the store of kisses I had missed so much.

I set my mouth gently upon his, flicking my tongue at his lower lip, where I nibbled a bit, too. Rob sighed and opened his mouth for me, his own tongue reaching out to caress and eventually duel with mine. The gentleness could last only so long.

I kissed and licked and bit down on his lips like I'd been starved half to death (it wasn't that far from the truth), and Rob responded in the same way. He bent his left leg, shifting so that his hot, hard shaft pressed boldly between my thighs. His hands gripped my hips to hold us both in place. He moaned as I ground myself into him, and again when my lips fastened tightly on his nipples.

"Thought about you all day," his voice was only a whisper. "Wanted this..."

I lifted my mouth from his chest. "I had hoped we could be in bed all afternoon and *then* do the premiere. I'm not sure that would have been easier, though."

"No," he grinned. "I'd have had this hard-on for hours, either way."

"Hours? Didn't that hurt?"

"Terribly. And then to watch every man in the room staring down your dress —"

"I'm five feet tall, sweetie — they didn't really have a choice. I didn't see anybody looking, though."

"That's just as well. I wouldn't have wanted you to get any ideas about going home with someone else."

I drew my tongue from his right nipple straight down to his navel, licking gently through the soft thick belly hair. Rob gasped and arched upward.

"Oh no," I whispered. "There's no one else in the world I'd do this with."

"Mmm," he moaned.

"I'm sorry I added to your pain tonight. Let me make it all better now."

Rob felt so good in my hands, his shaft ramrod-straight and rock hard. I stroked his silky skin a few times and then pumped him gently. He rocked his hips, thrusting between my palms for better friction. Eventually I blew softly across the tip of his cock and then carefully took him in my mouth, joyful over the breathless cries he made.

As I settled into the gentle rhythm he liked, Rob brushed his fingers over my face, cupped them around my head to hold me closer. But an instant later, he grabbed my upper arms.

“Kim, stop – please, love.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Come up here.”

He pulled me into his arms and then turned us so that I lay beneath him.

“Ohh...” I breathed.

“Exactly,” he said. And entered me with a single, hard thrust.

Anything else was forgotten as Rob focused himself on loving me. It was not gentle this time, not uncertain in any way as he plunged and pushed his body into mine. His arms wound tightly about me, keeping our bodies in contact regardless of how frantically he moved over – and inside – me. His open mouth sought mine at first, the kisses bruising, nearly punishing to my soft lips (though I was so hungry for the taste of him that I didn’t really notice it), but soon he simply rested his cheek near mine, and I heard him laboring for breath. He couldn’t maintain this pace much longer.

I made myself relax and drew him in even deeper – smiling at his heartfelt groan – then began to rock my hips, the movement imitating his. I set my lips to his ear.

“Fuck me,” I said through clenched teeth. “Rob, *harder*.”

His body tightened and convulsed as he came just a moment later with a loud cry, followed by a long, low moan. He collapsed on me, completely spent, breathing hard, unmoving. I held him there, wrapped him securely in my warm arms and legs, feeling utterly content for the first time in six long months.

“I love you,” I whispered.

Rob lifted his face to kiss me very gently. “I love you,” he said, and then smiled.

“What?” I asked – his expression puzzled me.

“This is the first time I’ve said that to you in person.”

“Is it different?”

“It’s better. Everything’s better when I can see you.”

He pulled out of me but remained where he lay, moving just enough to rest his stubbled cheek between my breasts.

“Is this all right – not too heavy for you?”

“You’re perfect,” I told him. “Sleep now.”

“Just for a minute,” he murmured. His eyes had already closed.

As Rob found rest in my arms I took a long time to study him, finding no real changes in the beautiful face. His long eyelashes lay in thick, full crescents on his

cheeks. He seemed to always need a shave, but this hardly bothered me; his beard was more of a rasping sensation against my body, not a sharp, scratchy irritant that abraded my skin. His mouth—oh gods, that beautiful, carnal mouth—was blessedly familiar, with lush, soft lips that pursed as he slept, giving him an expression of sweetness and vulnerability. There are a couple of scenes in *Little Ashes* that illustrate this perfectly.

He was sublime, exquisitely handsome as he lay quietly with me. I fell in love with him all over again, considering that his personality—Rob, himself—was in complete harmony with the physical beauty. I knew myself to be an incredibly lucky woman.

I didn't intend to sleep—didn't want to waste any moment of this precious time with Rob—but my eyes closed anyway and I found my own rest, clasped tightly in his arms.

Later, there was tenderness—all that a lonely heart could have wished for (and had done for many years). I woke from that brief nap to the stirring sensation of cool, soft rose petals brushing very lightly over my breasts.

"Rob," I sighed.

"I found the rose," he murmured. "Thought we should try it."

"Good idea—oh..."

He drew the rosebud (now mostly opened from the warmth of the room and contact with my skin) all around the curve of each breast and then up to the nipples

where he gently twirled the gorgeous bloom until I writhed in pleasure. His warm lips replaced the silky petals; I shivered.

Rob wouldn't allow me to pull him back on top of me, carefully loosening my hands where they grasped his arms. Instead, he continued to brush the sweet-smelling rose over my body, finding sensitive places at the inside curves of my arms, my deep navel and inner thighs, even the backs of my hands – all of which he kissed very gently afterward.

He refused to be rushed. His lips and tongue, his hands, even the movement of his body against mine, was a study in sensual deliberation. This time it was Rob who gave kisses deep and slow; who licked and explored with a gentle tongue, and whose long fingers seemed intent on learning every inch of my body. He patiently brushed my hands aside when I reached to guide him along, moving at the pace he preferred. I was allowed only to touch his beautiful face while he led me further down the path to pleasure.

No one had ever made such an effort for me. I came three times while Rob licked and nuzzled that most tender nub between my thighs. He moved up to the pillow then, taking me into his arms for another kiss. I could taste myself on his lips. He drew back to look at me.

"Have I hurt you?" he asked anxiously.

"No," I replied in surprise.

"You're crying," he whispered, touching my wet cheek.

"Because I'm happy," I told him. "Nobody's ever loved me the way you do."

“I do, you know – love you.”

“I know, Rob. I love you, too.”

He stretched his long, beautiful body until we lay side by side and then he quietly directed me to rest my head on his shoulder. This meant we were settling down for the night; I was ready for it. There was no denying that the prospect of a deep, restful sleep with Rob beside me was most appealing, especially after attending a huge (and successful) red carpet event.

As I drifted off, Rob murmured again.

“Tomorrow I’ll take you out for breakfast. Found a great place for coffee and scones...”

“Okay,” I said, and then knew nothing more.

It was the alcohol, I reflected later.

I woke around 4am with a monster headache that forced me to sit up and pay attention as Rob slept deeply at my side. There was no choice; I would have to deal with this before it got any worse.

Idiot – you know alcohol does this to you.

This pain wasn’t even close to migraine-level (which I also suffered occasionally), but it was more discomfort than I could ignore. It made me very thankful to have refused most of the champagne that flowed so freely at the party tonight. Now, where was my purse?

