In Real Life

by Jollytr

Summary

Katrina made several online friends, especially after writing her first fanfic “The Love of My Life” - very fluffy and silly Richard Armitage fan fiction. She wasn’t keen to meet them in real life but, after a year of emails, decided to take a chance on RAC71. What sort of friendship can an accountant in Toronto and a globe trotting actor have? Will they be able to plow through the roadblocks to be able to spend more than a couple of weeks a year in the same country?

This is a fluffy Richard Armitage Fan Fiction about the fictional writer of “The Love of My Life” and the muse who inspired her to write. It's not necessary to read TLoML but Katrina and Richard will reference it a couple of times.

Richard Armitage fan fiction at its fluffiest.
5,000! Jollytr had 5,000 hits on her fan fiction story, *The Love of my Life*. She couldn’t believe it! It was the fluffiest piece of fluffy fluff every posted. It was a wonder she didn’t get cavities writing it because it was so tooth rotting sweet. And there were lots of kudos and nice comments too. It was fairly G rated so she guessed there was still room for non-porn RPF after all. When she thought about some of the RPF’s she’d read she giggled, an honest to goodness school girl giggle. PWP had a whole world of meaning after diving in, head first, into AO3. And as George Takei would say, “Oh My!”

Sitting in front of her computer, staring off into space she reflected on the triumphs of the past year. She’d accomplished good things, not the least of which was writing a story and losing a lot of weight – 30 pounds of her own and 210 of her cheating scum of a husband. Twenty years of sticking by him, no matter how difficult it was. Twenty years of life, memories, family, companionship. Twenty years meant nothing to John when he started boinking his 28 year old assistant … or when he left her … or when he got engaged to said 28 year old. She shook her head and shivered, sloughing off the memory of him. Her second greatest regret was that he hadn't shown his true colours years earlier.

Her Mom was right, not that Katrina would admit it out loud. She was too young when she married John. She was 22 and just out of university, a freshly minted accountant. He was 28 and a rising star associate at his law firm. She thought they were the ideal couple with the brightest of futures. They had it all. Well, mostly. She received her CMA and CPA designations and he became one of the top ten go-to patent lawyers in the country. On the downside, it was never the right time for children, even though she wanted them. In hindsight it became clear that when she was becoming too interested in having babies John encouraged her to get her MBA from Hariott Watt University (online, of course so that she didn't have to take a sabbatical from her lucrative job). Achieving designations and degrees effectively consumed 15 years of her life and sidetracked her from making babies. She made do with her nieces and nephews, but it there was still that first greatest regret which occasionally haunted her.

She nixed the husband, nixed the extra pounds, nixed John’s disapproval of her interests and goals, nixed trying to love a man who was sometimes (but not always) a selfish jerk. She lost weight, poured herself into her job, developed a love/hate relationship with Bikram yoga, went back to volunteering with Hospice … and she started writing. It had been years since she’d written anything other than a thank you note. She doubted she could remember how but she did it and found a Beta to review it for her to boot.

And she had 5,000 hits! She was so proud she could hardly stand it. Double checking her AO3 dashboard just to make sure she wasn’t imagining the glorious 5,000, she saw there was a private message waiting for her. She smiled and took another sip of her Chai tea, excited to read a new comment.
Hi,

Just finished reading The Love of my Life. Interesting story. How did you come up with the idea?

RAC71

Hi RAC71,

I wondered what it would be like if I put a stranger in the path of my celebrity crush.; How would they meet? Would they hit it off? Would they feel any attraction? Would it be mutual? Would there be roadblocks? Could they overcome them? Would they live happily ever after? As I went for daily walks, possibilities started popping into my head, and *poof*, the story was born. It was great fun to do!

Cheers,
Jollytr

Hi again,

Do you know Richard or have you ever met him? Your story has a lot of personal details.

RAC71

Hi RAC71,

No I’ve never met him, nor should I. Sometimes it feels like I crossed the line by writing the story and wouldn’t want to compound it by having to answer for it. It would be too horrible for words to impose on the real Richard.

Cheers,
Jollytr

Jolly,
What line did you cross?
Just curious,
RAC

Hi RAC,

Actors should have a private life which isn’t infringed upon by the rest of the world. His public life is what he willingly shares, not his personal life. He shouldn’t have goofs like me making up stories about who he is. I feel sort of guilty about it … but too selfish to delete the fic :-(p.

Lots of internal tension & conflict,
Jollytr

Good theory about their privacy but poor practise? Why did you choose Richard Armitage?

RAC

Hi RAC,

Yeh, I feel like a hypocrite about his privacy - I know he should have it but I've made up a story
about it anyway. There are so many interviews on YouTube which show Richard Armitage as an intelligent, humourous, considerate gentleman. Looking at the various quotes attributed to him, I thought it would be fun to create something which tied all of those quotes and interviews together and which satisfied my curiosity about throwing a stranger in his path. He was my unwilling victim cuz he’s talented, personable and the perfect muse for the kind of a character who’d be nice to know. He’s just the image in my head, I doubt the guy in the story has anything in common with the real person other than name and cv. Richard in the story is maybe even a little too Marty Stu. Hopefully it wouldn’t be insulting to him, maybe he could laugh at it? Why did you choose/stick with the story?

Cheers,
Jollytr

Hi Jolly,
a friend suggested it – they thought I’d get a kick out of it. I did. What would you say to your muse if you met him?

RAC

Hi RAC,
Goodness, I hope that never ever ever ever happens! I’d be so embarrassed and busy begging for forgiveness that there’d be no time to say anything else. It would be mortifying to think he’d read The Love of My Life. I’d just hope that he wouldn’t be too horribly offended by it. Yikes – I’m going to have nightmares about meeting him now. Thanks a lot, lol ;-)  

Cheers,
Jolly

Katrina and RAC71 became email pen pals. It started with RAC’s curiosity about the hows and whys of her fan fic story and, over time, became less interview-ish, covering their significantly different tastes in everything from music to pasta to politics. The were dissimilar in most ways and their differences made for both lively debates and interesting recommendations. They enjoyed their emails, coming to look forward to the familiar ‘New Mail’ notifications.

They wrote about their lives with a unique mixture of highly personal, yet non-identifying, details. They shared their hopes, dreams, fears, achievements, failures and aspirations. Their emails were more honest and private than a diary and more therapeutic than talking to a psychiatrist. Their complete anonymity eliminated inhibition and propriety to the point where they knew more deep secrets about each other than anyone else on the planet … but they didn’t know each other’s names or occupations. It was a thrilling, liberating juxtaposition. Truth be told, she had developed quite the friend crush on RAC71. At a time in her life when she was rediscovering the joys and sorrows of independence, she looked forward to talking to RAC. He had no idea who she was before and didn’t expect her to think or behave as ‘Katrina: daughter, sister, friend, colleague, boss, etc.’ normally did. She could explore who she was with him, he with her, and they ‘got’ each other.

As much as she looked forward to his emails each day, Katrina became alarmed by RAC’s requests for her real name and he’d hinted, not exactly subtly, that he’d like to meet. She lamented, “I might have been born at night, but it wasn’t last night.” One did not simply go about meeting people from the internet. Not unless they wanted a tv movie made about their gruesome
death and dismemberment.

Jolly,

You KNOW me. We’ve been emailing for a year and you know me better than anyone else. You’re one of my closest friends and yet we’ve never met face to face. I want to make you laugh so I can see your smile instead of reading emoticons or ‘pffft’ or ‘bwahahaha’. Your profile shows that you are in Canada. I have to come to Canada for business – which sounds rather ridiculous because Canada is much larger than ‘ooooh, I must go to Canada for a meeting - I wonder if so-and-so from 4,000 kilometres away is free for lunch. But .... is there any way we could meet for lunch, lol? Pick a city away from your home, if you wish, and we can meet at a restaurant. Or bring body guards or an attack dog or a taser. Will you reconsider, please? <insert emoji of puppy dog eyes>

RAC

RAC you must be a successful salesman cuz you’re doing a pretty good job selling this! I admit, there have been times I’ve been curious about the sound of your laughter and to see if you seriously think you’re funny when you tell those awful jokes. I dunno ... you know WAY too much about me ... you know where all the skeletons are buried ;-) What are the chances that you’re an axe murderer? Do people who’ve met on the internet actually meet in real life? Is that a thing? It’s both tempting and terrifying. I don’t even know where you’ll be. Are you coming to Toronto? I guess we could meet there if you think we really, really must. Isn’t this ridiculous? We don’t even know each other’s real names and we’re going to meet IRL! It all sounds so .... shady. Are you sure about this? Do you have a when and where for this debacle? You probably do ... all the successful axe murderers have very detailed plans ...

Jolly

Lol, thanks a lot. I’ll try not to wear my Class of Axe Murdering 2014 leather jacket. What do you think of Pangaea restaurant on October 25th at noon? It’s a great spot in Yorkville. I am excited to meet you! The woman who created Meg is a hero of mine ;-) and I’m sure you know I’ve come to think the world of you.

RAC

You have suspiciously low standards! Guess I’ll find out what’s wrong with you for myself, lol.

Ciao for now.

*shudders in resignation* By the way, my name is Katrina.

Hi Katrina near Toronto. See you next week. Looking forward to it,

Rick.

PS now that wasn’t so bad, was it?
Katrina fussed and fretted for days. What had she done? She gave her name to a stranger, who may or may not have been a serial killer. Okay, he wasn't a serial killer. He was great ... but he wasn't a real life person - he was an internet person. A really wonderful internet person, but still ....She agreed to meet him – and now she knew for certain it was a ‘him’. Oy vey. Not smart, Katrina, not smart at all. She gave her sisters all of the lunch details and turned on her cell phone tracker in case the police needed to find her last known location. She took two different cabs to the restaurant, just in case Rick tried to track or follow her, feeling very ‘Spooks’ about it which lightened her mood.

She entered Pangaea fifteen minutes early and marvelled at the gorgeous décor. Two stories of dove grey walls, rich wood accents, a ceiling which looked like a piece of art and a skylight which actually was a piece of art. The reservation was in the name of Meg Porter, Rick’s idea, and Katrina chuckled as the Hostess showed her to their table.

Katrina ordered a glass of Beaujolais-Villages Les Belouzes to sip while she waited for Rick. Her sister, Leigh, continued to send text messages which helped distract her from sheer nervousness. She decided to visit the Ladies’ Room for a last minute pep talk. The mirror didn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know: she was foolish to be there and she should have left instead of visiting the Ladies’. She shook her head and squared her shoulders. Nothing bad could happen at Pangaea, surely?! Katrina refreshed her neutral lipstick and smoothed down her shirt. She looked like a perfectly ordinary woman, one to whom serial killers probably happen.

As she returned to the table, she saw that Rick had arrived and was seated with his back to her. She paused for a moment, taking note of what she could see from the back of him. She rationalized that it was a good idea to have details for police, just in case. In actuality, it didn’t take a thorough investigation to see that he was tall, fit and had thick dark brown wavy hair. She noted the particulars of his sport coat, slacks and shoes. Very nicely dressed! There was something about his bearing which didn’t feel menacing. On the hand she could see resting on the table, he nervously picked at the cuticles of finger with his thumb but his posture wasn't rigid or intimidating. He's probably as nervous as I am.

With a deep breath, she resumed her walk back to her seat. As she came around to her chair, opposite Rick, she had her first opportunity to see him face-to-face. His back suggested an attractive man, and his front delivered. Behind his glasses were gorgeous blue-grey eyes with long lashes. He had luxurious eyebrows, fantastic masculine nose, expressive lips, strong chin, perfect amount of stubble … he was breath taking. She chuckled at the coincidence of Rick looking similar to the person who brought them together, Richard Armitage.
Rick stood and extended his hand to her, “Katrina, it is lovely to finally meet you in person! Thank you for coming.”

She accepted his handshake and paused, stymied.

"Please, sit. I’m so happy you decided to join me. And relieved to see that there aren’t any attack dogs. Does that mean there is a private security detail outside? Or perhaps a taser in your pocket?"

He was obviously from England with that lovely accent. His deep baritone voice was as chocolaty as Richard’s. But it couldn’t be ... it was just a coincidence ... wasn’t it?? Kat hated coincidences and felt a bit on edge. He watched her with a slight smirk on his lips - just like a smirk she'd seen a dozen times in Spooks.

“Nice to meet you too, Rick.” She croaked, trying to shake her growing disquiet. She sat down, somewhat disoriented, but her auto-pilot manners dictated polite conversation so she wracked her brain for inconsequential small talk. “What does your user name mean? RAC71? R is for Rick, I assume?”

He smiled enigmatically, “You’re right – R is for my first name. It’s my monogram and year of birth.” He continued to watch her with poorly disguised mirth.

His answer did not settle her disquiet. Monogram? So his last name began with an ‘A’. His name/initials were Rick C. A. and he was born in 1971. Katrina felt slightly nauseous, all she could do was to stare at him, flummoxed.

He smiled, removed his glasses and placed them in his pocket. “Are you well Katrina? You seem a little ... out of sorts.” He was enjoying this. He well remembered their earliest messages and her vehement refusal to meet him - the Richard Armitage him. He couldn’t predict exactly how she would react, but he suspected her usual online equanimity would be shaken and, hopefully, she’d have a good laugh. Her continued confusion amused him and lasted longer than he expected. Granted, he didn’t look the same for long periods of time so while it was relatively easy to identify him in photographs, people on the street rarely spotted him. For some strange reason, changing his hair was his greatest camouflage. No doubt he looked much different than she’d expect, even if she knew to expect him at all. He watched the colour drain from her face. Recognition in 3 …. 2 …. 1 …. "Rick? Richard? Armitage?" Her eyes were wide and wild.

“Yes. It’s such a pleasure to meet the creator of Meg and Richard.” He smiled warmly and raised an eyebrow in amusement, "You know, you’ve provided untold hours of entertainment for my family and friends.” He drawled, watching her closely. He didn’t want her to suffer real humiliation, but he couldn’t help enjoying her discomposure. She had, after all, co-opted far too many details of his personal life which was worth a titch of embarrassment, was it not? However, he’d come to know her well over the last year and was certain that, in hindsight, this would be a tiny blip in their day and she’d be laughing over it soon enough. He was fully prepared, and happy, to assure her she need not be embarrassed. He was, in fact, delighted she’d written the story because she was a great deal more than a fan fiction writer – she had become a trusted and cherished friend.

She gritted her teeth and her voice was little more than a whisper, “You lied.”

Richard was caught off guard. He was not prepared for her to be angry. He knew he had walked a fine line by not disclosing who he was, but point of fact, it was she who insisted they keep their identities secret. However, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that his name was more...
significant than that of a regular person. His face was a blank mask as he tried to think about their situation another way. Perhaps his misleading her could be a good thing: if they had sins to be evened out she wouldn’t need to feel at a disadvantage. He lied, by omission, about the identity she stole from him. That was a strange sort of balance, wasn’t it?!

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth was set in a grim line. She began to rise from the table, staring him down. “You lied.”

She turned to leave and he gently put his hand on her arm to stop her. “Katrina, please don’t go.”

If she was somewhat angry before he spoke, she was furious afterwards, shaking with emotion. He could barely hear her quiet snarl, “Take. Your. Hand. Off. Me. NOW.” Her low tone was more frightening than if she screamed at him.

This was nothing like the conversations he’d imagined. If there was an injured party, it would have been him but she was carrying on like he was a monster. His own ire rose, “Pot meet kettle. You wrote RPF, stealing my identity. We’re even.”

That startled her. He was right of course. They’d talked about that very thing in their emails, she openly admitted that, for all intents and purposes, she stole from him. How many times had she confessed her guilt to him? The dawning realization that she’d confessed a great deal to him left her queasy. Embarrassment reared its ugly head, but she was still angry. She couldn’t abide liars. Enough of her life had been stolen by deceit and manipulation. “You’re right. We’re even. The score is tied. Congratulations. Goodbye.” She pointedly looked at his grip on her arm but he didn't remove his hand.

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“Please don’t go before we talk this through, Katrina. Stay for lunch and then, if you want, I’ll never bother you again.” His voice was low and steady but he watched her carefully. He didn’t want to throw away a year’s friendship and it looked like that’s exactly what was happening. He silently cursed himself for not slowly breaking the news to her over time during their daily emails. Over a long, long time if the look on her face was anything to go by.

“I need to think. If I’m not back in 15 minutes, start without me … and then keep going.” She yanked her arm from his grasp and darted out of the restaurant.

“Well, that was an unmitigated disaster, Armitage.” He grumbled under his breath. He ordered a glass of wine and nursed it while he waited for her to, hopefully, return. What had started out as an attempt to understand the motivations of creative fans had unintentionally turned into a real friendship. He hadn’t planned, sought or wanted to be friends with the writer of *The Love of My Life*, but that’s what they’d become. In the first couple of months, he confirmed what he had initially suspected, she poured her own character, feelings and quirks into Meg. He’d liked Meg and, by extension, he liked Katrina right from the start. He had come to see the vast differences between Kat and her creation – appreciating Kat all the more. She meant the world to him, and he didn't want to lose that world.

He was relieved that Katrina didn’t swear as much as Meg but he suspected it was only because Katrina had better self-control whereas her fictional alter-ego did not. She was never shy in her emails and from the less than 30 seconds she had sat at the table, he didn't think she was shy in real life either. If she returned, he had no doubt he’d get an earful, one way or the other. Please let her return.

Katrina walked out of the restaurant and tried to hail a cab. Un-freaking-believable. She was going to go home and delete her story as soon as possible. She missed the boat on Richard’s character, BIG TIME. The Richard in her story had integrity. The real one didn’t. How could he
ply her for fan information, lead her on, not tell her who he was? After all that time, HOW could he not tell her? She’d delete every one of his lying, liar, lies. “Fuck thee and thine.” She hissed in his general direction. Where are all the damn cabs when you need them?

She wanted to cry but she wouldn’t; she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Enough of lying, cheating, scheming men. ENOUGH! So what if it all started because she wrote something she probably shouldn’t have. So what if it was her that insisted on not revealing true identities. So what??!!???!!? Dammit, maybe there was a grain of truth, or something, to what he said. She’d felt guilty about posting the damn story because she knew it was an invasion of his privacy and a lot like stealing. And he had tried, on several occasions, to convince her to give up their secret identities. She groaned, “what would Meg do?” And she knew what to do. Her fictional character would take a strip off of him and then apologize! Maybe she could control her tongue better than Meg would.

She marched back into the dining room and sat across from a surprised Richard. She pasted a plastic smile on her face and declared in an eerily calm voice, “You’re a piece of work! You have known, for over a year, exactly how conflicted I felt about that story and knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I meant no harm or insult by it. It’s arguable that you didn’t have to say anything about who you were in our emails. However, when you arranged this lunch, with full knowledge of the importance of your identity, it then behooved you to come clean. You didn’t. You showed up here knowing full well what it would do to me. Game of Malice: Katrina 0: Richard 1, high score loses. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it.”

“You’re right. I should have told you when I suggested this lunch.” He paused briefly and pointedly looked her in the eye as he asked in an inscrutable voice, "Would you have come?"

“Hell no. And you know why.” She shook her head at his specious argument. “Wait a second … you actually thought it through and decided that keeping this secret was a good idea? That the end justifies the means?”

With a perceptible wince he replied, “Maybe? Let’s see how lunch goes and I’ll answer your question then.” He half grinned and raised his eyebrows in a questioning look which included a silent “I’m so adorable, how can you resist me?” Yeah, she'd seen that expression on Spooks too.

He was bloody cute when he made that face. Those forehead crinkles were irrationally fabulous. DO NOT get sucked into the ‘Richard the Adorable’ vortex! That shipped has sailed. Focus on the issues at hand … she was set up to look like an idiot because of his big fat secret identity. Huh? Deliberately set up? That was a new idea but did it justify her anger? So, was this a pride issue or did she have a righteous claim? Aaaaack. She suspected it was more of the former than the latter which fed her anger and gave way to frustration with herself.

Grudgingly, “Fine. I’ll stay for lunch. But I’m NOT making any promises.” And then under her breath, “and I still think you’re a tool.”

“I’m so glad. Are you hungry? May I order for you? I think I can pick your favourites.” He raised one eyebrow and grinned. He was devastating in person; far more compelling than his most stunning photoshoot or dashing character. He had a quiet about him - a stillness that drew her in and disarmed her, even in her anger and self doubt. A little. He disarmed her a little but he could not completely erase her confusing feelings about finding HIM sitting opposite her. And then he had the cheek to think he knew her well enough to order her food? Arrogant jerk.

“Do your best. Be prepared to fail miserably.” It was very difficult to maintain a grumpy when he smiled like that and those eyes kept sparkling. There should be a law against that voice. Meg was right about those things!!! She remembered a quote that had something to do with him never
being that cute kid who was forgiven for stuff. *Bullshit.* All he had to do was flash his smile and those baby blues and he’d be forgiven just about anything. *Bastard.* Katrina's disgust with herself grew exponentially. *What kind of woman is swayed by a deep voice and smiling eyes?*

The waiter approached, ready to take their order.

“I’d like to order the Antigonish oysters, but you’d probably think I’m trying to feed you aphrodisiacs and that I’m a lech, right?” He smouldered. Eye to eye, smouldered. Can of petrol on a fire smouldered. And then, if that wasn't bad enough, he broke out into a massive grin and snicker-giggled.

She nodded, trying to suppress a smile. The guy who became her closest confidante had sparkling eyes and snicker-giggled. He smouldered and had a voice which could pull any emotion out of her he wanted. Her buddy was the man she considered the most handsome man in the world. And photos didn't do him justice. She was disgusted by how shallow she was, that a smile could temper her ire. Was he her friend or was he a charmer used to getting his own way? Why couldn't she tell the difference? She resented how off-kilter he kept her.

“The lady will have the Heirloom Tomato Salad and the Scallop Risotto. I would like the Grilled Calamari and the Lightly Cured Ocean Trout. We’ll have a bottle of the 2001 Bordeaux Chateau d’Yquem Sauternes.” He looked to Katrina, “Pudding ... er ... dessert?” With a scowl, she gave a single nod. “We’ll have the Dark Chocolate Cheesecake and Lemon Panna Cotta – two forks for each please.”

“I would have selected the Steak Tartare and the Provimi Liver. Now I’m stuck with tomatoes and rice. Fail, big fail.” She smirked outwardly and seethed inwardly. *Crap – he ordered perfectly. The turd actually remembered their foodie discussions.*

He raised his eyebrows in such a way that said, “*Oh really? I don’t think so,*” without saying a word.

Smug bastard. Determined not to let him weaken her tenacious commitment to dislike him, she changed the subject. “What brings you to Toronto? TIFF has passed.” Her demeanor could not have appeared less interested. Inside, she was dying to know why the workaholic was in her town.

He shrugged, and kept his tone casual, “You.”

She was gobsmacked. He certainly had a flair for shocking her. She choked on her wine, “What? What did you say? Who talks like that? Are you for real? That's right out of a cheesy rom-com”

He couldn’t help chuckle out loud. To blurt out whatever’s on her mind with such ease made it patently clear how she constructed most of Meg’s dialogue. She simply wrote down what she herself would say. *Enough! Enough comparing Katrina to Meg!*

“Katrina, I didn't want to do the anonymous thing any longer. At first, I was both annoyed and amused when I read *The Love of My Life.* It wasn’t a great piece of writing but it was unique and I was fascinated by the person who responded to my initial questions. You were bright, funny and terribly self-deprecating. I had no intention of continuing to talk to you but we just seemed to hit it off and then I couldn't think of any reason to stop. I have appreciated you incognito for over a year and I don't think it's just me who recognizes what good friends we are ... what good friends we could be in real life. We’ve laughed, cried, shouted, encouraged, criticized and stupefied each other. It feels like I am better friends with you, a virtual stranger, than with some of the people I’ve known half my life. And ... well ... I felt dishonest, as you’ve so eloquently pointed out I should do, for not revealing myself to you.” He remained still, waiting for her reaction.
“Put the charm away Armitage. I’m immune. Now seriously, why are you here?” She gave him her best angry eyebrows, hoping to appear intimidating.

Damn. He laughed again. Her feeble attempt at maintaining outrage was clearly losing to curiosity.

“I wanted to risk public spectacle and humiliation to meet my favourite pen-pal?”

“Come again? What spectacle and how would you have been humiliated?” She asked with a disbelieving ‘hmmmph’.

“You must admit, there was a chance that you’d pull a Meg and …. well, I don’t need to explain that to you do I?” He looked at her hopefully, maybe she’d find it amusing. Meg would have sworn a blue streak, knocked over her chair in an effort to flee the scene, and probably spilt his wine all over him in the process. He saw the amused recognition of that same sort of scenario flit across her features before she tried to regain her scowl.

“Richard, I’m not Meg. When I got stuck I gave her bits of me, but I’m not her and she’s not me. Surely you can understand that? You’re not Richard any more than I’m Meg!” She snickered at how ridiculous that statement was. “You know what I mean, you’re not my Richard.”

“Yeh, I do understand. But sometimes you do and say very Megish things though – you have to admit.” He grinned and waited for her admission of guilt.

“Fine. Whatever. Stop evading the question. Why are you here?”

“It wasn’t a sales pitch when I said it is because of you. I really did want to get rid of the cloak and dagger and be friends in real life, not just on the net. There are whole parts of our lives we’ve kept behind a wall and I wanted to tear down that wall. We’ve never talked about work. We’ve never been able to claim our own identities. It wasn’t part of a master plan or anything, but I began reading Canadian literature and watching Canadian films because of you. I saw an interesting project come up and I auditioned. I’ve been meeting with Sarah Polley regarding a film and it’s brought me to Toronto several times in the last couple of months. Each time I’ve been here, I’ve wondered where you are and wanted to meet you. There was a chance to see you and I took it. And, here I am.”

“So, this is an honest friendship lunch, wrapped up in a lie of omission?”

“Ah. Yeh.” He looked at her with an amused grimace, "You don’t forgive and forget easily, do you?”

“Actually I do. I just want my pound of flesh first … and so far you’re only at 4 ounces!”

“Ouch. This could be a painful lunch.”

“Glad you’re finally starting to grasp the precarious reality of your situation!” She grinned for the first time since she saw his back sitting at their table.

They chatted back and forth, asking questions, clarifying things, and taking a jab wherever possible. It became much like their emails: plenty of teasing and challenging one another. They fell into their easy banter quickly once the awkwardness of their introductions was over.

Despite both of them hating it when people took food from their plates, they sampled each other’s appetizers, main courses and desserts. It was a challenge to see who could annoy the other the most, or so they said. He shook his head. If he’d learned nothing about her in the last year, it was
that she was a caring, compassionate person, with a wicked sense of humour. Yes, she would tease him, but she wouldn't try to truly annoy him. She had her flaws, but intentionally instigating negative emotional reactions wasn't one of them. And he wasn't annoyed with sharing with her - not in the least.

“This is why I came here today!” He rose from his seat and moved to stand beside her. “Stand up – I need to do something. I’ve wanted to do this many times in the last year and couldn’t. Glad to finally be in the same place at the same time so things like this are possible. You’re lovely Katrina!” He wrapped her up in a bear’s embrace, his arms nearly swallowing her petite body whole.

Katrina tried to hug back. She snickered when she discovered that she’d been correct in the story when Meg’s nose mashed into Richard’s sternum and hurt like crazy. She wasn’t adverse to hugs, but this one needed work if she was to avoid rhinoplasty. Damn he was tall.

He pulled back and looked down at her. “I told you that if you stayed for lunch I’d never bother you again if that’s what you wanted … so do you want me to bugger off?” He knew she’d not send him packing, but he wanted to hear it from her lips anyway.

“Well, the jury is still out on you and I don’t have the whole pound of flesh yet. Maybe we should hang out and see if you’re going to crash and burn … or survive.” She looked at him quizzically, "What are you up to this afternoon?"

“Your hard work! I don’t have any commitments today. Did you have something in mind?” He was delighted to see her humour bubble to the surface and even more happy that she wanted to spend time with him.

“The pandas debuted their baby last week. How do you feel about a trip to the Zoo?” She was notably excited and even though he would normally not sign up for an afternoon at the zoo, he couldn’t refuse.

They chatted their way through The Toronto Zoo, stopping to look at many of the animals and read the signs in front of the displays. Somehow, surely through coincidence, Richard was the one to read most of the signs. He gave her the side-eye when, strangely enough, she couldn’t find her reading glasses … again and again. Katrina was teary eyed at the Panda Exhibit; knowing how threatened the species was and how difficult captivity breeding programs were, it made the miracle of the little cub more awe inspiring. And no one could deny that the little babe was mind-blowingly cute to boot. Richard thought her a sappy romantic and knew exactly why the story she wrote was so mind boggling fluffy.

“It might be pushing my luck, but I was thinking we should have supper tonight. What do you think, could you?” He asked.

“Sorry. I’m off to my sister’s. In fact, I should probably get going”. She paused and looked at him questioningly as a thought occurred to her, "Hey, would you like to join us?"

“Your sister’s? Erm … not sure … wouldn’t it be … weird for a stranger to just tag along?"

“No, not at all. Leigh’s great. And she was my backup for today, she knows all about you – errrr, all about Rick. Well, she knows all about Richard too, sort of. She’ll like you, probably a lot more than I do, bwahahaha. Her husband, Jackson, is a nice guy, you’ll like him. It’ll be grand!”

“Ok, but if this goes bad, I am off the hook once and for all. A disastrous dinner party will be the end of my penance and my debt will be cleared, right?”
“Whatever! You’re so lame.” She rolled her eyes and smirked. “Dinner with Leah and Jackson is no penance. In fact, I’m doing you a favour!” To which Richard returned her eyeroll and shook his head.

They went to Leigh’s home in nearby Mississauga and enjoyed their evening immensely. Leigh and Jackson were funny, warm and it didn’t hurt that they were talented in the kitchen. They shared Richard’s passion for skiing and talked about it at length. Richard noticed Katrina’s detachment during their animated ski stories. He rightly guessed that her character, Meg’s, attitude towards skiing was something she inherited from Katrina. He filed that piece of information away and would remember not to make the same mistakes as the other Richard - no ski trips in Katrina's future.

Katrina drove Richard back to Toronto and fidgeted awkwardly as soon as she parked the car in front of The Hazelton Hotel. It had been an excellent day and she was loathe for it to end, but it was late and there was no reasonable excuse to prolong the inevitable, the night was over and she had to get home.

“So-“ They said at the same time, and each gave a nervous little chuckle.

“How long are you in town?” Katrina inquired.

“Three more days.’ He nodded and paused for a moment before an idea came to him. "Tomorrow is all mine; meetings in the mornings on Thursday and Friday; but afternoons and evenings open. Any chance you might have some free time?” He looked at her hopefully.

She was thrilled that they were thinking along the same lines as she pulled out her phone and checked her schedule. Once she decided to forgive him, she found that she enjoyed his company as much as if her were just Rick. In fact, he really was the Rick she knew and had come to care about. “Tomorrow is fine and Thursday after 11:00. Friday, not sure yet. Everything else can be rescheduled. Is there anything you’d like to see while you’re here? I’m a spectacular tour guide.” She said with an exaggerated smile.

“You’re the tour guide, I leave the agenda in your very capable hands. Surprise me.” Given that day’s trip to the zoo, he wondered what she'd arrange but knew they'd share great company, so even it was lame, they’d still enjoy spending a bit of time together.

She stared off into the distance, deep in thought. “Right, I’ll pick you up here tomorrow morning at 8:30. Wear comfortable walking shoes and clothes but bring a change of dressy casual. How does that sound?”

“Perfect. Any clues on what we will be doing?”

“A clue? No.” She shook her head and snickered at the Sheriff of Nottingham’s signature line. “See you in the morning.” She reached over to kiss his cheek just as he was doing the same and their heads clunked together.

“Owww. Remind me never to do THAT again! What have you got in there? Rocks? You’re a menace.” She laughed as he got out of the car rubbing his head.

“Tomorrow, then. I’ll bring the paracetemol!”
Touring Southwestern Ontario

Chapter Summary

Katrina takes Richard on a touristy day in Toronto and Niagara Falls

(Edited February 3, 2014)

Katrina pulled up in front of Richard’s hotel at 8:20. Better early than late was her motto. Well, it was her new motto. For too many years she had been chronically late and it always bothered her. Since kicking John to the curb, she took a good, long look at herself and set off on an ongoing mission to change the things she didn’t like and strengthen the things she did. Punctuality was challenging but she conquered it.

She mentally reviewed the plans she’d made for the day. She would take Richard up the CN Tower to give him an outstanding view of the Golden Horseshoe, that area around Lake Ontario which extended from Niagara Falls to east of Toronto. It was a gorgeous day and the visibility would be fantastic. From there they’d drive to Niagara on the Lake, stopping for a winery tour and tasting. She was excited to take him to Five Rows Craft Winery – they were known for their velvety pinot noirs. Hopefully there would be time for Hidden Bench Vineyard and maybe even Stratus. Eventually they would do the Maid of the Mist boat tour under Niagara Falls and perhaps go to the Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museum. Dinner at AG in the Sterling Inn would be a delicious end to a busy day. She was plugging addresses into her GPS when Richard tapped on the window and climbed in beside her.

“Good morning Kat! Thanks for this. It was great of you to clear your schedule for me. So, what have we got on today?” He doubted she’d tell him much, but it was worth a try.

“CN Tower and Niagara Falls, with a few stops in between. This is primo touristy stuff!” She grinned from ear to ear. It was the perfect blend of kitsch, adventure and personal interests.

He nodded, somewhat sceptically. She did say tour guide, so he shouldn’t be surprised at spending
the day as a tourist. But … oh well, he’d just go with it.

Katrina drove them the short distance to the CN Tower and they zoomed up the clear view elevator to the observation deck. At over 1,100 feet off the ground, they had an unrestricted view of Lake Ontario and environs. The sun glowed like white gold in the clear cerulian sky, glinting off the glass skyscrapers and sparkling off Lake Ontario almost like fairy dust. Katrina pointed out Toronto Island, Roy Thomson Hall, The Royal Ontario Museum, Ontario Place, and all of the landmarks she could identify. Standing on the glass floor they looked down to the ground beneath them and both got the willies, agreeing that it wasn't necessary to try that again.

She pulled Richard back to the elevators and they zipped up to the SkyPod, 33 stories higher. The view was breathtaking, they could see all the way to New York state and every boat on Lake Ontario. It was spectacular! They weren’t done with the Tower however, as if the scenery wasn’t good enough. Katrina took his arm and tugged him over to the Edgewalk station. She signed them up to do a hands-free walk on the five foot ledge which encircled the Tower’s main pod, 116 stories above the ground. They were harnessed and tethered to an overhead safety rail, but it didn’t feel the least bit safe. They walked around the edge of the tower, buffeted by the burly wind and looked down, down, down. Never had five feet felt so narrow, their balance so shaky or the ground so far away. It gave them both a gigantic adrenalin high and Richard's mind was officially blown - literally and figuratively - the winds were that strong.

When they returned to the car after the Edgewalk, Richard excitedly talked all the way to Niagara on the Lake. He had climbed the Sydney Bridge and loved every minute of it, but that was nothing compared to standing on the edge of one of the tallest buildings in the world and hanging over, secured only by a tether. Katrina felt like she was walking on air and giggled at Richard's excitement. If she didn’t need to be sober to drive, she would have fully joined in his delirium. It was a thrill to provide her friend with a brilliant memory.

When the car pulled up to Hidden Bench Winery, he had finally relaxed. A winery? Wine was always a good idea. He heard that there were some outstanding wines coming out of Canada, but he had little experience with them. They were unable to have a tour or a hosted tasting, however they were able to sample four wines and purchased a few bottles. Katrina was taken with the Gewurztraminer and Richard with their La Brunante, a stunning estate wine.

They had time for one more winery, and this was one was a source of pride. Katrina had arranged a private presentation and tasting with Five Rows’ winemaker. Wes talked about the harvest and terroir as they tasted the Pinot Noir, Cab Sauv and Shiraz wines. Richard was in love! He would marry the 2008 Pinot Noir if he could. Next best thing, he bought the last 8 bottles they had for sale and he vowed that he could die a happy man. He’d had a ludicrously exceptional day – and it was only half over.
Katrina wasn’t a huge fan of the Maid of the Mist, but it was a staple on a sightseeing tour. It wasn’t quite an Edgewalk or the most dazzling Pinot Noir in the world, but travelling by boat down the Niagara River and under the Horseshoe Falls was absolutely essential for all Golden Horseshoe tourists. The bright sunshine belied the slip nip in the air and getting wet from the mist wasn't the most comfortable thing in the world to do but it was the quintessential Niagara Falls tourist experience. Richard enjoyed it more than he thought he would and was glad Katrina included it in their itinerary.

They dried off and walked through Niagara Fall’s Clifton Hill district. It was a tourist trap at it's finest, with oddities, pop museums, small amusement park rides, and food that was guaranteed to be bad for you. They adored and abhorred the cheesiness of the shops and hawkers. Unable to resist, they simply had to go into The Guiness World Book of Records and Ripley’s Believe it or Not Museums. They were alternatingly nauseated and charmed and left with the same conclusion: human beings were inexplicable creatures.

Katrina had booked a room at the Sterling Inn so that they could shower and change for dinner. The rushing and colliding in the room resulted in teasing accusations and threats. Their reservation at AG Cuisine was for 7:30 and they barely made it on time. They had such an easy, natural way together that Katrina had to keep reminding herself that they were new friends instead of old.

Richard wanted to try his hand at ordering again. Katrina fessed up and told him he did a perfect job at lunch the previous day, which resulted in more teasing and a lot of boasting. For Katrina, he chose the Early Autumn Salad, the Roasted Loin of Lamb and the Callebaut Chocolate Bread Pudding. For himself he ordered the Indian Candy Salmon, Juniper Dusted Loin of Red Deer and the Spiced Apple and Almond Torte. Before dinner Katrina moaned her appreciation for the Ultimate Icewine Martini while Richard had a glass of the Tawse 2004 Meritage. With dinner he selected a bottle of Five Rows 2008 Shiraz. It was a delicious meal where, once again, they ignored their previous dislike of sharing food, sampling from each other's plates and enjoying the fruits of their multitalented chef's efforts.

By 10:00 they were ready to return to Toronto and Katrina felt okay to drive. It had been a long, full day and he wouldn’t have changed a single second of it. Richard had long known that he and Katrina enjoyed a comfortable amity in their emails, but to see it and feel it in real life was better than he had hoped. He wasn't sure what he'd hoped, but reality was better than whatever he might have dreamt up. Considering such things, he was thoughtful and quiet on their drive back to Toronto.

Katrina noticed the change in him. “Penny for your thoughts.” She said, as unobtrusively as possible.

He turned to her, with a tranquil expression. “Not thinking. Just feeling. Contentment, gladness, calm, and above all, gratitude.” He explained when he saw her puzzlement. “I am grateful that you wrote The Love of My Life; that I followed through on contacting you; that we became pen-pals; that you agreed to lunch yesterday; that you forgave me for … well, being me; and most of all, I’m grateful that we have this friendship. Today has been lovely and it’s all because of you!”

She was grateful for the same things. It gave her a chill to think about how close she’d come to
demolishing it the day before. Her pride was wounded far more than her principles outraged and she had been perilously close to smashing their fledgling friendship. In the spirit of the moment she should have said something eloquent and meaningful, but all she could come up with was “Me too. About you.”

They grinned at each other and he ruffled the top of her head. It was such a big brother thing to do she giggled out loud, like a little sister would. The evolution of their cyber relationship had the fine beginnings of a splendid real life friendship, and they both knew it.

As she parked in front of Richard’s hotel, they almost repeated the head blonk of the night before. He rolled his eyes and grabbed her head, turning the side of her face towards him. He kissed her on the cheek and chortled, “No concussions tonight! What’s up for tomorrow?”

“Well, I have to work until 11 or so. I was thinking we could grab some lunch and go for a hike on the Bruce Trail. Not as glam and adrenalin filled as yesterday but it’s supposed to be perfect weather tomorrow and The Bruce is always good for the soul. Are you up for a hike?”

“I don’t have hiking boots but I do have trainers. Will that work or are you hard core? Do I need anything special? Is there a shop where I could pick up some appropriate clothes?”

“Trainers will be fine, as long as you’re fine with wear and tear on them. The Mountain Equipment Co-Op (MEC) is the best place around for outdoor gear. We can go together when I pick you up. What time will you be done your meetings?”

“I should be done by 11:30. I’m meeting with Sarah and Margaret Atwood about the Alias Grace project. Can you pick me up here?”

“Will do. She grabbed his head and turned the side of his face towards her, just as he did to her, and she kissed his cheek. Ruffling his hair, she chuckled “See you tomorrow Rick. Knock ‘em dead.”
Katrina and Richard go gear shopping at MEC and then for a hike on The Bruce Trail/Niagara Escarpment

(edited February 7, 2015)

They had a blast in MEC. It was an outdoor gear heaven. Richard picked up a pair of MEC Synergy pants, lightweight merino crew neck and a Synergy jacket. He whole-heartedly agreed with Katrina’s recommendations for lightweight wool socks, a day pack and a water bottle.

They stopped for lunch at The St. Lawrence Market and chose a variety of healthy energy snacks. They’d be able to stay out until dusk without any threat of being struck down by hunger, he thought wryly as he guessed he’d carry the lot of it in his new daypack.

On the way to Milton, where they would access Rattlesnake Point and The Bruce Trail, Katrina gave him a history and geography lesson on the Niagara Escarpment and what they would see. He was impressed by her enthusiasm and by her knowledge of the area. She told him she always loved hiking and had recently dove back into it.

As they pulled into the parking area off Appleby Line, he asked, again, how likely it would be for them to meet rattlesnakes. He couldn’t shake the worry of a slow painful death via snake bite. Not for the first time she assured him that they were safe from poisonous snakes. It was with nasty glee that she later picked up a largish garter snake and insisted he touch it. For a large, strong man he had the ability to look like a little kid quite easily.

Their trek throughout The Bruce Trail's Nassagaweya Canyon gave Richard a whole new appreciation for good hiking gear. He sorely wished for his solid boots sitting comfortably in back in his New York City apartment – the trainers just weren’t great for the terrain they were traversing. He made the best of it and simply appreciated that Katrina was an unflagging and enthusiastic guide, providing interesting trivia on the flora, fauna and geology of the UN World Heritage Biosphere.

“Richard, can we stop for a minute? We need to talk about something.” She looked worried.

“Of course. What’s wrong?” He frowned.

“With all of the fuss the other day, there was something I should have done but didn’t. Richard I am truly sorry that I intruded on your personal privacy – and especially that of your family – when I wrote The Love of My Life. Can you forgive me?” She fretted.

“Oh Katrina. Of course. You don’t have to apologize!!! As late as last night I’ve told you I’m glad
you wrote it. By the way, my Mum particularly likes how spunky you wrote her." He chuckled. She didn’t look convinced so he gave her a hug. “No worries dear friend. No worries at all. I don’t even want to think of what I would have missed if you hadn't written it or if you’d taken it down after your first attack of conscience.”

“You’re sure? I don’t have to grovel or do penance or anything?” She asked and suddenly remembered the naughty penance scene in her story. Her eyes flew open wide and she gasped.

He looked at her questioningly, oblivious to the reference. Then it hit him – Meg’s atonement for accidentally crushing Richard’s testicles. The expression Katrina wore was absolutely priceless. His head tipped back as laughed so hard tears formed in his eyes.

Relieved he didn’t misinterpret her, and resigned to his enjoyment of her embarrassment, she slugged him across the arm and told him to “Grow up. I can see good manners aren’t part of your family values.” She scowled. If pushed, she would have confessed it was pretty funny. But she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of admitting she was an idiot with a dirty mind.

In one respect the hike was much easier for Richard than it was for Katrina. His disgracefully long legs made quick work of climbing over and around the boulders on the trail whereas shorty Kat often struggled. He recognized it fairly early on and was conscious of pace and her scrambling, often offering a hand to help her over an obstacle. They sat in companionable silence on the edge of Crawford Lake, appreciating the natural beauty and diving into their snack pack.

Katrina didn’t know when she felt more at peace, happier. Sitting by a lake in a park with Richard was the bee’s knees. She lifted her head and shielded her eyes from the sun in order to look at him. His contented expression warmed her heart. She looked closer and realized that she hadn’t done so before; a little taken aback by how magnificently good looking he was. She remembered thinking so when writing her story, but since then it slipped her mind. How had she missed that? She became aware of him as a man instead of as her friend or opponent.

He felt her staring at him and gave her an incalculable look, pulling her over to him for a one armed hug. “Katrina, this is an amazing day. I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone but you. Thank you! You are the best!”

The warmth in his voice was only exceeded by the warmth of his arm resting on her shoulders. She sighed her agreement and rested her head on him, awkwardly trying to find a comfortable and appropriate spot, ending up with her head in/on his armpit. Yeh, that was cool … not. He looked down and gave her a little kiss on the top of her head.

“Tomorrow’s my last full day here before I fly back to New York.” He said, sadly. “When I arrived on Monday I was thrilled to have one lunch with you. We will have had four days together and everything is different. Now I am bloody going to miss you.”

“Before we could only email. We’re not limited to that anymore. We can text, call, Face Time, Skype … you name it, the world is our oyster!” She said optimistically.

“Yeh, I know. But … it’s … it’s not … it’s not the same as … well, it’s not the same as this.” He gloomily pointed back and forth between the two of them. Images of wine tours, and screaming into the wind above the earth, boating under one of the largest waterfalls in the world, and gorgeous hikes played behind his eyes.

She exhaled a little glumly, slipping the arm which had been trapped under his armpit around him
and giving him a one armed hug. She felt blue too. *How the hell had that happened?* Three days and she felt like she was losing her best friend in the whole world. But it wasn’t really only three days – they’d been getting to know each other for a year. She had ‘talked’ to him about things she’d never spoken about with anyone. She knew more about his most private feelings than anyone else. They’d finally put names and faces to their friendship and it was impossible to return to the way they were before. Now she craved his physical presence whereas before it was just his conversation.

They sat there together with their arms casually draped around each other, feeling slightly melancholy. Well, there was no sense wasting the day grieving for next week when they still had an evening and a day left. She patted him on the back and stood, tendering her hand to help him up. He found that amusing – if he tugged too hard on the offered hand, he’d pull her down instead of helping himself up. The image of her falling down on top of him flitted through his mind before he jumped up and shook it off.

“Dinner at my house?”

“Can you cook like Meg?” He teased.

“Naw … but I can read a recipe. Do you still use your Jamie Oliver mobile app?”

“Yeh, not often. I’m not home much. Do you use it too?”

“Sometimes. Will probably use it tonight. Unless you’d like steak and potatoes? I can do that without a recipe.”

Deciding on steak, potatoes and salad with banana splits for dessert, they stopped at the market to pick up the necessary ingredients. They enjoyed a bottle of wine while working together to prepare the simple meal and talked easily, if somewhat subdued compared to earlier in the day.

Knowing Richard was leaving in another day and a half cast a bit of a pall over the evening. A vague air of sadness had settled on them, turning their conversation more somber than any they’d previously had.

Katrina considered that it may have been a bad idea to have dinner in her home. She didn't want to create memories of him in her home only to miss him when he was gone. Richard’s was a strong and distinct presence and she suspected his pending absence would be unpleasantly noticeable. Thoughts of loss were so prominent in her mind, it made her think of other losses.

Katrina’s feelings rippled out in waves as she told him about the death of her Grandfather. Richard put his arm around her shoulder to comfort her as she spoke. Katrina was the apple of Grandpa’s eye, and he of hers. It was Grandpa who inspired her user name. He called her Trina where everyone else called her Kat and whenever he suggested a silly adventure he always promised “It’ll be jolly, Trina.” She combined and shortened Jolly Trina to Jollytr and thus every time she logged on, she thought of Gramps. She told Richard dozens of anecdotes about their escapades and how Grandpa encouraged her to be adventurous, silly and outgoing, things which hadn’t come easily to her. She had been a very shy and timid child and she was convinced that it was only through her Grandfather’s refusal to give up or give in that she ever found confidence and courage. He smiled as he pictured the capers they got into but was empathetic towards Katrina’s long suffering Grandma who was often the brunt of the pranks and jokes. Alternating between laughter and a few tears, Katrina was grateful for Grandpa’s unconditional love and grieved the loss of him. She was the shining star in his life and when he died, she felt she was a star to no one.

“Your Gran sounds like she must have been a saint! She has my sympathies for being your frequent
victim. It would have been fun to see the two of you in action – sounds as if you were quite the team. I wish I could have met him, your Grandpa was special.” Richard mused.

He absentmindedly made small, comforting strokes on Katrina’s shoulder. She sighed and leaned her head on him. Both of them lost in their own thoughts, they sat quietly for a long time calmly resting with one another.

Richard broke the silence, “Before we begin filming there will be several more meetings here in Toronto. Sarah has been scouting locations in Southwestern Ontario so we’ll be local for at least two months. I’m not gone forever Katrina. We’ll be able to get together. You can fly to New York or London, yeah?”

She gave him a squishy hug to say thanks. “Well of course. Don’t know why I’m being such a misery. Now, we should be thinking about what we’re going to do tomorrow. I have to work until 2:00 but am all yours after that. Anything special you’d like to do?”

“Can’t think of anything. This is your town … what would you suggest?” He thought it was nice to just sit and enjoy each other’s company as they were doing at that moment but it would sound ridiculous to say “let’s sit on your couch with my arm around you all day”. He gave the top of her head a little peck and ruffled her hair.

She gasped, “I’ve got it! It’s perfect. I’ll pick you up between 2:30 and 3:00. Wear comfortable clothes and your trainers. There will be lots of walking and maybe a little vomiting. But it will be fun, I swear!” She snickered.

Richard tried to weedle hints out of her but she was resolute on keeping it a surprise. Her anticipation of their adventures, and teasing him about it, lightened the mood considerably and they spent the rest of the evening sharing embarrassing, silly stories and hopeful dreams. It was well past midnight when they noticed the time. Richard called a cab and said goodnight with a big hug and a kiss on Katrina’s forehead.

“G’night my pukey friend!” She hollered after him when he opened the cab door. He groaned and waved goodnight.
The next morning went slower than cold molasses running uphill. Separately, they had the same thoughts "when will this meeting end so we can having an adventure this afternoon?"

Richard was waiting outside the Hazelton Hotel by 2:25. He wasn't so much afraid as he was anxious; who knew what Katrina could have in mind that involved vomiting? Surely she was teasing and there would be nothing nauseating in their afternoon. He checked his email while he waited, trying to calm the disquieting uncertainty.

Katrina pulled up in front of his hotel a few minutes later and grinned as he climbed in the car. He was reassured because she didn’t look like she was prepared for a vile activity which would cause her to be sick.

“What are we doing this afternoon Ms. Tour Guide?” It was good just to see her eyes crinkle as she shook her head. He didn’t care a fig for what they’d end up doing as long as they did it together.

“Do you really think I’d tell you this soon? A clue: no.” She taunted. “We’re heading north, that’s all I’ll say.” She changed the subject to discuss their respective morning meetings.

An hour later they were exiting Highway 400 onto Major MacKenzie Drive and he saw the signs for Canada’s Wonderland. An amusement park? Seriously? He grinned as he understood the threats of sick. Ha! If she thought she’d out do him on rides, she had another thought coming. Game on!

Richard and Katrina ran from ride to ride, impatient to get to the next thrill. Katrina screamed at the top of her lungs on most of the rides, but never so much as on Leviathan, Behemoth and Dragon Fire. Twice she grabbed his hand and put it over her eyes so she couldn’t see the horrifying drops and turns in front of them. His laughter shook his whole body with the wild mixture of adrenalin, Katrina’s screams and her manic glee.

She was a cruel woman and was unmistakably trying to fulfill her promise of making him ill. When the ride lines were long enough, she would disappear for a few minutes only to rematerialize with one horrible treat or another. She forced him to eat Beaver Tails, Tiny Tom Donuts, fudge, cotton candy, funnel cakes, pizza, sliders and fish tacos.

By the time they were ready to head over to the amusement park’s Kingswood Music Theatre to see The Shins, Richard thought sick was not too far down the road if he didn’t settle his stomach.
down. Katrina didn’t appear to have been as affected by the junk food as he was, which seemed entirely unfair. She was downright chipper when she skipped off to pick up another nasty edible atrocity.

As The Shins took the stage she appeared at his elbow with two large ginger teas. She held hers up to his and said “Cheers”. For the next 90 minutes she danced and sang – or more accurately flailed about and mumbled poorly - along with the songs. She was flushed and flying high, grabbing his hands and making them spin in circles while she laughed. He could see the parts of herself she poured into Meg – unbridled enthusiasm, total commitment. He clasped her hand in his and joined her in singing Simple Song as they swung their arms together and ran back to the car.

“There are three Tiny Toms and a piece of fudge left – want some?” She asked as she pulled into the line to exit the theme park.

He groaned and heard his stomach ask permission to visit his throat. “Noooooo. I may never eat sweets again. You are a cruel, cruel woman Katrina!”

“How about a nice soft boiled egg? Or maybe a piece of liver? Or oysters? We could stop at a Sushi bar …” She taunted.

He clapped his hand over her mouth to stop the gross food obscenities she was spewing. Her eyebrows knit together and shot up. Oh crap did he hurt her mouth? He shifted his hand and gently traced her lips with his thumb to check for damage, thankfully he didn’t break the skin. Maybe it was just a bruise.

It was everything Katrina could do to suppress a gasp. His hand over her mouth sent jolts of electricity through her. When he touched her lips and looked at her with such tender concern she felt her world shift. While he was busy examining her face for unintentional damage, she observed him. Ahhhh, there was the tipping point from pal to something ... esle. Her heart was racing and she felt like an idiot. This was NOT on! All she had to do was to get through the next couple of hours and he’d be off, taking his confusing self with him. If only he’d stop being so sweet until then. If only he’d stop the newly debilitating physical contact.

“Did I hurt you Kat?” Richard worried, noticing the sudden change in her.

“Oh, no, no. You couldn’t hurt a fly.” She winked and grinned, trying to lighten up. She babbled on about her favourite parts of the day and he wondered why she was so nervous.

He was superfluous to the conversation for the entire drive back to Katrina’s. She carried on and on about nothing and used only hyperbole to describe it. He zoned out a little and went through a mental checklist of what he had to do the next day: bags were packed and ready to go; seat confirmed for American Airlines Flight 3628 at 1:10; and a car service was arranged to pick him up at LaGuardia. All he had to do was pick up his luggage and hit Pearson Airport. He was set to go.

“How early do you have to be up tomorrow? Do you want to go straight to your hotel now or ....?” Noticing he wasn’t paying attention, “Richard? Hellooooooo? Anybody in there?”

“Oh yeh, sorry. Sure wine sounds good. I don’t need to be to the airport until 11 -11:30. I wouldn’t mind having a bowl of soup or something light and bland tonight though – still slightly queasy from today’s gourmet fare.”

“No problem. I have some leftovers from Ravi Soup in the freezer. We’ll have to go there someday, it’s the best soup in Toronto.”
When they got back to Katrina’s, she set about warming up Chicken Hot Pot Broth and Beef Miso soups and made a batch of Grandpa’s cheese scones. She was quieter than usual but Richard didn’t notice because he was too.

When they’d finished their soups and scones, they each felt better. Happy, settled tummies made a big difference. Katrina turned on the tv and pulled up Breaking Bad on Netflix. They flopped back onto the couch and relaxed. Katrina must have pulled a muscle when she was dancing around at the concert because her neck was killing her so she rubbed it and tried stretching it out.

“What’s wrong with your neck? Come here and I’ll massage it for you” Richard spread his knees open wide and patted the couch between them. Katrina sat on the edge of the couch between his legs and he started kneading and pushing on the muscles in her neck, shoulders and upper back.

“You’re going to have to sit back a bit, I can’t reach properly.” She moved back a couple of inches and thought she was doing quite well at this proximity thing. He used steady, strong pressure to work out the knot in her neck and the tension in her shoulders and neck. “You are wound tighter than a top! Just relax and breathe deeply.”

She closed her eyes, regulated her breathing and allowed herself to flow into Richard’s massage. He was good! Long, strong fingers, perfect compression, soothing murmurs – heavenly. She let go of the millions of thoughts swirling around in her head and enjoyed the lulling sensation of muscles relaxing. She floated on another plane – tranquil, serene, peaceful.

Richard grinned at the little moans she probably didn’t know she was making. Katrina’s head lolled forward and she felt boneless under his hands. Now this woman knew how to relax! It was a pleasure to be able to do this for her. She slumped back against him and he had to move quickly because she almost head butted his nose. She rested her head back on his shoulder and made small sounds like purring. Richard wrapped his arms around her and was about to whisper in her ear that she should go to bed when he saw her throat … her lovely smooth throat. He could see her pulse beating and her head was turned just enough that he had perfect access to kiss his favourite spot.