The olive green Dooney sat where I'd left it earlier — on the coffee table, near my fragrant roses. I quickly fished out two caplets, thinking idly that I'd have to return those few items from the tiny evening bag I'd carried tonight, but that was way less important at this moment than something to drink. I moved quietly to the kitchen for a bottle of water from the fridge and swallowed the two Excedrin, hoping they'd get right to work.

Rob had left the door to his suite open. It was too dark to see clearly into his room from this one so I didn't bother looking. Instead, I gently closed the adjoining door and went to pick up his jacket where it was hanging at a weird angle across the low-backed chair — actually, it was almost *not* hanging, period. Shaking the creases out of the beautiful garment would be a waste of time and unsuccessful anyway, so I simply draped it back over the chair, but carefully.

A dull thumping sound came from the pocket as it swung against the table. Fogged with sleep and the vise-grips at both temples I reacted instinctively, as though the item had been damaged beyond recognition, and without thinking I reached into the jacket to get a look at what I had broken, hoping only to replace it without Rob getting too upset.

I totally believe in a person's right to his privacy — especially someone like my sweet Rob who lives so much of his life in an unrelenting spotlight. That might not seem obvious, since I'm telling this story in lush detail, but it happens to be true (and Rob certainly knows how much more *hasn't* been told).

So I had no intention beyond inspecting the cell phone for cracks or breaks — fortunately these things are made to withstand rough handling (to a point), and there seemed to be no harm done. Relieved, I bent to return Rob's phone to the pocket where I'd found it and jumped in surprise when the thing buzzed. The display screen (much bigger than mine) lit up well enough to be seen from the space station, making the text message impossible to avoid.

Hey Rob — she's wonderful, just like you said. Really happy for you, man. U 2 enjoy this weekend. Peter.

So nice. I'd really liked meeting Peter, too. Until now I hadn't given any thought to how (or if) I could blend with Rob's inner circle. Admittedly, Peter Facinelli and the rest of his cast mates might not truly be on the inside track of Rob's life, but it was still a relief to be accepted by one of them. Rob's closest friends and family had yet to be won over, but I hoped this meant it could be done painlessly whenever that opportunity arose.

I slipped the phone into the suit pocket and then took a deep breath. This thing...this love (it could never be acknowledged as anything less from now on) was well and truly *mine*. Rob's celebrity might be difficult in some ways — it would be a part of his life indefinitely, though I hoped the hysteria surrounding him now would soon recede to more tolerable levels — but we could handle that, together. His heart had been placed in my hands for safekeeping, and that was exactly what it would find.

I would never presume to claim that I could love Rob better than anyone else in the world, but I knew that my ability to *befriend* him was one of my strongest assets. Love him—yes, of course I did. But beyond that, I could bring to our relationship other traits that he already valued—honesty, trust, stability, a non-judgmental perception of his life, a giving heart. And the ability to keep him supplied with cookies. None of those aspects would ever be diminished by his profession. For as long as Rob wanted me, I would be there.

In the utter stillness there came a long sigh from the bedroom. *Don't leave me*, it said silently. *Come back—I need you*. Rob wanted me. Unbelievable—but true. Someone up there had been listening to the cries of my heart. *Thank you, Spirit*.

Now I hurried back to the bed where Rob lay sleeping—all arms and legs and tangled sheets—and moved immediately to his side, intending to hold him tightly whether he was aware of it or not. No need to worry; as I settled next to him Rob's body turned slightly to accommodate mine, and his long arms enfolded me in sweet warmth. The growing restlessness I'd sensed in him quickly subsided again into deeper sleep.

"Nice," he murmured. "nice."

Smiling widely, I settled into him with my cheek resting over his heart and then closed my eyes. *Nice* it definitely was.

My sweetheart was right—he had found a great place for coffee and scones. I finished everything on my plate and sat back in the booth to savor the fragrant brew

slowly now, feeling completely satisfied. Well-fed, well-loved...this was true contentment.

I wasn't sure the same could be said of Rob who—though he smiled so happily that morning—seemed to harbor another emotion that caused him discomfort. We hadn't spoken much about last night; I had to admit it was somewhat difficult to read him and yet, his manner didn't indicate that anything was wrong, exactly. I decided to keep my own attitude upbeat, hoping it would encourage him to talk.

"Rob, you were right," I said. "The food here is wonderful."

"I'm glad we made it here in time for breakfast," he replied, wolfing down the remnant of a chocolate chip scone. "Did you get enough?"

"Food? Oh yeah," I said, looking him over as though I still had room for a little more. He grinned and then again that strange dimming of his eyes. "Rob, what—"

"Kim," he whispered intently, leaning across the table. "you understand about what I said this morning, don't you?"

"Yes, I understand," I said, just as quietly. "It's the safest thing for you. Of course I'll go along with it—" *it* being the strict avoidance of touching each other in public.

In making the arrangements for my visit Rob had been required to tell his handlers that his relationship with me was personal. They informed him that they were delighted to coordinate the travel plans for me and even hoped I would enjoy

the weekend in Los Angeles but *we were not to be photographed in any way as a couple* — and there were no exceptions to this solitary condition.

He made light of it while explaining the situation before we left the hotel; I agreed readily enough to the restriction (after last night it was hardly a surprise the studio would insist that he be extra careful), and then it started in him — the disturbing see-saw between happiness and sorrow.

“But do I *like* being told not to touch you? No. Is it easy for me to sit this close to you without my hands on you, even casually? No. Sweetheart, is that why you’re upset today?”

Rob shook his head and mumbled something to the table.

“Is it that I agreed too quickly?”

“No. I knew you’d see that it’s necessary to play this stupid game with them, but...” His wonderful, expressive eyes looked over my face. “...I see you sitting here with me, and you’re happy — you’re glowing. And all I can think about is how long I waited to see you and now —”

“I’m happy because I’m with you again,” I told him, beginning to feel a little desperate. “It *was* a long time to wait, but —”

“I know, and I love it that you’re happy to be here with me. I just don’t think I can do this again.”

“It’s only breakfast, Rob. We don’t have to go out again.”

“Do you know how lonely I was before I met you? All that traveling for *Twilight*...there were nights I couldn’t even remember what city I was in and all I

could think about was how alone I was. It made me cry sometimes — but you'll know about that."

I nodded, still uncertain about what was really on his mind. The conversation, held in whispers between us, took on a surreal quality. I knew I must hear every word he chose to say.

"Then I fainted in an elevator and you were there to rescue me. It really felt like you'd saved me. I told you that, remember?"

"You've told me several times," I assured him. *Oh God, what is he trying to say? Please, not yet — I haven't had him nearly long enough yet.* "But dearest, you saved me, too. My life isn't as complicated as yours, but it was almost empty before you came along; it's true. I won't let you go, Rob — unless you tell me to. Is that what you're trying to do here?"

His head jerked up as though I'd slapped him. I watched with a breaking heart as a huge crystal teardrop spilled elegantly down his pale cheek. But in his white face, those blue-gray eyes suddenly blazed.

"No — never! Nobody's going to tell me who I can fall in love with. Kim, I'm in love with you — just you — so much it kills me to be away from you even for a few days. Oh, shit — I'm sorry. I'm saying everything wrong."

"Not everything," I whispered, feeling a tear on my own cheek. Had they been on the table, Rob would have seen my hands trembling. He would have wanted to take them in his and hold them tightly — which was why they had to remain clenched together in my lap.

“Let me start over — well, not start *over* —”

“Honey, what are you trying to tell me?”

“That I love you and...I can’t stand it, being separated. I’ve got you back after six months and tomorrow — *tomorrow* — I have to let you go all over again. I don’t think I can do it, Kim. It scares me so much to be without you.”

It’s just not fair that a man can be so beautiful while crying — I usually resemble the business end of a punching bag. But this wasn’t about me. I leaned across the table as far as possible to comfort him with only my voice.

“Rob, I love you,” I said gently. “You’re my heart, my safe place. I’m not leaving you and you’re not leaving me. Don’t cry, sweetie — not here, okay?”

He grinned and brushed at his wet cheek. “Sorry; I’m a little crazy right now.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’ve been feeling the exact same way, honestly, but I thought I wasn’t supposed to let it show.”

“Why?”

“Not sure,” I took a deep breath and prepared to defend my complicated emotional makeup. “I didn’t want to think about how little time we’d have together. I didn’t want to make it harder for you to go away for so long. I was kind of afraid it would change things between us if you knew I was scared.”

“Scared of what, love?”

“Oh, many things, Rob. You don’t know how much you mean to me, not really. I’m going to make sure you never have to wonder about *that* from now on.

But our relationship is still pretty new, you know. I thought if you realized I was afraid of being too normal, too boring, too...old...you'd just leave that much sooner."

"Are you really worried about that?" he sounded genuinely surprised. "I never think about *any* of those things in relation to you."

"You're more grown up than I am."

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*. But I wouldn't end a relationship over any of that stuff. You're stuck with me now, my Gem."

"I can live with that," I told him, rewarded with his mega-watt grin. "You're stuck with me, too."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," he said gently.

"Let's go back to the hotel now, please."

"You don't want to explore L.A.?"

"This town holds only one attraction for me," I said primly. "I want to explore *you*."

"You're the girl for me," he smiled, dialing someone on his cell. It was Steve, his driver, instructed to return for us.

Yes, I am. Thank God, I am.

In the back seat of the Crown Victoria I noted the deliberately darkened windows and raised an eyebrow at Rob, whose grin had returned full force.

"I think we could hold hands now," he said archly, offering his.

I took it gladly, but this was not the closeness I needed from him. After checking with Steve to ensure the car's windows were tinted sufficiently that no one from outside could see in (he promised me they were), I moved to sit across Rob's lap while winding my arms around his big shoulders. His arms quickly encircled me as well, and that was how we spent the twenty minute ride back to the hotel – warm and safe, wrapped in each other. I set my cheek against his and closed my eyes, absorbing the *feel* of him – the rise of his chest as he breathed, the clasp of his hands across my back; the warmth of his skin through the light tee shirt, the way he turned his face toward me so that his lips could rest very close to mine. But we agreed without speaking it that kissing was too private a thing to be shared with a limo driver (even one as cool as Steve), and so we savored this long, close embrace instead, knowing there would be a much sweeter connection once we were alone together.

The car rolled to a stop so smoothly it was nearly undetectable. Rob sighed in acknowledgment and I reluctantly moved off his lap. Steve gave us an extra moment to be properly collected when he came back to open the doors – mine first, since I was sitting on his side, and then Rob's.

Steve reached in to offer me his hand as I stepped out of the car and I realized the privacy screen between the front and back seats had been raised. Cool *and* respectful – a seriously great guy.

Once again Rob and I separated to a fairly safe distance in order to walk through the hotel lobby which was so filled with people and activity that no one

really paid any attention to us. When the elevator doors closed Rob relaxed visibly, making me wonder if he had been concerned about a run-in with fans while he was with me.

I asked as much and he said no, adding, “But the longer we don’t have to explain anything, the easier it will be for both of us. I’d like to keep you away from that kind of attention forever – no, love, because it’s *terrifying*. You can’t imagine how much of your privacy will completely disappear when they realize you’re with me.”

“We’ll have to deal with that eventually,” I said reasonably.

“Yes,” he bent to pull me into a gentle hug. “but not today. It’s still just you and me for now. That’s all I really want.”

Rob excused himself to disappear into his own suite for a few minutes. A call from his PR agent contained some schedule changes that Rob needed to put on his copy of the agenda.

“Be right back,” he said, giving me a quick kiss.

I busied myself for a while – pulled off my shoes, went to my own bathroom where, after washing my hands, I collected all the toiletries I’d brought for last night and tucked them into my suitcase, leaving out only what I would need to get dressed in the morning (this is because I never leave packing until the last moment, unlike a certain beloved of mine). That was when it hit me – hard – tomorrow my weekend was over. I would return to Seattle, leaving Rob in L.A. to continue with

the *New Moon* media junket alone. For the first time, I felt the terrible depth of loneliness and longing that had caused him so much pain this morning and now, like him, I didn't know how I could bear to be separated again.

I threw the suitcase on the bed and rushed through the door joining the suites, feeling certain that time was our enemy; there was not enough of it left now to waste on politeness and proper decorum.

He sat at the heavy table with his dark head (though still quite red from the coloring for Edward) bent over the thick collection of papers upon which he scribbled notes and crossed through lines to add the corrections he had received. He was no longer on the phone, so I went to him and gently kissed the nape of his neck where the skin looked so vulnerable, squeezed his shoulders, ran my hands over his arms.

"Mmm, hi," he sighed. "I'm nearly finished here."

"Don't stop what you're doing—I just had to touch you."

"I like that idea. In just a minute I can touch you, too."

"I'll wait right here," I said, kissing the top of his head.

But it looked like he might need more than a minute. Rather than distract him (and possibly cause an error), eventually I wandered into the bedroom--and had to smother a laugh. I'd have known this was Rob's bedroom without ever being told.

His arms slipped around me from behind; he bent to kiss my cheek.

"This I remember," I said.

“What — me kissing you?”

“No, the room. It looks just like the one in Seattle.”

Rob laughed his sweet, funny laugh. “Yeah. It’s the same clothes all over the bed, too.”

“I guess we could move them.”

“Or just dive in on top of them,” he offered with a grin. “I doubt we could make the wrinkles any worse.”

I turned in his arms to rub my face against his chest. “Wanna try that?”

“Could be interesting,” he breathed. I could feel him getting hard, pressing gently (for now) into my hip.

I slid my hands under his tee shirt and carefully raked my nails across his ribs. He shivered as my fingertips brushed his lean hips and tight stomach, but as I reached to open his jeans Rob caught my hands and bent to kiss me.

“This time,” he whispered against my lips. “I want to undress you.”