Woah. Kiss Katrina’s neck? No. No. No. No. Groan. Oh please yes. He contained a shiver, barely. The feel of her leaning against him, wrapped in his arms, her head thrown back on his shoulder … oh … OH. His body was aware of his need for her long before his head … she wouldn’t notice, would she? He had to get her off him – or he’d not be able to stop himself from getting her under him. Oh Katrina!

With eyes closed and a serene voice, “Rich you are amazing. I’ve never felt so good. Thank you. You’re my hero.”

“Time for bed, Love.” He scooped her up and carried her into her room. She looked up at him with dreamy eyes as he laid her on her bed.

“Guest room Rick, don’t feel like driving. Make you breakfast. Jammers in the dresser.” She closed her eyes and made an odd humming sound.

Richard tucked the blanket around her and brushed the hair from her eyes. He traced her eyebrows and cheek, confirming what he already knew: she was soft and sweet. She would be his undoing. If he looked back, he’d have known that he began travelling down this path a long time ago. There was definitely something emerging while they were pen-pals. She was sensitive, intelligent, kind, funny, empathetic, brave and generous. But he had thought her only a friend and denied attraction or any other possibility … how cliché.
He sat on the edge of her bed, watching her for a few minutes. She’d fallen asleep with that tranquil expression on her face. He took one of her hands in his and brought it to his lips for a kiss. He held it a while longer, tenderly rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb. He placed a whisper light kiss on her lips and left her room absolutely certain that she would be his undoing.

There was a strange assortment of clothes in the guest room bureau. He knew she’d not had a lover since her husband so they weren’t the detritus of a past relationship. He shrugged it off, perhaps they were things which belong to her brother. He took a quick shower and donned pajama bottoms which would work well enough.

Richard stood in the doorway of her bedroom, towel drying his hair and minding her sleep. He shook his head wryly – at one time she had fantasized about being with him but now that he wanted her ... well, didn't timing just suck!? A shiver ran down his spine, part of this was unpleasantly similar to the Richard in her story: discovering feelings and ratcheting them down to friendship. Life imitating art wasn’t nearly as romantic as it sounded.

He trundled off to bed, thinking about Katrina and whether or not he was as noble as she deserved him to be. He doubted it. He finally fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, oblivious to the world until he was startled awake by Little Miss Mary Sunshine who informed him it was time for his lazy arse to get out of bed. After the requisite yawns, stretches, farts and bladder relief, he ambled into the kitchen.

What chaos! She’d clearly been up for quite some time and he suspected she’d dirtied every dish in the house … and borrowed some from other houses. Bowls, pans, baking sheets, spoons, spatulas, plates, flour, fry pans, and every other implement and ingredient which could be used for any type of breakfast were covering every available surface. He shook his head in disbelief at the volume and variety of the mess.
See Ya Soon Ya Big Baboon

Chapter Summary

Richard's last day in Toronto, Christmas, plans to return to Toronto for another visit

(edited January 12, 2015)

“Your choice: porridge with berries, maple syrup & cream; cinnamon rolls; fruity pancakes; or veggie omelette.” She frowned, “Well, maybe strike the omelette. It’s too rubbery. But the others are ok – they’re Gran’s recipes with a bit of fruit thrown in. Sorry it’s only carbs left.”

He beamed. No one but his Mum did things like this for him. He’d venture a guess that this might not taste as good as his Mum’s, but for sheer effort it would be the most delicious breakfast he’d ever had. He looked at the clock and figured he’d be able to help with a bit of the disaster before he had to leave.

“I thought I’d drive you to the airport if that’s ok?” She looked up while shoving a very large piece of cinnamon roll into her mouth. Her eyebrows scrunched as she tried to chew with her mouth closed. There was no way to be graceful about it so she mushed the food around her mouth and grinned, “Hab I gob sumpding in my teef?”

He was shaking his head and chuckling as he strode over and pulled her into a big hug. “Katrina, you are a freak! An amazing, insane, outrageous freak.” He moved back a step and cupped her head in his hands. Looking into her smiling eyes, “I am going to miss you like crazy. You better bloody email me every single day!”

Her smile faltered, just for a second. “Of course silly! I take my job of pen-pal very, very seriously.” Quieter she said, “I’m really going to miss you too.” As she threw her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. She was glad he wasn’t able to see the tears gathering in her eyes.

They ate their breakfast and tried to make a dent in the mess, managing an impressive ‘scrape, rinse & stack’ but had to leave off at that point. Katrina waved away his concerns about leaving her to finish cleaning the disaster area with a comically resigned look, “Do you honestly think this is the first time I’ve destroyed this kitchen? Pffft. This is a cake walk compared to Easter dinner!”

They were subdued as they drove to the Hazelton Hotel to pick up his luggage and carried on to Toronto Pearson International Airport. He tried to convince her to drop him off at the departure area entrance but she insisted on parking and seeing him to the gate.

He checked his luggage and slowly walked towards the departures security area. He hadn’t seen them, but he tasted her tears when he kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her. His breath caught in his throat and he concentrated with all of his might to still the feelings building inside of him.

“I expect texts, emails and every other techie gizmo! Don’t let me down Katrina.” He tried to sound gruff.

“Yeh, well ditto, Mr.” She did her best fake gruff voice, which was quite poor.
As hard as he hugged, she hugged at least as hard right back. He kissed the top of her head and ruffled her hair. “See ya later, Alligator.”

“See ya soon, ya Big Baboon.”

He turned and walked through the security gate and removed his shoes to proceed through the scanners.

Katrina flashed to the scene in North & South when Thorton watched as Margaret left Marlborough Mills. She whispered, “Look back. Look back at me.” As if she willed it, he turned and raised his hand in farewell before he turned and walked on.

He was safely out of sight so her tears trickled freely down her cheeks, unencumbered by pride. Damn, but she was going to miss him. Taking a deep breath, she had to remind herself that it was for the best. Unrequited love was not nearly as romantic in real life as it was in stories. Better for him to be out of reach physically as well as romantically, she thought. She reflected on the last four days and how so much had changed. She was probably just having the feels like those of a holiday romance. The workaholic who doesn’t go out much, becomes the life of the party on vacation because the alter ego has free reign. Everything she did with Richard was driven by adrenalin and trying to impress him. Being his tour guide was her holiday alter ego. She’d finish up with these silly tears and get on with life. The holiday was over.

Richard had been saying extended absence goodbyes at airports for years, he thought he should be used to it. But no, there he was with that familiar hollow feeling. What was that stupid 1970’s song? Alone Again, Naturrally.

He pulled up “The Secret Life of Words” on his iPad, thinking that re-watching one of Sarah Polley’s films would be both good research and a distraction from the ‘Goodbye Blues’. Twenty minutes later he couldn’t recall anything he’d seen, leaving him irritated and restless. Small mercies, the flight was only an hour and a half. He couldn’t wait to get off the plane and move around, these cramped quarters were uncomfortable for his tall frame. He’d hit the gym as soon as he unpacked, work off the frustration and irritability.

Richard tried to make sense of his inconvenient attraction to Katrina. A divorced accountant who wrote fan fiction? How trite. It sounded like the banal plot of said fan fiction. But she wasn’t banal in the least. Through their emails he watched her emerge from uncertainty and reticence to confidence and cheekiness. Meeting Kat in person confirmed his positive impressions and revealed more lovely traits he’d had no hint existed. Emails allowed editing, face to face did not and he found that she was naughtier, more self-deprecating, braver, more solicitous, funnier and had a significantly greater temper than he would have imagined. She was also much, much shorter which, surprisingly, he found adorable.

It was cold comfort to know that he was a grown up and had not only the prerogative, but also the duty, to choose relationships wisely. Any fool could feel attraction, it was the mark of a mature man who knew when it was appropriate to act on it. And he didn’t come from a culture with a long history of repression for nothing! He should have been able to be sensible in choosing/not choosing Kat, but he suspected that he wasn’t going to listen to common sense.

The text message notification on his iPad dinged.

Hey RAC71, You have to watch “Away From Her” if you haven’t already. Sarah Polley is a GENIUS! Ciao, Jollytr
Jolly, Did it. Any other ideas? RAC

RAC, assuming you’ve seen Take This Waltz? Phenomenal! My Life Without Me? Incroyable! Jolly

Jolly, you are SO last year. I’m in the re-watching everything phase. You’re obviously a fan of hers, do you have a favourite? RAC

RAC, can’t pick a favourite. LOVE her work. Alias Grace will be amazing! Can’t wait to see you as Dr. Jordan – you are perfect. Giggles of girlish glee for fave actor working with fave director Jollyest Jolly

Jolly, so I’m still your favourite actor? Even IRL? So chuffed, RAC

RAC, stop fishing for compliments Doofus! Email when you get home. I’m off to yoga and then to Leigh’s. Jolly

He nodded to himself, he’d be back in Toronto soon enough and had no doubt there would be laughter and discoveries to offset the inevitable aching longings. The intensity of their four day visit couldn’t be maintained over time, they needed this distance to normalize things. He vowed to tell himself that every time missing her prevailed.

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Katrina convinced Richard to play Go online. He was sceptical at first but quickly became addicted, making death matches a regular occurrence. It took some doing to persuade Kat to play online Scrabble. She protested because she was certain his vocabulary was much more extensive than hers, giving him a massive advantage. He suggested a point handicap and she capitulated. The level of competitiveness surprised both of them and fed on itself. After two weeks Richard was in debt to the tune of two dinners, one song and an impression and Katrina was in debt for three tour guiding adventures.

Richard stayed in New York for a week before heading back to London. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she thought he sounded more relaxed and happier in London. She hadn’t thought him high strung or miserable before so it was curious to feel a change in him when he got back to his homeland. He took longer between Go and Scrabble moves. His emails and texts were shorter.
and less frequent. On the upside, his phone calls were more animated and enthralling. It was clear to her that he belonged in London.

If the past was to be credited, Katrina was certain that idle hands would lead to melancholia. She pulled out her “round to it” lists for home and office and got to work. After two weeks her home had never been so clean and organized. Her staff were puzzled as to why their boss was restless and suddenly manic about creating new projects and incentives. She was offered the opportunity to do a three session lecture series at the Wilfred Laurier University Business School. Richard was overjoyed for her and was confident her nervousness would fly away once she completed her lecture notes. She’d once had aspirations to teach at the university level but, with John’s assertive redirection, subverted those dreams to the cause of attaining greater affluence. Richard was proud of her for setting aside nerves and making a dream come true.

Richard had premier and press junket commitments during the first two weeks of December for The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies. It would be cutting it close, but he wanted to squeeze in a few days in Toronto before Christmas. It had been two months since he’d seen Kat and he wasn’t scheduled to meet with Sarah again until May. Seeing her would be bittersweet in that he wanted to simply hang out with his friend … but he was also tortured by the thought of being close to her without being able to make her his. He was sorely disappointed when the logistics couldn’t be worked out only to be surprised a couple of days later to find he had no commitments from December 28th to January 5th. More than a week? New Year’s Eve? Fantastic! He called Kat and was so exuberant she could hardly understand a word he said. It was done! He’d be in Toronto with Kat for eight days!

Kat flailed about in that weird place between excitement and dread. Without a doubt she missed him and couldn’t wait to see him. However, eight whole days of him staying in her house could prove to be more than she could manage. His last visit was only four days, staying at a hotel, and look where that got her. On the other hand, maybe spending this much time together would let his appeal wear off. After all, no one could be THAT heart thuddingly extraordinary for eight days in a row, could they?

Katrina loved all of it: time with family and friends; lots of great food; watching the wee ones go ballistic on Christmas morning; the annual pilgrimage to The Nutcracker and Handel’s Messiah. When she saw her Stepmother leaning back into her Dad’s hug she felt that ache of loneliness and longing threaten her heart again. Her Dad automatically wrapped his arms around his wife and lightly kissed her when she looked up at him. It was the sort of embrace that happened millions of times every day around the world, there was nothing exceptional or even notable about it but it wasn’t the embrace in and of itself, it was the stuff behind the embrace: love, sharing, companionship, trust, security, happiness with a partner. That was the stuff which Kat tried so hard not to covet. The one person who stirred her heart was off limits so it was useless to allow such longings to take up any space in her head or heart. But for just a few seconds, she could imagine that it was her leaning back against Richard and his arms around her, kissing her …

Richard’s Christmas was no less lovely. He enjoyed all of the same traditions and highlights as Katrina did, less The Nutcracker. His Mum made the best Christmas dinner in the world. In the early afternoon they feasted on roasted goose with nutty stuffing, roasted potatoes, brussel spouts,
parsnips, cranberry sauce, bread sauce, pigs in a blanket and lashings of gravy. He wasn't overly fond of Christmas Pudding but could tolerate it when covered in brandy hard sauce. He felt quite wistful when he unexpectedly walked in on his Mum and Dad waltzing around the kitchen together, gazing into each other's eyes, plainly oblivious to the world. He always took it for granted that he would find his 'waltzing partner' but was beginning to wonder if that ship had sailed. No matter how many outlandish scenarios he conjured up, he couldn't find one which would realistically lead Kat into his arms like that. Maybe it wasn't a matter of complicated schemes, maybe all he had to do was let her know he was interested and she'd meet him in the middle. Maybe …

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Arrival for New Year's

Chapter Summary

Richard arrives for a visit over New Year's, Meg has an embarrassing event, no smut yet - but almost

(edited January 31, 2015)

New Year’s Visit - December 28th

Katrina was so excited to see Richard she arrived at the airport half an hour early. She scouted the arrivals and baggage areas, located washrooms and tried desperately to calm-the-hell down. Over the last couple of months the freedom of anonymity they enjoyed before Rich's visit gave way to an intimacy and excitement afterwards. Attraction was no longer a pleasant daydream, it was real and palpable. Every day there was at least a little something - a text, a silly comic, or hours long phone calls with no one else in the world existing in their private universe. Sparks flew between them no matter if they were thousands a mile apart, but the compelling romantic attraction between them remained unacknowledged.

When the sliding glass doors opened and he walked through, all of her pent up energy and excitement detonated. She ran full throttle, throwing her arms around his waist and hugging him with all of her might. She could feel the rumble of his laughter through his coat, and what a wonderful rumble it was. He took her head in both hands and tilted her face up to him. For a millisecond he stared at her lips before he recovered and kissed both cheeks, her forehead and ruffled her hair. He pulled her back to him to rejoin the liver-squishing hug, giving as good as he got. She eventually let go his waist and tucked herself under his left arm, walking towards the exit with his arm around her shoulder. She kept looking up at him, making silly little sounds and smiling like a Cheshire cat. He thought this was the best reception he’d ever received and wouldn’t have been surprised if someone told him his daft expression mirrored hers.

“Your hair is so long. Almost didn’t recognize you. Looks good, suits you.” She said, suddenly feeling shy.

“Thanks – I think. Looks good and didn’t recognize me … is that a good thing?” He teased.

“There you go, fishing for compliments again. You big time movie stars are all alike. Ego, ego, ego. Good thing you’re here, you need bringing down a peg or two.” She joked.

As she remote opened the trunk of the car, he stopped and set down his luggage. She stood facing him and he imagined he saw her looking at his lips wishfully for a moment. He pushed that tormenting thought from his head and put his hands on her shoulders, drawing her to him. “I missed you too much Katrina. Let’s not go that long without seeing each other again. Deal?”

“Deal.” She thought that was either the best idea he’d ever had … or the worst. Trying to be light and bubbly, “But being nice isn’t going to clear your Go balance – you have gone into some serious debt. You don’t want to be in arrears, now do you?”

“Oh Lord, you’re not Dibleying me are you?” He groaned.
“What? Oh … OH!!!!!!! NO!!!!!” She was mortified. “I’m an accountant, I speak like that all the time.”

Richard enjoyed her embarrassment a little too much. When she saw his taunting expression, she gave him a push and knocked him into the car. This had the unfortunate result of compounding her embarrassment. “Ooops. Sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you … are you ok?”

He tried, unsuccessfully, not to laugh. “As if you could! You couldn’t hurt a fly! Are you even a full person? Maybe you’re a sprite or a faerie. You’re too short for an elf.” He winked. She shook her head in mock exasperation and gave him her best “tsk”.

“Hey, no short jokes, Stretch. People your height are only kept around to serve us normal sized folk. And don’t you forget it!” She drawled.

They loaded his luggage into the trunk and climbed into the car. Katrina hummed as she concentrated on maneuvering them out of the airport and onto the 427 Highway through heavy traffic. He turned the radio on and was inordinately pleased to hear the Lords of the North audio book playing.

“Good book. Nice reading.”

She groaned, “fishing, Armitage, fishing for compliments again? Didn’t know you were going to be so high maintenance!”

He chuckled at that. “Hey, I’m famished. I must owe you at least a hundred dinners by now – any chance I could reduce that by one as soon as possible?”

“Sure, let’s go to Chiadro. It’s a nouveau Portuguese restaurant and they have an incredible wine cellar. Do you want to shower or drop off your luggage or anything first?”

“Why? Do I stink that badly? I showered this morning and everything … I don’t do that for just anyone you know!” He taunted her.

“More fishing? Are you trying to get me to say that you smell lovely or something? Incorrigible!!!”

They decided to stop off at Kat’s house before continuing on to Chiadro. Richard changed his shirt and pulled a sport coat out of his garment bag. Kat frowned, she had just become under dressed. She ran into her room and caused all sorts of banging and slamming sounds. He suspected she was swearing up a storm, but her voice was too muffled to be certain. She emerged a few minutes later with different shoes, blingy belt, necklace, blingy earrings and a blazer. He rolled his eyes when he figured out why she had frowned at him. She stood in front of the hall mirror and applied a red lipstick which made her lips look succulent and imminently kissable. He wouldn’t mind wearing her lipstick on — he gave his head a violent shake and pushed all of those sorts of thoughts far, far away.

When they arrived at the restaurant, he scooted out of the car before she even had her seat belt off, and opened her door for her. He extended his hand to assist her disembarkation, her eyes widening for a moment when she placed her hand in his. When she stood, he reached behind her and closed the car door, not dropping her hand until he moved to her side and placed his warm hand in the small of her back. He held the restaurant door open and helped her off with her coat before handing it to the coat checker but his hand resumed its home on her back as the hostess escorted them to their table.
She was a confused mess and it was a miracle she made it to the table without dissolving. His lovely manners would be enough to make a grown woman say “aww” all on their own but adding all of those chivalrous touches made her melt. The feel of her small hand in his big one and his hand on her back sent sparklers shooting throughout her entire body.

Richard loved ordering for her and she got an unexpected thrill from it, with him she felt protected and cherished which completely annoyed her feminist sensibilities but she didn't ask him to stop. She knew it was just his manners but she loved it and … she hated it. It was exceedingly difficult to remain unmoved by him when he treated her with such reverence and those hands of his caused shock waves every time they found themselves on her person.

Dinner was different from the others they’d shared. He was the normal Richard but he was also different. He was more attentive, his fingers brushed hers when she reached for things on the table, his foot was between hers, he brushed the hair from her eyes, offered her bites of his food. For a friend he sure as hell was the most romantic fella she’d ever met. He was making it far too difficult for anyone else to measure up – how was she supposed to find someone to date with Richard as the gold standard???? As resolved as she was to not be bothered by his attention, she couldn’t help respond to him. The long looks, all of the little touches … she felt like she was being courted … or that he was the sun and shone his warmth and light on her alone … or every other hackneyed metaphor and simile ever used in bad dime store novels. She glowed; annoyingly, hopelessly glowed and hoped with all of her might he wouldn’t notice.

Richard had never consciously tried to be a Romeo before. He found the whole idea embarrassing but as he saw the effect of concentrating all of his attention on her, he thought there might be something worthwhile in it. When he saw her pupils dilate after his fingers brushed hers, he felt real hope. He couldn’t take his eyes off her and, on some level at least, she had to have known. She wasn’t shying away from him, she wasn’t shutting him down. She glowed. She was glowing … because of him. He had to work hard to suppress a smug smile!

It had been a long day, but he wasn’t ready to end it when they got home from dinner. Kat poured a rich, mellow port and they sat on the sofa chatting and listening to Bach. When he returned to the couch from stoking the fire he sat close to Kat, putting his arm around her shoulder and drawing her to him. She wasn’t relaxed and responsive like she’d been in the restaurant. She was stiff and had little tremours, but not in an excited way, he feared. He kept the conversation light and non-threatening so that she wouldn’t be scared off. He hadn’t realized he was holding her hand in his and stroking the back of it with his thumb until she bolted up off the couch, wild eyed and panicky.

“Long day. So glad you’re here Rich. Gotta call it a night.” She smiled wanly and scurried off to her room.

He swore at himself. He pushed too hard, too fast. He would have bet good money that she felt something other than friendship, but she wasn’t ready for the full court press. Shit.

He tidied up and banked the fire before trundling off to his room. He changed into pajama bottoms and grabbed his kit before heading to the bathroom. Her door was ajar as he passed by and he heard what sounded like sobs. He tapped on the door but she didn’t answer so he slowly pushed it open. She was sitting up in bed with her head in her hands, hiccupping.

Richard stood in the doorway and called softly to her, “Kat, what’s wrong, Love? What can I do? I’ll do anything …”

Her head shot up at the sound of his voice and she stared at him. Her inscrutable look was quickly replaced by one of … what was it? … humiliation? She shook her head and, making choking
sounds, dropped it back into her hands.

Richard moved slowly towards her, murmuring low, comforting sounds. He sat on the edge of her bed and drew her into his arms. She melted into him and he thought his heart would burst. She felt so good, he would comfort her until the cows came home if she’d just stay in his arms. Abruptly she pushed against his chest and pummeled him with her fists.

“You are a horrible person and I never want to see you again! Get out!” She growled at him but there was an underpinning of pain beneath the anger.


She wailed louder. “That’s exactly what I mean! You can’t go around talking like that. Doing that stuff you do, being the sun, standing half naked in my bedroom door, smelling like everything I’ve ever wanted, making me feel like everything you’ve ever wanted, touching me like you do, ughhh. How is anyone supposed to be just friends with you when you are sitting on their bed, holding them against that chest. I tried so hard to push away anything other than friendship but no, you wouldn’t let it go. I saw you smirk when you caught me blushing! You’re enjoying toying with me. So get out and don’t come back!”

He was dumbfounded. He had thought it possible she was starting to see him differently, but he had no idea that she was as far gone as he was. He felt so stupid, it was a miracle he could get himself dressed in the morning. She’d been right there all along, tortured and putting on a brave face just as he was. He chuckled and brought her back into his embrace.

When she heard him laugh, her temper erupted, “YOU. DO. NOT. LAUGH. AT. ME! GET OUT!”

“No. I’m not going anywhere. I have been all but pining for you for months, thinking I had no hope. Here we are – two simpletons. I’m not letting you out of my sight until you kiss me – a real, proper kiss, with tongues.” He grinned at the Dibleyism, she’d like that.

She struggled for breath. Did he really just ask her to kiss him? He wanted to kiss her? Oh, she must have passed out and this was just a dream. She pinched herself and it hurt, but she didn’t wake up. She pinched him and he yelped, but she didn’t wake up. She looked up at him confused. “I’m dreaming and I can’t wake up which is ok I think … we better kiss before I do wake or else I’ll be frustrated for the rest of the night.”

“As you wish, it’s your dream.” He dipped his head to kiss her and she stopped him.

“Since it’s my dream, I want you to kiss me as gorgeously as John did Margaret in the train station, with hands on face and everything.” She was dazed and confused wanted her alert and focused … on how she would feel when they kissed

“No. I’m going to kiss you as Richard does Katrina. There might be hands on face, there will definitely not be any acting.” He smiled.

“Ok. Set to it then.” And she looked up at him with a grin.

He smirked at her mischievously. He bent down, brushing her bangs from her eyes and his features softened as he held her gaze. For months he had thought this moment impossible and yet now that it had arrived, it was a little daunting. He guessed she would remember this kiss in excruciating detail and it would either be something that included romantic sighs … or raucous laughter and teasing. He was determined to get it right. She mentioned her face … that was a lovely place to start.
Richard cradled her cheek with his hand and lightly caressed it, feeling an infinitesimal quiver as she held his gaze and smiled. He traced the outline of her lips with his thumb and thrilled at her sharp intake of breath, breaking the silence and increasing the exhilaration. Her pupils dilated and she blushed fiery, leaning into his palm and seeking more. The intensity of her response to a mere caress surprised him and amplified his yearning for her. He dipped his head and delicately touched his lips to hers, gently and lingering, as though he was trying to memorize the feeling. His hand moved to the nape of her neck bringing, fingers delicately brushing against the soft hairs there making her shiver. He brought her closer and softly kissed her lips, first the top, then the bottom and then both, pressing close, closer to her.

His breath quickened, and with a tiny moan, her lips parted to mirror his. With a slight trembling, her hands moved from resting on his shoulders to wrap around his neck, feeling the course hairs of his stubble graze her fingers and she made her way to tangle in his nape curls. She groaned out loud when he took her bottom lip between his, giving it a faint tug. Katrina clutched him close, molding to him and he tentatively traced the crease between her lips with his tongue, making her whimper. She opened her mouth fully to him, a confirmation of pleasure and an invitation. The first caresses of their tongues were gentle and languid, slowly learning how to dance with one another. His fingers wound in her hair as he pressed firmer against her lips, exploring her mouth with increasing fervour. She outlined his upper lip with her tongue, drew it to her and softly nipped at it, tasting him, teasing him, having more effect on herself than she thought it had on him. Their tongues entwined, dancing to their own perfect rhythm as their bodies and souls sought more – more contact, more exploration, more fusion. His breathing was ragged and her heart’s tattoo was deafening in her ears. Both gasping for air, they broke the kiss and rested their foreheads together.

Richard moved the hand that had been wrapped in her hair down beneath her shoulder blades. His eyes smiled into hers as he lowered her down to rest her head on the pillow. She began to pull his face down to hers. Without warning, her hands dropped to his chest and she harshly shoved him away, aggravation replacing passion.

Richard was startled and confused. “Katrina?”

“You’re half naked in bed with me!”

“I had noticed and don’t mind a bit.” He smirked, looking rather naughty with one eyebrow arched.

“I don’t sleep with men after the third date, let alone before the first one. This … this … is too –”

“Erm, we went out for a lovely dinner followed by firelight and port, a very nice date. And in the fall we went out several times. We must be at date number five now … how do you feel about after the fifth date?” He asked, hopefully.

“It’s not a date unless it’s been called one before it begins. Tonight wasn’t a date! We haven’t been on a single date yet. I’m sorry but you can’t be in this bed! You’re going to have to leave the room.”

He waggled his eyebrows, “What about spooning? If I promise to be good, can we spoon?”

Katrina snorted, “Not highly likely. Do you honestly think I could keep my hands off you? Not after that kiss!”

“Well, it wouldn’t offend me if you decided to have your wicked way with me.” He made innocent puppy dog eyes at her and smirked. Kat couldn’t keep her hands off him after his
kiss? YES! First kiss a success! Was there ever any doubt?!?!

“Look here you! I’ve already compromised my principles once because of you, I’m not bloody doing it again.”

“Yes … but look how well that turned out for us. Just imagine if you compromised the dating rule tonight …” He tipped his head and smouldered at her, hoping for a laugh.

“Pfft. Yeh, writing that story used up my grace quota, I’m not risking it. Put on a parka and a jock strap and you can stay. Otherwise, git ooot! And put away The Smoulder!!! Shoo. Go. Bugger off. Oh, wait, ask me out on a date first, then bugger off. ”

He stared at her as if she’d just sprouted wings and was about to take her first solo flight. “Say again. Did you just demand that I ask you for a date?” He groaned. “Am I to court you like Richard did with Meg? You’ve got to know, I could never be as … restrained as he was.”

“HA. And I’m not Meg. There’s no way you’d climb into my bath naked and get out with just washing my hair … unless that was a euphemism.” She was practically leering at him.

He gaped at her. He thought the hair washing scene in The Love of My Life was a little sappy and very unrealistic, he’d never be able to pull off that stunt. Euphemism was right! He shook his head and offered, “My dear, may I have the pleasure of your company on a date for lunch tomorrow? And for supper tomorrow night? And for each of the activities which you have planned for us tomorrow? That must bring us up to four, right? Four is good, four is progress, right?!!?!?!”

“I’d be delighted to go on a date with you tomorrow. Now, kiss me goodnight – NO TONGUES – and get lost.” She looked like the oddest combination of the cat who drank the cream and a woman dying of thirst in the desert.

One side of his mouth quirked up and he shook his head. He threw his arms around her, pulling her tight to him and flipping her so that she was on top of him just as he landed prone. Her eyes widened in surprise and her mouth made a silent “Oh”. Her tongue peeked out to lick her lips, slightly moistening them and her hands snaked up to roughly grasp his head and she descended on his mouth with a fervour which belied her wish to slow things down.

There was nothing sweet, languid or gentle about the way she kissed him. It was raw and desperate, pulling, sucking, nipping, tugging at his lips and his tongue. He made the most delicious sounds she’d ever heard when she kissed him deeply, feeling the vibrations all through her body. Heat infused every cell in her body, she thirsted for him, needed more, deeper, closer. Richard kissed and nipped along her jaw and she groaned out when he sucked her earlobe into his mouth and twirled his tongue around and around it. He moaned by her ear, sending vibrations and liquid fire coursing through her body. She pulled him tighter to her and felt the solid length of him mould to her, the hardness of him against her. They kissed and held each other tight, strong, never ever letting go. They kissed with light as a gentle breeze sighs and held each other tightly, moaning, panting and clutching.

She suddenly pulled away, her face scrunched in agony, her breathing ragged and she keened long and low.

“Kat?” He tried to gently roll her off him so that he could figure out how she was hurt. Her hands held his shoulders in a death grip, not allowing him to move. Her skin was flushed and she held her breath. “KATRINA?”
One minute Katrina looked like she was in excruciating pain and the next, blissful if not a little embarrassed. She inhaled deeply and opened her eyes. “S’okay. Just a … muscle spasm. I’m alright now.” As she met his intense stare, she blushed bright crimson and gave a nervous little laugh. “No worries, it’s fine. I’m fine.” Her brows knit together and she searched his face for any signs of comprehension, uncertain as to whether she wanted him to know or not.

“What can I do?” The care and worry in his voice sent her into a fit of giggles.

“Oh, I think you’ve done quite enough already.” She said, tilting her head to one side, arching an eyebrow and giving him a naughty smirk. She waited for him to catch up, hoping she didn’t have to spell it out.

He was not that naive. “oh … OH! You just … really? Seriously? From a kiss? Wow. That’s some muscle spasm.” His astonishment turned into a comical smugness which made her laugh out loud.

“Yeh, yeh, yeh. You’ve a gift. That wasn't just one little kiss - that was Olympic Gold Medal snogging! Whatever. Don’t go getting all arrogant! Ten minutes with your lips appears to be sufficient. Now you really do have to get out of this room. I am a weak, depraved woman and this is more than just a little itch to scratch. Leave while I can still remember that!” She sighed heavily, looking at him as if she were starving and he was the last meal on earth. “You are worse than crack!”

She rolled off him and closed her eyes. She lightly traced her swollen lips, still warm from his kiss. The burning for him was excruciating and exquisite all at once, leaving her certain that he’d consume her, with nothing but ash remaining. He was going to be the end of her. No doubt.
~ December 29th ~

Kat’s eyebrows rose together in amused incredulity when Richard stumbled into the kitchen. He looked so bad, it was laughable. There weren’t enough words in the thesaurus to describe his haggard appearance and the lethargic misery in his voice.

“Coffee. Please.” He ground out.

“A little jet lagged are we? Keurig’s brewing, it will be just a minute, you poor man. Can I get you anything else or do you need to wait a bit?”

“Wait. Please. No talk.” He grunted. He miserably plunked himself down on a chair in front of the kitchen island.

She brought a cup of steaming coffee to him, with an indulgent smile. She smoothed his hair back from his brow, tenderly kissing his forehead. At the touch of her lips to his skin he arched his eyebrow, tilting his head down and to the side in an expression she’d seen on film many times before.

“You’re an inveterate lech! Here you are, barely able to put one foot in front of the other and you’re trying to give me the old “come hither wench” look.

His arm snaked around her waist and he tried to wink, “Is it working?” She rolled her eyes at him. “I was thinking—“

“Sounds dangerous.” She interrupted.

“Haha. I was thinking that YOU should ask ME for dates. You’re the one organizing the next week – how can I ask you for a date when it’s all on you? Oh, what are we doing today, by the way?”

“Horse drawn sleigh ride in St. Jacobs and then snowmobiling. You did bring your ski duds, right?”

“I did. That sounds … cold.” He thought Canadians had an unnatural attachment to freezing their arses off.

“Wimp. It might get a little chilly on the sleigh ride because of sitting still – but that’s what the brandy is for. I have mitten and boot warmers for you, just in case. You might feel cold on the ski-doo, but I doubt it – too much fun. More coffee?”

“Yes please.” He was doubtful about her plans for spending the day in a snowbank but since every
day didn’t have to be an Edgewalk on the CN Tower, and everything she’d organized so far had
turned out far better than expected, he’d just sit back and relax. At least they’d be able to snuggle
up on the sleigh so it wouldn’t be a total loss. He’d never been snowmobiling before, nor did he
know anyone else who had, so he couldn’t even begin to form an opinion on that choice.

“I’m going to have a shower and get ready. There’s cereal, instant oatmeal, eggs, and bread for
toast or a sandwich … help yourself if you’re ready, otherwise I’ll make something for both of us
when I’m done.” She kissed him as she passed by his chair on her way out of the kitchen. She
chuckled at how natural it was to just kiss him any old time. Nice!

The Keurig finished his second cup of coffee and he was glad of it and hopefully by the third cup
he’d probably feel halfway human. He loved how innately affectionate she was. Twice in a
couple of minutes she’d instinctively kissed him, as if she’d always done so. There was no
awkwardness or shyness, which was lovely. He finished his coffee and loped off to the bathroom
for a shower.

For Richard’s second entrance into the kitchen he was in much better condition than the first. Her
eyes lit up when she saw him standing there, hands in pockets, watching her. She hurried over and
launched herself into him, squishing him in a tight hug.

“For a little thing you sure have a mighty death grip!” He chuckled and squeezed back, lifting her
off the floor and enjoying her squeals. “I’m starving, what can I make?”

“Quinoa cereal with hemp & chia; eggs any which way you like; oatmeal & berries; grilled peanut
butter and banana sandwich; or some variation of those things. We’ll have a decent lunch just
before the sleigh ride if that matters …”

“How about berries on the quinoa?” He asked.

“Perfect, just finished washing the strawberries and blueberries. I’ll have that too.” She hummed
to herself as she assembled the simple breakfast. She couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket but happily
continued along anyway, which was endearing.

When she turned to make another cup of coffee with the Keurig, he quickly and quietly moved to
stand behind her and pulled her back into a hug. He bent down to whisper into ear and nuzzle her
neck. She made an odd little noise which sounded like a cross between a purr, humming and a
blissful sigh. Katrina revelled in the kisses and nibbles he trailed along her throat. This was her
new most favourite thing in the whole world.

She could feel the reverberations of Richard’s rumbling laughter through her back. It was the most
incredible sensation and left her weak. He laughed harder when he felt her stumble. “You, my
dear, make it far too easy for me. With a simple hug or kiss you make the most delicious sounds
and dissolve into me … and let’s not forget your ‘muscle spasms’. You’re putty in my hands and
I’m going to get lazy!”

She turned around and looked up at him innocently, “So, you’re saying you want to have to work
for it?” She gave him a wickedly salacious grin.

His expression darkened. He looked at her mouth and his tongue darted to lick his lips. She
gasped as he spun her around, roughly hauled her flush against his body, growled and claimed her
mouth. It was an assault on all of her senses – he ravaged her lips and mouth, his hands stroked and
kneaded her arms & back, he moaned into her and he smelled like heaven, like sex on legs. She
 teased, parried, and met his every challenge, issuing a few of her own. As he felt a subtle shift in
her, he thrust her away from him and smirked at her howl of frustration. “Work for it? I think
not!” He mocked.

She gasped and grabbed the counter to steady herself. “You can’t do that! You can’t just ... stop. You’ll set me back 10 years! Richard … please … I’m begging you … just a little more kissing?” she whined.

“Just so that I understand how this works, we can’t sleep together yet but you can have all kinds of orgasms while kissing me? Does that seem fair?” He teased her.

“No?”

“Right. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If I can’t, neither can you! Until further notice, you’re cut off! Consider this a moratorium!” He baited Kat with glee.

With an evil gleam in her eyes, “This is not a contest you want to enter! I’ve been soloing for 3 years and the ex wasn’t much use for 9 years before that. You, my friend, are not technically necessary.”

“Maybe not necessary, but definitely superior.” He whispered seductively in her ear and proceeded to nibble on it, making her moan again. “Right. Made my point, yeah? Now, let’s get out of here before you lose control … again.” For which she shot him a dirty look and a huge grin.

They gathered their cold weather gear and filled one thermos with amaretto hot chocolate and the other with warmed brandy. They piled everything into the back seat of Katrina’s car and headed off to St. Jacob’s. She gave him a brief overview of the Mennonite area of which St. Jacob’s was a quaint hub.

After a tasty lunch of schnitzel, cabbage rolls, and sausage at The Stone Crock Restaurant, they made their way to a Mennonite farm just outside St. Jacobs. They toured the farm and hopped on an old fashioned sleigh pulled by two beautiful Clydesdales. The benches were covered in sheepskins and there were sheepskin stuffed quilts to cover themselves with keeping them cozy and comfortable.

“It’s more beautiful than Monet’s ‘Snow Scene at Argenteuil’ This is gorgeous Kat! Come here, snuggle in so you don’t get cold.” Richard happily gathered her to him. They saw a variety of northern animals and birds during the hour long ride and he chuckled at it all because bucolic scenes didn’t usually hold much charm for him, but this one was a favourite. It was most likely due to the view within the sleigh rather than the one without.

By the time the sleigh pulled into the barn, they were happy to find their thermoses of brandy and chocolate. They stopped at The Kokken Village Kafe for Kransekage and Kringle before travelling east to Maryhill where Kat’s friends left keys to their house and Ski-doos for her. Kat had been snowmobiling with the Doerkesens many times and was excited to share the fun with Richard.

Katrina went over the machine she would be riding and told Richard what to look for on his. They checked fuel, lights, first aid kit, repair kit, signal flag, and the extra keys. They tested their helmets and goggles. She went over basic safety of starting, accelerating, braking, crossing roads, drifts, uneven terrain, trees, ice, encountering other ski-doers and how to signal each other. He was taken with how sober she was, she took safety very seriously and he could see how easy it would be for he to be significantly formidable if she put her mind to it. She admonished him to be
He was so wrong. Katrina didn’t exaggerate in the least. It was such a rush. He could easily throw caution to the wind and break all of her safety rules. He loved opening the throttle fully, speeding across a field and catching air on the drifts and hills. When she signaled for them to turn back, his disappointment was palpable. Even though the telltale violet and salmon shades of dusk were creeping across the sky, he wanted to stay out on the machines as long as possible. Perhaps they could zip around the fields close to the house when they got back. She granted his wish, they refueled the ski-doos and raced around the pasture to the south of the barn for another hour.

Once it was completely dark, they put the ski-doos away and readied them for the next use. He was amazed at how sweaty they were given the cold they had been flying about in. They went into the Doerkesen’s home to shower and change. Kat left a thank you note with a gift card and a bottle of wine for them and the left for dinner at Benjamin’s Restaurant.

Richard ordered their dinner and they devoured their Osso Buco and Lamb Chops. They savoured their Marshmallow-Irish Cream Crème Brûlée and Raspberry & White Chocolate Tarte. Richard suspected that Kat was up to something because she was as relaxed as he was but she had a twinkle in her eye he couldn’t explain. When he asked, she giggled and shook her head. When he made puppy dog eyes and begged, she just chuckled.

“If you tell me, I’ll give you one free kiss … you know, one that’s exempt from the moratorium.” He gave her his best smoulder and delighted when he saw her eyes darken and her breathing hitch.

“Well, if that’s your bribe, it’s a good one. I’m kind of a sucker for smooching with you, you know. We’re going to Osler Bluffs for three days.” She beamed, proudly. And then giggled when Richard continued to look puzzled. “It’s a private ski resort. Leigh and Jackson are members and have a chalet 10 minutes away.”

He looked like he’d been punched in the stomach. “Skiing?”

“I know, right!? It’s not the French Alps, but apparently they have some enjoyable runs. I’m so excited.”

“But you hate skiing and …” He couldn’t finish the sentence. He was drowning in the foreboding.

“Oh Hunny, I’m not skiing. I’m going to hit the spa and work on my lectures. I’ll join you for the Apres Ski fun though. Best of both worlds, don’t you think?” She was glad to see him perk up and was excited to give him a chance to ski.

“It’s that story … you hate skiing as much as Meg. That whole business of Richard and Meg going skiing was such a disaster. I’m ridiculous aren’t I?”

“Oh Richard …only in the loveliest way. You’re going to make me all weepy. Stop being so adorable!”
“Can’t help it, it’s genetic. Dad’s adorable. Grandfather was adorable. There are tales of the legendary adorability of Great Grandfather. Sorry to disappoint, but there it is.” He held her hand and just to add a layer of corniness, he kissed her fingers.

It was impossible to resist his charm. Katrina looked into those blue-grey eyes and melted yet another degree. He had the most devastating effect on her senses no matter what he seemed to do. Whether he was absentmindedly picking at his cuticles while reading his email or kissing her so deeply she felt it in her toes, she couldn’t keep her pulse rate calm or her thoughts ordered. Sweet, corny teasing like kissing her hand as if they were in an Austen scene just about did her in completely.

They had an easy drive home. It was an hour and a half of chatting about skiing, Leigh & Jackson and their friends, Suzanne & Duncan, who would be joining them at Osler Bluffs.

It had been a long day and they were both tired so they simply hugged and he gave her a sweet kiss goodnight, which made her chuckle.

“G’night Rick. I haven’t forgotten – you owe me one moratorium exempt kiss. I’m thinking of substituting it for the traditional New Year’s Eve kiss. Doesn’t it sound like a great way to start the new year?”

“Ah, yeh. It does. Don’t you think?!” He looked at her, pointedly.

“Oh … yeh. You’re right … that wouldn’t be very fair. I’ll think on it. Well, g’night.”

“G’night, Love”
Osler Bluffs

Chapter Summary

Arriving in Collingwood, skiing, smooching and ... Mature content in the last third of this chapter.

(edited January 31, 2015)

~ December 30th ~ Off to Osler Bluffs for Skiing

Katrina and Richard were ready to leave by 9:00, both excited about the skiing trip. Kat loved the whole Blue Mountains area, it was beautiful in both winter and summer and she was thrilled to share it with Richard, to give him the surprise of three days of skiing made her feel great and spending a couple of days with Leigh was a happy bonus.

Richard was touched that she’d planned something just for him ... and she was as happy about it as he was. It wasn’t curing cancer, but bloody hell, it was damn wonderful. He couldn’t keep his hands off her while she was driving, grazing her leg, tickling her ear, playing with her hair, anything he could think of. It was the best two hour car ride he’d had in an age.

They pulled into the chalet driveway just as Leigh and Jackson finished unloading the trunk of their SUV. Kat and Leigh ran to hug each other as if they hadn’t seen each other for years instead of five days. Katrina had given the Porter sisters in her story a touch of her own family: close sisters; loyal; best friends; and loving each other to pieces.

They stowed their gear and joined Leigh & Jack in the living room. Leigh received a text from Suzanne, letting her know they were running a bit late and would hopefully meet them at the chalet in an hour or so. Eager to get lunch over with so they could hop on the slopes, they piled into the SUV and beetled to Three Guys and a Stove. They had a delicious lunch sharing each other’s food – curry crab cake burger, fish tacos, low country dip, and a Mediterranean wrap. Duncan sent a text telling them they wouldn’t make the restaurant after all and to meet them at the chalet. Without the need to wait for their friends, they didn’t bother with dessert and rushed to get back. They were parking in the driveway when Susanne and Duncan pulled in behind them.

“Great timing! We stopped for a bite on the way and are itching to hit the slopes. You guys, ready? Oh, hi, I’m Susanne, this is Duncan. You must be Kat’s Richard?”

Richard smirked at his title and introduced himself to Leigh’s friend, helping them inside with their luggage. Within 15 minutes the five skiers were in the SUV and ready to go. They’d be back at the chalet in time to make a 7:00 dinner reservation at Tesoro in Collingwood.

Kat was delighted to have the afternoon to herself. She plugged her iPod into the docking station and selected the Bach playlist. With a tisane and a plate of raw veg, she opened her laptop and got back to work on the lecture she would deliver at Wildrid Laurier University’s School of Business. She had chosen to do a case study on Northern Education Resources Inc. (NERI) and was enjoying the preparations immensely.

She didn’t notice the time fly by and was startled when Richard and the rest of the skiers tumbled
into the chalet, laughing and trading stories of their afternoon. Richard was in a great mood, breezing over to Kat and sweeping her off her feet. He waltzed her around the room, humming Bach in her ear and whispering how much he missed her, feelings she echoed back to him. He spun her around, crushed her tightly against him and kissed her deeply, leaving her dazed as he went off to shower. Clearly he had a great afternoon and was very comfortable in her friends' company which was quite something for a man who had told her about his disdain for pda's.

At dinner, Susanne and Duncan were a riot, telling outrageous stories and making crazy comments about Tesoro's delicious food. Kat decided that turn-about was fair play and so she ordered for Richard who was delighted with her choices. She pushed him outside of his comfort zone a little, but with mouth-watering results, which, when you got down to it, was something that could be said about Kat in general. They returned to the chalet happy and sleepy, ready to turn in so that they could be up at a ridiculous hour and get an early start on the hills the next day.

Kat and Richard had taken the children’s room with two double beds. That suited Katrina perfectly – she and Richard could whisper secrets from their own beds and Kat wouldn’t have to worry about losing control as she would if he was sleeping in the same bed, right next to her. They snickered and chatted for over an hour when Richard suddenly said, “Kat, I promised you a kiss … I’m going to kiss you right now.”

“Sounds like the perfect time.” She replied, with an uncharacteristic hint of shyness in her voice. She was torn between her belief in waiting, her nervousness of taking that step from which there was no going back ... and her overwhelming desire to tear down any remaining barrier between them.

Richard got out of bed and sat on the armless chair in the corner. “Come here Katrina.” Slowly, hesitantly she walked to him, never breaking eye contact. She needed to borrow his confidence that this was the right thing, the right time. His humour, intelligence, empathy as well as his sinfully beautiful voice and body excited her, made her want things she never considered. He excited her beyond anything in her experience - anything she ever thought possible. When she was in front of him, he firmly told her, “Sit on my lap, straddling me.”

She bit her lip and her eyes grew wide as saucers. Kat put her hands on his shoulders and sat down across his thighs as he instructed. The remnants of his cologne and the feel of his strength under her hands and her bum combined to overwhelm her senses. Feeling him shift under her to make his arousal plain, she gasped and her head fell forward onto his shoulder, her hands gripping him for dear life. Who was this man and how could a look from him send desire raging deep in her belly? How could a touch, a kiss, an embrace send her over the edge? “A kiss might be superfluous. Gimme a second …” Her eyes scrunched together tightly, envisioning reality mixing with fantasy and knowing exactly what she’d like to do with the hard bulge straining against fabric so close to her sex.

He wanted her as much as she wanted him and the thought of them together, making love with each other was almost as good as doing it. Almost, but not quite. He could bring her close with his voice, his arms around her, his lips on hers and the fire in his eyes. It was an awesome power to be able to give someone that much pleasure just by being himself.

“Listen to me Katrina. Are you listening?” She nodded and he continued in the sternest voice she’d yet heard him use, “You can’t have your orgasm until I give you permission, do you understand?” She nodded with a little whine. “You seem a little distracted, repeat it back to me Kat.”

“I will try not to cum until you say so.” She lifted her head to look into his eyes - his stormy,
“But that’s not quite right, is it Love? Try again.” He said, with a hint of humour underlying his firm tone.

“I can’t until you say so?” She gave herself a little shake, pushing back the haze that threatened her common sense, allowing her awareness to gradually return. **So, he thought he was in complete control? Ha!** She’d just have to teach him a little lesson on that subject. She raised her eyebrows and gave him a little smile which, if he’d been paying attention, may have revealed her challenging attitude of “Go ahead, do your worst, I dare you”.

“That’s my naughty girl.” He growled into her ear. With his long, musical fingers he traced a pattern on her cheek and nibbled his way down her neck. He left tiny little kisses & bites and suckled on her skin leaving her weak with faint marks on her neck. He was adamant about staying above her collar bone, so with painstaking effort and steely discipline, he did not allow his hands or mouth to stray from ‘First Base’. He relished the idea that he’d make her beg for him. This was the most fun he thought he could have with his clothes on and he delighted in the frustrating need which he could feel was building within her. With more glee than he would have considered polite, he stopped his ministrations and firmly shook his head every time he felt her stiffen, “Not yet.” He’d growl in her ear.

Katrina was muddled. His hardness was taunting her, so close but so far away, she could fall into him and feel him against her, she was being devoured by his amazing mouth. But it wasn’t enough, not nearly enough to slake her thirst. He hadn’t kissed her lips yet and her entire body was electrified. Had she been mistaken when she issued the silent challenge for him to do his worst? As she struggled for some semblance of self-control she was pretty sure she was unable to stop writhing in his lap … but she hadn’t promised anything about that, so too damn bad. If he was determined to frustrate her, she’d give as good as she got.

He groaned out loud and crushed her to him as she moved slowly in his lap. Her laugh was husky when he told her, “you may not move your body unless I give you permission.” He tried to make it sound like a rough command but given her reaction, he suspected it sounded more like a plea.

Richard buried his face in the side of her neck, his nose tickling the soft, sensitive skin near her ear. He loved knowing he was making her pulse race as she made amazing, dirty noises just for him.

Kat threaded her fingers through his thick curls, tugging on them to pull his face back to hers. He could feel her want for his lips, his mouth, his breath. She needed to feel him, to taste him and to share herself with him was written on her lips. Despite his intended command for her to be still, he was only too willing spur her on by moving his body in time with hers. It was satisfying to feel tremors and shivers snaking through her body as they moved together: hands exploring; mouths tasting and body's rocking against each other. This would most certainly be her undoing, or so he thought.

She was so emboldened by his reaction to her, Katrina was determined to torment him. She made darting little kisses and tongued patterns on him, teasingly light as a feather. He groaned under her and his suffering was plain. She inwardly cheered at the knowledge that while he may think she was obeying him, she wasn’t - not in the least. She'd never really thought about turning a man to putty in her hands, but with Richard she suspected she was well on her way to her first experience of doing just that.

He intended on getting his wicked revenge and was extraordinarily smug, believing she would soon be imploring him for her release. The way she was moving, the sounds she was making, the
restlessness of her mouth on him … yes, she would be beseeching him any second. She must be close, surely. He simply had to ignore the excruciating discomfort resulting from her rocking and writhing on him. Good thing he was wearing loose pajama bottoms, he shuddered to think about the binding and pain had he been wearing jeans or even briefs. Maybe he shouldn’t have had her straddle him. But he had been confident that she would quickly collapse onto him, happily spent. It dawned on him that this was taking much longer than he’d anticipated and he stared wondering if she was playing him - he was far more affected than she was. Damn it.

She smiled knowingly at him. “Of course, as soon as I have your permission you know I won’t have any further reason to squirm around like this.” She said as she twisted and rocked in his lap. “Or do this,” she licked the length of his throat with the flat of her tongue and moaned in his ear. She laughed as he groaned and she felt him twitch under her. “Just say the word, darling.”

He could barely strangle out the words, “You may cum. Now!”

“Mmmm. That’s what I thought you’d say. Now, kiss me you fool.” She stilled on his lap and kissed his lips sweetly. When she opened her mouth to him he was galvanised. He possessed her, drinking her in, exploring her mouth, devouring her, savouring her, clenching her to him. He gloried in the sounds she made, in the fluttering of her hands on his chest & in his hair, on the way she flowed into him. He felt the tension build in her, and was jubilant when she quietly keened. He would have bruises from her finger tips as she dug her fingers into his shoulders, but it was worth it.

She slumped into him, pliant and panting slightly. “Thank you for that. I never imagined that you being so bossy could be so exciting. I kind of liked that submissive stuff!”

He snorted, “Darling you are the least submissive woman in the world. If there was any D/s, which there wasn’t, I think maybe you topped from the bottom. Now carefully get the hell off my lap before you break something.” He grinned at her and playfully swatted her bum. “Woman, you’re going to be the end of me.”

She gingerly stood up, the ache in her hips from sitting in an unusual position for so long made her almost topple over and it definitely prevented her from walking. With one hand she grasped the back of the chair to balance herself and with the other smoothed Richard’s hair from his brow. He looked up at her, marvelling at the woman before him. She leaned down and kissed him, sweetly, tenderly, lovingly. She put her arms around his shoulder and he wrapped his around her waist, resting his head on her chest.

“Richard?”

“Mmmmm?”

“It’s getting harder and harder to remember that we haven’t always been together. Is that weird?”

He pulled back to look at her thinking that a rather peculiar thing to say. But there was something to it … what was life like BK (Before Kat)? “Not weird. Me too.”

“Time to sleep, Love.” She kissed his cheek and pulled him up from the chair. As he sat on his bed considering how to best relieve the agony in his pants, she kissed him again and they said, “G’night” at almost the same time.
Katrina awoke to find Richard staring at her from his bed.

“You snore.” He said nonchalantly.

“Pffft. Whatever.” She grumbled.

“No. You really snore. And not one of those delicate lady-like snores either. More like a trucker.” He teased.

“Right. If you say so.” She said sarcastically.

“Yeh … it was rough going there for a while. I considered stuffing something in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

“Sure, like I believe a word you’re– wait, WHAT? What did you just say? ” She started to smile and then flushed bright red. “Stuffing something in my mouth? Yeh, not too hard to figure out what that might be! I can’t believe I’ve fallen for such a reprobate!” She threw a pillow at him.

“Mmmmm, I like the sound of that. You’ve fallen for me, eh!? Oooooo Katrina loves Richard. My evil plan is working.” He taunted and threw the pillow back at her.

Her stomach flip flopped. She buried her head under her pillow so she couldn’t see him and he couldn’t see her. He was jokey-teasey but did he understand what he just said? He said the L word as if it would be just fine for her to be in love with him. He was just teasing, right? She couldn’t believe he was doing that sing-songy thing from the Sandra Bullock movie …

“You think I’m gorgeous, you want to kiss me... You want to hug me... You want to love me... You want to hug me... You want to smooch me... You want to...

“Will you please go back to the mothership?” She groused. She looked up from under her pillow and decided he was just teasing and hadn’t meant anything by using the L word.

Richard thought it was enormously fun to get Kat riled up … and easy too. It was obviously a trait of her own she gave to Meg. He elected to use it to confirm the extent of her feelings for him. She had said she’d fallen for him – he just had to figure out exactly what that meant. He had provoked her and said he knew she loved him, twice. Her reaction wasn’t as definitive as he would have liked, but he thought it telling that she didn’t correct him or disagree.

“Come on Sloth. Rise and shine. Enough of this dawdling about. Get your idle arse outa bed!” He taunted her and changed the subject at the same time. He hopped out of his bed an over to hers to scoop her up and received a good pummelling on his back and bum for his efforts. “Ah, so you like it rough, eh? I’m taking notes you know.”
He could hear her exaggerated huff before she started laughing. He plopped her down on the floor and nearly fell over when she pushed him, “Yeh, well, that’s assuming I want it with you in the first place.” Within fraction of a second she realized she’d just made a big, big mistake.

He dropped his chin and looked up at her from under those brows, with THAT look. It was danger and sex and promises and … she better run.

“Oh. Sorry. Gotta hit the shower. Appointment at the spa. Can’t be late. Going to the bath now –“ She backed up, hoping to escape whatever devilish plan he had in mind in order to get his revenge for her taunt.

“You’re not going anywhere. Stand still.” He used THAT voice.

Kat’s eyes widened and her heart rate sped up. She stood riveted to the spot. He was only 2 or 3 steps away from her but the way he moved, it felt like a slow motion chase.

“Back up.”

She took several steps back, waiting for him to tell her to stop. He didn’t and she bumped into the wall, making one side of his mouth lift. He stood within millimetres of her, holding her gaze, defying her to move. He lifted his hands to her shoulders and caressed his way down her arms. When he reached her wrists he brought them up to his mouth, kissing the backs of her hands, the palms and her fingers. He smiled as she tried to stop herself from hyperventilating. He lifted her hands above her head and pinned them to the wall.

“Look at me. Don’t close your eyes.”