I went so weak that I could only nod in agreement. He smiled in approval and then his long, slender fingers attended to the task of disrobing me. His manner was calm, his touch never less than gentle even as the curves he’d devoured last night were revealed, and soon bared, for him. He dropped to his knees, pulling my jeans and panties out of the way, supporting me as I stepped out of them. I was now completely naked before his blue-eyed perusal and yet, had never felt more comfortable, more *accepted*.

Rob leaned forward to press tiny kisses on my hips and thighs and each tight, aching nipple.

"You have the most beautiful skin I've ever seen," he said, cupping my pale breast very gently in one hand.

"Thank you; people are usually turned off by my white skin."

"Not me. I want to taste you all over."

I hugged him, loving the rasp of his beard between my breasts. "Rob, you're the man for me."

"Yes," he sighed.

His hands gently directed me to sit on the edge of the bed. I did so, watching him with avid eyes. I will never tire of looking at him, but just then, he became a *performer* for my pleasure.

Without increasing his pace Rob casually lifted his arms to pull the tee shirt over his head. It seemed to take a long time to get the shirt clear of him but I could hardly object—not with his sculpted chest framed so perfectly by his muscular arms. He took a deep breath as I stared in lustful appreciation at the way his Levis rode even lower than normal across his hips; they were clinging to him, but barely, as if one good exhale would send them right to the floor. This also left much more of his hard, beautiful belly exposed to me. I leaned forward to plant my tongue—deeply—in his luscious, hair-obscured navel, but Rob only winked and stepped just out of my reach.

He kicked off his shoes and managed to get out of his socks without using his hands, and then turned his back to me so that I could gasp in pleasure as a quick twist of his hips had those jeans around his ankles in one smooth move. I had never before heard the sound that came from my throat at that moment. Rob – beautiful, sexy, passionate Rob – was naked under his jeans.

His head turned just enough to glance at me over his right shoulder; he grinned at my reaction (and yes, I *have* seen naked men before, just not one this elegant – not one that I loved this much).

He swung around to face me now and my eyes were drawn unavoidably to his thick, gorgeous erection standing proudly amid the dark nest between his legs. I made to reach for him again but a tiny shake of his head said no.

The large, long-fingered hands I loved dipped languidly and Rob gently stroked himself while I squirmed on the bed, breathing as though I were suddenly asthmatic.

He closed his eyes and moaned softly.

So did I.

“Rob,” I said brokenly. “please –”

“Gem, darling, watch me – this is for you.”

“And I *want* it. Sweetheart, now – please, Rob, *now*. I have to touch you.”

He relented at last, moving toward the bed where he bent to crush my lips with his. He allowed me to fondle his hard shaft for only a moment, then pulled out of my grip and put a knee on the mattress. Soon he was crawling on all fours up to

the headboard, moving slowly enough that I could watch his cock and balls swing gently between his legs.

Dry-mouthed, I stood and clasped a hand around each of his strong thighs. He paused immediately, not questioning, but his eyes glittered with excitement as he looked back at me.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you,” he replied.

And then I ate him.

It was like a ping pong match between sensation and sound. I stroked his crack with careful fingertips and he moaned. I licked the strip of skin behind his testicles and he moaned—louder. I suckled gently on his balls, first the right then the left, and Rob gasped a sincere “Oh God!” His chest got closer to the bed while that cute, firm ass rose higher in the air to give me room to work.

I cupped him in both palms, rolling and stroking and tickling the taut, hair-covered sacs, allowing the warmth of my hands to surround and soothe him.

Rob’s own hands clutched at the pillow into which most of his face was pressed. There was just enough room for him to breathe and to make those gasping, hissing sounds that encouraged me to *continue*, no matter what.

Slowly, I licked again at the strip of skin behind his balls and he arched sharply—in yoga, I believe the pose is called Downward Dog; he was really quite limber—I took this opportunity to slip my small right hand between his parted

thighs and clasp his throbbing shaft, rolling and caressing the hot, hard skin as gently as possible.

"Kim," he groaned. His taut thighs were beginning to tremble.

I moved onto the bed, keeping my right hand closed around him. Rob thrust against my fingers and moaned something unintelligible into his pillow. For a moment I considered turning him on his back; relief would have come swiftly in that case, but I wanted this to last as long as possible.

Instead, I kissed again the long line from his tailbone to his testicles but this time I moved beyond them, pressing his legs open a bit wider so that I could wiggle through them to lie beneath him, taking his cock in my mouth until his tip hit the back of my throat.

He growled, long and rough and deep--a sound of utter, desperate need.

My mouth moved along his length while my tongue swirled over and around, up and down. I drew back until only the broad tip rested between my lips, and then suckled hard while keeping my hands in motion across his hips and thighs. He rocked his pelvis, thrusting his beautiful body at my mouth. I could feel the effort he made to restrain himself--not wanting to gag or injure me--but the cries from his throat were agonized, breathless.

I reached up to gently tickle his hard, straining belly. His whole body convulsed (*"Oh...Gem!"*), and the throbbing shaft abruptly emptied itself down my throat. I swallowed hard, and lay quietly for a moment with my arms wrapped loosely around his waist.

Rob seemed to move in slow motion after that. Gradually he eased off to my right side, shifting from his hands and knees to lie on his back, looking somewhat boneless. He reached out to me and I was immediately enfolded in his arms and legs; he held me so tightly, rocking gently back and forth while his body trembled uncontrollably. It was the small, quivering breath he took that made me glance up at his weary, beloved face.

“Sweetheart,” I said gently. “Are you all right?”

He nodded, but a tear escaped his eye and left a wet trail on his cheek. I tried to sit up, half alarmed now, but he kept me pinned against his chest. A long moment later his hold relaxed a bit; this time he let me move around, but not out of his arms. I kissed his lips, and he gave me a sweet, watery smile.

“Remember I leave for Paris in a few weeks?”

“I remember.”

“I’ll be there three months. I won’t get to see you for three more months.”

“It’ll be a long time, but—”

“Promise you won’t let go of me,” he whispered.

“I promise I will not let you go, Rob.”

He cuddled with me for a while, pressing endless kisses to my face, my shoulders, the palms of my hands. I murmured words of love to him, returned his kisses and caresses until his tears subsided completely and he lay back on the pillow, comforted and calm.

I rested my arms on his chest and looked up at him. *Gosh, he is so beautiful.*

"We're okay now?" I asked.

"We're okay," he said shyly.

"So, you'll be in Paris for three months. Think what that's going to be like for me."

His brow raised in query.

"I will be in Seattle by myself, praying that you don't get carried off by some stylish young mademoiselle whose only English is '*oui, monsieur.*'"

"Actually," he said with that quirky grin. "most of the French do speak English quite well. I'm sure the mademoiselle could easily make conversation —"

"She won't be thinking of making conversation, sweetie. Not with words, anyway."

"She sounds like someone I should meet, then."

"Oh?"

"Sure. My best friend Tom would love to have a stylish French girlfriend. I could introduce them, you see."

"That would be very considerate of you," I said, trying not to grin. "But what if she's only interested in *you*?"

"Oh, well, that would be unfortunate — for her. My heart already belongs to you."

"Good answer."

"And it's true. It's what you said earlier — I'm not leaving you, and you're not leaving me. We're safe together."