Her eyes were dancing with excitement and anticipation. He traced her cheek with his finger, pausing to press his thumb against her lips. Her lips parted and her tongue peeked out to wet them. He pushed his thumb into her mouth, just passed her teeth.

“Suck it.” He instructed.

She used her lips to pull his thumb all the way into her mouth. She rolled her tongue around the tip of it and lightly sucked on it, having some difficulty because of her huge smile.

“Harder.” He demanded, his eyes darkening, making her gasp a little as the bantering turned to heated sexual tension. Arousal which had simmered beneath the surface began raging through her, claiming her self control as its first victim. She wanted him, all of him, in any way, in every way.

She hollowed her cheeks and used all the force she could, shifting her head so that she could move his thumb in and out of her mouth slowly, teasingly increasing the speed. She nipped at the sides of his thumb and swirled her tongue around the tip, flicking the edge of his nail. It felt so amazing to see him react to every movement she made. Watching him made her eyes darken to match his. She had intended this … what was it? thumb sucking? that didn’t sound right … whatever it was, she’d intended it to be a taunt but it turned out to be just as much of one for her.

He blew out a heavy, unsteady breath and pulled his thumb from her mouth. It surprised her and she looked almost … disappointed? He’d let her have it back in a while but would tease her a bit more first. He might be the one telling her what to do but, without a doubt, she was the one in control. He’d do anything see that look in her eyes.

His tongue followed the contours of her throat, stopping to nuzzle and tease the hollow at its base. He loved those low, sexy moans she made when he found sensitive spots. His fingers trailed from her wrist all the way down her arm, stopping to create feather light swirls on her ribs just
centimetres from her breast. She shuddered with every motion and ghosting of his fingers. Her eyes devoured his lips waiting for him to kiss her. He hadn’t kissed her yet, and he wouldn’t until he pushed her as far as he could.

Kat squirmed and tried to clench her legs together. He noticed immediately and growled, “Be still. Legs apart. Do you understand me?”

In a husky, breathless voice, “Yes. Please Rich, kiss me, please.” Every nerve was raw, every cell was screaming for him as the tension in her core reached painful levels.

He stepped back from her. “You are not to speak until spoken to. You should know that. Now you will have to accept the consequences.”

There was nothing truly menacing about him, but she wondered what he would do to ‘punish’ her. She was certain she would love it but feared it might also make her crazy. Need twisted and warped its way through her body, pooling at the base of her spine and making it more and more difficult not to grab his face and taste his fantastic mouth.

“You want me to kiss you, don’t you? You need me to kiss you.” She nodded emphatically. “Well, my terribly naughty girl, that is your punishment. I will not kiss you when you want me to. You will not have what you want until I decide you’ve earned it back, how long that will be remains to be seen.” He had no intention of waiting – he wanted some part of him to be in her, and of her in him. He was delusional if he thought that he could hold back from kissing her within the next sixty seconds; he wanted her so badly it hurt.

He took her hands down from above her head and massaged her wrists, gently holding her hands in his. He pushed his thigh between hers and felt her legs twitch at the contact. He kissed one palm and drew her thumb into his mouth as he smiled down at her wickedly, and slid his thumb back into her mouth. She mirrored everything he did – she moved as he moved, never taking her eyes from his, confused by being irrationally shaken by something so simple. It caused frustrated cravings more powerful than either of them anticipated.

The sensations were unbearably intense, making it impossible for her to keep from panting. Richard pulled his thumb away and she followed suit. The corners of his mouth twitched and he leaned down to her, holding his lips within less than a centimetre from hers. She could feel his breath but he wouldn’t touch her. The torment of not being able to clench and not being able to feel his lips on hers nearly felled her but she clung to the need to make him cave in before her. The agony of suppressing the longing she felt formed tears of frustration beneath her lashes. She couldn’t fight against her body’s needs and try to outwit him at the same time. It was too much, she was overwhelmed and had to let go of something. She had to make a choice so she let go of her struggle to best him. She instantly felt limitless – free to follow wherever he would lead her. She concentrated on his every nuance, every touch, every spot their bodies touched. He would be her safe tether to earth as she blithely floated in the clouds of sensation and pleasure he would provide with his kisses and his perfect touch.

“Good girl.” He closed the final distance and claimed her mouth with all of the power of their combined hunger. Lips, tongues, teeth, hands moving, clasping, pulling, biting, tasting, sharing. Their mouths moulded together with passion, curiosity and generosity. She gave everything he asked of her and he made sure she had every part of him she wanted. They kissed until they were both falling apart.

“Now.” He groaned into her. Her pupils were blown – she was unaware of anything outside of the two of them. He pressed her tightly to him as she passed through the spasms and tremors
which wracked her body. She had gripped his arms so tightly, he was certain to have yet more bruises which made him smile.

Even as her mind cleared, she still shook. He lightened his grip on her and she swayed unsteadily. He picked her up and gently laid her on the bed, climbing in and wrapping his body around hers. He stroked her hair and his voice was a gentle susurration in her ear. When her breathing calmed and the random body twitches subsided, he gently rolled her over to face him.

“Hi.” She said in a small, husky voice.

“Hi. You ok?”

“Mmmmhmmm. You?”

“No permanent damage.” He grinned as he stroked her hair and searched her eyes for any indication of what she was thinking and feeling. “That was—“

“Intense?” She smiled, knowing that was an understatement.

“That’s one word for it.” He chuckled.

She paused, scrutinizing him for a moment, her expression incalculable. “Is that kind of control your ‘thing’?”

He laughed, “Not really, you could probably convince me to re-evaluate though. It was a creative way to deal with the no sex edict, don’t you think? Is it your ‘thing’?”

“It was surprisingly amazing … but I don’t think I’d want to go further than that.” She was quiet for a few minutes. “Yeah, it was indeed a very creative approach. I’ve never felt anything like that before – I didn’t know it was even possible. It’s inconceivable that all of this has been from the neck up. You’ve changed everything Richard! It was less than ten minutes but it feels like you’ve ravaged me for hours. Oh, and I was quite wrong, you know.”


“A couple of days ago when I said you weren’t technically necessary … you are totally necessary. Only you will do.” She winked and kissed his smug smile.

There was a loud knock on the door and Susanne shouted, “Pull out Rich, get your arse ready cuz the bus is leaving.”

“Arghhhh. Kat, I don’t want to leave. There’s so much to say – so much to ask.” He said, raking his hand through his hair in aggravation.

She brushed the hair from his eyes and traced his eyebrows, “No worries – we have tonnes of time. However, you ski freaks don’t, so you should go. Have a fantastic day and bring your prodigious self back to me!” She gently held his face in her hands and kissed him, hoping he could feel all of the tenderness in her heart.

He wanted to say it so badly … he ached to say it. But he wanted it to be romantic and memorable, not the afterthought of a weird thumb sex thing. He stuttered, “Katrina, I … I … I—“

“Cmon Rich! Run, don’t walk.” Suzanne banged on the door again.

“See you at dinner time. Have a wonderful day you sweet man.” She kissed him again and didn’t
think she could ever stop wanting to kiss him.

“Okay. Tonight … tonight we’ll talk, yeah?”

She winked, “Whatever you say … sir”

He grinned and shook his head, disentangling himself from her. He noticed for the first time that she was wearing a flannel nightgown. He laughed at the absurdity of it – he was mental for a woman in a granny gown. They were no better than a couple of horny teenagers who’d never ‘done it’ before. And he had yet another incidence of horny teenager syndrome in his pants to deal with. He rushed as fast as he could to get ready for skiing and endured teasing from the others for the rest of the day.

Katrina showered, dressed and danced around the kitchen while she made a light breakfast. She was spending most of the day at Scandinave Spa and was looking forward to the heavenly baths and massage. She had originally planned it as a decadent treat but given the constant state of arousal and torturous suppression her poor body had been through since Richard arrived, she considered it essential therapy.

It was impossible not to think about the morning while soaking in the baths. She had been married for a long time and had never approached anything like that aching hunger or the fervency of her release – even when she and John were at their peak, which she had thought was pretty good. With John she would never have even considered doing what had felt so natural with Richard ... and she’d been happily married to John.

It didn't make a lot of sense … it was not like Richard had some magic technique or the most skilled tongue in the universe or the most sensuous lips ever created. The reality was that he was quite normal in every regard. When she thought about it, she had to admit that his lips were actually a bit on the thin side, especially compared to her own. And it wasn’t just Richard’s assets and abilities, hers didn’t make sense either. Heavens knew John hadn’t given her rave reviews so it wasn’t as if she was an award winning snog machine. But when Richard was near, when she heard his voice, when he looked at her, when she could feel his breath on her - EVERYTHING changed. Maybe it was a case of the sum being greater than the whole of its parts for both of them. She shivered when she thought of his arms and legs wrapped around her and giggled at the thought about much more amazing it would be once those fantastic limbs were naked.

They had spent so little time together and yet they knew each other intimately ... could you get all that from emails? It was a little frightening … no, it was extremely frightening. It wasn’t just the unbelievable physical pull between them, it was much deeper than that. When he was in New York and London, what she felt was as powerful as when they were side by each. She loved how he thought, what he cared about, his hopes and dreams and she was awed by his integrity, his character. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he could send her into a seizure just by kissing her. In a year and a half, he had found a permanent place in her heart and she couldn’t imagine not loving him. There were invisible threads tying her to him, trussing her senses wide open, binding her inhibitions, allowing her to be completely free and she couldn’t wait to explore what lay ahead for them.

It was a delicious day. Katrina couldn’t resist the other facilities at the spa, signing up for Hot Stone therapy as well as the full menu of beauty treatments. She had a facial, manicure, pedicure and was doubtful that any part of her body escaped the threading, sugaring, plucking, waxing, buffing and polishing that the staff put her through. She felt deliciously tingly all over, almost as good as when she was kissing Richard. Almost. A final stop in the hair salon for a blow out and she was ready for an evening of dining, dancing and celebrating the new year.
Kat was extremely grateful to Leigh for helping her pick out a dress for New Year’s Eve. She dressed entirely too conservatively according to Leigh, who made it her mission to bring Kat out of her fashion shell. They found a beautiful *sleeveless, backless chiffon column sheath*. The scoop neck had subtle beading which was repeated on the waist and its long silhouette made her look taller, which was always a bonus. It was the gown’s colour which Kat loved the most, the richest emerald green she'd ever seen, making her oddly coloured eyes pop. She never knew which shade would dominate in them – green, blue or grey. With the emerald dress, they were simply brighter and her brown hair looked richer. She hoped Richard would love it as much as she did.
Katrina had her back to the door and was searching for her lipstick when the skiers returned. The blast of frigid air from the open door made her shiver as she turned around to see everyone staring at her.

“The dress is alright, eh Sis?!” Leigh was delighted with how well it suited her. She had such a difficult time convincing Kat to go backless, it was a miracle the dress ever made it home with her.

“Thanks. It’s ok.” Kat blushed, unaccustomed to being gawped at, as all of them were doing.

Richard dropped his gear and sailed over to her. He wanted to kiss her so badly it hurt but, he didn’t want to mess her makeup or hair and if they started kissing, there was little chance they’d stop before he ruined her efforts completely. He rested his hands on her bare shoulders and smiled at her with a bewildered expression on his face.

His voice huskier than he intended, “You’re stunning. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

All of those trite descriptions of hearts swelling, pulse quickening, etc. etc. etc., were sappy but true. Her heart swelled with pride and her pulse quickened with the tingle of his hands on her shoulders. She felt like he’d turned a light on inside of her and she beamed, softly telling him “I am yours. If you’ll have me.”

“Always.” He said, searching her eyes, hoping she understood what he meant.

“YUCK. Will you two get a room?! We’re getting cavities over here! Too much tooth rotting sugary fluff. Give us a break!” Susanne mocked them.

Richard and Kat gave each other cheeky grins as she put her hand over his and gave it a little squeeze. He let his hand slide from her shoulder to grasp her hand and brought it to his lips for a chaste kiss, raising his eyebrows in a questioning look when she giggled.

“Damerel. You remind me of Lord Damerel.”

“So, I am a rake then?”

She winked at him and walked to the closet to retrieve her coat. Leigh and Susanne cornered her and gave her an amused look, “So what have you done to that poor man? He was positively distracted wanting to get back here all day. And when he walked in – whooooosh – love sick puppy lapping at your heels.”

“We had an interesting … talk this morning but really, I’ve done nothing. You know that we just decided to start dating a couple of days ago, it’s all new and shiny, that’s all. You remember dating euphoria, right? That’s all.” She blushed furiously.

“Oh good grief. You’re as bad as he is. Suz, I give them 3 months.” Leigh said.
“What? You think we’ll only last 3 months?” Kat was horrified.

“No you idiot, you’ll be either engaged or married in 3 months.” Susanne razzed her.

Kat rolled her eyes and walked away to the other two women humming The Wedding March.

An hour later everyone was ready to go. The Osler Bluffs hosted a fabulous black tie New Year’s Eve dinner and party in the clubhouse. The food was always excellent and the band great to dance to. There was something to be said for playing dress up, everyone looked gorgeous and it was bloody fun.

The clubhouse was decorated beautifully both inside and out with winter wonderland decorations which paid tribute to the real wonderland outdoors.

Richard touched Katrina, in one way or another, during the entire cocktail reception and dinner. Side by side thighs, fingers brushing, hand on her back, shoulder to shoulder, anything to keep the contact. At one point during the reception, Kat began to sway when Richard had his hand on her bare back and was absentmindedly ghosting little patterns on her skin with his fingers. He was busy speaking with Duncan and didn’t feel her back stiffen or hear her breath hitch. She had to tap his arm to get his attention, “Never thought I’d say this, but you have to stop. I beg of you. This is neither the time nor the place for … well … you know!”

He was confused. She raised an eyebrow and subtly licked her lips. He shook his head, laughing, as he understood her difficulties – she was incorrigible. He slid his hand from her back and grasped her hand, kissed it and interlocked their fingers so that they could hold hands. It helped, of course, but then his thumb traced little circles on that tender spot between her thumb and forefinger and she thought she might go mad. She tugged on his arm and made a pointed look at his thumb and he sniggered, “You’re in a bad way aren’t you? Do you want to go somewhere and snog?” He whispered.

“No … well, yes … but no. I’ll be okay as long as you stop with the rhythmic stuff. The caressing and circles and thrumbing … oy. If it’s any consolation, there is nothing in my entire life that could have provided warning about this insanity, Richard I’m sorry to be so ridiculous, I can’t imagine what you must think … “

“Don’t you dare apologize. This is fantastic. Do you think it’s just you? I’ve not wanked off this much since I was 15 years old. You’re not deranged – you are amazing - and I’ll try to be more considerate in public -- ” he gave her a naughty smile, “maybe.” He winked.

Dinner was Kat’s favourite: Rack of Lamb, Potatoes Pave, Grilled Asparagus & Tomatoes Provencal and the Lemon Tarte for dessert was so good it almost made her tear up. Richard enjoyed watching her eat – the expressions she made were entertaining to say the least, probably a good indicator of her O face he snickered to himself. Naughtiness aside, it was a pleasure to be with someone who loved to eat as much as he did!

She made it through the rest of the reception and dinner without completely unbearable discomfort. She constantly felt twitchy as if she’d recently been tazered, but otherwise managed her nonsensical nervous system quite nicely. Richard was of no help at all with his winks, whispers and forgetfully stroking her exposed skin. She was going to have to learn some self control where that man was involved but she didn't think it would be easy or happening anytime soon.

As the staff cleared the last detritus from dinner the band took their places in front of the dance floor. Richard spoke quietly to Kat, “I hope you won’t be too bored dancing with only me
tonight.” When she obviously didn’t understand, he continued, “It’s not possible for me to allow any other man to hold your body close and run his hands over your bare back, you see. So, you’re stuck with me. Sorry ‘bout your luck Sweetheart.”

“I’ll manage.” She grinned brightly. “Funny enough, the thought of being held or touched by anyone else is repulsive. I can’t even get a good fantasy going for Jude Law or Michael Fassbender … you’ve ruined me for anyone else.” She grinned, “As someone fabulous recently said, and I quote, ‘So, you’re stuck with me. Sorry ‘bout your luck Sweetheart.’ Can you live with it?”

“Oh, I think I’ll get by.” He leaned across to kiss her, opening one eye to check on her composure which appeared to be holding up. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed that she was calm, cool and collected when he kissed her.

All four of their companions chorused, “Get a room” and they reluctantly dragged themselves apart.

“Dance with me?” He held out his hand to her.

She placed hers in his, “Please.” She wasn’t a good dancer but what she lacked in skill she made up for in attitude – she didn’t really care that she wasn’t good, she was just happy to move to the music and to feel Richard’s arms around her. “How was skiing today? Sounded like you lot had fun.”

“Oh, so we’re going to do the small talk thing? I can do that. Skiing was great today. How was the spa?”

“Spa was lovely. Ummmm … is asking about something you love to do considered small talk?”

“It’s all relative. On a different kind of day, skiing would be a good topic. We have much more important things to discuss tonight, don’t you think?” He raised his eyebrows and smiled warmly.

“Okay … what important things would you like to talk about?” She had no idea where he was leading – either on the dance floor or in the conversation.

“Sex. Let’s talk about sex … hey, isn’t that a song? Let’s talk about sex baby, let’s talk about you and me, let’s talk about sex …” He smirked as she rolled her eyes at him. “You said not even after a third date … sounds like you have a pretty strict code and … well, maybe you could enlighten me?”

“Yeah, of course. Hmmm, it’s more a feeling than a written policy statement so this might sound bodgey … for me, sex is a declaration of the heart, not just satisfying raging hormones. Does that make sense?” She was disquieted, trying to put something purely conceptual into words. In her gut she knew exactly what she felt and could intuitively know when the time was ‘right’ but explaining it was complicated and difficult.

“Love before sex, not sex before love, yeah?”

“YES. Exactly. Is it unacceptably old fashioned and stodgy?” She asked him, nervous despite all of the evidence that, in fact, he could and would respect it.

“Absolutely old fashioned – and lovely. Hehe … we’ve been able to deal with those raging hormones quite nicely, don’t you think? We don’t have to worry about them interfering, we can concentrate on the heart, hmmm?”
She was flustered. She wanted to tell him her heart was all sorted, she loved him truly, madly, deeply. Instead she blushed like a schoolgirl. Good grief. Oh great … he noticed and, apparently, was quite pleased to make her turn pink. Fink. “So what are your thoughts on love and sex?”

“You’re philosophy is a sensible one, Kat. Would have saved a lot of grief had I subscribed to it when I was younger. Now? I like it, I think I’ll keep it.” He held her gaze and gave her an enigmatic look.

Damn. Her ovaries just exploded. A mature man, a fantastic, amazing, wonderful man who could have whatever/whomever he wanted had chosen love before sex … with her! She hadn’t thought he could be any sexier and then *ooof* he was.

He wanted to chuckle as she stared at him like a lovesick teenager, he was thrilled to honestly be on the same page with her and had a good feeling about the next page. His feet, however, were not always fairing so well, she wasn’t exactly Ginger Rogers. Richard noticed that if he kept her mind occupied, her dancing was smoother and his toes safer. He guessed it wasn’t surprising since she tended to overthink things, so he decided to keep her busy by playing a game of questions. “So, Katrina, have you ever done it in an airplane? Points for yes, no points for no.”

“Seriously? You don’t want to talk about skiing so you can play ‘Have You Ever’? You’re an odd duck, Armitage.”

“You are avoiding the question.”

She beamed. “Nope. Not me. Never in a plane. And you?”

“No. I’m too tall. Wouldn’t fit. Your turn to ask.”

“Have you ever made out with two or more people in one night?” She felt quite smug because she wouldn’t be getting any points on this one either.

“Clarify ‘make out’.” He asked.

“Oh you know. Tongues down throats. Groping. The usual.” She couldn’t stop the grinning.

“Um. Yeh. When I was 13 we played Spin the Bottle and I got to snog three girls. I was quite chuffed.”

“Aaaaah. As an adult.” She rolled her eyes. Juvenile Spin the Bottle couldn’t count. If it did, she’d have to claim more points too and she didn’t want that to happen.

“Well, then no. Sorry. And you?” Even though intuition told him she would give a resounding ‘no’, she had a look of mischief in her eyes which made him wonder what her answer would be.

She looked very smug. “No. Not at all. Your turn.”

“Describe a recurring fantasy.” He couldn’t wait to hear her answer and chuckled when she looked like she might faint. All of the blood drained from her face and her legs wobbled. “Damn, Kat! What kind of kink is going on in there? It doesn’t have to be the worst one, any one will do.” He didn’t know if he was impressed, worried or destined to suffer performance anxiety.

“I was Paige to Channing Tatum’s Leo in The Vow. Except it didn’t matter that I didn’t remember him.”

“Too vague. Be more specific.”
“Really? What do you think? My husband, who happens to be Channing ‘Drool all over him’ Tatum walks out of the shower and stands in front of me, buck naked. Take a wild guess. Or do you just want me to talk dirty out here on the dance floor?”

He taunted her, “Given how boring that fantasy was, talking dirty is sounding better all the time.” For which he received a swat on the back of his head. “Do you want to hear one of mine?”

She rolled her eyes and gave a little nod, “If I must.”

“I have the ability to enter dreams and control them. I meet a woman who fascinates me but she won’t have me in real life. I visit her dreams and seduce her every night, sometimes it’s languid and romantic – because that’s what she says she likes. Sometimes it fast and rough – because that’s what she actually likes. Anyway, I visit her dreams for months leaving her with vague memories of me and what we’ve done. One day I walk up to her in real life and smile, sending her reeling. Then she falls in love with me and we live happily ever after, The End.” The expression on her face was priceless.

“You’re so full of crap your eyes are brown. That is NOT one of your fantasies. You do not wank off to ‘and they lived happily ever after’. Truth time, fella.”

“Ok. I’ve been fantasizing about you for over a year. All of the ways I want to take you. All of the sounds you will make. All of the things you will do to me. All of the things I will do to you. If you’d like specifics, we’ll have to find somewhere private ... these are very powerful fantasies and my trousers are getting uncomfortable just thinking about them.” His eyes had darkened and his voice dropped an octave. “And just so that you know, they always end with ‘and they lived happily satisfied ever after’.”

She stared at him, her mouth agape. She wanted every single detail of every single thing he fantasized about what they did together/to each other. And more than that, she wanted to know what he meant by happily ever after. Speech had deserted her, she could only make odd little strangled sounds.

“Maybe instead of telling you about my fantasies, I should show you. Would you like that?” He looked right into her soul and saw that she did. He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, surreptitiously fluttering his tongue near her thumb. Kat made what could only described as a mewling sound and stumbled against him, her knees buckling.

“Ready for another?” She nodded. “Ok … let’s see … In a car?”

She blushed crimson. “I think I have to say yes. And you?”

“No. Too tall. Would never work. You’re not quite what you seem, are you? No stories about the car? Must be juicy since you’re blushing so vividly.”

“It’s … it’s probably a multiple point answer … do I have to tell?”

“Mmmhmm. You really must.”

She groaned and rolled her eyes. “Fine. I was … ah … flying solo … and, a trucker saw me. He honked.”

He couldn’t stop laughing and almost danced them into a pillar. “How did you manage to do that and get caught by a trucker but not your driver?” Her eyes nearly bugged out as she shook her head. He sputtered as he realized what must have happened. “Oh no, you weren’t … you couldn’t have! You were the driver? You’re a menace to public safety.”
She grumbled, “You are going to pay dearly and for a very long time for this … I don’t know how, and I don’t know when. But when you least expect it – expect it!”

“I’ll look forward to it. Your turn to ask.”

“I have to take another point for the car, right? I’m just not sure this is a game I should want to win. Hmm … thinking … thinking … thinking. Have you ever been caught in flagrante delicto?”

He congratulated her with a slightly naughty grin. “Well, I’ve been caught pre & post, but not during. No exciting stories to tell of it though. How about you?”

“Um. Sort of. Ask your next question.” She blurted out quickly so that she wouldn’t have to give details on her answer.

"Have you ever had sex outdoors?"

She looked at him and hesitated before speaking. “Yes, I have done it outdoors. A bunch of us decided to go skinning dipping in a nearby Provincial Park lake … and … well … one thing led to another and … we got caught by the Ministry’s patrol. We had to walk out of the lake towards the MNR officers whilst completely naked – oh, and their car had its headlights facing the water. We laughed about it for weeks. How about you?”

He could not have been more stunned if she’d said she kept a unicorn in her garage and it liked to eat rainbows. He stopped dancing and stared, mouth agape. “Outdoors, water, skinny dipping, group sex, police, whoa … Katrina?”

She scowled. She did NOT have group sex. There were others in the lake but they neither saw nor heard anything they shouldn’t have. She couldn’t tell if he was mocking her or judging her. Whatever it was, it was not a compliment and she was both hurt and annoyed by his dramatic incredulity and accusations. Her head buzzed, old voices, old put downs, old judgements babbling at her all at the same time.

He had thought her a sweet, old fashioned woman, apparently he’d never been so wrong. Compared to Kat, Richard worried he might be a neophyte. He couldn’t help staring, trying to figure her out, he simply couldn’t reconcile the woman in front of him with the woman she described. Best to answer her question and think about it later.


“No thank you, I don’t want to play this game any more. Actually, may we sit down for a while?”

She wouldn’t meet his eyes and she felt like the wind had been sucked out of her lungs. “Looking at her like she was a freak? She couldn’t breathe.

When he saw the blood drain out of her face and eyes turn shiny with gathering tears, he knew his reaction was not what she’d expected, or wanted. “Kat? Hey, look up at me. I am sorry – I shouldn’t have … Kat?”

“Excuse me, please. Washroom.” She mumbled. She pulled her hand out of his as if he scalded her. She darted towards the restrooms, unable to get away from him fast enough for her liking. She collapsed on the padded bench inside the washroom and leaned her head back against the wall. She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. The old ghosts were back, calling her a slut, shaming her. She thought they’d been exercised, but evidently not.

“Katrina please don’t ever do that again. Don’t run away – even when I’m the problem.” He
pleaded.

Richard didn’t have a problem with entering the ladies’ room. She was thrown by the tone of his voice. He sounded irritated, frustrated and very remorseful all at once. She looked up at him with tears trickling down her cheeks. He tenderly brushed them away and kissed both of her eyelids. She sighed, she wouldn’t run away – she’d stand up for herself.

Gathering up her strength, she explained, “I’ve been with two men in my life. I loved them both. Tom and I were together for three years. He was the guy in the lake. We were young, silly and adventurous. We had no idea what we were doing half the time, but we were in love and … exuberant. We laughed so much, especially at the ridiculousness of most sex stuff. There was an implicit trust – no matter what foolish idea one had, the other would give it a try with an open mind. We didn’t talk about it or agree to it or anything – it was just the way we were together. For all of the crazy things we got up to, we were incredibly innocent. We foolishly thought that ours was the way all relationships would be and that sex was as fun for everyone else as it was for us. Later, I was impressed by John’s gravitas. When we started sleeping together I discovered that for some, sex was very serious business, laughter need not apply, but I loved him so I accepted him as he was. Even though he’d had several partners and I’d only had one, I was far more ‘experienced’ I guess you could say. At first he liked it and took full advantage of my … adventurous nature. Over time things changed though. Everything I did was ‘perverted’ and he made me feel dirty and like I had some kind of depraved illness. It’s taken time and a lot of effort to figure out that I’m not a disgusting deviant and that things he chastised me for were actually very tame and perfectly normal for married couples. So here I am. Just me. I’m not ashamed of that night on the beach, I think it’s hilarious. But you assumed I was involved in some kind of … orgy. Richard, it doesn’t matter how much I care for you, I will not allow you to shame me.” She tried to hold his gaze, challenging him to judge or condemn her. She’d had enough of that with John - there was no way in hell she’d endure it again.

Richard’s thoughts and emotions bounced all over the map. He seethed with murderous rage at John, the prick hurt Katrina with more than infidelity and betrayal. He was ashamed because he jumped to conclusions and judged her when she had only ever accepted him. He was angry with himself because he ruined what he intended to be a beautiful night for them. He was frustrated because he had no idea what to say or do to reassure her. He was heartbroken that which made her ‘Kat’, John slowly, painfully squeezed out of her until only a husk remained. He was proud of her for reclaiming her life. He was astounded that she had played along with the pseudo-domination diversion. He was grateful that she trusted him, or at least had done until a few minutes prior. He was scared because they had suddenly stepped onto thin ice.

“Kat … I didn’t think you did anything perverted or depraved and from the bottom of my heart I’m sorry for implying you were in an orgy. I was surprised and I blurted it without thinking. I keep forgetting that we don’t actually know everything about each other … it’s no excuse … just … it was hard to reconcile this old fashioned woman before me with a free spirit. But those aren’t mutually exclusive, are they? Oh Kat, can you forgive me?”

She sighed, searching his eyes for any signs of deception or manipulation and found none. “Free spirit is ok … it’s good, I like it. Richard I am deadly serious – I will NOT tolerate shaming. Do you understand?”

“Yeah I do … Kat do you want to stay or would you like to go home, Love?”

Everything about the way he was speaking and looking at her doused the hurt she’d felt and reassured her that he was the man she thought he was after all. “Stay of course. It’s New Year’s Eve! Ghosts should never wreck New Years!” She looked up at him from under her lashes quite
shyly, “Maybe we should kiss and make up?”

He felt warm relief wash over him. “Absolutely. Chaste or normal?”

“Surprise me.” She grinned.

Richard lovingly caressed her face. He looked at the amazing woman who had turned everything inside out. He hoped she could see the depth and sincerity of his feelings for her; he hoped she knew how important she was to him. He kissed each cheek and rested his forehead on hers just before she pulled back, looking at him crossly.

“Umm … no offense or anything … but that was the lamest make up kiss ever! I’ve been ripped off!”

“Oh that wasn’t the kiss. No, no. That was just a casual greeting. You’ll know when you’ve been kissed!”

“Talk, talk, talk. Are you all talk? Let’s see your best …”

A bench in the Ladies’ Room wasn’t exactly the most romantic, or comfortable, place to snog her face off, but he made a valiant effort. Given the dreamy grin, smeared lipstick and glazed over eyes, he was confident he succeeded and that she approved.


“If there was a lock on the door, nothing could stop me. But, under the circumstances, I’ll have to give you an IOU. Will that do?”

“I charge interest! And there may be a balloon payment.” She snickered, grabbing his face and dragging it to hers, kissing him loudly and sloppily. Turning serious, “May I say one thing before we move on from this for good?”

“Yeh … of course …”, he said, a little worried.

“I … ah … I may have overreacted. You’ve never said or done anything to put me down. In fact, you’re the exact opposite, you’re kinda my biggest fan. There was something about the expression on your face which triggered a flash back to John. Richard, you’re nothing like John and I’m sorry for lumping you with him. Can you forgive me?”

He gave her the second sweetest kiss of her life, the first one being his first kiss. When he slowly pulled back to look into her eyes, he smiled and said huskily, “What do you think?”

She slumped against him, relieved and happy. “Mmmmmm. Maybe you should forgive me more often.” He hugged her to him, chuckling.

She did her best to touch up her makeup and hair, but she was slightly dishevelled. Suzanne saw this when she caught Kat and Richard exiting the Ladies’ room. She winked and made several “you go, girl” comments to Kat, who rolled her eyes and blushed like crazy.

“It’s not fair to do the time, if you didn’t do the crime.” She grumbled in reference to the teasing she was getting from Suz and Leigh.

“Maybe you should do the crime so it’s all worth it.” He gave her a very naughty look and winked at her. “I’d be willing to be your accomplice if it would help.”
“We’re just a regular Bonny & Clyde, eh? Ok, Clyde, what’s the first job we should pull?” She grinned. He coughed and considered exactly what he’d like her to pull. She fell against him laughing when she saw his smirk and realized the dirty direction his thoughts had taken.

They resumed dancing, conscious that their relationship was a little more delicate and a little less invincible than they had previously thought but a little more confident that they could probably talk most anything out.

Where it had previously been Richard who couldn’t keep from touching Kat, she developed the same affliction. Every touch was a confirmation that he wasn’t a figment of her imagination but the reason for the tingles racing up and down her spine.

The energy in the room picked up at 11:55 and everyone donned silly hats and noisemakers. The band counted down 10 … 9 … 8 … 7 … 6 … 5 … 4 … 3 … 2 … 1 HAPPY NEW YEAR. The band played Auld Lang Syne and everyone kissed their sweetheart.

Richard pulled Katrina a little bit closer and cradled her cheeks in his hands. “Happy New Year Kat, I love you.” He gave her the new best kiss of her life and wiped happy tears from her cheeks.

“Happy New Year Richard.” She paused for a split second and smiled shyly, “Hither my love! Here I am! Here! With this just-sustain’d note I announce myself to you, this gentle call is for you my love, for you. I love you. With all my heart Richard, I love you.”

Her hands reached up, clasping the back of his neck and brought his face back down to meet hers. Her smile was filled with pure joy and was so big her lips wouldn’t cooperate in kissing him. Following a sudden impulse, she rubbed noses with him and rested her forehead on his. She was happy, glowing and embarrassingly giggly.

They kissed again, so enraptured with each other they didn’t know they were standing still in the middle of all the dancing couples when the music stopped. Everyone smiled benevolently at them and most were inspired to kick up the romance a notch with their own partners. Almost everyone except Duncan who elbowed Richard and told him to stop breaking the Guy Code – something about never being romantic without warning your buddies first so that they didn’t look bad in comparison.

Katrina and Richard emerged from their oblivious little bubble all set to dance the night away, ridiculously happy … sometimes just ridiculous. Period.

Richard was as sentimental and romantic as Kat. He asked her to repeat what she’d said several times during the evening.

“Hither my love! Here I am! Here! With this just-sustain’d note I announce myself to you, this gentle call is for you my love, for you.”

“Yeh, that part’s lovely, by the way – what is it?, but I like the other part more” he grinned.

“I love you with all my heart? The poetry is Walt Witman’s.”

“That’s the part.” He grinned from ear to ear and danced horribly, making her laugh.

“When did you fall in love with me?” Kat asked, wondering what it was that tipped him from friendship to love.

Chagrined, “I … ah … can’t tell you.” She looked at him as if he was not right in the head. “You’ll laugh and never let me hear the end of it.” He told her.
Her curiosity piqued, “What if I promise not to laugh? And if I do, there’s a penalty?”

He smirked, “All right then, if you laugh or tease, you have to let me sit in on your lectures at Laurier. Agreed?” She had been adamant that he not be anywhere near her doing anything remotely connected to ‘performing in front of an audience’ even if that audience was students taking notes. He was a trained stage actor with a presence which commanded attention and she felt squeamish at having someone with his talent watch her muddle her way through public speaking. He would know how to use his voice, his body language and pauses to gain and keep attention. She didn’t. She might bore everyone to tears.

“Whew … that’s a pretty serious price to pay. But now I’ve got to know … so I promise, I won’t laugh or tease you.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head at him, wondering what in the world could be so embarrassing.

“I loved you the second I laid eyes on you.” He said, simply.

Kat was moved. She kissed him and was about to hug him when a weird thought started crawling around in her brain. Before she could stop herself she said, “and I absolutely know that we are meant to be together forever and we will always be happy?” She had a look of total incredulity.

“Umm … yes. I know, I know … but it’s like a brain worm and it won’t let go. You cannot tease me about this – nor can you tell anyone that I said it. You promised!!!” He tried to look stern but it was more like pleading.

“You … you used one of your character’s lines … in real life? You did that?” She was surprised.

“Right … here we go. I knew this was a mistake. You’re going to dine out on this forever aren’t you? Kat …” He resigned himself to his fate. Damned Dibley. He could have said it was love at first sight, or right away, or immediately, or anything other than the line Harry used in Dibley and the line she used for Richard and Meg in her bloody story. He rubbed his temples in an attempt to keep the headache at bay. He could quote poetry - he bloody wrote poetry - and all he could come up with to tell her he loved her straight away was a bloody line from a TV show. He deserved to have the piss taken out of him!

Kat took his hand from his eyes and brought it to her lips, tenderly kissing it. “I loved you the second I laid eyes on you and I absolutely know that we are meant to be together forever and we will always be happy. Richard, that sums it up perfectly – it’s lovely. I wish I could have said something as nicely.”

Relieved, “You don’t think I’m a dork?”

“Of course I do, but not for this. Rich, it’s a beautiful sentiment wonderfully expressed.” She was sincerely touched but he was right, it was a brain worm that wouldn’t let go, she couldn’t get it out of her head either. It was hilarious that he struggled to suppress it but blurted it out anyway. Of all the things he might have said that was, by far, the most uncharacteristic and … the most adorable. When she saw the expression on his face – a plea, a warning, embarrassment - she had to bite her lip, hard enough to bruise it. Most of the time he looked pure Alpha Male but at that moment, he looked like a little kid. She felt the smile on her face before she knew it had begun and she feared that the laughter bubbling up was beyond her control. She clasped her hand over her mouth and tried to suppress it … unsuccessfully. He just looked SO cute.

“Awww come on. You promised! You didn’t even last a whole minute.” The poor guy was a combination of crestfallen and amused.
She grabbed his arm, “I’m not laughing at the Dibleyism … I’m laughing at the expression on your face. It’s priceless. You are such a big kid sometimes! Can you look grumpy or arrogant or something? If you keep up with that hang-dog expression, I will not be able to stop giggling.”

“Fine. No more Mr. Nice Guy. How’s this?” He made his infamous ‘roar’ face.

“WORSE. Cut it out! I’m going to pee myself.” She squished her eyes shut trying to stop laughing by not looking at him.

“You’re mean! Did you lure me in with all of the ‘oooo I’m so nice, I’m quirky, I am a great tour guide, love me, love me’ and then when I do, you break out the real you – the callous, mocking Kat?!’”

“You’re on to me big guy. Seriously though – you cannot make that face and expect anything else. You’re alright Mr. Richard Armitage - yes, I think you’ll do just fine. Now come here and kiss me.”

Many kisses and dances later, it was time to go home. Kat had drawn the short straw and was the Designated Driver, leaving the champagne up to Richard, who was the life of the party. The whole car ride home was a riotous babble of happy, toasted fools.

When they arrived back at the chalet, Kat took Leigh aside, “Do you have any pretty sleepwear I could borrow?”

“Ooooo … you gonna do the wild thing with Richard? I don’t have anything suitable, but why don’t you just wear one of his shirts? It feels great and men love it.” Leigh replied.

Kat walked into the bedroom to find Richard lying down on the bed with his eyes closed, humming and conducting an invisible orchestra. She shook her head at the silly picture he made and stealthily grabbed one of his shirts out of the closet before skipping to the bathroom.

She freshened up and changed into his shirt. Leigh was right, there was something arousing about wearing his shirt. She smiled as she walked back into the bedroom to see that Richard was still lying in the same position as when she’d left. He opened one eye when he heard the door close.

“Hey gorgeous. You wearing my shirt? It looks better on you.” He said, slightly slurry.

Kat walked over to the bed and surveyed the situation. “And you are wearing entirely too many clothes my dear Rick. May I help you with that?” She gave him a look so naughty, he couldn’t possibly misinterpret her intentions.

“Mmmm. Please.” He watched through heavy lidded eyes as she removed his shoes and sox. She clambered onto the bed and crawled up to meet his lips. She traced the rim of his lips with her tongue and trailed feather light kisses across his chin to his neck.

“You smell so good Richard, I can’t get enough of you.” She murmured, soft and low and she nibbled on his ear, gently sucking the lobe into her mouth and tonguing it before letting it go. “I don’t think you need these trousers, do you?”

“Nuh.” He blew out a breath as she slid her hands under his shirt and pinched his nipple hard enough to make him shiver. Kat pushed his shirt up and replaced her fingers with her mouth, laving the tender area and blowing on it, making him groan. She kissed, nibbled and suckled a trail from his chest down to his belt. Using her nose to nudge the bulge in his pants, she puffed a hot, moist breath through the fabric eliciting a low growl. She straddled his legs and undid his belt, leaving a shower of little kisses along the waist band, enjoying his happy little sighs. As she
slowly pulled his underwear and trousers down together, he lifted his hips helping her remove them quicker. For every inch she drew the trousers down, she nipped and licked. When she finally had discarded the clothes she looked up at him. “Better, yes?”

“Mmmm.” He said distractedly as she began retracing her path up his body.

Her fingers fluttered along his thighs and behind his knees as she kissed her way upwards. Her lips, tongue and hands worked slowly towards his hips, exploring and savouring every millimetre. Oh she couldn’t wait to nuzzle into that amazing muscular V below his belly button and brand him as hers. She smiled when she heard his contented sigh and watched as he wrapped his hand around his stiffening member. She had missed this so much – the trust, intimacy, vulnerability, the thrill of giving pleasure. He was freaking amazing inside and out. She didn’t know which part of his outsides to honour first. He had the most fantastic thighs she’d ever seen – strong, long and thick – covered with soft, silky hair. She lightly chuckled, thinking they begged to be decorated with her love bites. She caressed his inner thighs with great care, becoming impatient to get to the prize.

He huffed as her nose grazed his balls and her tongue snaked out to lick their underside. She cradled them in her hand, giving them a wispy light massage. She sniggered when she remembered the scene in Labyrinth when David Bowie twirled the magic balls with his fingertips. Why not? Give it a go … she used her finger tips to lightly fiddle with him. He twitched and moaned providing her all of encouragement she needed to continue exploring him and experiment with touching, stroking, feeling him.

She pried his fingers off himself, “Let me …” He hummed his agreement and sunk further back into the bed. She held him tenderly in her hand and traced a feathery line along the underside of his cock. He was so beautiful … and thick … and hard. She smirked knowing how sore she’d undoubtedly be the next day. He wouldn’t fit far enough into her mouth but she hoped she’d be able to compensate with deft fingers. With her flattened tongue she followed the trail her hands had just traced from root to apex, pausing to make circles on the ultra-sensitive spot under his head. She twirled her tongue around his tip, fluttering on the slit. She kissed and licked all the way up and down his cock before taking him into her mouth and humming her appreciation. She looked up to his eyes which were closed and on his face was the most blissful expression she’d ever seen. She felt pretty damned blissful herself; he tasted and felt amazing and she wanted all of him. She slowly sucked him deeper into her mouth, relishing every centimetre. She synchronized the movements of her hand with the in and out of her mouth. It felt so good, she moaned and hummed as she sucked and licked him. She focused all of her attention on giving him as much pleasure as she possibly could.

She was no expert. John hated oral sex and it was nearly twenty years since Tom. But she was pretty sure that dicks in the process of being sucked off weren’t supposed to go soft. She let him flop out of her mouth and looked up to his face, worried. His mouth was slightly open and there was a soft, but audible, snore emanating from it. *What the ...?* He fell asleep in the middle of a blow job? WHO does that? So much for romantic notions of intimacy and sharing and providing pleasure. Was that a trickle of drool on the side of his mouth? Ewww. If her own arousal wasn’t so painful, it would be hilarious. The love of her life was lying naked in front of her with the most gorgeous penis she’d ever seen and she would have to flick the bean or go mad. Arghhh! In a terribly uncharitable move, she pinged said gorgeous penis with her finger. He grunted and rolled over in his sleep. Life was NOT fair.
New Year's Day

Chapter Summary

Lots more smut

(edited February 3, 2015)

After she had taken care of the devastating frustration his premature sleep left her with, she found
the whole situation hysterical. She’d be able to tease him mercilessly for a very, very long time if
she so desired, certainly razzing him about falling asleep during a beej would never get old.

The next morning Katrina sent the others off to ski without the comatose Richard. Kat was
munching on a bowl of fruit salad when she heard a raspy, “G’morning.”

“Well hello sleepy head. How are you this morning? Well rested? Did you get enough sleep?” she
could barely contain the snicker.

“Mmm. Yeh, I guess. What time is it? Where is everyone?” He was still a bit fuzzy.

“It’s 10:15 and everyone has gone skiing. They’ll be back at 4:00. I’ll make brunch while you
shower, if you like.”

He frowned, “They went skiing without me?”

“Mmm hmm. Is that a bad thing?” She asked, arching one eyebrow and smirking suggestively.

“No? OH. Absolutely not! It’s a very good thing.” The benefits of being alone with Kat for a
few hours finally dawned on him. He pulled her into his arms and growled, “You smell so good, I
could devour you right here, right now.”

She hugged him to her, making sure she pressed against the spots she suspected would be tender
from her love bites. “Mmmm. You feel so good I almost want you to. Why don’t you go have a
shower and I’ll make brunch first?”

“Why don’t I stay here with you and we can have brunch later?” He groaned as she kneaded his
butt.

She smirked, “Don’t you think it would be better for you to be well rested, fed and hydrated first?
I wouldn’t want you to pass out on me …” and she sniggered under her breath, ‘Again’.

Katrina was looking at him in the strangest way. She was snickering about something and it didn’t
look like simple lusty thoughts. She shooed him off towards the bathroom and returned to
puttering in the kitchen. It was definitely something other than lust – he was quite certain she’d
not have let him out of her sight otherwise. He shrugged and went to the bathroom.

Richard sang in the shower as he lathered up and thought about all of the lovely, sexy things he
wanted to do with her. He hissed when he scrubbed a tender spot on his upper thigh. Curious to
find out what caused the problem, he rinsed off and inspected the area. He was startled to find
three reddish bruises on his upper thighs. Looking closer he was puzzled to see that they were
hiccies. Huh? How? When? He wasn’t that drunk last night and there had been no visitors to the area for ages. Think, think, think. They’re still reddish, so they must be relatively fresh. He remembered getting home, Kat wore his shirt and was AMAZING … mmmm, if he closed his eyes he could feel her working her way down and up his body. He smiled as he finally remembered her marking him. A feeling of dread crept up and took hold. The very last thing he could remember was Kat’s amazing mouth making him harder than lonsdaleite … and then he woke up in the morning. Oh SHIT! No no no no no no no … please NO! Did he really fall asleep with his dick in her mouth? He cringed when he thought about the way she sniggered when she called him ‘sleepy head’ and joked about not wanting him to pass out … arghhhhh.

His ears, neck and face burnt with embarrassment. How was it possible to fall asleep during a blow job? How was he ever going to face her again? Why couldn’t he just sneak out the bathroom window and run all the way back to England? If there was any good news, and he highly doubted that there could be, it was that she wasn’t insulted or upset. The bad news was that she was far too amused and he was pretty sure she’d take the piss out of him for a long, long time. Ughhh. What if he just went to her and … and what? Fuck. He finished up in the shower and steeled himself to walk out of the bathroom.

He wandered out to the kitchen, stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and leaned against the cupboard keeping his eyes cast down and paid close attention to the cuticles he was picking at. “Hey.”

“Well hey yourself. Did you escape a champers hangover?” she asked, handing him a steaming mug of coffee.

He nodded, unable to make eye contact. He thought there was no point in trying to avoid it … might as well get it over with. “Thanks, yeh – no hangover. Guess it just made me enormously tired last night though.” He sipped the coffee, examining the mug as if it was a priceless relic.

“Mmm. Yes. I noticed you were particularly tired last night.” She desperately wanted to release all of the teasing she’d been storing up but he looked so miserably awkward she couldn’t bring herself to do it. “Of course you know I’m going to mercilessly mock you about falling asleep on me … but not today. Today you need a little compassion and lots of brilliant sex. Or maybe it’s me that needs a whole lot of sex. What do you say? Are you up for it?” And with that she broke up giggling, “Haha, UP for it?! Bwahaha.

He scowled so hard she thought his face might get stuck like that. Making jokes about him not being able to get it up? HA! She’d rue the day she said that! His scowl was replaced by a leer as a thousand smutty ideas crossed his mind.

Kat instantly felt the change in the air between them. The teasing was gone and in its place was a palpable heat with flames licking down her spine, pooling deep in her belly. Richard’s fiery gaze held her firmly in place, leaving her unable and unwilling to look away. Her breath quickened as he laughed low and dirty.

“Oh I think you’ll find there’s no end to what I can get UP for.” The predatory look in his eyes left no room for doubt as to his meaning and his tone dripped with filthy promises.

She gasped, marvelling at the power he had over her body because his gaze alone sent lava racing through her veins. He strode over to her, never breaking eye contact, stopping inches away but not touching her. Her heart was racing and her need for him was all she could think about. She swallowed hard, placed her hands on his hard chest and felt his muscles jump and his heart race beneath her palms. She smiled knowing that they would sink or swim together; that she was not alone in the tidal wave of longing which engulfed her. She raised up on tip toes, transfixed by the
sight of his beautiful lips and groaned as his tongue peeked out to moisten them. *Oh fuck – the Tongue of Concentration.* She felt sensory and motor neurons firing, clenching muscle deep within her.

She felt the caress of his breath on her skin, a brief warmth which breezed across her mouth. He was so close but he hadn’t touched her and she couldn’t breathe waiting, wanting his lips on hers. When her pleading groan vibrated through him, he touched his tongue to her lower lip and her arms flew around his neck, pulling him closer. He claimed her mouth, his tongue slid roughly against hers, tasting, teasing, searching. It was wet and messy and perfect.

Kat clung to him, unable to quell her whimpers and those sounds were gasoline poured on fire to him. His hands slid over her back, pulling her closer, stroking, kneading, and pressing her harder against his chest. She could feel the heat radiating from him, could smell his desire. He was intoxicating.

She wanted to crawl into him, to consume him from the inside just as he was doing to her. His kisses were feverish; he bit her tender lip and sucked it into the heat of his mouth before roughly melding their lips together. He stole her breath, her senses, her reason and reduced her to a quivering heap. He pulled back slightly, resting his forehead against hers.

“I love you Kat.” He said, simply.

She rubbed noses with him and replied, “I love you Rich.” She looked at him like he was the one who put the stars in the sky.

Richard scooped her up into his arms. She leaned into him and sighed happily as he carried her to their bedroom.

“You are so tiny. I’m afraid I might break you.” He said, worry creasing his brow.

“I’m not fragile,” she sniggered, “The only thing you’ve broken is my immunity to you. Corny, but true. I’m much, much stronger than I look. Please don’t treat me, or my body, like Dresden china, okay?”

“You’ll tell me if I’m hurting you?” He pleaded.

“You’ll be the first to know.” She grinned. He was big and strong and could probably snap her like a twig with little effort. But she knew the only things he’d ever use that strength for were protecting and pleasing her. Beyond a shadow of a doubt she knew her love and her body were safe with him.

She saw the enormous bulge in his trousers when he gently laid her down on the bed. She couldn’t believe how patient and restrained he was. She wanted to rip every stitch of clothing off their bodies and have him fuck her into next week. She bit her lip trying to suppress the memory of how delicious he tasted, how perfect he felt in her hands last night. She licked her lips remembering licking him.

“I thought you said it had been years …” He choked out, debilitated by the sight of what she was doing to those luscious lips of hers.

“I guess it’s like riding a bike …” She smirked up at him.

“I hope that’s not the only thing you like riding.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, sitting her up and pulling off her shirt. She wasn’t wearing a bra and he grinned appreciatively when her breasts were freed.
He trailed his fingers over the soft skin of her neck and shoulders, feeling her immediately respond to his touch. As her fine silky hairs stood on end under his caresses, he bent down and his mouth replaced his fingers. He gently kissed and nibbled on her collarbone and throat until she was writhing beneath him, her hands gripping his shoulders tight enough to leave more marks.

“Do you want me to slow down? Am I going too fast?” He asked in voice an octave lower than his usual.

Her eyes flew open wide in panic, “NO! Do NOT dare slow down.” She reached for his belt buckle slightly salivating for the treasure hiding behind too much fabric.

He swatted her hand away. “Impatient are we? Patience is a virtue so maybe now is a good time to learn it.” He enjoyed watching her lingering composure dissolve. He had a distinct advantage; no man arrived at his forties without learning how to cope with a raging erection. He’d been managing it for 30 years. He suspected that women didn’t have to handle the same frequency and level of physical agony of arousal as men did, they weren’t tortured by a painful boner multiple times a day. He was certain that he could live with the discomfort in his drawers longer than she could and so he couldn’t help an evil grin.

Richard undid the button on Kat’s jeans, slowly pulling the zipper down, smiling as she raised her hips to help him remove them. He tugged on her jeans, careful not to take her lacy purple knickers with them and she groaned in exasperation when she realized he’d left them on her. He lifted her leg and smiled while he watched her toes curl as he ran his thumb down the sole of her foot. He kissed the inside of her ankle and trailed his tongue up her calf as he slid it over his shoulder.

Kat’s legs tingled and twitched as she felt first his warm breath and then his kiss on her lacy panties. She grabbed and scrunched the sheets in frustration as his beautiful nose rubbed against her, unfortunately clothed, clit. He looked up to see that she was watching him intently, her pupils dilated, her lips parted and her breathing becoming ragged. She whined a little as he sat up, removed his jeans and tossed them aside.

He returned to her, gripping her hip with his long fingers, nails digging into her bum as he kissed and tongued below her belly button. He pinned her hips down when she tried to grind against him and he traced little swirls lower, lower until he could feel her wetness through the lace. The scent of her arousal magnified his own until the cotton of his boxer briefs was barely able to contain him.

Richard trailed his fingers along the bottom of her bum and her satiny smooth skin until his fingers rested in the centre of her panties. He felt her tremble and quiver under his hands. He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of her panties and slowly pulled them down off her hips. She gasped as he gently huffed little gusts of warm breath on her dripping, sensitive, swollen bits.

“A little eager?” His hummed against her and flicked his tongue into her warm folds, tasting her on the tip of his tongue. “Mmmm you taste like honeyed wine – you are delicious.” He spread her legs wider, opening her up to him. His deft fingers stroked and massaged her before he plunged one into her, making her shudder and sigh. His tongue made a sweep across her velvety soft, sensitive skin. He moved deeper into her, synchronizing his tongue and fingers, making her squirm under his hand. He bent his finger and rubbed little circles against that sensitive spot inside, making her moan louder. Her back arched and her hands bunched the sheets in her fists. She was on fire – heat surging behind her eyes, down her spine, coursing through her, pooling in her pelvis.

He tortured her with just enough pressure and motion to make her crazy with need but not enough for her to orgasm. How was he doing that? A kiss was enough to send her over the edge - how was he able to keep her from exploding like fireworks? She grabbed hold of his shoulder and
gripped it so tightly her fingernails made little half-moons on his skin. She could feel him smile as he sucked and flicked with his tongue. He pressed a hand down firmly on her abdomen as his fingers stroked that magical spot inside of her.

“Richard. I can’t … OH FUCK.” She held her breath for a moment before she let out a strangled cry and every muscle in her body convulsed. He gripping her hip tightly as he gusted hot breath on her swollen folds while wave after wave of spasms rippled through her. She softly keened and repeated his name over and over. He had neither seen nor felt such a glorious orgasm before in his life. She wore a beatific smile as she floated, boneless, in a fog between opacity and lucidity. He crawled up her body to fold her into his arms and kiss her tenderly.

He felt the energy and vitality return to her limbs and core before she began to stir. She soon hummed with electric excitement once again.

“My turn to make you fall apart.” She smiled up at him, cradling his face and kissing him sweetly. His heart skipped a beat as he felt her love and passion emanating from her in intense waves.

Kat continued, kissing his mouth, neck, shoulders and chest. His hands were firmly on her bum and he pulled her closer to him. She started to giggle between their kisses as she felt his erection dig into her hip. The more she laughed, the closer he pushed himself into her with an added naughty grin. He took one of her hands and placed it on the tight cotton he was straining against, gasping as she gave his balls a light squeeze. She smiled at his enthusiastic reaction.

“I love how big & strong and soft & gentle you are. I want to taste and feel every part of you.” As she spoke, her mouth continued down his body. She nuzzled the hair on his chest and licked and nibbled on his nipples, making him sigh. She trailed little kisses and licks down and down and down, nipping his soft skin as she tugged at his boxers. He was so hard he was in agony, he needed her – her mouth, her hands, her pussy … something, anything. When her small, soft hands closed around his ramrod stiff cock he thought that would be the end of him, but it wasn’t, not yet.

“What would you like?”

“Ride me.” He groaned.
New Year's Day (continued)

Chapter Summary

Quite a lot of smut

(edited January 24, 2015)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What would you like?”

“Ride me.” He groaned.

She moved up, shifting her hips and slowly lowering herself onto him. His hands tightened on her hips, trying to pull her down.

“Oh no, no, no.” She scolded, pulling his hands away and interlocked their fingers. She tormented him by going painfully slow, randomly squeezing him with her inner muscles until she finished taking every centimetre into her. She stilled for a moment, savouring the stretch and fullness of him.

He reopened his eyes to look at her. “I need to touch you Kat.”

”Mmmm … but no pushing me faster. ’kay?” She warned and grinned.

When he nodded she began to move on him, squeezing on each down-stroke.

“Oh fuck. Kat … how are you … awwww.” He moaned as his hands gripped her thighs, her back, her hips. His jaw was clenched and eyes squeezed tight, barely able to breathe.