“Yes, we are,” I said, greatly comforted now myself.

“Here, put this over you; I don’t want you to be cold. Mmm, you smell so good.”

Rob hugged me hard, then drew me to his chest once more and cocooned us in warmth. The peace and safety of this moment was extraordinary; so much so that as I drifted slowly to sleep, I had to ask just one more question.

“What if the French girl shows up in one of those skimpy maid uniforms?”

“If she doesn’t have your talents I’m not interested,” he said shortly. “But you know...if your cookie business doesn’t work out, you should try getting a job with Cirque du Soleil – they could use someone as flexible as you.”

I spent the next 24 hours trying to convince Rob that he would survive working in Paris for three months without seeing me every day – all the while knowing in my heart that I wouldn’t fare any better in Seattle without him.

Mainly I thought we handled it pretty well – whether by unspoken agreement or complete denial – we both allowed ourselves to be distracted for a time. Rob said nothing more about the imminent separation, but his eyes followed me everywhere. His hands were never far from my skin whenever I was near him. I made it a point to stay near him.

For my part I tried to keep the mood positive, encouraging Rob to talk about the film he was going to make in Paris – a remake of *Bel Ami*. I thought the period piece was an excellent choice, stretching his acting expertise a bit further – which

would only be good for his career. He didn't warm up to this topic for a while, but eventually his voice lightened and he described his role with some genuine enthusiasm.

He accepted the strawberry I placed at his lips over a rather late lunch, managing to capture my fingers for a kiss.

"Do you think it's a good idea to keep talking about Paris?" he asked.

"I think it's better to talk about it than pretend it isn't going to happen," I said. "Don't you?"

"I guess so, but I still don't like the reminder."

"I want you to be excited about making the film, sweetie, that's all. Now, are you ready to show me how good you are at Connect Four?"

"I hope I can still play," he grinned. "After the way you kicked my ass at Scrabble—twice—I need some success."

"Tried to warn you," I said blithely. "Not many people beat me at Scrabble."

It turned out that Rob was very, very good at Connect Four—he won in four moves that I found completely impossible to comprehend (I'm a wordsmith, not a strategist). He was gracious about kicking *my* ass, though, which made me like him a lot.

While I went to clear away the lunch dishes, Rob hustled off to the bedroom. He was gone long enough that I began to wonder what type of surprise he might be preparing for me. I went quietly to the door, braced to find him already naked, but

no—he was digging with great purpose through his duffle bag, having all but upended the enormous thing onto the bed. He saw me, and smiled.

“I bought something to show you,” he said. “I forgot about it till now.”

“Oh? What is it?”

His hand came up with a plastic bag from a store whose name I couldn’t see clearly. “I found them a couple of weeks ago. I was hoping...”

“You were hoping—oh, sweetie...”

Rob turned to me with two small books in his outstretched hand—copies of Tagore’s *Fireflies* and *The Meaning of Flowers*. I looked at him, speechless with happiness.

“I hoped you’d read to me while you’re here,” he said, pleased with my reaction to his surprise. “So I can see you and remember what you look like when...well, later.”

“I’d love to do that for you,” I said softly. “Which one first?”

In the end, it didn’t matter how much we were able to distract each other. Sunday simply hurt.

I couldn’t resist waking him (though it was much too early), couldn’t bear having him so far away from me even if it meant pulling him from dreamland. I kissed his beautiful, stubbled, beloved face until his soft lips opened for mine and he slowly joined me in wakefulness. His thick lashes finally lifted to reveal those

smoky blue eyes that smiled in welcome just before a flicker of realization caused them to deepen slightly in color.

Wordlessly, Rob turned on his side until we lay face-to-face. He drew my left thigh up to rest over his hip and then entered me slowly, pulling out almost all the way then pushing back in, a little deeper each time, until he could go no further. I wrapped my arms around him and kept my eyes on his as we rocked gently together one last time. The sweet burst of pleasure at the end was its own reward, of course, but I found a much more profound emotion in Rob's face.

His expression, while so full of love for me, also spoke of the sadness he would not voice—acceptance of the price for this weekend. I know my own expression mirrored his and yet, there were no words at that moment to convey this combination of sensations—love fulfilled, passion satisfied and the depth of loss so soon to come.

So we didn't say much for a long time, simply holding tightly to each other, exchanging kisses and caresses. It was the unexpected call on Rob's cell that finally jolted us apart—Steve, letting us know that he would be downstairs to pick me up at 11:30 so that I'd have plenty of time to get through LAX for my 1pm flight. Rob politely thanked his driver, and then turned to me.

"I guess we should get up now," he said quietly. "We can have breakfast before you have to pack, all right?"

"Sure," I said, though food had no appeal.

"Should we go downstairs, or would you rather stay up here?"

“You’re probably tired of Room Service by now, but I’d rather stay up here. Just the two of us – if that’s okay.”

“It’s always okay, Gem. I want whatever you want.”

Then I want to stay with you, always and always...

I don’t remember what we ate for breakfast. We showered quickly and Rob called in the order so that I could get dressed. I know I returned to his suite and set my suitcase down just ahead of Room Service. But all I could consciously comprehend was the sound of a small clock in the kitchenette; its audible ticking seemed loud – excruciatingly so – as it soullessly counted down these last minutes of happiness.

Rob, long-used to this sort of thing, spent most of the time being supportive and sweet.

“It’s harder to be the one going away,” he said gently, kissing my cheek. “I do know what you’re feeling, love.”

I leaned into him, drawing on his warm skin, his kind heart. He pulled me into a tight hug, folding himself around me just as he had done in Seattle.

“How do you get used to this?” I asked.

“The travel? There’s no choice. But leaving someone I love – I do love you, so much – there’s no getting used to that. I’ve just learned to bear it.”

“I guess I’ll learn it too, then.”

"It won't always be like this. There will come a time when we won't have to keep leaving each other."

I swallowed hard, and nodded against his chest. Rob kissed the top of my head. "We just have to do everything we can to stay together until that happens. So, are you with me, my Gem?"

"I'm with you, Rob," I said at once, rewarded with his sweet, perfect grin.

"And I'm with you, even if French girls chase me all over Paris."

"Run faster than they do, okay?"

"I won't let them catch me, promise."

"You make an excellent boyfriend," I sniffed. "Very trustworthy."

"That's because I'm *yours*, for as long as you'll have me."

He drew me outdoors to the wide, sun-splashed balcony.

"What —"

"Let me show you something." Rob leaned carefully over the edge at street-side. "That's where Steve will be waiting with the car. When you get down there look up here, so I can see you one more time. Will you?"

"Of course."

I didn't mention that it might be a good thing he wouldn't be able to see my face completely. My heart was already weeping the tears I couldn't allow to fall from my eyes but regardless, it was going to show.

"We should go back inside now," I told Rob, wanting equally to hold him in my arms again and keep us out of the paparazzis' relentless camera range. He followed me silently, clutching my hand in his.

"Please tell me you had a good time this weekend – the premiere and everything," he said anxiously. The stress of waiting for Steve's call was definitely taking its toll.