She kept him deep inside of her, with just enough pressure and motion to drive him insane but not enough to push him over the edge. Turn about was fair play!

“Faster please please,” He pleaded. He opened his eyes to see her shake her head. Her denial of his need was cruelty incarnate, she was sadistic … and gorgeous. Tiny beads of sweat glistened like diamonds on her chest and he desperately wanted to lick them off.

“Kat … please baby … please … faster.”

She smiled as she leaned forward, altering the angle of their junction. She braced herself on his chest, kissing everywhere she could reach, and varying her movements. Richard moaned and moved his hips against hers with one hand gripping her bum and the other circling her clit.

“This is much better than riding a bicycle, don’t you think? He said.

She laughed and said, “I don’t know … some of those bumpy roads can be pretty … invigorating.”

“You wretch.” He growled and slapped her bum with a resounding smack making her eyes widen in surprise and uncertainty before they darkened into something completely different.
“Ahh Richard. Yes!” She wailed. He pressed his fingers faster against her. “Fuck me Richard. I need you to fuck me!”

He reached his arms around her, crushing her flush against him, and flipped them over. He pulled her legs up to circle his waist and grinned at the expression she wore. “Yesss.” She hissed.

He pounded into her, snapping his hips perfectly for maximum effect. When she braced herself against the headboard of the bed he clasped hands with her and revelled in the pleasure of his body sliding along hers. Every stroke was fuel on the fire, consuming both of them. He levered his body, seeking every millimetre of contact, rocking his body into hers and seeking more from her, giving all he had to give to her.

She moaned and gripped his bum, pulling him into her as deeply as possible, trying to fuse their bodies together. She buried her face in his neck and tugged on the hair curling at his nape.

“Kat, you feel fucking amazing.” He leaned back and braced on his calves, taking her with him. One hand splayed in the middle of her back, the other gripped the back of her neck, holding her exactly where he wanted her, marvelling at the intensity of the passion burning within them.

“Oh Richard … yes … right there …” She moaned, throwing her head back against his hand, her whole body tingled and shook. She leaned backwards gripping his strong arms and pushed into him harder, her head buzzing and every muscle in her body tensed.

He felt the heat and tightening in his balls, he was so close. The pain from the cramps in his legs and back dimmed. Richard knew he’d vaporise, he’d finish with the force of a cyclone, and it would be the most amazing orgasm of his life.

Kat keened his name over and over as her inner walls convulsed around him, taking him over the edge with her.

“Oh fuck Kat Yes!” He threw his arms around her, holding her as close as he could while their bodies throbbed in ecstasy. They were weightless as they smiled rapturously at each other. He stroked her back and felt little tremours continuing to course through her body. Kat tilted forward, kissing his cheeks and chin. She softly kissed his lips and stroked his cheek, leaning in to lick the droplets of sweat off his neck.

He traced the lines of her face and neck and cradled her head, drawing it to him, resting it on his chest. He hummed into her hair as held her close.

“That was …” She sighed contentedly, unable to find an adequate descriptor.

“Yeh. It was.” He chuckled deeply, “I think I pulled a hamstring.”

He tilted her face up to him, showering her with slow, lazy kisses, making her purr. They floated on the euphoria and gave over to the peaceful lassitude which claimed them. They dozed off, wrapped up in each other’s arms, and more satiated than either could ever remember.

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Richard groused when he awoke to empty arms and an empty bed. He loved falling asleep in a tangle of arms and legs and wanted to wake the same way. He climbed out of bed and trundled to the bathroom, pausing to see Kat humming and puttering away in the kitchen. When she looked up and saw him her breath caught in her throat.

“Hi.” She croaked. He was standing there in all of his 6’2” naked glory. He looked scruffy and
messy and perfect. He was heart thudding, ovary exploding, sex on legs.

He strode over to her and enveloped her in his arms. “I woke up and you weren’t there. That’s not on! Come back to bed.”

She tilted her head back to look up at him and smiled. Kat took his hand, lead him to the bedroom and gently pushed him to sitting at the edge of the bed. She kissed him lovingly, repeatedly, until their breathing quavered. He hummed his pleasure as his lips closed on hers and pulled her onto his lap, stroking the curves of her spine and pressing her firmly to him. She slid her arms around his neck, both hands pulling his head closer and tangling in the curls at his nape. Would she ever get enough of him? Would she ever be able to deny herself the bliss of this intimacy he offered? Definitively: no, she would never get enough of him.

They took time to learn how their bodies fit together, how they would react to each other’s every look; every sound; every touch. Getting used to the feel of one another took patience, trust, exploring and discovering. Richard found the places which made her sigh contentedly and those which made her wanton. Katrina found places that made him tense and tremble when her lips or hands skimmed them. He learned, the hard way, that there were different reasons her toes curled – one was pure sensual pleasure but the other one put him at risk for serious bodily injury as she flailed about trying to avoid being tickled. She found places and movements which made him moan and call her name. They learned what needed a feather light touch and that which begged rough urgency. They weren’t chasing orgasms; they were learning how to dance together. It was something of a miracle that no one got hurt.

“The kids are going to be back soon. We should probably get up and pack.” Kat yawned.

He smirked, “we could just stay here by ourselves for a few days.”

“I have tickets for Shauna—crap – I have a surprise for you back in Toronto. If it helps, I do have a bed at home you know … it’s even more comfy than this one … and I don’t have any housemates who could interrupt us!” She gave him an exaggerated wink.

Sighing, “Oh fine. Join me for a shower?”

“Really? You are superman!” She was delightfully astonished that he was ready, willing and able.

“Hi Hunny, we’re home.” Suzanne called out as the door slammed behind four happy skiers. “Hey, this place smells like sex! Did you two get out of bed at all today?”

Kat threw on Richard’s t-shirt and pajama bottoms and walked out to the living room. “Nuh uh. Bet we had more fun today than you did, nudge, nudge, wink, wink say no more, say no more.”

Suzanne groaned, “Show off! If we didn’t have to pick up the kids, I’d march Duncan into the back room and make him drop trou. I’m officially jealous. Duncan, nap on the drive home – you’re going to need it.”

Duncan shook his head and rolled his eyes. He caught Richard’s eye and gave him a “what are you gonna do?” shrug. Richard was not the sort of guy to kiss & tell, making him a titch uncomfortable with the conversation between Kat and Susanne.

Kat noticed his uneasy expression and gave him a hug, going up on tip toe to whisper in his ear “What happens at the chalet, stays at the chalet. No worries. How about that shower now?”

“Ummm. Maybe you can pack up our stuff while I take a shower and then I’ll load the car while
you take a shower? I’m beginning to see the appeal of no interrupting housemates.” Richard whispered back.

She grinned up at him. He obviously wasn’t shy or repressed in bed, he was simply private. She suspected that he was much more of a gentleman than she was a lady. She liked the idea that he would be a good influence on her. “It sounds like a perfect plan.” She paused, darting a quick look up before fidgeting with her fingers, “I – I apologize for bragging just now. From time to time, you may have to remind me that a little discretion wouldn’t be remiss.”

He frowned slightly. “Hey – look at me. You have nothing to apologize for. Don’t change who you are – not for me, not for anyone. I may be … um … private, but you know who you are and who you want to be. You were held in the shadows for far too long – I will do everything I can to make sure that never happens again.” He brushed her hair off her face and kissed her forehead. “Ehehe, hopefully I’m not too fuddy duddy for you.”

She snorted. The last thing she’d call him was boring or conservative. She wouldn’t have thought those things after their fall visit and certainly couldn’t after all they got up to that morning. “I love you RAC71. Go for your shower and I’ll pack.” As he walked away she goosed him. He whipped around with narrowed eyes and chuckled, shaking his head and wagging his finger at her.

The three couples made quick work of cleaning up the chalet and packing up their cars. Katrina was sad to leave, it had been a brilliant couple of days: great company; great food; great feels; and great sex. This was where they said ‘I love you’ for the first time, this was where he fell asleep on her – correction, in her. Happy New Year! With hugs all around, they left for home.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Kat obliges. More smut.
Kat forgot stores would be closed on their return to the city and she hadn’t done a shop before they left. After digging around in the fridge and cupboards she was able to make ham and tomato grilled cheese sandwiches along with sweet potato fries for supper. By the time they ate and unpacked their bags they were both exhausted.

“Bed?”

“Bed.”

They washed up and brushed teeth together in the ensuite bathroom. Despite being tired, they did their best to make each other laugh and had a gurgling contest, which Richard won. Crawling into bed, Kat snuggled into him, throwing an arm over his waist and a leg over his thigh. She couldn’t remember ever having felt so serene as she languidly played with the soft hairs on his chest. He was just as tranquil, absent mindedly tracing circles on her shoulder. Kat looked up at him quizzically when she felt his belly and chest rumble.

“You purr.” He said, simply.

“Purr? What? You’re insane.”

“I’m serious. It’s happened a couple of times now – you purr. There’s this weird little sound you make when you are calm and happy. The only way I can describe it is a purr and it’s adorable.”

“Oh right. Next you’ll be saying that I snore.” She huffed.

“Well, now that you mention it … you rather do. It’s not a full on snore, more like an aggravated purr, really. It’s not loud enough to keep me awake so I’ve decided it’s adorable too.” He teased.

“I aim to please!”

“G’night Katrina. Love you.”

“G’night Richard. Love you too.”

Katrina woke with a new found appreciation for baby kangaroos. Richard had securely enveloped her with his body making her feel like she was in a kanga pouch. She would have been safe in a tornado and when she shifted, his hold tightened; when she leaned into him he relaxed, but only slightly. Kangaroo or not, there was an advantage to being more than a foot shorter and half his weight … she fit perfectly inside the circle of his embrace. There was no place in the world she would rather be … except maybe on the commode – she really had to pee.
“Sweetie … Hunny … let me have just a minute.” Kat tried to wiggle her way out to no avail. "RICHARD LET GO - I’M GOING TO PEE MYSELF.”

“Huh?  What’s wrong?  Where’re you going?”  He could barely open his eyes yet but that didn’t stop him from keeping a vice like grip on Kat.

“Bathroom … quick … PUH-LEASE.”

“Come back.”

Kat was as quick as she could be, stopping for a brief moment to wash her face and brush her teeth.  She resumed her spot as Richard’s joey and quivered when he hummed his approval.

“More sleep.” He grunted and within a minute he nodded off.  The feel of his body wrapped around hers and his slow, steady breathing lulled her back to sleep too.

She awoke on her back with Richard propped up on his side, watching her.  He had been tracing patterns on her belly and thighs and she suspected that was the reason for the naughty dreams she’d had.

His warm breath whispered across her lips. He paused and rubbed noses with her with a huge grin on his face.  The caress of his breath and the heat of his hands quickened her heartbeat. Richard nudged her face upwards and kissed her, suckling her bottom lip, drawing a sigh from her.  She parted her lips and caressed his with the tip of her tongue.  He raked his teeth across her tongue, making her moan.  They explored and tasted each other’s mouths with lips, tongues and teeth.

Richard cupped her face in his hands and rubbed noses again.  Kat chuckled and pushed his hair from his brow.  She adored little things like that, as apparently did he.

“Have you ever had a butterfly kiss?”  She asked.

“No … what is a butterfly kiss?”

She took his face in her hands and turned his head so that she could blink her eyelashes on his cheek.  “That is a butterfly kiss.  What do you think?”

“I think … that you are a lunatic.”

“Maybe so … but I’m your lunatic.”

“Yes you are.”  He smiled and kissed her, hugging her close to his chest. He stroked her hair slowly and began to sing to her.

Baby, here I am  
I'm the man on the scene  
I can give you what you want  
But you gotta come home with me  
I have got some good old lovin'  
And I got some more in store  
When I get to throwin' it on you  
You gotta come back for more

Boys are things that come by the dozen  
That ain't nothin' but drugstore lovin'  
Hey little thing let me light your candle
'Cause mama I'm sure hard to handle now  
Yes, I am

Action speaks louder than words  
And I'm a man of great experience  
Take my hand don't be afraid  
I'm gonna prove every word I say  
I'm advertising love for free  
So you can place your ad with me

Hard, Hard to handle now  
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah  
You're hard to handle now  
Oh, yeah

“You’re purring.” He grinned.

“Mmmmm.” She tilted her head to look up to him and he saw tears in her eyes.

“Kat, what’s wrong? Why are you crying, Love?” He was confused.

“Hmmm?” She wiped her eyes and gave a surprised little laugh. “If you ever mention this again, I’ll make you suffer … and don’t laugh … they’re … oh, I can’t believe I’m saying this … they’re tears of joy.” She scrunched up her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see his reaction to something so unbearably, disgustingly sappy.

To his credit he didn’t laugh out loud. However, he couldn’t contain the shaking from trying to suppress it. “You know that it’s okay to say you’re happy, right?” He said, trying to sound less amused than he actually was.

“Yeh … but it’s bloody embarrassing … ooooo, she purrs, she cries when she’s happy … she’s a freak!”

“Perhaps, but I wouldn’t change you for the world. I like being able to make you purr. It is incontrovertible proof of your happiness – it’s not words, which can be chosen, or a smile, which can be pasted, or a look, which can be schooled. It’s your subconscious’ truth and that’s amazing.”

He lifted her hand up to kiss it, turned it over to kiss her palm and brought it to rest on his cheek. They gazed into each other’s eyes like two love-struck fools. Smiling and sighing and being outright nauseating in their romantic thoughts and looks.

“That was a pretty sexy song. I love Hard to Handle, and I love that you sang it more like The Commitments than Black Crowes! How’d you know?”

He grinned. “Last fall I saw that you have both of The Commitments cd’s so I went through the songs to find one that suited and learned it. Glad you like it.”

Her eyes went big and round and tears sprung up. “You did that for me? Richard …” She hugged him so tightly he thought she was close to cracking his ribs.

It was hard to kiss properly, as the two of them were grinning too broadly, making it more a clash of teeth than anything sweet or romantic.

“I did something for you too. Ready?” She asked, shyly.
He nodded, curious about what she was up to.

She took a deep breath and banished her nervousness. “it’s from Arcadia: My True Love Hath My Heart by Sir Philip Sidney.

My true-love hath my heart and I have his,
By just exchange one for the other given:
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss;
There never was a bargain better driven.
His heart in me keeps me and him in one;
My heart in him his thoughts and senses guides:
He loves my heart, for once it was his own;
I cherish his because in me it bides.
His heart his wound received from my sight;
My heart was wounded with his wounded heart;
For as from me on him his hurt did light,
So still, me thought, in me his hurt did smart:
Both equal hurt, in this change sought our bliss,
My true love hath my heart and I have his.”

“Katrina! Oh, Love.” He looked at her with tenderness and awe.

She was a little embarrassed – it was rather daunting to recite poetry to someone who did it for a living. She started to ramble, “Philip Sidney’s uncle was the first Earl of Leicester and he was the heir presumptive. Shakespeare borrowed from it for the Gloucester subplot in King Lear. Did you ever do Lear? I can’t remember.” Seeing his reaction, she was not half proud having found a beautiful poem which both illustrated her feelings and which had some small personal connection to him. She guessed she hadn’t butchered it too badly.

Kat snuggled into the crook of his neck, once again throwing an arm across his chest and a leg over his thigh which was her new favourite relaxing mode. They lay there glowy, happy and oblivious to the world. He stroked her back and she his chest quite sure that all was right with the world. Eventually they both stirred, succumbing to restlessness and basic human needs.

“I’m ravenous. I need to eat.” He said, his voice deep and rumbly in his chest.

“Oh, of course. Would you like an omelette?” She asked.

“No, thank you. I prefer the menu right here.” He waited for her to catch on.

“Huh?” She was confused until the hand that had been stroking her back travelled lower to tickle between her legs. “Oh … OH! Well, who am I to deny a starving man?” She giggled.

As he straddled her knees, Richard whispered on her lips, “I’m going to make you scream my name.”

She gasped, the sound of his gravel voiced dirty whisper sending liquid heat through her veins. All she could do was nod.

He threaded his hands through her hair and claimed her lips. He dipped deeply into her mouth, tongues dancing, caressing, encouraging each other. His fingers tangled in her hair, tugging and pulling her closer until he released her mouth, leaving her panting for air. Richard kissed along her jaw, gently nibbling and sucking on the delicate skin, making his way along her neck to one of her favourite spots near her ear. He brushed her hair from her nape and bit down on the skin just
below her hairline, sucking hard and marking her where he would be able to see it with just a swish of her hair. Richard lowered his attention to her breast, running lazy circles around it, coming close but not touching her nipple. He tightened the circles until he could run the tip of his finger around the edge of the pink peak until, finally, he rolled it firmly between his thumb and finger, making her moan and squirm.

“I love to see you like this Kat. I love to make you moan and writhe under my hands. You’re making me so hard.” Richard growled. He trailed his tongue from one peak to the other, stopping to gently blow on the dampened buds.

Her back arched off the bed and that stupid Rolling Stones song kept looping through her head “If you start me up, I’ll never stop. Give it all you got, you got to never, never, never stop.”

He continued to massage her breasts and tweak her nipples as his mouth kissed and nibbled his way down her ribs. He tried so hard to go slow, to make her crazy with need for him but his heart was racing and his legs were shaky, he wanted her as badly as he was making her need him. With every flick of his tongue, every kiss, every touch he could feel little tremours just under her skin as he electrified her body.

He looked up to her eyes while he was tracing circles around her belly button, letting her see the heat in his eyes and it took her breath away. She bit her lower lip as she watched him which made him chuckle as he shifted himself further down the bed. He traced feather light patterns on the inside of her thighs, slowly nudging them wide. He lifted both of her legs up and over his shoulders, fully opening her up to him. Richard looked up into Kat’s eyes one last time before bending down to bring his face level with the silky curls between her legs. He blew softly on her, making her moan. His hands pinned down her hips before he burrowed his face in her. His mouth was hot and firm as he licked her tender folds with his flattened tongue; sliding between her lips, circling her clit as his stubble grazed her sensitive skin, creating multiple sensations. Kat’s mind separated from her body, she was floating on a cloud of pure sensual bliss. She was convinced she would die from need when he pushed his gorgeous fingers into her, making her whimper her need out loud. He crooked his finger and found that little rough spot inside, making her keen.

“Oh fuck. RICHARD. YES.” She shouted and threaded her fingers through his hair.

Every nerve ending in Kat’s body was on sensory overload. A caress, a breath, a kiss, a touch, a sound from him made her writhe and moan. Hearing the sensual sounds she was making, and feeling her tiny twitches, he knew without a doubt that he was giving her the kind of pleasure he intended.

Richard slowly removed his finger, tickling her lips and blowing a raspberry on her bean, making her laugh. Missing his fantastic finger didn’t last long and he wasn’t gentle any longer. He gave her loud open mouth kisses, just there, just perfectly. He used the tip of his nose to rub her nub and began tongue-fucking her. She screamed his name and bunched the sheets in her clenched fists, trying to hold on. When she heard the very loud, sloppy sounds he was making she couldn’t stop herself from laughing. Trying to supress it made it worse and she was shaking already.

“Hey, stop laughing! A guy could get hurt down here! Aren’t you supposed to be moaning and calling my name???”

“With the noises you’re making? And your fingers are tickling the back of my knee … how can I help it?” she giggled.

“I was going for dirty. Maybe I can make you laugh and cum at the same time… a happygasm.” He suggested brightly. “Now, where was I?”
He sucked on the sensitive nub making her moan his name as her hips twitched. He picked up the pace of his tongue, going deeper and faster, feeling the tremours start in her centre. He replaced his tongue with his fingers again, concentrating his mouth on her clit, lightly dragging his teeth along the sides making her scrunch her eyes tightly and swear like a drunken sailor.

The tension and heat which had been pooling at the base of her spine radiated to the rest of her body. Her fingers and toes curled and flexed involuntarily as she threw her head back against the pillows, shouting his name. She barely got enough air as she panted heavily. Her heart was racing and as her legs and pelvis trembled he pulled her ass tighter to him, bringing her closer and sucking on her while he moaned.

“Oh RICHARD … don’t stop … Ahh.” All of her delicate nerves exploded in a shockwave. The pressure and tension released through her core, making her buck and shudder against him. She couldn’t breathe and saw stars behind her eyes. “Ohh yes!” She throbbed with the most exquisite contractions rocking her body.

He kissed the inside of her thighs and traced his fingers slowly over her legs, trying to soothe and calm her oversensitive body. It took a minute before she was able to breathe normally but her limbs were filled with lead. She looked at him with the most sated smile on her face and was both amused and turned on to see him look very pleased with himself as he smiled and licked his lips teasingly.

“You are delicious Kat. I want you for breakfast every day.” He waggled his eyebrows and winked at her before kissing his way back up her body. He stopped at her hip bone to mark her with a love bite, “MINE!” He said in a Neanderthal voice and pounded his chest like Tarzan, making her laugh hard enough to snort.

Lying against her side, he nuzzled into her neck, nibbling on her ear lobe and thoroughly enjoying her little shivers and the sweet, small sounds she made.

She felt his enormous erection pressing against her leg and she enthusiastically decided to make him much, much more comfortable. She tugged on his arms to pull him on top of her. Her eyes twinkled as she held his face in her hands and ducked to lick a stripe up his neck to briefly nibble on his ear. She kissed him soundly as she wrapped her legs around his hips and made an exaggerated buck up against him.

“Hey big boy, come here often?” She chuckled.

“I hope to.” He said with the eyebrow waggle she adored. “You’re ok?”

She nodded her head and grinned “more than ok but some part of you better get into some part of me or nothing will be ok.”

“My naughty, naughty girl.” He growled as he seized her lips, invaded her mouth and dueled with her tongue. He took hold of his cock and teasingly rubbed it up and down her slit, coating it with her wetness and making her moan. He pushed just the head in and paused for which he received a death stare. “A little greedy, are we?”

“Damn fucking straight. I want it all. I need you so much.” She whined.

“Is this what you need?” He grinned as he moved with agonizing slowness into her. “This?” He pinned her hips down with his hands when she tried to grind up against him. “Tsk, tsk – what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. You may not pull me down or make me go faster. And yes, this is revenge for the hell you put me through when you rode me yesterday!” He
chortled.

“Arghhhh should’ve known that would come back to bite me in the arse.  You know this could set up a sex feud … you take revenge, I take revenge … it could get messy.” She sniggered.

“I like messy!” He chuckled as he continued to press inside of her until he couldn’t go deeper.  He paused as she adjusted to the fullness of him, smiling at the look of satisfaction on her face.  He watched her as he took it out at the same languid pace that he put it in, stopping when just the tip of him was in her.

Her mouth fell open and she chewed on her lip, trying to calm herself.  He was making that impossible and the bugger knew it, he was having the time of his life torturing her.  She couldn't figure out how he had such inhuman self control, she was like a wonton fiend and he was smiling all smug and calm, delighting in her crazed need.  Surely she must be able to reduce him to a blithering idiot as he was doing to her.  Sex feud? It’s on, Buddy!

He let go of one hip and brought his hand to her face, tracing her lips with his thumb.  He was about to kiss her when her eyebrows shot up and she drew his thumb into her mouth.  She delighted in seeing his eyes go wide when she sucked and licked his thumb as she had his cock.  She had a terribly self-satisfied look on her face when he picked up the pace of his thrusts.  Kat moaned, sending vibrations up his thumb and quickening his breathing.

She moved her legs up from his hips to his waist, letting her fingers lightly scratch his sides as she wrapped herself tightly around him.  She met his every thrust, destroying his self-control and making him pound harder, faster, deeper into her.

“Oh fuck Kat.  I can’t wait … KAT.”

“Don’t wait Baby, cum in me.  I want to feel you cum in me.”

His thrusts were intense and fast and white sparks formed behind his tightly closed eyes.  He was so powerful she wondered if he could actually break her apart.  What a wonderful way to go.  He could feel the tension seize him.  His brain shut off and all he knew was the driving need which claimed him.  He moaned at the magnificent fullness and tingling which travelled outward from his balls.  He rocked and then snapped his hips with everything he had.  He could feel his essence rising up and savoured those milliseconds before he came, relishing the sensations of each spurt hitting deep within her.  He groaned, long and low when she clenched her internal muscles, milking him for every drop.  His only (semi) coherent thought was that he had shared his energy with the only woman who would ever matter.  Richard was happy through to his very core.

“Kat.  Oh Kat.” He moaned as the last twitch subsided and warm, replete feelings carried him away.  He flopped down on top of her and she held him tenderly.  She decided that him remaining inside of her after the big O and before brain cells regenerated was definitely on her top ten favourite things in the universe.  She grinned to herself as she stroked his back and kissed his neck.

He made deep rumbling sounds and tried to lift his head to kiss her but was spent.  She started to giggle at the helplessness of the most virile man she’d ever known.  She could probably draw on him with a Sharpie and he’d be unable to stop her.  Her laughter at all of the naughty things she would write was cut short – laughing had the unfortunate consequence of him flopping out of her.  She missed him immediately.  With a heavy sigh she rolled him over and slipped out of bed to use the bathroom.  She brought a warm, wet cloth and towel back to the bed and gently cleaned him up before pulling up the blankets and hopping back in to snuggle against him.

She dozed off while considering the lack of romance and sexiness of wet spots and crusty sheets
and whether or not she should buy some pretty hand towels to keep on her nightstand.

He chuckled when he woke up. She was snuggled into him as tightly as she could with her head on his chest, her arm draped across his waist and a leg slung over his thigh. She was a possessive little thing! Even in her sleep she claimed him, which was more than just fine with him. He allowed his fingers to ghost over her with gentle caresses and grinned at how she flexed her hips into him when he touched her bum. Possessive and exquisitely responsive – better than fine.

Katrina awoke to Richard stroking her arm with a feather light touch.
“G’morning.” He said.

“G’morning to you too.” She replied with a sated, sleepy smile. “Are you hungry? Would you like some breakfast? There’s cereal and eggs I think.”

“Oh, I’ve already eaten.” He said in a comically lecherous voice. “But I could be convinced to have a little snack.” With that he flipped her onto her back and started to devour her breasts. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and tugged it out as far as he could before letting it pop out, providing “sproing” sound effects. She laughed out loud and shook her head at how fascinated he was with his new toys.

“Sex and sleep or shower and tour guide Katrina?” She asked, tittering at his juvenile antics.

“Must I choose? May I not have all four?” He raised one arched eyebrow and smirked at her.

She grinned and lifted his head so she could kiss him. “Yes, but not in that order. How about tour guide now and sex later?”

“Oh alright.” He groused. “Don’t fancy there’s any chance you might tell me what’s on the agenda for today?”

She ruffled his hair, “I can’t keep any secrets from you! Brunch, skating, hot chocolate, dinner and a concert at Roy Thomson Hall. How does that sound?”

“What concert?” He asked, intrigued.

She chuckled, “Well I lied … I can keep a secret from you. This is just such a time – it’s going to be a surprise.” She kissed the top of his head and carded his hair. Wow, she loved his hair. Maybe they didn’t need to go out, maybe she could keep him in her bed and just play with his hair all afternoon.

He looked up at her with those incredible blue eyes and gave her the most heart thuddingly beautiful smile she’d ever seen. “I kind of like you.” He hugged and tickled her until she was out of breath from squirming and laughing. “Woman, you keep moving like that and there will be no brunch, no skating, no concert, just lots and lots of sex.”

She snickered, “Is that supposed to be a deterrent? If so, it’s a very, very bad one.”

“Naughty, naughty girl! Let’s follow your plans – you always have great plans!” He patted her on the bum and kissed her neck before pushing her away and jumping out of bed.

While Kat was in the shower he ducked out to Whole Foods to pick up the fixings for Coq au Vin. He had enough time to marinate the chicken in the wine with a bayleaf, peppercorns and garlic. Double checking the clock he was satisfied that it would be ready to bake when they returned from
Kat took him to **Mildred’s Temple Kitchen** for brunch and he thought they’d have to roll him out of there from eating so much delicious food. He didn’t think he could walk let alone skate but skating is what he did do. Kat took them to the outdoor rink at **The Harbourfront Centre**. He was more than a little uncertain about the whole idea, he had been roller blading before but never ice skating. He dearly hoped he’d not break anything. Kat gave him some tips and was very patient with him, she let him lean on her and held his hands while she skated backwards in front of him to encourage him. Eventually he got the hang of it and enjoyed gliding around the ice, hand in hand with her. Skating beside Lake Ontario was a great experience – another that he’d never forget. Kat had a knack for creating memories and he was glad she used her powers for good instead of evil – no doubt she could create nightmares if she set her mind to it.

After skating they went to **Soma Chocolate Maker** for the best hot chocolates Richard had tasted. He had the Mayan, she had the Gianduja and both of them had multiple mouthgasms. They shared their drinks, unable to make a decision on which they wanted most, and couldn’t pick favourites. Kat was quite pleased with herself for once again giving him excellent tourist experiences – showing off her city and her country in the best possible light.

When they returned to Katrina's house, Richard shooed her out of the kitchen and into a bath while he finished making dinner. She was always doing things for him, being nurturing to him and this was a much deserved opportunity for him to do for her. **Coq au Vin** was delicious and he knew she’d love it … and it was something he could make well which meant he wouldn’t be anxious cooking it.

He pondered life as sautéed the pancetta, shallots and mushrooms. He had been in love before and he'd, duh, had sex before. But this, this thing with Kat was completely different than anything he'd known before. It's not that she was some kind of sexual expert, in fact sometimes it seemed she didn't have a clue what she was doing, just winging it as she went along. But it was better with her than with anyone else. He'd not had any complaints in the last couple of decades, but he hadn't had the enthusiastic praise that she'd given him either. Was he better with her? If her purring was anything to go by, he suspected he was. He wondered if her love-before-sex thing had anything to do with it. It had certainly provided a trust, vulnerability and generosity that he’d never known before. Even his filthiest thoughts and most raging needs were … lighter, freer, more fun, more satisfying, maybe even more innocent. He chuckled when he admitted that sex with Kat was more open … had more curiosity. She might be small but she was a freaking dynamo.

He knew that she hadn’t had a second orgasm that morning but apparently it was ok for she made it extremely clear how pleased she was to be part of his. In the past he would have fretted over it, worried that he failed or that it would reflect badly on him. Kat didn’t keep score and the Big O wasn’t her only measure of success in the sack.

He could easily imagine her with his friends and family. He had already met some of hers and enjoyed them immensely. He pushed away the niggling thoughts of the ocean between them; that was a worry for another day. He need only think about sex, skating, chocolate, baths, concerts and sex, smirking when he realized he listed sex twice. *It was a good day to be in love.* On that note, it was high time he checked in with his bathing beauty.
Richard knocked and walked into the bathroom. Kat was submerged with her nose barely peeking out of the bubbles but her legs straight up in the air. She mustn’t have heard him because she didn’t acknowledge him and she kept singing and blowing bubbles. He didn’t think Moondance ever sounded so silly. He leaned back against the door jamb, crossed his arms and watched her antics.

*Well it’s a marvellous night for a moondance ....*

*<Blub blub bubbles and synchronized swimming legs>*

*A fantabulous night to make romance …*

*<Blub blub bubbles and synchronized swimming arms>*

*And every time I touch you, you just tremble inside ....*

*<Blub blub bubbles and synchronized swimming legs>*

*And I know how much you want me that you can’t hide …*

*<Blub blub bubbles and synchronized swimming arms and legs>*

“Brava, brava!” Richard clapped.

Kat popped up over the edge of the tub and grinned, “Oh hi, didn’t hear you come in. Come and talk to me while I soak.” She swished the bubbles around to make a bubble bikini top, a Carmen Miranda hat, and a Van Goh beard. She looked up at him and asked, “So, how is your Canadian winter vacation going? Anything on your wish list I can help with?”

Richard leaned down over the tub to pile more bubbles on top of her head, “You say the most provocative things! I may throw up in my mouth a little for saying this … but … you’ve already made all my wishes come true.”

“You have 10 seconds to remove anything that can’t get wet and then I’m pulling you into this tub with me! Anyone who says cool shit like that gets my vote for ‘Most Likely to Get Naked in the Bath with Kat’ award.”

It was just an average sized soaker tub which demanded creativity and flexibility for them to fit in it together. With awkward elbows, inconvenient knees, laughter and frustration, they managed to slosh most of the water out of the tub, and all of the need from their bodies. Kat lied back against Richard’s chest, wrapped up in his arms.

“You’re purring.” He lightly rested his open hand on her chest to enjoy the vibrations.

He could hear the smile in her voice, “If ever there was a time to purr, this would be it. I’d like to learn how to make you purr – or whatever your version of purring would be.”

“This would be it … not a noise, but a feeling. Holding you, sharing happiness, knowing that come-what-may, you’ve got my back, Jack.” He kissed the top of her head and squeezed a little tighter.

As the water chilled, they reluctantly ended their bath. After a quick shower and shampoo, they dressed and sat for dinner. Richard served roasted potatoes and frenched green beans with his Coq au Vin which elicited many foodgasms from Kat. He loved her enthusiasm for eating, she savoured every flavour, relished every bite, and was always open to new food. He smiled to himself when he considered that was her way in most things.

Having completed the washing up, Richard asked “Any chances of telling me where we’re going tonight?”
“Hmmm. Okay, sure … we’re going to see Shauna Rolston in concert at Roy Thomson Hall. She’s one of Canada’s top cellists.” She looked to see his reaction and was pleased.

“C’mere you.” Richard pulled her into his arms and sighed into her hair. Her ability to surprise him shouldn’t surprise him. It was with a guilty twinge that he silently thanked John for being such a dick and letting her go. Pushing that aside, he lifted her up and twirled her around the kitchen. Damn, she was tiny … which shouldn’t surprise him anymore either.

It was a beautiful evening: clear sky filled with stars; crisp snow underfoot; fantastic music; and even better company. Rolston performed pieces composed for her by Oskar Morowetz, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Karen Tanaka & Krzysztof Penderecki and played selections from Bach, Debussy, Dvorak, Strauss, and Shostakovich. Her playing had a uniquely blazing personality which intrigued and delighted Richard and he found that he was transported by the music, lost in musical bliss. When the concert was over he clasped Kat’s hand in his and kissed it but as they entered the aisle to leave, he felt her hand on his arm.

“You’re headed the wrong way, Sweetheart. We’re going this way.” She nodded towards the stage. He looked at her with evident confusion.

Kat took Richard through the Orchestra, up the stage steps and behind the curtain where they found Shauna speaking with her pianist. Shauna looked up and smiled as she saw Katrina walking towards her.

“Kat. I’m so glad you came. How did you like the Debussy?”

“Loved it Shauna. As usual you managed to touch my heart. I cried – twice!” Katrina gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before continuing, “Shauna Rolston I would like you to meet my –“ She paused, uncertain what to call him, eventually deciding on the safest, “- my boyfriend, Richard Armitage. Richard I’m pleased to introduce you to Shauna Rolston.”

Richard and Shauna shook hands and exchanged the customary greetings.

“Richard, Kat told me you play. Where did you study?”

His eyes widened and he took a furtive glance at Kat. “I … um … went to Pattison College in Coventry to study music, dance and theatre.”

“Coventry. That’s near Birmingham isn’t it?” She continued when he nodded. “Do you know Mark-Anthony Turnage? He was the composer for the Birmingham Symph in the 90’s. Mark-Anthony’s an incredible musician and has written several compositions for me – I played two tonight.”

“I don’t know him personally but do know of him - he’s a bit of a local hero in the arts community. It was exhilarating to see his name in the program tonight. They were beautiful pieces.” Richard said.

Shauna placed her hand in the crook of his arm, walking the stage with him. They chatted about favourite pieces, challenges facing classical music, and the impact of Rostropovich’s playing as the Berlin Wall came down.

“Richard, let’s play together.” Shauna asked suddenly.
Richard froze. He couldn’t move, didn’t breathe, couldn’t speak.

Shauna continued, ignoring Richard’s sudden discomfiture, “Thinking about Rostropovich, would you like to play Bach’s Cello Suite #1, Prelude?”

He looked to Katrina who was nodding vigourously. Richard turned to Shauna and gave a weak smile. “Certainly. Thank you.”

Shauna motioned to a chair and asked her assistant to bring her second cello for Mr. Armitage.

Richard sat and held the beautiful instrument. He ghosted fingers over the strings, testing chords and appreciated how responsive it was even without callouses on his fingers. He bowed and marvelled at the rich baritone of the lower strings and the clear singing on upper strings. He’d played a decent cello for years but had never held one as finely crafted as the one Shauna offered him. He looked at her inquiringly.

“It’s an Anne Cole. It was custom made for me twenty or so years ago.” She said fondly. “Ready?”

He nodded and they began the Prelude. Richard let go of the world around him and let the music flow into and through him. He felt, rather than heard, Shauna’s leading and it carried him away. He wasn’t aware that he had automatically continued playing the Allemande and that Shauna was listening to him with an indulgent smile.

Shauna clapped as he bowed the final notes of the Allemande. “Bravo, Richard.” She said warmly. “It’s rare, and therefore quite special, to meet someone who can get lost in the music like you do. I hope you will continue to play as long as you live. Your music is a gift to those you share it with.”

He flushed crimson. “Thank you Ms. Rolston. This has been a great pleasure.” He rose to shake her hand.

Katrina and Shauna hugged and whispered in each other's ears. Smiling as they said goodbye.

They chatted for a while longer before exchanging farewells. Richard was still gobsmacked as they drove home. “I played Bach. With Shauna Rolston. At Roy Thomson Hall. On an Anne Cole cello worth over 100 grand. How does that happen?”

Kat shrugged lightly. “I’ve been her accountant for nearly 15 years. I thought maybe we could have lunch and go to her studio but she insisted on the tickets and meeting afterwards. I’d love to take credit for it but this was really all Shauna. She’s kinda great like that. I am so happy for you, Love.”

Richard was not one prone to babbling. His face, however, rapidly spoke volumes. He held one of Kat’s hands and kept kissing it. He continued to twirl, hug and kiss her hand all the way up the walkway and into her house. She could feel him still grinning from ear to ear as they kissed goodnight and she fell to sleep.
They awoke to the seventh day of Richard’s visit with a mutual urgent need. After a quickie they showered together, taking their time with one another. They were languid with caresses, whispers and slow, easy touching rather than their usual ‘faster, harder, deeper’. She teased him that he have to give her a hickey otherwise she’d have no bruises or soreness afterwards. He was slightly appalled that their lovemaking always resulted in such things … until he saw her expression and he adopted it with a grin of his own.

Kat tried very hard to not compare Richard and John but sometimes she couldn’t help it. John would never have gone for shower sex …or even allow her to wash his back. Richard thought it was an excellent idea and one worth repeating, repeatedly. Admittedly, Richard thought everything they had gotten up to was an excellent idea worth repeating. John was a decent person when they met, he was just not the man for her nor she the woman for him. It was a shame to have wasted so much of their lives struggling against each other’s basic natures. She had loved John and was willing to change for him to make that love work, which was a mistake – for love to work, he should have accepted her for who she was rather than need her to change. How could she apply that wisdom to Richard? Was there something she was unconsciously changing for him? She didn’t think so but would try to be self-aware.

Giving her head a shake, she brought herself back to the present. “Are you up for more outdoor, stereotypical Canadian winter fun?”

“Absolutely. You haven’t steered me wrong yet. Anything you recommend!”

“Ooooo. Anything? You ought to be careful handing out blank cheques like that!” She winked at him. “Brunch, tobogganing, a Maple Leafs hockey game and here for homemade calzones. How does that sound?”

With a chuckle he said, “Very Canadian. Can we stop at Soma for more hot chocolate? And will you teach me the basics about hockey so that I understand what we’re watching?”

She was aghast. “Do you mean to tell me that you don’t know the game at all? Where have you been for your entire life? Under a rock? Hockey is … well … it’s The Game. I don’t know … I just don’t know if I can continue to see you … this has come as a terrible shock …” She blew out an exaggerated sigh.

“What if I promise to be the best new hockey fan ever? Umm … just for curiosity sake, do you know football?”

“Promises, promises. I know football – err, soccer – but I don’t follow it. It’s like hockey without the skates, ice, speed, checking and excitement. A bunch of guys running about trying to kick a ball into a net… which, by the way, is far more exciting when it’s a bunch of guys skating fast, trying to shoot a puck into a net at 100 miles per hour and knock the crap out of anyone who gets in their way. Hmmm, maybe I just gave you the condensed primer.”
He feigned mortal wounding at her dismissal of his favourite sport. All of the way to Sadie’s Diner for brunch he tried to convince her of the superiority of football as the ultimate in human sports. She bought brunch but she wasn’t buying what he was selling – soccer couldn’t hold a candle to hockey. Katrina had the Chili Sin Carne and Richard chose the Huevos Rancheros, sharing with each other as had become their habit. All through the meal she gave him patronizing nods and ‘there, there, dear’ pats on his hand. Oh the poor deluded fool. Once he saw a live hockey game, soccer would pale in comparison and he’d be wrecked for life. She had a very treacherous grin at the thought of him trying to explain the superiority of hockey to his friends back home.

After brunch they made their way to Lithuania Park, arguably the best tobogganing hill in Toronto. Richard had been sledding as a child but didn’t have any adrenalin packed memories attached to the activity. He was very glad he brought his ski gear along, it was getting quite the workout on this trip. The view from the top of the hill was lovely, overlooking a nice area of the city. He noted that the run had a slight curve at the bottom so he’d have to steer his sled and not just fly down the hill willy nilly. Kat borrowed a selection of equipment for them to use, not knowing which type of sled he’d prefer. She had a Zipfy Freestyle Mini Luge, a Yamaha Intro Snow Bike, a Bradley Heavy Duty Snow Tube and an old fashioned wooden toboggan. After two hours, he came to the conclusion that tobogganing was far more enjoyable than he previously thought possible. He had a tough time on the Zipfy because of his long legs, but it was still a hell of a lot of fun. The Yamaha was fast and the easiest to steer. The Tube was crazy out of control, spinning and flying over the snow. If he had to choose a favourite it would have been the Woodie. It was slower, tough to control, heavy to carry back up the hill … and it had Kat sitting between his legs, hooting and laughing all the way and smooching the daylights out of him at the bottom of the hill. Yes, tobogganing was much better than he remembered.

They stopped at Soma Chocolate for another hot chocolate and to pick up treats for Katrina’s nieces and nephews. They made a Norman Rockwell picture sitting there with rosy cheeks, sipping hot chocolate and grinning like little kids.

“My arse is going to be black and blue after those last bumps. You’re going to have to take it easy on me.” He winked at her.

“Oh Darlin’, I’ll take it anyway I can get it.” She said in her best Mae West.

“I love that we’re sitting here making innuendos like a couple of teenagers. It feels like someone is going to come along, smack the back of my head and say ‘grow up’.” He shook his head and rolled his eyes at her.

Katrina smirked. “I know, right!? Here we are grown up, mature old fogeys and yet I’m positively giddy … like a kid at Christmas. It’s hard to reconcile how I feel to who I am.” She frowned a little as she took another sip of her drink.

“Maybe how we feel is who we are too. You’re still Katrina, I’m still Richard. You are the same person who emailed me 10,000,000 times … the same owner of her own firm … the same Kat who makes fart jokes … the same person who horsed around with her Grandpa. But now there’s … more. Now we’ve got someone of our very own to share it all with. You don’t have to be serious all the time, you don’t have to be anything you don’t want to be.” He paused, “You know we are allowed to be happy, right?!”

“Of course I know we can be happy. It’s just … I don’t know how to explain it … I’ve had to be responsible for so much for so long, it feels odd to be so … free. There’s this incredible lightness of being which feels foreign. I am more like the woman I was in university than the woman I’ve
become. I was, as you dubbed it, a free spirit but she had to grow up. Can I be that person and still run my own firm, do my Hospice stuff, manage all of the serious grown up things that are on my plate? And which version of me are you in love with?” She sat, eyes cast down, embarrassed and frustrated by the random insecurities assailing her out of the blue.

“Can there be only version of you? I rather prefer the whole package … serious, ridiculous, outgoing, introverted, calm, insane, graceful, a wreck … every part has its time. I don’t think you need to pick just one.” Richard took her hand in his, gently massaging it with his thumb. He smiled as he saw her head shoot up and her eyes widen with the contact. Her responsiveness gave him a tingle up his spine.

“Thank you for that. Not sure what came over me – giddy one minute and worried the next. You’re right of course: it would be horrible for sex starved Kat to do the seminar at Laurier University.” She smirked.

“Damn right! Sexy Kat only comes out to play with ME – got it!!” He gave her his best smoulder which had the desired effect. He could hear her breath hitch and chuckled as one arched eyebrow shot up.

“The game’s not until 7. Should we pick up our groceries and head home?” She was all but leering at him.

“Let’s.”

They finished their chocolate drinks and made their way to Zito’s for their dinner ingredients. They had the best raw pizza dough and store made sauces Kat found anywhere and she wouldn’t consider making calzones without them. They combed the aisles looking for tasty and unusual things to add to their dinner.

Katrina made Richard gag with some of her suggestions. She showed him everything from maggotty cheese to offal to brains. She was too busy laughing at Richard’s reactions to consider the disgusting items she was pointing to, otherwise she would have gagged too. They settled with semi-traditional pizza toppings to fill their calzones even though Richard vowed never to eat again.

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“I was thinking about making a couple of little ones.” Kat called from the kitchen.

“WHAT?” He dropped what he was doing and stood in the kitchen doorway. “Little ones? Um …?"

“Yeh, little calzones so we can have different flavour combos. Why are you so pale?” She walked over to feel his forehead for a temperature, but didn’t find one.

Richard looked decidedly embarrassed and shrugged. “Oh, yeh. Little calzones. Yeh, that sounds like a great idea. C’mere, you.” He pulled her into a hug, enveloping her tiny frame with his huge one. He loved the way it felt when she was wrapped up in his arms. He was relieved that she wasn’t asking to make babies. “Hey, wanna snog?”

“Mmm. Yes please!” She lifted her face to look up at him, unable to disguise her elation.

Resting his hands on her hips, he looked down to her with that mixture of affection and mischief she had come to love. She felt a quiver run through her when his gaze dropped to her lips and his tongue fleetingly snaked out to moisten his own. When he met her eyes again she was transfixed.
by the blue of his. She didn’t usually pay much attention to his beauty, often forgetting that physically, he was her ideal of perfection. However when he was standing so close, holding her, gazing into her as if he could see directly to her soul, she couldn’t help but recognize how phenomenally handsome he was. He took her breath away.

Richard gently swept the hair from her brow, traced her eyebrow and smiled at the flutter of her eyelashes against his hand. Oh, those silly butterfly kisses. He felt every fibre of his being lift with the surety of her love and passion for him. He held her face lightly between his hands and caressed her with his thumb, softly skimming over her lips and making her breath catch. Those moments before he kissed her stood outside of time – they were ethereal and sublimely intimate.

He loved everything about kissing her. He loved the little caresses, the fingers curling in hair, the warmth, the taste, the silent reassurances, the sensations of tongues dancing together, the long gazes, the blissful smiles, the little pecks, the forehead & cheek kisses, the comfortable silence, the nose bumps, the way their breathing changed, the silent vow of unconditional love, the passion and the complete intimacy of it all.

She shared his lazy, lop-sided grin as she considered all of the man before her. She was in awe of him – he was stunning inside and out. She admired his character and was stirred by his physicality. He was a genuinely nice man with a face, arms, legs, butt, and voice which could reduce her to a mewling mess.

Richard dipped his head, ghosting his lips across hers. He felt a flutter move through her as he sunk into the deliciousness of her warm lips. She tasted like chocolate and honey and sunshine. He pulled back slowly to look into her eyes and she sighed. That sigh was her unique blend of happiness, desire and love; it was all for him and it sent his soul soaring. If he could only hear one sound for the rest of his life, he would choose her kissing sigh ... or maybe her purr ... or ... he couldn't chose. He wanted both.

His lips rejoined hers softly, slowly becoming firmer and more insistent. The sweetness and virtuous beginnings of their kiss grew to something more distinctive and decidedly less chaste. Thirst and hunger made themselves known, darkening eyes and altering their breathing. The taste and scent of her was alive on his senses. He pulled her closer to him and revelled in the warm, yielding feeling of her body against his. To love and be loved so unconditionally added dimensions to every touch, every sensation, leaving him with a feeling of fulfillment, bar none. It didn’t matter how many times they’d made love, this kissing would always be a special world unto itself, leaving him light headed and happy down to his core.

He lifted Kat up onto the counter, enjoying how her new height changed the angle of their embrace and kissing. She sat on the edge of the counter with her legs wrapped around his waist and her arms around his back. From the very first time he’d kissed her she was overwhelmed by her body’s response to him. To be held and kissed by him brought her to peaks of arousal and satisfaction she’d never known or thought possible. Feeling his muscles flex and ripple under her fingers while their lips and tongues tangoed culminated in a flood of pleasure which undulated from her core throughout her entire body.

Her head dropped to his shoulder as she floated back to earth. She sighed again, but this one spoke of gratification, making him chuckle. “You did that on purpose.” She happily accused.

“Maybe,” he grinned as he gave her a peck on her forehead, “are you complaining?”

“Not even a little bit. You’re quite the amazing snogger. How’d I get so blessed?” She grinned while she nuzzled into his shoulder and played with the curls at the nape of his neck. She could have stayed right in that spot forever, twiddling with his hair while he stroked her back and kissed
“Pure luck I guess,” he chuckled and stroked her hair.

They snuggled together, teasing and joking and murmuring their affection for one another.

“Does it bother you how short I am?” She asked.

Richard barely considered her question before smirking, “Don’t be silly, of course it does. You’re a bit of a liability. I’ll suffer through though – I’m generous like that.”

She swatted him and tugged at his chin to look at her. “C’mon … I’m more than a foot shorter than you. Does it bug you? There’s not much I can do about it other than buy really high heels and stand on a lot of steps …”

He chuckled, “It doesn’t bother me in the least. You always find a way to distract me so that I have no idea how tall we are … or aren’t, in your case, haha. There have been a couple of times when it might have been more convenient if we were closer in height but there have also been many times when I’ve loved being so much bigger than you. Are you … concerned about it?”

“No, not really. We always manage to … um … compensate. I was just remembering some old interviews you’d done and wondered if it was a sore spot for you. Dancing and the old missionary position are a little awkward but other than that, personally I love it. Is that weird?” she asked.

He grinned, “Are you asking me if I think you are weird? This is not going to end well …”

Katrina made an exaggerated indignant huff and bit his neck. “That was rhetorical!” She grinned as she kissed the spot she’d bitten. “Now, time to make dinner or we’ll be late for the game. And we can NOT be late for the game!”

He groaned. “I’d much rather stay home and mess around rather than sit in a cold arena watching a sport I know nothing about. However, I’ll take one for the team because I am simply that nice.” She rolled her eyes and shoved him away.

They worked together to prepare four mini calzones and Kat gave him the run-down of hockey. She was right when she said the goal of the game was similar to football and he felt more confident that he’d be able to follow the sport. She was spirited in her description of the teams which were playing. Her beloved Toronto Maple Leafs hadn’t won the championship Stanley Cup in nearly 50 years but that didn’t dull her enthusiasm or support for them. The opposing team would be the Montreal Canadians (Habs) – the most heinous team on the planet according to all Leafs fans. She warned him that there would be rowdy competition and he had to choose sides before they left the house … not that he had a real choice if he knew what was good for him.

They enjoyed their dinner of calzones, salads and a bottle of Valpolicella. Kat made antipasto and Greek calzones while Richard had chosen to make Caprese and Hawaiian pizza pies. Katrina added herbs and spices to Zito’s amazing tomato sauce to make a delicious pizza dipping sauce. They shared each pie and were overstuffed when they finished.

Richard opened the gift which Kat gave him to find a vintage look Leafs home jersey with Bower 1 on the back. The gift bag also included a Leafs long sleeve thermal shirt and scarf. Apparently Kat had a thing for Johnny Bower who was, in her estimation, ‘the greatest goalie of all time’. She grinned as she pulled out her own jersey, scarf and temporary tattoos.

They made their way to The Air Canada Centre, home ice of the Leafs. Katrina upgraded her seats with the help of a scalper bringing them closer to the action. The atmosphere in the ACC
was electric before the game began because of the long standing rivalry between the Leafs and Habs. It was going to be a great game and Kat was excited for it to begin. She reviewed rules of icing, off sides, checking and penalties with Richard who quickly grasped them all.

The crowd cheered, chanted and sang during the game as the Leafs out skated, out shot, and out played the Habs taking the lead early on. Trina was so involved in the game she forgot that Richard was there in any capacity other than a fellow fan who’s energy was required to boost her beloved Leafs. He chuckled when the Habs scored and she had tears in her eyes. Calm, cool, collected Katrina who was such a meticulous accountant and adventurer was an emotional wreck during the hockey game. He found her enthusiasm contagious and by the last 5 minutes of the third period, he was on his feet and shouting along with the rest of the fans. Any victory would have been sweet, but Toronto winning 5 to 1 against Montreal was apparently nearly as good as winning the Stanley Cup. The fans went wild, shouting and hugging and hollering and singing.

As they waited for the arena to empty, Kat sent several text messages. Richard laughed when he saw they fell into two types. The first said “Suck it! 5:1 for the good guys” and the second said “The angels are singing 5:1 for our boys”. It was clear which of her friends were Leafs fans and which weren’t as she snorted her way through her contacts. She was extraordinarily animated all the way home, recapping every goal, referee call, penalty, power-play and save. He and his mates weren’t much different after a Leicester football match so he understood her mania and, while it would never replace football for him, Richard could appreciate how Kat could become so attached to hockey.

As soon as they walked in the door of her house, Katrina threw down her purse and jumped up onto Richard, wildly kissing him as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He laughed as he grasped her bum and met her wet, sloppy kisses with his own. She tugged and pulled at his coat and hers, trying not to fall as he stumbled to the living room. He fell backwards onto the couch with Kat landing on top of him, groaning and struggling to shed their coats and jerseys. They kissed and groped, making every kind of messy sound imaginable while refusing to break their lip lock. He fumbled with her belt and zipper and tried to tug her jeans down without much success because of the way she was straddling him. Kat grunted and pulled one leg out of her jeans and nickers at the same time Richard started pulling down his own. He had only pulled his jeans as far as his knees when Kat complained, clearly distressed that he was taking too long with his clothes. She felt his fabulous erection pressing into her leg and wanted access as soon as possible. She pushed his hands away to peel down his jeans and returned to straddling him. Without ceremony or warning she grabbed his swollen shaft and virtually impaled herself on him.

“Ooof,” he groaned, taken by surprise at the rough and urgent way she took him. She rolled her hips and rode him with a ferocity he had no idea she possessed. Kat grabbed his hand and pushed it to her clit, demanding his assistance in pushing her over the edge. Within seconds she was shouting as her orgasm exploded within her, making her see stars, scream his name and almost lose consciousness. Between the way she was clenching him, her filthy sounds and the way she continued to grind her hips he came with a shout and gripped her waist so tightly he surely left bruises, apparently a trademark in their lovemaking.

“What the hell was that?” He laughed.

“Victory sex?” She snickered back as she inspected his swollen lips. She was mildly concerned that she’d hurt him but was still enjoying the endorphins and adrenalin too much to be completely coherent.

He asked, “What would have happened if they’d lost?”
“Sympathy sex I think,” she said as she snuggled down into him and nuzzled into her favourite spot between his neck and shoulder. “Victory’s better though.”

He had no complaints and would take her word for it. He reached under her t-shirt to stroke her back and smiled to himself when he felt her purr. He dozed off only to awake moments later to her nibbling and kissing his neck. She smiled up at him when she felt him begin to stir.

“Bedtime?” He asked.

She agreed and carefully climbed off of him. She held out her hand to help him up and they both fell back down onto the couch as he tripped over his jeans, making both of them laugh. After another attempt, they were able to waddle their way to bed and collapsed into its cushiony softness with goofy grins on their faces.

They were no longer in any rush, taking their time to be gentle and exquisitely thorough. They had all night for kissing, tickling, nibbling, massaging, tasting, nipping, licking, caressing, holding, murmuring, smiling and loving each other. Their lovemaking was languid and sweet leaving them thoroughly contented, falling asleep in each other’s arms, satiated and happy.
Richard awoke with Katrina wrapped snuggly in his arms. Having her naked body pressed into his was one of the loveliest feelings in the world. She was soft, warm, and silky and he couldn’t get enough of her; he could simply go on holding her forever. He loved the way she smelled – like cinnamon, chocolate, ginger, a lot like sex and with only a hint of the sleep stinkies. Which reminded him to have a little sniff on himself and he groaned. Why did some people have to smell so bad in the morning? He would have to make sure she didn’t die from an Armitage Armpit. He’d sneak off to the shower before she got up, that would solve the problem.