"It was a *wonderful* time," I assured him. "The premiere stuff was fun, too."

"Good," he grinned. "Then you might say yes to the next one?"

"Just roll out your red carpet – I'll be there."

"You really are a gem," he said softly.

"But more importantly – yours," I smiled.

Rob bent to cover my lips with his in a long, sweet, gentle kiss that did nothing to make me happy about leaving today.

It was that moment the phone rang.

I don't want to describe how painful it was to kiss and cling to Rob in desperation, only to force myself to step away from him and pick up my suitcase.

To kiss him once more and make myself walk out the door. I couldn't quite believe I moved under my own power; it was like wading through a lake of molasses.

To navigate the hotel lobby and appear outside in sunlight so vicious it hurt my eyes. I heard Steve's voice at the curb say "Let me take your case, Ms. Kim,"

before I ever saw him. I was relieved to surrender the suitcase – that heavy, hateful reminder of my return to pumpkin-land – but still reluctant to follow him to the car.

He opened the door for me and stood patiently while I gathered the nerve to accept the reality – Rob was here and I was leaving.

Let me think – If I can just stand here a minute, I know I'll think of something--

“Breathe, honey,” said a deep voice from the back seat. And suddenly I was staring into Finn’s strong, sympathetic face. His hand stretched out to me, palm up, an entreaty to accept his invitation.

I tried to speak, but my voice refused to obey me.

Steve shifted a minute step behind me, a careful reminder that there was no time to waste. My mind went nearly blank as a crushing weight settled over my heart; nothing would save me from getting on that plane. Rob was here and I had to leave him.

Wordlessly I reached over to put my hand in Finn’s. He drew me steadily to the car, refusing to release me even as I paused one final time for a too-brief glance up to the balcony where Rob waited. There was a flash of his perfect grin. His hair was ruffled gently by the warm breeze. His hand lifted in a quick movement that looked like a wave, and then he vanished from my sight.

Finn tugged gently at my hand, and there was no longer any reason to hesitate. Sanity somehow returned. I sat down beside him, clinging gratefully to his strong fingers.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I said.

"I thought you might like some company," he replied.

"Thanks, Finn. It's good to see you."

"And you, my dear. After the premiere I couldn't help but think it would be difficult for you to leave today."

"You were right," I whispered, trying desperately not to cry. This was not made any easier when my cell phone buzzed. Rob, texting me before I was five minutes out of his arms.

Ask me to stay, Rob. I'll come back upstairs and never leave you again.

"It's Rob?" Finn asked, already knowing the answer. "Go ahead and speak to him if you like."

"I'll just answer his text," I said, and quickly sent a message that I'd call him from the airport. Rob responded that he would wait to hear from me. The urge to weep was still fairly strong, but so was Finn's brisk confidence. I settled back into the smooth-riding Crown Vic, and linked my arm through his.

"What are your plans when you get back to Seattle?" he asked.

It wasn't the thought of going back to Seattle that bothered me (it was the place I'd chosen to call home, after all), only that it would be lonely now. I gave Finn a short description of my life there, without going into any real details. But he listened graciously, asking a few questions, commenting here and there. It was done to keep me distracted as the distance from Rob grew longer, and I could only be grateful that he cared enough to try.

At the airport, Steve pulled the car to a smooth stop and stepped out to open the door for me. Finn took my hand again, to press a gentle kiss against my fingers.

“Would you like me to come in with you?”

“That’s very kind, but no. I’m all right now, thanks to you – and I’m sure you have better things to do than babysit me this afternoon.”

“If you needed it, I can’t think of anything else I’d want to be available for,” he smiled. “But since you have a little time, you’re probably hoping to talk with Rob before you board, and I’m happy to let you go for that, as well.”

“You are a prince,” I told him sincerely.

“Hardly that, Miss Kim, but I know good people when I meet them.”

“You and I have that in common. Thank you for coming with me, Finn. It was more helpful than I can tell you.”

“You’re very welcome. And please keep in touch, will you?”

“I’ll do that – oh, thanks, Steve –” My suitcase appeared at the curb. “Thank you both, so much, for all your help this weekend. Maybe we’ll get to do it again someday.”

“I would like that very much,” said Finn. “Take care, my dear; good-bye.”

I shouldered my bags and resolutely stepped away from the two wonderful men, making my way into the endless throng of other travelers like myself. The stressful (but necessary) security clearances took some time to navigate, but finally I was able to find a relatively quiet niche not too far from my gate, where I took out the cell and dialed a now-familiar number.

There were tears in his voice, a heaviness that spoke of much sadness, even though he was undeniably happy to hear from me.

"This is just awful," he said later. "missing you so much."

"I know, sweetie. It's awful for me, too."

"It was so hard to not run after you—I'd have been down at the car to grab you up and bring you back to this room in a heartbeat."

"I stood there trying to think of any way I could stay here at least one more night," I admitted.

"I'd have asked you to stay—you know that, don't you—if only I didn't have to leave so early in the morning. *This* is hard enough, but tomorrow...I don't know if I could have done it."

"No, I understand—this isn't easy, but tomorrow would have been much harder. We did the right thing, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, but I wish...well, enough of that. We had a great weekend together; it was completely worth every minute I could hold you."

"Oh yes, more than worth it—Rob, sweetheart, they're boarding us now, I need to go for a while."

"Call me when you get home?"

"Of course. Try to rest this afternoon."

"I'll try. I love you, my Gem, my heart."

"I love *you*, Rob," I whispered, stepping into line. "'Let my love, like sunlight, surround you and yet give you illumined freedom.'"

“Oh, Kim,” he whispered, and the tears were back in his voice, the soft and beautiful voice of my beloved. I ended the call before he had to hear the sob in mine.

Seattle welcomed me home with a towering black wall of rain accompanied by high wind and even some hail. This weather was hardly surprising (it was November in the Northwest, after all), but it reflected my own mood too closely. For a couple of days after returning from Los Angeles I wandered around my apartment feeling lost, incredibly low – and since most of the feeling stemmed from missing Rob, it was harder to shake this time.

I allowed myself to mope, but only briefly. In the real world, that is not my normal disposition – endless rain rarely has a negative effect on me – and I knew that Rob would call every day, which always made me brighten again. So I went back to the form of therapy that never failed, regardless of the situation creating the need for it.

This time there were two baskets to fill; one for sweet Rob, and the other for my new friend Finn. I divided the entire batch of shortbread between the two; it took most of one day to dip a third of the cookies in chocolate, coat another third of them in raspberry jam (Rob liked the strawberry jam from earlier, but asked if I could try raspberry next – anything for my love...), and leave the last third plain. I double-wrapped each package in plastic wrap and then sealed them tightly in freezer bags. I set each package into a sturdy, well-padded box to further minimize

any breakage, and then wrote a couple of cards, keeping the wording somewhat brief, knowing that other people would see them before Rob and Finn would. Rob's box had to go to the office of his agent, who would forward it to him with other mail; Finn's box was going directly to his office at Summit, but it was more than likely that an assistant would open it for him first. The timing was important, but not truly crucial; the shortbread cookies would not go "bad," and would take at least two weeks—probably longer—to even go stale. This was what made them the best possible type of sweet for mailing anywhere in the world, a fact I was counting on for the success of Kira's Kitchen.