He had been in love and he’d had great sex before but nothing prepared him for the overwhelming depth of physical cravings and emotional joy he’d found in Katrina. He smirked when he considered how exceptionally sappy he was becoming. Not that there was anything wrong with finding true love, he just didn’t want his teeth to fall out from an overdose of sugary sweet fluff. It was ironic that he’d teased his friends for being love-sick puppies when, at the ripe old age of 43, he’d become one himself. 

Wasn’t that nonsense for teenagers? Apparently not. With her he felt light headed, had bloody heart palpitations, was happier and more optimistic than he could remember and was perpetually aroused. Lordy, what she did to him.

Katrina stirred when he kissed the top of her head. She smooched his arm and wriggled into him, making that uniquely Kat sound which gave him tingles down his spine. The combination of the wiggling, the feel & smell of her and the romantic notions prancing about in his head created a decidedly physical reaction. Love and desire flowed through him in equal measures, getting him uncomfortably hard. That pending shower might have to take care of more than just morning stank.

Katrina awoke doing another good impression of a joey. She was snuggled so deeply and tightly in Richard’s arms that there was no way either monsters or bad weather could harm her. She revelled in the strength of his muscles; the curly hairs on his arms; his velvety skin; and the iron clad grip in which he held her. It was odd to think that she hadn’t always woken in his perfect embrace. In less than a week he had become her new normal and it was delicious.

He smelled like love – hints of woods, leather, faded traces of his cologne and lots of sex with an understandable trace of morning funk. She wriggled into him, luxuriating in the textures, scents and warmth surrounding her. This was what all of the poets, musicians and authors had been going on about – the sort of depth and breadth of her love for him was the muse for all of the love-struck art created over the centuries. She tipped her head to kiss the arm wrapped around her chest. It was odd to think that she hadn’t always woken in his perfect embrace. In less than a week he had become her new normal and it was delicious.

“G’morning,” she mumbled as she cuddled into him, “Love you.” Kat rolled over so that she could hug him back and chuckled, “Is that an anaconda in our bed or are you just glad to see me?” She was crafty in making sure his nose wasn’t assailed by her oral ‘perfume’. Between her breath and her sleep-stink, she felt as sexy as Jabba the Hut. Shower and mouthwash were top
priorities. Then she could think about more pleasant things like trouser snakes.

“Both. My anaconda and I are both glad to see you.” He made a few silly hip thrusts which elicited a giggle from her.

“All righty then, good to know. How does your anaconda feel about joining me for a shower?”

“He loves water. Let’s go.” He said in a low, naughty voice as he scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom. He took great delight in making her squeal as she grabbed his bum.

Setting her down, he tried to kiss her but she ducked. “Love you dearly but there will be no kissing until I’ve had some intimate time with my toothbrush.” She gave him a mock stern looked and pushed him away. He made a big deal of looking wounded but shrugged and brushed his own teeth.

Once again she regretted not having in-floor heating installed in the bathroom when she renovated. It could be bloody cold and that morning was a prime example. Otherwise, it was the bathroom of her dreams. The large glassed in shower enclosure had jets for full body bathing, a rain nozzle, a powerful hand held unit, and a bench. Normally she was glad for the bench because it was so useful when shaving her legs, but she was certain it would also be convenient when showering with a certain sexy someone.

They finished brushing their teeth and held another gargling contest. The mouth wash burned and Kat teared up trying not to admit defeat. No use, she couldn’t tolerate it a second longer and spit it out, grabbing a glass of water to wash out the vile liquid. Richard followed suit and chortled, “Maybe we could find something milder for you to practise with,” as he waggled his eyebrows looking decidedly puerile.

“Well you know what they say, ‘practice makes perfect’ and I’d hate to lose every time.” Katrina traced a light line from his bottom lip down to his thigh before taking his hand and leading him into the shower. The bathroom might be cold but she wasn’t!

As soon as the shower door was closed Richard leaned down as if to kiss her but paused, looking into her eyes. She smiled and caressed his brow. He really was an amazing and sexy man; even with morning-after hair and more stubble than usual, he was freaking gorgeous. Everything about his face and body kept hers at a perpetual low hum. She did a quick list of his qualities and quirks. He was simply lovely inside and out with just enough nerd thrown in for good measure. Her smile broadened as she thought about the geeky moments, making it very hard to pucker up for that long awaited fresh breathed kiss.

“What are you grinning at? You’re not taking the piss for something are you?” He arched one eyebrow and tried to look disapproving which converted her smile to a full blown laugh.

“Just enjoying all of your idiosyncrasies. Did you know that your fans think you’re adorkable? Seems apt to me.” She teased. She turned on the hot water to warm the pipes before twisting the shower controls and screamed as sprinkles of frigid water dropped from the rain shower head above them. The two of them shouted and tried to turn off the water, banging into each other, laughing and swearing a blue streak.

“I think that was my fault. I can’t remember turning if off after I showered yesterday.” Richard ground out from between chattering teeth. The bathroom was chilly to start with and the arctic water which fell on them certainly didn’t help matters.

Kat gave him a saucy look. “Well, it looks like you’ve been adequately punished for your crime.”
When Richard looked confused she continued with a snort, “Your anaconda looks more like an inch worm. I guess what they say about shrinkage is true.”

“Oh very nice, thanks for that! Maybe you should warm me up and reverse the process?” He opened his arms wide, inviting her in for a dirty hug which she gladly accepted as soon as she adjusted the temperature controls and turned the rain shower head back on.

Warm water bounced off the tiles, warming them up nicely as Kat wrapped her arms around Richard’s waist and hugged him tight. She was distracted by the feel of muscle rippling under skin, by the little twitches when her fingers grazed his lower back, and by the tickle of his curly hair against her body. She sighed happily as she laid her head against his chest.

“What’s that for?” He asked as he stroked her hair.

“I forget how big you are –“

“Why thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.” He said in a ridiculous Elvis-ish sort of voice. “Guess you should take back the inch worm comment, yeah?”

She pinched his arse and giggled, “Tall! I meant tall. Not big. Just tall. Freakishly tall. You know that your wiener is poking my belly button, right? That makes you bizarrely tall.”

“You little wretch. You know bloody well that you can’t stop thinking about how big I am! Even when you mean to say something else, it just slips out. I am so big it’s always on your mind. Admit it, you love how big I am.” He chortled and thrust his hips against her belly for emphasis.

“Did you just say ‘it just slips out’? Oh my darling, you make this too easy - it’s like taking candy from a baby! Now shut up and kiss me you fool.” She went up on tip toe to bring her face closer to his.

Richard smirked and shook his head, “No. No I don’t think so. You’ve insulted my manhood – three times – and wounded my pride. No, no kisses for you. You are going to have to apologize … like you mean it.” He grinned at the funny little mewling sounds she made as he grazed the side of her breast and caressed her back.

“Sorry.” She quivered as his fingers drew little patterns along her sides and just above her bum. His one hand spanned nearly the entire width of her lower back and every time he moved his fingers many nerves sang and danced at once. Oh those fingers – long, strong and slightly roughened by his cello - they tickled, teased, soothed and made her crazy with need.

“Pffft. If that’s your idea of an apology, you’ve got a lot to learn. Now, try again and put a little effort into it this time.”

“I’m really sorry?” She was distracted by the way his hands massaged her breasts and played with her nipples. His sultry baritone bounced off the shower walls, surrounding her with his velvety tones, lulling and pulling simultaneously. Coherent thinking was no longer on the menu for Kat. Her senses were all that mattered: the sight, smell, sound, taste, and feel of him were the only things on her mind.

With a smug grin he said, “My dear you’re going to have to do much, much better than that.” He stooped down to take one dusky peak between his lips, flicking it with his tongue and sucking on it hard enough to draw a moan from her.

Kat wanted more of him, more of this, more of everything. She automatically arched her back and whacked her head against the wall.
“Youch!” She squeaked. Her elbow cracked him on the nose as her hand flew to check for a goose egg on her skull.

“Bloody hell.” Richard groused. “You ok?” He asked as he pinched his nose, hoping it wouldn’t bleed. His watering eyes had nothing to do with the rainforest nozzle overhead.

Kate chuckled, “Yeah, I’m fine. It was just a shock, that’s all. Did I hurt you? I think I felt a crack …”

“If you break it, you buy it. That’s what Gran always said.” He wriggled his nose and face about, checking for any real damage, finding none. He teased, “This nose is my bread and butter – you’d better hope you’ve not wrecked it or there is a whole legion who will be out for your blood!”

She did her best impression of The Scream and laughed as she threw her arms around him, “Protect me, protect me. I didn’t mean to harm The Nose, honestly I didn’t. Don’t let them hurt me – I’ll do anything, anything you want.” Simpering, she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“Anything?” He gave her the head tilted, one arched eyebrow, slight smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth look which she said made him look like a smouldering, demented sex maniac.

“Anything!” She said, trying to look as innocent and pleading as possible.

He leaned down to whisper into to her ear but instead of sweet nothings, he tickled her. It was a proper tickling which made her scream and thrash and it nearly knocked the two of them over.

“I was right, you are a menace! I was just going to ask if you’d like to dance and you attack me by way of a spastic seizure. And don’t think I’ve forgotten that you owe me an apology … and that you promised to do anything I want.” He smirked as he held out his hand to dance.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes, “There isn’t any music – how are we going to dance without music?”

He hummed Moondance, which he assumed was a favourite as it kept popping up. He pulled her into his arms and twirled her around and around, making her dizzy and gigglily. The shower was big enough for two but not big enough for elaborate dancing so he led her in The Middle School Shuffle, rotating in one spot. He made her squeak when he pinched her bum and she returned the favour by giving him a two-cheek goosing.

He stopped and looked down at her for a moment, “I really fucking love you, you know.”

“That’s convenient cuz I really fucking love you too.” Kat grinned and hugged him tightly.

He shook his head, “No. I mean it. Not just sex and having a laugh and dancing in the shower. I really, really love you.”

She could feel the happy-tears threatening to reappear. “Richard I might be high on whatever crazy endorphins you flood me with, but that’s not only what’s in my heart. You matter in every way possible. I care about you – about your hopes and dreams, about you, about us, about our future. I don’t just love you, I LOVE you. I am really, really shitty at saying this properly. Remember that poem by Sir Phillip Yancy - My true-love hath my heart and I have his? That’s what I mean.” She took his hand and placed it over her heart. “It’s not just the boobs that are for you, it’s what’s under them too.” She snickered at his expression.

“Wow, you mean your ribs and lungs are for me too? No one has ever offered their ribs to me before. That’s either really amazing … or really creepy.” He grinned as he traced his fingers over
her breast, raising goosebumps and making her breath hitch.

“Oh, you know me. Have a rib, a lung, an ankle, a hand, my whole heart too … hey that reminds me of a song.

♫ Wise men say only fools rush in
But I can’t help falling in love with you
Like a river flows surely to the sea
Darling so it goes
Some things are mean to be
Take my hand, take my whole life too
For I can’t help falling in love with you ♫

“This must be love because otherwise there is no way anything so dreadful could sound so lovely. I was in Cats and you, my darling, put wounded cats to shame.” He teased as he kissed her wet forehead and brushed soggy bangs from her eyes.

Katrina and Richard danced and mocked each other, going to any length to make the other laugh. Kat told Richard silly penis jokes as she began washing his body with his heavenly scented body wash. She bade him sit on the shower bench so that she could reach his upper body properly otherwise he’d have gone unwashed from the shoulders up.

As she massaged his neck and shoulders with soapy hands, she asked “What do you call an erection when listening to hymns?” His grunt made it clear he didn’t know, and probably didn’t care. “An organ boner.” She giggled as he groaned. “Thank you folks, I’m here all night. I’ve got a million of them.”

Kat continued washing down his back and asked, “What do you get when you cross a penis and a potato?” Again she received a non-committal rumble. “A dicktator.” She slapped her knee and laughed at her own comic genius – a sentiment that wasn’t widely shared in the shower if his groan was any indication.

“Ok, one more, “What do you call a guy who cries while he masturbates?” Richard shook his head and closed his eyes, hoping to ward off the answer but knowing he would have to endure her deficient sense of humour.

“A tear jerker. Bwa ha ha ha. That’s a good one. I think it’s my favourite. Tear jerker, hahaha.”

He groaned longer than was necessary and shook his head, thinking of ways to get her to stop telling jokes. They all involved some part of his body in her mouth. Any part would do as long as she stopped with the wretched penis riddles. Until then he’d simply enjoy the soothing massage she was giving him under the guise of washing his back. She was working out every knot and bit of tension from his body and it felt glorious.

She was still tittering to herself as she massaged his scalp and washed his hair. The tumbled limestone tiles of her shower never looked as good as it did with him in it. She smiled to herself as she felt his body go loose and wobbly with total relaxation. Richard made a peculiar sound rather like a humming cross between a yak and low throatied lion chatter.

She had found his ‘purr’ and it was charming although he’d probably not think so. She’d have to record it sometime to play back for him and watch his reaction. Those little sounds of happiness were indeed addictive just as he’d said hers were and she wanted to make them continue indefinitely.
Kat used the hand held nozzle to carefully rinse the bubbles from his head and torso. He hummed his pleasure and leaned back against her with a sigh. Still at his back she draped her arms over his shoulders and embraced him. With little fluttety kisses she trailed from his nape down to his shoulders.

“You’re yummy even when you taste mostly like soap. How do you do that?” She nibbled and suckled on his earlobe, grinning when he moaned deep and low.

Richard was no longer feeling languid or patient. She was driving him mad, as per usual, and he wasn’t going to be a passive participant any longer. His voice broke when he reached to seize her and bring her onto his lap, “C’mer. I need to see you.” He flipped her around and misjudged her landing, bringing her onto him with an abrupt plunk and knocking noggins when he tried to kiss her.

She laughed while rubbing her forehead and taunted him, “Ow! That’s the second time this morning that you’ve nearly given me a concussion. What’s next? A punctured lung? A dislocated shoulder? You’re a brute Armitage!”

“It’s this damn shower, it’s a death trap. Let’s get out of here and jump into your nice, safe bed where no one gets hurt.” He growled, rubbing his head too.

She pushed down on his shoulders as he tried to rise, “Oh no you don’t! I washed your back, now you wash mine. And I want the full service deal – massage, massage and more massage.” She snickered at the scowl on his face, taking his hand and drawing him down to the floor of the shower so he could sit comfortably behind her.

“If you masturbate on a plane do they charge you with high-jacking?” She laughed at her own joke and he rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Penises are no laughing matter, they have it rough, they could use a hand now and then.” Richard smirked.

"Poor fella, it must be hard for him.”

"Yeh, he takes a beating every day." He waggled his eyebrows.

"I feel bad for him, he has to hang around two nuts all the time." \n
"Mmm. I agree. And everything seems to rub him the wrong way.”

"It’s tough being a working stiff." She commiserated.

"He’s a lot like Porter, you put a bag over his head, shove him in a dark room and whack him against the wall until he pukes." He sniggered a little at his own pun. "Now, I will have to stop you from talking if you keep up with those wretched jokes! And don’t think I won’t!” He dropped his hands from her neck and tickled her sides without mercy.

Kat squealed and squirmed and, unfortunately, drove her elbow into his groin in a thrashing effort to evade his brutal tickle fingers. With a guttural “Ooof!” he clutched his balls and collapsed onto her back. The pain was so intense he could hear it roaring in his ears. Tears were streaming from his eyes as Kat turned around to face him. While it may not have been logical or empathetic, there was something inherently funny about a guy getting knocked in the nuts. "Hey what did the left nut say to the right nut?” She shook with inappropriate giggles, “Don’t talk to the guy in the middle, he’s a dick.”
He looked at her as though he wished she’d melt in a vat of acid. If you could survive being run over by a steam roller, with every tissue in your body squeezed and crushed, that’s how his poor, abused testicles felt. The pain had dulled to a 12 out of 10 on the agony scale, which was quite an improvement from the 20 out of 10 where it started.

“Oh Hunny, I am really sorry. You know I’d never hurt you on purpose, right?” She thought she was going to burst from holding in the laughter and trying to sound contrite. She was terrible at hiding her twisted amusement and he could only give her the death glare in response to her patently false protestations of innocence. “Rich do you want me to kiss it better?”

When he looked at her all he could see was razors for teeth and vices for fingers. His eyes bugged out and he shrunk back from her in horror. “No fucking way. You’re a menace!” He panted.

“Come along dear, let’s get you into a nice fetal position in a warm, dry bed. It’ll be much more comfortable for your dramatic death scene.” She took him by the elbow and coaxed him up to a hunched over standing position.

He slowly shuffled out of the shower and Kat dried him off with soft, fluffy towels, doing her best to avoid the general vicinity of his ‘mortal wound’. The colour was returning to his face and he wasn’t making the pathetic strangling sounds any longer, which she took to be a good sign. Kat’s wondered how he’d deal with the mind-numbing aches and pains of a monthly period. Not well, she suspected and sniggered at the image of him whinging his way through a week every month.

She snuggled him into bed with lots of soothing susurrations and promises that he’d feel better soon. He looked up at her with sad puppy dog susurrations and asked, “Can you make breakfast? I think I’ll be hungry soon.” He grinned and made it crystal clear that he was going to play victim for a very long time. Kat rolled her eyes at him, letting him see and hear her amused disdain for his theatrics as she sauntered towards the kitchen.

Yes, playing the victim held a certain appeal. Or perhaps they could play doctor and she could be the naughty nurse. He chuckled at the thought of what she would do with that little diversion. He winced a little as he thought of his own terrible rhyme, ‘Roses are red, violets are blue. Math is real hard, and my penis is too’.” He called out to Kat, “Hey, I’ve got a funny for you. C’mere.”

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Next Chapter: This is Richard’s last full day in Toronto and Kat has lots planned in order to keep their minds off pending goodbyes.
Katrina set down the coffee cups and went to the bedroom door to check on her invalid. Her eyes grew wide as saucers. Lying back on the bed, propped up on his elbows was - ‘ooooof’. His dark hair was messy and his stubble looked not quite long enough to be soft. His strong jaw and aquiline nose gave his features a definitive masculine strength that was enhanced by his piercing blue eyes. Whether it was good genetics or healthy living didn't matter, he was the perfect representation of male beauty. He looked like love and sex and happiness all wrapped up in one package and he took her breath away. When he directed that smoulder at her she lost all free will and became a moth to his flame. She stepped towards the bed slowly peeling off the only thing she was wearing, his t-shirt, and tossed it on the floor. Watching her deliberate progress he smirked, she was on fire and he was eager to be consumed.

Kat climbed up on the foot of the bed and crawled very slowly up his body. She chuckled when she saw the expression on his face. He looked like his eyes just might pop out of his head as she made her way along the bed. Watching him absentmindedly stroke himself had a different effect than she would have expected: it gave her a fit of giggles. So much for sultry siren sex goddess.

“When Albert Einstein masturbates is it a stroke of genius?” She snickered as she pointedly stared at his own languid strokes.

He looked at her quizzically and followed her gaze. The tips of his ears reddened as she kissed the hand he barely realized he was holding himself with. She arched an eyebrow and gave him a cheeky grin.

“Don’t stop on my account.” She winked and licked his head with a long, slow swipe of her tongue. “I take it that you are sufficiently recovered from your … ah … injury?” She said, giving the tip fluttering little licks along the slit.

Richard nodded and grinned from ear to ear, drawing her up to meet him eye to eye. “I am quite recovered, thank you. I adore your sweet little mouth and I think I’d like to kiss it before you go on any further expeditions.”

”Tsk tsk. Kissing? You know where that leads!?”

“I certainly hope so.” He smiled as he traced the outline of her full lips with his thumb and twirled an errant strand of her hair around his finger. He kissed the tip of her nose and wrapped her up in a big bear hug, laughingly asking her, “So, want to have some of the sex?” His fingertips swirled feather light patterns along her shoulders and he relished the little quivers and sounds she made.

“I’d love to have some of the sex.” She framed his face with her hands and gave him whispy kisses on his eye lids, across his temple and cheeks, along his chin until she was before his mouth. He grinned as she licked her lips and bit them in deep concentration. He saw in her eyes that she was trying to decide whether to just jump him, quick and dirty, or float with him on a languorous, sensual cloud of lovemaking. Decisions, decisions – she could go either way.
Richard thought there was no need to make her suffer the pangs of uncertainty. He held her close and flipped them over, his weight pushing her down into the mattress. She sighed happily, very pleased with the turn of events. He propped himself up on his forearms, sharing smiles and silent promises. He loved the way her eyes twinkled when he caressed her face; when he kissed along her jaw and around to the soft spot by her ear; and when she sang happy little notes of pleasure. If his lips lingered on her shoulder above her collar bone or in the hollow at the base of her neck, she would melt under him.

He nuzzled into her neck, murmuring soft words of adoration as he breathed her in. He could feel the budding restlessness in her body as she hummed and threaded her hands in his hair. She loved playing with his hair, whether it was on his head, arms, chest or legs, her fingers would dance on him and it gave him tingles up and down his spine.

Richard kissed her softly, indolently. He smiled as their eyelashes touched and she purred. She could go from naughty to dreamily romantic and back again in milliseconds and he relished those mercurial shifts. It was all for him: every sigh; every look of wanton lust, every tremble, every shy smile, every naughty laugh; all of it was just for him.

With the tip of his tongue he traced a line down to the pulsing hollow where her collar bones met. “Mmmm so soft,” he hummed against her and was rewarded with a throaty coo of contentment. His stubble prickled against her tender skin making goose bumps rise.

He nibbled and kissed his way to her breasts, kneading them gently, soothing the taut peaks with his lips and tongue. As the pressure of his hands and mouth intensified on her sensitive nipples she moaned soft and low, almost imperceptibly arching her back to him. The vibrations of her moan and the restless searching of her body for more sent sparks of pride and desire through him.

Richard’s fingers caressed her side from her ribs down to her thigh, making her titter. It was a fine line between erotic and ticklish and he happily zig zagged back and forth over it. Looking up at her through his lashes, while he nibbled on her nipple, he was delighted to see equal measures of laughter and lust in her eyes. He grinned and plucked her rosy peak with his lips, “What did one boob say to the other?” He smirked as she shook her head, “you’re my breast friend.”

She snickered and swatted him on the head as he returned his lips’ attention to her boobs and his hands’ to her hip. He shifted slightly, allowing him to graze her inner thigh with his fingers, making her quiver and swallow hard. She moved her legs apart, encouraging him to explore further, deeper. He stroked her lightly, teasing and tormenting her as he moved closer and closer to her most sensitive areas but retreating at the last second.

He chuckled at her huffs of frustration which earned him a sharp tug on his hair and an admonishment to quit being such an annoying prat. “Without further ado then …” He slowly buried his finger within her, smiling at her lecherous grin and sigh of relief. She tugged his head back to her breast and he chuckled at her silent greedy demands. The scent of her arousal and the buzz of excitement flickering through her made him dizzy. It had never been so hard to wait, to make her come undone before his throbbing could end with his own sweet release.

His gentle attention to her breasts became firmer, rougher, needier as his fingers worked their magic on her and he began thumbing her clit. Between his mouth, his fingers and his thumb she was a mess of molten need, trembling and calling his name.

“Was that a shout of approval or to cut it out?” He looked up into her eyes with a mischievous smirk.

“Good. Definitely good.” She bit her lip trying, unsuccessfully, to regain some sort of focus.
He crooked his finger just enough to massage that sensitive spot inside. Her heavy panting stilled as she held her breath, savouring the first intense waves of her orgasm. He felt her whole body go rigid and winced as she tugged hard on his hair. He could feel the tension in her body collapse as the last ripples of ecstasy gradually dissipated. She exhaled his name, her voice soft and dreamy. Kat ran her fingers through his hair, soothing the spots she’d pulled and tutted at his look of utter smugness.

“You might even be better than a vibrator.”

“You have a vibrator?”

“No, but Leigh says I should get one. I think I’d like you better though.

He rolled his hips and growled, “And don’t you forget it! I’ll keep my woman satisfied – no need for machines when you’ve got me.” He flicked her nipple and smooched all over her face with as much noise and slobber as he could muster.

“Gross! Stop it! Keep your drool to yourself.” She giggled and swatted at his shoulders. When he continued his ridiculous snogging she cradled his head in her hands and kissed him sweetly. “Now that’s how you should kiss … none of that soggy business!”

“Are you implying that I don’t know how to kiss you?” His eyebrows shot up and he smirked a challenge to her. “Seriously? You wanna go there?”

Begrudgingly she said, “Oh, all right. You win. Yes … you can kiss quite nicely. I rather like it when you kiss me … except with all that spit – not overly fond of that.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t sound the least bit apologetic. In fact, he looked and sounded decidedly pleased with himself. He rested his forehead against hers and said, “I love you Katrina, more than the sun and the moon and the stars.”

She rolled her eyes and winked at him, “That’s good because I’m pretty sure they don’t love you back … but I do, so it all works out conveniently for you after all. Now I seem to remember an anaconda who needs taming, any thoughts on that?” She bumped her hips up and down a few times to make her point.

His brows knit together and paused, uncertain for a moment. He chuckled when she gave him a sassy look and nodded her head, opening the door to whatever possibility he might have in mind. He grinned as an idea formed into a plan.

“Roll over?” He raised up on his knees, sitting back on his calves.

“Ummm. Ok …” Kat turned over onto her belly and sighed as he pressed a kiss onto the nape of her neck.

“You have such a lovely back.” He massaged her, pausing between kisses on each vertebrae to recite ‘sweet’ poetry to her:

“A lady while dining at Crewe
Found an elephant’s whang in her stew.
Said the waiter, “Don’t shout,
And don’t wave it about,
Or the others will all want one too.

A horny old trapper named Rex
**Liked the risks of wild porcupine sex.**
**By incredible luck**
**His dick never got stuck,**
**But his nuts were just pitiful wrecks.**

"**For Christmas**, she said with a tingle
"I'd love a gift cunnilingual!""
**Twas with joy and surprise**
**She found twixt her thighs**
**The tongue of jolly Kris Kringle!"**

He kneaded her bum while he finished the last limerick and gave her a hickey on her left cheek, making the two of them laugh and her squirm. Richard tugged up on her hips, raising her arse up in the air.

She looked over her shoulder at him with one eyebrow raised and a smirk on her lips, “Oh, so this is where we’re going, is it?” She wiggled her bum at him and winked again. She lifted up to rest on her forearms so that she could see him better.

He licked a line up her spine with the tip of his tongue and smiled at her “oooo”. He traced a finger along her slit and was delighted by how wet she still was for him and followed the same path with his cock. He was happily positioned at her entrance, more than eager to begin but something was ... off. She was too low and he was too high, the angle wasn’t going to work.

He sat back on his calves behind her, scratching his head in confusion. She watched his increasingly distressed expression and could barely contain her laughter. “We need to make me taller, yeah?”

“Yeah.” He looked like a dejected puppy and she just wanted to kiss his worried little face. “Um, how about you stand on the floor and I scoot down to the end of the bed?”

He brightened considerably. “Yeah, that might work!” He hopped off the bed and stood waiting for her to find a comfortable station. He loved her arse, all soft and round and ticklish. He smoothed his hand over her cheeks and returned the filthy smile she was giving him over her shoulder. He thought that decadent look was the hottest thing he’d ever seen and desire curled around his balls, making him harder.

He rubbed his cock around her clit and teased her with it. Her pout was priceless and if he wasn’t feeling an urgent need, he would be delighted to continue teasing her and making her squirm. But he could no longer deny himself, he needed to dive into her warmth and bury himself hilt deep. With a hand on her hip and the other guiding him, he pushed just his tip inside and smirked at the delicious sounds she made. She tried to push back against him but had nothing to leverage against and he teased her by retreating the small distance she had gained.

His hands held her hips tightly, pulling her back towards him as he pushed hard into her. His head fell back as he revelled in the bliss of the sensations. Oh she felt warm and tight and wet and ... shaking? He opened his eyes to find her laughing as she tried to raise up from the face plant he’d just caused with that last hard thrust.

He pleaded, “Don’t laugh like that, you’re pushing me out!”

“Right, sorry. Do not laugh when your man is trying to give it to ya doggy style. Got it, won’t laugh.” She said as she tried to quell the snickers. “I do feel a bit like a wheelbarrow … but a good wheelbarrow, just so that you know.”
Richard wrapped one arm around her belly and the other gripped her shoulder, holding her steady against him. She wiggled her arse and wondered how it always seemed so easy in the movies. This must surely be the silliest position known to man. She canted her hips up a little higher, trying to be helpful. He pushed into her again and she forgot about her giggles as the feeling of him filling and stretching her sent liquid heat pooling deep within her.

She watched him over her shoulder and was awed by his expressive face. This was clearly a big hit for him as he held her tightly and thrust into her slowly, letting her feel every centimetre and making her want more.

He found his rhythm and his senses were overloading. The site of his cock thrusting in and out of her was so sexy, especially when she met his eyes over her shoulder and licked her lips. Every filthy thought in his head tumbled out in the dirtiest dirty talk either of them ever heard.

The site of his extreme concentration combined with his ridiculous filthy talk sent her into another fit of giggles. She asked, “What did you just say?”

“Too much?” He panted.

“Not if your career goal is porn star.” She sniggered.

He laughed too which sent a flurry of new sensations through his body into hers and brought a low, throaty moan to her lips. Fuck, he loved those little moans.

Richard widened his stance, hoping for best possible stability because it was becoming more difficult to stand. He wrapped both of his arms around her middle and rested his chin on her shoulder. As he kissed her neck and nibbled on her shoulder he felt the blood pumping into his heart and every nerve. His breathing hitched and that wonderful light headedness begin to claim him.

There was something powerfully erotic about watching and hearing her sweet Richard thrusting, mumbling incoherently into her ear and hanging onto her for dear life. He was everywhere, in her, around her, filling her body and soul. The sensation of him curled around her back, holding her so close she could feel his heartbeat, was overwhelming. They were one, not knowing where he ended and she began, sharing laughter and passion and exquisite pleasure with infinite rhythms and possibilities.

His head fell back as the tension in his muscles and his balls rose to an unbearable intensity. His long, husky moan combined with the twitching and trembling she felt coursing through him sent rippling waves of molten pleasure through her. Every gasp and jerk of his body as he spent himself in her shook her to the core. He collapsed onto her, no longer able to support his own weight, and nuzzled into the crook of her neck. She kissed his nose and stroked the sides of his thighs as his wilting body recovered.

Richard slowly slid out of her and climbed up onto the bed properly, pulling her into his arms for a warm and happy post-coital cuddle. With eyes closed, he smiled as she began to purr and he fell asleep thinking about how to do that again without having to stand up and where to find dirty jokes. She thought of warm honey and purring joeys as she dozed off.

Neither of them remembered it was his last full day in Toronto before he had to leave.
Katrina dozed briefly, more from relaxation than sleepiness. She snuggled into Richard’s side, gently playing with the soft hair on his chest. Lips and nose pressed against skin, legs tangled, breathing synchronized – it was heaven. Even in sleep he wanted her close; his arm held her against him into what they’d both come to call The Joey – surrounding her body with his own, protecting her like a joey in a kangaroo’s pouch. She sniggered a little as she thought that the queen sized bed could have been a single for all the room they needed.

Contentment drained away as did the colour from her face when she could no longer put off thinking about the implications of his imminent departure. They had been living in a bubble completely removed from their regular lives. Other than checking their email, they’d had no other involvement in the real world and everything had been arranged for their pleasure without any of the monotony of normal life. One last day of their holiday romance and then they would be drop kicked back into routine and responsibilities … and far away from each other.

Her tension seeped into Richard, causing him to stir as her brow creased and her frown deepened. He pulled her tighter against him, making her squeak in protest. Snuggling was fine; boa constrictor grip of death: not so much.

“S’wrong?” He mumbled struggling to fight his way back to full consciousness.

She snickered, “You were squeezing me like a tube of toothpaste. I didn’t think you were going to let me go.”

“Oh Darling, I’ll never let you go.” Wide awake, he teased and tickled her, gaining him a piercing shriek in the ear and a swat on the arm.

“Yeah, whatever. But I have to pee so unless you’re going to piggyback me in there and sit on my lap while I wee, you’d better let go!”

“Get lost, Woman!” He shoved her out of the bed with a laugh and she wiggled her bum at him as she sauntered off to the bathroom.

While Kat performed her necessary ablutions Richard made coffee and surveyed the fridge and cupboards for breakfast fixings. Kat stood watching as he became more and more frustrated at the lack of appropriate supplies. Standing arms akimbo in sleep pants, bare chest, mussy hair and that dark expression on his face, she thought he’d never looked sexier. She could spend the rest of his time in Canada in bed with him which, incidentally, sounded far better than the plans she’d made. With a sigh she knew that whatever they did, she needed to keep her mind busy or she’d be able to think too much.
“May I help?” She wrapped her arms around his waist, giving him a back hug and pressed little kisses between his shoulder blades. He sighed and turned around to hug her too.

“I wanted to make breakfast for you but your pantry won’t cooperate.” He said in a frustrated voice.

She patted his back, “My fault. I haven’t done a proper shop in a long time. How about something light now? I have reservations for a surprise this morning and then we could have **dim sum** for lunch if you like?

“Any chance you’ll tell me what we’re doing today?” He turned around in her arms to hug her and gave her his most disarming smile in hopes she’d tell him.

“Well … fencing lessons, skating at **Nathan Phillips Square** and for tonight, a play at **The Royal Alex**. If you’d prefer something else …”

He shook his head, “That sounds really great. I’ve used broadswords but have always wanted to do something with foils or sabres. How do you know these things? How do you always manage to arrange things that I’ll love? Fencing? Perfect! And I think I might be able to stay standing upright skating this time. Oh, what’s the play?”

“It’s called **Once**. There was a movie a couple of years ago. It’s an award winning musical about two very different people who take a leap of faith, follow their dreams, don’t bow to fear and find incredible love.”

He grinned, “Oh, so it’s a story about us?”

Her eyes rolled heavenward and she shook her head, “Corny alert! That was completely groan-worthy. You’re such a sap.” She gave him an extra squeeze in the hug and giggled.

“Yeah, but you love it. Admit it. Every time I do or say anything even slightly romantic you become shiny and glowy and you blush.” He tilted her chin up with his index finger and placed a chaste kiss on the tip of her nose. Even the action of that little kiss made her eyes light up. He chuckled at how quickly and completely she responded to his affection and attentions. He wasn’t any better with her – she had him wrapped around her little finger even if she didn’t know it.

“Can you do breakie while I shower?” He rested his forehead against hers, wondering if they needed to go out at all. He could stay right where he was, wrapping her up in his arms and snogging all day long.

He’d been quite diligent in living in the moment and not thinking about leaving, but reality was intruding. At the same time the next day their embrace would be a goodbye and not just for fun like the one they were currently sharing. ‘**Fuck, don’t get broody, Armitage!’** He silently chided himself. Kat loved skating and the theatre so he’d bloody well make sure it was a great day for her even if he felt melancholia lurking around the corner.

“Sure. I’ll round something up. Call if you need help with the hard to reach spots.” She winked at him and waggled her eyebrows.

He shook his head with a chuckle, “I value safety more than a good cleaning between the shoulder blades!” He showered tiny kisses all over her face and gave her a swat on the bum before leaving the room.

Richard and Katrina scarfed down quinoa puffed cereal and gulped their coffee on the way out the door to the **Toronto Fencing Club**. Joshua McGuire, retired two time Olympian, guided them
through footwork and blade work, refreshing the lessons Richard had received with the Royal Shakespeare Company many years before. Everything was new to Kat and she loved it, soaking up lunge, parry, riposte and feint as they were explained, demonstrated and practised. At the end of their 90 minute lesson, Joshua served as Directeur for Richard and Kat to engage in several bouts.

Richard’s experience and height gave him distinct advantages but Kat’s enthusiasm and concentration meant that she wasn’t quite the easy mark either he or Josh anticipated. By the end of their third and final bout Richard was the clear winner and they both were sweating profusely and giddy. The advice to bring a change of clothes was well informed and so after a shower they were ready to leave the club and make their way to The Crown Princess for dim sum. The Crown Princess was renowned for its opulent Baroque décor. Imagine exquisite Cantonese dishes in a dining room replete with priceless marble slabs hanging on the walls, Louis XIV furniture, luxurious linens, fine china tea sets, impeccable service, and some of the most expensive ingredients in the world.

“Let’s try something neither of us have ever had before. What do you think?” Kat looked at all of the exotic items available and in addition to the delicious dim sum, she selected Jellyfish with Plum Sauce. Not to be outdone, Richard ordered the Braised Sea Cucumber with Ham and Roe for them to share. Pots of fragrant jasmine tea and shared desserts of Chrysanthemum and Lychee Cake and Milk Tart with Bird’s Nest completed their luncheon. They agreed that they could live happily without ever eating jellyfish or sea cucumbers again but that it was an interesting experiment to have tried them.

The cold weather had held during Richard’s stay which was unusual for Toronto. It rarely stayed below freezing for long, making outdoor winter activities within the city hit or miss. The outdoor ice rinks at Nathan Phillip Square and Harbourfront Centre were in great shape and not too crowded during the weekday. Richard was far more confident on the ice and with his innate physical coordination, quickly became adept at skating backwards and sudden stops. Holding hands with Kat was no longer a fear response but a comfortable pda and so when the music slowed for a couples skate, Richard brought Kat in close to ice-waltz. Happily, the lack of rhythm she showed on solid ground didn’t translate to the ice where she was smooth and easily able to follow his lead.

“Not bad for my second time, yeah?” He grinned and smoothly manoeuvered them around the corner just as the music changed.

She stuck her tongue out at him, “Think so? Catch me if you can.” She zipped away backwards and turned, speeding down the long stretch of the rink.

She may have experience on her side, but he had legs twice the length of hers and powerful thighs. He was able to catch up to her after two laps and checked her into the boards, laughing. He bent down to tease her but she silenced him with a kiss. Forgetting where they were, their arms encircled one another and they deepened the kiss more than was appropriate for the time and place. The security staff member skated over and asked them to keep it family friendly, smirking as he returned to his station.

An elderly couple witnessed the kiss and its outcome, smiling at ‘young love’ and sharing their own brief kiss. They skated up to Rich and Kat and told them “Never forget how you feel today, love is the only thing that matters.”

“Thank you! You’ve obviously taken your own advice – you look like newlyweds. Oh, could we bother you to take a picture for us?” Katrina fished her cell phone out of her pocket and offered it
to the lady.

“I’d be delighted. Say ‘cheese’. That’s very nice, dear. One more for luck – and maybe one of those lovely kisses.” The older woman took the picture, proclaiming it a masterpiece and handed the phone back to Kat. “Remember today when the sun isn’t shining and you won’t be crushed by the dark.” She said as she returned to her husband’s side and they skated away holding hands.

“My turn. I want a picture too.” Richard pulled his iPhone out of his pocket and took several selfies of Kate and himself. These public photos were a pleasant change, being solely for them not for others. He was so used to being snapped he had forgotten that it could be fun having someone take silly pictures out on the streets.

They continued to skate for another hour but each was becoming increasingly quiet. Kat was certain the elderly lady’s advice was prophetic and the darkness would soon be upon them. Richard’s thoughts mirrored hers and it was all he could do to conjure up even a sad smile.

They returned to Kat’s to change for dinner and the play, surreptitiously stealing gloomy glances at each other. With a dejected huff Richard pulled Kat into his arms and confronted the elephant in the room.

“I hate that I’m leaving tomorrow. I hate that I won’t be able to hold you like this. I hate that you won’t be able to swat me whenever you want to. I hate that I won’t be able to wake up with you safe in my arms. I hate that you won’t be able to throw me down on the bed and fuck me into next week. I hate that.” He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her sweetly. “But I love you. I love us. I love that you will come to me and I will come back to you. I love that our future includes each other. I love that you snore and purr and call me your OTP. I love you.” He kissed her again, tasting the salty tears falling from her eyes. “Even though it feels bleak right now, I know that we will find a way to be together – Katrina, we’ll figure out how not to be apart at all.”

He was so earnest she had to smile. His confidence alone was enough to lift the pall which weighed heavily on her. She could see a sheen in his eyes, she could never doubt that he felt this just as keenly as she did. He knew more than she did about being away from loved ones; for years his work had him travelling the world and spending months far from friends and family. If he said there was a way, they would find it. Despite her multitude of unasked and unanswered questions, she trusted Richard.

With a heavy sigh and a fierce determination to be positive, “You are right, of course. It looks hard right now, but we’ll figure it out. Let’s not let tomorrow’s grief steal tonight’s happiness. We’ll have an excellent dinner and see an inspiring play and look fabulous doing both.”

He looked like he just walked out of a Sarah Dunn photo shoot in his dark Tom Ford suit, purple shirt and a slightly deeper purple tie. He found that sexy balance between messy and groomed with his hair, ensuring a few nape curls for Kat’s benefit. He was handsome on film and in photos but he was far more so in person, his features softer and reflecting his personality better. So much so that it made her knees weak just looking at him. She had never thought herself a superficial person before but, damn, he was freaking hot … and she loved it even if it made her feel somewhat shallow. His being good looking was a mighty fine bonus, one that she would hopefully be able to appreciate without drooling.

He felt a warmth spread from his head to his toes when Kat came out of the bathroom. The sapphire blue dress she wore was simple and modest in design, complimenting her petite form. She had pulled her hair partially up, covering the mark he’d left on the back of her neck but exposing her creamy throat which he was certain was begging to be kissed. He couldn’t wait to pull the pins and run his fingers through those loose, silky waves. As usual, her makeup was light
and natural but her lips, oh her lips, a deep crimson stained those full, sensuous lips. He gave his head a shake to quell the dirty thoughts gyrating around in his mind. ‘Dinner and the theatre first. Then you can ravish that body and those lips.’ He reminded himself. With a sardonic afterthought he mumbled, ‘You’re as bad as a horny teenager.’

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They had a beautiful dinner at George restaurant. It was a stunningly renovated nineteenth century chocolate factory with wonderful ambiance and an award winning kitchen. Richard ordered for both of them, delighting her with his choices of the five course tasting menu for Kat; the seven course tasting menu for himself and sommelier recommended wine pairings for each course. They had enough time before the play to enjoy sharing a flourless chocolate cake with star anise meringue and chocolate almond dust for dessert.

“You have created the best week Kat. It’s been full to the brim with surprises and delights.” He brought her hand to his lips for a kiss and smiled as she blushed. She had a particular twinkle in her eye which looked remarkably naughty.

She snickered, “That’s not the only thing that’s been filled to the brim with surprises and delights. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more. You’ve surpassed all hopes and dreams in that area.” She wickedly licked her lips and winked at him.

“You, my dear, have a very dirty mind … a deliciously filthy mind. And I’m eager to hear all of your naughty thoughts, after the play.” He smouldered. That look. The ovary-exploding, panty-dropping look which made women all over the world swoon. He focused all of that pent up desire trapped behind agonizingly delayed gratification through his eyes and directed it to her as his thumb caressed the hand he was still holding. He chuckled as he felt goose-bumps rise on her skin and saw her eyes darken. Her immediate and considerable response to him fueled his own desire. That play would undoubtedly be far too long for his liking.

She laughed at the sudden ‘yip’ he squeaked out when her foot ventured under the table and she lightly kneaded his crotch with her toes. “If you’re very good, I might tell you some of them before we get home.” With that he groaned long and low. She would likely take great delight in torturing him with her naughty mouth all night, verbally and otherwise.

They finished their dessert and made their way to The Royal Alexandra Theatre. Richard had just enough time to check their coats before the house lights dimmed, providing a five minute warning to the patrons. An usher showed them to their seats which were located dead centre of the orchestra level, providing them with an excellent view and superb acoustic balance.

Richard had heard of the film, Once, and was aware that the play had one several Tony awards but hadn’t seen it. The story and music captivated him and stirred his imagination. It was a beautiful tale of love and courage. Kat was completely immersed in the play and her sighs, smiles, snickers, tears and satisfaction were a delight to watch, leaving him wondering which he enjoyed more: watching the play or watching Kate’s reactions to the play.

At intermission Richard fetched champagne for them to enjoy. As they were standing and chatting in the lounge area Richard became aware of stares in their direction. He groaned inwardly, disappointed that the anonymity he had enjoyed in Toronto was lost. Four women approached him and nervously shared their appreciation for his work and asked if they could have a picture taken with him. He looked to Kat, concerned for her reaction and looked heavenward when he saw her unable to suppress her laughter.

Kat stepped forward, “Please allow me to take the picture for you so that you can all be in it
together.” She reached out her hand to take the four cell phones and proceeded to snap pictures on all of them with Richard being passed between them like a hot potato. The women graciously thanked him and moved away.

“My poor sex symbol. How do you stand it? Hordes of women just throwing themselves at you wherever you go.” She teased as she attempted to wipe the lipstick off his cheek with her thumb. He was just about to give her a scathing retort when he heard the unmistakable sound of a shutter clicking.

“Well that ought to get Tumblr roaring tonight. ‘Dwarf woman strokes Thorin’ or some other kind of witty headline followed by a picture of you playing with my face.” He ran his hand through his hair and closed his eyes. “We never discussed the fame thing and I’m afraid you have no idea the shit-storm this will undoubtedly start for you.”

She cupped his cheek. “I wrote fan fiction remember? I know exactly the types of things that people will say … I may even enjoy some of the more clever ones. Maybe I don’t have any experience with fame, but I’m not exactly naïve either so there’s no need to worry about me. Is there cause to worry about you though? This wasn’t exactly planned by your team and I don’t want to see you on tabloid covers which you’ve, so far, been very good at avoiding.”

“No, no worries. In fact, in for a penny, in for a pound.” He smiled and bent down to hold her close and kiss her. “Let’s leave no doubt what the mystery woman means to me.” He clasped her hand in his and grinned at her startled expression.

She recovered quickly, “Ok, Boss. This is all new to me so you’re going to have to tell me what you need me to do and not do.” She squeezed his hand and tickled his palm with her finger, making him laugh.

“You must be contagious because now I have a dirty mind. I can think of all kinds of things to tell you to do,” he whispered into her ear. “I’ll get my publicist to contact you with how to handle the media.”

She chuckled, “Oh Pervy McSexy – you sure know how to sweet talk a girl.

The lights flickered prompting Richard and Kat to return to their seats. He put his arm around her shoulders and she rested her head on him while they waited for the lights to dim. He gave her a quick kiss when she smiled up at him which had the frustrating effect of leaving him wanting much more than a peck in public. His consolation prize was holding hands during the entire second half.

Katrina and Richard both enjoyed the play immensely and discussed it at length on their way home.

“Do you miss it?” Kat asked.

He was quiet for a moment and then nodded, “It was right for me to leave musical theatre when I did but when I see a play like this tonight, I do miss it. If I could find the right role, I would do a musical but it would have to be something quite special. Theatre itself I really miss and I keep meaning to find a stage piece but it’s not worked out for a long, long time. My peers seem to manage it but I haven’t.” He frowned and stared off into space.

“Just goes to prove that one should never assume. I would have thought you’d have producers and directors knocking down your door and you’d have your pick of plum roles. Every second article describes you as ‘classically trained’ or ‘former member of the Royal Shakespeare Company’ or
‘stage actor’. Having been moved by your on-screen performances I can only imagine the visceral impact you’d have on a live audience. You have an astounding command of your voice and body, you would be a force to be reckoned with. If you’re still interested in Richard the Third, you should make it happen.” Her solemn tone turned light and teasing, “Of course, it would also mean throngs of swooning fans at the stage door every night.”

He was deep in thought as they entered the house and hung up their coats. “Don’t you think I’m a bit old and tall for King Richard?” He asked as he selected a bottle of Five Rows 2008 Pinot Noir from the cupboard and decanted it.

“You can’t be serious!? Mel Gibson was in his 40’s when he did Hamlet, a character in his early 20’s, and you have just spent five years on a project where you played a dwarf. My Love, age and height don’t enter into it. Good heavens, in Shakespeare’s time men played women – you don’t get any more ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ than that. If you’re passionate about the role, do it – be it. You transformed yourself into an almost 200 year old dwarf, I think you can manage a thirty something English king quite nicely!” She took his hand and led him to the sofa.

He fidgeted with the wine glasses and didn’t speak for several minutes. “I have been working on a Richard III film project with Phillipa Langley but thought I’d be better suited for the Duke of Buckingham. I’d thought I’d missed my chance to play Richard.”

“Hunny, I know nothing about making movies or plays but I have been subjected to the most ludicrous casting and plots. If 5’7” Tom Cruise can play 6’5” Jack Reacher and make over $80,000,000, you are a lock for Richard III. And people don’t even like Tom Cruise! But don’t trust me - trust your instincts and don’t be held back by delusions of inadequacy.” Kat stroked his hair as she searched his face to understand what he was thinking and feeling. “Richard III aside, I would dearly love to see you on the stage and I know thousands of others would too!”

One side of his mouth crooked up in a doubtful half smile. She was so confident and certain of him. It was disconcerting to have someone believe so passionately in him. He was no perfect demi-god; he made mistakes and sometimes he was a tit. He shifted uncomfortably under the weight of her faith in him. When he screwed up, and eventually he would in one way or another, he’d have to bear the consequences of disappointing her as well as the fallout of whatever mess he made. No pressure, ha! His eyebrows shot up at her disapproving glare, evidently she’d read his mind, the sneaky wench.

Katrina shook her head at him, “You’re better than you think, possibly less than I think. But I’m allowed to put you on a pedestal – I’m in love with you and as we all know, love covers a multitude of sins. Don’t do things just because I say so – but don’t discount my opinion either. You have a whole team of professional advisors. Talk to people who are wise in the area you need perspective on. I can advise you on Canadian tax law or how to restructure a company ... or how to kiss me so I forget Canadian tax law.” She smiled gently and kissed him softly.

“Yes, you are quite wise in the kissing thing. You’ve given me something to think about, and I promise I will.” He got up and strode over to the wall switches to turn on the natural gas fireplace and turn down the lights. Richard poured them both a glass of wine and tucked the soft mohair couch blanket over them.

Katrina snuggled into his side and gazed into the fire while shadows flickered across the room and bathed them in a low, lazy light. He occasionally kissed her hair as they relaxed into each other. She had been still for so long it was easy to believe her to be asleep, but that would be wrong. She was committing every detail of him to memory so that she would always have this night crystal clear in her mind. His arm around her, the softness of the blanket, the warmth of his body, his
clean, masculine scent, the tickle of his arm hair, the silky thickness of his nape curls, the strength of his chin, the scrape of his whiskers, the feel of his lips, the cadence of his heart … she wanted every detail captured in her memory and in her heart.

“Shall we?” His voice was quiet and low against her ear.

“Mmm hmm.” She nodded and turned to kiss him.

Richard picked Katrina up into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. He was so strong and gentle it sent sweet tingles all through her. He carefully set her down on the bed and very slowly began to undress her, folding each piece of clothing and placing a tender kiss on each newly exposed area. When he’d finished with the last of her clothes he pulled the duvet up to keep her from catching a chill while he undressed himself with the same deliberate slowness he had used with her.

He was beginning to feel awe at seeing himself through her eyes. There was nothing he couldn’t achieve, nothing he couldn’t do according to her. She believed in him – his hopes, his dreams, his character, his talent. She believed him to be a good man inside and out and she gave him wings to fly. There was nothing he couldn’t conquer with her by his side. He sincerely hoped that she knew he felt the exact same way about her.

Kat scooched over to make room for Richard to climb into bed. They faced each other and smiled, enjoying every second of the loving intimacy they shared. They lightly caressed each other, memorizing every feature, every texture. Richard moved closer to Kat, folding her into his arms and bestowing upon her sweet, emotional kisses and tender touches. She drank in all of the love he offered and gifted him with hers in return.

They shared languid kisses and soothing caresses as they whispered their devotion to each other. It was a night of unhurried, gentle lovemaking completely devoid of urgency or lust and completely full of wonder and affection. When Richard gradually brought Kat’s leg up over his hip he hugged her closer to him and sighed with pleasure as she massaged his back. He could feel how ready she was for him as they pressed against each other, just as he was for her. He entered her so slowly and reverently, it made them both smile. They were in no hurry, taking their time with every movement, every sensation. They cuddled and snuggled and kissed and caressed and enjoyed their joining more than they knew possible. There was no frantic, lusty sex that night, just making love for hours, savouring each other to the fullest, neither willing or able to let go of the other. They declared their love for one another with their words and with their bodies, finally succumbing to sleep, comfortably wrapped in other’s arms.
Katrina dreamt of hedgehogs traversing her stomach; prickly, heavy critters who wandered to and fro. She’d always liked the way they looked to be smiling, just like the ones on her tummy. She wanted to pet their soft little bellies but her dream hedgies didn’t want to be picked up. One last go and if it they still didn’t want to be held, she’d give up. Maybe she could dream of chocolate or marshmallow clouds instead.

“Ow, Kat please stop trying to lift my head like a bowling ball – it is attached you know.” Richard groused.

She woke up to find a distinct lack of hedgehogs, and in their place a very stubbly Richard’s face which was indeed attached to his shoulders and completely unable to be picked up. She giggled at the feeling of his prickly ‘hedgehog’ beard as he lay his head down on her stomach again.

“I thought you were a hedgehog and I wanted to turn you over so I could pat your soft little tummy. Guess not, huh?”

“Oh, I’ve got stuff you can pet but none of it is soft.” He teased while devouring her belly button and making all sorts of dirty noises.

“If I promise not to cause either of us bodily injury, would you like to shower together?” She asked in a decidedly muzzy voice.

He chuckled, “Do we dare risk it? Last time you were nearly concussed – twice.”

“No sexy times in the shower and I think we’ll be safe. It’s all of those hormones and distractions which are the problem. I won’t molest you and you don’t molest me – until we’re safely out of the bathroom - deal?”

“Wow. With an offer like that how could I possibly say no?” He kissed her quickly, leapt out of bed and grabbed her hand, pulling her after him. “All right then, let’s go,” he said, catching her as she stumbled.

The cold shower quickly filled with steam, warming the walls and floor. True to her word, Kat washed Richard’s back but didn’t provoke him. She did, however, groan inwardly and it took all of her self-control not to taste him or touch him the way she wanted to. The feel of his firm muscles under her palms, the smell of his shower gel and the sight of his gorgeous arse was just about doing her in.

Despite the warm room, Richard shivered at the touch of Kat’s small hands stroking his back. Ok, so maybe she was only washing it for him but there was no misinterpreting the funky sounds she was making. The sounds combined with her deft fingers and the response of his stimulated muscles had their inevitable effect on him.
Richard lathered up his hands with Kat’s soap and turned to wash her back for her. Turnabout being fair play, he didn’t inhibit the sounds he was naturally prone to make when gliding his hands over the strong column of her spine and cupping her bum in his big hands.

“Is this you not molesting me?” Kat demanded with a lecherous laugh.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Yeh, well you suck at it.” She turned to grab his bum and found him at full mast, poking into her belly. “Oh, it’s like that is it? Are you sure you want to risk this? I’m not responsible for any broken bones, contusions, concussions, or abrasions.”

He smirked and nodded his head definitively, right before he seized her mouth. Water ran down their faces, into their eyes and mouth necessitating the formulation of a plan. Either that or risk drowning standing up. So much for romance or smooth, sexy moves. He backed up to sit on the shower bench and drew Kat onto his lap, straddling him.

“Ow. Knees.” She complained and grinned at him. She was flexible, but not that flexible – her limbs needed to go somewhere and the tumbled limestone seat was not the least bit yielding.

“Turn around?” He suggested and began to kiss her nape and shoulders. She groaned as he kneaded her breasts, nipping and sucking on her ears and neck. One hand slipped between her legs and he grinned as he discovered she was as aroused as he was, not that there was ever any doubt. He rubbed little circles and random patterns on her sensitive nub, making her squirm and try, unsuccessfully, to hold his cock and cause him as much delicious agony as he was causing her.

She held onto the only easily accessible body parts, his thighs, digging her fingers into him as he tormented her with his. “Enough of the previews!” Her snicker was somewhat forced as her vision blurred and her breath hitched.

“A little impatient, are we?” He tweaked a nipple making her shout and throw her head back into his chest, full force. He grunted, “Fuck, have you got rocks in there? Your head’s like a battering ram. Now, lift up a bit…” He gripped her waist to help lift her up and she flailed about, cursing at him.

“Tickling? Seriously? You want a tickle fight right now? The only thing I’m interested in you tickling is my cervix with your dick.” She half turned and laughed as he avoided a swat.

“Not even tickling your clit with my tongue?” He smirked.

“Listen Pal, if you don’t figure out how to get this roller coaster going, you might just have to. But tickle me again and I’m not responsible for your health and welfare.” She leaned back on his shoulder, trying to look up, and stuck her tongue out at him.