Thanksgiving went by in a blur; I barely noticed the holiday weekend because I spent it wrapping Christmas presents for my family in order to mail them to my mom's house the first week of December. The question kept coming back to me, causing some confusion—what could I give Rob for Christmas? Seriously, what does one give a man who could afford almost anything he wanted and who routinely traveled enough of the world to simply go pick it up? I considered books and CDs, shirts or nice sweaters, travel mugs, gift cards...it went on and I couldn't settle on anything that didn't seem lame. The only item I truly rejected was another camisole, spritzed with my perfume; the last thing he needed was more of my underwear.

The pressure of deciding on something right then was relieved by the next e-mail that appeared in my Inbox, with the words *Thank You* in the subject line.

“My dear Ms. Kim,” it read. “Your box arrived here and I could not wait to tell you how delicious the cookies are—I should say “were,” because they did not last long at all. Your note was very sweet, and although thanks were not necessary in regard to the premiere weekend, the office staff and I so much appreciate your kindness. Actually, Steve has offered to drive you anywhere in the world you wish to go, if you will continue to bake cookies for us!

“We are very busy here at Summit, gearing up to start work on *Breaking Dawn*, as you probably know from Rob, although much of that work is still in the beginning stages. I hope we will see you during the filming, at least.

“Do you have plans for the holidays? If not, please let me extend an invitation to attend our Christmas party on December 17th, here in Los Angeles. My office and I can certainly help with handling any details if you need travel assistance. It would be lovely to see you again so soon, my dear. Please let me know.

“Thank you again for the wonderful cookie basket. I hope you are happy and well. You are often in my thoughts. Warmest regards, Finn.”

And that was the beginning of my e-mail friendship with John Finley, entertainment executive and all-around great guy.

I wrote back to him quickly, indicating that I had no plans for the holidays, but only because Rob and I hadn’t discussed Christmas yet. *Bel Ami* was being processed through another studio so I wasn’t sure how much could be discussed with Finn, but I trusted his professionalism and discretion in all matters. Over the

next ten days or so, I realized again how helpful it was to talk with someone who understood Rob's business, could explain potentially sensitive issues and how I could handle them even on the sidelines. His affection and respect for Rob was genuine; he never crossed any line as far as information shared with me, and it was obvious that he wanted my relationship with Rob to succeed on all levels.

I could talk to Finn about missing Rob so much (even though we spoke to each other every day), without feeling guilty. Most of the time I tried to keep Rob from sensing just how much I hated to be separated from him; he already felt badly about being gone all the time.

"Have you considered visiting Rob in France?" Finn wanted to know.

"I've thought about it, of course, but we've never talked about that," I said.

"Is it because of his schedule? I'm sure he would love to have you there, even if he's shooting every day."

"I wouldn't want to complicate things for him."

"Of course not," he said thoughtfully. "Have you ever been to Paris?"

I had not seen Paris, but Rob hadn't invited me to visit him there, either. He told me that he would go back to London for Christmas if the shooting schedule permitted. I didn't feel right about inviting myself to London--the thought of meeting his family still had me in knots—but there was definitely no money for travel to Europe, anyway. It was safer to plan on staying in Seattle for the holidays.

Two days later, Finn e-mailed me again.

"Kim, I have an idea. Could I call you to discuss?"

He called soon after I sent my cell number. “This isn’t Summit business, so we aren’t breaking any rules here, but I have a good friend who lives in Paris and I was just reminded that he and his wife will be traveling for an extended period of time. They always hire someone to house-sit while they’re gone. Yes, I know you haven’t talked to Rob about this – but I believe you should, my dear. When he agrees that you should be there with him, the pair of you could stay in my friends’ home.”

“But how?” I asked in astonishment. “Your friends don’t know me!”

“I know you. My recommendation will be more than enough, and they get the benefit of a trustworthy person looking after their home while they’re out.”

“Oh, Finn, I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you like the idea?”

“Yes, I love it!”

“Well, talk to Rob, find out what he thinks about this, and we’ll work out the other details later. I should tell you that my friends won’t start their trip until after New Year’s; I hope that won’t cause any problems for your Christmas doings.”

“No, I’m sure it won’t. I’m kind of in a daze here, Finn – this is so generous of you –”

“Not at all,” he said kindly. “It’s what friends do. You get to be with Rob for several days; he gets to come home to you every night, and my Paris friends can enjoy their trip without worrying about their home. Everybody wins.”

"It sounds perfect," I said. "Should I talk to Rob today, or wait until you've had a chance to ask your friends?"

"Don't wait," he advised. "I've already put the idea out to Dominique and Josée; they're waiting to hear the results of this conversation with you."

"All right, then. I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Finn, thank you--with all my heart."

I glowed with happiness for only a few minutes after that phone call—it took very little time to remember that I had no money to travel anywhere this year. Sadly, I would now have to tell Finn that his friends should find someone else to house-sit. And I was back to wondering what I could give to Rob for Christmas.

"You're kidding," Rob said in mock horror. "*Christmas is coming?*"

"It's right around the corner. Sweetie, quit laughing and tell me what you want this year."

"I'm not laughing at you, Gem—I thought you already had something for me."

"Well, not ...why would you think that?"

"I wasn't supposed to say anything," he sounded a bit guilty. "Finn said you have a wonderful gift for me and that I should find the best present ever for you. I just realized I don't know what that would be. I can't think of anything nice enough to give you."

The frustration made me want to cry. Instead, I choked out the truth.

“Finn tried to help me put it together, but Rob, I can’t make it work, no matter how much as I want to. Sweetheart, I’m so sorry –”

He was concerned now. “Kim, don’t be sorry. Tell me what we’re talking about; maybe I can help.”

“Finn has friends who live in Paris,” I said. “They travel quite a bit and he suggested to them that I could come over and house-sit while they’re gone. My gift was going to be a long visit – um, even though we’d have to wait until after the holidays.”

“Seriously? How long could you stay?”

“Three weeks, but –”

“You’d be in their house – I could live there with you?”

“That was the idea –”

“Kim, it’s *brilliant*. It’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. If we wait until after Christmas, I can still go to London to be with my family, and you’ll get to be with yours, and then we’ll have three weeks together. It’s perfect! When can you come?”

“I can’t come, Rob,” I said unhappily.

“Why not?” he asked quietly.

“I’m not going to my mother’s for Christmas, either. There’s no money; I can’t afford to go anywhere.”

“Money?” he asked in a completely different tone of voice; he understood the situation now. “No, that will *not* be the reason we can’t be together. Dearest, I’m sure we can fix this; let me think for a minute.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I said regretfully.

“Of course you should have told me,” he said calmly. “It’s a wonderful idea, and now that I know about it, I can’t let it *not* happen – now, *where* did I put those things? Give me a second, will you, love?”

“Sure,” I said, feeling a tiny measure of hope – and a tremendous amount of love for this capable young man.