“Sorry – just trying to help. You keep sticking your tongue out at me and I’ll find another use for it, you saucy brat. Here, maybe this is better –“, he held her hips and, without invoking the wrath of Ticklish Kate, helped her lift up. He moaned his pleasure as she slowly slid down on him, taking all of him in. They stilled for a moment as her body adjusted to the fullness of him and she sighed happily.

Richard tried to thrust but his position on the shower bench and Kat’s full weight on him made it look like he was doing a weird mating dance, and an ineffectual one at that. “Ah, I think I need your help here … can you – ouch –“.

With a strangled chuckle she said, “Um, my feet don’t touch the floor and I have nothing but your
legs to hang onto.” She leaned onto his thighs and pushed herself up, sliding down as slowly as she could. “How’s that? Feels pretty cool from up here.” Kat giggled, “I think I’ve found a nickname for you – ‘Vlad, the Impaler’. Holy moly, I feel like a shiskkebab, and I think you’re tickling my tonsils from the inside.” She couldn’t stop laughing and nearly elbowed him in the stomach.

“We aim to please. But don’t laugh so hard, you’re pushing me out.” He awkwardly rolled his hips, eliciting more giggles from his beloved lunatic. He bit down on her neck like Vlad the vampire would do, making her shriek, jump and laugh harder.

“If you’re going to brand me, make sure it’s not visible to the general public.” She arched her back and turned her head to see his face and snickered at his expression.

“No more talking, Woman. You’re distracting me and this is hard work.”

“Seriously? It’s pretty easy going from up here.” She tried, unsuccessfully, to reach down to tickle his balls and almost fell off.

With his feet planted firmly on the floor, his hands braced against the seat and her hands using his thighs to lever against, they managed to get the job done with Kat nearly toppling off of him only twice. There was nothing graceful about the way they needed to move to achieve the necessary friction – but there was a lot of laughter and swear words.

Thoroughly clean and sufficiently sated, they left the shower and towelled each other dry, far more quietly than usual. Richard and Kat helped each other dress; him doing up the zipper in the back of her shirt; she buttoned his cuffs; both frequently stopping to hug or kiss.

They worked together to make a brunch of scrambled eggs, turkey bacon and fruit salad despite neither of them having much of an appetite. Richard was on his third cup of coffee when he broached the subject of how soon they could see each other again.

“What’s your schedule like in the next few months?” He asked, paying more attention to his plate than necessary.

She paused and took a deep breath, “I have the lectures at Laurier’s Biz School from January 20-27. February and March are a write off because every hand’s on deck during tax season. I won’t even be able to see my family during those two months – it’s insanely busy. After next week, things won’t lighten up until mid-April. What’s your schedule like?”

“I’ve got a commercial voice over and a photo shoot in New York this week. Then I’m back to England for Metropolis pre-production. After that I’ve a commercial and magazine layout in Japan and afterwards will head down to New Zealand to visit Peter and Jed. February 1st, we begin the shoot for Metropolis which will take 3 months or so. Late May I’ve got 10 days of promo for the Battle of Five Armies dvd release. Then, finally, some good news, I’ll be here for four to five months with pre-production and filming Alias Grace. It’s pretty bleak until we’re both free for a week in May.” He looked down at her, completely dejected.

“I can come to wherever you are once tax season is over.” She picked at her cuticles, avoiding his eyes and desperately willing the tears to stay beneath the surface.

He lifted her chin and gave her a sad little smile. “Hey, we went for a year and a half without seeing each other and then almost three months this fall. It isn’t ideal, but we’ve had worse. We can do this, right?!?”
She wondered if he was trying to convince her or himself. The sad truth, which both of them were avoiding like the plague, was that they each had careers and lives which did not intersect with the other. Her eyebrows knit together and she let out a huge sigh.

“Of course we can. It just fucking sucks, that’s all. We’ve been in this gorgeous little universe of our own for the last week and now we have to put on our big kid clothes and go out to play in the real world. Even if you didn’t have to leave, we couldn’t stay cocooned like this indefinitely. My head knows that but my heart is screaming ‘We’ve come too far to let it slip away’. Agggg now I’ve got a freaking Chicago song stuck in my head.”

*If you leave me now, you'll take away the biggest part of me*
*Uh no baby please don't go*
*And if you leave me now, you'll take away the very heart of me*
*Uh no baby please don't go*
*Uh I just want you to stay*

“I am so lame.” She swiped at her eyes and tried to disguise the mounting sniffles with a half-hearted chuckle.

Richard pulled her into his arms. It was a pisser that he finally found her but she was from another world. *Why couldn’t she be from England? Why a freaking Canadian accountant for fuck’s sake?* There were more problems than just a tax season but he wouldn’t think about those for the time being. *One sucky difficulty at a time, thank you very much.* He wanted to hang onto her and not let go. *Shit.* He grimaced at his own lame ear worm.

"Oh yeh, you think that’s bad? All I can hear in my head is Rick Astley singing Together Forever."

*There ain’t no mistaking*
*It’s true love we’re making*
*Something to last for all time*
*It’s never changing*
*Can’t you hear me, I’m saying*
*I want you for the rest of my life*

Katrina’s whole body went rigid, “Will you make me a promise?”

“Name it.” He rubbed her back in an attempt to soothe her, and maybe himself too.

She reached up to hold his face firmly in her hands, “You’d end it with me before starting with someone else, right? You have to promise that you will tell me. No matter how bad it is, don’t lie to me. Okay?”

It knocked the wind out of him that she thought he could even think of someone else. He was on the way to becoming angry when he realized she was in anguish. She’d been cheated on before and was still haunted by it. He led her over to a chair and pulled her onto his lap. “I will never, ever, ever lie to you or lead you on. I will never cheat on you. I promise.”

Kat let out the breath she was holding and snuggled into him with her head over his heart and her hands curled on his chest. In a small voice she said, “Thank you. I knew it but I just had to hear you say it anyway.”

“Would you make me the same promise?” He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.
“Pffft. Of course. There’s no chance that I could ever be with anyone else … and I’m not saying that because I am under your spell … which I am … but that’s not why … I’m just kind of a freak that way. I couldn’t cheat – not with my body or my heart.” She tilted her head to look up and gave him a crooked little smile. Shrugging her shoulders, she continued, “I love you and that’s that.”

They hugged and kissed, reassuring each other and themselves that they were real; their feelings and their future was real. Neither wanted to break the embrace but the time was quickly approaching for them to leave for the airport. It was an atypically quiet drive to Pearson International Airport with them making sad, furtive glances at one another.

Richard checked in with Air Canada, never letting go of Kat’s hand and frequently bringing it up to graze her knuckles with a kiss. They found a bench not far from the security gate and sat there, foreheads pressed together and hearts trembling.

She stroked his cheek and tried to smile. “Okay you big lug. Go get on your plane. Text and call all the time. And send me pictures of everything you’re doing so that I can see your world.”

“Pictures of everything I’m doing? You want to see my ‘world’? You naughty girl!” He teased, loving the reaction he got for it.

“As much as I would dearly love for you to send me pictures of your ‘world’, maybe a little internet discretion might be in order and not send anything you wouldn’t want your Grandma to see in the Sunday papers. What you’re having for lunch, the shoes you’re wearing, your face covered in shaving cream … anything rated G. This is your mission, should you choose to accept it.” She grinned at him and pictured him covered in shaving cream, taking a picture with his iPhone.

“You too. I want to know everything you’re thinking, doing, contemplating … the mundane and the exciting.” He reached into his carry-on and pulled out a gift wrapped box. “You know, we never did exchange Christmas presents properly. You gave me a wonderful holiday but I didn’t find the right time to give you the present I brought for you. I was, am, afraid you’d think it a little much but when I saw it, I just knew you had to have it.”

She gasped when she opened the large red velvet box. Inside was an exquisite ruby, sapphire, emerald and diamond necklace from Cartier. She stared at him in confusion, mouth agape, unable to form words.

“You always look so beautiful when you wear jewel tones … I just thought …” He shrugged and looked at her, hopeful she’d like it.

“It’s extraordinary - I’ve never seen anything it. Rich it’s so beautiful – I love it.” With shaky fingers she lifted it from the box and held it out to him to put on her. As he was slipping it over her head and smoothing her hair back, a shadow fell on them, prompting both to look up.

A woman was standing there with wide eyes, staring at Richard. “Wow, it is you, Thorin Oakenshield. My friends on Tumblr said you were in Toronto but I never dreamed I’d actually see you. Can I have your autograph and a picture? You’re amazing in The Battle of the Five Armies - I cried when you died.”

Richard sighed. “If you could wait for me over by the security area I will be happy to –“

“Hey, you’re the girl from the theatre last night. Can I have your picture too?” The fan persisted. “Everyone wants to know all about you.”

Kat looked to Richard and shook her head, “If you can just give us a couple of minutes we’ll be
right over and I’d be happy to take a photo of you with Richard.” She surreptitiously tried to hide the Cartier box, not wanting any more details of their private life to leak out than already had. She glanced at Richard again who gave her a barely perceptible nod.

“Sure, ok. I’ll just wait over there.” She tittered as she walked away, looking back at Richard and Kat every few feet. She was texting or tweeting or doing some other kind of social media blitz as she waited for them.

Richard was crestfallen. “I am so sorry Kat, we shouldn’t have been interrupted like that. I hate that you have to put up with this.”

Kat paused as she lifted her hand, silently asking and receiving permission to touch him in public. “You have nothing to apologize for – you didn’t conjure her up. It was her bad manners for barging in on what was clearly a private moment. I can understand her excitement though - she probably doesn’t even know how rude she was. And, hey, this is part of your life, silly man, don’t apologize for it.” She gave him an indulgent smile as she brushed the hair from his brow.

He rested his face on her palm and closed his eyes. “It’s not always like this – often, but not always. Will you be able to stand it Kat?” He held his breath waiting for her answer.

“Of course, Doofus. For the most part, I’m grateful for your fans! Where would you, or any actor, be without them? Hmm, ‘in for a Penny, in for a pound’. Isn’t that what you said last night? Well, if that’s the case – “ She winked and snaked her hands around his neck and drew his face close to hers while she played with the curls on his nape. “Let’s give them something to talk about.” She kissed him and happily sighed when his infinitesimal hesitation dissolved and he kissed back. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, drawing her as close as sitting on a bench would allow.

He broke the kiss and buried his face in her hair. “Love you.”

“I’m fond of you too.” She smiled and stood, pulling him up with her. “Now, let’s go take care of your adoring public. You walk and I’ll just float over on my lovely necklace-cloud-of-joy.” She touched the beautiful stones and tucked the Cartier box securely in her purse.

A convenience of airports was the ubiquitous occurrence of hugs, kisses and picture taking. Fortunately the exchange with the fan brought no further attention to them. Katrina sufficiently distracted the woman to evade having her own photo taken. Richard said thank you and goodbye to his fan, encouraging her to leave, which she reluctantly did. Once he was confident they had some semblance of privacy again, he returned his attention to Kat.

“I’m so happy you like the necklace Kat. I bought it in London before we said our I Love You’s and I worried it was too much for friends. It looks beautiful on you!” He grinned from ear to ear, delighted his gift was a good one.

“I’ll be sure to wear it the next time you see me … your necklace and nothing else.” She hugged him, slipping her hands under his coat and grabbed his bum, giving it a quick squeeze.

He groaned and rolled his eyes heavenward. “You are a horrible, horrible woman. How can you say something like that as I’m about to get on a plane … alone? C’mon You – gimme your face.” He framed her face with his hands and smiled as his lips brushed hers. He savoured every bit of her – the taste of her lip balm; the sigh as she parted her lips for him; the tentative, subtle greeting of her tongue to his; her smile when he groaned at the feel of her against him. He breathed her in and held her scent captive in his heart. He tasted the salt of her tears as they rolled down her face, drenching their lips.
Richard hugged her tightly, pressing her head against his chest. “Texts, emails, phone calls, letters, parcels … I want all of it … all the time.” He pulled back to look into her eyes. “I love you Katrina!”

“I love you Richard. Call me when you’re back to your house.” She could barely speak through the sobs which were wracking her body. She definitely couldn’t see through the tears flooding her eyes. He brushed them away with his thumbs and nodded, kissing her one last time before he turned to the security gates.

She watched as he went through the scanners and collected his belongings. He looked back at her, trying to smile and raising one hand in an open handed wave goodbye. Her heart fell through her chest and every limb filled with lead. She’d never known such heartache and loneliness before, not even when John ended their marriage without warning.
Leaving on a Jet Plane, Don't Know When I'll be Back Again

Chapter Summary

Richard leaves for New York

(edited February 8, 2015)

If she’d have been thinking clearly, Katrina would have used a limo service to take Richard to the airport. Driving in her condition was not a good idea because she was distracted, crying and probably a road hazard. Her cell phone dinged three times and it was killing her not to be able to read the new text messages. Traffic on Highway 427 was a bugger and received a generous amount of profanity in recognition thereof. With gritted teeth Kat rode the brake more than the gas and eventually hit full stop. Fucking traffic. Her cell phone was peeking out the top of her purse, begging her to take a look at her messages. What the hell, she was stopped, might as well.

Traffic started to move again as she chuckled and tossed the phone back into her purse. It was a tedious slog but she eventually made it home, throwing her keys into the dish on the front hall table and sighing heavily. His coffee cup was beside the dish, right where he’d left it when they left just a few hours before. Walking into the kitchen didn’t make it any better - there was his cereal bowl and spoon sitting on the counter. Without thinking she scooped up the milk on the bottom of the bowl and put it in her mouth. She then proceeded to give herself a knock on the noggin. Was she actually sucking on a spoon just because it had been in his mouth? She had just reached an all-time low of ridiculousness and shook her head in exasperation. She was long passed her teen years and yet she felt the intense emotions of her love-struck teenage self.

She was surrounded by memories and by traces of him everywhere. A wine glass on the coffee table; snuggles on the sofa; a bunched up sock under the book case; and outrageous memories of crazy-good sex. Kat decided she’d used up her quota of self-pity for the day so she gave her head a
shake and tried to find something productive to do. After completing the mundane tasks of laundry, vacuuming, bills, dishes, she wandered aimlessly around the house with a growing feeling of cabin fever. She changed into her yoga clothes and picked up her mat hoping that she could burn off some restlessness and that taking nearly two weeks off wouldn’t leave her in agony the next day.

Just as she was picking up her keys from the dish her phone dinged.

She took a detour from her yoga plans and decided to have a quick peek to see if their public outings had hit the internet. Kat still had her Facebook and Tumblr accounts so they were her first stop. Oh boy. There were pictures, video and gifs of them at The Royal Alex and at Pearson Airport just hours before. She wasn’t prepared for the volume of reactions but the comments themselves were close to what she expected. The Army was happy for him and had nothing but lovely things to say about Richard and about her too. There were a few bitchy posts including everything from her being a ‘beard’ to criticism about her height and lack of sufficient glamour. It was disconcerting to read the few posts which hoped he’d dump her; those which wished her harm; and two which called for her death. Fortunately no one had figured out who she was so her anonymity was intact for the time being. She’d have to talk to Richard’s PR reps sooner rather than later to make sure she didn’t do or say anything to cause him difficulties and she wanted to know how to protect her own private life.

She sent him a text but he didn’t respond right away which was to be expected. It would be a while before he’d have disembarked and able to text again. It was best she continue with her plans to do some serious sweating at yoga. She loved the instructors at her Moksha studio – they had a sense of humour which didn’t evaporate when they struck the gong to begin their sessions.

Two hours later she was stretched, calmed, showered and back home reviewing the notes for her lectures at Wilfred Laurier University. She had always appreciated the Socratic method of teaching and fully intended to use it at Laurier. Over the course of three periods she’d present background on an interesting business; have the classes break up into groups to conduct a case study; and have the groups present their analysis/recommendations in their tutorial sessions. Katrina’s firm had been doing the accounting for Northern Education Resources Inc. (NERI) for over fifteen years and, because of her fondness for the owners, Kat had often provided consulting services free of charge. They had been struggling in the last few years and even though she understood why, she wasn’t able to convince Josh & Nikki to make the changes

RAC, we’re on the web. I’m still unknown – big yay. Have your people call me this week. Jolly luv ya xoxoxoxo
she knew were necessary. She was delighted that they agreed for her to use their business as the case study and looked forward to hearing the results.

Katrina enjoyed the objective, clear cut nature of accounting but she veered sharply away from any stereotype of ‘number cruncher’ with her vehement adherence to consideration of the people behind the numbers. She hoped to plant the seed of the importance of the human factor in the students she’d be speaking with.

As well as authorization to release all of the financial documents she wished to use, NERI had also agreed to allow Kat to create a short video. She would introduce the personal aspect of NERI: their goals; their employees; their office environment; and a testimonial from two customers. She’d never had a professor present such warm fuzzy materials in any undergrad or MBA class but she sincerely believed that richer, more effective recommendations would be forthcoming if the students had a better grasp of the big picture. She disagreed that business decisions should remove the human element to avoid being sentimental. To Kat, the goal was to avoid being idyllically romantic but to embrace sentiment. It was human beings who had to agree to changes, to enact them, to encourage their staff and customers to buy into them. Stakeholders were people with sentiments and their viewpoints were critical to the success of any business.

Her stomach interrupted her work, letting her know she’d passed dinner time a while ago. She didn’t have the motivation to cook so she ordered arugula and passion fruit salad and lake perch with fresh fruit salsa from Eat Fresh Be Healthy and requested delivery. At the last minute she added in an order of coconut panna cotta with butternut squash and grinned in anticipation. Richard would have loved it and she would have loved to share it with him but he was – which reminded her, he hadn’t answered her text.

She hoped he was having a great night but not too great because she wanted him to miss her enough for it to sting at least a little. It was absolutely true that misery loved company and she grinned at the thought of them relieving each other’s misery. Oh, it was going to be a long, long four months.

The last two weeks had been so packed full of activity she was at loose ends without an agenda to follow. She made a mental list of all the things she’d neglected while Richard was there and proceeded to make plans.

Kat called her Hospice client and arranged to meet her the following day. Rose sounded very poor, much worse than Kat would have expected having seen her less than two weeks previous. The very nature of being a visiting friend for those approaching the end of their days meant she was well aware of the sudden turns people could take under the tremendous pressure of whatever illness was claiming them. She just hadn’t expected Rose to experience such a dramatic downwards turn over Christmas. She wanted to speak with her Hospice Coordinator for an update on Rose’s situation but the offices were closed for the day so she left a voice mail for her Coordinator to call.

Kat called her sister Dawn and chatted for over an hour with her sister and her niece and nephews, laughing at their antics. Dawn and her family lived in Thunder Bay, Ontario and she didn’t get to see them often. Her favourite trips to the top of Lake Superior were with Leigh, the two of them making the long trip to see their sister together every year. She decided to see Dawn and the kids
before Richard was free in April. That would be both a good visit and something to look forward to while she continued the infernal pining for Richard.

Leigh wasn’t home when she called so she left a message and sat tapping her fingers in boredom and frustration. It was too early for bed and too late to go visiting friends. She checked the listings and there were no movies she wanted to see. She huffed and fidgeted and paced. She looked at the books on her bedside table just waiting to be read and couldn’t be bothered. She looked at the TV guide and nothing caught her fancy. She pulled up Netflix to see if there were any new episodes of Walking Dead and cursed. Of course MI-5/Spooks was right there on her Recently Watched spot.

“Argh. What the hell. Season 8 but absolutely no Season 9.” She muttered to herself. Half a bottle of wine and two hours later she turned off the TV and toddled off to ready for sleep. She was lying in bed rubbing moisturizer onto her hands when the phone rang. RICHARD! She grabbed the phone quickly but her slick hands couldn’t get a good grip and it slipped out of her hands, falling to the floor.

“I’m here, I’m here. Phone dropped. Don’t hang up!” She shouted as she tumbled out of bed trying to reach it. With a thud and lots of cursing she took hold of the slippery phone and said, “Sorry ‘bout that. I dropped the phone and fell out of bed trying to catch it. How are you Hunny? How’d the twins work out on the plane? What time did you get home? Did you have a good time tonight? Are you ready for the voice over tomorrow? -”

“Woah. Take it easy. I’ve been on Rapid Fire and they don’t shoot questions that quickly,” Richard chuckled at her loquacious inquisition. They talked for over an hour about nothing and everything. Richard could hear the longing in her voice just as he was sure she could hear it in his. Neither wanted to hang up but it was after midnight and both had to be up early for work the following day.

“Say ‘elephant shoes’ in the mirror,” Kat requested. When he grumbled that he was comfy in bed she snickered, “Trust me. Just do it.” She could hear him let out a huff and assumed he was walking to a mirror.

“Fine. Elephant shoes. So? Is that supposed to conjure you or something?”

She laughed at him, asking him to say it a few more times. He wasn’t seeing anything special so she gave him a clue. “Okay, just mouth the words and watch your lips.”

“OH. It looks like saying ’I love you’.”

“Exactly. So that’s our secret little signal to each other. If you ever say anything about elephant shoes or any pachyderm footwear I’ll know it’s just for me.”

“I love you, you nut job.” He chuckled as she made kiss blowing sounds.

“I love you one more than you can ever say.” She laughed and hung up before he could offer a retort.

With Richard’s laughter fresh in her ears, sleep wasn’t as elusive as she’d feared it might be. Kat snuggled into his pillow which still held his scent and before long was skating pirouettes in dreamland.
Kat heard her phone ping as she brushed her teeth. As she was picking up the phone she thought she should give Richard his own ring tone and notification sound so she’d know when it was him.

Kat smiled as she went about her day. She popped into the office to check on things and return several phone calls. There was a great deal of correspondence to catch up on but fortunately her assistant had prioritized it for her so she chose to respond only to the items on the hot pile. She checked her phone periodically in case she missed a text from Richard, but she didn’t and she knew she probably wouldn’t because he was working. She checked again anyway, just in case, and then rolled her eyes at her own silliness. Just as she was considering where to go for lunch, Sylvie, a junior partner, knocked on her door and invited her to lunch. Sylvie had become a friend as well as a colleague and Kat was delighted to have an impromptu lunch with her.

Sylvie knew that Katrina was in love with her newish boyfriend but she thought Richard’s name was Rick which was how Kat had always referred to him. She also knew that Rick was coming to spend New Year’s with Kat and wanted all the juicy details.

“It was the best few days of my life, Syl. We are in love and it’s fluffy and wonderful and sappy and I’m a wreck.” Kat beamed from ear to ear as she gushed to her friend. “He’s from England, travels a lot and with tax season coming up, we won’t be able to see each other until mid-April. Syl, what am I doing? This is nuts, isn’t it?” The fact that she was still grinning belied her claims of doubts – or maybe it proved her insanity.

“Kat you are the most pragmatic person I know. You also have a great bullshit detector. Long distance sucks but you know if he’s worth it or not. You’ll figure it out.” Sylvie encouraged her.

“Pffft. Yeh right. Where was this supposed bullshit detector when John was screwing around?”

“Awww he doesn’t count. You rightfully trusted him for years before he could bullshit you. And he was downright pathological! Is Rick that mendacious? Doesn’t sound like it but trust your instincts – just don’t doubt yourself!”

“My instincts say that I love him more than the sun and the moon and the stars. My instincts also say that we live in two different worlds and this probably won’t end well. Should I just cut my loses now before it gets even messier?”

Sylvie would have given her a stern lecture had she not seen the expression on Kat’s face. There was no way Kat was about to toss in the towel on Rick. Wild horses wouldn’t be able to drag her heart from his. Sylvie teased, “Yeah, right. Whatever. You just keep telling yourself that you have a choice. The only thing you have to figure out is how you two are going to be together.”

“You’re right, Syl. There is no choice, not for me. I love him just like in the stupid stories. It’s pretty nauseating … but it’s so freaking wonderful that I don’t care! Syl, save me!!!! I’m turning into a sap.” She laughed and changed the subject to Sylvie’s life, wanting to get caught up on her friend’s holiday shenanigans which never failed to amuse.
Katrina spent three hours with Rose, her Hospice client. She’d been volunteering with Toronto Hospice for six years and had met many interesting people, both clients and fellow volunteers. Rose had been diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma four years past and had been doing well. However, nearly two years prior they found an extranodal site and her LDH levels had increased significantly. No one ever made the guess on how much time a person had left on the planet, but it wasn’t difficult to see the changes in one’s physical state, pain and energy levels and to know when time drew nigh. Before Christmas Kat would have thought Rose had at least several months left, upon seeing her it was clear that, without an unexpected reprieve, Rose would probably not be with them on Valentine’s Day.

Rose’s husband, Bill, was delighted to see Kat. He liked as well as deeply appreciated the time she spent with his wife. Sometimes he would go out to meet with friends, sometimes he’d just read in the den when Kat was there. Her visits provided him with time without worry - he could spend a couple of hours knowing Rose was comfortable, safe and as happy as she could be under the circumstances. Rose would never tell him the things the two women chatted about but the way she giggled and blushed, he would guess it was a ‘woman thing’.

What he didn’t know was that Kat went to great lengths to indulge Rose’s secret enjoyment of dirty jokes. Kat sought the guidance of the Hospice Volunteer Coordinator with regards to the naughty humour. Hospice was adamant that relationships and communications always be ‘appropriate’ and that vulgarity did not fall into that category. It made Kat’s job considerably more difficult in that she had to find jokes that were risqué without being too rude. It was a fine line and sometimes she suspected she crossed to the wrong side of it, but Rose’s enjoyment assuaged her conscience.

Kat loved hearing stories of Rose’s childhood, marriage and tales of her kids. Rose usually enjoyed reliving the highlights of her life and seeing Kat’s animated reactions. Sometimes Rose asked Kat about herself, appreciating the chance to talk about things other than her illness and her own memories. In the last couple of years it was rare for Rose to feel useful so she was especially proud when she’d been a huge comfort to Kat when the divorce papers were served. Kat’s job was to be a friend to Rose but Rose had become just as important to Kat.

Even through her pain, Rose could see that Kat was radiant. She didn’t have the energy to reminisce or even to talk much so she asked Kat to do the talking – especially if it had to do with whatever was responsible for making her glow. For the second time that day Kat told a friend about Richard and with Rose, she used his real name. She tried to keep things ‘appropriate’ but she could see that Rose wanted – nay, needed – more. She made Rose promise to keep the secret that Richard was a famous actor and she pulled up internet photos of him which made Rose swoon and smile through her pain.

Rose exhausted easily and Kat gently encouraged her to rest while she gently teased Rose that she needed some time to send naughty emails to Richard. Rose fell into a fitful sleep but didn’t wake when Bill returned. She let Bill know how Rose faired during their visit and told him that she was flexible, able to alter her schedule to support them in whatever way they needed. Bill was touched by Kat’s loyalty and kindness to his wife and to him.

Not for the first time Kat was boggled by the generosity and trust her Hospice friends placed in her. The one commodity they had the least of, time, they shared with her. While it might be helpful in some little way for Bill to have a small amount of time to himself, by accepting it he lost time with his love. Rose trusted Kat and shared things with her she’d never spoken of before in her life, honouring Kat with her confidences. Kat’s friends thought volunteering with Hospice was depressing but in fact, it was the opposite; it was uplifting and rewarding and amazing to spend
time with these wonderful people. She called in her update to the Hospice office and let them know that she would make herself available more often as Rose’s journey wound down.

While she’d been with Rose her phone was on Airplane Mode and so she hadn’t received any texts. Turning it back on to call Hospice, she noticed there were four new messages.

She laughed and wondered who had given Richard the list of Thorin pick up lines from Tumblr. She had sufficient reasons to suspect that he visited fan sites more than he admitted and she didn’t know if that should make her laugh or shiver. Whatever the case, he needed to be more careful with his texts because he could easily get hacked and then there would be a tabloid frenzy neither of them wanted. If he wouldn’t want his Granny to read it, he shouldn’t be writing it … even if he did make her laugh with the silliest, corniest jokes known to man. As she pressed send her phone rang.

“Hi Kat. Can I say naughty things or are you going to censor me on the phone too?” Richard teased her.

She smirked, “Oh I think you can say anything you’d like. What’s on your mind?”

His groan was almost painful. “Argh … I would dearly love to tell you all the filthy things that are on my mind right now but I’m taking the red-eye to London and there’s a car coming for me in a few minutes. Let’s just summarize like this: kissing; naked; hands; fingers; tongues; shouting each other’s names; and collapsing in an exhausted heap of sweaty happiness. Does that cover it?”

“Only if you want me to whimper in frustration. You are a cruel bastard, aren’t you!? You say lovely things like that and then just leave me hanging … tsk, tsk. All I can say is that I hope you get really hard and frustrated every time you look at the washroom door on that plane … thinking of everything I’m gonna do and you’re gonna do when we fly together. Just remember: kissing; hands; fingers; tongues; mouths; quivering right down to your boots; and trying not to shout my name even though I’m blowing your mind … as well as your gorgeous, delicious, huge, fabulous cock.” She couldn’t refrain from snickering, knowing exactly how nasty that last taunt was since he always got a bit giddy when she lauded his penis. “While you’re flying over the Atlantic I’ll be flying solo here … cumming while I remember the way you made me feel this week and all the ways I’m going to make you feel.”

His groan was dripping with the pain of suppression. “You are evil. You are nasty. You will pay for this! The car’s here or you’d be in big trouble, Woman. Now help me get downstairs without embarrassing myself. Tell me something normal that will distract me from this raging erection.”

“I’m doing a video for my class at Laurier. Is that normal enough to help?” She teased, “I’ll just keep the fact that it’s going to be a video on how to masturbate when your boyfriend is too far away to free you from the agony of the crushing grip of relentless arousal.”

“I hate you. Have I told you that? No? Well I do. You’re evil and I hate you … your juicy lips, your wicked tongue, your tits, your belly button, that freckle on the inside of your thigh, the feel of your sex, the way you taste, the way you squirm under my hand, how tight you are around me, and the way you giggle when I use my mouth, nose and fingers all at the same time. I hate the way you
look at me with all of your feelings plain on your face, the way you absentmindedly touch me all the time, the way you purr, the way your eyes light up when you tell me you love me. I hate you so much … I think it’s going to take forever to discover all the ways I hate you. Vile, nasty woman! I want a copy of that video. Hang on a minute, I’m just getting into the car.”

Kat poured herself a glass of wine and sat back in her favourite chair waiting for Richard to come back on the line. It was sickening how much she loved him and she couldn’t have cared less if that was teeth rotting sappy-sweetness. When she closed her eyes she could almost feel him hovering above her with the same electric anticipation she felt during that split second before he kissed her. He would be so close, but not touching and every fibre of her being was waiting, aching for him. That night would provide no joyful union … nor would any in the near future. Despite her best intentions, tears threatened to spoil the lighthearted banter they were enjoying. She took several deep breaths to calm the overwhelming feelings and was having some minor success when he spoke again.

“I’m in the car all set for LaGuardia. I can’t speak much but can listen. Tell me all about your day.”

She could hear the smile in his voice and loved the genuine interest he had in her life. She told him all about her lunch with Sylvie, her time with Rose, her pathetic performance at yoga and the progress she’d made on her lecture. She didn’t tell him anything about stalking his fans online. She forgot to talk about the growing interest in his love life and the public pitfalls she needed help to avoid.

He told her all about the commercial voice over and the photo shoot, making her laugh at the crazy things they had him do for the sake of a unique photo or sound byte. They continued to chatter until Richard had to hang up at the security gate. He was glad Kat had close friends and family for many reasons. Not the least of which was because he knew Rose’s impending passing would hit her very hard and he wouldn’t be there to comfort her. He sighed, rueful that so much space would separate them for far too long. He was well on the way to becoming morose when he noticed the door to the restroom open and a young woman stepped out. Suddenly all he could think about was their earlier conversation about airplane restrooms and Kat’s dirty promises. He chuckled when it sunk in that it was going to be a long, uncomfortable flight. He’d simply have to spend his time devising all of the ways he would pay her back for his discomfort.
The next two weeks flew by. Between Rose, her lecture series and the advent of tax season, Katrina was hopping busy. Richard’s schedule wasn’t quite as hectic but he managed to keep himself well enough occupied. He found, rather quickly, that being idle was depressing and destructive. Too much time on his hands led to missing Kat, doubting his choice on doing Metroplois and darkening his mood to the extent that his friends commented on it. Certainly his gnawed off fingernails and bloodied cuticles could attest to his anxiousness.

The difference made it annoyingly difficult for them to speak and FaceTime. Richard was in bed by the time Kat got home from work and he left for work long before Kat awoke. Their daytimes were consumed with responsibilities, holding little to no opportunity for private conversations and the novelty of taking random pictures to illustrate their day worn off quickly (but their love of bad jokes did not). He loved to hear the ping on his phone to let him know there was a message waiting from Kat, more often than not groaning or shaking his head, and it made him miss her just that much more. He craved her voice, her warmth, the twinkle in her eye, the love in her heart. He craved everything about her and he was pissed off that he had to wait so long to see her again.

As the day approached for Kat’s first session at Laurier’s Business School she developed a nauseating case of stage fright. She had reviewed her presentation, the video, the financial documents, the background on NERI, the assignment and had rehearsed multiple times but it did little to calm her frazzled nerves.

The whole drive from Toronto to Waterloo saw her nervousness mushroom into anxiety bordering on panic. An hour before class, the Assistant Dean informed her that they would be video recording her sessions for possible use in their online extension courses. Kat was so dizzy she was terrified she would pass out. She needed Richard right then, right there to either reassure her or say something funny or to whisper naughty promises or … or anything to distract her. Screw cell phone charges, she had to hear his voice. He picked up on the fourth ring, just as she’d slumped thinking she’d missed him.

“Hey, Babes. This is a surprise – everything ok?” Richard asked.

“No, not ok. I’m either having a heart attack or a ruptured ulcer. I just called to say good-bye and that I hope you have a long and happy life – don’t mourn me too long.” She wiped her eyes and tried, unsuccessfully, to hold back the panic.

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing your lecture today? What’s happened, Love?”

“They’re going to record it and might use it for other courses. Richard I can’t do this. I don’t know how to get out of it and I think I’m going to be sick.”
He smiled and flashed back to every time he went on stage complete with the cold sweats, the stomach cramps, the dizziness, and the abject terror. “Do you have any fly-away boogies hanging from your nose?”

“What? What are you talking about? Of course not. Richard, don’t be ridiculous – this is serious! Don’t make fun of me!”

“I’m not making fun Katrina. Unless you have some embarrassing thing hanging off your body, like a boogie or toilet paper on your shoe you have nothing to worry about. You know more about NERI than anyone else, you love your subject matter and you have prepared well. Hell, I think I could almost do your presentation because you’ve taught me so much. You can’t be stumped, you are bright, have a lovely speaking voice and you are offering something unique – the human factor. I’m glad they’re recording it because you have the opportunity to enlighten even more young minds … and I’d love to see it so that I can prove I’m right – you will be outstanding!”

“But I need a hug.” If he wasn’t going to tell her she was right to run for the hills, she’d just have to pout.

“Put it on my tab.” He grinned, knowing she’d be fine.

“Fine. You’re rather insensitive, you know. I thought I could count on you to sympathize with me. I may have to rethink this ‘Richard is the nicest man on the planet’ thing. You might just be a turd.”

“Empathise? Yes. Pity? No. Encourage you to give up without a try? Never. Promise you’ll let me know how fantastic it went as soon as the kids leave the hall?”

“Whatever. Later. Elephant shoes.” She smiled as she hung up the phone and decided she’d move a waste basket beside the podium just in case she did indeed get sick. When she was a student it would have been massively humorous to see a teacher succumb to nerves like that.

The Assistant Dean introduced Katrina, reading from her c.v. and expanding upon how important it was for students to have real life examples of the principles they were learning. When Kat grasped the projection system remote control and stepped up to the podium she saw many smiling faces, eager for her to speak. She followed the old rule: tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em; tell ‘em; and then tell ‘em what you told ‘em.

Kat gave them an introduction to what she’d be sharing with them, the actual presentation and then a summary of what was covered. She provided an in-depth description of NERI, a company who provided curriculum and educational resources to remote communities unable to maintain mainstream community schools. She explained why she believed in the company, their successes & challenges and what she hoped they’d learn from the experience of doing the case study. She showed them the video which generated several interested, intelligent comments.

Kat logged on to the password protected website she created for the project. There was a positive hum when she showed them the bulletin board feature which she would monitor for any questions or comments. She had uploaded five years’ worth of financial records, production and marketing history and projections, the video she’d already played and a summary of her notes for each session. She explained that during the next lecture, they would be divided into groups of six and begin their case study, being prepared to provide observations and recommendations at their next scheduled tutorial and they were to upload their reports to the website.

Throughout her presentation she hadn’t heard any grumblings and had looked for, but did didn’t see, anyone nodding off. There were a few relevant, thoughtful questions which she was easily
able to answer with confidence. Overall, it went better than she’d dared hope. And she didn't get sick.

The student who had been filming the session approached Kat and congratulated her on a good class. He had filmed many professors and guest speakers, finding that it was hit or miss on their effectiveness and as he was leaving he told her he looked forward to her next lecture. Kat was chuffed called Richard as soon as she was alone. Unfortunately he didn’t pick up so she went with her backup plan, a text.

Kat called Josh and Nikki to let them know the class went well. They were delighted and reiterated their hope for a proposal which would help them significantly improve the prospects of their beloved company. Not one to count her chickens before they hatched, Kat was cautiously optimistic that the students would provide intelligent and relevant reports which Josh and Nikki would be able use.

Kat returned to her office with a take-out lunch and cleared most of the to-do items from her agenda. She had an exceptionally productive day and looked forward to her evening.

She was feeling buoyant as she pulled into Rose and Jim’s driveway, eager to share her day with Rose. The last few weeks hadn’t been kind to Rose and more and more Rose like to hear stories from Kat’s day. Kat looked for every honest opportunity to provide her with good news or a pleasant distraction. Her phone pinged as she locked her car and pocketed the keys. She smiled when she read his text – he made a damn good cheerleader.

Rose was happy to hear all about Katrina’s day in University and smiled when Kat let her read the text from Richard. She pat Kat’s hand and said, “That boy’s a keeper Katrina. You move heaven and earth for him. Trust me on this, love is not the most important thing …it’s the only thing!” Rose squeezed her hand and gave her a wink. They had a brief conversation because Rose tired so quickly however she rested easy when Kat read to her from *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Several times Rose grimaced but Kat couldn’t tell if it was from pain or because the book was so badly written. It had been a joke between them that if Kat had put a bit of smut in *The Love of My Life*, she’d have written a better story than *Fifty Shades*. They had snickered every single time the ‘heroine’ said the phrase ‘inner goddess’. With Rose’s declining situation, having something amusing she could give Rose was like a gift to her. Kat adjusted Rose’s blankets and left the room when she began to snore lightly. Jim saw her to the door, looking more worn and haggard than she’d ever seen him.

“Jim, I can stay if you’d like to get some sleep. I’ll stay right in the room so I’m there if she needs anything.” Kat wanted to hug him and take his pain away even though she knew it was impossible to do so.

Jim tried, unsuccessfully, to give her a reassuring smile, “You are a sweet girl to offer – don’t think I don’t appreciate you. But this is my job. The doctors say it won’t be long now so I want to spend
my nights with her. Thank you Katrina.”

“If you need anything, and I mean ANYTHING, you call me, ok?” She was worried about Jim. Rose, having had accepted her situation, felt as much peace as a person could under the circumstances. However Jim was lost in a sea of pain and grief. Her passing would be harder on him than on Rose herself. She hadn’t been great at sticking to the rules and wasn’t about to start so she did hug Jim, tightly. “Call me Jim. I mean it. I love you too!”

He nodded as he hugged her back. “We know it Katrina. And we love you too. I’ll see you tomorrow, drive safe.”

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There was a loud ringing as Katrina toed off her boots in her front hall. Richard! She ran to grab the phone and barked her shin on a chair. Wincing, swearing and out of breath she answered the call just in time before voice mail could kick in.

She heard his distinctive chuckle on the other end of the line, “Are you having some kind of wild orgy or something? You sound crazed.”

“Nah. I hit my leg trying to get to the phone before you went to voice mail. It hurts like a bugger. But who cares about that?! How are YOU? We haven’t talked in days – it’s so good to hear your stupid voice!” She inspected her shin for blood and rubbed it gingerly.

“I’m great but I called to find out all about you and your day. Got your text about your class this morning and I couldn’t be happier for you! Tell me all about it Kat – I wish I was there to celebrate with you. We’ll have to add a bottle of Veuve Cliquot to our reunion list.”

They continued to talk for two hours, only drawing to a close when Katrina realized it was nearly 4:30 am in London and Richard had work in the morning. As was always the case, her emotions were all over the map when she said goodbye … warm fuzzies from speaking with him and painful longing from missing him all over again. To help soothe her melancholy, she dabbed a little bit of his shower gel onto a facecloth and laid it on the pillow beside her. It wasn’t exactly the right scent because he was missing from it, but it gave her that feeling that he was close by and she was glad for that. Three weeks down, fifteen more to go before she would be with him again.

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The next three days were bitter sweet. She’d completed her second lecture at Laurier with decent success. She was clear with the students that NERI was at a crossroads and that their recommendations could very well affect its real life future. Kat reviewed the case study materials and expectations with the students who seemed eager to get to it. There had been many questions on the website which impressed her with their genuine interest and commitment to the assignment. When she spoke to Josh and Nikki about the students’ positivity for NERI, they were encouraged. Nikki was so taken with the online comments Kat shared with her, she asked if she could be present for the presentations. Kat was delighted with the idea and arranged to pick her up on Friday morning on the way to Waterloo.

The bitter part of the bitter sweet was Rose. She was fading fast and Kat didn’t think she’d last the month. Rose hadn’t been conscious for more than a few seconds each of the last two times Kat visited. Jim was trying to be stoic but deep lines of pain were etched on his face and his eyes were hidden by dark shadows. Katrina checked in with him and dropped off a meal in between visits.

Kat arranged to attend five tutorials on Friday. Each group was given 5 minutes to present their
oral report which summarized the written work they uploaded to the website. At the end of the day Kat was greatly encouraged to have heard nearly every group identify the human factor as an asset. Nikki was thrilled to hear the variety of recommendations the students had, most of which she considered to be realistic and worth trying. The Proposals shared many common strategies:

**Priority: Return to core business**

- Return to their original purpose which was to provide scope and sequence compliant curriculum
- Sell off all technology and school supply resale products
- Investigate discounts and or referral fees from current suppliers for technology and school supplies

**Marketing**

- Engage in aggressive marketing which promotes their unique offering
- Expand teacher support and student interaction
- Increase offering of custom educational units for local geography, history, culture, language.
- Make better use of web-based platforms including WebEx, streaming videos, bulletin boards, group chat, etc.

**Production**

- Use just in time print-on-demand for all curriculum and resource orders by current warehouse staff
- No longer keep inventory
- Investment in hardware and software would be required
- Production of video segments for unique needs

**Research and Development**

- Track jurisdiction educational requirements
- Source curriculum materials and resources
- Priority should be given to this department to ensure the unique offering of NERI is routinized nationally and to expand internationally

**Finance**

- Cash flow will be loosened by no longer maintaining costly inventory
- New focus of Marketing and Production will require more funds than eliminating resale inventory can provide
- Seek investment or business load to fund requirements of production, marketing and research

- Consider incorporating and initiating the sale of shares to raise capital

They had an animated conversation on the hour and a half drive home. Nikki was more on board with making drastic changes than she’d ever been before, undoubtedly due to the strain NERI had been under and her growing exhaustion with the struggle to simply keep up. She and Josh had started talking about closing the doors because the future had looked increasingly bleak. Kat promised to provide a written summary to Nikki and Josh and to spend time with them reviewing all of the suggestions.

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After dropping Nikki off at the NERI office, Kat returned to her own. She sorely wished Richard was there to share her elation at a challenge well met but he wasn’t, so she sighed and ploughed through her messages. She sent an email to Richard and thought, not for the first time, that the whole electronic thing was getting old. No matter how witty the reply or explicit the teasing, it didn’t replace the warmth of his breath caressing her cheek as he whispered in her ear. Nothing replaced the thousands of expressions in his eyes or the many different kinds of his embraces. It was certain that she couldn’t live in isolation from him indefinitely.

Kat was reviewing the online submissions from the Laurier students when her cell phone rang. Jim called to tell her that Rose was passing and if she’d like to be there, he’d be glad for her to be by their side. It was against her Hospice training but her hesitation did not last, she told Jim she’d be right over and packed up as quickly as possible.

On the drive to Jim and Rose’s home, she reflected on everything Rose had taught her and every way she’d broken the rules with her. She knew that she’d stepped over the line many times with Rose but couldn’t feel regret over it. If she had to do it over again, she would have bent the rules without doubt or guilt in order to give Rose her unrestricted affection and camaraderie.

Rose’s son opened the door when she knocked. He smiled through his tears when he saw Kat and gathered her up in a big hug. “Mom would be glad you were here. She’d count on you to say something under your breath to make her smile when all of us are sobbing in our soup. You should go right in Katrina, it won’t be long now.”

Jim looked up as she entered the room. A sob broke free and tears flowed down his ruddy cheeks. “Our girl is leaving us Kat. Come say bye.” He held out his hand to her and drew her to Rose’s side.

She had heard the distinct rattling breathing only once before and knew its meaning. She leaned in close to Rose, kissing her cheek and whispering in her ear, “You have done well Rose. Your life has been filled with love, integrity, passion and hope. You have given these incredible gifts to your children who are passing them on to their children. What a legacy you leave behind, dear friend. I love you and will watch over your family for you while you wait to be reunited with them in heaven. I look forward to reading smut with you again and am trusting you to find all the really cheesy stuff while you’re kicking back upstairs. Bon voyage.” She kissed her cheek again and brought Jim back to her side.

Over the next hour Rose’s breaths came further and further apart. They didn’t realize she’d taken her last right away and were momentarily confused when they saw the tension in her ease. Her expression softened and Jim saw his beautiful, serene bride once again. It was their daughter who recognized her Mom was gone. Kat left the room to give them privacy as they grappled with the arrival of the dreaded end. She made tea and hot chocolate, more to give herself something to occupy her hands than to think Jim’s family wanted or needed something to drink.

Kat was at the sink sobbing quietly when she felt Jim’s hand on her shoulder. She turned and embraced him tightly, silently sharing his grief. He looked at the trays she’d placed on the counter and smiled. “You are always taking care of us Kat. What would we do without you? I can’t remember what I have to do now. What am I supposed to do Kat?”

“No worries Jim. I will make the calls and take care of everything I can. Do you have Rose’s suitcase with her makeup and clothes handy? We can send it to the funeral home when they come.” Seeing Jim’s stricken expression, she regretted saying that, making the impending processes sound more blunt than they had to be. She could have taken the suitcase herself later instead she sounded heartless and officious.
Jim shook his head to rid himself of the cobwebs making his head fuzzy. “Yes. Rose had me pack and repack it so many times. It’s all ready and has her letter of instruction for their make-up artist.” He chuckled wryly, “She didn’t want them to make her look like a clown or a corpse. She even had me copy photographs to give them. I’m glad you remembered it Kat, she’d be so ticked off if they did her makeup with their own stuff and got it all wrong.”

It was just before 3:00 am when Kat finally got home. She was exhausted, sad and lonely. She needed Richard with every fibre of her being and missed him even more than she missed Rose. She’d forgotten to check her email and texts for hours and sighed as she pulled out her phone.

“Well done, You! Was there ever any doubt? You should always listen to me – I will never steer you wrong. I knew you’d be amazing and the class would be a huge success. Are you going in to work early tomorrow? Can I call when I get home?”

She’d missed his call. Correction, calls. There were several messages on her voicemail and the last two were sounded somewhere between worried and annoyed. Shit. Well it was 8 am in London so she called him. She called home, cell, texted him and emailed him all with no response. She sincerely hoped he was somewhere without reception because if he was avoiding her with his knickers in a knot over her not returning his calls, he’d have 99 problems and his attitude was 98 of them.

Kat made a cup of camomile tea and ran a bath. It had been a roller coaster day and she was far too keyed up to sleep. The music, warmth and tea were doing their job and she was unwinding when the phone rang.

“There you are! Where have you been young lady?” He sounded amused but there was an undercurrent of something more … negative.

“Hi Hunny. Glad you called. Long day. Need you.” All of the heightened emotions which had calmed during the bath had resurfaced, with a vengeance. She was fighting tears and losing the battle.

“You sound drunk. Were you out celebrating tonight?” He was noticeably relieved at the thought. The paranoid possibilities he’d considered were infinitely darker.

“No, not drunk. Just … overwrought I guess. It’s been a rough day and I wish you were here.” She no longer stifled her sobbing.

“Kat! What’s wrong, Love? Talk to me.” He ran his hand through his hair and paced, kicking a chair in his way.

“Rose died tonight. I was there. I just want you to hold me and you can’t. It hurts so much. Rich this is ... it feels so fucked up.” She wept with all of her grief and frustration flowing freely.

“I know, Love, I know. I want to be there so much and it’s killing me that I’m not. You’re hurting and there’s nothing I can do to help you. But it won’t always be like this – you know that, right? We will be together, I promise.” Panic began bubbling up inside of him when she called them ‘fucked up’. “I love you Kat.” The latter was more of a plea than a declaration.

“Love you too. I have to get up early to help Jim, I should go. G’night Richard.” She hung up without waiting for him to say goodnight.

Richard’s eyes widened and his heart raced as panic gained a firmer hold on him. They’d been apart little more than three weeks and it sounded like she wanted to give up already. How in hell
would they survive another three months if they couldn’t survive a few weeks?

It was Friday night and he didn’t have to be to work until Monday at noon. If he could just get to Kat, maybe he could reassure her. He checked flights from London to Toronto and found a flight that left Heathrow at 11 am. He had just a little over two and a half hours to catch the flight and would have moved heaven and earth to make sure he did. He grabbed his passport, threw a few things in a carry on bag and flew out the door. At the airport he received odd looks and extra scrutiny from security but was able to board the flight, even being so lucky as to get a first class seat.

He sent emails to family and friends he was supposed to see on the weekend, letting them know an emergency had come up and he’d have to reschedule their plans. He found an online florist and tried to order floral arrangements for Kat and for her friends but realized he didn’t know what funeral home to send the flowers for Rose. He wanted to make a donation to the Canadian Cancer Society but ran into the same problem of not knowing Rose’s address or even her last name. He checked his watch and figured, with the flight duration, time change, and taxi ride he could be to Kat’s by 2 pm her time. He’d love to surprise her but that would risk missing her at home, she’d probably be away from home most of the day. Without any further doable tasks, he decided to grab a couple of hours sleep.

Lack of checked luggage meant leaving Toronto Pearson Airport was quick and hassle free. He found a taxi immediately and gave Kat’s address to the driver. Once underway, he called Kat’s cell phone.

She picked up on the second ring, “Hello? Richard?” Her eyebrows shot up and she tentatively smiled at the unexpected call.

“What?  Where are you right now?” He asked, much gruffer than intended. Anxiety was messing with his intentions, twisting his tone of voice.

“I’m at the office for a bit longer and then I’m heading over to Rose’s. You sound funny. Are you ok?” Fatigue was evident in her sigh.

What wasn’t evident to Richard was that the fatigue was not directed to him. Fuck, he hoped he wasn’t too late to change her mind about their future. “I’m on the 427 on my way to wherever you want me to meet you.”

She screamed into the phone, “YOU’RE HERE? IN TORONTO? HOW? RICHARD? PLEASE DON’T BE JOKING. ARE YOU REALLY HERE?” She started crying and hiccupping, making further conversation impossible.

“Yes, Love, I’m here. Just stay at the office until I get there, ok? Will you be ok for another half hour? Kat?” He shook with frustration, being so close and yet so far, unable to take her into his arms and comfort her. Soon, very soon.

“Yes, I’ll be waiting in the lobby for you. Rich? I love you. I love you so much.” She sniffled and hiccupped again.

For the first time in twelve hours his panic receded instead of advanced. True to her word, she was waiting in the lobby of her office building for him. When he walked through the large glass doors she veritably flew into his arms. The force of her impact against him was so powerful he stumbled backwards several steps and only barely managed to stay upright. She had a death grip on him and was making a whole host of strange sounds.
Katrina leaned back and roughly grabbed his face, pulling it down to her. “You’re really here? Am I dreaming? You better kiss me to make sure this is real!” She smiled as he gently wiped her tear stained cheeks and lowered his mouth close to hers.

“I’m here, Kat. This is real.” He barely touched her, his lips grazed hers with the lightest, sweetest caress. She gasped when she felt his breath ghost over her – the breath she’d so desperately missed just the day before. Her fingers tangled in his hair and she sought his lips. Their kiss was intense, fueled by fear, longing, grief, desperation, relief, love and passion. Every feeling, every thought they’d had in the last day coalesced into that fiery kiss. They pulled back and smiled sheepishly when the security guard coughed, trying to get their attention. He picked her up and twirled her around, laughing with her. She took him by the hand and led him upstairs, winking at the security guard as she walked by. She locked her office door and playfully pushed him down on the couch. All playfulness evaporated as she looked at him intently.

“You’re here? But you can’t be – you’ve so much going on in London. How are you here?” She whispered and sat across his lap, snuggling into his neck.

“You needed me,” was his simple answer. He held her close, stroking her back and enjoying the feeling of tension leaving her muscles. “I’m so sorry that I haven’t been here every time you’ve needed me Kat. Can you forgive me?”

She pulled back in surprise, “Forgive you? There’s nothing to forgive! I can’t believe you came all this way for me. Have I told you how much I appreciate you? How much I love you?” She kissed him, sweetly at first and then playfully planting silly little kisses all over his face, making him laugh.

“Never enough. You could never tell me enough! Say it again.” He grinned, all vestiges of relationship insecurity had vanished, leaving truth in its stead.

“I love you to infinity and back. I love you more than 1980’s alternative music. I love you more than chocolate. I love you more than puppies, kittens and baby pandas. I love you. I love you. I love you.” She smirked and ruffled his hair, approving of the mess left behind. In her opinion, he needed messing up far more often. “I would love to have my way with you right now, but sadly I’m supposed to be at the funeral home to meet with Jim and the kids in less than half an hour. Wanna come with or go to my house to wait for me?”

“With you! When there’s a choice, always with you!” He pretended to be appalled that she would suggest otherwise. “One more hug for the road.” He pulled her closer, breathing in the scent of her hair and feeling the contradictory softness and firmness of her body against his. He wanted to relearn every nuance of her, storing it away for the long, lonely days ahead until they could be together again. He sighed as he heard a soft little sound peculiar to only her, he thought it a pre-purr, and smiled.

“Can you stay tonight?” She whispered.

“Mmm hmm. Flight is tomorrow at 6 pm. I’m all yours for a whole day.” He smiled as she let out a sigh of relief.

“I like the sound of that. All mine. You can sleep on the plane right? You don’t need to sleep tonight?” She snickered and cupped the bulge in his trousers before standing and tugging on his hands to pull him up. That was his Katrina, all right. All his. He ruefully thought, ‘Now all I have to do is survive until
we can get back to her house. Easier said than done.’
Jim was relieved to see Katrina when she arrived at the funeral home, hugging her tightly and nodding when he noticed she shared the tears which made his eyes shiny too. Before they could become too overwhelmed by sadness, one of his grand kids bumped into them on their way to the candy dish on the table near the door and made them both chuckle. Ah, the priorities of youth.

“How are you holding up?” Kat looked into his eyes and saw his grief mixed with numbness.

“Oh, I’m getting by. Kat I’m so glad you’re here early. I … can you …” he stuttered.

“What is it Jim?” She rubbed his arm to comfort and encourage him.

“I haven’t been in the room to see her yet. Can you go in first and make sure they did a good job with her make up? That must sound so –”

“I’m glad to. Rose and I talked about this a lot. I know how important it was to her.” Before she went to the chapel, she turned to introduce him to Richard when he startled.

“Pardon my manners. You must be Katrina’s Richard. I’m Jim.” He shook Richard’s hand warmly. “Rose would have loved to have met you, she was so happy the two of you found each other. So, welcome to the family.” He clapped Richard on the shoulder and smiled. Turning to Kat he said, “Remind me to get the envelope for you. I’ll talk to Richard while you go in.”

Kat opened the door to the chapel and walked slowly to the front of the room. She took a deep breath and tried to steady herself as she approached Rose. For all the times they talked about their ideal funerals, Kat was still shaking like a leaf as she gripped the side of the casket with her eyes closed. “Okay Katrina, there are people waiting … you can do this.” Her lids slowly raised allowing her to see her friend. Being so particular with the suitcase paid off, the funeral home had done a very good job on Rose’s hair and makeup. Rose looked different, of course, but still enough like herself in an extremely deep sleep.

“Oh Rose. Jim is doing you proud – he’s making sure everything is the way you want it, dear friend. I miss you already but I’m so glad you aren’t in pain any longer. I’m going to go let the rabble in now, don’t pay any attention to the kids, they’re a little wired on candy.”

She made her way to find Jim to let him know everything was in good order and paused as she watched Richard playing with Rose’s grand kids, evidently trying to keep them from trampling an ancient Great Aunt. Kat was reminded how much Richard loved his nephew and, judging by the look on all their faces, was clearly good with kids. It gave her a pang to think about it for too long.

She found Jim and nodded when she caught his eye. He was visibly relieved and started to encourage visitors to go into the chapel. For the next two hours there was a constant stream of friends, neighbours, colleagues and family moving in and out of the room. The visitation went
smoothly but was draining, leaving Jim plainly exhausted by the time they saw the last guest to the door.

“Kat, you have been amazing tonight. I don’t know how I would have gotten through this without you. I wouldn’t have been able to go in first, that’s for sure. You knew more about what Rose wanted than I did! Oh, that reminds me - wait here, I have to get something from the car.”

Without the adrenalin and expectations of others to keep her buoyed, she was starting to fade. Richard could see Kat’s shoulders slump. She sighed as he wrapped his arms around her and held her up, encouraging her to lean back against him.

Jim returned with an envelope and handed it to Katrina. “Rose wrote this for you a couple of weeks ago. Strict instructions to pour a glass of Mateus and have some 80’s New Wave playing on the stereo when you read it. She said you’d understand.”

Kat chuckled, remembering their giggling fits as they relived the nightmare hair & fashions, wines and so-bad-it-was-good music of the 1980’s. “Thank you Jim. This means the world to me.” She stepped away from Richard to give Jim a big hug. “I’ll be at your place tomorrow to get everything ready for the people coming from away. Just let me know if there’s anything you need me to pick up or do or … whatever. You’ve got my number.”

On their way home Kat and Richard stopped at Union Burger for burgers, sweet potato fries and poutine. Kat was quiet but wouldn’t stop holding Richard’s hand, which made it difficult to eat dinner but it was what she needed from him and all he wanted to do was to give her what she needed.

“Ready for some bad wine and worse pastries?” She gave him a sad smile. “Mateus, Flakies and Joe Louis. We have to stop and pick them up before we can read the letter from Rose just like we agreed last year. By the way, this is right up there with the quality noms I fed you at Canada’s Wonderland last fall – it may get messy.” The corners of her mouth rose in a small, legitimate smile.

“I’m tough. I can handle it. Are you sure I should read the letter?” He loved that she trusted him with something so private but worried she may feel pressured.

She chuckled, “We … ah … we talked about you and she … well … I guess you could say she approved. It’s more than ok for you to read it with me.”

When they got home, they changed into their pajamas and prepared the memorial ‘feast’. Richard had never seen Flakies or Joe Louis’ and was skeptical about drinking sweet, fizzy wine. Kat explained that these sweet treats were a rite of passage for Canadian teens in the 1980’s and that both she and Rose had pigged-out on them many times. Richard lit the gas fireplace and they sat on the couch with the junk food spread out before them on the coffee table. Taking several deep breaths, Kat opened the envelope and slid the letter out. “Here we go. I’ve no idea what to expect – this could be sweet or saucy.”
Dear Katrina,

We've travelled far together and I can't imagine a companion I'd rather have made this journey with. You have been a blessing to my entire family and have done it while making us feel like we've been the blessing to you. How did you do that?

When we first met both of us were angry and scared. Me because of the new diagnoses and you because of your pending divorce. Didn't we both cry a lot in those days? I think we knew we were kindred spirits pretty early on, eh? I know you broke many rules for me and I've always meant to thank you for that.

We were given each other and enough time to enjoy it. We've shared the good, the bad and the ugly but as I reflect back, the only things that leave a real impression are the good. It isn't possible to describe how happy I've been to witness the metamorphosis you've gone through since starting your new life. Writing your story, renovating your own house, buying out your partners, meeting Richard ... I am so grateful to have witnessed those things. You've grown from a timid mouse to a bold woman and I love every bit of you.

You've helped me in ways I will never be able to explain. You accepted me without question or judgement. You didn't cringe when I was cringe-worthy; you didn't blanche when I railed against the world; you encouraged me to express myself in my own way. You knew when to distract me, when to talk and when to listen, when to laugh and when to cry and when to tell filthy jokes. With you I was never dying, I was living and that is a gift more valuable than all the riches in this world.

I would love to write a whole book like you did but I don't have the patience so I’ll get to it and just tell you what I want you to know:

1. Thank you for accepting me with all that I bring to the party
2. You enrich my life in thousands of ways
3. I love you
4. I am deeply grateful that you love me so much
5. Love is all that matters – cherish it, nourish it, protect it, fight for it, never let it fade
6. That #5, I really mean it, screw it up and I’ll haunt you mercilessly
7. If it feels right, check in on Jim a few times

So if you're reading this it means I've crossed the Great Divide. I promise to watch over you (but not in the bathroom) and will miss you until you get up here too. I'll save you a good seat.

Love always and forever,

Rosie

PS There once was a man from Nantucket ....
become completely bed-ridden they’d gone out a few times and Jim had captured some of those happy moments in snapshots; Kat pushing Rose’s wheelchair through the park during an autumn stroll; all dressed up for an evening at the theatre; a selfie in front of a Thorin poster in a cinema; playing cards; watching tv; and a sweet picture of them hugging and mugging for the camera.

Kat collapsed. Whatever composure she’d maintained had crumbled and all she could do was to sob as Richard held her. He stroked her back and held her close, thankful he’d made the impromptu trip. There was nothing he could do to ease her pain except to just be there. She was a fiercely passionate woman who was firmly attached to everyone she loved and losing one of those loved ones wounded her deeply – even if their passing was expected. The thought of her all alone in her grief cut him to the quick. He watched as she looked at the photos again, slowly taking in every detail and smiling at the memories they triggered. He couldn’t help roll his eyes at the lascivious expressions they bore as they molested the Thorin poster. Kindred spirits, indeed! He felt a twinge of regret that he hadn’t met Rose, he had a feeling they would have gotten on very well and she’d have undoubtedly added more colours to his Kat palette.

“She wanted to meet you back in the fall because she was convinced that you were The One. She even stopped making jokes about Arsitage, Bulgitage, Thighs of Thunder and The Smoulder because she didn’t want to objectify the guy she staunchly believed was my Twu Wuv. I think she knew before I did.” Kat’s eyes were unfocused as she gazed off into the distance, a small smile playing on her lips, “Rose said it felt too pervy talking sexy body parts about someone who was to be her brother.” Kat chuckled at the picture from the cinema, “But that didn’t stop us from objectifying Hot Thorin. You don’t want to know all the Dwarf and sword jokes we made that night, we probably should have been embarrassed – but we weren’t, we were having a blast being outrageously filthy!”

Kat explained each photograph in detail. From tears to laughter and back again, she relived precious memories. She painted colourful pictures of where they were, what they were doing, what they were feeling … every description adding layers to his understanding of who she was as a friend and a woman and what Rose had meant to her. He could see how Rose believed Kat thought they were a blessing to her instead of the other way around. Kat had been through her own life trauma and it was Rose who saw her through it.

They toasted Rose with the Mateus and ate the pastries. Richard thought his teeth would sprout instant cavities from all of the sugar but understood the appeal they must have had to teenagers. For a health conscious adult, it was vile – or at least he should think it was. As Kat wolfed down her second Flakie, he grinned at her unadulterated blissful gluttony. She clearly thought that all of the hydrogenated fat, refined sugar and multisyllabic ingredients were delicious. There was no accounting for taste.

“We have a different memorial snack for Grandma. For her, we drink Bailey’s Irish Cream and eat Turtles.” Kat sighed. She smirked at the idea of honouring her loved ones with junk food. “I wonder what Elizabeth Kubler-Ross would have to say about that – grief gurus don’t usually address the sugar or liqueur options for working through loss.”

Richard grinned and kissed the top of her head. It was a wild ride keeping up with her emotions, but one he was glad to be on. Kat embodied something he’d long since known: when it came to human beings, absolutes were rare; she could not grieve without recalling the joy of love and she could not anticipate the future without honouring the past. Laughing one minute and crying the next wasn’t flakey or unpredictable, it was an appropriately mercurial, complex reaction to dealing with life’s complexities. She wasn’t black and white – she was every colour of the rainbow.

They half sat, half reclined on the couch for hours, talking about those they’d lost, those they
dreaded losing, the first funerals they’d been to and what they would want for their own, all the while with Kat comfortably ensconced within the safety of Richard’s arms. She absent mindedly played with the veins and soft hairs on his arm while he gently stroked her shoulders, each taking and offering comfort to the other.

When she dozed off Richard studied her face in repose. Even if she hadn’t been snoring, he would have known she was sleeping by how relaxed she was. It wasn’t just muscular but something much deeper – body and spirit at peace whilst she was within his embrace.

She made everything simpler and more complicated all at the same time. He had counted on love being forever when he eventually found it, but he hadn’t counted on it being so damned difficult to coordinate. He didn’t know how he was going to make it through the next three months without holding her like this, without having her jab him in the ribs when he made a stupid joke, without wiping the tears from her eyes when they spilled over (as they inevitably would do), and without feeling her soft, pliant lips on his. He was resolved to find a solution to their problem even though he had no frickin’ idea where to start.

Katrina shifted slightly, becoming aware of Richard’s chest under her cheek. Soft sweater over lean muscle with his unique scent of vetiver and crisp winter air elicited a small “Mmmmm,” from her. He felt and smelt so good she wanted to absorb and inhale him all at once even in that twilight between sleep and awake.

“You okay?” He tilted her chin up just enough to see her eyes better and answered her smile with his own when she nodded. He gazed at her lips which he thought would taste like bubbly wine, salty tears and sweet berries. She always tasted like berries to him, but that could have been his romantic fancies rather than the actual receptors on his tongue. No matter, he wanted to taste those lips. He groaned inwardly, repeating the mantra “right time, right place – right time, right place” and resolved to not take advantage of her raw emotions.

Kat watched his eyes as a myriad of emotions flicked through them. He was so close each breath tickled her, she could smell the wine on his lips and wanted him to kiss her but he seemed indecisive about it. Maybe he thought grieving was the wrong time to kiss, the very idea made her frown. He must have seen her frown because he started to pull away. She wanted to embrace love, to celebrate it. She didn’t want ’fuck me against the wall’ snogging, but she did want his gentle, slow kisses – the ones filled with sweet declarations and loving promises. She snickered to herself for just a second, making fun of herself for such sentimental thoughts. Sappiness be damned, she did love him and it was all encompassing and wonderful and romantic and sweet and she was entitled to a little cavity inducing fluff from time to time. She reached up to stroke his cheek and felt little tingles; it never ceased to amaze her how soft his stubble was – and how aroused she became when she touched it. She smiled and brought his head back down to hers, resting forehead to forehead.

“Love you.” She whispered, with her lips millimetres from his.

“Love you too.” He answered and caressed her lips with his own. He looked intently into her eyes seeking confirmation from her to continue or slow down.

When she nodded he smiled and sighed. He lightly traced her brows and the path from her cheek to her chin before gently outlining the borders of her lips with his thumb. She was so soft, he wanted fall into her and never surface.

The room was quiet save for the sound of their breathing but if his heartbeat could be heard, it would be a loud, steady tattoo which skipped an occasional beat because of her. She rested her cheek in his palm, turning to place a kiss there and then back to smile into his eyes. Even before
their lips met they were lost in each other, transported to a warm, safe, loving place outside of space and time and grief and worry.

Richard kissed Katrina exquisitely slow. She exhaled the breath she’d been holding and smiled; it amazed her how well he knew exactly what she wanted and what she needed even before she asked. She copied the way he’d caressed her face, tracing first the line of his brow and then from his cheek to his strong chin before daintily outlining his lips with her thumb. She kissed him tenderly and nuzzled into the crook of his neck, softly sighing.

They spent the night wrapped in each other’s arms, the space between them disappearing as they got lost in each other. Because time stood still, there was no rush, no urgency. They were bathed in warmth rather than consumed by fire. Every kiss, every taste, every touch was languorous and sweet. Kissing made way for snuggling which made way for listening to their beating hearts.

Their night was filled with slow caresses, calm kisses and linked limbs. It took more than an hour for clothes to be shed and several more before their bodies joined. They had been waiting for each other forever and would take that long again to make love. Joking and sexy talk was replaced by quiet smiles and an unending conversation without words. They touched each other’s souls as much as they touched each other’s bodies. Life was precious and fleeting, making them appreciate what they had found in each other all the more.

Despite a fierce determination to not waste a moment of the little time they had together by sleeping it away, they both fell into a deep, peaceful slumber. Richard woke first, content to hold Kat and feel her snore reverberate through his chest. He vowed that if he ever started to think her snore was annoying, he’d give his head a shake for if he was hearing that snore enough, it meant that they were together and that was more devoutly to be wished than anything else he could think of.

Katrina awoke to Richard stroking her hair and kissing her forehead. She snuggled in closer to him and nuzzled his neck and murmured, “Good morning. Alarm clock is fired – you are hired. I’d like to wake up like this every day.”

He could feel her smile against his neck and chuckled, “It would be my pleasure. May I list you as a reference? Alarm clock for hire.” He could feel her little shivers as he rubbed her back and her sounds of happiness made him hungry for more.

“Oh, it’s like that is it?” She followed his happy trail to the impressive tree trunk poking into her hip. She gently cupped him and began a slow, sensuous massage eliciting the exact type of moan she wanted to hear. “Richard?”

“Mmm hmm?”

“Last night was lovely. I’d like to have more nights like that. Would you?” She held him lightly in her hand and torturously slowly traced the veins on his erection, pausing to circle his head with her thumb and kiss him deeply.

“Mmm hmm.” He replied in a noticeably higher pitched voice than usual.

“But not right now. Right now I want steamy, shout-my-name, break the bedframe sex –“

She couldn’t finish speaking because he moved like lightning, flipping them both over so that she was lying underneath him with a look of delighted surprise shining on her face. He claimed her mouth and grinned when she opened her lips, insisting he do the same. Their tongues slid over one another, dancing and sparring as if it was the last kiss either would ever have.
Richard’s restless hands roamed over her body, rubbing, kneading, pinching, stroking every available centimetre of skin. His mouth feasted on her, tasting, sucking, biting her lips and tongue. She was a writhing mess of want and need under him, his kisses burning her alive.

“Please Richard, please.” She panted, trying to grab hold of him and desperate to guide him inside of her.

He raised his eyebrows in a questioning expression and smirked. “Is this what you want?” One hand slipped down between them as he took hold of his aching member and rubbed the head in her wetness to tease her. “Or maybe this?” He carefully moved his cock aside and his finger swiftly dove into her aching opening. “No … I think you want this.” He rhythmically rubbed circles around her clit as he bit down on her neck and crooked his finger inside of her, teasing her over-sensitive bundle of nerves.

Her hips bucked up against him, seeking more of him, seeking relief from the agony of craven need he’d created. She was delirious with the sensations of his hands and mouth and his hard shaft grinding against her leg. “If.You.Don’t.Fuck.Me.Right.Now.I.Will.End.You.” She spat out through gritted teeth.

His deep, sonorous laugh thrummed through her, adding to her torment. She started to whine just as she felt him shift and plunge into her. “Ahh. YES.” She hissed and smiled, savouring the brief glorious moment when the feeling of his beautiful cock filled her completely but just before the need to move with him overtook her.

He gripped her tightly and flipped them over once more. He was masterful at such manoeuvres, never once breaking their union but making her feel him deeper and fuller inside of her with the jolt of her landing on top of him. She threw her head back and laughed, “I think you tickled my tonsils with that one. Don’t need to tell you ‘deeper’, now do I?”

“Liked that did you? We aim to please.” He winked at her and gently pushed her shoulders, his voice growing husky, “Sit up. I want to watch you. I want to see my cock move in and out of you as you ride me. I want to see your face as you cum on me. I want to look into your eyes when I cum in you.”

Richard’s words set her aflame. She placed her palms on his chest and pushed herself up, marvelling at the feel of his soft hair there and the small, bullet hard nipples under her hands. She pinched and rolled them between her fingers making him shout and buck up against her. He grinned at the lecherous look on her face and licked his lips, knowing what it would do to her.

“So you want to tease me do you? Is that wise?” She bent her head down and bit one nipple as she pinched the other. When he swore she licked the tender bud and lightly blew on it, making him swear louder.

She laughed deep and low with a wickedly smug look on her face as she decided to give him back some of his own. “Is this what you want?” She said in the same tone he’d used when he’d said the same words to her just moments earlier. She lifted herself up so that only his head was inside of her and with agonizing slowness, moved down onto him.

“Or this?” As she moved straight up again she paused and clenched her strong inner muscles. His eyes rolled back in his head as she squeezed him.

“Maybe you’d prefer this?” She rocked back and forth on him, rolling her hips and rubbing his thighs. His eyes flew open and his chin dropped as he stared at her and tried to cope with the myriad of needs coursing through him.
“No. I think this is what you want. She bounced up and down on him several times, fast and deep, making sure he could see his cock sliding in and out of her. She took his hands in hers, threading her fingers with his and squeezing as she created a new pattern of rocking, thrusting and bouncing on him. The deep guttural grunts he made and the flush on his skin gave her every affirmation she could ever need that she was giving him what he wanted.

She put his hands on her breasts and squeezed, showing him what she wanted him to do. She smiled at his look of mild surprise as she trailed one hand down her chest, over her tummy and began to rub her clit. “You wanted to watch me do this?” She moaned for him when he nodded, incapable of speech.

Riding him, touching herself, teasing him and seeing his pupils blown wide open rocked her to her core. The heat and tension which had gripped her multiplied and then exploded into a violent tidal wave which ripped through her entire body. She shouted his name as her muscles clenched and spasmed around him, leaning back against his legs and gripping his thighs tightly as she rode out every last ripple of intense pleasure.

Seeing her come undone sent him over the edge. He felt the familiar tightening in his balls and thrust up into her, hard, fast and erratic, as he came in her with a force he’d never known before. Each spurt of his seed felt like molten gold filling her, adding an animalistic pride to his extraordinary pleasure.

They floated on a euphoric cloud, oblivious to the world, high on the joy they gave to each other and smiling like fools. Katrina sniggered at the random thought that after-glow should be renamed after-grin.

“I love you Vlad.” She snickered.

“Ah yes. You remembered my true name. Good, good. I am Vlad the Impaler. I do not drink blood – I feed on orgasms. I am replete for the moment, but be warned Wench, I may need to feed again … soon.” He gripped her waist and tickled her making her fall down onto his chest and him to flop out of her with a decidedly unromantic wet sound.

Katrina laughed out loud. She found soft penises to be inherently funny and he knew it. Before he left, he’d just have to wipe that particular smile off her face. Until then he hugged her close to him and kissed her hair. He didn’t even mind the distinct feeling of their combined juices trickling onto him as he squeezed her tightly. If it wasn’t clear before, that cinched it – he definitely loved her. Wet spots were bad enough, leaking onto him should be unpleasant but with Kat, he found it amusing. Maybe they could try the shower again, the thought of which made him laugh out loud.

Kat was about to ask him to share the joke when the phone rang. She didn’t want to answer it but there were important life events happening and she couldn’t take the chance of missing a critical call.

“Hi Sis, the kids are over at their Gramma’s and I’m all yours. Should I head over to Rose & Jim’s now?” Leigh asked.

Kat looked at the clock and swore. Leigh had agreed to meet her at Jim’s for 1:00 – after she was supposed to pick up the platters from the caterers - and it was 12:15. “Shit. Um, Leigh I’m running a bit behind. Can you go to Centro and pick up my order and then I’ll meet you there?”

“Yeh sure. Do I need to take cash? I don’t have much on me so I’ll have to stop if that’s what they want.”
“No, no. It’s all paid for. I’ll call them to tell them it’ll be you picking it up. There are three each of party sandwiches, veg, cheese and fruit trays. I’ve already taken the punch fixings over there so that’s fine. Thanks Leigh. You’re a lifesaver.”

Leigh was puzzled, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to help. But this isn’t like you these days – why are you running late?”

“Well –“

Richard pulled the phone away from her mouth far enough to shout into it, “My fault, sorry Leigh.”

“RICHARD? Richard what are you doing here? Kat’s been griping and groaning that she wouldn’t see you for months?” Leigh squealed in delight.

“He came as soon as he heard Rose died.” Kat looked lovingly at Richard when she said it. He smiled back at her as she stroked his cheek. “Ok, we can talk in person. You get the food. We’ll get ready and meet you there in less than an hour. Sound good?”

Leigh nodded despite the fact that no one could see her, “Yeh. See you BOTH then. Glad you’re here Richard!” The sisters hung up their phones and Kat scrambled out of bed.

“So, what’s the plan?” Richard asked, curious but not concerned.

“While Jim and the kids are at this afternoon’s visitation we’re getting things ready for the out of towners who will come back to the house afterward. I’ve got finger foods for this afternoon and a restaurant booked for dinner and left overs for the wake this evening, then catering at the house after the internment tomorrow.” She stared off into the distance as she mentally reviewed the logistics of Rose’s send off. Suddenly she remembered that Richard’s flight had to be fit into the day somewhere. “Oh, when do you need to be at the airport?”

He could see the look of panic in her eyes. “No worries. I’ll take a cab – you have enough going on here to worry about. I came to help, not be a burden, remember! I insist! Now, don’t argue with me!” He pulled her in for a squishy hug and playfully slapped her bum. “Now, into the shower for us. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I won’t be providing you with any form of sexual favours in the shower this time – I can see you’re devastated – but we simply don’t have time. I’ll give you a rain cheque though. Next time, I will satisfy all of your carnal and ablution needs.” He grinned and gave her a big, sloppy kiss as he took her by the hand to the shower.

True to his word, Richard didn’t start (or even hint at) any funny business in the shower. He did kiss her naked shoulder twice and groped her bum once, but he could hardly be blamed for that, surely. They made quick work of getting ready and packed up Kat’s car with the supplies she had organized for Jim’s house.

Jim was hugely grateful to Kat, Richard and Leigh for their help. As he was leaving for the funeral home he hugged all of them and whispered his thanks in their ears. To Richard he added, “She is the second best woman I’ve ever met – you’re a lucky man to have her heart. I hope you’ll be as happy together as Rose and I were.”
Richard, Leigh and Kat set up the house for visitors and kept things simple for Jim. It was fortunate that they were there while the family was busy at the visitation because many neighbours and friends dropped off food and flowers. Rose and Jim were well loved and it showed in the support and generosity of those around them.

As the clock approached 4:00 pm, a heavy weight descended on Kat and Richard. The taxi was due to arrive and they would have to say goodbye, not knowing when they’d see each other again. Mourners were starting to arrive leaving no privacy for Richard and Kat to make their farewells. They ducked into the powder room and closed the door, laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation. Richard flipped the lid of the commode down and sat on it. Kat grinned as she melted into his arms – sitting down like that made him only a tiny bit taller than her. It was quite nice to meet eye to eye, something that didn’t happen for them unless she stood on a stool.

“Promise you won’t give up on me while we figure all this out.” He quietly begged her, his eyes huge and glassy.

“Even if I was inclined to, which I’m NOT, I couldn’t give up on you. Rose has threatened to haunt me, remember.” She tried to lighten the moment. “I promise that I won’t ever give up on you. Your turn.”

“I promise that I will never, ever give up on me either.” He grinned as she laughed and swatted him. “Katrina I promise that I will never give up on YOU. For what it’s worth, I’m yours – body and soul. The rest is all details. Now, kiss me like you mean it.”

She straddled his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck, shaking her head at the look on his face. He tried to give her his best smoulder, the one that made her swoon, but he was grinning too much and just ended up looking like a loon. Apparently she was fond of loons because she kissed him deeply, leaving him with no doubt that there was plenty more where that came from and it would be waiting for him when they saw each other next.

It was a completely dishevelled and thoroughly kissed Richard who emerged from the powder room to calls from Leigh regarding the waiting taxi. She walked him out the front door and stood on the step as he started down the walkway. He dropped his bag on the ground and ran back to her, scooping her up in his arms and kissing her passionately. “Soon.” Was all he said as he kissed her forehead and set her back down.

Kat stood watching as he climbed into the cab and it pulled away. She held her breath and he did it. He did the thing. He looked back at her through the rear window and waved. She blew him a kiss and waved back, staying rooted to the spot until she could no longer see any trace of the taxi. “Soon.” She nodded to herself and went back inside the house to resume her duties.
Richard called as soon as he got home. He was exhausted but knew she’d still be up and he just needed to hear her voice. They talked for over two hours about everything from Jim & Rose to teasing each other about taking a flight going anywhere. Pictures of him at both Pearson and Heathrow airports had hit the net – he knew they probably would because he’d been stopped by fans in both places. The rumours were already flying around that he’d said goodbye to his Canadian chippy since she wasn’t with him at either airport. It was good to laugh with her, to be completely free to say whatever was on his mind, to feel her warmth even over thousands of kilometres.

He marvelled at how ordinary it all was, and paradoxically in its normalcy it was phenomenal. It certainly hadn’t been love at first sight and it wasn’t convenient or easy; Katrina was most everything he never wanted – a fan, short, had baggage and lived a world away in a life which anchored her steadfastly to one place. But she was a counterbalance to the hyperbole his life had become. There was no shortage of gorgeous, intelligent men and women interested in him; he could, as they say, have his pick of the litter. For all of their perfection, the women he’d dated, when he could, they were delicious desserts which left him empty and hungry for something different, something more nourishing.

Katrina was something different; something more fulfilling and definitely an acquired taste. She was not classic perfection in body or personality – indeed her character was run of the mill “nice person” but it was her unique combination of qualities which made everything about her different from anyone he’d ever known. He had not spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about relationships or finding a girlfriend but in the back of his mind there were things which were interesting, if not important, to him. Kat ticked the boxes on a list he hadn’t formally made and he found himself unable to imagine life without her. She challenged him, encouraged him, accepted him with all of his warts and scars and asked a lot of him – the best of him. All the while she stood on her own two feet, knew herself well, unconditionally embraced those she loved but didn’t allow herself to be trampled on, she was smart, silly and sexy as hell, she was an open book but she mystified him. For the life of him he couldn’t figure out how she had a naïveté and innocence about her when she was naughtier than he ever thought of being. Maybe it was her curiosity and penchant for adventure. She had reason and experience enough to be hardened, cynical and untrusting but she wasn’t. She had triggers but she usually found joy and delight in most things and it was inspiring. And she laughed at his jokes – now that was reason enough to put a ring on it.

He wanted to give her the world to make up for all that she’d lost or had taken from her. The irony was that she didn’t ask him to fill empty, broken spots inside her. All she wanted from him was honesty and respect. He’d never had anyone ask so little of him and so much at the same time which left him a little unstable at first. He couldn’t secure her affection with kindness, attention, opportunities or baubles. Peeling off his own layers of habit, expectation and protection had been easy when he realized she simply wanted him without masks or walls. He’d always been fairly self-aware – his craft demanded it – but he’d had to identify and shuck off any cloak of pride or self-preservation for her. He was himself at his most vulnerable and he’d never felt freer or safer.
He drifted off to sleep determined to find a way for them to be by each other’s sides and woke with the same thoughts burning in his mind. He showered, dressed and ate breakfast desperately trying to come up with an idea on how they could be together but he wasn’t able to find even a crappy one let alone a good one.

In frustration he ran his hands through his hair and chuckled, remembering the dirty sounds Kat made when she played with the same curls which had annoyed him greatly for so much of his life. Had he met Kat earlier, he could have saved a fortune in his mostly vain attempts to straighten those unruly curls.

On the way to the Metropolis set he called his agent, Dallas’, office. “Hi Charlotte, I have a huge favour to ask. I need help and don’t know where to start. Can you text me the name of someone I could talk to about having a Canadian accountant/MBA move to the UK to work? Thanks Charlotte, I really appreciate it … yeh, I’m on set all day but will check at day’s end. Say hi to Dallas for me.”

Not for the first time did he thank his lucky stars for his agents at United Artists. Dallas and Kirk were a great team. Richard relaxed for the first time in nearly 24 hours, knowing that he had started a ball rolling which would solve the most serious problem he faced – being far from Katrina.

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Katrina was exhausted. Too little sleep and too much emotion weighed heavily upon her. She still had to get through the funeral, finish her presentation for NERI and dive full force into tax season. She certainly didn’t regret talking to Richard the night before, but she did feel the effects of it. The amount of coffee it would take to cast off her sluggishness could float a battleship.

Rose had asked her to speak at her funeral and had helped Kat pick out a reading. They chose *Farewell My friends* by Bengali poet and philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore

It was beautiful as long as it lasted
The journey of my life.
I have no regrets whatsoever
Save the pain I’ll leave behind.
Those dear hearts who love and care…
And the strings pulling at the heart and soul…
The strong arms that held me up
When my own strength let me down.
At every turning of my life I came across good friends,
Friends who stood by me,
Even when the time raced me by.
Farewell, farewell, my friends
I smile and bid you goodbye.
No, shed no tears for I need them not
All I need is your smile.
If you feel sad do think of me
For that’s what I’ll like when you live in the hearts
Of those you love, remember then
You never die.

The funeral was as much a celebration of Rose’s life as it could be. She had requested that in lieu of flowers, people bring toys which Jim would later donate to the Children’s Hospital. The effect
was unexpected – initial surprise from most visitors which quickly morphed into some version of “what a great idea – that Rose was always thinking”.

Several friends and family members stood to recount a favourite memory of Rose, some touching, some funny, all endearing. When Kat read the poem she stopped at the end and looked up to the heavens, adding “I shall be sure to remember this when I meet our friends from Nantucket.” She smiled at the veiled reference to the many silly limericks they’d shared trying to ‘out naughty’ the other. Rose had chosen the songs she wanted and it was an eclectic mix of the traditional hymn *It Is Well With My Soul*, John Lennon’s *Imagine* and Monty Python’s *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*. It was a good funeral which included some laughter as well as tears.

The internment and reception went off without a hitch. Kat and Leigh did all they could to take care of logistics to relieve some of the burden from Jim and his family, managing the flowers, toys and the reception with a subtle touch. It was heart warming to hear the laughter as friends and family reminisced about a decent woman. She didn’t hear any naughty stories even whispered which led her to wonder if it was because people were being polite or because it was a side Rose hadn’t shared with anyone other than Kat. She suspected it was the latter which made her smile, glad to have had that unique relationship with her.

Kat knew that Jim and the kids would be quite busy for a few days and then reality would set in. When all of the visitors left; the paperwork was complete; the closets were cleaned out and the neighbours’ gifts of food all eaten then the real mourning would begin. It was then that the loneliness and emptiness would weigh heaviest on Jim. For a long time he’d been busy caring for Rose so his ‘normal’ had left no room for idle hands or an idle mind. The week after the funeral, he would have both in abundance and it would be very hard on him. Kat decided to wait until then to check in on him. Unfortunately, she had more than enough to keep her working 16 hour days.

When Kat finally got home she was so exhausted she wanted to collapse in bed without bothering to change into pajamas. With a heavy sigh and leaden feet she resisted the urge and put away the food Jim insisted she take home, washed up for bed and pulled on the t-shirt of Richard’s she’d swiped from his bag. She grimaced when she saw phone messages waiting for her, the last thing she wanted to do was listen to things which might require some sort of response on her part. One was from Dawn and two were from Richard which turned her grimace to a small smile. The latter surprised her because he’d texted her more than a dozen times during the day, offering encouragement and support, she wasn’t expecting phone calls too. Their expressions of love and empathy warmed her heart and made her sorely tempted to return the calls, but she was too spent to do it. She rolled herself up in the comfort they offered and tucked herself into bed, promising she’d get in touch with both of them the next day.

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Kat spent a week working her tail off at the office and finishing up the report for NERI. It was a tough slog and it wouldn’t ease up for another two months. She’d come to hate tax season and, not for the first time, thought she should refocus her practice so that they weren’t held hostage by it every year. That was a flight of fancy for another time, she had no brain cells available to even fantasize about it.

The presentation to Josh and Nikki went well. Katrina reviewed all of the recommendations thoroughly, explaining the features, advantages of each point. Nikki added impressions and relevant details she’d learned from sitting in on the student presentations. Josh and Nikki were receptive to all of the refocusing, restructuring and refinancing recommendations, leaving Kat optimistic for their future for the first time in years. They promised they would review it and get back to her by the end of the month and while Kat appreciated their desire to make a time
commitment, the end of February was no gift to her – she’d be eyeball deep in tax returns and managing the office.

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Charlotte had few options to share with Richard regarding the relocation of a Canadian to the UK. Immigration issues aside, her qualifications were not easily transferable. Her research showed that the most likely route would be a UK firm with Canadian divisions. Richard was disappointed there weren’t more choices but at least there was one. Charlotte and Dallas both recommended a head hunter as the next step if Richard was ready to go forward. Charlotte offered to find the names of firms who would recruit for such companies. She suggested that it might be helpful to have a c.v. ready for the head hunter to review and Richard agreed to provide one. Charlotte’s information, as slim as it was, gave him cause to hope where before he had only frustration and anxiety.

Richard didn’t want to burden Katrina during her busiest and most stressful time of year or to give her false hope so he did not discuss his little ‘project’ with her. If it turned out that working in the UK was even a possibility for her it still didn’t answer the problem of leaving family, friends and country behind. With a weary sigh, he knew he’d simply have to cross that bridge when they came to it.

A thought had bubbled up which was worth pursuing. He needed a North American base which was why he’d purchased his apartment in New York. He seemed to always be in transit between NYC and LA so maybe it wouldn’t be so different if his base was Toronto instead of NYC. That would give them at least a few months a year in the same place at the same time. He emailed the real estate agent he used to purchase the NYC apartment to arrange an appraisal and test the market. It was exhilarating to take action and find opportunities where previously there were only obstacles.

His current project had been a sort of filler. Metropolis was a quality mini-series and had excellent production values but he hadn’t preferred a return to television after The Hobbit. His film and international work was taking off but it was a much longer process than he wished, with extended periods between roles. He still had to answer the disbelieving question of “aren’t you a bit tall for a dwarf?” to directors and casting agents stateside. It was bad enough that every journalist asked him that question, those in the industry, who should know better, did it too. Without a major project until Alias Grace, he accepted the Metropolis drama as well as a repeat excursion with the 24 Hour Plays. If he had known, he’d never have accepted Metropolis so that he could have stayed in Toronto with Kat. That realization came as a bit of surprise – he would have never passed on work before Kat came into his life, ever. Work had always been a top priority and, for the first time in his life, he envisioned a future where it came second.

He didn’t want to go back to working only in the UK, but if he brought Kat to Britain he couldn’t very well traipse off to the far flung corners of the world for months at a time leaving her there alone. Perhaps it was possible to find his satisfaction on stage, tv, film, and audio recordings. He’d done tv and audiobooks before and made a comfortable living at it – he could do it again. He no longer had the fear that the bottom would drop out of his career and he did have something far more rewarding than work in his life. The thought of producing, directing and writing had long been in the back of his mind, and it was possible the time was right to start pursuing them. Money wasn’t a problem .... creative expression could take many forms. He smiled because it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

During conversations with Kat he discovered there was a great deal of usable information on her company website and that the NERI case study site was an interesting window into her skills. He
chuckled to himself, feeling quite Lucas North-ish, when he got her to tell him the login and password id for the restricted NERI site without raising any suspicions. When Charlotte gave him the contact details for the recruiting firms, he used Kat’s websites to provide the head hunters with her profile. Their preliminary meetings indicated a strong possibility with international insurance companies like Standard Life or Lloyd’s of London.

With prospects for Kat being explored, a role to be completed, and the heady rush of his new priorities, Richard was energized and enthused more than he’d been since he finished pickups for The Hobbit. His friends and family noticed changes, teasing him and wondering when they’d get to meet the muse who was inspiring their lad. For being the most career driven person they’d ever met, it was a huge relief when he started talking about cutting back on the roles, time off, and vacations lasting more than a weekend.

Dallas and Kirk were stunned when he told them he didn’t want to do the ‘filler’ jobs any longer. He intended to be far more selective and do 2-3 medium to large projects a year, tops, predicting that would have him working ten months with two off. A couple of months off and no draining overlaps was positively hedonistic compared to the gruelling schedule he’d kept for so many years.

A chalet in the French Alps was sounding more and more doable – he’d actually have time to use the damn thing. Envisioning Kat stretched out on a soft rug in front of the fire sent a familiar warmth flowing through him, pooling deep in his belly. The whole scene played out in his mind’s eye. He could see her smile as she held out her arms for him. She’d take his cold hands in her own, trying to warm them up, gently blowing on them and rubbing them, while lightly chastising him for letting himself get too cold. He could hear her squeal and laugh and swear, pushing away at his chest as he slipped his freezing hands under her jumper and held them on the small of her back. He could feel her breath on his face as she gave up struggling to get away from the cold and pulled him close to her, wrestling with whether to kiss him or taunt him. He could taste her lips as she kissed him, playfully at first but gaining intensity and arousal. He would bury his hands in her soft hair as he moaned into her mouth, every sense sparking with desire for her. He could hear how her breath would change as she felt him harden, her ardour matching his own. The warmth of the fire would be nothing compared to the heat of her skin against his. He shuddered because it would be easy enough to complete those happy thoughts but he had work to do and he doubted the cast or crew would appreciate him wanking right there and then.

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Katrina was just as busy as she anticipated she would be and part of her appreciated it. She spent as much time encouraging her staff and making sure they had everything they needed as she did working with actual clients. She brought in meals and snacks, a masseuse, a barista and a ping pong table. Kat learned early on in her career that the return on every nickel invested didn’t always look like a nickel when it came back and that was certainly true of investing in her staff at any time, but especially at tax season. Profits weren’t extraordinary, but the opportunity to bring in new clients made it all worthwhile, they had gained two of their top ten clients in such a way and maybe more importantly, her staff felt their value and her tangible appreciation.

With her commitments to NERI and to Jim, she off loaded some of her responsibilities to Sylvie who relished the opportunity to showcase her own skills and further her case for advancement. Kat admired Sylvie’s intelligence, work ethic, humour and her natural ability with people. She knew Sylvie would go far in her career and was very pleased to make sure there was always a challenging and rewarding place for her. She wished it was as easy for Richard and her to make a place for each other in their lives.

~ ^ ~
Katrina met with Josh and Nikki to determine next steps for NERI. They had reviewed the in-depth report and agreed with every one of Katrina’s recommendations. It was hard not to notice the difference in Josh compared to previous meetings. Nikki was typically enthusiastic and eager to take on the challenge but where Josh was usually assertive and animated, he was acquiescent and almost placid. He had dark circles under his eyes and sat slumped in his chair. When he spoke his voice was dull and there was no zest in his commitment to developing an action plan timeline. He had no objection to returning to their core business, strengthen marketing and R&D, initiate print-on-demand or to seek financing but he also had no excitement about doing any of those things either. They left their meeting with individual action lists and agreed to meet again in two weeks. Kat thanked her lucky stars for Sylvie because it was insane to keep working on NERI when everyone in the financial services industry felt like they were living in their offices.

Kat returned to her office and flopped into her chair ready to check email and felt a frisson of excitement when she saw one from Richard. There was no message, just a cryptic subject line of “by ao-on, from me to you” and an attachment. She opened it to find:

She choked and blushed bright red, looking around to make sure no one was able to see the poem. Of course they couldn’t but she couldn’t help the paranoia from his NSFW poem. Confident she had sufficient privacy she read it again, slowly, and closed her eyes letting her mind drift to him which may have been a mistake because when Sylvie popped into her office her eyes were glazed and her face was distinctly flushed. Sylvie noticed immediately and chuckled when she saw how tightly Kat was holding her cell phone to her chest. She correctly guessed the topic if not the contents of an email which was obviously from Kat’s boyfriend.

*Indulgence*

I want your legs draped over my shoulders, your voice, breath-filled and coy; your hands pulling me in closer, your body writhing with joy;

my face buried deep between your thighs, holding me in place; my nose filled with your sweet scent, my tongue dancing with your taste.

[@ao-oa]
“Was just wondering if you could cover for me tonight? I was going to stay until 9:00 but my brother’s got a layover here tonight and I haven’t seen him since last summer.”

Kat sat up straighter and smoothed down her shirt, which wasn’t wrinkled but she felt the need to tidy up. “Of course. Have a great time with your brother and don’t let him talk you into any more tattoos.”

“Thanks Kat. I’ll take your late shift tomorrow so you can … um … read your email at home … in private.” She winked at Kat as she ducked out quickly.

Katrina shrugged off any further embarrassment and was about to reread the poem when another email came in. Again, no note, just a subject line which said “my new theme”. She opened the audiofile which was Fine Young Cannibals’ “She Drives Me Crazy”.

_I can’t stop, The way I feel_,  
Things you do, Don’t seem real.  
Tell you what, I got in mind,  
‘Cause we’re runnin’, Out of time,  
Don’t you ever, Set me free,  
Even though this waiting’ ‘round’s, Killin’ me.

She drives me crazy,  
Like no-one else,  
She drives me crazy,  
And I can’t help myself,

I can’t get, Any rest,  
People say, I’m obsessed,  
Every-thing, That’s serious lasts,  
But to me, There’s no surprize,  
I won’t make it, On my own,  
No-one likes, To be alone.  

_She drives me crazy_,  
Like no-one else,  
She drives me crazy,  
And I can’t help myself,

She laughed out loud and danced around her office like a 1980’s club girl. Odd looks and smiles by staff passing by her door made no difference at all. She was having a moment, dammit, and then she’d get back to work. One thing that was certain, she had to figure out a way to be with Richard, sooner rather than later. If for no other reason than to keep him from sending naughty messages – he’d get crucified if they ever leaked out and if Tumblr and Twitter taught her anything, it was that there was little which didn’t eventually leak.

While mulling it all over she received another email with another attachment which was definitely _NSFW_.

She gasped and didn’t know whether to laugh or to lock her door for a few minutes. Her assistant knocked just as she was deciding on the latter. With a barely audible disappointed sigh, she waved Jean in and got back to work.
Long days and short nights bled into each other. Work, eat, sleep, rinse and repeat. Emails and phone calls between them injected humour and light as the dull days of February gave way to March. She saved her favourite photo from Richard on her phone to cheer her whenever she needed it.

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Kat had an appointment with Josh and Nikki and was glad for the break in routine. She was relieved to find that NERI had begun to follow the plan as they’d agreed. All school technology and supplies had been sold off. A new high capacity printer purchased, staff were in the process of being retrained, their website updated and they were trying to hire someone new for sales. They hadn’t settled on how to finance the rest of the investment into production, sales and research & development which was causing stress for Josh. He looked exhausted and sounded worse. Nikki made a valiant effort to compensate for his apathy but it was clear the strain was getting to her too. Kat drummed her fingers on her desk trying to find a better solution for them.

One option was to sell the company and given Josh’s prolonged disphoria it may be the only realistic option. Nikki immediately said no to the idea but Josh quietly mulled it over. He put his hand on Nikki’s leg and her head jerked towards him.

”Nik, I think we should talk about it. If we can get a fair price and get out from under all the sleepless nights, work weekends, missed family outings … if we can get our lives back, I want to do it. Nikki, please, let’s talk about it.” His eyes were pleading with her and she understood how serious the whole thing had become for him.

Nikki turned to Katrina, “Kat, how do we get a valuation on the business and sell it?”

“Well, we’ll need you to take a detailed inventory of every single thing on premises. You’ve done something similar for year end, but this has a little more information. We’ve got forms which you can use for it. We’ll go through sales for the last five years and current marketing efforts. If you have a real estate agent you like, they can provide an appraisal of the building and property. We can do the business valuation for you once we have inventory and real estate figures and then after that, we’ll contact a broker to verify our valuation and put it on the market.”

She could see the burden lift off Josh’s shoulders like a physical thing. Just the thought of getting out from underneath the responsibilities of running a business took years of his face. Nikki saw his relief as well and smiled, they were going to start a new chapter of their lives and that was a little bit scary but a lot exciting. Kat took them to Jean to get the forms they’d need to begin the inventory listing and then they were off. Kat was happy for them and hoped they would find a good buyer willing to pay a reasonable price for their business.

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Katrina had scheduled to go to the movies with Jim every second Saturday and dinner with him the alternating Wednesdays. He balked at first, telling her he didn’t need a baby sitter but he didn’t ask her to stop visiting. Jim didn’t know anyone else who ‘got it’ the same way Kat did. She didn’t comfort him when he cried, she didn’t change the subject when he talked about Rose, she laughed with him, she wept, and she was comfortable with silence when it came. Most importantly of all, she didn’t talk to him like he had to get on with his life. Jim had made efforts to spend more time with friends and found, quite quickly, that most folks were pathologically uncomfortable with grief and death. He had to put on a stoic mask in front of everyone except Katrina. What Jim didn’t realize at the time, is that he offered the same gifts to Kat – no one she
knew understood the depth of her grief because she was a Hospice volunteer and was expected to bounce back much better than she was doing. Indeed, she did break several Hospice rules with Rose and her grief was deeper because of it. Try as she might, Kat couldn’t quite regret what she did with Rose even though it hurt like hell. She did understand that she’d have to take some time off from volunteering with Hospice, she had to grieve and to get perspective back before she could commit to another client.

~ ^ ~

Richard was well underway with filming Metropolis and things were going along quite smoothly. A good production team, director, cast and crew were not unusual with the BBC and this particular project was exemplary. Most of them had worked with each other in one capacity or another over the years and, fortunately, they all got on well together. It was good to be back on home soil with a regular schedule. He had time with family and friends, time to read scripts, time to talk to head hunters and real estate agents, time to send emails to Kat which made her crazy, time to do a lot ... but not enough to go to her.

Things were looking promising with the head hunters. Standard Life was interested and if Kat was selected they were willing to help fast-track immigration. The next step was for Kat to have an meeting with the head hunter and then the interviews could commence. He also had the surprising news that if he was to sell his New York apartment he could do it without taking a loss even after legal fees, commissions and taxes. Things were definitely on the right track. He’d just send her another semi-risqué picture and snicker at the thought of her opening it.

~ ^ ~

On April 2\textsuperscript{nd} Katrina brought champagne to the office to celebrate the end of tax season. Everyone was exhausted after two months of 60 hour work weeks and were delighted to see it done for another year. She sent her people home in taxis and with instructions to take the next day off. Leaning back in her chair she sighed and thought she could sleep for a week. She chuckled when her phone chimed an email notification, assuming Richard was up to his shenanigans again. She would be right – his patent romantic attachment was waiting. She was glad he was mostly cooperating with her request to keep it clean, sending her romantic pictures and gifs without nudity and no more erotic poetry.

Kat met with the broker who would sell NERI for Josh and Nikki to review the financials and inventory numbers. They’d already received the property appraisal so all that was left was to bring it all together. Kat was disappointed that the business evaluation was only 1.5 million dollars. She’d have to talk to Josh and Nikki and see if they were interested in proceeding given the low asking price. If this was their retirement plan, it would fall seriously short.

Two days later Josh and Nikki arrived at Kat’s office to review the evaluation. They were
crestfallen to hear the broker’s recommendations. Kat had told them they needed financing, they hadn’t enacted the aggressive marketing strategy yet and they had been struggling for a while so it wasn’t entirely surprising that they weren’t getting top price. Josh just wanted out of the business, so after an hour of reviewing each aspect of the reports in search of errors or underestimates, he looked to Nikki to agree to proceed anyway.

Kat’s heart was with them. She understood all they’d been through in the last few years and their desire to move on. It was unfortunate because with just a little help, their business was on the cusp of a breakthrough. It would certainly be a good deal for the buyer but the buyer wasn’t her client and it was NERI’s current owners who were her priority. They agreed to meet with the broker in two days to sign the paperwork to initiate the sale, doing as Kat suggested in giving it a sober second thought.

She talked to Richard that night and told him all about her disappointment on behalf of NERI. It was always great to talk things through with him. Even though he knew little about accounting or business management he was a quick study who asked intelligent questions which prompted her to think things through in order to explain them properly. He’d helped her get to the heart of the matter quickly with a number of issues. It was his questions which planted the seed of an idea she became excited to pursue.

Kat worked like a maniac for several days, completing forms, reviewing figures, consulting professionals. She was close to being ready to present her new findings to Josh and Nikki and was getting more excited as each new piece of information fit into the proposal, making it more and more realistic. She had the answers which would make Josh and Nikki happy.

On the assigned day, Katrina welcomed Josh and Nikki into the boardroom. She began a PowerPoint presentation which reviewed information they already knew – their financial history, their current assets, their marketing plan, their business development needs and the selling price of NERI. She surprised them when she reviewed the next slide which called for a new review of their financial records, property appraisal and business evaluation. They looked to her, confused.

“Josh, Nikki this brings us to the new option.” She clicked through to the next slide which simply said:

Josh and Nikki were shocked to see Kat’s Big Idea. They looked to her to see if she was joking and when they saw that she wasn’t, they looked to each other.

“I think you have to explain Kat. This is out of the blue.” Josh said.

“You want a buyer who will respect and build your business. You are not ready to completely retire but Josh needs a break. Nikki knows more about the business than anyone on the planet. I don’t want to go through another tax season as an accountant. I love your business and I admire Nikki. Doesn’t that sound like a perfect match?”

“It does but …” Nikki was still numb and couldn’t find the right questions to ask.

“You will need to hire a new broker so that there is no conflict of interest, but I think that can be done easily enough. I will need to sell this business and my house, the latter will be quick but I don’t know about the firm. I do not want to pressure you or provide any advice which could be a
conflict of interest so you will need to speak with your own broker, lawyer and hire an auditor for the books – all of these fees can be negotiated with the purchase price. Here’s a package which outlines my proposal, hopefully it will answer questions which pop up tonight and then we can talk more in a couple of days when it all sinks in.”

Nikki was the first to look up and speak, “Kat we’ve known you for over ten years. If you say this is something we should look at, then we will. Does the proposal talk about what you want to do with the company? Where I would fit in?” Nikki was clearly interested and showing signs of excitement about the potential of working in a company she loved without the weight of carrying it on her family’s shoulders. She dearly loved the idea of being an employee for a change.

“Yes it does, but understand that most of the direction I want to take the company in is still in development at this point and open to discussion so don’t feel the proposal puts you in a ‘do or die’ position.” Kat assured them.

Josh and Nikki left the office in a very positive frame of mind and Kat was over the moon excited. If this worked, all of Josh and Nikki’s problems and all of her own would be solved in one transaction.

It was Kat’s intention to use technology to its maximum benefit and work remotely. She couldn’t help grinning at the idea of having a mobile office which could operate anywhere in the world with a reliable internet service.

There were still hurdles to clear, but they were looking good. As soon as she got all the ducks in a row she would fly to wherever Richard was and surprise him with the news. It was the best gift she could give and receive. She laughed out loud when she decided to send Richard a photo to celebrate.
Editors February 15, 2015

Whatever rest Katrina thought she’d be able to have once the tax deadline passed was obliterated in her drive to hammer out the particulars of the NERI purchase. Every waking minute of every day was consumed with details of her business or her house or Nikki’s future role or, or, or, it went on and on. She knew her savings and equity were not sufficient to pay for NERI outright so developing a business plan was not only good business sense, it was imperative to secure financing. Lenders had become much more cautious since the financial debacles of 2007 and she wouldn’t be able to proceede without doing a full court press. She was excited and focused on her goal but had not planned to tell Richard about it until she actually had a loan agreement in place. There was a very real chance of it all falling through and she didn’t want to get his hopes up for naught.

Kat’s appointment with the Business Development Bank of Canada was her top priority. She reviewed her business plan & notes and rehearsed her presentation multiple times. Despite her usually decent recall she was so nervous she doubted her ability to remember her own name. There was so much riding on this venture, BDC held her future in their hands. When the receptionist escorted her to the meeting room Kat thought she was going to throw up, grimacing at how much worse this was than her presentation at Laurier U. She smoothed down the jacket of her suit and walked with the air of someone going to the executioner: holding her head high as she faced certain death.

There was a panel of three representatives who welcomed her with professional courtesy and lukewarm smiles. Kat withdrew four copies of the business plan from her briefcase and distributed them, keeping the one with the different binding for herself. The tremour in her hands was only slightly noticable but her mind went blank and she couldn’t think of what she was supposed to do next.

The eldest woman handed her a glass of water and said, “Katrina please tell us about yourself.”

“If you will turn to Appendix C of the plan I will review my c.v. –“

“That’s the hard facts. We’d like to know about the person before us. What makes you, well, you.”

They spoke in a conversational manner about Kat’s education, hobbies, favourite client experiences, long term appreciation for NERI and her hopes for the future. Each of the panel members articulated their interest in her story and Kat was pleased that they had made the connection between her on-line MBA and her commitment to NERI’s distance learning mission.

As they moved on to the more technical aspects of the business plan Kat stumbled for a moment. She took a sip of water and looked at her “cheat sheet.”
intelligent questions and requesting elaboration on the hard facts.

Whether or not it was policy for loan consultants to speak in the affirmative future tense was irrelevant. It may have sounded like they were on board with her vision and abilities, but she knew better than to count that chick before it hatched. She was asking for $500,000 and that wasn’t chicken feed. They assured her their recommendations would be ready by the end of the following week. Ten days. Ten days of hoping, wishing, waiting. She thought she might go insane with all of the ‘what ifs’.

Fortunately, she had enough to keep her busy so that she had little time to obsess. Unfortunately she was so uncomfortable keeping a secret from Richard that she had begun to avoid him. He was still sending funny and sweet texts and calling every second night but she was less than enthusiastic in her responses and not calling on her designated nights. She was revising her notes on job descriptions when the phone rang. Looking up she realized it was her turn to call Richard and she hadn’t … again. Guilt and dread joined the stress party going on in her head.

“Hi. Sorry I forgot to call – did you get tired waiting?” She asked, flipping back and forth between her notes on Nikki’s current responsibilities and her future ones.

“Um … well, yeah. Kat you’ve been forgetful and distracted for over a week – what’s going on? Taxes are done aren’t they?” Richard had begun the journey from puzzled to concerned. Suddenly six weeks until they could see each other felt like five weeks and six days too long. He could hear papers shuffling in the background and it alarmed him; she normally gave anyone she was speaking with her undivided attention and had slipped into the opposite with him. Dreaded memories of past relationships resurfaced. He’d been down this route before and knew full well that absence didn’t make the heart grow fonder, absence made it go wander.

“Oh, just have a lot on my plate at the moment. Lots happening with NERI. Deadlines and commitments, all that kind of stuff.” She dropped her hand holding the papers and got up to pace around the room. The need to tell him was so strong that it was a physical pain but so was the desire to give him the – fingers crossed – good news when they saw each other in a few weeks. If she could wait, she’d have so many details settled, questions answered and then they’d be able to make their own plans. A big bottle of champagne and some frilly new knickers were all they’d need. Her excitement at wanting to tell him and her discomfort with keeping it from him were at
war, muddling her thinking. Unintentionally she said, “When I get to London there’s something important I need to tell you about. It affects --” She slapped her hand across her mouth.

“Oh?” his voice cracked as he tried to speak. “What’s up?” The sounds of her papers rustling again and a soft expletive were distinct. He was back to second string in her attentions, even after a declaration like the one she’d just made. *Fuck.*

“It’s not right to talk about it over the phone. There are still a few decisions I have to make and it is definitely better said in person.” She knocked her own head for letting that slip. She hadn’t wanted to alert him that she had a surprise for him. She worried that she’d already given away her secret because she had said too much. She panicked, “Listen, I … uh … I gotta go … big presentation tomorrow. Love you.” She hung up with more force than was strictly necessary. Shit, she almost blew it.

Richard was stunned. Standing there holding the phone he felt his world crumbling down around him. He let out a wailing roar which came from the bottom of his breaking heart. The shock and pain quickly morphed into anger as walls came up and stubborn stoicism took over. *Fine.* He would not give her the satisfaction of a reaction, he would head her off at the pass – ending it with her before she could end it with him. He wanted to make it memorable, a masterpiece of rejection and a lesson in the ugliness of inconstancy. He’d think on it and come up with the perfect plan.

The next day he had come up with, and discarded, many different ideas ranging from having her walk in on him fucking some young starlet to smugly thanking her for saving him the trouble of breaking up with her. As angry as he was, he would never do the former, not even to hurt her as much as he’d like to. He was coming to the conclusion that he probably would not hurt her at all, he’d just thank her for her honesty and kiss her goodbye. But in the meantime, he could daydream about all the ways he might do it if he were a prick.

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Kat was on tenterhooks, once again, as she waited in the reception area of BDC. In just a few minutes she’d know if her loan was approved, denied or tabled pending amendments. This stress was different from last time though, this time it was excitement whereas before it was fear. Her excitement was validated as she was met with smiles and full loan approval. They discussed the terms and conditions of the loan and after she had sought independent legal counsel to review the papers they would make an appointment to sign them. As she walked to her car she didn’t know which was beaming brighter, the sun or her face which would surely crack wide open if she didn’t stop smiling like a loon.