I heard the sounds of his near-frantic search; he finally set the phone down to continue with both hands. When he spoke again, his voice carried the warmth and excitement of a few minutes ago.

“This will be really easy, Gem. I’ll give you some of my frequent flyer miles to get here and back – I’ve got enough miles to circle the earth twice by now. You have a passport, don’t you? Good. Then...the flight can be *my* Christmas gift for you. It works out perfectly. Will you come to Paris now?”

“Yes,” I said with a sniff. “You really are wonderful, Rob.”

“If that were true, *I’d* have thought of something like this for us,” he said gently. “But the important thing is that we have the way to make it happen – I *love* the thought of you being here with me, every day and every night. Do you have a calendar there? Let’s figure out when you should travel.”

It turned out that January would be a good month for our holiday; Rob would be filming right up to Christmas, and then take a 4-day break that he would spend in London with his family. Upon returning to Paris, the shooting schedule would be reduced in general, to accommodate the season, but also because there were a finite number of days on that schedule, anyway. I didn't mind that Rob would have to work while I was there—each day would likely offer plenty of distractions for me, and the nights would be filled with him, with love. I always looked forward to learning more about him, something that could only happen with enough *time*.

"You know," he said. "one good thing about living in Seattle is that the weather here won't bother you much. It's terribly wet and cold already."

"Here, too—but I thought you'd be used to it yourself, having grown up in London."

"I might be used to it, but I hate having the shivers."

"When I get there, I promise to keep you very, very warm," I told him.

"Oh, wow...is it January yet?"

It was not the first time that I spent Christmas alone, but this year definitely combined the oddest mix of emotions. December moved along at a dizzying speed, which relieved me a great deal, for soon it would be January and Rob would be in my arms again. Knowing this made it easier to deal with missing my family and friends—Jeff lived in Northern California, but Pati was there now also, visiting her

in-laws; Judy and her husband were spending more time than ever in Spokane these days, to be near their son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren—I'd had dinner with them the night before they left town. And Jack...I gave little thought to hearing from him, but if things had changed so dramatically in his life it would follow that the holidays might be a bit rough this year. I hoped he had found his peace.

Finn had been delighted to hear that I could travel to France, and even more so when I told him about the arrangements that Rob had made for me. I was already in possession of a round-trip ticket on Air France; a beautifully detailed packet of information and instructions, plus a set of keys, had arrived from Finn's office just yesterday. All I had to do now was pack a few things, and there was plenty of time to do that.

Christmas week saw the arrivals of several boxes—from my mom and sisters, from my best friend Jeff in California—a gorgeous, *enormous* scarlet poinsettia from Finn, and a small box from France. I've been a grown woman for quite a long time, but when my mom says "Don't open your gifts till Christmas morning," I can't make myself disobey her (and I still think she would *know* if I did it, even from two thousand miles away!). I put them in front of my small fireplace, and set my sights instead on the box addressed to me in Rob's strong, flowing hand. Beneath the cheerful wrapping paper, so painstakingly folded and taped, the box was emblazoned with the proud *H* of Harrod's. Of course I was intrigued; Rob would never know I *hadn't* waited until Christmas Day to open it. Inside this box lay a small card.

“Something you can wear for France,” it read. “And something you can wear for *me*. Merry Christmas, my Gem. It’s only 10 more days until I see you! Love, Rob.” Below that lay a cream-colored cashmere scarf with chocolate brown and olive green accents, plus a pair of cashmere gloves, also in cream. They fit beautifully, warm and incredibly smooth over my hands. Further down in the box was the item that made me grin—it was obvious now that Rob had truly been paying attention in L.A.—a teddy in rich, dark purple with some serious underwire work around those C-cups. The fabric was unbelievably smooth, what there was of it, and somehow nearly translucent. I didn’t even need to try it on to know that the beautiful, silky garment wouldn’t hide a *thing*. Happily, I surmised that was what Rob intended, and made plans to thank him properly—and immediately—upon my arrival in Paris.

Eventually there came a time when I simply could not bake one more cookie, could not fill one more basket with homemade goodies, and I was there now, camped out on the sofa with a 24-hour showing of *White Christmas* on television—and I actually looked forward to seeing it a few times; it’s my favorite holiday movie. Wrapped in cozy flannel pajamas (a gift from my sister) and sipping hot chocolate from my favorite Santa mug (a gift from Jeff), the holiday spirit finally had time to descend upon my heart, leaving me pensive and more than a little grateful.

This was the first Christmas in many years that I was “involved” with someone, though Rob was truly not just any other man. The list of his attributes was already very long, and would only lengthen as he continued to mature. I very much

looked forward to watching his life evolve, to watching Rob become the man and actor and human being that he was destined to be. I didn't know how much time we would have together, and didn't want to speculate on that aspect right now. It was enough (so much more than enough) to be loved by this wonderful, gentle, generous man. His love opened my heart in a way that I believed would never happen. The fact that I not only welcomed Rob into my life but can't imagine my future without him now has given me so much joy and relief. *I no longer need to be jealous of Cinderella* – the next time I look at that tiny watch and put it away again, it will be for good.

Rob's influence also brought another exceptional friend into my small circle, John Finley – Finn – whose knowledge and experience with the actors' life will continue to help me successfully navigate these unfamiliar new pathways, giving my relationship with Rob a better chance for long-term survival.

Will we have issues? Of course; all couples do. Not all couples have their issues displayed to the entire world – and I admit that will cause me some concern – but I truly believe Rob's fans care about him so genuinely, so completely, that his happiness will be worth more to them than any headlines we raise. I guess we'll have to see what happens.

So here I am, having celebrated Christmas Day by myself and yet feeling happy, loved and safe, waiting for the daily call from my loved one. He truly *is* my loved one, and through some amazing miracle, he loves me, too. Pleasure, happiness, love...it really is all good.

When the phone rang I picked up immediately.

"Hi," I said gaily, not bothering to look at the phone's caller ID.

"Hello," said a friendly, *female* voice. "Is this Kim?"

"It is," I said. "Sorry, I was expecting someone else."

"No problem," she laughed. "I'm Deborah Holt from Summit Entertainment's Craft Services Division. Are you familiar with Craft Services?"

"Not in detail, but you handle keeping cast and crew fed on the set. Is that close?"

"That's it in a nutshell. We're gearing up to start work on *Breaking Dawn* in the near future. I heard from a mutual friend that you're aware of this already."

"You're talking about Finn?"

"Yes, he gave me your number--and a couple dozen samples from the cookie basket you sent him for Christmas. I'm calling because both Finn and Rob Pattinson have put in requests for your excellent shortbread cookie. I'd like to place a rather large order with Kira's Kitchen—we need about 1,000 cookies by July 30th, to start. Is this a good time to talk?"

As if loving me weren't enough, Rob offered one more blessing—he believed in my business enough to make sure I would have a chance to succeed with it. I hung up the phone, grinning widely. Then I got dressed and hurried out to find the nearest kitchen store. I was suddenly in the market for a new jelly roll pan. Or two.