When she returned to the office she called a meeting with the junior partners to discuss the pending sale of Solid Growth and her anticipated purchase of NERI. She assured them that terms of sale would include guarantees for their positions and she’d do everything possible to ensure that the transition would be smooth. She hadn’t initiated the sale or even contacted a broker, wanting to let them know before she took any such steps. There was shocked silence for all of Kat’s speech and for several seconds afterwards. Sylvie was the first to respond, initiating a standing ovation which the others quickly joined.

“Katrina you have the heart of an entrepreneur. It’s a long time coming for you to have a business like NERI. You will do well and I have no doubt you will ensure we are protected in the sale. Congratulations! Oh, and can we do your accounting? We need to keep our billables up.” She said with a wink at the last comment.

Kat was thrilled to receive their support and encouragement, it spoke well of their character that they did not go immediately into defense mode. Change was almost always stressful and since she
had no idea who would buy the company or when the deal would close, she couldn’t answer many of the questions they would logically have once the reality of the sale set in. As they were chatting about possibilities, the receptionist buzzed the conference room, notifying Kat of an important call. She left the room, with apologies, and promised to answer their questions to the best of her ability when she returned.

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Richard called Dallas, his New York estate agent and the head hunter. To the first he revoked the limits on jobs he’d be willing to take and replaced it with the command to have him booked every possible day of the year. He cancelled the potential sale of his New York apartment. He terminated all work the placement firm was doing on his behalf and agreed to pay fees for services rendered. He stopped calling and texting Kat other than to respond when she got in touch with him, which was increasingly infrequent and always vague.

Just as friends and family had noticed his buoyancy when he had returned from Toronto in January, they also noticed the grim stoicism which had replaced it. He still saw his mates and his family but never in situations where there were couples. He wasn’t interested in being the fifth wheel. He could get drunk with the guys or relax on his Mum’s sofa, but he would not go to dinner parties or anything of the like. That did not go without notice either. Whereas they had previously wanted to meet his muse because of Richard’s newfound happiness, his friends’ new motivation to meet her was to punch her in the dick – figuratively speaking of course.

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The day Kat signed the papers at BDC turned out to be an exciting day in more ways than she had anticipated. She returned to her office to find the junior partners and associates waiting to see her in the board room. Led by Sylvie, they informed her that they wanted to buy the firm and were prepared to do so immediately, they had hired their own representation and were ready to proceed as soon as she was. They had brought in bottles of sparkling cider to celebrate and it was a celebration indeed.

When she finally returned to her office she found several messages waiting for her. One of which was from her real estate agent. There was a written offer on her house and for a $5,000 reduction in the asking price, they were willing to accept a 30 day close. Kat screeched out loud and was laughing so hard her assistant flew into her office to check on her, relieved to find Kat grinning and fist pumping the air.

She started to thank her lucky stars and stopped dead in her tracks. It wasn’t bloody luck responsible for all of the good news. It was fucking hard work. She had been painstakingly careful when she bought her house – selecting a decent house in a good neighbourhood was no accident. It had taken her months to make decisions on the renovations and she ensured the plans were carefully executed. Getting close to her asking price and a thirty day close wasn’t luck at all, it was an investment of time and energy paying off as it should have done.

The same principle applied to the sale of Solid Growth. She had been very careful in hiring associates who were nice people as well as being excellent in their respective fields. She had nurtured and nourished her staff, always treating them with utmost respect and encouraging their success. Certainly she could have spent far less time and money on her partners and staff but she simply didn’t believe it would have been the right way to treat people. In any company she owned, all boats would rise on the same tide. While that was simply a result of her values and not an investment with expectation of return, it did turn out to have a profitable outcome via their loyalty and commitment to both the business and to Katrina.
The approval of her BDC loan wasn’t luck either. She used her years of experience - experience gained by the loss of some hopes and dreams - and her considerable acumen to prepare a comprehensive business plan which would be positive asset to NERI as much as, if not more than, a “please gimme yer money” plea to BDC. She worked hard and smart on her presentation and was rewarded for her efforts. She was not blessed by fickle gods of fortune/misfortune - she worked and sacrificed for every piece of good news she’d received in the last few days.

Everything was coming together beautifully and she had Richard to thank for it. She made an extremely comfortable living with Solid Growth and it took something more valuable than financial security to prompt her to take this risk. If it hadn’t been for him she never would have thought of it and she wouldn’t have made the move to get out of the financial services industry for many years, if at all. Richard, and her future with him, was the far more valuable thing to motivate her to make life altering changes and she was excited because of it. Even if he died in a freak acting accident, heaven forbid, she was realizing a dream by buying NERI.

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The next four weeks were busier than she could have thought possible – and she was a woman used to horrible schedules and hard work. Packing up one life and starting another wasn’t for the faint of heart but it was something she was grateful for. She couldn’t have done it without Leigh and Suzanne’s help with packing, chores, they made her laugh and kept her feet on the ground when she thought she’d go out of her mind.

She had her plane ticket to meet Richard in London before he began the press junket for the Battle of the Five Armies dvd release. They would have three glorious days together, 10 days apart and then they’d be together indefinitely. She could barely settle herself down enough to sleep at night. What would he say? How would he react? Would it please him as much as it did her? Thinking of those things alone were enough to keep her awake at night … the thought of pleasing each other was enough to make her moan in anticipation.

Leigh took her shopping for her trip. She wanted to have another beautiful dress and gorgeous under clothes and Leigh was definitely the go-to person to help with those decisions. Leigh didn’t disappoint, she picked out three casual outfits, a gorgeous dress and several different lingerie pieces. Kat seriously doubted some of those silky scraps of fabric, thinking there was no way she could wear them, but Leigh insisted.

Katrina was disappointed that Richard wouldn’t be able to pick her up at the airport. He texted her to say she should get a car service because he’d probably be running late and that there was a key inside the drain pipe on the west side of the house should he not be there when she arrived.

Her flight was slightly delayed which she thought would work to their benefit, hoping Richard would then be able to greet her. She warmed at the thought of hopping in the car with him. She was wearing one of the new bra and panty sets Leigh made her buy and the unfamiliar bindings kept her aware of them the whole flight. She couldn’t wait for Richard to take them off for her. With not a little vexation she realized he wasn’t there and since he wasn’t answering her texts she had no choice but to catch a cab by herself.

When she arrived at the address he gave her, the house was disappointingly dark. With a sigh she paid the cab driver and sought out the spare key to let herself in. Trying to find the bright side, it gave her time to freshen up and decide where and how to wait for his return. She decided to wait in his bed with one of his shirts over her pretty bra and knickers and she put on the beautiful necklace he’d given her, just as she said she would. She wondered if he’d remember her wearing his shirt during his New Year’s vacation ... and taking it off.
She wandered around his home and absorbed the details of the cosy refuge he had created for himself. His home reflected him very well and it was easy to feel his presence there. Tonnes of books, some areas messy but the important ones immaculately clean, dark woods and leather with oddball pieces here and there, music and art everywhere. It was just like him - welcoming, artistic, erudite, and a little kooky. Excitement aside, it had been an exhausting day and a long flight, both of which were catching up with her. She thought she’d take a cat nap while she waited, certain she’d hear him come home. The pull of deep sleep was too strong and she fell in, oblivious to the world and not hearing a peep when he returned to find her softly snoring in his bed.

While Richard watched her sleep every emotion he’d suppressed in the last month bubbled to the surface. Like it or not, he loved her still. It hurt more than he imagined to see her so close and yet so far from him. The memory of what they almost had was achingly vivid but as soon as she woke she’d end it, she’d end him. He didn’t understand why she’d choose his bed to sleep in, it was cruel if she thought he’d go for break up sex. He guessed he never really knew her at all. With a sigh he took clean pajamas from his dresser and went to the guest room. He tossed and turned all night, dread and heartache taking turns beating him to a pulp.

Kat slept like the dead. She didn’t hear him come home and she didn’t wake once during the night. If it wasn’t for sunlight shining directly on her face she would have slept longer. She was disoriented and confused but before she opened her eyes she smiled, she was going to see her Richard. Disorientation turned to disappointment when she discovered he wasn’t there and it appeared he hadn’t been. *Nothing was going according to plan, dammit.*

She went to the loo and brushed her teeth, hoping to find him in the kitchen having a coffee. Disappointment was becoming her closest companion because he wasn’t there either. There were keys on the foyer table which hadn’t been there the day before – so where was he? She looked in his study without finding him. She opened the door to what she had assumed was a guest room and was bewildered to see him sleeping there.

She smiled thinking he was so concerned for her that he hadn’t wanted to interrupt her sleep. Given their propensity for spooning, she thought it an odd choice but he was an incredibly thoughtful and generous man so she shrugged it off and quietly crept into bed. She snuggled up to him and was about to kiss him when his eyes flew open wide.

“Hi.” She whispered with a glowing smile.

“What are you doing here?” Confusion and irritation were evident on his face.

She laughed and raised her eyebrows, “You were expecting someone else? Something else?” She reached around to play with his nape curls and leaned in for a kiss once more.

He flinched away from her and pulled her hand from his neck. “No. I wasn’t expecting you to climb in bed with me either. Did you seriously think I’d want to have sex with you? I’m not that kind of a slut and I didn’t think you were either. But then, I clearly didn’t know you well enough after all, did I!?”

She was completely dumbfounded and beginning to panic. *What the hell?* He wasn’t teasing, he was deadly serious. *What the fuck?* She inched away from him, trying to get a better look at his eyes, trying to understand what he was on about.

“Richard, what is going on? Why are you being like this?” She could barely speak above a whisper, ghosts of abuses past assailed her and she was deathly afraid of what he might say because it certainly didn’t look like it could be anything she wanted to hear.
He gave her a dirty look, “Well that’s your bit, isn’t it? You came here because ‘we need to talk’ so go ahead, talk.” The determination to remain aloof failed him so he closed his eyes and tried to focus his breathing. He would not break down or show weakness. He would not be reduced that way in front of her.

Kat abruptly gasped. “We need to talk? I never said that. I said I had something to tell you. Richard why do you think I’m here?”

He opened his eyes which had turned a cold, steely grey. His face was devoid of all emotion, of all signs of the man she loved. “No need to let me down gently. Just say what you have to say. I don’t need a mercy fuck, but what the hell?! I am feeling a bit pent up.”

His sneer didn’t last long because she slapped him across the face leaving a bright red handprint as a souvenir.

“How dare you speak to me like that? What the fuck is the matter with you? Do you think I’m here to break up with you and have a good bye screw? Seriously? Is that what you think? Fuck off Richard, just fuck right off.” She was on the verge of tears and wasn’t sure if she could hold it together. She was beginning to understand his totally messed up misconceptions but she was gobsmacked at the cold cruelty he was heaping on her. Ghosts were haunting her once again. She’d told him before to never belittle her or judge her. How dare he? She didn't have the strength to maintain anger - the most important thing in her life was dead or dying and she was in shock.

Her near tears angered him to the highest degree. How dare she cry? So she was manipulative as well as nasty. He was just about to unleash his rage by telling her every despicable thing he thought of her when the tears spilled over her lids and fell down her ashen face. She was completely silent and still, save for the falling tears, staring into his eyes, looking lost, searching for something.

He faltered and bit off the vitriolic diatribe on the tip of his tongue. Fuck. He raked a hand through his hair and sighed deeply. “What did you come to tell me Kat?” He waited with his eyes closed, not wanting to see her rejection.

“It seems to be moot now.” Her voiced warbled and she moved to get out of the bed, but his hand gently held her back.

“I’m sorry. Go ahead. Say what you came to say.” He held his breath, wishing he could go back in time – or far ahead enough that the wounds would have already healed.

“I’ve sold Solid Growth and my house. I’ve bought a company which I can run remotely. I came to tell you that I can go anywhere with you. I came here to tell you I love you and want to be wherever you are but I take it you don’t want the same things.”

He stared at her, uncomprehending. “You didn’t come here to tell me I’m not worth waiting for? Or that long distance is just too hard?” His ghosts were fading fast.

Complete understanding washed over her. She smiled a little and reached up to gently brush the hair from his brow. “No. Not that. Never that.”

“You didn’t come here to break up with me?” The truth was sinking in and his heart swelled with reborn hope. He cradled her cheek in his hand and lightly traced her lips with his thumb.

“No. Not that. Never that.” She full on smiled and copied his thumb movements on his lips.
“You didn’t come to tell me to sod off?” He grinned as her tongue darted out to flick against his thumb.

“No. Not that. Maybe someday you’ll need a good telling, but not today I think.” She gasped as he sucked her thumb into his mouth.

“You didn’t come because I’m a shabby lover?” His voice had dropped, deep and smooth like the finest dark chocolate. She felt the heat from his gaze warm her from head to toe.

“Fuck no. Not that. Never THAT.”

“Well that’s somewhat reassuring I guess.” He growled as he hugged her to him and kissed her cheek.

She could feel his smile as he nibbled his way down her neck. “How might I reassure you better?” She felt her limbs go weak, fuck he was amazing at neck kissing.

He looked up and she saw how much his face had softened, “Make love with me like you mean it.” He said quietly while he slowly undid her buttons, smiling broadly when he saw the necklace and the lacy bra she was wearing under his shirt.

“Not ‘just fuck you into next week’?” She teased.

“No. Not ‘just fucking’ … well … maybe later. Right now I want your heart as well as your mouth and your arms and your thighs and your breasts and this little spot …” His words were cut off as he kissed the hollow at the base of her throat. He kept mumbling all the parts of her he wanted, making her laugh from the tickle of his scruff and the vibrations of his voice.

Kat cupped his face in her hands and nudged him to look up at her. She was still smiling but it was gentle and full of emotion, “I love you Richard. Right now. Always. I’ve missed you so much.”

He titled his head a little and looked at her, assessing her. “I love you too. I was wondering … since you’re homeless and everything … maybe you would like to move in with me?”

She took a big breath and bit her lip, “Yes please.”

“And?” His eyebrows shot up and he grinned, waiting for whatever else she was about to say.

“I … um … sort of … well, I assumed I would … it never crossed my mind that I should probably be asked first.” She looked sheepish and pleased all at the same time.

His chest rumbled with laughter as he pulled her in for a proper bear hug. “I really thought you were here to dump my sorry arse. This is much, much better.” At some point he’d apologize for being such a prick earlier but at that moment there were far more interesting things than talking that he’d prefer to be doing with his mouth.

Kat snickered and squirmed as he buzzed her chest while he undid the rest of her buttons. He kissed her breast over the lacy bra and sucked her hardening nipple into his mouth through the fabric, startling her with the intensity of the sudden sensations.

Looking up from under his lashes he asked, “Good?”

“Good!”

He grinned and slid the shirt off her shoulders, pausing to simply admire her. She was so tiny he
couldn’t believe she was such a powerhouse. She was soft and looked fragile but, Holy Hannah, she sure put him through his paces. Everywhere he looked, everywhere he touched, she was supple and warm and he knew her skin would be sweet on his tongue. Richard sighed and rested his head on her chest, just breathing her in and giving thanks that she was right there with him. He caught the faded scent of her perfume and hummed his appreciation against her soft skin and felt her smile as she sighed happily.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, playing with his messy curls and loving the weight of his head on her. He was so big, she couldn’t believe they fit together so well. She sniggered at her own double entendre - he was big and he was tall, no doubt about it. They might look ridiculous dancing, but they didn’t spend their time in a disco so it was pretty much irrelevant. It was handy having a tall fellow around – he could reach things she couldn’t and when she was snuggled up on his lap it didn’t matter if her feet touched the floor or not. She loved everything about him, everything that made him who he was. At that moment she was particularly fond of the feeling of his stubble as it rubbed on her skin and the vibrations of his lips as he hummed happily against her.

“It’s very pretty but would you mind very much if I took it off?” He asked, feeling for the clasp of her bra but not having much success.

She reached behind her and undid the hooks with one hand, “Please do.” She snickered to herself, men thought they had mad skills in the undoing bra department but they were rank amateurs compared to women who really, really wanted their unbelievably hot boyfriends to kiss and lick and nibble on their boobs.

Every single time her bra came off he grinned like it was Christmas and he’d just received the best present in the whole world. What was it with men and boobs? She understood very well why she liked him liking her boobs but she didn’t get it why he thought they were so fantastic. She rolled her eyes in amusement as he tried to decide which one to have first. Having selected the closest, he lightly kissed the dusky peak and watched her body react to the gentle caress of his lips. His tongue traced around her nipple and he looked up at her when he paused to blow on the wet tip. He enjoyed the little hiss she made, giving him a look which made it crystal clear he was not to stop. He raked the sides with his teeth and sucked it into his mouth hard, flicking it with his tongue. He couldn’t help a smirk when she moaned deeply and arched her back, pushing more of her breast to him. Without ceasing the attention he paid to one, he began to play with the other, rolling her nipple firmly between his finger and thumb. He was rewarded with another gasp when he pinched it and kneaded her breast. Instead of continuing to run her fingers through his hair, she tugged on it to bring his mouth closer still.

“Are you ambidextrous or something?” Kat asked in a breathy voice, enjoying his assault on both breasts at the same time.

“Hmm.” He mumbled, his mouth full of her. He grinned and tugged on her nipple with his lips, letting it plop out of his mouth. “Not using both hands. Just one. You want me to use both hands?” He raised an eyebrow and waited for her answer.

“Yeah, both’ll be fine.” Her whole body was restless, starting to fidget and squirm beside him.

He returned his attention to her lovely twin peaks, switching his mouth from one to the other, caressing and kneading as she settled back to enjoy every delicious sensation. He could feel goosebumps prickle her skin as he traced a finger down her belly, outlining her hip bone and trailing slowly down her thigh. When his hand had gone as far as his reach would allow he began to caress his way back up her leg, curving around to the more sensitive skin on the inside of her thigh. The little twitches he felt under her skin as he approached the delicate spot between her legs
told him exactly what he wanted to know. His long fingers slid beneath the edge of her lacy knickers, teasing her by advancing and retreating. He was addicted to watching her fall apart under his hand and eagerly anticipated it happening again. She was deliciously wet and he longed to taste her, but he was determined to take it slow, to savour every moment. There was time for a good old bump and grind later, until then he’d dial it back a notch to make it last.

Richard was not surprised by her howl of frustration but was a little surprised when she yanked his head up to her. He raised a questioning eyebrow and chuckled at the expression on her face.

Her voice was a guttural growl, “Tactical error. Instead of making love now and fucking later, how about fuck now, make love later? I haven’t seen you in over two months. All this sweet romantic crap is gonna kill me! Now rip those knickers off and put your thing in my thing and get to it!”

He collapsed on her, laughing heartily. “Put my thing in your thing? You really know how to make a guy feel special! Any other instructions, Ma’am?”

“Yeah, make it snappy!” She huffed, grabbing his shoulders and trying to pull him on top of her, puffing and grunting with the effort. Shit, he was a big, heavy lug – she sure hoped she’d never have to drag him to safety or they’d both be fried. She could barely budge him.

“Need some help, Miss?” He asked. He scrunched his eyes tight trying, in vain, to stop from laughing at her.

She wiggled a leg underneath him and attempt to lever him onto her with it. “You want a bloody road map? The thing in the thing. What more do you need to know?”

He propped himself up on his elbow and cast one heavy thigh over hers. While tracing little patterns on her chest and tummy he asked, “Can’t I have just a little romance? Gosh, it’s starting to feel like you only want me for my thing.” He kept a straight expression on his face but his belly was shaking with laughter.

“Arghh. Fine. You win. Romance away. This is wonderful. It's lovely. You're lovely. I love you so much. How’s that? Romantic enough for you?” She flopped back on the pillow, the worst of her painful need receding only slightly. “So what’s your next move, Don Juan? And when will Vlad the Impaler come out to play?” She was so frustrated she didn’t know if she’d be able to withstand romantic, lovey-dovey, slow as cold molasses shit. She wanted hot, heavy and fun I-haven’t-seen-my-boyfriend-in-months/make-up sex and then she’d be delighted to go all fluttery rainbows and unicorns on a cloud of eternal fluffy love. She guessed she could understand, when she really tried, how this could be seen as a sweet, romantic moment so with a small sigh of resignation she did her very best to give herself over to languid & lovely, putting away thoughts of steamy & swift.

He shifted up the bed a little so they were face to face. He kissed the tip of her nose and smiled innocently at her. “Let me know if this works for you.” He dipped his head to kiss her shoulder and began a slow, torturous feast of her neck while his hand skimmed over her body, leaving little ripples of desire in its wake. He could consider necking a secret weapon because he knew very well that it made her irrationally aroused. His hand settled between her legs, cupping her firmly, lazily stroking outside the lacy panties and he was delighted to hear the return of her deep moans and to feel her little quivers.

The scent of her arousal was sweet torture, clouding his mind. He had fully intended to make love long and slow but she was so wet, she was making filthy sounds and her desire was pushing him on much harder and faster than he wanted. The thing in the thing was rapidly becoming imminent. It
was less and less about the journey and more and more about the destination.

He moved on top of her, propping himself up on both elbows and placed little kisses on her eyelids. “What do you want, hmmm?” He murmured before he licked a stripe from her shoulder up to her jaw. “Tell me what you need.” He whispered to her, his breath hot and moist on her ear.

Her eyes flew open and she stared at him, biting off a smart ass retort. What she saw in his eyes calmed her jangled nerves and thrilled her heart. It wasn’t fantasy or an over active imagination fuelled by selective memory. It wasn’t hype or wishful thinking or something romantically exaggerated by absence. It was love: pure, simple, complicated, messy, beautiful love. It was real and it was happening, it was not a plan, not a hope, not an ‘if’ nor a ‘when’ … it was immediate and real and it was their life together.

It was sex and pleasure and sweaty passion and it was heart-swelling, altruistic, endorphin overloading love. She got it – she understood why he wanted to make love instead of just getting each other off to ease the physical ache. She willed the intense frustration to melt away, forcing herself to relax and savour the minute details of him and how he felt pressed tightly against her, and deeply entrenched in her heart.

“You. I want you in every way you can give yourself to me.” She stroked his brow and reached up to kiss him tenderly. “You are all I need.”

She looked at him with fresh eyes instead of through her biased memory. It was like the first time she’d met him. She saw the strength and character of his face – strong bones of his forehead and jaw; luxurious eyebrows and lashes; eyes the changing colours of the ocean; laugh lines and worry lines; those crinkles which made her go weak at the knees, his lips in their perfect shape, always ready to smile. His face was all the more gorgeous because of what lay within – the mind and heart of a truly beautiful soul.

She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him again, lightly and almost chastely. They shared soft, golden kisses with smiles and tender caresses. Kat lost herself in Richard’s embrace, her world made only of his lips touching hers, his shoulders and arms and the solid strength of his chest. She offered him her heart, her future, her trust and he cherished them. Her heart was as safe in his keeping as was her body in his arms.

Richard had found that which he’d always hoped for but had ceased to believe he would ever have, true love. It was sentimental, romantic and might otherwise make him feel silly but it wasn’t silly. It was a paradox which confounded him, he became invincible by making himself completely vulnerable. He gained strength, freedom and confidence by giving himself to Katrina. He was not so green as to believe in fairy tale endings where everything was perfect and no tears ever fell, he knew that there would undoubtedly be tears, however he also knew they would dry them together.

They kissed slowly, stopping every now and then to simply hold each other. They caressed with confident fingers, seeking and offering. In many respects the way they made love was much as they had last time – languid, gentle and full of emotion. The difference, which was of the greatest significance, was that the last time was steeped in sadness and worry at their pending goodbye whereas this time was filled with the pleasure only the certainty of their future together could bring.

They had all the time in the world and they took advantage of it. The fire within burned slowly, fueled by an intimacy neither had understood before. With the hundredth smile, Katrina moved to kiss along his jaw, nibbling and tasting every scar, every whisker on the way. Her lips were soft and plump against his rough skin, sending frissons of pleasure through him as she nuzzled and suckled, making low sounds of her own. When she tugged at his earlobe his muscles clenched
and, as wonderful as it was, he was hungry for more than unhurried making out. Her travelling kisses were heaven and hell in one fell swoop.

If she wanted to go on a kissing expedition, who was he to hold her back? He wrapped his arms tightly around her and rolled them over so that she was comfortably resting on top of him. It was, after all, the only gentlemanly thing to do.

Kat resisted the quip on the tip of her tongue, wanting to taunt him with “Game on!” but that wouldn’t have been a very romantic thing to say and this was a big romantic moment which she didn’t want to ruin with her impulse to be saucy. Instead she leisurely explored his neck and shoulders with her lips and tongue. She loved the soft chest hairs tickling her chin when she kissed the little hollow below his adam’s apple. Her mind wandered as her lips tasted him, curious to know if his chest hairs were soft because they’d been waxed so many times. She’d have to ask him later. Damn, sometimes it was frustrating trying to be romantic and serious. And it was bloody distracting to hold her tongue while she was trying to enjoy his fantastic chest.

Richard cupped her chin and tilted her head to look up at him. “Where did you go just now?”

“Hmmm?” Her brows knit together in confusion.

“I can feel your mind drift away and I can feel it when you bite your tongue. You’re not good at it … at least not with me.” His expression of confusion mirrored hers before a trickle of alarm began to seep in. “You don’t want to do this now? Here? With me?”

Her eyes widened in horror, “NO! Of course I want to make love with you – when do I not want to? Damn it man, there isn’t an hour in the day that I don’t think about it. You’ve unleashed the Cracken.” She gave him her most filthy, wicked leer.

“The Cracken of Sex?” His whole body shook with laughter. How could he doubt she wanted him? What was he thinking trying to be sweet and romantic? There was far too much emotion in the air for sweet and bloody romantic. He hugged her tightly and rained silly kisses above her shoulder blade, biting down harder than he intended when he kissed her neck.

“Vlad? Oh how I’ve missed you.” She let out an overly dramatic sigh of relief and grinned at him.

“Yes, it is I, Vlad the Impaler. Would you like to feel my big … teeth?” He asked in the worst Bela Lugosi she’d ever heard. He cocked an eyebrow and smouldered at her, momentarily thinking he’d have to strike that particular expression from his work because he wanted to keep it just for her.

The flash of lust in her eyes was unmistakable and, combined with her naughty laugh, it was irresistible. Richard ducked his head to her breasts and shook his head vigorously between them before honking both of them with his large hands and waggling his eyebrows at her.

Katrina rolled her eyes heavenward and shook her head at his silliness. She wouldn’t have thought it possible but she fell a little more in love with him because of it. She smirked at him and said, “Isn’t there an outstanding thing about the thing in the thing?”

“Why, yes there is. Let’s settle that debt, shall we?”

He gripped her bum and pushed himself up to a sitting position, smiling at her surprised little “Oooof!” She wiggled a bit to get comfortable straddling his lap and throwing her arms around his neck.

“I love it when you’re on top of me Trina. I want to hold you and kiss you and watch you when I
make you cum.” He buried his face in her neck, holding her close and savouring every morsel of her before he looked at her again.

Her eyes misted over and she searched his face for signs of teasing, finding none. “You called me Trina.” She took his face in her hands and kissed him deeply until they were both gasping for air. “I love that you called me Trina.” Her smile was like sunshine and rainbows and unicorns and all of the fantastical things she used to describe otherworldly bliss.

They did not break their gaze when Katrina slid down on him, or when she slowly rolled her hips, or when his hands roamed restlessly over her back, holding her to him, or when every nerve in her body exploded with glorious pleasure, or when he clutched her arse to drive deeper into her, or when she felt him stutter and twitch as he came and shouted her name, or when they both said “I love you.” They only broke their gaze to kiss and slump against each other, calm, happy and spent. Katrina rested in his lap and purred, making his heart skip a beat. There was no need to move because they had all the time in the world.

*Epilogue to follow.*
"Trina, puh-leez come down here. And don’t ‘forget’ your planner this time!” Richard hollered up the stairs.

“Fine! I’m coming – damn, you’re crunchy this morning.” Katrina grumbled and thumped downstairs with a scowl on her face. She continued to mumble under her breath that after three years synchronizing their schedules sucked hippo weenies.

“I don’t know why we have to do this today. It’s perfectly nice outside, we should go for a hike or something. We shouldn’t be stuck indoors, don’t you think?!” She glowered when he shook his head. “Well if you don’t want to go out, then there are much more interesting things we could be doing inside.” She sidled up to him and started to tug his shirt out of his trousers but he slapped her fingers away.

“Oh no you don’t. You’re not getting out of this one more day! Now open your planner and let’s get this over with before you exhaust the very last of my patience. I can’t bloody believe you actually run a company behaving like this.” He laughed at her pout and planned to kiss it off her face as soon as they finished with their calendars.

“So, May? What have you got lined up for May? I have to be in L.A. by the 4th … which you would remember if you’d paid attention one of the umpteen times I’ve told you.” He gave her an indulgent smile.

“Fine. So you’re off to L.A. for five months and I’m supposed to be all excited about this, why? I don’t know what you’re so bloody chipper about. And while we’re at it, Ron Howard should make his movie here in London.” She said testily.

Richard rolled his eyes at her. Her petulance wasn’t truly heartfelt and wouldn’t last which took the obnoxiousness out of her cantankerous behaviour. When he’d been given the lead in Ron Howard’s upcoming dramedy, Night Time, she was as thrilled about it as he was and couldn’t wait for filming to begin.

“Aww. Who’s going to miss me? Is witty bitty Katweena gonna miss me too much?” He teased her. “Is she gonna be sad and cwy?”

“Fuck off. I am not going to cry and I won’t miss you at all. You’re a proper bear to live with when you’re in the middle of a movie so you can just fuck off to L.A.” She was having difficulty maintaining her cranky attitude because he was so frickin’ adorable she just wanted to snog his face off. And, truth be told, even though she didn’t want to leave London for such a long stretch, she was excited for him and was looking forward to being in North America for a while.

“You know that L.A. is closer to Toronto than London is so it’s more convenient for you, in a way, and we’ll have a proper house to live in instead of a wonky little apartment like the last shoot.” He pulled her over onto his lap and patted her back like she was a baby who needed soothing, and
hoped he didn’t get swatted for his efforts.

Katrina snuggled into him and nuzzled her favourite spot on his neck, making all sorts of happy little sounds. She was starting to feel victory at distracting him from the dreading scheduling mission he was on until he abruptly stood up, almost tipping her to the floor.

“Right. Now, sit down and get this done. Then, and only then, can you have access to my neck, or any other body parts you want.” He smirked at her scowl and wondered just how long she was going to stubbornly cling to this façade.

“Fine. I’m going to Ottawa and northern Ontario for 10 days. I haven’t nailed down the exact itinerary but I’ve had tentative responses from the office of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and from four communities. Then I’ll spend a week in Toronto at NERI. And if you’re nice, I’ll come to L.A.” She grinned at him, “And if you’re really, really nice, I’ll make the sex with you.”

He snorted, “Since when do I have to be really nice? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say if you are really, really nice I’ll make the sex with you? You know bloody well you’ll be chomping at the bit after nearly three weeks! I won’t have a moment’s peace for days.”

“Hmmm. Good point. So, what do I need to do to be deemed really, really nice? I wouldn’t want to take any chances that you won’t do the sex.” She wiggled her eyebrows and winked at him.

He shook his head and wagged his index finger at her, “Finish this bloody schedule!”

“Whatever. Ok, so gimme the details.” She rolled her eyes and sat with pencil perched over her planner.

“Costume fittings and pre-production April 4-9; rehearsals May 4th; and principal photography is set to begin on the 11th. I was thinking we should go out on May 1st so we have a couple of days to get settled. What do you think? And what Minister are you seeing?”

“The Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. I’ll probably only get to see his deputy, which is a good first step. The report I did seems to be getting some interest. At the very least I want to increase awareness of the deplorable condition of education and information technology in remote communities like Attawapiskat and Akimiski Island. I’m also checking to see if I can get an appointment with the Provincial Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and the Ontario Minister of Education … that’s probably where sales will come from since education is a provincial issue. I’ve got welcomes from three chiefs and a mayor so far but would like to bring that up to six or seven.” She sighed, she was both passionate and frustrated with government’s slow response to improving education on northern First Nations reserves and in remote communities. “And I think we should probably head to L.A. by April 26th or so – you’ll need at least a week to get over the time difference and get comfortable with the neighbourhood.”

“You’ll be brilliant in Parliament – you’ll probably get called to serve on a Royal Commission if I know you. And yeh, you’re right about going out to L.A. earlier. See, this is why I wanted to do this today – I need your brilliant mind to make sure everything goes smoothly. What would I do without you?”

She made fake gagging sounds, “Uh huh. Stop trying to butter me up with your fake praise, Armitage! If you really want to show your appreciation ….” She pointedly stared at his crotch and licked her lips.

“Down girl! We’re not done here! So … let’s see … I’ve got the dvd release tour for The Fifth
Sunday from March 12th – 19th and the premiere of World’s Apart here in London on April 15th. Are you coming with me for Fifth? And what about Worlds?”

“Hmmm. I’ll come with you for The Fifth Sunday tour – that’s New York, L.A., Mexico, Vancouver and Toronto, right? You don’t need me for Worlds though, do you? I can come to the after party but I don’t really want to do the red carpet.”

“You always have such a great time, why don’t you want to do this one?” He was puzzled.

She shrugged. “I was thinking that I should only go with you to award shows where you’re nominated.”

“This is new. May I ask why?”

Katrina avoided his eyes. “I love the events themselves. It’s fun having designer dresses and to be pampered and the energy of the evenings is always a lot of fun. But I hate the press afterwards. If I show up they rip me apart, if I don’t then they say you’ve dumped me. And then I have to field the phone calls from family asking if I’m ok.” She paused and looked up, “It gets on my last nerve! I hate it.”

“I know, I know. So awards only? That brings us to the BAFTA’s which are only two weeks away. You’ve already got your dress, yeah? I want you by my side to either console me or celebrate with me. Jason says I actually have a good chance of winning this time so hopefully it will be the latter.” He gave her a puppy dog pleading look complete with his irresistible forehead crinkles and crooked smile.

“You are so bloody cute when you make that face. How could I ever refuse you anything? C’mere you big goof.” She gave him a loud, smacker of a kiss and grinned, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Just no more premieres ok?! And I’m going to look fabulous, I’ve got the best dress EVER.”

He pulled her back onto his lap and planted smooches all over her face. “Don’t distract me Wench, we’re not done with these calendars. You’ve got my stuff, now what else have you got on for the next couple of months?”

“Party pooper. I’m off to NERI for a week at the end of this month, you can come too if you like. Then I’m up to Thunder Bay and Kenora from March 15-25 – hopefully I’ll be able to pop in on Dawn on that trip. I’ve put in my name to speak at the Homeschooling convention in Dallas from April 6th – 9th. I’m not sure if that’s going to happen but at the very least we’ll have a booth. I have to get things nailed down for northern British Columbia and the Yukon and I’m still working on Alaska. Which reminds me, I should follow up on the contacts I made for the Highlands and the Hebrides.”

“Busy, busy. And you complain I travel a lot!”

“Yeh, well … it’s either keep myself busy or complain about your completely underwhelming performance in the bedroom.” She laughed and ducked as he pretended to throttle her.

“Underwhelming? I seem to recall stellar feedback last night! Or are you just trying to goad me into some raunchiness in order to vindicate myself?”

“Maybe. Is it working?” She leaned over and started to pull his shirt out from his jeans again.

“Mmmm. Now what’s to be done to improve my ratings?” He asked as he shifted her on his lap
and slipped his hands under her sweater, skilfully unhooking her bra.

“Well, for starters, you really should kiss me until I’m breathless and quivering.” She waggled her eyebrows. “And then you can earn extra points for originality and creativity.”

“Challenge accepted.” He knew how she adored him touching her face and playing with her hair. Richard gently swept her hair back from her face and lightly traced her brows, enjoying her contented sigh. He kissed her eyes, her temples, and the tops of her cheeks and smiled at the happy expression she wore.

She full out, properly giggled when she rubbed noses with him and gave him butterfly kisses. It never ceased to amaze him the little things which delighted her. She was a tough, consummate professional when she was working or her ire was raised and a silly snowflake when they were alone at home. She had certainly taught him a great deal about appreciating simple pleasures and letting your guard down.

She also taught him exactly how to torment her for the finest effects. The quickest and most reliable method was to *almost* kiss her. Lips so close she could feel their warmth, but not their touch; breath ghosting across her cheek; whispers of sweet nothings; and she would whimper for him. Sometimes her impatience got the better of her and she would seize him, kissing him so soundly it was *him* that was left a quivering mess.

The only problem was that Richard didn’t want to wait, he didn’t want to tease, he didn’t want to torment. He wanted to taste her and feel her and laugh with her and hear her shout his name to the rooftops. He kissed her, slowly at first and then unable to hold back, he devoured her. Their tongues slid against each other, tasting, exploring and challenging with complete wanton need.

Her giggles had quickly turned to sighs and moans as he explored her neck with his tongue and lips, murmuring his appreciation along the way. He nibbled her earlobe and sucked into his mouth, smiling at the indecent sounds she was making.

“Oh Fred, you know just how to make me feel so good.” She panted.

“Fred? Who the fuck is Fred?” He stopped and looked at her with brows knitted tightly together in amused confusion.

She laughed at his expression, “Just checking to see if you’re listening – sometimes I say really weird stuff and you agree with me. It’s kind of fun.” She nuzzled into him, licking a strip from his chin to his ear.

“You are really nasty! But you can make it up to me with that mouth of yours, hmmm? Now, make me forget all about Fred and your wretchedness.” He closed his eyes and relaxed into her kisses along his neck.

Katrina shifted from sitting across his lap to straddling him properly. Even with both of them wearing trousers his ardour was evident, making her smile. She began to grind on him, rolling and undulating her hips and laughing at his groan of discomfort. Nothing like a little dry humping to ramp up the frustration.

“Oh, sorry. You want me to stop?” She teased as she slid her hands up under his shirt and rolled his nipples between her fingers.

“NO. Yes. Pants off.” He tried to undo her belt and zipper without much success other than eliciting more chuckles from her. He grabbed her bum and stood up quickly, setting her down on
the table before he nudged her back and successfully removed her trousers and knickers while she leered lasciviously at him the entire time. He swatted her hands away when she reached over to provide him with the same de-clothing service.

Richard tugged at her hips, pulling her down to the edge of the table and wound his arms around her, bringing her into a tight clinch. She snaked her thighs around his neck and revelled in the feeling of his bulge pressing against her leg. He soothed her thighs, caressing and kneading them from hip to knee while his mouth traveled to her breasts. His stubbled tickled and scratched her tender skin as he nipped and sucked her. He quickly undid his jeans and shimmed them to the floor, taking one leg out but too distracted to worry about the other one.

Her hips began to writhe, slowly at first and increasing in their desperate need to have him closer, inside, providing her with that sublime friction which would fulfill all of her craven needs. His large hands hooked her knees over his hips and he grinned at her surprised “Oh.”

He held her just under her bum and lifted her up against him, holding her close. He smiled up at her as he moved towards the wall and murmured in her ear, “I’m going to press you against the wall and do dirty things to you.”

He could feel her shake as she tried to restrain a laugh. “How dirty? Really, really dirty or just a little bit dusty?”

“On a scale of 1 – 10, probably an 8. Why must you always laugh when I talk dirty to you?”

“Seriously? Have you heard your voice? Melted chocolate and your gorgeous accent … you should be speaking in iambic pentameter and reciting poetry. When you say naughty things it just sounds … wrong, but in a funny way. I like it though … don’t stop!” She waggled her eyebrows, making him shake his head and roll his eyes at her.

“Trina, just shut up and kiss me.” He pushed them hard against the wall and grinned as she moaned into his mouth, soft and low. He loved the feeling of her legs wrapped tightly around him as one hand gripped his shoulder tightly and she raked the other through his hair, tugging at it when she wanted more of his mouth.

He reached down between her legs to find her dripping wet and her little nub as firm as a jelly bean. He took hold of his cock and rubbed it against her wetness, teasing her and readying himself to enter her. She was starting to make frustrated noises as he positioned himself and slow pushed up into her. Her complaints turned to blissful sighs as she savoured the fullness of him deep within her.

“Oh Vlad, you feel so good. Your cock is so perfect, I love the way you fill me up. I can feel you everywhere. Mmm, I love your cock, I love you moving in me.” She slowly stirred her hips in tight little circles, unable to move much more than that but delighting in the friction it gave them.

He pulled back his head to look at her. “So, when you say naughty things it goes right to my balls and makes me harder but when I do it, you laugh. Doesn’t seem quite fair.”

“Sorry. Won’t happen again –“ She gasped as he snapped his hips, driving deeper into her and dragging his head against her sensitive spot before he slowly withdrew and then thrust back into her fast and hard.

Her eyes glazed over and she bit her lip as every muscle in her body cried out with agonizing tension. She was so close – just a little more …
“I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name. I’m going to make you cum, make your body shake and collapse on me. And then I’m going to shoot everything I have into you, searing you, marking you, claiming you as mine. Are you ready, Tri? Are you ready to beg me to let you cum?”

She was beyond humour or laughing or even understanding anything other than the violent intensity of their passion. She was dancing on the edge of a precipice – needing to tumble over but wanting to make sure she took him with her. She licked her swollen lips and nodded, wanting him, needing him, to pound into her again and again.

“Say it. Beg me.” He stilled his hips and smiled as her eyes flew open in horror at the sudden loss of his movements.

“Please fuck me Richard. Fuck me so hard I can’t see. Please make me cum. Please …” Her voice had gone from a desperate plea to a whine and then to a contented sigh as he plunged back into her. She arched her back, trying to give him every last millimetre of herself. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t control the way she moved on him, a magnificent rhythm approaching a crescendo.

“You feel so good Tri, you’re so fucking wet and tight around me. I love being inside you, licking you, sucking you, fucking you. You’re so –“

He couldn’t finish because every muscle in her body clenched as she screamed his name at the top of her lungs and dug her fingers into his shoulders hard enough to leave bruises. The undulating waves of her orgasm gripped him and the power of her release combined to push him over the edge. He felt his balls tighten and his hips stuttered in that fantastic way just before he came, those blissful seconds of supreme pleasure unlike anything else in the universe.

They rested their foreheads against each other as their ragged breathing began to calm and they held each other in a loving hug instead of the frenzied clutch of seconds before. Richard kissed her tenderly, loving the sounds of her contented purr. He gently shifted her so that he was able to carry her in his arms and moved to sit down on a nearby chair.

“Do you promise that every time we have to do that damned schedule that we can shag our brains out as soon as possible?” Curled up on his lap she twirled his chest hairs between her fingers.

“If you insist, I think we can oblige.” He grinned at her silly request. After three years there was nothing blasé about their love life; they loved each other passionately and … frequently. There was usually laughter, often taunts and always satisfaction which made him laugh at the fallacy that women had a lower sex drive than men. He’d never encountered that particular dilemma and he would testify under oath that it was not in the least bit true for Miss Katrina. That she would insist on a sound shagging to mitigate the mundane task of synching schedules was a prime example of her enthusiastic sexual appetite. For all of their differences, it was most convenient that they were very well matched in that particular area. “But then again, sometimes it feels like you just keep me around as your sex toy. What would you do if I didn’t ‘put out’ at your every whim?”

She swatted his chest, “Didn’t we have this discussion a few years ago? You’re not, strictly speaking, always necessary. But you’re handy for more than just your delightful dick – you keep my bed warm in winter, you reach the stuff on the higher shelves, you can open jars that are too tight for me, you are a mediocre, but acceptable, nurse when I have a cold, you carry heavy suitcases when I travel … so you see, you’re far more useful than just a sex toy.”

“Nice! Good to know where I rank. And here I thought you loved me for my suave style and
scintillating conversation.”

“You just keep telling yourself that big fella and we’ll get along fine.” She gave him a strong hug and rested her head on his shoulder. “Now, all I need to know is what you’re making for lunch and how are you going to entertain me tonight?”

“Jam on bread and the pub with Jonny. Does that meet your unbearably high standards?” He teased.

“Ooooo pulling out all the stops today! Sounds good to me. Plans for this aft? I have some work to do. What are you up to? Laundry perhaps?” She grinned at him.

“Damn, when did I turn into a house-husband? I think I liked it better when I was your sex toy.”

“Oh Sweetheart … you’ve always been so. Please don’t delude yourself otherwise. Now, where’s my jam and bread?

“You know … part of that did sound good.” He began, intentionally vague.

“Jam?”

“No.”

“Bread?”

“No.”

“Boy toy?”

“No.”

Katrina fidgeted and pushed herself up. “Oh well. Now, kiss me and go make my lunch.”

“We will talk about this. You can’t avoid it forever.” He shook his head at her obstinance but if she thought he’d ever give up, she’d be disappointed. He was particularly single-minded when the need arose and on this subject there was no one more unrelenting than he was.

“Gonna have a shower. Lunch in 30?” She scampered upstairs before he could answer.

After lunch they both dove into their respective work projects. Katrina had established a productive routine for online communications with NERI. Her considerable efforts to increase sales were beginning to realize tangible results in both Canada and the northern US which happily meant an increase in her work load.

Kat was able to take her mobile office, aka laptop, with her wherever they went, keeping up with the daily operations of NERI and helping her to identify areas requiring additional indigenous resources. She was building up sources which were needed to expand into new regions and it was exhilarating to see potential becoming reality before her eyes. It was growing so well she hoped that within the next year she’d be able to take a small salary rather than the paltry amount she withdrew from the company to cover business expenses only.

NERI’s offering of professionally produced local content set them apart from the many competitive online education providers. It gave Kat an edge when meeting with prospective clients but it also gave their Research & Development team a huge challenge to exceed not only the requirements of regional school boards but also to create locally relevant resources which, more
often than not, had no precedent. Katrina enjoyed the dual purpose of her travels: to increase sales and to develop a database of resources which could be used to provide local content.

Such was the focus of her late spring trip to Northern Ontario. She was to meet with existing clients to assess satisfaction and needs; meet with prospective new clients; and to find First Nations/Metis/Inuit elders they could video tape to provide language, history and cultural units for all grade levels. It was during her first field trip for investigations into community resources that she discovered the appalling state of information technology and education in remote areas. With Richard’s encouragement she wrote a detailed report and mailed copies of it to the affected riding representatives of both provincial and national parliaments; to the offices of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs & Northern Development and Education; and to their shadow ministers.

Richard had been more than supportive of Kat’s work. He listened and learned what NERI was trying to do and both asked intelligent prompting questions and made compelling suggestions. He narrated several audio pieces for NERI which always made Katrina laugh – world class actor doing voice overs for grade school northern Canadian history and geography units in a Canadian accent. And he worked cheap too: attending a red carpet event was good for the narration of 5 units; laundry for a month would earn her 2 units; making dinner for two weeks was a down payment for 1 unit; and so on.

Their support of one another was reciprocal. Kat travelled with Richard whenever he wanted/wherever he went; helped him run lines; attended a variety of industry events and asked probing questions when he was struggling to understand or form a character. She demanded little of him but asked for everything. She didn’t bid him to do typical domestic chores, except in jest, but she would accept nothing other than his complete, unconditional love for her and respect for himself.

She couldn’t care less about the mess in his study or his dirty socks on the living room floor but became irate when he stumbled with professional insecurity or complained about his appearance. She expected him to be self-aware, honest about his abilities, and to eschew the selfish navel gazing which accompanied unwarranted self-doubt. While the idea was considered passé by many, she was, in her way, fully, completely, permanently devoted to him and she expected the same from him.

Richard had only one complaint – if it could be called a complaint. Katrina was cagey about any and all discussions of marriage. When he subtly brought up the subject she’d become the master of non sequiturs. When he was more direct, she’d shrug and obfuscate. When he had presented her with a ring and asked her to marry him in the traditional way, on three separate occasions, she looked at him dumbfounded and said they already were, refusing any further discussion on the matter. When it first happened he was briefly hurt and confused but that didn’t last long because it was plain to see that her love and commitment weren’t in question. She simply refused to talk about weddings in any way, shape or form. It had become something of a challenge to him, trying to trick her into saying yes and teasing her about him wanting to be a happily domesticated husband.

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The day of the BAFTAs was an adrenalin rush from start to finish. Richard was more nervous than Katrina had ever seen him, pacing and fretting over every detail of what he was wearing, his new hair cut, the amount of stubble, his choice of cufflinks … ad infinitum. He gave many thanks to stylists and managers and to Kat for everything they did to make such things easier to bear, but even with all of their efforts he was still a wreck. Katrina was his rock – her laughter and quick assurances were a tremendous help. He chuckled when he considered some of her amazing
distraction skills. He’d just finished trying on his freshly re-hemmed trousers when she cornered him in the bedroom in formal hair and makeup, wearing only a dressing gown.

“You seem particularly high strung this afternoon, My Love. I think I know what will help you relax – even though it might seem a little stressful at first.” She grinned up at him as she began to undo his trouser button.

He choked at her brazenness and put his hands on her shoulders to stop her. “Trina … “

“The stressful part – for you – is that you won’t be able to touch me because we can’t have you ruining my hair. And you will have to keep your hips still and let me do all the work because you do tend to bring a tear to my eye when you decide to fuck my mouth … and we can’t have you ruining my makeup. So, can you stay still and not touch me? Can you leave everything up to me?” She smiled at him with complete delight, knowing full well that it would be torture for him to even try.

He really, really wanted to try – he wanted her deep red lipstick on his cock. He wanted her honeyed, hot mouth to reduce him to rubble and wipe every incoherent thought from his mind. He grinned and nodded as she backed him up onto a chair and quickly had him shouting her name.

When his senses returned he looked down to see her lipstick in a perfect ring around the base of his cock – like she’d tattooed him on purpose and seeing her expression, he knew that she did. Later, when boredom or nerves threatened him, he knew he’d just have to think of her ‘tattoo’ and happy thoughts would come to his rescue.

After she had finished licking him clean she pulled up his trousers, tucked in his shirt and did up his buttons. As she adjusted his tie he was amazed by the complete lack of evidence of her little diversion. She gave him a naughty, “yum”, smiled and cheek to cheek kissed him as she went back to the bathroom, to finish getting ready.

Richard was blown away when Katrina emerged and modelled her ensemble for him. Ilaria was able to obtain a number of beautiful dresses for Kat to choose from. It was a significant coup to have a selection of dresses for a petite woman as designers were usually focused on women over 5’7”. She felt absolutely pampered to have help with hair, makeup, dress and to find funky shoes which didn’t completely annihilate her feet. It was a bonus that her beautiful necklace from Richard went perfectly with the dress. When she walked into their bedroom to ask his opinion his jaw dropped and his eyes looked like they’d pop right out of his head.

“Wow. I never though you could look better than you usually do but - Damn, you look fantastic – Katrina you are stunning, Love. Hey, is that necklace –“

With his effusive praise she felt her skin pink. “Yes – it’s perfect. I’ve loved it since the moment you gave it to me and I think it’s a good luck charm for us. I have a very good feeling about tonight. Film Leading Actor – and the winner is …. Richard Armitage.”
“Ack don’t say that – you’re going to jinx it! Quick, kick me in the shin and tell me how awful I am.”

Kat laughed at his look of superstitious horror. “If you can figure out how to do it without crinkling me, you probably should kiss me now.”

He stood two feet away from her and bent over so that only their lips could touch. When he stood up the two of them were grinning at each other with unspoken promises of the different type of kissing they’d share when they got home later that night.

“Hey, I have something for you. I think it will go nicely with your dress.” He went to his night table drawer and pulled out a little red box.

Her brows knitted together when she saw the size of what was obviously a Cartier ring box. She already had three engagement rings tucked away in her jewelry chest and she thought he’d given up on that tactic. She relaxed with the certainty that he wouldn’t bring that up on his special day. She opened the little box to find a beautiful art deco ring of sapphires, rubies, emeralds and diamonds which was part of the same collection as her necklace.

She gasped, “Oh Richard, it’s beautiful. Thank you Sweetheart.”

She started to remove the ring she was wearing so that she could put on the new gorgeous new one.

“Don’t be silly, the ring you’re wearing is lovely – don’t take it off. Just wear the new one on your other hand. Here, let me help.” He took the ring and deftly slipped it onto the third finger on her left hand. “There, that is so perfect with your dress.”

She was momentarily disconcerted but brushed it off because he was so casual and it didn’t seem to be about anything other than a lovely piece of jewelery to go with her necklace. He was right – it really was a lovely addition and it would be something she would always treasure.

Richard’s nerves jangled as the limo arrived at the BAFTA red carpet at The Theatre Royal. She straightened his bow tie, brushed the lapels of his tux, kissed him on the cheek and squeezed his hand for courage.

“This is a great night, Hunny. You have been nominated for the most important award an actor in Britain can receive and that is something to always be proud of. You have worked hard to get here and your performance in The Fifth Sunday was extraordinary.”

They held hands, Richard squeezing hers a little harder than was strictly necessary, the entire way down the red carpet. There were the usual calls for photos and shouts of their names but when the photographers got too demanding he pulled Kat to him, holding her close. She marveled at the transformation when he stepped onto the carpet – he went from anxious doubts to friendly, open gentleman as soon as the car door closed. He continually looked to her, smiling, checking she was okay and keeping her close. Several photographers asked them to pose together when they realized Richard wasn’t going to let go anyway. Later they laughed at the Prom photo poses they were caught in.

Emma Thompson was introduced to present the award for Leading Actor in Film. Richard and Katrina held their breath, trying to smile for the cameras which were undoubtedly on them. Emma said, “And the winner is …. Richard Armitage for The Fifth Sunday.

Richard and Katrina stared at each other in shock. He leaned over to quickly kiss her as he rose to
take the stage. He was, in all truth, completely surprised that he won - he didn’t believe it would happen no matter how incredible the film turned out. In his humble and generous way he gave all the credit to the writers, director, producers, cast and crew. He finished by looking directly at Katrina and said, “And most of all, I must thank my incredible wife Katrina without whom I would never have understood the love in John’s heart. Pachyderm footwear, My Darling.”

Katrina’s jubilance at Richard’s win was replaced by shock at his words. She tried to school her face for the cameras but couldn’t completely hide her surprise or stop the tears which pooled in her eyes. She had to sit on her own while Richard completed the post-win, backstage photos and quickie interviews. When he returned to his seat she simply stared at him before and after he kissed her. She couldn’t speak but looked at him with an unasked question clearly on her lips.

“Well, you said we already were and you’d never lie to me. So I couldn’t very well call you my girlfriend could I? You’re my wife and that’s all there is to it. Now close your mouth, Trina-Dear, there are cameras everywhere.”

She was still gobsmacked hours later but tried to put on an acceptable public face for all of the congratulations and cameras. There was uproar over Richard’s unexpected news and she let him field all of the questions, looking at him adoringly if not somewhat stunned.

They danced and laughed and drank champagne until the wee hours of the morning. They were happy, and exhausted when they got home, kicking off their shoes and collapsing on the couch. It was the first moment they had to speak openly with one another since they stepped out of the limo hours earlier.

“So that was some kind of announcement you made tonight M’dear.” She snuggled into his side as he put his arm around her shoulders.

“Now that it’s sunk in you don’t mind much, do you?” He asked, stroking her arm and holding his breath for her answer.

“Funny enough, I don’t mind at all. I meant it when I said we were already married – I am your wife and you are my husband - if wife and husband means unconditional love that we will ensure endures forever.”

He breathed a sigh of relief, agreeing with her – that was what they were to each other and would always be. “Any chance we might be able to have a party to celebrate that we’re married? You know how I love a party.”

She looked at him, uncertain. “That sounds suspiciously like a wedding.”

“Well, I supposed some might call it that. I prefer to think of it as a large gathering of family and friends where we eat good food, drink good wine, dance and wear funny costumes while we stand up in front of said gathering and let everyone know we promise to tolerate each other fairly well for quite a long time.” He’d never gotten this far on the subject and wondered if it was wise to push his luck.

She thought for a moment and let out a huge huff. “Oh all right. You’re not going to stop nagging until you get your way and you know how I hate nagging. If this will stop your ridiculous obsession with the matter, I’ll go to a wedding with you.”

It was his turn to be gobsmacked. He hadn’t really believed she’d ever agree and when she did he wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. From the moment she sat down at the table in Pangea he knew his life was altered. When he accepted he was in love with her he never dreamed anything would
come of it. His life was permanently changed the day she came to London so they could be


together and this was the icing on the cake. She’d been his and he hers for years but this was the
culmination of his heart’s desire. He leaned down to kiss her and saw the sappy happy tears
misting her eyes.

“I love you Mrs. Armitage.”

“I love you Mr. Armitage. Now let’s go have nice and slow celebratory sex in the bathtub.”

“Your wish is my command, M’lady.” He laughed and scooped her up in his arms carrying her to
their bathroom and fulfilling his husbandly duties with gusto.

The End.

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